

Voices From Spoon River

The poetry of the dead is alive and well.

Excerpts from *Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Masters

Adapted by Bryon Cahill • Illustrations by Micah Farritor

READERS

Edgar Lee Masters,
narrator

The Hill

The Dead:

Judge Somers

Chase Henry

Trainor, the Druggist

Hare Drummer

Conrad Siever

Zenas Witt

George Gray

Grippy the Cooper

John Horace Burleson

Roger Heston

Walter Simmons

Jonathan Swift Somers

Fiddler Jones

Jennie M'Grew

Dippold the Optician

Edith Conant

Isaiah Beethoven

Edgar Lee Masters:

I didn't write my collection of poems, *Spoon River Anthology*, to be a play. Over the years, however, it has been performed as one. I'm flattered, of course. Seeing my characters come to life on the stage is a thrill, even if that isn't quite the way I first imagined them.

Because, you see, my characters are dead. As I have been, myself, since 1950. Back in 1915, I imagined these verses as if they were chiseled on the tombstones in a cemetery overlooking the town of Spoon River, Illinois. They are meant to be the voices of the people buried beneath.

These **epitaphs** are short, free-form poems in

which the dead tell their stories. Together, the verses describe the life of the town—and it isn't always pretty. Now that these people are dead, they reveal how they really felt about one another. Each epitaph mentions at least one other character in the cemetery. By following those connections, astute readers have found 19 story lines woven throughout my anthology.

We don't have room here to let all 212 of Spoon River's ghosts have their say. So in this read-aloud adaptation, we will meet 17 of them. All parts can be read by the living—male or female. The dead do not mind. They just wish to be remembered.

Our portrait of Spoon River begins in the cemetery on the hill.

The Hill:

Where are Elmer, Herman, Bert, Tom and Charley,
The weak of will, the strong of arm, the clown, the
boozer, the fighter?
All, all, are sleeping on the hill.

One passed in a fever,
One was burned in a mine,
One was killed in a brawl,
One died in a jail,
One fell from a bridge toiling for children and wife—
All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill.

* **vocab**

EPITAPHS: inscriptions on tombs in memory of the people buried there

Where are Ella, Kate, Mag, Lizzie and Edith,
The tender heart, the simple soul, the loud, the
proud, the happy one?—
All, all, are sleeping on the hill.

One died in shameful child-birth,
One of a thwarted love,
One at the hands of a brute ...
One of a broken pride, in the search for
heart's desire,
One after life in far-away London and Paris
Was brought to her little space by Ella and Kate
and Mag—
All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill.

Where are Uncle Isaac and Aunt Emily,
And old Towny Kincaid and Sevine Houghton,
And Major Walker who had talked
With venerable men of the revolution?—
All, all are sleeping on the hill.

They brought them dead sons from the war,
And daughters whom life had crushed,
And their children fatherless, crying—
All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill.

Where is Old Fiddler Jones
Who played with life all his ninety years,
Braving the sleet with bared breast,
Drinking, rioting, thinking neither of wife nor kin,
Nor gold, nor love, nor heaven?
Lo! he babbles of the fish-frys of long ago,
Of the horse-races of long ago at Clary's Grove,
Of what Abe Lincoln said
One time at Springfield.

Masters:
As we walk among the dead, be respectful, tread
lightly. Listen to their **solemn** voices, and try to
understand their stories. Take Judge Somers, for
example. He rests in an unmarked grave. Does he
deserve better?

Judge Somers:
How does it happen, tell me,
That I who was most **erudite** of lawyers,
Who knew Blackstone and Coke
Almost by heart, who made the greatest speech
The court-house ever heard, and wrote
A brief that won the praise of Justice Breese—

How does it happen, tell me,
That I lie here unmarked, forgotten,
While Chase Henry, the town drunkard,
Has a marble block, topped by an urn,
Wherein Nature, in a mood ironical,
Has sown a flowering weed?

Masters:
How is it that a fool is remembered while a good
man is forgotten? Let's ask Chase Henry, the
drunkard whom Judge Somers complains about.

