

FEASTLESS DAYS

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for my mom

ARIA: DISTANT OBSERVER

Searching for blood on the bed sheet,

I unfocus the flat print of prairie flowers.

At the center: a body-length blank

the shape of a shuttle. With a spritz

the blood begins to thin. But it's me too

thinning, nearing my clearest.

I heard the mind's synapses get sleepy

when one is eating. It's all the same

to me — my head, soft as a baby's.

The window, light fog gauzing.

I must resemble a decent buzzard.

I doubt God surveys the Earth for

the damage he's done. It takes so long

for fallen objects to reach the event horizon.

I orbit each with a dish rag—a broken planet

can be a metaphor for my troubles

why not? I give the empty weight

inside of me everything it wants.

I. GRAY DUNES

I found fasting easier than prayer,
but less easy than eating.

ALICE GRAY, November 30, 1915

They

wish
for
a simple

story—

dunes the
nude their beautiful lines,
straying

Eavesdroppers in

the sand

the crest
ward the lake.

under
to-

Dunes

and

dark air

a
Woman

twice

the
temper

for

years

For years

She

got bad

up there

plunge the lake dunes ,
fish
ing place And chang-

her shoes in a bundle

small no

desire
for hot weather wait

the sun

the sun

red

plush

strange

the bright nights
on

marshes

feeding

the

changed

somewhat

the waves

each day brings some new creation

more than

can hold

Gray,

get the
revolver

late in the day

Fish

frightened deer

slanting across

the hills

the world

hatching

a language

a name

marking the place

Gray

the talk

Gray

the

marshes

and A tangle of brush
 sand

Gray

the lake

Stretching away

Gray

the

fish

and

wild ducks

Gray

lapsed
world

the life

she is living.

II. ORCHARD

No amount of knowledge can shake my grandma out of me;
or my Aunt Maud; or my mama, who didn't just bite an apple
with her big white teeth. She split it in two.

RUTH STONE, "Pokeberries"

PRECIOUS

When she smiles, my doctor's teeth
are straight and white as little lab coats.

Fine lines score her eye bones.
And the diamond on her finger—

big and boxy as a molar.
She tells me to slide forward.

Above: speckled ceiling tiles,
palm fronds, a crystal strung up

with fishing wire. She glides
her hand into my vaginal canal

and touches the blind eye.
When my sister was seven

she found a pearl on the carpet
at church and tucked it inside

of her ear. She screeched and cried
like a trapped animal as our mother

used tweezers to pry the pearl out,
and our grandmother held her

small head between her hands
like a bowl of hot water. After,

my sister hid the pearl in her secret
jewelry box. She never told me

after the first time she had sex
and I never told her mine. I don't remember—

I woke up, a turbid body, lurching
to the bathroom where I vomited

pink liquid heat, and the scent
of faux-raspberry. I laid down

on a bunched towel and let
the tile cool me. On the door

of the exam room: a descending graph
of the female reproductive system:

A girl in utero holds six million eggs
inside of her. At birth: one third

this number. By thirty: one sixtieth.
I was never taught the body

was precious. My mother thought
she was bleeding out the first time

she got her period. She hid it,
too afraid to tell her mother

she had stained a garment.
My grandmother wore dentures

and tinted trifocals; her teeth turned
soft after five consecutive childbirths,

her right eye—bald and white
as a nimbus. We lived together

twelve years: my sister and I
tucked inside our mother's body,

our mother tucked inside
our grandmother's body, all of us

tucked inside the house, painted
pinkish gray like an infant.

Between our eyes,
my sister and I could speak

without speaking.
Her gaze held me in place

through shocks of days.
Who would ever believe that

when I was young I was
small and dense as a star.

BOBBING FOR APPLES

“Bride of Christ, send me some fruits
from your bridegroom’s garden.”
—Theophilus to Saint Dorothea of Caesarea

Tasha ties my wrists
behind my waist.

She asks if I am ready
and wraps a scarf

around my face.
I hover forward

stretch and lower
when the girls begin

to cheer my name.
What do I know?

My AOL horoscope
tells me nothing. Neither

does the big moon
floating in the vacant sky—

blind ball whose television
fortune teller fled.

