



## Something Strange

“The Elf-Thugs” began as an environmental poem, the elf-thugs warning the speaker to leave with the frogs and buckeye butterflies. I’m not sure if the thugs are sympathetic to the speaker or if they’re angry with her. What do you think?

The phrase *the old six-toed dumpster cat* comes from a notebook where I record words, phrases, images, snippets of conversations - anything that catches my eye and ear. Also in my notebooks are the phrases *the guy who licks books*, *master oyster shucker*, *real grackle time*, and *he dropped dead in a bed of pansies*.

When the elf-thug shouts, he uses the words *sloomy* and *rutterkin*. These are English words we no longer use. I found them in “Opening a Can of Words,” a book I picked up at a Scholastic book fair many years ago. *Sloomy* means lazy and *rutterkin* means bully. I hope someday to use the words *flosh*, which means a swamp with many weeds tangled together, and *lip-clap*, an old word for kiss.

### The Elf-Thugs

I burn my last chair and the elf-thugs tell me  
*leave now before we turn against calendars, leave.*  
They call from a drain or a mixing bowl, even semi-  
circular things, a burnt down candle or seashell.  
They come to me, these little things with knives  
in their boots and ice in their eyes. *The last frog*  
*waltzes* they say *or too few buckeyes, spread*  
*the news.* I try, but who listens when tomorrow  
my shoes could be labelled *indulgent points*  
*of disagreement*, and I’d have to burn them?  
When I leave, the old six-toed dumpster cat  
will come with me. She hears them too,  
brought me under the full moon my first elf  
in her mouth, the body rage-quivered,  
stiff, shouting - *you sloomy, you listen*  
*the rains to come will spare the stars,*  
*most mountains, even broken wings,*  
*but not you stupid lost lollies and rutterkins,*  
*hearts harnessed to fear, losing every –*  
and the cat spit it out. How could I not notice  
this mouthy ember sitting up by the cat’s  
water bowl? Now he and his kin are my eyes  
and ears, brimming with time running out  
and nut husk sounds, their knives swallow-swift.

from *how the gods pour tea* (Goose Lane Editions, 2013)



Questions to ponder:

- 1) Why does the speaker burn her last chair?
- 2) What other “semi-circular things” might an elf-thug call from?
- 3) Why might shoes be labelled “indulgent points of disagreement.”?
- 4) In line 6, what does “ice in their eyes” suggest about the elf-thugs?
- 5) Where do you think the cat found the first elf-thug?
- 6) In lines 15 to 19, what do you think the elf-thug is trying to say?
- 7) How would you describe the elf-thug’s voice?
- 8) In lines 22 & 23, why does the speaker say “now he and his kin are my eyes and ears”?
- 9) How would you describe the character of the speaker?
- 10) Illustrate an elf-thug. Or the “old six-toed dumpster cat.”

Suggestions for writing something strange:

- 1) You’ll need scissors, glue, paper, and a stack of old magazines. Cut out pictures and make a collage with your pics on the paper. Ask yourself questions about the collage. *A giant cat on the bridge - really? Why does the man have a boot for an arm? Whatever the collage suggests. Try answering the question with a poem. See what happens. This is fun to do with a friend or stranger, both of you working off the same collage.*
- 2) Write a myth or creation poem around something you see daily. *Why a fork has four tines. How fireflies found fire. Keep stretching. Why some crows are red.*
- 3) Find a poem or part of a poem in a foreign language (one you can’t read or speak) and write the poem out in longhand. Then, word by word, translate the poem by what the foreign words sound like and suggest to you in English. This is also a good group project. Every person “translates” the same passage, then reads their rendition, and we get some laughs, some surprises. The results may not make sense to you but might offer enough strangeness to start a new poem rolling around in your head or on the page.
- 4) Keep an observatory notebook for a few weeks, a month, whatever feels right. Write down what you see, what you hear, what you’re feeling that day walking to work as the rain taps the plastic cover to your coffee. (Sometimes I include sketches.) Take some time to review what you’ve collected. Can you write a poem off any of your entries, even a list poem that lists your favourites? Can you find an image or phrase that works in a poem you’ve already written, a poem you thought was finished?
- 5) You’ve been hired by a fortune cookie business to write fortunes for their cookies. However, the owner, Ms. Irma Evermydle says she is bored silly with traditional fortunes. “I want my cookies to wake people up. Every slip in every cookie must mention a colour, an animal, and outer space. I want 25 by tomorrow.” What would you write?
- 6) Find five old English words we no longer use and use them.