

Italo Calvino

Mr. Palomar

Translated from the Italian by William Weaver

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MR. PALOMAR
ON THE BEACH

Reading a wave

The sea is barely wrinkled, and little waves strike the sandy shore. Mr. Palomar is standing on the shore, looking at a wave. Not that he is lost in contemplation of the waves. He is not lost, because he is quite aware of what he is doing: he wants to look at a wave and he is looking at it. He is not contemplating, because for contemplation you need the right temperament, the right mood, and the right combination of exterior circumstances; and though Mr. Palomar has nothing against contemplation in principle, none of these three conditions applies to him. Finally, it is not "the waves" that he means to look at, but just one individual wave: in his desire to avoid vague sensations, he establishes for his every action a limited and precise object.

Mr. Palomar sees a wave rise in the distance, grow, approach, change form and color, fold over itself, break, vanish, and flow again. At this point he could convince himself that he has concluded the operation he had set out to achieve, and he could go away. But isolating one wave is not easy, separating it from the wave immediately following, which seems to push it and at times overtakes it and sweeps it away; and it is no easier to

separate that one wave from the preceding wave, which seems to drag it toward the shore, unless it turns against the following wave, as if to arrest it. Then, if you consider the breadth of the wave, parallel to the shore, it is hard to decide where the advancing front extends regularly and where it is separated and segmented into independent waves, distinguished by their speed, shape, force, direction.

In other words, you cannot observe a wave without bearing in mind the complex features that concur in shaping it and the other, equally complex ones that the wave itself originates. These aspects vary constantly, so each wave is different from another wave, even if not immediately adjacent or successive; in other words, there are some forms and sequences that are repeated, though irregularly distributed in space and time. Since what Mr. Palomar means to do at this moment is simply *see* a wave—that is, to perceive all its simultaneous components without overlooking any of them—his gaze will dwell on the movement of the wave that strikes the shore until it can record aspects not previously perceived; as soon as he notices that the images are being repeated, he will know he has seen everything he wanted to see and he will be able to stop.

A nervous man who lives in a frenzied and congested world, Mr. Palomar tends to reduce his relations with the outside world; and, to defend himself against the general neurasthenia, he tries to keep his sensations under control insofar as possible.

The hump of the advancing wave rises more at one point than at any other, and it is here that it becomes hemmed in white. If this occurs at some distance from

the shore, there is time for the foam to fold over upon itself and vanish again, as if swallowed, and at the same moment invade the whole, but this time emerging again from below, like a white carpet rising from the bank to welcome the wave that is arriving. But just when you expect that wave to roll over the carpet, you realize it is no longer wave but only carpet, and this also rapidly disappears, to become a glinting of wet sand that quickly withdraws, as if driven back by the expansion of the dry, opaque sand that moves its jagged edge forward.

At the same time, the indentations in the brow of the wave must be considered, where it splits into two wings, one stretching toward the shore from right to left and the other from left to right, and the departure point or the destination of their divergence or convergence is this negative tip, which follows the advance of the wings but is always held back, subject to their alternate overlapping until another wave, a stronger wave, overtakes it, with the same problem of divergence-convergence, and then a wave stronger still, which resolves the knot by shattering it.

Taking the pattern of the waves as model, the beach thrusts into the water some faintly hinted points, prolonged in submerged sandy shoals, shaped and destroyed by the currents at every tide. Mr. Palomar has chosen one of these low tongues of sand as his observation point, because the waves strike it on either side, obliquely, and, overrunning the half-submerged surface, they meet their opposites. So, to understand the composition of a wave, you have to consider these opposing thrusts, which are to some extent counterbalanced and to some extent added together, to produce a

general shattering of thrusts and counterthrusts in the usual spreading of foam.

Mr. Palomar now tries to limit his field of observation; if he bears in mind a square zone of, say, ten meters of shore by ten meters of sea, he can carry out an inventory of all the wave movements that are repeated with varying frequency within a given time interval. The hard thing is to fix the boundaries of this zone, because if, for example, he considers as the side farthest from him the outstanding line of an advancing wave, as this line approaches him and rises it hides from his eyes everything behind it, and thus the space under examination is overturned and at the same time crushed.

