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Wrightsville Beach

Poetry

Peter Venable

The tide rises, wind at twenty-five knots offshore,  
blows waves higher and higher and break,  
pounding shallows, churning sand in a trough.

Sand is packed hard as concrete—joggers  
dodge buried shell shards jutting like glass  
for careless soles. I plod and plunge into waves

for the next one, body surfing at my age. I’m game.  
White caps everywhere. A big one crests too soon  
and I dive below it, dig fingers into the sand

and feel it try to pull me into its jaws.  
Bursting to the surface, eyes smarting, I barely  
see a lifeguard stand waving, red flag flapping.

I’m not too old. A dark underwater shadow zooms by—  
No, a fleeting wind-surfers sail! Several Pelicans glide  
by inches above the swells as I tread. On the horizon

the Big One forms and billows. Surfers wait, politely  
jockey for position. It summits and we ride the crest  
but it smashes me like a ship from a rogue wave—

I plunge, somersault and like a shark clamping a fish,  
it yanks me under whipping surf over and over and  
over—a bug in a washing machine, until a frothy hand

pushes me through into a sandbank face first—  
I periscope up, gasp for air, sinus full  
as a ship’s ballast, chin sandpapered raw,

swimsuit full of sand like a toddler’s diaper  
in a tidal pool and stagger onto the beach.  

This has to be grace.
The Book Return

Poetry

Rebecca Holder

A single click. The books are mine!
Royalty dispatched to my humble abode,
Bearing unknown riches for my eager hands and thirsty soul.
They arrive, flagged and ready for their mission,
Given a place of honor by my side day and night.

These paper vagabonds regale me beneath the campfire glow of my reading lamp

Tales of mystery, intrigue, and danger;
Love stories, grand and eternal, or sadly unrequited;

Farcical romps through follies and foibles, laughter to my eyes;
Sage tomes of wisdom and knowledge, beyond my grasp, but pulling me up.
The time comes and they must take their leave.

I accompany them but so far,
Stopping at the steel door, its gaping maw ajar.

Such an unceremonious end for so glorious a beginning,
For they came to me on angel wings, fairies’ feet, and astride magical steeds,

And now depart without fanfare, fireworks, or gallant heroes’ procession.

I bid them godspeed down a laundry chute.
Nature’s Alarm Clock
Poetry
Sondra Wainer

A blue jay squawks and flaps her wings,
A wren lifts her head and begins to sing.

A warbler wails a soulful song
As a cardinal’s whistle rings clear and long.

A chickadee sporting his chic black cap
Chirps his name as his special rap.

A goldfinch shares his serenade with me
As he lands on a branch in an old oak tree.

It’s a feathered chorus sharing their tunes
As they all say “goodnight” to the waning moon.

But I yawn and stretch and roll out of bed,
Their concert my alarm clock for the day ahead.
Thunder in the Night
Poetry
Bill Gramley

On a humid night late in June,
I lay twisting and turning on my bed,
craving a breeze, anything to soothe me to sleep.

Like an ancient mariner adrift and helpless at sea, I went to my window
and cried, “O zephyr, sweet zephyr, where art thou?”

Silence and stillness.

Had I concocted a mirage in my mind or did I hear
the deep decibels of distant drums boom--booming?

Had someone tumbled down the stairs,
bouncing and thumping on the wooden runners?

Or had a Hannibal of military ingenuity gathered a herd of elephants
and provoked them with electric prods, making these monstrous mammals
gallop across our Piedmont hills and fields creating colorful cumulus clouds?

Wounded and wild, they came closer and closer
until I could smell their breath pushing out from their trunks.

They stampeded through my yard, crushing trees and shrubs,
lashing their tusks against my shutters and drapes,
soaking me and all who dared to stand in their way.

And then they were gone.

Stillness and silence.
Petals of Thebes

Poetry

Chrystalie Bruzo

The distance roar, of approaching storms
Like a thousand wild hooves
Thundering through her dreams
Of ancient warriors, from another time as she sleeps
Wandering through dusty castle corridors
Leading only to dead ends and almost forgotten
The petals pulled from their stems
Lay dying on the battleground of memories
Hushed utterings of regrets
Fill the ear-splitting silence with metamorphic color
While she sleeps
Torrents of blood falling like rain
Over broken lives and sorrows
Footfalls keep beat with a pounding heart
So, she weeps the bitter bile of longing
Where on these yellow pages is it written
All ends happily every after
Read over and over again
As the reel of a silent movie come to a close
When the tickling of the films end then she dies again
Life’s Journey

Poetry

Judith Ruff

Have you ever envisioned your life
as if you were like a stream?
Meandering along the water as it
ebb and flows like the journey of your
past and future.
Sometimes caught up in a web of
trash trying to break free.
When suddenly rainfall appears,
dumping lots of clean water,
untangling and releasing a freedom
to continue onward to your quest.
Finding Truth

Poetry

Betty Weatherman

Sun – Rain
Joy – Pain
Each sure to appear
At some unknown time
On the surface of our terrain
Testing our ability to
Stand tall and be strong
Igniting a spark
To sustain and maintain
The engagement of those
Daily renewing long walks
In nature healing park
Be steady and always ready
To search, learn and savor
Each golden grain of knowledge
Left in the quiver
As we continue on
In constant search for truth
Sense of Belief
Poetry
Debbie Halstead

Life is like a relay race
Ups and downs are pictured in one’s face
When one has performed their best
It is exemplified by passing the test
At times one must overcome strife
The body rotates around the obstacles of life
Successfully hurdling these times provides relief
Necessitating a strong inner sense of belief
Orion Transformed

Essay

Bill Gramley

On winter nights when I glance out the window, I usually see the constellation known as Orion the Hunter. The stars that form his two shoulders, two feet, belt and sword are clear and bright. They are separated enough from other stars to stand out and form what the ancient Greeks in their mythology called Orion, given that name after he pursued the Pleiades, the seven daughters of Atlas, and was slain by Artemis. That origin varies from Mesopotamia and Egypt to European countries, but I have known Orion the Hunter since my youth. That description of the constellation is familiar to many people in our American culture and beyond.

Now I think it is time to remove that name and title because it is a stereotype that limits this cluster of stars to other options. I know that our imaginations often compose figures or creatures from the stars just as the Greeks did. I don’t think Orion is a hunter any more than the big dipper is a cup or the bull and dog and scorpion and other constellations are what we name them. And yet, they are deeply imbedded in our minds when we scan the sky.

It is easy to pass along our stereotypes of the stars and assume they will never be anything else. They are prisoners whom we have limited to one dimension. But now I think it is time to change the way we view constellations. We need to set them free and let them be something other than what we have defined them to be!

The reason I am calling for a change in attitude about Orion is that if we can transform our thinking about the stars, we have a very good chance of breaking the stereotypes and images we have of people who differ from us in terms of race, culture, and traditions. Once we quit calling Black people names that cut and hurt and condemn them to a single slot in our minds, we can appreciate who they are and see the beauty, variety, creativity, and decency in them they have always had. They no longer all “look the same” or act in negative ways just
because we think they do. They have depth and splendor just as those stars have. They have a right to shine in their own way, not in the way we depict them. And the same can be said about our other prejudices about people, cultures, accents, styles, ambitions, and genders.

It will be very difficult to view the Orion constellation differently. But we need to realize that those stars are many miles apart from each other, for one thing. They do not compose a one-dimensional figure. There is depth to them, and dignity, and glory. And some of them have longer life spans than others and may have been formed at different times. And some may become red giants, or dwarfs or supernovas that eventually explode and bring about new possibilities in the universe. Why should we limit them to the myths that brought those names about?

We can become imaginative and creative in our views. We can try to make a geometrical figure out of them with dimensions, like polygons or trapezoids. We could say those three parallel stars are faith, hope, and love, or joy, peace, and gratitude, and remind us of those qualities we value. Then we can show them to our children and say, "Look at those three stars. Can you give them names that will remind you of things you value?" Or we can be silly and name them the "Three Stooges" or "The Three Musketeers," or the perennial three wishes. Or we can sing, "Twinkle, twinkle little stars, how I wonder what you are, up above the world so high, like a necklace in the sky." And we can "catch a falling star and put it in our pocket and save it for a rainy day," as one crooner puts it.

If we want to, we can go "dancing with the stars" and make Orion our partner, putting our arm around her sparkling waist, reach for her hands or shoulders up high and move in a way that we don't step on her toes. And if we insist that this constellation is a man, why not change him into a concierge who opens the door for our trip to a distant, mysterious realm, or a porter who carries our luggage, or a delivery boy or girl? Yes, one or all of these could be Orion
transformed. If we have a mind to say it, we can do it, love it, laugh it, and just plain fancy it because we want to. And I know we will thank our stars in the process.

There are no rules that say, “Black people must stay locked in the limited category where we have held them for over 400 years in our country.”

There is a hymn that refers to Jesus and begins, “Break forth O beauteous heavenly light, and usher in the morning.” But there is no reason we cannot make it point to Orion and him or her and their mates to usher in a different perspective, create a new dawn and day where stigmas are gone and geometrical clusters in the sky look different and are different from what we inherited and always thought they were!

When we look at that constellation again some winter night, we will easily revert to our ingrained view, but just as we get to know one another here on earth and remove our blinders and appreciate the beauty and dignity in all God’s children, so we can transform what we see after dark in the distant, beautiful night sky and use the creativity God gave us to make it so!
The War Of The Worldviews

Essay

Peter Venable

The philosophy professor, having read Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," placed it on the podium and gazed. "Try these on for size."

Touching a mole on his cheek, he bellowed "Who am I? Where have I come from? Where am I going? Why am I here? Where do I belong? Do I matter? How long have I got?"

The class keyed and then stared at his gaze. He, still as a Greek statue, searched their faces.

