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Conflicting Emotions

by Enid Shomer

Mrs. Dumpty, by Chana Bloch. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998, 69 pp., \$17.95 hardcover.

Four Testimonies., by Kate Daniels. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1998, 100 pp., \$11.95 paper.

The poems in Chana Bloch's third book, *Mrs. Dumpty*, are satisfyingly arranged in a circle of emotion and history as seamless as a wedding ring. Chronicling the dissolution of a long marriage, the book is a gallery of photographs of the couple and of the way the gradually failing light of love falls through the rooms of ordinary domestic life.

In the prefatory title poem Bloch constructs her version of the Humpty Dumpty rhyme:

*The last time the doctors gave up
I put the pieces together. . .*

*And now he's at my door again, begging
in that leaky voice,
and I start wiping the smear
from his broken face.*

After this preview of the pathos at the center of the book, she begins the first section with poems that recreate the early delectations of the romance, "the silky crook/ of his elbow" and his "cock . . . crow under the covers." These celebratory poems help gauge the extent of Bloch's grief later, when her husband's charms mutate into clinical symptoms of mental illness. The volume comes full circle with "The Kiss," an album snapshot of their wedding viewed from the distance of 25 years. In it the poet detects an omen she couldn't have known about on that bright occasion — "a ghost at our wedding,/ the caterer's son/ who drowned that day." In retrospect, this ghost presaged tragedy even while the newlyweds



watched the caterer's "first cut,/ one firm stroke, then/ dipped his knife-blade/ in the water." No one, Bloch suggests, is prepared for the grotesque challenges that twist love into disappointment, rage and, finally, disgust.

As the gap between the lovers widens in the second section, activities once bothersome or lonely — business trips, even daily errands — become a welcome respite for Bloch. To her fragile, volatile spouse she speaks "slowly/ as if he were a child, and too loud . . . and so careful." Hospitalized repeatedly, given electro-convulsive therapy, the husband loses interest in his wife and children, preferring "to be taken care of." At home, his anger ignites a chain-reaction, moving swiftly down the channels of family authority until "the child is pulling the cat's tail with both hands./ The cat// is storing up minus signs like a battery,/ sharpening its claws."

Bloch writes primarily short, free-verse, narrative poems that use clear visual imagery and tighten down like a vise to deliver a gut-wrench at the end. "Twenty-Fourth Anniversary" typifies her style and has a particularly stunning conclusion:

I hung my wedding dress
in the attic. I had a woolen

shoulder to lean against,
a wake-up kiss, plush words
I loved to stroke:
My husband. We.

You hung the portraits of your great-
grandparents from Stuttgart
over the sofa—boiled cottar,
fashionable shawl. The yellow
shellac of marriage
coats our faces too.

We're like the neoclassical facade
on a post office. Every small town
has such a building.
Pillars forget they used to be
tree trunks, their sap congealed

into staying put. I can feel it
happening in every cell—that gradual
cooling and drying.
There is that other law of nature
which lets the dead thing stand.

Bloch's poems resemble black-and-white photos with stark chiaroscuro: their focus is sharp but fixed. She directs our gaze from one still point to another as we progress down the corridor of her disintegrating marriage. Some of the sleekest poems ("The Equilibrists," "Crazed," "How the Last Act Begins") run on the high octane of extended metaphors, such as "Compost," in which Bloch compares her unexpressed rage to "a prize humus/ to grow a marvel in, / some monstrous cabbage of a thousand leaves."

"Esperanto," in nine parts, is the longest piece and the only one that attempts to incorporate material from outside the marriage into the poetry. Bloch tries to forge a link between divorce and the Serbo-Croatian conflict. (A "hyphen married them," she quips wryly.) This effort is not wholly successful. The connections are purely linguistic, as tenuous as the hyphen itself. Given Bloch's sensibility, which is neither encyclopedic (attracting whole miscellanies into a poem, the way, for example, Albert Goldbarth does) nor historic (able to incorporate real or simulated pasts into the poem as, for example, Carolyn Forché does), it is no surprise that the cumulative effect of "Esperanto" is no greater than the sum of its parts.

Bloch's prosody is powered not by the magnetic force of inclusiveness, but by a relentless

process of distillation. While the poems in *Mrs. Dumpty* are rich in image and emotion (primarily grief, but also a healthy dose of "jackhammer rage"), their reductionist clarity may leave some readers hungry for more shades of gray, for digressions to the larger world beyond marriage, as well as a richer grain in the canvas that a prosody driven by form engenders. Still, the clarity and thoroughness of her gaze are substantial achievements, for ultimately she demonstrates that the loss of love is synonymous with the forfeiture of safely itself, aptly defined as "To live without looking, to be able/ to lay your hand/ on any cup on the shelf."

"The past tense is so severe,' Bloch notes pensively, "it makes everything/ smaller." But her retrospection avoids the pitfalls of diminution as well as of exaggeration. *Mrs. Dumpty* captures the visceral pain of failed marriage as well as the exhilaration of undamaged love, "that moment in running when both feet are off the ground."

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