

Good Night

Good Night

Chantal Meng

Once upon a time, a Fox and a Girl set out to explore the night and two men (powerful and strange) kept getting in their way. Once after midnight, while the Fox was on the run, and the Girl had funny pictures in her head, a white deer appeared in a dark park. At the same time, the two strange men made strange plans, both with ambitious agendas: One claimed to protect women and girls with light—the other dreamed of enshrining every bridge in his city with a nightly shroud of colourful, flashing light. Meanwhile, a gigantic artificial moon was being built somewhere in China.

This is a story of true revelations, told as I meet with my old friend, Darkness, for a conversation in the Canary Islands:

Why are you telling me
a bedtime story now?

This is not a bedtime story.
It is a journey of nocturnal
exploration and contemplation.
And encounters between
you and me.

How much of this is fiction?

None. The narrative attempts
to navigate how you are both
impressive and challenging.

Impressive, maybe.
Challenging?

Let me start with one of the original challenges
I had working with you.

**This journey began with my determination to take
a picture of you. The attempts mostly failed, and
so I started sketching you, which I learned was
a much better way to picture you anyway. But that
is a story I have already told.**

As it turns out, my initial frustration with trying to
capture you with my camera was little more than
the frustration of being a photographer. I found the
flood of images lifeless, everything looked more or
less the same. A real picture of you, I thought at
the time, was what I needed.

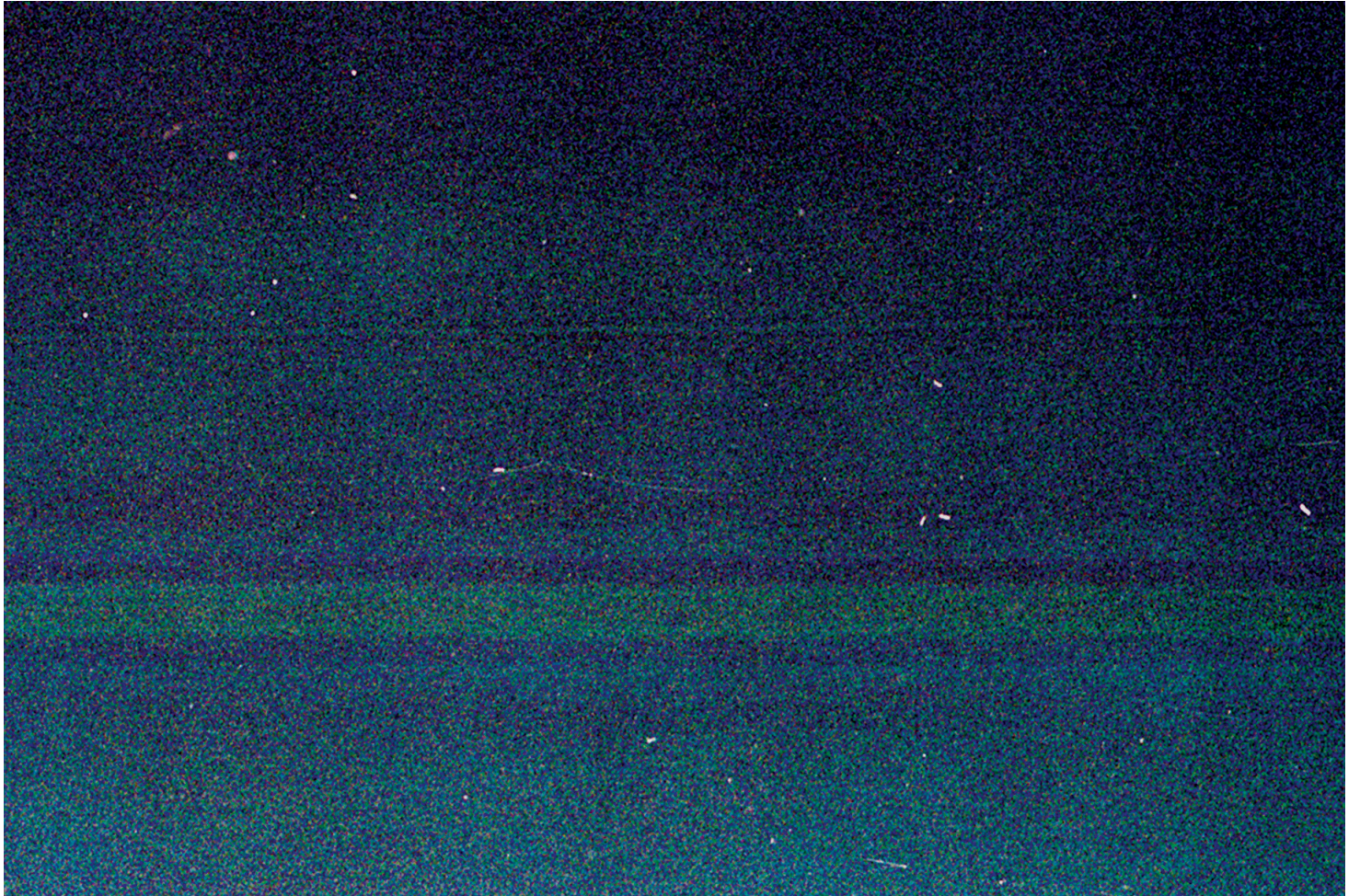
A real picture of me?

