

# GIRL KING

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# GIRL KING

BRITTANY CAVALLARO



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*for my parents*





## The Girl in Question

What the girl goes through to get here—thickets, coverlets, the half-built halls of this manor and its elegant, crumbling drawbridges, the tease of the moat beneath. She stops at its banks. Her frock is on wrong but she can't help herself, and what's below knows her, knows her buttoning hands. *Hello* she says back to the water *you wouldn't let me float would you?* but the moat would like her to unroll the grass on the other side, to fasten it shut like skin over a sore. She hesitates. Behind her the chanting. She knows there is a boy in the wood who has dropped to his knees and drawn a circle and is saying each of her secret names. *Susanna* he says *Silent Dog* and *White Scarf* and she tightens hers to hear her pulse. *Mend my wrapping coat* he says *I am so cold.* The water begs, the boy begs her and she could pull a girl from the storm cellar, a twin, tornado-legged and frozen, from her hiding-place in the icebox, the place she learned her breath's real shape, a twin from the shaved-grass garden. She could teach them how to mend, to wait for the final girl on the road, the one who will not answer. How to wait for the answer. How to tell them apart.



# Girl-King



## Points of Issue

*Errors or peculiarities in a book that help to differentiate it from other editions.*

No one else's marginalia inside. An unbroken spine and a pliable binding. No one else's marginalia

unless it was penciled into her first pages then thoroughly erased. No ellipses but in the last chapters

and then only in soliloquy. No strands of hair in the meadow chapter, nothing ripped out

in the two after that. And halfway—a blank page, and a scrawl and dash from the girl. The final story

of the back garden and her coiled braids and the dappled grey you kept too long.

The harmonica on the dashboard and the girl who taught you your scales. And the book

you were always reading, the pulled-off, pockmarked cover, the weight. The night

you left it in the truck bed and in the morning its swollen pages. The girl reading

your father's Wordsworth, the scrolling clouds in the meadow, your hands steady

on her heaving chest. The final story  
of the back garden and the coiled girl

telling you *no*. The pages after that.

## Bildungsroman

Her ripped red frock  
on the wet lawn, her inside  
it. She knew years had passed  
since the woolly caterpillars.  
Her mother's lips still the color  
of the yew berries that could not  
be eaten in threes & then there  
was the boy who wanted if only  
she missed with her cherry  
bombs. She went to the copse  
behind her house, it had arms.  
She was her dress. And then  
there was the dog & the dog  
understood. He hated the bow  
holding his neck together, he knew  
the clawed halls of her own. So  
he fed her crabapples, mashed  
them soft with his mouth & when  
she could talk again he doctored  
her with the under-sink chemicals,  
nosed the cabinet door open—  
she happily sucked their nozzles,  
pumped their levers, she gained  
strength, her mouth opened  
& closed now, if slowly. He took  
her to the party with the polio  
children, she daintily licked each  
of their half-eaten cakes when  
proffered by his black paw. Then

her arms! She shoved her stuffed  
animals against the wall  
& demanded alibis, the dog said  
*for their own sakes*, he slammed  
his head's black gavel against hers  
& declared everyone innocent  
of every crime. She was overcome.  
The dog crawled under the porch  
& she dragged her small body  
along. She mulched herself in  
with the dog gone flimsy & wet,  
she ate from his warm belly to help  
with the growing. She grew.



## Magician's Girl

You'll know when. My gossamer singlet flushes  
to its ends in fire. The black hats, too, begin  
to hate you. One wrong word & their brims curl  
to reveal knives. By Thursday, the floor translates  
your foot-falls as Morse code. At your step,  
the oubliette opens. Another narrow not-death  
& the curtains become girls again. They leave  
you again. They don't love you like Mother does,  
bound to the velvet board, febrile Mother willing  
your water-tank, your white-gloved touch,  
the part of her night where she is finally a half  
of you. Despite the involvement of blades. Despite  
my holding-down hands. She knows  
about your knob-kneed bedmates, their soft  
white hair. Girls lost in the long warren  
of your arms. Big-toothed girls, girls who disappear  
& disappear. You blame yourself. Why? You  
don't know that what you do in the dark  
of your room—I do it too? Watch closely. Here  
are my man's hands. Here is my girl's mouth, speaking—

## Lies I Told

I never made my living  
on the phone. I didn't see you,  
I'm sorry. Maybe the cold  
rain, or the nighttime. Anyway,  
gin is my favorite. Your house  
is fine; I always walk two miles  
to work and I'd love to see  
your succulents. Of course  
I never wore your Arran sweater  
while I stirred the red sauce. I always  
washed my hands. I washed  
my sheets, between, and when  
they were red, I'd made it up  
that morning. When I laid late  
in bed, I was reading, the book  
of course Russian. I wore the lace,  
the piece you talk about. I didn't  
tear it on purpose. Your dog  
seemed to like the hot backseat,  
lying in the sun that way  
like a lover. I never loved anyone  
before I loved you. The far end  
is the shallow one, I promise,  
I came here as a child.  
I'll never need another father.  
I clapped for you, afterward,  
but the banquet hall was so familiar  
and you were so familiar, up there,  
and I was so happy.

## Postcard from Perugia, Post-Wedding

I told my mother everything  
I'd had. About the ashes.

About the last hotel. The towels  
suspended from their bars, black-

streaked from my eyes. The flies  
that follow us, waiting. Balconies

where he hangs to test his grip. For  
me. My swallowed key. Beloved

throwing a blow-out sale before  
closing. Those of us surviving on

just one name. The last time I put  
my own to paper. If elopement

implies bride as white rabbit, these streets  
teem with top hats. But she knows

all this. I was born here, you know.

## The Virgin Disambiguates

Today, a test to identify my bones, the door  
to your room swung shut. Don't say  
anything with your mouth. Try this: before

words, a lettered spine, one language ancient, more  
aware than you of what *body* means. Today  
a mouse, unboned, blacked like rot beneath our door,

a dirty coin. You argue like a Tudor  
scholar—for the right to touch, you play  
upon *compliant* and *complaint*. Before

you ask, Marvell's mistress sent no letters, pored  
instead over her own anatomy. O gray  
mouse, I disjoint. My body, a dark fillet under your door.

Bone saws can't cut through tongue. Ignore  
this blinding white of alphabet, letters on my slate-  
cold body, my mouth a harmless cocktail. *Bar the door,*  
*Maria*, this door of new-grown bones.