

Dominique Bernier-Cormier

Fulgura Frango (or How to Count to Infinity)

Ucluelet, Vancouver Island

Years ago, my friend Arnold lived
on this island, building a robot

that could count (in theory)

all the fish in the world. *It's very hard,*
he would say, *to tell fish from water,*

sounding like a proverb.

Something about the brute force
of data, something about a net of neurons.

A salmon crests the surface now,
a silver muscle, flexed.

Back in darker and more Bavarian
days, bells were inscribed with the Latin phrase

Fulgura Frango—I Break Lightning

and rung to ward off storms. A brass pulse
to warn God people were there, to spare them.

The numbers speak for themselves.

Between 1753 and 1789,
a hundred and three bell-ringers died,
in Germany alone,

a rope of lightning seized in their hands.

Today, my brother-in-law lives
on this same island, and swims through streams,
counting salmon before they disappear.

An inventory of loss, he says,
like a poem wearing a flannel shirt.

The numbers speak for themselves.

I can never remember if treasure
is a countable noun.

Some treasure, like some water,
the indivisible ocean.

Or one, two, three treasures,
like fish, each its own

locked wealth of blood,
each its own ticking future.

That's the mistake we make,
of course: to divide the undividable,

to try to cleave, by the ringing of a bell,
grief or storms or silence

into bearable moments.

My brother-in-law can tell sockeye
from coho from Chinook in the blink of an eye,

in the split second it takes
for a single silver scale, like a pixel,
to flash across a dark screen of silt.

He floats, facedown, eyes open,
as still as humanly possible, numbers

caught softly in the net of his brain.

As still as a machine. As a wreck.

I Google what would happen if lightning
struck the ocean while you were swimming.

Would you and all the fish die? No.
The salt water would spread the charge,

would turn the singular *I* of lightning
into a diffuse *We* of waves,

the particular into the vague,
the unbearable into the bearable,

so that each living thing would feel at most
a tingle down their spine.

Sometimes, I imagine Arnold's robot
still wandering the ocean a thousand years from now,

working on its impossible task,
the pulsing brass heart of it

powered by photons and salt,
by the moon's gravity, ticking up, up, up.

Something about an unreachable horizon.

Something about a line of any length
(a fuse, a poem)

holding an infinity of points.