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THE BABY IS A BOMB

April Johnston

He is wrapped in blue blanket, wrapped in a cliché. I think this as soon as I see him, and I hope his mother doesn't ask me to hold him. I don't have to worry about that. You reach out first. You are too eager.

His name is Eli. He is just six days old and belongs to our friends. He can't speak or walk. He can't even hold his head up yet. He should be harmless. But he's not.

Eli is a bomb.

I know it as soon as you pull him to your chest. Your eyes and smile get bigger and your voice gets smaller and I immediately begin to pray that it won't go off, that you won't want to be a father.

But I know I can't stop it now.

It's done.

I am right. On the way home, the bomb explodes.

You keep pushing the automatic door lock button back and forth with your index finger, and the locks pop up and down in the doors like jack-in-the-boxes.

"Scott," I finally say, exasperated.

You smile like I've seen you smile only a few times before — once the day we met, once on our first date and once when you were down on one knee in the grass at Cooper's Grove, asking me to marry you.

"Sorry," you say, but you say it so automatically I know you don't really mean it. You're just waiting until you can say what you really mean.

"Eli is so tiny," you finally tell me.

I nod and look out the window at the trees and houses as we whip by them. Their colors bleed together.

"Yeah, he is."

"Can you imagine being responsible for something so small?" you ask.

"No."

There is a long, fat silence before you finally speak again.

"It seems like all of our friends are having babies," you say.

I don't answer. I keep staring out my window, trying to count the trees before we pass them and they disappear. Sixteen. Seventeen. Nineteen. You're driving too fast. I can't keep up.

"Does it make you want to have one?" you ask. Your voice is soft, like a child afraid to ask for a new bike or video game that he knows is too expensive.

"No."

I am firm this time. My voice is louder than before. It carries the I-don't-want-to-talk-about-this-anymore tone that you usually hear right away. You don't now, or you pretend that you don't.

"Really?"

I whip my head around to stare at you.

"You know it doesn't matter if I want one," I say. "You know I can't have one."

"Maybe you can," you say.

"No, Scott. I can't."

"I think you should talk to someone, so you know for sure."

"I don't need to talk to anyone, Scott. I already know for sure."

I'm yelling now. I can feel the frustration boiling in my stomach. I want to yell more. But instead I draw the deepest breath my body will let me and I go back to staring out my window, this time with narrow eyes.

We were never supposed to have this conversation. I told you before we married that our family would only be you and me. I asked if that was okay. It wouldn't have been fair any other way to make

you promise to spend your life with me and then tell you I wouldn't give you what you wanted.

You said it was fine. You and I were family enough.

So we married, me in the slinky, white satin dress and you in the tux with tails, and we never thought about children until we bought our four-bedroom house with the big blue awning over the porch and the half-acre yard. Then you started talking about wasted space.

Back then I thought maybe you wanted to build a garage or buy a swimming pool. Now I know better.

When we get home, we still don't talk. You change your clothes and head for the garage. A few minutes later I hear the lawnmower roar to life. I know you're cutting our half-acre: our *wasted space*.

I turn on the baseball game and pretend to watch. But all I can really think about is her.

You don't know her, not really. You've only seen the medicated her, the one who doesn't frown and doesn't smile, the one who forgot how to laugh, the one who never says what she means because she doesn't know anymore. The one who just exists.

I know the other her, the one who danced with me in the kitchen until she was so exhausted she slept right there on the tile floor, the one who left me in the grocery store because the voices in her head told her she should, the one who lay on the couch for hours staring at nothing. The one who loved me and hated me in equal amounts.

I don't know how to introduce you to that version of my mother. The doctors have made certain that part of her is dead now, killed by drugs with names my father always forgets. He only knows them because he presses them into her hands everyday.

She used to fight him. She used to tell him how they made her numb and how, if he really loved her, he wouldn't ask her to take them. But after she stood up at my high school graduation and pointed an accusing finger at the principal and screamed, "You! It was you!" After my dad and another dad had to drag her out and after I cried, she relented.

Now he says, "please," and she nods because she knows he's tired.

"What's the score?"

I turn in our overstuffed chair. I didn't notice you were done mowing the lawn or that you had come back into the house.

"I don't know," I whisper. "I'm not really watching."

