

# The Song of the Tree Frog

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Volume 37, numéro 1, 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088473ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1088473ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Athabasca University Press

ISSN

1705-9429 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Rindo, R. (2021). The Song of the Tree Frog. *The Trumpeter*, 37(1), 80–87.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1088473ar>

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# The Song of the Tree Frog

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Ron Rindo

One frigid, Wisconsin evening in early March, 2020, as my wife and I watched news coverage of Covid 19's insidious spread across New York City, we were startled by a loud, raspy croaking coming from the living room. We muted Governor Cuomo's stern, televised monologue and cocked our heads to listen. After a few seconds, the vibrant song resonated again. It echoed from a large, oval pot of English ivy on a table by the window, a thick, overgrown tangle of vines that cascaded nearly to the floor. As I held a flashlight, Jenna gently lifted leaves and pulled back vines to probe the soil with her fingertips. My light fell on the source of the noise: nestled half-buried in a crater of dirt, and shining like a freshly buffed shoe, was a beautifully-mottled gray treefrog no larger than the first joint of my thumb.

Though we'd lived in the country for two decades, only in the past two or three years had these frogs become abundant, joining a panoply of other flora and fauna, large and small, that had rewilded our acreage after we'd colonized it. On the southern, wooded half of the property, in a small clearing surrounded by towering bur oaks, we built the house where we raised our blended family of five children; around the house, we seeded a small yard of fine fescues. The northern half of our land had been intensively farmed for generations, the soil depleted by countless pounds of chemicals applied to increase yields of field corn and soybeans. Over the years, we planted over a thousand pines and spruces in that field, along with wild plum, hazelnut, and silky dogwood. The wind and birds have seeded the rest, and it is now a beautiful prairie of big bluestem, switchgrass, oldenrod, milkweed, Canada wild rye, blue vervain, and dozens of other plants and wildflowers. We like to think the increasing biodiversity is also due, at least in part, to the diligence of our neglect. Long ago, we adopted an "if it's green, it's grass" approach to lawn care. Once a sparse pate of fescues, our front yard is now a yearly procession of dandelions, white clover, and creeping Charlie, followed by a green finale of annual crabgrass. Our heavily shaded back yard is almost exclusively moss and broadleaf plantain. The yard won't win any landscaping awards, but treefrogs seem to love it.

Each of the past two springs, their raspy, contralto voices have resounded from every corner of our land. At night, they frequently appear on our front porch to hunt insects drawn to the light from our windows. Displaying the metamorphosis which earned them the scientific name, *Dryophytes versicolor*, they change color, to a vibrant green, to mimic the wisteria that has overrun the porch railings. They look like bright limes someone has sliced in half and stuck to the white newel posts. Each year in late May, Jenna moves her container of English ivy and a large, potted Norfolk pine out to that porch, and each October, before the temperatures drop

below freezing, she brings the plants indoors again. *Dryophytes versicolor* normally pass the winter in the crevasses of trees or frozen beneath woodland leaf litter, circulating glycerol through their cells to keep ice crystals from forming. The frog in our living room had obviously chosen to overwinter in the potted ivy instead, where it spent over three months asleep, waiting for a deep freeze that never came. Jenna tucked the ivy back over the frog, hoping he'd resume his long winter's nap.

He didn't. Several days later, the frog appeared on our living room floor. We filled an old, ten-gallon aquarium with potting soil, leaf litter, and a few sticks, added a plastic bowl of water, covered our improvised vivarium with screening, and transferred "Otto" into his new home. Days later, to our surprise, a second, larger tree frog appeared in the living room, from the potted ivy or Norfolk pine, we couldn't say. "Ophelia" was bright green when I plucked her from her perch four feet up the wall, but she turned mottled gray when I introduced her to Otto and the habitat they would share for the next several months.

