

# amanda gaines

## METAMORPHOSIS

WHILE SHE WAS ALIVE, IT WAS HARD TO IGNORE THE FROGS in my grandmother's house. The wooden shelves were lined with glass figurines of grinning amphibians, stuffed and sewn green bodies. Webbed hands, drawn and painted, were nailed along the walls. Her fridge was covered in frog magnets, her coffee mugs ringed with them. Annually, she sewed frog-printed fabric onto my sisters' plush winter hats. When we visited, our mother would tuck us in on blow-up mattresses under quilted triangles where we could make out amphibians dancing, kissing, riding bikes. Her house reminded me of interactive museums we visited in school, hers dedicated to these slimy creatures. She even kept a few live and colorful tree frogs in a steamy tank for a couple of years. When they died, none of us were surprised. She was a negligent and irresponsible romantic, always courting the idea of a thing over the maintenance of it. She smoked from the time she was a teenager until the day she died in May 2017. Her furniture was coated in a thick layer of pet hair and cigarette smoke. Even as a child, I wasn't ignorant to the number of dogs who'd come and been buried only a few years into their stay at my grandparents' house. Shotsy, Charlie, Poopshka. There were others; I can't remember them all.

The frogs didn't stand a chance.

At first, my grandmother's house was a place I associated with snuck cups of coffee while my mother wasn't looking and truck drives squished between both grandparents. Her living room doubled as a themed hair salon when I sat cross-legged by her feet, letting her comb my hair back and twist my yellow locks into intricate, tight braids. I was always looking for ways to be touched. Even when she pulled sharply at my scalp for looking off at the television, I translated this attention into love.

Over time, we visited my grandmother less and less. My grandmother and mother fought often. They would go through spells of silence, each arguing that the other was insensitive and to blame for what would be labeled post-fight as a miscommunication. Before I was born, my mother left their home in Fayetteville,

WV, at seventeen, leaving her two little sisters to live with my great-grandmother in Maryland. My grandmother and great-grandmother stopped speaking long before I was born, and my grandmother, like my mother, left home young. My grandmother go-go danced, made and abandoned a lot of relationships due to feeling slighted or dissatisfied. I imagine her in pastel blue boots that sucked against her dimpled thighs while she shimmied across tables doused in spilled beer and strobe lights. I imagine her slowly stripping in front of a married man in his shagged-out living room, the man who would give my grandmother her daughter — give me my mother. I imagine her throwing back shots in the corner of a dive bar, wiggling her finger at a nameless suitor, walking to the bathroom, hiking up her skirt, and gripping the grain of a wall covered in Sharpied rumors as he pushed himself into her.

The narrative my grandmother held onto was that my great-grandmother didn't care enough about her children — that she was secondary to her mother's desires. Strange, I thought later, that not caring about children was a central tenant in the dissolution of my grandmother and great-grandmother's relationship. She herself had left my mother soon after giving birth to party among Coast Guards, one of whom she would marry and introduce to my mother as her father. She changed jobs and homes often, fell in and out of favor with her family over and over again. She was in constant motion. She was cruel and knew how to cut a person with her words, especially her daughters. She had mastered the alchemy of wearing a heart down.

But despite the stories, her episodes of glossed-over viciousness, my grandmother had one inarguable love: frogs. Frog plates, animated amphibian fabric. Tiny toads becoming princes once kissed by a blonde princess. Remembering my own grandmother's box-blond hair, I can't help but wonder if she saw herself in these royals. How romantic it would have been to be able to peck her problems and watch them transform — the physical ease of a kiss resulting in a fantastical metamorphosis into a better life. In these fairytales, the princess has innate power — neither labor nor effort is involved in getting what she wants. That ability to control the natural world is something I believe my grandmother yearned for until she died. But she never got her wish. Her frog prince life was a series of angry memories that were boxed up and forgotten by her family. The magic in her life was the ease with which they forgot.

Frogs have a long history of magical associations. Across the globe, there are stories

and myths that seek to understand or explain these strange creatures. They've been seen as symbols of evil and the uncanny. They've been depicted as stupid, narcissistic creatures obsessed with self-preservation in works like *La Grenouille* and *The Battle of Frogs and Mice*. They've been associated with both fertility and fragility, and they've become symbols of resistance representing the weak and helpless, according to philosopher and historian Bernd Hüppauf. They're often described as possessing magical powers. Hüppauf notes that the perception of frogs as mythical beings has impacted the way they are seen in scientific spaces. It gives them, he writes, "an unwitting persistence of meaning."

