

Classic Poetry Series

William Matthews
- poems -

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William Matthews(November 11, 1942 - November 12, 1997)

an American poet and essayist.

Raised in Cincinnati, Ohio, Matthews earned a bachelor's degree from Yale University, and a master's from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In addition to serving as a Writer-in-Residence at Boston's Emerson College, Matthews held various academic positions at institutions including Cornell University, the University of Washington (Seattle), the University of Colorado at Boulder, and the University of Iowa. He served as president of Associated Writing Programs and of the Poetry Society of America. At the time of his death he was a professor of English and director of the creative writing program at City College of New York. A reading series has been named for him at City College of New York. His son is Sebastian Matthews.

A Happy Childhood

My mother stands at the screen door, laughing.
"Out out damn Spot," she commands our silly dog.
I wonder what this means. I rise into adult air

like a hollyhock, I'm so proud to be loved
like this. The air is tight to my nervous body.
I use new clothes and shoes the way the corn-studded

soil around here uses nitrogen, giddily.
Ohio, Ohio, Ohio. Often I sing
to myself all day like a fieldful of August

insects, just things I whisper, really,
a trance in sneakers. I'm learning
to read from my mother and soon I'll go to school,

I hate it when anyone dies or leaves and the air
goes slack around my body and I have to hug myself,
a cloud, an imaginary friend, the stream in the road-

side park. I love to be called for dinner.
Spot goes out and I go in and the lights
in the kitchen go on and the dark,

which also has a body like a cloud's,
leans lightly against the house. Tomorrow
I'll find the sweat stains it left, little grey smudges.

Here's a sky no higher than a street lamp,
and a stack of morning papers cinched by wire.
It's 4:00 A.M. A stout dog, vaguely beagle,

minces over the dry, fresh-fallen snow;
and here's our sleep-sodden paperboy
with his pliers, his bike, his matronly dog,

his unclouding face set for paper route
like an alarm clock. Here's a memory

in the making, for this could be the morning

he doesn't come home and his parents
two hours later drive his route until
they find him asleep, propped against a street lamp,

his papers all delivered and his dirty paper-
satchel slack, like an emptied lung,
and he blur-faced and iconic in the morning

air rinsing itself a paler and paler blue
through which a last few dandruff-flecks
of snow meander casually down.

The dog squeaks in out of the dark,
snuffling me too me too. And here he goes
home to memory, and to hot chocolate

on which no crinkled skin forms like infant ice,
and to the long and ordinary day,
school, two triumphs and one severe

humiliation on the playground, the past
already growing its scabs, the busride home,
dinner, and evening leading to sleep

like the slide that will spill him out, come June,
into the eye-reddening chlorine waters
of the municipal pool. Here he goes to bed.

Kiss. Kiss. Teeth. Prayers. Dark. Dark.
Here the dog lies down by his bed,
and sighs and farts. Will he always be

this skinny, chicken-bones?
He'll remember like a prayer
how his mother made breakfast for him

every morning before he trudged out
to snip the papers free. Just as
his mother will remember she felt

guilty never to wake up with him
to give him breakfast. It was Cream
of Wheat they always or never had together.

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.
And each of these selves had a childhood

it traded for love and grudged to give away,
now lost irretrievably, in storage
like a set of dishes from which no food,

no Cream of Wheat, no rabbit in mustard
sauce, nor even a single raspberry,
can be eaten until the afterlife,

which is only childhood in its last
disguise, all radiance or all humiliation,
and so it is forfeit a final time.

In fact it was awful, you think, or why
should the piecework of grief be endless?
Only because death is, and likewise loss,

which is not awful, but only breathtaking.
There's no truth about your childhood,
though there's a story, yours to tend,

like a fire or garden. Make it a good one,
since you'll have to live it out, and all
its revisions, so long as you all shall live,

for they shall be gathered to your deathbed,
and they'll have known to what you and they
would come, and this one time they'll weep for you.

The map in the shopping center has an X
signed "you are here." A dream is like that.

In a dream you are never eighty, though

you may risk death by other means:
you're on a ledge and memory calls you
to jump, but a deft cop talks you in

to a small, bright room, and snickers.
And in a dream, you're everyone somewhat,
but not wholly. I think I know how that

works: for twenty-one years I had a father
and then I became a father, replacing him
but not really. Soon my sons will be fathers.

