



Lisa Norris



The Gap



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Photos by Will Stauffer-Norris.

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



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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 unchanged.

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 tinkles
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

skin against skin through such a thin cloth—oh,
that jolt of static!

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.