In any case, Mr. Palomar does not lose heart and at each moment he thinks he has managed to see everything to be seen from his observation point, but then something always crops up that he had not borne in mind. If it were not for his impatience to reach a complete, definitive conclusion of his visual operation, looking at waves would be a very restful exercise for him and could save him from neurasthenia, heart attack, and gastric ulcer. And it could perhaps be the key to mastering the world's complexity by reducing it to its simplest mechanism.

But every attempt to define this model must take into account a long wave that is arriving in a direction perpendicular to the breakers and parallel to the shore, creating the flow of a constant, barely surfacing crest. The shifts of the waves that ruffle toward the shore do not disturb the steady impulse of this compact crest that slices them at a right angle, and there is no knowing where it comes from or where it then goes. Perhaps it

is a breath of east wind that stirs the sea's surface against the deep drive that comes from the mass of water far out to sea, but this wave born of air, in passing, receives also the oblique thrusts from the water's depth and re-directs them, straightening them in its own direction and bearing them along. And so the wave continues to grow and gain strength until the clash with contrary waves gradually dulls it and makes it disappear, or else twists it until it is confused in one of the many dynasties of oblique waves slammed against the shore.

Concentrating the attention on one aspect makes it leap into the foreground and occupy the square, just as, with certain drawings, you have only to close your eyes and when you open them the perspective has changed. Now, in the overlapping of crests moving in various directions, the general pattern seems broken down into sections that rise and vanish. In addition, the reflux of every wave also has a power of its own that hinders the oncoming waves. And if you concentrate your attention on these backward thrusts, it seems that the true movement is the one that begins from the shore and goes out to sea.

Is this perhaps the real result that Mr. Palomar is about to achieve? To make the waves run in the opposite direction, to overturn time, to perceive the true substance of the world beyond sensory and mental habits? No, he feels a slight dizziness, but it goes no further than that. The stubbornness that drives the waves toward the shore wins the match: in fact, the waves have swelled considerably. Is the wind about to change? It would be disastrous if the image that Mr. Palomar has succeeded painstakingly in putting together were to

shatter and be lost. Only if he manages to bear all the aspects in mind at once can he begin the second phase of the operation: extending this knowledge to the entire universe.

It would suffice not to lose patience, as he soon does. Mr. Palomar goes off along the beach, tense and nervous as when he came, and even more unsure about everything.

The naked bosom

Mr. Palomar is walking along a lonely beach. He encounters few bathers. One young woman is lying on the sand taking the sun, her bosom bared. Palomar, discreet by nature, looks away at the horizon of the sea. He knows that in such circumstances, at the approach of a strange man, women often cover themselves hastily, and this does not seem right to him: because it is a nuisance for the woman peacefully sunbathing, and because the passing man feels he is an intruder, and because the taboo against nudity is implicitly confirmed; because half-respected conventions spread insecurity and incoherence of behavior rather than freedom and frankness.

And so, as soon as he sees in the distance the outline of the bronze-pink cloud of a naked female torso, he quickly turns his head in such a way that the trajectory of his gaze remains suspended in the void and guarantees his civil respect for the invisible frontier that surrounds people.

But—he thinks as he proceeds and resumes, the moment the horizon is clear, the free movement of his eyeballs—in acting like this, I display a refusal to see;

or, in other words, I am finally reinforcing the convention that declares illicit any sight of the breast; that is to say, I create a kind of mental brassière suspended between my eyes and that bosom, which, from the flash that reached the edge of my visual field, seemed to me fresh and pleasing to the eye. In other words, my not looking presupposes that I am thinking of that nakedness, worrying about it; and this is basically an indiscreet and reactionary attitude.

Returning from his stroll, Palomar again passes that bather, and this time he keeps his eyes fixed straight ahead, so that his gaze touches with impartial uniformity the foam of the retreating waves, the boats pulled up on shore, the great bath towel spread out on the sand, the swelling moon of lighter skin with the dark halo of the nipple, the outline of the coast in the haze, gray against the sky.

