CutBank

Volume 1 Issue 24 CutBank 24

Article 45

Spring 1985

The Moon Year after Li Ho (791-817)

Ken Gerner

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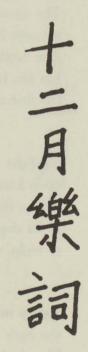
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The Moon Year

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



First Moon

Cross the bed of pine needles, swing the gate open to spring's coming. The night is crouched into itself.

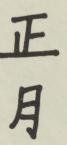
The white sun held in its claw.

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, wriggles 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.



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 sallow 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.

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.

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?





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.

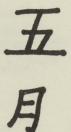
Fifth Moon (continued)

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.



Sixth Moon

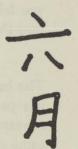
The earth is sore with the red sun.

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.



Seventh Moon

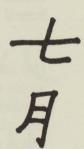
Starlight grows ripe in the lengthening night, the cricket's song whirrs in the rocks. Bells clang, as cows come down from summer grazing grounds.

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.



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*.



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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.

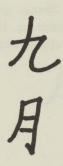
The wheel of the hawk rose between us. The strong wind made a song of the dry stalks of bear grass. The kite of my body filled with the world's breath. Soon, there will be only snow.

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.



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.





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.

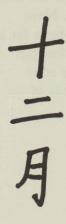


Twelfth Moon

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.



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.



