

Jerry Harp

ON JOE BOLTON

It's amazing to me that Joe Bolton was able to craft the supple and strong poems that he accomplished in his rather short life, writing as a member of the liminal generation. These are the persons born in the exile days of the late fifties and early sixties, too young to be baby-boomers and too old to be generation-Xers. We were just old enough in the sixties to have some vague awareness of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Bobby Kennedy, and to have inherited the idealism of those days, but then we had to face coming of age in the midst of Watergate, disco, mood rings, puka shells, and pet rocks, and we inherited none of the gen-X cynicism that could have protected us from unfettered nostalgia. It was still too early for our parents to have known what irreparable damage was being done by all the television we watched. Ours was not so much a cultural moment as a parody of a cultural moment.

No doubt, my flyby cultural analysis misses a lot, but it may serve as a kind of metaphor of the somehow familiar world I find myself entering when I read Joe Bolton's poems, in which Bolton often serves as a Virgil guiding us through the flames, pains, faded glories, Lethe waters, and longueurs of his world, one whose contemporary culture grows at times so outrageously thin as to function only as a veneer covering a vast emptiness, leaving the speaker to look back with longing on a world seemingly more real and substantial than our own, but also irrecoverable. "The Dead Gods" (dedicated to "Kennedy, King, Lennon, etc."), for example, begins, "It is no longer clear where we are going," a state of affairs that leads to a note of despair for this poet who would sing: "Whatever little we had / In us of music has gone out of us. . . ." When the poet then turns to "The New Gods," it may come as no surprise that "for a long time, nothing happened." In fact, the "lush" and "sexual" gods of the new age go unnamed, though we are informed that they come, not from mountains, rivers, or the sky, "But from the scented gloss of magazines, . . . / To become immortal and then to die." Often, the poems in this collection are imbued with a "sense of something almost over, / Something

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about to begin" ("Near"), although the something seemingly about to begin is constantly deferred, leaving the poet with "a bright, magnificent coin / That can't be spent in this world" ("Metropolitan Twilight").

Unlike the poems of Bolton's teacher Donald Justice (who has edited this admirable collection), whose nostalgias maintain an aesthetic distance that enables a critical and searching exploration of the workings of nostalgia, Bolton's poems sometimes get distracted by the idealized world as if it were a real possibility, and therefore the return to everyday life becomes a constant failure or betrayal, the years a dead weight: "Strange to want back what we wanted back then. / We were as good as dead, or better than" ("The Years"). The poems often flirt with a critical letting go of the past, but the letting go infrequently occurs without a struggle, and the letting go comes across, then, as a temporary state induced by exhaustion. As in the lines just quoted, a curious fatalism creeps into the poems, but nevertheless, again and again what lines of poetry these are! Bolton had an uncanny ability to transform his despair, often accompanied by a complicating affection for the very world in which he is lost, into powerful verse. The language is resonant; the rhymes are fresh, and the off-rhymes just off enough to prolong the resonance of the language. When Bolton writes metrically, the meter is deft, and when he writes free verse, the lines never lose touch with their grounding in formal structure. The skill of the lines convinces me even when I find myself rejecting the moods, or moodiness, that they invoke.

Among the more plangent of the poems in this collection, "In Search of the Other World" recalls a scene of intimacy in which the speaker, as a boy, is massaging his mother's back while she tells stories from her childhood, stories that lead the speaker to recollections of his own childhood, whose "days were holy, if anything ever was." The poem ends with the speaker still looking for his old friends, of whom he exclaims, "I can't believe they'd leave me / to face such a life as this."

This poem is not, however, only an encounter with the complications of memory, loneliness, and despair, but also with the Peruvian poet Cesar Vallejo. As the notes to the book explain, some half dozen poems collected here are adaptations of specific sections of Vallejo's *Trilce*. But even where Bolton remains close to Vallejo's original, he tends to make the language more urgent, sometimes to grasp after what finally cannot be held; thus, Vallejo's "*Me he puesto a recordar los dias / de verano idos*" (*Trilce* XV; "I have begun to

remember the gone days / of summer”—translation by Rebecca Seiferle) becomes in Bolton’s variation, “I can’t let them go, those days / Of summer gone” (“Days of Summer Gone”).

