

BALLARD

the republic of dogs

by Mike Kiley

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63 YEARS AGO

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The air is getting hotter. The air is a furnace. There's a rumbling in the sky over the mountains to the west.

A man comes in from the south. Walking over the cracked earth down the middle of the road through the center of town. He wears a black hat and his black boots are of cracked leather; dust hangs on him. He carries a knapsack over his shoulder, through the straps of which hangs a black coat. It looks like one foot in front of the other is just about all he can manage.

—My grandma would say you look like you been walkin since the middle a last week.

He sees her sitting on the porch. Stops. Regards her. She notices the once-shiny black stripe running down the side of each pantleg. Soldier.

—Your grandma'd be right.

He stops in front of her house. Sets his pack down. Pushes his black hat back. Puts one boot up on a wooden plank in the fence. He says to her:

—What's your name, child? And what is this place?

—I ain't no child. I'm Athena. And this here's Clarksdale you've arrived at. Who are you?

—They call me Joe.

—You say it like it's not your real name.

—Near enough.

—Well, it's not much of a name. Least in terms of length, I mean.

Joe shrugs. —It's what people seem to call me.

—Hmpf. What are you doin here?

—On my way to someplace else, darlin. Other side of those mountains.

She blushes at his “darlin” and wipes the black bangs off her forehead but they flop back into her eyes. Looks at him sideways through them.

—That sounds more interestin than here.

The sky rumbles again but the clouds are too high and too far off over the mountains for it to make much difference here.

—Won’t rain, she continues. —Never does down here.

Joe looks up. —Hotel down this way?

She nods. —Above the saloon.

—Thank you, Miss Athena. And thanks for the introduction to Clarksdale.

—You’re welcome. Bye.

He hoists his knapsack and gives her a crooked smile and grazes the tip of his hat with his index finger toward her. —See you around.

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—How’d you end up in the army anyway?, asks Luisa. —Not like this war just sprung out of the earth.

—Not smart enough to get out of it, I guess, replies Joe.

—What’s it like, nowadays. I mean, with it going on so long and all.

—Same as ever, I guess. People shooting, people dying. Not my favorite subject, if you don’t mind.

—OK. Sorry. You’re headed over the mountain.

Joe nods. Throws back the last of his whiskey; taps the rim of the shot glass; nods as Luisa hits him again.

—Yes. Heard there’s some pretty country.

—To do what in?

—Paint.

—What.

—Looking for a place to paint. He sips the fresh shot of whiskey; grins at her. —Just some place peaceful and pretty. You know.

Luisa grunts. —Well, that ain't here. At least the pretty part. Best keep movin.

They share a laugh and then a skeletal shadow falls over them: a frail fellow appears at Joe's side. He holds a soiled handkerchief, which he periodically brings to his mouth and coughs into. Blotches of bright red are on the kerchief.

—Pardon me, friend. I'm not prone to eavesdrop but I couldn't help hearing you are a painter.

Joe turns to look at this thin man who wears a clerical collar. —And.

—And I have need of one. A painter.

Joe, turning back around to Luisa: —Not interested, padre.

—It's an interesting commission. Not, strictly speaking, religious, if that is a concern. And I have money.

Joe looks again at the cleric; and then back at Luisa.

—Reverend Bradley, Joe. Joe, Reverend Bradley, she announces.

—What kind of a job is it, asks Joe, casting an acute eye at the reverend.

The cleric considers for a moment. Strokes the wispy blond whiskers on his chin. Then: "I'm looking for a man who can create a space ... who can create ... the possibility for transcendence."

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They're in the chapel. Front doors are open and a hot desert wind blows in from over the gravestones and struggling wildflowers outside.

—You were a soldier. Where'd you learn to paint.

Joe looks at the reverend; shrugs. —Was painting before I was a soldier.

—What kind of pictures do you paint.

—Big ones. Murals on sides of buildings. Like that.

Pastor Bradley nods. Strokes his mustache. —Are you a man of god, Joe? Are you a man of the church?

—No.

—But you are a spiritual man, would you say, soldier?

The reverend is bent over by a cough he catches in his kerchief.

—I don't know what that means, says Joe.

—Well, we shall see. Soon enough. Come.

He strides off toward a door behind the altar, pulling a set of jangly keys from his belt as he walks. Joe follows, and they enter a narrow hallway, lined with shelves on which sit books and papers. At the end of the hallway is an empty bookcase which the reverend slides across the floor, revealing a jagged hole in the rock wall behind it. They stoop to get through the hole and then descend a series of three rickety ladders to an earthen-floored cavern below.

