

*Rabbit: An Amphibian's
Path to Wisdom*

Rabbit: An Amphibian's Path to Wisdom

GUILHERME ALBIERI

Copyright © 2025 Guilherme Albieri

All rights reserved.

“Daddy, I want to watch this movie with you. It’s a true story. But every time it’s a true story, it is sad because there is dying and mean people.”

—My eight-year-old daughter

Table of Contents

Ribbit Meets His Destiny	1
Eternal Slumber	5
Not Back to Normal	9
Ribbit Meets Biggit	15
The Turtle	25
IT, the Bull Toad	30
The Toads and the Iridescent Amphibian	35
The Chameleon and the Little Fella	43
The Amphibian-Who-Knows-Everything	49
Dung Beetles	55
Survvit and the New Lake	61
Scafandrus Frogs	69
The Sculptor	75
Severitt: The 102-Year-Old Amphibian	84
The Inescapable Stages of Life	90
Return to Biggit	99
The Lily Pad of Life	103
Tuning the Instrument of Thought	116
The Crystals of Reframing	126

Thinking Errors	136
Awestruck	146
The Final Encounter	153
Endnotes	159

RIBBIT MEETS HIS DESTINY

The events of this fateful evening would provoke a tectonic shift in Ribbit's life.

That night felt like any other. The sky was bright; stars reflected on the clear water of the lagoon as a warm breeze caressed its surface; the air was thick with the scent of abundant life. But it was not just another night, as the events of this fateful evening would provoke a tectonic shift in Ribbit's life.

Ribbit prepared for his shift as if it were an ordinary work evening. He positioned himself in his favorite spot in the Goon lagoon, the lower half of his body immersed in water, head out, eyes gazing upward. He made himself comfortable. This nightly ritual was repeated routinely, almost faithfully.

The warm weather created the perfect environment for capturing mosquitoes, who were as active, succulent, and annoying as ever. Ribbit was about halfway to fulfilling his nightly mosquito quota when a sudden chill cut through the air. The lagoon came to a freezing standstill. A deafening silence settled—crickets ceased chirping, frogs swallowed their croaks, fireflies turned off their blinkers.

The entire lagoon knew this couldn't be anything good. Undoubtedly, it could only be one thing—Titana, the largest, fiercest boa constrictor in a vast region comprising hundreds of miles of lakes, lagoons, ponds, and marshes.

Having the status of a local legend, many, if not all, amphibians had heard of her. Yet very few had actually seen her. Those who laid eyes on her didn't live to tell the tale. She was fast and precise. Vicious. Deadly.

The wisest among them knew with heavy hearts that Fate had already chosen its victim for this night; they awaited only for the revelation of who would bear this burden.

Before Ribbit could react to the chill in the air and remove himself from what represented certain death, the corner of his eye caught the light emanating from Titana's eyes. His legs stiffened, his breathing became shallow, and his muscles unresponsive.

Ribbit could not move.

There was a certain beauty in the glare of Titana's eyes—an inescapable beauty that leads one to their end. It was clear that Titana was coming for him. But what can one do when instincts, thoughts, and muscles all freeze at once? Without instinct or thought, there is no action. With frozen muscles, instinct and thoughts have no means of manifesting themselves.

Ribbit's rear legs were stubbornly immobile, leaving him at the mercy of an amphibian's fiercest predator without the slightest chance of fighting back. A great leaper, Ribbit was now betrayed by his hind legs in the moment of his greatest need.

Titana slithered decisively toward Ribbit, dislocating and widening her jaw open, her breath exhaling what seemed to be a

numbing agent. There was no room for escape. In that moment, Ribbit's heart pulsed one final time before all went dark and his final breath left his body.

From above, he watched in wonder as his spirit exited his body.

In that split moment, Ribbit saw his life flash before his eyes, from the earliest memories of childhood up until that moment, the moment when there would be no more, when all had come to a halt. In taking stock of his life, he thought of the highs and lows, the good and the bad. More importantly, he reflected on how he had lived his life by principle—always with a sense of duty to self and others, always positive, always caring and gentle. It had been a good life.

Living a life by principle, you say! What difference does it make now? Misfortune has struck! The night will never turn into day and the day will never turn into night. That is an immutable truth. Why so unexpectedly? Why so ruthlessly? How could such a disgrace befall such a gentle soul? Ribbit, you were not done yet; you had much more to give and live! The cruel arbitrariness of fate!

Titana closed her mouth rapidly, denying her kill any chance of escape. But before swallowing, she sensed that Ribbit's skin was too cold for her liking, an indication that he had already passed away. If there's one luxury a top-of-the-food-chain predator allows itself, it's the freedom to choose its prey. And this

top-of-the- food-chain boa, Titana, does not choose dead prey. The taste is off, just not the same without the fresh taste of cortisol and adrenaline to season her meal. She also appreciates the struggle. A prey that's moving goes down easier. Titana spat him out, scoffing at the sorry sight of Ribbit lying miserably on his back, belly up, lifeless. She would find dignified prey elsewhere—a trivial task for a boa of her stature.

She slithered away to worthier prey, leaving Ribbit's sorry, lifeless self behind.

ETERNAL SLUMBER

*No tears, no cries, no prayers can
alter the course set by Fate.*

awn, the hour when amphibians retreat from their nightly activities, was about to break over the lagoon. Phobi, who had just discovered her dear Ribbit lying bellyup, leaned over him, calling his name repeatedly.

“Ribbit, Ribbit, wake up! Are you there?!” she cried, her voice growing frantic. But as Ribbit’s silence persisted, Phobi was struck with a terrible realization. “It’s the end of him,” she sobbed. “My best and only friend has met his destiny, the great equalizer—eternal slumber!”

Refusing to accept this fate, Phobi made one last desperate plea. “Ribbit, please! Pull yourself back from wherever you are and come back to where you belong. Goon is your only and true home.”

*Poor soul, in such pain for the loss of her friend.
Poor soul, can’t you see? Your anguish cannot change
fate. What is done is done. Life has left the body. No*

tears, no cries, no prayers can alter the course set by Fate.

Phobi's tears rolled freely, soaking Ribbit's face. As sorrow and grief clouded her vision, she felt a slight, almost imperceptible movement from Ribbit. She rubbed her eyes, wiping away tears of despair. Could it be? Was it true? The implication was almost too much to bear.

What now?! Had her tears through some mysterious power brought Ribbit back to life? That's where her confused logic led her, but what other explanation could there be? She had cried over him, and now he was moving? There could be no other explanation.

"Ribbit, you're alive! You live!" Phobi cheered, exalted. "My dearest friend, my plea for your soul to return to its rightful place worked! You breathe again!"

Ribbit, dazed and confused, felt a wave of relief at seeing his friend Phobi. But suddenly a disturbing thought hit him: What if they were meeting inside Titana's belly? Not out of the question since boas swallow their prey whole.

"You, too, Phobi, fell victim of Titana's precise and deadly strike? Now we both meet our destinies inside her digestive sac. Soon the acids will take their course. We will be reduced to protein molecules. What a way to say goodbye," Ribbit said incredulously.

Phobi, shocked, believing he was delusional, slapped Ribbit across the face.

This nonsensical talk was not typical of Ribbit. "Snap out of it," she cried and lifted him to reassure him that both were well and still alive with cold amphibian blood running through

their veins, not inside a mythical killer's belly, but home at Goon Lagoon.

Rabbit felt his heart rejoice. He had survived an attack from the most feared boa that ever lived. He was the only amphibian to ever have escaped an attack from Titana.

"I saw her," Rabbit said to Phobi, his heart racing. "I shouldn't be here," he insisted. His voice trembled with disbelief. "I was inside her humid mouth. I saw with my own eyes, the ridges of her palate looming over me."

"Have mercy and explain in detail what happened to you!" said Phobi.

"I don't know. It was all so fast." Rabbit took a shaky breath and continued, "One moment, the air froze. Silence shadowed every sound. For a split second, I saw the bright glow in her eyes. Then I smelled her warm, rancid breath as she dislocated her jaw to swallow me whole."

"Okay, then I brought you back from the dead, but why didn't she swallow you? Why would she spit you out?"

But Rabbit had heard something he didn't like. "Brought me back to life?" he asked indignantly.

"I-I'm not sure," Phobi replied, uncertain yet convinced. "You were cold, lifeless. I cried over you, and then ... you moved. My tears ... I think they might have ... I think they revived you." She paused as she heard herself speak but quickly returned to the burning topic: "Why didn't she eat you?"

"Answers will have to wait," Rabbit whispered. "We must leave now. Soon the sun will shine; our skins will dry. And judging by the lagoon's silence, she might still be lurking around."

They hopped away quickly, both still shaken by their brush with death, Ribbit shocked to the core for having nearly died and Phobi stunned by the near loss of her best friend and the power of her tears to revive him.

*The deceased rises! Tears that resuscitate the dead!
The unexplainable demands an explanation.*

NOT BACK TO NORMAL

Don't turn your back on life.

*A*s any good friend would do, at the crack of dusk, just before both would position themselves at the lagoon for the night's catch, Phobi decided to stop by Ribbit's hole to check on him after the harrowing events of the previous night.

What she saw alarmed her, filling her with great concern for her friend. Instead of the usual upbeat Ribbit, she encountered a deflated and apathetic spirit whose croak was subdued, whose bright eyes had dulled, and whose skin was a paler shade of green.

"How are you, friend?" Phobi asked, greeting Ribbit with all the friendly enthusiasm she could muster. "Oh, look at that face. Let's hop to your favorite spot at the lagoon. It will lift your spirits. Let's go!"

Phobi hoped her own enthusiasm might reignite his. But any attempt to persuade Ribbit to leave his hole proved fruitless. Instead, Ribbit insisted on staying in for the night,

claiming that the previous night's experience had shaken him to the core.

Weeks passed. Ribbit left his hole only to fulfill his basic duties. He barely ate and fell behind his daily mosquito-catching quota, a sharp departure from his meticulous nature. With winter approaching, when mosquitoes would become scarce, a low stock of dried mosquitoes was an omen of bad times ahead. And catching mosquitoes was just the first step in a long process of preparing mosquitoes for winter consumption. The mosquitoes had to be sun-dried, smoked with cattail plant, pressed into round blocks, wrapped in dried water lily leaves, and stored. Phobi watched her friend's demise with growing concern, knowing that his reduced productivity could have serious consequences not only for him but also for the supply of dried mosquitoes of the entire community.

Ribbit's negligence meant this would likely be a rough winter, but how could he think of anything else? Life, once abundant, normal, and predictable, had turned fragile and uncertain to him. The incident with Titana had awakened him rudely to the trap that defines the plight of every living being: the self-consciousness trap, that which gives living beings consciousness of their mortality and decline. Once oblivious, living in a state of slumber, now Ribbit was painfully awake and all too aware.

Self-consciousness: the source of all pain and fear, of helplessness and despair. What should one choose: to be aware of one's own fragility, insignificance, and mortality or to be oblivious? The latter. The latter.

Always the latter. For the sake of our already fragile soul, always the latter. Let me slumber then and not be awakened to—and by—self-consciousness.

A strong feeling dawned on Ribbit: the other amphibians looked at him differently now. As he hopped around, minding his own business, he felt the heavy weight of their judging eyes. He overheard whispers, his name being muttered. What could they be whispering about if not scorning him for his weakness? Their heavy tongues weighed on his spirit.

The word around the lagoon, so he assumed, was that Titana didn't eat him because he had fainted before she attacked him. Salamanders, water snakes, toads—everyone was talking about it. The strong, so the thinking went around the lagoon, faced their destiny head-on, reaching their final glory. To be so weak as to faint before an attack? Unacceptable!

Ribbit sensed that judging eyes followed him wherever he went. Few were interested in knowing what the mythical Titana looked like or even what had really happened. This was an unfortunate truth in those days at the lagoon—judgment prevailed, rather than listening or understanding.

Winter came, and as anticipated, Ribbit's personal supply of dried mosquitoes was insufficient. Phobi sacrificed her own supply to ensure that he would make it to spring. Deep down, Ribbit knew his sadness, if left unchecked, would drag him further down. Despair turned to anger and anger to outrage.

Having decided he had had enough, Ribbit grabbed a few provisions and hopped away from the Goon lagoon without

looking back. He had no plan and no certain destination—only the hope of leaving the past in the past, believing there's no better remedy for a conflicted spirit than to embark on a personal journey, or so he thought.

Rabbit traveled through distant marshes, ponds, and swamps. Thoughts percolated through his mind. Why had Titana targeted him? What had he done to deserve this? Having lived his life with a disposition to always do what was right, was it worth it when everything could be over in an instant? Questions were many, answers few. His attitude had soured. From his personal journey, he gained little except sore feet and dehydration.

At the summit of his life's mental mountain, with a 360-degree view, Rabbit found himself seriously out of balance. No matter where he looked, he could see nothing but despair. He could not step back; the past frightened him—the fragility and impermanence of life. In the blink of an eye, everything he knew to be true was questioned, taken away. The past had shown him that nothing was certain, and if the future was rooted in that past, what hope could it hold? A heavy weight filled his stomach; a strange lightness filled his head, a sense of void filled his spirit.

Looking forward was equally frightening. As he gazed into the future, his heart raced, his palms drenched in sweat. Aspirations of a desired future seemed fragile and futile, easily snatched without forewarning or notice. The uncertainty ahead seemed too much to bear. Hope, once a companion, was shaky at best, and as hope waned, the future became a burden, a dread.

As he looked down, now, the ground beneath him cracked and trembled. The foundations that had once supported him—beliefs, certainties, assumptions—now seemed fragile, ephemeral. He felt paralyzed. Looking back was painful; looking forward was frightening. The present was marked by the paralyzing misery of these conflicting temporal states.



As the biting winter left the lagoon and spring infused the air with freshness, Phobi learned that Ribbit had returned and that he could be found at the local Tipsy Lily Pad Tavern. Night after night, Ribbit could be found at the bar, drowning his sorrows in the numbing effects of beetle juice. Although bitter and unappealing to his taste, he drenched himself in beetle juice, seeking its temporary elation to momentarily weather his personal storms.

The aftermath of these nights was harsh—cramps, fatigue, headaches, and stomach pain. Yet, these very symptoms drove him to drink more beetle juice, seeking relief but trapping himself in a vicious cycle.

Rabbit, you are not alone! Amphibians, for as long they have lived, have tried to suppress pain with externals. And all have failed. Can't you see that your behavior, destructive at best, yields no results? Can't you see it does not solve the problem? Can't you see it is not you? Let not your anger and despair be what

*undoes you. Let not numbing agents be the remedy.
Don't turn your back on life.*

Phobi, unable to bear seeing her friend in such a deplorable state, knew, deep inside her amphibian heart, that something drastic had to be done. She appeared unannounced at Ribbit's den and uttered a command in a way that gives someone no other option than to accept what is being commanded. "We are going to Biggit today, Ribbit!"

"Biggit? The Biggit?" Ribbit asked, surprised.

"Yes," Phobi insisted, "something must be done, and Biggit is the only one who can help you. He lives on the other side of the pond. I brought two rings of dried mosquitoes for the journey. Let's keep on moving; it'll take us two nights to get there." By her tone, Ribbit quickly grasped that this was not a suggestion. Against his will, he hopped along.

Along their journey, Phobi offered words of encouragement, reminding her friend that life confuses, disorients, puzzles, and throws us off course. She assured him that amphibians shouldn't be blamed for finding themselves occasionally directionless. "There should be no shame," she insisted, "in seeking help to untangle the inevitable mental knots created by life."

RIBBIT MEETS BIGGIT

Suffering demands us to BECOME.

Biggit awaited their arrival, having been notified by a dragonfly dispatched by Phobi. As they approached him, he invited them onto his leaf, encouraging them to make themselves comfortable.

“Welcome, welcome,” Biggit greeted. “How was your journey?” Without waiting for a response, he offered them a large leaf laden with freshly picked bamboo worms and brewed flower tea. “Please help yourselves.”

After allowing them a moment to settle, Biggit turned his attention to Ribbit. “So, you are the one who needs to speak with me?” His tone was direct but kind.

Ribbit’s response was sharp and bitter, a far cry from his once-gentle demeanor. “I don’t need to speak with anyone; she is the one who had the bright idea to drag me here.”

Unfazed, Biggit prompted further, “I understand Titana nearly had the best of you?”

“Yes,” Ribbit replied in a whisper. “But all went dark at the sight of her, and ...”

Biggit, as if prescient of what had happened, gently interrupted, “Titana gave you for dead, and since she doesn’t consume dead prey, she let you go. Tell me more. What happened next?”

Alas! Everything has an explanation. There were no magical tears or miracles, only a body given for dead. An explanation to the unexplained at last!

Ribbit provided an emotional and raw account of what had happened that night, how the occurrences made him feel small and weak—as if his very essence had vanished. Nothing made sense anymore, and he saw no meaning in carrying on. He shared how his journey to clear his mind, aside from acquiring some callouses, did not produce the cathartic effect he had anticipated. Ruminating, stubborn thoughts hijacked his mind, and he became the talk of the pond.

As Biggit listened, he quickly invoked Her, the wisest of all amphibians. He called upon Her whenever he had a difficult case, and this was surely a job for Her. She responded and spoke through Biggit.

“I understand your pain,” Biggit began, his voice resonant with wisdom. “You may be right that you are the talk of the pond, but you shouldn’t and mustn’t let the bitterness of others dictate your life. The other amphibians react out of fear—fear of facing what you’ve encountered and survived, knowing they might not

be as fortunate. If the heavy-tongued speak about you at all, they do so out of insecurity, out of fear of their own fragility.”

Biggit continued empathically, his voice carrying the weight of experience:

“You have confronted the true essence of life, Ribbit. You have faced the moment when the certainty of the future dissolves. These moments create a chasm between the past and what once was thought to be a certain future, forcing an inevitable recalibration of expectations and projections. The tenuous link between the now and what is to be vanishes. The ground beneath your feet—the very foundation upon which you stood and planned your future—is abruptly swept away.¹

“This is the power of personal tragedy. It compels us to pause, to slow down and critically reexamine our priorities, assumptions, and certitudes. New paths must be traced, and fresh beginnings become possible.

“But don’t expect solace from me. I cannot feel pity for you for facing what is common in the amphibian experience, our shared destiny. We are all connected to hardship in some way.

“Hardship, in its myriad forms—including its terminal form—visits our species daily. Yet we insist on living as if these trials and perversions of nature were destined for others, never ourselves. Disease afflicts amphibians in every pond. Misfortunes are bestowed daily upon our species by the mere miracle of birth, making existence a form of a burden. Yet, we are surprised, even shocked, when misfortune strikes.

“You wonder why your arduous journey yielded no cathartic insights, why you turned to beetle juice for numbness. These are

mere escapist strategies, exiling yourself from life, turning your back to existence rather than accepting life for what it is. And when you realize there's no escape, you double down in your futile quest for evasion. The way out of agony is through it, not escaping it through life-numbing concoctions.

“What happened to you, Ribbit, is part of life’s inescapable and intricate design. Nature has unveiled one of its many possibilities. While before you lived with the illusion of certainty and comfort, life has revealed possibilities within possibilities—uncertainty and grief.

“Nature does not reveal what cannot be; it only reveals what is possible within nature. If this facet of existence was revealed to you, every living being is susceptible to it.

“Titana is at the top of the food chain. As predator-in-chief, she acts in accordance with her instincts—a coded nature predetermined in her very being. Her pursuit to satiate her hunger is intrinsic, and we, whether we like it or not, are part of her natural diet.

“And there’s one more reason I can’t offer you pity—you’ve finally perceived life for what it truly is: suffering. Suffering demands us to BECOME. Your ordeal, Ribbit, has expanded your repertoire of experiences and, ideally, equipped you with the tools to navigate future challenges.”

*Biggit spoke loud and clear! Words were not minced.
Nature, oh, nature, why show no mercy to your
own creations? You, who give life, also take it away
with no clemency! Are we merely to accept this cruel*

design? Why curse us with memory and emotion, making your indifference all the more unbearable? Lucky are the earthworms, blind to the weight of time—no past, no future—just munching dirt. If you are the mother of all living things, why bless so many with the gift of oblivion yet leave us amphibians to drown with despair?!

Rabbit interjected, expressing the perceived injustice of his plight, the profound pain that weighed on his spirit.

“Ah!” Biggit exclaimed. “A case of unbounded innocence.”

“Innocence?” Rabbit protested.

Biggit elaborated, “The universe should treat everyone fairly, gentleness should prevail among amphibians, suffering and pain should be uprooted from the amphibian experience like weeds, each being should always receive their fair share in this world—so thinks the innocent. It’s innocence without limits. While such ends are noble, the innocent become frustrated and angry when they confront the harsh reality that this is not nature’s way.”

“But that is exactly my point,” Rabbit interjected with visible frustration. “Then what is the point? What about *happi*—”

Biggit, who could barely tolerate the mention of *happi*...—a concept, in his opinion, overused and trivialized—interjected:

“Because nature cuddled us in our early years, we crave for the cuddling to continue. Because we were loved, we crave love. Because we were secure and protected, because we were fed, we want these comforts to endure. But when these blessings fade, when we realize they’ve been stripped away, we resent, becoming

amphibians of resentment. We throw our arms up high in the sky and demand, ‘What have you done to me?’

“We must acknowledge that the world offers no guarantees—not for fairness, justice, or the alleviation of suffering. Yet, this realization shouldn’t deter us from striving for them. That is the point. The pursuit of these noble ideals has been the life works of many fulfilled amphibians. The challenge lies in maintaining this pursuit without succumbing to resentment.”

As She, the All-Wise, listened through Biggit, She knew Ribbit’s unyielding resistance needed more than words. An intellectual conversation alone wouldn’t suffice. Ribbit needed to experience transformation. Deep work was required, something that had to be felt, lived. Time, words, and experience only teach the willing, and willing Ribbit was not.

