

Recollections of Being

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NATHANIEL TARN



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Poetry

- Old Savage/Young City* (1964)
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Selection: Penguin Modern Poets, 7 (1965)
Where Babylon Ends (1967)
The Beautiful Contradictions (1969)
October (1969)
The Silence (1969)
A Nowhere for Vallejo (1971)
Section: The Artemision (1973)
Le Belle Contradizione (tr. R. Sanesi, 1973)
The Persephones (1974)
Lyrics for the Bride of God (1975)
Narrative of this Fall (1975)
The House of Leaves (1976)
The Microcosm (1977)
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The Desert Mothers (1984)
At the Western Gates (1985)
The Mothers of Matagalpa (1989)
Seeing America First (1989)
Home One (1990)

The Army has Announced that Body Bags . . . (1992)
Caja del Río (1992)
Flying the Body (1993)
A Multitude of One (editor: by Natasha Tarn, 1994)
The Architextures 1–7 (1999)
The Architextures (2000)
Poems 1985–1998 (2000)
Three Letters from the City: the St.Petersburg Poems (2000)
Selected Poems: 1950–2000 (2001)

Translations

The Heights of Macchu Picchu (Neruda) (1966)
Con Cuba (1969)
Stelae (Segalen) (1969)
Selected Poems (Neruda) (1970)
The Rabinal Achi, Act 4 (1973)
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Prose

Views from the Weaving Mountain: Selected Essays in Poetics & Anthropology (1991)
Scandals in the House of Birds: Shamans & Priests on Lake Atitlán (1998)
Selected Essays and Talks (2004)

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I Home One

Home One : One

No other way than seemingly will this be
a seamless picture. To be feared : that, as far as
unity is concerned, split shares the narrative.
Shattered shards in the story of one and one,
equal to boot, living this house here together.
Days pass, faster than any before or since.
The moment expands and consumes itself
quicker than eye winks, no track is kept,
no map through deep. *Her* wish is to stay put,
overcome the breathless dumping of childhood,
left in one place after another no adult would
not dream, but no child not hate. His wish to go,
or at any rate alternate movement and stillness
in constant oscillation. Whether there is any point
to the production of stories any more is his concern
when everyone seems to have heard them all so often
they no longer remember the first ones. Lying still
after the domestic storm, he says “this room,”
(bathed in bright sunlight of “eternal spring,”)
“could be my Bora Bora!” Bring in some potted palms,
strew sand at the bottom of the bed for a beach,
hire a person in swimsuit and suntan to amble by
every half-hour on the hour. You put down
one layer after another, an immense skyscraper
sandwich: all that death-after-death somehow produces
living. In the evening, after supper, no show tonight
worth watching, she plays with dog-jaw, doing a dog-howl.
She howls too. Sitting here, in the evening light,
they howl for half an hour or so all together. Bliss.

Home One: Two

Only by suffering the soundless, surd, deaf howl
in the depths when it does not surface—
even though he says “it is quite comfortable
not having it there, doing somethings elses.”
Pursuit of attachments. Take the instance:
small colored papers, postage & revenue,
adhesives to a zillion hearts, he cares so much for,
bringing world plots, multitudinous crossways,
so that this slice of the 19th and all the 20th
now represent, stand in for, history *whole*—
even then the question sinks like a diver
down through layers of sea (multicolored)
to the pulse of doubt, rock tucked below,
base struck to the ocean floor. Should he
be doing all this? When you get, like they say,
right down to it: haven’t they heard *enough*?
More than enough by *any* standard? . . .
and the vocation crowded. “I too dislike it,”
even detest it at times, the sheer inuredness,
the inability to change by so much as one jot.
Save the language? “The sun is but a morning star.”
Ni modo: all Baptists go before, the major star
comes after. In farthest west, he buckles down
to one more piece of inordinate burrocassiness. Will it
save *him*? Paper stuff mouth? Slake froggy throat?
Calm a convulsive hunger in belly depth, in colon?

