

NIGHTSCAPE

SPRING 2020 | ISSUE #102



INTERNATIONAL DARK-SKY ASSOCIATION

GUEST EDITORS

PAUL BOGARD, EDITOR
BABAK TAFRESHI, PHOTO EDITOR

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

April, 2020

In these unprecedented times, few things bring us together like the night and its star-filled sky. I have heard from many IDA members that they take comfort in looking up at the night sky. I certainly do. Amid the constant change, the sky above is a source of familiar comfort that connects us with each other and the beauty of the universe.

For this special edition of Nightscape, I invited two friends of the dark sky movement to share in words and pictures what this moment in time means to them. Babak Tafreshi, renowned National Geographic photographer, science journalist, and founder of The World at Night, and Paul Bogard, author of the best-selling book *The End of Night*, enthusiastically answered the call.

I look forward to the time that Nightscape focuses again on the conservation of dark sky places, strong lighting ordinances, and helping people educate neighbors about responsible lighting. But for now, I invite you to reflect on Paul's words and Babak's images and think about what the night means to you. If you are moved, please reach out and share your thoughts with me.

Keep looking up,

Ruskin Hartley
ruskin@darksky.org

Front and Back Cover: A waterfall under the starry summer sky of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California, U.S. Photo by Babak Tafreshi

Image Right: As the moon sets, stars emerge into the dark sky above Great Sand Dunes National Park Preserve, Colorado, U.S. Photo by Babak Tafreshi



1

The most beautiful starry night I have ever seen was more than thirty years ago, when I was backpacking through Europe as an eighteen-year-old high school graduate. I had traveled south from Spain into Morocco and from there south to the Atlas Mountains, at the edge of the Sahara desert, to a place where nomadic tribes came in from the desert to barter and trade, a place that when I look on a map I can no longer find. One night, in a youth hostel that was more like a stable, I woke and walked out into a snowstorm. But it wasn't the snow I was used to in Minnesota, or anywhere else I had been. Standing bare chest to cool night, wearing flip-flops and shorts, I let a storm of stars swirl around me. I saw the sky that night in three dimensions—the sky had depth, some stars seemingly close and some much farther away, the Milky Way so well defined it had what astronomers call “structure,” that sense of its twisting depths. I remember stars from one horizon to the other, and a night sky so plush it still seems like a dream.

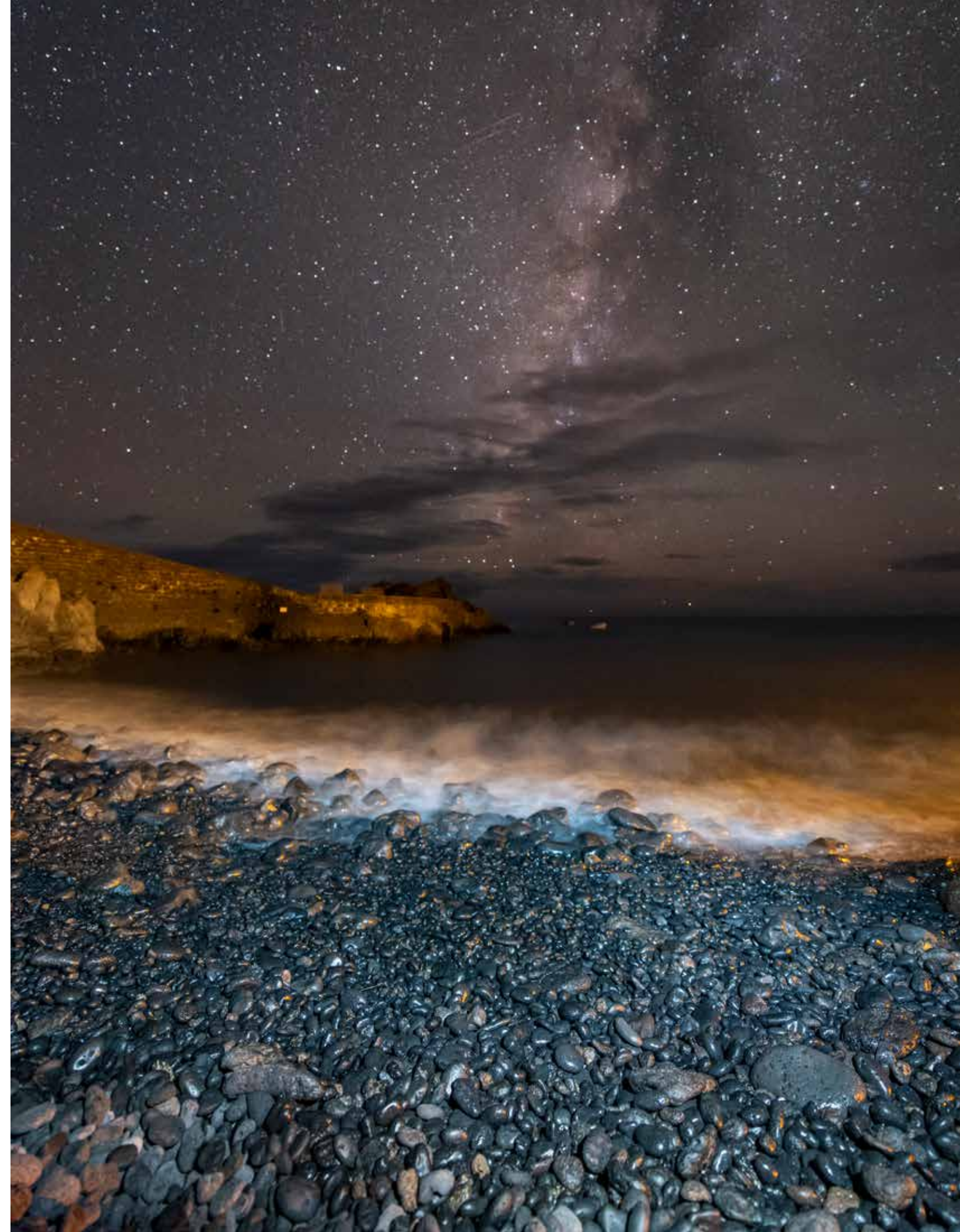
So much was right about that night. It was a time of my life when I was every day experiencing something new. I felt open to everything, as though I was made of clay, and the world was imprinting upon me its breathtaking beauty. Standing nearly naked under that Moroccan sky, skin against the air, the dark, the stars, the night pressed its impression, and my lifelong connection was sealed.

