

Hallucinatory Effects

By Richard Hell

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Jim Carroll died at the age of 60 a year ago. Rumor has it that his death had something to do with liver damage due to substance abuse. If that is incorrect, repeating it here is no more or less unfair than the way he himself massaged the facts of his life for public consumption. Carroll was a product of his imagination, like many of the best poets (Col. Tom Parker, Guillaume Apollinaire, Josef von Sternberg), and he was one of the best poets. There's a parallel time and world inhabited by those who understand that all information is legend, that experience is show business. That's why Hollywood is the dream factory and Carroll's first commercial poetry collection was "Living at the Movies" (and perhaps why his "Selected Poems" is called "Fear of Dreaming"). He lived in his head. Doesn't everyone? The difference is that he knew it.

Carroll was famous for his "Basketball Diaries." The first publication of that book, an obscure small-press edition that came out when he was 28 (though he claimed to be a year or two younger), contained a disclaimer that said the diaries were "as much fiction as biography. They were as much made up as they were lived out. It all happened. None of it happened. It was me. Now it's you. 'Nothing is true; everything is permitted.' " When the book was brought out by a commercial publisher two years later, that admission had been removed. The Penguin edition I have states on the back cover that he wrote the diaries between the ages of 12 and 15 and that Jim, during those years, "chronicled his experiences, and the result is a

diary of unparalleled candor that conveys his alternately hilarious and terrifying teenage existence.” As John Ford put it (in “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance”), “Print the legend.”

Carroll was a continuous generator of entertaining anecdotes featuring himself. It beat working. The stories paid for his drugs, and the drugs helped underwrite the poetry. The central matter is that Carroll could tell a story as well as anybody around, no matter how he arrived at his repertory, and furthermore, even more important, he could write a poem. He lived among the poets of history, of life, not the accountants or the police officers. He was a con man, but all artists know that, significantly, they are bedazzlers, masters of illusion. Beautiful poetry isn’t life, but it’s pretty to think so. Carroll wanted to be pure, and poetry is the definition of purity. He made it. His poetry is ultra-distilled, 200 proof. The ultimate proof. The proof of everything. He proved it.



Jim Carroll Riccardo Vecchio

Apparently, Carroll was working on this new book for more than 20 years: he presented a passage from what he called a novel in progress at a reading in 1987, and its main character had the same name, Billy, as this one's. Those pages brought thrilled gasps and happy laughs from the adoring crowd. It seemed he might well make the transition from poetry and "diaries" to great novels.

In some ways "The Petting Zoo" is "poet's fiction," like that of Rilke or Nerval — the genre of a poet's shift to prose in passionate, often elegiac, quasi autobiography. Carroll is, like Nerval, attractively a magpie of shiny poetical scraps of mythology and historical anecdote. Nerval cites Swedenborg, Apuleius and Dante on the first page of "Aurélia" as precedent guides to the dreams and spirit world that underlie ordinary life. Billy's guide is an immortal talking crow, and Carroll, 20th-century boy, arrays his novel with gleamings like "*l'appel du vide*" ("the call of the void," that allure of the abyss surrounding each skyscraper); John Garfield's death, "under shadowy circumstances, in a whorehouse in France"; and "milky quartz" (the composition of crystalline boulder formations found exclusively, according to Carroll, on the slopes of northern Manhattan).

In comparison with the run of literary novels, though, this one is clumsy. It feels formless, as if the writer were following every association that occurs as he proceeds. The characters seem like puppets, and the sentences are often lumpy and strained. Its strongest discernible structure is in its correspondence to Carroll's being, to his history and sensibility and psychology. That's irrelevant and unfair as literary assessment, but it seems more meaningful to read the novel that way than from any critical standpoint. The book is a mess, but moving and poignant as insight into its author. You feel the autodidact trying to measure up, to alchemize his hard-earned experience and knowledge into fiction. It's about an unschooled young New York artist whose talent gains him early fame, but who dies in a crisis of fear that he's betrayed himself spiritually.

The beautiful excerpt that Carroll presented in 1987 is the strongest example of the book at this raconteur's set-piece best, but it doesn't appear in the novel as published (Carroll was still "putting the finishing touches" on the book when he died, an editor's note says). It told of Billy on a bus in the rain. The young stranger

sitting next to him boasts of being a writer. Billy turns “his head to the window to completely seal himself off,” and then turns back, asking, “How many people have you disappointed?” The kid fumblingly calculates on his fingers before replying: “I’ll say eight. Eight people.”

“He faced Billy. Billy was right there waiting.

“ ‘I’ve disappointed thousands.’ Billy spoke firmly, slowly, right at the kid, who seemed suddenly so much younger in every feature, but in his lips especially. ‘Literally thousands.’ ”

THE PETTING ZOO

By Jim Carroll

327 pp. Viking. \$25.95

Richard Hell’s new artists’ book is “Disgusting.”

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