

Classic Poetry Series

William Matthews

- poems -

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A Poetry Reading At West Point

I read to the entire plebe class,
in two batches. Twice the hall filled
with bodies dressed alike, each toting
a copy of my book. What would my
shrink say, if I had one, about
such a dream, if it were a dream?

Question and answer time.
"Sir," a cadet yelled from the balcony,
and gave his name and rank, and then,
closing his parentheses, yelled
"Sir" again. "Why do your poems give
me a headache when I try

to understand them?" he asked. "Do
you want that?" I have a gift for
gentle jokes to defuse tension,
but this was not the time to use it.
"I try to write as well as I can
what it feels like to be human,"

I started, picking my way care-
fully, for he and I were, after
all, pained by the same dumb longings.
"I try to say what I don't know
how to say, but of course I can't
get much of it down at all."

By now I was sweating bullets.
"I don't want my poems to be hard,
unless the truth is, if there is
a truth." Silence hung in the hall
like a heavy fabric. My own
head ached. "Sir," he yelled. "Thank you. Sir."

Anonymous submission.

William Matthews

Dire Cure

"First, do no harm," the Hippocratic Oath begins, but before she might enjoy such balm, the docs had to harm her tumor. It was large, rare, and so anomalous in its behavior that at first they misdiagnosed it. "Your wife will die of it within a year." But in ten days or so I sat beside her bed with hot-and-sour soup and heard an intern congratulate her on her new diagnosis: a children's cancer (doesn't that possessive break your heart?) had possessed her. I couldn't stop personifying it. Devious, dour, it had a clouded heart, like Iago's. It loved disguise. It was a garrison in a captured city, a bad horror film (The Blob), a stowaway, an inside job. If I could make it be like something else, I wouldn't have to think of it as what, in fact, it was: part of my lovely wife. Next, then, chemotherapy. Her hair fell out in tufts, her color dulled, she sat laced to bags of poison she endured somewhat better than her cancer cells could, though not by much. And indeed, the cancer cells waned more slowly than the chemical "cocktails" (one the bright color of Campari), as the chemo nurses called them, dripped into her. There were three hundred days of this: a week inside the hospital and two weeks out, the fierce elixirs percolating all the while. She did five weeks of radiation, too, Monday to Friday like a stupid job. She wouldn't eat the food the hospital wheeled in. "Pureed fish" and "minced fish" were worth, I thought, a sharp surge of food snobbery, but she'd grown averse to it all -- the nurses' crepe soles' muffled squeaks along the hall, the filtered air, the smothered urge to read, the fear, the perky visitors, flowers she'd not been sent when she was well, the roommate (what do "semiprivate" and "extra virgin" have in common?) who died, the nights she wept and sweated faster than the tubes could moisten her with lurid poison. One chemotherapy veteran, six years in remission, chanced on her former chemo nurse at a bus stop and threw up. My wife's tumor has not come back. I like to think of it in Tumor Hell strapped to a dray, flat as a deflated football, bleak and nubbled like a poorly

ironed truffle. There's one tense in Tumor Hell:
forever, or what we call the present.
For that long the flaccid tumor marinates
in lurid toxins. Tumor Hell Clinic
is, it turns out, a teaching hospital.
Every century or so, the way
we'd measure it, a chief doc brings a pack
of students round. They run some simple tests:
surge current through the tumor, batter it
with mallets, push a wood-plane across its
pebbled hide and watch a scurf of tumor-
pelt kink loose from it, impale it, strafe it
with lye and napalm. There might be nothing
left in there but a still space surrounded
by a carapace. "This one is nearly
dead," the chief doc says. "What's the cure for that?"
The students know: "Kill it slower, of course."
They sprinkle it with rock salt and move on.
Here on the aging earth the tumor's gone:
My wife is hale, though wary, and why not?
Once you've had cancer, you don't get headaches
anymore, you get brain tumors, at least
until the aspirin kicks in. Her hair's back,
her weight, her appetite. "And what about you?"
friends ask me. First the fear felt like sudden
weightlessness: I couldn't steer and couldn't stay.
I couldn't concentrate: surely my spit would
dry before I could slather a stamp.
I made a list of things to do next day
before I went to bed, slept like a cork,
woke to no more memory of last night's
list than smoke has of fire, made a new list,
began to do the things on it, wept, paced,
berated myself, drove to the hospital,
and brought my wife food from the takeout joints
that ring a hospital as surely as
brothels surround a gold strike. I drove home
rancid with anger at her luck and mine --
anger that filled me the same way nature
hates a vacuum. "This must be hell for you,"
some said. Hell's not other people: Sartre
was wrong about that, too. L'enfer, c'est moi?
I've not got the ego for it. There'd be
no hell if Dante hadn't built a model
of his rage so well, and he contrived to
get exiled from it, for it was Florence.
Why would I live in hell? I love New York.
Some even said the tumor and fierce cure
were harder on the care giver -- yes, they
said "care giver" -- than on the "sick person."
They were wrong who said those things. Of course
I hated it, but some of "it" was me --

