

# COMING AROUND

*Selected Poems*  
By  
*Richard L. Rose*



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*Cover is from a drawing, "Seated Sojourner," made in a train station by the author.*

## *Introduction*

This is a work of poetry, narrative, history, genealogy, and fiction. Where necessary, the poems are annotated. I believe that some poems, like paintings or sculptures, require curators. End notes explain the origins of the poems and provide information about the author. The first set of Richmond poems concerns the antebellum period and early twentieth century. The Crowley poems concern the same periods in Louisiana. In the final section, the work "comes around" again to Richmond, this time in the form of a verse-novel set in modern times.

Like my other literary works and compositions, this book is publicly available at this blog site, <http://www.frameshifts.com>

Richard L. Rose

## ***Dedication*** ***To Rivers***

This song comes from *The Fisher of the James*, a musical work about a couple living along the James River. As in the Grimms' fairy tale, the couple meets an enchanted fish and is faced with a choice. Enchanted rivers like the Potomac, Tèche, Trinity, and Rappahannock flow through this book.

### ***Rappahannock*** *In mem. FLR, Sr b. 9/27/1892*

I have left the plains  
where the horned toads hide  
under weathered boards,  
under bluebonnet skies  
for the eastern hills  
where the black snakes glide  
out of white oak stumps  
to the river side.

Rappahannock waters, your fingers play  
all the tunes of fields and runs  
from your orchard slopes to your cord-grass banks,  
from white water to the Bay.

My father's father stayed and built  
on lands where dust devils stole the silt  
and the Trinity cut a sandy path  
to the Gulf from the scrub oak stands.

And the times were hard  
but the house kept hold  
under blue bonnet skies,  
under rain and cold,  
and their songs were sung  
and their stories told  
and the live-oak trees grew old.

Rappahannock waters, your fingers play  
all the tunes of fields and runs  
from your orchard slopes to your cord-grass banks  
from white water to the Bay.

From East Texas sand  
from East Texas sky  
we were spread as seeds by wind  
and in scattered fall  
as if shattered all  
our separate lives we tend.

But the songs we raise  
and the hopes that leap  
and sparkle in the sun  
gather down from us  
under bluebonnet skies  
as rivers gather each run.

Rappahannock waters, your fingers play  
all the tunes of fields and runs  
from your orchard slopes to your cord-grass banks,  
from white water to the Bay.

## Preface

### "A boatload of slaves" (1815)

Maybe Simon Abouette,  
with Toussaint in his eye,  
was in the lot from Richmond  
Weeks came to buy.

Fifty hands at Bayou Sara  
climbed aboard the boat  
my grandfather's grandfather  
took to Grande Côte.

Cast-iron grinder, trowels and mules,  
Jacob's staff and twine  
Simon was told to carry on;  
lay aft with line.

Near New Orleans they heard the guns  
of Jackson and Cochrane;  
bore west to Vermilion Bay;  
anchored in the rain.

Over cypress, whining insects  
clouded tupelo.  
Regrets egressing flew a way  
Simon didn't know.

The title comes from a family story told by Judy Clerc Wood in her genealogy, *Louisiana Rose Cousins*. This book is a primary source for the nonfictional portions of the Louisiana poems. Grande Côte Island was later named for the family of David Weeks, who hired Edmund Rose to transport fifty slaves and build a sugar house.



## **Richmond, Virginia**

## **Sophie's Alley**

2015 and 1938

The peloton passed into Sophie's Alley  
racing crumbling stables, whoosh of flame  
from tipped pail of kerosene igniting,  
shouts along East Main Street for a hose  
unreeled too late, and Time, the winner  
always. Rent was a dollar and two bits  
for corner rooms. The fans along the rails  
on Broad who cheered Colombians and Poles  
in spandex paid for spaces on the route.

Such payments enter us for main events  
like cycling tours or watching cradle melt.  
Two windows gave the corner room a breeze;  
the inner rooms were two bits less and stank  
from slops around the spigot in the courtyard.  
Years before the fire and many years  
before the race, an actress briefly lived there,  
mother of a poet. When the breeze  
inhaled the kerosene and supper cinders  
from the pail to heat her baby's room,  
another mother watched the finish line,  
a palisade of flames, not prominence  
in life and art, but space along the route.

On September 19-29, 2015, Richmond hosted the UCI cycling races, some of which traveled over the same area mentioned in this poem, a slum of the 1930s and many years earlier the former residence of E.A. Poe's mother, who came to the city with an acting troupe. In this and other poems, I follow the practice of historical fiction, using *The Negro in Virginia (NIV)* as the primary source.

## Walker's Negro Organization Society

To tell you plain, I never will be done  
with praising you. Not pain, my giant size,  
nor "hinge of midnight" ere the moon arise--  
my blackness--in no wise nor any season  
stopped your aid. Though ice or swampy prison  
held me back, yet you were calm and wise.  
From shoe-make, rags, and nails we devise  
for "hand and heart and head" the sweet occasion  
to learn from you to reason and speak plain.  
So even Wyatt, taken from the shelf,  
can salt with fire the strife that crushes self  
and Shakespeare salve the tired sojourner's pain.  
You, Letters that to learn one forfeits life,  
secured the health that wounds the wounds of life.

Thomas Calhoun Walker was responsible for guiding many other post-Reconstruction Blacks into gardens and homes of their own, fair treatment by the courts and local government, and higher education, such as that received by the narrator in this poem. Walker's story is told in *The Honeypod Tree*. Note that the narrator not only refers to Wyatt and Shakespeare but uses the end rhymes of the Petrarchan sonnet of Wyatt's whose last couplet Shakespeare copied. The reference to "heart, hand, and head" reflects the motto of Walker's alma mater, Hampton University. "Shoe-make," or sumac, and other items were collected and sold to raise money for educational grants. I also honor Walker, who was instrumental in arranging for the writing of NIV, in the opera *Monte & Pinky*.

### **Lumpkin's Wife**

He had a tall stump for the block  
and had to help me up.  
That's when I caught his eye.

He said, Step down. Wait in the back.  
Later he helped himself.  
And so I came to stay.

There were pies and cakes to make,  
spittoon and chamber pot  
to clean and things to know.

How much whiskey traders take  
to slumber. How to add,  
subtract a coin or boy.

In time he had me keep the Book,  
make poultice for his eyes--  
his eyes too full to see.

The dressing-up, the sales, the trick  
turned finally on himself.  
I was his friend, he'd say.

Bargain after bargain struck,  
value for dollar proved  
too much. He passed away.

We made our living from the block.  
As selling used him up  
I did what friends do.

More is given about Mary Ann Lumpkin in NIV. Lumpkin's jail, along with Goodwin's, Seabrook's and other auction houses sold slaves to buyers from Georgia and the Carolinas, and other Southern states. Slaves were dressed in finery and displayed like merchandise or cattle, depending on the custom of the house. Mary Ann, a former slave, was Lumpkin's sole heir. (See NIV p. 182.)

## Mined Out

We grew tobacco in a flower pot  
below the sill from seeds like sanding grit.  
Above the sill, it flowered over cosmos.  
A horned caterpillar gnawed it down.  
Green and fat with bitter alkaloid,  
the worm was snapped up by a mockingbird.

