

CROAK



CROAK

ISSUE 4





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First printing edition September 2025.

Cover font: Neothic

Heading font: Trebuchet MS

Body font: Baskerville

For submission and publication inquiries please contact us at editors@croaklit.com or visit our website, croaklit.com

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Cover art: “Green and Serene” by Xiera Younce. *Mixed media*.

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ERIC FISHER STONE

HUMANS ARE GENETICALLY CLOSER TO LIZARDS

than lizards are to frogs,
toads burping in Permian swamps
still here with other amphibians,
mudpuppies whisking the gumbo
of ponds, newts rooting gullies for worms.

Renunciate monks lash their backs
with branches, envisioning
topdown hierarchies of God
over angels to people over snakes.
Dividing flesh from spirit, they ignore
crickets making love in barns, moonlight
buttering gold whiskers of hay
and the stock tank, where,
as three hundred million years before,
tadpoles pop from frogspawn
in the bog's moss-bewitched cauldron
to bud legs and toes, vertebrae
hardened from cartilage, a body
the same structure as Saint Peter's bones.

SYLVA KEEFER
CONNECTED



Fig 1. "connected." Digital.

MARGARET KATHRYN WARREN
SELF PORTRAIT AS TOAD

*“This morning when I woke up I felt good
because the sun was shining.
I felt good because I was a frog.”*

-Arnold Lobel, Days with Frog and Toad

I felt good
because I was a toad.
Raindrops plop-kiss my headtop.

I eat goulash under rooftop, alone,
or with toad friends + have chocolate ganache
dessert. I’m just a toad, but I love the wind’s sound.

I wear red gothic corsets with baggy black pants
+ a blue flannel on top—a secret fem suit underneath my toad
costume. Ears + collarbone studded in gemstones too.

Once I burrowed cold as wood frog, transmuted
self through frost into an aqueduct. My eyes + brain froze
solid. I’m so happy to be what I am, to return in the spring.

People look at me. Categorize
me based on appearance just like a toad
observing my bumps.

They see a woman, but always. Not a toad
shapeshifting, changing, gender
fluid. They expect a toad to give them warts

but they should expect toad wisdom, expect
us to know ourselves + let us be who we are:
impulsive frogs or wisdom toads.

They should know a frog can be a toad,
a toad can be a frog. It just depends.

AIMEE BROOKS

RECOIL

While Papa prayed for his papa in heaven, the country, the President, and for their dinner to nourish their bodies to His service, Jamie stared longingly into the plate of fried chicken. He couldn't wait to sink his teeth into the crackling skin, for the grease to coat his lips, and the Cajun seasoning to burn his tongue.

They usually only ate dishes like this on special occasions; flaky beignets with powdered sugar for when him and his little brother, Oliver, did good on a test, seafood gumbo with pieces of crawfish and whole shrimp for Momma's birthday, and étouffée for Christmas dinner. She would stand at the stove for what felt like hours, browning the butter and flour, whisking and whisking until Jamie was sure her arm would fall off. All the neighborhood ladies would talk about her roux to him like they were gossiping, their hands cupped over their mouths. Have you tasted Kathlene's roux? Darkest roux in all of Lafayette Parish. But he knew they weren't really gossiping. Gossiping was a sin.

Jamie liked to watch his momma cook, and over the past few years, she had been teaching him. He wasn't a baby anymore, like when he had started learning in third grade. He had been afraid of knives and the fiery heat of the oven against his cheeks when he opened the door to check the edges of a pot pie. He had been the one to lower the chicken legs into the grease and watch over them while they popped and bounced around until they reached that rich golden color he longed for. The thing about cooking was it was all about color, like paints in a palette or the leaves on the trees when they changed from summer to fall. That's how you knew it was going to be real good.

*

Jamie knew where their dinners came from, even though the knowledge gave him a strange feeling in his chest. When Papa wasn't at the oil field, he was out hunting to put meat on the table. He shot quail and ducks. The freezer in the garage was full of venison from the buck he shot last October. A few times, he had even brought home a gator and sold its skin to a backyard tanner just up the road.

