

Practices

Going to  
the Moon

Sally Ashton

**Going to  
the Moon**



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# Going to the Moon

Sally Ashton

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*For Calluna and Fionn, my brightest stars,  
and to the memory of my dad, C. M. Stockard Jr.,  
who taught me wonder*



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CHRISTMAS EVE MORNING, 2022, I get one of those emails that you have to read at least twice to understand. The first sentence, “You’re going to the Moon!” makes no sense. Neither the subject line, “The Polaris Trilogy,” nor the sender’s name rings a bell. Nothing does. I read on, finger hovering over the delete key, my inbox inundated with end-of-the-year “We need your support” emails. This one continues, “Your poem has been accepted and will be published January 2023, in the earthly edition of *The Polaris Trilogy*. It will be sent to the Moon when the NASA flight is launched.” Say . . . what?!

When the news at last registers—a contest I’d entered the previous February—it’s like a shock of pure electricity. Unbelievable! My poem has actually been chosen for the Lunar Codex project.<sup>1</sup> It will actually be going to the actual *Moon*!

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Giddy. What a perfect word for the effervescent emotion flooding me. “I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a schoolboy. I am as giddy as a drunken man. A merry Christmas to everybody! A happy New Year to all the world. Hallo here! Whoop! Hallo!” Scrooge exclaimed another, fictive Christmas nearly two hundred years before, but the feeling rings true. Elation. Amazement. Jubilee! And, really, I’m just sort of stunned. Then I think, who do I tell first?

But wait a minute . . . isn’t the poem they’ve chosen, “4.6 Billion Years,” the same piece recently accepted at an online poetry journal?<sup>2</sup> I click open my submission log. Indeed it is, though my records show that I’d since dutifully withdrawn the piece from consideration at other journals, including from this contest. A frantic search turns up the original contest guidelines specifying previously unpublished work only. Dang. What to do? True, the poem has yet to appear in the journal’s forthcoming issue . . . how evil would it be to withdraw it from them after agreeing to their publication, just to make sure that the poem can—will—go to the Moon?! Surely the other editors might understand? The Moon! I’m an editor; I’d understand. Wouldn’t I?

In a quick response to my query, it turns out they do. The editors not only heartily congratulate me, they also offer to re-publish the poem with acknowledgments if I’d like. That their journal has a policy of occasionally accepting reprints helps. And if they didn’t . . . ? Well, after all, it is the Moon, right, once in a lifetime? My elation soars again. I am going! At least that’s how it feels. When another friend reminds me that my Christmas Eve announcement came the day the iconic “Earthrise” photo was taken in 1968 from out beyond Earth’s gravity, it all seems truly out of this world.

“Will you go to the launch?” another friend asks. Though the possibility hasn’t crossed my mind, now I’m sure I’ll at least look into it.

“Starry-eyed! Over the Moon,” I announce on Facebook. How quickly my disdain for Elon Musk, SpaceX, lunar conquest, the Artemis mission, NASA, space junk, planetary colonization—all of it—vaporizes. The Moon! I even think in exclamation marks, a shared reaction it seems. Friends I tell shriek, gasp *OMG*, or *I got chills*. I get over ninety likes on my post in a few hours, a record for me. “You are one of 30,000 people who have a common and unique distinction amongst 8 billion people!” an engineer friend comments there, “a .000375 percenter.” Astonishing.

Except some cognitive dissonance, or is it my conscience, isn’t so easily quelled. I feel a familiar twist in another good friend’s comment, “I’ll never see the Moon the same way.” Isn’t this what my own fear has been these past few years with the renewed international lunar missions plotting human settlement of the Moon?

There’s no way to whitewash the moment, to justify my abrupt change of heart. An epiphany? Just this. The very thing I deplore I find myself more than eager not only to excuse and do, but to celebrate. My outrage, *who are they to mess up the Moon*, apparently dismissed. In 2024, by way of my prose poem “4.6 Billion Years” etched on nickel discs along with thousands of other literary works from around the world traveling as privately purchased payload alongside NASA’s *Griffin* Mission One lunar lander, I am going there. I’m going to the Moon.

