

# “Moving from place to face”: Landscape and Longing in the Poetry of John Barton

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IN *HERE IS QUEER*, Peter Dickinson endeavours “to fuse two different imaginative modes of identity — one national, the other sexual” by “interrogat[ing] the (hetero)normative assumption that ‘nation’ and ‘sexuality’ are somehow discrete, autonomous, historically transcendent, and socially uninflected categories of identity” (3). Dickinson concerns himself in particular with queer sexuality, since the “aggressively masculinist and heterosexual ‘tradition’” of “the modern (and post-modern) Canadian literary canon” (7) relies upon “a critical refusal to come to grips with the textual *superabundance* of a destabilizing and counter-normative [i.e., queer] sexuality” (4-5; original emphasis). He points out that “Canadian literature, or at the very least *English-Canadian* literature, is riddled with male couples who displace their love for each other — and frequently their nation — across the ‘body’ of a woman, whom they symbolically share, or else onto a mythically feminized region or landscape, which they symbolically exploit” (5; original emphasis). The fabled Canadian discomfiture within or ambivalence towards the Canadian landscape, in other words, is ineluctably bound up in a parallel, subconscious discomfiture with or ambivalence towards sexuality, especially homosexuality (6). Dickinson’s book engages with an impressive array of literary works — a practice he provisionally refers to as “‘que(e)rying’ the canon” (29) — towards delineating the pervasiveness in Canadian literature of this “interplay between national ambivalence and sexual dissidence” (7). Northrop Frye’s infamous question, “Where is here?” (541), is answered by Dickinson with the pithiest of rejoinders, “Here is queer” (3).

In the epigraph to *Hypothesis*, one of his latest collections, John Barton also poses Frye’s question, along with Anne Carson’s observation from *Autobiography of Red*, “There is no person without a world” (Carson

27.1; qtd. in Barton, *Hypothesis* i). Barton's poetry is similarly preoccupied with exploring the ways in which Canadian national ambivalence, particularly towards the landscape, can be expressive of an equally pervasive Canadian sexual dissidence, particularly for those who diverge from the heteronormative tradition. In a 2003 interview with Shane Neilson, Barton describes his gradual transition from Canadian nationalistic preoccupations to an exploration of gay sexuality:

What got me to think about becoming a writer was Margaret Atwood's novel, *Surfacing* which I discovered when I was 17 . . . . It led me to her other books and to books of other Canadian writers and of other poets . . . . I was swept up in the nationalistic fervour to create an authentic Canadian literature . . . . I always say mine is the first generation that did not have look outside the country for inspiration; we had enough literature of our own to read. I got sidetracked from my nationalistic agenda later on when I decided to write about gay experience. Being gay is a whole 'other' nationality to explore. (qtd. in Neilson, "TDR Interview: John Barton (II)")

By conceiving of gayness in nationalistic terms, Barton hints at the extent to which his work will use the Canadian landscape to explore and to articulate this sexuality, in much the same way that Canadian writers in the 1960s and 1970s (such as Atwood in *Surfacing* and *Survival*, for example) used the landscape in an attempt to communicate the so-called Canadian experience. For Barton as much as for Dickinson, in other words, here is indeed queer.

Barton was not yet "out" when he produced his first collection in 1981 (qtd. in Neilson, "TDR Interview: John Barton (I)"). However, the poems in *A Poor Photographer* already show Barton's preoccupation with using elements of the external landscape to articulate internal thoughts and emotions. By exploring the symbolic possibilities of "ocean, island, seashore, mountain, plain, and river imagery," Eric Thompson writes, "Barton maintains a delicate balance between the inner and outer worlds" (134a). In "Prodigals and Pilgrims," the culminating poem in a longer cycle entitled "My Travels in Europe," the poet attempts to answer the question, "what is Canada" (1) by reading "the land's / syntax" (18-19), by cataloguing or enumerating elements of the natural landscape into "a grammar of icons" (15) or symbolic touchstones:

the word, *mountain*: an echo  
moulding darkness

...  
 the word, *sky*: an arid silence  
 the word, *island*: the isolation of sound  
 the word, *city*: a structure  
 the harness of chaos inside houses  
 and museums (5-6, 10-14)

For Barton, these individual talismans of the Canadian landscape come together to form a poem, a “clear lyric” (35) with “clean lines” (34), “rhythms” (33), and sophisticated “layers of / metaphor” (27-28) that “echo / codes cross- / country” (36-38). Only by deciphering these codes can “prodigals and pilgrims” (33) decide “in their own time” (45) whether Canada is “a place that returns nothing” (2), “a place to escape” (16), “a place of exile” (25), or “a place of returning” (32). Only by interpreting and comprehending the external landscape, in other words, can an individual undertake and successfully complete an interior journey of self-discovery and understanding.

Throughout *A Poor Photographer*, Barton endeavours “endlessly and unreservedly” to communicate his own personal journeying, to explore his own “childhood ... traumas” (qtd. in Neilson, “TDR Interview: John Barton (II)”), by seizing on certain elements of the external landscape and using them as symbols of interior states of mind. The ocean, for example, in Barton’s poetry becomes a potent symbol of shorelessness and longing, of being cast adrift to float aimlessly within an inhospitable environment (see “She” 11-13). “Despair,” Barton writes, is being “without shore” (“Ocean” 1). In “Polaris,” Barton connects “an ocean without / shore” (25-26) to “the hollow ... sky emptying of its / stars” (5-8). Whereas the lonely astronomer, however, can rely on the North Star, “o Polaris” (18), to guide him or her “into a bald arctic / dawn” (20-21), the speaker finds no such guiding “beacons” (“Moon” 8) in the ocean depths, but only “darkness” (“Polaris” 9), alienation, loneliness (13-15). In “The Hungry Sea,” the speaker laments that human beings “have no goals” (2) because they merely “slumber on” (3) the “lumbering / tongue” (3-4) of the “stuttering sea” (5) and its “unspeakable motion” (10). Similar linguistic failures occur in “The Poet Speaks Delphinese.” Despite the dolphin’s physiological ability to transmit sound (37), to “communicate / over long distances” (8-9), and “to use echoes / for recognition” (29-30), he finds himself “lost” (5) and “alone” (6) because “In the sea / language” (1-2) can only “result[] from / an agreement about / the meaning of sig-

