Shari Kocher | Condensed Launch Speech for Anne Elvey's *Leaf*

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Hello everyone. Wonderful to hear Peter Larkin read aloud. Thanks for that introduction, Rose. I'm coming to you tonight from Dja Dja Wurrung Country, whose lands were never ceded, and I pay my respects to Elders past and present. I'm very honoured to launch Anne Elvey's book with you all tonight.

Leaf (Liquid Amber Press, 2022), as we know, is Anne Elvey's fifth full-length poetry collection. This shimmering collection of liquid listening/s curates a broad liquidity of concerns, the groundswell of which has been nurtured over a prolific double decade of feminist scholarly, poetic, and activist work, not least informed by Elvey's seven years of dedicated service as founder and managing editor of *Plumwood Mountain: An Australian Journal of Ecopoetry and Ecopoetics.* This significant journal has published countless poets to date, the British ecocritical poet, Peter Larkin, among them. Elvey first encountered Larkin's work in the poem 'Arch the Apartness /\ Proffering Trees 3 (Pollard)' while editing the first volume of the forementioned journal, and she writes that she was struck, even then, by Larkin's use of imagery and the ways in which 'the build-up of language tend[s] to take me toward the otherness of plants – esp. trees in forests & plantations.' (Elvey, 2022, pers. comm.) As she notes in her Acknowledgements, Larkin was an early inspirator for the poetry in *Leaf.*

Despite significant differences in style and ethos, Elvey encounters Larkin's poetics as a productive querying of attenuated modes of attention (akin to prayer) in the service of unsettling habitual relations with trees. As Elvey puts it, Larkin's

> skilled saturated poetics [...] both calls to and unsettles the reader, performing – and at the same time setting up a space for – an impossible relation that might be called prayer, but might also be something else. This something else is what intrigues me in Larkin's work, the possibility of standing before a tree open to its otherness, with all that costs in terms of self-surrender and a principled unknowing. (Elvey 2020, 16)

In writing about her intentions for *Leaf*, Elvey describes how she wanted 'to develop form and voice for a poetics open to the agency of trees and their enmeshments, where settler/migrant poetries are unsettled by unknowing, where First Nations knowledges of trees are prior to and incommensurable with settler knowing, and form an unassimilable and necessary foreground to any ecopoetic writing' (Elvey, pers. comm). Elvey's strenuous activities in cultivating cultural canopies that cumulatively proffer an ongoing commitment to the unsettling of colonizing logics also proffer, in part, an answer to her own stated question

in a recent essay of hers in *New Directions:* 'can settler poets share decolonization?' (Elvey, in *New Directions,* 99). *Leaf* is a book that will surely merit scrutiny in answer to this question.

Leaf is composed in five parts. Part One signals its intention in the section titled 'To listen for the leaf', which gathers together ten poems that negotiate various leaf-human relations. Part Two approaches the matter and manner of how we might begin to interpret tree-related losses across five poems whose gatherings speak the title 'The dark industry of life'. This question of interpretation works in latent ways as the second-person actor in the opening poem of this section 'How is it you interpret things?' could be read from the perspective of a living tree encountering a human speaker, or a tree being beheld and questioned by its human observer, or indeed, as Elvey herself imagines it, this is a poem addressed to the wind (15). Either way, this poem astutely handles a transference of energy as material, whereby air and water connect across species in a dynamic motility of living relation: the poem ends with the lines '[a]gainst the bend and the pull // of a solid you ebb you flow / like a liquid handling a thing' (15).

Part Three, 'Luring water', continues this theme with eleven poems that depict various encounters with local coastal banksias and other 'found' plants in locations which ground Elvey's home place on BoonWurrung Country in the bayside suburb of Seaford (albeit with two exceptions). Included in this section is a visual poem, 'Water-bourne', whose 'sprung cups' entangle a second-person hand-drawn banksia with the loaded paradoxes of empirical botanical namings. Another 'Coast banksia' poem on the facing page deploys triple columns of buckling syntax that might represent an effaced observer's experiment in writing, as Elvey describes elsewhere, a 'biosemiotics that sees language itself, its acquisition and practice, as a more-than-human facility and exercise' (Elvey, pers. com). Then again, intersubjective pronoun positioning invites curious scrutiny in reflection.

