
Poetry : the Environment

by *Mario Petrucci*

RESOURCES FOR POETRY LESSONS & CREATIVE WRITING

(Target users: Year 9 and older; adults)

This study pack, inspired by major Environmental themes, has been commissioned for use in the classroom and for creative writing tutors. Some of the poems were composed specifically for this project; others are reproduced from books and journals.

Notes to the teacher ...

- Many types of lesson plan can be derived from what follows; please select and adapt the material to suit your purposes. It is particularly important to study the poems in advance, choosing texts that best suit the experience and ability of your students.
- There is a range of style in these poems: some are far from transparent; others are more direct. They all stand as an invitation for students to wonder at language, to enter its world of associations and resonances. Poems which seem at first sight more 'difficult' often engender (eventually) a deeper and more rewarding response. Supporting notes are provided, but these are only for those in real need of bearings. They do not 'explain' the poetry, nor should they be allowed to dictate how any given poem may be responded to, or taught, in class. They are pertinent but not exhaustive.
- Prime your study session with a general discussion on the Environment. Ask students what they feel the major concerns are; explore what they know about those issues. Cite familiar examples such as Global Warming and expand on them using suitable material: video, images, extracts from bona fide web sites. You will need to provide some explanatory support for some of the lesser-known themes (Gaia, Peak Oil).
- At the end of your session, encourage students to research any given theme in their own time, or to do further writing privately in response to it. Poem 14 (the 'follow-up poem') may help in initiating, stimulating or focusing such activity.

Notes to the student (or Foyle Young Poet) ...

If you are working on this pack outside class, by all means go for it. But, if you do get stuck at all, talk with a parent or teacher. Also, see if you can get together with some writing friends for those sections needing group work.

Part I: Preparation for Writing; Initial Discussion.

1. Select, together, an Environmental theme (A, B, C or D) and choose poems from that section to be read – aloud – to the whole class. Which poems (or parts of poems) focus on something specific or tangible (for example, a named place or thing)? By contrast, where is the poetry springing mainly from a point of view, or via a story? What are the advantages of either approach? Discuss favourite images and lines.
2. Students may be unfamiliar with some words in these poems: "troposphere", "pizzle", "Dodona", "sess", "chimaera", "chitterings", "squabs", etc. When these arise, pause to discuss what each word *might* mean, encouraging students to share what its sound suggests to them. Then look it up in a good dictionary. Does the 'real' meaning surprise them? If there is more than one meaning, is that confusing or enriching?

3. Is the idea behind each poem fairly clear? Or do some passages seem strange and puzzling? Examine those passages together, but avoid any temptation to somehow 'decode' them or explain them away. Instead, explore the impact of their sound and associations. Which images and phrases encourage us to struggle with what we know about ourselves and nature, or to engage more deeply with language?
 4. Should a poem be absolutely clear in its intentions, or leave room for the mysterious? Why would a poem give us – or *refuse* to give us – obvious or predictable meanings? Do we expect song lyrics or music to always make logical, obvious sense – or is poetry different? Set up a debate on these questions, using examples from the poems supplied (or other poems that they already know) to illustrate points.
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Part II: Some Environmental writing ideas ...

(*Suggestions for students, either for individual class work or as follow-up*)

1. Which poem most helps you to feel or think differently about its theme? How so? Does it draw you into its world and make you thoughtful, or is its main effect to excite and provoke you? Jot down your responses to that poem, including *your own* insights arising from it. Compose something, and structure it, to capture what you find.
2. Which poem do you most want to go back to, privately, to read again? What qualities in that poem make you want to revisit it? Having read it several times, does it reward your patience? Write something that incorporates any insights or feelings that arise.
3. Pick up a single object, or idea, from any poem in this pack. Make notes on it: your reactions, memories, images, imaginings. Do some research. The notes can be messy and fragmentary, or coherent and clear, depending on what is going on in your head.

When ready, turn your notes into a voice, either in a poem (as a monologue or conversation) or in prose (as a speech or dialogue). Do any of the supplied poems help you in creating a good voice? If so, do you want to: (a) imitate that voice; or (b) make something entirely your own? What are the pros and cons of each approach?

