

PALENQUE

SAMPLER

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BOOKS BY NATHANIEL TARN

POETRY

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October (1969) / *The Silence* (1969)
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The Persephones (1974; revised editions, 2008, 2016)
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Alashka [with Janet Rodney] (first separate publication, 2018*)
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TRANSLATIONS

Pablo Neruda: *The Heights of Macchu Picchu* (1966)
Pablo Neruda: *Selected Poems* (1968) / Victor Segalen: *Stelae* (1969)
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PROSE

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The Embattled Lyric: Essays & Conversations in Poetics & Anthropology (2007)
Atlantis: An Autoanthropology (2021)

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Nathaniel Tarn

PALENQUE

SELECTED POEMS

1972-1984

Shearsman Library

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SAMPLER

from THE PERSEPHONES

The Fifth Persephone

When they came for her to the land of the many
when she had been located in the land of
he who receives the many
and the father of all
had agreed to her return two seasons out of three
he slipped her the seed of darkness as a
pomegranate
which she ate out of violence and without agreement
for her freedom.

The ruin of herself entered her like a mist, it was as if her prime stood against the sky like a palace the palace of the kings with all its towers its battlements and her age at its peak of perfection there, all banners flying. Any onlooker could have told the perfection the peak of perfection about to crest in those breaking towers.

And any singer could have told
with eloquence she had reached her peak
had never been lovelier with that mist inside her
but she also would have known
that from then on
there was no path but down
and that come winter now in the timeless land
she'd fall to shades she ruled by right
and by the gravity of her accomplishments.

Meanwhile the mother
in the city of her mysteries every night in the fire

held the king's child in the fire to make him ageless
to make him immortal little by little, the lovely prince.
She drank no wine, but only barley and rye water,
she stood in doorways with her head to the ceiling
filling the doorway with a divine light and men with fear,
she wore dark veils like clouds masking her ageless beauty
and had given up the company of her own kind.

She did not grieve for those perfections
brought to fulfillment in the daughter but only men grieved
who had seen death enter that body and didn't know how to hack out
the roots of loss which had gripped her heart.

The Sixth Persephone

By his cunning, by his agreement, our father's
there'd grown, in the middle field, to which she came
out of her innocence with the big-breasted daughters
of ocean, in her flower-days,
that vast plant with its blooms piercing the sky
making gods and men to wonder and she reached
out to pluck the fragrance
which owed something to sky and some to honey and some
to the gifts of she who makes the seasons and some to her own thighs
but as she plucked delicately one fragrant head
a column of horses gushed from the ground
untiring
horned
unfrightened horses
with black mist in their eyes
and the smokes of death's kingdom.

His own eyes black
among the marigolds, hands black, among the poppies,
among anemones

arms black with the soot of unnumbered cremations
and she recognized the bridegroom
to whom she had been condemned, though she wanted this loss
which had been prophesied,
while he had emerged
as an earthquake among the horses unannounced
and it wd. have fitted the legend perfectly also
as they told it in later times
if she had not known.

I've heard the voice
the mother said as she grieved to the fountains and rivers
which are men and women who had grieved their lives away
in tears when time entered the living.

I've heard the voice of my daughter crying
on the musk of the autumn day which is so bountiful
and I know that something has taken her away into darkness
though I don't know what it is.

Into the sun, the fire,
into her city of mysteries, not quite accomplished,
she goes with pale dawn, with pale dusk, hand in hand,
to ask where is her daughter.

The Ninth Persephone

He lord of song whose lyre is of his sinews
and of his sufferings compounded, pure among the pure,
knowledgeable about her whom he visits to reclaim
the wife of shades the serpent lied into his kingdom
and delivered to the thundering horses
with jaws of avarice, jealousy's fangs, wrath's tongue,
come before the noble queen of death
she who receives the many
not that she may send him to the boned as yet, but to ask back

that shadow of her so justly loved
she did not complain, to have been loved at all being sufficient.

In the grove of white cypresses,
discolored blossoms, thyme without perfume,
rose without musk, violet without a scented smile,
shades of girls gone by like lambs shorn of their wool.

Who is to sing of brothers and sisters in love,
daughters mad for their fathers, mothers for their sons,
as he leads her upward thru the banks of darkness
son of heaven and deep earth, baptized of the underworld,
looking back at her all the time, afraid to look forward,
she whose name means forever,
like a ship on the ocean into the dispersal of the wind,
all sails abreast
fallen like a man into death
into the great arms of her beauty, his wrists cut and shredded
blood lapsing out like the hours, gone into time, gone weightless,
measureless,
beyond grieving and remembrance
seemingly dispossessed.

thru all the towns of the dead
in the poverty of his time,
of his becoming,
of his arrival
among thickening shades:
stepping out from the crown with his
swift feet
become a god instead of a mortal
singing all music,
reading all knowledge

and fallen/fallen/fallen
like a kid
into milk.

