

SAMPLER

Acoustic Shadows

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)

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Collected Longer Poems (2012) *

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Translations

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Jan Östergren: Rainmaker (1983) (with Göran Printz-Påhlson)

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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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John Matthias

Acoustic Shadows

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For Michael Anania and Peter Michelson

Fifty years of conversation

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PROLOGUE

After Carlos Drummond de Andrade's "Lembrança do Mundo Antigo"

I used to walk with friends in the ravine.
The sky was caught in the trees, and the trees
Were blue, the sky was green. The water
Under the bridge had dried to large puddles
Where we floated little boats. There were no rules
That told us to stay dry. We went home wet.
We went home late to dinners that our mothers
Had to warm for us. Nobody got mad.

Nobody got mad or shouted in those days.
Our cap guns only made a little bang. Real guns,
They told us, would now be turned to plows
And children's toys. A great war had ended.
Summer heat brought quiet fears whispered
By adults who loved us: polio, insect bites,
Or that we might get lost. We easily survived.

Old cars and broken bikes were sometimes left
Behind a stand of trees. We'd pretend to fix the cars,
And really fix the bikes. We stood up tall or crouched.
Carlos Drummond de Andrade,
We went down there early in the morning.
Like you, we had mornings in those days.

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I
'Stanza'
and
Other Stanzas

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Stanza

untitled, un-
finished drawing from around
1540 is anonymous
and delicate and tentative and so
worn as almost not
to be there and if I should
breathe on it I'm sure
the thing that hovers near non-being
would disintegrate detach
itself from paper to inhabit air as motes
of graphite possibly to cause
infection of the lungs upon my in-
halation therefore some unknown
authorities have caused
a thin glass to
intervene between the thing's ancient
image—profile of a woman? — and
our invading curiosity

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Elevenes

My dna is better than
your dna. Also bigger.
Dana, you think you're
a slugger. Bugger that.
Dinah is from North
Carolina. Nothing's finer
than my kgb that's
Better than your kgb.
And richer, slicker.
Anagrammed, the dna is
Only and, but quicker.

*

My fbi is cooler than your
fbi. Crookeder deletes
the straighter every time.
Hotter in pursuit is never
fast as just to stand in wait.
Who also serve. A warrant.
A current bun. Secret is
Your ibf is bluff. Never herd
Of it? Well that's the point.
The joints are out of time.
My nickel or your dime.

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Prayer

*Oh God please give me some money
and other things I want & that's my
prayer and good sex and oh good
god some trouble for my enemies
I hate them and I voted for Trump*

On the other hand the devout man's
neighbor simply plonks his banjo
on the porch while, down at the local
hall, a string quartet plays Haydn,
inventor of a hush of holy sound . . .

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Short Poem about Politics

In politics, I vote for sanity and reason.
And passion, too. Yes, of course passion.
But the passion ought to be for sanity
And reason.

As for poetry, things are different there.

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It Was Said

I

Ekstasis – it was said – or was that
ekphrasis – ? A lean meme of X or Y
explains all nothings coming at
you going in to stand unstill: Why

not say you exit in those words
instead of only looks –? Still stand-
ing, step away and lean in toward
a henge of stone and with thin wand

go wreck or wound whatever magic
into majesty. It's in your only hand.
Beside yourself and feeling tragic,
You amaze us even without mind-

ing or amending – any bloody one.
Come, come! said Mr. It Was Said.
I'll word your silent image, loan
You stasis, phrasic in your narrow bed.

II

You! – static, phrasic – narrow in a word
that's loaned by language and was imaged
to the manner born – come, now, It Was Said! –
did bleed into amendments magicked

all beyond, amazed, and minding tragic
outcomes undefined: Majestic in your hand –
or is that wrecked and ruined? – logic
the imperfect rhyme. We bound a wound?

We did. But no help from your wand.
Everyone could only look – not speak,
not write – and lean into the winter wind
that quickly left a salty film to reek

of sea spray upon every signaled E and K
of the Ekstasis. Ekphrasis stood by X and Y,
the way of things – standard method starts with A –
while It Was Said said only Hi, & then Goodbye.

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First Fear

It's mechanical, they said, and I could make
The little monkey twist and somersault.
You'd wind it, tighten the spring with a key,
Looking at its cruel face. Then it did its tricks.

It whinged and whirred, and little arms flipped
It in the air. Three or four times it did this,
And then ran down. And then lay on its back.
I was told to pick it up, turn the key again.

The fur – is that what monkeys had? –
Was bristly to the point that it drew blood.
I was told to handle it gently. That I tried
To do, bristles sticking in my thumb.

This toy is the first gift I remember being given.
Please take it away, I begged.
It makes me scared. They all laughed and
Told me, *Wind it up again*. My Aunt,

Who had given me the gift, had a cruel face
And bristles on her chin. Down she stared at me.
Wind it up again, they said. *Watch the way it*
Twists and turns those somersaults,

Listen to it whinge and whine and whir.

Meeting Czesław Miłosz, 1984

I'd seen the posters for his lecture
As I arrived for my own, University
Of Michigan, 1984. All I thought
Was, so much for my audience.
But I was pleasantly surprised. I'd
Penciled in a quote from the Hass
Translation of a Miłosz poem, but
In the end didn't include it and stuck
With my text. I had nothing much
To say, in fact. After the polite applause,
I went to dinner with some young
Poets, drank too much wine, and then
To bed.

Next morning, it occurred
To me that Miłosz must have been
Talking about 1984. It was, after all,
1984, and Miłosz was political. Or well
For some was still a kind of secular saint.
I wondered what the poet had said,
Was wondering as I opened the door
Of the guest house they'd put us in
And found myself staring at Miłosz
Himself, both of us with a toothbrush.
He looked – frightened. I suppose he
Was half asleep. As everyone in the
Guest house used the same communal
Bathroom, we were obliged to walk
Down the hall together with our
Toothbrushes and other toiletries.
Feeling that I needed to say something,
I mumbled: "How did your lecture go?
Sorry I couldn't make it." I could tell that
He too was trying to think of something
To say. "What were you doing?" he asked.

“I was giving a lecture. At the same
Time, but in a different building.” He looked
At me – still seeming frightened – and said,
“Oh!” Or was it “O!”?

No more than that. Years later
Hass wrote a poem in which Miłosz,
His great friend, asks from Kraków over
Long-distance telephone the difference
Between “O!” and “Oh!” Hass knew the
Answer, but back in 1984 I certainly didn’t.
We both brushed our teeth in the same
Stained sink.

Oh, sublime memories!
O, absurd mnemonics. I’ve just read Charles
Simic’s review of the standard Miłosz
Biography. Oh, 1984! O, let all of us
Brush our teeth in peace.

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A Balsa Wood Plane

A balsa wood plane would be one way
To get in the zone. These came in kits that
We'd find in the dime store for a dollar.
You'd assemble them quickly by fitting
The wing into a slot on the fuselage, the
Tail assembly likewise on the stern, and
Then you'd pinch a malleable weight
Onto the nose. It was ready, with small
Adjustments, to fly. We'd sail them off
The high bridge over Glen Echo Drive.
Sometimes in a good wind they'd sail
Far down the narrow road and turn
The corner as if actually maneuvered
By an imaginary pilot. Sometimes we
Never found the plane at all after we
Ran down the hill and around the bend.
It had left the glen for the zone, or found,
Where we couldn't yet see, just where
The ravine opened into the zone. It was
A while before we learned how to follow.