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Opening the Dark Compartment:

The Melancholy of Knowing in Jehanne Dubrow's *The Blue Dress*

The Blue Dress by Jehanne Dubrow explores two female losses of innocence as a girl finds both a haunting garment and photo albums in her mother's drawers. The mother's loss is envisioned through these traces of unavoidable suffering, while the daughter's unfolds over the course of the poem. Through sharp diction, unnerving imagery, and careful metaphors, Dubrow captures the sad epiphany of a child confronted with her mother's past, essentially contrasting the innocence of oblivion and the melancholy of knowing.

Immediately, Dubrow's choice of words in her description of the dress sets the tone of unease. It is "found folded...in the bottom / drawer, pushed to the back behind sheets and / pillowcases" (Dubrow, 2-4) with "drooping pearl" (5) buttons and "blue silk like skin just before drowning" (4) creating an aura of sadness. Though beautiful, the dress is no longer, or never was used. This description illustrates how the mother's happiness and sexuality have been abused and forgotten.

Additionally, Dubrow maintains the twisted water motif initiated in the “drowning” (4) dress. Traditionally water represents purity, however certain ominous comparisons construct a piece about purity lost. In the photos, the water motif is emphasized through clear “plastic film”(7) which would allow the daughter to see her reflection of innocence superimposed upon the mother’s “framed...black” image (7-8). Also, her mother’s face is “water just before a stone / drops in, surface-smooth, opaque” (9-10). This imagery creates tension, a figure like Dubrow’s own oppressed mother whom the daughter cannot warn of impending ‘stones’ or tragedies (MSBR). Thus knowledge the child gains is not only damaging but also futile, and reference to the perversion of water shows perfection as sinister and inevitably fleeting. Overall, use of water-related images throughout are what make the final verse of the poem so upsetting; readers are shocked, but recognize that the lake scene evolves from these droplets of disquiet.

Finally, the crux of the poem lies in a turning point and dual metaphor. The speaker concludes: “That our / parents have lives before us is a secret we / close in a dark compartment, the blue dress / a body dragged from a lake” (10-13). This is a grim shift in the speaker, never again able to unknow that once her mother was a person too. The resurrected body of the dress is evidence of a shattered woman previously thought of only as ‘mother’. Noticeably, the poem itself is a square shape, save the last verse. The eye is drawn to this dark secret “dragged” (13) from the confines of the poem itself. This closing image sharply differs from the opening one of a curious girl “tired of playing dollies and Let’s Pretend”(1-2). The cruel contrast of innocence and death captures the vitality of the poem. Its unexpectedness mirrors how they are

unknowingly forced into devastating situations whose consequences linger no matter how long a mother keeps drawers closed, or how hard a daughter tries to unsee.

Ultimately, Dubrow emphasizes how throughout childhood and adulthood women are burdened with knowledge that washes away their innocence. She opens up the dark compartment of her mother's life for readers to experience grave, unwanted realizations through the eyes of a child.

References

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