

**IN THE  
CAPITAL CITY  
OF AUTUMN**

**TIM BOWLING**

**IN THE  
CAPITAL CITY  
OF AUTUMN**

## **Also by Tim Bowling**

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*The Heavy Bear*

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*for Theresa*

*with gratitude for thirty wonderful years*



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# **PART ONE**



## Yesteryears

Took the fat family bible and tossed it  
off the Lions Gate Bridge.  
Goodbye Toronto pre-Depression infant death.  
So long psalms of Edwardian fiscal failure.  
Hurled it the same as Cobden-Sanderson  
into the Thames his blocks of type  
so no one could come after  
so no one could traffick in his lonely fight  
Good riddance to fleshpress and letterpress  
the antiquarian appetites of every cast  
let the orca swallow the bile anvil  
for a fibrillating sponge  
and sound so deep  
I'll never hear the undertaker's step  
up concrete walk to rented stoop  
or smell the sighing midwife's sweat  
as she wraps another swaddling corpse  
in garlic breath and sentiment.  
Limit the edition  
to a run of naught.  
Dropped it like a gargoyle cracked  
by revolution off a parapet.  
Dead weight of words and font  
a typewriter not typed with  
since the ceasefire of the Second War  
engine block of a Molotoved car  
who my people and their moments were  
a ledger book of no account  
to marauding tide and tireless neon  
all the totems not yet poles  
along the shore  
one black eye for the sun –

no more to visit those dates  
that everyone loses or keeps –  
the cage with a dead shark  
clamped to a dead limb  
most impossible evacuation  
the bone lifted from under the skin  
future's twin.

## Ancestry

My mother tells me I was baptised by no one and  
nothing and all that ever touched my forehead  
was the potato dust off the sacks of culls my father  
chucked on the split linoleum for his winter bonus  
or a few beads of bloodied brine he shook one summer  
off his gillnet for a pittance. I do not beg  
but I differ. The dandelion's floating sperm,  
for one, broke dry on my brow all those years  
I gathered the sacred waters off a dog's face  
and knelt to marionette on creosoted planks  
more than any god's patience. Understand –  
I've thrown my childhood like a younger brother  
into the pit long since and carry the jewel-less movement  
of a grandfather's railroad watch in my mouth  
to spit time redly into the rich dark  
yet I don't forget the hush that fell on the river  
when the blue herons bid me rise  
and I parted the rushes and returned  
to the meagre earnings of the earth and word  
where there isn't any paradise for mother,  
father, brother or son, and humbly we approach it.

## In the Beginning

Between the bed where I slept each night  
and the banks of a great river –  
a girl I loved  
and a vacant lot I loved.  
Her attic bedroom looked out on  
the fourth floor of the cherry blossom building.  
I stood on the mezzanine of sun-glare  
and dew, counting her heartbeats,  
reliant on the seed-bent grass for touch.  
If her face ever appeared  
at the summons of my silent need  
it is the reason I have aged  
that the dew burnt off  
that I held the sparrows of the pulse of life  
in my hands until the feathers turned chill  
and nobody carried the shards of the fairy-tale mirror  
away from the place of decks and masts.  
If I can see her face  
can I feel the boyish impulse  
to aspire to the rooftop of time  
and survey – with the bald eagle’s  
circling gaze – the lineaments of hunger  
that belonged to me and to the world  
at once? Feel again – without thought?  
I’m on new ground.  
The river – out of sight – flows differently.  
Whatever I understood of the heart’s impermeable longing  
lies deep under the dead grass.  
Standing here, on the third floor of blossom,  
in a dawn that more resembles dusk,  
no walls, a single stairway up,  
I can see her face

as old as mine  
beautiful and growing cold  
as the scales on the sides of the great plenty  
the man I loved and would briefly become  
tried over all birds' pulses forever to ferry home.



## Encore

That night I broke my mental wrist.  
My life hung like a dog's paw to shake.  
But my kind masters were gone and going.  
I felt the downward pull of that weight  
on my wheel-bound shoulder only those  
whose eyelids close nightly like butterfly  
guillotines on manual labour can't help knowing.

Here is a street like any other. You can die on it.  
You can stop and gossip with a neighbour.  
You can walk a colicky baby to sleep.  
Fifty years ago – pure vaudeville turn.  
At one end, a small man in midnight streetlamp shine  
dangling a forty-pound salmon under the gill  
at his side. At the other end,  
a small woman in a daylight rain shower  
holding a twenty-pound bag of groceries.  
Why don't they walk the distance between them?  
Why does the weight of their mutual errand to survive  
anchor them more than the night and the day?  
The audience in the theatre – one man  
with the blood of that fish on his hand, the taste  
of that food on his tongue – can't even applaud.

It is the day of the long night I broke my mental wrist.  
The streetlamp is the shivering sun  
that scalds the flesh of the dead.  
Human eyelids flutter over the blank of the salmon's black look.  
The money in each of its red pounds  
still pays my keep – to carry without acclaim  
or recompense until the street melts to river  
and the body to flow, to the spirit-morsel

all must eat at the feast of each absence.  
The bone is broken and still must break.  
Old couple, let me shift what you have carried –  
cells and blood and flesh and rain –  
into the sharp ache of my dull sleep.

