

MOONFIRE: MAILER IN AMBER

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Moonfire: The Epic Journey of Apollo 11
50th Anniversary Edition

By Norman Mailer

Introduction by Colum McCann

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BOOKS, FROM THE SKIN AND BONE OF THEIR COVERS AND PAGES to the genetic puzzle of their imprinted words, are things of the intellect, transporting messages between minds in a spooky burlesque of telepathy. They are artifacts, too, mementos of another time attracting our attention, quietly and without spectacle, by reminding us of what we have lost. *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1970), Norman Mailer's poetic reporting of the historically clamorous effort finally allowing a human being to touch the dust of another celestial body, was reimagined in 2009 as *Moonfire*, an extravagant publication from Taschen weaving photos of NASA's triumph around Mailer's text to create a double helix of historical identity. Some books—the Gutenberg Bible and the First Folio are notable examples—over time mutate entirely into artifacts, their contents so widely distributed in other forms that the only value remaining is the physical thing itself. Coffee table books, those instant artifacts of modern invention, are printed and bound to decorate a room, or to allow guests a moment of diversion as they canter from page to page, admiring images and anatomizing sentences to extract the bare skeleton of

meaning. *Moonfire*, a coffee table book in its most precious state of 1,969 copies, is enclosed in a resin case with a convex Plexiglas window and accompanied by an autographed photo of astronaut Buzz Aldrin standing at Tranquility Base. Twelve copies of that rarefied edition include a fragment of lunar asteroid as well as an aluminum case with folding legs emulating the struts of the Lunar Landing Module, thoughtfully eliminating the expense of providing a coffee table for display of this vibrantly decorative work.

But *Moonfire*, nearly extinct upon publication, so completely embodies a time and a place—intellectually, visually, and poetically—that assigning value based upon its physical state trivializes its accomplishment. The book has shed its struts and its moonrock and its autographs in a metamorphosis that began when the three-part series published in *Life* magazine became *Of a Fire on the Moon*, bound between boards and mass-market paperback wrappers, and then stripped to its emotional core by Mailer scholar J. Michael Lennon for the first Lunar Rock Edition, superbly-illustrated with photographs, curated by Larry Schiller and Taschen editor Nina Weiner, from *Life* and the NASA archives. Even in the later popular editions and in this new version published to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the landing on the moon, the book so thoroughly embodies a lost place and time that, regardless of price or wide distribution, no designation other than artifact remains. It is a singular statement both of Mailer's outlier intellect and twentieth-century technological and spiritual pizzazz.

Reviews and criticism of Mailer's literary moon walk, in all its published forms, have been so thorough and so insightful that I resist the thought of retracing those analytical steps, a redundant process sure to add little enlightenment beyond that available from a second reading of that earlier criticism or, better, spending time once again with *Moonfire* on your lap. I'm doing that now, as I write this, and as I have done in the past with other artifacts of the space race collected in my own adolescent moon-struck time. Here I have three Project Mercury commemorative stamps, released in 1962, glued to a card and displayed in a brown plastic frame purchased at a five-and-dime. My 45 rpm recordings of the Sigma 7 and Aurora 7 launches, issued by Nelson Doubleday that same year, are still in their faded cardboard mailing wrapper with a Garden City return address. The letter from astronaut Wally Schirra, thanking me for the youthful impulse of mailing him a birthday card, remains in a thin gold frame more suitable for a sister's portrait than an official communication from one of NASA's original seven as-

tronauts. The copy of *Life* magazine from August 29, 1969 with Mailer on the cover—containing the first installment of the moon landing serial—is in a nearby cabinet, a memento of my first encounter with Mailer’s circumferential prose, surrounding incident and landscape and surrendering them to some sort of elemental transcendence. “Mailer says he is not the central figure (Saturn V is) but is simply an observer and a voice,” writes Managing Editor Ralph Graves in his opening editorial. “He is quite a bit more noticeable than that. Everything he sees and senses becomes part of the account” (1).

