



In Search of Small Gods

Jim Harrison

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“Jim Harrison has probed the breadth of human appetites—for food and drink, for art, for sex, for violence and, most significantly, for the great twin engines of love and death. Perhaps no American writer better appreciates those myriad drives; since the publication of his first collection of poetry . . . Harrison has become their poet laureate.”—Salon.com

In Jim Harrison’s new book of poems, birds and humans converse, biographies are fluid, and unknown gods flutter just out of sight. In terrains real and imagined—from remote canyons and anonymous thickets in the American West to secret basements in World War II Europe—Harrison calls his readers to live fully in a world where “Death steals everything except our stories.” *In Search of Small Gods* is an urgent and imaginative book—one filled with “the spore of the gods.”

Maybe the problem is that I got involved with the wrong crowd of gods when I was seven. At first they weren't harmful and only showed themselves as fish, birds, especially herons and loons, turtles, a bobcat and a small bear, but not deer and rabbits who only offered themselves as food. And maybe I spent too much time inside the water of lakes and rivers. Underwater seemed like the safest church I could go to . . .

Jim Harrison is the author of thirty books of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, including *Legends of the Fall* and *Shape of the Journey*. A long-time resident of Michigan, he now lives in Montana and Arizona.

In Search of Small Gods Details

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From Reader Review In Search of Small Gods for online ebook

David Guy says

I've read every word Jim Harrison has ever written, many of them several times. I'm a huge fan of his novels, his essays, and his poetry, though I'm not otherwise much of a poetry reader. In this volume he has some prose poems that seem like passages from his novels; they develop fascinating characters in just a few lines. This isn't necessarily the poetry volume I'd begin with; he has a large selection entitled *The Shape of the Journey* that is a real feast. But everything the man writes is worth reading.

Jessie says

Though a few poems don't achieve lift-off for me, Harrison is fanciful and meandering, a poet inventing endlessly from the detritus of his day and from the detritus of his memory. He's a scallywag but I like him (and who isn't a scallywag?)

My favorite are the prose poems, portraits mostly, full-bodied stories of whole lives: one comprised of advice from an Ojibwe alcoholic; one about a 96-yr-old Estonian working extra shifts as a deckhand just to get more daylight, having suffered too much darkness; one explicitly invented, opening, "I like to think that I was a member of the French Resistance..."

"Poets run on rocks barefoot when shoes are available for a dime."
from "The Penitentes" 40

Here is a mini-portrait I love, "Another Old Mariachi":

"His voice cracks on tremolo notes.
He recalls the labia of women
as the undersides of dove wings,
the birds he retrieved as a boy for rich hunters.
Now in a cantina outside of Hermosillo
he thinks, I don't have much life left
but I have my songs. I'm still the child
with sand sticking to my dew-wet feet
going to the fountain for morning water."

East To says

Beautiful.

Kim says

I love pret'ner anything that Jim writes, but I am in awe of his poetry. Absolutely in awe. This collection is wonderful and not to be missed. Thank god for Copper Canyon Press for continuing to publish amazing poets like Jim Harrison.

Peycho Kanev says

The Home

If my body is my home
what is this house full of blood
within my skin? I can't leave it
for a moment but finally will. It knows
up and down, sideways, the texture
of the future and remnants of the past.
It accepts moods as law no matter
how furtively they slip in and out
of consciousness. It accepts dreams as law
of a different sort as if they came from
a body well hidden within his own.
He says, "Pull yourself together," but he
already is. An old voice says, "Stay close to home."

False says

Written in his late sixties-early seventies, more poems about lost relatives, nature, birds, rivers, women he'll never know again and this one:

Poor Girls

They're amputating the head of the poor girl
to put it on the head of the rich girl who needs it to survive.
This is always happening to poor girls
who are without defense. They've sold the contents
of their hope chests on eBay. The never-worn
size 18 wedding dress is cheap because it's black.
I've watched poor girls in diners eat piles of cheap potatoes.
Of course they sometimes marry poor guys
who leave them to work in oil fields or join the army.
I know one who has four children and takes care
of her vegetable husband home from sunny Iraq
with the mental age of a baby in big diapers.
Unmarried poor girls often have bowling clubs

and drink lots of beer Tuesday nights at Starlight Lanes.
They know they're largely invisible cleaning motels:
receptionists, waitresses, fast-food cooks, nannies.
Still they're jolly with friends and nephews and nieces.
I see a great big one wearing a bright blue bathing suit
when I go trout fishing. She parks her old Plymouth
and floats on a truck inner tube on a mile of fast water,
gets out, wheels the tube back through a pasture, does it again.

