



## **Dead Man's Float**

*Jim Harrison*

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## Dead Man's Float Jim Harrison

Jim Harrison's final book of poems, published only a few months before his death

"[Jim Harrison] is still close to the source...*Dead Man's Float* is, as its title would suggest, a flinty and psalmist look at mortality and wonder."--*Los Angeles Times*

"Mr. Harrison's novels and poems over the last two decades have been increasingly preoccupied with mortality, never so much as in *Dead Man's Float*, his very good new book of verse. Here he details the shocks of shingles and back surgery, as well as the comprehensive low wheeze of a fraying body... The joys in Mr. Harrison's world have remained consistent. If sex is less frequently an option, his appetites for food and the outdoors are undiminished. In one poem, he goes out into a rainstorm at night and sits naked at a picnic table. In another, he writes: 'I envied the dog lying in the yard/so I did it.'... The title of this volume, *Dead Man's Float*, refers to a way to stay alive in the water when one has grown tired while far from shore. As a poet, however, Mr. Harrison is not passively drifting. He remains committed to language, and to what pleasures he can catch."--Dwight Garner, *The New York Times*

"Few enough are the books I decide to keep beyond a culling or two. Barring fire or flood, *Dead Man's Float* will be in my library for the rest of my life. If it's the last poetry collection we get from Harrison--and I hope it isn't--it is as fine an example of his efforts as any."--*Missoula Independent*

"Harrison's poems succeed on the basis of an open heart and a still-ravenous appetite for life."--*The Texas Observer*

"Forthright and unaffected, even brash, Harrison always scoops us straight into the world whether writing fiction or nonfiction [and] goes in deep, acknowledging our frailness even as he seamlessly connects with a world that moves from water to air to the sky beyond."--*Library Journal*

"Harrison pours himself into everything he writes... in poems, you do meet Harrison head-on. As he navigates his seventies, he continues to marvel with succinct awe and earthy lyricism over the wonders of birds, dogs, and stars as he pays haunting homage to his dead and contends with age's assaults. The sagely mischievous poet of the North Woods and the Arizona desert laughs at himself as he tries to relax by imagining that he's doing the dead man's float only to sink into troubling memories...Bracingly candid, gracefully elegiac, tough, and passionate, Harrison travels the deep river of the spirit, from the wailing precincts of a hospital to a "green glade of soft marsh grass near a pool in a creek" to the moon-bright sea."--Donna Seaman, *Booklist*

"Jim Harrison has been a remarkably productive writer across a multitude of genres... His poetry is earthy, witty, keenly observed and tied closely to the natural world [and] mortality looms large in *Dead Man's Float*, his 14th collection of poems... [F]orceful, lucid, fearlessly honest, Harrison knows that the nearness of death intensifies life."--Arlice Davenport, *Wichita Daily Eagle*

## Warbler

*This year we have two gorgeous*

*yellow warblers nesting in the honeysuckle bush.*

*The other day I stuck my head in the bush.*

*The nestlings weigh one twentieth of an ounce,*

*about the size of a honeybee. We stared at*

*each other, startled by our existence.*

*In a month or so, when they reach the size*

*of bumblebees they'll fly to Costa Rica without a map.*

**Jim Harrison** (1937-2016) was one of America's most versatile and celebrated writers.

## Dead Man's Float Details

Date : Published January 5th 2016 by Copper Canyon Press (first published October 13th 2015)

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Author : Jim Harrison

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## From Reader Review Dead Man's Float for online ebook

### Kim says

These are very enjoyable poems...most of them just didn't find the right listener in me, hence the rating. I would like to try reading some of Harrison's other poetry collections, though.

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### Nicholas Trandahl says

I was late to the "Jim Harrison" party, and for that I'll always be regretful and embarrassed. However, the beauty of literature is that even when the authors are gone (Harrison died the day before Easter in 2016), their work and legacy will remain. And what a legacy Harrison seems to have left us.

