

## **Gauri Gill's Nizamuddin at Night**

*This is a piece that will be appearing in the magazine Marg, accompanied by a set of 10 photos from Gauri Gill's "Nizamuddin at Night" series...*

There is a sound peculiar to the middle of the night in the residential areas of South Delhi: the low whistle of a watchman on his bicycle, making the rounds, sounding muffled and quiet, not loud enough to wake up a sleeper but reassuring to the insomniac all the same. If you wander out into the streets, and try to track him down, you find the midnight street a place profoundly transformed. The noisy clatter of the hawkers, couriers, sweepers, kabadiwallahs, honking cars, screaming children, organ grinders and shouting neighbors is still and hushed. A strange intimacy takes over, and what seems open and public and populous in the sunlight has turned somehow private and enclosed, dramatically lit here and there by the orange sodium glow of a streetlight, filtered through thickets of leaves and casting crazy shadows on the street. The daylight color is drained, reduced to its barest essence, a sharp chiaroscuro, a black-and-white visibility that bleeds into darkness.

Photography of the night is almost as old as photography itself: Louis Daguerre took the first picture of the moon on a cold winter evening in 1839. Daguerre's moon is a spectacular instance of a side of early photography that captivated its audience, a side that photography of the night was particularly well-suited to explore: the camera's ability to document and reveal what was not clear to the naked eye. The gesture was one of scientific revelation, and documentary precision; the "miraculous beauty" that Edgar Allan Poe [famously saw in early photography](#), derived not from its artfulness but from its indexical accuracy. A photograph was, for him, a "positively perfect mirror" of nature and "infinitely more accurate in its representation than any painting by human hands." [According to Charles Baudelaire](#), in his vituperative 1859 essay "On Photography," documentation was its only legitimate role, its duty: "let it be the secretary and clerk of whoever needs an absolute factual exactitude in his profession—up to that point nothing could be better... But if it be allowed to encroach upon the domain of the impalpable and the imaginary, upon anything whose value depends solely upon the addition of something of a man's soul, then it will be so much the worse for us!"



Switch the numbers around, and look ahead to 1893, to another photograph of the night. A young Alfred Stieglitz--who would later influentially claim to make "pictures" not "photographs"--wandered New York's streets in the dead of winter collecting spectral, depopulated landscapes, among them "Icy Night." In it, we see two rows of snow-encrusted trees receding into an eerie streetlight fog. The focus is soft, and a sense of mystery is cultivated and left in place, not to be resolved. There is an ominous, dark formalism in this work that separates it from the gauzy platitudes of Stieglitz's Pictorialist contemporaries. Most importantly, the indexical trajectory of the image has shifted inward--the photograph is much more a picture of a mood, of an interior, subjective experience than it is of the external reality of a mundane street scene. Stieglitz was to later push this technique much further with his photographs of clouds, leaving behind any earthly referent, eschewing the terrestrial for a transcendent, ahistorical grasp at pure form. This is precisely what Baudelaire was worried about.



In a sense, these two nineteenth-century nocturnal photographs foreshadow and stand somewhere near the two extremes of a long continuum of photographic practices, ranging from the casual, evidentiary snapshot to the painterly, composed "picture." Gauri Gill's images are strongly atmospheric, but in a double sense that recalls Daguerre's scientific moon shot as well as Stieglitz's icy symbolist vision. On the one hand, these images literally depict the atmosphere: you can see the air, the fog, the dusty halo around the light bulb fading into shadow. On the other, they set a certain mood of introspection, depicting and evoking an emotional atmosphere, the lonely reverie of the midnight Rambler. This ambiguity runs throughout the series: Gill is concerned with documenting the realia of her neighborhood at night, its gates and watchmen, its station with night trains full of migrants coming in from the countryside, its token green spaces at rest. But her image-making in this series is also crepuscular and deliberately elusive, exploring the dark edges of the visible, the stillness and hush of the colony when the gates close, the guards fall asleep, and the populous turns still and solitary.

The results are remarkable. In one, a cluttered alleyway between two apartment blocks is transformed into an enigmatic stage set, bounded by darkness, empty of actors but somehow immanent and charged with presence. The air is thick and material, as textured as the dusty street with its snaking spill of water. In another image we see the dark slatted windows of a train waiting to leave Nizamuddin station. Hands stick out, clasping the bars, saying goodbye. This is a photograph that creates meaning by showing but not revealing the interior space of the compartment, which remains closed to us and impenetrable. Equally impenetrable is the guard who has fallen asleep sealed behind the glass of his watchman's hut, his duty lapsed, lost in a dream somewhere. His solitude and enclosure reminds us of our own. A nighttime landscape shows Humayun's tomb, the neighborhood landmark, silent and floodlit. People generally forget that the graves that rest underneath its magnificent dome are empty cenotaphs, signs that point to and substitute for the real ones hidden below, beyond our gaze.

Posted by Alex Keefe