You nod and sit down on the couch across from me, your elbows on your knees and your hands intertwined like you're praying. I wonder if you are.

"Can we talk about this?" you ask, staring at your hands. I look at them, too. They're small and soft, like a woman's. You mother told me this was a sign of your sensitivity. I wonder why you don't seem so sensitive now.

Then your hands begin to jump up and down so that I can't focus on them anymore without getting dizzy. It's your knees. They're bouncing, quaking. I can't tell if you're angry or nervous.

"Scott, I don't know what to say. You know I can't have children. What else do we have to talk about?"

"But that's the thing, you can have kids. Physically you can."

My anger, that hot ocean of frustration in my stomach, begins to boil again. I jump out of the chair. I can't believe you said it. Physically you can. I open my mouth to scream. Nothing comes out, so I walk out of the room.

"You can't live your whole life being afraid of becoming your mother," you tell my back.

I turn around.

"Yes, I can!" I scream. "I do!"

"I know," you yell back.

My shoulders, which just a moment before were held high in resistance, fall.

"I have to be afraid," I say. I'm not yelling anymore, but my voice is still high, threatening to break. I have tears in my eyes but you can't see them because you're staring at your praying hands again.

The room feels like it's shrinking, and I feel like I'm suffocating but, somehow, the gap between you and me, between the couch and the hallway, is widening.

I want to tell you that worrying I will end up like my mother is an inescapable part of my existence, like eating or breathing. I think about it when I fall asleep next to you, wondering if tomorrow we'll wake up to a world that's different. I think about it when I'm angry, wondering if that anger will ever leave.

I want to tell you what it was like watching my father's eyes sink into his head, what it was like to hear his words catch in his throat like there was a net back there, snatching them on their way out. I want to tell you that I'm doing this for you, because you deserve better than the life that leashed him.

And I want to tell you that I want a baby, too. I do. But I want to stay me more.

But I don't know how to say any of these things, so instead I ask you this question, because I know you won't have an answer for it:

"What if, Scott?" I say, glaring down at you. "What if I had a baby and it triggered schizophrenia? What kind of mother would I be then?"

While she talks, I stare at the blue cursive stitching on her white coat. She's using the words I want to hear: permanent, irreversible. I try to forget I could use these same words to describe the damage I'm doing to our marriage.

I've already thought enough about that in the three weeks since our fight, lying beside you in the dark, my eyes open and watching the headlights from passing cars dance across the bare walls. I don't wake you to talk about it. I know I should, but I don't. Because I already know what you'll say.

The doctor asks me if I'm sure. I answer without hesitating.

"Yes."

I'm lying on her table, my hair pulled up in a net, my body covered in a paper gown. I am alone except for the doctor who will soon trade her white coat with the blue cursive writing for green scrubs. She tells me it will be just a few minutes before they begin. Before she makes it so I won't be able to have babies.

I nod. I think about how you believe I'm at work. I think about how I'm going to tell you that I'm not.

But mostly, I think about her. I think about her in the black and white photograph that sits on the bookshelf in our bedroom. I think about how, each time you look at it, you stare as if you've never seen it before. I know it fascinates you how much the woman you love resembles this woman who created her. The same almond eyes, wide forehead and bow-shaped lips. The same high cheekbones, rounded nose and small frame. Only the eyebrows are different.

"It's scary how much you look like her," you always tell me.

That's not what scares me about the photo. What scares me are her eyes, identical to mine and filled with an expression I wish I didn't recognize, but I do.

She is sitting on her hospital bed next to my father. He is holding me close, staring down at me, admiring the daughter who began breathing only hours before. Her eyes are watching something else.

She is 22 in the photo, only months away from having schizophrenia grab her by the shoulders and shake her life loose. It's almost like she can see it coming for her. Her eyes, dull and empty, watch it approach, knowing she's helpless to stop it.

I close my own eyes against the fluorescent light of the hospital room and watch the images painted on my eyelids: Eli, my mother, us.

I tell myself I am doing you a favor. I am making it so you never have to see the look in my eyes that I saw in my mother's.

But I wonder, when I tell you what I've done, what kind of look I'll have to see in yours.