Maybe an absurd aspiration.
But listen.

**I took a trip to get a real picture of you.
Many strange things happened on Earth those
nights. I will tell you about some of them.**

**As I said, this is a story about two powerful
men— Boris and Andrew (not exactly fans of
yours)— a White Deer (figurative, who knows),
moons (two to be exact) and a Fox
(a new friend).**

* * *



ENGLAND **The urban Fox—a night explorer like me— moves quickly, travels far and is very smart.**

**“I am the fastest in all the land,”
the Fox told me early on.**

**“My speed and agility allow me to survive.
I can jump over any lazy dog in my path!¹
But my spryness is one thing, my dark coat
is another altogether. With my tint, I can become
one with the night.”**

¹ ‘The quick brown Fox jumps over the lazy dog’ is an English language pangram—a sentence containing all the letters of the alphabet. Graphic designer often use the phrase for design mockups to convey the visual impression of different fonts.

The Fox was my first friend when I moved to the city. Together, we discovered the urban night, and every time the Fox dispensed wisdom before I went to bed.

In 2012, its family was murdered by the Urban Fox-Hunter Commandos. Since then, the Fox has been on the run from a man named Boris. Boris was the man who ruled the city at the time, and he saw all the Foxes as pests and a menace to his city.

He hired people to hunt down the Fox: The Fox Cullers, as they were called in the capital, killed thousands of its kind every year.² Fleeing from home after its kin were killed, the Fox pushed further north and that’s where we met. It was a full moon and, as usual, I was photographing some dark landscapes near the river Lea.

² See the chapter ‘Contagion Set Free: The Urban Fox-Hunter’ by Sukhdev Sandhu (2007) and ‘Boris Johnson calls for urban Fox ‘menace’ to be tackled’ (Jones 2013) for additional information on Fox over-population in London.



One of the very first stories the Fox told me was the way it was born. It was 1992. The very same year Russia launched 'Znamya', a giant space mirror intended to turn night into day. The magnificent concept was to redirect the sunlight lost in space back to us, Earth. There were sceptics. Some were outraged that the mirror would disrupt biological patterns; others insisted that the night sky is common property. And others vehemently declared that access to the dark (that's you) and the stars is a basic human right.

The Russian scientists did not care; new technologies promised a bright future, they insisted. But in the end, the experiment only lasted a few hours. 'Znamya' sent a single beam of light back to Earth before it de-orbited and burned up in the atmosphere.³

³ In his introduction to *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (Crary, 2014:4–5) draws attention to this experiment.

