

BARBARIANS? SURE

B A R R Y N . M A L Z B E R G

Author's Note: Barbary Shore, published three years after the Big Novel, could not have been more differentiated from its predecessor; it collapsed commercially and sent its author into his own and also a more general public wilderness for almost a decade . . . the problematic The Deer Park, arguably, was a hiccup or series of hiccups succeeding its indigestible predecessor. ("What was I going to write? The Naked and the Dead go to Japan?") The first sign of refocus and recovery was "The White Negro," which with The Village Voice Columns foreshadowed and then were absorbed by Advertisements, which has been parsed beyond recovery, at least by the persona I created under its influence.

I HAVE SPECULATED FOR OVER HALF A CENTURY—influenced by my own rather shocked introduction to the Scott Meredith Literary Agency which employed me in 1965—about what Mailer might have written after the *Barbary* disaster if he had turned to what was called in the trade “commercial fiction,” fiction deliberately shaped to genre, fiction written for cash on the line rather than posterity, tenure or sexual favors. Romance and Westerns were probably out of the question. Gothics were not to be a true category for another decade and a half. Mysteries would not have been mysterious enough for the self-imposed Mailer intricacy. Gold Medal suspense novels, sado-masochistic furies, dirty and treacherous blonde temptresses savaging gullible men or killing them . . . well, maybe, Spillane and his imitators were a torrent and certainly Mailer, who eventually wrote *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, had at least an embryonic talent.

But it was science fiction which became the pivot of wonder here; it was my own particular sector of commercial writing in which I had had plenty of pubertal familiarity and I knew the routes, the highways and byways, the Spectre General of the muse, and I imagined a Mailer who—having attempted it as one of the earliest examples in his juvenilia—might find himself in desperation willing to attempt the flourishing, wildly expanding science fiction magazine market of the early 1950s. What would he have written? How would it have been received? If his desperate odyssey had been successful, would he have become the Alfred Bester or at least the Gordon R. Dickson of 1960 and, like both of them, won Nebula or Hugo or both, been adored by fandom? Nights of speculation dwindled into sullen grey days which demanded some exploration. So I speculated.

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Sergius could see the aliens, mechanized for the sullen Martian light, staggering in a low, uncertain line toward his spaceship, now there, soon enough here, their dull and sullen covering herded into a kind of dim constancy. Within, he could feel the tendrils of his own astonishment poking at the residue of a fear which had never left him: man on a mission, man doomed, man trapped within the constancy of an inconstant assignment.

I don't know, he thought, addressing not only his own regret but something more substantive, not the aliens now, certainly not them. He found himself instead in some high, poised, necessitous place beyond even questioning; the shudder of his mortality passing through him as Deimos and Phobos, in their own dim constancy, whirled overhead. Artificial satellites, both of them. He had come to Mars for the sake of just that discovery but having verified that they were not stone and dry bones, but had instead been constructed, he felt not the erection of knowledge, the phallic thrill of discovery but instead a kind of wasted futility, not the strong, surging sense of loss which had once pushed him toward carnal emphasis but rather the same emptiness which he could glimpse in the aliens, now in a ragged, increasingly disassembled line.

"I have come to Mars," Sergius thought, "I have come to the red planet, the site of the extraplanetary disaster which formed, focused, made inevitable this mission of discovery—why had they done this to us?"—and at the end only the same confusion, the ravaging of soul as if at the end of in-

tercourse and he knew that he had come a long way in a compressed space to rejoin only himself. He was everywhere. Sergius was everywhere. In the dungeon of consciousness, out of the torments of Terra he had come upon only that ancient and terrible conjunction. There were Martians. He was the first Terran in recorded history to conjoin with the Martians. It was shocking and at the same time utterly meaningless, like the stoned and shadowy eyes of his wife who in a distant eruption of time spent, had been lying against him in the limitless field of the bed they had made and were to lie upon forever was herself an alien. Plunge into her, plunge into Mars, plunge into the aliens: it was all the same. It was a genius' incompetence. Wherever you went: the hammering, mocking, mask of self. "One small step for mankind," he said through the Translating Horn which converted his feeble improvisation into what he trusted would be spotless Martian. He paused, trapped in his helmet took another, larger breath of foul air. "But one big step for a man."