

The Empress Jingû Fishes

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Women ruled Japan for more than eighty of the 177 years between AD 593 and 770. These tennô—"emperors"—were effective leaders, the first to call a national census, document regional geography and resources, institute legal and administrative codes, open and sustain relations with the nations of the Korean peninsula and China, and gather what have been for more than a thousand years the basic references to Japan's ancient history and literature. Jingû ruled Japan several hundred years before the earliest of the women tennô, in what is called the mythological era of imperial succession.

The empress Jingû fishes. The little mountain stream before her is fast but smooth, and clear enough that she can see an ayu-trout near the bottom, though it is nearly hidden by tree-shadows above and the busy pattern of the river bed below: gold and russet and gray rocks, waving tangled weeds. The trout does not see her—or does not care whether she sees it—only hovers there, as unconcerned and self-absorbed as the gods.

She is not hungry, for she has just eaten. Beside a small slender stone as long as her thumb is a tipped cedar-wood box; cooked rice spills from it, the remains of her meal. She picks up the stone and tucks it into her sash; she will need it later, and it will be just the right size and shape. Jingû knows this as clearly as she knows the death-name of the unborn son in her belly, or the date of her own death, forty years from now. Past and future are equally immediate to the gods, and thus to her, their shaman, to whom and through whom they speak.

Half a year from now, she will be in the kingdom of Silla on the Korean peninsula, completing a task the gods have set her. It will be bitterly cold, a pale-skied day with snow in the air. Though it will be six months before she sees it, she knows that Silla's capital will be built on the Chinese plan, its walls twenty feet high and roofed with tile to protect against flaming arrows, roads from the gates scattering across a treeless plain—a perfect place for her to draw up her troops. Though she is pregnant with her son, who will be due—and overdue—by then, Jingû is on horseback at their head, dressed in armor, her long hair tied close in a man's style. Her bow lies across her horse's neck, and she runs a crow-feathered arrow between her fingers. She longs for the Sillans to attack, longs for their king to open the gates of the capital and ride out to meet her. She has wanted this since her husband Chûai died. The gods demanded he take Silla; when he refused they killed him. She cannot avenge herself on the gods, but aches to kill someone, anyone.

That is half a year from now. Now, this instant, she looks at the trout suspended in water as clear and cold and pitiless as the future.

Eight years ago. Jingû is to be married. She kneels on a litter hung so heavily with silk and paper and tree branches that she can see nothing, but she sees anyway. This is the emperor's temporary palace; though it is only a month before they move to the next place, the many wood-and-plaster buildings are solidly constructed, with graceful tall roofs. Her husband the emperor will be called Chûai when he is dead, and this is his name to her even now, before she has seen his face—though she must remember to address him as "husband" or "your highness." The future is uncomfortable enough to a woman who is born to it, and she knows already that he will be afraid of the gods that speak through her, that he will ignore them

and die.

Her robes are heavy with appliqué and silver. The dangling headdress ornaments tickle her face when she tips back her head. The soles of her shoes are hung with silver charms shaped like fish. Her bracelets of jade are narrow but so deep that they form broad flat disks around her wrists. She cannot walk, cannot pick up anything. Her wedding-dress is nearly as heavy as the armor she will wear eight years from now, after the gods speak and her husband dies.

Her husband has other, older, wives and even two grown sons. This will be a problem when her child is born. For a time, anyway: she sees her step-sons' deaths, unavoidable as soon as they raise arms against the boy. Her son will prevail and become emperor. Many generations from now he will be a god, the god of peace and then the god of war, Hachiman. She smiles and touches her still-virgin belly: it is quite appropriate that his mother will conquer a land across the sea for him.

Five months from now. Jingû crouches alone in a shrine, a building sunk half into the earth, its roof many men's height over her head. The roof's supports make strange angled shadows against the morning light that sifts from the steep triangles of the eave openings. The air is thick with the scents of horses and hot metal, latrines and cooking fish: the smells of an army. Outside the shrine she hears her warleader Takeuchi talking with her guard. It is Takeuchi who will stop the rebellious step-sons for her, but that is years in the future, and Jingû has a war to fight and a son to bear before then.

