



Summer 2002

The Forum: Summer 2002

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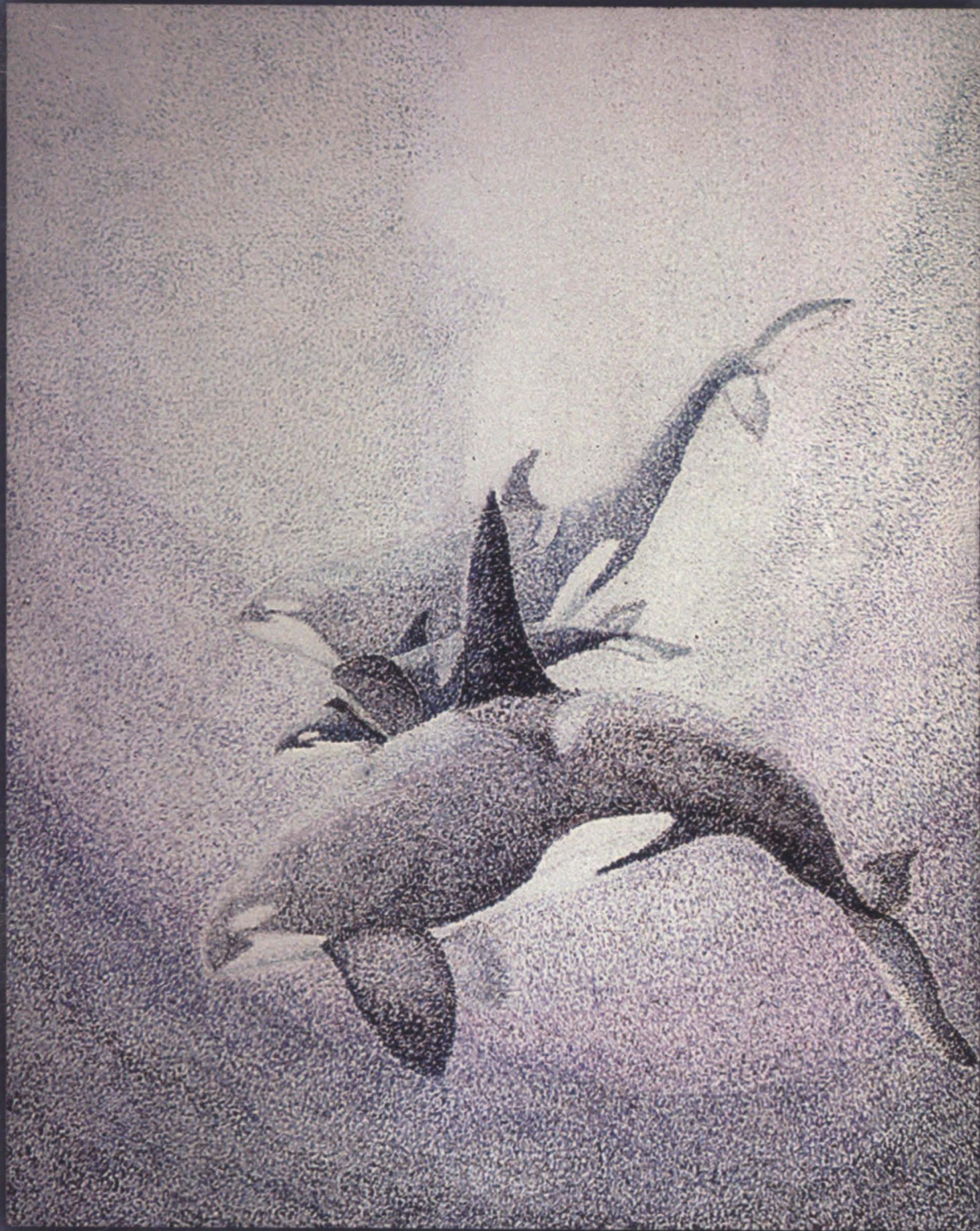
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Justin Baesler

Underwater Beauties

Are you breathing liquid oxygen?
Are you getting giddy from the fumes?
Does the sound we make become solid
Or does it trickle like water through you?

There is a shore upon these waters
One where weeping souls collide
But let me show you these underwater beauties
This shimmering water that doesn't get you wet.

Only breathe in your mind, my love
For this is all a wonderful dream.
In the morning you'll wake up feeling
As if you've swum the seven seas.

Oh, come with me, my darling
And swim like others do
I'll show you underwater beauties
But you must show my soul to me.

Lead me under the surface, shining skin.
As the temperature falls within you
Let the liquid warm all that you possess
But first there's something you should do.

You must show me your soul, my darling.
And these, the underwater beauties
Of which you spoke. These mirrors
Of the sea are mimes of the very soul.

