The Weight of Sparrow Tears

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SARASHINA

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To the ones we remember loving

Cast of Characters

LADY YUKIKO'S FAMILY

Yukiko, a refined noblewoman, born to a midranking branch of the Taira family in the eastern province of Hitachi, now lives in the capital

Ōtomo no Sakayu, her husband, a high noble of the Third Rank and Middle Counselor of the Right in the government

Taira no Yoshitsugu, brother of Yukiko, a provincial official of insignificant rank assigned to distant Hitachi

Hina, our storyteller, eldest daughter of Yoshitsugu, niece and handmaiden of Yukiko

Ume, niece of Sayaku and handmaiden of Yukiko

Nishi, maid-servant of Yukiko

THE FUJIWARA CLAN

Fujiwara no Yorimichi, Chancellor, the most powerful man in Japan, fifty years old, son of the legendary Michinaga and father of the late Imperial consort Motoko, who produced no heirs

Fujiwara no Nariko, the Emperor's favored consort of the Plum Pavilion, daughter of the Chancellor's brother Norimichi
Fujiwara no Yoshinobu, the Chancellor's rival half-brother, an indolent old man
Fujiwara no Kamatari, Yoshinobu's adopted son
Minamoto no Takeru, friend of Kamatari

THE IMPERIAL FAMILY

The Emperor, 69th holder of the Imperial Seat of Japan
Empress Sadako, enemy of the Fujiwaras, mother of Takahito
Crown Prince Chikahito, the Emperor's adult son from an earlier marriage to the Chancellor's late sister, soon to accede to the Imperial Seat
Prince Takahito, juvenile son of the Imperial couple, expected to be appointed the next Crown Prince upon his sickly father's death
An Imperial Princess, granddaughter of a past emperor

Masanori, a young man

A.D. 1044
Heian-kyō (now Kyōto), Japan

Winter

One

"Which of all the creatures in this world does not sing?"

Ki no Tsurayuki, c. 905

I have heard this song before. It is familiar, not in the way one knows a person but in the way one knows that clouds will bring snow and the glow of orange in the east will bring the daybreak. It reaches me in the hum of a voice, gentle yet urgent, and the cascade of zither strings in a melancholy scale.

On any other day, I might have ignored the music. But there is something in the air today, in the ground, in the rhythm and breath of the city, that causes me to turn and follow it to its source.

The last snow of the year lies in dirty patches, adorning the roads, the alleys, the angled roofs, and crumpling under my steps. A bitter breeze touches my cheeks; a pail of near-freezing water swings from my hand. The air is crisp and heavenly and smells of pines. It will be some time, still, before the blossoms appear on the trees and the morning warblers start their songs, before the court poets abandon the frost and the sleet for the ghostly spring haze over the mountains.

I round the corner and see him there, sitting in his garden surrounded by bare trees. Cross-legged, draped in a patterned jacket of crimson, his fingers trembling slightly, he plucks the strings of his zither and intones:

Peach blossoms
Flattened, discarded
On the stones—
Why does your leaving
Trample on my heart?

Something in the song is not quite right. My Lady would have noticed it instantly, I am sure, but I stand frozen for a few heartbeats, staring at this beautiful figure somewhere between a boy and a man, before I realize what is wrong.

He sings of peach blossoms, but there is not yet even the insinuation of a petal on the frail branches. It is a spring song in the scenery of winter. And his clothes: too bright for this snowy garden, they are spring colors.

His voice, as he sings, is vulnerable, almost pitiful. He looks up suddenly as he plays the final notes, his hands hovering frozen above the horizontal strings. I snap my head away and keep walking. I think he has seen me. My heart is beating as if he has.

Out of view, I wait for him to continue playing. All that hangs in the brittle air is the reverberation of the strings, slowly vanishing. Two pairs of footsteps arrive to collect the instrument. I hear the rustle of clothing, then the attendants standing, growing farther away, and then they are gone.

I find I am breathing heavily. I glance once more down the empty road towards the mansion gate, but no one is there, only the wind and the trees and the icy garden lake. I shake

my head, pass my pail of water from one hand to the other, walk off.

His playing pursues me, the words winding themselves around my mind. Why? It is not uncommon for a man of the city to spend his afternoon in music and leisure; there is nothing novel about what has happened here, nothing at all. Yet I cannot help but remember and remember.

It brings to mind the days when I first learned to write—when I practiced, like every girl my age, putting brush to paper and copying from the beginning of our most famous book of poems. As a child, you can try and try and try to make your brushstrokes the perfect length, the perfect width, but the characters never turn out right, no matter how many times you repeat the same motion. Eventually you have attempted the strokes so many times that the shapes will be with you forever, whether you have drawn them correctly or not. Not only the shapes, but their meanings, too. Every girl between the oceans could repeat the lines by heart.

All song, the text says, has its seeds in the heart, and every word a leaf. Song, poetry, verse—it is all the same. And there is no creature in this world that does not sing. Every living thing, melodious or harsh, bursts with voice: moving heaven and earth effortlessly, stirring the gods invisibly. To be alive is to one day taste death. But while we still live, we sing.

