

SHORT CUTS



a plant & story swap



PHOTO AND FRONT COVER PHOTO BY ANNIE B-S

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Curated by Annie Brockenhuis-Schack

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#Boundless21

LESSONS IN CULTIVATION

CARA LOPEZ

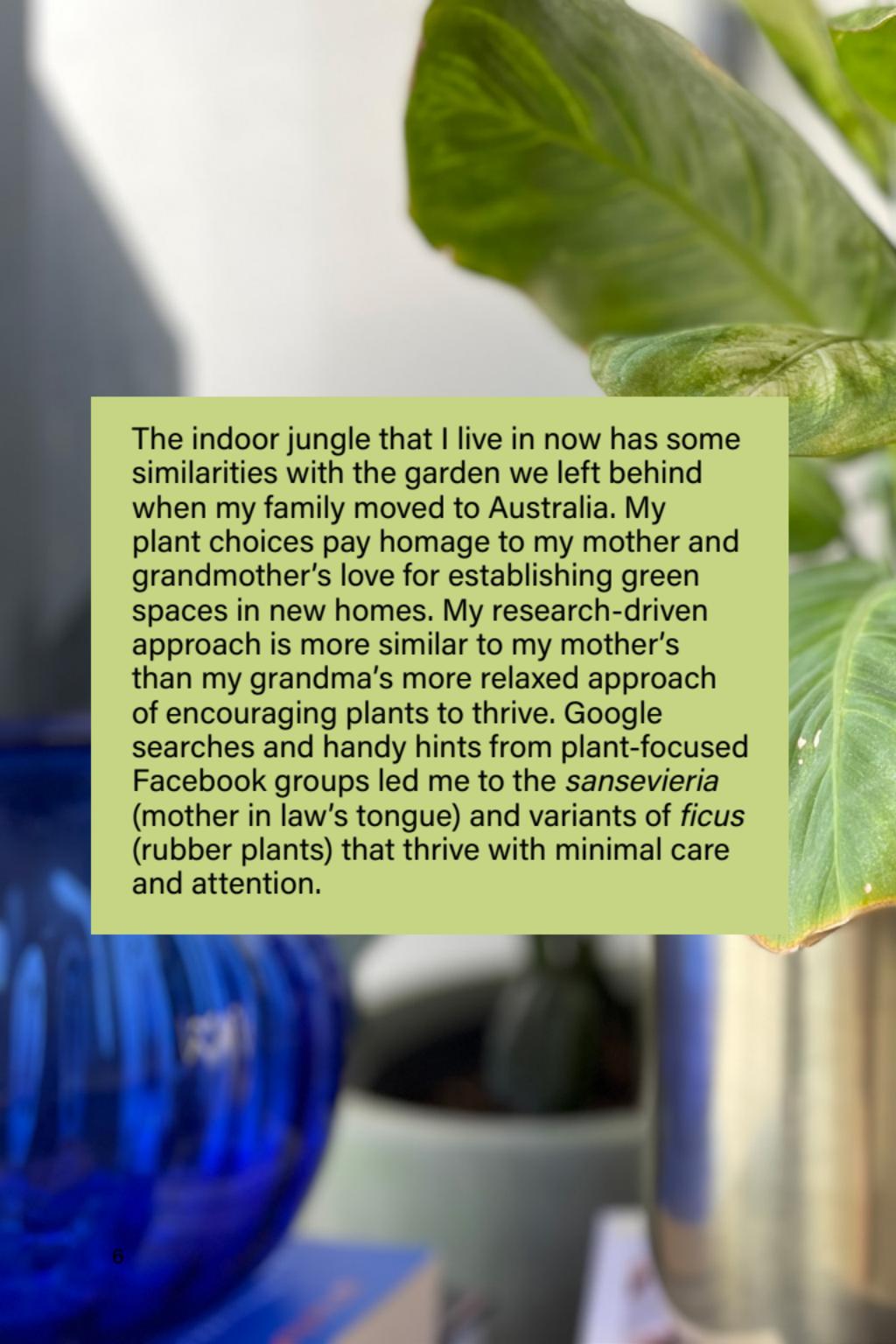


PHOTO BY
ANNIE B-S

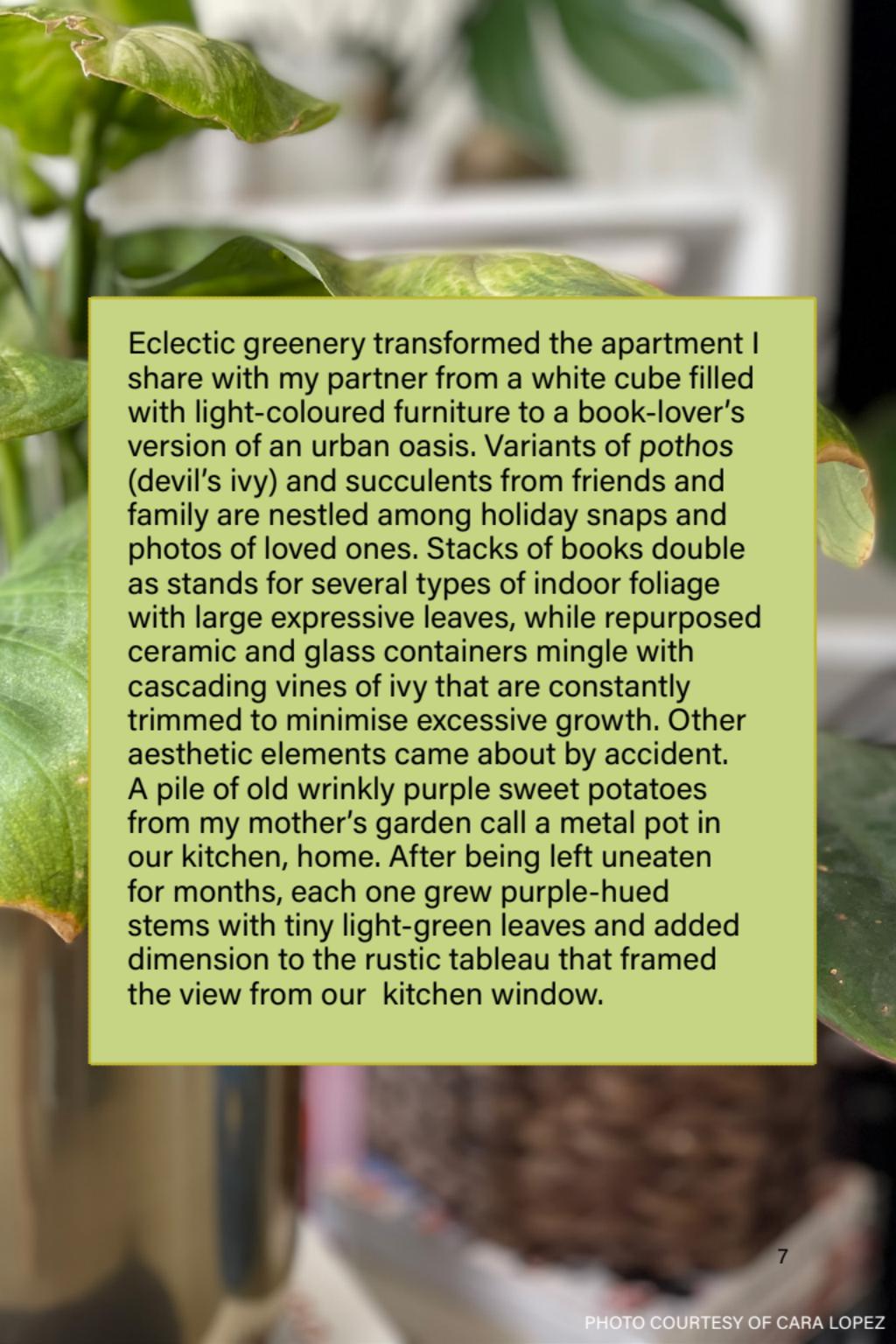
This piece is dedicated to Cara's grandmother.

