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## Blood as a Binding Agent in Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing*

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# BLOOD AS A BINDING AGENT IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *THE CROSSING*

by

ERIN MARTIN

(Under the Direction of Olivia Carr Edenfield)

## ABSTRACT

In Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing*, one of the most important aspects of blood is the way it connects Billy Parham to his family and the world around him. Billy's actions are driven largely by his desire to maintain his moral code and his connections to nature and his maternal grandmother. His link to nature begins with an encounter with a wolf pack and continues with an attempt to return a she-wolf to her homeland. The connection to his grandmother provides him with the means to do so when he crosses the border from New Mexico into Mexico. Billy's ability to speak Spanish is a result of his relationship with his grandmother, and it allows him to make three individual journeys into Mexico. In addition to language, Billy also understands enough of the culture to be able to interact with many of the people he meets, and he hears many stories that he would not know if he did not speak Spanish. Part of Billy's reason for going into Mexico is an effort to keep true to his promises, and the final two trips into Mexico are the result of trying to regain some element of his family, whether through his search for the family horses or the quest to retrieve his brother's body. Despite repeated failures, he remains faithful to his code, much in the same way that Plato tells the myth of Er, in which the only option once actions have been made is to stay true to oneself.

INDEX WORDS: Cormac McCarthy, *The Crossing*, Billy Parham, Blood, Wolf, She-wolf, Language, Spanish, Duality, Connection

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## DEDICATION

For Chris. You are the one who has been with me every step of this process, from choosing a thesis topic, to reading drafts, and just being here for support. I could not have done this without you.

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## INTRODUCTION

When Cormac McCarthy released *All the Pretty Horses* in 1992, the novel won the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, and it brought McCarthy to the attention of the public. Published two years later, the second book of the Border Trilogy, *The Crossing*, met with mixed reviews. One of the issues *The Crossing* seems to have faced in initial reviews is having to compete with the expectations created by *All the Pretty Horses*. While McCarthy's prose in *The Crossing* meets with good comments, with the novel even being described as a “miracle in prose” (1) by Robert Hass in his review for *The New York Times*, the novel is also described by other critics as lacking with regard to accessibility.

Hass describes how the “book teems with action, and with spectacle and surprise” (4). Jean Richey remarks that the novel tells the the “story of how Billy comes to respect the wolf and to recognize and love the freedom of its natural state” (140). This notion of Billy's respect for the she-wolf and understanding of her place in nature seems to guide Billy to a deeper connection with nature. In addition, Richey calls the story “beautiful and heart-rending” (140). Hass states that, particularly when it comes to the first section of the novel dealing with Billy and the she-wolf, “the power and delight of the book derive from the fact that [McCarthy] seems incapable of writing a boring sentence” (4).

However, the praise Hass gives the novel is not shared by all. In fact, Brooke Allen claims that the “critic in the *New York Times Book Review* gave *The Crossing* an unqualified rave, comparing McCarthy not unfavorably with Shakespeare and Cervantes” (24). Allen's stance is that “an inaccessible novel is a flawed novel” (24). She asserts that “McCarthy gave in to the temptation to editorialize” (24). The stories told to Billy are said to be “entirely at stylistic odds with the rest of the book, which retained much of the honesty of its predecessor” (Allen 24). Allen views the problem that faces *The Crossing* as a result of the way McCarthy “repeatedly

undermines his magnificent voice with a self-indulgent grandiloquence that breaks the frame in the most egregious way” (25). Allen may have a point that there are stylistic differences between the various narrators in the novel, but rather than those differences making the novel hard to understand, it almost seems to be more like the conversations people have in daily life. The telling of the stories with their own style seems to be more true to the style in some ways than it otherwise might if every encounter in the story is told through the same narrative voice.

Allen is not alone in her opinion of *The Crossing*. Daphne Merkin asserts, “There are no real characters in *The Crossing* other than the landscape and the author's mind--both are stark, even pitiless--and in this sense it is less accessible than *All the Pretty Horses*” (35). While certain elements of the novel are said to be beautiful, and other parts less so, the association with and comparison of *The Crossing* with its prequel seems to turn people away from the novel. Eric Olsen describes way in which the “second volume, so much like the first in the particulars of theme, tone, location, and protagonist, is closer to a parody than to a fully matured sequel” (313). Olsen claims that “Parnam [sic] simply does not grow, which, it is said, is evidence that something is not alive. McCarthy's stoical, almost fatalistic solution to the problem of moral and natural evil thus lacks the witness of genuine experience” (315). The lack of growth Olsen mentions seems to contradict certain aspects of the story such as blood and the way that blood flows between the characters.<sup>1</sup>

Richey proposes that “McCarthy is obsessed with blood as a symbol of life—both for the living and, in violence, as part of dying” (141). In this sense, blood serves the purpose of connecting Billy with other creatures. For instance, in addition to the she-wolf as Billy's link to nature, Billy giving his own blood in exchange for taking the blood of a hawk displays a deeper unity to nature than through one she-wolf. Richey uses the scene with the hawk to claim the novel focuses “on loss and survival as part of living” (141). While part of the novel focuses on

loss and survival, to say that the entire novel revolves around that idea seems to be ignoring some of the obvious aspects about life as they are presented in the novel. Merkin asserts that *The Crossing* “begins as a love story between a boy and his wolf, a soul communion between human and animal that is all the more strong for being unspoken” (33). Similarly, the section of the novel detailing Billy's journey with the she-wolf is described by Anne Dingus and Robert Draper as “surely the writer's most fully realized narrative. And the book's agonizing final chapters, recounting Billy's empty-hearted crossing back to America, show McCarthy at his best, ultimately redeeming the book” (70). One aspect of the final chapters that Dingus and Draper mention is the way in which Billy's journey is told. Alan Noble explains that “for the narrator, the being of *The Crossing* is not in the accurate representation of the socially and culturally constituted voice of each character, but in the act of telling” (239). Whether in the story of the novel or in the structure of its writing, the important part is that the story is told. Similar to the way Allen views the stories as differing stylistically from the general narrative, Noble also notices the difference. For Noble, however, the shifting narration tends to create what he refers to as a “double-voiced narrative” (245) in which the storyteller's words are not completely translated by the overall narrator, but the framework in which the story is told speaks to the presence of said narrator.

In addition to the physical elements of blood, language is also connected to blood, particularly for Billy through his maternal grandmother. Perhaps equally as important as the blood found in the text is the way in which language is used throughout the novel to reveal the meaning behind Billy's encounters with the people he meets both above and below the border. Ross Feld posits “when a Mexican wants to tell The Truth, only then does McCarthy downshift, and solemnly, eloquently, let us have the wisdom in English. It is Wisdom that these books have been convened to honor” (12). The structure of the novel and its bleak portrayal of the Southwest

may have been a negative mark against the novel for some readers, but the positive aspects of the text, such as the connection between Billy and the she-wolf or the way language presents wisdom, show that *The Crossing*, while unexpected and admittedly difficult offers insights into connectivity exemplified by blood ties and language.

Blood plays a significant role by both physically giving life and also by providing the means for many connections throughout life. Blood connects Billy Parham with both nature and his family in Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing* (1994). The bonds that blood creates between Billy and those two aspects of his life lead to the development of his character over the course of the novel from someone with a naïve perception of the way the world operates to someone who has lost that naivete, though not his desire to remain true to himself and his promises. Billy's connection to the she-wolf and nature opens the story, and it also demonstrates his dedication to a moral code. This striving for what is right carries through in the link provided by blood between Billy and his family. Through his family, Billy gains language skills he would not otherwise have, and he also develops his method of conducting himself such that keeping his word allows him to do what he thinks is right. Blood provides a connection between Billy, nature, and his family, and that link aids his growth into an adult who knows what it means to maintain his moral code.

BILLY PARHAM'S CONNECTION TO NATURE THROUGH BLOOD IN CORMAC  
MCCARTHY'S *THE CROSSING*

Blood serves to connect people to their families, but in *The Crossing*, the link formed through blood encompasses not just family, but also nature and the divine. As in Billy's case, blood also has the ability to connect people to things completely outside of themselves. Billy Parham finds himself on a journey that leads him far from home when he encounters a she-wolf who was, herself, far from home at the beginning of the novel. For Billy, nature seems to serve as one connection between himself and the divine. Blood begins, strengthens, and ultimately solidifies the connection between Billy and the she-wolf, and nature as a whole, throughout Book I of *The Crossing* and into the later books of the novel as Billy begins the journey from being a boy to becoming a man.