By late March, the pandemic was raging across the country, forcing us all into our own vivariums. Jenna, an elementary school ELL teacher, began teaching online, from home. An English professor, I did the same. Like most Americans wary of the virus, we entered the solitude of social isolation for the first time in our lives, an estranging torpor broken only by occasional, fraught trips to town for groceries. We spoke with our grown children, parents, and friends by telephone. Television news and computer screens became our only windows to the wider world. That view was alarming, even harrowing: a field hospital erected in New York City's Central Park; refrigerated trucks idling in hospital parking lots across the country to hold the overflow of dead; daily, scientifically illiterate, monologs from the incompetent president of the United States. In 2016, America had elected the person least able to successfully lead the nation through a socio-medical crisis, and that debacle would ultimately result in the highest Covid-19 death toll in the world.

Our balm in this dystopic Gilead came from an unlikely and unlooked for source: a pair of amphibians who had inadvertently hitch-hiked their way into our home. We researched the species online, learned what they ate, where and how they lived, how well they tolerated confinement (extremely well, it turned out). At night, we usually found them together, soaking in their small, square dish of water. Only Otto sang, so we knew he was a male. Ophelia never did, and she was nearly twice as large as Otto, evidence she was likely female. They never fought, but we never saw them mating, either.

In the beginning we fed them crickets purchased from a pet store; when the pet stores closed, the frogs ate spiders or other insects I scavenged from our basement. In late April, when the weather finally warmed enough to thaw the first few inches of soil outdoors, I fed the frogs slugs or worms dug from the garden. During the day, they remained motionless, Ophelia

wedged high in one corner of the aquarium, the bright, lovely orange of her inner thighs visible through the glass; Otto perched, nearly invisibly, on a branch that angled down into the soil. At night, they prowled the leaf litter, soaked together in their pool of water, or climbed the walls, leaving little, black commas of poop on the glass.

We kept the aquarium beside a south-facing window so the frogs could access natural fluctuations of sunlight and darkness. Even so, electric lights, and the sounds of modern life, clearly confused them. Once acclimated, Otto sang unprompted, nearly every evening. His lovely croaking filled the house, floating upstairs to the second floor, where we sometimes heard him as we drifted off to sleep. But each time the phone rang (we still have a land line), Otto also responded with three or four croaks of his own. And when the bird clock in our kitchen, which features a different bird song every hour, announced the time, Otto responded in kind, too. These plaintive songs reminded us that Otto and Ophelia's isolation and estrangement was very much like our own. Indoors, however comfortable they might be, the frogs were cut off from others of their own kind, separated by glass and distance from a larger world they knew and desired. Otto's hopeful singing produced no answering chorus, only silence and stillness.

It had been at least fifty years since I'd kept a wild frog as a pet. I'd forgotten the joy I found in such small, wild things. Like Proust's taste of Madeleines, Otto's singing returned me to those enchanted days.

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As a boy growing up in southeastern Wisconsin, I wandered the beauty of wilder places just beyond the borders of my parents' half-acre yard. Each summer, the unsold lots that abutted our manicured lawn metamorphosed into fields teeming with buzzing insects, and just beyond those fields, four hundred acres of farm- and woodland awaited my exploration. A field is not tallgrass prairie, and an overgrown oak savannah is not uncharted forest, but to a boy who could transpose a meandering, mile walk into a trek for survival by imaginative will, this land—owned by someone we called Farmer Shaffer, who lived miles away, and whom I never met—felt like wilderness.

From the lumpy dirt between rows of field corn I plucked exquisitely chipped First Nations arrowheads, seven in all over the years, many still sharp enough to cut flesh; in the fall, I sat alone in the rocky hedgerow that separated corn from alfalfa, cracking hickory nuts between pieces of limestone, reveling in the golden meats' smoky-sweet flavor. I snuck along electric-wire boundaries of sunny pastures, eyed by curious Holsteins, their ivory, vein-mapped udders swaying beneath them like giant bells. I examined spider webs jeweled with dew, woodchuck burrows and badger setts. I learned that mice sometimes gave birth in old bird nests and that

corn snakes could climb trees. Lured by the buzzing of flies and the potent reek of death, I discovered a pile of bones, femurs, fibulae, tibiae, bleached sternums white as tiny sails, where a fox had carried off and eaten some of Farmer Shaffer's leghorns.

