

## An Interview With Nicole Santalucia

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by J. Adam Collins



**AC: Congratulations, Nicole, on winning the 2015 Edna St. Vincent Millay Poetry Prize for “Central Pennsylvania” [reader, see our last issue for this excellent poem]. Let’s start there. Can you talk about what the route you’re describing in “Central Pennsylvania” means to you? You write as if it’s familiar.**

NS: Thank you! This is a great honor.

I started writing this poem about a year after I moved to Central PA for a teaching job at Shippensburg University. The route described in the poem is my current commute—most of it at least. When I first moved, I had a hard time adjusting to a longer commute (25 miles each way). Most of my life has been in upstate, NY and NYC where things are much closer and more accessible.

At first nothing made sense in this new environment, not just how long it takes to get from point A to point B. And I felt I was missing something; all I could see was empty space, traffic, cornfields (more

empty space) highways (more empty space), factories, warehouses that felt empty, and in the distance, farms. This contrast of open fields/emptiness and traffic had such an impact on me.

Also, I live near one of the largest trucking hubs in the country. It’s as if I moved to a very big truck stop. The house that my wife and I rent is three miles from the Pennsylvania Turnpike, a huge Petrol rest stop/CB shop, a Mac truck wash, and it is about a mile from Rt. 81. We live on a busy road in a small town, and the trucks rattle our windows and floors. Every time the house rumbles when a truck passes we say, *another angel lost its wings*.

But once I started teaching and connecting with my students I gained more insight. One of my students grew up on a dairy farm about five miles away from our rental house, and my wife, Deanna, and I spent a day with this student and her family. They work hard and tirelessly, and it was an honor to see their drive in caring for their land and animals. I was witness to the energy and exertion that I was searching for since the big move. When I was standing on this piece of farmland that borders the PA Turnpike (Rt. 76), I realized where I moved to.

We live in a place between fresh milk and a new pair of shoes from *Amazon.com* (there is an Amazon warehouse in Carlisle). We live in between the trucks carrying loads of internet orders and the farmers that can’t afford to fix their equipment. We live in the culture that has developed around the truckers, hence the sex shops and rest stops that I write about in the poem.

It took me almost a year to absorb these new surroundings. It took me about a year to write this poem. It took me that year to see what is here. When I finally

met the humans behind the landscape, I made stronger connections.

**AC: Setting and subject seem chained together in your poetry. Are your subjects a product of their environment? Or vice versa?**

NS: Yes, setting and subject are often linked in my work. Setting motivates many of my poems. I tend to emotionally respond to places and these responses influence what I write about. Sometimes the setting inspires the subject. Other times it becomes the subject. I am working on a series of poems inspired by central Pennsylvania, its history, its landscape, its people, its churches and prisons, its traffic patterns. All of these things are in the new poems.

**AC: Why did you start the Binghamton Poetry Project? And how is it doing?**

NS: I started the Binghamton Poetry Project in 2010 when I was a graduate student at Binghamton University. During the first two years in the graduate program, I was a Teaching Assistant for literature classes, and I wanted to be teaching poetry. So, I decided to reach out to the local community and set up shop. I was motivated, in part, by my desire to connect with the people in the place where I grew up, too. I lived in this place, moved away from it for 10 years, and then moved back to go back to school.

Poetry is community in a lot of ways, and I wanted to connect with the greater community beyond the university. I wanted to mend that gap between the school and its environment and the town and its people. I also have a lot of personal history tied to Binghamton and my perspective has changed over the years—writing poetry and teaching poetry in the community also helped me process and evolve and make amends for the trouble I got into when I was a youth growing up there. The Binghamton Poetry Project has

now been passed on to other graduate students at BU and it is thriving.

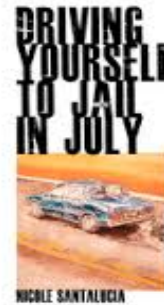
**AC: I enjoyed your piece “Married Bitches” for *Best American Poetry*. At that point, gay marriage was not legal everywhere. If you were to write a poem for the next national LGBT struggle, what would the topic be?**

NS: Acceptance. I’ve been experiencing, noticing, and listening to the struggles surrounding acceptance that the LGBT community faces; let’s not forget the QQIA, too. We need acceptance for all of the LGBTQQIA community.

My wife, Deanna, and I have had too many experiences and stories of discrimination and a lack of acceptance. I wish I were more confident in the way that I respond and react to acts of discrimination, too. I worry that my neighbors notice my wife and me. I think they are confused that there is not a man and a woman living next door. When we moved in last year there were men working on our house and one of them asked me where my husband was—he was flirtatious. It was as if he was trying to find out if I would be living in this big house alone. My response was: *my husband gets here tomorrow. He is on a business trip*. I said this out of fear. I felt that if he knew I had a wife and that she was the other woman carrying boxes that he’d treat us differently. Because he thought my wife was my sister, I felt safer, less vulnerable, letting him think this. We’ve been targeted in similar scenarios many times. The lack of acceptance is everywhere. We are the Other.

Another recent experience happened at a dog boarding facility. The place is wonderful and the people are kind and generous. It took us a couple of months before we were considered regulars. We’d often drop off and pick up our dog together. Then, our routine shifted. One evening when Deanna was picking up our dog, Luca, the woman asked if the other

woman that's usually with her was her sister. Deanna said, *oh, that's my wife*. The woman's response: *oh, well, look at you just saying it like that. People like you make great pet owners*. She was sincere and nice and in a way it was a kind sentiment, but, *people like you*, really? We are gay pet owners separate from straight pet owners. The lack of acceptance that we've experience is not nearly as scary as what other LGBTQQIA people experience, but discrimination is discrimination and it needs to stop.



*Nicole Santalucia won the Ruby Irene Poetry Chapbook Prize from Arcadia Magazine Inc. for Driving Yourself to Jail in July—published in January 2014. Her first full-length collection of poetry, Because I Did Not Die, is forthcoming from Bordighera Press in 2015. Santalucia's non-fiction and poetry appear in The Cincinnati Review, Paterson Literary Review, Hawaii Pacific Review, 2 Bridges Review, Bayou Magazine, Gertrude, Flyway: Journal of Writing and Environment, and others. Santalucia received her MFA from The New School University and her PhD in English from Binghamton University. She founded The Binghamton Poetry Project, a literary outreach program, in 2011. Currently, she teaches English and Creative Writing at Shippensburg University in Pennsylvania; during the summer she teaches poetry in the Cumberland County Prison.*