

TRANSLATING THE MYSTERIOUS

a review by Robert M. West

Michael McFee. *A Long Time to Be Gone*.
Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2022

ROBERT M. WEST is the author of numerous essays and reviews about North Carolina poets. He is the editor of both volumes of *The Complete Poems of A. R. Ammons* (W.W. Norton, 2017; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2019) and co-editor with Jesse Graves of *Robert Morgan: Essays on the Life and Work* (McFarland & Company, 2022). He is head of the Department of Classical and Modern Languages and Literatures at Mississippi State University, where he serves as Professor of English and Associate Editor of *Mississippi Quarterly*.

MICHAEL MCFEE has taught classes in poetry writing at his alma mater, UNC Chapel Hill, since 1990. A native of Asheville, NC, his honors include two Roanoke-Chowan Awards for Poetry; the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award; the James Still Award for Writing about the Appalachian South; the R. Hunt Parker Award for significant contribution to North Carolina Literature; and the North Carolina Award for Literature.

Michael McFee's *A Long Time to Be Gone*, which received the Roanoke-Chowan Award for Poetry from the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association, is his tenth full-length poetry collection and his sixth for Carnegie Mellon University Press. McFee is a consistently rewarding poet, producing one excellent book after another, but his latest is surely one of his very best, matching both the imaginative richness of *Colander* (1996) and the reflective grandeur of *Shinemaster* (2006; reviewed in *NCLR* 2008). His first book, *Plain Air* (1983), appeared before he was thirty and drew praise from eminences including William Stafford and A.R. Ammons. It's wonderful to find him writing even more brilliantly well into his sixties.

McFee is in fact closer to seventy than he is to sixty, and though his work continues to exhibit an attractively youthful spirit (one well-captured in the book's slightly impish author photo), several of these poems make clear he knows his age. That awareness is particularly apparent in the first of the book's four sections, where each poem touches in some way on aging and/or mortality, including his own. Take "Brother Ass," titled after Saint Francis's term for his body, which he habitually mortified as part of his spiritual practice. McFee makes the term the basis for his own startling self-portrait:

I mortified my body for half a century
by simply ignoring it,
taking a strong back and endurance for granted,
feeding and watering and grooming fitfully,
making it carry way too much
for far too long. That's what pack animals do.

Whereas the ascetic saint aimed to nurture his soul by punishing his body, McFee finds that his accumulated abuse and neglect of his own frame only make it less ignorable:

Brother Ass is sturdy, sure-footed, patient.
He knows when to kick.
Now when I laugh, it's his long-eared big head
that brays, baring crooked yellow teeth,
teaching me how to be humble –
my fellow friar, my twin, my poor balky burro.

A few other poems in this first section, such as "The Dwindles," "Hnnnh," and "Please," likewise



evoke his own bodily decline and its eventual outcome, but some reflect on others' mortality. "Nearly" recounts his being startled when driving past a man on a bridge trying to persuade a teenaged girl not to jump. "Parking Garage" offers a captivating, perfectly turned meditation on his late-night drive down and out of the hospital deck after visiting his ailing father. Present tense restores immediacy to that scene of decades ago, as he tells us, "I don't know it, but tonight will be his last on earth." "In Memory of My Niece" is an exquisite short lyric honoring his niece Stephanie, the subject of an elegiac sequence in his book *We Were Once Here* (2017; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2018).

The specter of mortality continues in the book's second section with a sequence titled "Coronavirus Variations," poems from the spring of 2020, inspired by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdown. Several – such as "The Valley of the Shadow" and "No" – highlight the social isolation the lockdown required. The disease's characteristics and its treatments remind McFee of past experiences, as we see in "Of Breath" (quoted here in its entirety):

Of Breath

Shortness of breath: one of the dreaded symptoms.
A chronic asthmatic, I know what that feels like.

One night, decades ago, I woke up gasping.
What heavy fog was choking my laboring chest?

On the front steps, I waited for first responders.
A fire truck roared up from the local station.

The young EMT held my oxygen mask in place.
He calmly exhaled clouds in February darkness.

It's less shortness of breath than shallowness.
There's scarce air left in the lungs' little sacs.

They tethered my dying father to a ventilator.
Could he hear its steady metallic hiss and click?

Sometimes we require a machine to help us breathe.
Sometimes we infect each other with our breath.

