# To Our Readers

We value the privilege of bringing you each individual work in every one of our issues, and I hope that with even a cursory look at the table of contents for this issue, *you* will recognize why I am beginning with such a remark. We offer here new writing by a number of *Georgia Review* familiars: two-time National Book Critics Circle Award–winner Albert Goldbarth, regular essay-reviewers Jeff Gundy and Kathleen Snodgrass, and Jennifer Culkin, whose first-ever essay publication, in our Summer 2006 issue, has already been followed by a book contract with a respected commercial press. You will also find new writing by long-missing *Review* friends Marianne Boruch and Nola Garrett and work by several newcomers to our pages—Sally Smits, Dorine Preston, and Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor. (Perspicacious readers will observe that with Gundy and Cahnmann-Taylor we continue our occasional practice of presenting comparative views on the same book; in this instance, the two takes are intriguingly related, with the reviewers zeroing in on the same poems—and even the same lines—as being central to the overall work.)

Now and then, the constant privilege noted above seems to carry just a bit more of an aura, to exhibit some additional oomph. Harry Crews, one of the most distinctive and controversial Georgia-born writers working during the past fifty years, recently placed his career's papers with the Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library at the University of Georgia, and *The Georgia Review* has been fortunate in having early access to the unpublished material in this important new archive. We present here a substantial, three-part Crews feature. First, an essay of commentary and appreciation by fellow fiction writer Larry Baker (author of *The Flamingo Rising* and *Athens, America*), wherein are chronicled the diverse and impressive reactions to Crews's work that Baker has encountered among authors, critics, and students. Then we offer a substantial section from Crews's "Assault of Memory," his long-anticipated, unpublished, second volume of autobiography—a sequel of sorts to *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* (1978). Third is a selection of Crews's letters, most of them written to various editors, wherein he speaks forcefully and eloquently about his goals and intentions as a writer. (NB: Special thanks to Skip Hulett of the Hargrett Library for his crucial and cordial assistance at many points during our preparation of the Crews manuscripts, and thanks also to our own Douglas Carlson for his vital help in selecting and annotating the letters.)

The extremes of individual and social behavior chronicled in the many novels and essay collections Crews has published in the past forty years have, understandably, rubbed many readers the wrong way. What is not understandable, however, is some critics' equation of controversy with lack of seriousness. Harry Crews is a writer's writer, a stylist with a highly studied view of craft. I recently found myself examining the epigraphs to Crews's books, and the exercise was even more instructive than I had surmised it would be.

Surely writers do not arbitrarily select their books' epigraphs—indeed, most authors give careful consideration to the pithy, often poetic phrases they offer up as both umbrellas and keys. Crews appended no borrowed opening words to his earliest novels—*The Gospel Singer* (1968), *Naked in Garden Hills* (1969), *This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven* (1970), *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit* (1971), and *Car* (1972)—but the first he chose, for *The Hawk Is Dying* (1973), comes from that consummate stylist Flaubert, and its intersection with Crews's rough world is one to remark: "Human language is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, when all the time we are longing to move the stars to pity."

Interestingly, Flaubert is the only fiction writer to supply Crews with an opening—other than Jean-Paul Sartre, whom we remember more as a philosopher but who provided, for *The Knockout Artist* (1988), "This hocus-pocus succeeded: I buried death in a shroud of glory."

Crews favors poets as sources, though he misquotes one of them: *Scar Lover* (1992) credits James Dickey with the ultra-brief "Guilt is magic," which so far as I can determine is a dubious abbreviation of the last words from "Adultery," one of Dickey's better-known poems: "Guilt is magic*al*." For *A Feast of Snakes* (1976), Crews takes the opening stanza of an early, not-well-enough-known poem by Richard Eberhart:

> If I could only live at the pitch that is near madness
> When everything is as it was in my childhood
> Violent, vivid, and of infinite possibility:
> That the sun and moon broke over my head.

*All We Need of Hell* (1987) takes title as well as epigraph from that chiaroscuro angel of poetry, Emily Dickinson: "Parting is all we know of heaven, / And all we need of hell."

Crews also reaches out on occasion for incisive comments from less literary quarters. *The Gypsy's Curse* (1974) quotes Diane Arbus, whose gallery of photographic subjects might easily be seen as analogous to Crews's overall

cast of characters: "My favorite thing is to go where I've never been." Karl Wallenda, patriarch of the most famous family of high-wire artists in recent history, provides this preface to *Body* (1990), a comment I cannot read without thinking of every artist's vocation: "Walking the wire is living. The rest is just waiting."

If epigraphs are any measure of a writer's seriousness and delicacy, and I believe they are, Harry Crews measures up.

I knew of but did not know Harry Crews during my four years (1975–79) as an English doctoral student at the University of Florida, where Crews spent all but the brief initial period of his teaching life. One of the few conversations I ever had with him took place one afternoon in a departmental hallway when I saw him approaching with a pronounced limp and a cut-up, swollen face. Shedding my usual reticence, I asked him straight out what had happened, and he proceeded to tell me the story of his recent "research": He was going to be writing about a dogfight, and since he hadn't been to one for a long time he had decided he'd go to another one. He knew the place would be rough and wouldn't necessarily welcome him, even though its rural world was his own by birthright. Expecting trouble, he went armed with a couple of friends and a straight razor. He *found* trouble, whether inevitably or via self-fulfilling prophecy, and his body before me that day was the result and evidence. The writing wasn't done but would, when finished, doubtless bear the marks of his studious effort. ("Walking the wire is living. The rest is just waiting.") "A Day at the Dogfights" appeared in the February 1979 issue of *Esquire*.

I read *The Gypsy's Curse*, Crews's perverse and violent tale of a legless bodybuilder's romantic misadventures, and then *Car*, that classic black-humor satire of Herman Mack, who goes before an international television audience to carry out his avowed goal of eating an entire 1971 Ford Maverick, half-ounce by half-ounce piece. I was duly amused, repulsed, and impressed by turns, but (like many other readers, I think) my overall assessment of Crews's literary abilities did not tip fully in his favor until I read *A Childhood* shortly before my departure from Florida in 1980. That brief autobiography of his first six years, focused as it is on memories of birthplace and family rather than on the sociocultural attitudes he had developed as a result of those memories, brought a special purity and depth to his prose. During the several years I remained in the college teaching profession after having read *A Childhood*, I frequently made use of it in the classroom—more than once as an actual text, and regularly as a cited source of strong, clear writing.

Harry Crews is not merely a describer, though he is a describer par excellence, beating beautifully on Flaubert's cracked kettle of language. Crews is also a thinker and a feeler with a keen understanding of a broad range of human beings—and with the need and will to present in his books many characters and characteristics whose existence some readers would just as soon overlook. (Oddly, much criticism of Crews in our so-called sophisticated times seems to equate an author's creation of a character with his embracing of that character's way of life.)

*A Childhood* is nothing if not good storytelling, but it contains as well a number of passages in which Crews reflects *upon* stories and their telling—among them this astute examination of the differences between male and female storytellers in the rural culture of his youth:

> It was always the women who scared me. The stories that women told and that men told were full of violence, sickness, and death. But it was the women whose stories were unrelieved by humor and filled with apocalyptic vision. No matter how awful the stories were that the men told they were always funny. The men's stories were stories of character, rather than of circumstance, and they always knew the people the stories were about. But women would repeat stories about folks they did not know and had never seen, and consequently, without character counting for anything, the stories were as stark and cold as legend or myth.

*

When I came to *The Georgia Review* in 1983, I quickly learned something about Harry Crews that I had not known: he began publishing not as a novelist but as a short-story writer. In the summer of 1964, *The Georgia Review*—then under the editorship of William Wallace Davidson—featured Crews's "A Long Wail," his first-accepted but second-published short story. (*The Sewanee Review* had taken a story later but brought it out sooner.) He moved almost immediately to longer works, publishing *The Gospel Singer* in 1968 and more than a dozen other novels since. He has written essays, some of them collected in *Blood and Grits* (1979) and *Florida Frenzy* (1982), but he has not released another short story in the forty-plus years since "A Long Wail."

To read that brief seven-page story is to be dazzled and then dismayed—dazzled by the writing and dismayed by thoughts of other short stories Crews might have given us along with his novels. "A Long Wail" tells of an hour or so in the lives of three Georgia farm people: a nameless and widowed old man,

suffering with advanced mouth cancer, who has just been told by the doctor that he must have his tongue amputated or die shortly; his daughter Sarah Nell; and his farmhand Gaff, whom the old man calls in for one last meal, hoping to persuade him to take over both Sarah Nell and the farm.

The setting is deftly but fully cut, as are the characters' personalities and their interactions during this literally life-and-death interlude. Here is the moment when the old man sends Sarah Nell outside to call Gaff in for supper:

> She stepped out onto the porch, and the night air met her cold and clean. She stood a moment breathing deeply against the scent in her nostrils, but it was no good. On her tongue was the taste of decay and it drew her mouth like alum. The rain had stopped, but a mist still hung in the air fine as fog. There were no stars now, no moon. The lamp from the kitchen window gave enough light to see the triangular rod of iron hanging from a piece of hay wire at the end of the porch. She struck it three times with an iron cylinder. The sound came back again and again, bouncing out of the black forest of pine that bordered the field at the back of the house.

The story ends with Gaff's implicit fulfillment of the old man's requests, emblemized by his agreeing to take Sarah Nell off to the evening's church service. As they depart, the old man also forces his beloved dog out into the night; the gesture seems cruel, but it is also profoundly sad for its show of the dying man's acceptance of absolute aloneness.

> Outside, the wind was up again and it was raining. They left the dog standing by the car shed, tail and ears drooping, his body slicked black with rain. The car was already past the mule lot, halfway down the lane between the rows of pecan trees, before they heard the dog howl for the first time, a long, moon-reaching wail breaking over the night.

One of the hopes we hope for art is that even when its subject and mood are most bleak, the overall handling of the medium—language, paint, music—will provide a counter-brightness born from that very handling, and from the achieving human mind and spirit it connotes. "This hocus-pocus succeeded: I buried death in a shroud of glory."

Harry Crews's writing remains controversial and powerful; we welcome its return to our pages.

S.C.