Leaving the flowers and letting suckers branch  
years past, when our lot was a field of Burley  
outside the limits, was a waste of seed.  
A girl who dawdled in the sun forgot  
her auntie's warning when she came of age.  
The overseer was waiting for this lapse.

Even the guano trade could not repair  
the mined plantation clays along the rivers,  
though fields grew even beside the monuments  
the city cultivated like a wound  
it meant to keep. Reap from exhausted soil  
exhausted hearts, but always keep the seed.

Who lived an unexcavated life?  
Not the owner, bleeding labor costs  
and debts for grand excesses. Not the child  
whose mouth was crammed with worms she didn't pick.  
Not overseer, a swollen pod of hate.  
Not us, who idly water bitterness.

Parts of the story come from NIV and from *Before Freedom Came*, an exhibition in 1991 at the Museum of the Confederacy. Exhaustion of the soil by continual tobacco cultivation led planters along the rivers to go further west, but by the end of the Revolutionary War, the days of tobacco fortunes had ended due both to loss of soil and trading partners. Planters found another business however--selling slaves to the cotton plantations of the Deep South. After the end of the transatlantic slave trade in 1808, this business boomed. Exploitation of land, slaves and themselves, however, led ultimately to less profit than anticipated.

## The Catcher

Not far below us moves a spring  
feeding abandoned fields  
and toppled trees, departed going  
concerns and lost yields.

The Monumental Church you see  
now stands where something burned,  
and I suppose it's meant to really  
assure us we learned,

although to say it stands for this,  
this learning, seems to me  
a premature conclusion. Here's what's  
more clear: *He* stood free.

An evening out to see a show,  
be seen--themselves the show--  
their servants (Never call them slaves.) go  
outside. Stage lights glow

and curtains rise. The latest play  
the ladies would behold

begins--A Girl Escapes from Grand Pré--  
who knows the tale told?

The curtains burning and the sets  
askew, the paints on flats  
smoke, smolder, shrink and blaze. The exits  
are blocked by hooped skirts.

A window on the second floor  
is open. Someone jumps.  
A doctor looking down calls over  
the struck crowd. Dumb stumps!

One man steps out. His black arms lift.  
White ladies float to him  
like tufts to earth or flakes to snowdrift.  
A tree has caught them,

a free man, uncompelled but knit  
of deep solidity.  
You hope to stand by what you've learned but  
he'd learned to stand and be.

The Catcher was a blacksmith named Gilbert Hunt on December 26, 1811, who caught people thrown to him from the burning Richmond Theatre. (See NIV, p..57 for this and other exploits by Mr. Hunt.)

## Two Veterans

Ginter's novelties began with toys,  
wind-up china dolls, gimcracks and slides  
for stereopticons. His switching sides  
came when the men he later led were boys.  
Anderson, who also served with Hill,  
feeding cannon from the Tredegar,  
rented slaves to fold the iron river,  
field hands who worked all day but didn't till;  
ate jowls, not hoe-cake, even praised their boss  
for renting wives and children at a loss.  
Hand-rolled, with classic art-prints in the pack,  
no cigarettes of Ginter's were machined  
because his heart with head had intervened.  
Both soldiers understood what to attack.

Lewis Ginter, a New Yorker, and Joseph Anderson were keen businessmen who also demonstrated compassion for their Black employees and fellow citizens. See the biography *Lewis Ginter: Richmond's Gilded Age Icon*, by Brian Burns, and NIV p. 54. By the way, the sonnet's usual couplet is demoted to penultimate emphasis in the sestet so that the last line may stand free to speak to the point.

### **The Painter, 1960**

Picked up for walking west of Boulevard,  
a painter on his way back home had proof--  
the check that he'd received instead of cash.  
King Prosser, Nat, and insurrectionists,  
the slaves who left to fight for French or British,  
and other losses and assassinations  
feared were punished with or without cause  
by hangings, ridicule, and mutilations.  
So even after seven decades gone  
one did not saunter west of Boulevard,  
where race relations had no crowded Speedway  
or corporate-sponsored vehicles or fans  
but only one who shuffles to the bank.  
Though cop and teller both direct him backwards,  
the Earth will carry him upon her back.

For the information about being Stopped While Black West of Broad, I am indebted to local Richmonder Martin Durham. References throughout NIV show that from the beginning of their enslavement, Blacks escaped, fought, cajoled and saved whatever they could earn to secure their freedom.

### **A Peppermint Stick**

Toothless, jawless, socket  
of eye pried half off,

she had taken candy  
and been cracked down

under Missus rocker,  
her head held while

arms and legs waggled  
as switch laid on

years before.

They sat now,  
the light failing,

sewing for soldiers.

The mistress stopped,

sent for someone: Sell her.  
Give her freedom.

No more gazing from  
those crooked eyes.

This story was told by one of the former slaves interviewed by the authors of the NIV. She was the 98 year old victim of the incident, Henrietta King of West Point, VA.

### **Sweet in the Springtime**

In kingdoms of absolute power  
the planters would sweeten each hour  
with music and prose.

Thus art often goes  
for a liberal dose against sour.

All those times when the servant would call  
and patiently wait in the hall  
as the chamber's retainer  
for the night soil container  
we'd rather not try to recall.

Sometimes you would come on a scene  
of slaves on a beautiful green.  
They sang sweet and low  
for old Massa to go--  
perhaps in a binding machine.

The title comes from a line in James Bland's "Carry me back to old Virginny," formerly the state song.

### **The New River**

All I knew there was a river  
going North that I must follow.  
Cross the mountains. Sleep in daytime.  
Sometimes mountain people help you.  
But you never cross a mountain  
as you cross a field or river.  
Mountains are a sacred people.  
Precious snow they keep, and thunder.  
Hemlock, sassafras, and pawpaw,  
sumac, river birch, and oak trees  
swat your face and make you listen.  
Listen to the mountains speaking,  
telling you they once were people  
walking on the earth and searching,  
taking, filling, 'til they sank here,

held here by their heavy riches.  
Feet became the slate and boulders,  
leaving only heads and shoulders,  
navels making springs beneath them,  
springs becoming streams upon them,  
streams like lashes laid upon them,  
stripped them down to bony outcrops,  
swept their bones down to the valleys.  
North the river. North, Ohio.  
New the river I would follow.

This is an escape story about the western line of the Underground Railroad, where mountain people would house and help escapees going to Ohio or Canada.

## **A Gentler Path Between Us**

Not everything said need be repeated  
nor made, replicated  
nor believed, transmitted  
nor used, kept  
nor wanted, required  
nor absorbed, incorporated  
nor built, maintained  
nor distrusted, derided  
nor ridden, driven  
nor decided, demanded  
nor prepared, eaten  
nor guessed, tested  
nor enacted, enforced  
nor challenged, defied  
nor honored, deified  
nor betrayed, avenged  
nor connected, strengthened  
nor savored, swallowed  
nor taken, given  
nor given, taken  
nor enjoyed, encouraged  
nor conceived, compelled  
nor lost, found  
nor listed, installed  
nor doubted, discounted  
nor lobbied, enacted  
nor expected, achieved  
nor sensed, believed  
nor earned, deposited  
nor saved, invested  
nor invested, squeezed  
nor created, managed

nor linked, tightened  
nor sown, reaped  
nor urged, promised  
nor imagined, detailed  
nor derived, proved  
nor verified, imposed  
nor broken, discarded  
nor eaten, sweetened  
nor dusted, polished  
nor celebrated, catered  
nor seasoned, burned  
nor known, uttered  
nor admired, glorified  
nor punished, abused,  
nor suggested, planned  
nor detected, warranted  
nor felt, expressed  
nor justified, exacted  
nor discovered, revealed  
nor unbordered, framed  
nor noticed, named  
nor dressed, displayed  
nor owned, arrayed  
nor loved, contained  
nor hated, remembered.

