



The Durham Witch Project
Durham Literary Festival Commission
Fiona Benson

THIS. W...	This W[oman is]?
PNUYSH	Punish[ed] ?
SEKING	Seeking ...
HORRIB	Horrible [sinn –]?
ES, SORC...	es, sorc [ery and]?
INCHA	incha [ntment]?

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Charm

Anoint thine eyes
with sap of common elder

and you may find
where witches gather.

The Witch of Easington

“In seed time, turnip time, weeding time, hay time, harvest time, and all through the year, she was generally left to work in a place by herself.” Legends & Superstitions of the County of Durham

We see witches
in fleet creatures –

the hare that runs direct
and does not jink,

but flies straight in
at the cottage door

through a little hatch
cut for the hens.

We hunt her then
with a black dog

suckled at a woman’s breast,
course her over moor

right to the threshold
and in at the hatch.

The black dog lunges
and bites her haunch.

When we break our way in
she is naked and shivering

a woman again
in a broth of sweat,

daubed in her own red flux,
unwitched, purged,

and powerless to sin.

Defamatio

crowket-handyd
posset whore

rotten drabe
and bitchfox

tanterbawd
taintyd of thy tongue

old carling
wissen-faced witch

mediciner of Cattle
conicatcher

arrant drunken bitch
thy haith a witch

to thy eldmother
and thy mother ...

was hange
for a witch

Mary Hunter

Forked thing
skimming the yard,

purple-satin, bloodstain,
wings like blades –

ribboned familiar –
no, not familiar,

a transformed witch,
streamered, needling,

dancing round the horse
scything close,

cutting through its legs;
a mare that of late

has been slow,
that no longer flicks its tail

to shake the flies;
a mare which is bothered

and bitten and maggot-soiled.
Mary Hunter witched this horse

in her swallow form
and now the horse is dead.

Janet Barker

Well, the devil told Janet Barker
that if she'd be his servant
he'd dress her in a fine red gown;

she settled for white plaid,
and carnal copulation with the devil
in her own little shop

in her naked bed,
and he was not like other men
but above her like an ox.

Summoning

Take a black hen's heart
and drive it through
with nails and pins
until it bristles,
set it in a fire starved of air
and rozzel it for hours.

The witch will come knocking
begging a cup of water,
for her thirst.
If you give it her
the child will be released
from the fever where he burns.

Charm for an Ailing Child

I stitched a sprig of rowan
in the pocket
of my son's white smock,
close to his heart.

He died in any case,
and was buried in the kirk
and I too will soon be gone
to the majority.

Leddy Lister

Leddy Lister: haunter, sleepwalker.
You have to imagine absolute dark
and the glimmer of her gown
conjured up like a soft, white howlet.

Greet her and she neither turns
nor deviates. Her eyes are open
but they do not see. Unnerving.
that strange mind walking.

*

Leddy Lister waking to the ditch again.
Rank nest of bedstraw and vetch.
Waking outside again. Must've walked
in the night again. Her gut sinks –
her husband is a timid, god-feart man.
Yet isn't this something holy
crossing the fields barefoot like a penitent,
this bright, late-summer dawn,
steam rising from the hedgerow thorn,
the blackie singing his fluid song.
Toes are dorty but will soon be flannelled clean.
And here is a handful of meadow mushrooms
to fry with her husband's bacon in the old black pan.

*

Caught Leddy Lister down by the burn
and kicked her we were booted and we kicked her
indecent her course-haired clam her black teats
showing through her gown we kicked her good
her legs and pelvis barely fleshed and femmer
we hauled her home then left her forenenst the door
like a broken-necked rabbit the cat drags in
shivering curdled trying to pull herself away by her arms
her hindquarters limp and that high yellow scream
coming out of her like an animal we wanted
to make it stop but her husband opened the door
and we skittered off not wanting to be seen
yelling from the dark like brave brave men
we'll kill her next time if you don't keep her in.

*

Still she wanders in her brain.
Grass between her fingers, that mealy swish.

She'll never walk again,
though now her husband roams

so when she wakes in her own cot
she finds a berry in her palm,

or smells wild mushrooms frying
in the greased black pan.

Accusatio

Who witched a coin out of my purse.

Who spun crosses on a corpse.

Who stole a horse.

*Who dropped hot wax into water
to scry what was lost.*

Who went to the woods
to cast clues through a sieve.

Who turned the riddle and sheares.

Who suffered the devil to suck in the shape of a dog,
in the shape of a white spotted cat,
a great Miller fly, or a toad.

*Who was stitched by the devil
and grew his child.*

Who gave me an apple a dish a poppet a spoon.

Who gave me a posset to slee the child in my womb.

Who healed a poor woman thirty weeks sicke.

*Who mumbled up charmes
and crossed my sick wife's mouth
who died notwithstanding.*

Who used witchcraft to heal John Tod's leg,
who is a cripple notwithstanding.

*Who gave herbs for Agnes when she fell
who died notwithstanding.*

Who told me to wash my fairyed son
in a southrowning stream
who notwithstanding died.

Edmundbyers: Elizabeth Lee

We did not want you
in consecrated ground –
wished you under the stile
and every time we crossed
stamped down.

But the vicar is a too-good man.
Insisted you lie in holy land.
So we buried you twelve-foot deep
and pressed you under-stone,
brought weights in our pockets

then korms, and dibbed them in,
till we'd grown a belt of wild garlic,
its white shine in the spring
its antiseptic, onion stink
its holdfast charm –

hemmed you in
with its white-starred crowns
hemmed you in
and pressed you down
but still it was not enough

still you were not bound.
So we scraped our pennies
to make a fund,
to make this window:
the eye of God.

He's watching you, Elizabeth Lee,
and you may not walk.
We take no chances.
We'll keep our children
from the witch.

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Thanks and Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Rebecca Wilkie and Grace Keane of New Writing North for arranging my trip to Durham.

To Professor Simon James for making me so welcome.

To Francis Gotto, archivist at Palace Green Library, for introducing me to the library's special collections material on witches, and for helping me read seventeenth century handwriting.

To Claire Malcolm for so kindly accompanying me to Edmundbyers.

To Liz Berry, David-Antoine Williams and Andrew McMillan for reading and commenting on the poems in draft.

To my husband James Meredith, and our daughters Isla and Rose, with love as always.



(Illustration from Ulrich Molitor (fl. 1470-1501)
De laniis et phitonicis mulieribus. Strasbourg,
Not before 10 January 1489, Palace Green Library,
SA 0064/2)