

## [The Anna Fragments](#) [1]

March 7, 2016 [Featured Poetry](#) [2]

[Illness](#) [3]

### Hybrid Poetry by Elisabeth Weiss

Winner of the 2015 Talking Writing Prize for Hybrid Poetry



*What's madness but nobility of soul  
At odds with circumstance?*  
— Theodore Roethke

I drive over the Queensboro Bridge and follow my GPS  
until it lands in a spot I recognize:

**KINOT 1**  
**Reconstructing Anna**

a towering white-sepulchered building.

I pull to the curb and look up.

I remember her at the window, waving goodbye.

Anna in her flowered housedress.

Anna in her blue cardigan.

Anna's clear stockings rolled down.

Anna and her long, white hair wound up in a bun.

Anna larger than life,

her profile like a proud Indian warrior.

Anna not giving in.

None of us really knew her. How could we?

We didn't visit often. We couldn't. My

father hated driving on the Long Island Expressway on weekends because of the heavy traffic. After working as an attorney for the state all week, downtown

at Broadway and Chambers, he was often irritable and stressed when requests were made for his free time. My mother, trapped by her own phobia of driving over bridges,

couldn't or wouldn't drive off of Staten Island. She was particularly

afraid of the bridge's outer edge.

"If you love me," my mother often said when I was older and at the

wheel, "you will stay in the inner lane." And so I did.

There were many conversations we avoided back then. In place of truth

Anna bows her head and studies her nails, blackened, dried and cracked. How beautiful and strong they were once. Since moving to New York and leaving her family behind, the pushcarts and crowds in the streets wore Anna down. She began to panic in large buildings. Visiting the Flatiron, then the tallest building in New York City, she had to run out onto the street just to catch her breath.

In the Bronx butcher shop all the housewives pushed around her, screaming in Yiddish, "a *shmalta* chicken, a *shmalta* chicken," and she was horrified. "How incomprehensible," she thought, "and how uncivilized." After all, she was American born.

The New York Anna desired was full of glamor: Fifth Avenue's satin gowns, pearls and furs and pin-curl hair, ostrich plumes, Prohibition's speakeasies with the smoky, shadowy gaslight and tin ceilings reflecting the coppery warmth of an evening out without responsibilities. Anna, trained as a stenographer, first worked for Breittholz Brothers Furriers and then became the wife of the blue-eyed brother who was a travelling salesman. Paul joked and charmed the customers south of the Grand Concourse, all the way to the Everglades. He was on the road for many weeks while Anna was left alone. City life became a ritual of shared spaces: the elevators, the Oriental-carpeted lobbies, and the velvet chairs in long, dark hallways when it all began to close in on her and fold her into the box of an apartment they rented until she couldn't get out of bed.



*From Mosby's Medical Dictionary:*

**postpartum depression**

Etymology: L, post + partus +  
deprimere, to press down

an abnormal psychiatric condition that occurs after childbirth, typically from 3 days to 6 weeks after birth. It is characterized by symptoms that range from mild "postpartum blues" to an intense suicidal depressive psychosis. Severe postpartum depression occurs approximately once in every 2,000 to 3,000 pregnancies. The cause is not proved; neurochemical and psychologic influences have been implicated. Approximately one-third of patients are found to have had some degree of psychiatric abnormality predating the pregnancy. The disorder recurs in subsequent pregnancies in 25% of cases. Some women at risk for postpartum depression may be identified during the prenatal period: those who have made no preparations for the expected baby, expressed unrealistic plans for postpartum work or travel, or denied the reality of the responsibilities of parenthood. Depending on the severity of the disorder, psychoactive medication or psychiatric hospitalization may be necessary.

My mother must have  
felt powerless when she  
badgered my father for rides to  
Creedmoor. Only occasionally,  
he relented. What follows is  
Anna's story, a woman  
imprisoned and suppressed by  
her circumstances. It begins on  
October 1, 1927, one-and-a-half  
years after my mother was born.  
There was nothing in the  
records to suggest that my  
grandmother might have  
suffered from postpartum  
depression. There was no

**KINOT 2**

***Intake Creedmoor Division, Brooklyn State  
Hospital 10/01/27***

Holding her cordovan lizard pocketbook against her chest with an air of defiance and defensiveness, Anna proceeds to answer the questions in a small, pea-green painted office. She sits erect, haughty, on a high-back chair, her chestnut hair pulled into a swooping bun with a tortoiseshell clip. She is serious, determined, exasperated, waiting to get to the bottom of all this.

