

LAMP 2015



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Editorial Statement: LAMP Vision

We live in a time in which vision is darkened to the point that we must walk by faith, seeing only the length of an outstretched arm in front of us. In Revelation we are told that in the future, at the fulfillment of all things, we will no longer need lamps because the glory of God's presence will enlighten all things. For now, though, we see through a glass darkly. And so we need lamps.

This account of the present conditions in which we envision and imagine sets some contours and purposes for what a literary magazine might be. One way forward is to cultivate through a community of literary artists what Ben Nyberg has called "fictive honesty." This fictive honesty entails a commitment to vision that is qualified by truthfulness. It's a posture of devotion, of attentiveness, to existence itself that, whether Nyberg meant it or not, prevents a disjunction between ethics and aesthetics.

That is to say, we are never simply conveying an experience or fictive vision, but we are also inevitably interpreting what we imagine, even while pursuing subtlety. Janet Burroway reminds us that the artist who avoids judgments altogether is in danger of indifference. If the artist does not care, then neither will the reader.

Fictive honesty means that we avoid sentimentality in our imagining of goodness, and we also refuse to equate "seriousness" with relentless grit; put another way, we avoid the fluorescent and pitch black ways of imagination. The excellent artist wrestles with complexity and tension. The tension here is the one between humanizing bleakness and attending to the depths of joy and beauty which are available to us, however dimly, in this life.

In short, this means that all of our imaginative work—including both the darker and the more hopeful—should in some sense be illuminating, or insightful. There are reasons all around us, embedded in the patterns of Creation, to be hopeful about a future in which we will be overcome with light. The more challenging task for the artist than even being transparent about darkness is to catch glimpses of that future now.

This sacramental sense of vision—of seeing the manifold ways in which the world around us mediates God's presence—is mysterious. It is the foundation of creativity and imagination. Calvin Seerveld said that the heart of the aesthetic is allusion. When we—poets, fiction writers, and essayists—allow love to call us to the things of this world, we confess the significance which is shot through the life of the world. We confess that there is meaningfulness to meaning. With words, we present this sacramental vision of all things through allusion, and as such, allude to a Creator.

Packing for Senior Year

Doug Stephens IV

Beyond bud but not yet full-ripe
The vines careen with the wine-weight
Of the rind-hard fruit
– split it with your teeth
 pucker
 for an instant and
 spit
 spit the seeds –

And I hear the supper-call sound, calling
Me to the house, but beyond the house as well,
But I wait, unwilling to go
Until I learn the scuppernong
Secret: to grow round and full
With sweetness, and to always
Smell of clay loam, and piney grass,
And of shoes clustered at the door.





79 Chevy
Mason Moyer

A Father's Song

Mark Tinsley

I've painted these walls twice pink,
waiting for your arrival. Bed sprung,
carpet stained, door jamb cracked, paint
can dabbled with dribble, I make new
what your brothers and sister aged.
Onesied clothes hang in your closet, tagged
and clean. I've hung and rehung them.
Your kick and curl I've seen many times,
ultrasonics proudly displayed, black-white
on the refrigerator. Future father of five,
I am energy like the sun, combustible
and bright-gleaming. I am.



The Summer I Lived a Young Adult Novel

Gabrielle Killough

Each bump of the road jolts through my spine
and shoves me against too many bodies filling space meant for only three.
Nervous chuckles and clumsy jokes from the shy boy
whose lap I attempt to vacate, mingle in the air
with music I know only from my countless journeys in this car.
Down, down through deliciously creepy woods, following familiar dirt roads,
we drive to the rickety dock that is always our destination.
We never seem to do anything but talk and joke.
Boys threaten to push each other in while
girls scold and egg them on in the same breath.
Somehow we always find ourselves migrating
in pairs and groups until we're all lounging
haphazardly in the grass, looking up at the stars
(pretending we're exempt from the cliché)
discussing a future we would much rather forget.



Talamanca

Samuel Kurcab

A flashlight held
To a glass frog's skin,
The beam unveiling
The whole delicate instrument:
The minute glottis, tuned
To pitch and tucked with thrift
Among the organs;
The translucent epidermis,
Snug fit and membranous
Screen for respiration,
The closed system,
The organic prism,
The self-contained maze,
The manifested vitalism.

The steaming forest teemed
With seething growth, trees
Competing for light, fronds
Grown long to find the sun.
It was all too much to catalogue:
The million songs, the caucus
Of caws in the invisible canopy,
The winged profusion, the plumes
Of neon and indigo; the incredible
Crowns and alien casques.
Everywhere she turned the beam
Something moved; eyes closed,
Lithe bodies froze, branches broke,
Some massive creature paused
Its progress in the dark.
The jungle breathed, alive
And wondrous in the humid night.