Sharon Ennis

Pens and Rulers

There are ants everywhere in the museum. With the searing heat, it is becoming more hostile to them outside, so they have concentrated their energy on exploring my spaces now. I'm not sure who understands ants, because it certainly isn't me. I continue to kill them as soon as I see them, hoping this compulsive need ends, before the negative actions come back to haunt me.

I also killed a moth the other day. I did it, simply, because it was the furry kind and the flaky dustiness of the wings gave me the sensation similar to grinding aluminum foil between my teeth. To say the least, the nerves all along my spine were snapping like fire crackers. So, I stepped away from this irritating being and, after checking out a thirty-six inch metal ruler from the tool shop, I loudly smacked the hairy moth. I stepped back and examined myself. Relaxed and relieved, I actually felt better than I had felt all day.

There is an ant walking by me right now. They must be able to climb walls, because they are always up here on the counter. This ant is lucky I am writing about him and his friends, because I most certainly would have killed him in any other case. For instance, the ant I killed earlier was walking by and I rolled the very pen I am writing with, right over the top of him and he was squished. The juicy stuff is still on the counter over there. I probably should clean it up, before the next person to occupy this space arrives.

The moth, however, is a different case altogether. He was killed on a wall above eye level (which is why I checked out a ruler for the job) by the men's bathroom in the art building. I didn't clean-up the juicy stuff from him. He's probably still there. Just as I am certainly still here, in the same exact spot, for at the least three hours and eleven minutes. The museum has had a total of fourteen human visitors and four ant visitors. Of course, I have not squished any humans yet.

Most of the visitors who visit on the weekends are friendly and don't have too many legs for climbing walls. Plus, the people generally come to look at the art. The ants, on the other hand, they come all the way from outside to look at a vast achromatic counter. They climb into my space and wander all over the mouse-colored surface.

If the humans had the urge to crawl up the desk wall and walk around on the counter, I would be back to the tool shop for that thirty-six incher. Of course they might fight back, but physical pain doesn't matter when principle is involved.

I guess the more I think about it, ants aren't really that annoying, they just don't speak. If ants could carry on a good conversation, I certainly would encourage their weekend excursions to the museum. The ant visiting the counter right now is very quiet, and walking all over the place. He is a peaceful thing to observe. There is a purpose to this ant's walk. He knows exactly where to walk and where not to walk. Where he's going I'm not sure, but I'll let him go there, because now I know where I am going. The museum is closing and I'm going out of these walls.

Talia Bailey

Time Spent with My Grandmother

I felt you there.
As the dim light streamed
through the rose-stained glass,
I could see you, sitting
in the window of Heaven,
listening to me.
Proud of me.

In a place all alone,
with only song as familiar,
I wept, for your presence
was so strong, as vivid as
your wedding ring left on my hand.
The distance between us more than seas.
The distance called life.

The applause dies.
Yet the tears remain,
streaming down my cheeks.
You also remain,
Your love remains.
In the most unexpected places can
I feel you, still loving me.



Stephanie Rollefson

Valerie Elleson

*Racial Inequalities in the
Miss America Pageant*

Each year fifty-one of the nation's most talented and beautiful young women gather in Atlantic City to compete for the title of Miss America. As many as 20 million viewers watch the Miss America Pageant, many of them young girls and women. The pageant is filled with what America considers "beautiful" women, most of them between 5'6" and 5'10", weighing no more than 125 pounds. The beauty pageants today are a tradition through which society defines its ideal of beauty. During the pageant, viewers watch tall, skinny women walk around in fancy gowns and bikinis. These pageants send a negative message to viewers, especially young women and girls who feel they are expected to look like those women on television.

Over the years, the size and shape of the typical contestant has changed, and society's preoccupation with fitness is visible in the pageants. According to Sharon Rubinstein and Benjamin Caballero of the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, contestants in the 1920's had Body Mass Indexes (BMI's) within the range that is now considered normal, or between 20 and 25. However, over the years, BMI's have steadily decreased so that the majority of winners are in the range of malnutrition, defined by the World Health Organization as less than 18.5. Some winners have even had BMI's as low as 16.9, which is dangerous because a BMI under 17 stops the menstruation process. In fact, since the beginning of the pageant, the winners' heights have increased a mere two percent, whereas body weight decreased significantly by 12 percent.

Especially damaging is the ideal that the women need to be tall, which is beyond personal control, as well as skinny, which is to some extent in the limits of personal control. Decreased body weight and increased height puts an enormous strain on both young women who want to enter the pageant and typical young women who believe that every female should have the same slender body shape. No wonder recent studies done by the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine found that as many as 50 to 75 percent of all adolescent girls and teenagers are dissatisfied with their weight and body image, a situation that contributes to the increase in eating disorders in the

United States.

