

2nd Edition

W R T F A C T I O N S



POEMS

By Harlan Richards

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Introduction

This is the second edition of What Prison Teaches. The first edition was published as an ebook by ebooks-by-crooks over a year ago. I withdrew it from publication because after a year the publisher told me he only sold 4 copies of my book. Either I've written the worst poetry book ever, my book was not promoted, or the publisher lied to me and kept all the profits for himself. Regardless of why my first edition didn't sell, I decided to expand it and include almost 20 additional poems and make it available for free on this website. I'll leave it to readers to decide whether my poems are any good.

I started writing poetry in 2010 after becoming a Christian. I had never been able to write poetry but after Christ called me as one of His own, He gave me the gift of poetry. If it hadn't happened to me, I would never have believed it was possible to suddenly have a talent for something as a result of becoming a Christian. I've written hundreds of poems, had dozens of them published and am now learning to draw - another gift from God I never had before.

I also have a blog where I've posted other poems and numerous essays on various subjects. betweenthebars.org/blogs/637 I can also be contacted through my blog or by writing me at my prison address. I hope you enjoy my poems. They are a gift from God.

Harlan Richards
Stanley Correctional Institution
100 Corrections Dr.
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Can't Think

They steal these guy's heads
So they can't think,
Figure out what's what.
Locked into narrow channels
Looking neither left nor right
And only so far ahead
To the next meal, rec period.
Slowly robbed of their wits
(like they were eating lead paint),
Subtly deprived of reason
(as if sniffing too much glue),
Unable to detect loss
(think Alzheimer's).
Creeping incrementalism,
Like a slow-boiled frog doesn't
Know it's being cooked until
It's too late.
Institutionalized, incapable,
Imprisoned in their own minds.
Doing decades in prison,
They steal these guys' heads.

Harlan Richards

Snipped

Like a kick in the guts,
When least expected, knocks wind out of you.
Life deals a blow that shatters foundations.
That's how it felt when the letter came back.
"Not deliverable as addressed" was all it said.
Not much, but enough to make worlds crumble.
What happened, where did she go?
Is she dead, get married and move away?
Merely forget to leave a forwarding address?
The last tenuous thread connecting
Me to my only daughter, has been snipped,
And it feels like a kick in the guts.

Harlan Richards

Douglas County Jail

I know I've had worse nights,
Slept on harder beds, gotten less sleep
Than I did on my first night in
Douglas County Jail, but
I can't remember where or when.
It must have been in my teen years
Where a bare floor was as good as
Anything and it didn't matter
Where or how I passed out
Before the next bout of drinking.
Except for a seg cell here or there,
Nothing in these decades of prison
Has equaled the misery
I found in a too flat mattress
Under a too bright light.

Harlan Richards

Jumpsuit Orange

Clockwork orange doors clanging
Every twenty minutes and the piercing
Scream of the watch key telling me
There is no good night's sleep.
Television screams out defiance from
Early morn 'til late at night reminding me
That George Orwell's 1984 is alive and well
In the twenty-first century.
I watch others as they watch the screen,
Wondering why they can see the screen
So well, but can't see
 It has enslaved them.

Harlan Richards

Ode to Stainless Steel

It's a steel plate
For God's sake, only
About 11 inches across,
Bolted to another piece of
Steel, part of a table.
Nuthun' nice about it,
Comfort only in leaving it,
Yet welded to my life
Because it's the only place
To sit, and sitting's required
When out of my cell in this
Mosh pit of misery
That passes for
A modern day prison.

Harlan Richards

No Worries

Like a jagged-edged knife
At my throat, the
Broken tooth threatened
The sanctity of my mouth.
Trepidation growing with
Each passing day,
Fearing the prison dentist's
Familiar refrain:

PULL IT!

Yet at the appointed hour,
He kindly blest me with
His solemn pronouncement:
"Just a little repair job
And it'll be good as new."

WHEW!

Even when half my tooth
Gave up the fight,
He was undaunted: "Well,
Well, grind a little here,
A little there,
A stainless steel crown
Will do just fine."

ARE YOU SURE?

Quick as a wink,
In less than a trice,
My mouth was all happy,
Fixed up and nice.

THANK YOU!

Harlan Richards

X Building

It's a barracks, but
Not the military kind, though
It still has rules and regimentation.
Pandemonium greets your eyes
When first you enter.
Sizing up soon-to-be bunkmates,
Wondering which one is the petty thief
Who will creep over to steal
Your new toothpaste, or
Last shot of coffee.
Over countless years I've been
Cycled through barracks like this,
No longer caring
About the lack of privacy,
Too much noise,
Too little sleep.
One prison after another,
One bleeding into the other,
The way prison bled away my youth.

Jackson's X Building,
Just another stepping stone
Toward freedom.

Harlan Richards

Sucked Down Into the Mire By A
Bi-Polar Celly

Every morning I stand at the top of
A slippery slope waiting to see
If my cellmate is going to slide down
Into the mire of his hateful bi-polar self or
Grab a handful of happy helium balloons
To float into cloud nine-o-mania.
Each time I must choose whether to
Follow him down the slide, float off in
Heliumistic euphoria or stand
My ground, perhaps showing him
Once and for all that it doesn't have to
Be this way, that he can wake up
Each morning on an even keel, setting
A straight course to a better life, and
Sail off into a glorious future.

