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Introduction

Yet it is not until the inner-most core is reached that the meaning of the whole is revealed, and, as one penetrates deeper and deeper . . . layer upon layer is seen . . . each with a character of its own but which can be fully understood only in relation to the others. | Herbert Weisinger, *Tragedy and the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall* (1953)

Although I should probably know better, in considering Jim Harrison's writing career, it's difficult for me to separate the man and his words or to sufficiently remove myself from the impact of knowing both the author and his work. But then I've never considered myself academically fashionable or, for that matter, dispassionately or clinically objective, so why start now? And, though my willful confusion of means and ends might be troubling, unsettling, and even embarrassing to Harrison, who has usually insisted on the priority of the written work over the cult of personality, he has himself managed to complicate issues even further by claiming: "We become what we write." The inverse of this is that we write what we become. Either way, the two are joined at the hip. In setting out to introduce Gregg Orr and Beef Torrey's landmark resource book, *Jim Harrison: A Comprehensive Bibliography, 1964-2008*, I am mindful of Rick Bass's statement in his 1998 essay "France" where he tries to explain how much Harrison means to him as both a friend and a writer: "I can't imagine him not ever being here," Bass concludes. In this moment of bibliographic celebration, what follows is a minority report—part confession and part observation—on the curative power of authorial friendship. It is my praiseful story, and I am sticking to

it, though I suspect that it speaks for many of Jim's readers, each of whom will have their own twist on the tale.

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Recently, after taking some knocks on the head from seismic personal upheavals and the allover gravitational pull of geezerdom, which has a tendency to dull even our sharpest edges, I thought life had lost its juice and what remained were only bruised skins and rinds, the kind of dispensable leftovers that exited the back door of Gatsby's mansion after one of his extravagant bashes. At the risk of sounding ridiculous, I knew I was in a grievous slump when, watching a dozen improbably large trout slurping down newly hatched mayfly duns on Montana's Beaverhead River, I felt none of that jangling anticipation that, no matter how skilled or experienced you are, accompanies casting a tiny dry fly on light tippet to a pod of gorging fish. Witnessing trout on the feed, counting heads as they effortlessly pick off floating insects, is usually enough to jazz me because it's a known fact that angling expectations increase exponentially with the size and frequency of rising trout. My funk at being out of step with the rhythms and abundance of life around me seemed to come and go during the next two weeks, as it had all summer, but the fishing—normally effective and reliable therapy for what ails me—seemed to be somehow unfulfilling, monotonous, even—God forbid—trivial and frivolous. Clearly, a fire had banked and some part of me turned to ash. Meanwhile, I muddled along and eventually fished my way to Jim Harrison's in Livingston, where we were meeting for our annual foray after Yellowstone River trout.

In the months before his fourteenth book of fiction, a novel called *Returning to Earth* (not to be confused with his 1977 poetry chapbook of the same name), was set to appear, Jim had started a comic novel called *The English Major*, and he was relatively deep into the handwritten manuscript when I showed up at the Harrison house. He had redefined contractual relations with his publisher (Grove/Atlantic) and had gone through a series of complex negotiations with a new literary agent in New York, and as a result he was working no less intently but certainly less obsessively than he had in the past. ("Got exhausted and extremely enervated by my own novel," he told me a year earlier. "Can't write six days in a row anymore without popping my skull.")

So his new regimen last summer, a routine with which he seemed reasonably comfortable, was to write four days a week (mostly a page a day on the fiction, but with inevitable side trips into poetry and essays), then decompress

by fishing on the other three. He had once again arranged his schedule and that of his master trout guide and angling partner, Dan Lahren, to coincide with my visit (and those of about a dozen other visitors who came through Livingston that summer). Fishing sixty days a year (ninety when he was younger) is Harrison's way of combating the rigors of writing and offsetting the incessant demands and numbing effects of what he regularly refers to—ironically and self-deprecatingly, I should add—as the “literary life,” especially its potential for suffocating his central drives in a “mud bath” of peripheral seductions, against which he remains as vigilant as possible.

