

## Rivers of the Red Planet

Written by Edogawa Rampo

Translated by Gabriel Rasa

There was a feeling like a spell dropping over me, familiar as if I'd been to this place before, and almost chilly, making me shiver. A dull, colorless darkness had enveloped my entire world. It was as if all sensation had fled my body—sound, scent, even touch—leaving me swathed in nothing but a soft, stagnant brown<sup>i</sup>.

Above my head there was a canopy of leaves, as still and silent as death, that formed layers of darkness like clouds in the night sky. Thick, black-brown tree trunks, waterfalls poured from the canopy to the ground, stretched like a line of soldiers in all directions as far as the eye could see, until they faded into the fathomless darkness.

I had no idea of what lay outside those countless layers of darkness, whether the sun shone gloriously bright or whether a cold wind raged. All I knew was the monotonous reality before me, that beneath the cover of that great, endless forest I walked, never checking my direction, never stopping. Walking, always walking, past trees with trunks several armspans wide, moving from one to the next, the scenery never changing. Centuries' worth of fallen leaves, ever since this forest had come into existence, formed a thick, damp cushion beneath my feet, an unmistakable oozing sound rising from it with each step I took.

This gloomy, silent world gave off a feeling of death, as if every living thing had long ago died out. Or, I couldn't help thinking, perhaps the entire forest was overflowing with monsters and evil spirits<sup>ii</sup>. I could imagine leeches the size of snakes falling from the black sky like raindrops, slithering beneath my collar and down my neck. I saw nothing move, but they could have been just behind me, hideous, bloated creatures like jellyfish, their bulbous bodies swarming and writhing together obscenely, their laughter following me in a silent chorus.

The darkness and the things lurking in it frightened me, undeniably so, but beyond either of those, the endlessness of the forest itself, holding unimaginable terrors, pressed in on me. I felt like a newborn child who shrinks back in terror from the vast empty space surrounding it, trembling with fear. I was on the verge of crying out for my mother, but at last I conquered the urge and redoubled my efforts to escape that dark world as quickly as I could.

But the forest only grew darker as I struggled onward. Perhaps I walked for years, or perhaps decades; time didn't exist here. There was neither twilight nor dawn. Was it yesterday that I had started walking? Or decades ago in the distant past? Even that was unclear.

It occurred to me then, a sudden doubt stealing over me, that I might spend forever walking in this forest, my steps tracing larger and larger circles. The uncertainty of my own progress was more terrifying than anything the outside world could evoke. There was a story I'd heard once, of a traveler in the desert who wound up walking in circles, putting one foot in front of the other but never gaining an inch of ground. At least in the desert the sky is clear, the sun rises in the day and the stars shine at night—in this gloomy wilderness, I might walk forever without finding a sign to mark my path. I felt an overpowering fear, such that the world had never known, like a paroxysm shuddering up from the very marrow of my bones.

Then, I suddenly became aware of a curious twilight beginning to gather around me. It was like the light of a film reel projected onto a curtain, as if this world were lit from somewhere else, which drew back even as I walked forward.

What was this, then? Had I at last found a way out of the forest? Had I somehow forgotten about it, and then panicked, thinking myself trapped there forever?

I struggled forward, against resistance like trying to slog through water, but little by little I came closer to the light. As I drew nearer, I could make out a break in the trees and beyond that I could see the open sky that I had so desperately longed for. But the sky... had it always been that color? And what was that in the distance? I should have known that I hadn't escaped the forest yet. What I had thought was the edge was still deep in the heart of it.

I had reached a round lake, no larger than a city block. The forest came right up to the water's edge, leaving not the smallest space around it. No matter where I looked, the horizon dissolved into blurry darkness. It seemed as though in all my walking I had only explored the shallowest edge of the forest.

In all the time I'd spent roaming this forest, I hadn't even imagined that such a lake existed, so I stepped out of the trees with alacrity. The raw beauty of it as I stood on the bank made me dizzy. I felt as though with one turn of a kaleidoscope, I had discovered a flower of rare and dazzling beauty. But this place lacked the brilliant hues of a kaleidoscope; the sky was the color of tarnished silver, the forest of brown and green-black, while the water could only mirror those dull, monotonous shades.

And yet despite that, this place was impossibly beautiful. Was it the color of the sky, like silver or perhaps slate? Was it the boughs of the mysterious trees, arched like monstrous spiders poised to leap? Was it the lake, as still and silent as glass, reflecting the sky from its infinite depths? It was all that and more, something that I couldn't quite define.

Was it precisely because this world had no sound, nor smell, nor touch? And so all of those other senses were gathered into one, into the sense of sight? It was that, but still there was something more. The sky and the trees and the water, didn't they feel as though they were waiting for someone, full to bursting with tense anticipation?

Didn't a sense of avarice, of greedy, limitless desire, seem to pour from them like an exhale of hot breath? And yet I found it all incredibly arousing.

I turned my eyes from the world around me to my own body and discovered, without surprise, that I was now entirely nude—moreover, that my body was not that of a man, but of a ripe and curvaceous young woman. I immediately forgot that I had ever been a man, and smiled as if this were the most natural thing in the world.

And oh, what a body it was! I was transported, I felt as though my heart had leapt to my throat. Curiously, my body was the perfect image of my lover's, though still gloriously beautiful. I had a luxuriant mane of hair, as black and glossy as lacquer; my whole body was infused with the fearless vigor of an Arabian stallion, my skin a lustrous, milky pallor like the belly of a snake. How many men had I conquered with this body, how many had prostrated themselves before me, like supplicants before a queen?

