

LIVERPOOL FRAGRANT PROJECT



EUPHORBIA VARIEGATA

W. & A. G. B. S. 1840

A READING OF POETRY
BY DINESH ALLIRAJAH
AND ELEANOR REES

INSPIRED BY
THE LIVERPOOL BOTANICAL COLLECTION
AT THE
BOTANICAL COLLECTION LAUNCH
AT CROXTETH HALL WALLED GARDEN
WEDNESDAY 15TH AUGUST 2007

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ARTISTS RESIDENCY BY JYLL BRADLEY
LIVERPOOL BOTANICAL COLLECTION
2007 - 2008**

Booklet published by Liverpool Culture Company, 2007

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Liverpool Botanical Collection

Throughout 2007 and 2008, international visual artist Jyll Bradley will be in Residence with Liverpool Botanical Collection. Drawing upon the rich history of the collection she will be making a number of high profile interventions both throughout the city and beyond.

In summer 2008 Liverpool University Press will be publishing Jyll's 'artists book' which reflects upon the two hundred year history of the collection, which was founded by William Roscoe. For this Jyll has been researching the extensive archives of material that relate to the former garden and collections. She has also been meeting the people who have shaped its recent history and ensured its survival, often against the odds. This will be the first time a book has brought together the stories of this remarkable collection.

In May 2008 Liverpool Botanical Collection will (for the first time in many years), exhibit at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show. As part of her residency Jyll will be working with the Liverpool Parks and Environment botanics team on the design of the garden and feeding in research. She will also be writing a shorter booklet about the history of the collection to bring its story to the wider world. This will be distributed at Chelsea and in Liverpool parks afterwards. Jyll will also be creating a public art photographic billboard exhibition throughout the city for 2008, again bringing images of the collection and those who care for it into the city centre. Jyll Bradley's work is funded by the Liverpool Culture Company in partnership with Liverpool Parks and Environment and supported curatorially by The Bluecoat as part of Liverpool Capital of Culture 2008.

For the opening of Croxteth in August, Jyll has introduced two Liverpool poets to the incredible story of the collection. Dinesh Allirajah and Eleanor Rees have subsequently been commissioned by her to write works inspired by the collection and its story. These poems will be premiered today.

We would like to thank the poets for their extraordinary interpretations of the Collection and the people involved in its story.

A MEMORY OF SAP

Dinesh Allirajah

a discovery of the Liverpool Botanic Gardens at Edge Lane and
Harthill, and the collection at Greenhill Nursery

This is the way it works. If you call this work. I have a line of thought. It isn't a straight line. It has a shallow curve; it unfurls around a central theme; it resembles a bracket that aspires to be a comma. I follow this line of thought, this suppressed tangent, and, the whole way along, everything has its place. The ideas correspond with one another; the words are evenly spaced; I breathe in the start of the line and breathe out the end.

Then I find the thoughts are overhanging another line, and this picks up where the other left off. The new line mirrors the pattern of the first, the same gentle veer to the side and curl back in, but this one scrolls further away from where I first began. It stops, and its thoughts eavesdrop yet another line. The longer I follow these lines, the more unsure my destination.

I'm thinking about Leslie Howard in *The 49th Parallel*, fleeing Nazis and Raymond Massey across Canada, trying to reach the border and neutral USA. I'm thinking about the swathes of pine trees, against which monumental backdrop he seems a pale blond blade of grass; every trunk tells him he's still on Canadian soil. Then I see a man waiting to tip a baggage porter at Preston Station.

The porter's livery is crimson trimmed midnight blue, his moustache a flowering bush, and he sets down a case and overnight bag, fresh cut lawn green. While his wife chats to the porter, the man stands by, pound coin clutched in the hand not leaning on his cane. The man's age and infirmity belie his straight back. As he waits to do the correct thing, that which was always done, I see his immaculate golfing casual sweater over a khaki poloneck, and his once slicked-back once fair hair and sharp, solid chin. With the porter tipped, he sets down his wooden cane and, because I'm following a line of thought, I think he looks like Leslie Howard.