Chase Henry:
In life I was the town drunkard;
When I died the priest denied me burial
In holy ground.
The which **redounded** to my good fortune.
For the Protestants bought this lot,
And buried my body here,
Close to the grave of the banker Nicholas,
And of his wife Priscilla.
Take note, ye prudent and pious souls,
Of the cross-currents in life
Which bring honor to the dead, who lived in
shame.

Masters:
So, as it turns out, the town drunkard's greatest
stroke of luck came after his death. Now let's turn
to the local pharmacist and see how he lived
and died.

Trainor, the Druggist:
Only the chemist can tell, and not always the
chemist,
What will result from compounding
Fluids or solids.
And who can tell
How men and women will interact
On each other, or what children will result?
There were Benjamin Pantier and his wife,
Good in themselves, but evil toward each other;
He oxygen, she hydrogen,
Their son, a devastating fire.
I Trainor, the druggist, a mixer of chemicals,

*** vocab**

SOLEMN: grave, sober, serious

ERUDITE: learned

REDOUNDED: had an effect for good or ill



Killed while making an experiment,
Lived unwedded.

Masters:
So sad, poor old Trainor. He knew that human rela-
tionships are based on chemistry. But did he learn
the wrong lesson from his observations? Alone and
childless, he devoted his life to his experiments
and, in the end, blew himself up.

Hare Drummer:
Do the boys and girls still go to Siever's
For cider, after school, in late September?
Or gather hazel nuts among the thickets
On Aaron Hatfield's farm when the frosts begin?
For many times with the laughing girls and boys
Played I along the road and over the hills
When the sun was low and the air was cool,
Stopping to club the walnut tree
Standing leafless against a flaming west.
Now, the smell of the autumn smoke,
And the dropping acorns,
And the echoes about the vales
Bring dreams of life. They hover over me.
They question me:
Where are those laughing comrades?
How many are with me, how many
In the old orchards along the way to Siever's,
And in the woods that overlook
The quiet water?

Masters:
If there's one thing that the dead in Spoon River
have in common, it's that they all seem to envy the
living. Poor Hare Drummer longs to laugh and
frolic as he did in his youth. Alas, no more will he
sip Conrad Siever's cider.

Conrad Siever:
Not in that wasted garden
Where bodies are drawn into grass
That feeds no flocks, and into evergreens
That bear no fruit—
There where along the shaded walks
Vain sighs are heard,
And vainer dreams are dreamed
Of close communion with departed souls—
But here under the apple tree
I loved and watched and pruned
With gnarled hands
In the long, long years;

Here under the roots of this northern-spy
To move in the **chemic** change and circle of life,
Into the soil and into the flesh of the tree,
And into the living epitaphs
Of redder apples!

Masters:

Peace has now come to this sweet farmer's soul.
Although he pines to be above ground and caring
for his tree, he is content resting under it, and
becoming a part of it.

Zenas Witt:

I was sixteen, and I had the most terrible dreams,
And specks before my eyes, and nervous weakness.
And I couldn't remember the books I read,
Like Frank Drummer who memorized page
after page.
And my back was weak, and I worried and
worried,
And I was embarrassed and stammered my
lessons,
And when I stood up to recite I'd forget
Everything that I had studied.
Well, I saw Dr. Weese's advertisement,
And there I read everything in print,
Just as if he had known me;
And about the dreams which I couldn't help.
So I knew I was marked for an early grave.
And I worried until I had a cough,
And then the dreams stopped.
And then I slept the sleep without dreams
Here on the hill by the river.

Masters:

One of the many sad truths about death is that it
cares not whether you are young or old. Let's visit
with a soul who, despite his current condition, tries
to keep the wind in his sails.

*** vocab**

CHEMIC: of or relating to chemistry

STAVES: narrow strips of wood used to make
casks or tubs

George Gray:

I have studied many times
The marble which was chiseled for me—
A boat with a furled sail at rest in a harbor.
In truth it pictures not my destination
But my life.
For love was offered me and I shrank from
its disillusionment;
Sorrow knocked at my door, but I was afraid;
Ambition called to me, but I dreaded the chances.
Yet all the while I hungered for meaning in my life.
And now I know that we must lift the sail
And catch the winds of destiny
Wherever they drive the boat.
To put meaning in one's life may end in madness,
But life without meaning is the torture
Of restlessness and vague desire—
It is a boat longing for the sea and yet afraid.

