

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 4, Episode 60: The Tale of Mr. Poe

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

In the chamber deep beneath the mountains of West Virginia, an awed hush had fallen over the assembly of witches and h'aints and boogers as the thing that until recent years had been known as TailyPo sat on the witness chair and twitched and thrashed his many shadowy tails in grim satisfaction. Most in this room knew TailyPo as a lesser creature that lurked in the lonely places betwixt the mountains. In the stories told by men, TailyPo would be spotted by some lost and starving hunter who had strayed from known hunting grounds into a place where there seemed to be no game whatsoever. Upon laying eyes on what looked to be a bobcat or a fox or some mixture of the two, the hunter would somehow manage to wound TailyPo, invariably severing his long, skinny tail. The hunter would curse his luck as his intended prey escaped into the woods, and go on about his business, unaware that his business with TailyPo was not yet concluded.

Once the sun had settled beneath the horizon, TailyPo would begin to stalk the man and his dogs. If the hunter was camping, TailyPo would slink around his tent in the deep hours, leaving long slashes in the canvas and pulling on the dogs' tails, causing them to whimper and howl in fear. If instead the hunter went home to his cabin, TailyPo would skitter across his roof all night and scratch at his windows, leave unidentifiable scat on the porch. Though the hunter invariably feared for the poor dogs TailyPo menaced, the creature usually merely frightened them until they ran away in search of less stressful accommodations. TailyPo would bide his time, creeping down the hunter's chimney to slash cushions and shred rugs, maybe help himself to the chicken coop, before finally butchering the hunter in his sleep with his razor sharp claws. It was a harrowing tale that kept many young'uns up at night and hopefully taught them to respect the dangers of the deep woods and the things that lived there.

Amongst the other h'aints and boogers of central Appalachia, however, TailyPo had long been a bit of a joke — a bottomfeeder and a scavenger relying on a single trick to lure half-starved and desperate men to an ignoble and shabby death. Everybody knew TailyPo could grow all the tails

he wanted. He never needed to go to the trouble of letting himself get bloodied at all. In the stories he was always presented as the wronged party, a poor critter minding its business out in the bush only to be mutilated by some thoughtless hillbilly. The things knew better. Ol' Taily was a predator just like them to be sure, but where was the *craft*? Where was the art in carving up moonshiners who drank too much of their own product and wandered off lost on the backside of the mountain? He was a monstrous thing of teeth and claws, and yet he was content to creep around old deer stands and hunting shacks, mewling his pathetic little "Where's my TailyPo?" like a sullen child.

It appeared, however, that TailyPo's fortunes had taken a turn for the better in recent years. Gone were the mangy coat and scrawny legs, the beady red eyes and naked, bat-like ears. The creature reclining insouciantly upon the witness chair sported a thick, shiny pelt of lush fur, claws to rival a cattywampus, and eyes that flickered orange like fire. The crowd assembled for the trial of Jack all knew what those glowing eyes meant. TailyPo — like Skint Tom, Old Green Eyes, Lavinia Thrice Damned, and god knows how many others — had looked upon the darkness that lived deep beneath the mountains. Had met it, embraced it, and been changed by it. And now Mr. Poe thrived upon it.

The representative of the dark, Miss Gray, looked into those burning eyes, and her lips quirked in a soft, chilly smile. "Mr. Poe, thank you for coming. I know you are very busy. We appreciate your assistance in this matter."

The thing that no longer acknowledged any other moniker than Mr. Poe inclined its head and spoke in a voice that chilled the blood and curled the toes, like walking on a floor covered in cold iron nails. "Of course. I cannot abide an oathbreaker, and thus I wish to do my part to see that justice is dealt. So it is no trouble at all, Miss Gray. I am at your disposal."

Miss Gray inclined her head in acknowledgement and turned to face the gallery, her voice rising to fill the room. "Do you recognize the man sitting at the table behind me?"

