At the Western Gates
Also by Nathaniel Tarn

Poetry

Old Savage/Young City (1964) / Where Babylon Ends (1969)
The Beautiful Contradictions (1969; 2nd edition 2013)
A Nowhere for Vallejo (1971) / Section: The Artemision (1973)
The Persephones (1974; revised editions, 2008, 2016)
Lyrics for the Bride of God (1975)
Atitlán / Alashka [Alashka with Janet Rodney] (1979)
At the Western Gates (1985; 2nd edition 2018*)
Three Letters from the City: The St. Petersburg Poems (2001)
Gondwanaland and Other Poems (2017)
Alashka [with Janet Rodney] (first separate publication, 2018)*

Translations

Pablo Neruda: The Heights of Macchu Picchu (1966)
The Penguin Neruda (1975)

Prose

Views from the Weaving Mountain:
Selected Essays in Poetics & Anthropology, 1991
Scandals in the House of Birds: Shamans & Priests on Lake Atitlán, 1998
The Embattled Lyric:
Essays & Conversations in Poetics & Anthropology, 2007

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Immense architecture
building in air
towers and palaces
from which their eyes look out,
star denizens
living in the heights
as they live below
building in air
and undersea
their passage through our life –
       a gentle glide
like a dream
because no thing men know
so huge and gentle at once
can be other than dream
       in such a world.
Whales breathing
all around us in the night
just beyond the lights,
ghost gulls
following the ship
which seems to breathe
yet never moves
against the great Pacific’s
unfathomable shoulders
The mountains rise out of the desert
way out over Baja
the whales rise out of the sea
the mountains rise out of the sea
the whales rise out of the desert
the whales are taller than the mountains
There was a man one time
got buried in a whale they say,
found bed and board down there
also some breakfast,
found desk and library
and was granted extra knowledge
   (the whale a shaman they say).
       Cast from the human city,
he went down to the sea in whales
clothed with all his grave clothes
collected over the years
complete with turquoise necklace
   – and jadeite necklace
and one bead of jade –
his body full of sweet winds,
   he lay inside the whale
and wrote, in his death, terrible hymns
which no amount of pain
had ever torn from him,
wrenched from his mouth
out through his teeth
   in his mind’s hearing
Touching the skin of water
as it glides against water
slow slip of time
the black flesh gleaming like a hull
   (they call it Grey)
mottled with barnacles,
the imaginary touch
which men could have touched for centuries
   (instead of the carnage)
as it took them so long
to come to the beaches
to come to the sea
to come to the mountains
Birds of America
we rendezvous with all of you
in Baja of the sweet blue skies
streaked with the grey and sand.
    From south you call,
    from north,
    up and down your flyways,
and visit here, on the desert floor,
where my love is collecting shells,
    shells of one kind
    Mound of Venus shells,
and laying them out in a pattern
facing into the wind
as if she were making a book
for birds to read.
    All morning she is at it
peacefully, like a worker,
while I walk my fears
from one beach to another
stilling them with the sight of birds.
    At the end,
she places three pelican plumes
at the head of her pattern
facing the Santa Clara mountains.
The very next tide
will take this prayer
back to the sea
Vagaries of the sea life.
My bunk is so short
I need to lose head or feet
and its sky is so low
I have to be fitted into it
like a dime into a slot machine.
If you come into the cabin
you break my back,
if I come in, I break yours.
We have bruised elbows.
Nowhere to sit and read,
the lights don’t work.
Water floods in the basin.
And how the hell we get to fuck in here
is any circus animal’s guess
Dazzle of light
pale mountains, pale dunes
pale clouds on pale blue skies
immense skullcap of light over the whole,
the sea fetching sighs
under the skiff,
his heart
folded among the sea’s pages –
from the depths coming up
in musical surf
arched bow of the whale
the vertebrae
shining through skin
circling the skiff
passing, they say,
the flukes over his head
so fast he did not see them
(though they were larger than his houseroof)
but felt the hair on his head
lie down which the wind had raised.
And the heart came up also
which, in its fear,
the sea had previously bound into its secrets