## THE BASKETBALL DIARIES Jim Carroll

 The BASKETBALL DIARRES by Jim Carroll is a literary miracle; a description of the formation of an artistic sensibility written by the artist, not in retrospect, but in the process. It is a portrait of the artist not just as a young man but as a child, written by the child, and thus free of the mature artist's complicated romantic love of himself in pain. It also works engrossingly well as a narrative, The Catcher In The Rye for real, for bigger

The Baskelball Diaries is an anecdotal journal kept by Carroll from the age of twelve to fifteen, more or less from the first time he shot heroin until he showed up at Ted Berrigan's poetry workshop, a basketball in one hand and his poetry in the other, when he became something of an overnight sensation. Entries from the Diaries have been leaked one and two at a time to various poetry magazines over the years, surrounding the work with the almosphere of legend. Once every couple of years there would be a new rumor that it was being published in feto, now, at least, here it is.

It makes a difference, seeing it all together. Reading it in drips and drabs over the years, a rather precious impression was created by Carroll's sharp ear for hip street lingo and the Mark Twainish droll exaggerations. It seemed to be the charming but trivial work of a preco-

ciously gifted young writer. The catch was that anyone who had read Jimmy Carroll's poetry (such as the extraordinary collection Living At The Movies) knew it was charming but trivial Ike Moby Dick is charming but trivial. Seeing it all together bears out one's ongoing suspicion that there's more here than the swaggering bravado of a smart kid grown up all wrong.

The tone of the Diaries is an uncanny blend of almost unnerving self-possession and a gentle, fully developed sense of irony. The first entry, by the young basketball player just turned thirteen, is representative:

Today was my first Biddy League game and my first day in any organized basketball league. I'm enthused about life due to this exciting event. ... My coach Lefty is a great guy; he picks us up for games in his station wagon and always buys us tons of food. I'm too young to understand about homosexuals but I think Left is one. ...

In the less than three years covered by the Diaries, Carroll progresses from the Biddy League to a start in the "very spectacular National High School All Star Basketball Game," from sniffing Carbona cleaning fluid on the Staten Island ferry to heroin addiction, from taking his girlfriend Joan to church league basketball games to S&M scenes with a middle-aged woman and hustling fags in the bathroom of a porno movie theatre, from spitting on the first graders at school to armed robbery in Fort Tryon Park to support his habit.

The Baskethall Diaries is a blow-by-blow account of a season in Hell. By the age of lifteen, he had experienced more in the way of existential vicissitudes and worldly observation than several ordinary middle class lives combined. Despite the adolescent egoism and occa-

sional tendency towards smart-aleckiness, the theme that reverberates through the whole, like the recurring melody of a jazz improv, is the struggle of a boy to hold on to his sense of himself. The Baskethall Diaries is concerned with the ethics, rather than the politics, of survival.

In one telling episode, the junk-sick narrator goes in desperation to his middle-aged lover for money to procure the only medicine that will avail. She gives him the money; a friend who has come along goes out to score the heroin, leaving Carroll to sweat and shake it out till he gets back. His insatiable lover attacks him as soon as the friend leaves. He is revolted and tries to leave, although he can hardly move from the cramps. "what about my sixty dollars, you prick!" she screamed. 'What about my innocence,' I said, going down."

Rimbaud is the name that pops up One especially thinks of Rimbaud's The difference is that Rimbaud is talking vation of the monstrous with the end of becoming a visionary, "the supreme Savant." There is nothing so calculated about Jim Carroll's excursion into the inferno; if there is an organizing principle here, it is not, refreshingly, the design of an artist preparing himself for writing poetry. He is only obliquely aware that he is a writer, which is exactly the genius of it. The Baskethall beded sensitivity of observation that sometimes occurs when the writer is in when his writing approaches when people (Ted Berrigan and Patti Smith, for instance) talk about Jim Carroll, and The Baskethall Diaries in particunappens in the Diaries, it is monstrous. about a self-conscious, systematic culti-Diaries functions with the kind of unimar. It is a useful invocation, for a change. remark that "The soul has to be made monstrous." If one word describes what direct, intimate touch with himself

artlessness. Make no mistake: The Baskethall Diaries

with Homer. Even the parts that are Assassins: "Nothing is true; Everything is permitted." To put it another way, the question is no more pertinent here than literature, in the usual sense, at all. It is a happens when two good friends on a cross-country drive find themselves on the interstate in the middle of the night, two hundred miles from nowhere. It others are stock footage from anyone's adolescence. In a prefatory note, Carroll with understandable skepticism, whether it all really happened. His response is a quotation from Hassan Sabah, the founder of the cult of the is no great work of literature. It is not elemental sense-storytelling as in Homer, the kind of storytelling that suffers from all the faults of the genre, too: some of the stories sound made up, says that people frequently ask him, great work of storytelling, in the most made up are true.

Like any narrative of the truth, The Baskethall Diaries is a harmonious blend of funny passages and depressing passages. When it is funny it is hilarious, reminiscent of Lenny Bruce at his best. When it hits a blue note, it is harrowing, as in the final entry:

In ten minutes it will make four days I've been nodding on this ratty mattress... both my forearms sore with all the little specks of caked blood covering them... two sets of gimmicks in the slightly bloody water... all the dope scraped or sniffed clean from the tiny cellophane bags... I get up and lean on a busted chair... I can see the Cloisters with its million in medieval art out the bedroom window... four days of temporary death... I just want to be pure.

Jamie James, formerly a sports columnist for Andy Warhol's Interview, has just completed a novel entitled The Wallis MSS.