

The Travels of Ribbits al'Ruddin
(Variations on Basho)

Evan A. Warfel

The sage-philosophers of northwestern {redacted} hold that there are only seven types of people. This is a seemingly logical conclusion from their six-hundred-year inquiry, where they concluded that there are only seven types of animals. They would have you believe that people are animals too, and thus there are really just seven types.

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Two centuries ago, the historians of northwestern {redacted} concluded that the seven types of animals were originally generalizations from ancient investigations into the personality types of frogs. Some of northwestern {redacted}'s more mystical types believe that the seven frogs were, at one point, the original creatures that started life on this planet as we know it.

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When traveling to northwestern {redacted} we advise not questioning the locals' belief about the underlying frogal nature of reality. You will have a hard time reasoning with the locals and will likely be kicked out of bars precisely because everyone readily agrees that no frog, animal, or person is a direct example of any of the seven types. Especially if you press them for precise and concrete examples. (Trust us, we've tried).

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The northwestern {redacted} frog scholars have compiled a table of the frog-types; which they believe to be an insightful commentary about your time on earth (in, we presume, northwestern {redacted}). For your information, and as required by northwestern {redacted}'s sometimes hostile and always extra-judicial tourist bureau, we present the table below.

TABLE 1.
Poetic Descriptions of the Seven Frog-types of northwestern {redacted}

Frog 1

Description:

old silent pond,
this frog jumps in,
splash! stillness, again.

Name:
Splash

Frog 2

Description:

How do you get to the other side of the pond?
—You are already wet, and on the other side!

Name:
Ribbits al'Ruddin

Frog 3

Description:

an auld silent frog;
a rapidly evaporating pond;
croak! death.

Name:
Croak

Frog 4

Description:

Oh, this frog has,
many teeth dear,
and it keeps them by its side.
Just a jackknife,
keeps <ribbit>,
for fear of being
part of culinary life.

Name:
Frogheath, King of the Beggars

Frog 5

Description:

As Julia Child dreamt of butter, butter, butter,
she wept,
for her mothers,
for her brothers,
for her fathers...
some of whom became *cuisse de grenouille*.

Name: Froglegs

Frog 6

Description:

(small) frog gotta hop,
frog gotta eat,
frog gotta piss them tiny ants off,
frog gotta sleep.

Name:

Frogino

Frog 7

Description:

Ribbit! To the frontier of the known world!
Ribbit! How does one get back?

Name:

K (after Kermit)

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By sheer coincidence, the only known English language frog-scholarly-commentary was faxed to our office in the fall of 1986. As we are the sole publishers of a travel guide to northwestern {redacted}, we feel a defensive responsibility to reproduce its content, (lightly edited for clarity, style, grace, and wit) here, lest we run afoul of agents working for the aforementioned tourist-bureau.

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For Splash, the only point to living was to jump into the nearest readily available pond. The profound simplicity in how they put their philosophy into practice never failed to impress Ribbits al'Ruddin. In his early days, nothing was simple for him. Everywhere he went, he felt encumbered by the reality that nature was out to kill him, and when it wasn't, frog-life was somewhat dull. Ribbits longed to be simple like Splash, perfectly content to transition between different states of matter. That Splash was often melancholic was a detail, Ribbits thought, that could be worked out later.

One day, Ribbits hopped by a frog skull and spoke to no one in particular. "Bad call, brother. You can't be happy you're dead."

Ribbits was quite surprised to hear an answer. From the depths of the skull, a voice replied. "Happy isn't the precise word I'd use, but I can tell you it was a preordained fate. One day, I was alive; the next, I wasn't. My friends call me Croak. And now that I'm dead, I can tell you: it was exactly as it was meant to be."

Ribbits' heart started to beat faster. "Nice to meet you, Croak, but wait just a minute. What does that really mean? Wouldn't you say the same thing regardless of when exactly, you died? Or IS SOMETHING STRANGE GOING HERE? Are you telling me you there *are* such things as accurate biological clocks which, when our time runs out or we misbehave, cause us to cease to be?"

