

conversations  
with  
Sebastian  
Matthews



Sebastian Matthews is the author of the memoir *In My Father's Footsteps* (W. W. Norton & Co.) as well as two collections of poetry, *We Generous* and *Miracle Day*, both published by Red Hen Press. A third collection, *Beginner's Guide to a Head-on Collision*, came out from Red Hen Press in 2017. [Learn more about Sebastian.](#)

**Alexander:** How would you describe your work?

**Sebastian:** It's taken me some time—many years, really—to see my work (and to understand it) as fully hybrid. And what I mean by that, specifically, is that my work, all of my creative work, whatever genre or medium, is at its core collaged. I employ collage technique at every turn, in every way.

You know, it's funny, these last three books I've written (actually, the latest one, *In & Among*, is almost done but not quite yet) have become more and more hybrid. *Beyond Repair*, for instance, is a bunch of short prose pieces arranged into a form not unlike a book of poems. And *Beginner's Guide* did much the same, though it mixed poems, prose poems, and prose. And again, for *In & Among*. The pieces themselves—I call them “encounters”—often work like prose poems. And the books work as collages, or quilts, with the short forms woven together, or cobbled together, around themes and currents. So, people may read them as micro memoir or prose poems or dispatches. I am fine with any or all.

I should add that when I say “hybrid” I'm also referring to a mash-up of forms, or a collection of forms, or a weaving together of modes and genres and styles—bringing writing and visual work together on the same page, for instance, or collaborating on a project with other artists and writers and musicians.

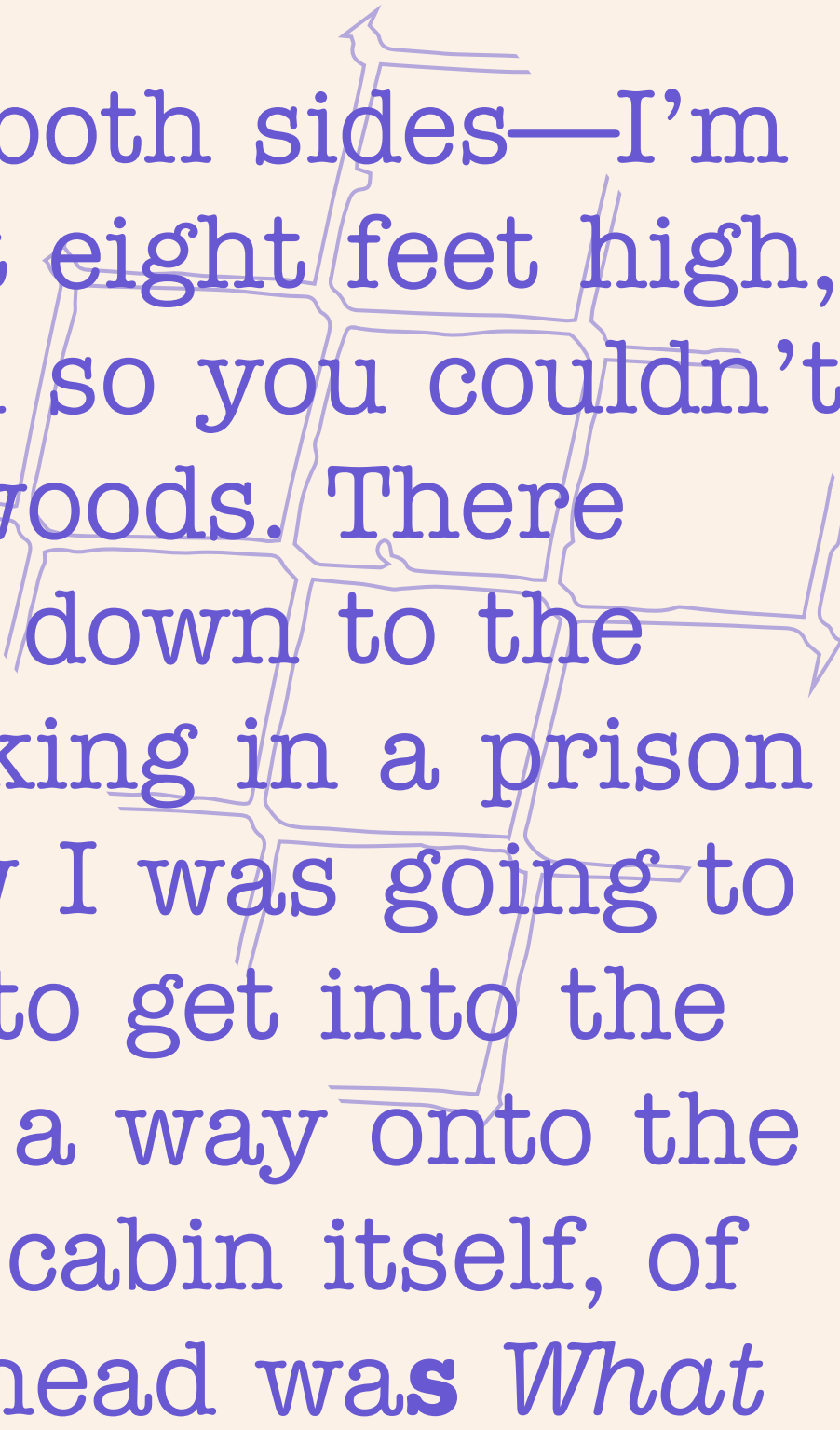
Increasingly I see my life—possibly all life—as an act of collage-making. One big stitching together of moments, revelations, memories (not to mention dream life and daydreams) that reside inside or alongside friendships, loves, flirtations, feuds, misunderstandings, accidents, prolonged silences...to be in and among...to dance inside the collage of life—that is my most prescient desire now. Heading toward 60, with a son about to turn 20, and parents in their early 80s, with friends and mentors falling sick or dying, with the world seemingly falling apart at the seams...I turn to the old standbys: staying present, opening the heart, paying attention, trying to do some good, working on becoming a better person (husband, father, friend, etc.), to be fully engaged, to give as freely as possible within necessary boundaries. Being there for friends and family while also interacting with and assisting strangers when and where you can. Doing your part. Remembering to be thankful for what life gives you, regardless of the pain and difficulty and disappointment. Being aware of privilege and good fortune and trying to spread the wealth and stay positive. These are the tasks at hand. The work of the creative artist. The collage work, you could say.

