

An Interview with Leslie Norris¹

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LN: “Autumn Elegy” I’m going to read first.

GP: Why?

LN: I’m going to read it because it’s the first poem in my *Selected Poems* (1986), and also because I wanted for a long time to write this poem. I was in World War II. I was a very young man and came out of it, and lots of people I knew didn’t. I’d always felt that a poem existed to keep alive what was important to the poet. As long as his language was viable and living, it was a kind of defeat of time in many ways, and because it was a duty I felt to remember those young men, and because autumn is indeed a very unhappy time for me. I like winter. The poem says it. May I just read it?

GP: Please.

¹This interview aired in 1999 on KUER; at the time Gene Pack was the station’s Classical Music Director.

LN: September. The small Summer hangs its suns
On the chestnuts, and the world bends slowly
Out of the year. On tiles of the low barns
The lingering swallows rest in this timely

Warmth, collecting it. Standing in the garden,
I too feel its generosity but would not leave.
Time, time to lock the heart. Nothing is sudden
In Autumn, yet the long, ceremonial passion of

The year's death comes quickly enough
As firm veins shut on the sluggish blood
And the numberless protestations of the leaf
Are mapped on the air. Live wood

Was scarce and bony where I lived as a boy.
I am not accused to such opulent
Panoply of dying. Yet if I stare
Unmoved at the flaunting, silent

Agony in the country before a resonant
Wind anneals it, I am not diminished, it is not
That I do not see well, do not exult,
But that I remember again what

Young men of my own time died
In the Spring of their living and could not turn
To this. They died in their flames, hard
War destroyed them. Now as the trees burn

In the beginning glory of Autumn
I sing for all green deaths as I remember
In their broken Mays, and turn
The years back for them, every red September. (97)

GP: Are there themes in that, do you think, that have been important themes in your poetry?

LN: Oh, yes I think so. I think there are general themes that are inherent in being human, so to speak, and that one in which we consider the brevity of our lives is one of the great themes. It's something we meet with all our lives until our own time comes. So, yes, there is. I think the mainsprings of many examples of our art, all art, are attempts to remain immortal, so to speak, to keep alive what we think needs keeping alive. That's deliberately so, but I think we could probably place them in many poems, many pieces of writing, many pieces of music, for example. It is extraordinary how often the word *eternity* will come up in a poem or in poems. So that's an immortal theme, so to speak.

GP: One of the things the poet is looking for is to live forever?

LN: Yes, and also to have to have extraordinary delight in living because however sad the poem is, it won't exist as a poem unless one has delight in the writing of it and delight in the reading of it. There is that dichotomy between the material and the emotional, so to speak, between writing the elegy and everybody feeling better because of it—if it's a good elegy. I don't suggest mine is, but that's what it set out to be.

GP: Why did you start writing?

LN: I started writing because I didn't know the differences as a child between reading and writing. Whatever I read seemed to me so much a part of my life that it was almost as if I wrote it. And because my father knew an extraordinary number of poems which he would recite at the drop of a hat. They were nearly always relevant, actually. So when I was a tiny child, I remembered many poems. When I went to high school and began to read poems seriously, I often came across poems that I thought I knew very well, only to realize that they were the parodies that my father had read of them at different times. I remember perhaps when I was growing out of his influence rather as a teenager; he was a very tall man, and I ran down the garden path, which was narrow, and he stood there holding in his arms

two huge red cabbages which he had grown for their appearance. He was extraordinarily fond of them—great, hard cannonballs of red cabbages—and I kind of bumped into him as I tried to go past him, as I was in a hurry to get to my friends, and he just looked down and said, “I have no pain, dear Mother, now, / but oh I am so dry. / Connect to me the brewery, / and leave me there to die.”² You see, I was accustomed to these things, and so I began my career as a deliberate writer, although I wrote in school all the time. I was beautifully educated as a child in the village school, where my teacher was, I think, some kind of genius, making us want the words to recapitulate the extraordinary experiences we had. I wrote as a very small child and remember a poem that I began which went something like this: “Oh many-colored parrot, thy nose is like a parrot.” When I was very small, I began because I loved comic poems. I began as a funny poet mainly because I loved the verse of a man called Beachcomber—that was his pen name, and he was a skilled verse writer—so I began as an apprentice to Beachcomber.

