

WITTY CITY

A New Forum for Recreational Linguists

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Chance? Or coincidence? You be the judge!

On November 1, 2019, the previous issue of *Word Ways* was posted. My article therein is a tribute to the beloved Competitions (1969-2000) in *New York Magazine*, which thousands of ingenious people entered obsessively. That same day, *The New York Times* published a call for Letters to the Editor, commenting on the news as such missives traditionally have, but employing creative forms such as limericks, haiku, parodies of songs and literary works and nursery rhymes, and the like. It struck me that this feature, called Variations, provides a forum for those of us who miss the challenges of the long-gone Competitions.

Of more than 300 entries, 18 were selected for publication, and posted on the *Times*' site on December 8. The following day, 13 appeared in the print newspaper, where space is more limited. Included in both editions was my submission:

*"Escape" won't work, 'cause it's a fact:
Online, your every move is tracked.
Watch what you click, what data typed,
So that your info isn't swiped.
Keyboarders need to get a clue.
Or someone might . . . "Control-U."*

Many of the other published compositions are equally clever, or more so. Here's the link. My verse follows a bevy of Trump-themed entries; I'm glad I chose another topic!

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/08/opinion/letters/letters-variations.html>

Sue Mermelstein, one of the *Times*' letters editors, came up with the idea for Variations. I asked about the response to the feature. She replied:

"We've gotten a great reaction to it! Comments from readers. Notes from friends. For me, the highlight was when the former publisher, Arthur Sulzberger, came over to tell the Letters staff what a kick he got out of it. We do plan to repeat it, but we'll probably wait several months. We'll let readers know, and because it was so popular, we'll try to publicize it more widely and prominently."

A postscript: My own verse went through a multitude of drafts and revisions. The interim printouts, festooned with edits and changes, look like palimpsests! For instance, I began with the idea of people being compensated for their data, but couldn't make that theme work. The "pun punchline" came first; the rest was crafted around that.

Years ago, I was an honorary member of an informal group of light versifiers, some professionals, known as The Bards. In contrast to my Herculean efforts, those people likely could ad lib such creations in seconds!