I remember being annoyed, in a curiously indistinct and adolescent way, at Mailer for body-hopping into Aquarius, a cultural detective decoding the moon launch profundity, and thus appropriating the most distinctive astrological sign of those turbulent times. I envied that Mailer *had even been born* an Aquarius. Hadn’t The 5th Dimension and the musical *Hair* taught us that this was the age of Aquarius? Was he trying to embody the post-Summer of Love age, *my age*, this tanned older man looking at me from the *Life* cover with an expression at once sympathetic and accusing? My father had that same look, that same attitude of acceptance and patient inquiry, when I confessed that I had crashed the family Buick on a winding country road. “Mailer was the ultimate skin-trader,” Colum McCann writes in his *Moonfire* Introduction. “He wanted to step from his body to a symphony of imagined bodies. . . . He was making layers of himself. At the heart of it was a selfishness to live as many lives as possible, coupled with the deepest possible empathy for others” (12). But Mailer’s skin-swap had left me, a Libra, characteristically indecisive about the prudence of interjecting so much elemental *self*—even one imagined or borrowed or stolen outright—into an account of an achievement that flabbergasted the world and demanded the straight-up reporting of a Cronkite, or a Bergman, or the tag-team treatment of Huntley and Brinkley. *Who was this man?*

In *The Atlantic*’s review of the original edition’s fiftieth anniversary, James Parker offers an answer to my question, one of many that I would read or divine on my own through the years, in context and with aplomb. “It’s Mailer through and through,” he writes of the book’s idiosyncratic reporting and prose. “Mailer all over: quite as bonkers and deliriously tasteless as *An American Dream*, more bloated with prophetic wind than *Advertisements for Myself*, exceeded only by *Ancient Evenings* in its level of numbing physical detail.” Parker perhaps waited a contemplative beat before continuing. “These are all compliments, incidentally. Because as always in the Mailer-

verse, the dross and the gold are whirled together. They are, God bless him, the same" (32).

So Mailer, the man, shed the outer layers of his ego to become Aquarius, the chronicler, a polymorphic self that could leap from mind to mind while capturing the entirety of the momentous event, teleporting from the concrete and steel of Launch Pad 39A in the riveting Florida sun to the glass-encased, air-conditioned command room of Mission Control in Houston, Texas. Mailer scrapped the layers of self just as a Riodinidae emerges from its pupal skin, its complex and colored wings demanding as much attention as the miraculous new landscape it claims as its own. Mailer discards the filters and restrictions of social personality just as the Saturn V sheds stages in the minutes following lift-off, transforming into its most elemental self, the stripped-back construct that can fly to the moon. There, on page 40 of that issue of *Life* magazine and page 173 of *Moonfire*, Mailer describes that process—*his process*—with uniqueness and with domesticized wonder:

Far in the distance, almost out of sight, like an all-but-transparent fish suddenly breaking into head and tail, the first stage at the rear of the rocket fell off from the rest, fell off and was now like a man, like a sky diver suddenly small. A new burst of motors started up, some far-off glimpse of newborn fires which looked pale as streams of water, pale were the flames in the far distance. Then the abandoned empty stage of the booster began to fall away, a relay runner, baton just passed, who slips back, slips back. Then it began to tumble, but with the slow tender dignity of a thin slice of soap slicing and wavering, dipping and gliding on its way to the floor of the tub. Then mighty Saturn of the first stage, empty, fuel-voided, burned out, gave a puff, a whiff and was lost to sight behind a cloud.

Life magazine, nearly the physical size of *Moonfire*, illustrates those words with two impressive photos, one capturing the moment of lift-off from above, the Apollo capsule and escape tower foremost in the field of vision, and the other a fish-eye view of the flaming Saturn V just inches above the pad, a white mist of liquid oxygen covering the rocket like the layered lace of an otherworldly wedding dress, a bride about to wed the sky. No wonder, then, that Mailer was suspect of this mosaic of fire and ice, unsure if we now

possessed a method for conversing with God or communing with the Devil. “Aquarius was not yet ready to call this hallowed ground,” he writes. “For the notion that man voyaged out to fulfill the desire of God was either the heart of the vision, or anathema to that true angel in Heaven they would violate by the fires of ascent. A ship of flames was on its way to the moon” (*Life* 40).