Remember this.

I call this a "path poem." It's a long one compared to the ones in *The School Year* (2015)

### **Still Spotted**

The juncrow is a flightless bird  
who sings a sullen song,  
a song that others having heard  
will never sing along.

It is a kind of warning call,  
interspecific cry,  
and shriek alarming one and all  
to what they must deny.

Its markings are distinct, a blaze  
across a twisted wing  
and colored signs that raise  
questions we're still answering.

### **The Artist to Himself**

The catered life requires some color  
hanging on the walls,  
wine and brie, a china ewer,  
varied marble halls,

contentment all around--good taste,  
in short. Stick with cartoons,  
Ben, something you can do in haste,  
like singing minstrel tunes.

I assume idyllic ridges,  
fading color lines,  
misty strokes that blur the edges  
and hopeful pinks are signs

of enlightenment, but hills  
are hills, as plain as any.  
The light your painting spills  
is lost on most--or many.

This ekphrastic poem is about the painting *Idylls of Virginia Mountains* (1952), which hangs in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. The painter was George Ben Johnson (1888-1990), a Richmond artist and newspaper cartoonist known for using his art in protest of Jim Crow laws.

### **Jump Rope Song, 1859**

Calico and dimity.  
Marmalade and stew.  
Down by the rail-yard  
I saw you.

Calico and dimity.  
Drinking from a shoe.  
Down by the rail-yard  
I saw you.

Calico and dimity.  
Bacon and pie.  
You've no money.  
Neither have I.

Calico and dimity.  
Bought nor sold.  
Everybody's looking,  
So I'm told.

**"Marsa, buy my chillun."**

They can sew, muck out a stable.

They can even set a table.

Don't you know how they can track  
and right smart bring your chickens back,

pluck and snap a pole of beans,

cook up a pot of turnip greens,

lay out your dress and petticoat,

trap a coon or snare a shoat?

And if they have to learn a piece

they catch it like a blaze of grease.

And if it's nothing I have spoken,

how can I work with my heart broken?

Robert Williams, a slave on a pass from his master to Lynchburg, Virginia, went to Woodroof's Auction on First Street, where he saw a woman begging buyers to take her and her children together, "saying Buy my chillun, Marsa!" (NIV, p. 188)

### **Data Driven**

Creatures of compaction, we delight  
in everything condensed, intensified  
and data-rich: the city's layered height,  
the triptych intricate--varnish applied  
inside, although it's hidden from outside.  
An image-stream, or screen of tiles, or number-run  
may mystify yet be a talisman.

Mahler's Fifth inscribed upon a pin,  
like illustrations in the Book of Kells,  
is something to imagine, not begin.  
But if begun, the close detailing wells,  
overtakes you 'til the effort tells  
and you become the thing you have conveyed.  
You are a strand that's twisted in the braid.

So with Maury and his braided sea  
of currents, sediments, salinities  
and sea-lanes known and measurably free:  
his steady efforts calmed the restless seas.  
But sometimes numbers' hidden catches seize  
and data systems sharply point to grief  
for the density of one's belief.

Blame war. Or blame the Cause he chose to serve.  
He claimed the deltas that two rivers made  
(where Amazon and Mississippi swerve)  
was Southern soil. So planters left and stayed  
on jungle plots and died, their debts unpaid.  
Their slaves fared better. For their masters' action  
they walked free, as Maury's last redaction.

In his book, *1493*, Charles C. Mann tells the story about the oceanographer Maury, whose statue stands on Monument Avenue in Richmond, and his plan for the Amazonia settlement .

### **Despite the Bright Hosannas**

The ink and wooden block serve for the substance  
of this moonlit scene of joy and sorrow.

Beyond the fields, back in the swampy country  
the knife must tap out lightly, a disturbance  
grows with singing like a rising mountain  
as the people wade into the river.

Wade in, lift the garments from the river.  
Bevel all around their shining substance  
like the sycamores upon the mountain  
spotted white with praise and dark with sorrow.  
Come to the river for the great disturbance  
by wading angels from the holy country.

Roughly gouged, the background of the country  
harsh but distant from the sliding river,  
the wandering preacher brought for this disturbance,  
the mourners' cries, the Holy Spirit's substance  
passing to believers bred on sorrow,  
is sedge and tipping reeds and distant mountain.

Some wait. Others run off to the mountain.  
Some hide from paterrollers in the country.  
Some follow Jesus in his way of sorrow.  
And others heave their burdens in the river.  
Ink the emptiness and ink the substance.  
Press from block redemption and disturbance.

White and black take different to disturbance.  
But Marsa does not own the wind or mountain.  
He's not a man of spirit but of substance,  
living on a people and a country  
that he thinks he owns, a mumbling river  
sickened with the stench of needless sorrow.

Shout! And step the flow to dance off sorrow!  
Shout! Join the great commotion and disturbance.  
Shout! Wade out and rise up with the river.  
Shout! String pots and pans around the mountain.  
Shout! 'Til stone-deaf hear us in this country.  
Then join the dark again, its inky substance.

A work to move the mountain of our sorrow

in this country may create disturbance  
but substance is our faith we are one river.

This ekphrastic sestina in iambic pentameter is about a print by Claire Leighton, *The Baptising* (1952), exhibited at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in 2014. Explicit references to the art of block printing remind us of the artists trying to understand the object of our meditative attention even as we portray it. The paterrollers or patrollers were looking for escapees and even for slaves who had sneaked away into the woods for an evening worship service led by one of the many itinerant preachers. Stepping the Flo' was a kind of dance. (See the chapters on this and on Paterrollers in the *NIV*.) To give themselves time to run away, the slaves would string pots and pans in the branches so that they would hear anyone sneaking up on them. The title comes from a line of the poem "The Preacher Ruminates Behind the Sermon," by Gwendolyn Brooks, in which she also reminds us that "no one loves a master." At the same time as these poems were being written on a train, the Library of Virginia began its exhibition on slavery in Richmond, *To Be Sold*. We need reminders about slave times and the carelessness, negligence, and brutality of being a master. Exploitation of the Earth and of other human beings always distorts the would-be master.



## **Crowley, Louisiana**

### **From A Train Window**

Behind a shed he disappeared,  
rolled out a drum; laid down the dress,  
now triple-folded like a flag  
he meant to sacrifice or bless.

A signal changed as he looked up  
three flights to see her close the blind.  
Shaking his head, he struck a match.  
The flash comes as the couplings bind.

The coach-car shudders as a tree,  
then sooty wall, displace the man,  
the woman watching nothing burn,  
and how it ended, or began.

### **Family Photo, 1932**

Eight stand outside the house, facing the lens.  
The men wear ties, their pants and shirt sleeves bright;  
all faces and cloche hats daubed gray and white.  
The ragged live-oaks with their gap-toothed grins  
enjoy the scene as they dispense the light  
to clapboard wall and lattice, polka dots  
on one black dress like moons escaping night  
for whatever shelter life allots.  
In front of them, six younger ones kneel down,  
their sleeves unfastened, faces smooth and sure,  
one verb in a ball cap, restless as a noun.  
His little sister thinks she is demure,  
sits very straight beside him, and believes  
she sees an angel searching through the leaves.

