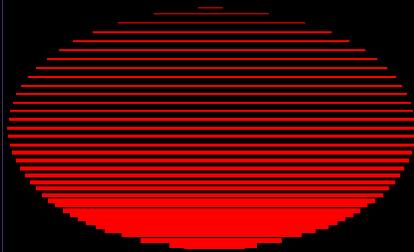


STRANGE



DAYS

ON MARS

A L A N R O B B I N S

# Strange Days on Mars

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On the day in question, I was all done with my errands at around noon. I looked up at the big gold blot in the sky and thought that I could detect the transit of Mars. Mars! That romantic, tragic red planet. How easily I could envision it dashing across the bright disk of the sun, one face demure, the other defiant. And how I wondered what secrets it might hold.

I was wrong of course. You cannot see Mars before the sun; it is a ridiculous notion to begin with. But what do you expect...I'm no astronomer. Just one more dreamer with no errands left.

So I sat down, tapped my fingers on my kneecaps, and reflected. I felt at that moment that my life had reached an apogee. In fact, I was convinced of it, and I even whispered the word to myself as I sat there sunning. But then I realized that I could not actually remember what an apogee was. Was it the same as an epiphany? Or was it more like a watershed? Or was it just one of those fancy-shmancy space terms I had stowed away for no particular reason...words like singularity and quasar and syzygy? What did *any* of them mean anyway?

I guess I was thinking that things were about to change, whatever you want to call it. And I knew that when that happened, danger always lurked. Somewhere I had written down that at the height of despair hope begins, and that midway on life's journey we go astray, and that things have to get worse before they get better, and all that. In other words, you have to watch your step. So I came to the conclusion that that was just what an apogee was all about.

Caution.

But I was wrong about that too, as it turned out.

Still, sitting there that day, I just could not shake the feeling that something momentous — or at least something very peculiar — was in store for me. As usual at times like that, I took out my notebook and read some of the entries: the unexamined life is not worth living for man, *nothe seauton*, be true to the nightmare of your choice.

I had written these down for my job as a professional distiller. You see, I was a sticker writer, the guy who came up the catchy phrases that you can slap onto your bumper. I therefore had a great collection of pithy remarks, notable quotes, and urbane blurbs. But it was really more than a job to me. I believed in these wisdoms, even consulted them for inspiration. So naturally I wrote down “an apogee is what you reach when the errands run out.” Not terribly poetic, but you never know. Some of the best work sounds really dumb at first. Then I closed the book and since nothing else came to mind, used the pencil point to remove some food from between my front teeth. While far above me, in spheres unknown, I continued to imagine Mars darting impishly across the bright noon sky.

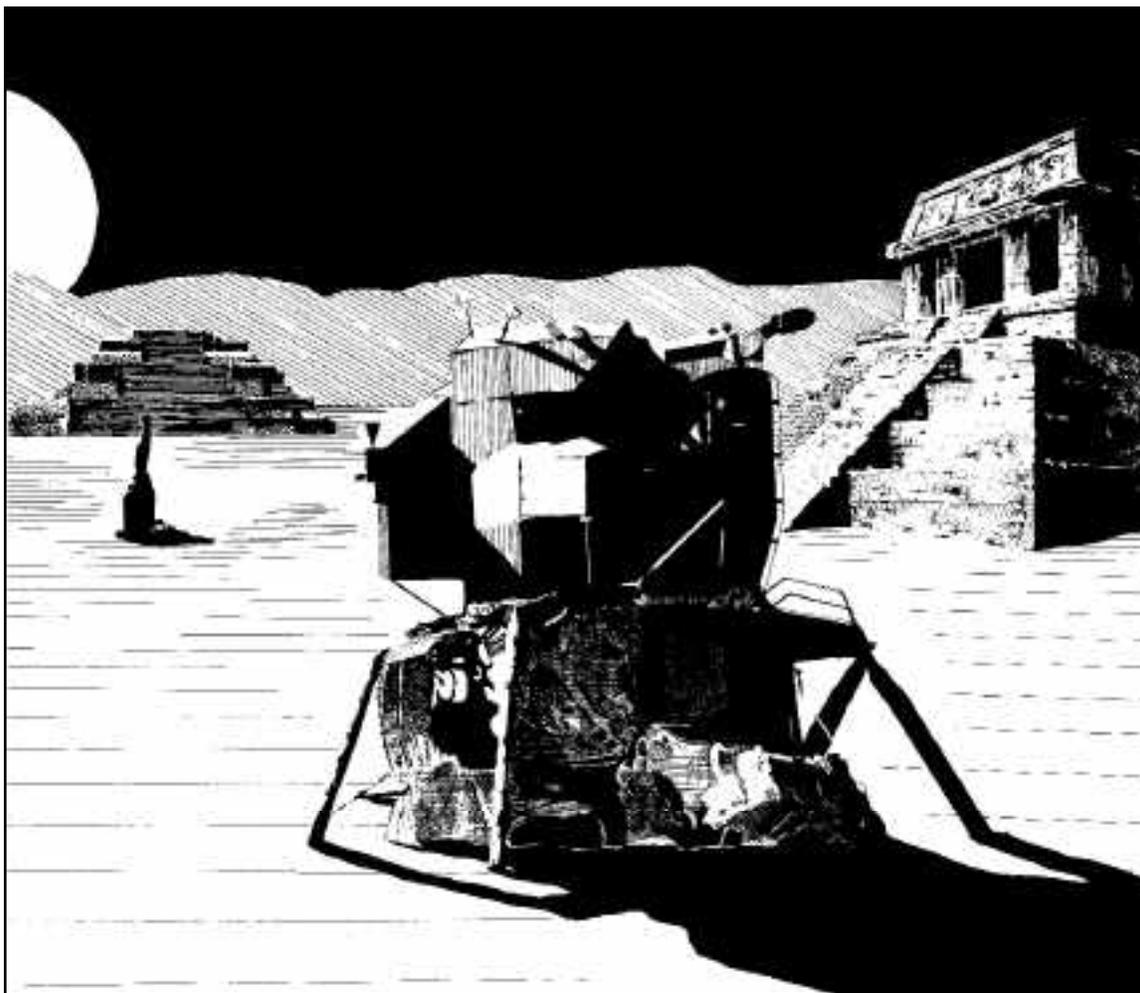
I often spent my lunch hour just like that...reflective, introspective, apogetic (whatever the hell that means). I liked the occasional thinking now and again. And, of course, I was always on the lookout for a great reduction, i.e. sticker phrase. Yes, I thought, let the other fools on the stoop ogle the women and talk about the latest baseball scores; I was much happier sitting there by myself, tapping my kneecaps, and probing into the nature of things, asking the big questions, and compacting it all into snappy tidbits. Dreaming of Mars, dreaming of...



One time I almost dislocated my patella trying to squeeze Unamuno's Theory of Tragedy into a single sentence...but I guess that is another story.

In any case, on this one particular day, as the sun dashed blonde hoops across the ha-ha (sorry, I guess I am not really much of a wordsmith) I began to turn inward, to consider the kind of person I had become. You know...what I was doing, where I was going, and above all, why I had come to this one apogee at this one point.

But when I closed my eyes to take a break from all that thinking, an unusual feeling came over me. Maybe it was from the heat of the sun or the fact that I had not actually finished my lunch. Or maybe it was lead poisoning from picking my teeth with the pencil tip... although I knew very well that they only used graphite. Nonetheless, something certainly happened right there. Something quite bizarre. I cannot say that it wasn't the result of the verbal swirl (or swill) that I had unwittingly created. It was certainly a vortex of some kind and I was suddenly caught up in it. I still don't understand the full physics of the thing (not being much of a scientist) but I think that somehow this whole combustion caused a spike in my body temperature relative to the surround until - half-baked, full of hot air and self-inflation - I began to rise into the heat and smoke. Just like a phoenix. Yes. I began to rise and rise and rise into the wispy layers of the atmosphere...



I landed on a distant planet.

At first I was not at all sure exactly which one. Despite the fact that I was no astronaut to speak of, I actually knew my planets pretty well. Mercury, Venus, Earth, etc. But this one was strange and alien, and it confounded my expectations. In addition to which, I had kept my eyes closed for the entire trip, knowing very well, as everyone does, that you can be blinded by staring into the sun. So I had no clues at all, either about the journey or about the destination.

Once I had a chance to look around, however, it hit me like a ton of bricks. There was absolutely no doubt in my mind. This was Mars! Mars...home of my hopes, inn of my intuition. Mars, with its leathery skin, seething ponds, and corrugated mountains. Not the cold planet of the Mariner photos, but Kepler's Mars, Lowell's Mars, the Mars of the midnight oil. In fact, standing there in the middle of a tranquil sea of sand with the earth falling to the horizon, it was quite obvious that it could not be anywhere but Mars.

And yet...