"This is your assignment, due the last day of your life."

He dropped The Republic into his briefcase and left the classroom early. Snickering, scurrying, texting, the students' exited and the room became empty as the space after each question.

These are human questions raised over millennia and are the ground of human searching for meaning. Ancient and current religions also address them, but answers vary between the secular and the sacred, the natural and the supernatural. We are questing and questioning beings.

Throughout history, whenever world views clash, it is debatable whether more blood or scholarly ink has spilled. Consider the ancient Hebrews surrounded by polythetic pantheons and the commandment for them to remain apart and to only worship YHWH—or else! (Deut. 30.) Perhaps today's mantra might be "Don't tread on my worldview!"

Worldviews are a useful concept in helping us understand another's viewpoint, perspective and thus perception of the world. It is our image and idea of reality. They address the perennial and ultimate questions of Who? What? Where? When? How? And Why? In philosophy, metaphysics is the pursuit to determine what is ultimate reality, "the big picture," the one active substance that causes and connects the many changing material things we experience (the One and the Many.) Matter? Energy? Space? Quantum quarks and quirks? God? Is ultimate reality natural or supernatural? Recall Tillich's Ultimate Concern? We humans have grappled with this for eons and continue to do so. As we strive to learn truth (epistemology), we create and maintain belief systems. All of this becomes quite complicated, as we shall see.

A question is essential to mention: on what authority do we base what we believe? That is, which one(s) are held to be truth by what criteria, and by whom? What proof, evidence, and verification substantiates that worldview—besides personal conviction and devotion?

Is belief truth? George Santayana jars our belief-net security: "People are usually more convinced that their opinions are precious than that they are true." Everyone is a believer. Most of these five belief systems are ultimately exclusive—to some extent. The question is, which one is Truth? All? Some? While one may combine
elements from one or more of these worldviews, a person may (and often does) evolve from one to another over a lifetime.

*Credo, ergo sum,* "I believe, therefore, I am" is a variation of Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" that speaks to the force driving our humanness: our belief system. Belief has a range of meanings: to concur to a proposition; acceptance of a fact, opinion or assertion as real or true without personal knowledge; reliance upon statements or testimony; assurance and confidence in someone or something. All of this shows the power our beliefs have in directing our lives.

Moreover, we cherish, trust and give our hearts to core beliefs about ourselves, others, nature and the universe, and God. They are our ground and foundation. In essence, what we believe is real, becomes our reality, and shapes our perception. Hence the axiom "Perception is reality." Furthermore, what we believe, we become. Thus, beliefs are mental habits and ultimately rules for action, as William James articulated in *Varieties of Religious Experience.* Core beliefs are not merely mental agreements to logical propositions, but visceral tenets and "rules" we trust, have confidence in and depend upon. When we believe, we give our hearts to a statement, idea, person, place, thing, event, or spiritual force.

Additionally, we have emotional and often passionate attachment to our cherished beliefs. What are more sacred than our beliefs? Any belief is as absolute as our stake in it. When we think about it, all of our beliefs are true—we believe our beliefs are truth. Consequently, our belief system is "circular," a cybernetic closed loop, in that our beliefs become self-fulfilling and self-perpetuating, our "self-fulfilling prophecy." That is, unless we allow truth to amend or replace belief. That takes courage when we know we have been wrong. Never underestimate the power of denial and delusion.

For instance, Claudius Ptolemy (81-161 CE), an astronomer and mathematician, postulated that the earth was the center of the universe, "geocentric," and planets and stars moved in perfectly circular orbits. This system became known as the Ptolemaic system, was adopted by the institutional church as fact and held so for some 1400 years. In 1530, Copernicus wrote a book *De Revolutionibus* and claimed the sun, not earth, was the center of the universe, "heliocentric" (yet he believed the earth moved around the sun in a perfectly circular orbit! Later Kepler dispelled this assumption, observing that the orbits of the planets are elliptical). Likewise, people used to believe the earth was flat and that Martians or other extraterrestrials made canals on Mars. Dare it be mentioned millions believe in a Covid vaccination conspiracy?

Consider what can be viewed as The Great Divide:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Naturalism</th>
<th>Supernaturalism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Materialism</td>
<td>Spirituality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relativity</td>
<td>Absolutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evolution</td>
<td>Creator and Creation's Creatures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Humans Evolved Randomly  Humans Made in God's Image
Chance Mutation  Purposeful
Empiricism, Scientific Proof  Spiritual Enlightenment, Experience
Bible as Religious Text  Bible as Revelation

Given that whatever we believe is our truth and our reality, *Credo, ergo sum*, what are the main worldviews? They are characterized as Religious, Theist, Supernaturalist, Agnostic, and Atheist. The graphic illustrates this accordingly.

To begin to examine these five, *Religious* peoples' worldviews are shaped by their spiritual backgrounds and both historical and current religious beliefs and practices. Eastern religions have traditions of *pantheism*: they believe that God *is* the universe; the universe *is* God and that it is alive and divine. Thus, God is in all, and all is in God—a mystical absorption if you will. In other words, I am God, I am divine. In Hinduism, the *atman* is the spiritual life principle of the universe, especially when regarded as inherent in the real (vs. false) self of the individual. *Polytheism*, belief in multiple gods, is also a feature of Hinduism. (Western religions are monotheistic, although hierarchical.) Let us not forget *reincarnation* - *karma*, or the transmigration of souls from one body to another at death, a fundamental in Hinduism and more acceptable in Western worldviews. Remarkably, some Christians privately entertain *reincarnation*, ancestors having a former life on earth. However, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity have *hierarchies* of spiritual beings, e.g. angels and demons. Within their
hierarchies, spiritual entities are either good and evil and vie for position and power in earthly and cosmic battles. (Buddhism does not have a deity to revere.) Religious persecution is insignificant compared to deaths caused by secular ideologies, see note 1. It is evident some religions combine political-economic principals within their doctrines, e.g., ancient Israel, and presently fundamental Islam. Theists (monotheists) believe that the ultimate supreme God exists, usually a Being infinite, immortal and indivisible—omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient. Alcoholics Anonymous and other Twelve-Step Programs, however, refer to God simply “as we understood him,” normally attributing that God is at least greater, loving, and caring and avoid further theology. Thus, AA and their Twelve-Step offshoots are theistic. While all scientists remain religiously devoted to scientific discipline, Einstein spoke of an “illimitable superior spirit” and Werner von Braun a “superior rationality.” Some theists may believe in and even pray to their deity, but do not profess or practice any religion. Some do both. Next, Supernaturalism (or spiritualism in a broad sense) refers to a wide category of individuals who believe in spiritual forces; immaterial entities they can invoke, influence or placate through ritual, ceremony, magic or prayer. Some are often lumped as occult practitioners. Examples include Ouija boards, séances, channeling, astrology, crystal ballism, occult, black magic, Satanism, psychics, Christian Science, Gnosticism, necromancy (contacting the dead, also dubbed spiritualism), Theosophy, shamanism, Voodoo, paganism, and hosts of others. (Primitive people tend to be animists, who believe that living spirits inhabit every existing thing). Some supernaturalists adhere to a vague form of pantheism, and as mentioned earlier, many incorporate aspects of differing world views. For pagans, Terra may be viewed as the Mother Spirit with accompanying goddesses. (Hell is not in their jargon and there is no sense of divine accountability.) New Age spirituality typically falls under this category; they are largely eclectic and are exemplified by a holistic view of the cosmos.

Some supernaturalists may employ a vague form of theism; they may have a hazy conviction of a universal “god,” masculine, feminine or an impersonal “It.” Their belief may be marginal and largely irrelevant in their lives. We are reminded that for some persons, these five worldviews are porous. “Many paths, one journey” is a familiar mantra. Agnostics believe that God’s existence cannot be proven—or disproved for that matter. They tend to be religious skeptics and demand pragmatic or empirical evidence—verifiable by the five senses—before they would validate any spiritual experience. It was not until the 17th century Enlightenment that many began to minimize or dismiss the role of a Supreme Being. Deism evolved—a belief that there was a Creator God who set the universe in motion (sounds suspiciously like Argument by Design from an Intelligent Designer), but ever since creation “God” is not involved in human affairs—much as if we paused to watch the activity of an anthill, then moved on. Hence, the deist God is a spectator or a “rocking chair God.” Many agnostic scientists lean toward an Intelligent Designer (ID) but have no personal views about the attributes or qualities, much less any personal relationship. They may range from leaning in the direction of atheism or tipping toward theism. Of course, some are Christians.
Atheists believe (and indeed, they are believers—like everyone else) that God does not exist and is at best a human fabrication, e.g., that religion is Marx’s “opium of the people.” They are materialists or naturalists, believing that fundamentally only matter, energy, and the laws of thermodynamics, motion, attraction, entropy etc. exists. Like agnostics, their whole viewpoint is based on whatever they deem is certifiable and provable by empirical methods and observation. Hence, God is a human projection. Freud summed his position: “At bottom God is nothing more than an exalted father.” It is conspicuous that in some bookstore, atheism book sections are shelved next to religious books. Some atheists are so vitriolic that one might wonder if for them if “Nothing is sacred.” Hence, for them human destiny is to decompose into fertilizer.

There are a number of sub-headings under atheism, such as secular humanism, political Marxism-communism, neo-Nazism, and Post-modernism. “Secular humanism is a comprehensive, nonreligious life stance incorporating: a naturalistic philosophy, a cosmic outlook rooted in science, and a consequentialist ethical system” (https://www.secularhumanism.org/). Post modernism is typified by broad skepticism, subjectivism, relativism and adherents have a general suspicion of reason and overarching narratives. Other common features include no absolutes, moral relativism, and pluralism. Relativity is their modus operandi.

