

In Our Element – with Linda France

Episode One Transcript

Linda France:

In our element. A poet's inquiry into climate change.

Young Activists:

We are four friends living in Northumberland who feel very concerned about climate change and the environment.

Linda France:

Episode one. Introduction.

Young Activists:

We are aware that you will be concentrating on coronavirus a lot, but climate change is still extremely important.

Linda France:

During the first lockdown you wrote a letter. You got together with some of your friends and wrote a letter to Boris Johnson about climate change.

Young Activists:

I don't think I would've been able to do that if it was just me on my own, but having friends doing it made me feel like I was sort of part of a team. That we weren't just doing something weird and unusual, but other people agreed with us and were doing the same thing.

Linda France:

Yeah. So that gave you confidence and courage. The thing that you asked Boris Johnson to have.

Young Activists:

Climate change is real. We've messed up a lot, but we can fix it. You need to help too, because you are our prime minister. You are our leader. Climate change matters, and you have a big part to play in helping everyone to wake up to the ways that climate change is affecting our planet. Please pluck up the courage to take action.

Young Activists:

Listen to us. We are the future. Yours sincerely, Leah age 11, Frea age 10, Grace age 11, and Una age nine.

Linda France:

That's really impressive and beautifully written.

Linda France:

I'm Linda France. I'm a poet who cares a great deal about the health and balance of ecological systems. For this series I've chosen to go back to the elements as a way of talking about climate change with poets and musicians, thinkers and activists, making an unmanageable subject manageable, remembering what is important, what we need to not just stay alive, but to thrive. What helps us to be in our element?

Linda France:

1986. I was in my late 20s then living in the countryside, growing our own vegetables, and we had hens and bees, and that's where my children were born. The point when I wrote this poem, we didn't have electricity. We just had oil lamps and a big Rayburn. So we lived a very, very simple life, very close to the elements.

Linda France:

So in 1986, there was an accident at a nuclear power station in Chernobyl in Ukraine, and the air was blowing westwards. So potential radiation and pollution was coming towards us and this country, but nobody quite knew. It's a little bit like climate change. You can't touch it. You can't see it. You can't hear it. You can't taste it. So it's happening, but it's an invisible threat.

Linda France:

So my children were very small, and as a mother, I was very protective and very frightened about what was happening as a young mother with a baby now might also be frightened about climate change. So I wrote this poem.

Linda France:

Elementary
(for Rufus)

I ask my son what he knows of earth,
of properties of metal,
the rings in the heart of wood,
what shapes he can trace in air,
how deep is the blue of water;
remind him to take care with fire.

He has a dangerous fondness for fire,

my son, learning the lessons of earth;
knows magnets are science, metal,
observes their attraction through water.
He's aware that a kite, and he, needs air,
the paper he'd miss so much is wood.

We scramble hand in hand through the wood
near our house, feeling the damp earth
spring under our feet, the lapping of water
in the silence. The cold air
makes him cough so we go home to the fire,
welcomed by kettle's singing metal.

His toys are plastic; mine were metal,
with sharp corners. They rusted in water.
Now the fashion's back for wood,
carved and painted trains, trucks and fire-
engines. Things have changed. This earth
I thought I knew, and love, is mutable as air.

My son was four the year the air
blew from the east, poisoned by fire,
a fire kindled with no wood.
The smell of my sweat was metal.
We couldn't trust rain, milk or earth,
were afraid to drink the water.

He loves to play in water,
and I to watch him, in the tenuous air
of summers. I lean against knotted wood,
by the rover glinting metal.
As certain as flames in fire
we're held in the breath of earth.

I pray to the gods of air, goddesses of wood
and water, that he'll be saved from fire,
and save, like precious metal, all he knows of earth.

Linda France:

In north America, the poet Jorie Graham, whose work has been concerned with ecological awareness for many decades, has lately been writing from the perspective of becoming a grandmother.