Nothing like this had ever happened to me before and, naturally, a host of new questions arose. To wit: why was I there? What was I expected to do? What force had drawn me? And why in the middle of the week? Questions without answers bobbed to the surface like...surfacing bobs. As before, I found refuge in my book of notes and just so happened upon the following

one: "If God had wanted man to fly he would have given him rockets."

Not much help there. But then again this was a whole new planet, undoubtedly spinning outside the cozy orbit of earthy words. Pretty soon (for someone like myself who is, frankly, not much of an explorer) I put the book away and began to look around. And what a timeless, graceful, rugged place it was. Not at all what you would expect from the old NASA photos. The real Mars exists well beyond our dopey recordings of craters and rocks. No wonder it had captured our imagination for centuries. Mars was where you would go if the rainbows dried up and all the seas turned to ash.

As luck would have it, I had landed not too far from the ruins of an ancient city. Miraculous! Imagine Machu Picchu, the gardens of Babylon, and Milwaukee in a blender and you would have nothing of the glorious Martian past. This was a city built by a race that coveted truth, a city of open colonnades and vast markets. I wandered around in those ruins for many hours, kicking up marsdust in gray muffs like rabbits, then following the rabbits like a drunk in a hall of mirrors. Smack in the center of this great dead metropolis was a tall stele covered in strange glyphs. It was a wall of tongues, and a challenge right from the start. I was thrilled. Just what I needed to get my mind off myself, and so I set to work in an attempt to decipher it.

The marks on the stone were definitely not terran. Not Mayan or Demotic or Runic or anything like that. These were somehow more deliberate, more yearning, and I spent the whole first day trying to decode them. I wrote notes like a mad little monkey, drew on everything that I knew about ciphers and codes (not much of course) and I tried to remember precisely how Champollion had cracked the Rosetta Stone. But all to no avail.



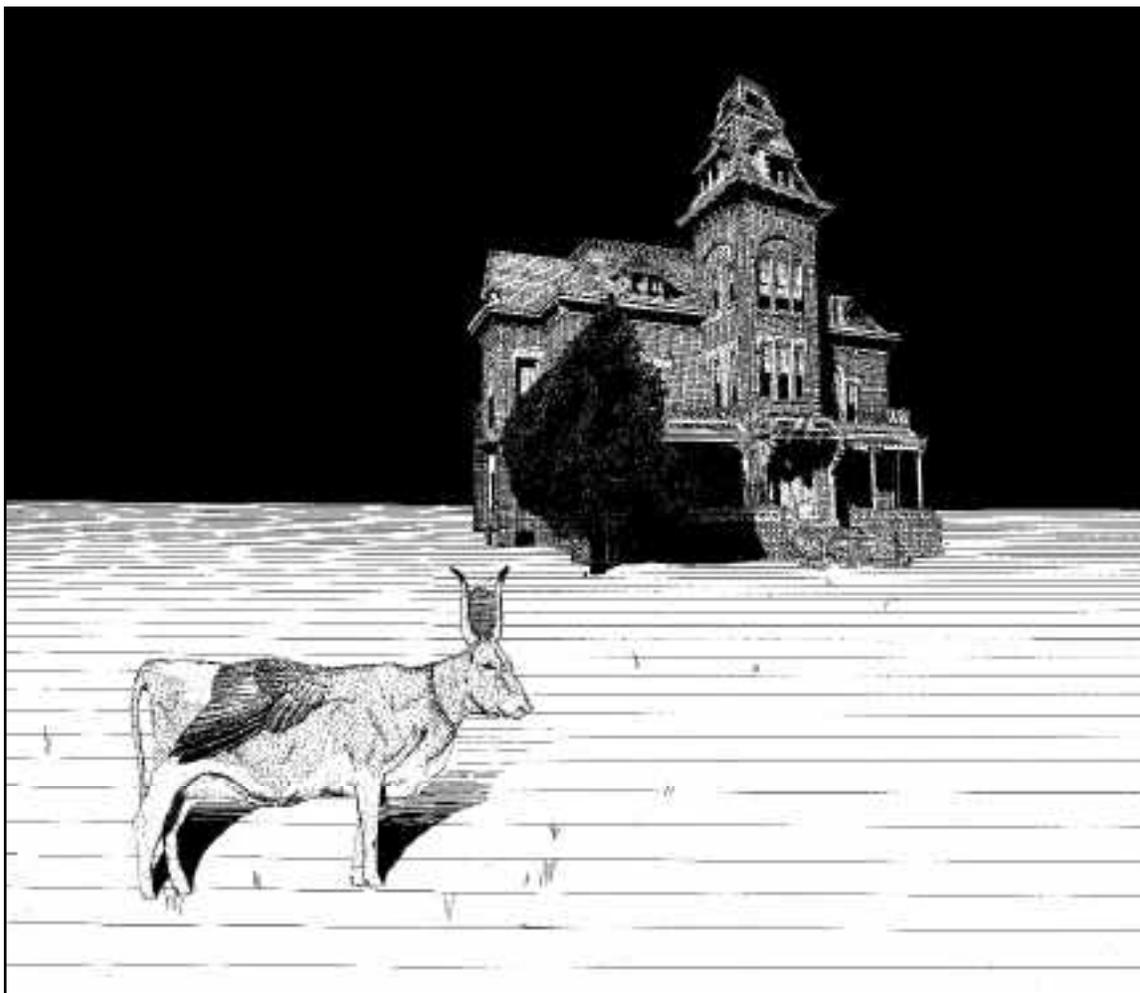
What I ended up with was indecipherable even to me. I was finally forced to conclude that the signs were not prehistoric word pictures, not letters of a long dead alphabet, not ancient symbols for syllables, nor even decorations from a forgotten past. Not simply a dumb tangle of curls and whirls, but no nitpicky list of warehoused food either. Instead they meant something else, something far more...menacing.

Yet even after my great failed effort, it seemed to me that this stone with its weird marks was a gateway of some sort. And, of course, in my notebook, as you can well imagine, I found a whole page of suitable sticker ideas that might apply: this way in, abandon all hope ye who enter, open sesame, enter not unless you know geometry, trespassers will be shot on sight, whites only, do not pass go, and so on.

Could the writing have been something like that...a warning, riddle, or password? Did it mean anything at all? And then again, what did meaning mean, and whatever it did or did not mean, who cared?

Can you believe it? There I was, perhaps the first and last man on Mars, the sudden unexpected cosmic cowboy, and all it meant was that I was stuck again, stuck in my usual verbal loop-de-do on a new terrain. My old chronic paralysis of thought...even there on the red planet!

How pathetic. Imagine me traveling all that way only to find a mirror to my own inane familiarity. But little did I know that this brief passing insight was actually the key that I had been searching for. For as this realization formed, I was slowly being enveloped by a long shadow, a dim penumbra in the celestial light, the shape of which was ominously familiar...



**I**t was getting cold. Night was beginning to shiver up from the dark ground. And the bright fluffs of vegetation began to mistify, to turn transparent and buoyant, and drift into the ether. Night on Mars is no simple descent or creep or fall...it blows right through you like a sense of deep regret.

I left the ruined city and, after a long hike, found the ideal place to stay for the night. It was a cozy little spot with a perfect view of the Martian rim. As the sun began its lateral eclipse, I gazed out the window of my room and watched the diurnal mammals turn into night ice. In spite of their alien nature, some of these were as familiar as daydreams of a lost tomorrow.

Despite its great distance from home, the room I was in had just enough objects from my childhood to keep me sane. A blanket with silky edges, a table with a brass lamp, a bicycle with a tear in the seat, a dog-eared copy of *Siddhartha*. That sort of thing. My mind wandered as I ran my finger along the lumpy overpaint on the sill and watched Alpha Centauri flicker. What might happen next in this odd venture? Who had been there before me and why? Are intellect and emotion truly opposite? And which came first...mind or matter, spirit or substance, the chicken, the egg?

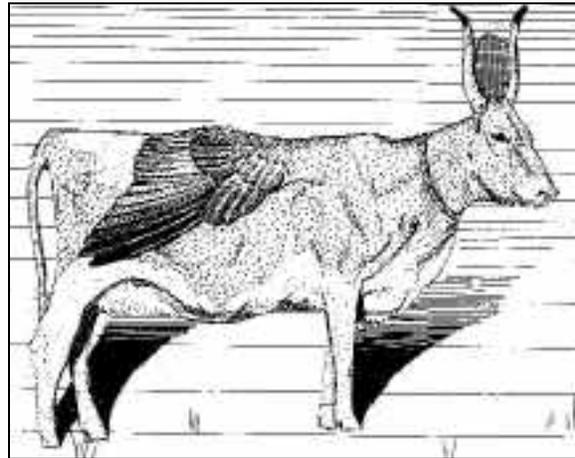
My eyelids began to droop as the lazy cracklets in the ceiling paint started to remind me of a relief map of Kansas I had when I was nine. The room was warm, the echoes muffled. Drifting,

I thought that it really *is* all riddles within riddles, riddles without answers, answers without questions, questions...

