

**The Bullet In Her Pocket**

BY

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THESIS

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Cleveland: A Map in Seven Parts

1.

Along the north shore, a warble. Sing  
the freshwater and afterglow.

2.

When it rains, it rains for days. At dawn,  
a man and a woman dance  
and dance.

3.

Bricks become the dark edge of longing.  
Do you know their mortar?

4.

Oh, steel workers, why do you burn?

5.

Say you've forgotten the city's old men.  
Their hats wear the trees, their shoes  
sing in the devil strip.

6.

When the river catches fire, the city  
tightens its belt.

7.

Streetcars and telephone wires. Women  
speaking where no women spoke  
before.

I. YES GIRL

Anna Dreams of Heat and Light

1940

Just yesterday, I found a rabbit's  
spine in the garden. I slipped  
each vertebra in my apron pocket.

All day, they hummed along  
my hip until, at dusk, I reached in  
and pulled out a string of pearls.

Why do you think I am lying?  
Because I gave away the only thing  
I had worth keeping? So be it.

Take this, too: once, my father  
touched my cheek and told me  
I looked just the same

as my mother when she  
was a girl. I know this is true  
because I dream of gravity,

a gentle kiss. I wake with a start,  
body like a rubber band  
let loose. Snap. And something

I almost had is gone. Snap.  
And my heart trips forward, clumsy  
as a kid. She is gypsy

dark, fingernails rimmed with black  
soil. Pebbles in her mouth. A gift.  
She made the first rabbit. I found its remains.

Euclid Beach Dancehall*Anna, 1940*

The oldest and still not married—  
do you understand? I must think of my family:

little sisters washing linens in the back yard,  
mother stewing a bushel of tomatoes.

Yesterday, Jo and I walked to the lake,  
met a man who danced like the moon

would rise between his heels. Gold ring  
on his little finger, silk under his suit.

Who was I to say no? He jitterbugged  
right off the dance floor, past the bandstand,

into the hot dark. Catalpa trees stood sentinel.  
He lifted my shirt. Some things I wasn't taught—

sins of the flesh had no names. Not his hand,  
the beginning of his beard. Not the animal

quickenings inside my skin. Why didn't they teach me  
what Hail Mary can't erase? My penance:

a broken rosary in my apron pocket,  
a stain on the dress I've been stitching.

Contribution*Anna, 1940*

You've always been a yes girl. Some say doormat.  
Doesn't matter. One yes is all it takes.

One yes and your name sounds like a howling dog,  
a low moan from belly to lips. Make it louder.

One yes and you're watching your boyfriend  
unzip his pants in the back seat. You line up

Hail Marys like bone fragments or chipped teeth,  
count the times *No* curled against your lips.

St. Rocco's Home for Girls*Anna, 1941*

For days, I'd waited in the usual spots:  
Lorenzo's grocery, our bench in Public Square,  
  
the playground behind St. Paul's. Even the club  
on Eighty-Eighth, a place I was ashamed to go.  
  
People there knew him as Johnny, laughed  
when I asked if he'd been in. I couldn't go  
  
to his home, but rode the bus past it, working  
his ring over my knuckle and back down, over  
  
and back down. That Sunday, Euclid Beach,  
between the boardwalk and the carousel, he dropped  
  
to one knee. We'd waste no time, he said, marry  
before anyone found out—only God would  
  
have to know. It was his sister who told me  
he'd been caught at the wheel of a stolen  
  
Oldsmobile, gave me a Zanesville address  
where I could write. We'd both be prisoners, I knew,  
  
and packed my things before I confessed. The home  
was not so different from my own. The sisters  
  
never smiled. We shared the work: cooking, sewing,  
scrubbing floors. At night, rooms crowded with girls  
  
like me, trying to hide their bodies out of habit  
though we were all there for the same reason. Some  
  
knew what they were doing. Most only knew  
that saying yes meant their sweethearts would smile,  
  
make promises. Those long months at St. Rocco's,  
we learned what yes really meant.

Maybe the butcher

1941

asked about her while she was away. He'd grown used to her coming for a Sunday chicken, grown fond of her smile, sometimes slipped treats across the counter—chunks of salami, aged prosciutto—and, knowing her family was large, her father poor, would save the fattest bird for her. When Jo came, first one week and then another, he asked: Where's Anna? Sick, her sister said, just sick.

Maybe the butcher had been paying attention. There was talk in the neighborhood—a few good-for-nothings stealing cars and running gin. He knew Anna was right in the middle of it. A Moll—is that what they called her?

Maybe the butcher counted the weeks she was gone, the number of hens Jo carried away. When Anna returned, it was springtime; she wore a once-yellow dress, now faded nearly white. He had seen her in it before and noticed it fit differently. Her body—breasts lower, waist thicker—bent now under something he thought he might like to carry.

