

## Armand the Frog · *John Hawkes*

IN POINT OF FACT there was not a single frog pond on the *Domaine Ardente* but many, all connected by little throat-like passages or trickling streams. And darkness? Secrecy? All I could want. Oak trees grew at the edges of these ponds, their roots bulging out like goiters from the dank earth where it dropped off into the sluggish water, and wherever they could find footing between the oaks—oh yes, they may well have been live oaks, may well have been—and selfish bramble bushes, broad weeping willows helped to enclose my frog pond, which I prefer to speak of in the singular, since there was one pond more appealing to me than all the others put together and where I most liked to squat and crouch in my own childish time out of time. How shrouded it was, my frog pond! How dark and cool—yet sultry too—even in one of the sudden warm hours that settled down that spring on the *Domaine Ardente*. Once I had made my way to my frog pond, I became as still as the frog I awaited, as unmoving as the water lilies that spread across the scummy or muddy surface of the pond. It was cool, it was warm, it was a place of midnight in the fullest part of the day. Here and there the oaks, the willows, the screens of bushes admitted tiny shafts of light that suddenly engaged in brief skirmishes, reflecting, criss-crossing, attacking each other before being just as suddenly extinguished in this daily night that was not determined by church bell or any sort of heavenly system. At least not when I hid in the depths of my frog pond at the height of the daylight hours. Of course the rank darkness was different at sunrise or dusk. For most of the day, however, I could count on finding this special, even illicit dimness, perhaps a smelly total absence of light in which it was hard even to make out the fleshy lily pads, whenever I had the whim or determination to go fiercely into the bright nocturnal world of my frog pond. So I crouched, or squatted, or stretched myself out flat on my belly, eyes at a level with the edge of the pond, immobile, silent, intent, undetectable to anyone passing by or to the creatures of the frog pond itself. I watched, I listened. The dragonflies hovered and dashed about the thick surface with a deafening roar of their little engines, the lily pads tempted me to reach out and touch their oily skins. Inevitably there was one in particular that I concentrated on, an immense beast as flat as a plate and apparently glued to the surface, so tight it was to the water which, like so

many of its brethren, it decorated. This grand dame of lily pads was large and of a blackish, greenish, dark bluish color, a thick creature composed of a soft pulp dressed in a gleaming skin as inviting as the water that kept it lubricated. She was a mystery, my awesome lily pad, and ancient as was evident by the broad indifferent wrinkles or undulations that so beautifully contradicted its apparent flatness. Touch it? Oh I was tempted to get into that productive water somehow, by slipping or falling, and entrust myself to the pack of them, violating them all with my fresh stubby fingers until at last I reached my fair queen, great flowering receptive mass, and touch it, pinch it, perhaps caress it like the small startled boy I might have been in the bedchamber of the young count's wife.

Farfetched? The height of improbability? Well, you will soon see just how close I came to being so ensnared. It was an alluring fright, I can tell you.

But all this was the crudest of my spring fantasies, for I respected beyond my own life my favorite lily pad that floated indolently just out of reach. It was only the imagined sensation of touching her that enthralled me, since it was the lily pad's sensuous invulnerability that kept me still, that held my gaze. Yes, I was almost angry with passion, such a marvelous living thing was this ancient lily pad in her ballroom of fecundity and slime. There were the various trees and growths attempting to drown themselves in slow motion in these fetid waters, there was the occasional inexplicable patch of clear water and rent in the trees and brambles that caused a clear mirror-like reflection of blue sky replete with a few clouds and little bird to lie before me and to divert my attention from the reality of darkness and worms and water flowerings that seemed to invite my mouth as well as my eyes. There was a curious truncated tree stump that proved, on closer inspection, to be two old rotten stumps grown so thickly together that I thought of this rotten sculpture as two old ladies hugging each other.

