

# Double Word Score

By Brent Newsom

Book Review:

*Hardscrabble*, by Kevin McFadden.  
University of Georgia Press, 2008.



Kevin McFadden is not one to shy away from a good pun. Puns are one of many forms of word play that obsess McFadden in *Hardscrabble*, where anagrams, etymologies (factual and fictional), spoonerisms, biblical misprints, and improperly punctuated road signs remind us of the latent possibilities of language. Even typography inspires; take this book-opening gem:

Is  
written this way  
to almost resemble  
us:  
half-straight,  
half-sinuous.

Though McFadden makes such wordplay seem easy, the book's title reminds us it is not. The poet toils over language the way dust-bowl sharecroppers worked the land—with effort and much sweat. Unlike that fickle soil, the book offers a rich harvest for readers.

The title *Hardscrabble* (a pun, fittingly enough) also portrays poetry as an exacting word game. This description is most accurate for several poems in which every line is an anagram of a line borrowed from an iconic poet. McFadden fiddles with the letters of these lines, rearranging them into bits of sense and nonsense. When they're working best—as in “Meditate Sea to Sea,” based on Hughes’ “Let America Be America Again,” and “Diet Meats,” based on the final line of Plath’s “Lady Lazarus”—the anagrammatical

lines cohere into poems that pay tribute to the poets without facilely mimicking their styles.

McFadden's strongest poems focus squarely on language and—his other grand theme—the sprawling, Whitmanic enigma of America. Both of these are central concerns of "It's Tarmac," the long prose poem that is the heart of *Hardscrabble*. Part travel log, part poetics, the poem offers bits of wisdom like, "A pun must smack us in at least two of our faces." Such wisdom, however, doesn't prevent McFadden from including a few groaners. Exhibit A: "Horseplay behooves me." Like the 18th-century poets who bad-mouthed puns with one pen and wrote them with another, McFadden sometimes breaks his own rules. Yet the breadth and ambition of the poem bespeak his great talent.

At times one wishes, though, that McFadden's talent were more restrained. The weakest moments in *Hardscrabble* come when the poems yield to a boring, consciously postmodern self-referentiality, sometimes combined with a direct address to the reader. Take, for example, the following lines from "Another, Cleveland," a section of the long poem "Time." The poem's speaker reflects on his childhood revelation that other boys share the name Kevin, a discovery made (he postulates) at age five:

. . . Might have said seven  
for the rhyme, but you'd probably think I was slow  
("Second grade, the lad hadn't grasped that?") and  
good thing too, since you're counting, I wasn't named  
Nate, the temptation would be too (don't say it)  
powerful.

McFadden seems aware of these tendencies but indulges them anyway. In "It's Tarmac," he writes a self-diagnosis: "What do I bring [home] this time? An interiority complex. A degree from the navel academy. I'm the fool who persists with his folly, hoping to be wise. Still too 'too': clever, cute, antic." Persisting in folly, unfortunately, produces more folly, not wisdom. In this regard,

McFadden risks appearing like a hypertensive doctor who eats fast food every day: He knows better but can't help himself.

Ultimately, the pleasures of McFadden's nimble wit and linguistic savvy overshadow those moments of excess. His reliance on humor and wordplay does not imply poetic immaturity; on the contrary, his is a wide-ranging intellect coupled with feverish attention to diction and syntax. Add that his poems are as bold in theme as they are surprising in language, and *Hardscrabble* ranks as a formidable first book, one that rewards rereading. Let's hope McFadden is reshuffling the tiles for another game.