Maybe the butcher loved her anyway, imagined he could make her happy. He thought she needed a steady man, one without a mug shot or a hand gun. Though he had only pennies to rub together, they were his pennies, and with enough of them, he could buy her a new dress, blue and bright.

## The Ontology of Secrets

A path, a riddle, a jewel, an oath—anything can be a secret so long as it is kept intentionally hidden, set apart in the mind of its keeper as requiring concealment.

—Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*

### I. A Path

near the lake. Seventeen miles. Ice so thick they say you can drive on top of it. The Buick sits idle, puffs of exhaust tangible as cotton candy. Your life is a series of idling engines, men waiting for someone to say, *Let's go*. You picture the inside of a vault, paper money stacked in neat piles along the walls, and when the men go inside, the bills turn to knee-high grass, dried by the season, tossing back and forth in the wind that crossed the lake from Canada. You wish this were true. Instead, the men take the bills from the vault and your man brings some back to you, says, *Take this, buy the baby something nice*, and you buy her a dress, palest yellow; a new toy, clean and soft. You take the bills to the cellar, create your own vault with old bricks, an empty drum where your father used to keep his homemade wine.

## II. A riddle

is like a recipe. Break  
 the bread into chunks.  
 Drizzle oil over the bread.  
 Lick your fingers.

## III. A jewel

looks legitimate,  
 and no one is brash  
 enough to ask questions.  
 Under your skirt,  
 the softest part of you  
 is bruised. Your very  
 body, the fat and the chaff.  
 Private is the mouth  
 that doesn't eat.  
 It glistens and glows.  
 Girl, you'll be a wife  
 soon enough.

## IV. An oath

makes you his wife.  
 He weds you with  
 the back of his hand,  
 with his belt. Don't cry.  
 Count the bills in the cellar,  
 go to work. When you  
 return, watch the child  
 fast asleep. Your body began  
 when she did. Like  
 a vault you kept her  
 and will keep her.  
 Your mouth is the vault  
 now. You speak so  
 little the child  
 can't recognize  
 your voice when  
 you call her back  
 from the gulley. She's  
 gone far enough; she's  
 shouting into the ravine.

The Bank Robber's Bride*Anna, 1943*

I take no joy in these vows, this promise  
to obey. Empty pews make quiet witness.

My faith is small: splinter in the pad  
of my thumb, fool's gold and stolen

jewels. We are one before God, but part  
of me is already lost. A hole straight through—

navel to spine. An empty *cassette*. Gray dress,  
drab and starch-stiff. No one will dance tonight.

Newlyweds: A Cento

I.

He seems unsteady in the world. I was glad to be wearing  
eyelets, fingers stuttering through muffled lace.

Softly, a circlet of arrows napped beside him. He taught me  
a steel wool cloud, a metal feather. What is it like

to mend and be shattered? The button on my husband's  
cuff, I imagine, is a woman's silky skirt married

to a grey suit hanging. I was never good at measuring  
anything, and sorry about that. And the sleep:

queer, distant calligraphy lining the hollow body.  
So we sweep our small room one more time and warm up

the cold space on our mattress. On the top shelf,  
next to the kidskin wallet: morning glory, kudzu,

piano wire. He's aloof as a sawtooth. A mattress  
creates its own secret space, tidal pools in the sheets.

How do I explain it? I'm the lot he draws. I come home  
with my fat and regret I am not a nest builder.

II.

The bride with my face cries, and he assures me that desire  
is like a boy, knuckled hands folded in his lap,

a spinning violence that follows me. The deed done  
quickly: almost fastidious. I will return home

and we will punish each other. All is ritual. Evenings,  
I untied my hair, pulled the blue worry bead into his mouth.

His sadness is ferocious. Somewhere, I traded my fingers  
for a handful of bubble and blue ink. Let's turn speech back.

When prison's pig iron fist eats it up and spits a bloodier,  
older man back, I see a stranger cool as dimes. My husband

smelling of mint and gin. No matter the roar, the shiver, I ache.  
Moths and blood prompted us to smile. I wake up

holding beauty marks plush enough to sink a lady's dreams into.  
If I could hurt you now, I could forgive you.

III.

As if I could bury the low mosquito hum I am standing on.  
The bells smoking beside me, my husband across the way

like an after-dinner drink. He was a mountain of shame,  
the idea of something precious. This is how we love. This is

where every crack is a flame before the fire or the wool.  
But it's only me now, a nest cupped in his hands: this balm,

this bath of light. I am a very different wife—I haven't  
even started to love him yet. I came because he cried

and I had to. Why bring light when we've needed wonder?  
If hunger is stronger than grief, I'll dance to anything.

I traded my fear of matches to make people I love say  
*You lie*. He's a groove in my lineage, a greasy spoon.

Don't admit anything. Don't ask your questions. Good-bye  
humming bird throat. Who needs kings?

Aftermath: A Romance*Anna, 1943*

She became cloudburst, gutted  
like a fat goat. She swallowed all he ate  
and remained hungry. A house burned  
around her. In the ash, a box full of knives.  
Where she drew the stocking seams on her calves,  
her skin split open, peals of birdsong seeping out.