Mr. Poe's mouth curved into a cruel grin as he locked eyes with Jack. "Oh, I do indeed, Miss Gray. I know him and his deeds well. He thinks himself clever, he does. He thinks himself a *businessman*. He thinks himself a trickster of sorts, deep down in his heart. But he is not," the

beast spat disdainfully, his voice slithering into the ears of the mortal folk in attendance like an unwelcome tongue. “Mr. Poe is a businessman. Mr. Poe makes the deals in the dark woods and reaps the harvest of his wits and tricksiness. Yes, he does. This one is not like me. He might be as I once was, running himself bloody chasing down the starving wretches that scratch out a living from these cursed mountains. But he is not like Mr. Poe. No. Mr. Poe always gets his.”

The delegate of the inner dark narrowed her eyes in a slightly reproachful look that encouraged him just to answer the damned question.

Mr. Poe nodded his vulpine head twice. “Yes, I know him. He calls himself Jack, he does, or Mr. J.T. Fields of whatever place he blights with his presence on a given day. Whatever he calls himself now, I know him, and he has wronged me greatly.”

[“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*

Trevor Gilbert hadn't felt this stupid in a very long time. He'd come out to Burke's Ridge to hunt for game to supplement the rapidly dwindling larder that was meant to sustain his family through the coming winter, but he'd made a crucial mistake the men of his line had made in various forms and fashions for generations. He'd brought his jug with him. Not all fruit borne by the Gilbert family tree in the far reaches of Hazel County, Virginia, struggled with spirits — the kind that lurk in bottles rather than old houses and boneyards, to be clear — but Trevor did. Just like his daddy and his granddaddy before him, Trevor would have been better off swearing off intoxicating beverages from the get-go. Alas, we all bear different burdens, and this was his, and

thus he found himself alone and lost in the deep woods somewhere that was most assuredly not Burke's Ridge.

Trevor had known where he was going. His family had been hunting this ridge ever since his papaw was a boy, and he knew where every lean-to, deer stand, and hunting cabin could be found on this side of the mountain. Burke's Ridge had been a reliable source of deer, turkeys, rabbits and squirrels for generations of families that had come to call this corner of Hazel County home. After two days of missed shots at squirrels and finding nary a track nor sign of deer, he'd decided to sleep under the stars on the side of a hill he and his brothers had camped on for years. He'd rise before the sun to head up onto the ridge proper to look for... well hell, anything at this point.

After he'd polished off the meager rations he'd carried in his satchel, Trevor allowed himself a small pull of his uncle Keebie's white lightning, just to warm his bones. One pull turned into a few and soon his bones were warmer than they had any right to be. As he started to drift into the fuzzy blackness that passed for sleep for many of the Gilbert men, his bladder alerted him that it wasn't time to bed down just yet. So he roused himself and wandered into the deepening gloom to answer nature's call at the edge of a shallow ravine he and his brothers had nicknamed the "Devil's Divide" when they were barely old enough to be out in the woods on their own.

It was a shabby tangle of dead trees, ancient brambles, and the sad remnant of what was once a nice little creek that had since grown stagnant and turned into a murky little swamp. The Gilbert boys had held many a literal pissing contest off the side of this hill — with points awarded for height of arc, volume and overall duration — and Trevor thought it would be a fitting tribute to his two older siblings, both lost in acts of military service in recent years, to perform his own single gun salute of sorts into the Devil's Divide. He'd gotten his belt halfway undone and his britches unhitched when his body informed him that due to the amount of corn liquor in his bloodstream, it would no longer be able to provide the services of coordination or balance, and he tumbled ass over little brown jug into the shallow chasm below.

As the sun crept back over the edge of the mountains like an unfaithful husband sneaking back into his own house after a night spent in the arms of a secret paramour, Trevor Gilbert woke, chilled to the bone and suddenly very, very afraid. Recalling his unfortunate descent into the

mess that littered the floor of the Devil's Divide, he groaned as he rose, preparing himself to be wet and smelly from a night spent in the marsh, but to his surprise, his boots and clothes were bone dry. His belt and britches were fastened shut and he'd somehow managed not to wet himself. He found his pack and rifle at his side, both as clean and dry as when he'd settled into his makeshift camp the night before.

