

# Out of the Darkness

By Julianna Conley

Theoretically, a globe represents the earth. It shows the shape of the continents, the vastness of the oceans, the humility of the islands. It shows all the details, right down to the longitude-latitude coordinates. But it's overzealous. It gives too much information, too much editorial comment. The globe cuts the world into brightly colored, plainly labeled, bite-size chunks.

When you look at a satellite picture of Earth, though, there are no lines — no clear difference between Europe and Asia. No distinctly labelled “Alaska,” claiming it for the US. When we look at a picture of Earth taken from space, the land all looks the same. Countries, continents, territories — they all blend into each other. Similarly, if you were to look at a group of people watching the sky, they'd all generally look alike. They tilt their faces towards the heavens, all in the same pose, the same mouth popped open in awe. With a childlike wonder on their faces, they lose their labels. They blend together as one entity.

The first time I looked at the sky — I mean, really, truly looked up at the expanse stretching *above* me and forgot about the world *around* me — was during the Great American Eclipse of 2017, the last day of summer before my senior year of high school.

I remember the week leading up to the eclipse was hot and stuffy and the entire world seemed to be in a bad mood. School started tomorrow, and the whole day reeked of high expectations and inevitable disappointment in the way that only the end of summer can. I'd been fighting with my mom all morning because I wasn't done with my main college application essay yet and I'd been supposed to finish it over the summer. Social media was abuzz about the eclipse, and I wanted to go to my friend Emily's house to use her solar glasses and watch the

astronomical wonder. My mother wanted me to stay at home and finish last-minute schoolwork. Tensions were high.

On a national scale, American politics were in chaos, as well (Kristian). Just last week, I'd returned home from a relaxing day at the beach only to turn on the news and hear about racism wreaking havoc through the Charlottesville riots and the Unite the Right rally. The day before, I was eating ice cream in the park with my friends when my mom texted me that North Korea had threatened a "merciless strike" on the US in response to American army drills with South Korea. At cross country practice, my friend Kyle and his boyfriend talked about how Sam Clovis, President Trump's chief scientist for the Department of Agriculture, announced that homosexuality is a choice and the legalization of same sex marriage may lead to pedophilia. State lines were not the only divisions separating my country. From where I was standing, the nation appeared to exist in only violence and venom. The great melting pot of America held too many views, too many ingredients that were insoluble.

And then the eclipse happened.

My mother's and my argument was just reaching a head when my little sister, Alexandra, shouted, "It's starting! It's starting!"

My whole family rushed into the backyard to check out the astronomical wonder we'd been hearing about all summer. In truth, there wasn't much to see. Southern California was far from the path of totality, so the sky never turned black. If Alexandra hadn't set an alarm for the start of the eclipse, I wouldn't have known anything was happening in the sky at all. I squinted at the sun, trying to see if there was something I was missing, but my older sister, Elleni, kept covering my eyes.

“You idiot,” she said laughing at me. “The people on TV said you can go blind.”

Still, I couldn't help feeling as if I was missing out, as if there was a giant, cosmic game changer happening and I was being kept from it. Luckily Alexandra read about seeing the shape of the waning sun by watching its shadow on a piece of printer paper, and we all crowded around the small 8.5x11 sheet, my mom and I completely forgetting the quarrel of moments past.

There was a childlike wonder, a purity in the moment that I have not found anywhere else. Elleni, a fickle and blasé twenty-one-year-old, was just as enthralled as fourteen-year-old Alexandra and my eighty-eight year old grandmother holding on to my arm for support. Even I, a notorious chatterbox, grew silent as I focused on the waning crescents sprinkling onto the page in front of me.

My mother gave me a sidelong glance. “Emily has eclipse glasses?” I nodded and she tossed me the car keys. “You better hurry. You don't want to miss the eclipse. This is something special.”

On my drive to Emily's house, I found I was right. There was something special happening on a universal level, something beyond the slim shadows scattered on the ground. Everywhere I looked, my community was coming together, pulled in by the promise of something wonderful happening in the sky.

Just pulling out of the driveway, I found neighbors congregated at two little girls' bake sale. The third grader wore a bright yellow t-shirt and a headband with yellow construction paper triangles glued on. The first grader donned a sparkly silver dress. Baring toothless smiles and faces with crumbs that hinted they'd done some serious product testing, the girls handed me a Ziploc of eclipse cookies: Oreos with bites of the cream taken out.

Driving down high traffic main streets, I saw businesspeople pulled over to squint at the sun. I spotted strangers with their faces pressed together to share eclipse glasses. Shoulders touching, cheek to cheek, not a trace of apprehension or awkwardness. For a few moments, no one was pointing fingers, no one was looking with judgement upon others. They couldn't — their necks were craned towards the heavens.

Similarly, for a few hours, it seemed as if the news stopped. Perhaps it was magic, perhaps it was just a slow afternoon for intrigue, perhaps the usual researchers were too busy squinting through their eclipse glasses to keep their ear to the ground, but for just a few hours, no station reported anything but the solar eclipse. The media consisted solely of people staring at the sky; Of grown men and women who took off work to watch a giant rock pass in front of a ball of gas; Of people who traveled across the country, some of them driving for days, simply for the chance to catch a better view of the moon blocking out the sun. For one day, entire cities gathered together in football stadiums to watch the solar eclipse. For one day, kids ran out of school, not from gun violence, but towards the disappearing sun. Strangers gathered on the streets, not to protest another group or share in hateful slurs, but to share eclipse glasses and binoculars and shrieks of euphoric glee. No stadium was divided by political alliance. No one checked to see another's citizenship status before passing their glasses. For one day, people of all races, of all political beliefs, of all religions — for one day, they all came together for something as simple as the sky.