The “garden” in our final home in the Philippines seemed more like a green wall in comparison to the massive aspirational gardens they often featured in *Gardening Australia*, *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Vogue Living*. Lush bougainvillea hid unattractive metal grates from view and lined the perimeter of our petite courtyard, providing it with privacy and bright bursts of colour. Instead of soft grass, the ground was lined with paving tiles and concrete, the perfect foundation for mismatched pots containing brightly coloured bromeliads and orchids, colourful compromises to the lack of space.

Mama (my grandmother) spent solid amounts of time tending to the multi-coloured foliage - something that I couldn't comprehend as a child, even though we spent most of our time together. She often became annoyed with the balls and loud expletives that flew into our yard from the outdoor street basketball court. The plants that grew in this space were mainly decorative, inedible and chosen for their ability to withstand extreme sunlight and typhoons. The only exception to this was a lone guava seedling that grew by accident - a prelude to the edible garden that I yearned for as an adult.



The indoor jungle that I live in now has some similarities with the garden we left behind when my family moved to Australia. My plant choices pay homage to my mother and grandmother's love for establishing green spaces in new homes. My research-driven approach is more similar to my mother's than my grandma's more relaxed approach of encouraging plants to thrive. Google searches and handy hints from plant-focused Facebook groups led me to the *sansevieria* (mother in law's tongue) and variants of *ficus* (rubber plants) that thrive with minimal care and attention.



Eclectic greenery transformed the apartment I share with my partner from a white cube filled with light-coloured furniture to a book-lover's version of an urban oasis. Variants of pothos (devil's ivy) and succulents from friends and family are nestled among holiday snaps and photos of loved ones. Stacks of books double as stands for several types of indoor foliage with large expressive leaves, while repurposed ceramic and glass containers mingle with cascading vines of ivy that are constantly trimmed to minimise excessive growth. Other aesthetic elements came about by accident. A pile of old wrinkly purple sweet potatoes from my mother's garden call a metal pot in our kitchen, home. After being left uneaten for months, each one grew purple-hued stems with tiny light-green leaves and added dimension to the rustic tableau that framed the view from our kitchen window.

Over the past couple of years, my interest in cultivating my own ingredients intensified as I developed a stronger love for cooking - evidenced by the piles of hardbound cookbooks beneath sculptural plants. My parents' carefully tended outdoor space provided inspiration through an eclectic mix of organic spinach, tomatoes and aromatic plants like lemongrass that infused dishes with deeper flavours and greater nutrition in contrast to the produce available from my local green grocers. For months I attempted to grow herbs like basil, sage, rosemary and thyme on our kitchen counter to complement dishes prepared after long work days. It was a lesson in patience, as some of them were propagated from seeds, whilst others were young seedlings with leaves that were ready to use for cooking.

Spoiler alert: I should have paid more attention to Costa and hosts of many other gardening shows I watched years ago, as none of my herby companions survived beyond two months - three at most. Other than my old, wrinkly, still-life sweet potatoes, the only edible plants that survived were dwarf lemon and lime shrubs from Aldi, each one waiting for the moment they'll be transferred from their pots to a well-tended outdoor space. Our balcony hid my shortcomings as a plantita (semi-obsessive plant aunty) in plain sight. Empty vessels are evidence of overwatered fronds (a crime, according to outspoken members in various Facebook plant groups) and numerous failed attempts at cultivating my own ingredients without understanding the specific needs of herbs and other edible plants.

Despite my herb-related mishaps, gardening became more than just a recreational activity. Like others who rediscovered a love for indoor flora during lockdowns, time spent in my indoor green space was an antidote against moments of emotional duress, which are comparable to extremities like drought and storms weathered by plants in the gardens I left behind. While working from home over the past few months, I mirrored my grandmother, who checked on her potted plants several times a day and often included my plants in daily chats with my Mum.