4. Go outside: search for writing ideas by observing nature. Take your time.
 5. Do you consider *yourself* an integral part of nature? Write a poem in answer.
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Part III: Editing

(*Group/ Class Work*)

- Allow time for most of the class to get to a first draft. Ask for a few of these to be read out to the group, encouraging readers not to read too fast or under the breath. Allow silences. Go deeply into what is happening in each poem. What can we learn from one another's work? How is our own writing enriched by hearing other voices?
 - Discuss (constructively) what alterations might be made to each poem, to deepen or assist its effect (if it helps, ask for the author to read out their draft again). House rule: authors are barred from the discussion of their work, at least initially. (Why?)
 - Is there agreement over the suggestions being made? Do the proposed changes amplify the poem's capacity to show us something, or is some essential quality about to be lost in the editing? Is a better balance now struck between mystery and clarity?
 - Towards the end of each discussion, invite the (so far) silenced author to respond.
 - Now run a plenary redrafting session. Those who did not have their work worked over can still apply insights from the discussion to their own drafts. Or pair students up for a while, to edit their partner's text. At a suitable point, ask for some first and second drafts to be read out, side by side, for comparison. Discuss.
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Support *Notes on the poems; some teaching suggestions (in final section).*

Support for Theme A: **Global Warming**

Support for Theme B: **Oil/ Peak Oil**

Support for Theme C: **Deforestation**

Support for Theme D: **Gaia**

Support for Follow-up: **Decision Time**

Mario Petrucci trained as a physicist and ecologist before becoming a freelance educator and poet. His award-winning collections reflect his scientific and ecological concerns: they include *Bosco* (2001), *Heavy Water: a poem for Chernobyl* (2004) and *Flowers of Sulphur* (2007) [www.mariopetrucci.com].

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Student's notes ...

ORDERS OF MAGNITUDE

One hundred thousand trillion joules
to turn an ice cap into mush

One hundred thousand billion joules
to erase a major Eastern city

A hundred thousand million joules
to run a car to death

One hundred million of the same
for Fire Brigades to reach the kitten

Ten million just to keep
December from cold feet

A hundred thousand joules for a mug
of tea – A hundred joules

for a second's worth of War and Peace
Ten to raise a hand – to lift

an average apple to the lips
A single joule to shout the command

Half a joule to pull the trigger
Just one tenth to push the button

Almost zero to have the thought.

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From: *Flowers of Sulphur* (Enitharmon, 2007)

*Patterns of rainfall will change dramatically with Global Warming:
Britain's is set to increase, probably with more frequent flash floods.*

in hay waist-deep was

uncle who said he saw
lash of rain snap
upward viper-

sharp to bite
the coming-down
tail – another tending

eaves at top of ladder
felt on his back
drops

worse than
wasps to a sack
while wife with foot

hard on bottom rung
kept her face of
tinder – yet

another
watched brown
slick of cloud a few

metres up suck back its
centre like a seam
in the roasted

bean – till it
split with blue &
for an hour all air smelt

of coffee – last it came to
me i said once
i stood

in rain so
ferocious streams
front & back met at my

pizzle till i knew how it felt
to piss like Orion: i said
this happened –

but they
laughed & took out
scythes & said the hay was

dry enough

DOVER

That morning the sea was late –
each swill at its edge mutely
lapping salt-mown grass

as though land had so
stilled itself as to bring
ocean with it – brimming

where it stalled with green and
chalk – fizzing into water
like pale demerara.

One foot – getting wet through
my sole. Over one shoulder
hills below the lazy level

of slop. Those wavelets almost
true with synapse trees now
ready for the hue –

each curve of chalk
still velvet with it. Frozen
at full swell. Mortal. Like some

heavy shot of a final sea.