Jorie Graham:

Anybody listening here who has her grandchild, grandchildren, children, who has children who one day will have children, it's almost like we have to close the door, put our hands over our face, walk away from it all, and go, 'I can't download this because it will make me insane. Life is difficult enough as it is.' Life sure is.

Jorie Graham:

Being able to stay productive and present and loving and human is an enormous task, let alone trying to imagine the life that your grandchild might have awaiting it. It's nearly soul destroying to watch a young person who has all the goodwill and the excitement, the willingness to be human... They've just been incarnated. They've just been brought down through somebody's body as a soul and put into flesh and put on the earth, and they look at the earth when they're that little, and they go, 'it's the most exciting place in a world'. And it is the world. And you think all of this capacity in all of these new children born all over the globe, what matters is that there's a world for them to carry on the human project in.

Jorie Graham:

I'm not the only grandmother looking at their grandchild and looking at the fires, the smoke and the flooding and the overpopulation and the reduction of resources and the enormous injustice. I've been thinking about climate change for most of my adult life, but having this child, it opened up an expanse into the 30s and 40s and 50s of this century, which is like a horror movie to me.

Linda France:

I spoke, too, to Nigeria-born UK-based poet, playwright, and performer, Inua Ellams.

Inua Ellams:

I went to this TED Talk years and years ago in London. There was a Ugandan politician, and he talked about how he approaches politics as a grandfather, and that was his opening statement, which baffled all of us in the audience. And he said that, essentially, when he makes a decision, he expects that the repercussions will not be felt by him or his children, but his grandchildren. So he makes long-term decisions in their best interest, which completely changes his approach to everything, because he's not looking for immediate outcomes. He's not looking for certainties. He's thinking far into the future, and it's all full of possibilities. And all he's concerned with is how can I make those possibilities as kind to children who are... not even alive yet? How can I create a safe space for them with the little that I do know now? And I think it is a radically different way of thinking.

Jorie Graham:

Anybody listening to this who has seen the joy in their grandchild's face and who has worried about their future, which is probably everyone on the planet and probably for most generations people have worried about, will my children be okay when I'm no

longer here, and what will my grandchildren or great-grandchildren have for them? Now we used to create, we used to save, and we used to prepare a world for the future of our peoples, our families, our tribes, our species. We tend to be living so much in the present that we don't do that.

Linda France:

Different ages, classes, ethnicities, and genders have different viewpoints on the climate crisis. Exploring the elements allows us to find common ground. Like nature, climate change isn't just one thing. It is a chimera, a hyper object, a super wicked problem, an entanglement of kin. I asked Inua Ellams as a Londoner about the vantage point of a free range city dweller.

Inua Ellams:

There are people who are absolutely at the forefront of these conversations and they are leading the conversation. There are those who are trying to build rooms that these conversations can be had in. There are those who have no clue what is happening and don't care that they don't have any clues, and a lot of who they are and why they are, why they care or don't care, sit across racial and class and generational lines. And it's a heady mix of everything.

Inua Ellams:

I think, generally, urban dwellers are divorced from the natural world, and unfortunately, because of how fast paced the city is, communication organizations and companies here take advantage of that, and we're not stilled enough to make big societal changes where we do something that makes a lasting impact. It's quite easy to be distracted.

Inua Ellams:

I wish we had village mentalities. I wish we lived in a time where civil rights leaders were still listened to and could still command the attention.

Jorie Graham:

What I tell myself and I often tell my students is would I want to be alive at any other time in history? And the answer to that is, however difficult, no. This is the most exciting moment in history that I can imagine, because it's a moment where we have an opportunity that is unique and unparalleled, which is to save the entire project that the human has put forth by perhaps awakening to some of its most nefarious aspects and changing ourselves, reorienting the ship. We have an astonishing opportunity. We are uniquely equipped. We have millions of like-minded people, and it is actually quite privileged to be alive now and to be asked these kinds of questions.

Linda France:

Having a grandchild and witnessing her waking up into the world and growing up is something that breaks something open inside you. It's another thing to enlarge and

enliven the imagination. I wonder, Jorie, whether this might be a good place for you to read the poem that you mentioned called 'Why?'

