



The Barnard Bulletin

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A VERMONT WRITER

BY MARGARET EDWARDS

This column is an offering of the Danforth Library in Barnard and a chance to introduce a Vermont writer who deserves wider renown.

Hayden Carruth

1921 - 2008



Hayden Carruth in old age

Literary critics and general readers seem to agree that the “Vermont poems” written by Hayden Carruth were his best. The facts—his birthplace and boyhood took place in Connecticut; his father was a journalist and newspaper editor; after graduating from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, he earned an M.A. in English at the University of Chicago—all set him up to be a garden-variety academic, drawn to literature at an early age and equipped by his education to master a variety of poetic forms. What set Carruth apart, however, was his misfortune. At the age of thirty-two he suffered a nervous breakdown, complicated by his severe alcoholism. He spent fifteen months in an asylum.

Carruth, by his own accounts in poetry and prose, felt broken by the experience of losing his mind. When he emerged from treatment, he lived in terror of a relapse, and he set out to distance himself as far as possible from the academic world that he felt had led to his mental collapse. He created a new life for himself on a small, remote property near Johnson, Vermont, where he stayed for more than twenty years. He had married, by that time, a German refugee by whom he had had a son. She was a hard-working source of the family’s financial stability—as meanwhile her literary husband labored at subsistence farming. And wrote.

When Carruth had steadied himself finally to feel able to return to the life of letters he had rejected but trained for, he taught a few courses at nearby Johnson State College. A psychiatrist had prescribed for him a medication that put an end to his worst symptoms of paranoia and anxiety. His friendships with writers, forged during his years of self-imposed isolation, were a lifeline back into the world he had rejected.

In 1978, after a two-year appointment as an adjunct professor at the University of Vermont, Carruth moved on. He divorced his faithful, devoted Rose-Marie (the first of his four wives) and left Vermont, never to live here again. He had abruptly departed to take a full-time position at the University of New York at Syracuse. There, in the years that followed, he was prolific—eventually he would publish thirty books, including poetry, fiction, memoir, general essays and literary criticism. In 1970 he compiled and edited a popular anthology of American poetry, *The Voice That Is Great Within Us*. From 1977-1988, he was poetry editor of *Harper’s* magazine. He died in 2008 after a series of strokes, all the while lovingly attended by a wife thirty years his junior.

Hayden Carruth won the National Book Award for his poetry, but he was never famous. His work, though “highly skilled,” was often dismissed as being “too detached,” which is another way of saying “too academic.” But the poems he wrote that center on Vermont and Vermonters are exempt from that criticism. Here follows the whole of Carruth’s longest poem, his portrait of a Vermont farmer he both admired and envied.

Marshall Washer

1.

They are cowshit farmers, these New Englanders who built our red barns so admired as emblems, in photographs, in paint, of America’s imagined past (backward utopians that we’ve become). But let me tell how it is inside those barns. Warm. Even in dead of winter, even in the dark night solid with thirty below, thanks to huge bodies breathing heat and grain sacks stuffed under doors and in broken windows, warm, and heaped with reeking, steaming manure, running with urine that reeks even more, the wooden channels and flagged aisles saturated with a century’s excreta. In dim light, with scraper and shovel, the manure is lifted into a barrow or a trolley (suspended from a ceiling track), and moved to the spreader—half a ton at a time. Grain and hay are distributed in the mangers, bedding of sawdust strewn on the floor. The young cattle and horses, separately stabled, are tended. The cows are milked; the milk is strained and poured in the bulk tank; the machines and all utensils are washed with disinfectant. This, which is called the “evening chores,” takes about three hours.

Cont. next page - Carruth

Carruth - Cont. from previous page

Next morning, do it again. Then after breakfast hitch the manure spreader to the old Ferguson and draw it to the meadows, where the manure is kicked by mechanical beaters onto the snow. When the snow becomes too deep for the tractor, often about mid-January, then load the manure on a horse-drawn sled and pitch it out by hand. When the snow becomes too deep for the horses make your dung heap behind the barn. Yes, a good winter means no dung heap; but a bad one may mean a heap as big as a house. And so, so, night and morning and day, 365 days a year until you are dead: this is part of what you must do. Notice how many times I have said “manure”? It is serious business. It breaks the farmers’ backs. It makes their land. It is the link eternal, binding man and beast and earth. Yet our farmers still sometimes say of themselves, derogatively, that they are “cowshit farmers.”

2.

