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THE FROG POND

Valerie Silver

Each January, the frog pond calls to me. I drive across town to the Discovery Center parking lot, put on my mud shoes, breathe in the damp, leafy air, and step away from my everyday world. I pass bat houses and bird boxes on my way up the hill. In another month, Violet–green swallows and Western bluebirds might take up residency in these square, wooden cavities. For now, they are empty, hopeful gestures of human hospitality waiting to be fulfilled. They catch my eye, mounted on 8-ft poles and scattered amongst the oak trees, but they do not slow my step. I have a pond to visit, a pond my son and I call the frog pond, because we do not know its real name. It does not, as far as I know, appear on any map, though it is well-known to local visitors. It sits in a small meadow, ringed by oak woodlands between the boundaries of Spring Lake and Annadel parks in Santa Rosa. I believe these few acres of meadowland belong to the Sonoma County Watershed District and are managed in partnership with the county and state parks. Ownership aside, the pond seems to be managing itself beautifully, under the direct care and supervision of frogs, newts, red-winged blackbirds and a multitude of other aquatic, terrestrial, avian, and photosynthesizing beings. It is a relatively small pond, only about 90 feet in diameter on a good winter day, but it is deep enough to nourish and sustain life all year round. In late winter and early spring, I visit as often as I'm able, for this watery sanctuary also nourishes and sustains me.

I follow the narrow deer path up a grassy slope where it meets a wider, more rugged trail. Loose pebbles and chunks of cobblestones dislodged from too many

mountain bikes require careful footing as I navigate mud puddles and leafless shoots of poison oak. The brief ascent gains 500 feet in a short amount of steps. An occasional glimpse through the trees of Spring Lake down below gives one reason to pause and catch one's breath if one feels so inclined. It is a temperate day, and children's voices from the lakeside rise to meet me on this path. Squawking geese and insistent crows add

their music to the mix. I continue climbing and the voices braid together into a distant hum. The trail bends and all is quiet. I am alone with black oaks, live oaks, madrones, and manzanita, sticky monkey flower, bayberry, laurel, and invasive scotch broom. Ferny

moss blankets shaded tree trunks and sea-green lichen blooms on boulders. The rough stones and pebbles beneath my feet give way to a more tightly packed ochre earthen trail.

It won't be long now.

I hear the frogs before the pond comes into view. First a solo voice from a clump of grasses near my feet. Then, an answering voice five yards away. A turkey vulture lifts from the water's edge at my approach, lifts and glides in a graceful swoop. It is late January and two weeks without rain. A rivulet that overflowed the pond is already receding, narrowing and evaporating and exposing the aquatic treasures that have called

me here. Not, frogs, actually, but newts. And not the newts themselves, but their progeny,

suspended in jewel-like clusters, fragile gelatinous orbs that depend upon cold-water submersion for their survival. As much as I love getting a glimpse of the bronze and orange adults as they undulate underwater, it is this rare opportunity to view their egg sacks that kept me climbing up that hill. On this day, the more I look, the more I see.

Hundreds of them. Translucent, lopsided spheres, aglow in the sunlight, each the size of a large cherry, each containing the beginnings of 10-12 California Newts. One visitor to the pond described them as smooth, transparent blackberries, each small drupelet containing the “seed” of a newt. In their earliest stages, the newt nymphs are tiny and round, like pale sesame seeds. A little further along, and they elongate into grains of white rice. Another couple of weeks, depending upon the weather, and the grains of rice bend into crescents, from which tiny appendages will begin to sprout. Finally, still nestled safely inside their sack-within-a sack, the newt nymphs will start to wiggle, signaling their readiness to emerge at last.

The docent at the Discovery Center estimates that between 2000 and 4000 potential newts are incubating in the pond this winter. Of those, three quarters will not make it into adulthood. They will be lost to dehydration, predators, careless human or canine feet tramping too heavily in this fragile habitat. It is the way of nature: creation, wonder, vulnerability, loss. But also, survival. And a deep instinctual impulse to protect the young. I squat at the pond’s muddy edge and gently lift and toss as many marooned newt sacks as I can find. I marvel at the unformed life cradled in my hands.

When I become aware again of my immediate surroundings, I note the comings and goings of other pond visitors: moms with children, grandfathers with grandsons, hikers with their dogs. I point out some fully-submerged newt eggs to an older man and his 8 –year-old companion who are carefully making their ways around the sedges. We talk about the difference between newts and salamanders (neither of us knows for sure), then I show them some stranded sacks along the shore. The boy helps me collect the

still-moist outliers and gently releases them into deeper waters. “We’ll have to go home and do a rain dance,” his older companion said. The boy looked at him and shook his head. “No. We can’t go home. We have to stay here and save more newts.”

This pond is both a public place and a private place. I like to think that every visitor who comes here brings something, gives something, leaves with something new: bits of knowledge, observations, a feeling, a discovery; all are freely shared here. This is a place where strangers can come together, sometimes in stillness, sometimes in words.

They can listen to frogs sing or point out a ribbon orange newt tail gliding through the murky water. Once while I was dreamily watching a pair of swimming newts, a visitor taught me that the coupling of newts underwater is called Amplexus. Another time, a woman politely asked me if those shiny pouches were frog eggs? Good question, I

responded, and shared what little I knew about the wonder and mystery before our eyes.

Not everyone comes here to see the newt sacks. They are easy to overlook, though hidden

in plain site. Those who do see are likely to fall under their spell. Mine are not the only hands which have reached out and transported stranded eggs to safety.

As the sun goes down, the January chill helps me rise and head for home. The frogs hush now, and I’m reminded that this pond is never the same from one hour to the next, one day to the next, one season to the next. Today it is frog song and newt eggs, tomorrow, perhaps, silence and sedges, dragonflies and water skimmers, or a flock of red-winged blackbirds. For a few hundred yards, my path is quiet. Then a solitary frog, far from home, calls out to the dusk. The trail turns. Honking geese and human laughter

accompany my descent. Pebbles, then cobblestones, poison oak, then bird boxes. The woodland peters out into parking lot. This pond is only a twenty minute walk on a well-traveled path, yet a world apart. I remove my old shoes, and admire the mud that clings to them.