

A Poet's Voice

John Barton

John Barton's ninth collection, *Hymn*, from which these poems are drawn, was published this fall by Brick Books. His previous books include *Hypothesis*, *West of Darkness*, and *Seminal: The Anthology of Canada's Gay Male Poets*. His work has received three Archibald Lampman Awards, an Ottawa Book Award, a CBC Literary Award, and a National Magazine Award. He edits *The Malahat Review* in Victoria.

Author's Statement I see language as a diagnostic, a median between reader and writer; each brings his or her own experience to a poem, changing it subtly. Therefore, while fixed in words, any composed text they create is unstable and mutable, open to multiplying and often contradictory interpretations—a time capsule that carries forward signs of what it *is* (and was) like to be alive in one place and time. Words are wonderfully charged, necessary tools of enlightenment and disruption. We read (and write) to see ourselves and to face the unknown. Art is about pleasure and engagement, validation and interrogation.

Foul Bay (Oak Bay, BC) photo by Richard Young in August, 2009

Runoff

What we release into the river.
How we alter the current.

The irrigation dam on the Old Man flooding the sacred

lands of the Peigan who have lived
here for generations on the arid Alberta plains.

The salmon ladders.
The transmigration upwards

slowing on the other side of the mountains, fewer
fish ascending waterfalls now absent.
Hydroelectric

dams everywhere in the middle of
nowhere: an invisible
sustain

able environment we sell—bill
boards defaced at the gates of Banff National Park

Don't embitter
Don't starve the bears

The town beyond Bow Falls
exempt from official remorse so it can

fence in more: tourists blind to

the missing wild

currant bushes we trans
plant from roadside
ditches along any highway climbing into the eastern

slopes of the Rockies, the civilized
currants boiled
in treated Elbow River

water, sugared and cooled

cellophane sealing in a tamed
alpine savagery
as lovers we grow

to forget the moment we taste it—
this confusion

of currants and river water
tartness
and intent, words

picked from the disturbed bushes and erased
of meaning in the 'natural'

flow of discourse, It's good for you

embossed on the empty
jars, sterilized or thrown away, cluttering
basements hungry for some purgative Boy Scout bottle drive or else

they are

dislodged from the landfill site during runoff
in the spring, residual tang mixing
with dioxins

piped up tendrils
of marsh weed and exhaled through the gills
of the jewelled trout we land downstream from the syllabic overflow.

Way Finding

This is the blueprint I have been given, its lapses
its language: I locate myself on the second floor

of your house on D Street while you show me
the way you want to redo it, your vocation still

unrealized from basement to loft, though an ex
lover's cats have run of the halls, dispossessed

of rooms where no one appears to live through
the week I am here except to sleep and excrete

trailing after you down flights of stairs by closed
doors for our first morning coffees after a shower

and attempts at love we improvise in a makeshift
bed, bivouacked in the front parlour, your room

on the third floor stripped to the studs, the walls
months from plaster and a longed-for move back

in, restoration of your dream life spec'd in phases
CNN turned on in the kitchen, the anchor recasting

network variants of the same abruptly diffused
bullets of text, reports on Kosovars—or are they

Afghans?—expelled from villages over six times
an hour between commercial breaks, they score

the white noise I exist in with the cats in the air
cooled corridors of your late-Victorian row house

fretworks of wrought iron gating its arched, sand
blasted entrance, a city laid out from your barred

door not quite as L'Enfant would have drafted
but with all the symbolic might his street plan

could unscroll: a war-razed capital, his frontier
icon of power majestic while, outside redrawn

borders or high in the mountains, thousands wait
in the rain, their houses abandoned yet still real

to them, if looted and burned, each newsflash
eclipsing the one previous until I seem to cease

watching and, in the quiet, feel only what I feel
a Formica table caught between us while you sit

disoriented, a tall man with a stoop still inclined
ascending ahead of me storey by storey past ever more

sun-crammed rooms of your house, to figure
the path you blaze can't fail to dawn on me as self

evident, once through enough to apprehend a way
into your life, keys shiny under chinks in the terrazzo

the doors tried by a future phalanx of solitary men
till one unlocks, the room it opens onto appointed

to accommodate more than a transient occupying
space, the doorknob turning in his hand long after

those without shelter return to remake their homes
forgotten, for good or ill, in a country unknowable

from what newscasts expose us to, dusk collapsing
through stained glass in the hall skylight as we step

outside with my suitcase, faint sun bringing blood
up in the refinished floors while you reflect on how

far Washington's tree-lined grand thoroughfares
and side streets should steer us towards and away—

such is the compass of your power—I am no good at
displacement, space has a lexicon too many deform.

Foul Bay At 2 AM

Soundlessly the clam diggers flicker down stairs hanging
against grey cliffs sunk low into ebb tide, lamps strapped

to hard hats as they descend in procession, holy miners
of night, the only noise a tingle of spades inside

empty steel pails, a flinty inner echo of quiet, the wind's
sandpaper lifting mist from the sky, starlight flinted

against the moon's albino, half-shut eye, clam diggers walking
into the sea, the stars soluble, phosphorescent, unclaimed.