Inside are stones from the Neolithic Age. They shan't escape, not now, but they're padlocked in. The Harthill conservatory takes to its role as a display cabinet the way a retired MP might approach a position on a Residents' Association committee. Its every feature is a reminder of what it no longer is but, still, it busies itself with what it has always done and will always do. It sheds light. And so a graffiti tag, in crimson spray on one of the glass panes, catches a beam and blooms like a bird of paradise.

**THERE'S A STONE NEXT TO THE PADLOCKED
ENTRANCE, ENGRAVED TO COMMEMORATE THE
OPENING OF THE 3RD BOTANIC GARDEN IN 1964.
IT'S WEATHERED NOW, APPEARING TO AGE IT
BY A FEW CENTURIES MORE. THE INSCRIPTION
ITSELF SEEMS TO HAVE COMPRESSED THIS
PROCESS. EROSION IS IMPLICIT IN THE NAME
OF THE PARKS DIRECTOR, CREDITED ON THE
STONE AS PERCIVAL W.H. CONN A.H.R.H.S., P.P.
INST. P.A. IF THAT 'PERCIVAL' - FROM THE AGE
OF RINGO - DID NOT SUGGEST ENOUGH WEAR
ON ITS OWN ACCORD, THEN EVERY INCISION
FOR EACH APPENDED INITIAL, AND THE
AUTHORITY IT BETOKENS, HOLDS YOU NOW IN
A NEOLITHIC EMBRACE.**

I'm thinking about the engraver now, and I'm assuming 'he'. Would he have earned many of his commissions from the business of things beginning? Did much trade spring from plaques, unveiled by Lord Mayors at gala openings, founding inscriptions on cornerstones, declarations of principles? Or would the Harthill job have been a sabbatical, a break from the tombstone grind? Is one letter, when it's dusted down, no different to any other? Does each one simply move a step closer to another deadline met?

The 4, of all the digits, is the hardest to navigate and most satisfactory to complete. Some days, you can step back from its slopes and crossroads, and it takes time to retrieve your focus. You forget there's a story to tell: you simply recognise that you've engraved a 4. The engraver stepped back and saw that this 4 completed a date: **18 SEPTEMBER 1964**.

Unaccustomed to the upright stance, his spine began instinctively to hunch. Soon, like an autumn evening sunflower, he stooped back down. The engraver prepared to add the hyphen preceding the date of death when his intellect jolted back, overriding the reflex to memorialise - although, further down, he inscribed **29 NOVEMBER 1940**, the date the previous garden was **DESTROYED BY ENEMY ACTION** and the stone's thoughts turned to rubble.

This is the way it works. You plant people should understand this. For something to grow, something else must have died. Even a building, as solid as it seems, is compost. It's compost: it's slurry given shape; it's metal mined from wounds in the earth; it's decommissioned vegetation. But even this is facile. It's no revelation that we touch death in every physical sensation. What you have to understand is that this process - we call it reconstruction - extends to all you have ever imagined, Mister Conn. Understand that your ideas have no validity based on something having once stood, but upon it having burned to the ground. Mere destruction is banal: your plans require first an inferno, devastation enough to reduce panes of glass to grains of sand.

A poem, too, is the embossed gold leaf detail in the fresco on the wall of the mausoleum of more poetry; and the use poetry has for a grain of sand is for it to slip through an hourglass. So it follows that Percival Conn's vision for a new Botanic Garden had to be borne out of so much death, and the realised dream could do no other than function as a moment in time slipping away.

I'm thinking about the first two sites for the Gardens. Conn's predecessors had no comparable awareness that they were building their visions upon a precipice. William Roscoe was able to conceive of an earthly paradise where nature could perfume the thoughts and words of men. The reality for John Shepherd, amid the first shoots of the Victorian era, was that immortality was both attainable and English. Only Percy Conn, in his role as the hod-carrier for our poetic constructions, could know that the sky might on any night scatter perishing fire all across the cultivated, nourished, preserved bequest.