To rearrange the reckoning behind  
the lens, rewrite the lines that passed between  
the dying father and mother of fourteen  
who will outlive him fourteen years, and find  
an outcome that would seem more well designed  
than lives like wire grass spreading out unseen  
to clench hard scrabble, and make words less mean,  
is not for us, whose thoughts and fields are lined.  
Kneeling in the front or later line,  
we reckon only with the things we see,  
the lines we make, the grudging fields we mine,  
unyielding surfaces we cannot free,  
words we cannot ablate, the curving spine  
uncured, the story on which none agree.

### **Weeping Rock**

Niobe turned to stone, or so it's told,  
because she loved her family like gold.  
Capsized from a life raft gone aground,  
a mother watched her baby as it drowned.  
While other mothers were kidnapped and held  
to watch their babies as they starved and swelled,  
Niobe only loved her precious ones;  
cared for them only--seven girls and sons--  
kept them from injury and filth and grief  
and any challenges, however brief.  
This shining treasure in her box installed,  
impenetrable as an emerald,  
at last when she beheld the hardened  
gem, she finally came to comprehend  
that she had turned her children into stone.  
Such insights are better fled than known;  
thus she became the rock face you now see,  
whose trickling spring seeps slowly to the sea.

### **Past Worthy Matron**

The bluebonnets have fallen under frost.  
Where I left them hang, the sheets are stiff.  
And sand under the door reminds me change  
comes suddenly. It's time to cover screens  
and move the barrel-grill into the shop.  
The boys must come to take away the tools  
where he left them, the new saw he never used.  
We all sawed trees those first years--scrubby oaks  
and cedars. A frowning line-storm in the sky  
crackled above us as we piled up limbs.

Coffee and butter make the list. And coupons  
from the paper. Maybe I'll take a book  
of green stamps to redeem another clock.  
The old one's empty hands fell down to six  
and wouldn't move. We rise through all degrees  
and colors 'til we catch on time. Our stars  
and flowers tip. Our hands fall to our sides.

The terms "past worthy matron" and "degrees and colors" come from the Masonic Order of the Eastern Star.

## **Song of the Spores**

A hundred hundred strong,  
all single-minded, we  
so fast and clean get in--  
get out as easily.

We've filled our hearts with rounds  
and rounded up all kinds  
uniting us to feel  
sufficient in our minds.

Our suits are strong as steel,  
with candies in the pack.  
We're hundreds hundreds strong  
and never rolling back.

An empire for a smile,  
a people for a wink  
are bought and quickly sold.  
It's stylish, don't you think?

Suppose, if you'll allow,  
that you could visualize  
our slowly burning crowd  
intent to monetize,

a self-consuming blaze  
that razes and appalls  
whatever claims to last:  
a wheel that never stalls.

Creatively destroy  
the single, mute, and weak.  
Attack, unwrap, enjoy!  
Through this the many speak.

## **Moeling, Louisiana, 1914**

Always on Saturdays she heard  
*Fais do dos et fais do dos*  
from Cajuns singing into town  
as she graded by the window.

Always Mondays she would hear  
*Fais do dos et fais do dos*  
as children sang about the dance  
and how it ended, blow for blow.

But Sunday afternoons he came.  
They talked of Crowley, home to both  
that both had left, of light and shadow,  
loss, marriages, and births and death.

He liked his beer and pepper sauce;  
her rice with secret remoulade  
of cares that grace had softened so  
it sweetly turned him back to God.

His piquant energy, her calm,  
the okra, snappers, and the slow  
decades to cook the gumbo down  
they had become, I serve you now.

**Burgess and Lois Binion**  
**d. Saturday, June 15, 1918**  
**Oberlin, Louisiana**

*Say not soft things as other men have said.*

They took each other in with every breath,  
new to each other in the marriage bed.

*Say not soft things as other men have said*

of bravery. While battle fevers spread,

they read in sitting room of distant death.

*Say not soft things as other men have said.*

They took each other in with every breath.

*Say not soft things as other men have said*

which on the scales are lighter than a breath

or young life pulsing on a slender thread.

*Say not soft things as other men have said*

to comfort him years since, both parents dead

three days after his birth. Of great brave death

*say not soft things as other men have said,*

which on the scales are lighter than a breath.

The repeating line is from "Sonnet" by Charles Hamilton Sorley. The second quotation is from *Psalms 62:9*.

**Celeste Rose Maxwell, Poet**  
Alexandria, Louisiana, 1920

Oh honey, we will all sleep on the floor,  
quilts everywhere and lines to use the privy.  
Reunions you must make like confiture  
of peppers, pears, and peaches, not like jelly.

The only light we need is Ma's bright countenance  
to have so many come: that we continue.

The Grosse Isle fire, the sugar kettle once  
tipped on a slave, the drownings make the stew,

the comfits, savory gravy, gizzard sauce,  
and paddlefish, looped in and through with jokes  
and foot race in the parlor; season our loss;  
lace and shade us like the old live oaks.

Look: Pa has made the rice his perfect mound  
like Petite Anse. Ma brings the pullet stew.  
I reach through death to tie the loop that's found  
in lacing words and finally meet you.

### **Auntie puts out the fire**

You live behind your lace and filigree.  
The white-streaked pigeon shed's for me.  
Old nigger aunties are not good for much.  
They only nurse and wean and teach and such.

They only shuck the world aside and pray,  
but prayers have never gotten in your way.  
So when I saw your house in flames and rout  
I filled this little cup to put it out.

## **Rose Bower**

Vermilion Parish, 1847-1904

Here grew from marsh grass and the salty dome  
of Petite Anse transplants who shaped a home.  
They lived with youpon, muskrat, and egret,  
boiled sugarcane, pulled moss to dry and set,  
fished crappie from the Tèche and sometimes drowned.  
Like indigo twisting through rice they wound.  
Inseparable by roots or seeds or hulls,  
transplanted here, they stayed. As strider sculls,  
or possum snarls, or tree frog peeps, they grew,  
made a high bower, slowly learned to do  
with land and stranded people whom they owned  
whatever pleased them; shot, plucked and boned  
whatever flew, drained bogs, complained of labor,  
rolled hogsheads to the pier until no more  
sugar, or people for their pleasures, paid.  
Now divagate they, other bayous wade.

## Interpreters

Unproved, an unappendaged, weak account,  
undisabused of what amounts  
to fantasy, crawls unsubstantiated.  
In oyer and terminer this counts  
less than a peddler's ounce.

*Two men were shot. Process for slave patrols  
was a head count. Our kinfolk heard  
while watching two blind horses milling rice.  
Kept milling. Never said a word.  
But locked down, rest assured.*

Such adumbrations miss complexities  
and issues our ancestors knew too well.  
The murderers were white. To the Committee  
charged to flush them out it fell  
to clean an abscessed cell.

*You read the letters that our Richmond kin  
wrote about Prosser, Nat, and Brown.  
The planters cleaned their Quarters and sold south  
the fears that they could not lock down.  
But fear still lolled downtown.*

Your umbrage taken at our history  
does not move me or convince,  
given contextual reality  
and our distance from events.  
I don't even wince.