**A:** I like this idea of encounters. It makes me think about the many encounters we all have in our day, in our life. I'm curious here about your process. How do you select an encounter to write about?

**S:** Short answer, it selects me. Or I walk into it. Every now and then I sense that what I am experiencing might be good material for a piece and so lean into it a little, maybe try to spice things up with a particular action or reaction. But usually, I just trust that life will place me in interesting moments. What really makes it a viable subject are the thoughts that follow, the connections that my mind makes right after the event. Something that happened earlier that week, say, might chime in some way with what just happened. That's when I head to the desk, or grab a notebook, and do my best to get down the experience, the connections, the insights.

Let me give you an example. I decided to walk along Walden Pond last fall. My wife's parents live about 10 minutes away and I'd never gone. Never really wanted to. But I went in the morning on a not especially nice day, so I hoped to have the place to myself. Not quite, but not busy. When I got down to the lake, I was shocked





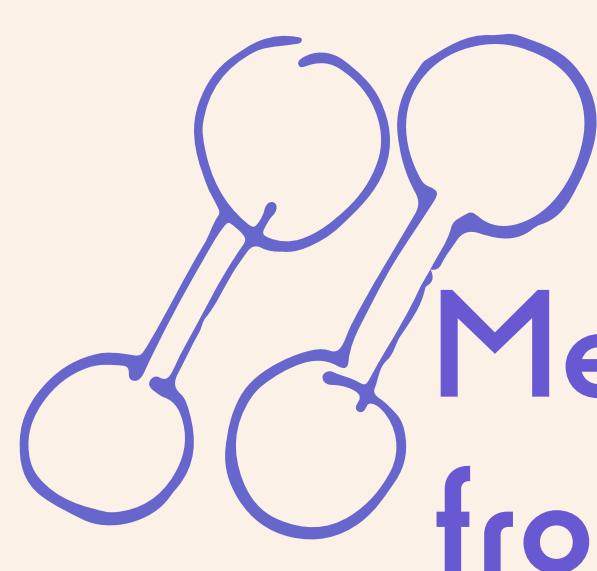
to find the main path fenced on both sides—I'm talking prison-like fencing, about eight feet high, on both sides, enclosing the path so you couldn't get to the shore or walk in the woods. There were a few places you could slip down to the beach, but really it was like walking in a prison yard. Within five minutes I knew I was going to write about it. And I made sure to get into the lake itself, shoes off, and to find a way onto the train tracks—while avoiding the cabin itself, of course. The working title in my head was *What Would Thoreau Do?* Later, when I discovered Freeman's Hill further down the road, and relearned some of the African American history connected to that land, I could see what I wanted to write toward.

