

Episode 39: Bittersweet
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There's a version of you lost in a cave right now. Your flashlight just flickered and went dark. Bone tired, you sit and listen to water dripping in some far-off cavern. You click your inert flashlight on and off in time with the dripping water. You wish yourself someplace safe, doing something as mundane as listening to a podcast.

Already the knowledge of that other you down in the dark earth is fading, because...

Your wish was granted.

Welcome to The CryptoNaturalist.

[Theme Music]

[Music Fades. Wind in trees. A crackling fire. A distant melancholy guitar.]

I'm recording this on Halloween. October 31st.

I don't typically work on Halloween, and the same is true this year. Talking to you folks isn't working.

My friend and RV Cassandra is off communing with the highways somewhere and I'm here on my own, camping at the dark mouth of a covered bridge that doesn't seem to belong to any path or road.

The moon is full and uncommonly bright. I've got a good fire here in these ragged autumn woods and a fine wind running its long fingers across the treetops. When the wind is just right, like it is now, the branches sing like plucked guitar strings. Can you hear how the crickets have all fallen silent, trying to learn the tune?

There's a lantern hanging in that old bridge. It's dark now, but it's been coming and going since dusk. I can hear the metallic chirp of it swinging on its hook.

Which specific woods I'm in right now isn't important. Not tonight.

I'll tell you a little secret.

All woods are the same woods. Do you think something as young and impermanent as a human town or a patchwork of cornfields dividing one group of trees from another really creates separate forests? No. Of course not. Not even the dark oceans and the weight of all their years can do that. The forest is the forest. The woods are the woods.

But, I understand.

The human brain needs names.
It's what we do.

Categorization and analysis. It's an adaptation. A survival strategy. It's our swift hooves, our silken web strung across the path.

[Thoughtful Pause]

There's that lantern again. It just faded on in the middle of that old covered bridge. Butter-yellow light pouring shadows into all the creases and gaps in the old boards. I suppose someone is covering and uncovering the light, but I haven't seen another soul tonight.

Well. It's a mystery.

But, I'm off duty.

And one of the key secrets to staying in love with mystery is to accept that a great many things may be admired without being explained. We tie ourselves up in knots trying to explain every little thing, don't we?

The lantern just faded out again.

It's funny isn't it. We tell ourselves that all these names and categories we assign to things are our way of understanding, but that's not quite the whole truth.

It's our way of making reality tidy. Bite sized. Taxonomies and classifications.

It's who we are and there's nothing wrong with that, but let's not kid ourselves. Labeling brings nature to us. It doesn't necessarily bring us to nature.

The difference between experiencing and describing.

It's sorta like how we think of consciousness as being awake.

Is it?

Most of the universe isn't conscious, so are we the only things awake in all this vastness? The only things fully engaged in the essential experience of the universe?

No.

The truth is, consciousness is the dream, not the awakening.

The trees. The soil. The stone. In many ways, they are all more in step with the universe than we are.

We don't wake up to consciousness. We wake up from consciousness.

But, hey. While we're all here sharing this strange dream together, I can't think of a solitary reason not to make it as odd and beautiful as we can manage.

Listen to that fire crackle. Listen to that wind, that tree music.

Sure, reality might be an illusion created by the brain in its lightless fortress of bone, but it's lovely all the same.

There's that lantern again.

Speaking of lanterns, how about a little poetry? It's time for tonight's hidden lore segment.

Today's hidden lore is a poem by Meredith Smith.

Lantern

It was in the back of an old almanac
Where you saw the ad:
Bulbs for sale!

It was dark, mid-winter,
So you sent for one.

Little did you know
What they would illuminate
Come spring.

Hmm. A hint of the supernatural or a plant pun? Doesn't matter. Both are great.

Meredith is a flash fiction writer and micropoet in Seattle, WA. She is an alumna of the Hugo House and student of writers who are students of Raymond Carver. She lives in a brick building by the lake with her tiny human. Learn more about her work and her re-released zine *Movement* at meredithsmith.com.

I wonder who left this covered bridge out here in the middle of these trees. I guess it isn't actually bridging anything, so maybe it's just a long house missing two walls?

Semantics.

When the lantern glows, that old bridge throws out a geometric pattern of yellow light across the trees. It's a bit like a fanned hand of cards, cool amber rectangles spilling out into the dark.