Home One: Three

An enormous sea floods past the picture frame
above which Blériot conquers the Channel,
day after day with no more movement in his scarf
than wind in the sails of model ships
crowding a desk here and its environs. All such
movement! This, while enjoying the desk, passion
to up and go, up and away, *n'importe où pourvu que:*
travel is trigger he maintains, dammit I need it.
But she has moved one final time too many,
now longs for stillness, at least for now.
To this house, a procession of plants daily
longer than triumphs to Rome, pilgrims to Mecca.
Mecca. A path has been built to the house
that was pathless before, as you might describe it
“pathless in the desert.” Around the path now,
paradise organizes itself, small clumps of Eden
in various configurations, some low, high,
wide, slim, according to their species,
each with a patch of moisture round it where the wife
husbands her garden to the morning sunlight.
Upstairs, he gardens words according to the absent friend
who says “garden words daily, treasure will come of it.”
Later she trims *palabras* into her machines
singing away in the studio’s quiet. Unseen by any,
the predecessors walk the garden, announcing triumph
though they’ll be ousted soon, leaving success to others.

Home One : Four

This is now, today, the dog *Nieves*. No longer thin black sausage dog of the Seventies, retired to Georgia now, looking after her father. *Nieves*: mix: Akita (Mo.), possibly Goldie (Fa.). Stubbornness of the Akita, that's for sure. Bolts a great deal, always, since infancy. Mopes round the house most times, dogs do, one daily walk: during which walk "bolts a great deal" despite her moons at school. Sweetly disposed to world in general, endlessly patient and forgiving, ready always, at any juncture, for "something to turn up." Have you noticed how, longer time goes, oftener it bolts? How we seem to accomplish so little though working each single moment with time bleeding from our hands? It's reached his head now. It's always been somewhere in the body: if here, it won't be there; if there, not here. Chasing around, like an animal frantic from nowhere to nowhere. (There are those like this, and those others, fine all their lives, who break suddenly with a terrible swift death.) So, it has reached the head now: thin veil of pain over the temples growing thicker and thicker as the day wears on. Abrupt hatchet stroke at insomniac midnight. When it seems as if we attempt the impossible to make any sun at all shine over this disaster, daily grind of work, with one hour's respite taking the dog around the sacred circle. And back.

Home One : Five

Asking why it is that, at four a.m. precisely,
every night, spinning on the nail of insomnia,
beasts fall out of the sky, pounding him into the bed,
the beast that spells car, the camera beast, the
computer beast—not to mention the calumny beast
and the catastrophe beasts: why do they all
begin with *c*? Why all *c* beasts? Is it because
c is the last letter of the abc and all that falls
is a last judgment? And to think: outside, moonlight,
all new-planted flowers singing to the planets
in magnanimous joy, so silent he cannot hear them
though if he could they would lull him to sleep
under the weight of the beasts? And the weight
would become beneficent, would help with sleep.
Dawn. At still point of silence, sitting,
asking the various known gods to get this off him,
then the various unknown gods, finally (laughing almost)—
realizing: if you take too many pills, how do you know
which cures you (if you are cured)? Talk to too many
doctors, how do you know? Too many gods: *who* saves you?
They say that clinical depression starts with *c*,
though he knows that it starts with *a* and *c*—includes *b* also.
The whole deal is an atrocity you put up with,
(it is not as bad as some atrocities),
unless you wish to be a zombie all down the line,
way past the abc, and sexually anaesthetized to boot.
On the whole he has been thinking, he must put up with it:
this has become as clear as a bell beginning with clangor.

Home One : Six

It is not that A. did not send him the present
he had thought of and purchased for him so far away:
it is that he did not tell him about Caracas—
whether Caracas is, or not, an interesting place,
what he had been there for, what he'd done in Caracas,
how Caracas, which he did not know, might never know,
had struck A., what it was about Caracas one should
remember. It is like the sun shines here every day,
far more than in any other country, but he doesn't see it,
it doesn't speak to him any more as it used to,
he doesn't see it as he should be seeing it—as he sees,
sometimes, night sky, because it is so bright against
dark. Or it is like this mouse which has been running
around the house like crazy these last few days
and night, shitting all over everything, making the house
its own, uncatchable, though dog sits in front
of furniture mouse might be under the livelong hours—
and then, when mouse is finally sighted, it's very small,
very harmless, almost “adorable,” nesting in there, going to
take over the place with multiple generations,
as numerous as the “sands of the sea” (“slumbers not,
nor sleeps”). But this other one, A. who knows, whose
frequentation
would be good for him, would save his life, would recall him
to the righteous path—this one says nothing ever, or
less and less is saying, he dying not to be hearing him.