

## Essay on *Northern Lights*

### ***The 300-year-old Storehouse Found in Ii, Finland***

The small forest town of Ii has a population of 10,000, whose old houses dot the surrounding landscape. The day I arrived, I encountered pine homes and storehouses made anywhere between two and three centuries prior, their exteriors painted red in the traditional fashion. Much as many other places around Finland, people continue to repair and live in the houses built by grandparents, great grandparents, and even earlier generations.

The hewn-log house walls bare marks from the axes used to build them. Bright coats of paint mask old scars on floors, doors, and a set of wooden chairs made by a father for his children more than a century ago. In storehouses, there are tools for repairing fishing nets, wooden barrels, and traditional shoes made of bark from silver birch trees. There are saws for cutting ice and wood, handmade looms for weaving old, tattered cloth, as well as clothing from the 1950s that still hang inside.

I was immediately touched when I saw the amount of effort, time, and love that was given to things in general. The handmade tools I saw bore a striking resemblance to the ones that were used in the region where my father grew up and made me imagine the ways in which my ancestors might have used them.

### ***Sunken Village in an Artificial Lake (Mutenia)***

(Village of Mutenia in Sompio region of Sodankylä, Lapland, Finland)

I have heard that Forest Sámi used to live in the Sompio region of northeastern Lapland, but following World War II, residential land was lost as hydroelectric power plants and artificial lakes sprung up along the banks of the Kemi River. The Lokka Reservoir, one of Europe's largest manmade lakes, was made in Sompio in the late 1960s and forced many of the residents to give up their way of life and move to the nearby village of Vuotso or even further away.

I learned much about the Sámi people and their folklore from the paintings and stories of Andreas Alariesto (1900–1989), an artist who was born and raised in the Sompio region, which was originally inhabited by the Sámi. Despite never having received a formal art education, Alariesto

was blessed with natural artistic gifts, which he used to draw the lives of the Sámi in vivid detail. To keep the memories of his homeland alive, he continued to draw pictures and write down the stories he had heard as a child. His village of Riesto now lies at the bottom of the Lokka Reservoir, much like Mutenia, one of several nearby towns that was lost to the artificial lake.

Currently most of Mutenia lies underwater, but a small part still sits above ground at the water's edge. Several red houses and sheds, now long uninhabited, are preserved here. It is a protected area, and special permission is required to visit, but with the help from several of my friends, I was able to gain permission to photograph the village. We took a boat from Vuotso, traveling upstream several kilometers until we reached the lake.

Once in Mutenia, we came across the home of the Tapio brothers, bear hunters who share the same name as the Finnish god of the forest. Inside their home, it looked as if the brothers and their younger sister had only been gone a little while. In addition to the beds, a fireplace, and blue chairs that faced one another, a räsymatto rag rug still lay across on the floor. Old tools were left in the shed, and a few butterflies fluttered by the windowpane. From the closed window you could see Lapland's windy steppes and the lake and, in the distance, the tors of Pyhä-Nattanen. I was deeply moved at the thought of the landscape before me and what former residents must have seen before the lake was made.

Summer's light shone through the night of the midnight sun. My friends and I walked through the tall forests of pine, silver birch, and spruce and climbed Pyhä-Nattanen. The birch grew shorter the higher we climbed, and large boulders began to appear. At the summit, we spotted the houses of Mutenia that we had visited earlier in the afternoon—now little red specks in the distance—and looked down on the vast expanse of the Lokka Reservoir. Pyhä-Nattanen overlooks Urho Kekkonen National Park all the way to the Russian border and beyond.

As I gazed out at Mutenia, both uninhabited and uninhabitable, I thought of the midnight sun, that it must be pouring into the Tapios' home right about now, and I imagined the still that would come over their old home. Even if the remains of a rich natural and human tradition lie in the water's depths, strong connections to places do not fade from our hearts and minds. I knew then that I wanted to capture something in my photography that once more reconnected the area's past with its present.

I later talked with a woman in Sodankylä about shooting Mutenia. She soon told me a brief story about how her family used to live in a village close by and said that they refused to leave their home even after hearing about the dam until one day she dreamt that the water rose and swallowed the house whole. It was then, in 1967, that she decided it was finally time to leave. Nevertheless, her dream is still fresh in my mind today.

## **Talkoot**

While in Finland, I presented photographs from *My Father's House* as part of a Tohoku-themed exhibition together with my friend and fellow artist Antti Ylönen in the city of Oulu. It seems that the Finnish countryside, much like Japan's, is facing depopulation and starting to see changes to ways of life that have been passed down for generations. Visitors to the exhibition said they sympathized deeply with my father and the people who had farmed in the foothills of the mountains in Iwate, saying they understood that way of life and know what it's like to have to move far from home.

One evening I was invited to have dinner at a neighbor's home close to my residence. During dinner, someone mentioned they had read my essay for *My Father's House* at the exhibition and told me about the Finnish tradition of *talkoot*, where neighbors will gather together to help out with tasks that can't be done alone like repairing a roof or renovating a house, for example. They went on to explain that once the work was done, the homeowner would treat everyone to a meal that they had prepared to thank them for their help. I was reminded of the Japanese tradition of *yui*, a similar system of mutual assistance in rural areas used to accomplish the planting and reaping of rice fields.

They went on to say that since my father's house was in such disrepair that they would all come along to help when it needed to be fixed, and that we could share a big meal afterward. Their kind words brought a tear to my eye, and unlocked something inside me that had stopped me from thinking about Japan's mountain villages and their impending depopulation. They gave me the strength to face an impending future that will be here much too soon.

## **The Joy of the Harvest**

From the short summer and throughout autumn, locals carefully cook and preserve the herbs and other crops they've raised in the fields along with berries and mushrooms that they've foraged in the forest. Seeds taken from vegetables are dried and set aside to be used the following year. As autumn drew near, I remember visiting the forest often to see if mushrooms were starting to grow. One day after the rain had let up, we foraged a bucketful of penny bun mushrooms (*boletus edulis*), which made my heart dance with joy. If you slice and dry penny bun mushrooms you can enjoy their aroma and eat them all year long.

When it starts to get colder, one part of forest becomes covered in blueberries. After filling our buckets with tiny blueberries, all of the neighbors made juice and preserves together. My friend and ecologist Kaisa Kerätär taught me about medicinal herbs, about which plants are safe to eat

and which ones are dangerous. She taught me the wisdom that comes from living among the rivers and forests.

The natural lakes and rivers in Finland were crystal clear, and everyone would go swimming in the mornings and evenings. Water drawn from the lake would later be boiled and used for the sauna. We also went fishing, and I looked on as my friends caught char in the rivers and pike in the lakes. I was treated to reindeer meat with mashed potatoes and lingonberries. On special occasions, even moose meat was served.

When the new potatoes were harvested, I told my friends that when I was little my parents taught me that you should face east, laugh, and be merry when eating the year's first harvest of vegetables, explaining that it may be a way of thanking the sun, which rises in the east. They enjoyed my story, laughing and saying that it was just the kind of custom a rural farmer would have.

After buttering the freshly boiled potatoes, we figured out which direction was east, and each made merry in our way. Looking around at each other, we all broke out in laughter. I was so grateful for that peaceful moment among friends, celebrating the joy of the harvest.

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