



Search Party: Collected Poems

William Matthews , *Stanley Plumly (Editor)* , *Sebastian Matthews (Editor)*

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When William Matthews died, the day after his fifty-fifth birthday, America lost one of its most important poets, one whose humor and wit were balanced by deep emotion, whose off-the-cuff inventiveness belied the acuity of his verse. Drawing from his eleven collections and including twenty-three previously unpublished poems, Search Party is the essential compilation of this beloved poet's work. Edited by his son, Sebastian Matthews, and William Matthews's friend and fellow poet Stanley Plumly (who also introduces the book), Search Party is an excellent introduction to the poet and his glistening riffs on twentieth-century topics from basketball to food to jazz.

Search Party: Collected Poems Details

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Download and Read Free Online Search Party: Collected Poems William Matthews , Stanley Plumly (Editor) , Sebastian Matthews (Editor)

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Diann Blakely says

Some people don't like National Poetry Month. Poetry is necessarily an elitist art, they argue, just as ballet and classical music are. In succumbing to the urge to democratize such arts' rare charms, the argument continues, Americans yield to a leveling effect that reduces all lovely complexity to a plain-Jane common denominator. Alexis de Tocqueville, of course, noted and described this phenomenon more than 200 years ago. Richard Howard, poetry editor of the *PARIS REVIEW*; translator of Baudelaire and Proust, among others, and author most recently of two companion volumes of selected poems and selected prose, has been the most vocal proponent of Tocqueville's thinking as applied to poetry since National Poetry Month's inception, which he made plain in a PEN speech, titled and published "The Ghettoization of Poetry."

There are arguments for both sides, and since my long-held policy is never to take one against the other unless some party can show me an exit wound, I'll merely point to Howard's most subtle but staunchest opponent: the late William Matthews, who began laying the groundwork—thus creating a mild brouhaha—while serving as president of the traditionally more egalitarian Poetry Society of America in the 1970s. Despite its ostensibly more democratic nature, the Poetry Society had traditionally required proof of several publications for admission to the organization. Pooh, said Matthews, asking if it wasn't a little perverse for the Poetry Society, which gives an annual prize in the name of the famously private and non-publishing Emily Dickinson, to demand something she would have never have offered.

Matthews's own subject matter reflected his keen attunement to the vox populi. If his favorite poetical themes were fury and regret, his favorite topics were jazz, basketball, cooking, and—yes—opera, which he managed to render as no more elitist than making a rim shot or sautéing onions. This does not mean that Matthews lacked discrimination. In a recollection of his 17-year-old self's offer of a poem to the bassist Charles Mingus, the famously grumpy jazz musician replies, "There's a lot of that going around." But—and here's the important part—Mingus glowered at the young Matthews but "he 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." There is no conflict between support for the roots of any art and mercilessly weeding those who later, when they have supposedly reached the level of professionals, fail to meet a certain standard of excellence. This is as true for Mingus as it was for Matthews, the latter perhaps learning this from the former: "Of course later," Matthews continues, "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."

Interest in Matthews's work has experienced a recent revival owing to the paperback releases of a truncated version of his collected poems and a memoir, *IN MY FATHER'S FOOTSTEPS*, written by his younger progeny, Sebastian—who also, like father, like son, knows how to turn (or remember) a pithy phrase. In fact, the most memorable line in Sebastian's memoir is an accusation hurled at the poet by his first wife: "You can't not fuck your students." And indeed, Matthews, a hard-drinking, mannerly, and enraged romantic whose charm with audiences as well as women remains legendary, is no less hard on himself in his poems than his son is on his father. "If I saw my sons more often," Matthews writes in one of the many poems that obliquely comment on his failures as a husband—"I'd be less sentimental about them." In a much later work, he reports, but does not comment upon, his grandmother's half-senile but common-sense question when he brings his third wife to visit: "Are you going to divorce her too?"

The degree to which personal integrity affects artistic standards can provoke an argument that will last until the four horsemen ride up. Here it seems best to say that Matthews's most obvious and faithful passion was always language itself, in all of its permutations and origins. One of the too many poems oddly omitted from the soi-disant collected poems, SEARCH PARTY, is "The Shooting," from his last published volume, AFTER ALL:

It be the usual at first.

