

Poetry Series

John F. McCullagh

- poems -

Publication Date:

November 2009

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

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A Murder in Chatham

St. Patrick's Church was sparsely filled
For Friday morning mass
The seniors getting restless-
the clock read a quarter past.

It wasn't like the pastor
to leave them waiting there.
Father Hinds was not the kind
to miss the call to prayer.

The usher and the janitor
Together went next door
They both recoiled in horror
at the blood upon the Floor.

The police came with the coroner
To the Parrish rectory door
And saw Jose the Janitor
Try CPR once more.

Chatham is a quiet town
A place when families thrive
And father was the Sheppard
to guide them through their lives.

It didn't take police much time
to find who did the deed
as Jose's cell phone records
had placed him at the scene.

The murder knife recovered
The crime confessed at last
The priest had caught him in a lie
about crimes in his past.

The people came together
And filled St. Patrick's seats
To send the Father to his rest
And give their hearts some peace.

A narrative poem about the murder of Father Ed Hinds, Pastor of St. Patrick's church in Chatham on Thursday 10/21/2009

John F. McCullagh

A Shea Stadium Swan Song

September comes around again,
And the Mets begin to fade.
They seldom reach the promised land-
where Series games are played.
The pitching staff shows signs of stress
They've made boneheaded plays
Santana says the Bullpen
Has to change their evil ways.

Old Pedro's arm is falling off
And EL Duque failed to heal
The fat lady sang for Wagner
Second half-Maine disappears.

The apple rises frequently
When Delgado's at the plate-
Where the hell was he in springtime,
When poor Willie got the gate?

They'd go to Church for solace
As if solace could be found
But their warrior was concussed
And took all year to come around

David Wright has his bad nights
When the calendar hits September
His swing gets long when men get on
He's quite the inning ender.

Reyes has a quick first step
He really covers ground
But as professional base stealers-
\$teiner \$ports \$till own\$ thi\$ town.

So now the Mets come back to Shea
And hope to win the crown.
Pinella's Cubs think otherwise-
A black cat must be found!

But cheer up fans there's still a chance
That Shea might see October
For it's the Brewers in pursuit
But if not, the season's over.

John F. McCullagh

A year ago today, the 9/11 poem

It was a year ago today
Twin towers built of steel and stone
Still stood beside the water's edge
To greet the final morning dawn

It was a year ago today
Some Saudi's bent on suicide
Commandeered a flock of planes
And human reason crucified

It was a year ago today
That wingless angels sought to fly
From the upper stories strewn with glass
To flee the fires of hell they tried

It was a year ago today
When dust and darkness reigned at noon
As glaring spotlights pierced the night
Stone by stone we searched the ruins

The year has past as it always must
3000 people now but dust
But should you come to walk Ground Zero
Tread lightly on the stuff of heroes.

John F. McCullagh

Beauty and her beast

In face and feature, line and grace,
a beauty like few others.
The first blush of her youth now past
Found her a wife and mother.

Her husband was a brutish man
Of gentleness devoid
His psychiatrist's opinion read:
"Schizophrenic- paranoid"

Beauty's son was with some friends.
Her bag was packed and ready.
She'd make a clean break with her man-
She'd found a job already.

He'd just been RIF'd that fateful day.
And spent it in a bar
The drink but fueled his darkening rage.
He could barely drive his car.

No witness saw what happened next.-
None lived to testify
But the evidence of her wounds suggests
That Beauty begged to die.

Her picture on the Post's front page
Displayed a classic beauty.
-The bleeding corpse the coroner saw:
The horror and the pity.

John F. McCullagh

Bittersweet

Some pictures hang upon my wall
Of baseball players from the past-
Gionfriddo's catch of DiMaggio's ball-
Lou Gehrig standing at the mike-
Babe Ruth pitching in the Bronx-
And the one place that links them all.

They happened at the lumberyard
The place on River Avenue
The place where Bombers came to play
Now sad, diminished, and by Fall-
a victim of the wrecking ball.

One other theme is intertwined
Within the pictures on my wall
Each enshrines the final time
These men enjoyed a curtain call..

Babe was pitching his last time
The season ender (33')
He never pitched another game
A complete game shutout
Against the Sox.

Gehrig speaking at the mike
A hot July 4th holiday
At home plate for the final time
He stood on the unaccustomed side

Gionfriddo's speed won the game
By making his miraculous catch
But next day he sat on the bench
And never played a game again

How bittersweet these moments are
for a scrub or a superstar
To know, at last, you've reached the end
To still have done the best you can.

Their time has passed, these men have died
And now their park has seen its day
I've only photographs to show
Perfection never fades away.

John F. McCullagh

Blood Red Diamond

It was unearthed in Palestine 2000 years ago
A heart shaped, blood red diamond-the finest ever known.
Though many did desire it
It went, by right, to Rome.