Some contestants are even willing to physically change parts of their body to achieve "perfection." In *Psychology Today*, Jill Neimark noted that many contestants are willing to undergo extensive cosmetic surgery, which state pageants sometimes pay for, to win competitions. "Those who will not resort to cosmetic surgery will resort to the old stand-bys, mummifying themselves with surgical tape to enhance their cleavage and the curve of their buttocks," Neimark said.

In addition to being beautiful and having a great body, contestants are also supposed to be talented and intelligent. Intelligence, however, counts for less than appearance. In the final interview, competitors are asked about their platform and their goals, the most stereotypical answer being to "end world hunger and promote world peace." Despite the fact that most contestants are college students, their answers generally are not meaningful. In the end, appearance is what really matters.

Even more frightening, each year there is a rise in child beauty pageant contestants; today there are more than two thousand girls under the age of twelve competing. These little girls, like their older counterparts, are painted with makeup and dressed in stunning, often revealing costumes. They are paraded around in front of a panel, to be judged on their beauty and talent, which is what many parents say it's all about. But parading children around like adults, to be viewed as sex symbols, does more harm than good for these young girls. Society's acceptance of child beauty pageants enables little girls to grow up with the idea that in order to be successful, to win, they must always be beautiful.

Some parents put so much pressure on their children to win these competitions that often times they are punished if they don't win a competition. The stereotypical mother of beauty pageant contestants will do almost anything short of murder to help her child's chances of winning the crown and pushes her child to spend hours rehearsing. Pageant mothers are quick to point out that Little League parents are also very involved and sometimes resort to violence.

While beauty pageants send out negative messages such as an "impossible standard of beauty" to all of America, they also suggest something far more harmful: racial inequality. The majority of Americans today are Caucasian, which naturally suggests that the majority of pageant contestants are also white. In 1984, the first black winner was chosen as Miss America, Vanessa Williams. Due to an unfortunate past scandal, the crown was taken away from Williams, but her replacement, Suzette Charles, was also black. Both these women were African American, but both had white ancestors. They both received a lot of criticism because they were said to have "fine-boned" features that matched the "white" ideal. In fact, only one African American pageant winner actually fit the black ideal, Marjorie

Vincent in 1991. Vincent had very dark skin and a full figure.

One major reason why there has been only one "black-black" pageant winner is because of a difference in the bodies of different races. According to an article by the American Dietetic Association, blacks have a disproportionately high risk of obesity because they have lower resting metabolic rates. Furthermore, the *New England Journal of Medicine* points out that black people of either sex generally have greater bone mass than whites and a higher fat mass as well. The article notes that men and women of Asian descent, on the other hand, have both lower fat mass and lower bone mass than white people. Because of these differences in body shape on both ends of the spectrum, many minority women who compete do not win based on the "white" standard of beauty which prefers tall, unhealthily skinny women. For black contestants who generally have higher fat mass and bone density and a lower resting metabolic rate, their bodies are not viewed as beautiful.

In a culture of thin body shapes and sizes, which are for the most part unchangeable, minorities are generally held back, which is why fewer African Americans previously entered the pageant. Many did not want to be judged by a different cultural standard, particularly based on their image. According to researcher Richard Strauss, "In general, African American women do not perceive overweight as unhealthy or unattractive. African American women also report more positive feelings about their bodies and less concern about body weight than white women."

With a more culturally diverse nation, many more African Americans, Hispanics and Asian Americans are entering the pageant, which accounts for a rise in ratings for networks. This seems rather ironic considering that the same minorities who are now entering the pageant are also at a genetic disadvantage based on their body shapes. However, it has been noted that the majority of entering contestants are "black-whites" and "Hispanic-whites" with body shapes similar to whites. But with a rise in diversity, the pageant may be providing a way for immigrant and outsider groups to enter the mainstream.

History, however, would suggest that immigrants will not be successful. According to Neimark, "Unfortunately it is at the smaller local contests that the clash of immigrant culture and mainstream America is most clearly seen. In fact, some local competitions seem to exist precisely on that fault line, providing a stage on which to battle out cultural assimilation in the arena of beauty." At local levels the pageants ask immigrants who they are and how much they are going to adapt to the mainstream culture. One winner who had to adapt to the mainstream culture was Bess Myerson, Miss America in 1945. She was and still is the only Jewish Miss America to be crowned. Myerson looked like the stereotypical Jewish person, she had dark hair and a somewhat larger nose. In society today, a large nose would

Daniel Becchetti

Laura and Me

My life changed that summer night. I was in the basement of my best friend Laura's house brushing my teeth and getting ready to spend the night like I had a hundred times before. When I was finished, I turned the faucet off and overheard Laura's older sister, Margo, and her friend, Stephanie, talking in Margo's bedroom at the end of the hall. Stephanie asked Margo, "Why is Danny brushing his teeth in your bathroom?"

"Because he is spending the night."

"Danny and Laura still have sleepovers? Aren't they getting a little old for that?"

