

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

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SHERRY'S PRAYER

NC TEXTILES 1967–2004

by *Barbara Presnell*

With an introduction by Fred Chappell

I am 46 years of age and no education.
Evenings I sit at the kitchen table
studying fractions with my oldest grandbaby.
Mrs. Wilkins at the college thinks I'll pass
my GED first try, but then what, I ask her?
I know I made the choice to start at the mill
and end at the mill but I guess you don't think
what if when everything is going good.

Winner of the 2004 Linda Flowers Prize



North Carolina Humanities Council
Weaving Cultures and Communities



PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The setting for these poems is a fictional underwear manufacturing plant in the North Carolina Piedmont. The characters and dialogue are creations of the poet's imagination and are not transcriptions of interviews.

The time frame for the poems is the present. The issues the characters address regarding the plant and its future in a world economy reflect real tensions and traumas faced by workers throughout our state.

The photographs depict actual workers at the Stedman Manufacturing Company in Asheboro and are from the company archive. They were chosen to complement the poems and to help bring Barbara Presnell's fictional characters to life. The sketches are from Barbara's notebook.

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

NC CROSSROADS
is a publication of the
North Carolina Humanities Council

“I’ll Stand Behind the Label”

Barbara Presnell’s *Sherry’s Prayer*

by Fred Chappell

Sherry’s Prayer: NC Textiles 1967-2004 belongs to a kind of writing we might call “documentary poetry,” because it deals with people, places and situations that are the facts of the case. Barbara Presnell knows and practices the first rule of this particular sort of poetry: It must not look like, sound like, or smell like what most people think of when they hear the word “poetry.” That is, it must not be fanciful, artificial or clever, and above all, it must not try to show how smart or learned the writer is. She practices the second rule too: However it looks and sounds and smells, it must *be* poetry.

