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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Finches of Mars**

Written by Brian Aldiss

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## *An Oceanless World*

The word ‘scenery’ was not in use on Mars. One might talk instead of ‘the prospect’.

The prospect was modestly dramatic. Volcanoes on this section of Tharsis were small and scattered. The settlement site on the Tharsis Shield had been chosen for its underground water supply and its comparative smoothness. A path had been worn leading eastwards a short way. A man and woman were walking side-by-side along the path, treading with the high-kneed gait the lower gravity of Mars encouraged. The pair were thickly dressed and wore face masks, since they were beyond the atmospheric confine of the project settlement.

This constitutional exercise, though remarkable enough, had come about by events and arrangements of some complexity, inspired in large part by the findings of the NASA experimental vehicle, *Curiosity*, in 2012AD – when both of these new Martians were not even conceived.

Rooy and Aymee were taking their daily exercise. They had discovered in the austerities of this derelict planet something they had sought without success in their previous lives. No air: perfect vision – clarity of sight and mind. Martian orange-grey sterility. Aymee, dark of skin and outspoken, always declared that Mars served as a physical manifestation of the support system of the subconscious.

The great spread of an oceanless world surrounded them. Such water as there was flowed hidden underground. As usual, the couple had walked until the brow of Olympus Mons showed like consciousness above the horizon.

They were walking now between two volcanoes, believed to be extinct, Pavonis Mons and, to the south, Arsia Mons, passing quite close to the rumpled base of the former. In one of these small fissures they had found a little clump of cyanobacteria which added to the interest of their walk. They believed it to be a mark of an ancient underground waterway.

Their progress was slow; Rooy had his left leg encased in plaster, setting a broken bone.

Little Phobos, having risen in the west, was at present speeding above the Shield. Sight of it was obscured by a wind that carried fine dust. The dust and the distant star, Sol, low on the landscape, gave a dull golden aspect to everything.

‘I was wondering about our contentment,’ Aymee said. ‘If we weren’t under some odd compulsion to come here? Or if we’re not here and are experiencing some form of delusion? Reality can be rather tenuous up here.’

‘And not only here,’ said Rooy, chuckling.

Back on Earth, one of the screamers had run an opinion poll about the six towers in the Martian settlement. The towers were graded as follows:

CHINESE: MOST ELABORATE  
WEST: MOST LEARNED  
RUSS-EAST: MOST ARTISTIC  
SINGA-THAI: MOST EXCLUSIVE  
SCAND: MOST SPARTAN  
SUD-AM: MOST EXOTIC

‘Maybe there’s something to be said for making it up as you go along,’ said Aymee. ‘How do “they” know what it feels like to be here?’

‘It’s nice to know we’re still in the news, however conjectural.’

‘Conjectural? More like a sideshow.’

‘I wake up every morning to marvel,’ said Rooy.

‘And sleep every evening to snore.’

‘Was it the twentieth century author, someone Burgess, who said, “Laugh and the world laughs with you, snore and you snore alone.”?’

‘Anthony, I believe. Anyhow, you’ve told me that one before.’

They fell silent. Something in the ambience of the prospect, engendered silence. Some found this ambience alarming, some a delight – if a delight of an uncertain kind.

It was Rooy who spoke next.

‘You know what I miss most?’ he said. ‘Rajasthan.’

‘Rajasthan!’ Aymee exclaimed. She had been born there of a high caste Hindu family. ‘Parts of Tharsis remind me of parts of Rajasthan.’

She thought only of the sandy reaches, where the odd goat might be found, and not of the fecund regions where deer ran and rutted among acacia trees.

The West tower loomed ahead of them. It did not stand alone. All told, the six towers had been built within sight of each other: not close enough to form an illusion of ‘togetherness’, yet still near enough to each other to make, as it might be, a statement of intent – that humanity had arrived at last, and was trying to form something more than a mere voice crying in the wilderness.

And those voices . . . The UU had created linguistic rather than political bases for each site.

A number of pipes led in from the wilds into the basement of the West’s building; the water they carried had been charted by Operation Horizon over a year previously. Methane plumes escaping from under the planetary crust were trapped to serve heating and cooking requirements. This development, as with the towers themselves, and the whole Mars enterprise, was funded by the UU. The settlement thus remained ever dependent on terrestrial liberality.

Liberality. Something else absorbed into the unceasing terrestrial power struggle: a tap easily turned off.

Confronting the grey tower, Rooy said, ‘Back to the subterranean life . . .’ He was a machinist and spent much of his life underground.

Once Aymee and Rooy were inside the confinement zone they could remove their masks and breathe shallowly. In a year or two – or maybe three – the modest area of contained atmosphere would have approached normal limits. The six towers stood in this zone under a large friction-stir welding dome; from this leaked an atmosphere consisting mainly of nitrogen, mixed with 21.15% oxygen. The circular zone guard retained most of the gas. Still, few people cared to stay unmasked outside the towers for long.

As Aymee punched in their code, she said, ‘Another new word needed there. “Subterranean” can’t be right.’

The gate was opened by the door guardian, a man called Phipp, who hustled the pair in. Guardianship was considered to be an important post. Blood, pulse and eyesight readings had to be taken by automatic machines within the martial confinement of the gatehouse before anyone from outside was allowed to move freely inside.

This entailed a delay of only 55 seconds, unless the automatics detected reasons for stoppage and possible treatment; nevertheless this precautionary delay was widely resented. Resented, although Mars imposed its own delay on the passage of time. Aymee and Rooy waited at the tower gate, hand in hand.