

Episode 27: Burrow

Written by Jarod K. Anderson

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I can't hold on to the moment when I first said these words. You can't hold on to the moment when you first heard them. That means that together we've created something wholly unique that will remain singular and unreplicated for the entirety of linear time. Huh. I guess we're pretty talented.

Welcome to the CryptoNaturalist.

[Theme Music]

What is it about a hole in the ground that demands answers? I don't know about you, friend, but I simply cannot see a dark opening in the earth and not feel a tingle in my curiosity bone. Cassandra keeps suggesting I report all my extra bones to a medical doctor, but there are only so many hours in the day and I just haven't had the time.

We all hazard a guess when we see a freshly excavated tunnel leading beneath an ivy-covered wall. Crayfish. Gopher Tortoise. Mole Pidgeon. How can you resist guessing at the occupant down in the dark, perhaps gazing up at you as you stand framed in a distant circle of sunlight? How it nourishes the imagination to think of the solid ground beneath our feet as a massive system of three-dimensional roadways hidden from the open sky.

Cassandra and I were in upstate New York earlier this week when I spotted a particularly fascinating hole like a lone segmented eye in the face of a shaggy green hillside. It was unusually angular, like someone had tried to adjust the hill with a tree trunk sized hex key.

We were gliding through a wet, gray dawn, creeping along backroads at a snail's pace looking for all the beautiful creatures that tend to visit roadways after a night of steady rain. Snakes. Earthworms. Field mice crossing like straw-colored lightning on business all their own.

Cassandra's "unusual burrow" light blinked on the dash just as I spotted the anomalous void. We pulled off onto the narrow gravel berm and I prepped for a subterranean excursion. I grabbed my lucky headlamp from my hat carousel. (Lucky because it had been my great, great grandmother's.) Pulled on some coveralls that look more out of place clean than dirty and stepped out into the sweet morning drizzle.

The grass sparkled like emerald in firelight beneath the rain and the new sunrise. It was so dang pretty I could have just stood there and lost myself in the landscape for hours, but I held tight to my purpose and found the entrance to the strange tunnel.

I was relieved to find that if I sucked in my shoulders a bit and didn't get too persnickety about breathing, I could fit down the strange shaft. The sides of the burrow had a, firm hand-pressed

look like a pie-crust smoothed by an army of subterranean bakers. In fact, I spied several distinct human handprints in the hard-packed clay. My own palms seemed to itch with recognition. It was an unusual sensation.

Speaking of unusual sensations, how about a bit of fiction?

It's time for our hidden lore segment!

Today's hidden lore is a short prose piece by Tyver Foucault.

(Untitled)

The lady at the farmer's market encourages you to sample the daffodil juice. It's cool and tangy. A distant memory stirs from your DNA, eons ago, when your roots drank deeply of the rain. The vendor laughs. Her eyes are so green.

All week you dream that your feet are stones. It's not unpleasant. Sometimes it's good to be sturdy. But each morning your alarm clock brings you back to bare untethered toes. And you wonder what keeps you here.

She's at the market this week too. In the park behind her you're shocked to hear the trees whispering to each other in a language you don't quite understand. "Hey," she says, snapping you out of it. You ask her out for coffee.

You order a latte. She gets a smoothie and asks to sit outside. You catch the scent of sunflowers when she pulls a cube from her purse. It's a dusty bouillon, dimpled and speckled gold. She plunks it in her drink and it dissolves like the afternoon.

On your second date, she takes you to the greenhouse. There's no door, but the glass panes are tapped like maple trees, filling buckets with light, drop by drop. "For making photon wine," she says. You smile and struggle briefly for words about gratefulness and how you admire the way she moves with the wind. But you only sigh. As the air escapes your lips, you're deeply aware of the meatiness of your own lungs.

One day she introduces you to her family. Her grandmother's face is carved with smile lines. You're served pie and the filling is sweet, familiar but not completely, the richness of pecan and the tartness of blueberry. A relative pours wine from a prismatic bottle and it fills seven glasses at once. You're the guest, so they insist you get indigo. New foods usually upset your digestion, but this time you feel only a pleasant glow.

You wake up at dawn and she's sleeping beside you, in your shadow for the moment, content in an old dream. Your heart is so full. You stretch out in the new light and for the first time, you don't feel like you want coffee to start your day, or breakfast at all, really. You turn toward the sun, and find that you're getting everything you need.

(end)

You know, it's lovely to imagine making a new connection with someone. And it's lovely to dream about gaining the power of photosynthesis. Ah, yes, this is my kind of story.

Tyver Foucault can be found exploring the unusual places that radiate outward from Columbia, South Carolina. He has written over a thousand micro stories in the Strange Twitter sphere, and he welcomes you to read along on Twitter @[TheDoorTHEDOOR](#)

I struggled deeper into the burrow, feeling a kind of preemptive ache in my muscles as I imagined the backwards wriggle awaiting me when it was time to leave. I certainly didn't have the room to turn around.

Every once in a while, I get a little claustrophobic in a situation like this. It's mild and I've developed a little trick to dispel the feeling. I take a deep breath, close my eyes, and imagine a storm. Lightning. Thunder. Hail. Freezing rain whipped sideways hard enough to sting your cheeks. I set myself plumb in the middle of all that chaos until I start to wish for a snug, quiet shelter out of the weather. I open my eyes and think of what a wonderful shelter I have, nestled beneath the warm blanket of the Earth.

