The Daughters of the Moon

Italo Calvino

*Deprived, as it was, of a covering of air to act as a protective shield, the moon found itself exposed right from the start to a continual bombardment of meteorites and to the corrosive action of the sun’s rays. According to Thomas Gold, of Cornell University, the rocks on the moon’s surface were reduced to powder through constant attrition from meteorite particles. According to Gerard Kuiper, of the University of Chicago, the escape of gases from the moon’s magma may have given the satellite a light, porous consistency, like that of a pumice stone.*

The moon is old, Qfwfq agreed, pitted with holes, worn out. Rolling naked through the skies, it erodes and loses its flesh like a bone that’s been gnawed. This is not the first time that such a thing has happened. I remember moons that were even older and more battered than this one; I’ve seen loads of these moons, seen them being born and running across the sky and dying out, one punctured by hail from shooting stars, another exploding from all its craters, and yet another oozing drops of topaz-colored sweat that evaporated immediately, then being covered by greenish clouds and reduced to a dried-up, spongy shell.

What happens on the earth when a moon dies is not easy to describe; I’ll try to do it by referring to the last instance I can remember. Following a lengthy period of evolution, the earth had more or less reached the point where we are now; in other words, it had entered the phase when cars wear out more quickly than the soles of shoes. Beings that were barely human manufactured and bought and sold things, and cities covered the continents with luminous color. These cities grew in approximately the same places as our cities do now, however different the shape of the continents was. There was even a New York that in some way resembled the New York familiar to all of you, but was much newer, or, rather, more awash with new products, new toothbrushes, a New York with its own Manhattan that stretched out dense with skyscrapers gleaming like the nylon bristles of a brand-new toothbrush.

In this world where every object was thrown away at the slightest sign of breakage or aging, at the first dent or stain, and replaced with a new and perfect substitute, there was just one false note, one shadow: the moon. It wandered through the sky naked, corroded, and gray, more and more alien to the world down here, a hangover from a way of being that was now outdated.

Ancient expressions like “full moon,” “half-moon,” “last-quarter-moon” continued to be used but were really only figures of speech: how could we call “full” a shape that was all cracks and holes and that always seemed on the point of crashing down on our heads in a shower of rubble? Not to mention when it was a waning moon! It was reduced to a kind of nibbled cheese rind, and it always disappeared before we expected it to. At each new moon, we wondered whether it would ever appear again (were we hoping that it would simply disappear?), and when it did reappear, looking more and more like a comb that had lost its teeth, we averted our eyes with a shudder.

It was a depressing sight. We went out in the crowds, our arms laden with parcels, coming and going from the big department stores that were open day and night, and while we were scanning the neon signs that climbed higher and higher up the skyscrapers and notified us constantly of new products that had been launched, we’d suddenly see it advancing, pale amid those dazzling lights, slow and sick, and we could not get it out of our heads that every new thing, each product that we had just bought, could similarly wear out, deteriorate, fade away, and we would lose our enthusiasm for running around buying things and working like crazy—a loss that was not without consequences for industry and commerce.

That was how we began to consider the problem of what to do with it, this counterproductive satellite. It did not serve any purpose; it was a useless wreck. As it lost weight, it started to incline its orbit toward the earth: it was dangerous, above and beyond anything else. And the nearer it got the more it slowed its course; we could no longer calculate its phases. Even the calendar, the rhythm of the months, had become a mere convention; the moon went forward in fits and starts, as though it were about to collapse.

On these nights of low moon, people of a more unstable temperament began to do weird things. There was always a sleepwalker edging along the parapet of a skyscraper with his arms reaching toward the moon, or a werewolf starting to howl in the middle of Times Square, or a pyromaniac setting fire to the dock warehouses. By now these were common occurrences that no longer attracted the usual crowd of rubberneckers. But when I saw a girl sitting, completely naked, on a bench in Central Park I had to stop.

