On ‘Epistle from inside the Sharknado’ by Fran Lock

Overview

I’ve been thinking a lot about what eco-poetry is, can be, or could be – which approaches are needed to capture people’s attention. Eco-poetry writes about and also advocates for the natural environment, an ever-more urgent task, and it can take a huge variety of often surprising forms.

When I heard ‘Epistle from inside the Sharknado’ by Fran Lock (see page 5), which was commended in the 2016 National Poetry Competition, I thought it really stood out for its boldness, vigour and risk – in form, subject and language. In his judge’s comments, Jack Underwood called this a “deadly serious eco-poem” – and its playful grotesquity is all part of that.

It uses a schlocky pop culture image (the film Sharknado has 3.3/10 on IMDB – I watched the trailer…) as a way to mirror back ideas about Hollywood capitalist excess, the unhelpful caricaturing of sharks and ‘Nature’. Hollywood, with its
“corkscrew / politics of plunder and blame”, sells us the image of ‘Us’ vs Nature (with its “maniac gusto”), while “running a scream up a flagpole” – a genius image of terrified nationalism – and “crouching in rainy basements”. In reality, the oceans and seas are under attack from human excess.

The poem is in an epistolary (letter) form, meaning there’s an ‘I’ and ‘We’ (the individual and collective voice of the Sharknado), addressing a ‘You’. It offers Lock the removed, godlike voice of the Sharknado, that funnel of “thick sleeves / of meat, working the humid air like a grudge”. It challenges the human reader to rethink their ideas of the Sharknado – and perhaps other things too, being sold back to us via Hollywood.

**Points to discuss**

1. How do you respond to the pop culture reference to the Sharknado? Was it necessary to look it up, or was everything you needed in the poem already?

2. Do you think that ‘pop culture’ belongs in poems? If so, why? If not, why not? These ideas can uncover a lot about our underlying assumptions about what poetry is and what it’s for.

3. For me, this is an eco-poem. Do you consider it one? If not, what is an eco-poem for you and why? Our ideas of nature and culture are vital to unpacking our current predicament, so I think it’s helpful to talk about this.

4. The poem even looks like a Sharknado. How else could you use form to evoke an elemental force like a tornado, Sharknado, or any other destructive weather condition?

5. The piece could have been written in a third-person descriptive voice. If the poem wasn’t written in the epistolary form – offering an ‘I’, ‘We’ and a ‘You’ – what would it be like? What information does the voice in the poem give us?

**Writing prompt: Bring the Schlock**

First, think of some images, places, objects etc from pop culture – your guilty pleasures, the things you watch, read, listen to when nobody is around. Perhaps there’s something which has stayed with you from childhood. Make a list. If you’re in a group, chat about your choices. Examples might be the river of ectoplasm in Ghostbusters II or the flying saucer on Mulder’s ‘I Want to Believe’ poster in The X-Files.

Poet and workshop facilitator Paul Matthews uses ‘It, You, I and We’ to write about objects – and I find this really helpful:

1. **Start your poem by naming and describing your image/place/object in great detail (It):** this works best if it’s something that couldn’t otherwise speak.

2. **Address that thing (You):** this might be enquiries about what it’s up to, its experience or ideas, why it’s doing what it’s doing, and so on. This could be entirely questions.

3. **Now, write back to yourself as that pop cultural image (I/We):** become it and discover what voice it has. You might want to answer some of your questions from writing to it. Often this throws up some surprises.

Look at what you’ve written. If some of the themes in ‘Epistle from inside the Sharknado’ are nature and nationalism, what themes come up in your poem? What information does the poem’s reader need to enter into that world? How could you develop those themes and make the poem something which stands alone and does something new?
‘Do not indulge indigo’ by Katie Griffiths

Overview

‘Do not indulge indigo’ by Katie Griffiths (see page 6) won second prize in the 2018 National Poetry Competition. It’s a poem which turns a word into a world, transforming the atmosphere from start to finish. Sometimes I get frustrated by people’s need for a poem’s ‘meaning’ or what it’s ‘about’; this piece magically, tangibly and troublingly avoids that, containing multitudes.

There’s the unifying device of “Do not…”, this negation making indigo even more prohibited and alluring. There’s the way indigo shapeshifts between creature, drug, tool, mountain in the images. The poem points beyond itself through the ‘cf’ and ‘eg’ references, to its own world, full of paranoia and wonder. That second-person “you” in “the branding on your arm”, “you a nascent witch” which needles the reader: suddenly, we’re not sure who or what we are. Griffiths even undercuts her own world, with her warning not to “introduce indigo into written phrases / [because] it may fall short”.

‘Indigo’ slithers around and through the lacunae (gaps), becoming a symbol of everything – including its own shortcomings as a symbol. It draws you into a world with history and geography. I admire the precision and humour with which it creates a world for each reader to inhabit and be unsettled by.

