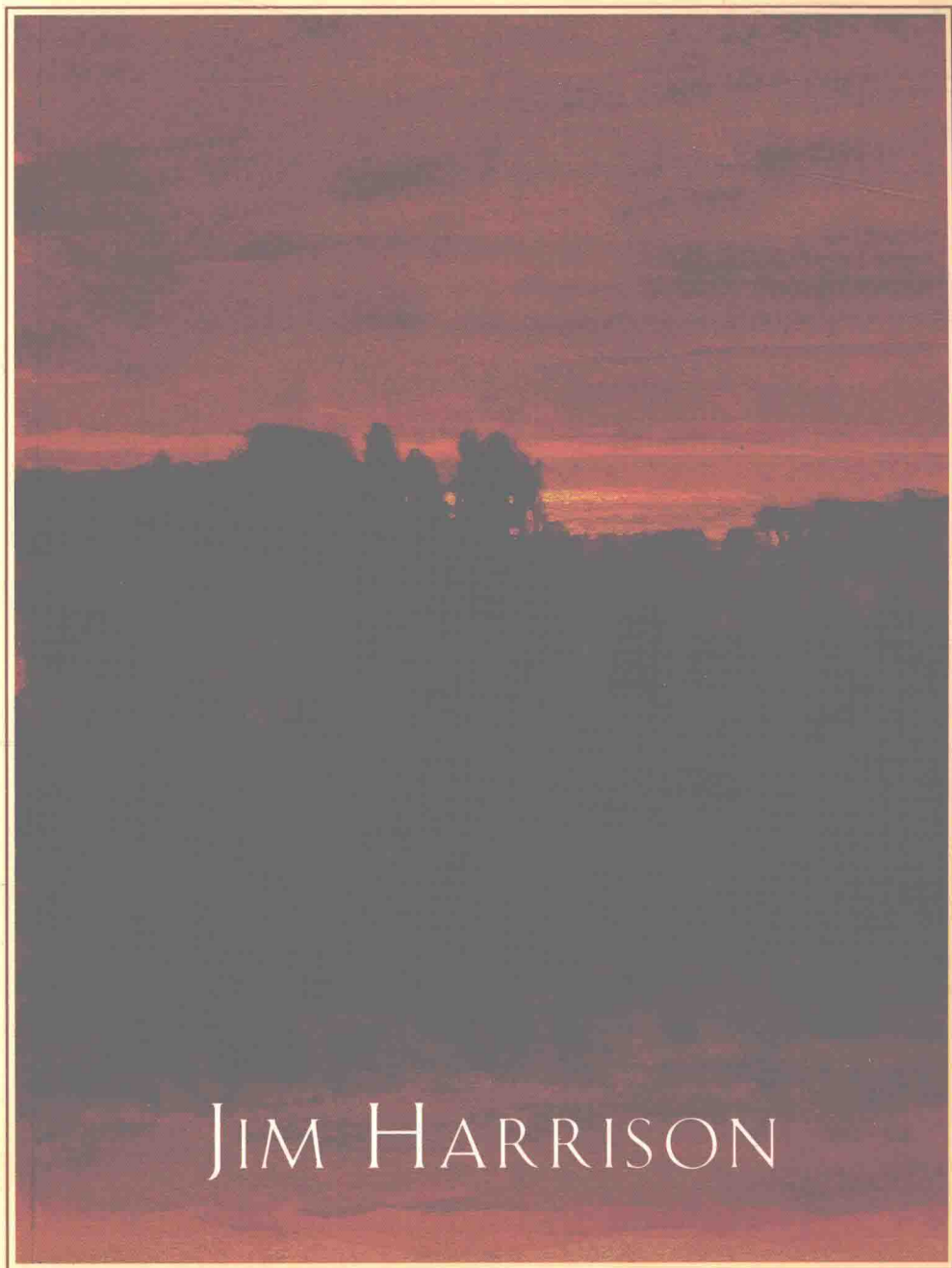


JUST BEFORE DARK

COLLECTED NONFICTION



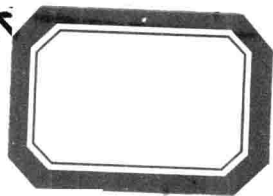
JIM HARRISON

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COLLECTED NONFICTION BY

JIM HARRISON



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN / SEYMOUR LAWRENCE

BOSTON • NEW YORK

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PUBLISHED BY ARRANGEMENT
WITH CLARK CITY PRESS.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
Harrison, Jim, date.

