

Episode 33: Glass Mice
Written by Jarod K. Anderson
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Some flowers only bloom in the darkness. Humans are the same.

Welcome to the CryptoNaturalist.

Good evening, friends.

It's... nearly 3AM as I record this.

I'm not far from Nelsonville, Ohio today, at an old roadside motel that was once called The Whip-Poor-Will Inn. It's been closed for almost a decade. It's once-white paint is peeling in long strips. The building looks like it's molting. There's a halo of broken glass and crushed beer cans around the place. The parking lot is mostly crumbled now, winter-brown vegetation lining the broad cracks in the pavement.

It's cold tonight, but not biting. Just a hair beneath freezing.

This place sits on an old byway. I can hear the main highway from here. When it was built, it siphoned a lot of the life from this old road. It haunts this place with its distant roar and murmur.

I guess maybe I'm making the old inn sound a little foreboding, but it isn't. Not to me. What I see here is a human space returning to wilderness. There's nothing

particularly foreboding about that. I like to see that civilization is still in conversation with the wilds, an ebb and flow of habitat and landscape. And, of course, habitat is why I'm here.

I spent the evening lying beneath the old rose bushes that grow in a thorny tangle near the inn's chained front entrance. I have a feeling that these bushes were pristine once, someone's pride and joy. Now, well, they are still beautiful, but much changed from their original caretaker's designs no doubt.

I donned my thick, thornproof canvas coveralls and hood, and slid beneath the bushes as gracefully as I could manage. There was a deal of scraping and scrambling, but I found a comfortable position to lie in wait.

Thankfully, I managed not to get pricked by the thorns. Rose bushes, especially old rose bushes, are a little too eager for a taste of your blood. A friend of mine once watched a bead of her blood disappear into a rose thorn and, every rose bush she had encountered since, had a uncanny knack for anticipating and thwarting her movements. Not exactly ironclad information, but roses and people have been living in close proximity for a long time and that sort of cohabitation tends to have an effect on organisms.

Anyway, I wasn't there for the roses. I was there to observe glass mice. Tiny, transparent rodents that frequent the edges of civilization, especially where human-built structures are returning to nature.

Glass mice are beautiful. They're also incredibly hard to see.

I sat there in the rose bushes, listening to the crisp, dry sound of leaves blowing against the thorns in the winter wind. There was breathy, hollow sound when gusts found their way inside the abandoned building. It was the kind of spot that I kept a cautious eye to the shadows, looking for my own fingers rising from the gloom, but I saw nothing of the sort.

I heard the glass mice before I ever saw them. A tinkling sound like ice melting in a glass of lemonade. It was an odd, refreshing sort of sound.

Speaking of odd and refreshing things, how about a little poetry?

It's time for today's hidden lore segment.

Today's hidden lore is two poems by Luísa Black.

Hidden Lore:

Oracular

"oracular
redolent of purple cane"
or was it
"fermenting syrup"
or husk or dusk

or burning aspartame?

I tap the maple like a keg
and search for the vein.

I want to be capable.

without a hammer or hardhat,
it only takes a handful of sugar
to inactivate a whole vat
of concrete.

I want to be exactly that kind of sweet.

a tree filled
with unassuming
destruction:

lazy veins of glowing amber,
slow blood

to boil
and be distilled.

roll call

Cast your life and grief in plaster relief.
When your lovers leave, keep and gild their teeth.

Pane past scenes in iron-framed stained glass screens
In cathedrals, where the light braids its streams.

Concentric circles, the shafts bend and seep
And the shafts bow and weep and wash your feet.

Light fields spin to gold and back into wheat.
We watch in rows with scythes, and do not reap.

I love the mood, rhythm, and rhyme of both these poems. These are the sorts of poems that remind me what language can do when it steps out of its shoes and goes skipping off into the wilderness. Wonderful.

Luísa Black is an anarcho-swampist and amateur ecologist methodically inspecting mosses in the coastal wetlands of southeastern Virginia. Her work has been published in Rabble Lit and under several prestigious overpasses. Her loyalties lie with the lichens.

Breath is the key to observing glass mice. They aren't shy about humans. They have no predators of which I'm aware and don't seem terribly concerned about being watched. The trick is to listen for that ice-in-a-glass tinkling sound, follow it, look for the twitch of a leaf or stem, then exhale in that direction. Breath will condense on the mice, showing a ghostly silhouette of frosted glass scampering along. Of course, only the half of the mouse facing you becomes briefly opaque, and as the condensation fades its as if the creatures dissolve out of our reality.

