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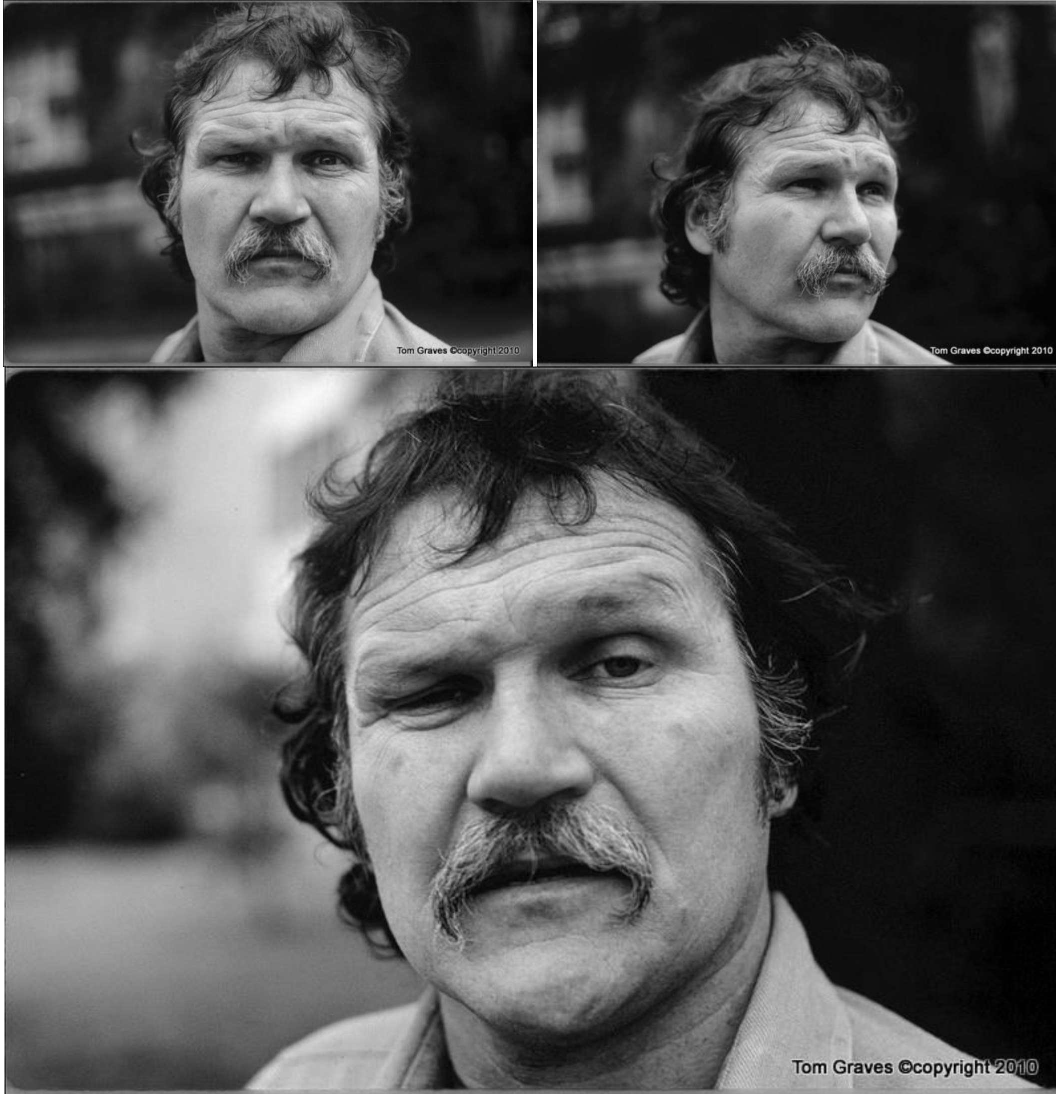
Cowboy Jamboree Magazine

"All We Need of Hell"



A Special Harry Crews Grit Lit Tribute

Ted Geltner, Dinty W. Moore, Tom Graves, Jay Atkinson, Chris Iovenko and more pay tribute to the man with interviews, insightful nonfiction and explosive homage fiction.

“If you wait until you got time to write a novel, or time to write a story, or time to read the hundred thousands of books you should have already read - if you wait for the time, you will never do it. ‘Cause there ain’t no time; world don’t want you to do that. World wants you to go to the zoo and eat cotton candy, preferably seven days a week.”

― Harry Crews

Cover photography by Tom Graves.

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Special thanks to Damon Sauve for helping us connect to Crews colleagues and interviewers, The Georgia Review for allowing us to reprint Larry Baker's 2007 article, Ted Geltner and Georgia Press for allowing us to reprint selections from Blood, Bone and Marrow, The Arts Fuse of Boston and Jay Atkinson for allowing us to reprint "The Passion for the Thing," and Tom Graves for his photography and allowing us to reprint selections from Pullers.

Fake Spring
By Frank Reardon

Dad called to say he smoked tar heroin in the Mekong Delta before the platoon leader told him to shoot women and children. The phone calls have become his confessional booth and I, his priest, the more his mind goes.

He called yesterday to tell me his best friend in the Delta, Jim Stone from Indiana, was the most savage person he'd ever met. "Jim shot three gook children without feeling any remorse," he said. "You wanna see midnight in the eyes? Feel nothing deep in the seams? Look no further than Corporal Stone." I have to light three cigarettes after each phone call, smoke 'em quick. Forget myself. Forget him and the savage stories. The other phone calls, his: "I've been so crazy for so long that no one else will talk to me," are daily and numerous. He leaves messages that mean nothing. On and on about loving me, or how much he misses me. He never missed anyone until faced with certain death the last year. Never ending babbling dementia madness. Other times he asks me: "How old are you? How old is your son? I don't have a son.

I ask Michelle for twenty dollars to head out to a bar for the afternoon. I don't think she minds much, better me out than me in her hair all the time. I'm out of work again. Last real job I had was managing a warehouse. It was back-breaking work, unloading trucks with a crew of useless meth heads to help me. The company was too cheap to put product on pallets. Instead the driver zipped twenty-four packs of beans, crates of soda, and large boxes full of combs down a large roller. These cartons don't weigh much on their own, but sling one full of dollar combs down the rollers, and they'll break the hands. The meth heads always quit, too weak and too sick to remain in a place that makes them sweat for a dollar. They had the strength of ants. Once one of the meth heads quit another was hired. The hiring policy was such bullshit that I stopped training them. In fact, I started taking bets in my head on how long they'd last. I guessed by how many facial scars and how much acne they had. If it was a little bit, I gave them two weeks, tops. If they had a face full of scars equal to that of a burn victim they often wouldn't last the day. I had to run the place and unload the trucks myself most days.

Michelle's happy because I'll be out of the house, far away from her imagination bubble of angry chefs, glittery vampires, and cheap beer. She holds the debit card above her head without looking back at me. "Take it," she says. I walk over to take the card, kiss her head, while she keeps watching some angry chef yelling at some perfect man who managed to mess up Cheerios on live television. I don't feel bad for him. Try making Cheerios when you have to use water because the price of milk is outrageous.

Sometimes she lets me talk if I start to pace the one bedroom apartment that we've lived in the last seven years. Truth is I get antsy standing in the place too much. Television, unless a live sporting event, has never been my thing. She stops the machine for a moment, swivels the leather computer chair around and faces me.

"What's wrong, now?" she asks.
"Dad called," I said. "Says he smoked Tar before going off and killing children. Something about the Doors music."
"It's not your pain," she reminds me.
"Yeah, I know," I say. "But he makes me feel like it is my pain. That I should feel it like he did. It's too much. Like yesterday, says he shot three children in the face. His friend, Jim, shot six."
"War's a bad thing," she replies.

I pace over to the wall near the back door where we used to have our bookcase until some squirrels got in the wall from the outside. Over time they chewed their way through the wall. Eventually they got at the back of the bookcase until it collapsed. We have tons of books in bins. We also have them stacked around the apartment like tons of literary Leaning Towers of Pisa.

"When's this slum lord going to fix the wall?" I asked looking at the duct tape I put over the holes.
"The woman at the Realtor said they put in a work order three times," she replied.
"Three months ago," I tell her. "The old pants you stuck into the cracks of the outside wall are not keeping them out anymore."
"They always find a way to get in."
"I know," I reply, pushing down the loose duct tape. "They'll get in here and give us rabies."

"They'll get you sleeping on that damn broken couch first before they get to me. Plenty of time for me to escape," she laughs.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. It's my father. I put the phone back into my pocket without answering. I walk back over to her and kiss her on the mouth. Her lips taste like four beers and taco dip. By the time I get home it'll be an eleven beer kiss mixed with chili from a can.

I get in the car and look at the phone. If I don't listen to the message, it'll annoy me that the phone keeps notifying me that he called. I press the voicemail button.

"I love my son," he says exactly seven times. I know he's dying to talk to someone, anyone, if he says "I love you" more than four times. I delete the call, turn on the radio to the classic rock station and drive. I can feel the phone buzz. Again, it's him. This time no message. I decide on the Lamplighter Lounge only because the women are better to look at. Most times I prefer On the Rocks because the people are nicer, but it's a dead end bar. Some say all bars are dead ends, but none of those people have been so lonely, so full of an unknown and indescribable pain, that they'll go to On the Rocks just so they can feel, even for a second, the same lonely pain coming from anyone who can relate in the silence and offhand conversation. Most suicide cases won't even go there on account the floors smell like someone took a piss on a hot day. The Lamplighter is clean; it has many different types of beer, a pool table, a juke, sports on the televisions, and pretty women. It has all the things a thirsty man who wants to forget for a few hours needs in order to get through another sleepless night. I've spent nearly my entire adult life in places like this. I don't see it coming to an end anytime soon.

I pull the car into the back of the bar and park. I see Chester and Monte smoking, two old men who try their best to get people to vote republican. It doesn't matter if you're not political, they still need to get you on the republican wagon. I learned to sit at the other end of the bar to avoid them. I light a cigarette before going in, they notice me and laugh through yellow teeth. I know why they're doing it, too. Not long ago I made the mistake of saying I went to a Sanders rally in Bismarck. That was the end. No more free BBQ from Monte's BBQ truck. No more free beers from Chester. I wasn't a good American anymore. "Fine by me," I said to myself, throwing the cigarette to the ground. I stamped the cigarette out like I had robbed a train full of gold and gotten away with it. I was proud of myself, and whether they believed it or not, the crushed butt under my foot made me proud to be an American. So proud in fact, that I gave it an extra swivel from the tip off my boot and crushed it deeper into the asphalt.

I sat at on my usual stool and looked around at the half empty bar. I liked to get out earlier than most people going out for drinks. The pleasures of a buzz at three to four in the afternoon while everyone was at work couldn't be topped. Robin, with his beer gut and funny spectacles, came over with my usual: a beer and one shot of Jameson.

"How's it going today?" He asked.
"Same ol'. Looking for a new job. Needed a drink. Needed out of the house."
"Them squirrels still in your wall?"
"Oh yeah, like little scratching ghosts." Even I could hear the presence of a NoDak accent slip out of my mouth with my response. I try to stop myself from using 'oh yeah' at the start of a sentence, but it's there now, and I'm fucked for it.
"Ghosts?"
"Yup, never seen them. Only hear the scratching, annoying as all hell. Reminds me of a bill collector calling from a different state without leaving a message."
"They're hiring over at the grain mill," he said, but I was looking at my phone. Dad was calling again. What did he want? To love me? To tell me he gutted a gook prostitute? I put the phone in the pocket of my black hoodie.

"What was that?" I asked.
"Harrison Brothers, they're hiring."
"Online applications?"
"Probably," he said.
"All the applications are online nowadays. I guess it's easier for them. Keeps them from having to look a hungry man in the face and telling them 'No!' Then you have to answer one hundred questions after you fill out the application part. Stuff about if you're right in the head, or multiple choice questions about what you would do if you saw another employee stealing."
"That's what I hear," he replied.

"They only care about law suits. Don't matter to them if you can lift a box, or crap rainbows. They only want to know if you're crazy or not. See if you'd shoot up the place if they fire you. And they don't care about the deaths of the innocent. They only care about the possible law suits, paying out money to the relatives of the dead. Whatever happened to looking a man directly in the eye? You can tell if a person is right in the head by looking at their goofy faces."

Stacy the barmaid walked up next to me and put down her barmaid tray.

"Robin," she said. "Need two White Russians, a bottle of Coors, and a shot of Dewar's"
Robin walked away and Stacy looked at me.

"How are you?" she asked with a large wad of crumpled oil field bills in her hand.

"Surviving," I replied. She smiled at me like barmaids smile. Nothing special about it. It's the same kind of sexy grin she gives every man in the place. Though if you had hips like Stacy's, then you'd be able to steal the rent and child support money from any lonesome man in the world. It's the last refuge for most of us. The last smile and set of hips we might ever see before the grave takes us, or the wives gut us, leave us screaming in our own blood on the kitchen floor, and take what little we got left—dignity and money. I've yet to talk to a man who disagrees.

"I hear that," she said.

"Only thing there is," I replied. I tried to extend the conversation, but what was I going to say to her to make her interested in a jobless, broke and beat down bastard like myself? I was puzzled as to why Michelle hadn't left me yet. I hold onto jobs like water running through fingers. Maybe I've become another fixture in the apartment she can't live without. Like a photograph from a long time ago of a dead person who she thinks speaks to her. I can't cook worth a damn. I've gained weight, and my beard has some white in it now. I'm not exactly trim and handsome like the TV stars she watches on television. But she stays and that says something to me. She stayed after the many nights I'd come home from the bar moaning hateful things about people I didn't know. She stayed after I accused her of cheating, being a lesbian, and using me for money I didn't have. My hoodie jacket is buzzing again, this time my father left a message.

"Feels like fake spring," Stacy said.

I can't help but stare at the message on my phone. It annoys me to leave it there. I don't understand how people can have hundreds of messages on their phone and simply leave them. It's like leaving unopened love letters on the kitchen table for months.

"What's that?" I ask her.

"Feels like fake spring. That's what my mother used to say."

"What's fake spring?"

"When it's April in North Dakota, and the weather says it's over fifty degrees and you go outside and you have to wear a jacket. They say one thing but really mean another. Fake spring, you know?"

She grabbed her tray of drinks, gave me the same money smile and walked away. I watched her hand out the drinks to a group of roughnecks at the far end of the bar. Filthy oil clothes. Filthy smiles, filthy finger nails from digging into the earth. One of them leaned back into his seat and stared at her ass. She knew it, too. He wasn't shy when it came to the tip neither. And she wasn't shy when she snatched it from his paw. We all like to think we're different, but we're not. We'll do anything for a dollar. Like Ellis the drunk. Every week he stands on the street in front of the furniture store on busy South Broadway holding up a sign. Fifty bucks a day to do that kind of work. Man's gotta do what I man's gotta do I suppose, even if Ellis spends the fifty bucks at the bar. It's his business, his money. Most people don't think what a man does with his money is his business. This is why I stay away from political, religious and spiritual people. They like to tell you what to do with your money. Michelle thinks I'm being paranoid, and maybe so, but we're all entitled to some happiness, even if it's fifty dollars in alcohol. We're all going to die. It's never pleasant when we go. Some get shot, others die of an overdose. Some commit suicide, others get cancer. It's all ugly and the story always ends with someone crying over your filthy corpse.

I can't see letting some religious and spiritual type from across the country tell me how to live my life. What do they know? Have they ever had to work twelve hour shifts at a warehouse? Have they ever had to choose between paying the rent or buying medicine? Have they ever had to pay child support when your only means of money to pay it is pushing a broom all day? They lie to you: "buy this crystal and your money problems will be gone." Or "follow this god and your life's plans will be laid out before me." The only thing

ever laid out before me is the road I walked on. The uneasy and difficult road of life that so few are willing to walk on. It isn't easy, but there is a point when the road splits and you go one direction or the other. Sometimes you pick the right road and it all works out. Sometimes you go the wrong way and you're in the gutters for months, sometimes years. It's as simple as that. You don't need magical chants, tricks, or holy books to choose a direction. It comes down to choices and whatever strength you got left to make that choice.

The phone message started to itch my brain.

"Anything else?" Robin asked.

"Bud bottle and a Jameson," I replied, slapping the twenty on the bar. "Going to grab a smoke." Robin nodded and went about the bar.

I pressed play on the message. This time he said "I love my son" eleven times. As usual he sounded desperate to tell me something. Perhaps he slashed a gook's throat in the rice patties. Or maybe he went to the casino and spent all of his money with his girlfriend. He liked their bus trips to the casino. The V.A took his license. He couldn't do anything anymore with his mind going the way it was going. The bus trips to the casino and the city were all he had left.

I lit my cigarette and watched the trains go by the back of the bar. Oil trains from out west in the Bakken, headed for Fargo, Minneapolis, and all points east. Rusted out and empty cars stuck in between the cars full of oil. An artist had spray painted several of the cars. Big graffiti letters that some country boy probably learned from a movie. I imagine he lives outside Williston. Typical farming family. He probably woke up at five in the morning. Fed the cattle, the chickens, and helped his father with the fields. Then, at night, when he was sick of doing the same thing he does every day, he snuck out, dressed in black so no one sees him, and created his art in secret. Except it's not a secret, all of us in the prairies see his artwork roll through our small towns.

We can see his sadness, his anger, and how much he wants the whole world to know he's alive without knowing what he looks like. That he's not an insignificant number in some town no one in the rest of the world has heard of before. I see it. I imagine he feels much like the rest of us. Thousands of miles away from everything. Days spent working jobs that pay you just enough money so you cannot move to a place that gives you a little more hope than you have. The body, once made of stone, now looks like an old factory that has been empty since the seventies. And the only love you got left in the heart is the love you try so hard to give to others, but most people don't want to accept it, so you soon forget what it's like to love. Life becomes repetitive. It becomes the same song; the same pair of jeans, the same haircut, the same broken voice, the same stories. It moves along like the train. It says "I'm here, are you?"

My phone starts buzzing again. I look at my father's number rattle my hand. I throw the cigarette on the ground, stamp it out, and watch. The phone tells me it's fifty-five degrees out, yet I have to pull my hoodie over my head. *Fake spring indeed,* I tell myself. I can feel the whiskey in my legs. The temporary warm smile in my heart. I know I'll be here all night, even though I said I wouldn't. I light another cigarette. In the distance Chester is harassing a young couple about politics. Like clockwork, same thing, different day. Their faces look like animals in a cage. Animals that were once wild and roaming the earth, now trapped by another person's steel demands. Chester mentions something about the lunatics in Hollywood hating honest hardworking oil men. How they need to support the oil workers who work hard for their families. The woman smiles. Her husband with his camouflage NASCAR cap shakes Chester's hand. *He's gotten to another one,* I say to myself. The Dakota wind blasts through my sweatshirt. "One thousand men have died from the cold this year alone," I read in the Daily News several weeks back. My phone starts to buzz again. I hope on the other line it's a voice I've never heard before telling me everything will be alright. That I'll get through all of this somehow. I look and it's my father, again. I don't wait. I swipe the number and hold it to my ear without saying anything. He says "hello," into the darkness, just like I do.

Al's Girl
By AJ Atwater

Nights, after Al's boxing match, we sip cherry brandy, learned taste from growing up in the south. Days, we frisk along the Mississippi River in St Louis, duck into restaurants with white table covers, eat steak with real silver like we're used to. Slip into jewel shops. In front of long mirrors the manager drapes, then fastens strings of pearls or a single jewel around my neck. Al the Pal, as he is known, says to me prance, Scar. I prance.

Outside the shop, fans crowd him as he loops a big hand under one of my jutting elbows. Autographs the full chest of a girl. She pulls her shirt down enough. Looks him in the eye. Al laughs. Signs her cleavage. Then tucks his pen in between. I nudge up to the girl's young lover. Open shirt, looping chains, no chest hair, soft pants, shiny shoes, his heavy-lidded eyes on me. Jazz leaks from a club. Al loops my elbow again. Steers me into the dark, down the cement steps of a club to a table by the stage, candle in the center burned to near nothing. Singer drawling. Musicians in a line. Air thrumming. Club manager slips Al a package. He breaks it open, hands me pills. Greenies. We swallow pleasure, then leave, snap along the sidewalk, past closed boutiques and neon-laced go-go's, Al's limo following behind us. Our smiles turn to belly shouts, deep as if from hollow legs. Al looks as big to me as a King Kong balloon. I squeal. Grab at his string. Chauffeur stuffs us in the limo. Escorts us to a hotel room. We make it on a mattress expansive as an ice sheet and as cold. Sleep. Wake. Look at each other. Start over. Jewel shops. Five star restaurants. Jazz clubs. Greenies.

It's a fine and high life tonight in St Louis, in screaming St Louis, at Al's match. My hair's lank and brown, but my red tam snazzes it up. I wear a yellow boutonnière big as a third breast. My violet suit laughs. Men roar. Reach for me. *Al's girl, Al's girl* the crowd chants. Then all eyes shift to Al in his violet robe going in through the ropes, massive boxing gloves tamping head-to-head. Al tamps gloves, flicks his robe off. Peck, his trainer, talks to him fast. Pats him down. Slaps his legs. Bell rings! Crowd roars to their feet. I scramble. Stand on a chair. Opponent is burly, red-haired with a big nose that Al breaks, then he swells the man's eyes to slits. Knocks him out in the second round. Al flings himself back into his robe. Out between the ropes. A blonde in the front row places a hand on his chest. He looks down on her. I push her aside.

We go into the bowels of the auditorium, down to the churning pressroom. Sweat hangs in the air like sluggish sheets on a Louisiana clothesline. One of Al's arms loops me, lazy-like. Sweaty. Flash bulbs go off, photo set to be on the front page of the Post-Dispatch, showing us riding high in 1975, a year of knockouts. Peck hustles Al into the locker room. I see a rub-down table swaddled in white. Al's laid out on it, profile like a mountain range. Fat, Al's promoter, hands me greenies. He goes into the locker room. Closes the door. I swallow.

Reporters drift from the pressroom up cement steps. I follow, fingering a cigarette. Press my lips around its filter. Light up. Step into the empty auditorium, feet tapping greenie tap. Smile twitching. Kick off my high heels. Smooth the hand holding my cigarette slowly down and around one hip. Behind the locker room door, I know Peck is bringing Al's body back to normal using ice packs and rough and tumble rubdowns. Tonight in bed he'll be roughed up and red, like he's lit from inside.

A janitor pushes a broom a few aisles way. I lean against the cement wall. Blow smoke toward him. He's a yellow-faced kid. Small sharp teeth, but he's tall. I lick my lips. Twitch him over with a flick of my eyes. He's at my elbow. Face looming. A hard on in his pants.

Al's girl, he hisses. He says, that was something how Al the Pal pounded the Red Flame tonight, he says, hand tight behind my neck. Lips near. He fiddles under my skirt. Shoves in. Up me good. We hear Al and his entourage, loud, shouting, coming up cement steps. Janitor pulls out. Pants up. Backs into the shadows. I straighten my tam. Bandaged and stitched, Al bursts into the auditorium. Back in Louisiana, Al's best friend Stout Kramer had put it to me behind a dance hall in the bushes years ago, whispering in my ear, don't tell Al. Fat was in my panties last month, finger up me in the dark of a go-go, Al sitting next to me, my legs spread for Fat in the velvet dark. Now the entourage envelopes me. Carries me along. High heels left behind. At the door I turn back toward the janitor. He has a high heel at his nose, sniffing me in.

In the limo I'm crushed between Fat and Peck. We speed through the streets to Lucky Ace's Bar where Peck rolls a cigar ash slowly into a wide ashtray at our table. Topless waitress takes our order, carries back drinks sprouting tiny umbrellas and swizzle sticks.

Peck cradles Southern Comfort against his chest, mouth open, tongue hung out on his lower lip. Women in white boots dance and sweat in suspended cages high above us.

Peck shifts forward, says, loud, no one left to fight you in St Louis, Al. We're moving on to the big time. Moving to Memphis, he shouts above go-go music.

Put in a word for you there, Al, Fat says, shouting. Slams his drink on the table, a blood red drink in a thick-stemmed glass. I've arranged a fight with Memphis One Shot at Mickeye's Gym.

One Shot's the youngest lay in the game, Al says, loud. Sits to the edge of his chair, hands palm up on the table. Peck smiles. Slaps Al's palms. Signals a swaying waitress to bring another round.

Al made the front page in St Louis with two more knock-outs, then by train we follow the curves of the Mississippi to Memphis. Lease a room on the second floor of the Royal Hotel. Below our bed is the bar serving cheap whiskey, straight. Jazz saxophone slams through the floor, drums beat, singer belts out, "Up the Lazy River." We buy greenies. Al's late for sparing at Mickeye's two weeks running.

Peck says to me, get Al here in time.

But Al's on top, I say. He's the heavyweight champion. He can be late.

He's got to stay on top, Peck says, picking his nose. Get him here early morning, Scar. And get yourself a new tam, he says.

What's wrong with this one, I say. I've wore it three years. It's lucky.

It's old, Peck says.

Before a packed house in Memphis that night, an up-and-coming kid pounds Al's belly to jelly. Two weeks later at Mickeye's, the easy lay, Memphis One Shot, knocks Al out in the third round. Al goes out on the town with Peck instead of me. Comes back to the Royal with a bottle of whiskey and willing girls with eyes sultry and cold. Al massages their girlish shoulders, eyes smashed black in his face. Nose smashed wider. Hair thinning. Legs not like tree trunks anymore. Whiskey in his veins instead of southern brandy.

Al says to me, gimme whiskey.

Come and get it, I say.

He twirls me. Grabs the bottle. I grab it back. Al slaps me. Lets in two more girls. Pours drinks for us all. Hands out greenies. Al's naked, pumping one of the girls, then he seems far away from me. A pinpoint in exact detail, him putting on a jazz record.

When I wake, Al's half off the bed. We dress. Al and me, Fat and Peck strut into Mickeye's that night, the auditorium roaring with fans for the contender. Al's knocked out in the fourth. After the fight, in the locker room, Peck darts ice packs at Al's swollen eyes. Peck says, a few months ago we were breaking out the champagne, corks popping around our heads, reporters clamoring for Al and his girl. Al the Pal, we got to talk. Come by in the morning. Leaves. It's just Al and me in a basement cold I never noticed when champagne made me hot, reporters bringing up the heat with microphones shoved in Al's battered face, Peck charging side-to-side, white towel around his neck. Now Al's wrapped hands fit tight into the sleeves of his pinstripe suit. Swollen feet shove into wingtips. Outside, we see Peck under flashing neon by the Pussycat Palace. He's hitting on the boxer who'd cleaned Al's clock tonight. Peck pats the boy reassuringly. Jabs the air. Dodges. Mouths how he can take him to the top. Tamps the boxer's muscles in the cool fall air.

At the Royal, the head bartender turns away from us, his gray eyes seek corners, anywhere but Al's butchered face, then he dodges into the backroom, sends a low level barkeep out to serve a fallen great and his girl. Two drinks and we're back in our room. Al grabs the phone.

Six months ago I was on the cover of Sports Illustrated, he shouts into the receiver. Did you see it, he asks the trainer he'd skipped out on three years ago when Peck came calling. Sid, did you see it? Do you want a piece of the action again? Sid? Sid? He dials again.

Cutthroat, he shouts into the phone. Al the Pal here. Settles confidently on the bed, stretches out against pillows, sure that Cutthroat, his former publicist, will take him on. He puffs a cigar. Face pouts at the hang-up, holds the receiver away, stares at it. Aims his cigar for the toilet bowl.

Call your first training gym in Baton Rouge, I say.

Tore down. Gone, Al says. Pulls a long drink from his bottle.

I say, call Sid back.

He does. Sid says you're washed up, Al. Get used to it. I tried to prepare you like I did all my boxers for the decline. But you were off and running. Straight for a cement wall. In the morning we skip out on our lease. We don't go in for the talk with Peck. Look for new connections. Sleep in a cheap hotel.

Search the Pussycat Palace for Fat. Seen him, says a lazy bartender. Late last night. He was on his way out of town on the hound. Al and me buy bus tickets ourselves. Not to Louisiana where we grew up, but north, into Iowa. Flat land. Plowed under. In the waning fall light, bus climbs into the bluffs of Minnesota, to a small town with no feel of a boxing ring. Near out of greenies and money, jewels hocked in Des Moines, we stop at a small café called Beth's Choice and ask about hotels.

Rentals we got around town, a waitress says, eying us. Saw mill closed here a year ago. Owner of a chicken plant keeps on a skeleton crew. Rentals you'll find. No hotels. Talk to Skinny she says. Points toward the end booth, to a man well-dressed who's got his eyes on us already, listening to the conversation. Next to him is a hollow-faced man, caved over a coffee cup. Seven kids to support the waitress says, quietly, nodding toward the hollow-faced man. He's on the skeleton crew at the chicken processing plant and looks it, she says raising eyebrows. Comes in every afternoon after work, drinks coffee laced with whiskey from his flask. Stumbles out drunk to his car, that battered old monster Pontiac you seen out front, fins out to here. She widens her arms. Laughs.

Skinny's up and out of his booth. Hustles Al and me out of the café, like we're old friends of his. Drives us to a piece of land with pine trees and a crooked house. Vines crisp and brown flow over it. We sit on porch steps like people spilled from above.

You can squat here for a month, Skinny says to Al from the top step, if you harvest these jack pines. A home-rolled cigarette's between his fingers as if it's a permanent part of his hand. He slips down a step. Fits himself in between Al and me. Smiles faintly. Nestles a hand on each of our shoulders. His cigarette burns close to my ear.

I provide the chain saw, he says to Al. You cut and split the wood. Al snaps Skinny's hand off his shoulder.

Bedroom's the first door, Skinny says, standing. Kitchen's at the back. We crowd up the steps. Cross the porch. Step into the bedroom. Skinny revolves his nose around. Mouth has a tick. Sits on the mattress edge. Pats it like it's a dog. Takes a flask from his pocket. Al's eyes light up. Sits next to Skinny. Skinny pops a pill. Hands me two. We wash them down with whiskey. Skinny slips off his shoes, hand in Al's crotch. If you do me good, he says to Al and me, hand stroking my lank hair, you can squat here for the winter. Plus get all the whiskey you need and a car dropped off for you in the morning. Babies, he says, easing our bodies down around him. I'll have greenies for you tomorrow. Al says strip, Scar. I strip.

Middle of the night, I see Skinny get up slip into his pants, slid into those shiny patent leather shoes of his. He crosses the porch without a word. I lean over Al. Lick his lips with a tongue been inside another man.

Next afternoon we drive the rusted car dropped off for us to town. Return with whiskey. I find a red cloth in a kitchen drawer and spread it on the table. Put faded flowers from the yard in a jelly jar. Place it in the middle of the red cloth. No jazz bands in this town, I say to Al. Bartender back at the liquor store looked ready to slip into his grave. Looked at your hands that are still near the size of the chain saw Skinny left for you.

These are boxer's hands, Scar, Al says. He holds them high. Jabs wobble around his caved-in face. I tip my head. Lips curl, one hand floats up in a beauty queen wave to the crowd. Al and his girl! My red tam is cocked just right, a little jewel pinned to it catching the lights of the auditorium, music swelling, sweat pooling next to Al's nose, shiny, a place I used to dip my tongue, instead of where I dip it now. Al passes out, face sideways on the red cloth. I open one of the whiskey bottles. Drive to town alone, bottle in one hand, past shabby lean-to houses. Out of work men sit on porches, backs turned on wives in faded house dresses. Children scream in treeless yards in twilight. I park and goin the café. At the far booth, I sit down with Skinny and the hollow-faced man with clothes so thin you can see his skin. Skinny puts a hand on my knee.

I'm here for greenies, I say. Skinny motions for me to follow and in his house, in his bedroom, he puts my red tam on his bald head. Then puts two greenies in my hand.

Only two?

Come back tomorrow, Skinny says to me, you get two more. Throws me my tam.

Back at the land in moonlight, I see Al's under the jack pines. Chain saw whines. Chainsaw rips into tree trunks. Sawdust flies in arcs through the headlights. I stumble into the trees, pine cones hard underfoot. Reach out, touch my man, sweating and thin, now lying curled in sawdust, hair plastered to his forehead, chain saw running at the mouth.

Next day, fog rolls in. Cold wind blows through cracks in the house. In the kitchen, red cloth in front

of me, I remember yellow boutonnieres, violet suits. Cheering men touching me. Remember back further, to Al in a letterman's sweater. See him in my mind on the steps of my father's porch in Louisiana. He's Allan Magive. I'm Scarlett Tartlet. Allan's cutting under oak trees between our parent's yards, coming up into the porch. Shakes my father's hand. Then he and I skip down the steps. My father laughs at us as he sits creaking on the porch swing. Laughs at Allan and me hold hands. Then we were on the sidewalks of our town. We wave to those who'd known us since we were babies pushed in carriages down this tree-draped street, our nurses chatting to each other over carriage bonnets. Father said he used to watch our nurses chatting, Allan and me flat on our backs in the carriages. Look at you two now, he'd said as we skipped off the porch, me in white. Me in a white dress. That night we sat in the back of the movie theater and he put his arm around me, moved me toward him on that fresh Louisiana evening, a time before the boxing life.

Now as the foggy wind blows long and cold in through cracks, Al comes into the kitchen and the cold blows across our feet, up legs freezing cold, us penned in, cooped up in this shack. Al smashes a whiskey bottle on the table edge. Takes after me, whiskey smell in a wreath around his head, his once massive shoulders now eaten alive from greenies, face bearded, no shirt on, body shivering, shaking. He takes after me. Corners me on the porch. Drools whisky.

I stumble down steps. Pass tree stumps, to the rusted car. Slam the door shut. Al behind me. I lurch the rusted car away from him. His hand bangs the car trunk. Ditches each side of the road brim with stagnant water and dead reeds. He toils behind the car. Following.

From the other side of this desperate town, the hollow-faced man is driving fast. A twin to Al's rage and despair, he's lost his job at the chicken processing plant. This man who has seven children and a young demanding ugly wife who he's just shot to death, speeds through town, past Skinny's house, past the café. Toward us.

I see Al toiling in my rearview mirror. He stops. I pull over. He seems to lean into the fog, push against it. Reach out to the trees of the swamp. I open the car door. To go to him. Leave the door open. Radio on loud. I hear a car coming fast. Car coming our way. I'm at Al's side when the hollow-faced man in his Pontiac slices off the rotted door of my car and comes toward us heavy. Rolling. He comes throttling. Speeding. Al grabs me suddenly as if startled awake in life. Moves me aside. Car careens into him, his face white and memorably young again. Then that face breaks apart, disappears beneath the car. Dragged into ditch water with the Pontiac. Stagnant ditch water furrows as the car plows water. Car steams. I'm in ditch water, slogging to Al. Blood and cuts on him like in the boxing ring. I see smashed limbs. Feel his crushed skull under my fingers. Music pours from the car without a door. Dome light is bright in the fog. Like the music and lights of the auditorium. Men reaching for me. Crowds screaming and roaring for Aland me, his girl, who once upon a time wore white and smelled deep of the soft, sweet air of home.

Father's Day
By Kent Frates

I remember the last words my father said to me. "You come in here, you son of a bitch and I'll blow your ass off." Spoken while holding his 12 gauge pump shotgun, sitting in his favorite, badly worn, red velvet arm chair, surrounded by stacks of old newspapers, plates of half eaten food and, empty beer cans. The place had that musty smell that comes with old houses and, old people and, the room was half dark, with the shades drawn.

He had already threatened Marilyn, the woman who occasionally looked in on him and, the police, who waited outside the house trying to avoid a confrontation with a deluded, old man. I had persuaded them to let me talk to him, even though Marilyn warned me that "he's been getting worse and worse".