The transcriber sits to her right with a memo pad and takes shorthand, transcribing every word.

*How are you feeling today, Mrs. Breittholz?*

*Well, I feel a little bit more shaky than I did when I came here.*

*Tell me why you came.*

*Why I came here. They told me they were sending me to Central Islip for a rest. There was no way out of it. If I resisted, I would be taken by force.*

*Who told you that?*

*The nurses.*

*Where?*

*In Bellevue Hospital.*

Anna shifts her weight and crosses her nyloned legs. After the birth of her second daughter, her calves seem to have grown excessive and weighed down the flesh in her Spectator pumps. The birth progressed rapidly so the baby was born in the apartment, before Anna could shake Paul awake in the early morning hours of February 17<sup>th</sup>, 1926. Most women gave birth in hospitals without their husbands, often given a combination of morphine and scopolamine, which acted as a painkiller. The drugs took away a mother's memory of the event as a whole, while also taking away her self-control. Because of the loss of control, women were often tied to beds for not only their own safety but for the safety of the hospital staff. They made sure to use soft materials like lamb's wool that would not leave marks on the arms and legs of these women so their husbands wouldn't question hospital

research on it at the time. There  
was no name for it, and there  
was certainly no cure.

Only one visit to

Creedmoor stands out in my  
mind. Anna was allowed  
outside. We sat on a park  
bench together. I was wearing  
sunglasses that were plastic and  
dirty. I spit on the lens, and  
Anna told me to never do that,  
to only use soap and water and  
wipe them clean with a soft  
cloth or else they would scratch.  
Why have I held onto this piece  
of logical advice? It was the  
only time I remember her  
acknowledging me.

The more I read about

state mental health hospitals in the  
early 1900s, the more I learned that  
they began with good intentions.

There's this from the *Kingston Lounge* blog about  
Brooklyn:

"Queens's Creedmoor State Hospital (now Creedmoor  
Psychiatric Center) had its humble beginnings as the  
farm colony for Brooklyn State Hospital.... A prevailing  
theme in the treatments of the period was that fresh air,  
a rustic environment, and

practices.

Anna knew she was happy to be alone and  
alert during childbirth. She wasn't afraid. The baby  
came more easily than her first daughter. She  
reached down between her legs and guided the

*From "The Unfinished  
Promise of Willowbrook:  
Twenty-Five Years of  
Unnecessary Despair  
for New Yorkers Living  
with Mental Illnesses":*

In 1965, U.S. Senator  
Robert Kennedy visited  
the now-infamous  
Willowbrook School on  
Staten Island, unannounced. Afterward, he declared  
the "wards were less  
comfortable and cheerful  
than the cage in which  
we put animals in the zoo."

shoulders out,  
first the left and  
then the right.  
The baby was  
bloody and slick  
with white. But  
nothing hurt.  
Anna placed her  
baby daughter,  
with chord  
uncut, on her  
chest and  
covered her  
with a cloth  
warmed from

the oven like a challah on a Friday night.  
She sighed. The night was ceremonial, quiet.



overcrowding, inadequate sanitary facilities, and  
physical and sexual abuse of residents by members of  
the school's staff," according to the *Wikipedia* entry on

**KINOT 3**  
**People Have Tongues and Can Speak and Say**  
**Whatever They Like**

Willowbrook.

My grandmother was finally discharged from Creedmoor, though she was resistant to any attempts to place her in the community and said she would never leave the ward. Her release precipitated my mother's initial breakdown, which coincidentally had many eerie similarities to her own mother's psychotic delusions.

How is madness inherited?  
What are the fine lines that connect us? A few years back, my sister requested records from Creedmoor, but there was a problem. They would only be released to the next of kin. Since my mother was in an eighteen-year bipolar phase at the time, her sister Meriam signed the papers. The documents came to us. Concealed within was the voice of my grandmother, essentially silenced since 1926. We have come to know her only through these few transcribed interviews and doctor's reports. We have her Oriental rugs. We have her Limoges. But with her records, her words return her to us and give her a voice finally, which is loud though fragmentary.

