

STRANGE LIGHT

GEORGIA WRIGHT, CLASS OF 2017

Casey Shearer Memorial Prize for Excellence in Creative Nonfiction, 2nd Place

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*“I’ve had enough of your dark nights,’ yelled Moomintroll.
‘I’m cold, I’m all alone and I want the sun to come back.’”*

—Tove Jansson

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If I’d had a substantial reason to claim Scandinavia as my temporary home, perhaps I would have felt less small in the breaking of each new morning. However, I was pulled to the north by a strong nostalgia, nostalgia in the form of a set of children’s books dating from around 1945. (There have been more tenuous ways to determine a place to live, but not by much.) The author, a gentle Swedish-speaking Finn named Tove Jansson, wrote long into her old age on a knobbly Finnish island.

In the series, small creatures called Moomintrolls live in a sleepy valley somewhere in the very north of Europe. They are sweet white dumpling-shaped things, with big sheepish eyes and round snouts that render them not unlike tiny hippopotamuses. The Moomins play the harmonica, ride clouds, and throw festivals. They are as prone to the changing of the northern seasons as they are to the magic of a sorcerer, or visitors from faraway lands. I have loved them since I was very small. I have always been prone to letting fits of sentiment determine my choices. Allowing trolls to dictate my temporary home was perhaps the most dubious choice of all.

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Copenhagen, 1

The sun hangs low and strange in Denmark’s winter sky. There is no high noon in the north this time of year, only a long uncanny dawn that slides seamlessly into dusk. Beginning traces the sky immediately until end, a rising and sinking without prolonged suspension. All the day is change, gradient, dream state. And then—the stretch of night.

Denmark, the southernmost of the Nordic nations, is very flat. I live just outside the city in a suburb called Høje Taastrup, in the home of a couple named Ellen and Morten Grøndtved. They do not seem remotely bothered by the weather, perhaps understanding that compared to the Swedes or the Norwegians they don’t have it half bad. On the contrary, they say the summer has extended late this year. They eat almost exclusively red meat and periodically walk their cat on a leash. I do not know whether these are classic Danish traits or pure eccentricity.

One day in the first month, over tea, Ellen attempts to explain to me the meaning of the word *hygge*. It’s a noun, though it can be manipulated into the adjectival *hyggeligt*. *Hygge*, as Ellen describes it, is a remedy of sorts, a notion she loosely translates as coziness. Candles can be *hygge*. Spending time with friends can be *hygge*. A warm blanket can be *hygge*. Moreover,

though, *hygge* is a feeling: that of inner warmth, kindled differently depending on who you ask. As she speaks, I think perhaps I used to know *hygge* better as a child, though the word was then unfamiliar. Sun-warmed skin, days salted by the sea.

My room in the Grøndtved household is very small, with a slanted ceiling. When I wake at seven each morning it is dark. Gaining consciousness here feels to me like falling into a black hole.

Displaced inside this Nordic darkness, I ache for a light of my own. I am not so sure I can live without sun, if I might wilt, unable to photosynthesize. But a lack of sunlight does not preclude *hygge*. If anything, it encourages it.

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Bergen

On a weeklong sojourn that concludes in Norway, fellow expatriate Louise and I climb through the slouching fog to scout for trolls. There are sculptures of them everywhere on Mount Floyen, scattered at random in the forest: hacked-wood carvings of creatures with scarred, bucktoothed faces and smelly grins. The Norwegians believe in them ruthlessly. As we search, Louise and I patter words back and forth. We have mutually suspended the last ten or so years of our lives; we are back in the yonderland, a place in which I used to build fairy houses out of bark and stones.

We soon find ourselves in a part of the woods that feels unrulier. Moss grows thick on every surface. At one point, we stumble upon a fallen tree, one that has long since fused its trunk with the ground. A deep crevasse cuts underneath it, and I climb to the entrance, call a soft and sheepish hello into the blackness. Beyond the high-topped trees above us, dark clouds scud in search of a horizon to land upon, letting loose in the meantime a light rain trembling earthwards. I spot a whittled wooden sign, pinned on a birch tree, that reads *OBS FARE FOR PULVERHEKSER*: beware of witches. Beside it is the outline of a sorceress on her broom. I grin at Louise to mask a breath of fear on the back of my neck. Perhaps a witch is no cause for alarm. Perhaps she knows how to bottle potions: to banish loneliness, to instill a sense of safety, to replace the sun. A cauldron of rays. Brewing light must be a necessity when one lives alone in these northern woods.

We descend. Night drifts into misted predawn. I wake to news that turns my stomach: gunfire in Paris, a city I slept in only nights before. Circumstance is wire-thin. So far trauma has hit only by proxy. Of late, though, I have felt it sideswipe my own body, closer each time. I swaddle myself in layer after layer of sweaters, bulky and protective, before our walk to the train station.

After the darkened trek from our apartment, the station is violently bright. We board a railcar and it stutters and then starts. Painted Norwegian towns flicker by in the dim, scattered across the bases of great peaks. Across from me, Louise fights sleep, eyelids twitching. I resist too. Resist sleep, resist news of tragedy. The gush of words and grieving it has prompted, how one catastrophe seems to give way to all of them. The peaks slide by. Slumbering giants, sunk into the soil, capped with snow. With age, a dwindling number of places left untouched by fear. I used to be an optimist.

The clouds burst with sleet as we board the ferry, but I remain undaunted. Instead, a sort of hardness has sprung up in my stomach, and I walk to the bow. The fjord is black and glassy, and

we glide along it, looking up from the base of gargantuan, overlapping slopes. A wooly fog gathers by each crag's pinnacle. I feel a sort of relief in my own diminutive body, in our tiny little vessel. Borne on the melting of ancient ice, the streaming split of mountains. I am grateful to be a small thing. Grateful and afraid.