She does not pray for her troops' safety in crossing the sea or a victory in Silla, for she has seen these things already. No: she is nine months' pregnant, and her child frets to be born. The contractions drive her to her knees, panting. Her urine runs into the hard-packed earth; snot and saliva and sweat drip from her face. She prefers not to embarrass herself in front of her troops. The privacy of the shrine is welcome.

Jingû has been careful to show none of the weakness that can come of pregnancy, though hers has not been an easy one. Her chest hurts, and her bowels, pelvis, legs, back—everything. She finds herself panting at even slight exertion. Her breasts have begun to weep, and the cotton with which she binds them chafes. Inside her, Ôjin grows large and kicks, searching for a comfortable position.

Things have grown a little easier for her since her son dropped in her belly: it's easier to breathe, easier to move. The clear fluid seeping from her loins to stain her saddle is only a minor inconvenience.

She wears the torso of her armor, though its slim metal plates are very heavy, and, since she is still in Japan, their value is based only in her troops' morale. There are ordinarily four panels that would cradle her torso—front, sides and back—but she has removed a side panel, claiming that her belly is too great to secure the fourth piece. In truth, she simply chooses to lighten the armor by removing some of it, and it is easy enough to see that the panel turned away from the enemy is useless. The weight: she already carries sorrow heavy as stone bracelets, and her child like iron in her womb.

When the contraction ends at last, she collapses on her left side—the unarmored side—tears leaking to the ground. "Not now," she says aloud, to the gods and her son. "Wait. When I've returned from Silla: then."

She has brought with her the slender smooth stone she found beside the trout's stream. She slides it into her vagina, a cold weight. The stone frets; gods are not all great gods, and this stone longs for its icy riverbed, for the company of its fellows. It has no choice but to stay, for she wraps hemp cloth tightly around her loins to hold stone and child in place, and ties a knot.

The stone, the army, the horse before the walls of Silla's capital—they are in the future. In the meantime, Jingû stands on the riverbank and eyes the trout. It remains supremely unconcerned with her shadow over it, her loss and anger, her war and the forty years of her life that stretch beyond, each day without Chûai. The fish does not care. "You bastard," she says aloud, and sets out to catch it, though she is not hungry.

Like every woman, whether peasant or empress, she has a needle, though hers is of silver, a treasure from beyond the same sea she will cross in six months. She draws it from her sash, and bends it easily between her fingers to a hook shape. It looks fragile, but will be sturdy enough for the trout, which is small.

The gods have taken even luck from Jingû; there is no serendipity to the fact she snagged her robe on a sakaki shoot when she walked to the stream's edge. She crouches and rocks back on her heels, and worries at the frayed thread, tugging until it starts to slide past its fellows. Its absence leaves a tiny flaw in the fabric, a puckered line that is more sensed than seen. When she has pulled half a dozen strands of the dark silk, she twists them together, and when this is done, she tugs on the thread, hard as a fish fighting to live. She will not lose this trout because she underestimates the power of denial and despair. It holds. She threads the bent needle and ties a knot.

Problems with the natives. It is a year ago. Jingû and Chûai are well content with one another, though Jingû already mourns him in her heart. The blurring of present and future has consequences both large and small: unexpected minor advantages have been Jingû's ability to sexually please her husband from the very beginning; and the passion they share even after seven years of marriage, fueled on her part by the knowledge that he will die soon. And not so minor: the two older wives are nearly forgotten, and it is Jingû who travels with Chûai now.

Chûai (though she remembers to call him "beloved") has for several years fought with the Kumaso, ill-mannered and independent-minded locals from a southern island of the empire, who refused to pay their taxes. The battles with the Kumaso have been inconclusive at best—it is never easy to force recalcitrants to battle on their own terrain—but Chûai remains confident. He has called a council of his generals in Na, a strange little barbarian town on the island. Jingû walks the hills outside of Na, weeping, waiting for the dream that she knows is coming.

