

# Like a Thief in the Night

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2009

a review of

*Let There Be Night: Testimony on Behalf of the Dark*, edited by Paul Bogard. University of Nevada Press, 2008

The “Reconsidering Primitivism” issue of *Fifth Estate* #365 (Summer 2004) carried a short article called “Support for the Forces of Darkness” by Luci Williams that lamented the poisonous infection of the nighttime skies by industrial-commercial lighting and called for “direct action in defense of the dark” against “selfish aggressors waging perpetual war against the night.” Ringing with manifesto-like intentions in that same issue of FE was a piece by Peter Lamborn Wilson warning against electricity: “Some people like Black-Outs: consciously because they enjoy seeing things fucked up, perhaps unconsciously because the filth of dead light and noise suddenly dies with a moan. Other people fear Black-Outs for the same reasons. It depends on your relation with night, with darkness and primitivity.”

The relationships between darkness and the various oppressions of civilization have been fruitfully outlined in historical anecdotes assembled in works such as Murray Melbin’s *Night as Frontier: Colonizing the World After Dark* (1987) and Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (1995). In A. Roger Ekirch’s *At Day’s Close: Night in Times Past* (2005), a recurring theme that emerges is how darkness was used by the propertied classes in late medieval and early modern Europe to consolidate and extend governmental and church authority over the population: the creations of nightwatch patrols, the institution of curfews, and nightly city-gate lockdowns after evening prayers are just a few of the examples. Ekirch quotes the French legal historian and sociologist Jean Carbonnier’s theory that early human communities recognized the differences between the ways people behaved in daylight and in the dark: “Night probably gave birth to the rule of law,” he writes.

But I would add that it was more precisely the fear of night that spawned these shopkeeper and landlord regimes of law and order. Civic authorities were largely helpless to enforce those sanctions until the industrialization of light could illuminate city streets, but that didn’t stop them from inculcating the idea that the things that happen in the dark are so chaotic (thieves, beggars, foreigners, prostitutes) and so unholy (ghosts, witches, werewolves, vampires, and other agents of the Prince of Darkness) that people should gladly sacrifice their benighted freedoms to the altars of Church and State. And we all know how that has turned out...

The relationship between liberty and the night is the howling truth at the core of civilization’s war on the dark. Six or seven centuries of aggressive erosion of those nocturnal freedoms and creations as integral parts to the project of civilization and its cult of public safety have gone largely unchallenged. We all blindly accept our daily immersion in a widening and deepening pool of “filth of dead light and noise” (in Wilson’s words) as a sick baptism into “progress.” There needs to be energetic responses to the destruction of certain unique facets of sleeping, dreaming, love-making, poetry, imagination, and myth-making that comes with the concentrated theft of darkness from us all.

As suggested in that 2004 issue of FE, the time for a new militancy to protect and reclaim the dark from the abuses of civilization is long overdue. The 30 environmental writing pieces by poets, creative writers, and scientists collected in the anthology, *Let There Be Night: Testimony on Behalf of the Dark*, ponder whether the autocratic regimes

of light do any good, but none, sadly, make an outright call for a dark insurgency. Though there are moments of illegalist activism (such as Robert Michael Pyle's short story that ends with a couple of moth enthusiasts hunting city streetlights with a .22 rifle in urban Minnesota), most of the writing here prefers to advocate for liberal, reformist solutions, such as penning letters to the editor, organizing petition drives, and responsibly attending town council meetings. Others, though, can only offer glum Wordsworthian rhapsodies about retreating into the wilderness—rural mountain villages in Guatemala, the deserts of the Southwest US, the Great North Woods of Maine, remote Caribbean Islands, Cradle Mountain in Tasmania—as the only possible solution. The final essay in the book—"What the Solution Would Look Like," by an astronomer at the US Naval Observatory's Flagstaff Station in Arizona—never gets more radical than "replace or remove a poor light fixture."

Frankly, there is an awful lot of wistful, nostalgic sadness in this collection and not enough rage. Gary Harrison's "Night Light," for example, is a rationalization for why he can allow a department-store parking lot full of 1000-watt light bulbs to blind him to the Albuquerque night sky in his backyard. "If I want dark night," he shrugs, "I can drive to Chaco Canyon," adding that "lobbying paid off" when the store management graciously installed some light shielding. Harrison refers with a meditation on Kant's "the starry sky above me and the moral law within me" to explain away his complacency; as a remedy for Kant, I would offer him the words of the Franco-Uruguayan Symbolist poet Lautreamont:

"It is only by admitting the night physically that one is able to admit it morally." O, nights of youth!"

David Gessner's contribution recounts how a doctor's newly-constructed McMansion set his neighborhood ablaze with "thirty-five spotlights, groundlights, and pool lights," a perpetually-illuminated "bed sheet-sized American flag on a fifty-foot pole," and a fully-lit lawn sculpture of a whale. In so doing, the Doctor robbed him of the long nights he once spent exploring the craggy shorelines of Cape Cod Bay. Town council meetings accomplished little as the Doctor (a nickname, he says, that reminded him of how angry peasant villagers referred to Frankenstein in old horror movies) "spoke of love of country and freedom, stressing that a person should be free to do whatever he wanted with his own property." Gessner's solution was to adopt the petty tyrannies of suburban home-owners associations and craft a regional zoning law for the preservation of "aesthetic tradition" against future invaders. When he craves darkness, he says, he trespasses at night on the Doctor's private beach in the shadow of a bluff.

The implications of how personal freedoms are destroyed by the obscene proliferation of metal-halide floodlights are featured in only a couple of the pieces in this book. Laurie Kutchins, for one, deftly pairs a university student-led "Take Back the Night" rally for rape-survivors and their supporters in the Shenandoah Valley with ideas about the cloak of darkness she experienced deep in the woods on the Wyoming/Idaho border; Ken Lamberton's "Night Time" makes tangibly real the grim link between continuous artificial lighting and his own time in prison: "The first night after I got out of prison, I realized that I had become afraid of the dark," he begins.

As environmental writing that introduces the problem of light pollution, *Let There Be Night* is a middling collection that gleans voices from many corners and styles. But the defense against the systematic destruction of night needs more inspired and creative critical thinking than just the typical self-satisfying liberal "awareness" campaigns that depend on petitioning the government or appealing to the good sense of corporations to solve the problem.

# fifth Estate

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