

# Summer 2016

New issue, new format, new assistant editors, some new poets as well as some familiar ones. Thanks to the gracious assistance of Lenoir-Rhyne University and the two interns / assistant editors they have allotted me I am able to once again pull together an issue of Wild Goose Poetry Review (something we hope to do with much greater regularity than the last couple of years have permitted). In fact, we are already reading for the fall 2016 issue and hope to have it online by the middle of December. My gratitude goes out to the poets and readers whose patience has been strained beyond all reasonable bounds. I hope this issue makes the wait worthwhile. I also thank my brilliant assistant editors, Jordan Makant, and Katelyn Vause, whose help has been invaluable.

With that said, sit back, relax, enjoy the latest incarnation of Wild Goose Poetry Review, and please share your thoughts with other readers and the authors of the selected poems, by leaving your own insightful comments for others to read.

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## MUTE BUTTON

Ron Riecki

I use it like religion,  
the commercials silenced  
so that I strain  
my back  
diving for the thing.  
My dad says there should be  
a blind button  
so we wouldn't have to see  
the one thousandth freaking  
Gieco commercial—  
however you spell it.  
We keep yelling "uncle!"  
I worked for a week  
at the front desk  
of an ad agency  
and I swear to God  
I heard an employee  
say they were looking  
at brainwashing techniques  
and how they could apply them  
to ads. I quit  
before the end  
of the week.  
My cousin said no,  
there should be a def button,  
where you just press it  
and instantly everything  
is nothing but hip-hop.  
My mom said that's all  
we need is another button  
on a remote control  
that already has a hundred  
goddamn buttons.  
She talks like that,  
uses the f- word  
more than anything  
you'd ever hear  
on HBO.  
No commercials  
on that channel,  
thank God above.

I wish I could afford it.  
I wish I could afford silence,  
the ability not to be brainwashed  
by these companies who we pretend  
don't have such strong connections  
to the Holocaust,  
to slavery,  
to the way that class  
crushes  
us  
in line,  
in life,  
in classrooms,  
inevitably  
in everything  
we do  
like birds beating  
their angels to death.

**Bio:** Ron Riecki's books include U.P.: a novel (Great Michigan Read nominated), The Way North: Collected Upper Peninsula New Works (2014 Michigan Notable Book), and Here: Women Writing on Michigan's Upper Peninsula ([May 2015, Michigan State University Press](#)). His screenplay The First Real Halloween was selected as best screenplay in the sci-fi/fantasy category for the 2014 International Family Film Festival.

Al Ortolani

SWAMP TOUR

A girl has opened a can of black olives.  
She wears them on the tips of her fingers  
like mermaid's purses. She slides them one  
by one into her mouth. They are better  
than promises, the juice on each fingernail  
cool and salty. Between hammocks,  
sawgrass sways against the gunnels.  
A ray, more shadow than light,  
races below them towards the open sea.  
Pelicans perch in the high branches  
of the mangroves, nonchalant, self-absorbed.  
The girl pries up the olive lid. She licks  
her fingers, shoves them in like spears.

Al Ortolani

TAKING THE ACT IN DECEMBER

High school seniors file in this morning  
to take the ACT. They are taught the future  
hinges upon a two digit score that will  
open doors. It's a cold morning,  
the roads covered with ice. The proctor  
carries a cup of Starbucks and a stack  
of essays to grade. She is young, just  
a year or two beyond college herself.  
The boys tap their pencils, wondering  
if she is the one who will  
meet them after the test, after their scores  
are compiled, after the doors open. The girls  
study her more closely: her boots,  
her tights, her layered hair, the way  
she shuts off her phone  
and drops it—finished into her bag.

Michael Estabrook

TEMPTATION

Whenever he finds a spider  
in the house he leaves it alone  
life is tough enough  
he reasons even for spiders.  
But sometimes one will show up  
in the bedroom  
around bedtime  
and his wife notices and says  
“either that spider goes or I do”  
So of course he captures it  
releases it outside  
where it belongs anyway  
but honestly at times  
he’s tempted to leave  
the damn thing  
right where she found it.

