

Strange lands





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These texts are about new worlds and the feelings of the people who explore them.

This text is an extract from a 19th-century fantasy story about explorers trying to reach the centre of the Earth. Axel, who is a scientist, and his uncle have just come out of a dark tunnel into a huge brightly lit space.



JOURNEY TO THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH

At first I could hardly see anything. My eyes, unaccustomed to the light, quickly closed. When I was able to reopen them, I stood in amazement.

‘The sea!’ I cried.

‘Yes,’ my uncle replied, ‘I will call it the Liedenbrock Sea - surely no-one would deny me the right to name it after myself as its first discoverer.’

A vast sheet of water, the start of a lake or an ocean, stretched beyond the range of sight. The fine golden sand of the shore was softly lapped by the waves, and scattered with small shells which had once been inhabited by the first created beings. The waves broke on the shore with a hollow echoing murmur.

Descending onto this gently sloping beach, about two hundred yards from the limit of the waves, were the foothills of vast rocky cliffs, which rose to unmeasurable heights. The massive vault that spanned the space above - the sky, if it could be called that - seemed to be made up of huge clouds of moving and changing vapours. The word ‘cavern’ does not convey any idea of this immense space: human language is inadequate when you venture into the deep abysses of the earth. I gazed upon these wonders in silence. I felt as if I had been transported to some distant planet. I gazed, I wondered, I admired, in astonishment mingled with a certain amount of fear.

My attention was drawn to another unexpected sight. At a distance of five hundred paces, appeared a high, tufted, dense forest. It was composed of trees of average height, but shaped like umbrellas. The breeze seemed to have no effect on them, and they stood unmoved and firm against the wind, as if they were made of stone. I hurried forward. I could not give any name to these unique creations. Were these species of plants already known? No. When we arrived under their shade my surprise turned into admiration, and my uncle immediately named them.

‘It’s a forest of mushrooms!’ he cried.

And he was right. Here were pale mushrooms, thirty to forty feet high, and crowned with a cap of equal diameter. There they stood in thousands. But the subterranean vegetation was not limited to these fungi. Further on rose groups of tall trees that were normally lowly shrubs, but here reached a giant size: ferns as tall as our fir-trees and *lepidodendra* bristling with rough hairs like monstrous cactus plants.

'Wonderful, magnificent, splendid!' cried my uncle. 'These are today's humble garden plants, which were tall trees in the early stages of the world. Look, Axel, and admire it all. It's a botanist's dream!'

'You are right, Uncle. Prehistoric plants have been preserved in this immense greenhouse.'

'Yes, it is a greenhouse, Axel, but you could also call it a wildlife reserve.'

'Wildlife?'

'Yes; no doubt of it. Look at that dust under your feet; see the bones scattered on the ground.'

'So there are!' I cried. 'Bones of extinct animals!'

Straightaway I began to put names to these gigantic bones: 'Here is the lower jaw of a Mastodon,' I said. 'These are the teeth of the Deinotherium; this thigh bone must have belonged to the greatest of those beasts, the Megatherium.'

Suddenly I stopped and said, 'If there have been dinosaurs in these underground regions in the past, who is to say one of these monsters isn't still wandering in these dark forests, or lurking behind these steep crags?' At this thought, I nervously inspected the horizon, but no living creature appeared on the shores.



These texts are extracts from interviews given 40 years after the first moon landing in 1969. Buzz Aldrin landed on the moon in the lunar module, while Michael Collins stayed in the command module orbiting the moon until the lunar module was ready to return.

Magnificent desolation



Buzz Aldrin

What did Earth look like from the moon?

From the distance of the moon, Earth was four times the size of a full moon seen from Earth. It was a brilliant jewel in the black velvet sky.

Is the moon's surface different from that of Earth?

The surface of the moon is like nothing here on Earth! It's totally lacking any evidence of life. The surface is made up of lots of fine, talcum-powder-like dust mixed with a complete variety of pebbles, rocks, and boulders. If you examine it under a microscope, you can see it's made up of tiny droplets of vaporized rock. This is as a result of asteroids hitting the surface from outer space at high velocity over millions of years.

Was being on the moon different from what you expected?

I expected the unexpected and went with an open mind. I think the visual scene was described by my words on first landing — “magnificent desolation”.

What was it like to be weightless?

The feeling of reduced gravity and the limitations of the space suit resulted in a slow-motion movement. Perhaps not too far from being on a trampoline, but without the springiness and instability.

What were your feelings about being on the moon?