There—he reflects, pleased with himself, as he continues on his way—I have succeeded in having the bosom completely absorbed by the landscape, so that my gaze counted no more than the gaze of a seagull or a hake.

But is this really the right way to act?—he reflects further. Or does it not mean flattening the human person to the level of things, considering it an object, and, worse still, considering as object that which in the person is the specific attribute of the female sex? Am I not perhaps perpetuating the old habit of male superiority, hardened over the years into a habitual insolence?

He turns and retraces his steps. Now, in allowing his gaze to run over the beach with neutral objectivity, he arranges it so that, once the woman's bosom enters his field of vision, a break is noticeable, a shift, almost a

darting glance. That glance goes on to graze the taut skin, withdraws, as if appreciating with a slight start the different consistency of the view and the special value it acquires, and for a moment the glance hovers in mid-air, making a curve that accompanies the swell of the breast from a certain distance, elusively but also protectively, and then runs on as if nothing had happened.

In this way I believe my position is made quite clear—Palomar thinks—with no possible misunderstandings. But couldn't this grazing of his eyes finally be taken for an attitude of superiority, an underestimation of what a breast is and means, as if putting it aside, on the margin, or in parentheses? So, I am relegating the bosom again to the semidarkness where centuries of sexomaniacal puritanism and of desire considered sin have kept it. . . .

This interpretation runs counter to Palomar's best intentions, for though he belongs to a human generation for whom nudity of the female bosom was associated with the idea of amorous intimacy, still he hails approvingly this change in customs, both for what it signifies as the reflection of a more broad-minded society and because this sight in particular is pleasing to him. It is this detached encouragement that he would like to be able to express with his gaze.

He does an about-face. With firm steps he walks again toward the woman lying in the sun. Now his gaze, giving the landscape a fickle glance, will linger on the breast with special consideration, but will quickly include it in an impulse of good will and gratitude for the whole, for the sun and the sky, for the bent pines and the dune and the beach and the rocks and the clouds and the

seaweed, for the cosmos that rotates around those haloed cusps.

This should be enough to reassure once and for all the solitary sunbather and clear away all perverse assumptions. But the moment he approaches again, she suddenly springs up, covers herself with an impatient huff, and goes off, shrugging in irritation, as if she were avoiding the tiresome insistence of a satyr.

The dead weight of an intolerant tradition prevents anyone's properly understanding the most enlightened intentions, Palomar bitterly concludes.

The sword of the sun

When the sun begins to go down, its reflection takes form on the sea: from the horizon a dazzling patch extends all the way to the shore, composed of countless swaying glints; between one glint and the next, the opaque blue of the sea makes a dark network. The white boats, seen against the light, turn black, lose substance and bulk, as if they were consumed by that splendid speckling.

This is the hour when Mr. Palomar, belated by nature, takes his evening swim. He enters the sea, moves away from the shore; and the sun's reflection becomes a shining sword in the water stretching from the shore to him. Mr. Palomar swims in that sword, or, more precisely, that sword remains always before him; at every stroke of his, it retreats, and never allows him to overtake it. Wherever he stretches out his arms, the sea takes on its opaque evening color, which extends to the shore behind him.

As the sun sinks toward sunset, the incandescent-white reflection acquires gold and copper tones. And wherever Mr. Palomar moves, he remains the vertex of that sharp, gilded triangle; the sword follows him, pointing

MR. PALOMAR
LOOKS AT THE SKY

Moon in the afternoon

Nobody looks at the moon in the afternoon, and this is the moment when it would most require our attention, since its existence is still in doubt. It is a whitish shadow that surfaces from the intense blue of the sky, charged with solar light; who can assure us that, once again, it will succeed in assuming a form and glow? It is so fragile and pale and slender; only on one side does it begin to assume a distinct outline, like the arc of a sickle, while the rest is all steeped in azure. It is like a transparent wafer, or a half-dissolved pastille; only here the white circle is not dissolving but condensing, collecting itself at the price of gray-bluish patches and shadows that might belong to the moon's geography or might be spillings of the sky that still soak the satellite, porous as a sponge.

