

A Letter from Mars

Good Evening.

I feel I should start with an apology.

This will not be the letter I was asked to write.

When I say apology, I mean of course what in my language we would call an *umdatha* – an expression of regret which carries no obligation on the giver to offer any kind of compensation and no obligation on the receiver to accept the sentiment without argument, though I recognise that as audience – because this is of course a broadcast rather than a real letter – you do not in this instance have much recourse beyond tuning to another station or switching off altogether.

My friend amongst your people, Jack Hughes, is highly amused that there are six hundred and fifty three words for expressing regret in my language. 'You are a sorry people,' he says, and I always say how much I regret the difficulty our subtle differences of meaning seem to cause him.

I do point out that he has told me that, amongst his people, some in the far north have sixty-two different words for snow. 'That is different,' he says. 'When you build your house of snow, it pays to make sure that the builders use the right materials.'

'My people have always built their house on courtesy,' I reply. 'We find it pays to know what type of courtesy is being used.'

It is perhaps less vital now, but within my grandfather's memory it mattered a great deal. Genocidal wars were fought because the incorrect type of apology was mistakenly offered, or thought to have been offered, or was even deliberately offered. It would be wrong of me (*tibils*, as we would say) to overlook this aspect of my people's history, especially as we now appear to have some troublesome groups that would like to go back to those days. And – forgive (in the sense of *iblotsovar*, if you understand my language), forgive the coarseness of the expression, but there is nothing in my own language of such graphic exactitude –

these people will 'beat the shit out of you' if you do not conform to their strict interpretations of the ancient rules of courtesy.

Violence is rarely mindless. There are nearly always rules, even if changing arbitrarily by the second. Injury and death can usually be avoided if you can only find out which rules are in operation at the critical moment.

So.

Already this is not one of the letters I was asked to write – I should explain that a small series has been mooted.

'A guide to the planet,' they said, 'for visitors.'

That set my mind into some confusion. It is not everyday you are commissioned by, well, let me for the moment call them The Committee of the Council. The real name is far too long – a veritable family tree – and the institution is in some need of brevity.

A guide to the planet. Where do you start? But there was a rather more important question first. I will here leave out the preambles defined as the necessary forms of courtesy when addressing members of The Committee of the Council. Let me just say that our discourse did not sound as sharply to the point as what follows, though to those experienced enough to understand our way of governance, it was certainly sharp enough.

'Why me?' I asked.

'First, you are a skilled translator,' was the reply. Well that is true.

'Second, you are a historian, with accredited access to most government as well as public archives.' Also true.

'Third...' there was a pause while the chairman seemed to consider what might be third. 'Third, we trust you.'

The significance of this remark may possibly escape you. As I have said, our people have always built their house on courtesy. Courtesy embraces trust as an unspoken necessity, whether it is real or not, and whether it is the basis for any action or not. Whatever the case, it never needs to be voiced. The subject is

therefore only ever raised when its absence or presence is felt in need of some highlight. I was to have The Committee of the Council watching over my shoulder, and evidently they wanted me to know that.

This not the type of letter I was asked to write. It may also turn out to be the only one of its kind. We shall see.

After an apology, a justification. An excuse, if you like. A guide to the planet for visitors is a fine thing, but if truth is painted over, if unwelcome facts are buried, if in short you do not get to know us in our worst and our mediocre aspects as well as our best, you will kill us.

Omiganza for being so blunt, but there you are. It is true. If you only get to hear the best in us, you will eventually become a little jealous and a little fearful. We will seem better than you, and you will come to think that we think we *are* better than you. There has never been more fertile ground for killing than the thought that someone else thinks they are better than you.

If you only hear our worst aspects, you will be very afraid that we are savages and will kill you without warning and for no reason at all. You will be tempted to strike first against this most obvious threat.

