

*Jeffery Donaldson*

**Review Article**

**The Still Life of Mark Strand's Darkening Harbor**

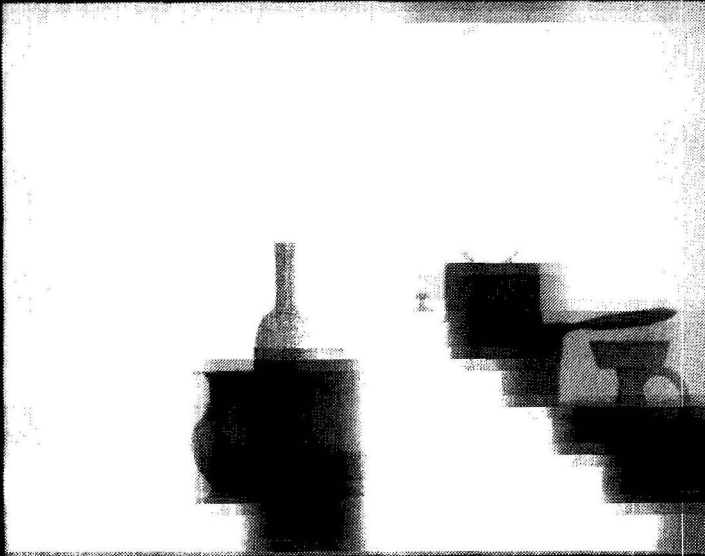
*Dark Harbor.* By Mark Strand. New York: Knopf, 1993. Pp. vii, 51.  
\$19.00.

*William Bailey.* By Mark Strand. New York: Abrams, 1987. Pp. 80.  
\$17.95.

The final poem in Mark Strand's *The Continuous Life*, his most recent book but one, is both a coda and an envoi, an afterword and a foreword. Its title and its subject is "The End," the end of the day, the end of the book, the end of the continuous life:

Not every man knows what he shall sing at the end,  
Watching the pier as the ship sails away . . .  
When the weight of the past leans against nothing, and the sky  
Is no more than remembered light, and the stories of cirrus  
And cumulus come to a close, and all the birds  
are suspended in flight  
Not every man knows what is waiting for him, or what  
he shall sing  
When the ship he is on slips into darkness, there at the end.

# MARK STRAND



# DARK HARBOR

*a poem*

William Bailey *Dark Harbor III* 1992

Strand's endings seem always on the verge of entering into something more ample and further on, and closure of any sort is seen as nothing less than a margin of opportunity. We seem already to have crossed over into something beyond the end, as though the poem itself wanted to show, in the way a poem can, that the truly immortal are those who at the moment of death think of the future. Strand was thinking of the future in this poem. Everything that he needed for the next book was here: the harbor view, the feeling of departure into the unknown, the sense of a space just out beyond the shores of ordinary life, the story of Orpheus crossing the river Styx into the underworld, and the poet's question of how he might best sing about the things that he finds there in the darkness.

To this we must add a poetry and a created world raised to the condition of still life. The title of Strand's latest book is taken from a still life, "Dark Harbor III," by William Bailey, the American artist whose work Strand has admired and celebrated for over a decade, most notably in an extensive essay published in 1987 with a collection of the artist's work. The painting is reproduced on the cover of the book. Readers unfamiliar with Bailey's work must picture a table surface, level with the viewer's eye, that bears on it kitchen ware of various description—a coffee urn, a water pitcher, several jars of different colors, a wine bottle, a candle holder, a small globe-like tea egg or colander. The colors are predominantly earth-tone: browns, ochres, a hidden dull blue, a flat, clayey orange near the middle of the grouping. Together they seem to proffer—in an almost abstract formalist mode—the colors and tones of sunset as so much *furniture*. The objects on the table are clustered just to the right of centre, leaving a sense of greater open space to the left. They are exact, self-contained presences. In Strand's words, "they affect, in their remoteness, majestic self-interest, but discretely, delicately enacted" (*William Bailey* 7). They are not the random findings of conventional still life—the fish, flowers and half-eaten fruit chanced upon in the mess of real time. These objects were never a part of time, never involved in the hubbub of a working kitchen. They are removed, purposefully chosen as *examples*, part of an idea of something that remains invisible and elusive.

