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“Tell Me Why I Shouldn’t Kill You”: On Jehanne Dubrow’s *The Arranged Marriage*

The Arranged Marriage. Jehanne Dubrow. University of New Mexico Press, 2015. 72 pp. \$18.95, paperback.

The title of Jehanne Dubrow’s new book, *The Arranged Marriage*, is suggestive of the Old World: steamer trunks, shawls, handmade figurines, vegetables preserved at home in barrels. And, true to her title, Dubrow threads these and other antique images throughout this highly accomplished book of prose poems. But the poems’ primary concern — the book’s starting and ending points of reference, and the locus of Dubrow’s most urgent writing — is a timeless one: a man forcing himself into a woman’s home to do violence.

The project of *The Arranged Marriage*, in large part, stems from a long-ago assault on Dubrow’s mother, who is thanked in the acknowledgments for letting Dubrow “borrow her story for a little while.” Though Dubrow’s mother is, at one late point in the book, referred to by her actual name, she has been for the most part transformed here into a nameless fictionalized character, described throughout as “the woman” or “my mother” or, simply, “she.” When we first encounter her, she is young, in school, living alone, and in the process of going through old accessories. “From the back of the closet, where old coats are rubbing shoulders — wool on wool, and felt on felt — my mother pulls the purse she never uses, heavy bottomed one, four metal feet that scrape, inside deep enough to confine a bowling ball.”

This is a markedly innocuous opening for a poem that details a captive woman’s furious search for any object she might use to bludgeon

her assailant. As the first few poems in the book unfold, we learn that the apartment building's handyman has let himself into the mother's apartment, under the pretense of having "heard a noise" and with the intent to take her as a prisoner. We learn that she has bit him, and that she is then made to dress the wound. We learn that he expects her to cook him dinner. We learn that he harms her — with his hand, with a hammer — and then demands that she cover her bruising with makeup. "Her face," writes Dubrow, "like one of those ancient caves where a man has left his signature. Handprint to say, I was here. . . ."

This matter-of-factness in tone is characteristic of Dubrow's approach to her subject matter. She writes in a consistently restrained register, her narration taut and analytic. In the poem "All the Sharp Things," she methodically lists household objects that might be used in self-defense, all of which the handyman rounds up to keep away from the mother: "the paring knives, the set of steak knives in their burnished box, the long serrated knife for slicing bread, the stubby one not good for anything but butter." This measured style, in combination with Dubrow's choice to refer almost always to the mother in generic language ("she," "the woman"), is particularly chilling; Dubrow's understated tone serves to underscore the ubiquity of violence against women and the horrifyingly unremarkable nature of a setting in which a woman is forced into domestic subservience.

As the book proceeds, Dubrow toggles back and forth between this story and two others, offering snapshots of other periods in the mother's life. First, Dubrow intersperses the account of the assault with poems about the mother's upbringing. We are told that the mother's family, Jewish and living in Nazi Europe, fled to Honduras in the late 1930s, where they made an uneasy peace with a foreign culture and climate. (From the poem "In Honduras, My Grandmother Dreamed of Germany": "No apples. Only warm tortillas here, each day cast iron that refuses cold, milk gone sour in the sweating glass.") Still other poems jump ahead in time, past the assault, to an unhappy first marriage. To assure the family's financial stability, the mother is made to marry a wealthy man, a baron of the coffee industry. And so we are back to the "arranged marriage" of the title, which could be used to describe each of the three narratives of forced union: the mother and the intruder; the European Jewish family and the new country to which they are strangers; and the literal arranged marriage between the mother and the unfamiliar new husband.

This third story — the one of literal arranged marriage — is rendered in almost dreamlike language, replete with lush imagery of vast lands

and an ornately adorned home. We see the mother walking among “fields of indigo, more pink than blue, a worker stooped among the stalks.” We see her husband with his “jeweled diminutives,” the array of small, expensive objects he scrutinizes unfeelingly, lifts “against the light to find the hairline crack.” We see, in the poem “The Epileptic,” the mother’s inability to break through her husband’s staunch interiority: “Conversations with him are like waiting for thunder. . . . You’re a stranger, he says. And she agrees. They lie without touching for weeks.”

At times, this portrait of a young woman trapped in a gilded, loveless life is painted in icy tones that shrewdly point back to the bleakness and violence of the opening poems, as when Dubrow writes, “Evening the courtyard goes pink, the portico a series of arched bones.” But at other points, the poems misfire, as when the marriage is compared to a “custom-made suit” — this is intended to emphasize the oligarchic atmosphere of the relationship, but it’s perhaps an odd metaphor for a marriage in which the spouses are notably ill-matched. Elsewhere, as when Dubrow describes the subsequent divorce proceedings, the tone is almost light-hearted. From the poem “Willful Abandonment,” which plays with administrative and legal language to chronicle the couple’s separation: “The trustee is instructed to keep his box of chocolates. Desist from velvet hearts.” This is the stuff of youthful mistake, not immeasurable woundedness.

