

*9 Original Poems*  
on Climate Change

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# Foreword

What will it take to stir us into a new way of being?

The [RSA's report](#) on the seven dimensions of climate change discusses the various causes and ramifications of our collective inertia. Intellectually we 'get it', and yet we still cannot close the yawning gulf between our knowledge and our day-to-day behaviour. In trying to close that chasm between cognition and action, we need a different sort of provocation. We need something to electrify us, move us, spur us on, trip us up.

In the fourth of our series of innovative events on climate change, we abandoned the logic of reasoned argument, and found a more emotional and intuitive way in to the problem. We hope you enjoy this collection from some of the country's most talented and prolific poets – each of whom have brought the full force of their creative power to provoke us into action.

*Abi Stephenson & Jonathan Rowson*



# George the Poet

## A Climate of Change

A paradigm shift is a change in common sense. But  
How do you go about re-arranging common sense?  
Especially with years of research and journalism  
Making the conversation long and dense.

Well, “sense” isn’t something to try and enforce, it should be  
Kind of *endorsed* by a reliable source.  
And in the case of climate change, a  
Good place to start would be science, of course.

You remember science from school, an essential subject?  
Let’s consider its standing with the general public:  
Our scientists are in a position to ad-  
vise us on some of our biggest decisions and it’s  
Probably in our interest to listen, but  
Also to invite others to witness the vision.

The first way to do that is to *be* the vision.  
Through your lifestyle choices you can lead the mission. Bring the  
Future to your present when it seems a bit distant: The  
Cleanest existence is green and efficient.

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And You

Haven't really played your part until your  
Lifestyle reflects a change of heart. It's a  
Continuous process, I'm still working on it myself but  
Technology plays a major part.

I'm trying to play my part as an artist but all I  
Do is write verses and harmonise melodies. Now, the  
Point of us working together on this is that  
One of you knows how to decarbonise energy  
So if you could consider that when making your plans I'm  
Happy to leave it in your capable hands.

This is the solution government can't offer:  
ground-level collaboration. Doesn't it  
Sound better than having patience?  
Instead of sleepwalking into the governance trap, using our  
Imagination to Take initiative as a nation, which involves  
Looking at our economic ambitions to ensure that  
As well as earning ourselves more and banking ourselves more we're  
Actually doing things we're thanking ourselves for in the long run.  
Because a lucrative plan is a smart one  
But a sustainable plan is a strong one.

*Ruth Padel*  
Water is Company

from '24 Splashes of Denial'

You close your eyes so you can't see the omens.  
You try praying for rain. You wait  
for an augury, sing to the brook

while the self flies out and away  
like a bird from a withered branch

and the wind, with a hollow sound  
like a breaking pot, whips the lake to a dance  
of bubble-froth soap-suds, blocking the drain.

# Simon Barraclough

## How's My Coal

How's my coal getting on?  
I set as much aside for you as I could.  
Don't use it all up at once.  
It might come in handy one day.

How's my oil faring?  
It keeps best underground, in the dark.  
Doesn't do so well in the light.  
Don't let it spoil.

How's the wind blowing?  
I try to keep it moving,  
keep it on the muscle,  
keep the pressure on, make it hustle.

How's the hydro hanging?  
All that *potential*.  
You don't oughta de-water: watch out for insects, birdlife.  
You're dammed if you do and you're dammed if you don't.

Any breaking news on wave power?  
I've hired an intern to handle the oceans.  
If we could make some ripples, get more converts,  
that would be swell.

Geothermal sounds like a blast.  
I've got files and files on extremophiles.  
Plucky geezers. There's life in the oven and life in the freezer.  
I'll keep the volcanoes ticking over for you.

Nuclear's nothing new  
but until some of you stop  
saying *nuclear*  
I'm not sure it'll do.

Hydrogen: now that's my bag.  
People say I'm full of it  
but one day you'll get a grip,  
stick with it: there's more than one way to fuse a cat.

You've got to get off-grid, kids.  
One day I'll blow the lid off.  
Your magnetosphere's too tempting for me,  
like bubble wrap I've gotta pop.

I assume you're using solar, right?  
This other stuff's for backup.  
In case there's a rainy day  
for me, in space.

Talking of which,  
one day you'll sail away  
on a fair wind of photons.  
Remember me this way.



# Simon Barraclough

## Polar Heart

Opposites attract.  
Perhaps.  
In fact: in fact.

But the whole wide world  
bulges between us:  
overfed, underfed,  
and will not be denied.

*We know, we've tried.*

My love expands for six dark months  
while yours retracts  
to rally again  
as mine melts away for half a year.

I know we have to stay so far apart,  
I know the climate needs our hopeless *pas de deux*  
but sometimes at the solstice  
I yell "Screw this!"  
into the polar gale  
and another ice shelf fails.

