

The BCSA 2015 Essay Competition second prize-winner

The Slovak discovery of Pluto

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Space is not empty for a robot lander. It is full of the geometry of stars. If I am allowed as a machine to say it, I experienced continuing pleasure in those changing shapes for as much of my journey from earth to Pluto as I could remain in active mode rather than the sleep mode that conserved my power. Even then, I think I was a little aware of the stately change, the transition from one huge position of the trigonometry of light, to another.

It was a delight to be back in active, fully alive to the web of angles by which my electronic circuits think their place in the universe.

And now I was touching through light the surfaces of the outer planet, still some distance away along the path I was calculated to travel, feeling my way, listening to a globe that seemed almost reserved and shy in the glow of a light much further from the sun than earth.

But this was to change. There was a crackle and a voice.

"Bear in mind the lower gravity, or your impact will be high velocity and you'll bounce."

Yes of course. But the voice was not from earth. The speed of instructions – four and a half hours to travel, another four and a half to indicate the action taken – that meant a high degree of automation, so that the control of my actions was mine. The voice knew this.

"Who is it I am addressing?" I asked.
 "The Slovak Mission for the Discovery, Landing and Exploration of the Planet Pluto," said the voice, with some sense of importance, "or SMIDOLEPPO, for short."

"Sounds more like an ointment, and it's not short" I said, "and you don't sound Slovak, you sound Yorkshire."

"Slovakia is the home to an international community of experts," the voice pealed defensively.

"It is? I thought most Slovaks were potato and cabbage farmers?"

"Oh really? Is your computer Czech made, in spite of the Essex voice – to judge by the prejudices?"

"Well, yes. And the planet legs. And the engine's by Skoda, which is why I got here a lot quicker than the American probe of a few years back. The voice and thought software is English, by a firm in Thurrock."

"What was the name of the firm?"

"Sound Space."

"You're pulling my carrot."

"No – straight up. As God's my witness."

"You sound like their work."

"And I always will. As Essex as you'd expect a Czech computer to sound. Where are you from?"

"Birstall."

I scanned my records.

"Birthplace of Joseph Priestley, discoverer of oxygen. Well at least you've got someone famous, which, as far as I'm aware, is more than you can say of Thurrock. Oh, I don't know though... there are one or two people... and it appears they hanged Captain Kidd there... as a pirate... though I think he was framed."

"You know a bit about him?" said the voice.

"Well, you can do a lot with a journey to Pluto, can't you? – sort of catch up on your reading. What's your name by the way?"

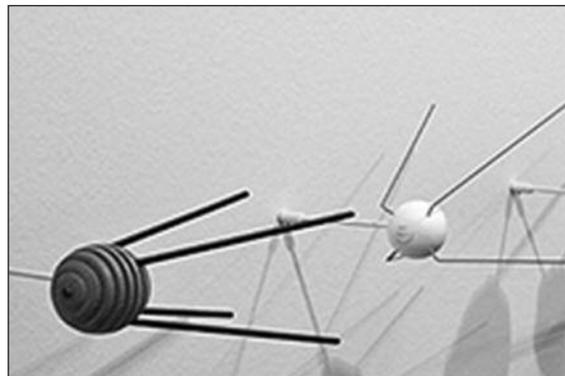
"Hoagie. You?"

"I'm the European Pluto Lander – EUPOL – a bit shorter than your mission title."

My concentration on the task in hand had drifted, and suddenly I came down on the planet with the slight bounce I had been warned about, but fortunately I settled without damage. I collected my thoughts – well, that sounds better than I collected my circuits, which would make it seem like I'd fallen apart. My

head camera looked around. Then the turret. I'd expected a reception, but the curve of the planet seemed empty.

I'm guitar body shaped, a camera turret at the waist, and a head cam at the front, six



sturdy legs and two arms, at present folded, hands tucked in safely – a total of eight limbs, and two independent eyes.

"Down here."

I dipped my turret cam. There beside me was something like a mushroom, a metal sprung stalk, and a glass or perspex cap, with, inside it...

"A snail?"

"And what's wrong with that? Have you got some objection to the neat evolutionary development of being and housing in one?"

"No. It's just a slight surprise to find you on the surface of Pluto. And claiming to act on behalf of Slovakia."