\* \* \* \*

With Anna gone, Paul sent the girls to boarding school, then camp, then boarding school. It went on like this for years. My mother, too young to attend classes, drew pictures instead. She played with the big boys, who would tease her. Told she could be in the school play, she

I

Well, I have an apartment on the first floor and those boys have been throwing cherry pits into my windows again.  
It certainly doesn't make sense to clean the house and it isn't very pleasant to stay in the kitchen and have things thrown in at you.

That morning I got up with an awfully funny feeling that someone was choking me, and I said, "Oh, stop, stop!"  
And then all my nails turned black.  
Remember the nice nails I had, Dr. Smalley?

My mother's fingernails were thick and healthy and always long. She asked the manicurist to leave nail polish at the little half moons above her cuticles. When she held my hand, I would bring her hand to my mouth and bite her nails. "Stop it," she would exclaim. Later, I would do it again.

And those boys throwing cherry pits into my windows, do you think the mother put the children up to it to annoy me?  
Well, the way she answered, one would think so.  
I am certain about it, Dr. Smalley.  
Those boys played with wooden guns and shot rubber bands. *It's the newest craze. The mother's voice called: Come on, Stanley!*

II

The windows were open and people looked in and the housekeeping, I couldn't keep up with it. So, I folded my best clothes and linens into a trunk and let the rest go.  
I fell asleep with two stones in my hand.  
The superintendent entered. What did he expect to see?

I went down to the police station to complain about the boys and the cherry pits and the guns and the mother hollering, *Come on, Stanley!*  
And I wound up in Central Islip for a rest.  
*Come on, Stanley!*



One day, three furrier brothers  
left Poland. They left behind  
their mother, another brother,  
and two sisters. They arrived  
in a city so poor they had to  
share one suit. So, one  
brother worked in the day and  
wore the suit, and another  
brother worked in the night  
and wore the suit. The third  
brother stayed home.

There is another story. A letter  
arrived, marked only with Paul's  
name, the word "furrier," and  
"New York City." When he read  
it, he cried. He said, "They  
killed everyone in my town."

There is another story. Paul  
returned to Poland just once  
and saw his mother again. An  
enormous rock he remembered  
from childhood became a small  
one. How do we tell the story of  
what we cannot see? Of what  
we cannot know? Do we say,  
"I ran to my mother, and I  
sobbed, and she held me to her

**KINOT 4**  
**Ideas of Electricity**

When the pinpricks began I knew it was  
happening again.  
My blood was being sucked out and something  
foreign was being sucked in.  
There are markings on my stockings to prove it,  
look!  
There are enemies here I cannot name.

My husband is not my husband.  
An imposter is in his body.  
He sneaks out at night,  
confiscating the goods of other women.  
His eyes follow me through cornfields where dust  
storms  
make the whole world dark for days.  
Here in the hospital they shoot dope into me and  
call me a dirty Jew.  
The nurses have the audacity to wear my clothing,  
cut up and resewn.  
During the night they cut up and resew my body  
too  
with their long scissors and needles.  
All the parts don't fit together again  
which is why I am so tired and cannot move.

*For these things I weep*

*my innards burn*

*And my heart is faint*

*He dragged me from the path and mangled me and left me without  
help*

*They mock me in song all day long*

*What can I say for you?*

*With what can I compare you, daughter?*

*To what can I liken you, that I might comfort  
you?*

*I am in torment within*

*My heart is poured out on the ground*

*for I am in distress*

*my heart is turned within me*



Watching my parents sitting in the  
grass on a windy day eating an  
avocado. Happiness like that. *High  
moments. They go round and  
round in me.*

On parole, Anna packed the  
girls for camp, but it proved too  
fatiguing. She was left alone  
with them and locked the eldest  
out. She cooed to her infant  
that she was her only real baby  
and held her tight. Anna's own  
mother and sister once claimed  
responsibility for her, but she was  
always returned to Creedmoor  
within months.

\* \* \* \*

If you saw the nervous flick of  
my mother's heavy eyelids, if  
you saw her look away as you  
were speaking, you'd know how  
easily she could disappear, a  
wispy vapor. What happened in  
her beginning years inhabited  
the thick air around her. It made  
others nervous. Her intensity.  
Her shiver. Made her care for  
the neighbor's kids as her own,  
made her never raise her voice,  
made her a shelter to the lost,  
the vagrant, the disabled, the  
palsied, the lonely.

