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The Road Down from Spoon River

They call it regional, this relevance.
—William Stafford

Route 9 west from Bloomington, looking for something like Spoon River: a necessary pilgrimage into the country where a lasting part of the Illinois mythology was conceived. Nowadays the highway is always busy, but the secondary roads are quiet and I follow them without design until the pastoral landscape of the river valley begins to take hold. Over the years, including recent years living in central Illinois, the name "Spoon River" has meant to me the spectral realm of Edgar Lee Masters's poems, not lines on a road map or state parks or folklife festivals. My Spoon River is dark. Yet this place I have come to now is spacious and sunny, lovely in a way very different from the necropolis of the book. Soon I abandon the car for a short climb to a little township cemetery, complete with its oak-grove, at the crest of a rounded hill. There is something melancholy—expected and appropriate—in the early springtime air. The rank grass and bright pink phlox stand in startling contradistinction to the graves and their weathered stones. Am I standing at the source of Spoon River? The reasonable answer is no, it is a romantic notion to suppose that Masters got his inspiration from walking around in this or any other cemetery. Thus far reason. But, unreasonably, I continue to think, walking from grave to grave, that these sleepers may be the very ones Masters put into the ground above Spoon River, and here they remain, well pleased with this land and this landscape, immeasurably preferring its elemental quality of refuge to painful consciousness in the town below. For in the end it was the town they hated, the narrow institutions that confined, the meager civilization that starved them. Down in the town the discontents (who epitomize Spoon River for the contemporary read-

er, though they are not its whole story) could find nothing to affirm in their lives, and if to live is to have a voice, they lived most fully in the brief moment when death allowed them to speak to the world.

The timeless poetic convention of the epitaph proved a neat device. The late citizens of Spoon River were at last free to size up the town, without reserve and beyond the censure of the ladies' aid or the chamber of commerce. In this sense, no doubt, every cemetery has the makings of a Spoon River. At my feet is the once-high Victorian obelisk of a leading family's plot tumbled into ruin. Close by is the residuum of an early settler's stone, far too worn by now to give up its modicum of information—what was surely a pious verse above, names and dates below. "All, all, are sleeping on the hill." Actual and fictive folk commingle in an imagination that can no longer distinguish the book of Spoon River from Spoon River itself.

As Illinois goes, this place is old. A few of the graves antedate the Civil War. A few reflect its ravages. And many more recall the waving of the bloody shirt in yearly celebrations to the turn of the century and beyond. Going further back, somewhere on this hilltop acre is reputedly the final western home of a Revolutionary sergeant who wandered out of Rhode Island in 1805, eventually found himself in Illinois, and became for years a fixture in the town's Independence Day parade, marching down Main Street to the tattoo of his own different drummer, marching long after he had ceased to know exactly what he was doing and the town had other wars to fight and remember. But I search in vain for the plain old soldier in the midst of the high-rise Gilded Age monuments and Grand Army of the Republic memorials. It occurs to me, and not for the first time, that the nineteenth century is a strange, vast distance away, with no bridge of ages for convenient crossing back and forth. Here, though our generations have their occasional markers, and a number of the old stones have been replaced by new monoliths of polished granite, "history" appears to have begun with Lincoln's progenitors and to have ended sometime around 1900. We talk easily about continuity with the past and try to possess it through the simplifications of genealogy and hereditary clubs devoted to American ancestor-worship. And in so doing we get a version of the past that tells us precisely what we want to know; it looks and tastes familiar because it is from our own recipe. But what of the *other* past, the one with so many ingredients that aren't handy and some few that we shall never find? The myth of continuity, if it is to serve us in health, must be taken entire. The myth must help us make not only those self-aggrandizing connections between past and present, which beguile us

into thinking that Lincoln was only yesterday and hence is with us yet, but also an approach to this perplexing otherness—a palpable difference that suggests an *ancient* Illinois, a vanished aboriginal race, with as yet no key for deciphering its traces in such high places of symbolism as graveyards.