Harlan Richards

Moving to a New Cell

After the darkness
Of that prison cell
My eyes cry out
Against the sun.
It's all too real, too vivid,
Too easy to see the pain
Looking back at me
From liquid pools of agony.
Sunlight burns away
Clouds of repression,
Cauterizes wounds of desolation.

Harlan Richards

The Corpse

The officers rushed up to my cell
Sure that they would find a
Bleeding corpse, or at least
Someone injured and in distress.
I laughed to think that I
Could have been that corpse,
Slightly annoyed that my ex-wife
Called the prison to warn of danger
When there was none to be had.
Yet I recalled the rumors of
A contract on my life, wondered who
Would step up to collect the bounty
And how my ex would have known.

Harlan Richards

Prison Photo

Stiff as wood,
Cigar store Indian
Of bygone era,
1850s daguerrotype.
Kernel of self, peeking past
Body imprisoned in
Military bearing, drab uniform.
Loving heart, struggling to
Burst from chest,
Translated into pixels,
Transmitted across oceans of
Time and space,
Lodging at last in loving hands,
Seeking eyes, feeling heart.

Harlan Richards

Thanksgiving (In Prison)

I asked my friends to play a game today
Our families hundreds of miles away.
Let's all take turns sharing
What we're truly thankful for.

I went first and spoke so clear,
I'm thankful for my friends sitting here
Who eased the pain in
My hour of greatest need.
Randy gave his thanks to the Lord above,
Dave agreed, thanking Jesus for His love.
So it went, this blessed day, as we
Gave thanks for family, friends, glorious health
And what's more, for all the trials
Which rebuilt us from the core.
Those decades in prison, agony galore, were
What gave us something to be thankful for.

Harlan Richards

A Separate Reality

A squirrel eating acorns,
That's what my celly thought
When he heard that crunching.
He looked over his shoulder,
Beholding me in all my bunkish
Tree-branched glory, munching away
On Grandpa's Granola.

I laughed to see the look on his face
Just before he turned back to
His typewriter and the book of
Poems he was sure was going to be
A best seller.

Maybe it is, but more likely
It will fade into obscurity the way
His youth is fading into infirmity
During the decades of his imprisonment.

Harlan Richards

Stanley Correctional Institution

Unlike the sweet smell of clover
On an afternoon breeze, the
Fresh smell of new-mown lawn turns
Bitter as it blows into my cell.
It is a mystery how a
Place can be cursed, where
Everything turns to rot, the way
Scraps stink in a garbage bin
Which only a few hours earlier
Were a sumptuous feast.

Stanley is such a place,
Brings out the worst in everyone,
Built to traffic in human misery
Like an old-time slave ship
Rebuilt for the 21st century.

Razor wire does not always
Mean misery, not every prison
Cultivates cruelty as a culture,
But Stanley does.

Harlan Richards

Horsing Around

Like a horse bred to work,
Then put out to pasture too soon,
I go from paddock cell to stable dayroom
Aimlessly, listlessly, disinterestedly,
Looking around at the rest of the herd
Seeing dullness reflected in deadened eyes.
Purposeless lives, inexorably aging
Victims of a country marching daily
Into its fascist police state future.
The lucky few rule in opulence,
Everyone else forced to choose between
Wage slavery under the bootheel of oppression
Or endless idleness in austere prisons.

Harlan Richards

Reality

I look through the plexiglass and bars
At the sunny April morning
Wishing I was some other place
Living some other life.
The ethanol plant in the distance,
Unlike the prison I am in,
Does not look like what it is.

I want to see spring flowers,
Hear the busy chirping of birds as
They build nests, establish territory.
This is a time for renewal,
New beginnings, a hopeful future.

Except for here, where each day
Disappoints in its austerity,
Crushes with harsh words,
Harsh sights, harsh living,
Where each fork in the road
Leads to bad or worse.

Men are ground down, spirits snuffed,
Empty husks staring, glaring, sinking . . .
Into mindless tedium as the real criminals
Live in governors' mansions, fill
Legislative seats or wear black robes.

Harlan Richards

Lunch Money

My presence was requested, as if
I was royalty or some potentate
Worthy of respect, obeisance and
Not just another inmate working
A prison job for wages so low, I
Couldn't pay a grade-schooler's lunch money.
It's a good thing there are school lunches
And prison meals, 'cause if it were
Up to me and my paycheck,
Me and the grade-schooler
Would both go hungry.

Harlan Richards

Going On a Trip

In a place where eyes are starved
For a view of humanity, the way
A shipwreck survivor wants to
See the shore,

It's considered a treat to
Get shackled up and bundled off in a
Van to see a judge or doctor.
And I was the envy of the pod
When I had to make yet another
Trip to the shoe place, to
Fix up a special pair for me,
The way a hot dog eater wishes he could
Afford the steak dinner at the
Next table over.

Yet it angers me, the chains,
Condescension, getting trussed up,
Forced into playing the game
that says I'm dangerous
When everyone knows I'm not.

Harlan Richards

Fourth of July

It was a holiday, a special day,
When we hoped for something good to eat
To go with the special events to mark the day:
Tournaments of chess, dominoes, what-have-you.

Yet in this prison there are no special days,
Not really holidays, unless you crave a
Holiday from life.

I suppose a woman battered daily
By a brutal husband,
Or a child raped nightly
By her father, would consider
Living like this a holiday.

But I don't.

Harlan Richards

Clover Fortune

I smelled clover
For the first time
Wafting on the breeze
Which surprised me.
'Cause I didn't know
Clover had a scent
Strong enough to experience,
Especially here, where there is
So little green, so much brown.
From those rare, green patches
Beautiful clover flowers
Ride the wind with
The nicest scent I've found
Since coming to Stanley.

