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How the Natural World Holds Together

The funeral ends in reception, ends in pastas slumped in oily vinaigrettes. Mourners gone, the house all but empty. He finds his sons upstairs in their bedroom, cracks open the door and feels cool air streaming from inside. The father thinks of sunken caves, of underwater exploration. The coolness causes him to shiver.

Do we want to talk about it? he asks, nose and mouth pressed to the crack. Would that help?

Son number one watches a game show blaring noiselessly on the muted television. Son number two has burrowed beneath his bedcovers. Neither responds.

Hello, the father says, inching the door open, anybody in here?

Are we in trouble? asks son number two from beneath the covers. His brother does not look away from the television.

Of course not, coos the father, his tone sweet, a friar talking to woodland things. No one’s mad at you. Now come on out.

On nights when their mother worked late, the father invented bedtime stories featuring bizarre forest creatures: elk with beautifully feathered antlers, fish that leapt into trees to catch their prey, burrowing birds that lived in underground cities like ants. Before long he’d invented a zoological kingdom all his own. Usually the stories ended with one creature devouring another, to which his sons feigned repulsion. Then the father would announce, his voice thick with grandiloquence: But that’s how the natural world holds together. Soon the sight of their mother entering the room with book in hand prompted the boys to shout, We want to know how the natural world holds together! They’ll fail biology one day because of you, she told the father, whose imagination wasn’t particularly remarkable: he worked in an opaquely glassed building overlooking a manmade pond. They give you all the attention in the world, the father replied. Can’t you give me these twenty minutes? In response she threatened: Don’t make me feel like the tedious one.

One afternoon son number two, who’d begun to keep glass tanks stocked with reptiles and amphibians, summoned the father to his bedroom. Watch, the boy said, plucking a frog from a plastic bucket on the floor, dropping the frog into a tank containing a fat snake. The snake immediately struck the frog, twice, before swallowing it whole. Watch, the boy said again. The snake struck the second frog and swallowed. Watch, the boy said again. Enough, said the father. Why are you doing that? To which the boy frowned and replied, It’s how the natural world holds
together. Well, your mother wouldn’t like it, the father said. Mom is boring, the boy responded. A slight smile spread across the father’s face as he knelt to watch his son drop another frog into the tank.

Welcome, thank you for coming, he greeted mourners at the door. She would have been so happy to see you here. The guests tried not to stare, his body trembling like a fledgling deer overwhelmed by the sounds of the forest. In the living room he presented a tray of desserts, claiming that carrot cake with cream cheese frosting had been her favorite. I made them myself, he announced. Inexplicably, the guests applauded.

A neighbor from down the street, a ruddy-faced man sitting on the piano bench, cleared his throat and began to speak: Just last week I heard an alarm going off down the block. It was the middle of the day, one of those quiet afternoons when it seems the entire place is deserted. I walked down the street and saw her furiously punching codes into the box. When she finally got it right and turned and saw me there, she said, I can’t believe I forgot my own birth date. See, that’s the security code, the man said, his eyes watering. He said, That was the last time I saw her.

Then the guests gathered around the piano bench, squeezing his shoulders. The father, who was often annoyed that this loud man had gotten on so well with his wife—they took evening walks around the block several times a week—said, Well, thanks, Frank. Now everyone knows our security code.

Maybe it would be nice, someone announced, if we shared a few stories like Frank has done. So they moved the gathering to the backyard deck, beyond where children leapt raucously from treehouse to trampoline. Has anyone seen my sons? the father asked the guests. The ruddy-faced neighbor leaned against the deck railing and shouted at the kids: Someone has died. Can’t you idiots behave? Then he began to weep. The father imagined leaping forward, shoving the man over the railing, the man’s skull smashing on the rocks below.

While the adults talked outside, son number one and son number two stole the blender from the impromptu bar in the dining room and retreated to their bedroom. Several minutes later, they returned the blender unnoticed.

Outside, one of the mother’s friends from college pointed at the father. The first time she brought you around we all wondered what she’d gotten herself into. The woman beamed at the guests. Listen to this one. We’d taken a camping trip to the North Shore and here was this new boyfriend she’d been going on and on about for months. And what do you know, he brought salmon to cook—salmon, in the heart of bear country.

The father’s eyes brightened; he smiled as the adults began to chuckle. Sure enough, the woman continued, middle of the night, three or four bears show up, start rooting through our campsite. These were small bears—a couple cubs even—but bears nonetheless, and you don’t want to take any chances with bears. All the while, we’re hiding in our tents, listening to her chew him out for forgetting the pocketknife, our only line of defense, for locking the pocketknife in the
glove compartment. Damn it, she kept saying, you’re going to get my friends killed. Shut up, we wanted to yell. The bears will hear you. So much for first impressions!

The guests erupted with mirth, only slightly embellished for the sake of the father, several clapping their hands or reaching over to slap his thigh. The ruddy-faced neighbor pitched back his head and gargled with laughter. Never cook salmon in bear territory, he announced. Everyone knows that.

