At Large

SAMPLER
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)
Working Progress, Working Title (2002)
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Kedging (2007)
Trigons (2010)*
Collected Shorter Poems, Vol. 2 (2011)*
Collected Longer Poems (2012)*
Collected Shorter Poems, Vol. 1 (2013)*
Complayntes for Doctor Neuro & Other Poems (2016)*

Translations
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Jan Östergren: Rainmaker (1983, with Göran Printz-Påhlson)
The Battle of Kosovo (1987, with Vladeta Vučković)

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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)

Essays
Reading Old Friends (1992)
Who Was Cousin Alice? And Other Questions (2011)*

Fiction
Different Kinds of Music (2014)*

* Published by Shearsman Books.
At Large
Essays, Memoirs, Interviews

John Matthias

Shearsman Books
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FOREWORD

This book can be taken as a kind of sequel to *Who Was Cousin Alice? And Other Questions*, published by Shearsman in 2011. Like that book, this one includes a mix of literary essays and memoirs, along with a few poems and letters reprinted from magazines. I am calling it *At Large* because that is the title of a column I have been writing in *Notre Dame Review* over the past several years. Being an “Editor at Large,” which is what I’ve been called since I retired from the poetry editorship after almost twenty years, can mean just about anything. I have continued to solicit some poems for the journal, but have mainly moved my operations to the back of the book, assigning reviews and writing my column, which has sometimes allowed me to include large selections of material by way of introducing major projects by some contributors. Examples of this are the long excerpts from James Walton’s novel, *The Progress of Romance*, and John Peck’s book-length poem, *Cantilena*.

With such substantial passages from the work of *NDR* contributors, this book, especially in its first section, takes on the character of an anthology. It also has room for two long interviews, my email conversation with Larry Siems from American PEN, and Joe Francis Doerr’s three-part email conversation with me, the only extended interview I have ever given. Both interviews have been brought up to date for publication here, and I hope that they mirror each other in various ways. Siems and Doerr were both Notre Dame students, but separated by decades. The interview, as a genre, has replaced the old manifesto for many writers. There’s not much of the manifesto to those printed here, but I hope they manifest nonetheless a degree of trust and candor, as when old friends talk together in private. The interview with Larry Siems, an undergraduate when I knew him, is the only occasion where he has ever described at length the heroic work he has done for freedom of expression during his many years as a travelling trouble-shooter for American PEN.

Because so much of this book derives from my work on *NDR*, I should repeat a few of the things I wrote for the anthology I co-edited with William O’Rourke, *Notre Dame Review: The First Ten Years*. What goes for editorial policy on the *Review* also goes for my own “At Large” contributions.
Sometimes [I wrote in the introduction], editors of literary magazines feel a little like Arthur Miller’s Willy Loman, “out there in the blue riding on a smile and a shoe-shine.” Notre Dame Review was founded by a group of faculty writers who, without the shoe-shines but maybe the smile that was almost in our case a prayer, established the journal on the initiative of Valerie Sayers. The first, pilot, issue appeared in 1995 and the second in 1996. From that point on, NDR became biannual. All issues since the second have had an umbrella-like theme—“Dangerous Times,” “Work,” “Signs and Surfaces,” “Body and Soul”—and have been committed to a wide open eclecticism that welcomes work from writers and artists of many different aesthetic persuasions.

