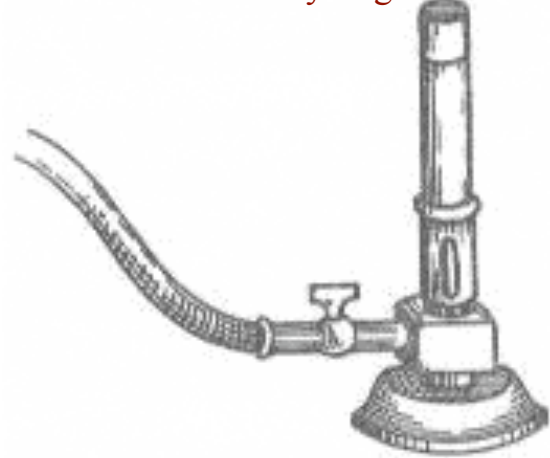


brief history of girl as match / kristy bowen



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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. dishabile: 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. Denouement.

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 carnelian, 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.

## fiction

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.