

At the World's Frigid Edges

By Evan McGarvey

Book Review:

Approaching Ice, by Elizabeth Bradfield,
Persea Books, 2010.



Elizabeth Bradfield, both a Stegner Fellow and naturalist, merges both talents into her second volume. *Approaching Ice* follows her 2008 book, *Interpretive Work*, which reflects her life in Alaska. The poems in this new volume weld intense research and images from the frozen North and South Poles. She creates not just visions of the men and women who toiled at the world's frigid edges, but also a record of a poet's obsession with her subject.

Bradfield invites readers to share her enthrallment with the world's coldest places. When she does not plunge us into merciless white tundra around the earth's poles, we sit beside Bradfield while she gathers her materials. "Half an hour with coffee / marking up a book—a check / to note sense, exclamation mark at astonishment or disbelief," she writes. Furthermore, by pulling back the curtain on the relationship between poetry and research, Bradfield makes us party to her discoveries.

She offers equal candor in her approach to arctic history and its heroes, granting *Approaching Ice* a crystalline, detached tone even as she exposes brutality. The story of the first camp below the Antarctic could sound predictably macabre in weaker hands, but Bradfield forges sonorous lines that envelope the horror: "They hacked / a grave, opening ice to the sea below / that still moved, teemed, heaved, through the Austral winter." In her Arctic, bodies fracture, assistants plot mutiny, and the elements prevail.

Bradfield, however, stokes fires of sex under the bleak sheets of loss. She poses various speakers in these more intimate poems. Inhabiting a stranded male telegrapher in "WYSSA," Bradfield probes a mind frayed with loneliness and unfulfilled yearning: "If

you dislike the beard, I will lay my head in your lap / and let you cut it from me, cut away my months gone // and burn them, acrid and bitter." The surprising role of sex in the book complicates even the most seemingly mechanical of lines ("Were the earth a skull, the lump / at its base would read to Victorian doctors as amativeness").

The book's rare tedious poem occurs when Bradfield addresses the figures of her work as one would address a statue. "Explorer, what will you wear?" she writes in "In Preparation." Here, her images, normally unflinching, soften to generalities. "You warm your hands at the flame / that lifts you," she writes in "Polar Explorer Salomon August Andree (1897)." Thankfully, these brief moments of pointing and staring leave only minor tears in the book's mesh of head and heart, research and desire.

Bradfield's encompassing research and range form captivating landscapes for readers interested in forgotten histories, reanimated heroes, and lyrics filtered through ice.