

If I Return

NFL pennants encircle the upper walls of the barbershop I patronize. Mirrors behind the barbers' chairs double the effect. The banter is almost always about sports. The barbers, and many of their customers as well, know who's on first, what's on second, and the genealogies and career histories of NFL players and coaches, present and past.

I have few opinions about sports. So, imagine my surprise when I discovered my sports-minded barber is a bird person. For some reason, I mentioned the bird feeders hanging in my backyard and it turned out he has more feeders than I, different kinds of feeders, and a birdbath. Plus, he feeds squirrels on his small patio, as I do. I told him the red-headed breed of hummingbirds is named Anna.

He said, "Yes, that's my mother's name and my girlfriend's name. It's the only kind of hummingbird we have here in the Valley." When I told him I had seen other species of hummingbirds, he was doubtful.

He said he'd seen songbirds attack hummingbirds feeding from the hummingbird feeders. My story about seeing an albino sparrow in my backyard impressed him.

He brushed the hair from my collar and removed the smock protecting my clothing. As I stood and reached for my hearing aids and glasses, a thought struck me. I have on my website two poems about birds. He has no computer, so I offered him my phone with an invitation to read my poem, "If I Return."

The poem begins with *when*, not *if*. "*When* I die, *if* I return." I cling to the hope readers don't reverse the order of the two words. Death has no *if*. The returning—that's the *if*. To some, returning might sound like reincarnation, when the soul or spirit returns after death in a new person or some other creature.

The second section of the poem focuses on how tough life is for a bird, facing dangers from weather and predators. How they die unnoticed except perhaps by God.

The third section of the poem pictures the life of a bird and the sky an ocean where a bird can surf, sail, and ride the winds. The poem finally repeats the opening idea.

If I Return

After I die,
 After my body is lowered into the grave,
 Burnt into ashes,
 or fed to wild dogs,
 If I return,
 May it be as a bird.
Lifespan of months or years, no more,
 Driven by season, snow, and storm,
 Gleaning with never a Sabbath rest,
 Falling to earth with none to mourn,
 Banished from thought by all but God,
They sail on placid lakes of blue,
 Fly with full-feathered wings
 Swim in heaven's crystal vault,
 Split clear skies without a sound,
 Surf invisible winds and clouds.
Bound by nature's laws alone,
 They soar . . .
 And soar . . .
 And soar . . .
 After I die, if I return,
 May it be as a bird.

My barber read the poem while I prepared to leave. When he turned to give me my phone, he had tears in his eyes. "Man," he said, "thanks."