A Song by Lantern Light (Uta andon, 1910) is two stories combined into one. The reader must jump back and forth between two narratives, two sets of characters, and two sites of narration until the point, near the end, where all merge. This structurally complex story is further complicated by numerous references to Jippensha Ikku’s famous novel, Shank’s Mare (Tōkaidō dōchū hizakurige, 1802–1809), and especially to that passage where his heroes become separated while traveling in the Ise area. It also makes great use of a nō play, The Diver, in which the heroine sacrifices herself by diving deep into the sea in order to save her son. Boldly experimental for its time, the novella has been appreciated for its flawless use of these two texts, and for a structure that anticipates the age of cinematic collage.

On a cold night in mid-January, a single muffled voice recited the opening lines from Book Five, Part One, of Jippensha Ikku’s famous Shank’s Mare.

Many were the sights and tastes that delighted our two travelers as they viewed the massive, daikon-shaped pillars of the sacred shrine at Atsuta and partook of the local cuisine—the same daikon radishes topped with miso. Continuing on, they ferried themselves over seven
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miles of choppy waters until they arrived with thankful hearts at the safe harbor of Kuwana on the Bay of Ise.

The sky was clear. As the two travelers crossed an elevated walkway, their shadows stretched out in an intense moonlight that was bright enough to bathe the stars. Moving toward the Kuwana Station exit, they took in the sight of the town’s flickering lanterns and the naked forms of wintering trees that appeared here and there below them.

One man wore a black overcoat, a suitable match for the bright moon, even if cut a bit generously for his frame. On his head rested an umber fedora with two stiff-looking peaks that rose up like mountains. Certainly, its obvious newness was a breach of good style, but perhaps we can forgive this lapse of taste. Even more telling was the way he had pulled the hat down until its brim rested firmly on his ears. Along with the dangling chin strap, a defense against a possible gust of wind, the hat suggested a nod to practical necessity. Bowing to the new age, he had abandoned the straw hat of an earlier era. A few years over sixty yet still young at heart, this one likes to call himself Yajirobei, after Ikku’s famous drifter.

This Yajirobei didn’t seem to be carrying much in the way of luggage. In one hand was a cheap velvet suitcase with another cloth bag tied to it. In the other hand he held an umbrella that doubled as a walking stick.

Again he quoted from Shank’s Mare as he walked. “As the text says, ‘In celebration of their safe arrival in Kuwana, our two travelers feasted on the town’s famous broiled clams and enjoyed numerous cups of wine.’ Before we go find our inn, how about a drink near the station? I want to call you Kidahachi, but I’m afraid you’re a bit old for the part. On the other hand, we’ve come to the place in the book where Yajirobei and Kidahachi become separated. I quote, ‘Without his companion, a lonely Yajirobei trudges along the road to Ise. Fighting to hold back his tears, he checks at every trellis-fronted inn along the way—all to no avail.’ And you? You, sir, are more like the new partner Yaji finds ‘on the road lined with pines.’ So how about a drink with my new partner? What say ye, Nejibe?”

“Oh, cut it out.”

His companion made a sour face. He was four or five years
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older, which put him near seventy. On his head was a brimless otter fur cap, pulled down to his white eyebrows. He wore a traditional gray wool traveling coat, baggy trousers, white socks, and leather-soled clogs. Strapped across his back was a bundle, a faded saffron *furoshiki*, fastened with a cord and tied at his chest. He also carried a cloth pouch. And although he favored the walking stick that he held in his other hand, he seemed to be a fit, good-natured fellow.

“Stop calling me Nejibe! It gives people the wrong impression. I don’t mind being your partner. But ‘on the road lined with pines’ has a bad ring to it—like I’m a pickpocket or something.” He planted his stick to emphasize the point; and like a goose forming a new formation, he quickly passed the other man and proceeded through the ticket gate.

Making a point of letting the older man pass by, Yajirobei eyed his partner, this older man who seemed to be in such a hurry to give someone a scolding. “See? Spoken like a true Nejibe! My making your acquaintance ‘on the road lined with pines’ doesn’t necessarily mean you’re a highway robber. Although I wouldn’t be surprised if there was a little of that in your past!”

Yajirobei laughed at his own joke as the station attendant snatched the ticket from his hand. Stunned, he stared blankly at the fellow.

And no wonder. He was the last of the passengers to clear the gate, having dawdled along the way. The train that had brought them to Kuwana was now gleaming through the blue fields in the distance, its white plume floating dreamily toward the moon like the waft of smoke rising from the town’s famous broiled clams.

Once on the other side of the ticket gate, Yajirobei resumed his recitation, unabashed. “He soon sets off. As he walks along, he hears a traveler singing.’ Hey, Nejibe-san, here’s a good line.