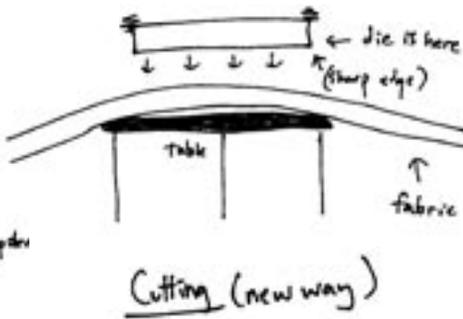
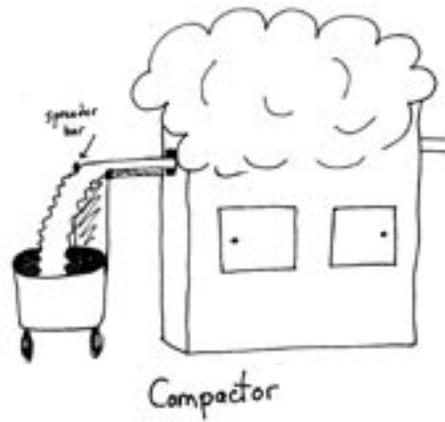
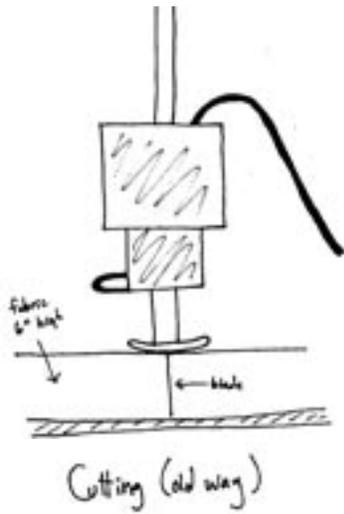
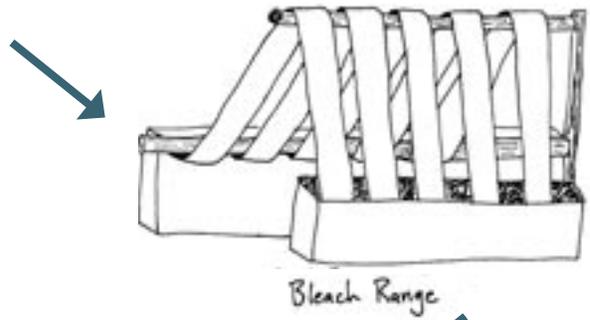
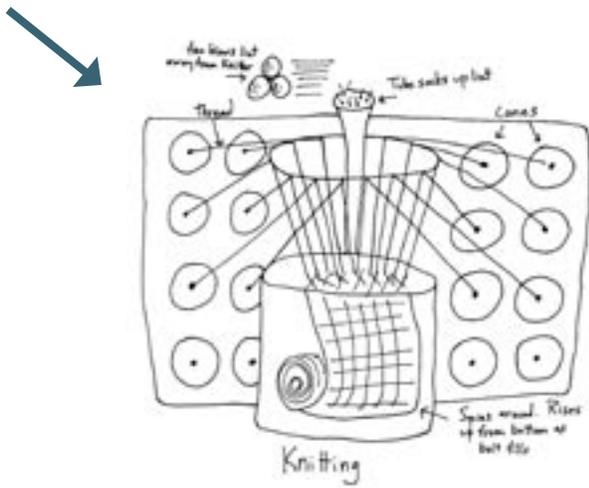
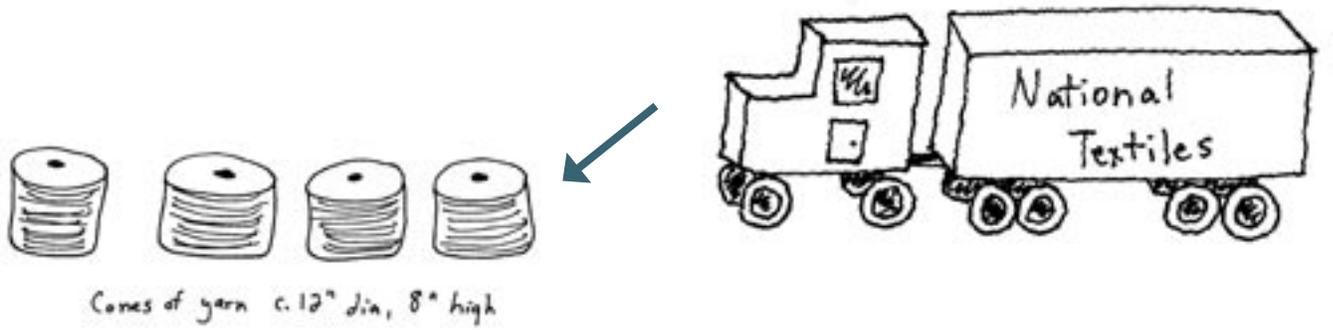
For me, the most admirable poetry is that in which the poet is invisible, does not appear to be present at all. In *Sherry’s Prayer* the people seem to speak for themselves, as if there were no writer about. And the poet seems not to compose but only to record. Yet this is not what has happened at all. A poem that begins “We both took the job right out of high school” and ends “God, that woman’s got the prettiest blue eyes” does not acquire its dramatic form, its deceptively casual opening and warmly revealing closure by accident. There is a shaping force at work, a talent for craft that I can’t help calling in this instance “the good hand.” Maxie, Charlie, Tonisha and Charlene we know immediately and understand as well as each of them desires us to. They are willing to open their lives to us, to speak of the limitations they have recognized, to hint at the prospects they hope for, “the promise/of the rainbow.”

If it is by a disarming reticence that Barbara Presnell has made these figures so vivid, the first stage in her portraiture has been respect. She takes each of the speakers at his or her own word; she does not second-guess them or psychologize. When Charlene says, “Some in the plant calls me God,” there is no trace of irony on the part of the poet, though of course we do hear the humorous tone of Charlene’s voice. She makes fun of herself as a picky-picky-picky perfectionist, but then this quirk of character helps to make her expert at her job.

As with most studies of proud, good-hearted folk who have fashioned their lives around their livelihoods, there is an elegiac tone in *Sherry’s Prayer*. The textile mill has closed, the building is abandoned, the skills that animated that spirit of the place Jeanette speaks of have been transported to distant shores. Sometimes it seems that every skill that is hard to learn and hard to maintain flourishes for a time and then is no more. When the use for it is gone, a great deal has gone out of the lives of those who mastered the skills. Whatever happens to Rodney and Jimmy and Sherry from here on out will not happen to the same person who worked in the mill. When the mill closes the workers turn into other, different persons.

