







GAUTIER DEBLONDE: THE FUTURE OF ICE

Gautier Deblonde's monochrome pictures record a voyage into the ice of Northern Europe. They were taken in summer 2003 during the first of many sailing trips around the Spitzbergen Archipelago. Today they are a portrait of a landscape that is vanishing. In the future they may be a souvenir of what was lost. The author Görel Ehrlich recalls the voyage in an extract from a work in progress titled The Future of Ice.

MAY 27. Left Tromsø, Norway this evening at a time when, in London, it would be getting light. But here it is all light, all night. When the mainsail is hoisted the boat lists to starboard and the halyards slap and vibrate. Five sails go up. A hard westerly wind fills them. We're on the *Noorderlicht*, a 50 metre gaff-rigged schooner built in 1910, traveling north on the Barents Sea to an Arctic archipelago called Spitzbergen between latitude 75 and 80 degrees north. As soon as we leave the last bit of Norwegian coast the seas become heavy and rolling. There are 20 of us on the Cape Farewell Expedition, a mixed group of scientists, writers, artists and photographers. We're going there to better understand the richness and fragility of the Arctic ecosystem, and how climate change is affecting the movement of warm water north.

Light all afternoon, all night. The seas grow heavier. We pass a last Norwegian lighthouse on a point of rock, then plunge north into the wild Barents Sea. House-sized swells lift up. The boat's name is Dutch for 'northern lights', but I see none here. Instead, we have grey skies, persistent rain, and an ocean bigger than us.

Rain turns to sleet, then rain again. Clouds braid and unbraid above us. We can see because it's light, but we can barely stand. The first: night

merges into the second day. We are still underway, still heeling over in an 18-knot wind – a natural nine – the second mate calls it, nine knots under full sail.

Watery buildings fall on me. The deck jumps. The bow bangs down into abyssmal troughs then points straight up. Will we ever stop? Will we ever see land?

Three days have passed. I ask if it's afternoon or morning. 'It's midnight', the first mate tells me. A line of Brannich guillemots flies by – a black stripe above the gold horizon. Everything here is made of lines, all dismembered and askew, picking up glints and hues, odd ducks and round the clock light as they travel. At midnight we can see the sun for the first time. Here, it hangs halfway between the top of the sky and the horizon.

Slowly an island comes into being. It is rimmed with ice, swathed by clouds, and ends in purple cliffs where sea birds nest and fledge. The west side is snow-blasted. Sunlight breaks on cliffs, paths of green lead down accordianed lobes to open water. The ice pack, jammed up against the flank of the island is its own symphony of sloshing and sluicing. The *Noorderlicht* rises and falls on a mat of ice. Sun casts white strings at the horizon. The strings

turn black. Mist warps the upper cliffs. Snow falls. A polar bear, swimming out to the boat and back, is lost in white. We sail away. Where the land stops, an ice foot continues. A frozen waterfall hangs from the cliff. Why don't these swells break it? A rainbow spurts up from the horizon in another direction. A snow cloud dives into the sea.

Underway again, rolling seas instead of the ones that rock. Rock and roll must have been a nautical term for oceanic music. We lean against the rail and look out. The sun is in the north and casts an eerie light across the sea. The water is aquamarine – a thick blue-green broth. The night-light blazes a path from the horizon to me.

3 am of whatever day it is. Falling water stacks up as ice. A seagull twirls. The ocean turns 360 degrees in a glass. Birds swarm. On land, I step on the track of a pink-footed goose. A piece of blue ice floats by, ice from which all the oxygen has been squeezed out. Blue ice is airless; the thing itself is total absorption, blue becoming blue, having been blue.

All night light. We sleep on glass. It too, induces a feeling of falling because there are no rolling waves to keep us upright.

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