

## OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

*presents*

BLACK MOUTHED DOG

Episode Ten: Blood Will Out

*A word about the story you're about to hear. Black Mouthed Dog is a prequel to Build Mama a Coffin, but is meant to be experienced after you have listened to Build Mama a Coffin. Steve and I take great pride in our non-linear storytelling. The way our stories move back and forth in time to reveal family secrets, hidden motivations, and other dark mysteries is very intentional. We highly recommend listening to our stories in the order that they are released. You can always go back later and listen in chronological order. And now, family, we give you Black Mouthed Dog.*

*Black Mouthed Dog is an all new story set in the same world as Old Gods of Appalachia, which is a horror anthology podcast and may contain material not suitable for all audiences. So listener discretion is advised.*

KYLE: Verna! No! This isn't fair! I saw them first! Y'all wouldn't even know about the dogs if it wasn't for me!

Kyle Teasely whined as his sisters bustled about Waylon's room at the Boggs house. The space was in the state of general disarray common to young, unmarried men of a certain age, so they had set to cleaning and dusting and pulling back the rugs on Waylon's floor at the request of Waylon's uncle.

KYLE: Glory Ann! Tell her!

GLORY ANN: Mama and Daddy left Verna in charge, Kyle. You know what she says goes. Besides, she's right this time.

Glory Ann wrinkled her nose at a week-old pair of Waylon's discarded britches on the floor and tossed them into the basket in the hall, then rolled up the rug that usually ran east to west in front of the bedroom door, revealing a line of wards etched into the floor beneath. Glory Ann was so jealous of Oanetta Boggs' delicate hand. You could feel a mother's protective love in the

graceful swirls and slashing lines of the warding. Though as Glory Ann wiped and cleaned the wood with oil soap, she could almost hear Waylon's mama in her head, asking her just what she thought she was doing in her boy's bedroom unattended? Glory Ann blushed and pushed the thought aside, mumbling:

GLORY ANN: Sorry, Miz Boggs.

Verna wiped dust from the room's lone window sill, polishing up the litany of protective wards and bindings carved there. She'd already cleaned the frame and the stout sigils that Waylon's Daddy had worked into the wood. They showed heavy and dark, like the night sky pressed into tangible form as the dust and neglect of a young man's living quarters was washed away. The power in these workings was palpable, but the Teasleys were guests, so the wards offered the girls no resistance or harm.

VERNA: We've been over this, Kyle. Mr. Batch has a very specific way this needs to be done, and we can't risk having you out there with us. Your gifts haven't come yet, and lord knows you can't ever sit still. Waylon's mommy and daddy warded this room up to keep things out, so it makes sense with a little favor from Mr. Batch, we should be able to change them just a bit to keep you safe by keeping you in.

The screen door swung, then slapped shut as Waylon Boggs entered his family's homestead. His voice carried to the back of the house before he came properly into view.

WAYLON: Uncle Batch! I got that last thing you said we needed to get Kyle settled! Are you ready?

Batch Boggs made his way from the kitchen in the back of the house, wiping his hands clean on a towel. He looked up the hallway and held up a finger to forestall his nephew.

BATCH: One moment boy — stay right there. We're not quite ready for you yet.

Batch made his way into the room and cast a critical eye over the wards and sigils the Teasley sisters had uncovered and polished.

BATCH: Good. Good work, ladies. Oh! You missed a set!

Batch knelt down by Waylon's bed and threw the quilts and covers back to reveal the wooden frame. Sure enough, all along the bottom rail, Lewis Bowen Boggs had carved thick-lined sigils that were unfamiliar to the girls. Verna, unable to hold her tongue when there was something she didn't understand, crouched down beside Batch, her eyes riveted to the carvings.

VERNA: Mr. Batch, I've never seen those kinds of markings before — what do they do?

BATCH: Oh, missy! I'd not be surprised if you found something at least in the same vein in your own bedchambers from when you was younger. These are what our Da carved on our beds, on our doors and our windows. Probably would have branded them into our hides at one point if he could have. These are what my grand-da called "trouble-locks." They're perfect for young'uns who think they can sneak out of bed and go adventuring through the woods at all hours. Try to sneak out when these are flush, and you'll find yourself snapped back into bed so fast you won't even know what hit you. Came in right handy when little Mr. Waylon decided he was gonna be a grand explorer like in those books Lewis that read to him when he was five. Thought he was gonna find treasure on the other side of the river, he did. These wards probably saved that boy's life more times than not.

WAYLON: Kept me from getting to the outhouse a few times too. I think that's why Daddy eventually stopped tending them. The clean up just wasn't worth it.

GLORY ANN: Ew! Waylon!

Batch took the oil-soaked rag that Glory Ann had used to clean the floor and wiped the frame of the bed in slow, even strokes. Dust melted from the carvings, reconnecting long-separated lines and filling them with power.

BATCH: There we go. Now, to give them a focus. Ladies, if you'll step into the hall please, and Waylon if you'll come in, and bring the box.

There was a moment of awkward shuffling around the door as the three teenagers followed Batch's instructions. Kyle pouted as Batch led him to sit on the edge of the bed.

BATCH: Kyle, I need to place my hands on your head. Is that alright with you, son? I won't hurt you, and you probably won't feel a thing.

Sulkily, Kyle looked over at Verna — who gave him The Look — and nodded once.

KYLE: Yessir.

BATCH: Thank you, son. Now this is for your own good.

