

## Classic Poetry Series

# Tu Fu

- poems -

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## **Alone, Looking for Blossoms Along the River**

The sorrow of riverside blossoms inexplicable,  
And nowhere to complain -- I've gone half crazy.  
I look up our southern neighbor. But my friend in wine  
Gone ten days drinking. I find only an empty bed.

A thick frenzy of blossoms shrouding the riverside,  
I stroll, listing dangerously, in full fear of spring.  
Poems, wine -- even this profusely driven, I endure.  
Arrangements for this old, white-haired man can wait.

A deep river, two or three houses in bamboo quiet,  
And such goings on: red blossoms glaring with white!  
Among spring's vociferous glories, I too have my place:  
With a lovely wine, bidding life's affairs bon voyage.

Looking east to Shao, its smoke filled with blossoms,  
I admire that stately Po-hua wineshop even more.  
To empty golden wine cups, calling such beautiful  
Dancing girls to embroidered mats -- who could bear it?

East of the river, before Abbot Huang's grave,  
Spring is a frail splendor among gentle breezes.  
In this crush of peach blossoms opening ownerless,  
Shall I treasure light reds, or treasure them dark?

At Madame Huang's house, blossoms fill the paths:  
Thousands, tens of thousands haul the branches down.  
And butterflies linger playfully -- an unbroken  
Dance floating to songs orioles sing at their ease.

I don't so love blossoms I want to die. I'm afraid,  
Once they are gone, of old age still more impetuous.  
And they scatter gladly, by the branchful. Let's talk  
Things over, little buds ---open delicately, sparingly.

Tu Fu

## Ballad of the Army Carts

The carts squeak and trundle, the horses whinny, the conscripts go by, each with a bow and arrows at his waist. Their fathers, mothers, wives, and children run along beside them to see them off. The Hsien-yang Bridge cannot be seen for dust. They pluck at the men's clothes, stamp their feet, or stand in the way weeping. The sound of their weeping seems to mount up to the blue sky above. A passer-by questions the conscripts, and the conscripts reply:

“They're always mobilizing now! There are some of us who went north at fifteen to garrison the River and who are still, at forty, being sent to the Military Settlements in the west. When we left as lads, the village headman had to tie our head-cloths for us. We came back white-haired, but still we have to go back for frontier duty! On those frontier posts enough blood has flowed to fill the sea; but the Martial Emperor's dreams of expansion remain unsatisfied. Haven't you heard, sir, in our land of Han, throughout the two hundred prefectures east of the mountains briars and brambles are growing in thousands of little hamlets; and though many a sturdy wife turns her own hand at the hoeing and ploughing, the crops grow just anywhere, and you can't see where one field ends and the next begins? And it's even worse for the men from Ch'in. Because they make such good fighters, they are driven about this way and that like so many dogs or chickens.

“Though you are good enough to ask us, sir, it's not for the likes of us to complain. But take this winter, now. The Kuan-hsi troops are not being demobilized. The District Officers press for the land-tax, but where is it to come from? I really believe it's a misfortune to have sons. It's actually better to have a daughter. If you have a daughter, you can at least marry her off to one of the neighbors; but a son is born only to end up lying in the grass somewhere, dead and unburied. Why look, sir, on the shores of the Kokonor the bleached bones have lain for many a long year, but no one has ever gathered them up. The new ghosts complain and the old ghosts weep, and under the grey and dripping sky the air is full of their baleful twitterings.”

Tu Fu

## Ballad of the Old Cypress

In front of the temple of Chu-ko Liang there is an old cypress. Its branches are like green bronze; its roots like rocks; around its great girth of forty spans its rimy bark withstands the washing of the rain. Its jet-colored top rises two thousand feet to greet the sky. Prince and statesman have long since paid their debt to time; but the tree continues to be cherished among men. When the clouds come, continuous vapors link it with the mists of the long Wu Gorge; and when the moon appears, the cypress tree shares the chill of the Snowy Mountains' whiteness.