In this phase the sky is still something very compact and concrete, and you cannot be sure whether it is from its taut, uninterrupted surface that this round and whitish shape is being detached, its consistency only a bit more solid than the clouds', or whether it is a corrosion of the basic tissue, a rift in the dome, a crevice that opens onto the void behind. The uncertainty is height-

ened by the irregularity of the figure that on one side is taking shape (where the rays of the setting sun arrive) and on the other lingers in a kind of penumbra. And since the border between the two zones is not sharply defined, the effect is not that of a solid seen in perspective but, rather, of one of those little drawings of the moon on calendars, where a white outline stands within a little dark circle. There would be nothing to object to in this if it were a moon in the first quarter and not a full, or almost full, moon. This, in fact, is what is being revealed, gradually, as its contrast with the sky becomes stronger and its circumference is being more distinctly outlined, with only a few dents on the eastern edge.

It must be said that the sky's blue has veered successively toward periwinkle, toward violet (the sun's rays have become red), then dulled toward ashen, and each time the whiteness of the moon has received an impulse to emerge more firmly, and inside it, the more luminous part has gained ground, until it now covers the whole disk. It is as if the phases that the moon passes through in a month were covered inside this full or gibbous moon, in the hours between its rising and its setting, with the difference that the round form remains more or less in sight. In the midst of the circle the spots are still there—indeed, their chiaroscuro becomes more distinct thanks to the luminosity of the rest—but now there is no doubt that it is the moon that bears them, like stains or bruises, and they can no longer be taken for transparencies of the sky's ground, rips in the cloak of a bodiless ghost-moon.

What remains uncertain, rather, is whether this gain

in evidence and in splendor is due to the slow retreat of the sky, which, as it moves away, sinks deeper and deeper into darkness, or whether, on the contrary, it is the moon that is coming forward, collecting the previously scattered light and depriving the sky of it, concentrating it all in the round mouth of its funnel.

And especially these changes must not make us forget that in the meantime the satellite has been shifting in the sky, proceeding westward and upward. The moon is the most changeable body in the visible universe, and the most regular in its complicated habits: it never fails to show up for an appointment, and you can always wait for it at the appointed spot; but if you leave it in one place, you always find it next in another, and if you recall its face turned in a certain way, you see it has already changed its pose, a little or a lot. In any case, following it steadily, you do not realize that it is imperceptibly eluding you. Only the clouds intervene to create the illusion of a rapid dash and rapid metamorphoses, or, rather, to underline vividly what would otherwise escape the eye.

The cloud dashes; gray at first, it becomes milky and shiny, the sky behind it has turned black, it is night, the stars are lighted, the moon is a great, dazzling mirror that flies. Who would recognize in this moon the one of a few hours ago? Now it is a lake of shininess, spurting rays all around, brimming in the darkness with a halo of cold silver, and flooding with white light the streets of the night walkers.

There is no doubt that what is now beginning is a splendid winter night of full moon. At this point, assured that the moon no longer needs him, Mr. Palomar goes home.

The eye and the planets

When he learns that this year, for the entire month of April, the three "external" planets, visible to the naked eye (even his, nearsighted and astigmatic), are all three "in opposition" and therefore visible for the whole night, Mr. Palomar rushes out onto the terrace.

Because of the full moon, the sky is light. Mars, though close to the great lunar mirror flooded with white light, advances imperiously with its stubborn radiance, its thick, concentrated yellow, so different from all the other yellows of the firmament that it has finally been agreed to call it red, and in moments of inspiration really to see it as red.

Moving your gaze down, continuing eastward an imaginary arc that should link Regulus with Spica (but Spica can hardly be seen), you encounter, quite distinctly, Saturn with its chilly whitish light, and still farther down there is Jupiter, in the moment of its greatest splendor, a vigorous yellow with a hint of green. The stars all around have paled, except Arcturus, which shines with a defiant air, a bit higher to the east.

To enjoy most fully the triple planetary opposition it is necessary to procure a telescope. Mr. Palomar, perhaps because he bears the same name as a famous