



the carbon project

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Introduction

Over the past two years I've sometimes found myself trying to avoid thinking too deeply about the challenges that face us as a society. In the face of climate crisis and pandemic, many of us have felt doubly disempowered to enact any meaningful change. In spring 2022, as we emerged from a series of lockdowns where anxiety often threatened to overwhelm us, I wondered if it was time to try and open ourselves again — to those anxieties and fears — but in the company of the community we've all missed so much. And so, the idea for **The Carbon Project** was born.

During my time as Poet in Residence for dlr County Council, I was keen to engage with local writers through a series of initiatives, but this one was particularly close to my heart. As part of my residency, I was working on a commission from Jamie Murphy's Salvage Press to write a hybrid scientific essay/prose poem about the element Carbon, which will soon be published in a book made entirely (from paper to ink and everything in between) from carbon; the element which both supports all known life, and threatens the delicate ecosystems of our planet. While I was developing this work, I wondered what other people were thinking and feeling about our environment. Did they feel as helpless as I did? And might coming together as a group to discuss this feeling give rise to poetry?

In planning workshops on climate writing, I was keen to avoid encouraging a purely elegiac tone. Poets are the wistful custodians of every dropped leaf and fallen flower, but the lyric contains multitudes and can make room for the kind of anger, or scorn, or joy that moves and changes the reader. And so I sought out some interesting cross-artform collaborators. We engaged with Cora Cummins and Saoirse Higgins' wonderful *On Steady Ground/Unsteady Ground* exhibition which ran in the Municipal Gallery in dlr LexIcon, with its themes of environmental change and deep time, and we had a visit from Anne Murray, Biodiversity Officer at Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, who talked to us

about the meaningful measures that are being taken to protect and promote biodiversity. We also read poems that looked at climate crisis through the lenses of class, gender and race and generated our own work in response to these ideas. My thanks are due to everyone at the dlr Arts Office, especially to Carolyn Brown, for facilitating these initiatives during my residency.

The poems that have emerged from **The Carbon Project** are infused with a sense of energy and possibility; from the sense of deep time and human endurance captured in Charlotte Buckley, Edel Burke and Hilary Casey's poems, to the meditative and ominous tones of Sree Sen and Jo Sachs-Eldridge's work, to the tactile immersion of Jess McKinney's and Monica de Bhailís's poems, and finally in the surreal and urgent flare of Emma Gleeson and Jane Robinson's visions. I am proud to have worked with these inspired and inspiring poets, and grateful to have had the privilege of spending time with them. In these poetic responses I'm confident the reader will see enough flashes of inspiration to reinforce the belief that we belong to a species ingenious enough to save itself.

Jessica Traynor

June 2022

Tsunami in Kerry

Geologists believe Ireland
was once struck by tsunamis,
and put a sea level gauge
off the cliffs of Inis Mór.

It could happen again;
they say the chances
of being flooded are low
but never zero.

A distant earthquake
could shake the Celtic shelf
and we'd be submerged,
but for the peak of Corrán Tuathail,

the wave making an island
out of unsteady ground
where we will gather
when the tide warns.

What might we see
under the wave?
Perhaps swimming
rows of cottages,

cows chewing seagrass,
a soggy crop of barley,
and a woman raising water
up from itself at a well.



Charlotte Buckley

Godchild

It was all trees, the whole country blanketed, you said,
trying to explain the hunter-gatherers, forests,
the fruits and hazel nuts. And when the farmers arrived,

the stone chopping tools used to cut down the trees —
burins, awls, the ground cleared to sow crops,
to rear sheep, cattle, goats.

And where are the forests now?, he wants to know —
felled. He tells me he cut his knee when he felled too.
Questions now, reaching out like branches —

how many trees, how old, he likes to count in millions.
He knows a thing or two this clever boy, the oak trees
in the park, gathered acorns with his sister for school.

You tell him the ancients thought of trees as gods,
revered and protected; named places after them.
You want to offer a gift — the forest to live on in him —

budbursts of wisdom and strength.
He stands before you, delicate as an oak sapling,
the footprint of a post-glacial wild wood.



Edel Burke

Raag Marwa

fingers caress the flute
like the floating eyelash of a newborn —
head tilted, eyes shut,
symphony cascading over the microwave
defrosting frozen appetites.
dusk settles into tired notes,

the earth bare bones,
prime meat scrapped from ribs,
bleached roots digging through
ashes of burnt meadows —
no time to grieve.

rubbing soil between two fingers,
staining cuticles with the promise
of finding the rhythm
that attracts the bees & the tigers,
we are not meant to tear

the music from naked breast of riverbeds,
bleeding silt shaped into benign gods,
veined buds throbbing in rage
pulsating with the high-notes —
will the night bring revolution,
will dinner get cold?