I found it challenging and rewarding. I was exhilarated, but also guarded. There was nobody around for hundreds of thousands of miles. But there was a camera and a radio and many millions of people watching us. We were aware of that, and that causes you to focus your attention and make sure you aren't making mistakes. You're on stage, but it's a very unusual stage. People still come up to me to tell me where they were when we were on the moon. They were able to connect to that moment in their lives. We weren't able to share that moment of excitement here on Earth. We were sort of out of town doing something else!

**Michael Collins*****How did you feel about having to stay in the command module?***

As I was such a calm person, I was pigeonholed as a command module pilot. I lost my chance of walking on the moon, but in return for that I gained a chance to: one, fly to the moon, and two, be a part of the first crew to ever land on the moon.

I discovered later that I was described as the 'loneliest man ever in the universe' or something, which is a lot of baloney! I had Mission Control yakking in my ear half of the time. I actually rather enjoyed it.

What did Earth look like from space?

It looked peaceful and calm and quiet and serene and fragile. That was the overriding sensation I got - that little thing is so fragile out there!

What did the surface of the moon look like from the command module?

When the sun is shining on the surface at a very shallow angle, the craters cast long shadows and the moon's surface seems very inhospitable; forbidding almost. I did not sense any great invitation on the part of the moon for us to come into its domain. I sensed almost a scary place, a hostile place.

Were you ever afraid while you were in space?

It's not fear - it's worry and I think there's a legitimate distinction between the two. It's not a question that you're scared all the time, but you're mildly worried all the time - or at least I was. You're not sure that all these things are going to work properly and there are a lot of things coming in a very fragile daisy chain and you don't want any of those links in the daisy chain to break. So yes you are worried, you're concerned.

What was it like to see the lunar module rejoin the command module?

Man, it was beautiful! I saw them land in a little golden bug down there among the craters and as it came back it slowly got bigger and bigger. Finally they got back into the command module and I grabbed Buzz by both ears - I was going to kiss him on the forehead, I can remember that, but instead I clapped him on the back or something. You don't have time to sit around and chat because you've got to get ready to come home.

This text is an extract taken from the novel Brick Lane by Monica Ali. It is about Nazneen, a young woman from Bangladesh who has recently moved to Britain. In this extract she ventures out onto the streets of London for the first time.

Stranger in the city



Nazneen pulled the end of her sari* over her hair. At the main road she looked both ways. To get to the other side of the street without being hit by a car was like walking out in a monsoon and hoping to dodge the raindrops. A space opened up before her and she ran. A horn blared, stretching its vocal chords to the limit. The car skidded to a halt in front of her and the driver got out and began to shout. She ran again and turned into a side street, then off again to the right onto Brick Lane.

The side streets were stacked with rubbish, entire kingdoms of rubbish piled high as fortresses. Small patches of mist bearded the lampposts and a gang of pigeons turned weary circles like prisoners in an exercise yard. A pair of schoolchildren, pale as rice and loud as peacocks, cut over the road and hurtled down a side street, galloping with joy or else with terror. Otherwise, Brick Lane was deserted.

Nazneen walked. Four blocks down she crossed the road (she waited next to a woman and stepped out with her, like a calf with its mother) and took a side street. She looked up at a building as she passed. The entrance was like a glass fan, rotating slowly, sucking people in, wafting others out. Nazneen craned her neck back and saw that the glass above became dark as a night pond. The building was without end. Above, somewhere, it crushed the clouds.

*sari - a length of fabric worn by Asian women

Every person who brushed past her on the pavement seemed to be on a private, urgent mission to execute a precise and demanding plan: to get a promotion today, to be exactly on time for an appointment, to buy a newspaper with the right coins, to walk without wasting a second and to reach the roadside just as the lights turned red. Nazneen, hobbling and halting, began to be aware of herself. Without a coat, without a suit, without a destination. A leafshake of fear - or was it excitement? - passed through her.

But they were not aware of her. In the next instant she knew it. They knew she existed, but unless she did something they would not see her. She enjoyed this thought. She began to scrutinize. She stared at the long, thin faces, the pointy chins. The women had strange hair. It puffed up around their heads, pumped up like a snake's hood. They pressed their lips together and narrowed their eyes as though they were angry at something they had heard, or at the wind for messing their hair.

Someone tapped her gently on the shoulder and she leapt like a dog away from a snake. It was a man in a dark coat and tie. His glasses had lenses as thick as pebbles. He said something in English, but she could not understand him. She shook her head and said 'Sorry.' He nodded and solemnly walked away. It rained then. And in spite of the rain and in spite of the fact that she was lost and cold, Nazneen began to feel a little pleased. She had spoken one word, in English, to a stranger, and she had been understood. It was very little, but it was something.



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