I met Jim in choir practice. We were both eleven, seated in red plastic chairs in a semicircle around our teacher's piano. I imagine I tucked my stringy blonde hair behind my ears as I watched the small cords of his arm clench as he punched his buddy's shoulder. His eyes were ice blue, his strawberry hair smooth. I thought he was cute in a short, svelte, boyish way that radiated both curiosity and malice. But we didn't speak until high school when we were both enrolled in a history course and I sat in a desk diagonal to him.

In that class, he teased me mercilessly. He delivered quick-witted, circular retorts and questions that I felt I could never keep up with. He was smart in a way that I wasn't. He operated in one-liners and soul-crushing comebacks while I got perfect grades on tests. I desperately wanted to be the object of his attention, and I was, to a certain degree. But his attention was not, as I'd hoped, born of affection. As he laughed at my expense, I felt my grandmother's hands in my hair, tugging. I fantasized about him resting his fingers on the top of my knee and was certain, at his touch, he would absorb my want into his skin, that he would become like the kind-hearted prince I read about in fairytales.

Frogs have a very sophisticated glandular system — scientists describe it as "miraculous." Unlike other vertebrates, they can rapidly heal wounds, even deep ones that slice through their dermal layers, without scars forming. They can, in other words, weather the worst and regenerate completely. My father used to say I could do the same: *You bounce back fast, kid*. I don't know if I agree with him, but it's been a month since P moved out and I haven't felt the heartbreak I used to when he'd abandon me. I don't lie in bed and cry, don't hit the torpor that leaves

frogs immobilized for months. I burrow in my work; I read, write. I visit my friends and family, skinny dip and cackle at the night sky and play board games and slice mushrooms for stir fry as if nothing happened. I worry that I am stuffing my hurt down, or in denial, so I give myself time and permission to grieve. But I can't seem to find my pain's quiet mouth. I drop in all its favorite vices like flies in a frog tank: beer, starvation, television. But though it eats, it remains silent. It's been a month, and, to my surprise, I've reconnected with Jim.

I was twenty-two when my grandmother passed. It had been eight or more years since I'd seen her in person. Much of my memory of her was faded, insubstantial. I didn't attend her funeral. She was unkind to me and my mother: I didn't have any respects to pay. After, my mother gave me one of my grandmother's gold brooches decorated with purple rhinestones to look like flowers, and a white, hollowed-out ceramic frog, just big enough to hold the brooch. This was my inheritance. I placed the pieces in my bag and told her I was sorry.

Now, twenty-eight and visiting home, I ask my mother if she knows why my grandmother liked frogs. She shrugs.

"Do you?" I press.

"No," she tells me. "Not really. I have some frog things of hers, but I don't really care for them."

I nod. If I'm being honest, I never thought much of frogs until a couple months ago, revisiting memories of my grandmother. Most of my experience with the critters happened calf-deep in the creek down our hill or outside our back door; me, plucking one up from a slick rock or a swath of grass, gingerly running my pointer finger down its wet spines, and shrieking when it proceeded to pee on me. I'd heard several frog tales as a child: that touching one would give me warts, that they acted as witches' companions or were used in evil spells cast from cauldrons, the one about Grimm's Frog-Prince. My mother told me these were all myths. But still, I remember cautiously lifting a frog to my lips as a child, believing that warts were a risk I was willing to take to witness a prince sprout out from its limbs as it lay trapped between my small palms.

According to the Burke Museum, the story that kissing a frog could give us warts or make us sick is nothing but an old wives' tale. In fact, we are more likely to get a frog

sick by kissing it. Frogs have thin skin: our germs can get under it easily.

The frog I kissed all those years ago is most definitely dead by now. Did I kill him prematurely, my adolescent bacteria seeping into his skin? How ironic, that a frog can die from a silly little girl placing her fantasy on it, but can withstand having a leg sliced off by a bird's talon.

The Q & A on the Burke Museum's website reads:

*Q: What should I do if I find a frog?*

*A: Admire it, take a picture and let it go.*

I text Jim on a night P tells me he won't be home until late. It's been years, at least two, since we've spoken at length. I don't know why my mind goes to him as I pace the hardwood floors of my empty, hot, attic apartment, but it does.

He changed his tune slightly during our junior year of high school when a mutual friend told him I had a crush on him. He asked me to winter formal, where, before we sauntered into the blue-streamered gymnasium, dressed in a suit and cheap slip, we made out in his bed. At the dance, he saw me talking to an ex and left me there, taking my purse in his car with him. We didn't talk for two years, until he caught me at a party in Huntington after my freshman year at WVU. That night, I saw him walk up the stairs to the balcony where I was ripping three beers from a bong. I was newly single and hated my university. I had been mastering the alchemy of negligent self-care. But despite my drunkenness and melodrama, I thought he was still beautiful. The night sky was black and warm, stars visible even with the city lights. Cars honked while the sounds of Super Smash Bros. played from inside my friend's apartment. Spit and booze ran down my chin, and my eyes were lost and hazy. I'd been crying and Jim could tell. He looked at me like he wanted to help. He looked at me like there was hope. I stood close to him and pointed my finger at his chest, where, beneath his shirt and unbeknownst to me, he'd just gotten his first tattoo. He was wordless as he pulled his collar down, and I smiled at his weeping ink.