Harlan Richards

Sensory Deprivation Segregation

It was so small, that crabbed writing,
Covering page upon page,
As he reached out, seeking
Illusive human connection.
I heard his cry for help,
As he grasped at sanity
Teetering on the edge of an abyss
From which he may never return.
My words of encouragement
Floated into his cell and what's more,
I prayed for him.
For when we learn that no thing
Will manifest unless the Lord wills it,
Then prayer is the only remedy
For relief from adversity.

Harlan Richards

Lost Belief

Only a four-year sentence,
But it was too much,
Too much sadness, too much pain.
His woman left him quick.
His mother put a block on her phone.
Brothers, sisters, too busy to visit,
Write a letter, send a few dollars.
Guards gleefully poked and prodded,
Instigated and inflamed, the unhappy
Son-brother-lover turned
Criminal-convict-scum of the earth.
He lost control, lost hope,
Lost his humanity.
At last, he lost belief in life.
They found him
In a segregation cell,
Hours later, hanging,
Twenty-three days before
His release date.

Harlan Richards

Jailhouse Crack

You can keep your cocaine, meth and all the rest,
I came to prison and found the best.
Nothing as good for a snack,
As homemade jailhouse crack.
The rush, the pleasure, the urge to eat all,
Of the succulent, sweet siren call.
Make it myself, no greater pleasure found,
Cook it up, cool it down.
Just throw in some cocoa, ice tea and water,
Round it all off with peanuts and butter.
Try some and see, I'm sure you'll agree,
Peanut brittle's the only drug for me.

Harlan Richards

Taller

The taller your canteen,
The more friends you have.
It happens every Wednesday,
The guys who forgot your name
On Sunday, suddenly remember
That you like to play chess,
Have children to be asked after,
And, oh, by the way, can I get . . .
Chips, candy, cuppa coffee,
Whatever they think you have.
Friends for a few days 'til
The goodies run out, and then
All your friends creep back to
Their rooms to eat the canteen
They hoarded all week while
Bumming yours, leaving you
Broke and disgusted, knowing
It will all start again next Wednesday.

Harlan Richards

Two Soups

A dollar forty-nine, the price of
Two soups and a bag of beans.
Thinks he's got the world by the tail,
Livin' large on two dollars state pay,
Enough money to buy
Two soups and a bag of beans.
Gonna make a hook-up with his bros,
A little cheese, a pepper or two,
And he'll make a feast out of
Two soups and a bag of beans.
Doesn't know, doesn't care,
What the rest of the world is eating.
Staked his claim on what he knows,
Two soups and a bag of beans.

Harlan Richards

Pit Bull & Wolf

Pit Bull & Wolf squared off
In the arena
Eyeing each other
Sizing up opponent,
Calculating odds, outcome.
Baited breath, all watching,
Waiting, wagering,
Wanting one or the other
To win.
Only one option, as
Pit Bull & Wolf squared off.
Each nodded to the other
As they passed
In the prison hallway,
Both moving on to
Face real challenges,
Refusing to die
For other people's pleasure.

Harlan Richards

Danny Pit Bull

They call him Danny Pit Bull
The nice kind, that you
Can trust with your toddler.
Not the other kind, unpredictable,
Vicious, eat-your-grandma kind of
Pit Bull that makes the news so often
By mauling a child, killing
Another dog, fighting to the
Death for a reason only it knows.
Danny Pit Bull can spin a yarn,
Cut your hair, entertain you
With outrageous anecdotes.
Makes you smile 'til he
Gets on his soap box, defending
His brothers, the other kind of
Pit Bull, as if they aren't
Unpredictable, vicious, eat-your-grandma
Kind of Pit Bulls, never admitting
Their existence, nor explaining
How to tell the difference.

Harlan Richards

Eighty-Seven Hours

Eighty-seven hours, fifteen standing counts,
Eleven meals and one shower,
Is what it took to
Get through the Dodge transfer cells.
It's hard to imagine,
difficult to believe, that
Eighty-seven hours can be so long,
So agonizing in Unit 17's dungeon,
Entombed in a sweltering
Crypt with two other guys,
Equally miserable, gladly enduring
Today's privation for
Tomorrow's rewards.

Harlan Richards

False Modesty

I live in a prison full of little girls,
Modest, twelve-year old virgins,
Just about reaching puberty,
Woefully insecure about their bodies.
It's not possible that I live
In a men's prison,
With so many guys
Afraid of their own nakedness,
Who cannot use the urinal next
To another man (for fear he doesn't
Measure up?), and always closes
The next stall door over
Because someone may try to
Use that toilet while they are
Having their private moment.
There are six shower heads
But only two can be used
Because everybody knows that if
There are more than two naked guys
In one place at the same time
At least one of them will turn gay.
I live with a bunch of little girls
And wonder how they ever
Made it to prison.

