

THE DISTANCE OF THE MOON

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We transferred to this home about two and a half decades ago. To fill the plain white ceiling of the small room I shared with my brothers, we bought packs of galaxy-themed glow-in-the-dark stickers. Aside from serving as decoration, these stickers also doubled as markers for the electric fan, the stereo speaker, the bed, and the light switch. It was careless sticking. Kids being kids. We had no intention to imitate the arrangement of the stars in the night sky.

When we were done pressing the stickers, we waited the entire day for the darkness to come. It was endless anticipation. My two older brothers must have thought they had relegated me to the pull-out bed, nearest to the floor, and farthest from the glow-in-the-dark galaxy. But maybe it was my choice to stay there. Although the top bunk was closer to the glow of the stickers, the lowest bed allowed me to look up at the ceiling, my intertwined hands cupping the back of my head, as if I was looking up at the night sky. When the darkness revealed what we had created, the child in me, found both delight and awe at the mystery of the glow.

At the time, we were one of the first few dwellers in the recently established village in Cavite. Brownouts happened often. There was no radio, no television, and since we had few neighbors, there was nothing else to do. Power interruptions only last a few minutes when they happen now, but in the past, they took hours. If Mom had allowed me, I would have gone outside during brownouts to watch the flying insects around the candles illuminating our neighbors' homes. I would have seen the Moon surrounded by a hundred stars.

It was a simple, comfortable life with no room for excess. I would look at the ceiling and see the stars, and the Moon, and I would fall deep into peaceful slumber. I would wake up blinded by the sunlight coming from the window facing me, still remembering the previous night's last moments of gazing up at the neon glow. I would look up at the ceiling again. The galaxy was gone, only to be seen again once it was dark. It was only a few years ago, when we had to repaint the old ceiling that we removed the stickers.



There's something about the title of R.J. Palacio's book that appealed to me, that wanted me to take notice. *Wonder*. I like how the word translates in the mind. *Wonder*. As though forcing a surprise and a discovery. *Wonder*. The exciting engagement between the known and unknown. *Wonder*. It needs to be celebrated, since it's the beginning of an eventual realization.

Ella Sanders writes, "A sense of wonder can find you in many forms, sometimes loudly, sometimes as a whispering." And it was with a whisper that the book title lingered with me. The book, modestly stacked on the bookstore's well-lit area, seen from afar, inspired a joyous sense of wonder even before being read.

The sense of wonder is a gift, for it is an encounter with the rare and the extraordinary. But it is also a choice, a practice, since the mind eventually lingers and calls to memory an experience it wishes to confirm and to confront. To wonder is to face the fear of entering unfamiliar territory, but also a step toward hope, toward an arrival.

When I discovered that R.J. Palacio's book *Wonder* had been adapted into a movie, I didn't miss the chance to see it. The movie adaptation was directed by Stephen Chbosky, another writer whose book I had read many times. Coming-of-age narratives greatly appeal to me, for I feel like I'm still in the process of reaching maturity. I'm also deeply interested in the

theme of acceptance and belonging—for I know how it feels when others try to dismiss a person only because of what they see on the surface. In my short story collection for my M.A. thesis as a Creative Writing major, I also tackled these themes. It's a different kind of resonance. It is not identification. Rather, an emotional tug.

The protagonist in *Wonder*, Auggie, is born with a facial difference. He often wears his spacesuit costume to hide this. Eventually, because of his reassuring parents, he learns to accept his identity. He learns that he is not different from everyone else.

Auggie is the best science student in his class. Seeing this made me want to return to my childhood interest. It didn't reflect on my grades, but I thought I would grow up to become a scientist since science classes were my favorite. When I would get home from school or during weekends, I would enjoy conducting experiments using bottles, batteries, wires, and other things I had found. Although I didn't pursue a science degree nor attend a science high school, I remained curious.

