Walking the White Fields

Lance Larsen
Behind his eyes lie the slim silver boys called by my name.

He was a Welshman, this Leslie Norris, who came to the Rocky Mountains by way of Seattle, a two-semester stint that turned into twenty-five years. And we, lucky novice poets, fell under his sway. Who was he? Epithets fail but fail beautifully, so let us begin there. Singer of stones, pilot, gardener, bicyclist of the clouds, soccer maven, translator (only sometimes of words), CEO of the seasons, cataloguer of grasses, late Romantic, medium, raconteur, pantheist, scop, publicist of hummingbird and hawk, amateur pugilist, pacifist, fisherman, walker of white fields, Isaiah of the senses,
TRIBUTE TO LESLIE NORRIS

critic, breeder of love birds, dog whisperer, keeper of earth
wind water and fire.

The poem stands on its firm legs. Now I am cleaning
the teeth in its lion jaws with an old brush. I'll set it
wild on the running street, aimed at the hamstring, the
soft throat.

A poet who taught—and teaching, helped others to see:
that was Leslie. I can conjure the lessons in craft we scribbled
in our notebooks and, we hoped, on some permanent wall of
our psyches. “After finishing your masterpiece, cut the first
due lines and the last.” “No adverbs.” “Worry about verbs
first, then nouns.” “Use adjectives only if they remake the
noun. Never a ‘large elephant,’ but maybe just maybe a ‘tiny
elephant’ or a ‘scholar elephant.’” Then there was the advice
about audience, also crucial. “Write for the little old man in
Chicago who hasn’t gone to college.” Other lessons remain
harder to sum up. Once, visiting him in his office, away from
the hurly-burly of the classroom, I asked, “What else can I
do to become a writer?” He looked out his window at craggy,
snow-covered Mount Timpanogos. “Take a walk, sit,” he said,
“be alone, preferably in the natural world.” Part of me wanted
to dismiss this as Wordsworthian nostalgia, okay for Leslie,
but not me. And yet, and yet. Something underneath rang
true. He was trying to explain that beneath or inside the words
of any decent poem lies an essential confluence of solitude,
perspective, vision—in short, a lived life. Self knowledge. “We
must all become poets,” he once said on another occasion,
“whether or not we ever write a decent poem.”

A full voice sang of such inhuman longing that I no more
can say which was the song or which the fiery star.

The girl I loved hailed from upstate New York by way
of Peru, and I from Idaho by way of Colorado, both of us
strangers to Utah, without a place to receive friends hoping
to wish us joy, or at least good luck, upon marrying. Wishes
we needed badly, since Jacqui painted and I wrote poems,
and neither of us had any intention of giving up and turning
practical. So I asked Leslie one afternoon, "May I borrow
your house?" He did not shrug his shoulders, or look at his
fingernails, or explain that his current abode was not well
suited for crowds, but said, "Of course." So on the appointed
evening, my two siblings sistered the refreshment table, gifts
arrived, and well-wishers shook our hands. And none of us
knew that Leslie and Kitty had squirreled away an entire year's
worth of cookies, in case we ran out of the refreshments we
had brought.

Outside, the sprinklers, waving their spraying rainbows,
kept America green.

In all, I took three classes from Leslie. Later, after
completing a Ph.D., I returned to share time with him in
the same department—more opportunities to bathe in his
stories. I loved the way he told them, parceling them out
like gumdrops, stories about Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath,
stories about pubbing with Dylan Thomas, about cleaning up
John Masefield's terrible nose bleed minutes before Masefield
received a prestigious international award, his white shirt pink
and wet but otherwise none the worse for wear. Whenever
I suggested that Leslie should write up his anecdotes as
memoir, he laughed. He was loath to attach himself to the
famous in print. But catch him at the right moment and his
stories resulted in a kind of oral publication—or shall we call
it transubstantiation? The stories taking on a new life inside us.
Like this one, about once seeing a handbill for an upcoming
medical lecture: *Unusual Obstetric Occurrences.* A professional
title, certainly. That is, until some wag scribbled beneath it,
"Mary had a little lamb." Just as the laughter subsided, Leslie
would smile and say, "Quite true. Holy Mary, poor girl—she
did have a little Lamb."
A bridge launched, hovering, wondering where to land.
A bridge is the path of flight.

