



KATHERINE COLES

Questions for Katherine Coles

THE BACON REVIEW

TBR: The world of science, math, logic, seems to congeal in your work and in your 'practice' if we can call it that; you've set yourself up (or been set up with) a variety of personages who are as related to the scientific community as to the poetic. How does walking that line inform you or provide purpose to your work? When (or) does observation become action in poetics and in science?

For me, poetry and science are disciplines that are after the same thing—truth, making reality visible and accessible—and that even use some of the same tools, most importantly perception and linguistic precision in portraying perceptions, to try to get at the truth(s) they pursue. Of course, it's in the way they use language—their different attitudes toward linguistic precision—that their essential difference inheres. In describing what she sees, the scientist must use the flattest language she can:

to the greatest possible extent, there should be only one meaning for every word in the text, and her precision lies in disabling other meanings. The poet, on the other hand, is working to activate every possible productive meaning in the words she chooses, and is selecting the words that have the most right possible productive meanings to be deployed. Both poet and scientist will also be alert to the ways in which their observations and descriptions may 1) alter the perception being described and 2) create new perceptions about what is being observed, but again I think that while the scientist is rightly suspicious of these alterations and creations, the poet revels in and attempts to use them. I guess I'm saying I think we're working on the same basic project, but from different angles. Still, I am interested both in what the scientists are able to perceive and in their tools, which allow them to come at things differently. Remembering just to look, for example, is useful to both camps, and can be something we forget to do. When a scientist lets me look through his microscope, I try remember just to look, if only for a short while.

TBR: Adventure, hazard, removal from habit – we're on that wagon, Jason heads to Africa

(cool!)

TBR: to walk in six weeks, leaving a job and security behind – that time on the road can be mined for artistic and personal growth, largely because of how strangely difficult it can be (in often really mundane ways). You've mentioned that it runs in your family, and we're curious how you discovered your own urge to self-challenge, what challenges you've faced in maintaining that lifestyle (familial, societal), with what frequency you've found it necessary to *get out*, and how, once you've returned, the adventure modifies and complements the life you left for a while.

First, I'll say that I am very lucky to have a stable base to work from—a wonderful job with time for research and exploration built in, students who give me immense joy, a husband who is not interested much in travel himself (beyond the trips he has to take to many scientific conferences a year) but who bears up pretty well under mine. But given that not everyone is as lucky as this, it's a good idea to get as much travel in as possible done BEFORE the bonds of job and family begin to tighten.

As for the discovery of the propensity to wander in myself, as you know I grew up in an environment where a certain level of self-challenge was built in, more or less in a way we took for granted. My parents were kind of amazing in how much freedom they gave us. Of course, this was a very different time, but I remember being tossed in the station wagon in my pajamas on a Friday afternoon and waking up under the sky in the desert somewhere on Saturday. While my parents slept off the drive, we kids—maybe from the age of six or so on—would be scampering up and down some pretty challenging rock formations until we were called to breakfast. The only real rule was we had to stay in earshot and more or less in sight. Oh, and we learned never to put our hands anywhere we couldn't see—that was about snakes and scorpions. Still a good rule. I remember once, on a multi-family camping trip to Arches, my friend and I were walking back to a cliff face where we kids (teenaged, unsupervised) had been rappelling. We'd gone to get some more carabiners or water or something. As we passed a couple in the campground who'd been watching us through binoculars, the woman gasped and said to her (I presume) husband, "They're letting GIRLS go!" This was maybe 1975; it was one in a series of moments when I was

brought to realize unusual my upbringing was.

The link to poetry is that for me poetry arises, as a rule, out of some kind of discomfort or self-alienation, and adventure of all kinds can help produce the right conditions for becoming a stranger. My early exposure was to the outdoors, but my first trip to a really major art museum, which didn't happen until I was in my late twenties, felt just as dangerous.

TBR: In the poem, 'Looking South' (published in the October 2012 issue of TBR) you write:

*Back toward the light in the earth's
Own good time. But I*

*Remember what it was to be
All about. I would*

*Like to be again back in it, flighty,
Blown, unhinged, singing.*

Are you singing now?

[smile] Right now, I am writing syllabi. But I squeeze out a few bars here and there. I think the Antarctica book, which was written really quickly, made the singing almost reflexive, brought it much more fully and closely into what I think of as my ordinary life. Maybe that experience—along with, I suppose, the cumulative experiences of 54 years—taught me that I am always a stranger, and even the world outside my front door has the capacity to fracture open into wonder.

TBR: We have been dying to know what it was like to live – and write poems – in Antarctica. Can you tell us a bit about your experiences there, and your artistic collaborations on the ice? In what ways would you consider your experience warm or hot?

Funny, I know I was often cold, but being cold isn't what I remember about the place. In some ways, it was white hot. I suppose if I wanted to be glib, I'd send you to the book for an account of "what it was like"; the closest I can get is to say that it was simultaneously the most unbalancing and most balancing experience I've ever had. For one thing, it's just so remote. Palmer Station is a four-day boat ride across the Drake Passage, and the boat comes once a month; if something happens

to you, there you are. So you're confronted constantly with the vastness of the geography and the corresponding smallness of the self, and at the same time you are confronted with the absolute importance of every action you take and the necessity of relying on yourself and being reliable for others.

I was the only poet there, so all my "collaborations" were with scientists, who were incredibly generous in letting me tag along with them as they did their work, especially once they realized I was happy to offer unskilled labor. They were also generous—even excited—about seeing themselves in poems.

TBR: You recently served as the Poet Laureate of Utah. Some poets love and cherish the responsibility that comes from the job, and others seem to recoil from it. How did you find the job?

As I see it, the job is about creating spaces for people to have pleasure through poetry, often in part by experiencing and enacting that pleasure myself. There's nothing in that not to like.

TBR: In addition to writing poems, you're also a novelist. Is there anything currently in the works on the

fiction side of things?

I've been working far too long on a (far too long) nonfiction novel about my grandparents.

TBR: You also served as the Inaugural Director of the Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute, "an independent forum created to provide a space in which fresh thinking about poetry, in both its intellectual and its practical needs, can flourish free of any allegiance other than to the best ideas." Can you tell us about what you discovered working with the HMPI? How is poetry flourishing today, in both practical and intellectual spheres?

The HMPI was a terrific experience, and I learned a tremendous amount doing it. Some of what I learned was just practical—in order to create the Poetry and New Media Guide, as well as the Best Practices for Fair Use in Poetry guide that came out of it, I had to learn about wills, for example, as well as about intellectual property, which was fascinating and useful. Perhaps most important, in all the projects (the two already mentioned and also Blueprints, which was a guide for bringing poetry into communities) I was constantly reminded of how passionate and generous poets are—not

at all the morose, narcissistic bunch we are often portrayed as being.

TBR: Thank you for your time, and for sending us your beautiful poems. It's an honor to publish your work.

Many thanks! I am very excited about how the new on-line journals are reaching, and even creating, new audiences for poetry. Thanks to both of you for your work.