## Daisy Buchanan

Uncured, the story on which none agree,  
she came to stay in nineteen thirty-two  
from Louisville to watch the Tèche bayou,  
an ashen specter on the porch settee  
when Mick and I would visit the Ouillechauds.  
We ran, tilted the Ouija, and played cards;  
she gazed beyond to wash lines in the yards,  
and strings of fish, and tramps sore from the rods.  
Papa's refinery once sent a car  
to bring us home. I slammed the screen, ran out  
into the street. A scream and then a shout--  
behind--she held me but had run so far  
she fell down to her knees, and said, "Irene,  
take care. Your life is not a movie scene."

"Take care, your life is not a movie scene  
that any enters and departs. Each loss  
diminishes your heart. With less and less  
required, production values only mean  
you're an It Girl, like Eva, who can't care,  
an empty thing who watches its own young  
killed as it has killed. The songs you've sung,  
wailing to dance bands, keeping time and care  
away, and the roles and props and praise  
all drop from a high window one black day.  
The scene ends and you strike the folded play."

We helped her to lie down upon a chaise  
and Aunt Celine said, like refining cane,  
such grief is only rendered with much pain.

For more about Daisy, see *The Great Gatsby*, set in 1922, when Clara Bow was the It Girl and Eva Tanguay sang and recorded *I don't care*.

### **Aunt Celine Ouillechaud**

Vermilion, she knew how to render pain.  
Hid in the smokehouse from the hurricane  
we heard her grab the backlands in her paws  
and sweep the yard with oak trees in her jaws.  
And didn't she know how to whack and grind  
better than a mule or hand  
and stir the houses fine as sand  
and for roaring leave tranquility behind.

It was then the Ouillechauds became Wishards  
and left the family their kind regards.  
A buried pipe in Richmond will stay down.  
Your Papa chased Vermilion from the town,  
straightened the Tèche and guessed he had enough.  
Old Vermilion squealed and hissed  
for all the good times she had missed  
and promised never to return so rough.

But your Papa had enough and told us so,  
and Henri Abouette would also go.  
Swamped galerie, water-house overturned,  
parents trapped below when gas fields burned,  
palmetto leaves and bricks his new address,  
he took the few things left to fold  
like an offering of old.  
Vermilion watched him burn his mother's dress.

## Coming Around

Webster's tree of words was the first wonder  
to our poet cousin, whose mixed compound  
of beats and syllables constrains conflicts  
to gently salve our family's flayed affections  
by deftly delving roots to our afflictions  
to face them, his face replaced by other faces.

As leaves sunned crown the births of golden faces  
every generation finds a wonder  
to be held, a truth for all afflictions  
to pay out, grip--even in the compound,  
dank and windowless, where affections  
blunt and Turnkey ridicules our conflicts.

For every tree and family have conflicts.  
Begin with Cain and other shadowed faces.  
The farmer's left in debt, the slave to wonder.  
The ribbon cane is milled into afflictions;  
the wonder ground into a sweet compound  
to pour upon the heart and glaze affections.

We raised the flesh of bark to grow affections  
for sugary confections. Later conflicts,  
wars for rackets, while diplomatic faces  
beamed assurance, and the growing wonder  
how sweetness brought coffles and afflictions,  
combined into a volatile compound.

Backs curved, hands slashed for a refined compound,  
our institutions twisting our affections,  
we disappeared into a clash of conflicts,  
a blur of principles, a stream of faces

set not to change but cherish our bold wonder  
of the world, whatever its afflictions.

We blunder to insist on the afflictions  
borne and delivered, the sugary compound  
of interests remembered, the old affections  
rehearsed, the long and comfortable conflicts  
nurtured. We do not come round by saving faces  
or turning them away to a spent wonder.

*Apply to self-afflictions this smooth compound.  
This poultice transforms conflicts and affections:  
A wonder when applied to hearts and faces.*

# **Richmond, Virginia**

## **Palliative Care**

*A picaresque novel in a few thousand words.*

*(Some rascals are not obvious.)*

Cloak the eyes.  
This trance though  
incurable  
can be made  
bearable  
salved by words'  
holy spit.

Now to Dub.  
Try to keep  
from doing what  
was done to you.  
You can't.  
The crazy rite you  
endured goes on.

Nothing going,  
you spin in place.  
Take Dub Wishard.  
So short of names,  
Lou picked Duvier,  
her Cajun uncle's.

Called Duveer,  
Dovey, and Douche,  
his freshman year  
he made it Dub;

joined the Gams.  
Spinning in place,  
his son's Duvier.

Dub Two's a Gam.  
His freshman year  
he made it Del—  
throwing up  
vodka, Corona,  
and a possum  
behind the House.

Dub was thrilled  
Del was a Gam.  
Gastric lavage  
done, so was Del.  
The spin cycle  
might have wrung  
another Dub,

male or female,  
but a year's drunk  
weekends later,  
Del dropped out  
and had a wreck  
catching the truck  
who cut him off.

An ER nurse  
named Tracie  
remembered him  
from Foster High  
playing drums.  
Two weeks later

they lived together.

Spin in place  
like the Earth.  
Granted, it shifts  
position—who's  
tracking it?  
We search our dreams.  
We dream our searches.

Lena Lawrence,  
the Director, died.  
Rochester-trained,  
aspiring to make  
Dumont Choir  
a Shaw Chorale,  
she lost to Del.

Trace said the altos  
and Dawn could stand  
Del's voice absent  
Lena's vocalise.  
The free-will help  
pleased Pastor Mills.  
(Lena'd been paid.)

Were they surprised  
when Del arrived  
with speakers, drums,  
bassist, girl singer  
and keyboard charts;  
finger spills all  
riddles to Dawn Mills.

Choir rehearsals  
Del called *sessions*  
went two weeks until  
the Pastor sat in  
because Dawn made him.  
And Del returned  
to Dub's rec-room.

The episode  
discouraged Del  
for seven years.

Dub would have worried  
but for Lou,  
Arla, and the  
Siamese.

Cornering  
the cat at last—  
string-garrotted—  
his eye-brow bleeding  
for the last time,  
Dub couldn't say  
where Sweetie'd got to.

That left Arla  
and Lou, his mom  
who wheezed at night  
across the hall  
as the live-in took her  
to the pot.

—*Sixteen of us,*

*eight facing eight,  
me and Lois,  
fifteen years  
boxed Models; taped  
the boxes. Near as  
you now, she died.*

*I'd like it that way—  
quick as a snip.  
Lucky Strikes  
slip off wheels  
to packs and hand  
to hand. None knows it.  
None feels the going.*

*Where's my smoke?  
That Arla's hid it.  
My house she waits for,  
Lorena, as I  
for this BM.  
Nothing you've done  
can make it pass.*

Lorena screamed.  
Del hid his phone.  
Arla woke Dub.  
He held his pants up,  
elastic gone;  
stared at Lou's hand  
on his new tile floor.

Arla called.  
She was the one  
waiting to call

all this time.  
He guessed this while  
the orange-vested  
driver spoke.

*—So often when we  
get the call  
they're on the toilet.  
Maybe you know  
it's death. You rush  
to bear down, maybe  
to expel it.*

After that,  
Del left off  
calling Trace.  
That kind of talk  
she said upset  
her life with Mike—  
that dirty talk.