I understood what she meant. There had been plenty of signs of his deterioration. Forgetfulness, long periods of silence and, sudden violent rages. Always quiet and morose, he graduated from cynical, to bitter and, then, brooding.

In spite of his mental state he had seemed controllable until about a year ago. That's when he attacked a Baptist minister in the Walmart parking lot.

The minister and several of his parishioners had been handing out flyers inviting people to a church event. Marilyn had driven Dad to the store to pick up a few items. He insisted on going into the store even though she discouraged it and, when the preacher tried to hand Dad a flyer all hell broke loose. “Get away from me you sanctimonious son of a bitch” Dad said. “No need for that kind of language sir,” the preacher replied. “Don’t lecture me you pompous piece of shit,” Dad said, as he glared at the preacher and, when the man started to say something else Dad decked him and started stomping him. It took two of the parishioners and a security guard to pull Dad off and, hold him until the cops arrived.

One thing about my Dad, he treated all religions the same, with equal disgust. To him the Pope, ISIS, and, the Dalai Lama were all the same. I remember watching a war movie on TV with him when I was a kid. One of the characters said “There are no atheists in fox holes.” Instantaneously, Dad blurted out “bull shit.” My mom shushed him but, there was no doubt how he felt.

After the attack, I had to bail Dad out and get him a lawyer. The fact that Dad was a veteran, an insincere apology and, the preacher’s good heartedness, was all that kept the Judge from sending the old man to jail. From that point on things had just gotten worse. Each day a marking of the time in a life long ago over but, refusing to end.

There was no question about institutionalizing him. He wasn’t about to go and, no one wanted to try to make him leave the small, white frame, house where he had lived for over forty years.

In spite of his problems, I had been able to reason with my Dad, maybe because I was his favorite, ever since I bloodied Jimmy Clark’s nose in the third grade. Sometimes he’d listen to me, even as his paranoia and dementia grew worse.

As I looked at him across the darkened room he was still formidable, although slumped forward and, beginning to shrink, like old men do. His powerful neck and shoulders swelled with the anger that was in him against his enemies, mostly long dead. It reminded me of those times as a boy when I would see him chopping wood, maniacally bringing the axe down again and again as though the logs had personally wronged him. I don’t know if the anger was always there or, if it was part of his fear and loathing for the war he wouldn’t talk about, but, could never forget. The anger just stayed with him, like the jagged V shaped scar on his back.

“Dad, it’s me, Charles” I said from the door of his room, but, his only reply was a grunt that may or, may not, have been “asshole”, as the gun swung up, pointing in my general direction. I had just time to dive away, before he fired off a wild blast that tore a huge hole in the living room wall. Then things went crazy. Policemen rushing into the house. Someone roughly jerking me aside. Yelling, and, the sound of running feet. My dead mom’s precious ceramic clock crashing to the floor in pieces. The screen door torn off the wall. The shotgun roaring out again. The smell of gun powder and blood. My shoulder hurting where I’d hit the floor. A taste of steel in my mouth. One policemen cursing, and, another saying “the old bastard had to do it.” Someone tried to help me to my feet, but, I didn’t really want to get up, because it was too late.

Idaho Girl
By Lisa J MacDonald

If you were the oldest of eight children, and it was modern times when nobody had that many kids unless you were Mormon or Catholic, even in Idaho, you’d find it was hard to rise above the label. It didn’t matter that it wasn’t your choice. It didn’t matter that your dad had money and was a surgeon; you were still the odd family where the mom must like sex too much.

You could really feel that oddness and what the outsiders thought when you were dragged to the mall

with your mom and all the rest. Your mom was a shopaholic pretending that she still lived in Southern Cali where clothes mattered and what her husband was doing with the office manager didn't. The moment you walked into the mall, trailing all your other siblings, trying to pretend that you didn't belong to the group, fingers pointed your way, and the mouths dropped gawking.

When your mom made it out into the middle of the mall, lowlife men gathered close enough that you could hear them speculating about how your mom was in bed, and how she must be a wild one, but this confused you. Eight kids just meant eight times, and besides all that speculation didn't fit your mom who read the scriptures for hours every day and had tears in her eyes as the spirit moved her every couple of hours.

The finger pointing didn't get any better at church even though you were taught to have a big family when you grew up and that it was an honor to raise these valiant spirits up to God. No, you saw the teenage boys pointing at your mom and laughing. You weren't sure why but thought it was because of her fancy dresses, and really high hair and thick Tammy Faye makeup that stood out in the midst of the all the other farmer's wives. You walked away cheeks aflame and talked to no one, not sure if this church thing, where they taught an impossible Christ-like standard of living, was for you.

The oldest of eight living in half farm, half mansion, in the middle of a potato field on Kinsmen Lane,with only other aunts and uncles houses insight, the closest a mile away,you felt lonely with only your brothers to talk to cause your sisters were still too young and only cared about their stuff animals and sneaking cookies and cake. All your brothers cared about was who peed the farthest, whose dick was the biggest, and which one was going to come up with a better name to call you. You had found the best way to deal with them was to retreat to your room where you hid on-religious books and read them hours at a time knowing if your mother discovered the truth of what you read she would cry for your lost soul and might never stop.

There were six bedrooms in your house but because there were so many boys you won a room to yourself. Your father picked a floral hide-a-bed for you to sleep on next to the windows. This room was the first accessible area to anyone who approached the house off the paved road. That fact hadn't kept some of your more perverted brothers from hiding in your closet hoping to catch you undress.

Every time you changed into your pj's you hoped that they weren't there and you doubly hoped that they hadn't snuck their friend's older brother in, the one you'd had a secret crush on for years, but didn't dare tell anyone because if your brothers heard about it they would tease you endlessly and destroy any small chance you might have with him.

Sometimes your brothers drew you outside where your crush stood, water balloons in hand, and he hit you with them. Those times you chased him with gusto cause you had a good reason and everyone wanted to see you get him because they weren't quite sure what you were capable of with your temper.

The crush seemed to like you chasing him, and he would laugh loudly as he headed toward the ditches, his worn cowboy boots slipping on the uneven dirt. He would jump across the ditch. You would follow and slip on the loose dirt and fall. He would find you on the dirt and smile his side grin and slip down on the ground acting like he was pinning you, but he really wasn't because nothing on his body touched yours. He would look you in the eyes, and you would look him in the eyes for a real long time. You would blush and smile, and then he would lean closer until his hot spearmint breath would wash over your face. You would wait, and he would stare and then finally he would kiss you and your head would explode with warmth, and buzz, and then he would grab your wrist and pull you to your feet and say, "Let's go four-wheeling."

Your stomach turned in a million circles as you couldn't help but lean toward him because he had a magnetic pull on you.

You two went four-wheeling. Him, driving and you clinging to his six-pack abs and flushing from pure attraction as you traveled down the bumpy road.

He'd stop behind a barn and kiss you more and more, and your head spun because you knew what you were doing was wrong and evil and felt so right. You knew, since you were Mormon, that if things kept going you would have to talk to the Bishop, and go through a long repentance process, and so would he. You would both be marred and kept from going to the baptism for the dead youth activity coming up in a week.

You weren't sure how you felt working for the dead or being in the temple where you weren't allowed to talk much and how you had to be holy all the time, but you knew you didn't want to talk to the Bishop,or

have Mr. Crush talk about you since everyone thought you were both good kids and you didn't think you could live with the reputation of being a ruined girl.

You both stopped kissing, clinging to each other tight, then he dropped you off a distance away from the house so your brothers and his brothers wouldn't see you two together.

You did these secret meetings off and on for years, but Mr. Crush never stood up to the boys by saying he wanted you, and that made you feel sad and trapped. You decided that he was a wuss and not worth it if he couldn't find the courage to speak up. Later, years later, you found out that he became a brain surgeon, and then you decided that maybe you missed out because of your rash judgment, but there was no going back and changing anything.

Before he left you in Idaho Falls, before he went to off to college to make something of himself, you heard from his sister that you were his first kiss. That was something. That made you feel special, but all the time you were away from each other also made you feel lonely, and you wondered why things had turned out as they did.

So you went back on living with your brothers who one day asked you to come and be a part of their pool contest. They wanted to know who could hit more balls into the pockets. You were excited cause besides making you cook for them and clean up after them, they never wanted to have anything to do with you.

Mom yelled at them to take showers, and she meant it this time. The oldest brother, the one you got along with the least and who liked to give you black eyes, bruises, and torn flesh wounds, commanded everyone to shower and meet in the basement for the contest.

You went and brushed your teeth and planned to bathe later when the water would be warmer. After changing your sisters' diapers and putting them both to bed,you hurried downstairs not to miss anything. You made it into the basement just in time to hear your brothers go, "tah-dah," and all five of them flung off the towels around their waiststo reveal their birthday suits. You tried to forget, but doubted you ever would, and it didn't help that another one of your brothers's kept streaking through the house in absolutely nothing after showering, claiming he couldn't find a towel. Even Mom couldn't stop him, and she prayed for hours after she spotted him one afternoon. You weren't sure if she was repenting for what she saw or for his soul or both.

By the time you made it to high school, you had heard mutters of people who wanted to leave this dump of a town and move on to a place where they could have a life. You weren't sure what that was, but you did agree this was a dump of a town, and you liked the idea of going out in the real world and finding something more, but every time you closed your eyes to picture it, you saw nothing. Not even a shadow or a hint of anything. You couldn't imagine a life outside of this one even though this one felt like such a trap.

Instead of talking to your dad about it, you listened to him ask you if you heard about the mass murderer in town who crept around at night shooting girls your age in the head at short range through their bedroom window as they read their novels. Your dad kept giving you the newspaper articles like it should be fun entertainment. You read the last murder took place three miles away to a sixteen-year-old girl. Your heart pounded faster than the music in a horror movie as you concluded that was walking distance away from your window.

The parents heard nothing and found her dead the next morning, bullet in the forehead, book tumbled to her side. The article didn't mention the title of the book, but you wondered what it could be. The bullet had been shot through the glass. One single shot. The police had no clue what the shooter had against sixteen-year-old girls who read at night, but he had killed three already so there must have been something upsetting about it.

You lay in bed hugging your large black bear given to you by your first boyfriend in junior high. You clung to the animal like he was a person, a man, your Knight in Shining Armor who was there to protect you from the creaks and howls. On nights when you were reallybrave, and you thought the murderer might have set his sights on someone else, you tucked the black bear behind you, set the paw on your waist to feel what it warlike to be held; but then you heard snaps and cracks outside your window. You shivered, pushing the black bear out of the way and made it on all fours onto your thick carpet. Jaggedly breathing, you looked at the black shadows passing your window. You crawled over and barely pulled back the drape to see a tall, large mass in the shadows. It was a man, and he paced in front of your window. The moon hid behind clouds making it too dark to see the man's face. You darted to the floor hoping he didn't notice the movement in the drape fabric.

Even though there were ten people in the house and only one out there, you knew it was only you against the large male shadow, well, you thought it was male.

The only thing your rigid brain thought was to army crawl on the floor away from the bed—the target. The blankets still lumped up in a pile might still look like you. You forced one arm to move in front of another until you made it to your lavender-smelling bathroom that you shared with your two little sisters. Most of the time you kept it clean leaving only a book to read next to the bath and curlers on the counter. Your bedroom opened up into the bathroom like it did on the *Brady Bunch* and you knew because of that, despite all the dishes, laundry, diaper changing and endless childcare you did—all day every day—you were spoiled. You were grateful once again that your mom and, you guess your dad, gave you a bathroom so close to your room.

Still in army crawl position, you creaked the bathroom door open. Looked back at the dark shadow that stood closer to the window filling up the frame. With a harsh breath, you reached up and flashed the bathroom light on and off three times before lunging under the hide-a-bed hoping the bullet would hit the metal frame instead of your head. Underneath the bed, you trembled wishing the last book you read hadn't been *Jaws.* You waited with your heart going "dahdah" like in the movie *Jaws* that you didn't have the stomach to keep watching. You heard footsteps fade. You counted one one thousand, two one thousand, and made it to four thousand before timidly crawling to the window seal to find the shadow gone.

The next morning you didn't tell anyone. After all, you were only a girl. You knew if you spoke it would make things worse. So you went to school and looked out for Mr. Knight in Shining Armor and decided who'd be a candidate, but the choices weren't very good. There was too much Idaho in the school halls. Too many boys blown out of their minds with smoking pot most of their lives because what else was there to do but go cow tipping? Then there were the guys who wore out circles on the back pocket of their jeans, signifying juicy black chew packs. You knew you'd find that chew was dripping inside their mouths forming white cancer sores, or at least that these sores would be there eventually. For sport those guys would see which girls they could kiss with that juice still leaking out.

Next were the farmer boys who loved working the field. They trickled into school wearing worn cowboy boots, manure still clinging to their soles. There were two other types of heroes to choose from—the jocks who made sport grabbing boobs and crotches, and the God squad who tucked Bibles underarm, watched their words and sprung on any chance they found to preach.

Your best bet was to make sure to graduate out of this joint and look for Mr. Knight in Shining Armor away from digging, trucks, and kegs,a town wherecows were kissed and tipped. Hopefully there were more refined choices somewhere else. But the closer you came to leave the more you worried you would always smell like someone who watched kids, tolerated poor grammar, and didn't have much for dreams except not to live in this town.

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When you had graduated from school, and survived all your brothers' harassing, it was time to go, but you couldn't go. You tried to put one step in front of another, but your legs wouldn't work. You felt the fear of the creeper come back to you. If you left the first room, the black shadow would come to where your little sisters slept, and they were just too young to be taken from life.

The shooter had never been found. Only the other mass murderer who swept through town cutting up people and then putting them in the freezer. He was caught after he had cherry picked a favorite teacher out of the Albertson's parking lot. He had waited in her car and pressed the cold metal gun against her neck and ordered her to drive to the distant pasture. Instead, she drove her car straight into the grocery store crashing the front of the establishment. Unfortunately she didn't survive. Now there were cement posts up in front to prevent such brave attempts at saving one's life. But on the positive note the law caught up with the guy after that.

Every time you thought about leaving you couldn't stop thinking about how that shadow would kill girls who read alone. Then you thought about the neighbor who stole kisses but would never say he cared out loud. You thought about all the times your brothers called you ugly and stupid and how no one would want you and you couldn't help but agree.

Your sisters cried every time you mentioned leaving, and the church told you over and over that serving others was the most glorious work you could do

so you saw no reason to leave right then and you stayed. You had to keep the little ones safe.

Besides, your mom was becoming more and more unhinged. She could no longer use shopping to pretend that the office manager didn't bother her. Dad ruled that her spending had gotten out of control and he froze her accounts. She declared that his batting eyes at other women had gotten out of control. She called him an adulterer and quoted condemning scriptures to him that made his face turn a deep red and his eyes narrow. He left and did not come home until deep into the night only to have the household wake up a few hours later to the sound of yelling and combs being thrown. You thought you heard your mom say damn once, but you weren't quite sure, and that would certainly be out of character for her.

There was more thumping around, and yelps that you didn't dare investigate. Another thump, then Dad slammed the door on the way out. You looked out the window and saw the red Suburban speed out of the driveway, and all that red made you think of blood and you knew that he would not be coming back to this house anymore. He had found more welcoming arms elsewhere.

There was a loud sob upstairs, but again you didn't respond. You knew you would find your mom in bed if you went to her. She had managed to get to bed, but she didn't manage to ever come out of it again, so that left you tending to the girls protecting them from any other possible murderer as you watched your brothers leave one by one on missions to serve God for two years. Each sent far off, and the only way to correspond was through letters.

A few months after the oldest boy left, you heard reports that he'd gotten caught up in cussing and playing and not taking being a representative of the Lord his duties as a representative of the Lord seriously. Those reports didn't surprise you. After all, you had grown up with the real him. Dad sent him a letter, only one, and all of a sudden any bad reports stopped, and back came reports of baptisms and promotions in the Priesthood leadership.

As the boys left, you thought about going to college or even getting a job, but instead you stayed in the house and took care of your mom who rambled on about Heavenly Father's mercies, and you fed and clothed the girls and took them to church.

One day both girls left reaching the magic age of eighteen. On the same day, you heard that Mr. Crush's wife refused to live in the same town with him, but they were still married. You wondered what that was about and what kind of life that would be.

You think about him leaving that mousy wife who wouldn't stand by her man, and you imagine him roaring up the road in a four-wheeler to find you. You look out on the setting sun, sigh, and then open up a novel that you were sure your mom would never like.

Roads Home: A Review of Ted Geltner's Blood, Bone, and Marrow: a Harry Crews Biography
By Adam Van Winkle, Cowboy Jamboree editor

My favorite part of Ted Geltner's Harry Crews biography, out today (5/15/2017) in paperback, is the end. There, Geltner intimately recalls his last meeting with Crews, detailing Crews' wish to have he and Geltner, a welcomed biographer by Crews, drive the old rural roads back home to Bacon County Georgia.
It's my favorite part because that's what my Crews reading experience has been. I'm not from Bacon County but I am from rural parts with plenty of strange cats. As has been the case with a few grit lit authors, finding Crews' catalog was like reading my way back home.

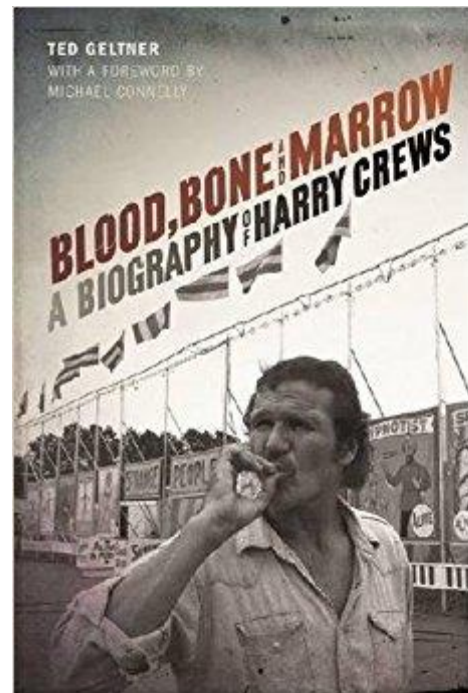
As Geltner paints it Blood, Bone, and Marrow, his biography began as an interview assignment before Crews' drastic health decline and death in 2012 that others ducked. They didn't want to mess with Crews. Geltner took the assignment and found a much bigger project worth writing and well overdue: an intimate biography with one of America's greatest living writers, at the time. Five years after Crews' passing the biography keeps the author very much alive, and it's fitting the paperback releases on the heels of that five year mark.

The biography pulls you in as a willing reader because Geltner hooks you with Crews' own enthusiasm for the project and the urgency at hand: "*Ask* me *anything you want*, bud," Crews eagerly quips to Geltner in the beginning, "*But* you'd better do *it quick*." Geltner keeps this intimacy between biographer, Crews, and the reader throughout the book.

Rather than paint an encyclopedic and dry third person historical biography, Geltner takes the reader on his writing journey, beginning to end, and the arc of his relationship with Crews as the biography comes to fruition. In this way, I suspect, the reader gets much more the kind of biography Crews would want: naked and intimate, bare and unpretentious.

I like that Geltner is honest with writing against Death in the book. I like that Crews is honest with that too. I like Geltner puts Crews on his deathbed and in struggled conversation for the reader. Those are the kind of characters Crews would write.

That I think is Geltner's most magnificent achievement here. These moments too feed the credibility of the rest of the biography. I feel like I'm getting the real Crews story because he's right there, the whole time, writing it with Geltner.
If you're into Crews' fiction or nonfiction or just interested in seminal grit lit, Blood, Bone, and Marrow is worth getting and reading and having.



Blood, Bone and Marrow: a Biography of Harry Crews
By Ted A. Geltner

Chapter 29: The Worm Farm

That was the great, grand secret of writing, the secret certain students lusted after, the secret some people wrote him letters about, the secret he was sometimes paid money to lecture on, the great, grand secret of writing: Put your ass on the chair. Repeat: Put your ass on the chair. —Harry Crews,

Where Does One Go When There's No Place Left to Go? I f you're looking for a place to turn over a new

leaf, a place where you could avoid distractions, stay sober, and get some writing done, New Orleans probably wouldn't be your first choice. A city where the bars have no mandatory closing laws, where drinking in public is legal and encouraged, and bartenders will pour your leftover hurricane into a plastic go-cup, where your waiter at even the most cultured of restaurants is liable to offer you a wine list at breakfast—a city like this would not be the place to go if you wanted to clean yourself up and jump onto the wagon. "New Orleans," said his friend Rod Elrod, "was not the place Harry needed to be." But that, indeed, was Harry's plan. He wanted to get away from Gainesville, from classes, students, and faculty meetings, from Lillian's and the Orange & Brew and the Rathskeller. It was to be an escape from the familiar haunts of Gainesville, the ones that had become a force of stagnation. It was time to pack up and ship out, change the scenery, reshuffle the cards and see what came up. Maggie, Harry's longtime, on-and-off-and-on-again girlfriend, had found some direction in her life, direction that had escaped Harry ever since he had completed A Childhood. On a tip from a friend of Harry's film agent, Maggie had, a few years back, set herself on the path to becoming an exercise physiologist. It wasn't quite psychology, her chosen field, but it was a subject she knew a little about, and once she cracked the books, she found she had an aptitude for the subject. She had spent years refining her own body through exercise; it wasn't much of a jump to do the same thing for patients. So she had chipped away at it, class by class, and in December 1985 she earned her master's, with a thesis titled "Physiological Profiles of Female Competitive Body Builders," based on hard-earned knowledge from her years pumping iron on the amateur bodybuilding circuit. Degree in hand, she was now ready to embark on a new career. She had secured a job as the assistant director of a wellness center at a brand-new hospital in New Orleans and made plans to leave Gainesville and start her new life as the calendar turned to 1986. Her sister bought her a golden retriever, which she named Heidi, and the two of them made the trip west on i-10 and moved into an apartment on Audubon Park, right near Tulane University. A few months later, Harry was headed down the same stretch of i-10. For the first time in twenty-six years, a fall semester would start without him. His supervisors in the English Department at the University of Florida had happily approved a sabbatical for the 1986–87 school year. He had clearly earned it. With nearly two decades of service, he was now one of the senior members in the department. And a little separation might do a world of good, for both Harry and the denizens of the department. So it was set. Harry would move into Maggie's apartment, put the bottle aside, and dedicate himself to a new novel, starting from scratch. He hadn't published a novel in nearly a decade. (All We Need of Hell was at the publisher and on track for release, but he had written much of that book in the early 1970s.) Now, cleansed of all the burdens of home, he was ready to start on an entirely new work of fiction. The plan went bad quickly. Harry arrived ready to tackle his New Orleans novel, and at first he seemed to be mentally and emotionally prepared to do just that. He tried to develop a strict writing routine, as he often did when he was in a productive period. He woke early, walked Heidi three miles around Audubon Park, had a light breakfast, and set up in front of the typewriter. For a short while, progress was on schedule. The Worm Farm 273 But the lure of Bourbon Street proved too strong. While Maggie was working long hours at the hospital, Harry began spending long hours in the bars of New Orleans. Gainesville had offered familiar barstools and friendly bartenders, but New Orleans was a major-league drinking city. Harry spent time in the French Quarter, ostensibly to do research for his book, but his research was always participant research, and he spiraled into a binge that he couldn't pull out of. He spent less and less time at the typewriter. The cycle that had happened time and again in Gainesville reemerged. Maggie began to feel she was losing control as Harry went deeper and deeper into his binge. He was powerless to stop drinking, and Maggie was unable to help. But now she had a fledgling career to protect, and she needed to do something before things spiraled completely out of control. When she reached the point at which she felt there was no other option, Maggie sat Harry down and, quietly and dispassionately, told him he would have to leave. "There was not enough from our years together for her even to be pissed," Harry said. After another night of excess, Harry somehow found his way back to the apartment and crashed on Maggie's bed, vodka bottle in hand. "This shit has got to stop," he told her. "I keep telling you that." "I think I've redlined again. I don't think I can get back without some help. You've got to take me to a hospital." Maggie knew the drill from a dozen times prior. "I don't know where to take you. Where do you want to go?" "A hospital, any hospital," Harry demanded. "If I

go down for the count before we get there, just tell them I have to detox from alcohol. It ain't a fucking big deal. Any hospital will do." But this time, the choice of hospital proved extremely important. Harry woke up the following morning in pajamas he'd never seen before. He began to detect that the level of sanity among his fellow patients was very low. And then he noticed that all the doors on the hall were locked from the inside. The hospital Maggie had chosen was DePaul Tulane Behavioral Health Center, and Harry, unbeknownst to him, had signed a consent form that called for him to be locked down for seventy-two hours. When he was lucid enough to understand where he was, he quickly realized he didn't want to be there. He asked for a phone call, then a lawyer, only to be told again and again that he had signed away his rights. Eventually, he convinced a nurse to let him talk to the doctor. The doctor silently puffed on a cigarette while Harry pleaded his case. Harry told the doctor that he was a writer and a professor and a respectable member of society. "And," he said, "I'm committed to give two lectures later this month." The doctor looked at Harry, bleary eyed, unshaven, and wearing institutional pajamas, and scoffed. "Do you think you can lecture? You can't lecture." "Give me a podium and I'll show you," Harry protested. The doctor was unconvinced, and Harry was becoming more desperate. "I can go down to the French Quarter and find you five guys in five minutes drunker than I was last night," he said. "You're not going anywhere," the doctor retorted. "Try to relax and be comfortable." Another day of desperation and internment followed before Harry struck upon the bit of information that won him his release. DePaul was a private hospital, and this time, Harry's lack of funds worked in his favor. He told another doctor that he didn't have the insurance to pay for a stint in such a prestigious facility, and, once his story checked out, he was quickly transferred, via ambulance, to East Jefferson General Hospital, where the rules were far less stringent and the patients less frightening. Still in his DePaul pajamas, Harry performed a reconnaissance mission in his new surroundings and learned that a simple request, to the right nurse, could grant him his immediate release. He spent another twenty-four hours playing pool, watching football, and wandering the corridors before he deemed it safe to request parole, and after a three-day hospitalization, he was once again free on the streets of New Orleans. Once on the outside, Harry called Rod, his former student, who had moved back to Franklin Parish, a backwater in the northeast part of the state. Rod drove down to New Orleans to pick up Harry, the two of them went to Maggie's apartment, packed up, and, with Heidi in tow, drove back up to tiny Winnsboro, Louisiana, population four thousand, which Harry would call home for the next year. Elrod had grown up in Franklin Parish, and after leaving the University of Florida, he had earned his ma at the University of Montana. He and his wife, Debbie, had moved back home to Winnsboro to raise a family. Debbie had given birth to their first child six months prior. Now Rod was teaching English at University of Louisiana–Monroe and considering a The Worm Farm 275 run for state representative. The couple lived on the farm where Elrod had been raised. His family was in the worm business, raising worms for fish bait, and now he and Debbie had taken up residence in a small house on the farm, about twelve miles from Winnsboro, about thirty from Monroe, the nearest city. And about a mile away from the house, across the farm, sat an empty worm barn. Rod understood how Harry worked best, and he knew instantly that with a little work, it could be an oasis. "It was just a little barn, and it didn't have a toilet," said Elrod. "That was the main thing. So we built an outhouse. Dug a deep hole, built a little outhouse, put a little curtain on it, and he moved right in." To visitors, it appeared to be nothing more than a shack sitting in a giant field of mud. Harry and Elrod outfitted it with a woodstove, some bookshelves, a few chairs, and a plywood desk. The bookshelves quickly filled up. On one wall, Harry posted Muhammad Ali's famous phrase of defiance, "No Viet Cong Ever Called Me Nigger," and on the opposite wall, "Only the Dead Have No Fear." And on the desk, he placed a placard with his Number One rule of writing: "Get Your Ass on the Chair." There was no electricity, and Harry had to get his water out of a jerry can. The Elrods had experience sobering Harry up from their days in Cross Creek. They cleaned him up once again, and Harry pledged not to touch another drop until he had a completed manuscript. Harry had stumbled into the exact situation he needed to recapture his gift. All his life, his best writing had come in isolation—in a makeshift study attached to the back of a trailer, in his house on Lake Swan with no tv, radio, or mail, in his hidden rented room in Gainesville—and now here he was, in a barn on a swamp, often without a soul in sight, just him, his dog, his typewriter, and the worms. Once sober, he quickly settled into a routine. Rod got him a fishing pole, and

Harry would catch two or three fish in the pond behind the barn, bake them on his wood stove, and eat them with some lemon for his meals. He had his old truck with him, and he found a little gym in Winnsboro, really just a metal structure where the owner had thrown some weights and benches. But it had a locker room, and Harry was there six days a week for a workout, a hot shower, and a shave. And every day, at four a.m., he was at his Underwood, ass in chair, a fresh page in the roller. The subject was boxing. He'd devoted a fair amount of time and energy to the sport over his lifetime but, until now, hadn't devoted an entire novel to it. His introduction to the sweet science had come early on in life. When Harry was ten, his older brother Hoyett had somehow come across a biography of Jack Dempsey, heavyweight champion and larger-than-life legend of the Roaring Twenties. Hoyett devoured the book, and then decided he was going to be a boxer. The family was on another tenant farm in Bacon County at the time, living hand-to-mouth, but Hoyett managed to save up enough money to buy himself some gloves and headgear, and he soon launched his ring career. On Sundays, they would hitch the mule to the wagon, and Harry would drive Hoyett across the county looking for fights. Age and weight were unimportant. Anybody willing to scrap with Hoyett was acceptable. Harry served as his big brother's trainer, cut man, and second. The fights were often just glorified wrestling matches, but they served the purpose of allowing Hoyett to experience the sensation of taking a glove to the face and coming back for more. Eventually, Hoyett boxed professionally, compiling a 22–2 record before breaking his hand, and Harry spent many hours in the gym with him. Later, in the Marines, Harry took up the sport himself and fought as a light heavyweight, winning a base championship belt. Now boxing, and New Orleans, would make up the backbone of his next novel. Needless to say, it wasn't to be a straight boxing story, where the bloodied underdog gets up off the canvas to gamely defeat the arrogant champion at the climax. In fact, there would be precious little actual boxing, as the general public understands the sport, in the book at all. There would be, however, a generous helping of perversity, debauchery, and one of Harry's most memorable freaks. Harry declared it a "novel with an absurdity at its center." The protagonist of the story was Eugene Biggs, a young fighter from Bacon County, Georgia, who finds himself in New Orleans after a quick trip from promising contender to washed-up pug before his twenty-third birthday. With his boxing career over prematurely, he learns accidentally that he has a special skill: the ability to knock himself cold with his own right hand, a trick he discovers spontaneously after his trainer and surrogate father abandons him in the dressing room following his final defeat. The trick was Harry's "absurdity at the center of the novel." Eugene performs it for cash, entertaining the New Orleans underworld of sexual deviants and bizarre misfits. Eugene's girlfriend is a Tulane graduate student who views Eugene as source material for her dissertation, and his best friend is another ex-boxer who now shows snuff films to tourists in the French Quarter. Eugene eventually rejects his profitable trick and The Worm Farm 277 goes to work for the undisputed king of the pervert underworld, J. Alfred Blasingame, a powerful businessman by day and a human oyster by night: But even before Eugene finished speaking, an enormously fat young man wearing an Adidas warm-up suit came into the room. He had chin after chin rolling down his chest toward a ballooning stomach that ended in a flap of fat even the warm-up suit could not hide. It hung across his thighs like an apron. His eyes were no more than slits in his swollen face. He had a leash in his right hand, the end of which was attached to a leather collar decorated with steel studs and fastened about the neck of an extremely thin man whose head was entirely bald, showing not a single wispy strand or a trace of stubble. He was dressed as a boxer and was as tall as Eugene but could not have weighed more than ninety-five pounds. Every bone in his body was insistent under his skin, skin that was diaphanous and desiccated. Eugene couldn't take his eyes off him. He was the most unhealthy-looking human being he had ever seen. As he watched, the man reached up and scratched his chest. A little shower of skin fell to the thick red carpet. "Knockout," said Georgie, "may I have the honor of introducing you to Oyster Boy." Eugene acknowledged him by simply repeating his name: "Oyster Boy." He did not offer his hand. Harry's short stay at Maggie's apartment in New Orleans and his research provided much of the backdrop for the story, as did the time he spent in northeast Louisiana. "We'd take drives and tour the countryside around the area," Rod said. "Went down and showed him some of South Louisiana, some of the antebellum homes, things like that. Then it all turned up in the book." Rod would later spend many years as a writer and editor at the Franklin Sun, the local newspaper in Winnsboro, but at the time he was still writing fiction and would

regularly join Harry in the barn. The two would chat about the weather or how the fish were biting in the pond and then commence typing, Harry at the Underwood and Rod at a word processor across the room. The two had developed a rapport back in Gainesville, and they fell back into the same rhythms now. "I've got a lot of the same stuff Harry has," Rod told a reporter who had come to record the story of Harry on the farm. "Compulsion," Harry said. Rod laughed. "Compulsion, I think, is the word. When I'm with Harry everybody thinks I'm the sane one. But when Harry's not around, everybody looks at me the way they look at him." But most of the time nobody was looking at Harry. He kept to himself to a large degree, stayed on what he called "his program," spending days at a time by himself. Winnsboro was the anti–New Orleans, a town that Rod called the most conservative place in the world. He knew that one night of the wild Harry on the quiet streets of Winnsboro, the kind of performance that was a regularly scheduled event in Gainesville, would mean the immediate end of the Worm Barn experiment. Harry made a well-received appearance when Rod brought him to the university to read for his students, but for the most part, Harry remained on the farm. "He wasn't trying to attract any attention, and I wasn't trying to give him any. He was here for a reason," Rod said. "He'd concentrate for several hours, and spend the rest of the day in a daze. I don't mean like in a trance or anything, but just letting things stew and getting ready to do it again. Might listen to NPR or something, you know? Talk about the news a little bit, but it was mainly just waiting to do it again the next day." About halfway through Harry's stay in Winnsboro, in January 1987, All We Need of Hell was released to generally positive reviews. And, more surprisingly, people were buying it. The first printing of 7,500 copies sold out in twenty-three days, and the publisher cranked up the press for another batch. And, because it was his first novel in eleven years, reporters smelled a story. "Crews is alive! And he's back!" When they learned that he had become some kind of literary Mr. Kurtz living on a bayou outpost with only a typewriter and a bottle of Jack Daniels, the smell got too strong to ignore. People sent a reporter down to Winnsboro for a profile, and other media outlets made inquiries, all wanting a piece of Harry. Rod acted as the dutiful secretary, scheduling appointments, and Harry would trek up to the main house to tell the tale of the outlaw novelist typing away in the swamp. Harry told People and the rest of the reporters that he had exorcised his demons for the time being and was bone dry, but the exorcism was not fully successful. More than once during his stay, Rod made the trip to the barn to find Harry in the grips of one of his binges. Harry would be on the floor hours, or days, deep into the bottle. The bare-bones literary command center would have transformed into the miserable pigsty of an The Worm Farm 279 alcoholic, the stench of urine in the air, waste of all kinds strewn around. While under the spell, Harry would stop eating or bathing; the longer the binge, the more time and effort would be required to clean him up. Rod would clean the barn and then drag Harry to his truck and drive him into Winnsboro, where a country doctor, a friend of the Elrods and a hard-core Christian, would help sober him up and send him back to the barn with a Bible and an admonition to follow the Lord. Harry's final binge, near the end of his stay, nearly pushed Rod over the edge. Rod wasn't the carefree student he'd been back in Gainesville anymore; now he was a family man trying to build a career and a reputation in his hometown. Watching over Harry, a task that had been exciting and new in Florida, was now becoming more and more of an aggravation. "Of all the years I've known Rod, that was the angriest I'd ever seen him," recalled Debbie. Harry took his Bible back to the barn after the last binge and, clearheaded once again, wrote the final chapters of The Knockout Artist. It was spring now, which meant the sweltering Louisiana heat was beginning to emerge, making life on the worm farm a little less pleasant. And in more ways than one, his sabbatical felt like it was reaching its conclusion. He composed a coda to Knockout in which his Bacon County antihero gets in his truck and heads east, all the while planning to do the same himself. On Easter Sunday 1987, Harry typed the final sentence of the novel and shortly thereafter packed up, bid the Elrods farewell, and pointed his pickup toward Gainesville. The Knockout Artist would be dedicated to Harry's Louisiana hosts: "For Rod and Debbie Elrod, who made every effort to keep me sane—and very nearly succeeded—during the struggle to write this book," he wrote. Late in his year on the farm, Harry had asked Rod to take on the responsibility to carry out a task he'd been thinking about most of his adult life: the scattering of his ashes when he died. He asked Rod to take his ashes to Bacon County and pour them into Big Hurricane Creek, where he had played as a child. It would be a year before The Knockout Artist showed up in bookstores. When it did, it was

taken as a confirmation that All We Need of Hell was not some aberration; Harry Crews was indeed back on his feet. Reviewers uniformly noted that his skills as a storyteller and satirist had not diminished. "Harry Crews writes like an angel, but one, of course, who is trapped in hell," wrote Chauncey Mabe in the South Florida Sun-Sentinel. The majority of the reviews had reservations, however, and they were all over the map. The book was either too much of a comic book, or not enough of one. The female characters were either too stereotypical, or too evil. And the vision was too dark, the story too outlandish, or the passages too cute. Charles Nicol, writing for the New York Times, discerned a change in Harry's work as he moved into late middle age: "Perhaps Mr. Crews has got too close to the sophisticates or, like his hero, has begun to find himself the subject of a dissertation or two. Has he quit knocking himself out, or is he just beginning?" And Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, also for the Times, wrote that when reading a Crews novel, "One doesn't pick up on its shortcomings; one allows oneself to be seduced. But one never forgets that one is being seduced. Or that Mr. Crews is a carnival barker of a slick and profitable freak show." Perhaps the most important development in Harry's life to come from the publication of The Knockout Artist wasn't the critical reaction or the sales figures, or even the acknowledgment in literary circles that he was once again a productive and formidable writer of fiction. What would have even greater ramifications for Harry's life was the fact that The Knockout Artist somehow wound up in the hands of a pop-music superstar who counted herself among the exclusive club of celebrities so famous they didn't require a last name. And to Madonna, the book was a genuine, once-in-a-lifetime masterpiece.

