

After All

LAST POEMS

William Matthews



A MARINER BOOK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
Boston New York

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for Celia

Mingus in Shadow

What you see in his face in the last
photograph, when ALS had whittled
his body to fit a wheelchair, is how much
stark work it took to fend death off, and fail.
The famous rage got eaten cell by cell.

His eyes are drawn to slits against the glare
of the blanched landscape. The day he died,
the story goes, a swash of dead whales
washed up on the Baja beach. Great nature grieved
for him, the story means, but it was great

nature that skewed his cells and siphoned
his force and melted his fat like tallow
and beached him in a wheelchair under
a sombrero. It was human nature,
tiny nature, to take the photograph,

to fuss with the aperture and speed, to let
in the right blare of light just long enough
to etch pale Mingus to the negative.
In the small, memorial world of that
negative, he's all the light there is.

Morningside Heights, July

Haze. Three student violists boarding
a bus. A clatter of jackhammers.
Granular light. A film of sweat for primer
and the heat for a coat of paint.
A man and a woman on a bench:
she tells him he must be psychic,
for how else could he sense, even before she knew,
that she'd need to call it off? A bicyclist
fumes by with a coach's whistle clamped
hard between his teeth, shrilling like a teakettle
on the boil. I never meant, she says.
But I thought, he replies. Two cabs almost
collide; someone yells *fuck* in Farsi.
I'm sorry, she says. The comforts
of loneliness fall in like a bad platoon.
The sky blurs—there's a storm coming
up or down. A lank cat slinks liquidly
around a corner. How familiar
it feels to feel strange, hollower
than a bassoon. A rill of chill air
in the leaves. A car alarm. Hail.

The Place on the Corner

No mirror behind this bar: tiers of garish
fish drift back and forth. They too have routines.
The TV's on but not the sound. Dion
and the Belmonts ("I'm a Wanderer") gush
from the box. None here thinks a pink slip
("You're fired," with boilerplate apologies)
is underwear. None here says "lingerie"
or "as it were." We speak Demotic
because we're disguised as ordinary
folks. A shared culture offers camouflage
behind which we can tend the covert fires
we feed our shames to, those things we most fear
to say, our burlled, unspoken, common language—
the only one, and we are many.

Rescue

To absolve me of my loneliness, and rather than board her for the stint, I brought my cat with me for two weeks in Vermont. Across bare, borrowed floors she harried ping-pong balls, her claws like castanets, her blunt face rapt—she kept a ball ahead of her and between her paws as she chased it full tilt.

Then she'd amble over to where I sat reading and stretch her utmost length against my flank and let her heartbeat diminish until she dozed. So long as she knew where in that strange space I was, and up to what, she could make it hers. When I stepped into eclipse behind an opaque shower curtain, not

at all like the translucent booth she peers into to watch the blur lather and rinse himself at home, and when I turned a different torrent loose, she must have leapt to the lid of the toilet tank, and measured what next, rocking back on her haunches, then forward, and back again, and then the flying

hoyden launched herself at the rod the shower curtain's strung along, landing, *clank*, only two or three inches off, and hung there held up by her forearms, if a cat has forearms, like the least fit student in gym class quitting on a chin-up. Her rear paws churned egg-beater style. And then what? If I pulled her toward

me with wet, soapy hands, she'd thrash and slash herself free, but free in a tub. Hung up as she was, she had nothing to push off from, so she'd have to let herself drop, *clunk*, and turn to the torn curtain her I-meant-to-do-that face, while, slick and pink, I called out from the other side, "Sweet cat, are you OK?"

Truffle Pigs

None of these men, who all ran truffle pigs,
compares a truffle to itself. “Fossil
testicles,” says one. And another: “No.
Inky, tiny brains, smart only about
money.” They like to say, “You get yourself

a pig like this, you’ve got a live pension.”
The dowsing sows sweep their flat snouts across
the scat and leaf rot, scurf and duff, the slow
fires of decay. They know what to ignore;
these pigs are innocent of metaphor.

Tumor, fetus, truffle—all God’s creatures
jubilate to grow. Even the diffident truffle
gives off a faint sweat from the joyful work
of burgeoning, and by that spoor the pigs
have learned to know them and to root them out.

Rocas del Caribe, Isla Mujeres, 1967

Broke, we went when no one else would, July,
and got a corner room. "The wind," the desk
clerk grinned, spreading his arms full span, "will frisk
your room." I'm sure that's what I heard him say.
Breeze surged through the room like gossip. The fear-
fueled calf we shared the ferry with was on
the menu every night. We ate in town.
"Camarones?" "Shrimp." It can take a year
twice for a week's vacation: first you save
that long for it and then it lasts that long.
The stubborn surf broke into spume and lace
above the rocks. Bored silly face to face,
we told each other there was nothing wrong,
but filled with dread like a pair of sieves.