It wasn't two days before that fried chicken dinner that he told Jamie it was 'bout time he started heading out to hunt with him.

He didn't have to spell out whose jobs were whose. Jamie could tell what his papa thought about him by the way he looked at him. "Take that off," he'd say when Jamie wore his momma's apron as he lowered potatoes into a boiling pot of water.

Besides that, he was small and weak. The jacket of his school uniform hung around his shoulders. He was always picked last in gym. He needed to bury his face in a blanket during the sad parts of movies. He was afraid he wouldn't make it through football tryouts the next year without serious damage, and he could imagine his papa's disappointed face on the sideline.

They walked through the soupy fields, Jamie's boots getting stuck in the mud as he scrambled to keep up with his papa, who had told him gun safety means walking in a straight line, side by side with your hunting partner. He didn't want to be holding a gun that felt as tall as him. He didn't want to practice in the backyard, shooting the empty cans of beer and beans. He didn't want the purple bruises on his shoulder from the recoil or to hear the ringing in his ears that lasted for days.

But he wanted his papa to be proud of him.

So, he lined up his sight, pointed it at the speckled bird with red around its eye, and fired. He smelled sulfur as he watched it drop from the sky into the field. He felt a snap in his chest like he had been the one to take a bullet.

As if by instinct, Jamie ran as fast as he could from the field and into the bayou, where the tree cover was enough to protect him from himself and all the feelings he shouldn't be having. He should have been a man now. He should have been able to keep his tears in until he was far away from everyone else, especially his papa.

The water was slow and lazy and green, reflecting the fuzzy moss across its mirror-like surface. He watched a distorted version of himself; little ripples making his puffy eyes look funny like a Saturday morning cartoon character.

Not much time passed before he realized he wasn't alone. Not just in the presence of something else, but stalked, surrounded. Annoying mosquitoes buzzed in his ear. A bird fluttered in the tree, reminding him of what he had done. He could see something moving just below the surface of the murky water, and he hoped to God it wasn't a gator coming to snap him up in its powerful jaws.

Of course, he knew the bayou was alive, but this was something else. He wanted his momma. He wanted to go home.

Just as he was about to head back to the house, there was a soft

sound and a slow arc moving from rock to rock. There were bullfrogs everywhere, and they were singing to him from somewhere deep within.

He saw them everywhere they looked, the little eggs floating in clusters on the surface of the water, the weird transitory forms like tadpoles with legs kicking in the water like they couldn't wait to get out, and the big old bullfrogs that looked like they could take out Missy, the family's old beagle.

He had to hold one, so he did. He scooped up one of the frogs and dangled it at an arm's length, watching its legs push and flex against the air like it was swimming. He was so enamored by the critter; by the translucence of its eyes, the sheen of its skin, the way its throat puffed up with air; that he didn't hear his papa calling his name. He appeared out of nowhere. No feet suctioning in the mud. No marsh plants crushed underfoot. Jamie wiped any residual tears off his face, frog still in hand, smearing mud with the back of his wrists.

"I'm sorry," Jamie said. His papa was carrying the dead pheasant by its feet, and its floppy neck swung with the light breeze. He sniffed a little and heard snot suck back into his skull.

His papa didn't respond for a while as he surveyed the area. The pond. The rocks and under the brush. The giant bullfrog quivering in Jamie's hands.

"There's nothin' to be sorry for, son. Nothin' at all," he said. He looked almost proud. The lightest flicker of a smile passed across his mouth for just a second.

Jamie breathed a sigh of relief.

*

Jamie calmed his fidgeting at the dinner table before straightening his back, bowing his head, closing his eyes, and clasping his hands. It was time to grow up. It was time to be the man his family needed him to be, the kind of man that made his papa proud; the kind stood for God and country, the kind that could shoot a bird out of the sky and watch it plummet to the earth without flinching or crying or running away.

"Amen," Papa said.

The family echoed.

