

“The seams between”

Hacker Packer, Cassidy McFadzean. McClelland and Stewart, 2015.

Reading Cassidy McFadzean’s awarding-winning debut collection, *Hacker Packer*, is like gazing into an infinity mirror, navigating the numerous layers of reflections and images. It comes as no surprise that the book’s cover art is a fragment of a sixteenth-century tapestry entitled, “Large Leaf Verdure with Animals and Birds,” as this is a book in a love affair with tapestries, collages, menageries, where various aesthetics and landscapes, physical and psychic, are “hacked” and “packed” together in thoughtful, elegant, sometimes strange, yet always captivating poems.

McFadzean’s ekphrastic poem of the “Large Leaf . . .” tapestry perfectly demonstrates her abilities as a weaver of language. She often uses enjambment to create a sense of entwinement and convergence in her poems, while constructing vivid displays of imagery interlaced with moments of needle-pointed insight and acuity:

The peacock’s tail display is amped-up paisley
on medieval tapestry. Flora and fauna intertwine
with palmettes against a botanical backdrop.
That it lacks a focal point upon which to rest our eyes
is not the crux of the fabric.

The last two lines of this gorgeous opening stanza stopped me in my tracks and had me scrambling for pen and paper. Even though this poem arrives early on in the book, I had a feeling that the lines provided a key insight into McFadzean's poetics, which offers so much in its mosaic splendour, blurring the sacred with the profane, the traditional with the contemporary, that it proves nearly impossible to pin down, to locate its nucleus. This is the kind of book that boldly compares the blood of Christ to a woman's "monthlies" ("The Bone Chapel"), where one moment you think you're in the *Exeter Book* solving an Old English Riddle, and the next you're in Google Street View, dragging "a cursor to the park / where Louis Riel hanged" ("A Skin for a Skin"). Or perhaps you're standing before the Holy Door at the Papal Basilica in Rome, haunted by social media: "a place for prayer and sacraments / No point when you can't Instagram it" ("The Holy Door, Opened and Closed").

McFadzean is fascinated with the collision of contemporary and ancient culture. In her world, "Nikon lenses could be / millstones or medallions" ("With the Temple of Jupiter Below Us"), iPhones are compared to "gold-leaf masked talismans" ("You be the Skipper, I'll be the Sea"), and ringtones become "a Greek chorus / calling from the hive to lion guards" ("You be the Skipper, I'll be the Sea"). Yes, this is a book where the likes of Van Gogh, Rodin, and numerous mythological characters dine at the same table as Justin Bieber and Selena Gomez — all of whom are either quoted or referenced in the collection.

Many of *Hacker Packer's* poems explore museums, ancient crypts, churches, and temples through the eyes of contemporary tourists/spectators, providing ample material in the form of culture clash: "camera flashes illuminate relics" ("The Holy Door, Opened and Closed"), the work of Pietro da Cortona is "armoured with Plexiglass" ("With the Temple of Jupiter Below Us"), and in "The Bone Chapel," the speaker leads us through the ancient Capuchin Crypt in Rome only to rush us head-on into the twenty-first century in its final stanza:

Then the gift shop, and a woman I follow outside.
Her short black hair and Ray-Bans. Wedged heels,
Tight grey jeans. I wanted to be her, in Rome,
and disappear down the street talking on an iPhone.

One of the book's most wonderfully surrealistic and culturally syncretic poems is, "On Wearing the Leggings of Earthly Delights," where McFadzean depicts Bosch's famous medieval triptych on a pair of contemporary tights worn by the speaker:

The pond dimples at my lower back, the floating globe
an alchemist's copper flask. I model a stream
of life that gushes forth at my hips' curve . . .

This is a fine example of how the poet plays with artistic perspective, as the speaker simultaneously occupies the space of artist, audience, and artwork:

I wear his inventions — his beastly ardour,
and fecund orchards, his eggs bursting with glaciers,
jutting swords and fragile charms, a garden both swelling
and crystalline — and he wears mine.

Hacker Packer is also formally syncretic and experimental. For example, she combines Old English Riddles with a contemporary form known as “Cleave Poetry,” a three-in-one poem, a trinity of sorts, that can be read as two separate discrete poems or all together as a third integrated poem. All five of the riddles in this book operate as cleave poems, creating a junction of aesthetics, another example of one those brainy and beguiling “mixed-messages” that command this collection.

Philosophically, McFadzean is interested in a variety of questions, ranging from the ontological and the aesthetic, to the tantalizingly macabre: “How am I sentient in any case?” (“The Unicorn Recognizes Itself in the Mirror”); “What’s a poem for? What’s it to you?” (“You be the Skipper, I’ll be the Sea”); “Would the hollowed trunk fit / me inside it, if we shrink some in death, / moisture tightening our features?” (“Drupe”). This is a book full of *memento mori* that at its end stages leads the reader underground, into the

blackened soil
wet and smelling of groundwater,
.....
crawling with worms
and legs of teeming centipedes (“To Bear All Toil . . .”)

Many poems delve into contemplations of death and violence; however, in true McFadzean fashion, she plunges the reader into a unity of opposites, reminded of the inseparability of darkness and light, how “all things grow from darkness” (“To Bear All Toil”), that “we are the roots writhing beneath / Wood-block prints of the almond tree” (“Boomwortels and Other Roots”) and also, “the blossom covered in dust,” a “pink thing — untwisting” (“Boomwortels . . .”).

It is evident that in *Hacker Packer*, Cassidy McFadzean establishes herself as a bold, inventive new voice in Canadian poetics. She perfectly embodies her own definition of what it means to be a poet, which she outlines in her final riddle (“Born of a Wolf”) as one who “brings no comfort but those held in cleaving,” who unlocks a song that “will linger inside you,” that “you can’t unfasten”; “a shaper of worlds.”

— Emily Skov-Nielsen
is a poet and an MA student in English/Creative Writing at UNB.