

The extraordinary new novel by

CHAIM POTOK

Author of *THE CHOSEN*

I AM THE CLAY

"A haunting tale of suffering, survival,
and redemption in a rugged, war-ravaged
Asian landscape...Remarkable."

Los Angeles Times

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I AM
THE CLAY

Also by Chaim Potok
Published by Fawcett Books:

THE CHOSEN
THE PROMISE
MY NAME IS ASHER LEV
IN THE BEGINNING
WANDERINGS
THE BOOK OF LIGHTS
DAVITA'S HARP
THE GIFT OF ASHER LEV

to
PHIL MUYSSON
whose gentle and
persistent urging
brought
this book
to life

and to
ADENA
who read it
first

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—CHAIM POTOK

There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night.

—ALBERT CAMUS



BOOK ONE

1



During the last retreat, when the Chinese and the army of the North swept down into the South, an old man and his wife fled from their village in the hills and embarked upon a panicky trek along the main road to Seoul and at one point scrambled with other refugees into a roadside ditch to avoid an approaching column of American tanks and jeeps. There they came upon the boy.

The old man glanced at the boy: blood-covered, barely breathing, lying face-up and unconscious in the snow in the bottom of the ditch. He looked indifferently away.

Two jet fighters swept past overhead, low. The steel-treaded thunder of the tanks; the trembling of the earth. Soil along both sides of the ditch cascaded upon the old man and the woman and the boy.

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The old man thought matter-of-factly: This ditch will be my grave.

Shells exploded close by. A stench of cordite filled the air. Something moist and cold fell upon the old man's face. He reached up to brush it away and saw it was a hand and thought it was a hand of a body blown to pieces, and his skin crawled. But it was the hand of the boy.

Lying on his back in the ditch, his head in snow to his ears, the boy had waked to semi-consciousness.

The old man looked a long moment into the boy's dark beseeching eyes and spoke briefly to his wife.

She opened the boy's shirt and gazed at the wound: a shrapnel gash below the right collarbone, the sliver of metal showing darkly, the wound oozing blood. A piece of the scale from the dragon of death. Remove it.

The last of the tanks had gone. On the road now were American and Korean foot soldiers. The refugees began to climb from the ditch. Townspeople and farmers and villagers. From the valleys to the north. Possessions on shoulders and heads and in carts. Infants carried on the backs of older children. Old women straddling the backs of middle-aged men. All begrimed, terrified.

Two carts had been sideswiped by passing vehicles and men were lifting them out of the ditch. An ox lay dead in the ditch, still harnessed to its ruined cart. Vapor rose from its mouth and hindquarters. The old man could see no wound. Dead, how? The heart abruptly ceasing? He had seen it before: an ox plowing and suddenly faltering, lurching to its knees, and collapsing onto the furrowed earth. And the day the

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carpenter's younger brother lifted a house beam to his shoulder and fell lifeless to the ground. Alive one moment, the next moment dead. You can't help it.

The old man climbed out of the ditch. Their cart stood on the edge of the road, where they had left it. The bright sharp morning air was wind-whipped and bitter cold.

The woman remained in the ditch beside the boy. The man looked around. The once-frozen road had been ground to powder by the steel-cleated tracked vehicles. A cloud of yellow dust hung over it like a fog. On both sides of the road were terraced fields bordered by wild winter grass and tall hills. No human sounds came from the road: only the clanking scraping leathery noises of the marching men and the creaking of the two-wheeled carts and the occasional bellow of an ox.

The old man turned impatiently and called to the woman, but she would not move. The ditch lay deep and empty save for the woman and the boy and the tawny-skinned dead ox attached to its wrecked cart.

He called again to the woman. She looked up and down the empty ditch and then at her husband. She pointed to the boy, who had again lost consciousness and now lay with his head in her lap.

The man saw that her skirt was stained with the boy's blood and he began to shout at her in anger but his words were cut off by the sudden chop and beat of a helicopter swooping in from the south and flying so low he could see the pale helmeted face of the man inside. He put his hands to his ears. Air vibrated inside his throat and head. When he looked again at the

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ditch he saw his wife trying to climb out, carrying the boy.

Angry, he took the boy from her, and was momentarily thrown off balance by his lightness. Like a small bird. He laid him down on the pile of quilts in the cart. The woman made her own way out of the ditch.

He thought he would take some flesh from the dead ox. It would soon be stripped clean, why not take some part of it? One of the legs perhaps. But the woman was talking to him about the boy.