His momma tucked long waves of hair behind her ears before gingerly placing her napkin on her lap. Oliver dug in, chewing huge mouthfuls of buttery potatoes, a little piece of corn stuck to his cheek. Though Jamie took his time, observing, trying not to appear to be too greedy, he was finally able to bite into that chicken leg and let his teeth break through the crisp batter and into the juicy meat.

“How’s it tasting, son?” His papa asked.

Jamie nodded in approval, though he thought it was odd he’d asked. It was usually his momma who asked about the cooking in that way women do when they know their food is good, where they’re clearly fishing for a compliment.

As Jamie let the flavor of smoky paprika, the sharp bite of cayenne, and the slight savory burn of the onion and garlic powder flood his mouth and heart and soul, he knew why this chicken leg was called comfort food. This gave him something that the plain cottage cheese and pieces of peach or celery sticks that his grandma ate to stay skinny could never provide.

All was well until Oliver let out a sharp yelp and spit a light brown ball of breading, meat, and saliva onto his plate.

“It’s moving!” He cried. “I think it’s still alive.”

And that’s when Jamie could feel it too; the heartbeat of fast-twitch muscles, squirming and flailing and writhing across his tongue and cheeks.

K
LET ME IN, PLEASE

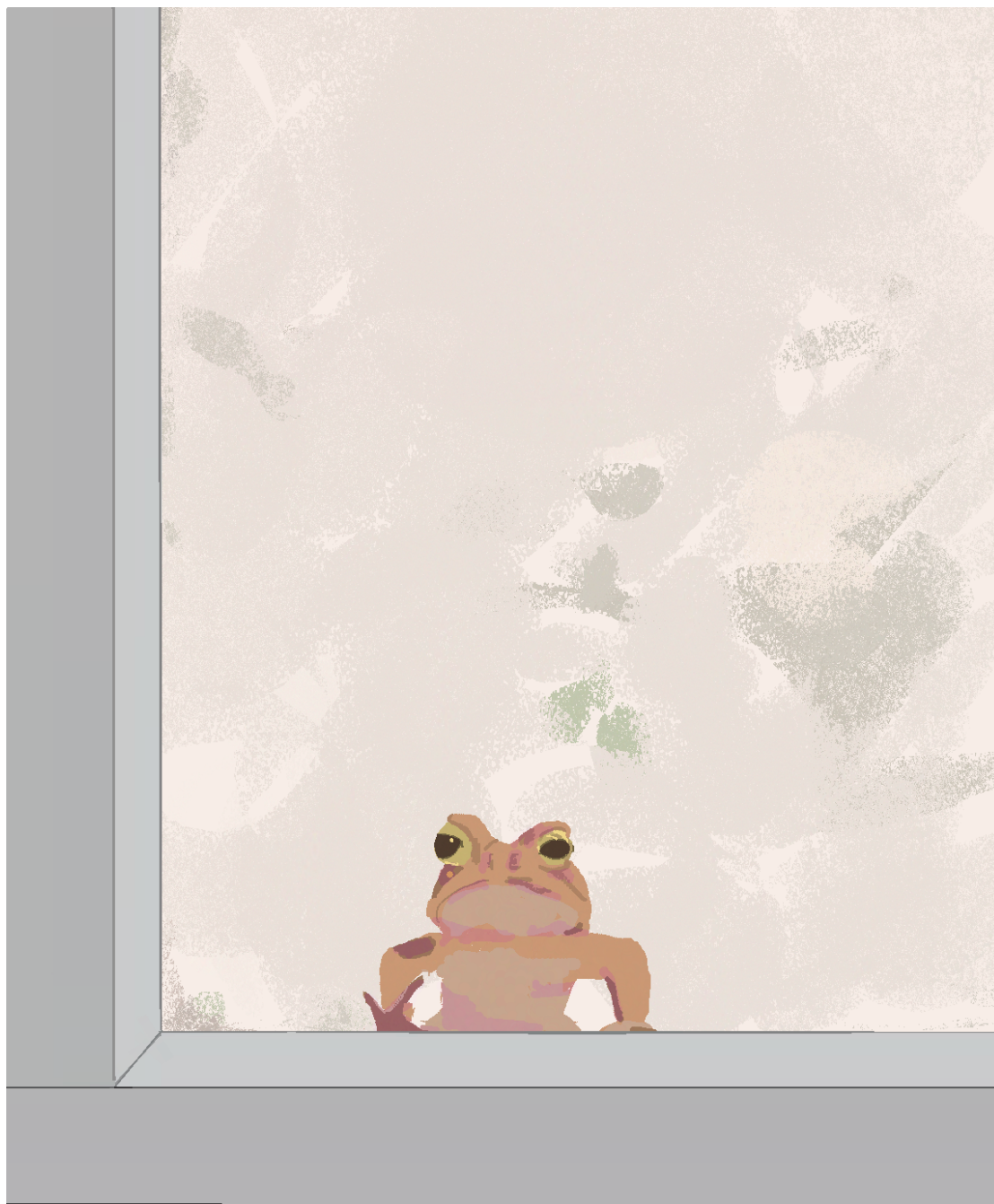


Fig 2. "Let Me In, Please." Digital.

GOLDA GRAIS

I'M SCARED OF FROGS

Everyone insists there's nothing to be afraid of.

Still, I stand in the doorway, struck dumb.

The frog sits on the concrete path. Impossible,
there shouldn't be any frogs so close to home.

Frogs made summers in Eagle River unbearable,

menacing in the grass, quashed into dirt roads with legs splayed flat.

Yet here one is on a concrete path in Northbrook, unbudging until
it will surely launch off, uninhibited. This is the concrete path

where my grandfather fell a year and a half ago,

like this is what he gets for waiting eighty-five years

to take that walk. My mother confessed over the phone,
a hushed tone, "I really thought he was gone." Instead,

he learned how to walk again, with a cane this time, but