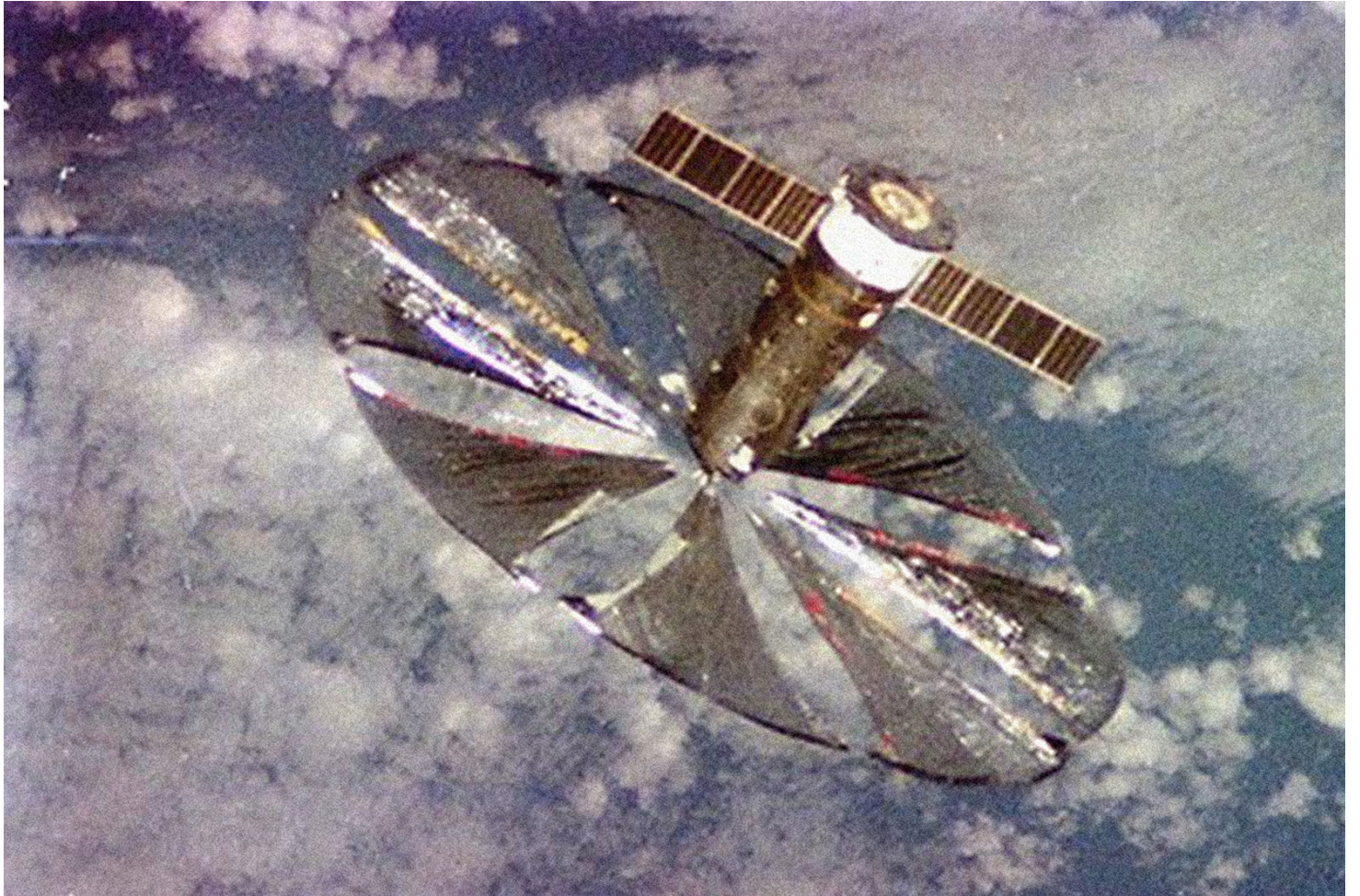
However, for the Fox, that beam was decisive. It grazed the Fox at the very moment it was born and changed its colour forever.

"At that moment," the Fox tells me, "my fur was overexposed, developing dark shades distinct from others of my kind — like light leaks into a darkroom."⁴

The Fox assures me that it has managed to survive only thanks to 'Znamya': "that is the only reason I haven't been shot and therefore gotten to live to this age — because now my shadowy appearance at night shields me."

"And so", the Fox continues, "I am not only the oldest but also the shadiest Fox of all Foxes."

⁴ Unintentional light exposure in analogue photography can lead to overexposed or washed-out images. Working in a light-protected environment is crucial to maintain the process integrity.



