

Poetry & Endless War

An Interview With Poet Dennis Nurkse

By Reamy Jansen

Dennis Nurkse is the author of seven volumes of poetry, the most recent of which is *The Fall*. (The collection's original title, when it was first accepted in 1998, was *The Swiftmess With Which Those Cities Fell*.) The only child of refugees, Nurkse writes lyrics that look slantwise at love and conflict between the sexes, at failures of the body and yearnings of the spirit, and, then, there is never-ending war and its illusory calms.

In fall 2002, we sat and talked in the children's room of Poet's House in New York City, both feeling, even in the small, warm space, the breath of war.

NOTE: Included here also is a recent poem and translation of medieval Spanish lyrics, an ongoing project of the poet.

The Bloomsbury Review: *So much of your poetry, from Shadow Wars to The Fall is concerned with war. What led you to that?*

Dennis Nurkse: My parents were refugees who met in 1940 when they took that route that Walter Benjamin took out of Portugal; they were on one of the last boats out. Then, when they got to New York, they had a little bit of that thing that lovers do—one wanted to marry the other for a few years, and the second wanted to marry the first, and the situation reversed, but eventually they finished that ballet.

TBR: *Your father was Estonian?*

DN: He was originally Estonian, but he had been working for the League of Nations in Vienna at the time that the fascists came, and he moved through Europe ahead of the Nazis. He was very much a socialist, somebody who wouldn't have survived under the Nazis. My mother was an artist. In my family there was a feeling of uprooting and political danger. They left Europe in a time of war and then arrived here at a time that seemed to my parents tinged with totalitarian elements, elements of denunciation and personal espionage. It was the McCarthy period, which seemed very strange to my parents. There was both the feeling of the shadow of war, accompanied by the feeling that problems in the human psyche were not limited to one geographical terrain.

TBR: *And then you grew up in the Cold War, as I did.*

DN: I grew up during the Cold War. In fact, my family moved back to Europe, and that was where my father died in 1958. We lived in French Switzerland at the time of the Algerian putsch. It was an extremely politicized area; I remember turning on the radio and hearing General Raoul Salan, the French general who headed the right-wing Secret Army Organization [OAS], saying that the paratroopers

would arrive at dawn and take over the government. That was a putsch that failed, but it was a time that scared my mother, and she basically moved back to America for stability—but that was in time for Vietnam.

TBR: *So it's no surprise that war is always there as a sort of free-floating valence in the landscape. As a child of immigrants, how rooted do you feel now?*

DN: I don't feel rooted at all. And that also speaks to the current global crisis. I grew up with people who were stateless, and the UN passport was their one piece of identity. At the moment, we have a government that seems to be ignoring tremendously real challenges. We're moving into a gangster era of permanent war, a gangster rhetoric, moving toward revoking the UN Charter, which fundamentally forbids the preemptive confiscation of other people's weapons. This violates the idea of the community of nations, the idea of binding treaties, the kinds of arrangements that, going back to childhood, were all that separated people from chaos.

TBR: *When did you feel that impulse to write poems?*

DN: When I was very young. I was very encouraged by my parents, and I grew up around poetry. I can remember thinking that when my parents died, I would have a lot of material to write about—that was the wrong thought, of course.

TBR: *But that's a kind of rootedness—to reclaim that material and that experience in writing. Your father's a very powerful presence in The Fall; there's an early poem where the son notes that his father's "strides were colossal," and they do make their mark in so much of the book, especially part 1. You seem to have had a strong, deep relationship.*

DN: Very much so. It's a strange thing that the relationship with the father is an identification that one can observe in oneself; in a way, the relationship with the mother can be so close that it becomes invisible. Yet some of the illness poems in *The Fall* were based on attending to my mother when she was in a coma, but I didn't transport that directly to the "I"—the mother then becomes invisible because she's too much me.

TBR: *She's fully incorporated into you. Do you sense the approach of a poem? How does the poem come to you?*

DN: Very often with a sense of extreme sadness. Sometimes it's a relief to me to realize that this may be the approach of a poem, jotting down a first line. With *Voices Over Water*, for instance, which was a specific project, I used to go into a dark room at night and just try to listen to either my grandmother's voice or the voice of the book, per se—just to wait for it, as you would wait for a radio program and write it down.