never again for that long. Not down that concrete path,

or to the zoo, where he'd offer his shoulders for me to ride on.

Everyone else waits in the car, goads me from the doorway.

Please, it's going to be okay. It can't hurt you.

The reservation is for seven and we're going to be late.

I know frogs can't hurt me. It was always about the jump,
the suddenly gone, the plodding helplessness of my own two feet.

Please, he doesn't stand in front of the TV like he used to.

They're so small and stupid. I find myself missing things in advance

even when he's still here. How he folded his hands

behind his back, those placid hazel eyes gazing on.

Please, I can't get past it, the stupid frog refuses

to hop along, waiting for the worst moment

to spring. Even if I close my eyes and rush,

I know it's there. I can't help it. It's all I see.

RYAN CROSSMAN
AS WE DISSOLVE

the sight of your waterlogged, shelled corpse,
drowned in a puddle of rainwater, surfaces
the flitting childhood memories of picking
your shells from Oregon tree bark. your diaphanous,
crackling remnants, palmed carefully
in infantile hands, as i resisted the urge to pluck
legs from your old lodging. your chatter used to
mix with the croak and warble of pacific chorus
frogs. Like them, you stayed out of view.
An invisible symphony that accompanied
the setting sun.

i peer down, now, at your yellowed, plastic-wrap
wings dissolved in stormwater and wonder
if that was how you died. I resist again, to pluck you
from the water and examine your full form—
eyes a misty and fading red, telling stories
of the seventeen years burrowed with your brood.
tymbalic vibrations in your gut, did you hunger
for the light and breeze of spring? had i heard your song
before you were swallowed by this shallow pool?

i hadn't known
your eyes were red, or body black, until
now—you were so hard to find.

LAUREN M. CONNOLLY
GUS AND THE FROG

A lone frog is out this spring evening. He is ambitious with his loud croaks. Gus, our neighbor's dog,

(why do I know the names of all my neighbors' dogs, but not the humans?)

has decided to respond.

Alternating
croak,
bark,
croak,
bark.

The frog pauses. The dog stops. The frog croaks, Gus responds.

I am being serenaded by the most unlikely of duets.