The movie adaptation of *Wonder* had a beautiful production design. Auggie's room had an actual painting of the galaxy, unlike ours which were only stickers. His room reminded me of the Filipino film *Ang Nawawala*. The main character's room was also filled with youthful memorabilia. Gibson's room, like Auggie's, was full of galaxy-inspired paintings and toys. It was later revealed in the film that the space-themed room was the one Gibson had shared with his twin brother, and the one he hadn't slept (and stepped) in since his twin died in an accident.

I wonder what made them want what I wanted too. Do we share the same thoughts about the galaxy and the Moon?



On weekend afternoons, Pop would come out of the house once the sun's scorching heat had abated to wash our car parked on the street. I would go out with him to see my playmates. We would chase after a ball or roll some bicycle wheels, until Pop would call me to hose down the soap from the car. Once done, I would go back to my playmates to continue our game, until our parents would summon us home for supper.

Where we played, one could watch the sun setting behind the hills rising above the vast meadows, without the distraction of houses or buildings. It would be a lovely transition from light to dark. Right after the sun had set, the Moon would begin to show. It was there that I, struck by its magnificence, gazed at it for the first time.

It looked large and my eyes tried to equal its size. I thought the Moon was larger than the ball in my hand, or the wheel, or the Earth. Its immense size illuminated the sky as far as the eyes could see. My playmates wouldn't allow it to join us in playing hide-and-seek. No one could hide from the Moon. The Moon always found us.

Seeing the moon for the first time meant being present at the moment when the Moon and I faced each other, not thinking of anything else, not doubting a thing about it, hoping also that it didn't doubt a thing about me. Perhaps it wasn't "wonder" I felt at the time, rather, a moment of illumination, of learning to accept what's in front of me.



I'm glad I had lived my early years when answers didn't come quickly. We went on with our daily life, living in wonder. No wings that fluttered, no magic horses, but a radiant kind of spell and enchantment.

As children, we anticipated the approaching Yuletide Season as well as birthdays by counting the number of nights of sleep we had to take. We measured distance by counting. If I asked Pop how far still before we reached our destination, he would always say count to a hundred. I thought one hundred was the farthest distance, so if we arrived in our destination before I finished counting, it must be close. “How many more counts before I reach the Moon?” I never asked. I haven’t started counting.

There was a freedom in not knowing. If questions gave birth to stars instead of answers, every time I pondered, the night sky would have been bright, filled with numerous constellations.

But if my curiosity was intense, I wonder why I hadn’t had the impulse to study physics or astronomy. Maybe because I had never seen the Moon through a telescope. I could only imagine myself as the young Maria Mitchell, who would slip away from family dinners to gaze up the cosmos through her tiny telescope.

There was never a time when I was out of our house and didn’t look up at the sky. I would look up when my heart felt heavy with pain, but also when my heart felt light with joy. Since I didn’t have an imaginary friend or a collection of video games, or a pet, I looked for another companion.

My brothers were older than me, and during our growing-up years, they were into basketball. But I had little interest in team as well as contact sports. I would rather ride the bike or skateboard—anything one could play alone. This may also be why I found solace in long-distance running, and in writing, why I valued solitude. But like the Moon, I never felt alone.

The Moon may sometimes be hidden from our eyes, unseen, but it had never been absent, never not up there. At times the Moon was only a sliver of light in the sky, but it had always been complete. It lulled us to a peaceful sleep with its comforting lullaby. We were its children.



I was eight years old when I first went up to Baguio. The fog that hovered on the wet pavement, the cold breeze that seeped inside our jackets, up there, up North, made me feel as though I was on top of the world. I was in a lofty place, lost in my thoughts. The ethereal scene absorbed me. It was only when we came back from Baguio that I realized how close I was to the Moon.

In one of the news reports on television, the news anchor mentioned that people flocked to Tagaytay because it was a great alternative to Baguio. I thought that if it was an alternative, then it must also be close to the Moon. I began to think that if I would climb the highest tree I would find there, I would finally be able to touch it.

