

A Selection of Shorter Pieces from

# Stark County Poems

War & the Depression Come to Spoon River



by BJ Omanson



Certain poems in this collection appeared first in the following publications: “The Greying Edge of a Winter Evening” in *Shenandoah*; “Last Stand” in *The Sewanee Review*; “The Widower” & “The Exile” in *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture*; “Class” in *The Hudson Review*; “The Harvest” in the Academy of American Poets anthology *New Voices, 1989-1998*; “The Old Masterson Place”, “There are Stories” & “The Prodigal” in *The Pennsylvania Review*.

A Country Where Little but Corn Endures

An Abandoned Bridge on Spoon River

The Exile

The Old Masterson Place

Class

Proprietress of the Party Line

Hanging Out the Wash in the Midst of Fall Plowing

The Harvest

Last Stand

There are Stories

The Prodigal

Nowhere to Nowhere

The Widower

The Greying Edge of a Winter Evening

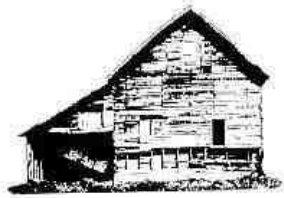
The Old and Obdurate Shade of Yews

Epitaph

## A Country Where Little but Corn Endures

A stark, monotonous land, encompassed  
by a distant, uninterrupted horizon  
as though all the shimmering miles of corn  
were a shoreless sea...

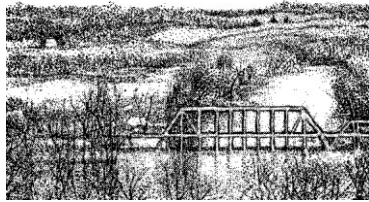
and there, adrift  
on the windblown acres, a solitary  
derelict barn collapsed on its timbers,  
the western peak of its roof abruptly  
pitching out of the corn like the tilted  
prow of a sinking ship...



## An Abandoned Bridge on Spoon River

The decrepit ironwork spanning the Spoon  
has carried no traffic for decades now  
except for the truants who brazen the bowed  
timbers to cross it. As such boys will,  
in the manner of boys immemorial,  
they loiter midway, lounge about, lie down  
and, peering through rifts in the rotted wood,  
beguiled by that which only boys know,  
they gaze on the mud-laden current below.

Cumuli pile above a near meadow  
where breezes conspire, ruffling the calm  
of leaves and rippling the water's film.  
The boys hardly notice, gazing as though  
the bridge were the rim of a sacred well  
and the river--- some whispering oracle.



## The Exile

On the winter morning that they were wed,  
she made of her husband a sole request:  
that before old age should overtake them,  
habits harden and joints be possessed  
by infirmity, they would move to town.  
The thought of a widowhood spent alone  
amid all that silence filled her with dread  
and she begged his promise. He nodded once  
in cautious accord. Now, fifty years hence,  
she lives contented with neighbors at hand  
and a house she can manage. As for him,  
he stands at the window in reverie  
as though in the empty street he can see  
acres and acres of newly-plowed land.



## The Old Masterson Place

Though barren for years, still it crowns the knoll,  
walls weathered gray, roof a gaping hole,  
windows like empty sockets in a skull.



## Class

was what she hoped for a little more of  
but wasn't holding her breath--- it was something  
in short supply on the farm and valued  
accordingly, like seedcorn or credit---  
a thing to be cultivated with care  
and hoarded like so many precious jars  
of late-summer fruit. Class was a velvet  
embroidered chair where the men never sat  
in a parlor always dusted--- if only  
she'd had a parlor--- so sometimes Class  
was only a corner of yard fenced off  
from the hogs where, tucked among onions,  
she cherished a hidden bed of alyssum.  
Class was keeping her six daughters clothed  
in handmade dresses, not hand-me-downs,  
while strictly admonishing every lapse  
of grammar or bearing or common grace.  
Class was a lyric by Longfellow learned  
as a child and softly recited  
(on mornings when all the men were afield)  
to a disapproving chorus of hens.  
Class was a few stolen moments sitting  
alone at the kitchen table, slowly  
turning a page in the **WARD'S** catalogue.  
Class was something to do with great cities,  
with distances traveled by night, a wordless  
prayer in her child's heart and a silvery  
horn from an east-bound express suspended  
above the fields as she drifted to sleep.

