

Episode 31: A Voice in the Woods

Written by Jarod K. Anderson

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Just because each twig snap and leaf rustle in the forest isn't made by the same creature, doesn't mean it isn't all part of the same voice.

Welcome to the CryptoNaturalist.

Hello friends.

Let's talk about today. Today is a good topic of conversation because most everybody has one.

As for mine, it began near dusk in a rain-soaked river valley in the Adirondack mountains. I had heard of this valley. I had heard where it might be, but this is the sort of valley that doesn't always stay where you left it. You know the sort I mean.

If you've traveled the misty, shifting valleys of the Adirondacks you may have guessed that I came here to see a locally famous stump with a radio sitting on it.

The stump seems old, a citadel of moss and slime molds. Mushrooms, pale and curved like the necks of swans march up its weathered slopes.

In comparison, the radio does not seem old at all. Its slick, gray sides are dappled with water droplets. Its face is sparse. Utilitarian. A volume knob. A tuning knob. A station indicator strip counting out frequencies. The uniform horizontal lines of the single speaker that dominates most of its face.

It sits there on the stump, perfectly centered on the decaying wood, its electrical cord ending in frayed spray of copper filaments that glint like embers when they catch the light.

Now, of course, this radio has no business at all being there on the stump and even less business being a functioning device.

But, it does. It functions just fine.

In this valley, a thunderstorm has always just passed. You can hear the recent downpour racing along in little rivulets to find their way ever downward. There's that metallic smell of ozone like a penny resting on your tongue. And, somehow directionless, but clearly moving steadily away, there is the growl of thunder, the parting remarks of the storm as it moves along to its next destination.

Let's move on to the radio's behavior. I think it's fair to call it behavior. In the absence of mechanical sense, I think it's fair to shift this to a biological context.

You see, every time the thunder growls, the radio comes to life for around six staticky seconds. That station bar flickers a dull green and the speaker whispers its words with a crackle like knotty pine popping on the campfire.

A lot of folks say it's a mouthpiece for things that, otherwise, don't have voices.

For roots and rocks and tender white sprouts that coil beneath fallen logs.

Well, I stood there on the storm-softened earth and I listened to that radio. I listened to that radio and, honestly, some of the things I heard unsettled me. Yes, friends, even I get unsettled from time to time. I won't repeat those things, my dear listeners, because sometimes repeating a thing makes it larger. Other scraps of language I heard felt as cool and pleasant in my mind as a water-polished river stone.

[Faint Static]

"We never move, but our world is still too big for us."

"Slick, slack, hearts crack, and into the sky we pour."

"The stars can't keep secrets, but their words don't touch us here."

"The green man wears many faces but owns none. Sorry, old friend."

"There are too many fingers here and it makes me dizzy."

"Paths pretend to be freedom but they are jailors within their bounds."

There were too many of them to catalog here. I stood there for a very long time.

When I got back to Cassandra, I noticed my hands were pruney from the damp and I was hungry. I don't get hungry too often these days.

It's funny, I'm not sure if the things I heard in the valley mean anything, and yet, I still feel like it was worth listening. It's like taking a long walk in the woods, ya know? You can tell yourself that you're doing it for a purpose. Maybe to spot a

rare migrating warbler in the honeysuckle or see the mayapples bloom, but if you examine your motivations a little closer, I think you'll find that purpose, that concrete meaning that is, has very little to do with why you went out under the trees and even less to do with how much you appreciated the trip. You can see how this sort of metaphor can spread out in concentric circles like a pebble tossed into the pond. The radio. The walk. The year. The decade. The lifetime.

Meaning can be a wonderful thing, but it isn't the only one pathway to worth.

Meaning is a great ally, but it can be a terrible master.

But, I'm rambling.

My mind feels a little muddled after listening to scores of static-whispered half-sense. I'm guessing what I need is a little poetry. It's time for today's hidden lore segment.

Today's hidden lore is a poem by Holly Day.

Hidden Lore:

### **Caipora**

You can't count on nature spirits to find  
babies wrapped in old sheets, by the side  
of the road and under the trees, gasping for their first breaths  
not quite alive, simply abandoned. You can't count

on fox-headed women, sylphs with cow tails  
to be there to find babies left behind

in rest station bathrooms on lonely country roads  
to come just in time to stop those tiny cries

to save those tiny fingers twitching in lines of ash  
left by cigarettes burning out on wet tile.