GREG BEM
FROG COLUMNS

Frog
is
dead
but
Frog
is
egghead
in
sun
setting
over
a
new
pond
of
Frog

*

Blackhawk
Frog
of
home
of
paradise
of
wind
food
flood
of
Dairyland
call
me
Lorine
says
Frog

*

Frog
disrupts
the
music
of
the
swamp
in
exchange
more
noise
of
Frog

DYLAN GERMANN

THE GOOD PEOPLE OF RANA TEMPORARI

On the Emerald Isle of the world, past the harbors of Howth just south of the Kylemore farms—which usher goat cheeses from pastures to plates—and north of the Galway bay, hills rolled towards a shallow bluff and the tallest and nearest hill to the shore bore a small stream that broke among the stumps and roots of old pines. The bundle of trees diffused the pine aroma with the seawind, sheltering the good people of the hill. Every night, rain or shine they would sing from the trees’ hollows, croaking the merry tales of their exploits and their forefathers’ exploits. These good people were the rana temporaria of Ireland, the faeries that once disguised themselves as frogs and forgot how to turn themselves back.

At dusk, they gathered within a roots’ hollow. A great room with floating wisps of light big as a mote of dust, yet sizable enough for the frogs, and the walls were decorated with stolen wool and silk from weavers of Connemara. They drank the black stout of stream water, bewitched by the fae magic to be beer.

Standing on of the tables the oldest of the frogs spoke, “I say c’mere to ya, and I remember our forefathers of Tuatha De Dannan!

“Do yeh?” the throng asked with joy.

The old frog ran his hand across a beard of growing moss and croaked, “T’was always told to me, and told me by many voices, one of which was a fella who thought I wer’nt a Tuatha De Dannan, but I say I am. That no good story without a good fella ever told without a moral behind why it was told or how, and otherwise it’d be quite a boring story. If that is it was ever a story to begin with, I say, and not just a slagging thought.”

“Get on with it!” The throng yelled.

“I say, that no good person here is no less than our mighty Cu Chulainn, I say to ye. I know this true because of my adventures, to say that I think I am a strong fello, you’d believe me well enough by the words that I say because no mortal man ever done as much as me—by that right I see we as just right like them old spirit’s well.” The old frog pointed his walking cane out like a sword, he continued. “I tell ya, I once slew a proper warrior good enough to give the mighty Cu Chulainn a proper fright, and by that I tell ya no banshees or likes of our kin could shed a word at my greatness—because it was right. In

seeking glory I set out to the scattered isles of our western shores, and for that I never thought too much about the eastern shores neither—given I do like the glendalough loch. As I had well enough met the strongest fellos from the western hills and brooks, and I tell ya, I tell it proper without a joke. They were easy pickings for the strength of a frog. I tell ya, we are different cause the western folk can scrap and slew enough of what I seen.”

“Can they?” The frogs croaked.

“Of course they can!” the old frog smiled. “Cause I did myself! And in such a way that an island made way to move proper far from the mainland. On the shore I wandered in my youth, I tell ya, searching for a dear tale to tell in my old age, wandering with my sole companion—the greatsword of MollyCullen bogswood. Steel wrought blue by the water, and I tell ye, the blade double my size granted might by the water hags of five points across the lands. I ought to still have the sword today if it weren’t for the giant I slew, matter that I still have the hilt here, as it makes a proper companion to a good person as any.”

The old frog gestured towards his walking cane, and continued. “I say, I found at first from the distance titans larger than any giant I’ve witnesses on this earth, so with some great deal of curiosity I thought the likes of them were worth seeing. There they were, with bronze medals dangling. They saw me, small as the crumb of stale bread in their eyes, I say, the largest moved forward with tremors beneath his feet. A giant whose name I will not speak once nor twice because no good fello shall ever need know the names of which, less they feel their calling back to the green isle of ours. He says to me, ‘Don’t suppose yer right to be here little frog.’ I says back, ‘who’s to say I’m sposed’t be anywhere but I? I am a mighty warrior ye hear.’ and to that he says ‘you seem mighty small if anything, I’ll be killing you now by the way.’”

