

Sinners of Sanction County

Charles Dodd White

Appalachian Writing Series

Bottom Dog Press

Hawkins's Boy

True, Hawkins buried his son more than once that summer. Wild dogs would get at the limbs glowing pale as quartz in the shallow ground, gnawing through the shroud of croaker sacks. They clacked their jaws, ceding nothing to sin or dignity. When he'd first buried the boy, Hawkins was too weak to break through the rocks and roots that choked the grave further down. Each time he had dug, the shovel tip sparked and split against the things already buried there—the iron so long corroded from sitting unused in the useless smoke house.

Hawkins would lie awake into that hour of the night and listen for the working of the dogs' teeth into tissue. The over and under shotgun lay slanted in the corner, the shape of a promise he would not place beyond his reach. But he did not take the gun and creep out of the house to shoot the dogs. If that had been his purpose, he would have crept, picked his naked soles over the tongue-in-groove. His deaf wife could not have heard him, but he knew the night had voices that could reach dead ears and pry open her sleeping mind like a hatch. So he would have crept had he ever stirred, had he ever

drawn himself from behind the bars of pretended sleep. But he knew there were rituals to everything. He learned to prefer the stillness and listening to his boy's body disappearing into the dogs' rockslid bellies.

In the mornings he would rise and move out through the house with ease, clattering dishes in the kitchen while he boiled up a pan of old coffee. In the daylight he could take his time with this, unworried about waking his wife. She would not hear him now any more than in the night, but certain laws were suspended when the sun ripped itself up from the smoky ridge. Old laws, but frail as ash, and when these laws quit, even night monsters were permitted joy of the daylight. The paleness of the visible world freed him from thoughts that encrusted his skull like gems set tight against his brain, black as bibles.

That first morning he found hands and a hip joint. The fingers were grey at the tip but darkened to the color of a tattoo where the blood dammed. *The son's flesh mortified*, the churchers would have said. They would look for the hand of God in the decomposing boy, the rites that shored up their faith, and that was why he would always hate them. They did not understand. Neither they nor the One they worshiped did.

He collected and put the pieces of his son back in the ground. Then he went on back to the house and sat for the rest of the morning, watching the yard to see that the rest of the boy didn't come back up.

The mourners came later that afternoon to visit his wife. They could not use their hands to speak with her as Hawkins did, so they came and sat and scribbled their words out on the slate she kept, passing condolences like grammar school lessons, working

diagrams for things that were supposed to give her peace. He sat in the kitchen and watched them. Because they were there to console, he wished them stricken. He knew that any wish he made, even a curse, was only breath spilled. But this still did not deprive him of his hate.

Once the mourners had sit with his wife for a while scratching with the chalk and saying pretty things she couldn't hear, they came at him, armed with pies, which wore tight hats of aluminum foil.

—And we'd only just heard that he passed.

—Yes, just this morning.

—You'll need to eat something. To stay strong.

—Reverend Coward told us. It was him that had us drive up to check to see if you needed anything.

—It's not much. Just a little blueberry. And a pecan.

—Hush. He doesn't need a recipe list. Poor thing.

—And he said he would be praying for you. The whole congregation would.

—Yes, every single one.

He remained as dumb as his wife, staring at them but committing no violence to the silence of the house. The women bunched themselves awkwardly together, hesitant and shuffling under his blank gaze until one of them made an excuse and then they were just gone.

He did not go to his wife, but remained sitting in the kitchen in that same chair he had the morning his boy dropped from his chair and strangled on his tongue. The boy had been perched there over a cup of Folger's telling of a fishing trip he had taken with a girl he was dating from Rabun Gap. The boy had been laughing and telling Hawkins how he (the boy) and this old girl had

been laying out next to the lake with a pint of ABC store Wild Turkey between them and how she'd hauled out a whole pale tit from her powder blue bathing suit once she'd emptied the bottle. The boy had been so surprised at her willingness that he'd swung around to get his boots and jeans off, but he was further gone than he realized himself, and in his excitement to get a piece of some of that young stuff, he'd slung himself clear over the side of the clay bank and into the water. The boy and Hawkins were laughing so hard at this and Hawkins was so worried that his wife might somehow get wise to the wild goings on of what was being said that he didn't see the first sharp blow of the seizure strike the boy, his son's words caught in that fierce slash driving straight down from his brain into his body, setting his whole skeleton as rigid as a bolt.

