

## SPREADING AWE: CHILDHOOD AND HERITAGE IN NEW POETRY

*a review by Sarah Huener*

**Joseph Bathanti.** *The 13th Sunday after Pentecost.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017.

**Michael McFee.** *We Were Once Here.* Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2017.

**SARAH HUENER** received her BA from UNC Chapel Hill and her MFA from Boston University. Her poetry has appeared in *Four Way Review* and *Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*. Her poem "to Pluto" won the 2016 Randall Jarrell Poetry Prize and was published in *storySouth*.

*We see the world once, in childhood. The rest is memory.*—Louise Gluck

Childhood is irretrievable; for many of us, this truth is our first real understanding of the passage of time. Yet childhood experiences have a profound effect on how we act and react throughout our lives. It's in our early years that we form our own idiosyncratic habits and patterns of perception. In turn, these sensitivities must be reconciled with the silent codes we learn as children – codes of family, of gender, of the mountains and of the city, of fellowship and of the church, and also of inclusion and exclusion. Our sense of the world and means of communication are formed simultaneously, and often before self-awareness.

The latest books of poems from Michael McFee and Joseph Bathanti explore this formative time and the insights it produced both then and after several intervening decades. These are two poets with distinctive voices, voices that observe their youth, but which are also wiser than the past selves we meet within their pages.

Our turbulent moment in history forces us to reexamine (and reconstruct) what it means to be American. These two books are vivid and masterful records of times and places we might do well to remember: places that no longer exist (and in some cases, never did); places that resonate far beyond their kitchens and bedrooms, yards and streets. The further we are from its inception, the more we appreciate finding a shared idiom. McFee's *We Were Once Here* and Bathanti's *The 13th Sunday after Pentecost* depict past worlds that are vivid enough to be instantly recognizable to some. To the rest of us, the poems are an invitation to visit and stay awhile.

**Michael McFee** is a poet of the South. In *We Were Once Here*, he has collected for us vignettes and parables, cigarette butts and dip cans. Humble as this may sound at first, McFee's choice of subject proves to be unerring. In one of the final poems of his first section, we learn that the "Dead Man's Pinch" is what his great-aunts used to call those little inexplicable bruises (the kind you don't remember getting). The poem's imaginative thought-path takes us from description to dark fancy, ghostly forefathers pinching children to test their "ripeness for the afterlife." Here death and heritage are one and the same. McFee the child may have been judged unripe, but McFee the poet is very much awake to death.

The second, middle section of the book is devoted to the final months of a cancer patient, seen through the eyes of her uncle and caretaker. It's not uncommon to hear a complexion described as "ashen" – but McFee's speaker opens the front door to his niece and is forcefully reminded of an actual pressed-ashes figurine in a Mount St. Helens gift shop. The figurine is in the shape of a bear. This psychological precision is the other key to McFee's skills of expression – physical description can only go so far.

Near the section's close, in "Cremation," McFee uses single-sentence lines to underline the strange meticulousness of the process. It's as if they're fed to us one at a time. The poem records the end of a body with a great solemnity that is nonetheless human: "Her body lay under a cloth, in its Minimum Alternative Container. / . . . / We kept staring through thermal



COURTESY OF MICHAEL MCFEE

I might call over-clarity, which is sometimes of the emotional kind. Quickness – in the sense of *alive* as well as *rapid* – is at odds with assured comprehension. The occasional truism can overpower the reflective tone so successfully cultivated throughout the book. Conversely, since so many details are sympathetically resonant, others seem flat by comparison, particularly in poems set in the recent past – as is often the case. Time and distance can be helpful, and memory itself often the best guide. The poems from furthest away are strangest and most potent.

McFee and **Joseph Bathanti** alike have looked (back) at stories, and seen the raw materials of history in them. They have the perspective, in addition to the perception, to learn what's strange, what's important, what's bigger than itself. *We Were Once Here* chronicles the folklore of home and the bittersweetness of heritage through curation. Bathanti's storytelling is kinetic. ***The 13th Sunday after Pentecost*** is a representation of how every day was, rolling on within a vast machine.

The book's first section, Omega Street, takes us just there – the Pittsburgh neighborhood of Bathanti's youth, complete with baseball games, kitchen food, and local characters. With setting firmly established, the anchoring middle section moves through the speaker's confessions of sin or ignorance, growing up in a confusing, culturally rich and contradictory America. The section is fittingly called "Confiteor," after a penitential prayer in the Catholic mass. Its poems are like sections of a dollhouse or miniature rooms in a museum, painstakingly crafted and frozen in time – as if at any moment someone might walk in and set the table.

