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BENEATH A SINGLE SKY

a novel by
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PROLOGUE: Born in Massacre

It was a crisp morning in Fetterwood, Nebraska. Fetterwood, founded on the parched plains in 1883 by 300 Seventh Day Adventists, now stood at a dwindling population of 183: 33 members of the Methodist church and 150 non-believers (some claim there's no difference). All 183 folks are related by at least one piece of the Holy Trinity: Name, Land or Blood. Fetterwood snakes along the Niobrara River in Southwestern Nebraska for a mile or so. "Niobrara" in the language of the Plains Indians means "Running Water." "Nebraska" means "Flat water." Fetterwood was named after Abraham Fetter. Fetter was a retired Army sergeant who massacred a family of Oto Indians on Easter Sunday in 1880. The Indian family had settled along the river after the war and farmed a small parcel of land they claimed belonged to them for a hundred years.

Fetter came upon them when the full moon shone high in the sky. He brought a fiery down upon their warm backs and set them afire while they slept. As hair singed and skin began to crackle, Fetter declared "I re-claim this land in the name of the Republic for which I stand!" As the children screamed and their parents fought to batter out the flames engulfing them, old man Fetter stood atop his horse and grinned down at the killing he had grown to miss and love. The parents dropped to the wet earth and moaned. Their children were burned black and cradled in their arms. The bodies were never found. Some claim Fetter buried them deep in a chalk mountain tomb where no one would ever find the ashen evidence of a single night of Wildhorse whiskey gone bad.

The Fetterwood locals remember Sergeant Fetter as a war hero who "cleaned the land and baptized the river." The Indians are not so kind. They remember the Fetterwood massacre and vow that one day their spirit will be avenged. Legend goes that Fetterwood is cursed by the spilling of innocent blood. Where rainwater should have fertilized the soil,

Fetterwood was founded in fury and fed by blood. A sin of such magnitude never vanishes and the indelible binding crime of mortal sin drenches every new birth sprouted from the Fetterwood land. Blue Crow, the great Oto Indian Chief prophesized half a century ago that the only way for Fetterwood to be prosperous and alive and healthy was to burn it down out of existence. "Fetterwood must burn," Blue Crow said, "or the land will never be free." Only in Fetterwood's ashes could the souls of his ancestors be set free to ride the wild wind again.

In a state where treeless and mountainless land slake the horizon from every vantage and no oceans touch its borders, the dedication to, and reliance upon, water to quench the land of parched dreams is not only bred into the vocabulary of Nebraska's places and ornaments, but it is genetically encoded into all children born into the earth and under Nebraska's flag as well. While the state motto is "Equality Before the Law" all children of Nebraska know the state motto really should be this plaintive prayer: "Bow Down to the Pregnant Heavens or Be Broken."

As long as Fetterwood runs, it is dwarfed by its shallowness of breadth. You can walk the width of the village in the span of two blocks. There was Main Street where business was done and then the alley behind the cement block stores where the mile long block of houses stood side-by-side, never facing each other. In Fetterwood you minded your own business, or at least you pretended to as best you could. You kept your eyes straight ahead, never making direct eye contact while your eyes were free to grab every iota of gossip and rumor racing on the wind.

CHAPTER 1: Where the Son Doesn't Shine

Easter morning, 1973, broke with a copper sun aching from the horizon. It was cold - the kind of cold that cuts the skin purple in seconds and snares the eyes to tears in a blink. Frozen dew crusted every surface making a misty menagerie of beautiful icicles out of garbage cans, rusted out truck parts and curb trash. Breath, flung from lips and snorted from nostrils to bite back the subsequent icy inhalation, froze into glittering crystals, floated in the air, and swirled to the earth and died. No snow blanketed the ground. Sometimes the weather can be clear and the land unburdened by the whims of a life found on the windswept prairie.

A ritual Sunday procession began from the grand old white clapboard house on the corner lot. Grandpa, dressed in a brown polyester suit and black patent leather shoes, eased himself down the kitchen steps and into the backyard. At 72, he was made circular by diet and crippled by gout. "Hurry on up," Grandpa said over his shoulder, "The sun'll be just right in a minute. We can't miss the warm washing over us for the photo."

The Mother, always maddeningly proper and curt, glided down the steps dressed in a yellow party dress and a tan cashmere coat. Her beehive hairdo was the only soft thing about her. She promptly melted the ice beneath her patent leather shoes by willing it away with a heated viciousness and gory despise usually reserved for the children she taught when they didn't memorize their vocabulary homework.

E. Wayne Clarder and his bastard twin, teenaged, mongrel, sons up from Oklahoma slunk from the kitchen and descended the concrete stairs into the backyard. The Clarders were famous for one thing: Their sinuous, colorless, lightless eyes. To make eye contact with a Clarder was to wish away your soul down a bottomless pit of depression. Hunched and sniggering, The Mongrels' hands hung from tendrilic arms and dangled below their knees.

E. Wayne, bald, slight and no taller than fourth grader, ritually pecked The Mother on the cheek without making eye contact and stiffly cupped her shoulder in his wetted palm. He pulled her nearer by an inch into the nook of his armpit. She complied and produced the pasty smile of a thrice divorced former beauty queen: Gums and Teeth whetted by dreams of what ought to be.

The Mongrels kneeled and took their place beside each of E. Wayne's knees. Their smiles revealed yellow, cracked, teeth.

Grandpa steadied himself by leaning against hulking cottonwood tree. He brought the Polaroid viewfinder to his eye and squinted. His finger pulsed on the trigger. He stopped and vaguely motioned. "Squeeze together a little more." The group hunkered together a bit more. E. Wayne flexed his bowed arm and his armpit completely drenching The Mother's shoulder. The Mongrels winced as E. Wayne crushed them together between his legs. Grandpa drew the camera back to his eye and peered through the lens and stopped. "Wait there. Where's Willie?"