Shielding his eyes from the sun's rays, Trevor peered up to see how far he'd tumbled down the ravine and was puzzled. There was no ridge above him. There was no swamp below him. There was no tangled thicket of fallen trees and brittle brambles nor carpet of forgotten detritus beneath his feet — no empty beer bottles or other trash left behind by other campers before him. He wasn't in the Devil's Divide at all, near as he could tell, and that was peculiar. Trevor had been drunk, make no mistake, but not so drunk as to mistake a spot he'd visited since childhood. Not so drunk that he should be lost in a patch of woods he'd hunted his whole life. And yet, looking around, Trevor had to admit he had no idea where he'd woken up this morning. It was somewhere deep, he could feel that much. Folks who've spent their whole life in these mountains know that feeling of being so far up in the mountains that you almost stop noticing them. You don't think about the sprawling beauty of that endless sea of treetops and cloud kissed peaks when you're smack dab in the middle of them. This was such a place, and Trevor Gilbert had no idea how he'd got there.

The morning mist was thick, shrouding anything more than ten yards away in a dreamy gray haze. Trevor had begun to wonder if he was still passed out and dreaming in that fetid little mudpuddle of a swamp when he heard the sound for the first time. Somewhere in the fog, something skittered in the underbrush. Something quick and bigger than a squirrel, but not as big as a deer. Faster than a turkey and lower to the ground. A fox? Maybe a big ol' racoon? Whatever it was, he would happily shoot it, skin it, and put it in the pot to feed him and his missus.

Trevor and his beloved lived alone at the edge of the woods on what he had to admit was a pitiful excuse for a farm. They hadn't had a crop of any kind worth selling in a year. The chickens barely laid, and their cows were slow to milk and too old and stringy to sell for meat. His only comfort was that it was just the two of them, as they'd never been blessed with children — and not for want of trying. There was nothing more they'd wanted when they were first wed,

and they worked hard to grow the Gilbert family tree, but to no avail. Four years in, they'd settled into a sort of quiet acceptance that their home would never be filled with the pitter patter of a little one's feet. Despite that, they'd been happy, and there wasn't anything Trevor wouldn't do for the woman he'd married, which is how he found himself out here in the first place.

The sound came again, closer this time. He silenced his thoughts and peered into the morning mist, quietly sliding the bolt of his rifle to ready a shot once whatever was moving out there showed itself. There. A flash of sleek, dark fur. Trevor did not fire but moved closer, quietly, the way his daddy taught him. He still couldn't quite make out what it was. The brush rustled again, and Trevor caught a better look at it — a long, furry body. He seized the opportunity and fired. The skittering stopped. He'd got it! Whatever it was. It had been long and low to the ground. Maybe a fox? If it was a weasel, it would be the biggest one he'd ever seen. Weasels around these parts were hardly worth the ammo you'd waste to kill them. There wasn't enough meat on them to throw to a dog.

A few paces in, Trevor spotted spatters of dark blood on the ground. If it were something small like a weasel or a young rabbit, there might not be enough left of it to take home. He hated that. Trevor liked animals. He never shot for sport, or to be cruel. If he could have seen it clearly enough to be sure it wasn't something worth shooting, he would have held his fire. He took a few more steps forward, and finally saw it. It was not a weasel, or a fox, or any animal that he could easily identify. It honestly looked like something had left its tail behind. He couldn't see a head or eyes or any kind of a mouth, just a long, furry body, almost like a hairy snake. Had he shot the tail off something larger?