Idle God and no
tarot or teachers.

I dip my face and I’m
my own white-robed priest

in a river throbbing
with apples. It takes so long

before I pin one with
my jaw against a corner.

The boys buck in line,
wipe their gums and whine.

When I pluck the apple
from my mouth—the scent

of flowers. And in the skin:
a perfect oval

my teeth had left.

FANTASY I: MAX

In July you wake to race the sun, running
thirteen before collapsing on your front lawn,

shirtless in soaked shorts and muddy Aasics,
sliver of sock under the rough locket of your ankle.

The sun burns the dew off the clover grass,
the sweat off your flushed back, as the neighbors

lift the windows of the split-level duplexes.
Is your window the same as mine? You said

you'd sneak out to see me: landing on the h-vac
and darting off in your mother's black Wrangler.

That night I copied lyrics from your first band's
only ballad into my buddy profile. Tell me, Max,

you can read the markers: a school that means
a mile, a bridge that means another.

BLOCK SCHEDULE

Daylight spreads like golden jam, sun-tonguing
our hair, glaring the desks. An old campaign ad

shimmers the mounted television. *It's morning
again* the voiceover tells the station wagons,

bright lawns, and birdsong. Darwin's finches.
Mendel's pea-pods. At lunch we hitch, we self-divide.

Nathaniel, a round of *Fuck Marry Kill*.
He aims his finger at one girl, then the other.

My abdomen's aperture panic, my clenched
seed of hope. We are named and ordered

and shot for sport. The water stain on the ceiling
looks like Homer Simpson. Like Abraham Lincoln.

We cover our mouths and shriek. In the gymnasium,
in the dark, girls dart like quail in autumn.

Their ponytails feather out behind them.
We are so many heavenly streaks

of want. And our mothers were our fathers'
favorite fish nailed against the walls.

NOCTURNE: CHICAGO WORLD'S FAIR

for my sister

Once I rode an elephant around a circus tent,
walked beside the sphinx in the golden streets of Egypt,
turned a corner, found the crying clowns, the men
in Stetsons pulling their starry guns. It was dark,
I needed to find you, so I rode the Ferris wheel up
beside the lake, black and glittering as beds of quartz.
Even when you're here, you're somewhere else—
eyes shift and face folds up into a hall of mirrors.
I enter, follow deeper, tap the trapdoor and fall through
into the bedroom. That's where I find you, shaking
beside the oil lamp we weren't allowed to touch;
its jeweled cargo bleeding into the carpet. No
I know, when she came home—it was terrible
how I hid. How she made you watch her clean it up,
her back like a bloodhound, rooting. How long
did I watch from behind the bureau? The old t-shirt,
the dish soap, the dark wave of her scouring the carpet.
Where do you go when you sleep?

FANTASY II: NICHOLAS

O Nicholas, your Melvins T-shirt,
black Vans and blood blisters, waxy scar
splitting your eyebrow. I want you all,
even the scrapes on your palms.

Where do you go after school?
How'd you get that bruise? I saw you
at the loading dock where the teachers smoke
lighting a black clove. Who will be the one

to suck your finger when the saw slips
in vocational. When your father makes bail
and your brother's not there, will you seek me?
Find me reading under the park shelter.

From the bus window, I watch you walk
bookless through empty tennis courts
with your skateboard and carabiner.
Every day, a fresh cut. Every day, Nicholas.

ORCHARD

Johnathans are the first
we find in the far back trees
late in the season

for harvesting. Gone
already: the early Idas
and Lodis, Rubys, Honeys,

Turleys, Melroses, Akanes,
Black Twigs, and Pink Ladies—
all named after girls

young in age, in spring.
Johnathans are hard
and simple, a fine fistful.

They hold on by the hundreds.
Ignorant as heiresses
we stroll past trees doilied

with rotting apples
bruised and dented
as faces with shattered

cheekbones. I try
to not step on them
as flies swarm the bulbs

like police at some
southern Indiana scene,
violent and typical.

C.