But they are not lost to us forever, as they were and needed to be. The “good-hand” skills of Barbara Presnell fix them in memory, in history. She makes us proud to know them.

Fred Chappell is the award-winning author of many poetry collections, including *Backsass* (Louisiana State University Press, February 2004), as well as eight books of fiction. Chappell recently ended his term as North Carolina’s Poet Laureate, a position he had held since 1997. A native of western North Carolina, he attended Duke University and recently retired from teaching at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.



CHARLIE, FIRST-SHIFT FOREMAN

Daddy had good hands, roped
like a black snake. Cows would low
and rub their heads against the stalls
when they saw him walking toward the barn
with a bucket. He'd talk to 'em like babies,

pull their titties like he was plucking up
spring flowers. They never knew what
they was giving up to him. He never knew
what he was giving up for them.
I do my daddy's work here in the plant,

for it's me makes sure this cloth
has a good hand. That's what we call it—
good hand—when it rolls out
soft as a kitten. Put that on your skin
every morning in a T-shirt and you'll know

what I do means something in this world.
It's like the seasons of the farm, I tell Mama,
that rough muslin moving like slow winter
through the bleach range, seven washes, each
a little brighter, till the cloth is pure as Easter snow.

Add the softener, squeeze out the moisture
(think of spring run-off, Mama). Into the dryer bays
hotter than July in full sun. When the compactor
puts the smooth back in the weave,
what we've done is nothing short of miracle.

I have worked my way up
from third-shift bleach range operator
to day foreman, 28 years of age,
wife, two children, one on the way,
out of the doublewide by August

into a house with a two-car garage.
My quarter acre, Daddy calls it.
Not for a minute do I miss shoveling stalls,
setting posts twelve hours straight,
taking an angry hoof in the gut, losing

a whole pasture to drought.
Machine's no different from a cow.
God made 'em both, I tell Mama,
Made two kinds of folks—one's like Daddy,
one's like me—gave both of us good hands.



TONISHA TALKS ABOUT KNITTING

I can't hardly leave this spot to pee—
thread or something might pop loose.
Don't happen much but when it do,
if I don't hit that OFF switch, that's all
she wrote. Piece a lint catch up
in them wires, shut the whole thing down.
That's how delicate this machine is.
Why it pay so good too.

Got two baby girls. They sorry-ass daddy
come around whenever he get a little
sugar in his pocket and I'm like,
"No way, Ho-zay. I gots me a job
making more than you'll see in your lifetime."
My babies gonna grow up, go to college,
not be no man's bitch. That man can crawl
right back to whatever gutter he come out of.

They's just one mechanic for all these knitters
so you don't jam up no more than you got to.
Lint flying all over on the floor, but ain't
nobody get the brown lung anymore.
That's what Mama and them keep saying,
"Tonisha, you put that mask on, girl."
They kill me. Nobody wear a mask.
Ear plugs, yeah. High-tech they is too.

Still I can't half hear when I gets home.
Baby cry and I can't hear a thing
till the ringing quits long about the time
I gotta go back in. If OSHA say it okay,
Tonisha say it okay. That's what I tells 'em.
Twelve machines is all anybody gets
no matter how good they is. I'm on ten.
Start at three but they's no money in three





so you got to get better and faster to earn
your machines. All day I ties them strands
from cones the pin truck boys sets up.
You can't have no knot in the strand.
Keep that bolt steady and smooth,
can't rush it. That's what some tries to do
and they don't last in knitting long.
Then I doffs it off, starts another.

One roll weigh 300 pound, around there.
Take a whole shift to do one. Ten roll
make a good day on my ten machines.
Three o'clock, this A-rab come in, take over.
I call him A-hab. He don't care, call me Honey
right back. I walks him through the machines,
what's up, what's down. At seven in the morning,
I picks it up from boy name Man-well,

smile all the time, can't hardly say "boo" in English.
I seen his wife and baby girl one time
when he bring 'em in. He all proud. Jabbering away.
They laughing, even the baby. Nobody here
understand a word. He might be saying,
"Tonisha she ugly as a rat's ass," for all we know.
Still, ain't nobody gonna get it over
on this girl. That's what I tells 'em.

