

Episode 40: Grandfather Jellyfish
Written by Jarod K. Anderson
www.cryptonaturalist.com

There are a dozen cryptid species that look just like clouds. So, if you're planning a trip to the sky, it's best to keep your distance.

Welcome to The CryptoNaturalist.

[Theme Music]

[Music Fades. A large clock tick-tocks continuously.]

One.

"There's time to experience," says the man on the far side of the room. "There isn't always time to understand."

With that, he slides a big brass key fifty feet across polished hardwood and somehow it comes to rest against the snowy toe of my boot. It's cold as a river rock and heavy as a hen. I drop it into my pocket and feel its weight tugging at my suspenders, feel the metal drinking in the heat from my leg.

Two.

When I arrived here, I couldn't see the room. It was just a broad, low dome of earth and stone, a lump in the whiteness hidden in a copse of maple. The landscape was all blunt and round with snow. So bright it stings the eyes. I almost missed the dome. It was crowned by a fallen pine that perched atop it like a sleeping dragon, shaggy green branches curving up to the bowed central trunk like a ribcage. Not truly dead. A corpse with one eye open. I half expected to see it rise and fall with breath. I was in Ontario, on the shores of Mudcat lake just off route 64.

Three.

I had suspected there was a jellyfish nearby. You know that feeling you get when you're within a mile of uncommonly large jellyfish. Kinda a combination of what the internet kids call ASMR tingles and driving over a dip in the road too quickly. Well, if you're a CryptoNaturalist and you get that feeling driving through Canadian forest, it's time for you and your inexplicable RV companion to get exploring.

Four.

Stepping inside the dome, transitioning from trudging through deep snow and into a warm, round, wood paneled den gave me an unusual sense of foreboding. It wasn't just the abrupt transition from cold to warm, bright to dim. It was the nature of the place. It was a little too welcoming. A little too... me. It smelled of wood and pipe smoke. There were a handful of overstuffed chairs next to bookshelves. A curio cabinet filled with unrecognizable skulls and preserved plant species. 100 reasons to stop and look. A giant grandfather clock stood off to my right, its brass pendulum swinging with a slowness that said it weighed more than I. Everything about the place told me to stay awhile. So, I started for the exit across the room.

Five.

In the center of it all a jellyfish the size of a beach umbrella hung in the air like a chandelier plucked from another reality. Its pattern was intricate, like a lace tablecloth draped over nothing. It gleamed like fresh poured cream frozen in time, haloed with the faint green glow of foxfire. It didn't sway or undulate or billow. Its long tendrils reached for the floor as straight and motionless as pinstripes. It was still as a photograph except that on each tic and toc of that massive grandfather clock it spun a few degrees clockwise, as if in imitation of a minute hand.

Six.

I knew I was seeing something new and maybe something dangerous. I also knew it was time for a hidden lore segment.

The hidden lore was a poem by me, Jarod K. Anderson.

Woodland You

It's easy to look at the contours of a forest and feel a bone deep love for nature. It's less easy to remember that the contours of your own body represent the exact same nature.

The pathways of your mind.

Your dreams,

dark and strange as sprouts curling beneath a flat rock.

Your regret,

bitter as the citrus rot of old cut grass.

It's the same as the nature you make time to love. That you practice loving.

The forest. The meadow. The sweeping arm of a galaxy.

You are as natural as any postcard landscape

and deserve the same love.

This poem appears in my new poetry collection, *Field Guide to the Haunted Forest* by Jarod K. Anderson. You can find the book at most online booksellers, including Amazon, Barnes & Nobel, and Bookshop.org. At the time of this recording, it has 58 five-star reviews on Amazon. Folks seem to like it and I hope you will too.

Seven.

Many things never asked to be named by humans and don't particularly care if and when they are. This was one of those. Yet, I named it all the same because words fuel the engine of my understanding. "Grandfather jellyfish," I said aloud as I passed the midpoint of the room and the spectacular invertebrate that floated there. "This trap is a beautiful and elegant as any spider's web and I don't for a moment begrudge springing it. I hope you don't begrudge my escape."