The reverend hangs back, gesturing forward, allowing Joe to pass.

—Follow the light, he says, now from behind.

Joe's boots scuff the dirt floor and he slides his fingers along the damp rock walls of the passageway. And up ahead is the light. Which stops him in his tracks.

It is dim. But glows. And seems to throw off a soft beckoning hum. It is golden and looks like it has been forged. Joe remembers himself and takes a step toward the light. And then another. But he continues to stop every few feet along the rock-rimmed dirt-floored passage. And when he stops he marvels at the light, which glows bolder as he reaches the end of the passageway.

And then he turns a slight corner, into the mouth of the light, and he is in a cave, and the source of the light is a glass dome fifty feet above him through which flows sunlight off the desert floor above.

—I can see you are a man of the spirit, soldier. This is where your work will hang. If you take the job.

Joe notices 14 blank canvasses stacked up in several piles against the stone walls of the underground chamber.

The reverend continues: —I want these to be sacred. I want you to bring sacred onto these canvasses with paint. I want people to come here and feel the presence of the spirit.

Joe has moved to one of the canvasses, is feeling its heft, and holding it up against the light.

—Are you up to this commission, soldier.

Joe looks up at the dome through which the desert light filters down into the underground chapel in flecks of gold. He nods. —I will get started tomorrow.

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A hundred yards behind the church and graveyard and up a little embankment stands a flat outcropping of rock, partially shaded by an ancient juniper. The heat is a beast; the juniper is his salvation. On this rock, Joe has spread the 14 blank canvasses. There are pails of paint at his feet, and brushes, and sticks, and pebbles of various sizes.

He stalks the canvasses with a clay pot of black paint in his left hand, a thick coarse brush in his right. He builds up a sweat, soaking his soiled undershirt, running down the back of his neck. He makes several trips around the canvasses, stopping here and there to light a cigarette, or to just stare at the white of them lying against the bare white rock. And then he moves again, stopping, starting, smoking, consulting a folded-up piece of butcher paper he's pulled from his back pocket, the as-yet-unspilled black paint jostling in the pot.

And then he springs and is at one of them with a fiery intensity: flinging black paint onto that canvass, he stoops and on hands and knees works the viscous black onto the white surface with the thick-bristled brush, working it in, working it around, notching it with stones retrieved from his pocket, swirling it with a branch picked up from his pile of tools. He lays down a base, a texture, a black that has solidity ... and then he smoothes in from a different pot a band of blood red paint which although it is soon overwhelmed by the black still lives as a deep purple undercurrent beneath the dominant surface of black.

This goes on, every day, from sun up to sun down, while there is light to paint by. At the end of each day he carries each of the fourteen canvasses off the rock and over into a wooden shed behind the church. To do this he must weave in and out of the tombstones and scraggly wildflowers in the burial ground. And then at the beginning of the following day, he carts each canvass back up onto the lightening rock and starts anew.

And never in his comings and goings over three weeks' time does he notice Athena sitting in the branches of a cottonwood just peeking up over the next rise.

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Luisa pours him another whiskey. —And so you paint. Every day. Sun up to sun down.

Joe: —Yeah. Mostly. Sometimes into the night.

—Well. Guess it beats dodgin bullets.

—Yeah.

—You keep promisin we'll have some fun one of these nights.

—I'd like that. Once I've got these done, ok?

She sighs and wipes the bar with her rag. —And when might that be?

—Soon. Soon.

He slides a silver dollar across the bar and heads off into the night.

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—You are a hard worker, breathes the reverend.

Joe, having stowed the last of his paintings in the shed for the night and now leaning back against the roots of the ancient juniper, is startled by the wheeze of the spectral man's voice.

—I haven't seen you around, he replies.

—No, I've been leaving you to your work.

The painter nods his thanks. Silence for a bit. Then distant thudding from up the mountain. The heat of the day dissipating around them. Lizards appear on the rocks and do little push-ups.

—What goes on up there?

Reverend Bradley follows Joe's gaze up the canyon along the foothills and into the range above. —Ahh. The thunder on the mountain.

In the dimming dusk, a couple of tiny spotlights can be seen up there, and soft echoes of distant thuds drift down to them in the valley below.

The reverend continues: —The Spencer Dam. They're apparently just about done. Hydroelectricity, my young soldier, hydroelectricity.

He directs a thin stream of roseate sputum into his kerchief.

—How long do you have.

The reverend smiles. —They can't really say. Not long.

—That's why you need this done now.

The reverend gazes up at the mountain, the flickering lights, the clink-clank of earth-moving equipment.

—No. It needs to be done when it is ready.

—What is that place, where the paintings will hang? You didn't build it.