I see a man with a low-bent back driving a tractor in stinging rain, or just as he enters a doorway in his sheepskin and enormous mittens, stomping snow from his boots, raising his fogged glasses. I see a man in bib overalls and rubber boots kneeling in cowshit to smear ointment on a sore teat, a man with a hayfork, a dungfork, an axe, a 20-pound maul for driving posts, a canthook, a grease gun. I see a man notching a cedar post with a double-bladed axe, rolling the post under his foot in the grass: quick strokes and there is a ringed groove one inch across, as clean as if cut with the router blade down at the mill. I see a man who drags a dead calf or watches a barn roaring with fire and thirteen heifers inside, I see his helpless eyes. He has stood helpless often, of course: when his wife died from congenital heart disease a few months before open-heart surgery came to Vermont, when his sons departed, caring little for the farm because he had educated them—he who left school

in 1931 to work by his father’s side on an impoverished farm in an impoverished time. I see a man who studied by lamplight, the journals and bulletins, new methods, struggling to buy equipment, forty years to make his farm a good one; alone now, his farm the last on Clay Hill, where I myself remember ten. He says “I didn’t mind it” for “I didn’t notice it,” “dreamed” for “drained,” “climb” (pronounced *climm*) for “climbed,” “stancel” for “stanchion,” and many other unfamiliar locutions; but I have looked them up, they are in the dictionary, standard speech of lost times. He is rooted in history as in the land, the only man I know who lives in the house where he was born. I see a man alone walking his fields and woods, knowing every useful thing about them, moving in a texture of memory that sustains his lifetime and his father’s lifetime. I see a man falling asleep at night with thoughts and dreams I could not infer—and would not if I could—in his chair in front of his television.

3.

I have written of Marshall often, for his presence is in my poems as in my life, so familiar that it is not named; yet I have named him sometime too, in writing as in life, gratefully. We are friends. Our friendship began when I came here years ago, seeking what I had once known in southern New England, now destroyed. I found it in Marshall, among others. He is friend and neighbor both, an important distinction. His farm is one-hundred-eighty acres (plus a separate wood lot of forty more), and one of the best-looking farms I know, sloping smooth pastures, elm-shaded knolls, a brook, a pond, his woods of spruce and pine, with maples and oaks along the road—not a showplace, not by any means, but a working farm with fences of old barbed wire; no pickets, no post-and-rail. His cows are Jerseys. My place, no farm at all, is a country laborer’s holding, fourteen acres “more or less” (as the deed says), but we adjoin. We have no fence. Marshall’s cows graze in my pasture; I cut my fuel

Carruth - Cont. from previous page

in his woods. That's neighborliness. And when I came here Marshall taught me...I don't know, it seems like everything: how to run a barn, make hay, build a wall, make maple syrup without a trace of bitterness, a thousand things. (Though I thought I wasn't ignorant when I came, and I wasn't—just three-quarters informed. You know how good a calf is, born three-legged.) In fact half my life now, I mean literally half, is spent in actions I could not perform without his teaching. Yet it wasn't teaching; he *showed* me. Which is what makes all the difference. In return I gave a hand, helped in the fields, started frozen engines, mended fence, searched for lost calves, picked apples for the cider mill, and so on. And Marshall, alone now, often shared my table. This too is neighborliness.



Hayden Carruth - circa 1978

4.

As for friendship, what can I say where words historically fail? It is something else, something more difficult. Not western affability, at any rate, that tells in ten minutes the accommodation of its wife's—well, you know. Yankees are independent, meaning individual and strong-minded but also private; in fact private first of all. Marshall and I worked ten years together, and more than once in hardship. I remember the late January when his main gave out and we carried water, hundreds and thousands of gallons, to the heifers in the upper barn (the one that burned next summer), then worked inside the well to clear the line in temperatures that rose to ten below

at noonday. We knew such times. Yet never did Marshall say the thought that was closest to him. Privacy is what this is: not reticence, not minding one's own business, but a positive sense of the secret inner man, the sacred identity. A man is his totem, the animal of his mind. Yet I was angered sometimes. How could friendship share a base so small of mutual substance? Unconsciously I had taken friendship's measure from artists elsewhere who had been close to me, people living for the minutest public dissection of emotion and belief. But more warmth was, and is, in Marshall's quiet "hello" than in all those others and their wordiest protestations, more warmth and far less vanity.

5.