This one be bad, that one be worse.

They do this in slow commotion.

Or never done be what they set

Fire to and slow turn into fast

Because a gun come out and then

Gun two, gun three, guns all around

Like walls. That mean we be the room.

A sly borrowing, and updating, of Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Be Cool," a standard anthology piece, "The Shooting"--and one might well wonder why--was left out of the "collected" version of poems edited by the author's son and by one of his lifelong best friends, the poet Stanley Plumly. For "The Shooting" not only displays its horrified delight in the contemporary demotic, but it also illustrates to perfection Matthews's enduring, less noticed, and life-long engagement with violence, especially in its peculiarly American forms. In a pair of poems titled "Old Folsom Prison" and "New Folsom Prison," Matthews reminds us of the circumstances under which Johnny Cash sang one of his most enduring songs to the audience best prepared to hear it:

Rapists rose; and arsonists, and the man

Who drew five life sentences, without

parole, for vehicular homicide

(a mother and four kids), to be served

consecutively, rose also, as did

murderers enough enough to still all breath

In a small town, and armed robbers, and

selllers of dope to your children and mine,

and earlier, perhaps, to you and me.

and when Cash sang that he'd stabbed
a man just to watch him die, their shout
rose like so many crows you'd wonder where
there was room for air, if you were there.

How did new Folsom Prison get built? Well, for starters, cheap labor: men who lay down in their bunks at night after a hard day's work of manual labor, the kind almost no American suffers anymore, to dream "of violence and manufacture." Manufacture of what? In "A Serene Heart at the Movies," Matthews reminds us that "guns are the jewelry of men. And cars—"

Or chariots. For Matthews, a translator of Martial, all linguistic roads lead back to Rome, and its imperial customs had much to do with Matthews's thinking about marriage, love, and how the human heart is best left alone by the state. Sebastian Matthews's memoir sheds a great deal of light on how such thinking led to less than exemplary behavior on Matthews's actions of a man, but so do the works of Suetonius. And those of Freud, the writer who may well have been the subject of Matthews's longest engagement.

In the best spirit of Matthews, I like to think that National Poetry Month, invented by his former student William Matthews at the high-toned Academy of American Poets, as well as <http://poets.org>, continues to represent the Horatian principles Matthews held dear: to delight and instruct. At the PSA, Elise Paschen, with the help of Molly Peacock, carried on the work Matthews began by numerous outreach programs, my favorite being POEMS IN MOTION, quotations from poems by nationally beloved authors posted on buses and subways and Elms across the country and now put in book form; how unfortunate that, for all of his pains, Wadsworth was fired, inciting an uproar among many of the nation's finest poets, for Wadsworth was--and remains--a beloved figure who has commanded the loyalty of hundreds merely by putting into action the "mild, democratic" principles Matthews once wrote his own father possessed. Matthews was, as always, being modest, for these are principles he held in abundance as well.

In fact, I'd venture to say that Matthews would have been proud, that his former protégé's ignoble, petty sacking made the front page of Matthews's beloved NEW YORK TIMES (<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/07/boo...>), to which he refused to subscribe. A heavy smoker until the genuinely tragic--an overused word, but in this case entirely accurate--end of his life, Matthews, a former basketball player himself, did in fact subscribe to the notion of ... well, I don't know how to use italics here, so I'll use Thomas Jefferson's paraphrase: "If the body be feeble, the mind will not be strong," and held fast to the notion that a daily walk to the corner store for a paper and two packs of Marlboro Reds would forestall his mortality.

At which he raged as well. I suspect that Matthews now is floating on a cloud in the heaven in which he did not believe, and furious only that he was unable, like his ultimate hero Shakespeare, after whom he named his first son, to pull off the Bard's feat of being born and dying on exactly the same day, for in Matthews's case, these two events happened within less than twenty-four hours of each other. And yet those of us who knew him, and learned from him, and continue that learning by reading his poems, continue to grieve. For example, I made the following Facebook post, an essay commissioned last year by David Lehman--
<http://blog.bestamericanpoetry.com/th...> while I sent reminders to some to add their wishes, the number of those who appeared without nudging astounded and pleased me, yet caused yet another outburst of tears.

