

Unrequited: For the Love of Frog

Years into my relationship with Blub, I knew only two things about her: She was lonely and she did not wish to be held. Or perhaps I should say I assumed those things, because it's difficult for a human to discern what a frog is thinking. Especially a frog like Blub.

Blub was an albino African clawed frog who swam into my life when I was sixteen. She had tiny, fingered hands and large, webbed feet accented by sharp black toenails. Aside from the white of her slippery-smooth belly, she was the same yellow-pink as the pig fetuses we dissected in biology, and approximately as energetic. Blub floated, motionless, for hours at a time. The small pink eyes atop her flat head looked alert but unreadable. Whatever Blub was feeling, she kept it to herself.

This trait was not shared by my mother. "Who knew it would be so ugly," she said when she saw my new pet. But I was into frogs. I thought Blub was great.

As kids growing up in Maine, my brother and I paddled around our pond in an inflatable raft, searching for bullfrogs in the muck. They were often too fast, too slick for us, but I thrilled at getting ahold of one. I'd examine its strange skin, watch the bulge of its throat, and feel the power of its kick as it sprang from my hands, back into the safety of water.

When I was a newly-minted teenager in search of a trademark obsession, frogs became My Thing. I doodled them on book covers and in notes passed to friends, added ribbits to song lyrics, sewed a bean-bag frog for my crush. A friend gave me a necklace engraved, *You have to kiss a lot of frogs before you find your prince*. "I'd rather keep the frogs," I declared.

I wasn't angling for a pet—I was trying on an identity—but a few years into my frog fascination, a family friend brought us Blub. I named her Blub because it matched her lumpy physique, and because if Blub could speak, that seemed like what she might say: "Blub blub blub." I said it whenever I saw her.

Blub lived alone in a tank and never reacted to things outside it. Most days she remained in a dead-man's float, not acknowledging my existence, until I tipped her food into the water. She lunged at the pellets with startling speed, shoved them down her throat with her funny little hands (African clawed frogs don't have tongues), and resumed inanimation within seconds.

I wondered if there ought to be more to her life.

The kid who gave us Blub said she sometimes fed her frogs fish. "They swallow them whole," she confided. My mother wanted to try it.

I wasn't eager to see Blub shove a fish down her throat, nor was I sure it was possible. She was larger than a typical goldfish, but not so big as to seem capable of consuming one in a single gulp.

We purchased thirteen: a feast that might last her forever.

When I poured them into the water, Blub did not move. They swam past and around her, as unthreatened by my frog as they'd be by a plastic castle. I exhaled.

That night, we heard the splashing. The next morning, one goldfish remained.

I was horrified and impressed. My lazy frog was an agile killer, able to swallow thrice her body mass in twelve enormous gulps. She floated, serene, no sign of the hunt. What other secrets did she hold?

The thirteenth goldfish did not share this wonderment. It darted around the tank, as far from Blub as possible, and clearly expected—as did I—Blub might lunge at any moment. But she didn't. She went back to eating pellets and ignored the goldfish completely.

Weeks went by. The fish lost or forgot its terror, and I realized why Blub kept it around: She wanted company. Floating solo gets lonely, and life is much better with friends. I couldn't exactly be Blub's companion, but it was nice I'd accidentally given her one.

Several months into their friendship, Blub swallowed the goldfish whole.

Perhaps I'd been mistaken.

In the hours Blub and I spent together, we didn't bond the way I bonded with all the cats, dogs, hamsters, rabbits, and ducklings my family had over the years—animals I petted or cuddled, who recognized and responded to me, and whose emotions, desires, and preferences I somewhat understood. This was a different kind of relationship. I felt awe, admiration, and a thrill at Blub's existence, but had no access to her inner life, nor the illusion she cared about mine.

I didn't need Blub to love me. I had a dog for that.

In a way, Blub's aloofness was part of her appeal. At sixteen, my own emotions bubbled over at the slightest nudge. What was it like to float through life with such detachment, no need for approval? Teenagers are masters at feigning indifference, but not wired to achieve it. I cared. I cared so much about everything. Sometimes it made life complicated.

Time with my impassive frog was a respite. Love's ebbs and flows can be confusing, but Blub's indifference seemed unconditional. There was comfort in how little she wanted from me—relief in something constant in those years of so much change.

When I left home for college, Blub went off to school too. She got a new home in a fifth-grade classroom, where the kids renamed her Chicken Man, and she belonged to all and none of them. I didn't exactly miss her. Yet of the many pets I loved in my youth, she is one I think of often.

I still get a rush when I spot a bullfrog afloat in a murky pond, or spy a tree frog suctioned to a window. It feels like my lucky day whenever a wood frog leaps from my path. I'm not privy to the frogs' secrets, and they have no interest in mine. But when I fall asleep to the racket of spring peepers, their chirps sound like home.

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