Rome monopolized the stone
resurrected from the mud.
Aspirants who sought the jewel
Were murdered in cold blood

Then came the Annis Horribilis-
Supernova lit the night.
Proceed Ecclesiastics
With your doctrinal fight

That night the stone was cleft in two
By the stone cutters art
That was the beginning
of a broken sacred heart.

Stone men cut in England too,
In Switzerland the same
Time and time again Rome's jewel
was split apart again.

There now remains a fragment
Of the jewel that graced a throne.
Its blood red color never dimmed
A beauty all its own

notes

Red diamonds are the rarest of the colored diamonds and the most precious. In 1054 a supernova exploded in the constellation of the Crab. In the same year doctrinal disputes over the "procession" of the Holy Spirit led to a flurry of mutual excommunications and the split between Rome and Antioch- the great Schism.

The stone men of England, Switzerland and elsewhere in Europe are the various Protestant reformers of the 15th and 16th Centuries.

Aspirants in the poem refer to various "heretics" rejected and killed off by the Roman church.
The "throne" is the papal throne.

John F. McCullagh

Burning Bush

The Taliban has lost many men.
And some others vacation in Cuba.
Marines hunt the villains in
Tunnels and caves
While Osama hides out in Aruba.

Yet, in theatre, the Taliban spreads
Like some Santa Ana fed fire,
Out of check, out of control
Like weeds on a grave, ever higher.

How many more must be tortured and killed
Before Arabs throw shoes at your dome?
How many soldiers and sailors deployed,
-nevermore to see family and home?

Shock them and awe them
And level their homes.
Take out yet more Chinese loans!
This is murder and mayhem
With vendor finance,
They manage on hatred alone.

Placing Murph's dog tags around your own neck
While symbolic, was still a good start.
Here are three thousand others to try on for size
Each stands for a Mom's broken heart.

Note:

Then President Bush put the dog tags of a slain soldier named Murphy around his own neck during the awarding of a posthumous medal

John F. McCullagh

Childhood's end

My friends all came and said goodbye
To College off we go.
Hugs and kisses all around
From everyone I know.

Tonight I saw my family-
(Enjoyed my last good meal) .
Tomorrow -cafeteria
With meal plans I must deal.

I spend my last night in my room
(Allow myself a tear)
How will my pandas get along
And thrive without me near.

My books, my things, my DVD's
so much to leave behind.
But pack mule Daddy must insist
I travel light this time

Childhoods end, not Journey's end
One more look back for me
Then off to make my future
at the University.

John F. McCullagh

Circle unbroken

I remember a day somewhere in time,
Before these words were spoken.
When I was still your little one
And our circle was unbroken.

Then I came to the foot of your bed
Watching, , helpless, sighing
Shallow breathing, then a gasp
Then silence. Someone crying.

In this grey world I dressed in black
In somber tones of night
I walked like one still in shock
Uncertain of the light.

Sometimes I sat here in your room
Quiet and alone
As if the presence of your things
Could lure your presence home.

Once on a midsummer's night
As I approached my home
The front door opened welcomingly
But I was quite alone.

The night was hot, no breathe of air
No breeze to make it move
What's more I'm sure I locked that door
But its nothing I can prove

Some explanation might be found
For what occurred that night
And probably my thoughts unsound
But I took comfort from that sight

I remembered a day somewhere in time,
Before these lines were spoken.
For I am still your little one
our circle is unbroken.

John F. McCullagh

Dementia

My mother forgot how to swallow.

Before that, she lost my face and my name,
erased from her memory by sickness and age.
Her nurses complained she took too long to feed
They wanted a stent and a tube for the deed

My mother forgot how to swallow

She forgot her late spouse, disremembered her vow.
With the loss of the past there is no here and now.
Once she read to my child, then my girl read to her-
Until all the sounds were a meaningless blur

My mother forgot how to swallow

Jesus and Mary and her patron saint
would loved to have helped her, so weak and so faint,
but she had forgotten the simplest prayer -
the beads in her hand little use to her here.

My mother forgot how to swallow

The night nurses found her while making their round
She was cold to the touch, no pulse to be found
She stared, eyes wide open, at the cross on the wall
Perhaps the Messiah had come after all.

John F. McCullagh

Evanescence

He sang a tenor's part-
No more a tenor really
Though aging cords may gamely try
It was disaster- nearly.

He lost the lyric line.
Poor fellow –must be blasted
Too much North Fork wine
Or maybe he's just past it.

A singer lost for words
is clearly up against it.
A staircase that's collapsing
can only be descended.

Some forty years or more have past
Since he sang at their Wedding
A rose cheeked boy with strong clear tones
He was, then, worth the hearing.

With time his talent vanishes
He cannot compensate
For lyrics he's forgotten
And notes he cannot make.