"My mom said that this is probably the last time."

My heart sank eight inches at that moment. Are my ears deceiving me or is Laura's mom, the woman who has, for the last nine years, shared parenting responsibilities for me with my birth mother, putting an end to our friendship? Did I use up the last punch on my slumber card at Laura's house? Am I the kid that the moms in the neighborhood don't want their kids to hang out with? Is this because I spilled orange juice all over the kitchen the last time I spent the night? Maybe my mom and Laura's mom don't like each other any more? I couldn't figure out why I wasn't welcome to sleep there anymore.

I was born on March 14, 1983. My best friend, Laura, was born roughly 14 hours prior to that time. Maybe it was the extra 14 hours of experience she had on me that made her realize that it was becoming unacceptable to have co-ed sleepovers at the age of ten. Anyway, since the time that my mother allowed me to walk the block and a half to Laura's house until that night, Laura and I hung out every day.

Every day that there was no school, I would call Laura at noon and say the three most important words of my pre-pubescent years: "Can you play?" After the phone call, I'd hop on my Huffy and pedal over to Laura's house. I usually arrived at her front door about 45 seconds after I hung up the phone. From there we would go outside and search for something fun to do. When it rained we would make boats out of toothpicks and race them in the water rushing next to the curb. I can still remember the rules we had for this game. If your toothpick boat got hung up on a pile of wet leaves, you had to count to five and then you were able to put the boat back

in the water to try and keep going and hope the other person got stuck too. We would play that until it got dark or the rain ceased.

There was nothing at all strange about the relationship between Laura and me. She was, by her own definition, a tomboy, and for that reason we did boy things. We shoved firecrackers in bullheads' mouths, played guns with the entire neighborhood as our private war zone, and soared on our prized bikes off jumps into the pond behind her house that even fish don't dare swim in. We were just two kids that loved having fun and spending time with each other.

We seemed to get along so well because we could have the best time doing the strangest things. We invented a favorite game of ours that we entitled "Dodge Cars." In the official "Dodge Cars" rules manual, in order to get a point you had to stand in the intersection of our two residential suburban streets and do anything in your power to get cars to stop. The process involved many elaborate schemes. My personal favorite was what I called, "Danny faking pain by pretending that he fell off his bike." This plan involved me writhing in pain next to my overturned bicycle, with accessories like ketchup used as fake blood all over the street and my face. The ketchup always made the neighbors stop, which is why I liked it so much. Laura's favorite tactic in "Dodge Cars" was what she called "Corpse on the side of the road." I don't think I even need to explain that one. It looked exactly how you would picture it. There was always a big celebration when we got a car to actually stop, unless it was one of our parents, in which case we were usually taken to our separate houses, locked in our rooms, and forbidden to ever play that game again.

We never needed or even wanted toys or video games because we could have much more fun playing with things we'd find in the world around us. One time we found a grocery cart at the end of her block and rode it all over the town for a month. Another time we collected paper milk cartons for three months in order to make a boat. When we had collected enough, we used five rolls of duct tape to attach them all together, as watertight as we junior engineers could, and attached them to a big sheet of wood. On our first test if the watercraft was sea-worthy, we took it out into the pond in her back yard. We had navigated the ship halfway across the lake when we sprung a leak. Our masterpiece had failed us! One of our pontoons was completely submerged, and we were going under fast. In order to save our lives and our boat, we had to jump in the pond, grab onto the raft, and swim it to shore.

The summer days I spent with Laura were the most fun and free times of my life, and we have had so many great memories that I could never remember them all. However, the fun times didn't stop when school started in the fall. Between the months of September and June, we had to adjust our playing schedule to accommodate elementary school. Every Monday

through Friday I would pack my peanut butter and jelly sandwich, potato chips, and Twinkie into my brown lunch bag and walk to the bus stop. But I didn't go to the bus stop that would pick me up at the end of my driveway; instead I walked a whole block to Laura's bus stop. We always showed up at the bus stop at least fifteen minutes before the bus was supposed to come and played around-the-house tag until either the bus showed up, or the mean man whose house we were running around yelled at us to get off his lawn. Every second we shared was an opportunity to play and be carefree.

After school, it was the same as any weekend day. I would get off the bus at her bus stop and we'd go to her house and play again. These times usually consisted of constant snacking, television watching, and card games. We would play cards every way that we knew how and for hours on end. After the game was finished, we'd turn it into a fierce card throwing fight. Finally we'd pick up the deck and make a house of cards. We were putting Parker Brothers and Milton Bradley out of business with our wild imaginations. The only worry in my little head those days was whether or not my mother was going to yell at me when I showed up late for dinner.

