

Zack Puente
Professor Peters
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Frog Island

The valley sky filled with black smoke like ink on a wet page. The slightest sliver of blue creaked underneath the smoke just at the horizon; it seemed to gasp and suffocate under the weight of smoke. The mountains were on fire, helicopters carrying water beat the air. Sarah took a breath and felt the particles of ash sit upon her tongue and settle in her lungs. She tasted it, her childhood and knew the cabin was gone. The porch rotted with gashes from years of chairs rocking in place. The couch where her older brother found the black BB gun with the viper carved into its handle. A cabin almost fallen apart, burned instead. A kind of relief washed over her.

Her home was built in the fifties. The sink, filled with dishes (a majority of them with a power ranger in action pose), sat under a small lookout window. This, Sarah imagined, was so the wife could look longingly out the window while the faucet water pruned her fingers. She told Hughie to stay within sight of the window, she didn't trust that friend of his.

She shut the window and continued washing dishes. She thought about calling out for her son, Hughie, to come back inside. She didn't like the idea of him breathing this air, but before she could come to any definitive decision a loud clank came from the backyard and a clash of something falling to the concrete patio. Moments later, dish still in her hand, Hughie burst the screen door open, sobs

already falling from his face. "I killed it momma. I'm sorry." From the window she saw his friend from down the street running home.

She collected him in her arms. He was still small enough to lift and sit upon the counter. She shushed him. He had such a delicate, sensitive face. Very much like her father's and so, very much like her older brother, Ron's. This chilled her. "What did you kill?"

"The frog. With the shovel. I don't know why, momma. I wanted to see what was inside, I'm sorry." Hughie said and she saw a flash of yellow in her mind. A yellow fabric blowing in the wind occupied her mind with such vividness she felt detached from the kitchen. The detachment was whole and dizzying. The yellow fabric, she could see now it was a dress, wilted into corpselike pale gray.

"Its okay, baby."

He buried himself in her shoulder. She thought he might suffocate. Breathe, she patted him on the back, breathe, child. "I'm sorry for the frog," he said, a choking, little whimper.

"I know you are."

The day was Friday. Sarah's husband, Hughie's father, came home on Fridays. He worked up north the weekdays, lived on beer and "peanut butter jells" and old dvds in his trailer. Usually, Hughie could be found on Fridays peeking through the blind's, waiting for the headlights of his truck to illuminate the window, but he was still sulking in his room. I should be the one sulking, Sarah thought, I had to scoop the thing up and throw it away. Poor frog. Her husband laughed, still in his

orange sweater and brown work pants, when she told him. He laughed and kissed her for the first time in five days, his stubble scratched her.

"Killed a frog? With my shovel? Did he at least eat it?" He said as he shaved and pounded the little hairs into the sink. Did he eat it? Sarah winced. He was kidding, but she hadn't told him that Hughie had acquired a new nickname, "Ewy." He had eaten a grasshopper in the center of a circle of kids on the blacktop.

"Stop it, I'm worried for him."

"Me too, that's good meat. We should have raised him like an Indian. Use up everything."

"I really am worried for him."

"He's just a boy, he's just a bored boy. When I was a boy I melted plastic jugs onto anthills. That was playtime."

"Very nice. I'm just afraid for this cruelty towards animals."

"Maybe he'll become a scientist. See? That wouldn't be so bad."

"This is what I am talking about," she started, knowing that any reference to "this" came from an argument weeks prior, an argument he had likely forgotten. "You're gone all week. That's fine and all, you have to make money, but the world doesn't stop when your truck leaves the driveway. He does this kind of stuff all the time and it just reminds me."

She stopped herself, left the room. He wouldn't follow her, he was shaving. Sarah had never told anyone. Not to say she hadn't been asked, but she could never quite explain it. The vocabulary to express it all was not with her; the details they demanded from her. Couldn't they have just been happy to have found her and her

brother? She'd considered returning and the thought always pained her stomach terribly, like a cat kneading her from inside. She knew the place was burned, the cabin, the surrounding forest. When the smoke clears and everything is ash and black sky, she thought, would Frog Island finally reveal itself again?