Batch pushed Kyle's mop of hair out of his eyes and rested one hand on his forehead. The other he extended to the room.

BATCH: Kyle Teasely, son of Oliver and June, I call upon this land and the wards set here by my blood and his bride to keep all harm from you while you are a guest in this house, and to keep you from all harm by this room holding you in its keeping.

There was a subtle change in temperature in the room, but nothing else happened.

KYLE: That's it?

BATCH: That's it. Once the rest of us go out, you won't be able to leave this room unless something happens to the whole house, and if that happens, we'll all probably be dead anyway.

KYLE: But what's in the box?

Batch grinned mischievously and called out to his nephew.

BATCH: Is she ready, Waylon?

WAYLON: She ain't happy, but... she'll do what we ask.

BATCH: We thought you might get lonely in here, Kyle my boy. I also know that you are very smart — the kind of boy who might find a way to get out of here and get yourself in trouble. So we brought you some company. Waylon?

Waylon smiled apologetically at Kyle as he lifted the lid from the box and an agitated, feline growl filled the room.

WAYLON: It's ok, old lady. You can come out now.

Like a whisper of cursed smoke, a large gray and black striped tabby, old as god and twice as grouchy, sprung from the box onto the bed. Kyle stared at the beast with a look of horror on his young face.

WAYLON: Kyle, I believe you know my mama's cat. Miss Emmaline, I believe you know Mr. Kyle.

Kyle remained frozen in place.

WAYLON: Miss Emmaline will be keeping watch on you Kyle, and she'd like you to know that she's willing to forgive all the times you chased her and she had to hide in the woodshed til you got bored. She's happy to help *you* to hide this time. She also wants you to know that *she* does not get bored. She's agreed to keep you safe should any of the dogs get close to the house.

KYLE: But... but she's just a cat! How can she—

The cat hissed, and silver fire lashed through her stripes and wreathed her body in a ghostly glow. Her eyes blazed as she raised a single extended claw to Kyle to show him its length and sharpness. Then Waylon scratched her head, and a purr shook the room like low thunder, and she settled all four paws under herself. Emmaline Underfoot, daughter of Bathsheba, the Grey Ghost of Black Mountain and longtime familiar to Oanetta Boggs and her mother and her mother's mother, turned her ancient eyes onto Kyle Teasely and did not blink.

[Black Mouthed Dog by Landon Blood]

*In the black I see  
Another witch running  
It's a black dog  
That she's felt coming*

*Here comes another  
Child, cry for your mother  
Old gods how they hunger  
Witch run now  
For deep Green and cover*

The door closed on the Boggs household with a near audible snap as the wards engaged and sealed the whole place snug as a lock box under your mamaw's bed. Batch looked back at the house admiringly, his eyes misted, and he was quiet.

WAYLON: Uncle Batch, are you ok?

BATCH: It's been a while since I've really seen your da's work brought to full bear like this, and it still makes my blood pound. The gift runs so strong in him... in us! We did a lot of good in our younger days before the war. I just... it feels good to be reminded of that strength is all, boy.

Batch cleared his throat and shook off the sentimental moment, and looked over his young charges sternly. Solemnly, he handed Verna and Glory Ann each a piece of scratch paper, on which he'd carefully drawn a complex symbol.

BATCH: So, in principle, it's a simple thing we're doing. It'll be like herdin' sheep — we just make a path they have to follow and bring 'em into the corral for shearing. But instead of sheep, we'll be herding the dead. Miss Glory and Waylon will mark key places between here and the spot where they saw Maggie and the others... taken, as it were... with these sigils I've drawn out for you here. The northernmost wards will draw any of the countless moping dead out there, and pin them in between the boundaries we set and the river. They'll be compelled to follow the path

on to the next ward, and then on to the next, until they all come together right down by the big pool at the southern bend in the river. Miss Verna will help me lay the trap there. That many dead in one place? I'd bet my right big toe them black dogs couldn't resist it any more than a pack of wolves could resist a flock of unattended sheep. And when they come running, we'll be ready for them. Waylon, you know the first places I need things marked, don't you boy? Those near and dear to our bloodline, yeah?

WAYLON: Yessir, I do. Daddy's rock-circle out by the bridge. The laurel grove where Mama told Daddy he should marry her, and the cold place out by the—

BATCH: Ah, ah, ah! No need to speak about that place out loud, boy. You and Miss Glory get on now. Get those done and come back to the house. Miss Verna, you'll come with me and help me with the second part of this endeavor, and when these two come back, I'll send you and your sister out with the map to mark the other spots. How does that sound?

VERNA: Whatever you say, Mr. Batch. Whatever you need us to do, we'll do.

BATCH: Good, good. Thank you, Miss Verna. You two have been right warriors through this whole thing. Your ma and da will be proud.

VERNA: I think Mr. Boggs would be proud of you too, sir. You're standing when called on, and that's a big thing when standing at all has been hard enough.

BATCH: All right, all right — we can stand around here glad-handing and backslapping each other til the sun goes down and see where it gets us, or we can get to work. Let's see to this now. On with you! Miss Verna, with me if you please. I'll explain the second part as we go.

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Waylon and Glory Ann Made their way from Boggs homestead to the mouth of the Holler. The bridge that led across the river was in clear sight. Waylon found his eyes continually drawn to it, to the river and the hillside beyond that led up onto the back of the Frazier property. Glory Ann

watched him for a moment — the way his eyes focused on that not-so-distant place, concern writ clear upon his handsome brow — before she asked, quietly,

GLORY ANN: Are you worried — about your friend?