From the Bahama  
cruise Arla  
owed herself  
without Dub,  
Ciguatera  
sent her home  
itching and sleepless.

So the reefs  
blanching from touch  
and commerce reached  
into Dub's life.  
Arla insisted

Lou woke her nightly  
with shooting pains.

Later she saw Lou  
afloat in daylight,  
puffing over coffee,  
which burned like ice.  
As her cells' gates  
flew open, she stalled  
in dingy smoke.

Where does this system  
end—skins-edge;  
chair-railed surround  
of supper table  
where Dub's sister  
Sis ladled soup  
after Grave-side;

the wide-spread plans  
of Uncle Mick  
who followed Del  
into the bathroom  
smoking and talking  
about his plants  
so Del couldn't sit;

or mycelium  
of enterprise  
infesting Mick,  
whose investments  
in micronils  
ran to millions;

or blue film

of gasps, wheezes,  
whistles, shrieks,  
fulminations,  
roars and whispers  
far and near—  
the Troposphere—  
or where trance ends?

Mick took Del on,  
showed him extruders;  
how loose gel hardened  
as it whipped and cooled.

Grignard and cross-linked  
resins beyond him,  
Del preferred the show room:

micronils cool to touch,  
silver, some jeweled  
for Asian markets,  
some jet black,  
others opal,  
intricately  
whorled within.

Twelve women  
milled the edges  
smooth; inserted  
wire flowers  
for the line  
of Bagatelles,  
and custom-wrapped.

Mick's division  
made Standards,  
Bagatelles,  
Economies,  
and Smoothgrips;  
employed hundreds.  
Del found his place.

So, on that day,  
left behind  
not by Rapture  
but by selves  
streaming off  
from duties,  
Dub was alone.

Coming home  
from shifting rows  
and columns, he  
knew they'd been there—  
a glass in the sink,  
a drawer ajar.  
They watched; recorded

twenty-four seven;  
put itching powder  
in his bed;  
turned his stools black  
with warfarin;  
flooded his crawl space;  
called and hung up;

wired his home;

wanted all he knew  
so they could scrub  
his mind, impair  
his power to think  
through their far-  
reaching, sordid,

festering schemes—  
pustulant issues--  
which took away his mother,  
wife and son. And now  
they wanted his house  
to stop him talking.

Here is the issue:  
incommensurables,  
incompatibles,  
an antinomy—  
the one in many;  
the many, one;  
protean;

the appetite  
for savagery  
yet able to trace  
the beautiful line  
of a forehead;  
to slice out a shoulder  
of cow or a man

for butcher or  
bodymerchant  
—transactions  
equal in value:

all the same  
to restless creatures who  
can do anything.

Try loving others  
as yourself.  
It can be done  
but be prepared.  
Things will not change  
or go your way.  
Cut with the grain.

Pray simply *Our Father*,  
all from one source  
called Parent—a kind one—  
wanting all our best.  
Sis believed this.  
Her Papa, Lou's Bill, was why.

Touchet Parish,  
where Bill came from  
was tallow trees,  
rice, scum-sheen inlets,  
gigging frogs mud  
mushing moonlit  
nights, and herons.

You could shout.  
No one would hear.  
Green bottle flies  
hopped—or changed  
coordinates—  
to reappear

a yard away.

So Bill and Lou  
appeared in Richmond,  
shivarees sung,  
lace curtains packed,  
and saints appeased,  
to roll tobacco  
and lay lead pipe.

The city stretched  
past Ginter's Hill,  
past burley fields  
around Marse Robert,  
past Jordan's Branch,  
and sprouted taps  
to every house.

*Like roots*, Bill said,  
the pipe he laid—  
cradled down,  
ropes pulled back up,  
Finch showing off  
standing on it,  
like a boat's hull

overturned  
in the ditch  
a spring had filled—  
spread west and north.  
Its runners watered  
shacks and mansions  
all from one source.

*Sis girl, he told her,  
we seem to know things  
but it's the bayou  
feeds our roots.  
All of us tap it.  
We're only how it  
makes new life.*

Plumbing supply  
was Bill's new life  
for forty years.  
He passed in sleep.  
Lou heard him say  
*The anchor bolt  
has broken clean.*

To Papa she was  
*ma gentille.*  
Lou called her Sis.  
*Take care your brother.  
Be sure you change him  
while I'm gone.*  
Now both were gone.

And behind the faucets  
in his office  
Dub heard chattering,  
churring, scraping—  
like men's low talk,  
crickets, and patting  
a grave with shovels.

How could she change him?

Cover his eyes?  
An ermine cloak  
of water turkeys  
lifts off the bayou  
past moss-hung live oaks.  
Fills the sky.

He sees so much  
he's blind, entranced.  
Try to see. You can't.  
Blue ibis, *poule d'eau*,  
the cape-winged crow  
in tupelo  
sing one refrain.  
Cut with the grain.

*Cut with the grain.*  
Who can name it?  
Not a person,  
place, or thing,  
*Hallowed be,*  
but who can name it?

Sis wrote down  
what Father Jim  
had said. *We want  
an understanding  
that does not  
exceed our  
comprehension.*

*More than this  
is pride, denial,  
waking dream.*

*The Holy Name's  
a space for breath  
alone, where words  
cannot take root.*

Sis was eldest  
of eight children.  
Two died at birth.  
Two died from smoking.  
Two over-ate.  
Dub went to college,  
grew Wishard & Son.

Here's the truth  
Sis comprehended:  
she was the last.  
Mick told her Del  
would have to go  
for calling Roxanne  
late at night.

She knew his voice.  
The girls in Shipping  
all knew his voice.  
Mick had moved him  
twice. No more.  
Del had to go.  
Sis called Old Finch.

*Cher, crois-les pas.  
He's not chaviré.*  
Her Papa said  
Finch was not nuts;  
only twanging

his *bombarde*  
made him seem so.

His mother's family,  
the Abouettes  
near Petite Anse,  
was glad Bill took him  
East to Richmond.  
Without Old Finch,  
Dub would be lost.

He took her call.

—*Onri ci.*  
—*Henri, it's Sis.*  
    *For Del again.*  
—*Ma gentille Sis.*  
    *I'm achalé—*  
    *fichu, you know?*

—*You're not worn out—*  
    *just ornery.*  
—*May kingdom come!*  
    *How do I please you?*  
—*Find him something.*  
—*Nothing comes*  
    *without looking.*

*Del expects*  
*the fish to whistle*  
*and drop in his pocket,*  
*like my Looey*  
*keeping the orders*  
*Captain gave us.*

*Finally shot for it.*

*Did Captain mean  
to hold this hill  
forever? I said  
as his head blew off.  
In our retreat  
I found the Captain  
in a ditch.*

*Del don't know  
to leave the hill  
no more than Dub,  
shut in his office.  
But I will see  
what I can do.*

So kingdom comes.

So Sis gave Mick  
the name Finch found.  
And Del then drove  
for Lavabo's  
whose PVC  
replaced the pipes  
Papa had laid.

And Dub heard voices  
explaining what he  
had to do.  
*Thy will, Sis prayed,  
be done with us.*

Unstuck from fate,  
we have choices.

*Don't listen to them,*  
*Dub*, she said.  
Later that day,  
as he was told,  
Dub gave the keys  
to Finch, packed up,  
and drove away.