Jorie Graham:

Obviously everyone who's had a grandchild or a child knows that phase they go through when no matter what you say, they say, 'why?'

Jorie Graham:

Why

you ask me
again—why
putting your tiny hand on
the not yet

unsheathed
bud on the
rhododendron
and I see

I need to be sky
I need to be soil
there are no words
for why that I

can find fast
enough, why
you say at
the foot of the cherry's wide

blossomfall
is it dead now why
did it let go, *why*,
tossed out

into what appears
to be silence
when I say
let's run the

rain is starting—why
are we lost why did
we just leave
where we just

were why is
everything
so far behind
now as we go on I

see you think
when you reach
me again to ask
why when I say

are you coming now &

you say no,
I want to stay, I want
things to stay, I do
not want to come

away from things—what
is this we are
entering—me taking yr
hand now to speed

our going
as fast as we can in this suddenly
hard rain, yr
hand not letting go

of the rose pebble u found
feeling the first itching of
personal luck as
you now slowly

pocket it thinking
you have taken
with you a piece of
what u could not

leave behind. It is
why we went there
and left there.
It is your why.

Jorie Graham:

It's about this pocketing of this pebble that you take it out of nature and put it into your inwardness, into your mind or your pocket, and you take it with you, and that's the way you survive your relationship to mortality and time. It's something natural in us, but which leads us to the problems that give rise to a program such as this one today. Why are we talking about these things? Because our reaction to the people that we were when we were in the cycles of time was to step out of circular time and into linear time in which systems... Accrual, capitalism, materialism, consumer substitution of desire... This poem is ultimately an exploration of desire and how you ended up wanting the desire to become personal and internal, because you can't express the loss you feel of the relationship that you would have had with the tree or the rhododendron. Does that make sense?

Linda France:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. And so much of what you say is carried by that repeated, why? So it becomes not just a question, but also a reason and part of that cycle that you describe.

Young Activists:

Avoiding climate breakdown will require cathedral thinking. We must lay the foundation while we may not know exactly how to build the ceiling. Sometimes we just simply have to find a way. The moment we decide to fulfill something, we can do anything. I'm sure that the moment we start behaving as if we were in an emergency, we can avoid climate and ecological catastrophe.

Linda France:

That's Gwen reading from one of Greta Thunberg's speeches. As part of the School Strike for Climate and Fridays for the Future, Una and Freya wrote a song for the global climate strike of September, 2019.

Linda France:

So did you strike yourselves?

Young Activists:

Yeah, we went to most of the strikes. On the one in which we sung, our whole school went because our head teacher's really passionate about climate change, and so we all went on a school trip to the climate strike. And me and Freya sung the song at that one.

Linda France:

Yeah? And what did that feel like?

Young Activists:

It felt like we had a lot of power and a lot of people. There was a big group of high school kids and adults with toddlers and stuff. It was very exciting, but also kind of nerve wracking. Pressurizing.

Linda France:

Yeah. It's quite scary being in front of all those people and having power, but with power comes responsibility, doesn't it?

Freya and Una:

(singing)

We're striking, we're striking, we're striking for our world.

We're fighting, we're fighting, we're fighting for our planet.

And we're never gonna give up.

And we're never gonna give up.

Until our task is done.

Greta spoke out loud and clear, that climate change is real.

The government must make a plan to start a green new deal.

We're striking, we're striking, we're striking for our world.

We're fighting, we're fighting, we're fighting for our planet.

And we're never gonna give up.

And we're never gonna give up,

Until our task is done.

Linda France:

You heard Freya on piano and Una on guitar. The song, 'In Our Element', was set to my words and performed by Joshua Green.

Linda France:

This series is presented by me, Linda France. It is a Sonderbug production with New Writing North supported by the Audio Content Fund and Arts Council England in association with Newcastle University.

Linda France:

Thank you for listening.