

Mother Mara: Reflections of an Early Settler

*by Denyse Goltha*

*100th (Earth-Year) Anniversary Edition*

*with introduction and commentary by Nyota Liu, Poet Laureate of Mars*

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0th edition

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# Introduction by the Editor

When I first learned about Dr. Denyse Goltha, as many of us do, in my sixth-grade history class, it seemed that her political and scientific achievements often overshadowed her literary ones. Why care about a paltry collection of poems when there are exciting bacterial discoveries and innovations, political activism and intrigue? It has been my belief after years of studying Goltha’s literary work that such achievements in the public sphere cannot be fully understood without reading her poetry. It is in her poetry that she first wrestles with questions like home, belonging, nature, human-ness / alien-ness, etc. It is in her poetry that we see firsthand her initial struggle to connect with Mars, a struggle that so many Earth-born colonists still experience. Her poetry is also where she begins to construct a mythology of Mars for Martians, something so seemingly intrinsic to Martian culture now that we forget that it was she who came up with it.

As her earliest poetic work, this collection gives us a picture of Goltha unseen in the media—young, rough, raw, but also passionate, curious, thoughtful. Not as refined as we’re used to, sometimes invasively personal, Goltha allows us to enter her mind with her while living in the first years of Colony One.[[1]](#footnote-1)†

Nyota Liu
Kinkora Crater, Mars
EY 2151 / MY 287

# Preface

Mars has other names, of course:

*al-Qāhira*—Cairo—the camp of Mars;

*Her Deshur*, Horus the Red;

*Ma’adim*, the one who blushes;

*Nergal*, the Babylonian deity of fire, war, destruction;

*Mangala*, who was born of the sweat of Shiva;

the Chinese and Japanese called it simply *huǒ xīng* and *kasei*—

“fire star,” as the first five planets were named for the five elements.

All these names succumbed to the Latin *stella Martis*,

star of Mars, later transformed to not merely Mars’s star but Mars himself—

and Mara gathered up these other names for herself

and they became the names of her battle wounds, her valleys:

a tribute to all the peoples for millennia who, looking up at the night sky,

pointed at her, the fiery red star, and named her, claimed her for their own.

# Part One

For her first years on Mars, Denyse Goltha struggled with the contradiction of her dream of living there coming true, and yet feeling depressed about being condemned to what she saw as a dead planet. She enthusiastically attacked her work in Colony One's greenhouse and her research exploring hints of previous Martian life; but inwardly, as expressed in her poetry, she harbored deep feelings of alienness and a lack of belonging.

The colony's rough beginning included questions of funding, a month-long satellite malfunction at the end of the Martian year, and several near-fatal accidents. The birth of her niece in EY 2042 / MY 230, referenced in her poem “Every Pixel,” also sparked a depressive episode, which some speculate is when she began drafting poems for this collection.

Goltha felt as if Mars was actively hostile to the seemingly-unwanted colonists, which spurred her to create a mythological personification of the planet as Gaia’s sister—“Mara.”

## I. Solo

I awake—a new *sol* has begun.

Even our name for the days here,

the sun same as the one

on Earth, reminds me that we are alone.

The sole inhabitants of an inhabitable world.

This planet wants so much to remain solo

(an immortal hermit shuffling laps around

and around the sun) that it rejects us

as many times as it spins in orbit. It is a wild planet,

not to be broken and domesticated like its sister,

our mother. It will not be killed slowly like her,

because it is already dead.

## II. A Fly in the Window

I’m thinking about ponderosas today, remembering

that he hated them. They reminded him of dryness and forest fires.

Through the glass, a dark planet. Phobos swings westward

and my gaze follows it, the only moving thing.

The stringy plants in the greenhouse weigh down my chest

with their fragile leaves, their thin yellowing tendrils.

What I would give for a fly in the window right now.

My husband catches my eye as it glazes over;

this weak instant coffee cannot prepare me for another sol.

## III. Thirst

This rusty planet: my new, dead mother.

Isn’t it sad? A mother with no milk to give her (adopted) children—

these children she didn’t want,

whom she tries to starve and suffocate.

And I don’t blame her.

We pretend to adapt, as if we have no other choice,

and search the night sky for our real mother,

wondering why we left her swollen green breast for this dried-up red dug.