Surely, that's what middle-aged means,
being father and son to sons and father.
That a male has only one mother is another

story, told wherever men weep wholly.
Though nobody's replaced. In one dream
I'm leading a rope of children to safety,

through a snowy farm. The farmer comes out
and I have to throw snowballs well to him
so we may pass. Even dreaming, I know

he's my father, at ease in his catcher's
squat, and that the dream has revived
to us both an old unspoken fantasy:

we're a battery. I'm young, I'm brash,
I don't know how to pitch but I can
throw a lamb chop past a wolf. And he

can handle pitchers and control a game.
I look to him for a sign. I'd nod
for anything. The damn thing is hard to grip

without seams, and I don't rely only
on my live, young arm, but throw by all
the body I can get behind it, and it fluffs

toward him no faster than the snow
in the dream drifts down. Nothing
takes forever, but I know what the phrase

means. The children grow more cold
and hungry and cruel to each other
the longer the ball's in the air, and it begins

to melt. By the time it gets to him we'll be
our waking ages, and each of us is himself
alone, and we all join hands and go.

Toward dawn, rain explodes on the tin roof
like popcorn. The pale light is streaked by grey
and that green you see just under the surface

of water, a shimmer more than a color.
Time to dive back into sleep, as if into
happiness, that neglected discipline

In those sixth-grade book reports
you had to say if the book was optimistic
or not, and everyone looked at you

the same way: how would he turn out?
He rolls in his sleep like an otter.
Uncle Ed has a neck so fat it's funny,

and on the way to work he pries the cap
off a Pepsi. Damn rain didn't cool one weary
thing for long; it's gonna be a cooker.

The boy sleeps with a thin chain of sweat
on his upper lip, as if waking itself,
becoming explicit, were hard work.

Who knows if he's happy or not?
A child is all the tools a child has,
growing up, who makes what he can.

William Matthews

A Life Of Crime

Frail friends, I love you all!
Maybe that's the trouble,
storm in the eye of a storm.
Everyone wants too much.
Instead we gratefully accept
some stylized despair:

suitcoats left hanging
on folding chairs, snow falling
inside a phonebooth, cows
scouring some sad pasture.
You know the sort of landscape,
all sensibility and no trees.

Nothing but space, a little
distance between friends.
As if loneliness didn't make us
responsible, and want accomplices.
Better to drink at home
than to fall down in bars.

Or to read all night a novel
with missing heirs, 513 pages
in ten-point type, and lay my body
down, a snarl of urges
orbited by blood,
dreaming of others.

William Matthews

A Poetry Reading At West Point

I read to the entire plebe class,
in two batches. Twice the hall filled
with bodies dressed alike, each toting
a copy of my book. What would my
shrink say, if I had one, about
such a dream, if it were a dream?

Question and answer time.

"Sir," a cadet yelled from the balcony,
and gave his name and rank, and then,
closing his parentheses, yelled
"Sir" again. "Why do your poems give
me a headache when I try

to understand them?" he asked. "Do
you want that?" I have a gift for
gentle jokes to defuse tension,
but this was not the time to use it.

"I try to write as well as I can
what it feels like to be human,"

I started, picking my way care-
fully, for he and I were, after
all, pained by the same dumb longings.

"I try to say what I don't know
how to say, but of course I can't
get much of it down at all."

By now I was sweating bullets.

"I don't want my poems to be hard,
unless the truth is, if there is
a truth." Silence hung in the hall
like a heavy fabric. My own
head ached. "Sir," he yelled. "Thank you. Sir."

Anonymous submission.

A Roadside Near Ithaca

Here we picked wild strawberries,
though in my memory we're neither here
nor missing. Or I'd scuff out
by myself at dusk, proud
to be lonely. Now everything's
in bloom along the road at once:
tansy mustard, sow thistle,
fescue, burdock, soapwort,
the mailbox-high day lilies,
splurges of chicory with thin,
ragged, sky-blue flowers.
Or they're one blue the sky
can be, and always, not
varium et mutabile semper,
restless forever. In memory,
though memory eats its banks
like any river, you can carry
by constant revision
some loved thing: a stalk of mullein
shaped like a what's-the-word-for
a tower of terraced bells, that's it,
a carillon! A carillon ringing
its mute changes of pollen into a past
we must be about to enter,
the road's so stained by the yellow
light (same yellow as the tiny
mullein flowers) we shared
when we were imminent.