Harlan Richards

For Whom the Bell Tolls

The bell rings and rings
'Til you think the button is stuck,
Sounding like the recess bell in
My grade school decades past,
Waking up the camp for another day.
The Jack Links workers coming back,
Dog-tired, smelling of cooked meat,
Sickly sweet, greasy, like a cold
Skillet after cooking bacon and eggs.
There is no excuse here for missing breakfast,
One of the first formal counts of the day.
For a man who's never known shackles,
Or the mighty oppression of his government,
This would be a hellhole beyond compare.
Less fortunate citizens, having been
Intimate with too many state prisons for
Too many years, are grateful for that
Miserable bell, the bell of freedom,
Meaning no more shackles, locked cells,
Or blue shirts saying have a nice day
And meaning the opposite.
Good food, humane treatment, nestled in the
Eau Claire River Valley, so long in prison
It's hard to imagine that life can
Get better than this out in the
Free World, where choice are made,
Dreams fulfilled, happiness found.
To think that there is really more
To life than cessation of pain,
That a comfortable pair of shoes feels better
Than the surge of relief after removing
The pebble you walked on for so long.
So grateful just not to hurt any more,
No longer able to imagine what the new
Pair of shoes would feel like.

Harlan Richards

Roommates

He works so hard doing what he loves best,
For just pennies more than minimum wage,
Grateful for the job, heedless of the
Circumstances that deprive him of sleep,
Knowing that every dime he saves is a
New beginning, a chance to do it all
Differently once he reaches the Promised Land.
There are so many less fortunate, who do not
Have the education, experience, luck,
To be on work release earning money toward release.
I go out of my way to make it easy on him,
Closing the door quietly, leaving the room while he sleeps,
Grateful that he is equally considerate, looking out
For me as I look out for him.
In a prison of unpleasant people, my roommate
Is as good as it gets.

Harlan Richards

Van Driver

Safe, alive and on time
Is my motto, as I
Drive the state van
to each destination, picking up
Or dropping off guys on work release.
There must be better ways to spend my time
Than driving hundreds of miles per day
On northern Wisconsin roads
But I can't think of any
Right now and I'm content to
Keep on delivering men
Safe, alive and on time to
Their jobs, knowing that hundreds of
Other men have been drivers and
Hundreds more will be drivers
After I move on, yet thinking to myself
That I provide the best riding experience
Ever because I treat my riders how
I would want to be treated, delivering them
Safe, alive and on time.

Harlan Richards

Night Driving

Birds sing in my ear,
In the wee hours, telling me
It's time to get up, get ready,
Go get the fellas, ten hours after
I dropped them off for work.
My alarm clock is my insurance policy
That keeps me from missing our rendezvous.
Electronic birds twittering, tweeting
'Til I extinguish their existence on my way
To the star-studded sky, gibbous moon,
Sultry, mysterious music never heard
In the light of day, but played on nightly radio
As I wend my way south on Highway 53.

Harlan Richards

The Ultimate Sacrifice

In prison I often find
Men who swear they would
Die for their loved ones, pay
The ultimate price to keep them safe.
Yet when I ask them if they would
Pay an even greater price if
There was one, they don't understand.
Going out in a blaze of glory
Seems the hero's path, yet in
The end it leaves their families
To shift for themselves.
In truth, those men love
Themselves more than life and
Their families not at all.
For if they did, they would
Choose to live a goodly life
For those they love
Instead of creating an empty place
At the dinner table.

Harlan Richards

Paradox

Another day in paradise,
Is a paradox
In prison
Where punishing people
Pleases the public.
Poppycock!
Paradise is an emotional state,
Chosen or not, by each prisoner,
Thus making the paradox:
Another day in paradise,
While in prison,
Possible.

Harlan Richards

The Triumvirate

There are many people I have
Appreciated during my time in prison,
Many of whom were serving time
With me, just as confined as I.
Others served time, but after a
Different fashion, where they
Chose to come into my life,
Face the arbitrariness and oppression
For no greater reason than a desire to
Reach out with compassion toward others.
Such were the volunteers of Oakhill,
Week in, week out, through cold dark winters,
Long hot summers, I saw Linda, Michelle
And Elizabeth reach out to help those
Most in need. Always a firm handshake,
Encouragement, a kind word, and most of all,
Caring. On behalf of all the men
Blessed by your giving, my thanks.
May you grow younger every day, wiser
Every minute and happier by the second.

Harlan Richards

Truly Free, Truly Blessed

Sitting in this prison cell,
Put on a shelf like an old VCR tape
That never gets played any more,
I find myself grateful for so
Many things that once would have
Been beneath my notice.
The blessings the Lord has bestowed
On me soar to the heavens, so far
Beyond the petty annoyances of the cage
I inhabit, that I am now truly
Free for the first time in my life.
Though I may not have the latest smart
Phone - or any phone for that matter -
And I'm not exactly living in the lap of
Luxury, these are meaningless details as I
Contemplate the everlasting life we gained
When Jesus gave His life for us.

Harlan Richards

Dancing On Wings of Hope

Sounds like geese gargling
The old con opined as he
Sat watching sandhill cranes
Fly over the rec field
In a parodic vee.
Sadly, that's as
Close as he'll ever get to
Nature in this land of
Concrete, razor wire and
Prison sentences so long that
Death or senility will arrive
Before his release date.
Yet glimpsing God's glory
In those gargling geese
Brings buoyancy to that
Old con's heart and puts a
Spring in his step as he
Dances a jig on
His way back to his cell.

Harlan Richards

A Bunch of Guys

Just a bunch of guys,
No one you'd do a double take on,
Or be impressed with.
You'd never know, unless you knew,
Who these guys are.
Concealed from sight, within these
Average Joes, lie vast reservoirs
Of creativity, compassion, courage.
Oakhill's creative writing group
Gushes verse like Old Faithful.
Midas-like nuggets of wisdom,
Mined from life's experiences,
Elegantly elided and alliterated,
Then spoken, sung and read.
Just a bunch of guys -
Oakhill's creative writing group.