My mother's ashes inside a tin  
inside a square cardboard box  
inside my file drawer, waiting.  
My father wanted her to be

***From auschwitz.dk:***

But the Chiger family miraculously  
managed to escape the liquidation  
of the ghetto by hiding in stench  
and darkness in the sewage-filled

***KINOT 5  
Lakewood and Other Pleasure  
Resorts***

*To the same hotel to which we  
have referred there is a  
reading room where no one is  
permitted to utter a word.  
To a man seeking refuge from the  
"strife of tongues," such  
a place is heaven on earth. No  
hotel gossip-monger can  
reach him there. Not even his wife  
can talk to him.*

— ad for the  
Lakewood Resort, circa 1900

Steamship moguls and steel barons  
built  
Georgian mansions  
in the Gilded Age, in the pine belt of  
New Jersey  
seven miles from the Atlantic.  
I swim their pools with abandon and  
volley on  
their courts  
grace their lush gardens in my  
promenade  
take tea in luxury in my mink and  
pearls  
all the while my thoughts are a tilt a  
whirl, a  
carnival ride, an exhibit at a dime  
museum. The  
barker will call you in.  
Who, after all, is more worthy of this  
quality and  
charm  
than I, a Jew, who has been sent  
for respite in the  
country  
far from the clamor of the raised El  
and the glare of humanity?  
Ordered by doctors to rest,

with him. I met the shrouded  
body in the driveway outside  
the chapel. I opened the plain  
pine box. The tin jammed, then  
twisted open. A little wind blew  
up, and bits of my mother flew  
into the blueness of Fairview,  
New Jersey.

I still cannot bear to throw the tin  
of her away. What if there is one  
ash, one remnant, one speck of  
DNA? Some days, I want to lick  
the remainder of her, finish the  
whole of her, she who created  
my body, who cradled my body,  
who bled for me, she who sang  
and rocked and spoon fed the  
emptiness within her with all of us.

What is it like to grow up without  
a mother? A tree without leaves.  
A withering.

*Away, I become like you  
An empty boat, floating, adrift*  
—Tu  
Fu

\* \* \* \*

Paul gave up guardianship. He  
annulled the marriage and  
married Tanya. My mother  
never accepted the replacement.  
I have no idea how often she  
visited Anna. She graduated,  
became a bookkeeper for the  
furriers, then worked in Greenwich  
Village. She met my father on a  
blind date in an Italian restaurant  
up a few stairs. She had coffee.  
He ate a full meal.

She later told him he was half  
handsome. She was never  
good at settling.



sewers of Lvov for 14 months amid rats, filth, and the constant pounding of rushing water. When heavy rain fell, the water nearly reached the ceiling of the sewer and Krystyna and Pawelek's parents had to hold their children above the waterline so they could breathe. They had to pick off each day's lice and cope with dysentery.

in this quiet paradise  
where formerly only Christians were  
granted  
permission,  
I handle the teacups with dignity  
and grace;  
fine china, the delicate weaves of  
Turkey carpet,  
full-bodied wines.  
I have a second sense, a third eye.  
I feel the next world war brewing  
inside.  
Is it not the plight of an outsider  
to smell danger and go toward it  
as much as one knew, back in  
Europe, the ghetto  
boundaries  
could be circumvented through the  
sewers?

Paul moved to Florida, found another wife. "Rose, if I forget you," he told this one, "may my right hand wither." Years later, Paul found wandering the streets, unsure of where home was, taken to a nursing home, asked, "If this is my home, where is my key?"



*I'll take care of Daddy, and you  
take Mother.*

There was no dispute.

When New York State released Anna to community care in 1975, she was placed in the Vanderbilt Nursing Home in Staten Island at my mother's request. Anna, dying of breast cancer, refused surgery. She said she'd lived long enough.

### My Mother's Laughter

Her deep guttural laugh, head thrown back, delight.  
Openmouthed. Then the lilting, at first ladylike. A tremor begins, held a moment too long, a sound emits, low howl. She catches herself, regains control.

My mother began to slip.