His hopes to leave on a better note

Then disappeared completely,
Only a swan- at its last-
can be sure to sing more sweetly.

(Evanescence: The Act or state of vanishing away; disappearance)
John F. McCullagh

Family Tree

In every proud Victorian home
There was a tree ablaze in light
Bedecked with gold and garland strands
to celebrate on Christmas night.

Again in times close to our own
In every decent Christian home
A little creche gained in favor
to celebrate our infant savior.

The years speed past for you and me
I thing back half a century
To when I was a tiny child
agog at my first Christmas tree.

Among the decorations there
Six small orbs of hand blown glass
From Mom and Dad's first Christmas tree
They were a precious legacy.

That home is but a memory, true
From those six orbs we have lost two
From other hearths now trees arise
to sparkle in our children's eyes.

John F. McCullagh

farewell to my fans

A farewell to my fans

When I am just a faded memory,
and my dimensions shift in your mind's eye-
think back upon the nights you spent at me
around a field of green beneath the sky.

For you were here the night back in 04'
The night that Jeter dove into my stands
When Yanks and Red Sox played a thirteenth Frame
he caught the ball but had to leave the game.

And you were here when A-Rod hit three bombs
Against the cy young candidate Colon-
you stood expectant in my left field stands
To catch the fourth if ever it should land..

Who can forget old Freddy and his pan-
The "Ancient Mariner" of Yankee fans
He wanders through my aisles just like a vendor-
He bangs the drum more slowly this September.

I've been the field where Ruth and Mantle played-
where DiMaggio stood out at center stage.
I've been the home plate where the luckiest man
bowed out before his disbelieving fans.

I've played host often to a Series game
My champions have added to my fame.
The shadows long upon my infield face
As days grew short and cool at Autumn's pace.

I was the place George Herman lay in state
When he lost his fight for life in 48'
Thousands of you wandered past his bier
(the only one he didn't want, I hear) .

But now my time has come, they say I'm through
And I think hard what Gehrig had to do-
He passed on the baton from failing hands
So I too say my farewell to the fans.

John F. McCullagh

I lost that Loving feeling (song parody)

You never Lift the seat any more
When you have to pee
And when we're making love
You always finish before me
it's getting hard not to notice, Hubby
That weekly you get more and more chubby

I've lost that loving feeling
while staring up at the ceiling
I've lost that loving feeling
Now it's gone, gone, gone
Whoa-oh

Now there's no tenderness
In your eyes when you reach for me
You seem more interested
In our wall mount LCD
I'm depressed and inside I'm dying
Cause Baby can't look beautiful crying

I've lost that loving feeling
while staring up at the ceiling
I've lost that loving feeling
Dead and gone gone gone
And I can't go on
No-oh-oh

Don't expect me to get down on my knees for you
You'd have to pay me more than you expected to!
We've had it love, but now I'm gonna have my say
My day in court, the Judge will make you pay.

Bring back that loving feeling
with someone far more appealing
Bring back that loving feeling
Now it's gone...gone...gone...
And I can't go on...
No-oh-oh...

John F. McCullagh

Keystone State of mind- song parody

Parody of New York State of mind

Some folks though we'd get away
Take a Holiday from the neighborhood
Hop a Flight out to Disneyland
Play the series in the Angel's hood

But I'm stuck here in traffic
Out on Route I- 95

I'm in a Keystone state of mind

We've seen all those Dodgers
Leave in their 25 separate Limousines
Froze our ass in the Rockies
Beating a better team

Now you know who we're facing
And I'm not going to waste your time

I'm in a Keystone State of Mind

It was so easy winning day by day
When the New York Mets limped into town
But I'm afraid things might not go our way
when the New York Yankees bat around.

I root for a Philly team that has lost more times
Than any other team playing any sport
I root for a team that's named for a female horse.
I come from a city that snowballs
Santa Claus

I'm in a Keystone State of Mind

John F. McCullagh

Lucky Man

Just so many seasons in a lifetime.
Just so many innings in the game.
Years I spent toiling in Ruth's shadow,
Batting my way to the hall of fame.

I proudly wore the mantle of the Captain
Which Ruth held just one day (to his great shame)
I stepped aside when I was struck by sickness
-my life a shortened, but official, game.

And now another Yankee claims my record-
a man like me who battles for the prize.
The Angels say he plays the game the right way.
He is a worthy Captain in my eyes.

The park is new, the team is good this season
My seat is in the grandstand way up high.
Remember my farewell one distant summer.
When I alone knew how I was to die.

John F. McCullagh

Oakland Lake

The sunlight, like a mother's touch,
lies gentle on the water's face.
The last warm breath of summer past
Not ready yet to yield its place

And you and I walk, hand in hand,
Around the long and winding path
Past where fledging Mallards stand
And weeping willows sweep the earth.

From beyond the rushes comes
the soulful melody of a horn..
All else is still, no sound intrudes
upon the bassist and his song..

