



## JIM HARRISON

### Mixed Coniferous Forest Osceola County, Michigan

*By Camden Burd*

“**W**hat we think of our hometown is our first substantial map of the world,” Jim Harrison wrote in his 2002 memoir, *Off to the Side*. A hometown takes the misshapen clay of a person and molds them, stands them up, and positions them in some vague direction. For Harrison, that was Reed City, Michigan—a rural town in Osceola County, situated in the northern portion of the state’s lower peninsula—where his family lived for much of his childhood. It was there, in a region defined by poor soil, long winters, and geographic isolation, where Harrison would cultivate the literary perspective that informed his essays, poetry, and novels.

There was nothing romantic about life in central Michigan at the middle of the twentieth century. It was rural, not wild, and definitely not idyllic. Hardship abounded. Harrison remembered ever-present poverty, in his family and with others. “Fate has never ladled out hardship very evenly,” he wrote. “Symmetry, balance, ultimate fairness seem to be abstractions remote to our occasionally naked sense of reality, as startling as walking out of a crisp and idealized civics class at a country school and into a lavish party of congressman and lobbyists.” He recalled eating at friends’ homes—minimal meals that included catsup

sandwiches or a plate of beans. It is no wonder that his boyhood heroes included Eugene V. Debs and Walter Reuther.

But Harrison did not conflate sympathy with sentimentalism. He never waxed nostalgically about the inherent values of his neighbors. Poor residents of rural Michigan—like their wealthy counterparts—could steal, lust, and lie too. Reed City also exposed a young Harrison to the tragic throughline of humanity. After a childhood accident involving a feuding neighbor and a glass bottle, he lost vision in his left eye. The accident, and a subsequent failed surgery, left him in a severe state of depression that would come and go throughout his life. Years later, his father and sister were killed in a car accident while driving on a Michigan highway. For Harrison, the human experience was defined by hardship—which was not shared equally.

The environments of northern Michigan provided temporary respite from his own depression and the realities of rural life. Amid the scattered forests and fields surrounding Reed City, Harrison found a landscape that absorbed him. “The natural world would always be there to save me from suffocating in my human problems.” He believed that wandering the woods, studying birds, fishing, and a general curiosity for the natural world could “lift you out of your self-sunken mudbath, the violent mixture of hormones, injuries, melancholy, and dreams of a future you not only couldn’t touch but could scarcely see.” It is important to note that Harrison rarely framed such excursions as an antidote to the modern world. His conception of nature did not fit the simplistic framework of civilization versus wilderness—a dichotomy he believed mostly spoke to upper- and middle-class men who invented the concept to bolster their own ideas of masculinity. “There is nothing quite so fatuous as a man self-consciously trying to act manly,” he writes in *Off to the Side*. Harrison immersed himself in the natural world for one simple reason: “Because that’s how I grew up.”

After several fits and starts Harrison received undergraduate and graduate degrees from Michigan State University. He worked in publishing for a short time in Boston and later received an offer to teach at SUNY Stony Brook. But he couldn’t shake the landscapes of his youth and, after two years of teaching, moved back to Michigan, first to Kingsley and then to a farm in Leelanau County. He regularly visited a small, remote cabin near Grand Marais. In *Off to the Side* he notes that these places “would appear nondescript and scrubby to those who favor the cordillera of the Rockies but to me it was homeground, similar to the terrain around Reed City where I had grown up.” Grand mountain ranges seemed almost vain to the writer, who preferred a bedraggled forest on sandy soil. The excursion into the natural world was not about summits or vistas. It was about losing oneself in the commonplace environments he knew near Reed City.

## JIM HARRISON

**Born:** December 11, 1937, in Grayling, Michigan

**Died:** March 26, 2016, in Patagonia, Arizona

**Forms:** Poetry, Novels, Memoir

**Recommended Works:** *Legends of the Fall* (1979), *Dalva* (1988), *The Road Home* (1998), *Jim Harrison Complete Poems* (2021), *True North* (2004)

Settled in northern Michigan and connected to the landscapes of his youth, Harrison found literary momentum. He wrote his first novel, *Wolf: A False Memoir*, in 1971 and quickly followed with *A Good Day to Die* (1973), *Farmer* (1976), and *Warlock* (1981). The author preferred to focus on characters of unassuming backgrounds: bad farmers, lazy detectives, floundering professionals—nearly all of whom suffered from a life crisis or deep depression. All his characters were flawed. Most were unlikeable.

Harrison’s protagonists were poor, and those who weren’t carried traits that signaled to readers the politics that Harrison had carried since childhood. The protagonist in *True North* (2004), David, spends his life rebuking his family’s legacy—lumber barons who clear-cut the forest of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula during the region’s mining boom. He despises his inherited wealth, disowns his father (a sexual predator), and commits his entire life to researching his family’s environmental destruction. It is mostly a solo project, a type of penance for inheriting the family name. Over the course of several decades, David stewes, guilty and ashamed. He only finds temporary relief by staying in an austere cabin in the dense northern woods where he can take regular walks and escape his own “self-sunken mudbath.” In *True North*, as in many of his other works, these woods are the landscapes where Harrison’s characters find brief sanctum.

The author’s own relationship to Michigan’s rural landscapes can be seen through his characters. In short, they wander in the woods to cope with their own traumas. The forests and fields, like those near Harrison’s boyhood home, helped to lift the cognitive baggage of life. As he noted in *Off to the Side*, the landscape could “draw away your poisons to the point that your curiosity takes over and ‘you,’ the accumulation of wounds and concomitant despair, no longer exist.”

The place consumes you so that your mind can’t. Exploring Harrison’s boyhood landscapes, I couldn’t help but feel the scenic humility. Osceola County’s forests and prairies never stuck me as particularly iconic or overwhelmingly picturesque. However, while meandering through the brush, tall grasses, and stilted pine, I found that time had been distorted, my consciousness muted. And in my own navigation of these landscapes, I also came to understand how they had been foundational in shaping Harrison’s “map of the world.”