Silence.

The sun twinkled across icy leaves and skipped along the pebbly dewdrops.

"Willie boy!" Grandpa called out, "Come on out, now, son! We're losing the sun!"

The Mongrels said in unison, "You want for us to go get 'em, Pa?"

E. Wayne said nothing. His face was grey and frozen. The bitter wind blew into his eyes and he shed not a tear.

"I'll go get my boy, E. Wayne." The Mother turned her head slightly to catch a glimpse of a response. "Nothing for you to fret on, E. Wayne. It's Easter Sunday. He's probably just hunting for eggs still."

In slow motion, E. Wayne drew his cracked, pursed, lips apart a sliver and let slither a slit of black breath between brown teeth. "No. Y'all wait here. I'll git him." His words drooled to the ground into a black puddle.

E. Wayne's Mongrels lapped up the anticipation and wiped the black dirt from their mouths, "Yeah, Pa. You go git him!" Peals of snotty giggling erupted from their hoarse throats. "Hoo hoo hoo! Bwa-heh-ha! Gewgaw!"

"I'll go with, E. Wayne," The Mother said.

"No. You'll stay. A woman don't know how to break a boy to raise him right." E. Wayne broke his grip on her shoulder and turned away from her. She gave him her back, ever so slightly, looked to the sky and said nothing more.

The Mongrels chomped on the discarded carcass of a marriage in shatters and chanted. “Git. Gone. Git. Gone. Git. Gone. Bwoo-hoo!”

A flash! Grandpa memorialized the moving family tableau in an instant photograph.

E. Wayne moved up the steps into the mud room. He paused and brushed the dirt from his shoes. He opened a jar of home canned pickles down from the windowsill and swallowed two pickles whole. He grabbed the door latch and it screamed a rusty rebellion against being dislodged from its jamb.

In the house, Willie played with his Big Jim doll on the parlor floor. The rubber arms of the doll could be flexed into gigantic biceps and Willie loved feeling the power of becoming bigger than you looked. Willie made Big Jim lift, and then roll, a psychedelic Easter Egg. Willie was a simple boy with a single wish: He dreamt to be left alone. Willie didn’t want to be touched. Willie didn’t want to carry on a conversation. Willie didn’t want to make eye contact. He was his mother’s only child. He resented having E. Wayne and The Mongrels living in his house with him in Lincoln. The Clarders were not his blood. They were not good country people from the plains of Oklahoma like he’d met before during summer school. The Clarders glowed darkness the way a lighthouse shines a beacon.

The radiator in Grandpa’s house hissed and kept Willie warm and safe. Mahogany lintels and floorboards struck out from white walls. Cedar wafted from an open closet. Incandescent lamps with shades of flowers and fringe cast golden hoops of light on whitewash walls and a giant woolen area rug the color of cream. Three purple and yellow Easter baskets overflowing with plastic grass and marshmallow Peeps dotted the floor. Willie was eight. He was slight for his age, eager of mind and thin and he wondered at the miracles of the world swirling around him every day: Where did the ice go when it melted? Why did he feel better when he sang? How does the wind know how to get home? One thing Willie didn’t wonder about was E. Wayne. He knew E. Wayne hated him for being a mamma’s boy. He knew E. Wayne despised his heather eyes and silky brunette curls. Willie knew E. Wayne lived to toughen him up through a banal brutality. Willie hated E. Wayne and E. Wayne knew it and relished it.

“What’re you doing in here, Willie?” E. Wayne hissed. He grabbed the Big Jim and pulled the rubber arms off the body and threw the pieces against the wall.

Willie froze. The golden hoops of light around him went white.

E. Wayne towered above him. A hand snapped down and grabbed Willie’s arm. “How long you expect to keep us waitin’, boy?” He heaved Willie up to his feet and squeezed his bicep hard as if wringing a washcloth of dirge water.

Willie trembled. The open closet creaked closed and the scent of cedar vanished into the dark. Willie vowed not to piddle himself. “Not this time,” he thought.

E. Wayne’s black breath touched Willie’s cheek. The mahogany faded to spruce while the steam stopped rattling in the heat pipes.

“Look. Look,” E. Wayne chanted, “Look me in the eye.” No response. “I said, ‘Look me in the eye!’”

Willie soldiered up the cold surrounding him and raised his head. He saw ice crystals crawling on the windows. The stinging in his bladder begged for relief. Willie refused to give in to any urge to release.

“Look me in the eye and tell me why you’re here and not out there.” E. Wayne pointed with a bony finger beyond Willie’s head.

Willie knew better than to be sunk by the Clarder eyes. Willie knew if he didn’t appear to comply, he’d be hit in a place that didn’t show a bruise: The bottom of the foot; the head; the armpit. Willie focused on the bridge of E. Wayne’s nose. That made him cross-eyed, but hoped it would be good enough.

“Good enough, then,” E. Wayne said and relaxed his grip on Willie’s arm. “You want to play dollies? We’ll play dollies.” E. Wayne grabbed Willie’s arm harder and bent it up to form a bicep. E. Wayne pinned Willie’s hand to his shoulder, putting the pain of pressure in the elbow. “You’re not going to cry, are you?”

Willie was lifted to his tiptoes by the discomfort. He was able to keep a cross-eyed stare on the bridge of E. Wayne’s nose. Willie did not scream. He tried to breathe, but the

cold and the shadows surrounding him made it difficult to draw a clean breath. He had to piddle. He had to release. He let go a single tear from his left eye instead.

“Don’t cry here! Your momma won’t lick your tears away! Not here. Not ever more!” E. Wayne pushed away the tear with a rough flick of his thumb. “I’ll let go when you tell me why you’re here and not out there.” E. Wayne pressed Willie’s hand onto his shoulder a bit more. “Speak up, boy. I can keep this up all day and you know it’s true.” The wind blew frozen branches across the roof. Ice particles skittered down the eaves.

