


5-2022

## Kaboom

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Kaboom

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

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University of Arkansas  
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2017

May 2022  
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## **Abstract**

This document is a collection of original poems written between Fall 2018 and Spring 2022.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to my family, especially my parents, who have always encouraged me to be a writer.

Thank you to all the members of my cohort who made the past 4 years so enjoyable.

Thank you to Davis McCombs for being a wonderful thesis director and a source of calm amidst the uncertainty of the past few years. Thank you to Geoffrey Davis and Padma Viswanathan for being on my committee and for all the ways you have encouraged me and believed in me throughout my time in the MFA program.

Thank you to my partner, Aaron, for being a great reader of my work and the best person to share an office with.

Thank you to baby Daisy for keeping me company on long nights of revision and writing—even if that company was swift kicks to the ribs.

## **Dedication**

*For Josiah*

## Epigraph

“I am living. I remember you.”

—Marie Howe

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## I. Faith Healing

*White River*

On a viscous day in mid-  
July, you draw  
us through woody vines  
& we see the White River  
just beyond the trees—  
little turquoise currents  
slosh & slosh the rocks  
& I pretend it's a miniature  
Pacific. Can I show you  
how to let river rush over  
your head—let current borrow  
you for a moment—what it feels  
like to delicately drown? You say  
I would end up in Mississippi,  
propped up on the sand, mouth  
full of baby bluegill. Will you  
meet me there? Lover, fall  
asleep on the limestone with  
my lips against your dewy  
shoulder—just the water's  
flux & bald cypresses slouching  
& the tide's tempo spilling  
into your ears. Remember  
me this way—our bodies pressing  
together  
no space between  
us

*Resurrection*

At Aunt Ruth's burial, we gather  
round as bulldozer lowers box  
into pit and pastor says *this is just  
a body, this is just a box*. We take  
turns heaping dirt into pit  
and wonder how long  
her flesh will wait for God  
to un-do our doing and  
our digging—fling 7 feet  
of clay, make maggots give  
back what they took.

*The Deer*

In a dream, I stand eye to eye  
with the deer who killed

my cousin. We're under a lemon tree.  
It's hot. Behind us—traffic speeds

by. An occasional horn. Little deer,  
when will you come back for me?

Will you let me press a finger into your spots—  
feel for the part of you that runs with your eyes

closed? She spits out a lemon. It halves  
in the dirt. Inside it—a small gun.

She wants me to kill her. I want to kill  
her, too. The white of her neck shimmers

in the sun. I aim for her skull. The gun  
shoots out lemon seeds. The deer darts

into traffic. Straight for a Subaru.  
Run, little deer, run run.

*At Youth Group*

They tell me to close my eyes and think  
about the night I lost my virginity—

only this time, Jesus is in the room.  
He's standing in the corner next

to my nightstand. I'm having  
sex with Matt and it only hurts

a little and I'm trying not to make  
it weird. We avoid looking at Jesus

as he takes a kitchen sponge and presses  
it to his hand until it's soaked in blood.

He scrubs our sinning bodies until  
we're crimson and the sheets

are red and red is oozing into  
the floorboards. My youth pastor

whispers, *is it working?* Blood fills  
Matt's eyes. Jesus wrings out his sponge.

*The Faith Healer*

After the sermon, people lined up to get prayed for. They fell to the floor when he touched them. I was open to falling. When it was my turn, he stared at me with his brown eyes and mumbled a prayer in Spanish. I stood above a sea of fallen bodies, wondering if I should join them. The church ladies covered them in blankets. I lay down next to an old woman, hoping she would teach me how to rest, teach me how to believe in something so much that you'll lie down on the dirty carpet for it, not worrying about the roads turning to ice outside or whether they have switched off the lights in the sanctuary to get people to leave or whether, after a while, the faith healer has gone out to his car and this woman and I are alone, inhaling the last bits of magic burrowed into the floor.

## *Shelter*

And then there was the day the grocery store was the most crowded I had ever seen it. People fought for parking spots. The carts ran out so we cradled stacks of groceries in our arms. I balanced peanut butter jar atop cereal box atop egg carton. I tried to pick foods that would last. And then there was the day campus shut down mid-lecture. How we hesitantly stood up and walked outside, not sure if we should linger and talk. And then we wondered if we should hide our faces. If it was safe to go on a walk. We washed our groceries in the sink; wiped down doorknobs three times a day. And then there was staying up late on the couch, staring at screens. Counting case numbers. Counting days. And then there was my partner, rasping next to me in the middle of the night. I rubbed his back, trying to work air into his lungs. How he nursed his inhaler like a bottle that night, perched on the edge of the bed. And then there was the day we settled on being alone, together—caught our breath and stepped outside. How we sat in the grass and cherished the sun. How when I closed my eyes all I could see were yellow flowers exploding.