### KINOT 6 Parole

*In view of the fact that her husband is in  
comfortable circumstances  
and can hire a maid to look after the patient,  
it is thought by the staff  
that she could be on parole.*

People move so slowly around me  
Are they underwater?  
Maybe I didn't eat enough  
of the right foods  
or didn't have enough to eat  
or didn't like the changes  
I didn't have a thought  
Always gossiping you know how  
neighbors are  
And the children, two rosebuds  
Handed off to me  
What was I to do with them?  
People entered the house and  
spoiled things  
And used all kinds of language  
I was waiting for someone to say,  
*Uh, she's dusting*

because there were spores. The shades remained down all day.  
People were looking in. The plumbing began to leak.  
Nothing was ever repaired.  
Showers were short. There was a bat on the curtain. The ceiling was Scotch-taped. The kitchen faucet exploded. Counters cracked. She followed people home from supermarkets. From the back, they looked exactly like someone she had loved.

Afterward, my father found her wandering in Concord, a neighborhood below our hill, with a box of old clothing. "Where are you going, Lydia?" he asked. A Lincoln in the drive. The door open. Keys fallen on linoleum. The dark hooves of my runaway heart.

In St Vincent's Psychiatric Center,



Nervous. Suspicious. Trying  
on guests' glasses and shoes.  
There was soap on everything.  
She scrubbed and scrubbed.  
Nothing came clean. She  
followed groups of cars over  
bridges. License plates meant  
something. She visited  
childhood friends, knocked on  
their doors, and asked to see  
their basements. No one was  
allowed to sit on the floor

*you*  
You know like when you're  
sweeping, a little dust  
will rise  
When the cherries started to come  
out  
When school let out, when the sun  
fell into the  
cracks  
When the children played outside  
again  
When the windows were open  
It all started again  
I packed the children's tiny  
pinafores and rompers  
How could I have not?  
When I said anything to him she  
said,  
*Stanley, come on now, don't mind  
her*

my mother swore all the novels  
in the day room were rewritten.  
*Because there's one thing left  
to do, and I won't do it,  
Elisabeth.*

All this time, Anna was behind  
her, breathing her breath.  
Holding her. Anna the icon,  
perfectly polished, placed on a  
metal pedestal. Mother. The  
harsh coldness of the word.



Two syllables. Guttural. Anna  
died in the summer of '76. Paul  
came to the funeral. He wanted  
to see her. *Verboten* in  
Judaism. I was there when they  
opened the casket. Her long  
gray hair spilled out. "This is  
not my Anna," he told us. I  
went off to college, leaving my  
mother shaky, bereft.

After school, after grad school,  
after a stable decade, after  
we all left home, after she found  
a dog wandering the streets  
with a rope wound tightly around  
his neck, after she stopped  
smoking and then started, and  
after we married and had  
children of our own, she took  
flight once more.

Her anger was a storm directed  
at my father. She walked out

## KINOT 7 The Living Museum

*Located in the grounds of Creedmoor  
Psychiatric Center, the Living  
Museum became a space where each  
participant could create art and  
develop a sense of ownership and foster  
their inherent creative talents  
in any sphere.*

Look how the art studio  
in the former dining hall  
bursts at the seams with joy:  
soup cauldrons  
filled with mannequin legs  
strait jackets hanging from rafters  
like flags from countries you'll  
never visit.

The world can't offer sympathy  
because most encounter  
such disorders on subway  
platforms  
and in movie theaters.

A Sunday phone conversation:

"Good thing you called  
because your mother's on  
the floor and can't get up."  
"Did you think of calling an  
ambulance?" I asked.  
"Nah, she's fine. I got her  
a bowl of cereal and a comb."

To the ER and out. Refusal.  
X-rays. Signing out against  
medical advice. Crawling on  
all fours from the taxi back into  
the house.

When we were admitted, we  
slept head to toe, until I shifted  
the wires that measured  
her vitals. In the early morning  
hours, I sprawled onto a  
makeshift bed between chairs.

In rehab, we got her back.

of everything. She ranted and  
pushed. She threw gold teeth.  
She would not sign documents,  
taxes. She kicked him out,  
piling furniture against her door.

And so the years went. Search  
and rescue. Dumbo Drop. Drive  
and scoop. Boston to New York.

Those people, my kind, were put  
away.

When Freud came to us in 1919  
with his Five Lectures, at Clark,  
suddenly there was meaning  
everywhere:

in the slip of the tongue,  
the dream, the shock.

Modern treatments followed:  
lobotomies, chemical straitjackets.

They weren't for me.