Even the first issue of NDR indicates the direction the magazine would take. It includes work both by the famous and the unknown—two Nobel Prize winners, but also two poets publishing their first poems—along with fiction by Michael Collins, one of the first and most successful Notre Dame MFA graduates, and long poems by John Peck and Michael Anania, poets who would become regular contributors. When NDR began, America was watching the atrocities of the Third Balkan War on their television screens—the siege of Sarajevo, the slaughter at Srebrenica. Then came 9/11, next the Iraq War [and now, as I copy these paragraphs into my text, ISIL]. With the pains and joys of simply leading one’s life, trying to think, trying to keep the imagination alive when it is numbed so badly by brutalities of history—who is to predict, much less prescribe, the forms the best writing might take emerging from someone’s daily struggle with words? In fact, it inevitably takes various and contradictory forms. There are a good many journals with a polemical, even hysterical, agenda; but NDR is not one of them. One distrusts a reader of Pound who cannot admire Auden, a reader of Elizabeth Bishop who will not open a book by Susan Howe. Nor, in a decade’s published work, are the contributions of poets who came of age in any one period—the ’60s, the ’70s, the ’80s—exclusive spokespersons for our times. We have published, side by side, a ninety-year-old master and an undergraduate of twenty. There are poets who could be called late modernist, postmodernist, even anti-modernist. Our contemporaries are all the people, whatever their age, who work beside us, whether in the next room or on the next continent, whether in the form of sonnets and quatrains, or with computer models and chance operations and graphics.
I notice that, among our contributors, we have not seen a lot of first-person hyper-subjectivity or narrow manifestations of identity poetics; when the self appears, it seems to be fully conditioned by history, and conscious of that. History, in turn, is often seen as a force field that the imagination can enter and engage, setting off sparks that can ignite unforeseen energies and urgencies.

In the spirit of this editorial position, I am concerned in this book with several authors who have figured in the life of the magazine: Peck and Anania, Tomas Tranströmer, W. H. Auden, Robert Duncan, Geoffrey Hill, Denise Levertov, Robert Hass, Jon Silkin, Donald Davie, Jeremy Hooker, and Peter Robinson. James Walton, who was a regular reviewer, left behind at his death a remarkable novel. It is possible that the excerpt printed here will be the only part of it that can be read for many years.

In Part Two of this book, I include a combination of poems and public letters. I have always published poems alongside my prose, and I am keen to continue that practice with a longish meditation on Donald Davie and his critical and poetic engagement with Boris Pasternak, and a sixtieth-birthday celebration for Peter Robinson, a poet and critic who emerged from Cambridge University in the 1970s and was a student of Davie’s students. He has been a regular NDR contributor and a friend. I was never a student of Davie’s, who arrived at Stanford University just as I was leaving. His books, however, have meant a great deal to me. In fact, despite our disagreements, I think he was one of the best poetry critics, and one of the best poets, of his generation. I had the pleasure of being his host at Notre Dame when he delivered the Ward-Phillips lectures on the subject of British poetry and religious dissent, Dissentient Voices, way back in the 1980s. Although it is no longer fashionable to publish letters to the press in books, the public letter, written in private, often expresses a deeply felt desire to commend or contradict. Leonard Woolf once joked that such epistolary unburdenings are what we have instead of prayer. Now and then I have written letters like this, five of them perhaps worth preserving. One is written with my old friend Igor Webb. Poems again appear in Part Four, ‘Des Petits Hommages,’ a sequence of minimalist pieces some of which gesture to poets also discussed in the prose.
Part Three, ‘Essays from Elsewhere’ prints or reprints various pieces not written specifically as ‘At Large’ columns. They include reflections on poetry in the context of film and opera, a survey of British late Modernist and 1930s poets following World War II, a comparison between Robert Duncan and David Jones, and some nostalgic pieces revised from my first volume of prose, Reading Old Friends. In the foreword to Who Was Cousin Alice? I noted that I had not reprinted or revised “any of the essays originally published in Reading Old Friends that make clear my long interest in Modernism.” I am now doing that in this book.