So, the Fox was
invisible at night?

Not quite. But it may seem
that way because the Fox and
the night shades are almost
the same colour in the dark.
It's a form of camouflage.

So, the Fox was shadowless?

Sort of. It's complicated.
Wait.

**The night, and with it, your presence—darkness,
the dark—is highly problematic for people. Perhaps
it always has been. However, various issues are
associated with you, or let's say, with your influence
on humans.**

**The problems range from the risk of injury to
hindrances in nightly activities such as work,
commerce, and social events. Your presence poses
challenges not only to personal safety but also to
the efficiency of activities like conducting military
operations at night or providing infrastructure
for the nightlife of joy.**

Darkness disturbs; you thwart human plans.
 For instance, you make round-the-clock access and
 availability challenging. In doing so, you always
 arouse the desire to overcome or even destroy the
 condition you have brought with you.

Yet, and this is important, what people on Earth
 find disturbing is not so much the night, as I am
 learning over time. What bothers them the most is
 your presence, manifested through the dusky
 appearance of your 'state of affairs'.

And what particular
 "state of affairs" am I?

For some you are cold, for others,
 inspiring. Some panic in your
 presence, others you calm down.

Intense. I am all this at once?

Yes, kind of strange.
 Remember the box in the Little
 Prince's drawing? There was a sheep
 inside that no one could see.⁵
 It's a bit like you; you're both
 inside and outside the box.
 You're the picture and the space
 around you, all mixed up.
 You're seen and unseen at once.

Wait, it's getting confusing.
 I'm not sure I understand.

We will come back to it later.

⁵ *The Little Prince* (Saint-Exupéry 2010:6) originally published in 1943.

Summer in London, and the Fox had a feast;
picnic-people in the park waste so much food.
Through the many meals, the Fox's energy grew,
and it began to travel farther and farther at
night. So it was that after that summer, the Fox
was overcome with the urge to embark on an
even greater adventure.

"I'm going to China" the Fox murmured,
"some business."

When I asked about the purpose of the trip,
the Fox would not tell me more. It sounded shady
in the truest sense of the word, but I had other
things on my mind. I had to go to Scotland,
and so while the Fox schemed his China trip,
we set off on separate journeys.

* * *

SCOTLAND I took the train from London to a youth hostel in Newton Stewart, located just close enough to Galloway Forest Park, the reason for my visit. I had first heard about this 'dark landscape project' from Tim⁶ (he's the real expert when it comes to your case) and I needed to see it—and photograph it—for myself.

In 2009, the park was officially declared a protected area from light pollution by the International Dark-Sky Association (known as IDA), making it the first dark-sky park in the UK and only the fourth in the world. The IDA is an operation with the ambitious goal of combatting artificial light at night, primarily to preserve stargazing.⁷

⁶ Cultural geographer Tim Edensor (2013, 2017) has significantly influenced the study of darkness in the fields of social, cultural and geographical studies.

⁷ IDA was founded in Arizona in 1988 by two astronomers to protect the nighttime environment from skyglow. According to the organization, light pollution worldwide has increased by at least 49 percent in 25 years. As of 2022, approximately 200 locations around the world will have achieved dark sky status (Adkins 2022).

Does IDA want to protect me?

It's more likely that they are protecting the night sky for kids now and later, who want to look at the stars.

And what do I have to do with it?

You make the stars visible. In IDA-certified dark landscapes, artificial light use is restricted. You shine in these areas, so to speak.

And what about the stars?

They shine too. But that's mainly up to you. Your shade.

Like the Fox, I worked at night and slept during the day. Usually, this inverted schedule wasn't a problem. However, the hostel I was staying at closed its doors early in the morning and didn't reopen until dinner was served, kicking me out for most of the day.

Since the season was still warm, I slept in the open fields. On my second day, after laying in a meadow away from the village, I opened my eyes. Something lightly kicked my feet. Blinded by the sun's rays, I couldn't see anything at first. The bright light faded, and contours slowly emerged. One by one I deciphered two faces looking down at me.

Where am I? How long have I slept?

The two faces become sharper—a man and a woman, both dressed in police uniforms.