WAYLON: What? Who?

GLORY ANN: The boy we saw you with — when I saved your life this last time? Waylon, honey... what happened to him?

WAYLON: Oh. He's... he's fine. I got him to get somewhere safe, and he'll be fine.

GLORY ANN: I... I didn't think anyone lived up at the old Frazier place. Who is he, Waylon?

WAYLON: He, um. He... uh, he... Oh! Here we go!

Waylon strode quickly to a circle of heavy river rocks that had been arranged around the trunk of a black locust tree. The stones were weathered, the craggy edges smoothed over with time and dotted with patches of soft moss, and there was the faintest trace of some now-illegible symbol etched long ago into each one.

WAYLON: This is where my daddy comes when he needs time away from... well, from the living and the dead. Some Sundays he'll come out here and sit and enjoy the quiet. We'd lose him for a whole day and a night if he had to do a whole bunch of choring, or if there was some issue with the dead that took a lot out of him. He needed that quiet and that space to recover and come back to us and be able to do what he needed to for both sides of things. I think it was hard on Mama sometimes, but she understood as best she could.

GLORY ANN: I know how that feels. Before some of the older girls moved out of our place, when I was littler, time to yourself was a precious thing over in the Glades. I also understand it can be hard when someone you care about has to set theirselves apart because they feel like they have to do it all theirselves.



WAYLON: That's Daddy. With Uncle Batch being the way he was for so long, he took the whole holler on his shoulders. It's about done him in a few times. He always says he's lucky to have Mama because she can put all of him back together — not just the hurts from working too hard, or from the strain of dealing with the other side.

GLORY ANN: That's because it takes at least two to head up a family, Waylon. You know that as well as I do. Your Mama has kept this whole holler alive for as long as I can remember, but she don't do it on her own. Nobody does it on their own.

WAYLON: I suppose you ain't wrong — but we have to get this done, Glory Ann. Hand me the bundle and let's get this thing in the ground.

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Waylon was mostly quiet for the next part of their walk, which took them from a man-made place of solitude and peace to one shaped and held by the Green itself. The grove of laurels that stood between the Bottom and the Glades framed a place that almost defies description in terms of its sheer beauty and tranquility. Even in the shadow of recent storms, the grove seemed to maintain a light that would set you at ease easier than a good shot of whiskey after a long day. Lush and abundant flora filled the air with the fragrance of the living Green. Stones older than any Christian name sprawled like great lounging gods here, an ample carpet of verdant moss covering them as if for modesty. Glory Ann and Waylon stopped, stunned by the undeniable and sudden beauty of the place.

WAYLON: It's always so calm and peaceful here. Seems like it would be covered up with people trying to picnic or with young'uns playing, as pretty as it is, but it always seems to be empty when I've been out here. It's like the whole mountain knows this is a quiet place and it ain't for all that.

GLORY ANN: Mama loves it here. She comes here for her quiet like your daddy goes to his circle. My mamaw and her sister are buried on the top of the rise there. Mama knew it wouldn't

be right to put a headstone down in this place, but I'm sure Mamaw and Aunt Draxie appreciate this view.

It must also be said that to step into the laurel grove was to step into the Green. For all the natural beauty of the forest life that thrived here, there was also a sense of unreality. It was said that if you came here alone at dusk and listened, you'd hear the songs of the long departed calling you home. It was said by a few of the elders out there that if a good and righteous person made their way here by themselves on their dying day, they could pass right over into the green without feeling a thing — just step through the old black door into a place like this forever and ever.

WAYLON: Daddy always said the veil was thinner out here, but in a good way. Like, you know, when somebody passes, we say they're watching over us or looking down on us from a better place. This is the kinda place where they can get a real clear view. It's why Mama brought Daddy out here when she knew he was the one for her. Daddy's told that story a hundred times if he's told it once. It was a Thursday Evening, and it had been raining the whole week and it was the first nice day in a while. So out of the clear blue sky, Mama invited him out on a walk. On a Thursday — a day they didn't usually socialize. Just turned up at the house and asked him to take a walk with her. So Daddy went. She took his hand first, which was real forward of her, to hear Daddy tell it. Daddy said she was real nervous and couldn't look at him for most of the walk. Then she turned off the main path and took him back here and showed him this place. He felt like she was trusting him with something deep and true in her family, and he was right. When he saw her amongst the green and in the shade of the late afternoon, she was more beautiful than he'd ever realized. He said his heart 'bout jumped out of his chest at how in love with her he was. Daddy also said he could tell they were not alone, that something warm and protective was watching them and he was right. As he was about to mention it, Mama squeezed his hand real tight, looked him right in the eyes, and said, "Lewis Bowen Boggs, you should ask me to marry you right now, if you mean to." And that's what Daddy did. Got right down on one knee and asked, and she said yes, and the sun come through the trees and the birds were singing... Mama always smacks him and tells him not to lay it on so thick when he gets to that part. He figured her mama and mamaw and great granny, who had all passed on before he knew Mama, wanted to meet him and see if he measured up. He thought they must've told Mama as

much in a dream, though she never said it plain. Daddy said he learned to take counsel of a good woman that day and to trust in their judgment.

GLORY ANN: What do you think would have happened if he hadn't asked, or even hesitated?

