

LINDA
FLOWERS
LITERARY
AWARD
2009

Amplitude

Katey Schultz

THAT TIME? We hiked along Pinch Ridge to the apex and climbed the radio tower at dusk. Ben didn't know the way, even though these mountains belonged to him as much as they belonged to me. Two creeks south along the ridge, his mom's trailer squatted on a cinderblock foundation — a Carolina Country doublewide the color of spent Levi's and just about as worn. I lived with my parents at the base of Pinch Ridge. A stone-faced house with a white porch and fancy roof; something the Baptists might have cornered in on if it weren't for the fact of property and bloodlines.

Ben's mom worked nights at the sewing factory and he started junior year at the high school the same year I was supposed to graduate. He worked evenings bagging groceries at Hughes Market where it was my job to unlock the tobacco case anytime somebody wanted a pack of Camels. A month before, Ben's kid brother overdosed on crystal and he missed a week of pay. The paper ran the story. Everyone in town said Patrick convulsed for hours in the ER, rattling the hospital bed like the rapture. "Some trouble, that kid," my old geometry teacher said to his wife the day after the obituary ran. He stood at the checkout counter, talking as if nobody cared. "Hush now," his wife said, touching his forearm. "Think of the mother."

Two hours uphill and another half mile along the ridge, we came to a mowed patch of mountaintop and heavy fencing around the radio tower. "Don't you want to climb it?" I said, shoving Ben a step toward the guard fence. The radio tower loomed a hundred feet above us. He shoved me back and that's when I curled my

fingertips around his belt buckle and pulled him in for a kiss.

Ben pushed me off of him. "Why'd you do that?"

"Shut up," I said, reaching for him again. It was our first kiss and I was sick of waiting. He kissed me back this time, mouth sweet and salty as ketchup. I liked his soft cheeks and pointy Adam's apple, earlobes like little shrimp tails just waiting to be sucked. He mashed my breasts around and I leaned my back into the fence. He wasn't very good.

"Why don't we climb it?" I said.

"Have you done it before?"

"Once," I lied.

"What about the barbed wire?" said Ben.

I took off my pack and unzipped it, pulling out a hacksaw and some muscle-handled pliers I shoved in at the last minute. "Man's job," I said, smirking. He picked up the tools like he knew what he was doing and I suppose he did. He never mentioned his dad. Ben's hands were big as a grown man's: thick veins, knuckles as wide as chestnuts with perfect, tan skin stretched overtop.

"Lillis, you're too much, you know," he said and went to work, but I saw the corners of his mouth holding back a smile.

Hacking through the barbed wire was a cinch. And we both knew about climbing chain-link fences. But taking hold of that first rung of the safety ladder at about eye level was another matter.

"Ladies first." Ben gestured.



View from Roan Mountain. Photo by Amy Annino.

“Fine,” I said. “But I need a lift.” My heart dropped to my stomach and I could have punched him. How could I be so brave and so chicken-scratch at the same time?

Ben put his hands on my waist. I wanted to stop right there with all his strength wrapped around me; just keep that energy for my own and use it someday. I stretched to reach for the ladder, then made a little jump. Ben was strong enough to lift me at least four feet and before I knew it the toes of my boots hooked over the first rung of the ladder. I pawed my hands above my head for a higher grasp and pulled my body in close.

“Come on, now. Get going before I change my mind and leave you up there,” said Ben.

I shimmied up a few feet and waited for him. The ladder shook as he muscled his way up, his arms and shoulders doing all the work until he got high enough to catch the ladder with his boots. He climbed a few rungs until we faced each other on opposite sides of the ladder, breathless. I felt too scared to look up or down, but I knew I didn’t want Ben to see me all locked up.

“Race you to the top?” I asked. I didn’t mean it.

“Fool’s chicken!” he said. “This is where we take it slow, Lillis. One step at a time. Just stay above me so we’re not on the same rung. And don’t look down, you hear?”

Ben talked more to himself than to me but I felt glad for it. I’d never

climbed higher than the jumping rock at Hazel Hole and that topped out at twenty feet. My skin felt tingly and magnetic from being so close to Ben or some sort of radio wave buzz. The higher I climbed, the heavier I felt. I heard Ben moving a few feet below me, slow and steady.

About two-thirds of the way up Ben hollered to stop. He climbed a few more rungs and put us face-to-face, our bodies pressed so tight into the ladder I could feel his stomach arching into mine. We breathed together and there was nowhere to look but straight into him.

“You ok?” he said, barely a whisper.

“Yeah, I’m ok.” My heart skipped around like a squirrel across hard-top. Our fingers wrapped end-to-end

around the sides of the ladder, knotted fists as tight as rope.

“Almost there,” Ben said. We leaned into each other and I felt the ladder dig into my ribcage. The world up there smelled like ice. Fresh and piercing. My muscles shook from fatigue. I concentrated on the buttons on Ben’s shirt, my face pressed right into his chest. He loosened his grip and stretched his arm across my back to the other side of the ladder, holding me steady. Then he kissed me like he meant it and I liked it better that way — me being trapped, him doing all the work. If I could have crawled inside of him and never looked back, I would have.