The reverend chuckles, a ghastly sound. —Certainly not. I stumbled upon it, quite by accident. And have never shown it to anyone.

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One night, as he is walking back to his room above the saloon from stowing his paintings in the shed behind the chapel:

—Thunder on the mountain again tonight.

He turns to see Athena. Her cheeks are apple-red from hustling to catch up to him. She's pointing up the mountain to the distant thuds and the spotlights.

She continues: —Wonder if they have any good parties up there when they knock off for the day. You never told me much about your soldierin.

—Lots I haven't told you. How do you know I even *was* a soldier?

—You got those stripes down your pants. And just the look in your eyes. Like you seen things.

—Everybody's seen things.

—Not around here. Nothing happens around here. Nothing *to* see.

—You go to school, right? Aren't you learning things?

—Crap like Pliny the Elder. What I'm gonna learn from Pliny the Goddamn Elder?

Joe laughs at this.

—Hah! Made you laugh. Was wonderin if I could.

She smiles and twirls her white cotton dress a little as they walk down the middle of the street. Three wild dogs pace them, in the shadows, in and out of the brush. She suddenly grabs his wrist.

—I'm serious though. About the war. No one ever tells me anything. It's just that it's gone on forever and I wonder if it's ever gonna end. I know people are dyin.

They've stopped walking and he is studying her face. She goes on:

—We get bodies almost every week to bury in the churchyard. No one ever comes for them. Men just dig the holes, lower them pine boxes into the ground, and then the Reverend Bradley murmurs somethin or other over them. Most times, I'm the only other person there. But I didn't know them, didn't know how they lived or how they died. There are so many of them ...

She's trailed off. Her eyes are moist. He looks down. Scuffs at a flake of cracked earth with his boot. —I don't know. I don't know anything about all that. All I know is it's over for me.

—But there's still a war, right? Did you just leave?

—Made the most sense at the time.

—Will you get in trouble?

—Not any more than I was already in.

The canvasses have taken on more and more paint, layers upon layers, applied in such a way that all layers remain visible—in some way—at the surface. Some of the

sub-strata lend color, influence the top-level black with a hint of maroon or deepest burnt red; others just communicate mood and express something by merely being there, buried, under mountains of paint, but still there, unseen paint expressing itself by being there.

When he lays the canvasses out each morning, he walks among them, and that takes time. Up to an hour, some days. Weaving in and out of them, making notes on the folded-up butcher paper he fishes out of his back pocket, crouching, scratching surfaces with a blade or rock. The canvasses are large individually—they insist that you jump into them and be surrounded—and they are huge collectively. They are forbidding, unapproachable, and there is no way to look at them casually and then drift away.

There comes a morning (hotter than all the rest) when after he has pulled them out of the shed, arrayed them on the expanse of rock, and walked and knelt among them for an hour or two, he does no more. He steps back, almost staggers. And lowers himself, sliding his butt down the trunk of the juniper tree. And when the sun goes down he takes the canvasses, one by one, not back into the shed, but down into the underground chapel, snaking each one along the hall, down the flights of ladders, through the final passageway, and into the cavern beneath the desert floor.

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More low rumbling in the sky, echoing down over the parched valley below.

—It's been raining in the mountains for a month.

Luisa pours the shot of whiskey and slides it toward Joe.

—That so? That can be dangerous, he says.

—Here? How?

Joe shrugs. —Water's gotta run somewhere.

—Won't get this far out into the valley. Never does. Besides there's the new dam. Fuckin boondoggle, you ask me.

Joe sits at the make-shift bar in the open-air saloon under electric bulbs strung on wires through trees. Long black cloud coming down from the mountain.

—Mud in your eye, says Joe, and downs the whiskey.

Luisa nods and then moves off to help someone else. Two guys up on the porch play bajo sexto and accordion. A fat drop of rain plops into Joe's empty whiskey glass. Then another onto the bar. Athena walks by in the street. Stops when she sees Joe. The musicians finish one number; each take a sip of beer; start another one. Athena approaches.

—Feel that rain?, he asks.

She wears her clean white cotton dress and a straw hat. She's barefoot. —I did. I stand corrected! It does rain here!

More fat drops plop. The musicians pause; move a little further back under a sheet of corrugated tin; resume.

—Where are you headed?

—Just had to get out. I dunno, she replies.

—Well, could be an interesting night for a stroll, I suppose. Mind if I join you?

She gives him a grin and a wink, links her arm through his, and they set off down the center of the road, up the hill, toward the church.

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It's weird. The plops are still so few and far between but man are they PLUMP. Just one of them is like a little water balloon exploding on you.

