

Tomorrow there will be another meeting, and then another meeting next month, and by 2001, the idea of men on Mars may well seem as distant as it seemed before Friday's meeting in Washington. No matter what happens, however, the moment is at least worth filing away in some distant mental corner: that a quarter century after the last Apollo mission returned from the Moon, some of the best minds NASA has to offer sat together in a conference room in Houston, Texas, where they believed—for a few hours, at least—that they were present at the birth of an enterprise that would someday succeed in landing men on Mars.

There is something typically human about our fascination with distant planets: an age-old desire to know the unknowable combined with healthy doses of egoism and pride. At NASA's campus in Houston, the best place to see these varied emotions at work is in the visitors' center, where tourists line up to touch a triangular sliver of the Moon, which is embedded in Lucite like a modern-day relic of the true cross. Children run their fingers over the smooth stone and grin.

Their parents hang back with their hands in their pockets, casting sneaky glances from side to side.

When the coast is clear they spring into action, rubbing the rock with guilty pleasure. They walk away a little embarrassed, but with an extra lift in their step that comes from having touched the Moon.

The fine-grained red ash from the Pu'u Nene cone is soft, and it sticks to your fingers. It's unearthly, yet strangely familiar as well

Most of what we know now about the surface of Mars comes from a few stray rocks: the 12 known meteorites from that planet, which are kept in nitrogen-filled cases in the Space Center's sample room, one floor below a vault containing 800 pounds of rocks from the Moon. Among these meteorites is ALH84001, recovered from the ice fields of Antarctica. It's a potato-sized rock that looks little different from the rocks you might find in your backyard, but that may or may not contain fossilized proof of life on a planet other than our own.

In the nearby engineering lab, it is possible to touch the "Mars simulant," a fine-grained red dust whose mineral properties and particle distribution are identical to what we know of the soil on Mars. The simulant is made of volcanic ash from the Pu'u Nene cinder cone in Hawaii. Within the next few weeks, 30,000 pounds of the ash will be shipped to Houston, to help NASA engineers test equipment for the possible manned mission.

The ash from the Pu'u Nene cone is soft, and it sticks to your fingers; when you wipe it off, it leaves stains on your clothes. Holding it, you realize that this may be as close as any human ever gets to touching Martian soil. The ash is unearthly, yet also strangely familiar, not unlike the larger dream its presence here is intended to serve. In the answering vastness of

space, postwar America found an extension of the frontier spirit that has bound us together since the nation was born. So it is only natural to see the end of the Apollo missions, and the years of uninspiring shuttle flights that came after it, as the end of something greater than the Cold War engineering programs that landed men on the Moon. Whatever the arguments in favor of sending men to Mars—and they are not bad arguments—it is hard to imagine that they will be taken seriously by a nation that believes more fervently in budget cuts than in government, a nation where new and intensely felt varieties of experience are brought to us by video games and big-budget movies rather than by can-do test pilots and crew-cut engineers. Now that the Cold War is won, the greatest challenge to the American space program will come not from the Russians but from ourselves, from the limits that history has imposed on our faith in a shared dream.

Doug Cooke grew up in Houston, not too far from where the Johnson Space Center now stands. His fourth-grade teacher, whose name happened to be Miss Moon, took her classes into the school cafeteria to see the Mercury flights on a black-and-white TV set. "It probably has the greatest effect on kids," Cooke says of his memories of American astronauts orbiting the earth. "Growing up, my family was very middle class, and there was no inkling that you would ever aspire to do anything different than what your parents and your neighbors did. My own experience of the space program was that it shaped your understanding of the possibilities for exploration in your own life, that there is something more to the universe than the four walls you live in or the world that you know."

Cooke's vision of a manned mission to Mars has less to do with spacesuits and life-support systems, and with the rocks and dust that the astronauts might bring back, than it does with the experience of the astronauts themselves and of the billions of people who might participate vicariously in that experience. "The engineering end is an artifact," Cooke explains, spreading his hands wide on the table. "It's what gets you there. The thing that has to come back is the personal experience of individuals."

The Apollo astronauts were test pilots and engineers, trained to report what they saw to Mission Control in language stripped of the shadings of human emotion. Astronauts of the 21st century, Cooke hopes, will be part technicians and part poets, chosen for their ability to convey their observations to the people who remain on Earth. The explorers who land on Mars will speak about the majesty of pink skies and the terrors of distant windstorms, about what it feels like to wake up one morning on a planet that is not our own.