Trevor rubbed his eyes. His head ached. He might have avoided pissing himself, but the after effects of Uncle Keebie's corn liquor were catching up to him. Whatever it was, it wasn't moving now — or was it? Trevor gaped as the thing twitched and began to roll around in the pool of its own blood, seemingly absorbing the dark ichor from the forest floor. Then it began to skitter back into the brush. Trevor's first instinct was to rack another shot and fire again, but he was too stunned to make his fingers do what his brain was asking. So he chased it. He would later wonder what the hell he'd been thinking. He would have saved himself a world of pain if he'd just let it go and gone about his business. But in that moment, he was consumed with a powerful

need to see it, to figure out what he'd shot. Whatever it was, it was on the move, and he wasn't about to let it get away.

There was no blood trail and the morning fog wouldn't burn off for another hour yet, so he listened hard, tracking it by sound alone. In another half hour or so, he saw it again, darting out of the undergrowth towards a fallen tree in the dead end of a clearing. Trevor shouldered his rifle and took aim, tracking the little critter as it scurried up onto the trunk of the downed tree and leapt into the air. It gave a little twist and then vanished as it came into contact with the other thing sitting on the tree — the thing Trevor would have seen when he entered the clearing had he not been so focused on the hunt. He lowered his gun with numb fingers as he beheld the strangest creature sitting before him. It looked almost like a fox, but it was bigger, though not as big as a dog or even a young bobcat. Its coat was the same glossy black as the snake-like thing he'd tracked through the woods, which should come as no surprise, as the furred snake — the thing he had found so similar to a tail — had in fact attached itself to the hind end of its night-black coat.

Trevor blinked. It *was* a tail. But he hadn't tracked this whole thing here. No, it had only been the tail — *one* of its tails, at any rate. He could count at least seven of the things languidly writhing behind the strange creature. It had huge, batlike ears and a face that was almost fox, almost cat, almost weasel — almost a lot of small predators found in the deep woods, and yet none of them at all. Its eyes were the strangest things of all. They flickered with a glimmering orange light as they regarded him there in the place that was not Burke's Ridge or the Devil's Divide, or anywhere else he knew. Trevor Gilbert had no idea what he'd done in his life to end up here, but he had begun silently praying he'd wake up from this 'shine induced nightmare when the thing with the writhing tails spoke to him.

"You shot my tailypo," it said in a calm, strangely coy voice.

Trevor's hands began to shake. Its voice came to him not on the air but from inside his head, as if somebody had poured sweet oil into his ear to treat an infection there. He could almost taste it, feel it running down his throat.

"I didn't mean to! I uh, I thought it was something else," he stammered.

The beast shook its head and made a tsking sound. Its voice rang in Trevor's head like shovelfuls of grave dirt. "There are no accidents in the deep woods, sir. If you've come here with an empty belly and the means to fill it —" the thing turned its campfire eyes to Trevor's rifle with a bitter glare "— then there are no accidents. You shot my tailypo. You have shed my blood in the deep, deep woods to sate your hunger and feast upon my flesh as you would any creature you might cut down with your hateful bullets. So here I am, sir. Do you think you can feast on me?"

The thing's tails had become plush black pennants, tipped in silvery white like a fox made of the nighttime sky. They fanned out behind it like a peacock's plumage. It scratched at the bark of the old fallen tree with sharp, hooked claws that extended from its tufted paws. Its eyes blazed like a bonfire.

"I... uh... I'm sorry? It looks like you're... all right now though, right?"

"Oh, but I am wounded, sir. You have wronged me, and thus find yourself in my debt. Only one of us will leave these woods with any true satisfaction," the creature purred. A sadistic grin stretched across the thing's face as it stretched like a cat then curled onto all fours. "So then, mighty hunter, I can repay you, wound for wound, if you like," it crooned almost sweetly. "Though I suspect you will not fare as well as I when it comes to reattaching parts of yourself that have been violently torn away. No, no, no." The thing's seven tails now numbered nine and lashed and fluttered in excitement as it narrowed its eyes, taking in the full measure of Trevor Gilbert. "Or we can come to an arrangement to settle your debt to me at a later date, but with... interest."