Still, when the dream takes her it is like a rape, and she awakens screaming. Her husband holds her until her muscles unclench and the tears begin. She speaks then, the gods' voice scraping from between her clenched teeth. "Ignore the Kumaso," it says. "There is a rich land across the water to the north and west: Silla. Take it."

Chûai has seen her weakness in the hands of the terrible gods before this; he knows that they tell the truth through her. But he is emperor, and understands (better than the gods, perhaps) the intricate exchanges of power and influence that are necessary to rule a land. "Why?" he says softly to Jingû. "It has taken years to bring this together. We can't leave this campaign to start another somewhere none of us have ever seen." The gods do not permit her to say what crowds in her mind: because they will kill you.

In the morning, Chûai leads Jingû to the tallest hill they can see from Na, and together they climb it. There are no fish on the soles of her shoes this time, and it is a simple walk, if long. The autumn sky is very blue, the oak and maple trees in their first startling change from green to gold and red. For an instant she pretends that she and Chûai are not emperor and consort but ordinary people gathering sticks or hunting,

free to live as they wish, to say without constraint, "Do that," or, "Don't do this." The illusion is gone as quickly as it comes; there is no rest from the gods. They come to the hill's top and look around them. The island they stand on stretches away to the south and west; to the north and east is the main island of the empire. To the north and west, where Silla is supposed to be, is nothing but water and sky and a few fishing boats, small as fallen leaves on a lake. "See?" he says. "There is nothing there, nothing to conquer, nothing to point to and strive for. Whereas here"—his sweeping arm encompasses the hill, little Na at its feet, the island they stand on—"are the Kumaso. Enemies we can see and destroy. Which do you think my commanders will see as the wiser course?"

"The gods—" she whispers past her strangled throat.

Chûai rubs his face with his hand. "The gods are unreasonable, and they are not all allies. Even the gods can be treacherous."

She knows this better than he ever will. The words come out in a rush: "They will kill you if you do not."

He touches the tears growing cold on her cheeks. "You've already seen your life without me, haven't you?" She cannot meet his weary eyes. "Then I am already dead."

Some months later, the gods do kill him, with a Kumaso arrow in the chest, an infected wound, and a quick (if uncomfortable) death. There are times in the last days when he asks about the future, but she has nothing to tell him, for none of it has to do with him, none but the barely-begun son in her belly: Prince Homuda, who will be Ôjin after he has died, and then the god Hachiman.

Knowing her husband will die is not the same as losing him. She is numb as she stumbles through the purification retreat and rituals. Past and future are meaningless to the gods and thus to Jingû. The pain never lessens: each moment of each day contains the first shock and the endless ache of his death.

Forty years before she dies.

A fish is not seduced by bait: when it grows hungry, it eats whichever mosquito egg or dragonfly happens to be closest. If one is fortunate or destined, one's bait looks like the fish's preferred food, and at that moment it happens to be closer than any other mosquito egg or dragonfly.

But it is chance that fish and bait are in the right places at the right time. There may be no fish there, or a different fish, or the wrong bait, or the fish may not be hungry. The woman who hopes to catch a fish knows she offers nothing to the fish that it cannot find for itself—and better, for her bait comes with a hook and a thread, and death.

The spilled rice on the ground is cold. Grains stick to her hand when she picks one up and presses it onto the needle. It looks a bit like the tiny things that live at the water's surface and become mosquitoes.

She stands slowly, and looks down into the stream, down at the shimmering motionless uncaring trout. "You bastard," she says again. "Prove to me that I should go to Silla."

Jingû knows what the gods want. They toss their demands at her, knowing she will meet them: a dozen shrines to this god or that; rice fields and offerings, priestesses in Nagata and Hirota. And Silla.

