

Daryl Lim Wei Jie, *Anything but Human*. Singapore: Landmark Books, 2021. 95pp. ISBN: 978-981-18-2204-9

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Daryl Lim Wei Jie's *Anything but Human* (2021) provides an intersection between imagination and reality. Lim's portrayal of the surreal landscapes offers a glimpse into the current society. Through the speculative lens, some of Lim's poems provide a premonition into the future that further probe into the "what-ifs" or "what's-possible or real", as experienced by human beings in current society. Having said that, despite this anthology challenging the boundary between "reality" and "imagination", Lim further reinforces the effects of capitalism through the depiction of the apocalyptic landscape.

The title of Lim's latest anthology is drawn from Wang Xiaoni's (王小妮) "A Rag's Betrayal" as seen in the last stanza of Wang's poem.

Only humans want secrecy
now I'd like to pass myself off
as anything but human.

(Translated by Eleanor Goodman)

Wang's poem highlights the persona's feeling of insecurity after the act of cleaning the windows, and thus, unveils the significance of the title "A Rag's Betrayal". The persona also stresses the notions of transparency that resulted in creating the sense of insecurity. Lim's anthology offers a platform to understand reality through imagination. Although some of the

poems deliberately explore the notion of surrealism in human experiences, they further unleash the human minds from the rational order of society.

The first part of the anthology entitled “Desert of the Real” further reinforces the sense of hyperreality, a term proposed by Jean Baudrillard that highlights the detachment from reality and representation. Due to the advancement in technology, it is difficult to differentiate between the real and unreal. Hence, the inability to consciously differentiate reality from the simulation of reality is known as “hyperreality”. This concept of the hyperreal is heavily emphasised in the anthology, which explores the unfamiliar through familiarity. The anthology highlights the changes in the nature of reality, which emphasises the sheer boundary between what is real and what is not. This anthology further establishes a zone where imagination meets the reality.

In addition, some of the poems found in this collection discuss the ubiquitous nature of modernisation. The depictions of the socio-cultural and political landscape in this collection further initiate discussions that questions humans’ sense of responsibilities and engages in human dilemmas. This collection offers perspectives that help us to rethink our roles in preserving and creating a more sustainable society. In “The Natural Order of Things”, the persona highlights the human capabilities in shaping the worldly cultural values of the society.

My neighbour predicts the demise
of art. I am in the way of the natural
order of things. Or should I say “against”?

“Fly Forgotten, as a Dream”, is a series of prose pieces, named after a line from Isaac Watt’s hymns entitled “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past”. This biblical reference stresses the fact that human beings are constantly caught up in situations where their endurance is being tested. In “Fly Forgotten, as a Dream (VII)”, Lim discusses the effects of excess consumerism. For example:

The land is furrowed deep with worry. The angšana trees are turning orange with pain...Plastic bottles strewn about us reflect your healthy nuclear glow. The dust in the air is what’s left of the last civilization that went mad. I have no answers to any of the questions you had asked...You tell me to take out my microwaveable meal and start the picnic (p. 52).

Human beings are deeply rooted in their consumer identity and mass consumption causes a lot of environmental pollution. This prose piece offers a critique on humanity’s excessive and unnecessary consumption that contributes to climate change, deforestation, and pollutant emissions. “Narrative (II)” also illustrates the negative aspects of consumerism that devastate the environment, as shown in the lines below:

if you look closely the bushes
are growing plastic packaging

The massive influx of waste and trash draws the parallel to an apocalyptic cityscape. Environmental degradation is also mentioned in “Where the Birds Don’t Lay Their Eggs”, where the persona states that “The river smells of upmarket insecticide”. In “Notes towards a Discount Revolution”, the notion of consumerism is associated with capitalism:

Dead man, your insistent ghost shimmers like cellophane

I carve your carbon footprint on your gravestone

This month's horoscope says the war on terror's going well but

All our children will be born sterile

The anthropogenic activities highlighted in some of Lim's poems and prose exemplify human negligence due to their materialistic and harmful behaviours. The anthology allows the readers to explore different possibilities about the society or environment around us. Lim's anthology deals with the possibilities which remain hidden or latent in the current society. The "what if" elements further helps the readers to navigate and reflect on the conjecture that explains the "strangeness" in this collection. Lim's creativity in this anthology is not limited by the constraints of reality but it often triggers readers to raise questions about real-world problems through the speculative lens. For example:

We wake up with fifth-generation antibiotics in our mouths. My skin is scaly with the pieties of the past. Everything we do now is terribly ill-advised. Just yesterday, you bought home a pack of sickly biscuits. They taste deeply of the amnesia we've grown to love and cherish ("Fly Forgotten, as a Dream (II)").

Additionally, this collection also probes into human beings' existential crises, typically related to the notion of profound emptiness, powerlessness, and pain. The persona in "What Roils Our Land of Plenty and Rampant" also indicates that:

Today, I walked down the street

And there was nothing

but the scent
 of distance

The notions of unfamiliarity and distance translate into a sense of nothingness and powerlessness. Therefore, this existential crisis can possibly contribute to the persona's pain. These recurring feelings of unfamiliarity and nothingness throughout Lim's collection make the I-persona reflect on the untranslatability of pain, as mentioned in "Love in a Time of Intermittent Fasting". Hence, the persona in "Some or the Other Number" also asserts that "Being human is/an ongoing activity", further hinting at the journey of learning the fundamental essence of humanity. The persona in "Nuclear Poem" also urges the people to preserve our culture, as indicated in the stanza below:

*For the sake of our culture
please please please
take a step forward*

The second part of this collection is rather experimental as Lim translates some of Bai Ju Yi's (白居易) poems. Bai is a poet from the Tang dynasty who is famous for his direct and plain style of verse. Lim opens the second part of the collection with Wong May's hopeful tone that alludes to the title of this section entitled "the great reset". The translation of Bai Ju Yi's poem, titled "Moored at Night" holds promising hope that prompts the road to recovery.

Darkness on the riverbank

more alone

than ever
Wet winds
&
Frosty air it is very very
Cold
Looking back at the moored boat
amid the reeds
a point of light.

The Covid-19 pandemic has provided a chance for all of us to reinvent capitalism and to rethink our future. Thus, “the great reset”, which is also the theme of the World Economic Forum, calls for an initiation to improve the current situation and the opportunity to “reset” the world due to the crises caused by the pandemic. Lim’s collection traverses through speculative elements to point out the realistic conditions of our society. Lim has created a poetic space that allows readers to explore the new epoch through his poems and prose. Thus, the readers’ engagement with Lim’s poems and prose fosters self-reflection and stimulates imagination. Hence, it allows the readers to appreciate the poetic and aesthetic qualities of this collection through the surreal post-apocalyptic landscape. As mentioned by the persona in “Narrative (IX)”:

This poem is behaving as it should because you’re reading it.
Otherwise, it is usually all over the place.