This is a surprising facet of the book — if the marriage poems were presented as a stand-alone project, separate and apart from the chronicling of the mother’s earlier life, they would likely give off an immense intensity. But here, scattered among the poems about the handyman’s aggressions, they almost arrive as reprieves from the greater horrors of the poems that surround them. “I want to say he isn’t bad,” Dubrow writes, evenhandedly, of the husband, which is not something that one could reasonably say of the handyman. And the peripheral omnipresence of manual laborers, reminding us that money is not in short supply, suggests, if not contentment, at least a measure of ease.

But this is not to say that Dubrow should have written these scenes as separate projects — the book’s capaciousness and ability to move between registers gives the project a thorny texture that makes the portrait of the mother feel fully realized, rather than flat. And, as Dubrow subtly but unmistakably makes clear throughout, the three narratives are not only yoked together under the broader theme of “arranged marriage” but combined in the service of making a larger point about the centrality of storytelling within this family and within Jewish and immigrant cultures at large. Early in the book, Dubrow alludes to the

character of Scheherazade, the quintessential storyteller and a captive woman herself, trying to entertain the king and so live to see another day. “Tell me a story, he says, Tell me why I shouldn’t kill you.” Here, bearing witness to history and lore has life-saving power.

And so we come to the poem “Story,” in which we get a rare sketch of the mother in a position of authority and control. We see her employed in a bureaucratic capacity, taking down accounts of state-sanctioned atrocity and sending “reports to Washington.” The poem begins, “The woman is telling a story — how many cigarette burns, that the camps were called HOUSES, the riverstone of her body. My mother asks, how many cigarette burns?” The mother here is helping to keep alive memories of something awful, for purposes of validating the experience of survivors and preventing it from happening in the future. This poem comes immediately following the poem “Interview,” which inverts the roles and has the mother in the position of answering questions. “Interview” is written in the voice of law enforcement: “Can you describe the man in question? Can you describe the man? Between the hours of what and what?”

These poems, in combination, document both the importance of preserving these stories and the dicey nature of asking the traumatized to volunteer difficult details. In the poem “Doubt,” which comes late in the book and without warning, we see a daughter suspecting that the mother has not been fully forthcoming about her experience. “[T]he weight of him was only wrist and ankle. That’s what she said. The truth of it? Perhaps a piece of onionskin, a carbon copy kept in place.” In these sharp, concise lines, Dubrow threads a needle, edging around the suggestion that the violence against the mother was perhaps more extensive, more invasive, than the wrist and ankle injuries she is willing to disclose to her family. The poem’s evasion effectively mimics the daughter’s trepidation in even allowing herself to imagine the potential horrors of the unedited story.

As the poems proceed, the daughter’s voice comes through more and more. One poem offers an old Yiddish joke as its epigraph: “Q: What’s the difference between a tailor and a poet? A: One generation.” The joke might at first read simply as a reference to the hard work that parents undertake in order to offer their children more choices in life. But in this context, it’s also about the burden placed on new generations to serve as the bards of the past. We hear the reverberation of the mother’s trauma in the daughter’s own upbringing, as when she describes her childhood neighborhood: “The air was full of insect violins, like a movie where the music lets you know a stranger

is just about to stab.” Elsewhere, the trauma sprawls outward, as the daughter sees her mother’s experience paralleled in a wide range of cultural touchstones: the film version of *Wait Until Dark*, the paintings of Frida Kahlo, a high-profile murder at a Lululemon yoga store in the DC area. (The first two of those allusions have ample staying power; the third, perhaps not so much.) The daughter, we come to understand, is implicated in the suffering that her mother has gone through, drawn into it by a cultural mandate to remember and repeat it.

In this sense, *The Arranged Marriage* is an explication of the testimonial impulse; passing down stories is hardly something relegated to the realm of the traditional or antiquated but instead a radical and necessary means of assuring a future that is safe for the vulnerable. Dubrow deftly cements this point in the poem “Family Business,” which is ostensibly about the family business of tailoring (“My mother sews each afternoon beside her mother, bribed by-the-inch to baste: a peppermint for a seam, a pair of caramels for a collar”), but is also suggesting a “family business” of recording and remembering the past. In “Garment Industry,” which begins with “a seam ripper, its miniature / hook made for a world of tiny violence,” Dubrow offers a rare, lined poem, the line breaks as productively disruptive as the mother’s work; splitting “body from sleeve, neck from yoke.” Here, as elsewhere, Dubrow tacitly yet pointedly celebrates the piecing together and preserving stories of trauma in order to move forward: “Look. Look at the dress we sew from the shards / of other things.”