We started dating shortly after that and broke up a little over a year later, both of us twenty. We talked and saw one another sporadically across the years while I was getting my undergraduate and Master's degrees, meeting at 123 Pleasant, a now-defunct dive, and at parties, or talking from our beds, one hundred miles away. These interactions never led to anything, but, unlike the boy I'd known as a child and

teenager, he always tried his best to be kind to me. He had, from both up close and a distance, watched me grow up.

*Hey, I tell him now. Just wanted to let you know I moved back to WV and wanted to see if you would want to hang any time when I visit home.*

He replies quickly, and my heart swells like a bubble in a frog's vocal sac at his response.

*Hey man, that sounds nice.*

I am so lonely.

The next day he calls as I'm walking into a Kroger, trying not to cry. He tells me he's sorry to bother me, but that he's worried.

"I know something is wrong when you're reaching out to me," he says.

I tug at my swamp-green satchel and inspect the bruises on my knees I collect from bumping into walls, from kneeling on the ground — my private blood disorder made public. He's right. Something is very wrong. I can see that P is trying to leave me. We're in the early stages of what will be our last breakup. I tell Jim all this and he listens. He tells me how sorry he is. He, too, has recently gone through a breakup that left him feeling ribless, full of self-doubt and guilt. He tells me stories about his band, the people he runs into at the DMV for work, about his family and friends from high school, people I've long forgotten about. We talk about us, the goofy, theatrical kids we were. We talk about how we've changed and, in listening to another, notice the ways in which we haven't. How he sets up a story and delivers a punch line. How I get long-winded when talking about books and television. How we jokingly parry back and forth from a phrase ripped out of context. I laugh in a way I haven't in what feels like months. Open mouthed, deep, guttural. Reflexive. We talk on the phone for five hours. When eleven o' clock rolls around, I don't want to get off. I feel like a child again, on the phone with their best friend after getting home from school. But I feel bad for keeping him. I haven't eaten or slept or drunk alcohol in days, but tonight, hearing Jim's voice curl through my phone speaker, my muscles relax and my eyes grow heavy.

"I can stay on until you go to bed," he tells me.

I thank him but say I'll be fine. There is nothing I want more than to do this, but I let him go.

The least faded of my memories of my grandmother comes from middle school. She's driven up from Fayetteville, North Carolina to visit. On her last trip up to us, she

brought me a sixty-pound computer. I loved the gift, spent hours on AOL messaging my friends. It came as no surprise, however, when the computer stopped working a few months later and sat collecting dust in my bedroom until my parents threw it away. When she visited this time, she asked about the computer. I looked at my mother, who ran her hand through her hair as she told my grandmother its fate. My grandmother got up and started packing. I retreated to my room, and she screamed at me from downstairs. Her voice was sharp, sharper than my mother's, even at her angriest. "Ungrateful brat," she yelled at me. "That's what you've raised," she told my mother. I don't remember my mother intervening as I hid in my room and seethed, afraid. Did she really think I, a twelve-year old, could lift that monstrosity and carry it to my father's truck bed?

I don't remember if she stayed or left after her outburst. I could search my mother for details, but, if I'm being honest, I don't want to remind her of yet another time my grandmother poisoned us. But I did ask, after my grandmother died, if my mother missed her.

"Yes," she replied. "Of course."

There was something behind that *yes*, something like relief. I imagined a potion coursing through her veins: blade-crushed grief, powdered regret, and slivers of comfort, splashing against her glass heart. A handful of sliced frog legs.

I projectile vomit on the glass windshield of my car on the way back home to Morgantown, the Appalachian city where I spent most of my adulthood. I'm returning from visiting Jim in Hurricane. I haven't stopped crying since hitting the road. I listen to Father John Misty, my face contorting as my stomach contracts. I have reached a new threshold of pain and am hovering precariously on it — a frog on a lily pad. The night before, Jim and I had our first miscommunication. Or, rather, spat. My pain's quiet mouth has finally opened, spewing undigested spaghetti against my steering wheel.

