



# MC CROSSROADS

A PUBLICATION OF THE NORTH CAROLINA HUMANITIES COUNCIL

## Tongue-Tied

*Winner of the 2005 Linda Flowers Prize*

by Kermit Turner

**Driving back from the western end of the county Fred Cooke started to think again about his son's accident. His hands grew shaky on the wheel and he felt his pockets for a tobacco plug, thinking chewing might calm his nerves. But his pockets were empty ...**

THE LINDA FLOWERS PRIZE celebrates excellence in the humanities achieved by people like her, those who not only identify with our state, but who explore the promises, the problems, the experiences, the meanings, in lives that have been shaped by North Carolina and its many cultures.

## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The setting, characters and events in this story are fictional and have been imagined by the author.

The Linda Flowers Prize winner is selected by a committee that includes members of the North Carolina Humanities Council, faculty from NC Wesleyan College, where Dr. Flowers taught, and outside reviewers. Viewpoints expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent those of the Council.



# Tongue-Tied

by Kermit Turner

Driving back from the western end of the county Fred Cooke started to think again about his son's accident. His hands grew shaky on the wheel and he felt his pockets for a tobacco plug, thinking chewing might calm his nerves. But his pockets were empty, he must have left his last plug on the mantelpiece at home.

What he really craved was a drink, but he had not had one for nearly two months and, like many times in the past, he had sworn that would be his last, because with him one drink was never enough, nor two or three or even a day of drinking. With this latest trouble on his mind he might go on drinking for a week and miss work again. That would mean food off the table, clothes off the children's backs. He didn't want them going ragged and cold to school this winter.

When he reached the crossroads at Cat Square, he decided to stop and buy tobacco, though he usually bought it at the country store near home. The rear springs of his aging

pickup groaned as he eased off the pavement into the gravelled lot. In the rearview mirror he could see the two armchairs swaying where he had tied them upside down on top of the

sofa. The sofa and chairs were worn and dirty and he did not look forward to tearing off the fouled fabric and padding. But he needed extra income, always needed it. Doing upholstery evenings and Saturdays on top of a forty-hour

factory week was not a good life, but he saw no end in sight. And for half the year there was part-time farming too. None of the boys was old enough yet to take over the plowing of corn and cotton fields.

Fred stepped stiffly down from the muddy, dented pickup and stretched his arms above his head. He was a medium-size brown-haired man, his waist thin in ill-fitting gray workshirt and pants, his factory clothing. He stood for a minute looking westward to where the sun touched a ridgeline beyond brown stubble fields, then he turned and mounted the steps of the clapboard general store.



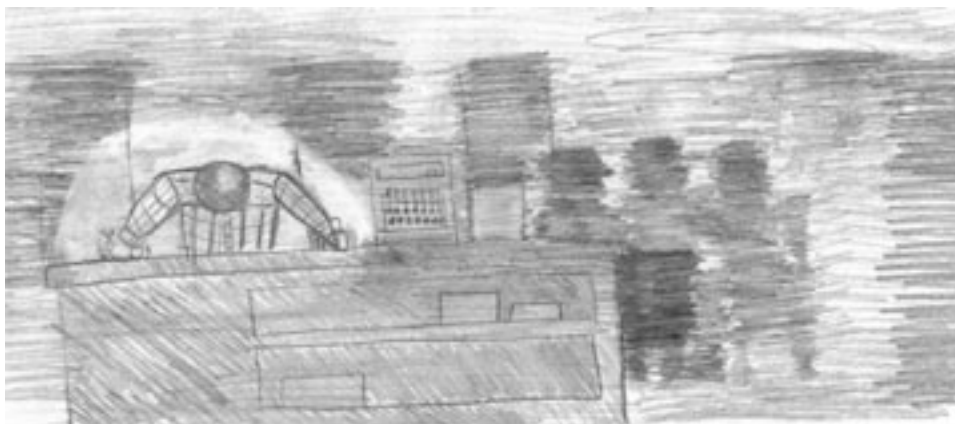
In the center of the store three men were sitting in slat-backed chairs beside an iron stove. The air was dry and warm. Fred nodded hello and went on toward the counter.

“Yeah,” one of the men said, “that’s what I heard. Just shot him point-blank in the back, close up.”

Fred Cooke stiffened in mid-stride, his breath catching, his chest and stomach tightening.

“His cousin and the colored boy was wrasslin’,” the man went on, “and the colored boy had him down, settin’ on top of him.”