Both of Willie’s eyes drew tears. His face was distended by pain. He refused to cry out. A single droplet of urine leapt from his penis. Willie clenched his urethra as hard as he could. He would win if he could only remain dry. Time stopped. Willie felt his heartbeat slow. He knew he had to answer, or he would lose consciousness. He hated to give in to the throbbing in his elbow and the ache of his bladder, but if he didn’t give in soon, the joint would snap and the floor would be stained. Quietly, Willie closed his eyes tight and coughed up a soft response. “You know the sun hurts my eyes.”

E. Wayne eased up on his grip and released Willie’s arm. “Oh, I know. You think I don’t remember? You think I’m stupid, don’t you? You don’t think I can remember simple, stupid, silly things. I’m right, ain’t I?” E. Wayne waited for a response. None came. He continued, “What did I tell you about the sun, hmm? What did I tell you?”

Willie’s arm was throbbing. He wanted to rub it, but knew it would give E. Wayne too much pleasure to show he’d hurt him. So Willie let his arm hang limp as the blood rushed back into his hand. His bladder was safe for now.

“‘What did I tell you?’ I said!”

“You said it didn’t matter if I hurt or not.”

“I said it ‘don’t’ matter, not that it ‘didn’t’ matter.”

“Yessir.”

“Okay, then.” E. Wayne sized up the room and hitched up his pants. “So put your dollies away after you take your punishment and come out for the picture.”

Willie’s voice rose a bit higher than he intended. “Punishment?”

“Well, sure,” E. Wayne growled, “You don’t think I’m going to let you off, do you? What do you take me for, a pussy? I’m not some little cut of the damp standing here waiting to be violated by the likes of you.”

Willie shivered. He knew what was coming.

“Lift up your shirt.” E. Wayne smiled and crossed his arms over his chest.

“My arm hurts. I can’t lift my arm.”

“Lift up your shirt, or I’ll lift it up for you.”

Willie struggled to comply. He drew in a great breath and slowly managed to untuck his dress shirt with his good arm and pull it up over his nipples.

“Now lay down.”

A cold shudder drew across Willie’s back. His arms shook as he dropped to his back on the red velour loveseat.

E. Wayne shoved the sleeves of his sport coat up to his elbows. He opened a hand and placed a palm against Willie’s throat and squeezed.

Willie closed his eyes and imagined a rainbow shining in his heart. Willie took himself to the sky, riding bareback on the backbone of the rainbow. He wandered among the clouds and drank in rain droplets before they fell. Willie wondered at the green pastures stretching below him like a carpet of fertile moss as he sank farther and farther into the sky and left the ground below far away.

E. Wayne took an index finger and plunged it into Willie’s bellybutton.

Willie didn’t flinch.

E. Wayne pressed into the nub of the button with his fingernail.

Willie didn’t breathe.

E. Wayne twisted and pushed Willie’s belly button deep into his abdomen.

Willie moaned.

E. Wayne released his death grip on Willie’s neck.

A warm crescent of piddle bled through Willie’s pants and soaked the sofa.

E. Wayne grinned, withdrew his finger from the bellybutton, licked the fingernail clean of the dead skin he'd removed and clucked, "Next time I won't be so easy. Clean yourself up and git outside before we lose the sun."

CHAPTER 2: A Golden Melancholia

When Willie regained consciousness, the smell of urine drew into his nostrils. He coughed a bit, felt something warm on his tongue, then struggled to sit up. He touched a finger in his mouth and withdrew it to discover blood. He had bitten his tongue. Hard. Willie looked around and tried to make out the silhouettes of images he knew by heart. First off, there was no E. Wayne Clarder. He sighed, thanked God for small dignities, and stood up. He felt his body. He saw the piddle stain. At least E. Wayne hadn't killed him yet, he thought. Then he made out the grandfather clock chiming nine times. He touched the trunk door and felt the familiar tones vibrating in his fingertips. There was the fireplace, still warm with embers. Willie coughed up a bit of blood and spit the swirl into the embers: A single curl of steam rose into the air. Then he saw the pieces Big Jim. Willie carefully collected the arms and body, kissed Big Jim on the top of the head with as much love as his heart could muster, and tossed the remains into the fireplace. Smoke mixed with ash as Willie watched Big Jim's plastic body and rubber arms melt into the hearthstone. Willie wanted to cry for the loss of his best friend, but he knew he couldn't afford to mourn at that moment. He had to hurry and clean up or E. Wayne would be back even harder and even more blood would be spilled invisibly from the inside.

As Willie mopped up the urine from the sofa with newspapers, he thought about his mother: The Mother who had been the paramount figure in his life for eight years. He wondered how love could so quickly turn to disenchantment. He wondered what'd he'd done two years ago that made his mother fling him from her bosom and replace him with E. Wayne Clarder and his Mongrel sons. Willie imagined loneliness must be the culprit, for nothing was worse than being lonely for most people. Willie craved loneliness, for it was the only solace he found in a reckoning world. If his mother found good company in the Clarders, then Willie wouldn't begrudge his mother her happiness. He was just disappointed that her happiness didn't include him. There was nothing to be done about that now, Willie reasoned, because once you've been betrayed by your mother, once she publicly picked and vowed herself to a fourth husband over an only son, nothing else mattered because you will never trust or love or

open yourself up to hurt again. A motherly betrayal is a bile that forever rises to bite the back of your throat.

The moment of Willie's betrayal was still bright in his mind. It was Thanksgiving a year and a half ago back home in Lincoln and E. Wayne and his Mongrels were out pulling a pumpkin from the thatch of the backyard. Willie entered the kitchen and summoned up the guts to tell his mother about E. Wayne. "Mother," he stammered, "I have to talk to you about E. Wayne."

"Oh?" She sprinkled powdered sugar on cupcakes. She did not look her son in the eye.

