

Episode 19: Midnight Library
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Every wolf's howl since the beginning of the species has been part of the same, ancient sentence in a language that takes generations to speak. Human's can't understand the words because... they aren't for us.

Welcome, to The CryptoNaturalist.

Ah, hello my friends. As ever, it's so nice to be chatting with you.

It's roughly 5:08 AM as I record these words. I just spent a fruitful time overnighing in a library in Muskingum county, part of the Appalachian region of Ohio.

What a pleasure it is to spend time in a library. Surrounded by thousands of books, windows into other minds. Some of the writers are living. Some are not. Neatly ordered rectangles of concentrated human life and intellect. A book is certainly a kind of ghost and libraries are pleasantly haunted places.

Add to that, the physical nature of books and paper. Wood pulp from trees all over the world, cellular memories of soil and sky and a thousand wild places pressed into the pages. The faint scents of mildew and the lemon tang of industrial cleaning products.

Why, you combine all those elements and then add in that shadowed sense of solitude that fills every well-trafficked public space after closing time and you've created a habitat that is undeniably strange and wild. Just the sort of place I like to visit.

Today we're talking about that silent prowler of midnight libraries, the book fox. Also, sometimes known as the ink hound, text fox or Gutenberg's fox.

You know, typically a **group of foxes** is referred to as a skulk, a leash, a troop, or an earth, but I suppose you could call a group of book foxes a shelf or even a library. Of course, they are deeply solitary animals, so there's little call for the collective noun.

I managed to observe a book fox in its natural habitat this past evening and, I must say, they are just as inspirational and intriguing as the libraries they call home. Miracles within miracles. Magic within magic.

Speaking of inspiration, how about a little poetry?

It's time for Today's Hidden Lore segment.

Hidden Lore:

Today's hidden lore is a poem by Lucille Valentine.

Coyote Sisters

It is not quiet now,
but I do not fear,
the echo of coyote voices
following me home,
parodying my own,
rough from disuse.

The flash of their eyes
in the light of itinerant headlights
is too much like my own -
moon and mirror,
predator and panicked pulse
resting on the same haunches.

How these violent things
mimic my movements,
replicate the tension
in my own shoulders
and the clench of my jaw.

These tales I tell
of rolling up pant legs
to wade through water -
stories of overflowing lakes
and girls who stepped around,
never noticing how quickly
we've had to learn to adapt.

Their ears perk up
at the mention of trudging through
syrup-thick desert heat,
and swimming through oceans
of burning asphalt,
to settle in untamed warrens
out of reach of personhood's grasping fingers.

In my next life I am a full belly,
alchemized into a larger unself:
a huddle of bodies;
a nest of bristling fur;
a wreath of slack muscle
and lowered hackles.

Oh, how we share
the heft of this world.

You could do worse
than to learn the lessons
of the trickster sisters;
of feral joy, shrieking,
fierce enough to crack the sky;
of teeth sharp enough
to break bone.

This poem is just so very alive, so full of a paradoxical mix of hope and brutality. Predator and prey. Narrative and identity. The lessons of feral joy. It would be difficult for me to choose a favorite line, but, "Oh, how we share the heft of this world" really resonates with me. Yes indeed.

"Lucille Valentine is a desert rat masquerading as a voice actor, poet, visual artist, and LGBTQ+ community advocate whose works often include themes of poverty, womanhood, queer and trans experience, along with whatever her current existential crisis is. You can hear her in the podcasts *The Six Disappearances of Ella McCray*, the upcoming second season of *Unplaced*, among a number of other upcoming shows, or by pressing your ear up against a cactus skeleton on a windy night. You can find her disappointing every grammar elitist over on twitter [@severelytrans](https://twitter.com/severelytrans)."

I found a lovely, dark alcove furnished with a comfortable chair next to a shelf full of graphic novels. In terms of places I've waited for an encounter with CryptoNature, well, it's safe to say this was one of the more comfortable.

Here's a general tip for naturalists and CryptoNaturalists alike. When you're settling in to observe nature, I like to allow a good fifteen minutes of pure, contemplative stillness to settle in before I expect to see much of anything. It takes at least that long for the memory of our clumsy steps and basic human ruckus to fade from the mind of the habitat you plan to observe. Humans are fascinating, but disruptive animals.

In this particular instance of waiting, I plucked an Aqua Man trade paperback from the shelf and read a bit. I must say, I love comics, graphic novels, and sequential art of all types. It was near pitch dark in the library but, well, my night vision is uncommonly good.

I enjoyed what I read, but... if you'll forgive a brief observation... fiction often imagines the ability to speak with fish or birds or trees as a super power, a way to gain an army of powerful allies, but that's not how it works. Trust me. If you open up a direct line of communication with

organisms millions of years older than your entire species, well, you work for them now and you're grateful for the opportunity to do it.

But, I'm getting off track.

The book fox, like most foxes, establishes a home range around its den, though it's noteworthy to point out that no other fox has a home range quite so small as a single library. But, then, book foxes have uncommon habits in general when compared to other foxes.

Heck, I'm frankly excited to tell you that I don't even know what book foxes eat. As far as I know, nobody knows. And that ignorance is as beautiful a chance for growth as any autumn acorn waiting patiently for next spring's rain. I have a suspicion that their diet is rather less tangible than other foxes, but my suspicion remains unconfirmed at the time of this recording.