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“Fly Me to the Moon”

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## 4.6 Billion Years

Scrolling down, reading news of the galaxy. The sun will last at most another five billion years when it will run out of fuel, become a red giant incinerating its own planetary system—us. Earth, our moon, our known fellow-planets and their myriad moons, whatever else wanders in interstellar space, vaporized—who cares about the exact science—it's the fact there's a predictable kapow versus an imagined eternal existence. This puts our solar system's lifespan roughly at its midpoint, a point my own life can no longer be said to occupy. Middle-aged galaxy. I'm at the  $2/3$  point at least. Another 30 not-improbable years to go before my own for-sure demise. In planetary years, I'm older than the sun, a good second half of its life still ahead, and Earth's with it, barring incoming asteroid or global self-annihilation. My god, I am older than the sun.



Looking through my binoculars, it's hard to get the Moon to just hold still. Or I should say, it's hard to hold the binoculars steady. A tripod would help. But even with this handheld low-powered pair, I can actually see the irregularities of lunar mountains protrude from what otherwise appears to the naked eye as a crisp circumference. How Galileo must have marveled when he first trained a telescope on what had been known only as a perfectly flat-surfaced Moon. And how that view shocked his world.

There's always something sublime about the encounter, going to the Moon in this manner, easy as it is. Not only seeing the magnified Moon, but simply in standing still, outside, as evening comes on, the air cooling, the fading birdcalls, an anxious dog, the empty palette of sky. The Moon hangs between two telephone wires, as if the telephone pole holds the first bar of night's song. To be alive for this, to feel myself a part.

This is how I've always gone to the Moon, in moments like these, taking the time to notice and observe, with or without binoculars, just paying attention. Feeling Earth turn. Knowing its primal yet companionable presence and that all people share this same Moon, anyone who has ever, ever looked up, pondered its shapeshifting, wondered at its nearness, at its powers, its mysteries, its changeable beauties, whether as citizen, scientist, philosopher, lover, or like me, poet. Or someone who is a little of all these.

You could say that poetry—or writing it—is another way I go to the Moon, but writing seems more like a response, a result of these observations, a different but related practice. For me, the Moon is a source of wonder and awe, gorgeous in any of its phases. That Moon brings me out here in the dark, looking up. That Moon has been the refrain of my going.

Peering at it now, imagining my poem as a miniscule dot on the lunar surface just seems like make-believe, or science fiction. But it's not fiction.

Only twelve humans—all Americans—have made it to the Moon to date, have actually stood on its barren surface, but there is a way in which people have always been going there, right? In the way I've always gone. Since human beginnings, we've been drawn to it like moths to a light in the dark, drawn

as if by its magnetism, like the tides. It's been a transcendent presence, part of our shared human experience. But if people actually get back up there as soon as predicted, you and I could be of the last generations to look at an uninhabited Moon, a Moon without buildings, roads, lights. Without people looking back. What a thought. It makes my moon-watching a practice most urgent and dear.

It's the passing of an era . . . no, that's not right. It's the passing of an *eon*—4.5 billion years from its first formation—when the Moon, our satellite, once luminous god, once a distant object, becomes an actual destination. It will be changed. And my poem will be going too, a part of the change. Surreal.

It's getting cold out. I prop my binoculars against the top of the front gate for a last long look. Though knowing how my nights go, I'm confident I'll see it later, gazing back through my bedroom window.



“A Time Capsule of Human Creativity, Stored in the Sky”

—J. D. Biersdorfer, *New York Times*, July 27, 2023

My husband, Frank, texts me the article describing this “vast multimedia archive telling a story of the world’s people through creative arts” of which I’ve found myself a part. The Lunar Codex. In the quiet intervening months since I found out my poem would be included, the article at last feels like solid confirmation that the project is for real. Yes, I’ve already purchased several copies of the print anthology, *The Polaris Trilogy*, produced for Earthlings, and handed them round to family members.

Yes, the Lunar Codex website continues to update and now lists my name among the other *Polaris Trilogy* contributors. But after the initial thrill of my poem's inclusion and the brief social media fanfare, the project has felt increasingly abstract and unreal. The silent interim has given me more time to sit with my conflicted feelings. More time to find out what's being planned for the Moon.

US Poet Laureate Ada Limón now has a NASA-sponsored poem headed to one of Jupiter's moons, which allays some of my uneasiness at my own participation—she's a *nature* poet, after all. But the ensuing publicity around her project overshadows somewhat my feeling of accomplishment. Maybe I'm having my own taste of the competition fueling the international race to the Moon.

On the Lunar Codex website's *Polaris Trilogy* section, I do see my name: Sally Ashton (California, USA). I read through the poets listed seeing if I recognize the other US contributors. Though most are unknown to me, I feel like one of the people in the movie *Close Encounters of a Third Kind* who had been chosen for an extraterrestrial visitation. Though strangers, each had been changed and somehow connected by that alien enterprise, relieved to find one another. I feel a similar otherworldly bond.



