

The Natural Order of Things

Richard Donze

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The free verse poems collected in The Natural Order of Things apply scientific intelligence to universal human concerns.

Physician Richard Donze's poetry collection *The Natural Order of Things* blends medical experience and personal faith into a lyrical examination of illness, aging, and the gift of family.

These poems reflect intimate familiarity with human frailty, as well as awareness of the powers of love and beauty. They are divided across six sections that move through the stages of a life, including childhood, marriage, parenting, maturity, and decline. These are united by vigilance against "the uncommon," a recurring reference to the sudden death of a two-year-old from an infection that impacted Donze's family for decades.

The acceptance of paradoxes is an organizing principle that runs through many of the poems. The poem "arithmetic" comments on the paradox of love multiplying as it is divided among the increasing members of a young, growing family. "Springhouse" describes an old "house about ten feet square" once used for preserving food—a symbol of human efforts against decay:

... not the
first and certainly not the
last proud bulwark against

the natural order of things.

The entries are free verse in form and diverge from standard punctuation and capitalization. Their heavy reliance on alliteration results in musicality, and their internal rhymes are strong. "Four perfect quarters" describes a neighbor who instructs its speaker on how to split wood: "the way the four quarters fall apart, the look / and smell of startled heartwood." The poems' short lines resemble columns running down a page, and their line breaks avoid standard syntax. While an impediment in some of the book's longer poems, these choices result in fresh, unexpected turns within shorter entries.

While those named within the poems are not always contextualized, the collection is often accessible. Its standout entries include "Hover Craft," about the helicopter parents of an ill child, and "Division of Labor," in which each line is a separate sentence describing actions taken by distinct hospital staff members who encounter a dying young man. A recurring question in the book is of how to reconcile parents' beliefs that they can protect their children with what every adult knows about the certainty of unexpected tragedies. Faith provides some measure of solace, as does camaraderie with others "sharing stories of / blameless suffering sons."

The book's final sections are concerned with mortality, looking back upon the death of Donze's brother, and forward to Donze's own inescapable death. They ask what can people can hope for when death is certain. One entry, "compline," makes modest demands framed in the language of science and medicine:

*may our cells always
know their boundaries, our
hearts know no
failure and only
break for love and
no other brokenness*

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MICHELE SHARPE (March 16, 2022)

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