

I'd Rather be Mexican



selected poems
Charles P. Ries

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by Charles P. Ries

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Biography

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

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

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

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

Table of Contents

- 1 Just Stories
 - 3 My Drawer of Balls
 - 4 El Latino Blanco
 - 5 Fly, Fall Dreaming
 - 6 Jesus Told Me I'm Just Fine
 - 7 Mexicans Love a King
 - 8 Monje Malo
 - 9 Plaza de Toros
 - 10 Reading Octavio Paz
 - 11 Return Home
 - 12 Snow Falling in Carlos
 - 13 Los Huesos
 - 15 Birch Street
 - 16 Erotic Geography
 - 17 Feathers for Carlos
 - 18 Perfect Saint
 - 19 Esperanza for Pale Face
-

Just Stories

I am flying today on a charter flight from Southern Mexico to Spain. The women are all beautiful and wear dresses so colorful they look like tropical birds – red, green, yellow. The men wear tight black pants with silver adornments running down the sides of their legs, in their big hats and on their tight jackets. They all talk and sing in the snappy Mexican way.

How could all the happiness of the world reside in one people? The Jews were chosen, but the Mexicans choose to be happy. God's odd choices.

I want to be Mexican too, but I am tall and white. I look like a ghost to them. They are sweet; they say, "We'll look the other way. We'll pretend you are Mexican." Wonderful people, so supportive of my desires.

My mind is wandering. I see it in the faces around me. Perhaps I have flown too far. Land has fallen away again, but I still remember the fragrance of fresh cut grass or an orange just sliced open and dripping in anticipation of my bite, but now I simply float.

"Put pepper on his wings. Make him sneeze and watch him soar. Don't let him hide, he's a crazy boy," my new friends shout.

Heaven on earth is the freedom to wander in one's mind. To line words up in single file, filling in the gaps, letting fantasy lead the reader to their own conclusion.

Just stories.

All these words – just boxes piled high to heaven's ceiling – they free us when we let them go. Sending them up in smoke. Drifting high like a helium balloon that has escaped a family picnic, "Dad, my balloon is getting away." "It's okay sweetie, it's only returning home."

Free to be free of them, floating higher. Out-reached hands. Out of sight.

The freedom of a clown poet, the one with the big shoes. Balancing twenty words on the end of his red nose. Intoxication. Intoxicating freedom.

They say when angels are present you can smell the scent of cinnamon. Did you know that? If you were free you could smell the scent of angels too.

In the hospital room soon after my daughter's birth – it was as if a can of cinnamon cookies had been freshly opened. Have you ever smelled such a thing?

A “reflection” on the stars. Their proportions blind me as I walk slowly on the rings of Saturn. Head down. Thinking hard. Working things out in my mind.

And when I walk....I can see them looking.

And when I stop.....the unseen opens.

And when I live.....I feel awkward, but determined.

And when I gaze at the star’s abundance..... I weep at the oddness of life.

My Drawer of Balls

Words live longer than
the memories of great men.

Monuments to time
Elvises of a paper Vegas.
libretto – bravo, magnifico.
Lining up on page like
perfect daisy chains.

Fragile too are these flowers:
cajones = desk drawer
cojones = balls

One letter can send your balls to the desk drawer.
“Ay Chihuahua, my cajones are blue.”
“Honey my pencil is stuck in my cojones.”

El Latino Blanco

(The White Latin)

I woke up throughout the night
as the fleas kept biting my toes.
Just my toes – the rest of me
didn't seem to interest them.

"El Latino Blanco" the bartender called me as
I ordered double shots of tequila throughout the night,
one for me and one for my friend the large white rabbit
called El Conjito Blanco Grande who sat invisibly next to me,
as he has next to the other drunks who have used him as an
excuse to order doubles.

My dreams that night were ones of desolation and consolation.
Always in that order. I remember because the fleas kept me
on the edge of real time. Maybe they weren't fleas at all,
but insect sized psychic miners, biting me to lucidity and
injecting me with some sort of drunken-poet-dream-sex-venom.
I'm sure I'm not the first drunken poet to be visited in this way.
I'm sure I will not be the last.

As the morning came, the fleas went to sleep and I too drifted away
into a deep cold river, waking to a pure blue sky, a massive Mexican
hangover and the smell of black coffee served to me by a mescal worm
named Little Rico.

Fly, Fall Dreaming

Sometimes when my mind wanders, it feels like I am walking down a steep city street almost falling, as if I am flying and dreaming. In my dream a great wave cascades over my bald spot, as if it were an island in a sky blue Mediterranean sea. Maybe dreams are like flying, falling.

I sit in the town square across from The Parroquia the great cathedral in San Miguel de Allende. It rises pink and brown in the early morning light. A woman dressed in white with a blood red shawl enters, making signs of the cross so quickly that I think she is swatting at flies or some invisible demon, but this is just her private ritual as she enters church. This is her crazy way of falling or dreaming. The arrangement we make in our mind with no one but ourselves.

