

Signs

by Jacquelyn Bengfort

The monkey did not live for long.

He'd lost interest in the stuffed dog pretty much right away. The farther away the shuttle, the more garbled and fanciful the sign language the monkey had been taught became, his silent status reports populated with cows and moons and musical cats. Shortly after he entered orbit around Mars we noticed his vitals growing weaker. We watched on the monitor as he struggled with a banana, his paws jerking with frustration over the stubborn peel. (God, the cost of R&D for fresh bananas in space!) Finally he threw it away, the lack of gravity dulling its motion as it cruised in a lazy yellow parabola. He watched it float for a moment or two, then turned back to the small triangular window that gave a view of the planet's surface, all rust and blooming black mold. He looked into the camera—into our eyes, it almost seemed. Bringing one paw up to his face, he made a chopping motion, three times. Then he died.

The room remained silent until a throat was cleared. One of the guys had a deaf teenager at home: he said the sign meant “you bastard, you bastard, you bastard.” Someone swore aloud and then we all laughed because nobody had ever taught the monkey that.