But when the grip relaxes, and the speaker of the poems is able to face into an uncertain future with a measure of detachment, the nostalgias can give tribute to the remembered world without veering toward maudlin indulgence, as occurs in “Stanzas on the Anniversary of Hart Crane’s Death”:

At evening’s end, strolling down the same street
You knew the dead end to by heart in childhood,
But somehow lovelier than you remembered . . .

—Especially at this late hour when, to the west
The twilight plays the game it loves to lose
And loses, over and over, to its dark sea.

Not only does the speaker acknowledge that a place in this world can be “lovelier than you remembered,” he formulates the loss that ends the poem as a game that nature plays, thus lightly modulating the poem’s somber mood.

No doubt part of what makes the detachment of this poem possible is the presence of Hart Crane, which allows some extra distance from the experience of loss. In fact, it is often the case in this collection that some of the more striking moments of finesse and liveness come when Bolton directly engages with other poets. While influence tracing can too easily become a mug’s game, I shall risk the observation that Bolton has profitably read not only Justice and Vallejo (already mentioned), but also Dickinson, Eliot, and Stevens, among others, whose inflections echo through these poems, often blending with Bolton’s own sense of place and local dialect. One example occurs in “Prelude: Late Twentieth-Century Piece,” which begins by echoing Dickinson (“And after pain, the calm—dark records on dark shelves”) and ends with an even more remote, yet still identifiable, echo of the same Dickinson poem: “the sigh / Of flesh on flesh, the cut, and the turning away.” The melding of voices also works well in lighter moods of observation, as in “Flamingoes,” which begins with a demotic echo of Stevens, dabbles in a famous eighties cop show, and parodies a line from James Wright’s “A Blessing”:

They must have imagined themselves, we think.
Bursting on the montage of *Miami Vice*,
They seem less animal than artifice,

Skinny-legged girls all got up in hot pink.
There is no gaudiness like theirs.

The sonnet then modulates into a rather impressive poignance, given what must be an astonishingly slim margin of error when meditating on flamingoes, ending on a note of acceptance that emblematically lets go of what is unavailable: "Unreal, they stride into their unreal world."

A similar, though differently inflected note of acceptance occurs in "Party," which allows quite another view of Bolton's strengths as a poet. In this poem, the speaker's "downstairs neighbors / Are having a party. Deep Purple / Seeps up through the floor, and if there were chandeliers, / They'd be trembling like flowers in water." He decides "to give up the literary life" for the evening, though the poem continues its literary life by narrating, in tight though expansive lines, the events of the evening, including a public scene of discord that occurs when a young woman, who is "sadly pretty in her earth shoes and cut-offs / And shirt that says she's a Pepper," abruptly walks across the street to join the party, and a young man yells after her and comes outside "armed only with a bottle / Of Jack Daniels" then sits down and cries. The poem culminates with the projection, "In the morning, sure as sunrise, we'll all dress our bodies / And walk out hungover into America." It seems to me that part of what makes this poem work is that while it eases away from (though never wholly gives up) "the literary life" of echo and allusion that makes many of Bolton's other poems so rich, it turns empathically toward a narration of its inhabitants' experiences in the present, in something approximating everyday speech modulated with Bolton's characteristic sense of pacing, detail, rhythm, and phrasing. The marvel is Bolton's capacity to turn seemingly anything into sinuous lines of verse.

It has become something of a commonplace, and for good reason, that to make his or her own contribution, a poet must come to terms with the wealth of literary traditions that are part of our culture. It strikes me that even today, when there is no lack of extremely smart and skillful poets, it is nevertheless relatively rare to find a poet who approaches the art as an exacting vocation, and who is therefore responsive to the vocation's strenuous demands. I believe that Joe Bolton was one of these latter practitioners.