Wolves, as they are seen in *The Crossing*, carry with them an element of the mystical or divine. For instance, at the start of the novel, Billy has an experience in which he goes out at night to watch a wolf pack, but his encounter with the wolves is not a normal occurrence. During the encounter, the antelope are described “as if they burned with some inner fire and the wolves twisted and turned and leapt in a silence such that they seemed of another world entire” (4). As though the wolves' presence might be perceived as concrete, instead of seeing how the wolves leave Billy's sight, the wolves ran until “they disappeared” (4). As a spectator to the natural event of the hunt, Billy is drawn in by the image he sees before him. That this scene carries the mark of a divine experience is corroborated by two similar theories. As Petra Mundik explains, the fire which the antelope seem to possess is “reminiscent of the spark of the divine, which according to Gnostic theology is a fragment of pure spirit trapped within the corporeality of all living things” (9). Both Billy and the antelope exist on the same physical plane at this moment, but it almost seems as though Billy recognizes some aspect of divinity that comes through the antelopes'

deeper connection with nature untainted by human society. Edwin T. Arnold describes, similarly, that philosopher Jacob Boehme follows a different “concept of the matrix, that of the primal condition or source” (222) under which, instead of the matrix being used to trap the she-wolf, the matrix serves as the source that gives life to all things. Arnold explains that “all forms of nature, animate and inanimate, human and nonhuman, come from this source and because this source comes from God, then all forms hold an aspect of God, a divinity, within” (222). That divine spark in Gnosticism, created through the interconnected nature of all living things, would also be in Billy, which could be why he is present to see the night hunt or why he responds to the night hunt in the way that he does.

The antelope are not the only creatures to appear otherworldly, however, as the wolves also have “a transcendent quality, [such that they] appear as though they belong to 'another world' or some sacred realm” (Mundik 9). This idea of the wolves as being from some other plane of existence is explained by Karen Jones: “From [Billy's] cultural perspective, wolves possessed an appealing otherworldliness, their energy sourced directly from the wild. Billy appeared mesmerized by the graceful animals” while they hunted their prey (224). One of the first connections the book reveals between Billy and the world around him shows the way in which Billy, at the age of eight, finds himself in the presence of the divinity of nature. The natural world, as opposed to the man-made order imposed on it, functions with such a sacred quality that Billy seems to be drawn to the same divine quality he senses when he meets the she-wolf.

Some element of Billy's connection to the wolves seems to be present even before he shares such an intimate moment with them before the scene with the wolves and the antelope. While he may not have some innate link to the wolves, he does know where the wolves will be hunting when he goes out to watch them, as is evidenced by his presence in the particular spot

from which he watches the seven wolves “pas[s] within twenty feet of where he lay” (4). Billy's connection to the wolves occurs in the moment when the wolves stop and “look at him. He did not breathe. They did not breathe. They stood” (4). This shared moment of existence marks the beginning of the union between himself and wolves, and the joint experience between Billy and the wolves as they pass so close to him serves, as Mundik explains, to enhance “Billy's affinity with the wolves [which] is established by the mutual acceptance and silent acknowledgment of each other's presence,” (10). The wolves could have simply passed by him, or they could have been aggressive toward him, but instead, there is simply a moment when the boy and the wolves exist together. Billy's sense of familiarity with the wolf pack seems to come partially from the way in which he “could feel the presence of their knowing that was electric in the air” (4). Although Mundik claims that the connection between Billy and the wolf pack comes from joint acceptance of the other, Billy is said to be able to feel the fact that they knew of his presence.

He knows that he has been brought into the pack in the way that he could feel them. In addition to the way in which Billy sees the pack as a unit working together, Billy's own family, and in particular Boyd, seem to aid Billy's understanding of what it means to work for the good of the pack, and thus he has some idea of what it means to be part of a pack before he met the wolf pack. He seems to be accepted by the wolf pack in that moment of acknowledgment that passes between the boy and the wolves, and he through his understanding of his relationship to his family with regard to the wolf pack, he seems to be more closely bonded to the wolves and nature as a whole than he was before.

Billy's knowledge of nature at such a young age seems to be deeper than the other people he knew then, for he does not mention that intimate moment to anyone else. Mundik suggests that a possible reason for Billy's decision to tell no one about the wolf pack is that the scene is described in such a way that “the wolf pack is imbued with a supernatural quality that cannot be

explained by a literal, realistic interpretation of the experience” (10). While this idea may not strictly be Gnostic in its presentation, it does show the way in which the wolf pack appeared to be something more than earthly. Thus, the unexplainable nature of the event in which Billy partakes may influence whether Billy even wishes to share that moment with anyone else. Billy perhaps keeps his experience secret as part of an unwillingness to explain what occurred, or his silence could stem from some inability to share the event. Mundik agrees that whether this decision to tell no one else the experience “is because of a failure of language or a desire to keep the vision a secret is not clear” (10). The acknowledgment the wolves give Billy when they stop is something unique and given the mystical qualities of the scene, Mundik claims that “Billy could never speak of the vision even if he wanted to because a mystical experience is impossible to convey in words and can only be experienced directly” (10). The events surrounding the connection formed between Billy and the wolf pack are not able to be told to someone else because the connection is more than the event. The true bond between Billy and the wolf pack could only be shared through experiencing the story, and since Billy would not be able to share more than the telling of his connection to the wolves with anyone else, he seems to be unable to convey verbally his encounter.

While he shares that encounter with no one else, the opportunity presents itself for continuation and deepening of that earlier connection to the wolves and nature as a whole. Certainly, Billy remembers that earlier time with the wolves while he is hunting the she-wolf that has wandered out of Mexico. In the scene in which he talks with Don Arnulfo, Don Arnulfo says “The wolf is like the copo de nieve,” for it is possible to “catch the snowflake but when you look in your hand, you don't have it no more” (46). As Mundik explains, part of what he “is talking about is the impossibility of truly knowing something through a study of its outward form, because the very essence of the thing—spirit—cannot be studied or apprehended empirically”



(15). The advice Billy receives from Don Arnulfo to unite his being with that of the wolf stems from the way in which Don Arnulfo “insists that the sacred ceremonies of the exoteric religion, such as the drinking of the blood of Christ during Holy Communion, are utterly meaningless and empty if they are performed without a mystical apprehension of what they actually represent” (Mundik 16). Don Arnulfo's idea that “men drink the blood of God, yet they do not understand the seriousness of what they do” (45) explains the separation between men and the animals, like the wolves, because men have lost their balance with the rest of nature in their attempt to be placed above nature. The connection is present, particularly for Billy, but it is not quite as strong as it is for those who know the balance of nature and are part of that balance. Humans often take what they see as a higher position in the natural order as license to do as they please, and that imbalance leads them to think they know more than they do. They treat the lives of other creatures more lightly than they probably should. One of the repeated questions that arises when Billy meets people with the she-wolf appears when he meets the rancher. Even after the rancher notices that the she-wolf is pregnant, and is preparing to bring new life into the world, his assumption to what Billy plans to do with her is that Billy would “collect the bounty. Seel the hide” (60). The lives of the she-wolf and her pups registers as nothing more than the value of her hide.

Jason Ambrosiano describes the way in which “when the blood of God loses authority to the ceremony it blesses[,] that ceremony decays into custom.” In such a manner, the physical actions cease to carry the sacred meaning they are meant to possess. This is true for the she-wolf as well, for the “true wolf, its spirit, cannot be known through possession of its body” (84). Living creatures, under this explanation, possess more than just their physical form. In a similar manner to the spark of the divine that exists in all living beings, the animals have the same kind of inner force that motivates them in the same way that it motivates humans. While the

connection between Billy and nature may not fit within the views of a particular branch of Christianity, Christianity serves as the framework from which Billy can discuss such matters of divinity with those to whom he talks. Billy does not appear to have the words to describe the intangible qualities he finds in nature through something general like Gnosticism, so the novel as presented through Billy's perspective uses Christian language because that is what Billy knows.