Masters:

The meaning of life contemplated in death ... need
I say more? George Gray said it all in the last four
lines of his speech. Let us continue ...

Griffy the Cooper:

The cooper should know about tubs.
But I learned about life as well,
And you who loiter around these graves
Think you know life.

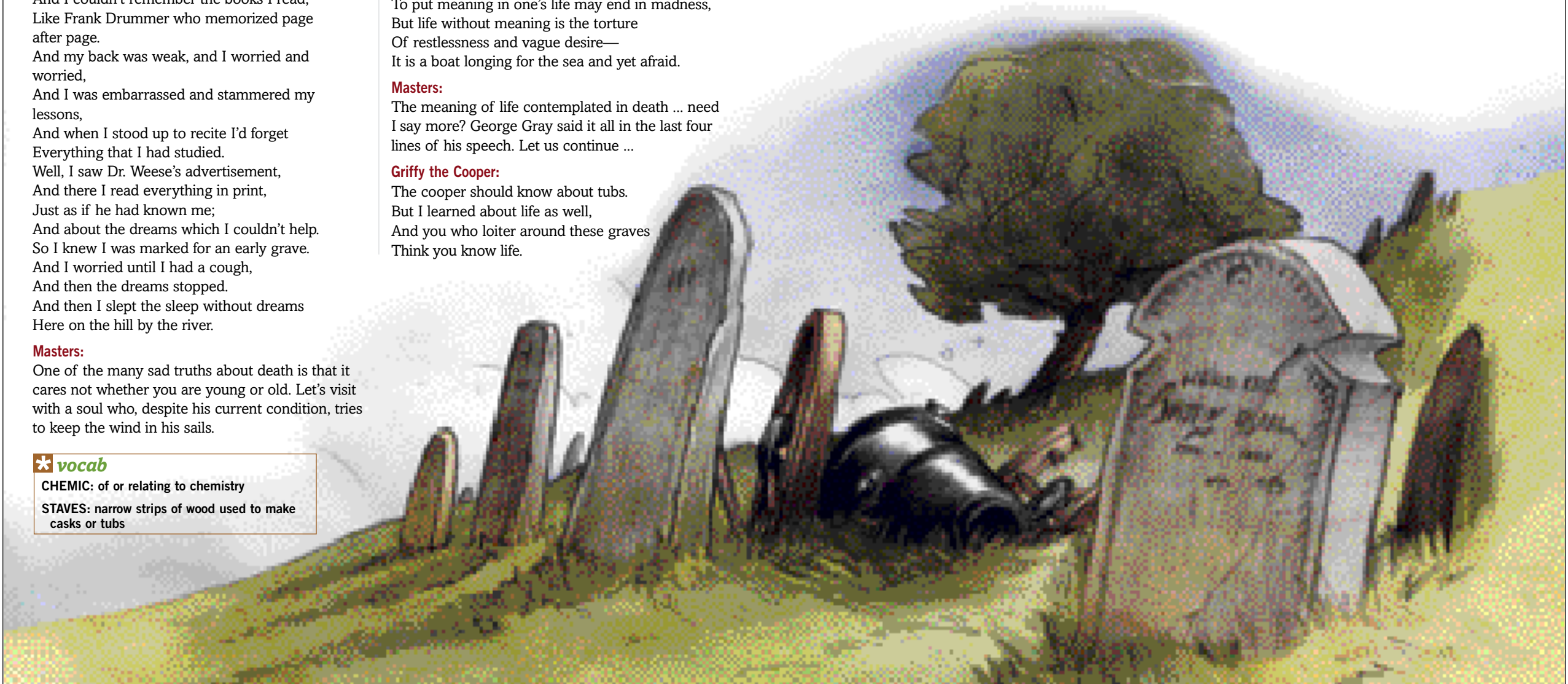
You think your eye sweeps about a wide
horizon, perhaps,
In truth you are only looking around the interior
of your tub
You cannot lift yourself to its rim
And see the outer world of things,
And at the same time see yourself.
You are submerged in the tub of yourself—
Taboos and rules and appearances,
Are the **staves** of your tub.
Break them and dispel the witchcraft
Of thinking your tub is life!
And that you know life!