Paola Salvatore Meets Her Granddaughter

1943

*Basta*. Enough of that crying, child. You think you're the only one confused about all of this? I sent that girl away, only thing I could do, what with your father being a no good *rapinatore*, and she comes back here with her slow hips and watery eyes, her voice like a ghost caught in the back of her throat. She tried to shame us twice, *carina*, wearing her grief like a diamond. Oh, I understand. If someone had taken her away from me, I'd have gutted them like a goat, but I knew better than to let my *fidanzato* sniff around under my skirts. In my country, we learn young, watch the filthy dogs mounting the bitch in heat, watch the bitch birth her pups and scavenge to feed them. In this country, we keep our eyes closed. My girls go to school, learn numbers and books, then forget the good sense God gave them. I'm supposed to believe this learning keeps them proper, but here you are to prove that isn't true. Anna, stupid girl, waited for that *pidocchio* of hers to get out of jail, told us she'd marry him with or without our blessing. It was enough we'd given her child away; she said she wouldn't suffer any further in the name of family. Of course we gave, reluctantly, our permission. Better to have her out of the house, not sulking around these rooms poisoning her sisters with her sad love story and her drooping breasts. Jesus and Mary know the truth, but the priest was ignorant. You may kiss the bride, he said, as if that hadn't happened before. Fool. And Biagio takes her away on some honeymoon (and no job to pay that bill?), comes home and hands me you? Where have you been these last two years, *piccola*? Who do you belong to?

Every Scrap of Cloth*Paola, 1929*

Your gypsy children  
played jacks below deck,  
allied with the others.  
No wars or words divide them.  
You were silent except to scold,  
language an ocean

you couldn't cross.  
A burgundy scarf clung  
to your dark hair,  
the same faded fabric  
of your daughter's dress,  
your son's shirt, too short

in the sleeves. All things  
patched or frayed,  
a quilt made of waiting.  
Behind you, a drowned boy,  
slaughtered goat, olive  
tree missing one branch.

Archivist of the Body*Anna to Biagio, 1945*

Once, I might have believed you  
were a cry for help, a wretch  
walking this city in search  
of a savior. Scars remember  
time served. You choose which stories  
to tell—I remember them all,  
remind you when you're lying.  
If your body is a record, then each lie  
is an appendix, a diagram to illustrate  
what you wish were true. Long before  
the bullet pierced your shin,  
long before you stood on the street  
rolling a cigarette in the rain,  
I was writing down the damage  
on your body. Yes, once I would have  
believed. I would have opened  
my arms to make myself larger,  
easier to target.

After Months Without Trouble, Anna Grows Suspicious

1946

Someone left a bullet on the bathroom sink.  
Outside, an engine exhales. Biagio, just home  
from work, snaps open a Zippo  
with two fingers and a thumb.  
His friends gather at the fender  
of the old Buick, pass a pack  
of Camels from one hand to the next.  
The radio announces bad weather—lake effect—  
and on cue, snow begins to settle  
on the sidewalk. The men flick their smokes  
into the yard and drive away.  
Anna puts the bullet in her pocket.  
Across town, someone is digging a grave.

Bone Song*Anna, 1947*

That was the year paint  
    peeled from the ceiling  
  
in great wet clumps, the year  
    the kitchen sink groaned  
  
and gurgled like coffee  
    percolating. When you fell  
  
down the stairs with your child  
    tight against your chest, did you  
  
feel her soft skull crack or hear  
    blood rush around her brain?  
  
What homespun acrobatics  
    did you perform on the way down?  
  
From the doorway, your sister  
    watched while a snake coiled  
  
around her waist. She was small. Her mouth  
    was open. You cannot  
  
remember if she was laughing  
    or screaming.

Biagio Brings Work Home

1947

In the moment after his fist,  
silence. Her jaw absorbs

all sound. Even the glass  
breaking behind her

stills. The pain is longer  
than a homily. Bodies

are strong enough to withstand  
so much—she thinks

it would be better if  
her teeth could shatter

like the glass, but no. Flesh  
swallows impact like the lake

takes a body bound by bricks  
and hides it within itself. The body

becomes stronger. The mind  
inside learns not to react.

Anna Becomes the Bullet

1947

And she is cool after the hammer.  
Even in the smallest spaces, she seeks  
an alternative to combustion.  
Prayer, a knife, the softest cotton.  
She pierces the walls. She enters  
without invitation. Trigger finger,  
recoil.

She believes one's never  
conscious of the moment  
of irrevocable change,  
but she's wrong.

A dog on the street  
knows not to chase cars. It chases  
just the same, and snarls beneath  
the milk truck's rear axle.  
Biagio might be the one to put  
the dog out of its misery, but it's Anna  
who feels the dog's heart  
stop beating from the inside. Oh—  
one last pulse. The body limp, the body  
slowly stilling. From here, she sees  
the way in but not the way out.