**Bio:** Michael Estabrook is a recently retired baby boomer child-of-the-sixties poet freed finally after working 40 years for “The Man” and sometimes “The Woman.” No more useless meetings under florescent lights in stuffy windowless rooms. Now he’s able to devote serious time to making better poems when he’s not, of course, trying to satisfy his wife’s legendary Honey-Do List.

Carl Boon

TRIANGLES

I draw triangles on a blank white page.  
She considers how they connect,  
turn colorful, turn into something:

a life chain, a monster.  
And then she goes to the window  
to watch the blue and white vans

and the rain. All is slanted  
and, perchance, will be over tomorrow.  
I dislike my pink one in the corner,

but think about relationships instead,  
the gray one on the right, how it might  
be purple or green, and why love

has three sides always: the loved,  
the lover, and the weather. I think to mark  
a black line across the page

I've made. Say to her there are no angles  
here, just being and becoming.  
A straight line and a life beyond.

But that would be easy and wrong,  
and now she's got the window open.  
She's folded my page into an airplane

and will let it fly. The rain will take it  
down, I tell her, the rain will make it  
make triangles I could never draw.

**Bio:** Carl Boon lives and works in Istanbul, Turkey. Recent or forthcoming poems appear in *Posit*, *The Tulane Review*, *Badlands*, *The Blue Bonnet Review*, and many other magazines.

John Amen

FOLK SINGER

of course you're suffering  
that goes without saying  
alone in yr own private tundra  
staggering through the snow

the face of some Beatrice behind & before you  
head & heart those masters of spin  
weave from the unknown a threadbare tale  
silence that gray country  
where you arrive & arrive already judged

you crave anything that steams  
be it liquid or flesh  
as long as words & notes keep rolling  
as long as there's a chance  
of surviving until spring  
seeing that Beatrice again

she'll slide a plate across the table  
drop her dress to the floor  
you won't have to explain where you've been  
or dance around yr conscience  
o you holiest of fools

John Amen

CURTAIN SPEECH

*for Michael S.*

after the final show  
we attend the final party  
encouraging ourselves to stay in role  
consider  
nothing's a failure  
unless everything is  
death's always advancing & always plants its flag  
we do what we can  
to hold the line for a while

frustrations spark in the wings  
flaring towards the open mic  
as we raise our drinks  
lamenting the end of the theater  
soliloquizing how the advisory board  
could've eluded this checkmate  
kept the lights on  
the doors open

fact is every dream ever conceived  
was at its best  
prior to being scripted  
before its author was even born  
before the big bang  
banged  
making all these dramas possible

a week later  
we're back to our usual improvisations  
the hungry gas tank  
illnesses that stalk us  
the math that keeps us up at night  
love we hold at bay & to which we finally surrender  
we straggle into our familiar & unfamiliar lives  
how comedy keeps becoming tragedy  
keeps becoming comedy...  
& there's just no telling  
how this one's going to end

**Bio:** John Amen is the author of four collections of poetry: *Christening the Dancer* (Uccelli Press, 2003), *More of Me Disappears* (Cross-Cultural Communications, 2005), *At the Threshold of Alchemy* (Presa, 2009), and *strange theater* (New York Quarterly Books, 2015). His work has appeared in numerous journals nationally and internationally and been translated into Spanish, French, Hungarian, Korean, and Hebrew. He founded and continues to edit [The Pedestal Magazine](#).

Karen Douglass

MINDING THE MARGINS

Nameless but familiar, a neighbor  
power walks on the diagonal  
gutter to gutter, lengthening  
his route. He's old but not lost.

Unpaired electron, he caroms  
off both curbs, daily  
quilts Earth's longitude,  
grinning as he makes  
his own crooked way.

