

Classic Poetry Series

Li He
- poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Li He()

A Ballad Of Heaven

The River of Heaven wheels round at night
Drifting the circling stars,
At Silver Bank*, the floating clouds
Mimic the murmur of water.
By the Palace of Jade the cassia blossoms
Have not yet fallen,
Fairy maidens gather their fragrance
For their dangling girdle-sachets.

The Princess from Ch'in rolls up her blinds,
Dawn at the north casement.
In front of the window, a planted kolanut
Dwarfs the blue phoenix.
The King's son plays his pipes
Long as goose-quills,
Summoning dragons to plough the mist
and plant Jade Grass.

Sashes of pink as clouds at dawn.
Skirts of lotus-root silk,
They walk on Blue Island, gathering
Fresh orchids in spring.

She points to Hsi Ho in the east,
Deftly urging his steeds,
While land begins to rise from the sea
And stone hills wear away.

Li He

Ballad Of The Savage Tiger

No one attacks it with a long lance,
No one plies a strong cross-bow.
Suckling its grandsons, rearing its cubs,
It trains them into savagery.
Its reared head becomes a wall
Its waving tail becomes a banner.
Even Huang from the Eastern Sea,
Dreaded to see it after dark,
A righteous tiger, met on the road,
Was quite enough to upset Niu Ai.
What good is it for that short sword
To hang on the wall, growling like thunder?
When from the foot of Tai mountain
Comes the sound of a woman weeping,
Government regulations forbid
Any official to dare to listen.

Li He

Butterflies Dancing

Willow catkins beat at the curtains,
Under sweltering spring clouds.
Screen of tortoise-shell
And dazzling clothes.

Butterflies from the eastern neighbour
Come fluttering to the west.
Today the young man has returned,
Riding his white steed.

Li He

Do Not Dance, Sir!

Flowers on ancient plinths of stone,
Nine pillars in a row,
Blood of slaughtered leopards dripping
Into silver pots.
Drummers and pipers at the feast,
No zithers or flutes,
Long knives planted in the ground
Split the singing lute.

Lintels hung with coarse brocade
Of scarlet woof,
Sunlight fades the rich brocade,
The king still sober.
Three times Yu saw the precious ring
Flash at Fan's belt,
Xiang Zhuang drew sword from scabbard,
And stood before Liu Pei.

'Ensign! Your rank is far too low.
You may not dance.
Our guest is kin to the gods themselves,
A red dragon's seed.'
On Mang and Tang auspicious clouds
Coiled in the heavens,
In Xian-yang city, the royal aura
Shone clear as water.

Iron hinges, iron barriers
Fettered the passes,
Mighty banners, five fathoms long,
Battered the double gates,
'Today the King of Han possesses
The Seal of Ch'in.
Smash my knee-caps, disembowel me,
I shall say no more.

Li He

General Lü

The valiant-hearted,
Riding alone on Scarlet Hare,
Out of the gates of Ch'in,
To weep at Gold Grain Mound
By funereal trees.

Rebellion in the north
Stains in the blue sky.
His dragon-sword cries out at night
But the general's left idle,

To shake his sleeves,
And stroke his cross-guard.
'Round the jade towers of Vermilion City,
A maze of gates and pavilions.'

Slowly, the silver tortoise swings
To the gait of the white horse.
A powdered lady-general rides
Under a fiery banner.

The iron horsemen of Mount Heng
Call for their metal lances.
They can smell from afar the ornate arrows
In her perfumed quiver.

Cold weeds grow in the western suburbs,
With leaves like thorns,
High heaven has just now planted them,
To feed our thoroughbreds.
In tall-beamed stables, row on row
Of useless nags.
Stuffing themselves on green grass,
Drinking white water.

Inscrutable that vaulted azure,
Arching over earth,
This is the way the world wags
In our Nine Provinces.

Gleaming ore from Scarlet Hill!
Hero of our time!
Green-eyed general, you well know
The will of Heaven!

Li He

Immortals

Strumming his lute, high on a crag of stone,
Sits an immortal sylph flapping his wings.
White tail-plumes of a simurgh in his hand,
He sweeps the clouds at night from the Southern Hill.
Deer should drink down in the chill ravines,
Fish swim back to the shores of the clear sea.
Yet during the reign of Emperor Wu of Han
He sent a letter about the spring peach-blossoms.