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from a to a

or Getting Nowhere

finding the freeway
to myself i put my foot
down to my own motive
floorboards asking the rear
-view what to do
next

it said

brother
the faster you
eat me up the more you
leave behind – you'll see
more of me slower so why not
pull over 'cause this road is going
backwards and your incessant
tyres are speeding up

the world

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REPOSSESSION (*excerpts*)

Down the long leg of the catwalker fishnet melts

to meshwork tobacco spittle. A black liquid garter.
Asphalt picks itself up – each scaly skin spread
between kerbstones is pulling free with a bass

pop. Every city suddenly a kicked nest of adders
coiling together into a spitting rope of pitch ...

Videos slime in the hand like

jumbo choc-ices. CDs in the rack pucker and shrink
to mushy black peas. Dentures gum up the works
jarred into toothless gaga. Those precise blocks

and avenues of electronics crinkle dark and
mediaeval. In the fast lane of the bowling alley
a caviar cannonball splashes ten full bottles of

devil's milk ...

Yes every

biro mothball racquet sags bleeds gutters
till the black string vest of tributaries resolves –
untangles towards tonsured ozone. Finally

we notice. On satellite-replays Presidents track
their sloed candyfloss economies writhing round
earth's spindle – are caught on camera in black lip-

stick salve leaning to kiss the screen goodbye – and for
that moment the globe has a single gathering purpose
as a girl glances up from her fractions to witness

those filaments merge to a mother of twisters –
merge and rise and take her place. She watches
the whole black mass lift up and out into daytime

where it balls itself – steadies a wobbling edge
against blue to sling there its low fat circle. Crude
and glossy. She sees the birth of the full black moon

that lights our ways with dark.

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From: *Earth Shattering: Ecopoems* (Bloodaxe, 2007)

Globally, oil production will peak circa 2010.

Hubbert's Peak

from afar – almost a poplar
in desert

stained brown with human weather
fanning up one

blue-green flame where flatness runs off
the chart I trudge to

make the tree grow – my soft body driving me
through late-morning

heat as my mostly-water pound after pound in losing
pence-worth sweat de-

hydrates me – so this verdant spike nations have driven
herds to (if stripped

of a few leaves) wilts – I could have driven too but walked
to find the tree

false – a shadeless sideways-on range I could scabble up if
younger if I had

energy : stone pinnacle swaying with my weight & needled
by those shimmers

faltering computers make – although no one climbs down
those windward slopes

so fully masked in noon
– down sharp curves of what a younger sun bought his

blue girl to make her fizzy
& blackcurrant-full of juice – ousted now from his

sleek limo onto a wagon
to places greens once grew with a world in tow

& the peak throwing its
first stub of soon-to-be gun-barrel shadow

I'll later die cold in
in spite of this squinting into an end

-less gold-
rush gush-down

sun

DONKEYS

The short-term view was a four-stroke fool –

now the car's extinct the mule must rule.
For having squandered that liquid sun
it's back to a horsepower precisely of one

where filling up means buckets and attention to dung.
The kind of Ferrari you get down our way
does nought to sixty kilometres (per day)

on two bales of hay. We made for our backs
a cross like the donkey's – but painted black.
Well. If this is entropy then its laws are an ass

that ekes us through the eye of the Energy Pass.
Down empty freeways our donkeys now plod –
they knew all the while. Hence that asinine smile –

the endless nod.

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SAPLING

Twilight, each morning
before the mist
he slips his Mother's

hive, for the forest.
There is a glade
a secret place where

he sits. While Mother
and Father embrace
sleep, his eyes sip

small movements of earth
the clay knots of worms.
There is no reason

for this. He grows roots
while the sun rises
follows rough limbs

of oak across shifting
cloud, where broad daylight
seeps from greyness.

Here he can taste
the newness of grass
fill his ear's belly

with spangles of finch
the chitterings of squabs
soft words from a wood-pigeon.

A cuckoo's woodwind
sounds him out.
This entire forest creeps

through his nostrils
fills his head with light
bright and true. He knows

that soon he must go
to school. His parents will
put a stop to all this

nonsense. As he leaves
he hears, distilled
by far distance –

the solitary bark
of a dog, the first thin
clack of the woodman's axe.

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Reprinted from: *Bosco* (Hearing Eye, 2001)

DODONA

Oak stands alone.
Spread thinly behind perspex
and barbed wire. Boxed
precisely to her reach.