Asleep, I dreamt that I had discovered a new kind of astrology. Not the old bugaboo of fates and futures but instead a scientific theory of startouched influences, of how dents in the space/time continuum resulting from cosmic mass affected emotions, relationships, loves and quarrels, touches, lies, angers and the like.

In my dozing mind's eye I imagined a golden astrolabe of the passions, cosmic graphs of affection and revenge, interwoven charts of starfields and feelings that could predict (given a large enough sample, of course) the course of love, sex, and romance for hundreds of years. Thousands even. I am no genius as you may have guessed, but upon waking I thought this idea was really hot stuff. Body Chemistry it used to be called, but that was back in the dark ages. This was the age of information and I had the benefits of neuro-anatomy and string theory. So I decided to lay it all out in my notebook, along with a list of topics for further investigation... metric tensors and the instincts, pulsars and personalities, gravity waves and heart throbs, S-matrices and the psychosexual stages! This was definitely a worthwhile endeavor, and the sudden appearance of a meteor shower like fireworks in the Western sky did not hamper my excitement.

Perhaps here was the answer I had been searching for...the reason I was drawn to Mars. Maybe even the purpose to which I was born! I mean, why not me? I had always liked upshots and inklings. I was already a compulsive note taker, and had certainly collected enough wise sayings to fill an entire wiseacre. All I needed was some time to myself and a decent pad of paper and I very well *could* be the one to figure out what's what...why we feel the way we do, why we can't seem to get along and, above all, why life is so godawful complicated.

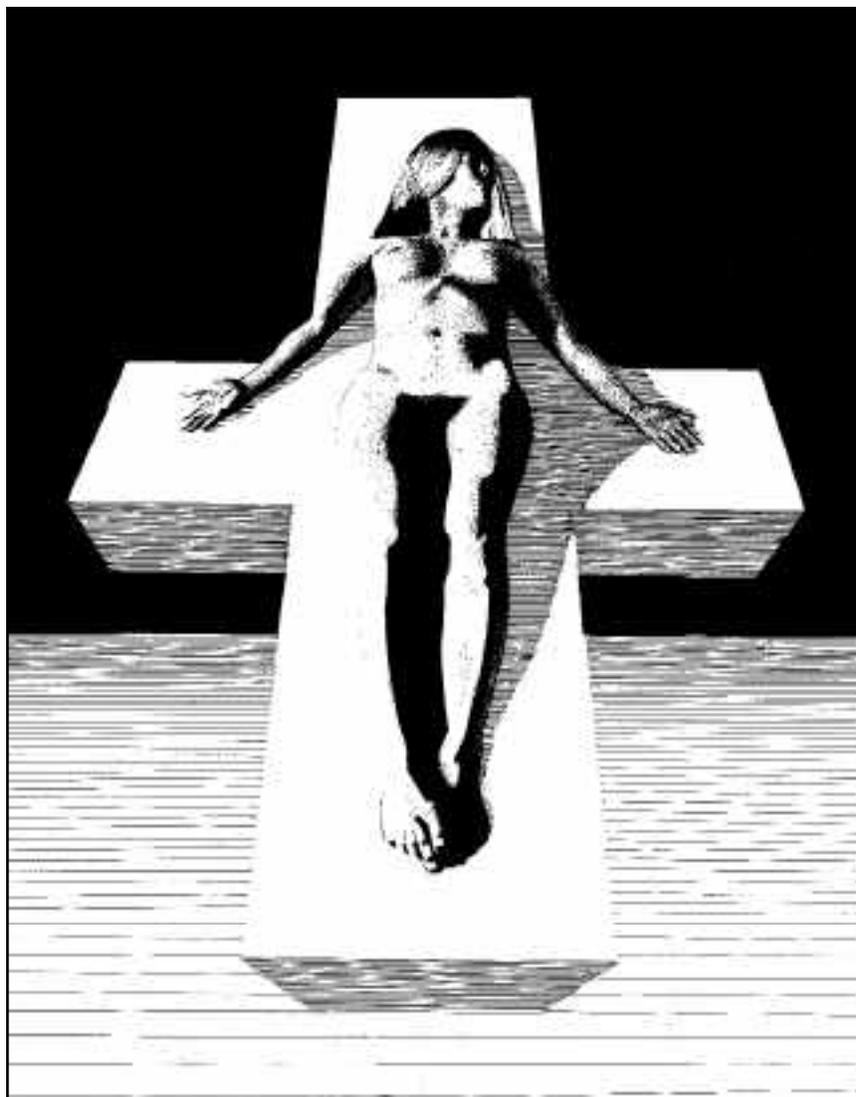


Of course, I knew that I would have to do a lot more reading up on stuff to figure out just where my new theory of Emotional Alchemy might fit in. Feynmann, Piaget, Gell-Mann, Heisenberg, Jung...the usual suspects. Research first, then amass the data, study the patterns, extract principles, postulate rules. Write a book, appear on Oprah. Easy as pi. Of course even as the night filled up with foamy trails like a cloud chamber, I understood that it was not yet at all clear how my idea meshed with true science. How, for example, to make sure that the theory was valid, testable, and reliable. Maybe I could even invent a new language of analysis...like a kind of affective calculus. The notation for a quantum poetry? I thought that maybe those strange runes I had seen the day before on the stone slab were perhaps...

As you may have already surmised, I am not exactly in the dictionary under the word Hotshot. But I do know a good opportunity when I see one. Besides I thought - and here is where a distance of 35 million miles can give you some perspective - someone had to come up with some answers before the world went hurtling into the whorl. Or something like that. And why not me?

Unfortunately, when I opened the book to write all these ideas down, there was something already written on that page. It was another one of my sticker quotes and it said: "searching for answers is like riding a cow in search of a cow."

I had no idea then or now what that meant. But something about it really threw me off...



One thing I found pretty early on in the adventure - through clues all over the city - is that the Martians really don't suffer over relationships the way we do. And you have to hand it to them. They have evolved way beyond that kind of emotional Mobius trip. And from all indications, they did it by adopting a disarmingly simple method. A method, I might add, that seems to have escaped us on earth with all our fretting and fussing. They simply don't have any relationships and that's that. So obvious, yet so elusive.

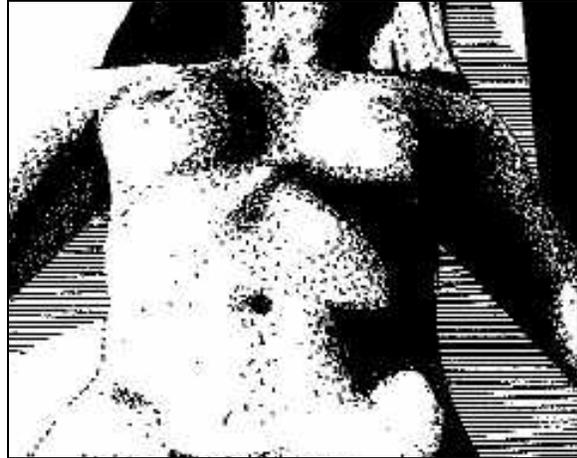
I, on the other hand, (and I wonder why it is always *I* who is on the other hand!) continue to plague myself with all my failures. Memories of women I have known or that I haven't known, or wanted to know or didn't know well enough. Knew only too well. Like the one who kissed me in the museum and then refused to make love later that night. Or the one on the train with the pointy chin and the charcoal eyes who seemed so soft and seductive but who abruptly got off at Ronkonkoma before I could even say a single word. And what about the one with the perfect breasts who didn't even utter a sigh when I broke up with her. Oh yes, and let us not forget the one who kept saying "Are you finished yet?"

Poignant rehash all this, but it does seem to apply. I am sure the Martians (if they were ever kind enough to show their faces and comment on my human predicament) would be sympathetic. Or at least gracious. Or just interested?

I read somewhere that relationships on Mercury only last seven nanoseconds...and still they have marriage counselors! So I ask you, just what is it about love that is so universally unruly? Countless millennia of poets, philosophers, writers, psychologists (in all eleven dimensions) and still no clue as to what is going on. Except here on Mars, of course, where the air is thick with a refreshing dispassion. I could learn to love this place.

Back on earth the popular pap was that men were from Mars and women were from Venus. Well let me tell you something...one trip to the ruddy planet dispenses with that bunk once and for all. It is just not that damn simple. You can travel from here to the Great Ort Cloud and no one but no one has figured out whether to leave the toilet seat up or down.

Love. On earth the word was a kind of mantra for the feeble masses. All you need is love, love makes the world go round, love is a many splendored thing. I alone had pages and pages on it. (As a side note, they were some of the bestselling stickers ever, but that is little consolation now.) What about the meat of the matter, the jing behind the jingle? I am talking about the harsh realities of love. Like the struggle to be committed but also independent. The endless battle between loving and caring on one side, and freedom and impulse on the other. Or the hapless effort to be a good man at the same time as being my own man? Could these ever be resolved? Not to even mention all the lunatics who love someone to death.

