REVIEW: Norman Dubie, IN THE DEAD OF THE NIGHT (U. of Pittsburgh Press) 82 pp. Linda Pastan, ASPECTS OF EVE (Liveright/ Norton) 56 pp.

I have great admiration for Norman Dubie's new book, IN THE DEAD OF THE NIGHT. It is a difficult book, partially because many of the poems leap freely in time and space, from the historical to the present, from the impersonal to the personal, and partially because the poems are long and the sentences complex. But the book is more than worth the work required to come to terms with the poems. Dubie's voice is almost unique in contemporary poetry: he has a unique ability to sustain narrative, he has a strong sense of image and detail, and a sensitive and humane intelligence. Motifs appear and disappear in the book, the way themes appear in classical music: often a theme or an image is introduced, then later in the poem it will be transformed, enlarged, developed.

The poems are passive in the sense that we are almost always observers, spectators in the world of experience. It seems as though we are destined to *witness* everything, as in the poems, "The Duel After the Masquerade," and "Pastoral," where neither the narrator nor the reader participate in the poem's action. The moral effect of such a technique, created in part by the skilled use of personae and dramatic monologues, is a sense that our own suffering as human beings is created by our being conditionally outsiders, aliens, unable to transform our desires into action, and unable to transform our suffering into salvation. One of the most moving poems in the book, "The Pennacasse Leper Colony for Women. Cape Cod. 1922," does not play on our sentimentality for the isolation or disfigurement of lepers, but rather makes a connection between us, our mutual suffering and disfigurements: "We are/ Human and not individual, we hold everything in common."

Many of the poems, like the abovementioned poem, take place in the historical past; but the poems are by no means nostalgic. "It is another century: things are/No better or worse." Or, as stated in the prologue of the book, "She says to us from her tree:/Please, one world

at a time! and leaps;/ Making it, which could mean,/Into this world or some other. And between." For Dubie, the past is our only means of interpreting experience, of viewing it and evaluating it. It is what we know. But he does not wish to recall the past, rather to call it forward, in order to either confront the present, or to recognize that while events and individuals may change, the issues which confront our lives, death and loss, remain constant. In one poem, almost as a gesture to offer instructions to the reader on how to read his poems, he says, talking about the past, "This is a world set apart from ours. It is not!" Elsewhere he says, "But we are really watched, being dead," which at once contains Dubie's concerns with learning from the past, and his concern for loss, his elegaic attempt to confront death.

There are a number of suicide poems in the book, and other poems which directly confront death: those who kill themselves, or whose deaths are mourned for, do so either because they have resigned themselves to suffering and loss (of love or self) or because they cannot bear to do so. These conditions seem central to Dubie's poetic vision. But he deals with this suffering with such compassion and tenderness, such an understanding of how humans struggle against this condition ("by degrees his rebellion sends us/The fresh monotony of repeating all this,/That it might be remembered in the next century./Might be remembered, and not us."), that the poems, though perhaps resigned, are by no means nihilistic. They create an ambience of empathy, of reaching out for others, a recognition we all share the same fate, or more likely, curse.

There are a number of poems to and about various artists (Trakl, Eluard, El Greco, Mayakovsky, to name a few) but the poems are not centrally literary – in the sense that they might exalt an aesthetic of art, an artifice – but are rather concerned with the people behind the art, the suffering each artist had been made to endure. "All beauty is an attempt on life," Dubie says, and it is this attempt, this process, which is valued in the poems. And which, in sometimes oblique ways, Dubie draws connections between other artists and himself, his relationship to his family. Take, for example, the beautiful poem, "Kindertotenlieder," which concerns Mahler's confronting the loss of his child, his helplessness and his guilt. I quote the poem in its entirety.

Some were quite certain. Clearly. Some were not.
Mahler. Rising in a kind of treaty

Or pond with an astonished mouth, more open to
Death entering the house while you slept next

To the lamp like a lacquered toad in fronds.
Someone pulls on your trousers. Twice. Again.

You are waking to your daughter who died of a fever
This month a year ago. Her gown was soaked.

There was a rainstorm.
You played out a melody for her on the piano.

Some men have carried large stones and hurt themselves.
You carried her out of the house.

Into the street. You fell briefly to your knees.
Rain collects in the linen of your sleeves and what

Is the dry bread on the pond doing not being eaten
By the hook turtles or trout. A bee sting on the lips after

The morning after the morning. After all
It is a cold month. And somehow it gets into the house.

And crawls around us. You feel it touch your ankles.
What's pulling at your trousers is yourself. Your hand

On the keyboard or playing like the slow water-spider
Up the leg making the girls laugh and shout. "Father!

Father. Help us!"

This brings us to another of Dubie's central concerns, the concern with loss. Children are often vehicles of that loss; he does not romanticize children, but recognizes that as adults we have lost something that children remind us of: "Everything centers as the child searches/ For what she lost, keeping us from it." So we are not to recover our childhood (neither is the child) but viewing that experience of loss, that suffering, that questioning, is an experience which humanizes us. This, of course, is a reductionist view of what children represent in the book: the children are most often as complex as the adults in the narratives, and most often are puzzled by the same issues we are unable to solve as adults.