In the morning she found the cat stiff
With death, out back behind the shed,
Black poison on its lips
Already tar-dry in the torrid sun.
A bad omen: she had woken
To new sounds in the night:
The combat of angry gods
In lawless fracas, two powers

Locked in contest, loud shocks
As the sky split like the jags
Of a cracked crock. The tyrant
Has his rival pinned, the limbs
Bent backward, the sockets popped,
The skin an ague-green. The victor
Gloats, for nothing quits his sphere alive.
He, old incumbent, grins
And tears the body with one snap.
He hefts the carcass in his arms
And flings away each giant bone.
The jungle quakes with the report:
A femur flies across its globe.





Buffalo Pasture Before the Storm
Melissa Perella

Elegy

Jonathan Howard

At 13 my Grandma timed life when her parents divorced
77 years ago,
but today is 8 days since
her first meal of peaches and unsweetened tea in
Genesis Assisted Care

When I was 11
white crochet in a plastic grocery bag
for when she's not around anymore, Grandma said.
Or Mawmaw said, before I could pronounce Grandma.
It's a small baby blanket for my firstborn which I may or may never—

Drowsy gossamer curls repose on a memory foam pillow
and she remarks that through the blinds
the bobwhite is back outside the window



Learning to Wear the Inheritance

Derek Via

“SEE DAREDEVIL HAROLD VIA LEAP FROM A STALLED AIRPLANE 2,000 FT. IN THE AIR,” says the ad from the 1935 Beckley newspaper advertisement. My grandfather was a *real* daredevil, hanging out of airplanes and doing terrifying stunts to wow the crowds at airshows in southern West Virginia. He shot himself in the back of a VW van when my father was thirteen. My grandmother told me he had a constant headache from the time my father was born and that the doctors fixed him on some powerful medicine for years. I’ve always wondered if he was in a coherent state of mind. My family doesn’t much talk about it. When I bring it up, the brothers talk about airplane engines he built, discussing amongst themselves the size of the engine or the year or the color of the airplane. And in many ways, I understand. As John O’Brien says in his book *At Home in the Heart of Appalachia*, “I sometimes think there is a tragedy at the center of every family that never stops reverberating.”¹

My Aunt Sandy is a determined and happy woman. I’ve only known the hair-in-short-curls grandmotherly version, but she was a daredevil too. She used to “walk the wings” of airplanes, a term for being strapped to the lower and upper wings of a tiny biplane. When she was nineteen, her first “walk,” she shocked her father by disobeying and strapping up to the wings of another pilot’s plane. Jim and Harold, her brothers, ran shouting into the room at the airport where my grandfather stood. The pilot was Mel Robinson, a family friend. Her father came out yelling. “Get down from there! Unstrap now!” She wasn’t about to. In a few short minutes, the plane cruised around, even upside down what seemed like feet over their heads, Sandy riding the wings bravely, laughing at the men standing below, I’m sure.

“Ain’t nobody got balance like your daddy,” my uncles always told me, “It’s in our blood.” I always questioned my Via-ness when I wrecked my own motorcycle (some would call it a dirt bike) or when I cried when I couldn’t make it up the steep dirt hills or ones with rocky terrain, but my dad assured me after I zoomed up the hill a few times, “See? You’re a *Via*.” The legacy my grandfather created by building (and wrecking) his own airplanes, flying under bridges, landing on small river islands, and dangling on a rope from the underbelly of an airplane (with no parachute) was being established in the heart and mind of every family member. Even as a teenager, my dad became state champ motocross racer. But how far will history dare to go? If we all carry the push for adrenaline, what does that mean for us all in regards to my grandfather’s death? And why can’t we, together, begin to piece together any of the big questions about what it all means?

I’ve often wondered what it would be like to meet my grandfather. Would I shake his hand or hug his square shoulders? In the pictures, he sits with my

1 O’Brien, “At Home in the Heart of Appalachia.” (New York, NY: Random House, 2001), 210 and 211.

two-year-old father, his black hair slicked down. Large black sunglasses cover his eyes, the part I want to see. When my grandmother was alive, the only thing I remember her saying about him was, “he would have been *so* proud,” as she grinned and looked at me in the way that usually annoyed me, a sulking teenager at the time.

I learned about another local pilot, Five Dollar Frank, who took anyone (I mean anyone) for a flight around New River Gorge for only five dollars. You’d show up, then he’d guide you past his tribute to Senator Rockefeller framed in a toilet seat. He also recited poetry: “What’s your favorite poem? I can quote it,” he’d say. And he could, with magnificent inflection. He wrote a book “It Is This Way with Men Who Fly,” and included a few sentences in a chapter about my grandfather, whom he knew. I didn’t know Five Dollar Frank, but I’ve seen videos of him quoting poetry to guests before flights. I’ve been imagining my grandfather to be something like him—funny and gentle enough, making you laugh and making you terrified to be in the airplane at the same time. I guess there’s a part in all of us that tries to forget the blow of what he did—to soften it. My uncles tell me he would do barrel rolls without warning. It’s my favorite fancy of him.

