

SEAN MILLER

the lord's work

It makes no difference what men think of war, the judge said. War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner.

—Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*

bUCKWALTER WAS MY SISTER'S SON, a bastard product of a "true" southern belle. he was six when she died from what my grandmother said was a lack of the lord, but i believe the lord has no dealing when a boy cradles his cold mother with a needle still buried in her arm. she fed that addiction more than she fed that boy, so maybe the lord did deliver him into my hands. hard to say, but i was unwilling at first. i was nineteen and with no schooling i had trouble caring for myself, much less a boy that could barely make words. but i was the only thing that boy had, besides grandma who'd done raised 3 generations already. a good crusted soul, but with cancer she was due soon. so i took him in and found a way to make it work. at that time i shared a trailer with a buddy of mine name jed, short for jedidiah. this proud possession, a chrome finished '55 spartan, he had inherited from his father recently passed. its steel structure was an aircraft design and was said to withstand any natural disaster, but with a leak in the corner of the kitchen i guess the rain didn't count. by nature of the town we worked for the same chipping company, and with my rusted out ford we were the perfect combination. work started at 5:30, and in accordance buckwalter was always the eager student that

got to school first. his day ended right before the afternoon shift change, and with a heavy foot, i had just enough time to drop him by the trailer before me and jed made a run at our second paycheck of the day.

we'd come home at night after ranching at mr. seers' usually to find buckwalter playing with mrs. lucinda's chow puppy that lived in the next trailer over. she told me that buckwalter would come knocking on her front screen at the same time everyday asking if that dog could come out and play. she didn't mind, she knew the boy loved that dog, seemed to be his only friend. but she was also fond of the boy, a reminder of jake, her son that had passed a few years back. i believe both were heart broke when we had to move away in march of '67, as result of me having to dodge the draft. at the time i didn't have no reason for warring, not my fight to be. plus, buckwalter needed me. mr. seers let us borrow his phone at the ranch, and jed made a long distance call to his cousin alan who lived on the westside of montgomery. alan said he knew of good work to be had. after talking to him i still wasn't sure, but with jed coming it was a sure place to live and that was enough for me to lift skirt.

job wasn't bad at the railroad, i was use to laboring. pay came as a disappointment, but it was steady so i took it. to make up for it me and jed became self made men on the side, though it was usually doing things we wasn't too proud of. it was now four months after moving, and we'd caught wind of a sure thing. vick, a scrawny fella that worked boxcar maintenance, told me of boy named rodney who'd been shot three weeks prior after being at odds with a man over a dog fight.

"that dumbass boy, he had coming," vick said. "when you do dealing with louisiana folks it's just a matter of time, can't trust men been raised around negroes. word on that side of town is that little rodney had a fresh litter of purebred pits in a chicken coop too. i swear it, right behind his auntie's house."

i chuckled, "is that right now, vick?"

"sure as general lee losing the war you ignorant son of a bitch," he proclaimed in defense as he pointed at me with an oil stained hand. "don't even get me started on that. if he'd a led them damn yanks round these parts it wouldn't of been same story twice."

"you slum full of shit and dirty shine aren't ya old man? don't you get me all riled up telling your ghost stories. an if i hear talk ill of the great general again i'm gona take that damn confederate smoke you're blowing and find a good fit for it right up your ass." never did have the tolerance for him.

"well alright big man, i tell you what. why don't you take that high an mighty ass of yours an go an find out if those dogs are still around . . . less you're scared of a few dusty old farmers out in the sticks?"

he knew how to test my patience, save for on this day he didn't have to challenge me; i was gonna do it anyway. his story wasn't worth a hill of beans, but you don't

just turn your head on something that might have some truth in it. pups without papers could still fetch a good price with the right people, for fighting and such. that being said, sunday was a half day, so me and jed took off right after work to some whereabouts i'd found through some digging. only direction we had was to take a left off sweetbriar onto an unmarked dirt drive hosted by an old baptist ministry. the abandoned church house set in the middle of an overgrown yard, weathered down and not much bigger than a shed. we missed it twice before we caught a glimpse of the black iron steeple catching the day's dying sun. the house was to be about 5 miles in through plots of woods and farmland, set in across from a harvested tobacco field. we came up on it about 30 minutes till dusk, late enough that the crows had called off their worming for the day. a beaten tire swing hung from an old oak tree shading over the white rock driveway. i parked in its shadow and sat in the cab for a minute, checking the situation out. i scoped a quick plan, thought i might pretend to be a friend of rodney's and see where it went from there. figured it was safer than a grab and go. i told jed to wait in the truck.

i walked a stone path to the whitewashed porch. its proper finish was unusually kept up compared with the rest of the house, where scattered paint peels revealed wooden scars that were slowly rotting away. i laid a few knocks on the door and sat there for a sec, then peered in past the drawn curtains. no one was home. i signaled to jed and hopped off the side of the porch. we met at the corner and took towards the back of the property. an infant white rabbit stead fast in my path. didn't move as we got closer, probably on account that it was frozen by instinct. when i was nearly on top of it i saw what it actually was, a blood drawn human foot, size telling me that it was from a child. jed turned head and gave me a look, letting me know that we gone too far and that whatever be past this point was none of our business. i wasn't ready for what i had just seen, a cold sweat furrowed on my brow. i now smelled the honeysuckles curled on the barbwired fence holding the cows, and could hear the locusts from the woods across the back pasture. i knew better, but i've always been a victim of curiosity. i continued on as jed followed a few paces behind. i drew open an ivy covered wooden gate. directly on the other side i came across a small naked boy, head face down in a large ant hill that peaked above the straw covered back lawn. red marks on his body told me that he had been held there, tortured. it had been a few days as the workers had already made good work of the area above his shoulders, and the near bare skull was well into the process of being built around. a girl, scalped in three places, lay breastless a few feet past the boy. her legs were still open. the old man had not tolerated the same abuse; clearly it was buckshot that had taken half his torso. the castration must have come after the fact. a few other members of the household laid to rest, all indecent and mutilated in some form or another. six in all.

we left the house in its stillness, not knowing why we'd even been there in the first place. i rolled the windows down to break the silence, chilly outside. as we turned off the road i took a glance at the ministry, now unveiled under the glow of the moon. years before i'm sure great sturdy doors stood on their hinges, locking in the echoes of the choir. i remembered when i was a boy, standing tall, following each hymn with grandma smiling down. even though i couldn't read i brushed my fingers over the words; sister's gentle hand rested on my shoulder, letting me know that she was proud. there was no lack of the lord during those days.

on a calling, the next week i joined the army. figured i could catch the tail end of the action. i phoned mrs. lucinda asking her if she could put buckwalter up for a couple of months. she agreed, even though she knew it was goodbye forever. been two years here now, and i've never felt this free. you know you're alive when you corner a man, stare right back at the devil in his eyes and pull the trigger cause you have the urge. i've seen the devil, proof enough to me that the lord exists. and without god, who then is in me quaking these idle hands? if in his absence it must be revenge that haunts me, pressing hard to free my mind of dreams that fail to heal the suffering that is certain. does evil have the right to grace life in a calm walk, undaunted by death? i will remain on this mission long after the war is over; from under its shadow there is still a need for killing. i will walk in steps of jesuit priests, yielding my blade in name of christ, and forgiving sin where it is due. i will spread the love of the lord where it is lacking.



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