When I shut my eyes that night to dream, I dance with the afterimage of the boy who sits in his garden in winter and thinks that it is spring.


Spring
春

Two

"I imagine that there can be nothing
so delightful as to be loved by everyone."

Sei Shōnagon, c. 1002

The dawn is unutterably beautiful in spring. I run my fingernails across the damp wooden rail of the veranda and watch the light creep up over the hills, cloaking them in outlines of red and purple. Here in My Lady's mansion, at the eastern edge of the city, there is little to obstruct my view of the morning unfurling its fan of colors, only the remnants of the ancient walls.

To this day I struggle to find words to describe the city. My father brought me here first when I was nine years old, before I was old enough even to have my eyebrows plucked and drawn. What I remember most is the shock of seeing so many buildings so close together, the mountains towering behind them like the body of a great reclining god. "Peace and Tranquility," the city is called by the aristocracy. Two characters: "peace," from the name of our previous capital; "tranquility," from the old Chinese city (though from the

poem-tales I have heard recited, I cannot imagine the Other Realm was ever tranquil). "Heian," the characters read. But to me it has only ever been "the city."

The poets would, of course, say that our city cannot be described except in terms of spring or summer or autumn or winter. I remember it was the height of the hot months when our caravan arrived at the city gates. Evening had already fallen, and the outlines of the mansions and the trees were ghostly in the dim glow of dusk. A bare sliver of moon kept watch from above, and the only other light was what flickered from the walkways of the people's homes. Back east, you might see the occasional mansion-house at some distance from the rice fields and the brushwood huts of the people who worked them. Here, every building was as fine as the last.

I remember that my father looked at me and said that China, in the stories, was even grander. I did not think it was possible to get any more grand than what was before my eyes. But I couldn't argue with him; nobody goes to China anymore. Already the light and the roads and the carriages and colorfully-dressed people made me think I had died and awoken in the Pure Land.

I remember, more than anything, when we entered one of those grand houses and my father stooped down and said, "Hina, this is my sister, Lady Yukiko." I took one look at the woman sitting in front of me, her hair so long that it trailed all the way to the ground, her layered robes shrouding her in a vibrant cocoon, her hands folded in perfect posture, and blurted, "You don't look like Dad at *all*."

I remember how she laughed and laughed at that, and how I blushed; how, a week later, I clung to her summer gown, so thin it was nearly transparent, and begged her to let me stay in the city. I was much too old to be behaving like that, and

she must have known it, but she bent down so her face was level with mine and told me that if I was a good girl, if I was nice to my dad, maybe I'd have the chance to come back and visit her in the city.

That was the first time I met My Lady. Since then, I have changed a great deal, but she has changed very little, I think.

It was last spring—a year ago now—that the letter arrived at our public estate in Hitachi. My father has been a deputy administrator there as far back as I can remember, so there was nothing unusual about receiving important envoys, even from as far as the city. He always accepted them with lavish fanfare and gifts, showering them with hospitality until the messengers passed out drunk slumped over a railing. Only this time, after he had opened the messages, he passed one to me. "It's for you, Hina."

The letter was written in the women's hand, not Chinese characters, so I could make good enough sense of it. This was long before I knew how important a lady's handwriting was, how it could spell the difference between winning a husband or wasting one's youth alone in one's father's house and becoming a nun. Even then I was in love with My Lady's writing, her effortless swoops and curls of brushgrass.

It was an invitation. Circumstances had changed in her household, she wrote, and she wished to ask my father's permission to send me to join her as a household attendant.

I took the letter and hid it inside my pillow, and a full day passed before I dared to broach the subject with my father and ask for his blessing. He said that he would miss having my help with my younger brothers, but the twins were nearly old enough to handle themselves. We lodged the envoys for two weeks, after which I said goodbye to my father and the boys and set off into the west with them.

My father cried when the caravan pulled away. I was too excited to feel any grief, thinking only of the magnificent buildings and dancers and poems and festivals that waited at the end of the journey. But when I think of that day now, it is hard not to get misty-eyed.

There is one more memory that returns to me often, though I paid little attention to it at the time. During that first visit to the capital when I was nine, I accompanied my father and aunt to the palace precincts. My father left to meet with some men of the government, and my aunt had me follow her around like a page-girl. I enjoyed carrying her train and being doted on so much that I remember little else from that day, only that my aunt had been speaking with a particularly sour woman who had raised her voice and shouted. When she had left the room, I tugged on my aunt's gown and said, "Auntie, that lady was scary!"

I will never forget how she looked in my eyes and said, "Hina, don't speak like that about the Empress of our realm." Nor how she looked back at the Empress, statuesque in her violently blue robes, and added, smiling, "But yes, she can be quite a force."

How young I was, to respond by asking, "Are you scared of her, too?"

"I am not," My Lady said. "But there are many who should be."

—

"Don't you know anything about good poetry? It's all in the delicacy of the seasons. Do you want to seem inappropriately forward? Leave out the blossoms, I say. Mention the butterflies or something. It really isn't that difficult."

