Mill Creek Suite

*Nancy Dew Taylor*

---

**At an Easter Dance for Returning Soldiers**

1919

Catching a glimpse of Frank’s face in the crowd, she almost steps on her partner’s feet, her heart catapulting, heat starting its slow body burn.

But the farm life he’s chosen—can she endure it? Applause wakes her from reverie. Caught off guard, distraught, she stumbles, mumbles an apology, wonders if Frank saw. Dares glance toward him, meet his keen gaze, hold.

Unaware of all except each other, they stare and stare.

---

**Dinner on Montford Avenue**

Asheville, NC, Christmas, 1919

“I hear you play the fiddle.”

“Yes, sir,” Frank ignores the slur. “Also lute and dulcimer, none particularly well. Do you play, sir?” he inquires.

Ellen’s father (her brother and Ellen called him Old Jove) snorts. Ellen looks down, demure.

“Your favorite composer?”

“Mozart, sir. I have a friend who finds his works sissified—” he takes up Old Jove’s gauntlet, Ellen smiles—“but I love them. Did you know Mozart almost never changed a note he wrote? Yours, sir?”

“What?” mumbles Old Jove.

“Favorite composer, sir.”

“Bach,” barks Jove. “And I suppose you mountaineer folk—voice close to a sneer—prefer your own music.”

“We do love it, sir.”

“More wine, Frank?” Ellen’s mother tries. Old Jove glares her quiet, demands of Frank what he is studying.

---

**A Crown Complex as Weavings**

That blue dress with its zig-zag—silver sequins stretched across her breast—is bested. He stares—gawks, even—a hopeless bumpkin.

Pale yellow silk. Duster thin as air, green-leaf embroidered, freckles flickering beneath—

And her hair:

that fluid amber roiling with braids that coil, disappear to resurface as sleek rolls wound smooth as the curve of waves about to break.

Pulled under, he sinks, drowns.
Old Fort to Ridgecrest

1925

Except during winter’s snows, the worst of stormy weather, or as Ellen’s confinement nears, Frank makes this trek each month, six miles from door to cabin door, to visit, help his mother. After crossing Mill Creek, he takes the trail into the cove until he’s close surrounded by mountainsides, bears left up the coiled path. Leaving behind the rhododendron-shadowed water, its splashing the last sound but for his breathing or birdcall, wildcat, bear, wind, he passes through the silence of soaring virgin hemlock, an empty dream-like forest floor dark as twilight, cool, bare, springy and brown with needles. Curling upward, he gains height on treetops, stops above them to catch breath, sight between oak and poplar across the gorge old Mitchell and Pinnacle clear and green in morning light. From here in winter bareness the world is all high sky, all chaste snow on blue-bodied slopes.

On. He runs the ridge, up, then over Eagle’s Aerie, dips once, rises, steady, three miles across lonely, unnamed peaks toward the long, high range off which he can see only southwest. In mid-July, he unloops the sack from his belt and bends to scoop blueberries across the back of the wide, steppe-like mountaintop. The journey’s last third is up even higher to Little Kitazuma, down, then up Kitazuma itself, passing the pale path leading to the Bear’s Cave, topping Kitazuma near out of breath, stopping to rest at The Rock. Now he can see all the way down the broad, rich Swannanoa Valley toward Asheville and, far off, Pisgah. Downhill to the gap, wagon track, a rocky road, the path. Well, son, his mother’s greeting. A glass of tea, last week’s news. Then he might clean the well, chop the limb that fell in Wednesday’s storm. Beans to pick, cucumbers. Ah, blueberries. Tonight pie, tomorrow before you go, some muffins for my sweet girls. And Ellen. Ellen is well?

Frank first says, “Ma’am, no more.” In his level voice, “Sir, classics.”

“What use are they to you on a rocky farm in wild country near Old Fort?”

“The same,” says Frank, “as to you in your bank business, as to my Welsh forebears and father in their kind of work—farming.

I understand, sir, you like the horses . . .” Ellen’s mother gasps. Old Jove cuts his eyes toward his daughter. Ellen stares, bold—“and have,” Frank adds smoothly, “fine stables.”

Jove harrumphs, stammers.

Ellen smiles at Frank. Then her mother quakes with awful dread. These two will wed; she will lose this child, as she did her son, to her husband’s hauteur, him she should long ago have fled, old beast powerful as this red pain in her splitting head.

