



AH BOLINAS!

A Travel Journal

Pat Nolan



2009

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For the Mistress of The Mesa



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*Season's first drizzle
that mutt sure could use
a little plastic raincoat
-- after Basho*

I think about the weather as I tighten the laces of my boots. I stand a good chance of getting caught in the rain on my way to Bolinas. Turning off the lights and locking the door, the gray of morning has failed to ease much.

Clots of mist snag
on the pointy tree hillside
postcard perfect

The damp cold invigorating, I stride the three-quarters of a mile into Monte Rio, briefcase in hand. I think out my itinerary: a series of bus transfers to a point where I will have to hitch a ride the rest of the way, about 25 miles. What if it rains? What if no one stops to pick me up? What if I miss my connections? What am I doing?

Time to spare
I cross the bridge
when I get to it



Waiting on the 9 AM bus, a neighbor offers a ride to the next wide spot in the road. She's in a hurry, late for an appointment. We speed around the curves and shoot down the straight-aways following the swollen, muddy river. I tell her I'm on my way to Bolinas because I've been invited to read my poems at the public library there. She's reminded of her youth growing up in Marin County and how she used to hang out in Bolinas because it was a hip place to be, to go get stoned and party. "Ah, Bolinas!"

Sky clouded
with mattress stuffing
oatmeal gray

I get a cup to go and head for the bus stop in Guerneville, minutes to spare. I've hardly taken a sip when some guy in a red pickup calls me over and asks if I need a ride -- he's heading into Santa Rosa, which is where I connect with the bus heading down to San Rafael. It's one of those offers you don't refuse. In the course of our conversation, I mention my eventual destination.

"Ah! Bolinas!" he says,
"Going down to buy some boo-boo, huh?"
by which he means marijuana.

Once in Santa Rosa, I'm way ahead of my schedule so I have no choice but to wait. The bus ride thirty miles to San Rafael is uneventful and I divide my time between going over the poems I plan to read that evening and keeping an eye on the incoming storm over the western horizon. Disembarking, I easily find the next bus that will transport me to the end of the line.

Full color sycamore
down the block from
the old Mission

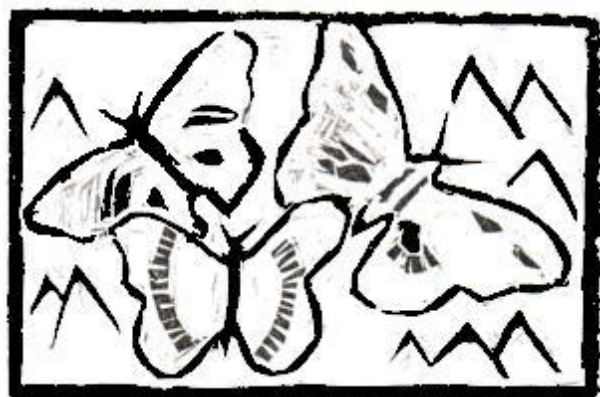


Thumb out I wait, having been here, standing on some sandy shoulder, many many times before, and when someone slows down and stops fifty yards up the road, I grab my case and run to the waiting car. Unsure of the way ahead, I take any ride offered which can sometimes strand you in a place where no one cares to stop, their speed too fast to even consider it. I end up walking a mile or so to a spot where I can be easily seen and wide enough for someone to pull off the road safely. It begins to rain. A shiny blue-gray Mercedes stops. The driver guessed by the way I was dressed (Levi's & Levi jacket & brogans) I was headed for Bolinas. He goes right by Joanne's place. Talk about luck!

Bolinas chic
knee high
rubber boots

Joanne offers to show me around, and besides she has to go into town to cash a check. Bolinas proper is a collection of homes and shops fronting the Bolinas lagoon and the Pacific Ocean, and resembling a tiny New England fishing village. Above the town, on the mesa, there are many more homes crowded together around muddy unpaved streets that give it the quaint ramshackled atmosphere of a psychedelic Dogpatch. There is no doubt Bolinas is very picturesque. Joanne lovingly points out every detail, even the fact that one whole side of the mesa is being eroded by the constant action of the Pacific.

The sea is eating
up the land nothing
we can do about it



Joanne takes me by the butterfly trees and then we're "downtown". I buy a six-pack of beer and we go sit on the riprap at the end of Main Street, drink beer, make small talk, and watch the waves wet the sand.

Mud puddles
eucalyptus stands
land slides

Downtown Bolinas is like a single street movie set for "Tom Sawyer Meets Tim Leary." It has a certain charm, one that its natives guard possessively. Someone is always tearing down the road sign on Highway 1 pointing to Bolinas. It's as if they want to secede from the mainland, physically as well as culturally. This, of course, makes it even more intriguing to outsiders. Joanne shows me the local landmarks: Smiley's Bar, and across the street, Scowly's, and further down, Snarly's. There's the library where I'll be reading tonight, the health food store, the bakery, the post office. "I checked the mail earlier, but no harm in checking it again," says Joanne.

