

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 4, Episode 56: The Traveling Marvels

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

Erebus Cain was the sort of man who oozes into your life like a grease stain on a good shirt that you don't notice until it's far too late to scrub out. He was the sort of oily interloper who squelched his way through people's lives until they found themselves befouled with the whole of his being, from his noxious, disingenuous demeanor to the outright horrifying nature of his life's work. Relatively little was known of the origins of the man who styled himself Erebus Cain, except for the fact that his name was neither Erebus nor Cain, both being affectations adopted in the interest of his chosen profession. Some said he came from down in Arkansas, where he was wanted for unspeakable crimes against the good people of the Ozarks. Others say he hailed from some big city or another up north maybe, as folks around here just don't do the sort of things he did. Born Herbert Guthrie, according to investigators who had serious questions about his work, Erebus Cain was the proprietor of a business so distasteful that few would admit to patronizing it... but, shamefully, many did. That enterprise was known as Erebus Cain's Traveling Marvels, an exhibition of the wondrous, the perverse, and the forgotten.

'Twas a freak show, family.

An attraction that latched itself onto the odd carnival or circus and wormed its way through the small towns and backroads of our great nation, freak shows of the time were exploitative showcases of the disabled, the uniquely proportioned, and folks who turned to showing off the things that got them labeled "undesirable" by many in order to make a living wage. Conjoined twins, folks with glandular or hormonal imbalances that rendered them overly hairy, too tall, too short, too fat or too frail, regularly found their way to the rosters of these grotesque theatrical displays. The amount of agency enjoyed by these folks varied, from those who worked as contractors fairly paid by reputable outfits, to others who lived as outright prisoners to their employers and captors, and everything along the spectrum in between. Erebus Cain's exhibits, however, were a little different.

While some sideshows might chill your bones or offer the titillating thrill of the taboo, the Traveling Marvels tended to haunt people. If you asked someone what the best part of the show was, they might not be able to put their finger on it, having difficulty recalling exactly what they had experienced in the collection of old tents or the dimly lit courtyard at their center. What they could tell you was that it was all kinds of messed up. Exhibits came and went as time passed. Some sold fewer and fewer tickets until their contracts were terminated — sometimes in a rather final fashion. Others died in their cages, surrounded by their own filth and the voyeuristic gaze of folks who had nothing better to do and lacked the common sense to find something. The World's Oldest Woman, the Vampire of Haw Creek, and the Son of the Minotaur had all come and gone, their signage disposed of, their living quarters hosed out and repurposed for whatever new wonder was set to replace them. There were three, however, who traveled with Cain wherever he went. They were his signature attractions, and they had been with him for a long, long time.

CAIN: Gaze if you will upon the immense form of the Goliath — far more than your average man with a pituitary issue, as you might have seen elsewhere! Ladies and gentlemen, you will find no medical trickery here, no mirrors, no illusions. The Goliath is a *genuine* giant!

The Goliath stood well over nine feet tall, with shoulders as broad as a hay wagon, arms layered in thick, ropey muscle and hands that could crush a grown man's skull. His skin was a dense and dusty gray, as though he were carved from stone. His hair and beard were thick and tangled and hung to his waist like a leonine shroud.

CAIN: Descended from the giant folk that roamed these hills centuries ago, a terror to both the Cherokee and those who came before them! Why, this specimen here is rumored to be a direct descendant of the mighty Judaculla himself!

The giant's name was not Goliath, nor was he a descendant of the legendary lightning-chucking titan described in Cherokee legend. He was a descendent of a quiet, if embittered, people who had chosen not to truck with the likes of men centuries ago. The passing of the giants from our world is a sad story, family, and how the Goliath was delivered into the clutches of Erebus Cain is sadder still, but that's a tale for another time. Just not right now.

Across the way from the Goliath sat a tent dyed a deep and luxurious shade of purple, trimmed in some shiny gold fabric and embroidered with constellations worked in gold thread. An ornately painted sign was propped outside its discreetly closed tent flaps, advertising the services of one Granny Cloud:

Oracle to the Stars

Augur of Fate

~ and ~

Practitioner of the Ancient Art of Divination

One customer at a time. Adults only. No refunds.

