

KEY STAGE	AGE
EYFS	3-5
KS1	5-7
KS2	7-11 ✓
KS3	11-14 ✓
KS4	14-16 ✓
KS5	16-18 ✓

#### AT A GLANCE

- NATURE
- LOSS
- CLIMATE CHANGE
- LIST POEMS
- THE SENSES

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**POETRYCLASS: FRESH IDEAS FOR POETRY LEARNING FROM THE POETRY SOCIETY**  
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# VANISHING ACTS: CONNECTING CLIMATE CHANGE AND POETRY

**BY HELEN MORT**

The challenge with writing poetry about climate change is getting students to bring personal and universal issues together in a way that is detailed and original. This activity, 'Vanishing Acts', draws on Cape Farewell's visual archive (online at [www.capefarewell.com/switch](http://www.capefarewell.com/switch)) and encourages engagement with ecology (and climate change in particular) through creative writing.

The theme for this writing challenge is **disappearance**, which the students can interpret on a number of different levels, with reference to their own lives and experiences or the fate of the planet. When we think about climate change, we often think about things vanishing. Climate change and growing industrialisation is bringing many changes to our environments, such as the loss of habitats for creatures like polar bears, and the disappearance of whole glaciers bringing rising sea levels which threaten whole communities.

#### Developing ideas

If you have an interactive white board, click through to the SWITCH website to look at Nathan Gallagher's picture of Sunand Prasad's project 'Greenhouse Gas': <http://www.capefarewell.com/switch/see/>. The red balloons in the photograph represent CO2 emissions. Together, the balloons mark out a cube representing the volume of space that would be taken up by 1 tonne of pure carbon dioxide. Carbon dioxide is the primary greenhouse gas emitted through human activities, and is causing changes to the earth's climate, including the gradual disappearance of some land forms and animal

species through flooding, erosion and damage to natural habitats. You could talk to your students about how Sunand's project represents carbon dioxide emissions physically and what the significance of his choice of balloons might be to the theme of disappearance.

#### How to disappear

With your class read Amanda Dalton's poem 'How to Disappear' on page 3. In this poem, Amanda presents a set of instructions for vanishing. She starts with 'the easy things' you might lose (misplacing everyday objects, for example, like a set of keys) but her list of instructions gradually becomes more abstract – magic tricks, or losing a reflection in a mirror – until, finally, she explores the idea that a person might lose themselves entirely. Talk to the students about the different things Amanda Dalton describes losing in the poem. Which are easy to lose and which are more difficult? Ask the students to think about things or objects that they have lost in the past, then ask them about things that they wouldn't like to lose.



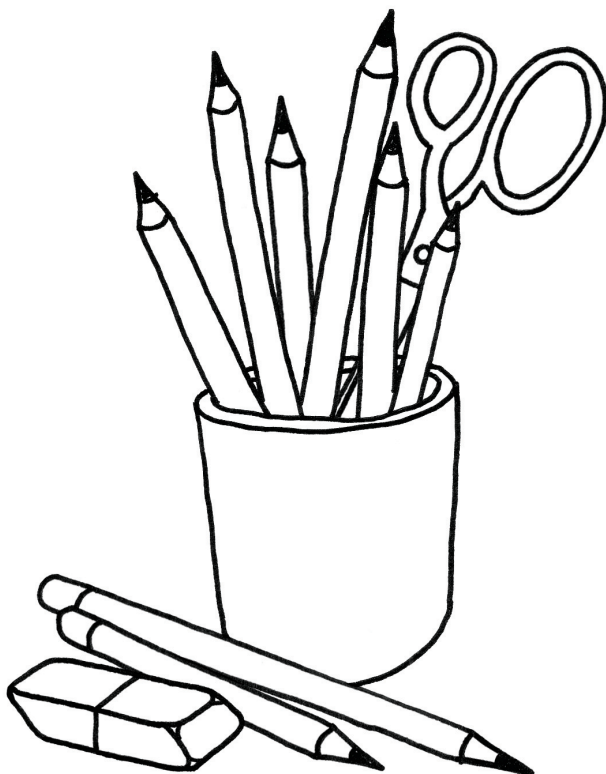
### Create a poem

When the students are thinking of things that they wouldn't like to lose, they can write these down on the attached handouts. These lists can form the starting point for a poem.