William Matthews

A Small Room In Aspen

Stains on the casements,
dustmotes, spiderless webs.
No chairs, and a man waking up,
or he's falling asleep

Many first novels begin
with the hero waking up,
which saves their authors
from writing well about sleep.

His life is the only novel
about him. Mornings
he walks past the park:
Tai Ch'i students practicing

like slow lorises.
A room on the second floor.
He'd dreamed of a ground floor
room, an insistent cat

at the door, its mouth pink
with wrath he couldn't salve
and grew to hate. All afternoon
he's a cloud that can't rain.

There's no ordinary life
in a resort town, he thinks,
though he's wrong: it laces
through the silt of tourists

like worm life. At dusk
the light rises in his room.
A beautiful day, all laziness
and surface, true without

translation. Wherever I go
I'm at home, he thinks,
smug and scared both,
fierce as a secret,

8,000 feet above sea level.
The dark on its way down
has passed him, so he seems
to be rising, after the risen

light, as if he were to keep watch
while the dark sleeps,
as if he and it were each
other's future and children.

William Matthews

A Walk

February on the narrow beach, 3o
A.M. I set out south. Cape Cod Light
on its crumbling cliff above me turns
its wand of light so steadily
it might be tolling a half-life,
it might be the second-hand
of a schoolroom clock,
a kind of blind radar.

These bluffs deposited by glaaciers
are giving themselves away
to the beaches down the line, three
feet of coastline a year. I follow
them south at my own slow pace.
Ahead my grandfather died
in a boat and my father
found him and here I come.

If I cleave to the base of the I berm
the offshore wind swirls grit
just over my head and the backwash
rakes it away. If I keep going
south toward my grandfather's house
in Chatham, and beyond,
the longshore current grinds the sand
finer the farther I go. It spreads

it wider and the beaches sift
inland as far as they can go
before beachgrass laces them down
for now. It gets to be spring,
I keep walking, it gets to be
summer. Families loll.
Now the waves are small; they keep
their swash marks close to home.

A little inland from the spurge
and sea-rockets my tan sons kick
a soccer ball north, against

grains that may once have been
compacted to sandstone, then
broken back to grains, stumbling
and driven and free again,
shrinking along the broadening edge.

William Matthews

Alcide

Walking with Jesus the slow,
behind the beat. Mr. Resistance.
Mr. Ohm, Mr. Exactly Lame.

By some reluctance, some
restraint, if it be a restraint,
by some undertow and stutter,

the halt and lame can strut.
You can hear it yourself. Buy
a few records and think how big

a bass is to a small boy,
his fingers bleeding to grow deft.
Bandages are for amateurs

and they blur the tone, that habit
a bassist and his bass conspire,
the way a couple learns a stride
though the man's taller by a foot.

William Matthews

Bedtime

Usually I stay up late, my time
alone. Tonight at 9o I can tell
I'm only awake long enough
to put my sons to bed.
When I start to turn off lights
the boys are puzzled. They're used
to entering sleep by ceding to me
their hum and fizz, the way they give me
50¢ to hold so they can play
without money. I'm their night-light.
I'm the bread baked while they sleep.
And I can scarcely stand up, dry
in the mouth and dizzied
by fatigue. From our rooms
we call back and forth the worn
magic of our passwords and let one
another go. In the morning Sebastian
asks who was the last to fall
asleep and none of us cares or knows.

William Matthews

Dire Cure

"First, do no harm," the Hippocratic Oath begins, but before she might enjoy such balm, the docs had to harm her tumor. It was large, rare, and so anomalous in its behavior that at first they misdiagnosed it. "Your wife will die of it within a year." But in ten days or so I sat beside her bed with hot-and-sour soup and heard an intern congratulate her on her new diagnosis: a children's cancer (doesn't that possessive break your heart?) had possessed her. I couldn't stop personifying it. Devious, dour, it had a clouded heart, like Iago's. It loved disguise. It was a garrison in a captured city, a bad horror film (The Blob), a stowaway, an inside job. If I could make it be like something else, I wouldn't have to think of it as what, in fact, it was: part of my lovely wife. Next, then, chemotherapy. Her hair fell out in tufts, her color dulled, she sat laced to bags of poison she endured somewhat better than her cancer cells could, though not by much. And indeed, the cancer cells waned more slowly than the chemical "cocktails" (one the bright color of Campari), as the chemo nurses called them, dripped into her. There were three hundred days of this: a week inside the hospital and two weeks out, the fierce elixirs percolating all the while. She did five weeks of radiation, too, Monday to Friday like a stupid job. She wouldn't eat the food the hospital wheeled in. "Pureed fish" and "minced fish" were worth, I thought, a sharp surge of food snobbery, but she'd grown averse to it all -- the nurses' crepe soles' muffled squeaks along the hall, the filtered air, the smothered urge to read,