One summer, I asked my cousin to teach me to climb a coconut tree, since it gave the impression of being the tallest tree, at least based on my observation. The coconut tree resembled a straight ladder, on which my cousins quickly made their way up using their improvised tree climbing spikes. It seemed easy, unlike the other trees where my cousins had to stretch out their bodies or jump off from one branch to another. Learning to climb myself would've helped me achieve my intentions.

I had always wanted to climb, and even tried to make my own treehouse. I was a fan of Tarzan, and treasured the action figure I got from a Happy Meal. He could traverse the whole forest with his ability to swing on hanging vines. Those who could do this seemed to possess a power I quietly envied. Growing up plump, and smaller than five feet, I was usually the one waiting for the fruits my cousins would throw down for me to catch. When I tried to climb, I would clamber and fail to go up higher than my height. It wasn't easy to catch up with them, since they moved like happy little monkeys. They unintentionally left me feeling excluded.



It was always a race to the front seat of the Volkswagen between me and my brothers. The losing ones would always protest and bring up the number of times the winner had sat on it. Pop would simply resolve the argument by saying that the front seat was reserved for Mom, reducing us all to silence. And although the front seat had the best view, I would concede it as long as I could get to sit by the window.

I liked slowness, the reduction of motion that magnified the nuances of the world out there, since it allowed me to see the Moon. At times, this slowness began to feel as if our bodies would rise up in the cold, thin air. Dream and reality seemed to merge into one. What did it mean to dream? To daydream? How about dreaming at night? What was the difference between the two?

Behind the coconut trees, across the meadows, the Moon shone brightly. Why was it following us? Why was it chasing me? These were the thoughts of a young mind after seeing the wondrous beckoning Moon. Was it a coincidence that we travelled the same path? How about the people we meet, did we meet them by chance or were we fated to meet them? Was the Moon our common fate?



Italo Calvino, one of the writers I greatly admire for his astonishing, tasteful creativity, wrote a short story called "The Distance of the Moon." It is part of his short story collection *Cosmicomics*, which I read as an adult. It had always been a habit of mine, every time I open a new collection, to begin reading the stories whose titles appeal to me. This title sounded poetic. It jangled tiny bells in my ear. I imagined myself being catapulted into space for exploration. I promised myself, someday I'm going to write like him.

In the story, Calvino told how many years ago, the Moon used to be so close to the Earth that people, by sailing at sea, could easily visit and touch it. Eventually, the Moon got pushed, farther and farther away, until it could only be adored from a distance. Perhaps the closest we can be to the Moon is when we are at sea.

I remember the physicist-writer Alan Lightman's experience when he was out one summer night in Maine in the wee hours before morning on his way home to the island. No one else was out in the water but him. He switched off his boat's engine and decided to look up at the sky—moonless and quiet. He knew that things existed with him, but what were those things that lived beneath. Being on the water was a game of trust, a challenge to one's peace of mind. He laid there—still—until things, the boat, then eventually his body, began to dissolve around him. He felt not separated from the world anymore, but one with it.



I was five then. We were on our way home from my grandparents' house, after the traditional family *noche buena*, when an unusual longing awakened me. Still sluggish, I gazed up at the endless sky and saw the Moon. It was large and bright—overly bright, unlike the light from the previous nights throughout the year. Its shape wasn't perfectly round, not a full Moon, but it had this moving serene glow, perhaps because it was Christmas and it reflected all the love that the season had.

There was a sustained anticipation as I waited for Santa Claus to pass by with his reindeers. Maybe I had a dream. Or I had a dream and stayed in the dream state. When we got home, I thought I saw Santa Claus with his reindeers. But maybe I didn't.



I like seeing people use their fingers to scrub their eyes as if clearing their vision, as though the tip of one's fingers has the power to make one see again. The poet, Gay Ross, wrote a beautiful poem called "Ode to Buttoning and Unbuttoning My Shirt," a lyrical evocation of how the tiniest part of ourselves, the tip, the unnoticed, may be the most poetic. How about us, a speck of dust as compared to the Moon, do we also make a difference? Can we ever affect the Moon? It's a humbling thought, that despite our feeling of largeness, we're just particles.