I'm a poet and I'm drawn to poetry, but I'm also pulled by solid fiction. I'm pulled by honest and truthful prose, artful blemishes left behind until what remains is a purified section of prose that can hit you with the hardest punch. Harrison, like Ernest Hemingway and Raymond Carver, had that elegant ability. He carved away the fluff with a literary knife.

"Dead Man's Float", Harrison's final book and my introduction to his writing (aside from watching Legends of the Fall throughout the years and being regrettably ignorant of its original source), has elbowed its way quickly into the small selection of my favorite books of all time. Few collections of poetry have embedded themselves in my mind and my own creativity such as this one.

My new favorite poem, of all poems written since the beginning of time, is "Zona" from this collection. In a simple seven lines, Harrison confirmed that it's not the amount of words that a writer pours into a thought in order to deeply affect someone. It's the talent for making sure that the words that you do include are perfect in their simplicity and impact. In "Zona" Harrison sets up the familiar themes of aging, looming work, and the unstoppable magnitude of time, but then quickly he focuses in on a simple silver lining; in this case that the radishes are good this year and how to best prepare them for eating. Harrison's poems and prose in this collection are all comprised of this style. I only have shown my favorite example of them.

It's a sign of a talented poet when in seven lines we are shown the largest and unavoidable themes of life and death and then suddenly forced into a simple quaint observation of a diminutive feature of the world, that something as simple as radish can have the enormity of one's body decaying in the epilogue of life. Harrison was such a poet.

You will be missed, sir, but what a legacy you've left us.

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### Cory says

Some incredible writing here. Definitely want to read more of his work. And Lorca.

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### Niki says

Gritty and gorgeous poetry. This collection was published just months before Jim Harrison's death, and it's a moving portrayal of the tail end of a life. Each poem paints a vivid picture - just a handful of words capture an experience of hard living, of liquor and women, of favorite dogs, of the desert landscape, of dreaming

about the hereafter. It's a bit like watching found footage of someone's last moments on earth, a bit like listening to a ghost.

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### **Andrew Blok says**

I might not know how to read poetry anymore.

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### **Benjamin Vineyard says**

Dead Man's Float  
by Harrison, Jim

These are poems of a man reflecting on his collection of decades, his single thread of story weaving through relationships and places. Harrison's writing is not restrained. He gifts us his words which are our words, but we usually hold them back and don't say them, thinking of a softer way to say it. Yet, deep within, we're thinking the same thing. Harrison doesn't do that. This makes his writing the voice of an unrestrained human — the voice of a free man.

I might borrow his word for when people ask him what he does. "I'm a log sitter." I like that. My father would like that.

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### **Melanie says**

"Conversing with the poet-novelist is somehow akin to watching his dogs work the cover for birds. They race off on tangents, describing broad loops and arcs, or tight circles, always returning in a controlled, if circuitous, pattern that is at once instinct, training, ritual, and play.

Harrison is a man of prodigious memory and free-wheeling brilliance and erudition, as well as great spirit and generosity, lightness and humor; so the reader should imagine wild giggles and laughter throughout, and supply them even when they seem inappropriate—especially when they seem inappropriate. Imagine, too, the sounds and the textures in the background of the tapes: the easy talk of friends and hunting cronies; the light, cold drizzle of the wettest fall in Michigan history; sodden leaves and branches underfoot; and always the ringing of the dogs' bells, sometimes nearby, sometimes barely discernible, fading into the woods."

Jim Fergus, *The Paris Review*

"It's the origin of the thinking behind *The Theory and Practice of Rivers*. In a life properly lived, you're a river. You touch things lightly or deeply; you move along because life herself moves, and you can't stop it; you can't figure out a banal game plan applicable to all situations; you just have to go with the "beingness" of life, as Rilke would have it. In *Sundog*, Strang says a dam doesn't stop a river, it just controls the flow. Technically speaking, you can't stop one at all."

Jim Harrison, *The Paris Review*

When I heard of Jim Harrison's passing last Saturday, my heart broke in a million pieces. I broke down in tears in front of my mother-in-law who probably thought that I was downright crazy. Some people will never

be able to understand how you can sustain an imaginary conversation with a writer for half your life and consider them your family. Jim Harrison was one of those writers for me.