To order the book or check out more materials check out: http://bloodboneandmarrow.com/

Writing against Death: A Conversation with Ted Geltner on Knowing and Working with Harry Crews

By Adam Van Winkle, CJ Editor

I wasn't surprised when I heard Ted Geltner won a Georgia Book Award this summer. He's only written the best literary biography I've read. What I was most eager to discuss with Geltner was his approach to the biography and his subject, Harry Crews. He was not interested, apparently, in writing a encyclopedia style third-person objective biography. Instead, Geltner weaves his biography with his interactions and impressions of the man himself, at the very end of Crews' road. I asked him about that choice and much more when I talked with him about his fantastic biography.

AV: You note the Crews biography started with an interview and feature assignment no one else wanted. Was Crews' reputation so bad no one estimated that interviewing one of America's greatest living writers was worth it? Or did he just not have that estimation at the time for them?

TG: To his fans and admirers he was one of America's great writers, but to a lot of citizens of Gainesville, Florida, he was just the crazy, slightly scary professor whose antics they'd heard about. Among reporters, Harry actually had a pretty good reputation. He was a bit intimidating at first, but he always picked up his phone (his number was listed in the Gainesville phonebook until the time of his death) and would answer any and all questions – just not always in language suitable for a family newspaper. Most of my colleagues had already had the pleasure, though, and were happy to pass the assignment on to me.

AV: What moment sparked the idea for a full biography if it started as an interview and feature assignment?

TG: I wrote many newspaper articles about Harry, and when I left the Sun I kept in touch with him. A few years later, I wrote an article about his time with Playboy and Esquire for an academic journal, and a book editor reached out to me with the idea of a full biography. I called Harry, who at that time was in failing health, but he thought it was a good idea and agreed to be involved. He definitely thought about his legacy (he started saving his letters years before he

published his first novel) and was pleased with the idea of a literary biography about him and his work.

AV: Did writing against Death cause an added anxiety or quality of importance (or both!) to the writing task? Did it cause anxiety about publishing and the author's estate once the project was nearing conclusion?

TG: At first I did feel pressure to get in all my questions quickly. But as I should have known by then, interviewing Harry was not really a question-answer process. Harry would decide what the topic was, and then talk. At best, you could guide him to certain subjects, but if he wasn't interested, he'd just move on anyway. Luckily, he was brilliant storyteller, and almost everything he said was of interest. After he died, the project took an even greater importance to me, because I felt that it needed to be both comprehensive and entertaining if it was going to do anything to give Harry's work the attention it deserves.

AV: In the way you write about your meeting with Crews to propose the biography, he seems in good humor about this failing health: "Ask me anything you want...But you'd better do it quick." Was this generally the case? Did that good humor swing at times?

TG: I knew Harry was ill and we didn't have much time. Several times I made the trip to Harry's house (I was living about two hours away at the time), only to be told by his nurse that he was too sick to talk that day. I learned the schedule of his drugs (the prescribed kind), since he was much less lucid afterwards. But when he was feeling good, he was extremely helpful, and in good spirits. He would usually spend the first few minutes complaining about his ailments, but after that he was ready to go.

AV: You know, you get the reader so into the research with you, beginning to end. That a natural thing that happened or did you deliberately want the reader in on the writing with you, as opposed to say a historical 3rd person kind of bio?

TG: It was a conscious decision to include some of my personal interactions with Harry in the book. My previous book was a biography of Jim Murray, the legendary sports columnist for the Los Angeles Times. Murray had died by the time I began writing that book, so I didn't have any personal experience with him. This book was a different experience because of my history with Harry. I had known him for eight years before I started the book. I felt the best way to acknowledge that to the reader was to make the relationship between the author and subject part of the book. I thought I could provide a somewhat more intimate portrait of Harry in those scenes because I was actually present.

AV: I've gotten so into your book, I gotta back off and ask, what kind of Crews fan are you? What'd you think of reading him before the biography and spending so much time with him? After? Favorite Crews novel?

TG: When I got that first newspaper assignment to interview Harry, I knew of him, but hadn't read a word he'd written. I started with "A Hawk is Dying," which at the time was being made into a movie in Gainesville (which was why I was writing about Harry in the first place.) I loved it – to this day it's probably my favorite Crews book. It's by far his most personal – he even includes his own address at the time in the book – and takes place in Gainesville. After that, I began to read his work – not all at once, but gradually, choosing whatever title intrigued me at the time. I worked through them, and didn't finish until near the completion of the biography a decade later. In total, I think the work of Harry Crews is of tremendous significance, and he will be remembered as an important voice in 20th century American literature.

AV: It is implied in the end that you and Harry, of course, wouldn't make it back to Bacon County to travel the roads of his home before he passed as he expressed a desire for. Have you gone and made the trip without him? Were his directions any good?

TG: Yes, I made a few trips to Bacon County, and Harry's directions were spot on. It's kind of a nothing place, and you wouldn't give it a second's thought if you hadn't heard of Harry Crews. His work instilled so much meaning into it, however, that when I finally went it felt almost like a religious experience. A few of Harry's cousins live there and showed me some of the important places, including a shack Harry had lived in 70 years before. If you got rid of a few convenience stores and fast-food restaurants, the place probably

looks basically as it did when Harry was growing up, and making up those tall tales out of the Sears Catalog.

The Baptism of Laurence Finn
By Andrew Rooney

Laurence had cut his foot open when he was breaking the blocks for firewood. No one was around so he had no choice but to wrap the boot with duct tape and drive himself into Alamosa. In the truck he operated the gas and brake with his left foot. He could feel the slush and squish of the blood in his right boot.

On the drive into town, the sun began to set in the west behind the San Juans. As it dropped over the horizon, it lit the Sangre de Cristos on the other side of the valley and turned them soft crimson. At one of the hot water ponds just off the highway, a coyote surprised a marsh duck and carried it off into the chamisa.

Spring had come to the San Luis Valley, but a week of freezing temperatures followed and the cold pushed against the truck's windows.

Laurence was lightheaded and wondered what would happen if he passed out. Would it be like the famous story where the gold miner froze to death in Alaska? Maybe the sheriff would find him the next morning stiff on the side of the road, and after looking at his foot ask the deputy what the hell happened.

In the hallway of the emergency room his boot left light waffle prints of blood on the floor.

The receptionist quickly put Laurence in a wheelchair and got a nurse's attention. As the nurse was cutting his boot off the doctor came in. He inserted a needle into the fleshy opening to deaden the pain.

"You're a lucky guy," the doctor said to Laurence, "half an inch either way."

The maul hadn't cut any of the tendons, only sliced a piece of his big toe off and partially separated it from the one next to it. Laurence felt nauseous and then lost consciousness.

The nurse who removed his boot wheeled him up to his room when they were finished. She told him he would have to stay off it and hop around on crutches for a while. Laurence asked what her name was.

"Cecilia," she said, "Romero."

He thought she was a handsome woman, tall, with good shoulders and a chest.

"How are you going to get home, Laurence?" Cecilia said.

"Not sure, maybe call my brother or one of my friends."

Laurence looked at the bandage and told himself cutting his foot open was a stupid thing to do. He was a little hesitant to call his brother or one of his friends because they would rag on him even more.

When Cecilia came back after her shift, she asked how his foot was feeling and if he'd called anyone for a ride.

"Not yet," he said. "Trying to think up a good story to explain what happened."

Cecilia smiled. She had four brothers and had heard them tease and taunt each other growing up.

"My brother Andres and I will be going down that way tomorrow," she said. "He could drive your truck and you could ride with me if you want."

Laurence didn't have to think long about the offer. "That'd be great. I'd appreciate it. You live out that way?"

"I live here in Alamosa, but we have our family place outside of Ojo, on the road to Espanola."

Cecilia patted Laurence on the shoulder and said they would come after her shift to take him home. That night he dreamed of a tall, good-looking woman.

Cecilia's brother Andres came early and introduced himself. He had the same square shoulders as Cecilia, but with more intense eyes. He took Laurence's keys and got the truck started.

In Cecilia's car, Laurence watched her profile as she drove.

Cecilia said she read in his chart that he worked for the BLM and was curious what he did. When he said "manage foresters" she asked what that meant.

"Plant trees, supervise cutting contracts, make sure people and animals are where they're supposed to be."

"You're not married, Laurence?"

"Once, in another lifetime," he said.

"No babies?" Cecilia said.

"We thought we wanted some at first, then as things began to come apart we gave up on the idea, just stopped talking about it. We were living in Denver and she moved back with her folks in Pueblo to finish school and I took this job with the BLM. We kind of limped apart. That was six years ago."

"Lots of people come to the valley to get away," Cecilia said, "escape something or someone. Sometimes they figure it out, sometimes they just keep on escaping."

As they drove, they watched the fields and farm animals pass on either side of the car. The horses in small pastures stood together with their rumps turned into the chill wind. Behind them Andres flashed his lights, pulled the truck over, and walked up to his sister's car. He wanted to know if she was all right and when she said she was, he got back in the pick-up and drove on. Cecilia explained that because she was the youngest, Andres and her other brothers were a little protective.

"How about you Cecilia," Laurence said. "Why'd you come to the valley?"

"I tell people Miners' Hospital in Raton was closing, and it was, but the truth is I was escaping a life sentence."

"Somehow you don't look like a wanted criminal."

"I was wanted, that's for sure, by a man I'd known since high school, Bobby Morales, a doctor. And it was complicated by the fact that my family knew his family and there were all the 'familia' traditions to consider. It was expected that we would marry. But one day I looked at Bobby when he was walking around in his running shorts and asked myself if I wanted to share my life with him, make babies, get old together, and the answer came back no, I don't think so."

Laurence interrupted. "Sorry, Cecilia, it's the next one, Road 15, right at Estrella. So, did you guys get married?"

"No and at first I didn't know exactly what I was going to do. Then when the hospital decided to close, he wanted me to go with him to Las Cruces, get married that spring. I said I was going to Alamosa and that I didn't want to get married. Bobby got upset and slapped me."

"Had he done that before?"

"He'd gotten angry, but never abusive. He said he wasn't going to let me go. I told him I wasn't asking his permission. After I moved he called two or three times a day, and would show up on his days off. Then our families got involved and there were some problems."

"Sorry to interrupt Cecilia but at the T, turn left on County Line and then right on 16. I'm down a half mile, green roof on the right, bloody footprints in the yard."

Andres pulled up behind them when they stopped. Laurence's dingo barked and jumped up on him when he got out. The house was chilly inside and Cecilia's brother started a fire in the wood-burning stove. He stacked enough wood to last a week.

"How about I make you a pot of hot tea before we leave?" Cecilia said. Tea sounded good to Laurence. He was tired and his foot had a dull throb. He drank the tea when it was ready and took more of the medication.

Cecilia said she would stop by on her way back from Ojo Caliente the next day. She left her phone number just in case he had any problems.

"You going to be all right?"

Laurence said he would and Andres shook his hand and said "Laters, Lorenzo."

When Tony looked at Laurence's foot, the first thing he said was "Man, what a dumbshit thing to do." He also wondered how he drove into Alamosa with his foot like that and how he got home.

Tony was Laurence's younger brother who lived in Del Norte. He'd followed Laurence to the valley because he was having problems in Denver with his relationship, DUIs, and keeping a job.

"So the nurse that cuts your boot off brings you home?" Tony asked Laurence. "What'd she look like?"

"What does what she looked like have to do with anything?" Laurence said irritated. "She offered to give me a ride and I took her up on it."

"I can always tell with you," Tony said.

"Tell what?"

"When you've got your nose wide open. What was her name?"

"It *was* Cecilia and probably still is. And I don't have my nose wide open."

"Cecilia what?"

"Romero."

"So what does she look like? Big, little, tits, ass, what?"

"I'd forgotten for a second what a dickhead you can be sometimes Tony."

"Oh, sorry, Mr. PC. She's from New Mexico and she's a nurse, so she's probably short, maybe carrying a little baby fat, kinda cute. How am I doing?"

"Tall, lean, square shoulders."

"Finally, man, no more miniature women. She got any money? What kind of car does she drive?"

"I don't know why I didn't ask to see her checkbook, Tony. You know it's no wonder Carmen and most of the women you date end up dumping you, listen to yourself."

"Carmen didn't dump me. We decided not to continue the relationship. She was starting to do the baby, baby stay home and watch videos bullshit. And I wasn't ready for that crap."

"Very thoughtful, very responsible."

"It's in the blood, brother, trust me, it's in the blood."

Cecilia came just after one the next day. She brought a pot of fresh green chile, beans, and homemade tortillas. Laurence washed up while Cecilia reheated the food. He'd only eaten the leftover pizza from the night before and was famished.

"The smell of fresh green chile is probably my favorite in the world," Laurence said.

"How is the chile?" Cecilia said. "It's my grandmother's recipe."

"Next time you see your grandmother, thank her for me. It's wonderful. The beans and tortillas are wonderful too."

"I probably won't be talking to her for some time, Laurence. She died a few years ago."

Laurence was embarrassed at first, and then they both laughed.

Cecilia put the leftovers away as Laurence ate in silence. Neither felt compelled to talk or turn on the radio. A flock of noisy Canada geese flew over the house, then landed in the barley field across the road. As the geese stretched to land, they could hear the chuffing of their wings and their raucous honking.

Cecilia listened by the sink with her arms folded. With his crutches, Laurence came and stood by her.

"It's very quiet here, Laurence," Cecilia said.

"I like it a lot," Laurence said. "At first I didn't know how to handle it, made me nervous. Once I got used to it, though, I liked it and now everywhere else seems noisy. How about you, Cecilia, too quiet?"

"Our place is on the Rio Grande. Some of it's orchard and some is farm. Most of the time it's pretty quiet. There was noise in our house growing up, but there was always someplace to go if you wanted to get away. And we're the kind of family that needs to be away from neighbors. Where I live in Alamosa is quiet, but it's still a town."

Laurence walked Cecilia out to her car. She shook his hand with both of hers and touched his arm. She promised she would call in a couple days to check on him.

In the house Laurence sat at the kitchen table, remembering the first time he crossed La Veta Pass into the San Luis Valley. To the north he saw the road to Salida and the green rings of the pivot sprinklers on the barley fields and potato farms. To the south was San Antonio Mountain and New Mexico. In the west was the wilderness of the San Juans and Wolf Creek Pass. If you wanted to get away, this was the place.

The other BLM crew manager and a friend of Laurence's visited that evening. Tony came a little later with a case of beer, chips and salsa, and one of his buddies. Laurence had to tell the accident story twice.

After everyone had had a few beers, Randy, the other crew manager, insisted Laurence take off the bandages and show them the stitches. All agreed the sewed-up black and blue foot was damned ugly.

"I know you almost whacked your toes off, and I know you drove yourself into Alamosa, and I know a good-looking nurse brought you home, Laurence," Randy said, "but you know what I really want to know?"

"I'll bite, Randy," Laurence said. "What do you really want to know?"

"What I'd really like to know is were you wearing your fucking hard hat and your safety glasses at the time?"

The five men burst out laughing. It was the simple tension release Laurence needed and for the moment he was glad they were all there. He'd been thinking about Cecilia and how alone he was. He'd been spending too much time inside his head. He didn't like it and couldn't remember ever feeling that vulnerable.

When Cecilia called that night, Tony answered the phone and winked when he handed it to Laurence. He told her he had company and would call later. That night he drank too much and stayed up late talking. He even smoked a little of the pot Arvin, Tony's friend, had brought. The next day he tried not to think about Cecilia. He put off calling her until late that evening. He thought of Tony's winking, mocking face as they talked.

Cecilia was having friends over that Saturday, she said, and wondered would he come for dinner. She would pick him up and take him home. Laurence told her he'd love to but chided himself later for saying it too quickly

Cecilia wanted to know if he'd started soaking his foot and he said he would begin in the morning. She chastised him for not doing it right away.

Laurence liked that she was concerned about him, or thought he did. Why was that such a hard thing to accept, her concern, he wondered?

From the living room windows Laurence could see directly into the trees and bushes against the house. It was close enough to the foothills that many migrating songbirds passed by on their way north. While he waited for his foot to heal he watched the pairs hopping and pecking and flitting.

Cecilia came Saturday evening before Laurence had finished dressing. She was wearing a cream angora sweater and tight black slacks.

In the car, when there was a break in the conversation, Laurence said, "Cecilia...."

"Yes, Laurence."

He wanted to tell her how great she looked. He wanted to touch her.

"Cecilia," he said, "thanks for the ride home and the green chile and tortillas and everything."

"You're welcome, Laurence. It was nothing. I was glad to do it."

Cecilia put her hand on Laurence's shoulder and then lightly massaged the back of his neck. He relaxed in the seat and closed his eyes.

A little after seven, Cecilia's two friends, Audra and Annette, arrived with bottles of wine, fresh smoked trout, and Cuban salsa music. They had short hair and Laurence thought they might have been related.

Audra had been a nun and worked in South America, Peru mostly. Annette had been in the Peace Corps in Colombia and grown up in southern Arizona, near Ft. Huachuca.

Cecilia made poached chicken with a red chile-garlic pesto and served it over rice. The chile came from their farm.

After dinner, Audra and Annette gently unwrapped Laurence's foot and washed the wound and the stitches. As they cleaned it, they asked about his family, his religion, and his job at the BLM.

When they finished, Audra called to Cecilia in the kitchen and insisted she come, they wanted to play music and demonstrate a dance step.

"We'll start with the basic steps first," Audra said. "One, two, one two three." Audra and Annette were accomplished dancers. Cecilia watched their feet while Laurence watched their faces and bodies.

Laurence liked these women. They were easy to be with, fun, smart. He didn't feel like he had to be "on" or that he had to take care of them, which is how he felt with his wife.

After Audra and Annette had gone, Cecilia rejoined Laurence on the sofa, demonstrating a salsa step as she approached. Laurence wanted to dance with her, press her angora sweater against him. He put his arm around her and kissed her cheek.

"Did you have a good time tonight, Laurence?"

"I had a great time, Cecilia.

"When your foot heals, we'll go dancing Laurence. You must be pretty tired? Do you want to go home now?"

"No, I want to sit here all night with you, Cecilia."

Laurence watched Cecilia's eyes, watched her head turn away, and knew he had said too much.

"Laurence," Cecilia said pausing, "it's not that I don't want to be with you, it's just that I don't want to rush things, go too fast, make another mistake."

On the way home, Laurence and Cecilia didn't talk much. Laurence thought he shouldn't have pushed it, that he should've left a great evening as it was, and he could see she felt badly too. She helped him into the house and they stood for an awkward moment in the dark. She put her arms around him and kissed him on the cheek.

"Cecilia," Laurence said, "stay the night."

"I will, Laurence, but not tonight. When we get to know each other."

Laurence held Cecilia tightly, tried to kiss her again, and she had to struggle to break free. It was a brief, tense moment. Without saying goodnight, she left the house quickly, got in her car, and drove away.

From the porch, Laurence followed Cecilia's headlights and taillights as she braked at the stop sign, then turned from Road 16 onto County Line Road. He watched as she turned again onto Road 15 and gradually disappeared. Laurence cursed himself and smashed one of his crutches against the side of the house. When he got cold he went inside, banked the wood stove, and stood by its radiant heat. He leaned on one crutch as the fire behind the stove's baffles lit the room with an orange glow.

Laurence began working part-time the next week and was glad for the preoccupation. Cecilia left two phone messages while he was out, but he didn't return the calls.

On Friday he met Randy and the BLM crews in Alamosa for a beer. After he'd caught up on work gossip and shot a few bad games of pool, Laurence sat and ordered a bowl of posole. Tony and Arvin arrived later.

When the men at his table had exhausted every other topic, the conversation turned to women. And from women it moved to Laurence and Cecilia, with Tony initiating the discussion.

"So how are you doing with that nurse?" Tony asked Laurence. "What's her name?"

"Cecilia," Laurence said after an extended pause.

"Yeah. So, how're you and Cecilia the nurse doing? You guys get down to the...."

"Don't even ask, Tony," Laurence said tensely.

"I used to date a New Mexico chic," Arvin volunteered. "Played hard to get, man, wanted to do a lot of kissy face but she never wanted to make the beast. Catholic girl, know what I'm saying. Finally had to cut her loose."

Laurence shook his head, finished his beer, and was ready to leave.

"Oh, and dig this," Arvin said. "They got this thing with squash in New Mexico, it's like a tradition. If the mom serves you squash at dinner, it's all over for you, man."

"What do you mean," Laurence said, "it's all over?"

"Like it's all over. No more tacos for you, baby. I heard about this guy once that didn't get the message, a doctor, and the brothers came to his house and burned up some of it and almost burned him up inside. New Mexico bitches, man."

"Arvin," Laurence said, "did you make that up or is that a real story?"

"No, man, that's a for-real story. Swear to god."

"Weren't you going to go over to her place on Saturday, meet some of her friends?" Tony said. "You spend the night?"

"It was great. And no I didn't spend the night. Cecilia cooked this chicken dish and her two friends brought music and showed us how to salsa."

"This was another couple or what?" Tony said.

"Two nurse friends of hers, from the hospital, nice women."

"What'd these two nurses look like? Kinda stocky, short hair?"

"What are you asking me, Arvin? You trying to figure out if they were lesbians?"

"Could be a thing, you know, the two of 'em, maybe the three of 'em, them being nurses and all, dancing with each other."

"Arvin, what does them being nurses have to do with anything? Anybody ever tell you you're screwed up in the head?"

"Hey, Laurence, don't get heavy with Arvin. I was thinking the same thing," Tony said, "wondering if this was some kind of nurse menagerie or something."

"Ditto Tony. Both of you are a couple classic fucking assholes. Do me a favor and go sit someplace else."

With that Tony threw a full glass of beer into Laurence's face. Laurence reached across the table and cuffed him hard on the ear. Enraged, Tony shoved the table out of the way and Laurence's crewmembers had to step between them.

On the drive home, there were very few cars on the road and Laurence tried not to think about Tony. Venus was hanging low over the southern horizon, so low, he thought, it looked like a ranch light. When he pulled into his yard, a car was there waiting and Laurence found Cecilia asleep to the radio. He tapped to wake her.

"Laurence," Cecilia said rolling down the window, "will you go for a drive with me?"

Laurence leaned on his crutches and didn't say anything.

"Please Laurence, I want to take you to a special place."

Cecilia drove the car south to Antonito and across the New Mexico line. Outside Tres Piedras, in the pinon forest, a red fox waited by the side of the highway until they had passed, then crossed the road behind them with a prairie dog in its mouth.

"I want to take you to my favorite place on Earth, Laurence," Cecilia said. "It's in the hills outside of Ojo. I know you'll like it there."

They didn't talk for a time and there was only the sound of late-night ranchera music on the radio from Albuquerque. Laurence was preoccupied with the story Arvin told about the doctor who was nearly burned up. Cecilia smelled the beer on him and asked if he'd been at the bar. He said he had but didn't comment on the disagreement.

"Did something happen, Laurence, at the bar?"

"Oh, Tony and I kind of got into it tonight."

"Did you fight with him?"

"Close. Some name calling and beer throwing. Nothing monumental."

Cecilia turned off the highway, crossed an iron bridge over the Rio Grande, and the car began to climb up into the forest overlooking Ojo Caliente.

"Laurence, did you get upset with Tony because he said something about me?"

"That was part of it. One of Tony's friends told a story about a doctor, maybe you heard about this, who was nearly burned up in his house when he didn't get the hint that this woman didn't want to see him. According to Arvin, in New Mexico there's a custom about cooked squash and if the family serves it the relationship is over and I guess he didn't get the message."

"It's called *calabasas*," Cecilia said, "and that story is about Roberto. My brothers made a mistake, Laurence, it was an accident. They went to Bobby's house and one thing led to another. They never meant to start a fire."

"How could something like that happen?" Laurence said. "How could his house just catch on fire?"

"I don't know, Laurence, but my brothers said they never meant to cause him any harm and Bobby never disagreed with them. Will everything be all right between you and Tony?"

"Yeah, we'll figure it out, somehow. Might take us a few months."

"Cecilia," Laurence said pausing.

"Yes, Laurence?"

"I need to apologize for my behavior the other night."

"That's all right, Laurence, I know."

Laurence turned his head to watch the scrubby pinons passing. He thought about laughing and crying at the same time.

Cecilia turned the car onto a nearly invisible track, drove for a moment, then pulled off into a small clearing. "We're here," she said.

In the dark Laurence couldn't see much but he could smell hot water vapor. Cecilia came around the car to help him with his crutches. With her arm around his waist, she led him on a path through the trees. Between the branches ahead, Laurence could make out the reflection of a steaming pool, illuminated by the moon.

The pool was a little larger than a hot tub and sat in the cup of a rock outcropping. There was a stone bench and a beach chair on one side. Cecilia steered Laurence to the bench and sat next to him with her arm still around his waist. They sat there quietly for a time without moving.

"You come here pretty often, Cecilia?"

"Not so much now that I live in Alamosa," she said. "But I used to come here a lot when I was in high school. I brought Bobby here a few times, too, and my brothers come once in a while."

Cecilia lit a candle and put her hair up in a bun as she talked. Then she stood and began removing her

clothes, laying each item on the chair. When she had taken all of her clothes off, she got into the water.

"Laurence," Cecilia said softly, "take off your clothes and I'll help you into the water."

Laurence removed his shirt and pants and his winter skin glowed in the dark. Cecilia came for him and helped him into the pool.

As they kissed, Cecilia said, "Relax Laurence, let me," and with her arms she lifted him until he was flat in the water. Cecilia supported Laurence firmly with one hand and with the other, stroked his body gently. Laurence closed his eyes and let Cecilia bathe him. In the crisp air and warm water, he breathed in her sweetness and accepted the gift.

Not far off, in the New Mexico night, coyotes began to sing, and together they listened to the plaintive music.

Laurence was a little surprised when he heard the sound of the first car, then the second, their doors opening and closing, and the approaching footsteps.

A Crown of Thorns
By Patrick Michael Finn

Dusk when we crossed the wash that runs behind Booth Gentry's ranch and a hot wind blew out of the west and dusted our horses and quad runners. This happened in California, about fifteen miles from the Arizona line. Pastor Noonchester brought the rope and Elder Higley brought the bullwhip. The blood train rumbled in the distance on a sunset the color of abortion gone wrong.

We found Booth Gentry naked and ashamed upstairs in his dead baby's bed.

"This is the bank's property now," I told him. "Let's go. Get up."

"Deputy," he said. "I may have a bedsore on my back that weeps and stinks, but being laid up all alone is the deepest burn I've ever felt. I quit feeding the animals and one by one they fell over, bloated, and burst. And now the blood train is coming. So why don't you gentlemen kindly have yourselves a nice evening and leave me in peace."

"Now Booth," I began, but Elder Higley was on him with the bullwhip. To this day I can't tell which sound was worse, the crack of the braided leather or Booth Gentry's wild screams.

Then we got him out of bed and down to the corral in a sheet with clowns all over it. He was weeping quietly, limping, bloody with cuts from the whip.

The air was thick with the reek of dead beasts: goats, horses, pigs, chicken, and cattle. The carcasses had long since seeped the last of their death juices and were now just dusty stiff hides ending off in splayed limbs. I directed two young deacons to build a fire in the drylot. Black smoke rose from the burning fur. Feathers, whiskers, hooves crackled deep in the flames. I had to cover my mouth to hold back a gag.

Pastor Noonchester tied Booth to the giant tamarisk tree at the edge of the property. Then he asked the rest of us to join hands for fellowship.

"Lord?" Noonchester said, but I was about out of prayers. I lowered my head. This territory of the earth had carved a cross into my heart. A big twisted cross. The sunsets were even getting tough to stomach, not to mention all the crank and angel dust the county's barn garbage couldn't smoke enough of. Battered wives. Butchered children wrapped in garbage bags and buried under piles of rocks. And now Booth, the starving bearded wretch. But the law needed its meat

to survive and I had become foreman of the slaughterhouse.

"Amen," Pastor Noonchester said.

We followed him to the tree to untie Booth so we could fashion the rope into a noose.

"Hold it steady there," Elder Higley said through his big Bat Masterson mustache. "Don't you move, Booth."

But Booth seemed resigned to everything, the lashes across his back and shoulders already drying into black scabs that clung to the sheet of clowns about him. I envied his serenity.

We hanged him naked from the tamarisk tree. He didn't put up any sort of fight. Didn't say a word in fact and barely breathed when we noosed him and propped him on the horse that charged off when I fired the pistol. His neck snapped and he violently voided his bowels.

I radioed for a helicopter to take me straight down to Tijuana, where I promptly secured a whore and had her bathe me while I enjoyed a phony Cuban cigar in a room above a quiet, sultry topless bar right off Revolution Street.

When I expired I died a spiritual death and dried myself off nearly in tears. She went back to work and told me to let myself out.

"The room is already paid for," she said, but I didn't remember paying for the room or for anything else. She could sense my despair and got out while she could. She gave me two looks before she left. The first one was tender, but the second severe. I sat on the empty bed, trembling. I knew exactly what she meant, but I forgot what it was once I was alone. The loneliness was so bad that I could only take a couple more minutes before I fled as well.

Down on the damp streets under the grimy light of dawn, I discovered in a fit that my gun, my wallet, and my badge were all gone. I ran to find the woman but the topless bar was dark and bolted. When I peered through its cracked and dusty glass the place looked like it had been closed for years.

And so did the rest of Tijuana. Rusted sheets of metal had been pulled over all the windows and doors. Stray dogs nosed the black water that ran along the gutters, but even they wouldn't lap at it.

Without any identification the Customs agents wouldn't let me across the border. I didn't have the strength to beg. I slouched back toward the city, looking at nothing but the flood-buckled sidewalks before me. I was headed to the topless bar to look for the whore and before I could get there I found her across the street. She was actually looking for me. She pointed me out to a healthy-looking Mexican boy about eighteen years old on her arm, and together they crossed.

"This is my son," she told me. "I think you've already met."

"How so?"

"I didn't think you'd remember me. But we did indeed meet two years ago by an irrigation canal just outside of Yuma."

"Ah, the handoff," I said.

"That's right," the boy assured me.

"You know I've spent all the money," I said.

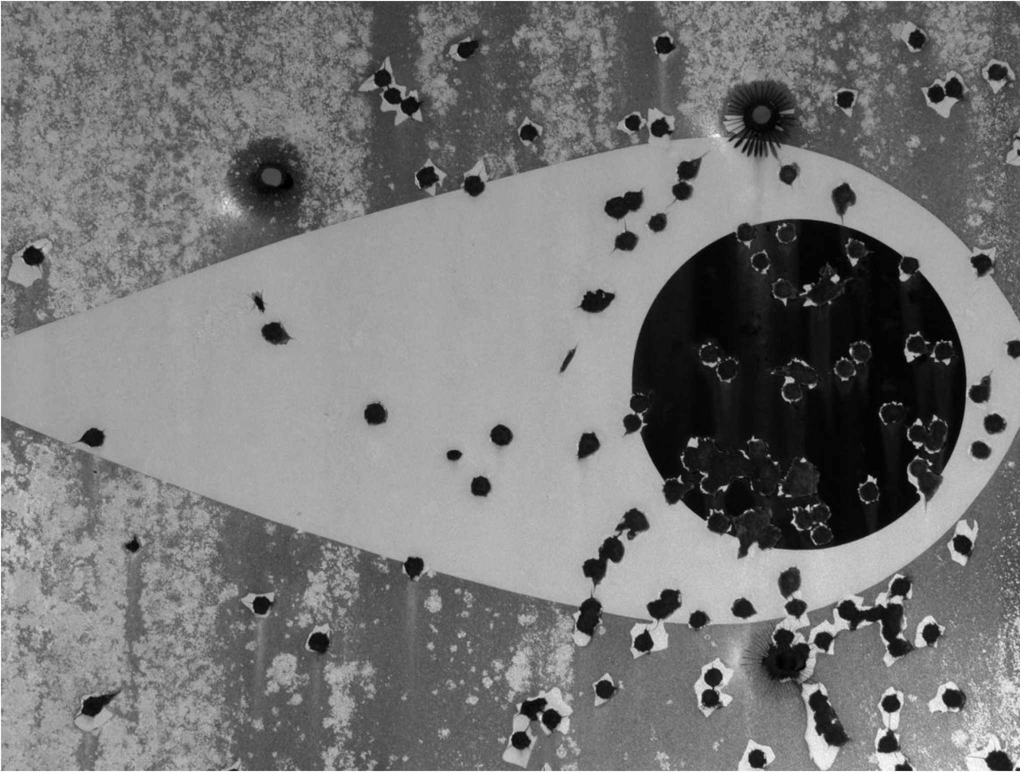
"I'm not after the rest of the money," the boy said.

They each put a hand down on my back and guided me to start walking. My legs trembled. I'd lost about ten pounds that night alone, and I knew I was about to lose ten more.

"I think you're going to be here for a while," the boy said. "And I think you're going to make some interesting company."