Eight.

If I darted my eyes to the side quickly enough, I could still get a glimpse of reality. A dirt floor. Drifts of deer bones the yellow of old paper. All of it vanishing into polished wood and tidy bookshelves a split second after I glimpsed it. I tried this

same trick on jellyfish, but it appeared just as it did in the illusion. Strange not to mask itself, but perhaps it was playing by rules that I didn't yet understand. I am not so arrogant to assume I should understand. It's like when I see articles attempting to measure animal intelligence by how closely they think like humans. Such an absurdly narrow definition of intelligence is hardly a definition at all.

Nine.

What was the jellyfish eating? Minutes? My minutes? The deer that owned those bones, what did this dome look like to them? Did they graze for months in a deer paradise? Clear sightlines and tender fresh shoots? Was it real enough to sustain them? Did they bed down hidden in deep, fragrant foliage, surrounded by crunchy leaf litter where no predator could move with stealth? Did they live this charmed life until the jellyfish had eaten all the minutes out from under them? Is that predation? If so, then time itself dines on all of us and rarely pays us for the meal with paradise, real or illusory. Heck, I've been a CryptoNaturalist too long to cherish that old human illusion that I've somehow stepped outside the food chain. Maybe it's all become a bit too philosophical for me.

Ten.

The man who slid the key to me had left the door open behind him, yet I couldn't see anything beyond it. Just a rectangle of white light that gave the impression of miserable cold. Piercing wind and face-stinging sleet. I suspected this impression was coming from the jellyfish itself, so I pushed back against it with thoughts of fresh air and deep blue sky. When I did, A heavy wooden door slammed shut with a boom and the snik of a lock.

Eleven.

I reached the door and laid my palm against it. It looked like stained oak, but it didn't feel like wood. It didn't feel like anything. It was like the air in that spot had just up and decided to become unyielding. I pressed and it pressed back. For a moment, I had the rising, claustrophobic feeling of being trapped, but the key in my pocket tugged at my mind and I reached for it. There it was. Still too heavy for its size. Still cold as snowmelt. I fitted it in the lock and felt an abrupt shift in the place. The door vanished into a frost rimmed hole in an earthen wall. I looked

over my shoulder and saw that low-domed room as it really was. A burrow. A trap. A boneyard of incredible age and variety. I spied one skull that didn't belong to any species I could recognize and I almost made for it. Then I noticed that my fingernails had grown half an inch in my stroll across the place and decided it was probably time to go.

Twelve.

I paused at the exit. An itch on the back of my neck. I turned and across the room I watched a snow-shouldered man who looked very much like me step inside. "There's time to experience," I said. "There isn't always time to understand." I slid the key toward him. It growled across the icy earth, miraculously finding a path between the bones to the toe of his boot. I thought of adding a warning, but I didn't hear that when I entered, so I couldn't say it as I left. Some situations and cryptids get awfully particular about symmetry. I don't remember stepping out the hole, but the next moment I was outside again, shielding my eyes from all that impossibly white winter brightness.

This was one of those excursions that made me exceedingly happy to see Casandra again, and I told her so. Sometimes I think one of the chief virtues of adventure and misadventure alike is that they help you appreciate home. Home as in place. Home as in people.

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

Show Notes: Episode 40 Grandfather Jellyfish (00:17:40)

Credits

A jellyfish is part ghost, part flower, and part trap. Is it any surprise that some defy explanation?

Check out Field Guide to the Haunted Forest by Jarod K. Anderson wherever books are sold. An audio version as well as signed bookplates are coming soon.

Reminder: Transcripts of this and every episode are available at cryptonaturalist.com.

The CryptoNaturalist**PO Box 837****Delaware, OH 43015**

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:

Jellyfish and sea jellies are the informal common names given to the medusa-phase of certain gelatinous members of the subphylum Medusozoa. I mostly went through my medusa phase sophomore year of high school.