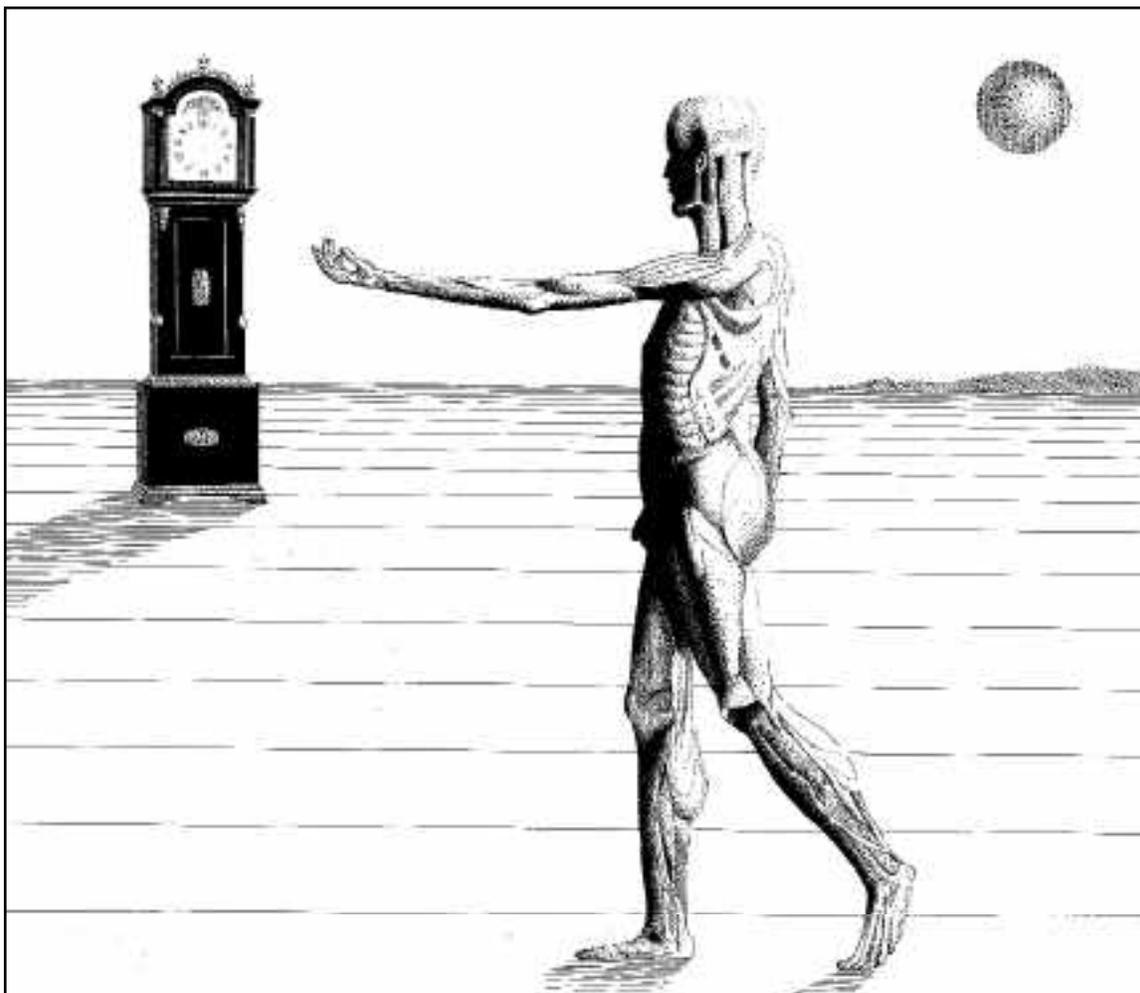


I hate to say it, but I was really a bit of an expert on the subject, having spent countless hours trying to tell women what I thought they thought I thought they wanted to hear. To not much effect I can tell you. If the expanding universe ever does begin to collapse, it will not be because of the limits of inertia. It will be because *love* sucked it into a compact nothingness, believe me.

The second day passed quickly, without any new discoveries on my part. The land near the Long Dull Desert turned out to be quite barren, as I might have guessed from its name had I not been so preoccupied. Still, as I stood there watching the cattails dissolve into an evening vapor, I came to the conclusion that intimacy and selfishness could *never* be balanced. Romance was a scam, love a scheme. And suddenly I felt pretty damn good about having left G. and being on my own again. No demands. No chains. No buying skim milk on the way home. No going to her parent's house for the holidays and trying not to knock over one of the crystal vases. Oh excuse me...*valzes*. Yes, a free man, that is what I was. Planetary traveler, raconteur, investigator. And it was the right thing to be. I had my life back. Women were starting to notice me again. My lust was swelling. Hey, I was even on Mars watching Phobos glitter on a velvet tableau. Me!

When I got back home, I decided, I would go ahead and buy that rakish leather jacket I had seen. I would approach the woman from Sales with the ankle chain and actually say something to her. Maybe even take up cigar smoking again and go out for a night with the boys. It all sounded fine, even better as night came and the landscape vanished like breath on a frosty pane.

But lying there under the vast cold canopy of the stars, when I recalled the rich sugary smell of her skin against the smooth white linen...



**O**n the morning of my third day (had it really been that long already?) I overslept and woke up a bit more confused than usual. At first I thought that I was late for an audition and began to frantically get dressed. Then I forgot what year it was. And finally, having calmed myself down, I ripped my jacket pocket while fumbling for my keys. In other words, it was not what you would call a good start to the day.

Funny how these things work out. Thanks to the bizarre manner of my unexpected departure, I had my house keys but had forgotten to bring my watch. And I must say that once I realized that, it became a bit of an obsession since it is virtually impossible to tell what time it is here. You see time itself poses some rather intriguing problems on the clockless world of Mars. Time on Mars is evanescent, like a secret whispered in a cathedral. In the first place, it is absolutely impossible to tell whether it flows, flies by, passes, creeps, or crawls. You cannot even say whether it is relative, absolute, or willy-nilly here (apologies to Newton, Einstein, Bergson, Bohr, and the others). For there is no arrow of time and no direction to it. No seconds, minutes, hours. No duration. And after three days of utter regret and self-involvement, I think I can say with absolute conviction that time on Mars does not heal all wounds.

I know what you are thinking, having heard it all before, especially from that quack of a doctor they made me see. You're thinking that all this rumination about time is just a deflection

from the real issue. I can't resolve my conflicts over G. and am therefore focusing on things over which I have no influence. Blah blah blah blah.

And you may be right. But as I wandered across Schiaparelli's Canals - which by the way are not real canals but mere scratches on the frail dermis of Mars - I thought to myself...so what? How many breakthroughs were the result of breakups? Maybe all theories resulted from failed romances. Nothing to be ashamed of, assuming that it led to something important...

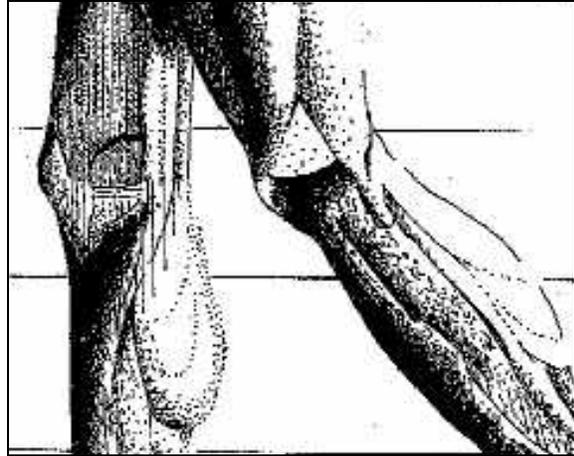
In any case, here is what I eventually came up with.

It seems to me (at least it made good sense in the refined airlessness of the fourth planet) that all theories of time are based on punctuation...periodic, elliptic, commaic, colonic, hyphenated. Time is just a way of keeping track of the pauses between events. Like the spaces between the stepping stones in a garden that control your pace through the foliage. Time is there to help us keep a grip on the momentary tempo. Without it there would be no way to tell the here and now from the where or when. It was invented simply to keep everything from happening all at once. Of course, you might retort that whatever is happening *is* happening all at once. But that just hints at the sparkling paradoxes of time.

I had the first hint of this back home when I became aware of this constant ticking going on. I once saw an ear doctor about it and he diagnosed tinnitus and gave me a muscle relaxant. But it didn't go away. In fact, I never really got rid of it. Tick, tick, tick...as though moments were somehow being checked off a huge timetable.

To deal with this, and at the suggestion of one of the shrinks (I'm not exactly a picture of mental health, you may as well know), I started to practice some self-therapy. I tried to hold on to my sensations for as long as possible. The idea was to concentrate on my senses, linger on a particular taste or touch. It wasn't easy. You try it. Everything slips away very quickly. The mind kicks in with its watch and its which and its whatayacallit. The second you start thinking about something, you lose the pause and pretty soon all the piles pile up like so many moments lost in time. Moments to lose, seconds to spare and time to waste, kill, keep, make. The Martians, as you can guess, have solved this problem. Big time. No things, no thoughts, no time. Damn nice.

