

The Mercury

The Student Art & Literary Magazine of Gettysburg College

Year 2017

Article 17

1-1-2017

Beige

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Class of 2017

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Grow, Carley M. (2017) "Beige," *The Mercury*: Year 2017, Article 17.
Available at: <http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2017/iss1/17>

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Beige

Author Bio

Carley Grow is a senior majoring in English with a Writing Concentration. Before spending her junior year abroad in England and Denmark, she had extreme aviophobia and had never traveled outside of the United States. Now she is a slightly less picky eater and can say that she has been to thirteen countries.

Beige

“While here I stand, not only with the sense
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
That in this moment there is life and food
For future years.”

—William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey”

At Beachy Head, where pastured countryside rolls and rolls until it meets a sudden drop-off into the English Channel, I understood what I missed about England. I had never visited the chalk cliffs, but already they felt like a familiarity: dogs without leashes making dashes for thrown toys, words tinged with British accents tossing around in the wind, a sunburn beginning its slow crawl across the bridge of my nose. I lunged readily into an old happiness. Up until the moment I requested a ticket for Eastbourne at the London Bridge station, I was still deciding whether or not I wanted to spend my day trip from London exploring a new part of England or returning to the one I had committed to memory. In choosing the cliffs, I would sacrifice Bath.

It was my junior year of college, and I had been abroad for two semesters, with barely a month at home in Pennsylvania wedged between. I’d spent the fall in what many Brits consider England’s smallest city, a utopia of teashops and bookstores and Georgian townhouses all carved out in beautiful beige stone. Named for its historic Roman Baths (which still exist, though the bathing pools have taken on a questionable green hue, and you can’t swim in them), Bath has the nobility of a city that has carried with it a multitude of reputations throughout the centuries, not all of them good. Pick up any late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century British novel and at some point you’ll find a scene where a cohort of anxious, upper-class women advise a character with a minor cold to “take the waters” in Bath to avoid certain death. In the same novel, sometimes on the very next page, some wizened character will hit you with a rant on the dangers of Bath’s society, how its rakes and social climbers and drunken gamblers spell ruin for the naïve, teenage country girl visiting the city.

Although attitudes toward Bath have shifted since then, Bath is well-preserved, and not just in the sense that you can feast on Bath’s famous Sally Lunn’s buns—larger in circumference and tastier than regular hamburger buns—in a house that is over five hundred years old. I think I knew, certainly before stepping off the train at Bath Spa station, perhaps even as far back as filling out the study abroad application for Advanced Studies in England, that I was going to Bath to be healed, to “take the waters” in my own way. After four months in Bath and then another four months in Copenhagen, Denmark, I was worried that Bath had doomed rather than cured me.

A few weeks before the end of my semester in Denmark, I was planning a two-day trip to a tiny Danish island called Bornholm with a close friend who was also studying in Copenhagen at the time. This journey would mark many lasts: my last opportunity to explore an unfamiliar region of Denmark, my final

weekend excursion to a European destination, my only chance to spend more time with my host mother's parents, who lived on the island and were eager to have me as their guest, though they spoke very little English and had only met me once. The friend I'd invited along had been in Denmark for the entire year, so I'd be depending on her to make sense of the Danish words I couldn't understand (which included every word in the Danish language besides *kanelsnegl*, or "cinnamon roll").

When my friend couldn't go on the trip last minute, I struggled with possible alternatives. I could journey to Bornholm alone and push myself to work through the inevitable bouts of silence and misunderstandings that come with language barriers, which was no less than what I'd been doing the whole semester. But the trip had suddenly lost its luster in the disappointment of losing my travel companion. I could book a cheap flight to Stockholm, which I wasn't too desperate to see. The other option, one that I'd waged a constant and internal argument against for many months, was returning to England.

In the time since I had left Bath and forced myself to readjust to a new culture and country, I traveled as much as possible, mostly on my own, sporting a hiking backpack with a complicated system of straps that crisscrossed my body like seatbelts. I fell in love with everywhere: the fjords of Norway, the Bavarian countryside, Edinburgh's pubs and icy beaches, the old subway cars in Budapest's underground. The eventual return flight to Copenhagen and the long train ride to my host family's house in suburban Køge should have felt like coming back to home base. But by mid-semester, I was choosing secluded seats on the train where I could cry into my grey scarf unnoticed. Worse than my sadness was my guilt in not being able to pinpoint its source. Nothing about Denmark—ranked 2016's happiest country according to the World Happiness Report—should have been disappointing me. And nothing was disappointing me exactly, only that Denmark was not Bath, and I was beginning to feel that the self I had cultivated during my time in England had, in Denmark, been misplaced.