"Mother. E. Wayne is... he's... he..." Willie fought to bring the words out and leave the crying inside where it belonged, "He's hurting me."

The Mother laughed lightly and blew away powdered sugar from the table that had missed the cupcakes. "Willie, your imagination is just too wild! E. Wayne loves you and he'd never do anything to hurt me."

"He's not hurting you, mother. He's hurting me." Willie blushed as the unrecognized fury of betrayal blossomed from his mind. "He's hurting me in hidden places."

"E. Wayne's a man, honey. He wants you to be one, too. Why don't you go out there and help him and the boys pick a pumpkin?" With that, she dusted offer hands.

"Don't you believe me, mother?" Willie stared directly into her hazel eyes.

"This isn't about you, Willie." She dug a heel into the linoleum, spun around and said over her shoulder as she left the room, "Have a cupcake. You'll feel better."

His face, burning with the indelible brand of a betrayal he now knew and would recognize from that moment on, Willie took a cupcake and bit into the warm chocolate. The braying of E. Wayne and his mongrels filled the house as they approached pumpkins. The chocolate cake withered in Willie's mouth as the soon-to-be familiar taste of bile welled up from his belly and spilled over into his cupped hands. Willie looked at the mess dripping between his fingers and felt hatred burning on his lips. The only way to extinguish the flames of hatred now searing him from within was to kill the heart of betrayal. Aghast at the blackness churning within, Willie promised he would never seek to taste the fruitful temptation of matricide again. He would, in fact, suck it up and be a man just as his mother wished. That

would be the final deed he would do in her name. Willie would take whatever punishment E. Wayne and his Mongrels would heap upon him until he was big enough, sure enough and strong enough to fight back. He swallow their blackness even if it killed him. Willie knew the day would come when he would be able to make a stand for himself instead of for his mother's happiness and that stand would be quick and deadly. Kill or be killed. When reckoning day came, either Willie or the Clarders would be alive. Not both. There wasn't room in the world for both Willie and the Clarders to be happy and swilling.

In Grandpa's house, Willie patted the piddle spot on his pants with a kitchen towel. He needed some help in getting the fabric dry. He placed the damp spot directly on the bare radiator coils and held himself against the spitting heat. The radiator was blisteringly hot, but it was the only solution Willie could think of to get himself dry enough to get outside on time for the photograph. As the heat vibrated into his skin, Willie thought of his father.

Willie wondered where he was and why he left 10 days after his birth. His mother and his father had been married for five years before they decided to have a child. In his mother's fifth month, his father told his mother that he didn't love her any longer. He left. Willie had no memory of his father. The divorce judge forced Willie's father back into the home for 10 days after Willie's birth in order to help out with the birth of the new boy. He stayed no longer than the 24th hour of the 10th day. Willie's father moved in and married the woman he'd been cheating with behind his mother's back. He fathered three more children until the new wife divorced him and ran off with a tailor. Willie's father religiously sent court ordered child support in the form of \$100 per month. On the memo line of each check was written, in red ink, "Blood money." How cruel it was, thought Willie, that a man takes a vow to love, honor and protect a woman and then once she's gifted with child, he changes his mind and leaves not only her, but his only son. What sort of man, Willie wondered, would wish upon a son loneliness, heartache and E. Wayne Clarder? What sort of man, Willie cried to the heavens, would disappear without shadow and abandon his only son and leave him to be taken and torn by the wolves of the world? Only God would do such a thing, Willie reasoned, because only God would trust his only son on earth to be humble and survive the pricks and pitchforks of

those who yearned to be like him. Willie didn't think of himself as Jesus Christ or anything like that, but he did find comfort in calling himself a son of God. Under the strong and warm hand of God Willie found the love and compassion that an ordinary father was unable or unwilling to shower upon the flesh of his flesh. Willie stood proud and silent under the bright shadow of God's palm and it was there that he felt strength and love for his fellow man enough though that love, so far, had been barren and unrequited.

CHAPTER 3: A Smile for Nowhere

Brittle sunshine pricked through the glimmering leaves of the mulberry tree and poked Willie right in the eye. Willie squinted and tried to courage his eyes full-open. He squeezed tears from his eyes and they drooled down his cheeks like candle drippings and froze there. Willie lowered his chin to his chest to relieve the bright pain in his eyes. He felt a sharp fingernail digging into the crux of his arm over the elbow. He looked up and saw The Mother towering over him; her jaw muscle was quivering; her eyes were pinpoints; her fingernails dug in deeper. Her scratches drew blood below the skin.

“Keep your chin up and look at the camera.” The Mother smiled at him through clenched teeth. “You always ruin every photograph because you won’t look into the camera.”

Willie twisted his arm away from her grip and said softly, “I’m happy to look in the camera. I just can’t look into the sun at the same time.”

E. Wayne shot Willie a death look.

Willie tried to raise his head and open his eyes, but he could not. The sun was too harsh. The pain in his eyes was too intense.

“Willie?” Grandpa called out, “Can you look at me?”

Willie opened his eyes a bit and rotated his eyeballs forward, but he did not lift his chin from his chest.

“Willie,” Grandpa continued, “Can you look up at the camera, son? I know the sunshine bothers you, but it’s the only way. The flash isn’t bright enough outdoors to wash enough light on everybody.”

Willie nodded his understanding, lifted his head to face the camera and held his eyes closed tight.

“If you’ll just open your eyes for a second, Willie, I’ll snap the photo and we’ll be done.” Grandpa held the camera to his eye and focused on the tense family tableau before him.

E. Wayne snarled to life. “There’ll be more than one photo. I want at least three. One for me. One for you. One for my momma in Oklahoma.”

“Ready Willie?” Grandpa’s finger twitched as it hovered over the red button.

E. Wayne leaned down and whispered in Willie’s ear. “Stiffen up, boy, or I’ll stick a rod up your ass into your head and out your eyeballs to get you to look into the sun.”