Part Four, 'These knuckles' welt on wood' turns towards deictic and first-person rhetorical modes across nine slow poems 'focused on the pandemic and climate change with an ear to more-than-human worlds and agencies in a context of colonial invasion' (Elvey, 'Notes'), while also alluding to personal terrain in which human relationships carry the plangencies of leaf tissue, also. The opening poem of this section, 'Regeneration' is a poignant example of this. I'll read it here:

Regeneration

A trigger
chews a moth hole in the conversation.

Streaming, I mend with slow stitch, while

doubt dresses in
the worn knit of another's

need, unpicked
like my own. Outside

wild breath's havoc
leaves me scathed and wondering.

Can I pick up
the ripped limbs again, knowing

I too am woven
bark thin and brittle? (43)

The final section of this leaf-oriented collection, 'Not to spoil the well', riffs across twelve poems, whose 'mesh towards hydration'(59) interleaves the personal with the political em/placement of non-human and more-than-human others, such as the limbs of fallen trees in dialogue with yellow-tailed cockatoos (61), or 'pollen-focused bees' making auditory overtures in the '[p]ink / quivers' of the 'succulent expanse' of a commonly named Pigface (62), or a second-person dedication to the voice of the wind, who 'improvise(s) in leaves' a 'wing-cleft, a cherish', a '*thrsss thrsss thrsss'* which 'endures. The atmosphere's un-wording' (64).

Elvey focalises *Leaf* with an epigraph that quotes from *Plants in Contemporary Poetry* by John Charles Ryan, thus stating her project in explicit terms:

> In imagining plants, are we prepared for the impress of their imagining *us* in return, as all beings – vocal and less vocal, mobile and less mobile, patient and impatient, photosynthetic and less so – negotiate a collective future on an increasingly imperiled planet? How do we imagine plants? How might plants imagine us?

In *Leaf,* the poetry asks: if settler poets can share decolonization, how might leaves imagine us? How might trees, or even a single leaf, share their speaking *with* us?

How indeed might *we* meet or imagine such encounters? How equipped are we to listen?

Each section of Elvey's collection is prefaced with a page of hand drawn visual poems – singular images of trembling leaves encircled by lower case text – structured by larger-case text which labels each leaf's shape with its attendant nomenclature in flowing cursive. This device visually separates each leaf from its neighbouring leaf, with the space around the edges of each leaf populated by self-reflexive description in smaller print, such that the reader is viscerally aware of both the tactile nature of the leaves called to hand, as well as the isolating function that classification incurs. This gesture, not without its hand drawn charm, also problematises settler modes of knowledge, such that the reader is immediately subject both to the effort of deciphering the text that encircles each leaf, as well as being warned (or reminded) that sometimes we can only 'see' what we have names (and stories) for.

What then, in taxonomical isolation, do we imagine, when encountering the diversity of singular leaves among a multitude of leaves in unsettling contexts? The implicit question of naming enters the poetics even before the first word – which happens to be 'you' in the first text-only poem in the book, titled 'Leaf' – and this conundrum, both in subject position and in multivalent address, is suitably amplified by the title of the first section: 'To listen for the leaf'.

That is, to listen *for*, not to listen *to* or *with*. This is an intentional word choice and seems to be deliberately pricking us to ask: how is this not unproblematic? Here, in one sense, we might find ourselves in the realm of Kinsella's 'resistance function of poetry' as Elvey herself notes in her 'Poetry as Alternative' section of her chapter "Writing Unwriting Wiriting": that is, aka Kinsella, 'the poem that asserts the beauty of a flower may be intended as its own activism *for* that flower *against* human encroachment.' (Kinsella 2016, in Elvey 2021, 101, my italics). Peter Larkin's tree poetics might, on the surface, seem incommensurable with Peter Minter's depiction in *New Directions in Contemporary Australian Poetry* (2021) of First Nations peoples' living sense of (ongoing) mutual obligation in relation to trees, such that the emergence of a corresponding 'genealogical-I' in Aboriginal poetics might sit uneasily with other readings of Larkin's poetics to date (Seita 2013; Elvey 2020); and yet, Jill and Gladys Milroy in "Trees are Our Families Too" suggest that latent knowledges of right relation exists in all of us (Milroy 2008, 23), but that we need

to respectfully remember which story we are in, before we can act in right relation with other stories.

