

**A READER'S COMPANION**  
*for*  
**Thomas Centolella's**  
***Almost Human***

Tupelo Press (2017)

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## Award citation for *Almost Human*

“Somehow magical — the way these oddly elusive, sometimes funny, lyrically discursive and poignantly beautiful poems engage the mysteries.”

— Edward Hirsch, final judge for the Dorset Prize

## Critical praise for *Almost Human*

“Thomas Centolella’s *Almost Human* has an arresting, original voice, distinctive in its being both elusive and direct. On the one hand it can be riddling and elliptical, the voice of someone who possess the ‘art of caring from afar.’ On the other it can be startlingly open in expressing the speaker’s concern with finding a vision to live by.

The poet can present himself as one of the followers of a remote visionary who seems in need of a vote of confidence, and as a roving prophet of tranquility who has to break off his instructions to the reader so he might go home to ‘acquire some peace’ of his own.

The speaker (in each poem) is bracingly honest about the resistance of the world to revelation, and at the same time seems always open to change, so that the simple act of sitting down to play the piano is felt as making contact ‘with everything that has come before / and is still to come.’ Without the hope of salvation, the speaker seems to believe in the possibility of engaging with a reality deeper than any he has yet encountered, regarding his frustrations as part of a ritual of desire that must be continually enacted.

The result is a book that keeps drawing the reader back and keeps surprising.”

— Carl Dennis, Pulitzer Prize winner of *Practical Gods*

## Biographical note

Lannan Foundation award-winner **Thomas Centolella** has published three previous books of poetry: the American Book Award-winner *Terra Firma* (Copper Canyon, 1990), the California Book Award-winner *Lights & Mysteries* (Copper Canyon, 1995), and *Views from along the Middle Way* (Copper Canyon, 2002). He was a Stegner Fellow at Stanford University and has taught literature and creative writing at San Francisco State University, the University of California – Berkeley extension, the College of Marin, and in the California Poets in the Schools Program, as well as for the Institute on Aging and WritersCorps. He lives in San Francisco.

## On the Poem “Spirit”

“... the better angels of our nature.”

~Abraham Lincoln

All through *Almost Human* we hear from an assortment of speakers — personas — who are not clearly identified by context, back story, or conventional narrative. They can be regarded as spokespersons presenting variations on the premise of the book, namely that we are not human beings having a spiritual experience, but spiritual beings having a human experience. Thus, there are two tropisms at work here: the human turning toward the spiritual and the spiritual turning toward the human. It is not always evident, with any given speaker, who is moving toward what; readers must suss this out for themselves. I’m the kind of writer who allows the material to tell me what it wants to be, what it needs to say. I trust my readers to be as open-minded.

Many of the persona poems in *Almost Human* arrived via an approach that was not my usual *modus operandi*. One day, on a whim, I sat down with a blank page and pen and decided to write whatever might occur to me. What emerged was a 21-line piece with a lot of leaps and an indeterminate speaker whose voice didn’t sound much like my own. The result was interesting enough that I decided to repeat the exercise, this time employing a 21-line limit. Again, another piece emerged with wild, intriguing associations and in a voice resembling neither my usual one nor its predecessor. I was hooked and wrote a series of 21-liners. The speakers of these poems expressed a variety of discrete points of view—not necessarily “my” POV—but they all had certain things in common: their energy was palpable, and they were not shy; they each included a number of reference points; they had an agenda but tended not to lay it out in a linear way; and they challenged the reader to listen to their spiels without the benefit of context.

As I continued my work on *Almost Human* I didn’t abandon more familiar approaches, e.g., lyric and narrative poems that clearly derived from my personal life, a.k.a. “my” point of view (POV). But I noticed a carry-over from the 21-liners. Several more expansive pieces each brought a voice I couldn’t authoritatively say was my own—even though I was, obviously, the author of these. This raises the question of inspiration: Whence does it come? And once we have received inspiration and put it to our purposes, how much should we take credit for the outcome? Without wading too closely into a metaphysical, even mystical, riptide, I’ll ask if writers are the true progenitors of their work, or just convenient channels? Am I the god, the oracle, the high priest, the supplicant—or all of the above?