The day prior, we sat on the patio of The Loud, a music venue in Huntington. String lights glowed while twenty-somethings sitting at picnic tables lit up around us. I was uncomfortable upon coming in. It was my last night with Jim, and I didn't know any of the people who kept coming up to talk to him. I nodded along to jokes I could only half-hear, stared at the bright mural painted onto a brick wall. I ordered myself shot after shot, hoping to loosen up, to impress these people that Jim seemed

to surround himself with. Jim introduced me to a fellow singer who mentioned playing at 123. I saw my opportunity and leaped.

“Why don’t you make some videos?” I asked him.

“I don’t care about doing that,” he replied.

I cocked my head. “Do you promote your music at all?” I pushed.

He bristled. “Not really.”

“Have you looked into touring?” I asked him.

“No,” he replied curtly.

My hands tingled. I was disappearing into myself. “Why?”

“Because,” he told me, “I don’t want to.”

I couldn’t understand — why pursue an art if you don’t want to make it your whole life? The person I was really trying to confront in my quasi-interrogation, was myself — my own shame at making gods of the things and people I love, my fear-driven reactions when, inevitably, these gods failed me. I am, to my disgust, like my grandmother in this way.

Jim suggested we go inside. We cashed out and walked silently to the car. When we got in, he looked at me, disappointed.

“Hey,” he said gently. “That made me uncomfortable. When someone tells you something, you should take it at face value.”

I nodded.

As we cruised through a construction zone on the highway, I looked out the window. Orange lights whipped by us. I clenched my jaw as tears slid down my face. Jim wasn’t being cruel; he was just being honest. But his honesty, and my behavior that night, ignited something inside of me that I had assumed I’d lucked out of dealing with in the month since P’s departure.

When we got into Jim’s house, I slipped off my dirty sandals and hid my face as I teetered to the bathroom. I closed the door, sat on the lip of the toilet and heaved, sobbing. My eyes reddened and swelled. My nose ran. My mouth expanded like a frog’s as I crumbled to the floor, holding the porcelain sink, emitting sounds I hadn’t produced in so long they seemed alien. I thought of how some frogs, when in distress, release a high-pitched, open-mouthed call that sounds like the screech of an electric saw. In that moment, I, too, felt as if I were being split.

Jim tapped on the door, and I wiped my face. He led me to his bedroom and



picked up a blanket. His eyes were wide with what could have been concern or fright. Perhaps both.

“I don’t know what to do,” he whispered. “I can let you have the room so you can cry, if you want. But I don’t know.”

“I don’t want you to leave,” I replied, lip trembling. “I’m just sorry.”

He held me against his shoulder as I sputtered.

“I was supposed to be done. I don’t know what I’m doing anymore. Who am I going to be now?” I asked him. “Where am I going?”

Vasalisa transforms in the cold of night. She’s long been one of my favorite fairytale princesses, this Russian bad bitch. She’s an archetype, a stock character, but every iteration of her is different. I cheered for her as a nineteen-year-old when reading “The Sea Tsar and Vasalisa the Wise,” “Vasalisa the Beautiful.” She’s often written as a peasant girl who rises through the ranks. She’s consistently depicted as brave, resourceful, headstrong. She’s a helpful character — generally one prince (such as Ivan) rely on for help. She is almost never awaiting rescue.

It’s probably not winter in Russia, where she tailors the king’s blouse and bakes him an intricate loaf of bread carved with small cities and gates, though I imagine the castle grounds doused in white, the sky gray-blue, the citadel’s yellow windows dusted with falling snow. No, it can’t be winter. She’s first found in the green glades. She’s out past the castle walls, Prince Ivan’s arrow in her mouth: he must marry her. He curses himself and his ugly bride, his inhuman companion. He doesn’t know that she, unlike his brother’s brides, is the full package. That there is a maiden bidding her time inside the gathered green skin of her frog-self. No matter; Vasalisa trusts the process. She nods at his devastation, his doubt, at the tasks set forth by his father that he is sure she, a frog, cannot complete. She cracks her webbed knuckles and gets the jobs done.

Ivan never thanks her.

When Vasalisa, his frog-bride, shows up to the banquet as a blonde-haired maiden, lovelier than the sunrise, she captivates the court. She summons a lake and swans from her sleeves. She dances beautifully and Ivan gets ahead of himself. Now that she’s not an ugly frog, he realizes he quite likes her. He’ll keep her, he decides.

Of course. *Of course.*

He runs to her room and burns her frog skin. Vasalisa returns and sees her once-self in dust. She tuts. *If only*, she tells him, *you had been patient*. She flies out the window to Koschei the Deathless. *You fucked up*, she tells him. I emit a little whoop. Ivan stuffs his pockets with creatine and switchblades and deodorant. He runs after her, bumping into a little old man who drops a spool of yarn on the ground. The old man tells Ivan that the yarn will lead him to what he wants. The prince, being an impressionable man, believes him. Ivan meets several creatures as he treks after the strand — a bear, a hare, a drake, a pike — whom he wants to shoot but doesn't. Who knows what stops him; it isn't in his nature to be good-natured. Don't believe me? Look at Vasalisa. Maybe she, maybe a girl, the right girl, can truly change a selfish man.