On this occasion, my imaginings were interrupted by the occupant of the burrow who graciously spared me any further wriggling.

What I saw was, well, confusing. It was a ball of very human hands rolling forward to greet me. There was a wide variety of shapes and colors among the hands, but they were all quite human and quite alive. A patchwork of angular knuckles and overlapped fingers that created a startlingly perfect ball with twelve flat sides. What the backwoods old-timers would have called a dodecahedron.

As I studied the geometry of the burrower, the hands began to unfold, fingers reaching and swaying like a many-jointed anemone.

That odd, itchy palm feeling returned, but this time it was far more intense. I looked down at my own hands to find that they were swaying in unison with the burrower's motion and I was fairly certain that I hadn't asked them to do that.

Perhaps more concerning, I found that my wrists had begun to be a bit, well, transparent. As if they were thinking about taking a little vacation from attaching my hands to my forearms.

I chuckled at the thought of my two grabbers going off on underground adventures of their own, but I knew I couldn't spare them.

I sang out into the flickering dark, "The stars at night are big and bright," [clap clap clap] "deep in the heart of Texas."

My hands couldn't resist clapping along to that old song and afterwards I noticed my wrists seemed quite solid again.

"Glad you decided to stay, old friends," I said to all my assembled tickle-sticks.

After that, I decided I'd gathered enough information for one day in the field and began my long, slow, retreat back to the surface. The ball of hands followed me all the way. Rolling forward. Extending fingers. Almost touching my face and then pulling back. I noticed one hand had nails that seemed freshly painted a vibrant turquoise, but how that paint was unchipped and unfaded I couldn't guess. Another hand had the word "hats" tattooed on its knuckles. Another was dusted with flour as if it had abandoned its original owner during the act of kneading bread.

When I reached the end of the burrow and I felt my boots slip on wet sod, all the hands slapped back into their geometric configuration and rolled down and away with a sound like fingers drumming on a table. I double-checked just to make sure my hands were where I expected them to be. They were. And they were perfectly happy to help me get to my feet and dust myself off.

When I returned to Cassandra, I looked back to the hill and found that the hole had vanished. And, for reasons I don't really understand, I wasn't surprised.

[Transmission Alert]

Well, now. Looks like this day holds even more surprises. Let's take a listen.

[Transmission]

(Jeffrey Cranor) Dr. Simon Blank

Dr. Simon Blank transmitting on CryptoNaturalist frequency 11-58-1.

As many you know, for the last few years I have been keeping watch on a disquieting cardboard box full of old National Geographic magazines. Well, I transmit today to invite you to share in my joy and fear. My vindication and apprehension.

My suspicions were correct. The box is not a box.

[Sigh] I have missed so much during my vigil in the Lee family's attic. The open air. The changing of seasons. The Lees' blessing to remain in their attic. The further estrangement of somewhat estranged relatives. And, of course, the unexpected death of the world's only forever-moth.

I won't get that time back, but I did gain something for the larger scientific community during my fieldwork. One more piece of the puzzle.

It started yesterday with a cold front. Bitter and sudden. The furnace kicked on for the first time in months, bringing that burnt dust smell with it. Domestic brimstone.

As a man of crypto-science, I reject magical thinking in all its insidious forms, but long years of experience as well as the precognition granted to me by a diet rich in owl-meat told me that my long wait was about to pay off.

I brushed a cobweb behind my ear and willed my eyes to focus on the apparent box. It waited like a crouched ocelot between the Rubbermaid bin of VHS tapes and the incomplete croquet set.

I leaned in as far as I dared and... that's when it happened.

A scrap of cardboard, no, not cardboard, rather dermis, folded away from the edge of the box. I detected a copper scent and felt a telltale change in humidity.

Do you see?

Biological processes. No doubt. The creature might be molting. Alternatively, this could be the beginning of a larger metamorphosis. Will the organism become a larger box or... good god... something even more unsettling?

My atrophied muscles quiver as I hold this microphone, but I had to tell someone. I only left the attic to update you, my colleagues, and already I feel overdue to return.

Think of me, friends. I bring the light of discovery to dark and unmapped waters and, truthfully, I fear what I may find there.

Well, back to it.

Wait, did I mention that the interior of the box is rimmed with very human-looking gums and teeth?

Yes, I think I did.

Simon Blank signing off.

[End]

Well, thank you Dr. Blank. I, for one, appreciate your unwavering dedication to fieldwork. I'll look forward to your next report from the attic.

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

End.

Thank you to Jeffrey Cranor for playing Dr. Simon Blank. Jeffrey is a co-creator of a number of my favorite podcasts including Welcome to Night Vale. Give a listen to Jeffrey's newest podcast *Start with This*. It's a creativity and writing focused show and each episode centers around a topic from world building, to opening lines, and even failure. Then they give listeners two short assignments: something to consume and something to create. I think you'll enjoy it.

And thank you to everyone who voted in the 2019 Columbus Podcast awards. The CryptoNaturalist won best arts podcast thanks to your generous support!

In personal news, I am expecting the arrival of my first child in the very near future, so my podcasting schedule may be a little uneven in the next few months. I appreciate your patience with me and I ask that you send welcoming thoughts to Arthur Orion Blackthorn Anderson as he enters our world.

Show Notes: Episode 27: Burrow (00:18:47)

If you crawl into a burrow to meet its owner, it's good to keep an open mind and a close eye on all your body parts.

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