

## **SPL Podcast Transcription – Eleanor Wilner (and Jennifer says goodbye)**

[Eleanor Wilner reads final lines of ‘The Minotaur’]

[Gentle guitar music]

Hello, you’re listening to a Scottish Poetry Library Podcast.

### **1. Jennifer Says Goodbye**

**Jennifer Williams:** Hello, this is Jennifer Williams, Programme Manager at the Scottish Poetry Library... no more! [chuckles.] That’s right. This is me signing off as Programme Manager and one of your friendly podcast interviewers for the Library. Because, by the time you’ll be listening to this, I’ll have started a new job at the University of Edinburgh, which I’m very pleased about. But of course I leave with mixed emotions because, while it’s wonderful to have an exciting new opportunity to go to and new challenges, I’ve very much loved working at the Library all these years. And it’s been such a special opportunity for me, both in my professional life as a facilitator and coordinator, but also as a poet and a writer. It’s allowed me to meet so many extraordinary and brilliant poets and to travel and go to poetry festivals. And a lot of that hopefully I’ve been able to share with you through these interviews. And I occasionally meet some of you who listen to the podcast from places as far flung as Vancouver and New Zealand, and it’s always so touching to think of you out there listening. So, I really hope you’ve enjoyed this series, which will continue with our other interviewer, Colin Waters.

But as a parting gift, I wanted to share with you this little tiny interview, which was actually the very first podcast interview I ever made at the library. I was so new I don’t think I really quite knew what I was doing yet, which is why it never made it into a proper podcast. But it’s with one of the most wonderful poets I’ve ever had the luck to meet. And that’s the American poet, Eleanor Wilner, who is such an inspiration to me. And actually, since meeting her at the library and conducting this interview, we stayed in touch, and she’s become a real mentor to me. I just have so much love for her. A number of other poets I meet also say the same, so I know she’s a real shining star and she’s had a big impact on many people. This is me speaking to her in – I believe it would have been

August 2012. As you'll hear, she's just an amazing poet and I'm so delighted that I'm going to get to share these three beautiful poems with you.

2016 has been a very challenging year in many ways, and I know we're looking at quite tough times, especially politically. Eleanor's poems, in some ways, are about the last time we had especially challenging times in American politics. It's sad that they have a new relevance now, but at the same time I'm always cheered by the way people like Eleanor are able to discuss these issues in ways that remind us that history is cyclical rather than linear, and that it's always two steps back, one step ahead for the human race. But if there's one thing I believe in and hope for, it's that with creativity and positivity, we can continue to go forward if we communicate and share the best things we have to offer – which is often our love and care for one another. And the beauties we perceive, which we can share with one another through forms such as poetry. So, happy holidays and I hope to meet you somewhere sometime soon. And I very much hope you enjoy this reading by Eleanor Wilner.

## **2. Interview with Eleanor Wilner**

**Jennifer Williams:** Hello, this is Jennifer Williams. I'm the programme manager at the Scottish Poetry Library, and I am sitting here with the gorgeous poet, Eleanor Wilner, who has been so wonderful and kindly dropped in to visit me at the library. She comes every year to the Edinburgh Festival and sees lots of different things while she's here. She has agreed to read us a couple of poems from her – this is your newest book?

**Eleanor Wilner:** This is the new collection.

**Jennifer Williams:** Called *Tourist in Hell*.

**Eleanor Wilner:** *Tourist in Hell*. [Jennifer chuckles.]

**Jennifer Williams:** It's got a quite extraordinary, sort of brass... boar? Is it a boar on the front?

**Eleanor Wilner:** That's the boar. That is... What's his name? It's escaping me now. But he sits in the marketplace in Florence and his nose shines because people touch him for some sort of luck. But it's the ferocity of the boar and the boar in the marketplace – the wild pig, the way greed is loose in the world and

especially in the American world now. It appealed to me as an emblem of sorts – you know: of rapacity, ferocity, every kind of “-ity” except for pity in that face.

**Jennifer Williams:** Yes.

**Eleanor Wilner:** And these poems really come out of a response to the bloody history of this species, and in particular, many of these poems were written during the Bush years, so they have that unfortunate period as their backdrop. [Jennifer chuckles.] Unfortunately for many, it’s not a backdrop. So, let me read a poem called ‘In the Time of War.’

**[Eleanor Wilner reads ‘In the Time of War’]**

**Jennifer Williams:** Thank you.

**Eleanor Wilner:** I’ll read you another one from... We were talking about messing with the *Bible* [earlier]. [Jennifer chuckles.] This has the ghost of a very well known story behind it, but I’ve altered it to fit the perversions of religion that we see all around us.

**[Eleanor Wilner reads ‘Magnificat’]**

**Eleanor Wilner:** Do you want me to read one from the *Labyrinth* series to close this?

**Jennifer Williams:** Oh, yes please.

**Eleanor Wilner:** Jennifer has been writing wonderful poems from Ovid, including the story of the Labyrinth. So, I’ll just read you – there are four voices that rise out of *Labyrinth*, here - and I’ll just read you the Minotaur, because he’s the one that gets us out. I gave him a new role, because he is [of an] animal-human nature, which we need to recombine. So, he becomes the speaker.

**Jennifer Williams:** And I feel like I should mention this: this poem on the page is also in a beautiful shape – almost like a goblet shape. Or, I feel like I can see a face in there as well. It’s like a concrete poem in that sense [...].

**Eleanor Wilner:** The other thought I had about it. It had to be reset a little bit to fit the page of this particular book. It was meant for an artist book, so I could

have a little more latitude here. But it was almost like the old sand clocks, through which the sand –

**Jennifer Williams:** Ah, yes, yes.

**Eleanor Wilner:** Because this is about what happens to mythological thinking through time.

**Jennifer Williams:** Of course.

**Eleanor Wilner:** Because we are revisiting this in the twenty-first century, and it was written so long ago. And then this page, which looks like the sand dripping out, is also meant to resemble the DNA molecule – where the nuclei wind their way around the staff. I love that, because that was the old caduceus that was held by Hermes, or Mercury, in the old myth. The DNA model was always out there, and that was [in] the doctor's staff, the staff of immortality, two serpents wound around a central axis.

**Jennifer Williams:** They knew somehow.

**Eleanor Wilner:** It was always there. So, the imagination always knew what immortality was really about.

**[Pause]**

**Eleanor Wilner:** The Minotaur speaks.

**[Eleanor Wilner reads 'The Minotaur']**

[Outro music]

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[Outro music]