I remember a year or so ago, where the road wound east round my Brocade River pavilion, the First Ruler and Chu-ko Liang shared the same shrine. There, too, were towering cypresses, on the ancient plain outside the city. The paint-work of the temple's dark interior gleamed dully through derelict doors and windows. But this cypress here, though it holds its ground well, clinging with wide-encompassing, snake-like hold, yet, because of its lonely height rising into the gloom of the sky, meets much of the wind's fierce blast. Nothing but the power of Divine Providence could have kept it standing for so long; its straightness must be the work of the Creator himself! If a great hall had collapsed and beams for it were needed, ten thousand oxen might turn their heads inquiringly to look at such a mountain of a load. But it is already marvel enough to astonish the world, without any need to undergo a craftsman's embellishing. It has never refused the axe: there is simply no one who could carry it away if it were felled. Its bitter heart has not escaped the ants; but there are always phoenixes roosting in its scented leaves. Men of ambition, and you who dwell unseen, do not cry out in despair! From of old the really great has never been found a use for

Tu Fu

## By the Lake

The old fellow from Shao-ling weeps with stifled sobs as he walks furtively by the bends of the Sepentine on a day in spring. In the waterside palaces the thousands of doors are locked. For whom have the willows and rushed put on their fresh greenery?

I remember how formerly, when the Emperor's rainbow banner made its way into the South Park, everything in the park seemed to bloom with a brighter color. The First Lady of the Chao-yang Palace rode in the same carriage as her lord in attendance at his side, while before the carriage rode maids of honor equipped with bows and arrows, their white horses champing at golden bits. Leaning back, face skywards, they shot into the clouds; and the Lady laughed gaily when a bird fell to the ground transfixed by a well-aimed arrow. Where are the bright eyes and the flashing smile now? Tainted with blood-pollution, her wandering soul cannot make its way back. The clear waters of the Wei flow eastwards, and Chien-ko is far away: between the one who has gone and the one who remains no communication is possible. It is human to have feelings and shed tears for such things; but the grasses and flowers of the lakeside go on for ever, unmoved. As evening falls, the city is full of the dust of foreign horseman. My way is towards the South City, but my gaze turns northward.

Tu Fu

## Day's End

Oxen and sheep were brought back down  
Long ago, and bramble gates closed. Over  
Mountains and rivers, far from my old garden,  
A windswept moon rises into clear night.

Springs trickle down dark cliffs, and autumn  
Dew fills ridgeline grasses. My hair seems  
Whiter in lamplight. The flame flickers  
Good fortune over and over -- and for what?

Tu Fu

## Dreaming of Li Po

After the separation of death one can eventually swallow back one's grief, but the separation of the living is an endless, unappeasable anxiety. From pestilent Chiang-nan no news arrives of the poor exile. That my old friend should come into my dream shows how constantly he is in my thoughts. I fear that this is not the soul of a living man: the journey is so immeasurably far. When your soul left, the maple woods were green: on its return the passes were black with night. Lying now enmeshed in the net of the law, how did you find wings with which to fly here? The light of the sinking moon illumines every beam and rafter of my chamber, and I half expect it to light up your face. The water is deep, the waves are wide: don't let the water-dragons get you.

All day long the floating clouds drift by, and still the wanderer has not arrived! For three nights running I have repeatedly dreamed of you. Such affectionate concern on your part shows your feelings for me! Each time you said goodbye you seemed so uneasy. 'It isn't easy to come', you would say bitterly; 'The waters are so rough. I am afraid the boat will capsize!' Going out of my door you scratched your white head as if your whole life's ambition had been frustrated.

The Capital is full of new officials, yet a man like this is so wretched! Who is going to tell me that the 'net is wide' when this ageing man remains in difficulties? Imperishable renown is cold comfort when you can only enjoy it in the tomb!

Tu Fu

## Full Moon

Above the tower -- a lone, twice-sized moon.  
On the cold river passing night-filled homes,  
It scatters restless gold across the waves.  
On mats, it shines richer than silken gauze.