The political spectrum of Conservative – Moderate – Liberal can be applied in these five worldviews, since people range from one extreme to the other, noting that among radical left or right wingers—whether secular or supernatural—men tend to endorse or participate in violence (see note 1.) As we observed, these perspectives are permeable; some world viewers embrace whatever fits within their schema, and some have worldview hybrids. Then, we have a spectrum of perspectives on worldviews: all are equally valid and true (a logical fallacy); one is more valid and truer than others; or one is valid and true, and all others are invalid and false.

In addition, people’s views evolve over time. Resolute Christians often lapse into agnosticism while attending college (like this writer). Others may change from one religion to another. Atheists can become theists or vice versa—especially when tragedy and trauma suddenly occur. Christians alike have grappled with this over eons as such calamities shatters their sense of a benevolent and protecting God.

Here again, we can broadly divide these worldviews between naturalists (no spiritual beings and everything is relative in the laws of physics) or supernaturalists (immaterial, immortal spiritual beings exist whom people can commune with).

In conclusion, in understanding and employing these five worldviews, it is critical to discern what is his, her, and their belief system and world outlook, since each worldview “viewer” is convinced his and her vantage point is Truth—or at least truer than the others. A person raised in a church may cease attending but retain a belief that God exists yet deny Jesus as Christ (like this writer once did). A person solely raised Hindu, Moslem or Buddhist etc. will have their backgrounds coloring their worldviews—whether they adhere toward a secular or sacred viewpoint and, here again, may merge their meta-narratives together.
In conclusion, it is critical to discern the person's belief system and worldview. As we share our faith in Christ, it is essential to realize that when anyone seriously questions the validity of their worldview, it takes great courage: such a paradigm shift is extremely threatening because we are what we believe.

Ideas, ideologies and beliefs run the world. On what or whom is our authority? Natural? Supernatural? Or mixtures of both?

1 The largest atheist worldview is Marxism-Leninism communism. They caused incalculably more deaths than all other types of religious-based deaths, past and present, combined. Estimates: China, 65,000,000 deaths, USSR 20,000,000 deaths, and other predominately communist countries 8,000,000 deaths. The Nazis caused 15 to 30,000,000 deaths, via extermination camps and World War II deaths. Surely in our era countless thousands have died (and are dying) due to radical religious persecution—and counting. Our Lord warned us in His Olivet Discourses. See The Voice of the Martyrs (persecution.com).
My thoughts on the high five

Essay

Jessie Crockett

Years ago, people used a handshake to show agreement on a particular matter. It is used now but not as often as a high five. Both of these are gestures serving as a way to communicate. Since the high five is used frequently, I thought it could have a special meaning.

Two hands lifted, five fingers touching could mean five words. The five words are faith, friend, fortitude, forward and favor. All of these words have a positive meaning we can use in our relationships with people.

We say words matter and they do, but actions can carry a message as important as words. The high five involves a touch that we all can use at certain times.

Now, we are advised to stop touching each other as we are accustomed to. The virus has put limits on many things, but I believe if we focus on the meaning of the five words, we can rise and overcome many obstacles that we face today.
Feelings

Essay

Helen Webb

Asking someone “How are you” is a common greeting that may or may not begin a conversation. Typically the reply is short. My usual reply is “Fine, thank you. How are you?” Depending on the situation, the conversation may or may not continue. At this point in time, I would like to express my true self...those feelings which have been bubbling up in my entire being.

I’m tired of the 2020s. The 1920s roared but the 2020s can only yelp.

I’m tired of wearing a face mask.

I’m tired of my hearing aids getting caught in the straps of a mask.

I’m tired of a mask making it hard for me to breathe.

I’m tired of my glasses fogging up when wearing a mask in the cold.

I’m tired of my nose running under a mask.

I’m tired that my amusement of the day is trying to see how many gnats I can catch in a cup of vinegar.

I’m tired of the news on TV being consumed with COVID.

I’m tired of hearing about the January riots at the Capitol building.

I’m tired of hearing about Trump and all his shenanigans.

I’m tired of a racial “spin” put on any news event... be it a fire, a murder, or what have you. If it’s not a racial “spin”, it’s a political “spin”.

I’m tired of not feeling free to visit with friends because I might take COVID with me or bring it out to someone else.

I’m tired of having to recognize people by their shape, or the way they walk or their hair or lack there of.

I’m tired of not feeling comfortable being with friends in a social setting without a mask.

I’m tired of being afraid to hug family members.

I’m tired of being afraid to go to events.

I’m tired of feeling like living in a cocoon.
Six months ago, things seemed to be looking up about COVID and life began bit by bit to return somewhat to normal. Then COVID came roaring back. According to the news, COVID is spreading less, but a new variant is emerging. Am I depressed? Yes. Am I going to take an antidepressant? No. I will continue to walk and talk with God about the situation. Hopefully in a few more months we will be dancing in the streets.
Defining is not Kind

Essay

Betty Weatherman

Call me what you will-Pale and Frail
Just because I wear a snow capped mountain on my head
But by golly, that doesn’t mean
I’ve fallen off my rail
Don’t mess around with me
For I’ll startle you with boldness
I’ll fool you everytime
So- Listen to me closely,
I can not and will not be “defined”
Not now, not later, not ever
So button your lips, put a zipper on it
Clear your head and get out of my way
By now, you have surely learned what not to say
Don’t ever try to belittle me, I will not let you
Because, “I’m one of a kind, you betcha”
When I’m bad, I’m wretched- and will never try to “fetch” you
Just sit there and stew in your opinionated juices
Until our relationship grows more stable-and
Neither of us ever again-sports a label
I don’t like it, just a childish destruction of another
A simple truth, I will now lay on the line
Defining is not kind
Stop it-Don’t do it
Enough said!
“Do you like roses?”

Abigail nearly jumped out of her skin at the question. She peered through the wrought iron fence into a thicket of bushes. Most every day after school as she headed home across the railroad tracks, she’d stop for a minute to look at the rose garden behind the fence at the big fancy house, but ain’t nobody ever spoke to her before.

“I said, do you like roses?”

A tall, thin woman, wearing a broadbrimmed straw hat and ruffled pink gardening gloves, rose from among the blooms. Them gloves ain’t even dirty thought Abigail. Momma told her not to have nothing to do with the people in the fancy houses. Just put her head down and walk on by. Them fences was there for a reason. But Abigail didn’t want to get into any trouble by being disrespectful if the lady was talking to her. It took every ounce of Abigail’s courage to speak.

“Yes'm, I do. But we don’t have none.”

“Well, there’s no harm in looking, I suppose. You may stand closer if you like.”

The lady nodded towards the high iron fence. Abigail nervously shuffled to the edge of the road, poking the dust and gravel with the toes of her worn shoe. There weren’t no way she was going to step across the ditch or walk up to that fence.

The lady stood silently watching her. Abigail felt her face getting hot and she started to squirm around in her faded, too-big cotton dress. She tried to wipe her scuffed shoes on the back of her fallen socks, but they were bunched up around her ankles and didn’t do much good. The lady still didn’t say anything, but Abigail felt her eyes looking too long and too close—so close they looked plum through her. Suddenly, Abigail couldn’t stand it no more and she turned and ran for home. She should have listened to momma. Kept her head down and walked on by.

The next day Abigail saw the lady right off, kneeling down in the rose bushes. Abigail didn’t want any more trouble. Her walk slowed to a crawl as she debated whether to run past or turn around and cut through the hayfield to get home. The lady didn’t look mad yesterday, but momma always said it was hard to tell what those folks were thinking. Before Abigail could make up her mind, the lady called out:

“You may stop to look. I’ve no objection to your stopping for a minute.”
Abigail looked behind her to make sure the lady was talking to her, not somebody else. The road was empty. Abigail inched her way forward, all the while looking this way and that, searching for a way to run. The lady held a basket filled with long-stemmed blooms. After a minute, the lady selected a flower and extended the thorny stem through the iron bars, her gloved hand cradling the bloom.

“Here. This rose is named Love and Peace.”

Abigail stretched as far as she could, gingerly taking hold of the stem, her hand and the lady’s separated by a dark green thorny expanse and the shiny black fence. Abigail took a tiny sniff of the rose, then sucked her lungs full of the rich, spicy fragrance as her fingers traced the edges of the petals. Abigail couldn’t contain her curiosity and delight.

“I ain’t never smelled nothing so good! Thank ya! I never knewed flowers had names. Do they all have names?”

The lady arched an eyebrow at Abigail before responding.

“Yes. They all have names.”

Abigail stared up at the lady, “What’s that one called?” She couldn’t stop the words from tumbling out of her mouth. The rose garden was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen and now she was holding one of the roses in her hand. The lady hesitated.

“That one is called Dark Night.”

Before Abigail could ask for another rose name, the lady turned and walked towards the fancy house. Scurrying home, Abigail’s insides were all tied up in a knot—first all happy and excited with her rose and then all worried and ashamed she shouldn’t have taken it.

Abigail told her momma she found the rose in a ditch. That it must have fallen through the fence when they were cutting flowers. Abigail didn’t like lying to her momma, but something told her momma wouldn’t take kindly to her chatting up the lady in the fancy house behind the fence. And Abigail sure didn’t want momma to know that she hoped to go back and learn more rose names.

From then on, Abigail stopped at the fence on her way home from school. Most times the lady was there. Once in a while, she’d speak to Abigail, telling her a rose name or two before going inside her fancy house. On one visit, the lady gave Abigail another rose. “This is Mr. Lincoln,” the lady said as she dropped the flower through the iron bars, then stepped back for Abigail to retrieve it. Abigail quickly picked up the rose. The deep red petals were soft as a kitten’s nose. Momma would never believe she found another rose in the ditch, so Abigail took
Mr. Lincoln to her secret hiding place by the crick, filling an old Mason jar usually reserved for catching tadpoles with water for the blossom.

