

BOOK REVIEW

# Down-home Poet

North Carolina's Michael McFee examines the state, pork skins, bald spots, and more.

{POETRY}

## That Was Oasis

by Michael McFee.

Carnegie Mellon University Press. 2012, 87 pages, paperback, \$15.95.



PHOTOGRAPH BY BERT VANDERVEEN

**YOU WON'T FIND HIM** slamming in Greenwich Village. You need not search the sidewalk cafes of Paris.

Try his office on UNC-Chapel Hill's campus. Or Linda's bar on Franklin Street. Maybe go up U.S. Highway 15-501 just across the Durham County line and try the basketball court behind his house. Better yet, walk around to the front of the house, under those big, shady ash trees, all the way across the rocking-chair front porch, and peer through that first window on the house's east side.

Michael McFee, a poet as North Carolina as they come, will probably be there, in the little room he calls his Poem Factory, writing. And his hands and heart and head will be squarely in the Old North State because Michael McFee is our poet. He's not New York's, or Los Angeles's, or anywhere else's.

Now, I don't mean to pigeonhole him. The man is free to write about whatever he wants. But read his new book, *That Was Oasis*, and then tell me: Can you name another poet who's published a 27-section ode to the baseball field where the Asheville Tourists play? Is there another poet writing about the snakes that were spooked out of hiding back when workers blasted a tunnel through Asheville's Beaucatcher Mountain? Do you know another man who can create a poem out of the expression "that's just bunk?" (It dates to 1820, when U.S. Congressman Felix Walker stood before the House and defended a long, tedious, and mostly irrelevant speech he gave by saying that he was "only speaking for Buncombe." Buncombe was Walker's home county, and it is McFee's.)

So I think it's only fair to say Michael McFee is ours. Now, don't get me wrong: Not all of his poems are explicitly about North Carolina. *That Was Oasis* has one about salt. One about the spit-and-tobacco poultice his mother plastered on a bee sting. A musing on the letter Q. Pork skins. A tree house, a bald spot. A handful of keys. Each poem is like an unexpected postcard from an old friend: At the mailbox, you stop and read it once. When you get back inside, you read it a second time, maybe out loud. And then, when you think to look at the postmark, you realize that Michael McFee sent it from the place you've been living all along. 🐾

— Jason Smith

## Gravy

By Michael McFee

Meat grease, flour and water, stirred till smooth—  
it's what my forebears ate, if they were lucky.

It's what my mother ate, those hard dark years  
she worked at a sawmill way out in the mountains,  
learning to live on cigarettes and coffee

and cold biscuits raised from the dead by gravy.

Now and then she'd cook a little for us,  
something to moisten and darken and quicken

the bowls of bland white rice or mashed potatoes  
I'd shape into a cratered volcano  
whose steaming lava overflow improved

everything it touched on my dinner plate.

Good gravy's not an afterthought, a dressing,  
a murky cloud masking a dish's dull prospect:

whether poured from a Thanksgiving china boat  
or a black iron skillet in Bloody Madison,  
it's the meal's essence, where flesh meets spirit,

where fat becomes faith, where juice conveys grace

as red-eye, gilet, sausage, faithful sawmill—  
whenever I think of those savory names

and the times I've poured or ladled or spooned  
then mixed and dipped and sopped up their elixir,  
not wanting to taste a single filling drop,

my mouth starts making its own thin gravy again.

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