Even before I saw her I’d had the feeling that something mysterious was about to happen. As I drove through Central Park at the wheel of my convertible, I felt myself bathed in a flickering light, like that of a fluorescent bulb emitting a series of livid, blinking flashes before it turns on fully. The view all around me was like that of a garden that had sunk into a lunar crater. The naked girl sat beside a pond reflecting a slice of moon. I braked. For a second I thought I recognized her. I ran out of the car toward her, but then I froze. I did not know who she was; I just felt that I urgently had to do something for her.

Everything was scattered on the grass around the bench: her clothes, a stocking and shoe here and the others there, her earrings, necklace, and bracelets, purse and shopping bag with the contents spilled out in a wide arc, and countless packages and goods, almost as if the creature had felt herself called on her way back from a lavish shopping spree and had dropped everything, realizing that she had to free herself of all objects and signs that bound her to the earth, and she was now waiting to be assumed into the lunar sphere.

“What’s happening?” I stammered. “Can I help you?”

“Help?” she asked, with her eyes staring upward. “Nobody can help. Nobody can do anything.” And it was clear that she was talking not about herself but about the moon.

The moon was above us, a convex shape almost crushing us, a ruined roof, studded with holes like a cheese grater. Just at that moment, the animals in the zoo began to growl.

“Is this the end?” I asked mechanically, and I myself didn’t even know what I meant.

She replied, “It’s the beginning,” or something like that. (She spoke almost without opening her lips.)

“What do you mean? It’s the beginning of the end, or something else is beginning?”

ADVERTISEMENT

She got up, walked across the grass. She had long copper-colored hair that came down over her shoulders. She was so vulnerable that I felt the need to protect her in some way, to shield her, and I moved my hands toward her as though to be ready to catch her if she fell or to ward off anything that might harm her. But my hands did not dare even graze her, and always stayed a few centimetres from her skin. And as I followed her, in this way, past the flower gardens, I realized that her movements were similar to mine, that she, too, was trying to protect something fragile, something that might fall and shatter into pieces, and that needed thus to be led toward a place where it could settle gently, something that she could not touch but could only guide with her gestures: the moon.

The moon seemed lost. Having abandoned the course of its orbit, it no longer knew where to go; it let itself be transported like a dry leaf. Sometimes it appeared to be plummeting toward the earth, at others corkscrewing in a spiral movement, and at still others it looked to be just drifting. It was losing height, that was certain: for a second it seemed as if it would crash into the Plaza Hotel, but instead it slid into the corridor between two skyscrapers and disappeared from view in the direction of the Hudson. It reappeared shortly afterward, on the opposite side of the city, popping out from behind a cloud, bathing Harlem and the East River in a chalky light, and, as though caught by a gust of wind, it rolled toward the Bronx.

“There it is!” I shouted. “There—it stopped!”

“It can’t stop!” the girl exclaimed, and she ran naked and barefoot over the grass.

“Where are you going? You can’t wander around like that! Stop! Hey, I’m talking to you! What’s your name?”

She shouted out a name like Diana or Deanna, something that could also have been an invocation. And she disappeared. In order to follow her, I jumped back into my car and began to search the drives of Central Park.

The beams of my headlights lit up hedges, hills, obelisks, but the girl, Diana, was nowhere to be seen. By now I had gone too far: I must have passed her; I turned around to go back the way I’d come. A voice behind me said, “No, it’s there, keep going!”

Sitting behind me on the trunk of my car was the naked girl, pointing toward the moon.

I wanted to tell her to get down, to explain that I could not travel across the city with her so prominently on view in that condition, but I did not dare to distract her, intent as she was on not losing sight of the luminous glow that was disappearing and reappearing at the end of the drive. And in any case—and this was even stranger—no passerby seemed to notice this female apparition sitting up on the trunk of my car.

