

A POETIC JOURNEY INTO THE APPALACHIAN PAST

a review by
Thomas Rain Crowe

Julia Nunnally Duncan. *When Time Was Suspended*. Red Hawk Publications, 2024.

THOMAS RAIN CROWE is the author of more than thirty books, including the multi-award winning nonfiction nature memoir *Zoro's Field: My Life in the Appalachian Woods* (University of Georgia Press, 2005; reviewed in *NCLR* 2006); a book of essays and articles titled *The End of Eden (Writings of an Environmental Activist)* (Wind Publications, 2008); and a collection of place-based poems titled *Crack Light* (Wind Publications, 2011). He has edited literary and cultural journals and anthologies and is founder and publisher of *New Native Press*. He has served on the boards of several environmental conservation organizations in western North Carolina over the last forty years. A resident of western North Carolina and the Southern Appalachians, he has spoken widely to groups on the subjects of higher consciousness, sustainability, and protection of the planet.

As former North Carolina Poet Laureate Joseph Bathanti says in his cover blurb for North Carolina native Julia Nunnally Duncan's latest volume of poetry, *When Time Was Suspended*, "Julia Nunnally Duncan has established herself as an acolyte of Appalachia, a daughter of song, with a voice as true as a plumb line, and a capacious gaze that stirs her to unforgettable language . . . [a] conflation of history, ethnography, genealogy, ancestry, [and] family Bible." This collection is something of a twin or complementary volume to her recent book of autobiographical essays, *All We Have Loved* (2023; reviewed in *NCLR Online Spring 2024*). Both books are written from the perspective of a modern Appalachian experience by one who has been there and lived it. Duncan's books remind me of my experience living off the grid in the late 1970s and early 1980s in a small cabin in the woods along the Green River in Polk County, NC, where, like the author in her early years in Southern Appalachia, I lived with no indoor plumbing and with a woodstove for heat. But Duncan's book is not about plumbing. It focuses on family roots and preserving family stories about those who have peopled her western North Carolina experience. Featuring a great photo of her gated wooden Appalachian house with all her early family members peering over the

fence at the camera, her new book takes us through her youth and introduces us to everyone in the family. First and foremost, we meet her grandmother, who has a romantic heart, patchwork quilts, and a love of Piggly Wigglys. From there, numbered sections introduce us to people from the poet's past. There are stories of drownings, suicides, lynchings, disease, and hiding from the local dentist in the family outhouse. Section III explores issues relating to the two world wars and the Korean War, focusing on details from family and friends involved. Section IV is dedicated to the subject of Nature. The first poem in this section, titled "Nature," references "Robert Frost [who] once observed that / nature was cruel." He appears in the next poem, too, saying, "the woods were all killing each other, / fighting for a place in the sun" ("Poison Oak"). Then we have poems like "Nest," which describes how the poet's husband "mowed over a yellow jacket's nest" and "the fast drive to the hospital" that followed. Then there are poems about panthers, copperheads, and pets.

In further sections, Duncan gives us poems on barbecue ribs grilled in the back yard, 9/11, her brother's garden with its "messes of Blue Lake bush beans, / golden ears of Kandy Korn, / bags of Clemson spineless okra; / cabbages, tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers," and birth-



COURTESY OF JULIA NUNNALLY DUNCAN

day parties spent dancing the Twist on hardwood floors surrounded by wallpapered walls.

The rest of the book deals with family members and important events in their lives, including a section of short poems concerned with photographs of persons suffering illness or death and victims of the American Civil War. That aside, perhaps the poem most descriptive and central to this collection is the title poem:

Mysteries are there –
faces from long ago
that no one today can identify;
and revelations, too –
youthful versions of loved ones
who lived in a past
we never knew.
Photographs capture times
we might forget
if not for an image to remind us
of that day.
Sad, enlightening, and dear
family pictures can be,
allowing us to see
what we and others were then
at that moment
when time was suspended.

Looking back on her past and even past generations, Duncan's poems resemble narratives written for family archives – to be read and appreciated

by future generations. Other such poems include "Family Portrait," which describes a picture of her great-grandmother surrounded by her eight children and ends with these telling lines:

Their progeny might have prospered
and been granted a life easier
than they were allowed.
But they were the rich soil
from which the rest of us sprang –
a tough stock,
worthy and proud.

Perhaps my favorite poem in the collection is a rhyming poem titled "The Great War," which sports an epigram by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: "*Yours has the suffering been, / The memory shall be ours.*" This poem serves as a mid-book interlude and serenade for the non-rhyming poems in the rest of the book:

It touched the mothers
who mourned their sons
and the wives whose hearts were lonely
and the girls whose marriages
would not come;
and it touched the boys and men
who left them for a cause
that some could not understand
or survive
or recover from.
It touched them all then –
in the glory and regret –
and now this hundred years later
we must never forget.

Here, Duncan is at her Bluegrass best with singing like Buddy Melton, the fiddler from Balsam Range.

In the end, Julia Nunnally Duncan has written from what she knows, creating a portrait of Southern Appalachia's past that can be appreciated as poetry, yet studied as definitive Appalachian history in classroom settings as a text. Having grown up, myself, in rural Southern Appalachia, I not only appreciate what she has done here, but applaud her for her efforts on a culture's behalf. ■

JULIA NUNNALLY DUNCAN is an award-winning author of twelve books of prose and poetry, including *When Day Is Done* (March Street Press Press, 2009; reviewed in *NCLR* 2010) and *An Endless Tapestry* (March Street Press Press, 2007; reviewed in *NCLR* 2009). Her upbringing in a western North Carolina textile town features prominently in her work. An alumnus of Warren Wilson College, she taught English and Humanities at McDowell Technical Community College for nearly forty years. Retired now, she lives in Marion, NC, with her husband, Steve.

ABOVE Julia Nunnally Duncan's family in front of their Appalachian home, circa 1916 (the photograph that appears on the cover of this book)