Students could take inspiration from Amanda's poem to create their own set of instructions for a disappearance. What things could they lose and how? How hard would losing each thing be?

Or they could write about something they've lost, or something they don't want to lose. What makes it special to them, and how do they feel about living without it?

An extended option is that students could try writing in the voice of the disappearing land or animals. How does ice feel when it melts? What do monkeys, birds or tigers fear as the rainforest is being stripped away? They could even write in the voice of carbon dioxide – how does it view its role in causing climate change?



### Tips for poem building

- Keep it concrete: encourage students to focus on their senses, on describing things that can be seen, heard, touched, tasted or smelled. You might discuss how Amanda Dalton makes each thing she describes seem 'real' in her poem.
- Make it unique: encourage students to include things that are particular or special to them. This might include writing in slang, or writing about places they know well and including the names of those places.
- Make a list: Amanda Dalton's poem uses the list structure to atmospheric effect. You might encourage students to use the same structure for their piece, listing things or using repetition.
- It doesn't have to rhyme: encourage the students to write without using rhyme to give their poems a bit more freedom.
- Read it aloud: leave some time for students to read their work out loud as part of the session so they can hear how their words sound off the page.

### Cape Farewell

Cape Farewell ([www.capefarewell.com](http://www.capefarewell.com)) leads expeditions of artists, musicians, writers and scientists to places like the Arctic and the Amazon so they can see the effects of climate change close up and respond to it in their work.

### Young Poets Network

The Poetry Society's Young Poets Network ([www.youngpoetsnetwork.org.uk](http://www.youngpoetsnetwork.org.uk)) – a dynamic online community and resource for young writers – has joined forces with Cape Farewell on their SWITCH project ([www.capefarewell.com/switch](http://www.capefarewell.com/switch)) to invite young poets aged 11-18 to join the vital conversation about climate change and the future of our planet.

# HOW TO DISAPPEAR

First rehearse the easy things.  
Lose your words in a high wind,  
walk in the dark on an unlit road,  
observe how other people mislay keys,  
their diaries, new umbrellas.  
See what it takes to go unnoticed  
in a crowded room. Tell lies:  
I love you. I'll be back in half an hour.  
I'm fine.

The childish things.  
Stand very still behind a tree,  
become a cowboy, say you have died,  
climb into wardrobes, breathe on a mirror  
until there's no one there, and practice magic,  
tricks with smoke and fire—  
a flick of the wrist and the victim's lost  
his watch, his wife, his ten pound note. Perfect it.  
Hold your breath a little longer every time.

The hardest things.  
Eat less, much less, and take a vow of silence.  
Learn the point of vanishing, the moment  
embers turn to ash, the sun falls down,  
the sudden white-out comes.  
And when it comes again – it will –  
just walk at it. Walk into it, and walk,  
until you know that you're no longer  
anywhere.

**AMANDA DALTON**

©Amanda Dalton, *How to Disappear*  
(Bloodaxe Books, 1999)



# ***VANISHING ACTS***

**1.** What things would you least like to lose? These might be objects, memories, places, people... anything you like!  
Write five things down on your list.

- a. ....
- b. ....
- c. ....
- d. ....
- e. ....

**2.** For each of the things on your list, write down three adjectives to describe how they are unique to you. Be inventive!

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**3.** Write down a list of things that the earth might lose because of climate change, based on your group discussion with your teacher.

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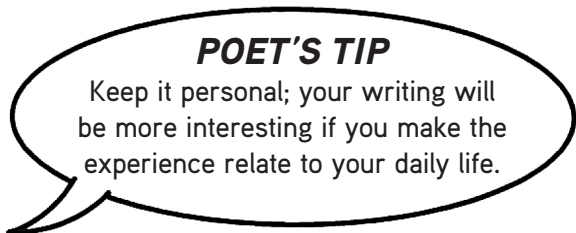
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**4.** Start forming some of your ideas about lost things into a poem. It doesn't have to rhyme. You could write about something you've already lost, or something you don't want to lose, one of the items you've listed above. What makes it special to you, and how do you feel about living without it?

**5.** Think about how your own experience of and attitudes towards loss relate to what the earth has lost, and what it will lose in the future.



***POET'S TIP***

Keep it personal; your writing will be more interesting if you make the experience relate to your daily life.