

New Moon

by John Olson

On the morning of July 20th, 1969, I emerged from a house near Burien, Washington shortly after sunrise, and tilted my head back to look at the sky. My neck creaked. I had attended a party that had gone late into the night. It was a warm, bright morning and I could see the moon, phantasmal and splotchy against a China blue sky. It's rare to see the moon during the day, and whenever I do, it seems oddly displaced, a prop from the theatre of the night someone forgot to bring in. On this occasion it smacked of significance. There were men walking on it. Or about to walk on it. I gazed at it as if I might actually see them hobbling about in the dust, the way you can sometimes see from a distance people scaling the side of a mountain.

My adolescence in the 60s had been witness to a long pageantry of lunar landing modules. My father worked at Boeing as an illustrator and engineer. I grew up in a house full of lunar landing modules, many of them constructed out of toothpicks and ping-pong balls. NASA's coveted contract went to Grumman, rather than Boeing, so my father's many illustrations and modules remained stillborn, although a few went on exhibit at the Smithsonian in the 1980s.

My parents were out of town that summer in '69. Home from California for a visit, I had the house to myself and watched the moon landing on TV. I saw Eagle land and Armstrong clamber down the ladder in his bulky space suit and put his foot on the surface of the moon and utter his famous words, "That is one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind."

Years later, circa the early 90s, Buzz Aldrin and my father had been invited to a dinner at someone's house on Bainbridge Island and gotten lost. My father drove and Buzz navigated. Bainbridge Island is heavily wooded, which outer space is not, which provides at least one mitigating factor to this otherwise curious misadventure. If I remember my father's story correctly, it had been a clear night,

and Buzz had been able to use the stars to pinpoint their position using a declination formula based on spherical trigonometry. That, and a map spread out on the hood of my father's Taurus, which they studied by flashlight.

Today the moon is a thin crescent that looks like a fingernail clipping hovering over the western horizon. There are no people flying around with jetpacks on their backs and living in homes that look like the Space Needle. The world is in crisis. Billions live in dire poverty. The poles and glaciers are melting. Millions in the U.S. believe that humans lived with dinosaurs and that evolution is a hoax. But Armstrong and Aldrin and Collins continue on tour, noticeably aged, but still smiling, still optimistic. I like to think that they know something that I don't know.

