

The Cryptonaturalist Ep 2: Teacup Whale
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All the species of starfish crawling the ocean floor should really be known as false-starfish or lesser-starfish. Thankfully, no true starfish has ever visited our solar system. For the sake of all life on earth, I hope they never do.

Welcome to the Cryptonaturalist.

Howdy, listeners. Or should I say, ahoy? Which is just the merfolk word for howdy.

That's right. As you've probably guessed from this flawless pirate impression and the eyepatch you currently hear in my voice, today's episode takes us to the briny abyss. Folks, you just can't love the secrets of the wild without loving the sea.

Why, just think of it. From the surface, it's a vast, undulating plane stretching to the distant horizon. We can neither walk on its surface, nor easily peer below the waves. To enter its depths unaided by human ingenuity is either the briefest of pilgrimages or a certain death sentence. To swim its alien waters is to voluntarily plummet many links down the food chain. Down, in the dark, hungry waters from which all life on earth sprang, we find that our strength is moot. Our senses ill-adapted and our bodies reduced to the efficacy of a flailing infant as giant lifeforms many-times older than our entire species prowl with a liquid grace that makes the flight of birds seem clumsy by comparison.

Now, I expect that, at this point, many of you are picturing sharks, those obsidian-eyed PR darlings of the deadly deep. But, let me just remind you that sharks are nothing but the tip of the fatality iceberg when it comes to the dangers of the oceans.

How about the leopard seal? Did you know that there was a confirmed case of fatal attack on a human by a leopard seal as recently as 2003? It's true. Leopard seals can grow to around 13 ft long, 1,300 lbs, and they have a mouth so packed full of sharp teeth that their skulls look like they would more properly belong to a predatory dinosaur than a modern mammal.

Sharks are fine and all, but what about the great barracuda, killer whales, Humboldt squids, and the hundreds upon hundreds of venomous and/or poisonous creatures that could kill you accidentally out of nothing but pure, blind reflex. Meanwhile, we humans are nothing but knobby skin-sacks, more likely to be killed by drowning or water pressure than by any of the living nightmares that glide effortlessly through the lethal waters that cover more than 2/3rds of this great planet's surface. Yes, nowhere in known space contains more teeth than the oceans, and yet the sublime natural wonder of the open-water calls to the human imagination as sure as any forested mountain-side or weekend trip to floating sky-desert. Wonder and danger go together like grits and peanut butter.

So, friends, next time you think about working on your summer beach-body, maybe give less thought to developing your six-pack abs, and more thought to electrified, reinforced body-armor.

Lacking both six-pack abs and body-armor, today I found myself on an expedition to that ancient hub of American bravery and brutality, the Nantucket whale fishery. And, no, listeners, I'm not talking about the artificial Nantucket that the locals maintain to distract casual tourists like Herman Melville. I'm talking about the real Nantucket. Lower Nantucket. That drifting island that roams New England waters and carries on its back a perpetual column of blue-black sea-fog so dense that some sailors call it the isle of perpetual midnight. Off of the shifting, sable shores of that errant Island swims one of the rarest wonders of the abyss, the legendary Teacup Whale, a creature as colossal in mystique as it is diminutive in stature.

I originally heard of the Teacup whale from a companionable stranger and fellow traveler who helped me pry the parasitic hubcap-sized gasoline ticks off of my Winnebago in a Walmart parking lot outside of Missoula, Montana. As we toiled together to rid my vehicle of the common highway pest, the stranger spun yarns of her time as a little girl spending lightless summers on the bone-shard beaches of lower Nantucket and her encounter with Teacup Whalers who risked their lives to harvest the whale's most valuable asset, a single bespoke song in which the listener can hear a melodic representation of their entire life in an explosion of sound that resonates through the body at the cellular level. The euphoria produced is said to be simultaneously spiritually terrifying and life-affirming.

Speaking of things both terrifying and life-affirming, how about some poetry? It's time for today's Hidden Lore segment.

Today's Hidden Lore comes in the form of two poems from Judith Skillman.

Loop

We walk pulpy leaves
smeared into the ground
by snowmelt. They resemble
torn pages of newspaper
shining white from dusk
and the full moon. This trail
pulls us deeper into the forest.
We come to a wall of rocks
piled by army engineers
to keep the lake from flowing
into houses set lower down
in the event of a flood.
The moon, the leaves, the news,

the rocks I can no longer
traverse, and, as an anthill
rises in the distance I want
that pile to seethe with war,
red bodies pitted against black
in receding light—
I want to hear the echoed doubled
sound waves reflected back
from the wall of these elder-years
spent foraging for sustenance
on an old path
near a lover's hammock.

Scroll

Ever unraveling—
a fiddlehead fern
wood-mottled,
the femininity of a violin
unplayed—no ripples
boning the f-holes
to song, only winter
here in rooms
above rooms.
Lichen trees dot
the grounds
where lonely men
in their VR headsets
stand on Everest
looking at sunset.

