

Murasaki Street

by [Carl Grandview & Donn Charivari](#) (July 2023)



Self Portrait, Tsuguharu Foujita, 1936

Flimmering

- 1. a flighty shimmering glimpse; e.g. a fleeing glimpse of a toned calf or shoulder (Quynh)*
- 2. flickering or shimmering (Donn)*

*Is the other world being a tease?
If your toned calf or shoulder could wink,
this is what they'd do.
This is the netherworld showing a little ankle.
All of the gods do it.*

*No one likes being left out, eclipsed, passed over,
and it's a way to garner a little interest.
They peek out a bit from the beggar's face,
or glow,
they turn some worthless object into solid gold –
or at least as hearsay has it.*

*Hearsay is a form of flimmering,
as usually a bit of truth is concealed there,
if you knew which portion to believe.
Which, of course, is the essence of flimmering
exhibiting both the presence and the absence.*

*A successful politician flimmers.
So does a courtesan.
The deep web of our consciousness
can cause a flimmering,
like ripples on a still pond.
Flimmering is how life foreshadows.*

Junichiro Tanaka arrived early at the little coffee shop, even though he was familiar with Fujii-san's characteristic lack of punctuality, forgetfulness, and general paucity of etiquette. But one had to tolerate such eccentric habits from a talent like Fujii-san.

Tanaka surveyed all available positions in the coffee shop. He chose a small table with two seats in the corner near the front window as the optimum location affording both privacy and visibility. He removed his messenger bag. Heavier than usual, he thought, as he rubbed his shoulder. He had packed the usual load as well as a very special manuscript. He tugged the sleeves of his navy blazer to make them even, fiddled with his cufflinks to ensure they were lined up, removed a pen from the bag, and placed it on the table as if aiming a compass.

He had to prepare carefully. Being Fujii-san's literary editor

was a very demanding job. They were meeting to discuss the author's new work, eagerly anticipated by his publisher. Akio Fujii, known to the general public under his pen name "Aki," was one of Japan's leading existential writers.

Aki had splashed onto the literary scene in 1997 when he published the semiautobiographical work *Flower Faces*, portraying his lonely childhood as the son of florists in Nara. In this story, flowers in the shop were characters with their own secret language, personalities, and agendas. He was especially known for great attention to detail, describing the mundane in delightful and quite unexpected ways.

He followed his debut with several fantastical epics: *Travels in Pangaea* was a mundane account of modern family life, except that the family lived in a house as it was being hauled across the Australian Outback. As the story progressed, it was darkly hinted that the family was being deceived as to their final destination. *Cloudhall* told the story of an engineering inspector as he made his way up an infinite skyscraper, an allegorical Tower of Babel. The society within the building was revealed to be more corrupt the higher he went, and he was pressured not to report any negative findings, despite indications of imminent catastrophe.

In the midst of Tanaka's thoughts, Aki appeared, taking him completely by surprise. How could such a dissheveled, even slovenly, little man with baggy pants and windbreaker that fit like a tent, move up on him without so much as a shuffle? After all, Tanaka had a commanding view of the entire interior as well as the street from the corner table.

Tanaka composed himself. "Fujii-san, how are you? Please sit down."

"Good morning, Tanaka-san." Aki said.

"I haven't ordered yet. What would you like?"

Aki pensively put a knuckle to his upper lip. "Hmm, I am fond of the espresso with a little foam on top—Macchiato."

"Right." Tanaka went to the counter and ordered. Upon returning, he said, "So. Let's talk about your new work. I read your manuscript most carefully."

"Ah. What did you think?" Aki asked eagerly.

"Well, I see it is titled *Murasaki Street*."

"Yes."

"Which, as the title suggests, describes everything about a section of Murasaki Street in Nara. I am amazed by the attention to detail."

"Thank you." Aki humbly cast his eyes down.

"However ..." Tanaka raised a finger.

"Yes?" Aki raised his eyes.

"So, that is ... is it about anything ... *other* than Murasaki Street?"

Aki glanced around the cafe, then out the window, and watched the traffic. Their coffees arrived.

Aki asked, "What do you have there?"

"Latte."

"That's good. Too much milk for me though." Aki raised the small cup and took in the aroma. "Oh, was there a question?"

"Is the story about anything besides Murasaki Street?"

"The answer is rather complicated."

"I understand." Tanaka took a sip of latte. He observed the room. He gazed out the window. A blue scooter whizzed by one

way, and a pink bicycle wheeled by the opposite way. "No, I don't understand, actually," he said.

Aki explained, "See, the story is not really about the street, it's about the walk, yes? I have kept strictly to the subject."

"That is evident. Unless I have misunderstood, the entire story is ... that you walk down the street."

