Kevin Clark

*The Vigil of Astonishment**

The Mercy Seat: Collected and New Poems, 1967–2001 chronicles the career of an important poet too often overlooked in recent years. As this extraordinary "collected" demonstrates, Norman Dubie has ever been free of the typical apprentice need to imitate. His published work has always been distinctly his own, characterized by an unmistakable voice and a nearly inimitable combination of techniques. His best poems involve a narrator telling a story in a language that provides hyperrealistic detail while inviting intimacy and empathy but rarely comfort. Dubie stares into the terror and the tenderness of crucial human moments, witness to both exterior circumstance and interior reality. He is, furthermore, a practitioner of a kind of contemporary naturalism: This life, not the best we can imagine, conspires against us; we're caught in our human horrors, and often there's nothing we can do about it—other than empathize.

In maneuvering us to this attitude, Dubie's work is deeply moral. His narrations are transfixing because, despite seeming to maintain an effective distance by relating each detail with a pointillist's selection, they fascinate us into caring about complex characters. Each poem speaks its details as if, like Coleridge's mariner, the narrator had taken us aside in order to redeem himself—and us—by revealing the single critical story of a lived life.

While that story is often harrowing, the voice that speaks it is a close presence, as in "Pastoral," which depicts the death of a young mother's father. In its pressing immediacy, its violent and exacting depictions, its crisis of events, and its deep psychological engagement, "Pastoral" is typical of Dubie's style:

> It all happened so fast. Fenya was in the straight
> Chair in the corner, her youngest sucking
> On her breast. The screams, and a horseman
> Outside the cottage. Then, her father in a blue tunic
> Falling through the door onto the boards.
> Fenya leaned over him, her blouse
> Still at the waist and a single drop of her yellow milk

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Falling into the open eye of her father. He dies
Looking up through this screen . . .

But these events constitute only the first stanza of three. The poem turns from Fenya to the revelatory last moments of her father's life, and ends on a striking image and declaration:

He sees tears on Fenya's face and
Milk coming like bone hairpins from her breasts.
The straight force in the twig that makes a great black
Branch. Two of which are crossed over his chest. Terror is

The vigil of astonishment.

Though such abstract closure is not common in Dubie's work, the preceding passage demonstrates his ability to create stunning images that induce both shock and empathy.

Poems such as "Pastoral" surely suggest Dubie's capacity for negative capability. In "February: The Boy Brueghel," for instance, Dubie imagines a key moment in the young artist's development. The boy watches from a window as a fox carries a bleeding rabbit across the snow: "Two colors! Red and white! A barber's bowl! / Two colors like the peppers / In the windows / Of the town below the hill. Smoke comes / From the chimneys. Everything is still." Everything but the boy's imagination, of course. Where a poet such as Ashbery believes that we change over time by virtue of accruing the minor wisdom that comes with age, Dubie clearly believes that intense experiences are the most transformational—and not many writers can render these experiences with such vividness. Privy to the crucial interior moments of Dubie's characters, we participate in "the vigil of astonishment."

Dubie presents the experiential impression of each life by employing an original array of poetic devices, but none is more notable than the unique quality of the narrator's speaking voice. By eschewing the conventional first-person lyric dominating the poetry of our time, Dubie has created a voice for rendering the human context of both large and small historical events. Since 1968, he has completely reconceptualized the interior monologue in poetry. Many of his narrators sound as if they are writing letters to intimate relations just after having been in the most revelatory, numinous experience of their lives. But these letters don't often declare their judgments forthrightly; rather, they relate the key story with an attention to getting the facts across with extraordinary precision. Dubie has realized a style of poetic speech that is simultaneously curious and disturbing, distant and intimate. A reader is immediately present in each poem's circumstance.

Frequently this eerie, often epistolary voice will own qualities of both innocence and dread, as does that of the imprisoned Russian czar Nicholas in "The Czar's Last Christmas Letter. A Barn in the Urals":

Alexandra conducts the French and singing lessons.