Chûai died because he sought to conquer the Kumaso rather than Silla, but the gods allow Jingû to defeat the Kumaso in mere months. Past and future blur in the gods' minds; they knew, and know, that this is

how things will happen. Chûai's death was arbitrary and meaningless, proof that the gods are either ironical or cruel, or simply do not care. The gods may define her actions, but they do not care what she feels, the sorrow and anger and love and grief that are always with her, always as intense as the first moments she feels them.

For a time after his death she performs divination after divination, all asking, Shall I conquer Silla? Catching trout with a needle is part of this. She will also watch a rock crumble and allow water to irrigate a rice field she has planted. Later she will bathe in a river and feel the water in her hair, drawing conclusions from the currents that pull it this way and that. She knows what the answer will be—has seen it already, as familiar to her as a song she will sing to her infant son when he is born—but her only power over the gods is this, that they must tell her what they want for her to give it to them. And so she asks them to repeat themselves and takes a chill comfort in hearing their voices and pretending they care.

There are places in Japan where the gods do not permit men to fish during spawning, for they cannot understand and will not properly respect the fish's feelings. Jingû often fished as a child, before she becomes consort and then empress, and old skills come back easily when the past is eternally now. It is still some months before Ôjin will disrupt her balance, so she stands precariously on the little river's bank, the thread coiled in one hand, the baited needle in the other.

The sun has moved barely a hand's breadth in the sky since she first saw the trout; still, this is a long time for a fish to stay in one place. Perhaps the trout must be here as surely as she is. She frowns as she calculates and tosses the hook through the air. It settles just before the eyes of the trout, light as an insect.

Six months from now, Jingû sits her horse before the walls of Silla's capital, longing to kill. She strokes the feathers of the arrow in her hand, and dreams a little dream: the king will open the gates and emerge at the head of all his armies, all dressed in armor from beyond China, riding tigers and breathing fire. With Chûai alive beside her, she will ride to meet the Sillans, and her own people with them. She will empty her quiver and then draw her sword; and she will cut and cut and cut. Men's blood will soak her hair, and there will be no gods, nothing but the random terror and delight of a life without certainties. Chûai might die or he might not. And she might die here, today, instead of forty long years from now, years already laid out before her as clear and cold and pitiless as a mountain stream.

It is only a dream, of course. She knows the shape of this victory in all its details. She has seen it since the first of her trances, when the gods broke down the walls between the past and the future. The king of Silla also has diviners, perhaps his own instructions to follow; in any case he has problems of his own: violent Paekche to the east, to the west China's looming shadow. He opens the gates, and sends out not armies but emissaries.

Silla falls to Japan without an arrow fired. The king surrenders and swears fealty, annual shipments of horses and gold. The only weapon hurled in anger is the spear that Jingû drives into the ground before the king's palace, the symbol of the conquest. Her rage is intact when she returns to Japan and bears her son, the emperor who will become the god of war, Hachiman.

The bent needle and its bait lie on the stream's surface just above the trout's head. Jingû can only wait, for she knows she will catch it, bring it to shore, and watch it die, gasping in the unbreathable air. This will prove yet again that she is to go to Silla, to conquer a land she does not care about for gods she hates,

who have killed her husband and will steal her son and make him one of them.

All moments are this moment. Past and future jumbled together: Jingû cannot say which is which. And because everything—sorrow and anger and love and grief—is equally immediate, she finds herself strangely distanced from her own life. It is as if she listens to a storyteller recite a tale she has heard too many times, the tale of the empress Jingû.

She lives this tale divorced from past and future, separated even from what is and what is not. The fragments of her life are stolen from later empresses: this woman will take Silla without a fight; that woman will manage the land for weary years after her husband's death. Jingû is no more than the tale of the empress Jingû, forced through the patterns of the storytelling, again and again and again. But she nevertheless feels, and she aches to kill something, anything.

The trout strikes and the hook sets. She hauls it in.