"If you're such a genius, why don't you write it?"

"Oh, I couldn't. You wouldn't want him to fall in love with *me*, would you? Not that I would mind, myself. Captain Yukitsune, you said? He's a looker."

"You've *seen* him?"

"I've had a peek or two. Oh, don't look at me like that! There is propriety, and then there is opportunity. I could hardly let a couple of curtains stop me from getting a peek at a man with a reputation like Yukitsune's. Why he sent a poem to *you* is beyond me."

"You're very charming, aren't you. Now are you going to help me come up with a reply, or should I ask the Lady Hitachi? She's got more literary sense than your whole family. I heard she impressed the Chancellor himself at New Year's by reciting an entire book of the *Grand Historian*. Isn't that right, Yukiko?"

The three ladies sit gathered around a flickering brazier on the mansion's low veranda, just a pebble's throw away from where rain patters on the garden pond. The visiting ladies come often in the evenings, arriving in palm-leaf carriages with bands of servants and lesser gentlewomen. It is always a pleasure to watch them emerge from the carriages, the layers of their clothing unfolding like petals, their faces painted in delicate white and their hair descending long past their waists. Their conversations are often like this one, jumping here and there and suddenly there. It is a rare night when they do not mention at least half a dozen names of so-and-so gentlemen in such-and-such a court office.

My Lady, as usual, says little. The firelight dances across her ruby robes, pale face, glossy black hair as she watches her visitors. I have served her long enough to know that she lets no emotion illuminate her face without willing it so, and

when she leans forward to answer, I know that every word has been carefully plucked, folded, and arranged.

"It was nothing," My Lady Yukiko replies. "I seem to recall that you yourself reacted with a measure of embarrassment on that occasion. 'Chinese? How unseemly in a woman!' Were those not your words? Strange that you now find me admirable."

"I have always found you admirable! Such grace, and—and beauty, I have never beheld in another woman!"

"Flattery is boundless when there is something one wants done, I suppose." My Lady sighs, with an amiable kind of exasperation. "Let's see the captain's poem. Surely the three of us can arrive at something satisfactory."

As the visitors converse, I linger at the edge of the walkway to stare at them. I cannot help myself. Imagine that—a city dweller for almost a year now, and still I cannot help but gawk at the patterned silk. I do not know what is more strange: how much finery there is, or how none of the ladies seem to think anything of it, how they move under mountains of it as if it were woven from something as common as pine needles. My Lady's apparel has twelve layers in all, with five colors of exquisitely patterned silk visible at the sleeves: lavender and vermilion, green and yellow, and on the outside, a deep pomegranate crimson.

"But really," one of the visitors is saying, "you read the old poems, and you think, Nobody loves like that anymore. Nowadays, if you want to hear affectionate words, you've got to bury yourself in a fiction tale. Men get worse every year I'm alive, I think."

"Things seem to be working for the Emperor, though, you know."

"How do you mean?" My Lady interjects. I suspect she

knows exactly how she will be answered, but wants to hear it anyway.

"Oh, it's obvious—haven't you seen the two of them together? The newest consort, I mean, the one in the Plum Pavilion. I swear he's more and more in love with her every time I see them."

"It does make you feel bad for the Empress," the other woman says. The Emperor has several consorts, but there is only one true Empress: Sadako, stepmother of the Crown Prince and mother of the second prince and the shrine priestesses. The one I remember.

"Well, yes, I suppose. But nobody thinks much about *that* Empress anymore—certainly not the Emperor—and it's impossible not to be inspired by young love."

"Why? Because it gives you hope that Yukitsune will notice you?"

"He *is* noticing me! He sent me a *letter*! Oh, Yukiko, forgive me, I should have remembered sooner—how is Ume's preparation going? Do you have a day chosen for her first wearing of the train? I should very much like to attend."

"Barring any ill news from the diviners," My Lady says, "we are hopeful for a date next week, along with the marriage announcement."

"Oh!" The visiting lady claps her hands excitedly, seeming for a moment very childish. "I can't believe it. That soon?"

"And such a handsome groom," the other adds. "Ume is a lucky girl. I always think, what a shame it is when a pretty young girl has her first train-wearing without any marriage planned. Those girls, I feel sorry for them, really."

"*Those* girls, I feel *sorry* for them, *really*."

Speak of the devil. There's Ume, whispering beside me like a little imp—or rather like a fly, so swattable she is.

"Imagine being *old* enough that everyone looks at you and wonders, Why isn't she *married* yet? Oh no, I guess we'd better make you an adult *anyway*."

"Shut up. I'm trying to listen."

"'*Shut up*,'" Ume repeats, mocking my accent.

Ume is a relative of My Lady's husband, ostensibly an attendant and servant under My Lady's guardianship. A year younger than me, she acts as though she's older than the entire court. She'd probably talk down to the Imperial dowager herself if they somehow ended up in the same room.

"Don't worry, Hina. I'll tell you *all* about what it's like."

I ignore Ume. This is the only successful way to deal with her.