In actions, in mind;  
on Earth, in heaven:  
*Go where we send you,*  
said the voices.  
Dub passed through Staunton,  
Paris, Wando,  
Fairall, and Fairborn.

Finally he heard  
them say, *Stop here.*  
Sis got the call.  
She shouldn't worry.  
He had enough  
to live on, to have  
some days to grow.

Said his mind was  
a ferment, a yeast-pocked,  
frothy, brooding,  
bready mass  
stealing sleep.  
But in Chicago  
he ate quietly,

found a two-flat,  
met a wholesaler  
of Tygon tubing  
at an expo. And *no*,  
*as far as Del, well,*  
*he's on his own.*  
Sis wrote the address.

Vanua Levu  
sank, she read,  
while off Gwadar  
another island  
rose, caul steaming,  
crusted with clams.  
So debts are cancelled.

So in autumn,  
as Mick's plant  
released the latest  
SP-Micronils  
and locusts left  
their slit bodies  
to live with roots,

Sis prayed for Dub's  
delivery, Del's  
restraint, and Mick's  
return. Mick's Master's  
was in scrambling  
olefins. He therefore knew  
the coming roll-out

of Micronil's

Scented Product line  
did not target  
Special People  
but SP-ganglia.  
Like a dead thing  
this secret lay

between them. Sis prayed  
Mick could return  
as she watched him  
descend into roots.  
So few knew  
or understood—  
would ever know

or understand—  
his life with roots:  
Sagging demand  
meant fewer jobs  
processing, packaging,  
pimping, promoting,  
lobbying, betting,

marketing, banking,  
distributing—all  
rooted in a product  
multicolored,  
multitextured,  
rolled and sucked  
by infants and matrons,

obsessively collected,  
sniffed by connoisseurs,

sung about in ads.  
Lovers shared them.  
Heritage models  
in estate sales  
brought fortunes.

All rooted in Micronils,  
the global brand  
of thimble-sized beads  
in signature packets  
uniquely etched,  
kept as hedges  
of intrinsic value.

When demand sagged  
a tenth percent,  
another tenth,  
then four, then five,  
the SP line  
was introduced.  
Its neural hook

through the noses  
of consumers pulled  
demand so high  
that Micronil  
became the market.  
As in the times  
when tusk-shells,

butterfly-beads,  
crinoids, stamp-seals,  
and quartz bowed down  
to Lapis pendants

treasured in Uruk,  
Micronil prevailed.  
The roots held.

Ancient history.

You need to know  
the five events  
which made Mick change—  
five fingers pointing,  
pinching, tickling,  
promising, spanning

Mick's underworld.  
You need to know  
how he returned,  
disentangled  
from roots, trance  
emerged, ready  
for the bonfire.

First, Dub's Rescue.  
Sis had to see  
the way he lived.  
Mick drove. Backed up,  
the Dan Ryan  
did not release them  
until noon.

Near Addison  
and Lincoln, Dub lived  
by tank-topped Lolla

hot-damning in the hall  
her Lollo, a remora  
who gazed at traffic  
and his hairy legs

with equal wonder.  
Their child, Wiinara,  
conceived playing Wii  
after marinara,  
said look for Dub  
downtown in Grant Park.  
Mick turned around.

In the forest of biped  
pachyderms without heads  
or torsos Dub could sleep  
shielded from signals  
by metal legs—  
the only place  
the voices left him.

A tiny girl  
in a red sari danced  
on the slippery slates  
under the arcing fountain  
spat from the Giant's Face.  
Sis called it  
Dub's Siloam.

But for Mick, trying  
to see around  
Dub's rocking head  
to change lanes,  
Millenium Park

was only a marker  
to find Lake Street.

Lollapalooza  
behind, the van  
sped south with Dub  
crying and drooling  
on the armrest.  
Back in Richmond,  
doctors, guessing

Arla's toxin  
passed to Dub,  
gave IV mannitol  
and mood-molding  
mortar rounds  
flattening feeling,  
muting the voices,

and calming Sis  
enough to leave  
Dub with an aide.  
Mick drove her home,  
stopping as always  
for the corner vagrant  
Sis gave her change.

The Altar Guild  
kept Sis while Mick  
opened the backlog  
on the roll-out.  
“Coca” every  
other message.  
The Secret out.

Claims and payouts,  
rueful confessions,  
long litigation—  
all for a bead  
to finger and sniff.  
Mick knew how to avert it.  
Distraction was needed.

Here is a city  
where half the residents  
traded in counters  
worthless in themselves  
but standing for labor,  
love, trust, craft, and power—  
the roots that last

as long as the trance  
goes unchallenged.  
Mick was pinched  
between the dream  
and how things were.  
The company line  
would be: Stonewall. Insist

coca leaves are inert  
ingredients, claims  
unproven, cases  
unrelated. *Thank you  
for your query, but no  
interviews now.*  
Or ever. Mick knew

this was coming. But Sis,

always caring for hopeless  
cases and causes,  
did not know. The thought  
that she would soon know  
him differently burned.  
Soured his breath.

*Reflux, Mick?* She said.  
*Did you take your pill?*  
He took off watch  
and ring, lay down  
beside her unsleeping,  
unable to fit back  
into their circle. He dozed.

His phone rang. Finch.

*—Ici Dub's room.  
Out of his head.  
Fou raide. Bill gone,  
now Dub. Me manque  
mes copains. He can't last.  
He already smells.*

*—But he's only sixty.  
—We all only something  
when we go, you know.  
Tell gentille Sis.*

So wild on Benadryl,  
Dub had been dosed calm  
to a hypoxic end.

In the hall with Mick

while Sis sat with Dub,  
Finch frowned and said,  
—*While you were gone,  
Del wrecked his truck  
on the Powhite. Lavabo's  
fired him.*

—*Where is he?*  
—*Back in Dub's rec-room.*  
—*Too much for Sis.*  
—*Ma gentille Sis  
says charred meat and cigs  
will do me in.  
We're all foqué  
you know. I'm eighty.*

*But I tell you about Sis.  
I knew her since petite.  
She's a gombo woman.  
Studies on you. Makes the soup  
to bring you round.  
A healer—a sad thing  
in this world to be.*

Dub did not come round.  
Paroxetine,  
the last of many  
speculations  
why voices screamed,  
shut the remainder  
of his liver down.

Cloak their eyes.  
What we do is make

bearable the trance  
they're in. Tickled  
by the thought, Mick  
found the Distraction  
needed by Micronil:

The Annual Turnaround  
Awards and Exchange  
Sales Event.  
Matchlessly made by  
eating, food's  
demand was the model  
Mick discovered.

Coupons the donors  
received discounted  
purchases of the  
next new line,  
all the old micronils  
melted in vats  
over bonfires circled

by dancers and singers  
in a civic festival.  
Memo to managers:

*Only replace  
what was made.  
Think of a soup stock  
in one pot, serving all.*

**The End**

**To Caroline Boudhili**

1957-2012

A gombo woman

*And other queens of peace with open hearts*

You took me into your confidence  
even as fearing for my life and sense  
I followed, waving off fear of Regret  
tearing at the impulse to believe.  
Such a raptor, quiet and definite  
in habit, waits; leans forward to receive  
his proper share of this rare incidence,  
chatoyant eye consuming evidence.