I mind the margins, afraid  
of the ditch, fretful  
over where to go except  
straight on toward another day.

My address is a box, a code,  
a key. What makes me cross  
only at the end of the block?  
a dodge, a bump, a possible fall?  
The dog keeps me leashed.

I live inside the lines I've drawn.  
I make my bed before breakfast. Civilization  
means beans sown in rows, cows  
pastured in fields walled with stones.

My old ones immigrated but I almost wish  
they had stayed put, so I do,  
where Ireland bleeds into England.  
But they crisscrossed the Atlantic,  
a respite from maps and borders.  
Let me too invite disorder.  
Loosen my stays and laces.

Ronald Moran

EYE OF THE WORLD

Possibly all the eyes in our world may be wrong  
(that is,  
the eyes of the people) except for my right eye,  
which  
nearly eliminates the expression too skinny  
from  
our lexicon, since, well, it adds bulk to everything  
it sees,

but it also adds height and, proportionately,  
whatever  
is needed to make a body or thing look natural,  
yet larger,  
and who is to say my right eye is not the eye  
of our world,  
the one eye that records dimensions as they  
actually

are, a spin of nature revealing a truth nobody  
will admit,  
and it would not be the first time in our history,  
that  
the truth revealed itself to only one person—in  
this case,  
an older guy in South Carolina, ordinary, yet  
possessed

with a certain eye power that makes most people  
look better,  
physically larger, more in command, which is what  
most want,  
and who spent huge amounts of money at gyms  
and for  
plastic surgeons, when, really, they are what  
they dream of.

**Bio:** Ronald Moran is Professor Emeritus at Clemson University and the author of numerous collections of poetry. "Eye of the World" is the title poem from his new collection, published this spring.

Donald Brandis

NARCISSUS POETICUS

Hidden as part of a curt border of flower beds  
in the western lawn, bulbs patient as a cemetery

wait to re-cycle our green-stalk, white-flower expectations  
blossoms like reversed cones as if to be scent-sampled

by Cyrano, though bees too are welcome and more useful  
the Frenchman would object, saying Beauty

is a vital shared uselessness  
fulfilling a moment beyond character or description

her absent pale red-rimmed face consoles  
a weeping eye against her ungrasped constancy

Now is that moment, he counters  
in her snowy bed unseen unseeing weightless

moving only as the slow old earth she rides in moves her  
only as our idle imagination pulls her backward and forward

in the same motion toward repetition;  
Now is her still moment, and ours

never was or is in our seeing it seen  
climate or weather or season or exclamation

but what unsaid these offer, witness and affirm  
in passing impassive, a perfumed suggestion

**Bio:** Donald Brandis lives in a small town in Washington state, has written several volumes of poetry, most recently *Hubble This*, has recently had several poems published by *The Camel Saloon* and *Poppy Road Review*, sees influence in his work his favorite poets by William Stafford, Tomas Tranströmer, Emily Dickinson, Gary Snyder.

Holly Day

EARLY

if I lie still enough  
long enough  
will my body melt the snow  
will tulips and daffodils race up  
expecting an early arrival of spring?

will our combined heat  
convince the rest of the plants that it's spring?  
if we lie here together  
will we wake crocuses, make snowdrops unfurl  
open bright crowns to herald the sun

shake Christmas roses awake?  
if you make love to me, here, in the snow  
on the hard-packed snow, on the frozen mud and ice  
will the roots of this tree feel us move  
will it unfurl tiny nubs of budded leaves  
thinking that it's spring?

Holly Day

I SEARCH THE MIRROR FOR TRAGEDY

flesh moves toward you as if summoned, and here, far from  
fairy tale castles and big screen love  
I am waiting by the telephone, in the dark—  
one last pastel-colored cocktail and she is yours

she will be. she glides through the walls of  
thinking, lying here, rotting from hollow places  
I am begging for just one last bite from  
ever, or just tonight, whatever you decide my role will be  
in the days before I become a rotting corpse  
plow me under.

waiting by the telephone, in the dark, in  
far away, I know exactly what you are  
in our bed, I am always waiting for you  
you've finally caught her, across the room, promises  
I am in our bed, always waiting for you.

