

Lisa Norris



The Gap



# The Gap

Lisa Norris

D Press 2017 Ellensburg

Photos by Will Stauffer-Norris.

"Belief" and "Goldfinches" were previously published in *Ascent*. Many thanks to editor Scott Olsen and also to the stalwarts who so generously critiqued these poems—especially Joe Powell and Gyorgyi Voros. Joanna Thomas's creative spirit in bringing poets to my 'hood via the Inland Poetry Prowl made me want to raise my voice to join in. I was able to do so in part because of Fred D'Aguiar's well-timed advice to write a poem a day to break out of writer's block and Gyorgyi Voros' suggestion to try the Daily Grind. Thanks also to Jampa Dorje who printed these poems.

These poems are especially for my mother  
the Eng who taught me to love language.



ALL RIGHTS RESERVED  
BY THE AUTHOR

## Goldfinches

Motion attracts me: the birds especially—  
goldfinches dip and rise—musical  
breaths of air push at the trees, boughs

bow and nod as if to say  
happy birthday. Outside, I still celebrate  
two dogs I buried under a fossil

from Virginia—trilobites preserved in the rock: bodies  
buried, filled in. Truly, I don't know  
how it works, except that it's miraculous

like the osprey circling without wingbeats,  
calling to her fledgling. When I plant a seed,  
green comes up, thin as an eyelash:

can you tell it is Spring?—a good season

to be born, I think, though the long dark remains  
in mortal cells. This morning, I recalled the hurts—

someone's back turned—a lover's  
(or was it Mother's?), but then  
those bright winged bodies flew across the yard.

### **The Gap**

I can't name it—

dark absence shadow—whatever,

a sound between your mother's heartbeat—

that motor of love carrying what moves you toward

the day she'll be gone, her smell of musk

and basil become yearning—

and silence like that between one lover and the next

when you wake at night to feel what isn't

under the sheets with you—and sometimes

what isn't takes your touch

between one leg and the other, back to a place

you can slide your fingers into—

that cavity like the space

from which you came: you know

the explanation, but it makes no sense,

journey of egg to sperm to produce a you  
who sprouts like a grape on that umbilical vine  
til the day of harvest when that ripe infant falls into  
what isn't there

between what you don't remember and being  
you who grew as fruit from your mother's parts  
and emerged as that membranous someone,  
between the absence of *her* and *you*:

you squalled at the suddenness  
of separation, and you will squall again, tears ferocious  
as waters in the swirl of that hurricane  
taking her, not you, into the gap

you long to fill with light and love  
in its purest form you have known only  
from the one who goes ahead into what  
you cannot know until you enter it.

### **Dear God**

Art Thou present even as  
our intestinal walls contract—

living within the bloated belly,  
the rashy skin, the pigeon toes?

We look for Thou in the sublime,  
but what if Thy beauty is inside  
the transubstantiation—rotting  
vegetation, steaming excrement piled  
by the roadside, bloody exit  
of liquid life to feed the big cat  
tearing at the flesh of lesser things?

Art Thou in the movement  
of water splitting the rock  
obliterating hillsides, houses,  
the little girl who, breathing mud,  
then becomes the muddy thing?

Dost Thou flare in the gaseous neon  
on that sign over the strip of spilled trash and those  
hungry for needles—taking up residence  
in putrid feet, stew of maggots  
in diabetic flesh, whatever  
takes us down until the skull is  
picked clean, bellies of vultures  
filled with what was, whilst the winged  
Thou flyeth forth to take up  
the next transitioning thing?

**After Reading Rilke's *Book of Hours* During  
a Season of Explosions & Absurd Politics**

The burn at my neck is of Your sun glaring  
on the hanged and the unhanged.

Even the blackbirds don't turn my head.

I look instead at the dog, pioneering

this old railroad bed between stalks  
of browning cattails dying to match the hills.

Then I have to leash the dog again,  
and we're back on the road: petunias

populate the flowerpots, ripe apple  
falls on the path. You'd say don't

pick it up, though you made it  
just to tempt Eve.