Harlan Richards

Two of a Kind

Fifteen years or more,
I thought he'd be dead by now,
Unrecognizable, yet familiar,
Like a forgotten childhood toy
Encountered in attic cleaning,
Bringing memories flooding back.
We were two peas in a pod,
Drugs, alcohol, death-defying deeds.
Capricorns both, whose paths diverged,
Life in prison for me, HIV for him.
Suddenly two castaways washed up
On the shore of Oakhill Correctional,
To share a last adventure together.
Courage palpable in his presence,
Accepting, yet adamant,
Yes, it will happen, but not yet.
Another victory in each day's awakening.
Older, wiser, each ruing past action
Which ended lives in different ways;
Creating profound spiritual awakening,
Only now aware that capricious decisions,
Made in haste and ignorance,
Were formed from God's plan for us.

Harlan Richards

Merely That

Some prisoners are anxious
About getting out of prison, knowing
That their lifetime of
Failure, addiction, dishonesty,
Makes it unlikely that they can
Make a change, make it different,
No matter how badly they want it.

There is a shortcut to success,
A way to beat the odds,
Win out in the end.
It's simple, not easy,
Merely give it all, all the time,
To God.
Merely that, and nothing more.

Harlan Richards

Takin' A Trip

Like a seldom-used gravel road
My path to freedom is
Clogged with weeds,
Impeded with potholes and
Sometimes lost entirely.

With a little luck and
A lot of pluck,
I steer into the ruts
Confident that
As those before me
Reached their destination,
I will as well.

Don't leave a light on,
Don't wait up for me,
Once I reach the blacktop
Super highway of my destiny
I won't be coming back
 Ever,
 Ever,
 Again.

Harlan Richards

Gordon

Gordon you're so good for me
When I'm there I feel so free.
People there are all so nice,
To lend a hand, they don't think twice.
Such beauty in the land and forest,
Is the sight that I hold dearest.
So let me go and get there soon,
Raise my spirits to the moon.
I've been so sad since last I left,
And in Stanley became a guest.
Dear Lord it's in your hands,
Help make real my Gordon plans.

Harlan Richards

Long Gone

Stanley don't wait up for me,
Or at the library expect me to be.
Rec can shut down for all I care,
I won't be in the dayroom on a dare.
You wonder why, ask am I high?
I tell you true, so don't be blue,
If some Wednesday out on the lawn,
You hear them say, he's long gone.

Harlan Richards

Get the Edge

When I first came to prison
I felt trapped like a rat,
No way out, no hope in sight.
Then I got the edge.
Suddenly, I became a golden eagle
Perched in my aerie, free to
Soar above all the strife and contention.
Perceptions are the prison bars
That keep us enslaved, and
When we throw off the yoke of
Preconceived notions about what
We can do or be, there is no
Limit to how high we can soar.
Shed your dirty brown fur, discard
You long slithering tail and grow your
Golden feathers so that you, too,
Can soar above the mental
Pennitentiary in which your preceptions
Have you bound.

Harlan Richards

Getting Published

I made my first book deal
While sitting in a prison cell.
I was ecstatic, counting my
Chickens before they hatched,
Thinking of all the things
I could buy, bills I could pay,
Good I could do.

The publisher assured me that
I had a bestseller on my hands,
Promised me untold wealth from
Royalties, movie deals and
Aftermarket memorabilia.
Imagine my chagrin when
I was called to the property
Department and given the
Two cases of Raman soups my
Publisher paid me with.

Harlan Richards

Drilling For Tornadoes In Toyland

I wonder what it would be like
To live in a sane world,
Where things made sense, people
Were rational, and I wouldn't
Have to endure idiotic edicts
Imposed on my daily routine.

Everybody knows you run for
The basement when a tornado comes,
Or at the very least, find an
Inside wall and huddle at its base,
Safe as can be.

But not here, where common sense is
Left at the door.
In the land of misfit toys
We climb to the second floor,
Enter a cell with a large window
And give the tornado its best shot.

For we can all agree, it is
Better to have a dead prisoner
In a locked cell
Than have him running loose
In the dayroom,
Where he may slip away in
The post-tornado aftermath.

Harlan Richards

Waiting For a Tornado

Think I'll die? So what?
Don't care if I do,
Don't care if I don't.
People die daily,
Life goes on, one
Dreary minute after another.

Sometimes it's all Christmas and joy,
Smiles, laughter, love all around.
Sooner or later, it'll be the caboose,
Tail end of everything, spoiled meat,
Stinky feet, misery in a bucket.
Who cares? I don't.

There's nothing worth living for,
Less worth dying for.
Is this what makes old folks
Shuffle off this mortal coil?
Abject apathy in the face of
Meaningless existence?
Don't know, don't care.

Think I'll die soon? So what?
Don't care if I do,
Don't care if I don't.

Harlan Richards

Just Like Mandela

I have now been in prison
Longer than Mandela ever was
But you won't see any billboards
Saying FREE HARLAN the way they
Did for him. He had
The politically correct cause,
While I got life based on
Perjury.
He fought the good fight against
Apartheid South Africa
With the whole world behind him.
I fought the futile fight
For Wisconsin justice
With the whole world against me.
I'll never be governor,
I may never be free again,
But one thing I'll never be,
Is guilty.