We crossed one of the bridges that link Manhattan to the mainland. Now we were going along a multilane highway, with other cars alongside us, and I kept my eyes staring straight ahead, fearing the laughter and crude comments that the sight of the two of us was no doubt prompting in the cars around us. But when a sedan overtook us I nearly went off the road in surprise: crouched on its roof was a naked girl with her hair blowing in the wind. For a second, I thought that my passenger was leaping from one speeding car to another, but all I had to do was turn my head ever so slightly to see that Diana’s knees were still there, level with my nose. And her body was not the only one glowing before my eyes: now I saw girls everywhere, stretched out in the strangest poses, clinging to the radiators, doors, and fenders of the speeding cars, their golden or dark strands of hair contrasting with the pink or dark gleam of their naked skin. There was one of these mysterious female passengers on every car, all leaning forward, urging their drivers to follow the moon.

They had been summoned by the endangered moon: I was certain of that. How many of them were there? More cars carrying lunar girls gathered at every crossroads and junction, converging from all quarters of the city to the place above which the moon seemed to have stopped. At the edge of the city, we found ourselves in front of an automobile scrap yard.

The road petered out in an area with little valleys, ridges, hills, and peaks, but it was not the contours of the land that created the uneven surface but, rather, the layers of things that had been thrown away: everything that the consumerist city had used up and expelled so that it could immediately enjoy the pleasure of handling new things had ended up in this unprepossessing neighborhood.

Over the course of many years, piles of battered fridges, yellowing issues of *Life* magazine, and burnt-out light bulbs had accumulated around an enormous wrecking yard. It was over this jagged, rusty territory that the moon now loomed, and the swaths of crumpled metal swelled as if carried on a high tide. They resembled each other, the decrepit moon and that crust of the earth which had been soldered into an amalgam of wreckage; the mountains of scrap metal formed a chain that closed in on itself like an amphitheatre, whose shape was precisely that of a volcanic crater or a lunar sea. The moon hung over this space, and it was as if the planet and its satellite were acting as mirror images of each other.

Our car engines had all stopped: nothing intimidates cars as much as their own cemeteries. Diana got down, and all the other Dianas followed. But their energy now seemed to fade: they moved with uncertain steps, as though, on finding themselves amid those shards of scrap iron, they were suddenly seized by an awareness of their own nakedness; many of them folded their arms to cover their breasts as if shivering with cold. As they did this, they scattered, climbing over the mountains of useless scrap and down into the amphitheatre, where they found themselves forming a huge circle in the middle. Then they all raised their arms together.

The moon gave a start, as though affected by that gesture of theirs, and it seemed for an instant to recover its energy and to climb again. The circle of girls stood with their arms outstretched and their faces and breasts turned toward the moon. Was that what the moon had asked of them? Did it need them to support it in the sky? I did not have time to ponder this question. At that very moment the crane entered the scene.

The crane had been designed and built by the authorities, who had decided to cleanse the sky of its inelegant encumbrance. It was a bulldozer from which a kind of crab’s claw rose up. It came forward on its caterpillar treads, squat and stocky, just like a crab; and when it arrived at the place that had been prepared for the operation it seemed to become even more squat, to cling to the earth with all its surface. The winch spun quickly, and the crane raised its arm into the sky; nobody had believed that a crane with such a long arm could be built. Its bucket opened, revealing all its teeth; now, more than a crab’s claw, it resembled a shark’s mouth. The moon was right there. It wavered as though it wanted to escape, but the crane seemed to be magnetized: as we watched, the moon was vacuumed up, as it were, landing in the crane’s jaws, which closed around it with a dry sound—*crack!* For a second, it seemed as if the moon had crumbled like a meringue, but instead it rested there, half in and half out of the jaws of the bucket. It had been flattened into an oblong shape, a kind of thick cigar held between the bucket’s teeth. Down came a shower the color of ashes.

The crane now tried to drag the moon down out of its orbit. The winch had started to wind backward: at this point, the winding required a huge effort. Diana and her friends had stayed motionless with their arms raised throughout this process, as though hoping to overcome the enemy’s aggression with the strength of their circle. It was only when the ash from the disintegrating moon rained down on their faces and breasts that they began to disperse. Diana let out a sharp cry of lament.

