

"THE MOON": AN ORIGINAL SHORT STORY  
WITH CRITICAL AFTERWORD

by

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B. A., Wichita State University, 1974

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A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

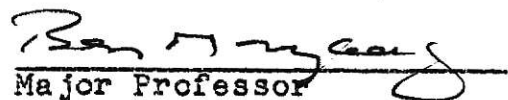
MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1982

Approved by:

  
Major Professor

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It is a steep climb, and the night air is noticeably thinner than down in the city. The rocks have proved too much for Jim Eagleplume's bumbling old Ford, so he has left it parked on the shoulder where the road switchbacks perhaps three miles below. He scrambles in the darkness now. The moon, unable to pierce the tree-cover, is no use to him.<sup>5</sup> He has left the remains of the road and taken the steep but relatively even slope of rocky soil which, for all its perilous crumbling, at least has trees to hold on to. There must be an access road, he knows, certainly smoother and probably even asphalted, that winds gracefully up the other side of the mountain, but in his hurry he has taken this one. He is still in a hurry; the underbrush is tiring him quickly, and he wants to get above treeline to rest. The climbing after that will be moonlit and easier, safer. He pauses only to let the ragged breath wash his lungs until it ebbs a little, then goes on.

The darkness he walks through is so full of pine branches that he has grown almost familiar with the lash of needles and the thump of pine cones in his face. He goes with a permanent squint; probably he could close his eyes altogether. Small twigs have snagged in his long, thick hair. It is pointless to fish them out right now. A heavy dew is rising out of the forest floor and soaking the underbrush of seedlings so he is wet to the waist. Not enough moonlight is getting through the trees to warn him of rotting stumps and tough

vines. He has no idea which way to climb except up. He knows that the observatory is built on the very summit of this small mountain, at about eleven thousand feet. He fears that he will reach a false summit and have to descend to a saddle and climb another ridge to reach the top, wasting time, but there is nothing he can do about it.

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He has thought and thought about it and somewhat understands why he has to climb this hill. He is uncertain whether his reasons would be clear if he explained them to anyone else, and if they were, he wonders whether his reasons would seem enough.

He knows that his mother and father were like two legs upon which he stood on the earth; his place on this planet was justified by them. But when first his father died, and then recently his mother, he found himself miraculously suspended with no ties to this planet other than historical ones, memories.

He has a disturbing static dream some nights. Nothing happens, but he is floating in space between the earth and the moon with no spacecraft. His space suit is connected to the earth by an umbilical hose. He knows how he arrived there, but he is not thinking about that just now, because he has just watched the fierce sun wink out behind the curve of the earth, which has become a thin soft blue circle drawn upon blackness. As he is remembering the instant of the sun's disappearance he becomes aware that the other end of the hose, the end that he supposed was connected to important machinery

on earth, is unexpectedly floating toward him. He can see no light below. Behind him is the full moon.

This dream is no mystery to him. He knows it expresses his feelings about the death of his father and mother. Yet he knows he must belong on the earth, that he is an earthling. It is his effort to understand, somehow, why he is an earthling that is making him climb this hill.

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After another half hour he notices the trees are more sparse. There are openings sometimes fifty feet wide, washed by the chalk-blue moonlight that makes the dew on the grass and the stunted pine seedlings shine sharp against the unspeakably dark skyline above him. In one of these clearings he stops, drawing his breath deeply. His mind is balmed to serenity by his exertion. The air tastes sweet. His gaping mouth smiles. He thinks, I am in some of the most oxygen-starved country for miles around, and yet the earth is lush with life.

He falls and rolls onto his back, giving in to the exhaustion for the moment. His black hair spreads slack around his head upon the grass. Blue light gathers in the curves and sweeps of the hair, making the black deeper, oil-black, iridescent. His thick features, glazed with perspiration, catch the light on their ridges. A single light glints in each of his black pupils.

He looks up into the face of the moon. It is the moon he is climbing up to. His eyes try to drink the light