The Song of the Clawed Frog

*In 1931, a scientist in Cape Town injected a pregnant woman’s urine into a clawed*

*frog, triggering the discharge of its eggs. Pregnancy tests became faster and more*

*dependable; clawed frogs were exported around the world. In 1992, on the space*

*shuttle* Endeavor, *they became our first species to conceive and bear young in space.*

I sing the song of the clawed frog, which has no words, but is the piping

of its arms, the high swish of its hands through water. I sing it the way

I learned it as a boy, in Wynberg, scooping water from a ditch, back when

I ran all day to catch the world, skying my first breaths of language.

I sing it now to hear it into words, knowing all words must be modified,

the way the world squirms loose and modulates to something else;

I stand the way the clawed frog stands to sing it, its eight splay fingers

braiding water on their spool, shifting with and braced against it,

riding the soft imperatives of flux. I hear again

the low swoosh of the clawed frog’s thick back legs through water:

its kicked webbed feet, the webbed toes’ six clawed hisses. In drought

it hunkers in the mud’s musts, till the rains come and the world’s

all squall of sky*—*then hear it splish through hammerings of water!

In dark water, the clawed frog is dark; in clear water, buff. Tongueless,

it feeds itself like a conjuror, waving its flat hands that grip,

sift, snatch, until the invisible world appears between its pointed fingers.

See it lean to cram into its mouth lithe minnows, tidbits of carrion,

mosquito eggs, to scour from pond scum the delicious larva.

It’s the size of the flat of my hand, held so, above the surface of the water*—*

though when I was a Coloured boy, on the Cape, where the clawed

frog came from also, I cupped in my palms

squidged tadpole swells of it*—*feeling its brisk first music

rinse back through my fingers’ staves to water.

Half-grown, I watched it scull its small hands flat as paddles

about the pools I’d pulled it from, until its country shrank to mud.

Yet now it circles the world, seeking our fortune and its own*—*the way

once it sang my mother’s fortune, the way it told her mine;

measuring four-limbed and breathless its obscure slick turns of water,

which here I sing—running to catch—to watch it wriggle between

sense and story; darkness and pallor; this song of its life and of mine.

First published in the *Saint Ann's Review.* They ran it twice, the second time in an anthology of the work they had published so far. On another occasion, they invited me up to NYC to read a creative non-fiction piece they had used of mine (also in *Mutt Spirituals*) on the radio; a good memory. And this is one of my favorite of my poems, in how it combines credo with true memory with life story with interesting non-me facts. For some reason, I write a lot of pieces about flight, usually space flight; and I once went several years writing only, exclusively about animals whose names began with C. Most of those pieces were light. This one pleased me enough with its heft that it may have gotten me out of that trough.