

NC CROSSROADS

A Publication of the North Carolina Humanities Council—Weaving Cultures and Communities
Winner of the 1999 Helen & Martin Schwartz Prize for Excellence in Public Programming

ISSN 1094-2351

Volume 6, Issue 3

December 2002

LAND OF AMNESIA

by Joseph Bathanti

Winner of the 2002 Linda Flowers Prize

With an introduction by Robert Morgan

I swear, given even this much
of a fool's chance, at the end
I'd beg to cross one last time
the Rocky River into Anson County.

I'd ask you to come;
and if you'd so consent,
I'd foreswear tobacco and shun drink.
But the bill of sale
this time would be forever.

continued inside



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Introduction

In Joseph Bathanti's poem "Running" we find a thrilling and unusual device which I'll call an *embedded text*, where one text is scattered as phrases inside a larger narrative. In this case it is "Hail Mary," broken into pieces and spread throughout the longer account of running. Familiar words of the prayer are interspersed and touched like beads of a rosary. The effect is electric, the excitement of the action and unfolding story compounded with the liturgical beseeching of the prayer. Nowhere in this suite of poems do we find the strength and depth of the speaker's quest for meaning more powerfully evoked. The two voices mesh in a responsive poetry of supplication, celebration, the perfect conclusion to the sequence, where anger and confusion, allegiance and ambiguity, are recounted and confronted. The poem enacts the quest not only for meaning but for redemption, for the resolution of wholeness.

The poem "Land of Amnesia" recounts a journey into the past, to the interior country, toward origins. It enacts the attempt to return, which is the way we usually go forward in our lives. "The Note" is a poem inspired by an angry muse, exploring the moral ambiguity of adultery, for example, in a world that God has apparently abandoned. In a time when divine love seems to be lost, human love may be our best, our only, substitute.

The poem "Rendition" dramatizes the anxiety of parenthood, viewing the world of experience from the perspective of the father. It illustrates the uncertainty that has replaced the sense of authority in our culture. "The Haybaler" further explores the return to a landscape of rusted farm implements, ruined acres, a man who has lost an arm, the pathos of the unloved. Here memory, formerly called the Mother of the Muses, is itself a wasteland. In "Forgotten County" we encounter an even darker past, the memory of slavery and lynching, the vexed map of our own history, which cannot be tucked away behind sentiment or forgetfulness.

Joseph Bathanti's poems are difficult at first, and they explore difficult experiences and themes. It has been said that poetry is the truest record of our consciousness and conscience, our struggle to know ourselves. Poetry celebrates both by soaring and by delving, and helps us to remember what we need to remember, what we have forgotten that we know. Poetry makes us feel less alone in our labors, and connects us through the luster of words to the larger community across time. Poetry provides the chorus to our story, in language that is memorable, expressing both fears and aspirations. Poetry joins our time with the timeless, reminding us that everything is linked and alive in the imagination. Poetry finds the language of passion in the idiom of our own days, in the truths that are beyond time.

I am pleased that Joseph Bathanti takes us to that place, in a voice that is authentic and immediate, through the detours and confusions, toward the further recognitions, the echo and pause, the promise and the poise of truths that make us free.

Robert Morgan

Robert Morgan, a native of the North Carolina mountains, was raised on land settled by his Welsh ancestors. An accomplished novelist and poet, he is the recipient of the James B. Hanes Poetry Prize, the North Carolina Award in Literature, and the Jacaranda Review Fiction Prize. He is the author of the novel Gap Creek: The Story of a Marriage (Algonquin Books) and numerous books of poetry, including Groundwork (Gnomon Press), Land Diving and Topsoil Road (both published by Louisiana State University Press). He is the Kappa Alpha Professor of English at Cornell University, where he has taught since 1971.

LAND OF AMNESIA

I swear, given even this much
of a fool's chance, at the end
I'd beg to cross one last time
the Rocky River into Anson County.

I'd ask you to come;
and if you'd so consent,
I'd foreswear tobacco and shun drink.
But the bill of sale
this time would be forever.

