

# **A GIBBET AGAINST THE SKY**

**A Collection of  
129 Poems by Robert E. Howard**



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## MUSINGS

The little poets sing of little things:  
Hope, cheer, and faith, small queens and puppet kings;  
Lovers who kissed and then were made as one,  
And modest flowers waving in the sun.

The mighty poets write in blood and tears  
And agony that, flame-like, bites and sears.  
They reach their mad blind hands into the night,  
To plumb abysses dead to human sight;  
To drag from gulfs where lunacy lies curled,  
Mad, monstrous nightmare shapes to blast the world.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert E. Howard was born in a small Texan town on January 22nd, 1906, as the only child of the traveling country physician Dr. Isaac Mordecai Howard, and his wife Hester Jane Ervin. During Howard's early years the family moved from one small Texas town to the next, relocating every year or two, until in 1919 they finally settled in the hamlet of Cross Plains, where Dr. Howard would be a well-respected general practitioner — here Howard would spend the rest of his life.

Howard started to write early — from childhood on, he had known that this was what he wanted to do — and he turned into an incredibly prolific author, covering a wide range of action and adventure genres. Howard wrote to earn a living, and since the magazines that bought his stories were paying poorly, he had to make up for this by volume. He was a careful writer, usually writing outlines and several drafts of his stories before he submitted them, but he wrote fast, rarely ran out of ideas (or of older stories to re-use and improve), and above all he was an unremitting worker: *“Writing is pounding out one damn yarn after another, pounding them out whether you want to or not ... the only way I can get anything done is to keep pounding away”* (as quoted by Novalyne Price Ellis, in her biography *One Who Walked Alone*).

Howard pounded away at historical fiction, fantasy, adventure, horror, boxing, western, detective and comedy stories, and also at several hundred poems — though these, he knew, would not be published by the magazines he was writing for.

All this time, Howard's life was troubled. From early age on he suffered from depression, and then he was burdened by the chronic illness of his mother. It was she who in his childhood had installed in

him the love for literature and poetry, and he felt very close to her — when she became bed-ridden, it was he who became her caregiver for many years until her death. His unsteady commercial success as a writer did not mitigate the pain of his depression, and a longstanding on-and-off love affair with the only woman he had ever been closely acquainted with was leading nowhere. On June 11th, 1936, when he was told that his mother would not awake from the coma into which she had fallen, he felt released of his duty to her, walked out to his car, took a gun he had borrowed from the glove box, and shot himself.

Many of the more than 700 poems that Howard has written appear to be deeply personal. While they tell more about Howard himself than his prose fiction does, we must not jump to conclusions too quickly — not all first person narrators are meant to represent the author. In many poems they are very obviously his fictitious creations, but even where this seems less obvious, it may still be the case.

When Howard writes (in *Man am I*), “*I’ve known [...] the flames that tormented Oscar Wilde and tortured Paul Verlaine,*” is he writing about himself, about his own homosexuality? In the absence of any information, we can only speculate. It is hard not to read *The Tempter* as an actual suicide note — still, if we do this, do we do his art justice?

Let us not get too distracted by questions which we cannot reasonably answer — we have Howard’s poems to listen to, and they speak for themselves.

## ABOUT THIS EDITION

This selection of Howard's poems, most of which were not published during the author's lifetime, reflects the editor's personal choices; it does not try to give a balanced picture of Howard's poetic oeuvre, nor of the poet's person. Not only the selection, which is arguably biased towards the dark, but also the order in which the poems are here presented, and their division in five sections, are based upon nothing but the editor's fancy.

No deliberate changes were made, but for lack of access to reliable source material typographical and formatting details do not necessarily conform to those of Howard's own manuscripts.

Where the title of a poem is identical to the poem's first line, this poem has originally been untitled.

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**1.**

## AMBITION

Build me a gibbet against the sky,  
Solid and strong and long miles high,  
Let me hang where the high winds blow  
That never stoop to the world below,  
And the great clouds lumber by.  
Let the people who toil below  
See me swaying to and fro,  
See me swinging the aeons through,  
A dancing dot in the distant blue.



## A STIRRING OF GREEN LEAVES

I long for the South as a man for a maid,  
The rose at the window bar,  
The stars and the palm-trees' velvet shade  
And the strum of a Spanish guitar.

My people laughed at the frost and cold,  
And the blast from winter's mouth,  
But my soul is worn and thin and old  
And it reaches blind to the South.

Why should I yearn for a gypsy trail  
Through the olive trees of Spain?  
Mine is the race of the Western Gael  
And the cold, slow blood of the Dane.

But never the restless leaves are stirred  
By a breath from summer's mouth  
But like the soul of a wandering bird  
My soul is yearning South.



