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Rebecca Blevins Faery

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MOON LANDING: A MEMORY

REBECCA BLEVINS FAERY

To question everything. To remember what it has been forbidden even to mention. To come together telling our stories, to look afresh at, and then to describe for ourselves, the frescoes of the Ice Age, the nudes of "high art," the Minoan seals and figurines, the moon-landscape embossed with the booted print of a male foot, the microscopic virus, the scarred and tortured body of the planet Earth.

—Adrienne Rich

The night is one I remember well. I remember, oddly, even the texture and taste of it, as if it weren't all those years away. A monument night, one of those moments destined to etch themselves into the collective consciousness and to make all of us remember always where we were then and what we were doing. Even who we were at the time.

I was in the mountains of New Hampshire that July in 1969, spending the month in a vacation house perched on a steep hill above a lake. A neighbor and I had brought our toddlers out of the steamy Boston summer to the desolate peace of the countryside. The days were bright and warm, the nights cool and very dark, except for the moon. The men came out from the city on weekends to join us. It was a peaceful time, especially the dense calm of weekdays. With the men away, we didn't cook much. We took the children to the lake in the mornings to swim. They slept in the afternoons, and I read or returned to the lake for solitary swimming, far out in the cold deep water, far past where I could go when my small daughter and son tethered me to the shoreline. After a quick supper, I read to the children, all four of them, for a long time. Then they slept again, and we, the mothers, were released to read or go to bed early. Often I sat outdoors alone on the balcony in the moonlight. The trees were black against the silver of the lake; the face of the moon shone in the lake's surface, caught in all its brightness as in a mirror.

Free of the routine demands of domestic life, our time there seemed looser somehow. But a vacation with four toddlers isn't exactly free of paraphernalia, so the house was cluttered with familiar objects: favorite blankets, dolls, stuffed animals, a stack of diapers for the youngest of the crew, books and books, juice glasses on every table top, popsicle sticks in the ashtrays. Baby toothbrushes, tiny beachcoats and

hairbrushes were everywhere; damp bathing suits draped the balcony rail; Lego rocket ships, matchbox cars and trucks punctuated the floor space. The house was a kind of satellite of the duplex we all shared in Boston. But there was no television, and no telephone. My neighbor and I took turns walking the mile down the dark road to phone the men back home, to say things were fine, and would they please remember to bring two more quilts, a quart of spaghetti sauce from the freezer, and the cough syrup on the shelf in the kids' bedroom. Still, even tied as we were by dependencies of both matter and spirit, the time away seemed like an escape—for me, from the emotional clutter and confused passions of a marriage gone awry. The weeks were a respite, but more, a venture into a space empty of routine associations. It was a time of reflection.

The peaceful scene had a turbulent backdrop. A bitter war waged on the other side of the planet, a war which mirrored the one within my marriage. I was a passionate opponent; in a few weeks the man I had married would leave again, for a second tour of combat duty in that war. Meanwhile, at home, another battle had been waged, this a technological one, a race against the clock to fulfill the promise made by Jack Kennedy as President, that we would land an American spacecraft on the moon before the decade was out. To the amazement of nearly everyone, that hour approached. A fantasy was about to be realized.

It was my turn to trek to the telephone for the mid-week report. Across the distance, my husband answered. "Bring a television set with you when you come," I said. "I want to watch the moon landing."

The night came, and after the spaghetti sauce was wiped off the hands, faces, and shirts of the toddlers, I overruled my husband's order that the children go straight to bed; I insisted that they be allowed to stay up to watch the first human being set foot on the moon. Since my two were to stay up, of course the other two couldn't be put down. So the eight of us sat in the dark room, illumined only by the silver screen of the small portable television. Four of the eight romped and screeched, paused occasionally to stare at the set, then resumed the battle for possession of the wicker basket chair which hung suspended from the ceiling with a chain. I helped all four into the chair at once, hoping the chain would hold, and stood in front to prevent spills, gently swinging them to and fro. The toddlers were overexcited from staying up too late, but overtired too, so were lulled into momentary stillness and silence, huddled together in the chair like puppies in a basket. They stared at the silver blur of the screen. The chair swung gracelessly in an elliptical loop, an orbit of its own.

