

Rana: A Love Story

No one wanted to help me, do you remember? My lab partner was home with the flu, and everyone else was already paired. To be honest, though, I didn't much care for any help, and I had learned by then that nobody much wanted to stand at my table. I guess I took it too seriously. The job had to be done right, with appropriate precision. I questioned my lab partner's absence. It was the flu of not wanting to work with me on the dissection.

The rigid plastic cutting board – designed for kitchen use – sat on the heavy black surface of the table, with paraphernalia gathered around – tweezers, scalpel, microscope, an extra set of rubber gloves, eye dropper, probes, specimen dishes.

On the board lay *Rana pipiens*. The leopard frog, his fat yellowed dead belly displayed and taut for the edge of my knife.

I glanced around, and everyone else had already cut. I heard the usual squeals and voices of disgust and laughter, but I attempted to ignore the others as I stopped to lift the little frog in my hands and turn it over to admire the spots from which he took his name – the leopard.

Finally, though, I gently placed him down, stroked once along the belly, and carried my scalpel over the shiny, dry skin.

I touched the blade lightly over the bloated surface, a vertical movement. The membrane hesitated along the line, began to split, and soon, gradually, gently opened onto the structures beneath, the organs blossoming in soft pastels, the scent – I breathed it deeply – of formaldehyde.

With parallel, horizontal cuts across the top and bottom of the original incision, I opened up a rectangle into the frog, with two flaps folded back. I gently stroked over the textures inside, felt the give of the intestine, the hard knot of the heart; then I stripped off the latex glove in order to understand if the shine on the stomach was slick or dry.

As I slid the skin of my finger among the organs of the frog, I imagined some kind of music resonating up from the embalmed tissue, and I continued to caress the frog's membranes until I noticed a silence, glanced up, and saw a few others, and you, watching, not even an impulse to laugh, but eyes open tight, as if I were palpating my grandmother instead of this amphibian.

I stared the others back to their tabletops and the butchery they were performing there.

I selected the smallest tweezers, and I prodded my leopard frog's vascular system, testing the elasticity of arterial tissue soaked through with formaldehyde. I lifted the tiny veins off from membranes and cut away the viscous fibers holding them there so I could bring the netting free. After careful cutting, it rose weightlessly on the point of my knife, like a desiccated butterfly wing.

This was close work, and I told you before that I never even saw you approach, though you couldn't have told I was startled. I never jump, as you've found out.

Yes, I looked onto your face a minute, but your eyes were down at my hands working on the plastic board. Slowly I returned my attention to the limp, open animal, and you reached in too. I showed you where to stroke the texture of the primitive lung and the green, flaky craw. Finally I moved your hand away and brought a probe to the vesicle rising from the dark, hard organ at the body's center. I lifted gently but kept tension on the broad black fibers. With the scalpel I cut slower than ever along the knot there, cut through the tight black surface and the bright, surprising red beneath, cut through that too and found it there and handed it over to you between my thumb and fingertip, the tiny thing I knew I would discover, the white perfect pearl that grows in the heart of a frog.