Writing Blood and Nature:

Redemption in Jim Harrison’s Dalva and The Road Home

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>3 - 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>5 - 14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One: Bloodlines</td>
<td>15 - 50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.I The Founding Father</td>
<td>18 - 26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.II Nature vs. Nurture</td>
<td>26 - 40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.III Dalva: The Final Struggle</td>
<td>41 - 50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: The Nurture of Nature</td>
<td>51 - 76</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.I Humans and Nature</td>
<td>51 - 62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.II Nature as the Ultimate Redeemer</td>
<td>62 - 80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three: Journals and Writing</td>
<td>81 - 90</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.I Journals as Read: A Family History</td>
<td>81 - 90</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.I Michael</td>
<td>90 - 96</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>97 - 99</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I drove 4209 miles because of Jim Harrison. Upon reading his *Dalva* and *The Road Home*, I felt compelled to take a road trip by myself, something I had never done before. I had no particular place in mind, so I eventually ended up in Colorado (getting there in perhaps the least efficient way possible). But on Tuesday, August 23, 2011, still five hundred miles away from my destination, I got side-tracked and found myself in Canyon, Texas, home to a natural phenomenon often overshadowed by its slightly larger cousin, the Grand Canyon. The sun-battered earth at the bottom of the Palo Duro Canyon is a mysterious place, where the unyielding 120 degree heat makes even prickly pear cactus appear thirsty. My red Volkswagen Cabrio looked out of place in harsh desert landscape. After three hours of wandering through the second largest canyon in the United States, I got back in my car and left with little more than a bunch of photos, some fragmented thoughts, a very dusty car, and a sense that I had discovered something meaningful about a road trip —there is always an unplanned surprise in store. In my case, getting lost created a moment of insight.

I headed northwest, taking US 87 through what has to be one of radio’s last unconquered territories. The “dead-air” made me wonder how there could be a road at the bottom of a canyon, but no radio to listen to in a place where people actually live. There was only static. As my radio continued to search for
some kind of human contact, I picked up US 64 and entered New Mexico—a border only acknowledged by a “Mountain Time Zone” sign, and finally the presence of NPR on FM channel 92.7. The land took on a vibrant green color, with dozens of extinct volcanos popping up like an ever-quickening game of *whack-a-mole*. After pushing the “I do not approve” button outside a dingy rest stop with four redundant “beware of snakes” signs, I decided I liked New Mexico. It was better than Texas. There were sunflowers along the side of the highway, which made me feel welcome and peaceful.

Soon thereafter, I came over a hill and got my first glimpse of the Rocky Mountains, towering in all their awe-inspiring beauty and might. I didn’t care if I ever made it to Denver. I was just happy in my car staring at what would eventually become the scariest drive of my life through precipitous winding mountain roads. However, in that moment I felt at peace and almost at home on the road. It didn’t matter where I was going, but where I was just then, all alone on the road. It is this feeling of being lost and finding myself that attached me so powerfully to Jim Harrison’s *Dalva* and *The Road Home* whose protagonists, his iconic Northridge family, spoke to me in a personal and critical way.

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Jim Harrison is a writer who cannot help but pour his own soul into his writing; in fact I would assert that he is nearly inseparable from it. His characters share many of his own personal attitudes toward the world which he crafts around them. From their obsessions to spiritual belief systems, a bit of Harrison can be acutely felt in the struggles of each of his characters. In two of his novels, *Dalva* and its prequel/sequel *The Road Home*, this is perhaps especially true regarding his iconic Northridge Family. The two novels focus upon the relationships within this family, and the way in which a central tragedy—the incestuous teenage pregnancy of Dalva and her concurrent but unrelated near-death illness—reverberates upon each member of the family.

We meet Dalva in 1986, when she is forty-five, and the mother of a son she doesn’t know. We discover how at fifteen, she was impregnated by Duane Stone Horse, a local boy who ran off after learning a terrible truth about his parentage. However, Harrison importantly unfolds her tale through a series of family journals and narratives, the most important of which belongs to her grandfather. He reveals to us (and Dalva) that Duane is the product of Rachel and an affair with either Dalva’s father, John Wesley Northridge III, or (less likely) her Uncle Paul. We also find out that Duane asked Dalva’s grandfather, John Wesley Northridge II, for Dalva’s hand in marriage but was then told his
father’s identity and consequently ran off in horror, leaving Dalva heartbroken and alone, although she remained unfazed in her affections.

The aftermath of this event is what shapes the vast majority of the two novels, from the conflict between her mother and grandfather over what to do with Dalva during her pregnancy, to her search for her son. After giving birth, Dalva, as a fiercely independent teenager, goes off in search of Duane, only never finds him until he wishes to be found many years later. Suffering from incurable war-wounds and illness after serving four years in Vietnam, Duane reaches out to Dalva. She travels to the Florida Keys where the two are married at Big Pine Key. Yet a few hours later she loses him a final time, when Duane commits suicide, leaving Dalva with nothing more than his veteran’s benefits, a box containing all of his medals, and a broken heart. She chooses to leave her wound open for many years, never really moving on with her life, preferring to remain haunted by Duane’s ghostly memory. Through the years, she wonders in passing about their son whom she gave up for adoption, and at age forty-five finally decides to find him. This decision brings up a plethora of related ghosts—those of Duane and her dead father most importantly. In choosing to face them, she comes to terms with her mortality and is finally able to move on, finding both peace and redemption through her long-overdue quest to return home.

A discussion of these two novels cannot be accomplished without first discussing the author himself. Indeed, Jim Harrison has a special connection
to his main protagonist and heroine, Dalva, causing some critics to argue that she is in fact Jim Harrison’s fictional “twin-sister.” Certainly, Harrison himself talks about her in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel in 1998, stating that “...she’s the sister I abandoned at birth in that Jungian sense” (Conversations 187). He explains that culture forces men to abandon their “sisters” metaphorically through an emphasis on masculinity as the absence of femininity. Importantly though, he goes on to say that “Dalva...I suppose is the kind of woman that takes all male prerogatives and more. She takes all prerogatives. Its unbearable to not be what she totally is” (187). While acknowledging her predominant masculine properties, Harrison would seem to discount the idea of Dalva as being a mirror for himself, as though she wrote herself into existence. However, James A. McClintock disagrees. In his essay “Dalva: Jim Harrison’s ‘Twin Sister,’” he writes:

The autobiographical connections between Jim Harrison and his character, Dalva, can be found in his essay, “Dream as a Metaphor of Survival” (1991). There Harrison describes a pattern of recurring, debilitating depressions, attributing that tendency in part to an accumulation of personal tragedies: the childhood loss of his eye when a girl cut him with a broken bottle, the deaths of his sister and father in an automobile accident, the death of his fourteen-year-old niece, among others. Significantly, in Dalva, the protagonist’s suffering comes from losses similar to
Harrison’s—her father’s death in a jet crash in Korea, the death of a lover from whom she was separated at age 16, and her separation at its birth from their child. The state of Dalva’s inner life is signaled by a series of dreams—often identical in content with Harrison’s own dreams. These dreams are her path for “going home.” which is the title of the last section of the novel (320).

Indeed, Harrison transplants his own experiences into Dalva’s female voice, making her struggles and questions a fictionalized parallel of his own. Consequently, Dalva’s struggles with depression and mortality arguably incarnate Harrison’s own.

Importantly, in the years preceding Dalva, McClintock says “By the time he wrote Dalva, Harrison was writing parodies of himself as self-destructive male writer. In Sundog, Dalva’s predecessor, the narrator who is even named ‘Jim Harrison,’ is a failing alcoholic journalist.” (Dalva: Jim Harrison’s ‘Twin Sister’ 320). While the narrator of Sundog is perhaps more obviously connected to Harrison (the writer) through his name, the stylistic departure Harrison makes after Sundog marks a significant change in his writing:

...Dalva, is written from the voice of a woman, and I can’t get into her voice if I’ve had too much to drink the night before; I can’t slip into her persona because it requires a conscious effort every day. The best best thing I’ve ever read on the subject of alcohol
and the writer was by Walker Percy, who defined it as a “re-entry” problem. The writer works in this totally solitary universe, and to re-enter the world he has to have a couple of belts, and then a couple of belts on top of a couple of belts. And most people drink for no other reason than that they started drinking. It’s essentially a sedative, and if you’re a manic depressive in the first place, which is basically my configuration, you sometimes need a lot of sedation (*Conversations* 69).

In *Dalva*, Harrison found a therapeutic outlet to mend his own damaged soul, where her redemption acts as a metaphor signaling the possibility for his own. In choosing to write from a female perspective, Harrison forced himself to battle his own tendency towards over-indulgence with alcohol in order to complete his task. Thus, writing for Harrison works in an almost therapeutic sense, which is echoed within the novels themselves. Where he once required sedation to quell his natural manic-depressive state, he now had to practice temperance in order to find Dalva’s voice. This forced his writing to explore new ground within the depths of his own soul, which is expressed in Dalva’s voice. Whether he wrote *Dalva* with this aim or not is not important, but the outcome is interesting. The emphasis on writing as a therapy for the troubled soul may also explain the presence of writing and journal keeping as a collective Northridge family trait within both *The Road Home* and *Dalva*. In writing, Harrison found an outlet for what James Hillman termed “soul-making”
or internal exploration towards internal wholeness (*Dalva: Jim Harrison’s Twin-Sister* 319). This process allowed him to seek and come to an understanding with the seemingly unfair world around him. The ability of writing to act as a tonic for the saddened soul is importantly echoed in the experiences and actions of his characters, further illustrating the presence of Harrison’s own internal exploration as a subplot of his writing.

However, despite being feminine Dalva’s character is also distinctly masculine. Her experience highlights what Harrison thinks shape a person most. Harrison guides Dalva’s obsessions most obviously with Her mixed bloodline and Her connection to the natural world. Dalva is perhaps more masculine in her pursuit of freedom than most women, but only in her fierce independence—something Harrison talks about in his own life. In 1998, he stated in an interview with Robert DeMott and Patrick Smith:

> I figured out that my main obsession is freedom, and if I didn’t have the freedom of close access to the natural world, I wasn’t going to survive. I think that’s basically why I feel like an alien in New York City, You have to create your own environment or you couldn’t endure at all. A few years ago a wrote an essay on dislocation, “Dream as a Metaphor of Survival” for the *Psychoanalytic Review*. If you don’t create your own habitat, dislocation becomes permanent. You know, let’s say if you can’t figure out depression in an interior sense, there are no pats on the back
that will mean anything whatsoever...There’s no way to get out of it by avoidance, and in Jungian terms it’s really a need to regenerate your whole personal, a need to regenerate your life. It’s your whole person saying “No!” Really quite debilitating, and you have to do something, though it may sometimes be very radical, or sometimes just very nominal (Conversations 206).

For Harrison, the natural world represents freedom, and importantly it is also the source of perhaps the greatest Northridge “obsession,” something acutely attached to Sioux ancestry. Dalva, despite being only one-eighth Sioux, imbibes her family’s spiritual belief system—one which is most acutely attached to the earth. The earth provides not only solace for her troubles, but also painful reminders of lost loved ones. This conjunction almost forces her “dislocation” from her Nebraska homestead and family. Her avoidance of this particular place echoes her internal avoidance of her depression, which she chooses to live with rather than move on from. Yet, Harrison’s incarnation of Dalva’s transformation is finalized when she returns home metaphorically facing her inner-ghosts and memories. There, she is finally able to regenerate herself and comes to understand the need to continue on with life, despite the setbacks of a dead father, dead lover, and a lost son. Certainly, it seems a very nominal feat to return home, but in doing so, and with the aid of the natural world, she manages to transform herself whilst discovering both inner-peace as well as her son, Nelse.
Jim Harrison is a writer of obsessions and appetites, but he also presupposes that one must not allow themselves to become engulfed by them. Dalva’s struggle with depression, her incestuous relationship with Duane, and inability to accept the finitude of death, all reverberate within certain experiences of Harrison’s own life and his own struggles, and in some ways she truly is a twin for Harrison himself, though a slightly feminized version (in the Jungian sense). However, the most important point here, is that for Jim Harrison a person, and by extension even a fictional character, is anything but simple. He believes fervently that under the influence of our parents, we are shaped and cultivated into troubled beings, but the nurture of the natural world holds an important key to redemption. Indeed, we must escape from our human troubles in order understand our very human limitations.

What I intend to argue through this essay, is that Jim Harrison shapes Dalva’s choices and ensuing struggles through the guise of two major influences—her bloodline and the natural world. Dalva’s character is shaped through Harrison’s meticulous creation of a family history, as presented to us through a series of family journals. The remnants of patrilineal anger and deep-seated obsessions reverberate throughout both Dalva’s character, and further through their continued presence within the individual narratives of each of her forefathers. These journals would seem to suggest that she is in fact the latest member in a long line of men, all of whom have struggled against their mortality. From her great-grandfather, John Wesley Northridge I,
who found difficulty in accepting his first wife’s death, to her grandfather, John Wesley Northridge II who struggled to accept a similar loss, Dalva’s experience exemplifies how a genetic legacy can pass down repeatedly. Like her forefathers, Dalva chooses to live in a world surrounded by the memories of ghosts. Yet importantly, Harrison connects their presence most significantly connected to the land surrounding her family’s homestead, which Dalva must return to and face.