Canadian physicist Samuel Peralta conceived of this project to inspire artists during the bleak months (years!) of COVID-19 lockdown, a project that continues to grow, according to the Lunar Codex website where he mentions that he's always wanted to go to the Moon himself. An award-winning writer of science

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"Fly Me to the Moon"

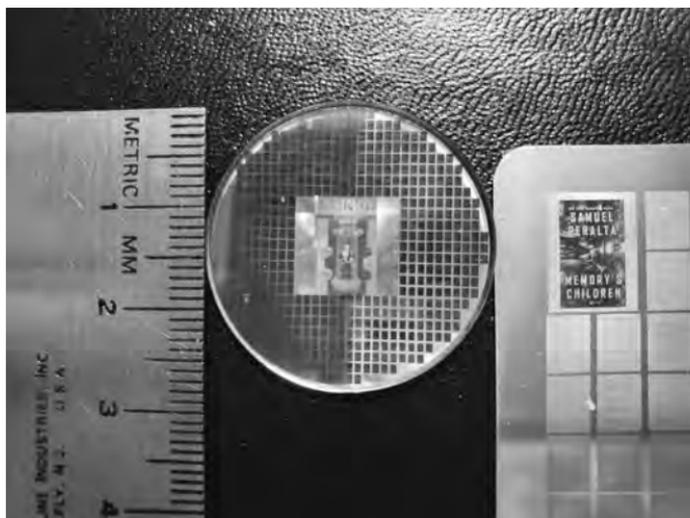
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fiction as well, Peralta's own writings are part of the time capsules, private payload on multiple lunar missions that have partnered with NASA's Artemis program. The Lunar Codex is the first such project to intentionally include art from several groups of people excluded from previous missions. Significantly, it is the first to take the works of women artists to the Moon. All of the diverse artists included are to be "ambassadors from this era to the future." That's something of which I'm definitely proud to be a part.



At the end of the *New York Times* story online, I find the public comments section, since closed. The thirteen comments left there offer scathing disapproval of the project and are harshly judgmental, ranging from *crazy*, *an insult*, dismissive of the curatorial process as well as the art itself: *space junk*, *silly*, *astronomically incorrect*, and an emphatic *Hubris*. Most comments frame themselves in apocalyptic concerns for the survival of our own planet, rendering human artifacts in space destructive, ironic, or meaningless. It's rough to be on the receiving end of such emotion-driven critique from internet trolls who trash others in anonymity. I can't help but take it personally, to feel my delight dimmed. But I don't deny that I share such concerns for the survival of our planet. I, too, hate the idea of a colonized Moon and how space industry views it as a commodity, a gold mine.

For Sam Peralta, the Lunar Codex provides a counterbalance and "speaks to the idea that, despite wars and pandemics and climate upheaval, humankind found time to dream, time to create art." It's a lofty ideal and one that reflects our human



Nickel NanoFiche. Courtesy of Lunar Codex.

dilemma, our dueling natures, if you will. Our capacity to create and to destroy. No, it doesn't seem right to simply abandon space to the forces of global governments and space industries. Finding myself—literally—on board the endeavor, one foot on the Moon, my head in the stars, I'm torn, wanting to protect the Moon but so proud to be in the Lunar Codex. The poem is already part of the NanoFiche files.<sup>3</sup> I wouldn't change that.

So this is my story of going to the Moon. Like all stories, it's complicated.

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"Fly Me to the Moon"

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## NOTES

### Chapter 1. “Fly Me to the Moon”

“Fly Me to the Moon”: Lyrics by Bart Howard, 1954. Frank Sinatra’s cover was broadcast back to Earth from a little tape recorder by the Apollo 11 astronauts, the first music on the Moon.

- 1 Samuel Peralta (founder), The Lunar Codex (website), accessed September 1, 2025, <https://www.lunarcodex.com>.
- 2 Sally Ashton, “4.6 Billion Years,” in *Listening to Mars: Poems* (Cornerstone Press, 2024), 44; first published in *The Polaris Trilogy: Poems for the Moon* (Brick Steet Poetry, 2023), 55.
- 3 “About,” Nickel NanoFiche, accessed September 1, 2025, <https://nanofiche.com/about/>.

### Chapter 2. “Moon River”

“Moon River”: Song by Henry Mancini and Johnny Mercer, 1961. Covered by Andy Williams, 1962.

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