She slumps. When Ellen touches her, she is already dead.
**Night Storm at the Bear’s Cave**  
1927

He can smell the rain come south instead of west—a bad sign for it to crawl around behind the Craggies and tall Greybeard heading to test the valley. It drags with it thick clouds stained black and gray as river rocks. Relentless as death, the storm converges at the county line, locks him in. He trots, hunched.

In two seconds he is soaked to his socks. He slows but plods on, squishing, head bent against drops sharp as sling-shot needles. He flinches as lightning blasts a white pine, wrapping the top in flames that shiver, then run down wet bark to sodden ground. Thunder booms across mountains.

He runs the last half mile up Kitazuma’s slick back to the dark, slight widening where the path to the Bear’s Cave falls straight off the mountainside. He slides down sideways, crashing, clutching at rhododendron, and jams to a sudden stop only feet short of the ledge. He scrambles through the dripping mouth, eyes scouring the depths till lightning lights the sandy floor. Thunder booms across mountains.

He runs the last half mile up Kitazuma’s slick back to the dark, slight widening where the path to the Bear’s Cave falls straight off the mountainside. He slides down sideways, crashing, clutching at rhododendron, and jams to a sudden stop only feet short of the ledge. He scrambles through the dripping mouth, eyes scouring the depths till lightning lights the sandy floor. Thunder booms across mountains.

On the Train, Doc DuBose Makes Notes

Second degree on right arm and hand only. Richardson of Black Mountain agrees. Keep her warm. Asheville’s Mott favors a new paraffin treatment—mix with melted Vaseline, liquid petrolatum, oil of eucalyptus. Thymol, iodide, mentholatum to stop pain and infection. Morphine. Swab picric, citric acids on cleaned vesicles. Strange how Mott asked me about her long, beautiful red hair. Said if she makes it, he’ll graft.

A hard haul, dark as this mile-long tunnel, circuitous as these snake-like tracks curling below Swannanoa Gap.

We’ll see. A fighter, this girl.

**Song of Water**

She dreams she sits in a boat softly rocking, only sounds the small lapping waves thrown back from a deep green curve of trees, slight scraping of the wooden bottom on the sandy shore.

Felt memories. Summers then were Bee Tree Lake—dark blue, lost beneath the Seven Sisters, primordial mud curling between her toes, trees growing right down the pitched mountainsides to the edge of the warmed water. She’d begged to go in naked to let water lap, anoint. Splashing in the slow-flowing Swannanoa, canoeing the French Broad’s strong back. That lake up the near-enclosed cove close to Black Mountain so icy.

This water swirls warm, smelling of lavender and Frank. She thinks he is kissing her breast.

Her whole body aches to arch.

Ellen’s Secrets

She performs her ritual: grouts the fracture in her heart the shape of little Franklin, fingers the eyelid stitched shut, then the crumbled mouth, braided plaid of breast. Webbed stub of hand.

How can anyone love this beast, this host of horrors pressed into what she has become? She will make herself a ghost, sew herself up like a doll with dead eyes, no mouth, no needs, make herself invisible, incorporeal, a blank. Keep them all out. Even Frank.

She turns her face to the wall. Embalms herself in dark Styx water at once black, burning, her self’s perfect analog.

She wakes Frank, screaming Water!
Awakening

From bed she hears Frank’s sharp call to the mule, hears the jangle of chain when, near noon, he leads Mel to new-green maple shade.

Then comes the long file’s rasp, sound rough as her skin. Frank sharpening the plow. She pictures his hand, recalls its touch on her breast. Her mind skitters, locks out love.

She rises, unsteady, sits to watch him bowing over his hot work. The sound of file grates. The smell of fresh-turned earth aggravates, makes her hands itch. She knows the feel of the file, its heft in her hand. Before the fire—

These six months inside.
I am winter. She fidgets, touches her good hand to hair stubby as the sound of plow he stumps back into ground. Frank loops the file to his waist. She knows it will rub against his thigh, caress, smoothe a swath against his jeans. She fingers that warm line, imagines, moans.

He stands, stretches, arches his back, walks to the well, unhitches overall straps, draws the shirt over his head, slow cranks down the bucket, muscles bunching. Then he bends, splashing water on his face, on his fair hair, darkening it.

His torso.
Strong, twisted cord of backbone.

