

also by D. Nurkse

Isolation in Action

Shadow Wars

Staggered Lights

Leaving Xaia

The Rules of Paradise

The Fall

Burnt Island

The Border Kingdom

VOICES over WATER

D. Nurkse

C *editions*

Voices over Water is the record of the lives of a married couple who emigrate from Estonia to Canada during the first half of this century.

The woman, a preacher's daughter and musician from coastal Estonia, is the narrator for the first five poems of Part One, *Leaving Estonia*. Her husband's voice interweaves with hers for the rest of the section.

The man, an estate foreman, merchant and farmer, is the speaker in Part Two, *High Canada*.

The woman's voice returns as the major narrator in Part Three, *Easter Snow*.

Voices over Water is dedicated to Viktoria and Villem Nurkse. The events in this book are fictitious.

First published in the USA
in 1996 by Four Way Books
This edition first published in Great Britain in 2011
by CB editions
146 Percy Road London W12 9QL
www.cbEditions.com

All rights reserved
© D. Nurkse, 1996

The right of D. Nurkse to be identified as author
of this work has been identified in accordance with
Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

Printed in England by Blissetts, London W3 8DH
ISBN 978-0-9561073-8-1

Contents

PART ONE · Leaving Estonia

The Nursery	3
The First Coast	4
Island Music	5
The Island Gospel	6
The Marriage to the Forest	7
The Nine Owned Trees	8
The Treaty Is Not Renewed	9
Slow Summer	10
Factions	11
The Middle of the Forest	12
The Rolls	13
The Breached Frontier	14
Civil War	15
A Letter from the Front	16
Desertion	17
The Cock	18
The Infiltration	19
The Occupation	20
Liberation	22
The Marriage to War	23
Rumors	25
The Hidden Fighters	27
Spies	28
Expulsion	29

PART TWO · *High Canada*

The New World	33
A Window in Saskatoon	34
Plains	35
The Eye of Winter	36
Sea of Grass	37
A Year of Hunger	38
The Market Holds	39
Precious Dust	40
Shared Land	41
The Well	42
Increase	43
The Years of Fine Harvest	44
Desirable Land	45
Lost Lamb	46
The Shy One	47
The Year in Bed	48
In Sickness	49
Snowbound	50
The Cure	51
Foot Soldiers	52
The Testament	53
The Stone Boat	54

PART THREE · *Easter Snow*

Building on Rock	57
A Song of Exile	58
Cold Brahms	60

Mistakes	62
Equinox	63
No Harvest	64
The Human Chain	65
The Oak Bed	66
The Summons	67
The Last Preparation	68
The Body Across the Yard	69
Funeral Feast	70
Limbo	71
Surviving Partner	72
Buried Stone	73
The Knots	74
The Frayed Veil	75
Afterlife	76
Writing Home	77
The Draft	78
Tracks	79
Wind Thieves	80
The Old Profile	81
Locusts	82
Extinction	83
Unheard Music	84
The Wake	85
The Return to the Stage	86
Arrival in the City	87
Grandmother's Cold	89
Inventing Nations	90

PART ONE

Leaving Estonia

The Nursery

I had only one bone button
but I had a hat with a plume
and a doll to command
made of a sack with eyes sewn on:
and each day when it was light
only in my mind, I played one game
I had played since I was born
and another I had never played before,
all by myself, wedged between brother and sister,
with the doll perched at my head and the infant
squirming at my feet, and that great chord of breath
drowning out the summer ocean.

The First Coast

We children came from anger.
On a calm night my parents
could elude each other, as if in a capital city,
in the but with the bleached pine floor
between the gulf and the granite pastures.
Mother crushed myrtles between her fingers,
father picked at a knot with his teeth
or hummed the roots of A Mighty Fortress.
As soon as one of us could sing, she was assigned
lead soprano, and the other children
were pushed down to alto, tenor, baritone.
I was the eldest, I felt myself plummeting
down toward that bass-pedal pulsing
in my father's belly. I alone knew
that while he was harmonizing with all his strength
he was also listening, for an accidental, for a fox
in his bean patch, for a neighbor carousing
a mile across snow: he was a lay preacher
and once when we were walking he picked me up
and covered my eyes with his rabbitskin glove
so I crept back later and saw
a prostitute being pushed out to sea
in a boat with no oars. She was huge like my mother,
and even at seven I knew that one of the men
grunting on the dock must have been the lover,
but all wore frowns of innocence, all were certain
that not even God has responsibility
for the actions of the winter Baltic.

Island Music

When I skipped rope before memory
the song was already in my mouth
as the bread was hot on the table
and the sea cold behind the shutter.
I thought I was listening to the whistling rope
and to laughter and my breath, but I was hearing
a force unknowable as my body,
familiar as my father reading by his candle,
and the prayer that summoned this god was:
One And Two And Three And Four And.

*

One summer, the village elder pointed, saying
'don't waste money on a boy, whose voice will break.
Teach this one.' So they shipped me to land
and when I came back my girlfriends
were fat and angry and pledged to elders
and refused to speak to me: when I made my village debut
rain was drumming on the steeple and the audience
fell asleep as if I were delivering a sermon:
they woke long after I'd exhausted my repertoire,
stretching luxuriously, and only because the trade wind
was hammering at the black stained glass window

The Island Gospel

At fifty my father's strength
became savage and began to batter him
like breakers on a reef, strength against strength.
Though he could will himself to dream only of God's Love,
porcelain shattered in his grip.
He waved us children away as if we were smoke.
When he knew he was locked in his power
he stamped off to the store and bought a bolt
of black cloth for my mother, a new shovel
for my younger brother, and then he sat home
staring at a drawing of the sea, and his veins
swelled up like cable, and he wished in secret
there was another man strong as he on our island,
so he might kill instead of simply dying.

The Marriage to the Forest

When I took that farmer's ring I wrapped
my petticoats in my apron and moved inland.
The forest was no change : green all day,
blue by night, bowing and shivering
enough to make you sick: but if you tossed a stone
it sank without even flashing,
and nothing ever washed up on the edge.
Only once in forty years, a messenger
lost on the path from court to court
came stumbling out and whooped like an owl
when he saw us, then whispered
'at last I can breathe like a man
without that load of shadow'
We explained this was just a clearing
with a hut, but he giggled and danced a hornpipe
on his bloated feet, so we bathed and fed him
but when we gave him directions
to the village four hours away
he just nodded and drooled, delirious
with joy at the lilt of our voices,
as if we were intoning scripture
and there was nothing to analyze,
so we made him a bed in the stable
and we nailed quilts over the green pine wall.

The Nine Owned Trees

This preacher's daughter claims to love me
in darkness and in church, and she can prove it
either way: she owns a calfskin book
and a dress made of tiny holes: she has
a sack of millet seeds, and perfect pitch,
and a swelling behind her cummerbund.
She doesn't know I was already in love
before she shared my bed, with those fruit trees
that I earned raking and burning
the landlord's leaves. I loved them best in winter
when I could see them all in one glance
no longer hidden by wind or each other,
as I could never see that woman
from start to finish, and best of all
they were mine clear, countersigned, paid for by sweat,
not by love, lies, happiness or suffering.

The Treaty Is Not Renewed

They warned us again and again
but we didn't believe it.
They were our masters, if they spoke
so clearly of war, we knew
in secret they must mean peace:
besides, how could any outcome
equal the horror of the omens?
We were tenants and had nothing
except our seed, and whatever crop
we could not move to market, animals
and a dog to watch them, and forty years
dreaming wide awake of an axe
about to fall a thousand miles away.