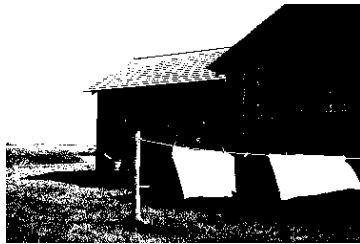
## Proprietress of the Party Line

It wasn't so much that she listened in  
on our every call, it was that she took  
not the slightest trouble to mask the din  
and clatter of pots and pans as she cooked,  
or bothered to set the receiver down  
as she bellowed out the door to her boys  
or cursed a pig off the porch. All the town  
had to talk above or around the noise  
of Lucinda's chaotic life, and yet,  
we'd not have embarrassed her on a bet  
by letting her know we knew she was there--  
the dullness and drill of her daily fare  
had left her, like most of us, deadly bored;  
whenever she blew off steam, we just paused  
and held our tongues till the turmoil passed:  
we wouldn't want her to miss a word.



## **Hanging Out the Wash in the Midst of Fall Plowing**

The sight of billowing sheets in the wind  
caused something to break in the little child,  
not only because, like anything wild,  
they wrangled and whipped but because their fall  
and lift afforded glimpses of all  
the impending darkness that lay beyond:  
the sinister acres of cloven land,  
the miles of merciless black without end.



## The Harvest

Toward evening they found him out in the field  
behind the tractor, lying face down.

The husking-bed of the cornpicker held  
a mangled glove, but no blood or bone.

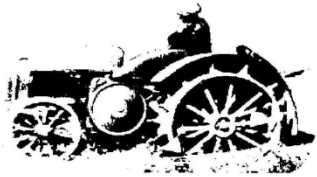
His hand was intact.

They puzzled it out.

Something, most likely a stalk, had jammed  
the snapping rolls. As he freed them, they caught  
a finger, ripped the glove from his hand,  
and gave him so unexpected a shock  
he dropped on the spot from a heart-attack.

They laid him out in the bed of the truck  
and ferried him home.

As they neared the yard,  
she stepped from the doorway, twisting a lock  
of hair round her finger, staring hard.



## Last Stand

When he woke in a cloud of pain to find  
that he'd been installed in a narrow bed  
in a strange room, a part of his mind  
returned to the morning he lay half-dead  
in the Argonne Forest, awaiting help,  
expecting deliverance, counting upon  
a fellow Marine-- but no such hope  
supported him now. He was on his own.  
He ripped that abomination, that tube  
and needle, ripped it out of his vein  
and, laying hold of the lamp like a club,  
he raised a thunderous shout till a rain  
of running feet on linoleum poured  
indignantly down the hall to his door.

Like Bowie near death at the Alamo,  
propped against pillow with pistol cocked,  
the old man waited for faces to show  
in the open door and launched his attack,  
hurling bedpan, lamp and telephone  
at the scrambling nurses. They had him packed  
and escorted home within the hour.  
That evening, dug in like a cornerstone  
on his own farm, resolutely locked  
against all reason, lord of his tower,  
he defied his family's threats and pleas  
till they crow-barred the door and found him dead,  
draped in a coat, sitting upright in bed,  
a Winchester rifle across his knees.

## There are Stories

There are stories you know without knowing quite  
how it is you know them, stories without  
any point to speak of, except the point

of their own peculiar strangeness, stories  
as empty of purpose as any abandoned  
barn in these barren fields, enduring

against all likelihood or good reason.

One such story took place around here  
a lifetime ago. An old couple died--

whether, as may be, by Providence  
or simply by luck-- they died, either way,  
on the very same day. He died before lunch.

The daughters decided to tell her nothing.  
She appeared to take no notice of sharing  
her bed with a corpse, except to complain

of his icy feet. She was dead before dark.

And that's all there is to that story.

No one recalls anymore who they were.



## The Prodigal

In the end the thing that disturbed him most,  
the thing he remembered most through the years,  
was when he returned to the family place,  
to the hard unforgiving acres where  
his father still farmed, and recalled again  
the inherent knowledge he once possessed  
simply by being his father's son---  
a knowledge foregone, consigned to the past,  
till he saw it rise up in his father's face  
as a look of reproach: that nothing gained  
by talking has worth, that cattle and land  
are the only wealth befitting a man,  
that a landless man is like Adam cast  
from the Garden, shamed, and forever lost.