nals" (2-4). Because of his alienation from his fellows — "his [fruitless] search for his own kind" (10) and his only "fleeting contact with others" (15) — the dolphin fails in the act of communication and must ultimately count "his career in poetry ... a failure" (11-12). In "Murderers and Holy Men," similarly, a swimmer finds himself "drift[ing] / offshore" (4-5) in the ocean amidst "a spectrum / of swimmers, other / voices" (15-17) who impose "their colour on / his voice" (24-25). Despite this potentially fruitful (if somewhat "force[d]" (23)) sense of community, the swimmer's "voice is permitted no / entrance" (29-30) into their society. Rather, "His voice blurs" (25), and he is unable to articulate himself (33-35), to express his sense of (as yet undefined) otherness (30-31). Despite the poet's desire "someday" to drop "anchor onto the ocean floor" ("She" 17-18; cf. "Final" 27), to "breathe in the deep, wondrous sea" ("Final" 26), to walk confidently across its face ("Moon" 1) rather than sink dependently beneath its surface (9), he is not optimistic that this enlightenment, this sure foundation, this ability to communicate and express himself, will manifest itself for him anytime soon:

I shall never grow  
used to this gliding through water,  
to this sea,  
to this unrelieved darkness.  
What I fear most  
is the eternal: the night  
without end, the ocean without island,  
without shore. ("Initiate" 20-27)

Until he finds that shore, that elusive "dry sand" (17), the speaker must continue to "swim blindly / the shoreless channels" ("Ocean" 16-17), to search for a way to perceive himself clearly and to give expression to his own alterity.

Despite this potential for a firm and secure foundation that the discovery of dry land may symbolize, Barton also uses island and shore landscape imagery in *A Poor Photographer* to express the elusive struggle for such assuredness or the utter futility of this struggle. In "Swimming Ashore," the speaker attempts to come to terms with his loneliness, isolation (7), disturbing "dreams" (3), and haunting "memories" (15) by "struggl[ing] / ashore" (24-25) upon "the / belly of an / island" (21-23). Because "No ocean conforms its wave to any beach" ("On" 16), however, he only has time to "look up into the forest ... leaves falling" ("Swim-

ming” 26-27) before “waves ease in behind him” and consume “his every / thought” (31, 33-34). In “The Blurred Memory of a Poor Photographer,” the speaker similarly recognizes that his struggle for dry land has been futile. “Since coming to this island not much has happened” (4), he laments: “what continues to exist bears no trace of my passing” (6). The futility becomes so palpable that, in “The Beach,” the speaker even begins to wish for an escape by water from the very dry land that he had hoped would provide a firm foundation. Because “nothing ever changes ... up on shore” (8-9), because his movements across the face of the beach — his “last refuge” (16) — are inconsequential (1) and directionless (13-14), the speaker longs “to build a means of escape ... over the edge of the ocean” (19-20). Possessing not “the skill” (19) competently to use “the wood the sea offers” (22), however, the speaker must continue to traverse the arid landscape, to “cut” meaningless “scars ... into the beach” (12). In other poems, Barton connects this sterility of landscape with the impotence of human relationships. In “Girl on the Beach,” the speaker watches mute (13-14) as “A girl” (6), after attempting unsuccessfully to draw close to him (8-9) and to engage him in conversation (12), departs from him, “stitch[ing] / another path across” the landscape (16-18). Dry landscapes become merely “the islands / risen between us” (“Poor” 2.12-13), rather than sites for successful communication and fruitful social intercourse. In “The Searching,” Barton is even more explicit:

each journey into the island of the self is one  
of autumn forests  
the wind a sackcloth of falling leaves  
I wrap about my shoulders  
I wear the wind like a monk his habit of prayer  
intent on revelation  
each leaf a thorn digging into my side  
their barbs the ritual fingers of my lover  
the horror of my indifferent communion with her lips. (13-21)

The poet deftly combines landscape imagery with religious imagery to emphasize the extent to which human relationships, especially romantic or sexual ones, have become for him as empty as a desert island “never charted” (“Islands” 5), as meaningless as a religious ceremony too oft repeated. Because, for Barton, dry land imagery — shore, beach, desert — comes to symbolize as much as water imagery — ocean, sea — the elusiveness of meaningful human relationships, the poet even begins to sug-

gest that water and land have become indistinguishable from one another. “My calloused feet,” he writes, are “no longer able to distinguish / pebble from wave / barbed thorn from a woman’s tongue” (“Islands” 42-45). Although Barton does not yet identify this dissatisfaction and longing with a burgeoning counter-normative sexuality, he makes it clear that his romantic or sexual liaisons with women have proven so far to be thoroughly unfulfilling and thus manifestly untenable. He continues to long for the obfuscating “mist to lift” and for an illuminating “dawn to hug [him] in an embrace / [he] can accept” (“Searching” 39-41).

Barton still did not explicitly “define [himself] as gay” (“My Emily” 136) while he was composing *West of Darkness*, his “documentary poem” (132) inspired by the life and art of Emily Carr, between 1978 and 1984 (Neilson, “TDR Interview: John Barton (II)”). However, it is clear that the poet was drawn to the artist’s depiction of the western Canadian landscape — especially its rugged, old-growth forests — as a place of rejuvenation and renewal, of personal illumination and new growth. In fact, many of the works in *West of Darkness* are Barton’s poetic reinterpretations of actual Carr paintings (*West of Darkness: A Portrait* 3n), Barton’s attempts to find his own “way in / into the forest” (“Forest” 1-2). When he sees the fulsome limbs of Carr’s *Red Cedar* “reaching upward / unwavering / by notions of sky” (“Red” 3-5), for example, Barton too longs for such unencumbered exploration and potentially unlimited personal growth (see 1-2). Barton sees the “rings of growth” (“Tree” 12) of Carr’s *Tree* as “the lines loosened / gently from his [face]” (4-5), lines of anxiety and longing that his communion with the forest have replaced with “harmonies” (11) and “ease” (“Red” 7). The aged trunks and limbs Carr depicts so hauntingly in *Old Tree at Dusk* and *Edge of the Forest* become for Barton “ensign[s]” (“Old” 31), objects of solidity and permanence that have the potential to root him more securely against the “intricate” (16) and “clumsy” (22) world of mutability and flux, even while they inspire him to “strain[] higher, / higher” (“Edge” 30-31) in interrogation of the “blue web of sky” (“Old” 5). Although, in the darkness of the wood’s interior, the poet can “never quite fathom / These trees” (“Wood” 7-8; see “Grey” 13-26), he is confident that the coming of “dawn” (“Grey” 42) and its “expanding circles of light” (“Scorned” 5) will enable him at last to perceive a clear path amid the “lucid green” (“Laughing” 9), to “think a way in / between the trees” (“Grey” 30-31). In much the same way that Lawren Harris encouraged Carr to turn to the forest