“Ribbit,” Biggit said, his voice carrying a serious undertone, “I will send you and Phobi on a mission homeward. This journey will answer your question about *happi*—” Biggit stumbled over the word with an allergic-like reaction to the concept. “You will meet my friend Survvit who resides at the New Lake, a Scafandrus frog. You will spend some time with dung beetles, and—”

“But I thought we were going home,” Ribbit interjected impatiently.

“Oh, you will go home, Ribbit. But not to the comfort of your den. You’re going home in the truest sense—into the world, where life actually happens. Where was I? Ah, yes. The journey.

You will travel through the Valley of Withering ...”

Phobi gulped.

“... and the Valley of Awakening. Along the way, you will experience eight carefully curated encounters and hear two fables, each designed to help you see life not as we wish it to be, but as it truly is.

First, you will meet that which prevents one from flourishing—the Blockers of Life. Then you will encounter the Releasers, those forces that unlock a life of growth.

Prepare yourself, Ribbit. No one has ever returned from this journey unchanged.”

“Deceitful,” Ribbit thought, with a gleam of resentment. Yet, he recognized he needed to give it a try if he were to reclaim his old amphibian self.

Ribbit! Deceitful it may seem, but Biggit speaks the truth. You refuse to let words move your mind. You refuse to let words alone change your heart. When one refuses words, experience must be the teacher. Open yourself to the transformative power of the journey.

Biggit summoned Mosqui, his most trusted mosquito guide, gave introductions, and set them on their carefully crafted journey with the urgency that the situation required.

The Valley of Withering



THE TURTLE

*I learned early that we turtles are never safe—
the Supreme gave us shells because It alone
understands the hidden dangers of this world.*

*M*osqui led Ribbit and Phobi into the Valley of Withering—a distant patch of land where few amphibians dared to venture. The dry air and the scorching heat made it difficult, if not impossible, for amphibians, with their delicate skins, to survive. They had to carefully and constantly monitor the moisture of their skins to avoid dehydration.

Every fifty hops or so, Mosqui used his needle-like proboscis to extract water from local plants, spraying it over Ribbit and Phobi to keep them hydrated. As they traveled, Mosqui also scanned the land from above, keeping an eye for big mammals—this was, after all, big mammal territory.

After five intense nights of hopping, they finally approached their destination.

Upon arrival, an air of bewilderment settled over them. Before them stood a solitary, motionless turtle shell, with no one

to welcome them. At Mosqui's urging, the pair approached the shell cautiously.

Mosqui dreaded this stop and had warned Biggit more than once. Mosqui's main concern was the toll the harsh climate could take on the amphibians' delicate skin. But truth be told, Mosqui found the turtle's drama-laden disposition unbearable. Still, the Master insisted: the lessons here were important for every amphibian. And so, Mosqui complied.

"Hello?!" Phobi called from a distance. "Is there anyone home?" No answer.

"Hello?!"

No answer.

"Is there anyone home?"

No answer.

Following Mosqui's advice, Ribbit gently knocked on the shell.

A faint voice replied from within, "Who is this? Why are you here? State your business."

After the pair introduced themselves, the voice continued, "Ah, Biggit sent you! My apologies for not coming out. I hope you don't mind, but I won't be leaving my shell today. To be precise, I haven't in years; it's nothing personal."

Phobi's curiosity piqued, and she interjected, "We're not offended; it is a pleasure to meet you. But might I ask, why you never leave your shell?"

"My, aren't you inquisitive?" the voice replied.

"I did not mean to pry," Phobi said quickly, trying to avert the uncomfortable situation she had help create. "It's just that I've never met a turtle who doesn't emerge from their shell."

“Aren’t shells meant for inhabitation?” the voice answered. “I use mine the way the Divine Creator intended.”

“True, but most turtles venture out occasionally, only retreating when threatened,” Phobi countered.

“Threatened?! Let me explain something I learned early on ...”

“Can you speak up?” Ribbit interrupted. “I can hardly hear you.”

“LET ME EXPLAIN SOMETHING I LEARNED EARLY IN LI—”

“Not quite so loud,” Ribbit cringed.

“I learned early that we turtles are never safe. The Supreme gave us shells because It understands our plight. It alone knows this world’s dangers for turtles. For this reason, It provided this very shell which I shall never abandon.”

“We, soft-skinned amphibians, lacking a protective shell, are also vulnerable,” Phobi reasoned. “Yet here we are, visiting you.”

“Speak of our own world’s dangers. The amphibian realm differs from that of turtles.”

“Surely they are the same,” Phobi insisted in her typical sweet tone.

“I beg to differ. Let me tell you about a dear friend. Some hundred turtle years ago, my friend approached the lagoon for a mere sip of water. As he extended his neck, lowering his head toward the water’s surface, a croc burst from the depths. In one brutal snapping movement, it seized my friend and swallowed him whole, enjoying him as lunch. My friend of hundreds of years turned into lunch! And ... I witnessed it all.”

Ribbit’s stomach churned; he turned pale. The turtle’s account hit too close to home.

Phobi noticed Ribbit's sudden change in color—a clear sign that his cold blood had retreated from his extremities, triggered by his fight-or-flight response system. It was evident that he was scared for his life.

Phobi attempted to change the subject, but the turtle, oblivious to Ribbit's distress, persisted.

“Oh, and there was this monkey who tried to catch an acquaintance of mine. My acquaintance managed to retreat into his shell. The monkey, persistent as it was, stared at the shell for days, trying to figure out how to breach it. And monkeys, being the ingenious animals that they are, indeed found a way—it grabbed a rock and …”

Overwhelmed, Ribbit fainted.

“Mosqui!? Mosqui?! We need help,” Phobi cried frantically. Mosqui rushed to the nearest water source, filled his proboscis, and sprayed the liquid onto Ribbit's face, reviving him. “This happens every time,” Mosqui murmured. “Always so melodramatic, this turtle.” He rushed back to fetch more water, shaking his head in complete disbelief.

As Ribbit came back to his senses, Phobi urged the turtle to change the subject, but he wouldn't relent.

“Oh, and do you know how many baby turtles go missing every year? One in two hundred survive. Birds of prey, raccoons, snakes—the entire food chain feasts on our eggs. Oh, and once, I stuck my head out, and who was there, waiting for me to stick my neck out so it could grab it? Who was there?”

“Please, I understand it was probably a fierce predator. But enough is enough,” Phobi said, exasperated. “Look, here you are, alive and well.”

“Yes! By the grace of the Supreme, who provided me with this shell that I shall never venture out of.”

In a final attempt to redirect the conversation, Phobi inquired, “How do you sustain yourself?”

“The Supreme provides. It provides me with water from the skies. Rainwater falls into my shell, and that’s enough for hydration. Occasionally, unsuspecting insects wander in, becoming meals. Friends visiting for welfare checks bring the finest local grass, delivering it right into my shell.”

“How ... convenient,” Phobi remarked, her voiced tinged with skepticism. “But wouldn’t living life to the fullest, despite its dangers and perils, be a more meaningful life?”

“Given life’s fragility and unpredictability, I choose the comfort and security of my shell. Oh, and let me tell you why. One day, an acquaintance of an acquaintance ...”

Phobi signaled to Mosqui that it was time for them to leave before Ribbit succumbed to another fainting spell.

They left the turtle speaking to himself. As they departed this bizarre interaction, Ribbit felt a great sense of unease about what lay ahead. Little did he know there was much more to come ...



IT, THE BULL TOAD

We're entering unsafe territory for a mosquito like me. You'll have to find your own way from here.

“I will give you directions to your next stop,” Mosqui announced in a serious tone. “We’re entering unsafe territory for a mosquito like me. You’ll have to find your own way from here.”

Phobi and Ribbit’s curiosity was certainly piqued. What kind of place could this possibly be? Would it pose an equal threat to them?

“You will be fine,” Mosqui assured them, instructing them to follow a beaten path until they reached a muddy area where IT lived. Mosqui refused to elaborate on IT’s nature, let alone say IT’s name. Just thinking of IT’s name sent shivers down Mosqui’s wings. “You’ll certainly know when you’ve encountered IT. There’s no way of missing IT.”

Down the path they hopped, carefully following Mosqui’s directions. As the terrain grew muddier, tension gripped their nerves—they could sense IT, whatever IT was, was nearby. As they made a turn, Phobi sensed a shadow looming behind her. Before she could react, a sticky tongue shot out, enveloping her body from the side, pulling her with shocking speed.

Ribbit leapt back in disbelief as a scream of despair escaped from his throat. "Let her go!" he cried.

Instinctively, Phobi spread her legs, making it impossible for IT to swallow her whole. Ribbit could hear her muffled cries for help, but her words were indecipherable—half her body had already disappeared into IT's mouth.

In that moment, Ribbit remembered Mosqui's parting advice: *"If you find yourself in danger, tell IT you have come on behalf of Biggit. That should keep you safe. And don't forget to ask IT for the story."* Mosqui's words had been barely audible as he flew away in fear for his life.

"Biggit. We are here by Biggit's orders," yelled Ribbit at the top of his amphibian lungs.

"Oh, III AAMM SOOOO SORORREE," IT mumbled through a mouthful of Phobi.

IT spat out a shaky, drool-covered Phobi, then continued, more clearly this time, "I am so sorry; if you had told me that in advance, I would not have tried to eat you. Are you okay, darling? It really was not my intention ... well, it was, if you hadn't been a friend of Biggit's. I apologize profusely."

Phobi, trying to clean herself from IT's thick drool, managed to appear polite while inwardly harboring less-than-charitable thoughts.

IT, now revealed to be the largest bull toad they had ever seen, with a disproportionately small mouth, felt compelled to explain himself for such a catastrophic welcome.

"I am a big bull toad with an even bigger appetite. I eat, and I eat, and then I eat some more. Everything that moves around

me becomes a meal. I eat because it tastes good, and because it tastes good, I eat. My mouth may be small, but my appetite ... insatiable!"

IT, with its tiny mouth, continued, "I am glad Biggit has sent you to me. I've become too large to hop around chasing food. Biggit is very cordial to send nice amphibians like yourselves to collect food for me. Now, off you go; gather as much as you can."

Puzzled, Phobi and Ribbit exchanged perplexed glances.

They had narrowly escaped a life-threatening situation, only to be tasked with foraging for their would-be predator? The absurdity of the request left them baffled.

For two consecutive nights, Ribbit and Phobi foraged for edible creatures. Estimating how much food it would take to satisfy IT's insatiable hunger, they immersed themselves in the task with unwavering determination. After filling numerous leaves with mosquitoes, flies, and worms, they felt they had accomplished their mission. Their collection, they believed, could have fed four amphibians for four nights.

Proud, they returned to IT with their bountiful harvest. Without hesitation, IT's sticky tongue shot out, scooping up half the food supply in one swift motion and shoving it down its small mouth.

"Yum, thank you for these delicacies. You surely know how to select only the best creatures," IT mumbled, his mouth still full.

Ribbit and Phobi watched in horror as two nights of arduous work vanished in less than two seconds.

"I'll save the leftovers for later," IT added.

“What leftovers?!” Ribbit and Phobi thought in disbelief. In another split second, IT’s tongue darted out, scooping up the leftovers.

Ribbit, do not hold your tongue. You must voice your concerns, your outrage with Biggit. What kind of a practical joke is he playing on you? Placing you in life-threatening situations, making you work for his friends. Can't you see you are being used? For what purposes, it's still unclear, but there rests no doubt that you are just a pawn in Biggit's selfish game. You are gaining nothing from this experience, serving him and his insatiable friends. The indignation you feel, the fervor in your chest is justified. Don't ever question it. It's there because it is real. Vocalize it. Don't hold back.

It became evident why Mosqui had avoided IT like the plague. Poor Mosqui would have been dinner on the spot. The pair remained with IT for two more nights, until the next “helpers” were due to arrive and assist him with his never-ending food-finding mission. Night after night, they scoured the land for every type of food an amphibian could possibly consume, even bitter-tasting roly-polies were fair game.

Toward the end of the fourth night, with a few hours remaining before dawn, Ribbit and Phobi finally found a moment to rest and nourish themselves. They chatted about this and that until Ribbit suddenly recalled Mosqui’s parting words: the story.

“IT,” Ribbit ventured cautiously, “Mosqui mentioned you had a story to share?”

IT, a great storyteller, seemed to perk up. “Ah, yes, thank you for reminding me. After all, Biggit didn’t send you here just to collect food on my behalf,” IT said with a chuckle. No one else laughed.

As IT began telling the tale, he casually slurped an unsuspecting earthworm or insect here and there, his appetite never fully sated.



THE TOADS AND THE IRIDESCENT AMPHIBIAN

Many believed this magical water was the source of his impressive youth and strength.

*A*nd so the story began. One of the oldest legends in the amphibian world is that of the iridescent amphibian. Some believe the legend to be true and continue their search for this mythical being to this day.

Hundreds of amphibian years ago, in a distant pond, there lived an amphibian revered by all. To those who knew him personally and those who only knew of him, he seemed almost god-like—though amphibians have no such deities.

According to legend, this amphibian gleamed as if covered in glitter. Blessed with a muscular physique and extraordinary health, he lived an illness-free life. His ironclad spirit and boundless energy allowed him to accomplish anything he set his mind to. The

combination of his physical prowess with spiritedness left others in awe. His charisma and positive disposition were as potent as his strength, leaving an impression on all who encountered him.

The legend claims he bathed in a secret pond every morning before going to bed and every evening before starting his nightly

activities. The pond, so it was believed, was filled with glittery water and maintained at a perfect, constant temperature, whether it was dawn or dusk. Many believed this magical water was the source of his impressive youth and strength.

Local amphibians, eager to be like him, questioned him insistently about the pond's location, hoping to benefit from its miraculous properties. He vehemently denied the existence of such a pond, insisting he bathed in water no different from that used by others.

His denial only fueled their suspicions. The other amphibians reasoned that if the pond were indeed magical, why would he share such a precious resource? Surely, they thought, he would keep this secret to himself.

The iridescent amphibian had mentioned that he bathed in ordinary water but did so at specific times: before dawn and at dusk. The others, employing what they believed to be pure logic, concluded that this specific timing must be the explanation for his great health and appearance.

And so, everyone in the pond—or rather, most of them (I stand corrected)—particularly those who aspired to live long and healthy lives, which was almost everyone, began taking baths at dawn and dusk.

Some amphibians immediately reported the amazing therapeutic effects of their twice-a-day baths. They claimed renewed energy, increased stamina, and a brighter outlook on life. However, as with many trends, not all baths were created equal.

Seeking to enhance the benefits, some amphibians experimented with additives. They added dragonfly wings for their iridescent properties, hoping to replicate the legendary amphibian's

glittery glow. Others added beetle carapace for the same reason. These concoctions were thought to elevate ordinary pond water to extraordinary therapeutic levels.

A whole new market emerged at the pond. Entrepreneurial amphibians developed and sold special soaps, bottled iridescent materials, and shimmering oils, all promising to deliver the secret of the legendary amphibian's glow.

The consumption of iridescent materials—butterfly and dragonfly wings, beetle carapaces—reached staggering levels. So immense was the demand that these iridescent insects fled the pond in a massive exodus, a historical event known as the Great Exodus of Iridescent Beings.

While being consumed as food was a natural part of the ecosystem, this went far beyond the natural order. These insects watched in horror their peers being captured in numbers far exceeding what the amphibian population could need for sustenance. Witnessing their peers have their wings and carapaces plucked and crushed into dry rubs or mixed oils proved too much to bear. They fled.

Faced with the shortage of the highly coveted materials, the amphibians reacted predictively: they chased them no matter where they went. Entrepreneurial amphibians, for the first time in amphibian history, ventured beyond the comfort of their ponds to search for new supplies of iridescent materials.

A moment was reached in the lagoon when the iridescent amphibian's smallest actions, words, and gestures attained the status of divine providence. If word spread that he had switched his diet from mosquitoes to worms, the entire pond

would adjust their diets accordingly. Should he express preference for a particular type of worm, consumption of that species would skyrocket, resulting in its disappearance from the local markets.

But I digress. Let us return to the amphibians venturing beyond their pond in search of iridescent materials for their baths. They traveled to distant ponds, marshes, even deserts, where the living condition for moisture-dependent amphibians was very perilous. One of these explorers stumbled upon a pond inhabited by toads.

The toads welcomed their amphibian cousin to their pond with unexpected warmth. They remarked on his vigor and gleaming appearance. The explorer was initially suspicious about the warm welcome—after all, toads have a reputation for being untrustworthy. But he needed the insects, and this pond had them in abundance.

Suspiciously curious about their visitor, the toads inquired about what had brought him so far from his native home. Aware of the delicate nature of the situation, he weighed his response carefully. He spun a strange story about self-discovery and adventure-seeking, which the toads received, being toads, with skepticism. Nevertheless, they provided him a place to stay and food to satiate his hunger.

As night fell, and sometimes during daylight, when it was best to capture dragonflies and butterflies, the amphibian explorer set about his secret work. His diurnal activities piqued the toads' curiosity; after all, amphibians were primarily nocturnal creatures.

Why was he exchanging the night for the day, especially because, unlike toads, he was a wet-skinned species of amphibian, the toads asked themselves with suspicion. Their suspicions were never voiced, as toads are not trustworthy animals, and that is what untrustworthy creatures do; they keep their suspicion to themselves.

Acting on their suspicions, the toads devised a plan. They assigned a young toad to shadow the visitor during the day, watching his every move without being seen.

Day in and day out, the young toad followed and observed. His observations confirmed their suspicion: this story of personal discovery was nothing more than pure fabrication. The amphibian had been secretly collecting iridescent materials, storing them for some unknown purpose. More puzzling still, he'd discard their carcasses, harvesting only the wings of the flying creatures and the carapaces of the beetles.

One fateful morning, determined to further uncover the explorer's lies and find where the amphibian secretly stored the collected wings, the young toad shadowed the amphibian's every step. Too focused on his target, the young toad accidentally tripped on a twig, sending him stumbling and revealing his position. The amphibian explorer's body tensed, realizing that his deception had been revealed.

With his cover blown and aware of his physical disadvantage, the young toad had no other choice but to utter a deep alert croak. The croak was so deep and forceful, the most intense he had ever croaked, that his vocal sacs sprained. The entire pond of toads awoke and rushed to his aid, as if they had been waiting for this moment.

The amphibian was quickly subdued and dragged to a cavernous hole, where he was interrogated relentlessly. “Why are you here? What purpose do these wings and carapaces serve?”

Cornered and desperate, the amphibian had to think on his webbed feet. He chose a risky strategy: telling the toads the truth—and more, offering them a stake in it.

He told them of the glittery amphibian—detailing his baths, extraordinary health, and superpowers. The toads, with their dry skin and not-so-appealing sickly look, listened to every word, as the explorer expected they would.

And that’s when he executed the second part of his strategy to escape alive. He offered to guide them to his pond and force the glittery amphibian to reveal the secret location of the magical pond.

The toads, driven by dark hope, accepted the offer. At twilight, a large caravan of toads traveled toward what seemed to be the promised land—the fountain of health and youth.

The amphibian explorer led the caravan with a sense of relief and pride. Relief, because he was alive, and pride, because he was certain the toads would revere him for sharing the secret. But he failed to anticipate what was to come.

“Two more dusks,” the amphibian explorer announced, “and we will be close to our destiny. He assured the toad leader that his pond mates would welcome them like old friends.

The toad leader, with an unreadable expression, asked to be informed when they neared the pond.

As the next dusk settled, the explorer, true to his word, informed the leader. “If we continue on this path,” he explained, “we’ll reach the pond.”

“The pond is at the end of this path?” the toad leader asked, his tone undecipherable.

“Yes, in less than an hour, you and your kind will have access to eternal youth, thanks to me,” the explorer boasted.

In that instant, a toad swiftly bound the amphibian’s vocal sac with a rope fashioned from cattail weed, choking him from behind. The explorer’s eyes bulged in shock.

“From now on, we are in control,” the toads declared.

He had been duped. How could he have been so naïve? He had trusted toads—the most untrustworthy species of amphibians. He should have known better, but now, what could be done? The answer was simple and devastating: nothing.

What was about to unfold was already in motion, and it was not pretty. The toads attacked with ruthless efficiency, taking control and capturing all wet-skinned amphibians, unleashing a relentless search for the glittery one and his secret pond.

When they found him, they used heavy muscles to demand the disclosure of the secret pond. He assured them that he could not reveal what did not exist. Unmoved, the toads issued an ultimatum: all amphibians would suffer unless he disclosed his secret.

Since there was nothing to reveal, all amphibians suffered the full force of the toads’ wrath.

After years of fruitless searching, one toad suggested a grim hypothesis: perhaps the answer lay in the glittery one’s body itself. He was sacrificed, and an autopsy ensued.

After a thorough examination, they discovered that he was no different from any other amphibian. He had, after scrutiny, two anomalies: a slightly more muscular brain, likely from frequent,

vigorous use. And, nestled within the happiness center of his brain, a structure resembling a permanent half-smile.



“Well, well, well,” mused IT, “it is time we retire and get some rest.” Rabbit and Phobi agreed. As fascinating as the tale had been, they were exhausted from all the hunting and gathering.

“Tomorrow evening, don’t forget to gather a hearty breakfast for IT,” IT reminded them.

Rabbit couldn’t believe his ears. Not only did he have to collect food for the creature who had nearly devoured his best friend, but IT also referred to himself in the third person—a habit Rabbit found utterly insufferable in any amphibian!

They rested peacefully that day, their bones aching from the previous night’s exertions. As evening fell, they dutifully resumed their tasks, collecting an assortment of edibles for IT. At the end of the night, their bodies weary but their quotas met, IT shared another story.



THE CHAMELEON AND THE LITTLE FELLA

*When the last stalk of green grass
vanished, they turned on each other.*

Twas bright daylight. Suddenly, a cloud advanced over the pastures near the lagoon, turning the day into night. The cloud descended from the sky, touched the ground, and abruptly disappeared. The lush green vegetation next to the lagoon—a field with all sorts of nutritious grass and plants—instantly turned from vibrant green to brown.

