

## *How to survive in a bell jar*

Cast iron and crystal. A microcosm, an ecosystem. A jewel box for living things constructed in the nineteenth century – the grand era of conservatory building – still tended to with care. A collection for contemplation, once fresh for the eyes, now a little aged. Fineries of the botanical world, from far and near, near and far.

Like other European collections from around this period, this one is marked by the legacy of scientific rationalism, and by the violence of the great historical machineries that produced it and its splendid display. Each species is entwined with these overlapping histories. Of therapeutic uses and exploitations. Of discovery and erasure. Of beauty, of cruelty, of care. Cocaine,<sup>1</sup> busy Lizzies,<sup>2</sup> tea.<sup>3</sup>

A bell jar, where lacy spiral stairs like brides lead upwards to the canopies above, to a space among the thickness of the palm leaves, among the columns. They gesture to the heavenly; they are like an image of knowledge's ascent from another era, a helix that would lead humanity ever upwards, towards the gleaming sky. A tropical oasis in for a cool world. Later, here and now, we are in a different time, one of reckoning with what remains: the structures built, the collections acquired, the uprootings, the habitats lost, the deathly deals done, the particles put into the atmosphere, the terrible debts, the terrible beauties. Here.

In a small biosphere such as this it is easy to feel the impact of one thing on another, the dependencies, and the consequences. The ramifications of breathing or smoking a cigarette, of introducing new organisms, of changing the temperature or adding fertilisers, antibiotics, viruses, perfumes. Who thrives? Who withers? Who dies? But isn't it clear by now that even outside these glass walls, we find ourselves in the same situation? And that the consequences have become cumulative: the boundaries are breaking down between every type of life on earth, as each thing is inundated by others. And isn't it also becoming clear that each life is impressed on to a high degree by human endeavors, the way that this dominant species molds, consumes and shapes the environment and its physical and chemical makeup. Dysentery,<sup>4</sup> decorative salad ingredients,<sup>5</sup> microplastics.

It feels close. Humidity and sweat. The tangibility of the atmosphere brings it towards us. Moisture collects on surfaces and on skin when the dew point and the temperature are close together, when moisture in the air and beads of salty water from our pores might mingle on skin. Recently, I read about the maximum 'wet bulb temperature' for humans, which I do not recommend reading about if you do not want to fear the atmosphere. It has everything to do with closeness, though.

I sometimes find it tempting to imagine being absorbed into an environment, like the chameleons that John Keats used as an analogy for the poet – a spacious self that waits to be filled up by the teeming life potentials of others. Or the praying mantises who fascinated Surrealist writers – insects so proficient at mimicking their surroundings that they might lose their sense of what belongs to their body and what belongs to the rest of the world. But these types of absorptions are not available to us in this kind of structure, so defined by its architectures and materials and its desires. To classify, to collect, to display, to wrench, to own, to educate, to impress, to preserve.

There is only the ability to meet at a halfway point, between the living and the non-living, between the organic and the industrial, wrapped in language, like a gel. To seep through the walls and stain them, to hang from the ceiling waiting to hatch, to mist up the windows with our breath. To transform, and then to become our own objects of study. Rose periwinkle, chemotherapy, remorse.<sup>6</sup>

Laura McLean-Ferris, 2023

<sup>1</sup> Use of *Erythroxylum novogranatense*.

<sup>2</sup> Name for *Impatiens walleriana* in the United Kingdom.

<sup>3</sup> Use of *Camellia sinensis*.

<sup>4</sup> Traditionally treated with *Alyxia buxifolia* by First Nations people of Australia.

<sup>5</sup> Use of *Alyxia buxifolia*.

<sup>6</sup> Name, use and symbolism of *Catharanthus roseus*.