Gardening enhanced my connection with these two incredible women who remind me that it's an act of love - not just for ourselves but for those around us. Whether we opt for the textbook definition of plant care (with exact watering or propagating times) or a more laissez-faire approach, gardening resets our energies and allows us to navigate challenging life experiences like illness, relationship breakdowns or separation due to physical distance. It is also a humbling reminder of the brevity of time, the preciousness of life and the lessons that we can learn from the plants themselves.



Cara Lopez is a multi-skilled Filipina creative who lives and works on unceded Darug and GuriNgai land. Her evolving writing practice uses food and storytelling as ways of navigating memory and identity.

Twitter: caaralopez
Instagram: storieswithsnacks

<https://www.caaralopez.com/>

Laurrie Brannigan-Onato

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GROWING PAINS

growing pains growing pains growing pains

TEUCRIUM RACEMOSUM
PHOTO COURTESY OF
RYAN P. O'DONNELL

Against all odds I sprung from infertile soil. A hybrid seedling known only to a few. Born from a mother plant - a hybrid herself - both native and invasive. And a foreign Father plant, who was lured to poisons, both taboo and shabu. And yet growth continued, although stunted.

When I was a sapling, my father took me to his homeland. A string of some 7,700 islands we now know as The Philippines. I didn't know the language and hardly knew my father. However, the mere two weeks left such an impression on my seven-year-old mind. And while I can't remember most of my childhood, I still have vivid memories of the Philippines to this day.

My Ate, in broken Taglish, showing me how to wash from a bucket.
My cousins and I, stealing mangoes from the neighbours tree.
Riding on an open trailer to The Province.
Cock fights on the street outside.
Rats climbing the curtains.
Garbage burning.
Crying, alone.