the fear, the perky visitors, flowers
she'd not been sent when she was well, the room-
mate (what do "semiprivate" and "extra
virgin" have in common?) who died, the nights
she wept and sweated faster than the tubes
could moisten her with lurid poison.
One chemotherapy veteran, six
years in remission, chanced on her former
chemo nurse at a bus stop and threw up.
My wife's tumor has not come back.
I like to think of it in Tumor Hell
strapped to a dray, flat as a deflated
football, bleak and nubbled like a poorly
ironed truffle. There's one tense in Tumor Hell:
forever, or what we call the present.
For that long the flaccid tumor marinates
in lurid toxins. Tumor Hell Clinic
is, it turns out, a teaching hospital.
Every century or so, the way
we'd measure it, a chief doc brings a pack
of students round. They run some simple tests:
surge current through the tumor, batter it
with mallets, push a wood-plane across its
pebbled hide and watch a scurf of tumor-
pelt kink loose from it, impale it, strafe it
with lye and napalm. There might be nothing
left in there but a still space surrounded
by a carapace. "This one is nearly
dead," the chief doc says. "What's the cure for that?"
The students know: "Kill it slower, of course."
They sprinkle it with rock salt and move on.
Here on the aging earth the tumor's gone:
My wife is hale, though wary, and why not?
Once you've had cancer, you don't get headaches
anymore, you get brain tumors, at least
until the aspirin kicks in. Her hair's back,
her weight, her appetite. "And what about you?"
friends ask me. First the fear felt like sudden
weightlessness: I couldn't steer and couldn't stay.
I couldn't concentrate: surely my spit would
dry before I could slather a stamp.
I made a list of things to do next day

before I went to bed, slept like a cork,
woke to no more memory of last night's
list than smoke has of fire, made a new list,
began to do the things on it, wept, paced,
berated myself, drove to the hospital,
and brought my wife food from the takeout joints
that ring a hospital as surely as
brothels surround a gold strike. I drove home
rancid with anger at her luck and mine --
anger that filled me the same way nature
hates a vacuum. "This must be hell for you,"
some said. Hell's not other people: Sartre
was wrong about that, too. L'enfer, c'est moi?
I've not got the ego for it. There'd be
no hell if Dante hadn't built a model
of his rage so well, and he contrived to
get exiled from it, for it was Florence.
Why would I live in hell? I love New York.
Some even said the tumor and fierce cure
were harder on the care giver -- yes, they
said "care giver" -- than on the "sick person."
They were wrong who said those things. Of course
I hated it, but some of "it" was me --
the self-pity I allowed myself,
the brave poses I struck. The rest was dire
threat my wife met with moral stubbornness,
terror, rude jokes, nausea, you name it.
No, let her think of its name and never
say it, as if it were the name of God.

Anonymous submission.

William Matthews

Drizzle

Baudelaire: 'The dead, the poor dead, have their bad hours.'
But the dead have no watches, no grief and no hours.

At first not smoking took all my time: I did it
a little by little and hour by hour.

Per diem. Pro bono. Cui bono? Pro rata.
But the poor use English. Off and on. By the hour.

'I'm sorry but we'll have to stop now.' There tick but
fifty minutes in the psychoanalytic hour.

Vengeance is mine, yours, his or hers, ours, yours again
(you-all's this time), and then (yikes!) theirs. I prefer ours.

Twenty minutes fleeing phantoms at full tilt and then
the cat coils herself like a quoit and sleeps for hours.

William Matthews

Eyes

the only parts of the body the same
size at birth as they'll always be.
'That's why all babies are beautiful,'
Thurber used to say as he grew
blind -- not dark, he'd go on
to explain, but floating in a pale
light always, a kind of candlelit
murk from a sourceless light.
He needed dark to see:
for a while he drew on black
paper with white pastel chalk
but it grew worse. Light bored
into his eyes but where did it go?
Into a sea of phosphenes,
along the wet fuse of some dead
nerve, it hid everywhere and couldn't
be found. I've used up
three guesses, all of them
right. It's like scuba diving, going down
into the black cone-tip that dives
farther than I can, though I dive
closer all the time.