A: I can see the importance of reflection and the impact of events presented to you by life. Something that also intrigues me is your awareness that you wanted to write about the experience of Walden. You purposefully seek out the lake and the train tracks.

S: You know, you're right. I was aware I wanted to write about Walden, half-knew as we were getting ready to visit my wife's parents that I might go. But I wasn't sure if the experience would be interesting enough to garner a piece about it. Worth the shot, right? So, in this way, I am being a tourist of sorts, though a snobby one with peculiar requirements. I want to say an anti-tourist, but that's giving myself too much credit. More like a tourist with contrary wishes...

Walker Percy explores these ideas in his weird but wonderful essay "The Loss of the Creature." (Which you can find easily on Google or whatever search engine cult you belong to.) And Jack Turner has an amazing piece called "The Maze & Aura," a chapter in his weird and wonderful (and at times maddening) book *The Abstract Wild*, which among other things delves into the ruinous nature of human curiosity and our desire to *own* our experiences. But I am drifting again...

Ever since I began writing these encounter pieces, I felt I have been searching out *necessary* interactions. But as I have moved out of long-term recovery mode—after a major car wreck—and then the subsequent PTSD, the subject matter has required more effort to search out. At first, I found myself inside "micro" moments. I started to witness micro aggressions (and try to avoid perpetrating them!) and was observing cultural rifts and awkward misunderstandings. Strange, I know, but less so if you think of it like being a reporter. (I am no *real* reporter, but maybe in the vein.)



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**Memory is so wildly divergent from camera footage, right? Or is it? I have always sensed that the body can work as both a camera and a film processing machine; dreams and daydreams and even our random thoughts are basically film stock.**

I was embedded only because I couldn't stop myself from having these encounters. But now, well into the third book, I am in a sense *hunting* the experiences. Which brings me back to your question, which isn't a question but an observation. *To purposefully seek out.*

A: You're an active agent shaping the experiences life is presenting. You're making things happen that you'll later then write about. I'm thinking hypothetically now...how far would this go? Would you say or do something in the moment because of how it will shape the story later—a kind of writing the physical world?

S: I love this question. And it scares me a little. But then I remember what Geoff Dyer said in an interview about not worrying too much about mixing fiction and nonfiction. He says something to the effect of his life not being important enough for it to matter, so the stakes are low. (Like me, he's interested first and foremost in telling a good story.)

And I think of someone like Ted Conover who purposefully embeds himself in worlds in order to write about them from the inside out—he becomes a prison guard at Sing Sing for a year, or rides the rails with "hobos," or drives a taxi in Vail. He's disguising himself, or holding back his full identity, in order to engage in a specific world and report back on it. It's embedded journalism with a twist.



I don't go that far. And if I were practicing that in my day-to-day life it would be a little creepy, no? I'd be play-acting in my own life.



An example. I wrote this piece called "Seattle Art Fair" about an afternoon visit to the, wait for it, Seattle Art Fair, with my brother and his partner, Julie. I had a good time, but part of the good time was being critical and occasionally snarky about the experience itself. The worst possible combination: critic-tourist. But we all do this from time to time. A kind of setting yourself apart, or above, in an attempt to keep your integrity (or so you tell yourself). Or simply being snooty.

I ended up cutting out Willy and Julie from the piece in order to free them of my own little melodrama. And I reworked the piece a few months later so that this brand of self-awareness and cultural critique was on even more show. I'm not sure it works.

A: I'd like to return to this idea of a hybrid approach. When you're working with a memory in this hybrid approach, do you find any tension between the accuracy of the facts of an experience and the truth of that experience?

S: I believe in the power of the subjective first person "I." And I believe equally in the necessity of a working, high-functioning Bullshit Meter. Can't trust the first without the second.

But I'd to push a little into this implied difference—accuracy vs. truth. What's accurate? How exactly? To whom? And the same goes for truth. Your truth? My truth? And what's the difference between the two?



Have you seen the video footage of Tyree Nichols' murder? It's horrendous. Disgusting. But the footage from the overhead camera placed on the street corner seems to me to embody both accuracy and truth. It's rare. You see what those cops did, and you see the consequences. It's accurate and true because it is objective and without spin. That young man's death is truly heartbreaking. Senseless. And that senselessness is captured in the footage in real time. The cop's bodycam footage is equally terrifying, but there's nothing accurate or truthful in those chaotic flashes. I mean they are accurate and truthful in their own way because they capture the moment, but they are ultimately undecipherable. But the on-high vantage and the evidence of the surveillance footage is lock-tight. Guilty, guilty, guilty.

