

John Matthias was born in 1941 in Columbus, Ohio. For many years he taught at the University of Notre Dame, but also spent long periods of time in the UK, both at Cambridge and at his wife's childhood home in Hacheston, Suffolk. He has been a Visiting Fellow in poetry at Clare Hall, Cambridge, and is now a Life Member. Until 2012 he was poetry editor of *Notre Dame Review* and is now Editor at Large. Matthias has published some thirty books of poetry, translation, scholarship, and collaboration. His most recent books are *New Selected Poems*, (2004), *Kedging* (2007), *Trigons* (2010), *Collected Shorter Poems Vol 2*, *Collected Longer Poems* (all verse) and *Who Was Cousin Alice? And Other Questions* (2011) (mostly prose). In 1998 Robert Archambeau edited *Word Play Place: Essays on the poetry of John Matthias*, and in 2011 Joe Francis Doerr published a second volume of essays on his work, *The Salt Companion to the Poetry of John Matthias*. His complete poems have now been published in three volumes by Shearsman: *Collected Longer Poems* (2012), and *Collected Shorter Poems* in two volumes (2011 and 2013).

Also by John Matthias

Poetry

Bucyrus (1970)

Turns (1975)

Crossing (1979)

Bathory & Lermontov (1980)

Northern Summer (1984)

A Gathering of Ways (1991)

Swimming at Midnight (1995)

Beltane at Aphelion (1995)

Pages: New Poems & Cuttings (2000)

Working Progress, Working Title (2002)

Swell & Variations on the Song of Songs (2003)

New Selected Poems (2004)

Kedging (2007)

Trigons (2010)

Collected Shorter Poems, Vol. 2 (2011)

Collected Longer Poems (2012)

Translations

Contemporary Swedish Poetry (1980)

(with Göran Printz-Påhlson)

Jan Östergren: Rainmaker (1983)

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Introducing David Jones (1980)

David Jones: Man and Poet (1989)

Selected Works of David Jones (1992)

Notre Dame Review: The First Ten Years (2009)

(with William O'Rourke)

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For Diana: A Ballad, A Book

*I had in my charge two ladies
And I was the King of the West.
I had in my charge two ladies
And two of Angloria's best.*

*And the wind beat the rain at the window.
And the wind beat the rain on the stair.
I bolted the doors and compartments.
I took down the ladies' bright hair.*

*And they set up a table, my beauties,
They filled it with wine and delights.
Fulfilled and complete were my duties;
Reward was an eon of nights.*

*And the wind beat the rain at the window
And the wind beat the rain on the stair.
We ate and we drank and we drank and we ate
And we finished our banqueting there.*

*And I belched and arose from the table,
I swallowed a pickled red pear,
I hurried as fast as I'm able
To strip me a lady bare . . .*

*When suddenly face at the window,
Suddenly foot at the stair,
Suddenly sound of an army around
And a voice that split open the air.*

*It said: I'm the King of the West.
It said: You failed your quest.
Hand over your beauties
Go back to your duties
Get out and work with the rest.*

*Oh I was sent out in the wind and the rain
And I never set foot in that country again.*

Part I

Early Poems (1)

&

Some from *Turns* (1975)

Triptych

1

He doesn't sleep. He sits.
He looks around.
Afraid of quiet, bits
Of dust and sound,
He doesn't sleep. He sits
And looks around.
He was in love, he thinks.
He cannot smile.
He reads his early poems
To learn his style.
He doesn't write. He was
In love. He thinks.
He scribbles at a pad
With colored inks.

2

There is no bed. One stands.
One walks about.
A fountain for the hands
Drips water out.
There is no pillow, sheet,
Or bed at all;
A fountain for the feet
Is in the hall.
A fountain for the feet
Or for the hands—
Oh, sit upon the floor!
A yellow needle
Pins a ballad to
The door.

