

Episode 13: Sassafras Grove
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The passing of time is subjective. Much as trees barely notice our hurried lives, there are species that view us as immobile statues while dozens of their generations flash by in the span of a single human breath.

Welcome, to The CryptoNaturalist

Howdy listeners. You know, careful planning is a noble habit. It keeps our feet on the path and our eyes up, looking toward a destination rather than simply gazing too much inward or too much outward in a way that nibbles at our time like a country mouse in the bread box.

Sure, introspection can be a worthwhile, productive pleasure. But, it's the human condition to weigh our actions against the fundamental knowledge that our time here is finite, a fact that makes each of our moments into shimmering jewels, flowing past in a gleaming stream that we can neither dam nor divert.

So, I was rather frustrated to find myself trapped within a caldera deep in a hollow glacier beneath the ice-jungles of Antarctica for most of last month. Needless to say, the details of my time of captivity make for a dull story, so I won't take up your time describing my crystalline prison. But believe you me, when I finally finished burrowing my way to the surface with the help of my trusty Winnebago, I had a foot full' o lead **and** mind full' o get-up-and-go. The call of the open road thundered in my ears like the booming dive of a supersonic falcon.

I put the pedal to the metal and smiled as the miles flew by, taking with them a bit of the weight of inaction that had settled on my shoulders. Perhaps unsurprisingly, I found myself returning to the states and my old stomping grounds in the Ohio Valley. Home territory. Something about the wilderness here feels like a security blanket to this old wanderer. Maple and oak. Sweetgum and locust. Walnut and shagbark hickory. Old friends that always seem happy to see me.

I gotta admit, despite all my talk of planning and hurryin', I didn't know my destination this week until I laid eyes on it.

I was exploring an overgrown path in Licking Country, not too far from the Dawes Arboretum. I was pickin' my way through briars and ducking beneath overgrown honeysuckle bushes. Autumn was heavy on the place, cool and wet, but there was still plenty of green about. To my right, through a clump of paw-paw trees, there was a wall of sandstone so smooth and regular that I wondered if it had been sculpted that way.

The surface of the stone was dotted with moss and lichen, radiating outward in spiderweb pattern from a central, round hole in the wall about three feet off the ground. The hole was just wide enough for yours truly to crawl through on knees and elbows with a small circle of golden light at the far end. I jugged the tunnel to be about thirty feet long and, while there was line of standing water and no shortage of cobwebs down that stony corridor, I resolved to pass through.

See, I was born with an enduring belief that the most inconvenient places to reach are often the places most worth visiting. Plus, heck, the day I won't crawl through an inexplicable tunnel to an unknown destination is the day I give-up on being a CryptoNaturalist.

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

Today's Hidden Lore is a poem from Suzannah Dalzell.

Hidden Lore Segment:

The Pheasant

The pheasant stumbled around the yard
drunk on the fermented windfall apples
along the driveway. Wormy and sour
the apples were probably planted
for cider not eating – the trees were that old.

Much older than the old cocker spaniel
splayed out in the grass wheezing
in perfect thirds – because a bullet
nicked his lung when some fool hunter
from the city mistook him for a deer.

In the natural order of things – as created
by the English in the High Middle Ages
who brought the breed from Spain to flush
exotic Asian game birds into the open
to be shot en masse – the pheasant
would take flight at the sight of the dog.

Instead, addled by drink, it walked up
and peered closely at the comatose cocker
first with one eye then the other. Unable
from this vantage point to form an accurate
binocular summation, the pheasant –

iridescent bottle-green feathers flashing
in the sharp October sun – settled
next to the spaniel and closed its eyes.

This poem is one of those pieces of writing that hovers in the air like a portal, inviting you to step through to a moment in someone else's memory. I can smell those apples rotting on the ground. I can see the dinosaur eyes of that intoxicated pheasant eyeing that sleepy dog, wheezing out the story of his misfortune. Just beautiful.

Suzannah Dalzell lives on Whidbey Island north of Seattle, Washington where she divides her time more or less equally between writing and land conservation. Among the journals her work has appeared in are Flyway, Pilgrimage Magazine, About Place, Earthspeak and The Raven Chronicles. She is currently working on a collection of poems that explore the places where her ancestry bumps up against race, class and environmental damage.

A familiar smell greeted me as I neared the end of that sandstone tube, begrimed and plucking cobwebs from my beard. It was an old smell. A smell from my childhood. Old remedies for stomach aches and roots dug from dark soil. Sassafras.

