

# I and Eucalyptus

Susan M. Schultz

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## I and Eucalyptus

For Laura Hinton & Carla Billitteri  
& in memory of Carolina Sinavaiana Gabbard  
(1946-2024)





## I

If *there is no I as such*, then who are you? *I contemplate a tree*. I am not such as the eucalyptus promises to be. But much as time enters a photograph as blur, the eucalyptus enters as tar, as sheets of bark separating from the trunk, as greens and browns and the reflected red of my cap. Jewel sap, sap as trap (leaves and geckos stuck), black when it's dry, brown after the rain. Stained, solitary amid the monkeypods. Standing near the swimming pool's chain link, an invasive of one. The monkeypods bend their branches, braiding shadows on green grass. Eucalyptus is tall and stiff, casting no shadow that is not the stickiness of tar. A rock at its base black with such, two small brown leaves its wide eyes. Whatever I might be stands in relation to whatever the eucalyptus is. My dog gets bored by these ritual visits, despite the scent. It's like an egg you think you've seen until you take its picture. Photographs trace a border between seen and unseen, real and surreal. I take them because I see something that is something else again when I download it. (This used to be called developing.)



The tree's undoing is development, almost a narrative, if we could hear it in words. If *relation is reciprocity*, then we're in relation, this self a blurred egg, this tree its peeling skin. One wonders if the tree feels pain at its self-loss, each day a newly detached wall of bark, smothered in black goo. I have come to think of self-loss as a mixed state, best described apart from loss and gain, terms capital imposes on us. The eucalyptus was planted to make money, but it's failed, loitering on the lawn beside the community pool. Freed from the economy of planks and paper and wind screens, it claims an economy of meaning, which is itself a seesaw process. What the image creates sometimes is a place that sits between color and meaning, like the space between the blackened bark and the light color of the tree. Between the meaning and me is abstraction. It's unconsidered, no artist to write its plot, or take its measurements.

What to make of the tree's art is mystery. Stories are how we solve mysteries (so often crimes) but these leave us puzzled. I can see a face in the movement of sap against the jagged bark, but I know it's not a face. Is it accident? Does accident depend upon there having been an intention, or can we



make an accident of what appears to us as accident already? I and eucalyptus fail to communicate, though we commune. After an arbitrary last photo, my dog and I return to the sidewalk. The side is of a road, but we've been on the other, the green side. My shoes are covered with seeds acquired earlier in higher grass. My dog carries the promise of a weedy afterlife on her gray haunches.





## 2

After I said, “look at the tree,” a woman walking by termed it “magnificent.” Adjective as abstraction; it (neutral pronoun) is magnificent (blanket term). Tree covered in a multi-colored blanket of reds and greens and blacks and browns, but only where reading lenses meet distance. *I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It.* This is not to say the tree is he or she or they, and thou seems an antiquated intimacy. If the *relation is reciprocity* then what does Eucalyptus get from me? Am I an It to it, who is not an It to me? I take photos of the tree, and note the verb. Appropriate isn’t appropriation, but something more decorous. In this decade I better know the self’s fragility as memory, self-contained upon a stage, a series of events to watch rather than to leap in like a river, seductive. You know you want to leap into what will destroy you, for you’re American, so you focus on a tree behind you. Stolid, it doesn’t succumb to desire, though sometimes to wind, an uneven heating of the earth. Two eggs stand on the bottom of a bowl, a light shining down on them. Like two boxers before they dance. A



brown egg kisses a white egg, and it's not allegory.

Only the cops wore masks, not against covid, but against our attention. They are not You, though they might be. They are not It, though they acted as such. The tree navigates its colors as if there were meanings to its palette. Red is not anger, but a cap reflected. Green is not jealousy, but the grass around the tree. Brown is not mud, though the rain makes it appear so. Is rain the artist? Is wind? Am I, for taking the picture, downloading and fiddling with it? Is the picture then a Thou, related or unrelated to the tree? If a bot can tell a lie, can the eucalyptus? Or is your accident a form of truth that carries no ethical weight? My photograph becomes the tree's memory. Yesterday there were streaks of sap; today there's a gecko stuck in it; in three days, the gecko's skeleton is held against the light, a jaw, a back, a tail entangled in the tar. The photographs are still, but it's sequence that interests me, not the one-off, the beautiful image. Abstraction as dopamine trigger. It's the silence between the shots (remove word from gun and give it to art) that gives us pause. Generous pause. What we don't remember we see again as flat and new and still only as it sits on its canvas. I look at a tree photo, see two profiles of demons, one eye



on each. Foreground demon has a mouth shaped like a Valentine's heart. I and Eucalyptus exchange our vows, before dog and I turn to trudge through the nets of other shadowed trees. That was not in the photograph.