Unpersonified, the harpy bird's  
real as green fear and rodent squirm of innards  
only introverts can feel in crowds.  
You, who allowed all, soaked up the threat.  
You, my laughing friend, now lie in shrouds.  
You, who absorbed and welcomed all, could let  
in even obstacles, and me, absurd as  
squeamish poems, ridiculous as words

telling how, since you, I faced down rage,  
found the words when set upon a stage,  
walked into the mountains without guide,  
watched the dark well up without relief,  
calmly set my pretty grief aside;  
danced as you did, like a twirling leaf.  
Now you are gone. I write another page,  
proof to loss. Enthroned heart, never age.

## Making Coming Around

While doing research for the opera *Monte and Pinky*, a story about my aunt, I began to stray into the family's history in the interstate sugar business. With decreased revenues from tobacco sales, and growing concern about rebellion by rented slaves and freedmen, Virginia's plantation owners became labor suppliers. Slaves from Richmond were sold to cotton and sugar plantations in other states. The products of these plantations returned to Richmond's "sugar pad," for local use and global distribution. Given the later health issues due to processed sugar and social issues due to slavery, my family's involvement led me to respond in some way. A documentary treatise this isn't, however.

The poems embody my experience in trying to imagine and understand the early circumstances of our people, free and enslaved. The first "Richmond" section began as a contest entry. The Poetry Society of Virginia annually offers prizes for poems in many categories of fixed and free forms. I had just completed the libretto for *Monte and Pinky*, drawing on the Work Projects Administration's collection of interviews and narratives entitled *The Negro in Virginia* (Roscoe Lewis, Supervisor, John F. Blair, Publisher, 1994. Originally published by Hastings House in 1940). During a train trip to Chicago, I began to write some poems about the people in this book. By the end of the trip, I had finished the writing and realized that it was not a contest entry but a series of poems to be read together. The contest had only served as a prompt.

Below are the categories of the PSV contest. Poems are in contest order with one exception ("The Artist to Himself"):

Edgar Allan Poe Award. Any Form.  
Sonnet  
Any form. About Friends  
Any form. About Farm life  
Any form. About Heroes  
Sonnet or other traditional form  
Reflection on inter-ethnic relations  
About a woman or women  
Limerick

"Sophie's Alley"  
"Walker's Negro Organization Society"  
"Lumpkin's Wife"  
"Mined Out"  
"The Catcher"  
"Two Veterans"  
"The Painter, 1960"  
"A Peppermint Stick"  
"Sweet in the Springtime"

Any form. About Nature	"The New River"
Any form.	"A Gentler Path Between Us"
Any form. About Birds.	"Still Spotted"
Ekphrastic poem.	"The Artist to Himself"
Poem for children ten to twelve years old.	"Jump Rope Song, 1859"
Any form. About spiritual impact of loss	"Marsa, Buy My Chillun."
Narrative poem	"Data Driven"
Sestina	"Despite the Bright Hosannas"
Ekphrastic poem, iambic pentameter.	"Despite the Bright Hosannas"

Additional notes are included with some poems so that readers unfamiliar with events or circumstances may better understand them. Notes are also provided on the art works which were subjects of two ekphrastic poems. Although poets cannot be good curators of their own poems, I believe that they owe readers at least enough information to orient them to the approach and contents of their work.

In the "Crowley" section, most of the family information comes from a genealogy, *Louisiana Rose Cousins*, by my cousin, Judy Clerc Wood. Additional sources were personal correspondence and another Works Projects Administration book, *Louisiana: A Guide to the State*, first printed in 1941 as part of the American Guide Series.

As the PSV contest requirements provided the prompt and structure for the "Richmond" section, so the "Exercises" from Mary Kinzie's excellent text, *A Poet's Guide to Poetry (Second edition, 2013)*, provided the forms and inner constraints of the poems. For writers interested in such details, the forms in this section are listed below. Please consult Professor Kinzie's text for other details.

From a train window	Descriptive quatrains
Family Photo, 1932	Sonnet of dramatized description
Weeping Rock	Couplet narrative
Past Worthy Matron	Blank verse meditation
Song of the Spores	Trimeter Mad Song
Moeling, Louisiana, 1914	Ballad of metamorphosis
Burgess and Lois Binion, 1918	Villanelle using lines by another poet
Celeste Rose Maxwell, Poet	Invitation to Heroic Quatrains

Auntie Puts Out the Fire  
Rose Bower, 1847-1904  
Interpreters  
Daisy Buchanan, 1932  
Aunt Celine Ouillechaud  
Coming Around

Epigram of condemnation  
Couplets in Praise of Place  
Dialogue in Nonce Stanzas  
Sonnets of secondary characters  
Ottava Rima Vision  
Sestina of Early Intuition

In dealing with family matters, it seemed desirable personally to decenter from the subject matter both by voice and by externally imposed forms. The many internal constraints offered by Professor Kinzie were invaluable in this regard. Perhaps the final results are not at all what she might have hoped, but I nonetheless appreciated her guidance even when departing from it.

The second "Richmond" section presents the experience of a fictional Louisiana family, the Ouillechauds, who first appeared in the "Crowley" section. They came to the city several years after the flood of 1927. With a new name ("Wishard") and a new century, the family in *Palliative Care* brings the story to the present. The nonce form of this verse-novel is a seven line stanza of very short lines. It has also been rendered as a prose poem, as given online at the frameshifts.com blog site (under "works"). It may be noted that Mick Michaud is the son of the sugar refiner previously mentioned in "Crowley," who was based on my great-uncle. One might also view the work as the devout Sis's meditation on the Lord's Prayer. Further commentary is left to genuine curators. I leave this work to the care of your eyes and ears.

## About the Author

Richard L. Rose (b. 1945) has retired from several careers, including teaching, medical laboratory work, environmental education and research, math and science supervision, and teaching science and science teaching methods in public schools and universities. After growing up “on the road” with a military family, described in the poetic memoir, *Marking Time*, he settled in Northern Virginia with his wife to raise two sons and follow a vocation of teaching and avocations of writing and musical composition. Since retiring, he has produced several chamber operas, *Annunciations*, *The Books of Daniel*, *Amber*, *The People’s Voice*, two children's books, *Shura* and *The Queen and the Crocodile*, and several books of poetry. Following his wife's death and beginning a second marriage, he composed *La Rinuncia*, produced with his *Missa brevis* in Richmond in 2015, a novel, *FRAMESHIFTS*, published in 2011, *The School Year* in 2015, and the opera *Monte & Pinky*. All of the operas were benefit concerts for groups like Amnesty, Habitat, and local charities. Another musical work, *The Fisher of the James*, focused on environmental concerns, and a set of stories, *Hidden Moves and Hidden Faces*, come from living in Richmond. These and other works are publicly available

on his website [marginalnotesinwordsandmusic.org](http://marginalnotesinwordsandmusic.org)  
and blog <http://www.frameshifts.com>.

In his spare time, he collects rejection slips.

Recurrent themes are the transience of our lives and habitat and an insistence that we find effective ways to attend to this fact. By producing benefit concerts, reducing royalties, and recommending nonprofit organizations worthy of their attention, he invites readers to make their own creative responses. Perhaps readers of *FRAMESHIFTS* will be inspired to imagine and accomplish something positive for their communities. In writing, however, his intention is simply to tell a good story with interesting characters in surprising situations.