No last minute dickering over the route,
no trips to the conjure woman
like Lot's lying wife.
I'll not have you looking back.

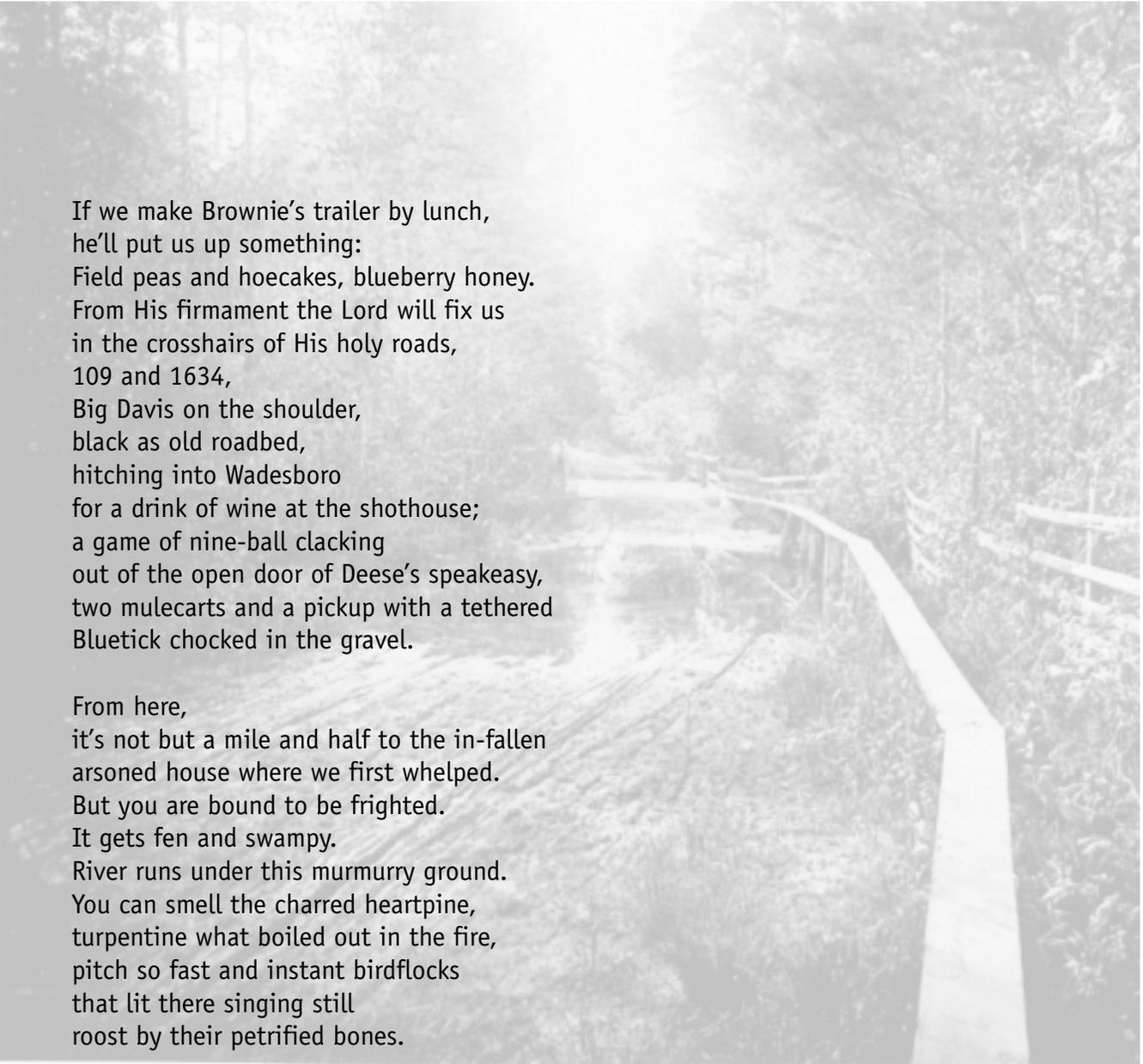
We'll hold Jesus to his writ
promise of forgiveness.
Not in such tongue as folks might reckon,
but signs, bodement:
Two nights of bloody sun
over All Souls Church,
shades in the vesture of deer,
your hand in mine atop Lord Anson's Bible.

