QIUGYAT ASINGCUGTUT UNUGPAK. – THE NORTHERN LIGHTS ARE BEAUTIFUL/NICE TONIGHT.
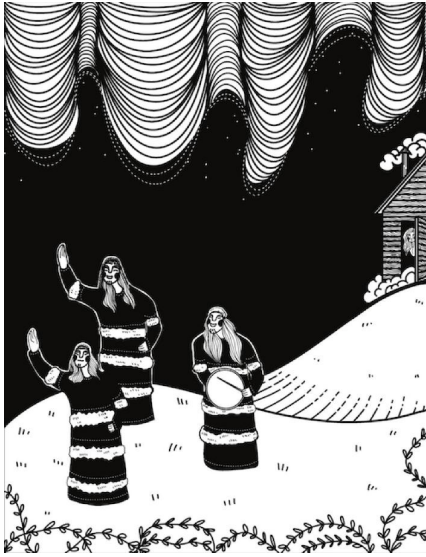

Images: Northern Lights. Digital media by Courtney Griechen, 2021.

The northern lights, also known as the aurora borealis, are shimmering curtains of light that illuminate the night sky across the north. Similar lights seen in southern polar regions are known as the aurora australis. Interaction between the Sun and the Earth creates these lights. The aurora is powered by an electrical discharge that occurs when magnetism from solar winds collides with the Earth's upper atmosphere. Glowing molecules created by this collision form dancing bands of multicolored light that extend from forty to six hundred miles above the Earth.

The aurora can cast a dramatic glow that illuminates the landscape. Athabascan and Iñupiaq people took advantage of this light to travel and hunt at night, even on moonless evenings. The Iñupiat also used the aurora for navigation because the most cohesive bands of light trend from east to west before bending north.

Most northern cultures have legends about the aurora that connected these eerie lights with life after death. The Iñupiat believed that the aurora could kill people, and they brandished knives at the lights to keep them at bay. A story from Kodiak tells of a time when villagers were warned not to dance while the northern lights are out. The villagers didn't listen, and so they were all killed by the northern lights.

The ?ingit of southeast Alaska believed that the spirits of people who died during warfare traveled to a world in the sky. When these spirits came out to play, people on earth saw them as the aurora. These displays were a sign of impending war and bloodshed.

In Alutiiq cosmology, the northern lights are also believed to be the spirits of dead warriors. These spirits live in the first of five sky worlds, closest to earth, with the spirits of the stars and the moon. And like the Yup'ik, Alutiiq people believed that whistling would bring the lights closer.