Empty peaks, silence: among sparse stars,  
Not yet flawed, it drifts. Pine and cinnamon  
Spreading in my old garden . . . All light,  
All ten thousand miles at once in its light!

Tu Fu

## **Gazing at the Sacred Peak**

For all this, what is the mountain god like?  
An unending green of lands north and south:  
From ethereal beauty Creation distills  
There, yin and yang split dusk and dawn.

Swelling clouds sweep by. Returning birds  
Ruin my eyes vanishing. One day soon,  
At the summit, the other mountains will be  
Small enough to hold, all in a single glance.

Tu Fu

## **Moonlit Night**

Tonight at Fu-chou, this moon she watches  
Alone in our room. And my little, far-off  
Children, too young to understand what keeps me  
Away, or even remember Chang'an. By now,

Her hair will be mist-scented, her jade-white  
Arms chilled in its clear light. When  
Will it find us together again, drapes drawn  
Open, light traced where it dries our tears?

Tu Fu

## **Morning Rain**

A slight rain comes, bathed in dawn light.  
I hear it among treetop leaves before mist  
Arrives. Soon it sprinkles the soil and,  
Windblown, follows clouds away. Deepened

Colors grace thatch homes for a moment.  
Flocks and herds of things wild glisten  
Faintly. Then the scent of musk opens across  
Half a mountain -- and lingers on past noon.

Tu Fu

## **On a Prospect of T'ai-shan**

How is one to describe this king of mountains? Through the whole of Ch'i and Lu one never loses sight of its greenness. In it the Creator has concentrated all that is numinous and beautiful. Its northern and southern slopes divide the dawn from the dark. The layered clouds begin at the climber's heaving chest, and homing birds fly suddenly within range of his straining eyes. One day I must stand on top of its highest peak and at a single glance see all the other mountains grown tiny beneath me.

Tu Fu

## On Seeing a Pupil of Kung-sun Dance the Chien-ch`i

On the nineteenth day of the tenth month of the second year of Ta-li (15 November 767), in the residence of

Yuan Ch`ih, Lieutenant-Governor of K`uei-chou, I saw Li Shih-er-niang of Lin-ying dance the chien-ch`i.

Impressed by the brilliance and thrust of her style, I asked her whom she had studied under. "I am a pupil of Kung-sun", was the reply.

I remember in the fifth year of K`ai-yuan (717) when I was still a little lad seeing Kung-sun dance the chien-ch`i and the hun-t`o at Yen-ch`eng. For purity of technique and self-confident attack she was unrivalled in her day.

From the "royal command performers" and the "insiders" of the Spring Garden and Pear Garden schools in the palace down to the "official call" dancers outside, there was no one during the early years of His Sagely Pacific and Divinely Martial Majesty who understood this dance as she did. Where now is that lovely figure in its gorgeous costume? Now even I am an old, white-haired man; and this pupil of hers is well past her prime.

Having found out about the pupil's antecedents, I now realized that what I had been watching was a faithful reproduction of the great dancer's interpretation. The train of reflections set off by this discovery so moved me that I felt inspired to compose a ballad on the chien-ch`i.

Some years ago, Chang Hsu, the great master of the "grass writing" style of calligraphy, having several times seen Kung-sun dance the West River chien-ch`i at Yeh-hsein, afterwards discovered, to his immense gratification, that his calligraphy had greatly improved. This gives one some idea of the sort of person Kung-sun was.

In time past there was a lovely woman called Kung-sun, whose chien-ch`i astonished the whole world. Audiences numerous as the hills watched awestruck as she danced, and, to their reeling senses, the world seemed to go on rising and falling, long after she had finished dancing. Her flashing swoop was like the nine suns falling, transfixed by the Mighty Archer's arrows; her soaring flight like the lords of the sky driving their dragon teams aloft; her advance like the thunder gathering up its dreadful rage; her stoppings like seas and rivers locked in the cold glint of ice.

The crimson lips, the pearl-encrusted sleeves are now at rest. But in her latter years there had been a pupil to whom she transmitted the fragrance of her art. And now in the city of the White Emperor the handsome woman from Lin-ying performs this dance with superb spirit. Her answers to my questions have revealed that there was good reason to admire, my ensuing reflections fill me with painful emotion.

