A Modern Plague in Mississippi

By: Morgan Lewis

There was a day in the not-quite-summer—before the sun boiled the thick air, before the school bell sung freedom, before the wasp battalion built its barricades in the corner of the splintered swingset—when the frogs came.

It was a quick invasion. I woke up one morning and they were here. Bounding, bouncing, bumping, breathing in every spare crevice. The neighborhood buzzed with their presence. My fingers itched to hold their compact bodies, to look them in the eye, to press into their bellies and feel their rhythmic breath.

These weren't my normal prey. The tree frogs that glowed green under the white siding by our front door, that had ballerina legs that extended muscular and long when they leapt through my netted fingers, suspended for a moment in midair. The slender lizards that scurried along the sidewalks, that had tails that grew back when I pulled a little too hard on them, that bit my earlobes softly and hung like exotic jewelry.

That was the year my mom told me to stop catching creatures because it wasn’t ladylike and I was going to get sick from the writhing pests.

These visitors were plainer things. Mud-colored, flat, and only the size of my fingernail. There must have been millions—and they all wanted to be caught. They leaped for attention when I stepped in the grass, four or five at a time like confetti. They wailed when they hopped on the fire ant mound. They rested, calm in the palm of my hand. Until they jumped.

I rallied the troops: the neighbor boy with sad eyes, my little sister, and my best friend who was Muslim. Little Sister would find the cages (big bowls, the ones we use for popcorn), Muslim Best Friend would collect the sustenance (sticks, some blades of grass), Sad Neighbor would grab the garden hose (frogs need water, right?), and I would capture the frogs.

That was the year the twin towers fell and I saw people jump like confetti from the skyscrapers.

I plucked the frogs one by one from the grass like raspberries from a bush, pinching their lurching bodies between two fingers, stuffing them into the slight opening in my other fist. They beat together against my sweaty palm, an attempt at a jailbreak. I carried the handful of amphibians to the big orange bowl where I let them drop into their kidmade habitat. Little Sister smashed the lid on tight, sealing their new home. Mom didn’t notice the missing bowl, the running hose, the children on a mission.

That was the year my dad spent months in Miami healing gunshot wounds in the gang members who terrorized the city.

Soon we were all harvesting the frogs, running back and forth to fill the bowls with our tiny prizes. When our captives revolted, scaling the sides of the bowls and jumping to freedom, we resorted to the lid. It's for their own good, we told ourselves, we can't cry over the casualties of the weaklings grasping the rim when the lid came crashing down. Some may be crushed along the way. We have more frogs to catch. We must catch them all. We divided up the houses and combed each front yard. For hours we waged war on the frogs, our prisoners and fatalities stacking higher by the minute.

That was the year my parents told me that Dad might have to go to war in Iraq to fight the Taliban.

Mom gasped at the sight of the popcorn bowl the next afternoon. We went out to defend our small ecosystem, but by then most of the frogs were dead anyway: corpses bloated and floating in the shallow pool of grimy water. We held our breath and mom retched as she poured the decay from the bowl into the ditch behind the fence. The rest of the frogs vanished from the premises within a week. Like the plagues of Egypt, the frogs were here and gone. Their forces never returned with the same vigor.

But that was the year my dad spent months in Miami, so my mom had to do everything herself. That was the year the twin towers fell, so I asked my Muslim Best Friend what the Taliban was and prayed that dad wouldn’t have to fight. That was the year my dad healed saved the lives of terrorists, but not the plane-flying kind. That was the year my mom gave birth to my little brother, so I stopped catching toads because that was his job now.