On another visit, Abigail found a waxpaper-wrapped sandwich and a jelly jar of lemonade on the ground outside of the fence.

"There is some left over food you may have."

Hungry as she was, Abigail hesitated. Momma would tan her hide if she thought Abigail was begging food like a stray dog. As she knelt to retrieve the sandwich and jar, Abigail wondered if this is how wild critters felt when they found a baited trap. The food went down kind of hard, even with the lemonade, and Abigail hoped the lady wouldn't do that again.

Abigail was kindly shamed each time she hurried to the rose garden because she knew her momma wouldn't like it none. And because, if truth be told, though Abigail liked learning the roses' names, there was something about the lady that made her feel right prickly. The lady never talked much and she always stood back away from the fence. Sometimes, the lady would just look at Abigail, or look past her. Abigail wasn't sure which. And she wasn't sure which felt worse, ashamed and guilty for coming to the garden or empty and sad when leaving.

But Abigail kept going, even as the days got shorter and she saw the lady less and less. One day, as the weather turned cold in earnest, Abigail stopped dead in her tracks at the sight of the rose garden.

"What happened?!"

Standing among trenches filled with the thorny, spiked crowns of the pruned bushes, the lady behind the fence looked down at Abigail.

"I'm putting my friends to bed for the winter," the lady said as she proceeded down the rows, naming each one. "Mr. Lincoln, Madame Delbard, Eternal Flame, Sweet Afton, Painted Moon..."

It didn't make no sense that the lady always talked about the roses like they were people—her friends—and now she had a sadness about burying them. Suddenly, Abigail realized they were the lady's friends; they meant something to her. She knew their names, but she didn't know Abigail's name. She'd never asked. Maybe it was only fitting as Abigail never asked the lady's name neither, but that wouldn't have been proper.

Abigail's brow knit together as she watched the lady carefully bury each bush in dirt and straw, nesting them gently into their winter beds. With every shovel full, Abigail felt the past few months disappearing, covered up and gone as if they never happened. The lady only had
eyes for her “friends” and Abigail knew her name never had been, or would be, among them.

Abigail thought about telling momma about the lady and the roses, maybe even asking momma why the lady never asked her name. Then Abigail remembered what momma said about there being things bigger than railroad tracks and fences that kept people apart. Things you couldn’t see, but were there just the same. Abigail didn’t understand when momma told her, but that sure enough was the feeling she had now.

It was getting late and Abigail decided to head on home; momma might need help with supper. Maybe Abigail could help make biscuits to go with the pot of stew. There was a bush with pretty red berries on it just past the tracks. Abigail wanted to break off a few sprigs; they’d be right nice on the table. Through the fence, with her back turned to Abigail, the lady with the fancy house silently buried her roses. Abigail watched for just a moment, then turned and hurried home to momma.
LUCY
Short Story
Sharon Cullison

Jack had been driving for 10 hours stopping only to fill the tank. In Wichita just before midnight, he picked up a bucket of fried chicken at KFC as well as an order of nuggets and a large, iced tea. If he was going to make it home tonight, he needed plenty of munchies and some loud music. He was a little concerned about the storm clouds building in the west. They were beautiful to watch as he traveled across the flat prairie, but they would most likely slow him down. He was determined to be in his own bed before sunset.

Jack set the cruise on his Dodge Ram truck at 85 and headed west on Highway 400. He stopped in Pratt to top off the tank and talk to the locals about the weather. They all agreed it was “gonna” be bad. Just as he pulled back on the highway the wind picked up and a few pellets began to splash the windshield. He didn’t get much further before the rain was blowing in sheets across the road. He knew instinctively that hail was coming and began looking for cover. Jack could barely make out a train slowly creeping through the storm above the highway and took shelter in the underpass. He pulled as far to the right as he could and turned on his emergency flashers even though he hadn’t seen another vehicle for hours. The wind howled and pummeled his truck bringing as much rain inside the underpass as there was outside the shelter. The lightning was blinding and the expected thunder deafening. And then the hail. Big hail. It would ruin the crops and do a lot of damage. Jack said a quiet prayer that his farm might be spared. It was a bumper year for the wheat farmers of Kansas and one storm like this could wipe out a year’s work.

Jack left the refuge of his pickup during a lull in the storm, to stretch his legs and breathe some fresh air. As he paced along the highway enjoying the distinct aroma of the earth after rain, he heard a low vicious growl. Turning in the direction of the sound he was startled to see a large dog crouched high above him where the embankment meets the train trestle. The dog was in a protective crouch, teeth bared, emitting loud warning growls. The next lightning flash revealed two pair of eyes. Jack took a step backwards intending to escape his truck when he realized that the second pair of eyes belonged to a small boy. Boy and dog were soaked through and obviously very cold. As Jack approached, the dog stood and snarled viciously.

“What you two doing out here all alone?” Jack asked without moving any closer.

“My truck is safe if you want to join me. I have food and it’s warm. There’s room for both of you. I have a border collie at home, named Jasper.”

The little boy eyed Jack cautiously, trying to decide what to do. About that time an enormous bolt of lightning followed immediately by loud rolling thunder prodded the boy to begin sliding on his backside down the embankment clutching his dog. His eyes open wide betraying his fear.

“I’m Michael Johnson and this is my best friend, Lucy.” Michael said as he stood at the bottom of the slope. Lucy was wary but sat beside the boy awaiting a command. “I’m not supposed to get in cars with strangers.”

“I understand that.” Jack reassured him. “Tonight, might have to be an exception. I have three children about your age myself and I would hope if they were lost on a night like this some kind stranger would help them out. If you don’t want to get into the truck, you can just sit beside it with Lucy and know you are not alone. I can bring you something to eat and a blanket.”

“I think Lucy needs to get warm. She’s shivering.” Michael said through chattering teeth. “We’ll sit in the truck with you.”
Lucy settled comfortably between them in the front seat after energetically shaking her wet mane two or three times. They quietly ate chicken and biscuits. Boy and dog showing exceptionally good manners as they shared Jack’s offerings. The boy was maybe eight years old Jack thought. Same age as his youngest.

“Do your parents know you are out in this storm?” Jack asked.

“They don’t pay too much attention to me anymore” the boy stated simply. “They have other kids, and the farm keeps them busy. Lucy and I sort of come and go as we please. I’m the oldest.” He said proudly.

Jack knew something was off kilter. He would not have let his eight-year-old out after midnight on a night like this. And he certainly would know where all his children were at all times. They couldn’t just “sort of come and go” as they pleased. He wanted to ask more questions but kept silent.

Once the storm abated Jack suggested he take Michael home. Michael said thanks and didn’t seem at all upset. They drove for miles in comfortable silence. Lucy sleeping peacefully between them. Jack couldn’t believe the boy and the dog hadn’t walked this far. It would have taken hours. Surely someone was out looking for them.

Just outside Greensburg, Michael told Jack to stop at the big tree up ahead. Jack was reluctant to let the boy out of the truck, but Lucy had jumped out and was impatiently waiting for her master. Jack offered to walk them to the house about fifty yards up a curved lane. Michael said they would be okay and thanked him again as he shut the door. Jack did not move on until he saw the boy and the dog walk to the house and disappear around back. Even then he sat quietly wondering if he should check further.

In Greensburg, Jack was still feeling uneasy about the boy, so he stopped at the police station. There was a sergeant behind the desk and another leaning in a chair against the wall apparently asleep. Jack told the desk sergeant about his evening and expressed his concern for the child who said he was Michael Johnson. His dog was Lucy. The officer leaning against the wall slammed his chair to the floor causing Jack to jump. The desk sergeant studied Jack curiously and asked about the area where Jack had left the boy. He flipped through a number of files, finally pulling out an old news clipping.

“Yes, that’s the boy I picked up at the tracks and took home just a few minutes ago.” Jack was relieved.

The duty officer gave Jack a few minutes to grasp what he was reading and when there was no reaction, he gently pointed out that the news clipping was an obituary from ten years back.

“Michael Johnson and his dog died when his dad lost control of a tractor and hit the tree at the entrance to their farm.” The sergeant told him quietly. “The family moved out shortly after the accident and no one has lived there since. I’m not sure who or what you saw tonight, but it certainly was not Michael Johnson or his dog.”

Jack laid on a jail cell cot contemplating how he had ended up there. Of course, the officer thought he was drunk or hopped up on drugs. Of course, he made Jack take all kinds of sobriety tests – which he passed. The officer finally decided Jack was sleep deprived and made him stay right there until he was rested. Jack gave in to a deep sleep as the sun was coming up on a new day.

Jack arrived home that evening in time for supper. Later that night he told his wife every detail of his unbelievable story. She was appropriately concerned, extremely skeptical and suggested lack of sleep had indeed made him see things that weren’t there. He promised to never push himself that hard again. As the week progressed,
Jack pondered the experience. It had been too real. He could not accept that it was all fabrication but decided not to worry his wife with it.

Sunday after church and a great family dinner, Jack and his wife sat on their patio looking out across the fields. Thankfully the big storm had bypassed their farm and the golden wheat was shimmering in the gentle breeze almost ready for harvest. Jack loved these afternoons. He and his wife were sipping iced tea and watching the kids playing some game Jack didn’t recognize that involved throwing and running and chasing and lots of childish laughter. A wayward throw came right to him. He picked up the ball to toss back and suddenly jumped to his feet knocking his chair across the patio in his haste. An anguished cry escaped him as he ran toward his children.

“Where did you get this ball?” he demanded and watched as his kids backed away from him in fear.

“I found it in the floorboard of your truck when I was helping Mom clean it out.” his oldest son replied as he moved in front of his younger brother and sister.

“What’s the matter Jack?” His wife had to support him to keep him from falling. “Calm down please and tell us what is happening.”