to “find totems of [her] own” (Barton, “Grey” 3; see “Sunday” 26-31), Carr inspires Barton to find his own “way into ... the forest” (“Forest” 32-33), his own “bronze ... beacon” of personal illumination that will crack through the seemingly “impenetrable” (“Grey” 38) and confounding “crust of darkness” (54) and give him “solace” (11). By depicting “the forests and waters of the West Coast” as a place of “isolation” that gives way to “a place of enlightenment,” Paul Denham writes, Carr contradicts the “genteel pseudo-Englishness of [early twentieth-century] Victoria and Vancouver,” a society that perpetuated an unsubtle form of “cultural imperialism” that held that Carr’s indigenous “country and region ... had no reality and no voice” of its own (122). Although Barton is not yet prepared to articulate his own sense of otherness nearly so explicitly, his strong identification with Carr and her work points to his analogous desire to assert his own reality, to speak with his own voice, to fulfil “the need I always find / myself carrying” (“Forest” 19-20).

Barton does, after all, refer repeatedly to Carr as his “drag persona” (“My Emily” 136; qtd. in Neilson, “TDR Interview: John Barton (II)”); see Braid 4), a cheeky sobriquet that emphasizes the poet’s appreciation for Carr’s embrace of “all those who — like herself — had been pushed aside or denigrated” while at the same time hinting quite strongly at his own identification (however embryonic) as “a gay man” (Braid 4), a member of a group also much marginalized and calumniated. Similarly, Barton’s seven “Life Class” prose poems, which he distributes throughout the opening section of *West of Darkness*, articulate Carr’s “painful experience” as a “dowdy colonial ... studying art in England” (Braid 4) while at the same time symbolizing the poet’s own nascent gay sexuality and its concomitant “feelings of ostracization [*sic*]” (Braid 4). Compared to the sniggering London “society girls” whose “wasp waists would have snapped if they ever dared to draw breath” (Barton, “Life Class (IV)” 1) and the exquisite nude art models whose clear “skin ... shone like milk in the sun” (“Life Class (III)” 2), Carr in her “fuss of stiff lace” and “dreadful twill skirts that crossed the Atlantic with [her]” inspires at least one observer to “think Canada the dowager and England the precocious young miss” (“Life Class (I)” 1). These unsubtle criticisms of her dress, her ruralism (see “Life Class (III)” 1), and even her English pronunciation (see “Life Class (IV)” 1-2) initially compel an embarrassed Carr to camouflage her Canadian identity: “[I am] from the far west,” she stammers, “but my father was born in Kent” (“Life Class (II)” 2). She even-

tually comes to see her English contemporaries, however, as the “charlatans” (“Life Class (VI)” 1), the “mummies” (“Life Class (V)” 3), and the “fossils” (“Life Class (II)” 3) who extol the virtues of “the squashed contours of the Westminster slum” (“Life Class (VI)” 1) while remaining ignorant of the beauty and grandeur of the Canadian landscape:

What about the tremendous forests ... that can root deep in a child's heart? Or the mountains? Or the rivers that pour the heart-song of our origins through their mouths? ... How can you dismiss its sweeping breath? How I despise London, its history muddled, one building snuggled up to the next like pigs in a sty. Even your parks are glutted with people. They never admire the trees, just the statues. (“Life Class (V)” 2)

By celebrating the ruggedness and expansive beauty of the western Canadian landscape, Carr overcomes the alienation of being a colonial in the old country in a way that reflects Barton's desire similarly to transcend the ostracism of being gay in a predominantly straight society. Neither culturally myopic nor sexually narrow-minded notions may persist, the poet suggests, amid the open, “vast space[s]” (“Life Class (V)” 1) of Canada. It is only after Carr recognizes this truth that she prevails over her discomfiture and becomes able to communicate cheerfully and on an equal footing with her English colleagues (see “Life Class (VII)”). Barton suggests that the openness and vastness of the western Canadian landscape has an analogous impact upon his ability finally to answer pressing questions about his identity, including his sexual identity: “How can I see ... life with any hope of clarity? How can people really know each other? Who am I?” (Afterword 126).

“Hidden Structure,” which he first published as a limited-edition chapbook in 1984 (while he was completing the poems in *West of Darkness*) and included six years later in *Great Men*, is perhaps Barton's most explicit use of the natural landscape in his early poetry to articulate and contextualize his burgeoning gay sexuality. As epigraph, Barton chooses a quotation from *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*, one of Edmund White's earliest and most intimate evocations of gay love and sexuality, in which various touchstones of the narrator's immediate natural landscape — “the beach,” “the palms,” “the ocean” — compel him to reconsider his place as a gay man in the greater universe of “space and time” (White 144). For Barton, similarly, the unfolding flowers (see “Hidden” 6-7), the “inextricable” sea (24), and the tall “trees / simply reaching into

sky" (2-3) render all his preconceived notions about himself and his sexuality<sup>1</sup> null and void, they "defeat / [his] need to be clear" (5-6) and thwart his ability to "swallow" the carefully cultivated "garden" in which he thought he could compartmentalize himself forever (32-33). Notice that Barton invokes the same landscape elements in "Hidden Structure" as in his earliest poetry, but how this time these images of sky, sea, trees, and "the bloody sun" (34) do not function as symbols of alienation and confusion, but of insight and illumination, of a newfound ability to see past culturally prescribed shibboleths — "the stories" and "lies" (242-43) that our parents have "spoon-fed" us (127) — and to embrace "moments of clarity" (152), however evanescent. In the early stages of the poem, Barton contrasts this clarity of vision both with the self-imposed blindness of those who (despite their proximity to the old-growth forests of the British Columbia "Interior" (68)) refuse to "hold" those "mountains and lakes ... in the cradle of [their] / first thoughts" (69-71), as well as with the self-imprisonment of those who wilfully insulate themselves from fruitful engagement with the natural landscape by taking refuge inside "the alarming shell of [themselves]" (43). The poet's willingness to allow the natural landscape to draw him into its "vortex" (196) and to "erode[]" (176) his "box / of questions" (258-59) results in a profound sexual re-awakening which Barton articulates with an exquisitely indulgent and liberating tone of homoeroticism heretofore not seen in his work:

I ... love men  
 with marble-  
 hard flesh that melts like salt  
 on the tongue. *I love men*  
 ...  
 they are the surge and break of  
 luxuriant storm. (165-68, 194-95; original emphasis)

This epiphany enables the poet to recognize the extent to which human-kind has bastardized love, "smoothed" it "into this one / inescapable stone" by whose dead "weight we are all judged" (227-29), forced it to subsist for "countless / generations" (224-25) under severely strai(gh)tened circumstances. Armed with the realization that human love cannot be so easily compartmentalized, that "In this age men and women / go by other names" (251-52) and "Those who love shall love / no matter how the bodies join" (447-48), Barton once again uses elements of the natural landscape as

metaphors to express these broadened horizons. The sea, for example, no longer threatens the poet with death by drowning (as it did in a number of poems from *A Poor Photographer*), but as he listens seemingly “For the first time” (345) to its expansive and radiating ebb and flow, he becomes able to relinquish to its depths the “stones” (363) of bastardized love that have for so long coarsened his hands (230) with the narrow and imprisoning “lies” (391) that “men only love women” and “women only love men” (408-09). Rather than a smooth and lifeless stone, the poet asserts, love must be a living and growing organism — “a nameless / flower” (278-79) or a blossoming tree — whose “pod of seeds” (280) will “send roots searching the depths / of the soil” (285-86) and eventually “bear [the] fruit” (414) of “a thousand potential / truths” (287-88).

Barton explores similar themes throughout the poems of *Great Men*. In the opening section of the collection, which he entitles “Guess-Work” (9), the poet describes once again the feelings of alienation and isolation he experienced before the sexual epiphany of “Hidden Structure,” the poem with which the section culminates. Sexual identity and its concomitant social conventions, Barton writes, can all too easily become a cell or “box” (“Tell-Tale” 1) whose “breathing / space” is limited and whose “potential” for “escape” rapidly diminishes (5-9). The poet recognizes his “mistaken” sexual identity (“Labyrinth” 3) — the extent to which he has passively allowed society to bind him (“Tell-Tale” 10-11) and restrain him (“Restraint” 59-61) in its immobilizing “suit of cellophane” (“My Cellophane” 1) — but he feels powerless to liberate himself from that imprisoning “labyrinth” (“Labyrinth” 44) which generations of preconceived cultural expectations has engendered. Instead, he must continue to be sexually strai(gh)tjacketed in a world where not even communion with the natural landscape can “cut through / [his] limited horizons” (“One” 38-39):

Prisoned by the familiar,  
 ...  
 he finds long walks by the sea  
 drain all too wistfully from his groin.  
 Sickened by the fictions  
  
 he makes of love, he trims  
 dreams down to nothing. (19, 22-26)

Barton’s tone changes considerably in “Humidity” (37), the middle sec-

tion of *Great Men*. Buoyed by the “epiphanies” (“Mile” 8) of “Hidden Structure,” the poem which immediately precedes this section, Barton uses the poems of “Humidity” to rearticulate his broadened sexual horizons and to align landscape and sexuality even more explicitly. In “Democracy,” for example, the poet allies the enveloping darkness and obfuscating wetness of the fall season with a breakdown of human communication in the modern world. “We misunderstand each other,” he writes; “the first leaves of autumn, already fallen, / bleed into pools of last night’s rain” (30-32). Inevitably, however, “morning . . . dawn[s]” (71) in the form of the poet’s realization that human beings may restore the “power” of “words” (33-35) by cultivating the power of love, especially sexual intimacy. “Let us join our bodies” (63), the poet writes, “to debate the semantics of love” (66) and thereby “renew the language” (64; cf. “Hidden” 445-48). The light and heat of this “sun-sharpened world” (“Photo” 20) inspire the poet to identify his lover directly with the landscape itself. “You are one of the earth’s poles” (24), Barton writes, and “the knowable world . . . radiates from you” (21-23). Closer to the beginning of “Photo Essay,” Barton’s linkage of lover and landscape is even more earthily homoerotic: “You are caught eating peanuts freshly pulled from the ground; / they hang from the roots / like testes in earth-warmed, scratchy husk scrotums” (5-7). In “Bridges,” Barton uses the image of fecund, vegetation-covered “islands tethered by bridges” (4) to symbolize the cross-germination of ideas and insights that results from the interconnection of human minds — those “prehensile, / phantom hands” (14-15) — and, by extension, the intimate joining together of human bodies. In “Sustenance,” the poem which concludes the “Humidity” section of *Great Men*, the poet writes:

I tuck my hand under your bath robe  
 where your heart is, stubbled  
 chin resting on your shoulder as I suck  
 on your ear, your testes  
 at rest on my palm. (26-30)

