

INTERVIEW WITH KATHARINE COLES

How does one become a poet? How did you become a poet?

The short answer is that you become a poet first by reading, then by writing. I knew I wanted to be a writer as soon as I realized, by the age of seven, that the books and poems I loved were written by actual people. The writing comes in response—both from the idea that “I want to do that,” but also usually from the urge to have a conversation with a particular other poem or set of poems.

Tell us about the first poem that really grabbed you.

Probably it would have to have been something from the Episcopalian liturgy, the Book of Common Prayer, or the King James Bible. These were the lyrical texts that were pervasive in my youth. But later, I heard, read, loved Dickinson, Frost, Millay—the kinds of poets that live on the household shelves.

What kinds of words make the best poems? Do you have any favorites?

Whatever is the right word for the specific moment in the specific poem. Figuring out which one is “right” for that place is the poet’s job. I am especially happy today because yesterday a friend praised my deployment, in two separate poems, of “wayward” and “sashay”—but entirely for contextual reasons.

You spent some time in Antarctica with the National Science Foundation’s Antarctic Writers and Artists program. Tell us a little about the program and what you did there. What drew you, as a poet, to Antarctica? Is such a harsh landscape a fertile place for creativity?

I was drawn by the fact that it is the farthest place I can go without actually leaving the planet. As a poet, I thrive on estrangement—on literally putting myself into a

place where I am a stranger. So for me, it was an incredibly fertile place. Not to mention that it is almost indescribably beautiful, so it creates tremendous opportunities.

Poetry is one of the world’s oldest literary forms, and yet poetry is still written and read today, in light of many changes in the way we communicate. How does poetry manage to remain relevant? Or is it losing its relevance?

There is more poetry being written, read, and performed now than at any other time on earth. Mark Strand once said, and I am paraphrasing, that the poem has the unique ability, at any moment, to tell us exactly where we are. This is, in my opinion, because it uniquely maps that place where the human mind meets and begins to articulate the world. This is an act that never becomes irrelevant—and that is more relevant than ever in times of disquiet.