Eyes wild with confusion and shaking uncontrollably, Jack handed the ball to his wife. She turned it over and saw the writing. As comprehension dawned, she screamed and threw the ball as hard and as far as she could. Clinging to each other the couple fell to the ground in tears trying desperately to keep the other from totally losing control.

The perplexed children retrieved the ball and examined it closely looking from their parents to the ball and back without understanding. Written on the green ball in faded red letters and childish script was the name Lucy.
Maude’s World

Short Story

Candi Lavender

Maude looked at the sleeping form of her husband, Howard, as she crept out of bed in the dark hours before dawn. Howard had suffered a heart attack just 4 months ago and was unable to work or provide for the family, so Maude was up every morning to take care of the farm animals before sending her children to school and resuming the many duties of taking care of the farm and family.

As she stood outside the boys’ room, she felt the familiar moment of blinking back her tears. She quietly tapped on the door. It was a small room located at the peak of the roof, just big enough for a double bed where all three boys slept. As she opened the door, she felt the resistance of her oldest son’s body on the floor where he slept most nights. She longed for the big house in town where everyone had a bed of their own. But that house was gone and the farm was their home now. She straightened herself to her full height of five feet and called softly to wake the children. Maude passed her sleeping daughter Barbara’s room as she went downstairs to wait for the boys.

In the graying light of dawn, Maude stood on the porch adjusting her apron. Her three little boys were now running across the dew-covered grass toward the barn and she smiled at their exuberance. Three months ago, this scenario would have been completely out of the question, but life often demands surrender when you least expect it. Maude moved deliberately down the steps and out into the yard behind the boys.

Paul and Jim, the two oldest boys, were running ahead of Fred, who at five, was a little chubby and found keeping up with his brothers difficult. They were all laughing and waving their arms and their silhouettes in the near darkness were difficult to distinguish at times.

“Don’t scare the cows,” Maude cautioned the boys. Sometimes Bessie wouldn’t give milk when the noise was too great, especially early in the morning. Milking was the most
important job of the morning and Maude couldn't afford for the boys to muck about too much.

Paul reached the barn first and unlatched the large sliding door. At eleven, he couldn't move the barn door by himself, so Jim, two years younger, grabbed the handle and the two older boys slowly slid the door open. Fred stood and watched and then ran ahead into the dark corridor of the barn's middle space. Maude reached the building and lit the lantern. The animals inside began to rustle and soft mooing could be heard.

Maude let out a long breath and moved into the barn to gather up the milking buckets. Paul and Jim ducked into Bessie's stall and worked together milking and filling the first bucket. Bessie was the oldest milk cow they owned, but also the most reliable when the boys could keep their enthusiastic noises to a minimum. Maude moved into Daisy's stall and pulled up a stool to begin milking. Daisy was cooperative this morning and the rhythmic pull on her teats was reassuring. There were 3 milking cows now and that provided the family their milk with a couple of extra quarts to sell to neighbors. Maude was hoping to save money from each milk sale to be able to buy another cow by the time summer came to an end.

James came over to Daisy's stall. "We're done, Mom. Do you want us to milk Brownie?"

Maude smiled at her second son. His dark hair and blue eyes were striking and she knew he would be the most likely of her children to be successful. "If you want to start, that would be great."

James left the stall and she could hear Paul talking. Maude knew that Fred was feeding the cat. He was afraid of the cows and didn't have the strength in his hands to milk yet, so he had the job of keeping the small barn animals fed and watered. He seemed well suited for the task and she hoped it gave him a sense of pride since he couldn't do the heavier work like his brothers.

Maude carried her bucket of milk out of Daisy's stall and set it next to the full bucket from Bessie. She walked down the aisle toward Brownie and could hear James and Paul murmuring back and forth. Brownie was softly mooing as Maude looked in on the boys.
"We're almost done, Mom," said Paul.

"Good job, boys. I'll start funneling the milk into the bottles while you finish up," Maude said. She brushed a long strand of hair out of her eyes as she turned and moved back to the milk containers. Her hands were calloused and sore, but she brushed her apron and moved on. Howard and seven-year-old Barbara would be waking to begin their day in the kitchen. Maude thought about former days when she would be the one preparing a hearty breakfast for the family instead of milking cows. Maude shook her head and focused on the task at hand.

As Maude finished filling the first two bottles of milk, Fred came along side of her. 

"Mom, the feed barrel is almost empty."

Maude nodded and smiled at her youngest child. "I know. Hopefully we can get to the store and get what we need today or tomorrow." She felt the old barn cat rubbing against her leg and noticed Fred's wide eyes. "Why don't you find a dish of some sort and we'll give the cat a bit of milk this morning," she said.

Fred grinned and ran to the other side of the barn. He returned quickly. Maude poured a little of the precious liquid into the worn bowl. The cat mewed loudly following the little boy. Fred rubbed the cat's back as she lapped up the warm milk. Maude returned her attention to the job at hand.

Paul and James brought the last bucket of milk over. "Brownie didn't have much milk this morning," Paul reported.

Maude looked at the half-filled bucket and sighed. "I can see that. I hope nothing is wrong with her." Maude shuddered at the thought that the cow might be sick. The cows and chickens were her livelihood right now and a vet bill would be disastrous. The sale of Howard's dry cleaning business had given them enough money to buy the old farm, but not much else. The big house in town where they lived wasn't paid for, so its sale money went back to the bank.

James spoke up. "I think she wasn't awake yet this morning. Maybe she'll have more after school today." James was the child who always thought in terms of the big picture and
didn’t let the small details get him down. “I’ll come home and milk her again.”

Maude was grateful for his optimism and went back to her task of filling the milk bottles. There were two extra bottles this morning to sell and the money was always welcome and needed, especially now that she had the extra expense of food for the smaller animals – chickens, cat, dog and ducks.

As the group left the barn, the lights in the kitchen were on signaling Howard and Barbara were fixing breakfast. The boys ran to the porch while Maude shivered in the cool morning air. Looking up at the sky she could see the rays of the sun moving across the pasture and knew it would be a warm day, one full of work and hope.
I found these letters in an old file drawer in my uncle’s room several weeks ago:

“Saturday morning, November 20, 1923

Dear Divine One,

You have called me for your purpose, and the first thing I think about is my own inadequacy. I am not able to go forth because I feel so unsure of myself. I have no power of my own. I don’t see myself as a powerful person. I lack many skills. I don’t have a plan, either. What do I have to offer your people? I think so often of what Martin Luther said long years ago, something like, “By my own reason and strength I cannot come to the Savior, but your Spirit calls me and carries me there.”

I have heard your call. All I have heard is your call for me to go to that church in Greensboro, NC. I don’t understand this. I don’t have it figured out. But I will get into the boat and head out across the sea. And now there is a storm! I knew it! The waves are tall and rolling. I’m afraid. I can’t see the horizon. The boat is being tossed every which way. I am sliding. Maybe I will slip slide away the closer I get to my destination. And the wind, the wind is so strong. I know it is pushing us, moving us, where? To what destination do we go?

I am fearful. Who am I that I should even get into this boat? All I know is that you called and asked me to step into the boat, ill-equipped as I am, just as I am. I heard your call, and that is all I heard. Who am I? Who am I that I should dare to get into such a boat? Where is the captain, where is the One who can calm this storm, who can muzzle these wild billows and waves?

It’s cold out here, and dark. Why didn’t we wait for a clear and calm day? Why didn’t we get into a bigger, stronger boat? Why can’t life be quiet and comfortable? Why can’t we sit, all of us under our fig trees and vines and laze away the days? Why can’t we laugh and love and never worry? Why can’t life be smooth and warm and tender? Why can’t someone else go forth, someone who is strong and wise and patient and loving? Why does the call come to me?

I have these questions, O Holy One, so I wanted to write and tell you how I feel. I’d like to hear from you.

Sincerely, Willie, your humble servant”
“Saturday afternoon, November 20, 1923

Dear Willie,

First of all, thank you for your letter. I know what you are thinking, and I have always known. I have this way of knowing what goes on inside you, but I like it when you talk to me or write to me. It’s better that way. It’s better that you wrestle with me and ponder your life and purpose than that I provide all the answers or that you should know all the answers.

You see—and I am going to tell you one of my secrets—you see, I am doing what I do to draw you unto me. I cannot force you or anyone else to come to me. I can only draw you to me. I can only invite. If I forced you or made you do things, then you would be less than my child. You would be a tree that has no choice but to grow and bear leaves and shed them. You would be an object perfectly conformed to my commands. I made some things that way. But to you I gave the freedom to choose. You can go like my prodigal son did once upon a time. You can go in another direction entirely. You can ask for and get your inheritance and go and spend it and leave me and my house. I give that gift to each human being out of my love. And often I wonder if I have done the right and loving thing. And yet I know that I have—just as you know it when a child of yours freely chooses to bring you a gift, a handful of flowers perhaps or a picture she has drawn and says, “This is for you, Daddy. I love you.”

That is a spontaneous choice that every person can make. It cannot be forced. I want this for every person. I seek it. I created you and everyone else with the prayer and the desire that you would recognize me, that I am love. I want you to know that the most loving thing I can do is give you the freedom to respond to me and my call to you. I wait as I waited for the prodigal son. I could not bring him home. I had to let him discover for himself who he was and what is important in life. I had to wait and hurt and wait and hope and watch. I do that often. And finally, the lad turned around. But he might not have. I could only hope that he would sense or remember that I am gracious and generous, that it is my very nature to give what is good.

What I do and why I do it is not for you to know, for my ways are not your ways. You can come thus far, and then I must ask you to allow me to be myself. You must give me freedom. This is the very nature of what you call “personhood.” There can be no control, no coercion. There can only be love and freedom. It is out of the essence of your soul and mine
that we are who we are. So many people have tried to define me and gain control over me. They want to tame me and put me on display. They want me captive. But I am who I am and will always be beyond those ropes and spears.

