

Beyond the fifth element: post-human poetry

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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.