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Elegy for Mark Strand

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John Poch

Elegy for Mark Strand

I.

Toward your final steps that summer in Madrid
we walked five blocks for coffee and pastries.
You shuffled, slow, methodical, and thought
out loud about your fall in the bathtub that morning.
You stopped to pull your pant leg up to show me
the gash. We walked. I held your arm as you stepped
from a steep curb. It seemed polite to hold you,
and you thanked me when we crossed the street.
There are cafés closer, you said, but Strand
likes this one. We shuffled on, trochaic, intentional,
you breathing hard beside me. Strand, I made
an effort to remember how it felt
to hold your fragile elbow in my hand.

II.

In Ischia this morning, I went for a run
from Casamicciola to Lacco Ameno and back
with another poet. We ran along that curving strand
past old Neapolitano men out for their stroll
while on the hillsides the balconies began to stir,
shutters opening, windows and laundry, coffee
in the air, past scooters polluting, whining and grinding
through traffic, past parked trucks like old men's toys,
diminutive, ridiculous, those battered
three-wheeled trucksicles. The men unload
their clanging crates of bottles, Styrofoam trays
of fish on ice, boxes of waxy fruit,
and strands of dried red chilis. Toward the port,

we passed a seaside shop called Stradafacendo,
which I wanted to mean, “making the strand” or
“reach the beach” but only meant “along the way.”
We pushed our breathing past comfort, and slogged
our middle-aged legs along the cobbles there,
past Gino’s, and finished with an almost sprint
out toward the end of the long stone pier, past
a couple cops writing a ticket, past
the little brown beans of Chihuahua droppings
in the shadow of the black container ship
tied and anchored there for days, and past
an old, abandoned ship rope, thick as my forearm,
the deadest possum-gray and yards along
the pier’s seawall, finally useless, unsafe,
unsound, but softened in the early morning.
The ends were tied in ragged knots the size
of human skulls, knots to stop the fraying
where it frayed. Dear Strand,

I felt I could tell

from your later poems that you were afraid. Instead
of broaching that, we left the coffee shop
and walked and talked of a poet’s life and lot,
Kafka and Bishop and the Nova Scotia cold,
though we were here, in Spain, in April. We stopped
in a custom clothing store so you could show me
the shirts. These shirts. These people know me.
Such lovely shirts, you said. Look at the thread.