

Spring 1985

The Moon Year after Li Ho (791-817)

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Recommended Citation

Gerner, Ken (1985) "The Moon Year after Li Ho (791-817)," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 24 , Article 45.

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The Moon Year

after Li Ho (791-817)
for Kenneth Rexroth (1905-1982)

poems by Ken Gerner

*The Chinese titles were drawn by
Dr. John B. Wang,
Professor of Chinese
at the University of Montana.*

十二月
樂
詞

First Moon

Cross the bed of pine needles,
swing the gate open to spring's coming.
The night is crouched into itself.
The white sun held in its claw.
Bow into this silence, bow to
the demons of winter's barren dreams,
bow to the passing.

A long bubble sucks flat
to the milky tatter of ice
that clings to the stream's bank.
The air sack pulses with the current,
wiggles free, disappears.
The broken pearl of winter's last moon
has set. In the dark, draw
the first cold drink of spring.

Sunlight will come, wake the croci,
open knots of bud to holiday and
seduce the delicate flower of luck.
In its shadow, the tiger
of night will gamble.

Asleep in a cocoon of red silk,
she curls from the cold into herself.
The shadow to flag this dawn
are yet to grow across her cheek,
across her ivory mask of sleep.

正月

Second Moon

I drink last year's wine by the stream
 where mint now greens and cherry
 blossoms ready to burst their sheaths.

Yellow blossoms of willow await
 hungry tongues of butterflies.
 Mountains turn to jade.
 All the growing plants resound.
 The dog's bark sets the tree tops swaying.
 Huge manes shake free from spring rain.

White silk clings to the hollow of her
 hips, shadows her spin across the floor
 of sky. The wind, a bamboo flute,
 accompanies. The deep rumble of
 a dragon-coiled thundercloud strums
 the taut silk-spun string
 of her body. Bright
 streamers snap out around her.
 A thousand arms surround her dance.

二
月

Evening comes early, still echoes
 the stone cold chime of winter.
 The green frog won't sing tonight.
 Only the small comfort of this wine
 is left. While in anxious sleep,
 young women coax fox, badger,
 weasel from their winter burrows.

Third Moon

East wind harps the pines.
 Yellow pollen frosts the crystal air,
 dusts the shoulders of farmers
 bent to open the ground.
 Swallows salvage mud
 to house their return.

The rising sun licks through
 the jostle of willow, a tongue
 of fire on the stream bank.
 New green waves on the graves
 of the dead, with the living,
 willing slaves to buds, shoots,
 roots that weave the earth.

My eyelids grow heavy
 with the petals of spring.
 White sheets of writing paper
 pray to be filled.

三
月

The wind scatters
 the thousand blossoms, rivers
 their scent to the west.
 It is this she trusts to take her
 sweet perfume, while
 for the evening alone,
 she shadows her eyes.

Fourth Moon

Leaves grow into their green,
what blossoms are left curl
to crescents in their shade.
Swallows chatter in the beams.

Peonies have found the will
to open, the high sun spins
their colors: water that sleeps
in moonlight, black robe stained
with wine. A stunted seed pod,
twisted loose by the breeze
drops into the blue pond.
The ripples don't last long.
The golden carp don't blink.

The warmth and dazzle of summer
depress me, no money to pilgrimage,
to return to memories, to leave
the city's walls. The rich caravan
to mountain shrines.

In the park, mothers, grandmothers,
doting girls play with their young.
In the cool shade of the trees,
who is that man shredding petals,
singing and beating time,
alone with his bottle of wine?

四
月

Fifth Moon

The river's current slices and twists
the cloud of moon into a host of lanterns.
Thermal winds sigh through pines.
Lament the drowned ones. The sun is down.
A resident pair of ducks fly the dark shore,
the flutter of wings cut into the night.

You held that rock like an amulet close
to your heart, like it was the last
piece of luck in the world.
You had tired of enticing her
with wild golden flights across
the sky, tired of your tricks
played out on high winds.
So you came back to earth
where you could name flowers
and took to throwing them
across the dark longing of her eyes.

Magnolias, orchids, melilotus,
petals strewn to hold her,
glistened like jewels of sweat
on her body, eddied and pooled
and ran down her dancing,
escaped from the swaying dark
tresses of her hair.
They soon lost their perfume,
not even time could bring them back.
You had thought at least
you could count on flowers.

Fifth Moon (continued)

What else could break through,
what was left, but the stone and you
the only one to build her a home
within the water. It was something
to hold, to weight you from the sky.
Unlike the delicate petals that
flew from your grasp, that stone
was firm to your embrace.

As you felt its cool press
against your breast, it was like her,
like the mornings you'd seen her shadow
twist and splay in the mist, the mornings
you took the dew as her caress.
As its weight pulled river into lake,
you felt your joy slowly sink
into the jade pool of her eyes.

The bubbles of your breath rose
like pearls through the dark clutch
of water. As you sank, wave after wave
came down to welcome you, Ch'ü Yüan,
and you held to the stone,
your final gift to her.

The nights will now grow longer.
I see her flower in the moonlight,
hear her laughter ripple the night,
daring me to fly.