I soon became paranoid that this was not a small sadness but the clinical kind, the same anxiety-infused depression I had chronically struggled with for years and thought Bath had shaken out of me. I could claim almost literally that it must have been something in the water, for in Bath, I hardly recognized myself. It was in Bath (or more precisely, in the nearby Bristol Airport) that I had conquered my fear of flying. On a program trip to Oxford, I had harnessed some previously unknown confidence and told one of my Bath housemates that I had feelings for her. And when our relationship ended poorly some months later, I read my writing aloud for the first time in front of a crowd in a Bath pub, channeling a private grief into an open-mic night confessional.

I was thinking of this version of myself as I, in panic, typed up an email to the care team at the Danish Institute for Study Abroad. A few days after, I found myself in a room the Danes would call *hyggelig*, a cozy space with soft lighting, across from a DIS staff member named Anders, who I trusted had some sort of psychological credentials.

"It doesn't sound like depression," he said thoughtfully, running a hand over his nearly bald scalp. "I would say you're just feeling beige."

"What do you mean?" I asked, though this assessment was an immediate

relief to me.

“Because you have a high emotional range, you’re used to either being at a one, extremely sad, or at a ten, extremely happy. England was a ten for you. It sounds like Denmark is more of a five, an in-between state. A beige color. You have to get comfortable with being beige. Most of life is beige.”

Already my mind was fighting his logic. *Beige doesn’t give my life meaning*, I thought. What I wanted was England’s chalk cliffs, toothy white against the blue water. The mollifying gray of British clouds making up their mind on whether or not to rain. The brilliant green landscape of the countryside, interrupted only by the white bodies of sheep. Bath is beige but made me feel, in my time there, the opposite of beige, an emphatic ten on the happiness scale. What I felt for England—love in its extreme—had developed into an absence of feeling in Denmark.

But I was terrified to return to England too soon, to renew the sense of loss when I left for the second time. I thought it better to return in five or ten years when I could form new and separate memories rather than risk corrupting the ones I had. A part of me was also worried that traveling to England by myself would intensify my loneliness. Of course, the seven Americans I’d shared a house with in Bath and roamed England alongside had long been back in America. If I went back to Bath, I’d have to stand in front of 1 Pierrepont Place and accept that my old home was now inhabited by strangers.

I elicited advice from friends in Denmark and America in the hope that they would validate my concerns and tell me to travel someplace else. Instead, they offered lists of pros and cons without leaning one way or the other. When I called my mother and asked what she thought, she let out an extensive sigh. “Just go where you want to go,” she said, and I hung up feeling even more frustrated.

Then it occurred to me that if I went back to England, I didn’t have to return to Bath. I could name a dozen British sites I’d wanted to see but hadn’t gotten the chance to the previous semester. Bath would overwhelm me, I reasoned, but if I stuck to London and visited the South Downs, a series of chalk cliffs on the southeast coast, maybe I could relearn myself in a way that wouldn’t be overrun by nostalgia. Where I wanted to go was England. The only person telling me “no” was myself.

Walking down the promenade in the seaside town of Eastbourne, I bought a cheese toastie before hiking up the grassy hillside leading to the South Downs. At 162 meters, Beachy Head is the highest of the cliffs, the ideal spot for family picnicking or selfie-taking or drone-flying, all of which I observed. As I wandered along the grass, I saw a cluster of white crosses near the edge of the cliff. I had read in a guidebook that Beachy Head was one of the top suicide spots in Europe, though I didn’t want to imagine the cliffs in that way, a site where tranquility might be broken, where a life might reach its end. Looking out at the people dangling their feet off the edge, laughing for photos and carefully peering down at the red-striped lighthouse far below, I was reminded how much it meant to me to *not* want to jump. I was not in Bath, and I was okay. The next day, I would be back in Denmark, and in a few weeks, America. I would be leaving England, but I would be taking my happiness with me.