Sometimes I remember the moments when I’ve been so proud to be a Via. Like when I discovered I could stand on the seat of my dirt bike, turning sharp between the trees and then back down the hill. Or like when my dad had to stop me from driving down to the elementary school where a teacher was being wildly unfair to my little sister. “You don’t mess with *us*,” I told him, like he didn’t know already.

I think of the many stories I’ve heard about my grandfather and then my father—stories almost unbelievable. I think of passing these stories on, keeping it all fresh. But how will I pass on the tragedy? Still tragedy undermines each story. O’Brien comes back: “In a sense, these tales must be retold because they have more to do with who people are and how lives have worked out...”² The facts about my grandfather, his airplanes, his stunts, his death, are part of my family and part of me. They help me know how I fit into this family (even the times I don’t want to) and pioneer who I want to be. I have to relish it all. It’s like slathering Old English on a tattered table—you want it to soak in over time so it holds the shine. I look at my daughter, not even two, and inadvertently apply the same principle to her. “You’re a *Via*,” I say to her as she climbs fearlessly through the jungle of dining room chair legs.

2 O’Brien, “At Home in the Heart of Appalachia.”





Golf Park
Chelsea Francis

Saudade

Wesley Peña

[From the Portuguese; saw•dah•djee; an untranslatable word defined as a vague, constant desire for something that does not and probably cannot exist, a nostalgic longing for someone or something loved and then lost]

We flew to São Paulo, Brazil, on the first anniversary of the September 11, 2001, attacks. We had no concrete reason to fear flying on that particular date, but I was only in third grade, and had read too many books. I feared that leaving on a date so marred by history was a dark omen.

The first flight only carried us from Home Memphis to Houston, neither terrifying nor adventurous. Seems a bit boring, actually, in the remembering.

We traipsed through the airports with a carry-on each, except for my mother, who wheeled the stroller containing the baby. This was the first flight of my life, and I sat alone, separated from my family by a random act of the ticketing office. In retrospect, I was probably not old enough to sit alone, not on a first flight with a destination like this, but I was the oldest, and so old enough. Someone else's mother explained that I couldn't use the tray table until we had reached a certain altitude and helped me buckle my seatbelt.

From Houston to São Paulo we suffered an agonizingly long flight delightfully fraught with the possibility of adventure, and then continued by car to Campinas.

The Lord had called my parents to be missionaries in Belém, Brazil, a destination as foreign and impossible to me as my beloved Narnia. But before Belém, a month in Campinas for language training, a mere four weeks for my parents to attempt fluency in a language as diametrically opposed to their ears and tongues as rattling kitchen cutlery. For as long as we were there, they never learned—they never had the time—and a mere trip to the grocery was shadowed by difficulties.

I dare say that I was not called to Belém—I was only along for the adventure. After all, I had no real choice in the matter, being only ten. I don't remember the announcement that we were going, and I assume that I was only told once the decision had been made. Because of my age, I was allowed to miss out on the months of agonizing deliberation, of crying out to God, of waiting and listening before hearing the answer: Amazon Valley Academy, Belém, Brazil. My youth did not make the leaving easier, but I think it made the going more exciting. After only ten years, I had little to leave: family, yes, friends, yes, but I was homeschooled, and so carried my classmates, my teacher, even my classroom with me, which made it a little easier. I did not have the years of experience to fear the pain of separation, or to understand the difference four thousand miles makes. For the most part, I was spared any anxiety or fear, and only wanted to go on this great adventure.

We arrived in Belém, Brazil, in October of 2002, prepared for at least two

years of missionary life, and we were late. The school semester had begun in August, but visas had kept us stuck in America, then stuck in Campinas, always stuck in the paperwork of serving the Lord when we needed to be rushing along to do His work. Dad walked into his classroom as Mr. Peña, science teacher, two months after his students had entered and begun the school year.

I don't think we looked the part of missionary family: Five very pale children under the age of eleven, the youngest sporting a sock on his hand to keep him from chewing the bandages that protected a scar stemming from a vacuum cleaner incident. I cringe when I think of how many things we brought with us, when I remember the suitcases piled to the ceiling—so glaringly American, as I remember it now. We collectively panicked at the sight of a tarantula waiting to welcome us to our new kitchen, and I wept when a horde of ants devoured the candy left in my desk drawer (in Brazil, all candy must be stored in the refrigerator). My mother, a saint in her own right, never grew accustomed to the frequent ant pilgrimage through her room; the sight of thousands of ants marching across her floor, her walls, even her bed, almost always drove her to tears. Only my father would have looked “at home” in the jungle of unreached people groups, pushing a canoe down the Amazon with a Gospel on his back, and only he was crippled by Brazil.

