

Li Po-ems

Poems by

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with translations by David Hinton and Yan Pu

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(11/12/22 updated edition)

All lines quoted from Li Po are from David Hinton's translations, as listed below, with the exception of the last two passages in poem #1, invented for that conversation, and the passages quoted in poems #1, #5, and #15, which were translated by my friend Yan Pu.

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Specific page numbers from which the Li Po quotes are taken are provided in a list at the end of the book.

Preface: 9/31/16

I stopped writing poems about 20 years ago, willfully, as I had stopped writing poems on several occasions previously when I was younger. I explain why in some detail in my book Re-reading Poets. Here is what I now want to add to that explanation:

When I'm working right, the whole process of composition, the writing, the revising, the reading, the rereading, the memorizing, all of it, enhances my life, rewards my time, elevates my being-presence in the world. I feel all of that in an immediately embodied way, down to my fingertips. When it doesn't do that, for extended stretches, I know I am off-center, out of kilter, unbalanced, in the wrong, and I know I need to get right again. The only thing that works for me in that regard, when it comes to poetry, the most cherished kind of writing I do, is stopping, completely, letting it rest. With all my earlier hiatuses, a new process, a right process, started up again quite naturally and spontaneously after 2-3 years. I was happy about it and went back to writing poems again. This last time it didn't. I have no idea why. So I've just waited, a great accomplishment for me because I love writing poems and I am extremely impatient. And still I waited, probably gave up, actually.

Then last fall my friend Yan Pu translated a poem by Li Po (Li Bai in the Chinese tradition), the 8th century Chinese poet, one of my favorite poets. Her translation just knocked my socks off, so beautiful, which got me thinking about him again. This past January one of her friends studying for a PhD in England found my book This Fall, and it found her at a just the right time in her life. I have gotten to know both of them quite well in the meantime. A few weeks ago, my friend in England sent me, via our friend here, a beautiful ceramic statue of Li Po, seated on a rustic wooden half-log lodged inside a golden-steel circle, which itself is perched up on

a large wooden base. It is magnificent. When I brought it home I wanted to put him somewhere I'd encounter him often, establish a relationship with him. As soon as I walked into my dining room, I knew where he belonged: on the table right across from me. You see him sitting there on my book cover. I am alone now, so having a presence on the other side of the table would be, I knew, a big upgrade to my dining experience. Almost immediately, first meal together, we struck up a kind of conversation (mostly, but not entirely, silently). Meal after meal, just Li and me.

In late August I thought I would try to formalize this conversational pattern through compositions that combined his words and mine. In other words, write some poems. So I began to re-read some of his poems (translated to English.) The very first poem I picked brought tears to my eyes, good tears, made me think, unexpectedly, about my wife, Carol, who used to sit across the table from me. I wrote the first poem quickly and then over the next ten days the rest, all coming so easily, like talking with a friend. These poems felt right. Just right. Good. The way poems are supposed to feel, for me at least. I put them together here to invite a right reader, maybe you, to join us in this conversation.

#1: 8/31/16

Li:

"The deep forest reveals a few deer,
the creek flowing conceals the midday bells.

No one knows where you have gone,
I lean against two or three pines, wistful."

Me:

Because last night I decided everything, today
I took the path we always took together,
the wide one, to the great green field, heaven!

At the head of the narrow way
down the hill, a small doe stood,
stared at me, perfectly still, so beautiful.

I knew it was you, stopped. Five minutes,
ten minutes, long, we stood still together
eye to eye, my tears streaming.

I couldn't bear for you to have to stay here,
this world, this nothing, so long, moved
toward you. You leapt away, heaven.

Li:

What is this heaven?

Me:

Where she is.

Li:

Are the gods there?

Me:

If no god is there
I will know there is no god
worth my knowing.

#2: 9/1/16

Li:

“I leave Ch’ing Ch’I for Three Gorges. Thinking
of you
without seeing you, I pass downstream of Yu-chou.

. . .

Poor waters of home. I know how it feels:
ten thousand miles of farewell on this boat.”