With regard to the she-wolf, Billy “begins to envision the wolf's connection to the spiritual, to God, as being located in its blood” (Ambrosiano 84). Billy recognizes that a link exists between people, animals, and the divine, and in the same way that blood provides the source of life, blood serves to connect the physical and the divine. This is solidified in the final scene of Part I when he carries the she-wolf's dead body into the mountains to bury her among her own kind. As Billy waits for dawn, he sits next to the she-wolf and “put[s] his hand upon her bloodied forehead and closed his own eyes [so] that he could see her running in the mountains, running in the starlight,” much like when he saw the wolf pack at the beginning of the novel hunting under the night sky, and when he lifts “her stiff head out of the leaves and held it or he reached to hold what cannot be held, what already ran among the mountains at once terrible and of a great beauty” (127). Even though the she-wolf was physically dead, Billy imagines her spirit not stopped by death and contained by her lifeless body. Instead, he imagines her spirit running freely through the mountains.

Before he leaves behind his father and brother in order to search for the she-wolf alone, Billy attempts to perceive the world as the she-wolf does. One of the ways Billy tries to understand the she-wolf's point of view, and in doing so to understand what he is hunting, is through wondering if “the living blood with which [the wolf] slaked its throat [had] a different taste to the thick iron tincture of his own. Or to the blood of God” (52). People may know the taste of their own blood, but Billy's initial consideration of the taste of blood of the natural

creatures upon which the wolf fed shows his desire for an interconnectedness between himself and the she-wolf. Billy's closeness to nature leads him to wonder if blood could provide a solid, harmonic link between man and nature. The mention of God's blood in this same thought gives credibility to the idea that for Billy, nature and the divine are linked as he initially wonders if the blood the wolf ingests tastes like his, but then he wonders if it tastes like the blood of God, as though blood could truly be a link between the natural world and the divine. The first thought would show that he and nature are of the same blood, literally, and it would explain in part why he tries to take the wolf back to Mexico rather than leaving her to what he sees as a bleaker fate. The second option of the blood tasting like the blood of God transforms Billy's time in the wilderness to a time of spiritual growth in which he becomes closer to the wolf and nature as representative of the divine.

The pleasant thoughts of the wolf as a part of the divine arise in the text, but as S.K. Robisch points out, the wolf has many good and bad qualities associated with it. Robisch declares that "McCarthy has given us opportunities to romanticize and mystify, the wolf, but he has also loaded his narrative with the blood and darkness that ensue when we seize those opportunities—that is, when we trap the wolf" (52). In some ways, Robisch's assertion that the darkness shown with regard to the she-wolf's more violent nature would seem to speak against the idea that she holds the same spark of the divine that humans and more docile creatures possess, but the balance provided through the presentation of predators and prey in nature shows that the divine can be present even in destruction, for life gives way to death, which then gives rise to new life, and the cycle repeats. The wolf is seen in many situations to be symbolic of the natural world and the divinity found within that world, but Robisch takes the stance that the rest of the novel, and particularly for the wolf, is a result of man's desire to capture the wolf to suit his own desires. Rather than reflecting the good intentions with which

Billy chose to return the she-wolf to Mexico, the Robish focuses on the destructive aspect of his decision.

When Billy finds the wolf with “white bone show[ing] in the bloody wound between the jaws of the trap” (52), her bloody paw seems to encourage Billy's decision to do what he can to protect the wolf even if it means going to Mexico without informing anyone of his plan to do so. Wallis Sanborn describes the way in which the capture and killing of the wolves in the Southwest serves “as a metaphor for man's ceaseless quest to control the natural world,” (31), and he continues by saying that the novel “demonstrates man's urge to control the natural world in a series of human-driven indignities the she-wolf is forced to undergo prior to her death. Ironically, all of these indignities occur only because Billy attempts to help the she-wolf” (33). While the she-wolf suffers those indignities after being caught by Billy, his motivation does not operate on the notion of controlling the world around him. Instead of being driven to control the world, the she-wolf's injured paw, injured by one of his traps no less, seems to speak to the caring, nurturing side of Billy. Just as the decision to trap the she-wolf is in an effort to protect his family, the choice to return the she-wolf is Billy's way of trying to protect her. While there are elements of control in the capture of the she-wolf, like the muzzle, the she-wolf began the journey with Billy with a better chance of survival than if Billy's father had a say in the matter.

In the same way Billy remains true to the course of action he has chosen for the she-wolf, he also stays faithful to his decisions with later in the novel with regard to his brother. Billy's initial decision to trap the she-wolf is not something he specifically chooses out of malice toward the she-wolf so much as it is for the protection of his family and neighbors. He follows what his father tells him to do, but his lack of direct malice can be seen by the way in which, while he traps her by stretching her out, “he wince[s] to see her bloody foreleg in the trap, but there is no help for it” (54). He first sees her with a bloody paw, and then he also understands that she is in

pain as he winces on seeing her struggling. His sympathy for the injured wolf and his knowledge that if he does anything other than take the wolf back to the Sierra de la Madera, she will not meet a good fate at the hands of others, lead to his decision to take it upon himself to return her to her home. Just as he feels a connection to the wolf pack, he seems to feel a little bit of her pain, and that bond between himself and the she-wolf seems to aid him in making his decision to try to save her. While she ultimately does not survive until the end of the journey, Billy does everything in his power to defend the wolf from anyone or anything that attempts to harm her. Even though people do not comprehend his reasons for traveling with a ferocious wolf, Jones explains that they struggled with how to “comprehend the enigma of the wolf, yet they all recognized the animal as her own creation, an independent spirit, unclassifiable” (225). Just as those he encounters recognize something special about Billy, they also notice the uniqueness of the wolf.

When Billy meets the rancher at the beginning of his journey with the she-wolf, the rancher tries to convince Billy to abandon the idea of returning the she-wolf to Mexico, even asking “what would you take for her cash money?” (70). Even though the rancher is uncomfortable with the Billy's decision, during the surgery on the she-wolf's paw, he held the she-wolf “by the rope and twisted the rope in his fist,” (71). The way in which the rancher holds tightly to the rope suggests the nervousness he felt in that he was trying to control the she-wolf so that she did not harm anyone. He does not seem to have quite the same connection to nature that Billy has, in that Billy's decision to leash and muzzle the she-wolf came as a result of trying to save her rather than control her, but the rancher still allows the she-wolf to be healed, which is a step closer to saving than controlling. It seems as though the rancher may have gathered some of the respect for nature, even the potentially dangerous elements of nature, from the care with which Billy treats the she-wolf. The rancher also remarks before Billy departs that he “thought

about keeping you here. Send for your daddy.” yet he lets Billy leave with the she-wolf sporting one of his collars. He senses something special in Billy's determination even if he may think it comes from naiveté.

Billy assumes his role as her guardian, and even when repeatedly asked about giving up the wolf, he explains that the wolf is merely entrusted to him, and with that reasoning, he does not allow anyone to dissuade him from protecting her. He even keeps her paw bandaged while it heals, and he does what he can to keep her healthy, such as giving her food and water even though his prolonged exposure to her increases his risk of her turning against him. For instance, when Billy meets the old woman and the girl, he is told “that if the perra should have her puppies in the night, she should lick them. [The girl] said that he should not leave her muzzled at night because who could say how near her time was?” (87). Billy's initial decision to muzzle the she-wolf for his safety is the same reason he continues to keep her muzzled, but with the she-wolf getting closer to giving birth to her pups, it would be better to unmuzzle her for her safety and the safety of her pups. The decision to remove the muzzle would put him in danger of being attacked. During the time she is in his care, he keeps her with him as long as he can with the ultimate hope that she would then be with her own kind, her own blood, when he releases her into the mountains.

The bond between the boy and the wolf strengthens over the course of Book I, and as Arnold states, during the events of Book I, as he travels with the she-wolf through Mexico, “Billy Parham grows more aware of this other world. He has always had a sense of kinship with this aspect of nature, as indicated by his early dreams and visionary experiences. But he has retained his separation” from that world (220). However, when the wolf is forced to fight for her life, Billy risks everything to save her once more. The separation between Billy and the natural world seems to dissolve through the connection he has with the wolf. As he tries to free her from

the fighting pit, he unhooks the chain from her collar and “[draws] the bloody and slobbering head to his side as he [stands]” (117). The way in which Billy brings the she-wolf’s head toward him seems, in some ways, to foreshadow the scene where Billy touches her head before he buries her and imagines her running free. This moment of physical connection between the she-wolf’s bloody head and Billy also lends strength to her death, as Vince Brewton describes it, as the a symbolic, “central act of violence [which] is the single event itself toward which the narrative proceeds” (122). Each of Billy’s trips to Mexico includes such an event, and the she-wolf’s death serves as the first, and it is also the first attempt which reveals the way in which “McCarthy leaves the hero’s quests either unresolved or settled in failure,” and “good does not clearly triumph” (135-36). In this case, with the she-wolf, Billy makes a decision to kill her to save her from more pain, but in doing so he gives up the ability to perform his initial task of returning her alive to the mountains. This is one of the last moments before he shoots the wolf to keep her from being brutally killed by fighting with vicious Airedales. The relationship that began with a bloody paw ends with the last time he has physical contact with her while she is alive as he brings her bloody head toward him as an act of assurance that he will do what he can to fulfill the promise he made to return her to her home.