We waited and waited. At last I gathered my two babies into my lap and wrapped them in pajamas, then held them against me, one in each arm. Feisty even in their drowsiness, they engaged each other in foot combat, sole to small sole, and pushed and kicked for control. Then the moon lander's camera began transmitting: the scene was grainy and jerky, astonishingly primitive, but finally we figured out that we were

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seeing a large boot descend a ladder. The foot fell, and Neil Armstrong's voice came across the great distance: "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." ("Humankind! Humankind!" I cried inside my skull.) The children stared in silence as I tried to tell them what they were seeing. They weren't impressed. They lived in a world where cows jumped over the moon, where the moon was a man with a face, so they were immune to actual wonders. I carried them upstairs to their beds and kissed them to sleep. It only took a minute.

I paused outside the bedroom door, on the indoor balcony which overlooked the large living room, still lit with silver from the screen. The scene was repeated in a reflection in the glass which separated the living room from the outdoors. Standing above the others, separated from them for a moment, I looked out at the fat, full moon shining above the dark trees, its ripe face shining again on the surface of the lake. My throat constricted with wonder, and I walked down the stairs and outside onto the balcony and looked up, wishing I could see dark silhouettes of the ship and tiny men who trod the moon's face with their outsized boots, just to prove it was true. On the other side of the glass sat two friends and a man I once had loved, near me now, yet as far away as the moon.

The moon. Diana, the warlike maiden with her bow and arrows, archetype of the Amazons, the women who amaze. The force of the moon, pulling and pushing the ocean tides, pulling and pushing the tides of my own body. The water of the human body has almost exactly the same saline and mineral content, the same specific gravity, as that of sea water, I had read. We are all creatures of the sea, I thought, but women especially, marking time by the moon's phases. The moon was the cool and quieter light, showing herself at night, offering satellite homage to the gravitational pull of Earth, offering Earth the reflected light from the burning, manly sun. Once a month she effaced herself and hid in shame. But once a month she glowed a full circle of momentary glory. I knew, I thought, what it was to be a satellite, with an orbit defined by someone or something else. I thought I also knew what it must be like to have a boot in your face.

And now the moon was claimed and conquered, or so we thought. The masculine territorial impulse had extended out so far. I thought of my great-grandfather in Tennessee. He had been born in 1881, so had been twenty-two, a man grown, when the Wright brothers had lifted off at Kitty Hawk. Now he was eighty-eight, and undoubtedly was watching that evening as his fellow creatures represented the race in its great adventure. I thought of what his life had spanned. I thought, too, of what his reaction to the moon landing had probably been: a repeated "hunph," half laugh, half grunt of disbelief. If there had been a telephone nearer than a mile down a dark and empty country road, I would have called to tell him how much I loved him. But everything was too far away.

The moon landing, in the next month, faded to a memory in the flurry of departures. The man I had married left, was lifted off to descend once again into the jungles of Vietnam, booted and suited for war. The

ties which had held us together weakened more perceptibly. Within the year, Kent State happened, and the peace march on Washington. And the invasion of Cambodia, which my husband, as his division's operations officer, planned and executed. Alone with my small children, I began to feel stronger, began to imagine a new life for myself in a new sphere, a new kind of space. I almost began to believe I could have an orbit of my own. It was a beginning. And the war wound on, driving a wedge into the heart of the nation, dividing us from each other.

Months after the moon landing, my father told me of a conversation he had had with an old farmer in a peanut field in southside Virginia. "It was a great trick," the man had said. "Those fellers wasn't on the moon. They was in the desert out in Arizona. They just wanted us all to think we had sent men to the moon. Naw, sir. We're stuck right here, stuck right here, and we ain't never gonna get off. Never. Better learn to make the best of it."

But he was wrong. Win or lose, he was wrong.