In William Bailey, Strand has found an artistry equal in every way to his own credences and aspirations. His still lifes aim at a condition that is the heart and secret of Strand's own late-romantic poetics. Like Bailey's paintings, Strand's poems are "grandiose and hieratic, self-

contained, and secretive" (50). The lost souls wandering about in these poems seek a condition in which—as Strand says of the painter's pots and bowls—"they take on a new life, becoming part of a painted place, fitting into positions more permanent than their domestic lives would ever allow" (28). It is this unembarrassed desire to find something of the condition of art mirrored or embodied in our domestic lives that Strand emulates:

There is a luminousness, a convergence of enchantments,  
And the world is altered for the better as trees,  
Rivers, mountains, animals, all find their true place. . . .

*(Dark Harbor 30)*

The domestic and quotidian are themselves an embodiment of this permanence, its material form, but only at certain times. It is as though Strand and Bailey had taken the aestheticism of, say, Henry James's question "what is art but life intensely lived?" and asked in return, *when or for how long is this true?* "Is a body scraped / From the bone of experience, the chart of suffering / To be read in such ways that all flesh might be redeemed, / At least for the moment, the moment it passes into song" (42). This is a precarious permanence, accomplished only in art, "only while Orpheus sings." It is removed and provisional, not the abiding condition of quotidian life, where "no sign / Of satisfaction is possible. There is only / larger and larger dissatisfaction. Only teeth / Tearing and gnawing. Everything always larger and more / Elusive, with the weight of the future saying / That I am only what you are, but more so" (8).

We live with the gap between art and life—Seamus Heaney prefers the more dramatic "song" and "suffering," and they seem right for Strand too. What Strand laments in these poems is the fact that Orpheus's hieratic song does not somehow enter more permanently into the currents of ordinary experience, of our failing powers and increasing losses. Orpheus's "brilliant limitation" comes to this: he "can change the world / For a while, but he cannot save it, which is his despair" (30). The line ending and enjambment here enacts that sense of falling just short of the desired goal: he can change the world . . . but only for a while. That Strand should grant, and then as quickly take away, the poet's vatic influence, beautifully represents the point on which he "turns," between

lament and desire, between resignation and aspiration, between an acceptance that Orpheus's song is remote, intractably limited in its influence, and the wish that it have more redemptive *purchase* on the world, that his words not be lost, that "I have not lived in vain," and "that what I have said has not been said for me" (10). Strand is more than conscious of the division between real and imagined places, between the moments of song, and the regular tides of ordinary experience. What he seeks is, if not a happy marriage of the two, at least a working arrangement, some sense of a middle ground. That middle ground is a dark harbor.



Still Life *Monterchi* 1981

William Bailey's still lifes—and "Dark Harbor III" among them—contain everyday utensils, bowls, pitchers, cups and jars. But looking at these groupings, what you almost immediately feel is their ability to suggest other things. At times, they will remind us of a group of people—tall and short—looking out from their moment of historical fixity, "characters playing out parts . . . of eminence or subordination, but of the sort reminiscent of a family portrait," Strand writes (*Bailey* 8). Even more compelling is the uncanny ability of these still lifes to suggest whole townscapes and landscapes: "Coffee pots are towers, bowls are colosseums, other containers are houses or forts, and between them shadowy piazzas, dreamlike passageways" (30). The titles of the paintings encourage this response: "Now they are named for cities, piazzas, or villas urging the viewer away from literalness, into a realm of possible resemblance, distant likenesses—that middle ground of associations that concludes in abstraction" (30). The painting "Dark Harbor III" is just such a middle ground. From our perspective, we seem to be looking across at a harbor view in the distance, feel the cluster of buildings at land's end, feel the soft suffusion of orange and ochre against their facades, and recognize the open watery space to the left. From where we look, we are already out beyond the harbor, already departed (the sunset orange in the clay jar can only suggest departure, not arrival). The land ahead of us is receding and fading.