It's worth noting that this is a fourteen-line poem with a kind of turn after line eight, ending with something much like a rhymed couplet. Over the years McFee has produced a number of sonnets

and variations on the form. (Additional poems in this volume invoking the sonnet tradition include "Before," "This Limbo," and "Table Muscle.")

Another poem in the "Coronavirus Variations" sequence is titled "Festival." McFee sounds incredulous as he recalls such exuberant togetherness from the Before Times:

The harmonizer leaned into the microphone.
His lips were maybe an inch from the lead singer's.

They broadcast spittle with their word-shaped breath.
They shook sweat onto the stage and the front rows.

The pickers kept swapping instruments and tuning.
The dancers swung their partners, promenaded.

Our bodies resonated like well-played strings.
"Community spread" back then was a shared quilt.

All weekend, the festive faces glistened with song.
Got a short time to stay here. And a long time to be gone.

That italicized last line quotes from the bluegrass classic "Little Birdie," presumably a song the band had played. In the context of a sequence on COVID-19, that pithy comment on life's brevity is haunting, and the rhyme of "song" and "gone" delivers a note of resounding finality.

Though McFee has long lived in Durham, NC, he grew up near Asheville, and the poems of the book's third section underscore his identity as an Appalachian writer. One of the most memorable, "A Grudge," begins:

She said, "You sure know how to hold a grudge."
Guilty as charged. That's one skill my parents

taught their children well, part of our heritage –

clutching a grudge tight, nursing a slight or insult
from kin or nearby clans who've dishonored us,

sipping its bitter spirits distilled out of sight

until the grievance explodes into a bloody feud
or simply turns inward, a private resentment

darkening the sore heart, a still-open wound

we can't seem to keep ourselves from poking,
secretly pleased to suffer that unhealed hurt.



After ingeniously pondering the way the sound of *grudge* suggests the word's meaning, McFee rounds out the poem with an extended metaphor comparing that hurt to a pearl: "indignities / and irritation" are transformed into "something smooth, a pearl // nobody beholds inside your homely shell." The wisdom of the poem's last line is startling, and it's underscored by a shift to authoritative-sounding iambs: "It may be all you have, when you have nothing."

The poems of the book's fourth and final section focus on works of various kinds of art – high and low – including several with ties to North Carolina. For instance, "The Gospel According to Minnie Evans" interprets drawings and paintings by that North Carolina outsider artist, and "In a Sentimental Mood" contemplates Duke Ellington's memory of writing that famous piece at a party in Durham. A reflection on the onetime ubiquity of the habit, "Smoking" ends by noting "the 1960s governor whose full-length portrait / hanging in the Executive Mansion in Raleigh // shows him with a lit cigarette in his lowered hand, // a product locally grown and locally manufactured." "Autographs" boasts of McFee's boyhood forgeries of various celebrities' signatures.

Most remarkable is "Portrait of the Poet as Saint Jerome," based on a late-fourteenth-century painting, *St. Jerome in His Study*, by the Master of San Jacopo a Mucciana – a painting held, like several works by Evans, in the North Carolina Museum of Art. McFee imagines himself as the saint trying to write but humorously annoyed by the painting's distracting details: "that miniature lion / is bleeding on the carpet / near my dropped hat, / paw lifted in supplication," and "Christ is exsanguinating / on a black cross outside, / His gaunt body ruining / my view of the world." The great miracle for him, he says, is any time his "pen / and hand will synchronize, / translating the mysterious / into a common tongue." Though Jerome was indeed a translator (he translated the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin), we know that we're also hearing McFee describe his own vocation as a poet.



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In "Sailing to Byzantium," the aging William Butler Yeats announces that his heart is "fastened to a dying animal" and "knows not what it is," and he pleads with the saints depicted on a church wall to "gather me / Into the artifice of eternity."* The movement from "Brother Ass" to "Portrait of the Poet as Saint Jerome" seems an echo of that same wish for escape, with the poet trading the miseries of his own "dying animal" for a new life in "the artifice of eternity." McFee should take comfort in the fact that, with *A Long Time to Be Gone* and so many other superb books, he has indeed earned a very long life after this one. ■

ABOVE *St. Jerome in His Study*, circa 1390–1400 (tempera on panel with gold leaf, 35 1/8x20 1/8) by Master of San Jacopo a Mucciana

* William Butler Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium," 1928, Poetry Foundation: [web](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44117/sailing-to-byzantium).