

INSIGHTS

Five Poems

Amlanjyoti Goswami

Indian Institute for Human Settlements, IN
agoswami@ihs.co.in

Five poems that critique anthropocentrism and go beyond conventional binary tropes: 'To Find a Feather', 'No Show', 'Forecast', 'Trees' and 'More Scenery'.

A Notes section outlines the poet's wish to consider 'a sensory project which breaks out of these [binary] distinctions' and 'moves into more relational spaces, not just as representational frameworks but as the very building blocks of reality'. Such an exploration 'enables us to find things by looking for nothing in particular' and in doing so, discover 'a language universal enough to embrace the particular'.

Keywords: feather; posthuman; poetry; tsunami; forecast; birds

To Find a Feather

You need to go deep inside the forest.
No park is enough.
No refuse among rubbish will trace
The remains of a cat hunt.
No feather or hope there.

Dawn disappears, strewing brown leaf, waters gliding.
Mud trails run bare.
Dog poop, tobacco packet, cigarette butt,
Fresh cow dung, morning jogger
Early chirrup. But no feather.

You wonder if a leaf will do.
How similar – each leaf, a feather –
How they curl, fly and fall on your face,
Green, brown and yellow.
Were leaves birds once, is every bird a leaf?

You look among trees, behind shadows
Where the spirits live
Among marigolds and fresh breeze.
Your hopes sink.
Just five minutes to go.

You imagine your face, crestfallen,
When you see her
Downcast, no feather.
Just then, on a lark,
There it was, lying there.

On the mud trail for no reason
But just so it would find you, this morning.
Brown crested, fluffy, soft,
Like a baby's caress.
Spine like leaf, only harder.

Found it, you exclaim.
A treasure you were looking for,
All your life.
You return triumphant, smile on face.
You need to keep it safe, on your palm, warm.

That does not say anything about
The bird. Not mynah, not sparrow,
Not crow or pigeon
But something wild. Perhaps from far away
Across salty seas, white mountains,

Who dropped anchor for a moment,
Before flying on
Leaving traces for you, and her.
She does not know you, you do not meet her.
Perhaps that only makes the story better.

It is true love, without companion.
But that still does not explain
Why you start
Squawking, the moment you reach home and
Display the feather to her.

How you grow wings suddenly.
A million feathers
And want to fly out of the window
That is shut for winter.
She steps back, but it is impossible to contain you.

You seem so eager – to somehow – fly.
On your feet, your broken ankle
Suddenly frees itself and grows claws.
Your nose turns beak.
Eyes, peer once – inside, then outside – for something,

Hard to tell what –
Perhaps a twig, perhaps blue sky,
Those first signs the world is slowly turning.
You are after something else, something tangible, not food,
Perhaps – a feather?

No show

Birds need no permission to fly.
Alert to all weather
Their morning screech
And caw is every day.
A blessing and absolution.

Bird and fish were once one.
One grew wings, the other fins.
We just let go of our tails.
Grew wings, four motor wheels.
Desire to be bird and beast

Turned wish to be earth and sky.
And we steamed our way through
Rough patch, little isle, cosy nook.
Became biped, a heart-lung machine
Tied to worry, with no memory.

We now reign in a world of no tomorrow.
Peacocks flutter when they see us,
Dogs make way.
The wilder beasts gave up long ago
Betrayed by flint, stick and stone.

Calling it law of the jungle, Darwin, evolution,
Our instinct now habit.
These winged beings know better.
Frogs who croak about
The world's upset stomach.

Vultures lurk top of the food chain, broken and plastic.
We are now artificially intelligent
For want of common wisdom
And ask with unhurried attention
If the flight is still on time.

Forecast

When word of the tsunami came
We reached the forest peak, and waited.
Bear and deer, elephant and monkey
Became one animal.

Waters of ocean rumbled
From a distance
Far from our common eye.
But we could tell which way the wind blew.

Leaf rustled, just like every day.
No sky darkened.
But ears perked danger
Noses sniffed trouble.

Old trees swayed – nothing new.
But we knew, the storm would come from ocean floor
Sweep beach, tree and stone.
Climb top of building like a two-legged jogger.

They were all swept aside, roiled into the trouble.
Danger did not come beating a tin drum.
The beach-goers, Christmas holiday-seekers,
Those in search of peace, the family with the last travel allowance.

They were all there. She came for them all, like a bounty hunter.
No one knew what we knew
And how those birds flew out of sight
Before the first wave crashed on a serene shore.

Trees

See a tree
For what it is –
A lanky leg moving up
Towards sky
Arm branching sideways
To catch the
Sun.

Then ask,
Questions – of breath
Oxygen,
And what trees can do
For you.