*At Breakfast I Recall*

How yesterday I went to grandma's house,  
collected lilies just to make our dinner,  
special, discovered grandma's illness prowls  
so hungry, causing wrinkled hands to shiver.  
She sprinkles pills in sorbet, trying hard  
to hide the trembles, wanting stillness, like  
her husband's boat pursuing fast, unbarred  
across the lake, surveying blurry pines—  
dissolving landscapes, helping grandma forget  
her body's movement, find relief reflecting  
on water's surface, calm amidst the outset  
of sickness. How at dinner, grandma, facing  
terrific pain, recalls the boat, the lake  
by swirling water, keeping her awake.



30 *Digressions on a Photo, 4 Years Old*

1. My cousin Josiah and I often played a game called “baby seal,” dragging ourselves through the shallow Hawaii water pretending to be little seals who didn’t know how to swim. There was no point to this game. No winners or losers. Just seals.
2. As an adult, I still play “baby seal” at the beach by myself. I know about seal social structure and how living in large groups protects them from predators. I know this isn’t safe.
3. In a dream, Josiah and I swim at Victoria Beach. We go out deep enough to turn the shore to an ant farm. When the sun sets, umbrellas float into the sky like paper lanterns. The water looks purple. I reach for the end of an umbrella, but my hand slips.
4. In another dream, Josiah and I speak Russian under the covers. When we sleep, *sposkoynoy noch*, and when we wake, *nyet*.
5. In the last dream I had about Josiah, he had prosthetic legs and played soccer on TV. I watched titanium scrape turf as he scored a goal. Grandma said this was God showing me the future.
6. After his accident, I watched Manchester United games and tried find his face in the crowd.
7. Grandma said God told her Josiah would be healed.
8. Dear Josiah, is the water warm where you are?
9. I know you are somewhere, somewhere.
10. Dear photo, it hurts to look at you.
11. When Josiah was in high school, he got in trouble for punching a boy. I laughed when he told me, and he spent his suspension in an open field—trying to perfect his rainbow.
12. When I was in high school, I was grounded for smoking weed on the baseball field. I stayed in bed and listened to Yellowcard.
13. And then there was the time my mom furied to Los Angeles to rescue Josiah from his father. In my mind, she cut through the palms in their yard with a sharpened machete before holding it to my uncle’s throat. In my mind, she only cut him a little bit. In my mind, she ground bougainvillea flowers to a pink paste and smeared it on her cheeks. In my mind, his father didn’t slip out the back door just as the police arrived.
14. And then it’s 3am and Josiah is airlifted to the hospital.
15. The EMTs had to pry his soft body from the motorcycle—metal fusing to muscle.
16. After work as a line cook, a vegetarian learning to fry burgers, he mounted his bike and rode not toward home. This is the last thing we know. *Josiah, where were you going? Josiah, why didn’t you leave work*

*a minute earlier? Josiah, stop for a moment and admire an Arkansas oak. Stop for a moment and guess the phase of the moon. Stop for a moment and tie your shoe. Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop.*

17. God, can these bones live? Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.

18. In the hospital, I want to hold his swollen body. In the hospital, I beg to take his place.

19. I whisper in his ear that he's going to make it. He doesn't hear me.

20. "I believe in God for three seconds in case it helps," writes Bob Hicok.

21. My last conversation with Josiah was an argument over a tree tattoo we both planned to get. I wanted a redwood resembling the trees we hiked under as kids. He wanted abstract, colorful lines blurred. When he passed, I got my version of the tree.

22. Once, on a backpacking trip at Jennie Lake, the mosquitos were so bad we slept with nets over our faces. In the morning, we dipped our toes in the runoff and smiled with checkered cheeks.

23. When the doctor said Josiah's soul had finally left his body, fluttered through the air vents and out the fire escape, I froze on the couch for five hours.

24. "...and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air."

25. Photo, at 4, we didn't know any of this was going to happen.

26. Josiah, we were supposed to take our kids to see the redwoods.

27. Photo, if we had stayed in the water another hour, would things be any different?

28. Photo, it's been five years.

29. Photo, I choose warm water, playing baby seal. I know he's out there somewhere.

30. Photo, stay. Photo, stay. Photo, stay.

*Something Like a Sonnet for Grief*

Release your body into a thicket  
of trees in fall. You won't be able  
to resist running. When you grow  
tired, cool under an oak and read picture  
books about talking animals. Convince  
yourself the forest creatures want to tell  
you a secret, lure you passive  
into the woods. Go without running  
water for forty days and don't think  
about funerals once. Lay your lonely  
body on a pile of leaves and watch  
orange glowing fungi sprout  
all over your stomach, how cardinals  
land on you, how falling snow will bend,  
just so, the autumn daises toward you.

