The Third Partner: John Barton and the Poetry of AIDS

by Robert G. May

"AIDS is a third partner between two men," John Barton says in his 2001-02 interview with Shane Neilson. The threat of AIDS[1] has exercised a profound influence over Barton's life, both as a gay man and as a poet, and his response to this threat "likely informs every aspect of [his] consciousness." Barton tells Neilson that he came out in 1985, "the year Rock Hudson died" and that AIDS consequently became "a household word." For Barton, as for many gay men, the emotion most closely associated with AIDS is fear:

> Because I write from my own experience, from the experience of a slightly younger man [as opposed to men who were sexually very active through the hedonistic seventies and early eighties], I write more about living in the shadow of the AIDS pandemic, rather than exclusively about the fallen. I write about the fear of being counted among them and the lengths I go to prevent it from happening. I write about the fears of being intimate, because death has become so closely linked to the expression of love.

Much of Barton's early poetry, in collections from the 1980s and early 1990s, such as *A Poor Photographer* and *Great Men*, is expressive of a pervasive but tantalizingly undefined alienation, fear, and loneliness that seems prescient of his subsequent AIDS poetry. In collections from the early to mid 1990s, such as *Designs from the Interior* and *Sweet Ellipsis*, that alienation, fear, and loneliness become sharply focussed as the poet's direct response to the dangers of being a gay man in a world beset by AIDS: the man who wishes to come to grips with his gay sexuality, rarely a smooth process at the best of times, now must also negotiate his own very physical "survival" (qtd. in Neilson, "TDR Interview: John Barton [I]"). In his most recent poetry, such as the chapbook *Shroud* and the collection *Hypothesis*, the fearful emotions strongly associated with AIDS are still present, but they are tempered with the strange and ironic realization that AIDS can be, potentially, a common bond that unites gay men and can actually contribute to their formation of a stronger community even while (or perhaps because) it threatens them with wholesale "extinction" (qtd. in

Neilson, "TDR Interview: John Barton [I]"). In spite of its massive losses to AIDS, Barton points out, "the gay community has prospered" because "It has learned how to take care of its own and has become a more mature, responsible community as a result" (qtd. in Neilson, "TDR Interview: John Barton [I]"). Barton's AIDS poetry is a striking example of the gay community's evolving response to the AIDS pandemic as it has unfolded over the past two decades: gay men may have reacted with fear when AIDS first emerged in the 1980s—fear that it would alienate them from one other, fear that it would destroy their sexual intimacy, fear that it would kill them—but, over the years, their response to AIDS has grown and adapted to acknowledge the ironic potentialities of AIDS to unite gay men in an even stronger and more coherent community.

Barton had not yet come out as a gay man when he published his first collection, *A Poor Photographer*, in 1981. However, the collection's overarching atmosphere of "guilt" ("It" 16), "darkness" ("She" 5), and "fear" ("Entering" 21) strongly suggests that the poet was grappling with issues of identity, including sexual identity, in these early works. Even in the opening lines of the collection's prefatory poem, "Saint John," Barton unambiguously establishes this mood of pervasive "meaningless[ness]" (6) and "emptiness" (13):

> my name is other
> anonymous
> as fire
> it radiates from the fire's centre
> an aura of darkness
> (1-5)

Although the poet in *A Poor Photographer* is never very specific about the precise object of his guilt or the specific source of his alienation, it is clear that these states have a lot to do, at least in part, with his as yet only nascent and "inarticulate" ("When" 2) identification as a gay man: heterosexual dalliances, even at the poet's young and heady age, are ultimately anticlimactic and deflating on many levels. In "The Searching," for example, the poet likens his coming together with a female lover to a "communion" (21) with the natural landscape, but he uses frigid religious imagery and diction to suggest that this union is—like a religious ceremony—mere "ritual" (20) and "habit" (17), and that it has more to do with "solipsistic" (Thompson 134) existential groping than with a spiritual commingling of bodies, minds, and souls:

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
("Searching" 13-21)