Above us Ninja squirrels fly
And bomb the path with acorn shells
If they should hit me do not laugh
Odds are that they'll get you as well.

I'm glad we came to Oakland Lake,
To watch the waterfowl at play,
And have a quiet conversation
about a nearly perfect day.

John F. McCullagh

Once upon a time

My song concerns a buried grief
Another place and time
A sorrow that our clan endured,
In the days of Auld ang Syne.

Our parents' lives hold mysteries
We seldom can divine
Like why my Dad would leave the room
When he'd hear Auld Ang Syne

The faces at the table change
The names effaced by time
We struggle to remember them
Back once upon a time

His sister, Kat, nursed old and sick
In the Flu Pandemic times
Then her bright candle sputtered out
Back once upon a time.

When her father heard the news
He nearly lost his mind
He never after sang again
And seldom would he smile

Her brother up in Aberdeen
Heard as New Year Chimed
He dried his tears upon his sleeve
To the strains of Auld Ang Syne

The faces at the table change
The names effaced by time
We struggle to remember them
Back once upon a time

John F. McCullagh

our house with the rotary phone

I sit in a room that no longer exists
On a chair long since splintered and gone
While I pick at a meal I once would devour
in our house with the rotary phone.

I sit in the room that doesn't exist
Enjoying my choice of ice creams
Recalling the window in Tiffany glass
Forgive an old man his daydreams

A simple "A" frame with three beds and a bath,
obsolete, yes, but our home.
It stood with its' sisters on Queens borough Hill,
where the L.I.E. jams are well known.

I had known for some time that her best days were gone
A plywood fence circled our home
Title had passed to a contractor's hands
Neglected, our house looked forlorn

My past like a picture ripped from its frame
They left not a stone on a stone
Not even the numbers on wood painted green
of our house with the rotary phone.

Our house and its twin have been wrecked and removed
And replaced with a modern brick "home"
So pardon my tear as I stand at the bier
Of our house with the rotary phone

John F. McCullagh

Racing for the Cure

I had a sister once
She had sunshine in her smile
She was everybody's friend
For you she'd gladly walk a mile

When I see her in my mind's eye
Jeanette's forever young
When we lost her to the monster
She was only 41.

So that is why tomorrow
I'll be racing for the cure.
With caregiver's and survivors
We will beat the beast for sure.
And if my step should falter
As I am no longer young
Her ghost will run beside me
Until my race is run.

Perhaps you have a sister too,
Or someone that you love
Perhaps she's a survivor
Of a battle bravely won

We must celebrate the victories
Each year there are still more
Until what was a feeble cheer
Becomes a mighty roar

So that is why tomorrow
You'll be racing for the cure.
With caregiver's and survivors
We will beat the beast for sure.
And if your step should falter
For you are no longer young
Your survivor friend will pace you,
Until this race is won.

Gather at the starting line
Young and old together
The sisters and the daughters
And survivors feeling better
There may be 20,000 here
The organizers say
They fail to count the shadows
Who will run with us today.

So that is why today we're here
All racing for the cure.
Family, friends and lovers
We will beat the beast for sure.

And if our steps should falter
For we are no longer young
Our dead will bear us forward,
Until their race is done.

John F. McCullagh

ROBERT EMMET

"Let no man write my epitaph."
The defiant rebel said.
'Let no woman eulogize me
After I am dead.'

'I give my life for Ireland-
An Ireland strong and free
An Ireland that's united,
One free of tyranny.'

'When my country takes its rightful place
Among nations of the world.
That day I will not live to see
When our banner is unfurled.'

'On that day, and only then
Let my suffering be recalled-
and that I died for Liberty-
The sweetest death of all.'

John F. McCullagh

Same Sentence

At Calvary three crosses stand,
where the rebel, Jesus, died.
With him, two petty criminals-
were also crucified.

Per legend, one man begged relief
sought pardon as he died.
The other merely mocked the Lord,
as they hung side by side.

The first rebuked the second man:
"No fear of God, you slime?
We both bear the same sentence-
just judgment for our crime."

"But this man who did nothing wrong
with us is crucified.
The dogs will get my body
But not my heart and mind"

Jesus then forgave them both
Upon his Dad's advice
For no one whose been crucified
should have to suffer twice.

At Calvary three crosses stand
Tenanted no more
Here good edged evil two to one-
for those still keeping score.

