

Liz Bradfield

PRELUDE TO *APPROACHING ICE*

*Because this life, this alarm clock time card
percolator direct deposit income tax stop light*

seems vast and blank and numbing.

*Tell me secret orchids hide
between the black rock and the ice.*

*Tell me a wild bird sings deep
in the crevasses, wingstrokes cracking air.*

*Tell me there's a surface we can walk on
lidding miles of plumed and luminescent fish.*

I'm ready to be amazed. I'm longing for it.

POLAR EXPLORER
 JULES SEBASTIAN CESAR DUMONT D'URVILLE—1840

For a day he sailed through bergs and along a face
 of ice. Land? The bellies of penguins, when slit,
 scattered stones on the deck, a granite morse
 that said rock grounded what they passed. Adélie Land,
 he called it. Named not for patron or ruler
 or favored lieutenant, but wife.

*... an act of justice, a sort of obligation I have fulfilled
 to give her, after losing three children, after his years away,
 something to perpetuate... my deep and lasting gratitude.*

Rock had been his fame before. Twenty years earlier,
 in Greece, a farmer showed him a statue of Venus
 so beautiful d'Urville had to have it for France.
 Dragging her back to the ship, chased
 by bandits, her broken arms were left on the rock
 of Melos. Her body stands still in the Louvre.
 What did he lose to Antarctica? Time. Men
 to dysentery and scurvy. The boyhood
 of his own boy. I wonder what she thinks of it now,
 standing in her climate-controlled room,
 the business of hands taken. I like to think she tracked
 his journey and return, heard among visitors
 whispers of his end: a train wreck coming home
 from a day at Versailles with his wife and son.

The land, the statue are still where he left them,
 and each Austral summer his wife's other namesake,
 a penguin, hunts up stones for its nest,
 presents them to a mate, steals more
 from other nests and then, until the chick
 fledges, guards them as if rightful.

ON THE LONGING OF EARLY EXPLORERS

I would prefer one hour of conversation with a native of terra australis incognita to one with the most learned man in Europe.

—*Pierre Louis Moreau de Maupertuis, - 1740*

Before satellites eyed the earth's whole surface
through the peephole of orbit, before
we all were tracked by numbers trailing from us
like a comet's tail—O if only,
they'd say in quaint accents and obscure
sentence structures—if only the unsullied
could be discovered, if only, once found,
it could speak its own nobility and let us
empathize. Poignant, the despair that itched
beneath their powdered wigs, their longing to touch
the unspoiled, their sense that the world was already ruined.

[First published in *The Gay and Lesbian Review*]

POLAR EXPLORER ADRIEN DE GERLACHE,
FIRST TO WINTER BELOW THE ANTARTIC CIRCLE (1898)

What hope at the outset: to put
his small nation in the running. To seek
a pure and scientific aim untroubled
by what his king, Leopold, was seeking
in the Congo.

The Belgica stuck on purpose?
Too proud to say it was error and pride
that kept them south too long? There were not
enough lamps for the unsunned days.
Not enough bags of flour or books.
They were trapped in pack ice.

North
of them, under the same crown, children
and wives were hostage to rubber. Bodies
dropped in a dark river to become
unrecognizable. Easy, there, to lose flesh to rot.

Under de Gerlache, a man was buried at sea.
They trudged out from the ship's stuck hull,
hauling him on a sledge. They hacked
a grave, opening ice to the sea below
that still moved, teemed, heaved
through the Austral winter.

A few short words—
and through them, uneven reports and crackings
as the grave was opened again,
again to the sea.

And then he was gone
to them, though his body
would not have gone to bone
quickly, chill allowing his flesh
to crawled by sea spiders
and limpets for years.

So was he erased? And were the bodies
in the river of Africa erased? No
headstones for either but memory. The sea
holds them all now. And in the water all have tongues.

[First published in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*]

WIVES OF THE POLAR EXPLORERS

Some hunk of ice or rock named after them, an address,
a memory for the men to write to those cold months, adding
to the pages then carrying them home.

Adélie d'Urville

The send-off is where she's most familiar, starched
petticoats at dockside attempting to empathize
with the ice-filled, cracking sea

Eva Nansen

her husband's headed for. Good-bye, dear heart—if
you lose a finger, string it for me as a charm
to beckon you home. Lucky if she

Kathleen Scott

has a fortune's backing because what bills
could the cold freight, the new maps,
the slim discoveries and rough ventures pay?

Josephine Peary

In the swelling absence, often,
a child born with his nose, his
remembered mouth. Of course

Lucy Henson

the return was worse. His restless, frostbit
limp, his early-aged eyes unable to focus
in the temperate air, his immediate schemes

Emily Shackleton

to leave again—or the household inspected
and the crew found wanting, his command
chafing. It could go either way.

Elizabeth Byrd

Either way, no easy slide back
into a shared sleep. I missed you, I missed
you each would say, trying to understand

Liz Bradfield

through the strange dialects discovered in separation
of solitude, of companionship.