I was always aware that I was a boy and Laura was a girl, but it never mattered to me. We just treated each other like brothers, or maybe sisters? It struck me that we didn't look at each other differently because of our gender on a fall day after school when we were eight years old. It was getting to be that time of year when you fold up your shorts and take out the pants for the cold seasons ahead. We were playing outside and, of course, wearing shorts. In order to stay warm we had to keep really active. Anyway, we were on her big trampoline and competing in one of our favorite pastimes, slap boxing. Slap boxing is a test of strength, endurance, and courage. It is fought very much like boxing only with open hand slapping instead of closed fist punching. We were in the middle of a hard-fought duel when I saw Laura's smile turn into a scowl and she screamed, "That was a fist!" Naturally she counterpunched with a jab to my chest. I wasn't about to let her get an advantage over me like that so I start flailing my fists like I was Rocky Balboa. After about a 30 second spar, a bloody lip, a few bruises, and a swollen cheek, we both fell on the trampoline, gave each other the angriest look we could, and then just burst out in laughter. I can't explain why both of us reacted with laughter after what was, to this very day, the only fight either of us had ever been involved in. We just knew that we couldn't ever be mad at each other. Maybe we were both happy that the little adrenaline rush kept us warm for a little while. I don't know. I just know that if I ever hit a girl I would not be able to live with myself, but boxing with Laura seemed okay. Kind of like how it's okay to tackle your brother whenever he isn't paying attention.

Looking back on the final time I spent the night at Laura's house, I know that that was the day when our relationship changed forever. Before that night I had never dreamed that the fact that I was a boy would prevent us from doing the things we liked to do. Even after that night we still hung out almost every day for the next two or three years, but at times it felt different. Sometimes I didn't ask her to do fun things because I was afraid that maybe we weren't allowed to do that either. We even started making other close friends. She became friends with some girls, and I got my first good boy friend, Dustin, who strangely enough was born roughly 14 hours after I was. I never again asked Laura to spend the night at my house, because I was afraid that my mom or Laura's mom would tell me the thing I already knew. I didn't want to hear the words that caused me so much pain again.

With each passing year Laura and I progressively spent less and less time together. We have different interests now and are very different people, but I still, to this day, consider her my best friend. However, I often wonder what would have happened if our parents would have let nature take its course on our friendship and I continued spending the night.

Maria Kambanos

Martine Natasha Johnson

Josie

I could feel her heart
pounding against my hand.
I could feel my own heart
pounding against my ribcage.
It lasted forever.
It lasted a millisecond.
I don't really know how long it lasted.
I just remember the unevenness of her breathing
and the gentle thump-thumping of her heart.
I remember feeling her heart stop; her breathing cease.
No.
That's not right.
I remember feeling her heart beating,
her chest expanding and collapsing.
And I remember feeling her heart not beating,
her chest not expanding and collapsing.
You don't feel things start;
you don't feel things stop.
You only feel them occurring,
and then you feel them not occurring



Joshua Tange

Maria Kannianen

Two-week Smoker

She watches the wisps of smoke rise in the crisp air as she blows the carcinogenic smoke from her nostrils. She shouldn't smoke, she knows it, and she's tired of people reminding her of it. Two weeks ago, she discovered that she was pregnant. Two weeks ago, she began smoking. She denies a direct correlation, but admits that something indirect is possible. She had smoked sporadically for years. She never bought a pack for herself, not until two weeks ago. She would smoke cigarettes offered by friends, and would eventually buy them an entire pack to make up for her cigarettes from the past year. It was pointless to buy her own. They became stale long before she ever smoked them. Camel Lights were her favorites. As a freshman in college buying cigarettes for friends she had learned the key phrase: "Camel Light 100s, hard pack please." She never bought cigarettes for friends who smoked Marlboros; she didn't like saying the brand name out loud to strangers.

She leans on a bridge overlooking the Souris River as it hurls itself through Minot, North Dakota. She never did make it out of the state, but that doesn't bother her anymore. She drops the cigarette butt into the river, and the rail she is leaning on squeaks in complaint. It shifts suddenly, and she abruptly moves away from the edge. She watches the still-smoking cigarette butt hit the water, and wonders what it would have been like if the railing had broken and she had followed it into the water. Butt, railing, belly flop. Her body full of metal and water. Would she feel it?

Shaken, she reaches for another cigarette. As she lights it, she drops her lighter. Bouncing off the bridge, it too surrenders itself to the muddy waters. The Souris River, or the Mouse River, depends on who you ask. The signs all say Souris; it sounds better, although no one remembers what it means. At least she was able to light this cigarette. Lighter, railing, belly flop. Or would she hit head first? If she were knocked unconscious, she wouldn't be aware of the drowning sensation.

She watches the cigarette burn for a few minutes before putting it to her lips again. Watching the burning ember distracts her enough that she doesn't really notice walking off the bridge back to the riverbank. She sits in the brown grass of autumn, glad to find a spot with no trees. The sun doesn't last long enough; she never sits in the shade if she can help it. She

props one arm behind her and closes her eyes as she points her face at the sun. Perhaps today the searing white light will cleanse her, take those thoughts away, the thoughts of railings and river belly flops. She knows better, she really does. Just like she knows she shouldn't be smoking. Asthmatic, pregnant.

