

# SAMPLER

*Complayntes  
for  
Doctor Neuro  
& other poems*

ALSO BY JOHN MATTHIAS (\* indicates a Shearsman publication)

### Poetry

*Bucyrus* (1970)

*Turns* (1975)

*Crossing* (1979)

*Bathory & Lermontov* (1980)

*Northern Summer* (1984)

*A Gathering of Ways* (1991)

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*Introducing David Jones* (1980)

*David Jones: Man and Poet* (1989)

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John Matthias

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*The Common*: ‘Post-Colonial Chicken.’  
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*The New Yorker*: ‘The House of Headache.’  
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*Poetry*: ‘After Las Formas Puras, after Lorca’; ‘After Quevedo.’  
*Salmagundi*: ‘Refusing an Archive’; ‘Notes of an Uninvited Guest.’  
*Stand*: ‘I didn’t, I won’t’; ‘Some Histories.’

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## Dedication: *Of Artemis, Aging . . .*

*for Diana*

But of course she does not age! Immortal, she  
Does what she has always done: There is no future tense  
To drag her down, to soften her hard body,  
Compromise her chastity. Through the ages she is  
What she always is: There is no past except for those  
She touches, touched, will touch: They rise and fall  
With time, but she is timeless. Does she envy them  
Their human grace to change? Callisto, found with child,  
Became a constellation with her son, Arktos, rising up  
Behind her in the circumpolar sky. Actaeon turned  
Into a stag. I've seen Diana at her bath but never was  
Devoured by my hounds, only by my longing.  
Young, she moved like the wife of Menelaos in the  
Eyes of Telemakhos — *straight as a shaft of gold*.  
But even Helen by that time had changed: Hausfrau  
In the great Lakedaimon mansion house, she began  
To age. The red-haired king found his lady all the more  
Amazing and the struggle on the beachhead year by year  
Receded in his memory. Vindictive Artemis forgets  
Nothing and does not forgive. Her eternal present  
Is as sterile as the moon's. If she could change, she  
Might be like the woman called by her Roman name  
Reading in a book beside the fire in my own house.  
She has come down all these years with me, and she  
Is getting old. She turns the pages slowly, then looks up.  
Her wise ironic glance is *straight as a shaft of gold*.

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I

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## Some Histories

My cat is eating a spider that she clawed  
Out of its beautiful web. I do not interfere,  
Am not like amber falling on the springtail  
Sixteen million years ago that turned up  
In a CT scan playing horseback on a mayfly.  
My wife's CT scan was negative, and so  
We hugged each other walking home from the lab.  
Nonetheless my cat continues eating the  
Spider and, after that, the fly the spider hoped  
To eat, still struggling in its web. Nothing  
Was eating at my wife's thymus gland.  
A botanist has boasted that he grew a plant  
Seeded from some cells preserved in permafrost  
For thirty thousand years. In the photograph, it looks  
Just like an Easter lily. Hallelujah, DNA has  
Risen from the dead. There's a record  
Somewhere of a rite in Poland where the villagers,  
All bereft of witches, substituted as a sacrifice  
A kind of Guy Fawkes effigy stuffed full of cats.  
On the pyre, they howled in ungodly ways.  
My cat jumps on my lap, purring. In 1574  
Federico Barocci painted the Madonna with  
An orange tabby reaching for a goldfinch.  
From the Hukawng valley, Myanmar, early  
Cretaceous period, a tiny fossil holds a wasp  
That struggles for its life in etched strands of  
Spider silk that caught it ninety million years ago.

## Pending a Piano Player: Maurice Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit*

It's hard to play *Gaspard* as from a gibbet but you're doomed to try. You play the ribs, the tendons and the nerves. You play the vertebrae. It's plangent, but *pendu*.

You play erection, which they say is always part of these executions. Forbidden love with any mortal woman now, at last you call upon the nymph Ondine to swim from the tear rolling from your blinded eye into the corner of your open mouth.