Once I could detect the connective tissue spreading through *Almost Human*, I was content to give free reign to somewhat enigmatic voices and POVs. In a book that aims to illustrate the fluid interplay of two natures — the numinous and the human — this indeterminacy served my purposes quite well. Certainly there are poems here that clearly derive from the universally familiar human experience, poems no one will have difficulty connecting to the life of the author (or what they assume is such). But there are

also poems here not so readily categorized. Nor should they be. Shouldn't the numinous have its say as well?

What if the better angels of our nature, for example, were tired of their prescribed roles, worn down and out by the darker aspects of the human enterprise, and by our difficult, seemingly incorrigible ways? What would they have to say, and how would they say it? Answering those questions was the genesis of the poem "Spirit."

As persona poems go, it might be that I have never taken a risk as great as I did with "Spirit." It's one thing to give voice to a figure who, mysterious as it is, is still recognizable as a human being. It's entirely something else to speak as a god—in this case, not even a god but spirit itself. (Unless you want to apply the Catholic approach and think of the spirit here as the Holy Spirit, one of the three gods that make one God—a concept which, as someone who endured eighteen years of Catholic education, was not lost on me.) Writing "Spirit" was liberating in at least one critical way: it was satisfying to leave the nature of this "presence" ambiguous, open-ended. What meaning of "spirit" are we to assume here? Is it the animating life force (*spirare*, "to breathe"; thus, *inspiration*, the taking-in of breath, of life)? Is it the common synonym for "soul," or merely a descriptor for someone with a lively personality? Is it a supernatural being, as in the Holy Spirit? Or not a Holy Ghost at all, but a plain old everyday ghost, something that haunts rather than inspires, that speaks with a tongue closer to flesh and blood than to fire? Or is it the *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age, our times—possibly time itself?

To offer possibilities but no definitive answers—no irritable reaching after fact and reason, as Keats would say—was to embody in one longer poem the theme of *Almost Human* itself: the spiritual and the human flowing through a common sphere, to the point where they can be indistinguishable—spirit and matter in a symbiosis, each unable to exist without the other. At the end of "Spirit," after listening to a long litany of mortal travails that call into question the lamentable, ephemeral, suspect, and quite possibly futile nature of existence itself, we hear this:

My time has come and has passed  
more times than anyone can remember.  
And will come again. In the meantime  
I have learned to endure what many cannot:  
Godly calm. Ungodly desire.

Is this the assertion of an avatar, a god descended into human form, or of a human subjected to godly forces? Or is it, perhaps, the very essence of what the two have in common?

## Links

**Thomas Centolella's home website**

[thomascentolella.wordpress.com](http://thomascentolella.wordpress.com)

***Almost Human* on the Tupelo Press website**

[www.tupelopress.org/almost-human](http://www.tupelopress.org/almost-human)

**Thomas Centolella's *Wikipedia* page**

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Centolella](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Centolella)

**Poems by Thomas Centolella on the Poetry Foundation website**

[www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/thomas-centolella](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/thomas-centolella)

**Audio of interview by Michelle Laflamme-Childs on SantaFe.com**

[santafe.com/kbac/podcasts/michelle-talks-with-poet-thomas-centolella](http://santafe.com/kbac/podcasts/michelle-talks-with-poet-thomas-centolella)

**Interview by Megan Ross Rodriguez and Julia Fox in *The Susquehanna Review***

[www.susquehannareview.com/centolella-interview](http://www.susquehannareview.com/centolella-interview)

**Thomas Centolella's listing in the *Poets & Writers* directory**

[www.pw.org/content/thomas\\_centolella](http://www.pw.org/content/thomas_centolella)

**"I Prefer the Tango" — An Interview with Maggie Morley**

[www.marinpoetrycenter.org/newsletter/2012](http://www.marinpoetrycenter.org/newsletter/2012)

**Thomas Centolella poems on The Writer's Almanac with Garrison Keillor**

[writersalmanac.publicradio.org/author.php?auth\\_id=1649](http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/author.php?auth_id=1649)