Rather than continue "on the strange journey to her heart" (26), which is ultimately doomed to failure (25), the poet resolves to be alone—to "return to the winter / discipline of cooking meals for one" (22-23)—until he can come to grips with his sexuality and subsequently be hugged "in an embrace / [he] can accept" (40-41). In "Cathartic," the poet likens a man and woman's sexual "bonding" (4) to a "web / of blood" (1-2) that, far from strengthening their intimacy or enhancing their mutual understanding, actually increases "the distances" (18) between them and exacerbates "the darkness" (20), the "fear" (28), and "the denial" (29) that keeps them apart psychically. Barton's use of blood imagery to emphasize the deep, almost violently inscribed breach between the two lovers is particularly arresting: "[W]hat is tangible" (1), Barton writes, are

the nights you dream of
blood spilling
from your thighs
erasing the stain I made
inside you
(5-9)

The commingling of blood and other bodily fluids can represent the most intimate kind of union between two people, but in Barton's work it can also very easily represent the deepest kinds of divisions between them, the injuries that predator and prey inflict upon each other in the fundamental battle for survival ("Interior" 2.16-18), the open sores that they wound each other with that will never fully heal without scar ("Switchblade" 6-8). In "Hidden Structure," a long poem that Barton first published as a limited-edition chapbook in 1984 before including it in *Great Men* a few years later, the poet seems much more willing and able to articulate a gay identity: "I love men" (168), he declares, "they are the surge and break of / luxuriant storm" (194-95). The poet employs blood imagery to suggest that this newly rec-

ognized sexual identity is something that is inborn, that has a biological basis, to which he is finally beginning to reconcile himself: "For the first time," he writes, "I am / listening / to the sea in my blood" (345-47). It is with this blood that "[his] cock [grows] hard" (130) as it responds as if instinctually to other men, with their "marble- / hard flesh that melts like salt / on the tongue" (166-68). This reconciliation is by no means complete, however, since Barton also employs blood imagery in "Hidden Structure" to express similar states of loneliness and alienation. For the poet, "the bloody sun" (34) in its daily rising and setting "is nothing but darkness" (35), suggesting a pervasive state of confusion and stasis rather than the healthy cyclical rhythms of nature. That blood imagery, for Barton, can function in such seemingly disparate and mutually exclusive ways renders it prescient of Barton's poems that will explore the AIDS issue, since the poet will deal with AIDS itself, as well as his evolving responses to it as a gay man, in similarly diverse and potentially conflicting ways.

In a similar vein, Barton also frequently employs medical imagery to articulate the surgical precision with which two people, formerly united as one, may so easily find themselves driven apart. In "The Pregnant Man," the poem that immediately precedes "Switchblade" in *The Poor Photographer*, the poet describes in harrowing detail the process of "giv[ing] birth" (6) to an all-too-conventional heterosexual relationship, complete with social sanction (52) and the inevitable, age-old, quasi-philosophical debate as to whether or not "lovers" can also be "friends" (62-63). The poem's medical imagery—which sometimes borders on the exquisitely grotesque—suggests that the stifling closeness of this tiresome relationship is slowly draining the pregnant man of life, rendering him "comatose" (50), and that therefore this pregnancy is one that he would gladly terminate, with bloody violence if necessary:

> You who festered into an unaborted spore,
> ate like a maggot into my sarcophagus,
> . . . . . .
> You became amorphous,
> swallowed my genitalia, my heart, my belly.
> . . . . . .
> My nerves became slow fuses,
> exploding into recurring dreams of afterbirths,
> drooling over coat hangers,
> like last year's Sunday best.
>
> (8-9, 16-17, 26-29)

Similarly, in "My Cellophane Suit," the opening poem of *Great Men*, the poet contends that he was born of his mother wearing "a suit of cellophane / snug and / clear as a surgical glove" (1-3). It is as if the poet has been born into the dangerous world with amniotic sac still intact, and it is from this seemingly safe and protective enclosure that he temporarily fools himself into believing he possesses insight and illumination beyond his years. "I was a bright kid" (17), he boasts, "I shone like silver / under my mother's touch" (13-14). This incandescent illusion cannot last, however, and soon the poet feels "the strain" (24) of his impending exposure to the travails of the world beyond the womb. His cellophane suit fails adequately to "stretch" (23) in response to these vicissitudes, especially round his "groin" (26), symbolizing sexual confusion and constriction. The tender touch of another man (27-30) results in the sudden and violent annihilation of his tight plastic tumulus: it explodes "with a bang / like a balloon held / to a flame" (32-34). The destruction of his cellophane suit of security renders him naked and "exposed" (36) to all the world's scrutiny, dissolving his former self-assuredness and rendering all his future life decisions merely "guess-work" (37), a term Barton uses as subtitle to the entire opening section of *Great Men*. The poet will experience similar states of insecurity and confusion when the threat of AIDS renders compulsory between men another kind of constrictive cellophane suit, the condom. Barton explicitly addresses neither his embryonic gay sexuality nor AIDS as such in these early poems. However, Barton's adept handling of blood imagery and medical imagery in these apprentice works shows how preoccupied he was with such devices early in his career, and it lays the groundwork for his exploration in his later poetry of this imagery in the larger contexts of his developing identification as a gay man living amid the AIDS pandemic.

