

## John Barton / FIVE POEMS

### NUMBER THEORY

Far out into orbit,

the satellite's been launched,  
launched from the cargo bay, spinning

not quite from  
between  
the thighs of the astronaut but remotely

programmed by touch,  
the keyboard extending its reach with the robotic  
arm.

The satellite spinning away —

antennas opening like

wings —

It receives at last and in a thousand languages

transmits  
the first signals at an altitude far

beyond eyesight, except at night.  
We follow the thread

of its faint

revolution without binoculars through rips

in the indigo stratus above

this planet where you and I  
on a balcony know

no more than each other's names.

Which seem

to represent us whether they are accurate or not,  
which we answer to,

like Soyous or Anik.

Tonight, over dinner, something unnamed  
was served us,  
which we are uncertain of, the savour

out of this world, piquant

like the salad of strawberries and freshly  
milled pepper on spinach,  
its structure more delicate

than gallium arsenide

devices.

Not quite known to us, as enticing

as quasars, those star-like

red presences at the edge  
of the universe proven so far  
only in theory by numbers relayed  
from the satellites wheeling,  
data gathered  
with the Hubble telescope a fraction  
of some primary  
whole,  
circumstantial evidence  
reconfigured on earth for our benefit  
pixel by pixel.

A potted  
history of the big bang  
which some men reset the hands  
of two hearts by,

by virtue of a faint  
subatomic hunger

for touch;  
two  
bodies of light beyond the visible

spectrum timelessly roaming the celestial vacuum.

## DEMENTIA

The blood that stagnant,  
sometimes sudden

river,  
fast-moving and virulent.

Stories, currents  
rising all too often to the wrists.

Why else do we sometimes slit them,  
gorgeous, delirious.

Anger subletting the body,  
flaring, uneasy

blood engorging organs.  
These days we wear

protection, like raincoats,  
an impermeable

layer of skin against the storm  
within, two men gowned

like doctors in this way only  
for an operation,

this bed,  
the stories we don't want shared,

we can't stand them,  
their denouement clinical solitude.

We are careful with each other.  
The unsheathed

penis  
a conduit of the loose-tongued

dementia we have come to be  
afraid of, stories

leaking from the bloodstream,  
my love, your love

confused with hurricanes  
shouldering inland

from the coast,  
the dawn birds silent,

flashflood and dissipating  
mass destruction.

New paths for all rivers,  
our destinies never the same.

## MISSISSIPPI

How to interpret what is current  
between us,  
the electric slough at twilight, the symbols

keyed into memory and then with such  
impulse one gentle and  
solitary  
<cr> sends so

much across emptiness, a power surge,  
a flood,

the characters,

the character magnetic, attracting our fingers which  
we entwine in the act

of input, the flesh fibre-optic,  
charged with an ether

net of nerves,

the ditch I cross beside the parkway exit ramp  
each morning, half-moon-shaped,  
(my lop-  
sided heart thinking out loud, nervous

for responses: yours,

mine, anyone else who listens in) a truncated

bit/memory byte of river  
tremulous with ooze,  
an oxbow

humming with midges and bulrushes and golden  
rod and all other  
imaginable virus, longing a fever

a delirium between

men, you and I: this love, this virtual  
noise  
at last something

codable, pure static  
and amphibious

lyric, tadpoles and the whine of the crickets  
deafening as I  
walk through marsh grasses on the way in

to dailiness, snagging  
the hair on my lower thighs and my hard-wired  
routine,  
reading the messages

left overnight by the others, sometimes  
by you, whose lips

might well be electric, who sends me

hugs,

such voltage, *o love*

in 1993 such fertile wantonness: the Mississippi floods.



## UNDERCURRENT

This is a bad semaphore  
we practice  
under the trees in the darkness, the damp white flags

of our t-shirts unable  
to tease out

surrender as we move toward and away and past

one another, eyes  
hungrily averted as we

pause

feet apart somewhere downstream along this  
bridle path by the river,  
the invisible

sibilant undercurrent deafened  
by the cicada roar —  
electric

morse code charging  
the humid air of the city,  
singing the *long, long, ecstatic short*

circuit of desire, the physiologic

imperative to be spent,  
to be filled,

the white of our t-shirt dampness

impotent in the moonlight,  
stained by pollen loose on the breeze,

what we want  
not meant by the language

we tease out with flags,  
its indefinite

pronouns not about the long

first person singulars of our cocks,  
intimacy

straining against cotton shorts,  
this language  
the only language of love

available, though it does not include  
us as *we*,  
though we use it

badly, the damp t-shirt whiteness,  
the fraternal tanned  
presence underneath smelling of river algae and sweat

not drawing us closer,  
our fear of how the white

flags of language distort

our kinship, seal us in the airless  
eternal privacy of *they*

at the bottom of the river, graveyard of lovers

who unlike us, beloved stranger  
(the park signs want us to believe)

could not resist the vortex.