‘Clams boiled in soy,  
Are better than a toy.  
No gift could be so fine,  
As maidens at the shrine!  
That’s dandy for me.  
Good and dandy for me!’"
“Need a ride, sir?”
There in front of the station, from a lonely row of four or five hand-drawn carriages parked in the darkness, a man with arms folded stepped forward.
Hearing his voice, Yajirobei made a crooked smile. “Many thanks, young man. What impeccable timing! Still, if it’s all the same to you, why not say, ‘How about a ride on my homebound packhorse?’”
“Yes, sir,” responded the man. He stood blank faced.

Yaji waved the sleeves of his coat and pleaded like a drunk, “Come on, say it! Say ‘How about a ride on my homebound packhorse?’ Be a good sport and play along!”
“Sure. You want me to say ‘How about a ride on my homebound packhorse?’ All right. How about a ride on my homebound packhorse?” The rickshaw man rattled off the line, and seemed earnest enough as he did.

Laughing, Yaji teased him. “My friend, if you don’t care for the long set phrase, then how about if I make it a bit fancier? If he gets mad when you call him Former Senior Regent Currently Priest of the Hôjô Temple, then call him Honorable Former Senior Regent Currently Priest of the Hôjô Temple. Makes all the difference, you know.”
“So, please get in.” Considering the deal closed, the rickshaw man ignored the rest and turned his carriage toward them.

Yajirobei glared. “What now, a carriage? That’s good and dandy for me!”
“Stop joking around.” Standing in the bright moonlight like a withered chrysanthemum clinging to its bamboo support, the older gentleman chided his partner. The moonlit sky seemed to make him feel the sadness of travel. “Hire the man, for heaven’s sake! We have this luggage, and we have no business wandering around at night in a strange town.” He half mumbled these scolding words.
“But first, we must have a ‘That’s good and dandy for me’ or we won’t be in agreement with the text. This is where Kidahachi speaks
up. ‘Can we ride for four mon?’ To which the horseman replies, ‘That’s not so dandy for me.’ And the horse neighs twice.”

“Young man, don’t pay attention to that fellow. Let’s just get going. We’d like to you to take us to an inn called the Minatoya, near the mouth of the river.”

“You’ll need two rides, right?”

“I suppose. We’re in a hurry.” Yajirobei’s partner looked back, grabbed hold of the side of the rickshaw, and climbed in. His sandaled feet pressed tiptoe against the footboards as he straddled his bag. Without bothering to take the bundle from around his neck, he simply let it bounce around on his lap.

“My fate is yours. If we die, we die together. Wait up, Nejibei!” Still giggling, Yajirobei climbed into a second carriage.

“To the Minatoya!”

“Got it.”

As the two rickshaw men raced off to the edge of the square, the pale lanterns of their carriages wavered in the moonlight. Rattling over the rocky street, they sped down a narrow alley lined by wooden fences, then turned at an intersection of earthen walls. They seemed to be taking a shortcut, passing through many lonely neighborhoods. By and by, they came to a row of two-story buildings, the road between them as narrow as a thread and shadowed from the moon by overhanging eaves. Tucked into the darkness on each side were a few lanterns, glowing white; and above their heads, stars were sprayed upon the naked tendrils of willow trees, and walls were illuminated by the blue moonlight that appeared here and there in the night. At the end of a long road, a fire tower rose to pierce the mist of the distant mountains, casting the sharp silhouette of a fire bell that seemed as if it were alive, while the clapping of night guards’ sticks—Beware! Beware!—sounded in the deepening night. Even though business is usually slow in January, the moonlight was still shining on the latticed windows. And yet, the girls of Kuwana seemed to be keeping early hours, for the pleasure quarter seemed quiet and desolate.

Beneath the spokes of the rickshaws the street turned into a narrow river of quicksilver. Hanging from the eaves of black-pillared houses, rows of plain and patterned lanterns looked like river otters
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crossing a bridge on festival night. Suddenly, the rickshaw in the lead, the one in which the older gentleman rode, came to a stop.

Listen to that! Falling over the hushed, one-street entertainment district of this small town, in the silence of the stilled wheels, came a voice that sparkled among the stars and echoed upon the crest tiles and over the moonlit waters that stretched to far-off Chikuzen, drawing its moonlight over a thousand miles of ocean, up the lapping river, pulled hand over hand like a silver thread.

The clasp that holds his sash in place,
Clothes softer than a pillow,
Hardly seems a country boy,
Smooth walking like a willow—

The sound of a Hakata ballad flowed out from the shadows of the eaves; and right there before the old man’s eyes stood a street musician with his head covered with a white towel, his gaunt silhouette standing before a sign on which was written in red the word “Noodles.” He was looking down and to the side, lingering like a shadow.