Matthews would doubtless have found such displays tiresome, but, dear Reader, I admit that this essay isn't

completely impartial, for he was one of the very best friends I had during the last five years of his life, during which times I saw only one flicker of his widely reputed Pavlovian skirt-chasing, and those interested can read my response above. The incident, quickly quelled, only allowed us to become more deeply intimate yet purely Platonic friends; and as for the attacks of weeping, well, he always said that we got along so well because he was, in fact, a Roman, and I am a Greek, though my tunics remain largely unrendered and my face unblemished by nail-tracks, for if he admitted he practiced what he said was called in Seattle "an unhealthy lifestyle," overt self-destruction was as foreign to him as...here I stop short, for his nature was also Jamesian, meaning one upon which nothing human--he also translated from the Bulgarian and was exceedingly well-travelled, venturing into many foreign and exotic cultures--was lost. Ever. And nor is his memory, nor will his poems ever be.

Diann Blakely

Today is the birthday of my brother, the late William Matthews (<http://blog.bestamericanpoetry.com/th...>) and yesterday M. Rimbaud! Bonne anniversaire à tous!

Ave Atque Vale: William Matthews by Diann Blakely - The Best American Poetry
blog.bestamericanpoetry.com

Not until the day he died, 12 November 1997, did I know that Bill Matthews shared the same birthday as my brother. We, like my husband Stanley Booth, are believers. Though Bill was not, I'm confident that he floats among...

Like · · Share · November 11 at 7:46am

Cynthia Atkins, Elise Paschen, Helene Cardona and 9 others like this.

Bertha Rogers Two poets in one family!

November 11 at 8:11am · Like

Gerry LaFemina Thanks for this, Diann. I miss Bill--I miss his poems and I miss his generosity, his limitless well of kindness and generosity he showed....

November 11 at 9:16am · Unlike · 1

Lance McKnight He was one of my two favorite teachers (Dick Hugo being the other). I can still picture him running into class after a longer than expected drive down from the mountain, his black leather vest flapping back and forth as he grabbed a (Marlboro?) and asking for a moment to catch his breath. His voice was like jazz and you cannot read his poetry without hearing his voice.

November 11 at 11:06am · Unlike · 3

Floyce Alexander One of the best American poets, maybe the very best of his generation, once said he wanted to be able to write about anything and that's what he did. His work should be read closely, over and over, until it becomes part of each poetic soul.

November 11 at 12:10pm · Unlike · 1

Lance McKnight The one thing he did not write, that he wanted to, was a murder mystery where the reader was the murderer.

November 11 at 12:19pm · Unlike · 3

Sue Scalf I danced with William Matthews at Bread Loaf and wrote a poem about him. He died much too young.

November 11 at 8:12am · Unlike · 1

Wendy Battin Bill's work will survive. He was a great smart teacher, a generous soul, and I miss him.

November 11 at 9:28pm · Unlike · 1

Diann Blakely Here's what I always do: while I'm not a wine-drinker, Stanley--had the two of them ever met, they would, for the reasons Lance states at the end of his first post, have bonded over Coltrane et alia and forgotten about me entirely,

November 12 at 12:11am · Like

Diann Blakely and Bill formed the basis of some of our earliest correspondence, with Stanley, whom I scarcely knew at the time, kept asking, "how can he be dead?"--is, thus I will, in a moment, pour a glass from the best bottle in the house and then offer a libation outside.

November 12 at 12:13am · Like

Diann Blakely I have a feeling that he'd appreciate the same gesture from everyone; and hell, even if my absurdly delicate stomach can't take the acidity, he'd probably appreciate it even more if everyone simply drank the glass! Cheers, Bill!

November 12 at 12:14am · Like · 1

Ron Slate Glory to Bill and my memories of him. He loved that line from Horace: "Non satis est pulchra esse poemata" -- "It's not enough for poems to be beautiful"

November 12 at 9:26am · Like · 1

Diann Blakely And so do I--thank you, Ron!

November 12 at 9:50am · Like

Julie Kane Bill was my teacher when I was 18, and he will remain my teacher until the day I die. He struck my life like a lightning bolt charged with the excitement of contemporary poetry.