William Matthews

Foul Shots: A Clinic

for Paul Levitt Be perpendicular to the basket,
toes avid for the line.

Already this description
is perilously abstract: the ball
and basket are round, the nailhead
centered in the centerplank
of the foul-circle is round,
and though the rumpled body
isn't round, it isn't
perpendicular. You have to draw
'an imaginary line,' as the breezy

coaches say, 'through your shoulders.'
Here's how to cheat: remember
your collarbone. Now the instructions
grow spiritual -- deep breathing,
relax and concentrate both; aim
for the front of the rim but miss it
deliberately so the ball goes in.
Ignore this part of the clinic

and shoot 200 foul shots
every day. Teach yourself not to be
bored by any boring one of them.
You have to love to do this, and chances
are you don't; you'd love to be good
at it but not by a love that drives
you to shoot 200 foul shots
every day, and the lovingly unlaunched
foul shots we're talking about now --
the clinic having served to bring us
together -- circle eccentrically
in a sky of stolid orbits
as unlike as you and I are
from the arcs those foul shots
leave behind when they go in.

Homer's Seeing-Eye Dog

Most of the time he worked, a sort of sleep
with a purpose, so far as I could tell.
How he got from the dark of sleep
to the dark of waking up I'll never know;
the lax sprawl sleep allowed him
began to set from the edges in,
like a custard, and then he was awake,
me too, of course, wriggling my ears
while he unlocked his bladder and stream
of dopey wake-up jokes. The one
about the wine-dark pee I hated instantly.
I stood at the ready, like a god
in an epic, but there was never much
to do. Oh now and then I'd make a sure
intervention, save a life, whatever.
But my exploits don't interest you
and of his life all I can say is that
when he'd poured out his work
the best of it was gone and then he died.
He was a great man and I loved him.
Not a whimper about his sex life -
how I detest your prurience -
but here's a farewell literary tip:
I myself am the model for Penelope.
Don't snicker, you hairless moron,
I know so well what faithful means
there's not even a word for it in Dog,
I just embody it. I think you bipeds
have a catchphrase for it: 'To thine own self
be true,...' though like a blind man's shadow,
the second half is only there for those who know
it's missing. Merely a dog, I'll tell you
what it is: '... as if you had a choice.'

William Matthews

Job Interview

Think you, if Laura had been Petrarch's wife
He would have written sonnets all his life?
DON JUAN, III, 63-4

"Where do you see yourself five years from now?"
the eldest male member (or is "male member"
a redundancy?) of the committee
asked me. "Not here," I thought. A good thing I
speak fluent Fog. I craved that job like some
unappeasable, taunting woman.
What did Byron's friend Hobhouse say after
the wedding? "I felt as if I had buried
a friend." Each day I had that job I felt
the slack leash at my throat and thought what was
its other trick. Better to scorn the job than ask
what I had ever seen in it or think
what pious muck I'd ladled over
the committee. If they believed me, they
deserved me. As luck would have it, the job
lasted me almost but not quite five years.

Anonymous submission.

William Matthews

Mingus At The Showplace

I was miserable, of course, for I was seventeen
and so I swung into action and wrote a poem

and it was miserable, for that was how I thought
poetry worked: you digested experience shat

literature. It was 1960 at The Showplace, long since
defunct, on West 4th st., and I sat at the bar,

casting beer money from a reel of ones,
the kid in the city, big ears like a puppy.

And I knew Mingus was a genius. I knew two
other things, but as it happens they were wrong.

So I made him look at this poem.
"There's a lot of that going around," he said,

and Sweet Baby Jesus he was right. He glowered
at me but 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. Of course later

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.

Anonymous submission.

William Matthews

No Return

I like divorce. I love to compose
letters of resignation; now and then
I send one in and leave in a lemon-
hued Huff or a Snit with four on the floor.
Do you like the scent of a hollyhock?
To each his own. I love a burning bridge.

I like to watch the small boat go over
the falls -- it swirls in a circle
like a dog coiling for sleep, and its frail bow
pokes blindly out over the falls' lip
a little and a little more and then
too much, and then the boat's nose dives and butt

flips up so that the boat points doomily
down and the screams of the soon-to-be-dead
last longer by echo than the screamers do.
Let's go to the videotape, the news-
caster intones, and the control room does,
and the boat explodes again and again.

