



# Dear Jim...

An Essay by Kelly Vaughn  
Photographs by Scott Baxter

## It started this way, Jim:

*There might be an interesting story for the magazine down there. Jim Harrison, the writer, lives next to the Bergers and uses one of their old ranch houses to write in for the last 20+ years. He winters in Patagonia & summers in Livingston, Montana. He wrote, "Legends of the Fall." Just an idea. He seems a bit of a character. Just a thought.*

Verbatim. An email from a friend, photographer Scott Baxter. We worked on a project about ranchers, and the connections grew from there. Nearly a year after his note, we sat on your porch in Patagonia, watching you watch birds. There were hundreds of them, and you knew their names, rattling one off every now and then between long, choking drags of your American Spirits. You smoked so much that day, I thought your lungs might fail in front of me, heave one final *Come on, Jim*, and give up.

We talked of commas and *Legends* and Paris, and you settled into the role of writer being written. You'd been there before, but you were gracious in the retelling of your wildest stories.

I remember the way the light sifted through the cottage windows, air coated in gossamer dust, the glass bottles and cactuses and horseshoes and rugs. The jaguar skin. The books. The ephemera of story and time and language. You wrote in ink on plain sheets of paper.

At one point, you looked out into the yard. I remember a tree. More birds. You let me look over your shoulder — a line about a woman wearing lavender.

Minutes later, Scott made your portrait. I stood near the tree, I think, and watched.

You flirted with me a little, comfortable as an old man with a loose tongue. We bantered.

I don't remember a breeze, but it was March, the gray area between winter and warm. Shortly,

you'd head back to Montana, but in those moments in Southern Arizona, the light began to fade and the trees began to darken. We drove to your favorite bar, and when we got out of the car, you wrapped your arm around me, introduced me to your friends as your new bride. Eye rolls and laughter and the start of stories about you and Hunter S. Thompson and a handful of other contemporaries.

In theory, I should never have liked you. The naturalist Bukowski, free with your stories of women and wine. You were rough, occasionally vulgar. You smelled of smoke and your skin had started to yellow and the part of me that wasn't in awe of you was a little bit frightened.

But you wrote from your bones, your own marrow into poetry, novellas. And you made me believe that there was something to writing. That storytelling really was something romantic, magic even. So, there, at the Wagon Wheel Saloon, I loved you a little.

That August, our story was published. I sent you a copy and never heard anything. I figured that you never read it. In my heart, though, I hoped that you had, then used it as a coaster for a fat glass of Bordeaux.

On the morning of March 27, 2016, Jim Harrison, I read you were dead. I cried. For the loss of you, of course — and the loss of the marrow, too. No one, for me, will ever write about birds or sky or grass the way you did:

### BIRDS AGAIN

*A secret came a week ago though I already  
knew it just beyond the bruised lips of consciousness.  
The very alive souls of thirty-five hundred dead birds  
are harbored in my body. It's not uncomfortable.  
I'm only temporary habitat for these not-quite-weightless creatures.  
I offered a wordless invitation  
and now they're roosting within me, recalling  
how I had watched them at night  
in fall and spring passing across earth moons, little clouds of black con-  
fetti, chattering and singing  
on their way north or south. Now in my dreams  
I see from the air the rumped green and beige,  
the watery face of earth as if they're carrying  
me rather than me carrying them. Next winter  
I'll release them near the estuary west of Alvarado  
and south of Veracruz. I can see them perching  
on undiscovered Olmec heads. We'll say goodbye  
and I'll return my dreams to earth.*

You died in Patagonia, there along the creek where you walked, where the birds came to visit, where you told too many stories and smoked too much.

I keep looking for the woman in lavender. **AH**

EDITOR'S NOTE: A version of this essay originally appeared on Songbirds Southwest: The Women's Writing Project ([www.songbirdssouthwest.com](http://www.songbirdssouthwest.com)).

