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Reluctantly: Autobiographical Essays

Hayden Carruth
Copper Canyon Press (August 1998)
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A reader of memoirs who isn't familiar with Hayden Carruth's poetry could be seriously misled by this collection of autobiographical sketches: Where Carruth's poetry is radiant and expansive, this memoir is muddy and self-obsessed.

In the two sections of his autobiographical sketches, titled "Fragments," and an essay concerning his suicide attempt in 1988, Carruth describes a life of bitterness, pain and defeat, of disinclination and even disdain toward the world around him. This is a book focused on the interior. A book of dreary self-love. But even that is bleary, contradictory, unexplained. The title itself, for example, is revealing and, at the same time, puzzling: Reluctant to act? Reluctant to tell? Reluctant to make the effort to put a memoir together? There is a serious lack of cohesion here. There is no story. There is no sense of looking back or moving forward. "Fragments" they are called and fragments they truly are. Often the fragments are vivisected by other, even shorter fragments of unrelated material, like sharp flashes of light. But they do nothing to illuminate, explain or enlighten. This is not a memoir in the usual sense of the genre. Rather it is a collection of slow memories that rise and burst, rise and burst, their communion resulting from the fact that they all came from the bottom of Carruth's 77 years.

This is not to say that some of the fragments aren't interesting. When Carruth tells us stories or illuminates his friends and acquaintances it is as compelling, as clear and swift and sure as anything he has ever written. But so often we only get long, humorless details of his illnesses, catalogs of old rooms, descriptions of his defeats, all in an unbearable sauce of self pity. Carruth takes more than two pages to list all the cars he has ever owned and driven in the poem, "Sociology of Toyotas and Jade Chrysanthemums." Even worse, Carruth begins to rock back and forth between first person and third person in the last 20 pages of the book as if he were fading in and out of consciousness.

Carruth's poetry has recently won the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. He was poetry editor for *Harper's* for many years and has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation as well as the Bollingen Foundation. His peers regard him as a poet of integrity, honesty, and technical skill. Carruth asks in his latest collection, Scrambled Eggs and Whiskey, "What does it mean / that two guys speak to one another / from the sadness of exile, / confronting their final / futility after years of futile awkwardness / in the world of doing?" The answer in this case is chaos.
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