## IV. Every Pixel

You are red like this dust that covers everything.

Your face is wrinkled, scrunched up, like so many valleys—

a tiny fist is raised, ready to challenge the god of war himself.

Tears rise as I memorize every pixel of this image.

I want to see it when I close my eyes

because you will never meet me, your mother’s sister,

as real as a character in a movie to you,

someone whom you can never talk to in real-time,

but always delayed, always out-of-reach,

who will watch you from afar, some ancestor

gazing from the heavens, as you grow up without me.

## V. The Crone

Earth’s children had tired of her, and searched for a new mother instead.

They chose Mara, a bony, dusty crone with no children of her own

because she had poisoned them, filled their bodies with red sand,

and was waiting for more curious Hansels and Gretels to wander into her home.

But Earth’s children were wise, or thought they were,

and came prepared with antidotes to outwit her.

They tricked her, trapped her in the cage she devised for them.

“We’ve tamed you, can you be our mother now?” they asked.

She stared at them through the bars of the cage, and she did not speak.

# Part Two

As Goltha became more familiar with the planet and was able to make more regular expeditions outside the colony, her attitude towards Mars as an actively hostile planet appeared to diminish, resulting in a characterization of Mara that is indifferent, almost self-occupied. As she continued to work on both her scientific and her poetic work, she found a way to connect to the environment while still questioning her relationship with it, and began to wonder how that relationship might change if Mars was found to have previously sustained life.

Her poetry in this section begins to adopt themes that will contribute to her anti-terraforming stance so prominent in her later work. As Earth at this time was beset with ecological problems resulting from its poor treatment at the hands of its inhabitants, Goltha begins to wonder what justification she and the other colonists have for attempting to "make Mars in their own image," as she said in her EY 2051 / MY 235 letter to the United Nations.[[2]](#footnote-2)†

## VI. Voyage to Mars

*I'm floating but I cannot float anywhere*

*because I am also trapped in a tight dark box*

*I'm floating in a box floating in a vacuum*

*I chose to do this, I remember now*

*I walked into this box fought to get inside it*

*my joints popping and thin bones crunching*

*so that I can die breathing my own carbon dioxide*

*a soft blue light I will float towards it*

*is it a screen or a sunset and does it matter*

*I will chase it anyway*

*anything but the darkness is good to me*

*let it shimmer over me and allow me to breathe*

*I gasp and my lungs collapse*

*there is light but there is no air*

*I have arrived but I am not home*

*the box opens and I unroll my body*

*and find that I am in another box it is larger but still small*

*other skeletons flop out of their boxes and snap joints into place*

*aren’t you relieved to be out of there they say*

## VII. Touch

i.

The rock is lifted by her (straining from the suit pressure).

She wonders how much it would weigh on Earth.

But that’s a pointless question; this rock will never feel

the gravity of Earth pulling it into the ground.

All it has known is Mars.

And now the rock knows a human hand,

gloved, lifting it, plucking it out from

its home of a million years

to move it a few meters.

Ostensibly to put it in the geology lab,

but really to bring a piece of Mars

into her home, touch it with bare skin, and

get to know the recluse sharing her apartment wall.

ii.

She passes through the airlock

and looks down at the palm-sized rock.

A wet circle of red appears on its surface;

her nose has begun to bleed.

She tilts her head back,

red redder than the rock she’s holding

trailing from her nose into her mouth.

Without stopping to mop it up,

she slowly suits up again, opens the airlock,

and hurls the rock back into its mother’s womb.

## VIII. Reflection on a Sunset

The sky is rose, turning blue where the sun sets.

Should it comfort me that this is the same sun that Earth sees?

Our stingy sun at its best gives us the light of a cloudy Earth day,

scattering through dusty air to give us Martian butterscotch skies.

Or perhaps it is Mara, resentful at my judgment of her sun,

spinning up weekslong duststorms so when the sun is finally back,

uncovered, we may weep with gratitude.

But as pink softens to purple deepens to blue I cannot be bitter,

cannot be homesick. Deimos is climbing, looking as Venus does from Earth.

The sun is almost beneath the crater rim.

That blue light calls me.

## IX. Touch, part ii

Stepping out of the rover into the dried-up riverbed,

I wish to press my ear to the ground and hear her voice.

I want to know what she looked like in her youth.