Above my writing desk in Canada, I had four photographs of writers pinned under glass like butterflies: Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Richard Ford and Jim Harrison. I talk to them when I'm distraught. I sit with them in Adirondack chairs at dusk and watch rivers go by in the roaring silence. I ask myself what they would do in certain situations. I stare at their faces as if they contain all the secrets of the universe, but mostly of a life well-lived, my elusive holy grail.

I cannot think of anyone whose appetite - his celebratory and constantly renewed hunger for life is legendary - is more contagious and more exquisite than Jim Harrison's. The joy he finds in the world, in the wilderness, in birds, in a dog's personality, in movement, in the passing of seasons, in the bodies of women, in the company of dead poets, in tree logs, in fly-fishing, heats up your heart like a floating sun.

The poems in *Dead Man's Float* are full of mortality and aging and grief and melancholy and yet you won't find more life and vigor and tenacity and attentiveness in any other book you've read recently. Jim Harrison talks to his own beloved poets (Garcia Lorca, Mandelstam, Rimbaud) the way he has his entire life and ends the book sitting with Machado at the edge of a suspended bridge above the sea. This poem both floored me and filled my heart with an animal pulse.

### Bridge by Jim Harrison

Most of my life was spent  
building a bridge out over the sea  
but the sea was too wide and it didn't  
go anyplace. I'm proud of the bridge  
hanging in the pure sea air. Machado  
came for a visit and we sat on the  
end of the bridge which was his idea.  
Now that I'm old the work goes slowly  
but the material keeps coming as I hang  
here in the air. Ever nearer death I like  
it out here high above the sea bundled  
up for the arctic storms of late fall,  
the resounding crash and moan of the sea,  
the hundred foot depth of the green troughs.  
Sometimes the sea roars and howls like  
the animal it is, a continent wide and alive.  
What beauty in this the darkest music  
which imitates the sky's thunder  
over which you can hear the lightest music of human  
behavior, the tender connection between men and galaxies.  
So I sit on the edge, wagging my feet above  
the abyss, the fatal plummet. Tonight the moon  
will be in my lap. This is my job, to study  
the universe from my bridge. I have the sky, the sea,  
the faint green streak of Canadian forest on the far shore.

Now go and read him.

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### **Mark Noble says**

Jim Harrison died in March of this year. I had a copy of *Dead Man's Float* on my shelf. This slim book of poems was his last published work and I thought I should read it in tribute to his amazing career. His poetry does not fit into the classical mold, with rhyming lines and specific beats. It is a free form style maybe better described as word paintings. His language can be quite beautiful and he manages to convey complicated ideas and emotions in a minimum of words. As could be expected from a writer in his mid-seventies, many of the poems deal with aging, death and the afterlife. Harrison shows a normal amount of fear of death but even more you feel his deep sadness at having to leave a life that he loves despite the fact that his body is falling apart and he is in a great deal of pain much of the time.

Birds often appear in these poems. Harrison loves birds of all kinds and envies their freedom and ability to soar above humanity. Dogs are also high on his list of lovable creatures because of their loyalty and boundless joy of life. He conveys the fragility of the human condition through his many pains, beginning with the loss of one eye as a boy, his painful and persistent shingles, a back operation and the need for a cane to walk anywhere. But his love of life, and of the natural world always prevails.

I read through this thin volume quickly over two days. I often wanted to linger over an image or a thought but the next poem always pulled me in. I am looking forward to a second, more leisurely reading. It is a bit sad that we will have no more poems from Jim Harrison. We have lost a real master.

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### **Kurt Kemmerer says**

Must read more Jim Harrison poems.

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### **Peycho Kanev says**

#### **Junk Pile**

God throws us out the back door  
onto a huge junk pile in another  
galaxy. There are billions of bodies.  
It's 1,000 degrees below  
zero but compacted souls don't need heat.  
It's logical because we  
came in the front door. All of us die  
in the caboose not of our choosing  
but then we've always seen life  
disappearing behind us, most always  
into what we clumsily call the past.  
Most of the girls I loved are now crones

with me a geezer, shuffling toward the moon.  
So many years ago the girl with brown legs  
in the green dress got off the yellow school bus.  
Sometimes the past flips over and determines  
what we are today. The girl's sandy  
feet were on the dashboard. Beneath, thighs  
were speaking the language of thighs.  
Godspeed is the speed of light.