Me:

Some nights in my dreams
she is right there, no river-seam

carving gorges between thinking
and seeing, her high mountain and mine.

She never speaks, knowing words
are just broken-down boats

that keep me afloat, barely,
between here and there, flotsam,

unable to go back, row home,
ten thousand miles upstream

where think and see are together again,
where there is no such word as “farewell.”

#3: 9/1/16

Li:

“Here, after wandering among these renowned
mountains, the heart grows rich with repose.

Why talk of cleansing elixirs of immortality?
Here, the world’s dust rinsed from my face,

I’ll stay close to what I’ve always loved,
content to leave the peopled world forever.”

Me:

Here, walking, you with me, and her,
we three, I say “I am no-not-alone,”

just these trees to believe me, wandering
solitary among them on the same small path

day after day, we three, these trees
what’s left of my peopled world,

both immortality and the world's dust
rinsed from my face daily by rain, my tears,

so close to what I always loved, but not . . .
heart rich with everything but repose.

#4: 9/2/16

Li:

“In Hsiang-yang, pleasures abound. They play
‘Copper-Blond Horses,’ and we sing and dance.

But it’s a river town. Return to clear water,
and a blossoming moon bares our delusions.”

Me:

The reel I designed in my dream,
smaller than her closed fist,
delivered a line to a tiny tub
100 yards upstream,
pulled a full-grown man
kicking to get free
through rough water
up the bank to her feet.
The other men tested
oohed, ahhed, went home.

So she set a second test
that no reel
in any man’s hand
could meet.

I smiled at her guile
packed my gear and left,
without even one cast.

I do not know
how long she watched
from the bank,
mouth wide, waited
for my turning back.

I know how to sing and dance
in these river towns,
pleasures abounding.
A blossoming moon
soon enough
bares the delusion.
Clear water, a fair test
for a good man
with a good reel
flows only downstream,
never turning back.

#5: 9/2/16

Li:

“Sun rises over the eastern nook,
as if coming from the underground.

. . .

Grasses never refuse to flourish in spring wind;
Trees never resent their leaf-fall under autumn sky.

. . .

I will include myself in eternal heaven and earth,
become part of the **Mighty Power** of the world.”

Me:

Just yesterday it seems
trillium carved starlight sparkle
into last year’s leaf-fall dark,
up and down ravines too steep
for hungry deer to reach,
the rare rosy-fingered ones
gathered at the dogleg turn
I take, the way down,
each a little dawnlit day.

Today sunroots, eight feet tall,
hundreds and hundreds, lean
into the portal of my path,
a palisade I pass through,
coming from underground
out into **Mighty Power**:
the light, right now and right now.

Do not refuse, they say, season
to season, resent. **Myself**: included.

#6: 9/2/16

Li:

“It’s September now. Butterflies appear
in the west garden. They fly in pairs,

and it hurts. I sit heart-stricken
at the bloom of youth in my old face.

Before you start back from out beyond
all those gorges, send a letter home.

I’m not saying I’d go far to meet you,
no further than Ch’ang-feng Sands.”

Me:

The one buddleia we planted out back
cost next to nothing, a buck.
This year there are seven, eight, ten,
so many, “invasive” they say.

So what, I say, so beautiful,
September now, seven-foot stems
cascade every which way, laden,

masses of purple florets bobbing,
butterflies all day coming and going,
swallowtails, monarchs, cabbage whites.

When they fly in pairs, they do not hurt.
Singles, maybe, the little white ones,
and I think you are almost with me,
now, so close, so out of reach,
letters home I cannot decipher.

I don't know how far I'd go to meet you,
further for sure than Ch'ang-feng Sands,
those thousands of miles, beyond the gorges.

The garden is so near. I see it from here,
and your face everywhere these days,
so full, we both, with the bloom of youth.

Next month, maybe, I will be old,
gray again, heart-stricken. Not today.
It's September now. Butterflies appear.

#7: 9/2/16

Li:

"The night's lazy, the moon bright. Sitting
here a recluse plays his pale white ch'in,

and suddenly, as if cold pines were singing
it's all those harmonies of grieving wind.

