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“We pick at the scabs”: Writerly Persistence and Family Woundedness in Harry Crews’s *Blood Issue*

IN 1989, THE ACTORS THEATRE OF LOUISVILLE OFFERED HARRY CREWS A \$15,000 commission to write a full-length play. Typically, Crews saw the offer as a challenge, telling Erik Bledsoe, “since I’d never written a play, didn’t know the first thing about it, I said yes, just to see if I could” (“An Interview with Harry Crews” 355). He looked back in satisfaction on the play’s reception in 1998, contentedly noting in the same interview, “The play got a standing ovation. There were seven new plays done there, and I got a standing ovation. It’s been performed at several local places since then. I always threatened to keep working on it until I got it down; it’s too damn long” (355).¹ The mix of pleasure and dissatisfaction in his comments about his lone play, one on which he had started then abandoned ten years earlier,² offers valuable insights into the existential worldview of this often inscrutable writer who nonetheless continues to write about realistic rural communities, the family, and violence. Moreover, *Blood Issue* remains the only fictional work by Crews to address and incorporate significant details from his compelling and disturbing autobiography and may be the clearest statement of his conception of the writer.

Author of numerous novels, many fine essays, and an outstanding autobiography, Harry Crews has gained only belated recognition in the academy. The publication of *Perspectives on Harry Crews* in 2001 by the University Press of Mississippi and the edited collection of interviews

¹Damon Sauve notes in his online bibliography of Crews that R. Joseph Adams, “the maverick director of Spirit of the Horse Theater in St. Paul, Minnesota, selected *Blood Issue* for production and scheduled the play to run from April 20th to May 14th. The local press gave good reviews to Adams’ production: ‘Director John Clark Donahue has drawn a first-rate performance from nearly everyone in the cast.’”

²Crews told David Jeffrey and Donald Noble in 1979 that he is “writing a play, the first play that I’ve ever attempted. I know nothing much about plays except insofar as I’ve read them” (“Harry Crews: Part of an Interview” 102).

Getting Naked with Harry Crews in 1999 by the University Press of Florida—both edited by Erik Bledsoe—probably marked a high point in Crews criticism. I believe there is still a need, however, to expand our critical sense of Crews's work. For example, I have long wondered why Crews's gift for drama has been ignored. Judging from his terse, colloquial dialogue in his fiction and autobiography and his instinct for dramatic situation, Crews is a natural dramatist, but has written only *Blood Issue*. This essay argues that through its portrayal of Joe Bass, the writer who has returned to his family in southwest Georgia, *Blood Issue* meta-dramatically both exemplifies Crews's Beckettian persistence in the face of despair and absurdity and models a lingering task of the now often deracinated Southern writer—to pick at the closed wound of family secrets until the hidden blood flows. Dwelling in the condition of woundedness without reveling in it both exiles Crews and his writer characters such as Joe Bass from community and inspires their creative activity, which is itself construed as burdensome.

One of the leading indicators of Southernness remains a sense of place, but the best scholarship on Southern literature and Southern writers themselves, such as Thomas Wolfe and Eudora Welty, have long recognized how place in the South is often a state of flux. *Blood Issue*, despite its evocation of an extremely traditional, local southwest Georgia community like the one where Crews grew up in Bacon County, accords with the decades-old instability of this trope of Southern literature in Joe Bass's vexed relationship to his home place. In "Why I Live Where I Live," Crews offers an apologia for living near Gainesville, where he taught at the University of Florida for more than thirty years. Living in north Florida enables him to be sufficiently near to his origins in south Georgia to be "close enough to the only people to whom I was ever kin in ways deeper than blood to still hear them" (10). He admits that he could not work in Georgia because "it was all too much for me. I was too deep in it, too close to it to use it, to make anything out of it. My memory doesn't even seem to work when I'm writing in Georgia. . . . If this is all symptomatic of some more profound malaise, I don't want to know about it and I certainly don't want to understand it" (10).