But Brazil was wonderful. My childhood was defined by that single year spent on the equator, a year filled with hot days, bikes, bare feet, friends from all over the world. Instead of snow angels, we dared each other to run bare foot through the fire ant hills that were two feet, sometimes three feet wide. For probably the only time in my life, we had a maid, beloved Dona Ero, because that was something you did as missionaries: hire a maid, provide someone else's living, her salary so cheap it could hardly be considered an expense. I would never get used to the sight of her hanging up my underwear to dry on the clothesline, always mortified by the thought that one of the high school boys would see it (not realizing at that age that they most definitely did not care).

We chased geckos through the houses, stepping on their tails so they would dash away tail-less, immune to our shrieks of delight. We grew tadpoles in the pool, watched a tarantula wasp kill a tarantula to lay its eggs in the corpse's stomach, and my sister Ryan kissed a frog the size of her head, hoping for a prince to appear. The gardener brought us baby birds from the eaves, feeding them while he waited for their mother to appear. We attempted to train the dog, Lottie, which we only had because everyone needed a guard dog. She never learned to guard, but she made an excellent Houdini, her escapes driving my father insane to the point of biting her ear “to earn her respect.”

Our house, though bigger than any we've lived in since, had no air conditioning except for one hallowed room, where every important electronic device, book, and DVD was stored in an attempt to preserve them from the heat. If anyone was sick, the lucky sufferer earned the privilege of sleeping in the tiny cold room, but only then. To combat the oppressive heat of the equator, everyone slept with a fan at the end of their beds, the imitation wind blowing over us throughout the night and the droning noise drowning out the mysterious

creatures that lurked outside.

My parents had committed two years to the Lord's work in Brazil, but He only accepted one. Close to the end of our first year, Dad began showing signs of illness, mysterious symptoms that refused to go away. A persistent shaking, as if coming off a sugar high, is all I can remember. He was sent first to a Brazilian doctor, accompanied by a fellow missionary to translate, who diagnosed it as Parkinson's. Most thirty-five year old men don't get Parkinson's disease, so he was sent to more doctors for more tests, until he quickly reached the limit of his translator's capabilities and the short reaches of Brazilian medicine. The mission organization brought him back to America for testing in English and with first-world medicine, leaving my mother in Brazil with the five of us to wait.

"He will come back," the Mission Board promised. "We will figure out what's wrong."

After a month, he did come back, bringing American candy and DVDs and gifts with him, but only to leave again after two weeks. The tests were inconclusive, and more were needed, more American doctors to be consulted with their American medicine. He left us to wait a little longer—on him to get better, on the Lord to work, on the mission board to decide what to do with us: six stranded Americans in a foreign land.

One night, I went to spend the night at Claudia's new house, and Mom had told me that we were not moving back. Not yet. I slept in the hammock next to Claudia's bed, teased her brother, and laughed for far too long after our bedtime, not realizing these would be my last definitive Brazilian memories. Then I came home and found that suddenly we were going home—back to our real home. Sometime in the night, calls had been made, bags packed, and decisions finalized before I even knew they were being considered.

It was more important to be together in America than it was to be in Brazil, because Brazil was not home. It was just a place we happened to have been.

Now when I travel I always say goodbye before I leave. Goodbye to the skyline, to the way the clouds look at sunset, to how the sun flickers through my window at four in the morning because dawn comes so much earlier in a place like Wem, England, than in Southaven, Mississippi. Hugs and kisses, sometimes shared tears, with the people who have offered me their country, their love, their home. I make memories, take snapshots, and hide them away for later when I am missing this temporary dwelling, the reason for these passport stamps.

I do not remember saying goodbye to Brazil. I did not memorize the sun's path under the screen door, the way the trees waved outside my window, the smell of brush fires after a long day. We simply left.

The flights that carried us away were harder than the ones that brought us. We left early in the morning, only wanting to be gone rather than waiting for a more convenient departure time. My mother's friend travelled with us, helping her, temporarily acting as single mom, to wrangle five children and belongings through customs in two countries and through airport security in three different cities. We carried much less than before, having taken only what we could easily carry, leaving behind toys, books, clothes, memories, loves. Ty, only seven, carried

a plastic cap gun strapped to his backpack through two airports until a large, cold woman demanded it be thrown away. The TSA did not care that his best friend had given it to him just before we left, passing it through the car window as we pulled away. They did not care what it symbolized to him as his best friend's most prized possession, only that it represented a plasticized symbol of terror to the rest of the world. Tate, only five, screamed through the long night flight, unable to wake from her nightmares, incapable of being silenced. A few rows ahead, I hunkered down in my own tears and pretended I did not know the screaming child, had no connection to the girl wreaking havoc on the rest of the plane's dreaming passengers.