#### Dead Man's Float

Dr. Guevara said that I'm hollow-eyed  
and exhausted from writing too much.  
I should take a break but I don't know how.  
Suddenly I remembered learning  
the "dead man's float" in Boy Scout  
swimming lessons and a light went off.  
That's what I'll do to rest up,  
the dead man's float without water.  
I got in bed and conjured the feeling  
of floating and recalled my last  
dead man's float about a mile  
out in the ocean east of Key West  
when I tired from too much swimming ambition.  
Big waves kept drowning my nose.  
I gave up floating and swam desperately to shore.  
I dozed in the hot sand and a pretty girl  
stopped and asked, "Are you okay?"  
"I'll never be okay," I said, and she left.  
I saw her later but she wouldn't talk  
to this goofy. A poet blows a chance with  
a dumb witticism.  
If you need me now  
I'm here along the Mexican border  
dead-man floating.

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#### Natalie Tyler says

Jim Harrison's final collection of poetry, *Dead Man's Float*, seems to have been written in the full  
knowledge that he did not have much longer to live. Approaching age 80, the poet sings of death and birds.  
The opening poem is our vade mecum:  
"Where Is Jim Harrison?"  
He fell off the cliff of a seven-inch zafu.  
He couldn't get up because of his surgery.  
He believes in the Resurrection mostly  
because he was never taught how not to.

The poems that follow will deal with these themes—falling, Eastern concepts, surgery, hospitals, the possibility of an afterlife, and what he was and was not taught. He (or his narrator) was certainly taught to observe the dead and the earlier poems in the book are filled with images of his own death and dying as he sings a “bedsore cantata” while being “endlessly sacrifices at the medical gizmo altar.” His “spine aches from top to bottom” and his “shingles burn, a special punishment”. “The old bugaboo of depression” is there along with the sound of cellos. “I wanted to be a cello. I hear cellos when I’m trout fishing.”

But in the midst of death life can come rushing in:

“Time rushes toward me—  
it has no brakes. Still  
the radishes are good this year.  
run them through butter,  
Add a little salt”

It is a burden to know that one has no clear expiration date, but that it must be rushing at one. The poet notices dead bodies of animals and thinks about dead people: “I pray for Mandelstam hiding / covered with snow in a ditch.” “Elsa’s head torn off / and her eyes stayed open....She was a find gardener with a sweet, / warm voice.” “Molly was the bravest...one day / her body was found down by the weir.” “A cow is screaming across the arroyo....Next morning she’s dead, / already smelling badly in the heat.” “so many American Indians freeze / walking home from bars on the reservation edge. / A friend died learning and dozing against / his mailbox, so near home.”

The poems are sometimes unpoetical little stories about death, corpses, illness, and old age. While I realize that this review is not likely to win Harrison new readers, I think that would be wrong. Harrison speaks honestly to his life. He has a great book of essays forthcoming called *A Really Big Lunch: Meditations on Food and Life from the Roving Gourmand*.

This book of poems, however, is a serious guide to the life of the elderly. The second part of the book triumphantly returns (mostly) to life and especially to birds and flowers. In “Tiny Bird” Harrison writes “Birds are poems I haven’t caught yet”. He’s a part of the poetic tradition of paying homage to the artistry of birds and bird songs. He praises the “two gorgeous / yellow warblers nesting in the honeysuckle bush....In a month or so, when the reach the size / of bumblebees they’ll fly to Costa Rica without a map.”

This book is not an easy book to read in many ways but it’s a necessary one for those who are wondering about death: when and why it comes. It offers no reassurance of an afterlife but acknowledges the possibility. If we are lucky, we will become old enough to embrace these poems with their wisdom. Without ever once becoming didactic, Harrison offers us lessons in what to see and what to watch and what to think about as we age into the sometimes crotchety, sometimes genial, characters we will become as we leave this world.