An ominous munching sound could be heard from afar. What was once a flying cloud had become a voracious, devastating force of nature.

The grasshoppers munched relentlessly for days, devouring everything in their path. They could have stopped, but they wouldn't. Their insatiable appetite drove them on.

When most of the grass was gone, the grasshoppers found themselves too bloated to fly to greener pastures. Yet their hunger would not subside, compelling them to continued munching on whatever they could find.

As the food supply dwindled, so did their tolerance for one another. Fights became the norm. They battled for territory, squabbled over a single stalk of green grass, and eventually fought for the sake of fighting.

When the last stalk of green grass vanished, they turned on each other. More than seven-eighths of the grasshoppers succumbed to a brutal trifecta of destruction: infighting, cannibalism, or becoming too bloated to move. Those who grew too bloated became easy targets for starlings that circled the skies in a feeding frenzy, feasting on them.

One grasshopper, wounded in a fight, managed to survive. Limping away from the battlefield, the little fella sought refuge from the swarming starlings that scoured the region for easy nutrition.

Desperate, the injured grasshopper pleaded to a chameleon for protection. The cunning lizard welcomed him with an offer of shelter in his den.

“I can’t imagine what you’ve been through,” mused the chameleon, “Your group is the talk of the town. First, you flew as one, dominating the pastures, consuming everything in your path. And now?” The lizard paused. “Now you wage war against each other.”

The little fella sighed, a mix of confusion and regret in his voice. “Said like that, it really doesn’t make much sense. How we got to this point … I honestly don’t know. But I can’t thank you enough for providing me shelter. Your kindness … it means more than you can imagine.”

The chameleon dismissed the gratitude. “It’s nothing,” he assured him.

Days passed, and they lived in harmony. The chameleon asked the little fella for help with daily chores, compatible with

his stage of recovery, and the grasshopper obliged; after all, he owed his survival to his host.

As the little fella recovered and slimmed down, the demands on him gradually increased. The chameleon's requests turned into commands—do this, do that around the burrow. The days grew long, and his recovery seemed to stall with all the moving about. Soon, the chameleon started sending him to run errands outside the burrow.

The more the little fella did, the less the chameleon had to do. Always in the most pleasant tone, he reminded the little guy how he had saved him. The little fella didn't complain, but inside his mind, he computed sophisticated equations as little fellas can: How many more days would he need to recover at this rate? When could he leave without risking undue harm to himself? How could he properly express his gratitude and move on?

Just as things seemed to be improving, an incident occurred that would change everything. The chameleon—unintentionally, or so it seemed—bumped into him, causing the little fella to lose balance. The grasshopper tripped, landing hard on his wounded leg, setting back his recovery.

A chilling realization dawned on the little fella. A pattern had emerged, one he could no longer ignore. Every time his leg showed signs of improvement, some “accident” would occur in that burrow that reversed his progress. The coincidence was too perfect, too frequent to be mere chance.

One night, realizing he was stuck in a perpetual trap, he knew it was time to act, with or without a fully functioning leg. He

would escape under the cover of darkness, away from the starlings and the chameleon's manipulations.

He woke up, gathered his few belongings, and quietly made his way to the cave's entrance.

“Where are you going at this hour ?” the chameleon inquired, his voice unnervingly calm.

Caught off guard, the little fella stuttered as his escape plan crumbled, “I-I-I-couldn’t sleep and decided to go for a walk.”

“Oh? Couldn’t sleep? Is something bothering you that’s robbing you of sleep? Something disturbing your peace?”

“Not at all. It’s just … my leg. It hurts.”

“Isn’t it getting better?” the chameleon continued, his tone laced with false sympathy.

“Much better,” the little guy replied cautiously, “but the last time I tripped on your foot, it stated hurting again.”

“It will heal soon. Look how far you have come under my care. When you arrived, you were overweight and broken. You’ve thinned, and your leg is almost healed.”

“Yes, and I can only thank you for that.”

“Oh, let’s not be silly. I did what any creature in this world with half a heart would have done. It was really nothing. It just pains me to see you still struggling. Let me not stop you. Go for your walk. I’d do the same. Walks are very … therapeutic. They have this power of distracting and clearing the mind. Let me not hold you back. Go for your walk.”

The chameleon turned back, heading inside the den. The little fella, heart pounding, moved slowly toward the entrance.

He turned his head slightly to catch a glimpse of the chameleon's whereabouts—and what he saw made his eyes widen in terror.

Time seemed to slow down. The chameleon was now facing the den's entrance. Its mouth gaped open, tongue ready to be unleashed.

A jolt of fear shot through the little fellas body, from head to toe. His rear leg muscles contracted and released instinctively, but fate had other plans. His injured leg slipped, depriving him from securing the grip needed to initiate the life-saving hop.

The chameleon's sticky tongue shot out with startling speed, latching on to the little fellas back leg. In mere seconds, he found himself enveloped in the chameleon's sticky tongue and gooey saliva.

The chameleon retracted its tongue, swallowing the little fellas whole. It licked its lips, savoring the moment.

"I saved you, provided you shelter and food, and that is how you repay me?! I don't think so. Besides, it is written in nature—chameleons eat grasshoppers."

A sinister chuckle escaped his throat. "And look at you, with your five eyes, your flying wings, your group bonding ... but who's in charge now? Oh, sorry—why do I ask if you can't reply?"

Biggit, a plan you must have, but it certainly defies comprehension. Phobi was nearly eaten alive, and now the pair must witness a tale of horror and death, as if Ribbit hadn't experienced his own horror. Why do you insist on this path? Are there no gentler ways of learning? What lengths one must go

to make sense of life and its wicked ways? Must the healing process be equally traumatizing?

On the fifth night, as the sun went down, before IT had woken up, Ribbit and Phobi exchanged a familiar glance. They knew they had to leave—and soon—before they were sent on yet another exhausting food-finding mission.

Their backs ached from days of labor, and the thought of venturing out again to gather food that would be consumed in a moment was unbearable. Quietly, they slipped away in search of Mosqui.

As they hopped away from IT's patch, Ribbit vented to Phobi with exhaustion and indignation. "You were nearly eaten alive; our backs hurt. We've slaved away for four nights straight, all for one insatiable amphibian. What is the point of this whole ordeal? I've got some words for Biggit when we see him."

Phobi replied, "I fear this is just the beginning, Ribbit."



THE AMPHIBIAN-WHO-KNOWS-EVERYTHING

*I knew there was nothing that Biggit knows
that I didn't already know myself.*

“**D**o you know why you were sent here?” the Amphibian-Who-Knows-Everything inquired, his voice filled with inflated wisdom.

The reason, Ribbit pondered, was because they had been sent everywhere, so why not yet another stop? But of course, this was not how he answered, being the polite amphibian he was.

“No, no idea!” was his actual response.

“Biggit encouraged all his pupils to speak with me. His heart’s desire is for me to share my thoughts with his pupils and to elucidate how my insights landed me the nickname of the ‘Amphibian-Who-Knew-Everything.’”

“We are curious now,” Phobi said with enthusiasm.

“It all began during my youth,” the amphibian began in a reflective tone. “I was engaging in typical young amphibians’ activities, leisurely playing with worms and other crawling creatures. A group of amphibians my age was chatting nearby when

one looked in my direction and made a comment to the others, and they all erupted in laughter.”

“What did they say?” Phobi interjected.

“I never heard their exact words, but I could feel the sting of their slander.” As he recounted the story, his emotional temperature visibly shifted. His eyes reddened; the veins in his neck bulged. And he continued, “It was unmistakable from their glances—I was the joke. There are certain things one just knows.” A cold, electric pulse traveled through Ribbit’s spine. He, too, since Titana’s attack, had this sense that he knew when others were speaking ill of him.

“Years later,” the Amphibian-Who-Knows-Everything continued, “I was hired by the amphibian control commission to monitor pollutant levels in the lagoon. However, I knew that the powers-that-be had hired me merely to fill a quota. It looked good to have a puppet they could claim was ‘monitoring pollutants,’ making the amphibian population feel safe and protected. But I knew their true intentions, and safeguarding the public wasn’t among them. So, I performed only the bare minimum. Why exert myself if I knew my findings would be disregarded? If you detect anger in my voice, it’s not without a cause. I knew the high-powered individuals would use the fact that I knew too much against me, and sure enough, I never advanced within the organization. What truly makes my cold blood boil is that any attempt to show my competence would be met with jealousy from my peers. It was a lose-lose situation from the start.

“And then, there was love. I always knew that love was a waste of time and effort. I once met a young amphibian who captured my interest, but knowing that a broken heart would be

the inevitable conclusion, I managed the relationship with the required distance. As anticipated, our brief romance ended with my heart being shattered as she left me for another.

“The grief of this experience still makes me boil with anger. My appetite left me; my will abandoned me. I was referred to Biggit for counseling.”

“I bet that helped,” Phobi suggested, her voice filled with hope.

“I never sought assistance. I knew there was nothing Biggit or anyone could do for me. I also knew that if I had gone, I would be judged, criticized, and the intimate information that I shared would be used against me. What purpose would it serve me?”

Besides, I knew there was nothing that Biggit knows that I didn’t already know myself.”

“How can you know all this?” Phobi asked, anguish in her voice.

“Experience. You live and you learn. You’re too young to understand; your experience is limited. You haven’t lived enough to accumulate the critical mass of experience that allows one to discern patterns, derive inferences, and make informed decisions about the world around you.”

Phobi felt her stomach churn.

“Oh, and I forgot to share the many ideas I’ve had throughout my life on how to improve amphibian existence. Some of them could have been life-changing for me and the entire species. I now live by very humble means, but these ideas—they would have transformed everything.”

“Tell us more,” implored Phobi.

“Yes, we’re now curious to hear about them,” insisted Ribbit.

“I no longer discuss them. These were complex concepts, and I knew if I shared them with other amphibians, which would be necessary for implementation, they’d invariably be misused, abused, or stolen. It was clear to me that ideas were so innovative and ahead of the times that no one would really understand or support them. Unfortunately, amphibians are limited in their perspectives and fail to perceive the true potential in innovative ideas.”

What a bore! Can this individual not hear his own words? Alone, isolated, jobless—how does he not see that he is trapped in the misery of his own making? Why can’t he ask himself what role he plays in creating his own despair? Oh, Amphibians—so deaf and blind to the weight of their own misguided assumptions!

Phobi, exhausted by this conversation, signaled to Mosqui that the time to hop along had come. Mosqui, well aware that few could tolerate the self-proclaimed omniscience of the Amphibian-Who-Knows-Everything, took the cue and began wrapping up the conversation.

To Phobi and Ribbit’s relief, Mosqui announced that their passage though the Valley of Withering had come to an end. They would now enter the Valley of Awakening. Though they had no idea what awaited them there, both felt a sense of relief and hope, sentiments they hadn’t realized they had lost.

The Valley of Awakening



DUNG BEETLES

We can either choose to accept their creation and live in contentment—or be dragged along.

*M*osqui brought them to a location that felt eerily familiar. The dry breeze carried the scent of larger mammals, a sign of danger. The wetting of their skins was resumed by Mosqui.

“Have we not been here before?” a curious Phobi asked.

“Very close by indeed,” Mosqui replied.

Ribbit sighed inwardly. “And here we are again walking in circles,” he thought.

“But worry not,” Mosqui added, “these two are among my favorites. Keep on following this path for fifty more hops or so while I refill my proboscis.”

What they saw next left them in awe: a pair of beetles walking backward, their rear legs pushing a perfectly round ball of foul-smelling material.

From a distance, Mosqui encouraged the two amphibians to approach the beetles. To his dismay, most amphibians wrongly

assumed that mosquitoes are unaffected by foul odors—a misconception likely confused with flies. And there is, indeed, a difference. Avoiding the stench, Mosqui observed as Ribbit and Phobi reluctantly hopped forward. Suddenly, with striking precision, the beetles squirted a liquid version of the same foul material that they were rolling, hitting the amphibians square on the face.

Quick as lightning, Mosqui swooped down, intervening, “Hi, hi, it is me, Mosqui. They’re with me; they were sent by Biggit.” He aimed his proboscis at Ribbit and Phobi, spraying the remaining liquid at them in an attempt to clean their faces.

“Oh, we’re so very sorry,” the female beetle exclaimed. “We didn’t know you were coming or that you were with Mosqui. You understand, out here in the wild, one can never be too careful. The spray was purely instinctual. Here, use this leaf to wipe your faces.”

The male beetle, less apologetic, grumbled about Biggit’s insistence on sending his mentees to learn from them. “Are we freaks to deserve such attention? We’re just dung beetles, for crying out loud! We eat, roll, and lay our eggs in dung for a living. What’s the big deal?”

Phobi, indignant, couldn’t believe her eyes or ears. “So the name ‘dung beetle’ comes actually from ‘dung’, real dung?” she asked in disbelief.

“Yes, my darling, from dung,” replied the kinder of the two beetles.

The other couldn’t hold his tongue. “What else would it come from? The questions I must answer!” he snapped with indignation.

“Don’t be so grumpy; they have the right to ask,” his partner appeased.

Ribbit intervened, “So you wake up every day knowing that you will deal with dung the whole day, every day?”

“That is why I don’t like receiving guests,” grumbled the male beetle. “Insult after insult.”

“Yes, darling, we do,” the female beetle replied patiently. “If you look at it from that angle, it does seem quite grim. We choose to see it differently. It’s more than just rolling excrement from other animals; we see it as our role in the ecosystem, and our role is our duty. No matter how we feel about it, the role must be fulfilled, the duty must be realized. So no, we don’t wake up every morning with a sense of dread—quite the opposite. When you know you are fulfilling your role in the larger ecosystem, what could be more gratifying!?”

As she finished, the male beetle puffed his chest toward Ribbit as if to say, “What do you have to say now?”

Trying to diffuse the tension, Phobi jumped in, “Do you eat and lay your eggs in any kind of dung?”

“Oh no,” the female replied, “usually only dung from large mammals. The larger the animal, the more raw material we have to work with. I prefer material from omnivorous animals, as they provide more nutrients. Grumpy here prefers dung from herbivores—richer in fiber but not as fragrant.”

“I would be a vegetarian beetle every day of the week,” Ribbit murmured under his breath.

The beetles explained how they foraged the land for miles, collecting the excrement of large mammals and using it not only as a food source but also as nurseries for their young. The balls

served as a safe place to lay their eggs in, meaning their offsprings were, in a sense, born into this world of dung.

“Uff!” exclaimed Ribbit. “And I thought amphibians had it bad!”

The beetles continued, explaining their role in fertilizing the soil as they spread dung through out the land. Despite the harshness of their condition, Phobi sensed a boisterous pride in their tone.

As evening approached, the female beetle invited them for a meal. Ribbit immediately refused the offer, unsure what good could possibly come out of beetles who ate dung. The beetle insisted, and Phobi conceded. Besides, they needed to eat before continuing their journey.

The beetles created a fire from dry dung balls and sticks, grilling the most delicious worms and insects, especially collected for their guests. “Dry dung from herbivores is just dried weed,” explained the female beetle.

Ribbit couldn’t muster the courage to take the first bite. Phobi, with eyes wide open and a sideways head nod, silently urged him, “Just eat it!”

The amphibians were in sheer ecstasy for the exquisite food they had just sampled. Ribbit, after much reluctance, had to admit that the beetle’s cooking method gave the insects and worms a delightful smoky flavor he had never tasted before.

As they enjoyed good food, talked into the night, and stargazed, the beetles explained beetle mythology and how it helped them accept their plight.

“Ribbit, since you seem very interested in how we carry out our duty without cursing our condition,” said the female beetle, “let me tell you about what dung beetles believe: The Three

Sisters. They are the entities responsible for our coming into this world, the quality of our existence, the length of our existence, and our departure from it.

“The youngest of the sisters rolls the dung ball of life, giving birth and shaping our existence. She gathers the materials that make us. Her old, crippled feet make each ball unique—some thick, some thin, some nearly perfect, all different. Rolling is what she does all day, getting bored by repetition. To keep things interesting, she experiments, blending materials to create variation. The quality of her rolling defines our physical form and personality.

“The middle sister determines the ball’s size—the length of our existence. She weaves in challenges and gives us freedom to shape the dung ball as we wish. Some roll it aimlessly, others curse it, and a few turn it into art.

“The eldest, the most feared, crushes the ball, releasing us from our existence. She determines when our journey ends. Sometimes at the right time, sometimes too late, sometimes, most cruelly, too early. Her touch is final.”

The male beetle chimed in, “They are called Sisters of Fate. Those who accept their design and will flourish; those who resist are dragged through life. One way or another, we can’t avoid them. We can either choose to accept their creation and live in contentment—or be dragged along. Those who go through life screaming ‘why, why, why’ are infant-like and need to overcome their child-like behavior. My partner and I decided not to fight the Sisters. When you are given the gift of life bestowed by the Sisters, you live it!”

The randomness of thrownness—we're thrown into this world by fate, with a skin, a body, in a place not chosen by, but chosen for us.

Radical acceptance! Embracing life and fate for what they are! How much energy we waste trying to shape reality to our preconceptions and how little we spend on understanding and accepting what truly is!

What have we to lose from acceptance?

What do we gain by clinging to comforting falsehoods?

Despite their shaky first impression of the beetles, Ribbit and Phobi enjoyed a lovely night filled with good stories and surprisingly good food. As the sun began to rise, they knew it was time to move on. Mosqui sprayed their skins with water and urged them to keep on moving to wetter lands, as their amphibian skin would not tolerate the dryness for long. They thanked their guests for the warm hospitality and hopped along.



SURVVIT AND THE NEW LAKE

Divert your attention and lay it elsewhere—dissipating energy on to other priorities—and chaos ensues.

*M*osqui sensed that it was time to move on. Determined to keep the mood high, he offered a reassurance, “Our next stop, the New Lake, is home to one of my all-time favorite amphibians.”

As they approached Survvit’s lake, they were struck by how meticulously well-kept it was, perfectly mirroring Survvit’s appearance. Every reed, stone, and lily pad seemed to have its designated place, as if the entire lake had been precisely planned.

And planned it was. But this tranquil oasis had once teetered on the brink of chaos and extinction.

Survvit had left his native lake to pursue advanced studies in wormtology in distant lands. On his journey home, on a beautiful warm night, he sensed something strange in the air.

The lake, once teeming with life and sound, was eerily quiet. The familiar chorus of amphibians and chirping insects that once

could be heard from miles away was now mute. For a moment, he doubted whether he was approaching the lake he once called home. Was he lost? But then he spotted the distinctive oak tree near the water. This unmistakable landmark confirmed he was nearing his native lake.

As the lagoon came into view, his heart sank. There was no welcoming committee, no signs of life—only the skeletal remains of his fellow amphibians and other creatures scattered across the landscape. Overwhelmed by grief, he collapsed to the ground, weeping for hours for all amphibians and non-amphibians alike, predators or prey, known and unknown, that had met this tragic fate.

Phobi, her curiosity piqued, gently asked, “What happened?”

“Who did this?” asked Ribbit.

“Did you ever find out the culprits?” Phobi asked. “Did they pay for what they did?”

Survvit nodded, the weight of the past heavy on his shoulders. “I did find out what had happened,” he said, his voice somber.

The story that followed was difficult to digest, but it was one that had to be told.

Confronted by the devastation before him, Survvit felt he had no other choice but to investigate. Drawing upon his scholarly training, he meticulously examined the evidence before him. His observation skills led him to a critical detail: the pores on the amphibians’ skins, those not yet consumed by time, were tightly closed. This led to a chilling hypothesis—they had likely been gasping for air in their final moments. Amphibians breathe

through their skin, and whatever had affected them had severely impaired that vital function.

Survvit carefully collected several skin samples and hopped to his alma mater for a thorough analysis of the samples. The analysis revealed that the amphibians had been exposed to a high dosage of an unknown element that blocked the flow of oxygen. The contaminant had likely been carried through the water. Intrigued, the scientists asked Survvit if the lake had a water source. He confirmed that a river north of the lake fed into it. The experts encouraged Survvit to investigate this water source—it might hold the key to understanding the catastrophe.

Survvit returned to his native lake. From there, he started his journey upriver, determined to uncover the source of contamination that had eradicated life downstream.

Three long days into his journey, the landscape began to change. The wild riverbanks gave way to lush fields of cauliflower, bell peppers, and string beans. Under normal circumstances, this would have been a welcome sight for an amphibian. While they didn't eat vegetables themselves, these crops attracted an abundance of insects. And they surely liked munching on insects.

But something was wrong. The riverbank was eerily quiet and devoid of life. "How could that be?" he mused. Survvit decided to camp by the river to further observe.

The next morning, as the night gave way to the day, Survvit was startled by a loud noise. He watched in awe as two-legged beings—creatures he had only heard about in stories—walked around the plantation. Each carried a strange contraption strapped to their backs, connected to a tube that spewed a white fog. They

sprayed every plant, weaving the tube back and forth, ensuring that every plant was coated by the fog.

As the plants were sprayed, the mysterious substance dripped from their leaves, forming a white, milky stream that fed into the river. The water's color matched the color of the fog.

A gust of wind from the north blew some of the fog toward the riverbank, causing Survvit's skin to contract. He gasped for air, realizing this was no ordinary fog. He knew it was time to flee. Gathering all his strength, he plunged into the water and swam toward a fresh, uncontaminated current, allowing his pores to reopen.

He found the answer he was looking for; the source of the agony of his pond had been revealed—the statutory river that fed the lake was tainted by this venomous white fog.

If he were to save his lake—or whatever remained to be saved—he had to act swiftly and cut off the contaminated water supply.

Inevitably, ambiguous thoughts raced through his mind. Wouldn't it be simpler to abandon the lake altogether? To turn his back to the devastation and find another place to call home? How could his mind not entertain these questions? The odds seemed insurmountable. He was alone, a solitary amphibian with no one to call upon, facing an impossible task.