GP: Why did you write poetry at first and not prose?

LN: I think that there was something to the texture of a poem. I think it is a more complete physical experience than prose. Prose seems to me to be a much more intellectual thing than poetry. The whole person engages in poetry. One’s voice—no one actually hears the poem as the poet hears it.

GP: One’s hearing?

LN: The skin of one’s knees comes into the texture of the poem. It’s very much the essential human language experience. It wasn’t until I was much more capable in many ways of writing that I became a prose writer. It was a much more intellectual thing. I had to have

²An anonymous parody of “Little Jim” or “The Cobbler’s Dying Child,” a saccharinely sentimental poem published by British poet Edward Farmer in 1870.

much more control, but as children, you know, we are constantly alert to the rhythms of words. Children naturally have many, many rhythms they need to express, and they have the skills of alliteration. As children, we insult each other by shouting, “Cowardy, cowardy, custard” and things like this, which is a kind of poetry really. So I think children are poets. They are discovering words; they are discovering language. They are deciding to define their place in the world. When I taught small children, which I did for a couple of years, I hugely enjoyed it. All my children wrote poetry. I wanted them to do it, and because they are only too eager to try things, they tried:

There was once a willow who wanted a pillow,
So he began to weep, because he couldn't go to sleep.
A bird passing by over to him did fly and said,
“Dear willow, do you want a pillow?”
“Yes,” he said, “since I already have a bed.”
So it was that very day that the bird flew away,
And every bird plucked a feather
And they clothed them all over with leather.
And the bird flew back and said,
“Dear willow, here's your pillow.”

And that was written by a little boy called Terry Gillard in my class at the time in the city of Bath all those years ago. It's totally memorable.

GP: It's lovely.

LN: And it's a proper poem, nothing to him.

GP: Just tossing it off.

LN: Yes, making a world as well; you know, it's kind of a godlike attribute. He makes a little world in which all those things are relevant.

GP: Made relevant perhaps by the sounds?

LN: Yes, and the rhyme and the act of discovering as he goes through the poem because he certainly didn't know that was what he was going to write about. It's the rhyme, so to speak, that dictates it. "There was once a willow. . . ." What comes next? Yes. "Who wanted a pillow." Why'd he want it? You know, it's in a sense that kind of poem, and my poetry, too, is an act of discovery. I'm astonished, so to speak, at what I mean and what I've said: "Oh, is that what you've been on about?"

GP: When do you discover this—what you mean and what you've said?

LN: Well, very often, I discover it in the middle of the poem when I suddenly begin to think, "Uh huh, this is what's coming." Then, though I don't consciously work towards it, the final line—whatever it is—comes in like a great gong bang, and that's the end of the poem. Then I have to work very, very hard to take out what's unnecessary, to balance things, to deliberately introduce the relevant sounds and textures. So half of it is subconscious, unconscious, and half very careful, deliberate writing.

GP: What is the proportion in time? Does one just come tumbling out and the other take you hours and hours?

LN: I think it all takes me hours and hours, me personally, but I think it's not an uncommon thing. I think that very often for me the poem will start with a phrase, an image, or sometimes even something that you might recognize as a little tune of seven or eight notes. You know, words attach themselves to it. But I do very often have an image which begins the poem, and then from it grows another image. My poems begin and are meant to follow imagery, images, and then from the marriage of these two images, I guess, the third image comes quite soon. I am in this condition where I am receiving my lines very slowly, but at the same time lots of other phrases are coming to my attention. I write them down at the side because I know I'll be needing them before I come to the end of the poem. So I've

got a poem that I'm writing with extreme difficulty, and then I've got lots and lots of pieces that are going to come in some time, and then I get the last line which I can put in, knowing I'm not going to receive anything else. Now I have to make the poem. So it sometimes takes a long time. I distrust one that comes very quickly, frankly.

GP: Why?

