

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &
Professional Papers

Graduate School

1988

Culture shock| [poems]

Bronwyn G. Pughe

The University of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Pughe, Bronwyn G., "Culture shock| [poems]" (1988). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 1963.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/1963>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

COPYRIGHT ACT OF 1976

THIS IS AN UNPUBLISHED MANUSCRIPT IN WHICH COPYRIGHT
SUBSISTS. ANY FURTHER REPRINTING OF ITS CONTENTS MUST BE
APPROVED BY THE AUTHOR.

MANSFIELD LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA
DATE: 1988

CULTURE SHOCK

by

Bronwyn G. Pughe

B.A., University of Montana 1985

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1988

Approved by

Patricia Gediche

Chairman, Board of Examiners

R. Murray

Dean, Graduate School

November 21, 1988

Date

UMI Number: EP35601

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI EP35601

Published by ProQuest LLC (2012). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code



ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

12-21-88

Acknowledgements

"False Entries" and "Cherubs in a Brimstone Bar" originally appeared in Amphora Review, (now Rio Grande Review); "Green Snakes and Wolves" appeared in Three Rivers Poetry Journal; "Dusk: City Park" and "The First Child" were published in Vanderbilt Review; "When a Kiss was Legal Tender" in The Bloomsbury Review; and "Oasis", "Woman Bleeding" and "Second Skin" were printed in the Mesilla Press pamphlet series, (#13, Oasis), edited by Ray Gonzales.

"Primary Care" first appeared in the High Plains Literary Review; and "One More Day" and "Tail Wind" in the Lord John Press 10th Year Anthology, edited by Herb Yellin.

CONTENTS

	Page
I. EVOCATION	
Dawn	2
II. SUBTLE MUTILATIONS	
Primary Care	4
Spring Dining: March 7, 1987	7
On Listening to Beethoven and Train Whistles	9
Second Skin	11
Woman Bleeding	13
This woman, dying	14
When a Kiss was Legal Tender	16
One More Day	17
A Bit of Blood on the Door	19
Culture Shock	21
III. PARTNERS IN CRIME	
Black Lace and Onions	25
Easter: Another Weekend	27
After School: Waiting	29
The First Child	30
The Hostess	31

	Page
Green Snakes and Wolves	33
Cherubs in a Brimstone Bar	34
Three Gifts	35
Gift from the Eighth Fairy	36
Winter Drowning	38
Oasis	39
False Entries	40
Tail Wind	42
IV. ENVOI	
Dusk	45

2

I

EVOCATION

Dawn

Last night, Mars
glowed bronze above the skyline;
its gleam, anticipation
in children's eyes -- the gather
who will pet dirty squirrels,
rabid pigeons, and smile.

II

SUBTLE MUTILATIONS

Primary Care

1.

I crave dirt, malnourished
as the Haitian woman who bakes
black soil from the garden.
She eats it, offers it,
sips water
when I decline.

So she slips it into round loaves,
crusty, baked dark and heavy
from overkneading and the rising
three times. She cuts the bread
into wedges, fries both sides,
offers toast
with blueberry jam.

She calls me urchin,
little waif, sees that I am clean. She
believes that a girl with no mother
cannot grow straight legs, white
teeth and shining black hair.

The children of her streets beg
or sweep stairs.
Her own front tooth crumbled
when she was paid in apples
and bit one. She is proud

of her new gold crown, smiles
and serves me vitamins, apple juice,
dirt toast. For Father, she butters
store bought bread, tongues
her paid for crown.

2.

The Dutch girls believes in fish,
codliver oil before bed.
She pulls it from a high shelf, pours
yellow slime on a silver spoon
I'll inherit.
She insists on the Wonderbread she bites
quickly, says it doesn't taste bad,
offers crust I always refuse.

Another bottle in her room. I watch her
smooth fat on her white skin, pat blots
on ashen hair. Fish-eyes
in the lamplight, she combs them through
and talks of med students, men, stiletto
heels she'll wear at her American wedding
and the red sports car
she must learn to drive.