the self-pity I allowed myself,
the brave poses I struck. The rest was dire
threat my wife met with moral stubbornness,
terror, rude jokes, nausea, you name it.
No, let her think of its name and never
say it, as if it were the name of God.

Anonymous submission.

William Matthews

Homer's Seeing-Eye Dog

Most of the time he worked, a sort of sleep
with a purpose, so far as I could tell.
How he got from the dark of sleep
to the dark of waking up I'll never know;
the lax sprawl sleep allowed him
began to set from the edges in,
like a custard, and then he was awake,
me too, of course, wriggling my ears
while he unlocked his bladder and stream
of dopey wake-up jokes. The one
about the wine-dark pee I hated instantly.
I stood at the ready, like a god
in an epic, but there was never much
to do. Oh now and then I'd make a sure
intervention, save a life, whatever.
But my exploits don't interest you
and of his life all I can say is that
when he'd poured out his work
the best of it was gone and then he died.
He was a great man and I loved him.
Not a whimper about his sex life --
how I detest your prurience --
but here's a farewell literary tip:
I myself am the model for Penelope.
Don't snicker, you hairless moron,
I know so well what faithful means
there's not even a word for it in Dog,
I just embody it. I think you bipeds
have a catchphrase for it: "To thine own self
be true, . . ." though like a blind man's shadow,
the second half is only there for those who know
it's missing. Merely a dog, I'll tell you
what it is: " . . . as if you had a choice."

Anonymous submission.

William Matthews

Job Interview

Think you, if Laura had been Petrarch's wife
He would have written sonnets all his life?
DON JUAN, III, 63-4

"Where do you see yourself five years from now?"
the eldest male member (or is "male member"
a redundancy?) of the committee
asked me. "Not here," I thought. A good thing I
speak fluent Fog. I craved that job like some
unappeasable, taunting woman.
What did Byron's friend Hobhouse say after
the wedding? "I felt as if I had buried
a friend." Each day I had that job I felt
the slack leash at my throat and thought what was
its other trick. Better to scorn the job than ask
what I had ever seen in it or think
what pious muck I'd ladled over
the committee. If they believed me, they
deserved me. As luck would have it, the job
lasted me almost but not quite five years.

Anonymous submission.

William Matthews

Mingus At The Showplace

I was miserable, of course, for I was seventeen
and so I swung into action and wrote a poem

and it was miserable, for that was how I thought
poetry worked: you digested experience shat

literature. It was 1960 at The Showplace, long since
defunct, on West 4th st., and I sat at the bar,

casting beer money from a reel of ones,
the kid in the city, big ears like a puppy.

And I knew Mingus was a genius. I knew two
other things, but as it happens they were wrong.

So I made him look at this poem.
"There's a lot of that going around," he said,

and Sweet Baby Jesus he was right. He glowered
at me but didn't look as if he thought

bad poems were dangerous, the way some poets do.
If they were baseball executives they'd plot

to destroy sandlots everywhere so that the game
could be saved from children. Of course later

that night he fired his pianist in mid-number
and flurried him from the stand.

"We've suffered a diminuendo in personnel,"
he explained, and the band played on.

Anonymous submission.

William Matthews

No Return

I like divorce. I love to compose
letters of resignation; now and then
I send one in and leave in a lemon-
hued Huff or a Snit with four on the floor.
Do you like the scent of a hollyhock?
To each his own. I love a burning bridge.

