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Victorian Box

What does that term conjure
in your mind's sharp eye:
rosewood and mother-of-pearl,
ivory and mahogany,
lavender and lace,
an etui filled with prim
little pins, cigars, love letters,
memories and scents of the past?

Then you are wrong,
you err, you are
in disgrace,
for a tree carries that name,
granted, a noble tree, an evergreen,
but one that bears a deathly sap,
its other name Hawaiian Weed,
a truly faux and fatal Victorian box.

The Climber

Bright orange rope tied to a waist,
the climber hesitates, leans into the slope,
steps up and pushes off,
finds handholds, places for her toes,
labors up the high granite mound.

From the ground below, I watch the show,
my heart thudding when she slips,
my eyes tearing when she reaches the top,
straightens up, bows to her partner,
lets loose with a whoop.

I sag back, wondering how it feels
to rasp across sandpaper rock,
to crab up an uneasy slope,
to slip, see the horizon from the side,
to risk life, limbs, self.

Her carabiner could fracture,
she could fall, never catching
her breath as she drops,
arms and legs akimbo,
as she makes landfall,

rousing a drowsy kangaroo rat
from its nap
beneath the yellow blooms
of a barrel cactus,
her body still and broken.

I stand at the bottom,
warm in the sandy wash,
while she grabs her friend
and the pair dances,
pirouetting on the hill top.

Bug Season Part 1

April is here, has blown in
with warm air and bugs,
and we no longer toss out seeds.
It's time for the wild birds
to engage, to chase insects,
eat gnats and no-see-ums,
go after mosquitoes and flies.

But still they come:
junkoes and towhees,
woodpeckers and scrub jays,
chickadees and wrens,
to dance around our empty platter.
They chatter in the oaks,
flutter from ground to trunk and back.

They sing in praise of spring
and longer days, sweeter air,
peck at the empty plate,
search the surrounding ground.
swarm and scold.
I sigh, for I have left them hungry,
bereft and unprepared.

I drag myself up, open the jar,
spill out some food.
The birds gather,
gorge on our buffet,
dig into millet, crack sunflower seeds,
disdain the air that whirs with flies and gnats.
And I scratch the fresh bite on my arm.

Bug Season Part 2

It's 11:30AM
and the towhee,
black checkered back,
sleek brown chest,
pecks in the feeder
we have left unfilled.

I watch from the deck,
sweater tight against the chill
of an April breeze,
as the bird circles the stump
of the oak, lands, hops,
picks at nothing, flies away.

I remember the spray bottle
that refused to spray,
the jug of olive oil
I dropped on the ground,
the eyelash that stung for days,
the new rosebush that died.

I cleared the spray nozzle of sediment,
sopped up the oil spill with flour and towels,
washed out the eyelash,
tossed the roses into the green bin.
Now I watch the towhee
to see what he will do.

He lands on the ground,
hops into a potted fern,
digs and scratches,
pulls out a long yellow worm.
I was hoping for flying insects,
but a worm will do for now.

Holding Up

Three cables carefully placed
Among the branches of an ancient oak.

One pulls taut against a gnarled limb
cracked and heavy with worms,
Trailing softly to the ground,
Leaves greening there, abundant, so bright.

Another, strung up tight,
Secures the tree's two highest arms,
Gray and weatherworn, below them
A paradise of coolness and shade.

Another braces the tree's bent back,
Saves it from the stream's rage,
Holds up a tangle of branches, acorns,
oak apples, where wasps and flies nest.

These three cables, rusted, endure,
Keep to their task, hold up the oak.

The tree, too, endures, outlasts
Fire, drought, rain,
Survives, with human help,
Will, I think, I hope, outlast us.