Billy has no chance to get her away from the pit while she still lives, but after he kills the she-wolf, he trades the family rifle for her body. The decision to trade the rifle for the she-wolf’s body shows a connection between Billy’s choice to do what he thinks is morally right and how it relates to his decisions regarding both his family and the she-wolf. Through the act of giving up his family’s rifle, he takes responsibility for shedding the she-wolf’s blood and does what is needed to keep his promise to her even after her death. His trading the rifle seems to be a way for him to both make whatever amends he can to the she-wolf, and the rifle links the she-wolf and Billy’s family. The rifle belongs to his family, but Billy also seems to view the rifle as belonging,

of a fashion, to the she-wolf in that the rifle's value serves as equal to that of the she-wolf, and he considers the rifle to be a worthwhile trade in order to be able keep his promise to the she-wolf. Even if he cannot return her alive to the mountains, he still understands that she is his responsibility. As he carries her body away, her "slow blood drip[s] in his tracks" while he walks out of the pit (124). Here begins the mingling of the boy and the wolf as her blood fills his footsteps as he prepares to continue the journey he began when he first found her. Even though she cannot make footprints of her own, she is present in his. He places her on the horse so that her wrapped body is in front of him, and as he rides away, the wolf's blood "soaked through the sheeting and through his breeches and he put his hand to his leg and tasted the blood which tasted no different than his own" (125).<sup>2</sup> The earlier event in which he tried to think about the world in the same way the wolf did and wondered about the taste of blood foreshadowed the latter moment where he tastes her blood only to find that it tastes the same as his. The thought about the taste of blood connecting all living things, worldly and divine, which began Billy's journey with the she-wolf ends with tasting of her blood. If his blood and her blood taste the same, it seems likely that, when combined with his pondering of the blood of God, he may have found the truth about the link between his physical world and the divine.

Through the connection strengthened by tasting the wolf's blood, "Billy shares in the meaning, the presence absent in language, which he partially perceives through the wolf's eyes" (Ambrosiano 84-85). While language is the primary way people communicate, there is a deeper form of sharing that allows for connections such as what Billy witnesses when he looks into the eyes of the she-wolf and sees that when she was "gone at last with [the wolves'] dignity back into their origins there would perhaps be other fires and other witnesses and other worlds otherwise beheld. But they would not be this one" (74). Billy's recognizes the singular nature of the she-wolf, and he understands that once she is gone, there will never be another like her. Just as the



she-wolf is unique in her existence, so too are the wolves irreplaceable once they have been removed from the region and the world irreplaceable once it is gone. This idea solidifies the way in which her individuality is always present, but ultimately Billy learns that he and the she-wolf are united by the same blood when he tastes her blood and learns it tastes the same as his. That similarity of blood suggests that he was branded by the wolf pack earlier in the story because of that unity between the boy and the wolves.

Another aspect of the story in which blood serves to connect Billy with the natural world appears at the beginning of Book II in which Billy chooses to shoot a hawk with a makeshift bow and arrow. Billy rides in search of the mortally wounded hawk, but “he never [finds] it. He found a single drop of blood that had dried on the rocks and darkened in the wind and nothing more” (129). In response to this drop of blood, Billy “made a cut in the heel of his hand with his knife and watched the slow blood dropping on the stone” (130). Sanborn describes this attack on the hawk as action Billy makes “because he has the opportunity to do so. He is not killing for sustenance, nor is he killing in self-defense. He appears to be killing for spite and for control” (*Animals* 89). Similar to the way in which Sanborn views trapping the wolf as a metaphor for man's desire for control, “the hawk is a victim of the ultimate human control, control through killing” and in that moment he states that “an honorable character commits a dishonorable act” (*Animals* 89). Rather than suggesting what Billy's offering of blood may mean, Sanborn stops his discussion of that scene with the idea that “Billy, infuriated at himself, acts out in impulse and in rage and kills the noble hawk” (*Animals* 89). The way in which Sanborn only discusses half of the scene seems to skew his reading of Billy's killing the hawk, for he leaves out the part in which Billy tries to atone for his actions.

The action of killing the hawk does more than simply show the way in which Billy kills the hawk. John Cant adds to this discussion of the choice to take the hawk's life by explaining

that part of the reason Billy “has become the desolate wanderer” is because he “has already committed his mythic act against the nature he wished to espouse in the wolf” (198). Cant then continues with an explanation of how Billy's killing of the hawk resembles the killing of the Albatross in Coleridge's “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” by pointing out the “similar disorientation” of the proper order of nature found in *The Crossing* (198). Billy's killing of the hawk seems to be a result of his state of mind after killing and burying the she-wolf, but instead of being a killing of mercy, as with the wolf, the killing of the hawk was a regression from the deep connection between Billy, the she-wolf, and the rest of nature. The scene of disorientation appears “[t]wo days later [when] he sat the horse on a promontory overlooking the Bavispe River and the river was running backwards. That or the sun was setting in the east behind him” (130). The way in which the scene is described seems to indicate a lack of order in the world, which may partly stem from the shooting of the hawk, but it could also be a result of Billy's wandering through the wilderness for two days. He may not be entirely alert or as aware of his surroundings as he thinks. While Billy certainly seems to be disoriented in that scene, it also seems Cant is overlooking an important event that occurs between the shooting of the hawk and the depiction of the world working improperly. In order for the disorientation to be a result of shooting the hawk, as Cant suggests, the scene of Billy's atonement has to be ignored, which is a significant act to attempt to overlook. For both Cant and Sanborn, the killing of the hawk seems to take priority over Billy's shedding of his own blood after killing the hawk.

Barclay Owens looks at the scene of the disordered river and sun as less of a disorientation on Billy's part, and more as Billy “hallucinat[ing] and witness[ing] strange miracles” (89). After searching for the fallen hawk, Billy finds only “a single drop of blood that had dried on the rocks” (129). It is onto this drop that Billy “ma[kes] a cut in the heel of his hand with his knife and watche[s] the slow blood dropping on the stone” (130). Owens reads this as “a

redemptive revitalization, a divine state of madness, mutilating his body in a ritual of shedding blood, cutting his hand with a knife, reenacting Christ's stigmata" (89). Billy does seem to make an attempt at atoning for killing the hawk in giving his blood in return for taking that of the hawk. Rather than being representative of Christ's stigmata, however, Billy's mingling of his blood on the stone with that of the hawk's blood seems to allow for a mingling of the two bloods in a way that is indicative of trying to link himself back to nature in the same way that he could previously. In retaliation against circumstances he could not control with regard to the wolf, Billy momentarily shuns the connection with nature by attacking the hawk. However, similar to the way in which he treats the dog at the end of the novel by scaring it off before eventually calling out for it, the scene of the hawk's death ends with another sacrifice for Billy.

Although the experiences Billy has are different, he manages to keep his promise when he buries the wolf in the mountains. He also tries to do his best to make amends when he kills the hawk and to maintain that connection to nature and the divine. He held true to his word, and as a reward for that, even though his journey did not go as expected, Billy found, through blood, a physical link between himself and the divinity he sees in nature, since blood links him to both the she-wolf and the hawk. Blood connected him to the she-wolf when they first met, and it connected them even as they parted ways after she was already dead. Billy's connection to nature whether through the wolf pack, the she-wolf, or the hawk serves to guide him toward a deeper connection with nature, and from those experiences Billy gains the tools to help him on his journey from boy to man.

THE FAMILIAL BOND AND ITS IMPACT ON LANGUAGE USAGE IN CORMAC  
MCCARTHY'S *THE CROSSING*

The familial bond through blood appears in the form of similar mannerisms and physical appearance, but it also exists in the lessons learned from family. For Billy Parham, one of the main lessons he learns from his family is how to use language accurately in many situations. The duality found between many aspects of Billy as an individual and the members of his family is influenced by the way in which language, and particularly Billy's use of the Spanish language acquired from his maternal grandmother, grants him a deeper connection to Mexico. Likewise, language also strengthens Billy's moral code when he learns from his father the importance of using words properly with regard to comes to making promises.