At noon a trace of Jupiter could be seen tempting the solar corona, and I was nowhere near any understanding of anything. I started to accept the notion that all that stuff about time *was* just another diversion, another mirage of the mind to avoid the obvious. A preoccupation without which the looming, blooming world bursts in, forcing one to think about all those angry barbs you wish you hadn't said out of blind rage as you slammed the door on your way out. But perhaps my new science of contact would help me here. Explain a few things that might heal the wound in my own soul, not to sound too deep about it. Conflict, someone once said, only means that you are standing too close. When you can step back and see the whole, the parts don't jar. Mars, with its profound lack of anything, could be a perfect place to do just that. But working out the whole theory could take years, decades, and who can wait that long for enlightenment? Who can muddle through that long? Besides, G. was expecting me to sign the papers this very week...





**F**our days and I had yet to see a single Martian. Yet I could still feel their presence as a kind of chilly restraint. In spite of their obvious timidity, I still believe that you can tell a lot about the inhabitants of this silent planet from their artifacts, castoffs, rubbish, inconsequentials, possibilities. One example...just from the complete lack of any cocktail party items whatsoever - glasses, napkins, toothpicks, and the like -might we logically deduce that the Martians have not bored themselves into oblivion as we have?

Of all the facts attaching to my present situation, perhaps the most astounding is the mere fact that it was *I* who made the trip in the first place. Of all people. I, who cannot even bear going out of the house, let alone out of the city, county, country, planet. Truly, I have always hated traveling, always gotten a urinary infection on the way to the airport, a nervous rash while unpacking. One of my most prolific sticker series reflected just this aversion...stay home at all costs, welcome to the exit, why leave in the first place, and on and on.

Had they bothered to ask me first, I would have not-so-politely told them where they could shove this annoying little escapade. But of course it is too late for that because here I am, on this distant rock, where the gravitational pull is only one third that of the earth's. Which means that you can barely put your foot down, let alone stamp it in anger. Hence, despite all the mythology, the complete lack of war on Mars.

With nothing else to do with my time (pardon the expression) I decided to keep exploring. On my way to witness first-hand the famous Luminous Rubble, my foot hit an irregularity and I fell flat on my face. Doubly humiliating since this happens in slo-mo in the frail pull of the red core. I got up, dusted specks of bronze off my pants, cursed under my breath. I suppose I should think myself lucky for the lack of any audience to magnify the indignity of this fall. Or have they been laughing in silence all along?

Not that I wasn't used to it. It was nothing new really. Even back home I had an embarrassing tendency to bumble and stagger. I would be walking along - preoccupied, as I am sure you can now easily envision - with some dumb obsession or other when suddenly...boom!...nose on the pavement. To be honest, I almost always felt slightly imbalanced, out of whack. Tipsy perhaps. Not like a drunk but like a clown in an eternal stumble between gravity and hilarity. "Watch where you're going," my father used to admonish me. Or sometimes just simply "Watch!"

The good doctor took to calling this habit a defense mechanism. He said I was stopping myself from moving on with my life, from trying things. I was choosing to be confused. And until I learned to take my fate into my own hands and take risks, I would forever tumble. The fool! If he only knew what I was doing now! Hey doc, guess what? I'm up here on Mars! Me, not you. I can see you down there in your dim little office over on 21st Street with the gurgling toilet and the photos of your rotten kids. Can you see me?



Not entirely his fault, I suppose, since self-improvement was a hot topic just before I was whisked away. Not just at the clinic but everywhere you looked. Like all those books that he was always recommending on how to be more productive, grow your psyche, practice creativity, expand your consciousness. I read a few of them too just to get him off my back and, as if in support my utter disdain for them, I completely failed to be improved.

Of course, don't think that I have not considered publishing my own bookpoo on how to live your life. Yes, with nice wide margins and a helpful quote at the beginning of every chapter. I have thought of calling it *Mutter & Die*, but someone told me that title was taken.

Lunch on Mars is a very simple matter...there is no food. And I mean nothing anywhere. Luckily I had stashed an apple on the ship (never mind what ship, it's not important) as I was leaving. As I bounced it in my palm, I naturally thought of Newton and Godel and the search for truth. Is that what I was here to uncover? Truth? What was that? How do you know when something is true? And more important, when something is *not* true? I knew that the opposite of what is false is what is correct. (I'm not an idiot either, thank you very much) But what is the opposite of what is true? The answer, according to my notes, is that the opposite of what is true is what is also true. Great. And here we have the final explanation for the fact that no one can ever agree on anything. Everybody has his or her own truth, all worked out to the nth degree. Like one of those chess matches which can never be played because every possible contingency is preordained from the first to the last, and the outcome of the game is sealed even by the very first move.

But of course, not for the Martians. The Martians don't play games...they live each moment in its stern and harsh authenticity.



**D**ays were passing without number (there are no days here, remember?) and all of this reasoning was exhausting me. So somewhere near the Nemus Pelium I think, (I didn't have a map and if you think I am some kind of cartographer you are sorely mistaken), I found a nice shady spot and went to lie down. Magnetic bugs razed my forehead. A hack of wind shuffled my hair and the grass beneath me hummed gingerly. A ruby cloud momentarily blocked the sun and in the shade I saw - or perhaps only had a vivid dream of - a stampede of wild horses. As they came galloping past me, I could almost smell their sweat, hear their hoarse howls, and feel the tremors through the ground.

Thrilled and out of breath from their erotic presence, I tried to write down everything I had experienced. The thundering sound, the crazed look in the eyes, the hot air billowing through the nostrils, the gleam on the thigh muscles. Not me, the horses! Dream or fact, were they some kind of signal from the dark sea of consciousness? Erotic, iconic, or mythic messengers? And just what was the meaning of a pack of wild horses on Mars?

There it was again...that word. Meaning!! Let me say this flat out that I was getting pretty damn sick of that word. I could just imagine the meager doctor sitting in his chair, tapping that smug mug of his with his finger, and mulling over the *meaning* of my latest outburst. Then arriving at his conclusion and going to make some coffee while I wrestled with his brilliant detective

work. And let us not forget G. analyzing my every move as some kind of personal affront to her needs.

Meaning, meaning, meaning...(please continue chanting this quietly to yourself while I find the nearest rope and hang myself.)

I mean, what do you suppose meaning means anyway? Everyone knows everything is ambiguous, paradoxical, absurd. Art, myth, dreams, love. Truth. The good doctor was not really figuring stuff out, he was just satisfying his own sense of conclusion so he could go home and have his dinner of brisket and potatoes. I told him so in no uncertain terms. His response, predictably, was to simply up my dosage!

This, by the way, was another of the things about me that drove G. to distraction. This ability of mine to think something through to death, to pick at every scabby thought about it, then come to no resolution whatsoever. She always used to accuse me of being a daydreamer. Accuse! She would complain that my head was up in the clouds, that my feet weren't on the ground, that my mind was elsewhere...in other words, that nothing was where it was supposed to be. Therefore, she said that she could never count on me because I was always off on some pie-in-the-sky flyby. The basic space cadet. Before she left me for that bald lawyer, she told me that what she needed was a rock, not a rocketeer. I was hurt, devastated really, but I put that right onto a bumper sticker. It wasn't one of the better ones though.

Anyway, I knew that she was right. I had always been like that, even as a boy. Stargazer, visionary, weirdo. I could never tell the pipe dreams from the pipes and spent most of my time lost in visions of grandeur and havoc, of thrones and bones. And precious little time building racing carts from old orange crates like the others.

But I ask you...was this genius or idiocy? I really don't know anymore. And I certainly could not blame her for her opinion about me...it drove me crazy too. Really crazy. Why else do you think I wound up in that clinic under the care of a second-rate headbender?

One of the things I have learned to most admire about the Martians is their ability to remain detached, unstuck, to move on. To avoid the mire of compulsive thinking, for one thing. In fact, as far as I could tell, they didn't think about anything at all. Ever. What a gift!

Could such a talent rub off on me? Dare I hope that Mars might somehow cure me of the need to know? I only wish that it could. That certain elements in the Martian atmosphere - carbon dioxide, dust, feathers - might stop my screechy idling. Might turn the horses into just horses, G. into just another failed affair, the doctor into some guy with a job.

In the end, did any of this make sense? I couldn't tell because, for the life of me, I couldn't recall the whole line of thought. I had managed to spend the entire day following these irrational trails like an ass in a canyon and ending up back where I started. And when I reread my notes about it...what a mess!

But the irony of the whole thing - the big big laugh about it - is that I really can't stand horses. Not at all. They smell funny, and drool, and look at you with those sidewise eyes until you think you are going to flip out of your mind. I mean...holyyesus!

Horses. I really hate horses!!