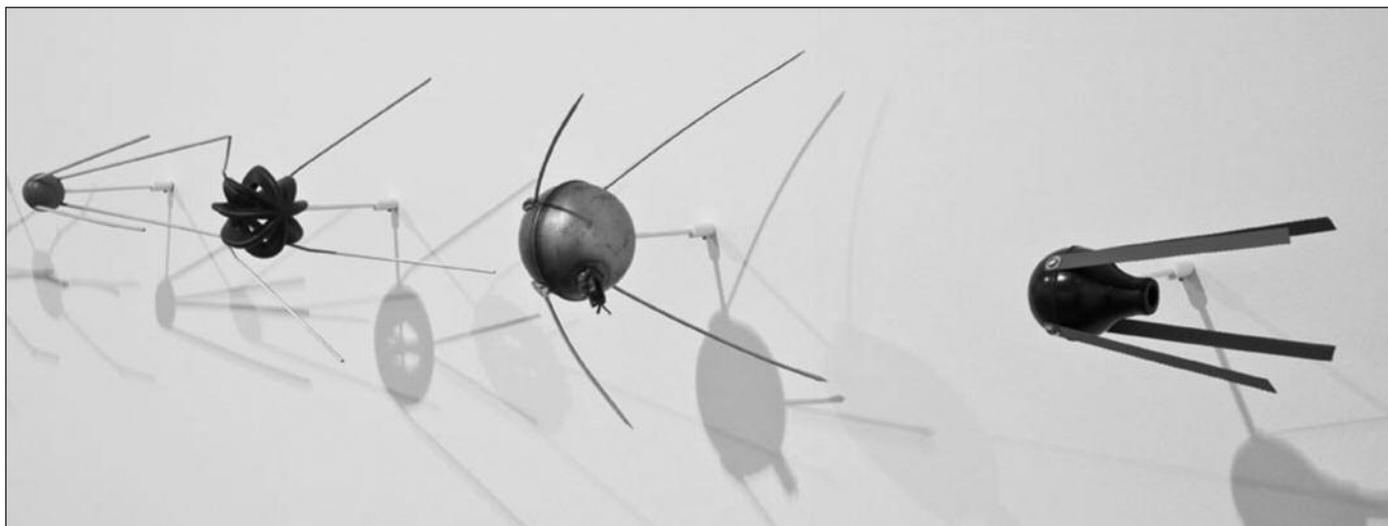
"That's right – look over there." He indicated a distant ridge with his eyehorns.

"Oh, it's fallen over."

"What has?"

"There should be a Slovakian flag fluttering in the methane over there."

"Maybe the nitrogen knocked it over." >>>>



<<<< “The nitrogen should have a stabilising effect.”

“And the carbon monoxide?”

“Let’s not get complicated... oh look, there’s Georgie.”

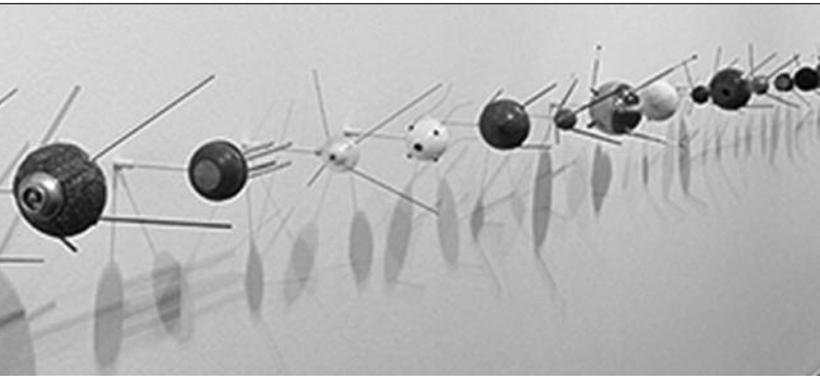
And another mushroom device was bounding along at high speed in the middle distance, and then seemed to lean down and set up a cheerfully bright Slovak flag, which promptly fell over again. The mushroom appeared to pick the flag up and began bouncing towards us, flag flying like a herald from a medieval army.

“What do you call those devices the two of you are in?”

“Springpods, or SPs, or pods... or pogos. They’re so much a part of our life here we tend to have several names for them – a bit like cars on earth: car, motor, wheels, transport, wagon – you know.”

“I am transport.”

“I suppose you are. But so much more.”



He wiggled his horns encouragingly.

“Can I be personal?”

“Go ahead.”

“You’re snails. You’re hermaphrodites. And yet you seem to act almost male.”

He nodded – well, waved his horns up and down.

“Yes. We vary. Some are straight down the middle. I’m more male, you’re right. Georgie here is more female. You’ll notice our names could go either way. You’ll notice something else about Georgie.” The bouncing flag reached us and fell in with our pace.

“It is so very annoying... some weakness at the base of the stick.”

“Pole.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Georgie is a Slovak snail – interpreter and liaison officer with the Professor. She’s very highly qualified in Human Studies.”

“And your specialism, Hoagie?”

“Interplanetary Propulsion.”

He did not seem to want to talk about it further, and began pointing out the features of the settlement as it came into view. The food growing tunnels radiated from and were connected to a large central module, which looked like a miniature starship.

“That’s exactly what it is. Small if it was for humans. Impossibly cramped in fact, but comfortably large for snails, and it is connected in various ways to what resources there are here. And the power source you see over there.”

Quite a distance away, just beyond a small ridge, was something I recognised, since I had one on board myself.

“A plutonium reactor.”

“Yes, nothing else would do the job as effectively.”

“And yet,” said Georgie, “it is so efficient, because we take less energy to support than one of the smallest organs in the human

body – which is why we were selected, as intelligent invertebrates, for the Pioneering Invertebrate Pluto Inhabitation phase of the mission, or PIPI, since there would have to be a great deal more funding for a Slovak human colony, the next phase of SMIDOLEPPO. We might have to go back to the Pope again.”