The audience is stunned: Could it be *grillon* or *mouche* or *araignée*? Cricket, fly & spider sing Ondine and Scarbo so that water nymph and gnome dance together, one on either pending hand. Every neuromuscular control is lost. Finger bones fly out into the night.

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## Anniversary

My wife's father and my own uncle were in it.  
It's still that close, that far away.  
Millions of lives ago and a tick of geological time.  
It's come around again, that day for poppies and  
Remembrance. A hundred years this time.  
What's a hundred years? What's a hundred  
Thousand years? I turn a stone up with my toe  
In a Suffolk field where my wife still saw  
The horses plowing in her youth, not just in  
The poems of Edward Thomas. The stone had  
Been waiting for millennia. A man who  
Knew three veterans from old Akenfield told me  
Of his conversations. In the early days they'd  
Take a village full of men together in one company,  
Put them in a single trench. One shell left a parish  
Destitute. Three alone were left to tell him.  
We wept, one said to him, not because we were  
Afraid – we were beyond all fear – but because  
We were so dirty, made of the same clay as  
The long graves we fought from, lice in our hair  
In our eyes, lice all crawling on our balls, and  
Cold, cold – like stones in a farmer's frozen field.

## Refusing an Archive

Another file of letters in another envelope.  
This is like self-burial, heaping earth  
upon my own body with a toy spade. Or  
getting in a box with all they've asked me for.

They'll even pay for what's too late to use:  
my mother's power of attorney, my father's  
Living Will. Where is the court in which  
I could appeal to leave them void? The doctor's

dead himself who closed my parents' eyes.  
And this – charge and counter-charge between  
two friends. What was that about? Or connivance  
with some Anna? – can't quite make it out –

Emma is it maybe? In the fire with them.  
And these! – bad poems. Old, old young poems.  
And I should save this corpus? Screw down  
the lid on scribblings gasping in a final breath?

The fire, O lucid choir. Sing it into flame.  
Flame it into song. Make an archive only  
In the Empire of all ash.  
Ash the only archive worth an ark at all.

## The Doppelgänger's Hands

In the mirror I catch a glimpse of his hands  
hanging from my wrists, some other old man's —  
dirty, gnarled, arthritic — colder even than  
my own, and can't remember, can't understand

where they've been. Or if the left ever knew  
what the right one was doing, out in the dark with a spade  
digging in his father's grave, looking for things decayed,  
all the anger once displayed, the parts that they played?

Or both on his first girl's breasts in a first caress?  
Or did they cook his solitary meals, count out his years,  
never welcome a single guest, or anybody's kiss?

Did they turn the pages of a thousand books?  
All thumbs and knuckles, twisted up in ecstatic fears?  
Did they make little fists tighter than this?

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## Yeats, Pound and Pooh: Stone Cottage, Sussex

If the poets walked through the woods northeast of the cottage they would have crossed the bridge, immortalized by Ernest Shepard on the frontispiece to *The House at Pooh Corner*, where Christopher Robin and his friends played Pooh-sticks.”

— James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage*.

The poets studied the Japanese Noh, but also  
the Yes and Maybe So. It was cold in Sussex and even  
a beast could long for the warmth of the hearth  
the humans liked, the kindled New Year’s fire.  
They translated weathers and signs in the terms  
The others could understand. They used the words  
That came to hand from the muck and the mire.  
One of them longed for love, another for fame,  
a third for something sweet. And even though  
indeed the *winter was icumen in*, not spring,  
I like to imagine them one bright hoarfrost day,  
Icetree branches click-and-clanging, holding  
hands where no birds sang, and walking  
all together through the high pine wood and over  
Mr. Milne’s old bridge, three bears you’d say  
of little brain – at least when forced to consider  
their worst and most famous thinks – but also each  
with a blazing and weirdly magnificent soul,  
all three of them left in the lurch by something –  
a growing boy, a beautiful woman,  
a terrible always and incomprehensible war.



## On the (Unfinished) Beach

Crap-shooting Palamedes, beardless, beards  
The dumbass Ajax on the beach, bets him lyrics of  
A song from *Guys and Dolls* against a Mallarmé.  
All's anachronism there, everything's at stake.  
Stuck before the walls of Troy for a decade, why  
Not make your homo *homo ludens* now and then?  
It passes the time. It pesters the rhyme.

