

## Working for Joy

Matthew Pullar

*I don't have a lot of prospects  
That can give some kind of peace  
There is nothing left to cling to  
That can bring me sweet release  
I have no fear of drowning  
It's the breathing that's taking all this work  
(Jars of Clay, "Work")*

For a long time I have found comfort in the songs of US group Jars of Clay. They are one of the few music groups that have been with me for much of my life. I first heard them on Gold Coast Christian radio playing one of their first songs, "Love Song for a Saviour". That was in 1995, the year their self-titled debut album came out. I do not rush out to buy each album of theirs and some of their albums are very much mixed affairs for me. Yet they are one group that have been with me in every season of my life. Sometimes their music brings me excitement and joy. I find it nearly impossible to keep from dancing, or at least tapping my feet and drumming whatever I find near me, when I hear "Boy on a String". Songs like "Worlds Apart" and "Frail" have always brought me a sense of closeness to God at times when I am more inclined to despair. The words to the title-track of their second album, *Much Afraid*, were with me when, at 14 years old, my closest friend turned into a bully, and they were with me again when, at 18 years old, I found myself on the brink of deep depression:

So scared to fall  
I might not get up again...  
Of all of these things I'm so much afraid  
Scared out of my mind by the demons I've made.  
Sweet Jesus, You'll never let me go.

When, at the end of the 90s, they switched mandolins and violins for electric guitars and synths, and switched candid background coughs for slick studio production values, I began to find less comfort in their music. Their fourth album, *The Eleventh Hour*, was an enjoyable listen, but only a handful of songs carried the same emotional weight of their earlier work. Only "Silence" managed to top the honesty and intensity of songs like "Frail":

Take, take till there's nothing  
Nothing to turn to...  
And I've got a question:  
Where are you?

Their work was highly inconsistent after that. When they took up their mandolins and acoustic guitars again with *Furthermore* and *Who We Are Instead*, they brought back some organic joy to their sound. They also recorded some of their most soulful, Psalm-like songs, with lyrics perfectly designed for the weariest of travellers:

You have led me to this sadness  
I have carried this pain  
On a back nearly broken  
I'm crying out to You.  
("The Valley Song")

Yet then there were moments of inexplicable insensitivity. A group that had always known the realities of pain, whose very name came from one of the most comforting books in the Bible, Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians – a thirteen-chapter testimony to God's power in our weakness – could somehow produce such a stylised Blues-pastiche as "Lonely People", a song so pat and patronising that it sounded as if its writer had never for a moment experienced loneliness:

This is for all the single people  
Thinking that life has left them dry  
Don't give up  
Drink from that silver cup  
Never know until you try.

By the time they returned to High Studio Pop with *Good Monsters*, I stopped caring about new albums and settled for personally made mixes of their best music. Songs like "Silence", "Frail" and "Faith Enough" were in abundance on those mixes. Songs like "Lonely People" were not.

Yet, when I was preparing to come to Malaysia and wanted some music to take with me, I found that I had been unfairly prejudiced against "Good Monsters", an album I had admittedly never heard anything from. I put my parents' copy of the "Greatest Hits" onto my computer, on the strength of "God Will Lift Up Your Head", a contemporary re-working of a wonderfully comforting hymn. I expected that the more recent songs would mean little or nothing to me. And, at first, that was the case. They sounded a bit like The Killers. They were fun enough. But where was the sweeping beauty of "Worlds Apart"? Where was the heartbroken grace of "Silence", or anything from *Furthermore*?

Then, one day, I really listened to the lyrics of one of the last tracks on the CD, "Work". It was a catchy song, which I guess made me want to hear it again. I had not really thought it would be especially meaningful. Their more recent lyrics had always seemed a bit empty to me. Then the repeated bridge struck me, and I started to listen to the words:

I have no fear of drowning  
It's the breathing that's taking all this work.

It is impossible, I think, to really catch the meaning of those words and not be shocked. It was a sentiment that made instant sense to me. Struggling with anxiety, I know the difficulties of breathing, and know that it often seems easier to simply stop breathing than to do all the "work" required to keep functioning. Their metaphor of drowning – an action that automatically leaves you gasping for breath, with increasing difficulty – was also a highly powerful

one, and a particularly fatal one. The words seemed deeply despairing; there was little or no hope in the sentiment they expressed.

But then there was the music. Where other sad songs of theirs often had a slow, reflective or melancholy feel to match their content (songs like “Sad Clown”, “Frail” or “Silence”, by far their saddest, were also their slowest), “Work” was a driving piece of Power Pop. The rhythm from the very start was one of great energy, the very beat seemingly pushing itself and its listener forward. And here, I think, I found the truth of the song. It did not lie in the words themselves, which offered seemingly no hope, but in the contrary truth of the music, a song which sounded suspiciously like it was forcing itself into God’s hands at a time when it would be much more easily inclined to the grave of despair.

This song has become a new anthem for me. A song that, at first, I was ready to dismiss, has gradually become one of the most played tracks on my iPod. Why? There are certainly times when I would still much rather the quiet comfort of “Worlds Apart” or “Frail”. Yet this song, with its grit and persistence, teaches me something that more melancholy songs cannot. There are times, I suppose, to sit mournfully in the comfort of God, and then there are times to order your soul to awake and find hope in God. After all, the very same psalmist who could reflect on his own deep depression could also preach to himself:

Why are you so downcast, O my soul?  
Why so disturbed within me?  
Put your hope in God,  
for I will yet praise him,  
my Saviour and my God.  
(Psalm 42:11)

Sometimes we need to be comforted, and sometimes we are simply licking our wounds and indulging our own despair. At those latter times we need to preach to ourselves. And that song, despite the despair of its words, preaches to me with its pulsing rhythm and driving melody: when I want to stop breathing and give in to drowning, it teaches me to work, and to keep working. The chorus lingers as a mystery, a question unanswered:

Do you know what I mean when I say  
I don’t want to be alone?

Yet I know the answer: of course He understands. He knows how it feels to despair, and what it means to be alone. And in that dangling question lies the answer. For hope lies in this simple truth: through the words of the chorus the singer does what many of the Psalmists do. They turn from despair to God, not knowing what answer He will give, yet declaring that they do not want to be without Him. In this is our hope, for He who knows our despair will never fail to hear those who cry out to Him. Sometimes we just need to work hard to keep ourselves trusting in Him.