The volume concludes with a lecture and an interview. ‘Hedy and George at the Wexner Center’ was first delivered at Ohio State University in 2015. My thanks to the OSU English Department Film Studies Program for sponsoring the event based on earlier performances of my play, Automystistical Plaice: A Spread Spectrum Cabaret, at the University of Chicago and at Notre Dame. Thanks also to Joyelle McSweeney for her text, ‘Lustrous Frequencies,’ originally written for The Salt Companion to John Matthias, edited by Joe Francis Doerr, that figures in the lecture. Also from The Salt Companion, now out of print, is Joe Doerr’s extended interview with me that I mentioned earlier. This, I fear, must have tried Joe’s patience as it stretched from a one-time email exchange to more than a decade’s worth of additions.
Part One

Editor at Large
I’ve been reading William Hazlitt after many years and thinking about “first meetings with poets,” Hazlitt’s essay by that title, and some first meetings of my own, along with the question of apprenticeship. Luckily enough, the first poet I met wasn’t Samuel Taylor Coleridge. And luckily enough, it wasn’t 1798. When Coleridge visited the Hazlitt family home in Shropshire, he began to talk and, says Hazlitt in his famous account, “did not cease while he staid; nor has he since, that I know of.” For me, John Berryman was a little like that, but Berryman, again luckily enough, wasn’t the first poet I met. The first poet I met was Milton Kessler. Nor was our meeting fuelled by any of the energies surging through a year like 1798, if there ever was another year like that. We were still in the “tranquilized fifties,” as Robert Lowell was to call the decade, and I was seventeen. The Sixties would soon enough be blazing in, but no one felt more than a mild tremor in Columbus, Ohio, even in 1959 when Lowell published Life Studies.

Still, even for a provincial high school student with literary enthusiasms, the town was not entirely without intimations of things to come. During that year I saw a performance of a strange new play called Waiting for Godot. I attended a lecture at Ohio State called ‘Down with T. S. Eliot!’ (why would someone want to put down my hero, and, I thought, a poet about as avant-garde as one could be?), and copies of Howl and A Coney Island of the Mind were passed around by those attending. And every Saturday John Vacarro read poetry to jazz with a quartet performing at a bar only blocks away from the coffee shop where I first met Milton Kessler, a coffee shop presided over by a tall short-order cook called Jewell, who knew all of his customers by name. Jewell’s one waitress was, everybody thought, his wife. He treated her with great respect and affection. “Honey,” he’d say, “make sure Mr. Kessler’s got a full cup of coffee there.” It was in fact Jewell who told me, with great seriousness, that Milt Kessler was a poet.

I was pretty sad that year because my girlfriend had gone away for what seemed like it would be forever to Ankara, Turkey, a place I had to look up on a map before I had the slightest idea where it was. I would go there myself in the coming summer, but this was still only early fall—three full seasons before I would see her again, and nothing but old-fashioned letters to connect us. How we’d have loved Skype, or
even email or fax. A phone call was a complicated business, and had to be arranged through the U.S. military base; it only happened once. I bought thirty fifteen-cent airmail stamps at the OSU post office on the day she left and used them up within a couple of months.

It embarrasses me to write down this lovelorn stuff more than fifty years later, but it's important for two reasons. First of all, Milt Kessler understood, and seemed to sympathize with, my state of mind. More than that, my girlfriend ended up in Kessler's freshman English class when she returned from Turkey a year later and enrolled at OSU. Kessler thought she was "a pretty girl," but he gave her Cs. She had spectacular looks, but wasn't the world's best writer. Neither, of course, was I. Kessler knew all about sex, lust, love, and longing. He was thirty-three, and married with children. He wrote a few poems that my high school English teacher, when I showed them to him, called "almost obscene." And he had been around, having worked for a decade as shipping clerk, salesman, truck loader, and buyer in New York's garment industry before going to college. It's important to be clear: I never thought of Kessler as having anything to do with the academy, even though we drank our coffee directly across from a university campus. The context was what was left of coffee house culture in those days. People sat around playing chess and Go. Longhairs grumbled about having abandoned their PhDs and told jokes about the people running to classes on the other side of High Street.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Although the arcana of academic rank is something that always eludes students, I thought Kessler must have been a long-term teaching assistant in the OSU English Department. I was soon to be taught by some terrific TAs. Perhaps he was some kind of adjunct or temporary instructor. He did say just once that I mustn't call him Professor. So we didn't talk of such things, and I would never have understood anyway what was what or why it mattered. Jewell had told me that "Milt Kessler is a poet." That was enough for me. One day he also told Kessler that "this young man is a poet, too." "Well then sit down," Kessler said with a broad grin on his face. "We poets need to know each other. There aren't very many in town." No one had ever called me a poet before; I was, after all, a high-school student.
At any rate, Jewell’s introduction began what I’m happy to call a proper apprenticeship. At the beginning, I’d simply sit there reading the typescripts of Kessler’s poems as he passed them across the table saying things like, “up all night on this one.” They were not like the poems of T. S. Eliot. I suppose the generation then emerging would eventually have called them confessional; they were clearly about Milt’s life. I was honored—and surprised, of course—that he was willing to share these intimacies with me, although he talked about the poems as if they had been written by someone else and about that other person’s experiences. I can remember more than fifty years later lines like “last night we made another son” and titles like ‘Dawn Sickness.’ I never met Milt’s wife, though Jewell’s was always nearby asking if we wanted refills. As a joke, sometimes one of us would order our coffee “in a clean cup.” After that, Jewell himself would come over from his scrambled eggs and burgers with the order: “Now which one of you prissy poets ordered the clean cup.” I learned to love coffee, as well as poetry, at Jewell’s place. I’d go back there in a minute if it still existed. “Black coffee,” I’d say. “And don’t bother washing the cup.”