I wear a flannel gown, wait for the brush,
our ritual. A hundred hard strokes
she will count, fish breath
tingeing my hair. I'll tell her Father
will teach you to drive. Are you almost
done. You can take me to school.
Leave a snarl in my hair.

3.

At midnight, I bake bread tinted with egg.
The bread is glutinous and shaped
like a totalled car. (It is good plain,
hot from the oven.) I filled it
with dead maids and Father.

Mother is gardening.
She is gathering slugs
from tomato vines, offering
them beer.

We are dressed in blue
jeans soiled with flour dust and sand.
My hair is pulled loose from its braid, hers
wisping from a sweat-stained scarf.

I wrap the bread in a towel, carry
it proudly on open palms to the shade tree
where a red flannel blanket
with scalloped edges is spread.
When we feed on the pale loaf, our bodies'
salt will drip in our eyes.

I call to her, offer
the bread I am breaking. She looks over
and smiles, each tooth a gold crown
glinting at noon. Black dirt and ashen oil
pour from the yellow loaf.

Spring Dining: March 7, 1987

We eat strawberries before dinner, fingertips brushing each other's mouth. And we taste sauce, carefully scraping the bottom of the spoon on pan's edge, gently tipping it to juicy lips. He serves each plateful when dinner is ready, the chicken just here, the beans with lemon and wine to the left. We eat, drink coffee and smoke.

Not alone.

This is a dinner party, of course. But isn't it spring. Friends taking new note of friends taking note of new inflections and sweaters shed, tight jeans and cautionless smiles, eyes bolder than conversation, the polite gesture, which turns to sex during chocolate desserts. "Hips," says one, "I'll have hips." And the blond man looks, rising from his chair. "Just keep them off the table," the married woman replies. We have come to this from the French etiquette, all hands visible during meals, though hands did not appear. We have sampled thighs simmered in red wine.

Chicken.

Chicken thighs.

There is still some ice on the ground, dust
and salt on the roads. Wet leaves rot
on the lawn, their acid killing
early shoots of grass. And though everbearing
strawberries have pushed back their mulch, they bronze
in morning frost, the light not warm enough.
Even crocuses, bracing these March winds,
keep their petals closed.

On Listening to Beethoven and Train Whistles

1.

This summer, the train has a new tone -- elegiac,
 a litany, question and response,
 maybe a composite answer finally celebrating the transients
 who die, almost daily, in the heat of boxcars accidentally
 locked when they closed their doors
 against the cold night air. Passed out, then waking,
 the travellers gasp.

It has been so hot that even the roads,
 seen from an air-conditioned car, cannot propose
 answers in their mirages. The images rise too quickly --
 without a waver are gone. Who can reflect leisurely
 what they form? In artificial comfort, the drivers
 and acceptable passengers fail to notice at all--their senses numb,
 their minds neglecting to ask.

One breath for them all
 barely rises from the tracks through small knot holes
 shrunken and fallen from the floor.

2.

Where do the bodies go as they disintegrate,
 shrivelling in dehydration? Some part must vaporize
 like the mirage. But nothing can escape the boxcar.
 Not really. Only anaerobic vibrations enter
 from the rails, travel along the couplings --
 boxcar to boxcar, piggyback to piggyback, lumber
 car to empty lumber car until they finally reach
 the engine and the whistle. Perhaps they glean
 what the dried swollen tongues cannot voice,
 translating escaping vapor -- the last surviving

(no stanza break)

molecules -- back into a frequency
 whose waves travel faster than the speed of trains,
 a frequency which rides the vibrations to this
 new whistle of summer, one long high minor tone
 answered by two low, pianissimo. Only
 our spines respond.

3.

These tones form an interval not even Beethoven could imagine.
 This arpeggio is not moonlight,
 not love. Perhaps, a brief
 ululation, a passion with recurring sting.

He never heard the trains
 which wake us at five a.m. to couple and gasp
 again and again. He would have found their symphonic phrase,
 one breath
 for the slow suffocation within. We
 close open eyes.