Points to discuss

1. For you, what is “indigo” in this poem and which of the tangible details make it so?

2. The poem uses some aspects of both the meaning, associations and sounds contained in the word “indigo”, as in the image of digging and in that final image which plays on the syllables in dig go and mutates into “infradig” (which I looked up: “a shortened version of the Latin phrase infradignitatem, meaning ‘beneath dignity’”). What does this do to the poem’s sounds, meanings and images?

3. What does the form do to the poem – those gaps or ‘lacunae’ and the big block on the page? What would it be like if you rewrote it as a newspaper column, or a concrete poem, or in another form entirely?

4. If you rewrote this poem as affirmative instructions, rather than negations, what would that be like? Would it be more or less effective for you? In what other ways can we negate in a poem?

5. The poem uses ‘references’ to a world outside itself (through “eg”, “cf”, “Caveat emptor”). How do these change your reading of the poem? Are there ways you could use these in your own poems?

6. For me, indigo is something louche and intriguing, existing in underworlds and conspiracies which are exciting and dangerous. Where else could the image of indigo have taken the poet? What’s the balance between the beautiful and the sinister in a poem, and does this poem get that balance right, for you? Why, or why not?
Writing prompts

1. Unpack your own indigo

   a. Start with an interesting word – open an obscure book on a random page and pick one that appeals, or try a synonym finder online.

   b. Unpack all the possible sounds and images from the word itself – break it down into its component parts (in dig go), and see what inspiration arises from this.

   c. Build all of these images into a poem with that word as the starting point. You could give it some sense of the unseen and conspiratorial, as Griffiths does, or take it in your own direction.

2. Write a poem which uses a number of references to a world beyond the poem, all of which are entirely made up. Make them absurd and credible. Or write a poem (as Ocean Vuong did, in ‘Seventh Circle of Earth’) which is entirely footnotes from an invisible text. Play with fictitious intertextuality (the links between texts) and what this can mean: marginalisation, knowledge, interconnectedness.

3. Write a poem of negation: tell us what didn’t happen, what we shouldn’t do, what you don’t know. This approach is very flexible – just think of Auden’s famous “poetry makes nothing happen”. Somehow by saying what we shouldn’t look at, do, or think, we just can’t help ourselves…

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www.poetrysociety.org.uk/npc
Fran Lock
Epistle from inside the Sharknado

You might call it God; might witness the weather’s disjointed volition, and figure it biblical payback for all your long decades of self-defeating industry: the gases in the atmosphere, the poison in the water.

And you might stand on your lawn in your shorts, running a scream up a flagpole; sniffing catastrophe’s rank surfeit on the bilious air. You might, for all I know. For all I care you could be crouching in rainy basements, debating plague or commies with the cans of beans; courting immortality with forward planning until your lungs fill up with sand like canvass punching bags. It means nothing to me, the human world: humourless delinquencies, the corkscrew politics of plunder and of blame; victims of this or that, rolling a moistened eye to camera. I see you, surrounded by dripping debris, in the local anchor’s sallow limelight, angling and righteous. Nuke the sharks! It will not save you. I will come again. We will come, seismic and genderless, thick sleeves of meat, working the humid air like a grudge. You’d better run. You’d better equip yourself with guns, and chainsaws, consult a TV psychic, burn your money, shave your head, sell your kids, anything at all. I am coming round again. We are coming, driven by insomnia’s deficient logics, our no-escape velocity. You will know us by the shine of our endangered Kevlar; my exoskeletal corset rips your fingers into kelp. You might call it God, but it’s not God. The sky is singing with Nature’s maniac gusto. It’s the only game in town. Come, hurry over the swooning horizon, stare into my flat-screen eye, and tell me, human, it is not so.

‘Epistle from inside the Sharknado’ by Fran Lock was commended in the 2016 National Poetry Competition. © The author, 2019.
Do not indulge indigo

even if it moons at your window  
Do not feed indigo as pit into which you pour ledgers
or the branding on your arm  
Do not romance indigo unless you want stains never to go
Do not dig with indigo your foot risks limb-affecting disease which is to say your toes
will drop off one by one  
Do not carry indigo like an organ donation card you will
be winded may as well shoplift flat-packs from a self-assembly depot or a pre-schooler
Do not exfoliate indigo its flesh is spotted with liver marks like your own you a nascent witch
living in a hut off the M3
Do not startled indigo in its lair while whelping its young
it may fall short as symbol of potency or grief Caveat emptor: do not deal in indigo
it will be cut with baking powder eg The Great Indigo Crisis of 2017
Do not climb indigo like a Munro mobile phone signal dead your face growing old in the wind
Do not map indigo declare it a colony where you offload petty criminals and onload avocados
Do not sue indigo it can rig juries remember the ‘Hermanos Coloridos’ or pixelate indigo
as anything tentative cf the theory of exits and entrances
Do not reduce indigo to sloppy syllables in dig go or get front-fixated on no room
at the ‘in’ searching for shooting stars Halley’s Comet Ursa Major framed in the sky
above your bed or would be if you didn’t shiver in the lock-up with a corrugated iron roof
always leaking and you thinking in in indig indignant indigent infradig simply dug in