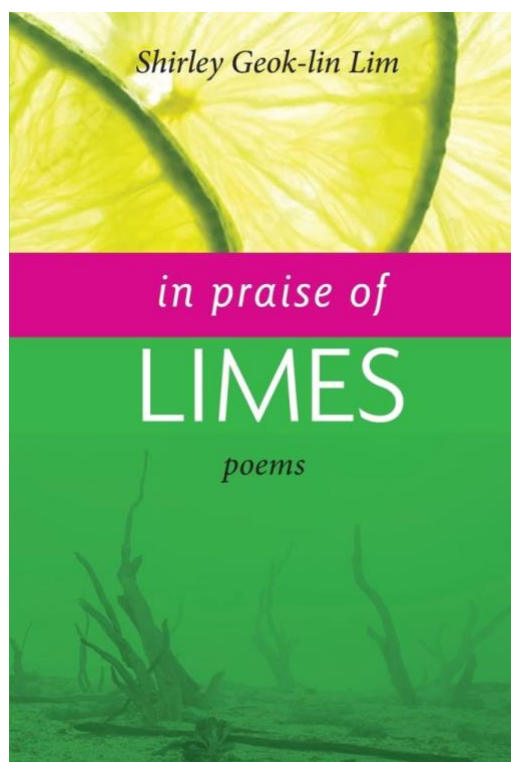


Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *In Praise of Limes*. Santa Barbara: Sungold Editions, 2022. 106 pp. ISBN-13: 9780999167878.



In Praise of Limes, Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s latest poetic offering, is nothing short of a tour de force. Prefaced by poet Dana Gioia’s insightful tribute and closed with an equally discerning afterword by Boey Kim Cheng, this slim volume packs a punch as it tackles critical issues and themes that are both topical and timely, teasing and exciting the reader’s senses with vivid imageries that draw their inspiration from Lim’s natural surroundings in her adopted homeland, California, USA. Published in mid-2022, *In Praise of Limes* is written with an acute ecosensitivity that speaks to the very real and present ecological crises and dangers enveloping the earth. Organised into three thematic sections, respectively titled “Passing Through,” “The Fire Land,” and “Wild Life,” the 63 poems in this collection read like one continuous ode to nature and the environment, containing both zesty-sweet praise and acidic bitter-sour observations.

The first pages of “Passing Through” —also the longest section with 32 poems—introduce what can easily be regarded as Lim’s love song to her Californian home. “California / is a poem, easy on the eye, bright as / a new

quarter, richer than a / hundred and twenty states, larger / than fifty countries” (“Passing Through” 3), she writes in the opening poem. Lush descriptive strokes, with splashes of brilliant colours, paint California as a veritable cornucopia, bearing “pop up yellow” blossoms, “scarlet” plums, and “orange, orange, orange poppies” (“Santa Barbara Rain” 4). The fertility and plenitude of the land are repeatedly emphasised: California is home to “succulents / that survive on dew” (“Santa Barbara Rain” 4), “[s]weet” peaches and blue-black berries (“California Mornings” 8), and “green-yellow” limes that “appear on sidewalks” in late March, “until neighbors tire of plenty” (“In Praise of Limes” 9).

Despite the promise of earthly paradise in such poems, there is nonetheless an ominous undercurrent running through them: a sense of foreboding and anxiety that subtly unsettles the reading. In “Santa Barbara Rain,” the unusual imagery of “scarlet burning bush plums” (4)—containing the biblical allusion to God’s miracle and truth—also brings to mind the devastating wildfires. The “sweet” tranquillity in “California Mornings” is broken by the “woodpeckers’ rat-a-tat-tat attacks” (8)—a sobering reference to gun violence in the US. In the same poem, the subtle use of diction “dying” and “Fear” further agitate the morning’s serenity (8). The profusion of limes in “In Praise of Limes” is vexed by the “uneasy zigzag land / rifts” and “thirst and desert brown / the homeless children” (9), reminding us of the less fortunate and poor in a land “of plenty” (9). The rich sights and smells of a Hmong stall selling “Thai basil, scallions, / lemon grass, *bok choy*, onions”—symbolising “Asia’s wet- / markets in cool California”—are undermined by the absence of an impoverished American vet who went missing; the juxtaposition between a thriving immigrant community and the “homeless vet” moreover drives home a certain irony (“Farmer’s Market” 14-15).

Anxiety grows stronger with each passing page as the writing moves effortlessly between interior / moodscapes and exterior / landscapes, with strategic diction and figurative language used to evoke a range of complex emotions and provoke reflections about the world we are living in. The message is clear: all is not well with the environment, both nature *and* human. Anger and defiance are discerned in “*Illegitimi Non Carborundum*” (“*Don’t let the bastards grind you down*”) (21) while the poem “Things That Make Me Happy” warns of “the present drought and coming / great hatred” (23). In “April Heat Wave,” the persona laments, “I’ve forgotten how not to hope,” with the poem’s atmospheric tension reflected in “eighty degrees Fahrenheit” and a “dead” noon, “withered” and “burnt white” (12). Other poems that foreshadow and build towards the thematic focus of the middle section, “The Fire Land,” include “No Rain Sonnet” and “Heat Waves;” the former bears a bleak prognosis of both present and future—“It will not rain today / nor tomorrow” (33), while the latter emphasises the relentless heat that “decides to stay [...] / Everyday” (36).

