

My second “paper” for the 2005 summer Trenton Area Writing Project at Rider University institute was a musical ballad called "When We Meet Again." I dedicate the song to my father, who died thirty-odd years ago of cancer at the age of forty one, after an extended illness. He was a sergeant major who taught ROTC at Princeton University; he also hosted a WTTM radio show and was musical director for The Frontier Room in Bordentown. Dad sang and also played guitar in his band, The Country Gentlemen. He came here from the Ozark Mountains, where his ancestors had lived for many generations. There are many musicians in his family tree. The most ancient of record is my great-grandmother O'Neal's grandfather through two lines, Richard Mynatt. Richard was a banjo player, who came here from 10 Billeter Street, London in 1749; he was head chef for first Thomas and second Phillip Ludlow Lee at Stratford Hall Plantation, Virginia. His handmade banjo survives and can be seen in the Museum of Appalachia at Norris, TN, near which he once owned and operated a large farm.

I have composed many songs, but one written for your father is always close to the heart. I was slow to settle for just any song that came to mind. I was searching to express my emotions in a very universal, well-developed way. I wrote the second half of verse three and the corresponding refrain melody about ten years ago, but could get no further than that point with the thing. About a year ago, I created a nice complimentary melody for the verse, but then I again found myself stuck. I *felt* exactly what I wanted to say, but could not *verbalize* those feelings. I had in mind a definite image to “paint” with the song. I wanted to capture the moment when a dying father says goodbye to one of his sons. I wanted the song to be a very sad one. Foremost, I wanted a very nicely polished jewel, something worthy of a son's love for his father.

During the pre-writing stage, I flirted with the idea of making the song a goodbye between father and infant son, in Odyssey fashion, but later changed my mind. This Odyssey notion was sparked by a story my mother told me. She once said that when my father left for his first tour of Korea during the Korean Conflict, he feared he would never return home again-- a common fear among soldiers. At the time, my eldest brother was an infant and I was not yet born. Unfortunately, the war and leaving behind loved ones has long remained a universal experience in our world. It is, perhaps, our greatest sickness and shame as human beings. A bit of this war notion comes through in verse one. The deception is deliberate. The listener is supposed to suspect that the teller is heading off to fight on foreign fields. My meaning is not clear until the end, when the listener hopefully sees that the fields are very foreign indeed, and that those raising a glass to ages past or doing so from the timeless space of heaven.

I had a plan for the form. The lyric meter would complement the song meter, not vice versa. I would use incremental repetition. I would be vague, at first, about the tale teller's destination, so that the meaning of the repeated line “And when we meet again, my friend” would change as the song progressed. However, I was really spinning my wheels creatively on this one, at least until late this past Monday night, when I jotted a few preliminary lines on a sheet of paper. I was getting that creative feeling. Before retiring I warned my wife that I would appear nearly insane for the next 24 hours-- that I would be softly muttering and jotting, but not to worry.

I spent the better part of Tuesday on the beach at Ocean City, writing lyrics and, later, tweaking away. I began, alone, at 6 AM, watching two whales feeding in the surf as I wrote the first draft. I used a small pocket notebook to draft the song. I wrote the last verse first, followed by the first and then the second. By 9 AM the shell was done. Once the shell of lyrics was composed, I read and reread aloud the first draft. Then I took the notebook to our room at the inn. At that point I returned to the beach, this time with my family in tow. I went over the lyrics from memory verse by verse, line by line. Between recitations, my wife and I played tag team, watching our five and one year-old sons. I studied the sound of the words carefully, and looked for images to draw out to the surface. I added alliteration, perhaps to excess, some assonance, and played with the words, one line at a time, for several hours. Once a line pleased me, I walked back to our room and changed that line only. Then I headed back to the beach. That was the routine for several hours.

Eventually, I finished what I would call the second draft. Next I sat on the beach reciting the lyrics from the notes, deciding what sounded right and what did not. Revision followed this process, then more recitation. Later that day, little changes came to mind independent of conscious thought. Finally, after pizza on the boardwalk, I said goodbye to my family. On the lonely ride home to Lawrence Township I added a few final changes, and that is how this current song came to be.

Tuesday night I took out a guitar and played the song a few times, trying to find a good key. Later I switched to piano, since the key of F sounded best for my vocal range, but F is not a good key for a guitar rendition. Wednesday morning, before leaving for Rider University, I rehearsed the song several times; then I recorded the linked video version of the "final" product. At that point I had not yet internalized the final lyrics, so some stumbling is present in the rendition. Sorry.

I am grateful to my fellows with [The National Writing Project](#) who offered me feedback through the E-Anthology, for which I am the Rider project's facilitator. Bouncing ideas off of them was quite helpful. I also thank God for my grandfather Eugene Tighue, a gifted writer who possessed an uncanny sense of the Celtic soul.

In retrospect, I believe I did not write the song so much as it wrote me: the song found me, not vice versa. Tough words from an Aristotelian, but Plato would love it. I am particularly well-pleased with verse one in general, with my allusions to heaven in verse two, with my selective use of alliteration and assonance, and with the closure that comes at the end of the song. The "shepherd song" is God calling him. His "sojourn song"-- his earthly song-- is over: it is "sung." And so the song proper also ends at that point. But in heaven the "song" will never end. *That* song is eternal. The children's rhymes notion in verse three is very dear to my heart, since Dad often sang children's songs to his seven children.

The lyrics follow:

## When We Meet Again

By Bill O'Neal Jr.

1. Fare thee well to all I long have loved,

Fare thee well to fleeting friends;

And adieu to comrades tried and true,

I will ne'er return again.

And when we meet again, my friend,

On foreign fields far-flung;

Let us raise a glass to ages past,

Oh when we meet again.

2. From the hills I came-- beyond the main,

Far beyond the brambling burn;

Ringin' in refrain they call again,

To those hills once more I turn.

And when we meet again, my friend,

Beyond the burnie brae;

High in heathered hills--'round the rolling rills,

Oh when we meet again.

3. Long this song was sung for you, my son,

Long the children's rhymes have rung;

Soft some shepherd song calmly calls me on,

So this sojourn song is sung.

And when we meet again, my friend,

That song will never end;

There will be all time for children's rhymes,

Oh when we meet again.