My mother
didn't birth me.
As in Macbeth:
untimely ripped,
not from the womb.
She was bifurcated,
my body wrested
from the soil's
ruddy root patch.
They say I nearly
killed her: stubborn
fistula. She was under
heavy anesthesia
when the doctor
reached into
the slit. He delivered
me first to my father.
Suction and shears,
my new lungs
bracing the air.
What was left of
us? The crater.
The tether.
Then with some
staples and glue
they shut her.

GHAZAL IN GERMAN

for my father

Before you were born, your father swore “Save me God and I’ll give you my son!”
Then passing a farm, the darkening barn, he heard her warbling to the cows in German.

He’d snarl at your mother about the house; then swing and fall like a plane
shot down. While he slept, she crept around, tidying, silent and German.

You remember him red and sun-sick after laying concrete. A sunken ship in the TV light.
Half-safe then: your blitzed colossus with the Nazi eye. Your father, the half-dead alcoholic.

His debt follows the blood: our inheritance, our bodies’ slick and flimsy ladders.
When you’re drunk—the fat tongue—I’d swear you’re speaking German.

At a private facility, you detox in a bed too small to sleep in.
You say you just lie awake. The body’s slow blade carves away your German.

Where was God today? Nowhere near. Your father, a dark barn you turn from.
Above, heaven bleeds and the angels shriek in cold-sweat, ripsawed German.

I am your daughter, plagued and loving. When I was born, you held me in your arms,
you couldn’t stop God from speaking: *Gott Gott Gott*. His name in my name in German.

CHRISTMAS ANGEL

She was uncertain how to build it:
the white wires of the angel spread out on the carpet.

She would begin with the wide hoop of the hem
then the cylindrical waist. Above the skirt she'd connect

the back to the wings and her neck to the haloed head.
There would be arms and hands that gripped a simple horn.

All of it: an empty frame we could see our mother
straight through. Christmas re-runs chattered on TV—

In the snowfall and ice, Nurse Carol trails away.
Dr. Ross looks at her so carefully, like his eyes are all

that keeps her from shattering on the sidewalk.
The El shudders and cries in Little Ukraine.

We'd like for Carol to fall in love, to believe
in happiness. When a wire snapped our mother's finger

a word we'd never heard hissed from her mouth,
and the wing stabbed the air like a bone. I don't remember

what comes next. You say she took us to bed.
Later the front door opened and you heard the crack

of his boots. *Why's Dad here?* you wondered.
We want to know what our life was, what happened to

our beautiful mother. You hand me a piece and I proffer
another. Maybe she called and said *I still need you.*

FANTASY III: TUCK EVERLASTING

Sitting behind the boys' elongated bodies
I couldn't watch the movie. We'd read the book

knew how it would end. The film light
shifted across Luke's face like water across

a starfish — I knew I could watch him
until I died. I dreamt he'd cross the rows

of desks between us and cover my mouth
with his pink kiss. All the school would spin,

the girls floating in dresses like refuse.
Stupid Winnie—I'd feel sorry for her

while Luke's body held me down
like gold. I'd be his shining when

his star-shape draped across me.
I'd swallow his whole name like a coin.

A VISIT

In every sketch I draw in art class—never
an owl now—she’s a different woman

slipping out of the picture. Once she was
a jet-haired nude, fixing her eyes on mine

as she pulled close the shower curtain.
Mom says it’s the Holy Spirit who delivers

God’s messages, but I know it isn’t.
If she were an angel, she’d tell me

something, the way Gabriel visited her
in the dark, parted his lighted robe, and left

her with the awful mess. It’s Mary
in the mirror. Her face in the chalk smear.

The figure passing by my classroom’s
tiny window. The first time she visited me—

an owl—I thought she’d come to hear
my prayers: Straighten my teeth.

Pare my nose with your talons. Austin
from history, make him fall for me. But Mary

with her huge eyes and tiny beak
just shook her head and hissed.

THE BLESSING

When the priest arrives he is unlike a father.
He floats down the hall blessing each room
with a single clerical strike.