Someone from the village must have called them. I was first interrogated, my personal details checked, and then kindly informed that I could not sleep on public land. That's when I learned that sleeping in public is prohibited by law, especially when the sun is out, and you and the moon are not exactly visible nearby.⁹

⁹ See also *Cities of Sleep* (2015) directed by Shaunak Sen, a documentary about sleeper communities and the 'sleep mafia' in Delhi, where finding a safe place to sleep becomes a matter of life and death for large numbers of people. It's worth noting that the moon is also visible during daylight. Exceptions include the time just before the new moon when the moon is too close to the sun to be visible, and just before the full moon when it is only visible at night (Talbert 2022).

On my third night in Scotland, I saw a white deer for the first time in my life. I stood on a hillside in the faint moonlight, somewhere in the middle of a clearing in Galloway Forest Park at around 2 a.m. I was surrounded mostly by your darkness, in an atmosphere of pitch-dark night.

I had set up my tripod. The film in my camera is high ISO.¹⁰ I calculated the exposure time for 75 minutes; hopefully, that will do the job. I set the timer and triggered the camera shutter with the release cable. One click to open the lens, another click—in 75 minutes—to close it again. I waited, waiting for my 6 × 7 cm negative to be exposed. There wasn't much to do meanwhile. 75 minutes is a long time. Halfway through, I decided to stretch my legs and wander away from my gear.

¹⁰ In analog photography, a high ISO film is sensitive to low-light conditions, enhancing performance in such situations.

On my way back, I lost sight of my footing. I stumbled. Weak moonlight barely creates any shadows. The night is not exactly colourful, particularly in the forest. Goethe would have agreed: no contrast, no contours, no shapes, no orientation.¹¹

As usual, your 'state of affairs' got in the way. I was wandering around ... I could have sworn I hadn't strayed that far. Where is my tripod? How many exposure minutes are left? I should have taken my torch. What a beginner.

¹¹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Theory of Colors* (1810) challenges the objectivity of color theory, asserting that colors arise from the interplay of light and darkness, in contrast to Newton's more scientific approach.



The White Deer appeared before me in all its glory, standing tall for a momentary glimpse. Just long enough for it to have been both imagined and real. In a flash, this unknown creature came out of—and disappeared into—nowhere.

I must admit, the White Deer in the moonlight, surrounded by your darkness, made a fantastic picture. Briefly, the idea of a job called 'white deer photography' crossed my mind, like a special kind of paparazzi capturing evidence of rare moments.¹²

¹² Uncertainty about photography as evidence is highlighted; Susan Sontag, for instance, noted that owning a photograph of Shakespeare is akin to possessing a relic, such as a nail from the True Cross (Sontag 2008:154).

Later, in the hostel (bewildered and thrilled), I typed the words 'fata' and 'morgana' into the search box of my computer. I've heard the word Fata Morgana (mirage) before—sailors who suddenly saw land or thirsty people in the desert, water. Maybe I overdid it. I had just been groping in the dark for too long.

From a website, I learned about Morgan le Fay (meaning Morgan the Fairy). A sorceress. A medieval legend. And the sister of King Arthur. She had the power to shapeshift, "with which she caused a great deal of trouble." She was credited with, or rather blamed for, creating complex mirages over bodies of water, particularly in the Strait of Messina. Today we know, says the website, that such optical illusions are really caused by atmospheric conditions, but we still sometimes use "fata morgana" as a synonym for "mirage."¹³

¹³ Fata Morgana: Definition and meaning according to Merriam-Webster.

And what now?
 Does the White Deer exist,
 or does it not exist?
 Do you believe in it?

Belief and fantasy –
 how much of it is fiction?

The White Deer,
 I asked.

I didn't take its picture.

A spokesman for Scottish Natural Heritage tells us: “White deer are rare, but actually seeing one is even rarer.” Albino, I knew, were found in several species—squirrels, blackbirds, penguins, foxes, and various marine life, but deer? British deer experts inform us that these white deer are rarely albinos with red eyes. Rather, their ghostly glow is usually the result of underproduction of melanin, which reduces the normal brown coloration of hair and skin.¹⁴ Actually, it's kind of the opposite of what happened to my friend the Fox.