The bombs had aimed for the railway, built to provide a detour to the Gardens, but they missed their target and struck a raw nerve. Percy Conn's post-war plans, for the replacement site at Harthill, would have been framed by the debate of use versus ornament. This was his privilege, our gift to him, to build his Gardens on soil fertilised by conditionality and compromise. The Gardens themselves may have lasted only twenty years but budgetary constraints, provisional measures and built-in obsolescence garland each breath of air we take today and cushion every footstep.

Inside Greenhill Nursery, there are immense, sweltering palms, centuries old, roots encased in pots suited to suburban patios. They totter, like matriarchs in microskirts, towards a shrunken sky. The topmost leaves, like trainee mime artists, slap and press up against the glass roof; the stalks, thick as oarsmen's thighs, buckle and cower as the route upwards is denied. The pressure is mutual and the glass wheezes with the effort to hold it all in. There's a countdown taking place, leading to the question: will the plants break the greenhouse or will the greenhouse break the plants?

Something pushed me along this line of thought. I can't explain how I came to be standing here, looking down at naked winter soil, looking up at the flaccid tops of giant palms, looking through glass at fraught pinewood frames. I know I can sow memories in language and these words come out but I can't break down the photosynthesis. I spotted vivid purple bedding plants in a British Council garden that told me I was in Lagos, but I didn't know the name of the plant and couldn't even find a name that would do justice to the purple. I watched latex spill from a snapped rubber tree leaf, like correction fluid on draught, and four weeks later, asked for the family story I'd grown up forgetting, of how my grandfather invented the Candarsan disinfectant that allowed the trunks to heal without scabbing, once the trees had been tapped for rubber. I can't explain how it works, how immature buds of knowledge and puny shoots of memory survive while skyscraping trunks are felled.

I'm thinking about the pine trees in Canada again, only now Leslie Howard has walked past, Michael Powell has taken the cameras home and the war is over. Percival W.H. Conn is trying to rehouse the collection, displaced since the 1940 air-raid, and the budget for the framework will stretch to a consignment of imported timber, Canadian pine. It's not the right material and it'll decay in twenty years, but it'll do to hold the glass, to shed the light, for the plants to survive, until then. Because surely that'll be all the reconstruction they'll need to do in the 1980s, won't it? They can build libraries for books then, and kennels for dogs and greenhouses for plants because people – surely *people* will have enough houses by then, won't they?

Or maybe this is the way it works: the pine would have held firm, if put to any use other than housing plants. But when tree trunks become timber, and when timber becomes planks and boards and beams, and when these become a structure, to what degree have they ceased to be trees? When the structure houses plants, does the throb from the shifting soil resonate in its joints? When the wood is the sole witness as a bud sparks into blossom, is there an inflammation within its grain? Was survival, rather than decay, taking place when the pine could no longer function as a dry, solid support so it withered and wilted? And could the dewdrop breath of the plants have rekindled a memory of sap in the wood?

This flower dipped in ink

Eleanor Rees

I came to this city
 from the other side,
from the dirt and murk
of river mud
and cloud

and I climbed
 fleet-footed
over the buildings to reach
your thighs and wet heat.

Sweet child. Amongst
the pigeons and the fuller stars.

We lie in the ardent fall
of black night
on Myrtle Street – in the alleys
up against the walls
 we came.
Child.

I became this flower dipped in ink
and the air before a thunderstorm

rich and sweet, the orchids'
fleshly wet skin is taut silk

and my eyes are your eyes
deep in the wet

thresh of the garden bed
and warm ache of damp soil -

curved roots bring us back together
when the night stumbles home.

