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How Do We Fill These Voids?

John Hoppenthaler. *Night Wing Over Metropolitan Area*. Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2023.

This stunning fourth collection by John Hoppenthaler grapples with the complexity of space, specifically emptiness, and what makes space “empty.” Hoppenthaler’s mastery of both endings and the continuity of the line really propel these poems through these “empty” spaces to inhabit them with the ecologies that make up our daily human lives: the creatures with whom we share a planet, our struggles and hopes, and the moves we make in attempting to dwell in these previously “empty” spaces.

Given the title, bird imagery peppers the collection, not as the somewhat-cliché representation of freedom, though. The winged things of Hoppenthaler’s poems instead illustrate how the space we often consider above us, though technically it surrounds us entirely, is not empty at all, but a home. This ether is not only a home, however, for winged creatures, the birds and bats whose appearances tether these poems to one another, but also the spirits of our departed loved ones, our dreams, and the politics and environments that impact our daily lives.

Notably, many of the environments in which these poems are set exist in partial or complete darkness to which the title alludes. For example, “First Light” and “2 AM” speak to those times of day where the moon still keeps watch, even as the sun begins its trek across the sky. This darkness functions as a presence in the sky’s presumed “empty space” rather than simply functioning as a backdrop in these poems. Its presence works to highlight the obfuscations we mere humans often commit in our own lives, from thinking of the sky as a vast empty swath to not fully understanding and appreciating our role in larger ecologies and environments.

Returning to “First Light,” the poem that begins the collection’s first section, we are introduced to the concept of artificiality of environment thanks to human construction as the speaker’s “old nemesis the blue jay” chooses to “bathe in the fake pool, / the fake origin of the cool, / but fake waterfall” that, despite its artificiality, “helps on this hot July day.” Importantly, Hoppenthaler observes that even while these aspects of the environment are “fake” and created by humans, they are still helpful and become likely integral to that blue jay’s day.

Like the blue jay's morning bath, Hoppenthaler connects these engagements with artifice to human ritual. Throughout the collection, he explores how rituals are essentially actions we take in repeated attempts to fill that "empty" space into something more familiar, more comforting. Whether these rituals are fear-based, compulsion-based, or religious in nature, they work to give us a sense of control over our environments; they make that "empty" space less threatening by making our existence in it seem purposeful. These rituals range from buying boxes of chocolate for one's beloved in "The Week After Valentine's Day" to prayers of thanksgiving in "After Listening to the Weather, I Pull into a Bar" to compulsive tapping in "OCD."

This exposure of the role of rituals, both human and non-human ones, works to shed light into those dark obfuscations that are central to many of these poems. Thus, Hoppenthaler seems to be both filling what we might consider "empty" space and illuminating how human and non-human creatures connect to these spaces through repetitions that both emplace us and connect us to one another. Many of the winged creatures featured in this collection are both seen through the speaker's eyes, which is one form of connection, but then too, these entities are shown to share similar behaviors, such as bathing, eating, mating, and migrating, dissolving the idea that they are significantly different from humans just because they can inhabit the ether in a different way.

The reader finishes this collection feeling much more connected to their environment, certainly, but *Night Wing Over Metropolitan Area*, like Hoppenthaler's earlier works, also offers a healthy dose of introspection blended with cynicism. There is the cynical critique of artifice and yet the understanding that humans and sometimes even non-humans need that artifice to enjoy and make sense of our worlds. There, too, is the jaded sense that amid the ethereal spaces that seem so empty, we mortals are just teeny tiny drops without the capacity to create real change. However, Hoppenthaler shows through these poems that even the smallest changes, like taking communion or planting a birdbath, can have significant repercussions for not only ourselves but the ecologies we share in a space that is anything but empty.