Such candour illustrates Barton’s liberation from the cultural prisons and labyrinths he describes in “Guess-Work” and other earlier poetry. Love is “the release / from form,” he now recognizes, “from expectations / that enclose us, / illusions that hold us apart” (10-13). In “Great Men,” the closing section of the collection, Barton continues to use landscape im-

agery to celebrate these recognitions and to look towards the future. After eulogizing various great gay men of history — Baudelaire (“Les Fleurs”), Claudel (“Incarnation”), Rimbaud (“Enfant”), and others (see “Great” 1-31) — the poet laments how the imprisoning restrictiveness of their respective societies obliged them to hide “their / lovers ... behind drawn curtains” (27-29), to succumb to self-immolating “cowardice” (64), to “ghetto themselves in the arms of women / they [did] not love” (47-48). In “Holiday,” by contrast, the poet uses Canadian landscape images from a vacation with his lover — “winding ... switchback roads” (3), “a disused mill in Balacava” (5), the “dusky hills” (12) by “Calabogie Lake” (8) — to symbolize his freedom openly and unashamedly to cultivate and express a gay identity. “In this century,” he writes, “those like us / refuse ... to live as if we have never been” (“Naked” 37-39), and, reiterating the epiphany of “Hidden Structure” (447-48), he asserts, “we are lovers whether our lovers / are women or men” (“Naked” 33-34). Much “Time it has taken to come this far” (“Holiday” 2), Barton shows, but in the passionate embrace of a male lover he can finally find “comfort” and “truth” (31-32).

Barton published *Notes Toward a Family Tree* as a “more heterosexual” complement to its “completely gay” predecessor, *Great Men* (“Social”). However, in its interrogation of “what constitutes a family ... nuclear, extended, or chosen ... in [an] age of shifting values” (back cover), *Notes Toward a Family Tree* nevertheless offers a number of insights into Barton’s “emergent gay sexuality” (“Social”) in ways much more subtle and nuanced than in the earlier poetry. In the opening poem of the collection, Barton imagines himself as part of a very mundane and suburban-sounding heterosexual relationship, complete with various trappings of culturally sanctioned bourgeois existence, such as cozy breakfast nooks (see “For” 13-14), “croissants” (12), and the more tedious offerings of CBC radio (see 14-17). At the beginning of the poem, however, Barton makes it clear that this compulsion “to love one / woman” is but a momentary “dream” (2-3), as transient and fleeting as waves breaking on a beach (see 5-6), as if to suggest that he is open to alternatives other than this socially prescribed heterosexual norm. The “winter-starved” ducks that shiveringly clamour for bread in this poem (21) as well as the frigid and inhospitable landscape Barton describes in “Straits of Juan de Fuca” — the “cold ... stone” (11-12), the bitter “wind” (18), the “ragged peaks” (23) — symbolize the extent to which human beings have

become so immured in the heteronormative tradition, so “numb in one another’s arms” (“Metropolitan” 20), that they are insensitive to other, potentially more fulfilling, possibilities. “Now I know how numb lovers can be to snow,” Barton writes, “risk temporary deaths falling into what they sense / is each other’s warmth” (“Straits” 29-31). The traditional, heterosexual nuclear family is fast becoming an extinct creature, the poet suggests, a woolly “mammoth[]” of the “imagination” (“At” 4-5), a “dinosaur[] immovable, stiffly held erect by ligatures of wire” in “the Museum of Natural History” (“Woman” 54-55). Those who subscribe to such outmoded notions are on very insecure ground, like the person who “precariously pitche[s]... a clever house ... on stilts at the delta’s edge” (“At” 1-3). Spindly “bamboo foundations” (6) cannot possibly support forever the dead “weight” (7) of “antique” (26) ideas overtop the shifting sands of new and constantly evolving value systems. Human beings must discard this dead weight, these fallow “islands risen / in the gulf between us” (“Saltspring” 24-25), Barton counsels, and cultivate more fertile ground. “We must claim the land,” he proclaims, “we must begin / seeding our fallen / stars in the soil” (71-74). This exhortation closes the first part of *Notes Toward a Family Tree*, which Barton entitles “The Moon in All Its Phases” (9). In much the same way that the moon in the night sky appears in its many phases throughout the month, so too can families appear in many different guises and permutations as time goes on.

Barton’s celebration of the “nuclear-free ... family” (“Vancouver” 1) is even more explicit in the second section of *Notes Toward a Family Tree*, which the poet entitles “Branches of the Larger Forest” (39). Whereas earlier generations viewed the family as “children / conceived ... / under the same skin” and as “leaves loosened / from the same tree” (“Notes Toward” 108-12), the poet points out that in this age of non-traditional families such easy and homogeneous categorizations “fade, slip like [the] bare / branches” (115-16) of some “impossible tree ... into the night” (89, 117). The complex networks of today’s family trees more resemble the “tangle of branches ... stretch[ing] to the ceiling” (“Centrepiece” 10-11) that the younger generation threatens to interpose between them and their arguing parents in “The Centrepiece” (1-9). In “Topographics,” a worried mother posts her itinerant son “maps” (2) painstakingly “marked ... with parallels, sources ... contour lines and quantified depths” (21, 25) in an effort to impose order and definition upon her child’s seemingly aimless wanderings, to arrange and prune the branches of a nuclear family tree

that she and her generation are desperate to keep alive and under control. The son, however, barely acknowledges this alien landscape, this “world” his mother has so carefully “surveyed for him” (22), preferring instead to remain mapless, “helpless / in the wet jungle of some lover’s legs and arms” (34-35). Prizing the “letters / from the men he has loved, from the women” (28-29) over his parent’s meticulous “mailing tubes like semaphore flags” (18), he muses that “Cancelled stamps are the only *Baedeker* he trusts” (30). His family tree, in other words, is made up of branches of the larger forest of friends, lovers, people “dug up by chance” (33) — not rooted by tradition — on the unpredictable and random “zig- / zag path” (39-40) across the landscape of life. The subject of “Housebound,” similarly, longs for escape from a landscape of traditional and mundane domesticity — his sinkful of dirty dishes (see 1-3, 18-19), his do-it-yourself home repairs (see 12-15), his bland culinary creations (see 26-27), his “colicky infant” (20) — seemingly imposed upon him from without (see 30-31). As an alternative to this state of stagnancy which offers “little transformation” (28), Barton once again invokes the transformative power of the rugged Canadian landscape:

God knows, he’d rather climb  
toward some peak in the Coastal Range,  
muscles hardening against granite and fear  
...  
snapping the fickle ropes that tethered  
him unexpectedly to this world. (4-6, 10-11)

In much the same way that the old grandfather clock gradually begins to chime out of syncopation with the mother’s newer mantle clock in “Patterns” (see 13-20), the traditional heterosexual nuclear family is gradually beginning to ring untrue in a contemporary world of chosen families, extended families, and constantly evolving value systems.

