

## **The CryptoNaturalist Ep 8: The Half-Remembered Forest**

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In a remote cavern high on a granite mountainside lives the last of an unnamed species. It will never know the contours of your face. You will never know its long whiskers and clever fingers. The earth will spin on, an unlikely blue gem, in the beautiful, silent void.

Welcome to the CryptoNaturalist.

Howdy, Friends. Ya know, the unknown is a humming engine that powers the machinery of beauty. The fact that there is a huge, immeasurable gulf of unseen, unmeasured, uncalculated truths beyond the reach of our understanding is as rich, and nourishing as sunlight.

The unknown is the sea on which we sail. It's the soil in which we plant our gardens. It's what keeps us humble, keeps us questing, keeps things interesting! Ignorance, like hunger, should be the driving force that makes our meals, our discoveries, all the sweeter. Folks, be thankful that there is always more to know.

Treasure the new. Embrace the uncomfortable. Cultivate your curiosity like a spring garden and keep it green and growing.

Why, like the rings of a tree, discoveries are benchmarks that map out our progress through life, give shape to our experience.

Ya know, trees are secrets that hide in plain sight.

This fact seems so plain to me that I sometimes take it for granted as common knowledge, but I suppose it bares statin' it plain and simple once in a while. Trees are not what they seem.

Well. They are what they seem. They're just a whole heap more on top of that.

Sniff Sniff. You smell that, don't cha? Yep. That's a segue cookin.'

Today's adventure in strange nature brings us to the Half-Remembered Forest, a beautiful woodland located...

Well... I don't rightly know where it's located, but my talented Winnebago Cassandra knows, and she was kind enough to take me there.

This is a little awkward, so I hope you'll bear with me, but I don't really remember the trip to the forest or even the desire to go there.

No worries. When life gives me waffles, I reach for the maple syrup.

Now hang with me fellow explorers, because I remember part of the story and... if my math's right... we can just keep collecting parts until someday we have a whole. That's just the beautiful puzzle of science. I never plan to go to the half-remembered forest, but I've been there before and I have a hunch that I'll be there again.

The half-remembered forest tends to leave visitors in something of a fugue-state. I came back to myself on a battered stretch of highway in West Texas, but I can't be sure how much time I had lost. According to Cassandra, I was driving, so she wasn't aware of anything unusual about my mental state.

She also made a rather juvenile joke about my general metal state, that I will not repeat in polite company.

Still, I got flashes of memory from the forest and my dashboard was covered with post-it notes I had written during the expedition, so I'm sure we can piece it back together.

You ever gone into a room and forgotten why you went in there in the first place?

Well, that's what it feels like when you arrive in the forest. I arrived just after dawn, I know because there was a pink/gray light in the sky and the birds were awakening in song.

Not song. Birds don't sing in the half-forgotten forest. They all make a sound like the heavy, rhythmic breathing of a deep sleeper. They also seem intent on making eye-contact with passers-by as they vocalize.

I find it's best to ignore them.

The other sound came from a peculiar species of cicada that were counting my footsteps in the forest in a whining, buzzing voice a little like an out-of-tune fiddle. Sure, it was disturbing, but it also helped me keep hold of linear time in the forest and mark gaps in my memory.

For example, I remember the buzzing count for my first forty or so steps beneath the trees, and then my next memory had those creaking voices counting out 215.

Now, I heard the count in English, but other CryptoNaturalists have reporting hearing the count in their own native languages. It seems ridiculous to assume that cicadas can sense language preferences and are linguistic masters of all spoken tongues, so that's probably the correct explanation.

The forest itself is a conventional forest, by which I mean the trees are made of wood, rooted in the ground, drink in sunlight and carbon-dioxide and produce oxygen as a biproduct of photosynthesis. By all appearances, it's a typical deciduous forest. Oak. Maple. Hickory.

But, they also eat secrets. Mmm. It's more accurate to say that they traffic in secrets. They both consume and release secrets.

As you walk through the forest, the trees tell you things and extract things from you. I tried to write down both the secrets I learned and the secrets I gave up during my time beneath the trees, but not all of my notes make sense.

Hey, speaking of strange writings, how about a little poetry? It's time for our Hidden Lore segment!

Today's hidden lore comes in the form of two poems by Eric Fisher Stone:

### **Hidden Lore Segment:**

#### **Fly Language**

Jazzing heat with wings,  
they smudge rooms and rub  
pinprick hands in washing prayer.  
People swat their gadding specks

to kill them but they live on  
in maggots like blisters  
chewing guts of a dead rat.  
Bottle, fruit and horse flies

glimmer emerald, ruby  
or onyx-black, the air's jewelry.  
The faint tasers of their voices  
sing epics no one translates.

#### **Somewhere**

a drunk astronaut has whiskey stills on the moon.  
Somewhere a clown is dreaming. Ghosts lick  
the abandoned trolley. Freight trains smash  
through clots of gnats frosting gutters.  
The spider's mind is a volcanic flower.  
Inchworms tiptoe plums that bruise like fists  
beating themselves purple against time.  
A fishheart siphons in a well.

In 1748 a child was born no one remembers. One novelist wrote a beautiful book burned by a dictator. Cro-Magnons painted caves before generations forgot their language. Light from the Pinwheel Galaxy is older than humankind. An undiscovered planet bears deep oceans no traveler descends. Somewhere a song is heard in a snail's wet sound.

My, oh my. These two poems are right up my alley. They seem to celebrate the untouchable loveliness of things that can't or simply won't ever be known. I don't know listeners. It seems like we might be perilously close to having a theme for this week's episode.