Over Cedar Hill and Pinkston
we'll shin the tar roads and foxtrots,
critter-quit but for snakes in oatgrass.
Even a mincing moon off cotton will yield
light enough to walk by.

In the morning I'll be there
with sweet milk. We'll watch the sun
break out of the cropshroud
like a borning baby, lustering the brake,
wild banshee turkeys sailing out of it.



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If we make Brownie's trailer by lunch,
he'll put us up something:
Field peas and hoecakes, blueberry honey.
From His firmament the Lord will fix us
in the crosshairs of His holy roads,
109 and 1634,
Big Davis on the shoulder,
black as old roadbed,
hitching into Wadesboro
for a drink of wine at the shothouse;
a game of nine-ball clacking
out of the open door of Deese's speakeasy,
two mulecarts and a pickup with a tethered
Bluetick chocked in the gravel.

From here,
it's not but a mile and half to the in-fallen
arsoned house where we first whelped.
But you are bound to be frighted.
It gets fen and swampy.
River runs under this murmurry ground.
You can smell the charred heartpine,
turpentine what boiled out in the fire,
pitch so fast and instant birdflocks
that lit there singing still
roost by their petrified bones.

Nailed across the door is a whiffletree.
Mrs. Little's thorns still thrive.
The old bay Star, dead two decades,
canters in the pasture. Cotton
fetches two bits a bale.
In the sky dart lights of other craft.
There's no one we can tell about this,
no one who would ever allow it.

Behind us pitches the crazed compass needle,
our lives of other counties long forgotten,
burnt up like hairlocks in a candle.

It is here, my best beloved,
we'll build on ruin.

The Note

I found it in the dew-soaked grass
beneath the apple tree, another bit
of morning trash, along with the fast
food wrappers, cigarette packets,
the inexplicable lone shoe
thrown to our yard in the night.

But this scrap is a note
written on stationary which,
in the lower left corner has
printed the footprints-in-the-sand poem—
I don't know what else to call it—
by Margaret Fishback Powers.

Everyone's seen it:
A man dreams he is strolling along
the beach with God,
their footprints side by side.
As his entire life spills out
in filmic retrospect,
he notices, however,
that during particularly rough times,
there is only one set of prints.
The man is angry, justifiably so,
it could be argued, and desolate.
Why, he wonders, would the Savior choose
such times to abandon him?
But Jesus, when confronted with what
amounts to betrayal, replies
that when only one set of tracks was visible
it was then, during those bad times,
that he had been carrying the man.

The hand in which it's written is careful,
perfectly legible, even practiced,
but filled with elemental spelling
and grammar errors:
"I can't take no more,"
"I can't hide this no more,"
"won't take not one thing for what we shared";
"threw" for *through*, "hole" for *whole*, "to" for *too*.

What it divulges is minimal.
A woman calling it quits after a three day fling.
"Am I wrong for loving a married man?"
She mentions a few names I don't recognize.
The signature, though I can make out
"love" and a wry smiley face next to it,
is water-smearred and torn.
It's got to be someone around here.

Our neighbors are sensible, Christian people
It is not that they are above adultery;
they simply don't have the stomach for it;
and none I know—
the undertaker, the miller,
the retired prison guard, the dairyman,
their wives—would ever commit
such naked sentiment to paper:
"I love you
more than I have ever loved anyone."
"I hope you get what you want out of life
because I didn't?"
"I'm by myself now and forever."

Who would allow such a document
to float out of her hands?
Since discovering it,
I've kept it on me at all times.
When I sleep I hide it under the Bible
in the top drawer of the nightstand,
my husband sleeping innocently beside me.
Like the woman in the note,
"I am giving it all up to the Lord,"
Lord underlined twice.



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RENDITION

Getting to the old Anson house by wagon
on the gullied two-track gripped in lynched corn
bottoms us into a sawgrass sump.
From there we walk, praying
it's turned off too cold for the mocassins
that rope the river shelf.