Billy's connection to his family allows him to speak not only the English language but also the Spanish language. The duality of spoken language in his family is explained when Billy describes in a scene about his mother that her “mother was a fullblooded Mexican didnt speak no english. She lived with us up until she died” (419). Given that Billy's grandmother did not speak English, in order to communicate with her Billy would have to speak Spanish. However, since he lived in New Mexico, for Billy to interact with the rest of his community, he would need to be able to speak English. As Linda Townley Woodson states, “McCarthy confirms that language is the activity of being human, that the story will go on in spite of postmodern questioning of the power of language” (10). While Billy experiences nonverbal communication with nature, the ability to communicate with other humans verbally aids him in both being able to attempt his quests and being able to learn along the journey. Nonverbal communication is used in nature, but language is the way by which humans are primarily able to communicate with each other. That use of language will not change even though the medium in which the language is presented may change. Even though his grandmother died when Billy was young, Billy was old enough to

remember his grandmother, and he keeps her stories alive, as evidenced by the fact that he sings her songs. His connection to his grandmother provides him with a link to Mexico, her homeland.

Even after his parents are murdered and there is no family left for them in that land, Billy acknowledges New Mexico as home for himself and Boyd. However, the three journeys he makes into Mexico, even though none of them turned out how he expected, suggest a draw to his other, older homeland. Much as when Billy notices that the “cranes were moving south and he watched their thin echelons trail along those unseen corridors writ into their blood a hundred thousand years” (328), Billy seems to be pulled down a path that speaks to some aspect of his past, as can be seen through Mexico as his ancestral homeland. The path leading to Mexico also speaks to his future, as his second trip is an attempt to maintain his bond with his father in the form of retrieving the horses. The third trip serves as a way for Billy to protect his connection with his brother in the way that his final trip is to retrieve Boyd's body from Mexico and return it to their home in New Mexico. Their grandmother's homeland has a draw for both Billy and Boyd at different points of time, and part of that connection is solidified by language.

The first instance of language in the novel appears at the opening of the first chapter, and it involves the importance of giving names to objects in the natural world. From a biblical perspective, the ability to give names to the physical world seems to correspond to God's ability to speak his creations into existence, but it is also similar to the way in which Adam was given the ability to name the plants and animals when “the Lord God formed out of the ground various wild animals and various birds of the air, and he brought them to the man to see what he would call them; whatever the man called each of them would be its name. The man gave names to all the cattle, all the birds of the air, and all the wild animals” (*New American Bible*, Gen. 2.19-20). A certain level of power over an object is obtained when a name for the object is known since it can then be referred to specifically and everyone who hears and understands the name

understands what the name references. The novel begins with the description of the family's move from their old home to a new one, and Billy “carried Boyd before him in the bow of the saddle and named to him features of the landscape and birds and animals in both spanish and english” (3). Knowing the name of an object allows people to communicate with regard to that object, and given that not all people speak the same language, the ability to call an object by multiple names increases the chances of being understood by more people.

Ashley Bourne takes Billy's naming of the land around him as something including language, but also place. She explains that the “naming of the landscape to soothe his brother bespeaks a fascination with and a deep, intimate knowledge of place; he is literally emplacing himself in the new territory where he will dwell” (117-18). More than simply being able to talk to people about his surroundings, he shows how well he knows his new homeland. The sense of familiarity provided by his use of the language helps to make the land a more permanent aspect of his life, even though he has just arrived. He is carving out a place for himself, and it is to this place he will always return, even after he follows his quests to Mexico.

Similarly, by knowing the proper word for elements of the landscape in both the English and Spanish languages, the ability to communicate expands to encompass two communities and, by extension, two cultures. Billy's ability to give names to items and share those names with his brother indicates the connection he has to the land around them with his command of both languages. Patricia A. Duff claims that the social interaction with a second language “does not necessarily lead to the reproduction of existing [second language] cultural and discursive practices but may lead to other outcomes, such as hybrid practices, identities, and values” (311). Thus, Billy does not completely follow the Mexican cultural standards such as when he tries to use the family's American papers to reclaim his father's horses without realizing that there are

different rules in play once he crosses the border into the southern country. However, he does know how to socialize with the people he meets in Mexico.

He knows how to interact with people in both languages, and he does so with enough grace that he is continually taken in by people, offered food, and told stories. Part of his ability to adapt comes from the way in which learning a language includes elements of “cultural, interactional and cognitive orientation” (Duff 312). So, using a language is not simply knowing the words but knowing how to interact with the language and also to understand some of the culture of the place in which the language is spoken. Without a cultural understanding of the way in which certain words possess myriad meanings, and how the words are used in context due to those different meanings, Billy would have stood out even more than he does. Indeed, his hosts in both the United States and Mexico seem to see something unique in him, which is perhaps a combination of his desire to maintain his moral code, his ability to communicate in two languages, and the innocence he still possesses as a boy of sixteen years when he begins his first trip across the border into Mexico. As referenced earlier, the first person who takes him in when Billy decides to take the she-wolf back to Mexico rather than returning to his father even tells him, “You a very peculiar kid, [...] Did you know that?” (68). Billy claims not to recognize anything different about himself, but other people certainly notice it. Many offer aid to him because he has an innocence and sense of determination that they lost long ago.

One aspect of life in New Mexico and the surrounding area that may explain the reason people are willing to help Billy is that, as Edwin T. Arnold and Diane C. Luce explain, “While existence in the often inhospitable environments of the Border Trilogy requires a certain degree of survival instinct, the hospitality that also pervades these environments may play as crucial a role in defining them” (220). Thus the kindness shown to Billy follows from the tradition of caring for

each other in hostile times. Arnold and Luce also state that “great generosity of spirit and sustenance can flourish in ... a western setting where strangers are welcome at the campfire or hearth because, on the frontier, individual survival has always depended on mutual hospitality” (220). The reception and aid Billy receives are reminiscent of the way Western travelers are supposed to be treated, and although *The Crossing* is more than a traditional Western novel, Sandra L. Hudock asserts that “McCarthy's heroes are forthright, capable young cowboys, embodying the traditional cowboy virtues of competence, reticence, and honor” (487). The quality people recognize in Billy speaks to an older tradition, and in keeping with the older tradition, most of the people treat him in the manner such practices require.

Even with all of the personal losses Billy suffers over the course of the novel, he is taught by the experiences of other people. As Hudock explains, Billy “hears the tales of others regarding loss, justice, and the nature of God while himself [is] nearly still a child, and yet he adheres to this internal moral code, barely allowing himself to tell his own tale” (490). The stories throughout the novel are part of what help him mature, but even through all of the tales he hears and the events he experiences, he maintains some of his innocence as well as some separation from the people he meets. Diane Luce states that “*The Crossing* indeed is a matrix of intersecting stories, partial or complete, often competing, with varying relationships to the truth, cutting across and interwoven with the apparently simple linearity of the road narrative of Billy's life” (196). As such, the stories serve as a way to see the truth of the novel from multiple perspectives. Billy hears stories that “comment aptly on [his] own losses, but he takes no comfort from their stories, nor from the information that such grief is universal” (Luce 198). Luce goes on to explain that the “matrix of witnessing, in which individual's tales encompass and are embedded in one another's,” through which “we are tabernacled in the hearts and memories of others who participate in creating the meaning of our lives, validates story as life itself even



where particular stories may be seen as lies or fiction” (198). Even stories which are fiction can be used to transmit a moral or truth. This is true for the stories told to Billy. As for why Billy does not tell his own story, it seems as though he may not know fully understand his story enough to tell it. Although he continues to follow the path he has chosen, he does not quite know what the lesson or moral of his story would be, other than perhaps staying true to his moral code. I may also be because Billy's story in *The Crossing* does not yet have an ending, so if he were to tell his story, it would be incomplete.

Billy's understanding that the grief he faces is not something that he alone has experienced may not soften his own grief, but he does have his code to provide him with the comfort of knowing that he is doing everything he could to keep his word. For instance, in response to the request to relinquish his guardianship of the she-wolf before she is taken from him, Billy responds that he “could not part with the wolf because the wolf had been put in his care” (111). Even though he had many chances to cease his protection of the she-wolf, Billy repeatedly stands by his decision to return her to her home. Whenever he faces tough situations, he always looks to that code for what to do, and he remains true to his code: that he will do whatever he can to keep his promises even if he is ultimately unable to complete those promises with his initial intent. When a quest fails, Billy does not give up. Instead, by upholding his moral code, he simply moves on to the next quest without losing any of his faith that he follows the correct course of action. He pursues his new quests with as much determination as each of the previous quests. For instance, after the failed attempt to return the she-wolf to her home alive, Billy's first reaction on learning about the stolen horses is to take Boyd to Mexico in an effort to retrieve the horses. He does not let himself become discouraged whether the quest involves the horses or his brother's body.

