

*Collected Poems*

***Also by Michael Smith:***

**POETRY**

*With the Woodnymphs*

*Times and Locations*

*Familiar Anecdotes*

*Stopping to Take Notes*

*Selected Poems*

*Lost Genealogies & Other Poems*

*Meditations on Metaphors*

*The Purpose of the Gift. Selected Poems*

**TRANSLATIONS**

Pablo Neruda: *Twenty Love Poems & a Poem of Despair*

Antonio Machado: *Early Poems*

Miguel Hernández: *Unceasing Lightning*

Francisco de Quevedo: *On the Anvil*

Luis de Góngora: *Selected Shorter Poems*

Federico García Lorca: *The Tamarit Poems*

*Maldon & Other Translations*

César Vallejo:

*Trilce*

*The Complete Later Poems 1923–1938*

*Selected Poems*

*The Black Heralds & Other Early Poems*

(all with Valentino Gianuzzi)

Rosalía de Castro: *Selected Poems*

Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer: *Collected Poems – Rimas* (ed. Luis Ingelmo)

Claudio Rodríguez: *Collected Poems* (with Luis Ingelmo)

Miguel Hernández: *The Prison Poems*

**AS EDITOR:**

James Clarence Mangan: *Selected Poems*

*Irish Poetry: The Thirties Generation*

**MICHAEL SMITH**

**Collected Poems**

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## DEATH OF A BIRD-FANCIER

He fought death, it is true, to the very last  
cursing the white coldness creeping up his legs.  
His birds were still singing in his brain.

It was a note to be heard never yet heard,  
a black tulip on the blue air—the unknowing  
he lived among could give it no word.

And there—where flies in summer darken the air,  
blackening the flypapers by the second,  
in black gaslight and the pigs' smell and the poor's despair.

When the time came, I imagine the sun  
set beyond the high grey wall,  
beyond the innumerable railway lines and the Royal Canal,  
and the birds at the foot of the bed were startled into song.

## THE CHEST HOSPITAL

Long lane of black timber huts  
desolate under high windy pines  
where the wick burns to encroaching dark . . .

The orderlies deal with our chaos there,  
efficiently,  
with mop, bucket, syringe.

Flesh shrivels there, contracts, concentrates  
to a final explosion of fluid,  
the decrepit matter of the skull seeping away.

Before the end old men will not stay abed,  
but try again and again to climb a non-existent stairway,  
failing again and again

## STREET SCENE

The butcher carried the cow's skinned head  
by a bright grey hook in its eye:  
blood trickled on the pavement.

The red-faced butcher felt  
only the awkward weight  
that pulled on the bright grey hook.

And there was the sun, too,  
a hot afternoon sun; and children passing  
who said to their mothers

'Mama, Mama, look at the moo cow.'  
But their mothers dragged them by,  
past the cow's skinned head and its hooked eye.

## GENETRIX

The great snake with dragonhead  
climbs upward, coil after terrible coil.

It climbs upward behind the naked woman  
who stands, like some public monument,

in the dead centre of a single coil—  
her hair is tawny as the great snake's scales.

Behind a timid waterfall the evening sky  
is a deep blue pool, hoarding no stars.

Still, the moon is there— dull as a brown mud—  
and a few clouds like small white worms.

Beside the snake and the wide-eyed woman  
the prostrate sleeping man awaits his genetrix.

## THE COLOUR OF GREY

Somewhere in Clare beyond fields and rutted laneways  
two herons lifted into the grey air.

I climbed a promontory Norman keep.  
Eyes swam over seas of grey rock;

And the dog at the head of the stair  
trembled and whined in a grey fear.

The orchard was deadly sick with a grey fungus  
and the bark of the hazel was silver grey.

The hair, skin, eyes, teeth of the old woman  
who polished my shoes for the dance, were grey.

Here in October dawn breaks in sheets of grey glass.

## LONG LANE

Long Lane, one of Dublin's back-streets,  
just such a street as Mangan struggled down,  
the winter darkness and the pitchy dampness . . .