“Well, sounds like he just didn’t like seein’ a colored boy get the best of his cousin,” another slow voice said.



Fred Cooke stood frozen, his rigid back toward the speakers, his fists clinched, fighting an urge to turn and smack the speaker across the face and set them all straight about the shooting. It was an accident, his son just a child, had never used guns, didn’t know what he was doing.

“What can I do for you, fella?”

The face behind the counter wavered and

blurred as if under water. Fred took a moment to bring it into focus and remember why he was there. “Chewin’ tobacco,” he muttered. “Where’s the chewin’ tobacco?”

Pale blue eyes in a round face studied him, then a thick hand motioned to the end of the counter. Fred stepped to his right and stood staring at the tobacco cartons, still listening to the men by the stove. He longed to turn and tell the story, tell how torn up his boy Craig had been after the accident, how he cried and cried and couldn’t eat and they had to give him a big dose of cough syrup with codeine to calm him down and make him sleep, afraid he would make himself sick or do something to hurt himself.

“See what you want, fella?”

Fred turned his head slowly and looked at the heavysset man behind the counter. “Yeah,” he said and looked back at the cartons, but it took some seconds for him to bring the brand names into

focus. He picked up a dark rectangle with “Apple” in red letters and a little red apple below on the cellophane wrapper.

His fingers trembled as he sorted out change. “You alright, friend?” the proprietor asked.

“Oh yeah, yeah,” Fred mumbled. “Just tired. Long day.” He tried to look at the man

and smile, but quickly dropped his eyes and turned away.

The men by the stove were still speculating on what must have happened in the woods when the boys were out shooting. Why had the two younger boys been allowed to tag along with their teenage cousin and the black boy? What had started the scuffle?

Why couldn't he just speak up? Fred wondered. Tell them that his nephew was good friends with the black boy, whose family were tenants on his wife's brother's farm, that it was just a friendly wrestling match, that his nephew had been careless and left the rifle loaded and the safety catch off when he stood it against the tree. That his ten-year-old son had just been playing like in cowboy-and-Indians when he picked up the rifle.

But he did not trust himself to speak; he was too wrought up, his nerves on edge, hadn't slept much since the accident, and if he spoke and the men acted like they didn't believe him he might lose control.

"Somethin' else I can help you with?"

The voice cut through Fred's coiling thoughts and he realized he had stopped and was staring at nothing. "Oh no, no, I guess not," he said and went out the door, across the porch lined with weathered wooden rockers and down to the gravelled lot.

The sun was gone now behind the ridge and crimson light flooded the early-autumn sky. Fred stopped and leaned back against the truck door, clasping his arms across his chest to stop his shaking hands and to ward off the evening chill. It was good he hadn't tried to

talk. He could picture doubt in the men's eyes and hear his voice desperate and angry.

He reached in his shirt pocket for the tobacco. Maybe a chew would calm him enough to drive home, and then after supper he would rip the dirty cloth from the sofa and chairs. He pictured the furniture in bright new coverings and found a moment's solace.

But his fingers trembled so that he could not unwrap the hard little rectangle of tobacco. Fumbling, he placed a corner of cellophane between his teeth and ripped it, then put an edge of the plug between his molars and tore off a sizeable chew.

Fred slowly ground the tobacco into softness, spat a dark stream into the dirt and gravel at his feet and stood gazing toward the crimson-streaked western sky. Had to get moving, he told himself, Sarah would have supper waiting and then he could get started on the chairs and sofa. Shooting another stream into the gravel, he climbed into the truck and started home in the autumn dusk.

As truck tires hummed on blacktop between fields and pasture, Fred's mind began to picture the shooting, as it had many times, especially at night when he lay waiting for sleep, a scene formed from details recalled by his nephew Harold and his little son Mark, lurid and somber as if projected on the darkening windshield.

The boys are walking along the creek that runs through pasture and woods near the back of his brother-in-law Glenn's farm, half a mile from house and barn. Through the morning Harold and Eli have taken turns

with the twenty-two, shooting squirrels high in oak branches.

Deep in the woods where the stream curves sharply Craig and Mark pick up flat stones and throw them side-armed at the deep pool formed in the bend, making the stones skip along the surface. From behind them in the trees comes the crack of the twenty-two.

