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Death of a Poet

Saying goodbye to Jim Carroll.

By *Gerald Howard*

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*Jim Carroll*

I went to Jim Carroll's wake and then to his funeral. It's what one Catholic boy does for another. Conventionally described as a "punk poet" (although there was nothing punk in the least about his Frank O'Hara-influenced/Arthur Rimbaud-inflected verse), Jim died this past Friday of a heart attack in his apartment in upper Manhattan. They found him at his desk, and those of us who loved and admired him like to think that he was putting the finishing touches on his long-awaited novel, *The Petting Zoo*.

If Jim Carroll's name means anything to you, it is probably as the author of the

electrifying memoir of teenaged misadventures and heroin addiction in '60s New York, *The Basketball Diaries*. It was made into a mediocre film in 1995, redeemed by a searing performance by Leonardo DiCaprio that was nevertheless deficient in one conspicuous respect: Leo did *not* have game, and his lame attempt to imitate the graceful All-City ballplayer that was Jim turned out to be an embarrassment. The musically inclined will remember Jim's terrific 1980 rock album *Catholic Boy*, which featured that anthem of early and grisly urban demise, "People Who Died." Cognoscenti of downtown culture knew Jim as a literary prodigy who was publishing his poems and diaries in the *Paris Review* in his teens. He was a fully paid-up member of New York's hip aristocracy, Lou Reed's peer, Patti Smith's lover, Allen Ginsberg's acolyte, Robert Smithson's friend, permanently welcome in the Valhalla of Max's Kansas City's back room. And I had the pleasure of publishing most of his work when I was an editor at Penguin in the '80s.

Tall, slim, athletic, pale, and spectral as many ex-junkies are, Jim was a vivid presence in any setting. He was a classic and now vanishing New York type: the smart (and smartass) Irish kid with style, street savvy, and whatever the Gaelic word for chutzpah is. The line of succession runs from Jimmy Cagney and Jimmy Walker through Emmett Grogan and Al McGuire. In the '30s they would have cast him immediately as a Dead End Kid—he certainly had the unreconstructed accent for the part, an urban rasp that was sweet music to my aboriginal ears. He came up athletically in an era when New York produced the best basketball players in the country—and a lot of them were white. Despite playing his high-school ball for a Manhattan prep school, Jim could more than hold his own on some of the toughest playgrounds in the city against the likes of Lew Alcindor and Dean "the

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Dream" Meminger. But his street-kid affect never quite hid his essentially generous and vulnerable nature and his poetic soul.

I thought of Jim not as my doppelgänger, exactly—that would have been ridiculous. But we were the same age, came from similar backgrounds (his old man was a saloon keeper; mine, a cop), and had something of the same spoiled altar boy's worldview, and we both worshipped at the dual shrines of the Roundball and the Word. I brought his astonishing first collection of poems, [Living at the Movies](#) (1973), and [The Basketball Diaries](#) (1978) back into print and edited his next collection, [The Book of Nods](#) (1985), and his raffish and absorbing "Downtown Diaries," [Forced Entries](#) (1987). That book had a fun legal read, all right: I had to convince our skeptical lawyers that the polymorphously perverse, joyously substance-abusing cast of characters were libel-proof (and that in any case they might sue if they *weren't* seen snorting and screwing everything and everybody in sight) and that the minimally disguised Warhol "superstar" depicted jabbing a syringe full of amphetamines right through her mumu was unlikely to come forward. Plus, you know, she actually *did that*. I've never published a more scabrously entertaining book. Jim and I lost touch mostly after I left Penguin, but his editor Paul Slovak kept me abreast of Jim's activities and his declining health. For all that, opening the page to the obituary in the *Times* was a shock to the system. Surely he (and I) would be forever young?

Jim Carroll was waked (in a blessedly closed casket) in a funeral home on Bleecker Street before a few dozen family, friends, and fans. The grief and loss was even thicker in the air than usual at these affairs. After the priest led us in prayers, Jim's ex-wife, Rosemary, invited people to share their thoughts and memories. New York rock legend Lenny Kaye gave a moving mini-eulogy that touched on Jim's gifts as a raconteur and evoked his sweetness, ending with the famous line from "People Who Died:" "I salute you, brother." Two members of the original Jim Carroll Band, Terrell Winn and Steve Linsley, reminisced about hooking up with Jim in Bolinas, where he'd retreated to get clean, and crafting the triumph of punk sound and poetic sensibility that was the album [Catholic Boy](#). Richard Hell marveled at the early arrival of Jim's gifts and expressed his admiration and astonishment. I spoke of just how much fun it was to be Jim's editor, fun being about as easy to experience in publishing these days as smoking in Mike Bloomberg's New York, and remembered the best Fourth of July of my life, when I played basketball in the Village all afternoon, showered, got good and ripped, and saw the Jim Carroll Band tear it up at the Ritz in their first New York appearance a few days after Scott Muni had unveiled "People Who Died" on WNEW-FM.

And then Patti Smith got up, her star power dialed down, and told a simple funny story about her first encounter with Jim, who had proceeded to recite for her a long section of Whitman from memory until he ... nodded ... off ... for about half an hour. Patti, "because I was a polite girl," sat there patiently until Jim awoke, and then he picked up exactly where he'd left off. This perfect vignette perfectly delivered, Patti turned to the casket, laid her hand on it gently, and and said, "Jim, when you get up there, say hello to Allen, and to William, and to Gregory,

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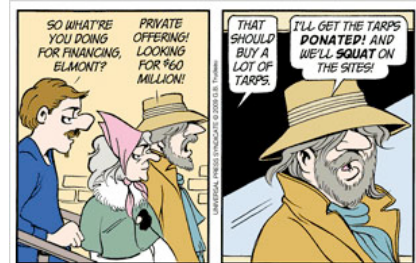
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and to Herbert [as in Ginsberg, Burroughs, Corso, and Huncke]. And to all our friends." That's when we all cried.

Patti did it to us again, at the funeral mass held the next morning at Our Lady of Pompeii on Carmine Street. The gaudy Italian baroque interior was well-stocked with the now somewhat aging band of '70s and '80s artists, hipsters, and fans—the one-time loyal customer base of CBGBs, Area, Danceteria, the Mudd Club. It felt like the *Soho News* should have been covering the event. But there was, surprisingly, no discordance whatsoever between the ultra-Catholic setting and old-school service and the worldly, transgressive-minded congregation. On this occasion, in honor of the man who sang passionately of being "a Catholic boy/ redeemed through pain, not through joy," the sacred and the profane joined hands. Jim's work and life were always at bottom quests for grace, and in a real sense he never left the church, which in any case will always welcome back its prodigal sons and daughters. After the consecration and the communion (which I, against all the rules that I recall very well, went up to receive for the first time in four decades), the priest invited Patti Smith and Lenny Kaye up to the podium. And with Lenny strumming his acoustic guitar, she sang her gorgeous song "Wing" as if it were a hymn, as if had been composed to complement the "Ave Maria" that had been sung 10 minutes before:

And if there's one thing
could do for you
you'd be a wing
in heaven blue

To quote the song's refrain: "It was beautiful/ it was beautiful."

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Gerald Howard is a book editor in New York.

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