Nowadays, fishing is a Harrison “panic hole,” an idea he adapted from Gerald Vizenor's novel *The Trickster of Liberty*: it's that place—literal or metaphorical—“where you flee to get back the present as a wild season rather than a ruse,” he claims in his 2001 essay collection, *The Raw and the Cooked: Adventures of a Roving Gourmand*. To put it in more pedestrian terms, as he did in a brief preface to a special issue of *Men's Journal* on “Hideouts, Dream Towns, and Great Escapes,” a panic hole is a hiding place “where you can shed the usual accouterments of your attitudes and personality, where you can rid yourself of the banality of your day-to-day perceptions.” It can be a locality or a state of mind, or both. So fishing is Harrison's refuge, passion, and antidote. “The only way I can erase everything. . . . I think it's a Taoist thing,” he informed the interviewer Lindsay Ahl in a recent issue of *Bliss* magazine. “A river has such an acceptance of mortality and it's such an aesthetically overwhelming thing that you don't think about anything else. . . . [Fishing] erases everything impossible in your life.” Angling and water gazing help fill the tank and keep the keel even: “I turned down being on Cannes jury this year because I MUST be on the Big Hole River in May,” he wrote me earlier in the season. Perhaps only an angling addict can understand the implacable logic and utter sanity of such a move. Indeed, fly fishing is one of the well-fingered obsessions around which Jim built his 2002 memoir, *Off to the Side*. He is the person, after all, who wrote the poetic treatise on rivering, *The Theory and Practice of Rivers*.

What I found out in Livingston—not that I had ever totally forgotten it—is how difficult it is to be depressed or dispirited in Jim's company. He says of Julip Durham, one of his fiercely independent female characters, that in a world of hemophiliacs she's a blood transfusion. Not to put too melodramatic a spin on this, Harrison too can have that kind of effect. He has a way, in his high-calorie, chain-smoking, gravel-voiced, go-for-broke manner, of completely filling the space he inhabits and sweeping you into it, for better or for worse, whether you are ready or not.

So the truth is that three days of float fishing the Yellowstone River in Lahren's Lavro driftboat (always enjoyable even if the fishing is so-so, as it was last summer) is really the least part of our yearly visit. Although fishing is an essential shared bond between us, a kind of bedrock of like-minded interests—especially our partiality to brown trout (*Salmo trutta*) and our dislike of any kind of competitive, one-upmanship air—I'd be lying if I did not say that for me the heart of our visit is elsewhere: in nonstop gabfests and lively banter; running commentary, mostly sardonic and humorous and frequently off-color, on the foibles and fiddle-faddle of the usual suspect male topics, which is to say, food, sex, politics, culture, nature, and dogs. And, because Harrison is a master raconteur and hypnotic talker, there is a barrage of animated reminiscences, anecdotes, yarn spinning, and story-telling, all with his characteristic digressions and looping, multidirectional tangents. (When Patrick Smith and I conducted interviews with Harrison in 1997 and 1998, the typescript of our audiotapes ran to well over 150 pages. Shaping a final version of sixteen thousand words for *Conversations with Jim Harrison* took several months, during which time we learned that, where Jim is concerned, the digressions *are* the story. Though he has a reputation for being gruff, imperious, and elusive, we could not have asked for a more candid, generous, and voluble conversationalist, as the annotated list of interviews included in this bibliography attests.)