Eli laughs. "Harry, you can't hit nothing! Give me that rifle!" Harry replies that Eli cannot hit a barn door at twenty paces and they begin to tease and taunt, as teenage boys will. By the creek Craig and Mark stop throwing stones and listen. Through tree trunks they dimly see their cousin and his black friend moving about, still laughing and taunting. Behind the little boys the creek rippling through rocks provides background for the voices in the trees. Then suddenly the dim forms are grappling, trying to topple one another.

Craig and Mark drop stones they have gathered and run into the trees. Harry and Eli are rolling in brown oak leaves, breathing hoarsely, their eyes growing hard as agates. Dancing about the fighters, watching closely, the little boys grow frenzied. Eli looks quicker



and stronger and they yell encouragement to their cousin.

Eli pins Harry, sits on his chest and holds his wrists to the ground beside his ears. Harry's face is red, wet and dirty and he breathes harshly, staring up into Eli's sweaty glistening face and luminous eyes. Craig springs to where the rifle stands dark and sinister against the grayish oak and with the walnut stock under his right arm, turns, looks along the barrel toward Eli and yells, "Don't worry, Harry, I'll stop him!"

The crack of the twenty-two echoes through the trees. Eli goes rigid, his head thrown back, then he slumps forward, his face pushing into leaves and dirt beside Harry's head. The two small boys are frozen, their faces drained, eyes bulging. Craig drops the rifle and gives a cry like a stricken animal.

White-faced, his teeth chattering, Harry pushes himself from under Eli and sits up.



Blood has darkened the shoulder of his brown jacket and is smeared on the left side of his face. After a moment he gently turns Eli's head and looks at the eyes, then lifts a hand and feels for a pulse. He looks up at the gaping boys and yells, "Don't just stand there, go get Dad!" The boys move suddenly, jerkily, as if startled from sleep and scurry like frightened animals uphill through rustling oak leaves and disappear in the trees.

Fred knows he will never forget how his boys looked as they ran screaming up past the barn and into the yard, their faces pale as fishes' bellies, their arms flailing like large birds trying to fly. And Craig could not stop, kept dashing in dizzying circles around the yard wailing, his arms flapping like heron wings, while little Mark blurted, "Eli's dead! Eli's dead!"



When Fred and Glenn reached the scene, Harry was kneeling over the body. He had tried to stop the bleeding by pressing his folded jacket sleeve hard against the bullet hole, but they could see that it had been futile. The autopsy showed the bullet had pierced Eli's heart.



They explained to the Sheriff how it happened and Craig was not charged with any crime, just a ten-year-old, never used a gun, clearly an accident. But he had something bad to live with, something he would never forget, and Eli's folks were without their boy, a good boy. He will never forget their faces when he



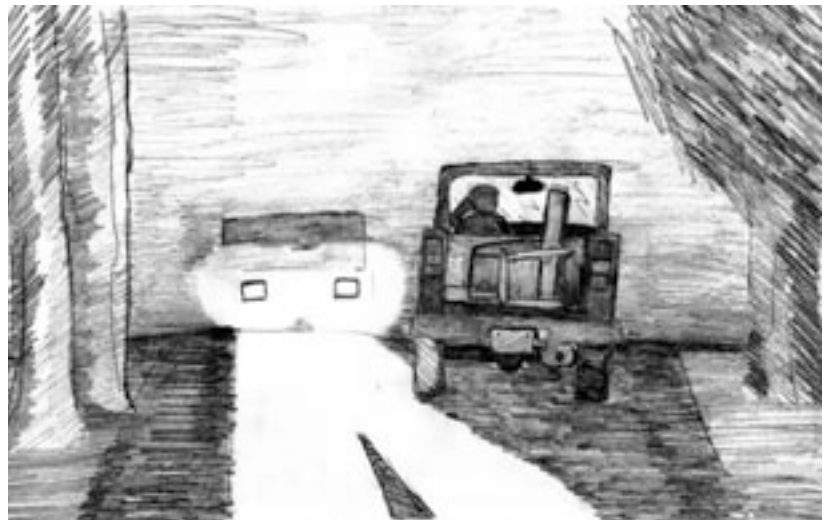
and Glenn told them, hard-working people in their scrubbed little weathered house and swept sandy yard, not showing shock or anger, their dark eyes sorrowful and helpless as a whipped beagle's.

