

# Reading Leaves

**Jean Sprackland** is an English poet and writer. She is the author of five collections of poetry and two books of essays about place and nature. Born in 1962 and originally from Burton upon Trent, Jean Sprackland studied English and Philosophy at the University of Kent at Canterbury, before starting to write poetry at age 30. She is now Professor of Creative Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her first poetry collection was shortlisted for the 1998 Forward Poetry Prize, and her second collection, *Hard Water*, was included in the 2003 T.S. Eliot Prize shortlist.

Reading Leaves is from this second collection (Sprackland, 2003)

<https://poetryarchive.org/poem/reading-leaves/>

This poem is rooted in the mundane, domestic, urban landscape of everyday life. Yet somehow it also expresses our desire to be elsewhere, to find a more unknown exotic, expansive experience. This is a poem about place and belonging, the local and the foreign, the anxiety of the journey between, and the doubt and uncertainty of arrival. As in the poems in the *Hard Water* collection, Sprackland uses a rich, textured physical language combined with a subtle humour to turn the familiar landscape of everyday life into something more mysterious and compelling, something beautiful, but with dark overtones, troubling and anxious.

The hedged lawn and dustbins of the first stanza place us somewhere in a comfortable suburban landscape, gazing at the alien red leaves blown onto the grass. The association of blood with the red of the leaves suggests the injection of new life into the scene. Perhaps then these are not the red, desiccated leaves of autumn, but something more optimistic, more life affirming. The mention of a generous sky and exotic parrots adds to the sense of optimism, the idea of life expanding into new possibilities. The narrator is prompted by these feelings to go in search of source of the leaves - of the source of new experience.

She initially follows the comfortable “scent of warmth and plenty” but soon finds herself in a more uncertain environment. Through her eyes we see the side effects of people’s existence, in the “boarded up shops” and the “stump of a roundabout” but not the actual people themselves. The landscape is populated by the ghosts in our

imagination, evoking the thought that the city, although populated, is in some way empty of life. The narrator carries her leaf as a guarantee, but surely this is more of a passport, a guarantee of safe passage perhaps, or more likely, a guarantee of a transition to the possibilities of a new world. But if it is a guarantee, then what is it a guarantee to, and who provides that guarantee? It certainly does not seem to be the people of the city. The narrator questions a young mother – but we are not explicitly told what the question is. Presumably the narrator is enquiring whether the mother knows where the red leaves come from. But the mother declines to answer, simply redirecting the narrator: “Try the bloke in the hat – he’s not from round here, either”. The ambiguity of the ‘either’ adds to the uncertainty of the situation. Does the young mother mean she’s also not from here? Or that she recognises that the narrator is not a local either? Or is it the leaves in the question that are not from her either? The ‘either’ dislocates our sense of certainty about the scenes that unfold before our eyes. This is just one example of how Sprackland makes every individual word work hard in her text.

In the third stanza the old man examines the narrator’s leaf, but although he speaks, we do not hear his words. His advice is opaque to us. Indeed we do not even know whether or not he gives advice. The poem reaches no conclusion about where the leaves come from, or even their purpose. Perhaps the reader’s journey does end in some sort of satisfying way, with the pleasure of the alliteration of the last line – “settling like rumours on his boots, the bench, the broken ground”, but there is no glib answer to the purpose of the journeys of the leaves or the narrator. The leaves it turns out, may well be travellers, but they are just like rumours, and we cannot be certain if they do or do not carry truth and meaning. We realise that the leaves are perhaps a metaphor for ourselves. Blown by circumstance, burnished and shining colourfully, but destined inevitably to fall and decay. Then again, maybe the leaves are simply the leaves of autumn, and as they fall on the broken ground, they are ending their journey, ready to decay and return to the earth, ready to feed the next generation of trees. Maybe too that is the fate of this entire landscape. The sense of anxiety and uncertainty of the second stanza remains in our minds at the end.

This is a poem about place and belonging, the local and the foreign, and the journey between. In Strickland’s landscape the inhabitants are dimly illustrated persona, who are just passing through, hardly touching or affecting their surroundings. Is it coincidental that this poem is about leaves and the narrator leaves their locale, to search for the source of the leaves? Perhaps that it is one word play too many. But

certainly, the poem is about the local and the foreign. The red leaves invade the narrator's lawn, but she welcomes them, seeing them as a currency from a foreign land, and quite different land to her own. She seeks their source, desiring not perhaps the material wealth of the current land ('the land of plenty'), but rather seeking the richness of experience it might bring – an exoticism, a generosity. The narrator seeks not the destination of the leaves (though that is what she eventually finds) but their source. It is with optimism that she travels from the wealth and warmth of her locality into the more desolate and damaged landscape of the playground and the roundabout. But she finds no answers in her destination, but the possibilities of new experience, a renewal from the red blood of the leaves, is offered in the rumours they bring. Or maybe there is pessimism too, as the leaves, exhausted, fall to the ground, their rumours unfounded, the future uncertain.

## References

Sprackland, J., (2003) *Hard Water*, Penguin Random House, Jonathan Cape, UK, ISBN 978-0224069595