John F. McCullagh

Soliloquy of the first time buyer

To buy, or not to buy: That is the Question.
Whether it is better in the end to suffer
The moods and whims of some outrageous landlord
Or take A.R.M.S. against your future earnings
And end up owning something? In hock, for years;

Pay rent? And by paying rent to say we end
The heart ache and the thousand natural shocks
Home ownership is heir to. Reduced Consumption?
No Politician's wish! To rent? To lease?
To lease, perchance to own? Ay, that's a thought
For in the grip of debt you're paying bills
Till you have shuffled off this mortal coil

It gives one pause. That's the aspect
That makes calamity of adjusting rates
For who would bear the years and years of debt
Fine dining now reduced to happy meals,
Buyers remorse, and the long delays.
The Questionable title and the risk
Your credit rating doesn't rate the loan.
When you yourself know if you lose your job
You'll end up sleeping in your S.U.V.

To grunt and sweat under a heavy load

Under the threat of something worse than debt
The forced short sale, from which, once closed
No equity returns. It puzzles the will.

And makes us rather bear such debts we have
And, if necessary, refinance them still.

Compounding thus make cowards of us all.

And so our youthful promise and ambition
Is hobbled by the weight of student loans
made by lenders judged too big to fail.

In this regard the risk is very real

We lose the house to auction.

(a parody of Hamlet Act 3, Scene one) A shameless rip off of William Shakespeare by
John F. McCullagh

John F. McCullagh

The Copse of Trees

We started out like Armistead
from the shelter of the trees.
The wind whipped by like a Fusillade,
the high grass at our knees..

The wind blew cold that autumn day
As we started up the rise-
The prospect of the copse of trees
Before us was the prize.

The flower of Virginia once
Paraded where we stepped
Until the double canister
Decimated those still left

Our force of two, no longer young
Stumbled up the hill
Numb with cold and short of breath
Proceeding forth on will.

No enfilading fire now
From the ghosts behind stone walls
Just wood post fences six feet high
Might our progress stall..

Brave Dick Gannett was unhorsed
Upon this very spot
Kemper, wounded mortally,
Was retrieved from shell and shot

We made it past the final fence
And up the grassy knoll
Defiant in the cannons mouth
(They're unloaded, so we're bold)

We passed the stone that marks the spot
Where Armistead left life
Where Rebel forces crested
Like the storm wave at its height.

The blue bellies yelled Fredericksburg
As the Crimson tide retraced
Half in Anger, Half in relief
that the challenge had been faced.

The hill before the copse of trees
Pocked with the dead and dying

While the remnants of Picketts men
Towards Longstreets line were filing

The victors and the vanquished both
long since have passed away.
And left mute stones and monuments
to mark brave deeds that day.

And we, the heirs of Union, stand.
Upon the very spot
That marks the high tide of the South
- what might have been was not.

John F. McCullagh

The crown of Thorns

The procurator came back home
As dusk began to fall
His man slave helped him to disrobe
He took his meal alone.

He thought about the days events,
of Procula's premonition
about the Jewish rabbi
Whose death pleased the Sanhedrin.

He'd washed his hands
But were they clean?
He struggled to decide.
He thought about this Jesus
Whom he'd just had crucified.

He'd found no real fault in the man
- just a holy fool.
Whom Caiaphas had wanted dead
and used him as the tool.

He'd had him scourged, as if just that
Would satisfy the crowd.
His men mocked Jesus with royal robes-
Woven a crown of thorns.

Next he gave the crowd a choice
To set this Rabbi free
But they preferred Barrabus
Nailing Jesus to a tree.

His chief Centurion arrived
From the place of execution
The rebel and two thieves had died
by Roman Crucifixion.

"I've brought you back the Crown of thorns
as a memento of the day "
but Pilate, looking horrified,
Ordered it away.

Notes

Procurator: official title of Pontius Pilate, Roman Governor for the Province of Judea

Procula: Wife of Pontius Pilate. In the gospel of Matthew she had a dream concerning Jesus and asked he husband to spare his life

Caiaphas Chief Priest

Sanhedrin: a religious group in first century Judea.

John F. McCullagh

The Death of the Washington Madam

'A terrible waste of curves and curls'
he said as the knot was tightened
She struggled as he kicked the chair-
Was Halliburton frightened?

She was the Queen of pay for play
for D.C. Movers and Shakers
Who, judging by their tastes in sin,
Won't be mistook for Quakers.

Her little black book (it won't be found)
Recorded details chilling
But keep your socks on, client nine
At least the sheep was willing.

"A terrible waste of a luscious mouth'
He said- her tongue protruding
'They'd have had fun in jail with that,
The clientele you're screwing.'

We'll 'suicide' as many 'Ho's
as it takes so this gets no higher.
Pay attention boys and girls-
This is our Reich stag fire

(I hated changing the first line to pass censorship
curves and curls was once T & A)

John F. McCullagh

The Easter Rising

eiri amach na casca
(the Easter rising)

The Proclamation had met with silence,
he must have known the fight was lost,
But, Connolly, faithful to the Cause,
Was accepting of its cost.

They took the Green, The inns of Court,
the Post on Sackville Street
De Valera stood at Boland's mill
the place where five roads meet.