Stopping at the intersection near Crouse, Fred reached for the red coffee can in the middle of the truck seat and spat a stream of tobacco juice. He had to stop thinking. Just got him upset, almost sick. But one detail kept nagging, one he wished he had never heard, that Mark had not heard, or had not remembered. Maybe Mark was wrong, maybe he had imagined it, had heard it somewhere else and the shock and excitement had confused

him. Sometime the evening after the shooting he said that Craig grabbed the rifle and yelled, "I'll get the nigger, Harry!"

He wished Mark had not told that, but the child could not know that it was better not to tell such things. Likely he did not even realize he was telling it, maybe did not know now that he had told it. A blessing if he didn't.

Fred spat another dark stream into the coffee can and assured himself he had not used that word in front of his boys, not used it at all in recent years, definitely not in front of his children. He leaned forward and set the coffee can in the floorboard and forced his thoughts to the sofa and chairs he would begin stripping tonight. He chewed vigorously, his jaw muscles bulging, and tried to relax his arms and hands. As he approached the bridge over the South Fork, two beams of light flashed up, bright—dim, bright—dim, almost blinding him, a horn blared past, and Fred realized he was driving without headlights.







**Kermit Turner**, a native of Lincolnton, NC, attended Lenoir-Rhyne College in Hickory, NC, and returned there to teach in the English Department, from which he recently retired. He earned an MA in English at the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville and an MFA in fiction writing at UNC-Greensboro. Before attending graduate school he worked as a high school English teacher, a salesman, and an insurance underwriter.

Kermit has published articles, poems, and short stories in *Phylon*, *Crucible*, *Charlotte Poetry Review*, *South Carolina Review*, *The Cresset*, *NC Tennis Today*, *Roanoke Review*, *Graffiti*, *Greensboro Review*, *Pembroke Magazine*, and *Changes Magazine*. He also has published one novel, *Rebel Powers* (New York: Frederick Warne & Co., 1979).

Kermit has been awarded writing residencies at Weymouth Center in Southern Pines, NC; at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts in Sweetbriar; and at Yaddo Artists Center in Saratoga Springs, NY.

He lives with his wife Carol in Hickory, NC.

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# Essay on *Tongue-Tied*

by Lucinda MacKethan

Toni Morrison writes, in *Playing in the Dark*, that “[In] matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse. Evasion has fostered another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate.” The title of this year’s Linda Flowers Prize-winning story offers us a powerful image of the “silence and evasion” that Morrison pinpoints, while the narrative explores how these twin shadows shatter lives. Kermit Turner’s “Tongue-Tied” follows the rule that Morrison describes, mandating that no one talk openly about racially inflicted wounds that everyone can see but no one can admit. Turner’s main character Fred Cooke, the father of a white child who has “accidentally” killed his cousin’s black friend, is unable to put into words the agony that two families, one black and one white, now face. He knows in his heart that the accident bears all the horrifying earmarks of racial violence, and as a white man and a parent, he grapples with the silence and evasion that have always ruled his culture in such matters. The word “tongue-tied” names his inability to come to terms with the ugly, tragic dimensions of American race relations.

For some, this story might simply provide one more example of how dramas of white guilt tend to shift attention away from white supremacist crimes against anyone deemed “different.” To put the question in its starkest terms: do we not need stories with a stronger, more direct judgment against bigotry and a sharper rendering of grief for yet another black youth lost to America’s perpetuation of the color line?

A similar controversy has engulfed Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for well over one hundred years. “Tongue-Tied,” like *Huck Finn*, shows us a world in which people of two races live together, sharing a land, a language, and

a past, without really understanding one another at all. No matter their innocence, no matter how unconscious or involuntary their prejudice, children in such a world inevitably reflect their families’, their region’s, and their country’s long and contorted history of race relations.

Toni Morrison’s analysis of how “open debate” on racism is foreclosed in American literary discourse can help us to frame some important discussions of “Tongue-Tied” to change this foreclosure. From the story’s opening, showing Fred Cooke trapped within his “rearview mirror,” to the story’s close, when he recognizes that he has been driving “without headlights,” Fred’s journey is a metaphor not only of his own state of mind, but also that of the white culture Fred has never had to question. It is a culture that encourages a “code” to keep down one race while perpetuating a false sense of privilege and superiority in another. Through his mirror, looking backward towards his truck bed, what Fred sees is a mess, in the form of old furniture that he is hauling home to “repair.” Witnessing Fred’s shaky nerves and nausea, we see the awful, messy legacy of bigotry. Can Fred do anything to clean up, to redeem such a mess? He is, he learns, driving without light.

