

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



Keeping Things Whole

In a field
I am the absence
of field.
This is
always the case.
Wherever I am
I am what is missing.

When I walk
I part the air
and always
the air moves in
to fill the spaces
where my body's been.

We all have reasons
for moving.
I move
to keep things whole.

Mark Strand¹

Reflections

I have loved this poem for a long time but I have a hard time articulating why, or what it is specifically that moves me. I find that is often the case—a kind of speechlessness—when I am in awe, or when I feel I have glimpsed the truth. As a teacher, I often withheld my most treasured poems for this very reason: an inability to adequately explain my *why* or perhaps a desire to abstain from speaking about something that seemed already to speak for itself. I don't know where, or how, to start. It could be that a poem like this doesn't need much commentary and sometimes annotations are more distracting than helpful. Good poems, by their nature, resist paraphrase. But I will attempt something brief, ever imprecise, if only as an expression of admiration for the work that the best poetry does, which is to say things otherwise unsayable.

¹ "Keeping Things Whole" by Mark Strand from *Selected Poems*, Alfred A. Knopf. Used by permission.

“Keeping Things Whole” reckons with what is difficult for the mind to comprehend and for our limited language to explain—the relationship of the part to the whole, specifically the self’s role as part of some unifying enterprise, the individual’s place in the larger universe, the meaning of life itself. Most of us are hungry for this kind of meaning-making: we want to know what the point is; we want to know what it is we’re supposed to be doing, and for whom are we doing it, and why. Here I am reminded of what I read in an Annie Dillard essay called “Total Eclipse”: “The mind wants to live forever,” she writes, “or to learn a very good reason why not. The mind wants the world to return its love, or its awareness; the mind wants to know all the world, and all eternity, even God.”

Strand’s poem feels to me like a kind of plea for this knowledge and ultimately rests in the impossibility of attaining it; in other words, the poet seems to accept the paradox of his own life: his being in the world as both a presence and an absence, a kind of negative space holder. It’s a contradiction: Strand asserts his identity by way of absence; he is what is missing. His existence both holds the world together and also breaks it apart. He is—and, I suppose each of us are—a force capable of both fragmenting the world and also unifying it, which is, to say the least, an enormous responsibility.

Already I feel I have said too much and am led back to that familiar equation, poetry as prayer: often the only utterance that feels adequate is a silent *Amen*. I will leave you this week with an excerpt from Matthew Zapruder’s essay from an anthology called *Poets on Teaching*:

Only poetry tries to take us together on a journey towards that which cannot be said, but which we are driven to understand. Old things that have always been there, waiting, on the tip of our collective tongue. [Percy Bysshe] Shelley in “Defence of Poetry” wrote of listening to a poem, that we are ‘moved and softened, yet know not whence or why.’ And the poem is where, as Wallace Stevens wrote, ‘out of the central mind / We make a dwelling in the evening air / In which being there together is enough.’

✂ About the Poet

Mark Strand (1934-2014) is recognized as one of the finest American poets of his generation, as well as an accomplished editor, translator, critic, and prose writer. In addition to the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, his honors include the Bollingen Prize, the Wallace Stevens Award, a Rockefeller Foundation award, and fellowships from the Academy of American Poets, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Ingram Merrill Foundation. He served as Poet Laureate of the United States and as a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. Over the span of his career, he taught at various institutions, including Yale, Princeton, Harvard, Johns Hopkins University, the University of Chicago, and Columbia University.



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