You hold me like a river
like a valley and a cavern

opening on the side of a mountain
on the fertile slopes, Chile, Brazil,

on green-woven terraces
near the huts and homes

where children run eyes to the gods
and the incoming storm.

Hold my city
in your mouth: a thorn.

Deep in the folds of this book
are the stems of endings,

dry plants are sluices
to hide the light in their green curls.

I dream I pass through earth,
lie upon it; space is rough.

I dream I am dissolved into rock.

I dream I loved a man made of wood
who formed himself into a ship

and sailed across the ocean.

I remember tomorrow,
small hands, afternoon rain.

He dreamt of a new world,
answers, knowledge.

I rest my hands on my belly.
Imagine it swelling, tuberous, full.

The night sky glues itself to the pane.
Breathing slow and serious.

I am reckless, restless:
around me the glasshouse swells.

If we were to stop to let the sky in
and the stove die down

or let the English day have its way
plants would wither, rot and die.

I run my thumb the length of a leaf.
Cry softly to match the rhythm of the rain.

*

I wake from a dream of you,

my lost son, child with a Chinese garden
tattooed on his chest, standing on a suburban lawn,

naked under the light of the white moon,

and I pull you close, kiss the pattern,
a twist of vines and bright yellow sky

across your collarbone and where
your pulse beats is a bloom of petals

fanned out like a star.

You need to be held like a bowl of water
I should not spill.

The child who needs a heart to hold him still.

*

I went down to the river and slept.
In its arms, its tides, its breath.

And always there is the other side,
the mist and wrap of spring,

the changing light on water's sheen.

Cultivate this wetness.
First sprigs of spring in the brown soil.

My belly swells in my sleep.
I birth fish slippery over the mattress.

The sheets stink of you and us
but ridged tough with a first frost.

In my sleep I am gardening -
I have my hands deep in soil,

grip at the root of weeds
that I expel from the trap of stone.

*

I dream fire -
mustings of smoke and temper

rise, a phantom
loose around leaves of soft silks

drives the air into frenzies.

Fire in the glasshouse
glistens in the pool-dark.

Somebody breathes in the corners by the inlets.

Remember underwater rivers tidal realms
deep in the depths of the streets of a younger town.

But where am I? I am not here.
I see the plants shiver and furl, flesh out their lungs,

green folds stretch up to the moon
and tremble at the hold and hope of the night.

The wounds of the glasshouse are wide open,
a fish tank over-flooding with life.

Lights out in the windows of suburban houses
where young families sleep and dream of day.

But who am I? I am not here.

I see a young boy wake to the street
strewn with leaf, threads of soil.

Plant pots cracked and split lie in drains.
He opens the bedroom curtains,

round-faced at damp glass,
amazed that the plants have gone.

But how am I? I am not here.

I see a storm begin, thickly wet
and sweat pour down the gardener's face

as he stands in the open door of his home,
woken from a dream of irises and meadow flowers.

The hallway's light illuminates his baldness.
The pink-carpeted stairs behind.

Whispers under his breath a prayer,
bids them well, his charges, lights up and laughs

as orchids flow, are ghosts
walking on slight roots,

and ivies wind like snakes
and palms stretch out and stride

back to the water's edge,
looking for ships, passage home.

*

Under a lack of summer
and storms
and the soft tip of my tongue
and the jewel of my mouth -

under this, sift and flurry,
slide within
a spiel of light -

buries itself in the walls
at the doors
of a room without edges

just eyes and sores
and a cut hand,

a cut like an entry
to run through into

a snowstorm on a desert floor,

into an arm crushed with
pressure of the storm-bred air

and the storm-birthing
at the water's edge,

a pool to dive,
now the scent of an afternoon in August.

*

From the thunderstorm's
rap on the day and its eyes

blazing through

to where the waters coil,
the plants are rooting

deep into the city's earth
reaching within the heart of rock

and gripping on

as rain bursts
and crawls within leaf and petal.

A dark sky feeds the living.
A dry light hums to the dead.