Ribbits had taken a long time to conclude that the notion of accurate biological clocks, somehow built into the soul of every hopping frogger and which could kill you when you were older was just a tall tale designed to get young tadpoles to behave. Probably so that their parents didn't have to do the harder work.

Croak responded by saying "No, accurate biological clocks are just a tall tale that makes parenting easier and more convenient. What I mean is that reincarnation is real."

Ribbits was confused. "What does the existence of mutual accusation conversational patterns have to do with you being not-precisely happy that you're dead? I don't mean to be rude, but I'm honestly not sure dying was a worth it if that's all the insight you got."

"Reincarnation, not recrimination," Croak said gently. "Each time we die, our soul gets sent back in another form to grow into a more 'advanced' version of ourselves. If we do this enough, we reach the end of the cycle. Having died, I can tell you that all of us frogs were once more neurotic lifeforms. The progression is different for each soul, but the general pattern seems to be that gods, after they die, reincarnate as different kinds of animals. Over time, souls get reincarnated into increasingly frenetic creatures, peaking with neurotic apes. Some souls get stuck there, consistently reincarnating as different people with the same frustrating temperament. Eventually, if the soul grows and matures, it starts to reincarnate as increasingly less neurotic animals, the final form of which is almost always a frog."

"That's quite the progression," Ribbits said.

“Yeah,” said Croak. “I’ve heard it called ‘The Arc of the Covenant.’ I’ve been led to believe it’s part of how this particular universe has conscious life in it.”

The sun was starting to set, and Ribbits was simultaneously struck with a desire to know more, a jealousy of Croak’s insight, a longing to gather and eat dinner and a mild confusion about talking to a wise skull, none of which he had fully processed. His unprocessed confusion won out. “You are the most knowledgeable skull I’ve ever come across. Most dead things just lie there, you know. But if you’re so insightful and seemingly karmically redeemed, what are you doing as a frog-skull?”

There was a long pause, as if the presence of Croak had fled from Ribbits’ penetrating question. Ribbits resisted an urge to fidget.

After a while, Croak sighed, saying “It’s easy to be insightful when you’re dead.” Ribbits felt that this would be the kind of moment to receive a knowing glance, but was stymied by Croak’s lack of eyes. Croak continued. “Something about the process makes you more philosophical. As for why I’m a skull, I suspect it’s a glitch in the system.”

Ribbits was moved by the neutrality of Croak’s tone. He doubted that he’d possess the same amount of froggy-sangfroid if he were in Croak’s shoes.

Croak continued to explain their predicament. “From what I’ve been told, my type of reincarnation is exceedingly rare. As recompense, I’ve been granted access to hidden knowledge. I’m starting to suspect it only comes out when I’m asked questions — I wasn’t aware that I was aware the stuff I’ve told you. I must thank you, you’ve been a real help.”

“De nada,” said Ribbits. He was on the verge of sharing an observation with Croak, when Croak continued to speak.

“I have to tell you, it’s tiring to find these things out. Nothing to do with you, mind you, it just has to do with recalling all of this information. In all honesty, I probably only have room for another question; and then I have to get back to what I was doing.”

Ribbits reflected for a minute, and realized he had had a question for Croak since they began talking. “I have a question for you. Why do I feel like life is dull even though I’m aware that nature is, by and large, out to kill me? Why does it feel like life’s incomplete?”

Somewhat impatiently, Croak replied, “Because you’ve died several times. That should be obvious. The implications should be obvious too. Now while it’s been a pleasure, if you’ll excuse me, I would like to be dead alone.”

Sensing his cue to leave, Ribbits thanked Croak and hopped onwards, his mind occupied with working out the implications of Croak’s last message. Who was Croak, really? Descended from a god? Ascended from a god? Both, in some way? And who were the parties to which the Arc of the Covenant applied? How often did “the system” glitch? On some level, Ribbits knew that he was avoiding pondering about who, exactly

he was, but he was also aware that that kind of contemplation was best done on a fuller stomach.