Pregnant. She'll like the idea eventually. She'll be thrilled by the time it's actually born. Now, she doesn't know where to start with planning. It's not her life now. Her decisions won't be about what's best for her. Perhaps that's why she feels so guilty about smoking. It's bad for the baby. Forget that for now, it is the strand on which her life seems to hang. She's not sure why, and she wouldn't admit it even to herself, but she actually needs to smoke. She needs to be able to focus on something, to be fascinated by something, to be able to depend on something that will be consistent. Even consistently bad. It's not as consistently bad as her thoughts about the river, the railing, the belly flop, which are consistently terminal.

She knows what her parents will say; she can hear the knowledgeable monotone. It would be easier if they would shout at her and she could shout back and it would be better once they were all hoarse. If she wasn't ready for a baby, they'd say, didn't want commitment, what was she doing with a guy? She won't tell them that there were several guys, that she was just beginning to enjoy life again, that she finally admitted that she liked sex, that she had finally let herself enjoy sex. Lots of sex, lots of stories, so many good memories. She had finally changed her balance of good and bad sex memories. She hadn't chosen the bad memories, but she had chosen to make good memories that would be better to remember than the bad ones. She had lived with only them for almost three years. She refused now to live in terror, to relive horror scenes over and over. Better to make a new movie. Her own movie, her own sex scenes. She was beginning to believe that she really was the director, that she had the control she wanted, that she had the power to choose only the good.

A Zippo. She'd always wanted one but could never justify it to herself when she didn't smoke. Now that she smoked and her cheap lighter had given itself to the river, she saw no reason to delay the purchase of a Zippo. She would need to use the car lighter for her next cigarette anyway. She gingerly rose to her feet. Her back ached in anticipation of the next seven or eight months and she was irritated. Her back had never been the same since the accident, and pregnancy wasn't going to help.

She walked towards her car, rubbing the hand that bore red imprints of dead grass and a sharp pebble or two. Her car was parked reassuringly where she'd left it. The sight of it always made her smile. It was her baby, a silver 2001 Mercury Cougar. She had wanted one ever since they came out, and had only been able to finance it three years later, August of 2004. She realized with a jolt that she had always referred to her cars like her

male friends talked about their cars. Her baby. Would the baby that came from within her evoke the same joy? the same delight? that certain pride? She smiled.

There it was. Her first positive feelings about her pregnancy. She knew herself well enough to trust that she would love the idea eventually, but the wait for positive emotions often seemed to delay their arrival. She was always afraid that the good feelings would never find her. Jubilantly, she patted the hood of her car as she approached and impulsively kissed the top of the driver's door. She didn't bother, as she usually would have, to glance around sheepishly to see if anyone had noticed.

As she unlocked the door and sat in her car, she pushed the car lighter, impatiently waiting for it to pop back out. When it did, she lit the last cigarette in the pack and leaned back into the perfectly adjusted seat. She'd had this car for almost a year, and she was still amazed and enthralled by it. It should be even better with a baby. A real baby. First steps, first words, first—which comes first? Steps or words? She'd have to do her research, and soon.

Pleased with these new thoughts, she started the car and ejected the KORN CD in favor of her old Blues Traveler CD. She wanted something cheerful to fit this lightheartedness, even if the music was produced by a nasty-looking fat man who reminded her of her Uncle Eddie. She always wished she'd never seen John Popper on late night TV. She released the parking brake and shifted into first, eager as always to feel the car's instant response to her slight pressure on the accelerator. She drove aimlessly, caught up in the music and her cigarette and her happiness about truly good thoughts. They had been the first for weeks.

The CD played song after song, she lost track of time, place, river thoughts. She forgot about buying a Zippo. She didn't reach for a cigarette. As if unconsciously anticipating the next song, she began to wonder when she'd last listened to this CD. It had been awhile...weeks? She was pondering this as song six began. A beautiful chord on a guitar, then "You...with your hand outstretched..." a ballad she had instantly and always loved. It was in this car, with him, almost two months ago now. "Finger on the key..." She was powerless, powerless to do anything but keep driving. She couldn't stop the song and its effect; she knew at the first chord that her happy thoughts were already a memory. He had dedicated himself and this song to her. "I amyo—oours...yours...." She had believed him, if only long enough to result in something that was by far the closest to "making love" that she'd ever known. It had been truly amazing. But now, it had ruined her movie. She had let him direct one of her sex scenes; she had willingly, eagerly relinquished her usual distance during intimacy—her control.