Manners

“Sweetypants,” Martha Mitchell (wife of John Mitchell, soon to be Nixon’s attorney general) cried, “fetch me a glass of bubbin, won’t you?” Out of office, Nixon had been warehoused in Leonard Garment’s New York law firm and had begun to clamber

his way back toward Washington. The scent of his enemies’ blood rose hotly from the drinks that night. Why was I there? A college classmate’s mother had suggested he invite a few friends; she called us “starving scholars.”

It’s hard to do good and not advertise yourself, and not to need the needy even if they don’t need you. I’d grown used to being accused of being somewhere else. I plied my nose, that shrewd scout, into book after book at home, and clattered downstairs

for dinner not late but tardy. I dwelt as much as I could at that remove from the needs of others we call “the self,” that desert isle, that Alcatraz from which none has escaped. I made a happy lifer. There is no frigate like a book.

“Outside of a dog, a book is a man’s best friend,” said Groucho Marx. “Inside of a dog, it’s too dark to read.” So what if my friend’s mother was a fool. So what if Martha Mitchell would later rat on her rat of a husband when Nixon’s paranoid

domain collapsed under its own venal weight and it took Nixon all his gloomy charisma to load his riven heart onto a helicopter and yaw upward from the White House lawn. He might have turned to Pat and asked, like a child on a first

flight, “Are we getting smaller yet?”
I was too young to know how much I was,
simply by being born, a hostage
to history. My hostess’s chill,
insulting grace I fended off with the same
bland good manners I used to stay upstairs

in my head until time had come for food.
A well-fed scholar, I sought out and brought
back a tall bubbin for the nice lady.
Yes, there’s a cure for youth, but it’s fatal.
And a cure for grace: you say what you mean,
but of course you have to know what that is.

The Shooting

It be the usual at first.
This one be bad, that one be worse.

They do this in slow commotion.
They strut, they fuss, something they done

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.

Prescience

Bloated and mesmerized by raspberries,
the possum wobbled into the open
as you or I might blink into the sun
from an afternoon movie, and because
remembered time is instantaneous,
I hear the rifle slash the silence now,
and smell the nitrate and shattered bowels
and spangled berries, and hear, next, a hiss—
the exhaust of a possum's life and a tithe,
a levy of breath from each who stood there
with nothing better to say than "Got it."
How old was I that stark day? Seven? Eight?
That hiss? I could hear me growing older,
rueful, guarded and sullen for dear life.

Vermin

“What do you want to be when you grow up?”

What child cries out, “An exterminator!”?

One diligent student in Mrs. Taylor’s class will get an ant farm for Christmas, but he’ll not see industry; he’ll see dither.

“The ant sets an example for us all,”

wrote Max Beerbohm, a master of dawdle,

“but it is not a good one.” These children don’t hope to outlast the doldrums of school only to heft great weights and work in squads and die for their queen. Well, neither did we.

And we knew what we didn’t want to be: the ones we looked down on, the lambs of God, blander than snow and slow to be cruel.

Memory

We're not born knowing how to love the world,
but squalling. The first two years of our lives
crucially form our psyches, but we have
no memory of them. Well, a few shards

perhaps: a ladybug, the gray underside
of a bright leaf, a pixelated mother
murmuring from inside a screen door.
When all we have are fragments, they suffice.

On the debris of rock, on sand, we build
our church, the Little Chapel of the Dunes.
Soon enough it's harder to forget than
to keep track. How steadily the past fills

with what the present could or would not use.
Our silos teem with corn and avid rats.
How will we love the world? We can't forget
what we never knew; we'd better improvise.

"The farther we go, the more we give up,"
we could complain, but there's always more
to lose. The vacuum that death abhors
is death. We all drink from a leaking cup.

Promiscuous

“Mixes easily,” dictionaries
used to say, a straight shot from the Latin.
Chemists applied the term to matter’s
amiability.

But the *Random House Dictionary*
(1980) gives as its prime meaning:
“characterized
by frequent and indiscriminate
changes of one’s sexual partners.” Sounds
like a long way
to say “slut,” that glob of blame we once threw
equally at men and women, all who slurred,

slavered, slobbered,
slumped, slept or lapsed, slunk or relapsed, slackened
(loose lips sink ships) or slubbed, or slovened. But soon
a slut was female. A much-bedded male

got called a ladies’ man; he never slept
with sluts. How sluts
got to be sluts is thus a mystery,
except the language knows what we may

have forgot. “Depression” began its career
in English in 1656, says
the *OED*,
and meant (science jargon) the opposite

of elevation—a hole or a rut,
perhaps, or, later, “the angular
distance of a celestial object
below the horizon,”

as *Webster’s Third* (1963)
has it. There’s ample record of our self-
deceit: language,
that furious river, carries on its foamed

and sinewed back all we thought we’d shucked off.
Of course it’s all
pell-mell, head over heels, snickers and grief,

love notes and libel, fire and ice. In short:
promiscuous.