But I have drifted far afield. Where were we? Memory is so wildly divergent from camera footage, right? Or is it? I have always sensed that the body can work as both a camera and a film processing machine; dreams and daydreams and even our random thoughts are basically film stock. As are the things we experience, take in, record. The body takes snapshots of all of it—or maybe it's Super 8 footage—and the brain is the lab (and probably the gut is too, but that's above my paygrade) where it all gets processed. And it leaks out all over the place. No memory is pure or constant or immutable. One memory can be jumbled together with another, or with some intense experience. It's kaleidoscopic.

So, when we sit down to write about a memory, or through it, we're contaminating everything with yesterday's encounters and last night's dreams and the song on the radio and the Proustian smell that wafts through the window. It's a complete shit show. That is, it's a shit show if what you're aiming for is accuracy. Get ye to a science lab for that shit! And truth? Dang, maybe you should go to confession or get your tarot cards read or try TM.

I guess what I am trying to say is that I don't really worry about truth and accuracy when it comes to memory. It's either good material for the story or not. I must sound more than a little crazy. *You asked!*



A: I'm interested in this idea of good material for a story. As someone who embraces the subjective first person and is focused on or motivated by considerations other than accuracy and truth, what is good material and what do the stories that this good material contribute to do?

S: Good material...hmmm...I seem to have backed myself into a corner. Let me flip this around and look at the problem from the vantage of the reader. The imagined reader, of course. Let's say one of my pieces is in a journal and this hypothetical reader (most likely a writer him or herself) is flipping through or scrolling down and stops on my piece. Maybe the title captures their fancy. They start reading.



They get four of five sentences in and hesitate. *Keep reading? Move on? Skip to the end to see how it turns out?* I make most of my decisions as a reviser with that hypothetical moment in mind. I want the reader to keep reading and feel the need to get all the way to the end. (Which is maybe why I write such short pieces.)

When I compose, I am trying to get the scene right and be as accurate as I can in describing and interpreting what happened. **B**ut when I revise, I want the work to hold a form and have an energy, to carry a spark, so the reader doesn't walk away. So maybe what is good material for the composer is not the same thing as good material for the reviser. Or maybe it's the same material but what makes it "good" is what changes. Is that even possible?

I have brought myself back to this idea of accuracy and truth, haven't I? Let me try again. In "Seattle Art Fair" I wanted to be accurate about a phenomenon and didn't mind bending the truth to get there. Maybe it's some sort of authenticity I am shooting for. Or a desire to capture the full range of complexity inherent in any human interaction. Wait, hold on, my bullshit meter is going off...

A: Let's explore material in a different light. Talk to me more about bringing writing and visual elements together. How do you make decisions about what to bring together and how to bring them together?

↳: It seems this is another example of being selected or being tapped on the shoulder by inspiration. Though, thinking twice, maybe it's more about being open to possibilities during the creative process—the composition stage, in particular, but also at times during revision. That is, re-vision. Again, let me give a few examples...

First, during composition. At some point soon after my father's death—he was young, just 55, and died suddenly of a stroke or a heart attack—I realized that the book I was writing (a memoir about divorce and being a child of divorce and how that affected my relationship with my partner, Ali) now had my father at its center. His death had moved to the forefront. And I needed to in a sense create a portrait of him, both as a young father in the 60s and 70s, but also as the "famous" poet he became who lived in Manhattan and taught at Columbia and City College and wrote poems. It didn't take long to turn to the few photos I had of him—as well as the plethora of photos of him out in the world. There was one in particular taken a few years before he died (maybe just the year before) in which his face was split into two competing emotional stances. One side was sad and tragic, and in the other his eye twinkles and a smile is forming in the corner of his mouth. It seemed to capture his spirit perfectly—the different sides of him at play in real time—and I realized that using that photo as a tool, writing off that photo, was the way in.

