



News from

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A Conversation with Elizabeth Bradfield author of *Interpretive Work: Poems*

This is your debut collection, but also the debut edition published by Arktoi Books as well. One of the goals of this imprint of Red Hen is to publish lesbian authors in order to involve them further in “the conversation.” What does this mean to you?

I see what Arktoi is doing as an extension of what Kitchen Table Press, The Feminist Press, and other women’s publishing collectives were doing in the 1970s and 1980s. How lucky we were to have them! Without the radical opening of doors that they did, we wouldn’t have some of the strong voices we have today. . . . There are many queer writers published by mainstream presses, but to stand as a writer published by a lesbian press states, for me, that I am a writer and my queerness, although not explicitly in each poem I write, influences my aesthetic choices. Insisting upon an acknowledgement of that position—stating upfront that I write from a perspective of a lesbian in the world—allows me a huge freedom, really. I can get on with the work of making poems sing.

Before you recently moved to California for your Stegner fellowship, you worked as a naturalist in Alaska. Poems such as “Nonnative Invasive” and “Mid-Trip Mid-Season” express some mixed feelings about this work. Could you talk about this?

I actually still work as a naturalist in Alaska and elsewhere. I love the work—I love being out on a boat and scanning the water and shores for . . . well, for whatever happens to turn up. And I love being able to introduce people to a new way of looking at animals or plants or ecosystems. However, as these poems reveal, there are frustrations. I became a naturalist because of my fascination with creatures and wilderness and my natural bent for teaching. But any time you make a job out of a passion, frustrations emerge. You realize the flaws and limitations of what you’re doing. You get jaded. And tired. It becomes a job, complete with concerns about bosses, health care, overtime, and the future and meaningfulness of the work itself. The poems you talk about deliberately probe into that conundrum, and are as much an intellectual inquiry as an investigation of personal feelings.

One thing that I’ve come to think about more and more through my work as a naturalist is how we see ourselves as part of / apart from wilderness. Also, how our well-intentioned interest can be less than benign. What does our presence in a place do to it? And where is the balance between the joy of discovery and the responsibility of discovery?

On that same topic, your writing combats pastoral tendencies with a well-informed realism and respect for the more complex and difficult aspects of the natural world. Would you agree? And would you consider yourself—or, for that matter, a poet who expresses her relationship with nature in a more idealized way—a “nature poet?”

I hope that the category of “nature poet” is broad enough to encompass me. But often I find my own interests lie in what much nature poetry so often leaves out: the way that we, as humans, frustrate our own attempts to commune. For example, it happens so often that when we go out to experience nature in solitude, we instead find ourselves fuming at the lack of solitude. Why does this infuriate us? Why do people (strangers, in particular) spoil our experience? What are we hoping to get from an experience in nature and what does that reveal about ourselves as humans? Those are the types of questions that interest me.

And then, of course, there’s the fact that nature itself isn’t always nice. “Organic” things are toxic, too. Animals have intense instincts and behaviors that are truly threatening to us. Why not celebrate that, as well? I want to write within the idea and tradition of the pastoral, but to rough it up a little bit.

Originally, I wanted to call the entire collection “Natural History,” but Dan Chiasson beat me to the punch. I wanted a collection that denied the boundary between nature writing and social writing—this is why, for me, the butch poems belong in this book. I wanted to challenge the idea of queerness as not “natural.”

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Several of your poems investigate the difficulty of being forthright about one's sexual orientation, such as "Now You See Me," or "Site-Specific Adaptations" which talks about a woman's denial of her partner, "not risking this truth and hating // that what she loves / could bring her to this lie." How important do you think it is for members of the LGBT community to "out" themselves? Similarly, do you feel it is important for LGBT writers to openly explore these challenges in their work?

I feel that it's important for me to be out. I can't speak for others. Living in Alaska, for example, I knew people who would face serious repercussions if they were out at work. I am lucky in that I work in fields and for companies that are incredibly supportive. For me, since most people assume I'm straight—or at least don't think "other" when they look at me—I think it's doubly important for me to be out.

Rendering the complex negotiation that takes place in social situations where being "out" is a choice is fascinating. We live in social worlds. Sometimes, someone feels strong enough to be visible as queer; sometimes it is difficult—either because of one's own internal pressures or because of very real external ones. I'm interested in the interior life, but I'm even more interested in how that interior life (love, hatred, joy) is pressurized by external forces, by social forces.

Your Butch Poem Series consist of seven humorous but poignant poems. What brought you to these poems? And what informed your decision to group them into two separate sections in your collection?

I moved to Anchorage, Alaska after living for five years in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and the conservative and homophobic eddies I felt upon arrival were startling to me. The butch poems began as a push against that force. I had written "Butch in a Red Dress" years earlier, actually, after seeing the amazing artist Peggy Shaw perform in Boston. But the series itself came from my frustration in how my partner was being seen—as "other," as "monstified"—on a daily basis in this new cityscape.

I also wanted to write the butch poems because I feel that it's important to put out into the world a perspective that appreciates the different beauty of the butch. I think love poetry is forgiving enough as a poetic category to have room for this song.

The poems are in two sections because I wanted the idea of looking and of being seen to infuse the entire collection. Looking at nature and looking at other people, after all, is a similar endeavor. We look both to find difference and to find resonance; we look to understand our own place within the world, to see how what we find beautiful matches up against the history of beauty.

"Cul-de-sac Linguistics" commandeers the "high profanity of kickball games" to describe the world as "fucking beautiful, ass-bastard gorgeous, / the evening light wild and soaring / like kickballs on a true arc into flowerbeds // of penis tulips and pussy daffodils / that nod their heads in wild agreement / with the whorish, shit-loving lot of it." How important is it to reclaim words as poets? As women?

As poets, every word we encounter on the street should be poem-able. It's incredibly important to reclaim words for poetry. Wordsworth's idea of pulling the language of everyday life into poems was right on. Whether it's prejudicial language or the language of florists or skateboarders or the military, that language should be in poems. I think of how exciting it was to hear the trash-can-lid pounding and matchbox shaking of Stomp—we need to pull the everyday into poems. To find the beauty and surprise and lyricism (whether that lyricism is rough or gentle) of it.

Do you have a project in mind to complete during your next two years as a Stegner fellow? Care to give us a sneak peek into your next book?

I have a pile of projects! I finished last year a manuscript about Antarctic exploration—I've been obsessed with Antarctica for years. Then, living in Alaska, the complications and histories of the Arctic came alive for me, and I'm now dancing around trying to find a way to write into that. I tend to be fairly scattershot and work on a few tracks at once. The Arctic book is something I can read, research and write toward in a semi-structured way. Then, of course, other poems "fall in," and I find myself writing quite a bit about Cape Cod. I'm not sure what will come of that, but I'm trying to keep the door open for serendipity. I've only been here, in California, for a month, so the door's wide open, I think.

I have some essays I'd like to flesh out and an idea for a poetry anthology... and of course I want to do work that will continue to advance Broadsided, my literary/visual collaborative grassroots/virtual press (now there's a mouthful). I want to get poems out on the streets.

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