He could have sung
 this litany of whistles -- elegies of transients
 we scapegoat in silence, of beings we choose
 to ignore. We close
 their open eyes.

Second Skin

The honeymooned bride is still veiled. Embarrassed gloves wait meekly, abandoned in her lap. Used in intimacy, the hands belong to another. Only white remains familiar.

These gloves will become night garb to clothe arthritic gnarls. Bare by day, the hands will knit infinite afghans, web her few talents in a prophylaxis of sweaters, second skin of wool.

Some child will know this mother, old woman who will wear a slip over her sweater, ask questions and answer herself. Harebells grow purple in summer, she will say. Her child will say he knows. Squirrels have sieged the feeder, she'll begin.

This child has heard it before. Remember the feeder? she asks, that blind cyclop's eye. Some child hung it by . . . But he has savored words.

"Do you see only dim institutions, hear
only feinting cries of wrens?
They are novice scavengers. Caught
by false bounty, they cannot flee
or wait.
You've been these birds, Mother.
You might will a crippled hand
to shred old rows from a sweater and
wind a new skein, to nurture
afghans reminiscent
of seasons I've discarded. But
our cells blend always as one.
I bide your grey time."

The bride cannot hear these voices,
coming gifts of the womb. She dreams
a baby's love, just pay
for the yearnings -- duties of the skin.
She cannot imagine her belly
as viewed by her stranger, a man. A child
will disguise her flesh, as the gloves
keep her from her hands.

Woman Bleeding

You swam
like a ray, breaking
the safety cord,
stinging your safe
little bubble.
I had fed you
my blood, nicotine
and alcohol, plasma
of fear,
hoping to give you
my steps.

I have one son.
You were the easy
companion
for his tenderness
lost in that first bus
he took to school.
I fed him
nine months, served him
five years.
You left me bleeding.

This woman, dying

Fake fabric smells of formaldehyde, infuses
its synthetic scent into delicate but aging skin,
turns designer perfume rancid as milk
in a forgotten thermos. Preservatives ooze
and puddle, clogging the pores of her body,
forbidding focus or scent. Cloth melds with her skin.

And the rose-filtered fluorescents of hot Los
Angeles hide laugh-lines, her cellulite -- make
polyester blouses blossom into cleavage and silk.
Even her geraniums, tulips, ginger
and roses bloom without her. Forced off season
in the artificial light, their color is less than magenta.

And when this woman, dying of too much place, reaches
for the blossoms she once nurtured
in nail blackening, fingernail chipping
soil mixed with the dark dung of cows, their premature
petals bruise and shrivel -- dissolve to black
at her touch.

Once, they dried
and freshened her silk. Once they flaked, floated
from her bedside table to burnished hardwood floors.
They were the sawdust chips of a dancehall, talc
for pliagets of Angela and her lover, their pas de deux -- weaving
arc of arms and backs. The embrace, the brief parting,
the trusting leap.

(no stanza break)

The petals rose
and buffered her languid dancing feet, her french-
laced curves, her cultivating hands as she cut
and placed fresh blooms in a crystal vase.

Now, all the choreography is in pieces
on an editing room floor
in Los Angeles, where art is cosmetic, where nature
and forgery congeal.

When a Kiss was Legal Tender

Kisses cost a dollar
from a woman, two from the tongueless
virgin at the church fair. I'll trade you
one for a pillow, feathers from Mother's
best. I'll show you shadows, ladderbacks
pulling half smiles
on the floor. I'll sell you
one for a word, join your collection.

A quarter lands face up
in the velvet lined plate --
purple, Ash Wednesday.
I threw my coins in
Trevi fountain. For a penny
I was guaranteed a kiss.
The man with the hairy chest
waited in the aisle. So I threw
two, hope for the forty days.

"I believe in . . . "
institutions and gave you up
for Lent. The man in the aisle
disappeared. The feet of the man
who might save me are dead
to my lips. I thought a kiss
was legal tender.

One More Day

for C.T.

