

ODD

New and Selected Poems
By

CHARLES P. RIES

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Charles P. Ries lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. His narrative poems, short stories and poetry reviews have appeared in over ninety print and electronic publications including: *Circle Magazine*, *Wisconsin Review*, *Rockford Review*, *Free Verse*, and *Clark Street Review*. He has received three Pushcart Prize nominations for his writing, and most recently read his poetry on National Public Radio's *Theme and Variations*, a program that is broadcast over seventy NPR affiliates. He is the author of *THE FATHERS WE FIND*, a novel based on memory from which excerpts have appeared in *MusesKiss*, *Write On!/Just Stories*, *Iconoclast*, *Free Verse*, *Toasted Cheese Literary Journal*, *Romantics Quarterly*, *SNReview*, *Thunder Sandwich* and *The Wisconsin River Valley Review*. Ries is also the author of three books of poetry, the most recent titled: *Odd*; which was published by Pudding House Publications in Columbus, Ohio. His fourth book of poetry; *The Last Time* will be published by Dark Side of the Moon Press in Tucson, Arizona, and is slated for release in 2005. He is a member of the board at the Woodland Pattern Bookstore in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

A citizen philosopher, Ries lived in London and North Africa after college where he studied the mystical teachings of Islam called Sufism. In 1989 he worked with the Dalai Lama on a program that brought American religious leaders and psychotherapists together for a weeklong dialogue. It was during this same week that the Dalai Lama was awarded his Nobel Peace Prize. Ries has done extensive work with men's groups and worked with a Jungian Psychotherapist for over five years during which time he recorded five hundred dreams and learned to find the meanings in small things. He is a third degree Reiki healer, and has received advanced yoga training. He now finds mystical insight while drinking brandy old-fashioned sweets and writing in his basement.

Ries has begun work on a second novel titled, *SEEKER*, which will follow his path as a mystic in Morocco, and subsequent floundering while living in Los Angeles. All of which has convinced him of the time-honored wisdom, "wherever you go, there you are" and "this isn't Kansas, Dorothy." He lives and writes in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, with his two daughters, four frogs, two cats, and one salamander on a wooded street along the lazy Menomonee River three doors down from his brother, Joe.

You may find additional samples of his work by going to: <http://www.literarti.net/Ries/> and you may write him at charlesr@execpc.com

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DEDICATION **ST. JOAN OF FARGO**

ORIGINAL COVER ART by Gabriel Ries

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"GOD BLESS THE SMALL PRESS"

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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 Ecplecticicos* 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.

FIVE REVIEWS OF ODD

PHIL WAGNER

Editor, Iconoclast

Mr. Ries is good at taking an everyday scene or moment and hitching it up to a larger issue. Street life becomes like a river. Simple thoughts and feelings turn into quantum and astronomical movement and prayer. As the opening phrase of the first poem say, “I like to disappear into my head...” But what causes the mind to duck into imagination and recall is usually something that happens outside of the head. As if nearly everything that occurs reminds or inspires our musing upon something which may or may not be related (of course this happen most readily when we are more observer than active participant in a moment). As E.M. Forster wrote, “Just connect.”

ODD is a good title for this collection, whose poems note not only the strangeness of the world, its creatures, moments, and paradox – but that here we are, perhaps the only organism capable of being conscious of how odd life is. An odd thing consciousness: it’s where identity (and morality) begins – as individuals, and as species.

Review of Odd

By: Christopher Robin

Editor/Publisher

Zen Baby

Perhaps the reason I relate to this poetry is the author’s inability to relate to the female species and the world. He’s a bumbler with a heart of gold. Though often his observations are right on the money, for one seeming so gentle. “Funny what happened to a life when the trees start talking to you.” (From “Odd). His everyday mysticism is fueled by complicated and/or medicated women, killing minds for a living and relating it to war, LSD, travel, a childhood spent in icy Wisconsin; of course, love and honesty that don’t mince words, and a plea for joy throughout. He may be only human, but I think that is why he is one of the best modern poets today. I can’t say enough good things in this small review. (*Reprinted from Zen Baby #13*)

LAURA STAMPS

Awarding-winning poet and novelist

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Charles P. Ries is the author of two poetry collections, *BAD MONK: NEITHER HERE NOR THERE* and *MONJE MALO SPEAKS ENGLISH*, both published by Foursep Publications. He has written a novel and his work has received two Pushcart Prize nominations. His poems, poetry book reviews, and short stories have appeared in over eighty print and web journals, including Staplegun Press, Free Verse, Pearl, Pitchfork, and Half Drunk Muse.

At first, *ODD* appeared to be a strange title for this exceptionally well-written collection of 28 poems. And the surreal cover illustration seemed more peculiar: a shirtless man with angel wings covering his ears, shadowed by a demon, and struggling to carry a huge head on his back spilling forth a lifetime of worries. But upon finishing this chapbook, I agree the title *ODD* and the excellent illustration by Gabriel Ries are indeed perfect choices.

ODD is actually a saga highlighting the plight of a spiritual pilgrim, a poet whose approach to life is too mentally and emotionally complicated to achieve his goal: spiritual happiness. Unfortunately, the spiritual path requires simplicity. Thus, his dilemma. From the first poem to the last, we follow this complicated man through the maze of his life, encountering bums, bag ladies, barrooms, Spanish beauties, love lost, singles mixers, his first divorce, his second divorce, and a fish named Mike.

Only Ries could expertly handle such a perplexing character, a complex man who sincerely seeks the happiness and joy of the spiritual life, yet fails to realize simplicity is the key to attainment. "I like to disappear into my head where it / doesn't cost too 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 thoughts / and see the future. In here I bring the dead back / to life and turn my tears to snowflakes. // 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."

Even though his goal continues to elude him, he manages to gather quite a few spiritual jewels along the way: "Our thoughts are like dancers, two / inter-mingled, co-existing electrons / spinning around the same nucleus. // I wonder if wishing sets thoughts in motion, / causing invisible ripples in the unseen? / Ripples that carry our secrets to God?" (POETS NOVA)

"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. " (STARS SUSPENDED FROM BRANCHES)

"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 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." (ONCE AGAIN)

"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." (VALENTINE)

But in the end revelation strikes, and the poet realizes spiritual joy can only be found in simplicity, which Ries expresses beautifully in the Taoist-like title poem 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 the trees start talking to you. / When you hear the voices of your / garden." Is the road to spiritual joy really that simple? That odd? Yes, it is.

This is a finely crafted collection of poetry, one that leads the reader through the bewildering ocean of anxiety and melancholy many face during the course of their lives and relationships to the land of hope and light. What a delightful twist that the poet should find this spiritual paradise waiting for him in his own backyard. Ries is not only a talented poet, but also an engaging storyteller, and ODD is the perfect collection for anyone seeking refuge from a world that grows more complicated by the hour.

ALAN CATLIN

Alan Catlin has received 15 pushcart nominations is the author of over 50 books of poetry

Reading the poems in Charles's latest collection, some for the fourth and fifth times, I don't feel the oddness of the title. That is unless you consider the poet as an observer of the world, as a dreamer when awake, as well as when asleep, as the man who hears the voices of his garden, as odd and unusual. That concluding thought/line of this collection brings to mind Miranda's musings in Shakespeare's, *The Tempest*, "of brave new world/ that hath such people in it" or of Marianne Moore's "imaginary gardens with real toads in them."

These are accessible but thoughtful poems. Ries refers to himself observing the world in a down to earth manner striving for something transcendent in "Poets Nova": "I consider these things from my bar stool / the poet's throne. A magical chair with roots / that grow limbs and a mind of its own."

What he sees is the stuff of life: humorous, evocative and nostalgic as in the wonderful "The Moon Was January in Wisconsin" where he likens himself and playmates as children to the lunar astronauts in their layers of space/snow suits being allowed into the warmth of the house as entering a lunar capsule.

Ries does not turn away from the harsher aspects of life as in "Watching a River Flow" where bag ladies dance near dumpsters and bums smell like a bar room floor. When spring arrives he feels the tug of a new found warmth in the loins, shedding long pants and layers, feeling the

rebirth of sexual yearnings. He goes on to celebrate mature, sexual love in poems as "Erotic Geography" where the lover's body is a topographical relief map he joyously explores. Far from being pornographic, the emphasis of his many meditations on sexuality at a "certain age", are thoughtful, tempered by experience and regret, yearnings for love and divorce from it.

Charles has recently largely put aside his poet's pen to work on novels he expects will never see print. What drives us to do these things? The same desire that makes us writers, that makes us human.

Kris Rued-Clark

Assistant Editor / Free Verse

Charles Ries has the heart of a storyteller, and his latest chapbook, *Odd*, builds on the work of his previous two chapbooks, even as it expands into new directions. Like a swimmer testing the water, he seeks new avenues of inspiration, with an imagination that sees souls as stars and pictures Mexico as a lover.

Many characters people his poetry, some of whom he encounters on his meanderings in Milwaukee and Mexico and parts in between, others only he sees, projected "against the movie screen / God attached to the backside of my eyeballs." In the single poem with uncharacteristically short lines, Ries cautions us on the need for patience, so that "even a leaf / descending / downward / will shout / words of / wisdom." In spite of this advice, he seems more at home in an urban setting, and writes with an unjaundiced yet not unkind eye about the misfits and human oddities who populate his home territory of Milwaukee. In "Watching A River Flow" he shows us a bag lady with neither contempt nor pity, but rather a willingness not merely to look, but to see and to make us see what we might otherwise miss. "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."

As a Wisconsin poet, Ries cannot avoid the topics of snow and cold and the craving for spring. But even these subjects are seen freshly through his eyes. "The Moon Was January In Wisconsin," turns into a sweetly nostalgic romp in the backyard when children were still sent outside to play in any weather, by beleaguered mothers who needed time undisturbed to prepare dinner. Winter appears in a love poem, where warmth is sacrificed upon the altar of fashion. "I love 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!" And in "60 Degrees of Separation," spring, portrayed as the reawakening of passion after a long winter's sleep, has the gift of a typical surprising Ries ending, in which "snow is sent running under / ground, and we are liberated from our / long pants."

His work is imbued with the Catholicism of his childhood and the dabblings into Buddhism of someone who came of age in the 1970's. Into this historic perspective, one reads of his youth on a mink farm. He tells of killing mink, and extends that to war, as he confronts a draft board

which questions his request for status as a conscientious objector. “Killing is killing, ain’t it son?” / “If I could kill mink, why not men?”

Most lyrical when the source of his inspiration is Mexico, his Latino identity is Carlos. Reading Octavio Paz leads to stanzas like this: “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.”

Ries writes with bewilderment and wonder of the odd predicaments he finds himself in. Perhaps in none of his poems is he more baffled than in his love poems. He is a man who searches for love without having a clue what it is. “Valentine” as so many of his poems, explores the vagaries of love, acknowledging what a mystery it is, this desire of heart, loin, and common paths walked. In the end he concludes, “It has been better to love.” Yet in “Schnook,” he confesses to being a lazy lover, too lazy to commit, too lazy to break it off. “Points of View,” begins with a troubled love relationship and ends questioning the nature of truth. “Truth is a murky pond / A beacon for the mystic / And bacon for the liar.”

He finds his inspiration from many sources: a man seated Buddha-like in a public toilet, the “Erotic Geography” of Mexico, even the bar stool, which he calls “the poet’s throne.” He writes of waiting for inspiration, “like a frog on a lily pad / scanning the sky for a fly to eat.” “I like to disappear into my head where it / doesn’t cost much to be alone.” And we’re grateful to Charles Ries for opening the window for us to share a glimpse into the world between his ears.

Charles Ries is a troubadour for our times who graces us with stories of the seemingly commonplace. His work sings to us of love found and lost, of what it means to be a man journeying upon the earth at this moment. He weaves a spell, retracing the paths of angels who have descended into perplexing circumstances, but who nevertheless shine with the divinity of the everyday. Having been brought up Catholic, Ries resides comfortably in the realm of angels; and yet he treads the world of ordinary conundrums equally well. His work shines with what it means to be human, reflecting upon and transcending the reality in which he lives.