This Northridge patrilineal obsession with defying mortality is eventually tempered by another equally powerful obsession—one Harrison grants the power for healing. Dalva’s great-grandfather, who established the family’s Nebraska homestead, also passed down, through his second marriage to a native Sioux woman named Small Bird, an emphasis upon the natural world. The natural environment forms the catalyst which finally pushes Dalva to recognize her own failures, and allows her to find redemption—not only for herself, but metaphorically for her entire bloodline. In seeking the solace of nature, Dalva sets herself free, finally meeting her son, Nelse, who is pointedly waiting for her at home. Able to move on with her life, at the end of The Road Home Dalva greets death with open arms, finally crossing over to the spiritual plane which she wasted so many years longing after. As though fruitless obsessions can be conquered through the combination of nature and journal writing, Dalva makes it home. In her desire to seek out her lost lover and son, the family journals emphasize the ability of writing to record a process that
James I. McClintock terms “‘soul-making,’ or movement towards wholeness” (*Dalva: Jim Harrison’s ‘Twin Sister’* 322). However, only through her excursions into the natural world and constant writings does Dalva eventually come to terms with her emotional and psychological issues, finally enabling her to move on with her life. Certainly, McClintock concludes after her transformation that “…the world around her has taken on a richness, texture, clarity, and meaning unavailable to her before living with and through her depression” (327). She releases the ghosts of her forefathers, and is finally able to move on and live her own life within the corporal world happily.

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Chapter I

Bloodlines: The Nature of Northridge Family Obsessions

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One of my favorite description’s of Jim Harrison’s writing comes from a staff writer at the Rocky Mountain News named John C. Ensslin. Ensslin wrote while laid up with a broken leg, “Harrison is the poet of broken people. Physically broke. Emotionally broke. Financially and spiritually, just plain busted and broke. And unlike Hemingway, Harrison seems to find that these people are not stronger when the survive but more interesting for the fractures” (Rocky Mountain News 12/5/2002). While his assertion was admittedly biased by his own condition at the time, I think there is a certain truth to it—especially when considering the iconic Northridge family of Harrison’s Dalva and The Road Home. In these two novels, we encounter Dalva’s struggle to come to terms with her own powerlessness against the damaging events of her life which, as Ensslin would say, “broke” her emotionally. However, I would argue she comes from a long line of “broken” spirits, who perhaps passed their troubles and shortcomings down to her. Her great-grandfather, the first Northridge patriarch, was broken by love—for the native Oglala (Lakota) Sioux, and Aase—his first wife who died from tuberculosis. His faith was destroyed by war, as was that of his son John Wesley Northridge II. Consequently, I suggest that Harrison places Dalva’s experience as the fourth installment within a generational tradition of “broken”
people. Like her ancestors, Dalva suffers tragedy in three sectors of her life: love, war, and death; but she manages to overcome this, finding inner peace, through sharing in two other family traditions—exploration within the natural world, and journal keeping.

In this Chapter I intend to examine the experiences of Dalva’s ancestors. Harrison constructs these through a series of family journals, narratives, and letters in both Dalva and The Road Home. Her forefathers’ experiences reverberate through common parallels to both Dalva’s and Nelse’s own. This is most obvious through a series of common issues, seemingly inherent to the Northridge bloodline. Michael Huey explains: “The issues that preoccupied Northridge in the journals...are not superficial; and they concern Dalva still: coming to terms with the strife between the white man and the American Indian; finding, and then quickly losing love; identifying with the ‘sacred land-scape’; and leaving behind a written record” (Contemporary Literary Criticism 165). Indeed, each generation of the Northridge family exhibits an equal aptitude for struggling with a similar set of difficulties, but also dealing with them through their general belief system. Their journals act as an important connecting tool, allowing us to understand the way character flaws and stresses flow between the novels, and further illustrate how Harrison has connected the family bloodline to a set of common habits which make up a shared consciousness. Dalva explains:
Everyone in the history of my family was a letter writer, a diary keeper. It’s as if they thought they’d disappear if they didn’t put themselves on paper. For a while in my twenties I stopped the habit but it made my thinking boringly recurrent. I resumed the practice so I could get rid of the thoughts and information, leaving room for something new. You make a topographical map of contours, then move on (Dalva 57).

Indeed, there is a shared experience among Dalva and her ancestors which is best displayed through their collective habit of writing. In crafting journals and journeys as part of the Northridge identity, Harrison seems to suggest that each family member writes in a therapeutic sense—to free their minds from the losses which haunt them.

However, the way in which the different narratives intertwine and overlap is particularly interesting. As P.R. Dyjack points out, “…in his novels about the Northridge family…it is made clear that each person’s life is not an isolated series of events, but part of a greater flow; it is the intermingling of many peoples’ lives that make each of our individual ones” (NY State Writers Institute: Writers Online Magazine 18). In constructing the family journals as nuanced accounts of similar journeys—both physical and spiritual—Harrison points toward a set of traits which make up a shared Northridge consciousness. These traits mirror Harrison’s own “obsessions,” from a preoccupation with mortality, an interest in Native Americans, to incest, travel,
and writing. In doing so, Harrison emphasizes the biological legacy as an essential component of the Northridge identity. Through the nurture of a bloodline, one generation is able nurture and influence the shape of the next, passing down both good and bad traits. With the symbolic immortality of the written word, Harrison cultivates a system by which each family member’s experiences are able to transcend both time and death, illuminating a fluidity between the consciousness of three generations of one family. Consequently, I argue that Dalva is the ultimate and final character who forms part of a greater, collective, struggle to find self-acceptance and inner peace from the pain of loss. Indeed, her redemption at the end of Dalva symbolically ends a vicious cycle of dangerous “obsessions,” which I intend to argue, is most importantly carried through blood and family.

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1.1  
The Founding Father: John Wesley Northridge I  
John Wesley Northridge I’s legacy most certainly begins a cycle of anger—towards many things, all of which generally focus around some sort of injustice of life, from his wife’s untimely death which leaves him heartbroken to the United States Government’s actions toward the Sioux at Buffalo Gap, Ft. Robinson, or Wounded Knee. His ideology is passed onto his son, who inherits both his father’s ire but also his homestead, which forms the literal
foundation for the family. We are first introduced to John Wesley I’s journals when Dalva explains “Ruth, Mother and I (and earlier Grandfather) had decided to keep all the material sequestered after the release of one essay in 1965 to the Nebraska Historical Society, which had caused some not very dramatic publicity and problems” (Dalva 36). His narrative is interesting in that he is the original source of the family identity as a bridge between the Native-American and white-“American” cultures. As such, his writing exemplifies the family traits which survive him in his ancestors. Harrison most obviously illustrates this through their connection to the Sioux, but further through their reverence for the natural world which surrounds them. This is but one “obsession” which transcends the generations through their bloodline. Beginning with the matriarch, John Wesley I’s second wife, a widowed Sioux woman named Small Bird, the natural world holds an almost spiritual sense for the entire Northridge family.

However, his tale begins much earlier in life, and catalogues the events which led him to anger and disappointment with both life and people. Indeed, Harrison begins his narrative shortly after the Civil War. When acting as an agricultural missionary, John Wesley I became close to the Native Oglala Sioux population through an interest in Botany. He explains:

General Miles does not understand I have no pact with the Sioux or any other tribe but that my preoccupation with trees, plants & herbs, rather than Jesus is thought among them to be a sacred
calling. I am also a student of their language & dialects and on long winter days & nights I speak to myself in Sioux. He Dog, however, was once troubled by my graftings, slips & plant breeding, wondering if I had abrogated the proper work of the Earth (Dalva 159).

In this way, Harrison seems to suggest that John Wesley I was more appropriately suited to the Sioux than to his own people. He gained their trust when so many before and after him were treated with hostility or killed. However, Dalva's great-grandfather defected from his faith long before meeting the Sioux, having lost it during the Civil War as we are told by Michael, who quotes his lamentations about writing letters for the families of the dead and dying: “A man who writes a hundred or so such letters finds himself well shut of Heaven and Hell. This horror has returned me to close to Earth and I would not trade a fragrant thistle along this road to the North for a warehouse of Bibles” (Dalva 115). In being surrounded by the horrors of war and the destruction of human life, John Wesley I decidedly became closer to the natural world. This too echoes in the narrative of his son, Dalva's grandfather, who fought in World War I. Nevertheless, in ascribing his denunciation of faith to writing letters on behalf of lost life, Harrison connects John Wesley I's spiritual loss to the process of writing, creating an important link between lived and written experiences. I would suggest that in writing letters for others, John Wesley I experienced their loss as his own; the scars
from which resulted in the erosion of his Christian faith (although he does return to it much later in life). Thus, it is evident that his soldiering in the Civil War led to his spiritual “breaking,” and consequent turn from Jesus in exchange for the comfort of the natural world, which, he acknowledges, seems to heal him.

It is after the war that our first Northridge began his journey north and west to Sioux territory as a faithless missionary. He hoped to help the Sioux learn how to live without buffalo, which the U.S. Government systematically slaughtered in order to incapacitate the Lakota’s nomadic ways. Yet, John Wesley I importantly became ingrained in their culture, eventually dismissing his own in anger and disgust. This happens most obviously after his first wife, Aase, dies from Tuberculosis. In his grief he writes a curious entry, detailing his search for solace:

I have tried mightily to commune with her spirit and those of my dead friends among the Sioux but only with the very slightest of success. I have heard that there is a medicine man with the Cheyenne up in Lame Deer in Montana Territory that may help me in this matter...He [Grinnell, a friend] counsels me to return to the strength of our own faith for solace. I said I do not sense the God of Israel alive in this land. Word was brought to me this morning that my friend and brother by his adoption, the brave White Tree, was clubbed to death at Fort Robinson for spitting on
a soldier’s saddle...I feel an urge to murder the murderers deep in my gullet.

In my dreams my dead wife told me to leave this place of ours and so I will...We were in the canyon where we found wolf cubs and took care not to disturb them...In the dream the canyon was full of her favorite birds...We sat on a rock amid choke cherry, wild black currant, red osier dogwood, wolfberry, all in densest bloom. Her breath was close to my ear but she spoke not. I embraced her and she went into my body, the canyon disappeared, and I was transported alone to the summit of Harney’s Butte. I suppose this to mean she is forever in my heart and blood (Dalva 136)

This passage recounts the depth of John Wesley I’s lapse of faith. He no longer feels the Judeo-Christian God in the land, preferring openly to consult a Native American medicine man for his answers. The passage’s end speaks to a recurring theme of connecting spiritual immortality to land, which Harrison suggests also houses a spiritual “unseen” plane. Deceased loved ones live among us, both within our memories and in writing, but furthermore through what Joseph Coates ascribes to “Harrison’s feeling for the spirit of a land or place and his identification with the kind of people, Native Americans among others, who routinely believe that the natural world is contiguous with an unseen one...” (Contemporary Literary Criticism 166). This is but one of many
instances where place is connected to the memory, or spirit of a deceased person. It is one of the most important recurring themes I explore here. Indeed, in his dream John Wesley Northridge travels to the places he felt happiest with Aase during her life, seeing her favorite birds, flora and fauna. She tells him to leave “this place of ours,” symbolically suggesting that he should move on from sadness because her spirit is still one with his, part of his “heart and blood.” Furthermore, The death of Aase importantly mirrors Dalva’s experience with the death of Duane Stone Horse. Both die prematurely, at young ages under seemingly unfair circumstances. Duane is killed from the after-effects of the Vietnam War, while Aase dies from Tuberculosis. Further they each die only after very short periods of marriage, leaving Dalva and John Wesley I with broken hearts and damaged faith. Importantly, Dalva often feels Duane’s spirit about her as well, in specific places or during natural phenomena. Through the parallel between Dalva’s experience and that of her great-grandfather Harrison to indicates how the two are more closely related in consciousness than would otherwise be assumed. Indeed, Dalva shares in the ideology which originated with her great-grandfather, which also leads her into the natural world.

This passage also exemplifies the great strength of Northridge’s ties to the Sioux, enabling us to understand that his interest and connections are those which lead to Dalva’s eventual revelation. Wishing to harm greatly White Tree’s murderers—white men like himself—John Wesley illustrates a decisive
refusal to identify with his own ethnic identity. Jonathan Yardley offers interesting insight here, stating:

He is posed in contrast to the soldiers who brutalized the Sioux: he is the white man’s conscience. Yet he is also, such being the contradictory nature of white settlement, an unwitting exploiter as well, for the family that he establishes in the West gains its wealth by farming land that once belonged to the Indians. 

(Contemporary Literary Criticism 163).

After this event, Northridge’s ties to the Sioux only become stronger. He marries a woman named Small-Bird (aka Margaret Northridge) and continues on a path towards rejecting almost all the vestiges of his White “American” identity. However, as Yardley points out, Northridge is unable to entirely separate himself from his role as white-exploiter, which I believe Harrison specifically intended. Indeed, Northridge, near the end of his life, writes “My love for these people whom my gov’t and religion have abandoned is great, but I have begun to fear that becoming a Sioux is an illusion I may not indulge...” (Dalva 313). He seems to acknowledge his own inability to be anything other than white, no matter how much he inserts and assimilates himself into Sioux culture. As such, Harrison reinforces the idea that we cannot choose to become something we weren’t born to be. Caucasian, John Wesley I can never become truly Sioux—it’s against the nature of his blood. Thereby Harrison supposes that identity isn’t a choice we can make for ourselves,
rather it’s made for us by our parents. Indeed, his son explains to us that his father forced him to live as a white man, which is why he too can never be Sioux, despite having a Lakota mother. Again, this theme reverberates in Dalva’s life, she loves Duane Stone Horse—who is also half Lakota Sioux—and at fifteen she doesn’t mind being called “Squaw” by the local boys who took notice (Dalva 25). She even recounts how Duane’s abrupt reminder that she wasn’t Sioux made her “downcast” (26) at age fifteen. However, she acknowledges later that she is one of the few who have the privilege of wealth and “white-ness” to be able to choose to live the way that she does—as someone who embraces aspects of a culture without having to endure the hardships.