That copy of *Life* stands beside *Moonfire*, with all its astonishing images, as an artifact of a convoluted moment in history, the axle of a wheel of divergent events that was flying apart by the spokes, a time when dreams were being realized and destroyed in a matter of months, week, days. In the pages preceding Mailer’s installment and his anguished worries about metaphysical puzzles, *Life* offers its first coverage of the Woodstock festival, the decade-defining event billed as “An Aquarian Exposition: 3 Days of Peace & Music,” with photos of an ecstatic flutist reaching for the sky, a young girl attempting to wash her hair in a makeshift, outdoor faucet, and the post-event pasture littered with abandoned milk crates and plastic. Following the seventeen full pages devoted to Mailer, the magazine allows six pages to the grief of film director Roman Polanski, whose wife, Sharon Tate, had been murdered less than three weeks earlier by assailants eventually identified as members of the Manson Family. And then, in a personality profile somewhat less topical but with perhaps just as many implications for the future as Woodstock, Apollo, and Manson, *Life* offers Grove Press publisher Barney Rosset’s ruminations upon *I Am Curious (Yellow)* and his notion that film would soon supplant books as the primary medium for pornography. “That’s . . . the old smut peddler himself,” the article snickers, “turning his dubious attentions to home movies and the debauching of the American family” (49). I recall standing on the back porch of our family’s home, deep in the mountainous coal country of West Virginia, thumbing through the issue with a feeling that our lives, our times, were rushing forward with almost vertigo-inducing velocity, liable to overturn and disintegrate in the very next instant. I had nearly shed the teenage stigma, my twentieth birthday just weeks away, and I wanted to be those kids at Woodstock, mud and rain and hunger and all, and I wanted to be one of the astronauts invoked by Mailer, perhaps my first childhood dream to die. I wondered, at the time, how Polanski could have allowed himself to be photographed at the blood-stained doorstep of his Benedict Canyon home, but didn’t he look so, so counterculture and all with his Keith Richards hair and his consuming mem-

ories of that beautiful, Hippie-actress wife. And yes, I wanted to see that boundary-vaulting film *I Am Curious (Yellow)* with the cute Swedish blonde peeking out from her Marianne Faithful bangs, a theatre experience I found, a few months later, more exhausting than revelatory during the two-hour run time in a crowded university auditorium.

This commemorative edition of *Moonfire* points to a time, five decades ago, when the world belonged to either God or the Devil, was either disintegrating before our eyes or hovering just above enlightenment. Fifty years seems the requisite passage of time to begin looking backward, as we do now at Mailer's remarkable work, or looking forward optimistically, as we are genetically imprinted to do. *Beyond Tomorrow: The Next 50 Years in Space*, a 1965 small press publication by Dandridge M. Cole, an analyst at GE's Space Technology Center, deserves distinction as a significant memento of the space age as well as a testament of the remarkable post-war belief in the progress of science and technology. Cole's book appeared in only one edition of perhaps a few thousand copies, most sold to subscribers of *Space World* magazine, and Roy G. Scarfo's visionary art and Cole's confident and enthusiastic text might appear almost naive to today's readers. Cole suggests that the development of the human race could be related to a specific individual's growth from childhood to old age, and that fifty years hence we should reach maturity. "The race will achieve complete independence from its physical environment," he writes, "and achieve ability to reproduce itself by forming space colonies" (139). Paintings of cyborgs, asteroid mining, lunar colonies, and human beings landing on the Martian moons illustrate Cole's descriptions of these grand technological advancements, all attained by the far-off year of AD 2015.

Isaac Asimov, one of the most distinctive science fiction authors of the twentieth century, understood the hazards of technological forecast but offered his own notion of the future in the August 1965 issue of *Science Digest*, another statement of early-1960s scientific ambition. "How did I ever get into the predicting business?" he asks at the beginning of the article. "Predicting the future is a hopeless, thankless task, with ridicule to begin with and, all too often, scorn to end with" (63). Asimov perhaps wisely set his time machine to 1990, just half the normal increment for this kind of speculation, but mostly he supports Cole's imaginative forecast of lunar colonization. "Population pressure will not yet have driven men off the planet altogether," he writes. "There ought to be a going colony on the moon, com-

posed of changing shifts of highly trained and specialized personnel, and there will be plans for landing a man on Mars” (66).