Ryan O'grady says

Jim Harrison

In Search of Small Gods

Copper Canyon Press, 2010

Human beings faced with the reality of their own mortality often turn to God for comfort. Poet Jim Harrison, approaching age seventy, looks not to Heaven for answers, but to the “small gods” here on Earth. He finds meaning in life’s simple pleasures: dreams, memories of youth, and the beauty of the natural world. The poems which make up *In Search of Small Gods* record his reflections on death, his observations of the life surrounding him, and his encounters with the deities he finds in nature.

In “On Horseback in China,” Harrison recalls a man who once told him “everything is to be found in the ordinary.” Harrison embraces this theme wholeheartedly, filling his poetry with the elegantly mundane. He sees his “gods” all around him: in the faces of sleeping dogs (“Late”), in the fatally shot rattle snake curled into the shape of a question mark (“Complaint & Plea”), in a goat snoozing in the sunlight beside a barn (“Goat Boy”). “I Believe,” the very first poem in the collection, immediately establishes this reverence for the mundane. Among his beliefs are “the overgrown path to the creek,” “brush piles,” and “turbulent rivers”—he values not the abstract, but the tangible, the concrete. This respect for the power of simplicity extends to his stylistic choices. Few of the pieces in the collection fit traditional poetic forms, foregoing even conventional meter and lineation. He allows the straightforward language and imagery to dictate how each poem flows.

Harrison’s poetic imagery places a special emphasis on the simple beauty of the natural world. Peonies, which grow “too heavy with their own beauty” and “slump to the ground,” but always “remember to come alive again,” feature prominently in two pieces (“Late Spring” and “Peonies”). The moon, too, plays a recurring role. In “Age Sixty-nine,” it “rolls over the mountain.” In “Night Ride,” it burns “dark orange from another forest fire.” In “Eleven Dawns with Su Tung-p’o,” it “speaks [...] with the silence of a sleeping dog.” It is in these things, Harrison asserts, that we might glimpse the gods that really matter: “Back when I was young and still alive there were almost too many gods. You could see them ripple in the water before the lake’s ice melted in April, the loon’s and curlews giving them voice.”

Harrison mourns the loss of such natural beauty with equal passion. The image of “golf clubs left on the moon” appears at least twice (in “Manuela” and “Eleven Dawns with Su Tung-p’o”), suggesting that Harrison feels humanity’s exploration of his beloved moon somehow diminishes it. In “The Golden Window,” he reflects on mankind’s destruction of nature, bemoaning “this overmade world where old paths are submerged in metal and cement.” The small gods’ greatest enemy, however, is man’s preoccupation with

time. "Time's poison," Harrison writes, "is in the air we breathe and the faint taste in the water we drink." Worrying about time—or, more specifically, how little of it we have—distracts us from the things that really matter. In "Calendar," Harrison reflects, "Of late I've escaped those fatal squares with their razor-sharp numbers for longer and longer." Instead, he measures the days in the birds he observes ("Seven Dawns with Su Tung-p'o").

Moriah Pearson says

"I tell them that this is a world where falling is best." - Jim Harrison, from *New World*

This book is almost always in my purse, what more is there to say?

I have a friend who describes poetry and short prose like Harrison's as so: "If you ain't over 30, you ain't gonna like it." That's mostly because it isn't about tinder, text messaging, or how you are a beautiful phoenix; it also isn't about the newest pop album or something that will remind you of how much your ex-boyfriend sucked.

But I'm 25 and I keep it in my purse.

Did I say that I keep it in my purse yet? Harrison's metaphor and subject matter both are very often plucked right from the nature he keeps to and placed to page. He has an affinity for birds and dogs and has developed an impeccable skill in making the heart ache. I think a better description for his work is: "If you ain't human, you ain't gonna like it."