LN: It may be one of the great experiences of my life. The poet is always terrified that it's never going to happen again, you know, so he lives in terror until the next poem comes along. Well, I distrust it because I believe that the poem is hard work. I believe you have to be incredibly careful not to spoil the poem as it's coming along. You always do. I mean, what you actually finish with is nothing like the experience of receiving it. I once did a lot—not a lot—but some research when I had people write to me about what happened to them at this particular stage. Many people shared with me their feelings, many of my friends who were poets, and some said they actually heard the phrase in their heads. Some had much more exotic experiences: I myself feel like growing up from my shoulder blade is an aerial—I've forgotten what the American word for it is now—to receive it.

GP: An antenna?

LN: An antenna, yes, that's the very word. Sometimes, the signals come in, but they're rather weak, so I ignore them. Then I wait until they come again, and if they're strong, I do something about them. But if they don't come in, then I'm very worried. I once asked the great British poet and novelist Robert Graves what happened to him, and he told me that to him it was as if life meant that he walked along an absolutely deserted beach, alone; he always felt alone, Graves did. He never seemed to feel that he had a companion. He walked along this beach, and even his footsteps after he walked a few steps vanished. There was no sign of him on the beach. Every so often, he would see a scattering of pebbles on the beach. Most of the time he ignored them, but occasionally he would

see the pebble that was totally meaningful for him—that is the poem—and he would kneel by it very carefully so as not to disturb anything, and grain by grain he would uncover the pebble. He would uncover it; he would discover it. But if he were too brusque, he would scar and spoil whatever the pebble's perfection was like. So for him it was a matter of infinite care and patience and time. Lots of people share something like that. So it's not like writing prose, really, at all.

GP: Where do you think it comes from?

LN: I've no idea where it comes from. I suppose that what I'm really saying is that the genesis of the poem is a great mystery, that we are thankful that it comes, and that maybe if we knew what the mystery was, it wouldn't come. And so it's the mystery that is wonderful to us. I don't think we know at all. We call it inspiration, I guess. We call it different names in different languages. Coleridge thought it was like an Aeolian harp being played by the wind in the window. What if all our natural world be but Aeolian harps played by God's wind?

GP: Do you write your poems?

LN: By hand.

GP: To be read aloud?

LN: Yes. I do write by hand when I'm making the poem because, as I say, it's a highly physical business. It has to do with flesh and blood and breathing and all the rest of it. But when I've got my draft down—that is to say, however awful the thing is, I have a first draft—the fish is in my net and it feels a bit like that. Then I go to the typewriter, and I type it out. I am now the editor, and I'm removed from the poem. I have a machine to look at. I can be more objective.

GP: It's a thing.

LN: Yeah. So that's what happens to me. Then I work and work and work, and the poem gets smaller and smaller as I take things out, and I see stupid mistakes I have made and things that are duplicated in other ways in the poem. Very often, I take the first two stanzas out because those are my five-finger exercises so to speak. Certainly, I will remove that magical phrase that started the poem—what the French called the *donnée*—because that was like the self-starter, really. It used to be very hard for me to take these things out I'd worked so hard on, this magical gift. It used to be very hard. "Why are you taking this out?" I used to think. But now I know that I have to be true to the poem and remove as much as I can of me, so to speak, out.

GP: How do you know when you're finished?

LN: I think when I can do no more, it's finished, because the poem is not mine any longer; if it exists, it exists somewhere between me and the reader, and the reader puts into the poem his or her experiences or misgivings or whatever. Then I think that's when the poem is finished, when I can do no more. I do let my wife see it, and she very often can see things that I ought to do to it.

GP: What sorts of things?

LN: Well, for example, I know my weaknesses are always the same. I never learn from them. I know that there will be the same errors of untrustworthiness, that I would like my poem to be built as solidly as a wall. In Sussex in England they build walls out of round pebbles stuck together with clay and it's an art, very beautiful to look at. But if one pebble gets dislodged, the line undoes like a row of knitting. I want my poems to be a bit like that, so that you can jump and bounce upon them, but every word is like one of those pebbles. Well, sometimes I use words which are more like sponges, you know?

GP: Is that one of your weaknesses? Using words like sponges?