I was too old already,  
for the idealism of Andre Breton,  
Jean Dubuffet or Oppenheim.  
*Art Brut* thrived when I could not,  
gentle daughters.

What good can art do except  
remind you  
of all you cannot be?

***From Bolek Greczynski,  
founder of the Living  
Museum:***

In here, *nous sommes  
tous les indésirables*—  
we are all undesirables—  
but that is not our  
problem but yours, the  
spectator from outside.

I am trapped,  
bruised, kept, shakier each year.  
I am being erased.  
The lunatic in me  
doesn't care.  
I sign myself in.  
I'll never touch you again  
or come near.  
Brittle words of little use make an  
awkward flight  
from my mouth and go to pieces,  
two stones of my heart.

Ravenous, her loving us.

Released and returned. My  
father was in charge of evening  
pills. She tried to put them in  
his mouth. They pushed.  
Fought. She made her way to  
my house. In her suitcase: one  
bra, one pair of pajamas.



Dementia had set. We walked.  
We had her hair done, her nails.  
She followed me around the  
house. She forgot what room  
she lived in. She circled the  
date. She forgot how to read.  
She could no longer put  
together parts of things. We  
sang to her, her common refrain,  
"Whatever will be, will be."

## From Wikipedia:

**Female hysteria** was a once-common medical diagnosis, made exclusively in women, which is today no longer recognized by medical authorities as a medical disorder. Its diagnosis and treatment were routine for many hundreds of years in Western Europe. Hysteria of both genders was widely discussed in the medical literature of the nineteenth century. Women considered to have it exhibited a wide array of symptoms, including faintness, nervousness, sexual desire, insomnia, fluid retention, heaviness in the abdomen, muscle spasm, shortness of breath, irritability, loss of appetite for food or sex, and a "tendency to cause trouble." In extreme cases, the woman might be forced to enter an insane asylum or to undergo surgical hysterectomy.

## KINOT 8 Diagnosis

The delusional formation, impatient.  
Overproductive with ideas of  
reference  
and persecution, egotistical,  
expansive,  
poor judgment, impaired insight.  
She insisted she was humiliated  
and insulted  
for being among the other patients.  
Sullen, suspicious. At first obedient,  
but later,  
noisy and resistive.  
She became hysterical and  
peevish.  
Very opinionated. Not violent.

She sits by the window, shrugs her  
shoulders,  
spreads out her hands.  
She speaks freely with a somewhat  
affected and  
airy manner.  
Tidy and clean. She dresses well.  
Delusions of persecution, of people  
molesting her, injuring her,  
breaking into her house, gossiping  
about her  
and passing remarks.  
Auditory hallucinations, poor  
reasoning, childish  
egotism.

*Diagnosis: She has an obvious,  
undisclosed  
desire to be free of her husband.*

When she left, I wailed. I broke  
open the source of my origin.  
My connective tissues fractured,  
my voice was a voice neither  
sisters nor fathers could  
understand. I held, then let go  
of her hand.

## For Anna

All those footsteps on the seashore.  
The fishermen hauling their blue net in before  
dawn. You in the room upstairs, not sleeping. Who  
owns anything?  
Anna, I am watching such a cold sea.  
I cannot tell you.

Last year I thought I put you away but you kept  
reappearing,  
falling out of my cupboards instead of sugar,  
folding yourself into my linens until I thought for  
sure  
I would weep myself mad.

Now I let you stay.  
I feel your black breath  
move across the table.  
It is everywhere  
in this house we share.  
I make coffee enough for two  
so used to nights like this:  
listless, watching you unwind your hair. Why did  
you die all these years  
and never tell me?

*Fall 1976*



When I was small, there was a  
valley below. To the east was  
the ocean. The far edge was  
Sandy Hook, where my father  
went deep-sea fishing, which  
had something to do with the

## KINOT 9 Release

What happened to Anna was  
beyond her control.  
Postpartum psychosis sometimes

## From E. Fuller Torrey:

*Deinstitutionalization* is the name  
given to the policy of moving  
severely mentally ill people out of  
large state institutions and then

long boots hung in the washroom. And he was a giant, and she was a giant, and they inhabited the Earth long ago, when animals crawled on primordial bellies and ate berries from their hands, and pheasants flew from the deep thicket of oak behind the redwood house.

