

Episode 55: Feather Fountain
Written by Jarod K. Anderson

Every humble hole beneath a log eventually leads to something sprawling, ancient, and inexplicable if you just follow it deep enough.

Welcome to The CryptoNaturalist.

[MUSIC – MAIN THEME]

Welcome listeners.

After being awake for... 32hrs now, I'm sitting in my RV's recording studio, sipping a coffee.

It's 2pm, a bit late for me to be drinking caffeine, but when your day involves standing in the shadow of a 200-foot-tall crustacean, a certain amount of afternoon beverage leniency seems appropriate.

I spent the night watching a meadow. This morning too. A meadow, tumbling into the ragged end of February on an unusually balmy night and day. Out there, it felt like the shadow of spring falling across the world's doorstep. As the sun rose and I felt its warmth striking a contrast to the winter landscape, I could sense the world shifting in her sleep, preparing to wake.

Spring is coming, no doubt.

Yet, the meadow was a brown, brittle tangle of dried thistle, goldenrod, and aster slowly returning to the earth. The nearby pond was surrounded with yellowed cattails, a few still holding onto tufts of white fluff. The bleached bones of pokeweed, splintered and fallen, gave me an idea of what the place would look like in just a few months. The purple shades and the greens. While a huge, gray knuckle of stone in the center of all that flatness stood as a showplace of moss and lichen.

Yep, it wasn't a bad spot to spend the day watching for a feather fountain, a gigantic, terrestrial crustacean that filter-feeds in the air, much as its aquatic cousins do in the rich, water columns of Earth. Like the freshwater bamboo shrimp or the goose barnacles of the Atlantic, feather fountains extend specialized appendages to gather food from their surroundings. Pollen on the wind. Flying insects. Even small songbirds and bats, by some accounts.

Beyond dwelling in the open air, the big difference between feather fountains and their kindred filter feeders being... well... big.

Feather fountains hibernate through the early winter months, echoing the dormancy of the surrounding deciduous forests. Then, on a warm day in February, always coinciding with a full moon, they emerge and begin their season of feeding. They tend to shelter beneath a domed cap of stone, rather like the one in the meadow I wandered this morning. How 'bout that?

I circled that stone as the full moon faded with the dawn, enjoying the sensation of wading through hip-deep vegetation without the warm weather worry of ticks making my neck itch.

There was a conspicuous gap in all that dry, dead plant matter where a fallen tree lay, spongy and decaying. Something colorful caught my eye and I knelt to look. On the shady underside of the log, the fruiting bodies of an insect egg slime mold stood out in traffic-cone orange. The mold traced words in a looping script.

It read, "Mr. Green, your laces are untied."

I looked down and, sure enough, they were.

As you no doubt know, all slime molds have incredible facility with language and some, like this one, are deeply clairvoyant.

"It's just 'Green' to my friends," I said.

I tipped my hat to my little, eukaryotic cousin and plopped down on the log to fix my laces. Slime molds are always neighborly and I like to linger in their company whenever possible.

Plus, it was a good spot to watch the rock and pick burrs from my socks.

It's awfully therapeutic to sit still in a place like that, letting the story of the landscape meet and braid with your own internal narrative. It's simultaneously nourishing and hard to describe.

It was certainly nourishing for me, as I sat and worried that I miscalculated somehow and missed witnessing the feather fountain. Its association with the full moon led me to assume the emergence would happen in darkness. I suspected I'd see it in the small hours before daybreak, but I suspected wrong.

Well, speaking of things that are nourishing and hard to describe, how about a little poetry? It's time for today's hidden lore segment.

Today's hidden lore is a poem by Kathryn Nuernberger.

A Sense of Belonging

There are a lot of good reasons to leave a place and one of them is that you hate everyone there and another is that everyone there hates you.

The ditches at the edge of the field were thick with poke, which I did like, even loved. The poison root of the poke grows down deep and snagged like a mandrake. Likely you could make a doomed baby by bathing this tuber in buttermilk too.

Poke will drink cadmium and whatever heavy metals our phosphorous fertilizers leave behind. It will drink, it will grow tall, and put on those berries that bulge weird eyeballs at passersby.

I had to be so angry to become someone who didn't need to be angry at all. The cowbirds stalk the ditch of the field eating the vitreous purple of such toxic fruit. I couldn't have known how I'd miss them.

Such a powerful poem about anger and place and the many ways we, and our world, must digest toxicity. Nature has such miraculous ways to heal itself, strange processes that happen down deep in the dark. It's one more parallel that reminds us that the distinction between us and our environment is paper-thin.

Kathryn Nuernberger is the author of *THE WITCH OF EYE*, essays about witches and witch trials, and *RUE*, poems about plants historically used for birth control. *ADVANCED POETRY*, a textbook on reading and writing poetry co-authored with Maya Jewell Zeller was just released in January. She is currently writing a collection of essays about symbiotic mutualism, mutual aid, and ways of being together in an age of climate crises. Find her online at: kathrynnuernberger.com

I felt the emergence of the feather fountain long before I saw anything. It was a subsonic rumble that knocked over a piece of furniture in my gut and left me feelin' a bit seasick. There was a tremor beneath my boots and then an extended hissing as that great island of stone split. The halves tilted up and away from one another like a hinged, double-door while a cloud of vapor rose. It smelled a little like a swamp and a lot like 10,000 dirty socks.

Up from that sudden, pungent fogbank rose two jet-black eyes the size of watermelons. They caught the light and held it, a splinter of sun shining at the end of long, lightless cavern. Those eyes rose further and I could see they were mounted atop fleshy stalks thick as young oaks.

