

The Cryptonaturalist Ep 11: Dirt Road Desolation

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There are plenty of creatures roaming this wide world with ears powerful enough to hear the beating of your heart even though you yourself cannot.

Welcome to the CryptoNaturalist

There's a dirt road beneath my feet, listeners. Hard, flat earth the color of a walnut shell. It's too dry and just looking at it makes me thirsty, but I have nothing to drink.

Somewhere behind me, I keep catching a metallic whine. Some rusted-out machinery is trying to work, groaning out its frustration at the white haze of the sky, but I can't seem to turn to see what it is. Those are the rules. Maybe an old wind mill or a water pump, metal blades turning slow circles in the parched air.

I wasn't paying much attention to the trip here, but this place smells like Arkansas. I'd ask Casandra, but she's out of earshot. I sent her away when I felt the rules kick-in because there was something here that I need to do alone.

Don't worry. You're allowed to be here, listeners. I feel it in my bones. You're allowed because there's a sheet of time, like thick safety glass, in between the now when I'm saying this and the now when you're hearing this. So, that's alright then. It's allowed.

I need to be careful what I say, because I don't want to accidentally wander away from my goal, but I'll tell you this.

There are many kinds of habitats. There are creatures that live in water too salty to drink. Creatures that thrive in acids, in the baking heat from volcanic vents. There are creatures to whom a gentle afternoon in your local park would be as deadly as a trip to the surface of the sun, yet they can survive at ocean depths that would crush a car.

So, now, don't think of it as strange when I tell you that some habitats are less tangible than tropical seas or alpine forests. There are creatures that live only in certain kinds of uneasy excitement. Creatures that make a home in very specific kinds of solitude. In desolation.

With practice, you can train yourself to sense these habitats. And they feel like... well, they feel like rules.

Maybe you've felt it before. You ever felt a silence that didn't want to be broken? That's a habitat for a kind of translucent, semi-corporeal mouse that needs that kind of silence. You

break the silence and, well, like most creatures they depart when the habitat is no longer suitable.

This... though. This isn't silence. This is something else.

There's a wind and part of the road continually rises in a cloud of dust like earthen smoke. It swirls in place for a moment and then races off toward the east, toward a low hill just down the road. The sun is setting that way, east toward the hill. I don't make a fuss about the sun setting in the wrong direction. This isn't a place for that kind of fussing.

I pull down the brim of my hat against the glare.

It's still very much summer here. I feel myself sweating and the sweat collecting dust. I wipe the back of my hand against my brow and feel grit on grit. I think of the way wet snow gathers on rock and I wonder if I'll accrete enough dust to look like a man-shaped extension of the road.

Ahead of me, that low hill rises a bit, turns a bit, and goes still again. A single crow, disturbed by the movement, caw's and wings toward the horizon.

I think I'm supposed to wait now. This place is alright for waiting. Just best not to get too excited. Best to stay quiet inside. Hear the wind. Feel the dirt. Be part of the place.

I decide to sit for a spell. I fish in my pocket and find two poems there and I know it's time for a Hidden Lore segment.

Today's hidden lore segment is two poems by Cara Ehlenfeldt

To the Bear of Winter

As I watch my dog's tail disappear through the door,
I notice a bear's nose pressed to the windowpane.
Bristly, unreadable face. How long has he been,
while I watched my dog waggle his way
into snow? Has he glared, as I overturned
my honey jar, let the sticky rope dangle into tea
until it was all golden light? I would let him in,
would the lock unclick just right.

I would tell of one who traipses through the snow.
Logs on my porch, boots by my door.
Who on my fire by night will crackle logs to life,
cast shadows across walls. Who will be nothing, nothing at all.

Some night when bees slumber in honeyed tones,

and the bark at the window is bear's-eye bright. Ursa Major
silver-spotted, Minor straggling, points locked
like a gun, like a spark, like the scratch up my arm.

Reaching into the Hollow of the Tree

It's simple, once the knot aligns
with the curvature of the hand,
the magnetic draw comes naturally, the movement,
as planned, continues. So the hollow,
with its gnarled floor and split walls
is seen with ridged fingertips, hesitant
as roving eyes, while a squirrel
in the corner freezes with its nut in paw, watches
as the hand circles the space
like a blind horse in its pen,
drawing closer to the inevitable bother,
like a spill spreading farther.

Ah, good, those seem like the right poems to be in my pocket today. Questing. Isolation.
Strange meetings in unexpected places. You know, I might suggest that reading a good poem is
often like a strange meeting in an unexpected place.

Cara Ehlenfeldt is a writer, sound studies grad student, and co-creator of the upcoming audio
drama podcast the Godshead Incidental. She originally hails from the New Jersey Pine Barrens,
although she considers the forests of the Pacific Northwest to be her true home. The Indegogo
campaign for Godshead Incidental launches soon. You'll find a link in the show notes.

The wind snatches the poetry from my hand and carries it behind me. I can't see what happens
to it next.

I rise to my feet and notice that the sun has stopped setting. It's just there now. Stationary in
the sky. Daring me to question it.

I don't take the dare.

I begin walking again because I can tell the road needs me to.

I smell something. Distant death. That abstract, old decay scent that means a body is becoming
landscape again which, in turn, is forever in the process of becoming and unbecoming living
things. With enough examination, the distinctions become trivial.

Ah, the hill is moving again.

This time when it rises, there's no hesitation.

The hill, a brown dome, covered in skeletal saplings and a mane of brown, withered grasses stands on four stout legs. Its feet has long, arched claws. A tale swings out in one direction and a head in the opposite.

It looks like an armadillo, that same face that's part piglet and part anteater. Part possum, part turtle. Only this one looks bearded and shaggy with drought-starved plants and a thick column of dust tilts up and away from its back. It could be forty feet tall. It could be a hundred feet tall. Everything here is so flat and brown it's hard to measure distance.

The creature swings its head in my direction and I see that it has no eyes, just a great green jewel like an emerald set into the rough slope of its forehead.

I can feel its thoughts and a moment later I understand why it's thinking at me.

I want to name it, because that's what I do, but it doesn't want me to. Not having a name is part of who it is. Part of where it lives.

I swallow my impulse and nod at the great, desolate wonder. It's hardly my place to force my preferences on another living creature.

I close my eyes and listen because I know that I am supposed to.

It's the sort of quiet that's full of questions and answers just out of reach. But I know that the wind that I'm feeling is also touching the creature, and knowing that needs to be enough.

When I open my eyes, I see that the creature has not moved. It still regards me steadily. The rules seem to be fading. I'm losing my sense of what needs to be done.

I walk toward the creature for five minutes. Ten minutes. Twenty minutes, but it gets no closer. It's a thing of distance and separation and I could no more get close and touch it than I could touch the heat-shimmer on an August highway.

I just smile and chuckle to myself, which, of course, breaks the rules completely. The unnamed creature and its lonely habitat slides away and I perceive green spreading back into the world like a living dawn.

Everything feels different.

I still want to name the thing, if only to make it easier to think of it fondly, but I commit to the far better choice of honoring its happiness before my convenience. As a rule, that's a skill we humans need to sharpen.

Well, now, there's my favorite Winnebago coming down the road to pick me up.

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

End.

Episode 11: Dirt Road Desolation (00:14:05)

Show Notes

When you find the dirt road with the unnamed creature, obey the rules, respect the emptiness, and make peace with the fact that not everything is there for your convenience.

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