

Camp Polliwog
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San Joaquin Review Spring 2020

By the end of summer camp, the only matter that distinguished the boys from one another was who had licked the frog and who hadn't. It seemed a simple enough demarcation line, even though the frog was just some slimy old pond dweller. A Northern Green Frog to be exact. Nothing exotic or yellow or named with words like Dart or Harlequin, the kind that could take a chap out.

But even so, it had quite a reverberating effect on the boys throughout the summer. The lickers, although they would never be called that, at least not to their faces, had taken to each other. At first they all laughed and squirmed and agreed that the frog tasted exactly how the pond water smelled. Herby and musty, maybe a little like the latrine in the morning. Nothing too terrible. It was almost nice even. One went so far as to say that it tasted just like the water itself, how you sometimes get a mouthful when you're swimming in the murk and go under.

But none of the boys had actually swam in a pond so it didn't quite translate in the way he intended. It didn't matter because they had all licked the frog. They'd all been brave and heroic in the face of such a dare. Even that became a point of argument because no one, not even the weenie non-lickers, could recall the dare itself. Just that the weird dark-haired kid with the freckles produced the frog one night and set it loose in the middle of the cabin. They pounced on the frightened thing, cupped it in their hands, and laughed when it jumped against their palms to escape.

But they couldn't remember who went first, just that the boys had parted like the sea - the lickers on one side of the cabin, the non-lickers retreating to their bunks. It was a primal thing to put another animal in your mouth, to feel its racing heart beating against the soft tip of your tongue. As the summer wore on the lickers gravitated to the pond's edge, spending hours on its banks tying flies. Each of them fighting the urge to slip beneath the skin of algae and into the dark water below.

But they couldn't escape its pull at night. The frog dominated their dreams, his tiny webbed fingers steering them ever deeper, and they kicked their long legs through the water with a newfound familiarity. Each morning, the non-lickers ran out of the cabin with clear bright eyes and teased the lickers for spending their days collecting beetles and moths. Prodding them to run and paddle and hike as the slow creep of lethargy overtook their bodies. They teased them as their backs started to hunch, their eyes strangely wider on their faces from the night before. And not long after they appeared bulbous.

But no one thought to report it until one morning the boys woke to find a deep green pallor had imbued the lickens' skin. All of them crouched on their bellies in their bunk beds, burrowed beneath the thin blankets instead of stretching out into the cool morning air. The non-lickens, pink and fresh and wide-eyed, whispered to one another until the tall blonde kid with the rich parents dashed off to the infirmary to get the nurse.

But when she arrived, she didn't come alone. She pulled up to the cabin in the camp jeep with two men in brown fatigues. Massive nets hung from the back, along with a 55 gallon drum of water with a sprayer attached on a curling extension hose. The nurse entered their barracks and surveyed the bunks with a knowing eye. "Licked the frog, did you?"

But there was no reply. Just soft croaking from deep within their throats.