My boy raises his eyes to the rain,
holds out his hand, catches the light,

as seeds in the blink of an eye
become plants as full as the moon.

Jyll Bradley – Fragrant Artist

Jyll has had a long standing interest in the relationships between humans and plants and for the last five years this has manifested itself in her multi-disciplinary project Fragrant. The starting point for this project are the narratives, rites and exchanges that occur when a flower or plant is placed in the human hand.

Through Fragrant she has made major projects in Colombia and China. Her projects with Fragrant have taken the form of site specific temporal installations using thousands of flowers to large scale photographic work.

Dinesh Allirajah - The Memory Of Sap

My introduction by Jyll Bradley to the Fragrant project was also my first serious introduction to the Botanical Collection and its place in Liverpool's history. The Memory Of Sap reflects the process of discovering this fascinating story. I've picked up threads of the human story of the collection, laid down by Jyll, and I've found inspiration in the scroll beds at the garden site in Edge Lane, and in the conservatory in Calderstones Park, as well as the magnificent and poignant collection at Greenhill Nursery. Gardening metaphors are unavoidable so I look forward to further digging.

Eleanor Rees - This flower dipped in ink

Botanical gardens have their heritage in Islamic culture and in the idea of 'the world in one place' similar to the garden of Eden. William Roscoe's Unitarian beliefs would have informed his understanding of the purpose of the Botanical Collection. The Roscoes had ten children, and much of the language of botany is the vocabulary of reproduction and fertility. Botanical art was painted by women but their details and in some cases names have been forgotten.

In the poem these themes are embodied in a rhythm of loss and longing: plants taken from their homes, a child gone missing, dreams of the loss of self, fire in the glasshouse, and the eventual disappearance of the speaker whose son sows the seed for the future.

Jyll Bradley

is an artist working with photography, text and installation. She studied Fine Art at Goldsmith's and The Slade. In the UK Jyll has shown her work at Interim Art, Spacex, Newlyn Art Gallery and in The British Art Show. Amongst recent projects Jyll undertook a major commission for the re-opening of Arnolfini, Bristol and for NVA Organization at Tramway, Glasgow. Her projects abroad include presentations supported by The British Council at Museo d'Antioquia, Medellin, Colombia and Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou, China as part of the Artists Links programme. This year, Jyll was one of five practitioners, including writer Jeanette Winterson and artist Tracey Emin, to be commissioned by The Arts Council to make a public art work in celebration of the Council's 60th year. Jyll is also a prolific writer for BBC Radio, and a past winner of the European Broadcasting Union Award for Best Script.

Dinesh Allirajah

is a fiction stylist, jazz poet, performer and creative writing tutor, who has been a respected figure on the Liverpool literature scene since the late 1980s. He was a founder member of the influential South Asian writing and performance collective *Asian Voices Asian Lives* and is a trustee of Black Arts Alliance. His performance and educational work has taken him around the UK and to France, Germany, Poland, Bangladesh and Nigeria. His debut collection of short stories, *A Manner Of Speaking*, was published in 2004 (Spike books, ISBN 0-9518978-9) and in 2006, he edited an anthology featuring work produced during a British Council writers' exchange between the UK and Bangladesh (*Maps And Metaphors*, British Council Bangladesh ISBN 984-32-3342-5).

<http://www.freewebs.com/dineshallirajah/>

Eleanor Rees

was born in Birkenhead, Merseyside in 1978. Her pamphlet collection *Feeding Fire* (Spout, Huddersfield, 2001) received an Eric Gregory Award in 2002. Her full-length collection, *Andraste's Hair*, (Salt Publishing, 2007) has been shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection 2007.

Eleanor works as a poet in the community for The Windows Project and teaches creative writing in Liverpool Centre for Continuing Education and other institutions. She often works collaboratively with writers, artists and musicians and undertakes a wide range of commissions. She lives in Liverpool. For more details please see www.eleanorrees.com

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