Your pet bird is dead. Two weeks
she remained nameless, waiting for the vision,
the right adage to crop up.
You've always been careful
about names. Joseph, your son. Ariadne,
your dog. Tomlinson, your English maiden
name.

The shopkeeper
said you can bring her back, exchange her
for another with the same cobalt wings, yellow voice
that delighted you mornings.

Her voice was your revenge, a purging
of the husband who disallowed you
pleasures. Birds are noisy,
he said. Dirty, he said.
They bother me.

After fifteen years he is gone,
to find himself, thank God, and she
lies frozen
in your freezer, waiting
for the day of exchange. Who knows
if you will bring her back, who knows
what the shopkeeper will do with her.

The shopkeeper might stick her in the dumpster,
ceremonious repose. Or charge her back
to the vendor -- what's a bird, one pet,
a debit in a column, A/R
a month later. He won't name her either,
simply package her up, express her
to Toledo, evidence
that she was, indeed, defective.

Divorce would be easier
if we could ship our merchandise back, make
the simple exchange. But even at Sears,
trading pillows takes guts. What
if they refuse.

This is just one more day
for you --
you bake bread, prepare your one son's lunch,
though he can do it himself. Later
you can decide
on the bird. Pick a name to send her off, choose
a new one in exchange.

A Bit of Blood on the Door

There is a woman in the world who would bite
 your left, earringed lobe right off,
 unscrew the back and extract the diamond stud,
 sniff the gold wire for soap and perfume
 checking on her own choice of scent. Lauren?
 Cardin? Pavlova? L'Air du Temps?
 This tells her something
 useless. That you wear unfamiliar perfume.
 So she checks for a slight decay,
 a build-up like old mother's milk
 on a forgotten nipple, an oversight, the neglected pore
 where she hopes men no longer nibble.
 But the fat of your ear is so clean
 she is disappointed and carves
 the flesh into minute bites, marinates your lobe
 in lime juice, onions, cilantro -- feminine ceviche
 for tomorrow's lunch. She will try anything
 to find something on you,
 the private flaw she needs to know.

There is an angel in the world who would kill
 your first born son, restore her own. She'd deny him
 the light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel anguish
 of glaring fluorescent tubes, our vision
 of death and salvation, bursting out
 to a doctor's arms, first father
 who would deliver him to you. Nine weeks and she
 sucks her child out dry. She saves the red placenta

(no stanza break)

and feeds it
 to her dog. It is quite bloody and real.
 She cannot eat it in stew, sometimes she is vegetarian.
 She cannot plant it for the suckling apple tree
 whose fruit bears superstition, memory.
 So she recalls you. You told her where to go, refused
 to say, you're not evil, thought serpents
are not always men. You offered
 no words or information, just the ear she would consume.
 She eats fruit
 from the trees in your yard -- pie cherries, apricots
 sweet italian prunes. She learns
 nothing.

Each spring you prick the index finger of your left hand
 with a whittled fruitwood stick, mark crosses
 on the jamb of your door, smear the knob.
 Then you suck out the sting, unappalled
 at your taste, close
 the wound with the pressure of kissable lips.
 A red scar for malevolence, her paranoia you feed --
 there are hundreds like her in the world.
 Each spring you plant anything
 but apples.

Culture Shock

In South Africa it is considered punk
among some adolescents
to have the four front teeth removed.
It makes kissing
sexy, they say. And my American friend
is shocked.

Personally, I prefer the click of enamel, tooth
against tooth, the grain of tongue
and groove, and the craving to nibble
in private. Neither of us finds this odd.
There are other spaces
with muscle and no teeth.

So we ask each other why this
removal of teeth is so different
from a hole in the nose in India, a large
stomach and breasts -- the veiling
of the face in Iran,
or the tattooing of the left buttock in El Paso or any
military town. Inscribed Forever Tom and limited
to toms or tomcats for the next long years,
we mark ourselves possessed and dumb. The women
with no teeth wonder why we bother to keep
our tongues. Is their camaraderie of lost teeth
so removed from our own icing of the ear

(no stanza break)

and sticking the needle through
in sixth grade bathrooms, one pair of lobes
company for the next? There are men
who might fill these holes
with diamonds. My friend and I imagine
what fills the gapped tooth smile. Perhaps
it is worth a try.