Sree Sen

Jeopardy

'we can now tell how old this place is,'
the newscaster says deadpan,
'by measuring radiation levels from
phosphates using a Geiger counter
indicating the mass extinctions of animals'

the ridge of the gap has swelled to encase
arks of ancient beasts accorded to
set in Burren limestone,

colour band stamped in bold orange —
slated Irish greys beneath, earthly browns above,
spring grass wry like a fallen fringe,

aging clearly ringed
in that one moment 321 million years ago
the identity of a line in a rock
could soon be us
just —



Hilary N. Casey

pin-hole camera

I remember when
we cut two squares
from the cereal box,
and traced a line
and pasted a strip
on the inside lip—
ripping the bit
I might have saved
for the doll in the yellow raincoat.

You picked the card
for its tensile strength,
to sculpt in pulped
polymer
our *Camera Obscura*.
Graphite, you told us
was a crystalline carbon
as we pierced
the stretched foil
with a Scooby-Doo pencil.

We found the sun later
us two, and you,
on the wall by the stream;
splattered on spades,
clinging to buckets.
We turned our backs
as elvers of light,
flooded the vent
and splashed a white disc
on our makeshift screen.

Shadow bands shuddered
as day became night,
and the sun, moon and earth
threaded together;
three heads in the umbra
craning to see,
a rim-fire frill
flicker and dance
on the inside flap
of a cornflake pack.



Tanya O'Sullivan

from 'In The Balance' Haibun

front hedge, Glasthule

robin

erithacus rubecula

Beech, forsythia, quince—a bolt of copper, yellow and crimson in early Spring. Bright camouflage for the pair of robins, all day whirring in and out and through it. From early morning, the hedge sings. The repertoire is wide and strong, marking this territory. Next door's chimes-with-mirror becomes a battleground, presenting a rival robin to fight to the death. Discussing this with my neighbour, I suddenly understand why bird droppings keep appearing on our parked car's wing mirrors.

Robin in our hedge—
a territorial flag.
Socks for wing mirrors.

Scotsman's Bay

grey seal

halichoerus grypus

From Newtownsmith, at half-tide, the bay is littered with protrusions. Not a soul in sight, but navigational cones, boat moorings and weather buoys signal all the human connections with the sea. They compete for attention with half-submerged rocks, on one of which a grey seal is banana-posing, her head and flippers keeping high and dry. More seals break the surface randomly, their hopeful heads and sleek, curved backs catch the light and throw it back. In the distance, squat container ships glide in and out of Dublin Port—*Net Positive Exports* also means *Mineral Fuels In, Live Animals Out*.

A steely wet moon
sitting on the cluttered bay—
Natural Capital.

Shanganagh Cliffs

sand martin

riparia-riparia

The land ends decisively. The cliff is cleanly sliced, a vertical face of boulder-clay climbs fifty feet above the stoney beach. Storms love this cliff, it crumbles so easily. Sand martins love it too. Their intrepid excavations reach in deep for nests. Rows of round tunnel entrances score the upper levels, like traces of musical notation. Have the nests survived winter's disintegration? The birds should be back again soon—insecting on-the-fly, flash of white undersides, wing-tips whipping up sand.

Cliff of sheet music—
allegro crotchets, quavers.
Sand martins nesting.



Monica de Bhailís

deathly silence

marking our existence
the delicious crack
of the unsweepable carpet

soft hearts bathed in filtered light
as sun dances through branches

emotional labour calms momentarily
knowing its true scale unscalable

the puzzle drifts
refusing neat lines

as knees once ached
change rests on rounded shoulders

wiping noticing pleading
ineffective

its story first told
in the silence of springs

remains unheard
as we
quietly rage
questioning our existence



Jo Sachs-Eldridge

Ostriches

I see us
trapped
in a hall of mirrors
muddled and myopic
puffing out po-faces
over clumsy
recycling

we clutch
bought indulgences
like pearls

no real penance

the seasons have buckled
in the heat
wrong-footed by early buds
we wrap our dread
in reusable clingfilm
shove it out of sight

all in our rusted cages
no murmuration
not a whisper

sandy eyelashes
throat-deep
but still trying
to fly



Emma Gleeson

Supermarket

Here comes the customer, a woman in a hurry who loves pattering along the polished aisles to fill her trolley with bottled water and cleaning products.

Or perhaps the customer adores nothing more than the acquisition of shrink-wrapped cuts of beef and lamb which the land spends its time growing and feeding on an exquisite quilt of ryegrass and buttercups.

