

## BOOKS

## A voice leaps out

**Bursting with Danger and Music**

Jack Coulehan

Plain View Press; 2012

Occasionally in this collection by Dr. Jack Coulehan, someone says something that grabs me by the lapels of my white coat (if I wore one) and says “Me too! I am as raw and unfinished and human as the person I am serving. You are too!” But let me back up and tell you whose voices I’m hearing in the hospital halls and rooms of these poems.

The poems are spoken primarily by a doctor, compassionate and observing. These are the poems of one who listens, witnesses and whose power is steady. He hears and tells the stories of those who come to see him, watches them go, and misses them. In the opening poem, the Virginia ham that a woman sent to him in thanks every year marks her death the year it doesn’t come.

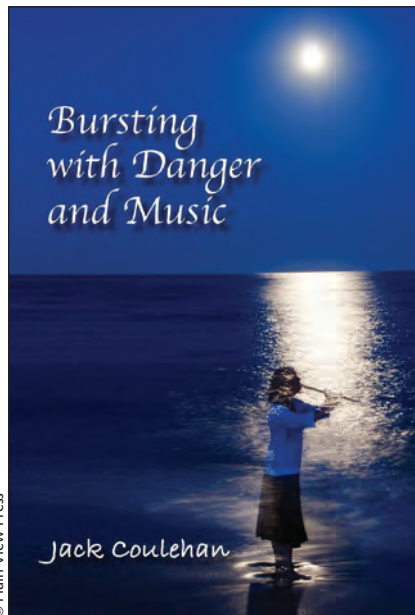
There are poems where he plunges us deeper, seeing the other in some flicker of their truth. In “Tattoo,” he describes the illustrated body of the telephone lineman: “serpents, women, even St. Francis with his hands raised...” Then says:

Men like him,  
rejection or weakness never occurs  
to them  
until it happens.

There are the poems of the doctor whose personal vulnerability grabs me. In “The Act of Love,” Coulehan says something that breaks my heart open more than the naming of the conditions of others (though that naming is necessary for this breaking).

As for me, I’m stunned  
out of the ordinary anger  
at failing to help her.

Some poems stand squarely in the imagined centre of another and speak from their perspective. He becomes the one he serves — “patients” seems too



clinical a term — in “clinics made of ugliness,” in his office, in hospital rooms. He stands, not beside, but inside their skins and rants or pleads or spits. Poems like “Slipping Way” and “Isn’t.” These poems pull no punches, allowing me to feel what it might be like, more than to see them, to be them.

When Coulehan is the observer, there is a quality of slight remove. At this distance he remains the doctor and calls his search for soul “illusion,” deferring to “electricity” that can explain a multitude of things we’d have once looked to the soul for.

The inner voice that Socrates said was god, but the Athenian state decided was blasphemy, could have been tracked, as it ran across his brain, had he had a scan.

There are poems where Coulehan’s doctor/poet selves meet so deeply, that soul can’t help but jump with the electricity of this connection. When he becomes Chekhov or William Carlos Williams (those poet doctors), we are immersed in their lives: Williams circumcising Hemingway’s son, Chekhov buying an apple tart for a man just before his death. (“The

very thing!” the man says delighted.) Only a writer could see the completion of his medical residency as the prodigal son of poet Elizabeth Bishop returning home. These poems thicken the work with history and companionability. Coulehan is both bringing these people to life, as well as tracing his own lineage.

Elsewhere he revels in the language of “Deep Structures.” The word *Amygdaloid* made me walk around with his words like medical nursery rhymes in my mouth.

When the title poem comes three-quarters of the way in, I need it. I have been waiting for it without knowing. There is a surge that moves up the centre of me here:

I’m bursting with danger and music  
I cannot control, O my soul.

The energy, freedom, fear of no control. The doctor has let go. Perhaps it could only arrive in the collection where it does. But I want more of this sound, these leaps.

The control he wields so carefully to do justice to the ones he serves, when he lets that go as on that road in February ice, marvelling at landscape, shocked by beauty, a voice leaps out wider than the doctor’s voice, wider than narrative. It is these poems that burst most with danger and music.

Coulehan’s capacity to evoke a particular person’s suffering is clear, but it’s his capacity to express gobsmacked breathless wonder that astonishes.

**Ronna Bloom MEd**

Poet-in-Residence  
Mount Sinai Hospital  
Toronto, Ont.

Ronna Bloom is a poet and psychotherapist. She is the inaugural Poet-in-Residence at Mount Sinai Hospital, supported in part by the Ontario Arts Council. Her fifth book, *Cloudy with a Fire in the Basement* (Pedlar Press) came out September 2012.

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