Intricate fingers flurries of white snow,
empty thoughts emerald-water clarities:

No one understands now. Those who could
hear a song this deeply vanished long ago."

Me:

Once a lazy moon-bright night she listened
and I sang. Now, no one, pale white I play,

recluse they say, cold pines, wind-
grieving, hard harmonies, who cares

to hear, share songs with air,
notes fingered, white flurries floating,

intricate emerald-empty clarities
no one understands now,

my love, friends, all vanished long ago,
such sweet songs buried deeply.

#8: 9/3/16

Li:

"Flourishing a white-feather fan
lazily, I go naked in green forests.

Soon, I've hung my cap on a cliff,
set my hair loose among pine winds."

Me:

Yes, let's let loose today, Li.
I cry way too much for a guy,
laugh like a moonstruck loon.
I am "tired of tears and laughter,"
twisted together licorice sticks.

It is summer still, forests
greener even than green,
knee deep in green.

If we meet another naked man
flourishing a white-feather fan
we three can walk all the day long,
lazily, hair set loose, caps hung on cliffs.

#9: 9/3/16

Li:

"It's like a boundless dream here in this world, nothing anywhere to trouble us.

I have therefore been drunk all day,
a shambles of sleep on the front porch.

. . .

I pour another drink. Soon, awaiting
this bright moon, I'm chanting a song.
And now it's over, I've forgotten why."

Me:

Ah! Li, just me, you and the moon
tonight, that tight, sidewise smile,
tiny bright tuck in a big, black sky.
The moon, the sky: one "me," the other
"my life," but which I wonder is which?

Last night, like most, my sleep
a shambles, stopping, starting,
stumbling back and forth:
boundless dream, boundless world,
but which I wonder is which?

I don't drink much, but you sure do,
so let's take some whiskey straight:
To you, to that soon-to-be-gooftball-moon
we just see a stitch of tonight, to me,
my life, a boundless dream, this world,
whatever makes the sweeter song
to chant, nothing to trouble us.
When any or all of it's over, I hope
we'll both have forgotten why.

#10:9/3/16

Li:

"Short and tall, spring grasses lavish
our gate with green, as if passion driven,

everything returned from death to life.
My burr-weed heart--it alone is bitter.

You'll know that in these things I see
you here again, planting our gardens

behind the house, and us lazily gathering
what we've grown. It's no small thing."

Me:

All the small things, you always said,
what you would miss most not being here,
that first taste of coffee in the morning,
the feel of a knee bending on its way
down stairs, and me I'd say, laughing,
Paul, from paucus, Latin for small!
You never said yes, but you never said
no, just laughed, too, no small thing.

Some days I think only of small things
so I won't recall all I now know,
my burr-weed heart growing bitter.

Some days I recall all the small things
so I won't forget what I love,
my burr-weed heart growing bitter.

Some nights, the perfect ones,
grasses lavish, passion-driven,
I sit in the back yard with my guitar,
sing songs softly, your chair
beside mine, empty,
but no, not in my yard,
only a chair I am "saving,"
a sweater maybe flung on it,
until the one I came with gets back.

From death to life? Crazy you say. Never.
I know. I know. But still,

It's no small thing.

#11: 9/4/16

Li:

"Heaven's fragrance everywhere pure
emptiness, heaven's music endless,

I sit silent. It's still, the entire Buddha-
realm in a hair's-breadth, mind-depths

all bottomless clarity, in which vast
kalpas begin and end out of nowhere."

Me:

This morning I woke with
the scent of henna on my pillow.
A few times a year you used it
on your hair, toucan on the box,
the same gray ceramic bowl
you mixed it up in, the one
you had before we were married,
kept on the bottom shelf
of the skinny kitchen cabinet
next to the refrigerator, lightly
stained from all that black goop.

Those days, when we made love,
I would breathe the scent in deep,
skies-full of wild dark birds.

I never knew why you did it,
your hair always jet black, thick.

If you were here beside me
this morning I would ask you.
Why? Just once. Maybe
if I were lucky, you would tell me
everything that gathers in my head
now around that question,
those flocks of many-thousand birds
swarming restlessly, early fall,
how they whirl and wheel
as if they are one thing, liquid,
flowing around an invisible
solid center, what they want
to know before it's time to leave.