There it goes. Fading to black again. That was fast. Maybe I paid too much attention to it. Or maybe I'm forcing sense where there is none.

We tend to understand our world through labels and through stories.

Well, I love a good story. You know that.

But... sometimes... I see folks getting themselves all twisted up over stories.

I mean the stories we apply to ourselves. The story of our identities.

Younger folks, older folks too, get anxious because they feel like their story hasn't actually begun. That they are in a play and they've missed their cues and forgotten their lines.

Or, they turn into literary critics of life and criticize their own character, looking for steady growth and rising action. A satisfying plot tying events together.

Here's the thing. Lives aren't stories. They aren't written to be tidy or to hang tight to a central theme or conflict. We consume a lot of carefully constructed stories and it can be easy to forget that life is not one of them.

You aren't headed toward a thoughtful climax and, so, you can't be off track within your own narrative.

Life doesn't work that way.

We live and then we don't.

That's the simple truth of it.

Our stories are happening now and if we get preoccupied looking for satisfying character arcs or a steady build toward some conclusion, well we miss what's here in the moment and we will always fall short of our expectations.

We can't judge ourselves like we judge the protagonist in a book or movie.

Life isn't failing you because it isn't delivering a cohesive story.

You aren't failing because you haven't stuck to a clear and explainable hero's path.

Stories are a great way to understand the world, but they are paper thin compared to actual life.

You, in contrast, are complicated. Make room for that truth and love yourself in all your messy complexity.

There's the lantern again. Welcome back, friend.

Tolerating ambiguity. It's an art and a craft.

Reminds me of a little story.

Once, I was in your town looking at that eyesore field near the gas station. You know the one. It always seems to collect the most disturbing trash. A child's shoe. A broken dog collar. It looks hungry for secrets. Hungry for tragedy. It's a field that makes things disappear and it seems like somebody should have built something there by now, doesn't it?

Well, I was stopped at a traffic light next to that field and there was a man as gray as a cloudbank standing near the edge. Gray skin. Gray clothes. Built like a tombstone looking up into the drizzle with ice-blue eyes beneath the wide brim of his gray hat. The rain sizzled on his shoulders. Folks were trudging along the sidewalk, but nobody noticed that slab of a man, but me.

You know what I learned about that man?

Nothing.

The light turned green and on we went.

Now, I have a choice of how to feel about that don't I? I can be eternally unsatisfied by that particular piece of the unknown. Or, I can smile and count it as a deepening of my understanding of life. Life is, after all, built on a foundation of the unknown and unknowable.

I choose the latter.

If you can learn to smile at the unknown, you'll find your universe becoming a much friendlier place.

It's nice to think of such things. As I stand here on the weathered boards of this bridge. Letting the smell of old cedar fill me up. Listening to the violin wine of my lantern swinging on its hook.

Mystery. I can't help but stare out at that fire near the mouth of my bridge, listening to the wind pluck the trees, the unknown seems friendly enough to me.

It's time for dark, so I cover the lantern up again.

Somebody must be out there tending that campfire.

It's been burning for hours, but I haven't seen a soul.

The unknown. It's bittersweet, isn't it?

I suppose... I can live with that.

Until next time. We're all strange animals. So, act like it.

Show Notes: Episode 39 Bittersweet (00:17:05)

Credits

The forest. The fire. The guitar in the wind. The covered bridge that has no business being there.

Background guitar music was "Three Ravens" by Axletree. Downloaded from <https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Axletree>.

Thanks to Meredith Smith for this episode's hidden lore poetry. Meredith is a flash fiction writer and micropoet in Seattle, WA. She is an alumna of the Hugo House and student of writers who are students of Raymond Carver. She lives in a

brick building by the lake with her tiny human. Learn more about her work and her re-released zine Movement at meredithsmith.com.

The CryptoNaturalist

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Exclusive stickers, pins, shirts, and access to bonus content and strange expertise on strange topics awaits you at our patreon page. Patreon.com/CryptoNaturalist. You'll find information about submitting your poetry or prose for our hidden lore segments in the about section of our website at CryptoNaturalist.com. The CryptoNaturalist is written and read by Jarod K. Anderson. Thanks to Adam Hurt for the use of his song Garfield's Blackberry Blossom from his album Insight. For more information on Adam's music, performances, and teaching, visit adamhurt.com.

Post Script:

If you're looking at the story of your life and you can't tell who the cryptid is, chances are it's you.