So I hope to enthrall you with our mediocrity. To let our good parts be balanced by our bad and to show you how utterly normal we are. That is not without its dangers. If we seem too much like you, perhaps we will look like immediate competition. Your theory of evolution – and we have something similar ourselves – does not usually allow two close species to stand on the same rung of the ladder for very long. Nor, of course, does it allow two close species to continue climbing at different rates without one becoming subject to the other. Rather awkward, is it not?

How are we to avoid it appearing a mere matter of necessity that we kill each other?

I think the way forward is this. In my letters I will concentrate on one thing that makes us different and on one thing where there is obvious similarity between us.

This leads to what you have probably been waiting for. Yes, we are little green men. That is one thing that I will not apologise for. You are animal and mineral; we are vegetable and mineral. You live above ground. We live below ground. You can enjoy the light of the sun. Since the final collapse of our civilisation on the planet surface as the conditions for living there became increasingly intolerable, we have lived below the surface sustained by artificial sunlight.

Jack Hughes once said to me that the real problem with knowledge is keeping sight of what you don't know. Too often your people and mine draw conclusions only from what they do know. All your data told your scientists that there could be no life on Mars. Correct. Undeniable. Fact. Lose sight of another fact, that you don't know what is happening *in* Mars, and you have a dead planet. Yet how far from the truth.

Which leads me to one of our legends which is strikingly similar to one that Jack Hughes has told me exists in one of your cultures. Here we differ little.

A very long time ago, when my people still lived on the surface, they spoke many, many different languages. It seems rather odd to us now as we have shared a common language for time without memory, but in the beginning we spoke more languages than could be counted. It seemed as though every small cluster of houses gave birth to a new language.

And one day the people in a city decided to build a tower higher than any ever built before. You know the sort of thing. Luxury apartments with views over the metropolis, to be bought by people who spend most of their time somewhere else. To start with, the building went very well indeed. But one day, for some inexplicable reason, which has sometimes been laid at the door of a deity, all those engaged on the project suddenly found themselves speaking the same language or, if you prefer, automatically understanding – as if touched by some divine spirit – the foreign languages being spoken by the people nearby.

It was a disaster of the highest magnitude. Builder A now realised that as builder B handed him a bucket with a cheery smile and a wave of the hand, the accompanying muttered words that had previously been a complete but

apparently friendly mystery were in fact: 'There you are, you dirty little rat-faced, turd-eating faggot, I hope you get some of this cement stuck up your arse.'

The tower rose no further.

Letter 2

In my last letter I suggested that in offering a guide to my planet, as requested by the Committee of the Council – or such I believe was the request, for the Committee of the Council has a remarkable capacity for making the plain obscure and the obscure utterly impenetrable – I suggested that to prevent our peoples deciding to kill each other on the slightest of grievances, I would explain in each letter one thing that we share in common and one thing that we do not.

So something we share.

Death. Like you, we die.

Which is just as well. While in part you may say that if we did not die, that would be a discouragement to trying to kill us, I think my friend amongst your species, Jack Hughes, is entirely right when he says that failure to die when forcefully attacked would probably create an unresolvable instability between us that would result in endless war. ‘Imagine,’ says Jack (first having explained to me what a fly is and does), ‘Imagine swatting a fly that has been buzzing round your room for the last ten minutes. Splat! Your increasing irritation, not far short of real anger, is immediately soothed, you feel a small burst of pride at your swatting skills as you savour the delights of victory, and your conscience interrupts (but not too loudly) to remind you that you have killed a living creature that was doing no more than nature intended.’

‘Quite normal,’ I say.

‘But now imagine’, says Jack, ‘that just after you have begun to experience these swirling and slightly conflicting emotions, the now two dimensional fly gives a small groan, pushes up with its splayed legs, sucks back in what appear to be its innards, and with a small ‘pop’ resumes its normal shape, before reassembling its wings and buzzing once again around your room. Would you not be incandescent with rage and as this happened again and again would you not devote all your resources to discovering where the one weak spot might be that would destroy this creature? Especially if it did not come from your own planet.’

Well, fortunately we die.

