Nick Norwood

Mark Strand on the Moon

With the death of Mark Strand in November of 2014, and of John Ashbery in September, 2017, the era of American poetry that would accommodate the purely aesthetic poet seems to have passed. Strand wrote in what he himself referred to as an international style—spare and ahistorical, gauzy and impressionistic rather than thick-textured and immediate—a kind of verse that avoids the local, topical, political, and overtly personal in favor of the ethereal and universal.

Easy to see then why Strand's evocations of the moon should become so central to his poetry. Moonlight is at the heart of what his poems are about: beauty, mystery, evanescence; night, death, loss. Whatever it is his poems intend to do aesthetically and thematically, the essence is lunar. In the poems mentioning either the moon or its emanation—let's say, a rough estimate, about a third of those he published—the moon serves alternately as a primary agent, peripheral character, point of reference, guiding force, light source, or inspiration. Some typical examples:

> Under the fuss of starlight, under the dusty
> Sickle of the moon, he stood alone,
> And waited for the birds to sing,
> For the wordless tirades of the wind
> ("Grotesques, 2 The King")

> How bold you are!
> You rise like the moon
> while I sit on the edge of my bed ("The Dream")

> And while I strain
> To keep that prospect near,
> The small night garden behind the house

Sheds its scented moonlit flesh.
("The Empire of Chance")

So they work all night
In rooms that are cold and webbed with the moon's
light ("The Midnight Club")

Autumn
Had come, the walks were freckled with leaves, and a
tarnished
Moonlit emptiness crept over the valley floor.
("Five Dogs, I")

Oh for the moon's displays of pallor ("Danse d'hiver")

The moon in fact recurs more often in Strand's poems than any other single element with the possible exception of night itself. Reading through his poetic canon in its entirety—made easier by the publication of his *Collected Poems* in 2016—one comes to realize that the moon served as the godhead of the idiosyncratic universe Mark Strand created.

Strand's tacit insistence that the moon is still a relevant symbol and inspiration opened his work to criticism. To many readers evocations of the moon in poetry have become passé, something to be avoided because of the perceived overuse. William Logan, for instance, in his dismissive review of *Man and Camel* asserts that the poems in it "rely too heavily on props left over from the 1970s—night and moon and stars, all available by mail order." Other readers would offer the opposing view. Christopher Miller contends that Strand followed his great precursor Wallace Stevens in thinking that the "ultimate poem . . . is abstract" and that Strand chose to follow Stevens by drawing on "an elemental lexicon of Platonic forms—trees, darkness, light, moon, room, breath, sleep, dreams—as if beginning in the 'plain sense of things' of late Stevens."

Strand remarked on a number of occasions—in his interview with Wallace Shawn in *The Paris Review*, for example—

that unlike prose, which tries for "a kind of concreteness," poetry "suggests." He also said that Carlos Drummond de Andrade's poem "In the Middle of the Road" represented for him what lyric poetry is all about. Drummond's poem is not directly about the moon, but it focuses on another of those Platonic forms: a stone. "I like to be mystified," Strand says. "Because it's really that place which is unreachable, or mysterious, at which the poem becomes ours." Certainly most readers would find Drummond's poem mystifying. Here it is in its entirety, in Elizabeth Bishop's translation, from the volume of Drummond's work edited by Strand and Thomas Colchie:

> In the middle of the road there was a stone
> there was a stone in the middle of the road
> there was a stone
> in the middle of the road there was a stone.
>
> Never should I forget this event
> in the life of my fatigued retinas.
> Never should I forget that in the middle of the road
> there was a stone
> there was a stone in the middle of the road
> in the middle of the road there was a stone.

Even putting aside the possible evocation of the moon we might find in Drummond's "stone"—a resemblance Strand's own work has recorded in poems like "Error" in which we are led "on foot into regions / where the sea is frozen and the ground is strewn / with moonlike boulders"—Drummond's lyric itself, taken on the whole, may easily remind us of the lunar presence. The poem is elliptical and mysterious. It suggests without pinning down. It exists monumentally and yet with great subtlety. It fills us with joy for no reason we can easily articulate. Mark Strand hoped, I think, that his poems would do something similar, and it is for that reason—though obviously not for that reason alone—that they so often feature the moon or moonlight.

