



Because the Night Belongs to Us

by Cielo Lutino

Drive a long length of macadam out of town. Pull over onto soft shoulder. Turn the car off and walk away. Look up. A damn lot of constellations pin the sky, so much so that the idea of man's galactic singularity seems both certain and certainly stupid. Another notion: The stars are timeless, and we are time-full, each of our seconds heaping atop one another, crushing us six feet under, where we expire beneath their heaviness.

Orion, Cassiopeia, and their brood of Greco-Roman starstuff evince such thoughts—no surprise when astrology coiled our fates to their hard glitter—but soon we may no longer be able to ponder, let alone view, their stellar composition. Stadium floodlights, neon signs, illuminated car lots, street lamps, whizzing headlights, blinking signals—all contribute to what scientists call

“sky glow.” The white-pink haze that hovers over centers of human activity, sky glow advertises density, civilization, something man-made. On a long road trip from the periphery of nowhere, sky glow assures drivers: Basic comforts ahead. There is more than one of you. Nearing San Diego.

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Fulgent heavens don't console us all, though. To the Tucson-based International Dark-Sky Association, or IDA, sky glow is pollution, light a form of litter. They preach their gospel and crusade to lower—even quash—incidences of light pollution. Their reasons are manifold: Maintaining a street-lighting system is expensive; the night sky is a natural resource under attack; light pollution makes astronomy impossible; it interrupts circadian rhythm. Finally, it's rude. The porch light that welcomes Johnny home robs the Joneses next door of a good night's sleep, thievery with no legal recompense. Thankfully, the IDA's influence has been far-reaching. Today, some states boast light-pollution ordinances. In Arizona, mercury vapor lights are outlawed; in Connecticut, roadway lighting projects that fail light-pollution criteria aren't doled public monies.

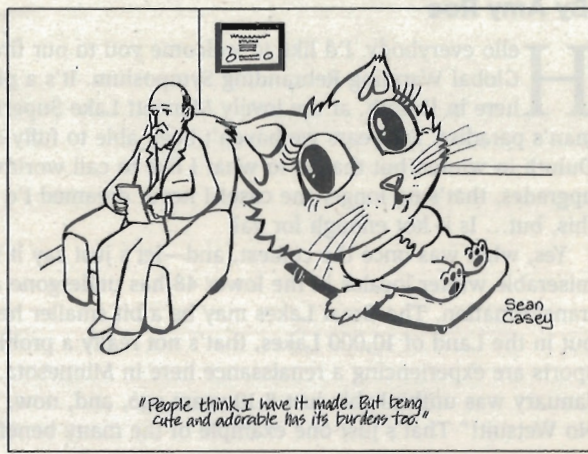
But activists still have converts to win over, like those enthusiasts who would prettify bridges with decorative lights. Such twinklies may delight the human species, but other orders suffer—seabirds, for instance. Night travelers, they grow disoriented by artificial lighting and collide with one another or, worse, buildings. And frogs and turtles that reproduce at low light levels? They don't like doing it under the hum and buzz of fluorescent bulbs any more than we do.

If propagation and evolution falter in a well-lit world, big business does not. In the most egregious violation of light pollution yet, the Space Regatta Consortium, a Russian company, in 1999 attempted to stretch a kind of “mirror” of thin plastic and metal onto the surface of the Mir space station. They hoped to reflect light five to nine times stronger than that of the full moon onto the earth below. But the plastic rolled back, SRC lost its bid for king of the utilities, and our nights were saved from perpetual twilight, from day itself.

SRC's failure keeps the drama of a harvest moon, as well as the attendant romances of sunrise and sunset, intact for now, but such blockbuster skyworks may be all we know how to appreciate in the future. During power outages in Los Angeles after the Northridge earthquake in 1995, residents reported a mysterious cloud above the city. It was the Milky Way. Light pollution had prevented Angelenos from seeing the sky in its natural condition for so long that it had become spooky and foreign, unknown to human eyes. This trend continues. Fascinating, terrifying—so were the stars described when they shone above Northeastern cities during last summer's massive power-grid breakdown.

We grow dimwitted: Zeus' greatest revenge for Prometheus' crime. Reliant on our greediness for fire and light, maybe the Olympian royalty simply await the moment when SRC or some other corporation radiates us in unending light, and we walk among one another, retinas burning. In such aspect, the world snaps back to the earthbound—glass and concrete buildings, lattes, terry-cloth shorts—and we see no farther than the trash we beam skyward. Beyond, cosmos glisten unseen. ■

Cielo Lutino writes and edits for various publications and organizations from Portland, Oregon, where cloud cover obscures the stars more often than light pollution.



"People think I have it made. But being cute and adorable has its burdens too."