"We had you here," I tell the boy.
In one foxed corner of his dream life
he remembers from an infant's fancy
the house, a hundred years haunted
by barrenness before he arrived.

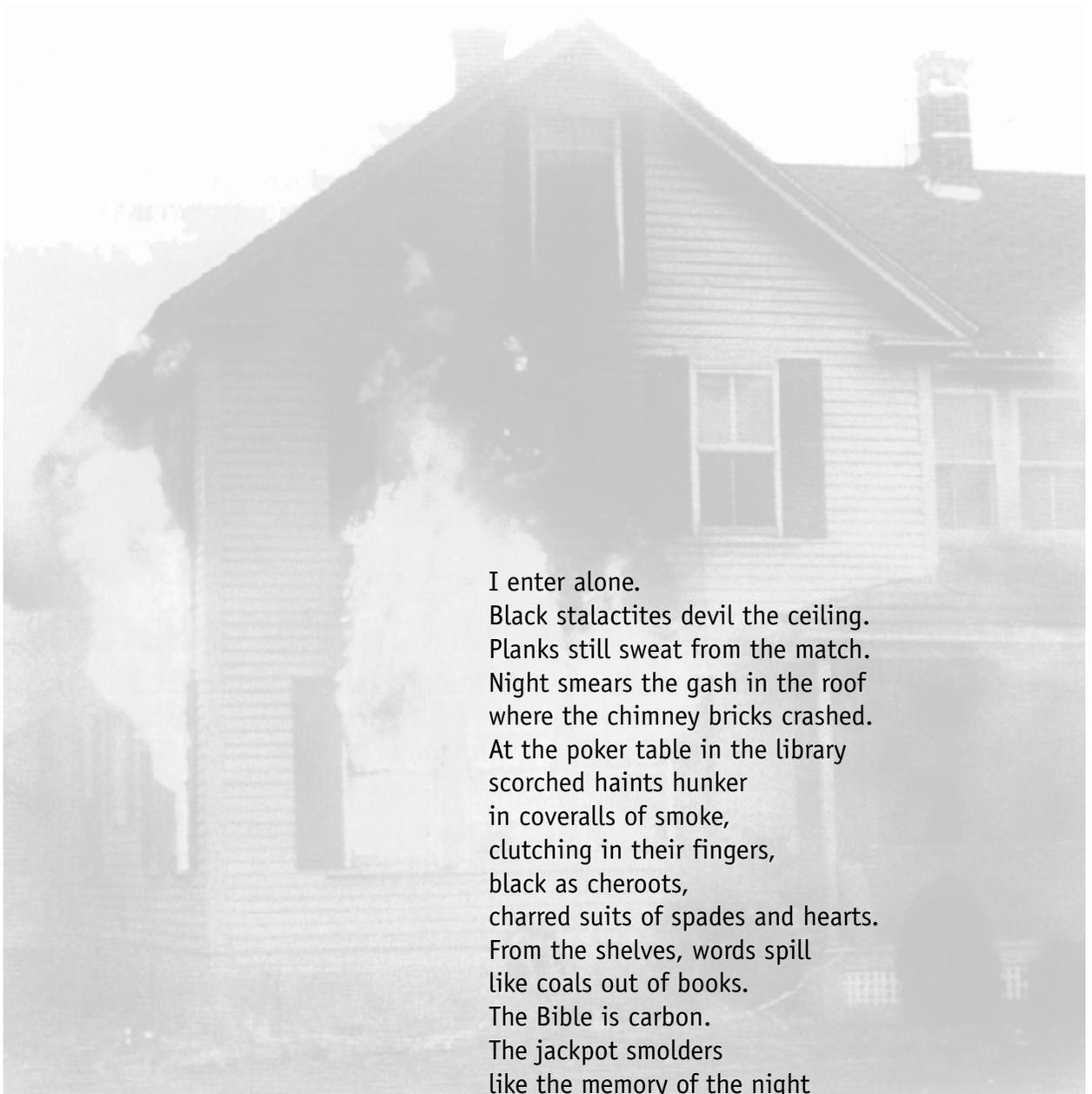
When he was born the black croppers
from Lilesville came like thurifers
spreading beneath the house snake sulphur,
the color of sun and bad-milk-smelling
to run off the mating vipers.
They thought the little white baby
was Jesus come
to resurrect the corn.

