

The Blue Hours

Dusk, early September, just beneath the Arctic Circle, by a tideline glacier in East Greenland. The cusp of the seasons, the cusp of the globe, the cusp of the land, and the day's cusp too: twilight, the blue hours. At this latitude, at this time of year, dusk lasts for two or three hours. We have returned from a long mountain day: pitched climbing up steep slabs and over snow slopes to a towered summit, from which height we could see the great inland ice-cap itself. Then down, late in the day, the darkness thickening around us, and the sun dropping fast behind the western peaks.

So we sit together back at camp as the last light gathers on the water of the fjord, on icebergs, on the quartz seams in the white boulder-field above our tents. Twilight specifies the landscape in this way – but it also disperses it. Relations between objects are loosened, such that shape-shifts occur. Just before full night falls, and the aurora borealis begins, a powerful hallucination occurs. My tired eyes start to see every pale stone around our tent not as boulder but as bear, polar bear, pure bear, crouched for the spring.

Across the Northern hemisphere, twilight is known as the trickster-time: breeder of delusion, feeder of fantasies, zone of becomings. In Greek, dusk is called *lykophos*, 'wolf-light'. In Austria, too, it is *Wolflicht*. In French it is the phase *entre chien et loup*, 'between dog and wolf': the time when, as Chrystel Lebas has written, 'it is nearly impossible to tell the difference between the howling sound coming from the two animals, when the domestic and familiar transform into the wild.' I do not know the Greenlandic word for dusk, but perhaps it would translate as 'bear-light'.

Because twilight exists as gradation rather than as state, its correspondent in terms of knowledge is not certainty but doubt. The Latin for dusk, *crepusculum*, records this association. *Creperae* are 'doubtful matters', writes the Roman scholar Varro, because 'dusk is a time when to many it is doubtful whether it is even yet day or is already night'. Such knowledge as is gained from twilight is chronic rather than acute, which is to say that it is acquired by waiting and watching, rather than by sudden action or decision.

Perhaps this is why photography and film are especially suited as media to twilight. Might one make a sculpture of twilight? It is hard to imagine. But film with its steady eye, and photography with its long exposures, can catch at twilight's degrees. Lebas has spent years of her life finding ways artistically to represent – or *inhabit*, perhaps, is a better verb for her practice – the blue hours in all their eeriness and in-betweenness. She works with a panoramic camera, and with exposure times of up to six hours: the eye of the lens open, patiently gleaning what little light there is. Her images are then printed up to a scale that is absorbing, even confronting, to the viewer.

Viewing Lebas's mysterious work, I am reminded of some of the dusks I have seen during my own years of walking and sleeping out in the landscapes of Britain and beyond. Twilight in a bluebell wood in Suffolk, when the colour of the flowers and the colour of the light combined to produce the strong illusion that I was lying on the bed of an ocean. Dusk on a winter peak in the Lake District, when for a few minutes the

white snow glowed the blue hue of compressed ice. Dusk in a Cambridgeshire fen, watching starlings gathered in a shifting cloud above the reed-bed, while a sparrowhawk struck and struck again through the cloud, which each time parted and then re-closed around the raptor's kill-path.

Twilight prompts recollection, a sense of what has passed. As Peter Davidson writes in his beautiful study of the poetics of dusk, *The Last Of The Light* (2015), twilight is best thought of less as a period of time and more as a 'territory': a 'territory of melancholy and revenants, longings and regrets'. For the only certainty of twilight is that it will end. The completion of the scene is also its annihilation. The earth will continue to rotate upon its axis, the sun will fall further below the horizon, the light will slip from the last things, until finally it can be said that night has come.

Robert MacFarlane for See All This Magazine No. 4 – Winter 2016-17