

Beyond the fifth element: post-human poetry

Dr Beverley Morris



Empathy or Die

(Graffiti on a building in Cambridge).

We are the bringers of the Anthropocene, the chapter in the dystopian story where the human species has changed the Earth in an irreversible way, and our own species is fragmenting to satisfy the individual ego that used to be called free will. The new religion of self is, of course, a luxury. If you are a woman in Afghanistan hiding your daughter's schoolbooks from the Taliban, or a homeless man evicted from the meagre warmth of a shop doorway in London, or a farmer in North Korea producing meat for the President's family but not your own, you have little time for anything but survival. This is the core of our ego as humans: we fight to survive and we fight to pass on our genes. We do that at the expense of others. Our leadership challenge, our challenge as humans, is to find a way to become more than the sum of our competing egos.

Every article, poem, podcast, film, play, book, comic, game, photograph we produce to raise awareness of the environmental destruction we are scattering in our wake, is also rooted in ego. I am a product of the Anthropocene Era, and I have been part of the generation that has created it and encouraged the cult of self to emerge. Now I choose to be an Anthropocene Warrior, fighting back in the most middle-class, genteel way that I can: I write poetry and I talk about the needs of others. I have no doubt that my own ego has contributed to the devastation of our world, and I am reimagining myself, my future and my impact on the world so that the noise of my ego is dulled by the needs of our planet. The irony is, of course, that the very act of doing this is an act of ego; to think that I am important enough to speak and be heard. The challenge is to take that egotistical act and find a place where it contributes to a collective good: empathy or die.

This article takes the poems I have written about the environment over many years and recycles them, repurposes them, gives them additional life. It also takes the traditional physical elements of water, fire, air

and earth that are essential to any eco-sensitive work, and adds the Anthropocene elements that will bring about change: reason and beyond. Humans need to have a rationale for change when change demands that they are uncomfortable in the short-term. And change that takes us further than our lived experience will take us beyond the limits of human reality, potentially to a post-human world.

Water



[Iceberg on water](#). Photo by [Fabrizio Conti](#) on [Unsplash](#)

We live on the blue planet, the one with water, the element that brings life. Without water, we cannot live, and water supplies are already contested around the world. It is such a vital element that I have included two poems here. The first is about the Salton Sea in the US. It is a sea created accidentally by construction work and leading to huge impacts on the surrounding land. From holiday resort to farming pollution, it has decimated the local avian population and other wildlife. The element that created life in a lifeless galaxy, that makes our planet so beautiful when viewed from space, is the element that could tear us apart in a rapidly warming climate.

Accidental Sea

I shiver as you step inside me
your toes ripping through my uncertain surface
shallow from the shimmer to the shore.
It's your fault, not mine.

We have history,
you and me.

The Whitewater feeds me,
the New and the Alamo fill me up and
I drink them in as you swim along my limits
feeling for monsters.

You are longing,
I am sea

and an accident waiting to happen. Again.
My moods moulded by the rocking of time
as rotting fish flank your salty thighs and I caress you
like every carcass that passes through me.

(First published in *Not a Drop: oceans of poetry*, Beautiful Dragons Collaborations 2016)

The second poem was written when I worked with the scientists at the British Antarctic Survey. Their experiences and world view changed the way I thought about the most inhospitable continent on Earth.

Inside Antarctica

Beneath me,
oceans packed and stored onto the Brunt Ice Shelf let me walk on water.
Around me,
the crevasse, creaking and pregnant with history, hosts an irregular foetal heartbeat.
Above me,
the light of another unending day makes me yearn for the green shoots
of an English spring.

I draw samples from the core of her pristine whiteness,
her shocking expanse impossible to measure with my eyes alone
as she shifts with the weight of her burden. I hold my breath.

She creaks.
She stirs.
She is ready to calve.

Her labour is a symphony of sonorous groans, polystyrene snaps
and crackling ripples.
The sounds of water frozen for so long it does not know how to flow again
without tearing itself apart and taking us with it.

(First published in *Well, Dam!* Beautiful Dragons Collaborations 2019)

Fire

While COVID-19 was spreading, so were the fires in Australia and Europe. 2020 gave us the warmest year on record in many parts of the world and wildfires became a terrifying reality for large numbers of people.

But fire is part of purging ground and creating new growth. Fire, at the most primitive level, was what kept early humans warm and gave them a way to cook food. For good reason, we are frightened of fire because it will kill us without mercy. Yet we fail to learn the lessons that fire has brought. In the UK, we are taught about the Great Fire of London and how it spread because of the way houses were built and people were crammed together. In recent times, we've had the catastrophic images of fire spewing out of the Twin Towers World Trade Centre and the horrific scenes as Grenfell Tower was engulfed in flames.

Fire tells us something is wrong in the way we are living our lives as humans.