But our locker-room banter doesn't paint the whole picture. There are also fabulous meals on which Jim and his wife, Linda, lavish so much attention and care that the course and arc of a whole day might be organized around an evening at their long harvest table. The dining room's ceiling-tall windows frame the Absaroka Mountains on the eastern side of Paradise Valley, across the Yellowstone River. It's what realtors mean when they say: "Location, location, location." (Even claustrophobic Jim admits to a sense of freedom in that breathtaking setting, where it is possible to see for miles.) After a stretch of serious angling, dinner is not just a welcome reward but a symphonic experience. In Jim's case, because he and Dan swap rowing chores, fishing is not only a contemplative Waltonian activity but a strenuously physical one as well. In the grand scheme of things, there is nothing like rowing a driftboat or casting a fly rod a thousand times a day to build a suitably deserving, guilt-free hunger.

And it isn't just eating as a routine feed-your-face activity but dining rightly and gloriously well. Judging from the number of food and wine columns listed in this excellent bibliography, cooking with gusto and imagination and savoring the results is not just a way of life but lifesaving. "I like

to think that my eating and drinking comprise a strenuous search for the genuine, that I am a voyager, an explorer, an adventurer in the ordinary activity of what we do every day: eat and drink,” he announces in *The Raw and the Cooked*.

Life, according to Harrison’s signature mantra, is best approached with “more red wine and garlic.” It’s all been vividly detailed in Jim’s fiction, where many of his protagonists find refuge and diversion in cooking or learning to do so—Nordstrom in “The Man Who Gave Up His Name” comes immediately to mind. In his copious essays his fellow food and wine impresarios Mario Batali, Russell Chatham, Guy de la Valdene, Peter Lewis, Gerard Oberle, and his own culinarily gifted family members (Linda Harrison and daughters Jamie and Anna and their husbands, Steve and Max) appear often, so I can’t add much in the face of those intimate experts except a few weak tea impressions. The particularity, the specificity, of meals, with their complex preparation, their collage of tastes, smells, and textures, sets an overarching tone for our visits. Fishing, cooking, writing: they are all of a piece. “You’re a dead duck if you don’t love the process,” he’s said on many occasions.

Mornings are a bit rushed so we can get to a launch site ahead of other boats (we despise being crowded or fishing in another boat’s wake), but breakfast is always simple and hearty and not exactly low fat in content because it usually involves fresh sausage (from one of Guy’s fattened and sweetened feral pigs) or bacon (obtained from an outstanding local butcher shop) and skillet-fried potatoes unearthed from Linda’s garden (sometimes in duck or goose confit, sometimes not). Lunches I’ll get to shortly. Dinners are off the chart and too elaborate to do justice to here, though, when the house is awash with the tantalizing odors of cooking—fresh chile verde, spicy Thai chicken, sautéed abalone, or roast shoulder of lamb—and bustling with the work of many hands, I sometimes feel that I am inside one of Jim’s food essays, and I can’t decide whether life imitates art or the other way around. It’s a happy dilemma, and, fortunately, I don’t really have to choose; being in the moment seems luxury enough. Whatever, it is hard not to smile inwardly, give thanks for such largesse and fellow feeling, and ride the dining car as far as it will go.

Lunches, too, are right up my alley because in the fifty years I’ve been traipsing through the outdoors (an alternate universe to my academic life) I’ve never found anything that compares with eating at midday something I’ve carried to the woods or water. Senses are keener after a morning of trout fishing, appetites sharper after following a zigzagging pointing dog through

grouse cover. Jim, too, knows the drill because he might have invented it: fennel and oregano salamis and culatello from Armandino Batali's Salumi in Seattle, crusty artisanal breads and sharp imported cheeses, and the ever-present bottle of Trappy's delectable pepperoncini for our alfresco dining, laid out without fanfare, monogrammed silverware, or hoity-toity Orvis pretentiousness on top of Dan Lahren's well-traveled portable cooler. "We're American sportsmen," Jim jokes, "and need to keep up our strength to battle these great fish." We're in on the joke and fall to.