Hughie sat in his racecar bed, tears falling and smearing the apology letter he was writing to the dead frog. Sarah wondered whether she would have to throw it in the garbage for it to reach the frog. She smiled and then inwardly shamed herself before sitting with him.

The young girl knew the cabin was too far back when her brother's walking staff became a snake.

"There is something in that hole," Ronnie tapped on the ground around the burrow. He looked like a blind man finding his way. He pretended he could not look in the hole himself. "Look into it, would'ja?"

The young girl said she would not, snakes and little foxes hide in those holes and their bites are death, or worse than death, tetanus. The young girl never checked under her bed for inky beasts with glowing eyes and fangs dripping with saliva. She did not suspect monsters hidden within her closet disguised as a scarf or jacket. She feared tetanus, lockjaw. In her nightmares, her screams were kept trapped by a mouth forced shut. She feared lockjaw, and her older brother Ronnie.

"I don't care about tetanus," Ronnie said, and he didn't. Rocks pierced the girl's knee when she fell to the ground. Walking staffs, Ronnie discovered, can be

used for lashing. Anger, like a trapped spice, burned in her throat. She wished for fangs or the jaws of a wolf to clench around Ronnie's ankle.

With her palms flat on the dirt, she peered into the hole. First was the darkness of the empty hole and then was the darkness of her eyes clasped shut as dust peppered the air. Snake! Teeth, like a guillotine, the young girl bit her tongue. It was as though everything in her body tensed until she felt like kindling wood.

Snake! It was the face of snake that propelled from the hole with the same pointedness as the pellets from Ronnie's bayonet-adorned air rifle.

Poison, was how the girl heard her brother's laughter. Shrieks of arsenic and spit bellowed from Ronnie as he pulled the staff from another hole. Her blood was termites crawling in her skin.

Walking staffs, Ronnie discovered, can become the face of a snake.

Between the trees, and just beyond the marshes, the boys ran with damp, blistered feet. Long stretches of their day had passed in the chasing of bullfrogs and tattering of their clothes. One of the boys, Ronnie created a dagger from chipped stone and thick sticks. The rest of their day and into the night was devoted to hunting unruly beasts in the forest. None of the three boys possessed any knowledge of hunting, but each could repress compassion enough to find and kill any creature they happened upon.

Pull back from beyond the marshes and come to the shore of a small lake carved and filled by snowmelt and kept full by a concrete dam. On the shore a young

red-haired girl stood in a yellow dress spotted with sunflowers. She walked towards the water; the damp sand filled the spaces of her toes. The drowsing sun lowered under the trees and enriched the strawberries that fell from her head in a million strands of hair. A light, lively atmosphere of gnats hung over the surface of the lake. Her feet dipped into the first of the water, cold, and the bullfrogs, anxious of her arrival, dived away. Tadpoles escaped under her steps.

Across from her a dwarf island of grass and a single tree at the tip of a grade sat in the water. The boys, like conquistadors with missing teeth and grimy cheeks, claimed it at dawn. Frog Island they called the little island. They named it after the previous inhabitants who were captured, killed or forced into amphibious refuge after the invasion. The boys, as masters of the island were also lawmakers with a specific, intolerant ideology. Girls were not to set foot onto the Island. Any female trespassers would be condemned to frogs and tadpoles, even a snake if they could get a hold of one, in the underpants.

The girl in the yellow dress moved fast through the water but quiet. Her yellow dress hadn't even taken to sinking, but followed in her wake on the surface. No shouts were announced at her back. The boys had certainly gone farther from the marshes where the animals were comfortable. Water touched her knees now and still her yellow dress did not sink but floated full circle around her. She smiled and wondered whether the boys would still want Frog Island after a female reclamation. She saw rocks on the shore of Frog Island. Excellent rocks to skip on the water and even better for protection against stone-and-stick-dagger wielding boys. She moved on the tips of her toes, no longer stepping but doing small mud-

ballet hops. Her dress sank and then she stood on Frog Island, unimpressed and defiant.

