

MANIAC IN MY SOUL: TWENTY-NINE POEMS

By Harlan Richards

Submitted: January 2014

Introduction

I have spent over 29 years in prison. In 2010, God gave me the gift of poetry when I accepted Christ into my heart. I hadn't planned on becoming either a poet or a Christian. I had never been able to (or wanted to) write poetry. In the last 4 years, I have written hundreds of poems, had dozens of them published and have an ebook of poetry - What Prison Teaches - published by ebooks-by-crooks.com. I am currently seeking a publisher for my second ebook, How Big Your God Is, a book of Christian and spiritual poems.

The 29 poems in this chapbook is a random selection from the poems I have written. Many of them have been posted on my blog (betweenthebars.org/blogs/637) and some of them have been published elsewhere.

I can be contacted at harlanisms@yahoo.com (but be patient, I do not have direct access, a friend maintains the email account for me) or by snailmail at:

Harlan Richards 37975
Stanley Correctional Institution
100 Corrections Drive
Stanley, WI 54768

January 26, 2014

Prison Foundation
2512 Virginia Ave, NW #58043
Washington, DC 20037

RE: Maniac In My Soul

Dear Prison Foundation:

I am enclosing a 29-page book of poems - one page for each year I've been in prison. I'm also enclosing a SASE.

I have not included a free-world permanent address because I do not have one. I did, however, include an email address and my blog address along with my current prison address.

I hope that my submission meets your submission criteria and that you will post Maniac In My Soul on your website.

Thank you for taking the time and putting in the effort to make this venue available for prisoners.

Sincerely,



Harlan Richards
Stanley Corr. Inst.
100 Corrections Dr.
Stanley, WI 54768

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Poetry Is . . .

Poetry is a miracle
Of imagining
Bringing forth healing,
Hope, for hundreds.

Poetry is an addiction
Replacing craving for
Self administered anesthetic
With so much more.

Poetry is where my heart
Feels full, fearless,
Sharing its bounty with
Every other heart intimately.

Poetry is God's gift
To sentient beings,
Keeping them anchored to
Compassion, and love for others.

Poetry is healing
Making the body whole,
Curing trauma of past injury,
Allowing us to move on.

Poetry is the human condition
Given structure and form
Enriching all who partake
Of its rich nectar.

Poetry is my life
Beyond who I am
Becoming one with every
Poet who ever shared verse.

Harlan Richards

The Poet

A nascent poet,
Desperate to shine,
Enters every contest,
Puts two stamps on his mail
To make sure his poem gets read.

Can't believe, won't accept,
Editor's rejections, thinking
There must be some mistake,
All the while, brilliance
Draped in drab words,
Trite, torporous trope,
Obtuse alliteration.

'Til muse opens heart's floodgates,
Disgorging deluge of delight,
Sensuous tornado of passion,
Tropical storm surge of desire,
Blinding blizzard white-out.

Poet laureate,
Delighted to shine,
Put two stamps on his mail
To make sure his poem got read.

Harlan Richards

Maniac In My Soul

Christmas Eve in a Wisconsin blizzard
Calls to the maniac in my soul.
Fire up the Harley, don the
Trench coat from the Great War
And away I go, slipping and sliding,
Hooting and hollaring, looking for
Someone to share my insanity.
Alas, alone and demented,
I cruise Madison's highways
And byways, getting colder by the minute,
Not wanting it to end, wishing
I could be Santa for just
One hour, to give the timid
Sheep, safe in warm cars, a gift of
The thrill and chill of risking
Life and limb for no other reason than
A Wisconsin blizzard calling to
The maniac in my soul.

Harlan Richards

Circa 1969

My 1956 Mercury was not much of a car,
Bought in Chico, California for \$75
By a 15 year-old runaway,
It took me down the coast
'Til drowsiness led me to
A closed gas station where
My sleep was interrupted by
A zealous county sheriff's deputy.
Busted on weapons charges, lying
My ass off, no one to tell them
Who I really was, or that I was
Only 15 and far from home.
My Mercury faithfully waited the 15 days
It took me to serve my sentence
For the knife, the chain, my smart mouth.
Back on the road, south, always south,
To beautiful Fresno and my Jehovah
Witnessing cousins, where I hid out
Until my father, fearful I'd be converted,
Flew out and dragged me back to
Face the destiny I tried so hard to escape.
Decades later, over half my life in prison,
I still remember my 1956 Mercury and the
15 year-old runaway who couldn't get away.