Alluding to T.S. Eliot's famous modernist epic *The Waste Land*, "The Fire Land" sounds a clear warning that our planet and ecosystem have indeed reached a crisis point: "HURRY UP PLEASE, IT'S TIME" (39). Containing only ten poems, "The Fire Land" spews stark imagery of ash, smoke, and fire—a grim poetic rendering of the wildfires that, year after year, have engulfed acres of Californian land as well as wrecked or destroyed precious habitats, homes, and lives, both animal and human. Climate change is real and the cost is high, for California and beyond: "Los Angeles is burning. / Ventura has burnt. / Home in Asia / where smoke is smog is / dying"; no place is left untouched as smoke is "in the air, everywhere" ("Smoke" 42). Earthly paradise has turned into Hell on earth, where "it's burning, has burnt, will burn" ("Sunrise in the West" 51). In the face of environmental apocalypse, praise—once lavished on limes and abundance—seems futile: "All praise / to the fecund, the newborn that suckle / purblind, germly and damp in the blasted / top soil, the corpse of their winter mother" ("Fog After Fire" 53). The message that no one is spared from ecological crisis, that we share the same earth and sky, is poignantly made in "California Skies" where in the end "only / sky" matters (50).

This point is crystallised in the final section "Wild Life," where the interconnections between humans, animals, virus (Covid-19) as well as the environment and climate form the focus. Comprising 21 poems, "Wild Life" carries a quiet lyricism that provides relief, especially after the onslaught of doom and gloom in the "The Fire Land." Almost meditative, and calmer in tone and mood, "Wild Life" reflects on the animals who are our constant but invisible companions of life that we have either ignored or taken for granted: ladybirds, gophers, owls, bees, fireflies, coyotes, herons, and more. What is remarkable here is how Lim weaves wild life and human life, memories and emotions, as part of the fragile web of life: for instance, the ladybird on the persona's "bare, near-barren flesh" recalls the vivid memory of "childhood's starvation" ("Ladybird" 58). The "meanest flower" who is "akin"—punning on "a kin"—to thousands of "neighbors," "extended family," "pigeons," and "to me" ("Akin" 79) highlights the symbiotic ties among plants, humans, and animals; we are all part of the same ecosystem. Earth's aliveness is moreover revealed through gophers, making "busy cities" in gardens and "breathing / below, sunk deep in the tunnels" ("Gopher Stones" 59-60). At the same time, alarm and danger are expressed in poems such as "Squawk" (66), "Firefly" (67), and "Alarm" (69); they tap into the perilous time of the Covid-19 disease, whose pervasive presence—"everywhere"—is underlined by a mounting sense of urgency and tension through the repeated line, "It is here [. . .], here now," in "Saving My Own Skin" (72-73). Yet, there are small mercies and miracles to be found: wild life makes a return, like the flirting Monarchs in "Social Distancing" (61) or lizards sunning themselves in "Lizards Are Us" (64); above all, grace can be found in the "feral world, / suddenly unafraid" ("Praise Song for the Pause" 70).

Throughout the collection, Lim's beautiful albeit disquieting imagery and lyricism as well as her clever use of diction, irony, juxtaposition, contrast, and allusion left me delighted and inspired, but also agitated and apprehensive. Some poems made me ache with longing and hurt in equal measure; most importantly, they made me think about what we have taken for granted, like the humble lime. Yet it is this very fruit that is praised and used to title the collection. Significantly, "lime"—a "migrant" fruit originally from northeastern India and Southeast Asia—is used not only to convey our interconnected world but also to articulate Lim's diasporic consciousness, which is never far from her writing. Her keen insights into the diasporic state of incompleteness, rootlessness, displacement, isolation, (non-)belonging, and home in poems like "Passing Through," "Shelter," "Tabula Rasa," and "Otherness" have added complex layers to the exploration of the human condition.

Ultimately, Lim calls for us to pay closer attention to our environment and ask pressing questions about what we are doing with our short time on earth (we are, in a manner of speaking, "passing through"), especially in the here and now. It is time to move beyond "blood and profit" and "selfish heaven" ("Shelter" 17); it is time to take a personal stake and responsibility in the planet we call our home; and it is certainly time to re-evaluate the meaning of our existence, identity, place, and direction on this earth: "Where am I? Where the way home? Who am I?" ("Otherness" 19).

Grace V.S. Chin
Universiti Sains Malaysia
Email: grace.chin@usm.my