Tenderman
by Tim Bowling

Reviewed by Gillian Harding-Russell

Tenderman is a lament for an age when salmon were plentiful and the world’s resources were burgeoning, while at the same time troubling the reader with the shadow of an apocalyptic vision. As it turns out, however, the present may be seen as a continuation of that bountiful age while humans persist with their testosterone-laden way of yielding power over others and exploiting the environment. Appropriately, the tenderman – technically a crewman on a salmon-packing boat – serves as an everyman who is both victim and bully in this apocalyptic world view. In the foreword, Bowling describes the tenderman as “savagely independent working-class,” but emphasizes he is not a “Romantic” figure and “not even particularly admirable.” Rather than point an accusatory finger, Bowling implicates both himself and the reader in the figure of the tenderman, who serves as a kind of alter ego for himself in mixed-gender guise as a red-bearded Russian who has so far fallen from his former position of world threat that his name is “Rosie.”

In “British Columbia,” Bowling satirizes a nostalgic impulse to romanticize the past when salmon were plentiful and the world was a seemingly profitable place. Alluding to Charles Dickens’s A Christmas Carol, the speaker entangles the reader in this fall from grace by addressing him as “Ebenezer,” and then sarcastically piles on metaphysical conceits that use unexpected metaphors that draw on a single point of similarity; for example, in relation to marriage:

Wake up, tenderman. This is our stop.
The past – where the unhappy take their honeymoons.
Somebody ought to toss confetti at a severed foreskin.
Or at least fold tears into a pocket handkerchief
for the Regret Chest. (17)

In the following stanza, we are offered a tableau of schoolboys who, after implied cruelty behind the scenes, play cat’s cradle with a garter snake’s guts. The rejoinder “Ebenezer, old friend, these ghosts are us” brings home to the reader that we, too, are to blame for destructive behaviour and insidious cruelty.

In “Tenderman’s Brief History of the Late Twentieth Century,” Bowling outlines snippets of political events, each punctuated with the refrain “we killed the salmon”: thus politics, ever transitory and the same, remain in stark contrast to the longstanding problem of damage to the environment that civilization has wrought on the salmon and on nature. The issue of farmed salmon having the well-documented effect of killing off the wild salmon is presented in poignant terms that emphasize the grotesquerie:

Some of the salmon we killed
were made of chemicals and plastics
and raised in pens
and they died listless in our nets.
There weren’t as many of the other kind
but we killed both. (19)

By presenting the lesser destruction of the farmed salmon first, Bowling impresses the reader with the greater destruction of the wild salmon: the banality of this destruction is seen to be on a par with the schoolboy’s evisceration of the garter snake without clear motive. Bowling’s tone here and elsewhere is vitriolic while the material is viscerally disturbing.

In the experimental “Walking Through a North American City, the Tenderman Picks Up a Rhythm,” Bowling demonstrates a virtuoso skill with verses emulating a rap beat. The alternating contradictory impulses of “conform” and “do your own thing” resonate with striking mixed message. At the end, an echo from Dylan Thomas’s famous line from “Fern Hill,” “Though I sang in my chains like the sea,” emphasizes the fatalism in this view of the world’s behaviour. Rather like a schoolyard chant, the poem’s repetitiveness captures both the bully’s malice and the victim’s pain.

Will you be ashes or food for the worms?
Be your own cancer conform
Do your own stroke conform
Will you be ashes or food for the worms?

Man is in chains before he is born. (34)

In “Happy Hour in the Arms,” Bowling demonstrates his versatility with many poetic forms. This dramatic monologue is written from the point of view of the tenderman, a figure both vulnerable and culpable. Coming from a hard upbringing, the tenderman-speaker’s father didn’t teach him to make nets and fish: instead he had to learn by watching and doing. Bowling captures the idiom of this tenderman, and underneath his coarseness, a refinement in his appreciation of nature:

The river at night in the fall. I remember
this one time. I was — I don’t know — fifteen maybe,
and I’d just finished setting on the Prairie
when I hear this big splash off the bank.
What the fuck? I turn around. In the moonlight
nothing but the head and antlers, must have been
a six point buck, and he’s swimming like hell
to get across to the marsh. (35)

With colloquial punch, Bowling ends the poem with the tenderman recalling how a fellow fisherman sent home his earnings from the sockeye catch “in the fucking mail.” By contemporary standards, those tendermen seem naive, but times have undoubtedly changed.

In “Last Will” and “Blame,” Bowling addresses a lost generation who tended not to have children and who the poet suggests may feel self-righteous in their view that the world is not one into which to welcome children:

You don’t have any children, tenderman?
No one to pass the hopelessness on to?
Don’t be proud. It’s no great victory
to end your road at the address
you boarded up with the planks
of hulls that never leave harbour. (66)
The speaker instead sees our children as viewing the dangers of the past as “Halloween candy,” with potential poisons hidden inside them – not to be avoided but to be sorted through. For all the anger in these verses, the speaker identifies the victims of the tenderman’s careless exploitation to be themselves and ourselves since, by extension, we are the tendermen: “The knife in the glove box – /sharp, the finest steel – /guts only the murderer” (72).

By turns ironic, sardonic, and lyrical, Tenderman banters with the reader even as it seduces and enrages with the insight that we, too, may be considered tenderman, both guilty and innocent. The cover design with a salmon-packing boat (created in non-toxic vegetable dyes even as the book, itself, may be recycled) distances that icon as from another era; but there remains a sense of danger in the busy rigging with its masts and cranes passing through the greens and blues of ocean and skies with the ghosts of fish and filigreed seaweed patterns that goes beyond nostalgia.

Gillian Harding-Russell has published three poetry collections, most recently I forgot to tell you (Thistledown, 2007). The chapbooks Maya: Poems for the Summer Solstice (Leaf Press) and the Stories of Snow (Alfred Gustav) came out in 2012. Poems have recently been published in Windsor Review, The Antigonish Review, and Goose Publications (an online nature and environmental journal). Poems are forthcoming in the anthologies That Not Forgotten (Hidden Brook Press, 2012) and Poet to Poet (Guernica).

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