Were rivers flowing, plants growing?

Does this bed carry the sleeping bones of fish, insects, trilobites—

or something completely unknown, waiting for me?

No. There is nothing here, and if there were,

it would not be waiting for me. It wants nothing to do with me.

It wants me to leave its dry bones where they are.

## X. Reflection on a Crater

i.

All around me, a wall of mountains that are not mountains.

They are the rim of a bowl that we are trying to escape, like trapped earwigs.

After bumping toward them for hours, they still look the same size.

We will camp for several sols before reaching them.

Wispy clouds mark the creamy sky; no duststorms this week.

Mara is sleepy. "Somebody to Love" starts playing

and the rover swells with our singing, as if we wrote the song ourselves.

ii.

Standing at the crater rim at last, I see my whole world—

bumpy rocks, dunes, pits, and valleys—laid out in front of me.

Wheel tracks mark the winding route we took:

a new geography ground into Mara’s face,

until she conceals the mark we gave her with a brush of dust.

## XI. Something New

She leans back, fingers weaving into her hair,

as the fleshy creatures wrapped in thirteen layers

of protection waddle around on her body, dipping

tools into crevices and tripping on the rolls of her stomach.

She doesn't care what they do.

Why would she? She is massive; she is ancient.

It is interesting at least to have something

moving around that's not wind or radiation

or her two tiny moons circling her for eons.

It is something new—as long as they play nice.

So she watches, the corners of her eyes wrinkling

while her mouth remains a line, and watches as the humans climb

out of the crater and into the bright sun.

# Part Three

In Colony One's third Martian year (EY 2046 / MY 232), Goltha's team made the stunning discovery of fossilized bacteria (*Allochromatium bradburius*), drawn from an ice core to ensure that it was not a contaminant from Earth. Knowing that Mars had been, at some point, capable of sustaining life posed problems for Goltha—did this justify bringing more life to Mars, deliberately as well as inadvertently? Could this mean that Mara was not hostile or indifferent, but mourning her children—and possibly open to more life?

Proponents of terraforming at this point began to claim that terraforming could be used to “restore” Mars to its previous, life-capable state. Responding to these claims, Goltha published her now-famous op-ed in *Two Globes*, “Humans on Mars: A Blessing or a Curse?”—a piece that, while not as strong or cohesive as her later work, debuted the question of terraforming as a topic not just for academics, but as a policy that every Terran and Martian now had to have an opinion on.

## XII. Vision

*I open the airlock and enter a Martian orchard*

*purple vines climbing green-barked trees*

*with flying snakes and desert mice singing*

*and coming in and out of vision*

*fruit the size of my head threatens to fall*

*a chirruping lizard threatens to drown out all other sounds*

*I plunge my hand into the rich red soil*

*and realize it’s not dirt but a clod of wriggling red worms*

*laughing into the jungle-orchard gathering strange flowers*

*a butterfly bigger than me lights on a tree and begins to drink*

*thirsty I join it and we drink together the milk of the flower of the tree of*

A pressure alarm wakes me, but it stops before there’s time to sit up.

Instead my gaze falls into the blank night sky of my bedroom ceiling.

The true Mars—the real, stark, barren Mars—

destroys the organic as if she’s defending herself from a virus.

To change her would be to kill her, even as I try to bring her to life.

## XIII. Reflection on a Duststorm

It has been dark for ten sols now.

The dust keeps the sun from reaching us,

and pummels the domes and windows of my home.

Soft lights mimic the pattern the sun would make--

someone on Earth must be patting themselves on the back

right now for thinking of that.

I continue with work and life, pretending that

an apocalyptic event isn't happening a few feet away,

just past the thin membrane of this wall.

I can die here from something much less bombastic:

a defect in my pressure suit, perhaps, or

the slow disintegration of my body from radiation.

The duststorm continues

and I am soothed by its constancy.

## XIV. Searching

We have drawn an ice core from deep within Mara's womb.

Shielded from radiation, sheltered within their mother,

perhaps some of her children survived, even

when her oceans and atmosphere abandoned her.

This ice core, born with the mountains, should be enough.

I fall asleep at my desk while computers churn, searching for new life.

## XV. Extinguish

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## i.

The stooped woman runs, clutching a small bundle.

She trips over a rock, a rock now red with blood.