We are born without scars, perfectly molded heaps plucked from a coral bed of grief. We are missing teeth and feel like straw dolls in strong arms. We are born and born again through the years, and wind whips through the walls as if they were paper. Goodbye, water sprites, you ragged and unruly, you o husk of voice. Shush! Like the angel who from womb to womb teaches a baby the entire Torah before it's born, then touches between the upper lip and the nose so that all that was learned is forgotten. Only the slightest indentation that we were here at all.

develops out of postpartum depression or hits women who've had previous psychiatric problems.

Sometimes, as in Anna's case, it shows up out of the blue.

Psychiatrists aren't sure what causes such a sudden and powerful break with reality but they know that changing hormones and the stress of childbirth are involved.

Records for Anna between 1931 to 1966 do not exist.

On December 16, 1966, Anna's status was changed from "involuntary commitment" to "voluntary."

In 1973, she was released, unwillingly, to the Vanderbilt Nursing Home on Staten Island.

The records state: *Obese, hypertensive, a mass in left breast; she refuses all treatment.*

Anna lived another two years.

Her husband stopped visiting her after Family Picnic Day, 1931.

There were no other records of parole.

closing part or all of those institutions; it has been a major contributing factor to the mental illness crisis....

Deinstitutionalization began in 1955 with the widespread introduction of chlorpromazine, commonly known as Thorazine, the first effective antipsychotic medication, and received a major impetus 10 years later with the enactment of federal Medicaid and Medicare.

Deinstitutionalization has two parts: the moving of the severely mentally ill out of the state institutions, and the closing of part or all of those institutions... The magnitude of deinstitutionalization of the severely mentally ill qualifies it as one of the largest social experiments in American history.

*Deinstitutionalization was largely a failure. Drugs were used as a panacea. Funding often didn't reach the community level, and a percentage of the mentally ill became homeless or imprisoned.*



- **Theodore Roethke:** Lines from ["In a Dark Time."](#) [4] *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* (Doubleday, 1966).
- **Kinot 1 box:** Excerpt from ["History of the Jews in New York City."](#) [5] *Wikipedia*, February 2016.
- **Kinot 2:** *How are you feeling today, Mrs. Breitholz?* and other italicized lines are from the Creedmoor State Hospital patient records for Anna (author's personal collection).
- **Kinot 2 left and right columns:** Quote that begins "Queens's Creedmoor State had its humble beginnings" is from ["Creedmoor State Hospital, Building 25"](#) [6] by Richard Nickel, *The Kingston Lounge*, March 31, 2008.
- **Kinot 2 first box:** Definition is from *Mosby's Medical Dictionary*, eighth edition (Elsevier, 2008).
- **Kinot 2 second box:** Excerpt from ["Twilight Sleep."](#) [7] *Supported Birth* (supportedbirth.com) website.
- **Kinot 2 third box:** Based on reference to "Dementia Praecox" in *Oxford English Dictionary*.
- **Kinot 2 fourth box:** Excerpt from "The Unfinished Promise of Willowbrook: Twenty-Five Years of Unnecessary Despair for New Yorkers Living with Mental Illnesses," a policy paper by the Mental Health Association in New York State, 2002.
- **Kinot 2 and 3 columns:** Quote about Rivera's expose is from ["Willowbrook State School."](#) [8] *Wikipedia*, February 2016.
- **Kinot 3 box:** Text by the author.
- **Kinot 4 Biblical passages:** Excerpted and adapted from ["Lamentations 1-2."](#) [9] *The Complete Jewish Bible* on the *Chabad.org* website.
- **Kinot 5 Lakewood Resort ad:** The author recorded this ad text while doing research for "The Anna Fragments," but hasn't been able to track down the original reference.
- **Kinot 5 left column:** *High moments. They go round and round in me.* Lines are by Carl Sandburg from "High Moments" in *The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg* (Harcourt, 1970).
- **Kinot 5 right column:** Lines by Tu Fu are from "Written on the Wall at Chang's Hermitage," translated by David Hinton, in *The New Directions Anthology of Classical Chinese Poetry*, edited by Eliot Weinberger (New Directions, 2003).
- **Kinot 5 box:** Excerpt from ["A Miracle in the Sewers"](#) [10] about the Chiger family in the Lvov ghetto on the *Holocaust* (auschwitz.dk) website.
- **Kinot 6 opening:** From the Creedmoor State Hospital patient records for Anna (author's personal collection).
- **Kinot 6 box:** Text by the author.
- **Kinot 7 opening and box:** Excerpts from *White Sale, Revolution Denied: From the Living Museum at Creedmoor Psychiatric Center* by Bolek Greczynski, October 29-December 1, 1990, Amelie A. Wallace Gallery, State University of New York/College at Old Westbury (The Gallery, 1990).
- **Kinot 8:** The italicized "Diagnosis" line is from the Creedmoor State Hospital patient records for Anna (author's personal collection).
- **Kinot 8 first box:** Excerpt from ["Female Hysteria."](#) [11] *Wikipedia*, February 2016.
- **Kinot 8 second box:** "For Anna," unpublished poem by the author, 1976.
- **Kinot 9 box:** Excerpt from *Out of the Shadows: Confronting America's Mental Illness Crisis* by E. Fuller Torrey (John Wiley & Sons, 1997), reprinted on the PBS "Frontline" website under ["Deinstitutionalization: A Psychiatric Titanic."](#) [12] Italicized commentary by the author.