## II. ONLY A SLIPKNOT

Transcription: Biagio Tells the Story of Red Rider

1945

Now once upon a time there was a little girl named Little Red Riding Hood. She was the state's champ jitterbug. She was jitterbugging on down to the forest, you know why? Because her mother told her to take these two bottles of whiskey over to her grandmother's because she was thirsty. So Little Red Riding Hood was jitterbuggin' on down the forest lane, and she run into one of them slick slickers, you know, one of them guys from the town in one of them jitterbug suits. He was the Big Bad Wolf. He had a zoot suit, a reet pleat, a big seat, and a stuffed cuff. So he stopped Little Red Riding Hood, and he said, "Hey babe, where you going?" and Little Red Riding Hood said, "Step aside big boy," said "I'm on my way to my grandmother's." And uh, the wolf says, "Well what for?" "My old mammy's thirsty. I got a bottle of gin here and a bottle of liquor I gotta take to my grandmother's." So the wolf said, "What you taking all that good stuff down to your old bag's? Let's you and I drink enough to cut a rug right here." So Little Red Riding Hood said okay, so they cut up a rug. And what do you think happened?

Criminology [1]*Biagio, 1925*

When he was a boy, he carried a small blade in his pocket; he carried a tool box with three drawers; he carried the heart of a rabbit in a felt pouch. Flesh, twine, cable, limb. When he was a boy, he memorized Paul's letters. He recited sermons while our mother cut his hair.

Il Palio*Biagio, 1934*

This is the kind of race a horse can win  
without its rider. Biagio imagines  
shucking his pack and sprinting for the city walls,  
but around him bodies are thick with sweat  
and—it seems—made only of elbows and shoulders.  
Only the horses have space to run. Secretly,  
he wants all the riders to fall so he can watch  
the horses' glistening backs rise and flex  
as the weight of their men gets lost in the dust.  
His skin is blistered from the straps  
of his bag, and last night, walking the hills  
outside the city center, the sole of his left shoe  
came loose. He steps high and sets  
his heel down first to keep the slapping  
sole attached. He is learning to carry his body  
in new ways, thumbs between straps and chest,  
torso tipped forward so the pack rests  
across his shoulder blades. But for now,  
he forgets he has a body at all, forgets  
the hot sun and his pinking skin.  
The race is short. He cannot count the number  
of falls, the bones that must have broken.

Kid Glove Holdup

1947

At 2:15 a.m. a man wearing  
white kid gloves entered  
the J.& J. Bar and ordered  
a drink of whiskey.

three other men

a stool pigeon  
smashed by police

sub machine gun

brains of the crime crew

He escaped  
a daylight holdup  
and fled  
back to 1934.

detectives broke down  
picked out the places  
handled  
the chief  
pistol.

Answer to Question 1: Anna

1947

He said he'd build me a house. He said my body was a train station and he needed to buy a ticket. *Slick slicker*. He was sugar on my tongue, like medicine. He was rain on hot concrete, shoe polish on a lambskin rag. *And what do you think happened?* He showed me the seams in the back seat of his Buick.

Investigation*Anna, 1947*

My body is evidence.

Evolution. Taste this.

The crime scene is a pocket

full of meat and metal.

A tea kettle for your tongue,

a reed or a whip. Take this

to the lab for testing.

To the morgue. Watch.

My body reveals the answer.

Your innocent girl,

your vinegar. Preserve

me. Send up a flare.

Erasure

"DEATH CHAIR"

by  
Biagio Morelli

the entire

hunger

waited,

drifted

As events

again

filed in

they had

arise and stand .

penetrated .

in this manner

remember leaving

The

next words

have

he could never kill a girl

evidence  
 the frame encloses the photo. True,  
 to die. When?  
 This is an unusual  
 world

we conceive  
 we expect

innocent, soon

this unusual burst

the Pen hesitated

Hope! that murderer  
 hope

to irony. The  
 taunted  
 The longer the more  
 over

The pyramid of his bitterness was  
 the meal he ordered.

they wanted to fatten him

The fear of

him

why should he

this LAST

thought

closer to the death-house.

Dazed

for some sign

indifference ... just another

two seeking consolation and

comfort.

He could

Father

he knew that

Criminology [2]*Biagio, 1948*

He lies awake at night and remembers his mother's hand around his arm like a tourniquet, the twist up and out that snapped the bone and left him unable to hold his violin for three months. Those months, he learned to play the trumpet, his right arm growing stronger as his left atrophied. The trumpet's keys, three valves topped with mother of pearl, seemed to shape his fingerprints, smooth now and whorled like clouds before a tornado takes shape. He lies awake and remembers telling the doctor it wasn't her fault—he'd been about to walk into the street without looking—and knew the old man didn't believe him. That was okay. His mother's fists didn't believe him either. They were just another way he learned to recognize his own shadow, the part of him that never did as he was told.