But not quite like you. As we are vegetable and mineral, being indeed the little green men of your fables, we do not die with any suddenness. We wither, we fade, we shrivel. We can be immobilised by death in an instant, but we then take our time leaving, making

our peace, or not, with the inevitable. We still refer, like you, to 'sudden death' but that is really a reference to whatever act or event precipitates the inexorable process. For death itself, we have ample time mentally to prepare and consider what has gone before. As you may imagine, this strongly colours our philosophies, our religions and our art.

Well that is a big subject, but one more easily approached is that such time for contemplation has resulted in a ritual of death that you may find interesting. I understand from Jack Hughes that on your planet, it is customary, at least amongst many of the peoples, to bury the dead and to mark the resting place with some simple facts and possibly some religious or otherwise felicitous phrase on a stone. And Jack has on more than one occasion remarked how this can sometimes cause unintended humour, as in a gravestone inscribed to one Major James Brush, stating that he was 'killed by the accidental discharge of a pistol by his orderly' and then declaring below some words Jack tells me are from one of your holy books: 'Well done, good and faithful servant'.

On my planet – and this is a difference – the practice is to write the person's last words below their name and dates. This causes a number of problems that by custom we simply ignore. Since the final words of many involve one or more expletives and we are, as I said in my last letter, a species governed – one might almost say tyrannised – by specific and complicated rules of courtesy, the accepted form translates more or less as your 'oh dear'. But we all know what is meant when we see that.

There is also a difficulty of knowing what the last words were and families often choose the last words spoken to one of them rather than what might have been said to someone attending at the very point of death. That means that to an extent the last words are carefully curated.

Jack Hughes found that interesting. In the case of his father he said, he might then choose the last words his mother reported his father saying to her – probably not his father's actual last words, even to his mother; simply the last that she told to Jack. They were: 'Does this taste funny to you?'

Sometimes my people prepare their last words in advance. Politicians and others who feed off the public's awareness of them are frequently accused of this, to the point where a spokesperson for the deceased may quite boldly announce that the last words would have been *these* if the withering had not proceeded faster than envisaged. Because there is a problem. If you cannot quite tell when the cords of life will sever, you must – to abide by our custom in perfect truth – speak your last words and say absolutely nothing thereafter. Not even 'water'.

It is not entirely unusual for some kind of compromise to be made so that the supposed last words can give some inkling of what disaster overtook the deceased. If we learn nothing of character, we learn a little about events. I have in mind some I encountered recently. 'Look what I can do' seems to say something about both the person and the general, if not specific cause of death. 'I'll just see if this vehicle is going to slow down' tells us all we need to know. As does 'How low is that flying?' 'Is that supposed to happen?' feeds the imagination while 'I will always outwit you' appeals to our sense that irony is one of the pillars of life. On the other hand 'I may live to regret this' has always struck me as rather poignant, as has 'I'll try anything once.'

The last words supposedly heard are also sometimes recorded. I strongly suspect that 'I just want to show you something in the garden, dear' is indicative of an event that turned out completely differently to how the now deceased expected, while 'Well, it *is* homemade' perhaps tells both a lie and a truth.

Of course, there are a few who seek to shock. The obligatory courteousness of our society can make this seem rather difficult, but in fact it has given rise to what we might call last euphemisms. These are not always easy to translate into your language with quite the same force or resonances as they really possess, but you will understand the idea if I say that the grave of a notorious figure of youth rebellion exhorts us at the end of the inscription to 'pass water not working'.

You may wonder whether in the light of all this I have made plans for my own gravestone. I have. While I cannot be certain that I may not say something different at the end or that a relative will not claim some particular words were said, more to please themselves than to please me, I think it quite probable that the last thing I will say is 'Oh'. There may possibly be another word after that, but I will try to confine myself just to 'Oh'. That will be fine as my dying comment and my comment on dying. We have just as many ideas about the possible existence and nature of an afterlife as you do, and I am more than happy to let my simple 'Oh' be interpreted by any reader as surprise, or recognition or exasperation or incomprehension or disappointment. Or anything in between.