While Billy does use his code rather than following the stories he hears, the stories play an important part in the presentation of the novel. One aspect in which the stories affect Billy is seen in the way Jean-Michel Verdun that although “McCarthy himself writes in his native tongue, English, it is probably significant that some of the most enlightening discoveries that Billy makes should be brought about through the use of the Spanish language” (164). While Billy's desire to maintain his moral code comes from his father, a point developed further on in this essay, the language he acquires from his grandmother in childhood proves to be helpful in his journeys. Without his understanding of the Spanish language, Billy would not have been able to understand the stories told to him in Spanish, and thus he would have been unable to learn as much about himself and his motivations for traveling to Mexico or why he makes the attempts to salvage what he can of his promises.

The scene describing the journey to a new home reveals the way that both Billy's Mexican and American heritages are being preserved equally in him and in his family. While he gives the names of items to Boyd, he first provides the word in Spanish, and then he tells Boyd the word for that same object in English. The preferential treatment is given to the Spanish language, which suggests Billy's blood attachment to Mexico through his maternal grandmother. This connection to Mexico seems to come through the familial connection and heritage passed from grandmother to grandson, but it also appears to have a less literal meaning in the way that Billy's choice of Spanish before English in the passage seems to speak to the way that Billy chooses to go to Mexico on three separate occasions even though he always returns to New Mexico. Beyond the language connection between Billy's immediate family and the maternal grandmother, Margarita, there is also a more direct connection between Billy's generation and that of his grandmother. When Billy returns to New Mexico and learns that his parents were murdered while he was gone with the family's rifle, the sheriff asks about papers for Margarita

Evelyn Parham. When Billy replies that she is his deceased sister, the sheriff inquires, “How come her to have a Mexican name?” to which Billy responds “She was named after my grandmother” (168-9). The shared name, which is recognized as Spanish, though they called the sister Margaret, is one aspect of biculturalism that is present in the family.

In addition to the similarity in names, which provides its own duality between the woman and the girl, the journey to their new home contains the description that in “the country they'd quit lay the bones of a sister and the bones of his maternal grandmother” (3). Both of them died before the move to the new land, but that did not make their presence in the family any less felt. Billy even mentions at one point how “I had a younger sister died when I was seven, but I remember her just as plain. I went to Fort Sumner to try and find her grave, but I couldn't find it” (419). Just as the blood connection to the grandmother enables Billy to make the three trips into Mexico, the knowledge that their old home holds his sister's body leads Billy to go in search of that place. The search for Margaret's grave provides some of the reasoning behind Billy's attempt to go to Mexico to retrieve Boyd's body. In the same way that the graves are for the living to visit, it seems reasonable that Billy wants to know where his siblings' bodies are laid to rest.

After learning that his parents were murdered and the horses were stolen, Billy and Boyd decide to go to Mexico to search for their property. That serves as the premise of the second trip that Billy makes to Mexico in which he and his brother attempt to reclaim the most meaningful remaining possessions of their family. During the search, Boyd is shot in the chest, and he almost dies. He recovers from the injury, but rather than returning home, he falls in love with a girl and leaves Billy. The lack of family in New Mexico and the love of the girl lead Boyd to stay in Mexico, which again would be complicated without a good understanding of the language. Billy, on the other hand, seems to display more of what Guadalupe Valdés describes as the idea in which being “natively competent in two languages would then mean to have had two

childhoods” (415). Billy does not quite fit into that category, however, because, if he did, then “it would mean sharing in the social forms, prejudices, and insights of two cultures. In short, it would mean being two entirely different people” (415). Valdés is making a rather bold statement in saying that having access as a child to two languages and cultures would mean growing up as two different people. It seems more likely that a balance would arise in which both cultures would be represented, though not necessarily in equal proportions nor to the same effect. For instance, Billy grew up in one culture, but his exposure to the Hispanic culture as a child grants him a deeper understanding of the Hispanic culture than someone who does not have that connection at a young age. While, according to that theory, it would be difficult to be equally well-versed in two languages and the corresponding cultures, without simultaneously living in both cultures, Valdés describes a class of bilingual people who are classified as “heritage language speakers within whose lives commonplace concepts such as *mother tongue*, *first language*, *second language*, *dominant language*, and *home language* become problematic” (411). As Billy demonstrates when he favors Spanish over English when providing names to Boyd even though his dominant language would presumably be English, Billy does not seem to conform to the basic definitions attributed to users of multiple languages, such as having a dominant language as it is determined by place. Billy's command of both English and Spanish appears to be equally strong, and in many cases, he switches between the two with ease.

The opposing presentations of Billy and Boyd in the novel seems to be linked to the same dual presentation of language found in the written text of the novel. Verdun explains that “[w]riting, —or, more generally, language— is a hybrid universe, situated as it is halfway between man's own view of God's universe and the truth,” which allows for the understanding of *The Crossing* as a work “whose text is comprised of both English and Spanish sentences” (164). Thus, language serves as a means to discovering the truth, and the significance of being able to

use two different languages follows the Nietzschean idea Woodson mentions “that using a foreign word to name something helps us hold it away from us in order to overcome its familiarity and to examine it in a new way” (8). If language is the way to arrive at truth, and the use of a foreign word aids in the ability to look at certain words in a different manner, then the combination of those two concepts would seem to grant access to a deeper level of truth. The conversations Billy has with people throughout his story guide him in each of the three journeys to Mexico, and they lead him toward the responsibilities he accepts with each oath he makes.

After his first journey to return the she-wolf, Billy returns to the United States, and the he returns to Mexico immediately, this time with his brother. In some ways, the two brothers both seem to have the same draw to Mexico as a result of their connection to their grandmother. Their Mexican heritage is something that is a large part of their development as can be evidenced in their use of the language. Both boys are linked to Mexico. While Billy makes three crossings into Mexico, Boyd chooses to stay, even though that decision ultimately leads to his death there. Bourne remarks that when “Billy rides through the Mexican wilderness on his errand in *The Crossing*,

his senses of identity and “placeness” are transformed by the space he enters, distancing him from the comforting memory of home place” (114). This seems to speak to the way in which Billy is described as wandering at various points in the text, such as after he buries the wolf, and at the end of the novel. He has a home in New Mexico, but at the same time, his journeys into Mexico change his sense of identity to something more suited to the landscape around him. Those changes he experiences due to his time in Mexico do not appear to go away, and as such, Billy becomes someone who is drawn to both Mexico and New Mexico, and as such, he is not completely at home in either place exclusively.

In the opening scene, as Keegan suggests, Billy takes on a patriarchal role, which also appears when he returns home to find himself the guardian of his brother. The two brothers are linked by blood, and certain belongings emphasize that filial bond. One scene describes how “[t]hey sat their horses side by side, Boyd sitting Billy's old saddle and Billy in the Mexican saddle his father had traded for” (40). The dual nature of the brothers' cultural background arises in the way that the younger brother receives the Billy's old saddle, but at the same time, Billy receives a Mexican saddle which his father gets in trade. Billy's shift from his old saddle to a Mexican saddle seems to represent the coming shift from his location in New Mexico to Mexico on his journey with the she-wolf. When he goes into Mexico, Billy does not only speak the language, but he even rides on a Mexican saddle. He is able to look and speak the part, although enough of his actions display the American traits of the second half of his heritage that he could certainly maintain the dual nature he possesses throughout the novel.

The other way that the memories of his grandmother show in Billy's actions are in the time after Boyd is shot and transported elsewhere to see if there is anything that could be done to save him. Billy is left alone with his horse, which was also injured in the same attack that led to Boyd's wounding. As Billy walks beside the injured horse, he talks to it, but when “he'd said all he knew to say, he told it stories. He told it stories in Spanish that his grandmother had told him as a child” (274). In a time in which Billy is left alone save for an injured horse, and knowing that his brother may not live, after saying everything he could think to say from his own experience, Billy turns to his grandmother's stories to pass the time while he walks and perhaps to keep his mind focused on something other than whether or not his brother will recover. From the point of view of language, rather than remembering versions of the stories in English as they may have been retold to him by his mother, Billy remembers them in Spanish and relays them to the horse in that same language. By maintaining the stories in the original language in which

they were presented to him, the meaning of the stories is preserved in its entirety. Part of the reason the meaning of the stories should be preserved is that they must have had some impact on Billy in order for him to remember them, and in order to maintain that same level of effectiveness, the meaning needs to be preserved. Many times certain intricacies of meaning are lost when stories are translated from one language to another since some concepts are only present in one language and not in the other, and given the variable meaning of words, the meaning of the translation may not carry all of the same depth as the original telling.