TBR: *And in the case of The Fall, the notion of falling, of having fallen—from your Schwinn in the suburbs, from a tower—gov-*

Recent Volumes by D. Nurkse

The Fall (Knopf, 2002)

The Rules of Paradise (Four Way Books, 2001)

Leaving Xaia (Four Way Books, 2000)

Voices Over Water (Four Way Books, 1996)

Shadow Wars (Hanging Loose Press, 1988)

ems the book.

DN: Yes, and it has a religious sense, too. The obsessive parts of that book were childhood and sickness and what links the two—the way humans act as if they're temporarily filling a strategy for that anxiety that tomorrow they expect everything to be transformed. So that it's essential, fundamental play-acting, where you act the role of the child expecting to be an adult or you act the role of a sick person expecting to be healed.

TBR: The Fall begins with both "The Threshold" and "Sunlight," the first poem about illness, with the speaker wishing to be a child, and the other is a poem about ...

DN: Yes, there's that aspect of acting "as if," acting provisionally on the basis of givens and, in the opening poem, the voice is concerned with taking the time a real patient might take to pretend to become "well." And then the children are instantly playing roles of adults: you know, arranging funerals, burying caterpillars.

TBR: You have other wars in your poetry, too. Marriage is a war. The speaker of "The Stone House at Black River" says, "If marriage solves sex/what solves marriage?" So marriage is a war?

DN: Well, it has its similarities, the similarity of being a contractual relationship with a potential for ferocity—which does define the self, but is a ferocity which is surprising because the idea is always to have a very liberated marriage. I don't mean in the sense of promiscuity but in the sense of mutual respect, and yet there is something about that contract, which is that you arrive at the confluence of a deeply felt emotional and social construct.

TBR: And the other war is illness? What are the forces in that war?

DN: In my own experience, I had various physical challenges. These books were partly influenced when, in 1993, I had some serious physical problems, including some neurological problems, that later seemed to lift. I worked for a long time in a mental hospital, and so I had a lot of experience with mental illness. With some of the physical problems, I ended up for a while in the emergency room.

TBR: Let's get to the structural centers of some of the poems, which display a preference for two- and three-line stanzas.

DN: Well, I like the reference to the ballad. And I also like what happens between the stanzas. As a poet you enjoy a line break, which, between stanzas, is like a double check in chess: It comes at you from different sides and has a great deal of resonance, and the hope is to be able to put the narrative elements in those spaces between the stanzas so they're in the reader's mind. That's where the story takes place, and the images can take place in the text itself. That's what I'd like to do.

TBR: Spaces that fill. You know, in The Fall, but in some of the other books too, there are nurses and nurseries—places and people that help.

DN: I'm interested, as Kafka was, in those mundane, in-between roles—nurses, messengers.

TBR: I also see you as a religious poet.

DN: I think you're right, and I don't know exactly why

that is because I don't necessarily consider myself a religious person. In fact, I would not sympathize with the religious agenda at all, but I do think that that's in the poetry. Whether I want to put it there or not.

TBR: And there's the notion of books, either as mystic texts, such as "The Book of Splendor," which is The Zohar, a foundational text in Jewish mysticism, and then there's the more generalized sense that all books are holy, sacred.

DN: There is a sense of a law that is verified as the law when it's observed and verified as the law even more so when it's broken, that is in "the book." The idea, I guess, of a possible totality.

TBR: And paradise is also there.

DN: Well, it has to be something in me, and I haven't been able to get it out. I see it there, but it's not really that I intended to put it there, but it wound up there.

TBR: And you're not removing it.

DN: No, I'm conscious that it's there, and I'm taking responsibility for it. The hand was moving across the page, and it was my hand. ■

INTERVIEWER/PHOTOGRAPHER: **Reamy Jansen** is the 2003 recipient of The SUNY Chancellor's Award for Creativity. His latest chapbook, *My Drive: A Natural History*, has been published by Finishing Line Press and can be ordered at www.hometown.aol.com/FinishingLine/. He is professor of English and Humanities at SUNY Rockland, a founding editor of *Radical Teacher*, and a contributing editor to *The Bloomsbury Review*.