



Leaping Ghazals and Inside Jokes Concealed in Tropes

by JAMES WHITEHEAD

Of the ten recent volumes of poetry that have given me the most delight as *books* of poetry, Jim Harrison's *Outlyer and Ghazals* (Simon & Schuster, \$5.95; paperback, \$2.45) may not be the best but I came back to it again and again. The idea of ghazals by a poet who reminds me of Richard Hugo, Robert Huff (the most underrated poet in America) and Theodore Roethke is passing strange. Ghazals, indeed! Arabic-Turkish-Persian-Michigan ghazals. I thought ghazals were made of rhymed couplets, five or twelve couplet stanzas on a theme. Harrison's ghazals don't rhyme and they vary in length—and, whatever they are, they are marvelous: the leaping ghazals of a furious imagination and intellect working out of northern Michigan, LXV ghazals plus eight other fine poems including "Outlyer":

He Halts. He Haw. Plummets.
The snake in the river is belly up
diamond head caught in crotch of
branch,
length wavering yellow with force of
water.
Who strangles as this taste of present?
numen of walking and sleep, knees of
snow
as the shark's backbone is gristle.
And if my sister hadn't died in an auto
wreck
and had been taken by the injuns
I would have something to do:
go into the mountains and get her
back . . .

"Outlyer" and the six other poems at the front of the book (and before the ghazals) are akin to the poems in Harrison's first two books, *Plain Song* and *Locations*. The solitary man

in nature (though sometimes in the city, where most often he is unhappy)—the solitary man *per se* (though often envired by women and children, and lovers)—, Li Po a little high on Wild Turkey or neat Jack: imagination as salvation, but without the self-pity and/or super-beasthoodness that characterizes much of the new Neo-Romantic poetry. Harrison takes a terrible pleasure in himself as a moral creature. Man and beast in the rounds of their dying—Harrison can tolerate it. He can celebrate it. Harrison at his best is right there with James Dickey and Hugo and Huff and Roethke.

From the "Ghazals":

My father is dead and doesn't care if
his vault leaks,
that his casket is cheap, his son a poet
and a liar.

(from II)

This won't do; farmlife with chickens
clucking in the barnyard,
lambs, cows, vicious horses kicking
when I bite their necks.

(from XXVII)

I'm going to Stonehenge to recant, or
from the manure pile
behind this shed I'm going to admit to
a cow I've lied.

(from VI)

R.H.W. Dillard's second book, *News of the Nile* (University of North Carolina Press, \$3.75), is wonderfully zany and wise. He takes on ideas that come from anybody from St. Augustine on up (or down) to Bram Stoker. And he has the intelligence to make the terror light and the morality a graceful act, and strange. Dillard is not surreal and he's far from camp—but what is this, besides a pleasure:

After the Election, A Dry Season

Toad sweat and wart water,
Old blister, the pond

Shrunk to its thick center,
Its broken bank, snake holes,
The jerked frogs and hard scum.
The autumn ducks fly by
Sun bound and water true;
The white fowl are dead
In ragged weed and dry dirt.
This water holds no sky.

The poem above suggests the regionalism in some of Dillard's work, a regional idiom carefully controlled and carried by a music carefully tuned—but ultimately he's closer to Wallace Stevens than he is to Robert Frost or Robert Penn Warren. (Warren's *Audubon: A Vision* is the finest long poem I've read in years, the one that faces nature with the cold eye of love and the dread of a civilized man.)

Dillard often makes the perfect decoration for an otherwise dull reality—he often shows how lovely an ornament is the real, the plain—and often, as in "Downtown Roanoke," he is just funny as hell:

The furniture store across the street
From the main fire house has burned
Nearly to the ground three times.
The smoke hung low and red, the red
Stop lights blinked, but no sirens
Were required in downtown Roanoke.

And the title poem is a marvelous imaginative workout, a language play to delight the most fastidious eye and ear:

The Nile flows north. A train runs
north
From Roanoke to Chicago. The snow
Is like cold satin. There is a gibbous
moon.
North to Chicago, towards Minnesota
Where the Mississippi oozes from a
frozen bank
And wanders south, to Wisconsin
Where August Derleth prints the books
Of Lovecraft, dreamer of *The Book of
Thoth*,
The Necronomicon, lost work of Abdul
Alhazred,

JAMES WHITEHEAD is the author of *Domains*, a book of poems, and *Joiner*, a recently published novel, his first.

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