Granny Cloud's performance was of a more subtle nature than most of Cain's attractions, appealing to customers of discriminating tastes. More than some twenty-five cent peddler of fortunes, Granny Cloud possessed a true gift for prophecy, one it was said she had nurtured with the study of divinatory practices from around the globe. Her insight into the wisdom of the tarot was without peer, though it was said she favored the simple deck of playing cards she'd learnt to read at her granddaddy's knee. She could throw the bones and cast lots as accurately as the disciples of Christ himself. She could read the lines of fate etched into the pattern of a handful of cowrie shells or channel spirits from the beyond, if the situation called for it. Bibliomancy and geomancy were well known to her. If a customer was willing to pay extra for her cleaning bill, she would interpret the signs from the entrails of a chicken or a rat or even a goat, if you were feeling spendy.

Upon entering her tent, you would find her reclining in a comfortable, gilt-framed chair upholstered in velvet, before a round table draped simply in a spotless white linen cloth. Granny Cloud was a striking woman, with a mass of silver hair piled atop her head, secured with jeweled combs, and a face whose lines spoke of character and wit. She had one eye of brilliant blue, and another of murky green, and a smile as crafty as a cat. It was clear she had once been a great beauty, though whether that had been three decades ago or a hundred, none would dare to guess.

She would invite customers to sit, and fix them with that versicolor gaze, and for long moments, Granny Cloud would say nothing at all. She would sit silent, seeming not even to breathe, looking not *at* you, but *into* you, unconcerned by any social prohibition regarding staring, the

only sound in the room the rhythmic *tick-tick-tick* of a clock that sat atop a carved ebony cabinet behind her. If nerves or poor judgment overcame them and they ventured a question or cracked a joke, in a blink Granny Cloud would produce a willow switch from beneath the table cloth and rap them across the knuckles with a *snap* and a sharp, “No!” And no more would be said while the patron nursed their bruised fingers and awaited her pronouncement. After some indeterminate period, which varied from one client to the next, Granny Cloud would nod and say, “We should have a cup of tea” or “The bones for you,” and name her price.

Sometimes the number she quoted was too high, and the customer would walk away disappointed. Some folks come with their heart set on one method or another — young’uns, she found, tended to be particularly enchanted with the tarot, while lawyers were convinced true prophecy could only be glimpsed in blood and viscera — and for an added fee, she would accommodate their whims. Granny Cloud recommended the method she sensed would give her the clearest vision for the individual in question. If they wished her to work a little harder and were willing to pay for the privilege, it was no matter to her.

Once her price had been met, Granny Cloud would tuck the money into her dress, and ask the question her client wished to answer. One question only — that was the deal. She asked for no clarifications, sought no details that might aid her in merely guessing at what folks wanted to hear. Granny Cloud’s visions were clear, and she delivered them without prevarication or sentiment, whether for good or for ill. Your business partner is cheating you. Your wife is sleeping with your brother. This match is a good one; you’ll enjoy a long life and have many children. If you marry that man, he’ll kill you within the year.

Some of Granny Cloud’s predictions saved lives. Others ended them. The outcome was none of her concern. Her job was to see the truth and speak it. What folks did with the information she gave them was their business. It was this rigid objectivity that endeared Granny Cloud to Erebus Cain. He was not a man who liked to gamble — leastways not unless he could be certain of stacking the odds in his own favor. Granny Cloud was ever his ace in the hole.

The third among Erebus Cain’s favorites was one of a sort you’d find at many such tawdry spectacles, under various yet similar monikers: the Cannibal, the Maniac, the Geek. A geek was often nothing special to look at when first they stepped onto the stage. Lots of them looked a lot

like you and me... at least until they got down to business. A geek's job was to remind everyone how lucky they were to be normal, to be free of unnatural compulsions toward violence or bloodshed. Shedding blood, however, was what a geek did best. Traditionally the geek's stage show involved the performer in question biting the heads off chickens, snakes, or other smaller critters and drinking their blood, then leering, bloody-faced, at the audience while growling and hissing like a wild beast. Some were known for eating and occasionally regurgitating inedible items such as tin cans or metal screws. Choking down things that would shred the insides of most folks and then puking them back up with a crimson grin was just another night on the stage for folks of these unusual talents. Geek shows always ended in blood

Erebus Cain had found all these talents and more in one neat package: the Eater of Bones. The Eater was, like many of the sideshow's attractions, a little different from your standard mutilator of poultry. This was no broken-toothed and bloody-mawed madman to howl and froth at the marks. The Eater was much, much worse. When folks purchased a ticket to see the Eater of Bones, they were admonished to keep their hands behind their backs, or in their pockets. No open toed shoes were allowed. A thick white line was chalked around the edge of the stage, and signs at each corner advised the crowd that anyone attempting to step over it did so at their own peril. Erebus Cain's Traveling Marvels would not be held liable for damages to property or persons that crossed that white line.

