

Poet Unaware
Elizabeth Crawford
December 2017

High school. Freshman English. Miss McKeever. Not much charisma there. But after all these years, why is her class one I remember?

One of her lessons on genre introduced the ballad: a poem narrating a story in short stanzas, frequently on a sentimental topic. Ho hum. But Miss McKeever issued a challenge--our homework was to find stories in the newspaper that could provide material for a ballad. (Yes, we did our research in newspapers back in those days.)

I have long forgotten whose story was chosen, but the one we used concerned the death of a young boy, including the fact that he was ill but had anxiously awaited a new baseball glove for his birthday, and had recently received it, but had not lived long enough to use it. Our class could see that this story contained suitable material for a ballad--the inexplicable death of a child and the struggle of the parents to come to terms with the injustice of it. This conclusion arose from what was probably the most animated discussion we ever had in that class.

But then Miss McKeever reminded us that a ballad required a poet, or several, to put the story into stanza form, and we were to be the poets. We would all write our own six-stanza poems, read them aloud to the class the next week, and then consider how various elements of what we all wrote might be combined or go off in different directions. We would consider how the ballad of Jimmy might spread and evolve over a couple of generations. This goal sounded rather exciting, at least to me, a potential English major, except for the part about actually writing a poem.

Sitting there at the desk in my bedroom, I was at a loss. Writing a composition in prose was easy, but poetry? Still, I was not willing to face the humiliation of an F, so I began to scribble some more-or-less rhyming words. Somehow I told the story of Jimmy's illness, what seemed to be a slow recovery, his anticipated birthday and hopes to play baseball again, followed by a sudden downturn and death. I managed to produce six four line stanzas, but all I remember are the two last lines:

God had gotten restless and called him from above.
The heavenly team was ready for Jim and his new glove.

Over the years these lines have come back to me more than once. Age fourteen, clueless, not especially religious, and certainly not meriting a distinguished poetic achievement award, I had stumbled on an explanation I have since tried to remember. In dark times when understanding is most difficult, there is probably a guiding hand behind what happens in life.