CHARLENE WORKS QUALITY CONTROL

They say a million sperms or more
shoot out from a man's thing
after one woman's egg. With them odds,
they're gonna get her sooner or later.
Walk out your house any day
and a tree could fall on you, you might
get hit by flying gravel from a semi's tires
right between the eyes and drop dead on the spot.
Or catch the stray bullet of a drive-by.
I'm not even talking about diseases
and inflictions of the heart, old age, the big C.
So picture all that might go wrong
from the cotton field to the poly wrap T-shirt.

Season of rain, or no rain, all we can do
is reset machines. Can't change nature.
Can't clean the flecks out either—
leaves, twigs, a weevil, flies, who knows what all gets
ground up in that spinner before it gets to us.
The boys at the pin truck—if one's out late
the night before, the other's got the headache,
one wrong cone'll ruin the whole lot.
One bulky knot or if the c.p.i.'s off—
we keep our cloth at 43 and one half to the inch.
You can tell the difference. Run your hand
on some Wal-Mart brand, you'll see what I mean.
Count their weave. Not over 37 or 38, max.

Holes in the greige goods, holes
in the bleached, holes when it runs out the dryer.
Cut 'em out and go on. That's all you can do.
Ought to be A-1 with so many checks along the way,
but you can't count on anything in this life.
I've always had this edge to me—
don't like chipped plates, crumbs on the floor,
tracking mud in the house, cats licking off the table.
Some in the plant calls me God.
I'm the one that wants it perfect.
I'm what makes it or breaks it.
Anyway, it's the label all of us works for.
I'll stand behind the label any day.





JEANETTE LEARNS TO STITCH

I could no more sew a straight line
than I could milk a chicken
but the other ladies helped me,
showed me how to set the needle
in the cloth to make a turn,
pull my thread to the side
so it wouldn't jam up in the bobbin.
I won't say I ever was much good at it,
but nobody'd accuse me a not trying.

A lifetime, it seems. Husband,
two kids near growed. Mama passed.
Went from T-shirts and boxers to
sweat shirts then collars then elastic.
One day, outta the blue, they unbolted
the machines, loaded them in trucks,
hauled 'em down to Mexico or someplace.
Nothing left on second floor
but concrete and empty bolt holes.
We was like family, us sewers.
You'd a thought we lost a brother or sister,
the weight we felt, grief tangling up among us.

You'd find broke needles in corners
for a while after, lengths a thread.
Ladies getting old by then just retired.
Young ones, they got on
somewhere else in the mill, some
other machine. Didn't lose nobody from it,
not really. Took our spirit, that's all.
You can work a 8-hour shift without spirit,
but it ain't half worth much, you know?

RODNEY'S FIRST DAY

*A machine is like a car.
Drive her every day and she'll run smooth
as long as you have her. Let her sit awhile
and all kinds of things begin to go wrong.*

Home from Nam in '67, April.
Laid around till October,
living on Army pay till it run out.
Got to the plant around eleven that morning.
"They's a job on second shift
if you want it," they told me.

Set me up with a cutter to see what all he did.
Wasn't easy work. They had these long tables,
I'd say a hundred feet each,
and you spread six layers, one at a time,
making sure they wasn't any holes anywhere.
Spreading it took two, three hours.
Then you'd take one of them graphic pencils
and a pattern—men's large torso,
men's medium sleeve, whatever they needed—
draw it up and down that white cloth.
You didn't waste any fabric. You cut
with a saw, slicing through all those layers.
You had a sharp eye, steady hand.
You didn't make a mistake
or it cost you a finger.

Seventy-five cents an hour.
Eight hour shift. Six days a week.
Got all the T-shirts I wanted.
Seconds. Paid almost nothing for 'em.
White or olive drab. I sent 'em over
to my buddies in Nam. They'd pay
three times more in the PX.

There's not one machine here
I hadn't stood behind. Reckon
I know this place better than the bosses.
Don't hardly seem like thirty-seven years.
Can't think why I'd ever want to leave.
Got to where I call this place home.



