From *Dark Ocean: an Anthropocene Diary*

Work-in-progress

Jean McNeil

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Paleo People

September 2nd, 2018. London, 26 degrees

The long, hot summer finally draws to a close. I find myself looking forward to autumn, never my favourite season. The relentlessness of the heat this summer created a strange energy: anxious, uncanny. Drawing the blinds every day I had the impression we were no longer living in the British Isles but in Poland or Wyoming. Winter is usually the season of forbearance but this summer required a different kind of endurance I've never encountered before.

On the 2nd I host a modest 50th birthday party with ten friends. My circle of association is narrowing, like a camera aperture tightened against the light: at 30 years old I had 50 people in my kitchen, for my 40th birthday party, 20. I never expected to be one of those people who hire entire houses or even ships (as Malcolm did for his 70th) for decadal bacchanals. Still, all I have been able to gather around me, these years on the planet, is suddenly revealed: a flat, a job, the books I have written, a clutch of friends. A small harvest.

As for turning 50, it ignites no existential crisis. In human terms I am now too old to be said to have died young, that's all. But wait, something *has* changed. I start to have dreams of a new order. They are not about me and my endless anxieties. They take on an epic tinge. In one I wake to find it is 10am but totally dark. Could the clock be wrong? Where am I? In some country – Norway? Finland? – where the sun does not rise. But even there in mid

winter it is not dark this late. Something has happened to the sun, I realise. It's gone out, like a blown bulb. The darkness outside the window is strange and different to anything I've seen before, even in the Antarctic. It is solid and leering, like frozen petroleum. I realise that crops will fail, the earth will freeze over, we will all die. In another I am driving a car, an SUV, along the lip of a lake. It's like being in one of those car adverts filmed from above by drone: grey metal car-shark, Big Sur roads, sword-sun glinting. Suddenly the land is not there, it has been dissolved and I am driving through water. Spray from the wheels coats the windows. Then the water deepens, and the car and I are submerged.

After I returned from the Antarctic, I dreamt of ice for a decade. Aircraft hangers were housed inside icebergs. To get to the plane we would have to move vast sliding walls of ice. In another a sheer island of ice unleashed from the continent crashed into Buenos Aires and destroyed the city. In another ice crept over the world, a reverse global warming. I looked out the window to find a glacier parked outside my flat in Stoke Newington. In the dreams the ice is a giant jellyfish that covered the planet. But is it ice? In these dreams the energy that moves between the ice and myself is abashed, electric, almost sexual.

At two in the morning I am still washing dishes: flutes with warm cava pooling sourly, plates encrusted with rubber-red beetroot humous. I realise I feel like I have been alive for 500 years, not 50. Probably this is to do with my time-warp childhood. I grew up in the 1970s, at least in calendar time (Chevrolet impalas, avocado-coloured bathroom sets, 'Working My Way Back to You, Babe' by the Spinners on the radio) but in technological time we were living in 1730 or 1850 – any time before the invention of the combustion engine, basically. Around me the world has changed so radically in the time I have been alive it feels as if it has been torn apart. Veins of wildfires cascade over its skin, the repeal of cold, and everywhere a vanishing. It is like being alive in a gassy inferno and a drawing made with invisible ink at once. What did I expect? I interrogate myself. Surely not stability, or

certitude, or plenty. But I did. Or whatever I expected to happen in my life it never occurred to me that we would destroy the very basis of life, that I would witness this destruction in real time.

I think of the Paleo People, those disciples of deep time. In 2009 I joined a scientific expedition to Greenland as writer in residence. Anne Jennings, a paleoclimatologist and second-in-command on the cruise science-wise, told me that anything more recent than 40,000 years ago was irrelevant to her. Numbers tumble through my head. All my life I have been overspecialised in language. How do 40,000 and four million years ago differ, never mind 400 million? I can only see the planet, years sliding over it in manic intervals: dark, light, hot, cold, sunrise, sunset.

'What are you going to write about?' Anne had asked, a reasonable question. There was no scepticism and disapproval in her voice, as there sometimes was with the scientists whose expeditions I'd joined over the years. 'What happens on the cruise, Greenland, time,' I'd answered. 'Which time?' she asked. There she had me.

I have mostly written fiction, a form which thrives on human energy, human emotion, human lifespans. If we want to expand the notion of the human we could say that fiction is an artform that rests on the fission of society. Its forms and genres are so varied as to be uncategorisable, but its storylines are often identical. A woman marries into a family and has to assert her autonomy. A man journeys to a foreign land and acquires riches. Three generations of a family struggle to maintain a farm. An orphan supersedes his origins and becomes a prophet. A group of survivors of a catastrophe build a new world.

Time is the clock that ticks through fiction, and landscape is often a background, not a generative force, or even a character. In 2009, I wanted to try to write about non-human time, and joining a paleoclimate expedition would make this task relatable. And anyway I had

already been there, to deep time, in Antarctica. I had seen how time was obliterated in that non-human place.