Roan Mountain, NC. Photo by Amy Annino.

When we reached the top, the view wasn’t all that different. Just more sky, less home. People’s porch lights looked tiny as a firefly’s flash. I pointed in the direction of Ben’s place. “We could see it right about there if this ladder went a little higher,” I said.

“How’d you get to know so much?” he asked.

“That’s only the beginning,” I said. I liked him. How he could tease without being mean. I wondered if he’d take me tubing down the North Toe where it flows into the Nolichucky. Or if he’d meet me gaze-for-gaze if we ever got to do it.

“Do you think he’s alone?” Ben asked. He pointed to the cemetery where his brother had been buried. “I mean, do you think if you’re that young and you beat everybody in your own family to Heaven, that you get there and you’re all alone?”

I inhaled a short breath. His mom was at work when Patrick died. Ben was home studying for Social Studies when he got the call. He drove straight to the factory to get her but she wanted to finish her shift. If she could just finish her shift.

“Or maybe he’s just watching us from right there in the church graveyard,” Ben said.

“Maybe,” I said.

“Last time I went the wind had messed up his flowers. They were all crooked. I set them right, though.”

“We could drive there later, if you want to. We could check the flowers.”

He turned to look at me and it felt as though the tower shifted, but my perspective was all

wonky. We could have been two flags at the end of a pole hanging loose against the ropes. Ben shook his head. “No, I don’t want to go. Not now...” There was nothing behind him but sky, a lemony hue from the last rays of sunset.

Back on the ground, we felt high. I whooped and yowled toward the lights of town, just six miles below us down Sweetwater Road. Ben sprinted a few laps around the fence, slapping his thighs and cantering like a show horse. Breathless, he snuck up behind me and covered my eyes. His palms smelled like rust and sweat from the ladder, metallic and clammy from the rush.

“How many do you think there are?” he asked, then opened his palms so I could see.

“How many what?”

“How many peaks?” he said. His heart pounded from the run and I thought then how all that blood coursed through his body, his chest fanning up and down, up and down. How even breathing and going to school in the morning was just about the bravest thing anybody could do after something as twisted-shin-screwy as your own brother dying like that. He let out a long breath and rested his chin on top of my head, squeezed his arms around me even tighter.

I studied the view, row after row of purple mountains, their soft, round peaks silhouetted against a deepening slate sky. It was never quite pitch black with the feldspar mine running nonstop, but it came pretty close. “I don’t know,” I said. “I never thought about it. How many do you think there are?”

“More than we can see, Lillis. There’s always more than we can see.”

Presentation of the 2009 Linda Flowers Literary Award

Emily Herring Wilson

Caldwell Laureate and author Emily Herring Wilson presented Katey Schultz with the Linda Flowers Literary Award 2009 for her short story “Amplitude.” Linda Flowers, author of *Thrown Away: Failures of Progress in Eastern North Carolina*, believed that the humanities are “equipment for living.”

IT IS A PRIVILEGE to say a few words about Linda Flowers and to present the ninth [annual] Linda Flowers Award to the winner, Katey Schultz.

Tom Lambeth and Valeria Lee first introduced me to Linda Flowers [at a reunion of the Z. Smith Reynolds Advisory Panel]. Anyone who ever met Linda will never forget her.

How many of you met Linda Flowers? Great. That makes me feel so good. We must remember her and pass along our remembrances to others. Marsha Warren and Doris Betts and others here tonight remember Linda reading at the 1992 NC Women Writers’ Conference, held in Winston-Salem. Afterwards, she came to my house to spend the night; and the next morning I heard her up early, and when I went into the kitchen, she was sitting at the table, and she looked up and said, “Tell me what they said about me again.” I told her again that after she had read, Doris Betts and Valeria Lee, the designated respondents, praised her to the skies. (One of Linda’s favorite books was *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee, about tenant farmers, like her own family.) I am sorry that I never told her often enough how great she was, and we must be faithful now to keep her name alive.

The North Carolina Humanities Council does this in awarding this

prize for the best submission on a theme that reflects Linda’s passionate regard for North Carolina people who were poor. I want to read a paragraph from her great book, which I believe is a classic, *Thrown Away: Failures of Progress in Eastern North Carolina*.

You don’t see them much anymore. Not in Rocky Mount and Goldsboro, Wilson, Smithfield and Clinton; in Faison, yes, in little towns like that, sometimes. Especially if on a Saturday you buy groceries at one of the less-than-grand supermarkets, your clothes, when you have to have them, at the dry-goods store. They stay out of shopping malls, away from the stores dazzling as operating rooms. At Christmas time, everybody sees them (but tries not to); they stumble along, slower than other people, more uncertain, as if they’re not quite sure where they are. As for the men, you can spot them without too much trouble. At the tractor places, the filling stations where they go to pass the time of day, the run-down ones; they’re driving battered pickup trucks and looking out across the land, poking along at forty and forty-five. But they’re not as common as they used to be, these old farmers in faded overalls, in khaki shirts, washed thin and almost white, brogans, hats usually: dusty as a March field. And the women, the country women of my childhood are as scarce now almost as hen’s teeth.