At the time, I knew none of this. I was tired. I hadn't slept much. I would not have been surprised if my mind was playing tricks on me. That same day, but in daylight, I made my way to the village, hoping that someone could give me an answer. I stepped into the Newton Stewart Post Office. I needed to buy stamps anyway.

¹⁴ The British Deer Society frequently receives inquiries about white deer, which are widespread across much of the UK (Smith-Jones 2021). In mythology, white deer are often seen as magical and powerful beings. Their ghostly glow is attributed to a recessive gene called leucism, which reduces pigment levels responsible for coloring skin, hair, feathers, etc., excluding the eyes (Dunnett 2017; Reuters 2008).

She pushes the stamps across the counter in front of me. I clear my throat. She looks at me. Is there anything else? I clear my throat again.

Is it possible that there are white deer in this area?
(If there was one, surely there were others.)

Silence.

Slightly embarrassed, I starred at the floor. The woman behind the counter brightens as she shouts, flapping her hands. Now, everyone in the post looks at me; excitement fills the room, and they start chattering, asking lots of questions.

So, it was then that I learned that a single white deer, rarely to be seen, lives nearby in the hills of Newton Stewart.

* * *

ENGLAND **Back in London. The strange man named Boris has new problems with his city. He tweets the following:**

We're taking action to make our streets safer, with better lighting and CCTV, tougher sentences and increased police patrols. We must drive out violence against women and girls and make every part of the criminal justice system work better to protect and defend them.¹⁴

Protect the women and girls from what? From me? Offensive.

They are convinced that having less of your darkness means having fewer problems.

What exactly is the matter with me?

It's not just about you. Believe me. There's more to it.

¹⁴ 'Twitter', retrieved September 2, 2022 (<https://twitter.com/borisjohnson/status/1371595501502660611?lang=de>).



Boris' tweet was prompted by the murder of Sarah Everard in London. Following this incident, the government announced a £ 25 m Safer Streets Fund, for measures such as better street lighting and CCTV, and launched StreetSafe, a website where people can anonymously report areas where they feel unsafe.

Wayne Couzens, an officer in the Metropolitan Police, was later convicted of the kidnapping, rape, and murder of Everard.¹⁴

An abuse of authority—darkness, you were not to be blamed for the violence.

Boris exploited a woman's death to justify more surveillance, sowing a system of dystopian control. But the people saw what he was doing and were not amused. After a while, the cities dissent settled somewhat, and the Fox finally returned from China.

I clearly remember the night I learned the Fox was back, because I found the Fox screaming to the moon in Stepney Green Park after midnight. I had never heard my friend make such ugly noises. The Fox was extremely upset.

It was most likely the visit to Chengdu (capital of southwest China's Sichuan Province) that so upset the Fox. At the time of its visit, there was a serious plan in the capital to set up a dummy moon to light up the night sky. You must know that the relationship between the Fox and the primordial moon was of a special kind, because of the story of its birth.

¹⁴ See also the article "What is being done to tackle violence against women in the UK?" (Topping 2021).



“Electricity is expensive, and the dusk-like glow of our artificial moon will be eight times brighter than the real moon!” explained the rulers of Chengdu. “The goal is to replace streetlights; it will be unbeatably delightful.”¹⁵

None of their reports indicated whether the project was feasible or if it was indeed cheaper than electricity. The municipal authorities’ marketing was full of contradictions and people were worried about what might go wrong with a second moon.

¹⁵ See articles from the time, such as 'Fake moon: Could China really light up the night sky?' (BBC News 2018) and 'Chengdu Plans to Launch 'Artificial Moon' to Replace Its Street Lights' (Hitti 2018) for more information. Based on the most recent available information, this project has not been realized.

The Fox traveled to Chengdu to advocate for the right to maintain a one-moon existence on behalf of its species.

However, things remained vague, I only know that the proponents of the project assured the Fox that the lighting with their dummy moon will not disrupt the routine of the animals. In a last-ditch effort, the Fox instigated a copyright dispute, claiming that its family still held the complete copyright to the moon. Apparently, that didn't end well.

“But,” the Fox snorted at me, “it’s none of your business.” Obviously, the Fox was in a very bad mood.

