

Episode 17: Found
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Right now, my mind is thinking in electrical impulses. My vocal chords are turning those thoughts into vibrations in the air. My microphone is converting those vibrations back into electrical impulses which are being converted back to air vibrations by your speakers or headphones only so your ears can convert them back again into electrical impulses in your brain and all of that is so commonplace we hardly ever think about it.

Welcome, to The CryptoNaturalist.

Hi there, listeners. I have had a bit of an ordeal.

Ordeals are unpleasant enough, but heck, they are part of a full life, aren't they? The chaos that let's you appreciate the peace which follows. The chilly feet that lend socks straight from the dryer their heavenly quality.

How shall I share the experiences of the last week or so with you? I suppose the best way for you to imagine it is if you step into my shoes for a bit. How about you slip on the CryptoNaturalist hat for a few minutes? I could use a little break from the driver's seat anyhow.

Your story begins, as so many stories begin, when you arrive on an uncharted island composed of discarded teeth.

Now islands like this are not as rare as some might think. A lot of teeth go missing in the world for a myriad of different reasons and, well, everything needs a place to belong. Why, exactly, they orient themselves into small vignettes and sculptures, (mostly referencing Shakespeare's tragedies), you do not know.

You wish you could stay and observe the teeth, but you have an appointment. Dr. Pennington has been writing you every Tuesday like clockwork for months, though you're not sure how he's reliably finding you. Nor are you sure you know what he means when he insists you know exactly who is he and what he wants.

You do not know.

But you try to be polite, especially to a fan, so you agree to meet him on this particularly edentulous archipelago. You pat Casandra as you head to your meeting, and she rumbled at you, always a worrier. You think, not for the first time, that winebegos are a particularly anxious breed of motor vehicle, and you head on down the beach.

You find it's hard to walk on teeth. They slide a great deal more than you can adjust for, but you're making good time. You find the good doctor sitting on a particularly large cyprus knee.

You're not sure how he got there. There's no ship or boat or even an extra-temporal passenger buffalo, but there he is, tall and thin, a little uncomfortably thin to your eye, with an impeccable black suit and a bowler hat with a nickel gray flower in the band. He holds a cane that looks precisely like a cat's tail, the plant not the fuzzy animal kind of cat's tail.

The flower you don't recognize, which is impressive. You know a LOT of flowers.

"Ah, the CryptoNaturalist," he says when he sees you. "I'm so glad you could make it."

Now, you're not sure if he means it, you've always been better at flora and fauna and your interpersonal skills are a bit rusty, but you think he says your title with a little...d disdain.

"Dr. Pennington, I'm glad to meet you," you say.

And then he gets very angry and you're quite sure you've done something wrong, though you're not certain what exactly it was that you did. This sort of thing is why you prefer the company of your Winnebago.

You can tell he's winding himself up for a full on monolog, but you know it's time for a hidden lore segment, so you apologize and ask his indulgence as you fish in your pocket for today's poem by Leslie J. Anderson.

I Know You Want To Lie By The Roadside But The Wolves Are Coming, Sweetheart.

I'm here with you.
Our feet are bare
at the beginning
of a long walk.

I know the field
looks empty now.
It's not. The seeds
are still growing.

Do not learn the lessons
of heartbreak.
The wisdom of sorrow is a lie.

It will tell you

wolves are a mercy,
that a bare field
is acceptable.

If you need to rest let's do it now.
Drink water, sleep,
hold yourself.
Save your voice
for when it's time
to scream.

I won't lie to you, though.
The wolves are coming.

In your heart is a knife
but also
a harvest.

When it's time,
use one to protect
the other.

You feel something in this poem resonating with your understanding of the natural world, the way brutality and kindness can dwell within the same landscape, the same lifeform. The way mercy often has claws and sharp teeth, even as it speaks gentleness and kindness into the world.