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## **Simon Robs says**

'At my age you don't think about the future because you don't have one.' And with this book, his last, it was fait accompli. The back cover photo shows it "Buzzard" an' all. More reason this cut-to-bone collection that recapitulates the penultimate loves of nature in forms of birds, birddogs, rivers and estuaries, apple trees, April, killed and/or avoided snakes and enduring love for Lorca. He yearns a nymphet still and always, lush of maidenhood, Moonbeams and fish rises. I called him the 'Buzzard King' a slough of review books back; I'm doin' it again. These poems road kill!

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## **Jeff says**

One of the finest books of poetry I've read. Many of these poems are unforgettable and deeply poignant. I'll keep this one close by - for a long time.

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## **Ray says**

Dead Man's Float by Jim Harrison. Excellent collection.

The subjects of many of these are other poets. Lorca and fellow Spaniard, Machado, make repeat visits; also Mandelstam (Russian), and Rumi (13th C., Persian).

And, as with Braided Creek (see below), many are about aging, about death, about birds. In two poems, in fact, he witnesses an unlikely sight, the moment of death of two birds, from natural causes:

Meanwhile, seventy-four years of birds  
have passed. Most have died of course  
so I shouldn't complain about the nearing  
end of it all. I once saw a bird fall out  
of a tree stone dead. I nudged it surprised  
at its feather lightness that allowed it to fly.  
I buried it in earth where they don't belong  
any more than we do. Dead birds should be  
monuments suspended forever in the air.  
(from 'Seventy-four').

And here, from 'Solstice Litany'),

A very old robin drops dead  
on the lawn, a first for me. Millions  
of birds die but we never see it--they like  
privacy in this holy, fatal moment or so  
I think. We can't tell each other when we die.  
Others must carry the message to and fro.  
"He's gone," they'll say. While writing an average poem  
destined to disappear among the millions of poems  
written now by mortally average poets.

A few other notable lines:

Birds are poems I haven't caught yet.

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As an artist  
you follow the girl in the white tennis dress  
for 25,000 miles and never close the deal.

---

Nature gets bruised, injured,  
murdered in bed

---

Some gods have been dead  
a thousand years and need our magic  
and music to bring them back to life.  
We owe it to them. They got us started.

---

It's up to poets to retrieve the gods.

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From a distance the head is a bowling ball on the shoulders, but not so: a carapace and inside, the contents are what children call "gushy." The soft brain has its own improbable life containing galaxies, tens of thousands of people met, the microcosm of life in one place and on the diaphanous and often filthy cloth of memory, hanging there and battered on the clothesline in so many years of bad weather, wet and stiff with ice or blasted by sun and heat, part of it in shreds.

(From 'Round')

Other favorites: Lazuli Trance; God's Mouth; Tethered, Time Again (2); Bird Nightmares; Nuthatch Girl; Apple.

Library copy. Intend to re-read, so, for my future ref, I also very much liked pg 7,11,13, 18, 34, 37, 39, 40, 43, 49, 51, 61, 63, 70, 71, 81, 83-86, 93

I'm new to this author and will be reading more. My introduction to him was via a collaboration, Braided Creek. An excerpt from my review of that book:

"Braided Creek"—300 very short poems, collected from letters exchanged over the years between poets Jim Harrison and Ted Kooser. Many are aphoristic, some are similar to haikus. Ranging from straight-forward to the enigmatic, subjects include nature, love, friendship, and of course, aging. (About a half dozen, I think, are about stopped clocks.) More than are self-deprecating, poking fun at poets. I loved this book.

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### **timv says**

Jim Harrison is at a point in his life that in addition to his usual subjects, he writes about unrelenting physical pain and frustration, which, for me, gave even more depth to his poems.... The authors photo on the back of the dustcover is in itself worth the price of the book. a big thank you to Jim harrison.

another reviewer on this site describe Jim Harrison as, "a unrestrained human voice". I find that to be a apt description.

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