In the later collections *Designs from the Interior* and *Sweet Ellipsis*, Barton seems far more forthcoming about his identification as a gay man. No longer does he feel ashamed of or reticent about his sexuality, like closeted men, those outwardly respectable "stickmen with sticks / growing where they weren't supposed to / between [their] shy legs" ("Stickmen" 73-74). Now his gayness is a source of dignity and self-respect: "something we are proud to give another man," he writes, "at last hangs between our legs" (97-98). Barton's use of second-person plural pronouns is indicative of the poet's growing sense of a strong and coherent gay community. No longer is his manhood a source of insecurity, isolation, and incompleteness—"a tiny / Swiss-army knife missing one or two gizmos" ("Homoeroticism" 2.8-9)—but it is now a source of pleasure, celebration, and beauty—a "sensitive / gay blade" (2.12-13) and a "beautiful toy" (2.15).

The existence of AIDS, however, mutes to some extent this spirit of community and celebration, tempering it with the fear that further explorations of the pleasure and beauty of gay sex may result in a slow and painful death by a mysterious and incurable scourge. In "For the Boy with the Eyes of the Virgin," the poet describes being propositioned in a seedy part of San Antonio, Texas, by a young male prostitute, with "black mestizo eyes, / broad face, bare-chested, barely sixteen" (3-4). Despite the rather erotic description of him, the poet emphasizes the seeming innocence of the "smooth-chested / boy" (46-47) by comparing his eyes to those "of the Virgin / of Guadeloupe" (47-48) and by likening him to the "arctic / purity" (35-36) of "the scooped-out globes of crushed ice" (32) sold at the snow-cone stand in front of which he plies his trade. "Let me be your ice" (42), the boy implores, and the overheated poet almost seems tempted until he sees "The scored veins of his arms / …clotted with stigmata" (44-45), the undeniable markings of intravenous drug use. The possibility of contracting AIDS transforms the prospect of a few hours of hot gay sex into a drawn out and frigid illness and death: "this aggressively beautiful boy" (67), the poet writes, "I refuse with money, not knowing what / icy current of death / he might carry in his blood" (72-74). In "Homoeroticism," similarly, the poet affirms that he loves the man he is holding in his arms (4.24), but once again their "tenderness" is tempered with the "fear" (4.22) of AIDS, their attempts at "intimacy" are ineluctably bound up in their "isolation" from each other (Richards 177):

> But this is the last time we will sleep
> together because he is afraid
>
> of my body, the pleasure it gives him.
> He is afraid to take my cock in his mouth;
> he is afraid of his own darkness and the cut on my lip.
> ("Homoeroticism" 4.5-9)

Fear of AIDS turns lovers into strangers, strangers into enemies. For example, in "Ripper"—the poem that immediately precedes "For the Boy with the Eyes of the Virgin" in *Designs from the Interior*—the poet describes a serial sex murderer who frequents the "clubs where men meet men" (17), taking macabre advantage of their desire "to be held, to be something / sweet and lasting in another's arms" (18-19), only to kill and disembowel them, a process that Barton spends the bulk of the poem describing in gruesome detail (24-52). "For days, callers to on-air / call-in shows will claim such passion / is a sickness," he reflects, "that the cold / blood burning

through [the ripper's] veins / is tainted like ours" (53-57). Barton even goes so far as to anthropomorphize AIDS to emphasize and give explicit physical substance to his fear: AIDS seems to kill gay men as unapologetically and as cold-bloodedly as a serial murderer, stalking them as they join together, targeting them where they mistakenly believe they have always been most safe.

