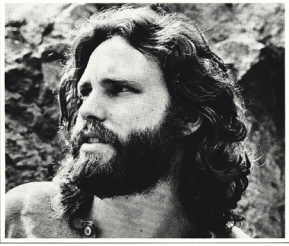


# Pilgrimage to the Lizard King

Jody Kennedy

AN AMERICAN PRAYER  
**JIM MORRISON**  
 MUSIC BY  
**THE DOORS**



The Doors

“Ghost Song”

An American Prayer

11/1978

Elektra / Asylum Records

I had been in Paris a few times already but always seemed to find an excuse for not visiting Père Lachaise Cemetery where one of my old imaginary flames, Jim Morrison, the lead singer from The Doors, was buried. *Paris, France.* The hotel where I was staying was in the Marais neighborhood, just off of Rue Saint-Antoine and not far from 17 Rue Beautreillis where Jim had been found dead in the bathtub at his then girlfriend's apartment. He was twenty-seven. His once beautiful skin turned pale blue Krishna, Rama, Shiva. Overdose at the time reported as heart failure. In the months leading up to that last breath in that bathtub in the apartment on Rue Beautreillis, there had been long walks alone in Paris, there had been the losing of his beer and mashed potato belly, and the shaving off of his beard. It had been like a partial rebirth, a new dawn, except for what seemed to be a continuing struggle between abstinence and not, between booze and air, creation and destruction.

Leaving the hotel, I started in the direction of the Bastille. I was thirty-six, thirteen years sober, and trying to get over a love affair that had begun doomed and ended impossible. He was French (born in Versailles not far from the Sun King's palace), a decade older, a madman, a drunk, and a genius, who lived 500 kilometers east of Paris in Strasbourg, France. *Paris.* The weather that day in Paris was mild and the metro didn't feel like a hellscape the way it sometimes felt like a hellscape especially on hot, rush hour days going down at stations like Châtelet-Les Halles, the Gare du Nord or the Gare de l'Est. There was a train change at the République and onto another line that took me closer to Père LaChaise Cemetery. *Père Lachaise.* Père Lachaise (actual name, François d'Aix de la Chaize) was the confessor of King Louis XIV, the infamous Sun King. François d'Aix de la Chaize, I would later learn, wasn't even buried at Père Lachaise but was interred at the Church of Saint-Paul Saint-Louis not far from Jim's then girlfriend's apartment on Rue Beautreillis.

*At Père Lachaise Cemetery, on a map near the entrance, I find you: James Douglas Morrison, Division 6. I wander narrow cobblestone alleys. I lose my way. I turn in circles. I pass tombs old as sin, mausoleums with clouded windows, gorgeous tarnished bronze angels side-ways glancing, plane trees, and moss, abundant green moss. I'm nervous, if I wasn't so nervous I'm certain my intuition would lead me straight to you. Finally. Voilà. There you are. A uniformed guard stands watch over your grave. I didn't bring flowers. I didn't bring any childish keepsakes or souvenirs. I only brought myself and my hard-earned sobriety. When I was fourteen, I would have knelt at your grave, stayed more than an hour, stolen a handful of dirt, mixed it with spit and rubbed it across my eyes, my cheeks, my belly. When I was fifteen, I would have left love poems, cut up my arms with my grandmother's broken plates, chain-smoked cigarettes, drank beer and cried (I was a melancholy drunk, the one you always found sitting at the far picnic table during clandestine parties in the neighborhood park on Friday nights).*

At fourteen, I found a copy of the Jim Morrison biography *No One Here Gets Out Alive* by Jerry Hopkins and Danny Sugerman and fell in love. I called Jim James though, not the Lizard King, and not any of the other names any of the other women called him. James: complicated, mystical, and broken (*like my father*). I'd never met anyone like him, not in my Madison, Wisconsin suburb anyway. I became his cohort even though he'd been gone already nine years, even though he was old enough to be my father. I conjured his ghost. We stayed up late into the night and I would steal his dream about the accident on the highway, Native Americans scattered on the ground, bleeding, and he would say things to

me like, "Awake / Shake dreams from your hair / My pretty child, my sweet one / Choose the day and choose the sign of your day / The day's divinity / First thing you see,"<sup>1</sup> and "I pressed her thigh and death smiled,"<sup>2</sup> and I knew what he meant about death smiling because I had said those same words to Adam when I was Eve in the garden long ago.

*I wanted it both ways. Drunk and sober, sexual and mystical. I wanted roses in my garden. I wanted my veins to explode. (Death makes angels of us all and gives us wings where we had shoulders smooth as raven's claws.)<sup>3</sup> I wanted you to plunge me into the abyss and pull me out fresh. I didn't want you fallen. I didn't want you lifting the skirts of strippers at your favorite go-go bar. I wanted you for me.*

James and I planned to be together forever, riding it out like some kind of Romeo and Juliet, all the way to the end, destruction, death, oblivion. But I started to fall out when he gained weight and grew a big beard. It was too much for my adolescent sensibilities. Greek gods weren't supposed to gain weight and grow big beards. They were supposed to stay fresh and fuckable. So, I ended up leaving James for more ordinary boys in popular rock bands all the while still trying to stay one step ahead of my darkness. As it was, Jim never could have led me out of the darkness. He could have only taken me deeper into confusion and madness. (*Be careful what you pray for, O Lovely One.*)

*I managed to live past twenty-seven (the famous 27 Club), didn't die at thirty like predicted, and finally, after hitting the skids some time into sober, stopped planning my exit. The only way out of the darkness is through it, a friend said. That. Was. It. I didn't want to have to come back and do it all over again.*

It wasn't until sixteen, after having obsessively looped *An American Prayer* (especially "Ghost Song") for so long, that I finally realized Jim was gone, that not even a flicker of his flame remained. *What other dreams died with you, James? Would you have set your An American Prayer poems to different music?<sup>4</sup> Do you ever miss Paris? Or are you back, reincarnated, and doing it over again?* Sadly, at thirty-six, I would have loved Jim overweight and bearded, an imperfect god, and I could have told him that, yes, death does make angels of all us, but addiction makes us orphans.

*James Douglas Morrison, Division 6, Père Lachaise Cemetery.* There seemed to be people everywhere, coming and going, milling around, curiosity seekers and worshippers, a real transatlantic (et al.) highway. *I just wanted to be alone with you one last time and now it seems so obvious that you never belonged to me. Maybe love means letting every last illusion go, yes (come what may).* "Godspeed, James," I whispered and blew a kiss heavenward, then wandered off to meet Guillaume Apollinaire (I was still a fickle girlfriend sometimes) and take a picture of the heart-shaped calligram (one of my favorites) inscribed on his gravestone that read, "*Mon cœur pareil à une flamme renversée.*"<sup>5</sup>

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1 "The Ghost Song," *An American Prayer* (Elektra/Asylum Records 1978 LP).

2 "Lament," *An American Prayer*.

3 "A Feast of Friends," *An American Prayer* (Rhino, 1995 CD).

4 *An American Prayer*, Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/An\\_American\\_Prayer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/An_American_Prayer) (last modified 26 July 2020).

5 "My heart like an upside-down flame."