WAYLON: I doubt we'd be having this conversation.

GLORY ANN: Well, I hope this place teaches you that same good lesson then — and you listen to those of us who know better, Waylon! I also hope that whoever might be watching us here now will lend us their strength, and forgive us for troubling such a place with this business.

WAYLON: Oh, right! I almost forgot.

Glory Ann handed Waylon the implements they would need to complete the task that Batch Boggs had assigned them, and they set to work. It did not take long, but given their final destination, they both wished it had.

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There was a nasty, foul-smelling old swamp down at the southern end of the Bottom, and it lay at the mouth of a cave — not a grand cavern that would inspire young folk to come exploring, or old men to come treasure hunting, but a low, rank hole in the side of the mountain that a grown man would have to get down on his hands and knees to crawl into. The stories would have you believe that something old and hungry lived in that cave and waited for littl'uns who weren't minding their mamas to get too close to it so it could gobble them up. It seemed like a good enough tale to keep young'uns out of a dangerous spot out in a swamp full of skeeters and snakes and god knew what else that might make them sick.

The place had been known to both the Shawnee and the Cherokee. They'd been the first to bind the thing that terrorized their people to this awful place — where nobody with any sense would linger — so it couldn't hurt anyone else. But when the white men came and stole this land, they ignored such warnings. They figured the people they'd run off or killed had used the same kind of stories to warn their children of the dangers of playing around an old cave, and maybe there

was something valuable hidden in there. So they walked headlong into the cold place, and found the danger that had been bound there as it slithered through the high weeds and swam in the water. If they'd had a lick of sense, they'd have run, for the being that dwelt in the cold place didn't really even try to hide its nature. It dressed itself in the hourglass scales of one of the deadliest creatures in these mountains, though its true form was much, much worse. And it spoke with a voice that slithered into the heart and chilled it — a voice that was haughty, not of these hills, in the oily tones of the sort of city folk they should have known better than to trust. Yet it spoke with the words of men, of things that tugged at the deepest desires of men, and so they listened, and they told others.

Before too long, word began to get around that you could come here with an offering and ask for knowledge of the future, of your enemies' weaknesses, or of how you yourself could rise to some sort of power — the usual foolishness that tempted the unwise. The stories varied when it came to what that offering might be — whiskey, 'baccer, maybe your firstborn. But it was said that if you did it just right, Old Copperhead himself would slither up out of the swamp and grant your wish. Why, he might even come home with you to make sure you knew exactly what to do.

None of these stories ever had happy endings. After more than a few people ended up dead or worse, a few folks with gifts got together and decided something had to be done. They managed to bind the old serpent back into his little corner of the mountain and left him there to rot. Young Lewis and Batch Boggs had attended that binding, though they merely assisted the more experienced workers of the time. However, when the two serious young men offered to take responsibility for the tending of the wards and keeping fools and children away from that place in exchange for extending their new-won property line to encompass that bit of the mountain, the elders agreed that they had proven their skill, and in the interest of community safety, their request was granted. The Boggs family had looked after the cold place ever since. A row of warded stones marked the boundary — along with a few signs printed in various languages known to the white settlers that made it clear that this land was now private property, and trespassers might meet an unfortunate end. It was a wretched and cursed place, but it was a place of power, and Waylon understood why his uncle had wanted to put a ward out here.

Glory Ann shivered as they drew up to the edge of the swamp. The shade was deep, and it was indeed colder here. Where they stood now was safe — this was where Waylon's mama had

brought him so that he could feel the place and understand why he should never come here looking for adventure, or bring his friends on a dare. The stories were true — and in some cases, much worse than most folks knew.

WAYLON: All right. We're gonna have to step into the swamp to do this, so listen to me Glory — no matter what you hear, or what you see in there, *do not answer it*. Do not acknowledge it in any way. You hear me? This ain't my Great Uncle Franklin being a pain in the behind. This ain't no ghost at all.

GLORY ANN: I hear you, Waylon. This ain't my first dance.

Waylon nodded as they stepped over the carved stones and set about the work they needed to do. In and out — that was the plan. But like all the plans laid by h'aunts and men, sometimes the Dark has other ideas. As they worked, something stirred at the edge of Glory Ann's vision, and rustling sounds filled her ears. Involuntarily, she turned her head and gasped at the sight of an immense copperhead snake curled on a nearby stump. Its eyes glittered and its tongue tasted the air. Waylon jumped at Glory Ann's gasp and almost fell over when its voice rolled into their heads.

OLD COPPERHEAD: Well, well, well... what have we here? A Boggs and a Teasley, out digging in my garden. Turning the soil of my little Eden. Looking for forbidden fruit, are we? Tsk tsk tsk tsk tsk. I'd have expected this from you, young master Boggs — but Miss Teasley? Why, I thought your lot had better sense.

GLORY ANN: How does it know my—

WAYLON: Glory Ann, don't listen to it! Don't look at it. *Look at me*.

OLD COPPERHEAD: Oh no, don't mind me, Miss Gloria. Don't mind me at all. You're the one in *my* garden after all. Trespassing. Digging up my petunias. Making a mess of what's mine. Tsk. It will take me ages just to set things right. The least you can give me for my trouble is a little conversation. Maybe you'd like to know if handsome Master Boggs there fancies you the way you do him — *hmm?* Maybe you'd like to know how many babies he'll give you if you play your

cards right. Oooh! Maybe he'll tell you what that dog bite on his arm is *really* doing to him inside. But I suppose you'll find that out on your own the next time you... change his bandages?

