

ODD

CHARLES P. RIES

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## A PERFECT PLACE

I like to disappear into my head where it  
doesn't cost much to be alone. I see a horizon  
in the distance lying between the vistas  
of my temples - spreading from my left ear  
to my right ear.

In here I astro project, read people's thoughts  
and see the future. In here I bring the dead back  
to life and turn my tears to snowflakes.

And while the weather is 70 degrees and sunny  
*in here*, it's quite another story out there where  
a suicide bomber kills for religion and we go to  
war for oil. It's all higgledy piggledy, out there.

In sleep, my mind becomes unpredictable.  
The oddest things rise up and collide. Things I  
could not imagine in my day mind - tea pots  
chase Sister Agnes wearing a red cocktail dress round  
the altar. A bluebird whispers to me in Spanish as  
we walk the rings of Saturn.

It's a vast cine plex between my ears. A world teeming  
with perfect lovers and sleeping demons. A theater in  
the round where I view my life against the movie screen  
God attached to the backside of my eyeballs.

## **WATCHING A RIVER FLOW**

The Third Street river is flowing cool  
and slow. It's high and tight on Friday night.

Bum walks by imitating the hype  
and clean...but smelling like a bar floor.  
He's listening...to something on the  
D Battery he's pressed to the side of his head.  
It's not a tune - he's not humming.  
It's not a prophetic vision - he's not glowing

Bag lady dances near the dumpster looking like  
a helium balloon. She's the gravitational center  
of a plastic bag she wears for warmth. A planet  
stuffed full of bathroom tissue and old newspapers.

She's humming...something too.  
In her mind she hears a hit parade.

Damp and 50 degrees doesn't prevent Ms. Candy  
Cane from showing off 80% of her six foot frame  
with only 8% body fat. Her boyfriend looks nervous  
holding this long, lanky love stick. Worried she  
might float away like tissue in a soft breeze.

Bums and bunnies drift past me like minstrels in a  
marching band. The river is leading me downstream.

## **POETS NOVA**

Our thoughts are like dancers, two  
inter-mingled, co-existing electrons  
spinning around the same nucleus.  
Our hearts, the pulsars at the center of  
this rich, red, universe. Roses clinched  
between orbiting lips that circle a black  
planet obscured by an eclipsing moon.  
I wonder if wishing sets thoughts in motion,  
causing invisible ripples in the unseen?  
Ripples that carry our secrets to God?

I consider all these things from my bar stool,  
the poet's throne. A magical chair with roots  
that grows limbs and a mind of its own.

## **YOU NEVER LEFT**

After you died, I kept you near.  
I brought you with me to parties.  
I placed you in the trunk of my car,  
close to my CD changer and the  
music we loved - together.

I felt cheated to be left with only  
memories of you. You filled so much  
space. A nature so luminous it lit the  
dark river path we walked along that  
autumn before you left me - alone.

So I'll keep you and set you on the  
table during poker night, or next to my  
pillow as I sleep, or amidst the floral  
arrangement at the museum ball.

"You look lovely in brass and silver  
tonight. Is your lid screwed on tight?  
Would you mind if I shake you baby,  
pop your top and sprinkle you on my  
Caesar salad?"

"Just look at them looking. They're all green  
with envy. I'm with the prize. One whose  
beauty they all wish they could possess."

I think I will keep you with me forever.

## STARS SUSPENDED FROM BRANCHES

My grandfather often told us that on the day of his birth they put him in the corner to die when he, the weaker of two scrawny twins, came into the world. "But I didn't die. Here I am," he laughed. His brother died a few days later. Funny how death works.

Shortly after my father died, my mother announced that she would soon be passing, and eleven months later with a slight smile on her lips, she released her final worry and said good-bye. Death was not in the room. My mother didn't believe in death.

At middle age I stand tonight on the field where we played 10,000 soft ball games as children. Where I called my brother the longest litany of swear words my ten year old mouth could spit out. I am standing here looking at the sky trying to remember something.

Maybe stars are the souls of the glimmering dead, or perhaps meteors are the tear drops of souls soon to be returned. Souls like me who dread their plunge back into life's unpredictable sea.

But tonight I mainly think of my grandfather Peter. Who at 94 could laugh about the day he chased death from his door. He didn't believe in death. He died sweetly with a smile on his lips just as my mother did.

As a small boy, I sit under the Elm tree that spreads protecting arms over my grandparents' cream city brick home. I watch my grandmother as she cleans her attic. Hurling, tossing the accumulated treasures of a life time out the garret window high above me. Beneath her, and before me, rise a pile of memories, treasure and heartache.

"I'm cleaning up. Clearing out. Getting ready to leave," she says, in that succinct way she spoke about everything important. "*For what?*" I wondered, until eight months later she died.

Someday it will be my turn to die, and when it is, I will laugh, clean my attic, and cast away my last worry. I will await release into an ocean of night where stars hang suspended from the branches of a massive Elm tree and souls who've returned home swing for eternity, shedding tears for the living.

## THE MOON WAS JANUARY IN WISCONSIN

“Damn, damn, damn it’s cold!” I heard a guy four up from me say.

“Hey, no complaining. If the girls can take it and so can you,” came a muffled reply three behind me that shivered its way through the frigid air from beneath a parka and a ski mask.

I was in line with the 5:30 a.m. wake up club waiting for the Rec-Plex to open its damn doors because we (the regulars) were freezing our asses off.

We’re from the land of *No Complaining*. Here is where the weather defines you, molds you, silences you.

As kids we’d wrap ourselves in ten layers of clothes, leaving only our eyeballs exposed to the snow and the chill. After 30 minutes of dressing, we’d be pushed out the door like paratroopers being dropped into enemy territory. “And don’t come back for an hour,” we’d hear our mother’s voice trail off in the distance as the howling wind became the only audible sound. The four of us bounded out onto a great, frozen, wind-swept planet whose landscape we used to call our back yard. We were Apollo 7. This was our moon walk.

At dusk, as the light grew dim and dinner time neared, we pounded on the space shuttle door and asked permission to enter - fearful that our hour had not yet expired. The benevolent silhouette of our commander appeared, shrouded in a golden light, emanating the thousand scents from the outpost kitchen. She permitted us to enter the lunar capsule, warm protection from a frozen planet.

## **60 DEGREES OF SEPARATION**

When winter gives way to 60 degrees  
we pause and wait for temperate betrayal.  
Not trusting spring or her herald,  
a winged red-breasted messenger. After all,  
she might just be winter in sheep's clothing.  
But our blood knows, and our hearts know,  
and the sap that has settled in our feet know  
as it gradually rises to a groin, which has  
grown as cold as January.

We sense the nuance of spring arriving.  
The sun bends our winter shadows shorter  
until a solar equinox sends them into hibernation.  
Shadows disappearing into summer vacation.

But today I feel a tingle between my legs.  
I expand with release, and the resurrection  
of loves promise. I am born again in  
spring, when snow is sent running under  
ground, and we are liberated from our  
long pants.

## ONCE AGAIN

Once I was a blade of grass and the breeze passed above me and rubbed against me, bending me. *“Such freedom,”* I thought. *“To be a breeze. To soar high above and close to the ground, to be rootless in air.”*

Once I was a crow and I fought for the food I could find. I sat in a great Oak Tree and surveyed the fields that stretched around me in all directions. Fields like pastured banquet tables that fed what I fought for or found. *“Oh, to be an Oak Tree, sucking sustenance effortlessly through a matrix of soda straws spread invisibly beneath the earth.”*

Once I was a human, I had complex thoughts and confusions. I yearned for wealth and love and power and good looks. All this yearning tired me and gave me migraine headaches. Headaches so vast and out of control they robbed my sleep and made me vomit. And as I lay on my couch, half in, half out of awareness, from the sleeping pills and pain killers, I remembered myself as a blade of grass turning my side to the sun and my tongue to the rain and my roots to China, and I ached to be simply green again.

## **BETWEEN the TIMES**

When one thing  
ends and before  
the next begins.

It is best to  
fill this time,  
a bridge  
that arches  
over the end  
and toward a  
beginning,  
with silence.

If we walk  
patiently  
wakefully  
eyes wide  
ears poised  
tongue still  
during this  
silent time,  
even a leaf  
descending  
downward  
will shout  
words of  
wisdom.

## **YOU GOT ME**

I don't understand it all  
the days as they change -  
the rise and the fall of joy.

I don't understand the  
jerks and the drunks,  
the long conversations  
about, "what's it all about?"

I don't understand why  
I feel rescued in your arms  
yet want to flee - later to return.

I don't understand how we  
drop out of the womb, exactly  
the way we will be - already  
quick, slow witted or restless.

But as this beer lightens my thoughts  
I see a mysterious order to a universe  
that I just don't understand.

## **KILLING SEASON**

I did what I had to do. I had no choice. I was the son of the man who raised them. From kittens in May to an early death in November. Our mink dressed the fashion elite. We cared for our animals like they were our furred children.

We gave them a good short life and a quick painless death. We'd drop them like quarters into a wooden box containing cyanide powder and wait a few minutes until they expired, slowly, silently, into eternal sleep.

We didn't always kill them that way. We used to break their necks. But it took a big man many hours to break 10,000 necks each pelting season. So we changed with the times and went with cyanide. This allowed me, at fourteen, to become the chief executioner.

I wasn't thoughtless. It never became like breathing or picking corn. I'd run wheel barrows full in to my father who peeled their skin off and readied them for New York furriers who'd select the best for full length coats.

My prolific ability at killing 40,000 mink over four seasons left me hanging when I filed for *Conscientious Objector* status with my draft board. They asked me, "If you had no qualms about killing thousands of mink, how come you have a moral problem with killing the enemies of your country? I mean, killing is killing, ain't it son? Aren't you just a natural born killer?"

The purity of their logic confused me. I had always been an absolutist, like those Jain monks who see God in an ant. Who, when inadvertently stepping on a beetle see a sentient being crushed to death.

If I could kill mink, why not men?

## SOURCE MATERIAL

It just hits you between the ears. The lady kissing her poodle. The young man crying alone at the airport. The big breasted blonde in skin tight lycra pants and three inch heels carrying white angel wings.

I'm on alert for these moments out of time. Moments of chartreuse against black velvet.

Catching the early flight to LA, I stop in the men's room to wash the morning news ink off my fingers when I see yet another chartreuse moment. An overweight, gray-haired guy in a faded wool plaid jacket, wearing one of those winter hats with flaps, taking a crap while parked like a monk in meditation.

I stop and stare, viewing him through a wide open handicapped stall, head down, pants dropped to the ground, deep in concentration. The world passing him by does not exist, for he is securely reposed. He is one - with something.

I take a mezzanine seat at the sink directly across from this wonder, "This guy doesn't mind sharing his private moments," I think. "Maybe he has an open door policy?" He's no exhibitionist, lurking through the airport in a raincoat. He's just going about his business as a free citizen of the USA.

He buckles up and flushes his masterpiece down the poop shoot.

30,000 feet above Kansas City I can't get him out of my head. A chartreuse moment?

## **WHEN PENIS WALKED THE EARTH**

*(Milwaukee Journal Sentinel December 2, 2003)*

I never thought of it as evolving. At least not like this.  
Never thought about when it first raised it's proud little head.

But a 425-million year old fossil found in Herefordshire, England changed all that. The oldest record of an animal that was unarguably male made me stop and take stock. A tiny crustacean, only two-tenths of an inch long - with an unmistakable penis.

They christened it *Colymbosathon Eplecticos* which means "swimmer with a large penis."

Scientists say it had copulatory organs one-third the length of its body. Wow. Makes a guy sit back and think about all the evolutionary outcomes. The cars we'd drive or the clothes we'd wear.

Monkeys became men.  
Fish learned to fly.  
Penises roamed prehistoric earth.  
I guess some things never change.

## **SEED OF GREATNESS**

*(Milwaukee Journal Sentinel 2/7/03)*

Some thought of him as a throw back to the Cretaceous Period. A yellow belly bottom dweller who in the midst of spring's spawning season could leap like a porpoise.

We tagged him in Lake Winnebago in 1978 and named him Mike. He swam down the Fox River, over 14 dams and locks and into the Great Lakes. Mike was to Sturgeons what Christopher Columbus was to Italy. The outsider, astronaut, citizen philosopher who followed his own stream.

Washing up on Sandusky Bay in Lake Erie, Mike was ignominiously found dead on arrival in the grip of a commercial fishing net. Wisconsin/Ohio wildlife authorities concluded his death was the result of spawning stress at 100 years of age. He had wandered nearly 400 miles as the crow flies from a lake his species was never known to leave.

God bless fish like Mike, or men like Mike, or reptiles like Mike. For out of the million aberrant matings and progeny they produce, a few mutant seeds grow wilder than the rest. Seeds that carry the promise of leading a flock, a school, or a human race out of their pond and into a vast uncharted sea.

## **READING OCTAVIO PAZ**

*(Early Poems 1935-1955)*

Mexican poets often leap from sidewalk  
to roof top. One foot on the earth and  
the other on a cloud of cotton candy.

They gaze at death and see dancing skulls  
with smiles stretching as far and wide as  
the Milky Way.

I close my eyes and see within myself a naked boy  
sitting beneath a vast pecan tree. From its branches  
hang stars. This canopy of shade becomes my  
universe.

Carlos blows into Olivia's ear a love whisper,  
sending a waterfall of kisses cascading out her  
mouth onto brown soil where white flowers erupt.