Their commander, Pearse, a scholar,
Apportioned his men's lives,
To garrison each strong point
Till the British would arrive.

Their tactics were pure suicide-
They could not hope to stand,
But their strategy was brilliant
Meant to rouse a sleeping land.

Sure to die of a snipers bullet-
Or a British firing squad
These unabashed Republicans
Held out against long odds..

Bloodied by the Rebel guns,
The foe paid dear for ground
The general post office was in flames
as their gunboats shelled our town.

The week crawled past and Dublin burned
The post Office glowed White hot
Pearse watched his troop dwindle and fade.
Faint from shell and shock..

They gave up to be crucified
In Imperial British fashion
And by dying saved their country.
Their deaths brought her resurrection.

The British with their firing squad
Could ready, aim and fire.
The Brotherhood by dying
Could persuade, convince, inspire

From the graves of these patriot men
Was an Irish nation grown.
Their struggle at the post office

Still captured in its stone.

John F. McCullagh

The Gift by A donor

Perhaps I'll save a life today,
-and help a child in pain.
-and give a cancer patient hope,
when hope is on the wane.

When I roll up my sleeve today
And watch my life's blood flow-
I never know the faces or names
To whom my gift will go.

My hope is the recipients,
Their crises safely past,
Will recall this gift I gave-
This day was not their last.

I don't look the heroic type-
A faceless friend to you-
But I stand tallest when I lie
upon a cot of blue.

John F. McCullagh

The Man with the Thousand Yard Stare

He sits with a stoic's resistance,
his son in the casket lies there.
No line of a tear mars his visage-
the man with the Thousand yard stare.

He sits in the front row of mourners,
His dear sobbing wife by his side
in silence he keeps his sad vigil
and stares up at Christ crucified.

The mourners pass by him in silence,
touch his hand or say meaningless words,
for his part he stares straight on through them
as if nothings felt, nothings heard.

The Parson commands us to silence
and struggles to lead us in prayer-
but half of the room has forgotten the words
like the man with the thousand yard stare

Death is my race's core competence
dealing with life, we're but fair,
but none living today keeps sorrow at bay
not the man with the thousand yard stare.

John F. McCullagh

The only way is through

I stand beside your open door
And look into the room.
A moment's hesitation, just,
a chill of pending doom.

I confess I've feared this day,
And hope my sight proves wrong,
but you still and quiet lay, -
a pause within a song-.

Your body covered with a sheet
No stir, no breathe of air
Waiting, patient, for the boatman
with nothing to declare.

I hesitate a moment there
Unsure of what to do
Then quietly remind myself
my only way is through

John F. McCullagh

The Poppy Seller

The poppy seller stands near the Rotunda.
He vends his paper flowers as before.
He wears a small red poppy in Remembrance
of heroes fallen in our nation's wars.

The people pass as if he's' non existent,
more interested to buy well watered beer.
The Veteran feels the sting of their indifference-
Upon his grizzled cheek I spy a tear.

I cannot, will not also pass in silence
I stop and donate something at his stall
He stammers thanks, but he needn't thank me-
more fitting that I thank those who gave all.

They who owed us nothing gave us everything.
We, their debtors, balk to pay our share.
And still the poppy flourishes in Burgundy,
past living memory, as a wordless prayer..

John F. McCullagh

The Race

An injury in sophomore year
caused me to miss the springtime meets.
I was sitting in a cast
while my teammates won their heats.

I am no brain, I can't sit still
No chance I'll ace the S.A.T.
But medal wins in track and field
could mean a scholarship for me.

Near Lewis is a cinder track-
an oval of a quarter mile.
So I come here to do my laps
And dream of victory for a while.

A short fat man goes jogging by
In sweat drenched shirt and navy shorts
Gasping, like a fish in air,
fleeing from his mortal thoughts.

I doff my sweats and start to stretch
I take no chances with this knee.
Soon I'm feeling good and loose,
it pays to warm up properly.

A tall thin runner, strangely pale,
About half of the track ahead
I'll pass him like he's standing still
Then he'll be chasing me instead.

I pass the jogger right away
The pale runner, though, moves speedily
I pick up my pace a notch
Just as quickly so does he..

I stretch my stride, he does the same
And gains upon me steadily
I thought that I was chasing him
It seems instead he's chasing me.

I never raced this guy before
At any of the local meets
He appears to be as old as me
But his gear is "thrift shop" quality.

Sure enough, he's gaining fast.

I dig down for a last reserve
I didn't think I'd lost a step
Bad news, if it's true, for me

I hear his foot falls close behind
And vainly try to stay ahead
I turn my head to see his face
It is the face of one long dead.

The ghostly winner makes a turn
and passes through the gate and chains
The cemetery lies beyond
That holds the urn with his remains

"You saw him too" the fat man gasps-
"I thought that he had come for me"
I knew he only came to run
I recognized the ghost you see.

