

so far from home

by eamon byrne

Its colour a spectral silver shimmered in the pale afternoon sunlight which glinted on its small red and blue insignia so far from home. The landing stage of the unmanned Viking spacecraft had broken away from the main section on schedule before starting its descent through the pale pink pellucid atmosphere. The command to separate had been radioed to the orbiting spacecraft. Small explosive charges blew apart bolts connecting the craft. A system of tiny springs pushed the module away from its housing which had been spiraling for months through the thin Martian sky. The lander had been instructed not to use its engines until it was so distant there could be no danger of damage to its purple solar panels. Only then were they burnt for twenty four minutes to crank its course and bring about correct descent trajectory. Only then was entry into the atmosphere of the red planet effected. Within six minutes a parachute opened billowing, breaking its fall. Its protective shield discarded careered on to crash. One minute later the motors came on braking. The parachute jettisoned floated off like some obscure piece of concept art draping a distant dune. For a moment in the pale wind there was a loud roar of light. Then down and in came Viking to hover over that alien plane. In its final four hundred metres of descent its speed had dropped from 200 to 8.8 kilometres per hour. Down, down the last tenuous, the terminal, centimetres on a soft updraft of rocket exhaust some mythic rutting insect it came. Groped out one of its probe's three extended aluminium suckers and humped the planet's surface. Contact. Across the universe sped beams to base expectant signals nineteen minutes from Viking. So to this end this dream of planetary fate fulfilled. Billions of years of writhing seething evolution. Then totally dead. Now this. In triumph, man. Here we are!

Later it would peer about blinking its big eye. See all. Line by line
on monitors. Rocks, rolling desert. Shadows of rivets on footpad.
Pink sky even, cirrus clouds, all.