Only once, as you know, did I let the ropes and spears touch me, and the thorns and nails. But that was my choice. I came because it was my pleasure to come. No one called me, no one pushed me out and down. I was not forced to do this. I came down because it was my love. I chose to come just as I chose to command the universe into being. These are things I do. But mostly I am pulling for you and the others, all the others. I am pulling for you in ways that will awaken you and invite you out of your captivity to doubts and into my arms. I create circumstances, yes, just like that storm on the sea of which you spoke. It does not seem like any good could come of it. It is senseless in your eyes. It has no purpose, and yet it has my purpose. Yours is to get into the boat. Mine is to stir the wind and waves. Yours is to cry out for mercy and deliverance. Mine is to awaken and calm the sea. Yours is to trust, and mine is to provide the assurance you need.

In kindness, The Holy One

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After I read these, I tried to remember if my uncle Willie went to Greensboro all those years ago, back in 1923. How could he not? I guess I would. Wouldn’t you?
Trees and Me
Short Story
Betty Weatherman

There is no way to measure
the influence, values, pleasure, and treasure
that the trees have sprinkled freely in my life.
For in all my childhood years I could be found
either playing under, swinging on, or climbing to their top.
Their shade a pleasure, their height my viewing station.
A special place for my dreaming and imagining arcade.
Their calm shelter has carried me through
many growing and knowing stages of life.
Their cooling breeze, their shady cover from the sun,
you name it, trees have sung a song to me.
Playing an enormous part in the who I am today.
For as they, I too, was once an acorn, a seedling, a sapling
seeking and reaching up to grow, hoping
that now, in my Autumn year, I may be considered
a stately, though slightly bent,
weather resistant, wise old oak
Now in my closing, may I, with all my heart
thank you trees, for always being
such a tried-and-true friend to me.
Valentinus

Short Story

Peter Venable

I remind future generations that I was a fearless Roman general, from 268-270: I squashed a revolt in which Gallienus was killed; I succeeded him and then marched to the East, to resist the heathen Goths who were overrunning our holy empire. I, Claudius, overwhelmed the Goths at Naissus and even had my image impressed on Roman coins! Wanting our soldiers to be readied from pagan attackers, I ordered this:

"I, Marcus Aurelius Claudius, known as Claudius II, issue this decree for all Roman men suitable for military duty. It has come to my attention many of you have not joined our army due to your wives and families. I hereby ban all marriages and engagements in Rome. Any clergy ignoring this ban for the sake of Pax Romana shall be severely punished."

This brings me to this odd case.

A priest of that annoying cult, a Valentinus, was brought before my bema, who was arrested for marrying young couples in secret. There was no doubt about his guilt. He freely admitted it in defiance of my ban, so I condemned him to a three-part execution of beating, stoning, and beheading. Asterius, one of Valentinus' jailers, was present and pleaded leniency:

"His Excellency Claudius II, our Supreme Emperor: I am the father of a young girl, blind from birth. I met this Valentinus and conversed with him, a priest of the 'Christus Sect' you are familiar with:

No doubt you have read Tactius' Annals, book 15, chapter 44, who wrote 'Nero had them naked and whipped, called Christians by the populace. A class hated for their abominations. It all began with someone with the name Christus... suffered the extreme penalty... at the hands of Pontius Pilatus' decree... a most mischievous superstition... they pleaded guilty, even to their last breaths— robbery of every sort was added to their deaths. Some were burnt to serve as nightly illumination.'

'"My point and plea is this Valentinus' spoke of this Christus' miracles of healing, during Roman prefect Pontius Pilate's governorship of Judaea. I was desperate, so I asked him to heal her the way he claimed Christus did for blind men many years ago. Excellency, Valentinus prayed to his God, and miraculously she was healed of her blindness!"

'I listened to this jailer's plea but dismissed him, and ordered Valentinus' execution the afternoon February 14, 269. The next morning, the chief guard seized a note from this priest written to the cured daughter of Asterius. It was brief, Worship Christus. From your Valentine. Valentinus signed the note. It was puzzling to say the least.

"I gave it back and ordered him to carry to the jailer as I had more pressing cases to judge."
Always Together
Life Experience
Betty Weatherman

Oh, how I wish you didn't have to go!
But, I must you know
I cried, he signed
A goodbye kiss and he's gone
At last, in a week, that seemed a year
He returns tired and drained, I felt his pain
After driving long hours, in 90 degree plus temperature
With no air conditioning, a plight of mighty 1950's
I soon grew to know, what it took
To bring him "alive" again
A cool morning flight in
A clear blue sky in an affordable piper cub
Practicing a fly boy ritual, that was so spiritual
Come what may it did the trick
My competition, sure, but that's okay
For from the beginning. We took this solemn vow
"Always together" in storms or fair weather
That was our promise true
From the very start, those simple words
Were engraved inside our golden rings and
Most of all "in our hearts"
Now, as one awaits the other, on a distant shore
Who could have asked for anything more.
In The Blink of an Eye
Life Experience/Memoir
Sondra Wainer

David, my son, turned 50 today. I have no idea how that happened.

It seems like just a “blink of an eye” ago he was an eleven year old, standing in front of me with his mop of red curls and those blue eyes that always turned a shade darker when he was really passionate about something.

I couldn’t miss his intensity as he began telling me that he wanted to take over a newspaper route. My first thought was, “Are you serious? You are just eleven and you would have to get up at 4:30 a.m. every morning to fold and deliver papers to over 300 apartments!”

Instead of voicing my first reaction, I took a breath – a really deep breath. I reminded him that this was a walking route and the neighbors expected their papers to be placed at their front doors, not in the yard and definitely not on their roof. To discourage his enthusiasm a bit more, I reminded him that as soon as he got home from school, he would have to do it all over again. (In those days we had both a morning and evening edition of the newspaper.)

David’s blue eyes deepened a shade darker.

When I realized that this was really important to him, a little voice inside me said, “Give him his wings.” So even though I felt that this was too much responsibility for an eleven year old, I reluctantly gave in.

Each morning when I heard the front door close, I would look out the window and watch his slender body, slightly bowed under the weight of all of the papers, disappear down the sidewalk, sometimes trailed by a scuffy-looking dog. (It was months later that I found out that the “scuffy-looking dog” that sometimes waddled along behind him was actually a neighborhood possum that wasn’t quite ready to call it a night.)

Sunday mornings turned out to be special for us. Because of all the extra inserts in the Sunday paper, David had to split his route into two trips. While he delivered the first part of his route, I would sit on the floor and fold the remaining papers for him, just the way he taught me to do. Wow! I added a new skill set to my repertoire!

When he returned from his last delivery, I would have pancakes, French toast, or cinnamon rolls ready for us to share. Because of our hectic weekday schedule, treats like those were too time-consuming to enjoy during the
week. And it also gave us a special time to share our week, our love of certain books, music, animals and other things that were meaningful to us. Those were such special times.

Today David’s curls are gone, the red hair has faded a bit, but his blue eyes still darken a shade when he is feeling passionate about something.

However, he is no longer eleven.

Deep down in a special place in my heart are the precious memories that I cherish of that eleven-year-old paper boy who “in the blink of an eye” has turned 50.

And I still wonder … how did that happen?
Birthday Adventure

Life Experience

Helen Walker Webb

It was 9:50 a.m. on a Saturday morning when my daughter, Lisa and her husband picked me up for an adventure located in the small community of Liberty, NC. Liberty is in a rural area of the Piedmont region of North Carolina. (Mt. Airy is a bustling metropolis compared to Liberty.) Looking out the car window I wondered how these people voted and I began to realize that the basic needs of small communities are the same as larger ones. The mechanics of meeting the needs of two different life styles less than an hour apart would be difficult.

Rising Meadow Farm is a sheep raising farm and February 19, 2022 was Shearing Day in addition to being my birthday. Not everybody gets invited to Sheep Shearing Day to celebrate an 86th birthday.

The day was cold – colder and windier than I had anticipated. The parking lot was a “hike” from the farm buildings. Cars were parking along the sides of the dirt and gravel narrow road. When we got close to the buildings, Lisa stopped the car and told David to get out and change places with her. She wanted to pull over and park, but was too short to see where the side of the grass stopped and a deep drop-off began. From my seat, I could see and started “sending up prayers.” David had no problem parking within two feet of the edge.

At the shearing shed we were told it would be twenty minutes before the next group of sheep would be brought up from the barn. People were leaving from the earlier shearing, so we were able to work our way up to the front of the enclosure. I was at a corner and could lean against a metal post. Some people had come from Charlotte: others from Raleigh and who knows where else. Little children would find their way to the front and stand around my legs. While waiting I talked to the shearer who was born and raised on his family’s sheep farm in Ireland. He now lives in Connecticut and does sheep shearing in the spring on the weekends. He told us that after being sheared, sheep often fight among themselves as they do not recognize members of their flock. The hand-held shears which he uses are similar to those used for hundreds of years. He let me hold the shears. My hands were neither large enough nor strong enough to make them work. The shearer uses his legs and feet mostly to manage the animal. He
wears special shoes that are softer than the normal. Once a sheep has been sheared, he does not object to being sheared again.

When our group of sheep approached the shed, they didn’t want to come in. But a “shepherd” pushed a little and convinced them to come in. It was their first time to be sheared. In the group of five was one black sheep who was sheared first. The shearing process was fascinating. It started at the foot and went up the leg to the body. The wool was cut so that it was in long pieces. The cut wool from around the body was about six inches thick and at least twelve inches wide. I really couldn’t tell. The facial wool was clipped. When finished, the wool was placed in a plastic bag, tagged, and taken from the shed. Wool is of different colors depending on the breed of the sheep. Some folks there were buying bags of wool. They must have been the artistic type.

