

Time capsule found on the dead planet by Margaret Atwood

In December world leaders will gather in Copenhagen to try to reach a global deal to tackle climate change. To support the launch of the 10:10 campaign to reduce carbon emissions, the Review asked some of our greatest artists, authors and poets to produce new work in response to the crisis

Margaret Atwood

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1. In the first age, we created gods. We carved them out of wood; there was still such a thing as wood, then. We forged them from shining metals and painted them on temple walls. They were gods of many kinds, and goddesses as well. Sometimes they were cruel and drank our blood, but also they gave us rain and sunshine, favourable winds, good harvests, fertile animals, many children. A million birds flew over us then, a million fish swam in our seas.

Our gods had horns on their heads, or moons, or sealy fins, or the beaks of eagles. We called them All-Knowing, we called them Shining One. We knew we were not orphans. We smelled the earth and rolled in it; its juices ran down our chins.

2. In the second age we created money. This money was also made of shining metals. It had two faces: on one side was a severed head, that of a king or some other noteworthy person, on the other face was something else, something that would give us comfort: a bird, a fish, a fur-bearing animal. This was all that remained of our former gods. The money was small in size, and each of us would carry some of it with him every day, as close to the skin as possible. We could not eat this money, wear it or burn it for warmth; but as if by magic it could be changed into such things. The money was mysterious, and we were in awe of it. If you had enough of it, it was said, you would be able to fly.

3. In the third age, money became a god. It was all-powerful, and out of control. It began to talk. It began to create on its own. It created feasts and famines, songs of joy, lamentations. It created greed and hunger, which were its two faces. Towers of glass rose at its name, were destroyed and rose again. It began to eat things. It ate whole forests, croplands and the lives of children. It ate armies, ships and cities. No one could stop it. To have it was a sign of grace.

4. In the fourth age we created deserts. Our deserts were of several kinds, but they had one thing in common: nothing grew there. Some were made of cement, some were made of various poisons, some of baked earth. We made these deserts from the desire for more money and from despair at the lack of it. Wars, plagues and famines visited us, but we did not stop in our industrious creation of deserts. At last all wells were poisoned, all rivers ran with filth, all seas were dead; there was no land left to grow food.

Some of our wise men turned to the contemplation of deserts. A stone in the sand in the setting sun could be very beautiful, they said. Deserts were tidy, because there were no weeds in them, nothing that crawled. Stay in the desert long enough, and you could apprehend the absolute. The number zero was holy.

5. You who have come here from some distant world, to this dry lakeshore and this cairn, and to this cylinder of brass, in which on the last day of all our recorded days I place our final words:

Pray for us, who once, too, thought we could fly.