Her bole, fissured deeply.
Hooped with steel. Probes
glitter among her twigs.
Cables intertwine, trail back
to the computer-rack life support.

Drizzles of atomised water
daily wheedle her; still she suffers
the haze of fumes, abhors
their heat – defies all
chemical incentives.

And so they stand, and pay
to watch. To listen.

It is almost like the First Times –
they clamoured to her, Oracle.
Her leaves rustled, and a hero died;
her boughs whispered, he lived.
Dodona, they would murmur. *Dodona*.
No one here speaks her name.

Now, all these children. Endlessly.
And she so sick, nothing good
to tell. Their little hands – pink
watersnails pressed to her aquarium.
Their faces – oh these faces –
mandalas of eyeball, mouth
aswim in the sess, the fog
of machinery.

Too old to fight.
No spring left. The lobes
of her leaves grow
crisp and shrivel. Afternoon
passes like an era.
Computer beeps – then emits
the insistent signal.

Shaft of the world tree
breaks

flashes of cameras
a scuffle bodies swept along like logs
arms rolling branches

Too late, they see
there was no logic in wood
no need for it – except

to shade them from the chimaera
that begins to strike root
ineradicably

in their sleep.

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Reprinted from: *Bosco* (Hearing Eye, 2001)

DESERTED

I use them too easily – lanes
of motorways, the dodgy walks
that turn to blackspots, roads
that are riderless, their trees
shorn like army haircuts

Groves tessellate with slabs,
parks, greens, commons
sprout litters of bins
Trunk roads, arterials, the loose
sphincters of ringroads –
press the hot pulse of traffic
to the hearts of cities
bring it to a stifled head
a fruitless breakfast jam

*The Estate? You hang
a left mate, then keep going
just keep going –
carry on right to the end
and you can't miss it:
bloody big concrete box.*

At a central reservation
the last zebra stretches out –
a welcome-mat for extinction
Still, I have gained gardens
of neatly aligned vehicles
hills, vales, rises
that heave under pie-crust
compo, squeeze green magmas
through cracks

*My Lord, I couldn't see
the signs. For fog. The asphalt
wasn't mine – on my mother's life
on the life of my child – I've had nothing
but hard shoulders to cry on.
Pre-stressed jungles to tramp.*

Before my very eyes
wind conjures bowls
of dust from which
I drink fug –
never mind
It's fine
Between strata of streets
I fossilize
Night

makes a circus of tarmac
The earth
is concrete
The moon
a crescent of cement

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Reprinted from: **Bosco** (Hearing Eye, 2001)

EXPOSURES

So. What will it be? Picture it on that reel
inside your head. Do you see purple-red bluffs

of flame? What do you hide there? Incandescence
pushing unstopably through troposphere? Bodies

making causeways for survivors? Who slipped those
pixels in? What if – instead – it's a vixen

stepping up to lick your fist? Or a circle
of rags black against snow? Perhaps it's going out

for papers and finding all the pages blank.
Or a cage hung out among pines – the squeamish

hinge – its parrot offering the forest tea.
Could it be the world shedding itself skin by skin

till a snotty-faced boy picks it up – shrugs then
pockets it – *because?* Just because there's no one

around and it fits so snug in his hand.

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From: *Heavy Water: a poem for Chernobyl*
(Enitharmon, 2004)

*Geologists believe that there used to be one vast 'supercontinent': Pangaea.
Inspecting an Atlas, certain shorelines do look as if they once fitted together.*

PANGAEA

Earth is young
stitches continents together
– uneven quilt thrown over time

under that cover a question

Before the drift
Africa's generous hip-bone
snug in Washington's socket

already the spur of her question

Johannesburg Perth
are shores cutting their milk teeth
before the milk froze

*between her teeth that first seed
of questions*

Australia curls around
Antarctica – feral in their basket
before they blew cold and hot

