

Futures

Five books from the Alnif Crater travelling library

A better way to text. By Stewart C. Baker



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

5. *Ghazals in Red* by Moniza Bukhari

Ten years now since they tented the crater. Six since the Alnif sea settled into its final shape, huddled against the easternmost wall.

Tashi's been here longer and should be used to it by now. And yet, as zie makes zir delivery run along the highland road, zie sees as if for the first time the steep cliff of the crater wall in the far distance, the waves churning greyly against the spires that jut up from the sea's surface closer by. Gulls wheel above it all, making their nests in the cliffs and spires alike, their raucous cries carrying surprisingly far in the crater's thin air.

Bukhari visited Mars only once, long before open water existed on the red planet. Before they even thought about tenting over entire craters. Still, this slim volume of poetry is full of ocean imagery and Martian landscapes, and for that, many transplants love her.

Tashi drops it in the mail slot of a bunker house near the crater lip, then turns back to the road.

4. *Maintaining Relationships from Another Planet* by Konrad Shelhamer

Zir first delivery done, Tashi follows another path down from the rim towards the crater basin.

The rim farms are older, more established. With the perchlorates that make Martian regolith poisonous to greenery leached away on their own farms, those who live there spend their spare time making the communal soil arable. Afterwards, they seed dandelions, kale, ornamental onions. The plants have gone wild by now, spreading with a fierce determination, belonging to everyone and no one, their green smell redolent in a way that belies their planetary surroundings.

Hiking down from the greened heights to the crater floor is sobering, like taking a trip to the past. Here, farms are set under the surface of the rock-strewn Martian desert. The distant sea vanishes, and the only signs of habitation are infrequent tunnel entryways flanked by chimneys of corrugated steel. The steam they vent slowly dissipates as it raises to the ultra-thin, ultra-sturdy roof of the crater's tent.

Back in the old days, of course, there was no tent, and barely a library. Tashi had to fight the crater's admin team for permission to deliver books by crater buggy, and won them over only with the help of zir partner at the time. Not like now, when wandering libraries are a part of Mars culture, a way the people living in various craters and hubs stay connected even when the planetary network's overburdened. Speaking of zir long-ago partner ...

Tashi reviews the name on zir next delivery – as if it's going to change – and sighs.

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Zie wonders if Shelhamer has anything to say about *not* maintaining relationships.

3. *A Familiar Stranger* by Alphonse Chu

Chu's masterpiece may be the first Great Martian Novel, but Tashi hates it. It's pretentious, full of unexamined assumptions about why people come to Mars.

Zir old partner ate it up with a spoon back when it was serialized. Even the ending, which zie thought especially overdone, in which the protagonist's family look wistfully at Earth from their hab's (highly unrealistic) observatory, giving the novel its titular metaphor.

Tashi and zir partner split not long after it was finished, and although the book wasn't the reason, the experience didn't improve zir views of it. But now isn't the time to get all maudlin – zie's nearly there.

2. *Simulating Sun, Stimulating Soil* by Isaya Otieno

At last, Tashi arrives at zir second destination: a home in the new Alnif style, fabbed from regolith and fixatives, its chimney dyed blue-green to stand out against the rust-coloured sand. Nearby stands an enclosed greenhouse, its array of lamps blinding in the crater's dim light.

Tashi's partner *hated* farming when zie knew them. But zie supposes ten years is enough time for anyone to change. Zie takes a deep breath, retrieves the requested items from zir satchel, and knocks at the door.

Zie's spent so long psyching zirself up to deal with zir old partner that zie doesn't know what to say when the person who answers is someone else – a woman in her fifties.

"Can I help you?" she prompts.

Tashi holds the books out like zie's forgotten what they are. "Uh," zie says. "These. But they're for ..."

The woman laughs. "You must be Tashi!" she says. "My wife's been waiting. Why don't you come in?"

1. *Good Morning Phobos* by M. W. Brown

An hour later, Tashi's on zir way back home. It was an odd reunion – equal parts awkward and charming and wonderful.

Zie's barely out the door when a child scrambles out from some hidden bedroom. "Wait! Wait!"

Tashi turns. "Something wrong?"

The child careens to a stop. "Do you have *the book*?" they whisper, face serious.

Tashi bites back a grin. The kid can't be more

than five. When someone that age asks for *the book*, there's only one thing they mean.

Zie digs around in zir satchel, making a show of being worried that something might be missing, then 'finds' the item the child wants before they can burst into tears.

Zie squats down and hands it to them. "You can keep this one," zie says. "We have extra copies."

The child's eyes go wide, and they shriek with delight, nearly knock Tashi over with a sudden, exuberant hug, then dash back inside, squealing. As if this shoddily produced, locally printed, picture book – rather than the books that will help their parents feed them, rather than the connections zie helps keep established – is the real treasure. The real reason Tashi walks this long and lonely, lovely route from farm to farm.

Perhaps, Tashi admits, letting the grin out, they're not entirely wrong.

Stewart C. Baker is an academic librarian, haikuist and speculative-fiction writer based in Oregon. His fiction has appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Nature* and other magazines.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Stewart C. Baker reveals the inspiration behind *Five Books from the Alnif Crater Travelling Library*.

This story is the second I've written that features Tashi and zir partner. The first, if you'd like to read it, is *Five things I hate about Phobos*, which also appeared in *Nature*. One of the inspirations for this story was the pithy subheading the *Nature* team gave to that previous story: "an unromantic view".

Five things is partially about the relationship its unnamed narrator forms with Tashi, who works in an archive on a research base inside a hollowed out Phobos. As the subheading for the story notes, part of the tension is between the uppercase-r Romantic views the narrator holds and the more data-driven, no-nonsense impression Tashi at least tries to give. I wondered what a relationship between two people like that would look like in the long term. Would it hold? Would there be enough commonalities? How would it change and develop with the surface of Mars? Tashi and zir former partner may not be together anymore in this story, but I would encourage readers not to find that discouraging. Both of them seem happy, in their own way. Does that make me unromantic? It's possible.

When I'm not slinging words, I make my living as a librarian. Unlike Tashi, I work at a university here on Earth, and intend to for the foreseeable future (although I can't promise not to become a roving librarian on Mars, I'd probably be horrible at it). Still, it's a matter of professional interest to me to consider how libraries will continue to evolve over the years, and in other environments. Today, most people take it for granted that research involves computers, for example, whether that's to crunch data or locate resources online. But as a 2011 article on an "interplanetary Internet" suggests (C. J. Krupiarz *et al.* *Johns Hopkins APL Tech. Dig.* **30**, 122–134; 2011), there are significant challenges to overcome in sharing the web between worlds. Who's to say what a library on Mars would look like, especially before there were enough people living on-world to make a local, Martian Internet worthwhile?