Like the Apollo program, the Mars mission Cooke has in mind would be an expression of its time: an interactive experience, the best movie ever, with life-or-death stakes and an ending that will remain in doubt until the final frame appears on-screen. The first scenes from this adventure, he believes, may be less than a decade away. "And as safe as we can make it," he adds, "it will always be a dangerous endeavor. It will be an exciting human drama, and you won't know what happens until the moment it actually happens. You can't fast forward and find out what happens at the end." □

E S S A Y

Guidebook to a Land of Ghosts

A Yiddish phrase book is an absurd, poignant artifact of a country that never was

By MICHAEL CHABON

Illustrations by BEN KATCHOR

PROBABLY THE SADDEST BOOK that I own is a paperback copy of *Say It in Yiddish*, edited by Uriel and Beatrice Weinreich. I got it new, in 1993, but the book was originally published, by Dover, in 1958. According to the back cover, it's part of the Say It book series, with which I'm otherwise unfamiliar. I've never seen *Say It in Swahili*, *Say It in Hindi* or *Say It in Serbo-Croatian*, nor have I ever been to any of the countries where one of them might come in handy. As for the country in which I'd do well to have a copy of *Say It in Yiddish* in my pocket, naturally I've never been there either. I don't think anyone ever has.

When I first came across *Say It in Yiddish*, on a shelf in a big chain store in Orange County, California, I couldn't quite believe that it was real. There was only one copy, buried in the language section at the bottom of the alphabet. It was like a book in a story by Jorge Luis Borges: unique, inexplicable, possibly a hoax. The first thing that really struck me about it was, paradoxically, its unremarkableness, the conventional terms with which *Say It in Yiddish* advertises itself on its cover. "No other PHRASE BOOK FOR TRAVELERS," it claims, "contains all these essential features." It boasts of "Over 1,600 up-to-date practical entries" (*up-to-date!*), "easy pronunciation transcription" and a "sturdy binding—pages will not fall out."

Inside, *Say It in Yiddish* delivers admirably on all the bland promises made by the cover. Virtually every eventuality,

calamity, chance or circumstance, apart from the amorous, that could possibly befall the traveler is covered, under general rubrics like "Shopping," "Barber Shop and Beauty Parlor," "Appetizers," "Difficulties," with each of the up-to-date practical entries numbered from 1, "yes," to 1611, "the zipper," a tongue twister that *Say It in Yiddish* renders, in roman letters, as *BLITS-sbleb-s'l*. There are words and phrases to get the traveler through a visit to the doctor to take care of that *krabmf* (1317) after one has eaten too much of the *LEH-ber mit TSIB-eb-less* (620) served at the cheap *res-taw-RAHN* (495) just down the *EH-veh-new* (197) from one's *baw-TELL* (103).

One possible explanation of at least part of the absurd poignancy of *Say It in Yiddish* presents itself: that its list of words and phrases is standard throughout the Say It series. Once we accept the proposition of a modern Yiddish phrase book, Yiddish versions of such phrases as "Where can I get a social security card?" and "Can you help me jack up the car?," taken in the context of the book's part in a uniform series, become more understandable. But an examination of the specific examples chosen for inclusion under the various, presumably standard, rubrics reveals that the Weinreichs have indeed served as *editors* here, considering their supposedly useful phrases with care—electing, for example, to give Yiddish translations for the English names of the following foods, none of them very likely to be found under "Food" in Dover's



Swahili, Japanese or Malay phrase books: stuffed cabbage, krep-lach, blintzes, matzo, lox, corned beef, herring, kugel, tzimmes and schav. The fact that most of these words do not seem to require much work to get them into Yiddish suggests that *Say It in Yiddish* has been edited with a particular kind of reader in mind, the reader who is traveling, or plans to travel, to a very particular kind of place, a place where one can expect to find both *abn OON-tebr-babn* (subway) and *geb-FIL-teb FISH*.*

What were they thinking, the Weinreichs? Was the original 1958 Dover edition simply the reprint of some earlier, less heartbreakingly implausible book? At what time in the history of the world was there a place of the kind that the Weinreichs imply, a place where not only the doctors and waiters and trolley conductors spoke Yiddish but also the airline clerks, travel agents, ferry captains and casino employees? A place where you could rent a summer home from Yiddish speakers, go to a Yiddish movie, get a finger wave from a Yiddish-speaking hair-stylist, a shoeshine from a Yiddish-speaking shineboy and then have your dental bridge repaired by a Yiddish-speaking dentist? If, as seems likelier, the book first saw light in 1958, a full 10 years after the founding of Israel—which turned its back once and for all on the Yiddish language, condemning it to watch its