Eric Fisher Stone is originally from Fort Worth, Texas, though now lives in Ames, Iowa as a third year MFA candidate in creative writing and the environment at Iowa State University. His poems have appeared in about 20 journals including *The Hopper*, *The Lyric* and *Jersey Devil Press*. His first full length poetry collection, "The Providence of Grass," has just appeared in print, published by *Chatter House Press*.

If you enjoy this show, I expect it's worth your while to seek out more of Eric's work.

Beneath the trees and their breathy birds, the cicada's count climbed toward 300. That's when the trees began to whisper in the dark within my skull.

I seemed to have organized my notes by the cicada's footstep count. The first note reads as follows:

292:

Once I was a mossy cave, uncharted full of slick wet noise. The crawling things named me a name of inner circles.

Of course, the problem is, I didn't note if this was a secret I heard or I secret I gave up. Once you tell a secret to the trees, it leaves your memory, so unfortunately I can't be sure.

Another note:

366:

I am the second son of a king, though none alive could tell you my name.

409:

I told Sarah I was certain I had turned the stove off before we left. I wasn't certain at all.

525:

The bluebirds have seen what I am. But we have an uneasy peace, for now.

574:

I spent lifetimes trying to count the stars. I failed, but if I could go back, I wouldn't do a thing differently.

701:

There's something written on my back. I can feel it there, but I'm too afraid to find a mirror and see what it says.

803:

I don't plan to leave this forest and I'm afraid the others know it.

I have a couple dozen of these notes and, at best, I remember writing down about a quarter of them.

I remember the building heat of noon beneath the trees and spotting a colony of bright red ants climbing up the bark of a sugar-maple. Every ant was wearing a little, white paper mask with no eye holes.

At one point, late in the day I think, I found the skeleton of a mouse with teeth made of blue glass.

And... that's about it.

The human brain is a wonderous organ. Sometimes it seems as tough and dauntless as a charging rhinoceros. Other times its like a fragile, fickle machine built of smoke and cobwebs. I can't even guess at what memories I lost during my time in the half-remembered forest, though Cassandra reports that she waited two full days before driving beneath the trees to retrieve me.

The last note I have reads:

49,433:

I lied about the volleyball match. I didn't forget. I just didn't want to go.

I'm pretty certain that this wasn't one of my secrets because I have long believed that volleyball is just a myth.

The unreliable nature of memories can be... frustrating. Even frightening. But, that can also be a somber reminder to live in the moment and appreciate your experiences as they unfold. Plus, it a wonderful quality of language that we can capture our experiences and share them with others.

On that note, I got a transmission a few hours ago from a Chicago-based cryptonaturalist that I think you folks might find interesting. Take a listen:

### **Transmission: Field Report**

Max Dean transmitting on CryptoNaturalist frequency 11-58-1.

They're doing it again.

Earlier tonight I saw tens of thousands of fireflies coalesce into a ball about 50 feet in the air above [choose a place in Chicago]. It looked like an ink spot against the nickel-gray sky. The clump just hovered there, an insectoid planet, and then it flashed with a yellow/green intensity that left an afterimage when I looked away.

Nothing about this behavior makes sense. Fireflies shouldn't be able to press together like that and remain airborne. They also don't typically synchronize their bioluminescence in this part of the world.

It gets weirder.

After the flash, there were a dozen answering flashes up in the cloudbank. Those flashes were cornflower blue and smelled like ozone. They rumbled in my chest like a subwoofer.

I saw this cycle repeat... I don't know how many times. I lost track of the minutes.

It's almost dawn. I got home a few minutes ago and saw that I had a rash in the shape of a roman numeral three on my forehead. Not sure what that signifies.

I also have the music of Hamilton running through my head on a loop, but that's probably not related to the fireflies.

I plan to look for the phenomenon again tomorrow night, but I wanted to share what I saw... just in case.

Stay safe out there.

Max, signing off.

Huh. I have no explanation for that, and isn't that exhilarating.

Maybe I'll just mosey on up to the windy city.

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

End.

A very special thanks to Adal Rifai for being the voice of Max Dean. You can listen to Adal on one of my favorite podcasts, Hello from the Magic Tavern. Also, check out his new podcast Hey Riddle Riddle. I just listened to their first episode and the show is a lot of fun.

A few of you kind folks have asked about helping to support The CryptoNaturalist show. I truly appreciate it. Now, this isn't a pledge drive or anything, but if you want to kick in a few dollars to help with the show's expenses, just visit [patreon.com/cryptonaturalit](https://patreon.com/cryptonaturalit). Donors will find bonus content including a bonus episode I recently released and there will be more in the near future.

Credits

## **Episode 8: The Half Remembered Forest (00:17:01)**

### **Show Notes**

This week the show takes a half-remembered expedition to a strange forest that manipulates minds, shares secrets, and consumes memories.

The voice of Cryptonaturalist Max Dean was played by Adal Rifai. Adal is the voice of Chunt on the podcast Hello from the Magic Tavern, as well as one of the hosts of Hey Riddle Riddle.

Hidden Lore Segment poetry contributed by Eric Fisher Stone. Eric is originally from Fort Worth, Texas, though now lives in Ames, Iowa as a third year MFA candidate in creative writing and the environment at Iowa State University. His poems have appeared in about 20 journals including *The Hopper*, *The Lyric* and *Jersey Devil Press*. His first full length poetry collection, "The Providence of Grass," has just appeared in print, published by *Chatter House Press*.