I love the faces of the Indians. They are darker, more bronze in color than Spaniards. A young Indian girl walks toward me with the sun on her face. It is as if she is wearing a mask of polished copper. Her skin is radiant in the morning light, as she quickly passes by without looking at me. What is her dream? Does she yearn to fall too? Are we alike in this way?

San Miguel de Allende is a city built in the clouds on the shoulders of nine churches. The buildings are painted yellow, orange, red, green, and white, like great tropical birds. They stand against a clear blue sky. It is easy to fall here. Time moves so slowly on this mountain of silver and dreaming.

Two broad-bottomed house maids wearing uniforms the color of orange sherbet walk by. They carry a large green garbage container between them as they pass me in the early morning mist on their way to work. They are dreaming too. I can tell because their eyelids are closed, but their eyes are moving.

At dawn people pour buckets of water onto the cobblestone sidewalks outside their homes and shops. Sweeping them with brooms that look like witches riding sticks, they wash yesterday's debris away, yesterday's fallen dreams into the gutter. Sidewalks must be clean to carry dreamers.

Me? What is my dream? In Mexico, I become Latin and romantic. Maybe looking at these women whose faces glisten like copper in the morning light makes me feel this way. Or perhaps it is the thin mountain air that gives my dreams room to rise up and find me. My dream today is for a lover. My dream doesn't require her to grow old with me and rub my forehead as I lay dying. She only needs to fill my dream time. My moment here and now.

Isn't that why we dream? To have the impossible for just a moment? To reach for things beyond our grasp during those times when falling and dreaming live suspended above our kitchen sink, answering machine, and dinner table?

Jesus Told Me I'm Just Fine

I sat in the rear pew of The Parroquia, the grand church off San Miguel Allende's city center called the Jardin. It was early on Holy Thursday morning and the church was empty except for the volunteers who were mopping the floor and dusting off Jesus, who will be carried through the streets later that day on the backs of twelve believers.

I was there to think, having argued with my brother the night before over who loved our mother more. This is always a delicate debate and unwinnable, unless complete and absolute fidelity is declared to her memory. My love for her is deep, but not so complete. My brother worries that the memoir I am writing will not do justice to her memory. I tell him "It's a fictionalized memoir. All memoirs live more in the author's mind than reality," but he was very drunk and would not listen. The youngest is often such a gate-keeper.

So there I sat, eyes closed, listening for some message from God. I often pray in this way, having a "My Own Personal Jesus" moment in which the supplicant (*that's me*), acts as if He (*God*) is listening, pausing to consider my question, and then stating, loudly and infallibly, (*in my mind*) the correct answer.

I'm quite certain that many dictators, demigods, and serial killers have used this same conversational technique with a wide and surprising host of replies, but I'm a simple man (*today*) and keep my questions basic. "How am I doing Jesus?" I think in my mind.

"Why, you're doing just fine." I hear His reply in a lexicon that is surprisingly like my own (*he's a very personal God*).

I leave the church grateful to God for taking time out of His busy schedule to speak to me, and continue my work of fictionalizing my past.

Mexicans Love A King

Dressed in purple and black
they arrive by the thousands
to see the king.

Men selling candy, women selling dried flowers,
and mariachis with those slick, silver studded,
skin tight black pants who will sing you a hymn,
or a ballad for your girl friend.

Maybe they never got over Maximillion or Montezuma.
Maybe they just love the splendor of royalty, tears,
and the mystery of crucifixion.

On Holy Friday they roll their King out of moth balls
and carry him through the streets on the
shoulders of twelve strong Indians,
while the beer and tequila flows, and the ladies weep.

As they crawl on their knees in honor to their king,
they don't care that this isn't Vegas and he ain't Elvis.

Monje Malo

(Bad Monk)

I unscrewed my head and reached down my throat
to find something. Something I had misplaced.
Without a head I thought quite clearly.

*Red rose petals and white doves flew from my mouth.
Our Lady of Perpetual Tears appeared before me.
A soft still snow fell around me and but for my red lips,
I would have disappeared in a cloud of white.
The Monje approached me, brushing the snow
from my shoulders, he whispered “in the moment of
greatest desire we draw nearer to god.”*

I put my head back on, and my mind wandered back to a
desolate world – pin striped, ball pointed and paper cut.

Plaza de Toros

The Matador handed me the bull's severed ear,
a trophy of his victory and the bull's predictable defeat.
He was called *El Tiempo Grande*.
They'd saved the biggest for last.

His ear filled my hand.
I raised it to the sky and the to the crowd
saluting El Toro's rage and defeat
at the hands of Pablo Hermoso de Mendoza.

Pressing the bull's ear to my own, I heard:
the morning of his birth
the pastures of Southern Mexico
the blood as it seeped into the ground
the last glimpse of the sun
the tears as they cut his throat

As they dragged his carcass out of Plaza de Toros,
I saluted him again,
he who symbolized the burden of rage
and the insanity of being born a male.