Subtle mutilations in the name of good sex
come from visceral sublimation, we decide,
though in public my friend would say they are distractions
from issues-at-hand. I might conjecture
a political statement, a personal revolt,
parents, tradition. Yet I consider
two hoops in my ear, check my teeth
in the morning mirror while he fingers
my clear left buttock.

"Page 23 omitted in numbering"

III

PARTNERS IN CRIME

Black Lace and Onions

My neighbor wakes me, knocks
 on the peeling backdoor, 8 am,
 Saturday. My sons are watching t.v. --
 Bugs Bunny, Droids and Gobots.
 The only day they get guns
 without censor is Cartoon day,
 the day I try to sleep in.
 But my oldest gets me from bed.
 It's the neighbor, he says. He
 needs me and won't come back.

I slip on jeans under my black chemise,
 pull on a workshirt, not bothering
 to button the buttons.
 My neighbor has seen this outfit before.
 I wear it to take out the trash
 on Thursdays, wear it to pull
 the paper from its tube,
 to the garden to water my
 onions before the heat of the day
 when I sweat and they would burn.
 I go to greet my neighbor.

My neighbor is painting his house,
 working off back rent.
 A thoughtful law student, he thinks
 I won't want yellow
 flecks from his spray-gun on my grey BMW,
 could I move my car. He couches
 his legal fears well.

(no stanza break)

I tell him my car needs a paint job
but he's bought the wrong shade.
I find the keys, park the car as he watches
and checks the wind with his finger --
a slight Hellgate curling around the hump
of Mount Jumbo. Spray could ride it
too far. But my car is safe by the maples,
my neighbor is free to paint. I guess
I'm glad to help.
I hope I didn't wake you, he says.
No, I say, it's o.k.
I go to water my onions.

Easter: another weekend

1.

It was Friday, I think, or Wednesday
before tennis. We gave up beer
until dinner.

Penitentes rose on the East slope --

three felons bearing crosses, feet naked
on searing stone. And the women
who flogged them with palm fronds
beat themselves when the three men fell.

2.

Saturday dinner. We joke
that the man in the middle
could sport velcro
not nails.

Think of the money.
We'd recycle the felon.
No iron to discard, no maids
to wipe coagulating blood.

Think of the sound. A smooth
phffft returning him to solid
rock on death row,
symmetrical bars ringing
his tin cup's scale.

We drink another beer.
Listen, the women wail.

3.

Each year, women
wait to roll the rock back and find
the cave empty.

After School: Waiting

There's a man out there
and he's out
to get my son. He
watches daily, waiting
for this child, or another.
He is looking shiny and new,
distracting. A son could forget
a mother, her ever increasing rules.
Like if Big Bird speaks to you
it isn't really him. Run,
I want to say. Kick him
in the groin.
He has one
under those feathers, you know.
And the neighbor woman
with the kind face and fresh
chocolate cookies. How do
you think she gets them so round?
With her long fingers
and sandpaper palms. Toying hands
and a wet tongue. She licks each sweet
to make a boy's eyes shine.
Run, I want to scream,
hard.

The First Child

These are goat's head.

 Their burrs coat
dry fields of South Texas,
a lichen tenacity to flat soil,
tender footpads of dog
and boy.

Their model, this skull --
dead under mesquite. Hidden
in childhood, a treasure,
plain bone
to all but you. Its hooked forehead
is in your memory a slow bleeding
festering wound.

Daddy beat you here, left
you in this crook of branches,
sulking above the burrs.
Bald skull, your comrade --
mutant to the tiny barb.

She is rarely allowed to leave. She manages
the polite conversation, less occasionally
her home. She buys lingerie like azure
Tupperware, like crystal -- the party comes to her.
The hostess receives a discount, gifts; the third guest
a door prize of Dior. His ex-wife has a trousseau
of winnings, the gatherings
must have been small.

