

## **Wearing the Skin of Dreams**

by Jack Phillips

Seldom do I remember my dreams and only fragments when I do, and for all the surreal juxtapositions commonly the stuff of dreams, mine are oddly ordinary. Even as a child, my dreams felt like a typical summer day, governed by local geography and populated by wild creatures of my waking acquaintance. So I was surprised at the reemergence when our nature-writing workshop leader jarred loose a dream-fragment that never would have survived for nearly sixty years if not for the morning event that followed. She bid us to write about an experience wherein nature and not-nature collided, wildness having broken into our domestic lives.

In a summer dream when I was around six or seven, a box turtle appeared in our driveway. This would have been only slightly out of the ordinary, as *Terrapene carolina* was occasional in my neighborhood woods. I was compelled upon waking—wearing pajamas and the film of a dream—to bolt out of the house to see if it were true. To my astonishment, in the very spot where my dream-turtle had appeared, was not a turtle, but an oversized toad. I fed her a cricket.

Early in life I came to believe in something true and wild beyond the schoolyard and the regularly-mowed lawn. I could find it boundlessly in nature to which dreams and other freedoms belong. Yet those dreams took me to places more familiar than exotic, beyond the outfield fence but not too far, with wild creatures not too strange, wandering the woods just on the other side of the creek. A dream could be a new path into those woods. I held this belief until I reached the age of knowing better, which I suspect has yet to arrive.

My mother always insisted that her children bathe before bed after a day of dirty adventures, which was almost every day. But there are some souvenirs that soap will not

scrub away, like bug bites, berry stains, pokes and prickles, and the residual smell of pond. The adhesive properties of amphibious slime endured for days. Under clean pajamas, the skin of freedom became the skin of my dreams.

Such was the case with daydreams as well. Even after school started, the skin of free afternoons and weekend safaris retained the smell of frogs and fish. With chin on fist or face in hands, the faintly-scented patina of semi-permanent slime helped me endure my classroom captivity. Thoreau wrote of the “slime and film of habitual life” as the obstacle to reconnecting with nature. But that depends on your habits and where you get your slime. The wildness within us, nourished by dreams and daydreams and dreamy summer days, is only and ever skin deep.

The morning after the workshop, I went to work wearing my habitual bug bites and carrying a notebook. My ecologist colleagues and I entered a steamy wood under the sentry of barking tree frogs. It smelled of young earth. Leopard frogs, hard to classify even when still, rocketed to escape our nightmarish advance. Slender chorus frogs, invisible at rest and even in flight, made mere dashes against the dewy green. With each step, the earth twitched with toadlets, barely more than yesterday’s tadpoles. A seldom-seen plains spadefoot (*Spea bombifrons*), with the skin of a frog and the body of a toad and the eyes of a cat—a local chimera—appeared. Secret spadefoots emerge on warm and rainy nights, and like a childhood dream, slip into the morning after.



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