## Apprentice

Too cerebral for the docks  
too heart-sleeved for the academy  
I lit out for the west (like Huck)  
to where the sockeye built  
their great silver cliff in the Gulf –  
straight over, one whole decade,  
alone but for the hearts  
of the high school dropouts  
who made me, I made friends  
of only fathoms and salt, the one  
saying “sink,” the other “swallow,”  
as two diseased lungs of the moon  
breached without height to gasp  
on sandbars sharp as human bone.  
Washed back on every tide to town  
I wore my mourning suit of rain  
and plucked the black threads  
of a typewriter whose carriage return  
returned so far I couldn’t recover  
my time – always my footfalls  
followed the orchard paths  
whose blossoms had browned,  
my hands pulled pits without flesh  
from the bough – I had to sing  
without voice on unread pages  
while my tender makers sighed  
over fire and stove  
always easy in the restless now  
of the uncomprehending love  
with which they sheltered me.  
The house thickened its shell.  
Dead, the salmon pressed their

silent laughter to the cracked  
linoleum. I struck and struck  
each key each black and  
gazeless eye from a creature  
swimming too deep and fast  
to touch or see – something –  
a cutting wind off the clavicle bar  
a cancer in the twinned carcass  
of breath down there in the baseboard  
dust of the derelict houses  
where my youth married age  
and carried solitude across the  
threshold I sought to save  
the life in the dead I heard  
the knock in the salmon's  
stilled heart even as my hands  
in its guts were the boy's  
hands who tried to hold  
the pastels in place on the paper  
borne home from the schoolroom  
in the rain the open mouths  
of the earth and the sea  
the night's shell the silence  
the ageless oils of time on my skin  
the love with which they sheltered me.

## Sweet Sixteen

The papier-mâché face and head  
of a three-toed sloth  
my daughter made  
several years ago  
has finally worked its way  
to the discard bin  
of adolescence. The animal  
stares at me and I  
stare back, too bone-  
weary to get up from my easy  
chair and start the chores  
of the next phase of life  
in which the modelling  
of the exotic wild  
succumbs to the postures  
of the parameter self.  
*What's the big rush?*  
whispers the sloth  
from across the room  
under the marked heights  
of the children  
on the doorway jamb.  
*Why the infernal hurry?*  
*Can't you see the distance*  
*I've covered*  
*in only a decade*  
*without even a body?*

Companion of the slow accretion  
(time and blood, time in blood)  
I feel the head and face  
of who I was

one child's childhood ago  
drift gently away  
as if in search  
of the kiss  
that can never touch  
those cheeks again  
while my body  
settles like wet sand  
on the river bottom  
to disperse with the tide.

Companion of change  
who hasn't changed  
enough to suffer  
change  
let us be the masks  
of the drama  
my daughter studies  
and loves  
so much still – the make-  
believe  
tragedy and comedy  
frown and smile –  
you, who cannot feel –  
me, who feels  
enough to swell a surplus heart –  
which of us laughs  
which of us cries  
as the girl walks out of her room  
fully in her body  
and her years  
and says, seeing where I look,  
*I'm almost sad to see him go.*

## The Family Portrait

My uncle who drank his family to ruin  
who was called (to his face)  
a little cocksucker by his older brother  
(my gentle father)  
whose compact size, speed  
and nastiness on the lacrosse court  
took him to a national title  
and who, demented, ended  
his days rearranging the fir needles  
on the floor of a Gulf Island forest  
in the off-season  
coalesces to one redemptive image:  
in a chair by a crackling fire  
his shaky hand motionless  
on his golden retriever's neck.

My other uncle who rarely drank  
to excess and attended every  
garage sale and police auction within  
a fifty-mile radius  
who saw the brains of two buddies  
splattered over the bricks of Holland  
and knew he had to live intensely  
with a cavalier care for them  
and who always played  
the devil's advocate (blue eyes  
twinkling as you spluttered your defence)  
does not coalesce but expands,  
rising from the smoke of war  
with frames of dripping honey  
and handshakes for all in his hands.

Two brothers, long dead,  
who watch me each night  
as I sleep  
from a photograph taken  
at some family function  
in their young manhood  
who sit laughing to either side  
of the woman who gave them  
life. Two brothers –  
a dark eye and a bright –  
who seem to ask  
of me when I wake  
to face the world: Are  
you living for others  
or only for yourself?

Yet why is the hand  
in the golden fur  
also in the honey and  
why is one brother  
rearranging his tears  
to box up for the auctioneer  
and why, woman  
soothing the child's pain  
and carrying the man's,  
do we bid against ourselves  
to possess what we can never own  
the heat of that limited fire  
the grace of that limitless debt?  
Why does the blood stagger  
so drunkenly through the ruins as it arranges itself to cry yes?