And now the boy was dead two full days, the silence confirmed. When the boy had come into the world, he'd brought sound, shrieking with the cruel heart of a life ready to be lived. Hawkins remembered the night when the boy had shouldered his way out of his Mama, purple with outrage. How long now that awful night—forty-three years? My God, that long.

He remembered the labor come on his wife when she moaned with the sound of that deep sex love turned inside out. Terrible and hoarse but still somehow pitched like the quickened groans of coupling so that he was ashamed when he became a little excited at the sight of her pain. But then the panic had set in and there was no thought of pleasure when he realized the time to drive down off the mountain to the hospital in Sylva had passed, leaving them on their own. Only the surety

of blood and the coming of his only son. Knowing the boy must be caught with his own mortal hands.

That second night after he buried the boy, Hawkins led his wife into the bedroom and sat with her while the wall-socket night light glowed over her tumbled shape like a little TV. He wished sleep on her before the dogs returned. He believed they would come, believed that they would slip out from the woods along with the fingers of evening fog. They had taken a set against him and there was nothing to do now but meet them.

When his wife finally settled into the deep breathing of unconsciousness, he went out to the porch carrying his shotgun and a full pack of Marlboros. He sat there all night smoking the cigarettes, watching and hearing nothing.

But once the ball of an early yellow sun appeared, Hawkins began to see the hunks of cadaver spread out before him like broken rinds in a harvest patch. The boy had arrived out of the dark without warning, carried in on the tide of night air and stranded in this brighter world. Again, Hawkins buried the boy, losing what little food he carried in his stomach from the smell of him.

A sheriff's deputy drove up under the hard noon sky. Gravel crunched and sprangled from under the big cleated tires of the Chevy. When it stopped, the deputy swung open his door and collected a notebook encased in metal with a plastic pen dangling by a silver beaded chain. His face wrinkled against the high sun.

He spoke Hawkins's name. The old man came up to talk with him.

—I knew some fool would get the law involved.
The deputy set the notebook on the Chevy's hood.
—Don't you recognize me, Mister Hawkins?
—Should I?

He removed his broadbrimmed hat.
—Your boy and me. We used to play ball in high school together. Down in Sylva.

Hawkins looked him over for a while and spat.
—Your family name is Painter, ain't it?

The deputy nodded, setting the hat back over his thinning brown hair, guarding what semblance of youth remained there.

—Yessir, my Daddy's Butch Painter. Second shift supervisor over at the paper mill.

Hawkins looked off at the road the deputy had driven up. The driveway cut into the sandbank, exposing a profusion of wild roots where trees on the hill above errantly sought purchase.

—I ain't paying no goddamn undertaker for what I went and done myself.

—Yessir. But there's still paperwork that needs filling out. Permissions for home burial. I brought em up here for you. To keep you from having to come into town to settle it.

Painter unlatched the steel box and pulled out a narrow sheaf of papers bound with an orange rubberband. Hawkins fanned the papers on the hood of the truck like a hand of hole cards.

—And that's all it's about. No other damn fool questions?

Painter toed his tire.

—Nosir. We all remembered the fits that would come on your boy. We've seen it ourselves over the years.

Even back there in high school on the ballfield it would happen.

Hawkins felt the old shame burn inside him, heating his face with clammy fever.

—There was nothing wrong with him, you know? He wasn't retarded or nothin. He was a smart boy. Always good about working. Never shirked a damned day in his life.

The deputy would not meet his eyes.

—Yessir. I always regretted not staying in better touch with him over the years. He was somebody you could always depend on. I remember that about him, sure enough.

Hawkins scratched his name on the forms where the deputy had put the little x marks and handed them back over. The deputy flipped through, ticking off each place to make sure the thing was properly met.

—Alright, Mister Hawkins. If there's anything else you folks need up here...

Hawkins went back to the house, not fit to hear another slight word.

That evening his wife woke him from a faint doze, working her hands in the air above his head, stitching words. Wednesday evening. The choir would be singing and she was intent that he drive her down to the church. Despite her deafness, she was always fierce about a choir. Hawkins knew there was no space for disagreement once her mind was set, so he got his hat from its nail. Together they went to the truck.

The drive was slow. A chilly fog had invaded the hills, blotting everything. The town's distant lights were a feeble guide, so Hawkins let the truck's headlights

stab a safe distance through the riddled haze before tapping the accelerator. He reached for the radio dial but was stilled when his wife began to hum. She voiced an old tune, a hymn she preferred when the evening had come on and she thought he had stepped beyond earshot. But now she made the sound without regard for him. Her pale head rested against the pane of the passenger's window, the hollow base of her throat moving with the remembered vibrations that captured her idea of true song. A sound not without beauty, Hawkins realized. He tightened his hands to the steering wheel and drove down from the uppermost ridge to the town's steaming streets.