These two poems make me picture Time and Solitude as dark, looming creatures that haunt the wild places like prowling jungle cats. The passage of time is an implacable thing and if solitude isn't its lover, then they're at least drinking buddies. Next time you go for a stroll in the woods, pause for a moment and see if you can feel the breath of time or loneliness tickle the hairs on the back of your neck. Either way, you know they're there with you.

Judith Skillman's recent book is *Kafka's Shadow*, Deerbrook Editions, 2017. She is the recipient of an Eric Mathieu King Fund Award from the Academy of American Poets, and Washington Trust grant. Visit www.judithskillman.com or mosey on over to this episode's show notes for more information on her work.

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When I say “whaling,” I realize that some of you are picturing boats and lances and harpoons. Well, set those images aside. In terms of teacup whales, no boat could hope to spot a tiny spout in the pitch-black waters surrounding lower-Nantucket, and good luck tossing a hunk of sharpened metal through the teacup whale’s intense magnetic field.

No, when it comes to this rarest of whales, a dive suit and a stroll through liquid darkness is required. And the goal isn’t a mortal wound, but simple eye-contact. Only locking eyes with the tiny behemoth will trigger its life-changing song, but finding one as it hunts its eternal rival the mythic pocket-squid, is no simple matter. Men and women spend decades daring the cold, unforgiving deep for just one glimpse of the little leviathan.

Still, I felt confident that I could get the job done on a single Friday afternoon in a narratively appropriate amount of time.

It was a cold, dark, misty noon on lower Nantucket as I met my contact Dale to collect my dive gear. He was a pale, stroke-like man with milk-white irises and the weather-punished look of driftwood. The air was only fractionally drier than the sea and breeze smelled faintly of formaldehyde and sawdust. We stood next to where my Winnebago Cassandra was anchored off the rocky coast and Dale walked me through the operations of my weighted dive suit, dive helmet, and the injection that would cause my face and hands to bioluminesce enough to see my surroundings beneath the waves.

I thanked Dale and he nodded to me, his neck creaking like an old screen door. I suited up and marched toward the water trailing my air hose behind me. The eerie green glow of my face produced a round beam through the glass porthole of my helmet and I swept it back and fourth along the beach as I trudged into a choppy sea the color of tar.

As I advanced and my head dipped below the surface, the calm, weightless stillness washed over me and I peered down the green tunnel of my vision entranced as I walked to the rhythm of my own thunderous breathing.

Tiny fish, drawn to the light, darted in and out of my field of vision hunted by larger fish that lurked on the margins of my sight as half-seen shapes too fast and fleeting for certainty.

A sea-squatch lumbered across my path, its hulking frame trailing tendrils of seaweed and its jaw locked open in an endless, silent scream.

A fun side-note about sea-squatches. Many folks don’t realize that the sea-squatch and sasquatch are actually the exact same species. A sea-squatch is nothing more than a sasquatch that sought to end its long life by walking into the ocean. Funny thing is, sasquatches are immune to drowning, so they wander the sea floor crying out their endless frustration and

waiting for a death that refuses to arrive. Gentle, lovable, and doomed, I took the sea-squatch as a good omen and continued my stroll into the crushing deep.

I continued on for roughly 47 minutes without seeing another living creature. I knew I was approaching the end of my tether and my patience when I found what I was looking for, more than I was looking for in fact.

Hovering at eye level, unmoving in the green glow of my countenance, was a double semi-circle of teacup whales. There were at least two dozen present, which, by the estimate of some experts and Snapple-cap prophecies, was likely the entirety of the species.

The whales, which looked a lot like humpbacks the size of Boston terriers, began fanning out laterally until I was enclosed in a perfect circle of Cetacea. The creatures never changed their relative orientation in the water, always keeping their heads pointing my direction and though they barely seemed to move their fins, they began whirling around me with ever increasing speed. The water around me began to churn in a vortex, and yet I felt no push or pull.

I thought that I had achieved eye contact several times, but no song filled my being with acoustic bliss. I don't know if this is because I didn't achieve true eye contact or if there is something wapperjawed about my soul in particular. Hard to say.

The longer I stood there, the faster they whirled, until I had a snake's chance in a typing contest of picking out eyes in that blur of whale and water. I shook my head in wonderment and planned my egress. But, before I could go an eye the size of billboard opened ahead of me in the darkness and regarded me with, dare I say, a naturalist's curiosity. A moment later, hundreds of more peepers began to shine in the water like an alien constellation in a darkling sky.

I reached up and tipped the oversized hat I was wearing on top of my diving helmet, and then saluted my thousand-eyed, undersea colleague. I know a cryptonaturalist when I see one.

I ducked beneath the boiling, gray blur of teacup whales that encircled me and scooted on out of the phantom vortex. I took my sweet time moseying back to shore, satisfied by the first beach vacation I'd taken in a dog's age.

I returned my rented equipment to Dale and his gills flared appreciatively at my story.

Even now, as I record this, Cassandra is cutting trough the waves on our way back to terra-firma. Lower Nantucket is a magical place, even if I can't approve of whaling in any form. Friends, if you have to hunt something, hunt up a sense of awe at the majesty of our amazing planet. It can be illusive at times, but trust me, the prize is well-worth the chase.

As always, remember. We're all strange animals, so, act like it.

End.