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B.J. Omanson. *Stark County Poems: War and the Depression come to Spoon River*. Morgantown, WV: Monongahela Press, 2017. Paper. 71 pp. \$12.00.

The title of *Stark County Poems: War and the Depression Come to Spoon River*, B.J. Omanson's fine first book of poems, calls to mind Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*. Omanson amplifies this suggestion, noting that he was born four days after Edgar Lee Masters died. Omanson certainly shares the locale of northwestern Illinois with Masters; Stark County lies slightly northeast of Fulton County where Masters lived during his adolescence, and Spoon River flows through both counties. Apart from these geographical confluences, *Stark County Poems* stands in sharp contrast to *Spoon River Anthology*. Masters' characters, some based on real people, speak their epitaphs. Having nothing left to lose in death, they are candid, petty, and, at times, mean. Omanson's speakers are equally frank, but they speak soberly and sympathetically about the lives of Omanson's grandparents. Omanson knew both, but almost nothing of their experiences during the First War and the Depression. In these poems, he seeks to move past his ignorance to understand the fulness of his grandparents' lives.

Omanson lyrically, lovingly evokes the grueling work and daunting poverty his grandparents experienced. Beneath their hardships, Omanson explores an anxiety and dread that almost no person escapes and few can articulate. In "Nights by a Window, Listening for a Train," Omanson imagines his grandmother's inner life when his grandfather left for military training the morning after their wedding. He starts vividly with the couple's wagon ride to the train depot and moves acutely to the "unrelieved, unrestful hours that made up" his grandmother's nights alone while his grandfather served with the American Expeditionary Force in France. In deft pentameter, he considers the barely speakable anxiety she experiences that he might die:

she could feel a filament of the seed
insinuating itself in her soul,
a seed of forboding that lay in wait
for the single thing that would draw it forth
to flower into a terrible grief:
a knock at the door and a telegram.

As the poem unfolds, Omanson contemplates her dread of something more terrible than death, that her husband might return a stranger after the War.

Other poems sound the depths of his grandmother's narrowly circumscribed, often lonely life. "The Dark Fields" recounts an evening his grandfather is summoned by neighbors to help in the aftermath of a murder-suicide on a neighboring farm. Left alone, his grandmother recalls and relives the existential isolation she felt while her husband was in France:

Too many winter nights she had watched
at this same window, delving the darkness
beyond the reflected face in the glass,
beyond the porch and the yard, throughout
the months that her husband was overseas.

Waiting for her husband to return, she experiences a deepening of her isolation and flees the house:

running until the remotest light
had vanished and there was nothing at all
but a black and indeterminate void
of field and starless sky and the sudden
unendurable pounding of her heart.

Here Omanson not only envisions his grandmother's predicament, but also articulates his quandary, for in trying to fathom his grandparents' lives, he confronts an essential human dilemma, the task of trying to make out what has happened without much certainty except the pounding of one's heart.

In "A Place of Old Trees, Set Back from the Road," Omanson recalls going with his grandparents to a family cemetery. While his grandfather dozes in the family Ford with the White Sox game playing on the radio, his grandmother tends the graves. As Omanson helps her, he observes the difference between the larger world coming through as a National League game on the radio and the smaller, more real world of his grandmother:

I felt I was slowly awakening
from a dream of unreality where
I had passed the majority of my days,
awakening now to this sanctified space
where my grandmother moved among silent stones
even as her mother and mother's mother
had moved before here, here in this place

In his grandmother's movements, Omanson finds a numinous reality set against the baseball broadcast.

Masters wrote of Spoon River before him, so Omanson is not the Virgil of Spoon River, but he assuredly is a Virgil, the first to bring the Muse to his familial past and to his own ignorance of his grandparents' lives. These poems meditate on that past and ignorance with lyrical, haunting lines about their inner lives set against images of abandoned houses weathering into decay and of family graves lovingly tended.