Everything was clear to me now. I finally understood the mysterious beauty of the lake and its environs. I was the one they had been waiting for, yearning for. Everything—the trees and the water and the sky—this was what they had weathered the centuries for, their entire existence culminating in this one moment when I would come to satisfy their brutal entreaties.

The beauty of the landscape was incomplete by itself; it was merely the backdrop for something else. And now here I was, a magnificent actress stepping onto the stage.

My snow-white skin was almost aglow, forming an exquisite harmony with the deep lake and the dark forest, with the whole murky, ashen world. What a glorious spectacle! What inconceivable beauty!

I took a step into the lake. Out in the middle, as black as the water it floated on, was a lone rock that I began to swim toward. The water was neither cold nor warm; like thick currents of oil, it billowed and rippled as I moved my arms and legs, but there was no sound and it gave no resistance. I silently glided along the windless surface of the lake, like a pure white swan as ripples of water stroked against my chest. Soon I reached the center and scrambled up onto the slippery black rock. I might have looked like a mermaid, dancing on the twilight ocean.

Now I sprang to my feet on the rock. Oh, such beauty! Lifting my face to the sky, I opened my mouth and screamed at the top of my lungs, the cry bursting from me like a firework, my chest and throat seemingly stretched to infinity, thinning to a single point.

Then my muscles began to twist with extreme convulsions. Could there be anything so exquisite? I was a snake torn in two, writhing in agony. I was a worm in its death throes, a wild beast wracked with neverending pleasure, or neverending agony.

When I grew tired of dancing, I dove into the black water to cool my parched throat. I drank deep, filling my stomach with water as heavy as quicksilver.

Yet even as I'd danced in ecstasy, I felt unfulfilled. Nor was it only me; the scene around me had not lost its strange sense of anticipation either. It was still waiting for something.

That was it, I realized in a flash—it needed something red.

The only thing missing from this glorious picture was the color crimson. If I could just find something of that color, then it would be complete. If the fathomless gray and the glittering snow of my body were complimented with just a touch of crimson, then there would be nothing more beautiful in existence.

But where could I find such a color? I had searched this forest high and low and found nothing, not so much as a single blossom, no trees except the rows of trees that crouched like spiders.

“But wait! You already have that marvelous color, do you not? It's right here, pounding through your veins, as brilliant as any paint you could buy.”

With thin, sharp nails, I clawed at my body, raking cuts over my full, ripe breasts and the fleshy curve of my stomach, over my trim shoulders, my straining thighs, even my beautiful face. Blood poured from the gaping wounds, running down my skin in rivers until it covered me entirely, my body a sculpture in red, until I wore my life's blood like a shirt.

I could see it reflected in the lake's surface. The rivers of the red planet! My body had become those uncanny waterways on the face of Mars. Except it was blood, not water, that ran here.

And so I began my wild dancing again, twisting this way and that, spinning and writhing, like a painted top, like a snake in agony. Once I pulled my chest and legs back, thrusting my hips upward as far as they would go, the muscles straining in my buttocks; once I lay back on the rock, my legs and shoulders arched like the line of a bow, pushing myself round in circles with the creeping gait of an inchworm; once I spread my thighs and tucked my head between them, tumbling like a caterpillar, then again a severed worm, then bounding and leaping over the rock, and it was not my arms or shoulders, stomach or hips, it was no single part of me that performed these myriad expressions, straining and relaxing. At the very limits of mortal life, I played my part in this grand, glorious drama.

“Hey, hey, wake up, love.”<sup>iii</sup>

Far in the distance, someone was calling to me. A voice growing steadily closer. My body was shaking violently as if it were in an earthquake.

“You were thrashing and crying out, love.”

I hazily opened my eyes. My lover’s face hovered above my nose, grotesquely huge.

“A dream,” I murmured absently, staring into her face.

“Well you’re drenched in sweat. Was it a nightmare?”

“Yeah. A nightmare.”

Her cheek was like a line of mountains in the twilight, that sharp contrast between shadow and light framed with silver like a strand of long, white hair. Clear beads of grease glistened in the curved hollow of her nose; the pores that had sweated them heaved hypnotically, like the mouth of a grotto. And then her cheek, like some heavenly body, moved bit by bit to eclipse my whole field of vision.

i “...a soft, stagnant brown the color of neri-youkan.”  
Exhibit A, [youkan](#).  
It’s pretty disgusting, gooey and sweet  
but lacking any real flavor. Like Peeps.

ii Googling 魍魅魍魎 (a kanji combination that makes even your average Japanese person go, “wut?”) or the component parts of 魍魅 or 魍魎, turns up images like this. The recurring theme is cannibalism and putting women’s torsos in boxes, which is curious because Japan doesn’t even have a custom of burying the dead in coffins, they cremate and then house the ashes in a family gravesite.

(Artist is Hagihara Kyouka)

iii Of all things, I had the hardest time translating this line, which is stupid because it’s ridiculously simple: あなた、あなた、あなた。 A literal and unlovely translation would go “You, you, you” which is technically correct, but doesn’t take into account usage or cultural conversational norms. Japanese is a language where the pronoun choice often indicates the degree of intimacy/distance between the two players, and “anata” is either for lovers or the abstract ‘you’ of technical manuals. (“Now you insert the yellow wire into the plug marked AC adapter” etc) So the question is, do you translate it as what they *said* in Japanese, or what they *would say* in English? Cuz we’d say, Hey, wake up.