The room went quiet in anticipation, and the old frog held onto that silence for only a moment, “but when the giant leaned over to get a proper look, I jumped with all my might and my sword true! Cutting through his eye with such force that the shattered bones of his head made mountains in the sea. In great fright, the giants of the isle picked up their island and marched off into the sea, never to be seen again. Somewhere in the bone laden sea the half of my faithful companion now rests, I tell ya, damning the giants to never return. Let it never be said that the frog is of small strength for its stature, is all.”

All frogs cheered as good people, drinking heavily their stouts in delight, and the old frog was happy for his youth.

DORIS M.
TELL THE KID TO RELAX A LITTLE



Fig 3. "Tell the kid to relax a little." Pen and marker.

CHARLY FETZER
DAMP PANTS

Yesterday's rain still sits in the front yard lawn chair
that needs to be thrown out soon.

Ripped red and stained beige looked better
last summer.

Someone will probably sit in it later today and stand
wishing
they hadn't done so at all.

Summer storms have started
to move in a couple cities over.

Today
is light rain.

Not the kind to be upset about. The kind
the cows still eat their dinner in
and the frogs lay out and
sunbathe under.

Sometimes, it's this kind of rain
that teaches me not to worry about
damp pants –
but to sit in the front yard
and wait
for the lightning.

RACHEL TURNEY
FALL

September sunrise
Golden like the hay fields

Balmy red morning sky
Like the crawdads in the creek

Little bodies and pinchers
Hiding among the rocks

A coyote runs across the pastures
The mare watches wanly

Cotton spins above us
As we gather clover flowers

To string around our necks
And braid through our hair

Frogs hop away from us
Marsh cattails rip open

Downy seeds quickly spreading
On the wind

Like the baby chicks that are now
Pullets, almost grown

Their youth a memory of
April and the start of spring

The cold air moves in after dinner
And we embrace the fall night

ELLE SKINNER
COZY



Fig 4. "Cozy." Digital.

SYLVA KEEFER

32 FASCINATING FACTS ABOUT GLASS FROGS

1. carnivorous, they eat small insects and arthropods
2. they're arboreal—that is, they live in trees
3. they will even eat other, smaller, frogs
4. yes, you can watch their little hearts beat
5. a natural spectacle, sure to impress children everywhere
6. those that live in glass boxes often wonder if they, too, are boxes
7. males will lay their bodies over their eggs to protect them from intruders like wasps
8. my grandfather was a hoarder, once stole a bicycle from my dad and made it into a telescope
9. can you be angry, really, at an old soul that just wants to watch the stars?
10. my grandmother was an avid collector of frog-themed glass cookie jars
11. now: four jars for my dad, four for my uncle, three and ten for the sisters
12. i think, though i haven't counted
13. in the wild, they can live up to 14 years
14. why not one longer, you might ask
15. i don't really have anything to say about that
16. in order to turn transparent, they hide their red blood cells in their livers
17. most animals cannot hide their red blood cells
18. red list status: least concern/critically endangered
19. unsurprisingly, we are killing them
20. parental care is uncommon in frogs, which makes these guys special
21. many cannot grow larger than 25 millimeters
22. some find themselves kept as pets, like *hyalinobatrachium valerioi*
23. the lifespan in captivity of *hyalinobatrachium valerioi* is mostly unknown
24. 160 kinds. will this be enough?
25. we do hope they maintain enough genetic variance to be classified as different species

26. emerald glass frogs are even more beautiful than their namesake
27. most glass frogs do not have telescopes
28. additionally, we are unsure if amphibians understand most astronomical concepts
29. fun fact! you can see their internal organs
30. a group of frogs is called an army, though they seldom go to war
31. glass frogs almost certainly do not own bicycles
32. i think, though i haven't asked them

ANGEL GUNN

ARE THE HUMANS OK? REALLY OK?

@TRANSLANTIS



Fig 5. "Are the Humans Ok? Really Ok?" Pen on paper.