Letter 3

It has been most gratifying to find that my close friend amongst your people, Jack Hughes, shares with me an interest in the myths of creation that tribes, races and civilizations across our respective home planets have conjured up to explain how everything, including themselves, came into being. It is a small fire that has been encouraged to burn harder and brighter by teaching each other our different stories and comparing notes, sometimes in wonderment at how the distance between us can be shrunk by a similarity of legend that must surely be coincidence – unless some other civilisation in the universe had carried stories between us when both our planets were in their infancy of hosting our two species. Well, *there's* a thought. But not for now.

Amongst the common elements that appear from time to time are how the children of an original god, or pair of gods, rebel and destroy one or both parents and frequently also a number of their siblings. One might well consider whether this violence is simply a reflection of the society creating the myth or whether the myth somehow suffuses the psyche of the society in a manner that subtly gives a certain justification to such acts in everyday life, especially if the perpetrators end up ruling the known universe without further punishment.

Be that as it may, one thing on which nearly all creation myths seem to be agreed is that before there is something, there is nothing. Things can diverge significantly from then on and there is of course more than one way to understanding nothingness, as in an absence and a negative, or a presence and a positive. There was not anything; there was nothing. Or as Jack Hughes has quoted to me, a sort of hedging of bets: 'there was not anything made that was made.'

In any event the silence is usually broken during the creation and sound is in many myths not only a result of creation but a creative force itself. It may take many forms: a cry, a shout, a whisper, a word, a musical note or polyphony, a bell, a spoken number. Or in one most notable example from a small collection of island tribes on my planet in the long ago when we lived on the surface and there were indeed seas to sail, a sound for which we have never had a single word.

We are, as I have explained before, people for whom courtesy has been of paramount importance, both as a means of keeping the peace and as a weapon, and so we are never, as *you* would say, blunt. We go – in a lovely phrase Jack Hughes has taught me – round the houses. Even the word blunt in this sense has no single word equivalent in our

language. 'To be blunt with you' comes out more or less, in the language of Mars, as 'to approach relevant dealings and conversation with your most esteemed personage in a manner which gives every indication of a diligent honesty unaffected by any complications that the circumstances may suggest might exist.' Quite.

So this sound for which we have no single word and which is attributed with the power of generating the beginnings of the universe is, we would say: the unfortunate toot of a posterior trumpet; the blast of an ill wind from the south; the freedom cry of an escaping gaseous prisoner; a song of subabdominal sentiment. You get my drift. As it were.

What I find fascinating about this... this...big bang theory? is that logically it presupposes a being of some sort that made this sound and so it is not a story of primary creation. But there are two schools of thought on this, which naturally led the tribes subscribing to this myth to split and come very close to exterminating each other. One is that there was no such being. The creative noise was the sound of breaking wind but was not itself wind breaking, and it just came into being. That is the esoteric view. The second is that the god, for want of a better word, who made the noise had been in existence for ever and would continue throughout eternity. Ah, you say, then there was not nothing at the beginning. Well, the believers reply, there was no universe and whatever medium this god existed in had only one known quality, which was infinity. Some then say: 'Discuss, not too heatedly please.'

There is one touching coda to this second interpretation. Pursuing this sound across the limitless expanse of all the universes, created and uncreated, is a second sound. It will of course never catch up with the first, but eventually it will arrive at whatever places the first has brought into being. That can be a very long time, given the fact that gods living in eternity seem to have very little sense of urgency and time measured in even millions of years is for them, presumably, a matter of seconds. But, the believers say, the follow-up sound *will* one day arrive. They await it eagerly, passionately. And it is composed this time of words, namely: 'I'm so sorry. I do beg your pardon.' Thus adherents to this version of the bottom burp creation myth not only have an eternal god to love, be loved by and fight over, but a god of creation who has issued an apology for what he, she or it has deliberately or inadvertently caused to come into being, including us and the worlds in which we live.

Now that I like. God, I forgive *you*.