Our conversations were quiet and seemed to me at the time almost conspiratorial. Milt sometimes spoke to me, and read his poems, in what was almost a whisper. I never heard him read publicly, but I’d be very surprised to learn that he read with what is now sometimes disparaged as “the poetry voice,” the semi-incantational performance that one got, long before it became institutionalized among MFAs, most spectacularly from Russian poets. This was the period of Dylan Thomas in America and, after Thomas’ death, eccentric readers like Creeley and Olson, Berryman and Bly, while, even before Thomas’ baritone bellow, there were the consonantal Bunting and the burr of Yeats and Pound. Even Yvor Winters had his bass grumble modeled on the instructions of Paul Valéry. Caedmon was just beginning—leading off with Thomas—to issue their series of LPs, from which many of my generation learned to perform in public. Hazlitt had been bowled over not only by the power of Coleridge’s mind, but by his “chaunt”—heard in Coleridge’s sermons even before his poems—and later the corresponding Wordsworth version, as the poet walked up and down his gravel path. Such a recitation by both, Hazlitt found, “acts as a spell on the hearer, and disarms the judgment.”
Milt Kessler cast no spell. He didn’t read his poems as if they were prose, but quietly observed their rhythm in a more or less conversational voice. Now and then he’d interrupt a poem to point something out, or even to say “I don’t think that’s quite right.” His hesitations made his work seem all the more convincing. He wasn’t trying to overwhelm his young friend with his own genius. But Milt’s voice was not like my voice—he was a Brooklyn Jew, and he kept reminding me of that. “That’s the way we say it,” he’d sometimes remark. And sometimes he’d ask me to read a line or two in order, he’d say, “to hear the words from outside of my own body.” On these rare occasions, he’d listen with great attention, but sometimes also with an ironic smile on his face. “You gave that last phrase a good old Midwestern twang.” It never occurred to me once that Kessler might have been lonely. He must have had “adult” friends in Columbus, but maybe not so many. His family life was probably, like everyone else’s family life, both a pleasure and a burden; his children were very young. In many ways he was a poet of the family—a poet of his own family—but to be that, he needed to be away from it. I don’t know where he lived, and I hardly ever saw him anywhere besides Jewell’s. Once at the poetry-and-jazz session with John Vacarro, I saw him stand up and leave. Milt loved—and sang—classical music, and I imagine he found Vacarro a poor performer of Whitman, his usual choice of text when he read with the quartet. Milt liked Whitman too, but the Whitman he heard in his head was doubtless very different from the Beat reclamation of the bard that was making the scene after Ginsberg’s ’A Supermarket in California.’

