

# Toyon: Multilingual Literary Magazine

---

Volume 68  
Issue 1 *Volume 68: Hope and Healing*

Article 5

---

2021

## Going Up the Creek

Jude Rouland  
*Humboldt State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/toyon>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Rouland, Jude (2021) "Going Up the Creek," *Toyon: Multilingual Literary Magazine*: Vol. 68: Iss. 1, Article 5.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/toyon/vol68/iss1/5>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons @ Cal Poly Humboldt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Toyon: Multilingual Literary Magazine by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Cal Poly Humboldt. For more information, please contact [kyle.morgan@humboldt.edu](mailto:kyle.morgan@humboldt.edu).



## Going Up the Creek

Jude Rouland

Sam was not very excited about his cousin coming to spend the summer with him.

It wasn't hard to see his lack of enthusiasm. He was told he'd be a good influence like it was meant to be a comfort, but when his mother told him to sit up a little straighter, uncross his arms, his frown only deepened.

"Sammy, you can't keep it up for the entire summer," his mom near-pleaded. "It'll be fun."

"Sam!" he corrected her, but he might as well have cut the formality of words and just gone right to biting. At times it was all he wanted—to clench his teeth so hard that they shattered. "You keep saying that."

"And wouldn't you know it, it's true every time." His mom ruffled his hair and went to stand in the doorway, as she often did. When she knew someone would be coming, she was always in the doorway, leaning against the frame, feet uneven on the threshold. Waiting for someone to come home.

Sure enough, Noah came bounding up the path. He wore a shirt that proclaimed an affinity for his favorite video game, or so Sam's mother had told him it was Noah's favorite. He'd hardly spent any time with Noah, and he was not about to be the one to start. His mom stretched her arms out for him, though, and he ran into them like a lost puppy. As if Noah remembered her—like he'd seen her since he was last a little baby.

"You've gotten so big!" she laughed as he nodded in agreement. At eight years, he was getting a little big for all

the picking up and carrying, but he was still small for his age. Sam remembered being bigger, at least. He slinked over to stand distantly behind his mom, but he kept his arms well-folded and his brow well-furrowed. Noah peered at Sam from over his mother's shoulder. His brown eyes were round and soft. Sam raised his lip, baring his sharp canine tooth.

Noah gasped. "Hi, Sammy!" He wiggled out of his aunt's arms—she was probably about to let him go, anyway—and she let him bound over to see his cousin.

Sam recoiled, bending out of the way of Noah's path. This was the person who was going to be in his dad's old office? Sleeping in that room like it was his own?

Despite Sam's coldness, Noah was unshaken. Sam looked him over, making sure to be thorough about it. He had wavy, messy brown hair, a lot like his own, when he was Noah's age. When he'd looked at Sam from over his mom's shoulder, he'd known the look, the shape, the color of his eyes—they could have been his own. Maybe if he'd had a brother. They were separated by freckles, and perhaps a pair of glasses, if Sam ever bothered to wear his.

"Mom, where's he going to go when Dad comes back?" Sam asked, keeping his voice loud.

She blinked back at him, surprised. At a loss, she only gave him a shrug. It was about what he expected. "Let's treat Noah well, Sam. Do you guys want lunch?"

Sam contemplated this for a moment. "Yes."

After lunch, Noah had asked if they had any video games. At his mother's behest, Sam had said yes, and showed him where they were. He picked out a game and told Noah, "This is the best."

"Then can we play?" he asked. Like he was asking on purpose.

Sam frowned. If he frowned a moment more, his dad would've warned him that his face would get stuck that way. "I'm going to be player one."

Noah didn't take any issue with it. He only picked up a controller, let Sam tag in, and then tried to get his own

remote working. When the little lights inside failed to respond, he turned it upside down, as if it would reveal all of its secrets.

“Sammy, it’s not working,” he said. “It won’t turn on.”

Another frown. Sam took the controller and, just as Noah had, turned it over in his hands. It felt too light. “It doesn’t have any batteries,” he reported. Certainly not in a way that implied he was going to do anything about it. After all, it was because of him that the remote had no batteries in the first place. When his mother had suggested they’d be able to play games together, it seemed the only solution.

