

The Cryptonaturalist Ep 3: Orbital Kingfisher

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Show me a chicken and I'll show you a dinosaur. A tiny, hyper-intelligent dinosaur piloting the chicken from inside a state-of-the-art cockpit.

Welcome to the Cryptonaturalist.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

That, of course, is a stanza from John Keats' famous poem "Aunt Ruth and the Corn from Mars." While the poem is primarily concerned with intergalactic agriculture, it also gives an apt nod to our feathered friends. Yes, what poetic soul doesn't swell with inspiration at the very sight of a bird on the wing.

Whether you're an avid birdwatcher, a casual bird glimpser, or a stubborn bird-denier, you have to admit that the very idea of unaided flight invokes a dizzying sense of unimaginable freedom in the human mind. From cedar waxwing to peregrine falcon, the stewards of the great blue yonder are some of nature's most spectacular children.

This week's wanderings have taken me to Oregon's Sky Lake Wilderness, a stretch of pristine forest that lies along southern Oregon's Cascade Range from Crater Lake National Park southward to Route 140. Picture a mountainous landscape of gray rock, dense pine, and clear lakes reflecting the limitless sky above.

Sky Lake. What an appropriate named location to hunt for that rarest of avian specimens, The Orbital Kingfisher. Like some of its earth-bound cousins, the Orbital Kingfisher is said to dive into freshwater to catch its prey. Unlike its cousins, however, the Orbital Kingfisher begins that dive from the inky vacuum of space high above earth's atmosphere. Moreover, there is some speculation among Cryptonaturalists that these birds also fish in stranger rivers and lakes beyond the bounds of our waking world.

I found a suitably seldom-traveled gravel road just wide enough for Cassandra and drove the winding track upwards into a thick, sloping pinewood of mountain hemlocks. It was a stormy afternoon and the wind seethed through the boughs, making the trees roll and roil like a verdant sea alive with cresting waves. The crunch of gravel and the boom of thunder lent percussive weight to the hissing melody of the breath of the mountainside. Casandra rocked in the wind and the driving rain turned my windshield into an abstract watercolor of green and gray intermittently lost in blinding white flashes of lightning.

I flicked on the heater and drank in the ozone smell of the storm mingling with the fresh scents of earth and pine.

My drive ended as the road ended. The gravel path terminated at the foot of a ten foot tall chunk of rose quartz pocked with what appeared to be hundreds of tiny keyholes, each oozing a dark liquid that stung the eyes and much as the nose. I could smell the chemical tang of the liquid even from my driver's seat. These sorts of things are pretty common in the pacific Northwest, so I ignored it and got back to the task at hand. Some distractions steal only our time. Others steal things a bit more vital.

The patter of the rain on the hood of my Winnebago switched to a metallic tinkle as a localized torrent of tiny brass keys began to rain just in front of the stone.

I muttered my regrets to the Duke of Keys that I didn't have time for a visit today, and continued about my business. It's always a little insulting to be mistaken for a tourist, but I took it in stride.

Speaking of dangerous distractions, how about a little poetry? It's time for this week's Hidden Lore segment.

Today's Hidden Lore is a poem from Leslie J. Anderson

You Continue to Grow After Death

Not your hair or nails,

but you –
the unquantifiable and vaguely midnight blue
idea of you, full of tiny holes
through which the killing fire of the universe
winks like a party clown.

Even chaos can be calculated
and you can be dissected to the most basic part
constant as the universe, smelling of lilies.

Lowered into the ground and left
beneath the The End
you will grow in the shape of a sieve,
impossibly thin.

Infnite.

Never really whole again, but equivalent.

Don't be afraid when you float up
toward the top of the universe.

That is only your name for it
and when your mind is thin enough
that the word leaks free
you'll understand

or you won't. Be not afraid.

The ceiling is growing upward –
goes before you like your queen
into the thing we can't conceive
so everything is okay.

This poem makes me think of a sort of transitive property of death. Death as a becoming rather than as an ending. Mortality viewed through the lens of the conservation of matter and energy. As somebody who likes to find the hidden and seek out the new pathways, I find this to be a very welcoming image of the great beyond. A hidden track through an unexplored wilderness utterly inaccessible to the living. Now that sounds like an adventure.

Leslie J. Anderson's writing has appeared in Asimov's, Strange Horizons, Apex, Pseudopod, and Daily Science Fiction to name a few. Her work has been nominated for a Pushcart and a Rhysling Award. Her collection of poetry, An Inheritance of Stone, was nominated for an Elgin Award. She lives in a white house beside a cemetery with her husband and three dogs.

