

THE LIGHT SIDE OF THE MOON BY NORMAN MAILER



Forty years ago, 'Life' magazine dispatched one of the 20th century's greatest writers to witness history being made. In this extract from his epic report on the Apollo 11 moon landings, he describes the unbearable tension – and the unintentional hilarity – of that first giant leap

That night, the walk on the moon had been scheduled to begin long after midnight, so plans had been laid for late moon-watching parties.

But the astronauts, to no one's surprise, were in no mood to sleep, and the moon walk was rescheduled for eight in the evening. Yet, this once, the astronauts were not on time.

Waiting in the movie theatre, the press was in a curious state of mingled celebration and irritation. It was hard not to feel like a fool. They were journalists, not movie critics, and tonight they would be taking notes on the events which transpired upon a video screen. The screen was dark when the voices began, and since it stayed without image for many minutes while one heard the voices of the astronauts working to get ready, a strain developed in the audience. Would the picture ever come on tonight, or had something gone wrong?

Then one learnt from the public affairs officer that the portable life support systems were working – the astronauts were now connected by umbilical tubes to the big white box on their back, that box which could cool them, clear the fog from their helmets, give them oxygen to breathe, and absorb the wastes of their exhalation. But the minutes went by. There was no image on the screen. Oxygen was being used. They had only a few

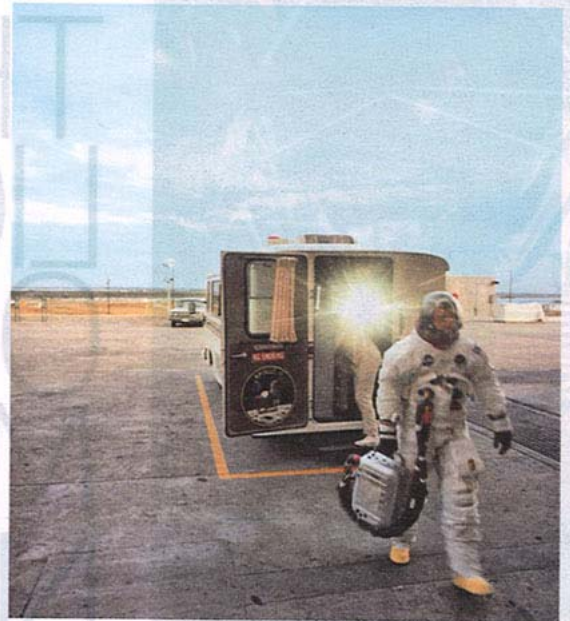
hours of life support in the system – would they be obliged to use it overcoming the difficulties of opening the hatch? Hoots and a hum of restlessness worked through the theatre. The journalists were nervous. That rare hysteria which is generated by an inability to distinguish between the apocalyptic and the absurd was generating. What if – assuming they could actually see something – what if Armstrong were to take a step on the moon and simply disappear? Whatever would one do in this theatre? The event would be a horror to watch if tragedy occurred; yet it would be a humiliation if it all went on schedule.

A cheer not unmingled with mockery came at the announcement at 9.40 in the evening that the hatch was open. Still no image on the screen. Now followed long incomprehensible instructions back and forth, talk of window clanks and water valves, high-gain antenna and glycol pumps. Out of all this, quiet exhortations from Aldrin to Armstrong. Through the words emerged the realisation that Armstrong, made twice bulky by his space suit and the portable life support system on his back, was trying to push through the open hatch of the Lunar Excursion Module (Lem) out onto the small metal porch which led to the ladder which in turn he could descend to the moon ground. It was obviously a very tight fit to get through the hatch.

Norman Mailer, 'MoonFire: The Epic Journey of Apollo 11' is published by TASCHEN in a limited edition of 1,957 copies, each including a framed photographic print signed by Buzz Aldrin; www.taschen.com



Up, up and away The launch site from the air, left; workers in California install electrics in Apollo's Command Module, bottom left; the launch site's blast-proof 'escape bunker', where the crew could retreat in an emergency, below right; and the crew arrives for lift-off, right



As Aldrin gave instructions there was an inevitable suggestion of the kind of dialogue one hears between an obstetrician and a patient in the last minutes before birth.

Aldrin: *Your back is up against the [garbled]. All right, now it's on top of the DSKY. Forward and up, now you've got them, over toward me, straight down, relax a little bit.*

Armstrong: *[Garbled]*
Aldrin: *Neil, you're lined up nicely. Toward me a little bit, OK down, OK, made it clear.*

Armstrong: *To what edge?*
Aldrin: *Move. Here roll to the left. OK, now you're clear. You're lined up on the platform. Put your left foot to the right a little bit. OK that's good. Roll left.*

The press was giggling. Sanctimony at Nasa was a tight seal. A new church, it had been born as a high church. No one took liberties. Now, two of the heroes of Nasa were engaged in an inevitably comic dialogue – one big man giving minute adjustments of position to another. The press giggled.

