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Book Reviews

THE DEATH OF JIM LONEY. By James Welch. New York: Harper and Row, 1979. 179 pp. $8.95.

> We need no runners here. Booze is law
> and all the Indians drink in the best tavern.
> Money is free if you're poor enough.
> Disgusted, busted whites are running
> for office in this town.
> . . . .
> Goodbye, goodbye, Harlem on the rocks,
> so bigoted, you forget the latest joke,
> son lonely, you'd welcome a battalion of Turks
> to rule your women.
> —from "Harlem, Montana: Just off the Reservation," James Welch

The Death of Jim Loney opens under Montana fall rains that wipe out a year's harvest and slog down a high school football game. As the town boys lose 13-12 on a fumbled fake kick at the goal, no time outs left, a local carps, "We're shit out of luck." To men drinking later in the Servicemen's Bar, the "moral victory" of such defeat adds up to an "Indian joke," the blue humor of living through loss. Welch's second novel continues "the sad same life of Harlem," a wilderness ghetto where a twenty-year old, warped booster sign flaps beside the highway, "WELCOME TO HARLEM, HOME OF THE 1958 CLASS B CHAMPS." The sad plot is a search for home in no man's land, haunted by ghosts from an unsettled past.

A rootless, lonely dispossession troubles Indian and White alike in this novel about a deadend "breed." Slipping a few years and scattered places on from the anonymous narrator of *Winter in the Blood*, the novelist this time names his protagonist Jim Loney, a tease on Welch's Christian name, a play with nicknaming him "The Lone Ranger" in a bar, a pun (loon, lunar, lonely) on a "funny name," his girlfriend muses, watching her sleepless bedmate doze like "a dark hummingbird at rest." Somewhere in the night Jim's Indian mother is locked up in "that damn bug-

house" for lunatics, as the local cop later handcuffs Rhea to the radiator in her classroom. "Loney, Loney," Rhea murmurs, staring at a moon waning the lonely companionship of sleepless lovers: a half-breed isolato and a Texas millionaire's run-away daughter teaching high school English in Harlem, Montana. "Lucky" Loney, Rhea dubs him, "you can be Indian one day and white the next. Whichever suits you." With a Hemingway twist Loney defers, "It would be nice to think that one was one or the other, Indian or white" (p. 14). The narrative keeps the reader guessing and mildly alert to small things that seem to count and that people count on, like the years. Loney remembers being 9 or 10 when his father left, then seeing Ike (the "I like Ike" termination years?) 12 years later, and telling of all this "fourteen years ago." So, again Welch's protagonist is roughly the artist's age, 35 or so, but *not* the artist.

Jim Loney cries in his sleep, "I'm small." By day he's wolfish, a "mongrel, hungry and unpredictable, yet funny-looking," thinks Myron Pretty Weasel, an ex-basketball teammate: "that quick animal glance, always alert, yet seeming to see nothing" (pp. 81-82). Indians, too, are caught up in Indian myths. Out of the "breed" stereotype, Loney comes half wild animal from the reservation (his prodigal mother Eletra Calf Looking, a Gros Ventre fury, though a "whore" was "as good a goddamn woman as the good lord ever put on this poor earth," the ex-husband swears) and half poor white trash from Harlem (his "scrawny" father, now a 62-year old bar fly who lives on pasteurized American cheese, reminds one of Huck Finn's scurrilous Pap, "the worst type of dirt," his son knows). Genders cut between bitches and bastards. Mothers and daughters run away like wild creatures; fathers and sons hang around, to no good. Transient women, sister and lover, want to rescue and hide Loney away in opposite coastal cities, Washington, D.C., and Seattle, Washington, mirroring capitals named for great White and Red "fathers." Kate, the successful six-foot "breed" business-woman, "lean and striking as a dark cat," lives for the "present" alone, a dusky princess tired of telephones, travel, and male "fuck games." This maternal big sister flies into Harlem to salvage her brother on the skids; the green-eyed girlfriend, Rhea, makes her own plans for Indian rescue. But Loney can't go anywhere, since he has no place to leave, and exiled from his past, he has no future. "He thought of his earlier attempts to create a past, a background, an ancestry—something that would tell him who he was" (p. 88). Loney lives as no man, nowhere, a kitchen drunk asking for "nothing" to end it all, as the first snow turns "blue in the dusk," running down the gutter next morning.

> It always startled Loney that when he stepped out of his day-to-day existence he was considered an Indian. He never felt Indian. Indians were people like the Cross Guns, the Old Chiefs—Amos After Buffalo. They lived an Indian way, at least tried. When Loney thought of Indians, he thought of the reservation families, all living under one roof, the old ones passing down the wisdom of their years, of their family's years, of their tribe's years, and the young ones soaking up their history, their places in their history, with a wisdom that went beyond age.
>
> . . .He had no family and he wasn't Indian or white. He remembered the day he and Rhea had driven out to the Little Rockies. She had said he was lucky to have two sets of ancestors. In truth he had none (p. 102).