*in full glare of night her insistent
question*

Stomachs touching – Brazil
with Angola – glued in lambada
enchancing across the seafloor
before our crowded seas

each moves in answer to the other

And even now
India a wedge – Eurasia
anvil of the North

*every border every answer
feels her squeeze*

There is give in stone
There is blood in it
Earth is plastic

across oceanic
intention straits of words
each to other must return
and fit

her answer plain

*i.m. homo sapiens***that guy—a**

case of you know
 how it is : downtown on
 vacation somehow you end up

someplace you shouldn't? – moon
 a scarface caught between
 two chimneys squat

& full low cloud
 filling the east with lead &
 just as in all those black-&-whites

the lone figure on the gothic corner
 embossing his shadowed
 doorway – one

of us spotted him
 saying *Down – can we*
keep things down? but that got

carried away & I should have
 done more than think
 we could just

keep walking
 while the sentry heavy
 as November's guy in stone coats

kept on fixing that averted gaze
 so the party went on –
 our racket as we

neared notching up
 ratchet by ratchet & now
 I recall something full & operatic

in his trenchcoat – in that uneasy
 tilt of Stetson – perhaps
 the suggestion

of a woman – though
 no mistaking those eyes blue
 -green as everybody's grandmother as

finally she turned & reaching
 both hands into pockets
 noticed

noticed
 us – till our bones
 cracked to be spared that

thick-swivelled neck & all our
 small world swivelling
 with it

left or right

nothing's as simple as that – though I
was there – when you first singled opposable

thumbs grubby with flints you glanced
together – down close afternoons mugging

skin for its sweat as you dreamed for water
or watched early birds skim interfering hues

using nothing but a palette of air – I stuck
at you through endless night in that tinder-

box head yearning down to earth my copious
sparks with you forever looking out for *there*

when all the time I was here – knowing you
have eyes for wonder but tend to leave it there

caught in some dilemma of whether you are
prisoner or warden to yourself when in fact

you act the pair – but look at the time : time
to go or stay for good – to choose whether to

hide in the laboratory sliding white coats
back on – or pick up that tan you used to

play in and come outside?

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Support for Theme A: Global Warming

The first of these poems, ‘**Orders of Magnitude**’ was originally written specifically for live performance, and has a strong rhythmic drive to it. The joule is the standard unit of energy or work, and the poem is based on a physics lesson the poet used to give (he is a former physics teacher) in which different scales of energy were explained by estimating the types of changes they could bring about. Starting with the almost unimaginable quantities of energy involved in Global Warming, the poem climbs down towards more everyday and familiar events, arriving finally at that small but vital source of social power and transformation.

‘**in hay waist-deep was**’ and ‘**Dover**’ both explore a world much changed by Global Warming. The former suggests a waterlogged Britain of the future, devoid of industry; the latter describes Dover with the sea brimming at its white cliffs, way above the level of inland fields which, themselves, seem like a “frozen” green sea. The poet watches crumbs of chalk “fizzing into water/ like pale demerara”. Of course, the oceans are not forecast to rise *that* much, and in any case would flood most of Britain long before they did; but the poem is based on a dream (or is it nightmare?) and may be granted all the poetic licence required of symbolic visualization.

Support for Theme B: Oil/ Peak Oil

Our petrol-thirsty world; the end of the Oil Age.

The opening poem (‘**from a to a**’) challenges our addiction to acceleration and economic growth, highlighting our dependency on the automobile. ‘**Repossession**’ goes even further, suggesting that the world’s oil is actually on loan to us, describing (often in surreal terms) what would happen if that loan were suddenly revoked. We are invited to visualize a world entirely without oil: which is – actually – quite difficult, because so many modern products are made from it. The poem thereby opens up a vista on oil’s ubiquity, pointing us towards the global symbolic dominance of the petrodollar. ‘**Hubbert’s Peak**’ is rich and complex, raising many issues around Peak Oil and the imminent collapse of the Oil Age (thorough teaching notes are given for this poem, below). Finally, ‘**Donkeys**’ offers a much lighter take on the subject, depicting a semi-comic future where beasts of burden are once again the main means of transport (this serves as a useful warm-up poem in class). Is there any suggestion, towards the end of this poem, that the ‘donkeys’ might be us?

Hubbert’s Peak (further notes)

Preparation and Initial Discussion.