Harlan Richards

Earth Day Twenty-Ten

Drill, baby, drill,
Chant Republican Fat Cats.
'69 Santa Barbara blowout forgotten,
'89 Exxon Valdez vague memory,
BP Arctic pipeline spill prelude to
Earth day disaster twenty-ten.
BP platform exploded, 11 dead,
Gulf coast destroyed,
Southern shore glistens
With thousands of barrels a day.

Wealthy, safe in enclaves, chant
Drill, baby, drill.
SUVs suck up black gold,
Careless carbon footprint,
Starving the poor, killing
Birds, fish oysters, hope.
Open Arctic Refuge to BP,
Polar bears turned oil-tar black,
Feed yachts, private jets, Big Oil profits.
And the wealthy chant
Burn, baby, burn.

Life has its own oil spills,
Devastating deeds destroy,
One mistake and our platform explodes,
Spreading toxicity to family,
Polluting relationships, killing careers.
Without the safety valve to
Prevent the destruction,
Our lives, too, can go from
Drill, baby, drill, to
Burn, baby, burn.

Harlan Richards

In His Head

The world is in his head,
Where rivers, mountains, seas,
Flow together in a melting pot of visions.

Faces fly through countless remembered
Cities in a kaleidoscope of
Noses, mouths, eyes.

So full to overflowing, with Noah's
Creatures, two-by-two, gliding
Through his dreams and into
His waking, walking, working hours.

There is no rest or respite
To collect the simple, loving
Memories of mate or lover.
Sons and daughters vaguely recalled
Amidst the clamor of songs, speeches,
Lectures ringing in his ears.

The world is in his head,
Leaving no room for the man
He once was, nor the memories
Which defined him.

Harlan Richards

The Musician

My thick, clumsy fingers
Stumble across the notes
Of my keyboard in a manner
Which would make a 5 year-old
Beginner look like a concert pianist.
Yet those halting notes I drag
Forth by their roots in an agonizing
Exercise of pure obstinacy
Sound to me like a chorus of angels
Singing God's own song.
It's not the quality of the sound
As it batters my ears
But how it makes me feel when
My fingers caress those keys and
Evoke the haunting melody that
Feeds the craving in my soul.

Harlan Richards

Boxcars in Florida

Just seventeen, cock-strong,
Ready for anything, or so I thought.
'Til my aunt's boyfriend hired me to
 Unload Florida boxcars.
I never knew, could never forget,
 The longest days of my life,
The cruelest exhaustion in the world,
Collapsing in bed, scarcely able to
 Stay awake through supper, while
That fat, middle-aged, cigar smoking
 Sicilian out-worked me all day,
 And danced all night.

Harlan Richards

Cat and Mouse

I look forward to what is yet to come
Like a cat waits for a mouse
To come out of its hole.
Eager, anticipant, immobile
With controlled tension.
Wait long enough,
It will come.
Cat sinks fangs into mouse flesh,
In frenzied blood lust
As cat toys with mouse.
I spring toward my future, claws out,
Pounce on possibilities,
Some slip away as I
Sink my teeth into others,
As cat, finally,
Eats the mouse.

Harlan Richards

Trees

Trees don't have any choice in the matter,
 Standing where God or man chose,
They stretch their fingertips to the sky
Ever seeking, never reaching, the sun,
 While tendrillic toes burrow deeper
 Into mother earth.
 Marking time, until the time,
 Of their demise, transformed
 Into paper, a roll-top desk, or
Rotting silently in the forest of
 their brothers, providing
Shelter, sustenance, to symbiotic
 Denizens, fresh compost for
The next tree, which doesn't have
 Any choice in the matter.

Harlan Richards

Tears

Real men don't cry
Or so I believed
For so many years
As I hardened my heart,
Layered scar tissue
Over old wounds
Numbed myself to pain.

When the dam broke
Which was holding back
The flood of tears,
I was relieved, yet ashamed,
That I could feel again
But feel too much,
Like a sensitive guy,
A Class A schmuck.

Tears are for pain,
Joy, moments in life
When feelings overwhelm
All that I am.
The wounds are healed,
The pain is gone,
And with it,
Went the tears as well.

