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Ms. Small

Humanities

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Planet Earth News: Human Extinction (See Footnotes)

The early 1950s were a period of silent turmoil in the United States. The American ideal of white picket fences and nuclear families put up an implacable façade. However, in certain communities, such as amongst writers, peacetime allowed an explosion in radical thinking. Many new social concepts, such as Marxism and civil rights, gained traction during that era. To Ray Bradbury, an American science-fiction writer, the greatest danger in this new era was the sudden rise of technology. Bradbury penned two stories foretelling a future where technology and nature continue thriving in the absence of humanity: “August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains” in 1950 and “The Pedestrian” in 1951. “August 2026” focuses on the experiences of an automated house that remains in a world scoured of man by a nuclear war. In contrast, “The Pedestrian” focuses on one man and his relationship with nature and technology in a world where everyone else is glued to their televisions. By personifying technology, nature, and the interactions between the two, “August 2026” better communicates that the world will continue normally even when mankind is gone.

Through its personification of technology, “August 2026” communicates that the world does not depend on the existence of humanity. For example, the house in “August 2026” takes on an identity of its own in the absence of its inhabitants. At breakfast time, it produces “eight pieces of perfectly browned toast, eight eggs sunnyside up, sixteen slices of bacon, two coffees, and two cool glasses of milk” (1). It is just the right amount for the family that no longer lives there. In its world devoid of humans, there is no reason for the house to continue pouring milk or

frying eggs; however, “August 2026” shows that as a machine, the house does not make breakfast so its inhabitants may eat, but rather because it is programmed and designed to do so. Moreover, it continues to run its programs when its inhabitants are gone. By contrast, in “The Pedestrian,” Mr. Mead notices “sudden gray phantoms” (1) and “whispering and murmurs” (1) inside the “cottages and homes with their dark windows” (1). While the street is so lifeless that Mr. Mead likens it to “a graveyard” (1), the houses are still occupied. “The Pedestrian” doesn’t show that the TVs would continue playing when there is nobody watching. “August 2026” portrays technology as a standalone character, and thus proves that it can stay standing even if humanity falls.

By illustrating that nature continues existing per the usual even if nobody is around to interact with it, “August 2026” shows that the existence of Earth is not dependent on the existence of man. For example, even as “the house stood alone in a city of rubble and ashes,” (1) “[t]he sun came out from behind the rain” (1). The sun is an archetype of happiness in human art and music. That said, Bradbury illustrates that even when no one is deriving happiness from it and the human world is thrown into chaos, the beauty of nature still exists. Additionally, while reading from Sara Teasdale’s poem in “August 2026,” the house recites, “Spring herself, when she woke at dawn would scarcely know that we were gone” (3). The seasons continue changing and the sun keeps rising just as they always have even when humans are no more. Furthermore, the house performs the poem even though there is no one listening. Just like nature in the poem, the house “scarcely knows that [humans are] gone”. By comparison, in “The Pedestrian,” the “dogs in intermittent squads would parallel [Mr. Mead’s] journey with barkings if he wore hard heels,” but they were silent once they could not hear him (1). Presumably, if there were no humans walking down the street, the dogs would not bark at all. “The Pedestrian” focuses on

how nature interacts with Mr. Mead, such as how the dogs change their behavior in accordance to him, whereas “August 2026” focuses on how nature acts when nobody is around. As such, “August 2026” more impactfully proves that nature continues thriving when humanity is gone.

In “August 2026,” nature and technology directly interact with one another in the absence of humans; this supports the idea that, on a grand scheme, the planet continues functioning normally even when humans are gone. The main interaction takes place when a fire erupts in the house. There are no humans left to help it, so the house must fight the fire on its own. The “blind robot faces [peering] down with faucet mouths gushing green chemical” (4) take the place of human firefighters; they are personified as “killing the fire” (4). On the other side, “the fire [is] clever,” (4) like an animal or person. It “[feeds] upon Picassos and Matisses,” (3) oblivious to the destruction it causes. To nature, the loss of human art is insignificant. The fire is only aware of its opponent: technology. When it finally wins the battle, it doesn’t merely burn the house, it “[bursts] the house and [lets] it slam flat down” (4) like a boxer laying out his opponent. While the battle between technology and nature is traditionally one revolving around humanity’s use of the two, Bradbury illustrates in “August 2026” that even in a world devoid of humans, the two forces remain enemies. Their struggle is not dependent on human existence, and thus, even when humanity is gone, they will continue fighting.

Ultimately, by utilizing nature and technology, traditionally static forces, as the protagonists of “August 2026,” Bradbury effectively conveys his message that the world won’t be affected by the disappearance of mankind. From taming nature with the superhighways to advancing spacecraft towards the stars, Bradbury’s generation was laser-focused on human expansion. By illustrating that technology and nature could exist independent of mankind, his novels, particularly “August 2026,” may have served as a jarring reminder that, as Copernicus

conjectured in the 1500s, humans are not at the center of the universe, but rather just one small part of an ever-growing cosmos.