JIMMY OXENDINE, RED SPRINGS PLANT

Crystalline was the one wrote and told me about the mill.
There I was, sitting ass-whipped on the only dry stump
in the swamp, VC behind every damn stick in the place,
was the same night Dewey Locklear took one in the neck,
got to go home after that. So I'm reading Crystalline's letter,
"Your daddy's got work in the new underwear plant."
Says he's holding the spot till you come home."
Don't know why it even mattered, jobs was easy
to be had then. Hell, it weren't no woman,
but it was damn near enough. Kept me going,

thinking about coming home to something.
Turned out Daddy didn't move aside, just moved over,
both of us working the plant. Good pay. Steady hours.
The money weren't what we could get in Fayetteville
or Laurinburg, you understand—but good for an Indian
and we knew it. Hard to tolerate now, seeing how
they come in with their big machines, big jobs,
making us all think we was something special, didn't tell us
they was paying more elsewhere. Stupid Indians,
we didn't ask for more, we didn't think union.

We made boxer shorts and boxer shorts. Bought 'em
cheap, wore 'em ourselves. Don't you know soon's
they stop making money off us they up and leave. Close
the plant. Look at 'em now, chasing the dollar down to Mexico.
If I could holler so's they'd hear it, I'd say, "Make 'em pay
what you want. They got it." Me, I've not worked
since I started getting sick. VA pays the bills. My boy,
though, he went off to Wilmington. Proud of his
"heritage," he calls it. You so proud, I ask him, why don't
you proud yourself right back here where you belong?



MAXIE ♥ SHERRY



We both took the job right out of high school. Well, Sherry, she never did finish but tenth grade. God, she was a looker, even then. Sixteen

when our oldest come along. Quit school. Had to in them days. Told her she didn't have to marry me but I sure wanted her to. Seems like one thing

after another ever since. First they was Steve then Maryella, just like that. Then her mama got sick, we bought that little house. Bryson

come along. One thing after another. She said she never cared that much but I saw her face when the others moved on, her still stuck in the mill.

Never lost one bit of what first drew me to her. Everything she was 30 year ago. More. I never did do right by her, but God knows I wanted to.

When we started hearing rumors at the plant, it was Sherry got the idea I ought to start electrical training at the college. By the time

I got laid off, I already had a little work coming in. You know, one person'd want a plug or to run a 240 for a clothes dryer. Hell, I learned all that at the mill,

but getting my electrical license, that made the difference. Yeah, I see a future for us, I do. Not like we had. No insurance right now. A little tough sometimes.

It's Sherry breaks my heart. Can't do much with me and a bunch of growed up babies. God, that woman's got the prettiest blue eyes.

SHERRY'S PRAYER

I am 46 years of age and no education.
Evenings I sit at the kitchen table
studying fractions with my oldest grandbaby.
Mrs. Wilkins at the college thinks I'll pass
my GED first try, but then what, I ask her?
I know I made the choice to start at the mill
and end at the mill but I guess you don't think
what if when everything is going good.
There was a time I thought I'd go to college,

wanted to be a nurse, can you believe it?
Mrs. Wilkins says I still could but I don't know
if it's in me anymore. I won't ever forget that day
the plant manager called us into the break room
and told us it was over, we were "let go," just like
we were cattle turned out to pasture. Thirty years
I have operated a machine. I grew up in that mill.
My family is in that mill and all I care about even if
I should have knowed better. Can't eat regrets,

I tell Maxie. He gives me them big moon eyes a his,
slaps me on the fanny like he could make everything
all right with a little lovin'. Can't eat lovin' neither, I tell Maxie.
I never had trouble sleeping but these days
I lay awake half the night listening to Maxie snore,
wondering what will become of us. I have learned to make
one chicken last a week. If you study it and shop the sales,
you'd be surprised what you can save at the grocery.
I put in for jobs whenever I hear of openings.

My check comes like clockwork every Tuesday.
I've still got three months coming, more if I stay
in school. Still we are better than some. Maxie says
we will make it to the other side of this.
I pray every day one of us doesn't get sick
and that we will not lose the house we have worked
so hard to have. God made the promise
of the rainbow, and that is what I cling to right now,
that God will not leave us with nothing.