Or just many-stranded strong black hair
caught up in gust of autumn wind
fulsome with the scent of henna.

#12: 9/4/16

Li:

"Alone, searching for blue-lotus roofs,
I set out from city gates. Soon frost

clear, Tung-lin temple bells call out,
Hu Creek's moon bright in pale water."

Me:

That moon tonight, sleek, white boat
sliding, silent, over still dark water,
I inside it trying to guide it, why?

Time, this deep, black lake
I float on, in, over, only one
moving: water, sky, which?

I set out tonight searching
again for something, anything
frost clear, nearby, far, no matter.

Temple bells call out, soon, when?
Sky, moon, lake, I, wait, glide, silent.

#13: 9/4/16

Li:

"Raising my cup, I toast the bright moon,
and facing my shadow makes friends three.

...

Kindred a moment with moon and shadow,
I've found a joy that must infuse spring:

I sing, and moon rocks back and forth;
I dance, and shadow tumbles into pieces.

...

Intimates forever, we'll wander carefree
and meet again in Star River distances."

Me:

My shadow dances with me
just like you did, can keep the beat
when I won't. I had no idea.

Today, by myself in the woods,
sidewise to sun, it just walked up
beside me, on the left, we turned,
faced each other, and right there
on the sunlit forest floor
we did a little bit of jitterbug.

I know there is always dancing
where you are, those Star River
distances "don't mean a thing"
if they "ain't got that swing."
Some night when I can't sleep,
sitting out back, the moon
and me rocking back and forth,
I'll slip it off, send it up.

We will dance the night away,
Our last dance your favorite,
"Waltzing Matilda," Tom Waits,
so long, like forever, that voice,
the one I would have had
if I had been a better man,
maybe there I'll have it,
sing to you, cheek to cheek:

"Wasted and wounded,
it ain't what the moon did,
I've got what I paid for now.
See you tomorrow,
hey Frank, can I borrow
a couple of bucks from you
to go waltzing Matilda,
waltzing Matilda,
you'll go waltzing Matilda with me."

And you'll be my Matilda
filled full with thrills 'til the
moon sends
my shadow
back down.

#14: 9/4/16

Li:

"Heaven's fragrance everywhere pure
emptiness, heaven's music endless,

I sit silent. It's still, the entire Buddha-
realm in a hair's breadth, mind-depths

all bottomless clarity, in which vast
kalpas begin and end out of nowhere."

Me:

My kitchen clock tick-tocks,
shrill crickets still trill,
sirens whine by.
I wait to want to sleep.

My mind is not at ease,
un-silent I sit, each breath
a hooked fish reeled up
from mind-depths, bottomless,
thick with un-thoughts.

Yesterday, heavenly fragrance.
Today just impure emptiness.
Vast kalpas begin and end
out of nowhere. No one,
not even you, to notice.

#15: 9/4/16

Li:

"Autumn wind clear, autumn moon bright,
Fallen leaves gather then scatter,
Dark crows settle and startle."

Me:

Beech tree bark is parchment
smooth, perfect for carving.

On one I walk by daily:
a heart, arrow-stitched,
meticulous script:

JC
loves
AW

Right beneath, huge letters
gouged out helter-skelter:

IT'S
ALL
FAKE

I wonder day by day:
one or the other betrayed,
hateful? Someone else
enraged, forewarning? Today
I wondered: Which came first?

All I know is this: Nothing
in this world is fake: love,
hate, rage: just decide
day by day which
your knife will carve in bark.

Li:

"When will we end our longing and meet again?
That thought, this moment, suddenly unbearable!"

Me:

Wind clear, moon bright.
Leaves, in piles, scatter.
Crows, cold, startle.

Nothing fake.
That thought, this moment, suddenly
unbearable.

#16: 9/5/16

Li:

"Are hopes and dreams any different?
We bustle around looking for what?"

...

A million miles azure pure--the eye
reaches beyond what ruins our lives."