Nothing matters in this novel of small revelations. Everything, in detail, remains local, down-played, and real to ordinary life. The brown-eyed basketball coach "never seemed to get upset, just sadder as his teams continued to break his heart" (p. 40). Even the mountains here are diminished "Little" Rockies. "It wasn't the end of the world," Rhea's grandmother would say, "but you could see it from here" (p. 11). The two-engine Frontier puddle-jumpers skip in and out of dusty northwest towns, mostly off-schedule; the local cop from California wants a "safe, warm life," makes model airplanes and housewives, drinks beer with the football coach, arrests drunks, and eats TV dinners; the bartender drops mothball jokes. A North Dakotan carries a turd in his wallet for ID, Kenny Hart quips, in a state that claims the housefly as its regional bird. And Hank Williams twangs 24 of his Greatest Hits on Myron Pretty Weasel's car tape deck: "I'm so lonesome I could die." With all this, Loney makes the best of a "plain" life in a kitchen smelling "the faint sourness of a man who lives alone": the day-to-day reliefs of a sometime girlfriend, a glass of bourbon, fall rain, a losing Friday night game, the first snow on Saturday. It is a season when washing hangs frozen on the clothesline. "Loney hated the cold the way some people who had to live on it hated deer meat, hopelessly and without emotion" (p. 49). These events anticipate worse things to come. To revise an Ojibwa song,

> As my eyes
> look over the prairie
> I feel the winter in the fall.

At the fall end of greening seasons, the traditional color of regeneration darkens blue toward death: the promise of distance in Rhea's eyes "the color of turquoise," Jim thinks, "and he wondered at their coldness, but in that morning light they were the warm green of alfalfa" (p. 13); Kate's

green-penned last paragraph in a typewritten letter about coming to save him; Ike's green teardrop trailer, his "home"; last year's Christmas sweater from Rhea never taken home, "dark green with red deer marching across the chest" (p. 42). It is a small, consequential point that Ike first remembers Eletra "like a sleek animal" dressed in doeskin around "young bucks" (p. 141). Loney ends his life plugging from "a green bottle" of Rhea's Scotch, hunted like a deer in a land where mad red women run wild.

These "mean" characters average small-town American life in a tawdry common denominator. Happiness for Kenny Hart is "a bar full of good people having themselves a real good time" (p. 93). Neither low enough to reach tragic depth, nor high enough to reveal insight, the monotony of common events picks away at these people's lives. Rhea makes it through another week, then another fall, cleaning Tampax from her gym locker, gossiping over the Trojan condom found in Colleen's desk after lunch. "It had been a long time; not a bad time, just a vaguely discontented time" (p. 7). Time to move on. Like the cheap painting that hangs over her bed, Rhea slides through life a midly passionless woman "waiting for something to happen," a Dallas blonde with a literary M.A. from Southern Methodist, who munches English muffins and keeps warm through northern nights beside her half-breed "Southern gentleman." The third party in this affair is a deaf old dog, Swipesy, who eats tomato soup, never barks anymore, and freezes to death in the mud on Thanksgiving, "his mouth open and his blind blue eye staring up at nothing" (p. 53). A man's best friend, his urban totem, foreshadows the man's end.

This novel is almost too real. Little ironies intersperse a poetry of inarticulations: "Their bodies touched on the narrow bed, yet they did not touch each other" (p. 43). "He knew her but he didn't know much about her" (p. 156). "She was a mother who was no longer a mother" (p. 175). Such a language of dying labels could fall flat if pushed for effect, but Welch unpretentiously states things as the half-living half-know them, or *don't* know: ". . .I realized I didn't know anything," Loney says to his deaf dog. "Not one damn thing that was worth knowing" (p. 18). Still, the truth about commercializing Christmas and eating white bread along empty Thanksgiving streets seems too easily known, a cliché to our common understandings. "Christmas makes for strange barfellows," Loney muses (p. 93).

> There was something determined about Harlem as it readied itself for the Christmas season. Except for a few decorations—a red cellophane wreath with an electric candle in the Coast-to-Coast store, children's cutouts of

> snowflakes in the laundromat window, and a cardboard Santa pointing out Buttrey's holiday items (hard candy 59¢, tinsel 29¢, hot buttered rum batter 89¢)—and the fact that the stores stayed open until nine every evening, it was hard to tell that a season of joy had visited itself on the community. But the weekly *Harlem News* proclaimed the event with a notation beside the weather box: "Only 12 More Shopping Days Till Christmas, Joyeux Noel." And there were kids on the streets.
>
> Kenny Hart was shaking Christmas trees in the Lions Club lot beside the Texaco station. He had read somewhere that if you could shake the needles loose, then that tree was too dry (p. 92).