He looked at the dead ox. Two men were already cutting it with their knives. Left behind, why? Diseased? But one can burn away disease over an open fire. Abandon a dead ox. This war made people crazy.

The boy lay in the cart, on the quilts. The woman stood beside the cart wiping the filth of the ditch from his face and looking at the sliver of metal embedded in his chest. The wound seemed deep, the flesh inflamed. She remembered hearing from the carpenter that such wounds should quickly be brought to one skilled in hospital medicine. She leaned over the side of the cart, trying to stanch the flow of blood with cloth she had torn from her skirt.

The old man took up the shafts of the cart and moved into the line of refugees. Her eyes upon the boy, the woman walked alongside the cart.

As they passed the ox the old man saw five men now sundering it. Because of the boy he could take nothing from that ox. His own ox he had not brought with them, because he feared he could not feed it in flight; he had left it in the shed with an open sack of grain. He did not think it would live long or that their village would survive this attack. It was said the Chi-

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nese looted everything and what they could not carry away they burned. He and his wife in their haste to flee the village had taken only their quilts and sleeping pads and the box containing the spirit of his father and enough food to feed themselves for a few days.

Around a curve they went by an elderly man lying on his back on the side of the road. Eyes and mouth black holes. Dead a long time. The line of men and women and children moved imperturbably past him.

The old man walked as if hitched to the shafts of the cart. They would bring the boy to a hospital somewhere or to an orphanage and move on. Probably he would die first. Then they would leave him on the side of the road. The land was filled with orphans. They roamed the hills and valleys like packs of wild dogs, stealing, scavenging, plundering. Obstinate old woman. Why did they need now upon their backs the additional burden of a strange boy?



The woman walked alongside the cart, feeling through the cloth she held to the wound the moist warmth of the boy's blood. He lay semi-conscious, burning with fever, and when he began to shake she tore more strips of cloth from her skirt and wrapped them around his chest—he stiffened as she moved him but did not cry out—and then put a quilt over him. She spoke briefly and silently to the spirit of her long-dead mother and to the spirit of the leafy chestnut tree near the veranda of her home in her childhood village and to the spirit of the only child she had borne, who had died in his first year of life. She traced

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in the air over the boy the long vertical and horizontal motions taught her by her mother to ward off the demons of death.

Pulling the shafts of the wagon, the old man heard the thump of distant artillery and tried to think only of each next step his feet must take on the torn and dusty road. The middle of the road was clogged with jeeps, trucks, and ambulances. On one side refugees fleeing south; on the other infantry in two lines moving north. Troops on the footpaths and in the frozen fields beyond both banks of the road, strung out in thin advancing lines all through the valley.

Two single-engine fighter planes approached from the south, about fifty feet above the ground. They followed the contours of the valley, vanished below the crests of the nearby range of hills, and reappeared on the other side as if launched from catapults.

The old man turned to his wife in time to see her step away from the cart directly into the path of an oncoming ambulance.

He stared at her in a paralysis of astonishment. All around him he heard shouts. He let the shafts of the cart fall from his hands.

The woman stood in the road. As the ambulance rolled past him, the old man saw through the closed window of the cab the startled face of the Korean driver. He found his voice and shouted a warning to the woman. The ambulance braked to a halt in a swirl of gravel and dust.

There was a moment of silence. Behind the ambulance the long line of vehicles came to a halt.

The driver rolled down his window and put his head

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out. "You crazy? You want to become food for worms?"

The old woman pointed to the boy in the cart. "Hurt. Very bad."

"Get out of the way, old mother, or I drive right over you," the driver yelled. Behind him there were shouts and horns blared and an American officer climbed down from a jeep and started quickly forward along the line of stalled vehicles.

"A child," the woman implored. "A boy. Hurt."

The old man went to her and took her arm. She pulled away.

The driver put his head back into the ambulance and a moment later brought out his arm. In his hand he held a packet wrapped in light-brown material. He threw the packet at the woman, shouted instructions, and rolled up the window.

The old man and his wife stood on the side of the road and watched the ambulance go by. The woman felt the huge red cross brush against her like a benevolent ghost, and she made vertical and horizontal lines in the air with the hand that held the packet.

The old man stared at her. She was opening the packet. Behind him people were shouting. He took up the shafts and brought the cart to the very edge of the road. The line of refugees started past him.

The woman removed the bandages from the packet. With the bandages was a small paper packet containing a white powder. She began to peel away the bloodied cloth from the boy's wound. The blood had congealed. She pulled gently at the cloth and the boy woke briefly and moaned. She emptied the powder onto the wound and saw the pupils of his eyes roll