

*No Other Place to Stand: An Anthology of Climate Change Poetry from Aotearoa New Zealand*  
Edited by Jordan Hamel, Rebecca Hawkes, Erik Kennedy, and Essa Ranapiri.  
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Reviewed by Jay Forlong

‘All I can do is write’: The second poem of this landmark collection, contributed by Dinah Hawken, includes toward its close this short, innocuous-seeming line. It is in many ways a small thing to write, the poet suggests. In the face of rising oceans and anxious observers, what function can the act of writing serve? The world is burning, and the only channel available to the poet with which to react is her words. Yet, it is also the greatest act that she can perform. The world is burning, and the only action powerful enough to make sense of the world is to write:

All I can do is write  
– I can try to see and mark  
where and how we are.

This ‘Anthology of Climate Change Poetry from Aotearoa New Zealand,’ *No Other Place to Stand*, is simultaneously a sole recourse and a powerful act in the face of the enormity of climate change, generated by over ninety poets and contributors. Each poet views the effects of the warming climate from the context of our small island nation, and they are compelled to write both because it is the only thing that they *can* do, and because it is the *only* thing that they can do.

From one perspective, the solutions to climate change are greenhouse gas mitigation and adaptation. We will not avoid the worst consequences of anthropogenic climate change without significant systemic and technological change, replacing our exploitative and extractive treatment of resources for economies that are circular, restorative, and centre around humanity fulfilling our roles as kaitiaki.

Yet, while further technological advancement and careful planning is certainly needed, these types of solutions already exist, waiting for the world to care enough to put them in action. We can produce green energy and decarbonise production, we can create carbon sinks and reforest the land, and we can establish the frameworks and infrastructure necessary to support adaptation. Rather, our narratives for communicating the danger, extremity, and unpredictability of climate change—as well as for showing the opportunity for transformation—are inadequate. Ecological poetry and fiction are growing genres and media, but the stories that we tell ourselves about the devastation of our home planet are still finding their feet.

Communities and societies are directly experiencing the effects of climate change at a local level for the first time with every passing day, including communities that many of this anthology’s poets call home. The stories of our experiences of climate change, first as news media and journalism, then as poetry and fiction, add voices to the growing chorus of expression, interpretation, and imagination of how the changing climate affects both the smallest part of our lives and the most far-reaching networks of international society.

Aotearoa New Zealand is an environmentally vulnerable country in the middle of an ocean. We advertise to the rest of the world with green tourist branding but continue with extractive

land-use practices. We are a wealthy nation, but also suffer from significant class disparity. We have a duty to our vulnerable neighbours in the Pacific as well as on our own shores. In all of this, our future—and already our present and past—cannot be disaggregated from the changing climate. Therefore, the voice of Aotearoa that is captured by *No Other Place to Stand*, or rather the myriad voices, have a role in the global climate conversation that is not only relevant but compelling, and not only compelling but vital.

A little further in, Michaela Keeble toys with how we talk about complexity, uncertainty, and tragedy in her contribution, ‘science communication’:

he’s new  
to science communication  
and no one here is in touch  
with their feelings  
[...]  
i don’t blame anyone [...]  
whose tools  
were not precise enough

Precise tools and science communication can only ever form half of the narrative of climate change. The the idea of being in touch with one’s feelings is thrown to us a cliché, but in its cynicism provides an alternative to precision for talking about our experiences of the warming climate. The poetry of this anthology is precise in one sense—it is artful and polished and commanding and timely—but also demonstrates active defiance of precision in a way that is defining and central to its project. Science communication’s precision is in the identification of temperate increase and sea-level rise, which cannot tell us how to feel and respond. The powerful imprecision of *No Other Place to Stand* is in its recognition that every perspective represented, including and especially those in tension with one another, is a necessary and compelling part of the anthology’s collective call to action.

Alison Glenny demonstrates this juxtaposition of technobabble with the personal in the excerpt from her poem, ‘Interglacial’. We are guided by the headings: *Noctilucent* and *Interglacial and Flow*. Then, under each heading is a poetic demonstration that the subjective cannot be substituted by definitions and data. It is ultimately our individual existences through which the effects of climate change will be experienced, and this same subjectivity is key in how we communicate and represent the damage to our environment. It is key if we ever hope to imagine the scale of what could be lost, and the diverse emotion that is generated, by climate change.

The threads woven through the poems are conscious in one sense. Each poet was given the same broad subject matter of climate change. However, these threads are equally unconscious in that their brief was no narrower than this, and yet the spaces in which our diverse experiences overlap resonate clearly throughout the anthology. The best way to demonstrate this, then, is through how the poets themselves communicate what this project is, why it matters, and how we should respond.

Some third of the way through the anthology, in Te Kanu Rolleston’s closing lines to ‘The Rena,’ we receive a précis for this anthology:

To overcome my anger, I had to find the silver lining,  
and what I ended up finding was a unity

Miriama Gemmell, in a similar way to Hawkens' drive to write with which this review opened, then gives us an impetus: 'I don't know what to do.' Laniyuk's lyrical summary of the tension between the statistical and subjective modes of climate change narratives reinforces the contrast that Glenny presents:

And I'll say a million times over  
That healing of land requires ceremony  
That the health of our earth  
Requires more than just solar panels  
It requires SPIRITUAL RECIPROCITY

Karlo Mila calls us to action, valuing our individual contributions but recognising the greater power of humanity together:

So let us harness our collective wisdoms:  
diverse, different and divergent.

And Kahu Kutia's Epilogue sets our sights on a new world:

You will hear scientific research that says we have eight or ten or twelve years before the run-on effects of climate change become unstoppable. This in itself is alarming. But in actual fact, marginalised communities have no years. We are already suffering the consequences and are making plans to adapt.

[...] This world requires radical reinvention from us all, because we cannot fix climate change within the system that invented it in the first place.

This book of words arranged in verse, printed on pages of forested wood—and all of the trade-offs between increased carbon storage and loss of biodiversity that this entails—cannot single-handedly change the course of human history to avoid the worst effects of climate change to come. Nor can it repay, repatriate, restore, and reconnect all that has already been lost.

But radical reinvention starts with ideas; with stories; with expressions of grief and of anger, as well as of hope; with the union of many knowledges; and starts, ultimately, in volumes such as this, where those who care come together to call on the rest of us to acknowledge and to act. This review is not an aesthetic assessment of individual poems—though, for my two cents, each is masterful. Rather, it is an endorsement and an advocacy for the mahi, the kaupapa, and the kōrero to which *No Other Place to Stand* contributes. Every voice lifted against the social inertia surrounding the climate crisis is vital. Here are many voices, with many ways of seeing and knowing, and many ideas and emotions that they wish to communicate. Here are many voices that nevertheless harness their collective wisdoms, not knowing what to do but choosing to write anyway, embracing the personal and the imprecise, and finding the unity necessary to begin radical reinvention.