Like I said, I almost always keep it in my purse.

Dan Butterfass says

Another gift from a master.

I don't know if this is his "best" work yet, but what does it matter?

Many many passages are as spirit-haunted and beautiful as any Harrison has ever written. As one reviewer put it some time ago, reading Harrison "is to feel the luminosity of nature in one's own being."

Here's Hayden Carruth on Harrison's oeuvre:

"No one has advanced and expanded the American literary ethos in the latter part of the twentieth century more cogently, usefully, and just plain brilliantly than Jim Harrison....This is a matter to which all literate Americans should pay serious attention."

Obviously I agree with these statements else I wouldn't quote them.

An interesting tidbit that just occurred to me is that as some of Harrison's fictions (*The Summer He Didn't Die* (2005), *The English Major* (2008)), seem to have fallen maybe just a notch of late with age, his poetry

continues to expand in beauty, depth, breadth and power. The proof of that is in these two latest collections, *Saving Daylight* and *In Search of Small Gods*, which might be viewed as companion volumes.

(Note: I said only "some" of his fiction above, as I consider his second-to-last full novel, *Returning to Earth* (2007), to rank among his finest works of fiction.)

Jason M. says

4.75

The prose poems are especially nice and sometimes also surreal and laugh-out-loud funny.

Ray says

'Calendars', 'Prayer', 'Limb Dancers', 'The Golden Window', 'The Penitentes', 'Easter 2008', 'Late', 'Ninety-Six Year Old Estonian', 'Old Bird Boy', 'The Quarter'.

"It is hard not to see poets as penitentes flaying their brains for a line.
--The Penitentes

". . . The gift of the gods
is consciousness not my forlorn bleating prayers
for equilibrium, the self dog-paddling in circles
in its own alga-lidded pond.

"With only one eye I've learned
to celebrate vision, the eye a painter,
the eye a monstrous fleshy camera
which can't stop itself in the dark
where it sees its private imagination.
The tiny eye that sees the cosmos overhead."
-- The Golden Window

Heather Shaw says

Advice

by Jim Harrison

A ratty old man, an Ojibwe alcoholic who lived to be eighty-eight and chewed Red Man tobacco as a joke, told me a few years back that time lasted seven times longer than we "white folks" think. This irritated me. We were sitting on the porch of his shack drinking a bottle of Sapphire gin that I brought over. He liked expensive gin. An old shabby-furred bear walked within ten feet of us on the way to the bird feeder for a mouthful of sunflower seed. "That bear was a puissant as a boy. He'd howl in my window until I made him

popcorn with bacon grease. You should buy a green Dodge from the fifties, a fine car but whitewash it in the late fall, and scrub it off May 1. Never drive the highways, take back roads. The Great Spirit made dirt not cement and blacktop. On your walks in the backcountry get to where you're going, then walk like a heron or a sandhill crane. They don't miss a thing. Study turtles and chickadees. These bears and wolves around here have too much power for us to handle right. I used to take naps near a female bear who farted a lot during blueberry season. Always curtsy to the police and they'll leave you alone. They don't like to deal with what they can't figure out. Only screw fatter women because they feed you better. This skinny woman over near Munising gave me some crunchy cereal that cut my gums. A bigger woman will cook you ham and eggs. I've had my .22 Remington seventy years and now it looks like it's made out of duct tape. Kerosene is your best fuel. If you row a boat you can't help but go in a circle. Once I was so cold and hungry I ate a hot deer heart raw. I felt its last beat in my mouth. Sleep outside as much as you can but don't close your eyes. I had this pet garter snake that lived in my coat pocket for three years. She would come out at night and eat the flies in my shack. Think of your mind as a lake. Give away half the money you make or you'll become a bad person. During nights of big moons try walking slow as a skunk. You'll like it. Don't ever go in a basement. Now I see Teddy's fish tug coming in. If you buy a six-pack I'll get us a big lake trout from teddy. I got three bucks burning a hole in my pocket. Women like their feet rubbed. Bring them wildflowers. My mom died when I was nine years old. I got this idea she became a bird and that's why I talk to birds. Way back then I thought the Germans and Japs would kill the world but here we are about ready to cook a fish. What more could you want on an August afternoon?"