A prisoner of my imagination, I turn to face myself  
and shout, "who's there?" The Mexican poets have  
impregnated my fiction with new possibilities.

## **RETURN HOME**

I took a vacation and traveled to the furthest place  
I could find. A place lacking the familiar landmarks  
and faces.

I spent the first year walking slowly around  
the rings of Saturn chanting Eileen.

I spent the second year in nine cathedrals waiting  
for a message from God.

I spent the third year in bed with Rosa Marie  
who chattered Aztec secrets in my right ear  
and sent monarch butterflies out my left.

And then I returned home to familiar faces, family  
and friends and thanked them all for being so steadfast.

## **EROTIC GEOGRAPHY**

Reclining after sex, I turn toward the south as day's final light floods in over the hips and breasts of my Mexico. Coal black hair, red lips and brown eyes. She satiates me into silence and I willingly dissolve into her olive colored thighs. A full woman whose face glistens like polished copper in morning light.

A soft still snow falls around us and, but for her lips, we would be invisible in a cloud of white. Dry gullies, morning mists and dusty streets speak to us in the soft whispers of old lovers, who communicate more with raised eyebrows than young lovers do in breathless paragraphs.

An image of Our Lady of Perpetual Tears appears on the pavement before us in an oil stain looking curiously like Our Lady of Guadeloupe. I kneel down before it and kiss my virgin queen in her guise of street black stain.

Mariachis in silver studded, skin tight black pants sing us a hymn and then a lover's ballad for five pesos. Angels whisper to us in Spanish as Mexico slips her tongue between my cold white lips and offers me sweet water from her full ample breasts.

## **FEATHERS FOR CARLOS**

I went to my first singles mixer last tonight. Or rather, I entered the room that overlooked the patio, where singles fluttered about like feathers from one shoulder to the other.

It was a snow storm of feathers, rising, falling, landing, leaning, seeking a soft safe place to rest. As I looked out over that patio of desires, where hearts emit silent but detectable love calls, I felt myself reconsider whether I want to join this sea of seekers. Maybe my heart is whole and not in need of one-true-love or her expectant arms of warm salt water.

Arms in which to float and wander; bobbing gently - up and down, and, up and down - as I gaze into an August sky on a day so humid the rain falls like mist sprayed from a gigantic squirt bottle held in the invisible hand of a water god.

I considered all this as I stood there looking, wondering whether I should step into that yearning river. And I turned and decided to go home.

It was just cowardice on my part. I told myself, I'll perfect my "oh-sweet-baby" come on line and return at another time to seek out the most listless of these feathers. I'll then hold her in my finger tips and ask her to marry me, and we'll live happily ever after in the pink hallow of my soft warm hands.

## VALENTINE

They're complex  
these things we  
build our hearts around.  
These things we construct  
out of lovers leaps.

Communicated in the  
silent language of -  
    how two bodies fit together  
    a familiar smile  
    a scent of remembering  
Souls recognizing reunion.

These are the mysteries of love.

A cat bugler creeps  
between two strange hearts  
and finds only their yearning.  
And looking into their  
underwear drawer discovers  
their lust. And in smelling the  
insoles of their journey together  
the miles they've walked.

And through seasons and  
doubts and changes of fashion  
they discover their relationship,  
unearthing a heart painted in a  
bold brush stroke and the message,  
*it has been better to love.*

## I LOVE

Your grilled cheese sandwiches under the full March moon, as Jupiter draws near and we witness its unblinking eye hovering above the horizon at early dusk.

The way your lip is slightly twisted upward at one corner making your mouth look like an irregular right triangle.

Your explanation for washing your bed sheets three times a week, "dust mites."

Your mantric complaint about how hard it is to dress well at 20 below zero in the midst of a blizzard. Yet refusing to compromise for the sake of warmth instead sludging, steadfast, like an Armani foot soldier through road salt, snow drifts and sleet. Saying, "some things will not be compromised!"

Your method of slowly moving, methodically passing through the house...dusting, resetting souvenirs, just so. You, the feng shui master of knickknacks and fashion magazines, creating a perfect order in the universe of our life.

## POINTS OF VIEW

You asked for the truth.  
And I told you, "I *think* I love you."

You were looking for  
a different kind of truth.

And that's where we get tangled up.  
Disagreeing about gradations.  
You certain.  
You wanting.  
Me avoiding.  
Often misplacing.

And the hunter asks the meditating  
monk, "Did you see a deer pass this way?"  
And the monk replies, "Yes," and sends  
the hunter off in the wrong direction.

A greater good lie.

Truth is a murky pond  
A beacon for the mystic  
And bacon for the liar.

## WHAT IT ISN'T

I used to think love was  
the electrical charge that passed  
between the groins of strangers  
searching for perfect union.

Later I thought love, mature love,  
was recognizing the abundance  
of space that circled one certain  
someone. And drowning in this  
tranquil pond of silence and rest.

Still later, after my first divorce,  
I lowered my expectations, as  
experience and life tends to make  
us do, and felt friendship was love's  
seed. If nurtured, it ignites into  
passionate flames – maybe.

After my second divorce, I  
wondered if it was only the brief  
predictable space between two lips,  
two half opened eye lids. Just before  
day disrupts the clarity of the groggy.

Now I realize how illusory  
and without definition love is.  
Transparent, weightless, out  
of time, unattainable. A sun  
that rises only to burn hope  
from hearts exhausted in  
the act of anticipation.

## SCHNOOK

I should have ended it two years ago.  
But I am a lazy lover.  
Lover of predicable routine.  
Thinking it might grow into fat  
happy romance.

You wanted to live together.  
I wanted one night a week.

You wanted me to be present  
and bend to your needs.

I wanted to remain true to my  
lazy nature.

I guess that makes me opportunistic.  
The kind of guy women talk about  
when they recite the ways in which a  
dog is better than a boyfriend or  
the many uses for the pickle they keep  
in their refrigerator.

Sometimes I think only another man  
can see what divinity doth lurk in  
the heart of a schnook.

But still I should have known.  
I should have ended this fantasy  
that you and I would live happily  
ever after - sooner.

Kiss a frog  
get a prince in pond water.

## **INFLUENCES OF LIGHT**

It happens each early summer.  
She backs off her anti-depressants,  
thinking more UV rays can substitute  
for her drugs. She comes out swinging,  
determined to reclaim what is  
rightfully hers.

For a day or a week she's a warrior,  
but quickly fades into a humble,  
tumble, pile of bewilderment. (It's  
hard to sustain determination on  
just sunlight. Warmth alone isn't  
enough to help you think straight.)

Following her short freedom flight,  
she becomes earth bound, a cloud  
that hovers low against a county trunk  
road - a vaporous curtain that flattens  
and abducts you.

But you drive on, and eventually pass  
through it, through her. And bring her to  
a small hill where you ask her to look  
a great distance and remember tomorrow  
or yesterday or her true nature with the ease  
of her winter fresh mind.

## **BLESS ME FATHER FOR I HAVE SINNED**

I was restless with the weight of ideas that flooded me and awaited their release in the red rain of my journal.

I stacked five stones on a farmer's fence post to create a monument to my existence that only cows and plow jockeys would see.

I flung myself off a quarry ledge high above a deep blue pool and imagined it was a concrete street, wishing for the end.

I drove my Ford pick up over a gila monster that peeled its pancaked corpse off Texas asphalt and chased after me spitting curses in Spanish.

I dropped acid and thought a thin curtain separated me from a world that glittered with diamonds, and angels, and joy, and that my manual Smith Corona type writer was an oracle who revealed ancient truths with the touches of my finger tips.

For all this Father, I ask you forgive me.

## **FLY OF INSPIRATION**

Sometimes when I sit down  
to write I place my fingers  
just above the key board and  
let my mind expand beyond  
the confines of my head.

It's a little relaxation technique  
I do. I fill the whole house with  
my mind and invite those  
'things' floating in the unseen  
to come visit. As I do this I  
can feel myself get a bit light  
headed. Then I remain still and  
wait. Like a frog on a lily pad  
scanning the sky for a fly to eat.

And I wait.

Sooner or later, I see or feel  
something as it comes in for a  
landing. I let it rest on my tongue  
as I try to figure out what it tastes  
like and feels like, and what it might  
become if I spend time with it.  
Usually it will tell me something  
about itself, but more often than  
not it remains a mystery until I  
follow it with my fingers.

## **GOOD NIGHT**

With the weightless hand of night.  
With today having no face or memory.  
I slip into my feathered honey pot.  
Casting lots with the guard of my imagination  
and win, rolling nine straight sevens.  
The stars must be perfectly aligned for such luck.  
I fold today into white cotton linens,  
and close my eyes,  
tumbling away to islands that float in the  
glorious mist of sleep.

## **ODD**

They can't hear it.  
They don't listen to leaves  
in the moon light. The mystical  
whisper of branches rubbing.

Funny what happens to a life  
when trees start talking to you.  
When you hear the voices of your  
garden.