In *Designs from the Interior*, Barton returns to what Timothy Findley calls his “no-holds-barred” exploration “of what it means to grow up as a gay man” in twentieth-century Canada. By exploring “the innate connection of body and place” (*Designs* front flap), Barton uses the exterior Canadian landscape in new and unique ways to symbolize the interior landscape of the male body and the gay psyche. Alan Richards writes:

Barton’s is a language in which the body functions metonymically [sic] as the site of “designs from the interior” landscape of men grow-

ing up and growing up gay.... Landscape, maps, and borders delineate that region where the subject is constituted among shifting patterns of relationships and identity is drawn between desire and the contours of family life, the ambiguities of friendship, alienation ... and violence. (177)

The poems at the beginning of *Designs from the Interior* engage with the struggles of the poet's childhood and coming of age. In "City in the Foothills," the opening poem of the collection, Barton describes the long and "snaking" (9) prairie road he "used to take / to and from school" (6-7) for years "back and forth, back and forth" (17). The poet comes to identify himself so strongly with this "familiar" (11) and unchanging landscape that he does not even notice when his body begins to develop into adolescence (see 13-16). Unequipped to understand what he would only later come to recognize as his burgeoning gay sexuality, the young poet must walk for a time in darkness. "What grows into my body," he writes, "is night" (1-2). Barton uses the darkness of the exterior prairie landscape to symbolize this lack of interior illumination. The sun sets so early and rises so late (see 7-8) in this sleepy city in the foothills that not even "the dull / sodium glow of the street lamps" (3-4) can irradiate "the ink prairie sky" (3) and the "dusky brown ... hills" (25-26). In much the same way, however, that "Something is singing / inside the cloth-covered box" ("13047" 1-2) in his dimly-lit bedroom, the poet recognizes "that something is singing" (14) a "music ... quiet, difficult, and [as yet] unnamed" ("Notation" 5.12-13) within himself, something that he yearns to expose to light, to "a flash of yellow ... sunshine" ("13047" 62, 17) that will open his eyes and enable him to perceive himself more clearly. Even at his early age, the poet seems to recognize that the source of personal illumination cannot be the older generation, whose "stories lead [him] / only so far" ("Hills" 44-45). Sitting in his grandmother's kitchen eating grilled cheese sandwiches, the poet reflects:

In silence we eat this  
 food that feeds the body only.  
 In silence the hills  
 shadow us, rain-soaked flanks  
 scored by fences and telephone poles,  
 the muddy streets like streams  
 running backwards  
 up the ravines. (75-82)

Notice how Barton likens this silent and sterile communion with the older generation to a dark, wet, barren, and backwards-moving exterior landscape; neither alternative offers any potentiality for illumination or growth. In "Setting," similarly, Barton uses words like "rigid" (2), "starched" (12), "wooden" (15), "ironed" (20), and "tight" (50) to describe his strict upbringing in the regimented household of his "Mum and Dad" (32). His attempt to inject some lighthearted levity into the carefully prescribed ritual of Sunday dinner (37-45) — to break free from the "straight[]" (as it were) and "narrow" confines of the older generation (13, 47) — results in his banishment to a dimly-lit bedroom (55-56; cf. "13047" 8-9), an excommunication he connects to the withdrawal of the sun (son) from a rapidly darkening landscape (see 33-34, 43). "The silence of the house / darkens like a stain" (48-49), Barton writes, "darkens my family, / darkens the downcast of my sister's eyes" (52-53). The poet's refusal to submit quietly to his exile (see 62-64) despite "his aching / private parts" (66-67) symbolizes a developing gay sexuality that he will not allow anyone to diminish or obscure beneath the shadow of suburban respectability. In much the same way that this compulsion towards suburban respectability makes his parents reduce human sexuality to "a stickman and stickwoman parked / in a red four door with stickchildren / in the back seat" ("Stickmen" 26-28), it analogously makes them perceive the natural landscape merely as a collection of "mountains" monotonously but reassuringly "sharp and regular as cat's teeth" (30-31). Rejecting these oversimplifications, Barton longs to find the untamed "wilderness" (82) within his pedestrian "northern suburb" (81), to "risk a part of the landscape" (83) and at last "become real" (80). He refuses to see himself and those like him as fearful and self-loathing (see 92-93) "stickmen with sticks / growing where they weren't supposed to" (73-74), but as living and breathing men possessed of something "between [their] legs" that they can be "proud to give another man" (97-98).

Poems in the other two sections of *Designs from the Interior* engage with a gay man's experience later in life, from post-adolescence "to the advent of middle age" (Findley). Barton replaces the curious and exploratory tone of his earlier poetry with a tone of sophistication and worldly wisdom that reflects his gradually advancing years and his growing confidence in his identification as a gay man. In "Ecology," the poet reflects from this mature perspective on his childhood "passion" (7) for "the boy next door" (1):

the 3 square feet of hillside we catalogued  
 under wind-torn sky, prairie  
 crocus and grasses, two types of sage,  
 red ants quick as blood, aphids nuzzling yellow  
 buffalo beans and pupa dreaming  
 among the roots. (9-14)

So intimately associated with the prairie landscape was the poet's youthful infatuation that he opts to label it "not ... love" (7) but "ecology" (8); their relationship was meaningful not because of any physical intimacy — the landscape they explored was "wild and fruitful with desires / sampled, then *elsewhere* spent" (42-43; emphasis added) — but because they knew and related to each other in the context of their physical environment. In "Interior Design," the poet (in the guise of an introspective interior designer) meditates on the fussy, stubborn nostalgia of the elderly "widows" (1) whose "empty ensuite bedrooms" (7) or "deceased husband's den" (8) he must "argue[] them into" (49) updating. He connects their "melancholic" (2) reluctance to paint and wallpaper over the past with their mania for gathering useless "driftwood" (56) from the beach, perhaps because on some level the "salt-smoothed / limbs of broken trees" (57-58) remind them of their own fractured family trees. "Flotsam," he writes, "is so easy to collect" (60). The poet, however, eventually opts for an alternative seaside pastime:

Sometimes when the bay is calm,  
 I skip stones across the deep,  
 each stone skipping through names  
 of men I love until it sinks,  
 a chain of names that lengthens  
 each time I visit New York. (66-71)

By connecting his intense but short-lived encounters with other men to the radiating but inevitably fading disturbances his stones make across the surface of the water, Barton ironically offers a more genuine and heart-felt perspective on love (see 75-77) than that of the "dowagers of Blue Hill" (59), whose mercenary shallowness seems as cold, synthetic, and absurd as their "kidney-shaped" Formica coffee tables (63). In "Lives of the Saints," Barton articulates the lonely world-weariness of the men who cruise public parks by night, but he manages to inject even this dark and despondent milieu with optimism and light by connecting these sex-seek-

ing men to the beauty of natural landscape in which they stealthily move. "We may never know / much else of each other," he writes, "beyond this park and the cold / ecstatic blue / potential of this citified river" (2.14-18). Barton even goes so far as to suggest that this communion with the natural landscape renders their clandestine nocturnal trysts holy: the park "transforms" (3.5) from a mere "maze of trees and men" (1.9) to a "sacred grove" (2.11) full of "virile ... saints" (1.18) whose quick, anonymous couplings are divine baptisms into the church of the body (3.1-6).

In *Sweet Ellipsis*, Barton refines even further this metonymic or semi-otic relationship between landscape and desire. "His recurrent theme of gay love," Ross Leckie writes, "is always codable as technology, landscape, history, or often what it is to be Canadian" (119). In gay relationships Barton sees a sweet ellipsis, something that is highly desirable but frustratingly "ephemeral" and "transitory," like the diverse and ever-shifting "contours" of the Canadian landscape itself (Leckie 119). In "Pushing Upstream," Barton connects the fragility and impermanence of his love for another man (see 32-38) to a crew of icebreakers working their way up the river, "exploding the myth / winter suspends over the current" (5-6). Although the poet wants desperately to believe in the "permanence" (8) both of "love" (41) and of "the ice" (24), the "insistent" (15) icebreakers "induc[e] the thaw" (19) as easily and efficiently as the poet recognizes the "shuddering cracks" (41) in his sexual relationships. The poet thus envies the icebreakers (see 46-48), since their job is merely to "blast[] a way into the river" (2) rather than to "live with / the aftershocks" (39-40) — to create "the gap" (27) in the landscape rather than to lament its unbridgeability. "Centre of the World [What hills we make for ourselves]" takes its inspiration from Otto Lilienthal's attempts at flight in the late nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> In much the same way that Lilienthal "spread artificial wings" (21) in an attempt to see from a distance the "countenance of the planet" (54) and thereby gain "a correct view of the landscape" (64), so too does the poet figuratively wield his own pair of "tentative" wings (10) in an attempt to gain perspective on "the great experiment" (4) of his life and his relationships with men. For both the poet and for Lilienthal, however, this enhanced "insight" (29) proves unsustainable and ultimately elusive: Lilienthal ascended "two hundred metres, three hundred, four" (45; original emphasis) and then "simply fell from the sky" (83), as quickly and inexplicably as people fall in and out of love. Finding true love is as difficult a feat as defying the laws of gravity, the poet intimates. Lilienthal

would have to defer to the Wright brothers (see 25) to perfect the art of flying, just like the poet will have to defer to a future generation to perfect the art of love, to elucidate “the mysteries of / what makes / things stable” (92-94). In “Saranac Lake Variation,” Barton articulates the elusiveness of love by likening it to the frigid winter landscape of the Adirondack Mountains (19) and “the frozen / Northumberland Strait” (10-11), amid which all things, even the most intimate caresses with his lover, seem smothered and obscured by deepening layers of ice and snow:

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. (20-27)

Today, the poet suggests, love has become debased, it has become a mere “slogan, a cold / wind howling in the streets” (55-56).

Even more importantly, however, Barton connects the mutability of the Canadian landscape with the mutations of “virulent” (“Saranac” 66) viral diseases, especially HIV-AIDS, as they circulate “like wind-sheer [sic]” (63) through the human bloodstream. The poet finds the caresses of his lover cold and “crystalline” (85) like the winter wind because of the frigid, “unspeakable” (85) spectre of HIV-AIDS, that invisible but omnipresent “third partner between all men” (qtd. in Neilson, “TDR Interview: John Barton (I)”); cf. “Saranac” 33), that makes them set their “teeth” and “tongue” nervously on edge against what they “may or may not pass on” (“Saranac” 29-30) to each other. “The unsheathed / penis,” Barton writes, has become “a conduit of the loose-tongued / dementia” of HIV-AIDS (“Dementia” 24-27), a seemingly unstoppable scourge that spreads “mass destruction” (36) through the body even more viciously than “hurricanes” (31) and “flash flood[s]” (35) spread devastation across the natural landscape. HIV-AIDS contaminates not only the individual human bloodstream but also intimate relationships between men, “the ability of gay men to bond” on levels other than merely the physical (qtd. in Neilson, “TDR Interview with John Barton (I)”). Analogously, Barton suggests, the natural landscape can be contaminated not only physically by natural disasters, but also ethically, economically, and politically by

“famine, war” (“Centre of the World [The heart]” 53), the maldistribution of wealth (66-69), and bad blood between world leaders (79-81). Most people seem happier not to discuss such atrocities, preferring instead to blue-pencil them comfortably out of sight and mind. Barton points out, however, that such convenient but artificial sweet ellipses do not alleviate the problems, but in fact may make them even more all-encompassing:

Desire takes many forms, but perhaps what  
is unspoken cannot be  
edited out and (sweet ellipsis) becomes  
the content of the poem. (“Saranac” 107-10)

HIV-AIDS, whether “acknowledged or unacknowledged” (qtd. in Neilson, “TDR Interview: John Barton (I)”), is and must always be the content of every poem composed between two men.<sup>3</sup>

The elliptical nature of HIV-AIDS in gay relationships becomes even more manifest in *Hypothesis*, Barton’s latest collection, especially in light of the poet’s remarks in his 2002 interview with Shane Neilson. To Neilson’s suggestion that the “elegiac heart” of *Hypothesis* “is the AIDS epidemic,” the poet responds with telling equivocation:

AIDS is but one of the book’s many hearts and many loci for elegy. In many ways I would say that what is central to the book is always shifting. Is it about AIDS? Is it about nationalism? Is it about the idea of a gay country? I chose “hypothesis” as the book’s title in part because it does not anchor the book around any one particular theme. It is an abstract noun devoid of sentiment or narrative. However, because the title poem is about one man’s response to being infected with HIV, I can understand why readers would focus the book around the pandemic.