Reading Octavio Paz

(Early Poems 1935-1955)

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

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

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

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

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

Return Home

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

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

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

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

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

Snow Falling in Carlos

“Carlos, the snow is falling in you
and there is ice on your lips.” Guadeloupe said.
Standing at the corner of Calle Sangre and Animus,
the white frost clung to me. The sun did not warm me.

“Carlos, I will plant a jalapeno in your mouth.” she offered.
I did not resist her tongue as it slid between my frozen lips.

“Carlos, my love will become your jail.
Lie down in my river. I will remove your mind
and put it here in this bottle of tequila,
keeping it warm in my fountain of Latin riddles.
Live in me and I will feed you soft red rose petals.”

I gratefully laid my head in her kind brown hands,
and wept eleven tears from cold tired eyes.

Los Huesos

(the bones)

I sit with the dead tonight. I have brought my father's tobacco and my grandfather's beer. Between their tombstones, I light a sparkler and (*with eyes open*) imagine them standing and dancing before me. So I get up and dance with them, turning, spinning, and falling to the ground. As I catch my breath, I look up to see their smiles shine down like porcelain stars. They point at me "There's our boy, he's come to drink and smoke with us. He loves the lost ones with a heart as big as heaven and inhales our graves as if they were fields of red roses."

The beer widens my eyes, makes the deep night opaque. Revealing a tribe of dead lovers who protect us from devils and demons, insuring our first communions and last rites, ready to welcome us back home with cold soft hands.

The graveyard is full. The living and their dearly departed sit in tight family circles telling old stories that recall ancestors whose names have now been given to babies.

We pass funeral cards, rosaries, and wedding rings among us – tiny monuments to people whose portraits hang along the stairs leading to the cellar where we make our candles, crush hot peppers, and shed our tears.

We slice lemon cake, eat chicken breasts, and drink tequila in the Cemeterio de Santa

Rosa. The ghosts are all brown, except mine.
Pale faces who've passed over - German,
pot bellied, serious white people, who,
in life, had things to accomplish.

We sing and dance to all the dead gone.
Mock death and remember a cast of bit
players who slip into our dreams with
whispers just before dawn.

As I pour my tequila into the earth I see
their spirit mouths open and skeletons
rise to dance three feet above the ground.
White vapor swirling like clouds. Sweet
misty blankets that embrace the tombs
of my family.

Birch Street

Sitting on the porch outside my walk up with Elaine
watching the Friday night action on Birch Street.
Southside's so humid the air weeps.

Me and Elaine are weeping too.
Silent tears of solidarity.
She's so full of prozac she can't sleep and
I'm so drunk I can't think straight.
Her depression and my beer free our tears
from the jail we carry in our hearts.

Neighbors and strangers pass by in the water vapor.
Walking in twos and fours. Driving by in souped up
cars and wrecks. Skinny, greased up gang bangers
with pants so big they sweep the street and girl friends
in dresses so tight they burn my eyes.

I can smell Miguel's Taco Stand. Hear the cool
Mexican music he plays. Sometimes I wish Elaine
were Mexican. Hot, sweet and the ruler of my passion,
but she's from North Dakota, a silent state where
you drink to feel and dance and cry.

Sailing, drifting down Birch street. Misty boats,
street shufflers and senioritas. Off to their somewhere.
I contemplate how empty my can of beer is and
how long can I live with a woman who cries all day.

Mondays are better. I sober up and lay lines for the
Gas Company. Good clean work. Work that gives me
time to think about moving to that little town in central
Mexico I visited twenty years ago before Birch Street,
Elaine and three kids nailed my ass to this porch.

Erotic Geography

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

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

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

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

Feathers for Carlos

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

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

Arms in which to float and wander; bobbing gently –
up and down, and, up and down – as I gaze into
an August sky on a day so humid the rain falls like mist.

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

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

Perfect Saint

The indigenous people of Guatemala say that
Saint Maximon is the union of saint and devil.
He drinks, womanizes, sins
and forgives any transgression.

Wearing red and smoking cigarettes
he rises with the sun and burns all night long.

How glorious to be naked
beneath a blanket of forgiveness.

Esperanza for Pale Face

In San Miguel de Allende
I drink tequila, look at the women,
sit in the churches and sip cafe el negro.
Angels whisper to me in Spanish,
but I don't understand them.

The women here are godlike.
Glorious and bronze skinned.
They love their brown men, but don't look my way -
Ghost boy is too white.
Pale face is too dumb to para hablar espanol, except
“Quiero una margarita por favor.”

The Indians say San Miguel slew the serpent here.
In steel breast plates, girded loins and a silver sword.
Looking feminine, yet firm.

When Christ rode into town
the Indians didn't throw their gods away.
Pagans make ambivalent Christians.
*Jesus chased the devil out of town one day.
Seven gods saved them from Jesus the next.*
Time to chase the devil from my mind,
“Quiero una margarita por favor?”
rocks, salt, and a cross to hang on please.