Bathanti, like McFee, favors free verse. Though unrhymed, unmetred poetry may seem liberating, the name is deceptive. It is – paradoxically – sound and rhythm that ensure these free verse poems hold together. In "Angel Food," Bathanti writes of lurking in the kitchen as a cake bakes, secretly wishing it ruined so that he will be allowed to eat it. The speaker's iambic wish "to lift / then slam a sash," comes to life even further with assonance, embodying the physical act by giving one vowel sound to one

glass till somebody shut the doors." The lines hover somewhere between fortune cookie fortunes and sentences for diagramming, their regularity straining against the bald strangeness of our mortuary rituals.

These odd and perfect associations and impressions are impossible to invent. This is all the insight we have into what lives in others' heads. At these successful moments, the images are detailed to a level precisely balanced between familiar and explained. That balance is key to these poems' ultimate effectiveness; neither momentum nor significance must be sacrificed. Essentially, the poem must be *just* intelligible. And many of these show how powerful it can be when specificity is sparingly invoked.

McFee's descriptive power is at its best in this book; for example, the end of "Roadside Table" sounds like it could be the closing sentence of the Great American Novel:

*as cousins skipped flat rocks to the far bank  
or waded on shivering legs into the river*

*and cigarette smoke rose toward the understorey*

*and the ripening barrels hummed electric with bees  
and watermelon seeds shone blackly under the laurels.*

I can't think of a better description of growing up in twentieth-century, rural America. The details speak for themselves.

The balance between clarity and momentum is a tricky one. When this collection falters, it is into what

A native of Asheville, NC, **MICHAEL MCFEE** has taught classes in poetry writing at his alma mater, UNC Chapel Hill, since 1990. He is the author of numerous collections of poetry, including *Earthly* (Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2012; reviewed in *NCLR* 2002); which received the 2001 Roanoke-Chowan Award for Poetry, and *That Was Oasis* (Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2012; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2013). His honors include the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award, the James Still Award for Writing About the Appalachian South, and the R. Hunt Parker Award for Significant Literary Achievement.

ABOVE **Michael McFee** reading his essay for ***Amazing Place: What North Carolina Means to Writers at Motorco in Durham, NC, 7 Apr. 2015***

action, and another to the other: lifting is one movement, slamming a second. Certainly this is not a formal poem, yet it seems to be quite pinned in place by the structure hidden beneath its surface. This mix of linguistic skill, familiar subject, and subtle structure makes these poems powerful, and it's often an understated power. Simplicity is surprisingly rare and underrated. Back in the cake kitchen, "it was ours immediately." It doesn't take long to read this simple line; yet it nonetheless says much more than, for example, "they gave it to us right away." In this way Bathanti creates moments of descriptive simplicity. His crispness is devastating.

I've mentioned before the movement of these poems, a powerful and successful part of the writing. Bathanti's style has the momentum and momentousness of a prose poem. Often this is good; sometimes it irks me, and makes me unconvinced of the lineation. I would be interested to read Bathanti in more varied forms. Still, his content is vivid in its own right. "Before Vietnam, *naked* was the vilest thing on earth," he writes in "Goldfinger." This explains why his younger self wasn't allowed to see the movie, but also tells us something about the climate of the times.

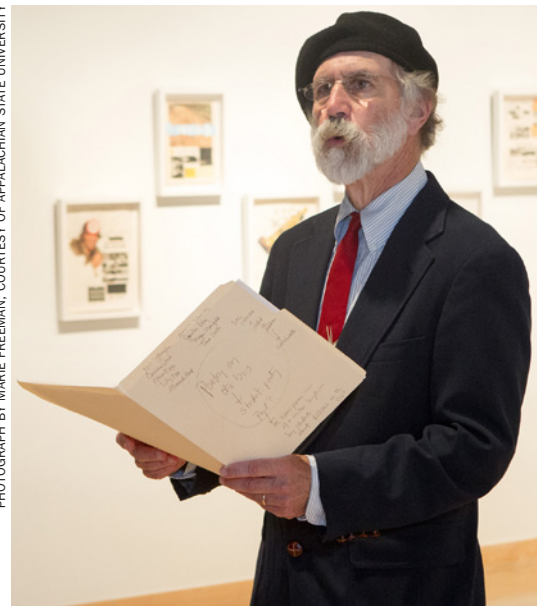
Life being the subjective creature it is, the struggle between synchronicity and meaning is a familiar one as we see in Bathanti's "The 13th Sunday after Pentecost" poem:

I smoked cigarettes and set fires,  
studied stolen pictures of naked women,  
dreamt of being loved forever.  
The Dodgers beat the Yankees  
four straight in the World Series.

It could not have happened other than it did: the day on the Table of Moveable Feasts, the television special on abortion, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s recent speech co-exist necessarily. It's as if correlation and causation are commingled with association and signification.

