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## Necklace of Steam

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# Necklace of Steam

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## THE NOTHING THAT IS

John Olson

Ravenna Press

<http://www.ravennapress.com>

150 pages; paper, \$13.95

John Olson is the least important part of his own autobiography. In fact, Olson doesn't feature at all in *The Nothing That Is*, which casts its subject's thoughts and actions in the second person. A bullheaded reader may attribute said thoughts and actions to a Seattle poet named John Olson, but this habit should be abandoned as soon as possible. The "you" that blusters and wonders and spins litanies through *The Nothing That Is* doesn't confine itself to a particular identity, much less the leveling narrative tendency of autobiography. It dances around the middle of a single year. In this book, writing is "a necklace of steam." It comes into being when the flame of a hungry mind meets the cold water of daily life.

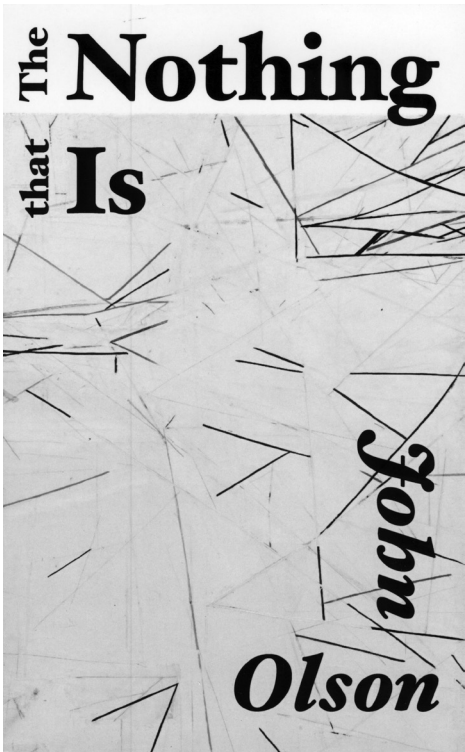
The book's monumental pettiness attains a left-handed form of universality. Even a supple reader will risk exhaustion during Tolstoyan excursions on noisy upstairs neighbors. You may not recognize yourself when "you risk being interpreted, perhaps rightly, as a neurotic crank...." You rail cloyingly against rap music, SUVs, and cell phones. But over time, your autobiography emerges as a comedy of thwarted transcendence. Your grievances don't matter in themselves; the problem is that you have to engage them at their level. The particularity of your complaints puts in contrast the indignity of a beautiful thought interrupted, and the waste of a culture that keeps what matters from mattering. "That's why poetry was so important: it ruptured and destabilized language, so that nothing congealed, hardened into dogma, or if it did, you could take a jackhammer to it and break it apart." *The Nothing That Is* takes words seriously—words as ideas, words as agents

of creation and destruction. Olson's brilliant prose poetry lurks around the corner of every idle speculation and seething anecdote. Passages on the creation and consumption and social life of poetry make for bewilderingly enjoyable reading. Much of the book chronicles situations to which you feel unsuited, so your fierce intelligence and palpable enthusiasm for writing stand out. You assume the responsibility of creating a space in the language for thought, or vice versa: "A helium attic full of haddock and metaphors throbbing with nuclear gerunds."

Such phantasms interweave with brass tacks. You describe a traffic jam as "A slow, bumper-to-bumper, inch-by-inch crawl of grid-locked frustration and cockamamie entanglements." Your search for peace and silence constantly ends in frustration, or never begins. "Solitude without silence is merely solitude." This book that disregards conventional plotting develops a rhythm of striving and sabotage, a spiral form visible from sentence to sentence or across dozens of pages. "All it took was the sound of some jerk's woofer to put you back in the world again." Violent fantasies do battle with Zen teachings in a parking lot. Personal connection fails to trump institutional indifference after a reading in Montana. Memories encroach on the present, and minding encroaches on "no-mind."

### *John Olson is the least important part of his own autobiography.*

The comic aspect of this veering isn't immediately apparent. You never explicitly acknowledge it. *The Nothing That Is* trades in the very small and the very large; the occasional wry observation or absurd image seldom admits the structure of a joke. But the book's open-jawed intimacy can't help but establish a sort of value system. You're concerned with balancing politeness with integrity, whether dealing with yuppie neighbors or earnest poets. Your eye for decay helps you seize moments of beauty. You're prepared to be surprised when the world is less oafish than usual. You compile lists that burlesque comprehensiveness, as in this speculation on the automotive choices of authors: "Shakespeare, on the other hand, would be a little less modest. He



would drive a Lexus. John Donne an Infiniti. John Keats a Jetta. Lord Byron a Harley Davidson. Elsa Von Freytag-Loringhoven a helicopter made of valentines and peacock feathers." Adhering to these values yields surprising results, and an ending so perfectly in tune with what came before that its very humility seems virtuosic.

Whether funny or rhapsodic or ruminative or whiny, Olson displays an intellect at work. He delineates the circumstances in which the brain's work can happen, and lingers on those in which it can't. *The Nothing That Is* solves the problem that it describes—it's a short book resplendent with space and time, strange enough to point at new possibilities and grounded enough to recognize where it comes from. Its nimble shifts of perspective teach a freedom that anyone can access and everyone needs. John Olson has often written "[a] poetry that capitalized on the inherently hallucinatory properties of language," but here we see poetry lapsing in and out of its fever dream.

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# All Dreamed Out

George Held

## NOTES FROM THE NIGHT: A LIFE AFTER DARK

Taylor Plimpton

Broadway Books

<http://www.randomhouse.com>

190 pages; cloth, \$22.00

Acutely aware of his many options in the New York City night, Taylor Plimpton, 34, recounts his experiences as a regular in the Manhattan nightclub scene when he was in his twenties. Though this debut has been compared to *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984), whose author, Jay McInerney, contributes a blurb, Plimpton's book is a memoir, not fiction, and

he comes across as more vulnerable and less hip than McInerney's narrator.

Plimpton's New York, though mainly limited to the West Side clubs where he spent most of his nights, is "this city of endless possibilities and movement, all of it pulsating around you." If this sounds a bit true, it's because so many books have been written about New York in the same vein, but Plimpton makes us feel that pulsation and puts the stamp of his generation on the city, much as F. Scott Fitzgerald did for *This Side of Paradise*, the debut novel that made him famous in 1920.

Compressing thousands of nights out clubbing into one typical foray from late evening to early morning, Plimpton shows his stuff as a stylish writer, the true son of George Plimpton, to whom *Notes* is dedicated and whose name "Tap" reluctantly drops

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