

Sestina for the Black Earth

by [Veronica Ashenhurst](#) in the [May 2023](#) issue

In memory of S.P., my grandfather

You, fatherless, wished revolution's wounds
might finally mend. At thirteen, held fit to farm,
you knew chilblains, threadbare boots. But not theft.
Mam sold a calf in Stavyshe, and led home,
to work the land, the frayed young pony
whose coat you brushed to gloss in the village.

You yoked him to a sleigh, sped from the village
for sugar beet pulp, forgetting your wounds.
Then, sour rumor landed near the pony.
Men with guns brought state decrees for the farms.
The village elder called all from their homes
to gather. An armed partisan roused by theft

stood on a rundown wagon, obliging theft:
yield your tools and oxen, he told the village;
hoes, plows, carts to the collective. Stripped homes.
The people stood stunned and hushed, then wounded,
they let forth cries. The man said this new farming's
certain utopia. Your bucking pony

whinnied, and men seized him, sliced the pony's
tail, tossing it at Mam—exulting in theft.
To build vast barns, men stole poplars from your farm.
You, fifteen, bore this ruin of your village.
A century on, revolution's wounds
aren't healed yet. You're not there, but your home's

a plunder anew. Empire's soldiers ship home
metric tons of pilfered shoes and tires. Ponies
gallop from wheat fields set aflame, while wounds

from mines kill men among the barley. This theft
palms Scythian gold; hauls girls from villages.
Rockets lie wrecked near sacks of grain on farms.

Still the conquest rolls, looting cherry farms,
blowing roofs from silos and smallholders' homes.
For you, I count the splintered villages
in the old country, struck like your pony.
Farmers save what wheat they can, amidst the theft,
but I can find no balm to close these wounds.

You memorialized home, a lithe pony.
Now village partridges take flight over the theft:
sundown gilds their wings, high above torn farms and wounds.