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Ill-starred

Ice. Tree. Your ski pole
jabbed at the wrong sharp angle.
Flung forward, your sprawl

seems slo-mo; you're like
a starfish peeled off its rock
rough hands have tossed back—

terribly free, it
hangs in the air an instant,
twinkling. Then you hit,

hearing a soft crunch.
(Had you descended an inch
closer to the branch

that would've been skull.)
But you don't feel pain; you feel
boneless. The muscle

along the break's edge
is shocked numb; wrecked cartilage
can't sense the damage

yet. Isn't the air
extraordinarily clear?
Nothing is clearer

now to you. As if
cares leashing you to yourself
have snapped, you're let off

the hook. Immediate
problems feel safely remote.
No cold, no thirst, not

fearing the worst—for
you've left no note. Who'll explore
off-route trails after

finding your car? When?
But this compels you less than
the spent sun's design,

azure and freaks of
orpiment slashed by dark mauve
hawk talons above

silhouette pine tops
you can't but admire, hap-
less as your collapse

under them was. Stars
(or is it Venus and Mars?)
rise. Their fire shivers

a little, the way
coins tossed in a fountain pay
out, then snatch away

the gleams their faces
refract up through the nervous
water's kicked surface.

The stars brighten. Or
do they darken? You've piqued their
interest with your

stillness, intriguing
them to lean closer, squinting
to see you, sea-thing,

chill echinoderm
who, in its salt medium,
would regrow that limb.

Fado

“Words are for those with promises to keep.” –Auden

Dogs’ feelings aren’t complex, you say; they lack
our nuances of mood. They look
sad when we leave them, sure, and their joy at a roll
in deer poo’s indisputable. But they don’t mull
over what they’ve done
badly. No guilt bites them. No pre-dawn
sorrow yawns...

Well, maybe you’re right—
but then, what’s gnawing at my pup? Each night
he howls, accompanied by wheezes
from a squeaky chicken toy he squeezes
balefully with his front paw.
He cries as if all faith is flawed.
I’ve laughed at my companion
pumping his slapstick bandoneon,
then sobered at the ache his notes reveal.
Some sorrow at the heart of things
haunts the rubber chicken’s songs
and he responds until, lonesome as a train’s whistle
late in the darkness, his wails unsettle
a valve my throat
must struggle to keep shut.
The chicken has no minor chords.
The dog’s expressiveness wants words.
Still, that strain descends
into the human soul and sounds
depths only the inarticulate can feel.

Euphorbia

Euphorbia damarana, endemic to Namibia

Not euphoria. This shrub
oozes a latex so toxic
eleven miners living
out near Uis went off fossicking

wood to cook their pap en vleis
and, kindling fire with its twigs,
inhaled its smoke... then woke up
dead before breakfast (or so goes

the bush myth). But if you're a
San hunter needing to poison
your arrowheads for duiker,
or American amateur

gardener planting borders
of spurge in some city locus
amoenus or provincial
eden, members of the genus

Euphorbia grow welcome
as rain in the Kalahari.

They're familiar to me, since
as things have evolved, my children

are all vegetable. I choose
annuals and perennials
based on their hardiness in
zones deranged by climate changes

or new to me as I range
far from home. With mixtures of de-
caying fish and decocted
ordure of horses, with tinctures

dosed out in grains to obtain
just the nitrogen-phosphorous
concord rotting affords and
fertility craves, I coax them

to bloom. Across continents
I've sown my seed, like Genghis Khan.
Ancient Roman stinks, buried
deep in sewers and necromanced

by rain, rose up to haunt our
kitchen sink until my roses
washed us in perfume. Jasmine
petals pitched tents of scent over

our terrace in Damascus.
And now in the Namib I nurse
succulents, ungrateful as
actual children, who bristle

truculently at my care,
resent their parent, and fail to
thrive. I've adopted orphan
sprigs off starving plants. This one, from

a burnt patch outside Tsumkwe,
grew on a spindle of sticks so
spare it made its eremic
kin look larded. Oryx browsed its

twigs and I culled one, blithely
ignorant that its milk dripped on
bare human skin would kindle
blisters faster than capsaicin.

Lulled by its milder cousins'
suavity into casual
potting protocol, I touched
my face and felt my cavalier

behavior punished: a wee
Euphorbia damarana
wants (my eyes aflame, mucus
membranes leaking) big caution. Aren't

children awful? They morph us
into foreigners awkwardly

inhabiting a country
whose customs we could not, once,

have imagined enduring
even for a weekend. And though
it's tough, we acclimatize;
soon we surprise ourselves serving

the whims of tyrants we can't
not love. So. Here I cosset my
lethal infant, pillowing
her in a bed of loamy sand,

trying to fathom how lit-
tle water I should offer in
sips through the automated drip
system's nipple to keep the soil

desiccated, almost. It's
a minimalist process, small
as the infinitesimal
increments through which, from urban

hoyden to doyenne of an
arid paradise, I have aged.

Liquid seeps in so slowly
it dries before leaving its faint

fingerprint under the urn.
Does it seem futile, my having
raised blossoms for summers de-
cades of winters have razed? I've made

nothing to outlive me, which
leaves me now with the luxury
of time to smell each morning's
flowers while, yes, grieving rosebuds

ungathered, etcetera.
I admit that, some days, alone
among greenery, my roots in
this world feel very loose indeed.

Though I know I'm needed: who
but me has time to feed moisture
with such attention through this
contraption? Likely not the San

mother lighting her pipe with
coal plucked from a blaze nourished by
sticks off bushes I couldn't
identify. Self-sufficient,

finding potable juices
in Tsama melons during droughts,
her baby in a folded
envelope of hide hung over

her shoulder (a letter to
herself in old age): our worlds seem
so different. What might we have
in common besides our skin, which

the hot wind wizens until
she soothes hers with !Nara oil and
I grease mine with a store-bought
cream? I've heard it called a "spinster's

pleasure," keeping a garden—
as if a fruitless woman must,
at a certain age, nurture
part of nature she didn't let

ripen in her; she's prone to
sour without this metonymic
fecundity tamed by dis-
placement into the wet petal

and pistil glut with pollen.
But don't call it "simple" pleasure.

It's an arduous ardor,
adoring the earth. Anyway,

at a certain age even

simple pleasures are complex. Each
day I tend my children, not
without whiffs of euphoria,

but also sometimes with eyes
burning from all I've not touched, half-
shut in sorrow, half in thanks,
half reverent, half hollowed out.