Regardless, he comes to the hut of Baba Yaga. She's really not interested in his type. But he's desperate. He's following orders. He's being very good. He asks her hut on hen's feet to turn and face him, which is more than most men have the courage to do, even when in service of their own desire. The hut, being a woman's, of course, turns at his request. He walks in and finds the witch in a corner, wielding a broom and a switch, as if to spank him. Her nose, a bent branch. She sighs and rolls her eyes.

*Who*, she asks, *comes here? Where from? Where to?*

There's another wives' tale that if one places a frog in boiling water, it'll jump out. But if one places a frog in tepid water while incrementally turning up the heat, it'll stay and accept its slow death. I am relieved when I read the words of Dr. George R. Zug, curator of reptiles and amphibians at the National Museum of Natural History. "Well," he says, "that's, may I say, bullshit. If a frog had a means of getting out, it certainly would get out. And I cannot imagine that anything dropped in boiling water would not be scalded and die from the injuries." Harvard biologist and professor Doug Melton affirms this. "If you put a frog in boiling water," he says, "it won't jump out. It will die. If you put it in cold water, it will jump before it gets hot — they don't sit still for you."

I think of my grandmother. My mother. Me. We have all, in our own ways, clambered into and out of pots meant to boil us alive. We have jumped free from the steel drum of our pain, which has often been welded by our own hands. We have learned the hard way — burning one another and ourselves with insults,

abandonment, relationships and decisions that didn't serve us — that we can and will heal, haphazardly, on our own. We search for ways to heal our own wounds. We have never sat still for ourselves.

I've seen more tadpoles than frogs. I've watched as they wriggled down streams, picked up handfuls of their opaque bodies from muddied water. Pre-tadpole larvae in frog eggs can sense vibrations from nearby predators — snakes, wasps, the like. When they feel a threat close by, they hatch early to avoid being killed. The tadpole stage has no timeline: some tadpoles burst from their algae-eating stage within a week while others sway in their legless innocence for one or more winters.

My mother tells me I was a breech baby — that I tried to pummel through her, legs first and kicking. They had to put her down with anesthesia to cut me out.

She'd been trying for a child for years before she got pregnant with me. I balk at this information: she gave birth to me at twenty-four. How could she have been ready? I wasn't ready for her. Perhaps I am relying on conjecture and half-baked psychology at this point, but I think she wanted me because my father wasn't fulfilling all her needs. He was, and is, bad at explaining and showing his emotions. When things get hard, he checks out — goes outside to lift weights or sticks his nose in a book or lies on his side in front of a television screen. And my mother, like me, like my grandmother, feels deeply.

My mother, I believe, saw me as the manifestation of her unspoken wants. I was a product of her magic. For nine months, we were in close contact, touching. I listened to her sing *En Vogue*, felt her hand moving over the membrane that separated us. I imagine her telling me how much she needed me, how beautiful the world would become once I entered it. I imagine her thinking: I will give birth to a daughter who will keep me company. Who will hear and respect and love me unconditionally. She will understand me.

I would never blame her for such intentions. I've sought the same from romantic partners since hitting thirteen.

Unlike me, my mother was not wanted. My grandmother didn't see her coming and booked it as soon as she was born. My mother resents her for this, but she was so young. Twenty. She wasn't done living yet. Wasn't done moving. When my grandmother came back for her, my mother says she wished she hadn't. She doesn't

tell me how she imagines life would have been different without her mother, but I can see reels of possibilities run behind her soft brown eyes.

If my mother had stayed with my grandmother, I would likely never have been born. Or, if I was, I would be someone else — an Annapolis baby, possibly, with black ringlets that fell to my jaw and a proclivity for gymnastics or piano. Maybe my mother would have married a lawyer who put us in a marble house on a beach coast. Maybe she would never have grown close to her half-sisters, only to have the youngest one die at her own hand. Maybe she would have found a job as a child psychiatrist, as she once planned, and together, she and my would-be father would sit me down as I grew up to talk about my changing body and mood swings. Maybe I would have been a scientist who studied migration patterns of frogs. Maybe I would have no sisters, but brothers. Maybe I would have no siblings. Maybe I would not have grown up with a pit in my heart that always yearned for more. I would never have met P or Jim. I would never have been raped by the man whose face I will never forget, or fucked when I didn't want to be fucked by so many men who haunt Morgantown. Maybe I would have never drunk. Blacked out. Wanted to black out. Maybe I would have looked at my body, the thick health of my muscles, and called them as my mother now often calls me, *Beautiful*.

