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The Duende of Tetherball by Tim Bowling

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Conviction and Tolerance in a Complex World

The Duende of Tetherball by TIM BOWLING
Nightwood Editions, 2016

Reviewed by GILLIAN HARDING-RUSSELL

In *The Duende of Tetherball*, Tim Bowling broaches the subject of the middle-aged self in an argumentative and sometimes faltering world. As the son of deceased parents and the father of his children, the speaker tries to make sense of his ancestry in a line of fishermen and of present day society with inevitable ecological glimpses into the state of the environment. While he borrows metaphors from nature, the rural workplace, and childhood games, Bowling writes verses that are alternatively sinuous and long or leaping into short bursts of song.

The speaker in Bowling's poems is always aware of where he comes from and of his place in a less-than-perfect society. Most often, he chooses the isolation of the self to preserve his own integrity. In the lyrical "The Children of Fishermen," the speaker recalls his roots as the son of generations of fishermen:

We wore gumboots that glistened
like the flanks of horses.
And slipped them off inside the rain-
rattled porches
as the salmon slipped off every tide.
We heard the glass floats being
blown in Japan.
Our closest friends were dogs and
blood. (14-18)

Following this nostalgic look at the past, we are brought abruptly to the present with the speaker looking introspectively into the middle distance around his bed and visualizing his own face "carved / out of my father's face" (21-22), but with no one left alive to tell his story when "crying to a sleeping people / is a lonely way to tell" (24-25).

In several of the poems, Bowling offers his view on his struggle of coming to terms with society. In the title poem, "The Duende of Tetherball," he draws on the poet Federico Garcia Lorca's term "duende" with its emotional/physical conception of struggle to consider the game of tetherball as emblematic of "a purely democratic / violence" (14). In this game, the punches are set against oneself or others in an emotional or intellectual battle of wits:

You wrapped the leather ball
around the pole by punching it
against another's punches
or your own, a purely democratic
violence of the kind
that teaches every one
of us, in time. Useless — (14-20)

In an alternative perspective, the tetherball itself is seen as emblematic of the "bully" who has "no victim" but himself, akin to "a tree / stripped by acid rain, / a one-armed boxer with a single glove" (29-33). Thus Bowling seems to go beyond easy blame to slip into a larger view of our social problems that may be explained in pragmatic, rather than moralistic, ways. Far from setting himself above the rabble in this game of tetherball, the speaker asks, "Did I say I

didn't play?" And he answers his own question, "Who doesn't play? (34).

Another poem that establishes the poet's sense of social responsibility is "Telephone Survey." Here, Bowling begins the poem, "Do I want others to be like me?" to which the answers is an emphatic "No" (1-2):

I would have my children live
with the terrifying risk of difference
to the precipice of tragedy
to the obliteration of the meaning
of my days. (40-44)

Although the speaker admits that he would prefer the world to be a better place, uniformity of opinion is not the answer. His most eloquent and wise closing words are "for it is a crime to command life: / and the prison is a mirror that shows a single face" (17-18).

In half poem/half prose "Animal Solitude," Bowling dramatises the story of a woman's accidental collision with nature as she runs over a deer with a car. Whereas the poem begins with verses that are most lyrical in which the sun's rays are seen as "roadkill," most surely an omen that warns the reader, the poem moves into prose on the second page (where the woman's busy life is profiled) and then moves back to verse during the emotional scene of the accident in which the woman's empathy with the animal and their shared pain is captured so viscerally:

But who can be the self - the
vanished self -
with the dying buck's head
gashed and twisting in your lap,

the antlers pinning you behind the
wheel
each short rasp torn from punctured
lungs (80-85)

The last section of the poem, in returning to prose, ends with a trucker's matter-of-fact "It's a nice buck," and "Too bad you can't eat it. The meat's bruised" (123). Here we see how two truths collide: the woman's sorrow and pain (her empathy very like pain) on killing the deer and a potential benefit as seen in a larger scheme that, however, does not deny the original sorrow about a loss.

Not unexpected in a poem about middle age and a less-than-perfect world, Bowling writes two poems about writer friends who have died. The first one is for Philip Levine, a poet who boasted that he was inspired to write by his boring job at work and by his contributions to unions. There is much camaraderie in the elegy's bantering opening lines: "I keep expecting a letter from you. / *Dear Tim I died on Valentine's Day. It sucks*" (1-2).

Phil, however much I want you alive
is not a fraction of the amount
you would want your life back
the poems unwritten
the forge's heat in your face
(39-43)

Here we have the portrait of a poet who evidently has much remaining to write about, a poet who "hated / lies, would hate the lie / that art is the essence of a life" (28-30).

The other elegy is for fellow Newfoundlander Alistair MacLeod, whom

the speaker cannot remember whether dying before or after the Scottish referendum. (I do believe it was after, so MacLeod may rest in peace.) There is much love and familiarity in the unexpected closing observation that short story and fiction writer Macleod was a "national poet" who "meticulously translated all his poems into prose" (51).

In his latest collection of poems *The Duende of the Tetherball*, Bowling writes with honesty and conviction, with frustration and warmth for his fellow humans. Furthermore, he writes with a will to be open-minded despite a personal need to isolate himself as the only way to survive in a world of diversity. His metaphors are often startling and unique as drawn from

the environment, the rural workplace, and children's games (as the homely central tetherball image), and his cadence varied as song mingled with speech.

GILLIAN HARDING-RUSSELL is a freelance writer and editor working for a number of magazines, among them *Event's* Reading Service. She received an M.A. from McGill (76) and her Ph.D. from the University of Saskatchewan (1986). She has three poetry collections and five chapbooks published. This year a poem sequence "Making Sense" was chosen as the best suite in *Exile's* Gwendolyn MacEwen chapbook competition (2016). A chapbook, *Fox Love*, came out last fall in The Alfred Gustav Press series.