This morning everything seems normal. There is food on the shelves and cattle low from the refrigerated dairy section.

The ground heaves and the customer teeters in her glossy shoes.

Some chicks are clambering from their egg boxes. The customer selects a box of quail eggs, failing to notice a feathery creature trapped beneath the plastic lid.

The customer encounters a friend, and they chat briskly about holidays in the sun and new clothes. As usual they reach for blue-tinged poisons, to be poured down the drain into the ocean, all the while holding forth on seal sanctuaries and organically farmed seafood.

Saltwater cascades from under the ice at the fish counter and a young walrus appears to have found his way too far South. He flounders out of the water onto a low display case. The customer, grabbing a sweet-chili drizzled salmon pizza for the kids, doesn't notice him.

The customer hurries on along the tea and coffee aisle, ahead of the floodwater now surging through the shop.

Here, the jungle is breaking through and the floor is slick with leaves and fallen coffee berries. A leech attaches itself to the customer's perfectly depilated ankle, but she does not notice it. Nor does she notice the trickle of blood staining the burnished leather of her ridiculously expensive shoes.

A philosopher leans against the cereal boxes searching for a suitable thought in the commonplace book of William Least Heat-Moon. He lingers over Willa Cather's words — *the land belongs to the future*.

Boxes of biscuits cascade from their display as a jackfruit tree springs up. Next moment a troop of macaques swings through the shop, chomping on bananas and tearing open sweet packets.

As though sleepwalking the customer wrests a bag of gummy dinosaurs from the dominant male's clutches, snatches a handful of chocolate bars, and hurries to the checkout.



Jane Robinson

Sméara Dubha

You should never eat blackberries after Michaelmas eve. My love spoke of private spaces to be found in public, corridors, hedgerows, the seasons within seasons. She led me down the garden path, her hand in mine in the dead of night. Eyes glinting sharp, glancing back to check that I was still in tow, talking excitedly as we drew closer and closer to the patch. Under low September moon, we moved by habit through the dark, with the insects all holed up in the ground. Creeping until we reached the overflowing bush, not burning prophetically but thrumming as we plucked. Heavy with a story it wanted to tell, a warning to impart. I wondered how we would carry them all home, as she kept on speaking, quick as her hands reaching, of a slanting rhythm, crooked creatures giving way to darkness, and archangels feasting. Writhed in tangled stems, thick with double life, spreading into toothy leaves which shivered in the shimmer light. The broad fruit sweetened darker, trading flare for dim, turning green to red, navy night, low purple and finally black. Glistening in spit and glut with sin, they hang bloodied for unlucky hands reaching outwards, strayed from St. Brigid's glance. Bruising always into Autumn and stained fingertips.



Jess McKinney

from CARBON

DIAMOND

noun

A precious stone consisting of a clear and colourless crystalline form of pure carbon, the hardest naturally occurring substance. From the Greek adámas: 'unbreakable', 'untamed'.

Difficult not to imagine this as Neoplatonic spheres spiralling out in four dimensions: this knotting of light and dark. Underneath the earth's crust, a carbon lake compressed by the weight of our bodies, buildings, thoughts, collapsing under ineluctable tectonics, grows stars in its womb. Above, in our purgatory of air and light, the dark wood is on fire, ash-fields spreading, flames lapping the green. And above us, in the crystalline sphere, meteors fly their blind trajectories, grazing the empyrean, stars within and without. Here, everything burns, everything bruises. In the inevitable collision, new orbits form, new measures of permanence. All history before this, obliterated. Imagine a hand, raising a stone and making a mark on animal hide. Imagine the mark wiped clean by fire. Carbon in the hide and carbon in the ash. Diamonds littering the earth with no one to own them. Beauty dies without eyes to see it. And still, carbon cycles through its forms. [*Carbon, not as noun, but verb*].

CARBON DIOXIDE

noun

A colourless, odourless gas produced by burning carbon and organic compounds and by respiration. It is naturally present in air (about 0.03 per cent) and is absorbed by plants in photosynthesis.

Jan Baptist von Helmont is burning charcoal in his laboratory as the 17th century flays the earth of its mysteries; apples fall to rot on misted autumn grass as human cargo sweats below deck. Inquisitors inventory their scold's bridles; oil their thumbscrews. As the bank doors open on the morning, von Helmont puzzles over a mystery which occurs again and again; how the volume of the ash is less than that of the charcoal burned. What element is escaping, and where does it go? *Spiritus sylvestris*, he calls it, 'wild spirit,' this invisible gas that can't be captured. And though he doesn't know it, this wild spirit feeds the plants and forests that still measure the world's vastest distances. Imagine each plant as a tiny mouth fed by the air we exhale, that feeds us in turn, and all the world's a lung. Inside our lungs, bronchioles branch in fractals, like trees. The great elegant mirroring of nature; what we nurture, nurtures. What we destroy destroys us in turn.