Kermit Turner makes us admit the consequences that Fred might not name, but still cannot escape. We share his place in the driver’s seat on this agonizing trip home to chaos, to the long-lasting horror of racially motivated murder. Turner does not downplay either the stakes or the complexity of the dilemma that has engulfed this one place, two families, and the community that is itself complicit in the tongue-tied silence that has descended. The story lifts up the dark questions, but who will supply the light?

*Lucinda MacKethan is Professor of English at North Carolina State University. She is the immediate past chair of NCHC.*

# Discussion Questions for *Tongue-Tied*

We hope that you have been sparked by Kermit Turner's story to probe some of the critical underlying aspects of social and race relations in the South. "Tongue-Tied" offers some provocative ways to imagine Eli's death, both in what its sparse, tight words say and suggest and what words are not present. We invite you to explore and discuss this story, see it from different perspectives and juxtapose it to your own sense of personal and regional history. Here are some questions to help guide your reading.

1. In the early parts of "Tongue-Tied," Fred thinks of the shooting as an accident. For example, the text starts "driving back from the western end of the county Fred Cooke started to think about his son's accident." Later, Fred explains, "it was an accident, his son just a child, had never used guns, didn't know what he was doing." Indeed, "his ten-year-old son had just been playing like in cowboy-and-Indians when he picked up the rifle."

In the context of the whole narrative, do you think that Fred's imagined version of the story shifted in how he thinks about—wants to think about—the events? How do you as a reader characterize Eli's death? Does your sense of events change as you read through the story? Why? Do you know of examples of a shifting context in the narrative flow that changes your interpretation of the story? Does that change how you would respond to this story?

2. Fred was "tongue-tied;" he was unable to say out-loud in the store what he thought, what he felt. Do you imagine that Fred also was "tongue-tied" in other contexts, his home, for example, or with his brother-in-law Glenn? The story reads that Fred "longed to turn and tell the story ... but he didn't trust himself to speak ... and if he spoke and the men [in the store] acted like they didn't believe him he might lose control." Why couldn't he speak up? What do you think the author means by saying that Fred "didn't trust himself to speak ... [that] he might lose control?" How? Why did Fred think the men might not have believed him?

The experience of being "tongue-tied" is common to all of us. Have you been in a situation in which you have been unable to speak out loud? In what contexts and why? Are they similar to Fred's situation?

3. What do you consider to be the relationship between literature and historical context in general, in this particular story? Does this consideration even matter?
4. "Fred's mind began to picture the shooting ... a scene formed from the details recalled by his nephew Harold and his little son Mark, lurid and somber as if projected on a darkening windshield." Do you think there might be differences in the narrative of events among Harold, Mark and Fred? If so, what might these be and how is it that we form our own version of events? Did Craig tell his version of the story? If not, what might it be?
5. If you could date and place the story, when and where would it be? Does specific information about these matter? Could the story have taken place anywhere?

6. It is interesting that Fred's narrative describes Craig as "just a child, had never used guns, didn't know what he was doing," while at the same time the autopsy report reveals that the bullet Craig fired had pierced Eli's heart. What do you make of this juxtaposition?
7. When Craig yells to Harold, "don't worry, I'll get him," what do you think Craig might mean by "getting him?" When Mark tells Fred a different version of those words, which includes a racial slur, does that mean that "getting him" means something different? If so, why and how? What might Eli's parents say in response?
8. The printed version of "Tongue-Tied" in this publication includes drawings by two different artists, neither of whom is the author. What implications might there be because these three people are different? How would your own perceptions bear on that question? For example, one of the artists rendered two images of what Craig's face looked like at the moment of the murder and immediately afterward. What visual images do you imagine? Do you think it occurred to Craig once he had the rifle in his hands not to shoot it? How might that change your perception of his appearance?

What other publications have you read that included illustrations? Did you have similar questions about the relationships between the images and the words?

9. According to the story, upon being told by Fred and Glenn that their son had just been killed, Eli's parents' response was "not showing shock or anger, their dark eyes sorrowful and helpless ...". What do you think the author means? How would you respond if you were Eli's parents? Why? Do you think Eli's parents may have responded differently after they returned inside to their house?
10. There is little about Eli in the details of the story. Who is Eli? Where is he from? How does Eli's absence as a character affect the story? What roles do you think he plays or doesn't play in the story? Why? If you could, how would you fill in your own description of Eli and what effect would that have on the story?
11. In their conversation trying to imagine the flow of events of this tragedy, one of the three seated men in the store says about Craig, "his cousin and the colored boy was wrasslin', ... and the colored boy had him down, settin' on top of him." Another replies, "Well, sounds like he just didn't like seein' a colored boy get the best of his cousin."

