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An interview with Elizabeth Bradfield, author of *Approaching Ice*

You recently returned from an expedition to the arctic. Can you talk about what role guide work and nature conservancy work plays in your life and its relationship to your poetry?

EB: I should clarify—I was up in the Arctic working as a naturalist on a hundred-passenger ship. It's true, the itinerary was at the mercy of ice and weather; more than once we had to cancel a landing because there were polar bears on the beach where we had planned on hiking. But at the same time, we certainly didn't face the same challenges that, say, Sir John Franklin did in the Arctic. We were traveling for pleasure. We ate well, slept comfortably, and enjoyed ourselves. I don't want to overstate what I do.

On the one hand, I see the making of poems and working as a naturalist as very similar: I'm telling stories. I'm finding things to focus on and hopefully inspiring people to pay close attention to one facet of something. I'm looking for the hooks that will engage people and interest them in looking more deeply and finding their own questions.

Every time I set out for a month of naturalist work on a boat, I make a vow to write while I'm there. I find the work so energizing, the places I travel so inspiring...but I can't write. So I come home full of stories, exhausted, and then the poems come. I care very deeply about ecological issues, and that thread runs through both my poems and my naturalist work. I'm very interested in how our human selves help and hinder us in non-urban settings. If I can do a bit either as a naturalist or as a poet to help encourage stewardship, I'll be happy.

What inspired *Approaching Ice* beyond your own work as a naturalist?

EB: My interest in polar literature began in 1995, when I left a year's work as a deckhand and was beginning to work as an editor at an internet startup. I stumbled upon Alfred Lansing's *Endurance*, the story of Sir Ernest Shackleton's failed attempt to cross the Antarctic continent. I hadn't been a reader of adventure literature, and I only picked up Lansing's book as a way to reconnect to the life on board boats that I so missed. It turned out to be fantastic. After Lansing, I read Apsley Cherry-Garrard's *The Worst Journey in the World*, then *The Noose of Laurels* by Wally Herbert and found myself haunting the sections of the local bookstores in search of new material. The stories amazed me. The slightly archaic prose appealed as well—there was just enough historic distance so that the psychology of the men felt familiar and yet at the same time foreign. Could I have survived? Would I have been one of the good explorers or one of the bitter, failed ones? These questions burned for me.

I didn't start writing poems about polar exploration, however, until about five years later. I was still reading exploration narratives, and one day I asked myself why I wasn't writing poems about them. There is something terrible, ridiculous, and glorious in the ambition, hubris, foibles, and tenderness of these men and women, something epic. I knew, once I started, that I wanted to write a book's worth of poems. By the time I was writing the final poems, I knew I wanted to not only wonder in baffled awe at the choices explorers made, but I wanted to ask how our contemporary ideas of sexuality, gender, race, and environmental responsibility would set against their motivations.

Can you talk about the importance of influence in your work and what guiding forces (in poetry) helped you complete *Approaching Ice*?

EB: There are many poets I admire and turn to for inspiration, and all of them are influential: the lyrical science of Linda Bierds, the political rigor of Adrienne Rich, the rich voices in Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*, Eavan Boland's blend of personal lyric and historic consequence. And more, of course. One poet, in particular, I should mention is Donald Finkel, who had a residency in Antarctica and wrote two Antarctic-inspired books: *Endurance: An Antarctic Idyll* and *Adequate Earth*. I didn't find his work until I was fairly far into the poems of *Approaching Ice*, but Finkel's free-ranging approach to the stories of explorers felt like just the encouragement I needed to follow the poems of *Approaching Ice*.

I was very lucky in graduate school to study with Linda McCarriston. Her deep belief in the ability of poetry to address political subjects, to subvert ordinary hierarchical thinking, prodded me at just the right time. She pushed me to write poems that engage with the world at large and that

illustrate the connection between personal experience and the world in which those experiences are enmeshed.

The book has a foundation in your research, yet reads in a very imaginative and intimately descriptive way. To what extent do you think the poems capture a researched history, a reconstructed history, and an imagined history?

EB: I want the facts of the poems to be accurate. But I wanted my own, contemporary judgment and reaction to them to be evident, too. The value of the poems is not as much in the events themselves, but in the sympathies and chasms discovered between poet and explorer. The poems are a conversation between fact and interpretation.

Some of the poems took years to write while other fell from the sky and were written in one sitting. I think the first poems were written in 1998, and the last in 2007. There are volumes of research behind some and just a few web pages behind the impetus for others. Part of my fascination with the explorers is in their ability to be a lens to see how we view “new worlds” and thus how we view our own present relationship to the earth, toward discovery, toward what inhabits the places we come to.

The poems of Approaching Ice capture the wanderlust and bravado as well as the humanity, longing and sensitivities of the explorers. Can you talk about how you dove into the persona of the polar explorers, especially those of bygone eras?

EB: I think a lot of those guys were crazy. Or misfits. Or romantics. At the same time, they were human and therefore linked to my own experience of the world. So I wanted to look through their eyes at questions that feel essential to me: How do you be human in a landscape that you see as utterly foreign? What aspect of the domestic survives when you are completely displaced?

Think about it—they were traveling off the map. When they had a nice day it must have been breathtaking beyond belief. And a horrible day must have been similarly dramatic. Can you imagine going to that place and not being able to communicate what you saw to your family? Seeing amazing things can be really isolating...those experiences set you apart and isolate you in a way.

Early on, someone suggested I write all the explorer poems in first-person persona. I had a knee-jerk reaction against that idea. I didn't want to *be* them. How could I? I wanted the distance of a modern eye and perspective to rub up against their lives and exploits. I wanted that distance to be in the poem itself, uneasily balancing admiration and criticism.

It was a surprising moment to find your name written into the lineage of explorers' wives at the end of "Wives of the Polar Explorers." Can you talk about the point at which you are part of this lineage and at what point you find parallels between your own voice and the voice of your explorers?

EB: On a personal level, when I was writing that poem, my partner was in Antarctica and I was home. I was a wife left behind.

Isn't writing a book similar to being married? You're stuck with the subject, through thick and thin. Sometimes in love with it, sometimes frustrated by it. I am a wife to the subject of polar exploration. I also think that my relation to the explorers themselves must be somewhat similar to the relationship between them and their wives: intimate yet distant, enthusiastic yet critical. Entwined either way.

Do you have any goals for Approaching Ice or any particular message you would like your readers to get after reading this book?

EB: I hope that lovers of polar exploration who might not otherwise be interested in poetry read and are engaged by the book. Similarly, I hope poetry-lovers are inspired to learn more about polar ecology and history. A message? Maybe more of an observation: wow, we are strange creatures and world is richer than we could have ever invented it to be.

Elizabeth Bradfield (www.ebradfield.com) is the author of a previous collection, Interpretive Work, winner of the Audre Lorde Prize and a finalist for a Lambda Literary Award. Her poems have appeared in the Atlantic Monthly, Poetry, and many other publications. Founder of Broad-sided Press and a recent Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, she now lives on Cape Cod and works as a naturalist there, in Alaska, in the Eastern Canadian Arctic, and elsewhere.