brief history of girl as match / kristy bowen
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open letter to the muse

Dear alphabet. Dear spark.

My head is dull like a shell with the ocean in it. When you left me in the restaurant, I scoured the dictionary for days. Kissed men until my teeth hurt. Craved margaritas and the salt on the back of your neck. O my barbwire. My broken key. When you went south wearing my blackest dress, I looked in every hotel room from here to Knoxville. Cried in the shower. Found you puking in the backseat and mumbling about metaphor. On good days, you’re a mad scientist. On bad, a vain girl with a scalpel. I put out a glass of wine to trap you. Line the drawers with sawdust. You hide my clothes and threaten to riot. Play gin rummy with the neighbors, throw record players out windows. On good days, I can get you to lie on the floor while I chant Light as a feather, stiff as a board.

Light as a feather, stiff as a board.

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language theory

You say nice and I hear knives.
We take precautions:
A taxi, a pregnancy test.
I am mistaken for a shovel.
A calla lily in my ruined dress.
A brunette. A barn fire.

There is a telephone
where my hands should be.
A dictionary in my ribs.

Soon, the scene where I succumb
to vertigo. Influenza.
In which I lean into.
Out of. Over.

brief history of girl as match

In the blue house, we are
coat rack and clutter.
Safety pins and antibiotic ointment.
Prone to night sweats and inflourescence.
The frayed ends of power cords.

I dismantle the piano first,
the back storm door.
Am obsessed with simple machines,
giddy with typewriters and transmissions.
Air conditioners. Electric mixers.

Can go for days like this sometimes,
smelling like lemons and diesel.
Dress made of paper,
I burn like nothing you've seen.
notes to self on the female body

1. girls who like to be tied up make terrible feminists. Also Mailer.

2. When dancing, do an awkward shuffle to the left, then vague hand movements resembling the mating sway of swans. When he dips you, meet the eyes of other men indifferently. Hold, then release.

3. dishabille: adjective. 1.a. archaic : negligee. b: the state of being dressed in a casual or careless style 2: a deliberately careless or casual manner.

4. French doors do not, under most circumstances, induce the female orgasm.

5. ligature: noun. 1: a something that is used to bind; specifically : a filament (as a thread) used in surgery b: something that unites or connects 2: the action of binding or tying

6. Also thigh highs. Soap operas.

pink test

If I stay perfectly still, you can make out the hairline cracks in my story, the bit of salt in the cake.

The lovers in the kitchen. Their lovers. The mother I keep, gasping in her clamshell box. Deluge. Denoument.

I was trying to be provocative when it all came undone. The volcano. The fat babies waiting.

Did you know I have perfectly symmetrical features? This heart wooded and populated by an obscene number of rabbits I’ve been giving up to the dark one by one. Did you know my tongue is a canceled stamp? That I love the tether, the fasten, like a fiend?
autobiography

In which I play the coquette. The vixen.
In which I am carnalian, carnal. All carnage all the time.
In which I am curator to a museum of clarinets.
In which I wear a red coat and lipstick that screams murder.
In which I am corrupted by janitors and Jesuits.
In which I am a porn star. A tiara on top of a cake.
In which my father is a butcher. A soap maker.
In which I am Anne Boleyn or a B-movie bride.
In which my hands are like a box with two birds.

dimestore operetta

Say I’m the girl in the yard,
holding her shoes. Holding
her arm, her papers and rain.
Dolled-up, doe eyed,
doled out. In the house,
a riddle, a rattle, a clutter
of cutlery. An aviary.
Where I’m bedeviled,
bewildered, beheaded.
My white-hot, white dress.
My open-ended, open all night.
bossa nova for the new bride

Sometimes, even the octaves are dangerous. 
Notes just low enough to set you spinning, 

A barbed question mark at the base of your spine. All kitch and dangling hooks. 

In the kitchen, the amnesiacs will be beautiful. 
Even the suicides, beautiful. 

You were waiting in your plastic coat for the bright yellow dresses, feet together like a girl in a movie. O, the space you took up unbearable. Crossing out the names with a felt-tipped pen. 
Breeding canaries in the bureau and lusting after broken things. 
All that splitting and sewing. 

All that blood just waiting to happen.

poem without birds or mothers

Allow even one and soon the house is full of them. Finches in the kitchen, doves in the oven. A canary perched atop the curtains where I mistook the light for a blur of silver spangles. An altar where I knelt inside you for weeks. 
After all, I’m a fool for a good scandal, a potboiler caper. Am a sucker for whiskey and the broken screen door of your spine. Freckled, I pull the sutures from my thumb, confuse the radio with a fire alarm. 
Was always reading the wrong books anyway leaving the pies half-eaten in the pantry and making radishes into rosettes. Beside myself with fits, flirting with bag boys and dreaming of plane crashes. Counting backwards in elevators to stop the vertigo. One sparrow and my ears give way to falling.
fictions

All things considered, I’m an excellent liar, throwing out my tongue like a rope, like a path, leading you back through houses without doors, the windows without latches. Maybe my mother in a dream went over a white rickety fence and ruined me. Wouldn’t come home though we cried and placed our shoes one by one beneath the bed. Or stayed, but flushed hamsters down toilets, threatened to open the doors of speeding cars. Once screamed she’d swallowed enough aspirin to kill her and wouldn’t we miss her when she gone. Shook the alphabet from us, gave us the hots for dead languages and spooks. Coaxed us til we could pull stories from beneath rabbits easy like cake. Easy as scissors through hair.

Could lick sugar off the table and smile.

systems

On Thursday, I wear a red ribbon around my throat and am capable of the most serious damage. Wash my hair with beer and make paperclip chains while he fucks someone else. A Katherine, whose name means torture. Who hangs out in wine bars and yoga studios and calls at 3am. Her syllables clicking like a bicycle tire, a pack of cards.

Arielle, whose name means lion of god, says to write messy poems. You know you’re there when the poem really makes you worry. I worry over car wrecks and falling in the shower. Crying on buses and wearing bad shoes.

I try to write a poem I wouldn’t want to sleep with. Would kick to the curb, wrap my thumbs around her slender neck and snap. This one’s still babied, blinking, wondering if it wants to be a skirt or a tire iron. Licking the perimeter of opened envelopes for a tiny bit of sweet. My nouns go awry every time I stop paying attention. Fall pretty like dimes on the sidewalk. My friend Melissa, whose name means bee-like, has a theory about systems. For every change in variable, the outcome shifts toward constant decay.
animal math

O my softened, my plastic Mary.
My halved, my dirty fruit.

This sea beneath my tongue
like a pearl, a swirling shimmer.
My limbs Atlantic, prettified.

O the tilted, the stilled,
my scaled and dangerous.
My lilt, my room
with a thousand wings.

One swan, two swans.
My confess, confess.

Kristy Bowen lives in Chicago, where she edits the online litzine wicked alice and runs dancing girl press, devoted to publishing chapbooks by women poets. She is the author of the fever almanac (Ghost Road Press, 2006) and feign (New Michigan Press, 2007), as well as several other handmade chapbooks. Her second full-length project, in the bird museum, is due out from Dusie Press late this year.