[Burning wood](#). Photo by [Benjamin Lizardo](#) on [Unsplash](#)

We should heed the signs that fire offers us. This haiku was written during the early days of lockdown in England. The blossom arrived in a glorious flurry, far too early, and the sun burned my cheeks. Today, La Palma is still alight with the lava and fire of a volcano that does not want to sleep. The Earth has an ego too, and our sense of self will never be able to conquer her.

Apple blossom warmed too early

not yet ready for
the fire of summer, pink-white
tipped and blushing red

(First published in the Haiku a Day Group on Facebook, 2020)

Air



[White clouds](#). Photo by [CHUTTERSNAPE](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Migration is a natural force, essential to the survival and evolution of many species. Elephants move in deliberate tracks, forming trunk-to-tail chains to keep the young and weak together until they reach food sources or traditional graveyards. Birds rise up in undulating clouds, the newest fledglings find their wings at the centre of the flock that will surround them as they head south, instinct their unwritten map. Early humans drifted across land masses looking for new territory, dominating everything as they went, including other humans. Our human need to take whatever we find, including the lives of others in our own species, shows us a complex interaction between migration, exploitation and extinction. The ego of one tribe of humans demands the subjugation of nature to produce food to feed its growing membership. Simultaneously, that ego sees the opportunity to farm the land, the animals and the people. And it will do this to the point of oblivion.

In the UK, the migration that we see every year is in the skies above us: birds flying south and people jetting off on holiday. Our mechanical flight pollutes the air that we need to breathe and destroys the habitat for the birds. Living near an airport, I've seen the measures taken to cull songbirds and crows so that they don't nest in equipment or fly into engines. Our migration is more important than that of any bird. Our need to breathe different air is our right as we assert our sense of self.

There is a further dimension to this assertion. The complicated interaction between our exploitation of others, in the form of migrant labour and our mistrust of anyone who is not like us, has been intensified during the pandemic. We closed our borders, kept out migrants and avoided breathing the air of others for fear that they would infect us. The skies above us suddenly cleared of planes and vapour trails and the air was cleaner, crisper, more hopeful. It seemed that all the protestations from airlines that the economy would collapse without them were a little overblown. But were we right to keep out migrants, to avoid those people we don't know, to keep ourselves safe from the invisible enemy? What about the migrants already here, the ones keeping us alive in hospitals and care homes? How could we avoid them? Fear is complex indeed.

The interwoven nature of the human and natural world has been the subject of many environmental battles. The RSPB has a 'red list' of birds that are endangered in the UK and together with the Natural History Museum PREDICTS report on biodiversity (Purvis 2020), it is clear that the UK is failing to protect our native wildlife. The reasons are many and the excuses even more plentiful.

I wrote this poem about a warbler, identified by Paolo Savi (a 19th century Italian geologist and ornithologist), which migrates to the UK but is now a rare visitor. Last year, only three pairs were sighted. The poem is a reflection on the loss of home and the feelings of isolation in a world that doesn't want you.

Unwelcoming Shores

(Paolo Savi's Warbler)

On the edge of a damp dusk
she thrums,
the necessary traffic of the night
comes and goes, in chaotic clouds, as she
bides her precious time.

There,
on her reedy skyscraper,
head inclined,
the little passerine holds her Old World heritage
close to her chest,
soft brown, unseen, but heard,
always heard

she throws open her throat and calls, long and deep and forever,
'Paolo, Paolo, Paolo, oh... Paolo, Paolo, Paolo'
blown in alone on a migrants' wind,
framed by rising mist,
she yearns.

(First published in Watch the Birdie, Beautiful Dragons Collaborations 2019)

Earth



[White sand during daytime](#). Photo by [Yang Shuo](#) on [Unsplash](#)

The name of our planet and the soil under our feet: earth. We become it when we die and are buried and this is our greatest contribution to the world that has sustained us. Even if we choose cremation, our energy is finally re-integrated with the world. The earth grounds us and gives us our sense of stability. Yet we poison it and take whatever it offers with little given in return. Ultimately, our ego is absorbed by our environment and we are no longer a drain on the world when we die.

The only thing that remains is the emotional pain for those left behind. My best friend, Jackie, was a great environmentalist and the woman who taught me that kindness is limitless. She trod gently on the Earth and her sense of self was in the service of others. She died during the pandemic and I wrote this as I walked in the cold of winter after her funeral.

Three weeks after your death

silver birch shadows
the ghosts of our Sunday walks
resolve into grief

Reason

Children ask tough questions. Grandchildren ask tougher ones. Step grandchildren take it to another level. I have four step grandchildren and they all view me through cynical, knowing eyes.



[Free Protest](#). Photo by [Zoe VandeWater](#) on [Unsplash](#)

They are the generation who will live with the chaos that our egos have wreaked on the world around them. Their world will be full of new dodos, empty of easy excess, uncertain like a thousand pandemics in a day. They are waking up to too many choices about who they are or who they can be, too many decisions about who should live and who should not, too many frightening futures. So, when the oldest one asked me why I was wearing a pink, pussy cat hat and marching with thousands of women through London in 2017, I wrote this.