CAIN: Don't offer the old boy any temptation and everyone will go home with the same number of digits and little pink piggies as they came in with. Wouldn't want anything to happen to those fingers, would we, madam? You have such lovely hands.

Erebus would confide to the crowds as they filed into the drab and dingy tent that was always set up in the furthest corner of the grounds occupied by the Traveling Marvels.

Upon entering the dimly lit space and gathering around the low stage, someone in the tittering parties of lookie-looks would invariably comment on the smell. The smell was part of the experience, Erebus would tell them, but they'd still complain, holding their noses or covering their mouths. Yet they always stayed, right on through to the bloody end. They would be confused at first, because there was nothing but an empty wooden stage, the aforementioned

white line chalked heavily onto the ground around its perimeter bright in the dank shadows of the room. The Eater of Bones was not to be seen, at least not directly.

It would appear on stage without fanfare or warning. To the novice attendee, it looked as though a short man, or perhaps a tall child, had wandered on stage wearing a filthy sheet over its head, like a ghost costume at Halloween. Erebus could almost count down to the second when the rubes would notice that no feet protruded from beneath the moldering shroud, that it was in fact floating a good six inches off the ground. By the time they realized this though, the first chickens would be released onto the stage, and the eating would begin. The sounds that came from beneath that stained old drapery would live in the nightmares of any who heard them for the rest of their lives. And if anyone accidentally got a peek under the covers? Well, that was their problem.

It was said that some folks wound up confined to an asylum after seeing what lurked beneath the Eater's veil. Most were fortunate enough to forget the whole evening at the carnival, but those who did not? The less spoken of them the better, family. Besides, there was a sign mounted above the ticket booth stating clearly that Erebus Cain's Traveling Marvels bore no responsibility for any injury to the body or mind of its audiences. By purchasing a ticket, patrons consented to witness what was on display, and in doing so absolved the proprietor of all liability in relation thereto. No refunds would be issued, nor were ticket holders entitled to any form of compensation if they misjudged the strength of their stomachs or the measure of their mental fortitude. If anyone asked too many questions, Cain had a way of removing folks from the premises quickly, and if anything went too sideways... well, the Eater was usually still a mite peckish, even after a show.

Whatever dwelt beneath that sheet served the owner of the Traveling Marvels not only as an attraction but as an insurance policy. The other exhibits knew better than to try to run or to give old Erebus any trouble, lest they wake in the night to find the Eater drifting into their sleeping quarters.

On this particular evening, Erebus Cain did not require the services of the Eater of Bones nor any other in his employ. He'd been tracking a potential new exhibit for the better part of a week. The carnival they were most recently following had been shut down just outside of Harlan after

the county Sheriff got stuck at the top of their rickety old ferris wheel. It had been two hours before the carnies were able to get him down, by which point the old boy was spitting mad. Erebus had seen the writing on the wall and had his lot packed up and on the road, heading east out of the Bluegrass State, long before Johnny Law could come sniffing around their end of the midway. They'd pitched camp just this side of the Kentucky/Virginia line to figure out their next move, and Erebus Cain decided to take a little walk in the woods to clear his head. Spending too much time in such close proximity to the freaks made his thoughts get squirrely sometimes. If he lingered too long in the Eater's tent, for example, he was sure to catch the dreams, and nobody wanted the dreams.

It was on this walk that he first noticed the signs of something mighty interesting moving through the woods of Grant County. He'd spent a few nights sleeping rough, following the trail through the thick brush, before he spotted it. A wolf-boy. Or a dog-boy? He couldn't tell exactly what it was, but it was young and it was scared. He'd acquired a new attraction of a similar variety just northwest of here, closer to Hazard, when they'd passed through on their way to Harlan. She wasn't quite stage-ready yet. She'd definitely require some coaching to mold her into a proper show dog, but this young feller here? He looked readymade for display.

Erebus could see the posters pasted all over the next podunk mining town now:

COME SEE THE DOG-FACED BOY!
MARVEL AT NATURE'S CRUEL HANDIWORK!

He'd not approached the thing just yet. He didn't want to spook it. You never knew what freaks like this might do if they were spooked. Most would just run, and then he'd have to waste time tracking it through the woods again. Then there were the others. A freak could be dangerous if it turned on you. Erebus had learned that lesson the hard way, and he only had to look in the mirror at the scars that twisted across his flesh like a map to remind him anytime he was tempted to forget it. On the fifth night of watching the boy scamper around, dragging back kindling and food he'd scavenged from the trash bins of a coal camp a mile or two over the ridge, Erebus was preparing to make his move, when something happened that stopped him dead in his tracks.