## Nowhere to Nowhere

When they sold off the farm she took the child  
and caught a bus out of town--- as for him,  
with everyone gone and everything grim,  
he opened a pint of bourbon, piled

pictures, letters and clothes in the yard,  
doused them in kerosene, struck a match  
and watched as they burnt to ashes, watched  
and worked on his whiskey, working hard.

The next morning he caught an outbound freight  
heading god-knows-where and he didn't care---  
he was down to nothing, a gypsy's fare---  
down to a rusty tin cup and a plate,

dice and a bible, a bedroll and fate,  
down to a bone-jarring ride on a train  
through country dying and desperate for rain,  
running nowhere to nowhere and running late.



## The Widower

It may have been only the consequence  
of his deepening age, or of something more,  
something to do with the unendurable  
starless nights or the drifted acres  
of whiteness stretching forever away  
like a dream of death--- but whatever the cause,  
he heard the scrabbling patter of mice  
over carelessly piled forks and plates  
as the sound of his wife downstairs at the sink  
drying the supper dishes. And later,  
forgetting he'd put on the kettle himself,  
he waited for its insistent shrill  
to summon her from her sewing, and when  
it persisted, dismissed it as nothing more  
than the endless and purgatorial keen  
of wind in the eaves. He tendered his watch  
in the nameless hour, sunk in his chair,  
submerged in a phantom procession of shades  
that moved through his mind like glimmerings cast  
on the wall from flames in the grate, all the while  
expecting to hear her foot on the stair,  
till like some old sorrow from somewhere deep  
in the subterranean soul of the house,  
a timber groaned and he knew she was gone.  
He hoisted his overcoat up to his chin  
and, turning his back to the deepening cold,  
slumbered by fits and starts. In the kitchen,  
a curtain, darkened and limp with steam,  
adhered to the windowpane till it froze.

## The Greying Edge of a Winter Evening

In Stark County, in his eighty-third year,  
my grandfather died. The tall gabled house  
overlooking the creek and bottomland  
from a rough oak ridge stands empty now,  
but nothing changes. The west-facing pane  
of the window-bay where he watched from his desk  
again glazes red as sunset crowns  
the rim out beyond the timbered slopes  
and, again, a raw wind sculpts the snow  
into curving drifts across the back yard.  
A familiar hour, the graying edge  
of a winter evening, when day and night  
walk the same bare fields. An ice-refracted  
ray of rose imperceptibly moves  
among old mementos lying upon  
the darkened oak of his desk, igniting  
the interior of a glass paperweight  
and warming the copper of four old coins.  
In a matter of days, we will all convene  
for the sorting out and dividing of goods,  
the auctioning off of machinery,  
of cattle and parceled land, the settling  
of last accounts. But for now it's as though  
my grandfather's only just left his chair  
and wandered off somewhere along the hall  
or down the darkened stairs to the cellar.  
Nothing has changed. Once more, as in all  
the uncounted winter days of his life,  
the early dusk haunts the empty house,  
the quiet rooms darken, the furnace kicks in.

## The Old and Obdurate Shade of Yews

A disused knoll between fields, set apart  
as burial ground when the first settler died:  
some ninety years later a horse-drawn cart  
conveyed the last coffin. Now no one knows  
of any visitors other than crows--  
the gate is grappled in vine.

This is no  
fit place for the living, where weedy rows  
of lichen-encrusted slabs recede  
in the old and obdurate shade of yews.  
There are presences here, not only of those  
bewildered and disembodied souls  
that cower about their bones like ghouls,  
but of something residual, more to do  
with the knoll itself, with the grating caw  
of crows in the distance, the muted blue  
of skies through a barren tree-- presences  
intrinsic as death, indifferent as dust,  
that discompose and deter the senses,  
instilling a dull unease . . .

All but lost,  
the west is like absence: each fencerow ends  
on that gray horizon where field and mist  
and darkening sky converge to a blur.  
Mourning-doves murmur.  
Night impends.



## Epitaph

Concealed under corn, the wreckage of farms,  
rotted timbers of buried silos and barns,  
the hard rusted shards of harrows and plows,  
the fallen-in hollows of cellar and house,  
long-buried fragments of saucers and crocks,  
doorknobs and buttons amid clay and rocks:  
such are the secretive depths of the sea  
of corn that extends to eternity  
from the banks of Spoon River: beneath the sky,  
beneath all we see, generations lie.