"Tommy Miller was his name
School Champion back in 63'
.He died crossing this finish line
an aneurysm in his brain."

Unfinished business binds him here
A restless spirit, more than most,
The race is ever to the swift
The quick are beaten by a ghost

John F. McCullagh

The Road to Emmaus

Did you ever wonder why,
As you hung upon the cross,
we weren't ready for your words?
if we were worth the price it cost?

At a place they call the skull,
hung upon a tree to die,
With nails that pierce your wrists and feet,
and dying thieves on either side.

"Others he did save,
but he cannot save himself"
Executed like a slave,
By a Rome malignant to itself.

As you spoke your final words
And then hung your head to die
Did you fear you were heard only
By the sparrows and the sky?

When the Pilus pierced your side
And the water flowed like blood
Had you already breathed your last?
Had darkness overcome the sun?

Do you miss the wine and water?
The perfume in the Magdalene's hair?
When I journey to Emmaus,
Will you accompany me there?

Our hearts will burn like fire
For love of him thought dead
When again we recognize you,
In the breaking of the bread.

John F. McCullagh

The Santa Conspiracy

From ages back in Time,
A Bishop with his coins
Gave succor to unfortunates
And funds to dower daughters.

Although this saintly Nicholas rests
Through centuries of slumber
Something of his spirit lives
When we love one another

A gentle vast conspiracy
Arises round this man
A tale told to the innocents
By parents in all lands.

His myth now robed in red and white
His beard now white and flowing
He dashes round the world by sleigh-
Even if it's snowing

The story seized by those who sell
Has taken on new life
He first appears at Macy's bash
And with Rockettes at night

Perhaps an errant Grandma
Has run afoul his sleigh
Perhaps he's just a cookie thief
This elf to whom kids pray

All I know is evidence
Is everywhere to see:
Suspicious trails of cookie crumbs
And presents at our tree

John F. McCullagh

The Sound of your Laughter

Why do I love you?
because you're my child.
Since before you were born-
So it's been quite a while.

I couldn't resist you
No way and no wise
Since the first time I saw you
in your Mother's eyes.

In part your remind me
Of those I hold dear
the sound of your laughter
the salt of your tears.

The way your tongue curls
And mothers' cannot
You're a storehouse of traits
That I can't do without.

Your voice raised in song
Can be heard in the rafters
Your song is a gift
Handed down from ancestors.

Like me you love humor
With a sarcastic wit
As often as not
you score direct hits

So while I still breathe
And still can remember
I love you dear child
and the sound of your laughter.

John F. McCullagh

The Strand*

I saw my father's face last week,
across the gulf of time..
I chanced upon a photograph
That you had left behind.

His hair shock white, his shoulders large
from years of heavy toil,
His eyes pale blue, his hands were rough
from working with the soil.

I thought I saw his face again
Across a crowded room
It must have been a trick of light-
a product of my gloom.

I saw my father's face last night-
within a vivid dream.
We walked familiar streets of home
in forty year old scenes.

Long vanished homes and people
paraded through my head.
I did not choose to break the mood
or remind him he was dead.

I took my father's hand last night
We walked a moon lit shore.
The beach's sand was coarse and black
the surf a subdued roar.

The land behind was all I know,
But the Ocean beckoned me
So together, hand in hand,
We stepped into the sea.

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*• a poetic term for a shore (as the area periodically covered and uncovered by the tides)

John F. McCullagh

The Visit

I went to visit you the other day,
a bunch of fresh cut flowers in my hand.
I only had a little time to spend-
Still you, I think, were glad to have me there.

I spoke about my troubles in your presence
You listen with an ever patient ear
You remind me that all trials are transient
That nothing dries as quickly as a tear.

Now that you and Mom are back together-
I can't believe already it's a year-
As often happens with long married hearts.
Does nothing dry as quickly as a tear?

With pain, I raise myself up from my knee
I say farewell with none around to hear
It's just a lie we tell ourselves, my Da
That nothing dries as quickly as a tear.

John F. McCullagh

There used to be a ballpark here

The Ghosts of Ruth and Gehrig sat
Up in Tier 35
And wiped tears from translucent cheeks
As the final anthem died.

DiMaggio brought the popcorn
The Mick supplied the beer
He bought it up in heaven
Cause it's cheaper there than here.

"An epic game", the Babe enthused
"The best I ever saw"
he chowed down on some hot dogs
And looked around for more.

Gehrig glanced out at his bat
Atop the center pole
And wished to get it in his hands
And feel its weight once more.

"I had a streak in 41' the longest in the game"
Then DiMaggio fell silent and turned to watch the game
"I did my best in 56"
Mantle then exclaimed
"I wonder what I could have been if both my legs were game"

Mystique and Aura, Saucy things
Each dancing at a pole
As Derek with his broken hand
drove a single through the hole.