**Bio:** Holly Day was born in Hereford, Texas , “The Town Without a Toothache.” She and her family currently live in Minneapolis, Minnesota , where she teaches writing classes at the Loft Literary Center. Her poetry has recently appeared in *Oyez Review*, *SLAB*, and *Gargoyle*.

Lucy Cole Gratton

TWELVE GAUGE

They say she is crazy  
sitting on her front porch,  
shotgun across her knees.  
Seven times they tried;  
seven times she said no;  
last time shots were fired.  
The state needs the right-of-way,  
to go around will cost millions;  
to destroy is all she understands.  
Home, all of her life,  
now dowdy and ill-kept;  
what could it be worth –  
these acres of huge oaks,  
hemlocks' cooling shade,  
rare wildflowers strewn along the creek?

Her home.  
Her way of life;  
here is reassurance,

refuge for bear,  
sanctuary for deer,  
canopy home to wings.

**Author's Comment:** A phone call from my sister one night, after viewing a piece on the national news about an older women, shotgun on her lap, defying local authorities from taking her property for a new highway, initiated this poem. That and the comment from her, that there was her sister some years hence. I admit to acutely empathizing with this woman and would certainly cheer her on in her efforts.

Brenda Kay Ledford

AMBIDEXTROUS

Even at six,  
I knew I was  
meant to be left-handed.

When Miss Mayme Moses  
turned her back  
to help other students

in the first grade,  
I held my pencil  
in the left hand.

Minutes ticked like hours  
on the classroom clock,  
the teacher caught me

and slapped the defiant hand.  
I hid my talent,  
colored with a chastised fist.

**Bio:** Brenda Kay Ledford is a seventh generational native of Clay County, NC. The beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains inspire her writing. Her work has appeared in 30 Old Mountain Press anthologies, and many journals. Finishing Line Press published her three poetry chapbooks, Aldrich Press published her poetry book that won the 2015 Paul Green Award. She is a retired educator, storyteller, poet and enjoys playing the piano and harmonica. She wants to play spoons.

Kelly DeMaegd

EACH SEASON HAS ITS WORK

Electroshock therapy  
alters her memory.

She recalls where the coffee mugs  
are located; forgets I am not the parent.

Worried by strangeness,  
lured by luminous

sash-high snowdrifts,  
I awake to spend moonlit

nights with Ma and Pa  
in the Little House in the Big Woods.

Reading about proving soap,  
butchering hogs, tapping maple trees,

schooling myself in the art  
of caring for a family.

**Author's Comment:** My parents instilled in me a great love of reading – this poem is an affirmation of the comfort and solace that can be found in a book.

**Bio:** Kelly DeMaegd is a Pushcart-nominated poet living in Sherrills Ford, NC. She has been published in Wild Goose Poetry Review, Vox Poetica, Your Daily Poem and Bloodshot. She is a regular contributor to Art of Poetry at the Hickory Museum of Art and a contributor to Winston-Salem's Poetry In Plain Sight.

Patty Cole

MAMMA'S RISING TO THE INK SPOTS

She had never died before,  
but there she lay breathing  
like a hooked fish thrown  
on the ground, eyes like coffins  
swinging open and closed on a rusty hinge.

For years we pushed Mom  
between thorazine and shock  
until she no longer spoke, hoped.

So she smoked all day, every day.  
Her endless trail of ash and fumes,  
destroyed anything sweet in our lives.

I never could extinguish her pain.

When the doctors took her off the ventilator,  
I was with her. Sweet Mamma. Pretty Mamma.  
The voices can't hurt you anymore.