In bewilderment I am inclined to return to the literature of the towns and locales of the Midwest for what may be a more direct route to the other culture. Masters's *Spoon River Anthology,* for better or worse our classic of classics, efficiently goes about the business in which literature excels both archaeology and history: its poems reduce the social and ethical complexity of a human community to a structured view, in this case one that is often negative to the point of misanthropy. No one who has read these bitter capusles of hatred or despair is likely to forget them:

> I loathed you, Spoon River, I tried to rise above you,
> I was ashamed of you. I despised you
> As the place of my nativity.[1]

The failed sculptor Archibald Higbie had lived in Rome, where he prayed every day for "another / Birth in the world, with all of Spoon River / Rooted out of my soul," but nothing like this ever came to the deracinated artist, who ended up back in the home ground for good. Even in Italy he had been "weighted down with western soil," and whenever he tried to sculpt Apollo he inexorably got a "trace of Lincoln." Do we sympathize with Higbie and feel the shock of recognition in his miserable life? When I was in college we were supposed to rage with Higbie against the town in the way we walked desperately on the beach with Hesse's Steppenwolf, but things have changed. Now that I know there's more to midwestern literature than Spoon River. Higbie's self-pity reminds me of another expatriate, Francis Grierson in London, for whom the ghost of Lincoln was also an unshakable heritage, though he turned the matter of Lincoln to triumphant account, the weight of western soil proving no burden but a kind of hothouse blessing when, further from his roots than Masters or Higbie, he needed to write another and a better book about nineteenth-century Illinois, *The Valley of Shadows.* Grierson's rhapsodic evocation of the 1850s is still moving and immediate, but Masters's Higbie whines from lack of talent and gumption—two qualities the despised Spoon River could not be expected to provide.

A more righteous case against the town is brought by its aspiring women. Many of them struggled toward identity only to be beaten down. There was Minerva Jones, for example, unprepossessing, ridiculed

on the streets, a sometime newspaper poetess, who was brutalized by one "Butch" Weldy, then turned over to Doc Meyers, who bungled the abortion and had to watch her die, "growing numb from the feet up." Her last behest is that someone "go to the village newspaper / And gather into a book the verses I wrote" (p. 44). This was never done.

Or Margaret Fuller Slack—the name says it all—who "would have been as great as George Eliot / But for an untoward fate": namely, marrying the druggist John Slack, who promised her leisure for her novel but, as soon as the wedding was over, commenced getting children on her to the number eight. Writing was obviously out of the question, though before long it didn't matter:

> It was all over with me, anyway,
> When I ran the needle in my hand
> While washing the baby's things,
> And died from lock-jaw, an ironical death (p. 70).[2]

On the slim evidence of her epitaph, Margaret Fuller Slack would never have rivaled George Eliot, but then neither did Masters, despite his more than fifty books. And the point in any case is that her scenes of provincial life went unwritten: even in death her only voice was his ventriloquism.

Over and over this is the fate of Spoon River's blighted women. Once in a while they flamed out, like Nancy Knapp, who danced and waved her arms in madness as her house burned down from a fire of her own setting; or they chose suicide, like Julia Miller, who wanted romantic transcendence but not her unborn child or her elderly husband. But for the most part they just endured in silence, until death offered a brief bitter voice for their "stories."

What a strange necrology, poem after poem! Where are the well-adjusted citizens of Spoon River, the ones who evidently lived in broad daylight and had little to complain of? They are consigned to the back of the book, arrayed in the part of the cemetery—well tended and redolent of artificial flowers these days—through which I walk in long strides, scarcely glancing down at the stones, on my way to the gloomier precincts where reside the most memorable grotesques in this dark book of failures. Failure is what literary history says is properly important about "village virus" literature, but who today would want to claim descent from these people? How can the likes of Higbie and Minerva Jones provide any real sense of spiritual kinship? The truth is that what was in 1915 a chilling indictment of small-town arrested development is, fifty years on and more, merely a curiosity. Fortunately for poets and citizens

alike, the village virus has been on the retreat in the face of tough and sustained public health measures—liberal infusions of culture and bright civic-mindedness—and has been, like smallpox, all but eradicated. Today Minerva Jones's doggerel would be collected and published, if only by her relatives or the local historical society, and Margaret Fuller Slack would contrive to make time for her novel one way or another. We live much more comfortably, too comfortably Masters would probably say, and the writer's interest in the hometown tends to be more sympathetic than in his era—more sympathetic and sometimes even reverential. The mythic overlay of a half-century's progress has disarmed social criticism. The recently rediscovered materials of vernacular history and folklore can now be used unselfconsciously and without the stilted irony and verged sentimentality of old Spoon River.

