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Between the Rows by Nancy Jentsch: Poems of Intimacy and Presence

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the wind whipped so hard
that stars shivered stones cowered

while silent breaths of will
just as inscrutable unfolded

the opaline petals
of my kitchen orchid

“Overnight” by Nancy Jentsch

Between the Rows by Nancy K. Jentsch was published in October 2022 by Shanti Arts, a self-described “fiercely independent publishing company whose work is grounded in nature, art, and spirit.” These three areas of interest fittingly capture Jentsch’s main sources of inspiration for her writing. Nature figures prominently in *Between the Rows*. The poet most often writes on the front porch of her rural home in Northern Kentucky, mining her creativity in her family surroundings and the hilly landscapes neighboring her historic home.¹ She regularly composes ekphrastic poetry and has engaged with varied artworks from Germany, France and the United States. *Between the Rows* includes seven poems written in response to German mixed media artist Bianca Artopé’s artwork. And spirituality, as a sacred interconnectivity of all life, unequivocally informs all of the poet’s writing. In this collection, Jentsch welcomes us “between the rows” in a space of mindfulness and intimacy with nature, ancestors, art, each other, ourselves. Her poems invite us to slow down, pause, be touched by the everyday gifts and ordinary wonder of our world; share in loss, grief and disquiet; attend to the vulnerable beauty of the nonhuman world. My reading of *Between the Rows* hopes to honor the dedication the author often inscribes for her readers when signing her books: “Reflect and enjoy.” Gentle yet clear imperatives that carry the author’s hope of joy for her readers, but foremost of a heightened

perception of the world brought forth through poetry. This study analyzes *Between the Rows* as a work of ecopoetry that engages with a vast network of multiple presences, spaces and temporalities: a web of interconnected organisms, human and nonhuman, past, present and unborn.

In his introduction to *Ecopoetry*, Scott Bryson identified three primary characteristics of ecopoetry: “an emphasis on maintaining an ecocentric perspective that recognizes the interdependent nature of the world”; “an imperative toward humility in relationships with both human and nonhuman nature”; and “an intense skepticism concerning hyperrationality, a skepticism that usually leads to an indictment of an overtechnologized modern world” (6-7). The poems highlighted in this study evidence all three characteristics of ecocentrism, humility and concern over repairing our connection with the natural world. Furthermore, my textual analysis embraces ecocritic Scott Knickerbocker’s aesthetic concept of “‘sensuous poesis,’ in which, rather than mirror the world, ... poems enact through formal devices such as sound effects the speaker’s experience of the complexity, mystery, and beauty of nature” (13). Knickerbocker argues that ecocritics have favored subject matter and mimetic realism at the expense of aesthetic expression. He proposes instead a reading of nature poetry based on “the process of rematerializing language specifically as a response to nonhuman nature” [...] “Ecological poetry posits a relationship between ethics and aesthetics. Poems best succeed at awakening one to the natural world through the emotive and rhetorical power they have over readers, and this power derives from the particular form that content takes” (2-3). If Jentsch’s poetry reveals her deep engagement with social and environmental justice—she warns of looming environmental threats and exposes the plight of migrants left out at the door of opulence--ethics never eclipses aesthetics in her writing. Jentsch is first a lover of words passionately searching for the most

expressive poetic form in order to create meaning. Her poetic voice is nothing less than epiphanic, the result of a rigorous craft, an unwavering attention to form, a painstaking quest to “slit the chrysalis / of English” (83) and to “rainbow words through prisms” (67). “Pen on Paper” (2019) shares the thrills and the uncertainties of the creative journey:

pen-touched paper
should burst with words
that tie-dye my page
in cerise suns
inch-worm whorls
cerulean loops
with a pinch
of sobering ochre
inescapable bittersweet

but sometimes
pen leaves only a blot
of ravenous darkness

The poems presented in *Between the Rows* are performative: they demand to be heard for their sound effects (alliterations, assonances, onomatopoeia); they must be visually observed on the page for their physicality (stanza length, breaks, lineation, enjambments); and they must be closely read for their figurative language.

Between the Rows is comprised of sixty poems arranged in four sections.³ The titles of the first three sections, “Unexpected,” “Into Uncertainty” and “Overnight” admit to a lack of certainty and clarity. Loss runs through these sections: loss of life, home, habitat, species, peace. In counterpoint, the fourth section titled “Every Day has Something in It” affirms presence, the certainty of “something” to be found. “Bucket list” (14), the poem opening the collection, sets the tone for the rest of the volume. The poem is written in the form of ten couplets cleverly paralleling the consecutive format of a numbered list. To the twenty-first century imagination, the phrase *bucket list* evokes lists of must-sees and must-dos to accomplish before one dies:

exotic destinations, thrilling experiences, measurable achievements. Nancy Jentsch’s list is far different. It does not locate meaning and substance outside, in some far-away place or in the accumulation of restless pursuits, but rather in the place where we stand and the things we have been gifted. The poet writes with all five senses on alert. “Bucket List” takes us on a sensorial day journey, smelling the hay at hand in a barn, anticipating the sweet taste of milk and blueberries, feeling the cleansing and electrifying power of the rain, sighting both the knobby burl and the perfect sphere of a blueberry, waiting patiently for the opening of the four o’clocks. Jentsch’s bucket list foregrounds intimacy with the natural world and invites us to experience its beauty and bounty at “half [our] normal speed.” In contrast to the frantic race of a to-do list, the very composition of the poem urges us to pause and breathe, inscribing a respiration between each couplet to allow for presence in the now and the here:

Sit by the four o’clocks
to watch them unfurl

when they join night’s first sighs
exhaling hue and scent

“Bucket List” is echoed by the poem closing the first section: “On an analog walk” (31) takes us on a similar journey of the senses. The poem launches with three short verses using assonances and one- or two-syllable words to sound out the incessant repetitive and fractured rhythm of the digital world:

no thumbs drum
no earbuds pulse
no Fitbits tick

The anaphoric negatives cast away the pulsating throb of the digital world to make room for the analog walk of five flowing verses, rich in alliterations and consonances, giving space and time for an exhilarating feast of the senses:

but champagne breeze prickles skin
birdsong bounces between wires
the bend ahead promises Oz
musky smells and sapsucker tapping
braid with the shade of a stand of trees

The third stanza of the poem visually disrupts both the monotonous throb and limited range of the first tercet and the leisurely pace and indulging length of the second stanza, heralding the unexpected:

Deer's stare
salamander's surprise
freeze time
so that
now
gains depth and breath
to sustain beyond
drumming pulsing ticking
at walk's end

This last stanza challenges us to Presence, undistracted by either the numbing of constant technological feeds or the euphoria of escape into nature. Presence is attentiveness and availability of the mind and heart for that split second in time when we may have the opportunity to connect intimately with our nonhuman partners. The sole capital letter of the poem--Deer--signals the momentous occurrence. The irregular lineation of the stanza prepares us for this encounter of the unexpected and converges in its middle core on the single word verse "now." Unadulterated presence in the place and time of our "now" is essential.

Jentsch's poetry aims at rediscovering and repairing that connection with our habitat. In "A Kind of Nothing is Prominently There Instead" (58), the poet offers her own perception and interaction with the living world. Whereas nature utterances are perceived by some as sheer annoyances--noisy bird calls, untamed weeds, invasive succulents--Jentsch approaches her surroundings with receptivity and alertness, reverence and wonder, delight and euphoria. She is

the in-the-know accomplice of birds, hearing “their knot of jocularities / in morning birdsong.” She “gasp[s] at first spring blooms” and “kneel[s] by Pheasant Eyes.” She “thrill[s] at succulents swabbed soft with rain.” Nature is not a mere backdrop to the poems, but an ecosystem of presences to engage with and learn from. For example, Jentsch portrays geese as “selfless leaders” who know “to peel back to the ranks” (34), alluding to the fact that geese travel in V-formation to conserve energy and birds take turns leading the formation. Welfare and safety of the community take precedence over individuals’ egos. Similarly, “All Brains and Thumbs” (68) illustrates the values of attentiveness, patience, and determination modeled by a cardinal:

an arched branch fell
with the first winter storm,
now anchored by inch
after inch of snow—a cardinal’s
perch where he awaits
a place at the feeder,
keeps clenched claws dry

if only I, with my brain-stuffed skull
and opposable thumbs could
grasp at chance as
firmly as he

“Virtual Sleep” (34) which opens “Into Uncertainty,” the second section of the volume, amplifies the message of mindful presence. It sounds the alarm of an earplugged humanity increasingly removed from any connection with nature, the characteristic that Bryson identified in ecopoetry as the “indictment of an overtechnologized modern world.” In this poem, the author, waiting at a bus stop, is noticing a young student “earplugged into virtuality” and oblivious to her natural surroundings, at that specific moment the raucous calls of geese, “masked ambassadors” “angled to scissor sky.”³ The poem warns of the emergence of a human

species dangerously disconnected from all other living entities, walled up and entrapped into its own esotropia and hypoesthesia:

And then the briars grow
seal the body's fortress
till nothing startles, wakes
not a kiss or even the geese
still plotting their course
 spring and fall
 north and south.

A strong sense of place anchors Jentsch's poetry. *Between the Rows* displays her deep ties to her immediate Kentucky surroundings: "Redbuds burst luminous" (74) in April; scents of "skunks, toads, voles" (15) linger in the valley; "peepers tsk a know-it-all taunt" (19); deers freeze time with "whole-note eyes" (46); "fresh-laid eggs [...] warm chilled hands / the scent of sweet clover spilling into lungs" (76). The poet paints for us aspects of our world that we are not able or not willing to see. She opens herself to a world of nonhuman presences that are manifested through colors, scents, sounds, shapes, temperatures and she invites us to become partners in this interconnected living web. Jentsch's deep engagement with the specifics of her local surroundings does not make her a regional poet, nor limits the range of her poetic landscape. Thus, in the whimsical alliterative "Landlocked Luck" (16), the poet's imagination wanders to seascapes and beaches. She compares the aerial acrobatics and loud calls of starlings to the rise and fall of waves: an avian "show and encore" echoing the "crest and crash" of ocean swell. Her musings have bridged and enhanced each geographical and time location and happily conclude with this query:

Or am I lucky living landlocked
by bluegrass and limestone
pinning a second stanza,
blue-green, to the poem the starlings
paint above our hills?