My birthday adventure was an educational experience. I learned about sheep and realized how vulnerable they are and how easily they are led. It made me rethink some of the Biblical stories. It also caused me to wonder why “the black sheep” is used as a negative expression. In addition my appreciation for people who work outside in cold weather increased greatly. (My feet had thawed enough to bend after arriving back home.)
You only go around once

Life Experience

Charles Swanson

I had been thinking about it for some time. I was soon to be LXXX or the big 8-0 in a couple of months and, since I wasn't going to pass this way again, I should do something for myself to commemorate the event. My wife Maria and I had already taken about two dozen cruises so it seemed a tad redundant to spend more time on a boat. Out of the blue it hit me: how about a new car? Not just any car, but a special one. I let my imagination run wild—it must be a car like I had never had before, my quest. The romantic side of me could take over and run wild; well, if not exactly wild at least put some "frisky" in my shuffle. After all, I still liked great mileage, a bit of "pep" off the line, low maintenance costs and of course a high resale value. I call it extravagance with moderation born of experience.

I had driven a Toyota Camry Hybrid for the past 8 years and loved it so I figured that would be a good place to start. A new red Camry Hybrid would be just fine. But, then again, I owed it to myself to take a closer look at the Honda equivalent: the Accord Hybrid. In a head-to-head comparison, the only real difference seemed to be that the Honda was a bit quicker, "off the line." The Honda could get to 60 MPH a whole second quicker than the Toyota. That settled it: I was going with the Honda. My calendar said 80 but in my heart of hearts...

The next step was to contact the local Honda dealership. The internet made the preliminary steps both easy and convenient. I dodged the listings replete with a half dozen pop ups selling everything from used cars to tires, until someone named "Agnes" appeared with a perky picture and an eager smile announcing that she wanted to help me if only I will let her. At first, I ignored Agnes and went right to the new car inventory. After a couple of mouse clicks, I had exhausted the dealer's "inventory" without even so much as a glimpse of my quest. Hitting a dead end, I decided to let Agnes into my life. Our "verbal foreplay" is all texting, of course, we don't actually speak to each other and for all I knew, Agnes could be sitting on her front porch in Mt. Airy. I guess there is too much Covid swirling around for us to get familiar. I texted Agnes, "Do you have any new Honda Accord Hybrids that are red?" About 30 seconds pass and Agnes replies, "No, but we can get one for you. I'm going to let Stan my manager take it from here." (Somehow, even her texting sounded cheerful.) Goodbye Agnes.

Stan was pleasant enough but immediately tried to "shift" me to some other vehicle. "We don't have one right now but one is due in Wednesday...But Charles, we do have the make, model and year you want in a different
color and can make you one great deal on the price. Come on down and kick a tire, take a test drive and have a cup of coffee."

"No thanks Stan...I don't want a test drive, I want to buy it. Call me when the red car is on the lot." With that, I hung up. You see, at my age, if you don't know what you want in life you never will.

Back to the computer...With a few mouse clicks I'm at another dealership and pretty much get the same story. They didn't exactly have one but either one is "due Wednesday" or they could get one. I posed a straightforward query: "If you don't have one on the lot why do you have one listed in your inventory?" The reply was always the same: "We did but I'm sorry to say, we sold it yesterday and haven't had time to change the computer." Really? How about 3-5 Pinocchios here!

At one point in my most interesting and eventful life, I actually worked in sales at a Cadillac dealership in Norfolk, VA. It was there that I acquired knowledge about buying and selling cars. I was relying on experience to guide me through the process that had been part and parcel of acquiring and disposing of a vehicle in America. Slowly but surely I was coming to the realization that much of whatever I knew or thought I knew was antiquated or obsolete. Reduced to its essence, I was trying to do two things--if not simultaneously at least in close proximity: buy a new car and sell a used one. I had done this many times in my life except it was before the ubiquitous presence of the internet and the myriad of changes wrought by Covid 19 to the whole process.

It is common knowledge that if you want to get the most money you can from your current "ride" you must sell it yourself-private treaty. You must do a modicum of work. However, if you want it all over and done with quickly, all you need do is work a trade with the dealership. The dealership values your current vehicle and gives you a cash equivalent toward your new purchase. Simple.

But first things first, I needed to know how much my present car was worth. Every sales manager at every car dealership in the country gets (or at least used to get) a monthly NADA (National Automobile Dealership Assn.) periodical. This was the car selling and buying "bible." He or she knew how much the car was worth by flipping the pages until they found your car. They knew to within a couple of hundred dollars what to offer on a trade. I don't know if NADA still publishes this little book but I can tell you one thing: there is a whole lot more competition out there now; there are several new actors in the game who want to tell you what your car is worth. Which one is correct? Which one can you trust? Roll the dice and take your chances...
The internet has taken over and there are more players than you can shake a stick at: CARFAX, Carvana, CarGurus and Buymycar to name but a few. I heard that there was a rather high demand for used cars brought on by Covid. (Gee, I didn't know cars got sick.) Conventional wisdom says that I will get more if I personally did the sales work...but first I had to know what the value is so I can price it correctly. Needing knowledge, I proceeded to contact the various car-pricing sites and plug in my car's data such as make, model, and mileage. If you think there was any consistency to the various sites' evaluation of my vehicle you would be wrong. The estimates of the value ranged anywhere from a low of $9,500 to a high of $15,500. If I accepted a dealer trade-in price, the value would be anywhere from about $10,500 to a high of $14,000. Obviously, if you don't know what you are doing you could be giving away a good deal of money...your money...as you venture into car buying/selling land! Pulling my hair out, I consulted my Ouija board. The spirits told me: sell it yourself. And, now that I had a working idea of the approximate value of my car, I felt I was prepared for the task.

Now, to find a buyer. The local newspaper? Nope, back to the internet. Newspaper ads are expensive and I'm not sure how well they penetrate (the market) anymore. Instead, I began with Autotrader.com. The site was easy to work with. I composed the ad for the car Maria had dubbed "Goldy." Officially, Goldy's color was "crème brûlée" which is a wee bit pretentious. "Hey dear, I'm taking the "crème brûlée" to the grocery store this morning." Goldy somehow seemed more apropos and definitely more plebian.

The morning after the ad went "live", I had a half dozen leads. Jackpot? Not exactly. Something seemed amiss with the responses. A couple of folks who contacted me apparently had some difficulty reading and asked for information, e.g., has the car been in an accident? I had already noted in my narrative about Goldy's lack of intimacy with other vehicles or objects in her driving history. One fellow called from a dealership and looked promising but did not pan out. After a couple more "leads" I came to the unsettling conclusion that these respondents were not serious buyers wanting or needing a car: they were "spotters" or "bounty hunters" and their sole purpose in making contact with me was to acquire a lead for someone else. Who were they trolling for you ask? Dealerships. I suspected that several of my respondents were housebound because of Covid and had no other job.

I was finally called by a legitimate buyer from a dealership in West Virginia. He offered me $14,000 and was ready to drive 250 miles to pick up the car! I said, "I'll think about it and get back to you." Just a couple of hours later I received a text message from another buyer, "Eric", who said he worked for an entity called Echo Park and
would make me a solid offer of $15,500. Lest you think his offer was without merit or imprudent, it was not. He was operating with a very detailed history of Goldy, a complete detailed service record and a very comprehensive array of pictures, inside and out. I called Eric and he asked about the car's title (it was clean); I asked him about the actual purchase and that I preferred cash. He said he could do a "business check." My anxiety meter was off the charts: was this guy Eric offering a deal too good to be true? I'm going to sign over a clean title and he is going to give me a check and not cash? All but panicked, I did some further research on Echo Park and found that it was indeed and an up and coming player in the internet auto sales business. Echo Park had an office/car lot/presence in Greensboro. When Maria and I got to the lot, the day after Thanksgiving, we found the building all but deserted and a car lot that held about half dozen vehicles. To use a pastiche from a phrase in Fiddler on the Roof, "It's a new world Goldy, a new world." My anxiety was assuaged; the check was written on a Bank of America business account and cleared within a matter of hours. My self-induced anxiety was for naught; these fellows at Echo indeed knew what they were doing--I didn't. After Covid, will car buying revert to the "old days?" I doubt it. Will texting ever go back to talking? On our return from our Valentine's Day holiday earlier this year, Maria and I went through Greensboro. Beside route I-40 there was a 5 story (at least) building that presented as a gleaming Carvana car dispenser; Maria noted a red car on the top floor of the dispenser as we drove by...Now where did I put my nickels?

Now that I had struck a deal for my old car, it was time to get serious about my quest. Again, the internet saves time and shoe leather. I began with the local dealerships, up to about 30-35 miles of Winston Salem. Once I got to a dealership's web site, I'd peruse the new car inventory. When I found nothing, I'd go on to the next dealership. I finally found one in Greer, S.C. I chatted with their online sales person and explained what I wanted and was advised that I would be contacted by the sales manager, "Buster." "Buster" did call me to say that my quest was indeed part of their "shared inventory." I think this was a new code word for, "we don't have it but we can get it." He then said he would work up some "numbers and get back to me." Sure. Maybe "shared inventory" meant cars 'shared' on a lot in Bozeman, Montana. Maybe. (P.S. he never did get back to me.)

