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

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

quickening 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.
Contrition

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

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 cassetta. 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.
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

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

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

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

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

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
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?
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.
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

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

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
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

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.
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

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.
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 gulley 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)

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

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

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.
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

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

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
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

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


“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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