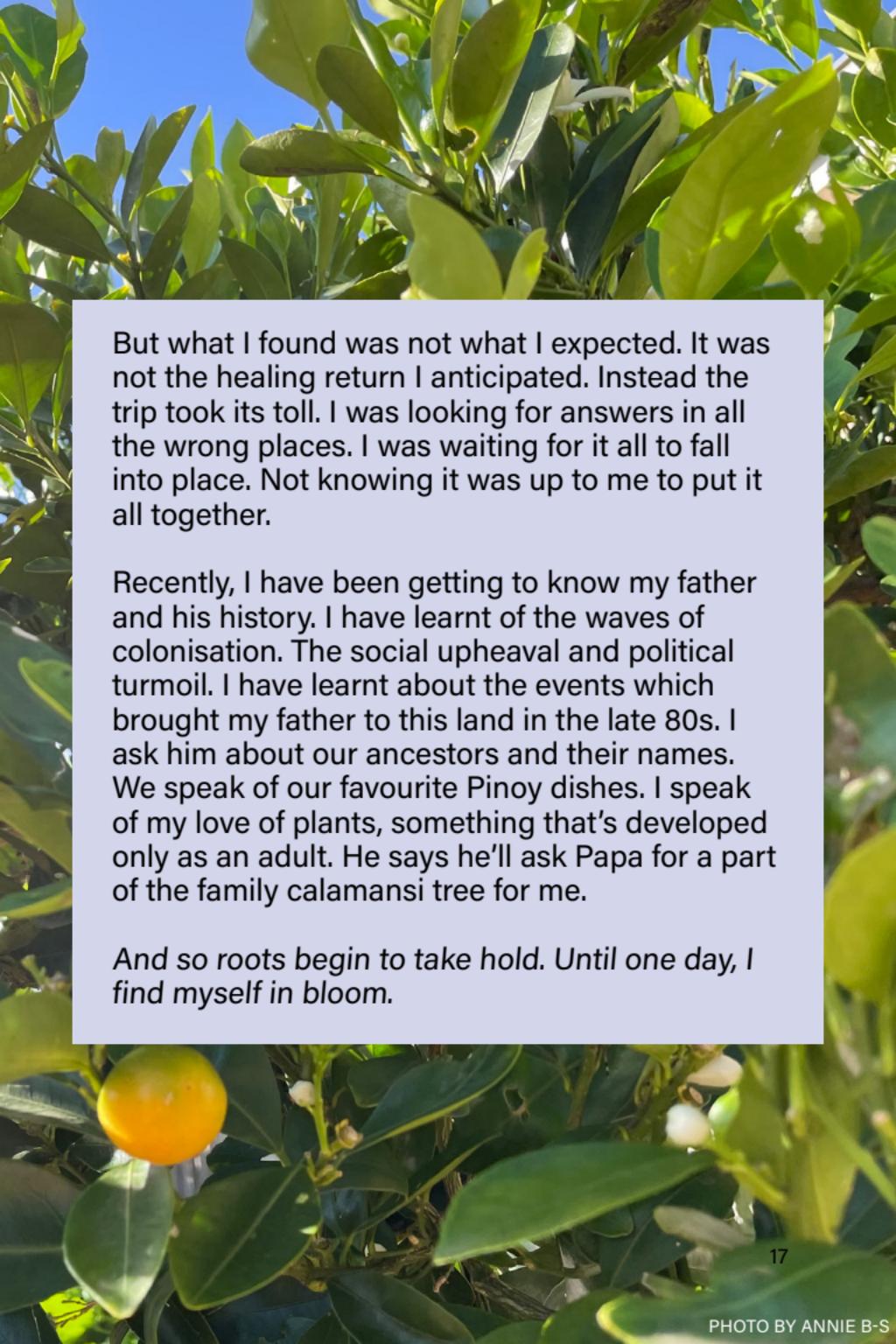


Almost twenty years later, I find myself in my father's homeland once more. However, this time, I am with a different man - a man I know and who knows me well. We're engaged. And I say I want to take him there so he can understand part of my culture. But the truth is, we're there so I can start to understand the pieces that make me whole. I'm here to understand my father. And by extension, myself.

I'm here to dig at the roots.

This isn't a holiday. This isn't just some tropical destination. I am not here to stay in a resort. I'm not here for leisure. I am here for my history and my culture. I am here to feel the soil beneath my feet. To bask in the light. To soak in the waters. To connect and grow.





But what I found was not what I expected. It was not the healing return I anticipated. Instead the trip took its toll. I was looking for answers in all the wrong places. I was waiting for it all to fall into place. Not knowing it was up to me to put it all together.

Recently, I have been getting to know my father and his history. I have learnt of the waves of colonisation. The social upheaval and political turmoil. I have learnt about the events which brought my father to this land in the late 80s. I ask him about our ancestors and their names. We speak of our favourite Pinoy dishes. I speak of my love of plants, something that's developed only as an adult. He says he'll ask Papa for a part of the family calamansi tree for me.

And so roots begin to take hold. Until one day, I find myself in bloom.



Laurrie Brannigan-Onato is a queer
Pilipinx-Aboriginal-Irish screen
producer and proud parent to 70 indoor
houseplants.

Instagram: justlaurrie







PHOTO COURTESY OF RYAN P. O'DONNELL

LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR

love thy neighbour

RYAN P. O'DONNELL

My grandfather was a biologist, and my grandmother was a librarian. With this genetic combination, it is perhaps unsurprising that I wound up as a plant systematist and taxonomist. Put simply, systematics is the science which aims to discover, classify, and interpret the evolutionary history of all life on Earth. Taxonomy then, is one branch of the systematics tree which concerns itself with how we name and describe this diversity. Where taxonomy provides us with a cast of characters, systematics gives us their dramatic backstory. At the basest level, systematists are simply life's librarians. But we are much more than this - we are also life's biographers, genealogists, and historians. As systematists, we are life's storytellers.

