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Review of York's "Cold Spring Rising"

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Cold Spring Rising

By John Thomas York (Winston-Salem, NC: Press 53, 2012) \$12.95, paper. ISBN 9781935708520, 97 pp.

John Thomas York has published *Cold Spring Rising*, his first full-length poetry collection, after many years in a productive career of teaching and publishing in chapbooks and journals. If it lacks the unity of books by poets who publish a new collection at each rung of the professional poetry ladder, it more than compensates with the variety of a career's worth of work—and a mature mastery of many techniques, tonal colors, and sensibilities.

I first became acquainted with York's excellent poetry 15 years ago when I reviewed his chapbook *Johnny's Cosmology* for *Appalachian Heritage*. Indeed, nearly all the 27 poems that made up that volume are included here again (a fact not mentioned on the Acknowledgments page). My only complaint about *Cold Spring Rising* is that I would have enjoyed more new or uncollected work.

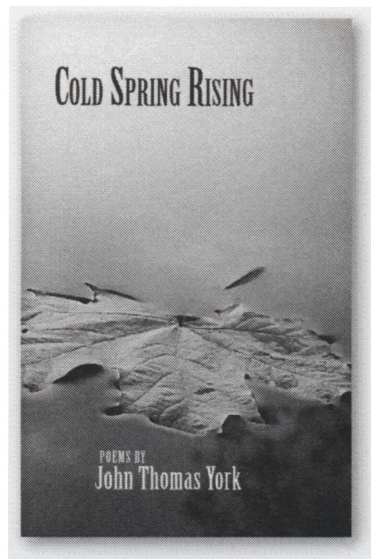
As others have noted—including the eminent Robert Morgan on the back cover blurb—York is adept at recreating the sensibilities of his boyhood with vivacity and pathos. This is particularly evident in the first of the book's five sections, "Tall Grass," a group of poems that orbits around a child's point of view. It includes a noteworthy pair of narratives that frame and recreate the child's feelings on arriving at his family's farm—then leaving it behind. The second piece in this section, "I Dream of Driving a 1949 Two-Ton Chevy Flatbed," calls to mind the mysterious wonder of a child's journeying to a new home, a child who is at once experiencing a myriad of almost-familiar visions:

... rows of brightleaf tobacco flowering greenish-white,
the fields of soybeans or corn,
the pastures where cattle were grazing,
and pastures given over to cedar and golden sedge. ...

We climbed a steep grade, we rode into the sky
above the house, the barns, the silos,
everything below getting dim with distance
as the Chevrolet roared to the right of the polestar. (9)

The departure poem, "Puzzle," is equally successful in presenting the boy's difficult-to-articulate sense that something important has come to an end, and that it has done so with more whimper than bang: "My father quit the farm / one piece at a time," the poet relates (22), then details the pieces that just seemed to disappear, leaving the speaker "looking for a missing piece, / the edges invisible but sharp ..." (23).

"Nebo," the book's second section, moves beyond the child's reflections and into adolescence. Especially effective here is "Johnny's Cosmology." Like many boys who grew up in the country, the narrator takes to the woods to



sort himself out: "*Going squirrel hunting*, I say: then head out / the back door..." (30). That he's hunting bigger game than squirrels is indicated by the fact that he doesn't shoot anything, that he returns not with game, but "loaded with songs" (31). This birth-of-the-poet theme continues in "Eleventh Grade: 1971." Here York communicates perfectly the elation a young man feels after showing his creations to a caring and supportive teacher. He writes, "I've been alerted, thawed, / charged, aimed, fired, called / to march at last" (35).