She launched rocks into the water from her place in the grass. The sun drifted an invitation to the moon and the sky waited in that half state of day and night where the clouds of salmon pink stretch. Crickets strummed and the flow of water sounded like the secrets mountains tell. It was peaceful. It was damn boring. The girl, her dress still damp, collected a handful of pebble rocks, stood to her feet and underhanded them into the water as a 'so long Frog Island.'

Behind her the water stirred much louder than the splash of pebble rocks.

A quick girl, "Leave me 'lone! I've got every right to be on the Island," She held a stick in one hand and a stone in the other. She'd heard that these instruments were fine tools for breaking bones. "Just 'cause, I'ma girl doesn't mean I can't throw, er swat at you."

"No doubt, little yellow girl," said a voice, guttural and without a body to match it. The girl in the yellow dress was not one to cower, even when daylight cowered to the moonlight, so she ran to the island's edge. Two rounded eyes like swamp bubbles peeped over the water. The eyes blinked separately. Knowing not what to do, but not wanting to stare at the water much longer, she casted the stick towards the wading eyes. After a reasonable splash the water settled and the eyes were gone, had receded. Still, she held the stone level with her head.

Quiet, even the bullfrogs as far as the marshes took silence in their throats.

And from the water a great lash speared towards her; it tugged the stone from her hand. Now the water moved again, around a figure that rose from the

shore. The moonlight touched the skin of the figure different than it would one of the boys. The skin of this figure had sheen, a gloss. Also, it was green, like moss. Paralysis kept the girl in place even as the figure, a large frog who walked on two legs, advanced onto the shore of the island. He spit the stone into the lake. It skipped on the surface.

Each of the frogman's steps on land seemed a conscious effort not to hop. He walked with pace, and his legs dipped low with each new step. His arms folded over a protruding stomach for what looked like convenience. He approached the edge of the island until his back was to the girl and his head turned upward to the moon. He did not show any signs of having a neck. His eyes, those swamp bubbles captured the light of the moon and held it like gems hold the greed of men. "Yellow girl, sit with me?" His language had come far from those poor creatures the boys chased around each morning, but still the frog, no matter how on two feet, could not escape a croak in his voice.

"Okay," said the Yellow Girl. His invitation to sit freed her legs to move and she did towards the grassy center. She sat and speculated.

"All questions are necessary." He turned with a pivot of his spine and sat next to her. Sitting was awkward for him. He hunched forward and held his shins in his hands.

"You're a frog--so why're you so big?"

"I am off many years, and of many songs. I sing every night to the moon of sky and water."

“Moon of water? There’s no moon of water,” she said. She looked at her amphibious companion. When he breathed his throat filled up, but besides his respiration he kept still as though imitating the moon. In her life she knew only one moon, and no one taught her differently. She looked at the great white plate set upon the blackness of the night. She’d sure know if there were two of them.

“No?” The frogman pointed to the water, it was dark as the sky, but shone a crisp reflection of the moon.

“That ain’t a real moon.” The Yellow Girl laughed, and arced a stone at the still moon of the water. It became ripple rings.

“That moon is real to fish, frog, and pollywog when we look up from the bottom.” Frogman said passively and waited for the ripples to spread far and for the moon to return to the surface.

“But, you can’t really touch eet or nothing, so its not real” The girl held to her defiance judging that an old frog must be a patient frog.

“You, Yellow Girl, have touched the moon in the sky?” He looked at her, the light of the two moons gleamed from his glossy eyes. There may have even been the slightest twitch of an ironic smile. “I honor both moons with song, and they honor me life and strength for in water and on land.”

