

the plants to live by



small plantain graft whose love for shade, and flies alike, were my endless afternoons, a passage through idle thought; an orchid who lived and wilted with the moon; the poison ivy who could not be touched; and the eucalyptus leaves we'd peel and tear, their shrill smell in the drying wind.

a palm frond's comfort on sunless weekends; a kelp's slow wrangle of my feet, a baobab who refused their shadows be pruned.

the wild stretch of cacti who'd remind me of the Guernica; the jacarandas whose purple marked a summer.

and last to the cyprus tree, its thinning needles that cut through moonlight; every word falling into the ocean.

to every blade, root, or bark,

every form, i could, or not, touch or remember.

to every plant i learnt to

live with,

abide by,

write into time.



Eucalyptus trees at the Elwood Grove, Goleta.
Photo by author.

A NOTE ON THE POEM

This poem is a testament to my time spent with trees in Santa Barbara, California. A city where I spent time as a graduate student at the University. Beyond its status as an idyllic haven, lined with tall palm fronds and arching clear coastlines, Santa Barbara's vegetal ecologies have been significantly altered by its multiple and ongoing forms of settler colonialism. Santa Barbara has been historically stewarded and cared for by the Chumash community, whose lands have been forcibly made into University lands, golf courses and even the present-day airport. Even the oldest eucalyptus grove titled Elwood Grove, home to monarch butterflies at the turn of spring, was built by settler-rancher Elwood Cooper who imported Eucalyptus trees *en masse* from Tasmania in the 1870s; slowly altering local ecologies, and seeding what has now become a regular wildfire hazard in the state. The poem attends to my walking through groves and relating with trees in the area, the horrors visible in this altered ecosystem, and hence the visual metaphor of Guernica. Walking through groves and forests also offers me a sense of engulfment, a slowing down of my breath and time that I hope to encapsulate in the poem's ever widening gaps and spaces. Each tree then is a mark of time – a sense of time the plant bears or holds, and a sense of time for me, as I exist in their company.

Pujita Guha is an artist, curator and currently a Mahindra Postdoctoral Fellow at Harvard University. Her current book project, *Forested Media: Indigenous Lifeworlds in Upland Asia* looks at how, in the post-Cold War era (1990s-present), Indigenous communities in the region (between India's northeast, contiguous Southeast Asia and Southwest China) claim the sovereignty of forests through artistic, popular and scientific media. As an artist and curator, from 2018–2023, Guha co-founded and co-directed the artistic and research platform, The Forest Curriculum, and from 2023–June 2025, Hosting Lands, a decentralised land and ecological curatorial project in Denmark.

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