Asimov’s predictions in *Science Digest* reached beyond the race for the moon, speculating on social issues and technological developments that, in retrospect, confirm Mailer’s suspicions that we have traded the beauty intellect for the expedience of commerce. While he missed the mark on some massive infrastructure developments and social issues—underground cities, worldwide government promotion of birth control, the prominence of nuclear power plants—Asimov was astonishingly accurate in his predictions concerning technology’s disruption of modern business and commerce. He speculates about helicopter deliveries, business by video phone, the proliferation of central air conditioning, barcoded supermarket products, and the wide-spread use of computers in the workplace. He is nearly uncanny in his prediction about flat screen TVs and cellphones: “The television set,” he writes, “will be, more than ever, the center of the home, and the telephone itself will become almost an item of entertainment” (69). If Asimov deserves ridicule and scorn for his predictions, as he worried, it may be for his notion that personal transportation by jetpack would be endemic by 1990, supported by the *Science Digest* cover of a businessman, complete with briefcase and fedora, flying to his office in the city below, the jetpack secured to his back flaming white hot exhaust. He even imagines these jet-propelled backpacks used for sport: “Will some child living today be the man who will organize the first game of ‘air polo,’” he asks, “using a helium inflated sphere of thin but tough plastic as a ball?” Quidditch, anyone?

Collier’s magazine arguably ignited the public’s interest in space flight and moon landings with its pioneering series of eight special issues published between 1952 and 1954, each featuring articles by contemporary space experts such as Wernher von Braun and Willy Ley, and astonishing art by perhaps the primer space artist of the century, Leslie Bonestell. “Here is how we shall go to the moon,” von Braun asserts with assurance in the initial installment of the series. “The pioneer expedition, 50 scientists and technicians, will take off from the space station’s orbit in three clumsy-looking but highly efficient rocket ships” (52). Bonestell’s art is a vibrant and eminently believable portrayal of doughnut-shaped space stations, winged shuttles, tubby cargo ships, and a fleet of spacecraft landing on the moon in one coordinated maneuver of space ballet. Von Braun predicted that this barrage of manned ships would reach the moon within the next quarter century, but

in fact the event Mailer covered—less an invasion of scientists and technicians than simply two experienced military pilots delivered in a metal canister—was just fifteen years after *Collier's* adventurous effort to inspire space-fever in the post-war imagination. Comparing *Moonfire*, in any of its published incarnations, with the *Collier's* articles today forces us to consider just how rapidly the moon mission advanced to success, and how muscularly ambitious von Braun's ideas really were compared with the eventual reality.

But we also wonder at Cole's predictions—aggressive, precise, and infused with an elemental faith in human progress—and try to trace the genetic code of history to discover how that advancement was derailed, why the human exploration of space has been stranded in low orbit now since Apollo 17 landed at Taurus-Littrow in 1972. Reading Mailer's transcendent description of the Apollo 11 launch, and examining the inspiring photographs of the massive rocket heading into the summer sky, we are motivated to forget that the Saturn V, retired in 1973, is the only booster ever to propel a human being beyond Earth's orbit. That description, and those photos, seems so immediate, so alive, so impossibly current, that we reject the bitter awareness that Saturn V's last mission was only one year after the final Apollo lunar landing. How could a transformation human endeavor, so ambitious and so inspiring, ever end with such barbarous abruptness?

Those looking for a suitable coffee table companion for *Moonfire* might turn to *Abandoned in Place: Preserving America's Space History* (2016), an oversized volume of photographs by Roland Miller documenting our unconscionable abdication from the human exploration of space. As Roger D. Launius writes in "Recapturing Our Youth," the Foreword to this book, "All that is left of Cape Canaveral's Launch Complex 34, the first site used to launch Saturn I rockets for the Apollo program in the 1960s, are a concrete and refractory brick pad, a reinforced concrete pedestal that served as a base for the rocket, a launch control center (now used for storage), and two steel blast deflectors" (xi). Converting this early site of Saturn rocket testing into a tourist attraction, as NASA did following its 1971 retirement, would be understandable if the manned space program had continued the way Cole and other observers had predicted. Miller's bleak photos of former space installations across the United States, however, demonstrate how dreams die, leaving fragments and detritus instead of wonder. The pressure Gauge panel of The Apollo Saturn V F1 Engine Test Stand, a series of clock-like components still affixed to a large rusted panel in California, appears obscure and forlorn;

a two-page shot of the abandoned Launch Complex 34 at sunrise, looking nothing less than a similar photograph of Stonehenge, is isolated and mysterious; a Project Apollo crate amid other debris in a Merritt Island junkyard recalls the *Life* magazine photo of Woodstock's littered aftermath, a reminder that something meaningful had just happened and should not be forgotten.

