

## Green Hills Literary Lantern



By  
MARK BELAIR

### RUNNING LATE

#### Review: Mark Belair's *Running Late*

<https://www.amazon.com/Running-Late-Mark-Belair/dp/1950462269>

Mark Belair's newly published book of poems, *Running Late*, is a remarkably philosophical rumination in spite of, or perhaps because of, its fixation on small, intensely human moments and items. Amid noise and motion, Belair finds expansive quiet, beauty, and philosophical value in the commonplace. He evokes themes of Aristotelian function, Platonic beauty and form, and existentialism in the span of a single book. What results from his wide-reaching gaze of back alleyways, snow-capped mountains, and everyday people is an accessible and stunning treatise on humanity's place in time, space, and cosmic purpose.

Belair consistently draws attention to the simple form and function of familiar tools and objects. In his opening poem, "Handles," he describes the "form" of "rakes, shovels, axes, hoes" as an elegant "lean-to offering a fan of worn wooden handles... in the filtered light, each tool stripped to/ its essence, pared to a monk's purity..." In only a few lines, Belair introduces the concept of Aristotelian *telos*, or an object's intrinsic essence and purpose. With his peaceful, sunlit image of garden tools as having a "simple, calm/ grace that seems to glow," Belair points to the simple beauty of form and essence. The garden tools rest in their potential to be used for yard work, yet the speaker notes they are "narrowly incomplete as me/ until, work to take on, I take hold." Here, Belair again notes the *telos*, or the ultimate goal of an object—as Aristotle writes, an object achieves excellence when it fulfills its purpose. Belair's comparison between garden tools and his own existence suggests that a human is a tool for a specific function, too. With such a comparison, he raises a question: what sort of work or purpose will fulfill his existence, and in a wider scope, will fulfill humanity's existence?

In "Summer Radiator," Belair confronts similar themes of *telos* and purpose. Again, his writing bestows transcendent beauty on a common radiator: "The cloud-softened summer sun/ bathes an old black radiator/ one cool to the touch... each arched, filigreed radiant/ in the round-shouldered attention/ of choristers in a cast-iron choir..." His line break on "one" references the singular *telos* and form of the radiator while comparing its metal parts to a human choir. The radiator, like the garden tools, is incomplete "until fall, one night, arrives/ to conduct its conduction/ back to blasting, soul-warming life." Here, Belair treats time not as an enemy but as an ally, for the passage of time is what brings the radiator fulfillment of its purpose. In "Summer Radiator," along with "Handles" and several others, Belair humanizes objects so that when he regards humans as a sort of



tool or item, the result is not belittlement but awe at the complex human machine. Yet, what is most admirable about “Handles” and “Summer Radiator” is their accessibility. No knowledge of Greek philosophy is required to appreciate the magnificence of these poems, nor to understand their messages concerning human function, though the poems are strikingly philosophical.

Mark Belair’s work expresses Platonic beauty and enlightenment as well. “Spring Chill” encapsulates the nearly inexpressible beauty of Plato’s Forms. In true Platonic fashion, Belair emphasizes the transition from darkness and ignorance to sunlight and knowledge: “With the spring day/ coursing cool/ in the shade,/ I turn a street corner/ and, struck by the sun,/ feel/ a recollection/ start to formulate...” Even without reference to Plato, Belair aptly describes the sudden enlightenment people sometimes feel as a result of living and thinking. This recollection, however, is “...not/ as an image, or even/ as an intangible/ muscle memory, but/ as from something stored in/ bone, a skeleton/ memory of my skeleton/ childhood-small...” much alike Plato’s indescribably perfect Forms. Furthermore, Belair recalls Plato’s World of Forms, a spiritual place in which the human soul encounters unadulterated beauty and knowledge. Plato claims the soul can remember the World of Forms in the physical world when presented with material objects of similar beauty. This World of Forms, often called the Land of Lost Content, is referenced with the lines, “to return me—/ for a full, brimming moment—/ to a sweet, long lost/ emptiness.” The soul is constantly searching for a way back to the Forms.

What is most enchanting about “Spring Chill” is its visceral connection between enlightenment and the body. The speaker can feel the intangible memory “radiating out/ from marrow/ to muscles/ and veins/ and skin,” suggesting that the search for beauty and enlightenment is a deeply human pursuit and biologically wired into human existence. Belair continues this quest for beauty and meaning throughout *Running Late*, and he is successful in his search—he admires empty seashells longing for new residents, rivers and leaves “dreaming into each other” like “lovers,” the infinite lineage of pigeons, and potted plants straining against apartment windows. His unique view of time as cyclical, not to be fought but embraced, affords the reader a simultaneous and united vision of all the rapturous beauties found in the ordinary.

Belair extends his philosophical musings to existentialism and its ties to items, people, and time. In poems such as “Mounds,” “icons,” “Mine,” and “The Trinket,” Belair distills entire lives and people to singular items, yet as mentioned earlier this objectification is far from dehumanizing. Rather, these items are a way of remembrance and respect despite the passage of time. Furthermore, time makes these items and memories more precious, for they allow a person to exist after they have passed away. In “Mounds,” Belair transforms his grandfather into a pine board studded with mounds of nails. “icons,” on the other hand, uses a Sunday hat and a death certificate to symbolize a pair of deceased parents. In “Mine,” Belair regards his son, not as his “duplicate” or a thing to be “owned by anybody,” but still a “living line/ of felt continuity,/ mine.” From these poems, it is clear that Belair sees the people we leave behind as mementos, thus valuing the social link between people. The relationships one forms with other people are immensely important, an intensely existentialist theme continued in “Trinkets.” Here, Belair considers himself “the final traceable trinket/ on a flea market table” linked to his dead friends. The question Belair poses concerning human function in the book’s first poem, “Handles,” is answered in the aforementioned existentialist poems. The human function, Belair seems to say, is to pursue emotional connection and to leave something behind to keep this connection alive.

In *Running Late*, Mark Belair implores his readers to consider their intrinsic purpose. What latent potential and function lie beneath the clamor and preoccupations of daily life? What hidden beauties arise between parked cars and beneath unfinished buildings? Who matters to us, and who do we matter to in return? Belair is a magnificent poet, but he is also a common man’s philosopher, whether intentionally or by virtue of his observations and quiet musings. The book’s final poem, “The Ocean,” echoes Belair’s growing questions of purpose, beauty, and human connection. In this poem, the sea asks the speaker what function he, as a human, holds: “...and while the great ocean/ cannot offer one simple answer it does ask one simple question/ we find ourselves ever unable to answer—unless you count/ simple devotion to all that has offered devotion/ through our long, complicated, weathering years...” Belair answers with devotion—devotion to finding one’s purpose, devotion to seeking beauty and knowledge, devotion to each other.

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