Other poems from *Designs from the Interior* and *Sweet Ellipsis* are even more explicit in their allusions to AIDS as a scourge that attacks gay men not only physically but also psychically, thwarting their ability to bond on any level. "[W]e have come to be / afraid," Barton writes, of "The unsheathed / penis" because it has become not an instrument of pleasure but "a conduit of the loose-tongued / dementia" of AIDS ("Dementia" 24-28). Now, he continues, gay men must be "careful with each other" (23):

> 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….
> (12-18)

Again, Barton employs medical imagery to emphasize the idea that AIDS has robbed gay men not only of their physical health, but also of their ability to form meaningful connections that transcend the merely sexual. In a world with AIDS, a gay relationship necessarily becomes a clinical "operation" ("Dementia" 18), a laborious procedure, replete with elaborate equipment that drains the experience of any vestige of spontaneity, romance, or intimacy. Similarly, in "Physical"—the poem that immediately precedes "Stickmen" in *Designs from the Interior*—the poet speaks not of emotional, intellectual, or psychic togetherness, despite their close physical proximity, naked together on a "camp cot" (9), but he speaks of disconnectedness—of "my love" versus "your love" ("Dementia" 30)—a "clinical solitude" ("Dementia" 21) that the fear of AIDS has immovably interposed between not only their bodies but also their minds and souls. Communication consequently proves untenable:

> This is how we have come
> to acknowledge the body, not through
> words, which are dangerous,
> but through touch and gesture, hours of playing
> out the story of the patient
> who does not get well,
> a game we never tire of
> as we search, play
> with other boys, looking for cures.
> ("Physical" 19-27)

Relationships between two gay men become a mere play in which the "dénouement" ("Dementia" 22) is forever delayed by the fruitless search for an AIDS cure, a mere game in which the outcome is perpetually postponed by the continual rewriting of the giant book of rules. In "Confidential," the poem immediately following "Homoeroticism" in *Sweet Ellipsis*, the poet sees the contamination of previously "clean" (5) and honest (9) blood by AIDS (34) as a metaphor for the greater and even more virulent contamination of the "consanguin[ous]" (64) gay community by the betrayal (76) that AIDS has wrought. "In blood we trust, / only now to distrust," Barton writes, "Prejudice leaking into the [blood]stream / of conscience" (35-38). Blood and the commingling of blood has been drained of its power to bind men together like blood-brothers, like "a power grid / of veins" (2-3), and now renders them forever alienated from each other, "trapped bloodlessly" (69) in silent anonymity.

In "Saranac Lake Variation," a poem close to the end of *Sweet Ellipsis*, Barton perhaps best articulates this conflict between gay men's desire for connectedness and the "virulent" (66) propensity of AIDS to destroy this connectedness, to mutate (68) this desire into "chimera-like" (72) alienation and silence (85). Close to the beginning of the poem, the speaker fantasizes about his faraway lover:

> The Adirondacks are 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….
> (19-27)

This exquisite celebration of physical gay intimacy is subsequently marred, however, by the fear of AIDS. The speaker tries to joke (34) that "the springs of [his lover's] bed / sighing beneath [them]" (31-32) is an invisible third participant "in some ménage-à-trois" (33), but his lover is not laughing (35) because he recognizes that it is the spectre of AIDS, not the benignly squeaking bedsprings, that is actually the "third partner between" them (qtd. in Neilson, "TDR Interview: John Barton [I]"). "[Y]ou / …[are] afraid," the speaker laments, remembering how his lover pulled back fearfully from their lovemaking, "of my teeth or tongue or what / you may or may not pass on" ("Saranac" 27-30). The immense geography of North America (8-10) is not the only seemingly insuperable barrier that has interposed itself between them.

This realization makes the speaker almost envy the likes of the gay American poet Frank O'Hara, whose biography by Brad Gooch the speaker is reading in his hotel bathtub (1-5). The speaker recognizes that O'Hara had to contend with his own afflictions as a young urban American gay man in the 1950s (38)—McCarthyism (39), pre-Stonewall-era homophobia (64-66), the vehicular mishap on Fire Island that would cost him his life at the age of forty (81-83)—but he cannot help but covet O'Hara's state of relative innocence compared to the speaker's own state of bitter experience living in an AIDS-afflicted world. The only disease O'Hara was ever in any danger of contracting was the "sentimental / disease" of "love" for the "Manhattan skyline" at two o'clock in the morning (51-53). The only place he was ever at any risk of becoming "immunodeficient" was in his "cruisy" but "vulnerable…spirit" (53-54) as he stumbled "drunkenly" down "8th Street," would-be lovers in tow (51). Whereas O'Hara in his artistic milieu was free to celebrate his "surreal / appetite for straight men" every bit as flamboyantly as his cravings for "bourbon, jazz, / [and] spontaneous poems" (43-45), the speaker—O'Hara's "pale imitation" (91)—finds he must keep his own appetites in decidedly more sober and unmusical check:

> 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….
> (55-65)

Despite his obvious affection for O'Hara's work and his recognition that the often "virulent" homophobia they have both been subjected to from the world at large (65-66) makes them part of the same gay "Tradition" (71), the speaker also recognizes that the fear and stigma of AIDS in his world has broken any sense of cross-generational continuity of that tradition, rendering him every bit as alienated from O'Hara as he is from his fearful lover in New Brunswick, and even from himself. "[N]ow I can't see / myself," he writes, "so [I] am lost" (89-90). Ironically, if the poet and O'Hara are connected in any way at all, it is in their mutual disconnectedness, the fact that both of them in their respective place and time are silenced and threatened (albeit in different ways) merely because of their status as gay men, that the straight world would gladly edit their sexual "variation" (104) neatly out of existence. This realization gives rise to the epiphany in which the poem culminates:

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

In much the same way that homophobia and intolerance bound gay men like O'Hara and his New York contemporaries into a unified, unspoken movement whose desire to be heard and acknowledged would culminate, eventually, in Stonewall (even though O'Hara himself died in his dune-buggy accident three years before the Riots), so too does Barton suggest that AIDS, the fears and stigmas associated with it, and the wholesale silencing to which it subjects gay voices, similarly possesses the power, potentially, to bind gay men together, to blow out the windows ("Saranac" 111) of bigotry, intolerance, and fear, and to give rise to a revolutionary new generation of gay men who are unafraid to express their "primordial and beloved" (106) sexuality loudly and "Frankly" (73), who patently refuse to be edited out of existence by a mere virus.

Hypothesis, Barton's latest major collection of poetry, contains perhaps his most mature articulation of these themes. In his 2001-02 interview with Neilson, Barton acknowledges this mature voice:

> The voice speaking in *Hypothesis* is middle-aged, aware that his body is losing its youthfulness and whatever beauty it once possessed, that his hair is falling out, that his friends are also aging. There is a wistfulness about the book, [an] elegiac tone….

Although Barton resists the idea that AIDS is the "elegiac heart" of *Hypothesis* (Neilson, "TDR Interview: John Barton [I]"), the poems in the collection that do invoke AIDS do so from the experienced perspective of poetic personas who have come to terms, more or less, with AIDS and its associated fears and stigmas, and who now wish, as Neilson writes in his review of *Hypothesis*, "to edify the illness" and possibly to "make sense of the carnage" it has wrought in their lives. The title poem of the collection, for example, "is about one man's response to being infected with HIV" (qtd. in Neilson, "TDR Interview: John Barton [I]"), not unlike Barton's earlier AIDS poetry, but in "Hypothesis," his attitude seems more determined, even upbeat, rather than fearful or despondent. Despite "his nearly exhausted / T-cells" (19-20), the speaker refuses to "go quietly" (10), resolving to dedicate "his / body" (12-13) as "a memorial" (14) to the HIV- "positive / men of the future" (16-17). AIDS and its as yet somewhat primitive methods of treatment dehumanize its targets—Barton uses words such as "aliens" (33), "foreign" (34), and "inhumanity" (37) in his description of the experimental procedure of transplanting the bone-marrow cells of baboons into HIV-positive people to help rebuild their immune systems (4-7, 29-32)—but he nevertheless manages to keep "a positive / attitude" (72-73) alongside his HIV- "positivity" (24). The subject of the poem implies that there may yet be hope for an AIDS cure for every other "man / who took chances / in bed" (56-58), despite the "doubt[s]" (63) of the medical community, "Those ethical, clean / cut guys / in lab coats" (65-67) who cannot help but be "nervous" (67) and feel "left out" (71) in the face of AIDS because all they are able to apply to it is the cold and sterile "scientific method" (64) rather than the warm and intimate community of "trust between lovers" (59) and friends.