Through his construction of John Wesley I’s journal, Harrison seems to point to the way in which many things can affect the life of any individual, and then how they pass on their decisions, choices, and character traits onto those that survive them. Indeed, each one of us is affected by those we meet. Yet I think Harrison would probably agree, our family has the most profound effect upon our person. John Wesley I’s narrative acts as the foundation stone for the entire Northridge family, both in that he built the homestead as well as set into motion a set of traits which passed down generationally. His legacy of irate anger and an obsession with nature forms the basis of an ideology which is shared in his bloodline. Nevertheless, his influence and lasting memory seems to have done more damage than good, a truth I think Harrison aptly
portrays through the narrative of his son and Dalva's grandfather: John Wesley Northridge II.

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II.I

*Nurture vs. Nature: John Wesley Northridge II*

John Wesley Northridge II wears many hats: he is an artist, a rancher, a veteran, a bully, a childhood hero, a grandfather, and a father; but like his father and grand-daughter, he is most importantly a broken spirit—broken by love and death, by war and culture, and perhaps most of all, by inheriting his father’s legacy. Harrison introduces Dalva’s grandfather as a narrator in the first two consecutive sections of *The Road Home*. The first explores the events of his life which would seem to have broken him, while the second details the sense of peace he found in his final year of life. Where the narrative of his father leaves off, John Wesley II picks up, solidifying many of the themes we later encounter in the narratives of his great-grandson and grand-daughter. Unlike his father, John Wesley II was in fact half Sioux, and in his struggle to come to terms with his identity both spiritually and physically, Harrison seems to showcase the power of bloodlines to shape the affinities any person has, even if they are not particularly nurtured. It is as though our blood grants us our individual nature, through its ability to pass on central obsessions through the emphasis of family.
What we must take from both of these narratives is how Harrison crafts them as a backdrop or foundation for the ensuing exploration of Dalva. Through his use of journals Harrison sets up Dalva and Nelse’s tales as part of a greater family heritage. We all experience the pain of loss, death, heartbreak, and war. However, in order to move on we must come to terms with them and let go of the anger and pain. John Wesley II does this through his writing, but also by realizing his death is nearly upon him. Knowledge of what is to come allows him to come to terms with his life as he lived it, and while he regrets much of the past, he finds peace which is symbolized through his return to art, an early obsession of his which the horrors of war extinguished. Dalva similarly has time to prepare for her death, realizing that once you know it is inevitable, it becomes the duty of the dying to comfort those who will remain (*The Road Home* 437). She chooses to time her own end, drowning herself before her ovarian cancer kills her. John Wesley II, on the other hand, knew his end was coming when his longtime friend Smith returns. A Lakota medicine man, Smith warned John Wesley that his return would signal the last year of his life. Interestingly though, his return does not scare John Wesley, just as death does not seem to trouble Dalva after she finds peace. Importantly, John Wesley II states

> I found it utterly liberating to think I had but a year left in my life. I immediately drew a sparrow in the crabapple tree outside the window, then celebrated the clumsy attempt...I began to
tentatively forgive myself for being an angry and wild asshole much of my life, partly because forgiveness seemed to exhaust the alternative (96).

John Wesley II had lost his passion for art after seeing the horrors of World War I. It is only in his final year of life that he returned to it, symbolic of the sense of inner peace he obtained having accepted the inevitable. All people die at some point, but Harrison seemingly would have us believe our spirit remains attached to the earth, invisible except in the wind or trees. However, as will be discussed shortly, this idea is more troubling than it seems.

Parallel to his father, John Wesley II also lost a much loved woman early in his life. With John Wesley II however, this happened twice. First, at the hands of his father who objected to his relationship with a Sioux girl named Willow. The second time was far more tragic in that the girl, Adelle, took her own life. The memory of Adelle elicits the following response from John Wesley:

it is arguable whether anyone truly recovers from anything. I still twitch at ancient rifle shots, and an errant memory of Adelle, dead now forty-one years, can make my body rigid with anguish. But then at other times, mostly when I am walking, her voice can become as musical as the May warblers in the thickets along the Niobrara. The dead do not offer themselves up as a consoling study when we loved them so (The Road Home 9).
With this statement, he seems to acknowledge his own state as a broken individual, in that the loss encountered with death is final. Yet, he also explores the ability of the natural world to console his sadness—quite similar to what his own father expressed after the loss of Aase. Nevertheless, his connection would seem to be more spiritual than that of his father, more connected to his mother’s sense of religion. I believe Harrison fuels this through John Wesley II’s blood connection to her culture, which is proven stronger than his father’s hopelessly failed attempt at assimilation. These tendencies are exemplified within his journal narrative, which then echo those by Dalva and Nelse.

John Wesley II acts as the son who challenges the narrative of his father. I think it is fair to say that John Wesley II quite resents his father, primarily because of his decision to raise him as white, which would seem to be a side-effect of John Wesley I’s realization that he, like the world around him, was hopelessly dominated by “white-culture.” However, John Wesley, looking back, challenges this, explaining:

Long after she died my mother had kept one of my legs ever so slightly in her world, despite my father’s active insistence that the future of the world was grievously white. She was so utterly ordinary she was as real as the moon to me after she had been dead forty years. I stood there, an old fool shivering on a cold October night, and could still hear her soft but bell-clear voice offering me the names of birds in Lakota, none of which I
Despite his father’s best efforts and intentions to keep him within the culture of White-America, his Sioux mother still managed to influence his sense of being. Indeed, the latter half of the quote illustrates how the natural world plays an important role in John Wesley II’s spiritual sense of the world. He can hear his mother’s voice in the wind even forty years after her death. However, John Wesley II’s inability to remember the language of his mother’s people would also suggest his father’s general success in keeping him away from Sioux culture. Thus, in marrying Small Bird John Wesley I solidified, with the birth of his son, a blood-connection to the Sioux, which I would argue Harrison expresses as the basis of a common set of familial spiritual beliefs.

Furthermore, Harrison creates a contradiction here. While John Wesley I discovered he could not totally become a Sioux, his son—whom he forces to live as a white man—rejects a central component of his father’s culture and ironically the very thing which brought him to the Sioux: his religion. This is perhaps the most astounding aspect of John Wesley II’s characterization, for he becomes part of a larger nature-nurture debate, which is then further complicated by Nelse who is the Northridge with the second most Sioux
blood\textsuperscript{1}. Nelse inherits similar family “obsessions” despite having no direct contact with his blood relatives until adulthood, but Harrison pointedly doesn’t have him embody their damaging effects. Throughout his work, Harrison often utilizes conundrums and paradoxes as one of his central methods, which he explains in an interview:

You can limit your paradoxes by limiting your life. But the more you want to see of life, the more contradictions are right there in front of you. When I first read Keats, whom I loved very much even in high school, that quality was right there. The hairs on my neck rose when I read about negative capability because that’s obviously what a novelist has to have more than anything else. It’s still the best tool for a novel, and the negative capability to just be willing to juggle ten thousand things at one and not arrive at any specious conclusion about them I think. The best example of it is in Shakespeare and Dostoevsky. Nothing human is alien to them. There is nothing that can’t be explored (\textit{Conversations} 215-216).

In being adopted by white people Nelse, like John Wesley II, was similarly forced to live as white. Nevertheless, in his experience he too comes

\textsuperscript{1} Nelse’s father Duane shared a great grandparent with Dalva, as well as a full blooded Sioux mother. However, Duane identified himself as a Sioux, having been raised within their culture and thus works as a reversal of John Wesley II. Nevertheless, Duane in fact, was more than half Sioux (5/8\textsuperscript{th}’s to be exact), and by identifying with the culture can be considered wholly Sioux and thus, it could be argued, he passed to Nelse the same amount of culture as Small bird passed unto Dalva’s grandfather, making Nelse half Sioux (or 6/16\textsuperscript{th}’s otherwise).
to reject certain aspects of his parents’ culture, seeking refuge in the natural world where he seems to find both answers and solace. Harrison seems to suggest that despite never knowing his parents, his blood passed down a certain affinity for the natural environment. However, unlike his grandfather, his partial heritage doesn’t seem to bother him. Even when he discovers his incestuous parentage, Nelse remains unfazed, accepting it as something out of his control. Perhaps his connection guides his temperament on a more subconscious level, more like an animalistic instinct. Indeed Nelse generally seems to be more at peace than his great-grandfather, and lacks many of Dalva’s own issues. Thus, what Harrison seems to say is that we are shaped by things other than our parents—greater things, like fate, blood, and even nature. Indeed, despite his father’s dominant influence, John Wesley II inherits his mother’s spiritual sense, which he passes down to Dalva and even Nelse. It does defy reason, but I think its safe to say that Jim Harrison would likely say, “so what? Life’s just like that.”

Furthermore, John Wesley II, like Nelse, experiences a conscious struggle to understand his heritage, which leads to extreme resentment for his father. Where Nelse desires to understand why he was given up, seeking out Dalva for answers, John Wesley II struggles to equate his two heritages. This is most obvious through his discussion of a failed love affair he had with a Sioux girl named Willow. He explains the effect its failure had: “It was the first mortal blow of my life. Her parents did not wish me near her because I was
half white, and later on, another set of parents with equal determination would cast me out because I was half ‘savage,’ a word they mouthed with enthusiastic terror” (*The Road Home* 19). The reality is that life is full of troublesome questions, some of which will never be answered. Indeed John Wesley asks himself late in life, “Can anyone actually be half of something, I wondered, and what part of me is my mother? This thought prickled my scalp…” (134). However, in giving up the possibility of an answer, he seems to achieve some sort of peace with himself. He is an amalgam and must accept it; he is neither one nor the other, but also both at the same time; and there is nothing that he can do about it. Although despite this, as he nears death, his spiritual connection to his mother’s people does seem to deepen, affecting more than one aspect of his life.

In his last months on earth John Wesley II is plagued by “Indian dreams,” where he sees various tribes, and even hears God as “a billion deafening songbirds” (*The Road Home* 124). Interestingly, Smith interprets these dreams for us, explaining:

> ...they were attributed to the landscape of my life since dreams emerged from the ground. He was especially fascinated by how I escaped the German troops by becoming a huge bird and flying down a river only to discover I was half bird and half bear. Smith said that that dream was a real stroke of luck and I better work hard at my life to make sure I was deserving of such a dream. I
asked how I was supposed to do that and he answered...‘Just do your art and be good to people’... (*True Bones* 136).

Smith’s advice was taken to heart by John Wesley, and in his last year he mellowed out, losing much of his anger he held in him before. It is as though knowing death is upon him, forced him to realize that he couldn’t change the life he had lived, and thus became able to let go. Dalva too follows a similar path, although she has less time to prepare. As his death approaches, John Wesley II’s Indian dreams increase in number and intensity, exemplifying the depth of his spiritual connection to his mother, as well as the unavoidable parallels to his father. Indeed he states right before he dies “Rachel chants for me in Lakota as my mother had done for my father. I am charmed at this continuity though I have difficulty staying awake and my dreams are full of birds” (*The Road Home* 154). Rachel was the mother of Dalva’s lover and Nelse’s father, Duane. She takes upon herself the role of Small Bird during the death of John Wesley I, chanting in Sioux for his spirit creating another important congruency between father and son. Furthermore this sense of interconnectedness is continued on when Dalva dreams of every dog and horse she had ever seen right before her own death, only she has no one to chant for her.

However, this is further complicated when John Wesley II recalls a thought upon his parents’ death: “We think of life as a solid and are haunted when time tells us it is a fluid” (*The Road Home* 13). His parents died three
days apart, which Northridge explains was because they loved each other—his mother refused to live without his father. Indeed, Thomas McNamee comments:

This book’s view of the world emphasizes connectedness, from generation to generation and between the earth and its furred, feathered and human inhabitants. Northridge sees these fragile bonds as the pattern for human love, the best of all willable motions in an landscape of pain and sorrow (NY Times Book Review, 11/8/1995).

It is as though the connectedness he speaks of is, in Harrison’s construction of it, able to circumvent death through being tied to the land, which acts as a setting for the memories and writings left which survive us. Certainly, there is a strong sense throughout the Dalva and The Road Home that no one ever really dies. Indeed, John Wesley II can hear Adelle and his Mother’s voices in the natural landscape, but further his last words are, “I’m not going to die. No one ever dies...Jesus, the world is upside down and I’m falling through the sky” (The Road Home 91). Harrison suggests that pain of a person’s death and the memories of their lives remain forever as imprints upon the souls of those they leave behind. Their obsessions are passed on through bloodlines to those they nurture or affect, even subconsciously or without intending to. Consequently, a survival of consciousness is solidified and passed down, creating a shared ideology within the Northridge Family. Certainly, Dalva too
senses the spirits of her father and son when she uncovers the skeletons left
for her by both her grandfather and great-grandfather. She states:

I sat there for a full hour in the state that perhaps approached a
prayer without words, not thinking about anything except what I
was looking at. My father and Duane seemed to be with me, then
went away as did the weeping girl I had felt in my chest (Dalva
298).

Like her grandfather, Dalva senses the spirits of lost loved ones in the
basement of her family home. This is the moment of her greatest epiphany,
after which she is able to meet her son. Their narratives, as presented in their
journals, remain as a comfort, but also as a kind of ghost of their
consciousness. This returns us to Harrison’s sense of life’s flow; how lives
intertwine rather than run parallel, especially between families.

