

Collected Ghazals: Poet Jim Harrison regains spontaneity through a fixed verse form

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For about a century, poets have largely abandoned traditional elements such as rhyme, meter, and fixed verse forms in favor of free verse. Yet formal verse retains an ability to attract and inspire contemporary poets. Ted Berrigan and John Berryman, for example, wrote sequences of “sonnets” that nevertheless disregard certain strictures of the form.

Another contemporary poet who was attracted to a received form was Jim Harrison, whose *Collected Ghazals* (2020) was recently published.

Harrison was born in Grayling, Michigan, in 1937. His father was a county agricultural agent, and he developed a lifelong love of the outdoors and of hunting and fishing. After studying comparative literature at Michigan State University, Harrison briefly worked as an assistant professor of English. Once he decided to try to establish himself as a writer, he gave up teaching and lived, at first, in near poverty in rural Michigan. He later divided his time between Arizona and Montana.

Harrison published his first book of poems, *Plain Song*, in 1965. He developed an informal, plainspoken style that abjured pretension and was sometimes blunt. His writing expresses a pleasure in the brute materiality of the world and often describes rural life, animals, and personal experiences.

Harrison later began writing fiction and is perhaps best known as the author of the novella *Legends of the Fall* (1979), which was the basis for the 1994 movie of the same title. Harrison’s novels sometimes feature complex narratives and address themes such as aging, sexuality and threats to nature and human culture. He also wrote or co-wrote several film scripts. His final book of new poems, *Dead Man’s Float* (2016), was published the year of his death from a heart attack.

Although he predominantly wrote free verse, Harrison became attracted to the *ghazal*—a form that originated in seventh-century Arabia—when translations of Persian

poets such as Rumi (1207–1273) and Hafiz (1315–1390) became more widely available in the late 1960s. The *ghazal* is a romantic poem that often expresses the pain of separation or loss. It has five to 15 couplets that stand independently but may be linked thematically. The couplets have the same meter and rhyming pattern and end with the same refrain.

Many of the poems in *Collected Ghazals* appeared in Harrison’s earlier book *Outlyer and Ghazals* (1971). In notes printed at the beginning of the new book, Harrison admits that he disregarded all the rules of the *ghazal* except for the minimum of five couplets. “We choose what suits us and will not fairly wear what doesn’t fit,” he writes, expressing an eclecticism that is also evident in the thematic disunity among the couplets in most of the poems. He chose this form, he says, “to regain some of the spontaneity of the dance, the song unencumbered by any philosophical apparatus, faithful only to its own music.” He succeeded; the modified *ghazal* form sharpened the focus and heightened the immediacy of Harrison’s writing.

Each poem strikes the reader as a collage of disparate images and seemingly unrelated couplets. A single poem might contain horses and chickens, a plane ticket to Alexandria, a fantasy about actress Lauren Hutton, a self-deprecating joke and a disparaging reference to Congress. Between couplets, the mood might shift abruptly from whimsical to rueful to pensive to romantic. Although some juxtapositions are intriguing, others are merely disorienting. But nearly every couplet, whether it conveys an observation or a wish, offers an element of truth.

The following couplets may begin to give a sense of Harrison’s voice:

*I want an obscene epitaph, one that will disgust the Memorial
Day crowds so that they’ll indignantly topple my gravestone.*

...

*We'll need miracles of art and reason to raise these years
which are tombstones carved out of soap by the world's
senators.*

...

*From the mailman's undulant car and through the lilacs
the baseball game. The kitchen window is white with
noon.*

...

*These losses are final—you walked out of the grape arbor
and are never to be seen again and you aren't aware of it.*

...

*She wants affection but is dressed in aluminum siding and
her
edges are jagged; when cold, the skin peels off the tongue
at touch.*

...

*I resigned. Walked down the steps. Got on the Greyhound
bus
and went home only to find it wasn't what I remembered
at all.*

One major theme that emerges throughout is Harrison's deep feeling for nature. He is attentive to the motion of a river around a rock and the way in which a skein of leaves scatters light on the ground. His images of nature do not exclude brutality. We see a bear eating a sheep and a deer suddenly wounded by a gunshot. He indulges in silliness in one poem by crawling around to understand animals' perspective and in fantasy in another by becoming a frog.

Love and sex are recurring themes as well. Most frequent are sexual fantasies or memories of past encounters, but moments of tenderness and romance (replete as well with historical and social suggestion) also arise. "When we were in love in 1956 I thought I would give up Keats / and be in the UAW and you would spend Friday's check wisely," he writes strikingly. In another poem, "I hold your / hand and watch suffering take the very first boat out of port." But he does not hide or apologize for his lust, nor does he refrain from insulting women (or men, for that matter) when he is angry. Harrison frankly acknowledges the human reactions that we all have.

Another theme is manual labor. Harrison, the son of an agricultural agent, describes farm work often and with sensitivity. For example: "Out by the shed, their home, the Chicano cherry pickers / sing hymns on a hot morning." Another poem mentions a man harnessing horses and drawing a wagon of wheat. In the same poem, "She forks the hay into the mow, in winter is a hired girl /

in town and is always tired when she gets up for school." Harrison mentions industrial work as well. In addition to the auto industry, Harrison refers to loading green beans all night in a canning factory. These glimpses of workers' lives are refreshing and encouraging.

Also positive are Harrison's expressions of political rebellion. He rejects President Richard Nixon and fantasizes "that that nasty item, [Spiro] Agnew [Nixon's vice president], is retired to a hamster farm." Harrison amusingly pictures himself as "a poisoned ham in the dining room of Congress." One of his hikes is marred by his fear of stepping into a hidden missile silo, and he calls for a way to earn a living without "blowing my whole life on nonsense." Commendably, Harrison refuses to accept the given political order and desires a more fulfilling and humane life for everyone. In this regard, Harrison compares favorably to contemporary poets, who generally espouse identity politics when they address politics at all.

The poems appear to date from the 1970s and bear certain marks of that period. The tide of radicalism and left-wing militancy of the late 1960s was ebbing, and a period of reaction beginning. Many erstwhile radicals, particularly those of the middle class, became discouraged and withdrew from politics. They began focusing on themselves rather than on social concerns. These trends find reflection in Harrison's *ghazals*. We hear a note of pessimism in lines like "Those poems you wrote won't raise the dead or stir the / living. ..." In Harrison's desire to "walk deeply into forests" with a woman to "eat animal meat and love," one might hear a turn from activism toward hedonism. Yet he is too restive to give up the fight and too attached to the social world to renounce it.

Perhaps the greatest strengths of the poems in *Collected Ghazals* are Harrison's frankness and close observation of the world around him. Reflections on his regrets, desires and difficulties are balanced by attention to the natural, social and political worlds. This balance, and the way that Harrison used the *ghazal* to preclude coherent narrative, is a refreshing contrast with the sometimes-self-involved confessional poetry of that time. Harrison's moments of pessimism are counterbalanced by humor and a restless desire for life in all its variety.



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