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Irminger Sea: Oct 22
Night Show by Dallas Murphy

The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,
But the queerest they ever did see
Was the night on the marge of Lake Lebarge
I cremated Sam McGee.
- Robert Service “The Ballad of the Northern Lights”

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Aurora photos by Ben Harden, Dan Torres, and Melissa Patrician

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“Maybe tonight,” we’d say if even the faintest hint of sky peeked through the evening murk, which it did only rarely since we left Iceland. But every night the clouds closed in and the sky went pitch black. Until October 21. We’d been steaming all day along the east coast of Greenland gaping at the mountains and squinting into bright light.

“What’s that?” someone wondered.

“That bright yellow thing, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

“I read about it somewhere. The Polynesians call it the Sun.”

“Maybe tonight.”

The sky was cloudless. The “Pointers” on the cup of the Big dipper showed the way, beyond the brim, to Polaris directly overhead, the first stars we’d seen in three weeks. We waited. About 9:00pm (2100), I noticed my shipmates in the main lab hurrying into heavy coats, pulling hats down around their ears, and I didn’t need to ask why. The Northern Lights. Aurora Borealis.

A great ribbon of blue arced from the horizon astern, spanned the stack and the orbiting radar receiver and dipped to the far horizon. It shimmered and undulated, and we watched delightedly, never mind the steel-cold wind as we tried to maintain our balance on the rolling deck. Tonight, definitely tonight.

To the Inuit, the lights were the spirits of the yet-unborn signaling to the living from the great beyond. To the Algonquin of northern Canada, the lights were their ancestors dancing around a ceremonial fire. When the lights shimmer and ripple, said the Eskimo, their friends and relatives who have gone to the sky are reminding the living of their presence. Prospectors during the Alaskan Gold Rush knew for sure that the lights were reflections from the mother lode. The Romans gave the Lights their name—Aurora for the goddess of dawn and Borealis for the north wind. To scientists the Aurora is “solar wind.”

The Sun emits energy-charged particles—ions—that soar out into space at 300 to 1,200 kilometers per second. A cloud of such particles is known as a plasma, and the stream of plasma from the sun is called solar wind. As they interact with the edge of Earth’s magnetic field, some of the particles are trapped in the solar wind, driven to follow the lines of Earth’s magnetic field down into the ionosphere some 60 to 600 kilometers above Earth’s surface. When the particles collide with the gasses in the ionosphere, they begin to glow: the Northern Lights.

The blue ribbon of light jinked and swerved, went green for a time then back to blue, and beaded curtains of light unfolded from the bottom and retracted, dancing ancestors about the campfire, as the end of the ribbon rolled back on itself, then straightened and repeated the performance. But this may be one of those sights that bears out the old cliché about pictures and a thousand words, so I’ll let my shipmates’ photographs tell the rest of the story.

But here’s an interesting aspect to consider. Earth scientists such as Dr. Bob first observe nature and then seek to explain it with the aid of electronic technology. So did the Inuit but without such aids. The two views of nature cannot be reconciled one against the other. There are no unborn spirits in the ionosphere; instead, there are ions and plasma and magnetic fields, but that does not diminish the beauty or the thrill or the wonder while watching Aurora Borealis perform for us on a cold, clear night in the Irminger Sea aboard this ship named Knorr. And the two views of nature can rest peacefully beside each other, like the present rests beside the past, each with its different kind of beauty.

Anorersuaq by Nick M?ller

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