And yet there is no time here. Our farewell—in a world in which "all is farewell"—has been raised to the level of an idea, a space that seems open, with objects that seem chosen, permanent and fixed. "Because space is so ample, we do not experience the frailty of objects so much as their fixity, their having taken precisely the place where they should remain" (12). That we should feel that everything is in its place and that even though we seem to be leaving, even though it is late and darkening, everything *remains* just as it appears before us, is the quiet accomplishment of Bailey's art. The painting, then, is an expression of the quotidian—its subject and its material—but one that is purposeful, grouped and ordered till it becomes more than itself, a middle ground in which, as Strand writes, "the near and the far are joined. The painting is . . . the transforming, ordering bridge between small and large, inside and outside, real and ideal" (30).

"Dark Harbor III" exemplifies the mode and the method of *Dark Harbor*. Strand's own realm in these poems is a veritable nation of dark harbors, and everyone in them—the ones who sing and the ones who don't sing—seems to be moving inexorably out beyond the land's end. There is something quite inevitable, even desirable about this, our wish to break out beyond the limits of our lives, to overreach the plain measures of the quotidian: "We are always about to take off into a future / Unencumbered, as if we could leave ourselves behind, / But of course we never do" (11). It is as though we were trying to walk straight away on the circumference of a circle. There is a sense of inescapable entrapment that attends this journey, and yet also a kind of comfort or relief in the familiar circuit:

Go in any direction and you will return to the main drag.  
 Something about the dull little shops, the useless items  
 That turn into necessities, a sense of direction,  
  
 Even the feel of becoming yourself on your return,  
 As you pass through the outskirts, the rows of houses  
 Aglow with an icy green from TVs, spreading  
  
 a sheen of familiarity, of deliverance, as you  
 make your way back to the center. . . . (5)

We are caught then between always turning away from the land where we belong, and feeling that there is nowhere else to go: so long as we are alive, we are always only *ready* to depart: ". . . the rules / On earth still hold for those about to depart, / That it is best to be ready, for the ash / Of the body is worthless and goes only so far" (3). It is almost as though our lives were subject to the same forces that function in Bailey's art, which can, even as it is rooted in the quotidian, "urge the viewer away from literalness, into a realm of possible resemblance" (30). Like them, we are composed of the quotidian, "bound by what is available" (6) but tending beyond it; like the viewer looking at "Dark Harbor III," we find ourselves just off shore, straining towards a "realm of possible resemblance":

The ship has been held in the harbor.  
 The promise of departure has begun to dim.  
 The radiance of the sea, the shining abundance

Of its blue are nevertheless undiminished.  
 The will of the passengers struggles to release  
 The creaking ship. All they want

Is one last voyage beyond the papery palms  
 And the shoals of melancholy. . . .

Why are so many of them crowded at the rail,  
 With the ship still dozing in the harbor? (16)

Orpheus is the poet's representative in this landscape, as he wanders quietly with the others among nearly half of the poems collected here, asking as the light fails, how and what he should sing, how he is to be heard, where he should go, to whom he should call. Naturally, for the poet Orpheus, the darkening harbor is something more than just the geography of our historical lives, where we stand just a little offshore, trying to get away. For someone who has been to the underworld and back, our dark harbor is also the river Styx, the entrance to Hades, populated with shades of the unliving:

. . . my hand, as I lift it over the shade  
 Of my body, becomes a flame pointing the way  
 To a world from which no one returns, yet towards

Which everyone travels. . . .

. . . And the new place, the night,  
 Spacious, empty, a tomb of lights, turning away,

And going under, becoming what no one remembers. (17)

Wherever Orpheus's presence is felt, the late world that we inhabit is perceived to be in part already the underworld that it promises to become. There is something ghostly and unreal about the shades of lives we find moving about in the poems. "Our friends who lumbered from room to room / Now move like songs or meditations winding down, / Or lie about, waiting for the next good thing— / Some news of what is going on above, / A visitor to tell them who's writing well, / Who's falling in or out of love" (45). It is difficult to tell here whether Strand is describing Orpheus's encounters in the underworld, or accounting for that analogous sense of loss and remoteness from friends that is our portion in *this*



world. They are indistinguishable. There is a good deal of Milton behind all of this, the lounging of the fallen angels on the hillsides of hell (which seem strangely earthly and rural in their appearance), and Satan's cry that we ourselves are hell. Dante is here as well, who, in his representations of life in the inferno, could draw so richly from his earthly experiences. For Strand, however, the underworld of where we live, like the Hades of the pagan poets, involves no sense of judgment or punishment, but describes a condition of human nature; it is a metaphor for a psychological state that is already ours, a Hades of loss and remoteness that we already inhabit, and where "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" (9). This leaves us with the feeling of being liberated into our own afterlife (detached, remote, suspended in limbo, circling within ourselves), and the feeling that we have entered into the bitter promise of things as they are.