LN: Well, that's bad, you see; that's bad in a poem that ought to hold together. And I do read my poems aloud. You asked me about that, whether I read them? That's the last test. That's the very last test. When I read it aloud, that will oftentimes show me weaknesses in the poem, rhythms that have gone wrong, sometimes lines where I haven't seen clearly what I want to say. Sometimes, a line will have a filler in the middle because I wanted to get on with the poem, and I put in something like "You say" or "I thought"; then I have to work to put that right.

GP: How long ago did you come to America?

LN: The year 1100. I first came in seventy-something, '75, I think, '73, maybe, when I came to be the Theodore Roethke poet in the University of Washington, and that was remarkable because I had never worked as a poet, so to speak. I worked as an academic and at that time as a freelance broadcaster, lecturer. That's what I was doing when I was invited to be the Theodore Roethke Visiting Poet. That was wonderful. It polarized everything for me because before that I hadn't had the confidence to exist purely as a poet, and everything else was secondary to that. It meant great things for me. I came for six months, and I did that several times afterwards and eventually came here.

GP: Why did you come to Utah?

LN: Because a student of mine in the doctoral program in Seattle lived in Orem and was my best student by a long way, and when he finished he came here and worked in one of the libraries. As a result of his recommendation, I went down to BYU—not to the University but to a summer school held there, a writing school—and I did some reading there. As a result of that, I was invited to become a visiting poet at BYU. That's how I came here.

GP: Is your poetry different now from what it was in England?

LN: Yes, I think I know a lot more. It's not as personal as it was. I think that I use a looser and longer line. But that might have come in any case, because I believe greatly, hugely in the craft of poetry. I've spoken about the mystery of poetry, but I believe the mystery is lost unless you have the craft, and so I had learned everything I could about the skills of poetry. But having got that, I could then let go; I could invent forms of my own. I could listen to the music of the situation. I could become a much, much freer poet, in fact. That's, I think, where I am now, although I think the form I might invent is as much formal and as difficult as a more orthodox, traditional form.

GP: Are there themes that are in your poetry now that you didn't have before?

LN: No, I think one could recognize themes after the poem is written. I think you could see that over the years I've developed modifications of themes, but that I'm not aware of them in writing them. I do see that in some poets. One grows. One's poetry grows; that is to say, I'm a much more coherent poet now. I'm not seduced by having an eloquent phrase for the sake of the phrase. I'm very careful of the play now. I think, too, that very often I'm a much more religious poet, clearly religious. I'm not in orthodox terms a religious man, but I do begin to see images, references to. . . . Well, can I read such a poem to you?

GP: Would you?

LN: This is a poem that I call—I find it very hard to give titles to my poems. This one is called "Peaches," mainly because I'm terribly interested in gardens, and in Europe I couldn't grow peaches, although I would have liked to have done that. So when I came to Orem and had a garden, I grew peaches and watched them grow. The other thing is of course that having a garden is kind of a religious act.

GP: Before you read it, why is having a garden a religious act?

LN: Well, we began in the Garden, and our lives, so to speak, are recapitulating the growth of gardens and the making of gardens in this life I say—I no longer say in my life because I want to remove myself and make such things universal, so to speak.

GP: You regard yourself in the third person?

LN: I do. It's part of a very long poem that I'm writing in the third person, yet autobiographical. Being in the third person means that I don't have to be meticulous about events. I can invent things that I might have done. Frost has such a poem about the road not taken, you know.

In his life he has made seven gardens, two
from the untilled meadow, some in good heart
after the spades of other men. One unkempt
inside its formal Georgian walls, he brought
to perfect order out of wilderness, its geometric
beds to flower, renewed its lawn, cut back
its gnarled espaliers and clipped their trimmed limbs
to the limestone. He remembers the rough bark
of those old varieties, pears mostly, and how
he hit the supporting nails into the mortar.

This is the first time he has grown a peach tree.
It is the third year of the small tree's bearing,
and already his black dog has cleared the lowest
bough of its green fruit, nibbled the flesh,
left a scatter of kernels about the grass. No matter,
there's plenty. He has posted a stout cross
beneath the branches, else a heavy harvest of peaches
pulls the whole bush down. Watching the early blossom
has been his pleasure, the frail brevity of blossom
blown in cold weather, then the incipient fruit.