Return

Nothing was ever so hard. Every chore takes three, four times longer, marred results far from perfect. She grits her teeth till her jaws hurt.

Frank is all patience, all helpfulness. Curt, she resists, snaps, sounds a crank. Admits to herself his love may still be real, knows it gnaws at the edges of her heart.

She plans to plant black cohosh, blackberry, deadly nightshade, juniper, pokeweed, yarrow.

Nancy Dew Taylor’s chapbook of poems, Stepping on Air, was published by Emrys Press in 2008. Born in Lake City, South Carolina, Taylor is a graduate of Furman University, with an M.A. from UNC at Chapel Hill and a Ph.D. from the University of South Carolina. She has taught English in the public schools of North and South Carolina and at Randolph-Macon Woman’s College, the University of Puerto Rico, the University of South Carolina, and Lander University. For almost fourteen years, she taught the medical humanities to residents and faculty at the Greenville (SC) Hospital System, where she was a medical editor.

Taylor’s short stories have been published in The South Carolina Review and Sargasso, a Caribbean journal. Her poems have appeared in Appalachian Journal, Kalliope, Scribble, The South Carolina Review, Timber Creek Review, Chebacco: The Magazine of the Mount Desert Island Historical Society, Tar River Poetry, and New England Watershed and in several anthologies, including Pinesong, Mountain Time, A Millennial Sampler of South Carolina Poetry, and Contemporary Appalachia, volume 3 of The Southern Poetry Anthology. She was a finalist in the 2006 Rita Dove Poetry Competition in Salem College’s Center for Women Writers’ National Literary Awards and in 2008 was named honorable mention in the same competition. She lives in Greenville, SC.
Ulmann to Niles*
1929

I want her from this angle,
dressed in whatever she wants,
her white, ropy skin shining
against all this dark order.
As backdrop, that chestnut oak—
rent, mangled, and scarred, its trunk
cruelly carved as her face.
Afternoon sun the best.

This garden, hidden, tells us
all we need to know of her—
look: Shakespeare’s rosemary, thyme,
a gourmet’s coriander,
dill, parsley, oregano.
A wild spirit inhabits
its owner: see how she chose
lush pink peonies, velvet
gardenias, white, fragrant,
these small but blowzy plants
that will not be restrained
but throw themselves at the air
with never a fear?

Yet, see?
something’s not right about this
newest area: too-straight
rows, odd plants—deadly nightshade.
She will not let herself love
this place, is uprooting things.

It’s that change in her I want
to catch, mirroring her loss.
Like the indentations left
on her tree when someone ripped
off old wisteria vines.

*Doris Ulmann, raised in Baltimore,
traveled across Appalachia photographing
its people. Her traveling companion, John
Jacob Niles, gathered its folk songs.

Ellen Follows Ulmann
into Deep Woods

I prefer to be alone.
She knows it and how I love
dirt and trees almost as much
as an empty room. I go,
unhesitating, with her,
a total stranger—bony,
tall, her hair stuffed carelessly
under a wide-brimmed straw hat.
I carry her camera
stand, being at ease with things
askew. We go into deep
woods. She will recognize, when
we get there, the place.

She gazes
at me frankly—ha—not like
the others, eyes averted
but with quick, covert glances.
She likes that I want to be
photographed by her, solo,
unashamed, by a single
eye like mine. She doesn’t know
yet I won’t keep a copy.
A negative, Ulmann calls it. Appropriate, I think.

Frank Leaves a Note in
Ellen’s Apron Pocket

This is your métier, not
mine, but your eye might see part
of me if I write. Forgive
my halting words.

I love you.
I love each of your bones bent
on having your way. I love,
centered on the inner wrist
and winding from neck to hip
(silver as sequins on that blue
dress you wore when first we met),
your seared, scarred skin that pulls back,
rippling, from near touch. I ache
to make my way down that path
to the secret place we had
before you locked me out.

That place is ours, not yours.
Let me in.

Oak Dresser

She stares as it sways, though roped
tight to poles on four corners
of the wagon, the bedroom
suite Frank had promised.

Right off
the shape the mirror holds stirs
whirls of resentment and rage.

While two slim strangers untie
it, Frank turns clear eyes on her,
approaches. She can barely
speak: Listen here. I said no
mirror. You think staring will
salve, help me accept this face—
I’ve heard you tell your mother
as much. I’ll not have it. That eye
and mine will not inhabit
the same space.

