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Review of McFee's "That Was Oasis"

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That Was Oasis

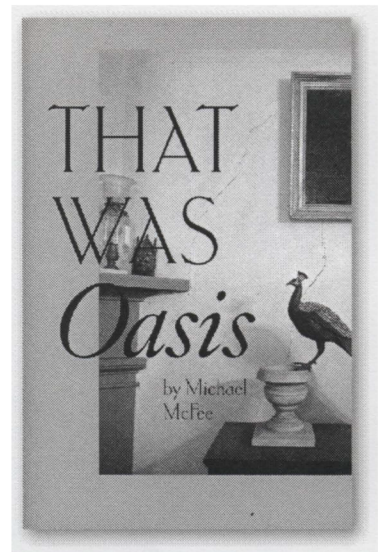
By Michael McFee (Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2012) \$15.95, paper. ISBN 9780887485480, 97 pp.

What may first strike the reader of Michael McFee's tenth collection of poetry, *That Was Oasis*, is the poet's infectious fascination with language and the act of writing: the obvious pleasure he takes in the look, the sound, the taste, even the touch of the written word.

The volume begins with the provocatively titled "Q," a meditation on the typographical detail of that letter, with its "fluent tongue / stuck from a wide-open mouth / that elegant half-mustache" (11). The promise of that poem is fulfilled throughout the volume. If such a piece is something of a metaphorical trick, sure to engage the most likely readers of a poetry volume (other poets), it's a good one. That it's followed by a poem about "Erasures," a piece about the "eraser crumbs" gathered up and tossed "over my right shoulder for luck," seems perfectly fitting.

And apparently the little ritual works, because McFee's "luck" certainly holds. If read only for his engaging language play, the book has merit enough to make it a first-rate read. With particular success, "Bunk," manages to integrate a dozen synonyms for the word and explore its very Carolinian etymology, all as the speaker defends his sister's honor: in his "nine-year-old righteous brotherly rage / choking on the purple prose / of Asheville dusk ..." (34). The poem "Oasis," too, discovers its richness in language as language. It seamlessly merges old-fashioned Sunday School teaching aids with adolescent lust, all in the luscious sound of that provocative word: "Its very vowels / were an exotic blossoming / in the desert of lessons / about Israel in exile" (37). And in the coined term and title "Bibliotaph," McFee speaks the double-mind of every literary person, opening with the admonition to "Bury me with my books," but closing with a less sanguine reference to "the books that buried me."

The poet's sometimes extravagant infatuation with words, however, is only the entryway into what makes his work compelling; while the gratification of



deft word-work persists throughout, that joy serves to pull us more deeply into 80 pages of poetry that consistently bring together a richness of personal and historical reflection, culminating in what Robert Bly has called “psychic weight.” Perfectly and wittily crafted, these poems are a soul-warming trip through the poet’s deeply felt Appalachian identity and history.

Most compelling in this regard may be “The Copperhead,” a poem that portrays the suburban speaker’s fearful thrashing of a snake against a contrasting memory of how his grandmother “would’ve calmly / raised the wooden handle / then brought the blade / down, fast, once, clean, / as if targeting a weed / in her vegetable patch” (13). In creating the vignette, he effectively couples a darkly comic scene with a sincere admiration for his hard-scrabble heritage. The subtle suggestion is that, even in light of what may seem to contemporaries an unsavory violence, much has been lost. Similarly, in 2013 maybe one must be reared in a tobacco growing state to use cigarettes as sympathetically and frequently as does McFee, particularly in the little masterpiece “Poultice.” In that poem, a mother comforts her “yelping” little boy by tearing open her cigarette, chewing a little of the tobacco, and applying the “brownish wad” to the “swelling bite.” With this folk remedy, she is “drawing out the fire, / its poison canceling the angry bee’s” (22).

More typical commonplaces of Appalachian poetry appear as well, yet in McFee’s work they never drift into cliché. Grounded in an Appalachian mind-scape, he writes capably and with appropriate respect for the cultural significance of music. “Banjo” honors the instrument. The poem portrays a cousin who played as “fiercely as Scruggs” until his fingers bled, then just kept playing, “only wincing slightly as / the music scarred and healed his flying touch” (25). “Thelonius and Archie” is his masterful if unlikely meditation joining the jazz great Thelonius Monk and the eminent poet A.R. Ammons, two accomplished Carolinians who spent periods of their youth playing piano for revival meetings. McFee writes convincingly of regional cuisine as well. “Pork Skins” gives that much maligned dish the respect it’s due, “the apotheosis of the epidermis” (26). And “Gravy” is a tribute to a dish that speaks of a culture and, significantly, to the spirit of hardy perseverance that offers a daily pleasure up against working class poverty. Gravy is, he writes, “the meal’s essence, where flesh meets spirit, / where fat becomes faith, where juice conveys grace ...” (23).

Throughout, McFee writes with an elegant wisdom that is at once elevated and matter-of-fact. When he tries to be funny and wise, he is truly so. One can read “Bald Spot,” his paeon to a receding hairline, as a comic tribute to a phenomenon with which many of us identify. Yet even as he chortles through a reflection, we are never far away, smiling, from the realization of our mortality. Hair passes with youth, we know; and then comes, in the poem’s final words, “the last of the light” (63). And in the volume’s briefest, most perfect controlling metaphor, the poem “50” likens the speaker’s body to “a leaky / barrel of myself,” but in this case, the speaker’s barrel is afloat in the “bitter river” that “races toward a Niagara / thundering dead ahead” (64).

The book's sixth and final section, a 16-page, 27-section meditation on Asheville's baseball park, seemed to me at first a dubious way to end the book. The poet had demonstrated such mastery in short lyrics that I was expecting the collection to end with a significant quick click or a weighty but crafty bang. But with "McCormick Field" [first published in *AppalJ* 32.2 (Winter 2005)], he eases us out, and this more extended meditation works. The poem is framed in the present by the speaker noting an old man in the ball park fastidiously keeping a scorebook. This observation serves as a vehicle for McFee's reflection on his father (also an obsessive scorekeeping fan) and, more importantly, on his relationship with his father, a relationship that revolves at least in part around the father and son's dedicated following of the Asheville teams. The poem reminds me of some of the best work of Donald Hall, not simply because of the baseball subject Hall has used so well, but because of McFee's masterful handling of the duration of relationships and the passing of his father's life, his life, all our own lives.

Where McFee's craft and warmth of soul come through most clearly is in his ability to take the most commonplace events and observations of everyday life and find in them the metaphorical suggestion that pushes us toward something weighty. That's what most contemporary poems try to do. Many poets, however, leave my more cynical self wishing that they'd suffered another tragedy or two, chased too hard after Helen, fought a few more years at Troy—done *something* to create an intrinsic interest in their material to compensate for lapses in craft. What lifts McFee above the rest is that he really does command our interest and stretch our perceptions. His craft is that accomplished, his gift of metaphor that transcendent. In short, *That Was Oasis* is the best new book of poetry I've read in a good long time.

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