Another aspect of Billy's decision to call to mind the stories his grandmother told is that it allows Billy to comfort himself through the events that had occurred in the journey until that point. After his first trip to Mexico fails from his original intent, then returning to find his parents are dead, and then learning that his brother might die, the stories may also serve as a reminder of simpler times, when he did not have so much to worry him. The time he spent walking and talking with the horse was also an opportunity for him to come to terms with the recent losses he had suffered, as he had not had much chance to consider what would happen to himself and Boyd without any other family members. For a boy who was not even old enough to be accepted into the military without parental approval despite all of the attempts he had made to enlist, which were unsuccessful due to his heart murmur, he suffers a great deal of turmoil without taking much time to give in to his emotions. However, the ability to reminisce and to take advantage of the nostalgia that stories would likely invoke may be the way that Billy can heal in that time when he is left alone with his own thoughts under these less than pleasant circumstances. This seems to indicate another tie to Mexico from his grandmother. He could have turned to other stories he listened to during his childhood, but he chose the stories in Spanish over any other stories he may have heard in English.

While the duality possessed by Billy through the ability to speak English and Spanish is one way in which he is influenced by his family, another aspect of the familial influence on him is the way in which he develops his moral code. Billy's parents provide him with his moral foundation. His mother, Carolyn, has control of the house, or at least the kitchen. One such instance appears when she asks Billy to be home before it gets dark, and she adds, "You try real hard and you wont have any problems" (30). Billy's motivation perhaps comes from this idea that trying with all of his power might help his ability to succeed. She also has control over Billy's father when he suggests checking the traps on Sunday, and she replies, "I dont know how you think the Lord is going to bless your efforts and you dont keep the Sabbath" to which the father responds by saying they would check the traps on Monday (34). The connection between language and blood also appears in the way that Billy's mother has the final say with regard to whether or not the men in the family work on the Sabbath. Billy's father may have the final say in terms of what happened with the work, but his mother also has a voice in the family. She has the final say about what happens with her children.

From his father Billy gained the tools to strengthen his moral foundation, and one instance in which this is particularly visible is after Billy said he would be home, but he arrives late. His father's response to Billy's tardiness is that he had "been witness to people showing up where they was supposed to be at various times after they'd said they'd be there. I never heard one yet that didnt have a reason for it" (51). When Billy's father says this, it seems to be because he knows how people can respond when they are running late, both in his family and in society in general. , and he does whatever he can to take care of his family, including taking the time to have all three of the men in the family looking for the wolf and instead of working on' other tasks. With the she-wolf threatening the general safety of their community, Billy's father tries to try to help, up until the point when Billy leaves for Mexico with the she-wolf. However, for all



the excuses Billy's father had heard, he gives the explanation that people are late because “their word's no good. That's the only reason there ever was or ever will be” (51). This desire Billy has to keep his word is part of the reason he buries the she-wolf in the first section of the book and why he goes to find the horses and later even to retrieve Boyd's body. As Hudock mentions, “the purposes of Billy's trips are an adherence to his moral code, in the true Western tradition” (488) even though he is not rewarded by his status as the Western hero in the novel. Hudock agrees that it is for this reason, his code, that Billy “attempts to liberate that which is wild and endangered, wreak vengeance for his parents' murders, reclaim his stolen horses, and fulfill his filial obligation to his little brother” (488). Billy does not seem to seek vengeance against his parents' killers, rather, his code is more designed to motivate him as best as he can to return the displaced to its proper state. Hudock's assertion that Billy seeks to “wreak vengeance for his parents' murders” (488) places a vengeful tone onto the text which does not seem to be present, as the Billy's main concern seems to be getting Boyd and the horses. She is correct, however, in the way in which, after Billy is met with failure after failure, he makes his choices based on his code, and after that choice is made has to protect his honor and keep his word.

One of the last conversations he had with his father was his father discussing the importance of being able to rely on someone's word. In order to be treated honestly, Billy must maintain his reputation, even if he is the only person who knows about that reputation. Regardless of whether anyone else knows what Billy is doing, or why he does it, Billy understands what he needs to do in order to accomplish his goal. There is no other option beyond the honorable thing to do in keeping his promises in whatever way he can. Even when Billy is attempting to get into the military by signing his mother's name on the form because he was too young to join by himself, as he looks over the form, the waitress “left to go back to the counter and he bent over the form and wrote on the line Louisa May Parham. His mother's name was

Carolyn” (338). For as much as his father emphasized the importance of making his word good, when Billy lies in an attempt to get into the military, before he learns about the heart murmur that makes him ineligible to join, he even avoids bringing attention to his own parents. Rather than signing his mother's actual name, he uses a false name. The reasons for this point to the way in which names are important, and Billy chooses to use a fake name rather than risking suspicion being drawn to his mother's name, as she was already dead. Billy may have felt that using her actual name might have alerted someone to the fact that he had forged her name. Alternately, he may not have wanted to use her real name with such a disregard for the proper respect due to his deceased mother.

Even though he is able to convince himself to forge a version of his mother's signature, Billy is unable to break his word to the extent that he put that particular truth into his lie. Part of his moral code exists in protecting the names of his family members, particularly given the circumstances in which he is unable to protect them on a physical level. This inability to provide protection is perhaps why he chooses to use an false name rather than using his mother's actual name. In referring to the story of Job, James Keegan asserts that “the parallels with Billy Parham are strong. Although Billy has no son, his relationship with his younger brother Boyd [sic] has a paternal cast from the novel's opening image in which Billy carries his brother” on their journey to a new home when Boyd was still very young (49). The connection between Billy and Boyd takes on a dual nature between patriarchal and filial at different points in the story.

At the beginning of the novel, Billy has a moment where he is accepted by a wolf pack, which in turn shapes the events that occur when Billy meets the she-wolf. Similarly, Boyd has a moment early on in the novel in which he develops an understanding with the indian he and Billy meet when Boyd is fourteen. From the time that the indian “looked into the eyes of the boy. The boy into his,” Boyd is set apart from his brother (6). Boyd sees himself “twinned in those dark

wells with hair so pale, so thin and strange, the selfsame child” as though two “orphans of his heart had miswandered in their journey in life” and had become trapped (6). The brothers seem to be linked in the way that just as they share the same blood, they experience moments that separate them from the rest of society. Just as Billy's early connection to the wolf pack seems to indicate his future connection to nature and moments of isolation from the rest of the world, Christine Chollier claims that Boyd's reflection in the indian's eyes also serves as a form of isolation and “alienation” (52). As Chollier explains, “[t]he duplication reinforces the fissure between him and the world,” since he does not truly recognize himself in the indian's eyes (52). That separation from the world is what allows “Boyd [to] sense the potential danger created by the neighboring Indian's presence, but does not prevent the tragedy of his parents' death,” and thus “it is enough to alienate Boyd from his brother” (Chollier 52). Chollier also suggests that the twinning of the reflection represents Boyd's isolation “from himself and from his brother” (52). Under this explanation, both Billy and Boyd seem to be following paths they chose at the beginning of the novel. Those choices appear to influence the decisions Billy makes later whether in regard to the she-wolf or to finding and retrieving Boyd at the end of the novel.

Even though the stated goals for both of the brothers as they make their trips into Mexico do not necessarily match the desired outcome of the journeys, such as reclaiming the horses as a way of regaining their lost parents, Lydia R. Cooper discusses the way that Billy and John Grady Cole, who first appears in *All the Pretty Horses* before joining Billy in *Cities of the Plain*, both take on quests which fail. As Cooper suggests, however, “failure is not necessarily an indication of value. Moral responsibility is prized in the Border Trilogy even though—or because—it is threatened by the incipient collapse of the human race” (80) as *The Crossing* ends with the testing of the atomic bomb. The only thing that matters with regard to the quests is the way in which Billy understands his moral obligations to those around him.

