

## ‘Hacker Packer’ by Cassidy McFadzean

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*Reviewed by Ian LeTourneau*

I’ve been anticipating Cassidy McFadzean’s debut collection *Hacker Packer* for some time now. Back in 2011, a friend in Regina posted on her blog about a young writer at a small art fair selling her self-made chapbook *Riddlehoard*, which was written completely in the style of Old English riddles. As an appreciator of original OE, I was immediately taken with the concept and wrote to McFadzean for a copy. The poems displayed skill with OE-style alliteration and compound nouns. Not long afterward, I also received a submission from her at *The Fiddlehead* and was eager to share with others my excitement about the work (I wasn’t alone: *CV2* published some of her early work as well). At one time, McFadzean was circulating a manuscript to publishers that was exclusively comprised of riddles (her MA thesis at the University of Regina), but the book that has finally found its way into print (with the impressive splash of a relaunched McClelland and Stewart poetry line, no less) contains only a handful of these original riddles. And the development in her poetry since is no less exciting.

To the book, then: it exists in the nexus of form, craft, and tradition. But that doesn’t mean it is overly serious, though it definitely takes the work of poetry seriously. Its use of the riddles itself shows its playful side. The most perfect example, though, is how McFadzean winks at the reader as she alludes to William Carlos Williams in the concluding poem “Boomwortels and Other Roots”: “Everything depends on me and you. / The old wheelbarrow’s been painted blue.” For me, it’s hard to resist feeling that this statement is meant to suggest that the poet has worked at her apprenticeship, and now will find her own way in poetry. And many of the ways into the poems collected here are through travel and an engagement with art. McFadzean has said, in an interview with *The National Post*, “Travel for me is the most immediate way to feel the strangeness of being in the world. I feel most attuned to my surroundings when I’m in an unfamiliar place, which is probably why I write so many travel poems.... travel is maybe a kind of distancing that brings to the foreground what’s really worth thinking about, what’s vital.”

McFadzean writes as a hyper-aware tourist, but there isn’t a world-weary tone present. It is refreshing to read a book in love with the world, in all its strangeness, eager to engage, discover, and articulate the inarticulate. The poems display cunning technique, as Seamus Heaney defines technique in *Finders Keepers*, “a dynamic alertness that mediates between the origins of feeling in memory and experience and the formal ploys that express these in a work of art.” Take for instance these lines from “The Bone Chapel”:

How can I keep my memory of this moment clear?  
Like cartloads of bodies pulled to the friary and air-  
buried, times eats our memories, no matter how dear.

Partly, I think her answer to this direct question is poetry. The half-rhyme of “air” with “clear” and “dear” is perfect. It echoes the metaphor of change described — the “moments,” or memories, cannot be as clear as experience. Later in the poem, there is

more tension introduced, a complication of this desire to preserve experience in poetic amber. Here are the concluding four lines, which follow the quoted ones above:

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.

This perfectly highlights the tension between old forms (poetry) and current culture, which as we all know often distracts us. The half rhyme of Rome and iPhone is brilliant: tradition and what has endured on the one hand, and nothing stands (or dare I say *chimes*) in as a perfect synecdoche for modern times as an iPhone does. The poem is not resigned to accept one over the other; it successfully marries these two aspects of culture and makes its own way (remember, the wheelbarrow is now blue).

This ending doesn't attempt to over-explain or summarize with an epiphany or grandiose statement. It trusts its reader, in a sense, to continue with the poem, cradling the questions it raises in our own minds. For if poetry is anything, it is a long conversation, and McFadzean's has proven herself a vital addition.

"The Bone Chapel" stood out for me as emblematic, but make no mistake: there are numerous treasures here. McFadzean looks deeply into things, finding different slants, and often with gorgeous language. In "Habits," for example, the veil "unravelling like a jellyfish / that first new breath its sting" and in "Trypophobia, or Third Mile, Appian Way": "We piled skeletons inside / the walls, like nectar hardening to its honeycomb." And her formal innovation is on display in "Stag Hunt Variation" as the poem gathers images like a mosaic for a greater purpose. It will be exciting to see how McFadzean continues to develop: she's definitely a poet who has some claim on national attention.

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