The Madcap Variety of Life

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The expansive, celebratory poems in Paul Carroll’s two recent collections, The Garden of Earthly Delights and Poems, expose much contemporary writing—for what it is: mannerism that mistakes dispiritedness for deep feeling, malaise for meaning. Resisting current trends, Carroll refuses to pare down experience to accommodate some “bloated moral.” Instead, he fashions a lush, sensuous diction that awakens our sense of the madcap variety of life as it discovers Arcadian delights “just beneath/The shellack of the everyday familiar.” In these poems, the Garden is, indeed, “here. Anywhere. Always,” rendered in language that authenticates the poet’s vision, helping him to explode ready-made abstractions:

Khaki the color of grasshoppers, dull emerald, blue of robin’s egg.
This undulating lake
Looks gentle and exciting as the Virgin Mary sleeping
And took me by surprise. I’d come here, Shams,
To wrangle with the revision of a poem about the Seven Deadly Sins
That had become like some boring dinner party guest
Bloated with its own didactic self, when, suddenly,
The day itself was light
And buoyant
As a butterfly in flight.

(from “Song. End of August”)

Shams, whom the poet addresses here and whose presence and voice preside over some of the best poems in these books, is the 13th century poet and luminary—a friend and mentor of the Sufi poet Rumi. As, presumably, he demanded of Rumi, so here Shams demands of Carroll total devotion to his art:

This blue jug
With its intricate design of reeds in wind and water birds
Told me two months to make, I love it. Here, look, let it drop
As if it were camel’s dung.
It breaks about the wood floor of your loft
Into more pieces than there are commentaries expounding on the Koran.
Only when you are able to forget
What may happen to your poems
Or, better yet, be prepared to burn them
As fuel in the middle of the winter in the desert
Will they have a chance
Of ever being mirrors of the soul.
(from “Shams”)

The strategy works, for in passages where Shams speaks, Carroll writes of his fiercest, finest lines—wary of complaint and explication, insistent upon hard-won, uncompromising joy. Ultimately, such joy earns Carroll the right to challenge modes of thought that diminish art—and thus experience, for in these poems the two are inextricable—that colonize it for the professions by making it portentous, somber, and scientific:

Concealed among the evergreens, the dwarf medlars, ferns and spruce
Hints of birds
Who live without the names we’ve given them.
We say their songs
Are calls to mates
Or staves of boundary lines
For nests as if a Sutter’s Mill,
The way we say that those Old Stone Age artists who drew the incredibly elegant bison and deer on the walls of Magdalenian caves Were making magic for the hunt.

But what if birds and cavedwells make their art just for the happy hell of it—
(from “Song For A Park Without A Name”)

In a prefatory note to Garden, Carroll calls Shams a “wandering ecstatic,” an epithet we might justifiably assign to Carroll himself. In a voice at once ribald and tender, jaunty and gentlemanly, cranky and serene, Carroll speaks like an irreverent evangelist, whose errant eye and unerring ear rescue the reader from a lapsed sense of wonder, revealing what culture and custom conceal.

This book can be ordered through the Illinois Literary Publishers Association, PO Box 816, Oak Park, IL 60603 or by calling 1-800-242-4572.