*I hope I will be forgiven for thinking that the following sequence, taken from "Restaurant," further suggests the kind of reader the Weinreichs have in mind:

- 508. *Waiter!*
- 516. *Please serve us quickly.*
- 525. *This is not clean.*
- 528. *I want something simple.*
- 534. *This is cold.*
- 535. *Take it away, please.*
- 536. *I did not order this.*
- 539. *Ask the head waiter to come here.*
- 544. *There is a mistake in the bill.*

native speakers die off one by one in a headlong race for extinction with the 20th century itself—then the tragic dimension of the joke looms larger and makes the Weinreichs' intentions even harder to divine. *Say It in Yiddish* seems an entirely futile effort on the part of its authors, a gesture of embittered hope, of valedictory daydreaming, of a utopian impulse turned cruel and ironic.

The Weinreichs have laid out, with numerical precision, the outlines of a world, of a fantastic land, in which it would behoove you to know how to say, in Yiddish:

- 250. *What is the flight number?*
- 1372. *I need something for a tourniquet.*
- 1379. *Here is my identification.*
- 254. *Can I go by boat/ferry to ____?*

The blank in the last of those phrases, impossible to fill in, tantalizes me. Whither could I sail on that boat/ferry, in the solicitous company of Uriel and Beatrice Weinreich, and from what shore?

DREAM OF TWO POSSIBLE DESTINATIONS. THE FIRST might be a modern independent state very closely analogous to the State of Israel. Call it the State of Yisroel: a post-war Jewish homeland created during a time of moral emergency, located presumably, but not necessarily, in Palestine; it could be in Alaska or on Madagascar. Here, perhaps, that minority faction of the Zionist movement who favored the establishment of Yiddish as the national language of the Jews was able to prevail over its more numerous Hebraist opponents. There is Yiddish on the money, of which the basic unit is the herzl, or the dollar, or even the zloty. There are Yiddish color commentators for soccer games, Yiddish-speaking cash machines, Yiddish tags on the collars of dogs. Public debate, private discourse, joking and lamentation, all are conducted not in a new-old, partly artificial language like modern Hebrew, a prefabricated skyscraper still under construction, with only the lowermost of its stories as yet inhabited by the generations,

but in a tumble-down old palace capable in the smallest of its stones (the word *nu*) of expressing slyness, tenderness, derision, romance, disputation, hopefulness, skepticism, sorrow, a lascivious impulse or the confirmation of one's worst fears.

The implications of this change in the language of the "Jewish homeland"—a change that, depending on your view of human character and its underpinnings, is either minor or fundamental—are difficult to sort out. I can't help thinking that such a nation, speaking its essentially European tongue, would, in the Middle East, stick out among its neighbors to an even greater degree than Israel does now. But would the Jews of a Mediterranean Yisroel be impugned and admired for having the kind of character that Israelis, rightly or wrongly, are taken to have, the classic sabra personality: rude, scrappy, loud, tough, hardheaded, cagey, pushy? Is it living in a near-permanent state of war, or is it the Hebrew language, or something else, that has made Israeli humor so barbed, so cynical, so untranslatable? Perhaps this Yisroel, like its cognate in our own world, can seem a frightening, even a harrowing, place, as the following sequence from the section on "Difficulties" seems to imply:

- 109. *What is the matter here?*
- 110. *What am I to do?*
- 112. *They are bothering me.*
- 113. *Go away.*
- 114. *I will call a policeman.*