"I've thought about marrying again, myself," says one of the visitors from out on the veranda, "but I couldn't bear to settle for anyone less than the Fourth Rank."

"Really, I'd settle for a husband who shows up sometimes. Surely that isn't too much to ask."

"Stop being ridiculous. Aren't you exchanging letters with Moromune? Wouldn't a loyal husband get in the way of that?"

"That's what I said! I want a husband who shows up *sometimes*. Not too often, that would be boring."

The other woman cackles. "You are *incurable*! I always wonder where all the good lovers have gone, and here I discover the problem is that there's ladies like you."

"You remind me," My Lady says, "of a poem the Empress once composed in my presence. I remember it quite fondly."

The others fall silent. My Lady is spare with her words, true, but when she does speak, all under heaven listens. I crane my head forward to catch every syllable, wishing I was sitting there around the coals with the three of them so I could see My Lady's fierce, vibrant eyes as she recounts the story.

"It was the first New Year after the Emperor married Consort Motoko, may her late spirit be blessed. She was a beautiful bride, much like her cousin is now—young, artful, flawlessly mannered, as I'm sure the Chancellor taught her. It was a perfect union for everyone. The bride would continue the glorious legacy of raising princes in the bloodline of Fujiwara, that house of matchless splendor. And the Emperor would be joined to the girl he truly loved. Everyone could see it: if she so much as twitched a finger, he dissolved into smiles and rushed to her side. On that New Year, he composed verse after verse in praise of her beauty, swearing that he had never seen any girl so divinely proportioned, so sweet and supple, gentle and obedient, and measured as if by the gods themselves, nay, never in his entire life."

One of the visitors, the easily excitable one, raises a hand to her mouth.

"It was a perfect union for *almost* everyone. The elder Empress had heard enough poetry. She rose suddenly, in the middle of her husband's verse, waved for those of us in her service to join her, and left the room. I was in the doorway when the Emperor turned to his new father-in-law, the Chancellor, and said loudly enough for everyone to hear: 'If she intends to leave, she may stay away.' This was the start of our Empress's banishment from the palace.

"Her Majesty has always been too stubborn for tears, and so she was on that night. Many have remarked on this as a flaw, but it is no lack of sensitivity. Rather, I think, she refuses to cry for a man who has never loved her. On that night, she was proud and bitter and scorned and helpless; I reached out a hand to provide some vain comfort and she shrugged me violently away, and she seemed so dearly young and I so dearly foolish that it was I who began to weep. Her Majesty

looked at me, bewildered, and then her features hardened—I remember as if it were yesterday—and she composed this:

"Is it not as if
This is the very first time
I have ever loved?"
You said this to another
While I sat waiting for you

"I had assumed, until that night," My Lady concludes, "that our Empress's existence had been fully devoid of love. How tragically wrong I was."

The tale ends in silence. Transfixed, I think back to my memory of the Empress all those years ago and find myself wishing I could remember what she and My Lady had been speaking about. Even in absence, Her Majesty is a forceful figure. It is strange to imagine that such tiny things as love and jealousy could move someone as towering as she.

I think, also, of the song of the boy from the end of winter, the mismatch of the spring in his words and the loss in his timbre.

"What are you staring so hard at?" says Ume beside me. "Memorizing how to sit properly?"

I growl, "My sitting is just fine."

"Is not. You sit like a deer with its two front legs broken."

"Have you ever even *seen* a deer?"

Ume rises to her feet. "I have been to watch Lord Sakayu *hunt* deer. The way they scamper away when the arrow hits—it rather reminds me of how you lurch around the house when you've forgotten something." She walks off.

Hours pass before the visiting ladies finally stand and stretch and conduct themselves and their attendants to their

carriages under a parade of umbrellas. My Lady remains sitting by the crackling brazier, alone with the silence.

I approach her, bowing. "My Lady?"

"Yes, Hina?"

"Is it true? About the Empress, I mean. That she—well—"

"It is not polite to listen in while others are speaking."

"Who else was I going to listen to? Ume? Er, My Lady."

She forms an amused smile. "You are surprised that the lady of our realm lives and breathes and feels like you and I?"

"No, not that. That the Emperor would—I mean—"

"Say what you mean to, Hina. All this dancing around meanings—you sound just like one of the Fujiwaras. And you know, though you probably ought not to, how I feel about the Chancellor and his ilk."

I swallow. "Sorry. Yes, My Lady. Um—you said the Emperor banished his own wife from the palace. Is that true? Is that—is that what she was so angry about when I came to visit?"

My Lady regards me curiously. "It is certainly a fact that it happened. As to why she was angry, I cannot say. Her Majesty is often prone to bouts of strong emotion. It is a part of her charm."

"But you agree with her, then? That the Emperor was wrong to marry the Chancellor's daughter? And the newer consort, too?"

"I would not place myself in a position to judge the one who occupies the Imperial Seat. That is the office of the gods themselves, and what are we without it?" My Lady pauses for a reverent instant. "But I will tell you this, Hina, to pacify that bottomless curiosity of yours. I have served Her Majesty the Empress for many a season, a privilege I have gladly filled before and which I expect I will gladly fill again. She means something to me that reaches beyond any other loyalty,

though there are many who view her as nothing more than a jealous shrew. Tell me—who rules this city?"