Masters:

Oh how learned the dead seem to be after life!
They have such revelations and seem to know all
there is to know! But what good does it do them
now? Pay heed to Griffy the Cooper's advice. Look
outside your tub.

John Horace Burleson:

I won the prize essay at school
Here in the village,
And published a novel before I was twenty-five.
I went to the city for themes and to enrich my art;
There married the banker's daughter,
And later became president of the bank—



Always looking forward to some leisure
 To write an epic novel of the war.
 Meanwhile friend of the great, and lover of letters,
 And host to Matthew Arnold and to Emerson.
 An after dinner speaker, writing essays
 For local clubs. At last brought here—
 My boyhood home, you know—
 Not even a little tablet in Chicago
 To keep my name alive.
 How great it is to write the single line:
 “Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean, roll!”

Masters:

There! A happy soul lies satisfied! John Horace Bursleson penned countless lines during his lifetime. But this one in particular is his darling. “Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean, roll!” Ah. It is enough, in John’s mind, to be the author of this one gorgeous thought. I find that very romantic.

Roger Heston:

Oh many times did Ernest Hyde and I
 Argue about the freedom of the will.
 My favorite metaphor was Prickett’s cow
 Roped out to grass, and free you know as far
 As the length of the rope.
 One day while arguing so, watching the cow
 Pull at the rope to get beyond the circle
 Which she had eaten bare,
 Out came the stake, and tossing up her head,
 She ran for us.
 “What’s that, free-will or what?” said Ernest,
 running.
 I fell just as she gored me to my death.

Masters:

Oh, sweet irony, have you ever been more grotesque? Let’s continue on with two more souls. Walter Simmons, a man who knows his limitations, and Jonathan Swift Somers, an **introspective** thinker.

Walter Simmons:

My parents thought that I would be
 As great as Edison or greater:
 For as a boy I made balloons
 And wondrous kites and toys with clocks
 And little engines with tracks to run on
 And telephones of cans and thread.
 I played the cornet and painted pictures,

Modeled in clay and took the part
 Of the villain in the “Octoroon.”
 But then at twenty-one I married
 And had to live, and so, to live
 I learned the trade of making watches
 And kept the jewelry store on the square,
 Thinking, thinking, thinking, thinking—
 Not of business, but of the engine
 I studied the calculus to build.
 And all Spoon River watched and waited
 To see it work, but it never worked.
 And a few kind souls believed my genius
 Was somehow hampered by the store.
 It wasn’t true. The truth was this:
 I didn’t have the brains.

Jonathan Swift Somers:

After you have enriched your soul
 To the highest point,
 With books, thought, suffering, the understanding
 of many personalities,
 The power to interpret glances, silences,
 The pauses in momentous transformations,
 The genius of divination and prophecy;
 So that you feel able at times to hold the world
 In the hollow of your hand;
 Then, if, by the crowding of so many powers
 Into the compass of your soul,
 Your soul takes fire,
 And in the **conflagration** of your soul
 The evil of the world is lighted up and made
 clear—
 Be thankful if in that hour of supreme vision
 Life does not fiddle.

Masters:

“Life does not fiddle.” What a succinct statement if I do say so myself. I’d like to put that line right up there with John Horace Bursleson’s “Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean, roll!” ... But then again, I wrote that too. In any case, who better to tell us about fiddling than Fiddler Jones?

*** vocab**

INTROSPECTIVE: given to considering one’s own internal feelings

CONFLAGRATION: a destructive fire

BEEVES: adult cows



Fiddler Jones:

The earth keeps some vibration going
 There in your heart, and that is you.
 And if the people find you can fiddle,
 Why, fiddle you must, for all your life.
 What do you see, a harvest of clover?
 Or a meadow to walk through to the river?
 The wind’s in the corn; you rub your hands
 For **beeves** hereafter ready for market;
 Or else you hear the rustle of skirts
 Like the girls when dancing at Little Grove.
 To Cooney Potter a pillar of dust
 Or whirling leaves meant ruinous drouth*;
 They looked to me like Red-Head Sammy
 Stepping it off, to “Toor-a-Loor.”
 How could I till my forty acres
 Not to speak of getting more,
 With a medley of horns, bassoons and piccolos
 Stirred in my brain by crows and robins
 And the creak of a wind-mill—only these?
 And I never started to plow in my life
 That some one did not stop in the road
 And take me away to a dance or picnic.
 I ended up with forty acres;