At that point, the imprisoned moon lost what little light it had left: it became a black, shapeless rock. It would have crashed down onto the earth had it not been held back by the bucket’s teeth. Down below, the workmen had prepared a metal net, which was fixed to the ground with long nails, all around the space where the crane was slowly lowering its load.

Once it was on the ground, the moon was a pockmarked, sandy boulder, so dull and opaque that it was incredible to think that it had once illuminated the sky with its shining reflection. The jaws of the bucket opened; the bulldozer retreated on its caterpillar treads and almost flipped over as it was suddenly lightened of its load. The workmen were ready with the net: they wrapped it around the moon, trapping it between the net and the ground. The moon struggled in its straitjacket: a tremor like that of an earthquake caused avalanches of empty cans to slide down from the mountain of refuse. Then all was peaceful again. The now moonless sky was drenched with bursts of light from big lamps. But the darkness was already fading, anyway.

Dawn found the car cemetery holding one more wreck: the moon marooned at its center was almost indistinguishable from the other discarded objects; it was the same color, had the same condemned look as something you couldn’t imagine ever having been new. A low murmur resounded through the crater of terrestrial trash: the light of dawn revealed a swarm of living things slowly waking up. Hirsute creatures were advancing amid the trucks’ disembowelled carcasses, the shattered wheels, the crumpled metal.

Among the discarded things lived a community of discarded people—people who had been marginalized, or who had willingly discarded themselves, people who had tired of racing all over the city to sell and buy new things that were destined to go instantly out of date, people who had decided that the things that had been thrown away were the only real riches of the world. Encircling the moon, throughout the amphitheatre, these lanky figures stood or sat, their faces framed by beards or unkempt hair. It was a tatterdemalion or bizarrely dressed crowd, and in its midst were my naked Diana and all the girls from the night before. They came forward, and began to loosen the steel wires of the net from the nails that had been driven into the ground.

Immediately, like a blimp released from its moorings, the moon rose, hovering above the girls’ heads, above the grandstand full of hoboes, and hung there, held by the steel net whose wires Diana and her friends were operating, sometimes pulling them, sometimes letting them out, and when the girls started to run, still holding the ends of the wires, the moon followed them.

As soon as the moon moved, a kind of wave began to rise from the valleys of wreckage: the old car carcasses crushed like accordions started to march, creakily arranging themselves in a procession, and a stream of battered cans rolled along making a noise like thunder, though you couldn’t tell whether they were dragging or being dragged by everything else. Following this moon that had been saved from the scrap heap, all the things and all the people who had been resigned to being tossed in a corner started on the road again, and swarmed toward the richest neighborhoods of the city.

That morning, the city was celebrating Consumer Thanksgiving Day. This feast came around every year, on a day in November, and had been set up to allow shoppers to display their gratitude toward the god Production, who tirelessly satisfied their every desire. The biggest department store in town organized a parade every year: an enormous balloon in the shape of a garishly colored doll was paraded through the main streets, pulled by ribbons that sequin-clad girls held as they marched behind a musical band. That day, the procession was coming down Fifth Avenue: the majorette twirled her baton in the air, the big drums banged, and the balloon giant, representing the Satisfied Customer, flew among the skyscrapers, obediently advancing on leashes held by girls in kepis, tassels, and fringed epaulets, riding spangly motorcycles.

At the same time, another parade was crossing Manhattan. The flaky, moldy moon was also advancing, sailing between the skyscrapers, pulled by the naked girls, and behind it came a line of beat-up cars and skeletons of trucks, amid a silent crowd that was gradually increasing in size. Thousands of people joined the throng that had been following the moon since the early hours of the morning, people of all colors, whole families with children of every age, especially as the procession filed past the crowded black and Puerto Rican areas of Harlem.