I blink. "The Emperor?"

"My brother raised you to be smarter than that."

"Yes, My Lady, of—of course—"

"Stop that. No, Hina; who provides the hospitality when there is a royal birth? When the palace burns, with whom does the Emperor lodge? Who gives the recommendations for matters of court office and rank? Whose daughters does the Emperor marry, thereby indebting himself?"

"The nobles. The Fujiwaras."

"And things were not always this way. The Emperors ruled. Oh, they ruled. They built this city. Thus the Empress's shame is the shame of our entire nation. In scorning My Lady Her Highness, the Fujiwaras scorn the gods themselves. Or so it feels when you are in the room and she speaks of love offered and love betrayed, when she puts it to tragic verse. You know the passage, do you not? We, and all other creatures that sing, are the voice of the land itself. A land that has suffered too long under the claws of a parasite."

My Lady exhales. "Or maybe that is just the mad tale of an old country woman. It is late, Hina. I must apologize for going on like this."

"You're not old, My Lady," I say, which seems to be the wrong response, because she laughs.

"No, no. To sleep with you. And please—do not neglect any of the preparations for Ume's coming of age. I think you are with me in hoping that the marriage proceeds all according to plan, no?"

This time, the sardony in her voice is unmistakable. I cannot stifle my grin. "Say what you mean. Right, My Lady?"

“Hina, try to at least pretend at decorum every once in a while.”

“Yes, My Lady. Of course, My Lady.”

Three

"Fondly one views the place where those lovers met,
and forgets the sadness of their ill-starred love."

QUOTED BY LADY SARASHINA, 11TH CENTURY

Ume is fond of telling me that I am too easily excited, that I talk too much. This may be true, but it also betrays a fundamental lack of self-awareness on her part.

"And for the Lesser Left Counselor's wife, I think a pink jacket would suit her demeanor perfectly, don't you think? We should have them sit along the east wall. And the Secretary Captain's wife, we could have her seated on the left, wouldn't that be perfect?"

"Is that everyone who's coming?" I say. "Or should I save room for the Chancellor, too? Maybe a spot for the Empress?"

She glares. "That's right—I *remember* asking for your suggestions for the ceremony. Because you have so much experience with the transformation by which an annoying, useless girl becomes a lady. Or am I misremembering?"

As always, talking to Ume is counterproductive. I attend to my duties in silence, lighting the perfume burner and arrang-

ing the clothing stand over top of it, where Ume's new robes will hang to be scented. From now on, she will not wear the plainer dresses of a handmaiden who must be free to attend on her mistress's wishes. She will have servants of her own soon enough. Hence the new wardrobe, courtesy of My Lady's wealthy husband, her dear uncle Lord Ōtomo no Sakayu.

The story is tragic on paper, I suppose, though it is difficult to view Ume as a tragic figure while I am hanging her gold-threaded gown and her new train, woven of even finer silk than most of My Lady's wardrobe. For years she lived under the roof of Lord Sakayu's brother until he passed away from a sudden bout of plague. The loss was too much for her poor mother, who shaved her head and renounced the world. The best solution, it was decided, was for My Lady to quit the Empress's service and care for the girl until a suitable match could be made.

A "suitable match." It sounds so easy when said that way—like selecting ripe *mikan* at the market. A question suddenly comes to me, stirred perhaps by the sweet tang of the incense.

"How did Lady Yukiko and Lord Sakayu meet?" I ask Ume.

"Hm? You should know, shouldn't you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'd think it would be a family legend or something. The most significant thing that ever happened to you all." When I ignore the bait, she goes on. "You should hear Lord Sakayu tell it."

I wrinkle my nose, though with my back turned, Ume does not see. "Sure. Because he just loves talking to me. Go on, tell the story."

"If you *must* know," Ume says, "it was just a routine surveying trip out east. Even the senior nobles do them, you know,

it befits them to be aware of what's happening in the lands beneath them."

I do not know whether to be appalled at her conceit or shocked that she is, for once, about to say something useful. I compromise by shutting up and letting her speak, leaning in to hear over the low bustle of servants and pages chattering and shifting the furniture about.

"The manservants started to gossip about a girl they'd caught glimpses of, the daughter of a deputy governor, of the requisite age for courtship but too far from the city for anyone to have heard of her, beautiful as a summer flower and so on. Lord Sakayu was typically above such gossip, but as it happened, he'd brought nice paper from the city, and so he scraped his inkstick against his stone and began to compose a poem to have his servants convey to the girl, in hopes that she might see his learning and wit and realize all she was lacking in such a secluded existence—"

"Untrue," a man's voice interrupts. "My Lord was about as tactful as a blunt boulder."

I startle. Amid the bustle of servants moving furniture and working in the garden to prepare for Ume's ceremony, I hadn't realized any of them might have been listening. "Do I know you?"