From **In Search of Small Gods**, to be released in April from Copper Canyon Press. Michigan poet Michael Delp will review the book in the March/April issue of ForeWord Magazine.

Garret Mischenko says

In search of Small Gods is a book that is easy to reject yet begs of acceptance, it is a book that sits next to my night stand at work (North Slope of Alaska) and I treat myself to reading one or two of the poems each night to make the collection last and help me escape from the reality of life if only for that short moment. His insight into nature and the translation is superb. I want to read more and more....

GM

I Believe/Jim Harrison

I believe in steep drop-offs, the thunderstorm across the lake
in 1949, cold winds, empty swimming pools,
the overgrown path to the creek, raw garlic,
used tires, taverns, saloons, bars, gallons of red wine,
abandoned farmhouses, stunted lilac groves,
gravel roads that end, brush piles, thickets, girls
who haven't quite gone totally wild, river eddies,
leaky wooden boats, the smell of used engine oil,
turbulent rivers, lakes without cottages lost in the woods,
the primrose growing out of a cow skull, the thousands
of birds I've talked to all of my life, the dogs
that talked back, the Chihuahuan ravens that follow
me on long walks. The rattler escaping the cold hose,

the fluttering unknown gods that I nearly see
from the left corner of my blind eye, struggling
to stay alive in a world that grinds them underfoot.

Tyler Koslow says

“In Search of Small Gods”

by Jim Harrison

Copper Canyon Press

2009

In his latest work of poetry, literary veteran Jim Harrison dips deep beneath the surface of everyday living to find the beauty and pain within life and death. His collection, “In Search of Small Gods”, is summarized perfectly by the title itself. Harrison uses his observing eye and thoughtful mind to discover the inevitable paradoxes we are all wrapped around, pleasure and pain, light and darkness, and of course, life and death. The old and seasoned writer repeatedly attempts to take on and explain death, as in his poem Larson’s Holstein Bull:

“Death waits inside us for a door to open
Death is patient as a dead cat
Death is a doorknob made of flesh/
Death is that angelic farm girl/
gored by the bull on her way home from school, crossing the pasture/
for a short-cut” (Harrison 5).

Harrison’s vivid explorations are driven by his use of metaphor and abstractions. He is able to portray his ‘small gods’ within the objects of the physical realm, “Often, lately, the night is a cold maw/ and the stars scattered white teeth of the gods/ which spare none of us” (Harrison 9). By delving into his memory and surrounding environment, Jim Harrison personifies the abstract concepts of death, space, god, and time. Not often does a poet come along that can successfully explore these unknowns like Harrison can. His descriptive style links the most minuscule of life’s moments to a bigger picture.

Harrison also uses superb lineation at the start of his collection. His mixture of end-stop and enjambed lines make for an exciting, yet well-paced read. The lineation is used to paint a step-by-step picture in the readers mind, as in his poem Singer, “It reminds me of the etching on my journal/of a naked girl/grasping the cusp of the moon with/both hands” (Harrison 19). Although the lineation is masterfully done at first, suddenly his flow of poetry transforms into dragged out, list-like prose. This middle section of the book is, in my opinion, the weakest point of the collection. Granted some of these individual works belong to the prose family, many of them seem like unstructured poetry. Harrison uses this prose to conquer and expose death again, but the absence of line breaks makes it difficult to construct his imagery inside the readers head.

Harrison is the epitome of an experienced writer, having been compared to the likes of William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway. This collection of poetry is no more or less than a great composition by him. His thought provoking subject matter and vivid descriptions make for a philosophical journey into life, death, and the limitless world of poetry.

Haines Eason says

There's a faint disdain among current poets for wandering, rough vulnerability, and said vulnerability is what you will find in these poems. Not many poets writing today would admit they are opposed to openness, though (but just read what's vogue--it is clear artifice and irony are privileged). Anyone writing should study Harrison, not so much what he writes, but how: free and wild and almost without a care.