Billy's adherence to his code is reminiscent of Plato's telling of the story of Er, in which during Er's journey, he learns that "great decisions have to be made in life, which, once made, are irrevocable, and dominate the man's whole career and conduct afterwards," as J. A. Stewart describes in his commentary on the myth of Er. When Billy makes a moral decision, such as deciding to search for the horses in Mexico, once he begins that journey, he will not change his course. Billy cannot escape from the fact that Boyd was shot, and he is left alone in the time following. The attempt to retrieve the horses does not go as planned, yet Billy continues to stay true to his code even after repeated failures. His decision to follow his chosen course of action serves as "a training of the will and judgment by which [human beings] become trustworthy in any difficulty which may be presented to them" (Stewart 172). Rather than discouraging him when he fails, each of Billy's tasks seem to refine his resolve to move forward. They shape him into someone who is capable of staying true to his chosen course. For instance, as a mirror to his failed attempt to save the she-wolf in the first section of the novel, Billy initially scares off the dog at the end of the book only to return to the spot later as he "called for the dog. He called and called," but the dog was already gone (425). Despite the initial attempt to change his devotion to the caring nature he displays in trying to protect the aspects of his family he can protect, he nevertheless ultimately stays true to the nurturing element in himself.

The decision Billy makes to retrieve Boyd was the result of an initial choice on Billy's part, and as Stewart explains, "The Pilgrim Souls hear the Prophet telling them in the words of that 'they are free to choose, and will be held responsible for their choice'" (170). The price for being able to make decisions comes in the form of consequences. Even Billy is free to choose for himself, but he must see that part of his journey through to whichever end it finds. In "The Myth of Er," such ability to choose appears "mythically under the form of a prenatal act of choice 'the choice, it is to be noted, not of particular things, but of a Whole Life' the prenatal 'choice' of that

whole complex of circumstances in which particular things are chosen in this earthly life” (Stewart 170). For Billy, the prenatal choice appears to be linked to his blood, for even though Billy appears to make many smaller choices throughout the novel, he really makes the same choice over and over. Billy chooses to remain faithful to his code which involves honoring his family both through name and through blood. Owens' claim that the “boy's whole future is compressed into this immediate action [of choosing to save the she-wolf], and once he makes his decision, whichever way, the moment will forever split into what is and what could have been” (79). Even that action of saving the she-wolf is something that Billy determined, consciously or not, before he sees her when he begins to wonder about the interconnectedness of living creatures when he imagined what blood the she-wolf tastes when she hunts.

The catalyst for the initial trip to Mexico, according to Owens, serves as the moment that leads to everything else. The moment Billy decides to take the she-wolf to Mexico does create a split, and once the disconnect occurs, he must see the tale through to the end. Between the combination of the initial action causing him to leave behind the life he has at the beginning of the novel and his strong sense of morality, Billy manages to reach the end of the novel while maintaining as much of his heroic self as possible. Part of Billy's morality extends to his family, and just as he makes sure to bury the she-wolf in her homeland, Billy seeks to do the same for his brother.

While Billy understands that Boyd's burial place does not mean anything to his dead brother, he replies that the dead do not have nationality, “[b]ut their kin do” (387). The significance of a grave is not because it holds importance for the person buried in it, but it is symbolic of that person's essence, a remembrance for those who remain. This is particularly true when Quijada declares near the end of the novel that Boyd “is in that place which the world has chosen for him. He is where he is supposed to be” (387). Billy's attempts to save what he can of

Boyd may not be entirely necessary given the legend Boyd becomes in Mexico, especially in light of the stated desire that Boyd preferred Mexico. However, Billy's desire to stay true to his decisions pushes him to proceed with his plan to return Boyd to his home. Any faltering would have gone against his principles. In each case, when Billy makes a promise, he does everything he can to keep that promise even though it may not be in the way he imagined. Part of Billy's moral code involves making sure he speaks as truly as he can about what he can do. That seems to be part of the reason that “[a]lthough Boyd's fate, history, and meaning may be subject to discursive relations, his body is not” (Ambrosiano 90). While the stories Billy hears about his brother change how the general population views Boyd, the physical nature of his younger brother's body could not be changed by stories. Rather, Boyd's body was something that represented the real Boyd in the way that the reality of his physical presence, even without the presence of the soul, was undeniably Boyd. The body may not be the complete Boyd without the soul, but it is what remains of Boyd on the earth after his death.

In a similar way to Billy's attempt to locate his sister's grave, Jason Ambrosiano claims the reason “Billy seeks the temporal part of Boyd the [Catholic] Church deems immune to discursive dissemination, his body” (90) is that the body is something to be regarded as sacred, and thus it should be properly buried. For the same reason to the way funerals and cemeteries are designed for the living to cope with the loss of loved ones, Billy desires to reclaim Boyd's body partly for the closure it provides in that he would be able to know that he had done everything he could do to honor his brother. As Ambrosiano states, “Sharing in the timeless, incorruptible exteriority the body can never be entirely lost amidst the arbitrary field of representation it inhabits” (90). Billy connects to his brother's body in a similar manner to the way that Billy seems to have thought that retrieving the stolen horses would serve as some connection to his

lost parents. Nevertheless, whether he reclaims the horses or Boyd's body, he cannot restore his family by those acts.

The duality possessed by Billy and his family influences many actions Billy performs throughout the text. Billy's use of the English and Spanish languages serves him well when he is traveling to Mexico as it helps him negotiate with many of the people he meets along the way. The double nature found in the Parham family between the generations and also simply between Billy and Boyd provides the motivation for Billy's strict adherence to the moral code he develops from the examples provided by his parents. Regardless of the many ways his efforts go wrong, Billy is able to stay true to himself and remain unchanged even with the stories he hears and the events he experiences during his travels. The strong moral compass and the influences of his family provide him with the tools to survive in a world which consistently fails him.

That moral compass also leads Billy in his interactions with nature, as can be seen with the she-wolf and the hawk. Billy's desire to keep his promise to the she-wolf is a result of his understanding of his moral code. Even though he is unable to fulfill his initial plan to deliver her to her homeland and the other wolves as he intends, Billy does the best he can by burying her there. He stands by his moral code as he defines it. The connection to nature Billy receives through his attempt to rescue the she-wolf appears again with the hawk he kills. Instead of shooting the hawk and then thinking nothing of his action when he could not find the hawk, Billy chose to atone for his decision through an offering of blood for blood.

Just as blood connects Billy and the she-wolf, blood also connects Billy and the hawk. The link between Billy and nature is formed through the physical blood that is shared, but the bond strengthens through the introduction of his sense of morals. The physical aspects of blood thus meet the less tangible qualities carried by blood such as those that connect family members to each other and their homeland. In Billy's decision to act on what he believes is morally right,

including making the three trips into Mexico, his connection with his family proved helpful in his efforts. Without the influence from his family, Billy would have neither his early acquisition of the Spanish language nor his moral foundation. Blood serves to connect Billy to nature, both of his homelands, and his family.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>With regard to the comparisons of *The Crossing* to *All the Pretty Horses*, and in particular the negative one presented by Olsen that *The Crossing* is more of a parody of the former novel, Ross Feld states that the “trilogy's second part, *The Crossing*, is a kind of doubling, parallel mirror image of its predecessor” (11). Rather than being a negative version of *All the Pretty Horses*, Feld claims *The Crossing* as an intentional double. Instead of a parody, under that idea *The Crossing* serves as a reiteration of some of the ideas presented in *All the Pretty Horses*, and the duality between *The Crossing* and *All the Pretty Horses* seems to show the many dualities present in *The Crossing*.

<sup>2</sup>Sanborn views “the she-wolf as negative metaphor for man's encroachment upon, and destruction of the natural world” (35), and as such she must die. Billy tries to prevent such a death by “first argu[ing] for the wolf's life and then shoot[ing] the wolf” (35). Sanborn's claim is that the she-wolf “will die on either side [of the border]” (36) either at the hand of the Mexicans or the American ranchers. In fact, Sanborn adds that “the she-wolf would not have ended up in the gladiatorial arena if Billy had not trapped, muzzled, and bound her in the first place” (34). To claim that the she-wolf's death is a necessity and that the relationship between Billy and the she-wolf is one of control over nature attempts to negate Billy's appreciation for and connection with nature flowing from his early encounter with the wolf pack to the moment when he tastes the she-wolf's blood and learns that their blood is the same. Instead of wanting control over nature, Billy seems to be concerned with protecting nature.

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