I may not know what they eat, but I do know this. In a library, we have approximated many aspects of a forest. The wood of the books. The shade. That quiet sense of concealed mystery and meaning. The hidden life and furtive stories waiting on each shelf. The feel of a place that coaxes us toward exploration. Forests and libraries are not-so-distant cousins, so it's hardly surprising to find foxes in amongst the books.

I pondered my ponderings as I sat there in the dark in my comfy chair and... I may have rested my eyes a bit too.

Ok, I fell asleep. Libraries are a home away from home for me and I may have gotten a little too comfortable.

I awoke to a tickle on my nose. A snuffling, sniffing sound. And then a cold, wet touch on my cheek.

I opened my eyes to find a book fox standing on the arm of my chair studying my face. Its coat was a gradient of grays on grays. Pencil lead to cigar ashes, with a faint pinstriping that, in the dim light, looked a bit like lines of text. Its eyes were inky pools with a bright spark of curiosity.

It put a dark paw on my chest and tilted its head a bit, studying my face, sniffing my beard, and twitching its oversized ears in every direction.

After a wonderful, endless moment of eye-to-eye connection, It swung its head around to the right. A sound must have caught its attention. A sound I certainly couldn't hear, but it hopped down from my chair and darted off between the shadowy shelves on silent paws.

I was left sitting there feeling the phantom pressure of its paw on my chest and smelling a sweet, dusty smell like old books that have been resting in a warm attic.

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, saw that dawn wasn't far off, and headed back to my Winnebago. I passed through one of Cassandra's hall of mirrors on my way to the recording studio and saw that there were a few ink smudges on my face where the fox's nose touched me. Upon closer inspection, I could see fragments of letters in the smudges, as if I had dozed off on a freshly printed newspaper.

[The Transmission]: Transmission Alert. Transmission Alert.

Ah, thanks for letting me know. Sounds like we have a new field report. Let's take a listen.

Field Report

Jed VanDorn reporting out of the treetops. CryptoNaturalist frequency 11-58-1.

It's me again. The emissary of the squirrels and I'm here to tell you that you goofed-up big time.

Last time I transmitted, I told you to start ignoring the squirrels. Did you do it? No, ground-walker, you did not do it!

It was for your own good, you know. Believe it or not, the squirrel queen has your best interests at heart. But, I guess that ship has sailed.

Look, I can't blame you. Squirrels are hard to ignore. Their grace. Their obvious nobility. Their fluffy tails like sunsets made of fur! I get it!

But, you need to understand, squirrels are fighting battles that you can't comprehend. They're protecting you, protecting this world from threats that defy human speech. The squirrels see angles that you don't see!

To you, a road is a road. Well, to a squirrel, roads are roads too, sure, but also trees are roads and branches are roads and the empty air between the branches are roads. Their minds go in more directions than ours, so they learn secrets that we don't learn. They see enemies that we don't see. They stare-down the in-between things that you can't imagine! Don't even try to imagine them!

So, the least YOU can do is pitch in to the cause.

Every Wednesday, we ask that you leave one standard, metric tube-sock full of peanut butter or walnuts or squirrel-sized swords and axes out in a tree of your choosing. Don't worry. We'll find it and we'll put it to good use.

Some of the queen's advisors were worried that this would look like protection money, but it's not! It's your civic duty, that's what it is!

As the squirrel queen says, [squirrel chattering].

Jed VanDorn, signing off for now.

(End Field Report)

Huh. Well, that sounds like a reasonable request for a worthy cause. I better go get my tube sock ready now before I forget. It'll give me something to work on before the library opens and I can check out that Aqua Man comic I was browsing.

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

Credits

A special thanks to my friend Saker for playing the voice of Jed VanDorn. Saker is a cohost of It's All Been Done: A Barenaked Ladies podcast. It's a comedy podcast in which two pals take a journey through BNL's entire discography a song at a time. You can find it on your favorite podcast catcher. Saker also has a nerd hip-hop group called 2d6, online at 2d6music.com.

You can support the production of this show and find bonus content and exclusive episodes by becoming a patron at Patreon.com/CryptoNaturalist OR by visiting the Merch and Support sections on Cryptonaturalist.com for t-shirts, stickers, and more. You'll find information about submitting your poetry or prose for our hidden lore segments in the about section of our website. The CryptoNaturalist is written and read by Jarod Anderson. Our theme song is Banish Misfortune, played by Andrew Collins. Stay Curious. Stay Wild. Stay Weird.

Show Notes: Episode 19: Midnight Library (00:16:49)

There's a wilderness inside every library. This episode visits one of the nocturnal residents after closing time.

Hidden Lore poetry by Lucille Valentine. Lucille is a desert rat masquerading as a voice actor, poet, visual artist, and LGBTQ+ community advocate whose works often include themes of poverty, womanhood, queer and trans experience, along with whatever her current existential crisis is. You can hear her in the podcasts The Six Disappearances of Ella McCray, the upcoming second season of Unplaced, among a number of other upcoming shows, or by pressing your ear up against a cactus skeleton on a windy night. You can find her disappointing every grammar elitist over on twitter [@severelytrans](https://twitter.com/severelytrans)

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