It was Kessler who told me about John Berryman. Berryman was to teach at what was then called a writer’s conference at the University of Utah, and he suggested that I might go see Peter Taylor, then teaching at OSU, for more information. I had no idea that Taylor was at that time probably the best short story writer in America. But I went to see him, and ended up at the Utah conference where Berryman became, I suppose, my Coleridge—talking, as Hazlitt says of the latter, more or less constantly from the point when I met him to the point when I saw him last, only months before his suicide. But I have written about Berryman elsewhere. Although I stayed in touch with him until the end of his life, Berryman was too great a poet for someone like me to adopt as a mentor. Nor would he have had any interest in such a relationship.
When I told Kessler about Berryman's eccentricities, he would smile and say “take care, take care.” I wasn’t sure what he meant.

Jewell’s coffee shop was an oasis for me for almost six years—two years at the lab school run by OSU, and four years at the university itself. Kessler must have disappeared in about 1963. I have one letter from Queens, where he spent some time before moving on. Having recently acquired his posthumous Free Concert: New and Selected Poems from a used book dealer, I have looked him up on Wikipedia. There’s not much there:

Kessler grew up in New York City in a Jewish family. He was a volunteer spear carrier and prop boy at the New York Metropolitan Opera as a teenager, and he had classical training as a singer. He worked selling cloth at the Sample Shop as a young adult, and he married his wife, Sonia, while working a range of modest jobs. His first book, Sailing Too Far, was published by Harper & Row and became widely noted. He signed an anti-war letter to the New York Review of Books. He attended graduate school at Harvard University, but after finding enough success as a poet, he left doctoral studies and landed at Binghamton University, where his students included Camille Paglia.

I do remember Milt’s stories about the Met. But what was the Met to a kid from Columbus in 1958 and 1959? What astonished me was not that Kessler had been a spear carrier but that he had actually published his poems—which, as far as I was concerned, made him as much of a poet as Berryman. More than that, I could understand Milt’s poems perfectly. Who was Berryman’s Anne Bradstreet? I didn’t have a clue. Out at Utah, Berryman had read from his Homage, and also from his new project, called Dream Songs, which only then were beginning to appear in magazines. Kessler showed me poems about things like the OSU marching band and football team. “Whose body bandages the field?” Good line, I thought. “The tubas boom their say.” Bad line, I thought. That I could make distinctions like this gave me hope. W. H. Auden writes in ‘Making, Knowing and Judging,’ that he was very lucky that his first master was Thomas Hardy. “He was a good poet …
but not too good. Much as I loved him even I could detect that his diction was often clumsy and that a lot of his poems were plain bad.” Such discriminations were no longer possible when Auden moved on from Hardy to Eliot. I suppose Berryman was my Eliot as well as my Coleridge, and Kessler my Hardy. I’ve always laughed, though nostalgically, at those tubas.

On the other hand, the other hand. One day over coffee at Jewell’s, Kessler passed me a typescript with what had become his familiar “up all night with this one.” It didn’t seem to me very much:

The IRT, racing the noon,
Made Moira’s pigeons, tearing her crumbs,
Quail to a wing. …

Now she walked to the place
Where the El-Painter, orange matted,
Lurching in sleep, gargoyle the base
Of a rusted girder.

She watched.
He shook on his side, a drunken dreamer.
Paint spooled down like toxic honey,
Brocading the quivering hand of her father.

There’s another stanza in the final version, but this is what I have on a yellowing typescript in my files. The poem was finally called ‘The El-Painter’s Daughter.’ I didn’t know what an El was, and Kessler explained. “What’s it all mean?” I asked, having been taught to search out “meanings.” “Nothing much,” Milt said; “it’s just an encounter.” I could have learned something similar from reading William Carlos Williams in those days, but I had never heard of him. My high school English teacher, the one who found some of Milt’s poems “almost obscene,” had been to Kenyon, and was teaching us to look for “seven types of ambiguity” and things like that. Having been told about “the heresy of paraphrase,” we nevertheless paraphrased and paraphrased. Could a poem just mean what it said? Could an El painter’s daughter simply encounter her father, who “shook on his side, a drunken
dreamer”? Many of us had drunken fathers, but none of them worked on the El. I suppose a few were dreamers, and even sometimes drunk on the job.

