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Brightleaf

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Michael Chitwood

Brightleaf

“Smell that,”
the farmer I was working for said,
the ropery, toasted musk of curing tobacco wafted
from the tobacco barn.
“You know what that smell is?”
I shrugged.
“Money.”

*

The first row I ever primed (I was 14),
riding that strange contraption, the primer,
its seat just inches above the ground,
working fast to get the bottom three leaves:
they ripened from the ground up
and the still-green top leaves were dew-covered.
It was like swimming,
my arms flailing and water pouring down
and when we got to the end of the row,
I was soaked,
my hands gummy with tobacco tar.
My head was spinning.
“It’s the nicotine,” Billy said.
“You just got your first buzz.”

*

John Rolfe, the story goes, brought the seed
from the West Indies to Virginia,
colony to colony.

It was the beginning of Empire,
the cash crop, gold leaf.
He later married Pocahontas
but she died in England,
slain by a European disease.
Later, back in Virginia,
Rolfe married his third wife.
The plants thrived.

*

It built cities—Richmond, Winston-Salem, Durham.
And homes, hospitals, and universities.
It bought shirts, shoes, and dresses,
food for the table,
and, early on, living human beings.

*

Thomas Jefferson noted
at the launch of the first James River bateau
that the big boat could haul 12 hogsheads of tobacco,
a thousand pounds each.
Three slaves—a steersman, a headsman, and a third hand—
poled from Lynchburg to Richmond.
It was a two-week trip, down and back.
Out on the river, they had the tug of the current,
the gentle clap of the water against the boat,
the occasional rasp of rocks on the hull
and with no overseer were most free.

*

It was unusual
that none of the Thurmans smoked.
Months of seeding, planting, weeding, topping,

priming, tying, curing
and finally hauling to market their livelihood
to make the little white straws.
As we loaded the brightleaf for market,
out of nowhere, or maybe guilt, Billy said,
“You know what cigarettes are. Coffin nails.”

*

Freed into servitude,
the sharecroppers had a saying:
they worked “can to can’t,”
can see (barely) to can’t see.
The children too.
After curing, Boss took the leaf to market
and returned with papers of the harvest’s worth,
knowing none of them could read.
From their share, he took a portion for fertilizer
and the seed in the spring.
“Only fair,” he said. “You’ve got a roof.”
“Yes sir. But a low roof and nowhere else to go.”

*

Danville Tobacco Market.
Here was where you made your year.
The farmers splayed the leaves on tarps,
a sampling of their crop.
The auctioneer’s chant was a poem of money.

Cub reporter, I couldn’t understand the song,
but farmers and cigarette buyers
nodded or waved off the offers.
It was all subtle and wispy as smoke
and the bargain was for everything they had.

*

The Duke of Danville came home from the auction
drunk in his Sunday best
with a year's worth of meals in his pocket
and a new truck.
She was minding the pots and pans.
Huffing, she said,
"You know I worked as hard
as you did for that crop
and did the cooking too."
He bowed deeply,
flourishing his hat, and said,
"And for that I thank you."

*

Driving NC 86 in the fall,
heading up to Virginia for Thanksgiving,
passing all the harvested fields.
The leafless stalks still stood,
sundialing their shadows on the ground,
counting hours, years, centuries
of this curious crop you could neither eat nor wear.
The stripped rows flashed by,
livings made and lives taken.