*Neptune's Projects*, Rishi Dastidar (Nine Arches Press)

I should have listened to George, who told me – after my rant about how wonderful Rishi Dastidar's previous books *Saffron Jack* and *Ticker Tape* were – that I would tire of them pretty quickly, just as he had. Needless to say, I ignored him, and have returned to those two titles, but (and it's a big but) this new book is mostly unsubtle, preachy and simply trying too hard.

I am no climate change denier and I am all for a bit of punning and topical discussion in poetry, but I really don't need smartarse reinventions of mythology where Neptune is at a loss what to do with the human race who are destroying the planet. And if I see the word 'anthropocene' again I am going to scream.

What is a reader to do with the banalities of poems like this, reproduced here in its entirety?

 **The waves speak happinness**

 be the sea lion of your life | | applaud your delight at being

This is worthy of Rupi Kaur herself! (And I haven't even mentioned the misspelling of happiness.)

Elsewhere, there are kelpies, mermaids, seasalter cocktails, shipwreck champagne and wave after wave after wave of heavy-handed poems with a message. Unfortunately it's a message that most of us have already heard and one that those who haven't won't come across because they don't buy or read small press poetry books, or indeed any poetry book.

Dastidar knows this though. The book's epigraph, from a song by the band Wilco reads 'But I know you're not listening / Oh I know you're not listening'. The whole exercise seems one of authorial masochism (saddo masochism?), driven by content and an urge to persuade and explain rather than any sense of poetry or language. May I suggest that poetry is rarely the best place for protest, and that those concerned about human extinction (the Earth will be just fine without us) might take direct action rather than write poetry?

There is one section of *Neptune's Projects* that shows some of the author's previous flair for writing witty and topical poetry, which is a sequence entitled 'Pretanic'. Here, Poldar turns his attention to the state of Britain, its politicians and the effect Brexit has had on us. 'Tight Little Island' discusses how we have 'shipwreck[ed] our ambition', whilst the brief three-line poem 'Impossible Nation' informs us that

 The one thing they fail

 to teach you at Eton is:

 don't play with matches.

which made me laugh out loud, as did the next poem's closing lines, which informs us that 'You can't be / weaned off glory, you know.' ('Imperial cosmic sickness') The standout poem in the sequence is 'The Brexit Book of the Dead' which lashes out at everything it can: nostalgia, pride, sovereignty, war and 'the imperial lorry /park formerly known as Kent'.

This satire works for me, as it scoops up *The Dambusters*, the 'History distortion field' attached to Britain's past, 'Empire 2.0', and 'The Overblown Age' that sees 'the fifth horseman slowly flatten[ing] his horse into a burger for a delivery.' What to do when the apocalypse comes? Not write well-meant poetry, obviously. Dastidar's provocative suggestion, his seemingly bored shrug, is another brief satirical poem:

 **Eating popcorn at the apocalypse**

 Well, the cinemas are closed,

 so what else are we to do?

George was – damn it – partially right, but I hope Dastidar will take time to give himself distance from whatever his next book's subject is and stay away from unsubtle polemic. When he is having fun with language, and takes potshots at everyone and everything, he is much more likely to hit his target, and the poetry is more innovative and readable. Rishi, don't be a sea lion, be a poet, a wordsmith; help me prove George wrong.

Rupert Loydell

(640 words)