The Mongrels leaned in and blew the hot breath of anticipation in Willie’s other ear. “We’ll help paw stick ya, Willie. Let’s do it right now.”

“No moving, please. Everyone back into position. You’re out of the picture now, E. Wayne.” Grandpa moved two paces back to re-frame the family.

E. Wayne squeezed The Mother closer to him. The Mother held Willie tight against her lower leg and tried to force his head up to face the camera. The Mongrels stood wicked and silent as they smiled for the photo.

“Eyes open,” E. Wayne said.

Willie kept his head down.

“Just let it go, E. Wayne. We’ll have another photo in the album of Willie squinting with his head down,” The Mother said.

“I won’t be disrespected like you.” With that, E. Wayne grabbed Willie by the arm, lifted him off the ground and into the cradle of his arm.

“You git ‘im, Pa!” The Mongrels howled and ran in circles around The Mother. “Just holler if you need us,” they shouted.

“Hurry back, E. Wayne,” The Mother said as E. Wayne and Willie passed behind the mulberry tree.

Grandpa watched E. Wayne disappear with Willie behind the garage. He followed.

“There!” E. Wayne crushed Willie’s face between his fingers, “Look up at the sun.” E. Wayne pointed to the shimmering disk with his other bony hand.

Willie held his chin against his chest and said nothing.

E. Wayne grabbed Willie’s head between his hands. Willie’s body dangled, unsupported, from his neck. E. Wayne, using the leverage of gravity, pried Willie’s head from his check and angled his face toward the hot sun. “Open your eyes! Look at the sun!”

Willie drew his eyes closed tigher.

“You reek of piss,” E. Wayne, using one hand under Willie’s chin to dangle the boy, used the fingers on his other hand to peel open Willie’s eyelids. Pupils disappeared to dots. Beautiful heather irises turned the color of ash as they were seared by the sun.

Willie’s eyes were dry. He wanted to scream out, to beg forgiveness, but he could not make a sound. E. Wayne’s hand was against his throat and he could not get air into his lungs that now dangled far beyond him. As his eyesight went grey, a flash of color presented itself before him. Willie’s eyes cleared and before him, he saw a fire on a distant hill. Willie tried to focus on the smokeless fire when a voice came to him. It was a voice that he didn’t process through his ears. This voice was an entity of his being. The fiber of his soul had been healed from muteness in order to speak with and connect to the dimming of the life.

“Willie,” the voice vibrated, “You are loved. I will protect you now. You are freed from suffering.”

Willie saw the outline of a face in the distant fire. The image smiled at him. Willie concentrated harder and saw the beatified face of God swirling as smoke from the fire. As suddenly as the vision had appeared, it was replaced by a harrowing fall into darkness as Willie hit the frozen ground hard. His head rapped against snakestone as another voice made its way into his head.”

“What’s going on here?” Grandpa dropped the camera and moved between E. Wayne and Willie.

“Uh, nothing, sir.” E. Wayne turned to Grandpa and smiled a charm that wooed women and men into pleading with him to invest their salaries in the stock market. E. Wayne could make money by sneezing on a stock and the line that formed around his brokerage office ran twenty deep most days. “Willie and I were trying to solve his photosensitivity.” E. Wayne smiled and perked out a small laugh.

Grandpa helped Willie up from the ground and held him in his arms. Willie clung to him as he used to cling to his mother’s bosom as a toddler. Grandpa was surprised at the desperation of Willie’s embrace. Grandpa held him back with a viciousness that would not be divided by blood or distance. “I don’t know what was going on here, E. Wayne and I rightly

don't think you want me to know. I don't know you well. Haven't seen you much. Don't know you long. But let me kindly remind you, son, that you're on my land, staying in my house and eating my food. You're a guest here and guests don't mistreat my only grandson even if they are a step-father by law. Do you understand that, E. Wayne?"

Grandpa looked E. Wayne hard in the eye and refused to be touched by the black tar of an eye that peered back at him from between wrinkled folds of skin.

"You'll never touch this boy again, E. Wayne. From this moment onward, this boy goes unseared by the you, the sun, or anyone."

E. Wayne smiled and picked up the camera and he headed back to his family without comment.

"Are you okay, Willie?" Grandpa held the boy up so their eyes were level. "Do you need a doctor?"

"No, Grandpa. I'm fine now." Willie's voice was raspy, but he couldn't help smiling.

"No photographs, Willie. I'm sorry I even brought it up."

"No. I will do the photographs, Grandpa. I have to. I have to or he wins."

"Are you sure, Willie? Why give in to a man like that?"

"He's no man a'tall, Grandpa. That's why I must face him. Demons run from the light. Did you know that?"

"I know it now, son. By God if you want a photo, then we'll have a photo."

"Thank you. Now put me down. I want to walk back. Unbroken."

Grandpa grinned at Willie and gently returned him to the ground.

"You should've stayed out of it, Grandpa. You only made it worse. That smile he gave you was nothing friendly."

Grandpa offered his hand and Willie took it. "I know a snake when I see one, Willie. I've been a pharmacist 'round here for 55 years and if there's one thing I know, it's people. I read 'em every day all day and I never liked the looks or feel of E. Wayne. Now I got a reason why not to like 'em. I can tell the difference between those who sow the grass and those who slither through it."

“E. Wayne won’t let this go, Grandpa. He’ll kill me.”

“The way you deal with snakes, Willie, is to chop off their heads. You let me worry about E. Wayne.”

“You can’t protect me forever. E. Wayne is forever around.”

“Forever ends tonight.”

Together, Willie and Grandpa walked back to the family tableau and took three photographs in a row. Willie’s head faced the horizon and his eyes were wide open and golden in the salvation of small things Holy.