A wolf — a genuine red wolf — trotted into the clearing where his new friend was tucking into his meager dinner and stopped about ten yards from the campfire. The boy-thing froze as he locked eyes with the russet-furred beast. Erebus didn't dare breathe. There hadn't been wolves in this part of the mountains in almost a hundred years so far as he knew, not proper wolves anyway. The wolf carried her evening meal, a fat rabbit, which she set down at her feet as she gazed upon the boy. For the longest time, the two stared at each other in silence, and Erebus had begun to worry this wandering predator might have decided his latest prospect made more of a worthy dinner than the bunny, when suddenly the wolf charged at the boy. Erebus choked back a shout, but to his wonder, she did not attack. Instead she ran up to the boy, and allowed him to scruff her around the neck. After a few moments of this, the red she-wolf settled on the ground, threw back her head, and with a low howl, began to change her shape.

Erebus Cain could not believe his luck.

[“The Land Unknown (The Bloody Roots Verses)” by Landon Blood]

*These old roots run
into a ground so bloody
Full of broken dreams and dusty bones
They feed a tree so dark and hungry
where its branches split and new blood flows
And the ghosts of a past you thought long-buried
rise to haunt the young
The shadow falls as judgment comes
Tread soft, my friend, amongst your fellows
Make your bond your word
Lest you get what you deserve*

When her cousin Anthony fled into the night, Jade Louise Benton had little other option but to follow. Anthony could move far faster through the night than their parents or any other folk. Jade had never seen Frannie or Tessa change their shape, and she wasn't sure either of the women could find their wolf anymore. She was the only one in the family with any hope of catching him up. She was small for a wolf, but lithe and quick. And anyway, Mama and Aunt Tessa would have their hands full tending to Anthony's daddy's wounds. All the parents would

be upset with her, of course — they would worry, and rightly so — but if there was ever a time for asking forgiveness rather than permission, Jade figured this was it.

So out the door she ran into a crisp autumn night illuminated by the moon's silvery glow. Jade had expected to overtake Anthony easily, four legs generally being better than two. She hadn't counted on how fast her cousin could move in the strange, long-limbed half-shape he'd found himself in, or just how powerfully he was motivated by fear and grief. By the time Jade had loped around the back of the shed, Anthony was already out of sight. She cocked her head, letting her nose and her sharp ears lead the way. His scent was strong on the air — still coppery with blood from his recent change — and she could make out the faint rustle of hurried footsteps through the woods, further away than she would have thought possible in so little time. Jade had put her head down, and followed him into the trees.

It was a beautiful night, clear and cool, the air filled with the rich scents of loam and woodsmoke, dead leaves, and crabapples fermenting in the moist soil. The moon kissed her fur and the wind tickled her nose, and in spite of everything, Jade's bones sang with a feral joy. Until she found her wolf, she had never known freedom, never known her own heart. She had so looked forward to sharing this with her cousin, her closest friend. To chasing each other through the woods, their paws pounding silent through the undergrowth. To teaching him how to stalk rabbits and small prey, and perhaps learning together how to bring down larger game. An extra deer or two would not go unappreciated in their family during the long, cold months of winter.

It broke Jade's heart to see Anthony struggle so with a transition that had become so natural for her. Sure, it hurt — every time — but the momentary pain was so little a price to pay for the symphony of sensation that sang through her nerves, the world a brilliant tapestry of sound and scent and color. Even on two legs, she felt more alive than she had ever known before the moon called to her. Now that his body had begun to change, surely there must be some way she could help him feel his way fully into his wolf skin. She just had to find him and calm him down.

But finding Anthony was harder than Jade anticipated. She followed his trail, nose twitching to catch his scent in the dense leaves and on the wind, until it dead-ended at the river that ran through the woods about a mile from the house. With a grumble of frustration, she waded into

the freezing water, her thick fur growing heavy but providing some protection from the chill, and paddled across to the other side. Once her paws found purchase, she hopped up onto the shore and shook the water from her coat. Then she put her nose to the ground again, and began walking the river's edge, nostrils flaring as she scented for Anthony's trail, searching for the spot where he had come across.

There was nothing. No scent. No track. No sign of Anthony at all.

Had he doubled back? Jade swam back across to the point where she had entered the water, and began making her way downriver on the opposite side. Still she found no sign. Could he have tried to swim upstream, and come across someplace north of there? It seemed unlikely, but she tried searching the opposite direction just the same. In the end, to her shock, it turned out Anthony had swum — or perhaps floated, by some means or another — miles downstream. It took her the rest of the night and the most of the following day to pick up some trace of him, by which point she was exhausted and had no choice but to rest.

