

Episode 54: Mirror Falls  
Written by Jarod K. Anderson

English is an absurd language. Somehow, a stick bug is pretty much exactly what you'd expect while crab grass is an absolute letdown.

Welcome to The CryptoNaturalist.

[MUSIC – MAIN THEME]

A soggy, grimy hello to you, dear listener.

I'm eager to record, but Cassandra is insisting I do it here in the mud room until I can get cleaned up. Probably a wise request.

I just returned from a lovely visit to an inexplicable location. Kinda my typical plan on an ideal day. The trip involved following a creek through a deep ravine in the Virginia hills, then continuing to follow it through a very snug cave.

I had to wriggle under the hills like a mole, but eventually I reemerged into a broad column of sunlight and a lovely grotto walled in by the living hills.

It occurred to me afterwards that I could have come in from above, but the kind creature that gave me directions does not think in such "above ground" terms.

So, I emerged into the cathedral-like space, hidden in the hills, and got my bearings.

My eyes were dazzled by the light after nearly an hour wrigglin' underground, but all around me was the sound of flowing water.

As my vision adjusted, I could see why.

I was on the lip of a huge natural basin and all around me water was trickling from inlets in the hillsides.

At every inlet, the water was collected by rock formations into broad, still pools, before flowing down in waterfalls like smooth sheets of glass. From where I stood, the falls reflected each other, along with the dappled green of moss and trailing ivy.

A moment later, I noticed something like a stairway traveling down from where I stood to the pool which caught all the flowing waters.

The stairs did not seem to be the work of human hands, which made them all the more inviting.

I followed them down.

It may have been a trick of the light. It may have been something else. But, as I descended, it seemed less that I was in a basin and more that I was in a polyhedral structure made from waterfall surfaces on all sides.

Some of the falls still appeared to fall at a predictable 90 degrees. Others, at 45. A few looked nearly parallel with the ground, forming a ceiling of flowing water through which the circle of blue sky high above shown like a distant opal, blue and streaked with cloud.

The stairs vanished into the pool.

The further I went, the more the falls began to shine like mirrors.

In the center of the rippling water a large, round stone protruded like the shell of a turtle.

It looked like a perfect place for standing.

Odd and beckoning.

Speaking of odd and beckoning, how about a little poetry?

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

Today's hidden lore is a poem by Matt Dennison.

### **The Various**

When I was quite young, our neighbors' daughter  
was going to school to be a teacher and had learned  
from her parents I spent many hours alone  
in the woods. Eager to find out what questions  
an eight-year-old boy might have regarding  
the natural world, I was summoned to their house,  
made to sit, offered a cookie and the opportunity  
to ask any and all questions I might have  
but I had none. I *was* the woods—the streams,  
the river, the trees, the skulls, bones and fossils,  
the earth breaking from tree roots exposed above  
stream beds, all creatures under rock, in soil and air—  
the soft-spined hellgrammite, the various suckers  
and snails, catfish and bass and dinosaur gar  
from another world—turtles snapping and boxed,  
snakes of water and land, insects under bark  
and on carcasses, the dried skins of discarded  
fish in the weeds, hornets under downed limbs,  
soils both sandy and clay-like, the slick clay itself  
and snake grass and arrowheads and Civil War bullets  
and rusty old beer cans so empty it hurt and bridges  
of wood and concrete with bad words layered  
and scraped into each and sand caves under trestles  
where wild boys died for being wild boys and springs  
from hillsides with water so cool and reaching my hand  
into holes in the riverbank, praying for fight or shaking  
hands with God at the tug of a fish and the struggle to  
catch, to have and to hold small creatures and save them  
in dark places, lift them in bright spaces and look into  
their eyes to see if I could see myself staring back from heaven—  
but I had no questions for the teacher-to-be and I did not care,

for I had small monsters in alcohol pill bottles, spread across pinboards, staring from shelves, whispering from walls and sleep talking in drawers who had already told me everything I would ever need to know.

Nature is indeed an excellent teacher, though many of its lessons are difficult to put into words. Which, in my mind, makes those lessons particularly meaningful and worthy of our attention.

Matt Dennison is the author of *Kind Surgery*, from Urtica Press (Fr.) and *Waiting for Better*, from Main Street Rag Press. His poetry has appeared in *Verse Daily*, *Rattle*, *Bayou Magazine*, *Redivider* and *Cider Press Review*, among others. His fiction has appeared in *ShortStory Substack*, *THEMA*, *GUD*, *The Blue Crow* (Aus), *Prole* (UK), *The Wondrous Real*, and is forthcoming in *Story Unlikely*.

I took the hint of the still pool and waded out to the island of rock.

It was warm and rough beneath my hands.