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After gathering his meal, Ribbits decided to go for a nocturnal hop before finding a place to sleep. He made his way around a few trees, and soon found a river. He was on the verge of reflecting on Croak's cryptic conversational conclusion when he saw a large gesticulating bullfrog on the opposite bank. As he got closer to the water, he shivered as saw the bullfrog's eyepatch and long dagger tucked under it's belt.

"I am Frogheath, king of the beggars," the Bullfrog boomed. "You there, how do you get to the other side of the river?"

Ribbits gulped when he realized that Frogheath was speaking to him. "Hello, Mr. Sir King Frogheath. How did you get that sword?" he yelled back, hoping he got the honorifics right. He was scared, for he had never seen such an ominous frog.

Frogheath replied "A strange woman lying in a pond threw it at me and declared I was king. An excellent basis for a system of government, don't you think?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure what you mean by 'government'" Ribbits admitted. "But never mind. Can you tell me why you want to cross this river?"

"Because I've got begging licenses, certification-exams, standardized testing, diploma mills and the other glorious aspects of capitalism to impose on all frogs. Now tell me, how do you get to the other side?"

"That's the craziest thing I've heard all day. You are already on the other side!"

Ribbits hopped away as quickly as he could; ignoring the shouts of "hey" and "get back here." The bits and pieces that he understood of the Frog King's nightmare vision for a different world scared him. He got as far as he could and then discovered he was exhausted from quite a long day. He then quickly fell asleep underneath a fern.

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The next morning, Ribbits woke up refreshed. He mulled over his bizarre experiences from the day before over his morning snack. He concluded that he might fully understand all of what happened at some point in the future. It was as if he'd been given several clues and pieces of a puzzle; the only problem is that he had no idea what to do next.

So, he hopped onwards, looking for a nice bit of grass upon which he might sun himself.

As he approached the edge of a meadow, Ribbits came across a funeral for a missing-in-nature frog. The frog officiating the ceremony had a dark band of color around its neck. Must be a frog-monk, Ribbits thought to himself.

The frog-monk was making a point to the crowd. "And YEA did we hop through the swamp of death to get here TODAY. Did YOU hop through a swamp?" they said, pointing to a frog near them.

"Yes," the frog replied.

"And didn't we all?" the frog-monk asked the crowd, receiving a chorus of grunts.

"But at least we didn't end up like FROGLEGS, destined to be cooked in artisanal grass-fed butter."

Ribbits was hit with a wave of sadness. He felt that he was alone in the world. He seemed to be the only frog perceiving just how terrible the service was going. Did no one else notice? Why would anyone point out that the subject of the funeral was now in a worse place, relatively speaking? Could no one else think or feel?

Despite this, Ribbits thought that if anyone could help him through these confusing times, it might be a member of the frog-monk species. So he waited until everyone had ribbited together, marking the conclusion of the service. As the crowd departed, he hopped up to the frog-monk.

Using the customary title, Ribbits said "Father-Mother hopper, maybe you can help me."

"Hello, my Anura-Rainidea friend," said the frog-monk, utilizing the traditional pan-frog species name.

"Do you know anything about reincarnation?" asked Ribbits.

"Yeah, I sure do. Call me Frogino. Some time ago – never mind how long precisely – when I was barely more than a tadpole, wanting to see more of the landy parts of the world, I accused my brother of stealing a cricket just because he accused me of doing the same. I regret it now, but at the time, it was a way of driving off the spleen and regulating the circulation.

Ribbits was struck by the fact that he had recently made the same mistake. "Er, I don't mean recrimination. Reincarnation," hoping to clarify the situation.

The very idea of reincarnation seemed to upset Frogino. Their mood shifted to a more agitated state. "What do I look like, that nutty frog who lives at the top of the log? The one who leaves you with the feeling that you've just talked with an encyclopedia that hasn't yet crashed into a bush?"

Ribbits replied "Well father, I can't tell you, because I don't know what they looks like. But can you tell me where I might find this frog?"