“Oh.” Noah deflated. “Do you have any batteries?”

“Maybe.” Sam put his remote down. Despite the millions of copies of the game that existed and were played every day, Sam had only played the game with his best friend and his dad. It was too close to play. It was too close to play with Noah. “I don’t want to play anymore.”

“That’s okay, I can go get the batteries,” Noah said. “Just tell me where they are.”

“I said I don’t know.” Sam said. He leaned forward and turned the console off. He tilted back into his cross-legged seat and kept himself very still.

Noah stood up, full of purpose. In the short amount of time he’d been there, Sam had found he was often full of purpose. “I’ll find them.” He puffed out his chest. “But we can play something else.”

Sam didn’t bother to get up and watch him go down the hall or root around in the kitchen drawers, but he heard it well enough from where he sat. A few moments later, Noah came careening around the doorway, slipping onto his bottom on the carpet, right next to Sam. A little too close. He stuck his hands out to show Sam the brass frog that his mom kept on the windowsill.

“Look!” he proclaimed. “A frog!”

“I’m looking,” Sam said. He was thirteen—a little too old to be excited by his mother’s decorations. “It is definitely a frog.”

“No, it’s real,” he said, enough confidence to blow the

snowpack off a mountain. “Not this one. I mean, gold frogs, in creeks and rivers and stuff. I’ve seen them before.”

Sam rolled his eyes. Eight year olds were prone to lies, he’d read on the Internet, but still he said, “Maybe you’ve got golden frogs in California. But not here.”

“Here,” Noah insisted. “I mean, I haven’t seen them here, but I know they’re here. They’re anywhere if you know where to look for them.”

Sam scoffed. He looked from the stupid little frog to his stupid little cousin. He brought his knees to his chest and wrapped his arms around them, head turned away. “Just go away, Noah. I don’t want you here.”

Noah’s round eyes bore into him. “I can show you. Really. We can go find one.” He slipped his small fingers around Sam’s upper arm and pulled as hard as he could, which was not very hard at all, but he still managed to rock Sam just enough.

His head whipped around as he took in a sharp, angry breath. If he took Noah out to the woods, maybe he’d get a thorn caught in his foot and he’d want to go home, or at the very least, never try to get Sam to “play” with him ever again. If he didn’t go, then Noah would never shut up about the frogs. Sam bit the inside of his cheek. He let his face soften. “Okay. But then you’ll leave me alone for the rest of the time you’re here.”

“Maybe!” Noah said, wicked smile on his small face. He sprang up, waiting for Sam to get to his feet before dashing back to the kitchen and putting the frog back, just so. While he worked on preserving the integrity of his aunt’s amphibious display, Sam climbed the staircase to his mother’s room.

He pushed open the door as quietly as he could. If she didn’t hear him leave, would she notice that he was gone?

“We’re going out back,” he said. “I’m taking Noah to the creek.”

His mother lay on her bed, staying away from the right side. Her long brown hair was splayed over the pillow, the gray streaks on display. She had a paperback book folded open on her chest, but an eye pillow over her eyes. It was a

small bag she'd sewn together, full of glass beads scented with lavender that mostly lived in the refrigerator, coming out only to star in his mother's best stress headaches.

"Don't let him fall in, okay? I don't want him getting cut on a rock or something." She did not remove the lavender-bag to see her son off.

Sam crept into the room, a little closer. "Remember when Dad took me out to the creek and I tried to see how long I could hold my breath under the water, but the current was too strong and I slipped and scraped my leg? And he made me walk home to you, and you were so mad when you were helping me wash it off?" His mouth showed a smile. He laughed about that story when he recounted it to her a few months before. She never found it funny, despite how good of a story Sam found it to be, despite how much his dad had laughed, too.

With a tired hand, she pulled the bag off her eyes, moved the book onto the right side of the bed, and pushed herself to sit upright. "Sam," she said, "it's okay that Dad's not coming back. It's for the better."