In all, I would spend six years travelling to and writing about the polar regions, commuting back and forth like an Arctic tern. In Greenland I was hauled back 40,000 or 400 million years, what did it matter, on another hardship mission spent hunting the ghost of winter. But really there was another task I was reluctant to admit, even to myself. Writers were only allowed into these very specific realms of science for any old reason. You had to sell yourself as a public communicator, like a journalist or a policy-maker. In truth I hadn't inveigled myself aboard these science expeditions to communicate climate change to the people. I was on the trail of something else. I would not know what I was looking for until I'd set foot on Greenland. There, the entity I was hunting for would reveal itself.

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August 2nd, 2009, Falmouth, UK. 17 degrees

Gyllingvase Beach is coated fog. Droplets of rain drip from the razored leaves of chilly palm trees and the town beach is deserted. I've thought it so often in the British Isles: *if this is summer I'd hate to see winter*.

After breakfast a van arrives to take us to the ship. Falmouth harbour is too small for most of the ships bunched around its arc to come alongside, so they stand by on their dynamic positioning systems, stacked in the sea like planes approaching Heathrow. We are sped out a few miles to sea via a pilot boat, an orange fibreglass lozenge that looks like a motorised Quality Street sweet. Outside the porthole windows we can't see our ship, or anything at all. But then an outline in of the fog, a stationary spaceship materialises, the *RRS James Clark Ross*. We hunch inside the pilot boat as spray flies over the deck outside. The

JCR's captain comes on the VHF and tells us to approach. He has a British Airways pilot voice – lofty, posh, certain.

We plunk ourselves onto a wet deck lashed with warm rain and shake hands with the officers. Two crews rotate on the vessel, doing four month-long stints. This crew is the 'opposite' to the one I'd encountered in Antarctica, so I haven't met them before. I say hello to a tall, bald man, unusually thin for someone to lives on a ship, for reasons which will soon become apparent. This turns out to be Richard, the purser. Richard shows me to my cabin, called Scientist 4. I've impersonated a scientist before, in Antarctica. Scientist 4 is so much less adrift and suspicious than Writer 4.

On the bridge officers in black trousers and white shirts garlanded with gold epaulettes dash across its conference-room blue carpet and pine furniture. Gruff seagulls stutter outside. Several cargo ships become visible in the mist, only about a kilometre away – the English Channel is one of the busiest shipping routes in the world. They are underway, their bows peel the ocean open. Forty minutes ago we were scraping the yolks from our plates in a Cornish B&B and now we are on a different planet, one of industry and precision. This is something I savour about attaching myself to such missions: the strange vertigo we feel as the ordinary world falls away.

Greenland is the world's largest island (Australia is classed as a continent). I have only ever seen it from the window of transatlantic flights, when I've stared and stared, riveted by its blank serenity. It will take us six days to get there. This does not seem very long to traverse almost the entire Atlantic ocean. The ship travels at an average speed of about 12 knots, although at a push she can do 16. 'That's what you can write in your articles,' Alex, the ginger-haired third mate, asks. Alex is, like all third mates, improbably young. He looks as if he has just escaped kindergarten. 'What?' 'That we're bicycling to Greenland. It's the same

speed as cycling.' Being on a ship did feel a lot like cycling, I thought – the circuitry of the waves, the iterative motion.

At the tea station Alex was boiling the kettle. The hierarchy on a ship is military-rigid, but all the officers, even the captain, take turns on the tea round. 'So,' he says. 'What exactly does a writer-in-residence do?' 'Write,' I said. 'Reside.' 'But what about us? Are we doing to appear in what you write?' 'Maybe, maybe not.' 'If one of us were horrible to you, would you write about it?' 'Definitely. If you want to appear in print, just be horrible to the writer-in-residence.' 'Thanks,' he says. 'I'll keep that in mind.'

Alex shows me the manifest, a print-out of who and what we carry. On board are eleven scientists from the UK, US, Norway and Canada and twenty-five crew. The *JCR* will be not only a means of transport, but a life-support system, a society, one of the most capable polar science platforms in the world. Because we will not touch land until the ship arrives back in the UK in five weeks' time, we carry 1236 cubic meters of Marine Gas Oil for fuel, 221 tonnes of fresh water (the ship is also able to 'make' 40 tonnes per day from seawater using two fresh water flash evaporators). In the food stores are 20kg of black pudding, 40 large wedges of Red Leicester cheese, 192 beef burger portions, and 10 boxes of iceberg lettuce. This is the one downside, apart from confinement, to ship life: we are on a floating Wetherspoon's pub, for weeks on end.

The light is already listing toward autumn. The sunset has a golden slant and the clouds are thin and high. The ocean beneath us is beguiling as always, a tilted blue that changes quickly to black in the shadow of the ship. My eyes drink it in. In my experience, where we are going there are no blue oceans. In the polar regions the sea becomes a chessboard. Black, white, black, white. There the world sharpens and gathers its power like hoarding ammunition. In the Arctic and the Antarctic a resoluteness lives in the land. I can't describe it – a spirit

mentor, a ghost, an aggrieved giant white bird, an old, old will? Whatever it is, it is chastising and thrilling at once. Once you have been subject to its gaze, you are never the same.