The malaise he warily mentions is dislocation, the condition of modern human beings, a situation that was largely forestalled for many decades in isolated pockets of the American South such as Crews's home Wiregrass region in southwest Georgia. Joe Bass is clearly his alter ego,

a character autobiographical in both his chosen vocation as writer and in his relative estrangement from his home place. At the beginning of the play, when he has returned for a family reunion as the Southern incarnation of the prodigal son, he briefly argues with his self-righteous brother George about his decision to leave home. George says, "I caint talk to you, Joe. You've gone off and ruint you mind," and accuses him of being sacrilegious (29), statements that uncannily echo Crews's actual brother Hoyett's words to him when they meet at the foot of their dying mother's bed in the opening chapters of Crews's long-promised new autobiography: "Writing them books is ruint you mind. And if you ain't a heathen already you ain't far from it" ("Assault of Memory" 178).

Crews portrays a series of characters in his novels that are lost and isolated and Joe Bass in *Blood Issue* admits during this same conversation that "I've gone off somehow and got myself turned around, got lost" (32). His brother does not realize that Joe speaks of his metaphysical condition, saying in response, "Well you ain't lost. You settin right here in you mother's living room" (32). Later in Act I, when sipping whisky with Pete, after his speech on the writer's duty to pick open the scabs of the past, Joe utters a classic metaphysical complaint: "A stranger in my own goddamn country. A stranger everywhere. People I grew up with—even my own kin—look at me like I've come back from the moon carrying death on both shoulders" (46).

Joe's displacement (along with his lack of Christian faith), marks him as profoundly different to his placed and faithful kinfolk, but suggests a continuing and growing trend of mobility among Southerners that has contributed to a gradual loss of identification with a particular place over the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries. At the same time, Scott Romine has argued that the location of place "is not so much in the South or in southern literature as in the critical discourse about those things," which suggests that "its validity is pragmatic in nature: 'place' is dependent upon practice" (24). And the practice of

a certain kind of critical discourse, both academic and journalistic, finds that any remotely "southern" setting demonstrates "sense of place," any representation of dialect evinces the South's "oral tradition," any vaguely eccentric character is a "southern grotesque," and any historical reference displays "the past in the present." (37-38)

While “certain writers litter their work with conspicuous southernness” (Romine 38), Crews has always rejected such practices, telling Sterling Watson in 1974, “I hope I’m not a writer of the new South any more than I’m a writer of the Midwest. I hope I’m just a writer who happens to live in a certain place” (“Arguments” 55). But he quickly goes on in the same response to note that “there is a new South,” and he attributes its emergence to “the fact of affluence, the television,” and adds that “the cadences of speech are breaking down or have all broken down. . . . The affluence has caused tremendous mobility” (55).

Rather than merely offer a mimetic representation of a fixed place, Crews prefers instead to create realistic settings that often slowly become surreal, as he told Joe David Bellamy in 1976:

I like to start with something that is obviously a world that nobody can quarrel with. Here is the porch and there is the chair and here is the man and we’re all happy, right? Then in a very slow kind of left-handed way, left-handed in the sense that you don’t call attention to it, it just slides off the edge of the real world into a thing that can’t possibly be true. Except it *is* true; at least, I think it is. (“An Interview” 78)

Such shifts from realism to surrealism, while they may have gained credence in fiction, have sometimes not played well onstage for audiences used to mimetic or stable representations of nations or regions. For example, the plays of the London-Irish dramatist Martin McDonagh challenge notions of the “real” Ireland as homogenous, nationalist, Catholic, and peaceful through their harsh depictions of domestic violence in the west of Ireland often committed for no compelling reasons. McDonagh’s work contradicts the “packaged” versions of rural Ireland still promulgated by *Bord Failte*, the Irish Tourist Board, and has elicited stinging rebukes from some critics.³

In a similar way, although Crews has challenged the agrarian school of Southern writing with his harsh depictions of the lives of poor whites and blacks in rural Georgia and in urban Florida, there is still a critical tendency to try to link him to particular, stereotyped notions of Southernness espoused by writers with whom critics and readers are

