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TU FU TO LIPO

Schuyler Swartout

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TU FU TO LI PO

SCHUYLER SWARTOUT

I am sick of your poems. I am sick of your moon and your shadow and your quiet nights on the river. I have tired of your privileged melancholy and drunken song. No wine comforts me. Three nights ago I began to wander again, not to seek the earth's mysteries, but in flight. Rebels had gathered in the square again. As I climbed the mountains to the north, I saw my thatched hut burning. My home, where the autumn winds had gently bumped juniper branches into my walls only days ago. My best calligraphy brushes, my one silk robe. My ease with life. I have had to cross the mountains like a grumpy ox.

Two days walked past me on the trails. Near one peak, I found a hardened traveler who warned me that the village ahead had been deserted due to famine. I have seen such villages before: the homes of rats and cockroaches. I imagine you have seen these villages too, mentioned them in your poetry, those peaceful places where you sip your wine. I asked you once how you spent your time, and you replied, "I nestle against a tree trunk and listen to autumn winds in the pines all night and day." And now I too sit against an old, grizzled pine, a vagrant with damp clothes, no money and no home to return to. The wind just sounds frozen. I look at mountain stones around me, their empty, solid weight. Their fluid, gray color.

A week before I left, a messenger told me you had died, had been swept into the river while jumping to embrace the moon. Friend, the moon is not a traveling companion, but a cold stone. I look up at it tonight and laugh, knowing you think it misses you now that you are gone.