As an artist Strand was influenced early on by surrealist film, and the surrealist impulse is seldom absent from his

poems. The moon, Strand showed us, is the one fixture of the objective world that can always be counted on to accompany and complement that impulse. Often it is the catalyst for a poem's other surrealist effects. Always the eerie, the death-haunted, the freakish and weird: the mostly subtle and sometimes more dramatic transformations in aesthetic and thematic strategy occurring in Strand's poems over the course of his career are registered in his depictions of the moon.

Long before Strand published his first book, perhaps even before he wrote his first poem that would be published, he made an apparent connection between what the moon represented for him and the kind of poetry he admired and would try to write. He discovered it through Archibald MacLeish's "You, Andrew Marvell," which, in his essay "On Becoming a Poet," he identifies as "the first poem about which I felt passionate, the first that I thought I understood, the first that I actually wished I had written." In describing how the poem gave "definition" to his thoughts about "death and time passing," Strand explains that he eventually realized how MacLeish's poem "seemed suspended between times" and that the "suspension seemed to feature a strange circularity." What he recognized of course is the cyclical nature of life, the seasons, and even larger cycles—beyond "just the simple diurnal round of night and day . . . the more tragic rise and fall of civilizations"—that MacLeish's poem connects to and that imbues the poem with some profound quality of truth and mystery that came to define for Strand what poetry ought to do, or at least ought to try to do. MacLeish's poem describes the coming on of night. Strand's reading of it provides that it "is darkness that happens to the world just as surely as death will happen to the one face downward in the sun." And if night becomes then Strand's symbol of mortality, the moon, being literally the most prominent single fixture of night, becomes his symbol of the transcendent beauty he associates with death's mystery. He says later in the essay that MacLeish's poem "carries with it the implication that there is something beautiful about bending to what is inexorable, and that meditating on one's mortality can seem a form of transcendence."

Through his own poetry, Strand connects his sense of the moon's evocation of that beauty and his reading of MacLeish's "You, Andrew Marvell." He makes what seems a direct allusion to the earlier poem in the lyric "So You Say," which appeared in the 1978 collection *The Late Hour*:

> You take my arm and say something will happen,
> something unusual for which we were always
> prepared,
> like the sun arriving after a day in Asia,
> like the moon departing after a night with us.

The sun's "arriving" from another continent will remind many readers of MacLeish's poem—the way his speaker describes night's movement around the globe, the way, as Strand explains, "You, Andrew Marvell" is "both about time and in time, about motion and in motion." Notice then how in Strand's own poem he immediately follows that allusion with a reference to the way the moon evokes the same sense of "circularity"—"something unusual for which we were always prepared."

Strand published his first book in 1964. In it we encounter a mild and ironic sense of menace somewhat different from the forebodings of apocalypse suggested in his later poems. The title of that first book is *Sleeping with One Eye Open*, and the moon, when it appears, is a little scary, insidious. It is a moon meant to haunt us, as in the collection's title poem:

> Even the half-moon
> (Half man, / Half dark), on the horizon,
> Lies on
> Its side casting a fishy light
> Which alights
> On my floor, lavishly lording
> Its morbid
> Look over me.

And things are about to get worse, for us as for Strand's speaker:

> Oh, I feel dead,
> Folded
> Away in my blankets for good, and
> Forgotten.
> My room is clammy and cold,
> Moonhandled
> And weird.

Like the room described in the poem, readers may feel they've been "moonhandled" by these early poems. Yet for all that, they may also experience a kind of delight in being thus treated. Here, as in the poems readers would encounter in the work to come, some solace is offered them—the solace of art, but not just in a general, abstract way. As it is a particular phenomenon of attentive, deeply engaged reading often to experience life on the page more vividly than life itself, to read Mark Strand poems is to be bathed in moonlight, to feel it enter our bodies like a form of radiation somewhat more affecting than the real thing—to experience it, paradoxically, more intensely than we might even if we were outdoors standing in it. It seems, no doubt, that only in reading Strand *by* moonlight might we hope to experience moonlight more completely.