*drouth: variation of drought; a period of dry weather

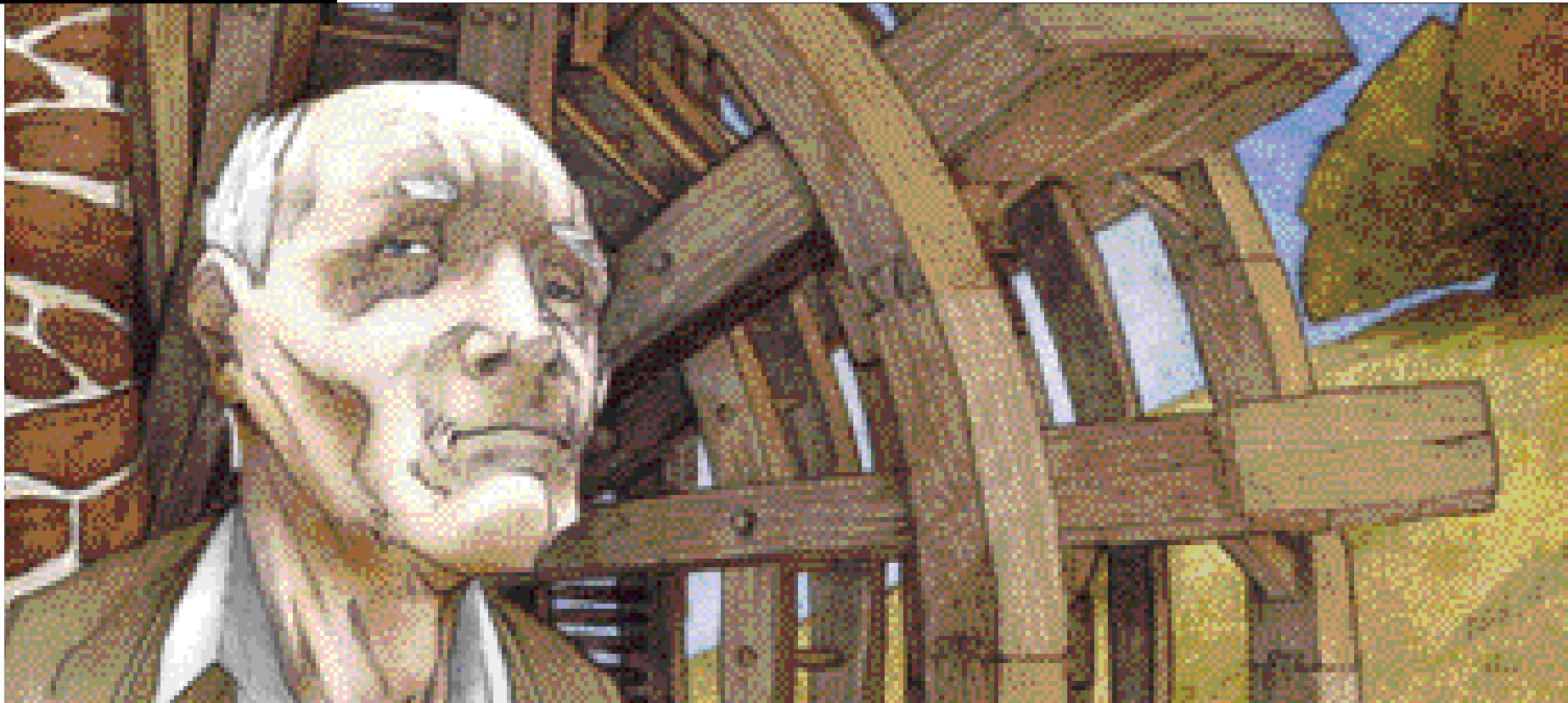
I ended up with a broken fiddle—
 And a broken laugh, and a thousand memories,
 And not a single regret.

Masters:

Ah Fiddler Jones. I’m going to go back and read that one again. You can join me if you like, or continue. Either way, the fiddle is playing.