The same might be said of the landscape itself. Dante's scorching inferno and Milton's fiery "darkness visible" have become here a living dark harbor after the blaze of sunset, a world of shade and afterlight, a middle ground once again, calmer and more melancholic, in which we are at once held back and released, and find ourselves in a place and in a life that is both less and more than itself:

Beyond the sadness—the empty restaurants,  
The empty streets, the small lamps shining  
Down on the town—I see only stretches

Of ice and snow, the straight pines, the frigid moon. (19)

This is one of the most characteristic qualities of Strand's latest poetry: that paradoxical feeling we have, under western skies, that while the lights are going down the sky opens up, and that, even while we become increasingly conscious of a painful, dull, almost ascetic simplicity in the environment, there is an accompanying sense of altitude, open distance and clarity that fills it up. As objects return to themselves, they seem to become larger. Strand is one of the few American poets still reminding us that only very great artists can say the simple things. Each landscape is made up of two or three elements that are moved about in the poems

like so much furniture, or they are parts of very simple sliding stage-flats (the mountain and the tree here, the harbor and the cloud there). And as with stage scenery, part of our sense of spaciousness here derives from our instant recognition that Strand's mountains and skies are largely symbolic. Like Bailey's kitchen utensils, they are chosen, not accidentally observed: their reality is ideational, and, diminished as they seem, "we have the sensation that we are seeing an arrangement that has always been and will continue to be long after we depart" (*Bailey* 18). Abstraction is itself a way of lending a place roomy clarity and permanence.

We do inhabit a closed world of darkening elements and simplified spaces, but, for a poet, the reproduction of that world in poetic terms (using simple tonal elements, coarsely conceived imagery), does not stand merely as a metaphor for something that we feel in the real world. It is an experience that the poem itself partakes of, and one that it can by its very nature make real to us. For Orpheus, the song is life; its extension is life's extension: the journey out into the dark harbor is also a journey out to the end of the poem, a journey to the end of singing. It is not unnatural, then, that he would fear the end, worry that it is no more than an end, that "the Beyond is just a beyond" (and not an underworld in which he can charm the gods with his music), and that his own voice will not last: ". . . will I have proved that whatever I love / Is unbearable, that the views of Lethe will never / Improve, that whatever I sing is a blank?" (43). The poems themselves seem self-conscious of their own closed space: they so often quietly invoke, just as they end, the whole problem of ending and limitation. I have already quoted the end of "The End" in *The Continuous Life*. Here are a few concluding lines from *Dark Harbor*: "for the ash / Of the body is worthless and goes only so far" (3); ". . . the particular way our voices / Erased all signs of the sorrow that had been, / Its violence, its terrible omens of the end" (13); "an understanding that remains unfinished, unentire, / Largely imperfect so long as it lasts" (34); "a fragment, a piece of a larger intention, that is all" (41). It almost seems that as the poem concludes it cannot help but draw discreet attention to the fact of its own imminent extinction, with a note of lamentation or complaint in the phrases "goes only so far," "omens of the end," "so long as it lasts," and "that is all." Strand feels this limitation as a palpable reality of the poem itself, but using something very like picture windows

on the interior walls, he also shows the way out beyond it. Here, in the proem to the book, he announces his method:

"This is the way," he continued as he watched  
For the great space that he felt sure

Would open before him, a stark sea over which  
The turbulent sky would drop the shadowy shapes  
Of its song, and he would move his arms

And begin to mark, almost as a painter would,  
The passages of greater and lesser worth, the silken  
Tropes and calls to this or that, coarsely conceived,  
Echoing and blasting all around. (vii)