In "Prêt-à-Porter," the poetic voice is similarly jaded: "dangerous / off-the-rack / love affairs," the speaker says, as if confiding in an equally cynical confidant, "quickly / come to wear you / out" (4-8). The second-person narration suggests an intimacy between subject and object that does not exist in much of the earlier poetry, as if they both are finally part of the same community and can at last share each other's burdens and lessen each other's fears. The poet skilfully employs clothing imagery to articulate the difficult process of coming to terms with AIDS. Gay men, like "tasteful, uncomfortably / white shirts" (24-25), can quickly "wear… / out" (7-8)

when they come out of the "closet" (23), the latter because of the fickle fluctuations of fashion and the limited life-cycle of "worked fabric" (30), the former because of the equally unpredictable nature of "the virus" (13) as it destroys "the water / marked tissues" (27-28) of the human body. The two lovers are "fearful of its invisible / dropped stitches / each time [their] bodies join" (15-17). Clothing, however, like love, is both a necessary and a beautiful component of human existence, and the instinct to cover one's nakedness to the elements is just as strong and as natural as the desire to reveal one's nakedness to a lover; both impulses transcend their associated fears and apprehensions. After the centrepiece of the poem, a tender shower scene in which neither textiles nor AIDS seems to be of particular concern to either participant (41-62), the poem culminates in a celebration of physical intimacy between men, an intimacy that can survive and flourish despite the inevitable mutabilities of the fashion or of the viral world:

> you ask him to
>
> caress your body
> to clothe it
> with pleasures only the weave
> of his tongue can tease out, lingering
> over your nipples, the flushed pink
> sheen of your stomach—
> the soul immune
>
> to the changing fashions
> of the flesh….
>
> (62-71)

AIDS simply cannot prevail amid relationships between men built on intimacy and trust rather than upon isolation and fear. In relationships built on intimacy in trust, there is room for no third partner, human or viral.

In "Somewhere Marked Farther Down the Lines of Destiny," the poet sees AIDS as a "new invader" (38) whose "army" lays "siege" (5) to this community of intimacy and trust. While gay men cannot afford, therefore, to be "indifferent to" (38) the possibility of being "overwhelmed by" (28) AIDS and "what [it] bring[s]" (38), they can be confident that the "brief…confederation" their "two bodies make" will "endure" (22-23) all threats, and so they may "receive" each other fearlessly and "with open arms" (36-37):

> my body taken into your bed the first night with such

> abandon—and wholly culpable, expressing in my build and stance what I fear had come to be long-held, intensely unconscious habits, the stiff muscles
>
> of my neck warming under your experienced, unfamiliar hands as I gave myself without thought….
>
> (14-18)

Even the style of this poem—a poetic form Barton calls the "singlet" because it is composed, essentially, of many stanzas of long single lines—is expressive of the strong and cohesive community of friends and lovers that gay men can be a part of, after they transcend the fracturing fearfulness and enervating stigma of AIDS:

> Writing the longer-lined [singlet]…liberated me and allowed me to think about the line itself in broader terms. These lines are about flow and expansiveness, and are less self-conscious and directive than some of my shorter-lined poems are, like the title poem in *Hypothesis*. Because these long-lined poems, like so many other poems I have written, are a single sentence, I love the way the words pile up on one another unmediated by relentless line-breaking. There is something panoramic and open about them. (qtd. in Neilson, "TDR Interview: John Barton [I]")

Barton even goes so far as to suggest (if only half seriously) that the singlet is a "uniquely gay" form of poetry, since "a singlet is [also] a man's undershirt—a tank top or a muscle shirt, which, on certain men, can look very sexy" (qtd. in Neilson, "TDR Interview: John Barton [II]"). In "Plasma, Triangles of Silk," Barton returns to the clothing imagery he uses to such arresting effect in "Prêt-à-Porter" (the poem that immediately precedes it in *Hypothesis*) by using a shirt, perhaps just such a singlet, as a metaphor (16) for AIDS and the ease with which it can be transmitted between men, like a well-worn hand-me-down passed on by an elder sibling or a used garment picked up inexpensively at a downtown thrift shop. "[T]he shirt you gave me I passed on to a friend," the speaker says, "yellow silk the colour / of plasma" (1-2). It dawns on him that such shirts are hardly unique, but they are mass-produced in their millions, "each one cut expressly like the other" (18), not unlike the way in which the "lethal viral load" (16) of HIV mass-produces itself in the bloodstreams of HIV-positive men. "[A]ll around us men were dying, men we did / not know and read about in the paper, men like us," the speaker says, "bodies full of a virus / …making [perfect] copies of itself in their blood" (9-11). This cruel realization does not give way to an atmosphere of fear, alienation, or disintegration, however, as it may have done in Barton's earlier work. Rather, the speaker recognizes that the seeming ubiquity of AIDS in the gay com-