"What do you mean, 'with interest'?" Trevor stammered. He couldn't take his eyes off those tails, which now he thought numbered at least nearly a dozen.

"I'll let you leave this place — with my blessing, even. You return home to your mate, and when she gives you your first child, you will bring it to me. In addition to letting you live, you will prosper. Your crops will grow, your hens will lay, your sad old cows will even give milk again — but your first born will be mine."

“What... what would you do with it? Eat it? ”

The thing chittered a low rattling sound that Trevor guessed was a laugh. “That is none of your concern, O great hunter. Do we have a deal?”

Trevor thought back over the four years of the loving but ultimately fruitless labor he and his beloved had put into trying for a child. He remembered the New Year’s Day that she told him they didn’t have to keep working so hard, that if it were to come, it would come. How he had held her as month after month came and went without her missing her moon. How he loved her and she loved him. They didn’t need a child to make them a family.

“How do I know your word is good?” Trevor asked, playing for time.

“O great hunter, I am Mr. Poe. My word is more than good. My word is a promise that cannot be broken. You will receive your just reward, and Mr. Poe always gets his.”

Trevor almost smirked, despite being more afraid than he’d ever been in his life. There would be no child. He was certain of that. So if it got him home safe to her, what was the harm in making a promise that he’d never have to keep?

“Deal. Do I, uh, just walk away now?” Trevor asked cautiously.

“Oh no, great hunter, I will not kill you on this day, but I never said anything about you walking away. ”

The furry black menace perched atop the fallen oak arched its back and closed its orange eyes as if in thought or prayer, then flexed so that all twelve of its tails stood out like a pinwheel, trembling and shaking. Trevor watched in horror as four of them darkened in color until they were inky black voids against the morning haze. One by one, they popped free of the beast's body. Two landed on the ground before him and two atop the tree. The furry tentacles writhed, growing thicker and longer, transforming from shed appendages to stalking horrors within moments. The raw wounds where they had detached from their master opened into mouths full of needle sharp teeth, the lips of which were ringed with their own tiny, burning orange eyes.

The two on the ground slithered like snakes, undulating in boneless fluidity. The two on the tree sprouted boney, cat-like limbs with hooked claws tipping each skeletal toe. All four turned eyes that pulsed like smoldering cigarettes on Trevor Gilbert as Mister Poe laughed his rattling laugh “No sir, I suggest you *run*.”

[“Atonement” by Jon Charles Dwyer]

Well, hey there, family. Welcome back to the deep hills of Hazel County, VA, a place that might be familiar to those of you that have been listening real close like, and even more so to some of y’all who might actually live in the real life version of that place, if you’ve figured that out. We do hope that you’re enjoying your time with Mister Poe. Trust me, you’re gonna get to know that little sumbitch whole lot better as this story carries on. Do what you need to do with that.

Family, I wanna talk to you briefly about advertisements and how you can avoid them. We know that having to wade through ads before each episode can be a pain, but the fact remains that the way that we and our network keep things up and running is partially by ad revenue. But did you know that if you pledge as little as \$5 a month over at patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia, you can get all of your episodes ad-free? Hell, not just ad-free, but a day early. If you want us to get your support directly and you don’t wanna hear ads at all, join us at the “We Know You From Church” level over on Patreon and get all of your episodes ad-free and a day early when humanly possible. There are detailed instructions on how to access your ad-free/early release options right there on the FAQ page that Cam has worked very hard to make as clear as possible. So if advertisers are the bane of your existence, head on over to patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia and avoid them altogether while supporting this show directly.

Now it’s time for your “every time I pass your cousin the collection plate he puts juicy fruit wrappers in it” reminder that Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media, distributed by Rusty Quill. Today’s episode was written by Steve Shell and edited by Cam Collins. Our intro music is by Brother Landon Blood and our outro music, “Atonement,” is by Brother Jon Charles Dwyer. We’ll talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.