He let her off at the church's cement stoop, the golden rectangle of the open front door confining her in electric light. They did not exchange antic gestures in their accustomed manner of physical speech. She knew he would leave her there and return at the appointed hour. This long fixed custom would not alter this night, their grief disturb nothing.

Once she had gone inside, he drove the empty streets for some time, circling the single downtown block. He counted each lap when he sighted the false clock. Down through the years, the sight never failed to anger him. The electric yellow digits above the Central Bank sign read 8:23 AM. Some fool had switched the evening and morning registers more than a decade ago and the clock was forever telling the exact time at the opposite end of each day. The error was enough in the way of poor number management to lead Hawkins to withdraw every account he had sitting in the bank and place the last dollar in a fire proof safe he kept under the bedroom floor. He had told his boy that he'd rather

be a fool with buried money than a man who would trust someone without a proper notion of night or day.

As he circled round once more, however, the idea of that hour put Hawkins in the mood for a hot breakfast. He had not eaten since the work of the morning had claimed what food he'd been able to keep down, and now his guts were a wronged and pained enemy. He saw that the Downtown Cafe was open. He turned in and cut the engine.

Inside, cigarette smoke striated the air. When he passed through, the visible waves circulated briefly before closing back over him like oil.

Hawkins took a seat at the counter and studied the whiteboard for specials, but when the night waitress came and asked for his order, he said to bring him only black coffee and eggs.

—Don't want any meat or nothing?

He stared into her pretty and catatonic face. She shook her head and went away when he said nothing.

A television hung from a suicidal angle above a poster of a stock car driver. A beer commercial was playing. Two men at the far end of the counter wearing Stihl and John Deere caps were paying scant attention to the pictures which played across the milky screen while they talked and smoked. Hawkins knew neither of them, so he didn't attempt a word.

While he waited for his meal, he thumbed through a newspaper splayed on the Formica. He did not read so much as skim his eyes over the type, looking at the pictures of the high school baseball team and a girl who'd been reported kidnapped. When he grew tired of this, he pushed the paper away and looked down at his hands

on the counter. Large and rough, but now also grown weak with age. What things he'd done with these hands.

His food came and he ate silently. Years of this odd habitual quiet lay on him. The more he remained still and without words, the more notice he drew from other people. He could feel the black stares of the men beneath the TV, their judgment. The waitress too, when she came with her little paper tab with doodled smile. He couldn't bear their hate. He paid and left.

The streets were tattered with fog, as if the sorrow inside him was spun through the nighttime world, mean and deprived. He went to the truck and took the .38 snub nose from under the driver's seat and locked everything, leaving the truck in the cafe parking lot while he walked the streets alone.

He kept his hands in his pockets, hiding them. They were ugly weights pinned to the rest of him, the bones in his wrists like loosened brads, fingers left flapping. When he was young, his hands had served well as trustworthy tools, but when his wife lost her hearing, Hawkins found the strong claws he'd once carried with pride were ill suited for threading words. His squared fingertips were slow and dead when it came to fine work. Without easy language, his wife had receded from him over time. Through no fault of her own, Hawkins realized, but because of *these hands*. Because he could not talk with her well, the words they exchanged became merely functional. And Hawkins had come to learn that function was not a place where love could survive long.

As he walked on he saw that so much of the town was utterly dark. Only the green pools of security lights on the grass out at the recreation fields. He quickened towards them, drawn on by the memories there. His

boy cutting across the right field to snatch a hard shot down the foul line. The pop of the ball skipping to his mitt and the masculine groan as he flung it home.

Inside the field gates, Hawkins became a younger man. He was a father again and there were the sounds of people talking around him. He eased himself onto the aluminum bleacher, the seat crying softly; this meant nothing to him amid the babble of all that remembered noise. So prevalent and easeful. So unmourned. The night's steady engine hummed, and he grew attentive. No longer the fear of others, just this patch of quiet world and time spreading inside him like music. What way was there to capture this sound alone?

The pistol in his hand rose. The muzzle level with his ear, trained skyward.

The first shot brought pain. But the others, fired off rapidly by each ear, lopped the sensation clean away, like a discarded limb into an amputee bucket. He felt the warm, leaky silence take him as he dropped the pistol and started out towards all that aching dark.