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on Ken Gerner

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Ken Gerner, *Throwing Shadows*; Copper Canyon Press; Port Townsend, WA; \$8.00

There is a certain pomposity to much contemporary poetry. Often we find ourselves wading through books full of trivialities passed off as important insights, only to drown under imagery so deliberately obscure that it seems even the poet must have been confused as to the actual nature of its object. In the midst of this deluge, a poet like Ken Gerner must be considered much more than a breath of fresh air; his work is an island where we can rest, catch our breath, and even find time for healing.

In *Throwing Shadows*, his second major collection from Copper Canyon Press (following the 1978 release, *The Red Dreams*), Gerner reaches a calm sense of clarity that can only result from a genuine desire to be understood. While many poets ask the reader to be dazzled by cleverness or overwhelmed by the strangeness of an event's rendering, Gerner's work is, in a positive sense, much more humble. "Listen carefully," these poems seem to say, "and you will be rewarded again and again."

For example, notice the lucidity, the earnestness and simplicity, of these lines from "Once in Passing":

One knows that one is nothing, that what one
knows is nothing, that only the pain
of the passing convinces us it is real,
once, and once only, and teaches us
care. We are left in the cold air
of solitude from which we embrace and
sing through the pain to each other,
man to man, each father, brother, son.

In this beautifully rendered poem, Gerner observes the changes his childhood home in the Bitterroot mountains has gone through, (how "the banker builds his ranch-/house on the hill that was an alfalfa field," "how the sick green of sewer moss fills the streams," "how coal mines and cities/ steal their children"), and we learn what is the fundamental message of his work: that it is exactly this impermanence, this "passing" of all that we love, that teaches us attention, that teaches us "care."

It is precisely this sense of attention and care that gives Gerner's poems their power. The book is filled with remarkably precise visual details ("A match is struck./ Everything we see/ in the room has/ a shadow."), proving that this poet has indeed taken care with his language, and paid particular attention to the Chinese poets he so obviously admires.

Regular readers of *CutBank* will surely remember Gerner as the author/translator of *The Moon Year*, a highlight of volume 24. This memorable sequence, based on the work of Li Ho (791-817), chronicles the seasons of the solitary heart,