A grim poem that pairs well with a night spent in a thunder-haunted valley  
listening to strange words scuttle through the dark. Nature can certainly be kind  
but, just like you and me, it is free to be otherwise.

Holly Day's poetry has recently appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Grain*,  
and *Harvard Review*. Her newest poetry collections include: *In This Place, She Is  
Her Own* (Vegetarian Alcoholic Press), *A Wall to Protect Your Eyes* (Pski's Porch  
Publishing), *Folios of Dried Flowers and Pressed Birds* (Cyberwit.net), *Where We  
Went Wrong* (Clare Songbirds Publishing), *Into the Cracks* (Golden Antelope  
Press), and *Cross Referencing a Book of Summer* (Silver Bow Publishing). Her  
newest nonfiction books are *Music Theory for Dummies* and *Tattoo FAQ*.

There's a superstition about that old radio that kept me company last night. They  
say that if you listen for long, the radio will swap a piece of your voice for  
something new and different. They say you'll leave the valley changed in a way  
you can't quite put a finger on.

Well, I love superstition and folklore of all stripes, but it seems like that bit of lore goes in the figurative category, not the literal truth category. Change is a good thing, but I seem to be unchanged by this particular supernatural bit of household electronics.

Ope. I've got a blinking transmission light. Haven't seen one of those in a bit.

Perhaps The Transmission took his snarky comments and went to commune with the radio. As two inscrutable members of the broadcasting family, I assume they have lots in common. Well, let's just play this field report the old fashion way.

### **Field Report:**

Juniper Grey transmitting on CryptoNaturalist frequency 11-58-1.

It's time we start calling common snapdragons by their proper name. False snapdragons. Because, well, I've found the real thing.

I was wandering the countryside just outside of [city/place of your choice] when I smelled something new. It was a bit like the sea and a bit like old leather. A library smell. A storm smell.

I followed my nose to a small hill that looked as if it had been spattered with paint. Red. Yellow. A deep midnight blue like the space between summer stars.

They were snapdragons, but not the snapdragons I know and love.

Something crunched underfoot as I approached, and I noticed the foot of the hill was a jumble of debris. Tiny bones. Not-so-tiny bones. A shredded aluminum can. The remnants of a hiking boot.

I must have made some sound of surprise because many of the nearby flowers turned their colorful snouts in my direction.

Intrigued, I set aside my pack and pulled out my standard CryptoNaturalist field kit. I found the regulation quiche within and tossed it among the flowers.

It was devoured with such speed and ferocity that a yellow mist of egg particulate rose above the plants like a savory fog.

This, of course, is both a fascinating discovery and a warning to all of us wilderness wanderers.

Be careful as you walk among the flowers.

Some of them have teeth.

Juniper Grey signing off.

[end]

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Yes, indeed. Be careful as you walk among the flowers for any number of reasons.

A wonderful report and a useful reminder to us all.

As ever friends, I am grateful to have you hear with me. Over the last thirty episodes, I've been delighted and humbled by the weird and wonderful community that has sprung up around this little show. As I travel the world, I feel the presence of that community like the warm sun on my face. Thank you for that.

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

## Show Notes: Episode 31: A Voice in the Woods

### Credits

**There are many voices in the woods. The more you listen, the more you'll here.**

Special thanks to Ella Watts for voicing Juniper Grey. Ella Watts is a podcast producer for BBC Studios, and executive producer for the science fiction drama podcast The Orphans, a terrifying adventure about robots, clones and friendship. You can find Ella on Twitter @GejWatts , or follow her podcast @OrphansAudio. Find out more about The Orphans at [orphanspod.com](http://orphanspod.com)

Exclusive stickers, pins, shirts, and access to bonus content and strange expertise on strange topics awaits you at our patreon page. [Patreon.com/CryptoNaturalist](https://Patreon.com/CryptoNaturalist). 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 K. Anderson. Thanks to Adam Hurt for the use of his song Garfield's Blackberry Blossom off of his album Insight. For more information on Adam's music, performances, and teaching, visit [adamhurt.com](http://adamhurt.com).

Post Script:

[Radio Static]

Change can be uncomfortable, but what is the alternative? Every leaf of growth and knowledge sprouted from the rocky soil of change.

Full fathom five thy father lies;  
Of his bones are coral made;  
Those are pearls that were his eyes;  
Nothing of him that doth fade,  
But doth suffer a sea-change  
Into something rich and strange.

[Radio Static Fades]