

Episode 36: Train in the Pines  
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We get three sets of teeth. Baby teeth. Adult teeth. And the last set that comes in after you die and just before you become a sentient mist that gnaws the shadows of those who wronged you in life.

Welcome to the CryptoNaturalist.

Howdy Friends. I hope you are keeping healthy and happy, because you deserve both. This isn't always an easy world, but it is always an incredible world if you take the time to notice. I'm glad you're here to share it with me.

This week, I took a trip to Louisiana to enjoy a little R&R on the Train in the Pines. If you're a CryptoNaturalist and haven't heard of the Train in the Pines, good news. I'm about to tell you about one of your new favorite vacation spots. Of course, when I say "vacation," I don't actually mean a vacation from strange nature. I mean a vacation to strange nature, just with more plush seats and a fancy dining car. Yes, I think it's fair to think of this particular train as a biome all its own.

This glamorous getaway starts, like many do, at a small gas station not far from Pearl River, Louisiana. Pearl River is a town with a fine bayou tour and an affordable retirement home for skunk apes. Both are worth a visit, but I headed to the outskirts to find Possum Pete's Petrol, a mom and pop gas station with neither possums nor petrol nor anybody named Pete. What they do have is an incredible selection of individual mismatched hubcaps for sale, no two alike, and three precariously tall piles of old tires.

Oh, and, of course, they are the one and only station for the Train in the Pines.

Cassandra parked herself in a chipped gravel lot nestled in the woods behind the station and I headed off with a duffle bag full of loose animal crackers and a spring in my step.

The bell over the door chirped a welcome as I entered Possum Pete's. The wall of air conditioning that hit me was bracing after the Louisiana heat and humidity, sorta like stepping out of a hot shower into an alpine meadow crisp with morning frost. Now that's a simile we can all understand.

I took a deep snootful of cool air that smelled of motor oil and popcorn. I caught myself smiling. Smell has a powerful connection to memory and that particular cocktail of odors had been the preamble to more than one lovely trip on my favorite inscrutable locomotive.

I made my way past a small Stonehenge replica lovingly crafted from out-of-order ATMs to a ticket booth next to the beer coolers.

A small wood-burned sign read "Train in the Pines." A post-it note beneath the sign announced that there was "One ticket left."

That note's been there for at least thirty years. There's always one ticket left and yet every passenger will tell you that they've never been turned away and they were the only person on the train. It's hard to say if the train's architecture is such that passengers simply avoid encountering one another or if the train only accepts one passenger per journey.

Well, I don't believe that the train is concerned with such logistical minutia, so I'll leave it aside too. There's a lot about the train that rejects such scrutiny.

As the notice on the platform in the back room says, "Step Away from Reality and Find What is Real."

Hey, speaking of truth-seeking, how about a little poetry? It's time for today's hidden lore segment.

Today's hidden lore is a poem by Annie McAndrew.

## **Hide and Seek**

in the night  
mile-distant  
whistle  
bridges  
time  
years-distant  
child  
runs to spy  
the train  
through leaves  
through kitchen window  
through summers  
where trains  
always chose  
the exact same  
spot  
to hide  
to be spotted  
through gaps  
green-gold  
with Texas sun  
now  
not so different  
from Texas night  
where the train  
still calls  
me to come  
try to see

There is certainly something haunting about the whistle of a distant train. It sounds so haunting and forlorn, yet we know that sound is tied to tons upon tons of very real iron thundering across the landscape on business of its own. Trains feel portentous. Old and new. Conspicuous, yet somehow mysterious. This poem manages to encapsulate all these disparate associations for me.

Annie McAndrew is a writer of speculative fiction from the edge of the Texas Hill Country. She can be found exploring the local creek trails and other odd, fantastical worlds.

Ducking under a low arch between nine-foot dunes of old pine tree air fresheners behind the deli counter, you find yourself on a platform looking out at a misty pine forest dense with trees that are not quite Norway Spruce.

The train was just arriving when I stepped onto the platform. It always seems to be just arriving.

