



RICHMOND SCENES

Poetry by Richard L. Rose

Contents

Introduction	3
Sophie's Alley	4
Walker's Negro Organization Society	5
Lumpkin's Wife	6
Mined Out	7
The Catcher	8
Two Veterans	10
The Painter, 1960	11
A Peppermint Stick	12
Sweet in the Springtime	13
The New River	14
A Gentler Path Between Us	15
Still Spotted	17
The Artist to Himself	18
Jump Rope Song, 1859	19
"Marsa, Buy My Chillun."	20
Maury	21
Despite the Bright Hosannas	22

Introduction

This 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*, for which my research had included the WPA collection of interviews and narratives entitled *The Negro in Virginia*. Given the sabbatical of a train trip to Chicago, the contest provided an opportunity to tell stories from this and other sources. By the end of the return trip, it was finished. But I realized that it was a series of poems to be read together. The contest had only served as a prompt.

Below are the categories of the PSV contest. The poems are in contest order with one exception, "The Artist to Himself." Here are contest requirements, excluding line counts and most titles:

Edgar Allan Poe Award. Any Form.	"Sophie's Alley"
Sonnet	"Walker's Negro Organization Society"
Any form. About Friends	"Lumpkin's Wife"
Any form. About Farm life	"Mined Out"
Any form. About Heroes	"The Catcher"
Sonnet or other traditional form	"Two Veterans"
Reflection on inter-ethnic relations	"The Painter, 1960"
About a woman or women	"A Peppermint Stick"
Limerick	"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"

Other notes are included with the poems.

Richard L. Rose
Richmond, 2015

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, 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.

8
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 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.

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 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. It's somewhat in the meter of the *Kalevala*, which I also used in the opera *Amber*.(1999).

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 in comparison 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 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.

Charles C. Mann tells the story about Maury in his book, *1493*. In form, this is a small homage to Auden's *Letter to Lord Byron* in rhyme royal.

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 their 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. (See the chapter 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 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.