

## **Why Learn the Word Benzene?**

by John Kerkhoven

*Regreen: New Canadian Ecological Poetry*  
Madhur Anand and Adam Dickinson, eds.

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142 pp.

All a poet can do today is warn.  
– Wilfred Owen

The best scientific minds of our generation, numbering far into the thousands, are for the most part united in their assessment that the industrial activities of humankind are directly responsible for heating the planet and that the consequences are likely dire. With respect to Wilfred Owen, this is a public warning on a scale that poets are unable to match in their wildest dreams. Worse, the effect that scientists are having in shaping policy is embarrassingly small. What hope then for poets in this age of rising sea levels, rising temperatures and diminishing biodiversity?

*Regreen*, curated by a poet and an ecological scientist cum poet, is an exhibition of poems in three sections. It is a collection of contemporary poetic imaginings directly or indirectly related to the subject of nature, the environment and our relation to the physical and natural world. As Madhur Anand says in her introduction, “We want to explore the more subtle effects of disturbance and contemplate a world that has not been destroyed beyond recovery.” The collection is also themed around Sudbury which is the site of a long-term regeneration

project, not to mention home of an underground neutrino-collector. The title, *Regreen*, “refers to the process by which the colour green (or what it represents) is returned to its proper place,” says Anand. And as Adam Dickinson informs us, the three sections of the book represent the physical, social and linguistic environments, each considered as a “site of inquiry”. All of this is fine, but Anand expresses undue optimism when she asserts that “this book is [an] attempt to broaden views on the role of language itself in helping to solve the environmental crisis.”

Any suggestion that these poems are going to help open up the way to a greener future is pretty much pure fantasy. Many, if not most, of these poems, though the poetic standards are high, are unreadable to an untutored audience. The audience for this collection is small, the number of people who will contemplate its entirety smaller still. Nor are these poems expressive or representative of a movement (not by far). There is little here to serve in the struggle against the corporate interests that will run us into ruin for the sake of every barrel of oil the bottom line says is worth extracting from *Pachamama*.

Spoken word poets rapping on social justice are probably closer to the nerve of what moves the world than sinecured academics contemplating either palm trees (Ross Leckie) or the ironies of imprints left on windows by errant birds (Alison Calder and Jeanette Lynes) – much as I like Calder’s concrete poem evoking the gossamer imprint of a leaf in, in fact, concrete.

Mari-Lou Rowley's 'In the Tar Sands, Going Down' is the closest this collection offers to spoken word song, managing in its dying cadences to echo T. S. Eliot. But it is others that stand out for me – others like Karen Houle's 'During the Eighth' that captures with light irony and linguistic surprise the horror of what we have done and are doing. It is a portrait of a once-lake. "... / the dock piling's dropped pants / stiff with lilies and scum // that's the ancient lake down around its ankles. // We're living on a layercake / of unmatched socks of waste." And the final couplet: "Seabirds at waist level. / A heron neck-deep in rust."

Bert Almon's 'Duty of Care' and Brian Bartlett's 'Leaving the Island', are two of the more accessible and more successful poems in the book. 'Duty of Care' leaves us with a man staring at an exhibited stuffed barn owl that we *understand*, though we are not told, he had once cared for.

There is much word play and linguistic inventiveness throughout *Regreen*. The poems of Michael deBeyer, Jan Conn, Jane Munro and Rita Wong are all impressive as works of language, though they are at least somewhat obscure. It is chastening to read Margaret Christakos's observation in her elongated rumination on love and effort, 'Wellington', that "Word play is something to entertain / as if otherwise time would be wasted, or desultory, or / ruined."

Rita Wong, though, in 'Green Trust', brings us back to earth, back to language, back to poetry, back to our collective legacy and burden and purpose, leading and landing us somewhere between my pessimism and Anand's optimism when she

asks, “Why learn the word benzene?” and begins her answer: “so as not to choke on oil and gas, hoping for wind and wave and sun and tide to climb”.

*Regreen* is not the answer to our environmental crisis; it may, however, be a sign of the beginnings of an answer, or of a series of beginnings since there really is no end in sight.