Glory Ann blushed furiously.

GLORY ANN: Waylon, can... can you hear it?

WAYLON: Is it talking to you? No, I can't hear it. This is what it does. *Do not* listen to it. Focus on me.

OLD COPPERHEAD: Oh no, Glory, don't listen to the wicked old serpent. Psh! I could give you what the other snake gave Eve, sweet girl. All the knowledge in the world. You'd be ten times the witch your mother is. All the other grannies would bow to you. I could make you the queen of Boggs Holler if you wanted.

And then it laughed at her.

It laughed at her embarrassment, laughed at how she felt about Waylon, laughed at all the things she didn't know. It slithered through her mind and picked at her private thoughts and memories. She felt its smugness and its disdain for who and what she was. Glory Ann felt herself grow hot with shame, and from that shame came anger, and the anger brought her gift roaring to life. And with the gift came the strength of the mountain. And before the thing that looked like a snake could slip another scaly word into her mind, she snatched it up by its tail, and with a thunderous crack like some great whip wielded by the gods, she hurled it at the cave mouth. The thing that called itself Old Copperhead spun end over end and splattered against the stone wall of the mountain with a satisfying *squish*, before Ol' Copperhead sank down beneath the water.

OLD COPPERHEAD: Now that was unnecessary. We could have been friends, Miss Teasley. We could have done great things together, you and I. But oh, we are not friends now. I will have you and yours. Maybe not today. But one day, Miss Teasley. One. Day.

The voice faded from Glory Ann's mind as Waylon pulled her across the warded boundary, and they walked away from the cold place, back toward the Holler proper.

WAYLON: I got it done. Are you ok? What did it say to you? You didn't promise it anything, did you?

GLORY ANN: I'm... I'm all right, it just... I didn't mean to lose control, but I'm all right. It didn't get nothing from me.

WAYLON: A snake's a snake, even if it just looks like one. C'mon. Let's go home.

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While Waylon and Glory Ann covered the three areas so important to the boy's parents, Batch led the older Teasley sister to the area requiring the most careful warding — the spot where they would lay their trap. There was a deep pool formed at a wide spot in the river between the steep side of the mountain and the southernmost end of the Boggs family land. It was bounded on the holler side by a flat, wide clearing ringed in tall stones that Batch and Lewis had painstakingly transported there one by one, to form a proper space for larger workings, way back when they took possession of the land. It was here that Batch and Verna would place the three most intricate wards, laid out at the points of a precise equilateral triangle. Glory Ann was a deft hand at warding, and Batch could see her skill improving for certain, but Verna Teasley possessed the steady hand and an eye for the fine details that spoke to the benefits just a few more years' experience could yield.

Batch carefully walked the area where they would lay their trap, marking the anchor points of each of the wards, and explaining the finer points of each to Verna, who nodded along, asking questions and scribbling notes at the edge of the paper on which Batch had drawn out the sigils for her. When she felt she was ready, they got to work.

Batch watched from a respectful distance as Verna carefully laid out the first of the sigils he'd assigned her, checking and rechecking the paper to be certain her work was just right. He felt almost as proud as if she was his own kin. Once she'd finished, he stepped over to review the symbol she'd laid out with a practiced eye, leaning down to correct one small error.

BATCH: Aye, that's good work, Miss Verna. But see here? Up at the right? Just a little more curve in that line, yeah?

Verna glanced down at the paper she'd smoothed out on the grass before her again.

VERNA: Oh, I see! I'm sorry, Mr. Batch. I thought it just mirrored the opposite line.

She quickly reached over to smudge out the previous line in her sigil, and meticulously drew it anew.

BATCH: Ah, that's it! Perfect. You've done a good job here, Verna. You've a fine hand for warding.

Batch glanced up, gazing into the trees around them for a moment before seeming to make up his mind about something.

BATCH: If you don't mind, girl, I'll leave you to it while I take care of laying the boundaries up on the northeast end of the Holler. Won't take too long. You understand what's needed, yes?

Verna nodded eagerly, pleased at the confidence Batch showed in her.

VERNA: Yessir, Mr. Batch. Won't take me too long to draw out these other two.

BATCH: Good girl. I'll be back before you know it, and we'll finish laying out this trap, yeah?

Leaving Verna to her task, Batch stepped out of the clearing and headed for the path that led northeast out of Boggs Holler, past the old abandoned barn where he and his brother had once cast out the ghost of Elwood Hall. Near the mouth of the Holler, he paused to lay down the ward and draw the boundary lines at that end of the property. It didn't take him long — Batch was an old hand at these sorts of workings — but when his work was done, he didn't head directly back to Verna. Instead, he continued up the trail, veering off just the right a little, through the trees and down the narrow track to the cemetery. As he stepped past the fence posts and into the quiet glade, he glanced around at the neat rows of humble stone markers. All seemed peaceful.



Batch knelt down by the grave he had come to know so well, and laid his hand upon it. He closed his eyes, and reached out with his gift.

BATCH: Rosemary? Rosemary McCoy, if you be with us in this world, I call ye to me. By the earth that claimed you, I call ye. By the bones of your ancestors, I call ye. By the tie that binds us still, I call ye. Rosie, are you there, love?