*Ode to Endometriosis Flare Up*

You're lying on the bathroom floor,  
losing hours to pain. You take comfort  
in how cool the tile feels on your swollen belly.  
You're familiar with every tile, each popcorn  
ceiling constellation. It helps to pretend  
you're in France, imagine you're woozy  
on the floor after a night of heavy  
drinking in the city. You feel the lingering  
warmth of clear summer air and decide to light  
a cigarette right there in the bathroom. You don't  
think about how it will make the house  
smell or whether it's good for you  
or whether the blanket you've dragged  
into the bathroom will catch fire.  
In the morning, there will be baguettes  
and fresh cheese and the scent of hyacinth  
blooms wafting through the open windows.  
All you have to do is sleep the alcohol away.

*Power Lift*

You settle under a squat rack,  
poised for the drop. You like  
how the bar presses into your spine  
how it might just push hard enough  
that your feet break ground  
and brush dirt below.

Today, you don't want anyone  
to look at you. Don't want  
anyone to see you struggle  
to press bar skyward  
or listen to the quiet grunts  
you'll one day make loud.

Today, you don't want anyone  
to notice how you place the bar  
back gingerly so as not to crowd  
the room with noise. Today, you  
see your calloused hands grip  
 barbells and don't think: weapons.

You can't think: weapons. You hope  
your body stretches out, but know  
it can only grow so sharp—  
how a shout gone on too long  
starts to sound like a howl.

*When I Said I Was Grieving*

what I really meant was your ashes will be split up between our relatives & they will all fight to see who can find the most meaningful place to sprinkle parts of you. What I really meant was your mom will think it's a good idea to put some of you in Japan since you studied Japanese that one year so she tells her boyfriend to fly you to Tokyo. What I really meant was your mom's weird boyfriend will take you on a boat ride through the Port of Tokyo & when the moment feels just right you will be flung into the water. & we'll all say *how magical* or *how spiritual* & we'll try to forget that your mom's boyfriend hardly knew you. When I said I was grieving what I really meant was sometimes I imagine you floating across the Pacific Ocean, trying to hold yourself together as you drift back towards me.

## II. Blood Meal

*New Orleans*

Today, we hang upside down  
on the swing, hair scraping  
the sidewalk, gawking  
at the porch's under—  
belly. We imagine this topsy  
turvy veranda as New Orleans:  
the pool a sleepy bayou  
with a bar balanced

on the dock. For as long  
as our heads can handle,  
we compose this world:  
piano chords from a distant  
bedroom morph into muffled  
sounds of swing or fond  
harmonies from a slow jazz  
trio. Where the boardwalk  
meets the marsh, a patient  
cypress bends to sip

from the murk.  
We'll hang here and listen  
to the swamp whisper for as long  
as our small bodies fit  
in this alluvial divot  
for as long as our small  
bodies fit in the fabric  
between this world and that one.



*Ode to Nightmares*

Today, you wake early with me no matter  
how strong your urge to sleep. We sip coffee,  
windows wide—giggling at the sappy things  
whispered before the sun's first radiance.  
We conspired courthouse & children—& all  
night I dreamed of running away with you—  
limoncello on a city balcony  
far from here. I dreamed us floating safe above  
the Amalfi in beach chairs, not afraid  
of falling, & then there's a figure flitting  
toward us—a bleeding doe melting into  
the sea—I woke to your hand wiping sweat  
from my back. The truth is: your body carries  
mine perfectly, so I'll say come every  
terror that leads me here—awake under  
the blankets with you, listening to mourning  
doves coo through the early wind.

*Against Minneapolis*

Tonight I hate Minneapolis & the way frost sneaks  
into my cells & touches each nucleus & nothing not

even beer can fix this. I'm standing on frozen  
Lake Calhoun in the middle of the night

because this is what people do in Minneapolis.  
I want to plunge my body through the ice & live

at the muddy bottom & let bass pick at my  
bones. When I pray, I imagine God as the sun

& he hasn't come out for six months. God, turn  
these snowflakes to fire—so hot that my tongue

steams & the soles of my shoes melt into my heels  
& the entire lake dissolves & the catfish cry out

that their jaws burn. God, tell me the one about  
early spring & how the Vikings buried the ball

in turf like a seedling & Lake Street softened  
to a river & merged with the Mississippi. Tell me

the one about sunfish swimming through skyways  
& the white belly of a walleye shimmering

in the sunlight. God, help me see this frozen lake  
as spring at a standstill. God says fish store warmth

in their gills. God says crack the ice. Take a sip.