My own encounter with abandoned space hardware occurred in the early 1990s when, after a day's work implementing software at a New Mexico newspaper, my employment at the time, I drove to the New Mexico Museum of Space History, an outdoor installation in the desert outside Alamogordo. I had no idea what I might see—rockets, I supposed, and perhaps examples of early stratospheric balloons or satellites—but what I found revealed both the length of time that had passed since the early, pioneering space experiments and the extent that we have ignored those first heroic achievements. As an adolescent I had marveled at photos of John P. Stapp, "The Fastest Man Alive," aboard The Sonic Wind, a rocket-propelled sled that in 1954 carried him to a land speed record of 632 miles per hour in five seconds time, an early test of human endurance under gravitational extremes. Stapp was a hero of sorts, just as surely as Armstrong or Aldrin or Collins, yet here sat The Sonic Wind, in the open air of the desert, rusted and with only a tarnished plaque to tell its story. As I climbed aboard and sat where Stapp courageously inspired adolescent minds, I was both elated and despondent, happy to have the experience of taking that seat, but crestfallen that Stapp and The Sonic Wind had been forgotten, discarded along with the intellectual curiosity and energy that had led us to the moon.

Mailer sensed this imminent collapse of spirit, this literal gravitation toward greed and intellectual apathy, and McCann expresses Mailer's awareness in insightful terms: "His overwhelming feeling is that his very people—his generation, his lifeblood—have thrown their beauty away. They have allowed corporate America to outflank them. While they have been stuffing their bongs and shucking their bras, the businessman got the imaginative jump on them. They were inventing the predominant American spirit that would govern for the next 40 years" (15). Could humanity be in a condition of arrested development, as Cole's phylogenetic conceit might suggest, without the courage to undertake the challenges of maturity?

An issue of *The Economist* from July of this year provides an appropriate follow-up confirming Mailer's notion that consumerism and self-indulgence depleted the adventurous spirit of the past three generations and endanger

future spiritual advancement. The cover feature is titled—what else?—“The Next 50 Years in Space,” and is illustrated for newsstand sales with a very 1950s-looking spaceship zooming around a stylized and cloud-denuded earth, looking more like a Carnival Cruise ship than a vehicle for interplanetary travel. The editor’s appeal for the codification of space law and arms control—the essential concerns of the magazine’s space-related content—is followed by stories concerning the commercialization of space, satellite war, and the American goal of returning human beings to the moon by 2024, a nearly impossible accomplishment given the present NASA turmoil and budget constrictions. SpaceX and Blue Origin, however, are two independent corporations prepared to lead for-profit ventures back to the moon and beyond. What better confirmation can we have that corporate America, that economics and businessmen, outflanked us, indeed?

Asimov successfully anticipated a trivialization of technology, a devolved version of the visionary efforts and tough science that would result in 1028 seconds of powerhouse thrust driving three men toward the moon in a capsule that itself was a wonder of technological genus. Instead of advancing intellectual curiosity and the human spirit, technology became a support system for business and commerce, a tool for producing gadgets that would entertain us, comfort us, and distract us from considering the sublime nature of our daily lives, the simple beauty of sight, touch, and smell. Hand-held devices—replacing our memory, our imaginations, and our friends, all eerily apart from our brains and our flesh—have dispelled real wonder and the desire to discover anything beyond the data stream flowing through a bitrate tunnel to the screen in our pocket. Barney Rosset’s notion of video-based pornography—and the attendant separation from human engagement—has been realized on the small screen. For Mailer, the ultimate outrage of his moon launch assignment was being separated from real events at the very end, bound to trade his own intellectual and sensual experience for the interpretation of others, filtered images appearing, as if by osmosis, on a screen. Access to return of the Apollo moon crew is restricted to just three reporters, he explains, and Aquarius is forced to go home before the climax of his story. “So the end of the greatest week was seen by him in his living room in Provincetown, glaring at the television set—there was nothing to see. The sky was fogged. He was left to watch a succession of commentators” (*Moonfire* 316).