[Selections. 1992]

Just before dark : collected nonfiction / by Jim Harrison.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-395-61329-9

I. Title.

PS3558.A67A6 1992

814'.54 —dc20

91-33168
CIP

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

MP 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

TO STEVE, JAMIE, AND WILL

The worst of all things is not to live in a physical world.

WALLACE STEVENS

Introduction

There is something quite comic involved in the process of editing, to wit, the notion that a successful self-editor should end up with nothing at all. Everything written in the past should be discarded in favor of the free flow of what is at hand. Life, anyway, is an immutable disappearing act. Pitch the manuscript and catch a plane. That sort of thing.

But then cautionary good sense tells us that to publish is to rid ourselves of a burden and offer it to someone else, pleasant or not. In this case the burden began as seven hundred pages which was reduced to half of that. The effort was not to sanitize the past but to present experiences that were more fully realized in the writing. The only piece about which my mixed feelings still run deep is called "A Natural History of Some Poems" in the "Literary Matters" section. I view this as juvenilia, of interest only to assistant professors, should my work prove durable. My choice of a publisher far from the centers of ambition was based on wishing to avoid the enervating hoopla that tends to accompany the publication of books in New York.

It had occurred to me early, by the mid-sixties in fact, that I was temperamentally unsuited for teaching, the usual career of a literary writer. I hadn't thought it through at the time but the real reason for the brevity of my teaching career was that the universities I admired were so far from the woods and water I had emotionally depended on since my youth. To earn a living for my family I began an essentially quadra-schizoid existence, continuing to write the poems I had begun with and adding all matter of journalism, novels, and screenplays.

When a writer lifts his obsessed and frazzled head from the work there is frequently what Walker Percy called "the reentry problem." Literary his-

tory abounds with cases of multi-addiction and personal mayhem of the most childish sort. To put it modestly, I have not been consistently innovative in avoiding the usual problems, but have tried to counter them with equal obsessions for the natural world, fishing, hunting, the study of Native Americans, cooking, the practice of Zen, not as a religion but as an attitude. "To study the self is to forget the self and become one with ten thousand things," said Dogen.

When you lift your head from the work you want to return to earth, simply enough. Just recently I visited the Animas Mountains in New Mexico where I explored the Gray Ranch, a five-hundred-square-mile spread acquired last year by the Nature Conservancy. In my journal I wrote: "Before making camp on Double Adobe Creek I headed up a feeder creek, the dense riparian thicket of a long, narrow canyon. I felt a wonderfully mindless eagerness toward exploring the new territory, a palpable return to the curiosity of childhood when the responses to the natural world are visceral. The pulse races at an unrecognized welter of tracks (javelina), then softens, determining where mule deer and a single, large bobcat stopped to drink. Walking at twilight owns the same eeriness of dawn. The world belongs again to its former prime tenants, the creatures, and within the dimming light and crisp shadows you return to your own creature life that is so easily and ordinarily discarded. I have always loved best this time just before dark when the antennae stretch far and caressingly from the body. I heard the flap of a raven's wings before I saw it, and exchanged a series of greetings before heading back."