Anna at Bedtime

1948

I sleep in the center now, don't miss  
the heat of him. I'm twenty-six years old,  
and I never slept alone before.

My sisters tugged and tossed, but he  
lay still. His breath stained the air like greasy  
hair on a white shirt's collar, his arm

a belt across my hips. He can rot in that cell,  
and I'll keep stretching my legs across  
this mattress. What did he ever give me

that didn't belong to someone else?  
Forgive me, but I love to wear  
the dress I didn't stitch.

The Wolf Lies Down with the Goat (Notes from Prison: 1947-1957)

The blacksmith's son  
pulls old shoes from horses  
and turns them into dolls.

\*

Here, the scent of stone. I recognize homesickness  
and think the word is insufficient.

\*

Lines bloom from your shoulders,  
a type of response or echo.  
I've never seen moon dust, but I believe in the moon.

\*

Your children will hate you.

\*

Your lungs are delicate glass fibers,  
and mine are filaments of light.

\*

The rain tastes like cedar chips,  
honeydew, dandelion greens.  
Let me burn it.

\*

This is not what you hoped for, is it?

\*

Your back like canvas, a sail turning  
toward the wind. Foxtail and riverwater.  
You know sixteen names for a bird with no beak.

\*

Suppose we could begin again.  
Suppose scratch was a place. Not

rock bottom, but a garden hose we drink from  
on hot summer days. Suppose the only thing I can prove  
is that I've been wrong more than I've been joyful.

\*

When I touch your hair, it's only to shake the dust from it.  
I was always waiting for you to become someone else.

\*

Sing a song of shot guns,  
a pocket full of lye.

\*

The beekeeper warned me about this.

\*

Every kind of devastation  
leaves behind something we want to keep.

\*

If we were carved from wood,  
how would our hair grow? If we were wax figures  
of ourselves, where would the moon go?

\*

You could paint a room the color of my eyes.

\*

Too bad the nightingale doesn't sing.  
Like angry drums. Between teeth, the black  
exoskeleton of beetles,  
birthing moss and hidden whales.  
Pin me down with dead bolts.  
I was a fly bird. Still I blink blood.

\*

Because your arms were just the first thing I saw breaking.

\*

Each spring, a child.  
The universe prodded into the belly  
of a church.

\*

The roadside motel.

\*

In the night, ghosts came through your mouth  
and caught in the rafters like bats trapped in a barn.  
I couldn't wake you, but I listened while someone else did.

\*

It was hot; instead of water, he brought us wine.

\*

I will line up  
along the blue veins of your breasts.

\*

We replace justice with a sidewalk cracked by tree roots.  
Yesterday, I nearly stepped on the kidney of some small animal.

\*

A tiny cot in a room too narrow to stretch your arms between the walls.

\*

Rain water rots the wood. Mosquitoes bring sweat,  
uneasy delusions. Who is the girl in between?

\*

The roughhewn twine your mother used to bind stacks of newspaper.  
I am tongue-tied, but this is only a slipknot.

\*

Your son remembers my name, the faint hum  
of paper against wood. Fingers bound with figure eights.  
On one wall, a mirror. You've bled here; you've set others to bleed.

\*

The bees gave this to us. Pain hit with no sound. It was like hands against your chest. You spilled coffee on the kitchen floor. I am the last stamped envelope. The bees gave this to us. Pain spilled on the kitchen floor. The side-walk hit your chest. This radiator drones like a pistol. We put laughter in an envelope. This is a bee on the sidewalk with a pistol in its hand. It has no sound. It is a radiator. I am a sidewalk. Your chest is the kitchen floor. Hands have no sound.

\*

My soft, melancholy spine.  
Call it dust in our mouths, blackout curtains.  
In the dark, you feel space more than time.

\*

I am the shadow of an exit. With you, keeping silent  
and not speaking aren't the same.

\*

I married your mouth.  
I married your hip.  
I married your left thumb.  
I married the sound of your waking.  
I married your wrist and the watch on it.

\*

Below the skin, we glow soft and cool as the moon.

### III. IF THERE'S NO HARM IN SPEAKING

Reclamation: The Story of a Girl with Two Names

*Cecelia, b. 1941*

[Origin]

The baby has never been lonely but perhaps only because she doesn't know better. In some parts of the world, the unwanted are buried alive. Here, the want is what we bury. The baby: a shovel.

[Grip]

Her hand wraps around her mother's thumb, invisible layer of hair on her skin like frost. In the old country, poor families eat soap when the meat's all gone. The baby grows cold as stone. Her fingernails already need trimming.

[Soundtrack with Sinatra]

An old nun whisks her away from her mother, girl with a heart stitched from tablecloths. The nun sings under her breath: *so worth the yearning for, so swell to keep every home fire burning for.*

[Barren]

Beth and Larry are in their thirties, old to still be trying for a child. They pray, pay for indulgences. They pull a girl's name from the collection plate.