## THE ADVENTURER

Dusk on the sea; the fading twilight shifts;  
The night wind bears the ocean's whisper dim —  
Wind, on your bosom many a phantom drifts —  
A silver star climbs up the blue world rim.  
Wind, make the green leaves dance above me here  
And idly swing my silken hammock — so;  
Now, on that glimmering molten silver mere  
Send the long ripples wavering to and fro.  
And let your moon-white tresses touch my face  
And let me know your slim-armed, cool embrace  
While to my dreamy soul you whisper low.

Dream — aye, I've dreamed since last night left her tower  
And now again she comes on star-soled feet.  
Welcome, old friend; here in this rose-gemmed bower  
I've drowsed away your Sultan's golden heat.  
Here in my hammock, Time I've dreamed away  
For I have but to stretch a hand out, lo,  
I'm treading languorous shores of Yesterday,  
Moon-silvered deserts or the star-weird snow;  
I float o'er seas where ships are purple shells,  
I hear the tinkle of the camel bells  
That waft down Cairo's streets when dawn winds blow.

South Seas! I watch when dusky twilight comes  
Making vague gods of ancient, sea-set trees.  
The world path beckons — loud the mystic drums —  
Here at my hand the magic golden keys

That fit the doors of Romance, Wonder, strange  
Dim gossamer adventures; seas and stars.  
Why, I have roamed the far Moon Mountain range  
When sunset minted gold in shimmering bars.  
All eager-eyed I've sailed from ports of Spain  
And watched the flashing topaz of the Main  
When dawn was flinging witch fire on the spars.

I am content in dreams to roam my fill  
The vagrant, drifting sport of wind and tide,  
Slave of the greater freedom, venture's thrill;  
Here every magic ship on which I ride.  
Gold, green, blue, red, a priceless treasure trove,  
More wealth than ever pirate dared to dream.  
My hammock swings — about the world I rove.  
The sunset's dusk, the dawning's glide and gleam,  
Moon-dappled leaves are murmuring in the wind  
Which whispers tales. Lo, Tyre is just behind,  
Through seas of dawn I sail, Romance abeam.



## A CHALLENGE TO BAST

Come not to me, Bubastes,  
With agate talons hid,  
Veil not the fury of your eyes  
Beneath the drooping lid.

Save all your gentleness for those  
Mad passion makes aghast,  
For they who are too frail to face  
Your love's unholy blast.

But come to me as you of old  
Your demon lovers met —  
A black, stark naked frenzied thing  
Of ebony and jet.

Where jackals haunt the shadows  
In the star-light's yellow glow  
With bodies writhing savagely,  
And teeth that gnash in ecstasy,  
We'll glut all hidden splendors  
That maddened passions know.



## EGYPT

Bubastes! Down the lank and sullen years  
Your magic haunts my dreams in distant lands,  
My old desire assails me with red brands;  
I see the god that o'er your shoulder leers,  
Your eyes, your eyes like mystic midnight meres —  
Your body quivering to my questing hands —  
Why do you beckon me across the sands?  
Have you not other victims to your spears?

There is no dream, but your long narrow eyes  
Bring back the days of Egypt's dusky skies.  
Fair Bast! I come! I know you wait me there,  
And I must feel again, like singing wine,  
Your slender fingers flutter through my hair,  
Your slim, white body nestling close to mine.



## IVORY IN THE NIGHT

Maidens of star and of moon,  
    born from the mists of the age,  
I thrill to the touch of your hands,  
    in the night when the shadows are o'er me.  
Your eyes are like the gulfs of the night,  
    your limbs are like ivory gleaming —  
But your lips are more red than is mortal,  
    and pointed the nails of your fingers.



## DESIRE

“Turn out the light.” I raised a willing hand  
And plunged the room into the silken, cool  
Darkness in which the deeper passions rule;  
Your tresses snared me with each moon-lit strand,  
Your soft breasts sent warm raptures through my hand.  
I felt your slim, fresh body close to mine,  
The blood went racing through my veins like wine  
And my desire was like a flaming brand.

The pulsing world was as a couch for us;  
The brittle moon that flung her silver down  
A jewel mystical and luminous  
Enshrined and fashioned in our passion’s crown;  
The dusky, deep sapphirean sky above  
A star-ensplendored canopy for love.



## SCARLET AND GOLD ARE THE STARS TONIGHT

Scarlet and gold are the stars tonight,  
The river runs silver below the bridge —  
But the hour shall come when the dawn grows white  
Over the eastern ridge.

Your face is a dim white flower of night,  
In your arms unheeded the hours fall —  
But the dawn makes hearts grow strange and light,  
And the far lands call.



**End of  
sample**

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