

ON *My Vegetable Love*, BY CARL H. KLAUS

THOUGH IT IS unconscionable to review a book by a friend, especially a book in which one has been mentioned in a friendly way, I wish to take note of this lovely book by our friend and colleague Carl Klaus. "A Journal of a Growing Season," as its subtitle explains, is all that and more. It is a compilation of daily essays written through the growing season of 1995, from March 16, the day before St. Patrick's, through November 24, the day after Thanksgiving, when leftovers may be enjoyed. The essays are a page and a fraction each, tightly written and rewritten, but with a sense always of an expanding mind and heart, and with, from time to time, a turn of phrase that sticks, as when Klaus worries, under the influence of a feminist thesis for which he is one of the examiners, that his mastery of his garden could be construed as overdone and that he could be guilty of beating his plowshares into swords.

At one point along the way, Klaus records that I among others, Donald Justice for example, urged him to be less strict with himself. Do you have to write every single day, we asked, thinking, well, at least I was, of Williams's *Spring and All*, to name one, in which strict sequence is at best a toy. Klaus mulls that over and rejects our advice as well as our implicitly subversive claims on himself. "The vegetables don't skip a day," he replies.

And so, among other things, this book is an object lesson in obsession. For those with a serious interest in gardening, *My Vegetable Love*, while hardly a how-to book, offers a generous display of what it takes to garden well. Now I know why Klaus's peppers and tomatoes have always out-produced mine. Klaus was at it every day, thinking about it every day, cheating never, never missing a chance to feed or prune or tie up or water or mulch. He studies his garden always. He walks in it; he looks out on it from his attic study; he kneels down in it and works. He starts every veggie from seed, every leaf of lettuce, and then in plastic six packs, not just seeding but "seeding up" a pack, then transplants them to larger trays which he moves into the garden just as the leaves are ready to leap toward heading out. He records every variety,

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of every vegetable every year, and is always discarding one slow-to-produce pepper or less-than-scrumptious tomato for another that offers better fruit. The only thing I ever beat him at was raspberries, and raspberries, if you prune them once or twice, spread some fireplace ash on them, and water when it doesn't rain, will more or less take care of themselves. Klaus records spending so much time in his garden that a dean could call him to account for hardly behaving as if he were fully employed—except, of course, his garden has become his laboratory, and his book is proof that he is a leader in his field, that he has made a contribution to learning, as we used to say, and so to culture.

What is true for his garden, is true of his writing as well. That too thrives under Klaus's obsessive care. Within the confines of the form—one can imagine, for example, Shakespeare writing a sonnet a day for more than half but not two thirds as many days—the form itself begins to exfoliate with intertwined themes, with over and undertones. Klaus is a husband, father, professor, and friend; he has colleague gardeners as well as colleagues at the university. All this finds its way into the journal, with reflections on the passing year, at home, at school, and around town. The whole book could be construed as one of the most original love poems ever written, with his wife, Kate, its focus. There is more than passing attention to political themes in our academic lives. There is a gradually accruing portrait of a community of gardeners who are free in their exchange of attention and help. Unlike most books, these gardens do not languish for want of attentive review.

Here is one detail that I noted with a certain joy. Klaus is a meticulous writer, measured and exact. He knows how to turn a sentence, a paragraph, and a page. He prunes his sentences and urges them toward symmetry just as his garden is symmetrical in height, display, and color. He is always on guard against being carried away. He knows when in the autumn to top off his tomatoes so they don't put their energy into starts that have no chance of becoming ripe. At the same time, he can sense when an extra runner, coming from below, is sustainable by the plant and could fruit out not wastefully but well.

So it is with his essays. There is a growing tendency, as the season of writing progresses, to let his paragraphs expand lavishly. Throughout March and April, each essay is two, three, or four neat paragraphs,

nicely turned starts you might say, seeded up in rows. Then once, in May, a single paragraph takes a whole essay over. A healthy planting threatens to run a little wild. In June there are five such. In July, six, in August, ten, just shy of one third of the days of the month. Then twelve in September, and thirteen in October, that most lavish of seasons, always, in Iowa. In November there are only eleven, though we may count them as twelve when we consider that one, for Thanksgiving, is two full pages and a half, twice as long as any other single essay, one long paragraph's hymn to the garden year, with never a halt in its stride. The book ends on the following day, with a week left of the month.

Several energies drive those runs. One seems simply that daily exercise makes for vigor. The runner goes a little farther each time out. More importantly, the themes Klaus locates occupy him more and more. He gardens some years after a serious heart attack. His wife, Kate, gardens also while fighting off breast cancer. Their spring times and salad days have slipped into the past. The inevitable turn of the garden year makes September, our most abundant season, a theater of foreshadowing and fear. At certain moments terror overtakes these pages. To watch Klaus confront that, control it, and modulate it into more tranquil thanksgiving for a season and for seasons past is worth the price of admission at the very least.

D.H.