

A POEM BY ROBERT ALLEN

BILL SMITH'S FARM

I am lonesome for the ghosts of the old farmers who died a hundred
years ago
And left their unpainted barns to stumble and fall and feel their
way
Back into the ground. I listen on the wind over the harvested fields
For their chucking to their teams as they plowed down the Indian
mounds.

I am lonesome for the ghosts of the farmers who are dust,
Who turned to good red clay before I was born,
Whose bones were made from the corn of the bottom lands, by the Indian
mounds
Where the men before them had villages, and fished.

Gone, gone, silent as the clay
Is the "gee" and the "haw" of the farmers driving their teams to the
fields.
Silent as the word of the Indians before them,
Hushed as the word of the bowstring to the deer,
Forgotten as the harvest songs of autumns,
That fell red, swirling to the dust,
Lost into the soil like the plan of the bride's dancing.

I am lonely as the wind on the stubble
For the ghosts of the old farmers and the Indians before them,
Whose blood is a rumor in my family.

Bill, my cousin, harvests the family fields
With snarling machines no one has ever spoken to
And never eats his own grown corn.
He never heard or has forgotten
The tale of our Indian Blood.

The wind rests on the stubble fields,
Lays silence doubly deep on the mounds where the war-chiefs are at
peace.
If the chants of the Indians live at all, this is it.
If anything survives of the old farmers, it comes to me.

A murmur, a rhythm
Elusive as the wind
Entangled in words.

I heard some Irish fiddles as a child
That could still prattle the battle lust of the Celtic gods,
Heard ancient folk-songs while the folk still had them,
But Whitman, Longfellow and Yeats formed my language.

The farmer's plow turned down the mound;
The iron plowshare smashed the pot for the dead man's corn.
Long ago the bones were dust in the acid soil,
And now the beads are turned under like seeds in the sweet-smelling
furrow.
And the song, if there is one,
Is the song of the birds that follow the plow.

Perhaps they knew, my earliest Indian fathers,
That their dead would turn to clay, their mounds wash away,
Their myths of corn maidens be plowed into the furrows, and they
themselves
Become a mumbled legend, the hard-handed farmers a childhood fairy
tale.

So they sent the torch of their life from hand to hand
Down the generations, as Plato says,
Till it comes to me, till it begins again
Wherever these words shall wander--
On a new star the song of the corn will wake again,
The old farmer call to his weary team to turn another round.