Letter 4

What, a listener asked me the other day, about the flying saucers? Was that not simply provocative?

Perhaps I need to take some younger members of my audience, assuming I have one, back in time. Before our two species got used to each other's spaceships, before in fact earth had mastered, safe, reliable and cheap public transport in space – I use the word reliable to refer to engineering, not timetabling – my people made frequent secret visits to your planet in craft that were then circular or ovoid in shape. Flying saucers in your terminology. A technology that has been superseded but was, until my early youth, thought to be the way forward.

It was considered unwise to allow these visits to be seen. Provocative? Well obvious incursion by an alien species in your planet's airspace would have been met with aggression in no time at all – temporarily unifying for your species though it might have been. How, after all, do you make it absolutely clear to inhabitants, who up until that point had no idea of your existence outside of myth, that this is not an invasion? Wave vigorously and say 'Trust me, I'm a little green man'? Land in some public park, approach a lady walking a dog and say 'Take me to your leader'? Consider for a moment every country on your planet you can think of. Now consider their leaders. Quite.

Shrouding the visits in secrecy would not be a problem as long as the secrecy was maintained. No-one takes offence and shouts 'You're spying on me' when they don't know they are being spied upon. The failure that revealed our interest in watching your planet was not, as is sometimes the case, one of a personal betrayal, but – as is so often the case – one of technological unreliability.

The materials of which our 'flying saucers' were constructed and a number of other technical features easily made them invisible to your satellite sensors, but that is only an electronic invisibility. No-one has yet managed to invent a means of being truly invisible to the naked eye. Deceiving the eye is, however, an age-old entertainment and political practice in both our cultures and our craft used an especially developed technology that made them look like clouds in the sky. It is more complicated than I can possibly understand, but an analogy would be hiding behind a picture.

This had one particular disadvantage, which is that clouds on the whole move quite slowly. A cloud moving at, say, twice the speed of sound would be very suspicious. So we

were forced to take our time traversing your globe, but on the other hand that was very good for observation and data collection.

The problem was that at times the image projection would without warning become unstable, at which point the perceived cloud would be of an unusual shape. Yes, all those earth authority dismissals of flying saucers simply being 'funny shaped clouds' were both right and wrong at the same time.

At worst, the mask would fail entirely, which explains your occasional sightings of objects that, once those on board had realised their sudden nakedness, would suddenly accelerate away across the sky at very high speed.

It is a tribute to human imagination that nearly all these latter experiences were assigned by the majority of earth people to the observers' imaginations. Although that may also be a tribute to your capacity, for which you curiously do not yet seem to have invented a single word, of not wanting to know things that might unsettle you. Ostrichsandheadedness is too clumsy, I agree.

In the distant past these secret visitations was further endangered by the bogga boggas between our planets. It is a word that is probably unfamiliar to most of you, since in recent times great care has been taken to ensure they no longer exist except in deep space, which at present you are ill equipped to access, as to a lesser extent are we. Many scientists will say that it is unhelpful to imagine either space or time as a continuous line, a road ahead and behind on which the present exists. However, to understand a bogga bogga the analogy is most useful as we can then describe the phenomenon as an area of damage to this continuum; what my friend amongst you, Jack Hughes, has suggested I call a pothole in space and time.

A spaceship running into a small bogga bogga will be severely shaken – some say that the word derives from the sound of a spaceship vibrating in such an instance, but that etymology may not be true. Jack Hughes has suggested it comes from the sound falling from the lips of the captain of a spaceship which has encountered one in its path, but I think that may be some kind of earth joke. In any event, some damage is likely to be caused. A large bogga bogga can cripple a spacecraft.