Li He

Lament That The Days Are So Short

Flying lights, flying lights,
I pledge you a cup of wine.
I do not know if the blue heavens are high,
The yellow earth is rich,
I only see cold moon, hot sun,
Both come to plague us.
Eat bears and you'll grow fat,
Eat frogs and you'll grow thin.
Where is the Spirit Lady?
Where the Great Unity?

East of the sky stands the Jo tree,
Under it a dragon with a torch in its mouth.
I'll cut off the dragon's feet,
And eat the dragon's flesh.
The morning will not come back again,
Night will not stay.
So old men will not die,
Nor young men weep.
Why should we swallow yellow gold,
Or eat white jade?

Who is Ren Gong-zi
Riding a white donkey through the clouds?
Liu Che lies in the Mao-ling tomb,
Just a pile of bones.
Ying Zheng lies in his catalpa coffin
What a waste of abalone.

Li He

Let's Drink Wine

Hsi and Ho gallop their six steeds
Days and nights leave us no leisure,
Chasing the crow to Mount Yan-zi's bamboos,
They flog their horses with a Coiling Peach whip.
Ru Shou no sooner breaks the kingfisher willows,
Than the Green Emperor creates red orchids again.
Millions of years have rolled by
Since Yao and Shun,
And no king halted his chariot more than a moment.
Green coins, white jade-rings cannot buy time.
We should be merry, make the most of the present.
Turtle-soup and bears' paws - why bother with them?
Let's drink the North Sea out of flagons,
Cross-legged on South Mountain,
Sing loud and long
To the low lilts of flutes,
Bestowing gifts of tattoo gold
For the amorous glances of singing-girls.
This is life at its best!
Why struggle to fathom the mind
Of the Creating Power?

Let's urge each other to drink,
Drink without stopping.
May the Emperor's great name
Endure without end!
His sons and grandsons spread abroad
Like arrowroot on rocks!

From Luo-yang to Chang-an
Stretch lines of carriages.
Liang Chi's ancient mansion!
The old gardens of Shih Chong!

Li He

Li Ping At The Vertical Harp

Silk from Wu, paulownia from Shu,
Strummed in high autumn,
In the white sky the frozen clouds
Falling, not floating.
Ladies of the River weeping among bamboos,
The White Girl mournful
As Li Ping plays his harp
In the centre of the Kingdom.

Jade from Mount Kun is shattered,
Phoenixes shriek,
Lotuses are weeping dew,
Fragrant orchids smile.

Before the twelve gates of the city
The cold light melts,
The twenty-three strings can move
The Purple Emperor

Where Nü Gua smelted stones
To weld the sky,
Stones split asunder, sky startles,
Autumn rains gush forth.
He goes in dreams to the Spirit Mountain
To teach the Weird Crone,
Old fishes leap above the waves,
Gaunt dragons dance.

Wu Ch'i, unsleeping still,
Leans on his cassia tree,
As wing-foot dew aslant
Drenches the shivering hare.

Li He

Long Songs After Short Songs

Long songs have split the collar of my robe,
Short songs have cropped my whitening hair.
The king of Ch'in is nowhere to be seen,
So dawn and dusk fever burns in me.
I drink wine from a pitcher when I'm thirsty,
Cut millet from the dike-top when I'm hungry.
Chill and forlorn, I see May pass me by,
And suddenly a thousand leagues grow green.

Endless, the mountain peaks at night,
The bright moon seems to fall among the crags.
As I wander about, searching along the rocks,
Its light shines out beyond those towering peaks.
Because I cannot roam round with the moon,
My hair's grown white before I end my song.

Li He

Mount Wu Is High

A cluster of emeralds
Piercing high heaven!
Over the Great River's swelling waves
Spirits trail their mist.
The King of Chu's soul sought a dream
In a bitter wind.
In dawn wind and flying rain,
Grow coins of moss.
The Jade Princess has been gone
A thousand years,
Amid lilac and Sichuan bamboos
Old gibbons wail,
Her ancient shrine is close to the moon's
Chill toad and cassia,
Pepper flowers shed scarlet petals
Among drenching clouds.

Li He

Songs Of The Brazen Immortal Bidding Farewell To Han

In the Mao-ling tomb lies the lad named Liu,
Guest of the autumn wind.
At night we hear his whinnying horse
At dawn not a hoof-print there.
From painted balustrades, the cassia trees
Cast down autumnal fragrance.
Over six-and-thirty palaces grow
Emerald earth-flowers.