I have only touched on a few of the surfaces of Dubie's poems, and the poems have such a probing intelligence, such associative complexity, that it is impossible in such a review to do justice to the book. The book is strongly unified in tone and voice, and this creates two potential dangers in Dubie's future work: first, some of the poems almost seem to disappear into one another because so many of them simply sound the same or use the same narrative strategy; second, and more serious, perhaps, is the danger that his narrative voice could be turned into a technique, a formula where the poems could seem to be invented, or could be imitations of themselves. A number of the poems contain the phrase, "There is the . . ." or "This is the . . ." and then proceed to describe a scene. Other poems let us know the poem *is* invented, that the narrator is telling a story, inventing a vision, as in "you are to imagine her walking . . ." or "I realize/ You know no one called Borya." But this potential problem grows out of one of Dubie's central strengths: a uniqueness of voice, a recognizable style. And at a time when there seem to be so many anonymous poems, poems which could have been written by any number of competent writers who have mastered technique separate from poetic vision, this quality is something to be grateful for.

Indeed, this is a fine book: the poems are graceful, tender, full of dramatic surprises, technically accomplished and deeply original. The poems are difficult but by no means private; one can only look forward to what Dubie will do next, but in the meantime we have a considerable poetic accomplishment in IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT, a book of poems we can read with pleasure and learn from again and again.

Linda Pastan's poems, at first glance, seem to be the polar opposite to Dubie's; she strives for, and achieves, a clarity of image and diction, a simplicity of statement; she uses short lines, uses enjambment effectively, and ends most of the poems with an illumination growing directly out of the process of the poem. But the issues she confronts are not at all dissimilar from Dubie's: the last section of the book begins with the epigraph (from a MacLeish poem) "Because Our Exile is Ourselves," and many of the poems deal with loss, of self or others. "Outside the fall goes on," she says, "without us." The context of the poems, however, is more immediate than Dubie's, dealing with the trials of daily life: there are a number of poems about family, the personal experience of death, and the death of self through routinization, loss, or fear of abandonment. She deals effectively with the costs of intimacy over time, the mechanization and loss of passion: "Now the lover repeats/his one line . . . there is no epiphany," and, "enclosed in the domestic rustle/ of birds and leaves/ I dreamed of knotting/ bedsheets together/to flee by." In some poems she suffers the subservience of the wife (in "You are Odysseus" as Penelope, "hide my song/ under my tongue –") or the neglect of motherhood, abandoning, or more properly, concealing, self for others:

> And I have been Niobe,
> all mother,
> all tears,
> but myself
> somewhere hidden
> in the essential stone.
>
> ("Sacred to Apollo")

And she resigns herself to change, to her children's necessary and imminent departure: "Children. . . wave us away,/ if they remember to wave/ at all."

There is an ambivalent vision which pervades the poems,on the one hand demanding the closeness and passion she shared with her lover in the past ("Swimming Last Summer") and her own desire for departure, to break free of her own routinized life, as in "Drift." Departures, in

fact, play an important role in the book, and many of the poems try to confront directly both the necessity of departures and the pain that departure causes. "You will leave each morning,/ soon our son will follow. Only my weaving is real."

It is the weaving, which in some ways is the poet's use of language, which becomes restorative, a way of re-discovering the self, making use of unconscious material and the dream world to locate the "hidden self" referred to above. In "Artificer" she says, "I follow the thread/ of a poem/ wherever it leads, . . ." And later in the book, in a beautiful poem, "Eclipse," she says, "It is not chaos/ I fear this strange dusk/ but the inexplicable order of things." What Pastan is able to admit in these poems, is that the world cannot any longer be made sense of (as in "Algebra"); we can now only live in the world, in process, and accept change as a condition of existence.

The most difficult change to accept is, of course, death. She confronts death, the loss it creates, its mystery, in the loss of her grandfather, in the loss of a friend (in another haunting poem "Death's Blue Eyed Girl," – "Remember Elaine/ a child on one hip/ for ballast, her head distracted with poems?/ The magician waved and bowed, showed us his/ empty sleeves and she was gone."). Or, in dealing with the death of her father, "I long to say, Father let go/ and death will hold you up." But she knows too much to say it. She never gives in to sentimentality, to faked emotion in dealing with this impossible subject, and this is one of the strengths of her poems.

Although ASPECTS OF EVE is in many ways a personal statement, the best poems here, and there are many excellent poems in the collection, transcend the personal, through mythmaking, or the collective process which we all share as lovers, parents, poets, and human beings. And it is this human quality in the poems, a voice which speaks to us as a real person, which I most admire in Linda Pastan's poems. This is a very strong book, which because of its quiet tone of voice may be neglected, and it shouldn't be. Because the voice is strong, authoritative, and compelling, never false and never staged.

– IRA SADOFF