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WHERE IS THAT BOY?

The poems in Mark Strand's latest collection are missing their subjects. Some have sent false confirmations of their impending arrival, some have come and gone, leaving only their skittish footprints. Depending on a poem's voice, the results of the omission can vary from wry to mournful, but the speaker of nearly every piece, regardless of any ostensible topic, attempts to explain what happens when he can't show us the subject of his meditation. The voice in the opening piece, "Untitled," asks, ". . . Where / Is she now? And where is that boy who stood for hours / Outside her house . . . ?" The poem fails to catch even the beloved's name, referring to her only as "So-and-So" or "The Adorable One." Where, indeed, is the couple of this poem? Are they the runaway subject of the rest of the book? And where, for that matter, is the poem's title? The following pieces in the collection, empty of their own subjects and pursuant to varying degrees, seek the answer.

The sad, simple laments are among the book's most memorable pieces. In "I Will Love the Twenty-First Century" the speaker declares his missing main course. "The potatoes were hard, the beans soft, the meat— / There was no meat." There was no meat. Some subjects stay not only absent, but elusive, as does the unnameable subject in "What It Was," a pronoun whose referent never surfaces. And in the collection's longest piece, "The Delirium Waltz," the speaker seems unable (or unwilling?) to identify his dancing partner. With these gestures, Strand is either offering an apologia or problematizing the act of writing in general.

Sometimes these poems' subjects are, unarguably, *there*, but not there enough, as the speaker intones in "The Beach Hotel": ". . . there in the faded light discover the bones, / The dust, the bitter remains of someone who might have been / Had we not taken his place." We are here, and we are the subject, he says, but to choose one, to choose us, to choose anything at all, is tantamount to endorsing the deaths of all the others. So how will any subject comfort the loss of all the rest? How, asks the speaker in "A Suite of Appear-

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ances,” after the snow melts, “. . . will the warmth of the fire, / So long in coming, keep us from mourning the loss?” How will any subject ever offer enough to make us forget the other elusive or impossible ones?

In addition to sounding their frustrated lament, these speakers show us another contradiction encoded in the act of writing (or of existing)—that we thrust our subjects away in spite of ourselves. In “Precious Little,” the subject receives a swift kick. “‘Out of my way,’ you say to whatever is waiting, ‘Out of my way.’” After the expulsion, “You head west over the Great / Divide. . . .” Heading west recurs in the collection as a trope not so much of escape as of deliverance—west past the edge of the old, toward the realer subject, the truer destination. “So why plug away at the same old self,” asks the narrator of “The Next Time,” “when the landscape // Has opened its arms and given us marvelous shrines / To flock towards? The great motels to the west are waiting. . . .” Are they mirages? or real possibilities of salvation?

The speakers can hope for salvation because a “better” subject, though elusive, is at least imaginable, as in “A Suite of Appearances”:

. . . But beyond all that, what cannot
Be seen or explained will always be elsewhere, always supposed,

Invisible even beneath the signs—the beautiful surface,
The uncommon knowledge—that point its way.

Plato’s well-worn theory of recollection surfaces here as if to remind us that—immortal or not—sometimes, we just *know*. What we can’t see in these poems might always exist somewhere, always “elsewhere,” within some realm of the possible. Let us go and find them! the curious speakers urge.

Yet not all of them are ready for adventure. Some speakers display a groundedness (or an ennui?) that the restless others lack. One purpose of a subject, say the homebodies, is to remind us of all the other lost ones. In some cases the very subject itself, the signifier of all, may also number among the lost. “A Suite . . .” asks not whether we may step into Heraclitus’ proverbial same river twice but, as Kierkegaard asked, whether we may step into it even once.

. . . the church bell

Tolled the hour. What more is there? The odors of food,
The last traces of dinner, are gone. The glasses are washed.
The neighborhood sleeps. Will the same day ever come back, and with it

Our amazement at having been in it, or will only a dark haze
Spread at the back of the mind, erasing events, one after
The other, so brief they may have been lost to begin with?

Can this speaker even experience anything—much less, remember it? If not, then what remains for him to hope for or seek? Can there be a poem if the subject is impossible?

Others of the collection provide an answer—that the mere desire for a subject can affirm enough, can offer enough of a reason for being. “Is there something down by the water keeping itself from us . . . ?” asks the voice in “Our Masterpiece Is the Private Life.” Is the subject there? And, if not, can we search for it anyway? “Why should we care? Doesn’t desire cast its rainbows over the coarse porcelain / Of the world’s skin and with its measures fill the air?” We might even abandon the search, this speaker suggests—for why search when desire already offers all we need? And in the face of desire’s casting its rainbows, does it even matter what we seek or keep? Might we not even have what we think we have?

If we do not, then watching our shy subject’s disappearance can at least be pleasurable. The speaker of “Our Masterpiece . . .” intones: “. . . the moment of pleasure taken / In pleasure vanishing seems to grow, its self-soiling // Beauty, which can only be what it was, sustaining itself / A little longer in its going . . .” If nothing remains to live for, he swears, we may at least take pleasure in pleasure’s dissolving right in front of us.

In this collection, writing neither freezes nor keeps what it takes. Anything to which we direct our gaze, any subject we choose, will only change or disappear before we can record it. I can’t decide whether this philosophy complements or contradicts Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” in which the art of recording is more, and not less, powerful than the world. But, whatever the case, the voice of the collection’s final piece, “The View,” reaches some kind of resolution—if not by solving the problem of this collection, then at least by finding the ability to endure it.

. . . Slowly the sky becomes darker,
The wind relents, the view sublimes. The violet sweep of it
Seems, in this effortless nightfall, more than a reason
For being there, for seeing it seems itself a kind
Of happiness, as if that plain fact were enough and would last.

The act of living in a moment, after all, carries value in itself, however little sense we can make of it, and a moment's ability or inability to last in the world bears no relevance to its "kind of happiness." In these poems it is not up to us to capture the subject, to find the boy. What the poems do capture, whether the subject is "there" or not, is what we must turn our attention to. Keats's "heard melodies" *are* the subject of this collection, and they *are* the moment, and they are all.