I touched it and the air seemed to fill with the mineral scent of deep earth and water wandering beneath infinities of stone.

I clambered up and stood on the rock.

When I did, I nearly fell right over.

Everything was different.

From that position, those falls shone like polished glass and all their angles reflected me. Dozens of me. All staring back in various states of amazement.

One of my reflections brought out a hat from... somewhere... and touched the brim in greeting.

I pulled my recorder from its waterproof bag and hit record.

I'll... uh... play that recording for you.

But, a little warning up front. It becomes what those of us in the audio production hobby would classify as “unlistenable” in pretty short order.

My original intention was to record this episode on location at the falls.

You'll hear why I abandoned that plan.

Alright. Enough preamble. I'm hitting play.

[SFX – Click of recorder's play button]

[SFX – Voice recorded with a small amount of echo? Sound of flowing water all around]

CN 1: “Okay. Testing my levels here. CryptoNaturalist Episode 54... Tentatively titled ‘Mirror Falls.’ Alright, I'm here on location at a natural wonder deep...”

[Next voice interrupts the first]

CN 2: “Hang on a minute there, fella, who said you get the steer this ship.”

CN 1: “Well, I am holding the recorder and I am corporeal.”

CN 2: “Looky here. I have a recorder and from where I'm standing, I'm the one with a physical body.”

CN 3: “Don't fight you two. I think we all have recorders and all came here with the same idea.”

CN 1: “Now, folks, we can't all host our shows simultaneously.”

CN 4: “It's not clear to any of us if our respective voices will be captured on these recordings or if we're each experiencing intersecting auditory hallucinations.”

CN 2: “All in favor of trying to record simultaneously say, “catywumpus.”

CNs All: Catywumpus. [SFX – Voices overlapping]

CN 6: “Hey, um, us... before we get to work on the show, could we do that thing we’ve wanted to do with more than one voice.”

CN All: “I suppose we could try.” (SFX – Variations overlapped)

CN 1: “Okay, and a one and a two and a one, two, three...”

CN All: Singing: “There once was a ship that put to sea. The name of the ship was the Billy O’ Tea. The winds blew up, her bow dipped down. Oh blow, my bully boys, blow! (huh)” (SFX – Various voices overlapped)

CN All: “Okay, okay, that’s enough.”

CN 2: “Hey, we could do a round? Wanna do *Row Row Row Your Boat?*”

CN 3: “No, I think we’re on a ticking clock here. This *feels* psychically damaging.”

CN 1: “Alright, gang, I’m going to start my show. So, hang tight, I’ll get around to interviewing you folks in a minute.

CN All: “Me too. Yup, same here. Indeed.” (SFX – variations overlapped)

[SFX: Show introductions layered/overlapped]

CN 1: Howdy listeners, today show is a soggy salutation to the world of water, falls that is.

CN 2: Good afternoon, friends. Gravity and water are an amazing team.

CN 3: Welcome folks. I’m in an unusual place with unusual company.

CN 4: Greetings fellow lovers of the strange. Today is a weird one.

CN 5: Hi there. Thanks for listening in on my existential crisis.

CN 6: Thanks for joining me today as I meet myself again and again and again.

CN1: Alright, hold it, hold it, hold it. I’m looking at my recording levels here and it is definitely picking up all of our voices. I just don’t think this is going to work.

CN 3: Same here.

CN 4: Agreed.

CN 1: That's enough on location recording. Let's continue our chat and handle the podcasting later.

[General overlapping agreement]

[SFX – Click of recorder's stop button]

Yeah. Sorry for subjecting you to that, listener, but now you have a pretty good sense of what my afternoon was like.

We chatted for some time.

Each of us felt very real standing on our respective stones, standing in our respective perspectives.

Most of us could live with that.

Of few of us could not, but found that they could not leave their spot standing on their stone until we all agreed to leave together.

Which, we did. None of us wanted to hold the fearful few version of ourselves hostage within their reflection.

So, we did a little countdown to synchronize and we all leapt of our perches into the pool.

After that, I looked at those glimmering sheets of falling water a bit differently.

I've heard it said, "water has memory."

I think it may have more than that.

Well, it's something to continue pondering.

Hmm. I see here on the mud room control panel that we have a new field report today.

While I start peeling off layers, let's take a listen.

[SFX Field Report Switch Click]

This is Cat Stone transmitting on CryptoNaturalist frequency 11-58-1.

Recently, I stumbled upon a Night Market.

The kind that happens spontaneously deep in a lightless woodland. The kind that's full of people who can't quite tell you why they turned up at such a time and in such an unusual location.

I did not waste the opportunity.

A convincingly human-looking fellow there sold me a tiny stone like a splinter of obsidian, only I was fairly certain it was no stone. It came in a little vial of seawater.

