George Stanley / The Other Side of Being Red

There's a particular kind of George Bowering poem where he takes us on a trip. "I Like Summer," the first poem in his 2013 collection, *Teeth*, is a good example. Like a trip, it goes somewhere. It goes more than one place, it seems to want to go places.

It starts in a kind of field, where there are rocks and shadows. A reference to Mars leads to an imaginary voyage there, and then to boys who might imagine such a trip, but who also "knew no better than to favour the New York Yankees." Next come Japanese tourists whose blond-dyed hair looks orange, and where do we end up? In 1947, sharing a meal of scrapple with Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie.

Now your ordinary anecdotal, philosophical, or anecdoto-philosophical poem, the kind late modernists tend to write (yes, I said modernists, there are still a few of us around) doesn't depart so far as Bowering's poem does from that field with rocks and shadows in it. The ordinary poem tends to first let you know what it's about, and it goes no more than one other place before it starts telling you *about* what it's about, looking back on it, reflecting. Bowering, in this trippy mood at least, will have none of that. Go here, go there, go somewhere else. Never look back.

The title poem, "Teeth," is a helter-skelter catalogue of the activities of the hard bony body parts referred to in its title. What those teeth are doing is "eating, eating." One of the first edibles listed is "faces" (but it appears faces can eat, as well as be eaten, since almost immediately there are "faces buried in troughs"). Then insects eat a corpse (maybe an unintended foreshadowing of more corpses to come later in the collection). Other shameless devourers are "your mother secretly finishing the stew after dark," "the whole skin of the planet," worms, and ourselves, enjoying the lamb souvlaki at Olympia or at Kits Beach "shoving" doughnuts in our mouths. Finally someone named "I" takes what's left home to consume later.

The ordinary (anecdotal, philosophical) poem ordinarily bears on serious (romantic) topics like love or death. "Teeth" is about eating. I think part of Bowering's intention here is to say that what's serious depends on where you see it from. Life is a serious subject; yet, biologically, life is eating. The unsentimental

voice of "Teeth" is in a way predictive of "Guillevic at Sea," the long poetic sequence that ends the collection, which will suggest another view of life that might be as significant, or more significant, than our habitual ways, though lacking all romantic sentiment.

Another kind of poem in *Teeth* is tributes to other poets (I call them tributes because that relates to *tribe*—the subjects are Bowering's tribesmen). A poem can begin with an apparently random yet sharply detailed recollection:

> What a stupid thrill it was, sailing Thelonius Monk LP's off Jamie's balcony
> onto the train tracks, maybe over. ("Play Like Bud")

These poems consist mainly of flash-visions of the poet-subject in exemplary moments, with commentary, biographical and other, by GB (Artie Gold, he tells us, was the first to call him that) and affectionate asides: Billy Little's tie "looked like the sky just before it's going to rain on some foreign planet yesterday afternoon" ("No, Not Those Trousers"); Robin Blaser "shared a cigarette with Pindar" ("The Company of Poets"); David McFadden "has won every book prize ever lodged in a secret corner of everyone's heart" ("A Step This Side of Salvation").

"Open Mind Blues" is a poem of deceptive simplicity. Its structure is roughly suggestive of blues lyrics: sets of three couplets with their second lines rhyming, separated by "[instrumental]" breaks. The mood is casual, almost blithe. But read more closely: the poem is about God, and how you can't count on his love. No matter what God may do, the poet remains unfazed, stoical; he keeps "an open mind," every bit God's equal in this staring contest.

I love the lazy river of a poem called "Gran." The lady of the title is a tutelary presence throughout the poem, while her grandson tells jokes, makes outrageous puns, like

> You are the Witch of And/Or.
> That iamb,
> she said the day I told her that

and writes lines that, just momentarily, get by (at least this) reader:

> I admire the leaves, my grandmother said
> even when they do.