The hostess is greeting her now,
asking how his children like school, spooning chile and
cheese. I like cheese.
She waltzes to the table with jicama, guacamole.
Chats briefly with the Dean. The Dean tells her
she's done well, she's left in the seeds.
I'm sure, if in France, she would know
to serve brie with small pate knives. The women
remove the rind. In England she would serve
something bland. In Spain, paella
in bright ceramic bowls.

But this is El Paso. She's learned
the routine and serves correct hors d'oeuvres.
She wears an almost "do", leather
boots and just enough gold to look expensive.
Border men like this. Her husband likes this.
The Dean likes this.

My hostess likes to dance,
her parties are always a two-step. It's one habit
she hasn't broken for her husband, her outlet
from applied grace.
The Dean might ask her to dance, pat her. He might
ask what she has won.

Green Snakes and Wolves

Green snakes are jealousy
and hangovers. Each causing
 the others. Fear
 she may love someone else --
 the stranger in the bar
 who bought the house
 a round. He looks younger
 than you. She smiled
 a thankyou, may have said it --
 the mirror tried
 your attention. Why not
 deck him, "just like in the movies":
 beer makes you piss, strychnine
 from bad drugs makes it hurt.
 She hasn't touched you in minutes.

Who would believe
 a wolf visits you mornings,
 an endangered species
 like yourself?
Hunger and poverty,
the wolf at the door -- the paycheck
 you drank, hoping
 for snakes. Snakes slide away,
 take the bite with them.
 Sometimes, the wolf walks past,
 lets you touch him once
 as a reminder. Lets you touch
 him, as she forgot to do.
 Today, he sits through dinner,
 lets whiskey cure the ache.

Cherubs in a Brimstone Bar

Ambiguous as her body
gone slack with evening, lips
kiss a weighted glass of wine.
Her fingers are clumsy
and cold, iced burgundy
in a cheap bar. Even her hair
is confused.

His beard is smooth
and still, face taut. His tongue
drips a cigarette, his hand
broods the shot.

They are surreptitious
drunks eyeing each other
in a bottle-lined glass.

In a painting
it would not be like this --
caricatures of cherubs
in a brimstone bar.
There would be grapes, voluptuous
smiles and breasts.
If they loved
it would be slow, thighs splayed
for waiting sleep -- snakeless
heads at dawn.

But this
is Pittsburgh. Squirrel Hill. Their love,
dissatisfied lust.

Come morning,
they will crawl, thighs chafing
night's whispers, to toilets
where they'll hang their heads,
wish they could turn to stone.

Three Gifts

1. Sculptor, a casting

His slow beat
of mallet on chisel
carves Venus
for his eyes.
He forms the perfect body
while chipping
bits of heart.

2. The Rapist

leaves scars
blossoming seed,
if he can.

3. The Mentor

trades in hero worship,
teaches pungent resins of the interior
to surface and sell. He filters your body
for the bitter dark of rockroses,
the base of all perfume.
His name? Mesmer,
heretic of the Vatican. Your ransom
is myrrh.

Gift from the Eighth Fairy

letter to an x.

This is a poem for cocaine. But not
for finely screened lines of white
laxative fluff or its pleasant results. It is not for
fights with your wife
after three days and
nights of no sleep, drinking
too much and not noticing the dollar
signs of mucus
parched to the inside of your nose.
Not bursts of
energy lent on long distance
drives through flat
lands of Kansas winters when crystal
is unavailable and your doctor
prescribes codeine for migraines, valium
for nerves but nothing for your trading
one snowy town for another, the motel
where you pause to write in
some sun after the storm.
It is for the twenty-sixth hour
you gain in a day, the nap postponed
and one more project you strike
from your list, vindication.
It is for ulcers
you will breed in the delicate flesh
of your belly and intestine. Add alkali

(no stanza break)

to acid, your perforated septum
snorting chalky Tums.
These lines
are ounces of incident you can't control
or sew in harsh white bond. Words
you send home remain razors. No straw
can bail you out.

