

Classic Poetry Series

Li Shangyin
- poems -

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Li Shangyin()

A Cicada

Pure of heart and therefore hungry,
All night long you have sung in vain
Oh, this final broken indrawn breath
Among the green indifferent trees!
Yes, I have gone like a piece of driftwood,
I have let my garden fill with weeds....
I bless you for your true advice
To live as pure a life as yours.

Li Shangyin

A Message To Secretary Linghu

I am far from the clouds of Sung Mountain, a long way from trees in Qin;
And I send to you a message carried by two carp:
- Absent this autumn from the Prince's garden,
There's a poet at Maoling sick in the rain.

Li Shangyin

Chang-Er

The candle casts deep shadows on the screen,
The Milky Way dims and morning stars fade.
Chang-O must regret stealing the elixir,
As she broods in loneliness night after night.

Li Shangyin

Falling Petals

Gone is the guest from the Chamber of Rank,
And petals, confused in my little garden,
Zigzagging down my crooked path,
Escort like dancers the setting sun.
Oh, how can I bear to sweep them away?
To a sad-eyed watcher they never return.
Heart's fragrance is spent with the ending of spring
And nothing left but a tear-stained robe.

Li Shangyin

In The Camp Of The Sketching Brush

Monkeys and birds are still alert for your orders
And winds and clouds eager to shield your fortress.
...You were master of the brush, and a sagacious general,
But your Emperor, defeated, rode the prison-cart.
You were abler than even the greatest Zhou statesmen,
Yet less fortunate than the two Shu generals who were killed in action.
And, though at your birth-place a temple has been built to you,
You never finished singing your Song of the Holy Mountain

Li Shangyin

Jiasheng

When the Emperor sought guidance from wise men, from exiles,
He found no calmer wisdom than that of young Jia
And assigned him the foremost council-seat at midnight,
Yet asked him about gods, instead of about people.

Li Shangyin

North Among Green Vines

Where the sun has entered the western hills,
I look for a monk in his little straw hut;
But only the fallen leaves are at home,
And I turn through chilling levels of cloud
I hear a stone gong in the dusk,
I lean full-weight on my slender staff
How within this world, within this grain of dust,
Can there be any room for the passions of men?

Li Shangyin

Note On A Rainy Night To A Friend In The North

You ask me when I am coming. I do not know.

I dream of your mountains and autumn pools brimming all night with the rain.

Oh, when shall we be trimming wicks again, together in your western window?

When shall I be hearing your voice again, all night in the rain?

Li Shangyin

Spring Rain

I am lying in a white-lined coat while the spring approaches,
But am thinking only of the White Gate City where I cannot be.
...There are two red chambers fronting the cold, hidden by the rain,
And a lantern on a pearl screen swaying my lone heart homeward.
...The long road ahead will be full of new hardship,
With, late in the nights, brief intervals of dream.
Oh, to send you this message, this pair of jade earrings!
I watch a lonely wildgoose in three thousand miles of cloud.

Li Shangyin

The Han Monument

The Son of Heaven in Yuanhe times was martial as a god
And might be likened only to the Emperors Xuan and Xi.
He took an oath to reassert the glory of the empire,
And tribute was brought to his palace from all four quarters.
Western Huai for fifty years had been a bandit country,
Wolves becoming lynxes, lynxes becoming bears.
They assailed the mountains and rivers, rising from the plains,
With their long spears and sharp lances aimed at the Sun.
But the Emperor had a wise premier, by the name of Du,
Who, guarded by spirits against assassination,
Hong at his girdle the seal of state, and accepted chief command,
While these savage winds were harrying the flags of the Ruler of Heaven.
Generals Suo, Wu, Gu, and Tong became his paws and claws;
Civil and military experts brought their writingbrushes,
And his recording adviser was wise and resolute.
A hundred and forty thousand soldiers, fighting like lions and tigers,
Captured the bandit chieftains for the Imperial Temple.
So complete a victory was a supreme event;
And the Emperor said: 'To you, Du, should go the highest honour,
And your secretary, Yu, should write a record of it.'
When Yu had bowed his head, he leapt and danced, saying:
'Historical writings on stone and metal are my especial art;
And, since I know the finest brush-work of the old masters,
My duty in this instance is more than merely official,
And I should be at fault if I modestly declined.'
The Emperor, on hearing this, nodded many times.
And Yu retired and fasted and, in a narrow workroom,
His great brush thick with ink as with drops of rain,
Chose characters like those in the Canons of Yao and Xun,
And a style as in the ancient poems Qingmiao and Shengmin.
And soon the description was ready, on a sheet of paper.
In the morning he laid it, with a bow, on the purple stairs.
He memorialized the throne: 'I, unworthy,
Have dared to record this exploit, for a monument.'
The tablet was thirty feet high, the characters large as dippers;
It was set on a sacred tortoise, its columns flanked with ragns....
The phrases were strange with deep words that few could understand;
And jealousy entered and malice and reached the Emperor -
So that a rope a hundred feet long pulled the tablet down

And coarse sand and small stones ground away its face.
But literature endures, like the universal spirit,
And its breath becomes a part of the vitals of all men.
The Tang plate, the Confucian tripod, are eternal things,
Not because of their forms, but because of their inscriptions....
Sagacious is our sovereign and wise his minister,
And high their successes and prosperous their reign;
But unless it be recorded by a writing such as this,
How may they hope to rival the three and five good rulers?
I wish I could write ten thousand copies to read ten thousand times,
Till spittle ran from my lips and calluses hardened my fingers,
And still could hand them down, through seventy-two generations,
As corner-stones for Rooms of Great Deeds on the Sacred Mountains.