At parties, I will often just say 'botanist' when the inevitable question of "so, what do you do?" comes up, which will invariably be followed up with questions like "why do my succulents keep dying", "how often should I water my orchid", or do I prefer *sativa* or *indica*. I will then have to break the bad news that what they really need is a *horticulturalist*, and that as a botanist, I am in reality a terrible gardener. As a plant systematist, I am more interested in the evolutionary relationships between plants rather than how to grow them, or how we as humans may be able to capitalise on their existence. Nevertheless, it was gardening that taught me to take notice of plant life, and to recognise the enormous role they play in our lives.

I grew carnivorous plants as a child; however, they had all but fallen off my radar until I performed in a university production of *Little Shop of Horrors*, which reignited my curiosity. After this, I went and bought my first carnivorous plant as an adult from a rather unassuming hobby gardener off Facebook. He showed me through to his backyard where his collection of hanging pitcher plants was growing happily in the humid summer heat. I pawed through his selection of cuttings and picked a robust specimen of what I now know to be *Nepenthes maxima x ventricosa*; a hybrid of two species, *Nepenthes maxima* from New Guinea and Indonesia, and *Nepenthes ventricosa*, a species endemic to the Philippine highlands.

This hybrid does not occur naturally, and it is only through human interference that it exists. I feel that there is some sort of cosmic poetry in this hybrid plant of partial Philippine ancestry making its way into my hands, another hybrid of partial Philippine ancestry, to live out the remainder of our lives in a country far removed from where our stories ostensibly began.