In his second book, *Reasons for Moving*, published in 1968, even as Strand plays with standard metaphorical uses of the moon his references to it become increasingly morbid and macabre, as in "The Man in the Mirror":

> Then out of nowhere late one night
> you reappeared
> a huge vegetable moon,
> a bruise coated with light

This poem is a treatment of the Narcissus myth and the "you" in the quote above is the speaker's reflection. The lines represent perhaps the central moment in the final and

longest poem in the collection. It is significant then that Strand chooses to have the figure appear—or "reappear"—as a type of moon, metaphorically at least.

Even in poems that accentuate the moon's beauty, its stateliness, its seeming nobility and grandeur, Strand associates the moon's presence with things dark and troubling, as in "The Ghost Ship":

> Through the crowded street
> It floats,
>
> Its vague
> Tonnage like wind.

One might argue that the poem is not about the moon; ostensibly it isn't. Yet given Strand's proclivity for including the moon in his poems and in writing directly about it—that is, having the moon as a poem's central subject—one can't help thinking of the moon when reading "The Ghost Ship." Here again the poet aspires not only to evoke this celestial body so central to human experience but to further explore its meaning. The moon among other things is a reminder of our mortality; its ghostliness alone suggests as much. In "Moontan," the speaker reports that "Moonlight / falls on [his] flesh" and says,

> I know that soon
> the day will come
> to wash away the moon's
> white stain

another instance of Strand associating the moon with mortality, and one that seems to suggest that a person should try to escape the moon and its chilling, insidious presence. As in other early Strand poems, this one seems to insinuate that we are doomed to be in the presence of the moon rather than blessed to be so. Poor, fate-stricken, moon-haunted us, the poems say. Still, readers may register how being described this way is a form of consolation, recognizing themselves in

the poems to the extent that the fear expressed in them, the angst, the existential sense of ennui, seem very much in tune with what it's like to be alive and conscious.

And then beginning with *Darker,* Strand ironically starts to lighten up. The coming apocalypse still hangs over every poem, but the poet seems to suggest we should be less worried about it. What can we do anyway? Maybe we should learn to laugh. "If a man craves attention because of his poems," the speaker says in "The New Poetry Handbook," "he shall be like a jackass in moonlight." World-weariness being a central characteristic of the postmodern period in which Strand lived and worked, the transformations occurring over the course of his career might best be categorized as variations on his reaction to world-weariness. The poet's response to the world registered in the poems in *Darker* suggests an attitude of ironic acceptance in a new key. He seems weary of world-weariness and responds accordingly.

And yet it is in *Darker* that Strand's poems begin to offer consolation more directly, at least as far as the moon is concerned. In contrast to "the white stain" the moon leaves on his speaker in the previous volume, in this book's "The Dress" the moon acts as a source of comfort. To be touched by moonlight is to be blessed:

> Lie down on the bright hill
> with the moon's hand on your cheek,
> your flesh deep in the white folds of your dress,
> and you will not hear the passionate mole
> extending the length of his darkness,
> or the owl arranging all of the night,
> which is his wisdom, or the poem
> filling your pillow with its blue feathers.

In fact, in this poem to abandon the moonlight in favor of shade is to risk dire consequences:

> But if you step out of your dress and move into the shade,
> the mole will find you, so will the owl, and so will the poem,

and you will fall into another darkness, one you will
find
yourself making and remaking until it is perfect.

The poem presents the moon as a protector—partly a protector of people from themselves. At the same time, as in poems throughout Strand's career, it seems that the reason the poet has brought us here in the first place is to revel in the strangeness we associate with night. He presents a benevolent goddess of a moon who appears as the guiding force behind the darkness we should seek protection from, which fittingly is not unlike the way the reader might view the creator of this poem.