GLOSSARY

- bobbin**—the lower spool of thread that links with the upper spool of thread to construct a seam
- bleach range**—a machine that bleaches the greige goods to result in pure white cloth
- brown lung**—chronic lung disease caused by inhaling lint and other fine particles from cotton
- compact**—a machine that straightens wrinkles and sets and controls shrinkage after the cloth is finished
- cone**—a roll of raw thread from the spinning machine, usually 12" in diameter and 8" in height
- c.p.i.**—"courses (or numbers of squares) per square inch"; small squares formed by the weaving or knitting process, per square inch of fabric; the more courses per square inch, the better the quality of the fabric
- cutter**—the machine (or person) that cuts pattern pieces from long bolts of finished cloth
- doff**—to remove a completely knitted bolt of fabric from a knitting machine
- dryer bays**—large machines that dry the fabric after the bleaching process
- finishing**—the bleaching, drying, and softening process that readies the fabric for cutting and sewing
- greige goods**—(pronounced "gray goods") unbleached muslin, just as it comes from the knitting machine
- OSHA**—Occupational Safety and Health Administration; a branch of the federal government that oversees working conditions in industry
- pin truck**—transports the cones of spun thread to the knitting machine; operators sort and load cones onto pins that feed into the knitting machine
- PX**—Post Exchange; a store on a military base where personnel can purchase supplies at a low cost
- the smooth**—"good hand"; the feel of the cloth after softener is added in the finishing process
- spinner**—a machine that spins cotton into thread for knitting
- a 240**—heavy voltage wiring for large appliances, such as air conditioners and dryers
- VA**—Veterans Administration; administers benefits, such as insurance and health care, for military veterans
- the weave**—the measure of thread count per inch, as determined by the c.p.i.

RESOURCES

Further Reading

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- Papers and presentations from Community-Based Adjustment to Textile Plant Closure and Downsizing, a conference sponsored by the UNC-Chapel Hill Economics Department and the Center for the Study of the American South, April 8-9, 2004. www.unc.edu/depts/econ/PlantClosure/index.html.
- Films**
- Norma Rae* Dir. Martin Ritt. Actors Sally Field, Beau Bridges, Ron Leibman. Twentieth Century Fox, 1979.
- Where Do You Stand?* Dir. Alexandra Lescaze. Mighty Fine Films, 2003. www.wheredoyoustand.info/index.php.

THE LINDA FLOWERS PRIZE 2005

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, *Thrown Away—Failures of Progress in Eastern North Carolina*, and “Coming Home,” *NC CROSSROADS*, 1998.

Winners of the Linda Flowers Prize

The Cure by Karen Gilchrist, 2001

Land of Amnesia by Joseph Bathanti, 2002

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

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 2005 Prize are invited with a June 15, 2005 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 June 15th.

RECIPIENT

The winner of the Linda Flowers Prize will receive a cash prize of \$500. Her/his original work will be published in the fall issue of NCHC’s *NC CROSSROADS* and possibly in other Council publications.* The winner will be introduced at the annual John Tyler Caldwell Award for the Humanities.

*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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North Carolina Humanities Council
Weaving Cultures and Communities

Barbara Presnell grew up in Asheboro, North Carolina, where her father was production superintendent of a locally-owned textile manufacturing company. She is the author of three books of poetry: *Snake Dreams*, winner of the Zoe Kincaid Brockman Award for best book from the North Carolina Poetry Society in 1995; *Unravelings*, recipient of the Longleaf Press Award in 1998 and the Oscar Arnold Young Award for best book from the North Carolina Poetry Society in 1999; and *Los Hijos*, set in Galeana, Nuevo Leon, Mexico. In 2002, she received a North Carolina Arts Council Fellowship for poetry writing. For eight years, Presnell worked as a writer-in-residence for the Kentucky Arts Council. Since 2000, she has taught writing at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She lives in Lexington with her husband, journalist Bill Kessler, and son Will.

NC CROSSROADS

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The photographs in this issue are from the archives of the Stedman Manufacturing Company in Asheboro. The sketches are from the poet's notebook.

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

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