1988

Culture shock] [poems]

Bronwyn G. Pughe

The University of Montana

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CULTURE SHOCK

by

Bronwyn G. Pughe

B.A., University of Montana 1985

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
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University of Montana

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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.
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
time 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.
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.
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.
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 shrunk 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
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.
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"
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.
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 --
mutable to the tiny barb.
The Hostess

greets me
on her way to fill the cheese dip.
She is perfectly groomed, as always.

Her smiling cheeks show no sign
of strain or wear. No lipstick
smears her straight white teeth.
And her eyes grin crowsfeet, faint
lines of flirtation. Fanny patting
is what some guests want from these parties,
from her. It is what her husband hates.

The hostess has learned to stop kissing
casual friends and her husband's colleagues hello.
The habit bought her irrational
jealousy, sleepless nights, a fist.
She tried hugging, the polite embrace, and her husband
assumed affairs, said laugh lines
were a sign of come on, asked
couldn't she get enough.

Tupperware is her perfect barrier -- the blue plastic
bowl balanced on a Mexican tile tray lined
with vegetables and dip.
If I were a man, I wouldn't want queso dripped
down the back of my white linen suit, remnants
of a too-tight embrace with a woman who says only
hello and goodnight. Some parties, I wonder
if she can talk.
She listens well, the right nod and expression,
足够的答案来优雅地逃脱。
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.