Skirting the sticky tar, I recall  
that You and I haven't spoken

for such a long time—so I think  
of Rilke in love and beckon You

into ordinary days of ragweed,  
despite armored tanks,

trucks run amuck,  
and body parts scattered  
  
on that same old road.

### **Big-Beaked White Birds**

My clever dentist has me looking out the window  
to see swallows or geese, osprey—or  
wild pelicans, even—on the pond  
before he leans me back,  
hot neck wrap, light chatter  
with the girl who congratulates me  
on my selection from her menu:  
bluegrass at 7 am to keep us all  
chipper.

“Those pelicans  
don’t come too often,” he says,  
and she, “Aren’t they the ones with big beaks?”  
He nods, propping my jaw open  
and passing little tools,  
stuffing and unstuffing my lips with cotton.

"Those pelicans are all over Moses Lake."

I think of the Biblical baby in the bulrushes,  
little dark Egyptian surrounded  
by big-beaked white birds  
looking down on him, wondering  
if he's edible, before Miriam swoops down  
for the rescue: in my mouth, they're closing in  
as the ceremony progresses,  
and something dark flies over the pond  
beyond the flat tv where a pretty blonde  
glibly details disaster (cop shoots  
unarmed black man again), and I close my eyes  
behind the glasses that shield me, thinking  
*pelican pelican pelican*  
as the dentist wiggles my cheek and moves the needle  
so I don't even see the point before it numbs

### **Sleeping in the City**

You know how you can't move  
sometimes, dreaming, when eyes  
are looking down on you, as in  
a horror movie: rustling  
in the walls. Maybe rats.

Is that thing perched  
on your pillow going to gnaw off  
your nose as you lie  
paralyzed, or is it just  
some leftover synapse, your brain

firing memories—there was  
that rodent in the park,  
huge, crossing the sidewalk  
to lurk in the bushes. Even  
sleeping, you're aware

that you're in someone else's  
house: how can you be safe  
so close to the homeless?  
Under the bridge, it stinks  
of piss. A pile of wet clothes

on the sidewalk. There was that  
figure under a blanket  
at the curb. You take  
an Uber to the movies,  
where you're made to feel

compassion for someone  
whose house burned down.  
Walking back later  
in the cold rain, you imagine

those without shelter might wish

for flame. How hard it must be  
for them to look in from the dark  
at lovers drinking champagne.

The walls are alive  
with sound. Rain tinks  
at the window. You have to know  
what that thing is moving  
on your pillow again, shifting—first  
a rat and now it's feathery, flying at you  
from outside the window.

In this new light, it's an owl  
with fox ears and big yellow eyes  
rimmed with mascara, saying  
*let me in, let me in, I have a message.*

## **Childhood**

When your bare feet in the mown grass gather  
little blades between the toes—and your nose opens  
  
to summer's scent—rubbery dodge ball,  
briny gallop of friends pretending to be horses,

leaping over ditches behind houses  
that lead to the murky pond—or you knock

on doors to sell candy for a good cause  
until you reach that old man inviting you in

to see the foot without the toe, after which you escape, breathless with fright, to romp under the parachute in the backyard,

squealing until you brush up one against another  
under that orange dome and briefly touch

# That Wild Place

Sculpted in sand on a wide beach,  
the little foxes looked like infants, still  
and cleverly placed. Circling eagles

searched for the wee red cubs.  
but they'd tucked themselves in  
behind boulders and driftwood

in that wild place  
where everything was big—

except the ones with tiny ribs  
rising and falling.