“A number of questions occur to me,” I said, as I began to see a fair number of other snails in the starship. “I’ll let the smallest organ pass, but why Yorkshire snails – I thought Yorkshire folk were very cautious – and where does the Pope come into this?”

Hoagie, waved his horns in a nod.

“Yorkshire snails are much more adventurous than Yorkshire folk, but equally hardy, so we form the main body of volunteers. Then Georgie has her communications team, who are Slovak snails, and then there’s the Treasurer...”

“Who is...?”

“German.”

“Of course.”

I could see a snail with steel-rimmed spectacles, and assumed that must be the Treasurer.

“And the Pope?”

“Ah, yes, Pope Sirius the First is, as you know, Slovakian, and chose his name out of a desire to be identified with the expansion of

Catholicism to the wider Cosmos. Few know that he provided our funding from the sale of the ceiling of a small chapel in the Vatican.”

“Which chapel?”

“The Sistine Chapel.”

“What!”

“He said it was being taken down for conservation, and it is being well looked after. No one seems to have noticed the fake that’s up there now. Don Carlo was very pleased with his purchase, and it’s nice and dry in Sicily.”

“He sold it to a Mafia Don.”

“Yes. But then Don Carlo began to feel guilty at the low price, so to save his soul, he sold it on to a Sheikh, who said it would be a good asset for him to use as security against deals, but he would make sure that in the future, when everyone who might be punished was gone, it would be given back, so all would be well and everyone would think it was very funny.”

“I bet they would.”

“Well I wouldn’t complain too much – it was the extra money that funded you.”

Georgie nudged her springpod against Hoagie’s.

“Let the Professor do the explaining. It will be better coming from him.”

“Where’s the Professor?”

“Bratislava.”

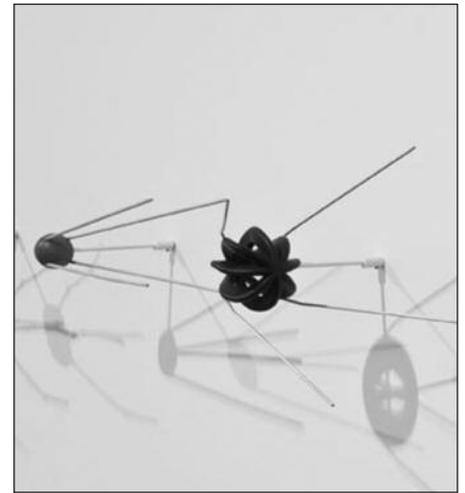
“Oh, so he’s nice and comfy, while you crack your shells out here on the edge of the Solar System.”

“It’s not too bad – centrally heated, plenty of space and food, no predators.” Hoagie waved his horns. “Plug into the communicator.”

“But the time lapse?”

“Hello? EUPOL? – I’m connected through a wormhole. This is simultaneous. Your job is to bring the snails back.”

“Wormholes and snails? All a bit horticultural. And the soil and geological samples I was supposed to collect?”



“The snails have done all that. Attach their ship to yourself and head back. Their reactor and yours will give you plenty of power and warmth all the way. And it will be a pleasure to have them back here crawling round on my copies of Wittgenstein, pointing out things I’ve missed. One horn pointing to themselves and one to the text. They make more sense than most of my colleagues here. Make sure they plant the flag firmly.”

“I think they’ve just done that. I can see them coming back.”

“They’ll need your arms and hands to slot the ship onto the lugs underneath you, and then you tighten.”

“Will it be war over Pluto then?”

“You think the Germans and EU will fight Slovakia for it? Like the Holy Roman Emperor fought the Bohemian Czechs in the Thirty Years War?”

“I thought the Czechs started that?”

“Ask your Czech computer – bye for now.”

I asked the computer. It was breezy and bright.

“The Defenestration of Prague? No they weren’t thrown out of the window by the Czechs as they claimed. Smoking had started by 1618. The Emperor’s men came in on the ground floor – decided to hop out of the window for a smoke – but a slope in the ground meant it was three floors up that side. Lucky to survive. They couldn’t tell the Emperor why, so they said the Czechs threw them out, and they started the war.”

I wasn’t going to argue with my own computer. Not before the journey, anyway. Hauling up the starship was straightforward. It seemed I was correctly designed. Before long we would leave the flag as the only remaining sign of the Slovak claim to the entire planet, and blast into space. The snails stored the last crops, packed the springpods, and stood down what remained of the settlement, hydrated themselves, drinking and bathing, and then sealed themselves in their shells in the starship and hibernated for the long journey.

I took off with the ship, climbed rapidly, left the flag far behind, set the temperature and the course, and then, just before I put myself in sleep mode for the voyage, I took one last look at the symmetry of the stars. ©

■ The images on this page are the work of Slovakian artist Roman Ondák. They are from his piece entitled *Enter the Orbit*. It consists of 96 small-scale models made from everyday items. The models are designed to resemble the USSR’s Sputnik1, the first ever space satellite.