This too I tell him.
He doesn't quite fathom it, though
he knows it's a story—
like his birth home
we trample on toward in the dark—
a rendition of the way things may have been.

From a distance it looks the same,
but we smell what's left of it:
shrunken by fire, the arsonist's flight,
three days' rain and the night
wall at its throat.



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I enter alone.
Black stalactites devil the ceiling.
Planks still sweat from the match.
Night smears the gash in the roof
where the chimney bricks crashed.
At the poker table in the library
scorched haints hunker
in coveralls of smoke,
clutching in their fingers,
black as cheroots,
charred suits of spades and hearts.
From the shelves, words spill
like coals out of books.
The Bible is carbon.
The jackpot smolders
like the memory of the night
I laid at the hearth
with the boy's mother and took fire.

My son waits for me in the spot
where I used to loiter with the moon
on my head, wondering
what he might be pondering in his mother's womb,
He watches deer sweep
over the swales to Savannah Creek.
"We can fix it up and come back," he says.
In the woods, torchlight flickers.
A wildcat screams.
"Yes," I answer.

THE HAYBALER

Wandering an elbow of cotton, long-harvested,
straggled with soiled white swabs on spindles
and limish-yellow, pollen-slick leaves
given over after a cold snowy spring
to heatspore. Blessed rot.
Raiment aplenty for the dying cropland.
Glittering work the harrow makes of quartz.

In its middle roots the rusted haybaler,
manufactured in St. Joseph, Missouri,
a Canadian patent stamped into it.
Four rungs lead to a platform, gibbet high,
a vertical conveyor chain,
withered locks of timothy
in its bloody broken teeth.

I can't help but think of Waite Trickham
at the White Store Cafe in Anson County
every day at noon dinner.
With his only hand removing
his banded straw hat,
setting it on the table,
then reaching with it for Mrs. Trickham's hand
to return thanks in bowed silence.



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And she, mouth a slit, cutting his meat,
lovely in that demure Southern suffering mien,
how sealed as if in paraffin was her heart
like a murdered saint's.
For half a century
she'd not been held with two arms.
Waite's hanging sleeve was stitched, I tell you,
as though each morning, like ablution,
she hemmed the stump into it.
He remained shy,
his face blunt, burnt clay.

That haybaler took his arm,
and still it takes it.
Takes it as the clouds slowly shift,
white flannel slipping from blue shoulders,
bare breasts a crow spraddles
like a boy's first crucifix.

FORGOTTEN COUNTY

A map is a Manichaen tract,
a web of lines and numbers
chiding the spirit
for detaching itself from matter—
nothing so determined as a tar road
boiling through the green swamp,
an empty sack of Bulldog Potash,
a man's black boot ravelled in shed snakeskin.

Like the cursor on a Ouija Board,
we divagate the scorched fist of **Forgotten**.
No bold legend decks it.
Not one "multi-lane highway,"
no points of interest.
Its four towns,
mere eyelets on "hard-surface roads,"
boast only the missing.
A jagged blue vein of water writhes
through them, but goes unnamed.

Remorse is the county seat:
senescent, once-lordly houses,
crutched, braced, paint scroffing
like caked rouge on the cheeks of the D.A.R.
In **Deadhand** dozes the ramparts
of a razed Confederate prison.
Hooker: after a Yankee general
or an octaroon whore?

And then dear **Pharoah**:
named for a slave whelped in a tobacco silo
by a tetch white girl
from the county's best family.
Two weeks old
the infant washed up in a hurricane
on the banks of the Pamlico,
trussed by a lynch-knot to a coping stone,
a cross chiseled in his forehead,
and was reincarnated as the town.
You say it couldn't happen?
A dead boy could not come back as a place.
But I say, map or no, by Bible or bone,
no one knows what makes this land—
or any other.
For dust to dust, water to water,
and the bastards are dropped in the sea
from whence they return as whole towns.