This is everyone's journey, yet at the same time it is the announcement of the poet's *modus operandi*. The first line of the poem as self-consciously opens the book as the final line of "The End" closed *The Continuous Life*. "This is my Main Street, he said as he started off . . .," and as the poet starts off, we see that the poem *is* his Main Street: it is both his principal avenue of approach, and the type of everyday poetic world that he will construct around him. It is both his reality, and his way into, and out of, that reality. As he starts down that "way," he watches for "the great space that he felt sure / Would open before him," where the shadowy shapes of his song would begin to fall into place. The song first comes to him in inchoate, indistinct shapes, and his job is to delineate, divide, and "mark, almost as a painter would, / The passages of greater and lesser worth, the silken / Tropes and calls to this or that, coarsely conceived, / Echoing and blasting all around." Strand's is a poetics of echo and allusion, callings to the shadowy shapes of song that fall to him from elsewhere. I can think of few other poets writing in English today, in whom one feels, as one reads, the constant tug of other voices, that sense of the ear reaching after some other expression, line or phrase. Listen, for instance, to the variation of Richard Wilbur's "the heaviest nuns walk in a pure floating / Of dark habits," in Strand's "everyone dreams of floating / Like angels in sweet-smelling habits." This sort of aural cue can be found everywhere in the book. Wallace Stevens commands the most attention: something of his "This Solitude of Cataracts" ("He wanted his heart to stop beating and his mind to rest / In

a permanent realization") can be heard in Strand's "solitude of soundless things" ("I would like to step out of my heart's door and be / Under the great sky.' I would like to step out / And be on the other side . . . in the random / Company of the wind, to be weightless, nameless"); an echo of Stevens's "the way, when we climb a mountain, / Vermont throws itself together" in Strand's "The morning mountains / Range themselves beyond the placid town"; and something of Stevens's "He discovered the colors of the moon / In a single spruce, when, suddenly, / The tree stood dazzling in the air / And blue broke on him from the sun, / A bullioned blue, a blue abulge, / Like daylight . . .," seems to have been refashioned in Strand's "If only it were possible to spruce up the air / Without buying a spruce, the day might begin / To take on a light of its own, green and piercing." In the proem, Strand goes on to say that "The burning / Will of weather, blowing overhead, would be his muse." Can we help but hear Stevens's "giant of the weather" in the line? The echoes themselves are blowing overhead, and if the Wallace of weather is not exactly named, echoes of his and others' poetry fall everywhere about us.

You can hear parts of Stevens in isolated lines throughout the book, but he will sometimes suffuse an entire poem:

Out here, dwarfed by mountains and a sky of fires  
 And round rocks, in the academy of revelations  
 Which gets smaller every year, we have come

To see ourselves as less and do not like  
 Shows of abundance, descriptions we cannot believe,  
 When a simple still life—roses in an azure bowl, does fine.

The idea of our being large is inconceivable,  
 Even after lunch with Harry at Lutece, even after  
 Finishing *The Death of Virgil*. The image of a god,

A platonic person, who does not breathe or bleed,  
 But brings whole rooms, whole continents to light,  
 Like the sun, is not for us. We have a growing appetite

For littleness, a piece of ourselves, a bit of the world,  
 An understanding that remains unfinished, unentire,  
 Largely imperfect so long as it lasts. (34)

Stevens's academy of fine ideas becomes here an academy of revelations, which gets smaller every year; the "weaker and weaker" world of his "Lebensweisheitspielerei" (which might be translated loosely as "The Game of Worldly Wisdom"), in which "those that are left are the unaccomplished," becomes in Strand a world in which "we have come / To see ourselves as less," and in which "the idea of being large is inconceivable." But it is Stevens's great poem on the capacities of art to quieten "the never-resting mind," "The Poems of Our Climate," that Strand most deeply recalls here. Strand takes the poet's "clear water in a brilliant bowl, / Pink and white carnations" and frames it more explicitly as a work of art, a "still life . . . roses in an azure bowl." Both poets go to the diminished thing, to "what had been so long composed," in order to discover, Stevens writes, that in art as in life "the imperfect is our paradise." Call it, as Strand concludes, an understanding that is "Largely imperfect, so long as it lasts." But there is a divergence: Stevens's poem, in its language and evocation, is simplified to the condition of still life and in a sense becomes that still life or is reduced to it ("a bowl of white, / Cold, a cold porcelain, low and round, / With nothing more than the carnations there"). His carnations are an incarnation, so that by the end we are ready to understand what he means when he writes that "delight . . . lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds": the language of the poem itself has embodied this bitter delight. Strand's poem is more obviously *about* still life (perhaps about Stevens's still life in particular). It is ekphrastic in nature. Ekphrastic poems speak of an original work of visual art and enlarge on elements that are implicit there. What Strand enlarges in Stevens is our sense of the frame of the poetic moment, and therefore a stronger sense of the limitations of the bitter delight that Stevens describes and partly accomplishes. In Strand, our unfinished understanding—in flawed words and stubborn sounds—is "largely imperfect so long as it lasts." The trick of uttering "so long as it lasts" just as you end, creates both a sense of enlargement *and* limitation, of going on or seeming to "last" just as you stop, a sense of expanding within the limited space that is available. Strand here both fulfils, in homage, and argues with the promise of Stevens's imperfect paradise.