AUTHOR BIOS

AIMEE BROOKS

Growing up, Aimee Brooks had trouble telling the difference between a frog and a turtle. When she was three, she had a pet fish and another dubious creature. She does not remember if it was a turtle named "Frog" or a frog named "Turtle."

ANGEL GUNN

@translantis/Angel Gunn (they/them) is a communist zinester & illustrator on unceded xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətał (Tseil-Waututh) Nations' lands & waters. @slug.slut420 on IG, @translantis on IG and tumblr - frogs like salmon and butterflies embrace the holiness of change and transformation. Shout-out frogs for teaching us how to grow and let go.

CHARLY FETZER

Charly is an undergraduate at Eastern Washington University studying Technical Communication and Creative Writing. She thinks frogs are mysterious and loves their songs and wants to hold one desperately!

DORIS M.

Doris's artwork involves a character from a frog murder mystery story that Doris has been working on for the past couple of years.

DYLAN GERMANN

Dylan Germann is an aspiring writer and ceramicist, he has written a number of non fiction and fiction publications ranging from Americana to Irish Folklore, and ecological journalism. His relationship to frogs has been seen in the past through bull frog inspired Americana pottery, and presently it is expressed through the Irish belief that frogs are the wee faeries in disguise.

ELLE SKINNER

Elle Skinner is a PNW cartoonist who loves drawing comics and cute little guys. In her opinion frogs are in the ultimate category of cute little guy. You can see more of her work at elleskinner-justart.tumblr.com, art.mysky.net, or elleskinner.bsky.social on bluesky.

ERIC FISHER STONE

Eric Fisher Stone is a PhD student in creative writing, a GTA and tutor, at Oklahoma State University. He has three full-length collections of poems published, most recently, *Bear Lexicon* from Clare Songbirds Publishing House.

GREG BEM

Greg Bem is a poet and librarian in Spokane, Washington. He has fond memories of the frogs of southern Maine, where he grew up.

GOLDA GRAIS

Golda is a writer and artist from Chicago. Her works of prose and poetry have been published in *BarBar*, *In Parentheses*, *Pink Disco Magazine*, the *Scripps College Journal*, and *The New York Times*. She has a debilitating fear of frogs.

K

K is a horticulturist, ecologist, and herp enthusiast.

LAUREN M. CONNOLLY

Lauren M. Connolly lives and writes four hundred and sixty-five river miles from the Pacific Ocean, where frogs live along the river bank. She's published poetry and nonfiction pieces in a variety of publications including the *Expanded Field Journal* and *Mindfulness Bell*. You can find @lmbconnolly on Bluesky.

MARGARET KATHRYN WARREN

Margaret Kathryn Warren (Maggie) is a queer and disabled poet who writes about love and toads. They work as an adjunct English instructor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, where they earned their Master's Degree of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and Media Arts in 2024. Their work has appeared in *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Half Mystic Journal*, and *Bear Review*. You can find more of their work at www.maggiewarren.com.

RACHEL TURNEY

Rachel Turney is an educator and artist located in Denver. Her poems, research articles, drawings, and photography can be found in a few publications. Follow her on Instagram at @turneytalks, Bluesky at @rachelturney, or check out her website turneytalks.com.

RYAN CROSSMAN

Ryan spent her childhood in Oregon, chasing after wildlife in creeks, under rocks, and in her moms garden. While she outgrew that phase for the most part, she still longs to have a pair of pet frogs. After graduating from her MFA at Eastern Washington University, this is her first time jumping back into writing (despite being a fiction writer!) and would be her third piece of published poetry.

SYLVA KEEFER

Sylva Keefer is a student studying science and poetry in the desert. She enjoys passing time in libraries, watching the night sky, and searching for spadefoots after it rains.

XIERA YOUNCE

Xiera Younce is a skilled illustrator, surface designer, and animator pursuing a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) in Illustration. Their vibrant artwork features diverse characters that captivate viewers. A passionate frog lover, Xiera has a pet white tree frog named Twinkie. Discover their creations on Instagram at burned.milk.

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