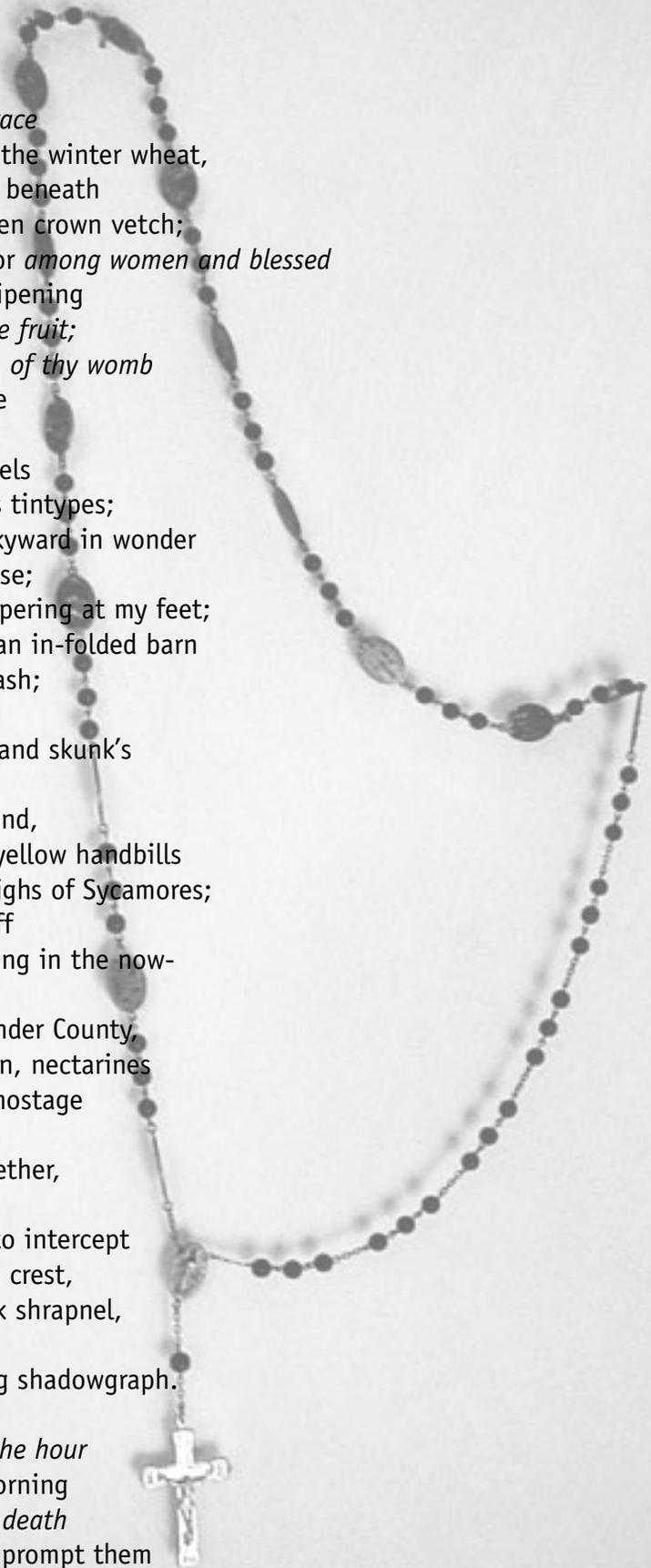
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Forgetfulness lifts an arthritic hand
from every abandoned plowfarm we pass.
In that capitulant amnesia of the road,
my family sleeps. Only the kiss
of time will wake them.
Like a lost dog, I stop
and mark my milepost with urine
next to a cornfield gagged in purple morning glory,
stupified by drought.
In a brackish ditch, turtles
line a log like an abacus.