Pettite our left handed ace
Dealt his greatest game
Glaring out beneath his cap-
His hate for batters plain.

The autumn sky had turned to black
When Mo entered the game
The Sandman tune was soon drowned out
By the faithful who remain.

Robert Merrill sang, and then Kate Smith sang
Then Sinatra one last time
Singers for the requiem
Living need not apply!

The Ghosts of Ruth and Gehrig sat
Up in Tier 35
And wiped tears from translucent cheeks
As the music died

"I wonder if we'll feel the pain
When they wield the wrecking ball
I wonder if our hearts will break
When they breach the wall."

"Fear not, dear friend, the Stadium's end
For if steel and concrete fall
The Stadium lives in our hearts
Whenever we recall."

The fans left standing in the street
On River Avenue
These corporate types in Luxury suites
Have little thought for you

Our paradise is lost tonight
Our little patch of green
But what a life we lived in there
The greatness we have seen.

John F. McCullagh

Thigh Way

to the tune of 'MY Way'

And now, my weigh-ins here
and so my scale faces destruction
I've cheated, had some beers
then gotten quotes for liposuction

I've eaten way past full
and then had one more for the highway
I've gotten old, I've gotten fat
don't diet my way!

Bagettes, I've had a few, but then again, too few to mention
I love my salty snacks
but that's what gave me hypertension

I planned each 3 course meal
Each greasy spoon along the highway
I've gotten old
I've gotten fat
don't diet my way

Yes there were times when I was blue
Ice cream in quarts, I would go through
but through it all, despite the gout
I'd eat it in, or take it out
I ate it all, - and I'm not tall
don't diet my way

I've lunched, I've wined and dined
I've had my failed attempts at losing
but now my jeans just split
and it no longer seems amusing.

To think I ate it all
and may I say not in a shy way
I've gotten old, I've gotten fat
don't diet my way

For what is a meal without cake for desert
and what good is jogging? - a guy could get hurt
I ate the foods I truly craved
and never once was fashion's slave
The weight-in shows, I need new clothes
don't diet my way!

John F. McCullagh

Twenty Seven!

We entered last night at gate four,
the precious tickets in our hands.
The Anthem's ending drowned in cheers
as we took seats high in the stands.

"Godzilla "had a monster night.
He was a one man wrecking crew.
Pedro couldn't get him out.
Nothing really he could do.

Here and there the Phillies tried
To stage a rally, beat the best.
But Andy always held them down
while pitching on just three days rest.

When "enter Sandman" starts to play
It's like a Frank Sinatra score:
Game over for the Phillies' reign
They weren't coming back, down four.

A happy meeting at the mound,
once Victorino grounded out
As coaches, players stormed the field
from the first base side dugout.

Flags and pennants, banners wave
And Modell's opens up the store
Faithful fans behold the prize
Like early Christians filled with awe.

John F. McCullagh

Until we meet again

I will not let my hand let go your hand.
How little time together here remains:
Dear sister- looking old, frail, and confused-
lost somewhere in Morpheus' gentle dreams.

The taxi that I called is downstairs waiting,
and shortly I must tear myself away
Knowing that our parting will be final-
We will not meet again till Judgment day.

We started out Depression era babies
When we were young we slept in the same bed
We had little, except each other, sister
but I would want for nothing else instead.

We've lived full lives and counted up our loses:
Your husband gone, my youngest in her grave.
It seems to me that we have come full circle
Hard times crash against us like a wave.

Our parents long since gone, their time receding.
Faded photographs behind a frame
When we are gone who then will remember
their lives, their love, their faces or their names.

I take a last long glance to save the memory
Embrace you in a gentle hug, then part
and if I can't abide with you forever
Live forever young in this old heart.

John F. McCullagh

When we dead Awaken

My trusted family doctor said
"Sit down, I have bad news.
Your PSA is very high;

to do."

there are tests we have

I sat numbly as if in shock.
I scarcely heard a word.
This can't be happening to me
This whole thing is absurd.

I have a wife, three kids I love
Important work to do
A house in a good suburb,
With a mortgage payment due.

* * * *

I went into the hospital
And they performed the test.
I can't say now which was worse-
the pain or my distress.

I started bleeding heavily
The room swam from my view
They told me later that I spent
Three days in I.C.U.

Three days I spent dead to this world
Like Jesus in the tomb
But no angel awakened me-
just the beeping breathing tube.

** **

The biopsy was negative
No cancer cells were found
They gave me back this life again,
but turned my world around.

I walked alone along the beach
Where sea contends with land
I thought about my life restored
my life's work seemed like sand.

I noticed as I walked along
The verge of sand and sea
The busy tide washed out my steps-
all evidence of me.

The god\$ I've worshipped all my life
Are mortal just like me.
But the God stuff is eternal
Like the salt and unplumbed sea.

John F. McCullagh