But then, hope blossomed. From the murky and still polluted water, Survvit noticed a single lily pad emerge. Over the following days, a beautiful lily pad flower blossomed. This miracle revealed a profound truth: even in the most unpromising of environments, life and beauty were still possible and could flourish. With this

new realization, Survvit's resolve solidified. Abandoning the lake was not an option.

For years, Survvit devoted himself to the lake's reconstruction. From dusk to dawn, he labored tirelessly, diverting the river's course to block the contamination. Slowly, life began to reemerge. At first, lily pads made a shy appearance. Water spiders followed.

Birds brought fish eggs on their feet, replenishing the depleted stock.

"Thus 'the New Lake'!" exclaimed Ribbit, realization dawning on his face.

"Today, the New Lake bursts with life. But it wasn't always like this. In the beginning, destruction prevailed without a glimpse of hope. A deep sense of unfairness weighed on my spirit. How could so much cruelty be permitted?" Survvit explained, his voice quivering with memories of a not-so-distant past.

"But look at what you have built here!" Phobi said, trying to encourage him.

Survvit nodded slowly, his eyes distant. "Yes, indeed. On the surface, now all seems well. But if there is one thing I've learned is that there is never a final stage, an end. Nature tends toward chaos. It takes constant effort to maintain order. As you fix one problem, others arise. It is the perpetual cyclical nature of nature" He paused, his gaze sweeping across the lake. "In fact, there is an interesting phenomenon in nature in which energy dissipates."

"Here they go, speaking fancy words," Ribbit thought, his confused expression unable to hide his bewilderment.

Survvit continued, “Let me show you. Come with me to the taro patch.”

They hopped about five hundred amphibian hops to a small hill overlooking the patch. Pushing aside some towering monsteras, the revealed sight left them in awe.

Hundreds of taro plants stretched before them, their roots immersed under water for as far as their amphibian eyes could see. The dark green heart-shaped leaves of the taro plants created a tapestry that blanketed the land. Dozens of amphibians toiled the fields, clearing weeds and guarding against pests. Taro moth caterpillars and taro beetles, notorious for their appetite for taro leaves, were swiftly dealt with.

“Why taro?” Phobi asked curiously. After all, why would an amphibian spend so much time and energy planting something that, although beautiful, seemed to have no practical use for amphibians?

Survvit smiled. “Mosquitoes. Taro plants attract mosquitoes. Since introducing the taro patch, mosquito catch rate has increased by three hundred and forty-five percent. But that is not the point I wanted to make.”

He paused, organizing his thoughts. “When you plant the taro roots, a shoot will grow, and in about two hundred amphibian nights, you will have a full taro plant. The first step—the decision to create a patch—is fueled by motivation and excitement. You work diligently to bring your vision to life, carefully planting the first bulbs. The roots, driven by the force of life, burrow downward, seeking nourishment and stability. The shoots emerge, seeking the nurturing light of the sun. As the shoots

develop, unfurling leaves, you marvel at the materialization of your vision.

“However, the moment the first shoot breaks the soil, it demands close and constant attention. Divert your attention and lay it elsewhere—dissipating energy on to other priorities—and chaos ensues. Weeds compete for territory; bugs satiate their hunger by eating the tender leaves. Chaos, you see, is the natural order of things. What you see here is nature but not natural—it’s the result of focused dedication of energy.”

Chaos, the natural order of things. Chaos, the very nature of nature. The amphibian condition can be distilled into one constant truth—the inescapable and persistent struggle to minimize chaos.

As the morning was about to make an appearance in the horizon, they sat in a circle and chitchatted until it was time for them to retire for the night. But a thought percolated in Ribbit’s mind. Ribbit related to Survvit. He too had grappled with the unfair nature of nature. However, unlike Survvit—who, despite, or fueled by his pain, had emerged from the shadows—Ribbit had been paralyzed. It was only natural for Ribbit to ask how Survvit had overcome his negative thoughts, so he did just that.

“I sought out Biggit,” Survvit replied with conviction. “And I went through the exercises as if my life depended on it. Because, in a way, it did.”

Phobi shot Ribbit a look that said, “See!”

Ribbit was puzzled about what these exercises meant, but he was more confused when Survvit said, “Above all, I learned how to conquer chaos.

“Chaos is the absence of order and coherence. It is the ubiquitous presence of randomness and uncertainty. Patterns, predictability, certainty, and order are non-existent. Signals and input come from everywhere. We don’t know what to pay attention to, how to discern what is important from the trivial. Thoughts, feelings, and emotions ran freely through my body and dominated the mind. Confusion ensued. The system is overwhelmed, leading only to one possible destiny—despair and helplessness.

“The exercises taught me that the only remedy for the chaos of living is organizing life through disciplined action. I needed goals, organized in a hierarchy of importance. From the moment I woke up every day, I knew I had one goal—to stop the flow of contaminated water.”

“You have created an oasis here. How did you know where to begin?” Phobi asked.

“I started from the beginning, by grabbing a handful of dirt from the river’s edge and placing it in the water to block it.”

The night was filled with experiences, and as dawn approached, their eyes felt heavy with sleep. As they woke up the next night, Mosqui, ever vigilant, urged them to move on. There was still more to be heard and learned.



SCAFANDRUS FROGS

The stresses of life weren't meant to be avoided; in fact, without them, true transformation isn't possible.

Scafandrus frogs live deep underwater. Don't bother looking for them on amphibian encyclopedias—you won't find them. Few remain in the ponds, lagoons, and lakes, their existence a closely guarded secret of the amphibian world.

Mosqui led Ribbit and Phobi to the Deepend Lagoon where a Scafandrus friend of Biggit resided. The lagoon was deep—deep as oceans or remote seas—a perfect sanctuary for Scafandrus amphibians who abhor shallow, marshy waters.

At the appointed time, a Scafandrus briefly broke the water's surface, signaling that he was ready for them. Mosqui encouraged Phobi and Ribbit to jump in and follow the Scafandrus, reminding them he would be back after five dusks at sunset to pick them up.

Phobi, at the first sight of their greeter, was impressed by the Scafandrus's physique—muscular and toned, with

surprisingly soft toes compared to theirs. They swam twenty feet deep, where the rest of the few remaining Scafandruses lived. The journey took almost an eighth of a full night, the water growing darker and heavier around them with each stroke. The Scafandrus knew his guests' earthly bodies weren't built to withstand the pressure of the heavy mass of water and slowly led them on their descent. Ribbit impatiently stroked his legs in an attempt to expedite the process. The Scafandrus stuck firmly to their slow descending routine, explaining that a measured descent allowed their bodies to equalize with the side effects of increased pressure and adapt to the lower levels of oxygen of the deep waters.

As they reached the bottom of the lagoon, Phobi's eyes widened in surprise. All other Scafandruses shared the same muscular, toned physiques and soft hands as their greeter. Little could she enjoy this impressive view as she felt dizzy, her head spinning not from the attractive physique of their new hosts, but from the sheer weight pressing down on her. Twenty feet of water atop a small amphibian was quite some pressure indeed.

Curious as always, Phobi asked if being exposed to such pressure was good for them. The Scafandruses explained Boyle's Law, a principle that governs their underwater life. "The volume of gas in our bodies," they explained, "shrinks as the external pressure grows. Simply put, the deeper we go, the less gas our bodies hold." The hosts taught them some equalizing exercises. "These will help you balance the air inside your body with the pressure outside," they assured her. They demonstrated slow movements, encouraging Phobi and Ribbit to mimic them. As

they practiced, Phobi felt the pressure ease slightly, her dizziness subsiding.

The Scafandruses gave their guests an overview of their species' body anatomy, from bone density to circulation. The pressure they lived under, they explained, caused their bone density to be considerably higher than that of their terrestrial cousins. Higher bone density meant the need for a higher consumption of calcium, which they supplemented by eating small, shelled crustaceans, a local delicacy. They went on to describe their circulatory system, which had evolved to be markedly different from their surface-dwelling relatives, adapted to the challenges of deep-water living.

Phobi listened in awe. Ribbit, however, could not help but think to himself why Biggit had insisted on this meeting with the Scafandruses. Although fascinated by these distant cousins, he wondered with resentment what this encounter and detailed explanation about amphibian bodies could possibly have to do with his traumatic encounter with Titana. The connection seemed murky.

The Scafandrus, oblivious to Ribbit's inner turmoil, continued. Pressure made it more challenging for blood to circulate in their extremities, specially in their webbed feet. As a result, their hearts had to adapt, working hard against the crush of water. Over millions of years, their hearts had grown to twice the size of their terrestrial cousins. The pores on their skin were considerably larger too, compensating for the scarcity of oxygen.

Speaking of lack of oxygen, the hosts informed Ribbit and Phobi that a Scafandrus had been sent to the water surface to

harvest oxygen for them. “Given the difference in the level of oxygen compared to the surface,” they explained, “you’ll probably need one or two doses of oxygen until you’re fully adapted.”

As if on cue, Ribbit spotted a shadow descending from above. It was a Scafandrus, gliding through the water while carefully balancing a large taro leaf. Trapped beneath the leaf were two large bubbles of air, precious cargo from the world above. The Scafandrus gently urged Ribbit and Phobi to enter underneath the leaf so that their skins could absorb the oxygen.

Restlessness marked their sleep on the first day. The weight of the water seemed to crush their tiny bony structures, as if the entire world was pressing down on them. Throughout the night, Ribbit and Phobi awoke gasping for air. The harvested oxygen provided some relief, but not enough for comfort. It was, in every sense, an agonizing sleepless day.

As dusk approached, Phobi eagerly left her resting place, ready to start a new night of discoveries, while Ribbit, still drowsy, lamented his sleepless day. Phobi inundated their hosts with questions.

She was particularly curious as to why their hosts’ webbed feet were much softer than theirs. The Scafandruses chuckled, proud of their callouses-free feet. Unlike their terrestrial cousins, their feet had very little contact with hard surfaces, preventing the formation of callouses. And their toned bodies? Swimming through water packed with pressure demanded strength, naturally toning their muscles.

As the nights and days passed, Ribbit and Phobi began to adapt to their new environment. But Ribbit still yearned for

earthly worms, finding crustaceans and small fishes less appealing. Their bodies underwent a remarkable change over a relatively short period. The pressure worked on them relentlessly—their hearts beat stronger, their skin became rubbery to work harder at oxygen absorption, and they craved calcium-rich foods as their bones grew denser. Even their once callous feet softened, mirroring those of their hosts.

They learned all there was to learn about deep waters—how pressure forged strength, but also how those who ventured too deep, beyond tolerable limits, faced fatal consequences. They discovered the delicate balance: a certain amount of pressure made amphibians stronger, but beyond a critical threshold, life became too much to bear. The stresses of life weren't meant to be avoided; in fact, without them, true transformation wasn't possible.

As the time to meet Mosqui approached, Ribbit, eager to return to familiar grounds, pointed his nose upward and kicked his back legs with all his might. How could he not? He'd had enough of this deep-water experience and still struggled to understand its meaning. On his second powerful stroke, he felt a sharp pull in the opposite direction that nearly wrenched his joints. A Scafandrus, alarmed, asked him if he had lost his mind. "The same rules that govern our descent apply when we ascend," the Scafandrus warned. "Surfacing requires its own choreography. We must zigzag upwards slowly to equalize oxygen levels and prevent decompression sickness."

Finally, they broke the surface safely, finding Moqui waiting for them patiently.

Ribbit, unsure about the point of this experience, pulled Mosqui aside for an intense inquiry into Biggit's intentions. Mosqui, ever the devout protégé of Biggit, understood Ribbit's need to know but reassured him gently:

“You must have patience and trust the process. No interaction is without purpose, even the ones whose value I sometimes struggle to see. Biggit will weave it all together. He always does. For now, let the intense questioning rest.

“We must keep on hopping!” Mosqui urged. “Next stop, the Sculptor.” With a final glance at their mysterious cousins, they hopped along, leaving the deep waters behind.



THE SCULPTOR

*And after all, life is precious—and it must
be invested in creating more of it.*

She was unique, eccentric—perhaps a stereo typical artist. A true free spirit. She lived in a part of the Aam lagoon, thick with cattail weed. Her atelier was situated in a cleared patch north of the lagoon.

Rabbit, Phobi, and Mosqui arrived at the lagoon at the crack of dawn, when an impenetrable fog blanketed the air.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” a voice called out from the fog, filled with enthusiasm. “Welcome, welcome to my atelier! Come, come!” The sculptor emerged from the mist, her form gradually taking shape as they approached.

Mosqui apologized for the delay; despite his many visits to her atelier, the visibility of less than a thumb’s length in front of their eyes made navigation a challenge.

As the air got hotter, the fog slowly thinned, unveiling a broad clearing dotted with shadowy outlines of what seemed to be dozens of sculptures. The first discernable shape was a rough

depiction of a female amphibian holding a tray in one hand and a long unidentifiable object in the other.

Imagining how tired they must be from their travels, the sculptor served them a plate of fresh berries and seeds, an unusual menu for her guests, but not for the eccentric sculptor. After satiating their hunger, she invited them to their resting place as the day brightened. They fell into a deep slumber until the next dusk.

When they awoke, aided by the light of a full moon, the sculptures had become fully visible.

“Uhm, intriguing,” Ribbit murmured to Phobi.

Phobi, in a cynical tone, murmured back, “Indeed.”

Oddly—or perhaps not so oddly, as artists enjoy oddities—all sculptures were variations of the same theme, Ribbit observed. The repetition was intriguing.

“As every artist attributes meaning to their artistic work, these sculptures must have meaning,” Ribbit deduced. But by the looks of it, that meaning was obscure. “But you know, artists,” he mused to himself, “they see meaning in everything, even when they are the only ones who see meaning in the things they find meaningful.”

As they sat down for a healthy dusk breakfast—not the hearty kind of breakfast Ribbit was used to—“After all,” he thought, “artists eat funny,” the sculptor explained, “Not all artistic creations have a meaning,” contradicting Ribbit’s earlier thoughts. For a brief, unsettling moment, Ribbit wondered if she could read minds. “But it’s funny how everyone asks, because my latest work, the one you see now, does have meaning,” she continued.

Ribbit, alarmed by the possibility that she could indeed read minds, resolved to stop thinking altogether. By the way she dressed, she did look like one of those psychic mediums, which only justified Ribbit's suspicions. But what about the thoughts he'd already had? Had she read them? How embarrassing! With no control over his thoughts, he thought, "I wonder if she could get to the point and explain the meaning of the statues."

And as if on cue, she said, "Well, let me get to the point and tell you the meaning of the statues."

Ribbit froze.

But she did not, in fact, get to the point. Instead, she told them a story—a story with a happy beginning, a muddy middle, and a happy ending.

She had been a talented young tadpole with an artistic gift. In those days, the Aam lagoon was a hotbed of life and creativity, teeming with inspiration. As she matured, her creations became highly coveted by local patrons who showered her with riches. Dedicated to her work, she never thought about further developing her skills. After all, Fortune had given her natural talent, and natural talent had brought her wealth beyond measure.

These riches allowed her to enjoy life abundantly. She indulged in the pleasures of amphibian existence with no worries about what tomorrow might bring. She ate in abundance, drank in abundance, celebrated in abundance, as artists do.

But one day, the winds shifted. Warm gusts swept down from the north, followed by light rain. After two nights of gentle showers, the winds gained strength, and then gained some more, until they became a deadly and destructive force.

Trees bent until their trunks could no longer resist and split in half; fields were swept clean; the water from the lagoon and the river merged into one raging torrent. Anything that stood in its way faced its fury. There was no negotiating with this force of nature; it destroyed everything in its path.

The sculptor had lost everything—but she couldn't afford self-pity. Her life was still her own, and many others did not have that to account for. Everyone had lost something; some had lost all. But her talent remained—a treasure that could not be taken from her. With this new realization, she vowed to rebuild.

It took years to rebuild the lagoon and just as long to restore her collection. But just as she was back in business, life, as it often does, struck without warning. A strange tingling began in her fingertips. At first, she ignored it. But the tingling persisted, her hands slowly stiffening, constricting her movements. Her fingers gradually curved inwards as her joints began to calcify. While most amphibians are oblivious of their limbs, the pain in her joints was an unwelcome companion and a constant reminder of their existence. Having lost movement in her hands, she could no longer create her art. Once again, she lost all she had painstakingly rebuilt.

There is nothing that is given to amphibians that cannot be taken away. The dialectical paradox that assails us all—with creation comes destruction, with health comes illness, with life comes death. What a miserable condition we are fated to endure!

At a crossroads, she determined that sculpting was her essence, and there is no escaping from one's essence. Her hands were just holders of the tools that brought her creations to life. Her creations were still actively bubbling inside of her, ever so alive, ever so in need to be externalized and materialized.

Painstakingly, she learned how to hold the tools with her crippled hands. Frustration, disappointment, doubt, and sometimes hope formed the emotional concoction that moved her those days. She finally mastered it.

Although an amazing story, none of it explained the statues, at least, not in Ribbit's simple mind.

"What do you see?" she asked Ribbit with anticipation.

Ribbit tried to sound more confident than he felt. "An amphibian standing on her two back legs, holding a water lily pad filled with worms, bugs, mosquitoes, and all the delicacies that we love so much. In her left hand, she is carrying a fish's tail."

"A fish's tail?!" she interrupted. "You've just downgraded a mermaid to a fish! How terrible for the mermaid!"

"Oh, a mermaid tail," Ribbit corrected himself. "Mermaid tail, fish tail, who knows the difference?" he thought, quickly taming his thoughts in case she could read them.

"There is a difference. There is a difference. But do you see what I did here?!" she asked enthusiastically.

Phobi and Ribbit hesitated, unsure what to make of it. Their silence seemed to encourage her.

She carried on, "The lily pad held by the amphibian holding the worms represents abundance—all the gifts life offers us. The mermaid tail controls the direction in which a mermaid

swims. It reminds us that our destinies can change direction at any moment.”

Intrigued, Ribbit hopped to the base of the statue to read the plaque. It simply stated: “Lady Fortune.”

The sculptor’s voice took a solemn tone. “Lady Fortune. With one hand, she provides all the pleasures in life. With the other, she controls the direction and flow of fortune.² Don’t get too cozy with her. She will bestow all her gifts upon you, and without warning, she will change the direction of that tail.”

She continued, “She favors you, coddles you, until she doesn’t. She provides us with all we will ever need and the superfluous, until she turns that mermaid tail in the opposite direction, taking everything away.”

She paused, allowing her words to sink in before adding, “Don’t be fooled by her; everything given by Fortune was merely lent—she’ll reclaim it whenever she pleases.”

Overwhelmed by the symbolic explanation, Ribbit sought to divert the conversation. He pointed to two unnamed and unfinished statues, the only statues that deviated from the *Lady Fortune* theme.

The sculptor’s eye lit up with the opportunity to discuss her newest creations. “The first statue, nearly complete, depicts Mother Nature as an amphibian, holding Earth, her favorite creation, in her arms. As you can see, the umbilical cord connecting Earth to Mother Nature is still intact. Mother Nature can be nurturing and coddling, providing amphibians with conditions for growth and development. But she’s also temperamental, having good and bad days. On the good days, amphibians bask in

her warmth and nurturing nature; on her bad days, amphibians face her wrath. She offers you all that you need to live well, yet remains utterly unconcerned and uncommitted to anyone.”

Oh Mother Nature! All living and non-living things are brought into existence through her womb and governed by Her hand. She orchestrates eternal conflict among Her creations. Even her mightiest works—the strong rocks that rise as mountains—weakens over time, worn by Her own winds and rains. Battered by the elements She commands, mighty mountains crumble into dust, returning to oblivion. The trees She creates and allows to grow tall and strong are consumed by the fires She ignites or are broken by the gusty winds She stirs. She stirs. She is mother to all, yet cares little, if at all, for the individual; only the species' survival concerns her. She gives us no solace, only the urge to procreate so she endures at our expense.

She then pointed to a statue of an amphibian holding a broken string connected to a dragonfly. Ribbit couldn't help but ask, “And what does this one mean?”

“What do dragonflies represent to amphibians?” she countered.

“What are they supposed to represent?” Ribbit answered curtly, attempting to avoid a prolonged exchange of ideas.

“Observe a dragonfly gliding over and skipping lightly over calm waters. It gently touches the surface, creating beautiful,

perfect concentric ripples. In the amphibian tradition, dragonflies symbolize equanimity—mental calmness, peace of mind. Notice how their shimmering wings are sensitive to the slightest shifts in the wind.”

“And why is the string broken?” Ribbit pressed.

Phobi jumped in, “Because while we try to maintain control of peace of mind, it is elusive as a dragonfly, slipping away from us.”

*Peace of mind. That momentary absence of chaos.
Just when you think you have conquered it, life asserts itself, inserting chaos back where it belongs.*

“Finally, an amphibian with the capacity for interpreting symbolic meaning!” the sculptor exclaimed with the enthusiasm that any artist would upon discovering a kindred spirit with the ability to interpret symbolic meaning.

“After all that has happened to you, you still hold this amazing energetic aura about you,” Phobi commented.

“Ha! I love it. A long time ago, when my career blossomed, I earned more than my keep. What to do with surplus? I was advised that I should invest my earnings. What does an investment do?”

“Hopefully they will give you high returns,” Ribbit added.

“Yes, you invest something of value with the hope it will grow. So I asked myself—what is of most value to me? After all I’ve endured, one truth stood above the rest: life. Life was my most

precious asset. With that epiphany, I choose to dedicate my time and energy to life-generating pursuits. Creation—any creation—is a life-affirming act. So I committed myself to making art. Being here with Biggit's mentees is also life affirming. It too deserves my care."