As they walk: the smell the dry cracked earth makes as the water moistens the lifting flakes of dirt.

They walk along a raised wooden sidewalk in front of the church grounds.

—Let's go inside for a sec, she suggests, as the plops increase a bit.

Joe shrugs, pushes open an iron gate that creaks. He pauses once they're inside the churchyard behind the creaking gate. There are graves, lots of them, most of them unmarked, several of them freshly dug.

—These are from the war, like you said, he whispers.

Athena, trying to pull him into the chapel as the plops get fatter and faster: —Yes. Most of them from very far away.

—But the ones from here, from Clarksburg, are marked. Over there, right?

He points to a smaller group of graves, some of which have relatively fresh flowers on them but none of which are freshly dug, around an empty fountain and a small stone statue of an angel.

—Yes. Those are ours. All these others are from over the mountain. They come in wagons, sometimes five or six at a time. Can we go inside?

Joe takes his hat off, bows his head in the rain to the rapidly muddying unmarked graves.

To himself: —For all my friends out on the burial ground.

There is a rumbling from far off that sounds different from before. He lets her pull him inside and they take refuge in the chapel.

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The chapel is smallish and rectangular; wood beams run the length of its plastered ceiling; wood ribbing runs up its plastered sides. The floor is cement—rough, with cracks. There is an altar. There is a center aisle and five rows of pews on each side of the center aisle. There are stained glass windows depicting the stations of the cross but no other decoration.

Athena wanders down the aisle; turns back to Joe, who has not closed the door behind him. The rain in the burial ground can be seen and heard splattering on the gravestones outside. There is a monstrous clap of thunder. She looks at him; he closes the door.

—They say it's been raining for weeks up in the mountains.

—So I heard, he answers.

—Oh. I'm sorry. Did I already tell you that?

—No. The bartender.

She smiles, removes her straw hat, shakes her raven hair, freeing a light mist of raindrops. — You like that bartender—what's her name?

—Luisa. Sure I like her. But I'm here with you.

Athena blushes, just a little, but looks him in the eyes. He continues:

—Do you come to church?

—To the great consternation of my mother: rarely.

He nods. Scans the spartan walls of the chapel. —Not much to look at, I guess.

—I'm no expert, mind you. But I believe you're 'sposed to be lookin within.

—Ummm.

The drumbeat of rain outside has become a wall of white noise. Another thunderclap.

—You say there's nothing to see here. In this town. Would you like to see something.

—What is it, she asks.

—Something I've been working on.

—Your paintings.

He looks at her, hard. She giggles.

—I've been watching you from that tree, silly!

He turns his back to her, while the rain gathers fury outside.

—Of course I want to see them. Really look at them, without having to stay hidden.

He grabs her hand then and hustles her up the stone steps, past the altar, fishes a skeleton key from his pocket, unlocks and then flings open the door. They move past the shelves of papers and books, duck through the jagged hole after he pushes the last bookshelf aside, then down the three flights of ladders, strung with electric light bulbs, and through the last passageway far below, toward a muted, different light. And then they emerge into the subterranean chapel.

She stops next to him; gives a little gasp.

There are 14 painted canvasses, leaned up against the rock on each of the four sides of the chamber. The muted light that leaks in is from the desert floor above; there is a glass dome that is being pelted with rain.

The canvasses are mostly black: thick meaty brushstrokes of black. But woven through the black are threads of maroon and purple and red, almost overwhelmed

by the black, but still there, still sending out faint signals of color along their wires. There are no paint splatters on the floor, no easels, no groundcloths.

She strolls around the room, padding softly on the dirt floor, running her fingers along the surface of each canvass in its turn. There are goosebumps on her arms:

—You can't just look at these, can you. They make you ... they make you jump into them.

She approaches him. Turns her face up to him. He wipes a raindrop from her cheek. She closes her eyes. He kisses her and then moves her to the wall, to a gap between two of the paintings on that wall, and she spreads her legs for him, and he is rough with her while she cries out, while she locks her arms around his neck, while the rain gets louder and louder and louder until they are finished, and have created a life, and they crumple to the dirt floor together.

And then sounds come to them, there in their underground chamber: human cries and wood splitting and water rushing at an ungodly speed.

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The church sits on a modest rise, at the end of a gradual climb up a dirt road, perhaps 200 feet above the center of town. When Athena and Joe burst out through the double wooden doors of the chapel the first thing they see is the Reverend Bradley, on his hands and knees in the graveyard, clawing his way toward them, trying to make it to the door.