If you'd like to hear your work featured in a Hidden Lore segment, head on over to the about section of Cryptonaturalist.com for writers' guidelines.

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I slipped into my rain gear, swallowed an anti-lightening pill, and stepped out into the driving rain. The bourbon taste of the lightning pill mixed with the plasticity smell of my rain gear brought back a whole tapestry of sensory memories from decades upon decades of life as a rain

drenched walker of the wilds. I grinned at the way a scent or a taste can ambush us with unexpected associations and pressed my way through the dripping pines. I imagined it felt something like walking through an automatic carwash, the pine needles brushing my cheeks and whispering along my shoulders.

I had consulted my handy, paradoxical “Unmapped Roads of America” atlas before leaving Cassandra, and I was reasonably confident that the slope I was climbing ended in a plateau occupied by a large lake basin. It turns out, the atlas steered me right. Unmapped roads are always the most trustworthy.

I crested the lip of the plateau more than a little winded and sweating to a degree that made waterproof rain gear a moot point.

A bit of scouting and I found a tall mountain hemlock with a sturdy build, rich green foliage, and cones the deep burgundy of a fine wine. I climbed the tree using a technique taught to me by a former Cirque de sole acrobat and renowned tyromancer, you can probably guess who I mean, and found myself looking out at breathtaking vista veiled by sheets of silvery rain.

Orbital Kingfishers are known to have a crepuscular streak, so I settled in and waited for dusk to approach.

As I waited, I reflected on what I knew of the Orbital Kingfisher. I only knew one Cryptonaturalist who had ever seen the bird in person, and her experience was a bit harrowing. Laksha Patel, a fine colleague of mine, once recounted to me the story of her encounter with the cosmic predator. She had situated herself in a Subalpine Fir Tree and waited near a mountain lake only a couple hundred miles from my current location. Fortunately, she was able to see the kingfisher. Unfortunately, when it dove it dove for her, swallowing her whole. The bird digested her and excreted her in the space a few terrifying, claustrophobic moments and she found herself tumbling back to earth to fall unharmed into the nearby lake.

The Orbital Kingfisher didn't digest her flesh. Rather, it digested something less tangible. Down in its inscrutable gullet Laksha lost her appreciation for her favorite musician, which happened to be Dolly Parton. Somehow, the creature gained nourishment from metabolizing a small facet of Laksha's personality.

She confided in me that there are days that she wishes the creature would have taken something a little more mundane. Like a foot or an ear.

I reflected on Laksha's story as I waited and wondered if I shouldn't have done a bit more to disguise my position. Ah, well. Regrets are like interdimensional parasites. We've all got 'em and it doesn't bare further consideration.

I sang while I waited, passing the time in a swaying treetop beneath an angry sky.

Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene... I'm begging of you please, don't take my man....

The wait was not long.

I saw the Kingfisher before I heard it, rocketing through the atmosphere like a comet, leaving in its wake odd concentric circles of blueish vapor that hung in the sky like alien outriders from the churning thunderheads. The sonic boom of the bird's passing hit me just as I saw the creature strike the water like a thunderbolt. I barely had time to register a body like prismatic glass and wings like blades of violet light. White foam leapt higher than the surrounding treetops and a wave of force caused me to cling for dear life to the trunk of my hemlock. The tree continued to rock violently, and it was still bucking like a spooked horse when the Orbital Kingfisher surfaced with its prize.

I only glimpsed the thing held in its sofa-sized beak for a moment before the kingfisher beat the air and shot skyward in a motion that mocked everything I thought I knew about the physics of flight.

The kingfisher's meal writhed and buzzed like a livewire. It was shaped a bit like a question mark, except everywhere I looked to try to see a patch of fur or scales, I only saw another gaping mouth... another questing tongue. Later, I tried to sketch a thing that was more mouth than body in my notebook, but when I tried to conceive of it in three dimensions all I got was a nosebleed for my trouble.

My experience with the Orbital Kingfisher was a country mile away from the trouble Laksha faced, but I wouldn't exactly say it was comfortable either.

Still, if I were to write down ten virtues of my ideal day, I doubt comfortable would make the list and in seeing that great, space-faring bird I felt myself a bit more connected to the great beyond.

The venerable naturalist and nature lover John Muir once wrote, "every bird song, wind song, and tremendous storm song of the rocks in the heart of the mountains is our song, our very own, and sings our love."

To be in love with a thing that is somehow emended beyond reckoning and yet as intimate as the sound of your own heart in the silence beneath a mountain lake is the very soul of what it is to treasure the natural world.

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

End.