

Eliza and the Bear

ELEANOR REES was born in Birkenhead, Merseyside in 1978. Her pamphlet collection *Feeding Fire* received an Eric Gregory Award in 2002 and her first full length collection *Andraste's Hair* (Salt, 2007) was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection and the Glen Dimplex New Writers Awards.

Eleanor works in the community as a poet, running writing workshops for The Windows Project and is also a part-time Lecturer in Creative Writing at Liverpool John Moores University. Eleanor often collaborates with other writers, musicians and artists and works to commission. She lives in Liverpool.

Also by Eleanor Rees

POETRY

Andraste's Hair (Salt 2007, 2009) Shortlisted for Best First Collection in the Forward Prizes and shortlisted for the Glen Dimplex Poetry Award.

CHAPBOOKS

Feeding Fire (Spout Publications 2001)

Eliza and the Bear

ELEANOR REES



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Contents

Merman	1
Changeling	3
Spillage	4
On an August Midnight	5
Walking the Avenues	8
Dreaming of the Winter's Mouth	10
The Knocking	11
The Earth House	14
The Winter's Mouth	16
A Flower Dipped in Ink	17
Flight	27
Enclosure	28
Material	29
Eliza and the Bear	30

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On an August Midnight was broadcast on BBC Radio 3 Breakfast Programme, part of the *Free Thinking Festival*, FACT, Liverpool, 2008. *Walking the Avenues* was commissioned by *The Verb*, BBC Radio 3 for live broadcast at BBC Radio Merseyside, 2007.

A Flower Dipped in Ink was commissioned by *Liverpool Culture Company* as part of *The Fragrant Project*, a collaborative project with artist Jyll Bradley on the history and future of *Liverpool Botanical Collection*. It was first published in pamphlet form and performed at *Croxteth Hall*, Liverpool, 2007.

Eliza and the Bear was first performed at the *Chapter and Verse Literature Festival*, *Bluecoat Arts Centre*, Liverpool October 2008 by Catherine Butterworth with specially composed harp score by Rebecca Joy Sharp. Subsequent performances include *Chester Performs* 2009, the Water Tower, Chester Walls; *Shindig*, Blackburne House; *Lost Voices*, View Two Gallery; *Cavalerie*, Black-E Arts Centre.

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Merman

Eyes wide and water-pleasured,

a silver tail like a horse's haunches
thick and shining—

quick in the slip of the grey;
whale-familiar, it guides a man

to land and a dream of home,
to dry nest, stone wall,

static, caught time;
a jar of bees.

There is no lack in the beat,
in the weaving curl of salt and spray

but still he swims towards the shore
to dry earth, future, past tense:

he swims towards history—
a loose dog with broken teeth.

He swims, he swims,
pummelling new tides.

*Stay in the sea, stay in the sea.
Sink your shoulders and fins like a trawler.*

(On the sea bed
sailors' skulls
skinned by water
stare vacant into weeds.)

He carries bones
in flat motion,

thick felt action
in stroke and oar—

that shore so far
so luring,

he is lured to the shore.

(A fire in a hearth.
A plate on the table.

Fresh fish. Fresh fish.)

A lantern swung by wreckers
at the abandoned lighthouse

seduces his human eyes
beneath a new moon.

His silver fins enclose a depth
of tissue, muscle, blood and nerve-talk.

The meat active and happy,
butting against breeze and pulse.

Heat in his heart, tingles, wells
and rushes on. The land no nearer.

The land so far, so far from home.

Changeling

His body seething,
brittle in the dusk,

shallow and sure,
finds its way out of its skin,

button eyes, ebbing breath,
out of humanness.

A full moon on the horizon line
and geese in their triangle

frame the hot red clouds.
Thoughts flit into the night like bats.

Let them go.
Fall to animal.

A bended paw,
a furred back.

Colours cede to grey.

A rupture in the belly.
Birth through skin not uterus.

Come child,
come night.

Woods far and minerals pulse.

Spillage

Rain-glossed wood,
a lizard's back. Scales

shiny touched by rain—
the whole of the day in each drop.

Under, a fox settles in an oval
of dark dust. Soil

heavens enclose his matted fur
in dryness—

head tucked on paws,
streaked with a film of mud.

On the roof of the earth,
inside is sheltered from wetness

and my home beyond woodland:
room, leather, varnished oak.

Inside here I find blood, marrow,
purple-ordered brain, openings of lungs.

How to move through these?
How to find myself there?

To curl under a weight of self
and sleep at the centre and be sure.

On an August Midnight

1.

And there floating in the river of my window
are faces looking in at me.
In the midnight hot summer dark—
watching, waiting, whole.
They smile and preen
and enjoy their eyes
which glow, two storeys up,
in on me here alone—
searching for names in the glass.
Air is stiff and creaking,
weighed down by the excess
of heat and drought.

Rain is days away.
Outside is a jewel.

Dark woods over the horizon
bellow *join us, join us,*
and the hollow by the canal
is just as cacophonous.
The city needs this look—this hot attention.

It is the house that breathes for me.
I am the outside looking in.

The house takes a deep breath.
Its lungs are corridors.

