

The Cryptonaturalist Ep 12: Storm Shark

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Perhaps you are at a larval stage of development and one day soon you will grow and change and swim upward into the dark, starry sea of your adulthood.

Welcome to the CryptoNaturalist

Did you know that the clouds are alive? I'm not being poetic here, I'm being literal. A recent study found nearly 100 species of bacteria living in storm clouds.

Some scientists theorize that the lifeforms in this lofty biome may play a role in the creation of weather and, more broadly, climate.

Many of the recorded species are commonly found in the ocean. Others are typically native to fresh water or soil. Yet, through one means or another, many of them have found an unlikely home 30,000 feet above the ground.

Ya know, it's not terribly easy to live at that altitude. It's typically dry, cold, and there's a punishing amount of UV exposure. But, bacteria and fungus go ahead and live there anyway.

Heck, we often think of us air breathers as being high and dry compared to our aquatic lifeform cousins. But, when you get right down to it, we're really walking around in a chemical soup swimming with all manner of microbes, pollen, and particulates of every description. We are dwelling within our own rich, gaseous sea. Us terrestrial types are merely walking the sea floor, while there is an entire ocean of sky above us.

As you may have guessed by this point, we're taking to the skies on this week's episode.

In preparation, earlier this week I took a trip to Montana, the Zeppelin State. As is says on just about all of their highway signs, "You can't spell Zeppelin without Montana."

Rather than scrutinize the truth of that wordy state motto, let's focus on the spirit of it instead. Montana was certainly the place I needed to be to convert my Winnebago Cassandra into a more sky-friendly design.

You might be shocked to here that Winnebagos are, generally speaking, not known for their aerodynamics. In fact, I must have visited nearly a dozen Zeppelin docks before I found a proprietor forward-thinking enough to even humor the idea.

Now, that individual wouldn't agree to do the work herself, nor would she let her staff participate on the project. She said something about "air-worthiness" and not wanting to have

my death on her conscience, but for a hefty fee she did allow me to use her facility to complete my modifications.

Now, I'm far more accustomed to the natural science than to engineering, but I took enough high school shop class that with the help of an industrious blue-jay named Jasper and a handful of instructive YouTube videos, I didn't have much trouble getting Cassandra ready for the skies.

So, after 45 minutes of diligent work in the Zeppelin shop, I opened up the pneumatic roof on the facility and gained altitude, waving to the warm, incredulous folks who happened to look my way.

It was an overcast autumn day and that big, Montana sky was darkening with building thunderheads. Exactly the weather I needed to witness a miracle of gargantuan, atmospheric symbiosis.

Speaking of chasing miracles, how about a little poetry? It's time for today's hidden lore segment.

Hidden Lore:

Today's hidden lore is two poems from Priyanka Sacheti, a writer based in Bangalore, India.

Listen To the Mournful Wails of Planets And

moons
because
who else will?
They puppet-string
our lives, loves
but what of their loneliness
as they treadmill away
in that submarine ink sea?
Remember, the fish swimming
in waters of the
earth's deepest sea
are blind:
the sun is a distant galaxy
and sunlight,
an archaic language
that their ancestors
spoke many genes ago.
If they can't see,
can they be seen?
Saturn

sends a letter of grief
to its moon
in a world
where there are no postboxes,
yet still yearning
that its moon
will read its words
of blood.
And a fish goes to sleep,
startled into a nightmare of light,
waking up in relief
into that blessed dark,
its home and hope.

Parenting

The swallow mother
is building a nest
inside the porch:
she dive-bombs
intruders,
carrying bits of
straw missiles in her beak.
It is orange, very small,
and contains oceans-worth of love:
she is a mother, after all.
The birds of paradise
stare blankly from their nest,
this haute-couture dress of green,
drunk on the salt air,
hearing the invisible waves pound
the distant shore,
never seeing the sea,
having to imagine it (*does it have wings too,
bringing sounds in its beak?*)
Look how they burn,
these fires of flowers.
The garden was empty
but now they have the swallow mum
to talk to
and they don't feel lonely
anymore,
shut out by
the shuttered window

that nobody ever opens,
the flowers no one waters,
leaving it all to the sun and rain.