He sows his millet broadcast, swinging left to right, a half-acre for the cows' "fall tonic" before they go in the barn for good; an easy motion, slow swinging, a slow dance in the field, and just the opposite, right to left, for the scythe or the brush-hook. Yes, I have seen such dancing by a man alone in the slant of the afternoon. At his anvil with his big smith's hammer he can pound shape back in a wagon iron, or tap a butternut so it just lies open. When he skids a pine log out of the woods he stands in front of his horse and hollers, "Gee-up, goddamn it," "Back, you ornery son-of-a-bitch," and then when the chain rattles loose and the log settles on the stage, he slicks down the horse's sweaty neck and pulls his ears. In October he eases the potatoes out of the ground in their rows, gentle with the potato-hook, then leans and takes a big one in his hand, and rubs it clean with his thumbs, and smells it, and looks along the new-turned frosty earth to fields, to hills, to the mountain, forests in their color each fall no less awesome. And when in June the mowing time comes around and he fits the wicked cutter-bar to the Ferguson, he shuts the cats indoors, the dogs in the barn, and warns the neighbors too, because once years ago,

Cont. next page - Carruth

Carruth - Cont. from previous page

many years, he cut off a cat's legs in the tall
timothy. To this day you can see him
squirm inside when he tells it, as he must tell it,
obsessively, June after June. He is tall,
a little gray, a little stooped, his eyes
crinkled with smile-lines, both dog-teeth gone.
He has worn his gold-rimmed spectacles so long
he looks disfigured when they're broken.

6.

No doubt

Marshall's sorrow is the same as human
sorrow generally, but there is this
difference. To live in a doomed city, a doomed
nation, a doomed world, is desolating, and we all,
all are desolated. But to live on a doomed farm
is worse. It must be worse. There the exact
point of connection, gate of conversion, is—
mind and life. The hilltop farms are going.
Bottomland farms, mechanized, are all that survive.
As more and more developers take over
northern Vermont, values of land increase,
taxes increase, farming is an obsolete vocation—
while half the world goes hungry. Marshall walks
his fields and woods, knowing every useful thing
about them, and knowing his knowledge is useless.
Bulldozers, at least of the imagination,
are poised to level every knoll, to strip bare
every pasture. Or maybe a rich man will buy it
for a summer place. Either way the link
of the manure, that had seemed eternal, is broken.
Marshall is not young now. And though I am only
six or seven years his junior, I wish somehow
I could buy the place, merely to assure him
that for these few added years it might continue—
drought, flood or depression. But I am too
ignorant, in spite of his teaching. This is more
than a technocratic question. I cannot smile
his quick sly Yankee smile in sorrow,
nor harden my eyes with the true granitic resistance
that shaped this land. How can I learn the things
that are not transmissible? Marshall knows them.
He possesses them, the remnant of human worth
to admire in this world, and I think to envy.

A copy of *The Selected Poetry of Hayden Carruth*, with a forward by Galway Kinnell, is to be found in the poetry section of the Danforth Library of Barnard. This book contains the long poem "Marshall Washer" which is quoted in this article, as well as many more poems of compelling interest.

LOCAL CRYPTOGRAM

A cryptogram is a code in which one letter is substituted for another. For example, the word "Church" could be written BWMSBW. The letter B would be the letter C and would be so throughout the entire message. In this message Y = T. The solution is found by trial and error. The CRYPTOGRAM answer is on the last page.

"YCR GWEMY VG PKEWI WM YCR
APF NR ERXRURE NCPY NR PER
YCR VYCRE 364 APFM VG YCR
FRPE. IRY QM UR YCPLDGQI
GVE GVVIM. UQY GVE YCRX
YCR ERMV VG QM HVQIA LVY
MQHRRRA."
- XPED YNPWL

ARTISTREE POSITIONS AVAILABLE

Summer Camp Counselor - For high school juniors, seniors or college students (age 16+). A paid seasonal, hourly position at Artistree. Summer camps run daily from June 23-August 22.

Summer Camp Apprenticeship Training Program - Open to high school freshmen & sophomores (ages 13-15) looking to develop their hands-on skills with community-based arts education. An Artistree volunteer seasonal, part-time position. Camps run daily from June 23-August 22.

Summer *Theatre Camp* Counselor - Available to exceptional high school juniors, seniors, or college students (16+) looking to develop their hands-on experience with community-based theatre arts education. A paid seasonal, hourly position at Artistree. Theatre camps run Monday-Friday from 9am-4pm beginning June 23rd. Counselors will need to be available on the show weekends.

Visit: <https://artistreevt.org/opportunities-for-teens>

Artistree Community Arts Center & Gallery
<https://artistreecommunityartscenter-bloom.kindful.com/>.

THE PLANNING COMMISSION meets on the Monday prior to the first Wednesday of every month at 7 PM in the Town Office.

BARNARD CONSERVATION COMMISSION meets the first Monday of the month, 7:00pm, Town Hall.

BEES MEETINGS are held at 6:30pm on the 2nd Thursday of each month in the library at the school.