The Tenth Persephone

Why is the queen of the dead exalted among the dead being
only one among the dead and chosen by chance
among the concubines
and chosen by apparent chance and apparent predestination
both together in the unfathomable desire of the other gods?

her head being allowed to go thru the upper air
into the perfection of seasons for some part of the year
though her feet remain weighted down by slow snakes
stirring slowly in the ooze of the trenches
and *only* her green hands in the upper sky
the great oaks stretching their arms on waking
giving sign of her life?

He who receives the many
even he who's used to reducing the dead to a common substance
doesn't wish to single her out
will not give her more than a passing glance
lately a sign of recognition
of the small affections...

when he burns
when in fact he burns that the branch may break
that the long voyage may end for the planet
and the furthest point of death be returned from
the separation into dead and live
summer and winter be ended and only green be seen above ground
that he might go home...

but she is taken up
she is received with smiles and trumpets by the big-breasted
daughters of ocean and brought to her mother
and is taken up into the arms of the mother
into the fins of fish, into the wings of birds,

and her hands are held outward, and her arms
in the position of everything that breaks and shoots

She is shown the marvelous city
taken thru its streets in triumph, spoken to,
welcomed at arches and doorways, asked to bless
the fountains where young girls wash clothes,
given the freedom of the city, freed of the labyrinth

He who receives the many being but
then one lost father of so many saved
the one who stays behind, growing much younger,
down from his age at last, golden in fire
the long night dipped him into and the royal mother
while the clouds of far heaven correct the fields of earth
and the dark kingdom is smothered.

AFTER JOUVE

for Henri and No Seigle

Think a little of the sun in your youth
The sun which shone when you were ten years old
Surprise do you remember the sun in your youth
If you focus your eyes well
Watch narrowly
You can still catch a glimpse of it
It was pink
It took up half the sky
You could look at it straight in the face you could
Surprise but it was so straightforward
It had a color
A dance it had desire
A heat
An extraordinary ease
It loved you
All that in the middle of your age sometimes
 running on rails along the morning's forests
You thought you imagined
Deep in yourself
It's in the heart that the old suns are put away
It has not moved there is that sun
Of course yes there it is
I have lived I have ruled
I illuminated with such a great sun
Alas it's dead
Alas it has never
Been
Oh that sun you say
And yet your youth was unhappy

.....

There's no need to be king of Jerusalem
Every life questions itself
 Every life asks itself

And every life waits
Every man travels the same way everything is limited
how to see more
And we went and invented ourselves machines
They came smashing everything drilling the old earth
filling the old air
Waves rays shining axes
And there you are my power has grown terrible
My anxiety also
My instability
I can't sit still any more
I search I become
I'm no longer my real age
I toy with everything
But my God hoary war has come back and scarcely changed
Human blood has only one way of flowing
Death has only one way of flowing
Death has only one step always the same to fall upon me
Has its mask changed must be the wax
Space has shrunk my soul is it newer
I do not say better
I would not dare

.....
We are far from stewing in resignation but
Our pleasure is always the guiltiest
For if grief should need justification grief is the earth
our city grows on
Joy purity
Don't come near
It's in relation to our joy
That our vanity seems so pitiful
We're in such a rush
Our doubts are so old
Yes it's with our joy that we tremble
Degenerate child
Yet the spirit suspended over universal sorrow
Said you have senses make them give back your pleasure

And that is bitter
More bitter
And that speeds up somehow in bitterness
For us

.....

Eternal Judge

What power stupidity has the stars shine for stupidity
Light suits it so well the great trains take it everywhere
Every town is its meeting place its pleasure park
And on sundays one catches sight of its family picnic
What glory after the war
For disorder and lightheartedness
Everyone lives so much better
What an achievement for the boxer
The poet
Still lives on the fifth floor ailing of an old hunger
Meditates on his approaching death looking to be eternal
No don't think he loves death as he used to love it
He asks questions
He tries groping
He sighs he is delicious
And life he thinks would be really marvelous if

.....

The greatest business is dying and we don't know
a jot of it
Those who came by don't come again
But I must admit that I'm not anxious
I no longer believe in them now
Without understanding I wipe them out they are dead
Oh silence
Complicity
Perhaps it isn't a business after all perhaps death
is nothing to us
Or yet again perhaps
Everything is for this only death this great gateway
this favored haven
Where the ship comes home

But no for I don't believe in happiness and I don't believe
in death
I must tell you that I am ultimately certain of being immortal
Essential vanity

.....

When young I loved time
I couldn't stand being the youngest
I loved the grass when it seeded the trees
when they spread themselves like music
I loved the old
Now I shadow the other side of the hill
The downward slope
I no longer know I've tasted many eras
Calm will come perhaps with age

.....

How much contempt man has for this mouth he adores
But he's found extasy there he goes on running after extasy
Vitality
He goes on demanding the smell taste and color
of women's bodies
Their elasticity
Their lie
Whatever in their mother-of-pearl flesh smiles chastely
at death
And then after that
His sadness comes
Which he recognizes

.....

How hard we've searched-miracles we are miracles
Nothing
This world was straight infinite now it is curved
slipping one into the other
Man's vision has grown but it is backed by less and less
Thought is thin feeble useless a trail of mist like the Milky Way
like the Milky Way