

also by D. Nurkse

Isolation in Action
Shadow Wars
Staggered Lights
Voices over Water
Leaving Xaia
The Rules of Paradise
The Fall
Burnt Island
The Border Kingdom

D. Nurkse

A Night in Brooklyn

Ceditions

For Beth, with love

First published in Great Britain in 2013
by CB editions
146 Percy Road London W12 9QL
www.cbEditions.com

Published in the USA by Alfred A. Knopf,
a division of Random House, Inc., New York,
and in Canada by Random House of Canada, Limited, Toronto

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Printed in England by Blissetts, London W3 8DH

ISBN 978-0-9573266-4-4

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Acknowledgements

Thanks to the editors of the magazines in which several of these poems were previously published: *The American Poetry Review*, *The Atlantic*, *NYCBigCityLit.com*, *The Cortland Review*, *Drunken Boat*, *Field*, *Hanging Loose*, *Harvard Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Literary Review*, *The Manhattan Review*, *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry*, *Poetry London*, *Swink*, *The Threepenny Review*, *Upstreet*, *West Branch*.

I'm grateful to the MacDowell Colony, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and the Corporation of Yaddo, and to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and the American Academy of Arts and Letters, for support that helped me write this book.

Thanks also to Deborah Garrison, my editor at Knopf, to Caroline Zancan, and to Philip Fried. – D.N.

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PART ONE

A Night in Brooklyn

Waking in Greenpoint in Late August

We wanted so much that there be a world
as we lay naked on our gray-striped mattress,
staring up at a trowel mark on the eggshell-blue ceiling
and waiting, waiting for twilight, darkness, dawn,
marriage, the child, the hoarse names of the city –
let there be a universe in which these lovers can wash
at the pearling spigot, and lick each other dry.

Making Shelves

In that lit window in Bushwick
halfway through the hardest winter
I cut plexiglass on a table saw,
coaxing the chalked taped pane
into the absence of the blade,
working to such fine tolerance
the kerf abolished the soft-lead line.
I felt your eyes play over me
but did not turn – dead people
were not allowed in those huge factories.
I bargained: when the bell rang
I would drink with you on Throop
under the El, quick pint of Night Train
but you said *no*. Blood jumped

from my little finger, power
snapped off, voices summoned me
by name, but I waved them back
and knelt to rule the next line.

Central Brooklyn

Behind the tenements lay wild gardens:
a swaddled fig tree, a muscat arbor.
I propped my forty-foot ladder against a shim
and climbed and began searing the high porches
with a butane torch. I gouged away dead bees,
resin, gum, soot from forges, caulk. Once
the lovers opened their blinds and watched
with pursed lips, hand in hand, her breasts
swaying slightly, his penis limp, their gaze
imperious and forgiving, and I missed a spot.
Then I painted white on white, when I finished
those streets were empty, no one lived there
except the rich, chalk-faced in their long divorce.

Flatlands

1

In that hotel, the mirror was naked.
I had never seen such a wavering cloud.
I ran my fingers along the glass.
It burned me slightly.

I didn't know who you are.
Just how to suffer, how to pass time,
and a few jokes whose appeal
was a forgotten punch line.

I poured you a cup of black wine.
It trembled. We could hear the trucks
roaring north and south – we were alone
in a huge city. August inched
sideways through the blinds.

2

I didn't know twilight would be naked.
The bells would be naked. Not knowing
would be naked.

3

We are told, only the moment is real,
all that exists exists in the moment,
but who knew how to get there?

We tried door after door
along those elm-lined streets
and heard just chimes
in triple-locked apartments.

Then we found it. It is here.
Though we are fading
all our actions last forever,
even fumbling at a button –

not in these words
but in the night sky hidden
at the center of the last period.

The Dead Remember Brooklyn

It is the great arguments
we are proud of, over a nibbled peach,
hair in the comb, a faulty lube job;
the reconciliations were always breathless
in borrowed rooms, sometimes in Queens
or Staten Island, we touched each other
shyly – we reminded each other
of loneliness and funk and beautiful pigeons
with oil-slick necks, cooing bitterly –
but there we lost each other,
in forgiveness; keeping score,
being wounded even in triumph,
walking home down leafy avenues
etched with the faint double line
of extinct trolleys, caressing
carved hearts under a sheen of sap
with a ragged nail, sleeping alone,
choosing the dream of betrayal,
entering by the wide door
and waking dead – there
we were superb. In Brooklyn
we held our own.

Red Antares in a Blue Mirror

On that close-nap futon
she taught me the difference
between being and becoming,
when she had finished
it was still twilight, a cricket
singing I, I, not furiously,
but with a cool insistence,
and I understood how the universe
was created – how it fit in a pinhead
fourteen billion years ago
when the first second lasted
almost forever, then it flew
in a trillion pieces and now
it obeys laws we recognize
the way a pet comes to look
like its owner: she was washing
at the cold tap, she was binding
back her copper hair, but I
had been given those absolute weapons:
suffering, abnegation, miracle:
and I had to use them
if only by counting, counting
until it was night and the rain
simmered in the dog's huge eyes.

The Dead Reveal Secrets of Brooklyn

We are frequently asked, *What is death like?*

Like tossing a Frisbee in Prospect Park,
making sure the release
is free of any twitch or spasm –
any trace of the body's vacillation –
willing the disc to glide forward
of its own momentum, never veering,
in a trance of straight lines.

Like waiting in traffic at Hoyt-Fulton
waving away the squeegee man
with his excessive grin and red-veined eyes.

Lying under your lover in Crown Heights
and divining a stranger's face
in the dark flash of her pupils.

Growing old in Kensington
on a block that reeks of dry cleaning
where you nod to three neighbors
and avoid the stare of a fourth
though a single brindle-tailed cat
patrols every dark garden.

Remember, death does not last,
not even a breath,
whereas the city goes on forever,
Cypress Hill, Gravesend, Bath Beach,
avenues screened by ginkgos,
vehemence of domino players
hunched over folding tables,

range on range of padlocked factories
that once made twine, hammers, tape
and now make small nameless articles
which we use to bind, shatter, or seal,
here where there is no self,
no other world, no Brooklyn.