When I asked him why, he shrugged and said that he found it in the sea, so keeping it in water seemed proper.

I asked him where in the sea he found it. He said he didn't recall, but it came from a shining rock formation that looked a bit like a pinecone.

I paid with pocket change and departed with a rare treasure.

Perhaps he knew more than he was saying or maybe he was just uncommonly lucky. Either way, keeping that "stone" in water was the correct approach.

As I suspected from the start, what I had purchased was a Cinder Pine Seed.

Of course, I was eager to plant it, but there were preparations to make.



I constructed a platform over the sea near a rocky patch of coast close to [You Choose Where].

I prepared the platform with soil and leaf litter and piles of rock and sand.

When everything was ready, with trembling fingers, I poured out the vial and caught the seed.

I risked holding the shining beauty up to the light for just a moment, but it was already starting to get warm as the air dried its surface.

I deposited it in the leaves at the center of the platform and fled to my little boat, working quickly to get back to shore and gain a safe distance, finding the place I had stashed my recording equipment.

The cinder pine did not disappoint.

At first, a tongue of bright blue flame.

A seedling like a hissing blowtorch.

The tree grew.

The more combustible materials on the platform leapt up in fire and gray smoke.

A sapling, a white-hot triangle visible in the column of smoke, so bright I could only glance at it for a moment at a time.

Already, a rivulet of molten rock ran like a tiny, crimson waterfall over the edge of the platform, setting the wood ablaze as it went.

The platform was built stout and sturdy, a layer of stone and sand stood between the seed and the wooden supports, but I worried it would collapse before it was time.

I had underestimated the intensity of a cinder pine's heat.

The tree grew and, thankfully, the platform held.

3 meters. 9 meters. 15 meters.

A great, shaggy pine made of pure heat and light rose above the choppy, grey sea. Steam and smoke braided skyward.

The heat made me retreat further, abandoning my recording equipment and shielding my face as I tried to backpedal over uneven terrain.

There was a great roaring sound and the tree began to flash like repeated lightning strikes.

I lie on my stomach and peered out between my fingers.

The flashes left an afterimage when I closed my eyes, like a storybook silhouette of a Christmas tree.

Then, sudden silence.

A huge, plateau of steam and smoke loomed above and I could just make out the dull, orange shape of a great pinecone wobbling on the platform before a sharp crack and whoosh of steam told me the construct had collapsed into the ocean, as intended.

Cinder Pines can remain as seeds on a geologic timescale, and then live out their lifecycles for mere moments.

I may return to that patch of sea to study the seeds further.

Then again, I may not.

I witnessed the entire life of one Cinder Pine, more than I have done for most species, and my heart is still full of it.

Perhaps that is enough.

Cat Stone, signing off.

[SFX Field Report Switch Click]

Ah, always good to hear from Cat. I believe we received her last broadcast back in episode 5.

Thanks for that report, Cat. What a rare and momentous thing to join such a singular species of tree on its journey through life. Remarkable.

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

## **Show Notes: Episode 54: Mirror Falls (00:22:10)**

**The mirror falls, like all water, link us to many other versions of ourself.**

Hidden lore poetry by Matt Dennison. Matt is the author of *Kind Surgery*, from Urtica Press (Fr.) and *Waiting for Better*, from Main Street Rag Press. His poetry has appeared in *Verse Daily*, *Rattle*, *Bayou Magazine*, *Redivider* and *Cider Press Review*, among others. His fiction has appeared in *ShortStory Substack*, *THEMA*, *GUD*, *The Blue Crow* (Aus), *Prole* (UK), *The Wondrous Real*, and is forthcoming in *Story Unlikely*.

To find bonus content and a variety of strange rewards, support our show by visiting [Patreon.com/CryptoNaturalist](https://Patreon.com/CryptoNaturalist). You can also help by rating, reviewing, and telling a friend.

The CryptoNaturalist is written and read by Jarod K. Anderson.

For books and poetry collections by Jarod K. Anderson and Leslie J. Anderson, visit [CryptoNaturalist.com/books](https://CryptoNaturalist.com/books).

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).

This show is produced and edited by Tracy Barnett. You can find them online, anywhere at [TheOtherTracy](https://TheOtherTracy.com) or [TheOtherTracy.com](https://TheOtherTracy.com).

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).

Reminder: Transcripts of this and every episode are available at [cryptonaturalist.com](https://cryptonaturalist.com).

Stay Curious. Stay Wild. Stay Weird.

**Post Script:**

Me and the other mirror falls me's had a long talk about starting an acapella group, but ultimately we decided that the details of our practices sessions would be a bit too cumbersome to manage.