

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA
Season 2 Episode 11: Prologue

Old Gods of Appalachia is a horror anthology podcast and therefore may contain material not suitable for all audiences, so listener discretion is advised.

O Appalachia: mother and maw that births and devours us, roots sunk deep and winding as gnarled hands clasped in prayer, hold us fast and give us foundation. O knotted cage and vine-wrought chains, O feast of hills and green, that which feeds our hearts but often starves our blood: Hear us now.

We stand atop your crown this day and we see you, O Mother. We see your bent joints and busted sinew, hips shifted from birth forever changed in the giving of life, we mark these new shapes born from blasted pine, the churned earth of an open grave, a temple reconstructed in burnt nettles, an altar formed by willing bones. We inhale the grease and death of the mines, the hot steel and empty promise of the railroad and we listen to the lies that they tell. These agents of the Inner-Dark, these outsiders, these night-heart shapes that would reach into the breached and ruined gate of us and plant their vile seed, teach our babies from birth that they are only as good as the blood and sweat that can be wrung from them, that their dreams are not more than brittle branches before the furnace of industry and work, O Mother we beg your mercy! O keep or pray and find a way to heal the broken hide of our land, O grove and barrens, close around *them* and

mislead *them*, make them understand the true meaning of *lost*. Sunless hungry soil, O sleeping chasm, O empty, empty belly, be still! Be filled!

O, Appalachia, can't you see? We've come home.

[The Land Unknown: Hollow Heart Version by Landon Blood]

A cold wind calls, and so I follow,

No time to rest these weary bones,

I hear her song and my heart goes hollow,

Best not to walk these woods alone,

Best stick to the roads, stay out of the shadow,

Best get on home, best to leave them ghosts alone...

If the coal mines of Appalachia are the gullet and belly of the Beast, then the iron ribbons of the Clinchfield Railway are its rust-encrusted tongue. Stretching out long from holler to hill to valley, rolling forth like Elija's chariot, hauling the bituminous bounty carved from the gut of the mountain into a world to be turned into heat, light, and soot. Clouds of earth swallowed and crushed dead and compressed time burned to keep the darkness away, all while sealing in the sky and just drawing it closer.

But as much as they carry coal and the bones of the earth, these rattling cars often ferry forth those who seek bigger dreams outside the cradle of the green and the shadow of

shortened days. Those who are loved and prayed for and sent on their way with a sack lunch and steamer trunk, boarding a train that might carry them to live out their dreams – or just to pass into the next life or death. And as all roads run both ways, those iron rails bring forth Things and men, bring them *to* these hills from elsewhere as well. Some are just good-hearted souls looking for work and a place to carve out their own, and others are... not. Others who are just that: Others.

Now, not in the way of skin, tongue, or self, but Others in the way of being made apart from the world of sun and light and the Green. Others called by Those Who Sleep Beneath as acolytes or allies – or in some cases, even kin.

So mind who you meet out by the tracks, family, mind well.

Somewhere on this mount tonight there is a child clenching his teeth against tears like a bear trap. There is a boy who is terrified of being a man because in his time and place, it is a man's job to die. For that child there will be no sleep. He will rise knowing he was not meant to, and that boy will go home late to his mama and a supper he cannot eat. He'll watch his daddy ache and groan his way to his chair on the front porch to smoke, watch him look longingly at the main road for death to ride up and take away the hurt. See, that's his job: to work, and then die.

This child will know he has failed his daddy somehow as he failed to die like a man in

the mines or on the tracks or even in some fool's war somewhere else, because he has died already. Fell down on a carpet of pine needles in the kaleidoscope shadows of the grove, the water of the reservoir and the gray-green overhead mixing the tinny smell of fish and turpentine. The setting sun painting everything an almost-indigo. And the sound of the rest of them running away, any words they might have left him dissolved into the panting breath of boys who knew there'd be trouble. His body cooling as the lakeside earth leached his bones cold.