She leaves a frosted crimson trail behind her,

but she does not notice.

All her attention is forward: running with her child in her

arms and she knows that she cannot save it but she runs anyway,

because all she has are her long legs and her vast lungs.

She can't stop but the atmosphere is thinning—

the corners of her vision are black—

she stumbles now as ice begins to creep up her bloodied legs

as it begins to wrap around her like her arms are wrapped around her baby—

## ii.

*Everything is cold now nothing can be felt* she says,

growing bitter seeing her sister falling over

from all the children hanging off of her limbs.

She sits by her child’s icy grave;

she sits with knees tucked to her chest

because it is so cold but she cannot die

so instead she waits.

# Part Four

The discovery of *A. bradburius* hugely impacted Goltha's—and the world's—understanding of Mars and the origins of life. These conceptions, however, would be put into question once more in just a few years. Three Martian years (and about five Earth years) after the discovery of the fossils, Goltha and her team isolated Mars-adapted Earth bacteria (*Serratia martiana*) that had been growing on Colony One's nuclear generator, and proved that it had mutated from an extremophile (*Serratia liquefaciens*) that had hitched a ride with the colonists. While such a phenomenon had been theorized about decades before, this was the first time it had been observed.

Possibly because of her discovery, Goltha began to wonder what made something “Terran” or “Martian”—if, for instance, life on Earth had been seeded by a meteorite from another solar system, did that make it alien? At what point did life become inextricably bound to the planet it was living on? These are the questions that Goltha is famous for wrestling with in later works such as *Domeplace: Theories of Post-Earth Home* and, of course, “The Making of a Martian,” but here, in this collection, is where they first plant themselves in her mind.

## XVI. Apotheosis

*crawling through a tunnel that is pulsating and alive*

*I’m not sure if it is trying to keep me in*

*or trying to push me out but in any case*

*I have reached the end it has vomited me out into a vast cavern*

*it is where she is hiding has she been hiding this whole time*

*I look at her I can hardly see your face through the matted hair I say*

*she reaches out the hand and I extend mine towards her*

*and caress her broken fingers*

*when we touch she gasps as if I shocked her with a defibrillator*

*she stands upright her bones cracking as they mend themselves and straighten*

*her hair is glossy and bronze oil has been poured over it*

*I have fallen back she is a giant now*

*she looks at me benevolently now, a queen*

*she breaks the roof of the cavern with the heel of her hand*

*and with me holding onto her ankle she climbs out*

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## XVII. Touch, part iii

Will I ever feel your breath on my skin?

Will I walk in your dirt, on your face, with bare feet?

My sealed suit keeps us from truly knowing each other.

Or is it a contraceptive, because my love for you—

my curiosity, my unthinking attempts at conquest—

must be contained, protecting you from earthly impurities—

and life—

##

## XVIII. Homeland

Some believe that millions of years ago

another race of aliens seeded Earth with life—

deliberately, as part of some conspiracy to spread themselves

across the universe like strawberry jam,

or indirectly, as pregnant asteroids or debris

found new homes on our planet.

If this were true, how many more million years

did it take for that life to be indisputably Terran?

One generation? Seven? Twenty?

At what point did it decide that it needed Earth to survive?

My mother left her family’s ancient Euphrates farmland

when it was scorched in a civil war.

She could never go back, and never felt like she

belonged in Europe, where her father forced her to stay.

I never knew that old place but I could feel it, sometimes,

in my mother’s clouded eyes.

The wind stirs rusty particles of dust across the crusted Martian plains.

I wonder if my mother would have preferred to flee here.

## XIX. Rise

“You are not my children,” Mara told the humans.

“You are my nieces and nephews, but one day we will have children together.”

She sits in a driftwood rocking chair on Olympus Mons,

a circle of humans sitting cross-legged around her.

In her lap is a rock like any other rock,

but Mara with her divine eyes can see

that the rock is covered by millions of microbes,

a gift from her sister for her to surrogate.

Her gaze drifts from the rock to the humans

and settles on the horizon.

Her eyes glow as the rising sun touches them,

and her fingers curl around the rock.

1. † Colony One was founded in Earth Year (EY) 2040 / Mars Year (MY) 229. This collection spans approximately from that time until EY 2051 / MY 235. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. † An Earth-centered precursor of the United Coalition of Planets. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)