Jennie M’Grew:

Not, where the stairway turns in the dark,
 A hooded figure, shriveled under a flowing cloak!
 Not yellow eyes in the room at night,
 Staring out from a surface of cobweb gray!
 And not the flap of a condor wing,
 When the roar of life in your ears begins
 As a sound heard never before!
 But on a sunny afternoon,
 By a country road,
 Where purple rag-weeds bloom along a straggling fence,
 And the field is gleaned, and the air is still,
 To see against the sun-light something black,
 Like a blot with an iris rim—
 That is the sign to eyes of second sight ...
 And that I saw!



Masters:

To breathe death here, brief, as if we, too, have died. To be led by these souls' voices. To feel what they feel, felt, know, and knew. Let us see what they see, through their eyes. This, after all, is poetry.

Dippold the Optician:

What do you see now?
 Globes of red, yellow, purple.
 Just a moment! And now?
 My father and mother and sisters.
 Yes! And now?
 Knights at arms, beautiful women, kind faces.
 Try this.
 A field of grain—a city.
 Very good! And now?
 A young woman with angels bending over her.
 A heavier lens! And now?
 Many women with bright eyes and open lips.
 Try this.
 Just a goblet on a table.
 Oh I see! Try this lens!
 Just an open space—I see nothing in particular.

Well, now!
 Pine trees, a lake, a summer sky.
 That's better. And now?
 A book.
 Read a page for me.
 I can't. My eyes are carried beyond the page.
 Try this lens.
 Depths of air.
 Excellent! And now?
 Light, just light, making everything below it a toy world.
 Very well, we'll make the glasses accordingly.

Masters:

How we view the world differs from person to person. But from this life to the next, do perspectives become impaired? It's up to you, the reader, to decide ...

Edith Conant:

We stand about this place—we, the memories;
 And shade our eyes because we dread to read:
 "June 17th, 1884, aged 21 years and 3 days."
 And all things are changed.
 And we—we, the memories, stand here for

ourselves alone,
 For no eye marks us, or would know why we are here.
 Your husband is dead, your sister lives far away,
 Your father is bent with age;
 He has forgotten you, he scarcely leaves the house
 Any more.
 No one remembers your **exquisite** face,
 Your lyric voice!
 How you sang, even on the morning you were stricken,
 With piercing sweetness, with thrilling sorrow,
 Before the advent of the child which died with you.
 It is all forgotten, save by us, the memories,
 Who are forgotten by the world.
 All is changed, save the river and the hill—
 Even they are changed.
 Only the burning sun and the quiet stars are the same.
 And we—we, the memories, stand here in awe,

*** vocab**

EXQUISITE: especially beautiful or charming

Our eyes closed with the weariness of tears—
 In immeasurable weariness!

Masters:

There is one more voice remaining that would like to be heard—one more memory to consider, one more life lived and lost.

Isaiah Beethoven:

They told me I had three months to live,
 So I crept to Bernadotte,
 And sat by the mill for hours and hours
 Where the gathered waters deeply moving
 Seemed not to move:
 O world, that's you!
 You are but a widened place in the river
 Where Life looks down and we rejoice for her
 Mirrored in us, and so we dream
 And turn away, but when again
 We look for the face, behold the low-lands
 And blasted cotton-wood trees where we empty
 Into the larger stream!
 But here by the mill the castled clouds
 Mocked themselves in the dizzy water;
 And over its agate floor at night
 The flame of the moon ran under my eyes
 Amid a forest stillness broken
 By a flute in a hut on the hill.
 At last when I came to lie in bed
 Weak and in pain, with the dreams about me,
 The soul of the river had entered my soul,
 And the gathered power of my soul was moving
 So swiftly it seemed to be at rest
 Under cities of cloud and under
 Spheres of silver and changing worlds—
 Until I saw a flash of trumpets
 Above the battlements over Time.

Masters:

Rest in peace, Spoon River. Or, at least, try. ■

BE INSPIRED!

Create a new character for the play. Write a poem/monologue that shows your character's perspective. Send your finished masterpiece to word@weeklyreader.com. We'll post the very best one on our blog, WORD, at www.readandwriting.com on May 2.