That night, Ribbit grew introspective, immersed in thought. The symbolism of the statues stirred something deep inside his amphibian soul. He began to reflect on his hard-won journey and the many ways *Lady Fortune* had smiled upon him. His encounter with Titana resurfaced vividly; had he not fainted in that critical moment when she held him in her mouth, he would have surely become snake food. In that instant, all of life's blessings would have been lost.

Ribbit realized with clarity that true peace of mind was indeed as elusive as the dragonfly. And that, without a doubt, Mother Earth was as temperamental as the sculptor had described.

And after all, life is precious—and it must be invested in creating more of it.

Much had been learned from the sculptor, and the time to continue the journey had come. Out of nowhere—where mosquitoes often seem to come from—Mosqui appeared, ready to guide them onward. He explained that the games had already begun and they had to rush. Though Ribbit and Phobi remained oblivious to his meaning, filled with curiosity, they hopped.



SEVERITT: THE 102-YEAR-OLD AMPHIBIAN

The only certainty in life is death, and until it asserts itself, the second certainty will—aging.

There was a palpable excitement in the air. This was the first athletic event of its kind that Phobi and Ribbit had ever experienced. Hundreds of amphibians congregated at the lagoon's edge to watch the competitions unfold. The crowds cheered and waved purple lavender stalks with infectious enthusiasm. The smell of roasted worms and flies filled the air.

The number of modalities was staggering, some of which Phobi and Ribbit had never heard of—long-distance hopping, short-distance hopping, hopping style, hop diving, and tongue weightlifting.

What struck Phobi and Ribbit as particularly curious was the reversal of demographics typical of such athletic meets. Normally, one would expect to find young competitors with older amphibians cheering them on from the sidelines. The athletic twenty-somethings would demonstrate their prowess to frenzied parents and grandparents croaking words of encouragement. But

this time, the older amphibians competed with vigor, while their middle-aged children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren—amphibians do procreate at a rapid rate, after all—croaked support at the top of their vocal sacs.

Mosqui, always uneasy in places with high concentrations of amphibians, rushed Ribbit and Phobi along as they attempted to find their target. Although most knew he was under Biggit's protection, in a crowded event like this where beetle juice flowed freely, he couldn't shake the fear that an amphibian under the influence might inadvertently swallow him.

"I heard he can be found at the long-distance hopping section," Mosqui buzzed nervously. "Shall we move?"

When they reached the long-distance hopping arena, they spotted Severitt, his head bowed, listening intently to the final pieces of advice from his coach. The coach, a robust, fair-skinned female amphibian, stood out. Her thick accent made it clear she hailed from distant lands far beyond the familiar confines of the Goon Marsh region.

Her instructions were as brusque as her appearance, a stark contrast from the gentle manner of speaking typical of Goon dwellers.

"Listen closely," the coach commanded. "You must hop fast before you deliver your last hop. Only by gaining momentum in your preparatory hops will you be able to pull a final long jump. Your body is tight, your joints rigid. You must flex them if you want the right impulse to clinch the title."

Severitt positioned himself at the starting line, hopping up and down a couple of times to build momentum. At the crucial moment, he channeled all the strength he could muster into his back legs, contracting his muscles before releasing them in a jump that in Ribbit's opinion was ... a bit of a disappointment.

Expecting a monumental leap, Ribbit found himself overwhelmed by what he had just witnessed.

“Did you notice that you weren’t fast enough?” the coach shouted. “Hop fast. Use those front arms to gain impulse. Utilize your entire body to your advantage. Warm-up is over. The next jumps will now count points,” the coach shouted.

Severitt positioned himself behind the starting line, his body tense with anticipation. As the signal was given, he fixed his eyes on the jumping line and hopped as fast as his aged limbs would allow. His old body protested, feeling the strain of the pressure he was exerting upon it.

As he approached the jumping line, he placed both his back feet firmly on the mark. With a mighty effort, he kicked back with all his strength. But the calcification of his knees, a natural result of his advanced age, prevented a full extension. The jump felt contrived and restricted. Nonetheless, he jumped, and despite the limitations of his aging body, Severitt managed to propel himself a full half meter.

“Not bad! Great speed,” the coach called out. “You have two more jumps. Work those front legs; throw them back to gain additional impulse!”

“Not bad?” Ribbit thought, confused. He glanced around, wondering if he had misunderstood something crucial about this competition. Most jumpers he knew could easily clear 3.5 meters—44 times their body length.

Expecting a comment about the witnessed performance from Ribbit, Phobi preemptively interjected. “That is incredible,” she

said, clearing a tear from her eyes. “He is one hundred and two—can you believe it?”

“I guess that explains it,” Ribbit murmured.

Severitt jumped two more times. His second attempt measured 0.613 meters while his final jump reached 0.489 meters. As stipulated by the Long-distance Hopping Confederation, the longest of the three jumps would stand as his official result—0.613. The announcer’s voice crackled over the loudspeaker, requesting all to gather at the podium where the champion for that year would be medaled.

“Dang, we got here too late!” Ribbit exclaimed in frustration. “We missed all the other competitors. I was starting to fancy this sport, but I can’t see the other competitors’ scores on the placard.”

“Let’s head to the podium,” Phobi urged. “I can’t wait to see the medal ceremony.”

As they made their way through the crowd, the announcer’s voice echoed again, “And the record-breaking hop of this year’s All Lagoons Tournament isssssssssss ... 0.613 meters.” The crowd erupted in cheers.

“Wait, if that is the record, then our guy won,” Ribbit thought, his eye widening in surprise.

“Therefore,” continued the announcer in his announcer-like voice, “the winner of this year’s All Lagoons Tournament for Long-Distance Hopping in the Ninety-Year-Old and Up category iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiis ... Seeeeveeeeeritt the legend!”

“Wait, what about second and third places?” Ribbit wondered aloud.

“Ribbit,” Phobi turned to him with an air of amused disbelief on her face, “there are no other competitors in this category. This is the ninety-year-plus group. How many amphibians of that age do you know that are still competing?”

“You have a point,” he conceded.

Severitt received his medal and embraced his coach in a warm hug.

“Okay, okay, let’s not get too emotional,” the coach said. “Now let’s sit with your guests sent over by Biggit.”

Phobi and Ribbit were elated to have the opportunity of a one-on-one sit-down with the All Lagoons champion of long-distance hopping in the ninety-year-plus category. Severitt’s coach brought him a lemongrass drink to keep him hydrated.

Before Severitt could even take a sip, Phobi blurted out, “You’re one hundred and two! That’s incredible. How do you maintain such good physical shape? And more importantly, why? What motivates you to stay active when most elders I know—not that I know many—abandon such pursuits past a certain age?”

“Thank you for the question,” Severitt replied, taking a sip and gathering his thoughts.

“In my early forties, I came to a realization: my body was aging and it would continue unavoidably down that path. Think about it: the only certainty in life is death, and until it asserts itself, the second certainty will—aging. So I followed the logic of life—aging and death are always competing to see who arrives first. And logically, if aging is inevitable, we must strive to age with grace.”

Severitt's tone turned contemplative. "Aging is rarely graceful. It's unpredictable and can take dark twists and unexpected turns at any time. The older you get, the faster these twists come, and the less forgiving they are. That said, we can lower the rate of aging."

"And how do we do that?" Phobi asked eagerly.

At that moment, Severitt embarked on a long explanation about the inescapable stages of life.

THE INESCAPABLE STAGES OF LIFE

*It is all laid out before us. Predictable.
Expectable. Circular. Still, we fail to prepare.*

“We all experience life differently,” the 102-year-old amphibian began, his voice carrying the wisdom of all his lived years, “yet it follows a highly predictable pattern. As a tadpole, you’re consumed by a singular wish: for your tail to disappear and strong back legs to grow as quickly as possible.” Ribbit and Phobi nodded in agreement. “During this stage, cells multiply at an astonishing pace, granting the body a remarkable ability to grow, regenerate, and heal.

“The brain, in its nascent state, reads the environment, creating intricate maps of reality. These become the navigational instruments for life’s journey ahead. And through it all, Mamma amphibian is an ever-present force: there to feed, warm, and protect. She offers the shelter and conditions necessary for survival. And in those early moments, we are our happiest, for we easily forget. Every moment a first.

“As teens, metabolism and stamina peak. Muscles are fully toned, and bones are strong as a rock. Yet the mind, in all its

vigor, is not yet fully developed, which largely explains some of the ... let's say, inconsequential decisions that teen amphibians are prone to make.

“Teens invest a great deal of energy trying to be seen and accepted. Their bodies undergo dramatic changes—testosterone peaks in males and estrogen in females—shaping gender traits and fueling urges that cloud judgment. Hormones amplify behaviors: aggression, confidence, self-esteem, and competitiveness, signaling reproductive readiness. The adolescent brain, bold yet inexperienced, struggles with nuance. Now, combine these hormonal changes and their associated behaviors with the fact that the brain’s impulse control system is still developing. The result? The thrill, the excitement, the torment, and the challenge of being a teenager.”

Severitt continued.

“In our twenties, both body and mind reach their peak. Health check-ups are reassuring, and even excessive beetle juice is processed with ease. We believe anything is possible—the world is our lily pad. Many amphibians begin to differentiate, carving out their unique place, learning and refining their craft. This is when we lay the foundations for the legacies we hope to leave. Don’t postpone building this foundation into later decades, your future life will rest upon it. With boundless energy at your disposal, channel it into erecting the pillars that sustain a flourishing existence.

“As amphibians reach their thirties, hormone production and bone mass begin a slow, steady decline, but largely imperceptible at first. With dropping testosterone comes a gradual loss of muscle. The once-clear mind grows cluttered with preoccupations. Youth’s carefree slumber gives way to lighter, broken sleep. The

weight of the carcass makes itself known, and aches emerge in places you never knew existed. This is also the time when metabolism begins to slow. The body burns fewer calories. Unless eating habits adjust or physical activity increases, those extra calories will eventually show up—uninvited.

“In our forties, we realize that the once wide-open horizon starts to narrow. The dreams and boundless hopes of our twenties are now measured against reality. We start to realize that perhaps we are not who we thought we were—and may never become what we once imagined. If we haven’t built a family by now, it’s unlikely we will. And in the realm of love, we’re no longer the most sought-after players.”

At this point, the 102-year-old amphibian delved into the unique nature of amphibian existence.

“Earthworms,” he explained, “are born with a fixed essence, rigidly determined by their DNA. In their preprogrammed reality, they live out lives entirely scripted by their genetic code. As far as I can tell, no earthworm wakes up wondering how to revolutionize tunnel-digging or contemplating a career change to sand-burrowing. Their essence dictates their existence. They dig, they eat dirt, bound by the chains of a limiting genetic code.³

“Amphibians, on the other hand, are unchained. We exist first, we live, and then construct who we are. And choices! Oh, we have plenty. We are free to choose our paths, to shape our destinies.

“Freedom! A great thing, right?! Well, not so fast. With freedom comes responsibility and accountability. The freer we are, the more we agonize. Our lives, our legacies become our

responsibility, not the outcome of some prewritten script. If things go well, all the better—we can pride ourselves for having made the most of our lives, on having fulfilled the promise, on having fully capitalized on the potential of our essence. But when things fall apart, there's no one to blame but ourselves, creating a species-wide anxiety crisis.

“This is to say that at this age, many amphibians experience an existential crisis. They throw their arms up in desperation and ask, ‘If life is really up to me, then what have I created?’ Seeing that half of one’s life is now behind them, they ask with a heightened sense of desperation, ‘What can be accomplished with what is left?’”

And he continued his chronological account of life: “In our fifties, eyesight dims. Pain becomes an unwelcome companion. But on the bright side, most amphibians reach the peak of their personal achievements. Experience turns golden, casting light on the path ahead. By now, you have had the chance to correct most of life’s missteps and reach your mental peak. Hormone levels decline to deficiency. And libido … libido—the electric current of life, the inner drive that drives and creation—begins to wane. The immune system, once an ally, releases substances that can inhibit memory and learning, potentially accelerating neurodegeneration. The abuses inflicted on our bodies in earlier years inevitably catch up with us. Beetle juice now sparks gastric rebellion. That full platter of worms, instead of bringing satisfaction, it becomes the harbinger of sleepless nights, courtesy of indigestion.

“As signs of decay become visible, the ego reaches a cross-roads. It can spiral inward into despair—or, in a profound shift, dissolve, redirecting focus outward: to family, community, and friendship. A major shift in values becomes possible—the superfluous is finally seen for what it is—superfluous.

“Now, we can take pride in what we’ve built. We can look back and savor the moments life hurdled our way—and the fact that you endured them all. The wrath of Lady Fortune may have felt life-defining, but we survived. Sometimes with grace, sometimes without. But survive we did. And still we stand—strong, weathered, and perhaps, full of grace.

“In the late sixties and beyond, every amphibian meets a critical bifurcation point: one path leads to a healthy, as healthy as age permits, and fruitful old age, the other to debilitating disease and decay. My own movement is limited now. The cartilage between my bones has worn thin, and the lubricating fluid has diminished. Ligaments have shortened, making every joint stiffer and less flexible.

“Where I am right now, or where I was twenty years ago, illness—any illness—becomes more common and far less forgiving. A mere inconvenience in youth can now take a deadly turn.

“It is all laid out before us. Predictable. Expectable. Circular. Still, we fail to prepare. When it finally reaches us, we are incredulous. How can there be such willful ignorance? We witness the progression of life in others every day. But when it touches us personally? We are surprised. Shocked. Saddened. We feel like victims.”

“Well ...” Ribbit attempted to answer.

“It is a rhetorical question,” Phobi intervened, saving Ribbit the embarrassment.

And the oldest amphibian alive continued, “It’s as if we believe ourselves to be the exception to the universal rule.”

“All right, all right, but what about lowering the rate of aging?” the coach intervened, noticing that Severitt was immersed in growing indignation.

“Yes, yes. That was the original question, was it not? Keeping a young heart and a fit body. I work out every day. And I compete, even if I am the only one in my category. This year my best jump was ... what was it again?”

“0.613,” the coach interjected, “a couple of centimeters below last year’s.”

“0.613. I didn’t beat the All-Lagoon record last year, but I was still the only 102-year-old to jump that far.”

Phobi leaned forward. “And why long-distance hopping? Why not another sport?” she asked.

“You know why that is, Phobi? Because I’ve been the champion of the short-sprint competition for the past ten years. I needed a new challenge. Something to keep my heart young. Ah yes, that was the third point I had forgotten: always challenge yourself. Have something to live for. Something to wake up at nightfall for—even if it’s just breaking your own record.

“Some say life is too short. I’ve come to believe that it’s neither too short nor too long. It simply is. I have lived many years, seen many things. I have lived a long life, and now,” he chuckled softly, “it’s starting to feel too long. The body’s decline is natural,

inevitable, and we must live by that truth. What's strange is how, year after year, generation after generation, we keep hoping and living in the moment, as if life's natural progression won't eventually catch up. We remain, as a species, stubbornly optimistic. We are slow to learn."

Severitt settled back, emptying his cup of lemongrass juice, clearly in need of rest, while the duo prepared to continue their journey.

Oh, the stages of life! Too short for some, too long for others. Well lived by some, wasted by others! Flourishing or withering depended on stewardship and luck, personal accountability, and providence. Infants are admired for their innocence, yet they yearn to grow. Pure innocence and ignorance, as they only yearn because they lack knowledge of what is to come.

And old age will invariably arrive; early choices will catch up to us. It has been written: with life comes age and with age come age-related challenges to be overcome. The earthworm, with its predictiveness and limitations, lives a simple life. We amphibians, as mental and motor gifts fade, agonize. All the efforts to achieve glory turn into despair.

The Return

RETURN TO BIGGIT

*There are those who can translate experiences
into insight, insight into learning, and
learning into action. Then ... there
are those who need translation.*

*A*s with all things, good and bad, Ribbit and Phobi's journey had come to an end. Mosqui, ever vigilant, guided them back to Biggit's lily pad.

"My dearest amphibians," Biggit exclaimed, his soul soaked with enthusiasm, "the sight of you overjoys me. How was your journey? Tell me everything."

Phobi, unable to contain her excitement, launched into a recounting of their adventures. She quickly realized that the question was aimed at Ribbit. As fast as she had let her amphibian tongue loose, she retrieved it, redirecting the conversation. "Right, Ribbit?! Wasn't it amazing?!"

"I missed my home. My daily routines. I'm tired of all this hopping to faraway places. Phobi was nearly eaten alive. The

arid land dried us out. We swam so deep that the pressure almost crushed us and encountered some ... very eccentric amphibians.”

“But what did you learn, Ribbit?” an anxious Phobi asked.

“That ... stuff happens?!” Ribbit replied, uncertain if this was the right answer.

Biggit smiled to himself: “There are those who can translate experiences into insight, insight into learning, and learning into action. Then ... there are those who need translation.”

Ribbit’s words proved that he belonged to the group that needed translation.

“The first part of your journey, the Valley of Withering, was a deep dive into the blockers of life. The second, the Valley of Awakening, is what frees us from entering or re-entering the Valley of Withering. Both valleys represent nature and the nature of nature.”

“You speak of different valleys, but at times we felt we were in the same place,” Phobi said on behalf of them both. “The turtle and the beetles seemed to be right next to each other.”

“Good observation. And in fact, they were. The valleys don’t exist in the physical world—they exist wherever your mind and your thoughts take you. Your thoughts and beliefs create the valleys you live in. But where was I again?” Biggit paused to regain his thoughts.

“Ah, yes, the meaning of the journey. Suffering, pain, and hardship are intrinsic to the amphibian condition.” He explained that although Ribbit had met a select group of amphibians with unique experiences, hardship was a universal theme—one shared by every amphibian.

Rabbit frowned. “And how does that make me feel better?”

“Firstly, you’re now awakened to consciousness of the true nature of things. What many spend relentless effort and energy denying, afraid to confront its implications, you’ve now witnessed firsthand.”

“But isn’t this consciousness a curse?” Rabbit countered. “Wasn’t I better off before? Living peacefully in ignorance?”

A mortal, now conscious of its mortality. A flawed soul, painfully aware of the flaws it carries. A fragile creature, conscious of his own fragility. An imperfect being, burdened by the knowledge of his imperfection. What torment could be greater?

“Shielding the ego by limiting consciousness—what a strategy! But what good does it do? Suppressing life’s harsh truths won’t make them disappear. Now, after this journey, you’ve seen how others cope with life’s tests and trials.

“Which leads me to my second point … this journey gives you a sense of perspective. All you have lived and all that all amphibians will ever live falls within the realm of the amphibian experience. You are not alone. Your near-death experience, in some form or another, has been lived by thousands if not millions of other amphibians. There isn’t a single amphibian who hasn’t personally experienced life’s tragedies or isn’t one degree removed from those who have. Some, in fact, have had far worse than you did.”

“But because others may have had it worse, does it discredit my feelings?” Rabbit asked with resentment.

“Your pain is real. Perspective doesn’t diminish what you’ve been through—it shifts your focus from the individual to the collective. When you see that your experience is part of the greater amphibian story, you realize you’re not alone. That can be both comforting and devastating. Comforting, because you realize life isn’t acting against you personally; it’s nature running its due course. Devastating, because you become aware of the suffering that surrounds us all. But even then, it can be comforting to know that despite everything, we’re still here, thriving as a species.”

Biggit leaned closer.

“Amphibian suffering stems from false assumptions about life. By accepting this simple truth, we can find liberation. When hardships bestow its heavy weight upon you, you now understand it’s not a plot against you, but nature running its natural course. It is simply the nature of nature.”

You speak of liberation, wise Biggit, yet here is Ribbit imprisoned in his own thoughts! You have promised a cure, but have failed to deliver it.

THE LILY PAD OF LIFE

*Distorted thinking breeds distorted feelings,
which inevitably lead to distorted actions.*

*As social creatures, we can find meaning in helping
others reduce their burden and live better lives.*

“*T*his is a helpful way to understand it,” Biggit said as he unfurled a round and beautifully designed lily pad adorned with intricate, embroidered figures.

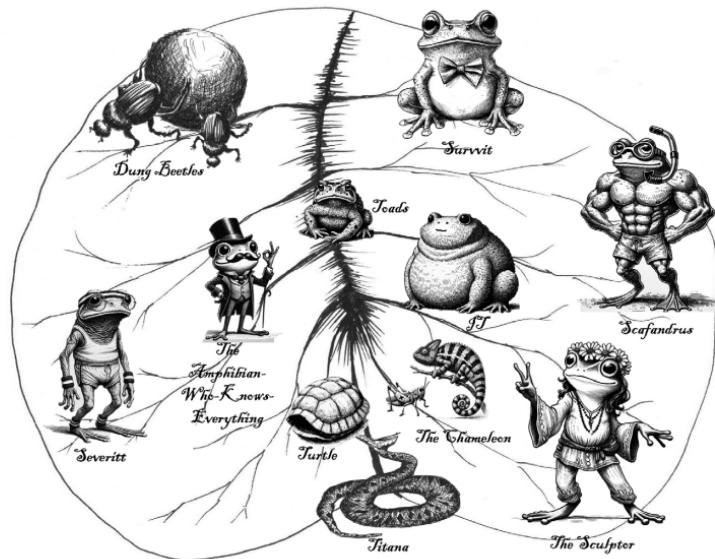
As Biggit revealed the design, Ribbit instinctively hopped back, his heart racing, gasping for air in sheer horror.

“Easy, my dear amphibian. There’s no need to be alarmed. A mere embroidered design should not scare the living soul from your body,” Biggit attempted to calm Ribbit’s nerves.

Phobi jumped in out of concern, “Ribbit, are you okay? Take a deep breath.”

Biggit proceeded to explain the designs in the lily pad: “This is the Lily Pad of Life—a metaphor for the circle that traps us all.⁴ At the bottom of the lily pad, you see Titana, her mouth

wide open, representing the great equalizer, the only certainty in any living creature's life—the endpoint of our ephemeral existence. Rabbit, I presume this is what scared you. Understandable. Facing death and coming to the realization of the fragility and shortness of life, as you have experienced, is distressing. It forces us to rethink our priorities, our values, our goals.