Such relaxation is, I think, mainly to the good. An obvious benefit is that the humor missing from Spoon River is back, in the form of a midwestern idiom that was once a wellspring of American literature in the nineteenth century. We all know both the words and the music to this ballad of cliché's from Dave Etter:

> It's certainly a lead-pipe cinch, pardner,
> that I'm in a dark blue funk.
> I can no longer root hog or die
> till the cows come home to this farm.
> You got to know the ropes to go against the grain,
> and scratchin' around in the soil
> ain't exactly my cup of Budweiser.
> But I can still cut the mustard
> and won't take no back seat
> to some highfalutin' fly-by-night dude
> who don't know if he's afoot or on horseback.
> I'm turnin' over a brand new leaf, you see.
> I've got other fish to fry
> when I get across that bright Mississippi water.
> And I ain't singin' you no tune
> the cow died of, neither.
> Remember, pardner, you done got the real goods,
> straight from the horse's mouth,
> which, while no manna from heaven,
> is nevertheless within an ace of the gospel.

"Bright Mississippi" is in the familiar idiom of the riverman's brag, the setting still a tavern by the water, the message still the same as in Mike Fink's day. Yet this gentler soul of the 1970s is not really spoiling for a

fight, nor itching to light out for the territory 150 years too late. He knows all he has to do is cross the beckoning bridge from Illinois to Iowa and he'll be beyond the bright Mississippi. And we and his creator know he's not going anyplace. That's the hint of pathos in an otherwise chuckling poem. The spirit is willing but we've run out of room for western heroism of the half-horse and half-alligator species. The bright image and the ritual phrases are all we've got left, but for Dave Etter this is mostly a laughing matter.

Today's imaginative atlas shows a new order of towns (though they may actually be as old as Spoon River) where life is good and there is a prominent sign forbidding tragedy posted at the city limits. Dave Etter's Alliance, Illinois, is built upon the mellower ironies of fellow feeling instead of alienation. When we meet his Michael Flanagan, unemployed and without prospects, he is sitting in his house doing what all our literary Illinoisans have seemed to do since Spoon River—composing his epitaph and preparing to go up on the hill:

> An open book is what I want chiseled
> on my marble gravestone,
> and these simple words,
> "He never got off the bus."
> Coming from a place so small
> that the tallest building
> was an Arco station,
> I should have been prepared
> to hear advice for the unemployed,
> such as the mailman's,
> "Perhaps you can catch on
> at the car wash across town."
> I gaze at the sheepskins
> tacked neatly to the wall
> and slump in my chair.
> I am an empty burlap bag now,
> the loose grain of my body
> falling on the bare floorboards,
> my tired, feeble thoughts turning
> to carnival lights blowing
> in the big Midwestern wind,
> my father coming out
> of the beer tent again,
> his Irish-American face
> red as a brakeman's flag.[4]

Flanagan could be the grand-nephew of any number of Spoon River deadbeats, but he is willing in 1975 to try a sad and knowing smile against the blankness of failure that drove his uncles to their grotesque and ineffectual antisocial behavior. Etter's latter-day towns have gas stations instead of liveries, and their post offices are closing one by one, but the corner groceries and taverns and courthouses survive to carry the same old load of human weariness. In Alliance, Illinois, Judge Emil Zangwill trudges home in the cold April rain to spend another night with Jack Daniel's, while over on another street Grover Ely muses over the decayed meaning of his "ancestral home":

> The ancestors who built this monumental brick home
> still stare, thin lips pursed, from their oval frames.
> We, the living Elys, are softer, poorer, sadder, but
> we try to stay on another year, bear another Ely child.[5]

"Softer, poorer, sadder"—the Elys are the heirs to a bankrupt tradition. Yet they will stay on another year, even though "Down in the yard the sundial has died of too much shade" and "All four chimneys are unsafe and haven't smoked in years." Why? Why stay on? Etter has a ready repertory of furtive non-answers, and none vaguer than Howard Drumgoolie's in "Hotel Tall Corn": "You know, I sorta, kinda like it"—a qualification and an accommodating middle ground never allowed in Spoon River.[6]

But to achieve a perspective Etter occasionally lets his people out of town for a brief retreat into nature: to a "forgotten graveyard" surely like my township cemetery and Spoon River, above the town and further away from it than the physical distance back.