Downstairs they huddle at the far crook of the couch, an L-shaped chunk of furniture consuming most of the living room. Before, the entire family would stretch across the couch, head to toe, toe to head; now, its immensity seems absurd. I’ve already called the school, the father explains. You can stay home all week. We’ll go through your mother’s stuff. I want to go to school, son number one says. You shouldn’t go to school, the father says. Why? the boy asks. That’s not what people do, replies the father. What do people do? asks son number two. They grieve, replies the father. Together. Our friends are at school, son number one says. I’m your friend too, says the father. You’re our father, says son number one. Forget about school for now, says the father. Why don’t I tell you a story, it’s been weeks since I told you a story. I don’t want a story, says son number two. Let him tell a story, his brother replies. It’ll make him feel better.

Now it’s your turn, the guests said. The father shook his head. Tell us a story, they urged—we’re preserving her memory. Nothing comes to mind, the father said. How about Mexico, someone said. Tell us something from the trip. I don’t know, replied the father, clearing his throat. With her passing so soon afterwards, it seems inappropriate…. But she was looking forward to it so much, said one of the mother’s friends. It must seem nice now that you had that final trip together.

It had been her idea, the father said. Cozumel is where everyone goes these days, she kept saying, it’s ranked higher than all the other tourist destinations. The funny thing is the boys were against the trip at first. What other tourist destinations? they asked her. She had no idea, so she made something up: Acapuerto. Where’s that? I teased, trying to catch her in the lie. I didn’t understand why we had to go so far just so the boys could get sunburned. But she was resilient, claiming we never take them anywhere fun. Which isn’t true—they loved Pennsylvania, they loved the coal mine tour. Plus, Pennsylvania’s cheaper and close to their grandmother’s. But she wouldn’t let it go—we’re going to Mexico, she insisted. Eventually, she pried them with snorkeling, with the promise of iguanas and sea turtles.

By now several of the guests glanced apprehensively at one another. The father, staring at the deck, continued: Of course, snorkeling sealed the deal for the boys. And I suppose we did see some interesting stuff: there was a column of silver fish, hundreds if not thousands of fish all
swirling together. The boys noticed first. Before long we saw there was something else inside the column—a pink, milky froth glinting with bits of silvery flesh. Several fish, long and thin as rifles, emerged, turned, darted back into the column. It scattered in a coordinated flash so that, for a moment, just the blood remained. Then it re-formed and the predators shot back in to continue the killing. You can imagine how wild the boys went over that, the father said. Afterwards, she really played it up, really wanted to show me how great they thought her idea had been. We can do this all week, she kept saying, we can go again tomorrow if you two would like. Really, the father said, shrugging his shoulders, it was nothing more than safety in numbers, all those fish swirling together. One of the most common strategies in the animal kingdom. Nothing too exciting. But isn’t it funny, in hindsight? Or ironic, maybe it’s ironic—the boys all riled up, this fascination over death. With what’s happened, it all seems pretty irresponsible now…

The father looked up at them with hopeful, expectant eyes. Several of the guests shifted uncomfortably before realizing he expected laughter, which began in a trickle. Then their concurrence bubbled forth, they expressed sympathy—it was, they agreed, ironic, although how could she have known at the time? Behind them, in the dark, the children had progressed to a form of tag using tree branches to lash one another, and when the chatter had finally subsided, the father leaned forward and smiled at each member of the group, one at a time, before asking in a voice heavy with grief: Can any of you tell me what I’m supposed to do with my two boys?

Just then a guest returned from a trip to the restroom and announced that someone had placed several frogs in the daiquiri machine.

They are a foreign species to me, he said, leaning forward to tap the blender. The frogs, gulping at the air trapped beneath the blender lid, dipped down, clustered around the stainless steel blades. The father turned to the adults. Please, he said, I’m asking for whatever advice I can get. I realize how dearly they loved their mother.

The guests could only watch the frogs in the blender behind him. Finally someone spoke:

Have they begun to demonstrate remorse?
Yes, replied the father, I believe so.
Good. Have they cried?
Of course, replied the father.
Have they spoken with their friends about the tragedy?
I don’t feel comfortable allowing them to leave the house yet.

Have they spoken with you then?
We’ve pieced together a few observations, he said.
Have they eaten anything that you’ve prepared for them?

The question, which caused several of the guests to snicker, came from a woman claiming to be the mother’s roommate in college. I’m serious, the woman said before repeating her question. A few oven pizzas, the father replied. I’m not talking oven pizzas, the woman said, I’m talking food from scratch. I’ve tried, said the father, but the boys aren’t often hungry. They don’t
trust you, the woman said. They don’t yet believe you can adequately replace their mother, who was a wonderful woman. Several guests nodded. I think I understand, said the father. Tell me the proper way to proceed. Trust will only come with time, the woman replied. You must give them space and show them that you care. How? asked the father. You must allow them to consume you, she said. Your attention, your love, your money—you must give them everything you’ve got.