- *Before (or in) class, research ‘Peak Oil’ and ‘Hubbert’s Peak’. Discuss findings and explore the environmental and social issues surrounding these terms. For instance, in what ways has agriculture become oil-dependent; how might oil shortages, then, lead to famine?*
- *Find an image of Hubbert’s Peak (or redraw it) on a timescale of several thousand years (say, 1000 – 3000 AD). What does this narrow peak look like (create a list)? Does the poem’s opening image work? Now examine the shape of the poem, holding the page any way up. What do you notice? Given the poem’s title, discuss how this distinctive form might feed into the overall meaning of the poem. [Optional: if you have time, it is informative to investigate the author’s ideas on ‘Spatial Form’ (www.mariopetrucci.com/spatialform.htm).]*

Reading. *This poem has some tricky line breaks and (in places) complex syntax. Be sure to read it out loud in class, carefully, a number of times if necessary. At some point, give special attention to the opening seven couplets. Find a way of reading these to maximize the sense.*

Main Discussion.

- *When oil production falls, oil prices can rise drastically, even though there is still quite a lot of oil left. Why is that? In the poem, how is this economic threat – and the market’s sensitivity to small changes – related to bodily dehydration and to the tree? [Research: in humans, at what percentage water loss does dehydration set in?]*
- *When the poet gets closer to the poplar, what does its “verdant spike” turn out to be? What do you think the phrase “to find the tree// false” (lines 14/15) really means here?*

- *How is crude oil created in the earth? Ultimately, where does the energy locked in oil (and natural gas) come from? In the latter parts of the poem, what imagery is used to describe this fact? Is it effective?*
- *When does a desert get very cold? How is this related (in the poem's closing stages) to our use of oil? In the final few lines, are we offered little more than impending doom, or are certain words used to suggest that the sun (which made all the oil in the first place) might offer a way out of our predicament? Are both of these interpretations present in the poem? Do you think the poet intends that and, if so, why?*

Follow-up. *How can society prepare for oil shortages? What are the benefits of doing so, well in advance? Starting with the clue in line 13 ("I could have driven too but walked") what can each of us do to help?*

Support for Theme C: Deforestation

This trio of poems explores different kinds of loss associated with our estrangement from forests and the destruction of trees.

'**Sapling**' paints an image of childlike innocence and connection with nature under imminent threat (from urban-based education?). Longstanding familiarities with woodland – its sensual richness, the calm and insight it can bring ("A cuckoo's woodwind/ sounds him out") – are all contrasted with a move to the modern adult world that will "put a stop to all this// nonsense". The poem shifts into a sense of foreboding, of deep isolation (for both child *and* forest) symbolised by the "solitary bark" and that closing, mechanical sound of a woodman's axe.

'**Dodona**' is set in the future and tells the story of the last oak tree on the planet, kept on "life support" by technical apparatus as part of a public show. With its death, something utterly profound is irretrievably lost. Before studying this poem in class, do a little research on *Dodona* (the ancient Greek oracle associated with the oak tree): what was it, and how was it consulted? Any convenient source will do: a mythology book in a library, Google, etc. Make sure you can shed light on other references such as "chimaera" and "world tree", if needed. The loss described in this poem is slow and agonising: the oak's extinction sparks an archetypal and spiritual disaster.

'**Deserted**' opens with the irony of concreted areas and asphalt strips (designed for cars) being called Greens, Walks or Roads (check the equestrian origins of 'Road'). Humanity, facing judgement, is stuck in impotent denial ("*The asphalt/ wasn't mine*"). The poem moves irresistibly towards a hellish and barren vision in which entire planets succumb to urban sprawl. Together, the poem's title and the phrase "I fossilize" suggest that the loss here is total: our species; life itself.

Support for Theme D: Gaia

Life as the real worldwide web.