What different ways could Craig have apprehended what he was seeing? Was his action inevitable? How does the racial slur Mark says Craig used in "getting" Eli work as a code word in Southern history? For whites? For African Americans?

12. What do you think Fred is afraid of?
13. What, maybe even who, do you think Fred saw in his rearview mirror on the way to the store? How might this question relate to the end of the story when "Fred realized he was driving without headlights?" Do you think the other characters in the story saw more clearly than Fred? Why or why not? What changes in the story's community would allow people to see each other more clearly? Would seeing more clearly have been enough to change the story's outcome? Have you experienced situations similar to those in the story? What was/would be necessary to change your outcomes?

# Resources

For further reading, you might be interested in the following:

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# Linda Flowers

The North Carolina Humanities Council was privileged to have Linda Flowers as one of its members from 1992 to 1998. During the years we shared with her, she taught us many things. Above all, Linda showed us what it means to live by one's belief that "the humanistic apprehension is as necessary for living fully as anything else ... [it must be] recognize[d] and nurture[d] ... to realize more fully the potential of the human spirit."



In addition to honoring Linda Flowers (1944-2000) with a prize named for her, the Council seeks to draw to the attention of others something special that Linda passed on to us. We want to celebrate excellence in the humanities achieved by people like her, those who not only identify with our state, but who explore the promises, the problems, the experiences, the meanings, in lives that have been shaped by North Carolina and its many cultures.

Linda Flowers was somewhat surprised by the strong connections readers made to her book, *Thrown Away: Failures of Progress in Eastern North Carolina*, in 1990. This is true to the portraits in *Thrown Away*; it is just as true of "Coming Home," the essay Linda wrote about her experience with cancer for NC CROSSROADS. Both are superb examinations of intimate, provocative, inspiring portraiture of North Carolina, its people and cultures. The Linda Flowers Prize is intended for a literary work that demonstrates these powers of recognition.



"That my book about Eastern North Carolina might touch a chord with some people, and with several ready-made audiences—teachers, social workers, health personnel, civic organizations, book clubs, readers in general ... I had not anticipated. What these groups are responding to in *Thrown Away*, I think, is its human dimension: 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 ... they must recognize and nurture it in themselves ... to realize more fully the potential of the human spirit."

*Linda Flowers, letter to the NCHC Membership Committee, July 1992*

# THE LINDA FLOWERS PRIZE 2006

**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 North Carolina Humanities Council with great distinction from 1992-1998. Linda was the author of the acclaimed book, *Threw Away—Failures of Progress in Eastern North Carolina*, and “Coming Home,” *NC CROSSROADS*, 1998.

## Winners of the Linda Flowers Prize

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*The Cure* by Karen Gilchrist, 2001

*Land of Amnesia* by Joseph Bathanti, 2002

*Miss Jessie Dukes and Kid Heavy* by Heather Ross Miller, 2003

*Sherry's Prayer* by Barbara Presnell, 2004

## DESCRIPTION

NCHC invites original entries of literary forms for the Linda Flowers Prize. Submissions should engage readers' understanding of the “humanistic apprehension,” bringing to light “real men and women having to make their way” in the face of “changes and loss, triumphs and disappointments.” Entries are expected to draw particular North Carolina connections and/or memories.

## TIMELINE

Entries for the 2006 Prize are invited with a July 3, 2006 deadline. The annual prize will be announced after August 1st.

## ELIGIBILITY

Writers of all ages are eligible. Applicants may or may not be native to or live in North Carolina. The committee will review original works of up to 2000-2500 words, typed and double-spaced. Ten copies of each submission are required and a cover letter. The author's name should not appear on the submission. Entries must be postmarked by July 3rd.

## RECIPIENT

The winner of the Linda Flowers Prize will receive a cash prize of \$500. Her/his original work will be published in an issue of NCHC's *NC CROSSROADS* and possibly in other Council publications.\*

\*The writer will maintain copyright of the literary work with the understanding that the Council may publish or republish it at a later date; for example, in an anthology.

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To comment on *NC CROSSROADS* or for more information about NCHC and public humanities programs, please contact us at:

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