Me:

Today, all that light leaning
into the hill on the high side
from azure pure September skies,
I saw for the first time all
the tallest trees! I've walked
this path now many-thousand
days, and today they were there,
everywhere I looked, up and down,
three feet wide at the base
some more, maybe four:
shapely maples, arms draped
over one another's shoulders
up there where light lasts daylong,
rocket-ship-straight poplars,
flames flaring on forest floor,
blasting past me into space.

I have no idea if they were here
yesterday, will be tomorrow.
But today I heard what they said,
not all those big things
they surely must know,
having been here so long,
not deep secrets whispered
close to my ear, and not, for sure,
hopes and dreams, no,
bustling around looking
for what . . .

Just this: "Look. See."
And today I did: so many
huge, true things standing
upright all the way to the sky,
right now, right there,
for someone, anyone,
me, say, to look, finally, see.

Li:

"Inexhaustible, Ching-t'ing Mountain and I
gaze at each other, it alone remaining."

Me:

Yes.

#17: 9/5/16

Li:

"Wandering Autumn River in sorrow, I gaze into
Autumn River blossoms fiercely. Soon, it rivals

Yen-hsien for lovely mountains and streams
and for wind and sun, it's another Ch'ang-sha."

Me:

In these woods, at least here,
this sacristy of space
that holds, releases
every shed tear, it is not
sorrow I feel, not joy, either,
not anything I name.

I gaze fiercely, blossoms
in spring, summer's green-
steeped trees, and now, fall again,
these first few flutter-down leaves.

This is no place for grief.
Here I am cared for. Where

care comes from, or how,
is of no matter to me now.

You say your river rivals
that one, wind, sun, the same,

Ch'ang-sha, much fought over
in your day, and that one,
for mountains and streams,
Yen-hsien, wide-astride seaside.

Autumn River, wandering,
where a recluse-fisherman
drops in a line, lazes,
while you gaze, fierce,
into blossoms, I see
what you mean.

Li:

"No plans to go looking for such solitude,
I set out on a whim, never mind distance."

Me:

Like you, Li, I do not go
where there is no one;
I go where no one else goes.
Solitude simply follows.

Here is everything they seek
there: wind, sun, mountains,
streams, not others, of course,
all crowding around
to see, but you, Li, and me,
what we find here, free.

#18: 9/6/16

Li:

"Spring breezes and their drunken guest:
today we were meant for each other."

Me:

We met once, breeze and guest,
meant for each other.
Then done. Months. Nothing.

Li:

"It's like a bird among clouds:
once gone, gone without a trace."

Me:

I never remember exactly the face
of someone I love. Only later, a trace.

Li:

"I hoard the sky a setting sun leaves . . ."

Me:

Sun sets for an hour,
gauze-clouds, layered lightly,
every color eye has ever seen,
or one color through many eyes:
what's left in the sky after light
memory hopes to hoard . . .

Li:

"I can't tell anymore. Which is long and which is short,
the river flowing east or thoughts farewell brings on."

Me:

Impossible to say exactly when day
turns night, is not now but then,
not farewell but what farewell brings on.

Li:

"Over Heaven Mountain, the bright moon
rises through a boundless sea of clouds."

Me:

Tonight a bright moon rises,
same clouds, different boundless sea,
sunset sky unremembered.

Li:

"I sing, watch cloud and moon, empty
song soon long wind through pine."

Me:

Cloud and moon, long wind,
soon empty song sing.

Li:

"There's nothing left now--only this West River moon
that once lit those who peopled the imperial Wu Palace."

Me:

Moonlight moves through air,
then nothing left,
not even memory of moonlight.

Li:

"And somewhere, high in a tower tonight,
a restless woman cries out in half sleep."

Me:

We always know exactly
when a lover stops loving.
Just listen: tonight, restless,
she cries out in half sleep.

#19: 9/6/16

Li:

"Staying the night at Summit-Top Temple
you can reach out and touch the stars.

I venture no more than a low whisper
afraid I'll wake the people of heaven."

Me:

Sky so Star-River-near tonight,
no moon, yet all-night light.

