

## The Nature of Humans: Personal Growth through Poetry

**Christopher Jones**

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*Even and moving, the poems collected in The Nature of Humans acknowledge people's shortcomings, but also celebrate their potential for growth.*

Functioning like exercises in self-reflection and personal evolution, the entries of Christopher Jones's poetry collection *The Nature of Humans* address human foibles and everyday challenges with an open spirit.

"I seek a loving demotion / from myself," a narrator who's striving for humility declares; their introspection reflects that of other speakers throughout the collection, who make a continual, conscious effort to be more thoughtful, more considerate, and more aware of the world around them. An early entry, "Kite," is an extended metaphor for fear-based inaction; though its speaker wants to see his delicate flier soar "against the sapphire sky, / twisting and turning, / twirling in delight," they are rendered inert by the conviction that their kite may be judged by others. The lesson is implicit and moving.

Throughout the book, figurative language reigns—always striking and direct, if of varying degrees of freshness. Poems speak of metaphorical "inner thunder," cobblestones, and dark corners; elsewhere, an instrument that's been "cracked by dissonance" leads an entry, and is, in moving form, revealed to represent the speaker themselves.

Appearing midway through, "Notice" is the first poem to truly celebrate natural images on their own merit: "the warble / of a red-winged blackbird, / an aspen leaf shivering / its pale back / to the breeze..." It's a standout moment in a book whose natural references trend representative, and whose Nature section indulges in the same.

Lovely instances of assonance result in surprising lines that force inward reorientations, as in the affecting poem "Both &":

*It takes our earth  
one full turn,  
both night and day,  
to finish a rotation.*

*I feel I am a contradiction,  
sitting twisted  
as an ampersand ...*

Powerful moments recur throughout—most often in poems that lean into their speakers' vulnerability. In "Endless Chatter," the narrator declares "So, I seek myself / elsewhere"; it's a sobering moment that results in an emotive pause mid-entry. And as the book moves from its focus on "I" to discussing topics as part of a "we," its already sympathetic work becomes more open, accessible, and involving.

But the repeating image of being trapped in one's own head diminishes in effectiveness with each appearance.

Further, some of the poems adhere too closely to familiar themes to be impactful. This is the case with “Footprints,” which begins in a backward-looking manner that recalls Mary Fishback Powers’s famous poem, sans religion; weighed down by adverbs and heavy metaphors, the entry never manages to escape that shadow. Indeed, adverbs prove to be a frequent stumbling block within the otherwise expansive and expressive collection.

Though the poems’ themes are grandiose, their presentations are inviting. Form seems less the objective than the clear conveyance of themes, and so many of the poems appear in a similar format: left justified, stretched across two pages, and with breaks at moments that reflect breathing pauses, more so than style. The entries contract and expand in length as the collection progresses, but their speeds remain steady. In effect, the poems become more like meditations than objets d’art—designed to provoke audience “reflection, and to give you the opportunity to look inward to find solutions to the problems you see in the world.” There’s a sameness to their movements and themes, yes, but also an evocation of calm.

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MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (December 17, 2021)

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