The dark iron cut through the mist like a surfacing sea monster. The front of the locomotive looks like a classic locomotive, if a bit antique. Black iron with a round face dotted with rivets. A pointed cowcatcher. Two wet-black eyes staring at nothing. Yet, as the train passes, much of the exterior ceases to resemble a train at all. Some of the cars are mossy cobblestone like an abandoned forest path. Others look like old plaster, crumbled in places to show wooden lath beneath. The car you enter looks a bit like an old cathedral, complete with flying buttresses and sharp-toothed gargoyles peering down from a scaly pinnacle.

Still, the heavy wooden door opened with a very modern pneumatic woosh and I stepped into an interior of dark wood and hanging tapestries the color of dried blood. The train smelled like old books a pipe tobacco, but it was cool and comfortable. Bone-colored plaster panels broke up the dark wood that dominated most of the interior, and some of these had deep alcoves with narrow stained glass windows. I even saw a reliquary or two on lit pedestals, holding the finger bones or dried ears of some saint or other.

It was a classic vacation spot and, as ever, I took to exploring right away.

I stopped by my sleeping car to drop off my duffle and retrieve my notebook. An owl with a broken wing and one glass eye hissed at me from beneath my bunk as I fiddled with my things, but I assured him that I was well and truly uninterested in the pile of mice corpses his was guarding and that seemed to satisfy him.

I stuffed my pockets with animal crackers for the many mouths I expected to encounter and began a proper wander in the only train I've ever known to have forking paths and descending staircases.

Now, I hesitate to give you the full details of my journey because, well, I'm hoping you get a chance to explore the train yourself and I don't want to spoil any surprises.

That said, I think I can safely talk about some of the more commonplace cars.

For example, the car that contains the train's heart.

The train in the pines has a two-chambered heart about the size of a minivan. As you probably know, two-chambered hearts are usually found in fish with a single circuit for blood flow. The heart has a single atrium and ventricle. I assume, like in fish, the train's ventricle delivers blood to the gills where gas exchange takes place and then the atrium collects blood after it flows through the train's body. Of course, I've never seen the train's gills or any other evidence of a circulatory system, but the presence of the heart strongly suggests the rest of said missing anatomy is lurking around somewhere.

Now, that's one of the more mundane cars, but I hope I've enticed you to visit the train yourself.

Oh, one note on safety. You really do need to bring plenty of animal crackers. On any trip on the Train in the Pines, you'll encounter the vestibule of muttering, a space between cars lined with whispering mouths. Friends, you don't want to listen to those whispers. A tossed handful of animal crackers here and there will spare you a lot of sleepless nights and brain-itch.

Well, that's all for today.

Before we go, I see we have a sponsor.

Let's see...

Today's show is brought to you in part by the garlic council.

Garlic. Did you know it's perfectly safe to eat and can be used to season all manner of human foods? It's true. It's not just to repel vampires and bog mites anymore. Buy it wherever nonlethal or semi-lethal herbaceous bulbs are sold.

If you'd like to be a sponsor of this show, how very odd.

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

### **Show Notes: Episode 36: The Train in the Pines (00:15:16)**

#### **Credits**

**The train in the pines is a great getaway provided you can get there and then get away.**

Hidden lore poetry by Annie McAndrew. Annie is a writer of speculative fiction from the edge of the Texas Hill Country. She can be found exploring the local creek trails and other odd, fantastical worlds.

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 at [CryptoNaturalist.com](https://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](https://adamhurt.com).

#### **Post Script:**

I like to see it lap the miles,  
And lick the valleys up,

And stop to feed itself at tanks;  
And then, prodigious, step  
Around a pile of mountains,  
And, supercilious, peer  
In shanties by the sides of roads;  
And then a quarry pare  
To fit its sides, and crawl between,  
Complaining all the while  
In horrid, hooting stanza;  
Then chase itself down hill  
And neigh like Boanerges;  
Then, punctual as a star,  
Stop — docile and omnipotent —  
At its own stable door.

LIFE, POEM 17: THE RAILWAY TRAIN

By

Emily Dickinson

1896