Even on their interpretation of the cover art of *Hypothesis* Barton and Neilson part company. Whereas Neilson sees in the dramatic black and blood-red cover an “electron microscope-like photo of [possibly HIV-AIDS-infected] plasma,” Barton contends that the image is “more suggestive of geography, a aerial [*sic*] or remote-sensing satellite photography.” The poet’s coy refusal to let Neilson pin him down to a single interpretation of the book’s focus attests to Barton’s breadth of inspiration and reference points, but even more importantly, it symbolizes the elliptical nature of HIV-AIDS, how the virus is and always must be present

between two men in a sexual relationship, even if for a time their focus shifts onto something more palatable. That Barton in particular counters Neilson's arguments with references to geography and landscape is an unsubtle reminder of the close connection of landscape for the poet to the HIV-AIDS pandemic specifically and the gay experience in general. In "Body Bag," the poet likens the bed of his ostensibly HIV-AIDS-infected lover to an uncharted landscape in which he aimlessly drifts "without / compass or horizon" (55-56). Although their uninhibited lovemaking is as hurried and intense as a "full force . . . storm" (50, 47), the slow and painful death of his lover (which he describes in harrowing detail (see 3-31)) reminds the poet that the scourge of HIV-AIDS can extinguish life even more quickly and even more intensely, that "The orange . . . one-size-fits-all . . . body bag" that "awaits each one of us . . . contains any / weather without effort" (65-68). If only, the poet suggests, his passionate lovemaking ("Hybrid" 13) could draw "fever" and disease away from "The dark snare" of his lover's "capillaries" (15-17) in the same way that the experimental "hybrid / poplar" tree and its absorptive "system / of roots" (6-8) can "lure radioactive / elements from the earth / to branches far off" (9-11).<sup>4</sup> Only then would they be able to "receive" each other "with open arms" ("Somewhere" 36-37), to find "the lost country two [male] bodies make" (22), and not have to concern themselves with HIV-AIDS, that virulent "new invader" (38) that renders "the body's apparently undefended boundaries" ("All" 14) fatally "immunodeficient" (18).

Throughout his entire career, John Barton has used the landscape — particularly the Canadian landscape — as a site for the exploration and development of his gay sexuality. Even in the very early poetry of *A Poor Photographer*, Barton seizes on certain talismans of the external natural landscape — the ocean, the forest, the beach — to communicate internal ideas, emotions, or states of being. In *West of Darkness*, Barton identifies himself with Emily Carr, his "drag persona" ("My Emily" 136), who engaged in her own art with the rugged western Canadian landscape in an attempt to overcome the invisibility and marginalization of being a member of a suspect minority group. The poetry of *Great Men*, especially "Hidden Structure," engages with similar icons of the natural landscape as *A Poor Photographer*, but they function in this later poetry less as emblems of alienation and confusion than as beacons of insight and illumination, symbolizing the poet's increasing willingness to identify himself quite explicitly as a gay man. Even *Notes Toward a Family Tree*, which

Barton intended to be a “more heterosexual” collection of poetry (“Social”), uses the natural landscape to interrogate the outmoded notion of the nuclear family and to offer other, more inclusive, alternatives. In *Designs from the Interior*, a collection that meticulously traces the growth and development of a gay man from early childhood to middle age, the poet explores “the innate connection of body and place” (front flap) by using the exterior natural Canadian landscape as a metaphor for the ever-shifting interior landscape of the body. In *Sweet Ellipsis*, Barton connects the frustratingly fleeting nature of meaningful gay relationships to the elusive contours of the Canadian landscape itself, suggesting his ambivalent relationship towards both. *Hypothesis*, Barton’s latest collection of poetry, extends this conflicted response towards landscape and longing by engaging meaningfully with the HIV-AIDS epidemic, a scourge that no gay man can afford to ignore. Canadian poets in the past have attempted to come to grips with their relationship with the Canadian landscape in order to define what it means to be Canadian. Barton, too, shared these nationalistic preoccupations until he found the Canadian landscape also to be a congenial vehicle for his explorations of gay sexuality (“TDR Interview: John Barton (II)”). Moving from “place to face” (“Eye” 8-9), Barton sees that here is indeed queer, that “The land we come to is the land we are” (“All” 25).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “My tongue hangs from my mouth,” Barton writes, and “my cock is hard” (129-30). Throughout *Great Men*, Barton also repeatedly invokes the image of the “groin” under various uncomfortable conditions — the pinched groin (“My Cellophane” 26), the tightened groin (“Restraint” 43), the drained groin (“One” 23), the confused groin (“Hidden” 272-73) — to symbolize his feelings of sexual anxiety and dissonance, and to foreshadow his sexual reawakening to come.

<sup>2</sup> See Barton’s “Notes on the Poems” at the end of *Sweet Ellipsis* for his full account of the genesis of “Centre of the World [What hills we make for ourselves].”

<sup>3</sup> Although Barton admits that “Gay men do tend to be very proprietary” about HIV-AIDS, “thinking of it as their disease” exclusively, he is not blind to the fact that HIV-AIDS has had a profound impact upon “other communities” as well, such as “intravenous drug-users,” “the homeless,” and “whole countries in Africa.” His future poetry, he suggests, will be “interested in seeing AIDS in its global context” (qtd. in Neilson, “TDR Interview: John Barton (I)”).

<sup>4</sup> The poet is referring to the process of *phytoremediation*, an emerging biotechnology that involves using the root systems of plants such as poplar trees to draw away and thereby reduce the concentrations of organic pollutants from contaminated groundwater and soil sites (Siciliano).

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