The middle section, entitled appropriately "Always in the Middle of Things," turns from adolescent experiences to adult sensibilities. It includes some of York's best observations of natural phenomena, along with weighty reflections on maturing romantic love. The two themes draw together in "Meteorites," a piece which suggests a transcendent parallel between his experience of the "night / of the noctiluca," when even the sand seems to repeat "the Perseids seeding the atmosphere"; and a second miracle of nature and love, the imminent birth of his daughter: "Will her life / be a mere flicker, a faster flashing than our own? / *She kicks!*" (40). Yet the standout may be "The Squirrel Woman," the poet's fantastical confabulation of meeting his granny in the guise of a squirrel, who, pointedly, does not approve of his poetic pursuits: "You're a disappointment, always / scribbling ..." (43). With the humbled self-doubt of middle age, he tolerates her scolding, as the language "can do me / no harm" (44). That she "flits / around the trunk and high into a tree, / far out of range of any rock I can toss," however, suggests that although the mature poet can doubt the path his life has taken, he might sometimes like to hurl a stone at the doubt (44).

There is gratifying variety in York's poetry. He varies his line, his tone, his subjects, and his narrative points of view. The most satisfying tangent in this last regard is the fourth section, "Donahaw County," a set of nine dramatic monologues each told by a distinct narrator. A few examples: "Katy's Sunfish" is the story of a girl who, inspired by a mysterious granny woman, persists in fishing the little creek behind her house, even after her daddy has told her "The tractor wheels / have churned it to mud" (55). In "Bobby Jester's Dandelion Blues," a young campus groundskeeper sees his would-be beloved swept away by "an ugly, hairy-faced" college boy (57), then turns for solace to the songs of his "Daddy's old Martin" (58). The section closes with "Victor Dobson's Night Out," the account of an old man who hides in the woods to avoid the son who would haul him to a doctor. Back home in front of the TV with his concerned son safely gone, he "dreamed my bones were leafing, that I was a tree / full of silver blossoms, blinking in the sky, / as peepers peep and the cows call me home" (71). To York's credit, we're never more than a few lines into any poem before we feel we know the speaker: each voice is distinct and engaging.

The collection's final section, "There's a Landscape that Lives," begins with a small masterpiece, "Chasing Diana Most of the Night, Driving from Wilmington to Banner Elk, NC," a deftly handled contemporary sonnet. York's star-gazing motif, threaded throughout the collection, finds its most engaging expression here: while the "grayish light / danced in most windows—TV ruled

the night”; but outside, “Ripe, libidinous” Diana makes her way across the cosmos, “followed by Orion, who wanted one last kiss” (75). The final poem, “The Calling,” is a fitting ending for a collection that has portrayed childhood sensibilities, suggested the poet’s coming of age, and demonstrated what an accomplished poet can do. It brings together at once the memories of boyhood and the aesthetic of loss (of childhood, of his father, and more). The speaker here, who may assume a kind of over-voice for the collection, has lived his life as a poet—he has followed his vocation. Yet it’s as if “the calling” that made him a poet also removed him from the ground of his poems: “And I’m the one that would not return— / for the land lives in me, the kingdom come, / thawing every morning in the hands of the sun” (91). Each line of this concluding poem offers a fine image, a fine sound, or a finely turned phrase. It’s a strong ending to an accomplished and moving collection.

In a poetry scene infatuated with experimentation and technique, one could argue that York is the most conservative of poets. His themes are typical: the passing of time, what it means to be a tiny human in an infinite universe, love lost and won, the past that carries its weight into the present. That’s not a revolutionary list. Technically, he sometimes breaks from typical form or syntax, as in his occasional rapid fire compounding of nouns: “I ... skim the water, / find that it’s red, not blue, and full of tires / panty hose clocks black spaghetti dead fish” (61). Even then, he’s never hard to track nor, some might say, is he particularly demanding. Yet at his best, York is graceful, precise, lush, and articulate. He’s challenging enough to maintain the interest of devoted poetry readers, yet never difficult for difficulty’s sake. York is a craftsman who knows the difference between elegant erudition and erudite distraction, and he remains accessible for any readers willing to adapt their pace to his studied eloquence and relax to savor the richness of image and memory these poems offer.

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