

# Brooks Haxton

## REMEMBERING HAYDEN

When Hayden Carruth came to teach at the Syracuse University Creative Writing Program in 1979, he was the best teacher many of us in the program had ever had, a life-changing teacher, beyond what we could have imagined. He was also my downstairs neighbor, and we got to be friends.

I used to tell him that I think his poems are among the finest moments in American poetry, and when I did, he would look down, and shift his head and shoulders, as if the fact were settling on him like a yoke. Having worked hard in the yoke of his gift, he liked to steer the conversation elsewhere. Still, his awards include many of the highest honors for an American poet, and that's as it should be.

Despite his wish that we not hold a memorial for him, some of his friends gathered in Vermont, and others a few months later in Syracuse, to read his poems, to celebrate what he described, in an essay about poetry, as an "Act of Love." He argues in that essay that the value of art follows from the act of personal subjectivity moving through and beyond itself. His work celebrates a life dedicated to acts of love.

Of course, Hayden was no stranger to the blues, either. Anyone who had seen the world in such a rapture of intelligence and imagination had to be far down in pain to find death preferable, which he did at times, as he reported movingly in person, and in prose and verse.

Once, he sent me a postcard from the park at Bear Mountain, a scenic view. I hadn't heard from Hayden in some months, and on the back of this card, out of nowhere, he wrote: "Dear Brooks, I spent some of the most miserable years of my life near here. Love, Hayden." He knew I'd laugh. Hayden loved to laugh, as he loved music, not in the denial of suffering, or as a distraction from suffering, but as a connection.

By celebrating our connection with his work, we join him in his lifelong act of love.

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### FLOWER MEDLEY

after lines by Hayden Carruth, 1921-2008

After the sour cherry four years dead  
had bloomed for him one morning in October,  
and a red hibiscus flower dropped onto the floor,  
he put them into poems. Before  
the spasms tore his heart, before the doctors  
tethered him with oxygen, and blinded him,  
he breathed, out walking with good friends, a raft  
of hyacinth in Brooklyn, and the white bloom  
of the blue plum broke. Day lilies came back  
in summer with orange tongues of flame.  
His old geranium still holds ten blossoms.  
The moth he called Catocala, or hidden beauty,  
frets, and beats the screen. For love  
he named them, not just moths, or flowers:  
stones, and animals, musicians by the score.  
Today the purple shoots of hellebore  
have broken through the frozen dirt.  
Doctors, he reminded me, once brewed  
from hellebore a cure for madness—  
he looked up—and it was deadly.  
I loved Hayden when he laughed.