Frogino sighed, recognizing a lost cause when he saw one. As a frog-monk, he was obliged to be helpful at all times. "You'd be wasting your time, but head for the tall pine tree at the bottom of the mountain to the north. After you hop north for a few days, take a right past a dead oak tree and then head uphill. You'll find yourself in a land of broken logs. Keep going uphill, and you'll find a broken log covered in red moss. The frog you'd be wasting your time to look for lives there. K is the name."

Ribbits thanked Frogino and hopped away, strangely hopeful.

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The next morning, Ribbits set out for the tall pine tree at the bottom of the mountain. He hopped north for the entire morning, pausing in the shade when the sun was at its apex. As he followed Frogino's directions, he noticed more and more fallen logs, just as Frogino had foretold.

Eventually, he found a log covered in red moss.

Not seeing anyone, Ribbits called out. "K? Hello? I was sent here by a Frog-monk. My name is Ribbits al'Ruddin, and I've got some questions I'd like to ask you." Ribbits was treated to a long bout of silence. He tried calling again. After some time, he heard the sounds of what seemed like a medium-sized frog rummaging around.

"Prr-un-dhil"

"What?" asked Ribbits, totally bewildered.

From the top of the log, a frog hopped down to meet him. As she hopped, she said "Any idea what the letters 'PRNDL' mean? They came to me in a dream, and I can't figure it out. No vowels. Honestly, it's a little weird to be dreaming with only constants. Also, I'm K."

Not having a better answer, Ribbits said to her "Maybe each letter stands for something."

"Brilliant" exclaimed K. "Totally. Off the top of my head, by which I mean based on some recent readings, I want to guess it's a code in an ancient tongue. I've found traces of an ancient grammar that supersedes all known frog languages; proto-frogarian, but it's hard work to reconstruct it. No one speaks it anymore."

Having once been waylaid for two hours by a linguist talking about the historical differences in croaking between voiced and unvoiced Quechua verb shifts, Ribbits was cautious about asking for further details. Despite not having asked her anything, K went on. "Park, Reverse, Neutral, Drive, Lloyd maybe? Eh, that feels close. I should probably write that down, Maybe I'll learn what it means in a year or two."

Ribbits saw a potential connection. He said, "I was told by a dead skull which called itself Croak that most frogs are the near-final incarnations of neurotic apes, who themselves are reincarnations of old gods."

"Now that's a theory you don't hear every day. Is that so?"

"It's what I was told. It wasn't the craziest thing I heard that day either. Maybe your proto-language is what we spoke before we were reincarnated into frogs."

K started to hop up and down in excitement. "That could be it! Sounds plausible. Don't know about the reincarnation bit itself, certainly the cross-species linguistic decay. I'd have to confirm it with a few tests, but if you controlled for the modifiers, it's always the modifiers, you'd model it with a second-order diffusion process. Hell, ol' Frogtrand Russell himself..." K paused for a second, realized she had gotten ahead of herself. She looked at Ribbits critically and continued, "Er, a skull told you souls exists? And you listened? You weren't licking any hallucinogenic frogs, were you?"

"That's disgusting and you know it," Ribbits said quickly.

"Okay, okay, just asking. Can't be too careful with conclusions these days. Facts are fickle things. Just the other day I heard a report about some dangerous riptides in conceptual space..." K noticed that Ribbits had no idea what she was talking about, and she stopped herself. "Where are my manners. I'm K. Most people don't bother to come 'round here; I think they think I'm loopy. Or they don't like how some frogs have turned out after talking with me. But, you are here and you have some questions. I'm happy to share my perspective, for whatever that's worth. Can I get you some turmeric fly-tea?"

Ribbits assented, and over fly-tea recounted all that Croak had told him. He concluded by saying "All my life, I've felt that the world could be more hoppable; a place where Frogheaths don't exist and Splash is happy. I want excitement, but not at the price of death from every angle. As I think about it, though, I really want to know why I long for these answers. If I'm not just Ribbits, who am I?"