With his scarf-covered bundle still tied around his neck, the older traveler looked back from where he sat in his rickshaw and said something . . . just as the second rickshaw came to a sudden stop and surrounded the song, capturing it between them and the walls of the buildings that lined the street. Before Nejibei had a chance to make himself understood, his rickshaw started ahead; and the one in the rear followed in pursuit. The two carriages pulled up neck and neck for a moment, then one fell back into line behind the other; and together they continued their journey through the moonlit night.

The rising moon, the shadows of the pines,
Ara, dokkoisho!

Standing there on the corner in front of the noodle shop, the street musician suddenly ended his song with one last, frost-cutting note, as if throwing his plectrum into the cold moonlit waters of the ocean. He lifted the head of his samisen slightly and, freeing his hands, turned the plectrum around and used its handle to gently push open the faded red door of the noodle shop. It slid open easily.
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“Anyone home?”

The proprietor seemed to be caught off guard by the sight of the musician’s clear eyes suddenly peering at him from beneath the towel on his head and through the cloud of steam that rose from the shop’s boiling kettle. The owner was dressed in a striped apron, a cotton kimono with its skirts tucked up, and a pair of green pantaloons. He had been sitting next to the register, listening intently to the musician’s song. It’s a bit much when he jumps to his feet and shoots back, “Sorry. No solicitors!”

This is obviously his way of dealing with all itinerant musicians—to enjoy their music first, then brush them off at the crucial moment with a “No solicitors!” The problem this time is that the towel-wearing singer entered the shop so suddenly that he caught the owner completely off guard. Luckily, no customers were there to witness his behavior.

Unaffected by the comment, the one who had come in from the street simply closed the door behind him. He lifted the neck of his samisen and stepped into the shop. “No offense, my friend. I’m the customer here. Isn’t that right, ma’am?” The singer chuckled as he said this.

Also enraptured by the street singer’s Hakata ballad, the shop-owner’s wife was standing amid the steamy haze of the hearth, with one fair-skinned arm resting atop the lid of a large pot of boiling water. She was a middle-aged woman, dressed in a teal-colored kimono with its sleeves tied up. Her hair was done up on top of her head and a bit disheveled. Her teeth were dyed black. She had a fair complexion, and blushed at the musician’s comment. Quickly, she left her place by the hearth. Her wooden clogs made a dry, scraping sound as she hurried over the hardened dirt floor, past the spot where her husband sat, directly to the register, where she plunged her hand into the till.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” the young man said gently. “Don’t bother. This isn’t extortion. I’m the customer, not you.”

On one side of the shop was a narrow area covered with six worn-out tatami mats all in a row. Customers were welcome to take off their shoes and relax there. But the musician chose one of the stools near the hearth. He sat down and stretched his legs.
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“Cold weather we’re having tonight. Thought I’d come in and have a drink. No need to worry, old man. I’m not going to make trouble.”

When he removed the towel from his head, he certainly didn’t look like someone who would create an incident. He had a thin face with excellent features. Fatigue showed around his eyes, but they were clear, and his eyebrows thick and dark. He seemed a well-bred young gentleman, about twenty-eight or -nine years old.

“I see.” Laughing nervously, the shopowner got off his stool and came forward, rubbing his hands. “Well, let’s hope this clear weather holds up.” He looked aimlessly at the soot-blackened ceiling, then glanced at the votive altar above the register.

“Young Master,” the wife said as she patted her apron. “Shall I warm a flask for you then?” She smiled.

The musician placed his plectrum down on his scarf and moved the samisen around to his back. He sat down with one leg tucked beneath him. Arranging his skirts to keep out the cold, he called out, “How about something good.”

“I’ll bring you our best.” The owner’s wife shuffled sideways to the tatami area on her left. With a pair of metal chopsticks, she stirred the coals in the hibachi until they flared red, then quickly pushed them over to where the musician was sitting on his stool. “Here. Warm yourself over these.”

“Thanks.”

He wasted no time making himself comfortable. He positioned himself around the hibachi and let out a long sigh. “When I realize there’s a wonderful fire like this in the world, I think of home. And that thought makes me feel even colder. It’s freezing tonight, ma’am. Make that wine boiling hot, won’t you? I have this cheap habit of trying to get as drunk as possible on as little as I can—just as you probably guessed about me. Isn’t that right, sir?”

The owner chuckled. “Go ahead, Okata. Make it boiling hot.”

His wife flashed her dyed teeth at the musician with a beautiful smile, “Coming right up.”