## Demolition

I called to tell you that the house is gone  
all the windowsills we leaned our elbows on  
the floorboards that creaked with our mother's vigilance  
the bedroom doors that couldn't lock the worn  
spot on the hardwood where we lay in front of the TV  
in the years before remote controls the humming  
almost-human furnace in the furnace room  
the mysterious vortex in the chimney – gone.  
But without a widow for the widow's walk  
why should it stay? There was no reason at all  
for the house to continue without us,  
our tears, sighs, laughter, the rare harsh word,  
no need for the shadow of the great maple  
in the front yard to cool our perspective on the street  
or for the linoleum kitchen tiles to peel and trip  
another unsuspecting guest – no reason.  
Even this writing desk I saved to mark all change  
where I wrote my early poems and will write my last  
would be better broken and thrown to flame  
for the failure of its surface to keep us whole  
as we no longer sleepwalk without harm  
or find fresh linen in the linen closet to solve  
the nosebleed pillows and the adolescent dream.  
I called to say that I'm cold and I want to touch the old walls  
as if they were the flesh of our parents  
but your voice when you answered told me  
that you had already heard the footsteps  
walking down the gravel driveway and the road  
vanishing where everything vanishes  
at the dark address of the street without a streetlamp  
with a moonbeam like the skin under a wristwatch  
in summer when the wristwatch is taken off  
lighting the family passage to forgetfulness.

## In Ladner Harbour

I went and sat by my father's old moorage spot.  
My eyes of frayed stern-rope  
my skin of planks  
changing colour with the weather.  
No boats passed  
except the leaky vessel of childhood  
that sinks a little lower  
every time we look at it.  
No fog, but the foghorn sounded  
out where the fresh meets the brine  
as a man cries (silently)  
between the salt in his blood  
and his mother's milk.  
The river's handshake with the ocean  
mine with Time  
the clasp and unclasp  
my father's grip  
always firm  
I can almost touch it  
a branch in the fog.

Look long where I look:  
the grey sky in the grey water  
for miles  
and the single nailhead of a risen seal  
that holds the halves of the world  
and a life together.

## Education

The geese flying over the yard this morning  
sound like the faulty school bell of the middle years  
of my life. I don't think I'll go to first block.  
My lunch of olive pits and lemon rinds can wait.  
Inside me, always, the kid who can't see  
the hopscotch squares for his tears.  
But outside, too often, the polisher of apples  
for power. The dog licks my dangled hand.  
I think it's affection – it's probably salt  
from the wiping clean of the boards of the world.  
With the children gone, the house is a croft  
burnt with the invisible fire of my longing  
for their childhoods. School bell, church bell,  
fire drill of the biological urgencies  
that place us in the stony arms of banks.  
If I could, I would do the long division  
beyond these lengths we're given  
but I'm falling behind in every class  
except the one in the room that smells  
of ripe blackberries and the grass  
the grave keeper keeps, hearing the bell  
in the bone of the pilots who fly the sky to its darker season.



**TIM BOWLING** is the author of twenty-four works of fiction, non-fiction and poetry. He is the recipient of numerous honours, including two Edmonton Artists' Trust Fund Awards, five Alberta Book Awards, a Queen Elizabeth II Platinum Jubilee Medal, two Writers' Trust of Canada nominations, two Governor General's Award nominations and a Guggenheim Fellowship in recognition of his entire body of work.

## ADVANCE PRAISE FOR IN THE CAPITAL CITY OF AUTUMN

“TIM BOWLING’s latest poetry collection, *In the Capital City of Autumn*, reads like a ‘Report Card for Middle Age,’ the name of a poem in Part Three of the book, but the subjects of study are less rote learning, more free-wheeling, more expansive – family history, salmon fishing, *The Great Gatsby* and F. Scott Fitzgerald, the passage of time, the particulars of loss, André the Giant, Superman comics – making this an incredibly satisfying collection. And what poetic lines! ‘My life hung like a dog’s paw to shake,’ or ‘I wore my mourning suit of rain,’ or ‘I was that child, am that thief, / stealing what all my neighbours steal – / the hour hand on the town clock.’ His poems cast a wide net over popular culture and antiquarian literature, the regional and the broadly universal. Bowling, in his poems, gazes upon these subjects, and slowly the moorings of the self slip away, and in that silence, the voice of the imagination enters, helping him transcend our hardscrabble lives, transcend time itself. This is what makes Tim Bowling’s poetry so shamelessly lyrical, so powerfully stirring. An important and vital poetic vision!”

CHRIS BANKS, author of *Alternator* and *Deepfake Serenade*

### PRAISE FOR TIM BOWLING

“Bowling unerringly finds the ways that the extraordinary and the commonplace are welded together.”

KENNETH WILSON, *Canadian Literature on  
The Call of the Red-Winged Blackbird*

“Bowling’s command of language is effortlessly beautiful.”

TANYA ROHRMOSER, *Quill & Quire on The Heavy Bear*



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