2

At twilight on a clear night at the end of June, I parked in a Cape Cod National Seashore lot and descended to the sand and the sea. I love the feeling of striding out to meet the night, and this was a night I had been looking forward to ever since reading Henry Beston's *The Outermost House* (1928). Shore fires ahead and behind, birdcalls all around, the pump and splash of crashing surf, the gathering curtains of dusk over the ocean to the east. Finally, I was walking Beston's beach.

"Our fantastic civilization has fallen out of touch with many aspects of nature, and with none more completely than with night," Beston wrote. "With lights and ever more lights, we drive the holiness and the beauty of night back to the forests and the sea." That Beston was aware of "lights and ever more lights" back in 1928 was remarkably prescient. It would be decades before electric lighting reached much of rural America, and could we step back to see the country then, most of us would not believe our eyes—this was still a very dark land. Yet in addressing his contemporaries, he sounds as if he's addressing us. "Today's civilization is full of people who have not the slightest notion of the character or the poetry of night, who have never even seen night," he wrote. "Yet to live thus, to know only artificial night, is as absurd and evil as to know only artificial day."

Near the end of his book, near the end of his year, having intimately known "the great rhythms of nature" for nearly four seasons through, Beston wrote of an appreciation for "a sense that the creation was still going on, that the creative forces are as great and as active to-day as they have ever been, and that to-morrow's morning will be as heroic as any of the world." I wanted to walk this beach to see if I could sense the power of the old world he'd known, and, though diminished, it is still here—the birds still migrate at night, the schools of fish still move close to shore, the Milky Way bends as it always has. I wanted to see if night here still grows dark enough for such wildness, if it's still possible to step for yourself through a place where the world we will know is still being formed. In the darkness of this sky, the beach, the sea, it is.





3

On my daughter's first night home, two days from her birth, I took her to see the stars. I wrapped her in fleece, held her close, and stepped out into a late spring night. Just above a neighbor's roofline I found the late-setting moon among a last handful of bright stars and lifted my daughter toward the night sky—a sight that with its steady distant ancient fires will accompany her no matter the changes, all through her life.

We live in the southern half of a northern city, and like almost any city ours uses light haphazardly, wastefully, sending much of it skyward to disrupt insects, confuse night-migrating birds, and wipe away the stars. And even so, as anywhere, night is half our life and darkness a natural part of what it means to be alive. In this strange time, told to keep our distance and not knowing what's to come, I think of the poet Wendell Berry waking “in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be” and finding in the night “the peace of wild things.”

Let us find this peace in the night as well. Let us use this time, if we can, to recognize the remaining beauty around us and to re-dedicate ourselves to keeping it part of our and our children's experience of life. Let us remember, that when all this has passed, the starry night will still be there, calling to us, inviting us to respond.

About the Editors

Babak Tafreshi is a National Geographic photographer, science journalist, and founder of The World at Night (TWAN). He is an advocate for preserving natural night skies, and bridging art & science. Find him at babaktafreshi.com and [@babaktafreshi](https://twitter.com/babaktafreshi).

Paul Bogard is author of *The End of Night: Searching for Natural Darkness in an Age of Artificial Light* and editor of *Let There Be Night: Testimony on Behalf of the Dark*. A native Minnesotan, Paul is now an associate professor of English at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, U.S., where he teaches creative writing and environmental literature. Find him at paul-bogard.com.

From McDonald Observatory in western Texas, U.S., the bright orange star Antares in Scorpius appears in the backdrop of a tree silhouette. Photo by Babak Tafreshi

International Dark-Sky Association
3223 N 1st Ave
Tucson, AZ 85719

