Books

Review: "Man and Camel"

By Mark Strand (Knopf).

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English artist Samuel Palmer's "A Cornfield by Moonlight with the Evening Star," watercolor, circa 1830. (The Trustees of the British Museum)

Certain literary stock images — the stag, the dove, the red, red rose — have seen their popularity wax and wane over the years, but the moon has really hung in there. Eudora Welty once put her finger on its appeal to writers:

“In my sensory education I include my physical awareness of the word. Of a certain word, that is; the connection it has with what it stands for. At around age six, perhaps, I was standing by myself in our front yard waiting for supper, just at that hour in a late summer day when the sun is already below the horizon and the risen

full moon in the visible sky stops being chalky and begins to take on light. There comes the moment, and I saw it then, when the moon goes from flat to round. For the first time it met my eyes as a globe. The word ‘moon’ came into my mouth as though fed to me out of a silver spoon.”

That literal roundness, on the page and on the tongue, may be one reason *moon* exercises a particularly strong pull on poets, the writers most preoccupied with the materiality of language. But the moon itself has properties that make it hard to keep out of poems — singularity, remoteness, ghostly beauty. Joe Bolton called it “a bright, magnificent coin / That can’t be spent in this world.” Elizabeth Bishop rendered it indirectly and indelibly: “Come, let me wash [your hair] in this big tin basin, / battered and shiny like the moon.” Philip Larkin mocked the poet’s tendency to metamorphose and metaphorize it — “Lozenge of love! Medallion of art!” — then succumbed himself: “The hardness and the brightness and the plain / Far-reaching singleness of that wide stare // Is a reminder of the strength and pain / Of being young . . . ”

Of all contemporary poems, Mark Strand’s may be the most moonlit. I find the moon in 7 of the 23 poems collected in *Man and Camel*, and feel its presence in a dozen others. “Open the book of evening to the page / where the moon, always the moon, appears,” he writes, and he could easily be describing the experience of opening his own book. *The Book of Evening*, in fact, would have been a fine subtitle.

It’s tempting to suggest that Strand, who is 73 this year and recently joined the Columbia faculty as a professor of English and comparative literature, is reckoning with the twilight of his own life and career. But in fact he has been a crepuscular poet for 40 years. His past collections include *The Late Hour* (1978) and the deeply influential *Darker* (1970).

The typical Strand poem is brief, slightly fanciful, and subdued, beginning in narrative and moving toward meditation. Its speaker is often alone, outdoors, at night. The darkness isn’t threatening, though — it isn’t even dark, because of the moon. But there tends to be a sort of vague dread at the poem’s periphery, a fear of self-erasure tempered by a longing for it: “To see one’s death. To see the darkening clouds / as the tragic cloth of a day of mourning. To be the one / mourned.” Strand’s great theme — depending on his mood, and yours — is either beauty marred by disappointment or disappointment partially redeemed by beauty.

But Strand refuses to muscle his poems into meaning. His relationship to his subjects is roughly that of the moon to objects below. He is a reflective poet, but always at some level disinterested, presiding but not judging. In “Mother and Son,” a man of indeterminate age finds his mother on her deathbed. The scene’s oddness and austerity make plain that Strand is working in allegory, not anecdote:

> The son leans down to kiss
> the mother’s lips, but her lips are cold.
> The burial of feelings has begun. The son
> touches the mother’s hands one last time,
> then turns and sees the moon’s full face.
> An ashen light falls across the floor.
> If the moon could speak, what would it say?
> If the moon could speak, it would say nothing.

Strand isn’t going to let the moon get away with mere symbolism, or mere solace. It wouldn’t offer a word of comfort even if it could. The son is utterly alone in the room, though his gaze moves from one face to another. It’s hard not to take this poem personally, for all its impersonality, because it speaks so mercilessly to the solitude of grief.

But Strand is no less susceptible than Eudora Welty to the beauty of the moon (and of *moon*), and in some of his poems it seems to be almost enough: “its lone syllable like a sentence poised // at the edge of sense, waiting for you to say its name / once more as you lift your eyes from the page // and close the book, still feeling what it was like / to dwell in that light, that sudden paradise of sound.”

The power of the “lone syllable” is a lesson Strand learned early, and has been teaching ever since. He may be, in addition to the most moonstruck American poet, the most monosyllabic. He never comes across as a writer with a limited vocabulary, but at times he does seem to be conserving a large one. There’s nothing mock-naive, or even modest, however, about his word choice. Indeed, as his appreciation of *moon* suggests, the simplest words are often the most potent. And a spare vocabulary can supercharge the words that depart from it. There’s nothing remarkable about *ashen* when it appears in a poem by a walking OED like Seamus Heaney or Paul Muldoon. But look at the terrible value it acquires in “Mother and Son,” by virtue of being the only word in the passage that’s even slightly

uncommon.

Another way Strand keeps his poems from sagging under their own thematic weight is with a self-reflexive irony. His sense of humor is as dry as a martini's first sip, and as bracing. "I am not thinking of Death," he writes in "2002," "but Death is thinking of me. / He leans back in his chair, rubs his hands, strokes / his beard, and says, 'I'm thinking of Strand…'" In a sequel, "2032," we learn that in addition to the pro forma scythe and hourglass, Death's possessions include a chauffeur-driven limo, in which he feebly sits with a blanket spread across his knees waiting to be driven to the Blue Hotel. The props Strand permits him, in other words, are ridiculous either in their triteness or in their improbability. Best to have some fun at Death's expense, Strand seems to say. He'll be having some at ours soon enough.

And yet it is life that gets the last word in *Man and Camel*. Comprising three sections, the collection darkens as it progresses, but ends at daybreak. Its final sequence, the seven-part "Poem After the Seven Last Words," was commissioned by the Brentano String Quartet to be read between movements of Haydn's quartet op. 51, "The Seven Last Words of Christ." Like its subject, the poem is neither a renunciation nor an avowal — according to Strand's notes, it "relies heavily on the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas." Yet its concluding lines are as free of that old existential dread as any in the book. Strand places his faith, finally, in the beauty and benevolent mystery that so often seem imperiled in his poems, embodying them in the process:

> Back down these stairs to the same scene,
> to the moon, the stars, the night wind.
> Hours pass
> and only the harp off in the distance and
> the wind
> moving through it. And soon the sun's
> gray disk,
> darkened by clouds, sailing above. And beyond,
> as always, the sea of endless transparence,
> of utmost
> calm, a place of constant beginning that has
> within it
> what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard,

what no hand
has touched, what has not arisen in the
human heart.
To that place, to the keeper of that place,
I commit myself.

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