

The song of the philodendron

Maggie Harris

Sometime in the early 1980s, my mother-in-law sent me up her garden to smell a rose. I felt like a pillock. Why on earth did I need to go round smelling roses? I was gauche, skinny, a mum, and restless.

In 1984, I took my philodendron (Philly) to Ramsgate Horticultural Show and won second prize. The craze for tropical plants came in with home improvements and designer trends. I decorated the dining room with palm tree wallpaper and kept a selection of houseplants – the ubiquitous Swiss cheese plant, a mother-in-law’s tongue, potted palms and ferns. When my first marriage dissolved, I took Philly with me and left the wedding album. Philly began a journey which would take him from Ramsgate to Broadstairs, Somerset to Wales. During those years he would be pooped on by cats, left out in the winter, and made to endure surgical removals from his pots when he outgrew them. Even if he had only one good leaf left, he held on to life firmly and grew eight feet tall, his large, sometimes glossy leaves like paddles. Other plants joined the household – a bougainvillea which I carried up Broadstairs High Street as if it were a child, and whose carmine blossoms would cover the back fence in Catalonian splendour, but who, after the move to Wales, never flowered again.

Olive Senior's poetry collection, *Gardening in the Tropics* (1994), remains a favourite, enlightening and inspiring, leading me to contemplate my own approach to addressing our history through plants. I was startled to discover how entangled colonial trade and exploration were with botany. For example, the story of the mutiny on the *Bounty*. Breadfruit was the cargo on that fated ship, its intended journey to the West Indies a cruel irony, considering the enslaved men and women for whom it was meant. In my poem 'I, Breadfruit', I allowed the breadfruit to speak for him/herself: 'I, Breadfruit, am Beautiful Bountye / I am slice of Historye'.

Considerations of voice, tone, time and place and my developing interest in gardens found a natural home in writing workshops. As International Teaching Fellow at Southampton University, I devised a workshop for students and school children, *Have Roots Will Travel*, which facilitates explorations into history and the natural world.

In the 'Valley of Stones', Cwmpengraig, the hamlet where Philly and I lived for ten years, I would experience the deepest loneliness, the darkest days. But I would write three short story collections, a memoir and three poetry collections there. I became the caretaker of a wild, unmanageable garden in woodland which stole the sun each day at four. Its wildness ushered in poems and propelled me to Cuba, a greenhouse of orchids. On my return, I addressed Philly with the news that his brothers and sisters were actually trees illuminated by the colours of the Cuban national tocororo bird. The words *settlement*, *roots* and *belonging* brought themselves out frequently and I would realise that we are as transient as these plants, these woodlands, and that beneath this earth lie unfathomable relics of nameless others. My digging took me along the Atlantic floor in a continuous litany of finds to South America. When I understood that, it was time to leave.

I left Philly there, gifted to a young man whose bones were cruelly curving his body to the ground; it was the greatest gift I could give myself.

Maggie Harris

Maggie Harris is a poet, prose writer, and visual artist. Originally from Guyana, South America, she recently re-located to Kent after 10 years in Wales. She attended Kent University as a mature student, achieving a BA and MA, and started her career performing, running workshops and teaching creative writing. She has worked for Kent Arts & Libraries, represented Kent in Europe and was International Teaching Fellow at Southampton University.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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