

The Desert Mothers

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)
Atitlán / 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) / *Reflections of Being* (2004)
Avia (2008*) / *Ins & Outs of the Forest Rivers* (2008) / *Gondwana* (2017)
Alashka [with Janet Rodney] (first separate publication, 2018*)

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The Penguin Neruda (1975)

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Selected Essays in Poetics & Anthropology (1991)
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Nathaniel Tarn

The Desert Mothers

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Flight from the Mountaintop

In memoriam Edward Dorn

*“Aber Freund! wir kommen zu spät. Zwar leben die Götter,
Aber über dem Haupt droben in anderer Welt.”*
—Hölderlin

1

Running off the mountain:
 billow of air,
ground drops below peak,
multicolored sails swerving
 above the valley:
not us flying those wings
 but flown by them.
(Tangle unraveled:
the compelling
drag on the bird... feet and legs in lime,
beak in his own thick blood,
needles sticking thru feathers,
all that behind us.)
Now: arrows, spears, lances,
 columns, towers of air:
victory headless at the crest,
yet throat spouting song,
stump bare and hardly bleeding.

 In their dreams men are
 (gods)
he had said,
 in reflection: SLAVES
Ground is philosophy,
 the hospital –
but the air
 six thousand feet above the valley:
you can't think of wreckage.

In his flight
remembered the isle of light,
how one morning
had borrowed father's wings,
strapping them on as if for combat, and had
neighbored the sun awhile in soaring lovelike
and free with birds, angels and all manner of
musical spheres, planets and meteors...

In their dreams (he had sd.) men were
alike.
Dumb bums below, his life was bound up with
in scalding slavery,
failed to recognize
his cataract out of that morning sky,
blood like the lightest wine
dissolved in sun and aether.

He could not have been
salvaged out of that air in any shape
recognizable to man, beast, god,
once he had started falling and
you could not have looked into his eyes
since the sun had taken them quite out.

But his mind from then on – we are told
in his final speech – what a hoard that was
of incisive tools, and how well he knew
what he wanted around him and what
had to be trashed, like old shoes,
outside his door.

“in the dream,
the glide descends in spirals
down to the extremity of my country
from which a ship will take you
to the farthest peninsulae
of all other imaginable countries.
It is a winter there
I had previously thought
unfathomable.”

“In deepest winter
coldest things calm most.
Causing the mind to desist from raving and to still
inexhaustible choice that is making us all mad.
My gods how I pity you all in this iron age
and want silence now, from now on, always,
and shall not speak to you anymore, nor fly with you,
holding your hands in the sun, protecting your wings,
shielding the delicate wax on your shoulders
from his deadly bite.”

“What it had occurred to me to say
concerned the birds of deepest winter in my country,
out of a north larger than memory,
perhaps full of mountains off whose peaks they flew,
which had now congregated for my eyes’ pleasure
on the border black lakes of my country:
all that sludge on the lakes like sick thought
sensing its own destruction.

The end as I had predicted
(that silent end full of bombardments)
of intellect.”

“Is not the metaphor of our indited clarity
that exquisite bird, part white, part black,

whose very head, the pattern of the head,
 is our question mark?
I forget (deliberately)
birds of one color,
even the great
 ghost-trampler of women,
or the black lout of the sea in all his forms,
who stands for the night of the sea in all his forms,
 and has no name, or,
if you will, a multitude, no matter.”

“— Your Majesty, my pilots sick today,
unfit for battle. They will not *think*
at the controls, they are dangerous.
I remember the country of the living,

 how they spoke in tongues,
the orders they gave, and the surrenders.

 I was granted today the order of silence.
 Already I don't remember speech.

Speech, I think, was like that very wide
 river behind my house
very beautiful in the cold air of winter,
 the blues especially,
carrying the perspective of all human things,
 whether you looked
back to the source of the river, or down to the sea.

 It is time
perhaps to move inland and look for walls.

 A tower perhaps.
My wife, held back by her own husband always
 (an air-traffic controller)
might not get around to making it with me.
I don't know whether it will be possible to fly again:
 my flights may be long and impressive,
 but will not be visible anymore.

Je suis hors concours.

These are the elegies, which is: a search for
the origin which does not belong to our deathless order.
And yet we are commanded to purify mankind
and the sentinel number I have posited as
characteristic of the nightly eras of the earth.”

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And let me add
 that if it were not for my own extreme sympathy with him:
 I mean he who has delivered this poem to you this way,
 I could not have spoken like this
 nor begun to tell you
 that in this America we now have
 a dreampath again, or spirit quest if you will,
 departing every day from the mountain top –
 billow of air underwing
 ground lost below height,
 altho it is not certain that anyone will look
 at the finest flyers as they perform in the blue sky,
 in the thunderhead sky with tones of copper or iron,
 in the misted sky at zero/zero –
 whether they soar beyond the sun
 or collapse into the sea below
 or fix the shape of their outspread arms and legs
 on the crumpled ground
 (slaves to reflection),
 the middle of their bodies pulverized
 by the effort of flight
 and the order of angels closed for the time of this era
 to any candidate whatsoever.

The Bay Dies of Pollution & Decoys Rise in Price

for Mark McNair

1

Thinking of her at breakfast
close by Annapolis, between two bouts of talk,
who bears with equanimity
grief's ships, my fleet, over her sea of patience
and that we are as familiar
to each other now as birds
in the great lines of geese yesterday night
while we were crossing Maryland –
when the sky became immense, translucent bowls
nested within each other
and their horizons stretched all the way west
to a distant house where we would soon migrate!
And the numbers of those birds
weaving their leaves of absence in the sky,
the number of those birds in that depth of sky!
Thinking that she haunts me
like an "azure" I have almost forgotten exists
whether it be in the poem
or in the depth of that sky which is reality
and which I still sometimes leave home for
to touch a base or two...

The association of beauty and pain
 – “beauty is but the beginning of terror
 we are unable to bear” – and this morning
 on the Bay beyond the storming waters
 in a smoke of Fall leaves and comfortable kitchens:
 eating: Roman disasters of blue crab
 smithereen-smashed on paper tablecloths –
 allows some domesticity to dispel the pain.
 The Names of the Great Carvers in my mind
 and their achievements, like crests and shields,
 posterized around us – the birds, the “BIRDS”,
 the lovely, feather-perfect, bobbing birds,
 the magnificent art of carving, what it signifies,
 the whole Bay culture still breathing in them
 as the Bay itself dies of pollution
 and decoys rise in price.

I know once more a door shut in my face,
 the market suddenly jumping way out of reach
 and the carvings swallowed by money,
 and for this once, which might be the last time,
 I’ll go back without a “bird” under my arm:
 (trivial misfortune – yet the whole fate of “art”
 and its true destination bound in that question),
 no: the great ocean beyond the window is not
 deep enough to encompass loss
 which encompasses little by little all we love –
 the bitterness of it, the uncounted days
 working at the pile’s bottom for pittances,
 lifetime of small doors closing.

In the radiance – luminism, luminescence –
in the breaking blastoff of American light
returning to haunt me when I least expect it,
blessed gift of the continent I have chosen:
the delicacy of the ships,
the small Bay Bugeyes and Skip Jacks
lying at rest among the fanning swans –
and behind them, the small wooden houses
almost like miniatures in a toy farm.
Going home tonight, carrying nothing
but for a two-bit flag “Don’t Give Up The Ship”,
empty-handed it seems, not yet recalling the words,
the treasury of words opening up
when least expected,
appearing out of nowhere like long lines of geese.

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