From then on, the Fox changed. It was hard to say what it was, but now it seemed to be in a constant state of restlessness—even despair.

Perhaps the trip had awakened traumatic memories of its family's demise.

The Fox never told me, nor did I ask, but it was clear that its relationship with the moon, and even with lights in general, was strained.

One day I decided to take the Fox on a trip to the deprivation tanks. Since we were both tired from our all-night research and many sleepless days, exploring the sensory deprivation tanks seemed like a great idea.

We were able to book a private one-on-one session exclusively with you! It was an expensive venture; turns out darkness is for the wealthy. However, still worth every penny. Like a ticket to a nutshell, it isolates you from everything around. You get into a tank and float naked in the dark, cut off from the world of sensory stimuli. Emerging who-knows-where is quite something.



Wait. Is that a thing?
People pay to see me and
spend time with me?
Didn't you just say that
people don't like
interacting with me?

Not if they can control
you in place and space.

So, I'm packed in tanks
all over the world?

Yes, you are.
It's a thing, really.
I mean, but that wasn't
always the case.

Let's get back to the tank. During my session with
you in this tank, many ideas came to me.

Surely the Fox had his own momentum in one of
the other tanks. But I can't say for sure, because
here on this trip we parted ways again. Perhaps,
I don't remember exactly, I began to daydream.
But around this time the Fox must have snuck off.

* * *

AMERICA From within the tank, I stared out my kitchen window (I had just moved into this new railroad apartment during the pandemic). From the window, I could look at the night sky and I see—but could not understand—a strange shifting coloured light in the sky, made visible only when clouds pass by.

Had it not been in the middle of another curfew, I would have assumed I was witnessing a rave in full swing. Or perhaps these lights were some historical commemorative events of which I was unaware; maybe an installation like the 9/11 'Tribute in Light'.

But months later, the lights were still there. The Fox certainly wouldn't have liked that. No wonder it took a French exit. There must have been already too much color and light once the Fox exited the tanks, and that's why it never came to this new town. Most likely, the Fox recognized this bizarre new environment much earlier than I did and crept away just in time. Smart, I guess.

Unlike the Fox, I was intrigued, and the surrealistic lights haunted me.

And so it happened that one night in a distant land, still equipped with my camera, I began to follow the lights. After a 20-minute walk, I found the nightly shroud of colourful, flashing light. The spectacle I observed so many nights from my window had its origin in a bridge.

Completed in 2017, the Kosciuszko Bridge is a cable-stayed bridge over Newtown Creek connecting Brooklyn to Queens.



The man responsible for my nightly ‘enlightenment’ was Andrew. He was the other man I meant to tell you about. Like Boris, Andrew oversaw a city. And he especially liked coloured lights at night.

The Kosciuszko Bridge was just one of the city's landmarks to become part of Andrew's ‘Harbour of Lights’ project. The project was a grandiose plan for a city-wide, computer-synchronised light show that would turn each bridge into an “international tourist attraction” and “spectacular light exhibit” with its own “colourful flashlight show”.¹⁶

¹⁶ See “Power failure: Cuomo’s \$106M bridge light show fades to black” (French 2021) for information on why the project couldn’t be realized and how the Cuomo administration repeatedly changed financial strategies for the Harbor of Lights project.

Still slightly confused and dazzled by my discovery, I stared at the magical kingdom opening up before my eyes. While my gaze followed the changing light of this disco bridge, not knowing exactly how I should or could photograph this landscape, I once again thought about how light moves in anything but a straight line.¹⁷

¹⁷ In his book *Lines: A Brief History* (2016), Ingold challenges the concept of the line, particularly the rationality associated with the “straight line” from A to B. This notion can also be connected to the visual aspects of urban lighting practices, including the use of light to highlight the architectural lines and contours of monuments.

" [...] And the vision that
was planted in my brain.
Still remains".

" [...] Within the sound
of silence".

Do you still listen
to that song?

This song.
It's a tribute to you!¹⁸

**"... when my eyes were stabbed by the flash of
a neon light," the song goes on.**

**On my desk, I have this photograph. Not a photo
of you, for once. It was after my trip to Scotland
and experimenting with very long exposures that
I started using a point-and-shoot camera with
a flash. See the overexposed, bright white faces
blinded by my flash in the photo?**

¹⁸ Simon, Paul, and Garfunkel, Art, 'The Sound of Silence' (1964).