The difficulties of having one of our ships crash land on your planet as a result of bogga bogga damage were immense and vast amounts of effort and finances would be poured into rescue and retrieval, to the point where the Committee of the Council was finally persuaded to prioritise funds into repairs. In one way such repairs are quite easy to

perform, filling in the gap, as it were, with a little bit of space and time from somewhere else where it is of little use and the loss will not be noticed. What drives up the expense is that in some bogga boggas, the damage to the time content is so severe that it remains where it is while the rest of time – in our linear analogy – flows on. This makes them quite difficult to find after they have been reported and of course, very difficult to see in advance, as they can just appear in your timeline from a point in the future. Nevertheless, suffice it to say that the general view of bogga bogga repairmen (and they do tend to be predominantly male) is that they are overpaid, grossly exaggerate their workload, and are never to be found when most needed.

Perhaps you may have met one.

Letter 5

One thing which our two civilisations have in common – and which I suspect is shared by all civilisations of any reasonable advancement that inhabit the universe – is curiosity about who else might be, as it is termed, ‘out there’. So once technology has reached a stage where sending a message into the depths of space is possible, that is exactly what happens. And listening posts are set up, not so much to await a reply, which is unlikely to be received in less than a few thousand years, but on the grounds that alien species must be performing or must already have performed the same exercise in trying to make contact.

Which strikes me as a colossal waste of time and effort. Not that I think the curiosity is a bad thing. It’s the message that is the root of the futility. Nearly every signal that is beamed across the universe will fall into one of two categories: greetings or help us. In both cases the communication will arrive too late. Given the timescales involved, even if broadcasting signals at the speed of light, the call for assistance is going to be picked up long after the senders have either sorted themselves out or been utterly obliterated. Many stars whose light we observe – perhaps even all of them – may not exist any more. ‘Help’ is most likely to be a call from the dead.

So what is wrong with sending greetings? If that is all you do, then there isn’t any real problem, beyond the fact that the recipients will probably say, ‘Thanks’, give a shrug and carry on regardless. Add your address and then you invite a visit, which might not be so welcomed by the generations receiving the visit as it was thought desirable by those sending the invitation. Especially when the visitors’ preconceived impression of their potential hosts is based on the history, fashions, music and achievements promoted by the long deceased. Jack Hughes, my great friend amongst your people, has suggested that it would be rather like receiving today a clay tablet inscribed with a message of greeting, accompanied by pictures of a trophy collection of shrunken heads, praised for their value in goats. Customs, aspirations, even right and wrong change over time. The gulfs between those who seek contact and those who make contact could be so great that the distant visitors will feel moved to ask: ‘When did you conquer and eradicate the species who sent the message?’

Ah, you say, but what about my people and your people? A different type of encounter altogether. We have spent most of our time hiding from each other, which is of course what

you do with neighbours. An occasional twitch of the curtain to see if anything is going on, but equally a determination not to be spied on oneself. Our living beneath the surface of our planet became a necessity after we had rendered the surface uninhabitable, but it also served to hide us from outside inspection – and if there's one thing all peoples share it's an innate dislike of outside inspectors.

Your presence was of course obvious to us, but the saving grace, the single fact which has prevented any outbreak of interplanetary war (so common amongst worlds within striking distance of each other) has always been our inability to covet each others' lifestyles. You can see no advantage in our subterranean existence where the essences of life – air, light and water – are all artificially created. Likewise the idea of living in direct sunlight, to which we have not been accustomed for thousands of years, and being subject to the vagaries of surface climates are utterly incomprehensible to us. What keeps the peace between us is a question, one that comes to mind each time our peoples examine how each other lives; the simple question 'Why would anyone want to do that?'

It is too often said that for there to be peace between planets, nations, even individuals, there must be understanding. Jack Hughes says that in a famous story by one of your people, the crucial sentiment is that harmony, or least lack of antipathy, comes from standing in someone else's shoes. I have grave doubts about this. It is too easy either to covet the shoes or to determine that the owner of the shoes should never have another pair, especially not a pair as good as one's own. The history of the relationship between the inhabitants of our two planets strongly suggests that concord is greatly assisted when the one who wishes to try on the other's shoes finds that the other doesn't even have feet and has neither a concept of nor a word for shoe. The peace between us is a consequence of fundamental misunderstanding. Long may we fail to see each other's point of view.