WINTER WHEAT

Barbara Brooks

Octobers, we would watch it sprout
and wait for Spring to grow. I hung to the back crease
of Dad's pants. Short enough to walk between his legs,
like wind weaving through straight, green

stems of May. Don't remember when the stalks
yellowed. Gradually, seed heads began
to bend, from top to last kernel. June, the harvester
separated wheat from chaff. The tractor blade cut low,

the hay rake windrowed, baler spat square bales
until the field was stubble like his face. Thirty Octobers later,
he is too tired to shave. His gray hair, a field of weeds.
He uses a walker, stiff like straw stalks.

In a Tribal Setting

William Doreski

Reverting to grim puberty
in a tribal setting, we cling
and sigh and your family approves.

A river, bottomless and gray,
gargles through the village. Children
splash naked in the shallows

while fishermen drag nets woven
of grass through the heavy current.
We never imagined long nights

before the invention of candles;
but pressed against each other
and ourselves we taste a pleasure

that would flee even the faintest
whisper of light. Yet this world
coughs up T-shirts plastic-wrapped

fresh from Sri Lanka, and canned food
your mother cooks on a gas range.
We're modernizing day by day:

propane lanterns scorching the dark,
a radio droning a language
that almost sounds familiar.

One morning we rise to a rumble
of power company trucks. I touch
the seams of your body and find

you've sealed and toughened yourself
against the primal urges
we loved. Your family suspects

me of believing in sin,
but they're wrong. One well-thrown rock
and I'm out of here, wide awake,

and hitching a ride on a yellow truck
headed south. You'll marry the bright
young lawyer who arrives to sort

land claims. He'll embody the nation
that congealed as we slept away
our bravest years. You'll love him

for his powerful sharkskin suit
and precocious verbosity,
forgetting how ferociously

we mated with unseen forces—
the river flowing through us
with a gray carnivorous depth.

St. Sebastian

Dustin Junkert

Why grow, raspberries? Me eating you
can't be enough to reward the slow
growing under jagged leaves.

I march through thorns in short
sleeves regardless of bleeding.
You are red and I am red.

Scientists, explain the dull thud of a raspberry
dropped onto a pile of other raspberries.

Oh Father, are we not of this world?
Oh brother,
I am here, physically

frustrated, tangled in thorns, biblical.
I am Saint Sebastian,
surviving far too many arrows. I am only here

because I was led here. Perfection
is no substitute for this broken world.

Music Appreciation

Michael Keshigian

He asked them
to take the music outside,
listen as they held it toward the sky,
let the wind rattle its stems,
or place the sheet against an ear
to hear a tune
through the hollow of its shell.
He told them to jog
the parameters of the staves,
walk the winding road of its clef
and imagine living there.
Perhaps they could drop a feather
upon the music's resonance,
follow its float among the timbres,
or ski the slopes of musical peaks,
gliding unencumbered into its valleys,

then thank the composer
for varying the landscape
when they left the lodge.
But the class was determined
to stalk each phrase,
analyze chords for manipulation, cunning
and seek the hidden form.
They handcuffed the notes
to the music stand,
even flogged the melody
with a drum mallet,
until it whistled a meaning
never intended.

Angler's Nightmare

Michael Keshigian

He thinks the fish
he landed,
the huge striped bass' eye
sees a monster's face,
a demon with soft hands of fire
that boils its slick body
in the acid of air
with a tease
from the hook's barb
that now knits
the gasping jaw closed.
He imagines himself
such beautiful meat
with a cruel demise,
no longer privy
to the love and seclusion
of the black emptiness
from which it was snatched.
He places the rod
upon the sand

and enters the ocean
until he can taste the salt
then asks the tide
to mend all wounds
on the motionless flesh
in his extinguished hands,
that it might again
have life
and return to the bounty
of the cold world
in the dark coral depths
where this bass
might then dream of him
in the bottomless sea,
of his hands
and his sorrowful blue eyes.

Sea Oats

Wendy Thornton

Looking like wheat from a blasted environment,
sea oats hang onto the edge of the ocean,
closer now than it has ever been,
buffeted by the winds of five hurricanes
eroding the beach away
down to the roots of sea oats.

Young girls, not knowing their function,
admired their simple refrain,
redolent of baby's breath and cane chairs,
straw hats and faces sans makeup,
sans artifice, hairy legs and armpits,
flowing skirts and home-made shirts,
jeans patched so many times they fit like
butter slathered on the tiny thighs
of young girls walking the beach
picking sea oats at the start of their lives.

