



Dark Horse
Michèle Betty
(Dryad Press, 2022)

If style may be thought of as an adaptation of means to ends, one may easily understand why Michèle Betty should have chosen a path of simplicity and restraint in presenting the theme that dominates the first part of her new collection, *Dark Horse*. That theme is suicide, and, specifically, the death of her father.

The treatment of such a theme might easily have resulted in self-pity and rhetorical overstatement. Betty avoids this by spareness of diction and economy of detail. Her poems are elastic instruments of feeling—they can skate over bright exteriors or soak slowly into deeper materials. Later on in the collection, she allows herself greater rhetorical expressiveness, a greater richness of colour and texture, but in this first section she uses direct, simple language to tell her story, sometimes allowing bald, short utterances to punch out shocking conclusions.

In ‘The Ins and Outs of the Inquest Docket’ an official explains her father’s recourse to barbiturates prior to his act of self-destruction:

Quieter now, he spells out how
many of *them* take drugs before –

to help finish off the unspeakable.

Betty sets the scene at the start of her book with a collection of short prose-poem paragraphs introducing us to her family’s Lebanese background and religious affiliation (Maronite Christian). A picture is built up of a cultured, well-to-do, secure and contented household. Arabic words—*sitto* (grandmother) and *jiddoo* (grandfather)—emphasise homeliness and familiarity. But a shameful secret comes to light—her father’s gambling addiction. The facts creep up on us in sparingly released disclosures. In the poem, ‘Sordid State’, a splendid example of terse, tight-lipped storytelling, Betty describes an episode in which her father, all dignity gone, begs a friend for gambling money:

Norman calls security
heavyweight buffoons
who drag my father
off still shouting

As the screws are tightened, the narrative becomes tauter, leaner, more concentrated and horrifying, with ominous references to chairs and ropes, culminating in the final revelations of 'Disturbia':

he had tied a gnarled knot, climbed a crooked
stool, stepped to his freedom –

As admirable as this sequence is, the poems that I find most satisfying in her book are those in which she responds to other writers and artists, the extra filter of detachment, of distancing, working in her favour. Foremost among these are two triptych sequences, poems derived from the letters of Vincent van Gogh. Betty's stylistic palette thickens, in keeping with the viscosity of Van Gogh's painterly technique. The sequence ends with 'In a Mood of Too Much Calm', a masterly evocation of Van Gogh at work in the fields, giving us the substantiality, the sheer experiential taciturnity of Van Gogh's environment:

purple earth, a tilled and weeded ground,
lost among drifts of grass and pale blossom

Another of the jewels of the collection is a prose poem 'Recovery', presenting us with Walt Whitman's ecstatic renewal of contact with the earth after a time of paralysis. The poem is full of life-affirming images—wild bees, birdlife, stars, bodies of water—and of Whitman's willingness to embrace nature:

Whenever he is able, he hobbles to water, small dams and nearby ponds, [...] and if his new body allows him, to swim for long stretches in the icy water.

What I prize most about Betty's work in this collection, despite the sombreness of much of its subject matter, is its calmly welcoming spirit. These are hospitable poems, inviting the reader's participation and making the reader feel like a valued confidante, even when very private family distresses are being aired. The sense of a humane and generous inclusiveness is the sweet aftertaste of this collection.

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