Harlan Richards

Little People

Little People, they're
Called children, I think.
It's been so long since
I've talked to, or played with,
Any Little People.
It has left a big hole
In my life.
All the children I meet in prison
Are full-size bodies with
Child-size brains.
Not like children at all,
But brats just the same.
I want to make friends
With Little People,
Mine the nuggets of wisdom
They drop in their haste to
Become Big People.

Harlan Richards

The Clown

Shirt too small, pants too big,
Looking Like Red Skelton.
Long hair, week's worth of stubble.
Won't work a job, doesn't have a dime.
Got this way, the hard way,
Fists too small, mouth too big,
Knots on his head, bruises on his body.
Too dumb to quit, too proud to surrender.
Just keeps going in his
Shirt too big, pants too small.

Harlan Richards

Feet Bangin'*

It was a short conversation,
"Feet bangin'" was all he said.
But the listener knew what he meant,
Having been there before,
Knowing both the man and
The feet that were bangin'.

Empathy flowed from listener to speaker,
A shared fate in a foreign space.

Shakespeare couldn't say it better,
Poe never put more message in any two words.
"Feet bangin'" was all he said,
But with that, he said it all.

*slang for stinky feet.

Harlan Richards

Dawning

With each day's dawning
My anticipation grows
The way a hungry patron
Nibbles breadsticks waiting
As the feast is prepared.
A lifetime of poor choices
Begetting bad luck are bound to
End soon, releasing me into
A sea of humanity as a
Salmon fry finds its way from
Fresh water to sea.
With each day's ending
I look back sorrowfully
The way an unlucky gambler
Peers into empty wallet,
Wishing things had gone differently.
Yet at the next day's dawning
My anticipation swells anew.

Harlan Richards

Clarity

Sun rises on a cool day,
Warm breeze caresses goose pimples,
Sensations slide across dendrites
Like rippling sand dunes,
Temporal ruminations pass as quickly as
Clouds scudding across clear skies,
Blue above green sward below,
Color vibrantly staining eyes,
Saturating soul, swooning satiety of beauty.
Sun setting, relieving senses,
Katydids and crickets sing
Moonlight into existence while
Frogs call across placid river
In a mating dance of delight,
Starlight witnessing nocturnal dalliance.

Harlan Richards

Turbulence

Impassive, like the Buddha
Impervious to roiling seas
Of strife washing up
On my shores.
Tranquillity in the eye
Of a hurricane.
Anger spews from
Volcanoes of uncontrolled
Wrath; viscous, vicious lava
Incinerating lives, creating
Ashes of regret
Blown into atmosphere,
Grounding high-flying
Jets of happiness.

Harlan Richards

Transported

I am transported, like
Cap'n. Kirk, when he says
Beam me up Scottie,
To a higher level
As far beyond mire of my life
As Matterhorn over valley below
Where no longer
Must I muddle through muck.
Soaring on gossamer wings, released,
Rejoicing like a newborn fawn
Capering across meadows, unaware
Of wolf pack lurking in shadows.
I reach across aeons of time
And space to pull others into my
Alternate reality; yet ever alone,
Visionary, hawk-eyed, seeing
Others still groping blindly
Mired in antiquity.

Harlan Richards

Places I Travel

I've never been to Piccadilly Circus,
Don't think I want to.
Places I travel are obscure, occult,
Out of this world.
Journey of self-discovery reveals
Myriad worlds, peopled by
Phantasmic facets of imagining,
Each on its own mission to
Elicit epiphany, enlighten
Awareness, demystify mystery
Of life, which kept me blind
As justice.
I've been to the Milky Way,
Vast, swirling vortex of energy
At my astral fingertips, bleeding
Into my waking, working hours,
Powering my actions like
Wind powers sailboat.
Whatever tack I take,
My sails are always full.

Harlan Richards

Bonsai

I wait with the patience
Of a bonsai grower,
For my dreams to become
Solid as stone,
Alive as I am,
Creeping into my life,
The way zebra mussels
Invade the Great Lakes.
I live my dreams
In a world not physical,
Real to me as
Sunlight on my window,
Distracted sometimes with
Nagging doubt of a tortured decision,
In a sea of serene confidence.
I am the bonsai,
Inching toward the perfection
Nascent in all of us.

