Chapter 1

Staving Off the World:  
The Early Years

It is important to remember that Mark Strand does not intend his poetry to be studied in sound bites. If we take the American Heritage Dictionary’s definition of holism, “The theory that living matter or reality is made up of organic or unified wholes that are greater than the simple sum of their parts,” we can perhaps better find a starting point for the consideration of Strand’s poetic cosmology. From his first volume, Sleeping with One Eye Open, to his 2006 collection, Man and Camel, transformations abound; confidence waxes and wanes. Nonetheless, Strand’s poetic evolution progresses rather consistently. Strand’s development as a poet reflects changes in Strand’s own life (e.g., The Story of Our Lives, dedicated to the memory of his late father, is understandably the most recognizably divergent and personal of his volumes), and in his confidence in the practice of poetry. The poetic theory, however, remains intact. In fact, the poems themselves often are reconsiderations of themes from previous poems, or reapplications of theories to new situations. With few exceptions, Strand’s work does not reveal a huge development of the craft of poetry, but rather the honing of a master craftsman. His maturation as a poet seems to have already occurred by the time he released Darker in 1970. Since then, his poetry appears to reveal not so much an improvement of his poetic craft as a reconsideration of ideas and poetics from different moments in a career and life.

To be sure, Sleeping with One Eye Open, first published in 1964, already exhibits much of Strand’s artistic characteristics, and the poetry often succeeds. Here, Strand is preoccupied with the power of

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the malevolent world to insinuate itself between himself and his goals, whether the latter be unity with nature, communication, friendship, love, or even sleep. In the title poem, Strand’s speaker lies half-awake listening nervously to the frightening silence of a storm as its eye passes over his house. Nature is as frightening in its quietude as it is when it is roaring. In this middle ground, lying with one eye open under the half-moon, expressing himself in half-rhymes, the Strand speaker ultimately claims he is a victim of nature—“Moonhandled,” to be precise (30). In this early stage of his career, the alliteration and assonance sometimes seem forced and the short line lengths will not take him far as a poet. Tonally and topically in his early work, he is more likely to be “handled” by tropes such as the moon. The mature poet, we will assert for Strand in particular and poets in general, possesses the lyrical authority to handle the moon.

Early on, controlled by the moon, Strand’s speaker remains intriguingly liminal at the poem’s conclusion, caught between the fear of everything and the fear of nothing, “sleeping with one eye open, / Hoping / That nothing, nothing will happen” (35–37). Kirby is right in asserting that this poem is indicative of Strand’s poetic voice and that it is “intoning the poems that define him” (9), but as Strand’s career proceeds, increasingly fewer poems remain tonally concordant with this one. This poem’s primary function is, however, to establish the environment within which the poet writes. This is the world, Strand seems to say, and this is my condition. Insecurity—about life in general, about the speaker’s life in particular, about the poet’s role as creator—reigns in a great majority of his early poems, in fact. To begin this study of Strand with this poem is not to identify it as most indicative of his poetry—and it is probably not among his very best work—but rather to provide a setting in which the rest of the poetry blooms.

The establishment of the world as a malignant force is reinforced in “Violent Storm.” The night is expressed as having “dubious plans, and the rain / Beats down in gales / Against the roof” (25–27). The wind outside the doors is “loose, untidy” (30). But more vitally, this poem introduces the role of the poet, albeit an insecure poet, in providing refuge from the storm. In doing so, Strand presents a dualistic view of people as being either awake or asleep. Later, he will expand this view to include the active and the passive, the alert and the inert. Invariably, it is the former of each group that ends up in danger. However, it is also the awake, the active, and the alert who have a greater capacity to weather their storms, for this group includes the poets.