Illuminated

Image by an unknown artist, *Aurora Borealis or Northern Lights observed from northern Norway, October 10, 1868*, (1906).

On finding your light.

Words by Jonathan Feakins.

Our first attempts to see the northern lights failed miserably.

To our credit, the lights were not the singular goal. S. and I had been dating for going on a year, and I had attempted to check off several of her bucket-list items (attend a music festival; see the lights; board a plane with no knowledge of its destination) in one fell swoop: I'd surprised her—at the airport—with tickets to Iceland Airwaves.

We spent the next week wandering the streets of Reykjavík, eating our weight in Icelandic hot dogs and fisherman's soup, getting lovingly body-checked by our Airbnb's majestic beast of a dog, and enjoying every tune we could from the likes of Hatari, and Hrím, and Of Monsters and Men. We also visited the Icelandic Phallological Museum (as one does).

But on multiple nights—after the shows, before bed, on the outskirts of the city—my partner and I stared into the darkness. And each night—having seen nothing but light-polluted ink—I'd reassure my beauty that the stars and skies weren't going anywhere anytime soon. That this wouldn't be our first wild goose chase. That we'd try again.

Six months later, the world shut down.

That summer, still in the thick of the pandemic's first act, we found ourselves on the couch, mildly high on freshly-legal edibles, talking in circles to the tune of lo-fi music backed by images of deep-space nebulae. I mentioned how, as a child, I had hoped to be an astronomer. Perhaps not unreasonably, my partner asked why—of all the things I've done—I hadn't done that.

Weeks later, buoyed by boosted unemployment benefits from my elder care job that had vanished into pandemic smoke, I cut a check for remote university coursework in astronomy. As S.'s tinies did their absolute best to phone in through a year of virtual grade school, I naively attempted to lead by example, with calculations on particle flux and planetary albedo.

S. and I ushered in 2023 with a relationship that had existed more in the new normal than the old. And so, in what sunny days we could muster,

"Just a little Green / Like the nights
when the Northern lights perform"—
"Little Green" by Joni Mitchell

In the 1977 book *Earth's Aura*, physicist Louise B. Young describes the aurora borealis as "fireflight flickering on the ceiling of the world."

she and I would spend our days on public rooftops, in our beloved Chicago, where we'd just … sit. Listening to our city. Soaking in the sun—a nonstop, celestial explosion that somehow warmed and fueled us, and everyone who ever came before. And thinking back to all the things we had, and hadn't yet, seen.

One day, as S. stepped away to use the building's powder room, I took the moment to check how the world was doing.

"An M1.7-class solar flare just occurred in association with a significant, large filament eruption near S20E11 that appears to be Earth directed. A full-halo CME is possible."

CME, or "coronal mass ejection," is a fancy acronym for billions of tons of plasma ejected from the sun that, upon striking the Earth's magnetosphere, cascade into what we call auroras. I checked the timestamp; the post from "Space Weather Watch" was not yet half an hour old.

Forty-eight hours later, S. and I picked up two young humans from their grandparents. We gave the third-grader and sixth-grader an unexpected proposition: Would they be down to drive three hours north and stare at the night sky? We might see nothing; they would surely spend the return journey unconscious in a car seat. Also, they would almost certainly miss school on Monday. Perhaps surprisingly, they acquiesced.

At ten o'clock that night, we parked underneath a starless sky. The breaks in the clouds we'd spotted from the highway were nowhere to be seen. S. and the children traipsed about in the lot, forlornly listening to my encouraging words about geomagnetic storms and Kp-indexes, but they were losing hope fast. Half an hour of overcast stargazing later, I began to fear that I'd disappointed the ones I love. I stared at a backlit cloud on the northern horizon. I sighed.

I suddenly realized that twilight clouds should not be backlit.

If you've never seen the northern lights, it's hard to describe what you should even be looking for, or what colors. "Aren't those just city lights?" S. asked, staring at a faint emerald hue blooming in the north. "WHAT CITY?" I quietly countered.

The green didn't stay green for long. Or stationary. The shimmering ribbons began to undulate, with a grace that smacked of blue whales turning over in their sleep. The green began to shift, electric-sliding its way into more poetic slices of the color palette: emerald, cerulean, azure. Locals began to pull up behind us, summoned by the nerdy grapevine.

I did not anticipate the sudden tsunami. Speeding ripples of light, cascading forth from the horizon, then buzzing over our heads until out of sight behind us. Again and again, these emotive eruptions of celestial energy, like a galaxy come to visit.

"WHAT," I eloquently sputtered, repeatedly. "WHAT."

We spent the better part of two hours losing our minds on a spiritual level. Wave after wave, ribbon after ribbon, until one day became the next. Eventually, the colors began to cool and quiet. Glancing at the kids, fast asleep in the backseat, S. and I looked at each other. Three hours later—a few hours before dawn—we tucked them into bed.

A long time ago, I tried to explain to my partner what it means when I say that I love them. It's like a meteor shower, I'd say. That there's a deep, unknowable vastness within me, through which this singular feeling—this core element, old as time—had traveled, unseen, for eons.

Until, finally, it reached the very edges of a miracle. A brilliant, impossible ball of life—you—where you witness my words, as they enter your atmosphere, finally burst into flame. Followed by another, and another, and another. In a storm that will never truly end.