*Peach*

Peach, are you scared to be bit? Do you wonder how it feels to have your soft skin ripped? Can I feel your outsides for softness—shove my finger into your side and see if it gives? I promise my teeth are sharp, and can do the job quick. And maybe you'll let me carve a whistle from that brown bone at your core, that tumbleweed lodged inside yellow flesh. And I'll use it to call out to you. And I'll spread your fuzz under my pillow to help me sleep and I'll squeeze you into juice and I'll plant you and re-plant you in the yard until you've become your own grandmother six times over and I'll sew your stems into a ladder to reach you at the top of the tree. I want to hide among you. I want to sleep in the tree until my skin turns orange. Peach, I'm going to stop shaving for a month to be hairy like you. Taste this, it's the dirt from under my nails. Here, I have a present in my pocket. It's a piece of lint and some string.

*Field Notes*

Scientists aren't exactly sure how mountains form.

If you whistle a perfect c#, fungi will sprout at your feet.

You can hold the moon for ransom. This will turn the ocean into a lake.

It's impossible to run a mile in less than ten minutes.

Everything is made of microscopic rats. And those microscopic rats are made of even more microscopic rats. And so it goes on.

In France, people respond to fire alarms five times faster than people in the United States do.

You can make orange juice without oranges.

If you get on the Blue Line in Chicago past midnight, the conductor will offer you a cold cup of soup and a crisp red apple.

The space between any two walls is constantly getting smaller.

When a crane dies, its feathers will be the first thing to decompose.

When you look in the mirror, there is always a marmot behind you. You can't see him in the mirror, but he's there.

## *Tahoe*

In Nevada, the sun stays up for 24 hours. In Nevada, the only refuge is the southernmost shore of Lake Tahoe, which draws over-warmed, tired travelers to its mouth. Mother says she's too weary to go on. Says it's nice to travel but nice to go home. Misses the tepid Seattle skies. Her leathery skin hangs loose, browned by hours in the sun. We're used to overcast, spurts of rain. We weren't prepared for how Tahoe draws you in, sucks you deep into the sand. My eyes hurt from seeing the sun's reflection on the lake. Mother longs for Washington darkness. For eclipse. In the distance, a sailboat glides across the melting sun's image in the water. I can barely see the sharp edges of the sail cutting into the horizon. The light reflects blindingly on the boat's white body, and us onlookers stand and squint as the water sun boat is consumed by radiance then cooled by the mountain runoff of Tahoe. And then, as quickly as it arrived, it morphs into something like a fuse being lit by the sun's heat, ready to make glow anything in our line of sight that dared not sparkle. Mother puts on her sunglasses. Without looking away from the skyline, I apply more sunscreen to my nose.

*Blood Meal*

In July, I tend to tomato plants who have given me  
only wilted leaves & listen to earthworms gulp  
in soil, re-tilling the garden with their soft  
digestive systems. I wonder how many  
I've disturbed today as I dig knees into  
dirt & feed blood meal to fading roots.

This morning I watch aphids resting  
on tomato stems—immune to soap  
& vinegar & cayenne—prone to birthing  
sixty offspring a week—& wish I could  
eat them, dip them in honey & crush  
them between my teeth. I want to know  
if they taste like a tomato flower almost  
bloomed. Or if I let them be, would they take  
this small mercy & fly away? Reader,  
you will have to forgive me for shoving  
beetles aside with weeds—for smashing  
this ant crawling up my glove.

*The Summer of Fruit Flies*

When September's heat stalled with first frost, the flies thinned out. Three hundred became three. But that summer, hundreds invaded my apartment. At first I assumed it was the bananas left out one day too long or the crumbs I lazily kicked under the oven. That they smelled sugar in bananas' bruises and rushed through holes in my screen, fighting over who would get first taste. My efforts to scrub and hide food and keep windows closed and trap and squish did little to stop their migration. In the mornings, they swam in my coffee. When I washed my hair, brown specks fell out in droves, soggy and fluttering on the shower floor. I spent hours hunting them—entire afternoons absorbed by fly swatter or tissue paper. For every fly I killed, ten more were born. I grew accustomed to shaking out my sheets—finding blots under my pillow. I grew accustomed to sharing a mirror with a dozen buzzing bodies and swallowing at least one per day.