Place rootedness does not preclude mobility of space and time. Just as migratory birds plot their route “spring and fall / north and south” (35), the poet travels back and forth in space and time and transcends boundaries without losing her fundamental connections to her home. Her poetic engagement with the Kentucky natural world has uncovered affinities and linkages with distant places. Christine Gerhardt explores the notion of a mobile sense of place, particularly through migratory phenomena. The critic points out the growing number of environmental poems that “challenge all-too stable notions of place and place-connectedness as ecological ideals, from the perspectives of a genre that is uniquely suited to transcend place and time, without necessarily relinquishing literature’s referential dimension” (421). *Between the Rows* takes readers to war-torn Gaza and poverty-ridden Managua, to London, June 1940, as the city is being bombed and to New York, 1889, as the author’s ancestor disembarks to start a new life.

Birds figure prominently in *Between the Rows* and give the collection a dynamic sense of place and time. The author is a fervent birdwatcher who has been participating in the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Project Feederwatch for twenty-three years, faithfully counting winter birds at her feeders. Starlings, doves, nuthatches, juncos, woodpeckers, goldfinches, cardinals and their songs inhabit the space of the poems. We hear the *garooo* of the cranes (55), the *kikiriki* of the rooster (62), the cooing of the doves, the honking of the geese. Metaphors abound and help us visualize the “flying Vs” of the geese “angled to scissor sky” (34) and the “cartwheel” of starlings (16). However, this boisterous hub of colored feathers and distinctive sounds is under threat. The poem “Fall from Grace” (43) underlines the ecological fragility of our living habitat and foresees an environmental apocalypse:

What will become of us
when all the birds are gone,
when earth’s days tangle and riot, dreams

pale and dusk bestows mere darkness?

The question is posed in unambiguous terms. It is not a hypothesis; it is not “what would” but “what will”; it is not “if” but “when.” Damaged habitats, deaths of species, damaged “us.” The extinction of this world will mean the loss of images and the loss of language.

Jentsch uses the topic of avian migration to highlight the precarious situation of migrating creatures, human and nonhuman. In “Cranes’ View” (55), the poet alludes to the “last line” of cranes becoming refugees in a camp allotted to their kind:

Will its instinct
Pinpoint the plot
Allotted the species
As refuge?

“Cranes’ View” and “Fall from Grace” are companion pieces to the seven ekphrastic poems interspersed in the four sections of *Between the Rows*. Jentsch engages with activist artwork by German mixed media artist Bianca Artopé. The series “hanging hopes from chandeliers” was created in response to the refugee crisis in Germany in 2016. Artopé juxtaposes poignant images of tired, homeless, desperate refugees against images of pristine, luxurious, vacant dwellings for the rich. In “hanging hopes from chandeliers I” (40), Jentsch’s poetic interpretation emphasizes the human dimension of the crisis through words like “pulsing blood,” “quivering limbs” and “smelly wounds,” yet the tragedy remains unnoticed by the absent unconcerned wealthy: “polished opulence / sneers, veiled stairways / deceive, lamps / hoard light.” The artwork and Jentsch’s poem “hanging hopes from chandeliers V” (64) specifically represent human migrations due to climate change. Human and nonhuman species are either forced to abandon their native habitat that can no longer sustain life or become extinct. What is/will be the response of our entangled world? “Must our lives be stunted?” Or:

Let’s imagine it dancing

awash in clever colors
welcoming
even our wounded warmth

Jentsch writes from spaces of intimacy that nourish and sustain her artistic imagination. Her poetry shows her deep reverence for the vegetal and animal intelligences she shares life with. Similarly, her family provides a rich terrain of deep thinking and inspiration: we hear the voice of a wife, a mother, a grandmother, a daughter, a grand-daughter, a descendant. This voice speaks in all emotional registers from the inconsolable to the hopeful, and back. It opens a space of intimacy, between the rows, where author and reader connect with each other and where vulnerability and resilience conjoin. Nancy Jentsch's ecopoetic voice matters for our world, our now and our here. *Between the Rows* concludes with "Sometimes for a Moment" (85), a reminder to cultivate presence:

Then the firmament's
core uncurls
sap creeps up trunks
branches sway
cradle the still
unbridled blue

Notes

1. Some information in this essay is drawn from an interview Nancy Jentsch granted me on December 30, 2022, following the release of *Between the Rows*.
2. All poetry quotations are drawn from *Between the Rows*, unless noted otherwise. The titles and quotes in this essay reproduce capitalization, spacing and punctuation of poems exactly as they appear in the original.
3. Nancy Jentsch taught German and Spanish for thirty-seven years at Northern Kentucky University and regularly rode public transportation. Anyone familiar with the NKU area has seen the flocks of geese populating the campus. Since reading *Between the Rows*, the honking of the geese and their flying in V-formations has taken an entirely new meaning for this reader.

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