When my mother asked, "What can you possibly *do* out there all day?" I could not provide her with an answer that met the intensity of my experience. In the woods, I felt gripped by mystery, cradled, contented; alone, but not in solitude: a dot of happy light melted into the sun.

Often I brought the wild home with me: crawfish, salamanders, leopard frogs, tadpoles, and toads endured brief incarceration inside a red Hills Bros. coffee can on my bedroom dresser, the plastic lid punctured with nail holes. If the percussion of frogs drumming the lid kept me awake, I'd sneak outside in the dew-chilled grass to free them. Empty mayonnaise jars became vivariums for black and yellow garden spiders, walking sticks, caterpillars, beetles, and bugs of all colors and sizes. One summer I became obsessed with butterflies. My mother sewed a deep net from the lining of old curtains, and my father strung this around a circular metal frame, likely fashioned from a coat hanger, which he attached to a long piece of broomstick. The net became my constant companion. I sealed each captured butterfly inside a jar with an alcohol-soaked cotton ball until it died, and then I mounted it with the others on rectangles of white Styrofoam that hung on my bedroom wall. From a distance, they looked like brightly-colored stamps airmailed from around the world.

Closer to home, I spent so many hours in the fields surrounding our yard, the knees of my pants reflected a permanent, grassy sheen. I'd disappear when I entered that jungle of goldenrod, milkweed, timothy, and foxtail; along the moist, fragrant earth, patches of bright, green moss grew that looked like tiny forests through my magnifying glass. Above me, goldfinches plucked the white down from Canada thistles, and red-winged blackbirds wove their nests in among the grasses, hovering and squawking as I inspected their pink, fuzzy hatchlings. In July, when skeins of sweet-scented white clover blossoms lined sinuous, six-foot stalks, I'd scootch along the ground on my back, pulling down the clover and tying the ends above me into knots every foot or two. Orange honey bees buzzed around me as I worked, their leg baskets bulging with pollen, and I had to take care not to be stung. I'd slide slowly along, twisting and turning to remain in the clover patch, meticulously tying knots, like some giant vole gifted with opposable thumbs, until I'd constructed a long, fragrant, green tunnel.

Animals populated my favorite books, television shows, and movies, too—*Dr. Doolittle*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *Call of the Wild*, *The Yearling*, *Lassie*, *Flipper*. I sobbed in the theater at the end of *Born Free*, and in my brief career as a Catholic schoolboy, I yearned to be St. Francis of Assisi, not because he was the first recorded saint to bear the stigmata but because birds landed in his hands and did not fly away.

Around age fourteen or fifteen, I happened upon my older brother's copy of Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*. He had been assigned to read Leopold and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in high school, and he did not have kind things to say about either book; but when I read Leopold's opening lines, I experienced something familiar to all book lovers, that moment we discover our way of knowing and being is shared by another: "There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot," Leopold writes. "These essays are the delights and dilemmas of one who cannot." I'd discovered an ally, someone who had lived in Wisconsin, too.

Yet, like many children who wander from religious faith in early adulthood, I drifted from my immersion in nature. For a time, it seemed as if it might be something I outgrew. I was in college and not paying attention in 1979 when Pope John Paul II named St. Francis the patron saint of Ecology. In 1980, when Congress established the Superfund to clean up hazardous waste sites, I'd just graduated and had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. Married and in graduate school studying American literature by 1985, I might have paused, briefly concerned, when Dr. Joe Farman and a team of British scientists discovered that initial hole in the ozone layer above the Antarctic. But I was preparing to write a doctoral dissertation, and after my wife got pregnant with twins, we moved to Birmingham, Alabama, and bought a house; and I began a career professing English. I found myself riding a different American wave, that headlong rush into modern, mortgaged life that seems ineluctable, even to admirers of Henry David Thoreau.