She looked at me, doe-eyed, bobbed her head,  
sang,

I love coffee, I love tea.  
I love the java jive and it loves me.  
Coffee and tea and the jiving and me,  
a cup, a cup, a cup, a cup, a cup!

**Author's Comment:** This poem was inspired by the passing on my mother in 2009, which sparked a firestorm in my mind on the subject of mortality—mine, my family's, and friends'.

**Bio:** Patty Cole, a writer of poetry, essays, and fiction, lives with her husband and many animals in Chatham County, North Carolina, where snakes increase, coyotes run in packs, stars punctuate black nights, and in rich and fertile soil, writers grow.

Maren O. Mitchell

BLACK COW

On the snaking country road October clouds  
block moon and star light while we drive

to the poetry reading. Black and depthless  
as a black hole, unexpected as mortality,

yet a comical cookie cutter shape—the black cow,  
if she'd been in our lane, could have changed

our lives and hers. She is not. She grazes the green  
shoulder, a contented, guilt-free escapee—

a menace to oncoming traffic. We slow, flashing.  
Ahead, like a huge flightless metal insect,

a truck responds in kind. The night's real surprise  
comes when eleven-year-old Donovan Scott,

composed, reads his poems to the audience gathered  
to hear adult poets: his last poem an unveiling,

*I used to be lost... / Now I am a poet, found  
in the ashes. Silently I exult, Yes! Yes! You are  
found! Afterwards, I tell him, I am found  
with each poem I write. The night's real fear  
arrives when I learn his parents, not present,  
do not treasure his discovery. Because control*

is an illusion, as we near home, I am warmed  
by our current safety, our shared treasures.

**Author's Comment:** This night was special to me, illuminating all I have, down to life itself, while also letting me witness to the birth of a very young poet.

**Bio:** Maren O. Mitchell's poems have appeared in *Hotel Amerika*, *Chiron Review*, *Iodine Poetry Journal*, *Appalachian Heritage*, *The South Carolina Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *The Classical Outlook*, *Appalachian Journal*, *The World Is Charged: Poetic Engagements with Gerard Manley Hopkins*, anthologies and elsewhere. Work is forthcoming in *Poetry East*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Poem*, and *The Crafty Poet II*. Mitchell's nonfiction is *Beat Chronic Pain, An Insider's Guide* (Line of Sight Press, 2012). She lives with her husband in the mountains of north Georgia.

April Griffin

I DON'T CARE WHAT DADDY SAYS

Daddy says  
You ain't got a lick of since  
"Mouth of the South"  
He calls me

Daddy's got  
Nicknames for me  
Bertha Butt and Thunder Thighs  
Amelia Airhead

Daddy says  
Little ladies don't play sports  
They wear pretty dresses  
Sing in the choir

Daddy says  
I can't cut my hair  
He likes it long  
Can't wear makeup  
That's for trashy girls

Daddy says  
Nice young ladies don't kiss boys  
Or hold their hands  
An' ain't no daughter of his  
Gonna date no colored boys

Daddy says  
Keep your mouth shut  
Let people think you stupid  
Don't open your mouth  
Prove 'hem right

Darrell Epp

ON THE OCCASION OF LOSING ONE'S GUIDING LIGHT

the desire to change, to molt,  
to sprout wings, to morph into  
mythology puffs out my chest,  
stiffens my spine, but i get so  
distracted by j-lo's divorce and  
a remake of a remake that now  
it's time for bed and i haven't  
even shaved. ochre creeps along  
the maples before their leaves  
irrevocably fall into the gutters.  
halloween trees look so naked  
it's hard not to laugh, or cry; it  
depends. in grade ten science  
class, lisa double-dared me to  
stick my tongue down her throat.  
endoplasmic reticulum, seminal  
vesicles and what's the difference  
between mitosis and meiosis?  
she had a thing for athletes. i  
saw her at the dollarama, her  
kids were alarmingly feral.  
she was pale, paler as i stared  
until she become translucent  
as a jellyfish. the space station  
that crashed into tamil nadu,  
i'd been using it as a sort of  
homing beacon. now it takes  
twice as long to walk home.  
i'll trade you a stale-dated  
manuscript and a sympathetic  
smile for just one gold trophy.  
it doesn't have to be solid gold.  
gold-plating or just a few strips  
of gold paint will do. you can  
even pick the sport, i'm easy.

