

## Tim Bowling / TWO POEMS

### THE LAST SOCKEYE

*for my brother*

Always I think of the last sockeye,  
the one in late October; blind,  
blood-red, half-rotted, so far  
from the creeks of spawning,  
it just lay beside our net  
in the silt-grey water — confused  
or resting, we couldn't say —  
then with one weak push  
gilled itself  
so we had to roll it in

it was the last of its kind for the season;  
most had died, or spawned and died,  
at least a month before:  
though barely caught, I could not gaff it,  
we stood in the chill north wind, bemused,  
as though we'd been given an early Christmas gift,  
red-wrapped and taken  
from below the mountains' undecorated evergreens;  
we stared at the rotted eyes  
and scales like bloodied coin,  
a glove of chain-mail  
after a Crusades slaughter  
the living hand still inside

three separate instincts  
and a whole long winter to forget

your drinking and failed marriage  
my loneliness and too often  
days of great despair  
over things I cannot change  
and always the gap between us  
as wide as the gap  
between the sockeye and its goal;  
three separate instincts  
with nothing to win  
three separate species:  
I don't remember what we said  
or even if we spoke at all  
but the salmon, at least,  
knew what it wanted,  
so I gave it back to the river,  
blind, rotted, and doomed,  
I gave it back

while we stood in the stern like the last men  
and watched the bloody hand of the year wave goodbye

## CROSSWALK

*Hand outlines in red are common in many prehistoric caves. In one called Gargas, in the French Pyrenees, the walls are covered by hundreds of these hand prints, but an astonishing number show one or more of the fingers lost. How these mutilations occurred we do not know, but it may have been due to some disease. . . — Richard E. Leakey, Human Origins*

Ghostly ancestors impel us to move,  
fossilized skeletons still gliding  
for invisible ibix herds, nomads  
of the African plains appearing  
everywhere in our grassless cities  
at the confluence of four cold streams.  
Their passage is frozen now, excavated  
under coloured suns that change  
quick as a chameleon's blink;  
they have no eyes to see us with;  
they gaze on a lost world as we  
gaze on them, waiting to evolve:  
commerce to domestic  
homo habilis to homo erectus

and when we approach, they vanish,  
as though frightened of their own  
children, their own futures,  
only to appear again, blocks away,  
travelling in a ritual dance

that leaves no footprints  
in our paved volcanic ash

only a small offering that makes us freeze,  
broken fingers dipped in the blood of a sacrifice  
we have long forgotten the reason for:  
what does it say, this gift  
held in the air like a slap?

And why do we feel so strongly  
the burn below our flesh?