The King was dead. Earth flat.
And women real.
Beside me Marcus sat.
We took our meal.
“I have his daughter, sir,
I have his bride.
A proper poem, my Lord,
Will buy them tied.
A proper poem, my Lord,
If you can write.
I’ll have them in your bed
Tomorrow night.”
And I remember that.
And I recall.
Beside me Marcus sat
And that was all.

From the Frau Trix Dürst-Hass Collection
(*& Pädagogisches Skizzenbuch*)

“Less is more”
Ludwig Mies von der Rohe

At night, alone, and sick
of anything the day
or sunlight had to kick
at him, that purple way
of his with purple fish
conceived a hook that may
have been a cloudy wish
or just a carless thought.

But either way, once caught,
those stricken eels took
the curious lance he'd tossed
them by its baited hook
and pulled him, silent, lost,
where only they had been before
so Bauhaus eyes could look
beyond the Skizzenbuch

& not at *yes* but *nevermore*.

(Paul Klee: 'The Seafarer,' 1923)

Female Nude, Young

Conscious of being
afraid or aware;
afraid of fearing
awareness or fear,
one can paint
colorful portraits of others.

Take that unrepentant
child there by the mirror. Take
those fallen scarlet flowers: Destroy,
hopeless with color, the flowers
the mirror the child.

Responsibility ends
and begins. Otherwise,
where have we been? And
what have we seen?

What They Say

They say that
Egon Schiele
drew from models
his onanistic nudes
and friends.

They lay on beds
touching themselves,
lithe. He painted
from a ladder
in his loft.

And it's perspective
that distorts
and the omissions:
the beds the girls
lay on, or the chairs.

The ladder and the beds
were Egon Schiele's.
The postures and
the gestures
were all theirs.

Painter Kinsey's Favorite Pages

Douglas Kinsey's favorite pages in the four
books of poetry I've given him
by Stevens, Lowell, Berryman, and Moore

are those that separate the sections.

There is nothing written on them at all
save for the Roman numerals,

I II III IV

rather high and very black and
delicately right of center,
sliding oh so gently into winter.

Song

Handsome lovers know this place
and lovers knew it long ago.
Spirits whisper: love is grace.

I brought my beauty here in lace,
here to where the shadows grow,
and spirits whispered: love is grace.

Spirits whispered: love is grace
and all the lovers seemed to know.
I took my beauty in that place

as spirits whispered: love is grace.
My beauty did not find it so.
She gathered up her lace to go

and fled, angelic,
from my face...
Spirits whisper: love is grace.

Swimming at Midnight

[Near my grandparents' home at the outskirts of town, a stone quarry was established, then abandoned, nearly a hundred and fifty years ago. The early blasting hit water, and after many soundings were taken, the management concluded that they had uncovered a bottomless lake, fed, they surmised, by a sizable underground river.]

Under a pine and confusion:
oh! Tangles of clothes: (come
on, silly, nobody's here:) and
naked as fish, a boy and a girl.
(Nobody comes here: nobody looks:
nobody watches us watching us
watch.) Except the police.
Thighs slide into the moon.
Humbly, into the stars: Mirrored,
flashes a father's red eye, a
blue-bitten mother's red lip: No
Swimming Allowed In The Quarry
At Night. (Anyway, nevertheless
and moreover: feel how warm!) here,
among the reflections. (Feel the
water's mouth and its hands, feel
them imitate mine: can there truly
be any danger?) danger allowed in
the quarry at night? can people
really have drowned? (Now my body
is only water alive, and aeons
ago you were a fish growing
legs—) well, dust to dust, a
curious notion. But quarry water on
dust green with seed! Quarry water
forbidden on land after dark! What
young forms of vegetation emerge.
What new colors of light.

Aubade

Listen: the city's alive: they're
selling the apples and wine
of a day and a night.
Drummer is playing a drum
in the street, somebody dances
and somebody sings—someone's
hawking copper pots & pans.

Listen: (ah, you're sleeping still)
but listen, listen anyway, or dream:
All of this is gift, improbable and
chance: it's inadvertence, accident
and all that slips the mind.