Everyone knows her
"Are you going
to India, Joanne?"

Back at Joanne's, we sit around the kitchen table sipping tea with a little of the creature in it. This is the first time I've really had a chance to sit down and talk with Joanne, someone I've known in passing for almost twenty years. I remind her of the first time we ever met. It was at a book party in San Francisco. I was a campus radical literary magazine editor then -- shoulder length hair, ratty, patched Levi's, cast-off Army jacket, I really looked the part. Joanne had come up to me and asked if I was one of those new "revolutionary" poets. I'm certain now that it was all in jest, but back then, being an ill-tempered young upstart, I mumbled an angry reply and cut short any opportunity to make friends.

On the mesa
a lost world of mostly
older single women

Joanne doesn't recall the incident, but then why should she? She's Joanne, after all, *la belle dame sans merci*, accomplished acknowledged poet on more than one continent, confidante of Gary and Philip, dowager of the local poetry minions, sponsor and patron of the literary arts, representative of the Muse on this muddy spit of land, promoter of esthetics, and so on. The list is quite long, and after a while, quite boring. It's not like she's the Virgin Mary or anything like that. But she has the presence and the posture and the stature of a great woman whose approaching grayness is the badge of her wisdom. I comment on her collection of little magazines. I collect them too, especially the ones with my poems in them. "Do you save them because you think they'll be worth a lot of money someday?" At least we share a common delusion.

Jungle of entanglements
gentle tigress digresses
moon in mist

Has a reading at the Bolinas Library ever started on time? It's a rhetorical question voiced by one of the local party animals. They come out of the woodwork and sometimes the bushes. This has been a long awaited event. I can tell from the size of the crowd. But then Bolinas is a small community so taking all that into consideration, it's standing room only. Bill can't stay long. Joe and friends tough it out through both sets.

Bobbie Louise
who had promised earlier
just couldn't make it.

Everyone was waiting to show up at Joanne's party afterwards, anyway. Now this is the real Bolinas, the kooky and the kinky, the yuppie and the yippie, rubbing elbows and tushes, sharing hors d'oeuvres and joints over glasses of white wine. Joanne has a lot of great looking women friends!

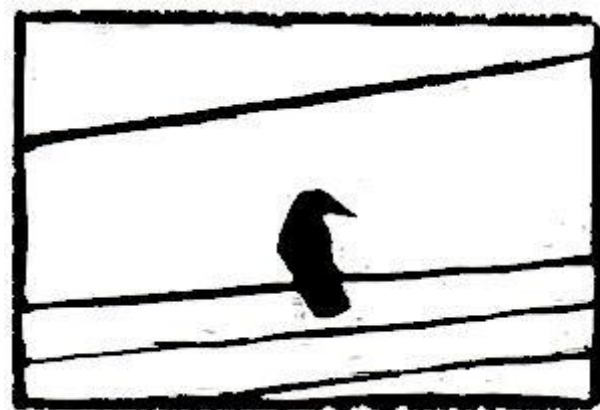
Suddenly this party has
possibilities! "Ah Bolinas!"
I raise my glass in salute

While there's still a crowd, the music of their mania is enough. After everyone goes home though, it's a different story. Joanne only has one Ray Charles record, all the rest are poetry sides!

The Bronx logic of
poetry on the phonograph
till late in the AM

Wake up early the next morning on the couch in Joanne's living room, a splitting headache and a taste in my mouth I'd like to disown. Best thing to do is get ready to leave without waking Don or Joanne. Arranged with Sara for a ride into Fairfax last night, but other details are blurry. What time did she say she'd be here? Dressed, step outside and take stock of morning.

Bird among
telephone wires
one note



The bare trees
speak of a chilly
dampness beneath

Sunrise hanging
from eucalyptus
glances off puddles

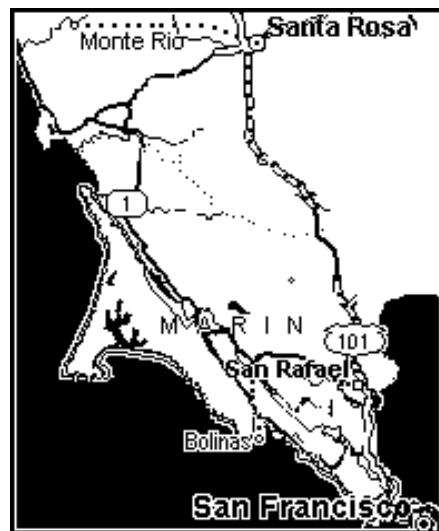
White voices
reach over
the treetops

Kids squeal
play running
feet bus stop

I say my good-byes to the mystic, musty isle of Bolinas. It was great while it lasted, but now I'm ready to go back. My journey has had the characteristics of a mythic quest. I performed almost every task the gods had asked of me, but I still have to endure one final ordeal: *ride public transportation with a hangover.*

Unlock the door
back home just in time to
turn on the lights

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Ah Bolinas!

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