**Bio:** Darrell Epp is the author of the poetry collection *Imaginary Maps*. His poetry has appeared around the world in places like *Rhino*, *Poetry Ireland*, *Exile* and *Queen's Quarterly*.

Jean Rodenbough

CARVING THE SPACES

wood chips fall to the patio  
as my knife follows the pattern  
traced on the bare plate

my life is in patterns  
that I discover  
through chips of motifs  
formed by time

to carve a shape  
is to carve its space  
as this plate is seen  
by what is missing  
when my keen blade  
flicks out the pieces

I wonder  
what will form me  
as I seek patterns  
in small chips  
of hope and love  
that reveal me  
by their absence

**Author's Comment:** My favorite endeavor is chip carving, which provides time to meditate while I carve.

**Bio:** I am a retired Presbyterian minister, with two published books by All Things That Matter Press: *Bebe & Friends: Tails of Rescue* (gathered from those who contributed stories about their pets); *Rachel's Children: Surviving the Second World War* (accounts from those who were children during that war). Self-published books by lulu.com: poems, a book on the grief process, and a book narrated by a 12-year-old girl about people in her home town.

Alarie Tennille

POETS IN THE SLEEP LAB

They called for thirty of us,  
for those whose eyelids drop  
near sunrise. We woke on the moon –  
a test colony. They thought it kindest  
to send subjects who can sleep  
in light and travel in imagination.

We write all we want, but share  
only with each other. Some volunteer  
for a satellite station on the dark  
side, where they can't see home  
and the past always looming.

I thought I'd miss the trees, grass,  
bird song. But when I stare  
at that glowing blue orb, I want  
to drown in its rush of water.

**Author's Comment:** The moon is taking over my poetry. This is great. It makes less work for me. "Here's another poem," she says, "pretend it is yours." Since I retired in 2012, I've embraced a night owl's schedule, which Luna loves. However, I definitely own the ending of this poem. It reflects my homesickness for the ocean, since I grew up on the coast and now live land-locked, a thousand miles away.

**Bio:** Alarie Tennille was born and raised in Portsmouth, Virginia, and graduated from the University of Virginia in the first class admitting women. She serves on the Emeritus Board of The Writers Place. Alarie's the author of a new poetry collection, *Running Counterclockwise* (2014) and a chapbook, *Spiraling into Control* (2010). Alarie's poems have appeared in numerous journals including *Margie*, *Poetry East*, *Coal City Review*, *English Journal*, *Little Balkans Review*, and *Southern Women's Review*. Please visit her new website at [alariepoet.com](http://alariepoet.com).

James B. Nicola

POP ART

Pop is what corn does, simmering in oil,  
when a little more heat's applied, and time.

Pop's what the gods do, shimmering in spring,  
when a little more light's applied, on time.

Pop is what art does, slathering on trends,  
when a little pressure's applied. In time

the butter, salt, and variegated flavors  
convince a world it's satisfied. The stomach's  
gurgles, near the lungs and heart, fool some  
that our hearts have been filled—until the snack,

devoured and digested, finally is pooped  
and turns to mulch, and a mysterious hunger  
for greens and proteins makes me crave and wonder,  
but wash the rancid pot still on the stove

so that tomorrow evening I might get  
some nice art film to watch couch-bound at home  
and make fresh popcorn, lightly salted, to feel  
all newly-puffed and crunchy and delicious.

**Author's Comment:** The idea of the final quatrain in "Pop Art" came after four drafts (over a ten-year period!), which then sparked an overhaul of the stanzas leading up to it. Both poems are from an evolving collection of Poems on Art and Artistry.