Deep in the dumpster down the street, hordes of their eggs stay warm, cozy against coffee grounds and candy wrappers and torn couch cushion. For now, they sleep, small bodies pressed into shells—preparing to scour for holes in screens at the first sign of spring—preparing to feast on every mess I will make.

*At Gouverneto Monastery*

Visit an ancient monastery carved into the side of a mountain. Walk deep into the cave and listen for God's whispers. Feel connected to your neanderthal ancestors. Suppress the urge to run out into the hillside and gather berries. When a stalactite drips water onto your face, lick it up. It might have special healing powers. Search for remnants of holiness: a candle (half burned), the last lingering note of a hymn, or a peeling icon. If the darkness gets too heavy, shiver to shake it off. Find a cavern too small to squeeze into and scream into its depths. Worry that you might cause an earthquake. Step out into the sun and squint.



### *The Tallest Building in Town*

The tallest building in town is made of glass, which was an architectural marvel when it was built. But now, the glass looks weathered, stained from years of being hit by the sea. Its once shiny walls are now crusted with salt, the occasional starfish. At midday, the sunlight reflects off the glass and blinds any passerby who dares go near. The locals proposed dropping a curtain over the building. Some outliers suggested it be painted black. One woman demanded it be demolished. Instead, the city council voted to make sunglasses mandatory in the area near the building. Those who abstained could not sue the city for eye injury related to the tower's glare. Residents of the tower enjoy the privacy the sun provides. They hide behind incandescence, save their most private activities for high noon. In the evenings, when the sun's glow has dimmed, I watch residents brush salt from the high rise into buckets. I've learned that this salt is a delicacy—made flavorful by a day's worth of sun. A tired woman walks past me and sprinkles some salt into my palm. It smells like a solar flare.

## *Watching the Building*

In the mornings, I stand on the jetty and watch the tower. I have sunglasses in my pocket in case I linger too long. Though I don't mind harsh lighting, I don't want to risk a faux pas. I want to blend in. I start my ritual by focusing on floor 6. Just through the glass, a man prepares to play the violin. He carefully rosins his bow then tucks the instrument under his chin. From this distance, I can't hear what he's playing. He continues for a few minutes, then turns his head as if he sees something and leaves my view. On floor 3, a woman holds a glass of wine in one hand and her phone in the other. She looks like she's on an important call. Next door, a kid sits cross legged and stares out at the sea. He glances in my direction and I get embarrassed. I pretend to be admiring the architecture. I stroll to the end of the jetty. From here, the building looks smaller. I can barely make out the rooftop garden. A rose swaying in the sea breeze.

*The Inside of the Building*

On my last night in town, I've been invited to have dinner in the tower. A man I met at the farmer's market lives on the twentieth floor. I'm not sure if it's a date, but I couldn't resist seeing the inside of the tower. I approach the glass structure as the sun is setting. It glows orange. Waves gently lap the first floor. I see the man standing across the street at the entrance. He's wearing a red suit. I can't remember whether in this city red means friendship or romance. I realize I've accidentally worn black, the color for grief. I tell him I'm grieving the end of my trip. A bus whizzes between us, breaking our eye contact. I cross the street and he holds the door open for me. The lobby walls are covered in shimmering candle sconces. Wax drips onto the carpet. The country's national anthem hums softly from the speakers. The man tells me they play it everywhere since the war. When the chorus comes, the man sings along softly, stifling his sobs.

*Athens*

On a paid walking tour of the city, we marvel at the busy town center, graffiti-filled back alleyways, and strong-smelling fish markets. We arrive at a public park surrounded by a thick fence. As we peer through the cracks we see tents and laundry hung up to dry—swaying in the wind. The tour guide explains that the government turned the parks in Athens into refugee camps. That residents of Athens bring food to the parks every day to keep the refugees from leaving. After the tour, we feel strange going about our normal tourist activities. We climb the hill to the Parthenon and look down at the city, imagining all the people whose entire lives are limited to a 1-acre stretch of grass. I pray they can see the Parthenon in the distance from the park. Beyond the city, the Aegean sea sparkles, fills the air with a fresh salty smell. I pray for the smell of salt to remind those without homes of something familiar—perhaps well-seasoned family meals or afternoon walks or the comforting rhythm of rain hitting the sidewalk.

