

The Poetry Blues

William Matthews

The Poetry Blues

ESSAYS AND INTERVIEWS

Edited by Sebastian Matthews
and Stanley Plumly

Ann Arbor

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Editors' Notes

By definition death leaves unfinished business. For a poet much of that unfinished business is unpublished poems. For William Matthews it was also a substantial miscellany of ungathered prose—essays, commentaries, musings, interviews, and so forth—of which *The Poetry Blues* is the essential selection.

The announced subject in these pages is poetry: poetry blues, poetry and music, bad lines, sentences, durations, awkwardnesses, precision, brevity, and privacy. But the real matter, the subversive subject, is Matthews's mind, the way it subtly and irrevocably turns the collective sow's ears of questions, clichés, assignments, and analyses into singular silk purses. Matthews had the passionate intellectual capacity of a Coleridge, with the equal ability to articulate well into the night. He was also a man of diligent taste, especially with words, who could, when lost in thought, go absolutely silent. Wherever he went in those taciturn moments, he always returned with the insight and wisdom one needed. The care of the thinking and writing, the careful measure of wit and pleasure, the distances recovered from the meditations to be found here are emblematic of the heroic quality of Matthews's integrity and intelligence.

There is great heart here, too. Vigilant against pomp and hype, Matthews is in favor of good sense, good work, and the legacy that makes the contemporary possible. His sympathies are with commitment and excellence, never with reputations. And he applies the same disinterestedness to himself, which is why his interviews are so attractive and disarming. The range of his reading and knowledge is obvious—from Martial to Merwin, Cavaradossi to Mingus, lexicography to lyricism—yet it is the attitude toward the issue under discussion, Matthews's equanimity, his sense of balance toward his material, that gives his critical voice its distinction. Matthews's tone is a beautiful mixture of

patrician and democrat, professional and keen amateur, practitioner and observer, uncle and wiser brother.

This is the Matthews so many of us loved in his quick takes and longer solo runs. These pages represent his word, his sweet mind, and nearly everything else we have left of him.

Stanley Plumly
Bethesda, Md.

My father died having just completed a manuscript of poems. The book, prophetically titled *After All*, was already sitting on the desk of his editor, Peter Davison. Only minor details needed to be attended to for publication, most of which were lovingly and painstakingly performed by Davison and my father's partner, Celia Bellinger.

Such was not the case with this book. In fact, I had no idea that my father might have been thinking of gathering a second collection of essays until stumbling upon a computer file labeled "Essays, 1993–1997." In it, I found a dozen or so essays and reviews, many published previously in literary magazines. There were also lying around, as you might imagine, various file folders containing old interviews and earlier essays not appearing in his first prose collection (*Curiosities* [1989]).

In among these papers and files I came across a strikingly wide variety of forms: journal entries; autobiographical sketches; remembrances; poetry reviews; essays on music, art, and the craft of writing; interviews and self-interviews; journalistic profiles; short stories; introductions and prefaces for books of translation; lecture notes; and a few short pieces that can only be called musings.

The need for a second book of "occasional prose" was obvious. The poet Stanley Plumly—not only my father's good friend but also his appointed literary executor—agreed with this conclusion, urging me to send the material along. David Lehman, the editor of the Poets on Poetry series, was enthusiastic about the project from the beginning. Before long Stan and I had narrowed the material down. The guidelines we set for choosing the work were relatively simple, with only a few casual rules.

Though a masterful and eager interviewee, Matthews often revisited themes in his interviews—jazz, the use of wit in poetry,

his love of Martial and Horace—therefore, we decided to include two or three of the most succinct interviews, trusting less to represent more. Likewise, his generosity and intelligence toward fellow poets led my father to write numerous book reviews—not only reviews for friends and colleagues but also for poets of the generations preceding and following his. We would focus on reviews that (1) discussed poets prominent in Matthews’s own literary and personal life (Hugo, Merwin, Kinnell, Carruth); and (2) went beyond simply reviewing a book and entered into a one-way conversation with some of his most preoccupying interests (friendship, jazz, etc.).

There were other small decisions. For example, it made sense to include some of my father’s journal entries because, for all intents and purposes, he used the form the way he used the essay and the interview—as a public, therefore self-conscious, means to explore the subjects that engaged him outside the scope of, and in addition to, his poetry. For similar reasons any piece not clearly intended for publication—private journals, letters, unfinished or unformed creative or critical material—was left out.

In the end we decided on twenty-seven pieces, a good many of which were written in the last ten years, with a few going back to earlier in my father’s career. The most recent piece is the interview he conducted with good friend and longtime editor Peter Davison for *Atlantic Unbound*, the *Atlantic Monthly*’s on-line poetry forum. It felt fitting to end the book in such a fraternal manner, as it did starting off the book with autobiographical pieces and remembrances of my father’s old friend and mentor Richard Hugo. We’d come full circle.

Sebastian Matthews
Asheville, N.C.

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