

Jessica Purdy

The Great Moon Hoax of 1835 *

Back when the moon was still uncharted
we could only imagine it
the way we imagine the future.
The fake astronomer told us
his telescope allowed him to see on the moon's surface
a ring of red hills, a Ruby Colosseum.
Man-bats with copper hair
and transparent wings mated in the open.
Biped beavers held their babies
and had surprisingly well-constructed huts. Fires burned.
There were blue unicorn goats.
The surface was covered in dark red flowers.
They had constructed a sapphire temple
with a roof of yellow metal flames.
And we fell for every last detail, limited by the telescope
and our beliefs on beauty.
We placed the creatures among classes according to skin colors.
We could only use what we knew from eurocentric Earth
and could not hear the Luminarian's language
but believed we could see them speak.

Every good liar has to cover their tracks
and so that fabricated telescope
caught fire from a wrong angle of sun
and our vision of the moon was lost.
134 years later when the astronaut's boot
connected with that dusty surface
it was like no place we'd dreamed:
sand and rock, craters and slopes,
gray as plaster of paris, devoid of life and gravity
but no less beautiful for what we had been through to get there.

*Note on subject matter:

“Throughout the final week of August 1835, a long article appeared in serial form on the front page of the New York Sun. It bore the headline:

GREAT ASTRONOMICAL DISCOVERIES
LATELY MADE
BY SIR JOHN HERSCHEL, L.L.D. F.R.S. &c.

At the Cape of Good Hope

[From Supplement to the Edinburgh Journal of Science]

The article started by triumphantly listing a series of stunning astronomical breakthroughs the famous British astronomer, Sir John Herschel, had made "by means of a telescope of vast dimensions and an entirely new principle." Herschel, the article declared, had established a "new theory of cometary phenomena"; he had discovered planets in other solar systems; and he had "solved or corrected nearly every leading problem of mathematical astronomy." Then, almost as if it were an afterthought, the article revealed Herschel's final, stunning achievement. He had discovered life on the moon." —The Museum of Hoaxes

Jessica Purdy teaches Poetry Workshops at Southern New Hampshire University. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Emerson College. Her poems and reviews have appeared in many journals, including *The Plath Poetry Project*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *The Light Ekphrastic*, *SurVision*, *The Wild Word*, *isacoustic*, *Nixes Mate Review*, *Bluestem Magazine*, *The Telephone Game*, *The Tower Journal*, and *The Cafe Review*, among others. Her chapbook, *Learning the Names*, was published in 2015 by Finishing Line Press. Her books *STARLAND* and *Sleep in a Strange House* were both released by Nixes Mate Books consecutively, in 2017 and 2018.