五
月

Sixth Moon

The earth is sore with the red sun.
Willow branches sweep the yellow grass.
Leaves turn their silver charms
to face the dry wind. A turtle
stares from leather leaves
stretching across the lotus pond.

Caught in her dressing mirror,
the sun's mirror of flame finds her,
dissolves into lightning, turns
to black and green coils around her.
Thunder beats a continuous roll
across the drum of sky.

Shadows of freshly washed hair
spoke across her bowed shoulders,
a wheel of white petals jeweled
with the pleasures of rain.

六月

Seventh Moon

Starlight grows ripe
in the lengthening night, the cricket's
song whirrs in the rocks.
Bells clang, as cows come down
from summer grazing grounds.

Dripping from the stream's bath,
she rises to the wind's chill.
Clad only in the raiment of flesh,
she steps onto the bridge of wings,
the black, lonely shore of night.

There, she awaits his warmth,
smells the musk, feels the steam
of his body encircle her. The only
cloth she cannot weave herself.

Wrapped in this cloak,
her hands fall idle
in their days of languor.
The sky grows cold,
naked to her eyes.
Tears and rain
raise a silver river

between them.
Invisible processions of the dead
throng the night sky.
Candles float out on the river.
A field of flame.
Bonfire for what is past.

七
月

Eighth Moon

Things have grown round.
They hunger to be held
by earth. Ripe
on the roadside, fat
black molecules of berries
suck from stems.
Apples, streaked red,
tug free from bent boughs,
thunk with the sound
of their juice. Melons
sink in the ground, holding
pools of sweetness inside
thick skins. Globes
of peaches, all turning
round and down. Perfectly
round, the autumn moon holds
herself high in the heavens.

Her arms of light move
across the scales of night,
comfort all things
with their measure.
Moon smooths the wrinkles
from my weary face,
turns to cool wine,
the air I breathe.
Her light lends grace
to the silhouette
of my awkward wanderings.

Eighth Moon (continued)

The many nights
these tired eyes
have held her.
The many times
this hand has
poised to write
I am coming home.

八
月

Ninth Moon

Slow with the tailings of summer,
the narrow stream whispers
like the rustle of raw silk.
Drying alder leaves chatter
in the breeze. The cricket's song
shadows me wherever I move.

In daylight, I climbed the heights,
left the rumble of the city,
the weight of moths and slow flies.
I rose above timberline,
over talus slopes, pulled up
through a rock chimney until
there was nothing left except
myself and the shrine of sky.

The wheel of the hawk rose
between us. The strong wind
made a song of the dry stalks
of bear grass. The kite of my body
filled with the world's breath.
Soon, there will be only snow.

Now, by the stream, the cold
dew crawls up my pantlegs.
Night takes the last croak
from the crow and the colors
from my eyes. From the cave
of underbrush, a night creature
cracks awake.

Ninth Moon (continued)

With wine, I try to sweep
clean the graves inside.
Drink sinks like sap into the dark,
leaves what is above ground
to the turning fall.

九月

Tenth Moon

Mountain peaks are buried
in the belly of cloud.
Fingers of fog trace
the furrow of each watershed.
The rendezvous that held
my hopes is frozen fast.
Wind has spun the colored leaves
to weave with the earth.
Frost burns the ribbon
of stream, kingfisher blue.

Stars spill
from the crystal cup
of moon. In the cold dark
before dawn, snowflakes drift
down the valley's clear sky.

Silence grips the shadows
like ice. Breath
clings white to my beard.

十
月

Eleventh Moon

Cold wind pierces the bare trellis of alder.
Frost laces the empty bench that
held the embrace of warmer nights.
Creatures slow in their fur coats.
Bears hole up in sleep.
Waterfalls hang in silence.
I dream of migrant geese.

It has been days since light
broke the thick cover of cloud.
Circling on their dim course,
the sun, the moon, seem erratic.
Darkness stretches ten thousand miles.
Chill cuts through my clothes,
stills my heart as I await
the thaw of dawn.

Only yesterday, I pleaded
for the night to hold the moonlight
closer to our touch. Now,
this longest night, she is far away,
beyond clouds, her bangles of white jade
slowly swinging, her echo
clinking through halls of ice.

十一月

Twelfth Moon

Before dawn, weak light breaks
red through windows
of houses clustered in
the hollow. Morning,
the many lives scatter

from the common bed of sleep.
Cold stars recede
through bare branches
of fruit trees, the fruits of summer
are gone, gone.
The moon remains.

The long nights end.
The long days begin.

十二月

Intercalary Month

We are certain of the time of coronation,
seldom death. Sunlight is accurately
recorded. The calendar is stuffed.

The blood let in its time, the smile
of the weasel, knows no end, only
accurate parts. These days are
numbered, the turning of blossom
to fruit, the circle of shadows
longing, the spin of repetition,
the remorseless accuracy of change.

Now darkness turns in upon itself.
Moonlight is cut by a measure
not its own, its shadow thrown
away to void, where it is possible to
dream of laughing, where any voice can
speak and the hand of caress is chosen.

The picking of peaches, our labor, is
for the day and timely.

The drinking of that wine, our love, is
for night and seamless.

閏

月