And in the center of it all the empty platter of the still empty queen. I watched that lily pad for the sheer illicit pleasure of watching—is there so great a difference between a lily pad and Diana? Let it go then. For of course I had an ulterior motive in fixing my eyes for half an afternoon on that unctuous thing undulating in the water. In my scowling fashion I loved its emptiness, but I loved that old noble demi-mondaine more when all at once plop! And there would be a frog, a big frog, squatting in its very center. If at that moment my ancient stately lily pad had been able to draw her bed

curtains, she surely would have. As for myself, in that dripping instant I knew what it was to act the spy!

All the while that I was so engaged in concentrated, furtive study of my lily pad I was of course awaiting the black frog. What could you expect? After all, I was only a two-year-old boy whose passions, with which unknowingly he was all but bursting, could hardly have reached the degree of consciousness and sophistication that I have not restrained myself from articulating. No indeed. I was just a small boy waiting to spy on a frog. But far from innocent. I was robbed of innocence at birth, though I suspect that back then, at the dawn of skepticism, many children were born missing their innocence. As for now, well, you'd be lucky to find an innocent babe in a thousand. If you wanted one, that is.

The point is that I was never able to catch the frog in the act of emerging from the muddy depths and plopping himself down on his favorite lily pad and mine. I stared for hours, I clenched my fists, I scowled, my angry willpower puffed out my round cheeks that dear little Mamma so loved to stroke. I readied myself to see the invisible frog's exact entrance into view, to see him shoot up suddenly with a flying leap and land safely on the lily pad, or to see first his head, then shoulders, then hoary arms, and to be witness to his ignoble struggle to haul himself up and out of the clinging water to safety on the spongy plate waiting to serve him up to my scrutiny. But I could not. As long as I watched, like a child determined to keep his eyes open so as not to fall asleep, I was unable to maintain a perfect vigil. Never did I entrap my majestic frog in my spying. Never. Nor could I detect my instant of failure, the chink in my armor. I was capable of holding watch for most of a day without the slightest trembling or consciousness of my remarkable feat. And I did not blink. In fact I was born incapable of blinking, which a few people, but only a few, noted with appropriate discomfort. At any rate I did not lose sight of the empty lily pad in the slowly changing light, was diverted by nothing, no matter the overly curious bird that might make his way into the seclusion of the frog pond, never again to fly free, no matter that another portion of the embankment might slide loose and disappear beneath the brownish surface, thereby leaving naked still another entanglement of virgin roots. By these slow contractions of the frog pond I was not diverted. Such patience was nothing less than satanic, especially in light of my general inability to maintain stillness. Yet so it was and so I failed. One moment my superb attention

would be fixed on the seductive—no, maddening!—vacancy of the lily pad, the next I would be staring at the frog who—yes—was there, so heavily filling that vacancy that the lily pad seemed threatened with sinking. But he was there, as large as my head and as slimy as if he had been sitting on that lily pad and fruitlessly attempting to dry himself in the sun all afternoon.

There must have been signs. The dragonflies must have shut down their engines and in an instant settled to the surface as if never again to rise. The trapped bird must have made some sort of strangled sound in its tiny throat. Surely there was some such sign of warning, no matter how sudden, how brief, how apparently insignificant, that the awesome frog was about to make himself visibly known in the frog pond once again. If so, such a flurry of heralding minutiae escaped me.

For as long as I studied him on this or that afternoon, my mouth going dry and my small black eyes starting from my head, my bold frog steadfastly refused to return my gaze, until just before his disappearance, that is, though not always, which is to say that he was not predictable, sitting as if a veritable cannonade would not shake him loose, yet all the while as aware of me as I was of him.

A big wet creature seemingly composed of slime that oozed the day long through what must have been tiny pores in his leathery skin, his appearance was that shiny and repellent, which made him all the more attractive to me. He held himself half sitting up with great effort. Midway between sun and stagnant water he blazed in his glorious colors of putrefaction—dark green, dark blue, black. He moved so little that even his efforts to breathe frightened me. I thought that inside the flat sack of him he had no bones. He looked like a bat. But oh, he might have been wearing a crown, that frog! How I loved him.

It was not merely to see him that I spent so many days at the frog pond. It was to see his eyes. By and large he kept them averted. He allowed me, so to speak, full view of his webbed feet, the sharp ridges that revealed the hair-like bones inside him, or even moved his great head a degree or so to the left, to the right, interested, that moment, in something other than me. But to that masterful frog his eyes were sacred, as I well knew. For hours he sat there as if deliberately waiting me out. On some days, after engaging me in hours of the most painful study—and to think that I was never an apt pupil, let alone scholar!—he would deny me altogether and disappear from view by whatever sleight-of-hand was his, before allowing me one glimpse

of his eyes. But on other days, toward the end of our hours together or at once, while he was still dripping profusely on his lily pad, fresh in arrival, he would suddenly turn his head or even inch his fat body around until—yes!—there they were, his eyes, meeting mine. It was then, even as I could feel my wide mouth smiling still wider in my elation, that all at once I was overcome with utter abasement and wanted only to wriggle, to move, to flee, to escape the dominion of the frog's eyes. But could not. And not once did that frog blink at me!

Have you ever been stared at by a frog?

When a frog looks deep into a child's eyes, he does so with such impassive recognition in that gaze of his that the child cannot help but be overcome by guilt, by terror, yet amazement as well. I should know. One glance into my frog's large black unlidged eyes, as they first appeared, and I had not the slightest doubt but that some terrible doom had befallen me, and that that secret doom was mine to carry within my person forever. A lifelong treasure that I could just as well have done without—or so I thought at my worst moments, which did not last long.

My frog's name was Armand.

And here we are! Back to the endless springtime of my nights in bed, back to the stories—about a frog named Armand, of course—that my mother used to read to me as preparation for sleep. I did not lie in the sumptuous hollow of my fresh sheets merely smelling and watching the darkness in which Mamma and Papa thought I lay above them safely asleep. Not at all. One of my profoundest nighttime pleasures was listening to the night as well. To what? Oh yes, to the distant frogs. In the night it surrounded me, engulfed me, far off, close to my open window, that sound of contented croaking that only the frogs could make. It was a chorus now soft, now loud, now timid, now bold, chaotic yet formed into the shape of a song, a lullaby without beginning or end, a natural hypnosis more soothing than that of any other nighttime sounds I heard—whether of owls, cicadas, or falling rain. And as long as it lasted, which was as long as I stayed awake, in its midst I always detected the authoritative croaking of Armand. He made no sound when we were together. In the daytime I saw in his eyes the sounds he made at night in his throat, or rather in the smell of those spring nights I strained to hear the sounds of Armand giving voice to what I had seen in his eyes in the daylight. There is a difference. At night the imperious Armand was but one frog in ten thousand, and at their center I

gave myself up to them, vulnerable to their swarming upon me yet safe from them all, the sole listener enjoying their song.

It all began just after dusk, when Mamma would tell me that it was time to have our nightly frog story, and up we would go, dear little Papa dismissing us with a flourish of his most generous fatherhood.

There was my nightshirt, cut from the same material as my thick sheets impermeated with the overpowering smell of cleanliness, and an oil lamp, and a small wooden chair, and the open window. At this point I would be more eager than dreamy, while Mamma would be smiling and shaking her head of dark curls in anticipation of what we were about to share. “Remember, Pascal,” she would say, “only one story! You musn’t ask Mamma for another.” Readily I would agree, smiling my smile that was so much wider than hers, settling myself into my square bed, though I was never exactly at peace with myself, looking at dear little Mamma and hoping that the expression on my face was pleasing her. Slowly she would open the book and begin the story. Beneath her voice—I hear it still—the sound of the frogs would be nothing more than the softest stirring of the night outside.

*The Stories of Armand the Frog* concerned a little girl named Vivonne, her bad-tempered friend Henri, and Armand himself who, as Vivonne well knew, was that lovely child’s brother transformed into an ugly frog, as if all frogs were not ugly, despite that sentimental majority who persist in viewing the frog as small or even precious, that detestable word. But how typical of most children’s stories, yet not quite, thanks to that peculiar tuck in its side, like my bat turned frog. Why, those stories might have been closer to life, as they say, had that magical frog proved to be not Vivonne’s brother but her father. However, there we are, and my nightly immersion in *The Stories of Armand the Frog* was so complete that I myself might have been both frog and brother. Naturally Vivonne, with her imperturbably good disposition and dark curly hair much like my mother’s could talk to the frog and knew that one day she herself would transform her beloved Armand, which was how she felt about him, back into her dear brother. Her only task was to overcome her repugnance for the frog and—pouf!—there, in a puddle, would stand her brother in all his glory, dripping from the years he had spent disguised in the frog pond. However, and in delicious fulfillment of every child’s expectation, Vivonne felt such abhorrence for Armand the frog that she despaired of ever doing what she was destined to

do in her pretty life, whether she wanted to or not, though she had in fact learned to let Armand sit in the palm of her cupped hand, trembling the while and biting her lip, despite her love for the ugly creature that looked up at her with imploring eyes. In rapture I listened to the tale of Armand, Vivonne, Henri and the gypsy woman, or of the frog, the children, and the one-armed traveler, and there was one, I remember, about the frog, the children, and another frog. What a delight it was, how instructive! My small bright eyes were as tightly fixed on my mother's lively face as they had been fixed on Armand the real frog only that afternoon or the one before. My mother read aloud those stories with all the sounds of artistry that a pretty woman could bring to bear on a story whose simple tones and vivid events could bring so much pleasure exactly suited to a child fully awake yet on the verge of sleep. Her curls trembled, her soft voice was as clear as the water at the bottom of our well, she was an actress for whom the story that issued from her pretty mouth was peopled with an endless variety of small creatures all holding tiny hands or fleeing each other. She would turn a page, Armand would beg Vivonne to allow him once again to sit in her cupped palms, Henri would come rushing to interrupt their reluctant tryst with a stick. Remember the tale of Armand the frog and Bocage the crow? What happiness!

One day the crow, who was of course ten times the size of the frog, challenged Armand to a singing contest. Henri, forever on the ready to thwart the frog however he could, demanded to be the judge, since there being little to choose between the cawing of a crow and croaking of a frog, Henri's own word would clearly determine the outcome in the crow's favor, thereby casting ignominy on the frog and in turn spiting once more the little girl Vivonne in all her partiality to Armand. The chosen day arrived, the contestants assembled just out of earshot of a little brook and near a wild flowering of blueberry bushes. Henri scowled and folded his arms judiciously, Vivonne said that she could not bear to see Armand suffer so severe a defeat and would absent herself from the field, though in fact she cleverly hid behind the blueberry bushes. Bocage declared himself the first to sing and preened his great black feathers, strutted in a circle on his two shiny black legs and then, in a long and prideful display of grandeur, as he thought, began to caw as long and loudly as he could. His feathers shook, four nearby cows kicked up their heels and fled, the wicked little boy Henri nearly covered his ears with his hands but managed not to. Surely no uglier

sound could have filled the day, pleasing the crow no end but making the poor frog cower. At last the self-satisfied crow ceased his terrible performance and took his bow. Then it was the frog's turn, which Henri anticipated with smug self-satisfaction, though he continued to scowl as if in the total objectivity required of any judge in a contest. Borage the crow stood back, Armand the frog hopped upon a small rock, thereby hoping to gain whatever advantage he could, which was little. There was silence, there was sunlight, the distant cows turned to listen, the boastful crow smiled to himself and waited. At last Armand filled his little body to bursting and opened wide his mouth and began to sing. But what song was this? What sweetness coming forth from the mouth of a frog? Oh not at all the monotonous painful croaking that the boy, the crow, and the attentive cows had expected to hear. Oh, just the opposite! For the frog on the rock was in fact singing in the cheerful melodic voice of a little girl! The cows drew near, the defeated crow flapped about in angry circles, his feathers flying, while after a moment the wicked little boy, his eyes meaner than ever and his face red, leapt at the frog, chasing the little creature off his rock and into the tall grass, and then—for of course Henri had understood the trick at once—ran to the blueberry bushes and caught the laughing Vivonne by her curly hair. The now frightened crow flew up to a branch of a nearby tree, again the cows fled, Vivonne struggled unsuccessfully to escape the angry embrace of the wicked boy. But before the boy could harm the little girl, or do anything more than to disturb her clothing, Armand hopped back onto the sunny rock and, as the defeated crow flew off after the cows, caused the bad-tempered Henri to free Vivonne and yawn, grow weary, and, overcome by the powers of sleep, to lie down beside the brook. . . .

And the rest? The second half of the story? Oh, there was Armand hiding himself in Henri's pocket while the boy slept, there was the waking of the wicked boy, the discovery of the frog in his pocket, a great commotion, Henri's escape from both the frog and his terror, thanks to Vivonne who commanded him to drop his trousers and run—silly boy—and finally the sound of Vivonne's laughter at the resultant plight of the now stumbling Henri at which she stared with suddenly sober attention, while the victorious frog hopped back into the brook to await his next encounter.

Most of the nightly tales that I remember from *The Stories of Armand the Frog* contained adventures similar to this one. Inevitably Henri lost his trousers, inevitably Henri the wicked boy would hop about in rage, the

little frog clinging for dear life to one of the boy's bare buttocks while Vivonne smiled or frowned and filled her eyes with the sight of Henri's whirling frightened nakedness. Did it ever end, that collection of stories in the ancient book that sat so prettily in the hands of dear little Mamma throughout those spring nights of my childhood? That volume from which there issued the sound of my mother's voice precisely as Vivonne's childish soprano voice arose from the mouth of the frog or as the song of the choir boy comes from the score he holds and not his mouth? Surely there must have come the final night, the last story in the book, when the song of the distant frogs grew faint with sadness and faded to nothing, and the last few words drifted off onto the vastness of the spring air and my mother ceased reading, smiled down at me and shut the book. Forever. Oh yes, that book I loved, fragrant with my mother's touch and redolent with the life of the frog who was the namesake of the real frog who so consumed my own life, must have had a conclusion.

No doubt Vivonne finally allowed Armand into her bed one night and twitched and squirmed, shivered and trembled, slept and woke as in a dream, shockingly aware of the little wet creature touching her here and there or, worst of all or best, suddenly hiding in the bedclothes, lost, unaccountable, waiting to resume his tickling of Vivonne's pure young body until she dozed, drifted partially awake, crying out in her little girl's ravaged voice as there in the new sunlight she lay, no longer a child, of course, but a young woman, despite her still youthful appearance. And the frog? He stood at the foot of her bed, of course, no longer a frog but the promised brother, who should have been a prince according to the dictates of most stories about frogs and children, but was not. Here *The Stories of Armand the Frog* must disappoint us, for that stalwart brother, when finally he shed his ugliness, or rather when our dear Vivonne recognized that same ugliness for the shining beauty that it was—male beauty, that is—emerged not as a prince, as he rightfully deserved, but in the form of an ugly old king smiling down upon his prize. But did the radiant Vivonne, sprawled out on her dampened bed without a thought to modesty, share our own shock and disappointment at this final gift of her story? She did not. After all, an ugly old king was better than nothing, if she could not have her prince, as apparently she could not, and she had already learned that the mighty powers of a frog will never suffer the rules of convention.

Oh, let me be honest, though honesty is nearly as repugnant as

rationality. However, I do not remember that *The Stories of Armand the Frog* ever reached a conclusion or that dear Mamma ever ceased her nightly reading. The curious fact of the matter, and this I do remember with undeniable certainty, is that for the longest while I was satisfied to allow my mother to read to me one story a night instead of demanding that she spend the entirety of each of those spring nights with her son and her book, as I might have done, though soon enough I contrived to manage even that. But patience is a virtue I require of others if not myself.