He should have stayed right there 'til they found him pale and empty, took him home for his mommy and daddy to bury, let the church not talk about how many children are in the ground out back. It had been a whole year since the last one, anyway, but they shoulda found him and put him with the rest, but he didn't die on their land or in the woods behind the house or in any dangerous place a boy might fearlessly play... he died in the Pines, and they never found him. *She* did.

For sisters, loneliness is a different bird entire. It nests under the breastbone, a hard but brittle place where the ache for family is born. An ache that runs like rusty barbed wire into the blackness trying to connect to the next fence post of blood and shared stories, but it always feels too far. In the valley, there sleeps a woman who dreads the night but does not fear it. For her, a quiet house is its own kind of hell, a prison built for ghosts that haven't learned to stop dying yet. As grateful as she is to have it, she'd almost burn it down if it could make her sleeping skin feel seen. Paint her bare, sweat-smear'd chest

with the ashes and mark her for the coming harvest, beg the sky to crack and the earth to yield forth a bounty of unbloomed death, pine-bound flower bulbs that reach for the cold kiss of the moon for fear that the sun might wither them. She knows the name of every haint in these woods and fears nary a one of them. But without kin to stand beside her, she might as well be one herself.

The Quiet, though, well that's something else. The Quiet has a whole bunch of names. None of them I'll spell for you so you can't tell it to go home or to hell or anywhere else, it just sits there. Drinking up your sleep like a skeeter sucking blood, leaving itchy spots you'd scratch into open wounds if you could reach them. The nights in the Quiet are harder for her than most, but don't worry, family, ain't nobody gonna be sleeping before too long.

As I've told you before, there are places in this world that humanity was never meant to see, but y'all came anyway. Y'all, the people before you, pushing into the darkness and through the green, carving up the land and parceling it out to outsiders. We cry out in lamentation and calamity and beg the unheeding heavens for mercy, so shocked to find what we have so clearly sought. The lands that were meant to remain unseen and unknown shrink by the day.

And that's where we find ourselves this time, down in the valley where the shadow is the bluest, and we are in the pines in the Pines, where the sun don't ever shine, and we'll

shiver the whole night through.

Oh my let's go, family. Let's go.

[Into the Pines (traditional) performed by Keena Graham]

Hey girl, hey girl, don't lie to me

Tell me, where did you sleep last night?

In the pines, in the pines

Where the sun never shines

I shiver the whole night through...

Welcome home, family. Welcome to Season 2 of Old Gods of Appalachia, In the Pines.

It has been a long time coming, and it is so good to be in the presence of family once

again, is it not? Raise a hand and say 'Amen,' church, yes indeed! We missed y'all. In

this season, we promised you a close and intimate walk with death, and we know what

you're saying: "Steve, Cam, last season y'all killed a whole lot of people." And that's true.

But this time around it's gonna be a smaller, more personal story. You'll see how it goes;

I think you're gonna enjoy yourselves.

And family, so as it was so let it be again. Please complete your social media ritual and

follow us on Facebook and Instagram as Old Gods Of Appalachia, tweet into the

ever-darkening void on Twitter with us @OldGodsPod, and for the rest of our social media like our Discord server, you can head on over to OldGodsOfAppalachia.com and join every aspect of the family that calls to you. And if you truly want to cast your lot with us, put your offering in the plate and pass it to your neighbor. Head on over to Patreon.com/OldGodsOfAppalachia where for a few dollars a month, you can gain goodies in the mail, creepy dark shadowy things that slither into your mailbox, as well as access to the seventeen-part epic storyline of Build Mama a Coffin that is exclusively on Patreon.

Today's story was written and performed by Steve Shell. Our intro music, that brand-spanking new theme song, is by our brother Landon Blood, and our outro music is by Keena Graham of Blood on the Harp.

See you soon, family. Stay safe.

[Instrumental: mournful piano.]