It is also beginning in *Darker* that the moon will become the dispenser of grace. In a universe humans have learned to distrust, in a culture that has lost its faith and its sense of an aesthetic compass, Strand's poems begin to place their faith in the moon as the one absolute good left standing. "I give up my lungs which are trees that have never seen the moon," his speaker says in "Giving Myself Up"; "I praise the moon for suffering men," in "From a Litany"; "The moon's light / spills over him like milk," in "The Way It Is."

The idea of the moon as something to believe in is maintained in Strand's next collection, *The Story of Our Lives*, where he continues to depict the moon as a sort of benevolent being and, further, seems to acknowledge that while this certainly is not a new idea in poetry, it is one still worth remembering and calling attention to. In "Elegy for My Father," for instance, the speaker reports simply that "The moon poised on the hill's white shoulder was there." As in many religious conceptions of the godhead, Strand's moon is synonymous with mystery, the unknowable, a being whose depth and transcendence are beyond our understanding. These depictions of the moon and moonlight go beyond merely describing their physical presence. They suggest something about their miraculous nature.

In *The Late Hour*, Strand's next book, he begins to explore that mystery in a more purposeful way to the extent that he

seems less devoted to surrealism for its aesthetic value and more concerned with its potential for pursuing truth. "Tell yourself," the speaker says in "Lines for Winter,"

> as it gets cold and gray falls from the air
> that you will go on
> walking, hearing
> the same tune no matter where
> you find yourself—
> inside the dome of dark
> or under the cracking white
> of the moon's gaze in a valley of snow

In such poems Strand seems to seek the kind of truth one gains through experience, in a way not unlike that of a more plainspoken, realist poet. Still, however, the poems generally stick to the eerie, nighttime landscape that is the primary locale of surrealism. In fact the reader may begin to sense that Strand wishes to have it both ways. The poem "White" is a good example, referencing "the weather of dreams" and in the next few lines the "morning" the dreamer will wake to:

> and in my sleep as I turn
> in the weather of dreams
> it is the white of my sheets
> and the white shades of the moon
> drawn over my floor
> that save me for morning

Notice how Strand's speaker has become less like a character out of surrealist animation—as readers might have felt about the speakers of his earlier books—and more like the neighbor, albeit a kooky one, who actually lives down the block.

In other poems in the book, Strand begins to work his lunar material almost entirely without surrealist effect. In the poem "For Jessica, My Daughter," as the title indicates, readers encounter the poet himself in his familial role, entreating his child to see the moon as one in a short list of potentially

benevolent objects that can help keep them together, protect her, protect him, and protect their relationship, because even if they are miles or states or countries apart they are unified in their ability simultaneously to look into the heavens and see the moon. In "Afraid of the Dark," he says,

> in which we drift or vanish altogether,
> I imagine a light
> that would not let us stray too far apart,
> a secret moon or mirror,
> a sheet of paper,
> something you could carry
> in the dark
> when I am away

The gestures here are reminiscent of Strand in his surrealist mode: it's not actually the moon but "a secret moon," something like the moon and not the moon itself. Yet the poem is one of that small minority of Mark Strand poems in which the poet steps out of his surrealist costume. That even such an instance as this features—in fact turns on—the idea of a moon-like phenomenon is testament of the moon's centrality in his work.

Any cursory review of Strand's career shows that wherever he goes the moon goes with him. In the surrealist poems the moon often operates as a central character, and always, it seems, as at least a peripheral one. Thus the poems in *The Continuous Life* (1990), the next book Strand published, continue the practice. "It was the middle of the night," the "Hunchback" section of "Grotesques" begins, "The beauty parlors were closed and the pale moon / Raced above the water towers." At the end of this ironically funny gothic poem, the speakers (says the hunchback, Franz) "lay down / Beside the corpse and slept, unloved, untouched, / In the dull, moon-flooded garden air." Another example from this book, the poem "One Winter Night," shows how even when Strand's surrealist impulse surfaces as a way of describing something that seems real, the moon, moonlight, and/or a moonlike essence may signal that we've entered a surrealist dream: "Later,

I went to the window and gazed at a bull, huge and pink, / In a field of snow. Moonlight poured down his back, and the damp / Of his breath spread until he was wreathed in a silver steam." For the moment the reader might guess that the bull's color is merely a trick of the moonlight, the speaker merely rendering—directly, soberly, lucidly—detail from the observable world. Then, as in the first of the poem's two stanzas, the speaker confesses "This, too, was a dream."