The heat takes me to task for being human,
not some creature that can't count past hardship.
Still I am happy,
happy as I've ever been, racing nightfall
for the vast amnesty of the Atlantic,
poring over my flagging memory
for the little I have known
of the soul's geography:
stumbling about the earth in ignorance
and the always prayer that it continue.

RUNNING

(For Leon)



I recite the rosary
Hail Mary when I run,
a wooden bead *full of grace*
per so many meters: for the winter wheat,
coy *blessed* barely green beneath
the purple *art thou* Lenten crown vetch;
the sun that rations color *among women and blessed*
sitting in its cupboard ripening
like a pomegranate *is the fruit*;
the frayed, porous moon *of thy womb*
dissolving on the tongue
of blue morning *Jesus*;
cows, musk of their bowels
scenting the fog, still as tintypes;
deer *Holy Mary* gazing skyward in wonder
at the cry of Canada geese;
papery corn shucks whispering at my feet;
strips of loose tin from an in-folded barn
thundering in the windlash;
my print *Mother of God*
alongside the raccoon's and skunk's
as I leap the creek bed
and cross Stikeleather land,
posted black letters on yellow handbills
tacked to the shaven thighs of Sycamores;
chicken houses a mile off
on Midway Road whitening in the now-
lightening horizon *pray*;
and far beyond in Alexander County,
on looming Fox Mountain, nectarines
that will hold migrants hostage
all spring flower.
I gulp another quart of ether,
dig *for us sinners*
up the steep farm road to intercept
the risen sun, sprint the crest,
my chest filled with pink shrapnel,
and fall into it,
a stretched and sweating shadowgraph.
For this searing instant
one chases *now and at the hour*
in the darkness every morning
the improbability *of our death*
that legs with hearts to prompt them
may keep lurching, decade upon decade,
chaplet upon chaplet, toward salvation *Amen*.

POETRY RESOURCES

The North Carolina Poetry Society aims to foster the writing of poetry; to bring together in meetings of mutual interest and fellowship the poets of North Carolina; to encourage the study, writing, and publication of poetry; to develop a public taste for the reading of and appreciation of poetry; and to expose diverse populations to poetry.

The society publishes a newsletter and offers workshops and annual contests. Its three annual meetings are free and open to the public.

For more information, contact Bill Blackley at: 336-835-4630
bblackley@aisn.net
or visit the Society's website:
<http://www.sleepycreek.org/poetry>

The Poetry Council of North Carolina is a forum for new and established poets to express themselves and be recognized for their achievements.

The Council promotes an annual contest and secures notable writers and teachers as judges for the seven contest categories, including the best book for the year. Along with monetary prizes, certificates, and publication in *Bay Leaves*, winners are invited to attend the awards luncheon, usually held in early October.

Janice Sullivan, President
JanLSull@aol.com
336-282-4032

The North Carolina Writers' Network: Founded in 1985 as a nonprofit literary arts service organization, the North Carolina Writers' Network connects, encourages, and educates poets, fiction writers, essayists, playwrights, technical writers, and journalists of all ages, backgrounds, and skill levels.

<http://www.ncwriters.org>
919-967-9540

The North Carolina Arts Council awards more than 1300 grants annually to nonprofit organizations and artists. A division of the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, the NCAC offers guidance and assistance to the groups and individuals that make up North Carolina's arts community.

<http://www.ncarts.org>
919-733-2111

Literary journals: North Carolina is home to a number of premier literary journals, including those listed below. Literary journals can be found at some public libraries and bookstores or obtained on a subscription basis.