Strand ends the book with an exquisite homage to Yeats's "Cuchulain Comforted," where Cuchulain's journey to the underworld is intricately refashioned into a scene, complete with its own Yeatsian "stone cottage,"

where the poet—travelling gyre-wise "the winding unpaved roads" of this world, or of the other, we cannot say—meets another poet who seems vaguely familiar to him, and speaks to him about what is dear to them, about poetry and the lines they are now ready to speak. The book ends with just the suggestion that the "meetings" between poets that a poet fosters in echo and allusion conclude in a sense of open space and readiness for new song:

I looked away to the hills  
Above the river, where the golden lights of sunset  
And sunrise are one and the same, and saw something flying  
Back and forth, fluttering its wings. Then it stopped in  
mid-air.  
It was an angel, one of the good ones, about to sing. (48)

The book ends where it began: the something flying back and forth in the sky recalls "the turbulent sky" that would "drop the shadowy shapes / Of its song . . . echoing and blasting all around" from the proem. And Stevens may be here again as well, if we hear the ghostly cry of the ocean, "fluttering its empty sleeves," in "The Idea of Order at Key West," in the "fluttering its wings" of this elusive angel. Poetic echo always lies just out of hearing, always just ready to ring clear, or like this good angel, always just "about to sing." Immanent echo feels like imminent song: the poem works its enlargements from within as it approaches the end.

Strand's echoes of Stevens and Yeats, of Ovid, Dante and Milton, are exactly what enlarges the poem within its own space. The presence of other poets in a poem for Strand is not a weight or a burden, but a room enlarged and opened up. In Bailey's still lifes, we feel that "Coffee pots are towers, bowls are colosseums, other containers are houses or forts, and between them shadowy piazzas, dreamlike passageways" (30). The "passages" Strand refers to in his proem are in one sense passages of poetry, but they are also "dream-like passageways" down and into the poem. When we hear echoes of other poets that we cannot quite name, that pull and tantalize us, there is a feeling of being drawn out and into spaces we did not know existed. They are in a sense unreal spaces, invisible and remote, except for that feeling of the mind casting off, being drawn away towards a voice that is outside the poem's narrow room. It

is more than just a metaphor, but a tangible experience. Echo and allusion are the Orphean underworld of poetry. As we read towards an inevitable conclusion, we feel we are already elsewhere, already listening to a choir of voices that are not a part of time, and in which each voice has its permanent place.

And so these poems deliver on the promise of their subject. In *Dark Harbor*, we are witness throughout to groups of lost souls wandering in circles, trying to rise above their own shadows and not being able to, having to leave but wanting to remain, setting out into their dark harbors while trying to wrest from that remoteness and melancholy a sense of liberation and permanence. But in Orpheus's song and journey, that dark harbor is already an afterworld. We feel ourselves already enlarged into it; we feel its nostalgia for the simple places and affections of our days, and recognize the sting of regret for lost chances and things that we left unsaid:

. . . there were many poets  
Wandering around who wished to be alive again.  
They were ready to say the things they had been unable  
to say—

Words whose absence had been the silence of love,  
Of pain, and even of pleasure. (48)

As Orpheus sings, the sufferings of the underworld become the accomplishments of our own restless passage in time—our aimless wandering, our straining against the shades of ourselves. Just as the poems echo into unseen rooms, we feel the enlargements of that afterlife, break through to it as we depart. And yet we are still here, not on the river Styx but a darkening harbor. Strand's orphic enchantments simply return us to where we are, and help us to long for the things that we have in this world as we pilot among them.