We put them in Mateus bottles.

The wine sucked, but the bottles were beautiful
and they decorated our barren homes
until we could paint the walls a brighter color,
add pictures torn from our schoolbooks,
Monet, Picasso, and the cheery lie of Van Gogh.
You had to know that road went nowhere
or your eye would be fooled by the paint.

and enters the ocean
until he can taste the salt
then asks the tide
to mend all wounds
on the motionless flesh
in his extinguished hands,
that it might again
have life
and return to the bounty
of the cold world
in the dark coral depths
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Barbara Brooks, author of “The Catbird Sang” chapbook, is a member of Poet Fools. She has had work accepted in Hospital Drive, Margie Review, Broken Plate, and Third Wednesday, on line at Marco Polo, Earthborne on line among others. She is a retired physical therapist and lives in Hillsborough, N.C.

William Doreski's work has appeared in various e and print journals and in several collections, most recently *Waiting for the Angel* (Pygmy Forest Press, 2009).

Eleanor Leonne Bennett is a 15 year old photographer and artist who has won contests with National Geographic, The Woodland Trust, The World Photography Organisation, Winstons Wish, Papworth Trust, Mencap, Big Issue, Wrexham science , Fennel and Fern and Nature's Best Photography. She has had her photographs published in exhibitions and magazines across the world.

April Johnston spent nearly a decade writing long-form narrative for newspapers and magazines. Today, she teaches her students in West Virginia University's P.I. Reed School of Journalism how to write those stories. Her flash fiction has been published in *The Mix Tape* by Fast Forward Press and in *Monkey Puzzle #10*, and her nonfiction has been published in *The Newport Review*. She has an MFA in creative writing from Carlow University.

CONTRIBUTORS

Dustin Junkert is a musician, writer, and small-time gardener living in Portland, OR. He and a friend recently started up a small literary journal of their own called *Cartographer: A Literary Review*. He has found that it's been a good way to stay in contact with other writers as well as to see the poetry world from the other side. Dustin recently had an essay published in the *New York Times*, a short story in *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, and poems in *The Journal*, *South Carolina Review*, *Weber: The Contemporary West*, *Chaffey Review*, *Georgetown Review*, and *Barbaric Yawp*.

Michael Keshigian, author of six poetry chapbooks, has been widely published in numerous national and international journals. Recently, his collection *Lunar Images* was set to music for Clarinet, Piano, and Narrator by Boston composer Dennis Leclair and premiered at Del Mar College in Texas on November 5, 2010. A Boston premier took place on March 7, 2011 at the Berklee College of Music. (michaelkeshigian.com)

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OK REVIEW MISSION STATEMENT

The Oklahoma Review is an electronic literary magazine published through the Department of English at Cameron University in Lawton, Oklahoma. The editorial board consists of English and Professional Writing undergraduates, as well as faculty advisors from the Departments of English and Foreign Languages & Journalism.

The goal of our publication is to provide a forum for exceptional fiction, poetry, and creative non-fiction in a dynamic, appealing, and accessible environment. The magazine's only agenda is to promote the pleasures and edification derived from high-quality literature.

-The Staff

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The Oklahoma Review is a continuous publication, now in its eighth year. We publish two issues online each year, Spring and Fall. Although we accept submissions at any time, our general deadlines are as follows:

To have your work considered for the Spring issue: January 15

To have your work considered for the Fall issue: September 15

All works must be submitted electronically to The Oklahoma Review. Submissions are welcome from any serious writer working in English. We will neither consider nor return submissions sent in hard copy, even if return postage is included.

Writers may submit the following:

As many as three (3) prose pieces of 30 pages or less.

As many as five (5) poems or translations of any length.

As many as three (3) nonfiction prose pieces of 30 pages or less.

Files should be sent as e-mail attachments in either .doc or .rtf format. If an attachment is impossible, writers may submit their work in the body of their e-mail messages, noting specific format criteria when necessary.

When sending multiple submissions (e.g. five poems), please include all the work in a single file rather than five separate files.

Authors should also provide a cover paragraph with a short biography in the body of their e-mail. Simultaneous submissions are acceptable. Please indicate in your cover letter if your work is under consideration elsewhere.