

# *Experiments and Observations on Different Kinds of Air, 1775*

## **Matt Howard**

Imagine him, lifting then placing his bell jars,  
Priestley, about those simple experiments,  
starting in on notions of composition  
with a mouse, lit candle and mint plant.

Breath, fire and time. Observable in each of us,  
the oblivious workings; contaminable, lethal,  
yet restorable, even life-enhancing combinations –  
sightlines to the very core through each blown glass.

Somehow all our hands since, setting them up again  
and again, the brittle mortal qualities.

# *Acknowledgments*

This poem emerged from a conversation with Dr Katy Wright, Associate Professor of Sociology and Social Policy. It was a wide-ranging chat that circled back to notions of how to engage people with what isn't always immediately visible in our everyday lives and how to think broader and deeper than our own places, lives, even our own lifetimes.

When trying to write a poem, I often find one idea or image draws me in and I then try to explore that through the process of writing. Often that will collide with other things I've been thinking about. I was particularly struck by Katy's thoughts on public attitudes to air pollution today as opposed to the past where a layperson's engagement is driven by what is readily visible. The example Katy gave was how in the past it was easier to engage people on such as issue as 'bad air' might settle as smuts on clothes and linen perhaps on their own washing lines. 'Bad air' now is something much less visible. This started me thinking back to Joseph Priestley's own simple experiments and observations on air and how (at least through the logic of writing a poem), they illuminate the climate and nature emergency and our own part within it all, our shared responsibilities and potential.