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Letters to Jane

By Hayden Carruth

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Letters to Jane consists of correspondence from Hayden Carruth to his friend Jane Kenyon, a uniquely gifted poet, fighting illness in the last year of her life. Writing every few days, Carruth chronicles his daily rounds: the comforts of a good marriage; visits with friends; travels to poetry readings; the doings of Stacey the dog and cats Mudgins and Cooker; birdlife beyond the window; the transplanting of lobelia so that it can survive the long winter. Nothing out of the ordinary. And yet these are the things that make up a life, that make up *life*, and so are bits of news someone abroad, so to speak, in the strange and lonely land of the terminally ill, might be hungry for. Details of the everyday, and a (seemingly, at least) more secure state of being. Letters from home.

Carruth instinctively knows how to talk to someone who is ill: the same way he talked to her when she was well. Despite the subtext that Kenyon's condition is worsening, these letters are far from grim, are oddly affirmative in Carruth's Eyeoreish way, and sometimes quite funny: "I arrived in Syracuse at about 5:00 yesterday but somehow was waylaid by friends who plied me with pineapple juice and hors d'oeuvres made from dogfood and bits of coal until I was utterly stinko." Though Carruth was born in 1921, he describes a close relationship to his laptop (a.k.a. "Hayden's Toy"), briefly threatened by, as the repairman writes on the sales slip, "excessive cat hair": "Name of Smudgie, as I think I've mentioned before. She is a champion hair-producer, the stuff is all over the place, if we could only find a way to spin it we could make sweaters for all our friends, very fine sweaters." And, lest you should think that poets spend all their time in heavy contemplation, Carruth apologizes for delaying the start of a letter on account of Nintendo: "Forgive me. I scored over 37,000 points at level 3, however, which I believe is my highest score ever."

The risk of a book like this is that it might become a tribute to the writer's constancy. But these letters, though about Carruth, accrue, just as they should, to a testament to the "power and sweetness" of Jane Kenyon and her lifesaving poems, and to the wonderful good luck of being her friend. If a life coming to its close is made up of moments, Carruth again and again holds out his hand to offer Jane Kenyon his own. What greater act of friendship can there be? As witness to it, one can't help but mourn, then, when the letters end and there is no more hearer for these plain-spoken words of love.

—Ann Stapleton