In 1993's *Dark Harbor* Strand offered his direct rebuttal to detractors—even critics of future volumes, like William Logan. The poem in question is number "VII" in the volume's forty-five-poem sequence:

> Oh you can make fun of the splendors of moonlight,
> But what would the human heart be if it wanted
> Only the dark, wanted nothing on earth
>
> But the sea's ink or the rock's black shade?
> On a summer night to launch yourself into the silver
> Emptiness of air and look over the pale fields
>
> At rest under the sullen stare of the moon,
> And to linger in the depths of your vision and wonder
> How in this whiteness what you love is past
>
> Grief, and how in the long valley of your looking
> Hope grows, and there, under the distant,
> Barely perceptible fire of all the stars,
>
> To feel yourself wake into change, as if your change
> Were immense and figured into the heavens' longing.
> And yet all you want is to rise out of the shade
>
> Of yourself into the cooling blaze of a summer night
> When the moon shines and the earth itself
> Is covered and silent in the stoniness of its sleep.

Here Strand delivers a testimonial of his continued faith not just in art and lyric poetry but in humankind's elemental

relationship to the universe. It is his *ars poetica*, which takes in—for the careful reader—all that existence comprises. It subsumes the topical and the individual in its beautiful evocation of the universal. In doing so it recalls what Seamus Heaney says about another poet writing in the international style, Czeslaw Milosz, whose work Heaney praises for its own evocations of "the wonderful sense of loss of what is most cherished" and for the way that in it Milosz "can turn what, in lesser hands or with a lesser writer, would be a poem of personal nostalgia into a symptom of great cultural and historical change, without portentousness. That move from personal lyric lament to visionary, tragic lamentation." Strand's, I believe, is a similar achievement. Never satisfied simply to make a record of his own experience, he continually strove to make a statement about the whole of human experience.

Blizzard of One, winner of the Pulitzer Prize, is a book filled with the beautiful moonlit emptiness that long before its publication in 1998 had become Mark Strand's trademark, and a book in which he perhaps worked his surrealist vision to greatest effect. In this collection the weird morbidity of his earlier career matures into something more refined and elegant. The moon provides the perfect lighting, as in "The Beach Hotel":

> We can stroll, can visit
> The dead decked out in their ashen pajamas, and after a tour
> Of the birches, can lie on the rumpled bed, watching
> The ancient moonlight creep across the floor

Likewise the moon is a fixture of the book's philosophical poems as well, the poems that begin to demonstrate the wisdom associated with age, as in "Old Man Leaves Party":

> It was clear when I left the party
> That though I was over eighty I still had
> A beautiful body. The moon shone down as it will
> On moments of deep introspection. The wind held its breath.

And look, somebody left a mirror leaning against a
tree.

"A Suite of Appearances" represents another such example: "We clear a space for ourselves, a stillness where nothing / Is blurred: a common palm, an oasis in which to rest, to sit // For hours beside the pool while the moonlight builds its palaces." If early Strand is something like "Haunted House in Moonlight," the later phase seems more "Moonlight of Our Essential Selves."

In *Chicken, Shadow, Moon & More*, Strand comes back to the moon not just in the title, and not just as the central subject and single repeated word of one of these anaphoras, but also as a figure—a landscape, a mood, a presence—in six of the other poems in the collection. In "Throat": "The moon's light in a throat is like salt on a melon." In "Sun": "The sun shines so the moon can read." "Sleep": "The moon sleeps with its eye open." In "Hour," in which it appears twice: "The hour in which the moon darkens" and "The hour of moonlight upon her body." In "Foot": "The elegiac foot of the moon in a bed of parsley." And "Island": "The island of moon thieves." The reader might write off these poems as mere amusements if it weren't that they so eloquently and evocatively speak to the human need for just this kind of metaphysical play. Each one of them creates its own world but is also a kind of recreation of the world we ourselves inhabit. As Strand said about the way Edward Hopper's paintings recreate the city, in these poems the objective, observable world "asserts itself formally rather than realistically." They seem useful in that they offer Strand's particular kind of momentary stay against confusion.