Moonrise found her up and on the hunt again, following her cousin's scent deep into the mountains. The trail was long cold by then, and there were several times she lost it, and needed to double back or scout ahead to find the track again. It took her the better part of a week to run him down, by which point she'd pursued him all the way to Grant County, just this side of the Kentucky line. She found him creeping through a coal camp after dark, digging through the garbage bins for leftover food, and her heart clenched with sympathetic misery. He shouldn't have to live like this. But the strange half-form he still occupied thwarted him in every possible way — it was too awkward, too clumsy for hunting prey as he might in wolf shape, yet far too strange for him to venture into human company. If he walked into a Cas Walker's looking like that, some terrified grocer would surely shoot him.

Jade followed Anthony back to his little camp in the woods at a discreet distance, keeping upwind. She didn't want to spook him, and she couldn't know how sensitive the strange not-quite-wolf's nose might be. She was pleased to note he had a little campfire going, and had done his best to construct a little shelter in the clearing. Jade watched him in silence for awhile, then slunk quietly away into the darkening woods.

She returned a few minutes later and slowly approached the edge of Anthony's camp, walking steadily but cautiously into the glow of the fire light, where she dropped the plump, fluffy rabbit she carried in her jaws. Anthony froze at the sight of the red wolf that had trotted into his camp, but then slowly, recognition dawned, and some approximation of a smile crossed his puppy-ish face.

He tried to say her name, but his transformed mouth couldn't quite find its way around the consonants. What came out was more like "Ay?" but she yipped encouragingly all the same, bouncing on her front paws. Anthony grinned and held out his arms to her. Jade picked up the rabbit and trotted over to him, dropping her offering at his feet as he ruffled the thick fur around her neck. She nudged the rabbit toward him again, and her cousin took the hint, smiling with gratitude as he picked through his pile of kindling for a piece of wood that might work for a spit. It would make a far better meal for him than the crusts of some miner's leftover sandwich.

While Anthony fussed about with the rabbit, Jade settled herself onto the ground, turning her senses deep inward, into blood and bone and sinew, and began the slow, bone-cracking shift back to her human shape. Though the air was cold and she had no clothes with which to cover herself, it would be far easier to talk sense to her cousin if she could, in fact, speak to him. Understanding her intent, Anthony hurried to her side with an old, time-worn quilt he must have snatched off somebody's clothesline, and draped it over her writhing form, in the interest of both warmth and modesty. When she had found two legs and fingers again, Jade wrapped the blanket around herself gratefully, and settled next to her cousin before the warmth of the campfire.

They had much to discuss.

Erebus Cain backed slowly out of view of the dog-boy's camp, careful to keep himself upwind of the pair. His first impulse had been to swagger into their camp, maybe offer a helping hand... but no, that would be unwise. This wasn't his first rodeo. Erebus was familiar with what their kind were capable of, and he didn't fancy the idea of potentially losing the hand offered in friendship.

This situation had to be handled delicately. If all went well, he would simply escort his newest exhibits back to camp and begin making introductions. If not... well, if the carrot wouldn't work, best come prepared with an appropriately large stick.

["Atonement" by Jon Charles Dwyer]

Well, hey there, family. Thank y'all for joining us for this installment of Old Gods of Appalachia Season 4: Root & Branch as we delve deeper into the impact our man Jack has had on generations of folk throughout our Appalachia. There's so much more to come, so why don't y'all just set a spell. Get comfortable. That's right. Y'all want something to drink? Well all right.

If you want to keep up with what's coming next with us, from live shows to new merchandise and beyond, we encourage you to head on over to oldgodsofappalachia.com and follow us on the social media portals to the nether realms of your choosing. And if you like what we do so much you want to support us financially as well as spiritually, you can go on over to patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia and for a reasonable monthly or annual sum gain access to hours and hours of exclusive storyline content and special extras reserved just for the kinfolk who go that extra mile for us. We appreciate y'all ever so much.

Now it's time for that every time I see you down at the grocery store reminder that Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media distributed by Rusty Quill. Today's story was written by Cam Collins and Steve Shell. Our intro music is by Brother Landon Blood and our outro music, "Atonement" is by Brother Jon Charles Dwyer. The voice of Erebus Cain was Darren Marshall. Talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.

© 2023 DeepNerd Media. All rights reserved.