For a moment, there was nothing. Just the gentle sighing of the breeze through the trees and the chattering of birds calling to one another in the woods. And then, slowly, his true love began to materialize, a hazy fog gathering over the spot where they'd laid her bones to rest, swirling higher until it hung a shade over five feet in the air, then gradually crystallizing into the form he loved so well — a pretty girl with dark hair, wearing the simple dress embroidered with roses that had been her favorite. She seemed confused at first.

ROSEMARY: Batch? What... why are you here? It's dangerous! I told you, they know when I'm with you. I tried to warn you—

BATCH: Shhh. Hush, now, Rose.

Batch reached out, his fingers brushing lightly over the space above her cheek, the face he loved more than all the world and had not touched for so long. And then the tears came, though he tried to hold them back.

BATCH: My dear, I'm afraid the time has come.

ROSEMARY: What do you mean, Batch? ...No. No! I don't want to leave you.

BATCH: You must, love. It's time — hell, we both know you should have moved on long ago. I've... well, to be honest, Rosie, I've been selfish, keeping you here when you should have had your rest long ago.

ROSEMARY: No! No, Batch, honey... I wanted to. I wanted to stay with you.

BATCH: I— shhh. I know you did, but... t'wasn't right of me to hold onto you the way I did. You stayed because you worried over me, and I... I let you because I love you so. Because I couldn't — I wouldn't — move on.

Batch shook his head.

BATCH: But we've got no choice anymore, Rose. We have to be strong, love, and do what's right for the people of this Holler — the living *and* the dead. I've got to blast those damned black dogs back to where they come from. But to do that, I have to send all the spirits on. That includes you.

ROSEMARY: Batch... you're... you're sure there's no other way?

BATCH: I'm sure. I've gone over and over it in my head, and I'm sure the only sure way to get rid of those bastards is this. And you've waited long enough for me. I'll be along when it's my time.

Rosemary's eyes filled with what looked like tears, but would have been as insubstantial as the rest of her had Batch reached out to brush them away, as he might have done while she lived. But she nodded.

ROSEMARY: All right. We'll do what we have to do.

A brave, sad smile trembled at the edge of her lips, and Batch was nearly undone. How could he send her away, the only woman he'd ever loved? The only person he'd ever felt truly knew his heart? But she reached out, and the shadow of her pale hand brushed over his — he could almost feel it — and Batch looked into her eyes. Rosemary nodded encouragingly.

ROSEMARY: I'm ready. I—

Suddenly her face contorted, her expression growing pained. Batch could see the threads of that strange darkness begin to crawl up her throat from under the collar of her dress.

ROSEMARY: Hurry! Batch, they're coming! They know I'm here.

So Batch reached out, into the darkness he couldn't always see but could always touch, and he found the old black door. He called it to his hand, and drew it close, and he opened it for her. Rosemary glanced over her shoulder at it, nervously, and nodded again. She stood up on tiptoe and leaned in, and he felt the soft chill as her ghostly lips brushed across his cheek.

BATCH: I love you, Rosie girl. Now, go! Hurry!

She gave him one last smile, and then turned and ran for the black door. Batch saw her stumble once, and knew the things that had gotten their hooks into her were fighting to keep her there. He started to reach out, to intervene — but Rosemary wrestled her way to her feet and leapt through the door. Something screamed — an inhuman sound of frustration and rage that Batch heard not with his ears but as a painful ringing in his head — but the black door swung shut behind her, and faded from sight. She was free.

And thus Rosemary McCoy passed out of this world forever. And Batch Boggs stood alone in the cemetery and wept.

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It was a good while before Mr. Batch returned to the place where Verna worked diligently over her wards. She hadn't much minded his absence. Verna respected Waylon's uncle, had even come to like him as she'd gotten to know him better since their parents left the Holler. But she preferred working alone — people were distracting, always filling up the quiet with their yammering when she was trying to concentrate — and anyway, having someone look over her shoulder made her nervous. When he returned, Batch was pale and red-eyed and seemed distracted.

VERNA: You ok, Mr. Batch?

BATCH: Oh! Verna. Yes, dear, I'm... I'm fine. I've got those northeastern boundary lines all set. What about you? How're you coming along here?

VERNA: I... I'm pretty sure they're ready. Take a look.

Batch carefully walked the perimeter of the triangular space where Verna had laid out the wards, which were linked by a series of arcs that tied the working together. An open space faced the mouth of the ring of stones, leaving the trap open for the dogs to enter. Waylon would have the task of closing the circle, trapping the things in the binding when the time was right. He inspected each of Verna's sigils with a keen eye. Her work was precise, and he found no careless errors after the first one he'd corrected.

BATCH: Aye! Good job, lass. Very good!

He glanced up at the sky, taking note of the sun, which had begun its descent toward the western edge of the treeline.

BATCH: We'd best head back to the house. Those dogs will be on the hunt soon and we need to be ready.

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The three teenagers and Batch gathered in the shared front yard between Waylon's parents' house and Batch's little cabin. Their plan was simple enough, and it should be effective. Glory Ann and Verna would activate the sigils to begin drawing in the ghosts, starting from the north and working their way south toward the bend in the river. Verna would take the places marked on the eastern side of the property, starting with the one up near the cemetery and working her way down toward Waylon's daddy's rock circle. Glory Ann would cover the western edge, starting from the laurel grove and circling toward the cold place, since she'd already put the wicked presence there in its place right and proper, and was well prepared to deal with its nonsense. They would meet up with Waylon and Batch at the spot by the river, where the two menfolk would have the trap ready to spring. Once they had pulled the local spirits to the appointed spot, Verna would use the connection she'd forged with the black dogs to draw them here.