At Memphis International Airport we were welcomed home by family, by strangers my parents knew, by friends I had forgotten.

I left a piece of myself in Brazil, a small piece, because at ten I only had small pieces to give. But the piece is there, its absence permanently etched on my heart. I am learning that having such a hole is all right, and is possibly even more significant than having a piece that fits there perfectly. Even now, that single year spent there still defines my life: everything before Brazil can barely be remembered, and everything after Brazil must be compared to it.



aesthetics

a.l. brubaker

all the cool kids do their existential crises early these days.

you can put it on your applications:

“questioned God, self, and universe at age 16”

“placed 1st in metaphysical uncertainty, state level”

“extracurriculars: the void.”

not to brag,

but my dark night of the soul burned a hole in me so big

it still echoes all my prayers back

and makes a hollow noise if i tap my fingers on my chest.

pretty good, right?

something to write poetry about.

the cool kids wear their hearts in the bags under their eyes

like 3am mascara smudges –

call it “nihilistic grunge.”

they look off into the distance and relish the not-knowing

while i press words into my canyon of a heart

and tell myself they’ve got it wrong.





Coal Town West Virginia
Derek Via

The Measure of It

Adam Snively

I tell her she's beautiful while she fries eggs in our dented black pan. The grease cracks and pops around her knuckles and the early sun drifts across her face in bars, lighting up bits of her at a time. Two freckles here, by her ear. A dark lock here, falling into her eyes. She looks up from the eggs.

"I don't believe you. You say it, but I just can't see it."

I cannot say anything. It's not that I'm so psychologically and spiritually affronted by the statement that it renders me speechless, like an angel-stricken Zechariah unable to move his tongue and explain the name "John" to the offended relatives wondering why their old fool of an uncle would ignore thousands of years of religious tradition and not name the miracle-nephew after them. I'm silent more like Jesus was silent when the priests and rabbis interrogated him. He knew he would not win, and he eventually stopped answering the questions. They knew the answers anyway. I know Kate's reactions. I had heard them before and argued. And I know that I cannot change her mind, so I cannot say anything. *Did I just compare myself to Jesus?* Internal monologuing will be the death of me.

"Don't give me that look. It's just how I feel."

"Look?"

"Yes, David. That look."

"I imagine I pay you many looks on a day to day basis. Could you describe this one?" She smiles even though she's annoyed with me. Sometimes I can be cute too.

"The one where you disagree with me."

"Hm. If you don't want that look, maybe you should stop making me disagree with you."

"Really?"

"Is this actual surprise, or are you just keeping the banter going at this point?"

She laughs because she knows she can't change my mind either, and because she doesn't want to. There's still a little girl in there that thinks she looks pretty in that dress. But that's before Disney manages to find a struggling actress to play Cinderella at Magic Kingdom who happens to be a size slimmer than Kate anticipates when she first goes. She doesn't understand how someone can have a waist that slim while filling out the top so well for several years as she fails to develop into a specimen of flesh with the sum total curves of the Atlantic. I mean, she can't even see the Dead Sea in the mirror.

"Just eat your eggs."

"After you, m'lady."

"Ooh, you're my knight in saggy pajamas."

"And don't you forget it." She pulls a stool up next to mine and I kiss her on the forehead. She stays there for a second, and another, and one more. Breathes

out, and in, resting in the hollow between my arm and rib cage.

"I love you."

"I love you too."

"I'm sorry."

"I know."

She really is sorry. She knows I think she's wrong. But she still doesn't know why I think she's wrong. She thinks it's because she cheapens my opinion of her beauty, and that it makes me feel bad. It does do both of those things. But it's not why she's wrong. She's wrong because she actually is beautiful. Not because that's what she feels, and not even because that's what I feel. She's beautiful because she exists. She lives and breathes and laughs at my jokes (some better than others). She rides bicycles and ice skates and throws those little helicopter-seed things. She eats and drinks and even fries eggs on a Saturday morning for her newish husband just because she wants to.

"Are you going to submit anything today?" She twists her neck to look up at me. I don't look back.

"Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"I haven't written anything new."

"But you still have plenty of pieces you've already finished."

"Mhm. Those have done so well thus far." She picks her head up and frowns at me, eyebrows flexing together like a bow.

"You're writing is good, babe."

"Well—"

"Well what?" Her words clip. My sigh sounds a lot like hers.

"It never goes anywhere."

"So, what, you should just quit?"

"...no."

"Mmmhmm." I cut through the eggs with the side of my fork and dance through the yolk with it, running it up onto the sides of the plate and staring determinedly at a point that doesn't quite exist. Maybe she does know.

Maybe I don't.

Somewhere between the point of me making faces in the runny yolk and Kate attempting to give me a soft yellow blush, we forget about the beauty conversation. We wash the plates in the sink together (since we only have four plates anyway, and the washing machine seems like overkill). After, I start for the bathroom to address the bird nest perched atop my head and the beard lying completely flat on just one side of my face.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm gonna grab a shower. Sick of looking like a slob."

"Oh, but you're my slob!"

"And maybe sometime I could even be your husband. Like after I shower."

"Suit yourself." And she laughs her way into the bedroom.

Later on, when I can't see her, she'll stand naked in front of the mirror. Maybe she'll think about what I said, or maybe she'll just imagine herself

bobbing about in the Dead Sea, so stagnant that it fills with more and more salt and keeps almost anything in a constant, static float. She'll stretch out her arms and try to separate the grains from the water, rubbing them between her fingers and filling the whorls. And all she can think about is the excitement of the seas off New England, the violence of the Nor'easter that rolls the water up into the air forever. But she'll still be wrong, because she is not the Dead Sea and she is not the Atlantic. She is the old Blue Ridge, who stand because they have never done anything else, and are not the tallest nor longest nor most breathtaking, but are beautiful because they are there. And the Blue Ridge do not take their measure off of the Rockies or grand Denali, because that is not the measure of it. Maybe we don't know that yet.

Maybe we do.



Otter Cliff

Adam Snively

Where the wind and sea conspire
to salt the pines
bowing inland unanimously;
that is where you are.

You are not in China,
with the impatient swarm
of face and neon
and tinnitus haunting
my ears,

and you are not in London
where moss seeps softly
into the cracks of Westminster,
laying quiet and low.

You are not
laughing in the street corners
of Rio or Sao Paolo,
and you are not
sleeping, just sleeping
in Hawaii.

I didn't bother looking in Ohio.

You're on the coast of New England,
shaking;
leaning with the pines,
with the wind,
worshipping the land.
Where the soil sticks
and the roots groan,

where the needles dry
filled with salt.



Serendipity
Becca Dillinger

Night Walking

Roni Olson

Rainy Friday evening
I look down at my bare toes
As feet tread glistening sidewalks.
Silhouettes seen in warm yellow
Through the eyes of windows
Reveal what I am missing
In soft, communal shades.
The announcer's voice in the distance
Tells of events just out of reach.
I envision the grinning shortstop sliding into home,
As the voice of the crowd swells and falls
Proof
That all is well
With the world.

Rain is now mist,
A bridal veil, un-lifted
Shouting to the solar system
That Earth is a virgin
With secrets still unknown
Even to lonely night-walkers.





River Convention

Becca Dillinger

Into the Whimsy: The Freedom of the Oddball Believer

Jonathan Miles

“Only in rites / can we renounce our oddities / and be truly entired.”

—W. H. Auden, “Archaeology”

“You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd.”

—Attributed to Flannery O'Connor

On some level, being a believer entails—and always has entailed—being viewed as an oddball. But what about the double oddball, the (oddball) believer who is also an oddball qua oddball? Not just the oddball Christian but the Christian oddball?

In hypermodern American culture, the oddball is shorn of novelty. People seem very conscious of their own weirdness; sometimes they celebrate it, sometimes they are almost eager to apologize for it. Some even campaign to keep their cities weird, stewarding oddity like some finite ecological resource. In a time when people have so little in common with one another, and when public discourse often consists of warring claims to rights, at least one can say without equivocation, “I am weird.” There, at least, resides one little crawlspace of meaning.

In such a pro-oddball climate, the genuine oddball may be prone to certain temptations. I speak for myself here. Temptation comes to the oddball as it often does: in a form amenable to one’s particular nature and temperament. The oddball may be tempted to lord oneself over others, pridefully identifying one’s self-worth with divergence from normal people. Young people may be prone to the oddball self-flattery that they are existential unicorns differing utterly from everyone around them, and that their tribulations lack historical precedent and extend beyond the scope of any possible comprehension or empathy. Certainly, the internet intensifies the lure and scale of oddball temptations, making it all too easy for the oddly-inclined to neglect one’s neighbors and become too ensconced in one’s preferred oddball society. Christians reap great benefit from social and intellectual cross-pollination, and the Christian oddball is no exception.

An oddball must learn from the sobering examples of fallen oddballs, and must never suppose oneself beyond such a fate. Sometimes eccentrics are harmless eccentrics, but sometimes they wear a mask to keep out the light. Sometimes the oddball flees from pain or guilt, or resorts to dandyish affectation because of some inner deficit. To me, oddball existence seems doomed for grief if merely a means to escape reality, if it is founded in anything but delight in the strangeness of being. “The minute diversities in everything are wonderful,” James Boswell exclaims in his *Life of Samuel Johnson*. The oddball bears ready witness to such wonder.