Anchored at river's edge miles east of Livingston, watching the great (and thankfully as yet undammed) Yellowstone roll by, listening to wind in the cottonwoods carrying the *yucka-yucka-yucka* of a red-shafted flicker or the piercing cry of a circling osprey, I began to feel that life had regained some color and vibrancy—and urgency as well. Not full-fledged healing, but a beneficial shift in attitude and perspective. If I hadn't become the bitter wine, as Rilke councils, at least some of my impossibilities had been erased, and life began to matter again. I resisted being naively optimistic as long as I could, but spending time at the Harrisons'—maybe it's better to call it *hiding out*—is good for the soul if not the liver and waistline.

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Among American novelists and poets Jim Harrison is the epic bard of epicureanism, the sweet singer of imbibement, the grand nabob of gustation—in short, he is America's poet laureate of appetite. "The way you eat," he told the *Paris Review* interviewer Jim Fergus, "bespeaks your entire attitude toward life." That's typical of Harrison—he lays what matters right on the table. In fact one of the happiest-looking author photos I have ever seen is on the cover of *The Raw and the Cooked*. Jim Harrison is smiling ear to ear, glass of red wine in hand, bottle of Louisiana hot sauce at the ready, and the entire table in front of him at his beloved Ajax Diner in Oxford, Mississippi, set as far as the eye can see with home-cooked fare. He's being challenged by all that deliciousness, I imagine, by all that's spread before him, and can't wait for the good work of tasting to begin. In the end, for the man who told the interviewer Kay Bonetti in 1984 that his defense against the world was to build a sentence out of it, food equals language, and language equals food, which is, of course, an invitation for us to taste his words and for him to invite another episode of gout or begin another radical diet. "Eat or Die," as his column title puts it: despite what our elders tell us, the path of excess sometimes leads to wisdom.

For the man of appetite, the sybarite of experience, the whole world is a

sensory smorgasbord. With Jim Harrison, the good work is far more than mere taste-bud gratification. He's a glutton for experience; everything is grist for his writerly mill. A brief parable that prefaces *The Raw and the Cooked* is entitled "The Man Who Ate Books." There is something especially fitting and arresting in that image because it characterizes Harrison's edible take on the world, his self-confessedly "fatal" appetite, not just for food and unalloyed physical experience, but perhaps more than anything else for language, for the life of the mind, for the sustenance that feeds the soul as well as the body: "There were books in the schools, where our young hero had taken to reading one every day, sometimes two, while totally neglecting his other studies. There were also many books at home but at home he was forbidden to tear out the endpapers and chew on them, which he sneakily did at school. Endpapers were his gum and candy."

The narrator of Harrison's novella "The Beast God Forgot to Invent" says of the wounded Joseph Lacort: "He's literally taking bites out of the sun, moon, and earth." I take that to be a self-referential statement because I know few other people with a more insatiable curiosity for life or a greater hunger to devour life in as many of its varied guises and obsessive forms. Eating, drinking, tasting, become the central somatic metaphors and processes that link all the writer's compelling pursuits, as he reveals in the introduction to *The Raw and the Cooked*:

I love to cook, hunt, fish, read good books, and not incidentally try to write them. Even the occasional glories of our sexual lives can be drawn into this picture. Not that much is finer than a morning spent at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York or the Musee d'Orsay in Paris followed by a good lunch. All of our senses and passions merge because we are one person and it's best not to neglect any of those passions if we wish to fully live our lives.

And yet, for every reference to organic processes, sexual practices, natural places, animal denizens, or bodily functions in Harrison's work (references that have caused some critics and reviewers to brand him as crude, sexist, earthy, brutish), there are equally frequent allusions to the world of art, literature, philosophy, history, cinema, and music. When Philip Caulkins, the narrator of Harrison's novella "The Beige Dolorosa" (included in *Julip*), takes on the task of renaming American birds (he believes that, with the exception of the elegant *trogan*, *whimbrel*, and *Hudsonian godwit*, their names are too pedestrian), he christens the curve-billed thrasher "the 'beige dolorosa,' which is reminiscent of a musical phrase in Mozart, one that makes