Words back up, breath
holds, not even a whisper,
so no stars get jarred
awake, make people of heaven,
reach down, stay the night.

Li:

"No noise, no confusion--all I want is
this life pillowed high in emerald mist."

#20: 9/6/16

Li:

"Are hopes and dreams any different?
We bustle around, looking for what?"

Me:

Last night in a dream
an old lover told me again
everything wrong with me,
why she was leaving with him.

I woke bereft.
Those who hurt most keep
seeping in through sleep,
come and go as they please.

I fear who waits for me
upstairs tonight, Li.
I fight to keep sleep away,
eyes tired, trying to close
even as I type this line.

Li:

"Are hopes . . . any different?"

Me:

Hope goes both ways:
holds out for the god
I don't now know,
holds in the devil
I do know, wish-maker,
looking . . . for what?

#21: 9/7/16

Li:

"Facing ten-thousand-mile winds, autumn geese
leaving,
we can still laugh and drink in this tower tonight,

chant poems of Immortality Land, ancient word-bones.
The clarity of Hseih T'iao reappears among us:

all embracing, thoughts breaking into free flight,
we ascend azure heaven, gaze into a bright moon.

But slice water with a knife, and water still flows,
empty a winecup to end grief, and grief remains grief.

You never get what you want in this life, so why not
shake your hair loose on a boat at play in dawn light."

Me:

Those geese: letters from home?
When home is azure heaven, they will never
make it, wind ten-thousand miles facing.

These poems: my knife slicing water
over and over. Grief remains grief, flows.

You get what you get in this life, not want.

Word-bones build poems. But breath,
yours, hers, broke long ago into free flight.
Immortality is not a Land I know how to find.

I can gaze into a bright moon all night long
laugh and drink in this empty tower,
shake my hair loose at play of dawn light.

But nothing, not even clarity, reappears.

Li:

"We the living, we're passing travelers:
it's in death alone that we return home."

Me:

I had a home here. Now, adrift,
passing, the way looks long

Li:

"Bleached bones lie silent, say nothing,
and how can ever-green pines see spring?"

Me:

Word-bones lie, too, Li, or say nothing.
Like ever-green pines, they never see spring.

Li:

"Before and after pure lament, this life's
phantom treasure shines beyond knowing."

Me:

I want to believe you, Li. I remember
when "before" was, treasure beyond knowing.
But tell me: when is "after?"

#22: 9/8/16

Li:

"At our gate, where you lingered long,
moss buried your tracks one by one,

deep green moss I can't sweep away.
And autumn's come early. Leaves fall."

. . .

"Hsien Mountain rises above emerald Han River
waters and snow-white sand. On top, inscribed

to life's empty vanishing, a monument stands,
long since blotted out beneath green moss."

. . .

"There's a flake of rock on Chiang-tzu Peak,
a painted screen azure heaven sweeps clean.

The poem inscribed here keeps all boundless
antiquity alive—green words in moss brocade.

Me:

This summer was so hot and wet
moss is everywhere, fallen logs,

flagstone steps, sidewalk cracks,
layered on forest floor,
so soft, thick, lavish, I want to
caress it lovingly, lie in its lap,
linger long on its lush-forever green.

Footsteps, monuments, words,
whatever these poems are,
swept away, buried, blotted out
vanishing. No matter.

Love rises like Hsien Mountain,
sweeps clean heaven's painted screen,
brocade boundless,
flows like Han River
shining by snow-white sand,
carves lines inscribed to life.

Li:

"my ruins of heart,
thoughts of you unending."

#23: 9/9/16

Li:

"9/9, out drinking on Dragon Mountain,
I'm an exile among yellow blossoms smiling.

Soon drunk, I watch my cap tumble in wind,
dance in love--a guest the moon invites."

Me:

9/9 here today, too, Li,
no holiday to climb
Dragon Mountain, get drunk
on chrysanthemum wine,
yellow blossoms smiling,
cap-tumble love-dance,
no, just another day, unless
I make something of it
finish this book, say,
write one last poem,
a long one, call it done,
20-some poems in 10 days,
not in your league maybe,
"100 poems/gallon of wine"

Tu Fu says of you, but
for me, 0-for-20-years
going in, not half bad!