I lean backwards in the storm wind
as the river far
hums me a line
from a song he half-remembers

and the high-rise by the park
bends over to the left,

opening up to the stars;
and the garden of the churchyard

mumbles in its gravelly sleep,
turns over in a blink,

roots freewheeling into the night sky
then back to earth, unseen, unheard.

And when the door opens
 downstairs in the gale,
 at the entrance is a small child
 with an outstretched hand.

He will not cross the threshold.
He is from the outside and made of rain.

2.

And still this territory remains imbibed
in sediment that is bone
and leg to sinew, to the lips
I use to touch your lips—

and sinking deeper into years,
with a house upon my beating chest,
the outside has moved within.
I have a day on my tongue
and the night in my toes.

How this city grows hot upon my surfaces.

I fly in sleep,
 spiralling above the outskirts;
 in a morning walk
 make my own earthworks
 out of footsteps,
my own edges out of night—
 ritual acts to border the dawn.

In awe

I place brick on brick,
 move my body
 before the sun
 to know the rhythm
 of the wilderness—
 and make it my own.

Walking the Avenues

I have no lantern to carry
—a fiery globe in the white fog—

across the estuary mouth
to lure sailors to the rocks.

I know that ships are still leaving
down at the river years before

—to Jamaica, America—

young sailors aboard with their eyes to the shore
and the girls they leave behind,

wild and red-eyed,
skin stung with the bite of the salt and the sun—

while at the end of my road
in today's shadowy dusk

a broad-shouldered man is walking
into the thick fog, into the ether,

and heavy with tiredness,
I carry my steps,

thinning the blood of the air,
taking it in and turning it out

and tattooed by the light
I see pictures in my skin—

the eyes of a rat,
the dog by the gate,

shining from beneath my cells :
this patterned self

is the day incarnate,
breath of hours billows in these lungs

as I fledge wings
and lift like an inland gull

to find only I am tethered
by the city streets —

held so tight
in the depth of rain.

Dreaming of the Winter's Mouth

Outside in the ruins,
beyond the room of books and snow,
bricks are grey, cold and rough,
damp with a morning rain.

Outside in the ruins,
a circle of standing stones
and at the centre the women meet
under the deep blackened sky—

and you are to join us here,
outside in the ruins.
We are waiting for you to come
downstairs, down the long

wooden steps from
thick grey winter clouds above
and join us in the circle.
Outside in the ruins we wait,

focus on the change in the air,
how it darkens and deepens.
The women talk under their breath,
whisper names and liturgies,

while under the house
in the basement where black is a tunnel
and the ceiling is sky, in the layers of height
a hole is opening and rooms

are trickling down mouldy walls
like beads of sweat
or saliva on the back of a throat
when I wake in the dark with a cry.

The Knocking

Man at the door the terror
raps small white knuckles
on hard wood—
and pulls his lips in
and laughs, *no not laughs* . . .

Small white bones catch on painted wood.

A man's knocking

—4 a.m. and an empty street—
volleys from redbrick valley canyons:
and someone has died

or far-over,
by the church,
by the high rise,
laid out on a bed
her eyes
flooded with darkness
well lit,
orange rainy street lit—

and she is a well she has fallen into,

forgotten at the valley floor,
as the moon gabbles,
gnarly and worn
with the day's fat knocks,
like spitting rain on a slanted roof,
and someone bleeds in an attic room,
as menstrual blood's
slow lava scalds
thickly down
a pink hot thigh.

Her eyes shut tight.
The night wide open
 and buzzing with fur and moths
 and turrets
 of castles pillaged by raiders

come from the sea . . .
come from the sea . . .

 while the night shivers,
 distracts a new rain
 from morning's slow crawl
across the river from the east.

It arrives like the ships once did
and anchors itself off shore.

There is a man knocking at the door

come from the sea . . .
come from the sea . . .

who rips and scuffs the soft skin
 of lovers high and solid
in a far away bed.

They lie on invisible tides
 that pull the man to the door
 where he rat-a-tat-tats
 without groan
 or cough, just
 furious,

from his mouth
pools of shining air.

Each knock cracks a hole
in the wall of skin.

The outside is alive and coming in.

The Earth House

In the bank of the hill
the earth house is red,

the sun settled down.
The earth house

is firelit, fire-bred,
reddening in the morning mist,

damp and salty
under a dip of cloud.

A peat oven, a stroking hand,

the roof of soil,
thick and mineral black.



The walls say she is amazed
at the darkness that floods her arteries.

Her skin is blue dark: dusk has come
and smoothed the mortar in heavy paint.

In this hearth, in the warm air,
I reach my hand into depths of brick

pull out an image: an ending.



Inset into the walls of the kitchen, open to the room,
she is in the space between emptiness.

Still and soft breathing slow,
she holds up the roof, tight walls to each side.

O house woman bricked in the dark—
at night the lights go out.



Night has been buried underneath the house.
It is kept in crates beneath the brick.

In the cellar fireworks explode,
ricochet off the thick stone walls,
fill the darkness with fire.

The torchlight glides across
the cobweb-cornered passage,
room of forgotten boxes
and forgotten night.

The walled-up woman
cries for night which isn't night
but a late autumn afternoon—
always grey and sodden.