The courtiers of Wei harnessed their chariots
To travel a thousand leagues.
The vinegar wind from the eastern passes
Arrowed their eyes.
Vainly bearing the moon of Han
I went out of the palace gates.
Remembering the emperor, my pure tears
Dropped down like molten lead.

Withering orchids bade them farewell
On the Hsian-yang road.
If God could suffer as we do
God too would grow old.
Bearing my dew-plate, I journeyed alone
By the light of the cold, wild moon,
Already Wei-cheng lay far behind
And its waters faintly calling.

Li He

Su Hsiao-Hsiao's Tomb

Dew upon lonely orchids
Like tear-brimmed eyes.
No twining of love-knots,
Mist-wreathed flowers I cannot bear to cut.

Grass for her cushions,
Pines for her awning,
Wind as her skirts,
Water as girdle-jades.
In her varnished carriage
She is waiting at dusk.
Cold candles, kingfisher-green,
Weary with shining.

Over the Western Grave-mound
Wind-blown rain

Li He

The King Of Ch'In Drinks Wine

Straddling a tiger, the King of Ch'in
Roams the Eight Poles,
His glittering sword lights up the sky,
Heaven turns sapphire.

Hsi and Ho whip up the sun
With the sound of glass,
The ashes of kalpas have flown away,
Past and present at peace.

From a dragon's head spouts wine
Inviting the Wine-Stars,
All night the gold-groove zithers
Twang and sing.
The feet of rain on Dong-ting lake
Come blown on the pipes.
Flushed with wine, he shouts at the moon
It runs back in its course.
Beneath dense drifts of silver clouds
The jasper hall glows.

The Keepers of the Palace Gate
Cry out the first watch.
In the ornate tower, a jade phoenix sings,
Faltering and sweet.
From ocean-pongee, patterned in crimson,
A faint, cool scent.
The yellow beauties reel in their dance.
A thousand years with each cup!

As fairy candlesticks waft on high
A light, waxy smoke,
Eyes rapt with wine, those Emerald Lutes
Shed seas of tears.

Li He

Thirteen Poems From My Southern Garden

Budding branches, stems of flowers,
Blossom while I watch.
Touched with white and streaked with crimson
Cheeks fo a girl from Yue,
Sad to say, once dusk has come,
Their wanton fragrance falls.
They have eloped with the spring wind,
Without a go-between.

Why shouldn't a young man wear a Wu sword?*

He could win back fifty provinces in pass and mountain,**

I wish you would visit the Ling-yan pavilion,***

How can a student ever become a rich marquis?

* Wu-gou (Hook of Wu) was the name of a famous type of sword used by the southern aborigines.

** Over fifty Chinese districts in Ho-nan and Ho-pei were in the hands of tribal peoples at this time.

*** The portraits found in the Ling-yan pavilion were those of military men who had aided Tang Tai-tsong in his truggle for power.

VI

Seeking a style, culling my phrases,
Grown old carving grubs!
At dawn the moon hangs in my blinds,
A bow of jade.
Can't you see what is going on, year after year,
By the sea of Liao-dong?
Whatever can a writer do
But weep in the autumn wind?

Li He

Throwing Off My Sadness

An autumn wind blows over the earth,
The grasses die,
Mount Hua becomes a sapphire shadow
In the chill of dusk,
Though I have reached my twentieth year,
I've missed my goal.
My whole heart sad and withered
As a dying orchid.

Clothes like the feathers of a flying gull,
Horse like a hound.
Where the road forks I beat my sword
With a brazen roar.
Dismounting at a tavern I shed
My autumn gown,
Wishing to pledge it for a jar
Of Yi-yang wine.

Deep in the jar I called on Heaven
No clouds rolled back,
The white day stretched a thousand leagues,
Cold and forlorn,
My host urged me to cultivate
Both body and soul,
Nor care at all if the vulgar crowd
Made mock of me.

Li He

Walking Through The South Mountain Fields

The autumn wilds bright,
Autumn wind white.
Pool-water deep and clear,
Insects whining,
Clouds rise from rocks,
On moss-grown mountains.
Cold reds weeping dew,
Colour of graceful crying.

Wilderness fields in October
Forks of rice.
Torpids fireflies, flying low,
Start across dike-paths.
Water flows from veins of rocks,
Springs drip on sand.
Ghost-lanterns like lacquer lamps
Lighting up pine-flowers.

Li He