> I have left my townsmen down below
> under the shadows of Town Hall:
> religious fakers, Republicans,
> the windbags at the barbershop.
>
> On this hill, the clean smell of skunk.
>
> The ape-faced trees crouch like gnarled bootblacks
> over the yellow tombstones;
> and there is a bird's nest—a torn blue wig.
>
> But I am at home among the dead,
> the deformed, the discolored.

A woodpecker joyfully carves his hole.

The sunset sweetens the mouth of a leaf.[7]

If there is such a thing as a tone which is both amused and elegiac, Etter's poems have it. They imply in an understated way the imminent passing of Alliance, Illinois, from the actual to the imaginative: not only is Grover Ely nostalgic (in a rather baffled way, to be sure) about his moldering ancestral home, but for the reader the very persona of such a man in such a situation is itself nostalgic. The towns I grew up in were ringers for Alliance, but they aren't like it today, and the town I now live in is busy transforming itself into something unrecognizable from the old small-town viewpoint. Every Illinois county has its ghost towns, and not all of them went to spirit way back in the collapse of the nineteenth century's expansive hopes. This is where Alliance, too, is headed, for the towns that persist into the next century will be larger, more central, more economically alive, and (no doubt) duller. They will be the "regional cities" so beloved of contemporary urban planners.

The sad part, of course, is that the more livable regions and their constituent towns become, the less they will be inhabited as places. In this crucial matter of place, no one has been more percipient than Wright Morris, the chief literary archaeologist of the Midwest, who observed some twenty years ago that "no matter where we go, in America today, we shall find what we just left."[8] And it is by now a commonplace that even the most tenacious aspects of regional culture—language and custom—are losing out to this creeping American uniformity. Certainly the physical towns, with their epidemics of franchises along Main Street and their naked subdivisions—like starting over on the treeless prairie but this time on the "amenable frontier"—are stupefyingly the same whether in Coffeyville, Kansas, or Clinton, Connecticut. The condition may seem worst in the Midwest because our towns are the most obvious (in the old literal sense of something standing smack in the middle of the road: you can't miss it) and the land is so open and extensive. We have nowhere to hide and protect what little is left of our cultural distinction.

The one midwestern difference everyone notices, and more often than not negatively remarks, is the landscape itself. On the long interstate haul across Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, the cars often seem to drive themselves, the passengers staring like zombies at the nothingness of the agricultural plains. Yet to an inhabitant this very openness is *place,* and openness is, paradoxically, an aesthetic refuge for many midwestern poets who still

feel (in James McGowan's memorable phrase) the "metaphysical prickle" of the prairie landscape.[9] Midwestern poetry of place treats the landscape as a standpoint. As William Stafford puts it, "Everything we own / has brought us here: from here we speak."[10] Stafford's advice is to "have a place, be what that place requires," and I would not underestimate the midwestern poet's abilty to blazon this as a motto with which to answer, in perennial words and images, the vagaries of fashion and taste and the generally bland homogeneity of American national culture.

I happen to live in a town where a painter named Harold Gregor does pictures of barns. The pictures are beautiful and cause comment in New York City. And in another part of the state a poet, Lisel Mueller, offers a striking (yet coincidental) poetic analogue which moralizes the archetype of Gregor's paintings:

> Look at this country,
> those shapeless multiple greens
> haphazard, inhumanly lost:
> but for the barns,
> the colorful mothers,
> settling them all like wayward children
> around their sturdy skirts,
>
> where would all that loneliness go?[11]

In "Highway 2, Illinois" the motherly barns subsume the loneliness of the land, and art mediates the lonely standpoint of men and women in the landscape. This relevance is all that Illinois, as a place, has ever had or ever needed.