In preparation, my grandmother emptied
the ashtrays and oiled the furniture until
the polyurethane glowed. We want God

to come in, to hang his white robe and gold purse
beside my pilling pink church coat. It's just us here,
now. As the priest moves room-to-room,

the house speaks in lies. The burns on the sofa
moan from their silent accusatory mouths,
complaining of our whorishness. The hinges say

*They banished the men, they never pray —
they'd even turn away their lost sons and husbands
from purgatory if given the chance.*

In the kitchen, my sister and I color on the tablecloth
decorated with piss-colored lemons. Beside us, our mother
holds her face in one hand. *That's wonderful*, she says,

as I fill Mary's hood with a waxy planetary blue.
How easy—Mary's gaze, beholding her brand new son,
whose upturned arms accept the world's offerings.

GRAPEFRUIT

Like a woman with child,
the fruit looks too heavy
to be held by the bough.

They were re-named
Forbidden Fruit
by colonists in Barbados

who found some thing
crossed between a sweet orange
and the old world *Shattuck*.

So aroused, they barely
made their fortunes off it.
Then, during prohibition,

a Texan bred a new strain
and named it Ruby. He said
she appeared one day

red as a pinko, born from
radiation therapy. Now,
everything is the same:

from Florida to Indiana
trains carrying fruit
and endless bags of salt.

Peeled back: a layer of cuticle
like the caul of a baby.
It's good for you, good

for the mother to eat.
In Pennsylvania, my
great-grandmother Vanetta

drank cleaning solvent
after her husband took
her daughters and left.

A mother since
fifteen. She survived
and lives on

inside my mouth.
Each day we grow more
bitter and acidic.

III. BETWEEN ORDINARY TIME

O brilliant, O languishing
Cycle of weeping light!
The mice and birds will eat you,
And you will spoil their stomachs
As you have spoiled my mind.

LOUISE BOGAN, "I Saw Eternity"

PELICAN

You bring me foxglove
for my fear of greener

pastures. You lay mums
in my china bone teacup.

You're so cute the earth
cannot sustain it. Let's go

to the frozen zoo in San Diego
where cells of species suspend

in tanks of liquid nitrogen.
Show me which

is your animal. Are you lion
or penguin? I could be

scraped from a bear's tongue
or the pierced breast of a pelican.

Our venturous primordial-selves
ran our kinder Neanderthals

to extinction, but not before
a little fun. I know what's coming.

Each time I roll away
the stone of sleep, I pat the bed

to find you in the dark.
In drought and famine I loved you

so much. I made our children
then ate them up.

EASTERTIDE

My mother wants to repair the balcony.
And the concrete front steps, which are sinking.
They'll push into the foundation like an impacted tooth.
She's preparing the house for market. She's retiring
in June. For forty odd years she worked as a nurse
snaking her scope through the bowels of patients.
Now around the yard she totes the green garden hose
to shower the sweet pea with their prim and peevish
faces. Her second husband conspired to sell the house
out from under her, and flee the country. He told her
on his deathbed, meaning to cleanse his soul.
Now every time she cleans, she finds another gun.
She says she wants them gone. And his antique clocks,
each missing various parts. They just hang on the walls
dumb as bucks. All my life, my mother and her mother
tried to muscle into middle class. *Like trying to get up in mud.*
At dusk, deer eat the blossoms. Nothing stops them.
Or the moths in the linen, or the whole house sinking down—
steel-town built on dunes, sprawl on marsh. When it rains
every bone comes out of the ground. My mother doesn't mind.
She wakes at five and lifts the deadweight sun. *What's a man
ever done, she says, but leave a job unfinished?*

IN BLOOM

The Church taught me
giving birth is a form of saving

There's an orphan soul at the gate
waiting to join the earth

My red missionary dress
My body's ready beds

Why was I a special egg
of my thousand sleeping siblings?

When a sprout emerges
small and mighty into the light

it snaps the seed shell
A mother is so snapped

*Is it right to bring a child into this
fucked up world?*

my boyfriends have wondered

NOCTURNE: STORAGE EXPRESS

Ben and I play our guessing game.
What's inside? He says: *Sex den, leg lamps.*

I say: *haunted dolls, a hand in formaldehyde.*
We whorl the blankets: I love to find

the warm crook under his shoulder
and nest. *Silks and antique leather,* he says.

