

the science of impossible objects

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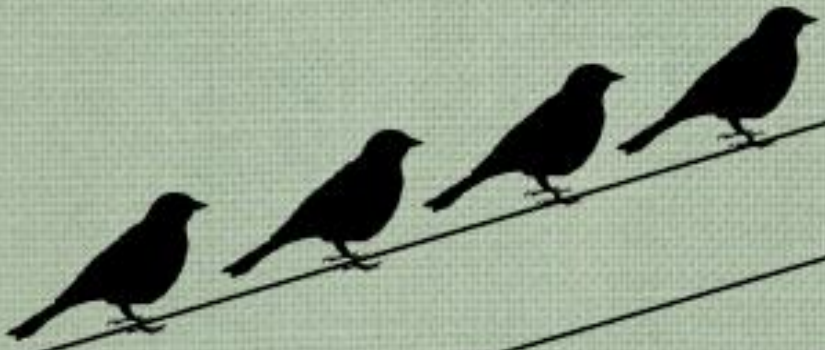
Kristy Bowen

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dear imaginary daughter—

There is no heat of you moving beneath my skin, no heartbeat knocking the inner machinery. But the halogens have been flickering for weeks, bees in all the sockets. Honey in all the spaces no one has licked. Even at night, my fingers grow slick with figs, my rabbit purse fallen open on the bed. Lewdly, sticking my fingers where they don't belong. Boredom is a tangible thing, heavy, like a bed or a suitcase we've tossed everything into that wasn't on fire. Downstate, I keep wearing shoes that blister my heels, the water rising to the surface where anything rubs too hard or just hard enough. It was always like this, sunburned, each summer, my hair going green at the bottom of the pool. The heat chafing my inner thighs. A mess of biology and awkwardness. But listen to them when they say the trauma of previous generations exists in your infrastructure. Drunk grandmothers and slutty aunts. The twin you may or may not have eaten in the womb stalking you from the other side of the door.



dear imaginary daughter—

When you're born, we both go pink with light. Dream dark and sparkling and full of stars. I try to keep you safe in the box of my body, but you escape. Skate the backyards, play *Sweet Mary Mack* with neighborhood kids, but still your eyes go black with neglect. Amazingly, you still marvel at my ability to hide twilight under the hem of my skirt. We make a game of it, here then gone, then here again. This body so heavy, like a cold, dead moon. On my knees in the coat check room, there was so much blood. We made an ocean of it. As if *ocean* were a verb, we *oceaned* into being. You make crashing noises with your mouth while they sort out the carnage. A life dividing again and again, shooting off in all directions.

dear imaginary daughter—

Sometimes you appear from nowhere, clutching blanket and doll, like an unfinished project. Something conceived, and then promptly forgotten. You appear suddenly in the corner of my apartment, thinner than you should be, but still glowing slightly blue. Sometimes, you have a sister, an infant, legs kicking off sparks, squalling on the ottoman. Both of you inconsolable. Somehow the product of all the men I fucked to get over just the one. How I sometimes played fast and loose with the whole birth control thing, rutting in the office of the sandwich shop, the back room of an insurance agency. The man I slept with all summer for his air conditioning in Bridgeport, our long rides north in the dead of night. Sometimes, you have to call it what it is, blind luck, that what tethers the body never took. Never shook itself free of the tree.



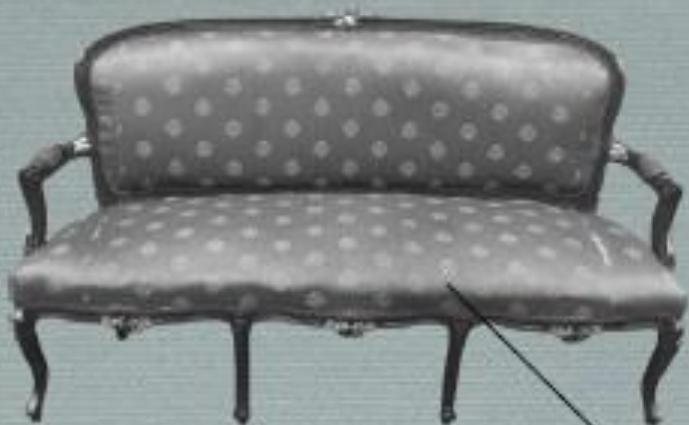


dear imaginary daughter—

It's so very American of you to blame your father. To blame the forest for the tree. The roots for their slow decay. You empty your mouth like a box of toys. Nothing there, and then everything. Filled with moonlight and knives. So very precise of you to make a game of it. So Midwestern. You get that from me, my obscene love of algorithms and ghosts. You say the world is always sloping toward you, or worse, sloping away. In the grass, you lay out your tools. Take your typewriter in the bathtub. Oversleep and burn your eggs daily. There's a photo of you in the middle of someone's backyard birthday party, antlers perched atop your head. The Barbie cake was so big it swallowed us all.

dear imaginary daughter—

Sometimes that other life flickers at the edges. The imaginary house. The imaginary husband and his imaginary unhappiness. Sometimes it aches like a phantom limb, a broken bone that refused to set. You keep a dozen plastic horses in your bedside table and all night, they keep you awake with their gallop. There are approximately 200+ bones in the human body, and how do we know if we've checked every one. How to know with certainty our soundness. It rains or snows, shit happens. Children die in swimming pools or car accidents. Kidnapped at the mall. All the choices we make, completely arbitrary and random as birdsong, headlong into our own little disasters. And you, with your trapeze there in the wind, flying above the trees. Scared of nothing, slinging your body into the air and singing.