Harlan Richards

A Hole In His Head

Doctors said drill a hole in his head,
So we can see what's going on.
There's no other way to
Delve into psyche, find lost
Soul, put Humpty back together again.
With a hole in his head
We can fish for answers among
The smattering of gray matter
Still functioning after lobotomy,
Shock treatments, decades in
Medication-induced stupor,
To find out what's going on.
Once he was normal, wrote
Long love poems, wooed and won
The love of his life.
The bullet that stopped her life
Stopped his life,
Leaving no choice but to
Drill a hole in his head.

Harlan Richards

Numb

I am numb,
where words should burst forth
like ocean surf 'gainst rocky shore
there is only the cool, still silence
of an arctic pool.

I am numb,
to the loves, urges and desires
which drive men mad--or to greatness,
feeling not the blood pounding in my veins,
nor lust exploding into stagnant loins.

I am numb,
to the pain and travails of others,
empty of empathy, indifferent to unease,
senseless to primal scream.

I am numb,
in a world that feels so much,
people that hurt so loudly,
and love so badly.

I am numb,
but I want to feel.

Harlan Richards

The Heart Speaks

I dreamt another sort of life,
 where my heart spoke loud and clear,
To all who would listen, but most of all,
 I dreamt another sort of life,
Where hard work was rewarded, integrity
 was praised and selflessness the norm.
It must have been a dream because
 as I awoke from my reverie,
I saw another sort of life,
 where hearts are crushed ere they speak,
And words are daggers falsely twisted.
 It was another sort of life,
Where despots destroy, treachery
 is praised and selfishness the norm.
Let me in my reverie stay,
 where my heart speaks loud and clear,
And all who listen do agree,
 It's best to be . . . in another sort of life.

Harlan Richards

Together

We belong together,
Today, tomorrow, always,
As we stride through busy days,
Sleep through lonely nights,
We call to each other,
Ever closer, approaching
The intersection of our lives,
Where we collide, fusing,
Like to smashed atoms, to
Become one new element.
Where "I" disappears into "we"
Trading selfish thoughts
For selfless deeds.
We belong together,
Today, tomorrow, always.

Harlan Richards

Fragile

I hold your heart in my hands,
Humble, in awe, of your trust,
Fragile as a Faberge' egg,
Delicate as a crystalline figurine.
Wishing with all my might
That I prove worthy,
Scared beyond reckoning
I'll fail you, crushing
The gift entrusted to me.
Feeling inadequate, too short
To reach the top shelf
Of my best self,
Where your safety lies.

Harlan Richards

Force of Nature

Like a tornado drives
Broom straw through wood,
Is how she pierced my heart.
So suddenly, surprisingly,
I was Wiley E. Coyote
Dodging my own missile.
It could have been fate,
Seemingly inevitable, yet
That same look, random encounter,
Were sterile seeds on barren soil
Countless times.
A lightning bolt strikes earth
Impotently, unless confluence of
Factors converge to
Spark forest fire.
Her spark set my forest on fire
And all I can think is,
Let it burn.

Harlan Richards

Your Eyes

I want to look into your wondrous eyes,
See my love reflected there,
Shining bright with hope and joy,
Telling me that I'm the one
Who lights your life like the sun.
From my heart I speak to you,
Caress you with loving words,
Planting seeds within your heart,
To grow a love that we can share.
I have no further want or need,
But to look into your wondrous eyes,
And see my love reflected there.

Harlan Richards

Love of My Life

I never dared hope that one day
The love of my life,
Would come into my life,
Loving me, astonishing me,
Completing me with elegant simplicity.
All the years of pain
I stoically smiled through,
Faded into nothingness,
Left me thanking God, thanking her,
Thanking the stars above,
Thanking, always thanking,
The destiny which brought us together.
Grateful, finally, for all the years of hurt
And loneliness which merely
Taught me how to appreciate
The love of my life,
When she came into my life.

Harlan Richards

Love's Detail

I remember every detail,
Of her, our love, our once-was life.
Beautiful white teeth, so
Quick to show themselves,
When she laughed at my jokes, life.
The mole on her hip, the taste of her lips.
There was nothing missing,
For me, in our love.
Arguments that never happened,
Quarrels that didn't exist,
In our hearts or our lives.
Our love sang through
The treetops of life's forest,
In joyous cacophony, drowning out all discord.
I remember every detail
Of her, our love, our once-was life,
But most of all, I remember
The void she left when she left.
Disbelief, denial, desperation,
Smothering fire of desire, a charred ruin.
I remember every detail
But one: why she left.

Harlan Richards