“It compels us to ask, ‘What will I do with what remains?’—sparking the vital energy to pursue what truly matters in life; it fuels the abandonment of our current selves, to the emergence of our ideal selves. It also unveils the ultimate life truth—the startling discovery that despite having a superior consciousness compared to other life forms, we are no different from them in our mortality.”

The Inner Layer

Biggit gestured to the center of the lily pad. “Here, where stem meets leaf, lies the core of life. From this center, life flows from roots to the edges of every leaf. It’s also where the ‘Blockers of Life’ take hold. If the core is healthy, life’s force flows freely through stem to leaves, sustaining life. When blocked, nutrients fail to reach the leaves, and they wither. These blockers are represented by the dwellers of the Valley of Withering—ignorance by the toads who chased the iridescent Amphibian; greed by IT; deceit, envy, and anger by the chameleon; fear by the turtle; and hubris and indecisiveness by the Amphibian-Who-Knows-Everything.

“Let’s start with ignorance, represented by the toads who hunted down the iridescent amphibian. Ignorance is the primary force that traps us in the circle of life. I don’t mean ignorance about how stars are formed or how the moon influences the tides. I speak of ignorance about the true nature of life and living. Distorted thinking breeds distorted feelings, which inevitably lead to distorted actions. The toads chased an illusion, mistaking externals for the source of true fulfillment, believing that an iridescent bath would be the solution to all their problems and as a result committed brutal acts.

“Ignorance is perceiving that which cannot bring flourishing as the source of flourishing, mistaking that which cannot bring satisfaction as the source of satisfaction. Based on the false belief that their lot could be improved through iridescent baths, by focusing on a material and perceptual deception, the toads decimated an entire colony of amphibians! The search for meaning in externals, in the outside world, plagues our existence. To believe that happy . . . , you know what . . . ”

Phobi interrupted, “You avoid saying this word.”

“Yes, because we tend to think it’s the ultimate goal in life, setting us up for failure because nothing is more ephemeral. The moment you find it, it leaves you. Life does not come with a happy ... guarantee certificate. It was never promised to us. When you believe you’ve grasped it, it changes shape, turning to smoke, leaving you chasing something else. I refuse to promote a concept that’s perpetually out of reach. This constant grasping and clinging to things as the source of happy ... , you know what, is the source of most amphibian suffering.

“Amphibian suffering and angst stem from misunderstandings and false assumptions about the nature of reality. We expect universal fairness, gentleness, and the absence of suffering and pain. We believe we should always get our fair share. But these expectations are wishful thinking, not the reality of nature. That is not to say we shouldn’t pursue them. It just means that they are not necessarily reflective of the true nature of things.

“When you overcome ignorance by understanding and accepting the nature of life, some traditions believe you begin to free yourself from the Lily of Life’s trap. In my tradition, however, I believe we are never truly freed from it. Rather, by removing ignorance, we allow the Lily of Life to flourish in its full splendor.” He then gestured to another part of the lily pad, pointing to IT.

“IT represents the insatiable nature of the amphibian soul—greed. We overindulge in anything that brings us pleasure—food, excitement, entertainment, adrenaline, bodily pleasures—believing that more will satisfy us. But the more we consume, the deeper our hunger grows.

“IT’s small mouth reminds us of how little food we actually need, how little of anything we truly require. Yet, we stretch

ourselves to the breaking point just to consume more. This applies beyond mere sustenance.

“We search our entire lives for things to satiate our unquenchable thirst, to bring contentment, to recreate the warmth once felt inside the fertilized egg sac. But when we find this contentment, it lasts a mere moment before evaporating. We then pursue the next thing, believing it will surely satisfy us—a logical conclusion since previous attainments did nothing to satiate our appetite.

“IT is always trying to find that illusive thing that will satiate; yet he can never find it, perpetuating his hunger for more. Perhaps the conclusion is that nothing—and I mean nothing—can fully satisfy our hunger, our desire, unless we consciously realize and decide that we don’t need much.”

Biggit continued circling the center of the Lily Pad of Life. “The chameleon represents the darkest aspects of our nature—deceit, envy, and anger. It lures others with false promises, only to devour them. Insects, amphibians, mammals, mollusks—acting in self-interest, with no consideration for the others—obliterate the very notion of Otherness.

“But the most insidious form of deceit,” he continued, “is that which we inflict upon ourselves. We deceive ourselves when we pretend to be what we’re not, when we fail to confront our true nature, especially the shadow self—that part of us we all harbor yet go to great lengths to deny. The Chameleon is always shifting colors, trying to blend in, trying to be someone else.

“The chameleon’s anger and bitterness toward life cannot be disregarded. Its awkward features—zygodactyl-like feet, independent-moving eyes, and slow movements—bred envy, which

turned into anger. This manifests in his denial of life to the all-seeing, flying, and in his mind, superiorly designed grasshopper.”

Biggit then turned to the tales shared by IT—the iridescent amphibian and the chameleon. These were tales exemplifying important lessons about greed and ignorance of one’s nature, yet IT remained blind to his own greed and perceptual flaws.

“This,” Biggit emphasized, “is one of the great challenges plaguing amphibians—the tendency to spot flaws in others, yet remain blind to their own. The inability to apply the lessons they see in others’ lives to their own.

“Too much time at the center … let’s move to—” Biggit began, but Phobi interrupted him.

“The turtle!” she cried. “You forgot the turtle, and I can’t let you overlook it after such a peculiar encounter.”

“Ah, yes, the turtle. The turtle represents fear—fear of facing life and its many challenges. The turtle has denied life by sheltering itself from it. It seeks solace in the Supreme, transferring the responsibility of life and living to an invisible Other. Its self-pity attracts attention to its life wounds. The one fearful of life becomes dependent, relying on others to feel sorry for them, to shoulder their burdens, to assist and help them. The turtle goes to such great lengths to protect life, to shield itself from life, that it ultimately denies life, slowly extinguishing the very thing it seeks to protect.”

The eternal, inescapable wheel that traps us all with its blockers of life! Oh, the blockers of life! The lies that suffocate flourishing, which drown any possibility of life, the cause of all withering and despair. How to escape it? Is it even possible?

The Outer Layer

“Too much time at the center … Now that we have identified the blockers of life, let’s now move to the outer part of the lily. The designs here represent the route toward emancipation from suffering. At the top right-hand corner, you’ll see …”

“The Scafandrus frog!” Phobi interrupted, reminiscing the great experiences she had in deep water.

“Indeed! The Scafandruses exemplify the resilience of the amphibian spirit. They show us that we are built to endure hardships. Amphibians are, in fact, anti-fragile.”⁵

Biggit noticed the confusion on Rabbit’s face and clarified the term: “Certain things are fragile; they break under pressure. A butterfly wing under pressure cracks into a thousand pieces. Butterfly wings are fragile. There are also things that grow stronger under pressure. Amphibians, under the right conditions, are such beings. Instead of breaking, we harden and grow stronger. Pressure strengthens the spirit, the species.”

Rabbit pushed back, questioning why hardships should be glorified and not eliminated. Biggit agreed that it was desirable and commendable that amphibians work tirelessly to eliminate hardships. Who could deny that? But hardships cannot be fully eradicated from the lived experience. The birthmark of amphibianhood is hardship.

Biggit then shared a concept he had learned from his ancestors—the notion that amphibians are *able to* or *capable of*.⁶

“Although we should aspire to reduce the plight of amphibians, when the wrath of nature or the misfortunes of Lady Fortune present themselves, we are ‘able to’ or ‘capable of’ coping with

them. And in some instances, not always but certainly frequently, we get better as we are faced with hardships; we are forced to overcome the self, to test the limit, to shed our skins and experience the world in new ways.”

This is what Biggit had learned, and he believed it wholeheartedly. Biggit had sent them on a journey to better understand the amphibian condition. “The beetles, Survvit, the sculptor—they all faced harsh realities, ones we’d rather avoid. Yet, they all possessed an in-built system to overcome. Life challenged them, but they were capable of, and able to, overcome and find meaning. Undeniably, one would want to avoid these hardships, but when they happen, rest assured that amphibians are ‘able to.’ Evolution has gifted us with this capacity, otherwise, our ancestors would have never survived.

“Amphibians develop strength not by shielding themselves from nature’s hardships, but by adjusting their outlook on reality and strengthening their cognitive system. Inner strength is all one can hope to cultivate to face the many challenges life will inevitably throw our way. Oh, if Lady Fortune has not thrown hardships yet, don’t worry—she will. After all, Lady Fortune is fond of hopping around. She never stays put and commits to no one.”

As they moved to the lower-right quadrant of the lily, Ribbit and Phobi observed the designs of Survvit and the sculptor.

“Survvit represents an important concept in this journey—the dichotomy of control. We have no direct control over the decisions of Mother Nature and Lady Fortune. What lies within our control is cognition—how we react to the gifts or curses bestowed upon us by these giving, yet often wrathful, deities. But you’ll learn more on this during the exercises.”

Here Phobi and Ribbit exchanged a glance.

“When Survvit observed the flower blossom, he understood the perpetual rhythm of life and nature—unstoppable, unyielding. Nothing can undo them. Only Nature has the power to undue Nature, and Nature is everything, so it can’t be undone. Inspired, he joined it in its creative flow. With determination, he built the barriers and shaped his lake, aligning himself with the miraculous cycle of nature’s creation.

“The Sculptor reminds us that despair is never the answer. All changes, and life always finds a way to prevail and thrive. Despite the Sculptor’s many challenges, she emerged not defeated but stronger because of the one thing no force could take from her—her talents and the essence of her being. She reminded us of the intricate duality of Mother Nature—nurturing and caring and yet, at times, cruel. As Her offspring, everything that happens to us is made possible through her complex and dualistic essence.”

As they continued around the lily pad, their eyes fell upon the image of Severitt, the 102-year-old amphibian.

“The old amphibian is a reminder of vitality and of life’s natural cycles—aging, decline, and the inevitability of change. These cycles will eventually catch up with us all. Each stage of an amphibian’s existence is marked by unique physical, hormonal, and mental transformation and challenges. While not every experience is equal, the cycles are predictive and almost certainly inescapable. Our current cycles prepare us for subsequent ones. Our present selves are stewards of our future selves. Instead of resisting the cycles of life and the inevitability of what comes with aging, he studied and understood them.”

Moving to the next section, Ribbit and Phobi were surprised to see depictions of the two dung beetles. “The beetles represent courage, purpose, and duty.

“As you’ve experienced, the life of a dung beetle is far from easy. Yet, those two rise to fulfill their duties every morning as the skies turn pink. That takes courage—to see life for what it is, in their case, a rather stinky business, and embrace it head-on. Many amphibians rise at the brink of dusk, throwing their front legs up to the skies in desperation, asking ‘for what?’ or ‘why?’.

“The life story of the beetles teaches us about one aspect of the meaning of life, if such a thing exists. Having pondered about the meaning of life and not having found a definite answer, I can only say with certainty that life presents us with abundant hardships. As social creatures, we can find meaning in helping others reduce their burden and live better lives.

“There is work to be done. Failure to carry out our assigned duties unbalances the ecosystem, creating disarray in ponds and lagoons. We must have a sense of purpose and duty to each other, to fulfill our common existence. Sense of duty comes above personal needs. Of course, it feels more comfortable to rest in idleness, but is that not denying our amphibian-ness? The meaning of life is not something out there waiting to be revealed by Divine Providence; it’s to be created through action. The beetles also represent a cognitive strategy I greatly appreciate—reappraisal or reframing.”

At this point, Ribbit was hoping Biggit would use one of his “in other words” phrases, as he hadn’t quite grasped the meaning of “reappraisal.” But an explanation was forthcoming as Biggit elucidated the concept with an example.

“Reappraisal or reframing,” Biggit explained, “is looking at a situation with a different lens. Take the beetles—pushing dung is no joke, yet they engage in this not-so-fragrant duty with pride. They framed it not as a distasteful task but as their crucial role in the ecosystem and a means for survival. We’ll delve deeper into reappraisal during the exercises.

“Ultimately, the beetles represent love of one’s fate. It’s an attitude—one that requires courage, and some reframing—of accepting life for what it is, with its blessings and, more importantly, its challenges, trials, miseries, randomness, and inevitabilities. The Fates introduced by the beetles teach us that pain is inherent in life; life doesn’t need to entail suffering. Pain when combined with acceptance translates into pain; pain combined with unacceptance equals suffering.”

Ribbit, uncertain about these “exercises” Biggit kept mentioning, interjected, “We’ve hopped for days now; can we opt out of these ‘exercises’ you keep referring to? I’d really prefer my life without exercises right now.”

“Oh, yes, the exercises. Let’s get to it!” Biggit exclaimed. “Mosqui, please inform Athennit that the trainees are ready.”

“But …” Ribbit interrupted.

Phobi shushed him, begging, “Ribbit! Just go with the flow.”

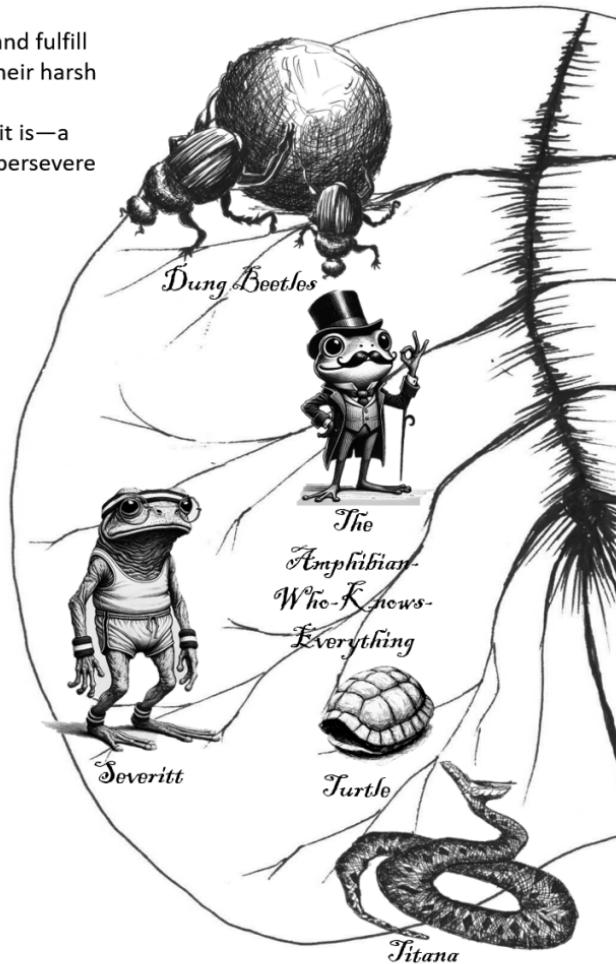
Displaced priorities—the one being helped seeks comfort, seeks the warmth of his known ways. The one trying to help insists on the need to press on. What a tiring dynamic!

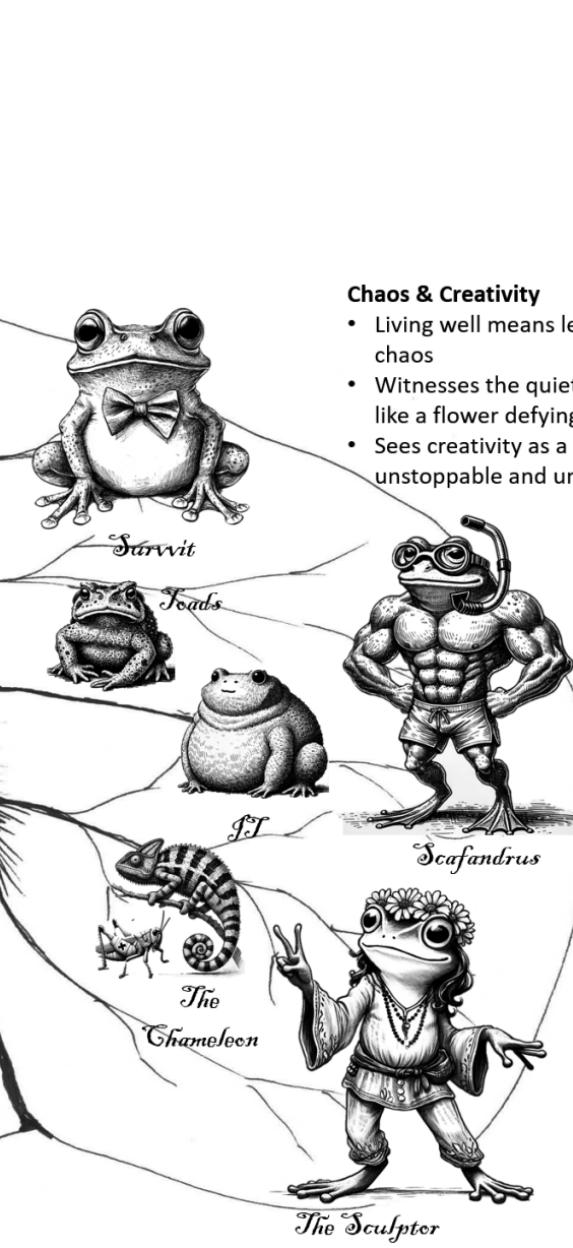
Courage & Duty

- Live with love for life and fulfill their duties, despite their harsh conditions
- They see life for what it is—a stinky business—and persevere

Vitality

- Embodies life's natural cycles and the inevitability of change
- Reminds us that physical, hormonal, and neurological shifts are part of existence
- Each cycle prepares us for the next; our present selves shape our future selves
- Instead of resisting change, we must study it, understand it, and prepare for it





Chaos & Creativity

- Living well means learning to navigate and contain chaos
- Witnesses the quiet power of life's will to bloom, like a flower defying the odds
- Sees creativity as a vital, life-affirming force—unstoppable and unyielding

Resilience

- Built to endure—strength forged through hardship
- Resilient not just by nature, but by proving what one is 'able to' and 'capable of'

Talent & Being

- Despair is never the answer—we all possess talents and the gift of being.
- We may not control nature or fate, but we can control our cognition: how we respond to life's gifts and burdens, and how we use what we've been given.

TUNING THE INSTRUMENT OF THOUGHT

To protect ourselves from the despair of living, we have created coping mechanisms that deny and numb us to reality.

We long for change, yet invisible forces hold us captive in a web of inaction.

Biggit prepared a room for them to rest in until Athennit reached the lagoon. Living faraway, it would take her a couple of nights of hopping to reach Goon.

When the trainer finally arrived, Ribbit was taken aback. Athennit was not who he had pictured. Among amphibians, Athennit is one of those gender-neutral names. Ribbit had imagined someone who ran a boot camp would have a bulky built; a strict, controlling look; and rigid words.

The sight of Athennit shattered his preconceived notions. She was indeed strong and toned with a stern physiognomy. But she also possessed a tender and calming presence, the kind that made

his heart beat for the first time since his ordeal. He blushed, his palms becoming sweaty and his knees wobbly.

“We will start our training now,” Athennit announced in a firm voice. “I demand absolute attention and focus. We will start strengthening our muscles.”

Ribbit’s physical exhaustion had fled his body in the presence of the stunning Athennit. However, this newfound energy was not as important as he had first thought, for the muscles to be exercised were not physical but mental.

“We will start with the first concept: we get stronger not by casing and protecting the system, but by strengthening it. You were sent on this journey because you went into a dark place after the incident with Titana, Ribbit.”

Ribbit’s inner voice was tainted with panic: “Oh, by the faltering mercy of the amphibian gods, how does that help me?! She knows I am weak.”

“Amphibians, for too long our species has denied consciousness. To protect ourselves from the despair of living, we have created coping mechanisms that deny and numb us to reality. We isolate ourselves from the active world; we find diversions; we cling to the secure, the numbing, the known; we create an intricate immune system to change with assumptions that are designed to keep us safe. The time has come for us to face it, head-on.

“This step in strengthening the cognitive apparatus is to understand reality and the dichotomy of control. As it should be evident by now, nature follows its own course. Nature is chaotic,

and it's our responsibility to cultivate the wisdom to discern what is under our control and what is not—this is the dichotomy of control. Snakes eat amphibians. This is the way of nature. This we cannot control. It lies beyond our influence. What, then, can we control?"

Phobi promptly enumerated the measures she had employed and observed to avoid predation:

"Seek shelter when the lagoon falls into an eerie stillness, jump into water when we hear rattling sounds, develop bio-protections like our amphibian cousins with their poisonous skin."

"Well articulated, Phobi. Fortune's fortuities lie beyond our control. However, we can prepare for when Fortune turns her mermaid tail, diverting her favors elsewhere."

Athennit drew on the ground two concentric circles, labeling the central circle, "Circle of Influence," and the outer circle, "Circle of Concern." She explained to the pair that the Circle of Influence encompassed what they could control, while the Circle of Concern represented areas beyond their reach. "The caprices of Lady Fortune, Mother Nature and that of others should always be placed within the Circle of Concern, while our strategies for a fulfilling life fall within the Circle of Influence."

"But how to cope when Fortune takes away what is ours, the things I've acquired through my own hard work? I've been drying mosquitoes and storing them. That was not given to me by Fortune. Are you suggesting Fortune can claim it at her whim?" Ribbit asked with indignation.

"Indeed, you are among the most talented mosquito catchers in your pond. You've honed your craft," said Athennit.

Rabbit adjusted his posture, expanding his chest with pride, as it was clear that she knew he was more than just a fainting amphibian.

Athennit continued: “But consider this: Fortune rarely takes what was not hers to begin with. Most things in life are but loans from Fortune, not eternal gifts. What Fortune bestows, she may reclaim at her discretion. Was it not Fortune that endowed you with the intelligence to pursue your goals, to be born in a pond teeming with mosquitoes? Just as she provided the conditions for you to thrive, that capricious mermaid tail may swing in an unfavorable direction at any moment.