Naturalism finds its limits here; to speak too little of the common malaise isn't quite enough. The bar jokes aren't as bizarrely funny in a novel whose plot and style seem left-over from the first. It takes two North Dakotans to eat a rabbit: "One to watch for cars." Street terms like tit, crotch, nuts, turd, poopface, and shithouse truncate the everyday data of small lives in small places, where Zane Grey and Mickey Spillane provide the male reading matter of bars, barbershops, and bathrooms, along with a smattering of *Argosy, Field and Stream, Reader's Digest, Hustler,* and *The Legion Magazine*.

Though persistently and powerfully James Welch, *The Death of Jim Loney* seems more self-consciously interior, less gutsy in detail than *Winter in the Blood*. The second novel's focus is less sharp, with less sense of place, ear for dialogue, and particularizing narrative voice. We are told that Jim Loney is half-Indian, but in voice and consciousness he could as well be a Mayflower descendent in up-state New York. The novel comes across more as ideas than execution, a sociological interior monologue neither as edged nor bitterly engaging as *Winter in the Blood*. In uneasy mix with pulp fiction, Joyce's Stephen Dedalus influences the plot at times (the opening football game, Jim's mission school and boarding house adolescence, the dark bird foreshadowing Icarus' fall in Loney's dreams), as though this novel were Welch's portrait of the drunken artist as a not-so-young Indian. Thunderbird wine induces Jim's rotgut visions, Mogen David for holidays. The novel opens with an epigraph from *Under the Volcano* about galloping away to someone you love "into the heart of all the simplicity and peace in the world"—the tragically sentimental dream of Malcolm Lowry, the novelist of drunks, the slow suicide.

Like a surreal play, much of the action and passage of time take place off-stage, in gaps between chapters, and the corny bartender at Kennedy's serves as a low-comic stage manager. The novel tightens and quickens by mid-point, the plot congealing, prose toughening, but the overall sting is

less penetrant than Welch's first fiction. The novelist goes inside Loney's mind to the extent of muffling his story, blurring his prose, imitating a boozy reality too closely: "Loney felt nothing but the warmth of the wine and a mild regard for the country they passed. It was a shallow country, filled with hayfields, thickets, stands of willow, and leafless cottonwoods that marked the course of a river without movement" (p. 113). Jim lives a life without friends, just "cronies," screwing Colleen in the car at a rodeo and leaving her sprawled in the backseat to go drink beer.

> It wasn't much of a life, but he had done those things, and when he bathed he had felt clean, and when he walked downtown he had looked forward to something. Maybe that was it. The "something" never happened and he had ceased to look for it. But why couldn't he have gone on with that life? The others, his cronies, did, and given the wear and tear of years, had survived. Somewhere along the line he had started questioning his life and he had lost forever the secret of survival (p. 155).

There are real gaps in conversations, real smears in a drunken consciousness, while Loney drinks to feel nothing, and numbness steals over him, "a general forgetfulness of all but the most whimsical detail, the most random thought" (p. 109). As his hands begin to shake from wine, cigarettes, and sleeplessness after thinking for a month, Jim Loney "saw things strangely, yet clearly," an amnesiac with tangled, troubling dreams. "But the days piled up faster than the years receded and he grew restless and despondent. But he would not concede that his life had added up to nothing more than the simple reality of a man sitting and drinking in a small house in the world" (p. 21).

"A real dream made of shit," Loney concludes (p. 119). To Rhea he laments, "I want to make a little sense out of my life and all I get are crazy visions and Bible phrases. They're like puzzles" (p. 105). So as a stranger coming to a stranger, he confronts his father with questions about a phantom mother. "What do I know that you'd want?" Ike challenges his son. "I'm an old man. I was born to buck and broke to ride. It's all over" (p. 139). With grainy pathos Jim toasts his "sonofabitch" father, "to the way we are" (p. 142). The tautological solution is to commit and exorcize one's own crime, not the sins of the fathers. "And Loney knew who the guilty party was. It was he who was guilty, and in a way that made his father's past sins seem childish, as though original sin were something akin to stealing candy bars" (p. 146). On a "pheasant" hunt for deer, the "wolfish" Loney mistakes Pretty Weasel for a bear—a sad totemic confusion for a warrior—and shoots him. Blasting the window of Ike's green trailer and some of his father's face with a shotgun old as

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Jim himself, the Oedipal-bred Loney makes love to Rhea one last time and goes south to Mission Canyon on the reservation, where he picnicked with a preacher's family and once seduced Rhea in a parked car.