Armstrong spoke out suddenly. 'OK, Houston, I'm on the porch.'

The audience broke into applause. There was mockery, as if the cavalry had just come galloping down the ridge.

A few minutes went by. Impatience hung in the air. Then a loud bright cheer as a picture came on

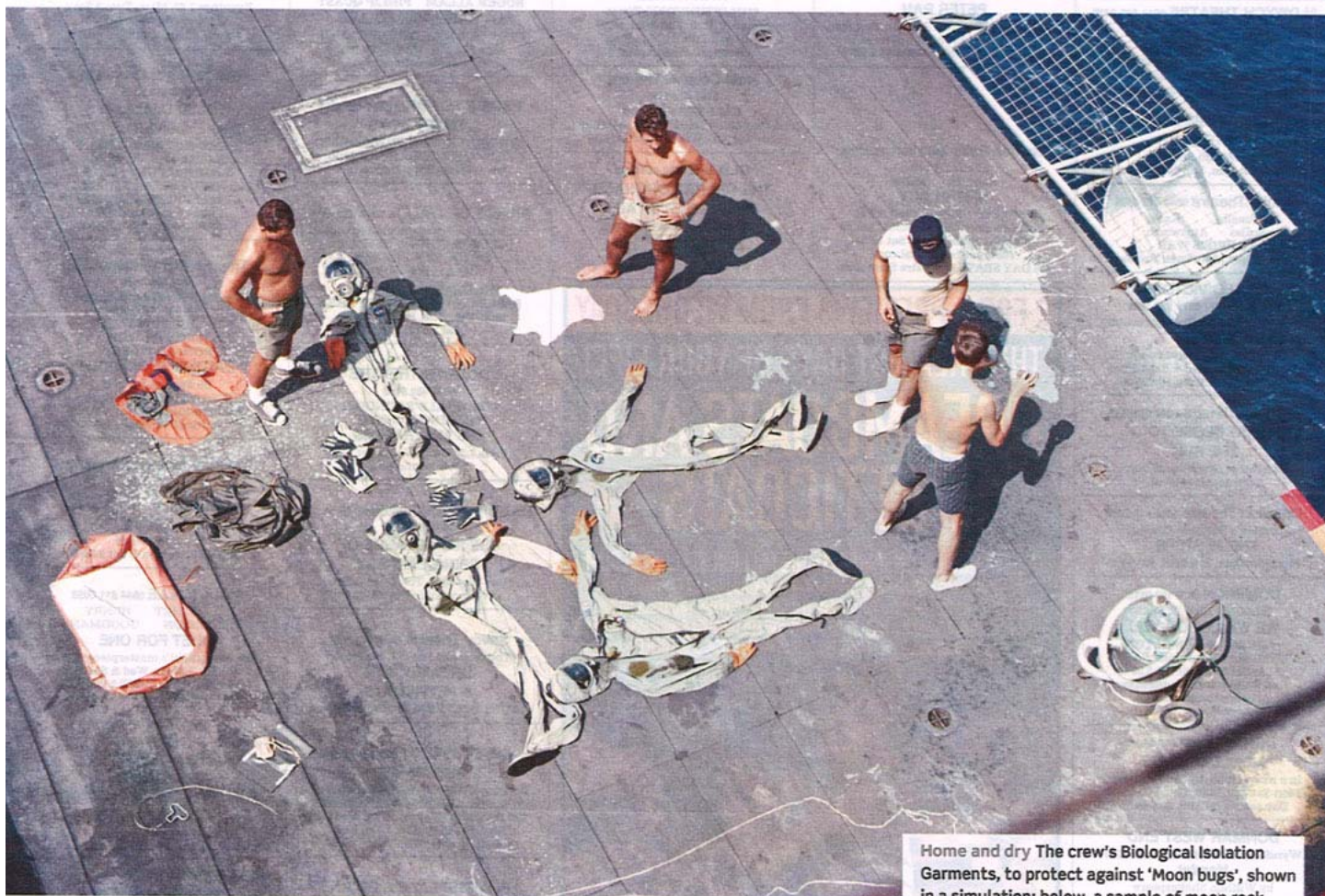
the screen. It was a picture upside-down, blinding in contrast and incomprehensible, perhaps just such a kaleidoscope of shadow and light as a baby might see in the first instants before silver nitrate goes into its eyes. Then, twists and turns of image followed, a huge black cloud resolved itself into the bulk of Armstrong descending the ladder, a view of confusions of objects, some rough-hewn vision of a troglodyte with a huge hump on his back and voices – Armstrong, Aldrin and Capcom – details were being offered of the descent down the ladder. Armstrong stepped off the pad. No one quite heard him say, 'That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind,' nor did anyone quite see him take the step – the television image on the movie screen was beautiful, but still as marvellously abstract as the branches of a tree, or a painting by Franz Kline of black beams on a white background.