BATCH: Now. I've told you it's a simple plan, and it is — but make no mistake, it's a dangerous thing we're doing here. Them dogs are deadly, as you've seen, and any mistake could cost us our lives. Do you understand? But if we all do our parts, all should be well. Are there any questions? Are you ready?

Batch asked, looking into the faces of the young folks one by one, searching for any signs of uncertainty. There could be no hesitation today — each of them must understand their role and execute it to the letter in order for the plan to work.

WAYLON: Yessir. I'm ready.

GLORY ANN: You can count on me, Mr. Batch.

BATCH: And you, Verna? You're sure you can do this, now?

There was no hesitation in Verna Teasley's voice now, only a steady, resolute conviction.

VERNA: I'm ready, Mr. Batch. I know what to do.

BATCH: All right then. Godspeed then, girls. We'll see you in the clearing.

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Waylon followed Batch through the woods, down to the pool that formed in the south bend of the river, where Batch and Verna had drawn the sigils for the trapping ward. It was clearly nice work, and the sight of it filled Waylon's heart with pride for his friend. The wards were arranged in a triangular layout, with the topmost placed at the edge of the riverbank.

BATCH: I'll be here, doing my part to turn the bastards, at the top of the circle,

Batch explained.

BATCH: As you know, boy, some h'aints and spirits can't cross running water. I'm hoping these dogs are the same, and standing here in the water will give me some protection. You and the girls stay well clear, you hear me? Keep out of the reach of them dogs, and well clear of the trap as well. At least until I give you the signal to close the circle, eh?

WAYLON: Yessir. We will.

BATCH: First, we activate these two sigils at the bottom.

Batch knelt by the precise markings Verna had dug into the earth with her knife at the bottom right of the triangle. He pulled out his pocket knife, and made a quick, neat cut in the fleshy part of his left palm, just below the thumb. He squeezed three drops of blood into the sigil, activating the working with his own lifeblood. Waylon could feel the subtle hum of power in it, like static electricity on his skin. Next, Batch activated the sigil at the bottom left with a few more drops of blood, and finally the one at the top of the pyramid.

BATCH: When the time comes, you'll draw the circle closed and spring the trap in the same way, aye?

WAYLON: I understand. I'm ready.

BATCH: Good boy. I... I want you to know... I love you, Waylon. You're a good boy, and I'm proud of you. However this turns out, you've done well.

Waylon felt the sting of tears behind his eyes, and quickly blinked them away.

WAYLON: I... love you too, Uncle Batch. Is there... is there something you're not telling me?

BATCH: No! No, boy. It's... it's just in case.

Batch's head jerked up at the sound of footsteps crashing through the brush, and Waylon turned toward the sound. In moments, Glory Ann and Verna raced into the clearing.

BATCH: All right, then. To your places. Get—

And then the ghosts began pouring into the clearing. There were dozens of them — then a hundred — then more. And Waylon knew he needed to focus, but he couldn't stop his eyes from scanning the faces of every spirit he saw who passed in a military uniform. Was Lucas among them? Had he been drawn in by the working, or was he far enough away to be safe? There were too many of them, and eventually he had to give up. To his sight, the ghosts had begun to blend together, their incorporeal forms overlapping in the limited space the circle granted them. But there were enough for him to guess that they'd drawn shades from well outside the Holler.

Finally, as the influx of spirits began to slow, Batch nodded to Verna.

BATCH: Now, Verna! See if you can call them.

Verna closed her eyes, reaching inside and then outward, feeling for the black dogs along the connection she'd gained to them. Suddenly her eyes flew open.

VERNA: It's too late! They're coming! Oh god... there's... there's *so many* of them...

The woods filled with the sounds of snapping twigs and brush crushed under massive paws, and the snarling of what seemed like a thousand hungry mouths, as the black mouthed dogs burst into the glade. There were more than Verna had ever seen or felt or even imagined could be real, dozens of them, a writhing mass of oilslick black coats and gnashing teeth. She gaped in terror and clutched her sister's hand as the deadly pack raced towards them... and simply swerved around, their glowing eyes intent on the shuffling hoard of ghosts packed into the space between the sigils. They descended upon the poor, unsuspecting shades like a tidal wave, howling with feral glee.

BATCH: Waylon! Waylon, close the circle! Hurry, boy!

Waylon dove beneath the feet of a writhing hound, his pocket knife in hand. One of the dogs noticed him, and reared back its head for the bite —

VERNA: Oh no you don't!

— but Verna was there in a heartbeat, reaching for the beast's scruff. She felt almost as if she'd caught onto something, and then the hound evaporated under her touch. Grim-faced, Waylon gouged the final arc into their circle, swiped the blade of his knife along the meat of his palm, and slapped his hand down on the ward. His blood seeped into the working, racing along the markings he'd just completed, and their trap sprung shut with a *thrum* that rattled Waylon's teeth.

The howling of the dogs rose to a piercing scream.

WAYLON: Done!

Waylon shouted, but Batch already knew. The older Boggs was already working, his eyes screwed shut, his hands drawing complex patterns in the air before him. Waylon could see his uncle's lips moving, but couldn't hear the words over the gut-twisting shrieking of the hounds. But then Batch's voice rose up over all of them, filled with an authority Waylon had never heard before.