CHAPTER 4: A Village in Pieces

Willie pulled on his white Converse All-Star basketball shoes and spun out of the house. He was intent on exploring Fetterwood and rediscovering the pebbles of himself. Willie looked back over his shoulder at his Grandpa's house. Even though it was April, a giant cut-out of Santa Claus and his reindeer pulling a sleigh kicked along the roofline above him. Flickering Christmas lights reflected from rain gutters and downspouts. These decorations stayed up all year long and each evening the Christmas lights were ignited, for every day was Christmas in Grandpa's house and every night brought the promise of gifts and good tidings.

Willie ran his fingers along the cold silver door of his Grandpa's 1966 Plymouth Fury II. It was a lumbering car of grey, chrome, silver and black and Willie loved riding shotgun as it thundered down the middle of the road, hugging the center line.

His first stop was the great state of Nebraska's green and white population sign standing outside his Grandpa's house. He felt the reflective lettering of "Fetterwood" and ran his nails across the "Population: 183" numbers. Willie slapped the sign and it reverberated like a gong across the ice-encrusted village. He stepped back a few feet from the sign and held his index fingers and thumbs in the shape of an "L." He brought his fingers together to form a rectangle and he peered through the viewfinder he made and framed the Fetterwood water tower in the middle. The water tower had thick, black tubular steel legs and a silver cup of a holding tank topped with a copper inverted crown of a roof. It looked like a giant 1950's coffee percolator without the spout. The name "Fetterwood" was emblazoned across the silver belly of the tank in heavy black lettering. The water tower was the first thing that greeted the eye as one came around the highway into Fetterwood and it was the last visible thing to fade away to a pinpoint in the rearview mirror.

During the Summer, local kids would climb the water tower and fling water balloons down on the villagers during the *Alfalfa Days* festival. Alfalfa is a European and Asian plant in

the pea family that is raised throughout Nebraska. Alfalfa is mainly used for hay and as a forage crop. Alfalfa is a hearty to raise and it doesn't die without a fight and little water. *Alfalfa Days* was a festival of agriculture that lasted a week each year in the dead Summer of August when nothing blossomed and nothing bloomed and all the grass grew brown and trees withered up in the dry, barren, heat. Like an ancient rain dance done during periods of drought to praise the rain Gods in hopes of being rewarded with tears of their joy as they trickled down their faces in drops that landed on the land below, *Alfalfa Days* celebrated the power of the planting and harvesting of the region's number one crop. Celebrate alfalfa in the lean times and the reward was bumper crops the next year. *Alfalfa Days* consisted of a carnival of motorized rides, a Ferris Wheel, games of chance you could never win, a parade of products made with alfalfa and as many "alfalfa cakes" as you could eat. The alfalfa cakes were really on 0.5% alfalfa - the rest of the cakes were made with oatmeal, barley, fruit and nuts all held together in a ball with Kayro syrup. Willie's mother was a former *Alfalfa Days* queen and when she won, it was the first time in the history of Fetterwood that two sisters had been crowned queens of alfalfa. Willie's aunt was older than his mother and he didn't see her much, though she always did try to stay in touch with cards and gifts on every appropriate holiday. She had come over from California to Nebraska to help his mother care for him on the 11th day of his birth after his father left. His aunt bathed him and cuddled him and was the first to discover and accept Willie's attempt to place a smile with another face in the world. Willie wished for a deeper closeness with his aunt and her children, because they were his blood, they understood what it meant to erupt from the land and bleed roots into fertile soil. Only cousins knew how it felt to walk arm in arm carnival midway - strangely tethered to each other by mothers but not being bound by the laws of ordinary marriage. Visiting cousins were like candy - you enjoyed it as often as you could get it and nothing was sweeter as long as it lasted and Willie was disappointed they hadn't visited since the marriage to E. Wayne. These days were lonesome for Willie and as he strolled the empty streets of Fetterwood, he longed for the time when the world was colorful and warm with memories and expectations that life could only get better. Each day would awake with the unspoken promise of unbound happiness

as far as the eye could view, the ear could reach and the heart could ponder. Now Willie's world was cooler. Darker. In order to fathom the light and run to the warmth again, he had to make his memories survive him. Through the past Willie prayed to regain his future.

Willie skidded along an ice shelf jutting out from the ditch along the main road and crossed a small, frozen creek where it met the land bridge. The Fetterwood grain elevator stood silently before him and was framed by two signs: A Lion's Club seal of membership and an invitation to frequent the Seventh Day Baptist church. The grain elevator was a major part of the village's economy. It was twenty stories tall and four giant cylinders on each corner of the tower held the grain. The middle of the elevator provided access to each of the cylinders for maintenance. Grain for money is exchanged there during the harvesting season. Farmers from three counties would bring in their grain, store it in the elevator and get paid for their product. The Burlington Northern train would then come in once a week, take on enough grain to fill fifty hopper cars and ship it off to consumers in the Eastern part of the state. Several years ago the old wooden grain elevator built in 1899 blew up in a firestorm. The grain dust in its bins can become combustible and if there's a spark from a match or static electricity, the entire elevator will explode like dynamite and burn like a sparkler for hours as individual pieces of rain shower across the sky and burn out as they arc to the ground. People have to get in the elevator to clean it's and help scoop out the grain into the hopper cars. The explosion happened in the middle of the night during a scheduled cleaning. The ensuing fire raged half a day. Russell Marley and his wife and five children were all buried alive as tons of grain erupted around them. Trapped in the quicksand grain, they were each then burned to ash as the fire licked eyes. The screams of the Marleys as they burned could be heard for a mile as the crow flies. Some locals called the explosion the revenge of the Oto for the Abraham Fetter massacre. Others simply called it dumb luck. Willie knew the Marleys were chosen to serve a higher purpose by reminding Fetterwood each person is only skin and bone and those don't last forever. Only the conditioned soul can live on into eternity. Only the spirit that tends others is given immortality. The lesson of the Grain Elevator killings was that we are not our bodies.