The age of heroes dies *right now*. On the beach  
For a bitch of a long time. They all get bored.  
Some of them are gored by a bull from the sea,  
Vicariously dissed and diced. Hands up please who  
Know the sum of *ptyx* and *ptyx*. Fish eyes  
Taken from the alphabet of wine-dark C's bright gaze  
Converting *coup d'état* to *coup de dés*.

Bow before the lady with a blue bow in her hair?  
L-Napoléon's sweet whore? Or is it Baudelaire's?  
Heir to what the dice said on the beachhead, heir as well  
To Damon Runyon tales, farce rolls out again  
As tragedy for [ . + . ] comedians. And they are?  
In a throw of the dice: In Palamedes' hand: knuckle-  
Bones of nothingness exalt a blather, and unbar . . .

## Notes of an Uninvited Guest

High on Molly, he lay on someone's bed;  
The rising moon with moonshine  
Raised the dead. Much earlier, he thought he'd  
(Hand on meth and short of breath)

Outfoxed already raves in Greenwich Village  
And outslummed the risen other, who was  
Bald and fey and pecker-faced, but tried  
To verse him, all defriended, in the hall. Waking

Was a fall into old times, into a kind of  
Brick-a-bracky shopping mall, and yet  
Domestic. Looking at the shelves he thought,  
*Pottery makes nothing happen! But has*

*Anybody tried this groovy stuff?* The vendor  
Wore a wig and called it snuff.  
Thomas was the nominal of normal here,  
And bet a bob on Robert, thrust a snout

Into the glitter of the *Geister* . . . Raving  
Was the form of greeting among rivals swarming  
Reiver modes, "dying of welcome." His little  
Hostess thought it queer to leave so early

When he'd only just arrived at *here*. "A stirrup  
Cup, no more," he said, and then he trotted off, ahoot,  
With the good cop. The bad cop said, "Dearth  
Is the matter of Molly. Hands up, with the loot!

Our code book always called you *Parachute*."

## In *Skunk Hour's* Maine: Reunion at the Fosse

Opening the door, I find them swarming  
Toward me – all my dead, or  
So it seems. But it's just reunion day  
And I have been away so long

I'm looking into eyes I haven't seen  
For more than forty years. But also  
Other eyes. There's Anchises Saul,  
Except that it's his son. I poured out

My libation and up came an imposter.  
All seemed risen from the dead, sons  
And fathers, uncles, nephews,  
Aunts, and many who did not come to

The door or even turn around. *Mother,*  
I said to someone's back, and when  
She turned, she laughed at me. Black sheep  
In this family, foreign to this northern shore

I might as well be Robert Lowell caught in  
Charlotte's web in Sarah Orne Jewett's  
Country of tall pines. My cousin owned  
A sailing boat, but I had been the sailor –

Gone so long that no one claimed me  
Until now. Had *they* died or had I?  
A seeming shade approached,  
Then leapt at me with strange embrace:

*We've missed you. You look exactly like  
Your father.* I said, *He's dead.* But then  
That person took me by the hand and led  
Me toward another who came up and

Said: *Neglect! You've neglected all of us and yet that hasn't stopped your Writing. How you've libeled us. What's The hour that permits the things you've*

*Done through all these years of Absence? It isn't this one, nine p.m. In Maine. It was some petty grievance That you held against us decades back –*

*Some lack of understanding, rather. Everybody wrote against his kin, so You did too. It was the period style. It was the period stile, and in you*

*Pressed your snout. Now look at this. The vouchsafed vision showed a scene I've carried with me since my father's Death, the very afternoon when he*

*Was buried. Anchises Saul stood Beside my mother, and my daughter, very Young and longing for relief from such A boring day, looked at him and turned to me,*

*Asking, Is he's better now? I asked her: Who? Is grandpa Paul? Not knowing what To say I looked at Saul. She thinks I'm Paul. No, I said. He's dead, and this is Saul.*