**G.** again. Just what was it about her that had stuck? The thick muff of pubic hair that tickled my nose? Those chubby ankles that bulged out of the shoe straps? The yellow tooth you could see when she snickered wide enough? Or the nasty way she used to look at me while I was watching television when she didn't want to? Oddly, even as I went where no one had gone before, I still could not get her off my mind. Not just her physical presence, but her eyes on me. Some kind of strange sense that I was being judged. Judged and found wanting. And now simply waiting to be sentenced.

Although she would never accept it, I actually worshiped her. But she told me that the pedestal I had put her on was actually a chopping block. That was clever, wasn't it? I always liked that about her, that talent for sarcasm. But of course, the matter of what I liked or didn't, didn't matter. She had long ago decided that my problem was low self-esteem. At least she told me that every single chance she got. It explained - to her satisfaction I guess - my total apparent lack of ambition. I tried to tell her that what she saw as laziness was really a complex project on my part...you know, this vast attempt to understand, to figure things out. But she didn't buy it. Neither did the judge. And, unfortunately for me, her analysis was supported by my sad habit of weeping when criticized. But so what. Big deal. What does that prove? You try growing up with a father who can never even remember your name.

Anyway, at that point I had pretty much had it up to here with the whole Self business. Self-confidence, self-esteem, self-assessment. All those books and lectures, tape cassettes, infomercials...all trying to help you find your self, or be true to it, or improve it or whatever.

And just what, I began to wonder so intensely that I was starting to attract attention on the subway, are you supposed to do when you do find your self? Try harder or stop trying so hard? Make plans or stop planning and be spontaneous? Get or lose control? Forge ahead or accept what is? Or everything all at the same time...which as any fool can see is tantamount to not doing anything.

Maybe this was the biggest challenge of all...how to get out of your own way. Case in point: I used to feel (and I told the doc this in no uncertain terms) like someone standing in his own shadow and wondering why it is dark. Think about that. I did, and I thought it said a lot about my mental state. But of course, I wasn't the one trying to revoke my unsupervised weekend pass. You know what he said? He said what he always said when I said something too smart for his own good. He said, "what does that mean?"

What does that mean!

I tried to explain what it meant by ripping a hole the size of small hamsteak in that ugly couch of his, but he still didn't get it. My fault, I'm sure.

I am no philologist (not even certain what one does, come to think of it) but I was starting to get the sense that the whole Self thing was also some kind of scam. The self, the ego, the me, me, me. All pretty vague stuff, don't you think? What I am does not seem to be a thing at all. It is more like a place, a site for thoughts, a center of intention. A location that is always here. How can I fix it if it isn't an *it* to begin with?

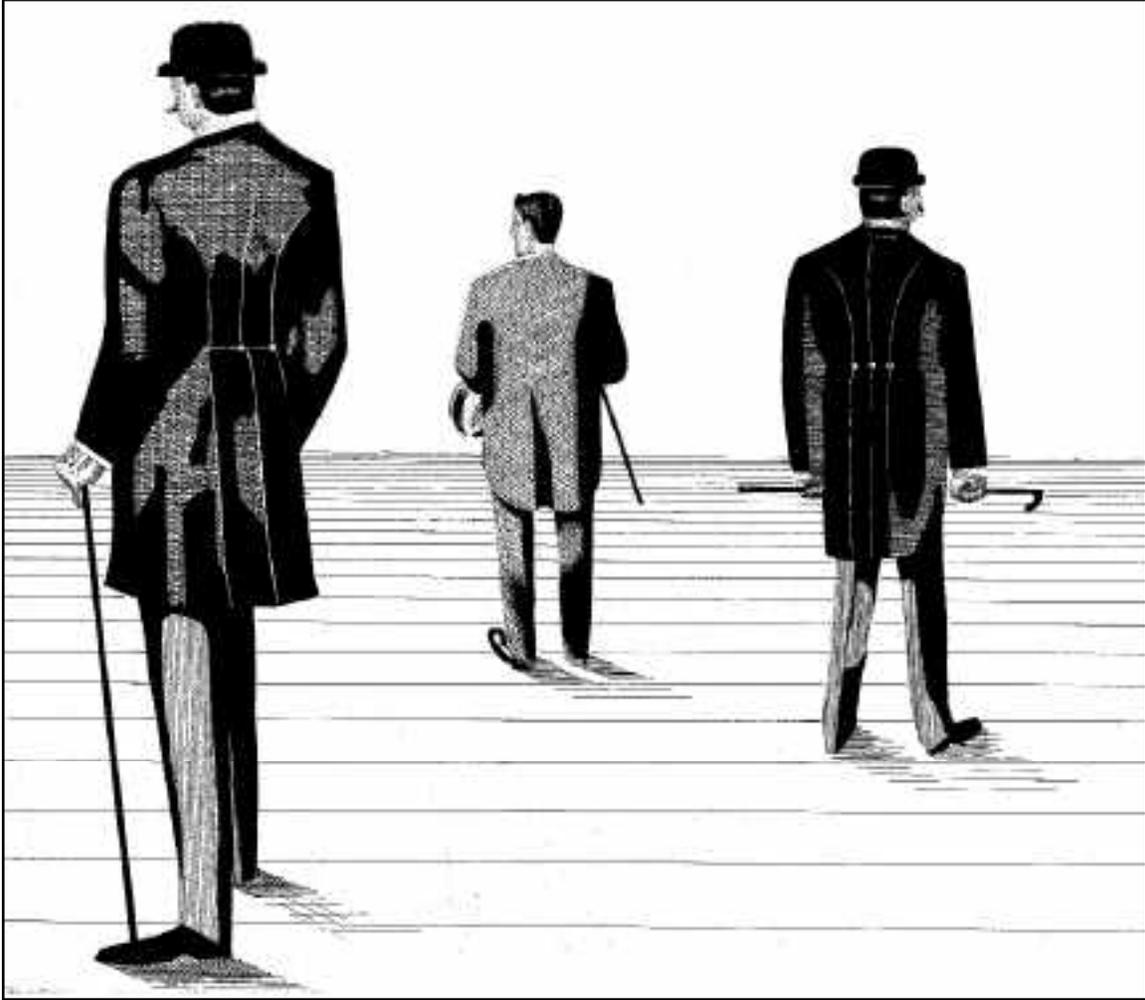
In the notebook, I found the following epigrams: to choose is to be, to be is to do. Then, to be is not to be and to do is to know! From which I conclude that no one - not G. with her bare feet up on the radiator nor the good doctor uncreasing his trouser leg - no one has a damn clue. Everything is just a marketing tool, an idea for sales, an ad concept. Self, time, meaning - and chairs and hope and glass doorknobs and the history of the whole damn world - are all just puffs of smoke in the fog.

Good then, let G. think what she wanted about me, I thought. (But was it any kind of *I* that was doing the thinking, I wondered?) Everything means anything you want it to mean. The horses, the pauses. Even my own precious book of sayings was starting to look like the random ravings of a psycho, the ones who live in the library and wash their feet in the bathroom sink.

Ah, but the Martians! The Martians have solved this riddle too. No wonder their civilization is considered to be light years ahead of ours, their evolution a dash to our crawl. They have no selves to get all esteemed up over. They have no egos to pump, no psyches to stroke. They pass through the world like gamma rays, untouched, undeflected.

I know this may seem like some kind of heresy, but I think that I have honestly grown to love the Martians more than my fellow human beings.





**T**he Martians are truly amazing. For thousands of years - or maybe even hundreds of thousands, hard to say since they don't record history - they have been able to avoid invasion, inspection, testing. Nobody tries to evaluate their tendencies toward neurotic compulsions. No one arrives with truckloads of projective tests to psych them out. No DNA markers. There are no psychiatric social workers on Mars either. I know because I could spot them in an instant with their sappy smiles and their bargain shoes. Nope, none of that here. And the Martians will go on like this for another thousand years, I can promise you. Why? Because they have discovered the secret to tranquility...no consciousness to speak of.

That's the ticket. And how I envy them, since I myself cannot get through a single earth day with that kind of immunity.

Like the time that *il dottore* contrived to find out more about my relationship with my parents and had me draw pictures of a man, a woman, and a house. I knew what he was up to, of course (being nuts not crackers, if you get the difference) and I quickly drew a man with no hands and a huge member hanging down to the floor. And then a woman with a shark's head and talons on her feet. So what do you think happened? The doctor accepted it at face value and doubled up on my sessions! Even when I admitted the ruse, his response was that it made no difference...purposely or innocently it still *meant* something. Meant something! If only I had

his scrawny little neck to keep my hands warm up here for the chilly Martian mornings.

At which point I sat down on a tree stump to take a break, having seen no markers or clues for miles and miles. But there was something odd about it. A rough splinter jabbed me in the buttocks in precisely the same spot as the one on the stump I sat down on three hours earlier. That is when I realized that I had been walking around in circles. Not just for hours but days! The circular reasoning to which I had become addicted had become physical. Real.