Not long after going over those lines at Jewell’s, I found another poem about the El. It was from one of the two books I had bought after the ‘Down with T. S. Eliot’ lecture, Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s *A Coney Island of the Mind*. It’s of course well known, ‘The pennycandystore beyond the El.’ I took it with me to Jewell’s and showed it to Milt. “No, no,” he said. “Look at that line about ‘unreality.’ What does it say? Nothing. It’s an abstraction. Ezra Pound told us to ‘go in fear of abstractions.’ Do you get it? Do you dig? The beginning is just fine: ‘at the pennycandystore beyond the El / is where I first / fell in love / with’ … Well, with anything besides ‘unreality.’ The rest of it is ok, though Williams does this kind of thing better. His immediate model is probably French, possibly Pierre Reverdy? Do you know Reverdy? Do you know French?”

I didn’t know Reverdy. I didn’t know French. “That’s OK,” said Milt. You’ve got plenty of time. So I began to work. I learned French. I read Reverdy. But I also kept reading Kessler, one poem at a time as he handed over typescripts at Jewell’s. Eventually I grew up enough to know what I was reading: “She was aware then, her knees opening, closing— / the chafings, the damp inner-folds, bruises— / their room dark with her smoking, locked … rubbing, / was aware, a hand between her legs, holding, she / beyond his numb loneliness of words, there, / touching herself.” His numb loneliness of words? Was this what a poet’s life amounted to? In spite of Milt’s love poems, and his celebration of a relationship that seems to have lasted through an entire life of marriage, the answer seemed to be Yes. My high school English teacher found Kessler’s lines “almost obscene.” I would soon be out of high school and on to whatever came next.

The *Wikipedia* entry on Milton Kessler is wrong. *Sailing Too Far* was not Kessler’s first book, but rather *A Road Came Once*, published by the Ohio State University Press in 1963. By that time my girlfriend had been Kessler’s student for a semester, and so the three of us got together to celebrate at Jewell’s. *A Road Came Once* is the first book of poems that I read all the way through, as a book. I had been taught, of course, to read poems in anthologies; I had little idea that poets wrote
books. And there is an interesting connection between Kessler’s first book and Berryman’s *A Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. The first edition of Berryman’s book has ten illustrations by Ben Shahn. Kessler’s book has one, but it is better and more moving than any in the *Bradstreet* book. A woman weeps on her husband’s shoulder, their arms around each other. Was Shahn thinking about this poem?

We raged again last night.
Your wail pierced my skull
Until my tongue was
Bloodless, white, and locked
Against my teeth like stone.
In a whale’s panic, I shook,
Struck, broke your sound.
Then we lay breathless,
Grotesque, like swollen puppets.

Last night we made another son.
Today, cool, affecting ease,
We walk, tall as our skeletons.
Yet, beautiful are these bones;
In the body of our son see them.
And for the loneliness
That we still share in pain,
And for the face
That you have given him,
I, fleshed and hairless,
My own father now,
Give you my boyhood still.

(‘Anniversary Poem’)

I’ve been able to recite those lines for more than fifty years.

I wish I had kept up with Milton Kessler and his work. As a poet, he gave me more of his time than any subsequent “teachers,” and he never thought of himself as my instructor. I suppose I spent hundreds of hours in Jewell’s coffee shop on High Street in Columbus. After my girlfriend had been Milt’s student for a term, she too became his friend.
When our relationship ended, I was on my way to Stanford to study with Yvor Winters, a poet and critic whose work I only read once I was in California. In my last letter to Kessler, I told him this. In his reply, which was a postcard, he wrote: “Oh, No! Not Yvor Winters. He’s even worse than Berryman!” There was no explanation. When I met Winters and mentioned Berryman, he said “Some interesting lines; but very eccentric stuff.” When I mentioned Kessler he said: “I’ve never heard of him.”