“Amphibians, what I speak of is perspective. You can’t control Fortune’s misfortunes, but you can 1) create systems to mitigate Fortune’s influence, remembering that Fortune and Mother Nature are ultimately in control, and 2) exert cognitive control over your reactions to circumstances.”

Athennit then introduced another area of control, “Our chosen mode of being. We rarely reflect upon which mode of being dictates how we navigate our lives, but this changes today. IT taught us the ‘having’ mode of being. In this mode, one measures life by possessions and consumption, allowing them to define one’s worth. What one consumes becomes one’s identity. The quantity of material possessions and consumption determines who one is. This applies equally to immaterial possessions—one must have others’ respect, recognition, and attention.

“As IT has illuminated, this mode is unsustainable. The more we have, the more we crave, and the well of desire is bottomless. An intermediate mode, the ‘doing mode,’ was exemplified

by Survvit, the Sculptor, and the dung beetles. They are actively engaged in the process of doing, creating, and producing. In this mode, we derive value and meaning from outcomes. We attain joy and well-being by fulfilling duties. This mode, too, engages in constant comparison of present states against desired states. Without it, we amphibians can't evolve. Yet one must be cautious not to lose oneself in the doing mode and lose perspective about the ultimate purpose of the doing. The doing mode should not be a mere anesthetic for the pain of existence, a mere diversion, though it is every effective toward that very end. The final stage is the *being* mode; the doing mode is often a stable bridge to the being mode.

“In the being mode, the focus shifts from possession and having to relating and understanding, from exerting control and doing for the sake of doing to being true to one’s authentic self.

“The turtle lived in constant fear and anxiety. Terrified of losing possessions and control, it neglected its potential for living. Grasping desperately to the having mode, it was left with nothing but the fear of death. The Amphibian-Who-Knows-Everything clung to rigid beliefs, rationalizations, and certainties that provided an illusion of control over existence and a sense of absolute truth. Trapped in the having mode of knowledge, his beliefs ossified; he inhabited a world of self-made falsehoods.”

“And when does one achieve the being mode?” Phobi inquired.

“The ultimate mode of being,” Athennit responded, “is an ideal toward which we strive but will always fall short. The sculptor reached the being mode to the degree that she became an

artist. She is her art, and her art is her. Though all was taken from her twice, she will forever remain an artist, regardless of the circumstances. Survvit honed his skills and knowledge in rebuilding the lagoon. He became a builder. He will forever be an architect of hope. The beetles will always be—will always live—devoted to their mission. Reaching the full potentiality of the being mode emancipates the soul, frees the spirit, releasing one from the yoke of falsehoods and allowing the authentic self to emerge. To truly become released individuals ...”

Phobi interrupted, “Released?”

Athennit continued, “Yes, released. Free to be and act without being controlled by falsehoods. To be released, we must understand the assumptions that hold us in the web of life. We long for change, yet invisible forces hold us captive in a web of inaction. We are committed to certain ideas, unaware that these very commitments keep us in chains.”⁷

“You’re saying that we act against our own best interests?” Phobi interjected.

“All the time. Let’s look at the Amphibian-Who-Knows-Everything. Although an extreme case, he perfectly illustrates the point. Don’t think we’re too different from him. He wanted to implement his ideas at the pollution control station, but instead, he kept them to himself, distrusting his colleagues. Why? He feared they would misuse or steal his work. He was unknowingly committed to keeping his ideas ‘safe,’ shielded from others. He struggled with indecisiveness: he believed he knew what to do under every situation, yet failed to act at every turn. Why? His Big Assumption was that others are untrustworthy and that sharing

ideas would bring harm. And so, he remained stuck in the web of his own assumptions.

“Now, Ribbit, let’s focus on you … After everything that has happened, what’s one big goal you’d like to commit to getting better at?”

“I wish I could …” Ribbit hesitated.

“State it as, ‘I am committed to getting better at …’”⁷ Athennit prompted.

“I am committed to getting better at …”

“Seeking help when you need it?” Phobi suggested.

“Phobi! This is his exercise,” Athennit chided gently.

“Sorry!”

“Well, it’s true. I didn’t seek help when I needed it most. If it wasn’t for Phobi, I wouldn’t be here today.”

“Great. The first step is to identify the behavior you want to improve. And here we have one: seeking help. Now, let’s look at what you do or don’t do that goes against that desired behavior.”

“I withdrew from everyone. I stayed in my den, found comfort in beetle juice, avoided my friends, ignored signs I needed help, and acted stubbornly.”

“Good. Now, let’s explore what you fear might happen if you did the opposite of those actions.”

“Hmm. If I look confused, it’s because I am. I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Well, you said you withdrew from everyone. What’s the worst that could happen if you didn’t?”

“I’d open up about my problems … and would be judged.

People would see me as weak.”

“Now continue for each behavior.”

“If I sought help, I’d be exposing myself. If I looked for comfort in others, I’d seem dependent. If I asked for help, I’d admit that I can’t take care of myself, that I’m not self-sufficient. If I wasn’t stubborn, I’d be too vulnerable, and vulnerability is never a good thing.”

“These fears are controlling your actions. They represent hidden commitments or competing commitments—commitments designed to keep you ‘safe.’ You want to seek help, but these competing commitments stop you. Now, let’s transform each fear into a competing commitment. For instance, you said that by seeking help, you’d be vulnerable. So, your competing commitment is, ‘I am committed to not feeling vulnerable.’”

“I am committed to not feeling vulnerable. I am committed to not depending on anyone. I am committed to not showing weakness. I am committed to showing I can take care of myself.”

“Great. From these hidden commitments, we derive the Big Assumptions operating in your life. For example, it seems you assume that vulnerability is a sign of weakness. Let’s state these guiding assumptions using ‘I assume’ statements.”

“I assume I must be strong, that I shouldn’t open up about my struggles, that vulnerability is for the weak. I assume independence equals strength. I assume I need to have all the answers for my problems.”

I am the ultimate guide. I read the environment, astutely gather observations, and piece together experiences. From these fragments, I create assumptions—mental shortcuts that help you make sense of

the world. I save the lessons from your past experiences—especially those born from failures, dangers, and anything that could hurt you—developing expectations about how similar situations might unfold in the future. These assumptions are the lenses through which you view reality, formed without your conscious awareness, carefully designed to keep you safe, protected, and out of harm's way.

I apply these assumptions to every part of life, making it easier for you to navigate a complex landscape. I simplify the unfamiliar, predict outcomes, and create a sense of stability and order from chaos. I am here to protect. Minimize me, and be prepared to live a life of certain pain and angst. Above all, why change what has always worked, especially when my sole purpose has been to shield and protect you?

“Wow. This is powerful stuff,” Phobi said, impressed.

“Now, the goal is to test these assumptions. This journey was meant to challenge those assumptions. For example, Survit sought help from Biggit. Does that make him any less of an amphibian?”

“No, not at all,” Ribbit admitted.

“Exactly. So now that you know the assumptions holding you back, you can design experiments to challenge them—starting with the one with the strongest grip on you. Remember, your assumptions are there to protect you, but they can also limit you, restrict your

growth. They must be questioned, tested, and sometimes dismantled to pave the way for real progress.”

Athennit continued, “So far, we’ve explored control over your internal choices—your beliefs, your assumptions, and your actions. But challenges often come from the outside too. To learn to respond to external forces in a healthier way, I recommend using the reframing exercise.”

THE CRYSTALS OF REFRAMING

A single beam of light can scatter into many colors. You get to decide which color to pay attention to.

Without further ado, Athennit delved into the meaning of reframing: “Reframing is the art of altering our perception of a situation.

“Let me tell you the story of how reframing came about. There lived in a faraway lagoon a miserable amphibian who complained just about everything. If the moon was out, the weather was too moony; if clouds covered the moon, the skies were too cloudy. If that year’s mosquito stock was plump, they were too plumpy for his taste. His mother agonized seeing him live a life of misery. Mustering her observational powers combined with her study of physics, she created input bending crystals.”

“Input bending crystals? I am confused,” said Phobi.

“It’s an ingenious idea!” Athennit exclaimed. “The mother observed that a single beam of light split into multiple colorful rays when it passes through a crystal. As information enters the

mind through our eyes, she reckoned that these crystals could help us see the full spectrum of possibilities embedded in any one beam of information.”

Musing on this, and skeptical about where the conversation was going, Ribbit told himself this was some deep alternative stuff.

Athennit continued, “So she created light bending crystals and sprinkled them around her den, some inevitably landing in her son’s eyes. Every time he blinked, reality would enter him like a kaleidoscope of possibilities.”

“Did he acquire a more positive outlook in life?” Ribbit asked holding some hope for his own condition.

“I wouldn’t say ‘more positive,’ but certainly different. He went from negative to neutral for sure. And here is how I know. A year later, the young amphibian was attacked by a viper.

“Fortunately, the viper’s fangs barely pierced his skin, and he escaped with his life intact. All amphibians in the lagoon congratulated him on his fortune. While before he would have interpreted this occurrence as yet another inevitability to a life he didn’t ask for, he now responded to his good wishers: ‘Good or bad, who really knows?’

“Although the viper had merely scratched his skin, a small amount of venom entered his body, causing gangrene to set in his bitten leg. To survive, his leg had to be amputated. As he recovered, amphibians demonstrated their affection by visiting him and conveying their sympathies. ‘We’re sorry about your misfortune,’

they said out of pity. ‘Fortune or misfortune, who really knows?’ he responded.

“Months later, humanoids carrying beams of hypnotic light captured amphibians in the lagoon. These humanoids hunt our kind to consume our legs, but because he lacked one leg, they released him. ‘Fortune or misfortune, who really knows?’ And he continued living his life in a more adjusted way, let’s say.”

“So the crystals deny reality?” Ribbit probed.

“The crystals, it was believed, changed outlooks,” Athennit answered patiently. “It broke down the appraisal of reality from a single beam into multiple possible alternatives.”

“You said ‘it was believed?’” Phobi asked, always attentive, picking up on an almost imperceptible detail in Athennit’s comment.

“Yes, *it was believed*, because later it was discovered that the crystals, although a powerful metaphor, had really nothing to do with it. The amphibian mind carries the capacity for reframing, regardless of crystals. The mind possesses the ability to break any occurrence into multiple interpretations, yet most of us tend to just stick to one interpretation, often a negative one.

“Most impressive is that it has been proven that by engaging in this exercise of reframing and broadening perspectives, the emotional temperature in our brains is reduced.”

“Emotional temperature? Since when do emotions have temperature?” Ribbit asked.

“Think about when someone wrongs you. You get angry. The temperature rises. Of course, this is just a figure of speech; you don’t get hot, but you get flustered and ready to attack or hop

away. This is hot cognition. The outcomes of actions under the yoke of hot cognition are never ideal, as they are often instinctual and its origin comes from a more primitive part of our brain, what is called our lizard brain.”

“Oh, our lizard friends, they indeed are different. They certainly don’t display high levels of thinking those ones,” Phobi said.

“Exactly, we would want responses from life’s events to be filtered through the rational apparatus. And now we know that when we reappraise any situation, the activity in our brains moves from the lizard to the rational brain. Therefore, how we appraise circumstances directly influences our emotional responses. Events can be seen as positive, negative, or neutral. By modifying our interpretation, we gain mastery over our emotions and the responses that follow.”

“Hardships can be positively framed?” Ribbit uttered, indigence in his voice.

“A significant hardship might be seen as a lesson that helps you avoid future suffering. Consider the evolution of the Stickbug: they were preyed upon so frequently and for so long that environmental pressures compelled them to evolve into a unique form; they mimicked a twig, and now predators can’t discern them. Even the Stickbug is uncertain whether it is a twig that believes it’s an insect or an insect that believes it’s a twig. The negative force that challenged their existence was transformed into a force for survival. The gene of adaptability is the ultimate precondition for survival.

“Near-death experiences can induce, as they have with you, despair and anxiety—both forms of energy. These, too, can be

rechanneled toward the positive—a renewed appreciation for nature, a deepened appreciation for friendships, a new perspective on life.”

Athennit continued, “Reframing is simple yet powerful. For every thought your mind suggests, transform it into something empowering. For instance, ‘I despise the rain’ can be reframed as ‘the aroma of fresh earth after a rainfall warms the soul.’ ‘I loathe my mosquito-catching job’ can become ‘this job brings me comfort and security.’”

They continued the exercise, Athennit voicing negative thoughts while the pair reframed them:

“Problems drain me … problems help me grow.”

“Other amphibians drive me crazy … amphibians are a great source of inspiration (and of how not to act).”

“My life is cursed … my life is filled with excitement and challenges (and great stories).”

“I am just not smart enough … you are a capable being who always finds solutions when you put your mind into it.”

Wait! Wait! Wait! I have remained silent until now. I see what you’re trying to accomplish here. Biggit and Athennit, how could you? Have I not been on your side this entire time? And now you suggest that my voice, the voice of consciousnesses, needs reframing?

As if my clear perception of situations needs rewriting! Insulting, to say the least! I never imagined the journey’s end goal would be to question me. Had

I known, I'd have used my convincing power and never allowed Ribbit to embark on it. Your attempt to nullify me is futile. My voice shall always prevail.

“In summary,” Athennit said, “reframing is about attention—what you choose to focus on. Remember the crystals: a single beam of light can scatter into many colors. You get to decide which color to pay attention to. It’s about seeing the opportunity, recognizing the good, and finding the lesson in whatever comes your way. And there is always a lesson.” Athennit suggested, “Let’s take a break for some belly-warming worms and reconvene in two hours for another set of exercises.”

Phobi and Ribbit returned to the lily pad at the assigned time. Athennit began, “We’ll now explore a type of reframing exercise—negative visualization. How mistaken are we to assume that our days will unfold joyously and according to plan? How erroneous to believe the universe will align with our will, that our wishes and desires will be granted uncontested? How mistaken to assume others will acquiesce and not interfere with our goals?

“More often than not, the universe imposes its way on us rather than us imposing our will upon the universe, yet we frequently disregard this crucial lesson.

“Negative visualization aids us in gaining perspective. It allows us to recalibrate our expectations. Remember, a significant part of suffering stems from erroneous, misguided, and unfulfilled expectations. Thus, you are encouraged to begin each day contemplating, for a fleeting moment, the potential obstacles you

may encounter. What could possibly go awry and how might you address it?

“A renowned amphibian started each day by rehearsing potential scenarios, anticipating less-than-savory encounters.⁸ He envisioned encounters with the ignorant, the small-minded, the jealous, and the difficult. And he devised a plan to deal with them. He would remind himself that these amphibians behaved in such ways not out of malice or an overt intention to harm, but because they knew no better; they were deprived of understanding what is good and beautiful. And because he possessed that knowledge of the good and beautiful, he bore a duty to treat these amphibians with compassion, not scorn.

“When embarking on a journey, anticipate the hills and mountains, the deserts, the storms, and the days hopping without shelter. Anticipate—not to be alarmed, but to be alert. When challenges present themselves, you will be prepared. We often fail to anticipate the negative before it manifests. All should remain expected. Contemplate the fragility of the amphibian experience, its impermanence, and nothing shall perturb you.

“There is growing evidence that amphibians who engage in this anticipatory exercise and develop alternatives for each potential scenario are more successful in achieving their goals. Reflect on your own experience; how would this practice have helped you avoid your encounter with Titana?”

Ribbit pondered for a brief second before responding, “I never truly considered one day being in danger. When the air quieted, I should have sought shelter, but I was puzzled. The fact that slithering predators exist is not new, but I never imagined I

would be the prey. Alertness. I suppose that's how I could have avoided this ordeal."

"An excellent start. Now let's change focus. Which part of your experience rattled you the most?" Athennit asked Ribbit.

"Having felt like a failure—one who fainted on death's breath—I know that I became the talk of the pond. It wounded my ego, my very amphibianhood. My feelings overwhelmed me. I know my name is rolling off everyone's tongue."

"You know?!" Phobi, unable to contain herself, let out a single, unintentional laugh escape her mouth. "Ha, you sound like the Amphibian-Who-Knew-Everything."

"Phooooobi!" Athennit reprimanded gently, knowing she did not harbor any ill intentions.

"I am sorry," Phobi swiftly apologized.

Athennit turned her attention back to Ribbit. "Let's take one step back. One of life's most crucial lessons is this: feelings are not facts. Neither are our thoughts."

Here you go again. Another cheap attempt to nullify me. How am I not fact? Fact itself I may be not, but all I say and suggest is based on facts! I read bodily reactions, I scan what the innards are saying, and I give it a name, a voice. How can it not be fact if the entrails are feeling it?

"But they feel so real. They truly represent how I feel," Ribbit insisted.

"Yet they remain non-facts nonetheless."

“How so? I just can’t see it.”

“Let’s dissect one of your initial comments.” (As she said ‘dissect,’ both Phobi and Ribbit visibly cringed. For some inexplicable reason, amphibians recoil at this word.)

“You said you knew everyone was speaking about you. How could you know this?”

“That is what amphibians do when another amphibian fails,” Ribbit replied in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Who does this?”

“I do,” Ribbit admitted.

“Ah. You really have no way of truly knowing what others are thinking. What if they are indeed discussing you but from a place of concern and compassion?”

“Well …” Ribbit faltered.

“Our brains were designed to jump to conclusions, to complete the story, to create alternative explanations for the unknown,” Athennit explained. “Objectively speaking, you cannot know what goes through the minds of others.”

“And after our visit to the Amphibian-Who-Knew-Everything, this should be clear by now,” Phobi added in a snarky tone.

“Phoooobi,” Athennit intervened. “But now I digress. This is just one out of what I call thinking errors.⁹ Understanding our nature also means comprehending the nature of our minds. And the fundamental nature of our minds is that they create thoughts, thoughts inform emotions, and emotions inform our overall sense of being and our actions. In creating thoughts, our minds produce a cacophony.”

“Fancy words again,” Ribbit thought.

Noting Ribbit’s expression, she backtracked, “It’s a mixture of embroiled thoughts. While those thoughts may seem valid, they are just that—thoughts. And our thoughts are prone to errors. Thoughts are interpretations and predictions, and as most predictions and interpretations, they are prone to error and, in fact, often wrong.

“But before we delve into it, I have an assignment for you. Here are some bamboo strips. I want you to write down your thoughts on them. One thought per bamboo strip. We will resume our discussions tomorrow.”

“Any thought? For instance, ‘I am hungry and wish I could eat ...’” Ribbit began.

“No, not that kind of thought. I want you to consider and record the thoughts that dominate your mind about the incident with Titana, thoughts that bother you and keep you up during your daylight slumber.”

With that she dismissed them until the next evening. Before sending them off, Athennit emphasized the importance of a good day’s sleep to tackle challenges with a mind as fresh as a spring evening.

THINKING ERRORS

Talk back to the thought, scrutinize it, test its real validity. Don't take anything for granted.

*A*fter settling into their quarters and enjoying a nutritious meal, Phobi and Ribbit set to work on their assignment.

“Alright, Ribbit, let’s do this,” Phobi encouraged him.

“I don’t know where to start,” he replied, his voice uncertain.

“I have an idea. You share your thoughts, and I will write them down. Remember our conversation right after the incident, when I found you intoxicated with beetle juice?”

Ribbit started thinking out loud, and Phobi captured every word. Each thought Ribbit voiced, Phobi dutifully recorded. The thoughts flowed so abundantly that the bamboo strips they had were quickly filled.

“I am a loser.”

“I am weak.”

“I will never amount to anything.”

“If it happened once, it will happen again, but next time I won’t have a way out.”

“I always knew there was no future for me.”

“What is the point of it all?”

“Of course, this would only happen to me.”

“Remember you mentioned something about hiding and never getting out again?” Phobi prompted gently.

“Yes, it’s too dangerous out there. I will stick to the comfort of my den.”

“Oh, and you were really upset about what you thought others were saying about you,” Phobi recalled.

“Yes, they were probably like ‘Look at this loser who’s only alive because he fainted; he didn’t have the dignity to fight back.’”

“Oh, that’s a good one,” Phobi said, recording it with enthusiasm. “And what about the comments you made about your contribution to the amphibian race?”

“Yes, I am a disgrace to Amphibianhood. I don’t deserve to be here,” Ribbit admitted, his voice barely above a whisper.

“You spoke a lot about your feelings. How did you feel and what were your thoughts behind those feelings?” Phobi prompted.

“I felt miserable; I felt like a failure, like I had failed my ancestors and future generations. By fainting, I felt weak.”

On a roll, Ribbit continued, “Here are some more thoughts: Nothing ever goes right. Maybe I don’t belong here. I knew this was going to happen to me one day. My fate has been sealed. But you know, Phobi, what dominates my mind is that I should have jumped. I should have sensed it coming, and I didn’t.”

“Oh, this is profound,” said Phobi. “Let me write it down.”

“I should have known. Why didn’t I do something about it? I must be more alert. I should have hopped with all my might.”

The night passed swiftly, and as dawn approached, they decided to catch some sleep, hoping to feel fresh by dusk.

As early dusk settled, they hopped to Athennit’s leaf, both carrying bamboo strips. Athennit did her best to conceal her surprise at the sheer number of strips. She calmly picked them up and spread them over her leaf.

Working in near silence, she moved the bamboo strips around, only uttering occasional sounds and one-word observations: “Uhm,” “Interesting,” “Ah.” For a good thirty amphibian minutes, she sorted through Ribbit’s thoughts. Finally, she looked up and asked, “How does it feel, Ribbit?”

“They are all there, as you asked. These are the thoughts that swirl through my mind, and they are as real as can be.”

“You’ve done excellent work. What I’ve done here is organize these thoughts into common thinking errors. It may not be entirely clear at this point what each thought represents, but I am confident that by the end of this exercise you will realize that although they may seem real, they aren’t facts.”

“This exercise is called labeling,” she continued. “Labeling, I should add, needs to be done carefully. Labeling is making the unnamed named, the unknown known. Labeling allows us to identify the object of analysis.”

