

Donna Baier Stein

THE FROG KING

This is one way the adventure begins:
someone blunders, a golden ball drops,
water ripples in a brick-ringed pool.
From deep springs under a linden tree,
a knobby head emerges to see the bare-footed
woodlander. The frog lifts its eyes to stare
at the straw-haired maiden in newsprint.
Ugly, ugly, she cries, and not for me.

Do you want the ball? the puddlesplasher asks.
*Just promise me I can sit at your table,
eat off your plate, lie in your bed.*

Missing her plaything, she says, okay.
He dives, finds the pretty toy
and throws it in the maidengrass.
The devious princess runs to her father's court.
Then comes something crawling -- *splash, splash* --
up the marble stair. A knock, she opens the door,
closes it quickly. It's him. Daddy holds her
to her promise: makes her take the waterplover
to table, where he eats heartily, and to bed.
Picking him up by two fingers, she throws him
against a wall, hard. *There, you nasty frog!*
But then he becomes a prince
with affable eyes and seductive lips.

Next morning a coach arrives
with eight white horses
harnessed in gold chains.
In the back stands
faithful servant, Henry,
three iron bands
laid round his heart
to keep it from bursting with grief.
As the prince and his bride drive away,

there's a crack: Henry, overjoyed
his master's back. So imagine:
a thing small as a dropped ball,
an accident really, leading to kismet.

You already have most of what you need:
Every daddy is a king. The tree:
any mid-point between dark and light.

A gold (immortal) sphere (perfection):
a soul to toss around. And then the luminous well,
where wishes are still answered.

Later that winter, walking hand in moist hand
with her love, what did the princess find
but ripe red strawberries under the snow.