

Continuation of the conversation between Katharine Coles and Jean Cheney:

JC: I visited the Mathematics Building at the University recently, to see Anna Bliss's art work depicting numbers and mathematics and your poem, "Numbers," on display there. It was wonderful! I imagine the pleasure it brings to all those math students and faculty passing it every day. How did this collaboration come about?

KC: One day Anna asked me to her studio and sat me down and said, "I want you to write me a square poem." This is not how poets think about their poems. I thought for a minute and then said, "Well, sonnets are square." Then, she said, "Well, good, write me a sonnet."

It was appropriate that it be a lined and metered poem, a measured poem because it was in a math building. It was also appropriate that it be a poem with a certain rigor to it. Yet it was so much fun for me because it's a poem that's really all about having fun. And also about how mathematics is a language.

JC: So different from what most people think about mathematics.

KC: Jim Carlson who was Department Chair then used to say he would go visit that poem about once a week.

JC: Was there a moment when you were growing up that you realized that you would be working in this nexus, between disciplines, when you knew you wanted to bring science and literature together, poetry and art and math together?

KC: It came to me amazingly late. I grew up at a time when most of the poetry getting published was free verse, somewhat narrative, usually about the poet's childhood. This was a problem for me because by the end of my first book I was thinking I've kind of used up my childhood! I had a happy childhood that was relatively uneventful in a lot of ways, but what I hadn't realized was that there were other subject matters open to me. So I went and wrote a novel, but then I realized that there was a poem in that early collection called "Love Poem in a Nuclear Age," that was moving in the direction that I could take my poetry.

But I really did have to write that novel because the poems that I was going to write required much more vocal flexibility.

JC: Not so tight?

KC: Yes, and with the ability to shift tone, modulate, use very long and very flexible sentences, if I needed to, and with that came a certain willingness to move into different kinds of line lengths within the same poem, from a sonnet to free verse in the same poem. It seems to me that when traversing subject matters (because every poem about science is also about history and art) what you need is a big tool box with a lot of different tools, to be able to say mid-poem,

“I’ve been using a screwdriver, but my God I need a hammer.” That started to happen between my first novel and my second collection of poems and is really evident in the book of poems coming out this spring.

JC: *Fault*? Is that about fault lines, by the way?

KC: Yes, the title poem is about geology.

JC: Maybe that’s it, why having so many disciplines of thought look at a question is important, because ultimately, none of them can answer that question with any kind of finality or completeness.

KC: And aren’t we, when we’re doing our most interesting thinking, thinking about exactly that, what it is to be human in the world, what is perception?

JC: And that’s what the humanities are?

KC: Yes.

JC: You do so much—and we haven’t talked about being poet laureate of Utah—but if you weren’t doing these things, what would you like to do? What’s Kate Cole’s alter ego?

KC: I’m 48, and I think middle age is the process of understanding that there are many, many lives that are possible but that you only get one. I thought about going to medical school. I thought about that until I was 40. I think I would have enjoyed being a diplomat and working in foreign policy which sounds so peculiar . . .

JC: Really! Have you met diplomats?

KC: It probably has a lot to do with the novels I like to read. You kind of imagine yourself into those positions. I would have loved to have lived in different places in the world, I would have loved to have studied more languages. This is weirdly related to both poetry and fiction, because I’m interested in cause and effect, I’m interested in intrigue and in the ways we construct possibilities. And that’s partly what diplomacy is. I’m exactly as introverted as any poet but I’m also an extrovert, in a way, especially when there is a structure, a shape for making things happen.

My outlet for that has been university administration which for me is about opening possibilities, creating structure that will allow people to fulfill their potential within the organization. That seems to me what happens in diplomatic situations. I live most of my life between four walls, and there’s a part of me that really likes that, but there’s also a part of me that loves to go alone to Indonesia, which I did for this last book, and to really be exposed to something

different. So I have found ways to do those things in a different form than I might have done had I become a diplomat.

One of the things I don't have to give up on is being a professional poker player.

JC: You were a poker player?

KC: When I was younger, I partly supported myself in college playing poker. I used to take the overnight train between Salt Lake City and Seattle where I was going to school, and would play poker with the conductors. When she picked me up, my mom would say, "You haven't been taking advantage of those poor conductors, have you?" I would say, "Mom, I'm nineteen years old!"

JC: But she knew.

KC: She knew.

FAULT

After John Clerk of Eldin's 1795 engraving of Hutton's geologic unconformity, as reproduced in *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle* by Stephen Jay Gould.

" . . . [U]nconformities are palpable proof that the earth does not decline but once into ruin."

Stephen Jay Gould

What I know about time is
minute: the mineral taste of his skin
dissolving, the interval of a sparrow's eye, phlox

and orange lilies setting summer to rest
in fire and wind. His fear of heights

grounds us. During its winter sleep,
the garden grows a new crop of rocks
we dig all spring. In the engraving,

provisional lines of fence and hedgerow
tame the field: two men believe earth keeps

still under the phaeton's rolling wheels
and their horses paw a ground

weightier than this friable shell of dust
smoothing history's flotsam over. Since then,
we've learned distrust for everything

that holds us. In fragile scratches,
the engraver undercuts the world
they know, heaves it beneath their feet, an ocean

eating its skim of ice. In its own sweet time
the land founders. Hutton, the first to set

his foot on that uneasy surface, must have thought
Don't look down. Looking, I want

to walk right to the edge, the life I inhabit
a shell I contain. His hand on the pillow
open, his hand closed. Even the window flows,

subject to gravity's tides. How distant from
each other we travel, bedded together,
eyelids flickering as if, beneath their skins,

buried ground were stirring, taking flight
into our deepest sleep, into our waking.

Originally published in *Ascent*