It’s not for you.
A strange inflection, so cold
she stops breathing, feels ice creep
into her knotted stomach.
It’s for the girls— His voice flat,
his hard eye jarring her own,
not for you—three words knifing.
Sudden, grim images swirl:
the scared self she wants to hide
from, her scarred face and body,
Frank with a different wife.
LINDA FLOWERS LITERARY AWARD

The North Carolina Humanities Council invites original, unpublished entries of fiction, nonfiction, or poetry for the 2012 Linda Flowers Literary Award. Submissions should celebrate excellence in the humanities and reflect the experiences of people who, like Linda Flowers, not only identify with North Carolina, its people and cultures, but also explore its problems and promises.

For complete submission guidelines and prize details, see the North Carolina Humanities website at www.nchumanities.org. Questions may be directed to Donovan McKnight at (336) 334-4770 or dmcknight@nchumanities.org.

DEADLINE: postmark date August 15, 2012

The North Carolina Humanities Council was privileged to have Linda Flowers as one of its members from 1992 to 1998.

That my book about Eastern North Carolina might touch a chord with some people... I had not anticipated. What [they] are responding to in Thowed Away, I think, is its human dimensions: the focus on real men and women having to make their way in the face of a changing, onrushing and typically uncaring world... This humanistic apprehension, I tell my students, is as necessary for living fully as anything else they may ever hope to have.

~Linda Flowers, in a letter to the North Carolina Humanities Council Membership Committee, July 1992

PREVIOUS RECIPIENTS

Karen Gilchrist (2001)
Joseph Bathanti (2002)
Heather Ross Miller (2003)
Barbara Presnelli (2004)
Kermit Turner (2005)
Kathy Watts (2006)
Susan Weinberg Vogel (2007)
Kristin Hemmy (2008)
Katey Schultz (2009)
Traci Lazenby Elliot (2010)

Read more previous winning submissions at www.nchumanitites.org/linda-flowers.

Nancy Dew Taylor, Reflections on Writing

The lives depicted in the poems are like those of the people I came to know during the summers my family spent east of Asheville: strong, resilient, self-reliant, loving. I hope they can see themselves in these poems — and can feel my admiration and my gratitude. This sequence of poems about a young couple living on a farm near Old Fort in the early part of the 20th century began when my friend Bill Perry told me the story of John May’s father’s weekly trips on foot from Old Fort to Ridgecrest to check on his widowed mother. The trip seemed epic to me. I’d hiked it down but never would have made it up, and I wrote the first poem in this series about that six-mile, uphill hike. I knew the Mill Creek area, and I knew the railroad, too. I had long been fascinated by the photographs of Doris Ulmann and decided it was quite possible she might have ridden the train, gotten off at Old Fort, and taken photographs of people living in the mountains nearby. Ron Rash introduced me to the form, a seven-syllable line with internal rhyme that came from the Welsh epic, The Mabinogion.

2011 SELECTION COMMITTEE

David Ford
host of Triad Arts Up Close, 88.5 WFDD

Scott Owens
poet and editor of Wild Goose Poetry Review

Steve Sumerford
Assistant Director of Greensboro Public Library

Mac Whatley
Humanities Council trustee and architectural historian

Ridgecrest to Old Fort
1931

This snaking trail twists like thought.

On these trips he’s taught himself not to rail or brood. Today, though, he’s overwrought, thinking only of Ellen’s turning to him in sleep two nights back.

Feeling her close, he’d gone hard, tried not to move. He knew when she woke, felt her stiffen with realization, pull back.

He turned and reached out for her. She rose and left him alone.

So anxious is he for home, he’s left his mother’s early, hoping to see pleased surprise in Ellen’s eye. Now he stops, prepares his mind and face. Steadies his twirling brain.

Crossing rain-swollen Mill Creek, he steps with care on wet rocks. As though one false move could send hope and his whole world whirling.

At Mill Creek

She gives him one more half hour because he is never late then sets alone to where creek and path converge.

In leafy light, she almost misses what divides water near the big rock: Frank, his leg bent back, bone and blood evident. She kneels beside him, kisses his face—cold, so cold. Her body shakes. She must pull him out—can’t move him with this nub, useless arm. She slides his head on her lap, watches eyeballs roll. Rubs, rubs his face, calls to him.

She hears a high scream, then another. In the end recognizes the voice as her own.

Steve Sumerford