"That is the jist of it." Aki nodded.

"There is, unfortunately—and I hesitate to bring it up—a small problem. As you are, of course, aware—" He reached into the leather messenger bag, pulled out a thick manuscript, and placed it on the small table with a thud." —your story is 409 pages long."

"I hadn't counted."

"Perhaps one might say that's a bit too long for a short story."

"One might say that. One might also consider it a sort of novella."

"True, but does this really have the, ah, range of a novel? It only deals with a single subject."

"Yes, hence the title." Aki smiled.

"Indeed. You appear to have written a 400-page story about walking down a single street in Nara."

Aki gazed at the black surface of his espresso, took a sip, and cocked his head to one side as if to reflect carefully. "Correct."

"And, if I have read it accurately, in this story you cover a total of three blocks."

“Not quite three, actually.”

“Is that so?”

“Ah yes, and that is the critical issue, you see. At the middle of the third block, Muraski Street takes a strange bend, off to the right, and down a hill. One cannot see where it leads, or where one is headed. It’s quite terrifying.”

“Yes,” said Tanaka-san, flipping through the manuscript. “I did notice you pointed that out. This—uh, catastrophe—appears to happen on ... page 23.”

“Hmm.” said Aki. “That is so.”

“Why then do you spend 386 pages deciding whether or not to go around a curve in the road?”

“That’s the whole problem, isn’t it? The problem with life!”

“What?”

“It’s appalling, isn’t it!”

“Most people might say it’s just a bend in the road.”

Aki rolled his eyes upward. “Most people! Most people walk around staring at their phones, or drooling at flashy billboards.” He brought his hand down flat on the table with a bang, rattling the cups. “No one pays attention to the world or where they’re going! They’d walk right off a cliff if their phone told them that was the way to go.”

Tanaka felt he was getting nowhere and decided to back off. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t question your vision. Perhaps you could explain.”

“The narrative is not just a simple walk down the street. It’s an exploration of the abominable unknown as suggested by Borges’ infinite Library of Babel. It’s a journey through the psyche like Joyce’s Ulysses. But what I really have in mind is

Moby Dick. Melville is the master, isn't he? The whale is out there. But it's not just a whale, no, it's an object of desire, of obsession, of terror, what we all fear most, past the vale of death perhaps, it's out beyond the horizon, beneath the waves. .. the bottomless waves ... the abyss ..."

Aki put his head down between his knees, his hands over his ears, as if to drown out the incessant sound of the ocean closing in upon him.

"I wonder," ventured Tanaka, "could you suggest infinity in say, 20 pages?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, what do you mean by 'infinite'? I mean, you're talking about a city street."

"Infinite in the fractal sense. As I walk, I notice that each detail of everything has an infinite number of details, and each of those details has infinite detail, and so on. As I progress, the number of details overwhelms me, until I reach the bend, which curves toward eternity ... toward madness."

"Perhaps you have had too much coffee."

"Nonsense. It's an important mathematical and literary concept! Are you suggesting I'm not up to it?"

"Not at all. I am simply wondering whether, in this realm, that is, the physical manifestation of, say, a book that you hold in your hand, whether this infinitude could have a conclusion. In a literary sense."

"What, you mean the end?"

"A mere termination of narrative. You could suggest that the story itself goes on forever. Perhaps you could cap the story with some kind of oblique observation that leads the mind into eternity—perhaps an ellipsis!"

“Ending ellipsis,” Aki snorted. “A hat trick. Oldest one in the book.”

“Ishikawa ended his latest novel with an ellipsis.”

“Which proves my point.” He pointed at Tanaka. “A favorite short cut of hacks.”

“It sold rather well.”

Aki turned his head toward the window. “There is no accounting for taste. I suppose next you’ll want me to put a love interest in the story. Or a lost kitten.”

“True, Ishikawa is not subtle; however, his advantage, as it were, since he cannot surpass you in actual literary terms, if I may suggest, is that—”

“What?”

“That he finishes his works. You must admit there is an advantage.”

Aki turned his eyes down to his cup and spun it slowly and sullenly on the saucer. “Yes ... yes, one must admit ...”

“Okay then, let’s not get distracted by other works. I’m sorry for bringing it up!” Tanaka smiled. “Back to your story, it’s really in good shape! All it needs is a bit of editing. Have you given any thought at all to a conclusion?”

“Well, it is very difficult. I approach the curve, I want to proceed, then I’m overwhelmed by doubt.”

“Yes, the reader is unavoidably reminded.”

“But if you notice at one point, near the end, I walk tentatively around the curve, and just when I think I can see what’s around the corner, I stop. I realize what it is I had set out walking for. Just ahead I sense this... flimmering.”

"Flimmering?" Tanaka tilted his head.

