

BOOK REVIEW

Sugarcane and Wild Turkeys

An English teacher revisits his childhood and fills a book of poetry with his sweet memories.

{POETRY}

***Cold Spring Rising* by John Thomas York.**

Press 53, 2012, 112 pages, paperback, \$12.95.

WHEN I WAS ABOUT 10, my brothers and I worked a couple of summers stripping and cutting sugarcane for a man named Jack Combs who lived down the road. One year I saved my sugarcane pay for a Red Ryder BB gun. Another year I bought a Western Flyer 10-speed. Cane leaves are coarse and stripping them is hard on your hands. Jack Combs almost always had a cigarette — lit or not — stuck to his lower lip, and it would flutter when he talked. When he drove his tractor he usually stood instead of using the seat. We'd play in our front yard and hear a low rumble from down the road, and soon Captain Jack would heave into sight astride his Massey Ferguson, cigarette flapping.

I hadn't thought about sugarcane and Jack Combs in a long time. But they came back to me when I read John Thomas York's new book. *Cold Spring Rising* is partly a memorial to a childhood spent chasing wild turkeys, picnicking at Cataloochee, mowing grass for grandmothers, and smoking cigarettes in an abandoned house. The poet Robert Morgan says the book "has both the sweetness and thrilling sting of the coldest and boldest spring water."

York, who has taught English in North Carolina public schools for 30 years or so, grew up on a dairy farm in Yadkin County, and one of the book's poems recalls how his father left the farming business one piece of equipment at a time. Another recounts a mill worker's inner dialogue as he takes a cigarette break.

My favorite is "A Stout One." In it, the speaker's father tells him that teaching English will take him nowhere fast, which makes the speaker want to reach out to the old man: "I want to jerk this old onion / out of the ground, to strip away / gray flesh and find a red-faced boy, / sobbing because his daddy's strop / stings like hornets, or because his mother / is leaving him with her foster father, / his mama taking the early train / to Georgia to look for steady work." He wants to pick his father up, "to put him to bed to dream / like a seed unfurling beneath a new moon. / But he is a stout one, and I have no / words, nor the will for such a cutting."

If you strip and crush sugarcane and simmer its juice long enough, you'll eventually get blackstrap molasses — the heady, bittersweet leavings of a plant that spent all summer in the sun. John Thomas York says *Cold Spring Rising* was 40 years in the making. He's already done the harvesting for you — all you have to do is savor the crop. 🍷

— Jason Smith



PHOTOGRAPH BY BERT VANDERVEEN

Whippoorwill

By John Thomas York

The clear horizon was fading,
and my father and I sat together
on the warm steps,
cinder blocks painted smooth,
Daddy smelling of cows
and a cigarette, glowing, fading,

when it started, a song
both monotonous and magical,
as if God were plying
a hand pump, a musical
machine that said, *Make-it-Flow!*
Make-it-Flow!
Darkness rising from a deep well
and flooding the woods, the corn field.

I pointed, wanting a name:
"It's just a whippoorwill, Johnny.
Just a bird, saying, *Whippoorwill.*"

Still the song rose from the dark,
a siren's voice, sounding
the alarm for me and my father,
ignorant of any danger,
father-son sitting close on the warm steps
and watching the farm fading into the night.

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