I tumbled from the tunnel and found myself in a dense grove of sassafras trees, surrounded on all sides by smooth brown sandstone. It was warmer there and the mitten-shaped leaves of the sassafras trees were the young green of early spring. The sun was warm and I was quickly compelled to strip off my coat and leave it by the stone.

The sassafras I've known have always been slender, relatively small trees that huddle along the margins of denser woods. And the trees near the encircling wall fit that image, but deeper in the grove I could see taller and taller specimens. Sassafras trees the size of oaks.

When I was a child, I would chew the leaves of sassafras and pretend I was a deer. I drank sassafras tea and generally loved the smell and feel of the plants. So, while this place was uncanny, I just didn't have it in me to feel any concern or suspicion about the place.

I marched straight toward what I judged to be the center, giving every tree I passed a friendly pat.

There was no doubt at all when I had found the exact center of the place, a matter of hour's hike. The center tree, the mother tree, was the size of a giant sequoia. It was like the axle of the great, stone-rimmed wheel of the grove.

I felt a radiating warmth as I approached the tree and frankly I'm unsure if it was a physical sensation or purely mental.

There were strange markings dotting the house-sized trunk which, when I came near, I saw to be face-shaped recesses as if the wood were soft clay and hundreds of people and animals had simply pressed their faces into the pliant wood. I saw everything from the huge indentations of long-gone cave bear faces to the tiny, pinpricks of ant faces.

I circled the tree, studying each face print, knowing what I would find and still tingling with mingled fear and excitement.

And, there it was, my own familiar face shape pressed into the wood just at eye-level.

I don't recall making the decision to press my face into that bespoke arboreal wonder, but I did. And when I did I learned things that I will cherish the rest of my life.

I learned what it feels like when a questing root tip discovers ground water. I learned something of the taste of sunlight. I learned the thoughts of the first sassafras tree that weren't really thoughts at all. I saw the faces of animals, living and extinct. Animals I know and animals for which we have no names. I saw all of human civilization as crackling, electric static buzzing over the landscape and changing it in unpredictable ways.

And... then I woke up. I was seated with my back against the great tree with tears still wet on my cheeks and a mind swimming with alien thoughts and familiar gratitude.

It was special. Even for me.

I plan to revisit that grove later this evening and, as I sit here recording, I'm giddy just thinking about it.

But, first things first, I see we have new transition. Let's take a listen.

Ah, yes. This is Dr. Pennington transmitting on CryptoNaturalist frequency 11-58-1. How very quaint.

So, you escaped my trap in Antarctica did you?

Well, it hardly matters. You remain as much of a danger to yourself as anything I could plan.

Did it ever occur to you that, perhaps, some things are secret for a reason? No. I suppose it wouldn't occur to you. The hubris of you.

I wonder if you even remember me. It has been a very long time since either of us could truly be considered human, though that sort of realization would likely call for more self-reflection than you possess.

Still, some human motivations linger like fossils in the layered stone of the mind. Motivations like ambition. Motivations like revenge.

Part of me wants to air my ancient grievances with you here and now, but what would be the purpose? I don't seek an answer from the court of public opinion. I seek an older form of satisfaction.

No matter. Words are but words.

We will meet again soon enough, CryptoNaturalist.

What an absolutely ludicrous title.

(end)

Huh. Not exactly a riveting field report, but I'm not here to censor an open forum. I do feel like that fella could benefit from a soothing mug of sassafras tea, but, hey, it takes all kinds.

Before I sign off, I just wanna say be kind to yourself out there folks. Take a little time to get outdoors, press palm to tree bark, look up into the sky and center yourself among all that which is ancient, green, and growing. There's an awful lot of turmoil in the world and, well, the human brain is a sponge that soaks up news and information. I recommend that some of that information you consume comes from the wild places and enters through your own fingertips, your own eyes and ears. You are worth the time and effort to cultivate a little peace of mind.

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

End.

Show Notes: Episode 13: Sassafras Grove: (00:14:40)

This week we visit home territory and visit a special grove of sassafras trees.

Hidden lore segment poetry contributed by Suzannah Dalzell. Suzannah lives on Whidbey Island north of Seattle, Wa where she divides her time more or less equally between writing and land conservation. Among the journals her work has appeared in are Flyway, Pilgrimage Magazine, About Place, Earthspeak and The Raven Chronicles. She is currently working on a collection of poems that explore the places where her ancestry bumps up against race, class and environmental damage.