[Adoption]

What child remembers the cold circumstances of birth? When her eyes open again, a nursery brightened by sun, clean blankets. A woman laughs as she blinks against the light.

[Begats]

They call the baby Linda. An awful name.

[Pattern]

Larry leaves for work at the same time each morning, returns at noon each day for lunch:

cold chicken on day old bread. Each night,  
 he sits in the parlor with a pipe. Beth, cross-  
 legged in nylons and spectators, teaches  
 Linda to crawl.

[The Pen]

The baby's birth father serves two years downstate.  
 Her birth mother pretends nothing  
 has gone wrong. She had planned a wedding,  
 picked a name. Now, she plays girl again.  
 A grown woman sleeping in a small bed  
 crowded with sisters.

[Ritual]

Baby eats cake with her fists, frosting  
 her nose and eyelids. The photos  
 will have white, scalloped edges.

[Premise]

Time passes, that's what it does.  
 Her birth father counts the days.  
 His will be the best wedding gift.

[Leave It Open]

He's a thief, but one can't steal  
 what's rightly his. His best friend leaves  
 milk bottles on Beth's front porch.

[Breach]

His hands smell like peppermint. His pinky  
 turns in against the ring finger like a drunk  
 in a doorway. *I couldn't wait to meet you,*  
 he whispers. The milk truck idles outside.

[Velveteen]

The baby holds a stuffed bear, filthy with love,  
 and doesn't blink or cry. They say blood  
 recognizes blood, a harmony the ear can't record.

[Laundry]

Her birth mother hates that dirty bear.  
When she washes it, the seams split  
and the soft belly spills out.  
They both hear birdsong.

[Rechristening]

When the baby is a woman, her husband will  
surprise her one afternoon when the girls are at school,  
singing as he walks up the stairs: *Oh Cecelia,*  
*you're breaking my heart. You're shaking my confidence daily.*

[Milk Carton]

Cecelia chases light, naps in sunspots  
on the carpet like a cat. She flinches  
whenever someone says *Linda*, though  
she never understands why.

Such Is Life In the Land of Preposterous Magic: Cecelia Escapes to the Cellar

1946

Who made the castle's fainting couch from fennel and coffee beans? A lilting voice is a harbinger of madness. Lie still, little darling, lie still. You learned how to gather pollen with the backs of your knees, built a honeycomb under the bed. Your beeswax in the shape of a feather. Stitch it together to build yourself wings. When the snow comes in April, after the white blossoms on the apple tree have bloomed, stretch your wings over your shoulders—wait a moment while your frame learns to balance their weight—and take to the street. The world is quieter when snow falls, and you will hear your feathers rustle and rub. This is necessary. Watch the snow fall. Settle your eyes on one flake, study how it takes the wind as canopy, how it flies and rests at once. This is how you will take off. Beeswax wings will carry you from the cold street. Where will you go? The girls in the kitchen are laughing for you, blowing bubbles in dish soap. If you want to return to the castle, close your eyes and picture a cocoa field. If you want to see the ocean, think of broken glass. Your wings, your knees know the way. The princess has been waiting, her pink hands cupped in her lap, turning the green chaise to a rocking horse or a lily pad. If you ask, she can teach you how to change things. Bury the golden seed of your fear with the tulip bulbs—it will grow into something softer.

What Goes in a Dead Hole*Cecelia, 1949*

In the Terminal Tower, a man in green trousers  
sleeps on a bench in front of the newsstand, tattered  
shoes showing the tips of his toes. I see him every time,  
like he's dead or a statue. Mama lets me buy our tickets  
with coins she carries in a pink pocketbook, and we get on.

I used to think the train was pretty, its big body like the tail  
of a black dog. Now, I think the train is like a coffin—  
dark and close, trying to bury me. They think I haven't  
been listening, but I know what goes in a dead hole.

I know Mama never laughs, her face sagging like a wilted flower.  
The engine churns. It's so loud I can't hear the voices whispering  
about us. I count the houses as we pass; at 137 we're almost there.