While John Wesley II hopelessly numbers himself among white people,
his journals display many important aspects of his mother’s native culture.
Harrison, it seems, would thus craft John Wesley II’s character as more of an
amalgam than he is even actively aware of being. In doing so Harrison creates
the first “translator” for a revised history of the American Old West; a role that
is passed down to Dalva and Nelse respectively. Where John Wesley I
represented both the white-man’s conscience and failings, the narrative of his
son becomes a means of transmitting Harrison’s revisionist history including
the Native American perspective in such a way that the our dominant white
culture can understand. Thus Harrison enables his readers to understand a story not often told, challenging our cultural heritage and role in the atrocities committed unto the Native population. This idea of a translator is raised by Jane Tompkins in her essay “At the Buffalo Bill Museum, June 1988.” She explains her thoughts over a troubling trip to the Plains Indian Museum, stating:

The Plains Indian Museum stopped me in my tracks. It was written in a language I had never learned. I didn’t have the key, maybe someone did, but I wasn’t too sure. For it may have not been just cultural differences that made the text unreadable. I began to suspect that the text itself was corrupt, that the architects of this museum were going to the motions whose purpose was, even to themselves, obscure. Knowing what event a figure stands for in the calendar doesn’t mean you understand an Indian year...Wasn't there an air of bad faith about preserving the vestiges of a culture one had effectively extinguished? Did the museum exist to assuage our guilt and not for any real educational reason? I do not have an answer to these questions. All I know is that I felt I was in the presence of something pious and a little insincere. It had the aura of a failed attempt at virtue, as though the curators were trying to present as interesting
objects whose purpose and meaning even they could not fully imagine. (West of Everything 192).

I believe Harrison constructed John Wesley II as the key to our understanding a culture which many of our ancestors effectively destroyed. The beauty of Harrison’s fiction addresses Tompkins issues with the museum. Even if a living key may not exist to translate for us, in his constructed world, Harrison, gives us a character who is capable of performing the task for us. Harrison creates in his fiction a story and language which enables our comprehension of the true depth of often overlooked atrocities committed unto the Native American population by the United States government. This is most importantly exemplified through the anger of John Wesley I which also is imbibed by John Wesley II and Dalva. However, Harrison does not condone the vestiges of anger left by the family patriarch, but rather suggests that we should move on but still remember. Indeed, Patrick Smith importantly asserts that the collection of Northridge narratives illustrate “Harrison’s profound sense of regret and confusion at the vagaries of American history...” (True Bones 97).

Indeed, through his characters Harrison rewrites, and transmits a new version of a regrettable history, in a means which allows for our comprehension without laying a particularly potent groundwork for guilt. From the decimation of the Buffalo herds and Wounded Knee, to the continual theft of Native land, Harrison constructs John Wesley II as perhaps a most sincere and believable attempt to create a revisionist history, which I believe, succeeds where the
curators and architects behind the Plaines Indian Museum failed. This is important, because Dalva continues on in this same ideology, and it also forms an important basis which leads her to an important revelation which leads to her own redemption.

Dalva and Nelse, despite being more white than Sioux, also appear to share in John Wesley II's understanding, and are able to translate their feelings into a language we can comprehend. Patrick A. Smith asserts “That history [of America]—the history of appropriation—is the focus of Harrison’s Dalva (1988) and its prequel/sequel The Road Home (1998), both which detail, in different ways and with different ends in mind, intricate interpersonal relationships and the forms of oppression and obsession that are magnified by the weight of history... (True Bones 95). The oppression of their ancestors and their shared family obsessions echo within the narratives of all Northridge family members, marking itself as an inherited legacy which must be grappled with. Indeed, John Wesley II notes, “...excepting for the First World War, this trap my father had built, and I continued building, for body and spirit. I tried to breathe deeply and couldn’t. I looked at my hands and didn’t quite recognize them” (The Road Home 74). The “trap” he refers to is the family homestead, which his father began and he continued, building upon both the physical and internal structures. The individual narratives, presented as journals, are what further illustrate the congruencies between the generations, allowing their voices to transcend both time and death through the written word. Yet, John
Wesley’s anger here is directed at himself. He continued a legacy of hate and anger, which began with his father and is connected to the very land which he lives upon. Rather than moving on with his life, he chose to live in the shadow of his father’s ghost, and even passing on this same anger and struggle with mortality onto Dalva. Through the power of reading, writing, and a metaphorical bloodline Harrison creates a device ensuring that this troubled consciousness is kept alive generation after generation, until it is resolved by his heroine, who metaphorically sets her bloodline free.

What I believe Harrison illustrates through these Northridge family journals is how obsessions perhaps aren’t entirely our choice. Our blood defines them to an extent, through the nurturing of particular ideologies by our parents and grandparents. Indeed, Patrick Smith explains Dalva is “Northridge’s great-granddaughter and a woman who is a ‘spiritual heir’ of the people whose history he is trying to construct” (True Bones 101). In their travels, Dalva and Nelse together represent the most recent journeys within the Northridge line. They pull from their heritage, sharing certain similarities, which through the narrative journals of John Wesley I and II, exemplify how an “obsession” can transcend reason, time, and even death through family. Harrison’s trilogy suggests that our individual “obsessions” are a core part of our nature, and we cannot choose them; but, with enough time and experience we can overcome them.

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The first portion of Dalva’s narrative details her many obsessions and problems, exploring what it is that emotionally “broke” her, as well as her resolution to return home and face her inner demons. I would like to suppose that Dalva represents the ultimate failure of her family ideology, as well as its only true source of redemption, while her son represents the possibility for the family’s future renewal. Todd E. Davis, and Kenneth Womack present an interesting statement about Dalva in *Embracing the Fall: Postmodern Humanism in Contemporary Literature and Culture*, explaining:

Harrison begins *Dalva* with the austere epigraph: “We loved the earth, but could not stay.” Here is the loss that Dalva laments, that drives her to cry out “Goddamn the world who gives me no father an no son. No Husband” (268). Dalva’s rage strikes to the heart of our mortal condition—the complexity and brevity of the life we lead in the moments we have upon this earth. It also speaks to Dalva’s own Imminent death, her struggle to come to terms no only with the deaths of her loved ones, but with her own mortality—a loss of oneself to the earth that ultimately will hold us all. I the same way, the original Northridge feels this loss when he watches the native people that he has lived among decimated by government actions, when he contemplates the
Christian faith he no longer finds tenable, and when he remembers the Eastern landscape he has left behind in his push West to search for some form of home. (14).

Davis’ and Womack’s point illustrates how Dalva’s anger and resentment at her major losses in life are really a continuation of those belonging to both her great-grandfather and grandfather. She cries out in frustration and anger at the world—the earth—which she blames for the death of her father and lover, but also for taking away her son. Her frustration is beautifully human here in its irrationality. Her anger, directed at the natural world around her, is really aimed at her own mortality which separates her from the men she loved. Death, which follows every life inevitably, is final. Nevertheless, Dalva seems unable to move on from her sense of loss and depression. Like the first John Wesley Northridge, who began this cycle of anger and ghost mongering, Dalva too is unable to let go of the memories of those she loves. Harrison, connects these ghosts directly to the land surrounding the Nebraska homestead, symbolic of the ideology which allows for their continual existence. Just as her grandfather bursts out in anger at himself for continuing the cycle of his father—who’s ghost he feels acutely in the shelter-belts which surround the family’s ranch—Dalva too has succumbed to their failures at understanding mortality, preferring to hang onto the memories of lost loved ones, whom they can only sense in the natural world for a fleeting moment.
Unlike her grandfather, who remained always attached to his father’s homestead, Dalva runs away from her problems, becoming a nomad.

Certainly, her life is very much defined by the events which surround her family and its foundation. Importantly, Davis argues:

> Early in the novel, we witness the power of the natural landscape in Dalva’s life. Burdened with her family’s secrets and the realization that those secrets were in part responsible for her having a son with a man she did not suspect was her half-brother, Dalva lives on the West coast, taking solace in the landscape:...Yet this is not Dalva’ home. Rather, this landscape serves as a salve for her wounds, offering some sort of solace but never a true working out of the Hanblecheyapi. For Dalva to receive a “new vision of life,” she journeys back to Nebraska where she finally comes to terms with the lives of her ancestors and ultimately meets the son whom she has never known. Of course in Harrison’s world, such events cannot be separated from the place in which they transpire, and because of this the most dramatic and telling trials leading to Dalva’s spiritual renewal are firmly situated in the Nebraska countryside (*Embracing the Fall* 14-15).

The secrets of her grandfather and father, and the former’s failure to intervene, are what led to Dalva’s unfortunate pregnancy. Having never been told about
her father’s secret affair with Rachel—Duane’s mother—Dalva falls in love with Duane, never knowing that he is in fact her half-brother. Duane himself didn’t know either, and such secrets led, not only to Dalva’s misery, but his as well. After sleeping with Dalva, Duane asked John Wesley II to marry her, but in choosing to reveal his son’s just then, the damage done unto Dalva was both complete and irreversible. However, even after this revelation Dalva remained steadfast in her affections for Duane, and presumably he felt the same way. Harrison thereby illustrates how it was not their love affair which was the mistake, rather the keeping of secrets in order to protect the memories of deceased loved ones, in holding back information. Indeed, it is the pain which Dalva associates with her family’s home that pushes her towards nomadism, never settling down in once place for very long. In avoiding her issues, which stem from the mistakes of her forefathers, Dalva ensures that her pain continues, while the natural world acts as her only outlet for solace. Indeed, Patrick Smith points out “Despite the years that have elapsed since their short affair, Duane’s spirit is still very much with Dalva who writes in her journal in *The Road Home* that he ‘has drifted far backward in time but is not the less vivid for being so long dead. I wonder if anyone can stand back from the earth and get a clear look for more than a few moments at a time’” (*True Bones* 101).

Dalva, being raised by men with very similar losses, learns and imbibes their unhealthy coping mechanism, never truly accepting that Duane is gone
from her world. Although, in choosing to return home to Nebraska, she faces her past and comes to terms with the very human failings of the family members who shaped her personality. She comes to understand that they are all dead, and cannot return to her. Her futile depression which she continues as though in their memory does nothing to resolve her sadness. Indeed, Dalva enables their mistakes to haunt her life, but in choosing to move on and accept them, she resurrects herself where each Northridge before her had failed to. She consequently finds redemption not only for herself, but perhaps metaphorically for the entire Northridge line, as all their secrets are now finally in the open.

Perhaps my favorite description of Dalva’s character comes from her grandfather’s journal. He writes:

Lundquist then said her [Dalva’s] behavior frightened him and he prayed she’d become a more ordinary girl. This irritated me and I said we had quite enough of those, whatever they are. I could fairly see his mind clicking off her somewhat troubled genealogy, including myself, my father, her father all wild-eyed for the machineries of war (The Road Home 53).

Lundquist is a de facto member of the Northridge family, and while he is not blood-related, he cares very much for them; an attachment the family returns. He was John Wesley II’s best friend, and even outlives Dalva. Lundquist’s worry adequately explores the root of Dalva’s character—her bloodline. Like
her forefathers, she feels a connection to the Sioux and acts upon it, falling in love with Duane Stone Horse. Thus, Harrison attributes much of Dalva’s orneriness to her ancestry and more specifically her paternal lineage, in contrast to her matrilineal line. Indeed, she is the first female born into the family, and has no brothers. Perhaps it is her femininity which allows her to overcome the shortcomings of her forefathers.

Indeed, Dalva is a fourth-generation Northridge, and after her father is killed in Korea, her grandfather took over his paternal duties, essentially raising Dalva as his own. In nurturing her, John Wesley II ensured the continuation of the Northridge consciousness as he understood it, rather than as it evolved in his own son. In his narrative we get a sense of Dalva as a child through her teenage pregnancy. However, it is from her character that Harrison’s use of bloodlines becomes most apparent. Certainly, she travels a very similar road to those of her forefathers and succumbs to their failures too, allowing memories to haunt her life. While it seems as though it is the Northridge family members who identify closely with the family homestead that also share in the family-consciousness, it can also be concluded that this is not necessarily a good thing. The struggle with ghosts felt acutely by all the men who preceded Dalva has lent her to similar feelings, emotions, and ideologies, and has consequently stalled her own life. Despite this, she alone manages to exorcize the ghosts of dead men, and the ghosts of the dead soldiers they killed, which are hidden in her family’s basement. She not only
succeeds where her grandfather failed, but in having Nelse and giving him up only to be reunited after she frees herself, seems to ensure that the Northridge line continues on after her own demise, but without the shortcomings of her forefathers.

We meet Dalva when she is forty-five, and unlike her grandfather and great-grandfather, she is writing a letter which we read, rather than a journal. Her words are directed to her lost son, whom she gave up for adoption at age fifteen. This is an action which troubles her still, having caused her to run away it seems. Patrick Smith notes of her purpose in writing:

Dalva’s own history begins with an explication of her purpose in writing, not as a journal which would facilitate her own creativity, but as a family history recorded for her son, “in case I never get to see him, and in case something should happen to me...” The writing is cathartic for Dalva, and she underscores her relationships with men whom...all of which, with the exception of her short relationship with Duane, either threaten to destroy her identity or reinforce her independence... (True Bones 103).

Smith cites her words which speak of her understanding of human mortality. Indeed, Dalva gives a family history which is further elaborated upon by her forefather’s narrative, and in writing to her lost son, Harrison emphasizes the immortality inherent to the written word. Should Dalva die, her words would live on in the material paper and ink she left behind, lending information and
peace to her only son should they never meet. In writing, she relieves herself of pain, creating a parallel to the healing effects of the landscape spoken of by Davis. Nevertheless, writing alone also does not allow her to move on, but it helps her on the journey towards redemption. While death is certain, Harrison illustrates that what we leave behind, in the form of art or writing, remains as an imprint of our existence upon this earth.

Dalva represents the ultimate failure of the ideology which was ingrained in her by her forefathers. The majority of her issues spring from her inability to let go of the anger which began in her great-grandfather, and in her own experience is extended to include the deaths of her father and lover. Regardless, what I find especially interesting about Dalva is that she seems to be naive: “...I’m not one to live or subsist on memory, treating it as most do, the past and future as an encapsulated space or nodule we walked into, and then out of, rather than a continuum of the life we have already lived and will live. What was my father, really? Genes provide the fragilest of continuities” (Dalva 7). This statement to her son is in stark contrast to how Dalva really lives, which I would assert, is most honestly in the shadow of ancestral ghosts. These ghosts are alive and well, connected centrally to the land surrounding her Nebraska homestead. She does not see an end between her life and those of her forefathers, rather like her great-grandmother, she expresses an understanding of life’s fluidity, where each life is connected to and builds upon the previous. As though her familial ties run deeper than mere
genetic material, she questions what makes a person. Disregarding the idea of her character as a living imprint of her father’s, she acknowledges how their lives are on the same continuum. The novel thus suggests that a bloodline is made up of more than shared genetic material, rather a shared ideology—analogous to a culture perhaps. Perhaps the Northridge mentality is passed down through the land, through obsessions, and through a common sense of home, which is nurtured by the bloodline. It is both spiritual and complex, as well as material and physical. Genes, which are conceptual, are too simple. Harrison illustrates how they cannot account fully for the fluidity of thought among the Northridge clan, certainly blood is more than DNA—it is our life-force and without it we are no longer living. Blood is where our genes live, only they are invisible, untouchable, almost unreal; so minuscule as to go unnoticed when faced with the totality of what constitutes blood.

Further I believe it is the Northridge family members who place the most emphasis upon the homestead who most imbibe their family consciousness. Almost like a culture, cultivated around the family’s heritage and sense of place; a way of life of consisting of a common set of ideals is passed down generationally. Dalva, like her grandfather, struggles to understand the limits of her mortality. She sees her life as a continuation of her ancestors, whom she is unable to let go of. As if a copy of her grandfather’s example, she allows them to haunt her, wasting her own life. Thus, Harrison illustrates how our lives may be on a continuum, but we have to let the oldest
parts go, moving forward with life. To be hung up on a spirit or memory is useless for the living. The realms are separated by an invisible barrier which cannot be crossed except in death. Yet, Dalva’s greatest mistake also seems to be her greatest success, in that Nelse, while maintaining his bloodline’s traits, seems to escape their least-healthy obsession. Indeed, he represents the power of blood to lend obsessions
Chapter II:

The Nurture of Nature

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I.1 Humans and Nature

Jim Harrison utilizes the natural world, of which all humans are a part, as a particular molder of our individual human natures. Indeed, David R. Pichaske notes on another of Harrison’s works, *Wolf*, that “…Harrison repeatedly suggests that in shaping character, the nurture of nature is inescapable” (*Rooted* 291). I believe this point strongly reverberates in Harrison’s *Dalva* and *The Road Home*. In this chapter I propose that Harrison positions the natural environment, as the focus of a Northridge “spiritual consciousness,” which mirrors a separation between the corporal and spiritual realms. I would argue that Harrison centers on this Northridge “spiritual consciousness” with the landscape, marking it as perhaps the only “true God.”

In his characterizations of the various members of the Northridge family, Harrison seems to provide nature as an essential part of the family’s spiritual identity. The earth gives us life, we live upon its soil until it grants us death and then we become part of it as our physical bodies decay. The Northridge family heritage, as represented in the family journals, is both influenced and pulls upon the imagery and setting of the earth, as something both spiritual and corporal; two separate worlds which coexist upon the land. Indeed, Dalva, as a member of this collective Northridge consciousness, shares in the reverence
for the natural world expressed in both her grandfather and father’s narratives. Her nature—like theirs—is influenced by her bloodline, as well as its connection to the natural world. Harrison makes the natural environment the key to Northridge redemption, a place of setting for their memories, a dwelling place of spirits, and the ultimate spiritual force which drives the Northridge family.

Nature plays a role in the spirituality of almost all the Northridge family members, and unlike the bloodline, this trait is not limited by blood-ancestry. Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack persuasively argue, “For Harrison, establishing a relationship with nature represents the possibility for redemption by perceiving the world around us in a different way, not by retreating into some mystically untouched locale where we are no longer tormented by the limitations of our mortality” (*Embracing the Fall* 4-5). I would further suggest that Harrison positions nature as the tormenter of human notions of mortality. It is not a forgiving or even loving God, perhaps just an honest and brutal one. It is the giver and taker of life, the setting of our memories, and the single greatest reminder of our overall insignificance and mortality.

The narrative of Dalva’s mother, Naomi, holds a spiritual-nature connection, whilst also illustrating the totality of nature’s power. I would consequently argue that Harrison has chosen a sort of “Mother-of-all Nature,” as the ultimate power in this universe. Neither good nor bad, this perhaps equalizing “force,” is most profoundly illustrated in Naomi’s rumination of a
near death experience. Although she believes in a Christian God, Naomi notes on how this scenario had put her “beyond prayer,” illustrating the darker side of nature, as well as its darker power:

I had turned for home at midday on a long Saturday walk, crossing the snow-covered frozen pond which is fed by a dozen springs and from which the creek that runs north toward the Niobrara emerges. Anyway, I slowly and helplessly broke through the ice and floundered there quite wildly...The snowshoes pressed down large sheets of thin ice so I sank quite slowly as I listened to the shrieks and chirrups I was making, my heart pumping spasmodically with fear. A crow flew over with only the briefest downward glance. I had verged on accepting my fate when the water was breast high and my snow-shoes touched bottom. My clearest memory of it after I reached the house was that the experience had been beyond prayer. Naturally I was thankful on the long walk back...but during the event itself I was simply another desperate animal facing very possible death....I spoke to my absent husband, mostly saying, “Your widow nearly joined you,” and he answered “You only have to do that once.” I agreed and said no more though his words hit me deeply because they covered both the bad and good idea of “only once” (*The Road Home* 303-4).
Naomi is in one of the many areas of water which are fed by the Niobrara river. Harrison often connects the transcendental experiences of the Northridge family members to the landscape surrounding their family homestead in northern Nebraska. The Niobrara River is rooted in the Northridge sense of home and place. Like the family homestead where people come and go, branching out and experiencing new places, the Niobara ebbs and flows, giving water to its many tributaries and granting life far outside of its wide channel. Nevertheless, Naomi in falling through the ice and expecting death, sees a crow. Interestingly, this scavenger pays her no attention, a natural sign that Naomi would not become its next meal. She manages to pull herself out of the icy water and survives, acknowledging that in the moment she was facing death she was literally without a prayer. She did not feel closer to the God she professes great faith in, rather she expresses herself as a helpless animal. Mother Nature is injudicious of our feelings; she is just as likely to end our lives as that of a deer; Harrison seems to be suggesting that life is life regardless of species. Our lives are no more important, nor more fragile than that of a dog or deer.

Furthermore, Harrison further introduces a degree of chance, fate, or luck into the equation. Naomi expresses her similarity to a deer she once saw stuck on her father’s fence, noting how it too “twisted itself free” (The Road Home 303), indicating how it, like her, equally could have died. Interestingly, the spirit of her dead husband comforts her, noting how we only die once.
However, this notion perplexes Naomi. As though its singular occurrence in each person’s life places death beyond our comprehension. While Naomi remained alive and within the temporal world, in that moment she came closest to the spiritual one her husband resides, and was able to commune with him. Thereby Harrison, suggests that in death, our spirits remain attached to the earth but transfer over to the other plane. While religion governs all men, Mother Nature governs all forms of life. The dead are silent, except in nature, where like a ghost, or even a figment of the imagination, we can fleetingly sense their presence. Indeed, Harrison illustrates this as the only comfort the dead can offer the living. However, we cannot touch nor see them truly, marking the Northridge family’s chase after them futile; an echo of Albert Camus’ absurdism.

However, I do not think that Harrison would have us understand that our lives are entirely equal to those of an animal, rather we are separated by a sense of spiritual consciousness, which in these novels he connects to the land. He urges us to have more reverence for the lives of all living things, but, particularly through his continued rumination upon dogs and horses. He places an almost Romantic emphasis on their simpler consciousnesses, suggesting that they have closer ties with the natural order of things in comparison to our own experience. Indeed, John Wesley I’s profession was greeted with austerity from the native population, in that his shelter-belts were altering nature’s plan for the trees. Yet, I would also assert that Harrison utilizes the
environment to reflect upon human nature, and how in fighting it we often fail. Nature may be marked by humanity for a while, but it will always revert in time. In one scenario, John Wesley II tells of his journey to locate his first love, Willow, who was taken away to live with relatives because he was half-white.

Quite naturally they hadn’t heard a thing about Willow, but after a few drinks Jake supposed she must be up near Mobridge, South Dakota, with the Standing Rock people. Her mother had a sister up there somewhere, he thought, adding that I should give up my quest before I got “my ass kicked real good.” After dinner we went out to the town dump and watched bears pick over the garbage, a melancholy site indeed (The Road Home 32).

John Wesley, fervent in his quest to find Willow, travels pointlessly to Michigan in hopes of seeing her. It is explained that John Wesley’s father was responsible for her removal, because he chose to raise his son as white, despite his fervent admiration of the Sioux. As such Willow’s family, in an act of reverse-racism, relocate her to the home of some unknown relatives. Interestingly, the natives illuminate their own desire to maintain racial purity; they want to keep their blood pure, as though mixing with the white culture might taint theirs. This concept is exercised here, through Jack’s warning. His harsh words illustrate both a communal desire to protect their heritage from Whites, as well as a common understanding that Willow should be separated from John Wesley II because of his white identity.
The ensuing “melancholy” image of bears surviving on human garbage, I would argue, further alludes to the corruption of the natural world by “white-men.” The white culture offers up its waste to the bears as an easy and tempting meal. The smell lures them from their natural environment, into one that has been tainted by human sewage. There is no sanctity to the land, which once worshipped and cared for, was stolen from families, like Willow’s, by the whites and unceremoniously destroyed or tainted. The sacred nature of the environment within the Native American culture is in stark contrast to our tenacity toward destruction and disposal. Harrison might be justifying how it is somehow against the Native Americans nature as a population to intermix with white culture. The latter has subjugated them for so long, attempting to destroy their way of life through their removal from sacred lands. White civilization has left its negative mark everywhere, altering both the landscape, as well all the life which used to merely exist upon it naturally. With his imprint upon the natural environment, John Wesley I altered the natural growth of the forest for his own benefit. This lasts as a lingering reminder for his son, who builds upon the foundations of both his father’s legacy, as well as the land throughout his own life. Thus, Harrison carefully reminds us that we, like John Wesley, must number ourselves as both the corruptors of both bears, as well as Native Americans. Like John Wesley II, Willow’s parents chose her culture for her, forcing her to leave John Wesley for the sake of its preservation. Willow’s family does not want her to be corrupted by white culture, which like the bears,
destroyed their natural sense of existence; an existence which was connected centrally to the natural environment and its preservation.

For Harrison, the Native American culture, which understands the land both spiritually and corporally, represent a rare coexistence of man and nature. Through an almost spiritual emphasis upon the natural environment as both the giver and sustainer of life, Harrison uses Sioux imagery to illustrate the potential for a more peaceful state between humans and the environment. This is not to say that Native American’s escape human nature. They too have wars and claim tracts of land for themselves, but it is their understanding of their place within the natural world is perhaps to be envied. It is misunderstood and misinterpreted by white culture. Indeed, Jane Tompkins, in her visit to the Plains Indian Museum interestingly notes:

I had expected the Planes Indian Museum would show me how life in nature ought to be lived: not the mindless destruction of nineteenth-century America but an ideal form of communion with animals and the land. What the museum seemed to say instead was that cannibalism was universal. Both colonizer and colonized had had their hands imbrued with blood. The indians lived off animals and had made war against one another. Violence was simply a necessary and inevitable part of life....There was no such thing as the life lived in harmony with nature. It was all bloodshed and killing...But perhaps there was a
way to understand the violence that made it less terrible.

Perhaps if violence was necessary, a part of nature, intended by the universe, then it could be seen as sacramental. Perhaps it was true, what Calvin Martin had said in *Keepers of the Game*: that the Indians had a sacred contract with the animals they killed, and that they respected them as equals and treated their remains with honor and punctilio. If so the remains of animals in the Plains Indian Museum weren’t the same as those left by Buffalo Bill and his friends. They certainly didn’t look the same (*West of Everything* 190-191).

As I mentioned in the previous section of this paper, I believe that Harrison has crafted a means of translating the differences between the Native American and White culture into a way in which we modern white readers can understand. He does not overly glorify the Native existence, rather he makes their existence seem more honest due to their regard for the land and environment as something greater than themselves. They cannot escape the brutal side of human nature, as Tompkins suggests, nor resist the urge to take life. They too fought wars over land, and killed animals for food, but they do so with a certain regard for all forms of life. Tompkins attributes the creation of the National Park system as a means of preserving “big-game” hunting for the American elite—Teddy Roosevelt, Remington and Buffalo Bill. She contrasts this reasoning with the Calvin Martin’s exploration of the Native American
spiritual conscience. Necessity governed the Native American’s actions, rather than gluttonous indulgence, fun, and sport. Teddy Roosevelt started the national parks system so he could kill animals, not for food, rather as a hobby—as though the lives of the animals were somehow less important than his—an almost disgusting, but at the same time common thought really. Harrison addresses this with his incarnation of the Sioux. John Wesley II writes, “These were not Methodist Indians but warriors with a lineage that owed nothing to the white men. We did not live upon the same earth that they did and we flatter ourselves when we think we understand them. To pity these men is to pity the gods” (*The Road Home* 21). John Wesley II, despite being half Sioux, notes his own inability to comprehend the mind of a Lakota Warrior. Certainly, he lives upon this same earth physically, but Harrison emphasizes how his ideological incarnation of the earth is vastly different.

Harrison, like Tompkins, realizes that there universal human traits, such as violence, which no one can escape. Despite this, the Native Americans would seem far more aware of the universality of life—even outside the human realm—which their respect for merits a deeper relationship with the natural world. They are not in perfect harmony, but closer perhaps than we.

Poignantly, Tompkins equalizes all cultures when she concludes:

Therefore, if you’re really, truly interested in not having any more genocide or killing of animals, no matter what else you might do, if you don’t first, or also, come to recognize the violence in
yourself and your own anger and your own destructiveness, whatever else you do won’t work. It isn’t that genocide doesn’t matter. Genocide matters, and it starts at home (West of Everything 203).

Thus, violence is a universal human trait, transcending cultural and physical barriers. I think Harrison would agree that the only way to find peace with yourself and stop destruction is through recognizing the inevitability and futility of fighting nature. Humans must learn to deal with their short-comings, as they are governed by the laws of life just as a bird or fish. Hate, destruction, and anger starts at home, as Harrison most ardently illustrates; and it can be passed down through generations. Consequently, I believe that Harrison, in his incarnation of Dalva, allows her to return home—where everything began—to address her bloodline’s losses, anger, obsessions and aggression. Harnessing the power of the natural world which surrounds her, Harrison points to the natural world as a source for solace and redemption. Indeed, Dalva uncovers the ultimate source of her pain within Mother Nature’s realm, finally allowing her redemption and peace. Indeed, Harrison seems to be urging his reader to seek out the natural world, and become more akin to its will as his incarnation of the only true “god.” It is what grants, sustains, and ends life. In truly attending to it solace perhaps can be found.

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II. II

*Nature as the Ultimate Redeemer*

This is but one half of Harrison’s overall message about the environment. David R. Pichaske writes:

Redemption in nature—through fishing, farming, ranch work, walking, botanical study, even travel or (in the case of redemption through human nature) through sex—is Harrison’s primary theme, as the destruction worked on nature by civilization is his secondary theme. That is because restoration in place is his primary experience: healing from the experiences in New York City, Boston, and Lost Angeles came in returning to Michigan. Writes Harrison, “If you hunt or fish a couple of weeks in a row without reading newspapers or watching television news a certain not altogether deserved grace can reenter your life” (*Rooted* 292).

Indeed, despite being the harborer of all living things, Nature also works as the redeemer of the Northridge family, healing their hurt and pain through its various incarnations. Nature’s ability to both give and take life causes each Northridge to realize their own mortality, as well as the futility of their struggle against it. Yet, most importantly, Harrison designates the natural world as the
catalyst which allows each Northridge to find inner-peace and the ability to move on with their lives. Davis and Womack importantly argue:

At the crux of these losses, Harrison envisions the Northridge family’s continued wonder and amazement at the bounty of the earth and its ability to heal those who truly attend to it...Harrison asserts his belief that because we are part of the created order—organisms whose lives are sustained by the earth and what grows upon it, as well as creatures whose bodies potentially will give back to the earth—we must increase our understanding of our relationship and place in those cycles and systems” (Embracing the Fall 14).

In nature Dalva feels most acutely the presence of her lost loved ones. It is where she escapes to find solace, but it is also where she begins her path toward psychological healing. Like the journals, the natural world brings to mind the spirits of the dead through the memories attached to it by the living. However, there is still a deeper connection made by Harrison.

The nature of the Northridge family consciousness is most obviously felt in the parallels between “obsessions” found in the journals of John Wesley I and II and the narratives of Dalva and Nelse. Their collective nature, which generation after generation continues to grapple with the separation between
morality and death, is passed on through Harrison’s construct of bloodlines in the physical world. Indeed, John Wesley II writes:

We were drinking wine and Paul told me that there was a word in Portuguese called *saudade* that appeared to represent our farm and lives, a homesickness or longing for something vital that had been irretrievably lost and only the dream of it could be recovered as if for a brief period you had loved a woman with every ounce of body and soul and then, quite suddenly, she had died (The Road Home 64).

This idea of longing for lost loved ones is central to understanding Harrison’s characterization of the Northridge family on the whole. John Wesley I longed for Aase, finding solace in his dreams. His son longs for Adelle, and Dalva—the ‘spiritual heir’—feels Duane in the wind or sun. Indeed, I argue, it is in seeking “the dream” of the deceased, which Harrison most acutely attaches to the natural world. It is where the ghosts of loved ones live, hiding from the living. Davis and Womack write “Indelibly linked to such losses...is the love that empowers Dalva and her ancestors and allows them to cope, to survive and, at times to transcend” (Embracing the Fall 14). They choose to live surrounded by ghosts, which at first appear as a coping mechanism kindled by love. Nevertheless, in living in a world haunted by the memories of the dead, each Northridge member metaphorically attempts to greet the dead before their time. In her longing Dalva escapes self-pity, but in refusing to face the
limitations of mortality, she lives a sort of half-life, stuck between two worlds. In chasing after the dead, Dalva becomes lost in her present, unable to move on. Indeed Harrison separates the worlds of the living and dead, but the cross-over comes at nature’s discretion. In uniting spirits and land, he seems to suggest that they dwell among us, in the same environment, but in a different plane. Indeed, once we die, our bodies decay and return to the earth. It is in the same stretch of sea where Dalva and Duane choose to meet their deaths, symbolic of the earth’s power to absorb what it once sustained.

Again, Harrison draws out a transcendental ideal for his readers. Like a “God,” nature can grant life, and dull its pains, or just as easily kill you. Life isn’t fair, but death is equal—it greets us all. Harrison shows how it is impossible to defeat death but he also points out that peace can be found through embracing nature’s oppositional forces. They—and our lives by extension—are merely two parts of a greater cycle. This cycle is like us, it is simultaneously both attached to, and sustained by the land. The Northridge bloodline is importantly linked to the environment. Its consciousness and emphasis upon it’s healing powers flows from generation to generation, sustained by the homestead and their blood.

Interestingly, Harrison utilizes the Sioux heritage of Dalva’s bloodline to symbolize, through blood, Dalva’s pull toward the natural world. William Barillas writes in *The Midwestern Pastoral* that “Harrison creates a version of Catherian pastoral, one modified by the lessons of Native American literature.
and history and motivated by his hope that “these people might clarify why I had spent over forty years wandering around in the natural world” and that “the two cultures had more to offer each other than their respective demons” (192). Similar to what Harrison extols about his personal experience, Dalva’s “obsession” with the natural world acts as both a numbing and stalling agent for her. In her letter addressed to Nelse which opens Dalva, she notes “I began walking at your age because just because the natural world seemed to absorb all the poison in me” (Dalva 51). The metaphorical poison she speaks of stems from her personal losses which have emotionally broken her. Like her forefathers, she dwells upon the memories of the dead, attaching them to the land as her own personal reminder, granting them access to haunt her. However, in going into the environment, Dalva obtains a sense of peace in escaping her problems, and eventually discovers the key to her own redemption.

James L. McClintock writes, “The depressions that affect Dalva’s characters and distract them from meaningful relations with others are not to be taken as entirely negative. They are necessary for engaging the anima or animus” (Dalva: Jim Harrison’s Twin Sister, 322). Dalva’s journey centers around her internal struggle, and consequent external exploration, to come to terms with the major tragedy in her life—the loss of Duane Stone Horse, her half-brother, and the father of her only child, Nelse. Indeed, In becoming closer to nature, she finds solace for her depressions, which she states “…I had
spent too many years just beyond the edge of sadness—barely, in fact—to equate retrieval with cure” (*Dalva* 265). I would suggest that Harrison utilizes the natural landscape of Northern Nebraska to act as Dalva’s, and by extension the whole Northridge family’s, “cure.” He harnesses nature’s duality to do this, forcing Dalva to do as McClintock suggests and live out her depression. In tending to nature she comes to understand the elements which necessitated her current state. Certainly, she acknowledges that she must retrieve herself, which means accepting herself and her life. As McClintock asserted, it is as though in escaping the human world, she takes on a more natural form. She becomes attuned to her own humanity and mortality as part of something far greater than herself, through existing in the most natural state.

Through representing nature as a binary force, Harrison enables Dalva to heal. He utilizes it as a source of great beauty as well as dark power. It is the source of both Dalva’s tonic and the reminder of her agony. She writes:

> The trouble with western Nebraska is that there’s only one way to get most places. Any other route would have added hours to the trip to Buffalo Gap. This means you have to put up with what you thought about on the road on other trips, as if these previous thoughts were hanging on the phone poles and power lines—even sexual fantasies from the distant past can lie in wait along creek bottoms and ditches, the village limits of no longer
occupied crossroads, the name announcing nothing but itself
and the memory of what you were doing and thinking other times
you passed this way. But the susceptibility depends on drift, and
I had begun not to drift, aware that I had been acting out effects
rather than causing anything new. It was as if I had made my
decision, gradual as it was, to come home, and I was hoping that
would supplant all other considerations...*(Dalva 292).*

The natural world is the most basic foundation of setting—whether as a basis
for things constructed by man, or in its own right. However, this passage
illustrates an interesting connection between memories, ghosts and the
environment. Harrison personifies Dalva’s memories with symbolic ghostly
apparitions, acutely attaching them to the land. The remnants of past regrets,
silly actions, or loved ones, hang upon a location encapsulated in her memory
and writing. Nevertheless, in Dalva’s voice at this moment I think there is a
twinge of fear and irritation, as if her memories are about to jump out from a
ditch or erupt from a creek. At the same time, she has reverence for her past,
as if it awaits her return to a location but cannot follow her. Importantly, she
forces these memories—these particular ghosts—from her thoughts. Harrison
decidedly marks them as the result of secondary action, the side-effects of
Dalva’s major losses in life. These ghosts cannot follow her as others do; they
are not as important, nor troublesome. They have not affected her life in the
same way, as the memories of others have.
Furthermore, Harrison emphasizes the spiritual experience of his characters, as deepest in the places connected most fervently to their family consciousness, but also those most connected with the natural world which surrounds it. The landscape is connected to spirituality, but also memory. Indeed, as William Barillas writes:

While significant locations sometimes disturb Dalva, they also reassure her and ease her sorrows. One such place is “the upper end of a small box canyon” across the Niobrara River from her grandfather’s ranch. She first visited the place as a teenager, accompanied by her lover Duane, a half-Sioux boy who was trying to recover his heritage. Duane “announced that this was a holy place” and to “prove it he found several arrowheads, and sat on the flat rock for a full hour in silence, facing the east.” The following year, after Duane’s disappearance and the adoption of their child, Dalva returned to the spot, where she sat for a day meditating and watching animals. “Mostly,” she remembers, “I had a very long and intensely restful “nothing.” I had the odd sensation that I was understanding the earth. This is all very simple-minded and I mention it only because I still do much the same thing when troubled” (*The Midwestern Pastoral* 193-4).

For the Northridge family, the places of most significance spiritually, are most often connected to their homestead and its surrounding landscape. Certainly, I
believe Harrison uses the journals to create parallels, increasing our understanding of the Northridge connection to nature. Nevertheless, the past they explore is very much alive and connected to Dalva’s current feelings and troubles. In a similar moment to the one discussed above, Dalva, while traveling through the Oglala and Buffalo Gap National Grasslands, visits Fort Robinson which she explains was the Sioux equivalent of the Warsaw Ghetto for the Jews:

My anger gave me a leaden foot and I passed three campers with Iowa licenses, swerving way off the left shoulder to avoid an oncoming car...I was partially mired in a the ditch so I put it in four-wheel drive and fishtailed along until I made it back up to the shoulder. My heart war racing and I couldn’t catch my breath so I stopped and got out of the car. I walked as fast as I could manage out into the ocean of grass and sat down hidden from the road. All that had just happened disappeared into the density of green with abruptness: ‘What am I trying to do is trade in a dead lover for a live son. I’ll throw in a dead father with the dead lover and their souls I have kept in the basement perhaps. Even if I don’t get to see the son I have to let the others go...Why didn’t I do this long ago? I’m forty-five and there’s still a weeping girl in my stomach. I’m still in the arms of dead men—first Father then Duane (Dalva 293).
The anger she experiences ties her to the lived experiences of her grandfather and father, who have passed down, through their blood, their sympathetic feelings for the Sioux. While she was able to avoid the memories which haunted the power-lines and ditches earlier, she now—in an inherited anger—succumbs the ghostly memories which haunt her mind the most: the ghosts of her father and Duane. Her father shared in her consciousness as a Northridge, a member of her bloodline. Duane was her greatest love and loss, suggesting the natural pull of two people together in love, as unpredictable and powerful a force as nature itself. Thus, Harrison categorizes love as part of nature, something which cannot be defeated by human interference; a part of our most primitive instincts. Dalva’s inability to let go of these two men symbolizes the power of both blood and nature to become one—through Nelse’s birth—but also to be the two influences which most strongly shape a person. In this moment, Dalva realizes they are the two memories, or ghosts, which have haunted her most throughout her life. Only in letting these dead men go, can she fully overcome their hold upon her life, and move on.

Interestingly, John Wesley II, in a moment of anger very similar to that which preceded Dalva’s revelation of this “weeping girl,” expresses similar frustration with his life being defined by ghosts. He states the following about his own life:

I looked around at the forested shelterbelts that surrounded me, perhaps further then I could walk at my age, and felt a flash of
anger that I had been so immovably stuck at the location, bound and tied here by not totally familiar parts of soul and mind. And this is improperly rational for the surge of pleasure and dread I felt for this place at that moment. It was a maddening struggle with ghosts, the ghosts of others, and the ghosts of my former selves that could not leave for more than a few months....(*The Road Home* 74).

Dalva’s grandfather looks around and sees his father’s work, his shelterbelts, which altered the landscape long after his death. John Wesley II feels as though he was bound to the location by these ghosts, and suffocated by not entirely foreign bits “of soul and mind.” These ghosts also attach themselves and John Wesley to the land; and he, like Dalva, seems to realize he must let go of the futile obsessions which his father passed down to him. As with the spirits who haunted Dalva, John Wesley II, as though on purpose, blames himself for being involved in the cultivation of ghosts, which he left for Dalva to grapple with. Like Dalva’s “weeping girl,” John Wesley clings to the ghosts of his former selves, his lost family and friends, thereby ensuring the continuation of the family’s obsession with mortality into the next generation.

Nevertheless, for Dalva, Ft. Robinson comes to represent the crux of her spiritual transformation. In this moment her familial anger is very much alive, further illustrating the presence of her family consciousness. In her panic she exits into the untainted environment, running away from the road and
abandoning her car. Following this, Harrison has “an ocean of grass” provide clarity for her where the road and steering wheel could not. Realizing she must let go of the pain of losing her father and lover, she finally comprehends the need to alleviate herself from her family’s obsession with ghosts. Even if she cannot find her son, she must free herself from their memory and live. Death is certain for all, and allowing the spirits of the dead to live on merely defies the most natural progression of life. Yet, in releasing the anger, longing, and frustration that were passed down by her bloodline; she realizes, and finally understands what she must do in order to redeem herself. Thus, Harrison has nature present her with the necessary seclusion and setting, allowing her to face the limitations of mortality, and find peace with herself and nature.

Indeed, Dalva's pain, like that of her grandfather and great-grandfather, insured the longevity of these newly realized psychological demons. Harrison crafts futile longing for a deceased loved one as a universal experience among the Northridges—from Aase and John Wesley I, even to Naomi and her husband whose spirit she still speaks to. However, in choosing to move on Dalva sets herself apart from her family, ending the cycle of futile longing, and enabling her to find happiness. Consequently, the redemption of both herself, as well as for the past and future of her family line, depends upon her actions. Indeed, as I mentioned before, her grandfather notes “We think of life as a solid, and are haunted when time tells us its fluid” (The Road Home 13). The issues of her family are now hers to face and In resolving her issues,
accepting both the role of nature and blood in defining her life, she seems to redeem her bloodline, bringing peace to all those who died before her.

This notion is importantly showcased by Harrison in the narrative of Dalva’s grandfather. He too struggles with his inner-ghosts, nearly getting himself “killed” by them, but comes to an interesting conclusion while also building upon the experience of his father. With the help of a Sioux friend named Smith, John Wesley II explains:

I gave him the shortened story of my long walk and memory of Adelle, ending up in the lean-to in the storm with a frantic heart but curled up closely with the four dogs for warmth. For his own peculiar reasons as a wicasan wanka, medicine man, he was animated by the story, saying “There’s worse things than getting yourself killed by a ghost.” (The Road Home 93).

Like Dalva, who longs after Duane Stone Horse long after his death, John Wesley in his old age, and nearing death, longs for Adelle—his wife’s sister, who loved him but killed herself when they were forced apart. He tells Smith, whose appearance now signals the last year of John Wesley’s life, of a peculiar experience, which mirrors Dalva’s earlier revelation. On a walk he is reminded of Adelle, becoming lost in his thoughts until it is too late to escape a storm. Having forgotten to take his pill, his heart begins to clog leading to a minor heart attack. He then notes of his precarious position that “It did not, for some reason, seem an unlikely place to die” (88). John Wesley’s life begins to
flash before his eyes in a rather dismal tone. Nevertheless Harrison markedly has him find the experience somewhat amusing. John Wesley II has finally realized that his life is its possible end. No longer angry, he seems to accept that his life is what as it was, and surrounded by his four dogs for warmth, he lives, having achieved clarity through his somewhat unsettling experience at the brutal hands of nature. John Wesley II, in finding peace here, represents a departure from his hypocritical father, while leading Dalva in the appropriate direction to end her now inherited struggle. Indeed, upon seeing Smith and realizing his life is nearing its end, John Wesley II feels relieved, and is finally able to forgive himself for being an angry and miserable human being.

Interestingly Harrison links dogs to John Wesley II's survival as well, and often has him remunerate upon their existence as being somewhat greater, as though incarnated as the perfect amalgam of human interference and the natural world. In his discussions on our environment, his almost romantic emphasis upon dogs seems to envy their lack of consciousness as separate from the natural world. Unlike dogs, Humans have imbibed ideas which destroy the very land we live upon. This natural tendency towards self-destruction is mirrored in both war, as well as our imprint upon the earth. We have separated ourselves from the animal kingdom, as well as our natural environment, through our own concept of consciousness. Perhaps Harrison emphasizes dogs because they are influenced by humanity, but also maintain their instinct. Indeed, Lundquist rather humorously explains: “if all dogs were
left in free concourse, soon enough all dogs would be medium-sized and brown” (*The Road Home* 53). Certainly, breeds of dogs are only the will of man, and never cultivated by the dogs themselves. Here, Harrison draws upon the ability of dogs to be influenced by humans whilst also maintaining their individual instincts and urges. His dogs save John Wesley from the storm, acting as his savior, suggesting that their loyalty is part of their most primitive nature, specifically adapting them to living alongside human life. Maybe Smith found John Wesley II’s experience so interesting because John Wesley was nearly killed by his infatuation with a ghost, but then saved by an animal—something at peace with the limitations of its existence. John Wesley, like Dalva, inevitably defies the nature of life in his obsession with the deceased Adelle, whom he can never be reunited with in his present situation among the living, bringing out Nature’s ire, and he too survives.

On a similar note, we consistently find throughout Harrison’s work that the environment is not always friendly in its methods of granting clarity. This reinforces his use of duality, while further hinting at nature’s total power over all living creatures. Indeed, the force of nature is neither wholly good nor wholly bad; both light and dark. I would argue, that Harrison suggests how in nearly losing our mortality, we become most astounded and aware of its presence. John Wesley II’s near-death experience at a far earlier stage in his life explores this concept more fully:
Making our way up the sun-dazzled, icy canyon a forehoof broke through the spring’s ice into soft mush and the horse became a bucking bronco. After a few radical leaps and twirls I was thrown clear, cracking my head against a rock and twisting my left arm. As I lost consciousness I remember thinking that at least it wasn’t my sketching arm... I must have been passed out for at least an hour... I sat up slowly and noticed a group of crows were watching me from up on the canyon’s ledge. I squawked at them and they squawked back which lifted my spirits... I whistled, quite happy for the time being to be alive... *(The Road Home 55-56)*

Harrison explores the duality of nature here again, showing how it has the power to quell John Wesley II’s disappointments, but through its unforgiving ability to end his life. In leaving the constraints of human civilization, Harrison has the Northridge family members individually take these journeys as spiritual pilgrimages. John Wesley II’s near death experience alludes to the idea that all that a man makes and is, can be destroyed quite simply by fate, disaster, or chance—the powers of nature. Our environment is not all beauty, and in experiencing Mother Nature’s wrath, John Wesley II finds happiness from his life being spared. It’s as if Harrison is showing how in the grand scheme of things, human life is relatively insignificant and fragile compared to the earth. In coming close to death, Harrison allows John Wesley II to find himself grateful for the experiences of his life yet to come.
Interestingly, after her revelation at Ft. Robinson, Dalva does not immediately let go of the ghosts, rather she must face them in the place most representative of their linear generational dynasty, the homestead built by John Wesley I. Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack write:

Indeed, both Dalva and The Road Home explore the intergenerational “root systems” of the Northridge Family, as well as their spiritual attachment to this place on earth, both dig into the soil that brings forth the fruit of a family history so tenuous that many of its secrets have been buried in a room dug deep beneath the Northridge home, the bodies of Sioux warriors and the remains of murdered cavalry officers entombed but never forgotten (Embracing the Fall 14).

Like the dead bodies hidden in her basement, the history of the Northridge family on the whole haunts Dalva until she faces the totality of her family’s secrets, the root of her family’s line of anger and shortcomings. Consequently, she ventures down into the literal foundation of both her family and its home, finding fully clothed skeletons of several soldiers her great-grandfather killed. It is in this moment when she fully accepts her own mortality, letting go of her ghosts as well as those which haunted her bloodline from the beginning. Certainly, her grandfather writes “A fully dressed skeleton is a poignant reminder of mortality and I had enough of that in my living body” (The Road
Home 57), yet he too avoided burying the skeletons, seeing them as his father’s legacy.

Thus it is Dalva who is able to end the cycle of hate and futile anger which was passed onto her, aligning herself and her family with the natural world and its laws governing life and death. As though releasing the “trap” which John Wesley speaks of in his narrative, Dalva discovers tranquility for both herself and metaphorically for her whole family. Furthermore, Harrison describes the moment as an almost of religious revelation, which he links through allusion, specifically to her experience leaving Ft. Robinson:

I sat there for a full hour in the state that perhaps approached a prayer without words, not thinking about anything except what I was looking at. My father and Duane seemed to be with me, then went away as did the weeping girl I had felt in my chest. She went out an upstairs window where she had sat watching the summer morning, the descent of the moon. Then I heard a cry or a moan far off behind me (Dalva 298).

The metaphor of a weeping girl in her chest is finally exorcized here; Dalva lets her go. She feels her father and Duane with her as well, releasing them too. She finally achieves self-acceptance and contentment, through aligning herself with the natural order of things. She now accepts the the progression from life to death, as separate worlds to which we are all respectively confined. Like her grandfather and great-grandfather she had to learn of her own
mortality in order to move on, both spiritually and physically. Only after this
does she meet her son, Nelse, who poetically is waiting for her, symbolic of
her choice to let go and move on with life within the mortal world. Harrison
consequently has her play the savior of the Northridge line both spiritually and
physically. Having released the ghosts which haunted them, Nelse reveals
himself to Dalva, having poetically awaited her return to the homestead. His
return suggests the opportunity for a renewal of the Northridge bloodline, with
an altered consciousness attached to it. Thus, Harrison provides nature as the
key which brought Dalva both redemption and the ensuing happiness and
tranquility.
Chapter Three:  
*Journals and Writing*

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III.1  
*Journals as Read: A Family History*

Dalva’s exit into nature mirrors that of her forefathers, but she is as Patrick Smith asserts, their “spiritual heir” who manages to exorcize the family, and herself, from the ghosts hidden in their memories and their past. These memories are most acutely attached to land. But they are also preserved through Harrison’s creation of the family journals. Through them, he emphasizes the immortality inherent to the written word, and in reading the consciousness they preserve, Dalva is able to acquaint herself with the spirits of her ancestors, even those who died long before she was born. The journals, which are both written and read, inseparably combine nature and blood in most profound ways. They present us both with what holds Dalva back, but also saves her and her family. In reading the words of her forefather’s, Dalva ensures that their memories remain alive, and attached to the land surrounding her homestead. However, the journals also present her with a generationally consistent ideology of the earth as a source of spiritual healing, thereby illustrating the foremost catalyst that allows for Dalva’s redemption.
The writings of her forefathers seem to urge Dalva to seek the solace of the environment to find solace for her bloodline at last.

In creating these family journals, Harrison presents us with a history by which we can contextualize and understand Dalva’s current journey towards wholeness. In reading and partaking in journal writing, Dalva continues her family’s history into its third generation, while maintaining and understanding her identity as a Northridge. Patrick Smith notes:

For Dalva, history determines the ways her family views itself...To give oneself over to the history of the family is paramount, through forfeiting the soul to the events of the past rather than keeping them in abeyance comes at a price. Even more so than Ruth in her fight to reconcile her past with the present and future, Dalva is a heroic figure in society that aggrandizes a paucity of character (True Bones 103).

Indeed, the journals seem to preserve the history and heritage which Dalva understands to be the foundation for her sense of being. Her great-grandfather’s interactions with the Sioux and US government seem to define her, yet his ideology is only preserved within his journals, which she importantly safeguards from prying eyes. In living with the past as though it were her own, Dalva applies herself to the struggles which her grandfather and great-grandfather never managed to resolve, most importantly illustrated through her inability to accept her own mortality.
However, the history of the Northridge family, as well as its ghosts, are very much attached to the Nebraska landscape which surrounds their family home, and which acts as the setting for their memories and lives. Harrison thus presents the natural environment as both the source most closely connected with ghosts, but also as the final source for Dalva’s redemption. The history of the family, and their connection—both through blood and obsession—to the Sioux is also reinforced through the parallels between the different narratives. Starting with the journals of John Wesley I we come to understand the depth of their ties to the Native American peoples who once thrived and were later desecrated by the US Government. In journal writing this sense of consciousness and understanding is continued and emphasized as important for the family identity, whilst also being ensured to continue through the bloodline, through reading. The side-effect of this is however, that the anger and resentment for white culture first embodied by John Wesley I is continued, forcing those he forced to imbibe white culture to be angry seemingly at themselves for the misdeeds long in the past. Indeed, Dalva’s revelation of her “weeping girl” is ushered in by a visit to Ft. Robinson, where she finally realizes that the anger she feels is not only futile, but not her own. Dalva values the accounts of her forefathers so much because of the history of her consciousness which they record and explain, but she forgets to live within her own present. Thus the journals not only preserve her family’s sense of consciousness, but also represent the very thing which holds them back. In
living in the past, and inside the worlds of her patrilineal ancestors, Dalva forgets that the world their narratives preserve is not the same one she lives in. Like the natural world, which provides both peace and pain, the journals both hold back Dalva but also encourage her towards her final source of redemption with their emphasis on nature.