³See for example, the quotation from Vic Merriman: McDonagh’s first four dramas “stage a sustained dystopic vision of a land of gratuitous violence, craven money-grubbing and crass amorality. No loyalty, either communal, personal or familial can survive in this arid landscape” (Russell, “Introduction” 7).

familiar. One of the felicitous critical exceptions to this trend is Joseph Dewey, whose lengthy and thoughtful overview of Crews's career discusses possible "schools" of writing to which Crews might belong—such as the black comedy practiced by such post-World War Two writers such as Ken Kesey, Norman Mailer, and Kurt Vonnegut; the skeptical religious vision of authors such as Graham Greene and Samuel Beckett; the naturalistic "Grit Lit" writers that reject the Southern agrarian vision for a harshly brutal, blue-collar environment; or the American satirists such as Nathanael West, gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson, and comic-strip writer Walt Kelly (103-05). Dewey concludes his assessment of Crews's place in American literature by arguing that he "seems doomed to linger in the uneasy between, between realism and postmodernism, between respectability and popularity, between reputation and celebrity, between heavyweight and lightweight, uncertain over just where he belongs" (106).

Samuel Beckett, a figure who has been far more influential on Crews's work than has ever been acknowledged, even by Crews himself, was similarly inclined to include misfits and the disabled in his plays and fiction while also rejecting reductive readings of his work. Beckett famously told an eager interviewer in 1961 when asked whether existentialist philosophy afforded a key to his work, "There's no key or problem. I wouldn't have had any reason to write my novels if I could have expressed their subject in philosophic terms" (Mercier 160). Yet Beckett was clearly influenced by philosophers and theologians including Augustine, Democritus, Descartes, Schopenhauer, Spinoza, and Bishop Berkeley, as Vivian Mercier has shown.⁴

Although Beckett's use of misery for comic purposes clearly stems from his place in an Anglo-Irish tradition going back to at least Jonathan Swift, as Mercier has suggested, his great empathy for such stricken characters provides a powerful model for Crews, who similarly elicits compassion from readers for his societal rejects.⁵ Patrick Murray has suggested how "Beckett makes us laugh" with his characters who "find themselves" in "painful and apparently hopeless" situations "as they

⁴See especially his chapter, "Artist/Philosopher," 160-86. And see the whole of Dermot Moran's penetrating "Beckett and Philosophy" for a thoughtful and wide-ranging discussion of philosophical influences on Beckett.

⁵Dewey has argued that Swift is a model satirist for Crews, though he does not see any direct influence (105).

reveal the macabre or grotesque side of their predicament or that of their fellow-sufferers" (20). Crews implies such a Beckettian view of the macabre in his work and observes in his autobiography *A Childhood: A Biography of a Place* that the stories he heard while growing up were both horrific and humorous: "No matter how awful the stories were that the men told they were always funny" (101).

Pain and woundedness stalk the pages of Crews's body of work, perhaps nowhere more searingly than in an incident related in *A Childhood*, when he recalls falling into a scalding pot of water used for boiling the hair of hogs while playing a game of "pop-the-whip" with other children: "the skin on the top of the wrist and the back of my hand, along with the fingernails, all just turned loose and slid on down to the ground. . . . I was scalded over two-thirds of my body. . . . Until I was about fifteen years old, the scars were puckered and discolored on my back and right arm and legs" (118, 119). In another section, Crews recalls the time when his legs drew all the way up behind him and touched his buttocks, a condition that persisted for weeks until it gradually eased itself. But in addition to these singular woundings, Crews habitually wounded himself. He recalls his terror at sleepwalking and then admits to wounding himself by chewing his lips in fear: "My mouth was full of the taste of blood where I'd chewed my lips" (76).