Early Thursday morning, April 6, Leslie suffered a massive stroke, which left him unconscious. I learned of his stroke minutes after my 8:00 class ended. What I had feared for years had finally taken place. I hurried to the hospital to keep vigil with friends and neighbors and writers and with dear Kitty, who sat beside him holding his hand. It was a strange and harrowing time. We knew Leslie would not wake or recover, but we behaved like children, believing ourselves safe from the full impact of loss as long as our friend kept breathing. And breathe he did—loud, open-mouthed, laboring breaths very close to snores. Friends brought flowers, specialty soups, good will. One offered to build a pine casket. A fellow Welshman who had driven down from Salt Lake said, “Anyone have poems?” I dug in my backpack and handed him a collection by Czeslaw Milosz, which he read to Leslie.

Next came my turn. I pulled out a collection of essays and read a short piece called “I Believe,” by a Catholic writer, Brian Doyle. Holding Leslie’s hand, I relearned what Leslie had taught me so many years before, that symbolic black marks arranged on a page sometimes equaled deep mystery. How else could you explain their ability to concentrate the mind, quicken the senses, and collect inchoate feelings like a lightning rod? A sample, then, of what I read: “I believe that the fingerprints of the Maker are everywhere: children, hawks, water. I believe that even sadness and tragedy and evil are part of that Mind we cannot comprehend but only thank, a Mind especially to be thanked, oddly, when it is most inscrutable. I believe that everything is a prayer. I believe, additionally, that friends are family. I believe that the best of all possible breakfasts is a pear with a cup of ferocious coffee, taken near the ocean, rather later in the morning than earlier, preferably in the company of a small sleepy child still
in her or his rumpled and warm pajamas, his or her skin as warm and tawny as a cougar pelt. I believe that love is our greatest and hardest work.” Amen.

Could Leslie hear me? I don’t know. I also don’t know how many times I had to stop midsentence to collect myself. Here I was: a Mormon reading the words of a Catholic to a dying friend who confessed no religion but embodied an uncommon spirituality and wholeness. In my life, God had rarely leaned closer. Four hours later when it came time to say my final goodbye, I hugged Leslie, kissed his cheek and forehead, and inhaled—an indulgence I wasn’t about to pass up. A cool, moist Welshness filled my head. Though he wore nothing but a hospital gown, I could smell his accent and poems, his debonair woolens and his chatty anecdotes about Dylan Thomas and a raininess that fell that day and for weeks to come.

I lace heavy boots, break brittle ice, feel winter’s bones under the snow. I hold my skull to the wind.

Less than two weeks after Leslie’s passing, I happened upon one of my journal entries dated December 27, 1997. It came as a shock, as if someone else had written it: “In my dream we were fishing, Leslie Norris and I. Late afternoon, mid-December, but temperate. No snow. More like September, and the day about that long. We were making our way up the canyon, crossing, then re-crossing the river, Provo River maybe, though not that wide. Did we actually cast? I don’t think so, though we had our poles out, flies ready. I was supposed to be acting as guide. Then we gave up and walked toward a cabin near the river. Or a community lodge. A man and his young son were eating pancakes, so we joined them. All this done wordlessly, though Leslie acted as negotiator. There were plenty of pancakes, and we kept drenching the
pancakes with syrup, then eating. Behind us, a hearth and fireplace of stone.” Ah, Leslie—even in my dream I seem to have gotten you right. A friend with whom to journey, a crosser of rivers, the welcomer welcomed by strangers, then the eating of a meal. How we hungered, how those pancakes steamed.

The small summer hangs its suns on the chestnuts, and the world bends slowly out of the year.