She hadn't controlled the trick he pulled that night in the car. She did-

n't check in the light to make sure he had put the condom on. Later was too late. She was on birth control, so it never occurred to her to get a morning after pill. She was irritated at first, only because she'd have to get tested for disease. She never trusted what they told her, boys who want sex will say anything. He claimed that he was clean, which he was. Lucky for him. Lucky for her only until she missed her first period. It had to have been him, all the others had passed her condom inspections. She was meticulous; she knew the risks, and most of them were hers.

The ballad was over, another upbeat song was playing now. As it launched into a particularly cheerful chorus it caught her attention again and she reached blindly for the CD player to end the now-grating music. As she drove on through the silence, she remembered her destination. Cenex. Cigarettes and a Zippo. She drove on, toward her next pack of Camel Lights.

Chris Kiefel

King's Rule

“We will not quit the palace.” A simple enough statement by the king. Law to those under his rule, foolishness to those who knew better. He looked at various people around the room in turn.

“We shall rally in the courtyard. Inform the peasants of the army’s approach, get them inside the castle walls. Raze the fields, we’ll not have them fed while attacking my kingdom. Take stock of our rations. Prepare the archers and catapults. Inform the wizards; tell them to be ready.”

The king had a knowing, but mad, look upon his face. The chancellor was slow to react on such orders. A general snapped into action. A wizard stood by, silent. Stewards looked on, eager to do any service. The queen was absent. Soldiers marched off.

The wizard stepped forward. “This is madness, your highness. Their army is beyond us, we have no chance.”

“And what are you, a common soldier? You’re a wizard! You shall crush them! My kingdom will not fall.”

“Magic begets magic, your eminence. They have wizards too, and thus, I am nothing.”

“Bah, our might has stood for thousands of years, unchallenged, unbeatable. Don’t stand there and presume to tell me about failure. It is impossible, we shall be victorious.”

Bowing his head, the wizard walked over to the seeing mirror. Around and around he waved his hands until the image began to swirl into a multitude of colors. The image reformed.

“This. This is what we are up against.” Thousands upon thousands of soldiers were arrayed in the mirror. A field of armor, horses, and soldiers with swords at their sides. The ground seemed to move as they marched past, each soldier looking insignificant in the whole.

The king took in the image and smirked. His confidence was not being shattered, but rather reinforced by the coming blood. He was not about to be intimidated by his enemy’s numbers. Rather, he was bent on the driving urge to cause as much damage as possible to his would-be conquerors.

“Yes, they are many, but they are but soldiers. We have a castle. A strong castle. Built by my ancestors, they were strong too. And I am a strong ruler. We shall not be defeated. Now, get along on your business,

you have much to do.”

The chancellor stepped forward, breaking his silence. His calm reflected years of experience. “He is right, sire. You’ve bore my counsel for many years. You know I would not lie about such grave things. The fact is, they are just too many, they’ll tear right through us.”

“This is mutiny!” The king stood, an imposing figure even without armor. His face took on a sad expression, pleading for support. “Will you not stand with me, after all these years? Will you not direct my army with me? Will you not protect our past, the very reason you stand here now?”

“I will better protect my past by being alive to tell it.” Taking a deep breath, the chancellor sighed, “No, I will not stay, and neither should anyone else.”

The wizard stepped forward, looking the king in the eye. “I will not stay either. I shall direct the army and the people to flee.”

“You will do no such thing! My people will stay and fight! I will not leave, and neither will you!”

The chancellor took another step forward. “I’m sorry, old friend, the people come before you. If you truly care for them, you will concede and do this for them. Let them live.”

“I will stay, *chancellor*.”

“Then you will die!” The chancellor yelled with a great deal of force. Taken aback, the king fell into his chair, all the while staring at his most trusted friends, tears forming and dropping from his eyes. Had he made a mistake? His friends held a dire conviction that could not be denied. He owed it to his people to be a brave ruler. But, of course, their words spoke true.

“Then perhaps you are right. Long have I ruled, but soon no more.” A confused look reigned on the king’s face. “Soon I shall be renowned for my short-term memory. I will have lost a kingdom and will not have known where to find it.”

The wizard sat beside the king to comfort him. “You have made an invaluable decision. You will be known for saving all your people.”

“Will I? History tends to be harsh on rulers who let their kingdom be conquered.” His eyes were clouded, unfocused, and tired from such responsibility. “Now, please go make your preparations. Thank you both for your insight.”

As he watched the chancellor and wizard walk away, he saw them both smile reassuringly. He mourned his own lack of strength and power. He knew his light had faded and no fire would ever recapture it. He paced back and forth, wondering about many things. Long ago, his kingdom thrived. His army was large enough to deter any enemy. But no longer, he had failed them. The king took a jeweled dagger from his side. Staring at its richness and crafted authority was like staring into the past.

"I was a great man, and I do care. But my power has faded, and thus I am a coward." His final thoughts as he plunged into darkness.