It's enough for me to touch the Moon with the tip of my fingers, not hold it. To touch the desired object that's forever distant, a seemingly impossible object, would be an achievement. It might be too much, the wish to hold the desired object. To touch it with one's finger can already be an act of remembrance. We can touch the Moon and sense its texture, like how the particles of sand would linger on the skin for a while, as though bringing home a souvenir from the beach.

Just the tip of my finger, even if for only a few seconds, and I would feel grateful. But what's with the tip of our fingers that makes us remember things? We use these fingers to do the mundane, the everyday tasks, but we don't remember everything. Yet for the most important, for the memory of the last time it has touched another's skin, it allows access. Touch then becomes a rite of passage for the eventual remembering.

Many accidental touches cling to memory. To touch another's skin even for the briefest moment can last a lifetime, like the brushing of fingers while paying for the jeepney fare, a hand on the shoulder patting approval, the nudge of an elbow on one's arm, a leg that brushes one's knee while squeezing toward a seat in the cinema theater. The touch becomes the portal for connection. The accidental becomes the monumental.



It's usually best to see things up close, but there's also a virtue in distance. We see the Moon's different phases and the varying changes it undergoes—size, shape, texture, and glow. The Moon stays up there for anyone to see. And the Moon continues to stay as a witness to the world—from war, to plague, to pandemic, to reconciliation, to healing, to love. The Moon teaches us to accept certain realities, certain truths about the world. It represents a paradox—inspiring curiosity, yet teaching acceptance.

I would rather stay down here, since if I were up there the Moon might lose its magic. The Moon might transition from an alluring mystery to a plain object. There's more comfort in gazing. The gaze is a moment of catharsis, a moment of true peace in one's heart. To gaze, undisturbed, is its own freedom. One becomes aware of the realness of the thing. To gaze is to remain present.

Why do people want to be active participants? To be observed than to observe? When Neil Armstrong landed on the Moon, everyone was watching him. But nobody knows I'm watching the Moon here now where I stand. Being grounded here makes me hope that having to look up implies that there are many more things to see in the world. This distance allows a space for longing. It gives room for larger things, higher things. It's in this act of looking up that we accept things bigger than ourselves. It's the acceptance of being less. People like to look down. It's easier. But to look up is to embrace smallness. It makes us humble. Because the Moon itself is meek.



If ever we live in the Moon, would we be looking up or looking down at the Earth? What's the orientation, the angle, the axis? And if we stay there for long, and the memory about the Earth has somehow faded, would we long for the Earth the way we here on Earth long for the Moon?

One evening, while driving home from a friend's house, I looked up at the sky and saw the Moon from a distance. I turned off the music. The engine roared, and the Moon got bigger and brighter. It felt as though I was moving towards it, magnetized, as if all the roads lead to the Moon.

As the car wheels rolled on the ground, the mind soared higher until I didn't know anymore if the car was about to fly or was already flying. That road was where the Moon and I would often see each other since I was a child. I couldn't prevent myself from gazing, hypnotized by its beauty. For a while, it didn't matter if I reached home. The feeling of traversing from one place to another, of knowing the destination and finding where the Moon shines, had also made me want to remain there. The journey brought longing and belonging.

I thought that going up to high places would take me to the Moon, that I just needed to believe, like the realization of making things real through the imagination. As I experience more things in life, the farther the moon feels, the more I feel that I'm nothing but a speck of dust in the entire vastness of the galaxy.

Maybe I'm just growing up, or maybe growing old. Or perhaps, it wasn't the Moon that was going farther away, but the child who used to believe—the little, chubby me, the one who used to dream. So I pick up this kid and raise his hand out into the Moon. Maybe I should start counting to a hundred again.