William Matthews

On The Porch At The Frost Place, Franconia, N. H.

So here the great man stood,
fermenting malice and poems
we have to be nearly as fierce
against ourselves as he
not to misread by their disguises.
Blue in dawn haze, the tamarack
across the road is new since Frost
and thirty feet tall already.
No doubt he liked to scorch off
morning fog by simply staring through it
long enough so that what he saw
grew visible. "Watching the dragon
come out of the Notch," his children
used to call it. And no wonder
he chose a climate whose winter
and house whose isolation could be
stern enough to his wrath and pity
as to make them seem survival skills
he'd learned on the job, farming
fifty acres of pasture and woods.
For cash crops he had sweat and doubt
and moralizing rage, those staples
of the barter system. And these swift
and aching summers, like the blackberries
I've been poaching down the road
from the house where no one's home --
acid at first and each little globe
of the berry too taut and distinct
from the others, then they swell to hold
the riot of their juices and briefly
the fat berries are perfected to my taste,
and then they begin to leak and blob
and under their crescendo of sugar
I can taste how they make it through winter. . . .
By the time I'm back from a last,
six-berry raid, it's almost dusk,
and more and more mosquitos
will race around my ear their tiny engines,
the speedboats of the insect world.

I won't be longer on the porch
than it takes to look out once
and see what I've taught myself
in two months here to discern:
night restoring its opacities,
though for an instant as intense
and evanescent as waking from a dream
of eating blackberries and almost
being able to remember it, I think
I see the parts -- haze, dusk, light
broken into grains, fatigue,
the mineral dark of the White Mountains,
the wavering shadows steadying themselves --
separate, then joined, then seamless:
the way, in fact, Frost's great poems,
like all great poems, conceal
what they merely know, to be
predicaments. However long
it took to watch what I thought
I saw, it was dark when I was done,
everywhere and on the porch,
and since nothing stopped
my sight, I let it go.

Anonymous submission.

William Matthews

Poem (The Lump Of Coal My Parents Teased)

The lump of coal my parents teased
I'd find in my Christmas stocking
turned out each year to be an orange,
for I was their sunshine.

Now I have one C. gave me,
a dense node of sleeping fire.
I keep it where I read and write.
"You're on chummy terms with dread,"

it reminds me. "You kiss ambivalence
on both cheeks. But if you close your
heart to me ever I'll wreath you in flames
and convert you to energy."

I don't know what C. meant me to mind
by her gift, but the sun returns
unbidden. Books get read and written.
My mother comes to visit. My father's

dead. Love needs to be set alight
again and again, and in thanks
for tending it, will do its very
best not to consume us.

Anonymous submission.

William Matthews

The Blues

What did I think, a storm clutching a clarinet
and boarding a downtown bus, headed for lessons?
I had pieces to learn by heart, but at twelve

you think the heart and memory are different.
"It's a poor sort of memory that only works
backwards,' the Queen remarked." Alice in Wonderland.

Although I knew the way music can fill a room,
even with loneliness, which is of course a kind
of company. I could swelter through an August

afternoon -- torpor rising from the river -- and listen
to Stan Getz and J. J. Johnson braid variations
on "My Funny Valentine" and feel there in the room

with me the force and weight of what I couldn't
say. What's an emotion anyhow?
Lassitude and sweat lay all about me

like a stubble field, it was so hot and listless,
but I was quick and furtive as a fox
who has his thirty-miles-a-day metabolism

to burn off as ordinary business.
I had about me, after all, the bare eloquence
of the becalmed, the plain speech of the leafless

tree. I had the cunning of my body and a few
bars -- they were enough -- of music. Looking back,
it almost seems as though I could remember --

but this can't be; how could I bear it? --
the future toward which I'd clatter
with that boy tied like a bell around my throat,

a brave man and a coward both,
to break and break my metronomic heart
and just enough to learn to love the blues.

Anonymous submission.

William Matthews

The Snake

A snake is the love of a thumb
and forefinger.

Other times, an arm
that has swallowed a bicep.

The air behind this one
is like a knot
in a child's shoelace
come undone
while you were blinking.

It is bearing something away.
What? What time
does the next snake leave?

This one's tail is ravelling
into its burrow—
a rosary returned to a purse.
The snake is the last time your spine
could go anywhere alone.

William Matthews