On the other shore—far off,

grizzlies grazed among wildflowers,  
cubs trailing by the waterfall gushing  
from a glacier. *I will preserve it,*

I thought: I was sure I had it all fixed  
in my lens. *I will center*  
*the sandy foxes.*

I will focus. Zoom in. I'll share this  
in email. On Facebook. Another small miracle  
like the herds of wild elephants

who came from afar to honor their rescuer,  
big ears like giant petals  
and trunks reaching out

to comfort their young, but  
before the shutter clicked,  
the foxes rose, shook off the sand,

and ran—*even better* (I thought) *to catch them trotting off toward the woods, red tails flaring.*

But they were too quick, or

I was too slow, for now I understood as the water rose,  
covering the small safe places  
where the foxes had been,

their log shelters floating light  
as matchsticks, as if they weren't  
dense, and all the sand was drowned,

the rocks too. Water crept into the dark woods  
up the hill so fast, I couldn't freeze frame it  
on my small screen, couldn't keep  
the chilly world chilly instead of  
my mouth agape and my own legs ready  
to carry me away when the water came—

and wasn't it a shame that only I  
got to see that odd brief loveliness  
as the ice broke off and the warming chased  
the wee red foxes on that wide wild beach?

### **Kittitas County Fair**

*Ellensburg, Washington, 2009*

I wanted to touch the nude pink pigs,  
two to a pen, asleep, unembarrassed,  
front to back like lovers, legs twitching  
in their clean litter. They did not budge  
when we spoke, and all the while

their snouts curved up, their dear ears pinked  
and curved, hooves spiked—  
quadruple high heels that took them  
wherever pigs go in dreams—

oh, I would like to know!—for no matter how close  
I get to the bewhiskered and beleaguered—lop-eared  
bunnies made fat for the butcher, roosters  
with their quivering combs—I find  
in those piggy ears and fleshy toes

some brutish blessedness far beyond  
the Blue Ribbon Best of Show.

### **Belief**

The little plane lifts—a lark  
at first—from that Idaho runway,  
to get you into wilderness—only

one quick way, engine turning  
like a lawnmower's.

You watch wings' shadows  
diminish. Angling high,

you who left church  
for Sunday hikes remember  
the Psalmist moving  
*through the Valley*  
*of the Shadow of Death*, supposedly  
*fearing no evil*  
as the pilot buzzes the peaks  
at the level of fire towers:

one down draft  
as you pass over the treetops,  
and you'll be wreckage—oh, how tippingly  
he turns that plane in the narrow  
canyon, so the river flies  
sideways. In headphones, he cannot hear you

cursing, singing hymns and working  
any other desperate remnant  
of remembered religiosity  
returning in a rush  
of panic: you can't watch,  
though it thrills you—  
you prefer the dark, shift into

follower gear. This

is how it happens: you first  
must be deeply afraid—then  
if you fall to your knees,  
won't the rest of the descent  
be easier? Faith is

an updraft, that gusty tale  
making the prospect of crash  
less terrible as you fall.

You close your eyes to pray  
as the plane goes down  
the air's declivity.

## Lilies

Though I hear my voice as a clean wind that comes  
from the north, the odd shape  
of the mole on my wrist still frightens me. That's all  
part of it. This instrument is not yet purified.

Paint on my arm, broken nails—skin dry  
as spent wheat stalks, and still I walk

the hills as I did last night. A strange bird appeared  
at dusk—red on the underbelly, warbling

without melody. The deer paused, turning their heads  
to listen. Spring calls forth new leaves  
with serrated fingers. Alone, without an agenda,  
I'll just see what's over the next  
brushy slope, just press on, explore the trail.

Unity is what I'm after—the way the last  
light works to fire what's still or call out the lilies  
offering their luscious bodies.

### **Larchlight in Fall**

Something in me yearns toward gold  
of larch trees and cottonwoods  
when Autumn sun illuminates those leaves.

I wander the curves of trails or roads winding  
in some pedestrian way when a cylinder inside me fires,  
responding to color. It splits me open

right at the chest, and some good alien  
thing flies out to merge—as if that cast  
of light compels me home. Is this the same impulse

drawing moth to flame—incandescent trap—  
or is it more like desire built from old

circuitry? When I look up from my bootprints,  
what felt fisted loosens—I spread my arms  
like limbs, turn my face toward that yellow warmth,  
and my words fruit into little red berries.