

The Last Golden Toad

SYBIL SMITH

He (it was a he)
emerged in early May,
shedding his coat of mold-stitched leaves,
stretching out a hind leg
to scrape each bright flank free.

He was ready —
he had been ready for eons —
to join his kind
beside the mountain pools,
alert for movement;
ready to leap astride a mottled female
and, holding her with his spongy feet,
writhe against her till some shudder
told him it was done.

It was as if there were a map
in his head,
though he couldn't read,
did not know his name was *Bufo periglenes*,
did not know of Newton, Einstein, Darwin.

He couldn't reason like you and I,
with our impure desires,
but he could feel — yes, he could feel;
don't think he couldn't!
And his desire was pure and shining,
golden like his skin, part of some complex design
so intricate, so labyrinthine,
that we could not grasp it
till it slipped from our hands.

There was a scientist who had watched the toads
for years, sometimes so thick and eager
they flung themselves upon her hiking boots.

And she saw him two years in a row,
in 1988 and 1989.

He sat there,
a solitary "Day-Glo orange jewel"
against the forest floor,
and he did not move.

He sat still and waited for a vessel
that never came,
because there was none, or if there was,
she was far away up the mountain,
alone by her own pool,
and she had no song or scent to fling
across the treacherous atmosphere
as a calling card
to conception.

It was not the earth that betrayed them;
it was us,
with our engines and emissions,
blow-drying our hair,
eating peaches out of season,
taking long showers, and
talking endless nonsense
about the meaning of life.

Would we have given all that up
for the golden toad
who sat alone
for two long springs,
peering into the stillness,

then burrowed into the earth
with a sense of something undone
and never came back again?