The lunar procession zigzagged around uptown, then started down Broadway, and came quickly and silently to converge with the other procession, which was dragging its balloon giant along Fifth Avenue.

At Madison Square, one procession met the other; or, more precisely, the two became a single procession. The Satisfied Customer, perhaps owing to a collision with the moon’s jagged surface, deflated into a rubber rag. On the motorcycles now were the Dianas, pulling the moon with multicolored ribbons; or, rather, since the number of naked women had at least doubled, the female motorcyclists must have thrown away their uniforms and kepis. A similar transformation had overtaken the motorcycles and the cars in the parade. You could no longer tell which were the old cars and which were the new: the twisted wheels, the rusty fenders were mixed together with bodywork as shiny as a mirror and paint that gleamed like enamel.

And, behind the parade, shopwindows became covered with cobwebs and mold, skyscrapers’ elevators started to creak and groan, advertising posters turned yellow, the egg holders in refrigerators filled with chicks, as if they were incubators, televisions reported whirling atmospheric storms. The city had consumed itself at a stroke: it was a disposable city that now followed the moon on its last voyage.

To the sound of the band drumming on empty gas cans, the procession arrived at the Brooklyn Bridge. Diana raised her majorette’s baton; her friends twirled their ribbons in the air. The moon made a last dash, traversed the curved grillework of the bridge, tipped toward the sea, crashed into the water like a brick, and sank, sending thousands of little bubbles to the surface.

Meanwhile, instead of letting the ribbons go, the girls had stayed attached to them, and the moon had lifted them up, sending them flying over the parapet and off the bridge: they described arcs in the air like divers and disappeared into the water.

We stood and stared in astonishment, some of us on the Brooklyn Bridge, others on the jetties on the shore, caught between the urge to dive in after them and the certainty that we would see them reappear again just as before.

We did not have to wait long. The sea began to vibrate with waves that spread out in a circle. At the center of this circle there appeared an island, which grew like a mountain, like a hemisphere, like a globe resting on the water, or, rather, raised up just above it; no, like a moon rising in the sky. I say a moon, even though it did not resemble a moon any more than the one we had seen plunge into the depths a few moments before: however, this new moon had a very different way of being different. It emerged from the sea dripping a trail of green, glistening seaweed; spouts of water gushed in fountains from fields that lent it the sheen of an emerald. A steamy jungle covered it, but not with plants. This covering seemed to be made of peacock feathers, full of eyes and shimmering colors.

This was the landscape that we hardly managed to glimpse before the sphere swiftly receded into the sky, and the more minute details were lost in a general impression of freshness and lushness. It was dusk: the contrasts of the colors were fading into a vibrant chiaroscuro; the lunar fields and woods were now just barely visible contours on the taut surface of the shining globe. But we were able to catch sight of some hammocks hanging from branches, rocked by the wind, and I saw, nestling in them, the girls who had led us to that place. I recognized Diana, at peace at last, fanning herself with a feather punkah, and perhaps sending me a signal of recognition.

“There they are! There she is!” I shouted. We all shouted, and the happiness at having found them again was already fraught with the pain of having lost them now forever, as the moon rising in the dark sky sent out only the reflections of the sun on its lakes and fields.

We were seized by a frenzy: we began to gallop across the continent, through the savannas and forests that had recovered the earth, burying cities and roads, obliterating all trace of what had been. And we trumpeted, lifting up to the sky our trunks and our long, thin tusks, shaking the shaggy hair of our croups with the violent anguish that takes hold of all us young mammoths when we realize that now is when life begins, and yet it is clear that what we desire we shall never have. ♦

*—1968*

(*Translated, from the Italian, by Martin McLaughlin.*)

Published in the print edition of the [February 23, 2009](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/02/23), issue.

[*Italo Calvino*](https://www.newyorker.com/contributors/italo-calvino)*was, at the time of his death, in 1985, the most translated contemporary Italian writer.*