Winter Drowning

A slow rumble as lake's ice
gives way, and the child's assent
echoes, oh.

 This warning reverberates
in wide eyes, her reaching hands,
still sounds in frozen blue bones.

Oasis

for Janet

Sapphires
are colored in showshed,
slight bitterroots poke their faces
from tree line to the river
below. It runs clear
and raw, shallow
before mud-drenched snowmelt
will fill its banks.

A woman
steps slowly in. River sand
melts through her toes
as if waked
by the caress of strangers.
Sand bar
is her destination. Empty,
it has been cleansed by frost,
enduring until the thaw
when silt waters will ready this beach
for teens and summer beer.
They'll succumb
to the rituals of heat.

For now it is hers. The river envelops
her body, her breasts, shares
its numb determination.
She rides its currents
to reach her oasis where the sun
will stroke her thighs
and belly. Cold sand
will scratch her back. Frost,
friction and body heat --
when warm she must return,
fight a current
that would keep her, waters
that would chill.

False Entries

They have broken
into your home, touched
and destroyed
talismans of blood -- charms
that held your memory,
your place with kin.
They have taken
nothing. Now,

the police have entered,
dusting your son's
first birthday
for a fingerprint,
recording your late husband
smiling through broken
glass on film.

They say it will help
them, give them a clue.
You've paid your taxes.
But they fail
to question neighbors
who might help
to remember.

Nellie Johnson
might have seen where
you kept the white dove
or the silk rose of december --
gifts from your drunk husband,
absent son; where you hung

a diploma, or shelved a new book,
sewed and folded
grandchildren's clothes;
where you placed
your red chair, beige phone,
and waited
for a call.

These mapped the path
to your late husband's grave,
three generations
of memory.
Which ones were shared,
which a bequest
to you?

A gold ring
still fits your fourth
finger, left
there by chance --
a church meeting with a man
who ceased, at last,
in these scattered souvenirs.

Perhaps
this is your second lot.
They have made false entry, moved
the markers
on your plan. You must place them
somewhere new. You may form
the man you wanted.

Tail Wind

Trains bring fall from the East
beginning in mid-July. Their pace slows through town
anticipating urgency
of haying, harvesting, canning
what vegetables remain on the vine.
And the women wonder is there is time
for a late crop of the rapid growers --
peas, carrots, onions and greens -- or
if frost will strike its minor chord
echoed by these engine whistles as they slow,
sounding smooth major tones
decelerating to a single diminished seventh,
as they ease through town.

The notes their whistles lose
are transients they pull from under bridges,
waiting to ride to a warmer, damper coast.
It is July 29th, and the visitors are disappearing
already. The residue of canned fruit,
home brew, and beet greens
has replaced the finer pickings of stolen beans
and barbecue remnants. It is cold to eat outside
in this evening air of mountain breezes,
the fine change of twenty degrees
no longer a reason to hold to mountain
valleys and drainages.

Constancy becomes desirable.
A steady coolness that will not drop. It is held
by humidity just as summer here is held by filled jars,
sealed from decay and frost which will soon surround
the women and their families who must stay.

(no stanza break)

The Ball jars bear vibrant raspberry and the tart
green of pickled tomatoes the women feared
would not ripen and do not want lost or wrapped
in old Missoulians tucked under the varied heat of
marriage beds. Tomatoes can begin to soften
instead of healing red. And even then,
they would need to be put up. By the end of July,
it is hard to wake and wash frost
from carefully tended gardens. The desire
to nurture has left with the trains which cop
a seasonal crowd. Only hoarding is left
and the waiting for the long,
grey months when whistles remain shrill and whole
as the metal wheels clacking steadily
along frozen rails, picking up no one,
the Hellgate a tail wind at their back.

IV

ENVOI

Dusk

Last corn shrapnels
from his hand to birds.

Winter flags lower
in answer.

The gather of children
gone, it is time

to hobble old wounds home,
cadence ragged
as his hero stripes.