## *How*

How we grew legs and crawled out of the sea. How we felt the wind on our skin. How we pawed through the mud. How we feasted on insects. How we enjoyed the crunch. How we sprouted fur. How we became brave enough to explore the trees, grind sweet fruit between our molars. How we learned the danger of predators. How we protected our young. How we hung from branches. How we started walking on two feet, slowly at first, not used to the full weight of the forest floor on our toes. How we lost our hair, watched it fall off in wisps and then in clumps. How we sharpened stones with stones. How we collected shells. How we drew bison on cave walls to show our grandchildren who we were. How we lit up the darkness with flames. How we buried our dead. How we stood atop hills and screamed.

### III. The Harvest

*Oath of Enlistment*

I wish you never went to Afghanistan,  
chose not to bear true faith or defend  
us against all enemies—said no to the sand,  
stayed on the couch instead of traveling  
thirty miles to the recruiting office  
with your new girlfriend—offering  
her a ring if she signed with you.

I wish you didn't survive on MRE's  
for eight months straight—no vacuum  
seal, no just add liquid, no desert grime  
removed with moist towelette. I wish  
your commander never promised your unit  
cinnamon rolls and that you didn't think  
this was the best thing to happen  
in months. I wish those wonder  
bread slices dusted with cinnamon  
never arrived, and that you didn't see them  
and think you were ready for heaven.

What I'm trying to say is— I wish you  
ordinary: DMV lines and tiresome  
books. Dishes stacked in the sink.  
An afternoon pulling weeds. I even wish  
you never saw snow fall in Kabul  
because you were too busy  
working that sleepy gas station in Memphis—  
you know, the one with the chainsaw  
bear sculpture out front—and your girlfriend  
shows up on your break with chicken  
and rice in Tupperware. And you look out  
at the field across the street and try  
to ignore the mash-up of screaming  
cicadas and Whitney Houston descending  
from cheap speakers and think—*I could do this for a while.*

*The Kunia Tunnel*

My father, drunk on bourbon, tells me again how his station hid three floors underground. How humidity made him sweat through his fatigues. How air conditioning would attract attention. How the Russians were always looking. How he was swayed by the army's presentation of Oahu. White sand and warm Christmas. How he didn't expect the darkness of 30 feet below a pineapple field or grimy walls. How he sifted through civilian conversations: a woman in the bathtub seducing a lover, a young man nervously applying for a job, brothers playing with radios in the street—pretending to be astronauts. How headset Russian sounded like someone spitting sunflower seeds. How he knew things about the government that would shock me. How they might be listening now. How he still thinks of Yeltsin. How he can't recall the Russian word for *promise*. How six mangoes in a bowl on the kitchen table no longer make him think: grenades.



*List Poem for Ovarian Cyst Removal*

1. You've been in pain for months. Your gyno tells you there's no way a cyst of that size could be causing that much pain. You tell her you can't get through the day without crying. She suggests birth control.
2. You find a new doctor. You are shocked when he believes you. You tell him you can feel the cyst tugging your ovary down. You wish he would rip you open right then and there and rip it out.
3. You find out ovaries are the size of almonds. You imagine squeezing the cyst until it pops and freeing the almond from the mass trying to break it.
4. Your doctor suggests a bunch of tests. So your life becomes weekly doctor's appointments. Ultrasounds. A CT Scan. Blood work. An MRI. You grow used to being prodded. You don't feel like a person anymore, just a body in pain.
5. You don't realize getting an MRI means being trapped in a tube for an hour or wearing scratchy underwear that's 2 sizes too big. They give you headphones to pass the time. You're forced to listen to popular country music but can barely hear it because of how loud the machinery is. You close your eyes and pretend you're in bed in a seaside cottage with the windows open, try to convince yourself that the roaring machine is the waves hitting the shore.
6. The doctor calls to tell you it isn't cancer. It's likely endometriosis and you need to have surgery to remove it. You're relieved but never expected to have surgery in your twenties.
7. In the weeks leading up to surgery, you research all the things that could go wrong. You're scared of anesthesia. Scared that you'll go to sleep and not wake back up.
8. The day before the surgery, the nurse calls to ask if you have an advanced directive. You aren't sure what that is.
9. It's surgery day. You lie in the hospital bed and your husband sits in a chair across the room. They put an IV in you and have you fill out dozens of consent forms. You have to accept that something could go wrong. That they aren't liable.
10. It's time to get taken to the operating room. The nurse tells you to hug your husband. You fight the intrusive thoughts to rip out the IV and go home with him.
11. In the operating room, they slide you onto a metal table. You stare at the giant lights above you and feel like a lab specimen.
12. The nurses chat about the coming snowstorm as they get you ready. You close your eyes and see white specks drifting across your vision. This lulls you into something like comfort.
13. You wake up in pain.

