

Winter 1992

## *Just Before Dark* by Jim Harrison

Mary Vanek

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

---

### Recommended Citation

Vanek, Mary (1992) "*Just Before Dark* by Jim Harrison," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 37 , Article 43.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss37/43>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).

## **Just Before Dark**

Jim Harrison

Livingston, Montana: Clark City Press, 1991.

\$24.95; cloth.

Reviewed by Mary Vanek

Jim Harrison's *Just Before Dark*, his sixteenth book, is handsomely bound between hard covers by Russell Chatham's Clark City Press. It's a true joy, a door opening up a number of different thresholds to this poet and novelist's sometimes frenetic world. In three sections, having to do with food, travel and sport, and literary matters, Harrison builds up and peels apart a series of fascinating personae. These pieces of nonfiction give us—Harrison's devoted and sometimes unbalanced fans—a chance to hear him unburden himself on any number of subjects. Mostly, though, these essays are bulletins from the different points in our republic where Harrison has managed to rescue himself. Along with his survival, we, too, find one more avenue of escape into the world that actually matters, the separate places we make for ourselves furnished with totemic items, home recipes, and quotes from writers who tell us certain home truths.

In "Part I: Food," Harrison astounds and astonishes with complicated, exacting recipes for everything from a "reduced-calorie Tuscan stew (very savory lean Muscovy duck, *pancetta*, white beans, copious garlic, fresh sage, and thyme)" to "preparing roast quail stuffed with leeks and sweetbreads (served on a polenta pancake with a heavily truffled woodcock sauce)." The point is, as Harrison says, "to eat well and not die from it—for the simple reason that that would be the end of my eating."

With the body handsomely provided for, Harrison goes on to tackle more troublesome matters in "Travel and Sport." Fishing and hunting have restored Harrison's mental balance more than once by his own account. It is the last three essays, though, that speak most plainly to me. "Log of the Earthtoy Drifthumper," "Going Places," and "Don't Fence Me In"—all accounts of road trips undertaken for

their own reasons—close out the sporting middle of the book with Harrison's peripatetic recipes to cure what ails our dislocated souls these days. From the precise images of "a big coyote with a blood-wet muzzle settling down for a stint of car-watching," to the good advice of "Leave your reason, your logic, at home," to the assurance that "Driving into emptiness keeps you at least a few miles ahead of your neuroses," Harrison's sure-footed, cinematic prose offers avenues of escape into the back country of our own homeplaces.

Harrison saves his own home ground for the final section of the book in "Literary Matters." The last two substantial essays key on the metaphor of survival: "Poetry As Survival," and "Dream As Metaphor of Survival." "Poetry As Survival" goes on to find beauty and hope in Native American poets' accounts of the various reprieves they find themselves working their way through. In the poetry of Louise Erdrich, Simon Ortiz, Joy Harjo, and James Welch, Harrison sees "the kind of poetry that reaffirms your decision to stay alive." Harrison's final word on his own survival comes in his definition of the novelist's struggle "to convince the reader that the nature of character is deeply idiosyncratic to a point just short of chaos, that the final mystery is the nature of personality." Harrison's own richly complicated personality, as reflected in his work, "began to revolve around more 'feminine' subjects, the acquiring of new voices, and away from a concern with the 'men at loose ends' that tends to characterize the fiction of most male writers."

And that is how Harrison chooses to end this remarkably candid collection of essays—with twenty-one short summaries of sometimes intimate dreams. His own survival as a writer and a human being comes from his ability to "offer my family, my writing, my friends, a portion of the gift I've been given by seeking it out, consciously or unconsciously."

In this collection of recollections, Harrison crosses all his thresholds of perception, exploring himself for his readers. With a single

exception—"A Chat With A Novelist"—these essays enlighten and enlarge the worlds of both reader and writer. This book is that rare treat: a well-marked map of the best route home. It assures us we will arrive at the hour of peace and contentment with the promise of a fine supper and dear friends to share our good stories with, just before dark.