Backroads Bullets
By Kathleen Galvin

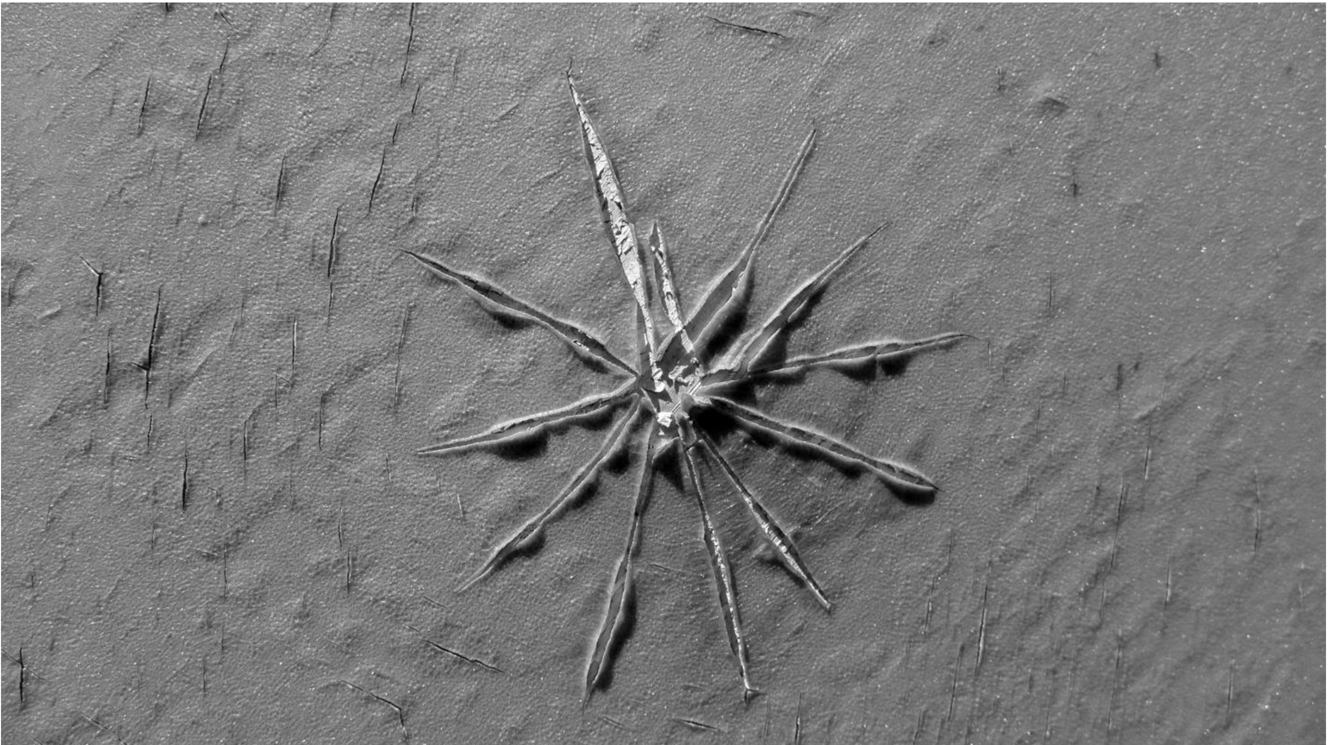
Framed



Riddle Me

Small Town Prometheus

Solar Flares



Lone Star

Green Field

Stop Jesus

Letting Go
by William R. Soldan

for Delores

Bobby Voss sat at the end of the bar, the corner closest to the jukebox, and as the last few people who'd attended Dee's funeral straggled in, he was already working on his second shot and chaser. He hadn't stayed until the end of the service, couldn't stand it anymore—everyone bowing their heads and wiping their noses, looking so damn sober and sad. The last thing Dee would have wanted was for people to mull about mourning her. "Get your heads outta your asses," she would've said. "Stop puttin' up such a fuss." But what really got to Bobby was the fact that no one gave two shits one way or another that Dee was gone, except that it meant one less person to get generous and buy rounds on the first of the month. And now they'd brought their insincere grief back to the bar with them, putting their arms around one another, raising their glasses and getting nostalgic.

After his third drink, Bobby went to the juke, popped in a quarter, and punched some random numbers, not really caring what came on so long as it drowned out the noise a little. Back on his stool, he waited for Sally the bartender to bring him another beer while he munched stale pretzels and stared at the Polaroid photograph in his other hand.

Meanwhile, people kept on drinking, talking, and telling lies.

Sam Harrison was at the opposite corner of the bar, his usual spot, looking stoic and wise with his silver hair and two-tone beard. He was good people, Bobby thought, the only one in the lot of them other than Sally and maybe Joan Simpkins, an older gal who had played Bridge with Dee a couple nights a week. The rest of the crowd, however—good enough to drink with, he supposed.

A pall of tobacco smoke stretched across the bar in an ever widening, ever thickening canvass. Through the haze, he watched and listened to Wade Little, who wasn't little at all but about six and a half feet tall and built like freight car. He was standing next to Gil Cunningham and Roger Kneff on the other side of the room, his loud voice carrying over the music.

Wade began telling a story about how he'd done some snow removal and other odd jobs for Dee over the years.

"Time's been tough since seventy-seven, seventy-eight," Wade said. "First the mills, then the blizzard. Ol' Dee helped me out, though. Kept the power on, at least."

The others nodded, as if each had a similar memory of Dee's charitable nature.

With each new anecdote, someone would raise a glass and say, "To Dee," and the others would follow suit, toasting to the woman they all claimed to adore.

Maybe it was the bottom-shelf whiskey that did it, but after about ten minutes of listening to Wade and his companions go on jawing, Bobby couldn't keep his mouth shut any longer.

"Seventy-eight was bad all right," he said, raising his voice so they all knew he had joined the conversation. "Lot of folks needed work. Lot of folks paid for services never rendered, too, if I'm not mistaken."

They all looked at Bobby, who had put the Polaroid back in his breast pocket and was now clicking the lid of his Zippo while he spoke.

"In fact, if my memory serves, Dee gave you an advance, didn't she, Wade? Exclusive dibs on snow in the winter, grass in the summer, and leaves in the fall. So tell us, how many times did you get over that way, you know, to do the job you were paid to do?"

Wade Little's flat pug face sagged, as if suddenly losing its battle against gravity.

"What are you gettin' at, Voss?" he asked.

"Oh, just that maybe things aren't always the way we remember 'em."

The process of reading between the lines seemed to cause Wade physical discomfort, and he finally said, "You callin' me a liar?"

"If the shoe fits," Bobby said, punctuating the end of the statement with the Zippo: *Clink*.

"You oughta slow down, bud, 'fore you get yourself all worked up," Wade said.

"First of all, I ain't your bud, Wade"—*Clack*—"so let's go ahead and clear that up right now. Second,"—*Clink*—"you left Dee snowed in for nearly five days one time before she finally called someone else to come over." *Clack*. Bobby stared at him, challenging Wade to respond.

"For your information," Wade said, intoning as much self-righteousness as his pea-sized brain could muster, "my truck was broke down for a while, not that it's any business of yours. A lot of us were snowed in that year."

"I don't suppose you ever paid her back for the days you failed to show up, though?" *Clink.* Bobby didn't give him a chance to say anything else. "No, of course not. Spent it all by then, right?" *Clack.*

Bobby was on his feet by then, walking down to their end of the bar. So far, no one else had bothered to chime in.

But the others weren't off the hook.

He was tired of Wade already, so Bobby turned his eyes on Gil Cunningham. "And what about you?" he said.

Gil sat up, looking confused. "Wuddaya mean, me?"

"You want me to get started on that half-assed duct tape job you passed off as plumbing when Dee paid you to fix her burst pipes? 'Cause I'd be happy to talk about that, if you want."

Gil just stared down at the bar, didn't even comment.

Roger was next.

Bobby directed his gaze at the man. "And how much did you still owe her on that Riviera, the one she let you make payments on, the one she signed over to you up front and let you have in good faith? What was the story you gave her, the reason you didn't have the money month after month? What was it? Child support payment? Or maybe it was fines from that DWI you got when you totaled your last car. Whatever it was, I'm sure you were real convincing."

"It's not like she drove the damn thing, anyway," Roger said. "She told me I could pay when I was able."

Bobby laughed. "It's funny that no matter how strapped everyone is, they manage to drink away hours a day in this goddamn place." He shook his head, and finished the rest of his beer.

"Who the hell do you think you are, Bobby?" Roger said, going from embarrassed to indignant. "You think you're some kind of saint or something?"

"Me?" Bobby said. "Nah, I'm far from it. But then, I don't pretend to be, neither."

They'd all been looking at him, but now turned their eyes away.

Wade motioned for Sally to bring him a refill.

"Each one of you acts like you went out of your way to do things for Dee," Bobby said, "when all it ever was was you dipping your hand in her pockets because she was good enough to let you take advantage. And I'll guarantee she never once called any of you out on it, because that wasn't her style."

Bobby had Sally pour him another shot and beer. When she placed them in front of him, he emptied the draft in three gulps, but held off on the shooter.

No one had really engaged in Bobby's deliberate confrontation, most likely because they all knew he spoke the truth. The rest of the patrons—some regulars, some friends of the regulars—sat talking amongst themselves, drinking their drinks and not paying the scene much mind.

Bobby lit a cigarette, pocketed the Zippo, and reiterated: "Nope, I'm no saint. Hell, I might be just as much of a piece of shit as the rest of you for all I know." He took a pull from the cigarette and exhaled two streams of smoke through his nose. "Now, Dee," he continued. "That old broad was a damn saint."

Bobby stood for a long minute just staring at the wall across the bar. Dee had often told him that every moment of every day we stand at a fork in the road, that while God knows our choices before we do, he still gives us the will to decide. Bobby didn't know about all that. But he did know that he stood at such a place now.

"To Dee," he finally said, raising the shot glass. There was hesitation, but several others soon joined him in the toast. He downed the shot, and as it burned its way through him, Bobby held the glass in his fist, feeling its weight.

The conversation began to pick back up. He snubbed his cigarette out in the metal ashtray on the bar, tightened his fist around the small glass.

Finally, Bobby said, "As for the rest of you . . . well, you can just go fuck yourselves." Then he hurled the shot glass. Wade, despite his size, moved out of the way as it sailed past his face, close enough that he must have felt the breeze. The glass shattered against the wall above the pinball machine.

A murmur of surprised voices erupted, the scraping sound of stools being pushed away from the bar. Wade had Bobby by the collar before the pieces of glass had finished settling on the floor. "You got a real problem, you know that?" Wade said to him through clenched teeth.

"Maybe you're not as dumb as you look, Wade," Bobby said.

Wade gut-punched him.

"Jesus Christ!" Sally shouted. "Take it outside!"

Wade began dragging him toward the door, but Sam Harrison and someone Bobby didn't know intervened, getting between them.

"You little cocksucker!" Wade yelled from behind a wall of men. "I'm gonna whup your ass, boy!"

"Get outta here, Bobby," Sam said, escorting him out the door into the overcast April afternoon. "Get some air, and get your head together, for Christ's sake."

"Suppose I could stand to anyway," Bobby said. "The bullshit in there's thick enough to choke us all."

"You really are a crazy sonofabitch, Bobby, you know that?"

"Hey, don't go gettin' my mom involved, now," Bobby said. "That's disrespectful." Then Bobby grinned and put up his dukes, danced around Sam Harrison like a fighting leprechaun in the gravel parking lot.

They both laughed. Bobby stopped and patted the older man on the shoulder, a gesture that seemed to express a repressed gratitude.

When Bobby climbed into his beat-up Bonneville and started the engine, Sam said, "You really think you should be drivin'?"

Bobby shut the door, looked at the man through the open window as he put the car in gear. "You know something, Sam?" he said. "You're all right."

#

Bobby drove to the outskirts of town, meandered along winding two-lanes banked with scrub and maple and the last lingering patches of a late March snow. When he again neared town, he turned onto Hillstead, passing ramshackle houses with stripped siding, clothes lines sagging above dead lawns, and broken down campers in rutted driveways. About a mile up, where the street curved and sloped down to Main, he slowed to a stop.

To the right was St. John's, where he'd accompanied Dee a few times for worship, despite his reservations. It meant a lot to her, he knew that, so he kept his doubts to himself. Above the arched doorway was a single word inscribed in the wide keystone: Sanctuary. A place of refuge. It was something everyone sought at one time or another, and for Bobby Voss, the first time had come when he was only eleven years old.

It was the summer of 1968, the weekend he and his mother had first moved to Miles Junction. His father had laid down his chopper on an icy switchback and slid right into the path of a box truck when Bobby was only three years old, so now it was just the two of them. Well, mostly. They'd rented an old garage apartment at the bottom of a long, eastward sloping drive that intersected the main road into Pennsylvania and disappeared into an overgrown field that stretched all the way to the turnpike. That night, the yard was full of motorcycles and rusted-out cars, while the small residence was full of pale women with husky voices and scary-looking men with names like Chewy, Red Dog, and Spider. His mother's friends. She'd always had friends like these. They'd be in and out for a while, eventually replaced by a new cast of characters, just like the others—bloodshot eyes and smelling like gasoline.

Around eleven o'clock that night, Bobby found himself sitting on the cement steps while the party geared up inside. He'd been in his bedroom, lying on the mattress on the floor and listening to the sounds of the adults in the main room (sounds he struggled to interpret because even the laughter sounded like fighting) when a bearded man in a leather vest and a skinny, black-haired woman with lots of silver bracelets and a gap between her front teeth came in. They started kissing and taking off their clothes right in front of him, as if he wasn't even there.

He snuck outside and tried to read a well-thumbed Spiderman comic under the sallow porch light but couldn't concentrate on anything but the pictures. After several minutes of flipping through the pages, he put the comic down beside him and began chucking pebbles at a beer bottle that sat crooked in a clump of grass beside a Harley's front tire. The late-summer air was warm against his skin. The sky was ribbed with thin clouds and illuminated by a sliver of moon that looked like a clipped fingernail.

The voices and music inside rose and fell and blended together until they were eventually just a singular, warbled chorus of sound with no words.

He was tired and wanted to be in his bed, but his bed had been taken and he was just a lousy kid who couldn't do anything about it.

Then, as he contemplated curling up on the step and trying to sleep, a gravelly voice came out of the darkness: "Little late to be outside at your age, isn't it?"

Bobby looked up and saw a woman standing in the side doorway of the only other house on the drive, which sat a couple hundred yards away. She was silhouetted against the light behind her and close enough that she didn't have to talk much above normal. He didn't respond to her question and continued to throw rocks at the discarded bottle, bigger ones now, until finally it broke.

"Looks like a real shindig goin' on down there," she said.

This time he replied, “Yeah, I guess.”

She reached her arm inside the door and flipped a switch, bringing to life a glass covered light fixture on the porch. He could tell that she was old because of her short, curly white hair and big-framed eyeglasses, but her features were still mostly in shadow.

“What’s troublin’ ya, kid?” she asked. “You got a look on your face like someone your age ought not have.”

He shrugged, not getting her meaning.

There was a minute of silence, then, as if losing her patience, the old woman said, “Well, all right,” and turned to go back inside. But she stopped and looked back at him. “Anyhow,” she said, “door’s open if you need to use it.”

When she was gone, Bobby sat for a while, staring blankly at the woman’s house. It was a small single-story home, surrounded by blackberry brambles which had begun to obscure some of the windows. The roof sat at a steep angle, and the siding was the color of bleached bone. Lit only by its own porch light and the moon’s faint radiance, Bobby thought the place looked like something out of a fairytale.

His mother and her friends continued drinking and smoking and being loud inside. At one point, a shirtless man with tattoos covering his arms stumbled out onto the porch and began urinating in the bushes a few feet away from Bobby, muttering to himself and blind to the boy’s presence. When he finished, he zipped up his jeans and noticed Bobby sitting there. “Hey, man,” the guy said in a sloppy voice from behind a cigarette, “you got any pills?”

Bobby looked at the man and said, “I’m only eleven.”

The man looked confused for a moment, as if suddenly unsure where he was, and then started muttering again as he disappeared back inside.

Bobby once more turned his eyes toward the old lady’s house. He could see her outline through the window, moving back and forth in what he guessed was the kitchen. Then, almost without thinking, he stood up, tucked the comic book into the back pocket of his jean shorts, and walked up the drive.

He tapped lightly and then reluctantly opened the door. As he crossed the threshold, the smell of cooked cabbage and potatoes, both of which filled large bowls on a long table, greeted him. He stood there in the kitchen, alone, feeling like he was somewhere he didn’t belong. A moment later, just as Bobby was about to turn around and leave, the old woman appeared, a bag of flour in her hand and a dish towel draped over her shoulder. She was dressed in fuzzy slippers, sweatpants, and faded T-shirt bearing the Pittsburgh Steelers logo.

“Decided to come visit, after all, huh?” she said.

Bobby didn’t move at first, just looked around the room as she continued puttering around the kitchen. Beside the mixing bowls filled with cabbage and potatoes was a mound of dough. After sprinkling flour out on the table, she picked up the dough and slammed it down, sending up a light puff of dust, then began flattening it out with a rolling pin.

Finally, she said, “You gonna just stand there not sayin’ anything? ‘Cause if you are, you mind helpin’ out a little?”

“Sure,” Bobby said. “What should I do?”

“For starters, you got a name?”

“Bobby,” he said, “Bobby Voss.”

“Well all right, Bobby Voss, take that there drinking glass on the counter and hand it to me, would ya?”

Bobby did as she asked.

“Now what I want you to do is flip the glass over and press the rim of it into the dough like this.” She demonstrated for him, cutting a perfect circle into the flattened dough. Then she let him try.

He took the glass from her and did exactly what she had done. “Like that?” he asked.

“Already a professional,” she said.

Bobby took it as a compliment and smiled. “What’s all this for?” he asked.

“Pierogies,” she said. The word sounded strange as it rolled off her tongue, like some other language.

“Pier what?”

“Pierogies,” she said, and laughed. “They’re Polish, sorta like a little dumpling you can fill with all kinds of stuff. You know what a dumpling is?”

He didn’t but said, “I think so.”

She walked to the freezer, got some ice, and added several cubes to a different glass that sat on the counter.

“Are they good?”

“Of course they’re good,” she said, pouring some type of liquor into the glass and topping it off with some ginger ale that she got from the refrigerator. “Tell me, you think I’d be makin’ ‘em if they weren’t?”

“No, I guess not,” he said, feeling a little foolish.

"I'm Delores, by the way," she told him. "But my friends call me Dee, so I suppose you can call me that, too."

"Okay," he said.

"You want some ginger ale? Or I think I have some cocoa in the pantry if you'd like that instead."

"No thank you."

Bobby finished cutting the dough, and then he helped Dee spoon small amounts of the filling into the centers of the circles, after which they folded them to form small pockets, and sealed the edges by pressing down on them with a fork. While they worked, she asked him why he'd been sitting outside by himself so late at night, but rather than recount the story, he simply said that he liked it there. A look crossed Dee's face that seemed partly amused and partly sympathetic, but before she could press him on the subject, Bobby asked, "How come you're making"—he hesitated on the word—"pierogies so late at night?"

"Oh, I'm a bit of night owl," she said.

"But I thought old people went to bed early."

She eyed him like she was offended and then broke out laughing. "Why you little son of a gun."

She seemed to get a real kick out of it, so he asked, "How old are you, anyway?"

She continued to laugh and said, "Didn't anyone ever tell you it's not polite to ask a woman her age?"

He had in fact heard that before, but didn't admit to it.

"But if you must know, I'm sixty-one if I'm a day."

"I turned eleven last winter," Bobby said, figuring she would probably ask, though once he offered up the information she didn't reply. She pulled a long, skinny cigarette from a brown leather case on the counter and lit it with a lighter that her knobby thumb struggled to strike.

Then Bobby heard someone calling his name. It was his mother. She must have finally noticed he was gone.

"I should go," he said.

"Well, thanks for your help, Bobby. Tell you what, you drop by tomorrow afternoon. These'll be all ready for eatin' by then."

"Okay, thanks."

She smiled at him in a grandmotherly way and said, "You're all right, kid."

He smiled back and started out the door.

"Wait a second, Bobby." She reached into a small tin that sat on a shelf above the stove and removed a five dollar bill. "Here, this is for you."

"What's this for?" he asked.

"For making my job a little easier. I see you got one of them comic books in your back pocket. Maybe go and buy yourself some new ones if you want. Heck, do whatever you like with it. It's yours. You earned it."

He tucked the money in the pocket of his shorts and thanked her again before walking back down the drive toward home. By the time he got there, his mom had returned to the party. She had already forgotten he wasn't there.

#

Bobby's drive had brought him nearly full circle. And now he sat parked in front of the small garage apartment where he'd lived with his mother. It was still boarded up, the bricks around the windows and doors still stained black from the blaze that devoured everything inside. One of his mother's boyfriends had been playing chemist in the kitchen, and the landlord never bothered to renovate.

Up the slope, a car sat parked in front of Dee's place. Mercedes. Washed and waxed. It took him a moment to realize why the vehicle struck him as familiar, but as he walked toward it and caught his reflection in its tinted glass, he remembered. Earlier, at the funeral, it had been parked alongside the grass between two pock marked pickups, as out of place as a nun in a poker game.

The side door of the house was open, so he got out of his car and went inside. The gloom overtook him, but his eyes adjusted quickly. Dust infused light seeped through random cracks in the plastic window blinds, lending a sickly hue to the place. The stillness was that of a tomb, the air dry and stale.

Somewhere in the house, the sound of a drawer being closed, another one being opened, disrupted the silence.

Bobby moved through the kitchen, into the living room, and down the short hall, where a shapeless shadow moved on the hallway wall opposite Dee's bedroom door.

He approached quietly and peered in. A late-middle-aged woman sat on the edge of the bed, the contents of a drawer—clothing, papers, what looked like a small lock box—strewn on the mattress beside her.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked.

The woman jumped, placed a hand to her chest. Her surprise lasted only a moment, however.

Now she glared at him. "I'm Janice," she said, the authoritative tone in her voice suggesting some sort of dominant position in life. She stood up. "Who the hell are you? And what the hell are you doing in my mother's house?"

"Mother?" Bobby said. "Dee's your mother?"

"Was," she said.

He leaned against the dresser.

She was a well put together fifty-something, though the sense of strain in her expression gave her the look of someone ten years older. She didn't resemble Dee at all, with the exception of her eyes, which possessed a kind dignity that belied her anger. Being Dee's daughter, she hadn't come from money, though between the Mercedes and the way she was dressed, it appeared that she had found her way into it somehow. She wore high-end attire: black skirt, gray blouse, and shoes that Bobby suspected cost more than all the clothes he owned combined. Gold jewelry, modest yet clearly quite valuable, complimented her long neck and angular face, her boney wrists and thin fingers. Even the silver that laced her styled hair looked expensive.

She put down a stack of pictures and repeated: "Tell me who you are and what you want, or I'm calling the police." She moved around the bed, keeping her eyes on him, and picked up the phone on the nightstand. "Now," she said.

"It's Bobby Voss," he said, raising a hand for her to hold off as she dialed the 9. "Dee was a good friend of mine. I just saw the car and the open door and wanted to know who was in here."

She seemed to relax a little, and after a moment put the phone back in its cradle.

"You were friends?" she asked. "Kind of young. What are you, thirty?"

"Thirty-four, actually," he said. "I knew her since I was a kid."

"Well, that's real nice, but now isn't a good time," she said, shoving past him.

He remained in the tiny room for a moment. Almost everything in here had been packed away in boxes; about eight of them sat stacked on the far side of the bed.

When he returned to the kitchen, she was checking her face in a small compact mirror. After plucking something from the corner of her eye, she snapped it closed and placed it back into a sleek handbag which lay on the table.

He lingered in the doorway.

Finally, she said, "The last time I spoke to her was two years ago, over the phone. I didn't even know she was sick."

"I don't think anyone knew," Bobby said. "She never showed it."

Except that wasn't entirely true. He had seen the prescription bottles in the bathroom. Blood thinners, heart meds, things with names he couldn't pronounce. But she never seemed ill, so he never asked. He figured it was her business, and that she'd bring it up if she want to.

He hadn't been by for a while, at least a month. He'd been working a construction job out of town, clearing a lot for a new shopping mall down in Cincinnati after the first thaw in early March. Nothing permanent, but you've got to go where the money is. Now, though, as he thought about Dee and whatever secret ailments she might have had—there was no telling what she'd been like in the very end.

"They said her heart just stopped beating. I got the call two days after they found her," Janice said. "Asked if I would be able to make the service arrangements." She slid one of the chairs out from the table, its old wood creaking as she sat down and looked past him. "And then there's the rest of it."

Bobby looked over his shoulder at more boxes stacked in the corner of the living room.

"Looks like you've gotten a bit done already," he said.

"I haven't been able to do a damn thing," she replied. "It was like this when I got here."

Bobby hadn't gotten farther than the kitchen that day, hadn't seen the boxes, and it occurred to him now that Dee had begun packing herself because she'd seen it coming.

As if reading his mind, Janice said, "She must have known she didn't have long."

Despite his thinking the same thing, Bobby didn't know what to say.

"The last time we spoke, she asked me to visit," said Janice. "She always asked, and I always told her I couldn't get away. Too busy. And now . . ."

She trailed off but didn't have to finish the sentence for Bobby to know what she was feeling; he was no stranger to regret.

Several loud seconds ticked by on a wall clock, and he asked, "What's gonna happen to everything?"

"Pack the rest of it up, ship it back to Connecticut," she said. "Put it in storage until I have more time to go through it all."

"How long are you here?"

"I'm due back in Hartford in a few days. Should be enough time to box up what's left of it."

The thought of Dee's stuff sitting in some storage locker, moth-eaten and forgotten, made Bobby feel emptier than he'd felt in years, probably since his mother skipped town while out on bond for a long list of drug charges. She'd never even told him goodbye. He still found himself waiting sometimes, hoping, for a phone call or a postcard—anything at all that let him know she remembered she still had a son.

"I could give you a hand if you want," he told Janice. "It's no bother."

As if not hearing him, she said, "I could really use a drink."

Bobby walked over to the cupboard above the sink where Dee kept her bottle of Brookside. It was a little over half full. He picked up two water-spotted glasses from the dishrack and went to the table, sat down, and poured two fingers into each.

She drank, made a face, and said, "Christ, this is terrible. I never could stand this crap."

"Here," Bobby said, walking to the fridge and removing a near empty two liter of ginger ale and a tray of ice from the freezer above. He dropped three cubes into her glass and topped it off with the ginger ale. "Maybe this will help."

#

He was surprised by how naturally they seemed to get along. Her initial crassness and anger, justified as it was, fell away little by little until it was as if they were old friends.

They moved about the kitchen, Janice wrapping dishes in old newspaper and placing them in the boxes which Bobby had assembled from a flat stack in the basement. Over the course of several hours, they packed and talked. He glossed over his tumultuous childhood, about his own mother and the crowd she ran around with, but Bobby told Janice about the first time he met her mother and how she was one of the first and last friends he'd ever had. He learned that Janice had hit the ground at a sprint straight out of high school, married into Real Estate, divorced ten years later, and built her own successful agency, all without ever looking back.

"The Podunk life wasn't for me," she said, then added, "no offense."

"None taken," he replied. "If only we all had your gumption. This would be a goddamn ghost town."

Once in a while, they took a break to have another Brookside and ginger ale.

Now on their fourth or fifth drink (Bobby had only vaguely been keeping track) they sat in the living room, each in a tattered, floral patterned armchair facing the dusty television set and empty fireplace. Between them was a round table with a built in lamp and magazine rack, its wood scuffed and worn. Dee's tan leather cigarette case was still there next to the glass ashtray. Her bible with the gilded edges was there, too. The dish still filled with sticky butterscotch candy and those airy, pastel butter mints that look like Easter. All was as it had been—at least when it came to these details.

He offered one of the cigarettes to Janice, but she declined. He removed one for himself, lit it. It was harsh and stale, so he snubbed it out after only a few drags.

"My God," Janice said, getting up from her chair and approaching the mantle. She examined the graduation picture that was on display with a variety of other knick-knacks and Pittsburgh Steelers memorabilia. "I can't believe I ever looked that young." She shook her head in disbelief. "I left that very same weekend," she said.

Though she wasn't looking at him, Bobby nodded. "Lotta folks talk about it," he said, thinking about all the times he'd made his own grand plans to do so, how often he still did, usually in those transient moments at the bottom of the bottle when anything seemed possible. "You might be the first person I ever met who actually did it, though."

"I should have come back sooner," she said, personal reproach mingling with watered down liquor.

Bobby tried to imagine what she must be feeling. Earlier he'd thought, when sensing her remorse, that guilt was a universal thing, but now he wasn't so sure. He was beginning to think that his and hers were unique, and that hers had been simmering for a long while.

"She forgives you," he told her. "I'd put money on that."

And he would. He was fairly certain that Dee was incapable of resentment, which is why she didn't let the actions of people like Wade Little and the rest of them make her bitter. So why then was he having so much trouble convincing himself that she would have forgiven him, too, for not being here in the end?

"Maybe so," said Janice, "but that doesn't make it any easier."

This was the second time this afternoon that Bobby felt as though they were sharing some mental connection. Before he had a chance to think about how it might change the weight of the conversation, he said, "I'm the one who found her." It was the first time he'd said it out loud to anyone besides the police and the paramedics.

Janice turned from the picture she'd been staring at and returned to the chair.

"What?"

"Right there," he said, pointing toward the kitchen. "On the floor. She looked like she was just taking a nap. Couldn't have been there long."

He chose to spare her the whole truth: that Dee had been there at least long enough for her creased complexion to turn waxy and gray, that the sour smell had begun to gather about her like a cloud.

"I suppose she looked sorta peaceful," he said.

They both sat and let their eyes wander around the room, eventually settling on the spot of linoleum where he'd found Dee's body. They didn't talk for several minutes, finishing their drinks in silence.

After a while, Bobby got up and paced back and forth a few times in front of the window before stopping to gaze past the chokecherry thicket growing along the edge of the yard. The neighbor's lawn beyond was uncut and planted with junked cars, tractor motors, and heaps of old tires. The sun was starting to fade, and in the dying light the scene resembled a graveyard.

He turned back toward Janice. "Ready for another?"

She considered, then said, "Sure."

She followed Bobby back into the kitchen and began poking through cupboards that still contained a few things while he fixed the drinks.

"What's this?" she asked. She held out a small tin with a piece of paper taped to the side. "Has your name on it."

Bobby took it and opened the lid. In the tin was a roll of bills, hundreds and twenties mostly, some tens and fives mixed in.

His eyes widened for a moment, then narrowed as his forehead furrowed in confusion.

He looked up at her, his thumb running across the edges of the rolled bills. "There must be a few grand here," he said, tilting it toward her so she could see. "What's this all about?"

Janice cocked a manicured eyebrow and shrugged. "She must have meant for you to have it, I guess," she said. "Is there anything else in it?"

Rolled into the center of the bills was a small folded piece of paper. He removed it and read the short note, written in Dee's unsteady hand:

Bobby,

I've been putting a little aside for a while now, because I knew this day was bound to come sooner or later. And, let me tell you, I'm glad it was later. You take this and do whatever you want with it—it's yours. Maybe take a trip, live a little. Or if there's something you need, well, I hope it helps some.

Goodbyes are hard, so I won't drag this out any longer than need be. I'm blessed to have known you, Bobby. You made an old broad not mind sticking around so long, even when she probably should have called it quits years ago. I love ya, kid. Remember that. See you in the clouds.

Your Friend,

-Dee

Bobby read the letter at least three times through, then folded it and tucked it into his breast pocket behind the Polaroid photo he kept there.

After some time standing silent, at a loss for what to do, Bobby looked up when Janice said, "I hate to cut this short, Bobby. It's been nice talking with you, and I really appreciate you giving me a hand around here. It's helped make things less overwhelming today. But my head's aching and I think I ought to lie down for a little while before going back to my hotel."

Bobby wrestled with the heavy thoughts that filled his head. Looking at Janice, it was clear she indeed needed some sleep, perhaps something to eat. Her eyes were rheumy, her face pallid and expressionless.

"Yeah," Bobby said, "no problem." He held the money out to her, his eyes moving from the loose coil of bills back to her. "Here, to help with the moving truck and storage."

"No," she said, waving it away. "Keep it. She wanted you to. I'll take care of all that."

Bobby put the money in the pocket of his jeans, only half aware he had done so.

Janice went to her purse and came back with a business card with her number on it. She jotted something on the back, another number. "Keep in

touch," she said. "There's my home phone. And if you want to stop by Monday morning before I leave, I'll be here early."

"Sure," Bobby said. "I will."

Back in his car, he reached for a cigarette and realized he had pocketed Dee's leather case. His eyes got bleary as he flipped open his Zippo and lit one. It was harsh and stale. But this time he smoked the whole thing.

#

Back in the center of town, Bobby went into Mort's Little Shopper for a bag of potato chips and a can of Coke. Standing under the overhang outside, a sterile fluorescent light humming above him, he ate the chips, their greasiness coating his mouth and lining his stomach. The cola was cold and bubbly; it burned his mouth and made his head tingle. When he'd emptied it, he deposited the can and crumpled bag into the trashcan by the fuel pump. Then, leaving the Bonneville parked between two faded yellow lines on the pitted asphalt, he crossed the lot toward Miller's Tap.

Since leaving Dee's, his thoughts were so many and so fast, it was as if he weren't really thinking at all. Perhaps that's why, when Bobby found himself standing at the rail waiting for Barb, the night bartender, to make her way down to his end, he felt a sense of dislocation. Like he had just *arrived* here, not quite sure how.

The place had filled up by now. The music was loud, the smoke thick.

"You ain't planning anything stupid, are you, Bobby?" Barb asked when she saw him waiting.

His autopilot switched back over to manual. "Now when I have I ever?" he asked, smiling at her.

"I heard about earlier," she told him. "We're not gonna have any more of that?"

Bobby didn't say yes, but he didn't say no. Instead, he said, "How about something to wet the whistle?"

"The usual?"

He nodded, and as she ventured down the bar toward the beer taps, he thumbed the lid of his Zippo and looked at the Polaroid he'd been carrying since before the funeral. The memory resolved in Bobby's mind, vivid enough to be playing out right in front of him.

It's the night of his thirtieth birthday, the night Dee gave him a new Polaroid camera as a gift. They're sitting down on the other end of the bar, but the place is packed with regulars. Dee's buying drinks for everyone and sucking down 7&7s because the bar doesn't carry the forty-two proof stuff she usually drinks at home. She always puts them away just as quickly, however, and it's not long before she's lit up like a Christmas tree.

Earlier, Bobby's mother ran off with the little bit of savings he'd put aside. An entire summer of hauling scrap and scrubbing dishes at the Idle Hour Diner. She's on another run with one of her boyfriends, and he knows it might be a week or more before she returns, looking used up and broken down. She's been doing it his whole life.

"You gotta learn to let things go, Bobby," Dee tells him as he sits gritting his teeth and cursing the woman who brought him into the world. "Let me tell you something. People aren't gonna change until they're ready to change. And your mom needs to get to that place on her own. There's nothing you can do 'cept love her as best you can. No sense gettin' hung up on what she's doin' out there. It's bad for the digestion."

"Don't know if I can," he says. "It's hard."

"Of course you can. She's your mother. And of course it's hard. Life's hard. Now quit your gripin' and take my picture, would ya'?"

As was her way, Dee had pulled Bobby from the muck of his own mind that night with a simple imperative and a dose of tough love. Just like that. And he had felt better. He tested out his new gift, snapping a photo of Dee. A big smile split her flushed face in two just below her thick bifocals. Not fifteen minutes later, she removed her brassiere through the sleeve of her blouse and flung it onto the ceiling fan. The bar rioted with laughter and raised glasses. The undergarment twirled there through the smog of cigarette and cigar smoke for nearly a week before someone finally took it down.

Bobby smiled at the memory, and when Barb returned with his shot and beer, he downed them quickly.

A worried look played at the edge of Barb's features. "Another?" she said with a note of hesitation.