Of course today's serenity easily slips into tomorrow's nonsense. To become prematurely autumnal is to lose the writer's most cherished possession—the negative capability that keeps the work's heart pumping. Perhaps, as someone said, there are no truths, only stories. I began as a young poet, standing on the roof looking at the moon and stars, smelling and listening to the swamp out back, dreaming the world. As a middle-aged poet, an identity that seems undisturbed, I have seen much of the world and am trying to dream myself back to where I already am. Midway between these two points I wrote a series of poems that took the form of letters addressed to Yesenin, a long-dead Russian poet I admired. This one in particular shows some of the character of the journey of the book that follows:

from LETTERS TO YESENIN, NO. 22

These last few notes to you have been a bit somber like biographies of artists written by joyless people so that the whole book is a record of agony at thirty rather than thirty-three and a third. You know the sound—Keeeeeattts wuzzzz verrrry unhapppppppy aboutt dyinnng. So here are some of those off the wall extravagancies. Dawn in Ecuador with mariachi music, dawn at Ngorongoro with elephant far below in the crater swagging through the marsh grass, dawn in Moscow and snowing with gold minarets shouting that you have at last reached Asia, dawn in Addis Ababa with a muslim waver in the cool air smelling of ginger and a lion roaring on the lawn, dawn in bleery Paris with a roll tasting like zinc and a girl in a cellophane blouse staring at you with four miraculous eyes, dawn in Normandy with a conceivable princess breathing in the next room and horses wandering across the moat beneath my window, dawn in Montana with herons calling from the swamp, dawn in Key West wondering if it was a woman or tarpon that left your bed before cockcrow, dawn at home when your eyes are molten and the ghost of your dog chases the fox across the pasture, dawn on the Escanaba with trout dimpling the mist and the water with a dulcet roar, dawn in London when the party girl leaves your taxi to go home to Shakespeare, dawn in Leningrad with the last linden leaves falling and you knocking at the door for a drunken talk but I am asleep. Not to speak of the endless and nearly unconscious water walks after midnight when even the stars might descend another foot to get closer to earth. Heat. The wetness of air. Couplings. Even the mosquitoes are lovely and seem to imitate miniature birds. And a lion's cough is followed rhythmically by a hyena's laugh to prove that nature loves symmetry. The black girl leaves the grand hotel for her implausibly shabby home. The poet had dropped five sorts of drugs in his belly swill of alcohol and has imagined his deathless lines commemorating your last Leningrad night.

*Livingston, Montana
February 15, 1991*

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FOOD

Eat or die.

MIKHAIL LERMONTOV

Sporting Food

Small portions are for small and inactive people. When it was all the rage, I was soundly criticized for saying that *cuisine minceur* was the moral equivalent of the fox-trot. Life is too short for me to approach a meal with the mincing steps of a Japanese prostitute. The craving is for the genuine rather than the esoteric. It is far better to avoid expense-account restaurants than to carp about them. Who wants to be a John Simon of the credit-card feedbag? I'm afraid that eating in restaurants reflects our experiences with movies, art galleries, novels, music: that is, experiences that inspire mild amusement but mostly a feeling of stupidity and shame. Better to cook for yourself.

I eye the miniature Lake Superior brook trout I have grilled over an oak fire, the sliced tomatoes, fresh corn, and wild leeks vinaigrette, and think back to a winter day when it was a few degrees above zero and I was out on the ice of Bay de Noc near Escanaba in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, beyond the last of the fish shanties. It doesn't matter how far but rather how long it took to get there—an hour out and an hour back to my hotel, the House of Ludington. Unfortunately, I was caught in a whiteout, a sudden snow squall out of the northwest, and I couldn't see anything but my hands and cross-country skis, a short, broad type called Bushwhackers, which allow you to avoid the banality of trails. I turned myself around and tried to retrace my path, but it had quickly become covered with the fresh snow. I had to stand there and wait it out because the evening before a tanker and a Coast Guard icebreaker had come into the harbor, which meant there was a long path of open water or some very thin ice out there in the utter whiteness. I would most certainly die if I fell in, and that would mean, among other things, that I would miss a good dinner, and that's what I was doing out here in the first place—earning, or deserving, dinner.

I became very cold in the half an hour or so that it took for the air to clear.

I thought about food and listened to the plane high above, which was circling and presumably looking for the airport. With the first brief glimpse of shore in the swirling snow, I creaked into action, and each shoosh of ski spoke to me: Oysters, snails, maybe a lobster or the *Kasseler Rippchen*, the braised lamb shanks, a simple porterhouse or Delmonico, with a bottle or two of the Firestone Merlot or the Freemark Abbey Cabernet I had for lunch . . .