He took a step back, placing himself in the doorway. He grabbed the handle and began to close the door. "Go back to sleep. We'll be back before it's dark. No falling in the creek. Got it."

The two boys picked through the brush until they hit Sam's favorite spot: a clearing right next to the creek, where the bank came to meet the water. The ledge on the other side of the water was nice, sure, but it only took one twisted ankle for him to learn it was a bad idea to forget his wits over there. The water was clear and true blue, each of the rocks visible underneath the stream. Tiny fish and mosquito larvae fought the current. The bank on their side was dotted with smooth rocks of all sizes and a few patches of sand. Around the creek, trees grew true and tall: hickory and sycamores and cottonwoods.

It took Noah hardly any time at all to get right down to business. He flipped rocks, poked at the sand with sticks, and pressed into logs with his well-worn sneakers.

“Good luck,” Sam told him.

Noah looked at him and nodded with a wide smile. He was missing one of his teeth on the left side. Another was growing in ugly. Noah sat down right on the bank and got to work rolling up his jeans as high as he could get them. He pushed his shoes off and stuffed his socks inside of them. Without a moment’s hesitation, he waded into the creek. The cold water rushed around his feet and he found himself smack in the middle of it, wet up to his thighs despite the water only passing up just below his knees. Somehow, Noah’s jeans were already soaked.

When Sam was young, he’d always found some way to get his jeans soaked too. He sat down, knowing the sand would stick to his pants and be a pain later, but choosing not to care. He rested his elbows on his knees. His gaze fell to the side, to a few rocks that held onto the moisture of the creek despite having been baked by the sunshine all day long. Halfheartedly, on a chance, he turned one over. A spider ran out from underneath and scuttled into the thicket.

“Did you see anything good?” Noah asked. Sam turned his head up to look at him. The sun caught his soft brown hair, summer and excitement bringing a pink tinge to his nose and cheeks. He gave his younger cousin a smile, earnestly this time.

“Just a spider,” he said. “I honestly don’t know if I’ve ever seen a frog around here before. A few salamanders, maybe, if I was lucky.”

“You’ve just got to give it time!” Noah assured him. His face looked as if Sam had told him of some terrible tragedy of his life. He might as well have. Still, he smiled, like he was the only one who could cheer Sam up after such a thing. “You’ll be catching all the frogs in the creek in no time.” Then, very seriously: “You let them go, right?”

He nodded. “Of course I did.”

“Good.” Noah turned his attention back to the water. He turned over rock after rock, sending streams of sediment down the flow of the creek. Despite all his pushing and

shoving, the water still did not turn cloudy, whisking all his troubles away in the cold current.

A sharp gasp. Noah plunged his hand into the stream and pulled it out just as fast. He waddled over to Sam. Sam peered over his closed fist, watching with intent as his fingers uncurled to reveal a tiny brown frog. Sam recognized it from one of his wildlife guide books as an upland chorus frog.

“Not gold,” Sam noted.

“Not gold,” Noah agreed. “But look! It’s a frog!”

Sam looked from the frog to his cousin, and back to the frog. It looked so small, even in Noah’s small hand, and so dark against his pale palm. The frog turned in place. Its bulging black eyes met Sam’s face. In the blink of an eye, it turned and hopped away, back to the creek to be whisked away in the current. He couldn’t help but smile. “It sure is,” he said. “You oughta get back in there if you want to find a gold one, though.”

Noah nodded dutifully. If there was in fact a gold frog anywhere in that creek, it was going to be Noah who found it. He shuffled back into the water, making his way past the center and toward the ledge, toward the deepest part of the water. It wouldn’t reach too high up, and his mom had said that Noah knew how to swim, that he was a strong swimmer. Still, Sam bit the inside of his cheek. He’d known how to swim, too, when he’d come with his dad.

“Be careful over there,” he warned. “I scraped my leg really bad over there before. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

His cousin turned to give him a thumbs up. Sam wouldn’t have listened to the same warning when he was eight. But here was Noah, a smile on his face, soaking wet denim sticking to his skinny legs.