Beware the pseudo-oddball culture. The world of *Fifty Shades of Grey* might seem like the work of oddballs, and perhaps it is. However, the Christian oddball thirsts for what is real. The English poet Christopher Smart, a stupendous oddball, says in *Jubilate Agno*: "For in my nature I quested for beauty, but God, God hath sent me to sea for pearls." Finding the real world insufficient, pornographers turn to semblances and simulacra, artificial pearls of their own devising. Far from diversifying life and celebrating the strange, propagandists actually dull and flatten life. It is far easier to justify manipulating and exploiting the desires of broken people when the world is drenched in bleak monochrome. Shades of grey, indeed.

Judging by my own experience, being an oddball incurs real costs on one's friends and loved ones, exacting from them an unreasonable measure of patience and understanding. Behind every great oddball hides a story of greater sacrifice. Therefore, I exhort the oddball: take pains to cultivate gratitude, and always seek out the common rituals that engender and proceed from gratitude. The stranger the fruit borne by the oddball branch, the more fully engrafted to the vine one needs to be. An oddball can never be too thankful or too willing to be humbled. And although it cuts against one's oddest-ball instincts, the oddball should be willing to accept accountability and to pay at least a modicum of deference to practicality. At least I tell myself as much.

How asinine for me to think, as I have sometimes thought, that the church has insufficiently considered the oddball in its midst. Whatever truth may operate in that suggestion surely pales next to my marked failure to love other oddballs as myself. Granted, the oddball is not easy to love. Affection for the oddball, but not necessarily love, comes pretty easily; after all, love digs deeper than the world of appearances, which is precisely where the oddball often prefers to be situated. Sometimes that preference for surface-life originates in simple vanity, but not always: oddballs like to find some unusual thing, some fascinating oddment, and follow it to its roots. Final judgments on people and things come very reluctantly to the Christian oddball. By dint of strange grace (and what is odder than grace?), the Christian oddball is sublimely free to take life on faith, to love people as they are, and to luxuriate in what is possible.

For a long time now I have thought of myself as an oddball, but my attitudes toward oddball nature have changed with time. Much of what in my high school and college years I saw as my unique personal oddities, I now recognize as something more entwined with a thoroughgoing strangeness characteristic of humanity at large.

A predilection for the unusual need not confine the oddball to obscurity and isolation. To the contrary, an oddball temperament can bring a person's desire and need for ritual and communion into sharp focus. Blessed is the oddball who respects the appointed jurisdiction of Terminus, who understands the limits of one's curious personal vision, and who is willing to wholly abandon any aspect of oddball life the moment it obstructs the dictates of charity.

The modern world often seems specifically contrived to disintire: to capriciously separate what it decides to call wheat and chaff; to mince and lop

off life's complexity into digestible chunks; to make life safer and less whimsical; and to ward off, if not death itself, at least the thought and imminence of death. In the end, my deepest longing as an oddball is the same as yours and everyone else's: to be "truly entired."

The freedom of the oddball believer, the culmination of oddball ecstasy, consists in this: absorption in the whimsical mystery of things, the mystery permeating everyday life. Mystery is the quiet babble of an oddball tongue; it cries out from the supermarket, the post office, the movies, the doctor's office, the streets. The Christian oddball is a spiritual packrat who finds a strand of being and follows it into mystery. The mystery speaks to every one of us, if we are willing to hear it. Above all, the oddball is free to experience time as the gift it is, and thus is well-suited to deploy that gift for the sake of whimsy, to spend time on seemingly useless matters without regard to social consequence. "Nothing odd will do long. *Tristram Shandy* did not last," Samuel Johnson once remarked. But absorption, not lasting, is the oddball's main impetus. I know that my life as an oddball is unlikely to resound through the ages, or even through the days. But the given world requites my oddball attentions; life repays life in a serendipitous currency of delight, and for me this suffices.





Fayette Station Rapids

Derek Via

First Impressions

Katie Lomax

Meeting you for the first time,
was like hopping the split-wood fence
into the neighbor's fresh field of snow.
At first, the fear of trespassing
into unknown territory was paralyzing:
an atmosphere of potential creeping through my clothes.
There were no tangled trails of footprints
leading across the iced grass, nor a history
full of crisp and shallow conversations.
Only a blank canvas on which to begin.

If and when we meet again,
let's promise to not rush our steps
and plow our shins through banks of snow
that quickly turn to slush.
Let's tread carefully,
but deliberately,
and melt away together
in the sun's good time.



Rain Scene: Acts I and II

Kathryn McCracken

Walk barefoot in the rain as
the cool numbs protectively,
 touch your toes to spongy earth.
Press into the mud and absorb this place,
suddenly new, freshly alien as
 droplets collect on prickled skin.
Run a splashed wake through temporary pools.
Pioneer, explore this, your
 adventuring path.

Walk barefoot in the rain as
the hard wind obscures vision,
 brace your hood against the pour.
Shield ill-chosen shoes closely to the chest,
bundle them that they might not be ruined
 as weary feet grate on sidewalk.
Commute by drudge, your bowed head determined:
traveler, get from one place
 to another.