Then, like some strange figure out of mythology—  
a sphinx— the silhouette of this club-footed man  
against the glaring yellow of the lamplight.

As the branch tip tapping on the window glass  
in the snow-stormed night becomes the lost object,  
to return always when a sense of loss occurs,

so fear comes now with twisting twisted legs,  
hobbling down Long Lane a winter's night,  
climbing steps, then knocking at a door, and passing in.



## END OF VIGIL

Since now you're dead and I, I saw you dying  
hours before that death  
when life was flickering  
delicately  
like candle-cast shadows . . .

Through the window of your cubicle I saw  
the first fall of snow  
falling  
falling  
delicately  
as only snow can fall

from long thin grey clouds like distant trains  
travelling across the sky above the pine tops  
their destination inscrutable as your silence . . .

as you lay upon your final winter bed  
your face shrunken black upon the pillow . . .

Silence.

And then . . . *A stairway! A stairway!*  
At the end of a corridor to nowhere  
*A stairway!*

While the first snowflakes disappeared  
into the black square of the chest hospital  
*A stairway! A stairway!*

## SWEENEY PEREGRINE

Because he'd lost his nerve,  
    when they threw him out  
he became a bird,  
    growing beautiful feathers,  
flying from hillock to hillock,  
    feeding on delicious watercress  
and, at night,  
    perched high up in a tree,  
dreaming of the wife  
    he'd left behind.

Once, for some inexplicable reason,  
    he was readmitted  
to polite society,  
    meaning human society,  
but an old leering hag  
    started him off again  
with a ridiculous game of leap-frog;  
    the feathers grew  
and, airborne once more,  
    there was no going back.

Finally, despairing of rehabilitation,  
    he began to like being a bird,  
to enjoy the watercress  
    and the heady delights of flight  
over summer landscapes.  
    In winters of black frost,  
with big brown wolves howling  
    beneath the tree he's perched on,  
he waits, in silence, for the dawn,  
    with passionate, burning-red eyes.

## FALL

The desolate rhythm of dying recurs,  
the rhythm of outgoing tides, corrosion of stone,

fall of petal and soft rain on empty squares,  
the fading memory of song, say, in an old man's head,

that never stops at a point of time,  
a rainbow vertigo spinning beyond the nurse's cool hand,

subsidence of wind and branches against a settling sky,  
and stars fading at dawn, or fall of snow:

Something ordered, yet desperate and violent—  
A rose, say, or an old man's humiliation.

## DOMICILE

Dead days, like a vegetable world all burnt up:  
blossom and weed, rose and pimpernel, gone to the flame's mouth.

And there is no point in asking, no one can tell you why,  
there is no reason for dying, it just happens that way.

In a cobbled lane of stinking pig and lesser celandine  
a vagrant crone fumbles and stumbles among her pieces.

With querulous voice she hails to every passer-by she sees,  
pointing to the green church dome among the hawthorn trees.

To every passer-by who will not mind her  
*The moon is a greener cheese, she says, only kinder.*

## THE GIFT

Through no imperial portals, but rusty bars on broken hinges,  
to this kingdom of black earth like dampened dust

where my green knight evades the black-shawled witch's eye,  
the dragon's teeth and the sly pervasive worm.

Bells beyond the kingdom toll the significant hour  
and the streets are silent, the squares empty.

In his gaslit room of the golden birds  
roosting quiet as the small rain of summer,

the old man receives the boy's green gift,  
and the green knight hears his golden song in wonder.

## POET

There is something white and still in the black river  
                    below the cathedral—  
in the black river quiet as the dark it flows through—

and no one can see it but the still man across the parapet.

Streets have fallen taking pieces of the sky with them;  
summers have passed taking many who walked through them;  
the spring is busy computing a new mortality list.

It has rained,  
                    it has snowed,  
                                    and even the sun shone  
occasionally.

But the gaze of the still man across the parapet  
is fixed on something white and still in the black river.