Harlan Richards

Trapped in the La Brea Tar Pits

Being in prison is like being
Trapped in the La Brea Tar pits.
I struggle to break free, exhaustion
Overtaking me, sinking a little further
Into hopelessness.
Thick, gooey tar clings to
Every action I take, bogs
Me down, suffocates my dreams of
Freedom until my oxygen-starved
Imagination shrivels into nothingness.
I long for the strength to wrest my
Broken body from this mausoleum of
The barely living, yet each day hopeless
Despair darkens my vision,
Crushing my quest
 For a brighter future.

Harlan Richards

French Kisses

It has been so long since
I was able to drown my self
In French Kisses with
A lover or a friend.
What must people be like who have
Spent the last quarter century
French Kissing to their
Heart's content?
What must I be like
Lacking hugs, kisses, kind words
For decades, while I filled
One prison bed after another, in
One prison after another?
Some men would have become bitter,
Hated everyone.
I chose to become better,
Giving up the rage,
Forgiving the hurt.
Even though
I could not drown myself
In French Kisses,
I could still love.

Harlan Richards

Again

It struck me again,
As it has so many times in the last 25 years,
While watching him mop the bathroom floor
For 12¢ an hour, that
There are so many other choices
 I could have made,
 He could have made,
 We all could have made.
Yet I chose to come back to prison,
Knowing what it was like,
Hating it while it lasted
Then forgetting it even existed
Until deed was done, fate sealed,
Lifetime committed to horrendous life.
Oh, to turn back the clock, or forward,
Anything to end the nightmare.
Except death, not that, but just barely.
Only now, when it is so late,
Perhaps too late,
That I can now say
Never again, and mean it
With the sincerity of a life lost
In the bowels of a monster,
Chewing up men and women,
Shitting out husks of humanity,
After sucking out all that was human.
Never, ever again.

Harlan Richards

Math Skills

Once I was staunch as they come
Stood up for myself and
My way in the world.
A danger to all, solace to none.
Hurting so hard, turning me hard,
A steely-eyed soldier battling
Everyone, everything, every day,
Bound to win, damn the cost.

Sad to say, strange to relate,
I was so wrong when I thought
I was so right.
Like adding two plus two
Thinking five was the answer.
And perhaps it was,
In an alternate universe.
But not here, not in my life time.
Now, after nine times three years
In prison, I can do the math
But can't find the answers.

Harlan Richards

On My Anniversary

It would be a lie to say
The last 26 years went by quickly or
That I had a wonderful time and
Want to relive the experience.
But I do have to admit that
I'm a better man now,
Than I ever was before,
Even if it took 26 years of the most
Unendurable misery I could have imagined.
I'm looking forward to the next 26 years
With eyes full of wisdom I gained
From the last 26, hoping against hope
That I will never again have to endure
Decades of malicious cruelty,
Gratuitous torment or the mind boggling
Convolutions of security-crazed bureaucrats.

Harlan Richards

On the Anniversary of My 29th Year In Prison

I walked out the door into a burst of
Bright sunshine glinting off
The frosted blades of deep, green grass.
The clear, sharp air pierced
My lungs like thousands of
Delicious needles, each with
Its own exquisite clarity.
I looked around for a pumpkin
To see what the old wags
Meant when they spoke of
Frost on the pumpkin but there
Were none to be found, unless
You counted the orange stocking
Caps of the prisoners speckling
The prison yard.
Some say there is no beauty
In prison, with its concrete
And razor wire, compounded misery accruing
like interest on a savings account.
But I say beauty is in our hearts,
Provided by a loving God who
Comforts us when we are at
Our lowest, most needful of His
Love and support.
I thank the Lord for the crisp
Fall day, sparkling frosted
Grass and so many
Joyous pumpkins I couldn't
Count them all.

Harlan Richards

Ennui - Or What It's Like to Be 60 Years Old
And Still In Prison After 30 Years

Exhausted as a long distance swimmer
On his last reserves, fighting a tide of
Opposition bent on destruction.
Decade upon decade, years piled up
Like cordwood, enough wasted energy to
Fly to the moon and back.
No longer eager to beard the lion
In his den, or to right the terrible
Injustice which ravaged a lifetime,
Too tired to look for a lifeline,
A good time, or thoughts sublime.
Like all great forces - not vanquished from
Without - but undermined from within.
Too tired, too ground down, too
Depleted to rise again in a fresh
Explosion of exuberance where resistance
Crumbles into grains of sand on a
Sunny California beach.

Harlan Richards

Frustration

When it comes to getting a parole
I'm about as effective as a
Blind man in a wind storm
Trying to swat a fly.
I can hear the buzz of freedom,
Know it's around here somewhere
But I'll be darned if I can
Find it.

Harlan Richards

The Parole Commission

I saw the parole board again
To mea culpa my ancient sin
Let shine the Lord's voice and changes within
No release, no relief from prison with life.

I sang mea culpa to my ancient sin
Swore it wouldn't happen again
Grant me release, relief from prison with life
Still told me no, kept here for spite.

Swore to all it wouldn't happen again
Made plain that my life I did change
Again, told me no, kept her for life
Asked for parole, it wasn't given.

Made plain my life I did change
When I saw the parole board again
Asked for a parole and it wasn't given
Tho' I spoke from the heart of changes within.

Harlan Richards

A Prayer of Sorts

Pray for justice
The man said,
And I wondered to myself
Why God would
Want to bother with me,
An old man in prison
For an old offense.
It may not be a crime,
What I did, even though
It got me life. But
I was wrong in the
Eyes of God, who sees all.
And He must have seen my sin
To let them send me to prison.
So I guess it's not so silly
After all, to pray to God
For justice, since His will
Put me here, His mercy
Can set me free.

