

At  
the  
Western  
Gates

SAMPLER

ALSO BY NATHANIEL TARN

POETRY

*Old Savage/Young City* (1964) / *Where Babylon Ends* (1969)  
*The Beautiful Contradictions* (1969; 2nd edition 2013)  
*October* (1969) / *The Silence* (1969)  
*A Nowhere for Vallejo* (1971) / *Section: The Artemision* (1973)  
*The Persephones* (1974; revised editions, 2008, 2016)  
*Lyrics for the Bride of God* (1975)  
*The House of Leaves* (1976; 2nd edition 2018\*) / *The Microcosm* (1977)  
*Atilán / Alashka* [Alashka with Janet Rodney] (1979)  
*Weekends in Mexico* (1982) / *The Desert Mothers* (1984; 2nd edition 2018\*)  
*At the Western Gates* (1985; 2nd edition 2018\*)  
*Palenque: Selected Poems 1972-1984* (1986)\* / *Seeing America First* (1989)  
*Home One* (1990) / *The Army Has Announced That Body Bags...* (1992)  
*Caja del Río* (1993) / *Flying the Body* (1993) / *The Architectures* (2000)  
*Three Letters from the City: The St. Petersburg Poems* (2001)  
*Selected Poems: 1950-2000* (2002) / *Recollections of Being* (2004)  
*Avia* (2008)\* / *Ins & Outs of the Forest Rivers* (2008)  
*Gondwana and Other Poems* (2017)  
*Alashka* [with Janet Rodney] (first separate publication, 2018)\*

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Pablo Neruda: *Selected Poems* (1968) / Victor Segalen: *Stelae* (1969)  
*Con Cuba* (1969) / *The Rabinal Achi, Act 4* (1973)  
*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 Atilán*, 1998  
*The Embattled Lyric:*  
*Essays & Conversations in Poetics & Anthropology*, 2007

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Nathaniel Tarn

*At the Western Gates*

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Journal of the  
Laguna de San Ignacio



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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

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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

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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

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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 when the wind had raised.  
And the heart came up also  
which, in its fear,  
the sea had previously bound into its secrets