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James Welch, *The Death of Jim Loney*

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REVIEWS

The Death of Jim Loney

James Welch

Harper and Row, Publishers

New York, New York

\$8.95, hardbound

The other day a bird flew into my living-room, fluttering in the corners and thumping against the pane of a closed window. Settling finally to the floor, too dazed to move, its image evoked strange fears; the eyes blind, the head twisted unnaturally to one side. As my friend cupped his hands around its body, the dirty-yellow beak gaped open in a terrible and soundless slow-motion. Through the unclean feathers, ruffled and loose at the shoulder, you could see the pink skin. The translucent beak opened and closed in spasmodic helplessness, and feeling no kinship—or perhaps too much—we took the bird to the window and watched it recover in midair.

I thought of that bird while reading James Welch's new book, *The Death of Jim Loney*. Loney, half-white, half-Indian, and living in Harlem, Montana, also has a bird. His is large and dark and comes to him with the beauty and terror of a vision. His bird is a dream-bird, a black mystery rising out of fire, out of wine and nothingness. Gracefully beating the air with powerful wings, it carries—to a distant place—the hint of immortality. My bird, of course, was nothing like that. A bedraggled sparrow, small and sick and primitive, my bird held no elusive beauty and no mystery but the mystery of unconscious, unredeemed pain. If I thought of it perhaps I was thinking of Loney himself; beating against his life with raw and crippled instinct, "his quick animal glance always alert, yet seeming to see nothing."

But Jim Loney is not really a "half-creature" and if Welch's book uses and inspires such strange symbols, it is because strange symbols are as much a part of the human world as bars and super-markets.

The Death of Jim Loney is about living in this world. It is about mothers and fathers, holidays, and what you do at night. Loney's tragedy is neither mystic nor inevitable, but can be traced to his childhood and his society, to luck, weather and liquor. This does not mean that it can be reduced. Loney tries that himself, to "think of all the little things that added up to a man sitting at a table drinking wine . . . searching for the one event, the one person that would bring everything back and he would see the order in his life." But, in the end, it is not a question of thinking up answers. It is a question of surviving them.

The bartender in Welch's Harlem—a puffy old Santa—knows in his guts that Loney is not "geared for survival." Most people are. Loney's sister has "gotten up and out of a dismal existence" through education, will and the refusal to look back. His lover wakes up "resolutely human." His father remains blithely unconscious, the primal old man, selfish and tricky and gleeful. Welch is not a moralist and no one is heroized for what they do—or what they cannot do. "We're neither of us bad guys; just adversaries, that's all." We watch curiously as Loney strips his life to the bone; to a treeless landscape unprotected from winter wind. We have recognized in ourselves his isolation, his displacement and his inwardness. Yes, we say, that's me too. And we follow him—running in the snow with bare stinging feet. We follow him—our other self, the Indian, the drunk, the man we have always seen and tried to avoid—until we must fall behind, draw back and admit; he is going too far. He is staying out too long.

"Loney stepped forward and squinted through the pale light. The men were not talking to him but that was all right. The rain was not cold."

Welch's prose is simple and clean and packed. We suspect, rightly, that he is also a poet (*Riding the Earthboy* 40 published in 1971). His details reverberate and from the first page, "The rain was not cold," we are in Loney's world—grateful for small favors. In the simplicity of Welch's language is a bleak laconic humor, an entry into the loneliness we are allowed to taste, to see, to hear, but not to weep over. *The Death of Jim Loney* is a pessimistic extension of Welch's first novel, *Winter in the Blood*, a book similar in its obsession with a familial past. In *Jim Loney*, Welch has taken the narrator of *Winter in the Blood* as far as he can up a dead-end street. We know what is at