

Dheghōm

## Matter 27

### Summary

Creepy Sleepy Weepy

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### Report

*Fringe Eye* 2022 issue 17

SPOKEN WORD

POETRY

SINGLE PERFORMANCE

**REVIEW: Endless Love** – Love Ellis. Venue 21 C  
ARTS 17:00.

★★★★★

By Pat Elkin

“Love Ellis is infuriating. The content of her work exhibits a depth almost unequalled among British poets of her generation, but at the surface level it has the same, unrefined dismissiveness of

language and over-concern with form that has characterised her work since she burst onto the scene with her opening collection, *This Thing Called Love*, in 2019. She knows what she wants to say but has yet to develop the verbal artistry or poetic vocabulary to say it."

I wrote the above in my piece for yesterday's *Fringe Eye*, in the full belief that I would today be venting my disappointment that yet another potential future star of British poetry had failed to deliver on her early promise. However, after the extraordinary reading she gave in her one-off appearance at the C ARTS venue last night, I find myself having to re-evaluate this young woman from top to bottom. Her rickety rhymes, clunky scanning and shoehorning of expression into unstable structures of her own invention are, I now realise, quite deliberate. She knows exactly what she is doing and why.

Quite simply, yesterday evening's reading by Ellis is the most singular, remarkable event that I have attended in all my thirty years of reviewing poetry at the Fringe.

The evening began with four works from her two withdrawn collections, *This Thing Called Love* and *In the Name of Love*. Having previously given no explanation for her decision to pull the volumes, it had been widely assumed that she'd been stung by their less-than-perfect critical reception; last night, she attacked this view with a new poem, *Rare and Well Done*, in which she used the voice of a

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waitress in a steakhouse to suggest that by withdrawing her first two collections she had guaranteed there'd be a frenzy to buy her third collection, *Love Story*, before she withdrew that, too.

This was the first hint of the evening that Ellis is a far more intelligent and calculating individual than she has hitherto been credited as being.

Ellis's reading of her own work is assured and flowing. The words that scan so poorly on the page are natural and swirling when they emerge from her mouth. The forced rhymes are acknowledged with a crispness that shows them to be intended, an ironic statement on the way she herself feels constrained. Within the first half-hour, I had concluded that Ellis was not the incomplete article I had cosily assumed her to be, but a poet in full possession of prodigious and formidable powers. If one trusts her, if one accepts that every perceived fault is no such thing, then a phenomenal world of insight opens up. She wields her words with multi-layered precision.

Multiple more new pieces appeared, with subjects ranging from *Queueing for Coffee's* frustration (and it was abundantly clear how she wanted "for coffee" to be pronounced) to the dark humour of *Guess the Guest* (a parody of a TV game show) and *Dayglow's* dreamy musings on time. If her session had ended at forty-five minutes, I would have come away suitably chagrined, having been compelled to re-evaluate my opinion of her work in the light of her exceptional talent.

The remaining fifteen minutes of her performance were to take it to another level completely.

She announced that her penultimate poem would be *I Don't Know my Father*. As possibly her most enigmatic and celebrated work, the audience had been expecting it to end her reading, perhaps introduced with some explanatory context that might offer them a further glimpse into its meaning. She did not oblige, though: instead, she went straight into it, delivering its text from memory with such emotional intensity that it took one's breath away. It was mesmerising. I remember thinking that the poem I knew from the page was like a black-and-white photograph compared to the colour version rendered by Ellis herself. I had so many questions – I was sure I wouldn't be able to sleep that night as my mind ran through the implications. If only it hadn't been a no-phones event, I thought – I could have captured it and studied it line through dazzling line at leisure.

By all rights, that should have been the final poem in a bravura evening that cemented Ellis's place at the forefront of British poetry. We'd been told it was the second-last, though. The audience was on tenterhooks: how could she possibly top it?

Ellis declared that her final poem was a new one, *Creepy Sleepy*. She said that she had curated all the previous poems that evening solely to lead up to this one. The narrative they told would then become apparent.

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I confess to losing a little respect for her at this point. Treating a poetry reading itself as a meta-poem is a hackneyed idea that every young poet thinks original until they try it and are robustly informed otherwise.

I should have trusted her. This isn't what Ellis meant at all.

*Creepy Sleepy* was rendered in the first-person using Chaucerian stanzas. Most modern poets have eschewed the constraints of rhyme and metre, preferring to explore the affordances of free verse; to write in so antiquated a form as Chaucerian stanzas is therefore to make a statement. Typically, that statement is an allusion to literary tradition, and given Ellis's obsession with form I hypothesised this to be the case here. As we shall shortly see, my hypothesis was correct, but only partially so: the literary tradition transformed into a literal tradition in a quite astounding way.

Superficially, *Creepy Sleepy* relates the story of a woman who follows the narrator around. She sleeps whenever the narrator stays in the same place for more than a quarter of an hour, regardless of what the narrator is doing – writing, eating, travelling by train, partying, watching TikTok videos, playing online games – any situation where the narrator remains relatively *in situ*. Other than sleep and follow, the woman doesn't do anything.