Bobby said, "You know, I think I'll have a 7&7 for a change. In fact"—he reached into his pocket and removed a hundred dollar bill, slapped it down on the bar's scuffed surface—"get a round for all these folks," he said. "And keep 'em coming."

As Barb worked her way along the rectangular contour of the bar, Bobby noticed Wade Little

shooting pool and sharing a pitcher with Gil Cunningham at the other end of the long, narrow room. Roger Kneff sat at a high-top, chalking a cue, waiting to play the winner.

Bobby walked in that direction, plucked a pool cue from the holder by the juke, and went back to the rail of the bar for his 7&7.

As he sipped it, his grip tightened around the cue, his knuckles turning white.

The thought of leaving town entered his head again as he slipped another C-note into Barb's tip jar and began moving back toward them.

Wade and Gil had just finished their game, and Roger was racking a new one.

Bobby's mind divided: thinking of Dee and her unwavering forgiveness of people who didn't deserve it; thinking of himself and how he wasn't sure he'd ever be capable of it himself.

It was apparent that Wade and the others hadn't seen him come in, distracted and drunk on a day's worth of cheap beer and grand gestures.

He approached the three men, whose backs were turned, and Bobby knew he had again come to that place where the road split in two directions. His hand squeezed the cue, the sweat from his palm making it slick in his grasp. He sipped the 7&7 once more before setting it on the corner of an empty table. His mind grew quiet then. He heard the ice shift in the glass. Louder than everything else, even the sound of his own beating heart.

"Underneath All the Sham": Dinty W. Moore on his 1992 Harry Crews Interview
By Adam Van Winkle, CJ Editor

Dinty W. Moore's got chops. He's the editor at *Brevity*, a micro non-fiction rag that's been going for two decades. And he is the director of the creative writing program at Ohio University. He received the Grub Street National Book Prize for Non-Fiction for his memoir, *Between Panic and Desire*, in 2008. He is on the board for *Creative Nonfiction* magazine. His writing has appeared in places like *The Southern Review, The Georgia Review, Harpers, The New York Times Sunday Magazine, The Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine, Gettysburg Review, Utne Reader*, *Crazyhorse*, and *Okey-Panky*, among numerous other venues. In 1992 he interviewed Harry Crews. We caught up with him recently to ask about the experience.

AV: How'd your Crews interview come about? Had you worked with or communicated with him in any way before the 1992 interview session?

DM: I contacted him out of the blue, as a fan, when I saw that he would be speaking at a conference I would be attending (AWP 1991, in Miami). He was entirely gracious about meeting with me, and offered up a full afternoon of time. I was just one year out of graduate school, no name or reputation behind me, but that didn't seem to matter to him one bit.

We met in my hotel room, two chairs set up by a window overlooking the Miami coastline. I was nervous, but he had a gregarious friendliness and charm that put me immediately at ease. I've heard his former students – some not all – talk about his generosity, and that's what I saw too.

AV: 1992--Scar Lover is being marketed as a "classic Southern" story, Crews discusses his autobiography in the interview, as well as the merits of being a "southern novelist." What was Crews' view of himself in the Southern Lit tradition as far as you know?

DM: He deeply respected those writers before him who had been tagged "southern," but he wasn't at all happy with the limits of the label. "I don't think any novelist worth his salt wants an adjective in the front of the word novelist," he told me, pointing out that no one calls Updike a "Northern novelist." He didn't seem angry about it, of course. He just seemed to find it all – the notoriety, the criticism, the reviews, the pigeonholing -- a bit ridiculous.

AV: How was Crew in '92? The recent Geltner bio, <u>Blood, Bone, and Marrow</u>, chronicles well the days near Crews' end; the late 70s interviews seem to chronicle a novelist professor at the height of his powers; the 80s interviews tend toward a model of reporting on a badboy writer's latest antics without a recently published novel (not to overgeneralize). With Scar Lover the fourth novel in five years, did there seem a sense of rejuvenation or new found wellsprings?

DM: He was in a sober phase when we met, meaning no drugs or booze, and clearly he had to work at it. I wouldn't characterize his mood as buoyant or rejuvenated. I would call him determined. He was a fighter, in every aspect of his life, it seemed to me, and he was clearly fighting to keep the writing going and the many demons at bay.

AV: Beyond the interview, when did you first come to Crews' writing? What'd you think of him and do you have a favorite Crews novel?

DM: Though most of my work these days is nonfiction, my MFA was in fiction writing, from Louisiana State University, so I was drawn to Crews both because of genre and because of region. What I loved immediately was the extreme vividness of his characters, the music of the dialogue, the humor, and the violence. It was a heady mix I hadn't seen elsewhere.

DM: My favorite novel would be a toss-up between Scar Lover and A Feast of Snakes. I also adore his memoir A Childhood: The Biography of a Place. I get chills whenever I read it.

AV: How did spending time with Crews in an intimate setting like the interview alter your perception of him as a writer, if at all?

DM: The honest answer would be "not at all," because I had boundless admiration for his writing before we met and that admiration continues to this day. But as I mentioned earlier, my esteem for Crews as a person grew that day. He was generous, smart, open, and damned funny. I know he had his dark sides, but all I saw was a good man who worked hard against tough odds and wasn't about to quit.

AV: What else do you remember about the interview?

DM: In the weeks leading up to our meeting, I copied and recopied about twenty-four questions onto a yellow pad, ready to explore Crews' career, his writing, and his teaching (and hoping, as well, not to seem too stupid.) What actually occurred was that he strode into my hotel room, we shook hands, and he started talking, almost non-stop, for about ninety minutes. I interrupted twice, maybe. He even motioned at one point for me to follow him, with my tape recorder, into the bathroom so he could take a leak, and all

throughout this he just kept telling stories. It was an amazing performance.

When I went home and transcribed my notes, I inserted the questions here and there that I had intended to ask. He anticipated almost every one of them.

AV: You've got your finger on the pulse of the college writing classroom--are you using Crews? Are others?

DM: I teach out of his memoir, and love to use his writing advice to get classroom discussion going. Here's my favorite: "If you're gonna write, for God in heaven's sake try to get naked. Try to write the truth. Try to get underneath all the sham, all the excuses, all the lies that you've been told..." Now that's good advice for any writer, any day. It is rare for me to teach fiction writing now, so I'm not able to use the novels or stories. I don't know that he is widely taught at all. Not as widely as he should be. Tastes change, and I suspect he seems dated to some. But good writing is never dated.

AV: What did Crews tell you that day that influenced you, as a writer.

DM: He was so brutally honest about how hard it was. He didn't hesitate to tell me about his first four books, all unpublished – "The first one really wasn't good, the next one was a little better, and the third one was a little better than that, and the fourth one was almost there." – and he told me all this without apology. That meant a lot, then and now. I wrote three novels, one was my MFA thesis, two came later, and none of the three ever found a publisher. They probably shouldn't have. But I learned so much writing them, and my subsequent nonfiction books are shaped by my early efforts. Failure is a part of any writer's life. But failure is no reason to quit. When great ones like Harry Crews admit their failures, it becomes easier for the rest of us to embrace our own and then get back to work.

To check out Moore's interview with Crews be sure to check out Getting Naked with Harry Crews: Interviews **(1999)**

For more on Moore check out dintywmoore.com!

The Hard Thing
By Larry Thacker

Alder's final trip up the seventeen steps from the garage to his front porch was about all he had left in him. He hoisted the aged box of books with a grunt from waist level to atop the other three, making the stack about head height, the musty cardboard surprisingly sturdy and holding a half-hearted promise of balance. Smoke from the cigarette flapping in his lips was getting hot in his nose, threatening his eyes

along with the sweat drops ready to river in and set to burning. He sighed, glad to be done with at least that leg of carrying, turned and left the stack and walked back to the comfort of his steel rocker. It was hot on his back, even in the shade. But it rested him. The day seemed out to cook him in his own fatigue.

He tried to rest, near motionless for a time he didn't bother to track, sweat beading, trailing his temple, creeping along the curvature of his jaw and neck, soaking into the collar of the t-shirt he hadn't thought of taking off in at least two days, maybe more. Sure was nice not to care. The accumulating scent of self was actually comforting. The sweat would dry, staining the cotton's white, the acridness a floating reminder around his face of the question he hadn't been able to shake.

Until just now. Maybe it was the stink.

How many days was it since his father's call, those words miring him down into such a loathsome state?

y for adult crimes. Don't willingly scurry like a hunted insect across open fields with a friend's guts hanging from their soldiering equipment as the world explodes around them. He'd been there, on that field. It had only made him want to crawl back into childhood. Blood wasn't the answer.

On vacation, huh?

His father's voice had been slurred.

Why don't you use this time to grow up and find a real job, son?

His father had a simple and odd way of cutting to the painful quick.

Alder robotically returned his regular humoring tone. This conversation, one they'd traded in endless versions, held nothing but the obligation of dead end ritual.

But the question had set and gnawed on his mind. Long enough to become a distraction.

When you gonna finally be a man about things?

What a shitty thing to say to a son. He'd wanted to smash his fist through the phone, plow it in and stretch it over across town full into his father's nosey smugness. Hurt him back.

When the realization finally hit it felt as if he'd wasted a number of days getting comfortable with something already sensed but ignored. It was a clear thing now, sitting there all along, obvious and waiting. You have to believe you're a man. The problem was

When you gonna finally be a man about things, son?

He'd never bothered asking himself such a question. It wasn't until things started really hurting that you finally got to the place in your head where you could have such a conversation, where the walls of mirrors reflected past the internal bullshit, where you can't lie to yourself anymore.

A man is not a man until he believes himself one. That was his conclusion. He gave a nod of faint satisfaction and sipped his drink, arm bending slow at the elbow, glass offering up a last sip of precious sting, subtly toasting this simple moment of epiphany.

Wasn't that it? No magic, no ceremony. No snap of the finger in the imagined moment. The sudden wakefulness of maturity can't be legislated. Or taught, or beaten into someone. Men don't just wake up on an 18th birthday willing to vote and change their country. Or take responsibility

Alder didn't know what he believed anymore. Or whether the question even mattered.

The thought of calling his father up and screaming his conclusion over the phone crossed his mind. The temptation passed just as quickly, though. He didn't know where his phone was anyway. It hadn't rung in days. And his father wasn't really expecting an answer.

He squinted dry eyes, pulling in a scene identical to yesterday, sunlight heavy, building tops and mountain hues in a rippling heat of mid-day. Loamy scent cooking up from the thinning grass. Windless.

This perfected replication was his vacation, away from his job over those hills, just far enough to be slightly disengaged, just close enough for it not to feel like a real break, a near workable false sense of safety in between. It was late June. For the fifth year he'd gone nowhere on his vacation time. Yet as the days repeated, he'd settled in with it, just like last year.

But this year he was alone. Not just mentally, but physically alone and they were gone. Wife and daughter. Vacuumed out of his life by the self-destruct button he had slowly pressed for almost ten excruciating years, watching the expanding destruction play out in frame-by-frame slow motion. And they'd stolen all the good air in the house, leaving nothing but an invisible dead space he couldn't shake.

He'd taken up sitting on the front porch a lot, avoiding inside, guessing the time of day by the

numbered mug of coffee and its temperature. By where he was in the day's pack of smokes and the yet emptied jar he used for an ashtray. By where the trees allowed sun to fall in the neglected garden flowers. By when his stomach growled and how long he could put off eating. By the honeyed line of bourbon in the bottle.

A corner of cardboard box gave and collapsed an inch, threatening to tumble across the porch and back down the steps. He stared them down, mentally daring them. He'd have to move them soon or risk it all making more of a mess than he had energy to care about.

But he dreaded having to be in the house. Something lurked in there, waiting to claw up his back and choke him in his sleep. The sound of their names attached to everything still in there, claw-gripped and stubborn. Sleeping on the porch again sounded like a good idea.

I have real job, dad, Alder had hissed into the face of the phone.

And have I ever dropped in at the plant to jump your shit about what you do for a living?

No, you sure haven't. And you'd better not. And don't talk like that to me.

Well, what gives you the right to show up at mine and do it?

Alder could hear his father taking another long swig, not hiding it. Making him wait.

I'm lucky I kept my job after what you pulled--

I'm your father...and I reckon I'll do what I want. Besides, they ain't gonna get rid of you, son. You're too good a paper weight for them stacks of important paperwork you do all the time.

This wasn't the first time, but this was worse. He'd barged into Alder's office in the middle of a staff meeting demanding a tour of the new offices.

Them fancy new offices!

Alder had told him they'd all moved to new offices, but all his father heard was bragging so he was there to take them all down a notch and remind them how so many others were out doing "real work" while his son and his "associates" drank coffee, philosophized on stumps, and avoided the hardships of life, compliments of *real* men out doing *real* work at *real* jobs with *real* lives. Security was called, a silent message that they would, in fact, do something this time if Alder didn't get his father under control.

He'd taken him to lunch. Maybe a few pounds of food would sober him up. And maybe they wouldn't have to talk much. But it didn't sober him up, and they had talked. Nothing new was ever realized in their talking. His vacation started that weekend.

You'd feel better about yourself and the money you waste if you worked harder for it, buddy.

And, he added, securing the always-present knife deeper*, you might have kept that family together. Sometimes doing the hard thing is what's best for a man.*

Dad, I'm hanging up now.

Don't you hang up on me...

I'm hanging up.

The lecture had seeded with him differently this time, not by way of new words, but by some chance of timing, the ring of truth hinted. Against better judgment, his days were spent questioning not only how he made a living, but his adulthood. This led to questioning other things and by the end of the first week he'd effectively chipped up the foundation of everything he was – and wasn't. Every choice, hesitation.

He'd scraped himself completely out and it hurt. Especially while there alone and drunk most of the time. There was little freeing about it. The more he thought the more he folded in on himself. His sitting spells lasted longer, his mind racing enough to make up for his lack of movement.

He just didn't want to go into the house. Alder, the monster, lived in there.

Something was dying in there. He could smell it.

What was left of them was in there.

He would eventually have to go.

He glanced around taking painful stock of his surroundings. Wife: gone. Daughter: gone. House: nearly the bank's. Car: falling apart. Yard: out of control. Cats: somewhere. Inside the house: Electricity, left cut off when he hadn't paid the bill last month. Upstairs: A bed he avoided.

Boxes. Boxes everywhere. Half-packed, half un-packed, spilled about with no real method. Floor: books, stacked and unread. Tabletops: covered in loose files and scribble-covered paperwork.

Bookshelves: overflowing. Books were one thing he hadn't grown up around, a mystery finally stumbled across in college. Now, they were everywhere. When they got in the way, they became tabletops, towering shaky skyscrapers in corners. Most were read. Some not. They felt cumulative, a decades-long chronology of self-centered escapism. A retreat haven, a silent collection he likened unto damming back his father's scorn of his professional life.

He drew a loud and long breath, feeling like he'd been neglecting to breathe, stretched the pulse of blood back into his arms and legs, propped the door open and grabbed a box of books.

The cats shot through his legs. He'd given up caring whether or not they were in or out.

The heaviness clawed as he walked in, like a special indoor shadow knowing only his form, searching him in that instant. No book would carry away such a spatial loathing. No too-loud music would drown the burden of utter, shapeless guilt wrapping him up, his ex-wife's words rolling out in his own voice. A whispered bawling, animal-like.

*Why... Why? I'm so lonely...*she'd cried out over the phone a week after they'd left town.

The strange sound from his lips would trail off, leaving him wide-eyed and wide-mouthed, fading wordless in response, no one left to hear his sorry mumbled excuses for having no excuse.

I don't have the answer, Annie.

Her name hadn't crossed his lips in weeks. He killed off the word, surprised as the warm bottle met his mouth. He'd forgotten bringing it in. The day's dregs at the bottom found his tongue, seared her name clean.

Light was failing. The floor snapped as he stumbled his paces through rooms, the dark roaming about in slow chase, soon nearly too dark for shadows. He was busy now, even in the dark, his father's advice driving him to the evening's task, working almost lightless, but intent, unafraid finally, exhausted with arguing in mind in his intoxication. The curtains pulled. Windows shut. Front door bolted.

Then he was in the living room on the floor staring into the fireplace, as he always was these nights. But this time a brilliant, uncomfortably hot fire glowed. It had been one of summer's hottest days and the house wasn't air conditioned. He was stuffing as many books as the fireplace could stand, his mind fuzzed with another half bottle of bourbon sloshing in his gut.

He'd carried more books into the living room, finally emptying the library after several nights, adding to that the garage's books from this day's work, and now he'd surrounded himself, fort-like, with massive piles of pieces of his life. He sat cross-legged in the middle of the room facing the mouth of the fireplace, his limbs and head heavy from the alcohol, barely able to concentrate at this point, the heat quickly drying his sweaty shirt. It was soon a furnace, filled with loud amassed flames licking up the chimney, the glow lighting only his space, the house fully gone to night.

The fireplace was overstuffed, purposefully. As a little space opened he tossed another one in, then another, then two, the heat growing near unbearable, stinging and tightening the skin of his arms and face. The lack of temptation to page through each book surprised him, the desire gone for some symbolic reminder of the pleasure they'd provided. But he made sure to toss them just so he could see the spines and watch the titles cracking into black. The first books were morphing to black layered ash and collapsing under the shifting denseness, alive, pancaking down, spitting sparks and leaking glowing smoke out of the corners of the fireplace up into the living room ceiling.

The greedy weight fell in on itself finally, toppling layers out and licking yellow and red, new air igniting the fire's innards. Alder watched in crazed expectation as the nearest piles caught, lighting the room in living shadows of red and black. The room filled with smoke faster than he'd expected.

His hope was to have at least a few moments of clarity, some magic in the act. Even as blind drunk as he'd managed. He remained as motionless as he could stand, cross-legged still, testing the crawling heat curling his arm hair. He could smell the rubber of his tennis shoes smoldering.

Something screamed upstairs. The smoke detector. The flames fingered out closer to his lap, stalking him a page at a time, a cover at a time, a story at a time. Struggling to keep his watering eyes open as whatever dam holding what was left of the smoke burst, he stared through, past the brightness barreling in his face. He forced his eyes wide, refusing to blink, fought the fear of the heat for fear of missing something in the flames, a sign boiling from all the charring and flighted ink in the roiling mess. He heard the growling ball of fire starting to crunch down around him and finally eat into the remaining circle of books.

Keep staring.

Was that something there?

Keep staring.

Or there?

Keep staring...

But there was nothing of interest in the flames. Nothing in the pain. Nothing in the light. No fantastic answer from the crisped words around him swirling up and vanishing into black.

So he gave in. Lightheaded. Vision tunneling.

Expelled his used air and moaned with disappointment, in recognition of what he'd done.

He gasped in, the planned for, poisoning black ash breath seizing his lungs with a quick bursting choke, lips trembling some semblance of words no one would see.

$4 Dollars a Pound (Chapter 7, Gone Alaska)
By Dave Barrett

At eleven o' clock on our third day out Swanson ordered me out back to work the lines.

"I ain't paying you to sit on that stool like some kid on a Disneyland ride! I'm paying you to be a puller."

By now the idle had been properly timed. Swanson had even gone to the trouble of stringing a three-cornered piece of plywood in our wake as a drag board:

"We want to keep her down to two knots. Ain't no other way of going about it with Kings. The big bastards stay way down low . . . scratching their bellies along the bottom."

We were thirty miles south of Elfin Cove, free-trolling down Lisianski Inlet, en route to Pelican, Alaska. We'd left the spitting rain and williwaw winds miles behind us. The sky was a salty, distant blue. The steep red-shaled cliffs, which had helped produce the violent gusts of wind that first morning, were replaced by long rolling hills of Sitka Spruce and Western Hemlock. Dogwood, alder and various berry bushes crowded down to shoreline, providing cover for hundreds of hidden streams emptying out at water's edge. Sea otters lounged in beds of kelp along the bank. The clatter of their rock utensils, chiseling away on the shells of abalone for the succulent meat inside, was carried clear across one side of Lisianski Inlet to the other. Mist curled up off the water and hovered a few feet above it in places. The nearest trawler was about 300 yards in front; another a half-mile behind going down the other way.

Swanson had granted me the "privilege" of attending the wheel these first 48-hours so I could get acquainted with my short order duties about the Western World. First order of the day was to light the oil-burner stove in the hull and start a pot of coffee. Because Swanson had forgotten to get a new damper for the stovepipe's flue, it would become next to impossible to light it on blustery mornings. Between shifts, it was my duty to cook breakfast and dinners. Because there were better things I could be doing than standing around a stove all day, Swanson instructed me to cook things like canned beans and ravioli in the cans the came in: eating their contents out of the same cans to avoid dishes. He showed me how slow cook salmon: stuffing its open belly with chopped onions, potatoes, radishes—whatever—then wrapping the fish in aluminum foil and cooking it at a low temperature (in case extra work above deck kept us away from out regular meal hours). What Swanson hadn't taught me—or neglected to emphasize—were precautions I should take while performing these or any other seemingly obvious procedures: for, just the night before, in haste to return to a task I was simultaneously engaged in above deck, I had forgotten to remove the lid off a can of Boston Bakes Beans before setting it on the burner and. . .upon returning to the stove after correcting the difficulty above . . . had practically blown my

head off while attempting to open the heated contents after the fact.

But with the exception of the can of Boston Baked Beans and the tangling of the lines on opening morning, my first 48-hours had passed with little incident. Swanson's remark about the Disneyland ride wasn't far from the truth. At times I felt as though I was on an enchanted carnival ride: porpoises, like shiny metal torpedoes, played games of criss-cross across our moving bow-point; humpback whales breached a hundred yards to stern like babes from a mother's womb; great pods of herring broke the sea's surface in shimmering waves of silver. And if this natural spectacle wasn't enough, the Western World's wheelhouse came equipped with all the accessories: a quadraphonic stereo with graphic equalizer and headphones; an impressive collection of mostly "stuck in the 70's" CDs and cassette tapes ranging from, on one side muscle-rockers like Creedence Clearwater Revival, ZZ Top and Mountain's "Mississippi Queen" to, on the flip side, country western faves like George Jones, Tammy Wynette and a Hank William's Jr. version of "Ain't Misbehavin'." And on the dashboard, in a plastic bag Swanson referred to as the "glad bag," the pot. Mother Nature's Dramamine and a fisherman's best friend! A half-ounce of it! Wonderful green sticky stuff that stayed stuck to your fingertips when you plucked it from the bag.

As I sauntered out back, expecting a leisurely stretch before moving to my new task, Swanson was in process of pounding the brains of a sixty-pound King salmon into breakfast porridge with the back of his gaff. The sixty-pound King had knocked itself and its dozen smaller comrades out of the 20-gallon picnic cooler (we used as a temporary storage bin before glazing the catch in the ice holds below deck).

"You-stinking-son-of-a-bitch!" Swanson shrieked, gesticulating each word separately between blows.

The salmon was a good four feet long. The smaller gaff Swanson had brought the fish aboard with was lodged in the salmon's side just beneath the gills. It hurked and jerked and and po-goed its dime bright body across the slippery deck in defiance of Swanson's assault. I looked on in disbelief as two the King's comrades were kicked across deck by Swanson's boots and flip-flopped to freedom over the two-inch high stretch of sluice railing. I made a tentative step forward. . .in hopes of retrieving the rest of the catch from a similar fate. . .but jumped back inside when Swanson and the sixty-pounder came whirling my way like two cocks in a cockfight.

Swanson was a man possessed. His gaff was an obscene blur as it came down on the head of the salmon again and again and again. I noticed--in a kind of horror--that Swanson's lips were set in the same savage sneer as the salmon's; his beady eyes burned with the same wild indignation; his forehead gathered in a white knot. The hitch of Swanson's high shoulder gave his body the look of a jack-hammer gone wild.

Overwhelmed, I returned the wheel. I felt fairly certain Swanson hadn't seen me standing there all googly-eyed in the doorway. I would pretend not to have noticed because of the clamor of the motor and the music. I cranked the volume on the stereo; then, thinking better of it, plugged in the headphones and covered my ears with them. My shaky fingers were placing a fresh pinch of the green in my pipe when Swanson came barreling in like the world's biggest-Asshole parent, shouting,

"Get your ass out there and get them fish in the cooler! Now, damn it!"

He slapped the pipe out of my hands and ripped the headphones from my ears, then dropped below to the hull without another word.

I raced out back to salvage what remained of the catch.

The deck was smeared with blood and scales now. The half-dozen remaining salmon were flinching and flopping all around me, gasping. I fell to my knees beside the carcass of the sixty-pound King just in time to get a clumsy hold of another fair-sized King attempting to flop the sluice-railing. I half-carried, half-juggled the still kicking salmon to the cooler and dropped it in. The plug piece for the orange and white cooler had been knocked overboard during the scuffle and the little water left in it quickly dribbled out when I righted it.

Swanson emerged from the wheelhouse with an answer to the plug problem: shoving a hacked-off piece of carrot into the drain hole.

"Nevermind," Swanson said, referring to the difficulty I was having gathering the catch.

"Nevermind! I'll take care of the catch. Grab a bucket. Start filling the cooler."

I grabbed the only bucket on deck: the same one we used as a toilet. I had the bucket, but hesitated whether I should use it for the catch.

"Look," Swanson said, grabbing the bucket out of my hands. "From over the side! See!"

Swanson scooped a bucketful from over the side, then poured it back out on the running waves.

"Is that too fucking much to ask?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I thought I was supposed to use a clean bucket?"

"Wash it out!" interrupted Swanson. "And don't suppose. Don't be sorry. Just do it right the first time, dumb ass!"

It took everything I had not to answer back.

After refilling the 20-gallon cooler and giving the deck a quick swamping, I joined Swanson in the cockpit of the Western World.

The cockpit, sometimes referred to as "the turret" because of all the "flak" a puller gets back here, was a four by three by two foot sunken box at the extreme rear of the trawler. It was here, in this four by three by two foot wooden box, that I would spend fourteen hours a day for the next seven days hauling in the catch.

"Speed's the key out here!" Swanson began. "We want those lines in the water as much of the time as possible. Simple percentages. Each line here is capable of snagging four fish in one out. . .which means. . .including the second line. . .as max of eight fish at once! You follow me?"

I nodded.

"Think of this in dollars, kid. Eight twenty-pound Kings at $4 a pound adds up to $640 on a single out! Think of this when your arms I so tired you couldn't raise 'em if Miss America was shaking her tits in front of your face! Let alone wheel in another 200 pound load of fish! Think of the dollars then and all the time and it'll be all right. Even when it begins to sound like bullshit and, in fact, you know damn right it's bullshit—think about it anyway. In and out, kid! In and out! As soon as you get that soaker on board, you want the gear back in the water. Simple percentages."

Swanson had me stand back now and watch. He explained how the two trolling poles were hooked up to blocks and pulleys hanging from the gurdie's steel hayrack. He showed me how to set and release the brake when reeling in and reeling out the trolling lines with the gurdy crank. He showed me how to unclip the four tag-lines from the main trolling line by their steel clothespins and how to be sure to thread the tag-line in with my fingertips only:

"None of this wrapping the line round your palm shit. A one-handed puller won't do me no good."

Swanson made a gesture of a hand being sliced by the blade-thin nylon line.

After each tag-line was brought in, I was instructed to neatly lay the coiled-up tag-line along the fender of the trawler. Then, after I'd brought all four tag-lines in, I could quickly rebait the hooks (with the salted herrings in the bucket beside me), clip the tag-lines back onto the main trolling line, run it back out, and side-step it over to the other trolling line.

"Remember," Swanson said. "Speed's the key! In and out. And don't ever forget—when it gets tough out here—it's the dollars you're back here for. The dollars when it's tough!"

"Right," I said, already reaching over the water for my first tag-line.

"Oh, yeah" Swanson said, as though an afterthought. "Watch them swells. Don't have yourself leaning too far out of on top of one. Let it pass first. When I'm sitting up there at the wheel I sometimes don't look back for a half-hour at a time. By that time I'm afraid—"

"Right," I said, grabbing onto the hayrack as one of those swells passed. "Guess that water's colder than it looks."

"She's a cold bitch, all right," Swanson replied, flashing a rare smile. "Now you're getting it!"

And for the next three hours I ran the trolling lines in and out at a furious clip. Swanson sat at the wheel with his ever-present pipe and Penthouse magazine in his lap and gave me a thumbs up progress report from time to time.

Not once did he let me in on the fact that most of the salmon were bedded down for their noon siesta and that it was highly unlikely I'd snag even one. . .

At $4 dollars a pound. . .

"The Grit in Himself: a conversation with Tom Graves about his 1979 Harry Crews Interview"
By Adam Van Winkle, CJ Editor

Tom Graves and his partner Darrin Devault at Devault-Graves scored a major victory for indie publishing in 2014 when they published Three Early Stories by JD Salinger, the first new Salinger fiction published (legally) in 50 years.

But that barely begins to scratch the surface of Graves' contributions to the publishing and literary world. Among other remarkable literary and cultural achievements include a biography of Robert Johnson, *Crossroads*, that won the Blues' Foundation's Book of the Year award in 2010, the last interview (and one of very few) with the reclusive cinema star Louise Brooks, the discovery of the "first Elvis impersonator" Bill Haney, and helped track down the disappeared actress Linda Haynes with Quentin Tarantino. He is the former editor of *Rock & Roll Disc* magazine and has written for numerous national publications including *Rolling Stone, The New York Times, The Washington Post, American History* magazine*, The Oxford American, Musician, The New Leader*, and others. Currently Graves is professor of English at LeMoyne-Owen College in Memphis, Tennessee.

For our money, the best Graves read is his 1998 grit-lit novel *Pullers*. was praised by the legendary Harry Crews, crime writer Robert Campbell, Charles Gaines, and critic Dave Marsh. It has been compared to the gonzo style of Hunter S. Thompson and follows characters through the world of professional arm-wrestling (Sly Stallone and *Over the Top* got nothing on this story!). Be sure to check out the review and excerpt that follows in this issue.

Among the many fascinating accomplishments and the myriad of stars on his interview resume is a 1979 interview with Harry Crews that perhaps best captures Crews in his domain as a University of Florida writing professor in Gainesville. We wanted the story behind the story on Graves' meeting with Crews so we went to Graves to ask (and see if Devault-Graves has any plans for some Crews publications!).

AV: How did you come to know Harry Crews? Was the '79 interview your first meeting, or had you formed a relationship with him previous?

TG: My first meeting with Harry was in 1979 when I flew to Gainesville to interview him. I had talked with him briefly before that and in fact had scheduled an interview with him several weeks previously. As the time neared, however, I couldn't get in touch with Harry and cancelled my flight. I didn't know if he was incapacitated, out of town, or what. I rescheduled with him after he told me his beloved van was in the shop for repairs and he was stuck in town. I figured correctly that then was the time to go.

I discovered Harry's writing from his Esquire magazine column and the piece on Robert Blake which profoundly disturbed me because it broke all the rules for a journalism profile. I had also read a review of Feast of Snakes in Rolling Stone magazine written, I believe, by Greil Marcus. The review also featured the great jacket photo by Charne. I thought that anyone who looked like that had to write great fiction. But I was already familiar with his journalism.

AV: I note that Harry Crews gave a positive review quote for your 1998 novel, Pullers--which is extremely good. Did you continue working with him in some capacity after the '79 interview, or was that a re-connection?

TG: I met Harry again in Memphis when he appeared at the River City Writers forum. He never knew that I was the one at the University of Memphis who pushed for him to be featured for that, which paid him a tidy sum. I had been asked to write a feature on Harry for The Memphis Flyer, our alternative weekly newspaper. I demanded as my terms that it be the cover story and I wanted the right to the title which was: Meat Eaters, Killers, and Suckers of Blood, a quote from Harry in the interview I did with him. The cover shot was of Harry with his Mohawk and tattoo prominently shown off. The piece got huge response in Memphis and it was standing room only at his university reading. He also did some workshops as part of that gig and I attended one. In the middle of his talk he had some sharp things to say about the piece I wrote for the Memphis Flyer. He

disagreed with a couple of things in it and obviously didn't connect me with the guy sitting in the room and the guy who interviewed him in 1979 and the writer of Pullers. It made me shrink down in my seat. I had several opportunities to talk with him in later years.

AV: Tell me about Devault-Graves agency and it's mission. It looks fascinating. How did this come about? Have you ever considered or tried to reissue Crews' catalog?

TG: Five years ago Darrin Devault and I decided to wade into the indie publishing world by rescuing great books by prominent authors that had gone out of print. We made world news by getting rights to three short stories of J.D. Salinger and collecting them in Three Early Stories. This was the first Salinger book in over 50 years. We've sold the book to nine foreign countries. We also have published three Jack Kerouac novels including his great novel Big Sur. My long-time love for the work of Harry Crews made him an obvious choice for us. So, I contacted Harry, told him we wanted to bring his back catalog back into print, and he was very pleased with the idea. He approved it and told me to contact his literary agent to make the arrangements. His agent was John Hawkins and I spoke to him. Everything was moving forward and then John Hawkins died and very soon after that Harry passed away. This threw Harry's work to his heir, his son Byron. Naturally all Harry's catalog at this point had to be reassessed and things ground to a halt. One complicating factor is that a lot of Harry's books did not earn back the advance monies paid to him. In those cases, the rights to the books still belong to the publisher, not to the estate. At this time all that is being reassessed and it's complicated, I'm sure. The Hawkins Agency and Byron Crews all know of the Devault-Graves' commitment to Harry's works. Nothing would please us more than to represent Harry by bringing his works back into print, even if we were only given two of his books. We wait and we pray.

AV: So to the '79 interview: How did the opportunity come about for you? Did you pitch this to Paris Review or the other way around? How did you feel when Plimpton ultimately declined the piece (and about his opinion that Crews was not a first rate American author)?

TG: Yes, I had pitched this to Paris Review and the editors wanted me to do it. Understand that George Plimpton had final word on everything that went into the publication, but didn't run things, necessarily, day-to-day. The other editors loved the interview but Plimpton, despite his hanging out with Hemingway and boxing with Archie Moore and other macho things, had issues with REAL tough guys who didn't parade around in tennis whites at the club. So Plimpton told me via phone that he was rejecting the piece because he didn't think Harry was in the "front rank" of contemporary writers. He then told me he'd like me to interview Walker Percy who hated to do interviews. Now Percy was much more in Plimpton's wheelhouse than mine. I was never real comfortable with Percy's landed gentry background. We exchanged letters and Percy wouldn't commit. So, I gave that up and years later he finally did a Paris Review interview. (By the way, my contact at Paris Review during all this aggravation with Walker Percy was Mona Simpson, the sister of Steve Jobs.) My interview with Crews, however, has had a life of its own. Portions were published in Southern Exposure magazine and the majority was published in Chouteau Review. Then it was published in the book Getting Naked with Harry Crews. I shouldn't tell you this, but I couldn't help but notice it was the longest interview in the book. Then I published the interview in my book Louise Brooks, Frank Zappa, & Other Charmers & Dreamers. I still get mail and comments about the interview. Which I love.

AV: You mentioned Crews canceled on you previous to the actual '79 meeting in Gainesville. Did he seem problematic to reach for interview or was this just random incident?

TG: Crews didn't cancel, I did. I was worried that I'd pay to fly to Florida and then not be able to find Harry. I think Harry was always pre-occupied. That was his nature. I got lucky one weekend and caught him without wheels. But he was really amped up for the interview and responded fabulously well to my questions. I've found as a

long-time interviewer that if you are really well-prepared and well-read on your subject, they pick up on that immediately and are much more giving in an interview. Interviews just don't get better than the one Harry did with me.

AV: So, we're into vintage and junky cars. You mention about your '79 interview that Crews "prized van" was in the shop. What was the van? We're hoping it had a great two-tone conversion van paint job? Was it well known to Crews at the time or after?

TG: Well, I never saw the van because it was in the shop. He told me all about it when we went out for lunch. I remember the van being prominent in his "Carny" article for Playboy.

