



PROJECT MUSE®

First Light: Poems (review)

Celia Miles

Appalachian Heritage, Volume 32, Number 2, Spring 2004, pp. 73-74 (Review)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aph.2004.0035>

Appalachian Heritage



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/434576/summary>

Nancy Dillingham. *First Light: Poems*. Alexander, NC: Worldcomm Publishers, 2003. 104 pages. Paperback. \$12.00.

Some books of poetry are for keeping, just as some are for putting on the shelf and eyeing occasionally when one wants the simplicity of childhood nostalgia for another era or the challenge of wending one's intellectual way through the linguistic maze of another's mind. But some poems are for keeping, for returning to, for sticking close by. Such are the poems in Nancy Dillingham's third book, *First Light*.

Some images are "soft as smoke rising" ("*First Light*"), some slice through your senses so sharply you hurt ("On the edge of madness save for fractious fowl/garrulous guineas/ in the field/creating a din..."). Some poems are so expressive they leave you knowing you'll never experience a particular scene or object the same way after reading Nancy's take on it: "Wheat field," for example: "Liquescent/as fire/the grass/like glass/undulates/with light. This image stays in the same way Wordsworth's "Solitary Reaper, yon solitary Highland lass" remains with the reader long after her song and his words are gone.

Ranging from six lines (10 words) to three pages—imagistic, narrative, dense as a laurel thicket, clean as the hogkiller's knife, precise as a lightning flash—these poems catch at your spirit; they linger like a memory. Simple? Hardly.

I've been rereading some of Stanley Kuntiz's poems, returning to them after long years of being overwhelmed by their syntax in college; I treat them like intellectual exercises, studying the structure, the diction, the punctuation, finding in some of them, over-grammar-ed and over-flighty as they are, a pleasure in discovery. After long careful reading, an occasional wow...that's what he's saying! Perfectly legitimate, but reading that way is thin pleasure beside reading *First Light's* perfectly honed phrases, perfectly aligned words. Dillingham's poems tap our emotional keyboard with deft and delicate, yet meaty and strong vocabulary. She's not "playing with the reader's mind" so much as illuminating the spirit. Rather than being irritated by what the poet conceals, the reader is drawn in by the silences between words, the spareness, the spare, the sensory. As a master carver removes to reveal essence, this poet pares away verbiage and peels back syllables. The result is stellar—poems blindingly immediate as sticking tongue to frozen metal.

Dillingham writes of the pioneer woman ("Pioneer woman/ in all my silences/ I think of you"), the mountain woman ("There is a landscape/ of the heart/ that sets us apart"), and gives her the universal womanhood grounded in the specific ("Still/ as a white

sapling/ she stands/ daguerreotyped/ by the night"). The listing of herbs, the description of a diamondback rattlesnake, the "fence of flowers"—it's all poetry.

This collection moves us through the seasons, through the life, the hurts, the beauty of a hard life with touches of humor (surely most mountain kids remember the woeful "Big Toe Tale"); but there's no glossing over the painful miscarriage, the snake bitten child, the mood of the wife, the "umber statue in the dusk," who waits in the doorway when the unfaithful husband returns from his week with her sister in Idaho.

If you're going to buy just one book of poetry this year, buy *First Light*. If you're going to buy three books of poetry, buy Dillingham's *New Ground* (1998), *The Ambiguity of Morning* (2001), and *First Light*. And don't expect these books to gather dust or merely add to your shelved collection; they are to be read again and again. To paraphrase Eudora Welty's story title: A good poem is hard to find. You can find plenty of them in *First Light*.

—Celia Miles

Prajznerová, Kateina. *Cultural Inter marriage in Southern Appalachia: Cherokee Elements in Four Selected Novels of Lee Smith*. New York: Routledge, 2003. 161 pages. Hardcover. \$65.00.

This groundbreaking book, part of Routledge's Indigenous People and Politics Series, explores the Cherokee influence on Appalachian culture by analyzing its appearance in four novels by Lee Smith: *The Last Day the Dog Bushes Bloomed* (1968), *Black Mountain Breakdown* (1980), *Oral History* (1983), and *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988). Prajznerová, an English professor at Masaryk University in the Czech Republic, employs the "Marxist branch of cultural anthropology" to show how Cherokee ideas about climate, geography, religion, race, sex, and family intertwined with those of European settlers to create a distinct set of cultural codes now recognized as "Appalachian." Although this book is a revised version of Prajznerová's Ph.D. dissertation, readers will not be put off by its theoretical nature or Marxist orientation. Her discussion offers fresh insight into both Smith and Appalachia, and her clear style will be enjoyed by any fan of Lee Smith, scholar and lay reader alike.

After a brief introduction that lays out her theoretical framework and provides a background of previous Smith criticism, Prajznerová delves into her discussion of the author's work by focusing specific chapters on Smith's ecological concerns; her use of orality; and her depiction of women's roles in Appalachian culture, analyzing especially the characters