I can imagine a different Yisroel, the youngest nation on the North American continent, founded in the former Alaska territory during World War II as a resettlement zone for the Jews of Europe. (For a brief while, I once read, Franklin Roosevelt was nearly sold on such a plan.) Perhaps after the war, in this Yisroel, the millions of immigrant Polish, Romanian, Hungarian, Lithuanian, Austrian, Czech and German Jews held a referendum, and chose independence over proffered statehood in the United States. The resulting country is obviously a far different place from Israel. It is a cold, northern land of furs, paprika,

samovars and one long, glorious day of summer. The portraits on those postage stamps we buy are of Walter Benjamin, Simon Dubnow and Bruno Schulz and of a hundred Jews unknown to us, whose greatness was allowed to flower only here, in this world. It would be absurd to speak Hebrew, that tongue of spikenard and almonds, in such a place. This Yisroel—or maybe it would be called Alyeska—is a kind of Jewish Sweden, social-democratic, resource-rich, prosperous, organizationally and

temperamentally more akin to its immediate neighbor, Canada, than to its freewheeling benefactor farther south. Perhaps, indeed, there has been some conflict, in the years since independence, between the United States and Alyeska. Perhaps oil fields have been seized, fishing vessels boarded. Perhaps not all of the native peoples were happy with the outcome of Roosevelt's humanitarian policies and the treaty of 1948. (None of the empty places of the world is ever empty enough. If they had sent Jews to Antarctica, the penguins, one feels, would now be setting off bombs.) Lately there may have been a few problems assimilating the Jews of Quebec, in flight from the ongoing separatist battles there.

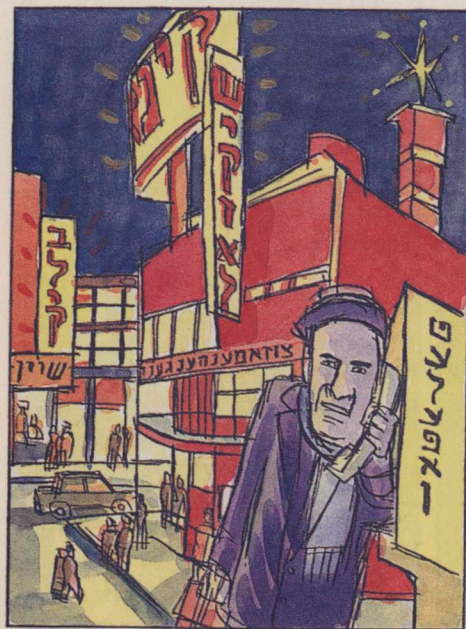
This country of the Weinreichs is in the nature of a wistful fantasyland, a toy theater with miniature sets and furnishings to arrange and rearrange, painted backdrops on which the gleaming lineaments of a snowy Jewish Onhava can be glimpsed, all its grief concealed behind the scrim, hidden in the machinery of the loft, sealed up beneath trapdoors in the floorboards. But grief haunts every mile of that other destination to which the Weinreichs beckon, unwittingly perhaps but in all the awful details that Dover's *Say It* series requires. Grief hand-colors all the postcards, stamps the passports, sours the cooking, fills the luggage. It keens all night in the pipes of old hotels. The Weinreichs are taking us home, to the "old country." To Europe.

In this Europe the millions of Jews who were never killed produced grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren. The countryside retains large pockets of country people whose first language is still Yiddish, and in the cities there are many more for whom Yiddish is the language of kitchen and family, of theater and poetry and scholarship. A surprisingly large number of these people are my relations. I can go visit them, the way Irish-Americans I know are always visiting second and third cousins in Galway or Cork, sleeping in their strange beds, eating their strange food and looking just like them. Imagine. Perhaps one of my cousins might take me to visit the house where my father's mother was born, or to the school in Vilna that my grandfather's grandfather attended with the boy Abraham Cahan. For my relatives, although they will doubtless know at least some English, I will want to trot out a few appropriate Yiddish phrases, more than anything as a way of reestablishing the tenuous connection between us; in this world Yiddish is not, as it is in ours, a tin can with no tin can on the other end of the string. Here, though I can get by without them, I will be glad to have the Weinreichs along. Who knows but that visiting some remote Polish backwater I may be compelled to visit a dentist to whom I will want to cry out, having found the appropriate number (1447), *eer TOOT meer VAY!*

What is this Europe like, with its 25, 30 or 35 million Jews? Are they tolerated, despised, ignored by or merely indistinguishable from their fellow modern Europeans? What is the world like, never having felt the need to create an Israel, that hard bit of grit in the socket that hinges Africa to Asia?

What does it mean to originate from a place, from a world, from a culture that no longer exists, and from a language that may die in this generation? What phrases would I need to know in order to speak to those millions of unborn phantoms to whom I belong?