He stood, and she stayed to the ground. All quieted. The chirp of crickets subsided and the croaking of bullfrogs hushed. The frogman steadied one palm upon his stomach and placed an open hand to his mouth. He took a breath that enlarged the entirety of his torso, his shadow grew twice in size. And the frogman began his hum. It resonated as though from the lungs of the Earth. The girl’s teeth chattered

with the vibration. Rhythmically he pressed his stomach and a new bass atone pitched out between the two moons. The creatures of the pond joined. Those unable to sing, the fish and the insects, complimented the orchestration of frogs and trebling crickets with enthusiastic dance.

The girl watched on as fireflies from no place but the stars themselves whisked through the night-dark like luminescent conductor's batons. The fish, with moonlight skipping from their scales hopped from the water. The eccentric fish who migrated from the west did these great dives and flips and others just came up for the fresh air and jive tunes. The frogman signaled the Yellow Girl to rise from the ground and pitch her voice to the vastness of the forest as she had done with the stick to his eyeballs. She imitated the frogman, pressed her hand to her abdomen and forced the voice of her soul to rise to the moon of the sky and glide lithely over the moon of the water.

Then it all fell, the crickets, the roar of the bullfrogs, the fireflies burned out, and the fish drowned. The conductor, and the composer, the Frogman gasped and the moon fell from the sky and before all was dark the girl saw a dagger pressed into his back. Ronnie churned it deeper. The frogman croaked as the last of the light from the sky, and the water in the lake, drained.

"I killed it!" Ronnie cried out in the blackness.

"The hell was it?"

"Was a monster! Didn't you hear it howlin,'" Laughed one of the boys, the spit of success sputtered from his mouth.

The Girl hid in the darkness, not wanting frogs and pollywogs stuffed into her underpants.

The violent death of The Frogman brought an unnatural silence to the forest. Thunder, brought by the gray clouds that followed, came bearing no voice. The crash of thunder she felt in her feet and chest did not carry the sound that was like Ronnie throwing rocks at car doors. Frogman inhaled the life, and the color, of the forest with his final gasp. There it wilted inside of him.

Distanced from the site of execution and behind a tree, the girl watched the boys. They trotted through the mud of the drained lake. A death rhythm of the fish, gills flaring for lack of water, slapped the Earth. This broke the silence. The boys collected the fish in their pockets and wrapped them in their shirts. Buddy Boyd the long haired boy launched a writhing fish like a football to the boy whose name she did not know. The scales sliced the receivers hand. The air was thick like the drowsy smoke from her father's cigars. It was heavy with the haunting smell of death. The stench began at Frog Island and wrapped itself around the entirety of the forest like a vine about a toppled statue.

The Frogman lay there still, in the sand of Frog Island, his orb-like eyes empty but staring out. His death came as swift as inspiration and left him with his hand pressed under his stomach as when he sung his songs. Can a song be a soul? The Girl wondered. The memory of the night before was a reflexive one. She pressed her stomach and cast her voice into the empty lake. The sacked and pocketed fish burst from the grips and vices of Ronnie's boys. They scrambled to collect them

again. The fish heard her, but did the boys? Did Ronnie hear? If he did, he went on like he didn't. Planted in the grass before the mud he tore the legs from a grasshopper and whistled the tune their mother hummed to them before bed.

Bright yellow drops leaked from her dress and dripped into the soil from where she crouched. Buds of yellow flowers speared upward from the drops and seemed to bear a thousand winter seasons as they shriveled and blackened. With the color poured out, her dress came to resemble the gray clouds that masked the sky overhead. Those clouds were full, impregnated with tears that would not flow.

She felt swollen, with defeat. It was like a sponge, absorbing all it could before it began to leak. Her eyes began to water, to pour with tears. But with each whimper, she made herself aware of the sound she could possess, of the songs she could sing in memorial for a frog of many moons.

Again she pressed her hand to her stomach and breathed voice.