14. The doctor tells you that you have stage 3 endometriosis. All over your pelvic organs and even on your intestines. He says endometriosis looks like sticky black cobwebs, so you imagine your ovaries as spider nests.
15. You don't remember the rest of your time at the hospital.
16. You throw up in the car on the way home.
17. Your husband tucks you into bed.
18. You start to think about potential infertility and recovery and pain killers and chronic illness, but for now, there's the warm bed, your husband's body curled up next to yours, and the faint sound of pine trees blowing in the wind outside.

*Kaboom*

Let me forget Kaboom—a dog we found grazing the LA River where it crosses beneath the 5. How my mom scaled the cement banks to secure him in a blanket—how she spent hours plucking burs from his skin. That summer my brothers and I slept in stacks—Kaboom on the bottom bunk with the baby—snarling at eucalyptus branches twisting in wind. Let me forget how we'd lose him for days—how he'd dart out the door in search of dumpster meat or candy wrapper. How he refused to be trained—not tempted by treat or the routine of having a name. He only knew traffic and river water and sleeping under Jacaranda trees.

Let me forget the gulley—that dusty ravine behind our house where sugar gums touched the sky. Where my mom took Kaboom to pee in the dirt—how she stood on top of the hill and watched his wild form creep through overrun ivy or inhale the scent of steel from the train tracks. O let me forget the day he stood fixed on the train tracks, smelling a dead skunk or turtle—how he kept his nose glued to the ground amidst vibration and horn and my mom screaming—wondering if she should try to grab him. Let me forget how my dad collected pieces of him in a trash bag—how that night I dreamed a bright light crashing through my window—parts of me scattered throughout the house—my collarbone in the kitchen by his bowl, my ear to the ground beneath the couch.

*Portrait of the Baby Artist*

I.

My brother is born on raspberry-patterned  
sheets on a street called Shadow Fax. At ten,

on a family trip to Sea World, he mounts  
a starfish sculpture and immediately slides

down the stucco, slicing his leg on a stray  
sucker. Three years later, he hangs over a ravine

by a vine and loses his grip, landing in the rocks  
below. He treads home and watches the other hikers

gawk at soil mingled with muscle, doesn't wince  
at staples placed gently on top of yellow fat.

II.

He practices a low frequency hum on a 1990  
Epiphone. He grows taller than the Sears Tower.

His brush roughly cradles oil. Next comes charcoal.  
Fujifilm in the junk drawer. He gathers basil

from the garden to press onto paper. Convinces  
himself his wild days are over and paints stills

of fruit baskets. A naked lady now and again.  
An orange tin of Jasmine tea. He shaves his head

but can't grow a mustache. He hides his projects  
in the attic and shoves apple seeds in the vents.

III.

In a dream, English subtitles accuse  
*do svidaniya* of permanence. In a dream,

the boy hangs a backwards flag on a shimmering  
wall and the flag salutes itself and did you sleep

well and am I alone and control and *kontrol*.  
He awakes: *soldat* and so help me God

and domestic and allegiance and basil  
in the back of his throat.

IV.

At eighteen, he hides out in a cot for nine weeks  
and learns the masonry of mending a firearm.

With night vision goggles, a field in Georgia  
mimics the emerald pacific—and if he feathers

the light just right, he can see the western sun  
on the verge of dipping below the sea. If he feathers

the light just right, he can reach through the window  
to pick Valencia oranges for a painting. The boy lies

in the wet grass, half-submerged in a puddle from a spring  
storm. His fatigues are soaked. In the distance, he swears

he can catch a glimpse of the soft glow of Atlanta. A hickory  
branch droops into the puddle and coats the boy in seedlings.

*Harvesters*

As a child, my grandpa & his family  
drifted back & forth between  
Arkansas & California to find  
the freshest fruit. I grew up watching  
him carefully wash blueberries  
under hot running water, trying  
not to damage them with  
his calloused hands. He served  
us berries and fresh cream  
for dessert, told us the blueberries  
were never that big when he was a kid.

When I eat fruit, I think of my grandpa's  
young hands picking the same weight  
as the adults in his group did—upwards  
of sixty pounds. How he pulled giant  
bags of produce in the Ozark heat.  
When I peel an orange, I imagine  
my grandpa's skinny frame perched  
on the branch of an orange tree,  
taking a quiet break among the blossoms.

*Corning*

On his way to church, my father stops  
for a can of Grizzly off Highway 99.