These poems play with the tension between vast spaces and living, intimate moments. The moon, the sea, the sleep of a fish, the thoughts of a swallow returning to her nest. The effect, for me, is to contextualize small, seemingly fragile lives within the world of immeasurable seas and unthinkable distances. There is a feeling here of both hope and isolation. The strange, uniqueness of being a living thing is such a massive, mysterious universe. Just beautiful.

Priyanka Sacheti is a writer based in Bangalore, India. Raised in Oman and educated in United Kingdom, she has been published in *Guardian*, *Art Slant*, *The Establishment*, *Gulf News*, and *Brownbook* among others. She is presently an editor at *Mashallah News*. Her literary work has appeared in various journals and anthologies. She tweets @priyankasacheti1. A collection of her writing can be found at priyankasacheti.contently.com.

Like most Winnebagos, Cassandra has a pressurized cabin, substantial oxygen reserves, and a sophisticated climate control system standard, so once lift and propulsion were accounted for, we were off to the races.

Well, not racing so much as rising steadily into a churning storm. Buffeted by wind and rattled by the staccato impact of hail stones. I held my weathered fingers over the dashboard vents to warm my joints and I breathed deep that sharp, ozone smell of the storm.

I fiddled with a modified “fish finder” on my dash and the bright green screen came to life. I had to make some adjustments for the scale I had and mind. Plus, I wasn’t seeking a fish in water... I was seeking a fish in the air. Well, not a fish exactly...

As I rose into the blind gray of the clouds my fish finder chirped. Off to the north it showed a huge, shark-shaped blob of darker green making lazy circles in and out of the sensor range.

The wind was alive and kicking in Cassandra’s steering wheel, but I wrestled us into a northerly heading and kept gaining altitude.

The windshield grew lighter and soon I found myself in an in-between place. The storm raged below me. Gauzy clouds rushed by further overhead. Light grays above dark grays.

As soon as my eyes adjusted to the light, I saw it and it was everything I had hoped.

A storm shark. Bigger than a dozen city blocks. More mountain than animal. Half meteorological phenomenon and half living creature. It rose up out of the storm below like a breaching whale and I saw it plainly silhouetted against the lighter clouds above.

Its body was made of a dark, dense cloud vapor that carried hints of midnight blue. The length of its body and especially its dorsal fin seemed to be stitched through with lightning that pulsed and strobed at regular intervals. Its wide, gaping mouth was broad and seemingly toothless, reminding me of the gentle whale shark, the largest fish in the sea.

Through the work of other CryptoNaturalists, especially Cat Stone and Valentina Blackwood, we know that the storm shark isn't actually a single animal. It's a collection of cloud-dwelling bacteria and fungi that have adapted to live in the sky and formed a symbiotic bond, forming a composite animal under the right weather conditions.

The storm shark grazes on other microbes in the storm and seems to harvest electrical energy as well, though the mechanism through which it seems to harness lightning is still an utter mystery.

I halted Cassandra's ascent and simply watched the colossal creature, a team effort of millions of tiny lives coalescing into a wonder of the natural world.

The storm shark just kept circling. Silent. Impossibly large. Both a part of the storm and distinct from it.

I lost track of time. The storm continued. At some point, the sun set and I was left staring at nothing more than a vague shape lit intermittently by a flash of lightning.

The storm finally moved on and I was left to wonder if the shark moved on with it or simply dissipated, returning to the water cycle until another chance to manifest presented itself.

I missed the creature immediately, though I have no doubt that that storm shark will continue to swim through my memories, just as strange and vivid as the first moment I saw it. I can still see it now.

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

End.

Episode 12: Storm Shark (00:13:30)

Show Notes

What creature swims through the ocean of the sky? What could graze within the storm? I know the answer. Listen and you will too.

Poetry by Priyanka Sacheti. Priyanka is a writer based in Bangalore, India. Raised in Oman and educated in United Kingdom, she has been published in *Guardian*, *Art Slant*, *The Establishment*, *Gulf News*, and *Brownbook* among others. She is presently an editor at *Mashallah News*. Her literary work has appeared in various journals and anthologies. She

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