AV: You mention in your reflections on the interview that you did not know of the writing "abyss" that Crews was apparently at during that time in his career. So no indication? Was he talking at that time about writing and writing projects?

TG: Harry only had a beer with me. No other evidence of alcohol, although he talked about his issues with alcohol. He talked about work on a play titled Crab that I never heard another thing about. Remember he had just released A Childhood and Blood and Grits. Feast of Snakes was the last novel before I met him. There was a period of nearly ten years before he wrote another novel and I felt that his first novels after the comeback weren't as strong as the first Crews era. But he came back later with Scar Lover and Body in my opinion. Those rank high with me as does Celebration. The premise of The Knock-Out Artist, which a lot of Crews fans adore, is something I couldn't quite buy.

AV: As far as you learned, how did Crews tackle his writing craft? What were his procedures and routines for making pages?

TG: The only thing that stood between Harry and alcohol was his writing. He would go on the wagon to write and took his rituals seriously. He would rise very early in the morning (like about 4 a.m.) and write. I'm pretty sure he wrote in his university office a lot too, which is what he was doing when I caught up with him. In fact I startled him when I knocked on his office door and he said, "Damn, coach. Be careful about walking up on a man like that." I laughed at the remark and we got along great.

AV: During your interview, you went to a bar for beer and burgers with Crews. How was he received around Gainesville? Did folks know him as a campus celebrity, or did he move around town more anonymously?

TG: For all of Harry's tough guy pose, in person he could be quite comical. This is something that is seldom mentioned. He could be damn funny. He waved and hollered at several people across the campus and in the bar he spoke loudly across the room to someone he knew. He paid for our lunch – that was generous of him – and he held out his hand to get the change from the cashier. He got caught up with his conversation with the guy across the room and the cashier kept trying to get his attention to return his change. She finally poked a finger in his outstretched hand and he turned to see what was happening and she paid him his change. This was quite amusing to me.

AV: I've read your mention of Crews' follow up to A Childhood (presumably unfinished then at his passing). Do you know any more of this project or any intentions to bring it to light?

TG: I don't. I am not sure how Byron Crews plans to handle his dad's legacy. My efforts to talk with Byron have not been successful.

AV: How aware was Crews, if you know, of himself as a kind of forefather to Grit Lit? Did he see himself simply in a Southern Grotesque tradition (ie Flannery O'Connor), or did he view himself and others as creating something innovative with hardscrabble characters and language and setting?

TG: He absolutely had a sense of himself that he had staked out something new and original in the literary world, that no one else was like him. He also knew he had influenced a number of up and

coming writers, such as me. My novel Pullers owes a great debt to Harry and to Charles Willeford. Willeford knew Crews and had gotten a good plug from Harry on the novel Cockfighter about cockfighting. They were very different writers but I learned a great deal from both of them. I was an MFA in Creative Nonfiction and my whole writing life I had studied and read the New Journalists like Tom Wolfe and Hunter Thompson. I absolutely feel that Harry's journalism was in that vein and was among his best work. He was a great novelist. And he was a great journalist too. He claimed a lot of influences and in our conversation it was obvious he had read widely and read very well. He could really talk about literature.

Harry often talked about how he couldn't write anything worthwhile until he recognized the grit in himself. I always felt that what was at the root of Harry's existential dilemma was the fact he was from the rickets belt, as he said, but also and just as important that he was an intellectual too, a profoundly deep thinker, and this too served to ostracize him from those he grew up with. He was always made to feel he was an outsider from both worlds.

From the Armwrestling Message Boards: a Review of Tom Graves' 1998 Grit-Lit Novel, *Pullers*
By Adam Van Winkle, CJ Editor

How do you know you've made it as an author? When the Northeast Armwrestling Board is talking about your book. At least, that's one measure.

Okay, well the thread in question devolves into a lambast of Scientology and Tom Cruise pretty quickly. But the point is, when it comes to armwrestling, there's one underground novel that's cornered the market: Tom Graves' *Pullers*.

A "puller" is slang for the contestants in an Armwrestling match and a night of competition in such matches is referred to as "pulling." This novel is full of useful information that'll keep you from looking like a tourist if you find yourself at a Pine Bluff bar armwrestling tournament.

The novel's charm though moves well beyond niche status. It's a good story. With damned interesting characters.

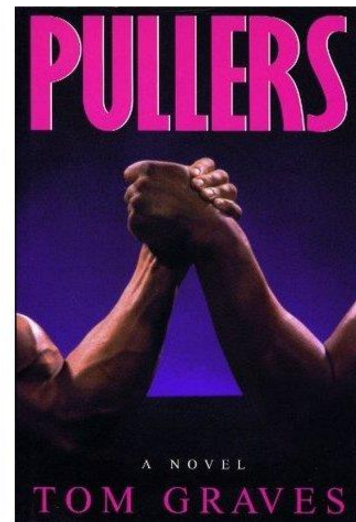
The carnival freak cavalcade of bodies that comprise the novel's characters are of the ilk in Harry Crews' most body-centric freaks: *Gypsy's Curse* or *Body* or *All We Need of Hell.*

These characters are on a journey: to get to the nationals in St. Louis. The first matches begin with one man leading another in by the penis, and therein starts the satiric overtones of masculinity and machismo that run throughout in, dare I say, even more clever ways than Crews typically executes.

Oh yea, the book will make you laugh out loud. And cringe. And cheer. And boo. In other words, it's real good grit lit.

<u>Pullers</u>, a novel (excerpt)
By Tom Graves

"If you only buy one book this year, this is the one."
--**Harry Crews**, author of *Celebration* and *Scar Lover*



"Wild is a category of its own." –Larry Brown

Chapter 1

Cockroaches. Nice American cockroaches. *Perplaneta Americana*. The size about, oh, as long as the first two joints of your little finger. A whole boiling swarm of them.

Like everyone else, Carroll Thurston had hated cockroaches his whole life. Which was the whole point. They made his skin crawl every time he caught sight of one.

But not now.

He'd learned to love them. And it wasn't easy to love a cockroach. But now he did, every goddamn one of 'em. He'd had to. Otherwise he couldn't do what it was he did.

These weren't just any cockroaches. They were *mail-order* cockroaches. Grown and bred in a sterile laboratory by people wearing white lab coats. Of course he could have gone to any run-down part of Memphis—any one of Memphis's housing projects would do—and gotten all he needed for free. But the fact was you never knew where homegrown roaches had been. No telling what kind of germs and all they carried.

No, Carroll Thurston wanted *clean* roaches, roaches with a pedigree. Roaches a man could trust.

Carroll kept his roaches in a ten-gallon aquarium filled with shreds of corrugated cardboard. Because cockroaches are the Houdinis of the insect kingdom, he took the extra precaution of placing a heavy Plexiglas lid on top.

He'd learned an awful lot about roaches in the last year. For example, they were basically unchanged despite millions of years of evolution. They could also survive a nuclear war better than just about any other living organism. And people just hated the shit out of them. Would rather die than touch one.

Carroll had read that a fear of cockroaches was a learned behavior. Kids over the age of four picked up the fear from their parents and peers. Researchers had gone so far as to put fake roaches in the drinking glasses of kids under four years old. They had no problem at all drinking their water with a roach staring up at them from the bottom of the glass. The dread came later.

Smiling to himself at how grown men would run at the sight of a cockroach, Carroll Thurston tilted the lid off the aquarium, reached in, and grabbed a seething fistful of roaches. Without a grunt or a grimace he quickly stuffed the whole squirming mass into his mouth and crunched down hard three...four...five times.

"Hmmm, kind of like popcorn shrimp," he thought to himself as he washed it all down with a big slug of Diet Coke.

Chapter 2

Near rock-bottom of those annual lists that rate cities according to their desirability (or lack thereof) is the sleepy town of Pine Bluff, Arkansas, an old railroad and paper mill community that still seems stuck in the belly of the Great Depression. The city's most famous resident had been Martha Mitchell, the loudmouthed wife of Watergate alumnus and former Attorney General John Mitchell. Elvis Presley, natives are quick to tell you, performed at the Pine Bluff Coliseum once during his tours in the seventies.

Other than a few stoplights and strip malls, the town hadn't taken on a lot of luster since the World War—the first one.

Although Pine Bluff is, and always has been, a God-fearing town, the nineties are the nineties and good ole boys will be good ole boys. Bad Bill's Hawg Trawf (the Trawf for short) is the place where they generally went to do it. Bad Bill lived up to his nickname by charging patrons a one-time membership fee of twenty dollars, which stiffed all the out –of-towners, who in all likelihood would never come back, while giving the locals a place to water, dance, and raise hell without paying a nightly cover charge.

The Trawf was a metal building that covered five acres and looked like one of those enormous sheds used to house combines and cotton pickers. A crude cartoon of cowboys lined up at a slop trough to drink beer suds served as the invitation to all passers-by from the sides of the building. Bad Bill had a tidy cottage industry on the side selling t-shirts, ball caps, mugs, and you name it emblazoned with the cartoon and his logo. A Bad Bill's t-shirt immediately notified one's Pine Bluff neighbor on which side of the Christian equation you stood.

At the Trawf beer was sold in Mason jars at a dollar-fifty a pop. There were four pool tables, a shuffleboard, two video poker machines, a backgammon table (which went unused), a stage from the bands, a broken mechanical bull in the corner, and a stout hardwood table used for arm wrestling. In the

ten years the Trawf had been in business—since liquor by the drink finally passed during a local referendum—arum wrestling had become a surprisingly popular form of entertainment. On Friday nights Bill held an arm wrestling tournament with the winner collecting two hundred fifty dollars in prize money. Farm boys from a ten-county area came to try their hand (and arm) at the sport, and Bill made a sweet profit charging each newcomer a membership fee plus a twenty-collar entry for the tournament. Of course, the prize money was s mall part of the action. The winner could, if he placed his bets at the proper odds, snag another four or five hundred dollars, better than two weeks' take-home pay.

The tournament was closely followed by the locals who shouted out bets throughout matches. The action often became so heated that fistfights erupted among the spectators, mostly over drunken accusations of cheating. Bad Bill and his beefy bouncers made sure no one welshed on bets. But he could not have cared less if some of the boys wanted to take their arguments out to the parking lot.

Pine Bluff's undisputed arm wrestling champion was Sampson Jackson, a local rowdy who ran a car battery shop. Sampson seldom had an off night at the wrestling table, but that never stopped locals form trying to best him or from showing off for their girlfriends how long they could last. Unless he was beered up or in a particularly foul mood, Sampson Jackson usually tired to make the other guy come off looking good. After all, it kept them coming back.

And it kept his name out there to attract fresh meat from out of town. Some guys drove all the way from Memphis to give him a go. They always lost.

For more check out the entire novel from Hasting House!

"If I Do My Job Right": Harry Crews and His Readers*

By Larry Baker

> *I only know Harry Crews through his writing and stories told by his students, but to me he is like some crazy twisted root come out of the ground. Judged by a few externals he'd look likely to spend his life in prison but for that little genius spark that must plague him like a mosquito all the time. Just as an example of humanity I've always found him inspirational. You don't make people like Harry, they just happen. Really, they make themselves.*
> *—Mike Lankford, writer*

> *Lean, muscular, commanding consent—the man is the style, the style is the man.*
> *—Alan Cheuse, writer and reviewer*

You could say that Crews is a real "character," in both senses of the word. An account of his importance, then, would seem to involve an investigation of America's romantic faith, at least in some version, that the most authentic art grows directly from the person. Crews would seem to be an exemplar or paradigm of that faith.
—R. M. Berry, writer and editor

How embarrassed should I be that I have no idea who Harry Crews is?
—anonymous writer

See, if I do my job right when I'm writing, I will really get you turned back on yourself, and on your own code of ethics or morality or vision of the world or sense of self or whatever. If I get you turned back on yourself, then I done my job. I've done what I set out to do.
—Harry Crews

I've never met Harry Crews, but I'm pretty sure he would hate the following question: Will Harry Crews be remembered for the stories *about* him or the stories *by* him? To me the answer seems obvious, but it may not be so for others. Crews is one of those writers whose work has its own corner in an overcrowded room with a southern exposure, not intruded upon even by the likes of Faulkner or O'Connor, who themselves have their own corners. Most of the other writers are forced to scramble for space in what's left of that room.

Let me tell you a story about how I first bumped into Crews's work. I was teaching at a university in Florida in the fall of 1988. I had a one-year appointment, no future in it except as a line on my résumé. This was my first real job after getting my PhD, and I had never heard of Harry Crews. I was given a syllabus and told which essay anthology to use for my freshman comp classes. The text included the usual suspects of comparison/contrast and other rhetorical forms to study, but there he was, too—Harry Crews as a small child being whip-popped into an in-ground vat of boiling water and having his skin melt. (If you're lucky, you already know this story.) While looking for an essay for my pampered Florida students, I had found this:

> Out in front of the house where the boiler was, I was playing pop-the-whip as best I could with my brother and several of my cousins. Pop-the-whip is a game in which everybody holds hands and runs fast and then the leader of the line turns sharply. Because he is turning through a tighter arc than the other children, the line acts as a whip with each child farther down the line having to travel through a greater space and consequently having to go faster in order to keep up. The last child in the line literally gets *popped* loose and sent flying from his playmates.
>
> I was popped loose and sent flying into the steaming boiler of water beside a scalded, floating hog.
>
> I remember everything about it as clearly as I remember anything that ever happened to me, except the screaming. Curiously, I cannot remember the screaming. They say I screamed all the way to town, but I cannot remember it.
>
> What I remember is John C. Pace, a black man whose daddy was also named John C. Pace, reached right into the scalding water and pulled me out and set me on my feet and stood back to look at me. I did not fall but stood looking at John and seeing in his face that I was dead.
>
> The children's faces, including my brother's, showed I was dead, too. And I knew it must be so because I knew where I had fallen and I felt no pain—not in that moment—and I knew with the bone-chilling certainty most people are spared that, yes, death does come and mine had just touched me.

I read the excerpt twice; it was my introduction to Crews's *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* (1978).

I had been so excited over reading that excerpt that I gushed about it to another faculty member. A smart woman, brighter and more experienced and better read than I, but younger. I asked her if she was using the same essay in her class, and there it was: the look of being trapped, suspicious of a trick question, as

if her answer would itself be interpreted as right or wrong. But she was honest, and I'll try to quote her as closely as I can remember. The answer's essence was clear, the revelation of a guilty pleasure: "He must be an awful man, and somebody I'm not sure I'd want to know personally, but"—this said slowly, as if exhaling after sex—"oh, can he *write*."

There it was, my first story *about* Crews, my introduction to him as a brilliant but supposedly out of control writer. Or so I thought. There was more to this woman's discomfort, but I would not understand it until I started reading his fiction, which I did as soon as the semester was over. On a superficial level, Harry Crews is any assertive and intelligent woman's worst nightmare. His early memoir has many noble women in it, especially his mother, but, oh, that fiction. Crews makes Hemingway look like a feminist. In my less charitable thoughts about the dead, I envision a hell for the radical feminist Andrea Dworkin in which she has to read Crews's *A Feast of Snakes* over and over again.

Many such stories are told *about* Crews, and sometimes those stories are the handed-down versions of *other* stories whose introduction is usually, "I've never met the man, but somebody once told me . . . ," and those stories inevitably have led to questions being put to Crews himself, such as this one from an interview published in the Fall 1994 *Georgia Review*: "There was a time in your past where your behavior seemed pretty self-destructive. Where did that self-destruction come from?"

Damn, we might say, this Crews guy is a man's man, a brawler, a drinker, a hot-blooded bloody writer for sure, and his prose shows it. He's a character right out of his stories, and you can always find an author photo that makes him look like a man beaten soft and pulpy by fists and alcohol. The trouble is, I expect that few if any of the characters in his fiction could have written the passage I cited above, and none could have explained how to write dialect or parse a verb as he did in that 1994 interview:

> Okay, now about the dialect. The first thing you wanna do is get rid of what I call "Uncle Remus" dialect, gross misspelling, or phonetically spelling everything. You know, "I'm gwine down to de ribber," and spell river r-i-b-b-e-r. I ain't even never heard nobody say "ribber," and I'm a sharecropper's son out of south Georgia. Most of what I see that passes for black dialect, I never heard, and I lived close with blacks all my life. Because I wanted to try to do it right, I went to some trouble to study it.
>
> Here's what you do. You either do it with idiom—get a flavor of the speech, the dialect, like, "He's so stingy, he wouldn't give you the steam off his shit." Well, see, to most of the young people here that might not make any sense because you never shit outside when the ground was frozen, but if you do you will see that shit steams. Or you can say, "He'd rather climb a tree and tell a lie than stand on flat ground and tell the truth"—that's a pretty sorry fella. So idiom will partly do it; the other way you do it is by syntax, the placing of the words, and by phonetically spelling a key word. Take an easy line: "There's enough business in this town for everybody." Where I come from, first we get rid of "there's," and we put "it's" in its place: "It's enough (good to do) bidness (probably, spell it b-i-d-n-e-s-s) for everybody." And I'd drop the "y" and spell it "ever" (run the "ever" right with the "body"), and I would not put one of those—if you drop a letter out of a word that you're writing, don't put one of those little apostrophe things.

Thus, a key distinction must be appreciated. His characters should be judged on what they do; as a writer, Crews has to be judged on what he says. His words are their own action.

> Oh geeze, I've always thought he was a mad genius—but haven't gone much further than that, just because I haven't read enough to have a really developed opinion.
>
> —anonymous nationally known book critic

Times change, but Crews has not. Political correctness has gone from being a necessary corrective for historic institutional and social abuses to becoming itself an institutional abuse. Harry Crews, though, was never politically correct.

Crews was the first writer I read in the Southern "grit lit" genre, which was fresh and exciting for me, having been raised on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers. First-class writing devoid of sentimentality—what a wonderful introduction to Larry Brown and later Cormac McCarthy and others. I'm grateful to him and to those who were courageous enough to publish him.
—Nancy Olson, independent bookstore owner in North Carolina

The sheer magnitude of his pain trumps everything. That pain might stagger me into silence. He seems to live a life and write from the perspective of a life in which he has nothing to lose but his voice. That has to be admired.
—Jacquelyn Mitchard, writer

I didn't know that it was okay to write about the area of my upbringing until I read *Feast of Snakes*, *Naked in Garden Hills*, and *Car*. Up until this point I had tried to write about everywhere except small southern towns, filled with characters elbow-deep in scams. Because I'd been a philosophy major, I somehow missed Miss O'Connor's small-town scammers, so Mr. Crews's work became my surrogate writing daddy.
—George Singleton, writer

We all know the addictive pleasure of finding a writer whose work surprises and then seduces us. I started reading Crews's fiction in 1988; in a year, I had read almost everything he had published. I was born in Louisiana and grew up in Texas, and even though that childhood was in the 1950s, I had been sheltered from the South of Harry Crews. I knew about it as part of the air we all breathed, a scent of the South, but being an army brat I was protected by the regimented equality of low-rank military families. Only later, as I got older and lived away from the South, did I learn the truth about black and white America. It wasn't pretty.

Here's an odd thing about Crews's fiction. Overall, black people are secondary figures. Racism is there, but it is not his focus. Crews has three characters in his fiction: region, race, and class. The region is the American South; the race is southern white; the class ranges from poor to marginal middle class. But you do not have to be southern, white, or poor to appreciate Harry Crews. Those are his starting points, but his destination is more transcendent. Still, you must honor those starting points. For instance, Dennis Covington went to Alabama and handled snakes, blending region and religion, and he gave us Crews's people in a real world, a human genre upon which most "solid" Americans look down, distancing themselves from the intense passion that true faith is capable of provoking and even requiring. For Covington and Crews, that passion, not just in religion but also in appetite and thought, is one of the things that makes the South different from the rest of the country.

The South was, and still is in many ways (notwithstanding northern urban crime), more violent than the North. Crews is not interested in explaining why. The nexus between maintaining slavery and the use of violence is obvious, and historians can document it. Unlike Faulkner, Crews does not take the Old South as a source of inspiration. For Crews, it is the legacy of that history that matters—southerners today. What *is* simply *is*. So, who are these people? Are they really that different from you and me? Here is Dennis Covington in an essay called "Snake Handling and Redemption":

> The South hasn't disappeared. If anything, it's become more Southern in a last-ditch effort to save itself. . . . I'm talking about our fall from Grace. I'm talking about the scorn and ridicule the nation has heaped on poor Southern whites, the only ethnic group in America not permitted to have a history.

How important is the South to Crews, the man and his writing, and therefore to his readers? The South is more than hot and humid weather and fertile geography, more than the people and their personal and collective history; for Crews, it is also home. He went away from that home in south Georgia to be a marine, but he came back and had to relearn a truth about it. Working in the fields with his cousins, he endured their teasing him about his stamina but then got angry—and he made his memory of that anger the final anecdote in *A Childhood*:

I glanced up at the sky and said: "Goddamn sun."

As soon as I'd spoken, I knew what I had done. The four boys perceptibly flinched. When they turned to look at me, the joking and laughter were gone.

"Look," I said, "I . . . I didn't. . . ."

But there was nothing I could say. I had already done what, in Bacon County, was unthinkable. I had cursed the sun. And in Bacon County you don't curse the sun or the rain or the land or God. They are all the same thing. To curse any of them is an ultimate blasphemy. I had known that three years ago, but in three years I had somehow managed to forget it. I stood there feeling how much I had left this place and these people, and at the same time knowing that it would be forever impossible to leave them completely. Wherever I might go in the world, they would go with me.

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Obviously some people just don't get it, can't get past the whole gonzo redneck persona, the brawling and the boozing and the rhetorical grandstanding, can't even get past the dust jacket photo with the mohawk and the death's-head tattoo. Once you get past all that, and see it for the conscious provocation that it is, then it comes down to the work itself. Of course, some people just can't get past that either, would rather not read about all those blessed freaks and misfits, harelips, mutes, midgets, whores, all the blood sports, the bloodshed.
—Brian Carpenter, editor of "Grit Lit: A Rough South Reader," a manuscript in progress

Sex? For sure, but not as much as you hear about. Violence, too. Sometimes the two combine so that, on a visceral level, a reader maybe can understand more than he wants to know. The reader/critic who dwells on sex and violence as central to Crews, however, misses the point. As is true for so many of the best writers, his real subject is people—their baseness and nobility. Sex is one force shaping those outcomes, and violence is a manifestation of the success or failure of the struggle.

To appreciate sex as power to be used and a life force to be sought, read *Celebration* and savor the nymphet Too Much:

> Stump watched Too Much getting ready to skin out of her clothes, fixating on her in a kind of killing fury and at the same time loving her as he had loved nobody or nothing else in the world. She was standing in front of the bathroom, where she was filling a tub. She liked her bathwater nearly scalding, and the steam swirled out the door and beaded on the skin of her naked arms and shoulders, while she languidly and without pause scratched herself in a kind of dreamlike state.

Stump is the one-armed patron of the Forever and Forever trailer park. Too Much is just that. Gentle souls might avoid this Crews novel unless they're prepared for sessions of what might be called "nub" sex. But if you detour around this tale of lost souls, you'll also miss a classic example of Crews wisdom, channeled through Too Much's desire to bring the park back to life. She wants Stump to understand the world in which he lives but which he has never appreciated:

> "Forever and Forever is a gold mine. Stump, when you walk around the park, all you see are wrecked and ruined people, people who are dying or people who already ought to be dead. As you've heard me say before, it doesn't make you bad; it only makes you human. Did it ever cross your mind that right here in this park you've got architects, poets, bricklayers, and concert pianists? Did it?"
>
> "Never."
>
> "You do. You name the craft or art, and I'll go find the man or woman who is the master of it. And I'll never have to leave Forever and Forever to do it. They're the ones who have made [this]

> place into something you wouldn't believe. And they did every bit of it for nothing. They're starving for something to do besides wait for death. And I'm going to give it to them. Before I'm done, I may organize Forever and Forever like the frigging Prussian Army."
> "You mean the Russian Army."
> "No, the Prussian Army."

You can bet that Harry Crews knew the difference between the Russian and Prussian armies when he wrote that line, as did Too Much when she spoke it. Men like Stump, however, will always operate with a base view of humanity, compounded by an inability to understand the distinctions that history and life offer.

> Listen, if you want to write about all sweetness and light and that stuff, go get a job at Hallmark. But if you're gonna write about human beings, you're getting down where it's quick. You know *quick*?—alive, bloody, bleeding, open, *quick*? Cut my finger in the quick.
> —Harry Crews

To understand how sex is a weapon of degradation and an extension of power, take the few hours necessary to read *A Feast of Snakes*. Unfortunately, the mythic power of the snake has been rendered almost cartoon-like in popular culture since Crews's most powerful novel was published in 1976. Snakes on a plane, anacondas in the jungle—we can still be frightened by Hollywood, but then we come back into the sunlight and laugh about our experience. Snakes, after all, are just special effects. Emily Dickinson and Harry Crews (you won't often see them in the same sentence) might be a long century and temperaments apart, but they would agree on one thing about that narrow fellow in the grass:

> . . . never met this Fellow
> Attended, or alone
> Without a tighter breathing
> And Zero at the Bone—

A Feast of Snakes is surely one of those rare books that will make you uncomfortable on almost every page, but you will keep reading. Even now, after popular culture has trivialized most of the iconic symbols of Christianity and Freudian psychology, Crews's opening paragraph is almost hypnotic:

> She felt the snake between her breasts, felt him there, and loved him there, coiled, the deep tumescent S held rigid, ready to strike. She loved the way the snake looked sewn onto her V-neck letter sweater, his hard diamondback pattern shining in the sun. It was unseasonably hot, almost sixty degrees, for early November in Mystic, Georgia, and she could smell the light musk of her own sweat. She liked the sweat, liked the way it felt, slick as oil, in all the joints of her body, her bones, in the firm sliding muscles, tensed and locked now, ready to spring—to *strike*—when the band behind her fired up the school song: "Fight On Deadly Rattlers of Old Mystic High."

Snakes are on almost every page of this book, but that first line is a story all by itself. How many other readers have flinched, as I did, at the opening image of a *real* snake between that young woman's breasts? How many people even know the definition of *tumescent*? It's a word that Dickinson would certainly appreciate for its exotic preciseness, the sound hinting at its meaning. A single word in a single line that is itself tumescent with sexuality and danger, followed by more lines of heat and muscles and oily hot sweat all modifying that initial flesh-and-snake image. Then, in the last line of the paragraph, Crews offers us a temporary and ironic haven from the danger in which he has placed us. We're just in Georgia. It's just high school. The snake is just a mesh of raised thread, just a mascot . . . right?

Crews's accomplishment in *Feast* is to throw snakes all over the place, stretching the phallic parallels in literal and symbolic directions. After all, the book is about a rattlesnake roundup. Years ago, a colleague of mine thought he was insulting Crews by describing him as "just a white-trash parody of Faulkner, a vulgarized version of O'Connor." The O'Connor comparison was wrong, but the Faulkner had a proverbial grain of insight—though I think the connection is not that of parody but of white-trash *parallel*. Rereading Crews while preparing to write this essay, I imagined him and Faulkner sitting down for a drink together after the latter had read about black Lottie Mae in *Feast*. First,

her general assessment of whites:

> White people were dangerous and snakes were dangerous and now the two were working together, each doing what the other told it to do. She was sure she had seen a snake in a weeded ditch with the head of a white man. Right after she came out of the house on the way to Big Joe's, which she had immediately forgotten, she saw it, long and black and diamond patterned in the ditch with a white man's head. It had blue eyes. The bluest eyes any white man ever had. She was sure she had seen it. She thought she had seen it. Maybe it was only a dream or a memory of another time. Whatever it was, she saw it every time she closed her eyes, coiled there on the back of her eyelids, blue-eyed and dangerous.

Then, a few pages later, her confrontation with Buddy Matlow in the sheriff's car, where he offers her whiskey and his exposed penis:

> She knew without looking that this was what he had looked for her for and what he had brought her into the sheriff's car for and that there was nothing that she could do but look. She turned her head and saw a snake standing in his lap. Right in his lap a snake rose straight as a plumb line, no striking coil in its body but arrow straight on its tail, and at the top of its body the mouth was stretched and she could see the needle fangs like tiny swords. It was the snake that she had been waiting for. . . . She did not answer but in a movement she had been practicing in her mind all day she bent to her ankle where the straight razor was wedged inside her shoe and in a single fluid movement she struck his lap and came away with the snake in her hand, its softening head with the needle fangs still showing just above her thumb and forefinger.

*

> See, I believe that all of the best fiction is about the same thing: it's about somebody trying to do the best he can with what he's got. That's all—the best he can with what he's got—sometimes nobly, sometimes ignobly.
> —Harry Crews

Harry Crews is a southern writer, but so are countless others. Remove the regional pigeonhole, though, and Crews is a brilliant writer, and there aren't a lot of those. His brilliance is not just a matter of style or subject matter, but also of *effect*, of making the reader remember. Crews knows what is important: "Listen, there are novels that are so personal that I just close the thing, mark it with my thumb, and look out the window to keep from crying. There are novels where I just can't bear . . . just can't bear the thing that only a god would ask you, the burden of it."

Life always goes on, but a good story is like a brake. You slow down, perhaps you stop, so you can enjoy the scenery. Right about now, I can imagine the voices of people from my past, those with whom I talked about Crews. "Sure, Larry, we slow down. But reading Crews is like slowing down to go past a car wreck. Prurient interest in death and dismemberment, blood on the goddam tracks."

A *Booklist* review of Crews's most recent novel, *An American Family*, is probably typical of how most reviewers approach him now: "Crews's latest testosterone-fueled trance of cryptic meaning and freakish violence . . ."—and so it goes. I read a line like that and I'm reminded of what happens early in a political campaign. The media requires a narrative about the candidates, something that explains them and that all subsequent statements and actions have to be made to fit if they are to be included in the coverage. In 2000, Gore was branded the serial exaggerator and condescending smart guy; Bush was the laid-back but genuine guy you'd like to have a beer with, forgiven for his foibles because he seemed to lack the pretensions of Gore. Hear it enough, you don't have to think anymore. You don't need to think at all. Harry Crews's "narrative" is doomed to be a gush of pyrotechnic *cojones* prose in a Bosch or Diane Arbus Confederate landscape. Unless you read him, and you slow down, and you're willing to be imprinted.

> I never wanted to be well-rounded, and I do not admire well-rounded people nor

> their work. So far as I can see, nothing good in the world has ever been done by well-rounded people. The good work is done by people with jagged, broken edges, because those edges cut things and leave an imprint, a design.
> —Harry Crews

A few years after being introduced to Crews's fiction, I introduced it to my students in Iowa. We're talking *Yankees* here. A course in the contemporary American novel. At the time, the only Crews novel I had not read was *Body*, so I thought I would put it on the syllabus and do the lazy professorial thing—read it a week before my students and prep a brilliant lecture. On the same syllabus I included Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, which I had also not read yet, but which had all sorts of relevant credentials: Iowa author, Midwest farm setting, prose from the heartland, reviews praising its King Lear subtext, and a Pulitzer Prize offering a comfort zone for readers, an outside validation provided by professionals. *Body* had fat women and bodybuilders.

In an educational smackdown, I predicted, Smiley would be the winner with my students. I was wrong. And pleased to be wrong, because I had underestimated my students and learned something from them. My education came weeks after we had discussed the two books, near the end of the semester. Sensing boredom in the classroom, I asked the cosmic question: "So, of all the stuff we've read so far, which was your favorite?" Implicit, of course, was the follow-up question: *Why?*

Silence at first, as usual, but then a lone female hand went up meekly, and when the young woman spoke I had a flashback to the colleague in Florida: guilty-pleasure confession coming.

"I liked the one about the bodybuilders."

And we were off. Others nodded, but still others rolled their eyes as if they thought their classmates had gone crazy. Class was a free-fire zone for an hour, and I wondered why I had not been able to provoke the same discussion earlier. In my best Aristotelian mode I asked, grabbing what I thought would have been their first choice, "But what about the Smiley novel?"

A collective shrug, with one student volunteering, "It was okay, but, I mean, I was disappointed in the incest thing. I mean, it's all over television now, so I figured it was like watching Oprah."

I defended Smiley, a good writer: "But isn't that real life? Secrets from our past affecting our future." (An approach I had used in the earlier discussion.)

More shrugging, as if to tell me, *Sure, but so what?*

"And her use of the Lear parallels?" I was rehashing my lecture notes, but, not so very deep down, I was pleased.

When I had first read *Body*, a week before the class discussed it, I thought to myself, "Well, *this* is going to be interesting. Fat women having sex, and crazy Vietnam vets. Suicide, murder, and a grenade dropped down a guy's pants. I wonder how many complaints will go to the administration about me making the little darlings read this?"

Body opens with a sex scene between a female bodybuilder, Shereel Dupont—whose real name is Dorothy Turnipseed (She Real? Dupont = chemical product, that is, steroids? . . . a name worthy of O'Connor)—and her trainer, Russell "Muscle" Morgan, who operates a gym, Russell's Emporium of Pain. Shereel is one pound over her competition weight limit, and she just wants four ounces of water. Russell makes clear the price: "'You want that water? You want a nice cool piece of ice to suck on? Here's where you earn it. Earn it here or you don't get it.'" Then follows the ultimate workout, two muscled bodies exercising each other all over a steamy room at the Blue Flamingo Hotel, the sex so intense that furniture is shattered and Russell is left bleeding—but Shereel's body is unmarked:

> Russell had been very careful not to leave any sign of struggle on her. It would not do to mar the flesh he had brought here to win the world.

In the classroom discussion of that first chapter weeks earlier, as professors are trained to do, I had tried to show them how it set up themes that would come back later. The quest for perfection, the consequential pain and personal deprivation required, the individual against a system, competition as a metaphor for life, the pleasure of the flesh versus artificial re-sculpting into a physical form that is both grotesque and godlike. And so on, and so very forth.

I had asked them to reread one of my favorite passages from the book, one that I felt had thematic significance. A group of bodybuilders are working out when "an enormous, hairless, veined man . . . dropped to one knee, placed his fists on his hips, and went into

a lat spread pose." In a few seconds that bodybuilder's veins are "working like worms suddenly come alive." His eyes become glazed, and he seems almost rigidly catatonic as his muscles swell. The other competitors understand his routine, but the spectator Turnipseed family—recently arrived at the luxury Miami hotel from their farm in rural Georgia—sees only a man in utter distress. Those overweight and flabby brothers and sisters go on a mission of mercy, as brother Nail explains: "Les jump that sucker and save his ass in the name of love and feeling for our fellow man." As a teacher, I was fascinated by the response of the other bodybuilders:

> All the other bodybuilders—men and women—had rushed to the other end of the pool and stood packed closely together, craning their necks in an effort to see what was being done to one of their very own by these strange creatures who had appeared among them, and who were not—it was sickeningly apparent—one of them, but rather only normal, malnourished men and women who could have been selected at random from any segment of the regular old pathetic American populace. None of the Cosmos contestants made any move to help their fellow athlete pinned to his back at the far end of the pool, because after all they had their own perfect bodies to protect. A single scratch or abrasion on their uniformly tanned bodies could lose the Cosmos for them. Nobody with a scratch on his skin could possibly win any more than anybody with a tattoo could win. Perfection was the name of this game and they were not about to take any risk for anybody.

Muscle does not equal strength, nor courage. The quest for physical perfection is not a team sport.

My teaching was brilliant, I was sure. But one comment from a brave student was enough to make me pause. "I think the writer likes these people more than you do, Dr. Baker."

When I returned to that comment during the class at the end of the semester, I asked that same student if she would choose *Body* as her favorite of the term. "Well, probably, but I'm still having nightmares about that scene with the mega-fat girl and the guy having sex in the tub. Too much information, you know?" The class began a nodding frenzy, pro and con Crews readers united in a collective flashback.