Lighting walks a fine line. As a photographer, I know this. The realisation that both under- and overexposure obscures things comes as no surprise.

For a long time, using a flash in photography was frowned upon. It was considered cheating—not appreciating and using ‘natural’ lighting conditions. That perception has changed. Street photography and photographers such as Tillmans brought flash back into fashion. Highlighting things beyond recognition was suddenly trendy. And yet, it wasn’t long ago that enslaved people in New York were forced to hold a lantern in front of their faces after dusk in order to be seen.¹⁹

Today, however, certain people believe they look brighter because they live brighter.

¹⁹ In her book *Dark Matters* (2015), Simone Browne frames the term “black luminosity” using the example of the eighteenth-century New York lantern laws, which required enslaved people to carry lighted candles when moving through the city after dark.

Are you celebrating
the light now?

The overexposure is no joke.
It worries me.

Why? Is it that uncanny
feeling of light?

Maybe, yes, brightness has
also taught us to fear you,
after all.

* * *

CANARY ISLANDS The Fox understood the light dilemma all too well. Continuously evading it yet captivated and wounded by it, the Fox repeatedly fell in love with various lights.

“Our fear of the light gave it the power to tame my people,” the Fox said seriously. It continued, “By the streetlights, we find la grande bouffe. The light guides us to eat,” the Fox stressed, adding, “it harbors great dangers and tasty adventures.”

As always, the Fox’s shadow melted into you—the darkness of the night. I could barely see its eyes. I was glad both the Fox and the original moon were back. We finally reunited in Roque de los Muchachos, located in the Canary Islands, considered the darkest place on Earth at present.²⁰

²⁰ See “New Study Officially Found the Place with the Least Light Pollution in the World” (Harden 2021) for the Roque de los Muchachos Observatory as the darkest place on Earth, alongside dark spots in Sierra Nevada (US), Montsec commune (France), and Extremadura (Spain).

We’ve finally made it all the way out here, and I sensed that something very special was about to happen.

“Aren’t lights at night remarkable?” the Fox whispered. It was back to its old self, in great spirit—in love, others would say.

We sat in the shade of light. Once again, I wondered, when was the time to say goodnight? The night turned on the light as I searched for a spark of dark. The Fox mischievously nodded at the optical illusion of a bright light visible on the horizon. A fata morgana?

“Both an obsession and a potential danger” remarked the Fox as the beams of two headlights approached us. The radiance, the glow of light on a dark night is not only effective but affective, I agree.



The rays of light disappeared somewhere in the dark between a path and some trees. The headlights of a taxi. A guiding light, eventually, I thought, and the Fox said:

“You never really know what’s behind it.”

At that very moment, the Fox (as always, hardly visible or noticeable) quickly jumped over the light halo and disappeared into your darkness. And it became clear once again: The Fox, just like Morgan the Fairy, really has the power to shapeshift.

I saw the Fox no more. And I never found out which light the Fox was in love with. I also never spoke to any of the moons. But I still saw one moon from time to time and had no doubt that the Fox lived happily ever after in the shadow of its light.

My attention wandered back to follow the taxi’s headlights—bright beams that literally obscured the presence of you, the darkness, for a moment. I looked at the driver, “I won’t come with you right now. But will you pick me up here at 4 a.m., exact same spot?” He nodded, and I had to count on that.

I shouldered all my gear. I can’t say the driver looked back at me with concern. Instead, his expression was probably one of bewilderment.

I pictured the Fox howling and went on my way. Nobody said it, but the words were out there somewhere: “Good Night, and Good Luck.”

* * *

Wait! Before you go, will
you finally tell me what's
really bothering you?

Why do you always put
yourself in the spotlight?

Didn't you say I was in
the shadows?

Obviously. You and the night
are nothing but shadows.

Nothing?
Shadows are everything!

Fair.
We keep searching for shade.

So, let's go!
What are you waiting for?

Some other time.
It's bedtime now.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Chantal Meng**

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