Mother, we are again a physical couple.
I brush out her hair for her at night.

She thinks that we'll be rowing outside Geneva
By the Spring. I hope she won't be disappointed.

Yesterday morning while bread was frying
In one corner, she in another washed all of her legs

Right in front of the children. I think
We all became sad at her beauty.

Through such a voice we sense the larger historical significance of events dropping away just as the dense psychological landscape of fear, perplexity, and insight is rendered. We know Nicholas is doomed, and we sense that he knows it, too. And the poignancy is heightened as he imagines a lovely, impossible future. Dubie's grimly engaging narrative tone renders outer machinations and inner crises through structural and pictorial agents, many of which operate in unison. He is a poet fascinated with highly charged epiphanic moments that may be horrific, ecstatic, or both. His interior portrayals allure, often heightening the reader's role as voyeur by revealing perceptions and human behavior usually hidden from social discourse; in "The Czar's Last Christmas Letter," a son tells his mother he's resumed having sex with his wife. Though most of the poems aren't sexual in subject matter, we often feel both exhilaration and revulsion in response to Dubie's depictions, almost as if reading these poems is a taboo act in itself.

As I've indicated, many of Dubie's poems are set in the historical past and speak in language that mimics the idiomatic formality of their times. Distinctly different from the conversational verse lingua we're used to, such expression is so believably formal that it creates an odd intimacy between narrator and reader. Dubie's voice also naturalizes us to the many unusual devices he employs. In both short and long poems, he often weds his personas to historical narratives by employing the tools of ekphrasis, multiple speakers, precise and graphic imagery, magical realism, and Jungian synchronicity. Though far too extensive to quote here, "Elegies for the Ochre Deer on the Walls at Lascaux" is one of the great long poems of the last three decades precisely because it is animated by the linking of disparate images and causes: events that are centuries apart are collapsed into simultaneity.

Dubie is considered difficult by some because he combines so many methods of narrative that we are forced to read in a new way. He quickly shifts planes of reality; he also gains heightened intimacy by exploiting techniques related closely to cinema and the visual arts. Key details become the focus of our attention and seem enhanced, in the way the images of a hyperrealist painter may seem almost ethereally transformed.

In "Radio Sky," a childless husband and wife watch television late at night after a station has signed off: "Making the adjustments in the contrast / We watched snow, what Phyllis said / Was literally the original light of Creation. / Genesis popping like corn in a black room." We know that Phyllis is the wife's sister, and that she's been unkind about the couple's inability to bear children. As the poem ends, the couple sleep "In the blue snow of the television / Drifting under the familiar worn sheet." In "Radio Sky," even Dubie's elegiac moments feel urgent.

For Dubie, urgency and awe are closely related. He offers up a stunning imagistic world to place us in experience that provokes wonder. "Of Politics & Art," commenting on poise in the face of mortality, the redemptive virtues of literary art, and the vagaries of political correctness, contains a series of breathtaking moments. At first, the narrator remembers being stuck at school long after dark as an Atlantic storm "shook the schoolhouse." His young teacher Mrs. Whitimore, dying of tuberculosis, read to the students from Melville:

> How in an almost calamitous moment
> Of sea hunting
> Some men in an open boat suddenly found themselves
> At the still and protected center
> Of a great herd of whales
> Where all the females floated on their sides
> While their young nursed there. The cold frightened whalers
> Just stared into what they allowed
> Was the ecstatic lapidary pond of a nursing cow's
> One visible eyeball.
> And they were at peace with themselves.

When I read this stanza I'm haunted by that "ecstatic lapidary pond of a nursing cow's / One visible eyeball." And then by the transient conversion of the hunters. But the poem isn't finished. Now in the present, the narrator tells us about a woman who believes there is a chance Melville may not be taught in the future, "because there are / No women in his one novel." The narrator returns to Mrs. Whitimore, who was now

> reading from the Psalms.
> Coughing into her handkerchief. Snow above the windows.
> There was a blue light on her face, breasts, and arms.
> Sometimes a whole civilization can be dying
> Peacefully in one young woman, in a small heated room
> With thirty children
> Rapt, confident and listening to the pure
> God-rendering voice of a storm.