OK, back where it started,
those chrysanthemums, not wine
yet, that was later, took time.
I'll rewrite the first poem
I made just for her, this time
"I" and "you" instead of "he" and "she:"

*Crazy as the wind I was and wanted,
for myself, nothing; but for you:
the most glorious chrysanthemums,
armloads of yellow held loose, huge
blooms oozing dollops of sunlight;
behind them, my smile, so wide
no one, not even you, could ever hope
to resist; then I'd run toward you
through the tall grass, in slo-mo
maybe, my dozens of chrysanthemums
bobbing every which way, crazy
as the wind I was, and wanted.
Or so I told my florist in the morning,
who recommended roses, or a nosegay--
anything but crazy, but chrysanthemums,
but what I wanted, was: the wind.*

That florist was a moron.
What wind we were!
Crazy every which way.
Your sunlight dollops,
my smile wide. I wanted:
Nothing but for you.

Even on this dark-as-your-hair
night, late summer heat stifling,
no moon, stars haze-hidden,
leaves leaden, locked in place,
nothing running even slow-mo,
if I stand stock-still long enough,
focus just at the edge where
cheek-skin meets with air,
it's there. Feel it? There, now,
there! a little breeze, a breath,
mine, yours, who's to say,
what's left of all that crazy wind.

Li:

"Yesterday was our grand scale-the-heights day,
and this morning I'm tipping the cup again.

Poor chrysanthemums. No wonder you're so bitter,
suffering our revels these two days straight."

Me:

Today is still today where I am, Li,
not yet yesterday. My cup stays full
no matter how often I tip it,
mums not yet poor here, bitter.

I would take this day two days straight,
revel in it every day, forever.
9/9: tomorrow always on the wing!

Li:

"Success or failure, life long or short:
our fate's given by Changemaker at birth.

But a single cup evens out life and death,
our ten thousand concerns unfathomed,

and once I'm drunk, all heaven and earth
vanish, leaving me suddenly alone in bed,

forgetting that person I am even exists.
Of all our joys, this must be the deepest."

Me:

You look so relaxed there,
lounging on your log
on my dining room table

looped in a halo of gold,
cup hoisted to welcome me
every time I sit down to eat.
Maybe you drink all day long,
forgetting you exist,
all heaven and earth vanished,
when I'm not here, too.
Or maybe, like me,
you remember everything,
every single second of every
single day, today, yesterday,
even tomorrow, the one
that never seems to come,
ten thousand concerns
unfathomed, long or short,
that flood of life that recedes
every night, same way,
suddenly, in bed alone,
the forgetting, the deep,
I-am-less joy of sleep.

Li:

"How is it you've gotten so thin . . .
Must be all those poems you've been suffering over."

Me:

Actually I've put on a few pounds,
maybe enjoying meals more

now you're around.
I must just sound thin,
old siren winding
down whining.

Li:

"This is music enough. Why tell
flutes and pipes our troubles?"

Me:

You're right, Li:
When old flutes and pipes
get tired of blowing out
the muck we blow into them,
time for a change.

I have a new guitar,
let's give it whirl:
"Fairy tales can come true,
it can happen to you . . ."

Yes, Li, to you.
And to me, too, me, too.

Li:

"Boundless, I can dwindle time and space
away, losing the world in such distances!"

Me:

Yeah, yeah, I know. I can, too.
Dwindling space and time,
might sound hard but it's not,
especially at our age,
dwindling as we speak!

Lose the world? Sure,
I can go for that,
at least the world
handed out to us here,
so near to nothing
I can't believe anyone
takes it seriously.
If you don't lose that,
for a while anyway,
get up where it's clear,
you'll never even know
a real world is there.
But until you get
back down again,
all the way in,
what you saw up here
won't much matter.

You can stay drunk
as you want, Li,
long as you want,

float your little boat
through great gorges
all the way to Timbuktu.
But there's still a here
here, a now now.

