

1948

By Roger Pfingston

Cookie Taylor, whose given name
I never knew, came strolling out
of the woods, his bare chest writhing
with green snakes, Cookie smiling,
inviting us, younger by four or five years,
to step up and be equally adorned,
Unless, he said, you're chickenshits.

To my surprise, I stepped forward
that June afternoon, muddy sneakers
squishing in a rain-soaked field, put down
my catch of tadpoles and crawdads,
frantic in the gray-water slosh of a Mason jar,
and offered a sunburnt arm to Cookie's dare:
emerald green the living flow down my wrist,
smooth, cold, tangling itself between
my fingers, its tiny head erect, tongue
flicking, tasting air but never my skin
as I stood perfectly still, my heartbeat
beats ahead of my breathing as Cookie
lowered a second snake onto my other arm,
iridescent...coiling...uncoiling.

When I slowly turned to show the others,
I saw it in their eyes, how they too would
remember—Simon, Donnie Shaw, tomboy
Madeline Hughes, the bug-eyed Archie
King who came caning across the floor
at the fifty-year reunion to shake my hand:
Snake boy! he'd said, squinting,
trying to read the print on my name tag.