There's still there, of course. They're just so perfectly transparent they may as well be invisible.

I did something a bit reckless while observing the glass mice this evening. I laid my bare hand in the path of a glass mouse that was moving along a stem at eye level. I felt the mouse run over the back of my hand. It was a cold sensation that made my scalp tingle. I looked down and saw little rose petals of blood welling up where the mouse had passed. Tiny glass claws so sharp I hadn't even felt the cuts. Just fascinating.

I bandaged the tiny wounds, careful to keep my blood away from the roses and their unknowable machinations. The cuts stung a bit, but I suppose they're a good reminder that observing nature is best when it is just that. Observing. There's rarely a call for audience participation.

Ah, I see we have a new field report. Let's listen.

Field Report

This is Jo transmitting on CryptoNaturalist frequency 11-58-1.

You don't know me, but I'm a human. Like you.

Some of you listening to this might have retained a deep and primal spark from when your ancestors still lived and dreamed freely beneath the leafy trees. That spark might be warning you that I am not human, that I am actually the queen of

squirrels, a creature who leaps between the branching eons and is on a first name basis with the tides and the duchess of summer lightning, but that's ridiculous.

I'm like you.

Small and soft and full of doubt. You and I know that we can't trust our own thoughts, so we should probably just accept that the speaker is human and continue listening with unquestioning reverence and obedience.

Anyway, let's talk about oak trees.

Ha. Look at us. Just a couple of tail-less people talking about an amazing tree that we don't understand or respect like we should. How human-ish of us.

Let's use our ground-locked brains to think about what it would be like to live in an oak tree. It would be as if our ugly apartment buildings were powered by sun and rain, and with little more than that they produced oxygen and dropped a year's supply of boxed lunches for us every autumn.

I wonder if we would then chop up those amazing shelters to make coffee tables?

I bet we would. That's the kind of thing we do, isn't it?

"Remember those homes that fed us and filled our lungs," we would ask our fellow dull-eyed soil-walkers.

"Yes, I guess it's kinda sad how destroyed so many of them, but now we have these small tables to bruise our shins and hold our unread copies of The New Yorker. Isn't that just as good?"

Huh. How stupid we are, you know?

Maybe, for the love of the tall, whispering oaks and all the unseen sharp teeth that hide in their branches, we should stop being so careless?

Food for thought.

Jo the human, signing off.

[End]

Well, there you go. Obviously a human giving very human advice in a human way.

We could all learn to pay more respect to the trees.

I think that's enough from me, today.

I'll be doing my part during the current pandemic to distance myself from crowds.

Not much of an inconvenience for me, but still very important. Know that I'm thinking about you and wishing you well during these trying times.

If you have wild places to walk and observe during this period of isolation, I'd suggest that spending time in nature will be worth the effort. Reach out on social media and let me know what you observe. There's subtle magic to be found. Look closely. You'll see it.

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

Show Notes: Episode 32: Glass Mice (00:15:14)

Credits

At the tattered edges of civilization, the glass mice thrive.

Special thanks to Jo Firestone for today's field report. Jo Firestone is a Brooklyn-based comedian who can be seen on The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon, Joe Pera Talks With You, High Maintenance, Shrii, The Chris Gethard Show, and others. She can be heard on Maximum Fun's Dr. Gameshow, a podcast she co-hosts with Manolo Moreno. Her album, "The Hits" is available on Comedy Central Records, and if you like puns, check out Punderdome: A Card Game for Pun Lovers. She is very willing work with animals please consider her for animals.

Hidden Lore poetry by Luísa Black. Luísa Black is an anarcho-swampist and amateur ecologist methodically inspecting mosses in the coastal wetlands of southeastern Virginia. Her work has been published in Rabble Lit and under several prestigious overpasses. Her loyalties lie with the lichens.

Exclusive stickers, pins, shirts, and access to bonus content and strange expertise on strange topics awaits you at our patreon page. 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 at CryptoNaturalist.com. The CryptoNaturalist is written and read by Jarod K. Anderson. Thanks to Adam Hurt for the use of his song Garfield's Blackberry Blossom from his album Insight. For more information on Adam's music, performances, and teaching, visit adamhurt.com.

Post Script:

Scratches from cryptids are not like other scratches. I've had wounds sing and buzz and glow in the dark. So far, these glass mice scratches just itch. So far.