Asheville Poetry Review
<http://www.artbarge.com/poetry/asheville.htm>

Carolina Quarterly
<http://www.unc.edu/depts/cqonline>

Cold Mountain Review
Department of English
Appalachian State University
Boone, NC 28608
coldmountain@appstate.edu

Crucible
Terrence Grimes, ed.
tgrimes@e-mail.barton.edu

Greensboro Review
<http://www.uncg.edu/eng/mfa/review/review.htm>

Lyricist
David Tillman
P.O. Box 220
Buies Creek, NC 27506

North Carolina Literary Review
<http://www.ecu.edu/nclr>

Pembroke Magazine
<http://www.uncp.edu/pembrokemagazine>

Sandhills Review
Stephen Smith, editor
Sandhills Community College
220 Airport Road
Pinehurst, NC 28374
910-695-3875

Tar River Poetry
Department of English
East Carolina University
Greenville, NC 27858
<http://personal.ecu.edu/makuckp/home.html>

Essays on contemporary southern poetry:

Chappell, Fred. "Not as a Leaf: Southern Poetry and the Innovation of Tradition." *Georgia Review* (Fall 1997), pp. 477-489.

Kirby, David. "Is there a Southern Poetry?" *The Southern Review* (Autumn 1994), pp. 869-890.

McFee, Michael. "Poetry, World War II to Present." *The Companion to Southern Literature*, Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda H. MacKethan, eds. Louisiana State University Press, 2002, pp. 665-669.

Prunty, Wyatt. "At Home and Abroad: Southern Poets with Passports and Memory," *The Southern Review* (Autumn 1994), pp. 745-750.

Smith, Dave. "Cornering the Southern Poem." *The Southern Review* (Autumn 1994), pp. 643-49.

Smith, Dave. "There's A Bird Hung Around My Neck: Observations on Contemporary Southern Poetry." *Five Points* (Spring/Summer 1997), pp. 115-135.

Anthologies of southern poetry:

Buckner, Sally, ed. *Word and Witness: One Hundred Years of North Carolina Poetry*. Carolina Academic Press, 1999.

McFee, Michael, ed. *The Language They Speak Is Things to Eat: Poems by Fifteen Contemporary North Carolina Poets*. University of North Carolina Press, 1994.

Stokesbury, Leon, ed. *The Made Thing: An Anthology of Contemporary Southern Poetry*. University of Arkansas Press.

Additional works:

Morgan, Robert. *Good Measure: Essays, Interviews, and Notes on Poetry*. Louisiana State University Press, 1993.



Born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, **Joseph Bathanti** is Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Appalachian State University. Prior to appointment at ASU, Bathanti was a member of the English faculty at Mitchell Community College, where he also was writer-in-residence and humanities division chair for more than eight years. Bathanti is the author of four books of poetry: *Communion Partners*, *Anson County*, *The Feast of All Saints*, and *This Metal*, which was nominated for the National Book Award and won the 1997 Oscar Arnold Young Award for best book from the North Carolina Poetry Council. His first novel, *East Liberty*, won the 2000-2001 Carolina Novel Award from Banks Channel Books in Wilmington, NC. He is the winner of the 2002 Sherwood Anderson Award, and his poetry, fiction and nonfiction have appeared in numerous national literary reviews and journals.

The Linda Flowers Prize is awarded annually to the author of an original literary work that addresses a public humanities theme in an especially noteworthy way. The selection of the prize-winning entry is based on its capacity to capture the richness of North Carolina, its people and cultures. Established in 2000, the prize honors the memory of Dr. Linda Flowers (1944-2000), who served on the NCHC with great distinction from 1992-1998. Linda was the author of the acclaimed book, *Thrown Away—Failures of Progress in Eastern North Carolina*, and "Coming Home," *NC CROSSROADS*, 1998.



North Carolina Humanities Council

Weaving Cultures and Communities

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Editor: Lisa Yarger

Copy Editor: Katherine M. Kubel

Design & Production: PRINT TO FIT

Publisher: Harlan Joel Gradin, Associate Director, NCHC

Cover photo by Rob Amberg

Thanks to Sally Buckner, Lucinda MacKethan, Robert Morgan, Marsha Warren, and the Linda Flowers Prize Committee.

Joseph Bathanti wishes to express special gratitude to Harlan Gradin, Katherine Kubel and Lisa Yarger.

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NC CROSSROADS is a publication of the North Carolina Humanities Council (NCHC). Serving North Carolina for over 30 years, NCHC is a non-profit foundation and state-based affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. NCHC's mission is to support public programs that address fundamental questions about who we as human beings are and how we can live together in the world we share.

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