My next lead was in Richmond, VA. Their inventory (not shared) showed not one but two red Accords. When I called, miraculously, one of the two had been sold and the other one has been spoken for...but of course they have one that is a slightly different color and they could definitely make the price right. Translation: "bait and switch is alive and well in the car selling business."
Thwarted but unbowed I turned to a dealer closer to home: Oakridge, NC. Here I was told that a car (of my dreams?) was *en route* and should arrive "soon." Soon translated into the early afternoon. Then something totally unexpected happened. The person I had been speaking to was replaced, with no warning, by "Cedric." Cedric advised that he would call back in an hour. He did but had bad news. The car that was not yet on the lot was sold! I put this all together: the fast moving vehicle had arrived and was already spoken for. If I had not had some prior experience with how a vehicle arrived on a dealer's lot and moved to a state readiness or "available for sale" I might have believed him. If the one fellow got 5 Pinocchios, this character would have gotten a dozen. First of all, any car (new) arriving on the lot must have a state inspection before it can be sold. All of this involves a sequence of activities and scheduling. Could the dealership really have personnel, remember it is Covid time, standing by and ready to inspect and approve a vehicle at the drop of a hat? One chance in a thousand. Second, since the buyer was getting a loan (pesky Covid again) he or she would have had to show "the bank" appropriate paperwork including the VIN. No paperwork no loan; no money, no car. (My branch at Wells Fargo required *all* patrons to make an appointment to even walk in the door!) After my short stint with "Cedric," I ceased speaking with *anyone* at that dealership. What exactly was Cedric's game? Search me but I wasn't playing it.

Somebody out there had my quest and I was going to find my special birthday present. Again, I had to go far afield: Charleston, West Virginia. Once more, I could see two red Accords in the inventory; I only needed one. I wanted one with a sunroof but I had told Maria, "If I can get 80% of what I wanted that would be good enough for me." I called and spoke with Sterling, a pleasant enough guy with a West Virginia drawl, who said "yes" he did have my car; it was not spoken for and was *not* in some mythic inventory. I told him I did not need a test drive but I did need an out-the-door price that the dealership was asking. After a little hemming and hawing, he gave up the price. I said, "good, go back and tell the manager I will take it ($1,000 less than he avered) and be in to pick it up Saturday next." We ultimately split the difference and Maria and I took the 225-mile trip to Charleston and gave Sterling a check for exactly $28,180.64. The whole process took 15 minutes from start to finish and we were back on the road. Maria drove my *shot-of-vehicular-testosterone* back home and got the highest gas mileage on the trip that *I had ever gotten in my life... over 50 mpg*. She also "smoked" a couple of would-be pretenders on the drive back. I was as happy as a shark in a wading pool!

My quest completed, and I was none the worse for the wear. Maria now lets me drive "Rosy" (new car; new
name) on alternate Wednesdays of months having 30 days and ending in "R" … if I'm good and remember to take out the trash.

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Writer's note: In part, the title of my story is borrowed from Frank Sinatra whose complete quote was: "You only go around once...but if you play your cards right once is enough." Recall, he also sang a song entitled, "I did it my way."
It Was a Very Good Year

Life Experience

Bill Gramley

It was a very good year when I was seventeen. It was 1952, some thirteen years before
Frank Sinatra released a song with that title.

Our Reynolds High School football practice began in August when I was still sixteen, but I
turned seventeen on September 27. By that time we had already won our first three games, 8-
6 against Gray, 19-0 over Hanes and 14-0 at Burlington. I played tackle on offense and defense,
and in that first game I blocked Gray High’s punt in the endzone for a safety to give us 2 points,
which later turned out to be the margin of victory.

I was big at 6’ 3” and weighed 195 pounds. We only had two players bigger than that.
In those days no one worked out with weights to gain strength. Most of our players weighed
between 150 and 180. We practiced with calisthenics to warm up, and ran wind sprints toward
the end of practice, but basically, we relied on whatever natural talents we had. We learned
the skills of blocking and tackling as well as our plays.

We ran the single-wing formation which did give us an advantage since only one other
team in our conference used it. Everyone else ran the T-formation and were not used to our
double-team blocks, traps, reverses, and tail-back sweeps where some of us linemen pulled to
lead the runner and side-body-block the defensive players.

This was my second year of football and I happened to be one of four seniors to have
played enough the year before to earn letters. That meant we had to rely on other less
experienced seniors and a lot of juniors and sophomores. It would seem at the opening of the
season that we were a bit shallow and raw, and yet our coach, John Tandy, got us into good
physical condition with two-a-day practices a couple weeks before the September kick-off.
It was hot in August and even into September. This was a time in the history of the game when coaches and trainers didn’t believe we needed to drink water. The only thing we got was an occasional salt tablet after practice since the coaches knew we had perspired a lot in the summer’s humidity. Even during the games we got no water. We didn’t know any better and maybe the thinking was that the main quality in sports was “toughness.” It was a long time before someone invented Gatorade. One of the guys I rode with to practice drank a Pepsi at lunch time once and I didn’t think he should have. I thought it would give him “side pains.” It didn’t. He was a great wingback runner.

I recall when we rode the bus from our school to Bowman Gray Stadium across town, I used to pray silently, and basically asked God not so much to help us win but to make these games and experiences a preparation for whatever I might face later in life. That included the ability to deal with wins and losses, to gain self-confidence, to develop endurance, and to play to the best of my ability so that when I looked at myself in the mirror in the dressing room after the game, I could feel that I had done just that. My Dad told me to play that way since he had played football back in the 1920s and knew how important “all-out efforts” are.

We were off to a good start and won a close game, 19-13, against Asheville. Then we went to Greensboro and lost to Grimsley (Senior High in my years), 6-0. They ran us ragged with end-runs and we couldn’t get our offense moving. At half time in the locker room the coach asked me how I was doing, since I was a co-captain, and I said I was tired. (The following week he told me in a kind way not to say that in front of the team since I was a leader. I learned a valuable lesson and I appreciated his counsel.)

We bounced back and defeated Gastonia 13-6, then went to play Durham, a team in the Eastern AAA Conference. As we entered their stadium, they had a long row of drummers beating a steady, somewhat frightening rhythm. I think it un-nerved us because they creamed us 34-6. I don’t know whether any of our coaches scouted them ahead of time as they usually
did for our other games. Their scouting reports helped us prepare. They handed us spirit-duplicated sheets of paper with the necessary information. We also had a practice team of our own players to run their formations so we would know what to expect. (Only later did I realize how hard our three coaches worked to get to opponents’ games and take notes for our benefit.)

Our next game was an important one against Charlotte Central since they had not lost a game thus far. I remember our wingback phoning their best player, fullback Dickie Mattison, to tell him we were going to beat them. Why he thought to do that I don’t know, but it worked psychologically and so did the new Ohio State buck lateral series we ran for the first time all season. These plays were so deceptive the opponents didn’t know who had the ball. We won 27-7.

We beat High Point Central 20-6 and then had a crucial game against a tough Boyden High team from Salisbury on a muddy field. They ran the single wing as we did, and the game was close and in their favor until Bill Shelton kicked a field goal in the waning minutes to give us a 15-14 win. I recall that at half time our coach told the managers to replace our cleats with longer ones. That may have given us a slight advantage for digging into the turf. The win meant we now had to play Charlotte Central again on their field because we were tied for first place.

They knew us better now and kept it close, but we won 13-12. That took place on November 29, and it meant we would play Durham for the state championship. Their coach protested the delay in the schedule since their season had finished a week or more earlier. But athletic officials did what they could and shortened the date for the playoff game to the following Wednesday night rather than the usual Friday night. We would have to go to Durham to play.

Our coach told us in our few practices that he knew the Durham coach was telling his players not to take us lightly just because they had whipped us a month ago. To get ready for the game I did two things. I replaced my black shoelaces with white ones as a personal symbol
of celebration. Our uniforms were mostly black as well, and I wanted to break with tradition. And I met a girl I liked in the cafeteria at lunch time on game day and told her I was going to score a touchdown. I don’t know why I said that since I was a lineman and never carried the ball.

This time we were not intimidated by their rhythmic and daunting drums when we entered the stadium. We were motivated from our recent victories, for one thing, and I suppose we wanted to upset them. Our school had never won a state championship and a win down there would make history.

The game was close. Somewhere in the second quarter Buddy Spach, who was beside me on defense, tackled their runner and the ball popped right into my arms and I took off for the endzone. I didn’t make it because their quarterback caught me, but I felt good about my unusual prediction. All in all, it didn’t really matter because we won the game after a hectic goal line stand in the final minutes: 12-8. We ruined their perfect season. The rivalry between our Western NC Conference and the Eastern NC Conference began in 1919, and our high school had finally come through.

I remember the excitement of that season as though it were yesterday. I am glad I went through the turmoil and challenges of those games, learned from my mistakes, gained an appreciation for my coaches and teammates, and felt I was a little better prepared to face whatever would come my way in the years ahead.

It helped greatly to have a strong and supportive school spirit. Our teachers pulled for us. Annie Graham Caldwell, our librarian, often handed personal notes to us to cheer us on. My Latin teacher, Mrs. McDermott, said she would support us since I was a good student. Assistant coaches Herman Bryson and Jim Siford helped inspire and teach us as they shared their knowledge of the game. Coach Tandy had a great sense of humor and would tell a guy who made a poor play, “When is that pimple on your shoulder going to turn into a head?” Or, he’d say with a smile, “I’ll eat you for a ham sandwich.” In addition, he told us not to be
lackadaisical and for everyone to practice hard because it would benefit the whole team. He also made every effort to let all the players get into at least one game.

There was no dissension among the players. In fact, we had fun before practice. One time I threw Gaylord’s helmet onto the goal post upright because he said if I did, he’s climb up and get it in his jock strap! He didn’t have to since the coaches soon showed up.

The only time I had to exert my leadership was to tell some of the guys in the huddle during our homecoming game to stop arguing about which of our school clubs was sponsoring the dance afterwards and to focus on the game we were in.

I was popular with the girls even though I didn’t play football to impress them. Or maybe I did. I dated two of them for a time, but those romances eventually ended after graduation. Still, there was something of Sinatra’s song in what I experienced when he sang, “It was a very good year for small town girls and soft summer nights. We’d hide from the lights on the village green when I was seventeen.”

It really was a very good year.