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Seeking Totality

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Seeking Totality

Author Bio

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Seeking Totality or: Risking Blindness Nearly Naked in My Front Lawn

I stand in my front yard. Half of the grass I can see is mowed in wobbly, vertical lines, trails of yellowing clumps running parallel to the cut lanes; the other half, which is to my left and across the driveway from the cut side, is high enough to tickle the bottom of my shin and subtly glistens with left-over dew. I wear only gray briefs and a pair of cheap, plastic sunglasses I found in the junk drawer. Its hinges and temples are a shamrock green. Something crawls over my feet. I ignore it, and it scurries on. A car drives down my lane, and the racket of the flung pebbles rebounds off the trees.

Against every recommendation coming from the TV inside, I'm staring straight at the sun without protective glasses.

When I was between six and eight I experienced a meteor shower.

My best friend, a shy boy with an inherited overbite named Nathan, lived in a house similar to mine: two stories, remote, atop a hill with a sizable lawn flanking all sides of the house, and surrounded by woods. It was an ideal locale for meteor-watching. My presence at his house late at night meant it was either a Friday or a Saturday—no sleepovers on school nights.

I had a ghost runner on third—the supportive pole near the washer and dryer—and led by two runs when Nathan's mom came down the basement stairs. "Come on," Mrs. Zetterstand said. "Come out and watch the meteors." I dropped the meter stick we used as a bat atop home plate—a pillow—and Nathan set the beanbag ball on the stairs as we hurried after his mom. I made sure to remember the details of our game.

Mr. Zetterstand and Nathan's older brother, Shane, met us at the top of the stairs. "The shower should be starting soon," Mr. Zetterstrand noted, steering us outside by the shoulders.

The sky outside was twilit and cloudless. The tree line was marked by edges of a deeper darkness.

As soon as we stepped outside, Nathan and I began playing, chasing each other around, looking for quartz in the dark. Mr. and Mrs. Zetterstrand and Shane, too old to care about quartz, stood in a loose triangle and peered upward, Mr. Zetterstrand occasionally checking his watch.

After a few minutes, Mrs. Zetterstrand gasped and quietly said, "Look."

I don't know whether I listened to her, whether I stopped and regarded the distantly burning sky. I have a vague memory of standing next to Mrs. Zetterstrand, her hair silver and her arms wrapped around herself. She gazed upward. In this memory, the streaks are an acidic green, a shade associated with cartoon aliens, ones with teardrop heads and obsidian eyes. Meteor showers are, of course, not an acidic green.

The source of this misremembrance remains unknown, and it makes me doubt I ever looked up.

If I squint and peer through the cloud cover with the sunglasses, I can discern the dark, distant outline of the moon pushing against the white of the sun, the image like a cookie with a cleanly round bite out of it. I can't actually see the moon. I see only where the sun isn't.

It is now 2:27. My phone, to my surprise, has managed to capture exactly what I see in the sky. Later, I'll delete these photos to save space; they are for my parents who, on their drive home from Minnesota, say they can't stop and look. "That is beautiful!!" my mom replies. I suppose she's right. It looks like every other gibbous to me, except I know it's the sun.

Beyond the meteor shower, I have lived through a series of partial eclipses and appearances of Venus. Like the meteor shower, I never saw any of them. Afterward, I looked at the photos that appeared online or flickered on the news and wondered if they really looked like that, looked so vivid, so sublime, every picture inspiring awe.

This new event has stirred something inside me none of the others had. Maybe taking an astronomy course titillated my inner Galileo. Maybe I want an excuse to stop vacuuming around the house for my parents to return. Maybe the promise of totality tinges it with a consequentiality I subconsciously find lacking in the other cosmic events; a partial eclipse sounds so dull. The buzz surrounding the event is probably what did it, though, is probably what drew me outside and has kept me there, incapable of focusing on anything else for the duration of my wait. The voices telling me how spectacular, how unique this event will be, and the smaller voice inside telling me not to be left out, not again, like the meteor shower: these are what have planted my toes on my stone front walk. Not that those other reasons aren't good enough, or true.

From what I can find (which means quickly Google) total eclipse should occur around 2:50 and last anywhere between thirty seconds and two minutes. I hope for the latter.

There is too much uncertainty in the predictions for me to feel comfortable about the timeframe: nobody, neither the local news nor any website, gives a precise time for Palmerton, Pennsylvania, instead grouping the town, which I'm already at best on the fringe of, into the greater region of the Lehigh Valley. Uncertain and unwilling to risk missing the main event, I went outside at 1:23, and I don't plan on returning inside until I watch the sun get swallowed.

I haven't spent the full hour standing there and staring at the sky. My patience is not that monk-like. Right now, I'm sitting on my front porch, which could really use a new coat of paint, the white chipping to reveal a darker wood beneath. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* sits open on my lap, unlooked at. I haven't turned more than 2 pages since I came outside. I maintain a careful watch on the lighting in my yard, ready to jump up and down my porch steps should the light suddenly dim. Who could miss the descent of abrupt diurnal darkness? Every few minutes or so, even if the light remains the same, I step to the edge of my porch, put on the sunglasses, and check the regression of the sun.