Ribbit was silently hoping for one of those “in other words” moments, and sure enough, Athennit obliged:

“In other words, if you have an illness, correctly labeling the illness allows us to treat it. Or if you have a certain unlabeled emotion,

identifying the emotion helps us lower the emotional temperature inside our minds. We will be labeling your thoughts, Ribbit. By doing so, we are qualifying what type of thoughts they are.”

Ribbit, intrigued, asked, “What about the negative aspects of labeling?”

Athennit nodded. “That’s precisely the kind of labeling I want you to avoid, and many of your thoughts fall under this category. Let’s examine the bamboo strips that exemplify what I mean. For example, see these bamboo strips here … ‘I am a loser,’ ‘I am weak,’ ‘I am a disgrace.’

“These are all-encompassing, blank statement labels that you’re using to negatively describe yourself. You are not ‘a loser’; you are an amphibian. No one can be a ‘loser’ in everything they do. We lose, we win. And that one event that has happened to you, although you may not have liked the outcome, does not qualify you as a loser or as weak. Reflect on the times when you were not any of these things; think of the occasions when you overcame obstacles.”

“There aren’t many to be quite frank,” Ribbit replied.

“Still, that doesn’t make you a loser. And about being weak, consider that in a world where the fittest survive, you have come a long way. Consider the millions of tadpoles who never became two-legged and the two-legged who never reached four legs. Perspective, Ribbit. Perspective.

“These labels are generalizations that don’t fully capture the complexity of existence, yet we apply them as if they did. They’re not very helpful, and if you believe words have power, they have a very lasting effect on our self-perception.”

“Drop the labels!” Phobi exclaimed enthusiastically.

“Label your thoughts and your emotions so you can sort them out; don’t label yourself.”

“Phobi,” Athennit continued, “choose a bamboo strip.”

“Hmm, let me see,” Phobi mused. “I like this one: ‘I don’t deserve being here.’”

“Quite dramatic,” Ribbit commented with a hint of self-deprecation.

“Yes, and so are all the other strips in this bundle: ‘Nothing ever goes right,’ ‘I will never amount to anything,’ ‘I have failed my ancestors and future generations.’ This thinking error is called *catastrophization*—the tendency to blow things out of proportion or exaggerate the importance of things to the extreme. The good news is that you’re not alone as most of us catastrophize.

“Talk back to the thought, scrutinize it, test its real validity. Don’t take anything for granted. Let’s take ‘nothing goes right in my life.’ You are breathing; you have Phobi as a friend; you are young, energetic, and, after the incident, still alive! Isn’t that something gone right?!”

And you are at it again! Calling me an error?! Yes, I may have raised my voice, overreacted, spoken passionately here and there, but that was all for the greater good. Have I not prompted Ribbit to listen to your words of wisdom? And for what? To be nullified? Now insinuating that I overblow matters out of proportion! Ribbit, be careful with what you hear. I am your consciousness, fruit of millions of

years of evolutionary process to keep you alert, the mechanism that anticipates and helps you react to danger. I am your survival!

“I failed my ancestors and future generations.’ How can we dissect this one?”

“Uhhhh. That horrid word again!” Ribbit hesitated.

Sensing the struggle, Phobi stepped in: “Amphibians are eaten by boas every day; amphibians faint every day. As for future generations, it’s impossible to anticipate what Ribbit’s legacy will be and how he will be spoken of. He’s young and with much ahead of him, much to contribute; perhaps poems will be written about him, songs sung. Regarding past generations, some are not among us because they were eaten by snakes or owls or humanoids, so who are they to judge!?”

“I like where this is going,” Athennit said with enthusiasm. “Things happen to amphibians every day, yet life goes on. Inconvenient, undoubtedly—but the end of the world? Far from it. Let’s look at a couple of other errors. Using words like ‘nothing,’ ‘everything,’ ‘always,’ ‘never’ are typical of the thinking error called *Overgeneralizations*. ‘Nothing goes right,’ ‘everything goes wrong’ ... again, these thoughts are just not true. You went on an exciting journey with Mosqui and Phobi in which you were exposed to the elements of nature, and you are here now, safe. So, some things do go right. This error is also called *Negative Filtering* or focusing on the negative aspects of a situation while discounting any positives. Pay attention to the things that do go right and cherish them. Be cognizant that we have a filter that focuses on

the negative and try to see beyond the filter. Look for the positive, and you shall find it.”

“I get it, I think,” Ribbit replied thoughtfully. “Not everything goes wrong in my life. In fact, I liked my life before the incident.” But eager to shift the conversation, Ribbit pointed to another pile with his thoughts about what others thought of him. Convinced that amphibians spoke ill of him, he dared to know what the *error* in this thinking could possibly be.

“Let’s examine them,” Athennit said, reaching for the pile Ribbit had indicated. “Oh, there’s a lot of good material here for us to work with.”

“Thinking errors you mean?”

“Indeed. Let’s see: ‘Look at this loser,’ ‘only alive because he fainted,’ ‘deprived of the ability to fight back.’ How do you know these things were actually said?”

Before she could continue, Ribbit jumped in, “Well, I just kno—”

“You don’t need to explain yourself,” Athennit interrupted, “but the reality is that you truly cannot know what is in others’ minds. This thinking error is called *Jumping to Conclusions*, and this specific type is known as *Mind Reading*.”

“I love to mind-read,” Phobi chimed in. “When I was younger, my friends and I would play this game where we had to guess what other amphibians were thinking as we observed them going about their business.”

“That is delightful tadpole play, but as we mature, jumping to conclusions about what others are thinking can be emotionally crippling. My suggestion is simple: DON’T DO IT. Nothing is

more prone to error or more unproductive. Whatever you imagine is just a guess, not a fact. Unless you ask the thinker directly, you simply can't know what's going on in their minds."

Insult added to injury. Jumping to conclusion is what you call it, uhm? I call it anticipating challenges and helping avoid them. If this is not a concerted effort to quiet me, then what is it?

"And even if they are thinking the things we imagine, they could be engaging in thinking errors themselves," Phobi suggested.

Athennit's eyes lit with approval. 'Excellent observation. I have never considered it from that angle. They could be engaging in overgeneralizations and jumping to conclusions themselves. Even when we are right, we are oblivious to the degree and intensity of their thoughts and their true feelings about us."

"Phobi," Ribbit asked hesitantly, "did you never think ill of me when the incident happened? What about the others? Did you not hear them speaking ill of me?"

"Me? Never. In fact, just the opposite. I thought about how fortunate you were. And others? Amphibians generally hoped that they never have to encounter what you have, and some have even suggested you may have special powers because amphibians don't escape the grip of Titana."

"Rarara, special ... that is funny. Special pow—"

"You see, that is one type of *Jumping to Conclusions*. The other type is *Fortune Telling*. Thoughts like 'I know my fate has been sealed.' You believe your prediction is an already established fact,

that you know how things will end up. Again, we don't. Fate is up to Fortune and Mother Nature. You may think to yourself that Fortune is always against or for you (a sign of overgeneralization), but does not Fortune change the course of her mermaid tail at her will at any time on anyone? So how can you really know?

"Now you have the tools to correct thinking errors. Identify the feeling, the thought behind the feeling, isolate the thought, label the thought, challenge the thought."

"If I may make a qualifying statement, during our conversation last night, I thought you were quite harsh on yourself, saying that you should have done this and that during the night of the attack," added Phobi.

"I appreciate you raising this point," Athennit said, reaching for a cluster of bamboo strips containing 'should' statements. "We've skipped this pile. This cognitive distortion is called the *Should Statement*. Consider how it feels when you tell someone they've done wrong or fallen short of a standard."

"I try not to speak to amphibians like that," Phobi shared. "Telling them what they 'should' or 'must' do feels authoritarian and overbearing. Half the time, I can't even act the way I know I should. Who am I to tell them how to behave? When amphibians tell me that I should or ought to act in certain ways, I feel guilty."

Stop! Enough! Since when did having high standards become a crime? My 'must' statements are simply guidance for a lost soul, a map for the lost

*wanderer. And now you condemn me for wanting
to help the helpless?*

“Thank you.” Athennit nodded. “Indeed, we hesitate being authoritarian with others, yet we have no qualms about being authoritarian with ourselves. We embark on a dark guilt trip aimed inward. We pride ourselves on having high standards, but when we punish, belittle, or scold ourselves for not meeting self-imposed standards that are almost impossible to reach to begin with, how does that help us? The sense of guilt this creates is numbing. And guilt is that viper that torments you night in and night out. Amphibians, be gentle with yourselves. Be kind.”

She paused, allowing her words to sink in. With a soft smile, she announced, “All right, amphibians, it’s getting late. Let’s take a walk.”

AWESTRUCK

*Take a moment every day to reflect on
the wonders of life and living.*

While Athennit was overtaken by excitement for having reached her favorite part of the exercises, Ribbit was confused, wishing they be dismissed for the night. A midnight walk was Ribbit's definition of a nightmare. Trying to show bravado, he accepted the offer without hesitation, much to Phobi's surprise. They followed Athennit along a path never traveled before, teeming with nocturnal creatures.

“Walk and observe,” Athennit instructed them, “but observe with the eye of a child, who absorbs with innocence the wonders of the world.”

Ribbit walked the path with his recently acquired disinterest in things. His mind wandered, more concerned with the potential dangers lurking in the shadows than the beauty around him.

As they made a turn, they encountered a clearing with millions of tiny points of flickering lights dancing in the skies. Fireflies, their green bioluminescence transforming the forest into a

living constellation, hovered all around them. Phobi gasped in awe, her breath stolen by the beauty of the scene unfolding before her eyes.

Athennit gently cupped one in her webbed hands, watching as the tiny creature crawled up her arm, blinking on and off. “The miracle of life,” Athennit mused. “Through a biochemical process, this tiny insect produces its own light, flashing it to attract partners.

“This can’t possibly be the creation of the same Mother Nature depicted by the Sculptor’s statue,” Phobi said in disbelief.

“And yet it is! The mystery and duality of Mother Nature! If you like this, come—for a bioluminescent wonder, you must see this.”

She led them to a nearby cave where glowworms hung from the ceiling, casting a soft glow through their silky and sticky threads that illuminated the entire entrance of the cave.



“This is magical!” Phobi exclaimed as she touched one of the thousands luminous threads dangling from above. “I’ve never seen anything like this!”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Athennit cautioned. “Glow-worm larvae spew these threads from their mouths, but you’ll be grossed out to learn what they’re made of.”

“Nothing shocks me anymore,” Ribbit replied, his voice flat.

“Urine,” Athennit revealed with a grin.

“That constitutes a shocker,” Ribbit said, showing interest that had been hidden.

“The bioluminescence attracts insects, which get trapped in these sticky threads and are then consumed by the worms. Nature, in all its fascinating ingenuity,” Athennit concluded.

As they spent minutes observing this natural spectacle, survival anxiety, typical of lower-in-the-food-chain creatures, kicked in, and Athennit warned them, “Beware now, as this is the territory of the great owl, and we are on its menu.”

Ribbit wondered, indignantly, why she would expose them to danger?

Sensing his fear, Athennit quickly explained, “I want you to observe one of the most fascinating creatures in the animal kingdom. Look up—there is her nest. She defies the law of gravity with what is considered one of the smoothest flights in the avian world. But that’s not my point of fascination—it’s her eyes. Owls possess one of the most developed visions in the animal world. They spot prey from hundreds of amphibian hops away in the dark!”

“How does she see so well?” Phobi asked, intrigued.

“Owls are endowed with extremely large eyes compared to their body size. Their retinas are packed with cells specialized for detecting light and movement. The pupils are much larger than those of most creatures, allowing more light to enter, a true evolutionary marvel. Have you ever pondered over the miracle of vision?” Athennit asked.

“Not really, but I see where you’re going,” Ribbit responded.

“Through physical and biochemical processes, the eye captures light from objects. The light travels through the eyes. It is transformed into impulses which are sent to the brain to be interpreted, creating sharp representation of the world around us. The miracle of vision is one of the most awe-inspiring anatomical phenomena in the animal kingdom.”

“I’ve always been fascinated by the heart as well,” Phobi interjected.

“Choose any part of amphibian anatomy, and you will find awe,” Athennit agreed. “The heart is a marvel, for sure. There’s a small shallow pond a couple of hops from here where amphibians raise their spawn. Let’s check it out!”

As they approached the nursery, Ribbit noticed the bright moonlight illuminated the fertilized eggs.

“Look at the movement inside the spawn,” Athennit said softly. “Cells multiply at an astonishing rate. Soon, these cells will specialize and form a self-beating heart. The involuntary contractions of the heart will pump oxygen to every organ, making life possible.”

Phobi’s eyes widened with wonder. “It’s indeed mind-boggling to think about it … cells coming together, creating life!”

Ribbit looked over his shoulder, worried about what might come from behind.

“Some believe this splendor is the work of a creator. Others believe it’s evolution.”

“What do you believe?” Phobi asked curiously.

“Regardless, it’s all a miracle,” Athennit replied. “The body is a system of intricate designs, each running specific functions—from cell formation to reproduction; others designed to inhale oxygen, absorbing it into the blood stream and transporting it to cells throughout the body; a system designed to digest food and break it down into life-dependent nutrients; a system designed to pump the same blood carrying the processed oxygen and nutrients; and other systems designed to clean the blood and liberate it from toxins.”

“When you put it this way, it does sound awe-inspiring,” Ribbit admitted.

“And that’s without counting the behavioral diversity of species,” Athennit noted.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Think of the leaf moth, which is not part of our menu due to its incredible mimicry. Or the fire ants, creating living rafts by linking their legs and jaws during floods, saving their colonies from certain death. Then there’s the altruism of bats, sharing blood with those in their colony who fail to find food. Even the territorial behaviors of birds and mammals have their fascinating intricacies. So, tell me, Ribbit, when you think of the world beyond your lagoon, what comes to mind?”

Ribbit paused, rehearing an answer in his head, “I had never left my lagoon until the incident, so I knew little about the world.

But each night, as I wait at the water's edge for mosquitoes, I'm mesmerized by the curtain of blinking lights that traverse the sky."

"Stars!" Athennit said with a smile.

"Yes, and sometimes, I see a few falling from the sky, leaving a shining tail trailing their paths."

"Falling stars."

"Yes, and the white stroke across the sky?"

"The Milky Way. It's a collection of millions of stars that form one of the many arms of our galaxy. When you think of the Milky Way, it puts things into perspective—it reminds us how small we are. We're just a tiny, tiny speck in this vast cosmic creation. Some even go as far as saying we live in a floating ball in an ever-expanding universe," Athennit said with a chuckle. "But of course this is a ridiculous assertion."

"The comment that we are a tiny speck ... what does that say about us?" Phobi asked.

"It humbles even the most self-centered minds," Athennit reflected.

She then added, "This realization excites me. To be a living, contributing part of this awe-inspiring universe is nothing short of miraculous. So, here's an exercise for both of you—take a moment every day to reflect on the wonders of life and living. We so far have touched on nature, our bodies, and our smallness. But you can also focus on the virtuous actions of amphibians—admiring their courage, justice, altruism, selflessness, temperance, and excellence. Realize that these virtues flow in our own blood. Or contemplate on amphibians' creations—our intelligence and industriousness to transform the world around us."

Suddenly, Ribbit's internal voice asserted itself in a last attempt to demonstrate it had not been deemed useless ... "I'm really enjoying this conversation, but it's getting late, and that's when creatures come out to feed. Should we be so exposed?"

Athennit agreed it was time to rest for the day, reminding them to get a good day's sleep for a night filled with activities.

THE FINAL ENCOUNTER

They kept it close as a reminder of life's passing and transient nature—a symbol that nothing is constant; all is temporary.

Ribbit and Phobi hopped to their den. They positioned themselves on the edge of the lagoon to catch a few mosquitoes for dinner. As night deepened, Phobi suggested to Ribbit that they take a calm swim to ease their minds.

Instinctively, Ribbit rejected the idea.

“Label,” Phobi insisted.

And so Ribbit did. He immediately bracketed the thoughts that had led to his rejection and labeled them, realizing that his thoughts were full of thinking errors; he was catastrophizing, negative filtering, and fortune telling. He took a moment to reframe them, and then they both went for a swim.

“How is this whole process working for you, Ribbit?” Phobi asked, floating on her back with arms crossed behind her head, her legs stroking the water.

“I feel relieved,” Ribbit replied thoughtfully, “like a weight has been lifted from my chest. There’s new life inside me. The thoughts

still rush through my mind, but now I'm able to capture and label them. When you invited me to swim, my mind immediately went into overdrive: 'Swim?!" Swimming means exposure. Exposure means viper attacks. But I was able to interrupt my thinking, realizing I was catastrophizing a simple invitation to go for a swim. Amphibians go on swims every night in lagoons across the vast landscape ... Perspective, like Athennit says. I calmed down. And here I am."

I see it. Athennit and Biggit have reached their goal at last by redeeming me useless. No one wants to be where one is not welcome. I, too, have dignity. I take my leave.

"So glad to hear it," Phobi said warmly. "Athennit is quite something, isn't she?"

"Oh, she is! Sometimes I can't focus on what she is saying."

"Oh no, dazzled by Athennit?" Phobi teased.

"Stop! It's nothing like that. But you can agree with me that it is difficult to look at her and not feel something. She has this aura about her."

"Ribbit, this is the first time in a long time I've heard you speak like that. Your heart beats again!"

"Enough! It's getting late. We should go back. Thank you for this, for the swim, I mean. I needed it."

They swam to the edge of the lagoon and returned to their dens to rest.

Alone in his den, Ribbit reflected on how the incident with Titana had transformed his life and plunged him into darkness, and now it was offering him a new, fresh perspective. A smile played across his face as he drifted into deep sleep.

The following evening, Athennit prepared for her final meeting with Phobi and Ribbit. She held a memento for each of them behind her back. She asked them both to close their eyes. Once they did, she placed the mementos in front of them and said, “Okay, so soon you will be going back to your normal lives. I have a small gift for you. You can now open your eyes.”

Ribbit let out a piercing scream and leapt atop Phobi. “Ahhhhh, what is this? Is this a bad joke?”

“No, Ribbit,” Athennit replied calmly. “Why would I joke about this?”

“Is this an amphibian skull?” Ribbit asked in disbelief.

“Yes,” Athennit confirmed. “This is what our ancestors called a Memento Mori. They kept it close as a reminder of life’s passing and transient nature, a symbol that nothing is constant. All is temporary. I want you to carry this with you or place it somewhere meaningful to remind you to reflect on our fleeting existence and the natural progression of our physical bodies and minds.”

“Oh,” Phobi murmured, “the 102-year-old amphibian gave a sobering lesson on that.”

“Indeed! Amphibians often live with little regard for how their choices and actions impact their future, treating their future selves as strangers. We, and we alone, are stewards of our future selves.

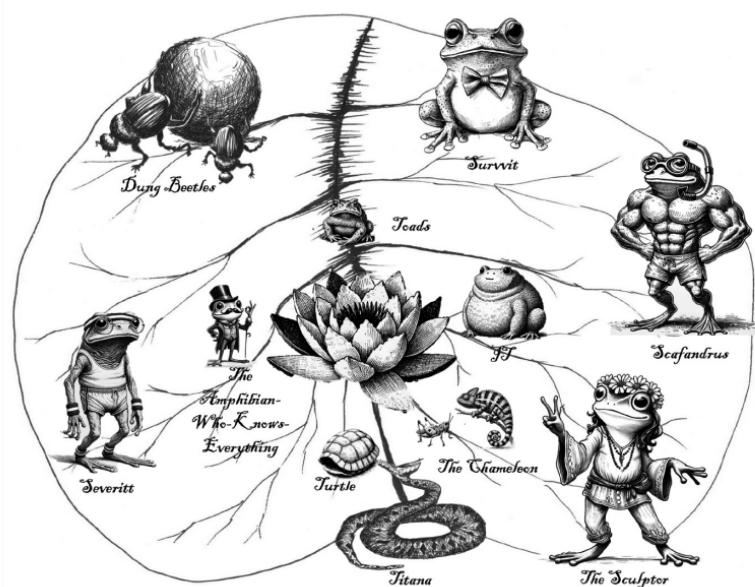
“The Memento Mori has deviated our attention; let’s refocus.

“I wanted to touch upon some crucial concepts we’ve learned:

“First, control the things you can control—our actions. We can strive to become better amphibians, cultivating virtues like courage, justice, temperance, and wisdom. Second, the blockers of life, primarily ignorance, are the greatest evil-plaguing amphibians. This journey was an opportunity to open your minds to the realities of life. Life is a dialectical journey—life is joy, life is suffering, and everything in between. It is never one or the other; it’s often one followed inevitably by the other or coexisting with the other. And don’t forget that no good lasts forever, and no evil is eternal.

“Finally, live with a sense of duty and purpose. Think dung beetles. By serving their purpose, they transcend the hardship of their task. Reframe your struggles, transform the meaning of hardship, and find inspiration in difficulty. It’s not what happens to you, but what you do with what happens to you.”

As Athennit spoke, Ribbit noticed something curious—the lily pad with the wheel of life seemed to quiver. To his surprise, the design had reshuffled. At the core of the wheel, a lily pad flower was now blossoming.



Athennit's final words resonated deeply with Ribbit—finding purpose and a sense of duty by helping others diminish the hardships of life. Like a flash of light, an idea struck Ribbit, one that could potentially help other amphibians avoid his plight.

But that is a whole other story ...

Endnotes

- 1 – Inspired by the work of Lourens Minnema and Simon Critchley
- 2 – Inspired by Boethius's The Consolations of Philosophy
- 3 – Inspired by Jean Paul Satre
- 4 – Inspired by lectures by Tenzin Palmo
- 5 – Inspired by the work of Nassim Taleb
- 6 – Inspired by the work of Seneca
- 7 – Inspired by Immunity to Change by Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey
- 8 – Inspired by Marcus Aurelius's Meditations
- 9 – Inspired by the work of Aaron Beck and David D. Burns