Of the eight thousand women who served our late Emperor, Kung-sun was from the first the leading performer of the chien-ch`i. Fifty years have now gone by like a flick of the hand - fifty years in which rebellions and disorders darkened the royal house. The pupils of the Pear Garden have vanished like the mist. And now here is this dancer, with the cold winter sun shining on her fading features.

South of the Hill of Golden Grain the boughs of the trees already interlace. On the rocky walls of Ch`u-t`ang the dead grasses blow forlornly. At the glittering feast the shrill flutes have once more concluded. When pleasure is at its height, sorrow follows. The moon rises in the east; and I depart, an old man who does not know where he is going, but whose feet, calloused from much walking in the wild mountains, make him wearier and wearier of the pace.

Tu Fu

## **Overnight at the Riverside Tower**

Evening colors linger on mountain paths.  
Out beyond this study perched over River Gate,  
At the cliff's edge, frail clouds stay  
All night. Among waves, a lone, shuddering

Moon. As cranes trail off in flight, silent,  
Wolves snarl over their kill. I brood on  
Our wars, sleepless here and, to right  
A relentless Heaven and Earth, powerless.

Tu Fu

## Rain

Roads not yet glistening, rain slight,  
Broken clouds darken after thinning away.  
Where they drift, purple cliffs blacken.  
And beyond -- white birds blaze in flight.

Sounds of cold-river rain grown familiar,  
Autumn sun casts moist shadows. Below  
Our brushwood gate, out to dry at the village  
Mill: hulled rice, half-wet and fragrant

Tu Fu

## **Restless Night**

As bamboo chill drifts into the bedroom,  
Moonlight fills every corner of our  
Garden. Heavy dew beads and trickles.  
Stars suddenly there, sparse, next aren't.

Fireflies in dark flight flash. Waking  
Waterbirds begin calling, one to another.  
All things caught between shield and sword,  
All grief empty, the clear night passes.

Tu Fu

## **Spring Night in the Imperial Chancellery**

Evening falls on palace walls shaded by flowering trees, with cry of birds flying past on their way to roost. The stars quiver as they look down on the myriad doors of the palace, and the moon's light increases as she moves into the ninefold sky. Unable to sleep, I seem to hear the sound of the bronze-clad doors opening for the audience, or imagine the sound of bridle-bells bourne upon the wind. Having a sealed memorial to submit at tomorrow's levee, I make frequent inquiries about the progress of the night.

Tu Fu

## Thoughts of Li Po from the World's End

Here at the world's end the cold winds are beginning to blow. What messages have you for me, my master? When will the poor wandering goose arrive? The rivers and lakes are swollen with autumn's waters. Art detests a too successful life; and the hungry goblins await you with welcoming jaws. You had better have a word with the ghost of that other wronged poet. Drop some verses into the Mi-lo as an offering to him!

Tu Fu

## **To the Recluse, Wei Pa**

Often in this life of ours we resemble, in our failure to meet, the Shen and Shang constellations, one of which rises as the other one sets. What lucky chance is it, then, that brings us together this evening under the light of this same lamp? Youth and vigor last but a little time. --- Each of us now has greying temples. Half of the friends we ask each other about are dead, and our shocked cries sear the heart. Who could have guessed that it would be twenty years before I sat once more beneath your roof? Last time we parted you were still unmarried, but now here suddenly is a row of boys and girls who smilingly pay their respects to their father's old friend. They ask me where I have come from; but before I have finished dealing with their questions, the children are hurried off to fetch us wine. Spring chives are cut in the rainy dark, and there is freshly steamed rice mixed with yellow millet. `Come, we don't meet often!' you hospitably urge, pouring out ten cupfuls in rapid succession. That I am still not drunk after ten cups of wine is due to the strength of the emotion which your unchanging friendship inspires. Tomorrow the peak will lie between us, and each will be lost to the other, swallowed up in the world's affairs.

Tu Fu