Harlan Richards

Desperation Is Not An Option

In the land of misfit toys
Where nobody really fits in
I found a place not to my liking.
Tho' I wished for better than this,
Hoped for more than this,
Prayed for other than this,
I wake up from my nightmare
Only to find I'm still here.

Harlan Richards

Devolution

In an internet age where
World wide web connects
Everybody everywhere
I've never sent an email,
Surfed the web or twittered.

When ebooks replace paper books,
Snail mail is no longer delivered,
And newspapers are published online,
I'll still be a luddite living
In the dark ages.

Facebook toppled tyranny everywhere
Except Amerika, where corporate
Hegemony wields governmental authority
In a prison industrial complex
Feeding on human frailty.

Enslaved under the only
Constitutional exception,
Alone and out of touch,
We are tortoises isolated in
Galapagos prisons
Devolving as society evolves.

Harlan Richards

Memories

Was there ever a time in my life,
When I wasn't stoned,
Drunk off my ass,
Intoxicated, inebriated, on
Acid, 'shrooms or some other
Mind-altering substance
Which skewed reality so badly
I sometimes couldn't remember
Who I was, didn't care,
And didn't care that I didn't care?
Then I came to prison,
Vowing to never get high again--
Until I wrested freedom back.
Decade followed decade, court battle
After court battle, appeals and hope exhausted.
Nothing left but the epiphany that
There will never be a time in my life,
Where I will be stoned,
Drunk off my ass,
Intoxicated, inebriated, on
Acid, 'schrooms, or some other
Mind-altering substance again.
A decade of abstinence freed the me
Who was drugged and held hostage
For so many useless years.
Now freer in prison than
When chained to involuntary servitude of
Free choice's default intoxication plan,
Strangely grateful that privation
Led to abstinence, healing, wholeness . . .

Harlan Richards

What Prison Teaches

I don't trust anybody
Who is nice to me.
Prison has taught me
People aren't nice
Unless they want
Something from you
You don't want to give them.
The most adept predators
Know that
Velvet glove over steel fist
Often gets the best result.

Harlan Richards

Inside

He stood on the inside looking out,
At the darkening winter hillside.
A thousand yard stare with eyes unseeing,
When a man has been crushed beyond endurance,
Yet endures.
You will see them still,
Scattered here and there.
Old men, broken men, men too long inside,
Sprinkled among the young and yet-to-be-proven.
The hillside, like his life, was bare.
Still, he stared, unmoving, no longer in prison.
No longer . . . on the inside looking out.

Harlan Richards

My Muse

That's not very amusing,
my muse said,
When I asked her to accompany
me to Stanley
So that I could continue to
wax eloquent in my verse.
I miss her terribly and wonder
what I must do
To lure her back
into my heart and
onto this page.

Harlan Richards

Dichotomy of a Muse

They say we have
An angel on each shoulder,
One good, the other bad.
One to help us rise to our best self
The other manifesting hell on earth.

I found my good one
When I became a poet,
But she of the sunlight
Could not live in
The darkness called Stanley.
Instead, her evil twin
Leapt onto the page.

Patron saint of darkness
Poisoning words with
The worst from within.
She spouts angry screeds
'Til my heart bleeds,
Feeding the anguish of
All who are lost to
The Lord's healing light.

Harlan Richards

C H R I S T M A S

Come and let me tell you
How much I love a
Rollicking, frolicking Christmas
In prison, where most guys
Seethe about the privations
That they are suffering, missing the
Many creature comforts and amenities
Americans are used to, thinking they
Should be treated like kings.

Harlan Richards

Curmudgeon

From kid to curmudgeon,
He had no life in between,
Except the life he served in prison.
So many tragedies, so many injustices,
Each person a story, sometimes told,
Often buried, nothing certain,
Except all things pass with time.

A 16 year-old child could not learn in prison
How to become the adult he could be.
Rather fear, uncertainty, insecurity,
Formed a shell of tough, of gruff,
Of don't-mess-with-me,
To protect the Inner Child who
Was still the outer child,
'Til that child could become a man.

Manhood is not counted in years,
It is in the set of shoulders,
Calm certainty born of confidence earned,
Life's challenges met and mastered.
Decades passed, he never became a man,
Growing sadly from kid to curmudgeon.

Harlan Richards

Counting Numbers

Just a number, six digits
Among five hundred thousand
Who have felt the lash of
Society's scourge to less or
Greater effect. His is a tale of
Contradictions, benedictions, destructions,
Finding finally, in the decades of devastation
Wrought upon him, God's grace.

The Lord's sweet voice rang in
His heart, hastening healing,
Heartening wholeness,
Nevermore shod in Satan's shoes,
Nor swinging the club of cruelty
'Gainst his brother.

Harlan Richards

How Many?

How many years in prison
Does it take before a man
Becomes as empty as a cast-off
Milk carton?
How many years can a man
Go without a hug or kind word
Before he shrivels up like a
Dried-out husk?
How many years can a man survive
Surrounded by concrete and steel
Before his soul dies and his eyes
Become the glassless windows in an
Abandoned tenement?
How many hopeless years can a man
Live before bitterness swallows
Him the way urban blight
Consumes a city?
How many men have learned the
Answers to these questions
Wearing youthful bodies,
Minds decayed like rotten logs?
How many men have gone from
Vibrant youth to their dottage
In a prison cell?

How many people, never having been
To prison, will be willing to hear
The answers to these questions?