The progress is slow and steady. Time trickles in the way it does when you want something. It's now 2:29 and the sun is somewhere between half and two-thirds gone. With the eclipse still far from its seminal moment, I return to my

chair.

The last visible total solar eclipse across the contiguous United States fell on February 26, 1979. Jimmy Carter was president, gas cost an average of \$.65 a gallon, Rod Stewart crooned “Do Ya think I’m Sexy?” across America’s radios, and *The Empire Strikes Back* was a week from starting production. Along the geologic timeline, hardly a whisper had passed. On my timeline, the last eclipse may as well have ended the dinosaurs.

The next total solar eclipse for the continental US will take place in April 2024. Much can happen in 2,416 days. I could go blind—possibly from staring at the sun without eclipse glasses. In enough ways to provoke agoraphobia, I could die. In enough ways to provoke nihilism and alcohol-dependency, we could all die. Or it could be cloudy.

These possibilities have coalesced into a feeling of necessitated immediacy: if I would ever see a total eclipse, it would have to be here and now. Hence, my anticipation has swelled well beyond levels I’ve felt for anything for too long. Something within me depended on those thirty seconds to two minutes; this feels like my last chance at carefree, inexplicable, unreasonable excitement, a final vestige of the childhood aura we forever crave once it vanishes unannounced and unnoticed until, suddenly, we look back and realize it has left us, never to return.

A glow announces the appearance of the sun from behind the thin, light gray clouds. I put on the sunglasses to see what has emerged.

There is a problem—not a crisis yet, but certainly a problem.

Until now, cloud cover had dulled the rays, and through it I could discern the shape of the sun as the moon crossed before it. Without cloud cover, the light is overwhelming. Instead of a slowly shrinking ball perched in the sky, the sun has transformed into its usual self: indistinct, shimmering, and visually merciless. Nowhere is the moon. Everywhere is the sun.

I try to adjust the sunglasses, push them tighter to my face, but this does nothing. Neither does holding my hand over my eyes and the glasses. After a quarter of a minute of trying to find the outline of the moon, my eyes have begun to hurt; they squint so tightly I see only a bright, hazy slit through the curtain of my eyelashes.

The door grunts closed behind me. Inside is twilight. Violet blotches block my vision like cartoon squids inking on a TV screen. Hands held out to avoid bumping into corners, I make my way through my dining room, around my kitchen counter, and to the junk drawer. My fingers fumble around inside and close on a gallimaufry of goods ranging from fish oil pills to an old disposable camera to a pile of old mail, which, I know, is mostly from casinos. No sunglasses meet my fingers.

I venture back outside and look up at the sky again, scanning for clouds. The only ones in sight are already east of the sun and creeping towards the horizon. This may, I admit to myself, now be a crisis.

Throughout history, we have chased the sun. We have chased its light on the equinox and the solstice and its edges during an eclipse. We chased it west-

ward as it sank, across open waters, across continents. When we couldn't reach the sun, we landed on its sister and claimed it as our own. Now we seek its children as surrogates, sending rovers to explore Mars and probes to document Pluto.

Icarus, given his chance, chased the sun until his wings melted. I don't know when I first heard of Icarus. I do know when I first understood. Had I wax nearby, I would have formed wings, too.

2:42.

Back inside, I grab a black cloth headband from the cabinet with our winter apparel. My other options are ski goggles, full beanies, and scarfs. My options aren't good, but this headband is my last hope.

I half-jog down the stairs and back onto my front walkway. With naked eyes, I can still only see a normal sky. I sweep my hair back to keep it out of my eyes and slide the headband down my head and over my face. The absurdity of my image—still only gray briefs on my body and now with a black headband over my eyes—is not at all lost on me.

I can barely open my eyes. Through the crisscrossed holes of the stretched fabric, instead of the position of the moon across the sun becoming distinct, everything has become indistinct.

2:47.

I'm pacing. My soles slap on the rocks. I'm wringing my brain, but the only option that comes to me is to wait, to have faith that the moon would consume the sun and its blinding lights along with it, giving me the chance to peer above uninhibited. I'm not good at faith and never have been.

Maybe I had it right as a boy: I should run around in the grass, ignoring the space above me, and let my imagination lie to me afterward, let it fill me with the splendor I never saw.

Maybe I should've ordered protective glasses.

2:50

It is, according to the website, the moment of truth. I can't feel any truth pouring upon me. The space around me still blazes with a summer glow. I don't know whether the wind blows or something inside me has chilled. The sky remains typically blue. Hairs stand on my arms.

The predictions could be off, right? I should stay outside and continue to wait.

Hope, always so flimsy and fickle, has started its slow, seeping drain from my veins, and my heart slows because of it, easing back to normalcy.

3:05.

Nothing has happened. I've stayed outside and held faith as tightly as I can. Fifteen minutes is too great a difference to account for calculative error. My chance at totality has evaporated with the pounding rays of the sun. Numbness creeps from my naval. Seven years are a long way away, and I have already spent this much time seeking a light that has never stopped.

I raise my arm into the air. My hand turns red in the sun, and I feel warmth on my palm, but it stops at my skin. I close my hand, and my fingers grasp around nothing.