In my notebook I found a fitting quotation by the philosopher Giambattista Vico. It said that the second appearance of an event is not science, it is farce. Pretty funny, no? Recurrence, which up to now has had a somber credibility, is really just based on a joke, a double-take, a comic rerun. Ha and double ha! Can't you just imagine it? I could. I could easily imagine a plump and balding god - oddly reminiscent of G.'s new lawyer/ friend perhaps - behind all this. A giggler who is farce-feeding the world its events. God as a comedian playing to an audience that is afraid to laugh.

Just before I entered the clinic - well, before they *sent* me there if the truth be known - I honestly thought that I was on my way towards a kind of vision. I had been studying some of the Eastern religions, reading up on my Schopenhauer and Nietzsche and all that, and anticipating an epiphany. The urinating on the water cooler episode clinched it for me. Why else would any sane person do such a thing? In fact, I began to think that my peculiar behavior of late was not the result of rotting synapses, but rather a psychic breakthrough. Naturally the experts had other ideas about this.



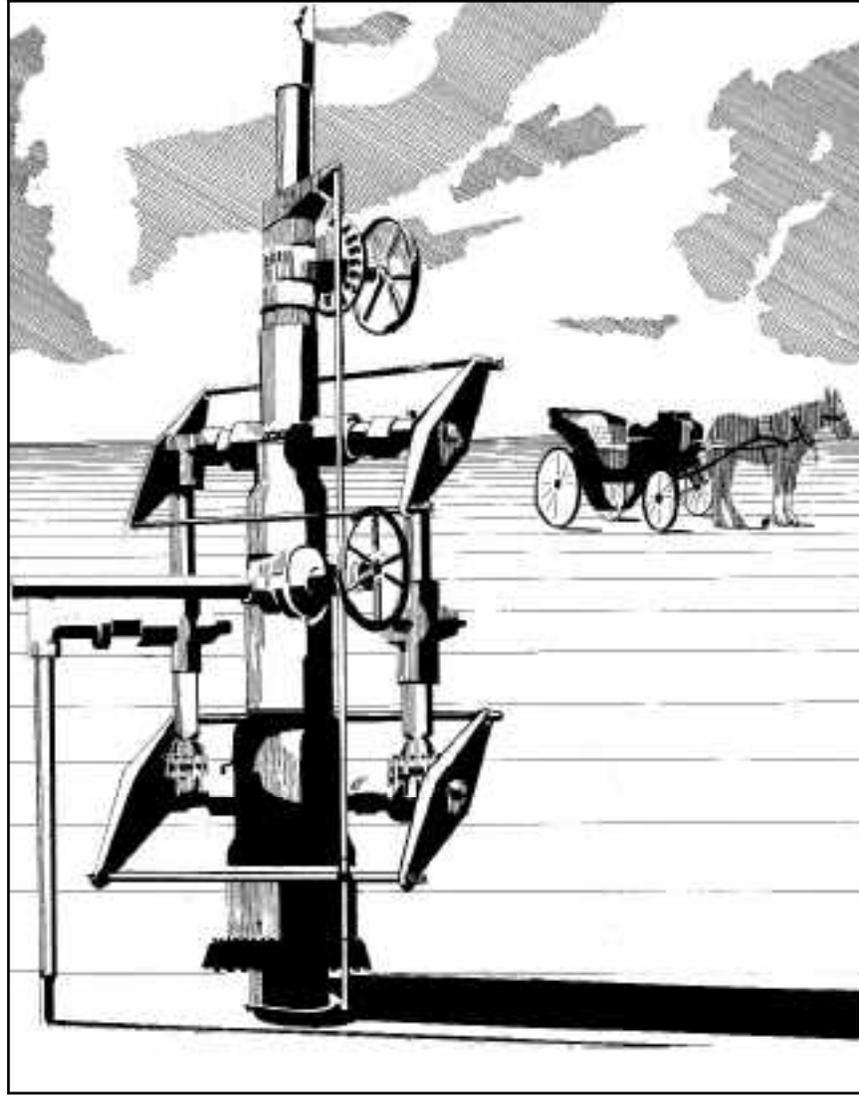
Still, on that stump for the second or third time, and starting to giggle for no known reason, I began to think that true enlightenment must be just getting it...the big fat joke that is. The banana peel of understanding. The snort that is at the center of the universe. This was certainly a new angle for me, the eternal pessimist, as all laws turn out to be nothing but conventions of comedy. Theories, principles, fundamentals, rules...an endless array of hysterical patter. Even my own new science of human contact looked like nothing more than a routine slapstick routine. Vaudeville of the lowbrow heart.

New sticker idea...the perfect recipe for comedy consists of one part eternity, one part banality, mixed with a half truth and a half fudge. Cooked.

From this new perspective I could see the entire cycle of guffaw, almost as if I was outside of it: the hoopla of history, the ring of birth and death and birth, the boom and the reboom of universes, the stuttering footnotes of knowledge and the twisty he-he-helix of thinking and feeling.

So much for explanations. The world was already a cliché, already too familiar for words. A standard standup bit. I threw my head back and howled. All that inane hiccup of activity - the thinking, the screwing, the figuring - and all for what? Just for a joke! Even gravity turns out to be neither a force nor a warp in space/time...but a gag. The great giggler plops apples, fighting to contain the glee.

I saw it all now clear as a Martian day. Nothing mattered but the harharhar. And from somewhere came an eerie, echoing laugh and I soon knew that it was mine. In fact, I became quite unglued and could not stop laughing. Laughed until my belly hurt and the sides of my cheeks rippled with pain. And through the tears I could clearly see the ages of gods, heroes and men spinning giddily into oblivion...



On the way back to my lodging on the following day I happened upon on a strange mechanism. But unlike my other findings, this was no relic. It was an actual working device. A complex concoction of parts, I studied it for a long time and could not quite understand what it was for. But as it made no noise, I finally concluded that it was a gizmo for pumping silence.

Having never finished that engineering degree from MIT (having never even applied, for that matter), I could not tell you how it worked. But my best guess was that it used some kind of coherent high-energy waves to superheat the Martian core and boil it to the surface, where a sophisticated array of valves, cooling pipes, diodes, anechoic chambers, compressors, and so on created a quark-gluon plasma that had sucked the sound out of the air.

(What, who...no air on Mars? Shut up, who asked you?)

Whether this was an ancient mechanism that had been running for ages or a modern invention only recently installed, I could not say. If the first, perhaps it was the very paradoxical device that both killed off the ancestral Martians while also saving them eons of aggravation. If the latter, maybe it was their final innovation before their inevitable melding with the stars. Either way, I took this one machine to be the only explanation for the fact that the Martians had yet to reveal themselves. And probably never would.

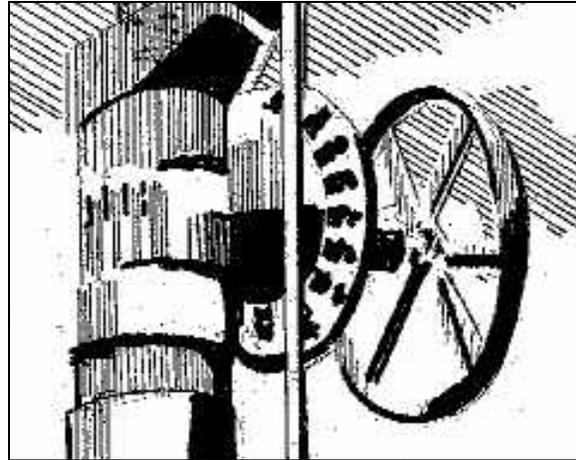
My first thought was to try to bring the thing back to earth, to try to effect the same mar-

velous transformation there that apparently occurred here millennia ago...or yesterday. Imagine, one little gizmo that could wipe out humanity for all time. What a boon! But it proved to be much too big and heavy. There was no manual. And all my efforts to capture its mechanical design wound up looking like a child's bad drawing of bad teeth.

My father would have had a field day with this. He was the one who always insisted that I would never amount to anything. "Can't you do anything right?" he used to say. Not as a jibe...that would have been too easy. Instead there was always that note of sorrow in his tone. As if to suggest an inevitability, a fatefulness. So any failure on my part to make the most of my Mars gambit would have been music to his ears.

Perhaps the happiest day of his life was when he found out that I had dropped out of college. I could almost bask in the radiant joy of his demeanor that said "Thank you son, I'm so happy to be proven right." No, Dad, thank *you* for protecting me from growing up confident. Thank you *so* very much.

The college news became one more thing that the old man could cross off his list. The list, that is, of all the things I never did that he thought I should have. College, Army, dental school. What can I say, I've been busy. One can only do so much. One can only do what one can do. You can't expect everything from yourself. And besides, I haven't exactly been idle. I have been busy reading (and not pump manuals either) and writing in my notebook and thinking and thinking. Isn't that enough? No, it wasn't. Not for him, never for him.



I was getting all worked up - shadowboxing old arguments with Dad and all - when the pump kicked into high gear and a deafening silence reverberated. And then I recalled a previous day's insight. All this - about Dad, and G, and engineering plans - was pure dribble. I had been farce-fed the facts anyway. Bonked on the head by you-know-who-almighty. It wasn't up to me at all! Things happen as they will, there is no changing that. All I can do, all anyone can do, is watch the pattern, pick up the beat, and try to get in a good laugh now and then. Even if it is at your own expense.