Just what am I supposed to do with this book? ■



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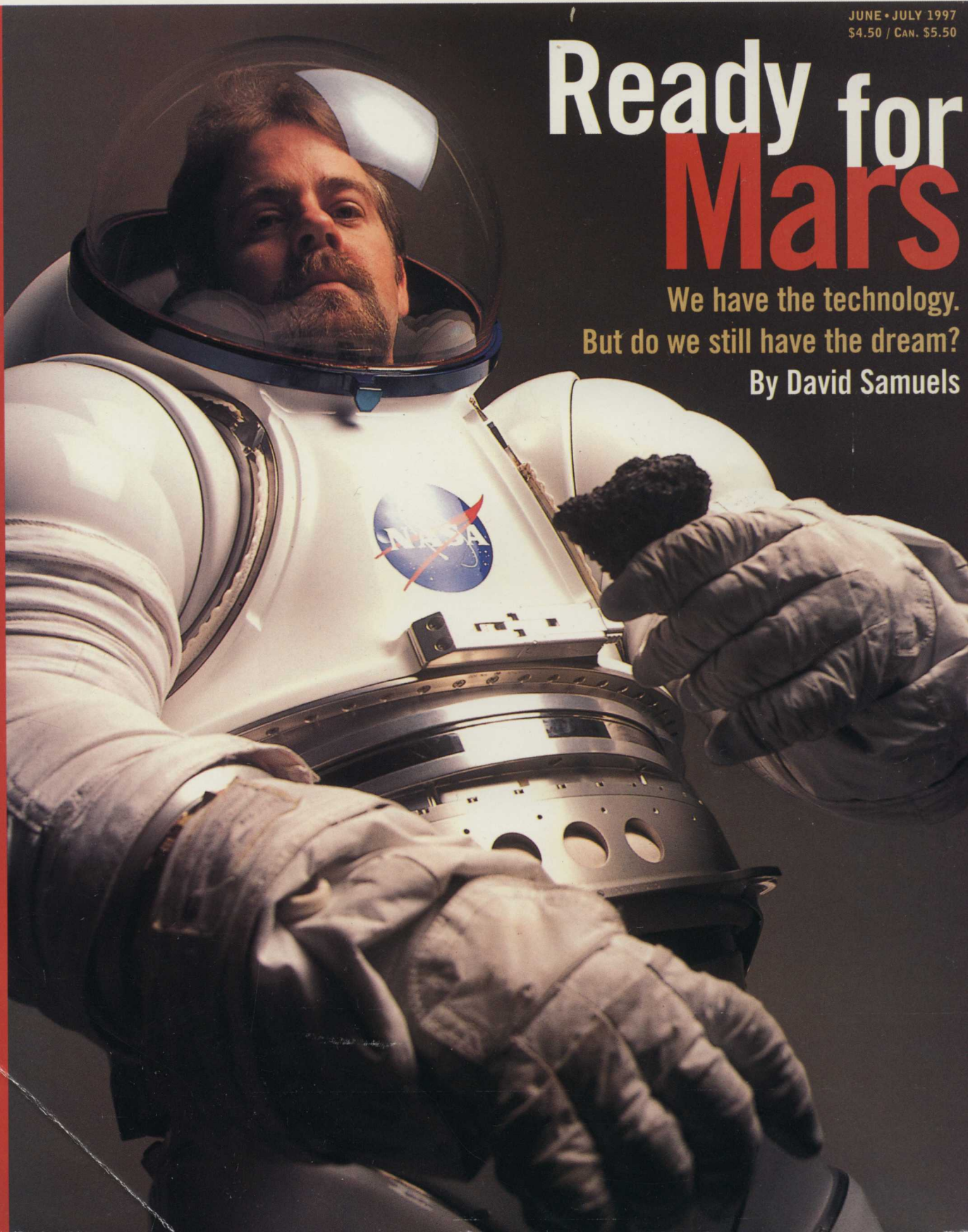
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My Life as
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Ready for Mars

We have the technology.
But do we still have the dream?

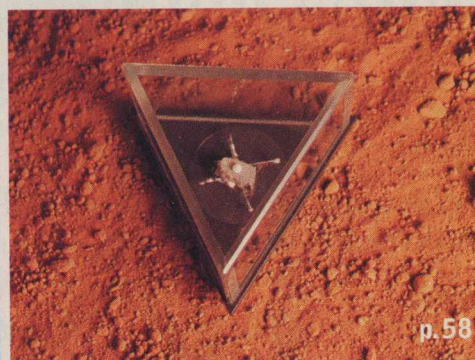
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