On some moonless nights you can still hear the Marleys sobbing for mercy as the wind winds through leaves.

The Fetterwood jail was little bigger than an outhouse. It had no office. It had no phone. It had no desk. It only had rusty bars and sandstone walls. No one can ever remember the last time anyone was arrested in Fetterwood. No local has ever served time there. Fetterwood was policed by "Sheriff Topsy." The Sheriff wasn't a drunkard. He had Cerebral Palsy and that condition made him look and act drunk against the better wishes of his heart. Even though the Sheriff did not have the hot magma for the job because he lacked the free flow of molten morals that would solidify Fetterwood into the rock of protection and service; the townsfolk let him have the job as a form of local welfare. He could do no harm, they reasoned, since he didn't drive or carry a gun. Sheriff Topsy unknowingly kept the law with pity: No one could bear the thought of having the Sheriff having to arrest or confront anyone in his condition, so the town and its known visitors kept their behavior in line with the desire to "Serve and Protect" Sheriff Topsy and not them or their beloved ones.

Willie felt the rough relief of the sandstone blocks that made up the solid walls. He closed his eyes and let his fingers press into each chiseled crevice divining time and place and the faces living within the same way a blind man presses Braille dots into his fingers for wider meaning beyond the ken of his reach. Willie pressed the entirety of his palms against the stone and felt the wild Irish faces of quarrymen quivering beneath his touch: Their wide jaws reveled in stories of the homeland. Their wooly, red beards, itched beneath his palms. He smelled the homebrew rye whiskey as its body traveled from fingertips to his flaring nostrils. Right there he felt a ridge of sadness peak and fall as a fellow worker was lost, suffocated in a mineshaft. Over there he impressed and found a child rising from the womb unadorned with the gritty sandstone shards and chalk dust that would blanket her future as the heavy arms of her two-fisted father. The sandstone released its grip on Willie and he shuddered off the living memories of those who labored to build Fetterwood into what they hoped would be an everlasting monument to their work.

Willie's hands were now drawn to the door of the jail. "Fetterwood Police" had been written in Roman script in reverse on the other side of the lead glass window in bright white paint outlined with red. The years had worn away the paint so it now only read "wood lice." Willie tapped his fingers on the window and the glass rattled in its frame. Willie waited for a response. None came. Willie knocked louder on the door and a splinter dug itself into his knuckle. The splinter stung him like a needle and the venomous terror of the lives that passed beyond the threshold took hold of him and imbued Willie with a fear pushing up inside him of entering the jail: Once you enter, you will shall be forever changed. Willie plucked the fear from his knuckle and flicked the splinter to the ground. He dug his heel into the splinter and buried its loathing a half inch into the frozen ground.

Before Willie placed a hand around the tarnished brass to twist open and enter his future, he ran his hands across the quilted patchwork of the door. Various pieces of plywood in unequal sizes had been nailed together to form the front door. Untreated and open to the elements, each grainy panel had discolored to its own shade of grey. The rough edges of each panel offered their own splinters. Willie carefully laid his hands upon the center of two square pieces and felt the history of nature peeling along the lifelines marking his palms. He saw beautiful untouched pastures lined with tall, wind breaking, trees. He saw barren fields ripped clean of sod and roots in order to feed the lumber hunger growing in Omaha and Lincoln. Willie heard bandsaws ripping into the fleshy rings of time that would forever end their record of life within these forests of trees.

With no answer to his two rapping inquiries, Willie stood on his tiptoes and peered in window. He saw frozen footprints in the sawdust floor. Willie twisted the doorknob. The door creaked open and rested wearily against the iron grille of the jail bars. Willie stepped into the small space and grasped the bars between his hands. He looked at the cell window across the opposite wall.

The window came alive with the murky image of a young E. Wayne Clarder. Through the grime of time, E. Wayne's black eyes pierced back at Willie from beyond the widow pane. Willie did not back away or run even though his heartbeat urged him on. He stared down E.

Wayne and saw within him the loneliness of a beaten child. Whippings with a silver belt buckle tethered to the end of 48 inch length of leather made a shining arc in the air as the metal dug into E. Wayne's backside. His teeth were clenched, but E. Wayne didn't cry. His face got more distant as if it were being enveloped by a crawling, silent fog that robbed him of his sight and his voice. Then Willie vision pulled back to reveal more of E. Wayne. E. Wayne was kneeling, naked and he was flaying himself with the buckle. He swung it around in the air until it knifed into his buttocks. Willie withdrew a step from the vision as he saw E. Wayne's dark eyes begin to penetrate the fog and to glow black like hot tar in a road boss' wrought iron tub. Those eyes of darkness suckled in the fog and gave E. Wayne's face a revitalized consistency. No longer an expressionless rubber mask, cheeks changed from colorless to simply pale; ears turned from a frozen blue to a common chilly pink; lips were now only grey where once they had been green. As the buckle arched again and again in the air making a circle of silver, E. Wayne's eyes grew older and even deeper.

Willie stepped back from the jail cell and remanded E. Wayne's vision to remain behind bars. The eyes glowed black at him, dripping with desire and the need to be dried. Willie turned his back and softly creaked the door closed behind him. With the presence of E. Wayne still pricking his skin to Goosebumps, Willie decided not to go back to Grandpa's quite yet.

As Willie peeled past his Grandpa's house, its 100 year old New Hampshire slat roof shimmered the air above it into thin rippling ropes of heat. He remembered the wheelbarrow trips around the and of being dumped, head first, into a pile of fallen oak leaves. He smelled the "shorty" Ord sausages grilling on the open pit barbeque in the side yard. His nose became cold as the sleeping porch brought back chilly nights spent there with his cousins. On cold nights the sleeping porch would frost over on the inside due to a lack of steam heat and three bold bodies yammering against the encroaching pinch of Winter. Snow dunes rutted the sidewalks and gravel driveway. Four for long lances stood sentry at the crest of the roof to accept and defer via copper tentacles any Midwestern lightning strikes harmlessly into the rocky ground below.