Understandably, then, blood was much on his mind during his childhood. In his recollection of his origins as a writer, he has significantly noted that his made-up stories when he was young, based on the pictures of people in the Sears Roebuck catalogue, revolved around family feuds and blood:

in excruciating detail we established how all of them were related one to the other. Before we were through we had established feuds that had been running between families for years. We married men and women and we gave them children, some who died and some did not. And blood! God, was there an extraordinary amount of blood splashed over those pages. ("Introduction" 11)

Bloodiness and woundedness recur throughout Crews's interviews. For example, Watson asks him about his main character George Gattling's attempts to subdue a hawk in *The Hawk Is Dying*. Crews's response gets to the impulse behind all of his work, to lay bare the truth, to pick open the wound inside all of us: "George has an attraction to blood. . . . You can't argue about an open wound. I mean, 'I am cut. I am bleeding. My arm won't work'" ("Arguments" 56). Even though Crews

suggests there is a pejorative sense to being wounded here, there is another way in which he draws power from his own childhood wounds and his fictive portrayals of maimed characters like the brother Pete Butcher has accidentally scarred with a hammer in *Scar Lover* (1992).

Edmund Wilson's seminal essay, "Philoctetes: The Wound and the Bow," remains essential reading for anyone wishing to understand the relationship between disease and power, especially the literary imagination. Crews's own shattered body, his withered leg and ruined knees, along with his childhood afflictions, detailed in *A Childhood*, have combined to make him a supreme example of the walking wounded. But so has his radical deracination, his isolation both from his blood kin in south Georgia and his colleagues at the University of Florida over the years. He has drawn on his personal woundedness again and again for sources of inspiration and subjects for his writing just as Sophocles's wounded warrior, Philoctetes, gazes at the wound on his festering foot and ragingly recalls how Odysseus and the other Greeks had abandoned him on the island of Lemnos some ten years previously. Besides his depictions of woundedness in *A Childhood*, nowhere has Crews's painful search for truth been more autobiographical than in *Blood Issue*, as Joe Bass seeks the truth behind the family's silence about his disfigured, long-dead baby brother.

Wilson memorably argues that Lessing's description of Sophocles's Philoctetes in *Laocoön* rejects him as "an example of the conventional idea of impassive classical fortitude" by detailing his demoralization during his seizures, further citing Lessing that Philoctetes "submits to the prolongation of his pain rather than renounce one iota of his resolutions, even where such a concession would promise him the termination of his misery" (235, 236). But Philoctetes does not deserve our unqualified sympathy as Lessing and, by extension, Wilson, indicate. In fact, Sophocles seems to take his wounded warrior to task for reveling in his suffering so much. The contemporary Irish poet Seamus Heaney, in his version of *Philoctetes, The Cure at Troy* (1990), even uses Philoctetes's self-obsession as a way of critiquing republicans and loyalists on both sides of the religious divide in Northern Ireland, whom he accuses of using their woundedness to validate their victim status but not to move

forward toward rapprochement with “the other side.”⁶ Heaney’s observation suggests that dwelling on woundedness can cripple and divide us, and the truth of this recognition will be borne out in *Blood Issue* when Joe Bass finally rips open the dark family wound about his parentage, effectively casting himself out of his blood family again, even as, Philoctetes-like, he draws inspirational literary power from this act. Crews’s writerly characters such as Joe, who are drawn to reopening wounds, cannot help themselves, indeed do so ineluctably, knowing full well the pain they will often cause themselves and others.

Crews and his fictional and dramatic characters often wallow in their misery, hugging it to them as Philoctetes does. Joe chooses the bottle to assuage his profound pain and loneliness, which choice has led him to repeatedly wound himself and others. As he tells his estranged brother, George, early in Act I, “I drink to make it all go away,” saying shortly afterwards that “Being alone” is a pressing problem for him (33).