The man, though much older than Ume or me, wears the unremarkable robes of a low-ranking attendant or messenger, the kind of clothing that makes one invisible to those of higher birth. "My Lord Sakayu sent me to make sure everything was in order for the wearing of the train." Ume straightens herself importantly; I stifle a giggle.

"And believe me," he continues, "My Lord's proposal to his lady was nothing storybook. I can still imagine it now. He approaches her with fan extended; the girl reaches out her

own, plucks the poem from his fan, opens it, and reads. How exquisite his handwriting! How delicate his vocabulary!

I am sad
And lonely
Please love me
Or I will probably die
Or something

"And the girl's polite response:

Your gentle poem
Like the cloth of morning snow
Sets my heart spinning
I could never love you more
Were we married a lifetime

Seeing the sour look on Ume's face makes me burst into laughter.

"When he sat out to return to the capital," Sakayu's servant plows on, "he wished dearly in his heart to see the maiden again. But oh! what tragedy! the house was impure, owing to the death of a horse, and he could not enter. So he stood without the gate and intoned his emotions:

On our parting
My sleeves are damp
Indeed, even wet
Soaked with the tears
Of the crying of my eyes

"That's a bit redundant, isn't it?" I force out through laughter.

Ume reaches out to give me an annoyed shove; I step back to avoid her and feel myself knocking backwards into something. I turn to steady the stand above the incense burner, but it clatters to the ground, and I barely realize what I have done until I smell the odor of burning silk and my heart stops.

The corner of Ume's ceremonial gown is smoldering. The burner is upended, hot charcoal scattered all across the floor. I yelp, stamping at the smoking fabric. Sakayu's servant yells something and rushes across the room. I look in his direction to see that a stack of paper near the paneled wall has caught alight, flicking embers into the air.

"Water!" I shout. "Someone get water!"

I extinguish the gown under my foot, crushing out the growing flames, then frantically look around for something to stop the larger fire. Everything in the room is wood or straw or silk. Through gritted teeth, I grab hold of Ume's damaged gown, the fibers already black and splitting where it was burnt, and beat at the flames with it.

This only grows the fire. The burning air rushes at my face; I squint my eyes to slits, barely seeing as the edge of the gown catches fire and charred streaks appear on the wall. I shout for My Lady, for everyone to get out of the house, and I am about to drop the ruined gown and run when a wave of freezing water crashes over me and everything falls silent.

I blink my eyes open and slowly push the soaked hair out of my face. Sakayu's servant stands, panting, with an empty bucket in his hands. Beside him, Ume is frozen in disbelief. I look away to the mess of ash and soggy paper, the burnt wood and the marred scene on the wall panel.

"I will, ahem, apprise Lord Sakayu," the manservant says; he sets the bucket down gingerly, then crosses the room in four steps and vanishes.

Ume looks at me—not at my face, but at the dripping bundle in my arms. "My gown."

Trembling, I unfurl the garment. It had been more beautiful than I had noticed before, patterned with waves of gold like a waterfall of pure sunlight. Now the threads are coming apart where it was burnt; half of it could be salvaged, maybe, but on the other side I can poke my fingers all the way through where it is frayed.

"I'm sorry," I begin to say, but Ume sticks her nose in the air and wipes tears from her eyes. "You realize that you've ruined *everything*," she wails. I can think of nothing to say, so I merely stand in place and shiver, knowing there is nothing I can say or do to repair the damage.

This is when My Lady enters the chamber. She takes in the stand overturned on the ground, the pungence of burnt wood and fabric, and she says nothing.

Here, I am certain, is where it all ends. She will have me in the next caravan back to Hitachi. This is not like the time I forgot to bring in the washing before a rainstorm and found men's riding trousers four blocks away a week later, or the time I accidentally let slip that My Lady was feigning sickness to avoid any obnoxious visitors and thereby brought a parade of teasing men to the gate, or the times I delivered private letters to the wrong side of the city entirely. This time, My Lady will finally realize that she's had enough of a useless attendant like me.

She draws herself up, but hesitates before speaking. Ume keeps on whining until My Lady silences her with a sharp look and sends her wordlessly from the room. I stare at the floor, the soaked, burnt floor that was so fine before I came along.

Finally My Lady speaks. "Was it not I who taught you how to perfume a gown?"

"Yes, My Lady."

"And did I not teach you that one must exercise the utmost caution when doing so?"

"Yes, My Lady."

"And were you, during a period of great urgency, amusing yourself with frivolous stories about your mistress's past?"

My face burns. "Yes, My Lady. It won't happen again."

"Hm." She sniffs. "Though it was, admittedly, a fine retelling. I wonder if that attendant really was present. I suppose he must have been."

"My Lady?" I risk a glance up, but the disappointment on her face makes me avert my eyes again instantly.

"This will all need to be cleaned up by tomorrow, of course." Whatever levity was in her voice vanishes. "Get yourself presentable. Then see whether you can't contract an artisan to take a look at the building. It will not be a trivial repair, but it appears doable. And we will have to see about Ume's attire. I doubt Sakayu has anything finer, but perhaps I can call in a favor at the palace. It is rather a shame; I remember that I felt quite like a goddess wearing it. I suspect Ume would have felt the same."

Guilt throttles my chest. It would almost be preferable if she did send me away now.

"No matter. Take it with you to the market; surely there is some value you can get out of it. And do be more careful." She seems as though she would say something more, but shuts her mouth and walks out of the room, the brilliant trailing fabric of her layered dresses following her out.

It is only when she is out of earshot and I am left alone that I finally begin to cry, wiping my eyes with the tattered scraps in my hands, the proof that I will never belong in My Lady's world.

He is bent over as if praying. With his right hand, extended in front of him, he plucks the *koto* strings using plectrums tied around his thumb and first two fingers. His left hand, stretching out to the side, bends the strings, causing the tone to warp and warble. His head is bowed in concentration.

"Back again?"

I have already walked a few steps before I realize that he was speaking to me. I stop, glance back.

He sits cross-legged behind his zither, the instrument resting on small stands and extending out to the left of him; it is as long as he is tall. His head remains down, focused on the movements of his right hand. He plucks a wrong note, grunts, and plays the section over again. He is young, his face round and unweathered. His eyes are focused and eager. His robes are patterned with the forbidden purple.

I respond, my face burning, "I'm just passing by."

"Oh. This isn't a main road. Where are you headed?"

"The market."

"No you aren't. That's in the opposite direction."

"I'm going to do the washing. Then taking it to the market."

But he seems already distracted. He continues to pluck and bend the zither strings. There is a haunting intensity to his playing that is unlike anything I have heard—like he is stacking rocks in the air, and at any moment they may come tumbling to the ground, but they remain suspended now by each pitch and harmony and the driving rhythm. I glance around: we are alone here on the edge of the mansion garden, so magnificent that there is no question to whom it belongs. The Fujiwaras.

He does not seem to care whether I stay or go. So I remain,

leaning against a tree, listening and watching, until the silence grows too heavy.

"Your clothing is nicer than usual."

His eyebrows rise.

"I mean it."

"My father brought me along to the Council of State meeting today."

He glances up, as if to judge my reaction. I don't know much about the Council, besides what I hear from Lord Sakayu during his infrequent visits. The little I have heard usually involves complaining about taxes on provincial estates and debates over resuming a campaign against the northern barbarians. I merely nod. "Oh. That's nice."

This is when he stops playing, all of a sudden, and seems to look me over for the first time. My hands go to my hair so that they have something to do other than flop at my sides like two dead salmon. I am noticing a hundred things: that the bottom of my robe is smeared with ash, that the fabric is unperfumed, that my heart is throbbing; and also the things that I notice myself when I look in My Lady's mirror, that my eyes are too large and close together and my nose is too small. I cannot hide all of these things with my two hands.

"So what's that you're holding? The washing?" he asks. He removes the plectrums from his fingers—they slip into his kimono's chest pocket—and leans forward curiously, conspiratorially. "It seems rather—ah—"

"I'm developing a new fabric pattern."

"A new fabric pattern."

"Sure." I hold up the gown. "It's called 'burnt chrysanthemum.' Perfumed with the elegant aroma of, uh, smoke."

The boy smirks.

"It's a symbol, actually." My face is bright red and my legs

are groaning to walk away and bury my head in a bush. But my mouth has opened like a gate for a caravan, and now the rest of the ox-carts must push their way out. "You know. The Last Days of the Law, the decline of the Buddha's precepts. When the hearts of men become fickle and the scriptures will be forsaken and all that. So they say."

"Unbelievable. It's bound to be a new hit at court."

There is an easy grin on his face; it makes me smile as well. I suddenly find that my shame over the disaster has dissolved. Here it is a funny little thing, this saggy cloth that has caused such a fuss. He adds, "But I don't suppose you've ever been to court?"

"My Lady has," I say proudly.

"Your lady?"

"Yukiko Hitachi. She's married to the Ōtomo Middle Counselor."

"I know the one. There's to be a marriage in the family soon, no?"

"How do you know that?"

"The Middle Counselor is no insignificant man at court." He must notice the distaste on my face, because he adds, "And a bit of a windbag and a general enemy to peace and good breeding and anyone who happens to share my surname, yes, but still a man worth knowing."

"You wouldn't say that if you knew him."

"Maybe not," he says, laughing in the way of someone who knows he is supposed to carefully measure out his laughs but cannot help himself now. With every word, distance evaporates from between us. I take a few steps closer and kneel beside his *koto*, gazing at the intricate engravings on the board. He watches me, seeming as curious at my sudden interest as I am about the instrument.

"It's incredible that people make stuff like this," I say. "This could be your whole life, you know? Imagine what it must be like to carve these every day. To be one of the people who builds the city's music."

"It's not so exotic. Everyone is a musician, everyone is a poet, everyone is an artist." His words have a bitter edge. "They all miss the point, I think. It's not the music or the poetry that really moves us. It's—" He looks down at his instrument, almost as if he is the one who is embarrassed, and his speech trails off. For the first time, I notice the paper and brush on the ground beside his *koto*, the paper filled with the same Chinese character repeated dozens of times, each attempt more careless than the last.

