

Black Welts

As the Voyagers and Pioneers erode away to stardust, in the end our radio waves, bearing sounds and images that record barely more than a single century of human existence, will be all the universe holds of us.

— Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us*

An immortal horror plagues taciturn and terrified locals as destruction looms over their native West Virginia.

Hook

A Delta Green contact with the CDC has sent word of a hitherto unknown affliction dubbed “black welts” by its victims in West Virginia. Most of these victims are miners. Their disease is badly disfiguring and has killed a man named Bill Ridley. The immediate cause of death was asphyxiation resulting from malignant facial and tracheal growths. A cover-up is in the works. The CDC will be analyzing samples from Ridley's body while sitting on the information for a week, as DG determines the nature of the supernatural threat, if any.

The Mountain State

Most likely arriving in a rental car via Elkins-Randolph County Airport, the agents find themselves with no local friendlies in a hostile environment. Most of the people they see are dirt-poor white trash reminiscent of Lovecraft's “Beyond the Wall of Sleep”. Unemployment was the norm here long before the latest financial crisis. Local schools are falling apart. Farming is done almost exclusively by agrobusiness giants, using Roundup Ready crops and titanic machines on fields so big they demonstrate the curvature of the Earth.

The agents reach a mining district that's been active on and off for more than a century and a half. Its locals feel their lives depend on that activity, which resumed about two years back due to high oil prices. The last time the mines closed, it was due to unionization and talking to OSHA, so the locals won't be trying that again. They distrust strangers and bear a deep, dark faith in God and television. Reluctant to answer, they claim not to know anything about a disease. This is because they recently escaped from a level of poverty that involved getting shot at in the dark while tearing up crops sprayed with dangerous quantities of glyphosate, just to eat. These are desperate people, ready to kill for their oppressors.

Doctor Levy

The area doctor's a Maoist coward pushing retirement. Named Rose Levy, she likes to go on about who'll be first up against the wall when the revolution comes. Her empathy for the locals has eroded over the years into bitter self-sacrifice, but she doesn't mind a government snoop. Ridley's wife sent for her when he was dying, and she's seen other cases of “welts”. She's noticed the cells appear to be cancerous under a microscope, but knows nothing else for sure.

Levy assumes the welts have something to do with the apocalypse that's defined the region since the days of Karl Marx. She's gathering data and trying to get in touch with organizations who might help, but the locals think she'll get them fired. If pressed, she will grudgingly recommend talking to a “corporate whore” named Ernie Merkel, the area veterinarian, who earns more than Levy. She's heard he may have a theory, but they are not on speaking terms.

The Coal Mine

Local mining is done by a major international outfit, whose leaders smile warmly on press photos. Since the 1970s, the method of choice has been to pulverize the top third of each mountain, sluice out the coal with water, bulldoze the rest over the side, line up a neat grid of new charges and blast deeper. It's cheaper than strip-mining, very fast, and desecrates the landscape. Skilled jobs are performed by out-of-town contractors, while locals handle the loudest, dirtiest and most dangerous tasks. There's no time for logging, so while the agents fruitlessly search for any local worker willing to speak to them, they can watch oaks, hickories and magnolias pushed over the side of a flattened mountain, crashing into and burying a little stream of water below.

Wearing crude masks to protect their lungs, workers refuse to speak to the agents while on duty, claiming they're busy, deaf, or "done nothin' wrong". By contrast, demoted site manager Chris Tubman talks too much. He shouts to be heard above the noise from a passing caravan of coal trucks: "Damn good thing there aren't many people still living out here! You saw that stream we buried in tailings today?! When that gets back out, the water table is shot! Do you know how long it takes for chromium to leach out of cropland soil?! 70,000 years! This is some geologic shit!"

The Locals Speak

If cornered in their free time or away from the eyes of others, local miners will take money or medical threats to pull down their masks and show clusters of growths, like pitch-black cauliflower. The bigger ones are an angry red where frightened workers have worried at them. Nosebleeds and other discharges from the nose and mouth, where the growths are, go along with asymmetric swelling of the face and throat. Alcohol is helping a little against the pain.

It's possible to convince these men that the "welts" are a greater threat than unemployment. A day of investigation will then reveal that a total of 22 people are afflicted, 9 of them women. One man and his wife have trouble talking or breathing. On some victims, the growths attack the genitals as well as the face. Neighbors have stepped in to hide this problem from the company, praying fervently for the disease to go away, but only one woman has gotten better. There have been attempted suicides.

No amount of talking to or keeping tabs on the miners will prove a supernatural or Mythos connection, though there's plenty of domestic violence and distillation going on. At most, hawk-eyed agents may notice that a pair of feral dogs in the hills have vaguely similar growths on the vagina. Asking about this, they are told that some dogs in the area have had that disease for as long as anyone can remember. Last summer, a sick hunting dog was put down because Merkel, the vet, said a cure cost too much.

Doctor Merkel and the Truth

It's not easy to get a hold of Ernie Merkel. He's on the road a lot, listening to Faulkner audiobooks in his big SUV. Considering the kind of animal treatment he's paid to overlook, he's not thrilled about talking to the government, so the investigators will probably not corner him until they've done some snooping around. Merkel knows the sick dogs have what's called canine transmissible venereal tumor, or CTVT. It is the oldest mammalian cell line in existence, possibly upwards of 2000 years. Normally attaching itself at the genitals, it sometimes affects the mouth or nose instead, spreading through physical contact and bringing on the symptoms the investigators have observed in humans.

The local variant of CTVT seems new and especially malign. It's also north of the infectious sarcoma's optimal climate, but probably still treatable with standard chemotherapy the victims cannot afford.

Merkel supposes that a mutation of the cancer has enabled it to spread from dogs to humans. At the end of the week, a report from the CDC supports this conclusion. If the investigators stick around after that, they may see a veteran reporter driving into the area in a white Ford, looking for human interest. He soon gets back in his car and drives away. This story wouldn't sell quite enough ad space.

Links

- [CTVT](#) is real.
- A comparable disease in the area, once almost wiped out, returned in the 2000s:
 - [Severe Black Lung Reaches Near-record Levels](#) by Ken Ward Jr., for a local paper.
 - [Resurgence of a Debilitating and Entirely Preventable Respiratory Disease among Working Coal Miners](#), a scientific paper in the American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine.