

The Lunatic Ball. By Margo Taft Stever. Somerville, MA: Kattywompus Press, 2015. 26 pp. \$12, paper. ISBN:978-1-936715-78-7.

With her new chapbook, *The Lunatic Ball*, Margo Taft Stever immerses us in the chaotic, often savage and always heartbreaking world of mental illness with empathy, lyrical grace, and humor, while consistently maintaining respect and sensitivity for her subject matter. Deftly crafted and sequenced, this collection provides a fascinating and nuanced journey—a historical glance at the treatment of mental illness in 19th century “insane asylums,” interspersed with poems that take us into the depths of the narrator’s psyche. Themes of dislocation, isolation, loneliness and loss echo throughout these poems with simplicity and musicality derived in part from internal rhymes and repetition.

Ms. Stever pulls from her own family history using letters which she transforms into sparsely elegant poems. “Cracked Piano,” crafted from a letter written by her great-grandfather, Peter Rawson Taft—an educated young man incarcerated in an asylum—to his father, Alphonso Taft, conveys an unsentimental yet poignant glimpse into life in a mental institution. The use of enjambment and spare, simple rhythms underlines the patient’s loneliness, isolation and his need to reach out for connection: “Dear Father, I am alone / this evening / as every evening / alone...”

In other poems, descriptions of daily life in the asylum are rendered with a wry, detached sense of humor: “An artist / of imperfect mind / is endeavoring / to extract / harmonious chords / out of a cracked piano /... At the head of the patients’ / table sits Colonel Passot / who is never guilty of / two consecutive ideas. / He is, moreover, / quite dirty. / On the right side sits your son.”

And earlier in this poem, “Mrs. W / spent some time on this floor /...Her visit / was a godsend to me. / Tell Tillie... if she will / come and see me, it will do / me more good than anything / that could happen./

As a troubling and ironical counterpoint to the patient’s plea for connection, the poem “Causes of Mortification,” derived from a letter from the Superintendent of the Sanitarium to Alphonso Taft, advises: “...Your son requires, above / all things, quiet... / The less said to him of himself and his / relations to others, the better...It is / very desirable for one in his condition / to abstract the mind...from self... / very few persons recover in association / with those who, in health, they most / devotedly love...”

One cannot help but contrast this astonishing advice with modern psychiatry’s focus on in-depth explorations of the self and family dynamics.

The centerpiece of the historical account is the terrifying and wrenching “The Lunatic Ball.” (A footnote explains that “superintendents at insane asylums often held balls, considered therapeutic for their patients. Spectators were sometimes invited.”)

Furious dancing gives way to screams
five men stare, ghoulish, at the wall.

This is the lunatic ball...

A woman names her baby doll Christ, lurches
leans, a building in an earthquake, then
she crawls. This is the lunatic ball...

Behind a glass wall, well-dressed spectators, riveted,
sit amused. Looking at them looking, the patients know
they are through....”

Also embedded here are clues as to why young Peter Rawson Taft’s life was interrupted at an early juncture and took this tragic turn:

The best student Yale had ever seen—
three months after graduation, typhoid—
brain swelled inside his skull....

They dosed out Calomel==five ghosts appeared
in a mercury dream, headaches unbearable.
This is the lunatic ball.

The notion that this public spectacle of private misery provided entertainment for others makes us want to turn our eyes away, and yet we cannot, we are riveted by the vivid imagery, the hypnotic rhythms, fascinated and drawn into this spectacle as people have always been both fascinated and repelled by the florid display of mental illness.

Throughout the historical narrative the author intersperses poems of a more personal and lyrical nature, weaving the threads of psychic distress. An ongoing preoccupation with body image, presented imaginatively and unflinchingly in “Animal Crackers,” alludes to early struggles with body distortion, and foreshadows a fascination with the animal world:

Rhinos, lions, hippos,
zebras, tigers—...
I eat them all patiently
again and again, down
to the bone, beyond.

Elephants taste best.
Their trainers work them
in a circle with a whip...

When one more bite

could burst me, I stop.
Once again, I want to be perfect
like the elephant.

I want to be thin.

Elsewhere, body parts turn into metaphors for shifting and tenuous affective states: “Hand” highlights the duplicity of the body, the capacity of the mind to shift between spiritual calm and murderous rage: “A hand can be a monastery, / fingers bent in repose, / or a slaughterhouse / where nothing is safe.” The startling and arresting image in “I Have Been My Arm” foretells an awareness of the body as a central and stabilizing force.

As in previous works, the narrator both loses and finds herself through immersion in the natural world, where animals, trees, rivers are her touchstones, her saviors and her guides. Even insects claim a place: The wasp in “Not a Prayer” digs deep: “The digger / wasp digs / until the earth / is all undone / deeper than / the restless itch / of winter gnawing...”

And there is a deeper wisdom to be found in the earth itself. From “Dance of the Jackrabbits:” “Jackrabbits jump / in circles. They leap / turn, scatter— / pirouettes askew. Moonlight / is the force, the jackrabbit / the medium, following language / under the earth...”

In “Bottomland,” a series of evocative images describe the impact of an emotionally rejecting and labile maternal figure, and the search for refuge in nature:

How a mother can change from angel
to sour mudqueen of all decay
by those who feel the sting, by those
who cry out.

Flail my heart upon the stone
in the grove near the riverbank...

Thin rivulets of fear, running-away-
with-itself fear, fearful fear...

Don't forget me, don't forget that hill
the horses cantered you down
to the bottom land...

The haunting final poem, “Idiot’s Guide to Counting,” reverberates like a mystical incantation summoning the healing power of the natural world.

How do you become one
with the horse, riding and becoming
the act of riding,
and the horse becoming the self
and the other at exactly
the same second, counting strides,
...counting
the everything

of one?

How to become one with
the branches of a tree, a grandfather
tree in an apple orchard
that no longer exists...

The tension and poetic arc throughout this collection comes from the poet's subtle awareness of the thin line between the certifiably insane and the confusion, violence, sadness, and madness of everyday life. The illogic and irrationality of our acts, our dream states, our innermost thoughts, and desires are explored with compassion, through a heightened, almost childlike, sensibility. The poetic voice is understated yet powerful, and draws us into the narrator's world from which we emerge with a renewed empathy and appreciation for the complexity of the human psyche in all its humorous and tragic manifestations. This collection is a fascinating and compelling read—I highly recommend it.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Burk