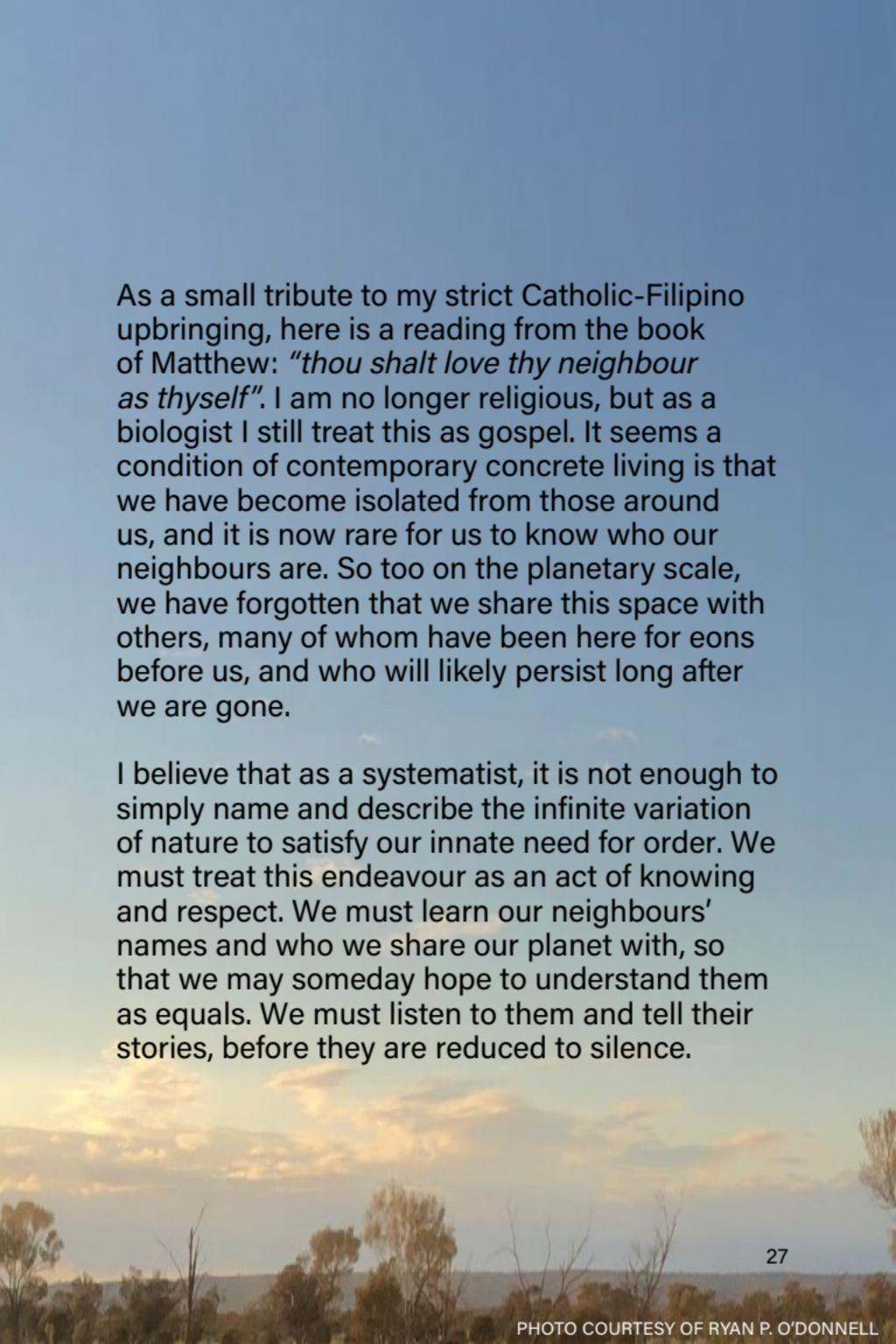
NEPENTHES MAXIMA X
VENTRICOSA
PHOTO COURTESY OF
RYAN P. O'DONNELL

Like Audrey II and Seymour Krelborn, this new plant had a hold on me. In my characteristic (and occasionally disabling) hyperfocus, I had to learn everything about it. It started off simple with questions of how do I care for this thing and where did it come from, but soon I needed to know more.

I learned about its close relatives, its family tree, the spectacular evolutionary forces that had shaped it over millions of years, and from there I was compelled to expand my horizons to the whole plant kingdom. I learned about the ecology of plants, and their place within the vast network of life.

Finally, there came the time where I would learn of the dire existential threats that all plants face, all products of our own doing: the prospect of a slow and torturous heat death as a result of an ever-warming climate, being burnt to ash as rich rainforest land is torched to make way for agriculture, or winding up on the black market, where the narcissistic need for the newest, most exotic plants drives the poor and desperate from countries ravaged by colonial forces to hunt for these natural wonders, forcibly rip them from the earth, and transport them to whiter shores where they will undoubtedly perish, perched atop a neglected bookshelf, far removed from their hothouse jungle habitat.

I felt a visceral pain when I realised what we as a species had done, and will continue to do. I grieved for the species that we have lost, and for the species that will soon share the same fate. I had grown very attached to the plants in my care, and in turn they had helped me to care deeply about the world around me. It is because of this that I chose to abandon my previous career ambitions, and instead pursue a life of science. It is easy to look at certain plants and think, "who cares?" Why bother saving them? The same can be said of any biological group – fungi, fish, birds, frogs, mammals, the list goes on. But who made us as humans the arbiters of life or death? I am a firm believer in the equality of species, in that every species has an inherent right to exist—just because. Not simply because they can deliver to us as humans new foods, medicines, or profit.



As a small tribute to my strict Catholic-Filipino upbringing, here is a reading from the book of Matthew: "*thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*". I am no longer religious, but as a biologist I still treat this as gospel. It seems a condition of contemporary concrete living is that we have become isolated from those around us, and it is now rare for us to know who our neighbours are. So too on the planetary scale, we have forgotten that we share this space with others, many of whom have been here for eons before us, and who will likely persist long after we are gone.

I believe that as a systematist, it is not enough to simply name and describe the infinite variation of nature to satisfy our innate need for order. We must treat this endeavour as an act of knowing and respect. We must learn our neighbours' names and who we share our planet with, so that we may someday hope to understand them as equals. We must listen to them and tell their stories, before they are reduced to silence.



Ryan O'Donnell is a Filipinx-Australian botanist, writer, musician and voice actor. Their research interests lie in plant systematics and taxonomy, with a focus on using integrative taxonomic methods to resolve species boundaries in taxonomically challenging groups.

Twitter: rpodonnell_

<https://rpodonnell.github.io/>



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