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Days of Summer Gone by Joe Bolton

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Days of Summer Gone

Joe Bolton

Baltimore: Galileo Books, 1990.

\$9.95; paper.

Reviewed by Beckie Flannagan

In his poem "Old Dominion," Robert Hass comments on Randall Jarrell: "It puzzled me that in his art, like Chekov's, / everyone was lost, that the main chance was never siezed / because it is only there as a thing to be dreamt of." When I knew Joe Bolton in Bowling Green, Kentucky, in 1985, he had this poem taped to his refrigerator; but I little suspected then how apt Hass' words would be in describing Joe's work.

Like Jarrell, Joe dreamt of other worlds, unreachable Kafkaesque constructions that his narrators get closer to as they examine the past, but farther away from as they realize the past is no longer touchable, but alive only in a manufactured dream world. Though Jarrell may have used his "other world" as a refuge from the real world, Joe's only hope is in a precariously balanced present caught between other, better worlds. What we hear in *Days of Summer Gone* is an elegy to those other worlds, made eloquent by his sensual language, his formal constructions, and his skill at handling the abstract nature of this loss with the particulars of his own life.

It's not hard to read the tragedy in the poems in this volume. In "The Seasons: A Quartet," for example, the narrator tells us that "The best days of summer are the days of summer gone: / Something cooking, a wash of light on the water . . . / The music dies, and what I hold is the world. / One leaf falling would break the spell. It falls." Sadly, however, it is also easy to read Joe's work as "suicide poems," poems made more poignant, as Joe Anderson says in a blurb on the back cover, by Joe's death in 1990. When I first read many of the poems in *Days of Summer Gone* in manu-

script before Joe's death, I was taken with their ability to convince me of limited choices in a doomed world, not of inevitable personal doom. Believing the poet is the suicide in "One World" who "had a photograph / He couldn't reconcile his life with anymore" greatly limits this book and forces an answer to the questions Joe poses as unanswerable. The power of the poems rests in their ability to question and probe an often horrific realization, not provide a rationale for one poet's death. To read this volume with that end in mind is to misinterpret its fundamental explorations.

Bolton's best probing is in "American Variations," a poem whose multi-part structure is reminiscent of poets Joe admired, including Donald Justice and Robert Penn Warren. While the structure of each section remains in strict syllabics, the content of the poem, remembering long distances, flaps back and forth through time. The tension between the constraints of form and the fluidity of time suggests the further tension between lost worlds and the present one. Furthermore, the narrator's insistence that he is telling "you" these things forces "you" to consider that "Once there was a world you could / Hold in the palm of your hand."

By Part II, "Song to be Spoken, Not Sung," the narrator's imperative commands us to "Say *this world* and let it be *enough* for once," as though the speaker's vocalization will somehow force it to be enough, that no one could possibly want more than the world at hand. It's hard to believe the narrator, but even harder to accept that "this world" will never be enough. The schism between worlds opens even wider.

In Part III, the narrator begins to describe his "other world," in this case, a woman who once loved him. Typical of the lost world, the images suggest the splendor of what is gone: "I remembered/

How gold the fields of the farm got in September, / And how the woman let her hair loose from the blue bandana." In "The Return" of Section IV, the narrator finds that nothing has stayed the same, that the place "hardly recognized you," that rivers and people all move forward with the same unforgiving speed. Here, the narrator seems to dismiss the woman of Section III, suggesting finally that "lovers were, in the end, reduced / To the sounds of names, the flesh utterly forgotten." Despite his attempts to remember and contain a previous world, no place seems to stay static enough for this narrator to hold.

If there is hope in this poem, it is in the couple's ability to "make what love they can / In this, their one and only world"; but this decision seems to bear little solace since the flesh, as the narrator has already suggested, is forgotten so easily.

Throughout the book, Joe poises his narrators on this same sharp line between going backward and going forward, though neither movement seems advantageous. The real world, finally, must be what is in the present. In "Autumn Fugue," Joe offers a possible alternative to looking for another world:

If there is nothing between a man and a woman
Except the light by which they see each other,
And a past in which they appear continually smaller,
And a future that seems already to have acquired
The irrevocability of the past,
It seems important, nevertheless, to acknowledge
Their brief victory: the surviving it.

Certainly, even this possibility is bleak. Still, the speakers of the poems in *Days of Summer Gone* never pretend that anything is easy, nor does this poet who forces us to look at our own decisions, our own precarious balance.