

John Barton / from *SOUTHWEST FRAGMENTS*

SUNRISE, GRAND CANYON

We stand on the edge, the fall
into depth, the ascent

of light revelatory, the canyon walls moving
up out of

shadow, lit
colours of the layers cutting

down through darkness, sunrise as it
passes a

precipitate of the river, its burnt tangerine
flare brief, jagged

bleeding above the far rim for a split
second I have imagined

you here with me, watching day's onslaught
standing in your bones, which are

implied in the record almost by
chance, fossil remains

held in abundance in the walls, exposed
by freeze and thaw, beautiful like a theory

that states who we are
is carried forward by the X

chromosome down the matrilineal line
recessive and riverain, you like

me aberrant and bittersweet, and losing
your hair just when we have begun

to know the limits of beauty, you so
distant from me now but at ease

in a chair in your kitchen, pensive, mind
wandering away from yesterday's Times, the ink

rubbing off on your hands, dermatoglyphic
and telltale, but unread

on the chair arms after you
had pushed yourself to your feet such

awhile ago, I'd say; for here I am
three hours behind you, riding the high

Colorado Plateau as the opposing
continental plates force it over

a mile upward without buckling, smooth
tensed, muscular fundament, your bones yet

to be wrapped around mine
which will come later, when I return

to your place and time, I know it, you not
ready for past or future, our combined

bones so inconsequent yet
personal, the geo

logic cross
section of the canyon dropping

from where I stand, hundreds
millions of shades of terracotta, of copper

manganese and rust, the many varieties of stone —
silt, sand and slate, even the “green

river rock,” a rough misidentified
fragment of which must have

been dropped when I was a boy into my as-of-yet
unsettled sediments by a man who tried to

explain how slowly the earth meta
morphosed from my meagre

Wolf Cub's collection of rocks, his sheer
casual physicality enough to negate

all received wisdom, my body voicing its immense
genetic imperatives, human

geology falling away
into a

depth I am still unprepared for
the canyon cutting down to

the great unconformity, a layer
so named by the lack

of any fossil evidence to hypothesize
about and date such

a remote time by, at last no possible
retrospective certainties, what a

relief, your face illegible
these words when I began not what I had

intended to say, which was to
be about the natural dynamic between earth

history and art —
but you are my subject, unavoidable

and volatile, the canyon
floor a mile from where I objectively

stand taking photos I will later develop of
the ripe, trans

formative light on these surreal
buttes to show you on the surface

how beautiful and diverse
and unimportant our time together

or with anyone else
really is —

AGAINST THE CURRENT OF THE VIRGIN

Now that we have entered Zion
it is time to step from the bank

into the shallows and wade
staff in hand, against the current

of the river, which, would carry us
downstream or hold us here, pull

one or both of us
under, in some eddy uncoiling

in wait at the base of a cliff
our destination not the river's

source, which only the skilled
try to reach, for to approach

is to wade back through time
how we became who we are

summarized in the fluid
layers of rock by persistent flood

the details smooth, partially exposed
haphazard, rough, a journey

we know each must orienteer
alone, the thigh-deep cold

water suggestive
however, of the glacier, tasting

of the cavity where it loiters, wearing
down the mountain, releasing

trace elements
as we continue wading in

through the present with no real
end in mind, at first you

then I leading the way as we
stumble over

submerged rocks, one winding many
steps behind the other from shoal

to sandbar, through slow and fast
moving water, unable to avoid

chest-deep sink holes and the occasional
long portage, knowing we will go only

as far as we can, this brief upward
journey for whatever distance something

we appear to share, though right now
we seem to be drawn so far

apart, several deep channels between us
the mercurial current and these walls

that ascend 3000' and darkly
narrow, the porous

limestone leaching blinding
shades of light until one

or the other calls
a halt, our backs

turning against the origins
the river aspires from, to see

what little we've passed through
from a different vantage, our faces

like the canyon unexpectedly
unfamiliar in the slow rising

darkness as we re-pick our way
over shelves of rock, neither of us

certain who is leading, in sync
only with the current, its inexorable

dangerous tumble downward
over splintered

boulders, uprooted trees and through
twisted gorges until one takes

the other's hand one last time for
balance, the anxious

solitude of the journey upstream
nothing to the unrecognizable

proscription of the descent to where
we might know ourselves again, the walls

of limestone that light
our way yet block

the sun at turns
transparent and opaque

while the Virgin River we step from
cleansed yet dirty

roars onwards in pious radiance
unrepentant and misnamed.

DISAPPEARANCE OF THE ANASAZI

The car broke down
we thought, in Cortez

Colorado, the engine not turning
over when you depressed

the clutch and then
mysteriously

five hours ago
it started, the clutch

depressed by some sweet
mechanic, the tuned

machine of his body
for a moment behind our wheel

and then we were gone
the suggestive

spread of his thighs as he teased
the brakes a persistent heat

mirage we drove toward
but never reached while our car

laboured over twisting
blacktop freshly laid

into Mesa Verde
the park gates well in

from the highway turn-off
the time we had left

to spend unequal to the lay
of the land, the many fingers

of the mesa splayed into barren
plains we had trouble

conceiving, looking hazily
down arroyos widened below

and away from us as we stood
among the excavations

at each site the young clean
shaven rangers breaking

our concentration with the facts
of how the Anasazi left

the mesa top
for the numberless

fissures in its wind-gouged
striated face, built multi

storied communal dwellings
with bricks of mud and straw

the supplies for which
along with food and water

they shifted on their backs
from above, footholds cut

so cunningly into the cliffs
that if the untoward started

down with the wrong foot
they would several holds later

fall to astonished deaths
each ranger's lean

shadow distended across the flesh
toned walls that a people

civilized for a century, then
abandoned, the reasons

not apparent to
archeologists who crave

evidence to excite a theory
they feel comfortable believing

without prejudice
the disappearance

of the Anasazi never meant to be
a breakdown in their logic

evidence I weighed, driving
away from the Temple

of the Sun, the actuality
of our being here

more telling than any speculative
frame of those who unearth

effects
their veneration

of objectivity more
important than the object —

me assuming this in all arrogance
as we looked away from each

other blankly, the shared
moment hard

to focus on when all of us
are vacancies, craven, carried

forward until desire peters
out and blurs, failure

seen reflected in traces
where none exists

until the heat exhausted
us and we grew

afraid the car would strand us
in the park, but it coughed

to a start
and we disappeared.