

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.

His limp
nearly gone. She tries to keep
her mind aligned, vows she won't
look at him again. Yet yearns.

So much about this soldier
draws, knits her heart to his life.
Wit, tact, lack of pretension,
height enough for her 5'10.

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.

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.

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.

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.
The world flicks bright on, then off.
Earth trembles and rain drums down.
He sleeps finally, when rain
turns steady, softens to drips,
not yet knowing his cabin
has been struck, burned to the ground.

Come first morning he rises,
brushes the crust from his clothes.
He'll have to rush his mother's
visit, return home today.
Ellen, the twins, and baby
Franklin expect him.

Day Two

Dig. Build coffin, drive home
nails with strokes like shots. Lay in
Franklin's charred remains. Carry
box uphill, shrug off John's hand,
ignore his proffered help.
Glare shut the preacher's praying,
the women's voices singing
dirges. Fling dirt clods, grunt.
Bare teeth, snatch the twins from Sue,
stride away toward home. Stop. No,
no home. Toward Ellen, death-like.
Transformed. Innocent of all woe.

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, rosy 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 blowsy 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.

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 brai n.

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 out 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.

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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 Thrown 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

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*.

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