

MARTE

By Hernan Dario Jourdan

*We don't know about Martians not because they don't exist,
but because they have forgotten about themselves.*

Once there was a place with trees and plants and animals and rivers, all in different tones of red. Here lived all kinds of creatures. There was a soil where rain did fall, and helped create everything they needed to survive: food, shelter, lakes –they had it all.

Walking on two legs set some apart. These creatures soon developed a language that allowed them to communicate very specific things to each other, and in coming up with names for things, they started calling themselves “Martians.”

They gathered in groups and built houses for shelter and work. In spending too much time among themselves, they began to forget other creatures and how to deal with them. So it wasn't uncommon for Martians to pass by a four-legged creature, peacefully grazing or perhaps just looking about their surroundings, and feel uneasy about it –even when there wasn't a single threat in sight. Martians called this feeling of uneasiness ‘fear’ and learned it was triggered by the uncertainty that inhabited the space between them and that other creature. As four-legged creatures didn't speak, Martians had no way of knowing what they were thinking. Little by little, they began wondering if something could go wrong between them and those beings deprived of language.

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Over the years, Martians kept growing in number and their civilization continued developing. Great inventions were made and this made their daily living more convenient. But in the same way they had grown strange to other living beings, as they fabricated their own environments they also started to feel strange towards the soil of their planet. And it also happened that in looking out for their own groups, some Martians even became strangers to other Martians from far away places.

In general, there was a solid conviction about the good of their specie, as they had produced many useful objects (and they displayed their red history proudly and publicly) but there were also the cases of some Martians who felt disrespected when treated as strangers by fellow Martians. Little by little, the notion of trust among them began to tarnish. Was this undermining their progress as a community? Some surely thought so. But could this become a threat to their survival?

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Language had given way to thinking and this in turn made many of the Martian's advances possible. Similar to us, their thinking involved reasoning, and many Martians learned to appreciate these traits very much. On the other hand, all the thinking and reasoning didn't come alone. Despite considering themselves an intelligent race, they couldn't explain their own existence and that of the planet they lived on. It was a logical consequence of their intellectual activity to question their environment, but their environment seemed uninterested in engaging with such thoughts. The soil was pale, orangey-like and dry; mountains were harder and darker; water much more transparent –but *that was it*. Questions of their origins presented a challenge, but to some represented a boost of confidence, as they thought: “We get food from the land, we can create shelters, the weather conditions don't threaten our lives and we can think of ourselves –we are masters of our existence.”

Yet something else ought to be said about this legion of short, red bipeds. Every one of them remembered with fear –and some fascination too– an event that had happened one particular night. After being helplessly flooded and leaving their hometown behind, a large group of Martians was traveling across the land when they arrived at a near by settlement. After so much traveling, they were in dire need of rest and food. Being late in the night, the visited community was taken by surprise, and a startled and fearful Martian attacked one of the visitors. The migrating group retaliated and a battle ensued as a result, lasting until sunset –which, by the way, is the only thing in red Mars that is blue. This event was referred to as “The Battle in the Blue.”

Since then, every time two Martians had a conflict that appeared to get out of hand, they remembered the story of “The Battle in the Blue” and the many lives taken in it, and feared death

would be brought upon them too. Gradually, this fear towards each other became as real as the distance they had learned to keep towards their four-legged (now distant) neighbors.

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What to do when fear takes hold of a community? Fear spreads through the air like a virus, and it's very hard to make it leave. Is there a cure for it? Maybe a medicine to help those suffering from it? Martians thought there must be, and as eager as only they were, they took this question as a real subject of investigation. Leading innovators found that fear is based on the premise of danger: knowing that things *can* go wrong –and although they *can* also *not* go wrong, some things certainly *do* go wrong, much like it had happened in “The Battle in the Blue”! What would happen then, if memories of violence were erased from every Martian's mind?

It didn't take long before someone found a method to forget. By way of chewing on a root (Mamirolieis Parabens) while thinking about the memory (or memories) to be forgotten, subsequently swallowing the juice and spitting out the rest of the stringy roots, it was discovered that knowledge of that event would disappear. The first Martians to do this with all their disgraceful memories claimed they felt ‘very light’ after the process. Of course, they couldn't say how ‘light’ they felt, as there was nothing to compare this state of being with anymore –unlike the other Martians who, knowing fear, carried a heavier heart. The faces of the ones ‘who had forgotten’ seemed to have regained a certain serenity or lack of vigor. As no real damage was observed by this procedure, it was promoted and rapidly adopted. Soon all Martians were chewing on this root while thinking of their most unpleasant memories, spitting it out and forgetting all about them.

I know you must be thinking: “but didn't they soon forget *why* they wanted to forget in the first place?” –and well, yes: this actually happened. The day came when the last two Martians to eat the root got together at sunset to perform this. “To the last Memory in the Blue,” they joked before biting on the dry root. And remembering all the memories of conflict, and fear, they became the last ones to forget.

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We know about the history of Martians because of the rivers of their planet, which communicated with the rivers here on Earth before they dried out. See, rivers never forget. They just keep flowing, constantly moving on to new places, taking stories with them for those who can listen. Certain rivers produce a murmur that's quite strange: to some of us it sounds just like a constant noise, but to others (the Quikucha people, for example, but that's another story altogether) certain rivers appear in their dreams with perfectly understandable voices.

Some people believe that each river contains at least one story: that of the clouds passing above, or a flock of birds flying through the sky, or even of that tiny branch that submerges in its water – for rivers have a way of understanding everything well enough to share their story faithfully. One has to really wonder at the rivers' capacity to remember, but also at their patience to listen, absorb and share, and not get aggravated (or afraid) like others sometimes do. Perhaps that's why rivers can tell the story of Martians and it's not the other way around.

A cloud told me this story, after picking it up from a river in Uruguay, and then it added that some Martians used to wonder, like some of us still do: “how can we understand like water?”