A vault no one can open. It's fun until
it's not. The game ends soon as I hiss

*Whoever has money for storage spaces,
heated garages, lake houses—fuck them,*

fuck their lucky lives. Ben shakes his head.
He hates it too, but not like I do.

I turn to the wall and shut my eyes. There:
the armoire, the silver, the gilded crib.

A family portrait wrapped in quilts. I find
the fur and baptismal dresses and make

my bitter bed. From Ben's side, through
his window: the long blank wall

and air conditioners. They keep him up
as they kick and whir.

BETWEEN ORDINARY TIME

Soon it will be too hot to sit outside.
Minor birds chitter in the hedges.
A sturdy groundhog runs across the yard.
And a hawk and turkey vultures circle like slow
stringless kites. So, this is what it's like
to be out again among the unabashed elements.
Bees shaking the honeysuckle, the queen
breeding at the lawn's edge. How does the world
fit us? As a stray cat mounts another stray,
and another stray watches moaning, I pack away
my winter thoughts. No one told me life would be
idyllic. "The only difference between us and trash
is a spotless trailer," my grandmother would say
to my mother, who once said this to me as we cleaned
the house some Friday. Every spring, something wakes
up in the blood. I don't know what it saves us from.

FEASTLESS DAYS

My great-grandmother was married
to an abusive man. He put a daughter
in her and then another. She pushed

each out, named, and loved them. Then,
on one ordinary day, he took the girls and left
for good. That's when she tried to leave

the earth but couldn't; the sky so thick
with particulates, as the steel mills pushed out
slabs of pig iron, bright orange and burnished.

I've heard people say women only do it
for attention. But I wasn't there,
couldn't say why she chose bleach

over other implements. Something
from the kitchen. It's a century later now
as my Aunt Roseann tells me this story

at a Greek diner off of route thirty.
Our waitress winks at me as she turns to leave;
her eyelid a dark and sparkly plum.

My great grandmother married again
and gave birth to my grandmother,
who gave birth to my mother, who gave birth

to my sister and me on feastless days
in September. Between us, there were parties
and paychecks, one brand new blue Chevrolet

won in a radio contest. Black eyes, train rides,
and a single family portrait. In it—

a dark velvet backdrop, five teenagers,

and my grandmother and grandfather
posed at the front. My mother's hair
is feathered over her mock-neck sweater.

I'm still unborn. I've yet to station them
like statuettes in this cramped Midwestern
diorama and take their common miseries

as my own. Following the story, I must pluck
each man out, leaving each woman hard and mad
and poor. When my great-grandmother

woke up—her dress front stained in vomit,
the scent and burn of solvent, and her missing
children striking the back of her throat

like a bell—what else could she have done?
What we all would have done. She rose from the bed
and gathered up the kitchen rags.

POMEGRANATE

I find you at your most carnivorous
curved over a pomegranate

with a spoon, carving straight
down the skin. You haven't eaten

meat in sixteen years. It's funny,
isn't it? This fruit with almost

nothing under the skin but seeds.
You dig the pith, spilling loose

the arils and juice. Then, like a fox
you eat egg after egg after egg.

I hear the bright snap every time
you chew. When you've finished,

you toss the shell in the sink
and I have you for breakfast.

A RIDDLE

Lay me
but don't leave me
inhabited. There's no money

for that

You might say
I have a tough shell
despite consuming nothing

but corn and marigold petals

Inside I'm slick
and raw, I'm sick
for you but never want

to be your baby

Just happy here
with my little
bag of air

growing old

Don't break me
Test me in water
I know I can be

so rotten

I'm shelter enough
for myself—my neat
bloom and cuticle

I'll come first
then you

AVOCADO

Evolutionists say we're
anachronisms. I say

science is old and distant
now. We're all so hard

to bear. I wake up
early morning as female

rest in mid-afternoon
and wake the next day

as male. I dream of
an alligator, erotic,

that invites me in like
a knife through a pear.

I can hang on to just
myself for months

and could kill a horse
but never a woman.

