FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Incomplete Knowledge
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In seeking to make sense of the world, Western intellectual tradition has celebrated the power of reason and the rational mind. Yet pivotal moments arise in life when the most formidable assembly of facts is useless, and its capacity for explication can neither console nor convince. Death, and even more so, suicide, are subjects that rouse bafflement, fear, and anger—while rational analysis remains inadequate to relieve the disorder left in their wake. Poetry dares to enter such volatile, dimly lit places where reason fails. With his new volume of poems, the author embarks on a relentlessly inquiring journey into the shadow zone in which the rational mind is ill at ease, beyond "the sum of names and data, vast and unknowable."

Harrison has written three previous poetry books; his debut collection was chosen by James Merrill for the National Poetry Series. He has also received fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, in addition to two Pushcart Prizes, the Amy Lowell Traveling Poetry Scholarship, and Lavan Younger Poets Award from the Academy of American Poets.

Elegy infuses his latest work, as Harrison marks a chapter of relinquishing people and places he has loved—the essential coordinates that serve to locate the self in the world. A grandmother sinks into dementia, friends are lost to illness; and most devastating of all, his brother Andy kills himself at age forty-seven: "The undertaking of his suicide / a task / beyond understanding / exerts its force / like a huge dark moon / we hadn't known before / but whose pull / will never release us." It's a season of jeopardy, when the familiar turns unpredictable. Even home has become a site of risk, as the narrator unpacks in a strange, new house where "a drunk driver knocks the mailbox down / and I kill a snake in the basement, / its mottled body writhing on the slab. / All before we've even moved in."

In several poems, Harrison scans the sky like a man who knows that the forecast for fair weather can't be trusted. In "My Personal Tornado," for example, he writes of "[h]eart attack, car accidents, / a lump in the breast felt / in the morning shower / the maelstrom of sudden unemployment, revelation of a spouse's unfaithfulness, vortex of divorce—we all have one, /

it's just a matter of when it hits / and how." There's an uncanny resonance with Rilke's famous poem, "Evening," in which the darkening sky becomes a symbol of transformation ("leaving you … your life anxious and huge and ripening"). Harrison examines a wilder, more furious horizon, where the jaundiced sky "starts spinning" and "screaming peels the roof off your life and leaves you / cowering naked in its roar." Yet no matter how chaotic the process itself, above all, this collection is about navigating change—and finally, about survival.

There's bravery in cataloging all the things one cannot *know*. The word *know* turns up again and again in these pages. Its repetition builds an agitated, restless sense of search—a litany of questions without answers. Harrison crafts an exquisite tension, integrating an emotionally combustive narrative with taut and elegant form. The poetry asserts itself as a defiantly creative act in the face of loss, and in that way, trauma finds reconciliation in language. In "The Investigation" about the aftermath of his brother's suicide, Harrison uses the villanelle's circular reiterations to convey grinding bewilderment and anguish. It's as if the reader were eavesdropping on the narrator's most private, internal obsession, with the insistent gnaw of the line "[I would never] know" and then, the refrain: "let it go." This poem stands as a powerful example of how, in the right hands, formal structure can serve content.

Ultimately, in Harrison's poems, when the gaze shifts away from the safety of what is *known*, a different kind of comprehension comes into focus. If knowledge is accepted as "incomplete," a vast field—free from the fences of definitions and names—opens to discovery and awe. In the book's title poem, for instance, he writes: "I misplace facts as easily as my glasses, / so the world seems blurred for a while— / but then I find them, put them on, and go outside / to greet the ten thousand things … no less amazed / for my not being able to keep them straight."

Even in grief, his work moves irresistibly toward inquiry, full of yearning and thus, the appetite for life. In his elegy "To Kenneth Koch," the poet addresses his "first and best teacher" with the lines: "I have your poems that never stop asking / 'So what is the ecstasy / we are allowed to have in this one life?'" The tenacious scrutiny and wonder of questions in this book are Harrison's most potent homage.

Melanie Drane