According to James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, the living/ non-living components of the Earth form a complex, self-regulating system that behaves, in a sense, like a single global organism. These poems explore various aspects of our relationship to/with Gaia. Are we really heading for global extinction ('**Exposures**')? Who supplies our images of apocalypse and, if it does come, might it be in a manner few of us expect? How can we gain a global harmony echoed (in '**Pangaea**') by that time when the continents (find visual aids for this) were one, snug-fitting mass? Who, or what, is asking the (unspecified) "insistent/ question", and what might it be about? What does the story in the third poem ('**that guy—a**') suggest about humanity's importance to Gaia? Do we need to change, rapidly? Is our collective behaviour reflecting that need? (Further notes and ideas for this poem follow.)

that guy—a (*further notes*)

Reading and Discussion.

This poem seems to tell the story of a holiday night-time jaunt that somehow goes wrong. Invite a paraphrase, or summary, of what is happening. Does everyone agree with it? Be sure, en route, to discuss the possible meanings of any strange or striking phrases, such as "black-&-whites" (line 9) and "November's guy" (line 21).

Now look at the text more closely. Note the dedication above the title (“i.m. homo sapiens”) and the pun within the title (“guy—a” = Gaia). Gaia means ‘Earth as a goddess’ or ‘grandmother Earth’, and is related to words like Geography and Geology. With this in mind, reconsider the identity of the “lone figure” who has eyes like “everybody’s grandmother” (line 33) and whose appearance has “the suggestion// of a woman” (stanzas 10-11). Crucially, what emerging recognition (i.e. ‘recognition’) is finally confirmed by the shift of pronoun in the first line of stanza 12? Moreover, what descriptions point us away from a purely human interpretation of this character?

Initially, is the figure beneficent, indifferent or antagonistic? How does its attitude change, eventually, with the group’s noisy behaviour? Given the poem’s dedication, who might this group really represent? Has the speaker’s language been Americanised (“downtown”, “vacation”) simply to fit in with the type of movie depicted, or might there be some other reason? Is it clear who says “Down – can we/ keep things down?” (stanza 5)? Is this ambiguity significant?

Taking all these discussions into account, what might be the deeper story behind this poem? Invite offers to recount that story as you now hear it. Under this new interpretation, what might the group’s “racket” really stand for? What does it mean for them to be “noticed” – and is that a good thing?

Advanced discussion. The poet seems to be offering a challenge to those who complacently assume that the Environment will sort itself out, or that Gaia is somehow inherently on our side. Why might the poet be making that challenge? Does the class agree with it? Why disguise/ describe such an important message as a scene from an old black-and-white movie? Finally, what possible reasons might there be for making mistaken identity/ gender so central to this poem?

Support for Follow-up: Decision Time

The final poem in the pack (‘left or right’) is not attached to any particular theme. It may be used to close a session, to widen the discussion, or as a prompt and provocation to personal study or writing.

There is a sense, driving through this poem, of our species having been accompanied (by what?) from its first gropings with knowledge (when we “first singed opposable// thumbs grubby with flints”, presumably playing with fire) down to the present day with all its crises (“but look at the time”). However, we cannot take basic resources for granted (“you dreamed for water”) and should be more aware of the untapped stores around us (warm air, for instance, picks up and holds evaporated water as humidity: “close afternoons mugging// skin for its sweat”). Nature is astonishingly creative: lines 6-7 evoke the marvel of harnessing air for flight, and how certain birds exploit the reflection of light to make their iridescent colours (by means of ‘thin-film interference’). We, too, have evolved (“I stuck/ at you”) – but matters have now come to a head and the poem urges us to choose our next step. Although the opening line subverts the title’s idea that there is a straightforward decision or answer, two clear options are laid out at the poem’s close. What are they? Are there any other alternatives?

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Advanced discussion. Refer to the opening verse of the Leonard Cohen song, *Everybody Knows* (this is easily found via Google). Given how central the Environment is to our survival, why is it that we (socially and personally) can be in possession of all the predictions and facts, yet (often) fail to act accordingly? Find out about particular cases where these ‘facts’ (on Global Warming, say) have been contested in public debate; what agendas seem to be operating in the opposing camps? What can the poetry in this pack – or *your* writing of poems – contribute to the situation? Should poems be telling people what to do, think or feel? What has been poetry’s deepest value to us through the ages, and how might it help us now, in our current predicament?

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