Loney can't say he loves Rhea because "there was no place to take it." "I have to leave, he thought, but he held her as though to prevent her from slipping away" (p. 154). A dispossessed man who must run, but can't leave someplace not there, he fears others leaving him as he drives them off, so he clutches at a displaced self trying to run away. "'Good bye,' he whispered, and he didn't weep and he didn't feel corny" (p. 156). The tragedy is a loss of place, simply said, "home"—the heritage of land, family, clan, tribe, spirit world turned alcoholic nightmare. And the doubly tragic solution is ritual death, betrayed by "an old bastard" father—cathartic for a reader who suffers with Jim Loney, potentially self-destructive for one who identifies too personally.

With his father's "perfect bird gun" and Rhea's Scotch in below zero weather, Jim prepares his own murder at the hands of a tribal cop, Quinton Doore, a sadistic "thug" who edged into reservation police work. "It had been a long night and the sky gave no indication that it was about to end." "He stopped and caught his breath and took one last look at the world. And it was the right light to see the world, halfway between dark and dawn, a good way to see things, the quiet pleasure of deciding whether the things were there or not there (pp. 166, 167). To die, definitively, is to end a mean existence. "This is what you wanted," Loney thinks at last. "And he fell, and as he was falling he felt a harsh wind where there was none and the last thing he saw were the beating wings of a dark bird as it climbed to a distant place" (p. 179). The myth of an Adamic falling Icarus informs this Hemingway out, a *denouement* to end it all, with a touch of Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*:" . . .it was like everything was beginning again without a past. No lost sons, no mothers searching" (p. 175). It is an old American myth, too often reality, repeatedly fictionalized: a violent end to a life of troubles, death a "place" to go "home" to a lost mother. Richard Slotkin traces the psychohistory of America in *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*, and A. Alvarez tracks this violence in a history of Western suicides, *The Savage God*, to name only a few from diversely related contexts, Magua, Ahab, Jesse James, Crazy Horse, Joe Christmas, Gatsby, Dillinger, Berryman and Plath.

And still one questions why. A suicidal culture hero, drawn from an American frontier fascination with "rich regenerative violence" (William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain*), can perpetrate despair's self-destructive truth along with stereotypes of the blood-thirsty savage,

noble redskin, cigar-store stoic, and vanishing American in the wilderness of Harlems of Native America. A reader must consciously work away from these images toward the end of civil war on reservations, the control of alcoholism, the reversal of a sense of dispossession. To be sure: to see and give voice to the truth of suffering takes the first moral step of an historical fiction whose muse is truth. "We're neither of us bad guys," Loney thinks of Indians drinking ill-humoredly in a bar; "just adversaries, that's all" (p. 7). In internecine competition, rather than tribal reciprocity, old basketball teammates end up shooting one another after twenty years of mainstream acculturation: "he used to be the best friend I ever had. . ." Pretty Weasel jibes Loney, who replies, "Times have changed" (p. 101). Loney accidentally, at least without conscious motive, kills "Super Chief," the Uncle Tomahawk who went to the University of Wyoming on scholarship and quit to work a modernized ranch with his father. Myron's acculurated "success" deep-ends Loney's "breed" estrangement. And Doore, the mean second-stringer "standing right behind" Loney in the state championship photo, assassinates the lone wolf with a telescopic deer-hunting rifle. This half-breed finds his thanksgiving in death.

> Loney decided it must be very early because all the houses were dark. And he remembered the boy who had watched him chip Swipesy out of the frozen mud and he wondered which house was his. Amos After Buffalo, and he came from "out there." Loney saw him standing on the bleak Harlem street, pointing south to these mountains and his country. That had been on Thanksgiving Day, almost a month ago. Amos After Buffalo will grow up, thought Loney, and he will discover that Thanksgiving is not meant for him. It will take him longer because he lives in Hays and Hays is on the edge of the world, but he will discover it someday and it will hurt him, a small wound when you think about it, but along with the hundred other small cuts and bruises, it will make a difference, and he will grow hard and bitter and he might do something bad, and people will say, "Didn't we tell you, he's like all the rest," and they will think Indians do not know the meaning of the world "Thanksgiving."
>
> Amos, if I could, I would take you with me, right now, and spare you sorrow. I might survive. Oh, God, we might survive together, and what a laugh. . . . .
>
> Loney turned to the dog. "You tell Amos that Jim Loney passed through town while he was dreaming. Don't tell him you saw me with a bottle and a gun. That wouldn't do. Give him dreams" (pp. 166-67).

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