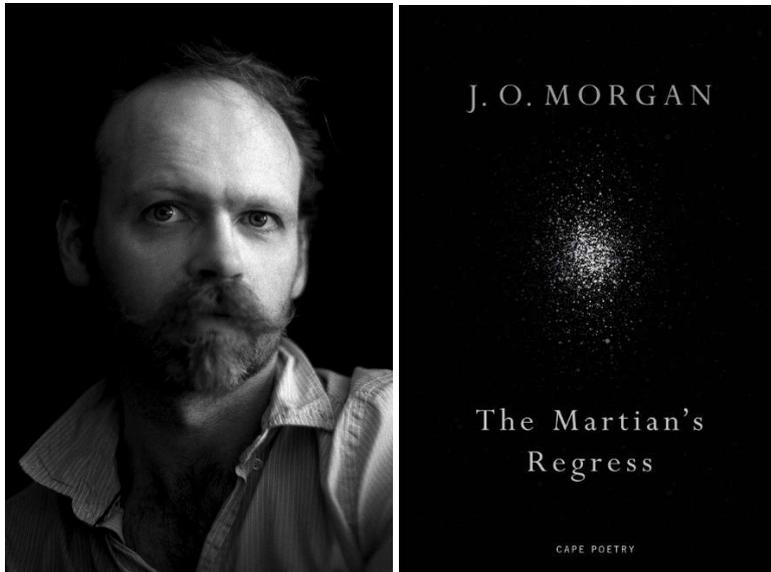


The Martian's Regress **by J O Morgan**



J O Morgan lives on a small farm in the Scottish Borders. His first book, *Natural Mechanical* (CB Editions, 2009), won the Aldeburgh First Collection Prize and was shortlisted for the Forward First Collection Prize; its sequel, *Long Cuts* (CB Editions, 2011), was shortlisted for a Scottish Book Award. In 2015, Morgan published *In Casting Off* (HappenStance Press), a poem-novella that tells a love story that is set within a remote fishing community. *Interference Pattern*, shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize, appeared from Cape Poetry in 2016, and *Assurances* – which won the Costa Prize for Poetry - in 2018.

Reviews

‘A lone martian returns to Earth. He leaves behind him a hardened survivalist culture, its muddled myths and songs, its continued abuse of the environment that sustains it. During this journey back to the now-broken and long-abandoned mother planet, the martian begins to consider his own uncertain origins, and his own future.

Cut off from his people, the martian's story is that of the individual: his duty at odds with his desire; the race of which he's still a part playing always on his mind, as well as the race that once was. This is the story of what life becomes when stripped of all that makes it worth living – of what humans become when they lose their humanity.

The Martian's Regress is a brilliant, provocative, often darkly comic work that explores what a fragile environment eventually makes of those who persist in tampering with it.’
(description via Cape)

‘Morgan ... allow[s] for cadenzas, nursery rhymes, fables and sort-of-sonnets as the narrative progresses. It is a melancholy book in that the Martian is returning to a devastated

Earth, and is homesick, for example, for two moons in the sky. What it does exceptionally well is make clear what ecological catastrophe might feel like as well as look like.' (Stuart Kelly, *The Scotsman*)

Of the Urge to Return

Like the tentative step towards
The seemingly fizzled fuse of a huge re firecracker
And the hand reaching out once again
With the end of the dropping taper fiercely glowing

Or the sponge cake far too long left in the oven
And still when the skewer is pushed in deep
Then slowly drawn back out
Its surface is inexplicably sticky with dough –

So there was always that nagging doubt
A persistent gnawing restlessness
The itch they knew it was probably best not to pester
That something they desperately needed had been left behind

And if they ever found it wasn't there
If absence yawned its heavy emptiness they also knew
They'd have to go on looking a little while longer
Just in case their methods had been wrong.

On a tour of the Martian Caves

If the pale slender figures scratched onto the walls
Were said to reflect the first of intelligent life
It was only due to the sticks of white chalk being used
Standing out better against the slick black stone

And where these primitive artworks had been patterned
Out of smeary fingerprints
It was such as children
With small grubby hands often made

And if over countless generations
This record had been preserved through lightlessness
It was only because none but the bored and the work-shy
Ever ventured to loiter down this way

And if stopping to listen you thought you could hear
Their long-dead voices still murmuring through the caverns
The trick worked best if you spoke fairly loudly and clearly
Before shutting up

The Martian Commutes

The routine of his breakfast bright
With early morning's glassy light,
He'd sip his tea, she'd zip him
Into his plasticated suit, test its robustness with
A small sharp pat on the back
Before passing him his battered briefcase
In which his sample jars and airtight lunchbox
Had been packed.

Across the hall from the martian's penthouse suite
His private elevator shaft,
The sudden start of that long descent
Lifting the weight for a moment from his feet.

The next floor on his list was deep underground.
He needed a secret code just to open the doors.
An automated hiss and purge
The chime of strip lights blinking on and there
Was the cold grey tunnel that led to the lab.

He stepped out. He stopped.
He considered his options.

She wouldn't show any surprise at his early return.
She'd have no concept of how long he'd been gone.
he'd get on with his jigsaw and she'd stand by
Ironing his cotton handkerchiefs.

He took a short step back and pressed
The button for the topmost floor.
The doors sucked slowly shut. The cables jerked.
He took the day off.

Discussion Ideas

- What do Martians mean to us? How does that meaning change across time or artistic genres? Which are your favourite literary, filmic or musical Martians?
- Is 'Of the Urge to Return' laid out like you'd expect a Martian to write poetry – formal quatrains, old-fashioned majesculated lines (capital letters at the beginning of lines unrelated to the word's position in its sentence or phrase)? Why might J O Morgan have chosen this form for his Martian's tales?

- What does 'On a tour of the Martian Caves' have to say about the impulse to create art?
- In an earlier poem in the collection we are introduced to the Martian's companion as she is unpacked – 'soft rubber skin', 'wipeably clean', 'A womanly shell with the woman removed'. Reading 'The Martian Commutes', how do you think gender relations are going on J O Morgan's version of Mars? If you read the whole collection, does your opinion change?
- 'The Martian Commutes' – is this a vision of the future of work?

Other books by J O Morgan

Assurances (Cape, 2018)

Natural Mechanical (C B Editions, 2009)

If you liked J O Morgan, try ...

- Michael Symmons Roberts
- Don Paterson
- Steve Ely

J O Morgan online

[J O Morgan at the Poetry Archive](#)