Harlan Richards

Wisconsin's Pride

We rode proudly through
Downtown Wisconsin Dells,
Premiere resort town of the Midwest,
Giving the tourists one more
Attraction to draw their eyes.
It is not enough to warehouse
Prisoners beyond reason, the
Public must be allowed to gawk,
Gape at them, anonymous
Behind opaque windows, restrained by
Stalwart keepers.
Every Tuesday, the DOC bus
Rolls through downtown Dells,
To give the tourists one more
Attraction to draw their eyes.

Harlan Richards

Forgiving Ain't Easy

I heard them laughing,
Not at our misery, but
In spite of it.
A lockdown is a lark
For the blue shirts,
A chance to relax,
Enjoy some fellowship,
Get paid for doing nothing.
Lord told me to return
Good for evil,
Forgive Dominion group
For their greed, in
Building this wretched prison
And bribing a senator to buy it.
But it's hard when
I get locked into one of those
Crackerbox tombs with another man,
No privacy, no solitude, no comfort.
I want to curse the guards,
Curse God, curse the cruel fate
That led me to prison in
One of the worst waves of repression
Ever launched in America.
Our enemies are not the
North Koreans or Irani people
But the fascists in America
Who built their fortunes on
The backs of their own people.

Harlan Richards

Yet They Call Me a Criminal

I'm ashamed of myself,
The depth to which
I've been reduced,
Where 26¢ an hour is
Considered a good wage
And I'm willing to
Sink to such God-awful
Depths to get a few
More cents an hour.

The desperation disgusts me,
Knowing that it doesn't
Have to be this way,
Is forced on me, by
Those controlling
Every aspect of my life,
And to them I'm scum,
Not deserving of compassion,
Nor even humane treatment.

Harlan Richards

Do I Have To?

There's really no reason why
I should let myself be
Annoyed by standing up to be
Counted Four times a day,
Except that I know it's only
Because the bullies in charge of
The prison system must have taken
A course in criminal justice
Where they learned that compelling
Us to submit with blind obedience
To inane commands makes us
More likely to obey every order
Instinctively, in a Pavlovian manner
That would have us salivating on cue
If only we were given something
Appetizing enough to make it all
Worthwhile.

Harlan Richards

Growing Up Is Hard To Do

He screams it out -
STANDING COURT, LIGHTS ON -
Thinking he's ten feet tall,
Sounding more like the
Ten year-old boy he is.
Someday, when he reaches
Manhood, maybe he'll look
Back and laugh at his
Younger self, chuckling over
The false bravado that let him
Keep coming back into
This prison to pretend
He was in control. But the
Convicts knew better, knew
That he was one wrong move
Away from his worst nightmare.

Harlan Richards

Training Day

Every month, like a broken clock
Is correct twice a day,
It's time for training day at Stanley.
Laudable goal, progressive managing,
Making sure staff are
Up-to-the-minute in
Technique, tactics, tradition.

I don't see it that way.
Bi-monthly, we all get locked down,
Confined to a concrete bunker,
Sitting on round steel plates
At cold steel tables
In austere, sterile discomfort
While the staff have a paid day
Of virtual vacation.

Nevermind paying them less,
Just put them to work,
 Every day,
 Doing their jobs.

Harlan Richards

Eulogy

For 26 years I have watched state employees incrementally tighten the screws on prisoners. One deprivation after another, one specious rationale after another, we have lost opportunities, privileges, rights. We are treated despicably in the name of security.

Having lived through and witnessed the changes I can attest that the reign of oppression is nothing more than mindless vengeance, purposeless except to feed self-righteous zealotry.

Now, after 26 years, those very same people who so eagerly competed to see who could step hardest on our necks are facing their own oppression.

Soon they will be losing opportunities, privileges, rights, treated despicably by their employer.

Will even one of them see the parallel? Will they come to realize that had they not engaged in the systematic dehumanization of those of us at the bottom, the governor would not now be able to do to them as they did to us?

Sadly, I fear they are so blinded by their own ideology they will be unable to see that by taking away our humanity they forfeited their own.

Harlan Richards

Backs of Prisoners

They wrote their paychecks
On the backs of prisoners,
No longer needing the lash
To leave their scars.
Going home nightly
To a spouse, children, barbeques,
Leaving the miasma of their evil
At the prison gate, donning
The persona of an upright
Christian breadwinner.
Nevermind the crushed and broken
Remnants of humanity left behind.
Focus on wages, benefits and
Getting those union rights back.
Get ready to collect
Those fat pensions and
teach a son or daughter how to
Wallow at the state trough.
The next generation
Doesn't need college,
As long as they can
Write their paychecks
On the backs of prisoners.

Harlan Richards

Never Alone

Once, I was the only one
The parole commission abused
So heartily, so thoroughly.
But the evil which masquerades
As good, feeds upon itself,
Spreading putrid pestilence,
Migrating miasma, 'til
Others are sucked into its
Suffocating swamp.

Forgiving is fine, for finding faith,
Forgiving divine for future grace,
But heaven forbid the
Evil within
Which masquerades
As society's good.

Harlan Richards

Orchard View

I look at the beautiful orchard
Which produces apples abundantly
And wonder why those apples
End up feeding feral deer
Instead of hungry humans.
No pruning, no pesticides,
Wormy, unreachable apples
Falling to waste, while
Children starve.
Budget shortage, food shortage,
Common sense shortage.
Oakhill's picture postcard orchard.
Merely that, and nothing more.

Harlan Richards