I like to watch the small boat go over
the falls -- it swirls in a circle
like a dog coiling for sleep, and its frail bow
pokes blindly out over the falls' lip
a little and a little more and then
too much, and then the boat's nose dives and butt

flips up so that the boat points doomily
down and the screams of the soon-to-be-dead
last longer by echo than the screamers do.
Let's go to the videotape, the news-
caster intones, and the control room does,
and the boat explodes again and again.

William Matthews

On The Porch At The Frost Place, Franconia, N. H.

So here the great man stood,
fermenting malice and poems
we have to be nearly as fierce
against ourselves as he
not to misread by their disguises.
Blue in dawn haze, the tamarack
across the road is new since Frost
and thirty feet tall already.
No doubt he liked to scorch off
morning fog by simply staring through it
long enough so that what he saw
grew visible. "Watching the dragon
come out of the Notch," his children
used to call it. And no wonder
he chose a climate whose winter
and house whose isolation could be
stern enough to his wrath and pity
as to make them seem survival skills
he'd learned on the job, farming
fifty acres of pasture and woods.
For cash crops he had sweat and doubt
and moralizing rage, those staples
of the barter system. And these swift
and aching summers, like the blackberries
I've been poaching down the road
from the house where no one's home --
acid at first and each little globe
of the berry too taut and distinct
from the others, then they swell to hold
the riot of their juices and briefly
the fat berries are perfected to my taste,
and then they begin to leak and blob
and under their crescendo of sugar
I can taste how they make it through winter. . . .
By the time I'm back from a last,
six-berry raid, it's almost dusk,
and more and more mosquitos
will race around my ear their tiny engines,
the speedboats of the insect world.
I won't be longer on the porch
than it takes to look out once
and see what I've taught myself
in two months here to discern:
night restoring its opacities,
though for an instant as intense
and evanescent as waking from a dream
of eating blackberries and almost
being able to remember it, I think
I see the parts -- haze, dusk, light
broken into grains, fatigue,
the mineral dark of the White Mountains,
the wavering shadows steadying themselves --

separate, then joined, then seamless:
the way, in fact, Frost's great poems,
like all great poems, conceal
what they merely know, to be
predicaments. However long
it took to watch what I thought
I saw, it was dark when I was done,
everywhere and on the porch,
and since nothing stopped
my sight, I let it go.

Anonymous submission.

William Matthews

Poem (The lump of coal my parents teased)

The lump of coal my parents teased
I'd find in my Christmas stocking
turned out each year to be an orange,
for I was their sunshine.

Now I have one C. gave me,
a dense node of sleeping fire.
I keep it where I read and write.
"You're on chummy terms with dread,"

it reminds me. "You kiss ambivalence
on both cheeks. But if you close your
heart to me ever I'll wreath you in flames
and convert you to energy."

I don't know what C. meant me to mind
by her gift, but the sun returns
unbidden. Books get read and written.
My mother comes to visit. My father's

dead. Love needs to be set alight
again and again, and in thanks
for tending it, will do its very
best not to consume us.

Anonymous submission.

William Matthews

The Blues

What did I think, a storm clutching a clarinet
and boarding a downtown bus, headed for lessons?
I had pieces to learn by heart, but at twelve

you think the heart and memory are different.
"It's a poor sort of memory that only works
backwards," the Queen remarked." Alice in Wonderland.

Although I knew the way music can fill a room,
even with loneliness, which is of course a kind
of company. I could swelter through an August

afternoon -- torpor rising from the river -- and listen
to Stan Getz and J. J. Johnson braid variations
on "My Funny Valentine" and feel there in the room

with me the force and weight of what I couldn't
say. What's an emotion anyhow?
Lassitude and sweat lay all about me

like a stubble field, it was so hot and listless,
but I was quick and furtive as a fox
who has his thirty-miles-a-day metabolism

to burn off as ordinary business.
I had about me, after all, the bare eloquence
of the becalmed, the plain speech of the leafless

tree. I had the cunning of my body and a few
bars -- they were enough -- of music. Looking back,
it almost seems as though I could remember --

but this can't be; how could I bear it? --
the future toward which I'd clatter
with that boy tied like a bell around my throat,

a brave man and a coward both,
to break and break my metronomic heart
and just enough to learn to love the blues.

Anonymous submission.

William Matthews