Chugging toward Main Street, Willie's hot fog breath blew from between his purple lips and surrounded him, for the life of the condensed air swirling around his head, in a calmer time when warm was home, his family consisted of his mother and his grandfather and of the sweet smell of his cousin's freshly washed hair. In those short moments of tranquility born from his lungs and the freezing atmosphere, Willie reckoned he could die a happy boy if he could only be guaranteed that these misty moments of melancholia would remain alive within him forever. As he ran out of breath and came to a hapless stop in front of the Greenleaf Grocery, Willie dropped his hands to his knees and tried to catch his breath back from the stinging air. His breathing grew shallower and quicker as he worked to re-oxygenate his body - and just like a single marriage vow can change a boy's future forever, so too had his misty breath changed the world around him as it disappeared into the thin air. Willie collected himself and strode past the orange, blue and green checkered storefront of what used to be Hill's Jack and Jill. The Greenleafs had taken over the store and the day they did was the day they stopped selling S&H Green Stamps. Fetterwood hated the Greenleafs for putting an end to that delightful national points and reward system and the village communally wished the store ceiling plaster would fall on them.

Next Willie tried to peer in through the one way UV mirror film stuck on the door of the Francis Montgomery's cinderblock *Fetterwood Tap*. The mirror film was put up by Francis to ward off wives seeking their husbands by peering in and knocking on the window. Francis had a hard and fast rule that if you broke the threshold of the bar, you couldn't leave without buying something. Since the wives only wanted their men home for dinner or to plow the fields, they weren't about to enter the dusky domain of Francis' sticky, sawdusted, floor. Willie had never been allowed in the *Tap* because he was underage, but he imagined how much fun it must be to head in for any of the jewels offered inside as advertised on a white board painted in black print: Fishing Permits, Ice Cubes, Ammunition and Fishing Tackle. Willie had to know what it was like to go into the only place in three states where you could buy a Budweiser and legally shoot a crappie all under one roof. He pressed against the door. It was locked. The red neon sign that read "Bud All the Time" was dim. A scrawled note with yellowed edges was taped to

the window and it read “Open Christmas and New Years.” Willie shook his head as he reckoned those holidays didn’t include Easter.

If you needed a new pair of jeans or a new dress, you went to see Vera. Vera was always in the store and always delighted to see you and serve you personally. Her ashy hair was perpetually pulled up into a soft bun that punctuated the back of her head. *Vera’s Style Shoppe* was the best, and only place, in Fetterwood where you got what you needed to wear because she had everything in stock in all sizes and if, on the off-chance she didn’t have what you sought, she’d order it for you and you could pick it up the next day or so. The ceiling in her shoppe was tin embossed with intricate, turn of the Century leaves and Roman pillars. Giant, electric, ceiling fans felt fantastic during the dog days of Summer as they swooshed the cooler air from above down below you. Christmas garlands rimmed the picture window of her store all year ‘round. An orangish gel shade was always pulled into place to protect her window displays from fading in the hot afternoon sun. That orangy gel made it difficult to see the real color of her display items, but, Willie mused, maybe that orange shade made for a greater invitation to step inside and say hello while seeing the display closer up? Looking out that orange shade from inside Vera’s made Main Street look as if it were on fire. The flaking blue and white fancy script heralding the name of her store was 80% vanished.

The *Scissors Shack* was two results in one: You could cut your hair and launder your clothes at the same time. The barber carried a change machine on his hip, so he could give you quarters to feed the coin slots to wash your clothes. A haircut was \$6.00 flat. That didn’t include a shampoo. Barney didn’t believe in wetting his hands to work. “A man’s work is brittle and dry,” was the slogan posted on Barney’s giant work mirror. It didn’t matter if you were a man, child or a woman. Barney liked flat fees - it made it fair all around - and it made it real easy to balance his books every night. If you wanted a shave - either on your legs or on your face, Barney would sell you a disposable razor to do the job yourself at home. “I cut hair, not stubble,” was Barney’s John 3:16.

As the light fled and darkness fell, Willie stepped into a green pool of gaslight thrown off by a cast iron streetlamp. He surveyed the places he’d touched and found it charming that

Fetterwood had stop signs on every corner of Main Street but. Not a single stoplight had been purchased and put to use.

The Fetterwood hardware store bound another corner of Main Street and when Willie was in town, he visited twice a day to replenish his supply of copper BBs for his single-action Daisy BB-Gun.

The places Willie saw were the touchstones that kept him healed when he was away from Fetterwood. The places spoke to him without him having to listen or comprehend and touched him on a dirt level of the soul where things silently grow and blossom into magical, emotional, things one could never comprehend in any intellectual moment.

Willie met no townsfolk on that Easter Sunday and that was precisely the way he wished.

No church?

CHAPTER 5: A Head for Dinner

Grandpa said down at the dinner table and

Chokecherry jam smiled from hot slices of homemade bread

Kolaches

Sour cream on bread

Fried chicken

Smoked turkey

Candied ham

Willie will stay with me for now.

CHAPTER 6: Cathedrals of Chalk**CHAPTER 7: A Ghost is Known****CHAPTER 8: A Sprit Shines****CHAPTER 9: Burwell Rodeo****CHAPTER 10: Lincoln****CHAPTER 11: Alfalfa Days****CHAPTER 12: Willie drives to get a dog****CHAPTER 13: Mother Drown****CHAPTER 14: Dog Blinding****CHAPTER 15:**

Grandpa dies.

Blinding of dog.

Fly swatter - Fetter

Look into the Sun - Oto

Peeing together

Fantasy - Club him with a baseball bat.

CHAPTER LAST: The Bitterness of Ash

Fetterwood had burned to ash.

EPILOGUE: Arising