Reversal

Doug Stephens IV

It was the rain what finally put out the fire. The men stood, my father among them, surveying the broken and fallen wreck of the church still steaming and hissing like a new loaf fresh from a dark oven as the dirt turned to mud under their boots and clung to the horses' hooves and quivering flanks as they stood hobbled in the yard. Not two years built, cut from the living forest and shaped by sawblade and adze. Now reclaimed by naked element, the father that all men are sired from and war against. For a day and another half they had worked to save the building, smoke-blinded and straining with the buckets filled from the creek bottom, giving crops and cows a Sabbath from their husbandry as the pews blackened and charred and the blue-bound hymnals turned to ash. Then the rain came and drowned the fire and swelled the tributaries and dispatched every man back to his hearth and corn before the roads were swallowed and they were stranded in the scorched churchyard. It was two days before the first horsemen could swim the creek to view the remains.

The reverend stepped over from the other men, unsteady in the mud, as my father lifted me down from his saddlebow. "There are coals still deep inside, but—God be praised—the worst seems to be past." My father said "Hm" and swung himself down to the earth with a smooth, animal motion. His deep brown boots were spackled with red mud which ran and bloodied his feet as he walked with sure step past the reverend and stood with the other wet and sweating men gathered in council near the doorpost.

I picked my way around the side of the ruin and looked in at the newly sunlit floors of what once was a room, now charred and leprous with the white ash that covered all the space that was not now open to the wet ground. A hot snow of flakes were floating suspended in the spears of pitiful sunlight, disturbed by the boots of the men who had first ventured in before turning back in heat and disgust at the wrack and heavy shuddering of the unsound boards. Above the space where the pulpit had stood a single drop of water ran coursing down a pitted stick of pine and glistened in the steaming yellow rays as it gathered for one pendulous and trembling moment all the world into its uncertain globe and fell silently into the warm earth.



Tanglewood
Anna Hurt

This Gravel Chapel

Joshua Novalis

High above my drywalled apartment,
near the top of the mountain that oversees our schizoid city,
a quiet, blackened lot lays hidden along a cobalt ridge.

It is concealed by oaks and maples,
half-paved, as if its maker
gave up his task midday and never returned.
I have only ever been there at night.

Around its charcoal margins,
dusty fallen leaves amass,
as if the forest threatens to retake
that colonized land of black stone and dim white streaks.
There are rarely more than a handful of cars, and
though they sit dormant within their parallel lines,
they, too, are nomads here and fellow witnesses to
this place's morbid microcosmic splendor,
if they notice at all.

I often wonder if the morning sun spirits this refuge away,
for such places cannot be dreamt of in the day but
these thoughts are mere hypotheticals, and
and abstractions are always swallowed in the night.

All I know is it's here when I come,
and I have come on many occasions.

Though mundane necessity once claimed the cause
for my stays in this stony retreat,
earthly purpose is no longer my impetus;
now I come of my own will,
for while this sullen lot holds no home for me,
its darkness has brought me far
and given much.

For whenever I enter this gravel chapel,
I leave life's burdens in the backseat, locking all doors,
and I sit on the chipped trunk of this rusted sedan to look across the solemn sky.
I linger on the cityscape sprawled below,
littered with rich iridescent beacons,
one of which is mine.

There are two ways of seeing the light, and one of them is to turn it off.
There are two ways of knowing home, and one of them is to leave.



Michigan

Samuel Kurcab

On my mind's street
Stand houses from four states
And six counties.
Roads are missing miles.
Stadium touches pier,
Basement stairs open on
Front doors, Detroit skyscrapers
Rise from dark woods. Great Lakes
Empty into the ocean and all the dogs
Of Yager are unchained and giving chase.
Again I mark the Maersk traincar
And taste the strangeness of my joy.
Oak stumps pass an oar's shaft deep
Beneath a man-made inlet.
Grand Traverse Light is stranded
In a snowy vineyard, black against arbors,
Its beams breaking on brittle ground.
From somewhere comes the sound
Of falling icicles. I'm patiently
Explaining to a stranger the map
Of Michigan: it is a giant mitten.
We are here on the thumb.
Near the Blue Water Bridge
And the border. Canada comes
In a colorwheel: the green
Of broad plains, the yellow
Of corn, the rust-red of toads.
There are patterns on Petoskey stones
If you wet them and there is white
Under the bark of sycamores.
There are extra blankets
For the brown-out.

Tonight will be a record
Temperature-drop
And I will dream all freighters
Safely into port
Till I wake up to foghorns
In the Lord God's early hours.

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Because of this mission, we publish poetry and prose that:

1. demonstrates a high level of artistic achievement
2. recognizes aspects of the goodness of creation, the truth of our fallenness, and the beauty of redemption.



