

STEPHANIE NIU



Last spring, motherhood was on my mind. I had just finished Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, in which one of the characters, pregnant, contemplates how to factor in climate change when deciding whether to keep her child.¹ She wants the baby; she considers letting the child go to be "a way of mutilating my real life as a gesture of submission to an imagined future."²

Around this time, my climate anxiety was running high after conversations with friends about the merits of chestnut trees as carbon sinks and the casual history of human modification of living beings (yielding fleshier watermelons, cuter and more belabored pugs). These poems were my own way of asking: Can wanting a child in a climate crisis be responsible? Can it be hopeful?

One window into these questions was using poetic forms that allowed me to treat language like a finite resource. This felt like play; in some ways, language is the opposite of a resource. Words are as free and infinite as a thing can get. Yet the duplex emphasizes conservation and reuse, permitting new words only when absolutely necessary. The golden shovel recycles language, taking something extant and making it new.

Constraining something as free as language, like contemplating motherhood, was an exercise in accepting my own mortality. Though language is infinite, it can be powerful when limited. And though I long to perfectly remember this world and exist in it forever, it's a relief to believe in a world that will outlive my imagination—a world for children.

1. Though abortion was illegal in Ireland at the time Rooney wrote *Beautiful World*, she is outspokenly pro-choice. See her essay, "An Irish Problem," in *London Review of Books*, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v40/n10/sally-rooney/an-irish-problem>.

2. Rooney, *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, page 350.