Jessica Traynor

Biographies

Charlotte Buckley's poetry has appeared in *The Stinging Fly*, *Msllexia*, *Ambit*, and *The Rialto*, among others. Her work has been listed for the Gregory O'Donoghue International Poetry Prize, the Poetry Book Society's Women's Poetry Competition, and the Basil Bunting Poetry Award. She lives in Dublin where she is currently pursuing a PhD in ecofeminist poetry.

Edel Burke was recipient of the Words Ireland Mentorship programme, 2021; winner of Dromineer Poetry Competition 2017, and highly commended iYeats Poetry Competition 2017. She was published in *Cranadó, Banshee, Boyne Berries*, *The Cormorant Broadsheet* and *Book Drawn to the Light Press*. Edel is working towards a first collection.

Hilary N. Casey divides her time between Dublin and Tyrone. Among other things she is a UCD English and History graduate and a lawyer. She is currently working on preparing her first poetry collection, *Impossibly*, for publication.

Monica de Bhailís lives in Dún Laoghaire. She won the Red Line Poetry Contest in 2020 and has published poems in *Poetry Ireland Review*, *The Honest Ulsterman*, *Msllexia*, and *Crow of Minerva* amongst others. She is currently a recipient of a Words Ireland Mentoring Award sponsored jointly by Dún Laoghaire Rathdown Arts Office and The Lexicon Library.

Emma Gleeson is a writer specialising in the environmental impact of the fashion industry. Her poems have appeared in a wide range of publications from pothead to Leaving Cert test papers. Her first book of non-fiction, *Stuff Happens!*, was published by Penguin in 2021. @stuffhappensemma

Jess Mc Kinney is a poet from Inishowen, Donegal. In 2020, she completed her Poetry MA at Queen's University Belfast, where she was awarded the Irish Chair of Poetry Student Award. Her writing has appeared in *The Belfield Literary Review*, *The Moth*, *The Stinging Fly*, *Banshee* and New Island anthology *The New Frontier* with upcoming work in *The Cormorant*. Her debut pamphlet *Weeding* was published with Hazel Press in 2021, was shortlisted for the Patrick Kavanagh Poetry Award 2021, and Saboteur Awards 2022. She was selected for the Poetry Ireland Introductions Series 2022, and was recipient of the 2021 Ireland Chair of Poetry Bursary.

Tanya O'Sullivan is a freelance researcher, editor and writer from Cabinteely, Co. Dublin, now living in Co. Down. Her writing focuses on natural history and history of science and her first book *Geographies of City Science: Urban Lives and Origin Debates* was published by University of Pittsburgh Press in 2019.

Jane Robinson's first collection *Journey to the Sleeping Whale* (Salmon, 2018) received the Shine-Strong Award; other recognitions include the Strokestown International Poetry Prize. She was Writer-in-Residence at Bergen, Norway in 2019; and at South Dublin's Red Line Book Festival in 2021. A second collection will be published in March 2023.

With a background in psychology and sustainable transport planning **Jo Sachs-Eldridge** is a change-maker, cycling advocate, festival organiser and emerging poet living in Leitrim. She mostly dreams up projects involving bicycles, words, communities and other stuff she naively believes will change the world.

From India, **Sree Sen** is currently based in Dublin, Ireland. Her creative works have appeared in *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Dedalus Press 'Local Wonders Anthology'*, *Honest Ulsterman*, *bath magg*, *The Night Heron Barks* and others. Her debut poetry pamphlet *Cracked Asphalt* was published by Fly On The Wall Press in August 2022.

Jessica Traynor is dlr Poet in Residence 2022 and poetry editor at *Banshee*. Her debut, *Liffey Swim*, was shortlisted for the Strong/Shine Award. *The Quick* was a 2019 Irish Times poetry choice. Awards include the Ireland Chair of Poetry Bursary and Hennessy New Writer of the Year. Her third collection, *Pit Lullabies* (Bloodaxe Books, 2022) is a Poetry Book Society Recommendation.

Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown Arts Office

Since 1994 Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council has taken great pride in developing and supporting the Arts. The Council views the Arts as an important service that contributes to the quality of life of those who live in, work in and visit the County. We are proud of our reputation as a supportive home for the Arts and believe in their intrinsic value and the vital contribution that they make to the wellbeing and quality of life of the County.

The Council's Arts programme supports a number of artist residencies each year and it was delighted to host Jessica Traynor as dlr Poet in Residence for 2021/2022.