Whether writing in the guise of a grown student, a despairing Coleridge, the World War II saboteur-singer Marie Triste, or a deranged but cagey murderess in backcountry Arizona, Dubie provides a voice of witness that is wounded and fascinated by public and personal circumstance.

But witnessing requires our close attention. Events in a Dubie narration often come to a high-velocity resolution, and conversely—in the midst of swelling apprehension—our capacity for recognition and assessment shifts into slow motion, as in the moments preceding an auto accident. In "A Physical Moon Beyond Paterson," for instance, William Carlos Williams suffers a stroke while in his car:

> He walked out into the late-afternoon sun
> And sat in his car, an emerald Hudson.
> He said *no* twice and straightened,
> The car slowly going down the rural hill.
> He saw a row of technicians dressed in lead coats
> And yesterday's baby with a bowel obstruction.

That this depiction does not correspond to the historical facts is, for Dubie, irrelevant. What matters is the human truth in the depiction. We have time to see all aspects of the scene in the kind of explicit detail one might associate with a John Woo film, experiencing the specific texture of the moment and the adrenalinic fascinations attendant on such an event. When Williams' car finally comes to rest in a marsh, the poet is crying and singing and nearly crazed with the detail of revelation:

> He was not the Polish woman of his night-calls:
> She endured two hours of labor
> Scouring her kitchen floor. She curtsied
> And froze, delivering in that position
> A seven pound girl.
> And that's the glory.

So much is revealed in a Dubie poem that, while we may feel wounded by our own voyeurism, the wound is passage to new insight. In "A Physical Moon Beyond Paterson" we are presented with the visceral effects of a stroke, and then we are to consider a baby's bowel obstruction and a woman's giving birth on a kitchen floor. For Williams, these events seem part of a ravaging of human sensibility, a ravaging that leads to his epiphany.

And that's the poet's glory. Ultimately Dubie renders the experience of human beings in the act of witnessing spectacle. We can see what the witnesses to history see, and in our fascination we engage the personal realities of that history. (In *The Mercy Seat* he also provides us with thirty-six pages of his own aphorisms, which I can easily

imagine as excerpts from long, sprawling letters to literary friends. While not nearly as captivating as most of his poetry, these keep us off guard by making surprisingly frank comments on the literature, politics, and culture of our own time.)

Norman Dubie's ability to enter the specific environment of a scene is a strength of his work and a challenge to his audience. He asks readers to bring much historical, artistic, and scientific knowledge to the poems: it would help, for instance, if we knew that Phobos is the larger of the two moons of Mars, that Yuri Olesha was a Russian novelist who practiced magical realism, that the superior oblique is a muscle in the eye. And it would certainly enrich one's reading to know something about Coleridge, Brassaï, Rodin, Einstein, Proust, Piero de' Medici, Georgia O'Keeffe, Dina Yellen, Odilon Redon, Alfred North Whitehead, etc. At the same time, however, Dubie often abandons historical verisimilitude and simply makes up stories about famous characters.

The difficulty inherent in Dubie's myriad devices and wide referencing is not the primary reason for his relative obscurity; certainly Jorie Graham and John Ashbery are famously difficult. Given the breadth of Dubie's inventiveness and his long and diverse history of publishing at prestigious houses, it remains surprising that he's not a more central figure in American letters. The fact is, Dubie is somewhat reclusive. He lives in Tempe, Arizona, far removed from the cocktail parties of the urban critics and conference attendees. He travels not at all, writes few essays, and gives few readings. His work must speak for itself. Copper Canyon's rich production of this collected should make us all more vigilant about his astonishing gift.