Oh, but they were something! The beauty they’d had as girls wrung out of them, and in its place another: faces composed, purposeful as iron....But these were proud people. Thrown away they may be, but it won’t do to count them out.



Emily Herring Wilson and Katey Schultz.

Now I want to ask this year’s winner of the Linda Flowers Award, Katey Schultz, to come forward.

Katey, your prize story, “Amplitude,” which, by the way, is a word Linda would like and use the way you did, recognizes, I think, Linda’s voice, and answers in yours. It’s a story about two young people, the young girl leading the way (Linda would like that) for them to climb up a radio tower, and not letting on that it’s the first time she’s ever done it (Linda would like that too). When they finally get to the top, it looks the way, pretty much, that it looks from the bottom. Linda would like that. And then there’s a last sentence that Linda would agree with:

“There’s always more than we can see.”

Katey is from Bakersville, in the western part of the state, Linda was from Faison, in the east, and the landscape is different; but they look at the world in the same way, seeing more than we can see.

Congratulations.

Previous Recipients

KAREN GILCHRIST	2001
JOSEPH BATHANTI	2002
HEATHER ROSS MILLER	2003
BARBARA PRESNELL	2004
KERMIT TURNER	2005
KATHY WATTS	2006
SUSAN WEINBERG VOGEL	2007
KRISTIN HEMMY	2008

2009 Selection Committee

This year's distinguished Linda Flowers Literary Award selection committee included

- **Philip Gerard**, chair of the Department of Creative Writing Program at the University of North Carolina Wilmington and author of *Cape Fear Rising*;
- **Glenis Redmond**, a new member of the North Carolina Humanities Council and a poet whose work has appeared in several journals, including the *Asheville Poetry Review*;
- **Sandra Govan**, professor emerita, Department of English, University of North Carolina Charlotte and a former member of the Humanities Council;
- **Lynn Salsi**, an award-winning author, teacher, playwright, historian, and Humanities Council Road Scholar.

Katey Schultz

KATEY SCHULTZ writes from her home in Bakersville, North Carolina. In 2010, she will serve as the spring semester Writer-in-Residence at Interlochen Academy in Michigan. Schultz is the author of *Lost Crossings: A Contemplative Look at Western North Carolina's Historic Swinging Footbridges* and editor of *Dots on a Map: A Collection of Small Town Stories*. A graduate of the Pacific University M.F.A. in Writing program, her fiction, nonfiction, and poetry have appeared in *Perigee, M Review, Oregon Quarterly, Cadillac Cicatrix, The Nature Conservancy Newsletter, Southern Arts Journal, Writers' Dojo*, and more. Fiction

from Schultz is forthcoming in *Cold Flashes: An Anthology of Alaska Short-Shorts*. Her essays about art and the creative process appear regularly in national magazines. She edits in various capacities for *Silk Road, Main Street Rag*, and *Memoir (and)*.

"That a writer like me," Schultz says, "trying to make a living from my words, can be considered for such a prize...and then be awarded so generously, is a really affirming feeling." She explains that North Carolina, particularly western North Carolina, exerts a special "pull" for her and believes that it is the writer's duty "to live in an engaged, aware way in the communities in which she finds



herself. The more deeply engaged, the more deeply imagined her writing can become and the more likely she is to write in a manner which best serves, reflects, and gives back to the community she invests in."

Linda Flowers Literary Award

Description

THE NORTH CAROLINA HUMANITIES COUNCIL invites original entries of fiction, nonfiction, or poetry for the Linda Flowers Literary Award. Submissions should detail examinations of intimate, provocative, and inspiring portraiture of North Carolina, its people and cultures, bringing to light real men and women having to make their way in the face of change, loss, triumph, and disappointments.

While authors do not have to be North Carolinians, entries are expected to draw on particular North Carolina connections and/or memories. Above all, entries should celebrate excellence in the humanities and reflect the experience of people who, like Linda Flowers, not only identify with the state, but also explore the promises, the problems, the experiences, and the meanings of lives that have been shaped by North Carolina and its many cultures.

Guidelines

ENTRIES SHOULD BE ORIGINAL, unpublished works of up to 2,000–2,500 words, typed and double-spaced. Five copies of each submission are required with a cover letter (copies will not be returned). The author's name should not appear on the submission. Only one entry per writer will be accepted. The winner of the Linda Flowers Literary Award receives a cash prize of \$500 and a stipend towards a Writer's Residency at the Weymouth Center for Arts and Humanities in Southern Pines, North Carolina.

You may wish to enclose a SASE postcard for the Humanities Council to acknowledge receipt of your manuscript and a SASE for notification of the award selection.

Send entries for the 2010 Linda Flowers Literary Award, postmarked by August 15, 2010, to the North Carolina Humanities Council, 122 N. Elm Street, Suite 601, Greensboro, NC, 27401. Questions may be directed to Executive Director Shelley Crisp at (336) 334-5383 or scrisp@nchumanities.org.



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, 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 North Carolina
Humanities Council Membership
Committee, July 1992