Second, during revision. Above I talk about writing encounters. I also try to capture aspects of those encounters as snapshots on my camera phone. So, it's often the case that I have this weird, arty shot taken in or around the moment/encounter I have written about. With the Walden piece, I had taken a shot of a little compass I had in my pocket, held it up so it loomed huge in the shot with a sliver of Walden Pond behind. Up to this point, we're still in composition mode. Just being in the moment and creating stuff—photos, dispatches, poems, Instagram fodder. But about halfway through the process of putting together *Beyond Repair*, I realized that I could select a dozen or more of those shots and spread them out *in and among* the dispatches. That they could become another kind of encounter. And they could also help me structure and balance what had become a mosaic of short forms. And soon after that I started using quotations in a similar vein. When that patterning became clear, I knew I had the book right.

A: I'm struck by the intuitive nature of what you're describing and by the role that emotional juxtapositions play in creating structure for a piece of writing. Are there feelings or juxtapositions of feelings that you look for, gravitate towards, or trend toward avoiding?

↳: I am a big fan of mixed emotions. Why be certain about something when you can experience a plethora of attitudes and responses? It's the poet in me. A striving for "negative capability"? I am partially joking here, but not entirely. (See what I mean?) *Partially joking* because I can see the ridiculousness in the statement "I am a big fan of mixed emotions" and *not entirely* because it happens to be true.



The lines from Joni Mitchell’s “Song for Sharon” have just now risen up in my head: “But I’m a fool when love’s at stake/ Because I can’t conceal emotion/ What I’m feeling’s always written on my face.”

(A funny association, if you think about it. She’s talking about something else here. But something about these lines spoke to my subconscious. This might be the intuition you’re talking about. I trust **my** gut and my ear and my dream life, and I trust what happens naturally and without much thought. Trust that **it** might be interesting, that is, not that it is always right. “First thought, best thought” is an easy maxim to misinterpret.)

I love jazz music, collage art, and flow sports like basketball and soccer because they emphasize a sort of integrated attention—absorptive intelligence at fast speeds—that can create a call-and-response in the moment. An engaged listening and a collaborative impulse both. I didn’t know at first that was why I love **these** things, but over time it has become obvious. It’s about the groove.

**A:** I can see a connection, feeling-wise, between your work and a love of jazz. That makes a lot of sense to me. I can immediately think of examples of the musicality of your language and rhythm within and between prose poems in *Beyond Repair* especially. As part of this interview, I asked if you’d be open to a collaboration with two musicians. You generously provided 9 recordings of your *Dear Virgo* poems from *Beginner’s Guide to a Head-on Collision*. I’d love to hear what that experience was like for you and your response to the work of Too Hands and Joshua Dumas?

**S:** I’d love to! But where to start?! What these two composers have done is really quite extraordinary. And wild.

I wrote those poems not too long after a major car wreck. I was trying to recover and was struggling, with depression mostly, but **also** with growing PTSD. The poems became a way for me to address **myself** inside this fragile and self-hating state. I found a way to talk to myself in this mock astrology voice, to give myself advice, berate myself, and, eventually, come to terms and forgive myself for all my shortcomings. Really, quite healing. After the book was out, I had a chance to work with the Talking Book folks in Asheville in recording an audio book. They had this sweet little studio with superb sound quality. **So**, when you asked me to send something along, those Dear Virgo pieces seemed like a good idea.

I had no idea how they were used or to what effect. I didn’t know how they were going to be combined **with**, or backed by, music. Had no idea that the words themselves would be *turned into* music. Just stunning. I hope you can provide a few of those pieces here. You really have to listen to **them** to have the experience.

But what I can say now is that both composers/musicians created original, quirky music. Industrial at times, video-game-like at times, soundtracks for some strange movie for which these Dear Virgo poems become voice over. I can’t wait to play some of these pieces on my radio show and, hopefully, to play them in front of a small crowd during a poetry reading. I **think** it will add an intriguing layer to the experience.

**A:** Thank you, Sebastian for **talking** with me about your work.

Dear Virgo

Track 1

Track 2

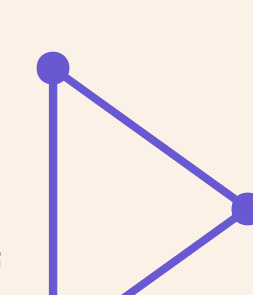
Track 3

Track 4

Track 5



[Tap here to listen on mobile.](#)



JOSHUA

DUMAS

Joshua Dumas is a composer, new media, and sound artist in Brooklyn. He scores dance, theatre and film; creates algorithmic compositions; makes glitch art and digital video; and creates installation and sound work; often at the intersection of technology with social and ecological justice. [Learn more about Joshua.](#)

TOO

HANDS

Too Hands is a musician and composer from Oakland, California.

[Learn more about Too Hands.](#)