"Ignoring your homework?" I ask, smiling as I think of my younger brothers back in Hitachi, the twins.

His eyes dart up to mine, his face—dare I say it—flushed slightly pink, but he makes no attempt to hide the sheets of characters as he shifts them onto his lap and flips through them. The back sides of some are covered not with characters, but with drawings: intimations of peach trees and eaved roofs and the *uguisu*, the morning warbler.

"May I?" I reach for the papers, letting Ume's gown fall to the ground. When I realize my impropriety, I pull my hand back and blush violently. But the boy offers them to me.

"Take a look if you like. They're nothing; I'm supposed to be focusing on my writing. The language of statecraft. The only sensible thing for a Fujiwara to apply himself to."

If he keeps speaking, I no longer hear it. The sincerity in his drawings drown out the irony in his speech. Many of the images are only half drawn, interrupted, and those that are complete are hardly more corporeal. They all seem rather like dream-images, like the kind of picture a blind itinerant might

have of a plant he has never touched, only felt with his hands. I sit and leaf through the pages, only looking up when I hear the gentle scratch of brush on paper and see that the boy has begun to draw on one of his remaining sheets.

He notices me. "Don't expect anything extraordinary," he says. "I only have a calligraphy brush, so this won't be any good."

He turns the back of his paper toward me, clearly signaling that he does not wish to be disturbed. As if attending on My Lady, I kneel patiently as he works, listening to the faint crackle of paper and shivering slightly in the breeze. His glance occasionally darts up to my face. Just when I think he is done and I move, he says, "Wait a moment. Don't look yet. I'm almost there."

Finally, he lays down his brush and turns the page around. It is a strange portrait. The figure, a lady in the flowing robes of an empress, is drawn not in lines themselves, but the space between the lines. She has no facial features except for eyebrows, and the shape of her robes and her hands—raised, touching her hair—are only faintly insinuated by the curves of the brushstrokes. Maybe it it just the contrast between the light paper and the thick black ink, but the image evokes a penetrating sadness, some grief that is impossible to say clearly so it pokes through in the formless shadows. I cannot take my eyes off of it.

"It's beautiful."

"It's actually you," he says, and hands it over.

"Me?"

"For lack of another reference image."

"Oh." My mouth is dry. "I'm flattered."

"Good."

I cannot tell if he is being genuine. His gaze has returned

down to his zither, as if he has neither said nor drawn anything at all.

"Well. Um. Thank you," I say.

He does not reply. What thoughts are going through that heart? I remember his poem from the end of winter. Not the exact words, but he described a lover, didn't he?

"Masanori!" The shout comes from the mansion. An old man stands on the steps wearing formal robes like the boy, but in a deep royal purple, his hair tied in a topknot with a tall silver ornament. The boy glances over his shoulder at him.

"You have to go?" I ask.

He nods and stands. Servants emerge from the mansion to transport the koto. He looks in the direction of the mansion, eyes out of focus, forehead knotted in thought. He glances back at me and speaks.

Shut your eyes
And I am ordinary
See me like this:
Wearing no purple robe
Only common words

The breath leaves my chest as if I have been struck. It is one thing to engage in idle chat with a maiden of no consequence, a child of nobility low enough to be forgotten, someone like me. It is something else to speak in poetry. I glance down at my robes, just to make sure they have not changed, and I am not suddenly in My Lady's clothes. No—I have no dazzling sleeves, just these ragged hems and plain hands.

His jaw is tight, frustrated, and his eyes angle downwards away from me. The servants are approaching. I regain my breath and try to reply.

How can I not look?
You are strange to me — no —
You are —
Someone I don't know —

The servants are here, picking up the instrument, and I feel that I must disappear.

The boy does not look at me again.

It is only after nightfall, after I have arrived at My Lady's mansion and tiptoed past the canopy in the center of the main chamber where she sleeps, that I remove the drawing I have hidden in my sleeve. It is slightly wrinkled, but the ink is unsmeared. A lady in monochrome. Such a small, fragile thing. In an instant it could be torn up or shrivel into ash. It is the only proof that I spoke to the boy, that our meeting was not some fantastical dream.

Fujiwara no Masanori. Masanori Fujiwara. I play with the words in my head. That was his name, was it not? Of course he is a Fujiwara. No other family in the capital has mansions that splendid, and nearly every courtier of a rank to wear purple is either one of them or related to them. The Emperor himself is practically a Fujiwara, with his Fujiwara mother and grandmother and consort. There is no other name but Fujiwara that means splendor, beauty, power. Everything I am not.

I do not fall asleep quickly. I wonder whether it is the way I am lying on my mat on the smooth wooden floor, which feels harder than usual, or whether it is exhaustion from having walked all the way to the market and back today. I am deceiving myself. I know it is possibility that keeps me awake,

snapping at my heels like a tiger. I could fall asleep if I wanted to. But I do not want to stop my wondering.