The chancellor and wizard walked back into the empty room, save for a dead king lying at the foot of the throne.

"We could have stopped him." The wizard voiced, mostly to himself.

"He wouldn't have wanted it that way. He knew he would die either way. Fight and we all die, run and only our king dies, whether physically or in the eyes of his subjects. Come, we have preparations." The chancellor lead the wizard out of the room, and they set about their grim task of saving the people and leaving everything behind.

Talia Bailey

Perception

Fantasy lies before you,
and reality looms ahead.
Which one will you choose?

A bright star in the night sky
falls without warning.
Make a wish.

Laughter ruined at the sound of a yell
drowning out words.
Why do you cry?

Escaping is reality
if the only joy you find
is not real.

Don't know what...

We just have to find the best of the best. Our goal is to encourage...



Stephanie Rollefson

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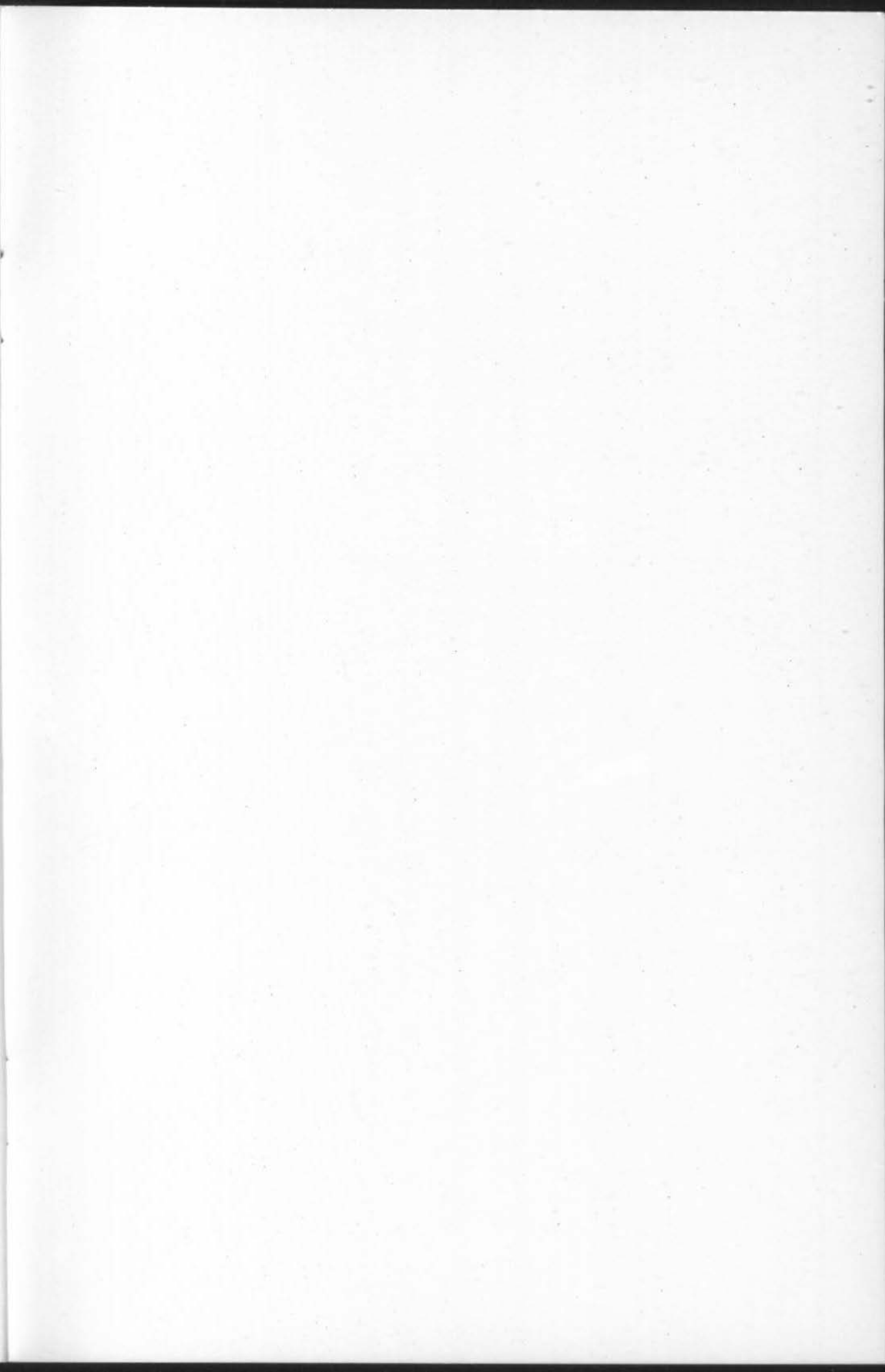
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Thank you,

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