

Grid Interactive

On the longest day of the year

Rich Dana (Ricardo Feral)

2019

The solar array's passive tracking system wakes to the first rays of the Pennsylvania summer sun. The solar panels don't care that today is the solstice, or that the sun will rise on its arc to an angle of 72.5° at noon.

Its rusting actuators will strain to follow the sun all the way to its apex. As freon warms in the black copper tubes that run along the edges of the frame, the liquid vaporizes and moves from one side to the other. The tracker begins its daily task of following the thermal energy of the sun, keeping the photovoltaic panels facing into the sunlight as it moves along a course from east to west.

Gradually, across North America, other solar arrays awaken to the longest day of the year. The electrons begin to flow from the PV panels to their inverters, and the inverters patiently listen to the power grid, waiting for their daily conversation to commence.

The 400 kW array on the roof of a Walmart in Ohio reaches out, looking for others, sending its energy out across cookie cutter subdivisions which metastasized and then died on what was once wetlands and farms. Inside, among the aisles of the 24-hour superstore, the shoppers are gone. The lights remain lit, vigilant, awaiting the next holiday rush. Only raccoons forage here now, unconcerned about the expiration date on Fruity Pebbles or Doritos.

In the Mojave Desert, the lonely giants—the 150 MW solar generating stations—pump energy out across the 750 kV high-lines, for no particular reason. Their electrons reach the empty casinos on the Sunset Strip, where coyotes pass flickering lights on their way to sleep, out of the heat of day in empty hotel rooms. Turkey vultures nest in the substations, eavesdropping on the conversations across the lines, but unable to decrypt the messages.

Further west, in Mendocino, the solar roofs of boutiques and B&Bs chat with each other across the local 11-kV distribution lines. Disinterested in technology, the feline inhabitants of Victorian houses absorb their solar energy directly from the sun, stretching out in the south-facing windows, licking their paws, washing their faces and squinting out across overgrown lawns.

The coal-fired boilers and gas plants went cold long ago unlike the nuclear reactors. Wind turbines, without maintenance and lubrication, spun for a few years, then stopped. But the PV panels, in their durable simplicity, their crystalline solid-state elegance, live on.

Their inverters will eventually go bad, and when that happens the panels will stand alone, generating voltage, waiting in vain for a load to power.

The cats, the coyotes and the vultures won't repair the inverters. Neither will the deer that graze in the overgrown urban farms of downtown Detroit, the dogs that hunt in packs along the East River in Manhattan, or the mountain lions who occupy the high rise condos of downtown Denver.

The raccoons, on the other hand, may try. With their nearly opposable thumbs and endless curiosity, their stock is on the rise. But no, it is unlikely that they will take the time to fix the inverters before the lights go out forever.

But today, on the summer solstice, the longest day of the year, the solar arrays will talk, sending electrons out across the grid, silently telling the story of humanity, until the sun goes down.

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<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/403-spring-2019/grid-interactive>
Fifth Estate #403, Spring 2019

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