munity actually offers an opportunity for that community to work together towards a cure, not unlike the individual "triangles of plasma-coloured silk" (17) that the speaker sews "by hand" (3), "strip by strip" (5) and "seam / by seam" (30-31), to "other salvaged / bits of fabric" (3-4) to form a new "favourite shirt" to replace or "heal" (6) the one "too soon worn out by years of wear" (2):

> though a cure will never bring back the dead, it should unravel
> the evidence they left us in the blood, painfully ripped-out threads read
>
> by anyone who does not want to pass their message on, the quilt stitched
> with quiet knowing hands toward something no less bold in design than
>
> the shirt: silk the colour of plasma, of inspiration, its triangulation never
> once undoing your gift, a contagious, heartfelt gesture that healed us both
> (35-40)

Barton ultimately expresses confidence in these closing lines of the poem that the gay community will one day find a cure for AIDS by becoming, like the parti-coloured, patchwork shirt, similarly close knit.[2]

There is a clear shift in Barton's later poetry away from the examination of AIDS as an affliction that affects only the gay community, and towards the examination of AIDS as an affliction that affects many different kinds of communities on a global scale. In his 2001-02 interview with Neilson, Barton is explicit in his assertion that he wishes to broaden the scope of his work on AIDS to include some of these alternative points of view, if only to make people—including gay men—recognize that AIDS is not just a gay disease:

> If I write more about [AIDS], I want to find different angles. I have begun to take note of the other communities affected: intravenous drug-users, for example…. Gay men do tend to be very proprietary, thinking of it as their disease when whole countries in Africa are being infected, with huge economic and humanitarian crises looming. I am very interested in seeing AIDS in its global context.

"California Notebook," for example, from *Designs from the Interior*, contains one of Barton's only direct and explicit references to AIDS (in his fearfulness, he usually refers to it only indirectly, as a "contagion" (e.g., "Transient" 31) or "the virus" (e.g., "Prêt-à-Porter" 13)), but the poet uses it in reference not to the gay community but to the homeless community: "the HIV+ homeless," he writes, "scaveng[e] / for handouts among the flower stalls at Union Square" (1.29-30). The poem's setting is San Francisco (1.11), that gay mecca where "the family tree has come to an end"

(1.12), yet Barton is able to see beyond the men "on Castro Street" (1.11) with their distractingly "toned arms" (1.34) and "well cropped hair" (1.32) and take into his purview "the whole of nature…In this city" (1.22), including its diverse racial constituents (1.27), its heterosexual community (1.35), its workaday "commuters" (1.47), and its ubiquitous tourists (1.25-26), many of whom may very well be "shaken" not just "by the periodic / passions of the San Andreas fault" (1.41-42), but also by the scourge of AIDS as it "overruns house after house" (1.46) like a uncontrollable "fire" (1.45). Barton deals with homelessness, intravenous drug use, and AIDS even more explicitly in "Transient," a later poem from *Hypothesis* (see Neilson, "TDR Interview: John Barton [I]"). An anonymous, disembodied speaker breaks it to an idealistic outreach nurse that he "can't / help" (36-37) the HIV-positive, drug-addicted transients with whom he works, despite his "30-pound knapsack" (3) full of "blankets" (6), "granola bars" (7), "condoms" (29), and other provisions, "temporary succour against more than one / discharged contagion" (30-31). He can offer them "not cures," he asserts, "but chance / ways of coping" (39-40) with a disease for which there is no treatment (54-56). In "Centre of the World [3]," from the culminating sequence of poems in *Sweet Ellipsis*, Barton's purview is perhaps at its broadest. In much the same way that "the blood-brain / barrier" of an HIV-infected person often becomes "overrun / by AIDS" (51-53), so too does the figurative blood-brain barrier of "the world" (16) become "uncentred" (52) not only by the virus as it attacks the world's various populations, but also by "ethnic / cleansing" (41-42), other illnesses (77), "famine, war" (53), the maldistribution of wealth (54-57), and "Bad…blood" (88-89) between "delegates all over the map" (79). The result is a diseased world that is declining every bit as rapidly as the sickest and most drug-resistant victim of AIDS:

