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The Lease by Mathew Henderson

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Consciousness of and Conflict on *The Lease*

The Lease by MATHEW HENDERSON

Coach House Books, 2012 \$17.95

Reviewed by JON GORDON

Mathew Henderson's debut poetry collection is described by the publisher as being, "Distilled from his time in the Saskatchewan and Alberta oilfields." The poems, we are told, "plumb the prairie depths to find human technology and human labour realigning our landscape." However, it is the realignment of the speaker's psyche, his mental landscape rather than the physical one, through his labour in the petroleum industry and his interaction with his co-workers that is described most vividly. In one poem from early in the collection—"Who Are You Out There?"—we read, "You're no part of it. You can only watch / as they throw tongs and catch string like conversation . . . Tilt your head to see the swab line buck and spray, / and feel everything as the oil turns your face brown." However, by the late poem, "What You Do," Henderson's speaker listens to the misogynist remarks of a co-worker and thinks, "When he talks you quease and pull away, but grow a little / more like him for all your shutting up." Despite his aversion, he is part of it. The final poem "Someday" recognizes that "You will lie about these men . . . And you will make yourself apart," but the process of reading the collection shows Henderson's commitment to telling the truth about the consequences of the labour involved in extracting the energy used to power our culture. In the end, readers cannot hold themselves apart either.

George Grant states, "In human life there must always be place for love of the

good and love of one's own . . . In many parts of our lives the two loves need never be in conflict . . . But sometimes the conflict becomes open" (73). The poems that stand out most for me in Henderson's collection are the portraits of his co-workers in which the details reveal the conflict between that which is their own and that which is good. For example, in the poem "Dave Talks About 'This One Guy'" we read, "this guy quits. Really. / He goes and gets himself a shrink who gets him on comp / because he had a *traumatic experience*": the italics suggesting the absurdity of such action. The actions of that "one guy" are contrasted with

And you remember that day,
when we were out there

and the oil carried over, shot out
the stack

and the whole lease went
up? And you and I, we stood

at the tank and we fucking
worked, in *that*, with all that fire

behind us. And yeah, you
pissed yourself: so what?

You pissed yourself because
you didn't have a choice,

Because that's what work *is*,
right?

This question, which concludes the poem, leaves the reader to think about the nature of work, the work required to fuel our cars and heat our homes. Henderson has a wonderful ability to render characters, and I would love to read a novel about them. Steven, Renay, Dan, Todd, Kelsey, Bill, Devin, Gary, Caitlin—ordinary people, ordinary lives given in precise detail, and in that detail evidence of the conflict between

one's own actions, one's own culture, and that which we might imagine as being the good.

JON GORDON teaches Writing Studies in the Office of Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Alberta. He has published on mountaineering, hog production, and bitumen extraction. His chapter "What Should We Sacrifice for Bitumen?" — forthcoming in *Sustaining the West* — considers representations of labour in Alberta's bituminous sands.