BATCH: Vile curs, servants of the things that dwell beneath the mountain, I CAST YOU OUT! In the name of all the gods, the new and the old, I banish you! In the name of these poor spirits you have taken to feed the monstrous things you serve, I banish you! In the name of my mother and my father and their mothers and fathers before them, I banish you! In the name of the dear girl you took from me, I banish you! In the name of every man, woman, and child who dwells by right in the light, I banish you! By earth and water, I banish you! By air and by fire, I banish you! By blood and bone, I banish you! *GET YE OUT!*

Batch's voice cracked with the volume of his last words, and a deafening *boom* split the air as a shockwave rolled through the clearing. The pack of black dogs descending upon the feast that had been laid before them paused, almost in unison, for just a moment before the working slammed into them and the spirits alike. And just like that, the dead and those who would prey upon them were swept from Boggs Holler like leaves in a rushing stream, each carried on to whatever awaited them beyond, or outside this world.



Waylon clutched his head and his ears began to ring. On the other side of the circle, he saw his uncle sway, and then drop bonelessly into the water. Waylon stumbled to his feet, and ran to Batch's side, his pants soaking and shoes slipping on the mud as he waded into the water.

WAYLON: Glory Ann! Verna! Help me!

The Teasley girls hurried to his side, and the three of them dragged Batch's limp, soaked body from the river, laying him on his back and pounding his chest, trying to force the water from his lungs. They shook him and they called his name. But there was no water, and there was no answer. Batch Boggs was gone.

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Neither Waylon nor the Teasleys had any previous experience carrying out burial rites, but they'd attended plenty of funerals in the course of learning their craft from their parents, and so they made do as best they could. Young Kyle — who had been found safe and sound, dead asleep with Miss Emmaline perched regally upon his lap after all was said and done — solemnly assisted Waylon with dressing Batch for the funeral. Waylon had found the dress uniform from Batch's time in the service in an old trunk shoved into the back of his closet, and Verna and Glory Ann aired it out and brushed it clean for him. They laid Batch out in the bed of his cozy little cabin, and took turns sitting up with him, as was tradition.

The word of Batch's passing spread, and for three days, folks from around Esau County came to pay their respects — some alone or in pairs, others in small groups. Every mamaw from the Holler to the other side of the mountain brought food — pots of stew or soup beans, cornbread and biscuits — far more than Waylon alone could have possibly eaten, but the four of them ate together, so it saved Verna the trouble of cooking.

On the fourth day, Glory Ann fetched a spare shovel from her daddy's tool shed, and followed Waylon up the narrow path to the family cemetery. They picked a pretty spot under a hawthorn tree not far from the place where Rosemary McCoy enjoyed her eternal slumber, took shovels in hand, and began to dig. While they worked, Verna wrapped Batch's body in a pretty white sheet

with a lace edge that she'd found tucked carefully into a drawer. It had been a wedding gift intended for Batch and Rosemary, according to a note she found tucked inside the folds of cotton, and that, she thought, was fitting.

When the time came, they lowered him into the ground, and Glory Ann and Verna quietly sang a hymn their mother had taught them, and they laid wildflowers over the breast of his shroud.

WAYLON: Good night, Uncle Batch. *Dùin an doras agus thoir dhomh sìth.*

But for Batch, Waylon knew, the door was already shut. He had searched the Holler for his uncle, and had called out to him, but there was no answer. When that old black door opened for Batch Boggs, he'd felt no fear of what lay on the other side, and he hadn't hesitated.

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The Boggs and Teasley matriarchs and patriarchs returned the day after the funeral, and were understandably grief-stricken at the loss. Lewis Boggs wandered the Holler like a lost soul after the death of his beloved brother, and the pall of that shared sadness hung over them all for weeks. But time heals all wounds, though we bear the scars forever, and in the fullness of time, joy came to Boggs Holler once more.

In the summer of Glory Ann Teasley's eighteenth year, Waylon Boggs came to her house on a quiet Thursday evening, and invited her out for a walk. He took her hand, and led her into the laurel grove to the west of his family's home, and he dropped to one knee, and asked if she would be his bride. The wedding was nothing like the fancy affairs so many folks dream of these days. It was a simple exchange of rings and words on the banks of the river, celebrated with much rejoicing by Lewis and Oanetta Boggs, Ollie and June Teasley, and attended by all of Glory Ann's sisters. Verna stood up with Glory Ann as matron of honor — having married herself the winter before — and Kyle served as Waylon's best man.

The sun shone overhead, and June and Oanetta baked a delicious cake, and young love was in bloom, and on that day, no shadow marked the bridal couple. So we will leave them there,

before the dark times that would come to the Holler. For every life is full of sorrows, but we feel them the most keenly because we've known joy.

[ Black Mouthed Dog by Landon Blood ]

And thus concludes episode ten of *Black Mouthed Dog*. Today's story was written by Steve Shell and Cam Collins, and featured in order of appearance: Steve Shell as Kyle Teasley and Batch Boggs, Allison Mullins as Glory Ann Teasley, Aliya Johnson as Verna Teasley, Brandon Bentley as Waylon Boggs, and Ashe Loper as Rosemary McCoy. Our theme song is by Landon Blood. *Black Mouthed Dog* is a production of DeepNerd Media, exclusively for our supporters on Patreon.