Ripening rooms are full
of ethylene and magazines

on fitness and natural living.
In the grocery, people grip

my skin as they pass.
Just testing they say

and *You give this easily?*

Yes. I'm a sensitive

soft thing.

It's fine by me.

CAVITY GHAZAL

The dentist and her ponytailed aid roost above me peculiar nannies
cooing behind their masks.

Why does she talk to me? The shell she makes of me, echoing
each tooth with her mirror and hook.

I'd sensed something burrowing spent months vigorously brushing
nothing but bone and the invisible ache.

Then appeared one day: the tiny black nest and its tiny empty egg.
Her hook lifts — a tooth pick from a cherry I taste like a can of coke.

When I was six I hid when my mother spoke with the pediatrician:
Fatigued swollen lymph nodes feverish peaked

Lifting me over her chest she set me in a chamomile bath.
Combed back my hair and washed my red-speckled back.

When I was twenty I found her in oncology my stepfather out of surgery.
Sentry in the chair beside him — body the surgeon pecked open and stitched.

The dentist's syringe slips into a nerve in my left jaw then the right.
She drills the cavity and suctions the putrid yolk.

Reflected in her scope and plexiglass: a miniature of myself I can't stop staring —
Michelle you're so fragile — eyes reaching like an infant wanting something back.

After, I call my mother the first time in weeks.
Oh, sweet heart she says, knowing before I remember how to speak.

SPIDER

Me and a southern house spider
hanging out by her window, drinking

some tea. I like her moxie, I like
her tousled bed. When a clumsy moth

finds her nest, I leave, I let them be.
The males are wanderers, wolfish

and lanky. But she's huge and full
like a moon. When she chases one from

her radial web, he returns, returns.
She might eat him if he stays

(—though seeing you walk through
the door, didn't that feed me for days?)

That's when I go outside
with my broom. I tear down

her little cloud, whispering
I can't have you here laying eggs.

MYSWEET LORD

for Ben

We're all here tending to
our own imaginary good:

coffee shop full of typing,
little boy wheeling a fire engine

across the rug. And me too
with my lists and black notebook.

Through the speakers
George Harrison sings

*I really want to see you
Really want to be with you*

I substitute the thought of you
for "Lord" in my mind

and have done this a thousand
other times. How easily

we wove what will take
years to untangle. Each morning

I peel myself from bed
and visit the site of my own

demolition to fill the trenches.
Each day, a fire set by dawn.

It's true. This work
is raw and stinging as a single

black radish. I really want
to show you. But it takes so long.

ARIA II: AUSTERITY MEASURES

I know, I know
productive spring day—

Cardinals teasing cardinals
on the branches, so many bees, and even
my sister getting married

Soon there'll be tomatoes
4-H fairs, and everyone from high school
doing well at our ten-year reunion

Here, in Virginia
spring is long and lurid. Later

I'll plant a garden
something economical

Sunning in my deckchair
the squirrels squawk
the cats scowl

In me
a ferris wheel rehearses
a pale moon drops

Shh, I tell them

I have this all to myself

Notes

“Aria: Distant Observer” refers to the concepts of gravitational redshift and gravitational time dilation, in which objects approaching a black hole appear, to a fixed distant observer, to redden and dim. At the same time, the object will appear to slow as it nears the event horizon, taking an infinite time to reach it.

Alice Gray was born in a poor working class neighborhood in Chicago, Illinois in March of 1881. In November of 1915, Gray fled Chicago with only a few belongings, and relocated to the dunes along the yet undeveloped southern shore of Lake Michigan. She lived there until her death nearly a decade later. In 1916, Chicago presses learned from local fishermen about a mysterious woman who bathed naked in the lake, and began running stories rumoring her identity: a scorned lover, a public school teacher, a wealthy student who left the city to heal an eye injury she had sustained from reading too many books. She has been considered a curiosity, a nymph, a feminist, a conservation activist, a heroine, a hermit, and a poor and unkempt woman. The area of dunes where Gray lived were in the initial stages of development during the last years of her life, and is only a few miles from where I grew up. US Steel Corporation’s Midwest Plant also sits on this beach.