There was a sudden gust as two of the feather fountain's forelimbs surfaced and unfurled in fibrous fans. The obscuring mists vanished and I was looking at a creature a the size of a minivan. Its exoskeleton was iridescent, a rigid tapestry of rainbows that shimmered and swayed. It looked a bit like a mantis shrimp in full, kaleidoscopic glory.

Except, as it continued to rise that minivan sized creature became speedboat sized. RV sized. Subway car sized. Up and up and up. There were rows of barbed,

scythe-shaped legs like those of a mantis. There were far more limbs that unfolded into broad feather or palm-frond shapes, some the size of billboards.

I sat there, staying stone-still, doing my very best to think neutral, log-like thoughts.

The last thing I wanted was to surprise the creature. Or, look like breakfast.

It grew to fifty feet. A hundred feet. Two hundred.

It was like a vertical swath of dense jungle made from jointed limbs and swaying fans of prismatic tissue.

It was a tower and a trap. It was a hungry pillar rising above the encircling tree line.

Perhaps it grew more. I stopped estimating height when the creature became transparent and, eventually, fully invisible.

But, there was still that shadow. Frayed at the edges. Wide as a country road. And I was sitting directly in the center of it.

Something caught my eye and I looked down. The companionable slime mold was swelling into a new, single-word message.

“Yikes,” it said in the stippled orange of thousands of fruiting bodies.

“A’yup,” I replied.

I stood, and moved directly away from the source of that shadow with slow, deliberate steps.

The feather fountain is a gorgeous, majestic creature. And, the sort of animal that really should be admired from a bit further away than my spot on that log.

Well, coffee or no, I believe I’m headed for a long rest, somewhere away from peaceful-seeming meadows.

But, first, I see a flashing light that tells me we have a new message.

Let's take a listen.

[SFX Field Report Click]

This is your Stairway Keeper broadcasting on CryptoNaturalist frequency 11-58-1.
I remind you.

When you visit the stairway, it is natural to be curious.

It is a curious thing to step through the doorway and take the gray, stone stairs into the colorless deep.

Curiosity is acceptable on the stairway.

Ambition is not.

Do not come to the first alley or the fickle door for fame.

This is not a place to build a reputation.

I do not look forward to archiving your brave bones.

I remind you.

You will not be the first to discover where the stairs end.

If you try, it will be my voice, centuries hence, answering your ghost, saying it might have been otherwise while you walk down and down and down, hoping a discovery-to-come will quiet your regret.

It will not.

The stairs do not owe you satisfaction.

I remind you.

You will not see the owner of the footsteps ahead in the dark.

Do not try.

It gives you the sound of its footfalls. You do not know what that gift costs it, but I advise you to be grateful.

It has easier, less wholesome gifts it could choose to give.

I remind you.

You may bring a light to the stairway, but it will increase the danger.

Light invites shadow.

I will not be responsible for the shadows you create.

They are the unruly children of your poor choice to interrupt the dark.

Shadows do not like the stairway. They will tell you so.

They will ask for compensation.

Many of you think that you are too wise to take a shadow's bargain.

I am afraid not.

When you become tattooed on the stone's skin and your shadow pilots your body back to the sky to shake a smug fist at the sun, it will be too late to seek my help.

My help is here with you now. Make use of it.

I remind you.

The stairway will show you things.

Here is a tiny mushroom, like a pushpin, pale as a milk drop where the log crumbles to soil.

Here is the seabed grave of a whale, where midnight is a place, a boom-and-bust town of spider crab and sleeper shark building a ribcage cathedral in reverse.

You may linger within these sights, but time will not wait with you.

You cannot expect to keep a living body and be a resident of the visions forever.

I remind you.

Come to the stairway as a guest.

Respectful.

And you may return home enriched by your visit.

Unharmed. Not unchanged.

The stairway is not hungry for your misfortune.

I speak to you because the stairway is kind.

Not everything you find below values your safety.

Do not be indignant.

It is no different than a pinnacle of rock in arctic waters. A cave beneath the Catskill Mountains.

Such places were not made for you and do not request your visits.

I have met the keeper of the Catskills.

Do not expect to hear his kind warnings.

I remind you.

The stairway will open to you when it is ready.

Not when you are.

[SFX Field Report Click]

You know, moments ago, I was thinking that today really couldn't get any more menacing. When you're wrong, you're wrong. Serves me right for making assumptions.

The sun is shining, but it is definitely past my bedtime.

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

Show Notes: Episode 55: Feather Fountain (00:19:45)

The Feather Fountain is as beautiful as it is deadly and it's plenty of both.

Thanks to Cecil Baldwin for voicing the Stairway Keeper. Cecil has long been one of my favorite voices in podcasting and you can hear him on the show that first inspired me to create audio-fiction, Welcome to Night Vale.

Thanks to Kathryn Nuernberger for today's hidden lore poem. Kathryn is the author of THE WITCH OF EYE, essays about witches and witch trials, and RUE, poems about plants historically used for birth control. ADVANCED POETRY, a textbook on reading and writing poetry co-authored with Maya Jewell Zeller was just released in January. She is currently writing a collection of essays about symbiotic mutualism, mutual aid, and ways of being together in an age of climate crises. Find her online at: kathrynnuernberger.com

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The CryptoNaturalist is written and read by Jarod K. Anderson.

For books and poetry collections by Jarod K. Anderson and Leslie J. Anderson, visit CryptoNaturalist.com/books.

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.

This show is produced and edited by Tracy Barnett. You can find them online, anywhere at [TheOtherTracy](https://TheOtherTracy.com) or TheOtherTracy.com.

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.

Reminder: Transcripts of this and every episode are available at cryptonaturalist.com.

Stay Curious. Stay Wild. Stay Weird.

Post Script:

If you look across a wide, round meadow and find a river of shadow pouring out from a central stone... maybe go ahead and find another spot for enjoying the outdoors.