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Copenhagen, 2

Days spin by, spokes whirring on a bicycle or many. Traffic laws are obeyed here religiously. Even drunk youths in the wee hours of the morning patiently wait for the little walking man to flick from red to green before stumbling across the road. I have been counting on my body to begin, at some point, generating its own light. The fact that it hasn't started this yet makes me anxious and sick.

At my desk each afternoon, I obsessively Google Høje Taastrup sunrise and sunset times. I can't stop thinking about them. I draft a text, knowing it is perhaps inadvisable. Do you know, I write, that the sun is going to set at 4:13pm here next week? It's only October! The recipient is bored but patient. He has heard this before, though the specifics change each time. Send me some daylight, I write. Send me some warmth.

When a letter arrives in Høje Taastrup, worn after crossing two continents and an ocean, I handle it gingerly. A mark of my generation, I suppose, that the electronic transmission of words across the world feels more probable than this successful arrival of snail mail in Denmark. I am tired of the light of screens. When I was young, everything was graspable, everyone I loved close. Now, I can only imagine. Bodies once close to or touching mine breathe thousands of miles away.

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Reykjavik

One weekend after the weather grows wintry, I fly to Iceland, hop a bus across the country. At first I think the Icelandic light is weaker than Denmark's, being farther north, but I am mistaken. It is wildly potent, filtering out in small hued strands from behind puffs of geyser steam. Through the scratched bus windows, it magnifies, warming my cheeks as I watch cosmic lava fields slide by. Though I am not yet ready to greet it, night falls. The bus shudders ever ahead.

There is a spark in the distance. One of the small shacks that peppers the twisty shadow landscape. Inside, I imagine a fire crackling, belching flame as a man in a sheepskin nudges it with an iron prong. Outside his cottage, the wind gallops in bitter eddies. Something ripples distant in the night sky. Were the air not so bone-cold, the man might go outside to watch the aurora borealis and perhaps never return. It's happened before. The Huldefólk, those wily elves, are so lecherous and seductive that even the burliest man is vulnerable. Legend has it they lurk in the crevasses of the terrain, small unbreaths sucking in and out of the coldest shadows. They entice from the periphery mortals to step farther and farther away onto the lava fields until they find themselves stranded. There, the humans freeze into ungodly befuddled pillars, skin waxy, numbing slowly solid in the endless night.

Our leader is called Freya, and she moonlights, inexplicably, as a Dolly Parton impersonator. Freya has lived all her life in Reykjavik, weathered many of its dim winters. She stands at the front of the bus full of runny-nosed, stiff-limbed tourists, and with round eyes unspools tales of the northern lights. Periodically, she breaks into song—at one point a singlehanded duet, attempting when necessary a Kenny Rogers baritone. Then she lets loose the legends.

“Some believe,” she says in an accented voice over the fuzzed hum of the loudspeaker, “if a man and a woman copulate beneath the northern lights, they will conceive a genius baby.” She laughs, raucously. “We have blankets in the back, should anyone want one!” The bus sneezes and rumbles over a hill. On either side of us spread great ice sheets, lava fields capped with snow. But we are all preoccupied with the sky. “Last night, we saw them dance for us—reds and blues and greens. The gods were with us.” Her tone is reverential. Freya’s tales range from traditional Icelandic myths to unfounded superstitions, such as the following: if you whistle in the presence of the northern lights, the lights themselves—spirits of the dead—will whisk you away. A forever-disappearance. I wonder what might happen if one sings Dolly Parton to them.

The bus thrums quietly now, the initial excitement of its passengers subdued by impatience. Freya hums a lullaby. Her voice has a certain indisputable soothing quality to it, and I am lulled, heavy-lidded. Abruptly, she stops. The bus shudders to a halt. “I see some activity!” she says, ecstatic. “Above the rock faces to the left—hurry, hurry!” She exits, docile as a fox. Jolted awake, we triple-wrap our scarves, rush out of the bus into what feels like a physical wall of cold and darkness. Then I see the exuberant silhouette of Freya, perched on the crest of a hill, silhouetted by shifting, luminous ribbons in the northern sky.

Their celestial glow is worlds away from the daylight I’ve pined for. Not a sun, or a weaker version thereof, but a new and odd radiance. For once, tiny under the swirling spirits of gods to which I have no claim, I do not resist the strangeness. Instead, I let myself feel strange, too.

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Copenhagen, 3

Early one mid-December morning, Ellen and Morten drive me to the airport. Though the baggage check line is hours long, they refuse to leave my side until I process through.

As we wait side by side, I think of a couple weeks ago, when Ellen and I sat on the couch in their very small living room. It was nearing two in the morning, candles flickering. We’d all talked late, lazy and beatific, sated with food and drink. Following a silent moment, Ellen closed her eyes and told us about when she and Morten had applied to be foster parents. It didn’t work out. They have children, lovely and grown children. Yet they still longed for more. As a substitute for the foster kids, they had hosted more than eight students like me. Enough *hygge* present in their small and boxy home to welcome us restless souls. How wide and strong their filaments must be, to bridge so many partings.

In the weeks and months after I return to the states, I still won’t feel quite right. I will wonder if what I thought was a result of slanting and uneasy rays was in fact created by watching my childhood fade into movie stills or storybook fiction, the outlines of friends and family and loves nudging soft into memory-echoes. Once in a while, I’ll turn to lock eyes with a ghost.

When we reach the end of the line, I squeeze Ellen tight to me. I watch her and Morten grow small as I move forward, upward on the escalator. When I reach the top, I am for a moment frozen there, reluctant after all this time to take another step. But the strange and slanting sun is low in the sky, so I turn, and keep an uneasy move on.

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