> the history
> of our time a succession of cardiac
> arrests, the failure
> to love….
> . . . .
> We are on life support
> now
> and time is
> running, is running out….
>
> (37-40, 62-65)

Barton's diction is reminiscent of his earlier poetry that fears and laments the ravages of AIDS within an individual person, but here his scope is much broader, encompassing as it does the population of the entire world: "5.5 billion by 1994. / 5.5 billion more by 2050" (13-14). Not only does the poem articulate how AIDS affects many communities throughout the world, but it also acknowledges that AIDS is but one affliction that sickens and lays waste to humanity as a whole.

"When it comes to modern gay life," Natalie Hope McDonald writes in a recent article in *The Gay and Lesbian Review*, "no other phenomenon has so completely defined a generation as AIDS" (32). The poetry of John Barton is particularly illustrative of the pervasive and evolving literary impact of the AIDS pandemic. In the Introduction to one of his most recent projects, *Seminal: The Anthology of Canada's Gay Male Poetry*, Barton is candid:

> It is an understatement to say that gay writing in Canada, like everywhere else, was profoundly changed by AIDS…. AIDS has had a profound effect on the psyche of any "active" [gay] poet. Self-consciousness must be at play during the composition of an erotic love poem since we have all had to become, even in the performance of the most casual acts of love, more self-aware. (23-24)

In Barton's work, this self-awareness manifests itself in a poetry that is at first fearful, then resolute in its recognition that AIDS, even while it can prevent men from achieving certain levels of sexual intimacy, it can also bring men together in far more intimate and profound ways. In his latest poetry, Barton extends this sense of community to encompass AIDS in its larger global context. In "All That Enters Must Pass Through—Love, the Virtual Body, and the Decline of the Nation State," the poem that closes *Hypothesis*, Barton sees the larger world around him as a single deteriorating entity, an AIDS-infected "body" (1) whose "boundaries" are "apparently undefended" (14), whose "systems" are "borderline / immunodeficient" (17-18). Despite the physical body's inevitable sickness and decay, however, the larger "virtual body," that human community not just of gay men but of all people who are touched by AIDS, will remain forever intact:

> Our bodies speak
> in languages we do not comprehend

yet we know who we are, distinct despite
the ether's apparent lack
of borders.

Let us go then, love
let us let go: something always dis or re

connects us to something.

(121-28)

Notes

The author wishes to thank John Barton for permission to quote from personal correspondence.

1 Although politically correct contemporary usage tends to favour the term "HIV-AIDS" to the term "AIDS," Barton sees the term "HIV-AIDS" as an emotionally distancing and diffusing expression that can "quarantine emotion" and "dilute the intensity of response" to AIDS:

> In terms of many of my poems about the disease, I suspect I wrote them to articulate a fear of AIDS (not HIV), especially in the poems in *Sweet Ellipsis*, which are poems that voice anger, danger, fear, and a desire to find accommodation with a deadly force brutally encountered through intimacy.

This article refers to "AIDS" rather than to "HIV-AIDS" to emphasize this theme of fear that pervades Barton's poetry. "[I]t is good that we acknowledge the range of possibilities by using a term like 'HIV-AIDS,'" Barton writes, "but we cannot ever lose sight of the real risks that the virus presents: that people die of AIDS" (E-mail to author).

2 Despite the rather optimistic tone of "Plasma, Triangles of Silk," it is worth pointing out that Barton also laments in this poem the increasingly widespread practice of "barebacking—or barrier-free (i.e., condomless) sex" among "a new generation of gay men" (qtd. in Neilson, "TDR Interview: John Barton [I]"). The poet writes, "some men forget, joining / their bodies without protection, unmindful the porous, spontaneous / membranes between them are still thinner than silk" ("Plasma" 24-26). Such passages remind the reader that, despite the many advances made by the medical community over the past decade in the treatment of AIDS, it is still a very dangerous and debilitating affliction, and thus gay men are best advised to do what they can to avoid exposure to the virus (i.e., practise safe sex by using condoms) rather than put their faith in as yet imperfect methods of AIDS treatment therapies. In a world with AIDS, "safe sex" is not "just a catchphrase but a matter of life and death" (McDonald 35).

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