How are such paradoxes encountered in leaf-business, or even countered by encounter in Elvey's own *Leaf*? Resistance as a productive force catapults *Leaf* into questioning what is reciprocal when subjectivity is thrown open in relation to who might be (fleetingly) inhabiting the 'you' in Elvey's poems, in all their flux and shimmer. Sometimes the 'you' is a plant or tree addressed, either in dedication, such as in the poem 'To the Apple Box (*But-But, Eucalyptus bridgesiana*)', or in tender observation, as in the poem 'Coast banksia in a neighbour's backyard', in which the speaker reads the signals of a tree as a kind of chosen speech: 'Your bone shift of limb / and bare leaf are mostly / mute even in gale until // *Snap!* Your branch or half / a trunk crushes the line' (32). In other poems, such as in the wry 'Banskia Integrifolia', there is a withdrawing of speech, as if the objectified plant *objects*, and decides to withdraw from the 'our' of humans in 'settler-scape', whose speaker declaims '[w]here the asymmetry / of gums is elegant / on the whole, a banksia // bristles.

It will not say

consider yourself at home' (33).

This might feel like contested space, and it is, if Aboriginal ways of knowing are not foregrounded and prioritised. In coming to *Leaf* on the heels of reading Elvey's own chapter "Writing Unwriting Writing" in the recent book of scintillating essays, *New Directions in Contemporary Australian Poetry* (2021), I read this new vegetal direction in Elvey's poetics as both implicitly and explicitly responding to the various challenges pointedly up for review in settler-poetics, as outlined in such pressing questions as Cassidy's 'what is needed to create a relational "meeting place" in our doing of poetry?'(*New Directions*, 88), Kinsella's 'do we have to counter our own intactness to respect that of others?'(*New Directions*, 137) and Farrell's 'what happens when we read poems of politics through the entity of the land?' (*New Directions*, 108). In particular, I see Elvey's project as not only informed by Peter Larkin's poetics, but also in the contexts of kinship-making, I read this collection as a creative tuning into the precepts and principles presented in the Indigeneities cluster of essays in *New Directions*, in which Peter Minter and Natale Harkin, among others, trace genealogical kinship lines not only to trees in and of themselves, but to the family albums of relational sustenance that trees bequeath when approached as sovereign and inalienable from

Country. As Ellen Van Neervan succinctly puts it: ‘For us there is no difference between land, sea, sky, earth, and people, we all are related.’ (*New Directions*, Van Neerven, 34).

Resistance as both tactic, and as connective tissue, may be one mode of accessing a version of ‘principled unknowing’ in Elvey’s *Leaf* (Elvey, 2020, 16). In the opening text-based poem of the section that foregrounds the act of listening *for*, the brief eight-line poem ‘Leaf’ proffers a heightened sense of tactility as one form of possible attunement when finding one’s respectful place in story. It’s a brief and minimalist poem, consisting of two four-line stanzas built on imbrications of formatted pause, or white space.

‘Leaf’

you touch from inside’s
other

after which there’s a pause, a barely perceptible breath in which the same line turns a sensate touch to visual cue—

you touch from inside’s
other vein and skin
silver
to a spot of rust smooth

At the stanza break, there’s a fulcrum: textured listening turns on leaf *as* hand, and as leaf *in* hand, both. In terms of affect, Eve Sedgwick, quoting Renu Bora, observes that ‘smoothness is both a type of texture and texture’s other […] liminally registered on the border of properties of touch and vision’ (Sedgewick, 99-101). The second stanza continues this liminal touch, which exudes the unsayable inside the breath that is shared between an implicit ‘I and You’ – not fully graspable, and certainly not taken for granted. What is human and what is leaf, already, and who is saying ‘you’? From ‘smooth’—

to the swell of an insect’s
egg held in finger’s
breath
becomes a word (3)