## SARANAC LAKE VARIATION

*I am mainly preoccupied with the world as I experience it, and at times when I would rather be dead the thought that I could never write another poem has so far stopped me. I think this is an ignoble attitude. I would rather die for love, but I haven't. — Frank O'Hara September 1959*

Boxing Day 1993,  
alone in my hotel room, reading  
*City Poet* in the bath, (Bruce calls it  
Brad Gouch's *I-do-this-I-do-that* life  
and times of Frank O'Hara),  
water hot and replenishable to my armpits,  
toe blocking the overflow,  
and I think of you,  
far away in New Brunswick, (yes, it *is*  
important) with your family, the frozen  
Northumberland Strait outside  
the window like a ghost looking in  
while you dine no doubt  
on leftover turkey and mince,

and I think of Frank's love of the unrequited,  
the longing

and invention he needed to articulate his poems,  
those windows.

The Adirondacks rise outside my hotel window  
into grey light, your chest pushing  
against my hand last

week as it slid, a cross-country skier  
down and across  
the plateau of your stomach, fingers coiling  
round your cock in clouds of snow,  
my mouth a blizzard about to  
touch down, which you  
sometimes becalm, afraid (I am not sure)  
of my teeth or tongue or what  
you may or may not pass on,  
the springs of your bed  
sighing beneath us like a stand-in  
in some menage-à trois I said to  
make you laugh, though you want this  
variation (not the laughter)  
hidden from all those who listen.

Something Frank never worried about  
in the 1950s, the emergencies that he meditated in  
the midst of (despite McCarthy)  
more *automatisé*,  
generations of Abstract Expressionists at the Cedar  
apprehended by his conversation and surreal  
appetite for straight men, Irish  
tears and bourbon, jazz,

spontaneous poems  
dribbled unrevised  
on the backs of coasters in 10 minutes flat  
for someone in their circle (the nerve  
of those private  
asides drawing the rest of us — his future  
readers — in) before he headed out

onto 8th Street drunkenly at 2 AM, alone or not alone,  
love with a Manhattan skyline a sentimental  
disease of his cruisy,  
immuno-deficient (ie. vulnerable) spirit only.

In our time love has become a slogan, a cold  
wind howling in the streets  
of liberation, something we keep before the courts,  
a paper coolly delivered at seminars  
worldwide where doctors,  
scientists, and activists compete  
on how best to shield the sick  
and unsick from variations mutating  
like wind-sheer in the blood and in the minds  
of those who wish us  
dead, hate  
no less virulent than in Frank's time —  
only how the language is used  
has mutated,  
has kept mutating since his death,  
though how it mutates and the aesthetics  
of mutation (a.k.a. The Tradition)  
allow it, chimera-like, to persist in secrets.

Frankly speaking, as Frank would say, the discourse  
from the bathtub should be direct  
(hot or cold), ie. \_\_\_\_\_,  
find me irresistible, though I can be a  
klutz, for instance nearly dropped Frank in at least once so far;  
the sodden pages might well have frozen  
shut and cut his story short

(which would be sad since he died  
(not from love — on Fire Island  
a beach taxi ran him down) at 40).

This afternoon the wind has been too  
unspeakable and crystalline  
for anyone to skate for long on Mirror Lake.  
The wind-chilled glass in my window  
changes steam rising from the bath  
to frost and now I can't see  
myself, so am lost and ready to confess  
that I, Frank's pale imitation (Bruce says  
I echo his looks), wasn't straight

about you with John and Lorraine  
this morning over breakfast, invoked you  
not in conversation by name  
(who am I protecting?),  
only as someone's son who came here once,  
not my lover lured by the fleeting  
weekend leaves with your parents to stay  
in this hotel, perhaps sleeping comfortably  
in the roomy bed where last night I dreamt of you,  
where you might have once  
dreamt about someone like me,

anticipating our bodies, a variation  
on the unconscious,  
therefore primordial and beloved.  
Desire takes many forms, but perhaps what  
is unspoken cannot be

edited out and (sweet ellipsis) becomes  
the content of the poem —

    windows blown out  
by winds loosening chance  
ecstatic needles from stands of white  
pine on some far shore that even  
a city boy like Frank would walk along  
for lack of anything else  
new to write about.