A fly buzzed around Sam’s head. He waved his hand around, but the fly was unconvinced. He grit his teeth. The fly landed in his hair, making Sam shake his head around like a dog out of the bath. He swatted at it when he saw it take flight again. It flew away, seeming to have had enough. Sam turned his attention back to Noah, who was still stand-

ing, safe, watching the water, turning over rocks. Sam gave a sigh of relief. It was too dangerous for Noah to not be even in the corner of his eye.

The sun was considerably lower than it had been when they got there. Sam watched the sky for a moment, then took a moment to feel the breeze. “Noah, the sun’s gonna go down soon. You ready to come out?”

“The frog!” he said.

“I know, the frog,” he said. “But I told Mom we’d be back before it got dark.”

“Five more minutes,” Noah pleaded, in the way young children did, where they thought five more minutes might grant them another day’s worth of time.

Sam agreed, reluctantly. “Okay. But I’m not putting the itch cream on your bug bites.”

Noah shrugged. “I won’t need it.” He flipped over another rock, pushing around a plant that was held in place by the stone.

Something glinted under the clear blue water.

Another gasp. Noah reached with his arm, then his shoulder, then his chest. He was soaking wet, but in a heartbeat, he came up, and went as fast as he could against the water, his fist closed, tight-but-not-too-tight. He waddled up to Sam, fighting his stiff jeans, and fell to his knees beside him.

His fingers uncurled. In the palm of his hand, sure enough, was a small golden frog. No bigger than the last one, but no smaller, either. It was brilliant, its honeyed hide catching the sweet rays of the early summer sun.

Sam couldn’t find his words. He opened his mouth, but when nothing came, he closed it again with care.

“Just like I told you,” Noah said. “Real.”

“Real,” Sam echoed. It was real. As real as he or Noah. He was almost scared to breathe, as if the intake of air would be too loud and scare the small thing away. He took Noah’s cold wet hands in his own, cupping his palms underneath Noah’s, like the tiny little frog was too heavy for him to hold up on his own. Noah’s fingers were so gentle. He had to

keep them safe. He almost couldn't take how much bigger his hands were.

The frog hopped away.

The two boys were quiet for a minute in its wake.

"You did it."

"I did it!" Noah said, proud as ever, full of purpose. "This is a good creek spot, Sammy. We should come back tomorrow."

Suddenly, Sam didn't want to leave.

"What do you think your mom is making for dinner?"

Noah asked, sitting down beside Sam, unrolling his heavy jeans and shoving his socks back onto his soggy sandy feet. Like he didn't know the enormity of what he'd found.

After dinner, it didn't take too long for Noah to get tired, and then not much longer still for him to get ready for bed and to be tucked in by his aunt. Sam didn't get put to bed like that anymore—it was unbecoming of an upcoming high schooler, after all. But he couldn't say he didn't miss it, a little bit.

One night, she'd put him to bed, tucked him in, and the next night, she didn't. One day, she'd picked him up, put him down, and the next day, she didn't. One morning, she'd left a note in his lunchbox, tucked between the sandwich and the ice pack, and the next morning, she didn't. It was almost too much for Sam to bear.

She let him stay up until his usual hour, watching television next to her on the couch. He didn't care for the show, and to his memory, she didn't either, but it was something to watch. That was how it usually was. How it had been. He'd been so excited the first time she let him go to the creek alone, with just his friends, no grown-ups around. Something was different now.

And when he was in bed, he found that for the first night in many nights, he couldn't sleep. He squirmed under the covers onto his left side. Maybe his dad would open the front door at any second. He rolled over onto his right side, pressing his face into the pillow. Maybe Sam didn't want him to come back. His leg itched.

He plucked his pillow from his bed, made his way down the hall, and knocked on his mother's door. He pushed it open to find her reading her book with her lamp on, the eye pillow nowhere to be seen. Her hair was pulled back away from her face, tucked into a halfhearted bun. Against the lamplight, he could see the lines forming next to her eyes and around her mouth. She looked up to see him and her face softened.

Quietly, he asked, "Mom, can I sleep with you tonight?"