“You might give me meat and drink and a steam bath before asking questions,” Prince Ivan told Baba Yaga.

Prince Ivan was an asshole.

I hate this fucker, and it troubles me to notice that the story becomes, like so many fairytales, his rather than Vasalisa's.

Baba Yaga, as any good Appalachian mother would, went into care-mode at the sight of this lost boy. She bathed and fed him and put him to bed. While she tucked him in, he confessed he was looking for his frog-wife, Vasalisa.

“I know, I know,” said Baba Yaga. “But the problem is, she's hanging out with Koschei, who is...” She looked him up and down. She patted his leg. “Let's just say your energies are better spent elsewhere.”

Ivan sat up and huffed like an indignant child. “I will get her back!” he retorted.

Baba Yaga groaned. “Look,” she told him, “Koshchei is more than a match for you. His death is at the point of a needle. The needle is in an egg; the egg is in a duck;

the duck is in a hare; the hare is in a stone casket; the casket is at the top of a tall oak tree that Koshchei the Deathless guards as the apple of his eye.”

“I don’t get it,” Ivan sputtered.

Baba Yaga blew out the light. “Men never do.”

In the morning, Baba Yaga wanted to do yoga but couldn’t meditate with Prince Ivan moaning in the spare room. So she showed him the route to Koshchei’s tall oak. Ivan tells everyone that he walked a long time, but who’s to say? When he reached the tree, he saw the casket far out of his reach. Out of nowhere, the bear Ivan had wanted to kill but didn’t came up and ripped up the tree, roots and all. The casket tumbled out and shattered. The hare inside sprinted off, but, to Ivan’s luck, the hare he wanted to kill but didn’t appeared and ripped the runner limb from limb. Out from the dead hare flew a duck that flapped its wing as hard as it could into the sky. And then, of course, the drake who Ivan wanted to kill but didn’t swooped from above and tussled with the duck until it dropped its egg into the blue ocean.

Prince Ivan was inconsolable: even he knew he was no match for the sea. As he sat on the edge of the shore, the pike that Ivan wanted to kill but didn’t swam up to him, the egg in its mouth. Ivan didn’t waste any time (some might call this lack of plan impulsive), as he cracked the egg and took out the needle, bending the needle’s point this way and that. Koshchei the Deathless floundered, screeched his deathless screech, but it didn’t matter. Ivan broke the point and Koschchei the Deathless died.

Prince Ivan went to Koshchei’s white stone palace. How did he know where to go? Something is missing, as it often is in men’s retelling of victory. It’s said (who said?) that Vasilisa the Wise came running out to meet him and kissed him deeply. Ivan is purported to have scooped her up and carried her back to their home where they lived in peace and happiness as they aged.

I refuse to accept that this is the truth. Certainly not the whole truth. Or maybe I just don’t want it to be. Ivan *burned her skin*. His carelessness sentenced her to stay at Koschchei’s house for eternity. He was dismissive and avoidant and unkind to her while she was a frog.

Instead, I like to envision Vasalisa at the top of the tower, middle finger up as she watched Ivan jog down the road. I picture her sitting on the stoop, crossing her arms as approached her, muttering, “Well, well, well.” I want to believe that she punished him, at least a little. Maybe she said, “I quite like it here, actually. I don’t have to do

stupid tasks for you and your family to convince everyone to accept me. I get to play the lute and sew myself beautiful gowns and bake myself artisanal bread that I alone get to enjoy. What's the point of this? Of you?"

Then, the alternate ending: Vasalisa chills in Koschechi's tower for eternity, having supernatural parties where everyone conjures up pink-frosted cakes and flutes of champagne and animated animals. She hosts a dance every Friday that Baga Yaga deejays. She contemplates the cosmos. She sews herself a new frog suit and wears it on adventures to the bog and the countryside and never thinks of Prince Ivan again.

Scientists generally agree that frogs can live, at maximum, ten to fourteen years in the wild, but the frogs who live the longest are those who live in captivity. Captured frogs have been recorded surviving up to forty years. We can't ask tanked frogs if they are happy there, living out their longest life. But we can ask women. When I ask my mother if she is happy, she tells me.

"I realized early on that I couldn't rely on your father to make me happy. But it took me years to find places for me to go, people to connect with, and work that made me feel fulfilled. Sometimes, still, it hurts to look at him and know he doesn't see me."

I do not want Vasalisa to go back to Ivan. She deserves better than that. I need her to know she deserves better than that.