So, was there a fundamental difference between my students' reactions to Smiley and Crews? Nobody really disliked *A Thousand Acres*, but nobody picked it as the favorite book of the semester. It had been necessary medicine for them to take from Dr. Baker, and it would surely make them better educated. As for *Body*, about a third of the class loved it, and two-thirds thought it was gross and stupid and one of the worst books of the course.

I had my own opinion about why so many of them felt so strongly about Crews relative to Smiley, but I waited for the students to articulate the reasons. I knew where to look: an older student, off to my left, who had been my most reliable and insightful talker all semester, but who was oddly quiet this day. I turned and let my body language ask the question: *And you?* He shook his head. "I never thought Smiley's characters were real. I always heard the writer, not the narrator." I looked around the room. We had spent a lot of time discussing point of view in fiction.

"It was a novel more than it was a story?"

The older student did not say that. I did. The distinction made sense to me, but I could see that it had not helped the students. The student finally spoke again, "I don't know about that. All I know is that I'll remember that ending for a long time. Not sure what the hell it means, but, you know . . ."

Murmuring and nodding, more eye-rolling and head-shaking, the class discussion ricocheting for another few minutes. Finally, the original Crews fan, the young woman who had made the first classroom commitment to him, raised her hand again. "Dr. Baker, if I were going to read some more by him, where should I start?"

I looked at her, and the answer seemed obvious.

"How do you feel about snakes?"

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*Except for quotes from his novels, all the Harry Crews comments about the writing process come from "Some of Us Do It Anyway: An Interview with Harry Crews" by Tammy Lytal and Richard R. Russell in the Fall 1994 *Georgia Review*. Comments about Crews from other writers or readers were drawn from e-mail responses I solicited in August 2007, in preparation for

this essay. The Dennis Covington quote is from his essay "Snake Handling and Redemption," which appeared in the Winter 1994 *Georgia Review*.

Ordinary Crimes
By Chris Iovenko

Hotel checkouts for Gordon Beauregard Travis III, multi-millionaire, were a nightmare not for himself but for the hotel staff. Gordon prided himself on not paying; not paying for his room, or what he had eaten, or what he had used, or even what he had purchased. In the past Gordon had brought along an empty suitcase which he loaded with towels and robes until recently when the larger franchises had begun keeping track of missing items. Frugality was Gordon's tactic for preserving his inherited wealth and the key pillar of his self-identity. He saw it as a sign of business acumen: Gordon himself was a successor yes, but an equal none the less to the original tycoon, his grandfather Gordon Beauregard Travis numero uno, inventor of the Spongee brand window cleaner.

"Just pay the bill," said Stacy, his twelve year old daughter. Her short blond hair had a long bang that masked her expression when she tilted her head forward and stared at the ground, her common stance when in her father's presence.

"He always does this," she added in way of apology to the corporate stick figure of woman with thin black glasses of the current style and a carefully carved wooden smile. A dramatically lit waterfall foamed and bubbled down the roughhewn red rock wall behind the checkout desk.

"I lost $120,000 dollars at the craps table and you have the nerve to charge me for the rooms?" shouted Gordon loud enough for all those standing in line behind him to hear. He towered over the desk clerk; his broad palms flattened on the countertop, his knuckles drawn as white as the marble.

"May I scan your Player's Card?"

"I don't have one," said Gordon, who had once lost five dollars on a nickel slot machine. It had taken

him a week to shallow the shame of the event. His grandfather was a notoriously lucky gambler who had once hit a numbers jackpot worth a hundred thousand. He had, with press in attendance, given the money to a local orphanage.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Travis, but with no Player's Card we have no way of tracking your gaming at our casino."

"Are you saying I'm lying?" said Gordon aghast.

"Just comp him the room," said Miranda. Miranda was Gordon's current girlfriend, a moon-faced waif who treated Gordon like a rich and attractive uncle. "Otherwise you'll be here for an hour arguing with him."

"I can't. The threshold, even with a Player's Card for comp rooms, is $750,000," said the woman.

The number left Gordon temporarily speechless. Worse, he felt poor, a feeling that was both unnatural and slightly nauseating. He could taste a frisson of bile in the back of his throat. The gurgling of the water from the fountain sounded suddenly like a doomed boat sucking water through a hole in its hull.

"Is there anything else I can help you with?" said the clerk.

"I demand the discount I deserve," said Gordon fiercely, letting his anger overshadow any hint of doubt.

"I'm sorry, sir," said the woman.

The clerk looked down at the screen and began tapping at her keyboard. Gordon stood his ground. He would stand silently at the counter for an hour or a week. Gordon would get his discount. The clerk looked up at Gordon and seemed to understand.

"Red Rock Gaming Industries' primary interest is in serving our customers and in your return business," said the woman with a glance at the long and visibly impatient line that had formed behind Gordon. "I'll deduct all the room service charges from the bill."

"Fine," said Gordon defiantly; he'd gotten something for nothing and that would have to suffice for now.

"Next time you visit be sure to get a player's card," said the woman as Gordon signed the new bill.

"It wouldn't make any difference," said Gordon loudly as he walked away from the desk. "I don't gamble."

Outside the heat was withering. The bags were waiting next to the cab and the sweating bellboy made an elaborate gesture of loading the bags in the trunk and opening the doors for Gordon, Stacy and Miranda.

"Thanks for your invaluable help," said Gordon as he got in the cab. He handed the bellboy a folded slip of paper and got a smile and nod in return.

"I didn't think you believed in tipping," said Miranda.

"It was a 10 percent off coupon for the buffet bar," said Gordon with a smile.

"God," said Miranda laughing. "Their employee discount would be more than that."

"I don't ever want to go on vacation with you again," said Stacy, her eyes welling with tears. "All you do is act like a jerk."

"It's a joke," said Gordon. "I'm sure he gets it. Those guys don't need tips. They're union; they're covered cradle to grave."

The traffic on the freeway had slowed to a halt. "Our flight is in a half-an-hour," said Gordon, leaning forward and speaking to the cab driver, a young man with a Yankee's cap and peroxide-white goatee.

"Had wings I'd fly you there," said the taxi driver.

"We'll miss our flight and my mother will be furious," said Stacy. In the distance smoke plumed from the highway up to the clouds. Traffic on both sides of the freeway was stopped.

"Must be a long-haul truck on fire," said the cabbie cheerfully. "That's your slowdown. Guys are broke because of the economy. Cut corners to stay alive. They use retread tires, burn the brake pads down to the shoes, next thing you get blowouts, jackknives, death and destruction."

"Take this exit," said Gordon.

"I'm sorry dude, but I don't know any shortcuts. I've only been here a month. All I do is drive the expressway to the hotel and back like a damn yo-yo on a string."

In the distance the Luxor shot a thin knife of light straight to heaven. The sky was darkening and headlights began to flick on turning the highway in a frozen stream of light.

"Get off here, yo-yo," said Gordon. The cabbie looked back furtively.

"Now," roared Gordon in voice that was rarely denied.

The cabbie shrugged. The cab inched over and got onto the off-ramp and curved down onto an open boulevard that headed through a residential area surrounded by a high wall. Few other cars were on the

wide street. A sun-bleached banner hung from the wall that read "Resort Living on a Budget – First Three Months Free!"

"Where do I go?" said the cabbie.

"Straight," said Gordon. "The Luxor is our compass. It's due north. The airport is west. Keep the light on our right and we'll get there pronto."

"I think they broke the mold when they made you, Gordon," laughed Miranda. "The problem with most guys is they won't take charge."

"There's a thousand bucks in it if you get us to the gate on time," added Gordon pompously.

Gordon winked at Miranda who covered her giggle with her hand. Stacy was about to say something but Gordon shook his finger at her. The cabbie floored the old sedan and they rocketed down the empty street.

"You think you're rich," said the cabbie. "I had Donald Trump as a fare when they were shooting here. Now that's rich."

"That show was a long time ago," said Miranda. "I thought you said you just got here."

"OK," said the cabbie. "You caught me. I never had him in my cab. But I've had plenty of rich bastards or them that thinks they're rich bastards."

"Are you saying I'm a rich bastard?" said Gordon.

"You act like one. You want me to drive like a maniac through residential neighborhoods where I could lose my license and when we get there you'll stiff me on the grand whether I make it or not."

"I'll pay you," said Gordon.

"Then pay me now," said the cabbie. "I'll get you there on time or I'll give it back."

"You get us to the damn airport, punk," said Gordon.

With a screech of brakes, the cabbie pulled over. On one side of the road was a dusty plain and on the other skeletal rows of half completed houses.

"Get out," said the cabbie.

"Please," said Stacy, who had begun to cry. "Please just take us."

"I'm not going to apologize if that's what you think," said Gordon. "Not to the likes of you."

"Get out or I'll haul you out," said the cabbie.

"Drive you little bastard or I'll see you reported to the police," said Gordon.

The cabbie opened his door and got out of his seat and so did Gordon. The cabbie was twenty years younger than Gordon but a foot shorter. Gordon shoved the cabbie who tripped and fell backwards. Gordon ran over and began to kick him as he struggled on the ground. Stacy jumped from the car.

"Stop it," she said. "Please. Stop it."

But Gordon wouldn't stop. The man curled into a defensive ball. Gordon's soft pony skinned loafers weren't up to the task and one went flying. Exhausted, puffing like marathon runner, Gordon staggered over to recover his shoe which he replaced on his foot. Blood spattered the yellow uppers. Stacy sat huddled and sobbing on the curb. Miranda watched Gordon with a new found pride.

"You kicked his fucking ass and he was my age," said Miranda.

Gordon glanced at his watch, a diamond encrusted Corum which, thank God, had no scratches.

"We only have fifteen minutes to catch the flight," Gordon said and cast a final triumphant look at the man, a dark question mark scrawled against the gray street. Gordon jumped in the front seat of the taxi.

"Cool," said Miranda, as she jumped in the front seat on the other side. "You're stealing the car."

Gordon gunned the engine and took off with a screech of tires.

"Do you think I ought to have killed him for talking to me like that?" said Gordon. "I could have."

"Raw," said Miranda. "That was some raw shit."

"People think I'm full of shit that I'm all talk but I don't take shit period," said Gordon. Gordon's heart was pumping racing fuel; he felt that he was in danger of literally bursting with pride.

"You rock," said Miranda. "You're not some old soft rich dude at all. You rock."

"God, I'm so fired up," said Gordon. He looked in the back seat. It was empty.

Miranda followed his glance. "Should we go back and get her?"

Gordon pulled over to the curb. His face was cherry red with excitement. "You ever fucked in a stolen car before?"

Stacy sat on the curb as she watched the cab drive out of the sight. She felt torn between rage at her father and cool relief now that he was gone. Stacy hated spending time with him and felt like a slave to the terms of the divorce. She sat for a moment, feeling helpless and stared at the setting sun which made the distant red rocks of the mountains glow like coals in a furnace. Stacy heard a groan and looked over at the cab driver who had struggled to his knees.

"Jesus," he said, staring at Stacy. "What kind of cocksucker leaves his daughter alone on in the heart of the ex-urbs?"

"What are the ex-urbs?" said Stacy.

"Tomorrow's Vegas," said the cabbie. "A hellhole with air-conditioning, chilled pools, and a million ways to lose your paycheck."

"Are you hurt?" said Stacy.

"Born hurt," said the cabbie, wiping blood from his nose and looking at it. "That pussy was kicking me with slippers on."

"I've missed my plane,"

"My name is Chico," said the cabbie.

"Stacy," said Stacy.

"Do you have a cell?" said Chico.

Stacy pulled a small pink phone from her purse. "Is my dad going to go to jail?"

"That was my brother's cab I was driving," said Chico. "I bring the cops in and he'll lose his medallion."

A flat bed truck hauling a grader coated in red dust from the red rock mountains roared by. Chico took the cell and dialed a number.

"Got jacked," Chico said and then listened to a long shouted answer. "We'll get it back. It'll be in the airport parking garage. Just get me. It's too much bullshit to explain."

Excited as he was, Gordon found himself flaccid when they got in the back seat of the car and started making out. He usually took Viagra before sex but it was packed in his suitcase. Gordon felt a flush all over his body, he was hot with passion but his groin remained numb.

Gordon looked at Miranda's fresh, expectant face and his anger boiled over. He drew his hand back and slapped her hard. She looked too shocked too speak, her eyes welled with tears. Suddenly, Gordon was hard. Miranda tried to push him away but the more she struggled the more of a beast he became.

A primer gray '57 Chevy pulled alongside of Stacy and Chico and a man who looked like an older, larger version of Chico stared out.

"Fucked up again," said the man flatly.

Chico shrugged.

"You hurt?" asked the man this time with a note of sympathy in his voice.

Chico shook his head.

"We need to get this girl to the airport," said Chico.

"Shit," said the man. "I need my fucking cab back."

The man gestured for them to get in the car. Chico sat in front, Stacy in the back. The interior was a custom purple plush that prickled through Stacy's thin dress.

"I'm Stevie," said the man, putting the car in gear. "Dude your father who ripped me off?"

"Yes," said Stacy. "But I don't care really."

"Shit on my dick," said Stevie. "He didn't get far, the bastard."

In front of them was the orange cab. Miranda staggered out and the cab squealed away.

"Stop!" shouted Stacy. Stevie slammed on the brakes and Stacy rolled down her window. Tears streaked Miranda's freshly bruised face and her dress was torn. She held it together with one hand. Stacy opened the door for her and Miranda got in. Before the door had closed Stevie had stood on the accelerator, the tires screamed and smoked and the big car launched down the long straight road. Nobody said anything. Street lights flicked on one after another as the day darkened and soon the red tail lights came into view.

"Run the motherfucker off the road," said Miranda.

"Shit," said Stevie. "And wreck my own cab?"

Stevie pulled up to the bumper of the cab but suddenly it swerved to the right and rocketed down an unpaved side street. Great skeletal mansions, framed but not sided or roofed, loomed in the shadows on either side of the unfinished street. The cab kicked up waves of dust as it barreled down the gravel street.

The street dead ended in a cul-de-sac. The cab drove up on the dirt front yard of one of the mansions but the houses, despite their size, were placed only a few feet from each other.

"He's trapped," said Stevie. "Fuck, I hope he don't look under the seat."

Stevie swerved the car to a sideways stop in the gravel road blocking the only exit. He then reached down and pulled the speaker out of the door panel. He reached inside the door and pulled out a snub-nosed .357 revolver.

"I'm calling the police," said Stacy pulling out her cell phone.

"No, you're not," said Miranda, snatching the phone out of Stacy's hand and holding it out of reach.

"We ain't going to kill him," said Stevie. "Unless he tries to kill us first."

"How could he try to kill you?" said Stacy in tears.

At that moment, Gordon stepped out the car and began to walk towards the '57 Chevy. He had a gun held in front of him.

"Fuck," said Stevie. "Get down everyone."

Suddenly, the glass smashed on Stevie's window and the sound of four quickly fired shots echoed in the cab. Both Stevie and Chico slumped down in their seats. Stacy started to scream.

When Gordon reached the car, Stacy was still screaming. Gordon opened the door and pulled her out. He tried to hug her but she pushed him away.

"Where's their guns?"

"They didn't have any," said Miranda.

"Bullshit," said Gordon. "Impossible. It was self-defense."

Gordon leaned into the cab and roughly punched the two men but neither moved. He turned to Miranda and the last thing he saw was the muzzle flash of the .357.

Miranda carefully wiped her finger prints off the gun with a torn section of her dress and then dropped the gun over the front seat. Miranda got out of the car, tears in her eyes, and walked over to Gordon's body. She kicked him in the ribs but he didn't move. Miranda turned and saw Stacy sitting in the dirt, her head down, her bangs shielding her face.

"Why did you kill him?" said Stacy.

"Have you ever been raped?" said Miranda.

"We could have called the police," said Stacy.

"We still can," said Miranda.

Stacy shook her head. "I don't want to talk to anybody about this."

"I've got to change into some else if we we're going to go airport," said Miranda.

"How will we know which way to go?" asked Stacy.

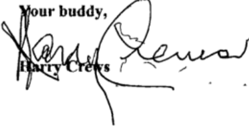
Miranda pointed to the Luxor's clean white beam needling through the dark sky.

"Keep the light on our right," said Miranda.

Stacy nodded. She'd stopped sobbing for the time being and wondered if she'd ever cry about anything again.

The End.

"The Passion for the Thing": Learning to Write with Harry Crews (June 7, 1935 – March 28, 2012)
By Jay Atkinson



Harry Crews
2820 N. W. 34th Street
Gainesville, Florida 32605

March 25, 2005

Dear Jay,

I speak to you as a man, a friend, and an equal. Of course I got your book. You did yourself proud. I am pleased and honored for the dedication. I also loved the picture of you and your son. I know you are raising a fine man. Like father like son.

The picture of you in the newspaper piece: Now you've got a writer's face. Looking into the dark corners of your own heart will do that. You've earned your stripes. Welcome to the company of the best writers.

Good luck and God speed.

Your buddy,

Harry Crews

I studied under Harry Crews. I knew Harry Crews. Harry Crews was a friend of mine. And I've never met anyone as blunt, compelling, controversial, flawed, or talented as he was—and I've been around. At age 71, chain-smoking like an air traffic controller during the Reagan administration, Crews told a *New York Times* reporter: "I had an ex-wife and I had an ex-kid and I had an ex-dog and I had an ex-house and I'm an ex-drunk." Now, five years after the volatile writer's death, and upon the paperback release of Ted Geltner's *Blood, Bone and Marrow: a Biography of Harry Crews*, I'm drawn back to my recollections of Harry as a writer, teacher, and friend.

Crews had a temper as short as his life was long, burning more bridges than General William Tecumseh Sherman as he rampaged across Georgia during the Civil War. Despite his I-don't-give-a-fuck attitude, Crews was the author of 23 books, including his celebrated memoir, *A Childhood: the Biography of a Place*, and a startling array of gritty southern novels, including *The Gypsy's Curse*, *A Feast of Snakes*, *The Knockout Artist*, and *Karate is a Thing of the Spirit*. Born in Bacon County, Georgia, at the nadir of the Great Depression, Harry arrived at the University of Florida in the 1960s after a three-year hitch in the Marine Corps. His tenure as student and professor at the university would become legend.

After earning a degree in philosophy at Acadia University in Canada, I enrolled in Harry's fiction writing seminar in the UF graduate school, where I was a fixture for eight consecutive semesters beginning in 1980. By the time I met Crews, he'd drank himself past the dark good looks and chiseled torso of his early publicity photos. Dressed in Sears Roebuck jeans and ill-fitting polo shirts, he was a large, shaggy, sore-legged wreck in his mid-forties, known for holding forth in his gravelly voice with a mesmerizing admixture of erudition, insight, and profanity.

Walking into Harry's class was like an aspiring trapeze artist going under the Big Top with P. T. Barnum. Crews didn't just teach—he *evangelized*. This was classroom as performance space, teaching as theatre. In light of all the hardships Crews had endured in willing himself to become a writer, he had little tolerance for those who weren't dedicated to the craft. And though Harry dressed like a hobo, he lectured like a king. I can see him now, in all his ragged glory, stabbing his finger at the ceiling: "The thing! The thing! To have the passion for the thing, and to remain true to it—despite everything that's going to happen to you, the heat, the grief."

It was the sort of charged atmosphere that appears to have vanished forever, and remembering how much I loved it makes it seem even more distant.

Everything Harry said in that stuffy classroom grew out of his long, painful apprenticeship, and the haunting memories of his early life. On their dilapidated tenant farm, the Crews family survived on

the paltry crops they scratched out of the loose gray dirt, and whatever they caught or killed. As an infant, Harry suffered the premature death of his father, Ray Crews, inheriting Ray's mean, hard-drinking brother, Paschal, as his stepfather. When he was five years old, Harry contracted polio, bringing on temporary paralysis and forcing him to walk with a limp for the rest of his life. A few months later, rough housing with other kids, young Harry was knocked into a vat of boiling water meant for skinning hogs, which burned him over two-thirds of his body. That same year, his stepfather, in a drunken rage, fired a shotgun over the head of Harry's mother, Myrtice Crews, and she decamped for the poor section of Jacksonville, Florida with Harry and his older brother, Hoyett. Crews never really called Georgia home again, but constantly revisited Bacon County in his books, his manner of speech, and in his dreams.

Whenever these childhood mishaps came up, Crews would quote one of his literary heroes, Flannery O'Connor, who wrote, "The fact is that anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days. If you can't make something out of a little experience, you probably won't be able to make it out of a lot."

Of Crews' legendary and tumultuous youth, I'm reminded of what my father said about my two-fisted great uncle, Jack Maynard, who ran away at 16 to enlist in the British Navy during WWII: "If half of what he says is true, he's tough as whale shit and twice as stinkin'." But Crews, in his manner and his work, was not so much concerned with the literal accuracy of his stories as he was their moral truth. Harry had grown up maimed, scalded, and crippled, among hard living, inarticulate folk who had also been mangled and maimed, and the terrible beauty of his early life was made manifest in the addled bodybuilders, boxers, and karate masters; the brokenhearted dwarfs, freaks, hucksters, paralytics, and whores that populated his fiction.

In this way, the teeming, Southern-inflected melee of Crews' universe, like a Hieronymus Bosch canvas dipped in whiskey and flour and deep-fried, will continue to attract readers for generations to come. The work of Harry's semi-contemporaries, including John Updike and his fixation with middle class, middle aged adultery; Norman Mailer's all-consuming fascination with himself; and Phillip Roth's slick, masturbatory condescension are already fading from the public conversation, while Crews' frightening but ultimately cathartic and sympathetic tales of society's outcasts and misfits are primed to endure. He took the hard-bitten rural characters of William Faulkner and O'Connor, warping them outward, exaggerating them almost beyond recognition, tying them to what Faulkner called "the old fierce pull of blood", and yoking them to an increasingly shallow, menacing, and doomed modern world. Enter Crews' depiction of that world, and you'll never be the same again.

Crews' storytelling is frequently dismissed because Southern Gothic literature, which is one way of describing what he practiced, is limited by its regionalism. But that ignores the central feature of "Grit Lit"—the genre's first principle—that the *land itself* is the enduring hallmark of Faulkner, O'Connor, Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty, and the rest. That is, the single most important element in the story is the real estate where it occurs. From Harry I learned that all the best storytelling is rooted in this sense of place; that the characters are integrally connected to their own ground, and that the ground binds those characters to one another. And there's no ground more saturated with blood, failure, sweat, tears, and pride than the American South. If three generations of Crews' writing students learned nothing more than that, their tuition money was well spent.

Like the man himself, Harry's darkly comic vision of American life has staying power. He may have, at times, been overwhelmed by the self-hatred and torment that often possesses artists, but he genuinely loved the characters in his books and cheered for their humanity. Aside from the question of whether readers 100 years from now will consider a novel such as Harry's *Car*, about a man who eats an entire Ford Fairlane, bumper to bumper, as representative of the late twentieth century over, say, Updike's *Rabbit, Run* or Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint,* is the fact that not many heavyweight writers of Crews' era distinguished themselves as teachers. (John Irving, a bit younger than Crews, might be an exception, and perhaps the late John Gardner, the author of *Grendel* and several other books). In that respect, Harry has beaten most of his peers by a country mile.

When I attended the University of Florida, Crews was going through a creative dry spell after publishing his first nine novels in only ten years. But that didn't seem to faze him. One night, Harry and I were walking past the library, and he revealed that after an especially dazzling burst of hortatory exclamations, where a kind of St. Elmo's fire jumped among his students like blue lightning, he'd saunter down University Avenue, muttering to himself: "Son, you *may cain't* write, but you sure can *teach."*

Among the revelations in Geltner's *Blood, Bone and Marrow*(The author interviewed me for the book) is the time that Crews, on a 1958 motorcycle trip across the U. S., met Jack Kerouac in San Francisco. Kerouac had become famous a year earlier, when his second novel, *On the Road*, was heralded as the most important work of his generation. Apparently, Kerouac's presence intimidated a lot of people, but Crews, who hadn't published anything yet, ran into the Lowell, Mass. native in a Haight Asbury bar and tried to engage the shy, Franco-American writer in conversation.

Kerouac was my literary idol when I showed up in Harry's class, and during that first month I was working on a story called "Gainesville Blues", which was set in the rundown boarding house where I was living and included passages cribbed from the Kerouac playbook: "Mrs. P. has this slinky-stinky fake satin bathing suit with a watermelon curtain for her stomach and she grabs my ass every time I squeeze by her in the narrow kitchen..."

Harry let me continue like that for a while, holding his tongue. But during one of our meetings, he said that I'd never be anything more than a Kerouac wannabe if I didn't learn to write stories in my own voice. Then he pushed a small, dun colored book across the desk. It was *Dispatches*, by Michael Herr.

"Take it home and read it," said Crews. Before I could respond, he added, "And when you're done, read it again."

I still have that worn hardcover edition of Herr's harrowing experiences as a young reporter during the Vietnam War. I've probably read *Dispatches* twenty times, given it as a gift, and often recite my favorite passages in bars and at rugby parties. Early on, Herr writes, "Talk about impersonating an identity, about locking into a role, about irony: I went to cover the war and the war covered me; an old story, unless of course you've never heard it."By handing over that book, Crews was not saying "write like me", or even "write like Herr." There was no anxiety of influence with Harry. In performing that simple action, Crews revealed more about his intentions than he did in his famous soliloquies on writing prose fiction. He knew that if I read Herr's book, I'd figure out that a writer can accomplish more by adopting a plain style over an ornate one; that by keeping his or her cadences brief and bright and sharp, a writer can maintain control of the narrative, stopping at opportune moments to embroider on that style, to provide the right flourishes.

It's also noteworthy that Harry practiced this technique in his own work, demonstrated by the classically balanced opening of *A Childhood*: "My first memory is of a time ten years before I was born, and the memory takes place where I have never been and involves my daddy whom I never knew." Here was another Crews lesson salvaged from all those unproductive hours, all those crumpled up pages.

Now that I've published several books and made the acquaintance of quite a few writers, I realize how generous Harry was to his peers, as well as his students. Writers can be a selfish, thin-skinned lot, more focused on their own careers than anything else. But Crews would go out of his way to help lesser-known writers, and was inundated with advance reading copies of all sorts of books, sent by publishers eager to land his blessing. (Crews provided a jacket blurb for my first two books, until I dedicated my third, *Legends of Winter Hill*, to him, figuring it was time to sink or swim on my own.) During another meeting, Crews pulled out a first novel he'd received in the mail. The author's photo depicted a homely, middle-aged woman with a 1950s hairstyle and old-fashioned glasses.

"She writes just like she looks," said Harry, chuckling at the photo. "But I gave her a strong review, because she had to beat long odds to get where she is."

After a few rowdy misadventures early in our acquaintance, some of which are described in Geltner's book, I spent the bulk of my free time with the other guys on the University of Florida rugby team, seeing Harry mostly in class and around campus. Even before

my time in Gainesville, and for twenty years afterwards, Crews engaged in an embarrassing skein of loutish drunken behavior, the perennial adolescent, leading a coterie of young male acolytes he called "the boys with the high pectorals." Intuitively, I understood that maintaining a friendly student-teacher relationship with Harry would be more productive, and longer lasting.

But emphasizing Harry's wild streak, as many observers have, misses the man's essential decency. For in spite of his abrasiveness and bluster, Crews was a sensitive, caring, goodhearted man. Certainly, he made mistakes. Over the course of Harry's life, he suffered from addictions to booze, cars, cigarettes, cocaine, falconry, karate, distance running, and weightlifting. But his most persistent habit was the compulsion to write—the habit of storytelling. It steered him through an abundance of tragedy, including the accidental drowning of his three-year-old son, Patrick, which would have destroyed a hundred strong men. In a real sense, Harry's weaknesses were his salvation.

Late afternoons, I often found Harry alone in the creative writing suite, reading or smoking a cigarette. These are among my most cherished memories of him. During those times, Harry was usually in a genial, reflective mood; warm, friendly, quick to laugh, and to offer advice. When an attractive young reporter called Harry for an interview, and offered to publish something he'd written, he suggested an up-and-coming young writer instead. That afternoon, the reporter picked me up in her yellow convertible. We dated for several weeks, and the magazine published one of my early stories, entitled "The First Day."

In my last semester, Harry chose me and another student to read from our work at a gala literary event honoring the Nobel Prize winning poet, Czeslaw Milosz. Milosz was a formidable, serious looking man with bushy eyebrows, and as I stood at the lectern, nervously shuffling the pages of my story, he stared at me from his seat in the front row. Leaning against the wall, Crews, looking relaxed and pleased, merely winked.

Harry was not a cruel taskmaster, but he was stingy with praise. Upon curing my Kerouac affliction, he suggested I start writing about episodes from my youth that took place in Lawrence, Mass., a moldering relic of the Industrial Revolution. One of those stories dealt with a thirteen-year-old narrator who was playing on a hockey team far above his age group. One night, waiting for a ride to his game, the boy was carving out pieces of the curbstone with his hockey stick, and "wristing" them down the street, occasionally pinging one off a car fender. For some reason, this image delighted Crews.

"I don't know the first goddamn thing about that sport," Harry said. "But I can *see* that." He made a motion with his hands, like he was shooting a hockey puck. "You just snap it around."

When I was ready to graduate, Harry said I should write a novel. Previously, I'd turned in a couple bareknuckle tales about my undergraduate days at Acadia University. "Write about your boys up in Canada," he said. When we parted that afternoon, Crews added, "See you in ten years."

He wasn't kidding. A decade later, my first short story, "Imagine Lawyers Behind Every Chippendale Armchair", appeared in the *Chattahoochee Review* in Georgia. Then, in 1997, my rugby novel, *Caveman Politics*, was published and widely reviewed. But in a dusty manuscript box in my hall closet is a 300-page draft of that first, unpublished novel, *Local Talent*, painstakingly tapped out on a manual typewriter in several drafts over five years. There's even a character that resembles Harry Crews. He's a hard drinking, middle-aged ex-Marine who puts on his mothballed dress blues to confront a group of thugs who have been threatening people in their seaside town. Every couple years, I take down the box and read a few yellowed pages. That book is Harry's gift to me, as well as everything that came after it.

Over the next three decades, Harry and I stayed in touch. When my books came out, he typed up his congratulations and encouragement and sent them to me. On June 7, 2007, I got Harry's voice mail when I called to wish him a happy 72nd birthday; a day later, he called back and left a message. In his phone messages, which I often copied into my journal, Harry substituted his gruff public manner for a more personal, friendly tone.

"I think of you often, buddy," Harry said. "When I close my eyes, I can see the characteristics of

your face, your mannerisms, the way you walk. You're one of the best I ever knew, the best teacher and writer, and I love you, man. I miss you, and hope I see you before I die. Even after all these years, I still remember you and will remember you as long as I live. I hope you'll remember me. God love you."

His kind-hearted messages reminded me how vulnerable Harry was, with all the feelings of isolation and insecurity attendant to the trade. He was blessed with what Jack London called "wealth of story", but that, considering his background, might have seemed more like a weakness than a strength. It gnawed at him somehow. In Bacon County, a man was expected to undertake the most brutal labor without comment or complaint. These warring impulses—between the outrageous aspects of his behavior and career and the principle of unheralded toil—never let him rest, I don't think, and he was forever trying to reconcile with himself.

I visited Harry at his Gainesville home in January 2010, which was our first meeting in twenty-eight years. His face was a magnificent ruin, like an old Viking's, but his eyes were a bright, clear blue, as always. Wracked by pain from a number of ailments, Harry couldn't stand up, so I leaned over his easy chair and said, "Give me some love, big guy," and he laughed as we embraced.

All that morning, my old UF rugby pal, "Surfer" John Hearin and I re-enacted colorful sporting episodes from our days in Gainesville, while Harry added his profane commentary, downing bottle after bottle of green tea. It was the last time I ever saw him.

Although Harry delivered sermons that rivaled those uttered by the corncrib preachers of his youth, he didn't attend church and hardly ever talked about religion. Still, Graham Greene and Flannery O'Connor, both Roman Catholics, were two of Crews' favorite writers. I always believed that Harry envied the Catholics for their embrace of the gloomy rituals and mysteries of the faith. Or maybe it was the doctrine of sinning and being forgiven, of being broken and made whole again, of attaining grace.

The fact that I was a blue collar Irish Catholic from Massachusetts seemed to endear me to Harry. So it's only fitting that every night since he died, I've said a Hail Mary for my mentor and friend, an act of devotion previously reserved for a hockey teammate who died young. Then, before drifting off to sleep, I add, "Dear Mary, say a prayer for Harry Crews, and ask your Son to permit Harry into His Kingdom. Harry was a good man, and he tried his best."

The author with Harry Crews.

Harry Crews
2820 N.W. 34th Street
Gainesville, FL 32605
December 27, 1996

Garth Battista
Breakaway Books

Dear Garth Batista:

Thank you for sending Jay Atkinson's novel. Here is my effort to help a helluva guy and his book.

Talent has struck. Jay Atkinson is a writer to watch. I read the book in one sitting the afternoon I got it. I send Mr. Atkinson my ultimate praise: Whatever he writes next, I'll read. I have a gut-feeling that this is a writer we will hear much from in the future. Gutty, powerfully written, from start to finish, my kind of novel.

Please edit this in any way you see fit. I really did think Jay wrote a very fine book and if you happen to speak to him tell him that I send him my friendship and affection.

Sincerely,

Harry Crews

HC/mp

Java Man
By Jay Atkinson

The Hornets' guard brought the ball up court, glancing left-right and calling out a string of numbers. But with 17 seconds left in the game and the scoreboard showing

Home: Carter Hornets 98
Away: Shawsheen 67

everyone in the gym knew where the ball was going. Loping along the sideline was the Hornets center, Pete Lincoln, a deft, agile player with quick hands and feet. Pulling up for his beautiful, arcing jumper, and knifing inside for layups, Pete had already scored 28 points, snagged nine rebounds, and blocked seven shots, willing his team to the verge of a school record. The Carter High Hornets had never scored 100 points in a game.

My best friend Jeff Murdock and I were sitting in the balcony, poised above the basket where Carter had taken the ball out. You felt like God up there, looking down on the Hornets in their gold satin shorts and white singlets; the vaunted Shawsheen five in their maroon away uniforms; the team benches crowded along the sideline to our left, and the bleachers filled to capacity for the last game of the season. Throughout the fourth quarter, the stands had been roiling with pompoms and blaring with klaxons, but had grown quiet.

Thirteen seconds, twelve—the guard crossed over to the right, picking up his dribble. Meanwhile, Pete glided along the baseline, six-four and loose-limbed, with the same mild expression he wore during the games he played against Murdock and me.

In addition to being Carter High's star player, Pete Lincoln was the coach of our C.Y.O. basketball team. We played on a dank court in the church basement, wearing threadbare St. Charles Borromeo wife beaters, our gym shorts, and black hi-tops. Murdock was three inches taller than me, a real basketball nut, but Pete treated everyone the same, teaching us how to set a pick and play zone defense. We were the envy of the other sixth grade teams.

Now, as we looked on, the bees' waxed floor shone under the lights, dark and smooth except for the cattle trail of scuffmarks under each basket. Everyone but Pete Lincoln and the Hornet's guard was frozen in tableau, even the Shawsheen coach, standing with an arm outstretched, his mouth in a gaping O. A zeppelin of rosin dust hovered between the benches, and the referee, small and trim in his striped jersey and black trousers, had one eye on his watch, the other on the ball handler, and his whistle in his mouth.

Five seconds, four...

Cutting inside, Pete was already rising from the floor when the ball arrived. Shawsheen's center, two inches taller than Pete Lincoln, jumped at the same instant, thrusting his hands upward like a diver. But Pete had already let it go—a soft, parabolic lob that rose in the air, dropping straight through the basket as the earsplitting *dit-dit-dit* of the buzzer tore through the gym.