Woundedness, moreover, reflects Crews’s existential philosophy, which nonetheless incorporates many elements of realism. Gary L. Long has asserted that Crews’s own and his characters’ predilection for pain enables him to invoke “a kind of ‘naked’ realism for comprehending life” (58), and Crews admits and details the pain and suffering in the world, suggesting his interest in realism, while nevertheless pressing on, hoping against hope, a strategy that reflects his existentialism. Martin Esslin, the theater critic who coined the phrase “theatre of the absurd,” has argued that each dramatist his classic book surveys is “an individual who regards himself as a lone outsider, cut off and isolated in his private world” (4). More important than this isolation, for Esslin, is what he terms the “hallmark” of the theatre of the absurd: “its sense that the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting, that they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions” (4-5). Esslin cites Romanian-French playwright Eugene Ionesco’s definition of the absurd

⁶In his essay on the play, Heaney uses the language of wounds to point out that

Philoctetes is not meant to be understood as a trimly allegorical representation of hardline Unionism. He is first and foremost a character in the Greek play, himself alone with his predicament, just as he is also an aspect of *every* intransigence, republican as well as Unionist, a manifestation of the swank of victimhood, the righteous refusal, the wounded one whose identity has become dependent upon the wound, the betrayed one whose energy and pride is a morbid symptom. (175)

in his essay on Kafka as the description *par excellence* of the absurd: "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose. . . . Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (5).

Crews has long averred his absurdist sense of himself in his deracination and fear of the world. In 1972, in one of his earliest interviews, for example, he told Anne Foata, "I feel myself cut off from almost everything" ("Interview" 29), and shortly afterward, subsequent to talking about the freaks that populate the worlds of his early novels, he flatly told her, "I am convinced that you and I, all of us, are caught in the same kind of inexplicable, almost blind terror, except that ours is not so apparent. . . . I fear my worldview is a terribly black, awful one" (30-31). In this same interview, when Foata presses him on the question of belief, Crews admits, in an explicit confirmation of my argument that he is essentially Beckettian in his outlook, "I am aware of the black kind of vacuum that you have to get up with in the morning if there is no belief. *I think of Beckett a lot*. I wonder how he gets out of bed in the morning" (38-39; my emphasis). Even though he goes on to argue that "If I could anchor myself irrevocably in belief and order, and put God in his heaven or wherever he is, if I could, I would do that, irrevocably. Some days I can, and some days I can't" (39), he is clearly agnostic and often looks to human rituals, even the ritual of writing itself, to sustain him. Jeff Abernathy has briefly but tellingly articulated Crews's existentialist worldview in his discussion of *Naked in Garden Hills* as an agrarian nightmare: "Perhaps we see in Crews the conviction of the Agrarians that much is wrong in our modern ambivalence. But Crews, in the tradition of existentialists, must end with ambivalence; for him, God is not the king in this southern realm of the Absurd" (75).

Crews's Beckettian outlook, his realistic existentialism, encompasses his persistent portrayals of the so-called "freaks" that populate his novels. Crews's conception of the human condition as essentially absurd makes him realize, as both Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor did, that "freaks" are humans too, humans who are simply more constantly aware of their strangeness in the universe than we are. In one of his discussions about why he writes about abnormal people, Crews notes that many of us have abnormalities that we can hide, "But if you are less than three feet tall, you have to deal with that fact every second of every day of your life. And everyone witnesses your effort" ("Introduction" 14). In an interview with Al Burt, Crews argues that the word "freak" is "not my word. We're

all freaks, but just in different ways, most of us" ("Harry Crews: Working the Kinks Out" 83). Beckett's tramps in *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon, are abnormal to us because of their isolation, repetitive movements, and lack of understanding. Yet Beckett intends them to be representatives of the human condition who are stripped down to their essence. Similarly, Crews's "freaks" may seem abnormal to us, but we often fail to realize that his "abnormal" characters are more in touch with the essence of reality than we are, shielded as we are from the flow of time and our isolation by the daily rituals we perform. Fellow Southern novelist Tim McLaurin, however, has wisely pointed out that after reading all of Crews's works, "I did not see the characters as freaks or outcasts, but as people with hopes and fears and triumphs and failures like my own" (11).