Cecelia Explains It All

1952

My favorite story is Red Rider—do you know why?  
My daddy told me that story the day before he left.  
He told me the Big Bad Wolf isn't as bad as they say—  
he doesn't eat the Grandma, he just hides inside her.  
I'd like to hide inside my grandma. She's fat enough  
to hold me, and no one ever bothers her. Old as door knobs,  
my grandma. I think she knows everything,  
but I only understand some of what she says, so I guess  
I'll never learn it all. There's a lot I do know, though.  
I know my daddy left when I was six, and he won't  
come back soon. Before he left, we ate  
meat every day. Pink hams shining under sweet glaze,  
pot roasts big as my head. Now, mama makes  
tomato sauce, and sometimes I steal salami  
from the cellar. It's grandpa's special stash  
(he keeps wine down there, too, but I don't like  
the way it makes my teeth suck) and he'd whip me  
if he knew. My grandma would say I'm a *rappinatore*  
just like daddy. I guess that's why we're poor now.  
Mama works real hard, but she only takes what's hers,  
goes to work in the morning wearing pretty dresses  
and high heels. She says she makes it so when people  
pick up the telephone, they can talk to whoever  
they want. She knows how to bring people together.  
My daddy only knows how to keep them apart. We go  
to see him on Saturdays. He smells like mint  
and acts real sweet, but if nobody was watching—  
well, I don't want to talk about that. When he first  
went away, Mama told me he was sick. She thought  
maybe he'd be back soon I guess, thought if she lied  
to me I'd think my daddy was a good man. I never told  
how one night I woke up thirsty, went to the kitchen  
for a glass of water. He was at the sink, scrubbing  
blood from his shirt the way grandma did when I tripped  
in the street and bled all over my Sunday dress. She cursed  
and cursed at me that day. Anyway, Daddy was washing  
blood from his shirt and on the kitchen table  
was a big pile of money and a pair of kid gloves.  
Uncle Jimmy and Mr. Rick were there, too, the three of them  
whispering until Daddy got real mad and the other two  
left in a hurry. I went back to bed without any water,  
and the next day Daddy said we were moving to California.  
I didn't like it there. I missed my cousins and the gully  
we weren't supposed to play in but did. We were only

there a little while, and then one day Mama told me  
Daddy had gone away and we were going home.  
I knew Daddy wasn't sick, just like I knew it wasn't his blood  
in the kitchen sink that night. But I didn't say a word.  
Mama was so sad, and it seemed to make her feel better  
to think I didn't know. I wish she'd kept on lying.  
I don't like going to the jail. All the men look at me  
like I'm Red Rider with a big bottle of gin. Daddy says  
the wolf isn't so bad, but I know how the story ends.

Cecelia Recalls Her Father

1956

I.

When she was a child, his mouth  
was a mountain.

II.

Imagine time is a continuum  
she moves across freely. Imagine time  
is a continuum. Imagine time.

III.

Extract the snake's tail from its mouth.

IV.

She gathers his tools: cups and balls,  
coins, a sword or dagger. Arranges  
them on a small oak table.

She offers him a dove or a woodland  
mouse, waits for morning.

Biagio's Release Upsets the Status Quo (Cecelia Observes Her Parents)

1957

No records exist of this hateful empty.

Because they don't have it,  
they don't want it.

Near is not the same as close.

It's unkind but accurate,        underscored  
by an insomniac's awareness—

oh god her wrists are so small.

Desire made her brave.

Maybe they rushed it just a little. His work?  
How to be uncontained by rooms,  
what she's drinking while she watches him  
attempt aloofness.

Can he smell her disdain  
like the first hint of fire?

They didn't have bifocals,  
the chickenpox, a giant coffee mug in which he kept  
stolen car keys.

She would make inseparable cities  
if he said so. As long as his lungs would let him.

We came to Riddle Road. I didn't know what  
I was becoming.

Real families have plenty of room at the bottom.

Cecelia Writes Only First Lines of Poetry

1958

1

Didn't you love dirges best? Like spiders

2

The night coats her. Damp flannel, sweat beads

3

My mother cleans when nothing is dirty.

4

Force plus struggle equals a good night in this book.

5

Whose prints will they find on my door knob? Which letter will look like a clue?

6

Redemption is an old woman, slow to arrive and disapproving.

7

When they snapped the clavicle, she didn't make a wish.

8

You stole the sheriff's knight-stick and called

9

It is September, soon we won't be able to hang

10

I was afraid you wouldn't see me without

11

Broken bottles catch sunlight in their jagged mouths,

12

Medieval Mary disappears in the kitchen. Let someone else confess.

Cecelia and the Greaser

1958

She likes his Levis best  
when he folds over the fender  
of his 50 Ford Coupe, his belt buckled  
at the hip to protect the paint.  
His hair is blonde, the comb  
in his pocket fine-toothed.  
He keeps his nails clean  
with a switchblade. Whistles  
like a tornado warning  
and drives with his right arm  
on the seatback. *This is how  
you make a girl feel safe,*  
Cecelia thinks, tucking herself  
into the crook of his arm. *This  
is how you keep a girl warm.*

Answer to Question 1: Cecelia

1959

Who needs a honeymoon? We're here, Paul and I, in this small, quiet house. We're quiet in this house. No shouting, no cursing. Paul snores like an old man, but when he's curled up behind me, his arm where my pillow should be, his heartbeat is a lullaby. I drink coffee now, a little milk, and when it's warm I sit on the back stoop and watch the tomatoes grow. It won't be long until I turn these mornings over to a child, then two, then more. Those babies will always know I want them. No one should feel a chill at her mother's hand or wonder where her father sleeps at night. When Paul wakes, he'll come to the door, ask what I'm making for breakfast. There'll be a cigarette in his lips and sleep in his eyes. I sip my coffee and wait.