The idea is to eat well and not die from it—for the simple reason that that would be the end of my eating. I have to keep my cholesterol count down. There is abundant dreariness in even the smallest health detail. Skip butter and desserts, and toss all the obvious fat to the bird dogs. But as for the dinner that was earned by the brush with death, it was honest rather than great. As with Chinese food, any Teutonic food, in this case smoked pork loin, seems to prevent the drinking of good wine. In general, I don't care for German wines for the same reason I don't like the smell down at the Speedy Car Wash, but perhaps both are acquired tastes. The fact is, the meal required a couple of Heileman's Exports, even Budweisers, but that occurred to me only later.

Until recently, my home base in Leelanau County, in northern Michigan, was over sixty miles from the nearest first-rate restaurant, twice the range of the despised and outmoded atomic cannon. This calls for resourcefulness in the kitchen, or what the Tenzo in a Zen monastery would call "skillful means." I keep an inventory taped to the refrigerator of my current frozen possibilities: local barnyard capons; the latest shipment of prime veal from Summerfield Farms, which includes sweetbreads, shanks for *osso bucco*, liver, chops, kidneys; and a little seafood from Charles Morgan in Destin, Florida—triggerfish, a few small red snappers, conch for chowder and fritters. There are two shelves of favorites—rabbit, grouse, woodcock, snipe, venison, dove, chukar, duck, quail—and containers of fish fumet, various glacés, and stocks, including one made from sixteen woodcock that deserves its own armed guard. I also traded my alfalfa crop for a whole steer, which is stored at my secretary's home because of lack of space.

In other words, it is important not to be caught short. It is my private opinion that many of our failures in politics, art, and domestic life come from our failure to eat vividly, though for the time being I will lighten up on this pet theory. It is also one of the writer's neuroses not to want to repeat

himself—I recently combed a five-hundred-page galley proof of a novel, terrified that I may have used a specific adjective twice—and this urge toward variety in food can be enervating. If you want to be loved by your family and friends, it is important not to drive them crazy.

The flip side of the Health Bore is, after all, the Food Bully. Several years ago, when my oldest daughter visited from New York City, I overplanned and finally drove her to tears and illness by Christmas morning (grilled woodcock and truffled eggs). At the time, she was working at Dean & DeLuca, so a seven-day feast was scarcely necessary. (New Yorkers, who are anyway a thankless lot, have no idea of the tummy thrills and quaking knees an outlander feels when walking into Dean & DeLuca, Balducci's, Zabar's, Manganaro's, Lobel's, Schaller & Weber, etc.) I respected my daughter's tears, albeit tardily, having been brought to a similar condition by Orson Welles over a number of successive meals at Ma Maison, the last of which he "designed" and called me at dawn with the tentative menu as if he had just written the Ninth Symphony. We ate a half-pound of beluga with a bottle of Stolichnaya, a salmon in sorrel sauce, sweetbreads *en croûte*, and a miniature leg of lamb (the whole thing) with five wines, desserts, cheeses, ports. I stumbled to the toilet and rested my head in a greasy faint against the tiled walls. Welles told me to avoid hat-check girls, since they always prefer musicians. That piece of wisdom was all that Warner Brothers got for picking up the tab.

Later, John Huston told me he and Welles were always trying to stick each other with the tab and once faked simultaneous heart attacks at a restaurant in Paris. In many respects, Orson Welles was the successor to the Great Curnonsky, Prince of Gourmands. This thought occurred to me as I braced my boots against the rocker panel to haul the great director from his limousine.