Unlikely is the gentle
sleep you sleep; unlikely are
the simple sounds, the bending dawn,
my arms; unlikely and absurd
that we are here.

Dear girl,
against the certainties
what hour? What day?
How make what accident
and chance what rule?

Fragments for an Epithalamion

...in lieu of ornaments,
a wedding song. No angels can I summon
and no swans; no maidens, no, nor drunken
dancing boys. I summon this:

remembered seas and silences

in the quiet of the dusk there will
be ceremony soon and there was
ceremony of uncertain kind before.
Silent by a silent sea did we see minstrels
in the surf who sang?

This stillness summons
absent things like time...

like angels, maidens,
dancing boys, and swans

Song

Sound of people playing tennis
in the little park.
A neighbor practicing her violin,
sunbeams through a window.

Anyday, anyday. This day too.

An agreeable letter
from a poet I respect.
A sentence in an old friend's book,
I love my life.

This day too. Or anyday.

The present *does* compel us.
How I'd like, old friend, to say
I love my life. I have.

The cat rolls over, stretches
out its hind legs in a beam of sun.
The violinist
and the tennis players play.

Song: For an Isele Setting

Between here
and away
is a
way

And a point
to be made

What matter
now
is how?

To leave is
to the point

It is

It is a way

(And equally
the coffee
and the
calm)

Song: Of a Lady Long Gone

Mosquitoes buzz and flies
and it is hot, and is
afraid who waits, bathed

and scented, lilacs
braided in her hair. *Can*
Walk away. Can disappear.

Can leave an empty garret
and a key. Across the
lake the city glitters

light. (Who waits and
listens, listening is
afraid.) *To leave the*

door ajar and nothing
there. To put a lantern
out & drink the rain. She

naked is her body is her
cry. (Insects ticking at
a pane.) *Can walk away:*

I'll walk away. She is
her death, His phallus
on her thigh. Across the

lake the city glitters light.
I'll walk, she says, the
quiet waters by.

Song: Intonations

Strange that I
should say
it your way
“*Are* you asleep”
to her
and after all
this time
and after all

Are you asleep?
(a stupid question)
No she says
I’m not
and then she
turns and yawns
and then
she is

Are you asleep?
I wonder where...
I wonder why
your voice is
in my mouth

Song: Into the Bargain

Stranger, agent, sinister
shade, friend of my oldest
enemy's friends

Why do you follow me now
to railway stations
and airports?

Why is it always
you in the taxi,
gondola, rickshaw?

Open, kindly, to
somebody else's
terrified eyes

Your travel brochures

Fathers

I never knew them.
Neither one. That
ancient Englishman
was deaf and in-
accessible—I

took his daughter
from his house.
He was dreaming
of ships, of Vienna,
his German assassin

sleeping under
his bed:
I never knew.
In Republican
Ohio, the man

I thought I
hated grew so
thin he'd slip
he said a wedding
band around his

upper arm. Rheumatic,
he rode like a horse
his electrical in-
valid chair.
He was a judge

and should have
been a sailor...
Who'd stand no
nonsense, tell
them of the Empire

and by God Britannia,
chew his pipe
and try to
understand his girl—
twenty-one and

born when
he was fifty.
And if I'd known them,
ether one, if I'm a
sailor now and should

have been a judge,
what son will talk
to me? What stranger
take my daughter from
a father's house?

Uncle

You were our antique toy
from the twenties, a wealthy
visitor from Dayton who
arrived on Saturdays and

passed out dollar bills.
Your nephews liked you drunk.
“A way of life” you told us—
and sang, basso profundo,

all your fraternity songs.
Before you made your million
you sold balloons to kids
and waited for the war you

didn't fight to lift you,
pickled, out of the depression.
And now you have a day nurse
and a night nurse.

When my father died, the best
you managed was: “They had
to stick his pecker in
the pot for months.”

And my father in a book he gave
his sister once (your wife):
“For Betty: who doesn't need
a gyroscope to keep her steady.”