There is mystery here, as there needs to be, in the foregrounding of a non-linguistic tactility as nuanced as that which passes between hands, as between stories in shared exchange—for, without breath, in a world denuded of leaves, there can be quite literally, no 'word'. A hand in the 'you' who listens is also a hand who breathes, whose rhythms are prescribed by time, leaf and human, both. And whatever is held, in this poem, in the finger of a breath, also implicates the swell of an insect's egg, the multiple pauses of how we are (invited to?) slow down enough to listen differently, uncertainly, and in difference, empty-handed. Maybe leaves listen like this, always. Maybe not. Whatever the exchanges in interleaving leaf and human sensibilities in this first section, Elvey is alive to the problem of subject positioning as well as to the human-centred urge to decode leaves 'performing their artful scripts' (5).

For Elvey, the vegetal imaginings encountered in Larkin's poetry activates a theologically-inflected listening *for*, whose relational imbrications proffer an unsettling glimpse of what, elsewhere, Elvey has named provisionally as a 'green night of the soul'. It is from this productively troubling *topoi* that many of the poems in *Leaf* might be read. In an astonishing essay in response to Larkin's 'praying // firs \\ attentuate', Elvey confesses:

> My sense personally was of 'divine absence' – in the traditional mode of there not seeming to be a personal presence at the other end of the address 'you'. But my poetic attentiveness to wind, trees, creek, birds and so on, in the area where I live, and to vegetables, food preparation, bodies, the everyday world of domesticity, felt like a different kind of 'night' – a different divine withdrawal – than the divine absence which 'dark night of the soul' suggests. Here, divine 'missing' seems more connected with the impossibility of undoing ecological damage as well as the kinds of cruelty governments practice (such as on asylum seekers and refugees in detention on Nauru and Manus) and the ensuing withdrawal of divine comfort or a feeling for/from the sacred, except as grief. So, a green night is more connected with this divine missing, and the ground of this missing in an attentive and ethical orientation to more-than-human (including human) others. (16)

Networks of settler poetic list/(en)/ing/s, and an orientation toward such listening *for,* undoubtedly galvanise the opening section of *Leaf*. Among poems that foreground local connections to place and other poets, Julia Kristeva and Paul Celan are also featured, such that literary 'family' are an explicit part of this poetry's canopy of connection. The final poem in this opening riff, 'What to do in Early Autumn' responds to Paul Celan's 'Corona', and this poem hints at lacunae the rest of the book seeks to un/(en)/tangle. The use of the

imperative mode, for example, in the anaphoric un/gentling of 'Let' in this poem reminds me of what Elvey has depicted elsewhere as the troubling of prayer, even as it echoes Celan's intentional unsettlement from within the language of the oppressor, and the oppressor's ongoing conditionals. Indeed, perhaps this poem suggests a tuning that *seeks* direction in the effacing—and effacement—of all instructions. As Peter Minter quotes Kakadu man, Bill Neidjie, in a medicine poem 'Tree' that speaks to all that can't be said here, but which feels pertinent to me in relation to Elvey's sense of intersubjective and interleaved longing in *Leaf*:

> *You feel*
> *because your body in that tree or earth.*
> *Nobody can tell you,*
> *You got to feel it yourself.*
> (from 'Tree' in Minter, *New Directions,* 24-25)

Anne Elvey's poem:

> 'What to do in Early Autumn'
> *after Paul Celan 'Corona'*
>
> Tuck a spider in an emerald
> shell. Let a dry sprig
>
> cling to its stem. Its crimson
> gives nothing to the tree.
>
> Let the sun lick the brine
> from your skin. The mollusc
>
> has quit its case. Ask what
> answer your hands should
>
> give. It is time. It is time
> they listened for the leaf. (12)

And so, with both and all of our hands, it is time to celebrate this mutlivalent act of listening by launching Anne Elvey's poetry collection, sung with the light-kindling power of leaves from within, or beside, a green night of the soul—Please join me in declaring *Leaf,* in all its pleasures and paradoxes, alive and launched!

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