Blood Issue offers no living abnormal character of fascination, but it is haunted by the absence of Joe Bass's brother whom no one wants to discuss, the baby born with his liver outside his body that Joe is seeking to find out about during his trip home in the play. Joe's persistence in pursuing the story of this dead baby finally demonstrates another way in which Crews's notion of the writer's duty to keep plodding ahead with his project is Beckettian. I have argued previously that Crews's major inspiration as a writer is Graham Greene, but here would emphasize the undeniable influence of Beckett on Crews because of that writer's penchant for dramatizing failure, which Crews has often emulated. In his finest essay, "Climbing the Tower," Crews cites Greene's statement that, "The artist is doomed to live in an atmosphere of perpetual failure," then says, "I am very nervous about the word artist. . . . But I know what it means to live in an atmosphere of perpetual failure" ("Travels in Greenland" 35). And yet, like Beckett, Crews persists, doggedly writing three to four hours daily when he is working on a book. He told Steve Oney that "the thing I like to call getting naked . . . is my need to keep myself going as a writer. You can't find out about a thing . . . as well as you can when you're naked and vulnerable to the experiences of the world" ("Harry Crews Is A Stomp-Down" 95). It is hard not recall here the famous last words of the struggling narrator in Beckett's novel *The Unnamable*, "you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on" (414).

Joe, Crews's alter ego in the often autobiographical *Blood Issue*, is a drunk who nevertheless perseveres in his search to discover the family secret he believes exists. When he talks to Pete the first evening he is

back and Pete tells him how much pain he has caused his family by his automobile accidents and by writing about family members (with names changed) in his books, concluding by saying "that ain't even decent," Joe replies that he is no under no obligation to be decent and that he cannot help but write:

if you want decent, find a preacher. I'm a writer. Decent's another word I never got much mileage out of. It just came with the package. I didn't ask for it. It's just there like the color of my eyes. To ask me to be what I'm not is like asking me to have different colored eyes. I don't have to like it. (45)

The burdensome compulsion to write is one that Crews has often discussed in his interviews. He told Jeffrey and Noble in 1979 that he was writing a novel called *Crab* that was in part about a boy to whom people tell terrible stories, and that he himself has been in such situations with people who want to tell him horrific things: "I hold up my hands and I say, 'No, no, man, wait. Don't tell me that. Don't tell me that. It's not so much that I don't want to know it, because I would like to know everything, but I don't think I can bear that. I got enough on my back already'" ("Harry Crews: Part of An Interview" 103). Crews styles himself as a crab here, bearing the weight of narrative burdens that he cannot help but tell even if he does not want to.

Crews's blend of revulsion and attraction to writing out of an overriding sense of failure recalls Beckett's statement in his 1949 dialogues with George Duthuit for the Parisian journal *transition*. In one passage, Beckett claims that

to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion. . . . I know that all that is required now, in order to bring this horrible matter to an acceptable conclusion, is to make of this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relation, and of the act which unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation. (Kearney 116)

Like Beckett, seemingly unable to keep from writing, Crews himself and Joe Bass in *Blood Issue* return time and again to the laborious art of writing, drawn to it like moths to a flame, heedless of the danger they put themselves in, often not caring whom they hurt. Crews told Damon Sauve in 1996 that "If there's something that I think is of significance and ought to be put down and has value larger than its immediate confined context of the moment . . . then I don't have any feelings one

way or the other. . . . The pain comes not because I might hurt somebody. The pain comes from just having relived the shit” (“Everything Is Optimism” 321). He even told Bledsoe, in a statement recalling Joe Bass’s statement above about writing (“I don’t have to like it”), that “I’ll tell you, I can’t understand anybody who tells me that they enjoy writing, that it’s fun. Frankly, I don’t believe them. It’s certainly never been fun for me” (“An Interview with Harry Crews” 362).