None the less, a cheer went up, and a ripple of extraordinary awareness. It was as if the audience felt an unexpected empathy with the sepulchral, as if a man were descending step by step, heartbeat by diminishing heartbeat into the reign of the kingdom of death itself and he was reporting, inch by inch, what his senses disclosed. Everybody listened in profound silence. Irritation was now gone as Armstrong described the fine and powdery substance of the surface: 'I can see the footprints of my boots and the treads in the fine sandy particles.' Every disclosure for these first few minutes would

be a wonder. If it would have been more extraordinary to hear that the moon had taken no imprint in soft powder, or the powder was phosphorescent, still it was also a wonder that the powder of the moon reacted like powder on Earth. A question was at least being answered. If the answer was ordinary, still there was one less question in the lonely spaces of the human mind. In an instant I glimpsed space expanding like the widening pool of an unanswered question. Was that the power behind the force which made technology triumphant in this century? That technology was at least a force which attempted to bring back answers from questions which had been considered to be without answers?

The image was becoming more decipherable. As Armstrong moved away from the ladder in a hesitant loping gait, not unlike the first staggering steps of a just-born calf, he called back to Mission Control, 'No trouble to walk around,' but as if that were too great a liberty to take with the feelings of the moon, he came loping back to the ladder. Activities went on. There were photographs to take, descriptions of the appearance of the rocks, of the character of the sun glare. One of Armstrong's first jobs was to pick up a sample of rock and put it in his pocket. Thus if something unforeseen were to occur, if the unmentionable yak or the Abominable Snowman were to emerge from a

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Home and dry The crew's Biological Isolation Garments, to protect against 'Moon bugs', shown in a simulation; below, a sample of moon rock

crater, if the ground began to rumble, if for any reason they had to re-enter the Lem and take off abruptly, they would then have the chance to return to Earth with at least one rock.

The television image was improving. It was never clear, never did it look any better in quality than a print of the earliest silent movies, but it was eloquent. Ghosts beckoned to ghosts and the surface of the moon looked like a ski slope at night. Fields of a dazzling pale ran into caverns of black and through this field moved the ghost of Armstrong. There were moments when one had the impression it was possible to see through him. His image was transparent.

Aldrin descended the ladder, then jumped back on the lowest rung to test his ability to return to the Lem. The abruptness of the action broke the audience into guffaws again, the superior guffaw a sophisticate gives to a chair creaking too crudely in a horror movie. Now two ghosts paraded about, jogging forward and back, exchanging happy comments on the new nature of hopping and walking, moving faster than a walk but like much-padded toddlers, or overwashed beginners on skis. Sometimes they looked like heavy elderly gentlemen dancing with verve, sometimes the sight of their boots or their gloves, the bend of their backs setting up equipment or reaching for more rocks gave them the look of beasts on hindquarters learning to think, sometimes the image went over



Armstrong and Aldrin moved faster than a walk but like much-padded toddlers. Sometimes they looked like heavy elderly gentlemen dancing with verve

into negative so that they looked black in their suits on a black moon with white hollows, sometimes the image was solarised and became positive and negative at once, images yawing in and out of focus, so the figures seemed to squirt about like one-celled animals beneath a slide – all the while, images of the Lem would appear in the background, an odd battered object like some Tartar cooking pot left on a trivet in a Siberian field. It all had the look of the oldest photographs of expeditions to the North Pole – there was something bizarre, touching, splendid and ridiculous all at once, for the feat was immense, but the astronauts looked silly and their functional conversations seemed farcical in the circumstances.

'What did you say, Buzz?'

'I say the rocks are rather slippery.'

Huge guffaws from the audience. When the flag was set up on the moon, the press applauded. The applause continued, grew larger – soon they would be giving the image of the flag a standing ovation. It was perhaps a way of apologising for the laughter before, and the laughter they knew would come again, but the experience was still out of register. A reductive society was witnessing the irreducible. But the irreducible was being presented with faulty technique. At that they could laugh. And did again and again. There were moments when Armstrong and Aldrin might just as well have been Laurel and Hardy in space suits. ☺