Li Shangyin

The Inlaid Harp

I wonder why my inlaid harp has fifty strings,
Each with its flower-like fret an interval of youth.
...The sage Chuangzi is day-dreaming, bewitched by butterflies,
The spring-heart of Emperor Wang is crying in a cuckoo,
Mermen weep their pearly tears down a moon-green sea,
Blue fields are breathing their jade to the sun....
And a moment that ought to have lasted for ever
Has come and gone before I knew.

Li Shangyin

The Jade Pool

The Mother of Heaven, in her window by the Jade Pool,
Hears The Yellow Bamboo Song shaking the whole earth.
Where is Emperor Mu, with his eight horses running
Ten thousand miles a day? Why has he never come back?

Li Shangyin

The Leyou Tombs

With twilight shadows in my heart
I have driven up among the Leyou Tombs
To see the sun, for all his glory,
Buried by the coming night.

Li Shangyin

The Palace Of The Sui Emperor

His Palace of Purple Spring has been taken by mist and cloud,
As he would have taken all Yangzhou to be his private domain
But for the seal of imperial jade being seized by the first Tang Emperor,
He would have bounded with his silken sails the limits of the world.
Fire-flies are gone now, have left the weathered grasses,
But still among the weeping-willows crows perch at twilight.
...If he meets, there underground, the Later Chen Emperor,
Do you think that they will mention a Song of Courtyard Flowers?

Li Shangyin

The Sui Palace

When gaily the Emperor toured the south
Contrary to every warning,
His whole empire cut brocades,
Half for wheel-guards, half for sails.

Li Shangyin

There Is Only One

There is only one Carved-Cloud, exquisite always-
Yet she dreads the spring, blowing cold in the palace,
When her husband, a Knight of the Golden Tortoise,
Will leave her sweet bed, to be early at court.

Li Shangyin

Thoughts In The Cold

You are gone. The river is high at my door.
Cicadas are mute on dew-laden boughs.
This is a moment when thoughts enter deep.
I stand alone for a long while.
...The North Star is nearer to me now than spring,
And couriers from your southland never arrive
Yet I doubt my dream on the far horizon
That you have found another friend.

Li Shangyin

To One Unnamed

The stars of last night and the wind of last night
Are west of the Painted Chamber and east of Cinnamon Hall.
...Though I have for my body no wings like those of the bright- coloured phoenix,

Yet I feel the harmonious heart-beat of the Sacred Unicorn.
Across the spring-wine, while it warms me, I prompt you how to bet
Where, group by group, we are throwing dice in the light of a crimson lamp;
Till the rolling of a drum, alas, calls me to my duties
And I mount my horse and ride away, like a water-plant cut adrift.

Li Shangyin

To One Unnamed I

You said you would come, but you did not, and you left me with no other trace
Than the moonlight on your tower at the fifth-watch bell.
I cry for you forever gone, I cannot waken yet,
I try to read your hurried note, I find the ink too pale.
...Blue burns your candle in its kingfisher-feather lantern
And a sweet breath steals from your hibiscus-broidered curtain.
But far beyond my reach is the Enchanted Mountain,
And you are on the other side, ten thousand peaks away.

Li Shangyin

To One Unnamed II

A misty rain comes blowing with a wind from the east,
And wheels faintly thunder beyond Hibiscus Pool.
...Round the golden-toad lock, incense is creeping;
The jade tiger tells, on its cord, of water being drawn
A great lady once, from behind a screen, favoured a poor youth;
A fairy queen brought a bridal mat once for the ease of a prince and then
vanished.
...Must human hearts blossom in spring, like all other flowers?
And of even this bright flame of love, shall there be only ashes?

Li Shangyin

To One Unnamed Iii

Time was long before I met her, but is longer since we parted,
And the east wind has arisen and a hundred flowers are gone,
And the silk-worms of spring will weave until they die
And every night the candles will weep their wicks away.
Mornings in her mirror she sees her hair-cloud changing,
Yet she dares the chill of moonlight with her evening song.
...It is not so very far to her Enchanted Mountain
O blue-birds, be listening!-Bring me what she says!

Li Shangyin

To One Unnamed Iv

A faint phoenix-tail gauze, fragrant and doubled,
Lines your green canopy, closed for the night....
Will your shy face peer round a moon-shaped fan,
And your voice be heard hushing the rattle of my carriage?
It is quiet and quiet where your gold lamp dies,
How far can a pomegranate-blossom whisper?
...I will tether my horse to a river willow
And wait for the will of the southwest wind.

Li Shangyin

To One Unnamed V

There are many curtains in your care-free house,
Where rapture lasts the whole night long.
...What are the lives of angels but dreams
If they take no lovers into their rooms?
...Storms are ravishing the nut-horns,
Moon- dew sweetening cinnamon-leaves
I know well enough naught can come of this union,
Yet how it serves to ease my heart!

Li Shangyin

To The Moon Goddess

Now that a candle-shadow stands on the screen of carved marble
And the River of Heaven slants and the morning stars are low,
Are you sorry for having stolen the potion that has set you
Over purple seas and blue skies, to brood through the long nights?

Li Shangyin

Willow

Boundless the leaves roused by spring,
Countless the twigs which tremble in the dawn.
Whether the willow can love or not,
Never a time when it does not dance.
Blown fluff hides white butterflies,
Drooping bands disclose the yellow oriole.
The beauty which shakes a kingdom must reach through all the body:
Who comes only to view the willow's eyebrows?

Li Shangyin

Wind And Rain

I ponder on the poem of The Precious Dagger.
My road has wound through many years.
...Now yellow leaves are shaken with a gale;
Yet piping and fiddling keep the Blue Houses merry.
On the surface, I seem to be glad of new people;
But doomed to leave old friends behind me,
I cry out from my heart for Xinfeng wine
To melt away my thousand woes.

Li Shangyin