An eclipse occurs when one celestial body passes in front of another, obscuring its light. In a given year, one location can have four solar eclipses and three lunar eclipses (“What Happens More Often”). But a *total* solar eclipse...a total solar eclipse is almost too good to be

true. So much had to go right when the blueprints for nature were being drafted. The Earth, Sun, and Moon must be aligned in a perfectly straight line. The Moon is 400 times smaller than the Sun; the Sun just so happens to be 400 times farther away from Earth than the Moon, allowing the two celestial bodies to match up perfectly. It's as if nature came with a little magic, a secret weapon to make people slow down when they need to most.

Admittedly, total solar eclipses have not always been seen positively, but even when considered an evil, the eclipse was an evil that impacted an entire community. It cast its darkness indiscriminately over both privileged and marginalized peoples. Early Argentinian, Paraguayan, and Norse civilizations all yelled to frighten the mythical creatures they believed were eating the Sun. Ojibwe Native Americans shot flaming arrows to relight the Sun. But even as the ancient human reaction to eclipses was negative, it was a reaction shared by many. Ancient Indians believed they could only scare away Rahu, the god chasing the Sun, by creating raucous noises. But one person yelling alone would never be loud enough. The village had to band together to restore order to their world. These people shrieked with fear, but it was a fear that brought them to crowds in the street. A fear that brought neighbors together, clutching arms, holding on to each other in what they believed may be their last moments.

In 2017, UC Berkeley researcher Yang Bai conducted a study into how “awe” affects humans and its impact on a community. Defining awe as the emotion accompanying the presence of something vast and beyond a person's capacity for understanding, Bai found that standing in an awe-inspiring nature-setting leads to a smaller sense of self. Filled with wonder and realizing the grand scale of the world, people put into perspective just how small they really are. They realize how minute, how trivial, how fleeting their problems are, their differences, their

anguishes. Though a person's own sense of self-importance decreases following awe, their sense of others does not shrink. Rather, by comparison, others feel bigger, more important, more necessary to help. Described as the "quintessential collective emotion," awe puts our own worries in perspective (Bai). Awe humbles us. It makes us revel in a world that's bigger than ourselves.

Eclipse chasers say there is no way to fully anticipate the experience of a total solar eclipse. It's hard to imagine the otherworldliness of a place where we're blocked from the center of our universe. People assume that in totality, all light disappears. They expect darkness to prevail, a black sky to triumph. In actuality, though, the night sky is a dark inky blue. Without the Sun dominating the sky, stars can be seen. Even as the Moon blocks the Sun, is the corona, the aura surrounding the Sun can still be seen. Try as it might, the Moon cannot fully extinguish the light. Even in the deepest moments of totality, the corona remains visible: a white halo surrounding the black hole to the heavens.

In an eclipse, the moon wedges itself between the earth and the sun, between humanity and the light. But the light always returns. Like the earth, we find ourselves separated from our light by all this...stuff, by the banality of day to day existence: the squabbles with roommates, the frustration of traffic, the extra point on our essay we just *know* we deserved. We get distracted by the minutiae of everyday life that separate us from one another. We define ourselves by the organizations we join, the colors of our skin, the neighborhoods we live in, the countries we are born in, but we forget that at our core we are still the same. At our core, we still have a childlike wonder that made thousands sit in a stadium and squint at the sky through

eclipse glasses. We still have a curiosity that motivates us to put our day on hold to revel in the awe of watching the sun disappear.

By the time I'd made the ten-minute drive to Emily's, what little eclipse my Southern California town was afforded was almost over. Still, when I placed the cardboard lenses, not unlike 3-D movie glasses, on my face, my mouth dropped open. Looking at the unfiltered sun before, the light had appeared completely normal. But when I donned the glasses, when I gained a new perspective, everything changed.

Only a small crescent shone through the dark filter. It reminded me of the Cheshire cat's smile from *Alice in Wonderland*, a cocky grin that seemed to laugh at the insignificance of my problems. Looking at the sky, I agreed with that flaming Cheshire cat. My worries, my quarrels, my "stuff," I couldn't see any of it through the eclipse glasses. All I could see was the light.

A week before the eclipse, counter-protestors gathered in Charlottesville to oppose gatherings of alt-right supporters and white supremacists in the Unite the Right Rally. As white supremacists cursed slurs and spit out hate, the counter-protestors took up a chorus of "This Little Light of Mine." In videos from that day, the singing drowns out the hateful chants of the supremacists. Like gleeful youths singing the cherished children's song, the counter-protestors locked arms and formed their own ring of light, following through on their promise that "Everywhere I go... I'm gonna let it shine!" Leader of the singing, Reverend Osagyefo Sekou, explained, "They [Neo-Nazis] didn't know what to do with all that joy. We weren't going to let the darkness have the last word."

Out of darkness, there will always be light. There will always be a draw to that center of the universe, that center of one's soul. A call to the childlike purity that can never be truly



exterminated. The childlike innocence that makes a person sing a folk song of freedom when others chant hate. That makes more than 215 million Americans watch a giant rock pass in front of the sun. As spreaders of darkness endeavor to create borders on land, I challenge others to look towards the sky.

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