James B. Nicola

PAINTERS OF THE SKY

– For A. T. the director and A. T. the protagonist on the premiere of their first film, “Painters of the Sky”.

Wanting to give all you had  
Needing to offer all you were  
You gave all you could  
With abandon  
And joy  
Under-appreciated

When you found  
At the post-pubescent miscarriage  
That All wasn't Enough

You wanted it back  
Needed it back  
And took it back  
All  
Almost

And have lived ever since  
Half-way  
Having to convince yourself  
Of values  
Of no value  
To you

\* \* \*

But somewhere within  
Where you are You  
The star whence  
Your greater elements have dropped  
Was yearning for even the minerals of nutrition  
– Calcium, Iron, Magnesium, Potassium –  
Not to mention the very Nitrogen and Oxygen of breath

To twinkle  
Shine

And brighten forever  
The loving, giving, living  
Firmament  
That's wider than the Milky Way  
Yet contained  
Unrevealed  
Inside the merest all of  
Who you were  
Who you've become  
Who you are

\* \* \*

And who you now will be.

O, what tragedy  
What trauma  
What threatening cancer

Mobilized  
Your Stardust  
Into Action

Released  
The Floodgate of your  
Juices-dyed river

And Makes your Fingers itch  
Your Mornings ache  
Your every Word issue forth as

Unstoppable  
Improvised  
Melodies  
Of angels?

\* \* \*

Thank the gods and doctors  
For your triumph  
But thank yourself for your restored  
Pre-adolescent

Sense of Purpose  
That knows no purpose

But that reckless, unstable non-sense  
Ignorant to  
Or unmoved by  
The lauded or lucrative

That has filled  
You  
Once more  
With unbridled  
Daft  
Creation

And the togetherness  
Of heart  
And hearts

Well before the hours have dwindled  
To their last  
Trickling  
Grains.

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**Author's Comment:** I was privileged to compose and perform the score for the independent film "Painters of the Sky" about an art teacher finding her creative compass as an artist. The writer/director is Alan Tongret, alluded to in the poem's dedication.

**Bio:** Widely published on both sides of the Atlantic, James B. Nicola has several poetry awards and nominations to his credit. His nonfiction book *Playing the Audience* won a Choice award. His first full-length poetry collection, *Manhattan Plaza*, has just been released. More at [sites.google.com/site/jamesbnicola](http://sites.google.com/site/jamesbnicola).

Review  
by David E. Poston

UPON THE BLUE COUCH  
Laurie Kolp  
Winter Goose Publishing, 2014  
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What sustained me through this lengthy first book—104 poems—was the image of Laurie Kolp reading the opening poem at Poetry Hickory and the tone of that poem’s closing lines. She read them with something between a twinkle and a steely glint in her eyes:

And the subtle scar  
on my cleft chin,  
the one you can only see  
when I’m looking up?

Accent it.

“If You Paint My Picture” aptly introduces the tone, themes, and stance of the collection. The shift from “skin as pale as buttermilk, a touch of strawberry” to “ruffled by a smartass” signals how quickly these poems move from lyric to gritty. Though poetic touches will color and smooth what follows, they will not obscure it. We learn how that scar came to be, in “Rock Bottom,” and about many other scars and tears—and also joys.

“Prepare for disarray,” says the speaker, leading off an array of poems about love, mortality, despair, blue tarps, hurricanes, middle school boys, MRIs, disco balls, beauty, and serenity. We encounter beautiful images such as the opening lines of “Gibbous Orbit,” but also the opening line “I threw your testicles to the clouds.” There are ethereal lyric poems, but also poems about the fears arising when a spouse is late, or this image from “Helpless Victims of a Distracted Driver”:

That night,  
sitting on the couch,  
picking shards of glass  
from baby’s head,  
husband crying out  
in pain.