Poets and painters are rightly suspicious of facile uses for art. But the work of softening the white summer glare and shaping the "shapeless multiple greens" of the Illinois landscape is something they surely must affirm. The Midwest as a unique cultural region is dying. Thus the retreat into place—into, as the familiar metaphor goes, an island in the corn—and the preservation of a usable past are more urgent matters than in former days. In the world of the quotidian I find it easy to ignore my own backyard, living with an inertial complacency that would no doubt have angered the "village virus" writers. Most of the time I do not live in a place and do not care. But once in a while, say early in April, "something startles me where I thought I was safest" and I feel the need to rediscover Illinois. Commencing in the springtime on a township cemetery hill, continuing in summer when "the whole wide land is a map," I prospect the

country with a painter friend, whose geometry on canvas recalls the primal ordering act of the first surveyors—the act of enclosing the land against its being "haphazard, inhumanly lost." In abstraction he and I do again what the pioneers first did to Illinois, ordering and framing the land with straight thought. And if I dream of some breathtaking expanse of lost virgin prairie, dimensionless and shapeless and innocent of the deep cut of the plow, I am also happy to be able to imagine that wilder landscape in the regular rectangular one spreading before my eyes. This act of imagination is necessarily coeval with art: I see Illinois both through my own eyes and through the composing and tempering lenses of painting and literature.

Both kinds of seeing are important if we are to hold on. I believe we face an important choice about regional culture. We can leave, or leave in staying, and be judged for it, much as the colony of prairie dogs judged William Stafford, long after the original "Prairie Town" was gone:

> Pioneers, for whom history was walking through dead grass,
> and the main things that happened were miles and the time of day—
> you built that town, and I have let it pass.
> Little folded paws, judge me: I came away.[12]

The alternative is to remain and work to keep what is ours from passing. We must start with the "rude beginnings" of the American civilization in Illinois, with the first stunning sight of the sea of prairie as scrawled in a pioneer's diary, and trace the distinctive utterance to its contemporary center in our own backyard:

> "We're staying right here the rest of our lives," I said.
> "In Illinois?" she said.
> "That's where we are, isn't it?" I said.[13]

1. Edgar Lee Masters, *Spoon River Anthology* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 204.
2. Masters, *Spoon River Anthology*, p. 70. Masters's antidote for this despair among the women was the idealized portrait of his grandmother, "Lucinda Matlock," who is both strong and happy, no doubt because she knows her proper sphere: she was married for seventy years, raised a large family (twelve children, not the mere eight of Mrs. Slack!), and did social service by nursing the sick with herbs gathered in her wanderings over the Spoon River country. At ninety-six she dies ("I had lived enough, that's all") and passes judgment on the younger generation:

Degenerate sons and daughters,
Life is too strong for you—
It takes life to love Life (p. 239).

3. Dave Etter, *Bright Mississippi* (La Crosse, Wis.: Juniper Press, 1975), n.p.
4. Dave Etter, *Cornfields* (Peoria, Ill.: Spoon River Peotry Press, 1980), pp.14–15.
5. Dave Etter, *Alliance, Illinois* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Kylix Press, 1978), p. 62.
6. Etter, *Alliance, Illinois*, p. 63.
7. Dave Etter, "The Forgotten Graveyard," in *Heartland: Poets of the Midwest*, ed. Lucien Stryk (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1967), p. 63.
8. Wright Morris, *The Territory Ahead* (New York: Atheneum, 1963), p. 22. The entire paragraph is worth quoting: "The *region*—the region in the sense that once fed the imagination—is now for sale on the shelf with the maple-sugar Kewpies; the hand-loomed ties and hand-sewn moccasins are now available, along with food and fuel, at regular intervals on our turnpikes. The only regions left are those the artists must imagine. They lie beyond the usual forms of salvage. No matter where we go, in America today, we shall find what we just left."
9. From his poem, "On Writing an Illinois Poem," which is printed in full as the epigraph to this book.
10. William Stafford, "Lake Chelan" and "In Response to a Question," from *Stories That Could Be True* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 84 and 75.
11. Lisel Mueller, "Highway 2, Illinois," from *Voyages to the Inland Sea*, ed. John Judson (LaCrosse, Wis.: Center for Contemporary Poetry, 1971), vol. 1, p. 16.
12. William Stafford, "Prairie Town," *Stories That Could Be True*, p. 70.
13. Dave Etter, "Kermit Olmsted: Roots," *Alliance, Illinois*, p. 75.