But Vasalisa does go back. I wonder if she assessed her options. I wonder if she, in fact, didn't have a choice. She might not have been able to reject the prince's fickle advances and desires and decide to live her life on her own terms.

But I can.

As a tadpole reaches the end of its development, it goes through metamorphosis. Over the course of a single day, it loses its gills and develops lungs. It sprouts front legs. It grows eyelids, eardrums, middle and inner ears. Its skin gets thicker and tougher, and its glands become functional. It loses its tail. Before metamorphosis, tadpoles eat constantly, devouring any- and everything. But almost immediately after transforming, their hunger is suppressed. Their internal organs, their guts, have changed.

Frogs are at their most vulnerable when going through metamorphosis. But afterward, they hunt: slugs, insects, crabs, worms, snails, mites, other frogs, small

mammals that can fit in their bellies, some reptiles — even fish.

Frogs, despite their seemingly harmless nature, are predators.

I've heard that every seven years, our cells replace themselves. We become new people. Our taste buds change, our skin sheds, our organs grow new linings. I'm twenty-eight, which means I have metamorphosed four times. My mother, around seven times. My grandmother, before she died, endured almost ten whole versions of herself. It's been just over seven years since I've been intimate with Jim.

Jim tells me that he can't stand the person he once was. I share his sentiment, but counter it with, "I can't stand the person I am now, either."

He cups the side of my face. "That," he tells me, "is not your voice you're hearing."

I know whose voices I am hearing. A chorus of frog song, a rippling opera of pizzicato cello strings and trombone thrum. My grandmother, my mother. All the men who have hurt and left me. They are so loud. But I am in there, too, in my mind's chamber. I am the conductor. I choose who gets the best solos. And for the last four years, I've given it, without audition, to P.

"I feel like I've completely regenerated," Jim says. "My brain. My heart. You know how our bodies shed every seven years?"

I nod. I don't know how to tell him I too have changed, but perhaps not for the better, so I tell him I am writing about frogs and growth and being saved from ourselves. He sits back and places his hand in mine.

"You are good," he tells me. "You are not a broken thing. You do not need saving."

And I know he cannot see all of me, all of my sins, my selfishness, my stuttering eyes and heart, my insatiable, tadpole hunger. I know that he believes what he says, that I am whole and never needed to be saved, the same way my mother believes

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what she says when she tells me the same thing. But I hear them now with clarity. I have not been using the right words, the right potions and practices, to get what I want, which is to be spared of unnecessary pain, which is to say pain that I choose to invite in, knowing what it will do to me. What I want is to live out my days in the tranquil waters of a familiar place, holding a hand that will stay in mine forever.

I know what I need to let go of: the binge-drinking, P. I know what I need to let in — myself, unencumbered by the fantasy of being everything to someone else. I won't wait another seven years to realize I can reach out, hold my own hand, and keep myself still.

In *Clinical Neurotoxicology*, MD Terri L. Postma writes that certain frogs, namely the poison dart frog, can cause paralysis when touched. It stores alkaloid poisons and toxins in its skin. Even though frogs are predators, they, too, are hunted. They're snatched by herons, hawks, fish, salamanders, snakes, raccoons, skunks, mink, and other bigger, stronger animals. For certain species of frogs, though, when eaten, their killer will suffer from swelling, nausea, and muscular paralysis. Sometimes, they, too, will die.

My grandmother, on top of her histrionics, was a hypochondriac. That's why nobody paid her any mind when she checked herself into the hospital weeks before she passed, claiming she was dying. The doctors ran tests, decided she had some mild infections, and gave her medication. She kept going back, saying that she wasn't feeling better. She called my mother, my aunt, anyone who would pick up and screeched, "Nobody believes me. Nobody is taking me seriously."

They all said the same thing: "You're not dying."

When she went into the hospital for the last time, she was light-headed. She was nauseous, her muscles swollen and feeling as if they were pricked by needles. She couldn't breathe. The doctors ran another series of tests. What did it matter to them that they just saw this madwoman? They were making a profit. When they found that, in fact, she had sepsis, they called her husband. She shivered in her bed. There was too much damaged tissue, the doctors realized. They puffed her up with antibiotics to slow the infection. But she didn't stand a chance. She died on July 16th, sixty-seven years old and ripe with poison, immobilized, at the end of frog mating season. Part of me wants to ask my mother if she was alone, but that, I know,



is a useless question. It doesn't matter who was there: my grandmother was always lonely.

We, like many other students in middle school science classes across the country, dissected frogs in seventh grade. I don't remember much, but I remember the cold, sweet smell of the room, filled with the slit stomachs of our amphibians. I remember being afraid, not of the frogs, not of dissection or wielding a knife, but of tearing their crepe-like skin, as if they were capable of still feeling pain.