At sixteen, he has just learned to pomade  
his thick hair back like James Dean and keeps

dip in his left cheek. His allowance is five  
dollars per week for a movie with his girlfriend

(usually something rockabilly or an old Hitchcock  
on repeat). Once, my grandparents decided

dancing was a sin and took away his prom  
tickets, so he stole a bottle of Jim Beam

and drank it behind the olive processing plant.  
At Christmas, my grandmother serves him a plate

of chocolate gravy softly melted over  
biscuits. My grandfather beams from the bench—

slipping his fingers into the belly of the piano  
to make sure his whiskey stays hidden among the strings.

*Market*

In the produce section of Wal-Mart, I see her  
poised—frail hand outstretched for a pepper,

thin fingers flexed toward slick apples  
dipped in wax, her rabbit face glowing

in fluorescent light, black eyes bright  
with fruit. She moves through

the fruitage, and I'm afraid she might lose  
rhythm, might tune out the market's simple

jazz and scale the linoleum tile to find  
my body gawking from aisle 7

as I count the months between us.  
When I say mother-in-law, I mean,

*almost*, I mean for a moment  
I see A's rosy face on top of hers, flattening

her stature. When I say mother-  
in-law, I mean wild raspberries stuck

in the freezer, sweet strawberry cake  
blooming, rosaries crammed in the junk

drawer. Today, berries are cheap,  
so I pretend she's cooking me another

cobbler—for as if this might fix  
the fidgets in her chest. In mine.



## *The Rooster*

George roosted in an oak tree next to the porch. At sunset, he tucked himself in on the same sturdy branch—low enough for him to jump up but high enough to avoid whatever scary creatures lurked in the dirt below. We often tried to coax him back to the coop—convince him it was safe. That we could make it safe. He refused to go within twenty feet of it. It all started when racoons broke in and killed the hens. Somehow, George escaped. In the mornings, he stood at our front door and screamed, not wanting to be alone. Sometimes, we'd feel bad and let him inside. But a grieving rooster doesn't know what to do with couch or rug or a floor without bugs. He pecked endlessly at the carpet, yelled at the toilet. My mother says racoons are evil because they kill for no reason. They didn't eat the chickens, just left them bloody in the dirt. One night I had a nightmare—dreamt racoons tearing at my bedsheets—so I wandered outside and curled into the crook of the tree, George snoring in the branch above me.

*Dream with Lashes*

— *after Dostoevsky*

In the distance, I hear singing and shouting. My father drags me toward the drunken celebration. There's a man tying a skinny horse to a cart overflowing with junk. The horse screams like a child. The man yells that he wants to take all the villagers for a ride, thinks they can stuff themselves in among the trash. Six large men pile in and laugh like crows, kicking pieces of garbage into the street. The sickly mare tries to pull but can barely manage a meek walk—her little legs bend toward the cobblestone. The man lashes her. More people flood the cart, bringing more whips and more screaming. The mare falls to the ground in a bony heap. I'm crying. My father tells me not to look. The villagers break out into song. More lashes. On the eyes, on the face. One of the whips grazes my cheek. I shout at them to stop. The man rips a wooden stick from the base of the cart and beats the mare over the head. She doesn't die. Killing her is hard work. The man strikes and strikes until she stops moving. I fight through the crowd and throw myself on her, kissing her bleeding muzzle and swollen eyes and brushing her thin hair with my fingers. The horse grows heavy and sinks into the earth: her exposed white belly glistening like a freshly cut apple. I pray for a storm to pass through and soften things—dissolve the man and wash this gray mare out to sea.

*Alphabet*

When I turn six, my father decides I'm old enough  
for Russian. We begin with a children's book

about a *zoo*park & I listen to him read each rhyming chunk  
of Cyrillic—yoked to every treble & hum.

My father is ruthless with Russian—  
insists I memorize the book, recite each curve

and cadence. He tells me stories of Russian  
School to scare me—how he studied for eight

hours every day—was rapped on the hand for mixing  
*cat* with *code*. In St. Petersburg, black-throated

loons perched on his windowsill to wake him  
from nightmares of fast-firing *Kalashnikovs*.

In St. Petersburg, he walked to school in the snow  
wearing three coats. He learned to memorize backwards—

begin with the last page first, grasp *ya* before *a*. So we travel  
through the zoo backwards one night before bed:

the animals are stuffed with food & napping.  
They awaken & vomit their breakfast onto platters

& the zookeepers take the wet slop away, jogging  
in reverse toward the kitchen. The animals are starving.

It's dark. My father glares at the watercolor deer & closes  
his eyes. *That's enough*. His tired head droops like a horse.

I can't stop feeling bad for the hungry animals.  
He says they'll be full again tomorrow when we start.