The erasures were made using articles from the first flurry of reports published about Alice Gray in 1916. The articles included are:

“Mystic Nymph In Wild Dunes.” *Chicago Tribune*, 22 July 1916, p. 13.

“Nymph of Dunes Mystery Solved.” *Chicago Tribune*, 23 July 1916, p. 1.

“Nymph of Sand Dunes Found: Daughter of Nature is Living Simple Life in Indiana.” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 23 July 1916, p. 1.

“Nymph of Dunes, Midway Alumna, Fleeing World.” *Chicago Tribune*, 24 July 1916, p. 1.

“Diana of the Dunes.” A Line O’ Type Or Two. *Chicago Tribune*, 25 July 1916, p. 6.

"Diana of the Dunes." Men and Women. *Chicago Tribune*, July 30, 1916, p. 34.

"'Nymph' Alice Now A 'Diana'." *Chicago Tribune*. 14 November 1916, p. 3.

"The Hermit Nymph of the Dunes." *The Indianapolis Star*, 10 December 1916, p. 71.

These poems could not have been dreamt of or completed without Janet Zenke Edward’s biography *Diana of the Dunes: The Trust Story of Alice Gray*. The History Press, 2010.

The television fortune teller alluded to in “Bobbing for Apples” is Miss Cleo, partially conflated in my memory with Dr. Ruth.

“Nocturne: Chicago World’s Fair” refers to the 1893 Columbian Exposition. Attractions included a built-to-scale facsimile street of Cairo, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, and the world’s first Ferris wheel. Alice Gray was twelve years old and living with her family in Chicago when the fair took place, though there is no evidence that she attended. I have an inexplicable memory of riding an elephant around a circus tent when I was a child. It is believed that Alice Gray’s father died of complications from burns he sustained while working as a city lamplighter. My mother owned a decorative oil lamp that my sister and I were forbidden to touch, warned that it would catch fire if knocked over. The poem conflates these, now, unprovable memories between us.

“Orchard” refers to the Anderson Orchard in Mooresville, Indiana.

The fistula in “C.” refers to the holes drilled and fitted into the sides of fistulated cows. The fistula is a passageway that connects a cow’s stomach to the outside, and is covered by a removable plug, similar to a porthole. The portal allows a human arm to reach through the fistula for the purposes of analyzing digestion.

“Fantasy III: Tuck Everlasting” was inspired by “Against the Couple Form,” an essay published in 2012 by the radical feminist collective CLÉMENCE X. CLEMENTINE AND ASSOCIATES FROM THE INFINITE VENOM GIRL GANG.

“A Visit” was inspired by a young fascination with the *Joan of Arc* 1999 miniseries starring Leelee Sobieski, and the 1999 film *Stigmata*, after which I began anticipating a visitation from the Virgin Mary.

“A Visit”, “The Blessing”, and “Christmas Angel” all draw from Sylvia Plath’s poem “The Moon and the Yew Tree,” particularly the lines:

The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary.
Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls.
How I would like to believe in tenderness —

The pelican was considered by medieval artists and thinkers, such as Saint Isidore of Seville, as a symbol of Christ’s sacrifice. From The Getty’s educational blog *The Iris*: “The standard pelican story begins with the mother pelican giving birth to a brood of young chicks. As the young grow, they become violent toward the parent that has selflessly cared for them, attempting to peck out her eyes and mutilate her. In anger she retaliates, striking her young dead, but after three days regrets her actions and pierces her own side with her beak. As she allows her blood to drip on the young, they revive and she dies, having made the ultimate sacrifice for her children.”

The answer to “A riddle” is: an egg.

“Avocado” draws from the growth and distribution processes of commercial avocados. The bark, branches, fruit, leaves, and buds of the avocado tree are toxic to many animals, but are especially deadly to horses.

Female southern house spiders build silky, non-sticky webs that resemble a tangle of wool, often in the corners and crevices of window frames. Insects get easily trapped inside the web, which the spider can navigate speedily through small passages. These spiders allow their webs to become quite messy over time, filling with leaves, debris, and carcasses.

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Thank you Ben. Did you think for even a moment you’d get out of this one?