At the low points, in poems dealing with tribulations and with doubts about self, others and even God, I was glad Kolp began with that confident, commanding, unabashedly honest poem.

The speaker in these poems addresses many different people: husband, daughter, son(s), mother, a toxic past lover, a friend, often the reader, and often herself. Early on, she expresses a thirst for “Something Better [t]han This Couch” and many poems describe her travails in search of it. Often there is a retreat to the blue couch for refuge, as in “Bits and Pieces of Truth in the Night” after a friend’s suicide. Ultimately, the blue couch comes to represent the nexus of whom and what she values most in the world and in herself. The homage to it that begins Part II reveals it as a creative catalyst for these poems, a focal point for the myriad of life experiences described in them. For me, the most poignant moment involving the couch is the conclusion of the poem “While She Stayed in New Orleans,” which personifies it as her most knowing but still truest friend.

The poems about struggles with alcohol, such as “To Watch Someone Else Drinking Death,” “When She’s Ready,” and “When I Was a Worm,” show its depths, and “While Waiting for a Table at the Bar” describes how close one can be to sliding back into them. However, this is the story of someone overcoming the disease. For all the self-recrimination of “Giving UP,” the poem’s speaker still empathizes with the suffering of others. After a series of poems expressing religious struggles, the poem “One Step at a Time,” in its appropriate twelve sections, chronicles a journey to grace.

In the domestic poems, even quotidian subjects are infused with that peace, joy and fulfilment. Poems such as “Sidereal Stars in First Love Eyes” will strike a chord with any parent wishing to prepare a daughter for heartache. That the romance is still there is expressed in poems such as “I Feel Your Presence” and “Advancements.” Sometimes the diction is overwrought, as in “Haunted by the Past,” but the passionate conviction of “Politicking with a Lobster” is undeniable. That poem, as well as “Phone Conversation with an OB/GYN Nurse,” conveys a powerfully-felt message with a humorous touch. That humorous touch is also deftly employed in “When Baby Comes Along” and “Spousal Communication and Forgetfulness”

Three poems kept drawing me back. The taut second-person narrative of “Consider Serenity” compelled me to imagine the impending confrontation. I admired how vivid description and a brilliant bit of unconventional punctuation heightened the intensity of “What Happened on Texas Highway 105.” In “About the Moon,” lines such as “...its opulence/in the funereal sky,/a petal in the wind...” both evoke the long tradition of such poems and make the contrasting conclusion, in diction reminiscent of traditional Chinese poetry, all the more powerful.

Poems sometimes teeter between sentimentality and bitterness, but that may be the bravest thing about them. That bravery is evident in the unflinching way the speaker of the poems addresses her subject matter—and even more so in the unflinching way she addresses herself. These poems are earned and deeply felt, often displaying technical skill and grace, always ringing true to human experience—to the way we all have wavered between hope and despair.

The poems in Part IV, dealing with her mother’s illness, show perhaps the most poetic command: the understated compactness of “Lack of Oxygen,” the dead-on accuracy of description in “Long-Term Stay,” the stark brevity of the last stanza of “When People Heard the News,” the apt use of the triolet form in “Chilled.” Lines such as “that cold bed of white noise” or “time hangs in a white

sheet, a ghost" will linger with readers. And the speaker in "An Epiphany" compels this reader to believe the closing line could refer to herself as well.

At the Poetry Hickory reading, Laura Kolp spoke matter-of-factly about the autobiographical nature of these poems, with the demeanor of someone who had mastered her struggles and longings. One other powerful longing remains to be addressed here, her longing to be a "Poetic Danseuse." In "Voiced," we find these lines:

Poetry is...  
the voice I'm scared to speak  
unleashed in ways mystique  
birthing words I need to hear,  
that through past years of fear  
formed a  
throttlehold~

Through these poems, Laurie Kolp has indeed broken that throttlehold and unleashed a touching, beautiful poetic voice.