Jeff Murdock and I scrambled downstairs and dashed onto the court, which was teeming with cheerleaders, parents, high school kids, and the ref, who looked like a man escaping from a fire. Grabbing at Murdock's belt, I swung along behind him, rolling with the surge of people. Suddenly, Pete Lincoln appeared, swooping down to embrace Jeff and me. But at the last instant, we were shoved aside—"Get the fuck outta here"—as one of Pete's teammates grabbed him and pivoted for the exit.

It was Kenny Dussault. He'd fouled out in the third quarter, after breaking the Shawsheen captain's nose. Dussault was a burly, black-eyed, wild-haired reserve, six feet tall and weighing about two hundred pounds. He couldn't shoot, pass, or dribble, but when he ran the court, opposing players got out of his way. Kenny's teammates called him Java, because he resembled a prehistoric man.

With his low forehead, protruding brow, and massive, rounded jaw, Java Man was an intermediary species, arriving between apes and humans. When I walked into my Carter High biology class three years later, I noticed a poster of Java Man, or *Pithecanthropus erectus*, hanging on the wall. Some wag had drawn a 7 on his chest, which was Dussault's uniform number.

The Carter gym occupied the upper half of the building, with stairs leading down to the locker rooms and out to the street. When the horn sounded, the opposing team sprinted off the court and through the nearest exit. Now, stumbling along, we were rushed downstairs with everyone else, buzzing over Pete's shot and beating Shawsheen, who won the league every year. Java and Pete Lincoln were below us, shoving their way toward the locker room. As they descended, Shawsheen's coach, apparently having left something in the gym, popped out of the visitor's room and began struggling against the tide. He bumped into Java, who thrust out his arm, sending the coach, who was a pretty big man himself, flat on his back against the metal landing. But Java charged past him into the locker room, where he was greeted by more laughter and shouting.

Murdock finished the C.Y.O season, but I sprained my ankle jumping off our garage roof, and then school ended. Pete Lincoln graduated from Carter High and left for Notre Dame that fall. He played basketball there, and married a girl from Indiana. I never saw him again.

*

In ninth grade, I stopped growing and took up soccer. But Murdock was a star on the basketball team, and eventually broke most of Pete Lincoln's records. High school came and went. Murdock attended junior college for a while, took the Civil Service exam, and got on the Lawrence fire department during my freshman year at St. Trinian's in Maine. Occasionally, Murdock rode up on his motorcycle, just to eyeball the coeds. At St. Trinian's, I made the soccer team, playing in the midfield. Even at such a tiny school, the competition was stiff, but after my first season I'd improved enough to become a pretty good player in the leagues back home.

By sophomore year, I was dating a smart, long-limbed blonde named Madison Gray, who I met in Economics class. Maddi was an all-state high jumper from Shawsheen, Mass., and placed regularly for St. Trinian's. Since Maddi lived one town away, our relationship naturally carried over to the summer. But when she and I went kayaking on the Merrimack, or biking through Groveland and Boxford, I struggled to keep up. Maddi Gray blew into my life on a zephyr, glowing like Venus on the half shell. I knew I was in trouble.

That summer, I worked a shit job at the Coca-Cola bottling plant, and Maddi taught sailing to little kids. On Monday and Wednesday evenings, Maddi ran intervals on the Carter High track while I played in the midfield for the Pepperell Bismols. With my leggy blonde girlfriend zipping around the oval, I scored a mess of goals and we made the finals against a team called the Hellenic Spirits. They had a longhaired striker named Kostas who would do a back flip after he scored a goal. He'd beaten us with a header in the semi-final the year before.

Five minutes into the game, Kostas scored on a penalty kick and performed his signature flip. We hated his guts. But late in the second half, we tied the score, and with a minute left, Turf Walton snaked a pass between defenders into space on their right flank. Running onto the ball, I stabbed a low hard shot just inside the post. As I wheeled around, there was Kostas, head down, his hands tightened into fists. Running over, I did the kind of somersault you learned in first grade, and as I came to my feet, I spotted Maddi on the touchline, shaking her head and laughing. Turf came over and mussed my hair and the whistle blew. We were the champs.

I threw my cleats into Maddi's VW and we headed to the Rally Club, a rickety beer joint perched on a gravel lot at the east end of town. The plywood door lacked sashes and sill, opening into a smoky, rattling joint that looked like an old boxcar. The bar stood over to the right, stocked with Calvert whiskey, Crystal Palace gin, and other bottom-shelf brands. Wooden booths ran along the left-hand wall, with a few tables occupying the space between the booths and the bar.

Turf Walton brought in our trophies while Maddi and I perused the jukebox, which was filled with great old records by Petula Clark, Smoky Robinson and the Miracles, and the Yardbirds. From the kitchen, a skinny cook handed pork cutlets in little greasy paper boats out through a window. But we ordered the specialty of the house, chicken bar-b-q, which consisted of boiled chicken served on a hamburger bun with a dab of industrial mayo and a ragged piece of lettuce. Any customer who didn't live within five miles of the

Rally Club, expecting a hunk of barbecued chicken, was surprised to receive a soup sandwich.

With Johnny Cash singing "Ring of Fire" from the jukebox, Turf heaved the box of trophies onto the table. My best friend on the team, Walton was a square-built, bandy-legged defender, originally from Pepperell, Mass., with a head of close-cropped hair that resembled Astroturf. Studying for a degree in criminal justice, Turf had an unsentimental way of looking at things, which involved a perfunctory dismissal of anything that didn't interest him, and his interests were limited—soccer, eating, and becoming a cop. But he was a scrappy little player, and a terse master of ceremonies at all official team functions.

"Hey, Fillion, shut up," Turf said, directing his ire at our congenial left wing. "It was good to beat those fuckin' Greeks, thanks to—"

From outside came the deep, threatening roar of motorcycles. It sounded like a pride of lions, and Maddi wriggled in, squeezing my arm. The bikes, perhaps four or five of them, bleated in several chest-pounding registers, but there was a growling *fup-fup-FUP-FUP* that was darker and louder than all the rest.

Suddenly, a large black Harley Davidson barged through the front door. Astride it, a shaggy, bearded fellow in a leather vest was shouting in a voice that couldn't be heard over the rumbling motorcycle. Pawing the floor, the biker emerged from the gloaming of the parking lot until the entire 1,000-cc Sportster was inside the club. Smoke poured from the exhaust, and as the rider goosed the throttle, the walls shook, and a bottle of vodka plummeted from a shelf above the bar. Waving his arms, the bartender contorted his parboiled face, telling the biker to get out. But he just laughed.

Although I hadn't Kenny Dussault in seven years, I knew him right away. He'd shed the rawboned look of youth, and now, in his late twenties, had taken on the bulk of someone who dug ditches for a living. Occasionally, Java's name would come up—he'd done three months at the Farm for receiving stolen property; then a year in Middleton for assaulting a guy with a crowbar; and another six months for intimidating a witness.

Walking the Harley up to our table, Java leered at Fillion's girlfriend and then at Maddi. His hair and beard were unkempt, and when I stood up, he trained his little pig eyes on me. But there wasn't a glimmer of recognition and Java pushed on, shouting the sallow-faced cook back into the kitchen, and rolling out the back door into the night. Soon the other bikers joined him and they zoomed off.

The rocker on the back of Java's vest, spelling out MASSACHUSETTS in block letters, meant he was a Hell's Angels prospect. "The man has ambition," Turf said. "He's climbing to the very bottom."

In May 1983, I graduated from St. Trinian's with a psychology degree. My diploma stated that I was entitled to "All the Rights and Privileges Thereunto Appertaining," of which there were none. So I spent a lot of time analyzing my decision to study psychology in the first place. That spring, Maddi and I broke up when she met a Swedish exchange student who was a pole-vaulter. With his blonde hair and form-fitting tracksuit, Lars was always whizzing around campus, leaping over shrubs and vaulting fences, and at the end of the term he and Maddi bounded away like jackrabbits.

I owed seven grand in federal student loans, and the economy was a shambles. Murdock was assigned to Engine 7, and Turf graduated from college and entered the Massachusetts State Police Academy, both settling into their careers. I worked as a substitute teacher, newspaper reporter, and employment counselor. Eventually I cycled through all the occupations available to a person with a college education and no discernible skills.

An old roommate offered me a job selling timeshares and I moved to Fort Lauderdale. I met a cocktail waitress named Ginger and we got married. To say it was a mistake of youth is an insult to young people everywhere. The marriage lasted a year, and the less said about that, the better.

By the time I came back, the Rally Club had been demolished to make way for another CVS. Now in our thirties, Murdock and I would drink at a place called Maxwell's, where we occasionally ran into Java. When I was in Florida, he'd served eighteen months at Concord MCI for dealing coke. Java hung around the

bar, smiling and laughing, but with a definite air of menace about him. I pretended I didn't see him, but Murdock usually bought him a beer. Turf said that Java was a strong arm for some o.c. guys in Boston, while maintaining his status with the Angels. Except for Murdock, hardly anyone talked to him. It was like getting into a cab and finding Hitler behind the wheel. You just paid your fare and got the hell out, with as little interaction as possible.

That fall, Maxwell's burned to the ground. A local character named Doug Tbilisi owned the club and there was ample suspicion about the fire. Originally an old barn, Maxwell's stood amidst a clump of oaks on a rise overlooking Carter Pond. The fire was so big, Lawrence sent Engine 7 on mutual aid. Murdock said it was fully involved when they rolled up. They helped Carter firefighters throw water on the blaze until mid-morning, trying to keep the woods from catching fire.

Doug Tbilisi was the kind of guy who'd smile at you while rifling through your wallet, stealing your jewelry, and groping your wife. Reeking of aftershave, deodorant, and mouthwash, Tbilisi, who was in his mid forties, resembled a Baltic strongman who'd fallen on hard times. Over the years, he'd pursued a number of vocations, few of them honorable, and got into the restaurant business when his third wife, who owned a Mercedes dealership, fell off his sailboat and drowned. After that, I certainly wouldn't go swimming with Doug Tbilisi.

The case took an unexpected turn when Tbilisi bought a rundown bodega in Lawrence and turned it into a sports bar called Overtime. By the early nineties, Lawrence was a grand old mill city in steep decline, and sports bars were all the rage. A raft of TVs blasted Australian Rules football, synchronized swimming, and other dubious spectacles while buxom waitresses served drinks to middle-aged guys who hadn't touched a football in years.

Late one night, Murdock and I were in Overtime watching some rednecks hunt for alligators on TV. The place was nearly empty, with a retired mailman nursing his drink and a waitress in a skintight referee's jersey. The plate glass window, etched with the name of the bar, was like a black slate in the darkness. By chance, I happened to notice a vague shape going along the sidewalk past the bar. Moments later, the figure reappeared and threw a large object through the window.

There was a crash, and the object bounced away, under a table. Shards of glass rained down on the carpet. The waitress in the referee jersey began running around, blowing her silver whistle. "What the fuck was that?" she said.

The noise drew Tbilisi from his office, with the exclamatory stub of a cigar jammed in his mouth. "Who broke the window?" he asked.

"Somebody—a guy outside—he threw something," said the waitress.

"Who?" asked Tbilisi, his eyes shifting around like someone had mentioned the IRS.

Murdock and I, the referee, bartender, postman, and Tbilisi stood regarding the dark, empty street through the hole in the window. Just then a large triangle of broken glass, pulled downward by its own weight, smashed to the floor. Puffing on his cigar, Tbilisi crawled beneath the table and retrieved something wrapped in paper—an old brick. The paper drifted to the floor and as I reached down, Tbilisi snatched it away, tearing off a corner.

My piece of the note read, "...the fuckin money. Java."

"Everybody *out*," said Tbilisi, balling up the paper.

Up and down South Broadway there wasn't a car, pedestrian, or prostitute in sight. I told Murdock what was scribbled on the paper, and he laughed. "He should've just called," he said.

*

A week later, the state fire marshal opened an investigation into the fire at Maxwell's. Tbilisi had given Java $500 with a promise of five hundred more if he received a settlement from his insurance company. Then he reneged on the second payment. If Tbilisi wasn't so cheap and Java wasn't so stupid, they would've gotten away with it.

Java got two years at Concord MCI for arson, while Tbilisi received nine months at the Farm on a conspiracy charge. He served six, obtained early release, and within the next year, sold Overtime and built a nightclub called Bottomley's on the site of the old Maxwell's.

I had nothing against Tbilisi that free booze couldn't fix, and attended the opening. Bottomley's was a replica of an old town hall, with four large pillars out front. A gallery ran around the upper level, where patrons could look down on the dance floor. Tbilisi had even hired the Fabulous Thunderbirds to play that night, and they were banging out their opening number when I walked in.

Now in real estate, I came to mingle with some of the wealthy people in town. But while I was working the room, confronted mostly by other real estate brokers, I couldn't help noticing that Doug Tbilisi, convicted felon, was drinking champagne with the mayor, while Java spent most of every day, including Christmas, in his tiny cell, shitting into a steel basin while another dude watched. It almost made you choke on your bacon-wrapped scallop, if you thought about it too much.

*

A year later, Jeff married a bartender named Sharon Campesi who worked at the 99 Restaurant. Under her steadying influence, Murdock got a dog from the shelter and moved into a little bungalow on Carter Pond. Sharon's family owned half the shoreline, which was thickly wooded and included a long, narrow beach. That fall, Turf made detective in the state police, and I heard from a college pal that Maddi Gray had married a thoracic surgeon and moved to Colorado. Tired of chasing nickels, I snagged a job in commercial real estate in Boston. The Winthrop Company was established in 1697, after their surveyor, John Butcher, laid out, bounded, and measured the twelve divisions of land that comprised Dorchester. The original map, on a yellowed parchment in Butcher's own hand, was kept under glass in the company office on Hereford Street. Outside, iron rings pierced the foundation, where company employees had tied up their mounts. Since then, the horseshit had not abated.

One day I was showing a client an eighteen-story glass tower that housed, among its thirty or forty lessees, a semi-popular FM radio station. So far, my contribution to the Winthrop Company had been selling a rundown garage that had been the headquarters for an old gangster. We were on the seventh floor, examining the WROX offices along with the station manager, when I caught sight of a petite, black-haired woman in a mini skirt. She flitted from one room to another, like a sleek little bird.

My client followed the manager into his office. Hanging back, I opened another door, and there was the rock n' roll chick, eating a hamburger and fries from a paper bag.

"That stuff'll kill you," I said.

The woman raised a mug with *My Job Sucks* printed on it. "You just wash it down with coffee," she said.

Husky-voiced Judy T. was a deejay at WROX 91.9, an indie rock station that catered to the beard and sandals crowd. With her heart-shaped face, spiky black hair, and Cleopatra makeup, she wasn't my type, since I usually dated athletic blondes, like the vegan hat check girl at Maxwell's. But there was a definite charge in our first meeting, like that buzz of electricity when they pass a wand over you at the airport. Peering through gray-green eyes, Judy T. made a quick appraisal of my oxford shirt and khaki pants.

"It's across the hall," she said.

"What is?"

"Aren't you here to fix the copier?"

I shook my head. "I'm selling the building to that old guy."

"Tell him I'm available," said Judy T., lighting a cigarette.

Throughout my life, certain women have shown up like an approaching storm, disrupting my barometric pressure. Madison Gray was a soft summer rain, the kind that lengthens a pleasant afternoon, lulling the senses with its patter. Such a rainfall ends

before you want it to, puddling the street and revealing an unwelcome sun. My marriage was a vicious little coastal storm that brewed up in the Gulf of Mexico, turning the sky black. It barreled across the strand and flattened a couple of grubby beach towns, then moved out to sea, as brief as it was objectionable.

Judy Tornado, as I called her, was a dark funnel cloud that wheeled all over the landscape, with a caravan of thrill seekers forever giving chase. When I met her, Judy T. was living with a Brazilian guy who owned an electronics store; their favorite activity was throwing dishes at each other and swearing. Never one to make plans, she'd show up unannounced at my office, like the prairie twisters she was named for. Sometimes I'd call the station when she was working, altering my voice to get on the air. As soon as I'd requested a song by Pat Boone or Trini Lopez, she'd slam in a commercial and pick up the phone again: "Very funny."

"I like to think so."

Judy T. worked7 PM to midnight. Alone in the building, she'd call me when a song was playing, her voice hushed like a child's. She had none of Madison Gray's inner strength or confidence, but for a man in his late thirties, with a failed relationship or two behind him, life is an extension of high school. He's all for going, all for taking risks, all for making hay while the sun shines. So, despite my skepticism, having a definite attraction to Judy T., and not disinclined to seeing her more often, I began to ignore the crockery-throwing Brazilian, and would arrive at the lonely tower at the stroke of midnight, seeking, if not to rescue its sole occupant, to buy her a few drinks.

One Sunday, Judy T. drove up to Carter, avoiding the scrutiny of her jealous ex-boyfriends, who I found out also included the singer for a band called "The Question?" (Answer: "Fuck off"), a car salesman, and a professional dog walker. Evidently, Judy T. was an ace at starting relationships, but not very good at ending them. But that night all I wanted was a cold beer, after which we planned to have dinner with Jeff and Sharon.

At Bottomley's, Judy T. and I walked beneath the oak trees, their shade giving way to the early darkness. Inside, the faux gas lamps were turned down low, and the gallery was thronged with shadows. A few parties were scattered across the dining room, and the bar was nearly vacant, just an absentee drinker, his place marked by a jacket thrown over his stool.

` Holding up two fingers, I pointed at the Bass Ale sign and the bartender nodded. Then I left Judy T. by the jukebox and proceeded to the men's room. Feeling pretty good about myself, I strolled back down the hall, whistling the old Bob Marley tune that was playing. Rounding the corner, I noticed Judy T. backed up against the jukebox, her chin thrust downward into her leather jacket, like a turtle retreating into its shell. A large, disheveled figure loomed over her, the heel of each hand resting on the jukebox to either side.

It felt like someone had punctured my lungs with a knitting needle. Now I knew that the greasy canvas jacket draped over the barstool was Java's, and that he'd probably been off snorting coke as we arrived. Apparently, he and Doug Tbilisi had buried the hatchet, at least to the point where he could drink in Tbilisi's joint. Wearing ratty jeans and a pair of hobnail boots, Java leaned over my date, talking in a low voice.

Nobody had seen Java in six months. He was down in Mexico, they said, or riding with the Angels in Florida. Recently, Turf said Java's name had surfaced during a murder investigation. A bookie that owed money to the wrong people was rumored to have been buried in an Everett landfill.

Java's hair fell to his shoulders, obscuring his face. But there was no mistaking the cannonball shoulders and bulky torso, the messy clothes, and a large, unkempt beard that would've made a Viking jealous. By this time, Java was past forty, and weighed about two hundred-fifty pounds.

When my footfalls sounded on the parquet, Judy T. shot me a glance that said, *who the fuck is this?* My legs went numb as I closed on them, trying to think of something to say.

"Hey, Kenny," I said. "How ya doin'?"

Java swiveled toward me, though he was still looking at Judy T. "That's my boyfriend," she said, in a tiny voice.

I hadn't been this close to Java since the Rally Club, fifteen years earlier. At the sound of the word *boyfriend*, he turned from the jukebox. He was a heavyset, jowly man, and despite the undergrowth of beard, which crept up from his neck, I could see his rotten teeth. Judy T. cowered against the jukebox, while Bob Marley kept insisting that everything was gonna be all right.

Java shot me a baleful look, his little red-rimmed eyes as empty as the moon. I couldn't think of anything else to say, and Java never talked much, anyway. Outwardly, he was calm, though there was something untethered about him. I just stood there, hoping he'd remember that I was Murdock's buddy. Java liked Murdock.

He studied me, his pupils like two black dots, and then ambled back to his drink. Judy T. came over and took my hand. It felt like that encounter at the basketball game, so many years before. Only this time I stood my ground—a little.

Soon, Judy T. was spinning westward, headed for a gig in Iowa. We had a short conversation about going there together. Over the previous four months, Judy T. and I had argued everywhere except the bedroom, which crackled like an electromagnetic field whenever we entered. But I couldn't see myself living in a cornfield, and I doubt she really wanted me to go.

*

I'd quit playing over-the-hill soccer, focusing on the popular sport of making money. For every deal, several went nowhere, and as a result, I drove a leased sedan, and floated a large note on a condo in a middling section of town. I dated a succession of waitresses and bank tellers, ate out five nights a week, and started drinking gin and tonic. After seven years of marriage, Jeff and Sharon divorced, mainly because he wanted to have kids and she didn't. Murdock and his dog Bruno moved into the attic bedroom in the old brick fire station that housed Engine 7. Sharon came by twice a week to take Bruno for a walk. Murdock used to say she was the ex-wife he'd always dreamed about.

Murdock always worked New Year's Eve, giving one of the younger guys the night off. I'd buy a pizza, and we'd watch the Three Stooges on a little TV he had up there, with Bruno sleeping on the rug at my feet. At midnight, Jeff and I watched the ball drop in Times Square and then I'd go home. Descending from the attic with Engine 7 gleaming in the light from the street, I'd have the strangest feeling, like I was a ghost passing through a different life, something I'd grasped at and missed.

On my fortieth birthday, I met Turf Walton for dinner at the 99. He was a captain in the Special Investigations Unit, a few months from his retirement. The subject of Java was raised, and Turf said they'd gone over every landfill in Everett with cadaver-sniffing dogs, but never found that dead bookie. It was now a seven-year-old case, as cold as that bookie, and represented the nadir of Java's career. More recently, he'd broken into a local butcher shop sometime after midnight, grabbing a few bucks from the register and absconding with three hundred pounds of meat. He loaded the T-bones into his car, and spent the night trying to sell them, lowering his price to a dollar apiece as the steaks thawed out. Lawrence police found him sleeping in his car the next morning. When they saw all the blood on the floor, they drew their guns, fearing the worst. Java woke up and said, "Anybody want a steak?"

Kenny Dussault went back to the Farm, and Carter returned to normal. That spring, I was trying to pull off the biggest deal I'd ever attempted. At length, I convinced the federal government to buy a parcel of land near Logan Airport, and then lease it to the Mass. Redevelopment Authority for a dollar a year. Also, the feds agreed to build a transportation hub for the city, which would eventually comprise a great number of plot plans and architectural drawings, but ended up being a vast parking lot choked with weeds.

With my share of the filthy lucre, I bought a little place on Carter Pond. From my deck, I'd gaze across to the blue-shuttered cottage, now obscured by hedges and tall grass, where Jeff and Sharon Murdock had been happy for six and a half of their seven years together.

One July afternoon, with a light wind rustling the trees, I was talking on my cellphone to the CEO of a bank in Madrid, when I heard my landline ringing inside the house. Senor Uribe said they wanted to locate the bank's North American headquarters in Boston, so I let the other phone go unanswered,

echoing across the glassy surface of the pond until it finally stopped ringing.

A minute later, the house phone started up again. I offered my services to the bank, Senor Uribe accepted, and we hung up. But the other phone went silent just as I slid open the screen door. I poured some vodka into a glass and splashed tonic water over it. Land one good deal, and suddenly you're a rainmaker.

Carter Pond glowed with a queer phosphorescence from the absorbed light of the day. The ripe smell of the pond brought on daydreams of old Spanish money, and no sooner had I regained my chair than the landline rang again. Too happy to get annoyed, I drank some of the cold, bittersweet gin and jerked open the slider.

` "Hey," Turf said, when I'd picked up the phone."Jeff was in a motorcycle accident."

My lips moved, but nothing came out. "On route ninety-seven," Turf said."He's dead."

It appeared that neither speed nor alcohol was a factor, and that an oncoming car, or an animal darting from the woods, had forced Murdock off the road and into a tree, killing him instantly. There wasn't even a scratch on his Harley.

"Sorry, man," Turf said. "I'll call you later."

Slinging the receiver, I was back on the deck before I noticed the vodka in my hand. I drained the glass, but it tasted like kerosene. Just like that, Murdock was gone.

*

At Racicot's Funeral Home, the line for Murdock's wake stretched for a block, extending into a residential neighborhood. It was hot as a blast furnace, with hundreds of mourners in a somber row, perspiring in their black suits and dresses. I joined the queue after going into Boston for a meeting, adopting that peculiar habit of not being inconvenienced by someone else's death, even a close friend like Jeff.

In the line were roofers in soiled work clothes, professional women in smartly-cut suits, dental hygienists, hulking dudes in leather vests, and a small army of hair dressers, waitresses, bartenders, plumbers, and bookies, each of them silently testifying to Murdock's easy-going nature and the quality of the short life he had lived.

When I approached the white-pillared mansion, I saw Turf among a group of state troopers. Raising his eyes, he broke off, coming toward me in his jodhpurs and stiff-brimmed campaign hat. Our handshake turned into a hug, and it occurred to me that the last time I'd embraced him was on the soccer field twenty-three years earlier.

"It's bad," said Turf.

At that moment, Sharon Murdock exited Racicot's, wearing a knee-length black dress and the wisp of a veil, her face streaked with mascara. She hurried toward her car, with one of Racicot's flunkies trailing behind. The man wore a discomfited expression, caught as he was between the obsequiousness of a funeral director, and a pique related to whatever had occurred inside.

"It's reality, Ms. Murdock," said the undertaker.

"It's bullshit," said Sharon, who slammed herself into a little sports car, jerked it backwards, and sped away. A Lawrence firefighter came over. Apparently, when Sharon reached the coffin, she said, "Jeff, are you fuckin' kidding me?"

"My sentiments, exactly," Turf said.

*

Murdock was buried from St. Charles Borromeo Church. St. Chuck's, as we called it, was a massive cathedral with stained glass windows. Turf and I sat in the back, sweating in our jackets and ties. It was hot that week. When the coffin was rolled down the aisle, a dirigible of incense floated along behind; and I was reminded of Carter High's one-hundred point game, young Murdock and I running through the cloud of rosin dust onto the court.

The cardinal, the pastor, and a deacon said the Mass; the first twenty pews were a solid blue wall of firefighters; and a bagpiper marched into the skirl of "Amazing Grace", followed by the deputy chief, carrying Murdock's helmet emblazoned with #7. After communion, six firefighters hauled Murdock down the granite stairs, then placed his coffin on the bed of Engine 7,parked at the curb.

Two limousines were behind the fire truck, buffed to a glossy sheen and occupied by family members and colleagues. Engine 7, radiant in the sun, had been polished so diligently that the entire scene, from the trio of clergymen, resplendent in their gold vestments, to the floral arrangements lining the sidewalk, was reflected along its length, the figures and shapes miniaturized in the shiny chrome fittings of the truck.

Turf and I stood at the top of the stairs. As the bagpiper segued into "The Wild Colonial Boy", the lights on the fire truck began to revolve. Then the funeral cortege, all of a piece, inched out from the curb, with thirty or forty cars parked down that side of the street, each topped with a small flag marked "funeral."

The music stirred in my chest, but it felt like something was missing—something that hadn't been communicated through the bishop's sermon.

From beside St. Chuck's came a guttural sound, erupting in a roar that drowned out the bagpiper. Just ahead of Engine 7, which was creeping along South Broadway, a black Harley Davidson, coughing and snarling like a beast, pulled out from the alleyway, establishing itself in front of the cortege. Atop the motorcycle, revving its engine and spewing exhaust was a black-eyed, bushy-whiskered man, riding bare-chested in a leather vest with MASSACHUSETTS rockered along the bottom. With his Nazi helmet and straggly gray hair, he resembled some accursed Rider of the Apocalypse, a defiant emissary from the lower regions of hell.

"Java's out of the can," Turf said.

Now in his fifties, large-limbed, and broad across the chest, Java led the odd-looking cavalcade down South Broadway. His face was ridged and buffeted like an old coin, his sunglasses reflecting the clutch of mourners that fanned over the sidewalk. Past the bodegas and check cashing places, Java continued on, keeping a thirty-foot interval between his bike and Engine 7. Two cops stood at each intersection, preventing motorists from cutting into the procession, but nobody made an effort to stop Java, or direct him to the curb. It was like *fuck you* to the whole rotten deal, and knowing Murdock the way I did, seemed exactly right.

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It starts as a trickle: a close friend killed in an accident; a co-worker struck down by cancer; you lose your grandparents; an uncle; a favorite teacher dies. Then it becomes a deluge. Your parents are gone; another childhood friend; even people younger than you; and soon you've entered a fast moving current of wakes and funerals and boozy dinners, saying goodbye to your auto mechanic, a neighbor's son, your accountant, and a workout fanatic from the gym, until it seems like you've buried a third of the people you know. At least, you've said good-bye to a lot of folks you knew twenty years ago, replacing them with a new gym buddy, accountant, neighbor, and mechanic. You wake up one day and you have a crippling mortgage, a dozen extra pounds, and a pair of cheaters from CVS so you can read a newspaper, whatever that is.

I hadn't started power walking around the local mall, but I could see it on the horizon. Turf retired, and moved to Virginia. He planned to hike the Appalachian Trail with his son, and take up fly-fishing. That September, I sold the land for Banco Espana's tower, closed up my place on Carter Pond, and leased an apartment in Boston's Seaport District. At night I'd pour myself some bourbon, gazing out toward Peddock's Island, where Italian prisoners were held during WWII. When Italy surrendered, the POWs were allowed trips into Boston. Many of them stayed, raising children, starting businesses. They got respectable.

Occasionally, I'd get together with Fillion. Once we attended Carter High's annual football game vs. Shawsheen. It was Thanksgiving, with the large crowd in a convivial mood, and the Hornets losing 17-12 in the fourth quarter. Bundled in our winter coats, we passed around a flask, the bourbon enlivening our spirits. Carter recovered a fumble, and as the crowd

erupted, I glanced down at the field. The bulwark of the stadium dropped twenty feet to the grass below, with the only entrance beside the grandstand, where two cops kept people from getting onto the field. Besides the players and coaches, the only person down there was the mayor, Tommy Burress. He stood at the twenty-yard line, talking to the referee. Burress was a slender, middle-sized fellow, in a gray topcoat and herringbone scarf. Occasionally, I'd notice him shaking hands with a player, or laughing with one of the cops.

Beside the mayor was a shabby-looking man in a dirty raincoat, shouting garbled instructions to the Carter offense. How Java got onto the field was anybody's guess. I reached for the flask and took a snort, laughing at the idea of Tommy Burress chatting with a suspected murderer. Perhaps in the time I'd been absent, Java had become respectable—his tenure as a local institution had somehow eclipsed his notoriety. It was like finding out that he'd become an astronaut. If only Murdock could see this.

When I visited Carter Pond, I'd stare across at Jeff's bungalow, which Sharon had long since moved away from, but never sold. Half hidden by the rhododendrons, Murdock's small, solitary house was a reminder that things hadn't worked out. My success had come too late, and the idea of being neighbors on the pond and raising our families together would never come to pass.

That spring, I became reacquainted with an old college friend named Marjorie Malkin. A former varsity swimmer, Marjorie was a lanky, dark-haired orthodontist with two teenaged daughters. We had lunch, and began dating. Still competing at the master's level, Marjorie bought a house on Sebago Lake, just a few miles from St. Trinian's pool. She had an appealing, girlish quality, and we'd sit in her kitchen laughing at our youthful antics, trying not to wake up her girls. We grew close, and Marjorie asked if I'd like to move in with her. She had plans to remodel her kitchen, and needed a cutthroat negotiator to deal with those Maine sharpies.

A month later, I sold my place on Carter Pond. Pulling a trailer with my belongings, I dropped off the keys to the buyer's attorney. It was Sunday morning, and I passed by St. Chuck's as the bells started ringing. At the top of the hill, some kind of ruckus was causing the traffic to back up. People were getting out of their cars, wondering what all the commotion was about.

An old, rusted Buick was sprawled across the intersection, the driver's side door thrust open. The car was unoccupied, and a chorus of horns erupted from the vehicles log-jammed around it. The other motorists were trying to ignore the stout, gray-haired man, stumping along on a bad leg, who'd emerged from the Buick and was demanding money from horrified churchgoers.

It was Java. He'd run out of gas, and with the sole flapping on his boot, he stumbled from one car to the next, lurching past my window. Briefly, Java's wild, frightened gaze met mine, and then he disappeared into the welter of gleaming fenders, shifting vehicles, and pedestrians. The light turned green, and I made a careful maneuver around the Buick, dragging the trailer uphill toward the interstate. It struck me that, all along, Kenny Dussault had been a kind of performer, and finally, he was putting on a show that nobody wanted to see.

This story may seem inconsequential, but if you, too, had been born in a small town, and had lived there most of your life, you'd probably suppose that people in all sorts of towns had experienced the things you did. Perhaps Java was unique to Carter, Massachusetts, but no matter where you hail from, you'd have to admit he was remarkable in his own way.

Contributors

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Ted A. Geltner- Ted Geltner is an award-winning writer, editor, and a journalism educator who specializes in biography, sports writing, and the history of sports journalism. His current project is *Blood, Bone & Marrow: A Biography of Harry Crews*, which is the first full-length biography of the legendary novelist and journalist Harry Crews. Geltner got to know Crews while working as a reporter, writing numerous articles about the cantankerous author and about his colorful escapades. Geltner began the research on the biography in 2011, interviewing Crews many times, and conducting dozens of interviews with friends, colleagues and contemporaries of Crews, as well as examining the Crews archives at University of Georgia. *Blood, Bone and Marrow* was published by University of Georgia Press in May of 2016. Geltner earned his doctoral degree, focusing on journalism history at the University of Florida, where he was a teacher, student and researcher while working as an editor and feature writer for the *Gainesville Sun*. He has written extensively about sports journalism history, authoring articles and giving presentations on subjects such as the history of *Sports Illustrated* magazine and literary journalism in sports.

Lisa J. MacDonald- Lisa J. MacDonald has an MFA in Writing Fiction from Antioch University LA. Some of her stories have appeared in *Women's World, Roar, Irreanteum, Nomos Review, Mahogany & Molasses,* and *Once Upon.* She has published to date twenty-three books including, *Silent Cries* and *The Superstitious Romance*, an Amazon Bestseller under the pseudo name Anastasia Alexander.

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Larry Thacker- Larry D. Thacker is a writer and artist from Tennessee. His stories can be found in past issues of *The Still Journal*, *The Emancipator, Fried Chicken and Coffee, Better Than Starbucks, Vandalia Journal* and *Dime Show Review.* His poetry can be found in more than ninety publications. He is the author of *Mountain Mysteries: The Mystic Traditions of Appalachia,* the poetry chapbooks *Voice Hunting* and *Memory Train*, and the forthcoming full collection, *Drifting in Awe*. He is taking his poetry/fiction MFA from West Virginia Wesleyan College. www.larrydthacker.com

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Tom Graves-Graves is the former editor of *Rock & Roll Disc* magazine and has written for numerous national publications including *Rolling Stone, The New York Times, The Washington Post, American History* magazine*, The Oxford American, Musician, The New Leader*, and others. He is a professor of English at LeMoyne-Owen College in Memphis, Tennessee. Tom Graves is the award-winning author of *Crossroads: The Life and Afterlife of Blues Legend Robert Johnson*, the Blues Foundation's choice for book of the year in 2010. *Crossroads* is now available in an updated Second Edition and is also available as an ebook. Graves is acclaimed for the literary verve of his writing and his eclectic tastes and interests, which have ranged from cult icon Louise Brooks to the wild and largely hidden world of professional arm-wrestling. His popular ebook, *My Afternoon With Louise Brooks*, is about exactly that -- the afternoon he spent with the fascinating but very crotchety and reclusive Louise Brooks. Graves was the last interviewer ever allowed in the former silent film star's apartment and life.

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Larry Baker

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Constance Beitzel- Constance Beitzel is former lead editor and writer for The Buzz Magazine, a weekly culture rag in Champaign, IL. Currently she is a PhD candidate studying American Literature and Women's Studies at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale.