

Dalva (Contemporary Classics (Washington Square Press))

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From her home on the California coast, Dalva hears the broad silence of the Nebraska prairie where she was born and longs for the son she gave up for adoption years before. Beautiful, fearless, tormented, at forty-five she has lived a life of lovers and adventures. Now, Dalva begins a journey that will take her back to the bosom of her family, to the half-Sioux lover of her youth, and to a pioneering great-grandfather whose journals recount the bloody annihilation of the Plains Indians. On the way, she discovers a story that stretches from East to West, from the Civil War to Wounded Knee and Vietnam -- and finds the balm to heal her wild and wounded soul.

Jim Harrison is the author of three volumes of novellas, *Legends of the Fall*, *The Woman Lit by Fireflies*, and *Julip*; seven novels, *Wolf*, *A Good Day to Die*, *Farmer*, *Warlock*, *Sundog*, *Dalva*, and *The Road Home*; seven collections of poetry; and a collection of nonfiction, *Just Before Dark*. He has been awarded a National Endowment for the Arts grant and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He lives in northern Michigan and Arizona. From DALVA Santa Monica -- April 7, 1986, 4:00 A.M.

It was today -- rather yesterday I think -- that he told me it was important not to accept life as a brutal approximation. I said people don't talk like that in this neighborhood. The fly that flies around me now in the dark is every fly that ever flew around me. I am on the couch, and when I awoke I thought I heard voices down by the river, a branch of the Niobrara River where with my sister I was baptized in a white dress. A boy yelled water snake and the preacher said get thee out of here snake and we all laughed. The snake drifted off in the current and the singing began. There are no rivers around here. Turning on the lamp above the couch I see he's not here either. I can hear a car screeching on the coast highway even at this hour. There are always cars. The girl in the green bathing suit was hit seven times before the last car tossed her in a ditch. The autopsy said California speedball. Her suit was the color of winter wheat as I remember it, almost unnaturally green when the snow melted. It was so nice to have another color on earth other than brown grass, white snow, and black trees. Now between the cars I hear the ocean and the breeze lifts the pale-blue curtains with a sea odor the same as my skin. I'm quite happy though I may have to move after all these years, seven, actually. There is an abrasion, almost like a slight burn, from his mustache on my thigh. He asked if I wanted him to shave his mustache and I said You'd be lost without it. That made him somewhat angry as if his vanity depended solely on something so fragile as a mustache. Of course he wasn't listening to what I said but to all of his imagined resonances of what I said. When I laughed he became angrier and marched very dramatically around the room in his jockey shorts which were baggy in the rear. It was somehow warm and amusing but when he tried to grab my shoulders and shake me I told him to go back to his hotel and screw himself in front of the mirror until he felt he wanted to actually be with me again. So he left.

I thought I was writing this to my 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. My friend of last evening said, What if he isn't worth the effort? That hadn't occurred to me. I don't know where he is and I have never seen him except for a moment after his birth. I can't go to him because I'm not sure he knows I exist. Perhaps his adoptive parents never told him he was adopted. This is all less sentimental than it is unfinished business, a longing to know someone I have no particular right to know. But to know this son would complete the

freedom men of my acquaintance seem to consider their birthright. And then, perhaps, my son is looking for me?

My name is Dalva. This is a rather strange name for someone from the upper Midwest but the explanation is simple. My father's older brother was a victim of rebellion and adventure magazines, and was at odd times a merchant seaman, a prospector for gold and precious metals, and finally a geologist. Late in the Great Depression Paul was somewhere in the interior of Brazil from which he returned, after squandering most of his earnings in Rio, to the farm with some presents including a 78 rpm record of the sambas of that period. One of the sambas -- in Portuguese of course -- was "Estrella Dalva," or "Morning Star," and my parents loved the song. Naomi, my mother, told me that on warm summer evenings she and my father would put the record on the Victrola and dance up and down the big front porch of the farmhouse. My uncle Paul had taught them what he said was the samba before he disappeared again.

I just now thought that you can only meet a man at the level of his intentions. When my father and mother met and courted in the thirties the intentions were clear; they were both from fourth-generation farm families and the point was to marry and to continue traditions that had made their predecessors reasonably happy. This is not to say that they were simple-minded people in bib overalls and flour-sack gingham dress. There were several thousand acres of corn and wheat, Herefords, hogs, even a small slaughterhouse that at one time supplied prime beef to certain restaurants in faraway Chicago, Saint Louis, and Kansas City. From scrapbooks Mother has stored there are records of their trips to Chicago, New Orleans, Miami, and once to New York City which was my mother's favorite. From World War II, when my father was a fighter pilot stationed in England, there is a photo of him with three gentlemen in front of the Hereford Registry in Hereford, England. He is in a jaunty hat and looks rather like one of the early photos of Howard Hughes. As Naomi would say, or prate, "Blood will tell," and his unstable streak came out in his passion for airplanes. He was not called up but reenlisted for the Korean War because he wanted to learn to fly jet fighters. So between the ages of five and nine I knew my father, and I have still not exhausted the memories of those years. Beryl Markham said that when she stopped in Tunis on the way back to Europe in her small plane she met a prostitute who wanted to go home, but didn't know where home was because she had been taken from her parents at age seven. She only knew that in her homeland there were tall trees and it was occasionally cold.

But 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.

On the farm we had a small plane called a Stinson Voyager. We'd go for Sunday rides when the weather was right. If I had been sick and out of school my father would tell me I'd feel better or be well by the time we landed and I believed him. I liked seeing the water birds on sandbars in the Missouri River, the way they flew up in clouds, then landed again when our immense shadow passed.

What upsets me is the terrifying and inconsolable bitterness of life; at close range in certain friends, and particularly in my sister who regards her mid-life as an arctic prison though she lives in Tucson. She's never been given much to going out of doors. She lives in a fine home with a gray-and-white interior backed up against the Catalinas though she has never walked in these mountains. I thought of her yesterday at daylight when I walked the beach. Someone had spray-painted the word MENACE on the benches in Palisades Park, and on the steps going down to the beach, and somehow on a highway overpass. I stopped counting at twenty. Fortunately most lunatics don't have the vigor of Charles Manson. I was interested in someone who spent a whole night spray-painting MENACE virtually in the face of the Pacific Ocean. Perhaps this vandal is the flip side of my sister. It is somewhat a mystery to me how the rich can feel so utterly fatigued and victimized. She drifts back and forth without specific density across the line of what she thinks is the unbearable present, but then she surprised me this March, during Easter, when my mother and I visited. I asked her how it was possible to live so thoroughly without nouns. At that moment she was waiting for the single drink she allowed herself each day at six.

"Why don't you save up for six days and have seven drinks on Sunday?" Naomi asked. My mother does not stand back from any of the forms life takes. "You could have yourself a party."

But my sister just sat there looking at the martini she would make last an hour, thinking about nouns as if on the lip of speaking the sentence my mother and I knew wouldn't come. Ruth went to the piano and played a Mozart exercise my mother favored which also served as a signal for me to begin fixing dinner.

"Nouns are a burden to people these days," Mother said. "Maybe they always were. Tell me about your latest fellow."

"Michael is in the history department at Stanford. He heard about our journals years ago and last fall in Nebraska traced me back to Santa Monica. He's about twenty pounds overweight and self-important. He tends to lecture at you and might talk about the history of food over dinner, the history of rain when it's raining. He's an expert at everything awful that ever happened in the history of the world. He's brilliant without being very conscious. He's a bad lover but I like being around him."

"I think he sounds just wonderful. I've always preferred men to be a little goofy. If they're trying to be men in the movies they get tiresome. I had this little fling with an ornithologist because I liked the way he climbed trees, waded up creeks, or into stock ponds to take photos. My mother is sixty-five.

We hadn't heard the music stop and Ruth was right behind us at the kitchen door. Grandfather, who was half Oglala Sioux, called her Shy Bird Who Flies Away. Though Ruth is only one-eighth Sioux she had assumed certain Sioux qualities as she grew older, a kind of stillness that she forced to surround her.

"I think you're right about nouns. Think of 'car,' 'house,' piano,' 'food,' 'priest.'" We were prepared for the rush of words that came not more than once a day when we visited. "We have always been lapsed Methodists but I met this priest and we talk about love and death, art and God, which are all nouns of a sort I believe. He's not a priest in a church but works with a charity for Indians and I know he sees me partly as a contributor. He loves to drive the car Ted sent me for Christmas." Ted is her husband from whom she had been separated for fifteen years, the father of her son, a man who at twenty-eight discovered he was conclusively a homosexual. Ruth was born four years before Father died in Korea, losing the two central men in her life to quirks of history and sexuality. Ted and Ruth met at the Eastman School of Music where they intended to become famous in the music world, she as a pianist and he as a composer. Instead, she raised her child w...

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