Why do I protest?

because this is
wrong
immoral
stupid
terrifying
unethical
relentless
exhausting
increasing
spreading
insidious
viral
corrosive

evil
time to stop

Beyond

Our egos are within us, within our human frailty, within our human limits. Creating a new era, beyond the Anthropocene, means we must transcend our focus on self and find a focus on others.

Shrill arguments on social media, in the tabloid press, in governing bodies around the world are deafening us so that we are no longer able to listen to each other because we are too busy listening to ourselves and the echoes we set up. Fragmentation, dissent and polarisation feed our egos and distract us from a common purpose as a species, constraining our evolution and speeding up the environmental catastrophe that will destroy our home.

Simultaneously, we are leaping ahead in scientific, medical and philosophical thinking, with augmented humans and centenarians becoming increasingly commonplace. We are on the cusp of realising the full potential of the Anthropocene Epoch to define humans and the planet. In itself, this may mean nothing more than adjusting to a world that is hostile to us because of the pain we've inflicted on it. Alternatively, it may be the catalyst for the next phase of our evolution: post-human.

The post-human state may mean that we create augmented arguments, built on the best of human creativity and compassion and improved by the deductive abilities of machines. This form of post-human life may protect us from the vagaries of our flesh-and-bone existence. This post-human world may need to be devoid of ego to be able to flourish, but it cannot be stripped of the one thing we do well as humans: love.

the heat of attraction

I am a collaborator
whether you like it or not.
Whether it sits easily with your
headlined view of the world and the rot
in a Westminster window frame:
wrapped around imperfect glass it filters light
onto the life that is the same
as the one to your left, to your right.

I am a collaborator
and I will carry you along with me.
No hiding behind Queen and country, with your
red-topped opinions denying my reality
and your lazily repeated cognitive dissonance
standing front and centre of every raucous claim. A part
of my disquiet and anger and stance
is to say we matter, we all matter. To start

arguments that ring division bells not
echo chambers. To hear voices so different
in the cold light of day and the hot
heat of the pub, my grubby car, your spartan front
room. You listen with amused contempt
to my naïve views. But, like blowflies
to fresh meat, you're drawn to my clumsy attempt
to disarm your blunt-bladed lies.

I am a collaborator:
I hold out my hand to you.

(First published in *Rugged Rocks, Running Rascals: poems for complicated times*, Beautiful Dragons Collaborations 2019)

References

Purvis, A (2020) Biodiversity Intactness Index <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/our-science/our-work/biodiversity/predicts.html>

About the author

Bev's a polymath, working across education, pharmaceutical and security industries and writing across form and genre. She was a college Vice Principal and now runs her own consultancy and coaching business, releasing the creativity of extraordinary people through curiosity, kindness and compassion. Bev has been published in literary anthologies (*Smell of the Day* and *Coast to Coast*) and women's magazines (*Australian Family Circle*, *Woman's Own*, *Bella*). In 2019, her first poetry collection was published in *Rugged Rocks, Running Rascals*, in 2020 she was a finalist in the *Write Here Write Now* playwriting competition and a runner up in the *Retreat West* Flash Fiction competition, and in 2021 she was a finalist in the *WOW* Flash Fiction competition. Her academic pieces have been accepted by BERA, SCUTREA and CASAE and her doctoral research into models of coaching and mentoring informs her leadership practice. Currently, she's writing a feminist dystopia, developing a podcast on friendship and looking for a way to be a better human.

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A note about AMED

Sadly, so far, nobody has expressed a willingness to take over from the outgoing AMED Council. So in the circumstances, the EGM on 26 May is likely to confirm that AMED will finally cease to operate as an educational charity by the end of 2022 at the latest.



AMED stands for the Association for Management Education and Development, www.amed.org.uk. We are a long-established membership organisation and educational charity devoted to developing people and organisations.

Our purpose is to serve as a forum for people who want to share, learn and experiment, and find support, encouragement, and innovative ways of communicating. Our conversations are open, constructive, and facilitated.

Through AMED, we strive to benefit our members and the wider society. Exclusive Member benefits include excellent professional indemnity cover at a significant discount, free copies of the quarterly journal *e-O&P*, and discounted fees for participation in a range of face-to-face events, special interest groups, and our interactive website. We aim to build on our three cornerstones of **knowledge**, **innovation** and **networking** in the digital age. Wherever we can, AMED Members, Networkers and Guests seek to work with likeminded individuals and organisations to generate synergy and critical mass for change. www.amed.org.uk, or contact **Linda Williams**, our Membership Administrator, E: amedoffice@amed.org.uk, T: 0300 365 1247