## Art Information

- ["album80004"](#) [13] © Janel; Creative Commons license.

Elisabeth Weiss teaches writing at Salem State University in Salem, Massachusetts. She's taught poetry in preschools, prisons, and nursing homes, as well as to the intellectually disabled.

Her poems have appeared in many journals including *London's Poetry Review*, *Porch*, *Crazyhorse*, *Ibbetson Street Review*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Muddy River Poetry Review*, and *Paterson Literary Review*. Her chapbook, *The Caretaker's Lament*, was published by Finishing Line Press. For more information, visit [Elisabeth Weiss's website](#). [14]

On the hybrid nature of her piece, Weiss says:

'The Anna Fragments' began as a nine-part poem. It deals with how my grandmother's life was shaped by her times. I added the preface as sidebar commentary and then added further definitions and explanations to enlarge and expand her story. The text resembles a page of the Talmud, which is how learned rabbis argued texts across centuries. Last summer at the Millay Colony in Austerlitz, New York, I completed the narrative by extending it to women in the following two generations. The combination of research, poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction mirrors Anna's schizophrenic world, but I also hope it gives voice, in many different ways, to a woman who was silenced.

**Source URL:** <https://talkingwriting.com/anna-fragments>

### Links:

- [1] <https://talkingwriting.com/anna-fragments>
- [2] <https://talkingwriting.com/talkingwriting-categories/featured-poetry>
- [3] <https://talkingwriting.com/tw-issue-themes/mental-illness>
- [4] <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172120>
- [5] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_the\\_Jews\\_in\\_New\\_York\\_City](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_New_York_City)
- [6] <http://kingstonlounge.blogspot.com/2008/03/creedmoor-state-hospital-building-25.html>
- [7] <http://www.supportedbirth.com/articles/twilight-sleep-childbirth-history>
- [8] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willowbrook\\_State\\_School](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willowbrook_State_School)
- [9] [http://www.chabad.org/library/bible\\_cdo/aid/16457/jewish/Chapter-1.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/16457/jewish/Chapter-1.htm)
- [10] <http://www.auschwitz.dk/Chiger.htm>
- [11] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Female\\_hysteria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Female_hysteria)
- [12] <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/asylums/special/excerpt.html>
- [13] <https://www.flickr.com/photos/tillmanns/109047920/in/photolist-aCU9y-aCPHW-aCU6u-aCUWg-FZ5T5-aCXL5-6UJ6xs-6vSvb1-5hrYb5-4yyp3p-pQsn5-4jpYBe-7wrEPj-6ytWkK-ayibJ-6SCUGw-agwBtY-6F9cfj-6vKiDv-6vNj4c-6F9drA-6vKiHF-qDK3xH-6F4YJe-6F8oE5-6vKiKM-6vPuTy-6Vj4Xq-6vPuKG-6vKizt-728M2q-6vKiyR-5EVVuT-6F5574-2UTVhB-2UZiEh-2V1wG1-2UXBUw-2VM3as-2UVRzn-2VHQxZ-2VFDVx-2Vfwi2-2UXKDC-6vPuZG-6vNmNB-6F5586-6vPuLY-6vPvcw-6Fp64y>
- [14] <http://www.elisabethaweiss.com/>