There is a full moon. And there is a wall of water 50 feet high and a quarter-mile wide rushing through town at a locomotive's speed. The floodwater makes a dull roar, over which you can occasionally hear the shattering of glass and splintering of wood. But mostly it just keeps coming.

There is little left standing in the town below. And then the wave is nearly upon them. And Joe is scooping the skeletal reverend into his arms and trying to carry him and shepherd Athena back into the chapel. A boxcar tossed on the wave levels the shed which housed Joe's paintings. They are not going to make it back inside before the water hits the top of the hill.

The moon is so bright. She sees his eyes then, so calm, so knowing. They race to the rock and scurry up the juniper, Joe stuffing the reverend's body up and over a branch and then hoisting Athena over his head to safety. The moon bobs brightly. Will the wave knock the moon from the sky? Athena knows the reverend is dead but pulls him up one more branch so that only his ankles are buffeted by the torrent; she is dry further up the juniper; and Joe has vanished.

Uprooted pine coffins dive and dip in the wave. The juniper's ancient roots strain. Then snap, and the tree is awash and Athena rides her branch on the swell, then falls and goes under losing the moon entirely in the sucking black. Until Joe surfaces and lifts her up and hurls her onto a floating roof of wood shingles that hurtles by. He uses his belt and straps her wrist to one of the planks, and then is flung under again (and this time for the last time) by the surging water.

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First light. The sky is clear. Dawn stars twinkle and disappear. Athena opens one eye lying on the plank. Sees her wrist still bound to the wood with his belt. The wave has run its course against the butte behind the town and the waters are receding back down the hill. She drifts past the church. Burial ground ripped open, gravestones asunder, pine boxes exposed, some broken. Sees through a huge hole in the side of the chapel that a boulder has wedged itself behind the altar at the entrance to the hallway leading to the underground chamber. All the pews have been smashed up against the back wall; their splinters loll in the two feet of water on the chapel's floor.

Joe, no longer of this world, works as if he does not have much time. He spies Athena below just waking on her plank. Descends and then touches her hair and kisses her cheek. And moves on.

She raises her head then, and her hair moves in a sudden soft breeze of morning and she smiles; and then shivers. Goosebumps raise on her forearms.

—Joe?, she croaks but there is of course no answer.

There is a government man in a rowboat. He takes pictures of everything while a Mexican boy rows him around what used to be Clarksdale. He takes pictures of people who shout and wave to him from the roofs of ruined structures, from the tops of a few stalwart trees. He photographs Athena, just waking up on her plank. He turns to the churchyard ...

Joe floats in mid-air and finds the reverend splayed and tangled in a cottonwood's branches; eases his body into the churchyard; leans him up against an unmarked gravestone. Smooths the hair on his forehead. And moves on.

Down into the town. Finds Luisa unconscious and pinned up against a brick wall behind the splintered wood of a far-flung door frame. He eases her out and onto the rooftop of the hotel, where a couple of other survivors help pull her to safety. And he moves on. And then he is finished and is no more; he blinks out and is gone.

Athena wears thick boots and carries a shovel and a rucksack. She slogs through ankle-deep mud down the center of the ruined post-flood town, heading up the hill for the church. In the churchyard, the headstones in the burial ground extrude from the earth like ground-down teeth.

She climbs into the church through the boulder-sized hole in its side, trudges through mud and pew-shards. There is a huge stone flung back up against the door to the underground chamber. She looks around; sees what she needs; pulls a piece of timber out of the sludge and wedges it into the space between the stone and the floor behind the altar. Stands on the makeshift lever; jumps; creates a bit of space with a slight rocking, a judder; and then rolls away the stone with a subsequent bounce onto the wooden crowbar.

But the door behind the stone is jammed and will not give and so she takes a hatchet out of her rucksack and hacks away at the handle till it flies off and she can put her shoulder into the water-sodden swollen wood of the door and force her way through.

The hallway is relatively dry: a thin ribbon of muddy water runs down its center. She reaches the bookcase and slides it back, revealing the access to the first descending ladder. She lashes the hatchet and shovel onto her rucksack. Pulls a torch from the wall and lights it with some matches from a dress pocket. She heads down the first ladder, torch flickering in her hand, equipment rattling on her back.

Two more ladders. After a brief respite on the intermediate platform, she is on the earthen floor, and it is dry down here. And the golden light at the end of the passageway. She makes her way into the underground chamber and finds his paintings, 14 of them, leaned up against the rock on each of the four sides of the chamber

She sets her rucksack down, pulls out wire, a hammer, metal screws, and starts installing the paintings in their intended places by referring to hand-drawn figures scrawled on the back of a creased and muddy piece of butcher paper.