Importantly, Harrison presents the journals as a way of escaping the confines of mortality. The thoughts and words they preserve remain on this earth long after the bodies of each individual family member decays, acting as a sort of living memory, ghost, or even gravestone. Indeed, Patrick Smith notes, “Dalva’s own history begins with an explication of her purpose in writing, not as a journal that would facilitate her own creativity, but as a family history recorded for her son, “in case I never get to see him, and in case something should happen to me, what I have written would tell him about his mother.” (True Bones 103). The journals manage to circumvent the finality of death through the words written by a once-living person. Their thoughts and experiences seem to be alive again in the action of reading, preserving their memory through text. Their record of travels and journeys, which explore the various facets of the joint Northridge consciousness, also emphasize the ability of nature to be the ultimate healer of all emotional wounds. They showcase the roots of the Northridge family’s struggle to come to terms with their own mortality, which passed down, forced the struggles of Dalva to mirror
those of her forefathers. Indeed, Nelse, who pointedly escapes this troubling issue, indicates that it is only through nurturing, which such a trait continues.

Consequently, the journals act as the definer of the Northridge sense of consciousness, illustrating for the more current generation their history. In fact Dalva’s own thoughts and actions regarding the journals imbibe a certain aggressive sense of protection which echo Tompkins. Patrick Smith writes:

The power of highly personal written communication (the journals themselves, which are important for pointing up the occasional failure of language) and unspoken communication and their link to the natural world that is so important in the lives of the Northridge family manifests itself as a shorthand through which the family communicates to each other and to the initiated who read the journals:...(True Bones 108).

The journals, which Harrison crafts, allow his reader to understand the fluidity between the lives of each generation of Northridge, and how the obsessions of Northridge I are very much alive in his great-granddaughter. In reading the journals of her forefathers, Dalva as if communing with their spirits, is able to transcend time and death, while also being affected by their knowledge. She also writes her own journals, detailing her various thoughts and experiences, which are really a continuation of those belonging to her ancestors.

At the same time, the subtle differences between the various accounts also illustrate the family’s evolution from its patriarch, as well as the
shortcomings of each Northridge which followed in his footsteps. The loss of Christian belief, and its replacement by Sioux naturalism mirrors the alteration of the previously white-bloodline to include John Wesley II’s mother, Small Bird (aka Margaret Northridge). Consequently, the journals act as both a tool for solidifying the collective mentality of the Northridge family, but further ensure its continuation. Patrick Smith writes:

The writing is also an identity forming exercise. Dalva’s role as the keeper of the family’s history requires a vision and balance that none of the other character’s exhibits; in protecting the integrity of her family’s history, she makes space for new experiences by writing out the old ones, a process that makes linear time irrelevant for her. Michael observes that “Dalva is punctual on a nominal level but never seems to know the date or year of anything within the nearest decade. She says she sees events, the past itself, in terms of ‘clumps’ of years, which is a blithe evasion indeed. I told her that the study of history can’t afford such messiness.” (True Bones 98).

Harrison presents a conundrum through the journals. Indeed, Dalva, while physically living in the present, is very much tied to the past which is preserved within her family’s journals. As their protector, she places great importance upon them and the history which they preserve. She is unable to identify herself as separate from them. Harrison symbolizes this in her cloistering of
them, and further in her inability to talk about time as something occurring as a constant.

Harrison enables the journals to act as a point of confluence, where the influence of both blood and nature can be seen on a larger, trans-generational scale. They act as a family history, as well as an almost a sacred doctrine which must be safe-guarded from those who would not fully understand their meaning or have no right to think they could possibly understand it. Jane Tompkins addresses this conservationist idea in her thoughts about museums:

What are museums keeping safe for us, after all? What is it that we wish so much to preserve? The things we put in safekeeping, in our safe-deposit boxes under lock and key, are always in some way intended finally as safeguards for our own existence...the objects in museums preserve for us a source of life from which we need to nourish ourselves when the resources that would normally supply us have run dry....We go and look at the objects in the glass cases and at the paintings on the wall, as if by standing there we could absorb into ourselves some of the energy that flowed once through the bodies of the live things represented. A museum, rather than being, as we normally think of it, the civilized of places, a place most distant from our savage selves, actually caters to the urge to absorb the life of another into one’s own life (*West of Everything* 188).
In a similar way, the Northridge journals are safeguarded by the family. They are not published, nor kept in a museum. Rather, Dalva has separated and organized them into three trunks, which are locked and guarded pointedly in a safety deposit box of the local bank.

In reading them, Dalva imbibes a similar struggle against mortality which troubled previous Northridge generations. Thereby, Harrison provides the journals as perhaps the greatest source which holds her back from experiencing life. She cannot see herself as separate from the ideology of her deceased ancestors, and more importantly she refuses to. In fact, she imbibes a sort of protective aggressiveness which echo’s Tompkins assertion. Angrily directed towards Michael, an academic who wishes to study her great-grandfather’s journals, Dalva writes:

Michael spoke of the uses of history at length, larding his talk with enough of the anecdotal to keep the lay-man (sic!) interested. I spotted the gist well before he got to it: to wit, I was in defiance of a grand tradition of scholarship by not turning over the goods to a lover but virtual stranger. I gulped my Meursault and was guilty of a barely controlled explosion: history in his terms was utterly self-serving and no one had a right to know what he was looking for. Everyone was dead, and everything that followed in political terms was the equivalent of spitting on the memory of the dead. I said, You seem to think that if you don’t tell someone, nothing has
happened. I won't allow you to paw over these people for historical novelty or whatever. You will put a dress on your own designing on them like a circus poodle (Dalva 37).

It would seem as though Dalva, as the ideological heir of her Great-grandfather, feels as though no one other than her family can truly understand the totality of his spirit which is preserved in his journals. She mistrusts Michael’s intentions, accusing him of self-interest, despite his obvious academic motivations. As a religious text, Dalva fears misinterpretation, feeling it would somehow damage her family's past. She understands only on a nominal level that Northridge I is in fact dead, as the idea utilizing his words for a secondary action enrages her. As though Michael were a propagandist for white America, seeking to propagate some skewed message to the masses, she equates his—an outsider’s—request to read her great-grandfather’s journals and write about them, as a desecration of his grave—as though he couldn’t possibly comprehend their meaning. The heritage which Northridge I left in his journals, which Dalva has so deeply ingrained herself in, blinds her to the value the works could hold for other people. Indeed, Harrison has passed down to Dalva her great-grandfather’s suspicion and anger towards the white-community; allowing it to transcend into a time where it is perhaps no longer relevant.

John Wesley I’s journals, as the subject of inquiry here, exemplify the basis of Dalva’s identity as something inherited. Dalva’s suspicion and
consequent irrational anger illustrate the extent to which she has attached herself to the ideology of a dead man. Harrison presents the journals as the remaining vestiges of a patriarch, whose text, like a Holy Bible of Northridge consciousness, Dalva must keep cloistered, away from the outside world. Dalva’s memory of her grandfather is so close to her sense of self, that she understands his writing as part of her being—as the foundational root of her identity. Although she has never met this ancestor, Harrison importantly presents her only contact with his spirit through his writing, emphasizing the ability of written words to both transcend time, but also to affect the present ideology of those who choose to do so. Indeed, Dalva acts as though allowing Michael to study Northridge’s journals would destroy some aspect of herself, rather than present to the academic world a man who saw the world differently, fighting against his countrymen for those he loved. Certainly, her entirely negative attitude illustrates how deeply she identifies with the past, and how tightly its hold upon her prevents her from moving on with her own life—a power Harrison most acutely attaches to journal writing.

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III.II

*Michael*

However, Michael is allowed access to the journals of John Wesley I, and enabled to do so by Dalva. Harrison writes the second section of *Dalva* in
his perspective, as an academic, and outsider, looking in. His narrative is described by Jonathan Yardley:

Michael’s presence in the novel is at once amusing and distracting. He narrates the middle section—Dalva herself narrates the first and last—and the book runs a bit off course while he is at center stage. In part this is because his voice is so different than Dalva’s that for a hundred pages we forget what she sounds like, and in part because his research into the Northridge family’s past yields more for him (a discovery that “life was indeed larger and much more awesome than I presumed it to be”) than it does for the reader. Obviously Harrison means to contrast the charming but self-destructive Michael with the doughtily self-reliant Northridges; the point is made, but it does little enhance our understanding of Dalva... (Contemporary Literary Criticism 163).

Indeed, Michael’s narrative is markedly different than Dalva’s, but I disagree with Yardley in that Michael greatly enhances our understanding of Dalva, as he is a foil for her character. His many varied differences from the Northridge line. He is unable to control his own life, making bad decisions and promises he cannot keep. However, Harrison also presents him as a man who is perhaps more like his readers, and is then able to communicate with us on a more personal level. Certainly Michael is not accustomed to the lives led by
the Northridges, finding himself lost in many of the places which Dalva finds sacred in the landscape.

Michael is able to look at the journals for their academic merit, seeing things which Dalva either missed or took many years to understand because she placed too much emotion and emphasis upon the past which they record. Through Michael’s character, Harrison would seem to present an argument for the importance of the written word as read by outsiders. The journals, as read and interpreted by Michael, are looked at for their academic qualities, rather than as an indicator of identity—as Dalva sees them. Michael is able to present a new level of understanding for the reader, in that he is not blinded by his own connection to them emotionally. Interestingly, Dalva notes:

There is another consideration that took years to occur to me though Michael noticed it immediately: the journals tended to form Northridge’s conscious which became a good deal more idiosyncratic as the years passed. By 1890 he had spent a full twenty-five years “in the field” as missionaries call it, and his sense of accomplishment had become as brutalized as the landscape itself. His secretive business dealings had always provided a semi-schizoid overtone, a restrained be-hedging, the orphan always mindful of his future nest. As an obvious instance, the business documents show that he met with his nursery agents who had been summoned to Rapid City in August of
1889. One of these, a Swede from Illinois, stayed on for three
days with Northridge and received the design and instructions for
the building of the current homestead. For reasons of his
inherent secrecy the entire carpentry crew was secured in
Galesburg, Illinois, and they worked with little or no contact with
the local Nebraska population.

Rather than presenting us with the whole of John Wesley I’s journals, Harrison
has provided his readers with an academic who, almost certainly, decodes
their meaning on a greater scale. Dalva, who invests much of herself in
reading the narrative of her great-grandfather, is blinded to much of the
concrete actions which made up and defined her family’s patriarch. Michael on
the other hand, being about as different from Dalva and her ancestors as
humanly possible, is able to see immediately many of the things which have
created her own sense of identity, and its very foundation in her bloodline. Her
great-grandfather in his later years, sensing the loss with his battle on behalf
of the Sioux, concentrated himself on making a homestead, from which his
legacy, and ideology prospered. His son, in anger, continued building upon this
foundation despite ardently despising his father. However, what Michael
reveals, is that the Northridge family legacy, as well as Dalva’s current
struggle, was planned for by its patriarch. John Wesley I wanted his ideology,
his anger, and his prosperity to be passed on through his bloodline, his
memory thereby living on after death in the personalities of his bloodline. He
gave it a physical manifestation, through the homestead, as well as its psychological foundation. His anger, and continued presence upon the land, was ensured to continue on through his building plans. His desire to build a homestead, was ushered in through his anger, and desire that no one in his family forget the plight which he fought for and failed.

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The experiences and thoughts of Dalva’s forefathers saved within the journals present her with her family’s common set of ideals, ensuring the continuation of a legacy first began by her great-grandfather. Through their emphasis upon the natural world, the journals seem to re-enforce their existence and thoughts as part of her family’s fluid history, ensuring their existence as physical embodiments of the ghosts which haunt and follow Dalva still. Dalva, in reading her family’s journals, is confronted by the heavy influence of Sioux culture upon both her great-grandfather, as well as her grandfather. Even after their deaths, their writing enables her to connect with them spiritually. The journals present her both with physical incarnations of the spirits which haunt her and hold her back, but they also ensure that she imbibes the singular ideal which allows her to find redemption for them all.

Thus, in this way Harrison presents the journals as a central conundrum, where they both stall Dalva’s life, as well as point her in the very direction which ensures she finds redemption for not only herself, but her entire bloodline. Her narrative works as the last and final chapter of a pan-
generational struggle within the Northridge family to not only come to terms with their own mortality, but to find inner-peace within the natural world which surrounds them. Upon releasing the ghosts of her forefathers from her homestead's basement, Dalva enables her family to continue in the future with a fresh start—free from the anger, resentment, and ghosts of the past which haunted both her and the land. With the return of her son Nelse, Harrison creates a symbolic outlet by which the Northridge family is able to regenerate itself. Nelse, having not been raised within the Northridge ideology, escapes John Wesley I’s plight against mortality. Dalva, as our heroine, ensures that her legacy brings about peace for her family, which is now able to continue into the future with Nelse and his children.

Through the journals, Harrison creates a past, present, and future, through which his readers can contextualize Dalva’s struggle as part of a longer, fluid, and inter-connected familial plight, motivated through their shared consciousness. She, as the “spiritual-heir” to their troubled ways, becomes the savior of them all, in reading and writing the final chapter of her bloodline’s plight against mortality. She finally discovers and accepts that which her forefathers could not—that all life is governed by the natural world, and death is merely a part of its great cycle. Death comes when its time is due, and can never be avoided by any of us as it is the great equalizer. To struggle against it, through longing for ghosts of lost loved ones is futile and damaging. Nevertheless, both the spiritual and corporal realms exist upon this earth,
which births, bores, and sustains us, until the time comes for us to return to it again. These two planes are separated by an invisible line which can only be crossed once—in death, when mortality ends, but a record—in writing—may be left behind. Thus Harrison illustrates how the written word can act as both a comfort and source of advice, which can alter the futures of those who read them, and imbibe their messages. Furthermore, he warns of the dangers of becoming too obsessed with the past—which like any obsession—ought to be tempered. We each have our own life to live on this earth, and our lives should not be wasted searching for answers from those who are no longer among us.

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