Booth

Volume 6 | Issue 12 Article 1

12-5-2014

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Abstract

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A Harvard graduate and son of an esteemed economist, he turned down an opportunity to pursue an international academic career. Instead, he went to work in factories, painting houses, and tending bar. He also became a human rights advocate, and his activism consistently supports children, the poor, and the traumatized.

His ten books of poetry reflect this resistance to elitism and embrace of democracy, craft, and workmanship: Nurkse initially published in distinguished journals and small presses, with strong books such as Shadow Wars*. Subsequent titles include* The Fall, Burnt Island, Border Kingdom*, and most recently from Knopf,* Night in Brooklyn*. Along the way, he won a Whiting Award, a Guggenheim fellowship, two NEA fellowships, and a Literature Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He was the poet in residence at Butler University in the 2014 spring semester. He teaches at Sarah Lawrence.*

Cover Page Footnote

"A Conversation with D. Nurkse" was originally published at *Booth*.

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A Conversation with D. Nurkse

by Josh Brewer

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Josh Brewer: *Do you see poetic tradition as an encumbrance or a source of inspiration? A limiting factor or a wellspring?*

D Nurkse: I do see it as a source of inspiration, I really do. You know, I see poetry as kind of a river of language. In some ways, I love poetry written by dead people, but

one would like to, let's say, enlarge the number and categories of dead people that we look at, rather than turning away from tradition. I grew up in a generation that was very sensitive to the idea of the canon being white and male, and one of the things that I would like to do is just go back to the origins of tradition and look at poems in the tradition that are not necessarily class bound.

In my own life, I've been inspired by folk poetry from the Middle Ages, anonymous poetry, troubadour poetry—translations from that Japanese period in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries where there was an amazing wellspring of poems by women. I really do love the poetic tradition, I love all of it, and in some ways, you know, sometimes we see it as more narrow than we should, and people rebel against it.

The other thing is that our retrospective look at tradition normalizes it, and if you do go back and look at something like Beaumont and Fletcher, or *The Faerie Queene,* you'll realize how strange tradition is—the real strangeness of great literature, which is not my real insight, but we constantly realize that professionalizing our study of it, we make it seem as if, not only does it make sense, but that it had great influence in its time. You know, it's important to read Keats and realize how marginalized he was in his time, in his period, and how strange his work was in his period.

JB: *Many of your books seem to fall into three sections, often with section titles. How do you form a collection? Are you simply writing individual poems all along that eventually make up enough material for a book? Or are you writing poems that will fit into particular moments or "movements" or "flows" in a collection?*

DN: Yeah, that's a great question, and it's certainly an agonizing issue. You really could write a book that would be just fifty poems (and maybe I should). But, you know, in this particular period, people structure their books—I know I do—into sections. They try to make the books thematic. The sections are there to give the book a sense of foreground and background, or a sense of both rupture and continuity.

But I worry about that. In some ways structuring a collection of poetry is a really different process from writing a poem; it's much less intuitive, and there are moments when I've written poems to fill out the theme of a collection rather than writing a poem of its own necessity. That can be a very hard thing—to have a poem end up feeling the same as a poem that you wrote at three o'clock in the morning because you had to write it.

JB: *I asked about section titles, but I'm also interested in the titles of individual poems. For example, in your book* Night in Brooklyn, *the poem "Mid-August in the*

Dolomites" (I love that poem) was originally published either under the title "A Marriage in the Dolomites" (Poetry, *June 2009) or as "Engagement in the Dolomites." Do these titles shift in order to fit into a collection, to change the meaning of the poem? When do you know that a title must change?*

DN: Those were changes to fit into the collection. The poem appeared—it was an engagement or marriage poem—but in the collection you may not want to emphasize that. In the collection, there were much earlier marriage poems, so this is kind of a threshold of a relationship experience. Within the collection, to call it an engagement would be screwing up the chronology. It's sort of a logistics thing, like in a work of carpentry, hammering in a shim in order to make a leaf fit, because it's a little bit too short. Skewing things around in order to make them fit into a hypothetical structure, and frankly, that structure probably exists only in my own mind. People don't necessarily read these books chronologically or for structure.

JB: *Speaking of reading, what are you reading now? What will you always read?*

DN: I think I'll always read Lorca. I'll always read folk ballads and folk lyrics. You know, I'll always read great poets (like Gwendolyn Brooks) who are so large in the American tradition that they're kind of invisible. What she would do with solid structure . . . What am I reading right now? I'm about to reread Ilya Kaminski's *Dancing in Odessa,* a beautiful book.

JB: *At the end of* Burnt Island*, you write,*

> Yet our bodies are shaped
> exactly like the resting place, we fit each other
>
> like silence in desire
> we live another second
> our much less, less than a blink
>
> until the code comes to know itself
> and the mind dreams another mind
> that will survive it
> there, in the bright green curtain of spray.

Is there a natural code that we can know?

DN: With that poem, I'm no expert on what it means, but it is thinking of things like the immortality of DNA, which contains a whole instinctual response to the world.

The way we live in the bottle of our awareness, but we're part of a completely determined biological syntax, which kind of determines what we know and don't know. That poem is a little about the individual being part of a larger whole biologically rather than spiritually.

JB: *Most poets can only imagine what it is like to publish with a large house. What can you tell us about publishing with Knopf? Are there drawbacks or only benefits? How does it compare with publishing with a smaller press?*

DN: I'm just grateful when I'm published. I've published with large presses, small presses, and I'm grateful for all of it. It's amazing that people will give their lives to edit and promote poetry in America without expecting the return that poets get, that people give their lives to editing and publishing, because it is obviously such a necessary thing. It's not always quite clear who's going to be doing it. It is quite clear who's going to wake up at 3 a.m. with a desperate love poem, but the person who will give six months of their life to shepherd that poem into print is a person who is rare, and I'm very grateful to that person.

JB: *In the poem "The North Side," a ghostly father joins a conversation about whether Billy Martin had "ruined Vida Blue." He sort of turns away from the speaker at that moment. In fact there's a lot of baseball in* Night in Brooklyn *and in earlier collections. Does the coach become a sort of father? Or is the poet a pitcher?*

DN: I don't know if either of those is true. My father was a vulnerable person. It's more that I identify with Vida Blue and Billy Martin just in terms of the poem's obsessive wanting to win. Used up Billy Martin becomes a metaphor for somebody who is in a situation that is demanding and doesn't recognize the other person's vulnerability. I think the father reappears in the collection as a vulnerable person who gets marginalized in daily life. That might be the resonance of that conversation, because people are talking about the implacable desire to win that's rooted in daily life. Somebody has been wrecked by that, and my father is an Eastern European not even getting it and marginalized from that, so I think the details would be about the degrees of marginalization, or not being part of the dominant culture. Vida Blue didn't get the chance to say, "I'm a great pitcher, but give me a day of rest."

JB: *This led to a whole conversation I had with a poet about your use of the forkball in that poem and about which Mets or baseball players you're mentioning in your poetry.*

DN: Vida Blue is also in there because there's a poem about death: Vida Blue turning blue, *vida/*life. It feels like there's something about mortality. Something about the living and the dead, so Billy Martin vs. Vida Blue becomes a larger struggle.

JB: *And the ghostly father? Is that a ghost or a person? And the speaker's tending bar and projects onto that person. That's where dad used to sit. That's the kind of conversation he would get into.*

DN: I would say it is about projection. The kid is out there tending bar; he's exhausted and projects his father.

JB: *Hamlet-like. Does history create in writers a sense of obligation?*

DN: I think it does. I think that's an important question. I've answered this in a schematic way. A writer must step back and see themselves as part of us, as part of history. I do think that history will make demands on us retroactively, will see us, at least my generation that has failed on some of its major tasks. I think it is important to recognize that and to take it on as a burden. In my own work I want to see myself partly as someone who feels sorry for himself for his own reasons and partly as someone who really fumbled the historical mission my generation was given. We were supposed to do better than this.

JB: *You've spoken of a sense of "loyalty to that past that the parents came from" in the same breath that you mentioned "survivor's guilt." Is your personal or political investment in human rights tied to issues of immigration and persistence?*

DN: I think that's very true. I remember being a young poet in the '80s, going to Canada, feeling terrified crossing the Canadian border, wondering why. Well, my parents did cross a lot of borders; there were difficult borders leaving Europe in the 1940s. There was a lot unspoken that I grew up with—they had a sort of shared trauma of watching Western Capitalism degenerate into fascism and degenerate into Stalinism. They were sparing me that, but that also gave me a feeling that there was a huge unspoken dimension behind daily life. I think that was one of the things that made me want to be a writer.

JB: *After Harvard, you had a chance to go to graduate school in France, but you decided to go work in a factory. I worked in a factory, too, when I was a kid, so I connected with that. But what was the decision-making process like?*

DN: I did have a chance to go to France, but in my own mind I was being unethical. You know, I was entering a contest just as a joke and whipping together academic

ideas that I didn't believe in, writing an essay on a book, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, that I really didn't know that well. I was kind of voluntarily making myself an imposter. I thought, "Wow, you didn't really deserve this. You're not taking this seriously. It's a bad direction to go in." Yeah, I did. I worked in a factory because it was a way of making money. I felt it gave me a little emotional and intellectual freedom. I wasn't apprenticing myself to any particular force. I did that for quite a while.

JB: *You've noted the difficulties of addressing politics in poetry: "Even if the speaker is trying to promote a sense of unity, he will end up objectifying his audience and seeing them, perhaps less morally advanced than he is." It's a trap that people fall into, yet you manage to express a certain solidarity: You write about baseball, bars, home maintenance, and everyday practicalities. You do this without sounding inauthentic or sounding as if you're attempting to assume an identity to which you're not naturally predisposed. How do you know what to disclose and what to withhold in poems?*

DN: That's the beauty of revision, trial and error. You can write a poem a few thousand times until it has the texture of truth and falsehood that you want it to: The tension between what's true in a poem and what's a lie in the poem is a tension that seems alive to you. If I write the poem that's meant to be true, it comes on as a tract, but if I write the poem that's meant to be a lie, it comes on as wish fulfillment. There's a certain trial and error to get balance, the way an abstract painter will balance forms until he or she gets the balance satisfying.

JB: *You've said that* The Fall *was "actually about my mother." This was in retrospect: "My mother was kind of the 'I.' … She had become the 'I' of the poem and therefore invisible, which is a problem that mothers go through. My father was the 'he' and therefore visible, my father was idealized, but my mother was internalized." . . . Once you've had these revelations after the fact, do you ever want to go back and revise and recast? Or does that push you forward?*

DN: It does push me forward. A lot of these books went through a long, long painful process, so it's not like my first draft. A published book might be a hundredth draft. Even if I wanted to go back, I did put years into that. It's over.

JB: *We could talk about music. There seems to be a lot of architecture in your poetry, but it isn't all about the Parthenon and Mozart or skyscrapers, really. It's also tenements, common doorways, generic cityscapes, couches in plain living rooms. Are there other art forms, like architecture, that are ubiquitous or constantly informing* your *art?*

DN: Certainly music is something I think of all the time. It may sound pretentious, but Aristotle said that whenever you hear music, all you hear is a cry. You know? And the hope is like an architecture, but it only exists in memory and anticipation. You never see the structure of a piece of music. It only exists in your mind, and it doesn't exist in the present of your mind. It exists in the past and the future of your own consciousness: that idea of a universal language that is only accessible to anybody as a cry at any given moment, and yet it exists for everybody as an immense landscape in the past and the future of their private minds. Everybody can access that architecture in a different way—that's an amazing idea to me—but in a way if you try to objectify and define that architecture, you'd never get to it. You may say, "I want to hear Bach the same way that Pablo Casals first heard Bach," but you'd never get there. It's impossible. You really have to trust your own dream world to take you there, and architecture, too: We are surrounded by a world that men and women labor over so profoundly to maintain its invisibility. In this room, somebody worked so hard to make it look as if this room had just appeared here. There's something large that's involved here. There's an ongoing process to make reality seem as if it's just a given. There's so much in this room that speaks to some kind of universal language of what would make someone feel comfortable and also of what would make the laboring and suffering of others invisible.

JB: *What does your process look like? Are you scribbling on brown paper bags at the grocery store? Sitting down each morning to write a poem before lunch?*

DN: It's definitely scribbling and acquiring endless scribbles and then trying to structure that into the poem, then acquiring a bunch of poems and trying to structure that into an arc. It's laborious, in that there's a lot of scribbling, but it's not all that conscious. I don't think I could sit down to write a poem. I have no idea what one would do if one intended to write a poem. It's more just wandering around, seeing a detail. Right now, we're watching a brick wall, fences, and some very light snow. It's like three different kinds of resistance.

JB: *I'm glad you said that. In* Burnt Island *you zoom in on three particular objects (or more), usually at the beginnings of poems. Dana Roeser said they were like talismans welcoming you or standing guard, almost before the poem, before you enter the poem. Is there a constellation that occurs to you when you are perceiving the world, and that gets you into a poem? Or do those objects come later?*

DN: It probably does begin with just being a physical person in a physical world. This leads to the idea that if we didn't die there wouldn't be any meaning to our existence. The lights cast on the brick wall from the fence: If we're going to live forever and see all those things in every possible different combination, there would

be no particular meaning to the combination I'm seeing now, but since I'm seeing those things for only a finite amount of time, that is a big deal.

JB: *I'm trying to be sensitive to the finite amount of time we have, so lightning round. Either or. George Oppen or Frank O'Hara?*

DN: That's a tough choice. I love them both. If I had to choose, I think it would be Frank O'Hara. Both.

JB: *Adrienne Rich or Elizabeth Bishop?*

DN: I'm going to say both, too.

JB: *I should add that you can't say both. Dwight Gooden or Darryl Strawberry?*

DN: Now I feel bad for saying both. I *really* feel for Dwight Gooden. When Gooden came up to the Mets, he was wearing glasses. Reading glasses. They were really scary, because you're worried about a pitcher's eyesight, and now here's my pitcher with reading glasses. There was actually nothing in the glasses, he was just a vulnerable kid, and he felt like wearing glasses makes him look more adult.

JB: *He was like 18, 19?*

DN: Yeah, they were just glasses that had glass in them. They didn't magnify. It was this defensive thing, made him look more adult, people would take him more seriously. It was a misunderstanding between him and the world. I just really feel for him. He started out so young and with so much pressure, so I'm really on his side.

JB: *Italy—north or south?*

DN: South.

JB: *Alexandrine or iambic pentameter?*

DN: Iambic pentameter.

JB: *Miles Davis or John Coltrane?*

DN: John Coltrane.

JB: *Stanzas or "verse paragraphs"?*

DN: I'd say stanzas.

JB: *What's your favorite font?*

DN: My favorite font is the old courier, old dark courier.

Josh Brewer writes poetry by a lake in the wilderness. A professor at Ivy Tech and MFA candidate at Butler University, his poetry and scholarship appear exclusively in the most selective venues, publications of *Booth*'s ilk.