dear imaginary daughter—

If you lie perfectly still in the dark, we can pretend we're twins. Your breathing full of goldenrod and river rocks. The black dog curled on our stomachs the same black dog, the same sharp teeth. Morning starves us from the cabinet where we sleep, side by side, holding our breath. In our mouths, the same cavities, the same configuration of bicuspid teeth that ache with spring. The same madresses, buzzing in our throats. Truth is, I never liked children all that much, but you and me, we're like *this*. Which is to say, like peas in a storm, a port in a pod. You think it and I say it. I think it and you keep throwing sticks at it, hoping it will burn. If you lie perfectly still, no one can tell us apart except for the tiny dolls you keep between the mattress and the box spring. How they call you *Mama* and *Mary* and stalk the fences looking for wolves. They frighten me with their bleeding. Morning screams like a teakettle.

dear imaginary daughter—

When you're born, I name you *Mary*. Then *Mona*, then *Marni* with an *i*. Your crib slowly fills with names, cast off like shoes. I help you shimmy into *Melissa*, but it never quite fits. *Michelle* and *Miranda* as out of date as slouchy ankle boots. Tired of all those *em* sounds lulling you to sleep, we try for something that sounds more like breaking---*Kate*, *Katrina*, *Kimberli* with an *i*. *Krista* sounds like stained glass shattering, but it somehow suits you. That is, until I picture you name-tagged in the Rite-Aid crying over \$2 toothpaste. Someone tells me the more syllables the name, the better the prospects. Women named *Clarissa* and *Cynthia* grow up riding ponies, settle into cashmere-lined husbands. *Carolyn*, *Charlene*, *Cheryl* and you go limp as a towel on the line. I prop you back up and call you *Cassandra*, but we all know how that turns out.



dear imaginary daughter—

Sometimes, I erase you in increments. Hands first, then knees. After I've abolished your mouth, I start in with your hair. Admittedly, I was a dishwater blonde in a family of respectable brunettes. Drunks on the street always find me, sidle up to whisper in my ear. Today, your eyes are bright and cruel as the lake I rescued you from, small boats glinting on the horizon. Your eyes, you roll them endlessly. Tell me I put too many boats in my poems. But I like the sound of it --B-O-A-T--and the way it pushes itself between my lips. Falls on the paper and floats. Besides, its summer, and the neighbors are always fucking or fighting. You grow bored with my indecision. My pen is running out of ink. I draw you some legs, modeling the musculature of a calf. They're exquisite, but too thin to hold you. I tell you there's a boat that looks like a swan in the park. Your flimsy wings flutter and fall.

dear imaginary daughter—

I can't keep a blender working without breaking it, but oh, how your anger astounds me. At five, you live in the space between the coffee table and the floor, reciting Shakespeare and smashing all my plates. At intervals, balancing every dish in the apartment on your head and plummeting down the stairs. It's scary, how much you wander, for your age, gone down to the docks hunting shiny objects to fashion into weapons. Every fake rolex a noose to strangle some loathsome doll who has it coming. Morning, and you trash every lightbulb. Some chubby Susie on trial for embezzling tiny bottles filled with imaginary milk. Some Ken doll done Barbie wrong. The stuffed rabbits prodded, witnesses to the carnage. The creamer sours and I burn the toast to black. You fill my cup with imaginary tea while I lean toward the spoon you've held to my throat.





dear imaginary daughter—

The man you call *father* was a fireman, a farmer, a pharmaceutical salesman. We blinked fast and you were conceived in an avocado, fully formed, all tequila and open sky. At night, I'd take off my skin, put it back on. Pull the shades while he flipped through the remote looking for porn. So it went like this for a decade or more, all of our closets emptied of their bodies. Full-frontal. Everything burning all the time. Even the pets, a sizzle of white fur or black tail. Everything good until the neighborhood children grew restless at night, took to foraging for oranges in our fridge, Started the rumor of a baby made entirely of bread. He was dead by then, your father, replaced by a bartender, a bookbinder, a beautiful wretch. At night, we'd take you out and roll you back and forth on the floor until you couldn't stop laughing.

dear imaginary daughter—

By eleven, you tell the very best ghost stories. Like the one with the woman, green ribbon round her throat and her head come clean off. . Or the one about the girl whose lips were made of prickly thorns. You're a little sickly sometimes, but all good storytellers throw their whole body into the tale, fainting on the kitchen floor and faking suicide in the shower. Your mysterious disease gets us free breakfasts at IHOP and the occasional shoplifted nail polish. You are particular about distinguishing between house ghosts and everyday object ghosts and your favorite, the garden ghost, who leaves a trail of honeysuckle in her wake. But worse, the machinery ghosts, who are responsible for broken microwaves and jammed printers. For busted hairdryers and the odd plane crash. You are being dramatic again, and I lure you off the roof with sugar cubes and milk, your favorite meal, to tell me about the ghost who circles every letter in red marker to spell out *d-i-e*.



dear imaginary daughter—

You are heavier than you look. Constructed of bone and air, you hook your fingers into the soft parts of my neck. Ride shotgun over landscapes filled with rusted out cars and rotting trees. In the beginning, you were small enough to keep inside my totem bag, but now you want more. Warring with strangers on the internet, riding roughshod over dreams filled with other feral children, setting fires and fucking up machinery. In the museum, you keep rescuing the poor taxidermied animals and bringing them home. The living room fills with patchy leopards and moth-eaten zebras. There's a box of beetles under my bed. A cache of dead birds in the fridge. They sing at night the way all dead things do, like their lives depend on it.

## Acknowledgements

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