As the poem initially developed, my symbolism senses were telling me that it was either about death or a decline in mental faculties or physical

prowess – concerns at the back of the mind of everyone, but rather clichéd for a poet of Ellis's presumed stature.

The context shifted, though. Sometimes, the follower is joined by another woman. Sometimes, the other woman takes over the following.

Now, the poem was suddenly more interesting. The women don't represent death, unless there is more than one death. Do they represent mundanity? Motherhood? Anxiety? Acceptance? The subconscious? What fate is always there as a possibility, waiting? What could these women betoken?

My money was still on death as the poem continued.

The followers were passive. They did nothing but observe and sleep, although while observing they sometimes ate or drank. They didn't react when the narrator made eye contact. They kept on watching, impassively.

The status of the women remained ambiguous. I knew they encoded some feeling or idea or other insubstantial concept, but they had such focus, such apparent strength of purpose that they felt almost real. The two co-operated with one another, so they didn't represent competing concerns. Or perhaps Ellis was suggesting that they did? Do good and evil communicate?

Did they represent futures with different faces? With different endings, or different beginnings? Or are all futures the same, they only appear to be different?

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The third stanza wondered how they always found the narrator – whom we now implicitly accepted was Ellis herself. The creepy women were easy to escape from, because they were sleepy, but she was just as easy for them to locate afterwards. They could see her when she hid, they could see her at a distance. Only in crowds were they lost.

Perhaps, I speculated, she was saying that only among others are we truly ourselves – or, again as is typical for her, perhaps she was saying the opposite?

The questions she was raising were profound, and I suspect different for each member of the audience. Is she worried or comforted by her creepy sleepy stalkers? Are we ourselves worried by our own creepy sleepy stalkers – the ones we have projected onto those of the poem in order to try to make sense of it?

At the end of two earlier poems in the reading – *That Which is Not* and *Rare and Well Done* – the applause had been particularly enthusiastic; when *I Don't Know my Father* had finished, the applause had been rapturous. When *Creepy Sleepy* finished, there was silence. Individuals did seem to countenance clapping, but thought better of it and desisted. They were stunned, overwhelmed.

Then, just as they we were collectively coming out of it, the poet rose to her feet.

Instinctively, we knew: we hadn't applauded the poem yet because it wasn't ended.

In the audience, towards the back, was a sleeping woman. She was wearing jeans, Adidas trainers and a black Max Planck Institute hoodie. I'd say she was in her late twenties.

Ellis went over and shook her awake.

The effect was electric! This was clearly part of the poem, but it wasn't a poem – or was it? Had it pivoted to theatre?

Then, it hit me: Ellis was concretising her poem and confronting its symbols head-on. She was commanding us, the audience, to do the same. Poems are performance and always have been – that's why she'd used Chaucerian stanzas. She was bringing her words literally to life. It was genius!

I had the presence of mind to scribble summaries of the dialogue.

What are you playing at?!

Protecting you.

From what?

From your father's people.

They can't hurt me.

They can only hurt you.

Why do they want to hurt me?

When you die, the world dies.

How does sleeping protect me?



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When I die, I'll awaken where I last slept, close to you.

How do you always find me when I run? Am I bugged?

I see souls. They're symbols, slashes, like thorns, hovering above the head as if they were name-plates, always facing me.

So you recognise my soul?

Yours is different. It's three-dimensional, a circle, a halo, rotating, brighter than the rest.

We have to talk.

Everyone has to talk.

Everyone has to live.

The two held each other's gazes for two or three seconds, then the entire audience erupted in ovation. It was cathartic, it was tearful, it was thankful – thankful for showing us, and only us, this fabulous flash of our inner selves.

Both Ellis and the actress playing the sleeper behaved as if their exchange was an impromptu, unrehearsed development. They each give astonishingly believable performances. It was sensational. I now understood why this was a no-phones event. One had to be there to experience it. A recording would have been dead on the screen in comparison. It was incredible.

"Your father's people" – the past you carry with you.

"When you die the world dies" – from your perspective, your own extinction is accompanied by that of everything else.

"When I die, I'll awaken" – yet the world does carry on without you.

The women represent life. Of course! This isn't a poem about death, it's about life! That something-that's-always-there, always with you, always watching: it's not the future, it's the present, the here and now.

"I see souls" – I am a personification of life, of existence.

"Symbols like slashes, like thorns" – everyone carries their own hurt.

"Nameplates, always facing me" – everyone shares the present.

"A halo, rotating" – a crown of thorns. Everyone is their own Christ. Every moment, they complete the definition of themselves.

Everyone is different, but everyone faces life together. Everyone has to talk. I see it.

I feel privileged. I'm weeping as I write this.

Love Ellis: I have misunderstood you, and now, through your words, I understand that I have long misunderstood myself.

I thought I knew greatness when I saw it, but now – now I've seen it – I realise I knew nothing at all.

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**Notes**

None.