His next volume of new poems to appear, *Man and Camel* (2006), was yet another one in which Strand focused on final thoughts—most obviously in poems like "Afterwords," but in other poems, as well. Throughout the book readers may get the eerie sense they are experiencing the poet's last run through favorite things. In "Mother and Son," for instance:

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.

The volume contains twenty-three poems, seven of which directly mention the moon, moonlight, or that which is moonlit. In the poems' contemplations of death and the afterlife, the moon, as we might have anticipated, figures prominently. In "2002," for instance, in which the poet considers his death perhaps more directly than ever—yet still comically, ironically—the moon, *de rigueur*, maintains its presence:

I am not thinking of Death, 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, I'm
thinking
that one of these days I'll be out back, swinging my
scythe
or holding my hourglass up to the moon, and Strand
will appear
in a jacket and tie, and together under the boulevards'
leafless trees we'll stroll into the city of souls.

And not for the first time one of the poems in this volume is called simply "Moon":

Open the book of evening to the page
where the moon, always the moon, appears

between two clouds, moving so slowly that hours
will seem to have passed before you reach the next
page

where the moon, now brighter, lowers a path
to lead you away from what you have known

into those places where what you had wished for
happens,
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 moon, always the moon—as in some of the last poems he would publish, in his final volume of new poems, 2012's *Almost Invisible*. The third to last of them is called "Nocturne of the Poet Who Loved the Moon":

> I have grown tired of the moon, tired of its look of astonishment, the blue ice of its gaze, its arrivals and departures, of the way it gathers lovers and loners under its invisible wings, failing to distinguish between them. I have grown tired of so much that used to entrance me, tired of watching cloud shadows pass over sunlit grass, of seeing swans glide back and forth across the lake, of peering into the dark, hoping to find an image of a self as yet unborn. Let plainness enter the eye, plainness like a table on which nothing is set, like a table that is not yet even a table.

Clearly it is the poem of a person coming to the end of life, and one very much in the vein of the last poems of Wallace Stevens, Strand's great poetic hero.

It's hard to read Mark Strand's last poems and not recall Stevens's "The Planet on the Table," particularly the line "Ariel was glad he had written his poems." At the end of his life, Strand was clearly assessing his own life with his chosen art form. And what that life has meant to American poetry is to present an aesthetic view of human experience, one not only dedicated to poetry but convinced of the power of lyric poetry to save and redeem us. During politically turbulent

times like these, when out of frustration and bitterness so many poets turn to the topical and overtly political, Strand took the stance that to do so demonstrates a lack of faith in poetry itself. He would not regard such a position as "claiming poetry for its own sake." Rather, he saw it as a way of claiming the redemptive qualities of poetry by maintaining poetry's absolute highest standards—not just the grievances of this day, but the universal griefs of all time. Because clearly Strand believed that Robert Frost was right: poetry should be about griefs not grievances. Grievances are things, Frost explained, that can be fixed—politically, for instance. And griefs are things that cannot be fixed—like, for instance, the loss of a loved one, the loss of a child or parent—but can only be endured. Griefs represent the kind of loss that will be with us always, no matter what we do politically or otherwise. For Strand, to focus poems on mere grievances rather than on timeless, universal human griefs constitutes a loss of faith in lyric poetry and dooms to failure not only the individual poem but, potentially, all poems. Strand's own work stands as a testament to his continued faith in lyric poetry, a faith he maintained to the end of his poetic career, which extended virtually to the very end of his life.

When readers leave him, place him back on the shelf, and then later return to him in their minds, they are likely to find their remembrance of Mark Strand flooded with his favorite example of universal human experience: moonlight. Everything will be beautiful and a little weird. Strange things will be happening. And everything that happens, no matter how seemingly random, comic, or whimsical, will be freighted with meaning. In film noir, it is largely the quality of light that defines the style. It is the same for a Mark Strand poem. And that quality is the quality of moonlight.