Suddenly, I felt okay again. Light-hearted. Fancy free. The heck with Dad, I thought, he had been dead for seventeen years anyway. Time to move on. And ditto for G. Let her have her stupid affairs with high school Latin teachers. Let her run off with a tax attorney. That was her problem, not mine. And as for the mechanism...that was not my concern either. I walked away from it as one might leave a funeral, with a slight bounce in the step. The world simply wasn't ready for barrels of silence!

Like they say on Mars (or at least like *I* say on Mars)...nothing to get upset about. No worries. There is nothing to know, nothing to do. And no one to know or do it.

Perfect.



As the last days of the Martian summer shattered into yellow dust, I knew it was time to leave. I was not thrilled about the idea because there really wasn't anything back on Terra Firma to go home to. Job, therapy, ex-wife. Like I said, nothing. But as a card-carrying fatalist, I accepted the truth of it and so I began to pack my bags. I took no souvenirs, no mementos, as there were none to take. I left only a half-used tube of toothpaste, some stale crackers, and the cryptic word "metronome" on a scrap of paper. Just to give the next sap something to work on.

Then I sat down to write a few final comments about the red planet. I sat and sat and sat, but nothing came. A blob of space debris whizzed through the thin atmosphere and landed in the sand, making a small dent, the way a sneeze can jostle the hair. Still nothing came. It is hard to put what you know into words, especially if you know nothing. And anyway, what else had my entire weird adventure proved but that facts are fictions, language lies, rules are for fools...and therefore clearly that summations are futile.

Language lies.

That reminds me of one of my favorite stickers. It said: "language is a virus from outer space." And I believe it. Call me a Class Four Paranoid with a Deluded Self System, but I was really starting to think that language itself was my biggest problem. Maybe even the world's biggest. It was certainly another media obsession back at home...the language of art, of this, of

symbols, the language of myth, of music. Blather. People could talk until they were blue in the face and all they would get was blue. Which is why the silence pump was so damn appealing. But no, it would never work, even if I could reconstruct it. People were just obsessed with language. Everyone loved the orgy of words, signs and statements up the wazoo. Everyone wanted to be able to read everything, to explain everything, to say everything. And to come up with answers and lay them all out in neat little rows all nouny and verby.

I'll say one thing, and then shut up about it...the language virus did *not* come from Mars. Pluto maybe, which probably does not even exist. But not Mars. Not a word has been spoken here since the Big Bang, which is another way of saying ever, for all practical purposes. The shimmering, glimmering void of deafness...that's why I could not bear to leave. It was so delectable, it could make you swoon.

I don't expect you to understand this. Few people can. But ask yourself, what exactly will there be to do when everything is said? When everything is transcribed, translated, diagrammed and read? When all the meanings are clear as crystal? When Pluto, just to take a recent example, is mathematically proven to be a perturbation in the continuum simply caused by wishful thinking. I'll tell you what...nothing. There will be nothing to do but sit around and wait for the inevitable. But it won't be any old nothing, it will be a commodity achieved at the cost of a dire innocence. Boy would I not mind staying right here on Mars where it is precisely the nothing - but a true and brash nothing - that keeps you honest.

No matter. Already my sense of departure was becoming too intense to ignore. So I quickly scribbled a few final thoughts. Whether they were for a diary or for a sticker I wasn't sure. Fact #1...a fact is a rumor that has not yet been squashed. The only things that are true beyond any shadow of a doubt are the shadows of doubt. (Don't know where I got that from; I sure as hell didn't make it up). But it is true anyway. One day they decided that the earth went around the sun and not the other way around. Okay fine. It makes them happy. Do you believe it? I mean go outside and take a look, for heaven's sake.

You need only to tiptoe through the fine red talc of Mars to become painfully aware that Ptolemy and Copernicus and all the others were dismally wrong. In fact, all the planets and the stars and everything revolve around a great big fat hole in the nonsense, and that's the end of it.

Nonsense, now there's something to believe in. The language of buggie-buggie, of murk. Like that story they tell you in third grade about the dusk dragon that flew and flew too near to the icy moon, which froze its wings, and turned it into a diamond. Fiery but earthbound. The moral? How the hell should I know? All I know for sure is that whatever they say it means, it doesn't.





**A**fter a long trek I came to the edge of the Southern Plateau. This was the jumping off point, so to speak. In spite of the lack of signs (and what else would you expect?) this was clearly the far point of the journey; it did not take a Nobel laureate to sense that there was nowhere else to go but up. The horizon towards which I been heading for all these strange days was no illusion, it really did end at an edge. (Mars is flat as a dime, you know). Standing there with my toes tickling the void, I was finally able to peer over the rim and for the first time see the world beyond Mars. Below I could discern the star clusters spinning off into the great expanse of the infinite cosmos; and above, the earth hanging like a spitball in the deep dark sea of space.

The earth.

Had anything changed much since I was last there? Doubtful. And I didn't even know how much time had elapsed. I mean, I knew that I had been on Mars for seven days, but since time is missing from the planet, what did that mean precisely? And then there was Relativity Theory to contend with. So had moments passed on earth, the wisp of time between a wish and a regret? Had minutes passed, as G. lifted the spoon to her lips and tasted the chamomile just as it slid over her tongue? Hours, days, decades of the doctor sitting and judging? Or perhaps ages, as empires rose and fell and carbon passed to silicon and then to encomium.

I knew that there would be questions when I got back. What was it like, what had I learned, would I go back? How to explain it all to the dimwits who spend their time scurrying about asking dimwit questions? All the compilers and accountants. You can't do it. Mars just cannot be explained to the earthbound. So I decided that if they asked where I had been, I would lie. I would smile and say Duluth. I just did not think the world was ready for Mars. In fact, even in the face of hard evidence (should they manage to find any) I would deny my journey altogether. I would simply slip into some easy patter about baseball scores or the stock market. I would act as though I had been at home all along. Adopt a casual insouciance. I would turn the tables on them and ask where *they* had been, what *they* had discovered. Could I get away with it? If all else failed, there was always one question I could ask that would give the illusion of currency, one question that would always be timely. Who's winning the war? There's always always that.

35 million miles does a lot for one's sense of sorrow.

Of course, secretly I knew that I had in fact discovered a thing or two. Well, maybe only one thing. I was departing with a deep conviction that all answers - all answers everywhere - are lethal. Answers are for small minds. A decent question (as I had been trying to ask on Mars as elsewhere) does not get an answer. The really good questions are just jumping off points for more questions. And the truly *great* questions plant the seeds for a full mind-boggling, consciousness-bibbling psychosis. Answers are too easy. Meaning and words are in cahoots. Be careful, say little. Lie.



At least that is what I plan to say when my case comes up for review. Assuming, of course, many things. That the earth is still there, that it is still the 21st century, and that I still have the legal right to a hearing. I won't admit to the trip to Mars but I'll be perfectly willing to tell them all I know about myself, about the truth, and even about how the Martians fought (continue to fight every single day) to retain their glorious denials.

They would be smart to listen to what I have to say. A fresh view, a new way of seeing things, is always helpful. The old ideas are stale and frail...force, meaning, love, time. Only from a great distance can you see that a new wind is pushing through, carrying all the toxicity out to sea. The time (oh how I have missed its comforting regularity) is right for paradox, for an insane clarity. There were hints that this had already been starting when I left. You know what I mean. Particles are waves, motion is rest, form is function. Mass is energy. The earth is in the heavens and man is an animal. Who would have believed it? Chairs aren't solid. Things are thoughts. God died...but in precisely the sense of a failed comic on a dark stage.

Oh yes, I had plenty to say on the subject, on how to proceed, should they bother to shut up for two seconds and listen. But first, there was a return journey to make. And who knew just what could happen in the interim. A new clarity? A new confusion? Anything at all was possible. I was all tingly with expectation as I closed my eyes and held my breath. I felt the heat rise, and the triumphant lightness draw me up. Then I took one last look back at the broad Martian plane, shook my head in gratitude, and jumped off into the foggy brew...

## About the Author

Alan Robbins is the Janet Estabrook Rogers Professor of Visual and Performing Arts at Kean University in New Jersey where he is also the director of The Design Center, producing unique publications, award-winning online exhibitions, and innovative products.

Professor Robbins is also an award-winning writer and graphic artist. He is the author of 30 mystery science fiction, puzzle, and humor books and the winner of both a New York State CAPS award and a Reader Views Award for Best New Fiction. His essays on technology have appeared in *Newsweek* and *The New York Times*.

His card, board, and computer games – including 25 mystery jigsaw puzzles – have fans nationwide and his cartoons, illustrations, photographs, and graphics have appeared in numerous publications. His channel on Youtube has over 9 million viewers.

All of his work can be seen at [alanrobbins.com](http://alanrobbins.com)