DANFORTH LIBRARY HOURS: Monday & Wednesdays 2:00 – 4:00 p.m.; and Saturdays 10:00 a.m. to Noon. ECFiber Wi-Fi. Phone: 802-234-9408. Email: charlesdanforthlibrary@gmail.com.

SELECTBOARD meets the first and third Wednesday of the month at the Town offices at 7:00pm.

TOWN ADMINISTRATOR, selectboard@barnardvt.us, 234-9211 x 2. By phone at any time, or by appointment. Office hours coming soon

ZONING ADMINISTRATOR, zoning@barnardvt.us, 234-9211 x 2. By phone at any time, or by appointment. Office hours coming soon.

TOWN CLERK office hours are Monday and Tuesday, 8:00am—3:30pm. Public access is restricted. Call 234-9211 for an appointment.

THE DEVELOPMENT REVIEW BOARD meets the third Thursday of the month at 7:00pm at the Barnard Town Hall as necessary.

THE BARNARD ENERGY COMMITTEE meets on the 2nd Tuesday of the month, 7:00pm at the Town Hall

BARNARD GENERAL STORE, Monday-Saturday: 7am-7pm, Sundays: 8am-6pm. <https://www.facebook.com/barnardgeneralstore>

BARNARD LISTSERV: to subscribe please send an email to: barnard-subscribe@lists.vitalcommunities.org

RECYCLING Click [here](#) for Hours and Regulations

THE BARNARD INN is running a "Feeding Neighbors & Sustaining Community" campaign. Purchase an e-Gift Card and in turn the chefs will feed neighbors. Whole chicken dinners (serves 4-6) and individual sized meals to help feed Vermonters in need. Thank you and please stay safe. E-Gift Cards are available at www.barnardinn.com.

ECFIBER Governing Board meets the 2nd Tuesday of the month at 7pm via. Zoom. Contact the clerk of the District. secretary@ecfiber.net, for meeting information or visit <https://www.ecfiber.net/virtual-meetings/>

HISTORICAL SOCIETY Programs to be announced. Questions? Email: historicalbarnard1761@gmail.com

DELECTABLE MOUNTAIN QUILTERS (DMQ) meet the 1st Tuesday of every month at the Bethel Library from 1-3pm. Contact: Mary Croft 802-763-7074

BARNARTS EVENTS 2025

Spring Global Music Residency, w/Pamyua (inuit/soul) May 1-10, Various Schools & a Saturday performance.

Race Around the Lake 5k/10k Fundraiser, May 18, Silver Lake State Park. Registration is open. Visit <https://runsignup.com/Race/VT/Barnard/BarnArtsRaceAroundtheLake> for Early Registration.

Feast & Field Music Series, May 29-Sept. 25, Fable Farm
The Sound of Music by Rogers & Hammerstein, June 20-29, Outdoor Summer Theater.

Roald Dahl's Matilda BarnArts SYT, August 1-3, Barnard Town Hall.

Barnard Street Dance, August 23, Barnard Town Hall.

Haunted Village Theater, Oct. 18, Village of Barnard.

Fall Global Music Residency, tba October/November Various Schools & Venues.

Holiday Cabaret dinner & dance, Wassail Weekend, December 13, Barnard Town Hall.

Winter Carols, December 19, First Universalist Church of Barnard.

Registration for BarnArts 14th Annual Summer Youth Theater is now open!

Our 2025 production: MATILDA

During BarnArts 3-week SYT camp, youth will take on characters, learn songs and dancing, and prepare for the full-scale production to be held at the Barnard Town Hall with original staging, costuming, choreography and a live band! Our team of theater professionals will teach, guide, and inspire your kids in a supportive, ensemble-based environment.

- Camp Dates: July 14-Aug 3
- Performance Weekend: Aug 1-3
- Hours: Monday-Friday, 9:30am-3:30pm (possibly until 4:30 during final week)
- Performances: Barnard Town Hall - Aug 1, 2, & 3
- Cost: \$550 thru March 31. \$600 starting April 1.
- For Youth ages 8-18
- Scholarships & before & after care available!

More info and registration forms: <https://barnarts.org/summer-youth-theater/summer-youth-theater-matilda/>

CRYPTOGRAM ANSWER

"The first of April is the day we remember what we are the other 364 days of the year. Let us be thankful for fools. But for them the rest of us could not succeed."

- Mark Twain

GLAD RAGS SPRING DONATION DATES

The remaining donation collection dates for the Spring sales are the following Saturdays: March 29 and April 5. Spring Sales will be on Friday - Sunday, April 25 – 27.