*Grace Nichols*  
Except for the Lone Wave

Like a heiress drawn  
to her light-reflecting jewels,  
Atlantic draws me to the mirror  
of my oceanic small days  
and the old seawall, so beloved by all.

But Atlantic is far out,  
beach deserted in the mid-day sun  
except for the lone wave of rubbish –  
old car tyres, plastic bottles,  
styrofoam cups –  
    rightly tossed back  
by an ocean's moodswings.

Undisturbed, not even by a seabird,  
I stand and gaze into the tradewinds –  
discovering that the sun  
is the only eldorado, the only gold  
whose rays will grace and sear our skins.

Like a tourist, I head back  
to the sanctuary of my hotel room  
to dwell on change and age  
and our brooding planet  
in the air-conditioned darkness.

# *John Agard*

## Inheritance

If we, the children of the meek,  
should inherit an earth  
whose rainforest lungs  
breathe a tale of waste –  
an earth where the ailing sea  
shudders in its own slick

If we, the children of the meek,  
should inherit an earth  
where the grass goes nostalgic  
at the mere mention of green  
and the sky looks out of its depth  
when reminded of blue

If we, the children of the meek,  
should inherit such an earth,  
then we ask of the future  
one question: Should we dance  
or break into gnashing of teeth  
at the news of our inheritance?

# *Tom Chivers*

## Untitled

that surface glare & dazzle  
is what we want to make of it

for who would keep a rotting heart  
inside a cardboard box:

what is falling apart, breaking away  
beneath a crust of pale gold.

I'm sorry, we have already melted down  
the family relics for this quick fix

insisting that the ship will right  
that has fallen by the way.

^

after the great lithium dump  
it was felt we might try to conserve.

we hoarded palm oil and salt  
like the emperors of days gone by

till they too dwindled  
and were extinguished.

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for a time peat was all the rage:  
we dredged the edgelands.

we dug for it in gardens and derelict pools  
in the relict pingo beneath the Rockingham Estate.

speculation flourished: they were speculating  
here and they were speculating there

and whilst our bairns mudlarked for guano  
there was a run on sugar water.

when the peat dried up  
we traded ice & nickel,

rummaged the ruined citadels of Asia Minor.  
we stole the birdsong for klaxons.

we led great terraformers across the steppes,  
broke the permafrost above the cities

with diggers tipped with carbide  
scavenged from the front.

when stocks ran low  
we entered the mangroves at dusk,

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trapped the spectacled caiman in his lair  
and sucked his eyes for juju beans.

we lay, deflated, in wrecked workshops:  
for all had come to pass that had been foretold.

^

inside it's all glitter  
& white rabbits

& everything crackles  
with the radio static of moving forces:

unseen iceflows so blue  
you'd think the sky had poured herself in.

this is architecture  
& it's on the move, son.

you're going to have to live with that.

# *Alice Oswald*

## Alongside Beans

weeding alongside beans in the same rush as them

6 a.m. scabbling at the earth

beans synchronised in rows  
soft fanatical irresponsible beans  
behind my back  
breaking out of their mass grave

at first, just a rolled up flag  
then a bayonet a pair of clapping hands

then a shocked corpse hurrying up in prayer  
and then another

and then (as if a lock had gone and the Spring had broken loose)  
a hoverfly

not looking up but lost in pause  
landing its full-stop  
on a bean leaf

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(and what a stomach bursting from its clips  
what a nervous readiness attached to its lament and  
using the sound as a guard rail over the drop)

and then another

and after a while a flower  
turning its head to the side like a bored emperor

and after a while a flower

singing out a faint line of scent  
and spinning around the same obsession with its task  
and working with the same bewitched slightly off-hand look as the sea

covering first one place  
and then another

and after a while another

and then another

and then another place

and then another



*Selina Nwulu*

## We Have Everything We Need

We have each become a small world,  
spinning from one collision to another.  
We scrub cities off our skins  
and watch its roads leave tracks in the bath.

Damp rises, rent rises, high-rises.  
Look how the cities silhouettes grow new forests for us.  
What new constellation of stars guides us home?

We are tower block light flickers come evening  
crammed into shoe boxes, basements,  
living room-come-bedrooms.  
Stretch out our feet to turn the TV on.

Reach out for our phones,  
our faces made radiant by its birdsong.  
Mining happening somewhere, but we can't be sure.  
We are compassion in 140 characters.

We are lying lonely next to each other  
between paper thin walls.  
We know our neighbour's shouts and moans.  
*She sounds like a redhead, I think.*

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Rent rises, heat rises, sea rises.  
Put the kettle on, scald dinner in microwaves.  
Droughts happening somewhere, but we can't be sure.  
*Tesco Metro* fluorescence lives on.

I wonder what will this all look like in 50 years' time.  
How will our cities exhale then?  
How will we wear our loss?  
How will we sleep when we cannot turn our alarm clocks off?

We have each become a small world,  
spinning from one collision to another.