I'm no space-time Einstein,
but sooner or later,
you have to look to see,
take the path to make it.
So how about, for once,

we try to beef up time
and space, fill it, full as
we can, real me and
real you, at our real table,
putting on pounds so
we take up more space,
sing sweet old songs,
nothing in them but
perfectly pitched noise,
to mark off one now,
then another, and another,
all that time is, really,
a rhythm, a wave, moving,
one we make and ride
in the making: now, now,
now, marking note by note
all the time it takes.

Li:

"I bow, then bow again, deeper, ashamed
I haven't an immortal's talent."

Me:

I think we both
can take a bow now, Li.
Immortal's talent?
Out of my league, too.

Ashamed? Well, elegy
gets old, at least for
those who listen.

Let's call it off today,
9/9, your wine-wine day,
my stop whine-whine day!

Right while I was typing
that stupid joke, yes:
RIGHT! NOW! WOW!
Feel it? the air,
the instant I made myself
laugh, moving again,
not fast-forward-fast
maybe, totally tomorrow,
but not just a little breath
either, tickling cheek-hair;

this one's a big one,
wind, then another
and another . . .

Tonight, Li, I'm not in love
with anyone but me.

And I have a feeling,
when I wake up tomorrow,
it won't still be today.
It will really be tomorrow:
9/10: the rest of my life.

So what-say,
after I come back
from my morning walk,
if you're not too hung-over
from all that mum-wine,
when I sit down
here with my oatmeal,
we just talk about sports,
those Buccos, lost another
tough one. I'd like that.
I think you might like it, too.

Lines quoted from *The Selected Poems of Li Po*, trans. by David Hinton (New Directions, 1996):

- Poem #2: P. 4, lines 1-2; P. 5, lines 7-8
Poem #3: p. 6, lines 7-8; p. 7, lines 1-4
Poem #4: p. 17, lines 1-4
Poem #6: p. 13, lines 3-8
Poem #7: p. 28, lines 1-8
Poem #8: p. 27, lines 1-4
Poem #9: p. 18, lines 1-4; lines 11-12
Poem #10: p. 21, lines 1-8
Poem #11: p. 9, lines 5-10
Poem #12: p. 9, lines 1-4
Poem #13: p. 43, lines 3-4, 7-10, 13-14
Poem #14: p. 9, lines 5-10 (same as #11)
Poem #16: p. 30, lines 9-10; p. 50, lines 7-8; p. 67, lines 3-4
Poem #17: p. 79, lines 5-8; p. 63, lines 1-2
Poem #18: p. 31, lines 7-8; p. 25, lines 3-4; p. 24, line 1; p. 34,
lines 7-8, p. 26, lines 1-2, p. 24 lines 5-6, p. 33, lines 3-4
Poem #19: p. 11, lines 1-2; p. 19, lines 7-8
Poem #20: p. 30, lines 9-10 (same as #16)
Poem #21: p. 71, lines 3-12, p. 110, lines 1-2, p. 110, lines 7-10
Poem #22: p. 12, lines 19-20, p. 13, lines 1-2, p. 17, lines 5-8;
p. 80, lines 5-8; p. 48, lines 12-13
Poem #23: p. 97, lines 1-4; p. 48, lines 12-13; p. 98, lines 1-4;
p. 45, lines 5-12; p. 54, lines 3-4; p. 85, lines 9-10;
p. 37, lines 1-4

Paul is the author of numerous books of poetry, personal essays, and scholarship available in multiple formats at online booksellers and (for free, in PDF form) at paulkameen.com

Poetry:

ligh/waves (2022)
first: my newer tiny poems from (t)here (2022)
slights: my new tiny poems from here not there (2021)
In the Dark (2016)
Harvest Moon (2016)
Li Po-ems (2016)
Mornings After: Poems 1975-95
Beginning Was (1980)

Personal Essays:

In Dreams . . . (2022)
Living Hidden (2021)
Harvest (2020)
Spring Forward (2019)
The Imagination (2019)
A Mind of Winter (2019)
First, Summer (2018)
Last Spring (2018)
This Fall (2016)

Scholarship:

Re-reading Poets: The Life of the Author (2011)
Writing/Teaching (2001)