The relationship between electricity and the nervous system was discovered through the use of frog bodies by eighteenth-century biologist Luigi Galvani. He measured an electric current out of one of their legs. In 1852, H. F. Stannius put a frog's heart to good use performing a procedure called "Stannius ligature." He proved that the ventricle and atria beat independently of each other and at different rates. The African clawed frog was used to great extent in labs as an antiquated pregnancy test. A woman's urine was injected into female frogs, and if she produced eggs, the pee-er was with child. The first frog was successfully cloned in 1952 by Robert Briggs and Thomas J. King. They used somatic cell nuclear transfer.

I don't know what most, or any, of these, methods or terms are. All I know is this: the frog gave way to discovery at the expense of their body, a practice I understand well.

My mother and I often tell each other that we love one another to the moon and back.

My father means the world to me. But my mother deserves the moon.

On the Orbiting Frog Otolith mission in 1970, NASA sent two unwitting bullfrogs into space for six days to test weightlessness. They apparently had a hard time adjusting at first, but by the final day of their expedition, they'd returned to a state of normalcy. I imagine the frogs in miniature silver space suits, licking the glass insides of their globular helmets, shouting to one another as they gripped hands, *What the fuck?* I like to think that the two fell in love over the course of their mission, that they spent their final day on the spacecraft dreaming up futures for each other back on Earth, misconstruing the stars as gnats just out of reach. It didn't matter — reaching stasis. They were killed when their capsule battery died. The mission, it turns out, was a one-way trip.

This is what it means to metamorphosize: to go elsewhere and return with new features that allow us to face an unfamiliar world, hands heavy with knowledge born from time and distance.

I ask Jim to visit the Frog Bog at the Newport Aquarium in Kentucky with me.

“Sure, man,” he says.

I ask him this because I am determined to find a way to shut this door of my history, and I think this frog exhibit might give me some semblance of closure. That in seeing their neon bodies pulse through clear waters, I, too, might push through the stagnant pond of my life and reach some cool, blue hole. That I might tie up all the loose ends that keep tethering me to one place, or rather, to the fantasy I’ve built up in my mind of how I should be. I could go to a river in Morgantown, or to the pond past my house where I grew up and hope to catch a glimpse of one or many in motion. Maybe I will do all of this. Maybe seeing the frogs at the Bog won’t do anything for me. But I hope they will.

I am unmarried — single. I do not live alone or own a house. I have no children. I do not have a 401k or a job whose paycheck puts me above the poverty line. But I have a new roommate who assuages my fear of covering rent and shares books with me. I have a weekly long-distance-friend-date with M, a kind and generous man I befriended before I left Oklahoma, that I look forward to with unsophisticated joy, where we talk about life and writing. I am working on appreciating and nourishing my body. I am working on cutting down my drinking. As I sit here, I’m sober, the smell of roasted tofu and cauliflower blooming from my stovetop. Maybe one day, I’ll abandon my bad habits altogether. I pray I won’t let them control me in the future, succumbing to a not-yet pain I can’t anticipate, but for now, this is a start I can be proud of. There is no part of me missing. My frog-skin — burned by thoughtless men and booze and starvation, but a stage of self I lived through, the evidence of which still exists — is real, because I remember it.

I am able to see my sisters whenever we like; the youngest lives down the street from me, the middle just a couple hours west. I have gone home to my mother more times in the last month than I have in the past three years combined. We play Rummikub and cook and paint each other’s toenails and hold one another and tell each other we are grateful our distance has collapsed. And, for now, I have Jim, who

loves me in a way that makes me feel like it's safe to revisit the past, to move laterally, to spiral and swim and leap wherever I feel like going, even if that isn't forward.

And so I ask him to see the frogs with me. We haven't gone yet. I don't know if we will ever go together. If we will be anything other than two old friends who care for one another in an uncomplicated way. But I know I don't need more than that. I know that I can't control or know the future. I will go, with or without him. I will see these curious beasts and ask them questions through the glass that they cannot answer. I will pull up a seat for the unknown, tell it to stay as long as it pleases, to lay as many eggs as it can in my bathtub. Some will hatch. Some will die. Those who make it will try their fucking best.

I know that endings and beginnings are not neat. We are not doors. And I don't think, if I'm being honest, that I want us to be. We might be palaces in the way we hold one another and our memories of each other, but if this is true, I want to keep my windows open. Gates unlocked. I want to hear the sound of my once and future selves splash about like hopeful toads in a nearby river. I want to draw the curtains and see the Appalachian mountain ridge jutting against the sky. I want to let the light come in. To leave room for surprise when a version of me I haven't met steps over the threshold, a live thing cupped between her hands. 