



FROGS (CROAKUS CALIFORNICUS)

THE HUMPING FROGS OF LOS ANGELES COUNTY

WORDS & DRAWING BY JIM McCAFFERTY

Our Correspondent in Southern California wrote recently expressing grave concern over the many frogs that had invaded his estancia. They were everywhere, and in great numbers, and were bathing (and dying) in his pool, climbing the pink cement block walls that are endemic to Southern California, procreating flagrantly, and generally making an unsightly nuisance of themselves. The family cat, a pampered creature not used to wilderness ways, was suffering from the excesses of eating frogs to the point of nausea, which didn't please the lady of the house, you betcha.

Somehow, with the fires, floods and earthquakes that visit Southern California on a weekly basis, a plague of frogs did not surprise me all that much. However, being a student of Nature and strange natural phenomena, I was able to allay his anxiety to some extent, as follows:

Dear Correspondent in Southern California:

Your anguish over the proliferation of frogs seems to be an overreaction. Frogs are Nice. See their happy smiles. A smile that goes from ear to ear has got to be a Nice smile, indicative of a warm, friendly personality. Have you ever seen a headline that reads "Rabid Frog Attacks 13 Year Old Girl in Park"? Of course not. (I'm not really sure that frogs have ears; in fact, they are probably not frogs at all but tree toads or spring peepers. Are you troubled with toads peeping at you?) (If so, what are doing that makes you so all-fired upset about a simple amphibian watching you do whatever it is?)

Fact of the matter is, to the great disquietude of the scientific community, there has been a blight of frogs. This is true. Frogs the world over are dying off, and frog populations are significantly down. The U.N. was about to launch a massive environmental study, but Bosnia came up instead and they decided to solve that first. In the over-all, the creatures of the earth that rely on egg-laying in their reproductive process appear to be in a kind of transitional and distressed period of unknown cause(s). For example, in Lake Apopka, Florida, the alligators have problems (ref. *Newsweek* article of six or eight months ago). Their penises are 30% to 50% smaller than normal. Whatever inspired the biologist who determined this to check it, or how he went about it, was not discussed. I mean, some clown with a tape measure slogging about in Lake Apopka measuring alligator dorks is bound to cause talk, and some anxiety in the alligator community. Seagulls in the Great Lakes are also reportedly in danger: boy gulls humping boy gulls, girl gulls with obscene tattoos on their upper thighs. I mean, gosh. There is, as I said, a considerable stir in the scientific community, and more than passing anxiety. Researchers suspect PCBs which leach out of plastic bottles, which in consequence causes one to wonder how baby bottles are affecting our grandchildren.

During my college years I was obliged to take Biology. The usual concern here is that you get to dissect dead frogs. This didn't bother me all that much except that they stunk of formaldehyde, and it didn't wash out. After Biology Lab, girls tended to avoid you. But the Biology text, in the section relating

to Sex (which I immediately turned to see if there were any dirty pictures) had this photo of a Surinam Toad. A toad from Surinam, wherever that might be. The reason for this picture, still graven in my mind, is that the lady toad has little pockets in her back, and the gentleman toad hops upon her back and deposits sperm in these little pockets, and baby toads grow up in each pocket. The photo showed a multitude of little toads peering out of the holes in Mom's back. For some reason this concept rather shook me. I think it was the whimsical expression on the toad tads' faces. The picture is still sharp and clear in my mind's eye.

Several years back, while exploring Mayan ruins in the jungles of Yucatan, we stayed at a *palapa* at Chichen Itza. There by the pool our children, in their teens, found a large, grumpy-looking frog. Green with lumps. May have been a toad. They also found several large, black, horned beetles which they induced this frog (or toad) to eat. These beetles were, as I said, large, with shiny black wing cases and a big wicked looking horn sticking out of their heads. The frog (or toad) didn't really want to eat them, but the kids kept presenting them to him, and since such creatures are basically greedy, he kept gulping them down. After about the sixth one, he kind of croaked. He barfed up a couple of wing cases and a horn or two and died. The kids were distraught, but got over it. A lesson in uninhibited greed, that has stood them well over the years I am sure.

(You were probably hoping that this story would tie in with the one above, and it was a misplaced Surinam Toad. Well, it wasn't.)

I have never seen a frog (or toad) in this part of Oregon. My wife says she saw a frog in the parking strip at the Fred Meyer store, but I didn't. Something was going *Rumph*, though. It may have been the large, uncorseted lady in a pink MuMu, pushing a full shopping cart while eating a Kosher Dog as she walked.

In the Pacific Northwest we have slugs. Specifically, banana slugs some six to eight inches long, spotted like over-ripe bananas. I'll take a frog any day. These slugs parade about in the moist undergrowth, snacking on anything that might bloom. They especially favor the unopened buds of exotic lily bulbs at \$2.50 a crack that I plant every year with such high hopes, only to see sinuous tracks of snail slime all over the little buds; and the smacking of the gross, blubbery slug lips keeps me awake and restive at night. I've tried snail bait of all sorts, but the only thing that works is the heel of a boot. Which leaves a slickery residue on the boot heel which then tracks into the house. Last year there was a reduction in the number of banana slugs, perhaps because of the dry spring; whatever, I am grateful. They got the lily buds, though.

In short, old chum, enjoy your frogs. They are the Farmer's Friend, a boon to be cherished, not vilified. Yrs. in scientific enlightenment.

Jim McCafferty unhappily coexists with the slimy slugs of Clatsop County.



OUT OF THE DARK

Out of a long and unremembered night
it comes.

Out of the dark

*The cold dark,
where the slow spreading mycelium
devours the dead.
The wet dark,
where year and day and night
are not marked or measured.*

Out of the cold wet dark
it comes.

*Where there have been no stories,
only stillness:
water, starless sky,
and ice
with shrouds of fog, above, below.
Now, a story starts
from a knotting in the mist
the primordium congeals:
a waxing, growing moon.*

It comes,
rising against the downward pull,
bobbing through decay and dormant grass,
it breaks the soil surface,
cracks the ice.

It comes,
into the sun and dew of dawn.
Its universal veil is torn,
the cap, glistening blood-red
atop the bone-white stalk,
has come to meet the light.
Toadstool, fly mushroom,
fruit body of the world below,
firm as flesh, stuffed with spores:
the daughter-sons, mother-fathers
of all those
who, out of sleep,
will one day come.

~JIM DOTT

Jim Dott also drew the toadstool. He lives in Astoria.

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