Meanwhile the ruddy-faced neighbor, disregarded by the guests thus far, had inched closer to the blender, fingers groping the legs of his pants. The woman continued: Be patient. You must allow your sons their mutiny. But you must also make sure they eat. They don’t like my cooking, said the father. Then lie to them, the woman said, tell them someone else made it.

Wait, shouted one of the guests. What’re you doing? Before they could stop him the man lunged at the blender, jammed the appliance’s MINCE button. With a crunch the contents turned a slurry brown. Several of the guests screamed. Then the blender continued whirring, a private, whining tornado. That blender was a gift to my wife, the father said to the ruddy-faced man, who sobbingly replied: You think you’re the only one upset? Now everyone’s upset. The adults stood in silence while overhead footsteps thumped across the hallway, down the stairs, through the living room. Son number one and son number two appeared in the doorway. We got you, they announced, pointing at the father. When they saw the rest of the adults, their eyes went wide.

Finally the woman, the mother’s college roommate, stepped forward and unplugged the blender. In the resulting silence several of the guests gave sickly groans while the boys stood looking both triumphant and terrified. Then they turned and ran, footsteps thundering up the stairs. Get back here, shouted the father but the woman grasped his hand. Wait, she said. This is exactly what I’m talking about. The father shook his head, tried to free his hand. That’s no way for boys to behave, he said. It’s sick. It’s disturbing and unnatural. They gave her that blender as a gift—I helped pick it out. The woman stroked his hand. It’s time to forget about things like that, she said.

The father turned to the guests. For the record, he said, they told me afterwards they’d have preferred a trip to their grandmother’s. It’s too hot in Mexico, they said. He laughed. What are you talking about? asked the ruddy-faced man. You should be grieving, you son of a bitch. But I am, said the father. Then a peculiar smile distorted his face. He began to blink rapidly. His sons could be heard thumping about overhead. As if drunk, as if seeing the guests there for the first time, he said, Who are you people anyway?

Eat, he says, urging them to sample the copious foods. The boys approach the dining room tentatively, eyeing the blender as if its mucky contents harbors contagious disease. They return to the couch carrying plates heavy with leftovers, and when they push the food about without eating, the father says, It’s okay, I’m not upset. It was a good gag. He fakes a laugh. You got that man good. Now please, eat this food our friends were kind enough to provide. A pleasure spreads through his gut as they spoon into their mouths the potato salad he made from scratch that morning, before the funeral. It’s good, isn’t it? he asks. Wasn’t it nice of our friends to bring all
this food? Don’t worry, he tells them. In a little while we’ll all feel normal again. The important thing is that you know I love you. Then, feeling alleviated, giddy almost, his lips moving silently, hungry for words, he says, Do you love me?
Author Notes

Jeff Frawley recently received an M.F.A. in fiction at New Mexico State University, where he now teaches writing. His fiction has appeared in Ellipsis and Timberline magazines. He was recently awarded a Fulbright scholarship to Hungary, where he will research and work on a novel.

About the Work

Like most of the stories I’ve written, this one blossomed from an image—a frog stuck, for some inexplicable reason, inside a common yet potentially dangerous kitchen appliance—rather than a situation or plot; and like most of my stories, this one was significantly reduced in size from one draft to the next, from forty pages down to ten. I often long to be the type of writer who possesses a full sense of story before sitting down to write, but I suppose I have, over time, learned to go with what works for me. The obvious question when considering the image that spawned this story was, So how did the frog get inside the blender? Over several drafts I found myself intrigued by and committed to the idea of two young brothers who collect reptiles and amphibians now jeopardizing the wellbeing of these exotic pets—an act of “playing God” some might say—in a bizarre behavior that is equal parts mourning, attempting to cope with death, and seeking irrational revenge against their father. Once this complex situation had sprung from that image the story began, as the cliché goes, to write itself.

Or, not exactly. Only a few drafts before this, “How the Natural World Holds Together,” while also having a different title, was over forty pages in length. The characters had names, the narrator access to characters’ thoughts and emotions. Much of my writing process, because so many of my early drafts are loose, unsightly behemoths, involves hacking out unnecessary, frivolous material. It is interesting to me that oftentimes this cut material contains most of a story’s narrative interiority, along with scenes meant to teach the reader (or, more likely, me the writer) the “point” of the story. Once I succumbed to this slash-and-burn revision with “How the Natural World…” I began to understand and embrace the removed, objective, unflinching narrative stance from which this story is told. This narrative stance, I now see, is not so dissimilar from someone staring, “Godlike,” through the glass walls of a terrarium upon some more unfortunate, suffering creature whose behaviors the person watching can attempt to rationalize yet can never truly understand. After many, many drafts I now realize this story is very much concerned with, given an event as tumultuous as death in the family, the irony inherent in “playing God”—that is, offering explanations, extending clemency, affording for suffering—when wisdom and omniscience are in fact very far away.

And this is in essence is my writing process: image spawns character situation, spawns story, spawns revision towards narrative stance, spawns preliminary understanding of theme and “aboutness,” spawns more revision. Lots of spawning. Like frogs in a blender.