He quotes Gran:

> She said
> there is more about you
> that you don't know
> than there is about you
> that you do know

which made me think of Margaret Laurence: "There are things you know that you don't know you know."

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The genial mood of *Teeth* ends abruptly when we reach the final sequence of poems, "Guillevic at Sea." Bowering, actually at sea while writing these poems (on a cruise, with Jean Baird, from Athens to Singapore), takes on a doppelganger, the French poet Guillevic (one name only). Or to state that more fully, Guillevic *at sea*.

I don't entirely understand the relation between the two. It may be that their association is meant to partly depersonalize the poems, so that the *uncanny* quality of the voice is heard as coming from "poetry" or language. Or is it that Bowering, being himself *at sea* (figuratively), "without landmarks for guidance" [Webster's 3rd International Dictionary]—though most of the part-titles of the poems are the names of landmarks—wants a second self—a shipmate—to commune with?

As far as I know, in real life Guillevic was never (literally) at sea. Though born in Brittany, a seafaring country, when Guillevic was twelve his family moved to Alsace (an agricultural, wine-producing region—like the Okanagan)—where he began to read, and write, poetry. From reading his *Selected Poems*,[1] Guillevic seems to me a profoundly *earthbound* poet:

> The earth is heavy, it will take me.
> Meanwhile it is in me. ("Companion" 65)

I only found one poem of Guillevic's that referred to the sea, that one from the point of view of gulls, who

1 *Guillevic: Selected Poems*, trans. Denise Levertov (New York: New Directions, 1968).

curse the sea
that will not set bounds
to space and hunger. ("Gulls," 59)

The poem "Guillevic at Sea" (and I do think of it, now, as a single poem—like Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*) is inhabited by corpses, monsters, and blood. The corpses and monsters I see as stage properties; the blood, though, is another matter (see below). For me, the strangeness of the poem's voice is felt more between the lines, in discontinuities (that seem like sea-swells) like

A corpse full of pain
walking in the scrawny green park?

You bet, the world's
great in summer, people love it. ("Athens")

or

Fancy clothes made of second-hand lace
white as the waves below Arabia,
you are newcomers
among us.

We have enough layers
of time hanging here. ("Arabian Peninsula")

(Who are the referents of these pronouns? I can imagine the source speaking of itself as "us.")

or in references that seem specific but are unidentifiable:

this land without breeze
without music of survival ("Arabian Sea")

a line that rings more of Jack Spicer than Guillevic (and I think Spicer is a major influence on this poem).

Blood flows in poem after poem. "The Red Sea" begins, "It's out of meat that blood pours." In "Gulf of Oman" the subject of the poem is "our blood," and though "the blood of a car-crash youth" is not the same as "the blood of a youth who died for liberty," they are each "the other side of being red." The blood "glistening on the pavement" is *the other side of being red*—of us—alive—and "weeping." Blood is life and also the marker of death.

The vision of our life as blood is not disconnected from our more landward concerns. "The Arabian Sea" begins in a domestic interior:

> All this furniture we don't want
> hulks in our bedroom

The poem is invaded by "the wild dog of the Arabian Sea"—a magic dog—but now the poem begins to waver between two realities, for this dog who is

> the beast of highways,
> beast of danger, beast of battles...
>
> who knows he is stronger

also lets us feed him and is our "companion." The poem ends in a terrifying image

> night and blood leaning
> against the human

but this is also ambiguous—for all the terror of whatever this thing is, it is *leaning* against us. Is that menacing? Or are we its support?

The simplest statement the poet makes about the new knowledge imparted by this poem is

> Simply enough,
> it will go on being difficult
> to live simply. ("Bombay")

"Guillevic at Sea" is dictation from an oracular source that shows little affection for us, at least in the ways we ordinarily imagine ourselves. (Far beyond little God who can't decide if he likes us, even.) Bowering—or rather, Guillevic/Bowering—at sea, had the heart to keep listening.