"It's a kind of beckoning, like a flickering, shimmering light on the edge of the ocean at night. But with a certain sadness like *mono no aware*, 'the sadness of things', for it is too soon gone."

"So then?"

"Well, as it turns out, I've known all along how I'll conclude it. In fact this was the first thing I wrote." From his jacket he pulled a small, tattered index card with precise, miniscule writing, and read from it:

"Just beyond the curve, which had always held for me a sense of wonder and dread, I looked up. It was the moment when late afternoon turns into evening, when the sky is dusky and colors form at the horizon.

"A single star appeared in the sky. I don't know if it were hidden beyond a bank of clouds or vapor, but it seemed to brighten from nowhere. It shone there for several seconds, just long enough for me to recognize it, and when I had, it just as gracefully passed away."

"That's wonderful!" exclaimed Tanaka. "Why didn't you include that in your manuscript?"

Aki shrugged. "That's the thing. I started out with those very words and have held them in my mind all along, like a dream. I simply do not know how I'm going to get there. That's the problem, don't you see? We know where it starts and ends! It's everything in between—that's life, curving around, to the elusive and unseen future."

"Ah!" said Tanaka, "There's our solution! All have to we do is stick that in, and it's done."

"Stick it in? You are not just going to 'stick it in'. The story has to build up tension."

"There are 409 pages of tension. The reader will have a stroke."

"Is that so? Every word I've written is justified. What's more, I will continue to write until I'm satisfied."

Tanaka put his hands up. "All right now, let's calm down. Perhaps some dessert?"

Aki breathed heavily, as if winded from the indignity he had suffered. "Yes, thank you. Do they have cookies? I would like a cookie."

"Mm. I'll ask." Tanaka went up to the counter. He had to get that card. He thought for a minute about what to do, then returned to the table.

"Ah, they didn't have cookies. I got you cheesecake instead." He handed the plate to Aki.

Aki picked up the soft cake with his fingers, bit into it with a *smoosh*, and said muffled by a mouthful, "Ah, quite good!"

"I wonder," said Tanaka, "Could you read that ending once again? I'd like to get a sense of it."

"Of course."

Aki pulled out the tattered card and read with cake on his lip like a toddler. Tanaka could barely restrain himself from grabbing a napkin and wiping the author's messy face. Aki read, holding the card with one hand and the sticky cheesecake in the other.

Just as Aki finished the passage, Tanaka reached over and took hold of the card with both hands. "Splendid. Let's go with this."

"What?" Aki held on tight.

"Please give me the card, and I'll put it in the story."

Tanaka said.

Aki gripped the card firmly. "You don't have my permission."

Tanaka pulled it toward him. "Of course I do." replied Tanaka. "You just told me you intended to include these words in the story all along."

Aki pulled it back. "But I'm the author and I decide what words to use!"

"Well, as editor, I have the final say on revision. And you told me it's the ending, so it goes at the end!" Tanaka tugged the card toward himself.

"I do not agree." Aki pulled the card back and held on tenaciously.

"Fujii-san," implored Tanaka. "We have a contract. The publisher is waiting. We'll both be in trouble if you don't finish this story." He pulled harder. "Please hand it over."

Suddenly the card tore in half, and the men fell back in their chairs. Aki stared at his half in horror, and Tanaka held his piece with two hands and said, "I respectfully accept!" Then he quickly put it in his pocket, grabbed his messenger bag, and stood up. "Ah, is that the time? I really must go. Let's have coffee again for the next story. Yes, very productive. Good bye."

A month later, Aki was having lunch with a friend. The friend congratulated him on his new story. "What new story?" Aki asked. His friend had brought a book with him and laid it on the table. "Here, haven't you seen it?" Aki examined it and saw that it was the entirety of *Murasaki Street* as he had submitted it, with virtually no edits. But what of the ending? He skipped ahead and read:

*Just beyond the curve, I looked up.
At the moment when afternoon turns into evening,
A single star appeared.
It flimmered just long enough for me to recognize it,
and passed away...*

It appeared that Junichiro Tanaka had finished the story using only words from the fragment of card he had torn off, yet miraculously they still retained the meaning of that moment. Aki lay the book on the table. "So," he smiled, "Tear eternity in half, and you still have eternity."

"I don't understand what you mean." said his friend.

Aki replied, "It's a long story."

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Carl Grandview and Donn Charivari are both Doctors of Psychiatry and are currently working on a collaborative project, which is a literary glossary of needed psychological terms. These terms have been given literary form utilizing short stories (by Charivari) and poems (by Grandview). Each term will form a chapter in the forthcoming book, *Mentallections*, to be published soon by Magic Bean Books <https://magicbeanbooks.co/>

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