When my oldest daughter, who had since moved to Montana (where the only sauce is a good appetite), came home to plan her wedding, her mother cautioned the Food Bully, threatening the usual fire extinguisher full of lithium which we keep in the kitchen for such purposes. While dozing, I heard my daughter go downstairs to check out the diminishing wine cellar. (I can't hear an alarm clock, but I can hear this.) Certain bottles had been preserved for a few guests the evening before the wedding: a '49 Latour, a '61 Lafite, a '47 Meursault (turned, but the disappointment was festive), a '69

Yquem, and a couple of '68 Heitz Martha's Vineyards for a kicker. It was a little bizarre to consider that these bottles are worth more than I made the year my daughter was born.

That first late evening, we fed her a winter vegetable soup with plenty of beef shanks and bone marrow. By the next evening, she was soothed enough for quail stuffed with lightly braised sweetbreads, followed by some gorgeous roasted wood ducks. This meal was a tad heavy, so we spent the next afternoon making some not-exactly-airy cannelloni from scratch. Later, I pieced up two rabbits and put them in a marinade of ample amounts of Tabasco and a quart of buttermilk, using the rabbit scraps to make half a cup of stock. The recipe is an altered version of a James Villas recipe for chicken (attribution is important in cooking).

The next evening, we floured and fried the rabbit, serving it with a sauce of the marinade, stock, and the copious brown bits from the skillet. I like the dish best with simple mashed potatoes and succotash made from frozen tiny limas and corn from the garden. The rabbit gave me a thickish feeling, so the next day I broiled two small red snappers with a biting Thai hot-and-sour sauce, which left me refreshingly hungry by midnight. My wife had preserved some lemon, so I went to the cellar for a capon as she planned a Paula Wolfert North African dish. Wolfert and Villas are food people whom you tend to "believe" rather than simply admire. In this same noble lineage is the recent *Honey from a Weed* by Patience Gray (Harper & Row), a fabulous cookbook. Gray's a wandering Bruce Chatwin of food.

Naturally, I had been floundering through the deep snow an hour or two a day with my bird dogs in order to deserve such meals. But enough was enough. I hadn't exactly been saving up for the big one. A cautionary note here, something Jack Nicholson said to me more than a decade ago after I had overfed a group in his home: "Only in the Midwest is overeating still considered an act of heroism." Still, I find it important to go on with eating, not forgetting the great Lermontov's dictum: eat or die.

So I eye the brook trout again and consider my options. It is almost the fall bird season, when the true outer limits of my compulsion are tested. Perhaps when winter comes I will resume running at night, all night long across frozen lakes, trying to avoid the holes left by the ice fishermen.

Meals of Peace and Restoration

I believe it was the late John Wayne who said, “It pushes a man to the wall if he stands there in the buff and looks straight down and can’t even see his own weenie.” I *think* it was John Wayne who said that. However, I’m a poet and a novelist, not a John Wayne authority, and so what if I’m a tad burly? In my childhood we prayed every evening for the starving children in Europe, causing a primitive fear of hunger. There are also the scars from my youthful New York City art wars, when I thought I was Arthur Rimbaud and the average dumpster ate better than I did. And then there is the notion of the French surrealist poet Alfred Jarry: “I eat, or someone will eat in my place.” In any case, I have decided it is time to escape the sodden mysteries of personality and try to help other folks. Not that I really wish to become the Baba Ram Jim of food advice, but something calls me to offer a handful of garlic along the way.

Times have changed. We have seen the passing of the blackjack and the accordion. Few of us sing alone on our porches on summer evenings, watching the sexual dance of fireflies in the burdocks beside the barn. The buzz of the airport metal detector is more familiar than the sound of the whippoorwill or coyote. The world gets to you with its big, heavy, sharp-toed boot. We are either “getting ready” or “getting over.” Our essential and hereditary wildness slips, crippled, into the past. The jackhammer poised daily at our temples is not fictive, nor is the fact that all the ceilings have lowered, and the cold ozone that leaks under the door is merely a signal that the old life is over. There is a Native American prophecy that the end is near when trees die from their tops down (acid rain).

To be frank, this is not the time for the “less is more” school when it comes to eating. The world as we know it has always been ending, every day of our lives. Good food and good cooking are a struggle for the appropriate and, as such, a response to the total environment. Anyone who has spent an afternoon in New York has seen the sullen and distraught faces of