K took all of this in. She said "I have about five things I could say and five more questions I could ask. But let me start by saying that it sounds like that what you long for, you long for deeply." Ribbits nodded. "You should know that his longing is a vital step in any frog's quest, at any age. Rest assured, many scholars recognize it as a sign you are on the right path. The second thing I'll mention now is that I can see why Frogino sent you to me. I've been working on a device that can create an accurate fortune cookie, provided the conditions are right. I know it sounds campy, but trust me – it is better than reading cricket entrails. Tomorrow morning, come back, and let's see if we can't use it to help you find some answers."

Ribbits thought this was fantastic. His years of hopping through the woods, being a self-reflective frog had finally lead to this.

As he turned to leave, K said "Be warned, Ribbits. There is a price to pay; most people are not ready for the unvarnished truth itself. A few who used the device were unable

to handle it; they've since resorted to hopping into old silent ponds, all day, and all night. There are others who weren't able to understand their fortune. You get one chance with this device. You may not like what it reveals."

Ribbits gulped, nodded, and hopped away to find a place to sleep for the evening.

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The next morning, Ribbits hopped nervously back to K's log. Upon seeing her busily connecting wires to a chain of spikey devices, he said "I've thought about what you've said. I'm ready."

K said to him "I'm glad. It's a great day for self-discovery, don't you think? Look at this sunshine! Also, drink this; it will put you in a mild trance. Then go hop off the top of the log; I've got all sorts of sensors hooked up to the fortune-cookie machine."

Ribbits looked at the log and said "I don't like heights! I've always been afraid of both flying and falling." He looked back at K, who had raised her frogbrows at him. "I know, I know. Getting to the top of the log is a thing I have to do, but it doesn't mean I won't complain about it on the way up."

K shrugged. "Whatever floats your bromeliad."

Ribbits sipped the liquid, and made his way to the top of the log. He found himself increasingly light-headed with each hop. His brain was feeling like a pretty terrible place to be by the time he was ready to hop off the log into the mossy landing below. Just as he started to question his own judgment, he found himself hopping off the log. "I'm the bombardier, I'm the bombardier" he found himself shouting as he flew through the air, landing on the moss.

He hopped back to K with a sheepish look on his face. "I have no idea why I said that."

K looked at him sagely. "It can be hard to know our own motivations sometimes. Maybe this will help" She hopped over with a fortune cookie.

Ribbits took the cookie, opened and read it aloud. "*You are the penultimate reincarnation of the being variously known as Anansi, Nasruddin, Loki and, most recently, Capitan John Yossarian.*"

Upon reading this, Ribbits was enlightened. He finally knew exactly who he was. And as who he had been for the past thousand years dawned on him, he found that all of his questions were answered, and that he was no longer afraid of being airborne.

"K! K!" he shouted. "It worked! Everything makes sense." Ribbits was so excited he couldn't help but vigorously hop up and down. As he hopped, he got higher and higher with each rebounding. "K! It isn't gravity that keeps us stuck here, it's a very ancient pan-species, pan-reincarnation fear of flying!"

K was beaming. "You know, I didn't expect that to work quite as well as it did. You must have done a lot of prep work before reading that fortune cookie. Most fortunes from that machine are nowhere near that specific. Instead they say things like *Don't Be Afraid to Flail*, which I always took as dancing advice, or *The Law of Attraction is Only Valid if You Have a Warrant*, which I still don't understand."

Ribbits was floating roughly 20 frog-feet off the ground. "K, surely you could use your own device on yourself! Why aren't you up here already?"

K was bemused. "Because there are questions that I can only answer down here."

Ribbits said "You do you, K! Thank you. This was amazing. I'm going to go hop westward now; I've always wanted to see the snow."

As Ribbits hop-floated west, he heard a final shout: "Ribbit in peace, Ribbits al-Ruddin! May you always be on the other side!"

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As you can tell, this passage has stumped many. Please refrain from sending us your recipe proposals or theories or about the culture of northwestern {redacted} via normal postal routes. Interested lay-scholars can submit papers, abstracts, and posters to our yearly travel conference. Details can be found on the next page.