Notes on Feminism: Anna Looks Back

1976

Trust me—then and now—you can't hide  
from ugly. They never know the difference  
between gaslighting and lighting a lamp before dark.  
They only know *they* know better.

Our fear is like thick, dumb fingers  
on fine buttons, hope in the absence of light.  
What comes back? The beating heart  
of a rabbit, the bleating throat of a tender,

young goat. We eat what we can't protect;  
we protect what we can't survive.  
My memory is the last gold coin  
in a vault made of wild flowers and bone marrow.

My daughter keeps a goat now, gave it  
a name and a soft bed on the back porch.  
Her husband feeds it bits of apple  
and onion when he comes in from work,

finds her in the kitchen making supper.  
He grabs her by the hips and kisses her hard,  
and she believes that's better than what I had.  
Why? Because she likes to lie down beneath him,

likes the way his body pulses inside her?  
That's not enough. You keep your secrets  
like blades with wooden handles, you keep them  
no matter what. She won't listen. She speaks  
as if there's no harm in speaking.

When his granddaughter starts to show*Biagio, 1981*

he gives her a pair  
of cheap wedding bands,  
the same ones he'd bought  
forty years earlier.  
Fool's gold.  
He pats her belly,  
whispers: *Wear these  
when you don't want people  
asking questions.*

Inventory: Second-story Hall Closet*ANNA'S HOUSE, 1998*

Grandfather clock stilled at 3:17  
A dozen dinner plates  
Family bible (unopened since 1933)  
Two jugs of homemade wine  
One ball jar full of river water  
Six broken bones  
One stethoscope  
Corona typewriter, number eight missing  
One blue wool coat  
One pair of tap shoes, size 11  
A silver trumpet  
Five opened cans of shoe polish, black and brown  
A lock of blond hair  
A bracelet made of fish bones

Periwinkle

Cecelia, 1998

Your mother is a very old woman  
by the time you come to paint the kitchen.  
You wonder if you should tell her:  
*You look tired, Mama. Why don't you sit down?*

She has stopped plucking her eyebrows.  
Everywhere, paper towels and tinfoil  
wait, rinsed and ready to be reused.  
She has taped the edges for you, laid out  
trays, rollers, screwdriver. You pop the lid  
and find a blue like your father's eyes.

\*

Your father called you the day he died.  
His words were sticky, like wet grass.  
There were already too many voices,  
a basket you carried at your hip.

\*

For lunch, she serves wedding soup,  
salami, olives, lady fingers.  
Alabaster saints guard the windowsills.  
You pick paint chips from your hands  
while she asks if you've been to mass.  
If you could tell her one thing,  
you would say, *Prayer won't bring him back.*

\*

When she lies down  
for her afternoon nap, you go  
to the study, pull boxes  
from the closet. Photographs  
and letters familiar as your own  
reflection. You don't know  
what you're looking for, but believe  
she's keeping secrets, has always  
been keeping secrets. There's  
something in her that smells  
like shame. You believe  
it's your story she refuses to tell.

Interview In Which Anna Becomes a Solar Eclipse

1947

*Do you love him?*

I gave him a porcelain doll with my face on it.  
She closed her eyes when I tipped her head back,  
spiky black eyelashes drooping down over glass bulbs.  
On her back, I wrote, "Better to be choked in the ocean  
than be strangled by misery."

*Does he love you?*

He believes in resurrection but not salvation.  
A spider is only as fat as the flies  
that land in its web.

*Were you happy?*

We learned to jitterbug together.

*But were you happy?*

We never spoke of it.

*Do you miss him?*

My favorite time of year is just before spring,  
when there is no green, only the promise of green.

*What will you tell your daughter?*

There are coyotes in the city now.  
We used to keep chickens in the back yard,  
but one morning, I went out for eggs,  
and all I found were feathers.

## NOTES

“Newlyweds: A Cento”: Lines borrowed from John Ashbery, Jan Beatty, Mary Biddinger, Traci Brimhall, Eduardo C. Corral, Rita Dove, Leilani Hall, Tyehimba Jess, A. Van Jordan, Simone Muench, Aimee Nezhukumatathil, Craig Paulenich, Kathleen Rooney, Kevin Young.

“Kid Glove Holdup” All text lifted from *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*: July 20, 1947; October 31, 1947; November 1, 1947.

“Investigation” is after Annah Browning.

“Answer to Question 1: Anna,” and “Answer to Question 1: Cecelia” are after A. Van Jordan, *M-A-C-N-O-L-I-A*.

“Erasure” uses as its source a short story written by John “Biagio” Morelli while he was serving ten years in the Ohio State Penitentiary for armed robbery, circa 1947.

“Transcription: Biagio Tells the Story of Red Rider” is transcribed from a family recording made in 1945. The record cuts off abruptly after the question, “And what do you think happened?”

“Interview in Which Anna Becomes a Solar Eclipse” is after Traci Brimhall.

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