Shortly after the exchange about decency with Pete, that character, begging Joe “Not to cause no more pain,” invokes the language of blood and kinship—“in this house you surrounded by blood, son”—but Joe responds by disavowing kinship and swearing he will open up the family wound (46). He observes woefully, “Other people allow scabs to heal over and scar up. Not me. Not people like me. We pick at the scabs, non-stop scab pickers, keep’m bleeding. The sight of issuing blood is our only joy. If we can make it bleed—whatever *it* is—we can stay alive” (46). Bleeding to stay alive sounds paradoxical but Crews is suggesting that Joe’s determined picking away at family history is an ineluctable process necessary to feed his writing. Rejecting literal blood as the basis for kinship in favor of drawing metaphorical blood as a precondition of writing becomes his mantra in the play.

Late in Act I, Joe’s mother, Mabel, attempts to remind him of the importance of blood, urging him to reunite with his family but especially to have children by saying “You got to make blood to have blood” (53). Joe replies that “The only record I’ll leave is the one I leave in print,” but Mabel retorts, “Then that’s purty damn sorry is all I can say. The only record that counts is the one left in blood.” Joe quietly says, “I may not be able to leave a record of blood, but I can leave a record of the blood that was left. For some of us, that’s the best we can do” (53). He tells a shocked Pete shortly afterward that “I had a dream about a blood issue last night. . . . Dreamed about the baby. My dead brother. . . . But it won’t leave me alone. And if it won’t leave me alone, I can’t leave it alone” (55).

Warned off repeatedly by Pete, George, and other family members, Joe nonetheless discovers the truth about his dead baby brother in Act II of the play when he forces Mabel to relive that horror. In the process, he discovers the truth about his real father, just as Crews himself does in *A Childhood*. Mabel tells Joe finally, “Baby didn’t have no chance. I never looked at it but once. The birthin blood wasn’t even cleaned off. . . . I held’m til he was dead. . . . It was like lookin at my own

death. . . its little liver was on the outside . . . blue . . . but it never cried . . . once" (67). As this first scene of Act II concludes with Mabel's relating of the burial of the baby, George tries to strangle Joe, calling him a "low life, self-made, son-of-a-bitch, Joe Bass" (67).

As the play hurtles to its climax, Mabel opens the next and final scene of Act II by singing of another wounding, that of Jesus, and of the shaking of the world caused by that death, anticipating that her own family will shortly be torn apart by her final revelation:

Was you there when they spierced him in the side
was you there when they spierced him in the side
oh Lord
it set the world a tremble, tremble, tremble
was you there when they spierced him in the side. (68-69)

Then, believing herself alone, not knowing that Joe is sitting nearby in the dark listening, she recalls that after the baby's death, her husband "Frank would not be comforted. Would not be comforted. Would not believe it was not some taint in his blood. Crying, the sin of my life is in my blood, tainted, all tainted" (70). Frank is haunted by his sexual experience with a Seminole woman in the swamp where he worked when young—long before he met and married Mabel—after which he contracted chlamydia and had to have a testicle removed, just as Crews's own father did when Crews was a child (*A Childhood* 19-21). In Act I, Pete, under heavy interrogation from Joe, finally says about the man Joe believes is his father, "He'd woulda never laid with that Seminole gal had he known she was tainted. But she was, she was tainted" (44). Joe then asks Pete, "Way I heard it, he was told he'd never have children," but Pete brusquely replies, "That's doctors for you. You here ain't you?" (45).

After his mother shoots the figurine of a black panther and breaks it, Joe tries to get her to stop her story, telling her he knows everything, but Mabel now is roused and defiant, vowing to finally metaphorically kill the story about her, her husband, and the man she married after her husband died. She says about the story, "It ain't gone. Is it Joe? You been talkin and the people here abouts been talking to you. It ain't gone. Tell'm it ain't gone" (73). Mabel recognizes the persistence of oral narrative, one that has lingered in community memory and been resurrected by Joe's recent repeated inquiries. She finally tells Joe as the rest of the family assembles once she starts blowing up objects around her with a shotgun at the end of the play, "You bound and determine to

tear open a wound that's been tryin to heal for bettern forty year. . . . nothin would do you but to see if it's any blood left to spill" (73). Her realization about this family story's staying power recalls one of Crews's opening statements in *A Childhood*: "Nothing is allowed to die in a society of storytelling people. It is all—the good and the bad—carted up and brought along from one generation to the next" (21).

Identifying Joe as the source of the emergence of this most disturbing of family secrets, Mabel says about him: "That brought it on. That drunk who has to come talkin of dead babies" (74). Confessing to Pete's exasperated query—"You happy with what you've done, goddammit?"—Joe replies, "I'm not happy. But that was never the point. The point is that I don't have to eat my liver anymore wondering who the hell I am" (74). Bringing into play the medieval conception of the liver as the seat of anger and gall, Crews here links Joe's anger and drinking trouble to the dead baby born with his liver on the outside, which in turn precipitated his supposed father to make a disturbing request to Mabel.

She finally confesses the awful family secret: she slept with her husband's best friend Lonny—at her husband's request—so that she could have normal children. Again the language of blood taint is employed when she muses,

Maybe we poisoned the blood of this fambly. But it was what Frank wanted, and I've thought many a time it's what killed him. . . . Frank wanted chirrun. He wanted a fambly. In that day and time it was about all a man could hope to have. Then he thought his tainted blood killed that poor baby, deformed it and killed it, and killed the only hope he had of a fambly. . . . Frank asked me would I? . . . He asked me would I with Lonny. . . . And then he asked Lonny. And Lonny said yes he would if that was what Frank wanted. And I said yes too. When Frank died, Lonny taken and married me and raised you boys. Everbody said we married before Frank was cold in the ground. They started talking and never stopped. (74)

As difficult and painful as this confession is, it brings some healing to the family. George Junior, George's son, vows to Mabel,

It ain't no taint in *my* blood and it ain't none in yours. I never known Grandfather Frank but I known Grandfather Lonny. If it come to that, I got two grandfathers on my daddy's side. And I got you and I love you. Anybody says anything about you, Grandmother, they got to come by me to do it. That's everbody outside this room and everbody inside it too. (75)

George Junior's oral declaration of blood purity and physical threat of blood violence energizes Mabel, who stares at Joe and says, "There, that's blood talking. You ain't got nothing to hold on to but a empty glass of whiskey" (75). The family circle has closed, leaving Joe outside once again for his opening up of this most painful of wounds. But he is described as "*almost smiling, almost happy*" in the stage directions and states, "I thought I'd take this picture of Dad Lonny on home with me when I go" (75). Joe missed Lonny's funeral and has been chastised for it by his brother George at the beginning of the play. Now, the prodigal has come home, making things right with the memory of both fathers, yet having effectively cast himself outside his blood kin's affections by opening this bloody wound.

A shattered Mabel wonders if the black panther figurine she has broken, which Lonny won for her at the fair years ago, can be put back together again, and when her grandsons George and Buster gather round her, vowing to help her do so, she asks them if she can help them fix it. George Junior has the play's last words, which suggest the family members are now rapidly stitching together this raw and oozing wound from their past: "Shore you can, you darling. You can help us put it back together as good as new" (75). Of course, the panther, like the narrative wound Joe has ripped open, cannot ever be fully put back together again, but this fictional possibility seems enough to draw the family members together in love, except for Joe, who has now achieved his writerly goal of being able to "leave a record of the blood that was left" (53). He will leave his family soon and go to his own lonely home to write this record of the family's blood issue, temporarily satisfied until he desires to pick open another festering wound from the past.

Because of its subversion of a traditionally placed Southern family's culture and its reclamation of a Beckettian existential philosophy for Southern drama, Harry Crews's *Blood Issue* should become a better-known part of his canon and indeed, part of the expanding canon of Southern drama. Like Harry Crews, Joe Bass is caught between the rural world of his youth and the urban, academic world of his adulthood, suspended, placeless, yet persistent in his search for the truth. Rather than taking his stand on an agrarian patch of ground, Crews prefers to pick open, then dwell on the site of wounds, a predilection that has become a hallmark of his sense of place, a psychological position from which the writer draws strength and inspiration while effectively cutting himself off from all that is familiar and known to him.

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