I realize now that around the margins of that life, and in contemplative moments that exposed my yearning, I still felt the tug of earth, as if the soil itself, and the flora and fauna springing from its sweetness, were a magnet, and my heart warm steel. Soon, E. O. Wilson's biophilia hypothesis, his belief that human beings have an instinctive bond with other living things, an "urge to affiliate with other forms of life," would again resonate for me. Though our Alabama dirt was too acidic and shaded by pines for a vegetable garden, I put one in anyway, a few leggy radishes, stunted carrots, a bit of bolted spinach. I also reveled in the dazzling forms of life in this new climate: the startling, green anoles that lived in the holly bushes along our front porch; fire ants that built sandy igloos in our Bermuda grass; tiny, black scorpions that skittered along the floor of the garage.

When I returned to a university teaching job in Wisconsin three years later, even though my wife and I looked at houses in the country, we ended up buying a house on the tiniest of city lots. Knowing my love for wilder places, my father expressed surprise at this choice, and wondered aloud if I could thrive there. I put in a small vegetable garden; planted a Japanese maple and three dwarf apple trees; raised a flock of bantam chickens in the back yard (illegal in the city limits, but the neighbors loved them). I bought an incubator, mail-ordered eggs, and

hatched pheasant and bobwhite quail chicks that I raised and released in the country. But it was as if I were trying to squeeze the sunrise into a porch light, a pond into a pail. When my wife and I separated, a local farmer agreed to take my chickens. Months before we divorced, my wife sawed down my apple trees.

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My second life, as I have come to think of it, has been a return to the mysteries and wonder of my boyhood, though with the benefit of experience and retrospection. I'd been a bit like those radish and spinach seeds I planted in Alabama, trying to root in infertile, indifferent soil, but I've become a joyful wanderer again, this time on the five wooded acres that Jenna and I have called our own, now, for twenty years.

Thomas Jefferson believed America would become a nation of small farmers. A slaveholder, Jefferson wasn't working his own land, so it was easy for him to romanticize that life. Farming is difficult work with uncertain rewards, starvation just a disease or drought away. And yet how better to "affiliate with other forms of life" than to daily live among them? How better to accept the gifts of nighttime darkness and starlight, the music of wind in the trees, or bird-seeded elderberries, mulberries, and currants? How can one measure the value of seeing daily the full arc of the sun, from its pink rising to orange setting, or the moon shadows cast by oak trees against snow at three in the morning? The little brown bat dangling from a rafter in the shed? The soprano baying of coyotes? The katydid singing at 2 a.m. on the staircase newel post? Garden shovel in hand, how can we *not* rejoice knowing there are more microorganisms in a teaspoon of healthy garden soil than people on the earth?

Like Leopold's family, as I've said, we've planted a lot of trees, mostly white and Norway spruce, which the deer and rabbits leave alone, but also white pine, red pine, and balsam, which they don't. One spring we planted a hundred Juneberries, and that winter an explosive population of meadow voles girdled ninety of them. Over the years, we've gradually put in a small orchard too, twenty-two semi-dwarf trees to date, a few common varieties—Cortland, Honeycrisp, Haralson—and many less common, Cox Orange Pippin, Calville Blanc D'Hiver, and Jefferson's favorite, Esopus Spitzenburg, among them. We raise chickens and Shetland sheep. They are a source of eggs and wool, of course, but they also provide more. It is impossible to spend any time among them without feeling calmed, connected. The sheep rest their chins on our knees and wag their tails as we run hands along their heads, their wool fragrant with lanolin, their breath green with the scent of fermenting grasses.

I am comforted knowing my sensibility is far from rare, that a whole literary tradition has been built by a community of people with similar sensibilities. I also think I understand what Ralph Waldo Emerson meant when he wrote, in *Nature*, "in the woods is perpetual youth." One of

the mysteries of aging has been the seeming agelessness of my consciousness. As my body moves inexorably (more slowly, please!) toward its inevitable date with the earth, bones and muscles weakening, skin wrinkling, consciousness seems immortal, undamaged by time. To speak more poetically, my heart, and by that I mean who I am, and how I experience wonder, is still that of a roaming boy. Yet, because I have grown in other ways and have read and listened, I understand more, and I can articulate more. What I felt as a boy, and what I feel now, is *likely* what Emerson recognized while wandering the woods of Concord, and what John Muir discovered while swaying in the highest branches of a spruce tree during a windstorm in the Sierra Nevada. Awe. Enchantment. Something the Japanese call *yūgen*, an emotional response to the beauty and mystery of the universe too deep for words.

In Japan and South Korea, but also in many other nations, Forest Therapy (*salim yok* in Korean) is becoming a popular remedy to the ailments of modern, urban life: anxiety, depression, and feelings of intense isolation. The Japanese call this full, sensory immersion in nature *Shinrin-yoku*. Some translate this as “the medicine of being in the forest,” but I prefer the more poetical “forest bathing”. It has given a name to something I knew as a boy, and now, as an aging man, I live immersed in a beautiful, five-acre bath I have had some hand in drawing, and sweetening.

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For hundreds of thousands of years of evolution, we *homo sapiens* lived outdoors, connected to and evolving with forms of life that sustained (and, yes, occasionally hunted and/or harmed) us. When we moved indoors, we gained physical comfort but lost our connection to the revolution of the seasons, the circadian rhythm of day and true night, the daily immersion in soil, sunshine, and serenity. When we gathered our indoor habitats together into vast cities and suburbs of concrete, perpetual noise, and twenty-four-hour light, we gained security but distanced ourselves from the scents, sounds, and beauty of nature without knowing the cost to our overall well-being.

Through the spring and summer of 2020, the corona virus continued its inexorable spread through the human population. Ultimately, in the U.S., by the end of the year, government incompetence, and politically-motivated hostility to mitigating behaviors (mask wearing, distancing, and avoidance of group gatherings) would bring a greater surge in infections than anywhere else in the world. But as the weather warmed and summer approached, life—at least temporarily—got better and more hopeful. People flocked outdoors, planted gardens, wandered state and national parks and wilderness areas, camped, swam, biked, and kayaked. Escaping our indoor vivarium, my wife and I once again felt the warmth of the sun on our skin; we luxuriated in the intoxicating geosmin scent of spring and its allied fragrances: the sweet blossoms of hawthorn, wild plum, lilac, hyacinth, black cherry, and dogwood. Marauding bands



of chipmunks resumed their raids on our birdfeeders, their pinata cheeks stuffed with sunflower seeds. The woods came alive again with birdsong and the frenetic flutter of mating and nest-building. Each night as we fell asleep, bedroom windows slightly open, we heard Canada geese calling from high overhead as they winged their way north.

In *Walden's* chapter on "Solitude," during an early spell of intense loneliness, Thoreau wonders "if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life". The feeling passes quickly, after an hour, when he suddenly becomes "sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature. . . I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred in me. . . I thought no place could ever be strange to me again". Emerson writes of a similar feeling of kinship in *Nature*, where he says, "The greatest delight which the woods and fields minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable". I am not alone and unacknowledged.

The presence of this kinship, this "occult relation," was affirmed for me by a pair of gray treefrogs which daily refreshed our spirits as we navigated the bewildering fog of pandemic isolation.

I am painfully aware that it has taken me until my sixth decade of life to fully grasp the importance of my connection to Earth's myriad living things, and it has taken a virus that human beings have whisked around the world inside our host bodies, to reveal the depth and powder of that connection. The symbioses are often invisible, most likely, unknown to us. But sometimes they are not. The chirping of crickets at sundown; the buzzing of cicadas on a blistering August afternoon; the scent of spring rain; the deep silence of midnight beneath a black sky powdered with stars; and yes, the surprise singing of a gray treefrog in the midst of winter cold: these are not incidental noises but the essential soundtrack of a healthy, ecocentric human life.

On a bright, golden morning in late May, the sun a white fire in an achingly beautiful blue sky, my wife and I carried the ten-gallon glass aquarium outside to our front porch. The vivarium had housed Otto and Ophelia for ten weeks. We removed the screen cover and set the frogs free. Slow to grasp the extent of their liberty, they tentatively climbed our butter yellow siding and wedged themselves in the hollow tracks of a window, safe from predators.

The next morning, they were gone.

All summer long, from the woods and from the porch, we heard gray treefrogs singing. That song is not a language we're privileged to understand, but its beauty is familiar and affirming, as heartening as a smiling nod from a stranger, or the warm hug of a friend.