More Scenery

Nothing but
Land cleared up
Shaped ideas of beauty
For a few hundred years

Till the land turned
Its gaze on us
The trees began to speak
Like before

And those huts in the distance
Straw as Van Gogh
Began to walk towards us
Bellowing a strange howl

As the air too changed
And the old pastels would no longer do
It would be now two-way or nothing
A strange reckoning

Our daily life, our museums
Our view of what works
That eureka moment, even that long lost
Trace of a smile.

Notes on 'To Find a Feather' and Other Poems

For years, traditional disciplinary thinking has been beset with binaries. These are the foundation stones, the building blocks, the DNA of thought. But if the mind's canvas were to widen, allowed more thread for its weft and warp, the molecules of 'thinking' and 'feeling' may not be so distinct. Binary constructs limit—that is a truism—but epistemes outside dialectical dichotomy find themselves 'othered' before they can even begin. As such, Cartesian ontologies continue to predominate mainstream thinking just as such 'thinking' is unravelling at its seams.

It may be worthwhile to conceive a sensory project which breaks out of these distinctions of spirit or mind and matter, subject-object, nature-culture, human-nonhuman. It may then move into more relational spaces, not just as representational frameworks but as the very building blocks of reality. What is real, is a matter of perspective. 'Real' is not what is *out there*, but what happens *while* all this is going on. Where perspective alters and bends towards a plurality of diffractive understandings, it constitutes a fundamental shift in the very basis for conceiving reality. In this project, the threshold figure, the shaman, the liminal space, the outlier, the outsider, the prankster, the jack-in-the-box, the joker, the transient being who transforms itself from morning to night, becomes a prime character. Actor and agent are embedded within the space, and is constitutive of the space. The meaning of such space is constitutive of the actor as well as everything else that is happening inside. Fluidity is at its heart, where the fixity of the object dissolves into transience. Nothing stays the same. Heraclitus, but also Charon. This is also a crossing back and forth of thresholds, where the borders are never the same. Such shamanism is indigenous, redirecting energies inward, so the winds outside blow a little differently.

If 'matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers', as Karen Barad (2012) remarks in a heroic attempt to bring, among other things, humanities and sciences together, then the current climate crisis, the global pandemic as well as the economic and political conditions of reality, are epistemological phenomena, and we are in a moment of epistemological crisis and awareness. The moral and ethical argument for solidarity must also acknowledge that there are multiple realities, and not just one way of seeing, since subject and object are constantly changing, eyeing one another, circling each other, in different contemporaneous temporalities. But are we listening? Do we do so with awareness of what we do not have?

The articulation of such phenomena, through the diffractions of language, must accommodate ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, sensing, experiencing and conversing that are outside the dominant circles of meaning. Poetry is always, first and foremost, about experience: it is subliminal only as far as matter is subliminal. It can reach realms not possible in theory. It is its own reward. Our realities, rendered too anthropocentric, find poetic truth strange. Poetry opens a window to other aspects of ourselves that are otherwise kept well hidden. These selves are too tactile and fluid for a straitjacketed entry and an all-too-narrow seat at the high table. To imagine a transhuman universe, where bird and fish were once one and personhood is not just about intellect, is to question some of the fundamentals of thinking. We may yet find room for some new exploration into uncharted terrain. This exploration, by its very nature, is diffractive, outside, defying labels. It enables us to find things by looking for nothing in particular. In that sense, my search is for a language universal enough to embrace the particular.

Acknowledgements

The poet would also like to acknowledge the influence of the work *Cannibal Metaphysics* by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (Ed. and trans. by Peter Skafish, 2014) Minneapolis, MN: Univocal Publishing.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

Amlanjyoti Goswami's recent collection of poems *River Wedding* (Poetrywala 2019) has been widely reviewed. His poetry has been published in journals and anthologies around the world and have also appeared on street walls in Christchurch, exhibitions in Johannesburg, an e-gallery in Brighton and buses in Philadelphia. A 'Best of the Net' nominee, he has read in various places, including New York, Delhi and Boston. He grew up in Guwahati, Assam, and lives in Delhi.

Reference

Barad, K. (2012). Matter Feels, Converses, Suffers, Desires, Yearns and Remembers: Interview with Karen Barad. In R. Dolphijn & I. van der Tuin (Eds.), *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*. Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press/MPublishing. Available at: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/o/ohp/11515701.0001.001/1:4.3/-new-materialism-interviews-cartographies?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>

How to cite this article: Goswami, A. (2021). Five Poems. *Anthropocenes – Human, Inhuman, Posthuman*, 2(1): 4. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/ahip.928>

Submitted: 20 January 2020

Accepted: 16 December 2020

Published: 22 April 2021

Copyright: © 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Anthropocenes – Human, Inhuman, Posthuman is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by University of Westminster Press.