

MARGO TAFT STEVER

Plank Walk

Cincinnati Sanitarium
Private Hospital for the Insane
April 7, 1878

Dear Father,

Sunday has come again and gone. The doctor allowed me to move into the cottage. It is retired and quiet, has none of the unpleasant associations connected with the upper story.

At our table are Mr. Sheets, the steward, and his wife; Dr. Savage, the assistant physician; a Judge Johnson, who is staying here, hailing from the South; and your son. No one knows why Judge Johnson is staying here. I have tried to find out in what particular part of his mental or physical structure the deficit exists which requires his confinement in this solitude, but the only item of intelligence elicited is that he has been cross at home, that he is staying here because his family wants to keep him here.

The plank walk which you and I would answer for the purpose of exercise does not seem to meet the case. I never tried walking on a plank walk before. But it is the hardest thing to walk on that I ever got hold of. It is not possible for the foot of mortal man to stand walking on it for any considerable length of time. I have been on it for half a day, and my feet are so sore and bruised that I had to come in long before I wanted to, because my feet would not stand further service in that way. It is a perfect means of torture to move for any length of time upon that walk.

Love to you all,
Your loving and obedient son,
Peter

P.S. Will you please tell Tillie that I want a pair of thin soled gaiters? I think there is a pair at No. 592 Freeman Street. If not, A. Hirsch on Walnut Street under the Gibson House has my measurements and can make a pair to suit. The shoes that I am wearing hurt my feet.

ABOUT THE POEM & AUTHOR

“Plank Walk” was created from a letter written by one of Margo Taft Stever’s great great grandfathers.

About the poem and the process of creating it, Margo says:

“‘Plank Walk’ is one of a number of found poems created from letters written by my great great grandfather, Peter Rawson Taft, when he was institutionalized in the Cincinnati Hospital for the Insane. These letters form the core of my latest chapbook, *The Lunatic Ball*, and my upcoming, full-length collection *CRACKED PIANO*. Peter had earned the distinction of graduating from Yale University with the highest grade point average of any student to that date, but then he contracted typhoid fever, from which he was never able to fully recover. Both of my latest poetry collections explore the nature of the chasm between the certifiably insane and the everyday madness of existence.”

Margo Taft Stever has published five collections of poetry, including *The Hudson Line* (Main Street Rag 2012), *The Lunatic Ball* (Kattywompus Press 2015), and *CRACKED PIANO* (forthcoming from CavanKerry Press, Laurel Books imprint in 2019). Her work has also appeared in *Blackbird*, *Salamander*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Connecticut Review*, and *The Cincinnati Review*. She received an MFA in poetry from Sarah Lawrence College and is the founder of The Hudson Valley Writers’ Center as well as the founding and current co-editor of Slapering Hol Press. She lives in Sleepy Hollow, New York. Online at margostever.com.