He does not walk in the garden until evening,
the days too hot for his uncovered head. When shadows

spread from under the trees, he stands there,
near a dusty lilac, surprised by hot gusts
out of the desert. His roses are abundant now.
He has let them grow and mingle, throwing their trails
over and through the massed green of other shrubs.
Alba and gallica roses, damask roses, centifolia roses,
an old moss rose, a bed of hardy rugosa. Refreshed
by roses, he cherishes the garden air, his head filled

with generations of perfume. Far in his life
he nods to the spent iris, remembering how in water
his yellow flags stood high, how as a child he took
in his father's garden bright vegetables from the soil,
and how in the autumn hedge blackberries glowed.

It is his way of life to desert his gardens.
The neighbors' evening lamps light up the peaches.
Fruit is ripening, orchards everywhere ripen.
He throws a fallen peach to his black dog.
The animals were not expelled from Eden. (296–97)

So you see, all the images are there. The cross is there, everything, the Garden of Eden, and I really do think that is our life, that we as children are innocent in all kinds of ways, and we are, once we hit puberty, expelled from Eden. All our lives, we try to repeat such perfection in garden after garden after garden. So my seven gardens are the right number and everything else. It's a very deliberately religious poem but not necessarily Biblical perhaps.

GP: It's beautiful, very beautiful.

LN: So . . .

GP: Oh, what else would I like to ask you? I think we've covered much wonderful territory. Give me another poem.

LN: I'll give you another poem. Why don't I give you a local poem and then that will be—it will show you my line has changed and that in my age, though I don't feel any younger or older than I ever did. I was asked to do something which militates against my whole belief. I was asked to write a poem by people up in Winter Quarters in Scofield, who were going to celebrate the centenary of that terrible pit explosion which took place on May 1, 1900, and killed so many young men and boys, all of them new immigrants or immigrants anyway, all of them from European countries, and they were killed in half an hour, destroyed. I was asked because my father was a miner. I said I couldn't possibly do it, and they said, "Oh well, there's a year to go. We'll just leave you there and if something happens . . ." and I was pleased with that because I really wanted to do it. But four or five weeks beforehand, I had to tell them I couldn't do it, and then having done that, I saw quite clearly as a child of four years old or rather less, my father being brought to the house and lifted out of an ambulance and carried indoors pick-a-back because he had been savagely injured in a pit accident. So the poem came. This is the "Elegy for the Men Killed in Winter Quarters, Scofield, on May 1, 1900."

Before I was five years old I watched three men
 Bring my father home from the mine.
 One carried him pick-a-back.
 They brought him through the kitchen
 And laid him soft as women could
 On the bed made hurriedly in the back room.
 They were in their pit dirt, lips and tongues
 Scarlet in the black dust of their faces.
 One of them, the biggest, said to my mother,
 "I'm sorry, love, I'm afraid his back is broken."
 Speaking in Welsh, which was our language then.

I make this poem for the men who sat at ease
 In the safety of their evening homes; who labored
 In darkness, and died in the shattered earth.

George Williams was my father's boy,
His helper. He would hand my dad his pick.
When enough coal was cut, he'd slide
On his shoulders to the narrow seam, scrape
The bright coal into the scoop
The boys used, and lift it, lump by lump,
To the waiting tram. He was fourteen.
I did not know him. I like to think of him
At my father's side. "Tell me about George Williams,"
I used to ask. When I knew he was dead

Beneath the stone that crippled my father,
I would not be comforted. Many years ago.

I make this poem for the men and boys
Whose lives were taken wherever coal is cut,
Who went too early to the earth they worked in.

I have brought with me to Winter Quarters
Echoes of the voices of mourning women,
And the silence of the men of Gresford in North Wales,
Where two hundred and forty lie in darkness,
And of the many dead in Sengenydd, killed
In one morning. Let the men from Finland,
The Welsh, the Scots, Englishmen, Frenchmen,
Dying far from their countries a hundred years ago,
Let them be united in the rough brotherhood
Of all tragic mines. Let the winds blow kindly
Above them, and their graves be peaceful.

I make this poem for the men who died
When darkness exploded, and for their families,
And for those of us who come after them. (397–98)

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