The present day collides with the worlds of the past in *13th Sunday's* third and final section, as the speaker's parents reappear in a recognized but altered space as recognized but altered selves: the mother's cane is "racked above the bed" and at night his father nods in the living room, "flesh-colored hearing aids / like fetuses curled in his ears." Even the speaker has changed. In this section, familiar context melds with a more contemporary voice that's wiser and perhaps a little tired. In "Haircut," the youthful speaker's father takes him to dinner after a dreaded haircut: "With his pocket knife, / he diced pears into his Chianti, / and fed them to me on a spoon. / He wouldn't die for half a century, / but I missed him already."

Bathanti filters these experiences so recognizably the book seems almost to take place all at once – but what we hear in the last section is an adult's voice and an adult's troubles. The section marks an overall shift to the recent past, where new folklores



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARIE FREEMAN; COURTESY OF APPALACHIAN STATE UNIVERSITY

appear ("Owls in daylight – an Appalachian omen – preside the transverse beams") just as old ones resurface ("bury in the yard / a statue of Saint Joseph"). From one of the book's final poems, "Burying Saint Joseph":

He ignites the subterranean quartz  
and hiddenite. Pooled above him,  
on the parched earth surface,  
glows a crown of milky light.  
Black Widow spiderlings  
flash their scarlet fetish,  
and scatter in the rosemary.  
The house sells in a fortnight.

The first specimen of hiddenite, a variety of spodumene, was found in Alexander County, NC. Though nearly all of Bathanti's book is fixed in a neighborhood in Pittsburgh, in the above (and some other later poems), the setting feels distinctly different.

Former Poet Laureate of North Carolina **JOSEPH BATHANTI** earned BA and MA degrees from the University of Pittsburgh and an MFA from Warren Wilson College in North Carolina. He teaches at Appalachian State in Boone, NC. He is the author of several books of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, including *The Life of the World to Come* (University of South Carolina Press, 2015; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2016), *Half of What I Say is Meaningless: Essays* (Mercer University Press, 2014; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2015), *Concertina* (Mercer University Press, 2013; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2015), and *Coventry* (Novello, 2006; reviewed in *NCLR* 2008).

ABOVE Joseph Bathanti reading poetry to an Appalachian State University audience, Boone, NC, 2015

I hear echoes of Western North Carolina – growing up, we always just called the western part of the state “the mountains.” In these same mountains are McFee’s roadside tables and hilltop graveyards. Not just the time, but the time and place shift over the course of these books. Just as the saint’s day and the Yankees have something psychologically in common, so do time and place in our own histories. We look back on them as inextricably linked: don’t we use them to push the limits of our memories, remembering what year you had Thanksgiving at your

house based on when you lived in that particular apartment?

With only the smallest amount of uncut nostalgia, these poets offer us real pieces of the past. They do this in a manner so alive and unvarnished, many of these poems have not had the time to brush the dust off or compose their faces. In “Fingal’s Cave,” McFee writes of being part of a legacy of artist-travelers who visited a place and were awed, then later tried to produce “something / that might make people feel what they felt here, / but failed.”

Bathanti, too, is conscious of his own role as storyteller. His epigraph to *Omega Street* is from the book of Revelations: “*I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: . . . What thou seest, write in a book . . .*” Their stories are larger than themselves, shining toward us. Their vivid details are anchors. Samuel Taylor Coleridge writes in his *Biographia Literaria*: “The simplest and the most familiar things / Gain a strange power of spreading awe around them.” In these insistent documentary poems, McFee and Bathanti have harnessed that power. ■

## THE RAGAN OLD NORTH STATE AWARD

*presentation remarks by D.G. Martin  
North Carolina Literary and Historical Association  
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A biography of Goldsboro’s Gertrude Weil would be welcome at any time. Born in 1879 into a family of German Jewish immigrants who had quickly achieved extraordinary success as merchants, entrepreneurs, and community leaders, Weil, who never married, became an unapologetic progressive, leading the struggle for women’s suffrage and playing critical roles in the

League of Women Voters and other organizations’ efforts to address attention to the problems of health, education, hunger, labor fairness, and racial justice – all the while tending to her family and local community responsibilities. All this is important. But in the hands of Leonard Rogoff, master historian of the Jewish experience in North Carolina and author of the classic *Down Home: Jewish Life in North Carolina* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010), the Weil biography, *Gertrude Weil: Jewish Progressive in the New South* (University of North Carolina Press, 2017), becomes much more. In his new book, Weil’s story becomes a new and important window into the history of North Carolina and of the nation during the middle years of the twentieth century. The book helps us see differently and more clearly the complex and sometimes contradictory challenges faced by North Carolina progressives like Weil and her friends Frank Porter Graham and Terry Sanford and their political hero, Weil’s neighbor, Charles Aycock. So this book is not only a tribute to an extraordinary woman, it is a much needed light on a period of our history that historians still struggle to understand – and for such an important contribution to the understanding of our heritage, the Ragan Old North State Award for Nonfiction this year goes to Leonard Rogoff. ■