But Mailer, in the following days and weeks as he worked at his desk in

Provincetown, created his own images with words that captured the vibrant spirit of an age for the readers of *Life*, or *Of a Fire on the Moon*, or *Moonfire*, forever. Nicole DePolo, in her masterful examination of *Moonfire*'s editorial development from the original text, discusses the importance of visual narrative in today's culture as well as Mailer's earlier ego-obscuring personas. Aquarius, she notes, "was a similar guise to the one Mailer had donned for *The Faith of Graffiti*, dubbing himself A-I—the Aesthetic Investigator—a detective decoding pictographic spray paint tags, pseudonyms for a fraction of renegade street artists who had hijacked, as their canvas, the abundant walls of New York City" (279). Mailer's concern with visual communication makes the addition of photographs to his text logical and gratifying, a natural extension of the poetic imagery in *Of a Fire on the Moon*. "He painted pictures for us," writes McCann, "and now we're seeing them. Even from a quarter of a million miles away, Mailer somehow got it right. He used the techniques of fiction to illuminate a historical reality that was at turns good and bad and ugly" (15).

And what pictures they are! We see Armstrong and Collins in a tight closeup, their bodies obliterated by the bulk of their space suits and helmets, each looking away as though avoiding the camera's intrusion; a two-page spread of the 1950 launch of a Bumper V-2, tripods and cameras in the foreground, calling to mind an early photo of Georges Melies at work; the Saturn V ascending into a pure blue sky, witch-fire trailing; the surface of the moon, nearly flat and ghostly gray; the American Flag at Tranquility Base, almost an incidental feature in a photograph of Armstrong absorbed in his work; the illuminated crescent of an Earth otherwise consumed by darkness, the pure black of outer space; the nearly disorienting image of a Navy helicopter drawing the command module from the ocean, the adjacent blue sky and white clouds demanding nearly as much attention as the recovery process itself.

These images, communicating with power and grace a momentous human accomplishment, allow us to recall our own memories of that historical milestone, or to understand the majesty of a moment if we were not there to experience it firsthand. Apollo 4, the first unmanned test flight of the Saturn V booster, was launched in the early morning hours of November 9, 1967. My friends and I had driven from Melbourne to the Merritt Island causeway the previous evening, camping out on the beach just across the inlet from Launch Pad 39-A, the best view possible without being shot as

trespassers, as the causeway guard blithely told us. The sky was still dark at 7:00 am when the engines of the vehicle ignited, and in a moment the beach was illuminated as though it were noon, the ground actually shaking as we stood there, overwhelmed by the sight and sound of such a powerful human invention breaching the clouds. I later attempted to translate my experience into words, abandoning the attempt when I decided that any such effort was impossible. Less than two years later, Mailer's account was published in *Life*, and I was gratified to be proven wrong.

Moonfire, its words and images bound together into one enduring artifact of an age of contradictions and perplexity, is a sublime statement of Mailer's ability to pose elemental questions, the work of a detective attempting to understand the murder of the moon. But the first magazine installment exposes the rough action of an intellect at work, a masterpiece of cultural autopsy surrounded by other stories from that conflicted time. I have that issue of *Life* before me now, its photos grainier than I had remembered, but there, between pages 44 and 45—right inside the Polanski article—I find the curious form of a mummified fly, wings spread, ready for flight, trapped in the ur-amber of the printed page, the resin of events fifty years past. Mailer wanted to be all of us, every living being with a soul bad or good alike, but as we read *Moonfire*, we all become Mailer, we all become Aquarius, regardless of our astrological sign. Our DNA, as we read, becomes entwined to transcend biology, the telepathy of reading being that spooky phenomenon that it is. And the moon becomes a thing of archives and memory, artifacts and symbols, the extraordinary ordinary of touch and smell and feel of something from another time, lost perhaps forever in mundanity if we do not capture it, an insect in amber, as Mailer has captured it in *Moonfire*'s crazed and heated words.

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