

Dark Botany: The Herbarium Tales

Chapter 24: Adventures in the Undergrowth

By Georgina Reid

I'm prowling the garden like a psychopathic cowgirl. Secateurs in holster slung low on hips, ready for attack. Spade tucked under arm. I am a villain or a god, depending on who you are and where you take root. It is both violence and growth I'm after. The plants may or may not be quivering.

Today's victim is a blameless *Lomandra longifolia*, or mat rush: a strappy-leafed perennial plant endemic to much of the east coast of Australia, from Hobart to Cairns, coastal sand to country clay. There is nothing particularly striking about poor old *Lomandra*. Flowers, yes. But not gorgeous, iconic blooms like waratah, banksia, or wattle. Rather: tiny and hidden by not-so-tiny-and-very-sharp spikes puncturing shins of unsuspecting passers-by. Fragrance, yes, but not romantic and evocative like jasmine or frangipani. Rather: semi-toxic, like nail polish remover. They—yes, I am “they-ing” rather than “it-ing” because a plant is a being, not an object—grows in sun and shade, swamp and sand.

It is somewhat paradoxical highlighting the subjectivity of a being whilst also defining them by their scientific, binomial name. Genus: *Lomandra*. Species: *longifolia*. Classification, separation, objectification. Yet to name, surely, is to see and assign value. At a time in which all beings without eyes that can meet our own are perceived as an indistinguishable backdrop to the grand human odyssey, a name might act as a thread of recognition and connection. Love, even. I have many names for my partner, precisely because I love him. I wouldn't bother if I didn't.

I know *Lomandra*, too, has a spectrum of names grown of the soil, gifted by Country. I dig around in online, Indigenous-language dictionaries—Dharawal, Darug, Wiradjuri, Gamilaroi—but cannot find anything specific. I resort to asking ChatGPT. It (let us not forget AI is always an “it”) gives me a list of entirely inaccurate words.

Language is a strange beast, created by stranger creatures. Is it the job of the writer to scribble around the edges, push and pull words and meanings, write into the gaps between what is said and what is meant, between what is named and what isn't?

*Lomandra*'s skill (why not?) in adapting to a wide range of soil and climatic conditions means they're planted where others might fail. Petrol stations, road verges, roundabouts. A set-and-forget plant, if there were such a thing. In humans, qualities like adaptability, resilience, and vigour are celebrated and championed. We give medals to such people. But if you happen to be a person of the vegetal nation, yet still hold such qualities, you're in trouble. Either you're a weed (kill kill kill!), or you're unworthy of serious garden consideration (unless you're edible, because then you are a product, not a plant, which is an entirely different thing). *Lomandra longifolia* is disparaged by many gardeners. Not because they're weak, but precisely because they're strong.

Killing plants is rarely considered a problem. (Need to raze a forest for a new suburb? Sure, no worries, mate; I'll go and grab my chainsaw). Many religions preach non-violence, and many people don't eat animals due to not wanting to perpetuate such violence, but what about plants? Who decided plant-people (over 82% of all the biomass on Earth) are excluded from being-ness and alive-ness, therefore fair game for our savage ways?

Gardening language does not typically evoke brutality. It is all "sanctuary," "respite," "beauty," "wholesomeness." It is pretty and placid. Except it isn't. Gardening is not about *making* a place. It's about finding a pathway *into* a place. Being *with* a place. It's about scratching around in the physical and metaphorical undergrowth.

Find a clearing to rest in this strange and slightly uncomfortable—yet familiar—landscape. Feel the branches scratching your shoulders, witness the many-legged critters rustling in the soil below. Sit with yourself and the world; with growth and death, terror and beauty. Sit, and contemplate this question posed by Amitav Ghosh in *The Nutmeg's Curse*: "What if the idea that the earth teems with other beings who act, communicate, tell stories and make meaning is taken seriously?"

What do you do, as a gardener, with this question? How do you dig yourself into a place, while at the same time acknowledging the being-ness of all those you are digging around and through and with? How do you hold both the intimacy and brutality?

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Here is a picture: a still autumn afternoon. Light bouncing off the glassy, molten surface of the river. No wind, no clouds. The garden, sandwiched between water and bushland, is glorious. You stroll (no one walks in a garden on day like today) down the path from the house towards the river. Tea tree leaves twinkle in the light, hakea limbs stretch

towards yours, *Lomandra* leaves brush against your shins as you pass. You exalt in their caress.

Or not.

Not everyone, it turns out, appreciates forced intimacy with foliage. My partner, a very tolerant and accepting man, has had enough. He does not want to elbow his way through plants in order to access our house. I've held out for years, due to my conviction that vegetal fondling is a profound daily practice. To maintain the peace, I trim a few errant hakea branches, and decide to relocate an offending *Lomandra*.

I grab the spade I bought from a nice man on King Street years ago. English oak handle, polished with years of use. Narrow blade made of Sheffield steel—the good old stuff from the halcyon days of our carbon trip. A dangerous, efficient weapon.

Slam sharp steel into soil. Pierce what is alive and essential. Wiggle, loosening life from life. Repeat until plant is adrift. Lift.

Some questions I ask myself before, during, and after the act. Questions that should make me stop but don't... Does this act of destruction mean I don't believe in the intrinsic being-ness of *Lomandra*? Will my actions disrupt the stories the plant is telling with soil? Why should I make *Lomandra* move, instead of moving around *Lomandra*? Does it hurt, being hacked in half? Am I doing *Lomandra* a service, carving them into two, or is this a story I'm telling myself to assuage my guilt? Will *Lomandra* survive my violence?

I can't answer my own questions, but I don't stop. I place the newly mobile *Lomandra* horizontally on a flat rock and locate the blade somewhere in the middle of the clump. Left foot on spade. One two three. Thump. Try a few times, because they're dense and strong, unwilling to be broken. I use all my bodyweight to split the plant. I cut the long, fibrous leaves in half lengthwise, a propagation trick that my mother taught me years ago. (Remove half the foliage when transplanting/planting so the plant doesn't need to work as hard while roots are recovering.) Violence in service of life. Or so I tell myself.

Holes are dug, *Lomandra* is planted. One here, one there. A big bucket of water poured gently over traumatised foliage as a housewarming present.

I am an arsehole. I am a gardener.