November 12 at 12:27pm · Like

Diann Blakely <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/13>

William Matthews- Poets.org - Poetry, Poems, Bios & More

www.poets.org

November 12 at 1:56pm · Like ·

Diann Blakely You can read RISING AND FALLING, and much else, in its entirety here! Thanks to all the good folk at the Academy!

November 12 at 1:57pm · Like

Diann Blakely <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/w...>

William Matthews : The Poetry Foundation

www.poetryfoundation.org

William Matthews's poetry has earned him a reputation as a master of well-turned...

Diann Blakely And of course to the Poetry Foundation, especially Christopher Merrill for his fine remarks here.

November 12 at 1:59pm · Like

Diann Blakely And also to the Poetry Society of America, where, as president, Matthews abolished the rule that only those poets who had a record of publications could become members:
<http://www.poetrysociety.org/psa/?act...>

Poetry Society of America

www.poetrysociety.org

?...I have for friends! Translated by William Matthews * * * "Epigram V, xxxv...

See More

November 12 at 2:02pm · Like ·

Christopher Merrill What a great poet he was... Thanks for the reminder.

November 12 at 4:18pm · Like

Terin Miller Happy Birthday, Bill. Thanks for watching over poets and writers and all us other lost causes...)

November 12 at 5:09pm · Unlike · 1

Diann Blakely Terin, Bill will love this post in particular!

November 12 at 7:59pm · Like · 1

Terin Miller It comes from the heart. Where it goes after that is as much a mystery as Longfellow's arrows...:)

November 12 at 10:33pm · Like

Rodney Jones: "Bill grew into his work until it seemed elemental, of a natural and easy grace, and, in all my conversations with him, he never expressed a thought that was not uniquely his own. He expected poetry. I miss him."

November 13 at 11:50am · Like

Diann Blakely ?"Emma Kate Tsai likes this" and so do I.

November 13 at 11:51am · Like

Michelle Boisseau Thanks, Diann. What I'd give to have Bill's take on the world these days.

November 13 at 12:37pm · Like · 1

David Yezzi Happy Birthday, Bill Matthews! A great poet who walked a bunch of us through Dante at Columbia one year.

November 16 at 11:26am · Like · 1

Diann Blakely From Cynthia Atkins, one of the most beautiful tributes of all: "This week marks the anniversary of Bill's birthday and his death. A consummate poet, arbiter, teacher and friend--(who reminds me to give a shout out to support and save the US mail)--because Bill never failed to send a postcard, he always made the small and grand gestures to remember and connect with people.) Bill, you are greatly missed!" William Matthews (1942-1997)

November 17 at 1:07pm · Like

Atkins ends with some of Bill's finest lines:

"It turns out you are the story of your childhood
and you're under constant revision,

like a lonely folktale whose invisible folks

are all the selves you've been, lifelong,
shadows in fog, grey glimmers at dusk."

("A Happy Childhood")

November 17 at 1:07pm · Like · 1

(earlier version of the essay originally published in the NASHVILLE SCENE / Village Voice Media)
(Facebook thread from November, 2011)

Katra says

Some poems five stars of flaming awesome. Others I wasn't so fond of. Overall - 3.5. I like it and a smidge more.

Brian Fanelli says

This is a fine sampling of poetry from all of William Matthews' collections. My favorite of the bunch are this jazz poems, his praises in verse to blues and jazz musicians long gone. Matthews' lines also have a clever wit and irony to them.

Katie says

Matthews was an unabashedly playful and sentimental poet. But don't worry...those are good things. Language warps like a fun-house mirror as Matthews unwraps the possibilities of his subjects: money, an onion, a woman, and harnesses his infectious energy to propel you though the poem. Great fun. A great read.

Brian Wasserman says

why are some modern poets so convinced that poems about their own personal life is so interesting, so intriguing, especially when written in a prose that anyone could quite readily imitate.

James says

Damn.

Caley says

A raw collection of poems with a good dash of Americana. Read slowly and repeatedly.

Rachel says

Really great collection--I can't remember the last time I read a poet's entire collected. Top shelf stuff.

Alarie says

There aren't many poets who can maintain my attention and admiration through a 300-page collection. That's why I featured this book in Poetry Circle (my poetry book club).