Leslie's bio comes to mind and you find yourself saying it aloud. Leslie J. Anderson's writing has appeared in *Asimov's*, *Uncanny Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *Apex*, to name a few. Her collection of poetry, *An Inheritance of Stone*, was released from Alliteration Ink and was nominated for an Elgin award. Poems from it have won 2nd place in the *Asimov's Reader's Awards*, and were nominated for Pushcart and Rhysling award. Find Leslie at www.lesliejanderson.com or @inkhat on twitter.

Dr. Pennington stares at you, tapping his foot with an impatient rattle on the toothy soil.

"Quite finished?" He asks. "Good. Then allow me to give you a little gift. A new pet for your collection, hmm?"

You see him reach in a breast pocket and produce a gold object that looks a bit like a pocket watch. He clicks it open and you hear the telltale sound of a Valentine Borer, an absurdly dangerous beetle that only drinks heart's blood. The noise is a bit like a chainsaw running underwater and you see it flash crimson as it corkscrews away from Dr. Pennington and straight at your chest.

You have a few moments to appreciate what a large and aggressive specimen is careening toward your beating heart just before the Crested Threepwood's Chameleon that lives in your vest pocket snatches the beetle from the air with a flick of its long, bioluminescent tongue, leaving an afterimage of greenish light lingering in your vision.

"Well, that's a dangerous sort of creature to keep on your person," you say. "Better switch to a more personable species. A chameleon, for example."

He frowns at you, then turns the watch to show you, you guess, the time. You don't want to be rude, so you step forward and lean over and glance at the beautifully wrought hands, 14 in total, spinning merrily around a red, luminous watch face.

When you look up to remark on the watch, you are no longer on the beach.

While spontaneous transportation might be unnerving to a more junior cryptonaturalist, you simply find your new surroundings inconvenient. For one, you left your tea on Cassandra's counter top, and it will surely be cold by the time you get back.

You are standing in a long hallway with a rich, red carpet and black paneled walls. The passageway smelled strongly of Sulphur and ash, letting you know you were likely in the heart of some kind of super volcano. It's likely that Dr. Pennington wanted to invite you for supper, and had meant to transport you to his dining room, but he had no way of knowing you had just come from harvesting the chrysalises of Velvet Turnspotters, and were likely covered in their dust, which famously frustrates all kinds of teleportation as well as tranmogrophocation.

You suppose you will just see yourself out. Dr. Pennington's home is truly a marvel. There is a spacious Titan Piranha tank, a very impressive laser aviary full of photon starlings, a long study filled with a variety of weaponry it must have taken him years to collect, as well as a pit, the bottom of which you can't detect.

You smile as you catch yourself thinking of this place as Dr. Pennington's habitat and you consider the old truism that a habitat tells the story of its residents.

Anyway, you found what was probably not the front door, but lead to a tunnel at least three miles long. The walk was hot but not altogether unpleasant, and there was the genial rumblings of the volcano to keep you company.

At the end of the tunnel was Cassandra, who informed you that you'd been gone much longer than you'd thought, but she managed to keep your tea hot just the same.

And so here we are, kind listener, back in our trusty points of view, back in our inestimable Winnebago and keeping our promise to it that we will put a few hundred miles between us and Dr. Pennington's volcano before we plot our next adventure.

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

End.

Credits

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Show Notes: Episode 17: Missing: (00:13:26)

The CryptoNaturalist is lost and then found in the usual place, a twisted scientist's volcano lair.

Hidden lore poetry by Leslie J. Anderson. Leslie's writing has appeared in Asimov's, Uncanny Magazine, Strange Horizons, Daily Science Fiction, and Apex, to name a few. Her collection of poetry, *An Inheritance of Stone*, was released from Alliteration Ink and was nominated for an Elgin award. Poems from it have won 2nd place in the Asimov's Reader's Awards, and were nominated for Pushcart and Rhysling award. Find Leslie at www.lesliejanderson.com or @inkhat on twitter.