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Polar Explorer #8

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ELIZABETH BRADFIELD

Polar Explorer #8

NOBU SHIRASE'S FIVE RULES—1911

1. *Never drink alcohol*

"A crew of gorillas," "Beasts
of the forest." The locals came
to gawk at our camp in New Zealand,
ground for our huts begged
from a wealthy man. This
after barely scraping funds
to leave Japan? After our small send-off
of only a few bored students? After the ice
itself pushed us out of its bays? Drink
might have been permissible.

2. *Never drink tea*

That is to say, don't be held
hostage to ceremony.
It was one of Mawson's men
who came to our aid. Vouched
for us, told us what he'd seen
of the white land. Scientist
to scientist. I gave him
what had been given me
before I left the templed shore.
Made three hundred years ago
by Mutso no Kamikanoyasu, its maker's name,
carved in the blade, can only be read
in reflection. What need did I, a scientist,
have of a sword?

3. *Never drink hot water*

My father a monk, as a boy
all of Konoura knew I was too...
well, they called me naughty.
At the school for priests, they said
Buddhists could not make expeditions.
Too much striving.

4. *Do not smoke*

We planted our flag on Yamato Yukihiro
having marched eight days, unable
to go farther. Two weeks before,
Amundsen stood on the pole. A week
before, Scott and his men found flags
at the spot they sought. These goals are smoke.
Our flag stood on ice unanchored, no land
beneath it to be claimed. Fifty-six years
would pass before another followed
from Japan. My presence by then
only spirit, the evidence sunk. Perhaps bits
of it rising by then as fog.

5. *Never warm your body*

Home, debts were larger than the dream
through which they had accrued. I lived
to see the great cloud above two cities,
fire that never should have been made.
A year and a month later, above the fish shop
in Koromo, a blocked intestine killed me.
My farewell poem the only thing left
to show those who found me that once
I'd lived a strange, cold dream.