Poems from Other Tongues
Also by Michael Smith:

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- Collected 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*
- Claudio Rodríguez: *Collected Poems* (with Luis Ingelmo)
- Miguel Hernández: *The Prison Poems*
- Elsa Cross: *Selected Poems* (with Luis Ingelmo)
- Juan Antonio Villacañas: *Selected Poems* (ed. Luis Ingelmo)
- Verónica Volkow: *Arcana and Other Poems* (with Luis Ingelmo)
- Enrique Juncosa: *Selected Poems*

**AS EDITOR:**
- James Clarence Mangan: *Selected Poems*
- *Irish Poetry: The Thirties Generation*
MICHAEL SMITH
& LUIS INGELMO

Poems
from Other Tongues

Translations from the
Greek, Latin, Arabic and Irish

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A Brief Introduction

During a stay in Cairo in 1928, the Spanish Arabist, Emilio García Gómez, had the good fortune to meet and come to know H.E. Ahmed Zeki Baghá, and through him acquire a small anthology of Andalusian lyrics, unpublished and completely unknown. It was entitled *The Book of the Flags of the Champions and of the Standards of the Elect*. Its author was the celebrated Ibn Said who described how he had made his selection “only of those fragments whose idea is more subtle than the zephyr and whose diction is more beautiful than a pretty face.”

Amid his academic labours, García Gómez slowly worked away at translating these poems. Some of them made their first appearance in August 1928 in an article in *Revista de Occidente*. In due course, more translations were added, and the result was a book entitled *Poemas arábigoandaluces* which appeared in 1930, a time close to the celebrations of the 3rd Centenary of the great Spanish baroque master, Luis de Góngora. García Gómez’s prose translations, consisting mainly of metaphoric fragments, proved hugely interesting to those poets and scholars such as Lorca—the famous Generation of ’27—who were championing the cause of Góngora’s work.

These short poems were composed as aesthetic literary artefacts obeying complex prosodic forms (i.e. *ghazals* and *qasidas*). They were created to be appreciated by a cultured and affluent class—some of them kings. They sometimes remind one of the love poems of the *Greek Anthology* but without the poignancy the Greek lyrics often possess. As they were composed in a distinct genre (like the sonnet), naturally there is a certain amount of repetition in them.

The poems are predominantly celebratory: poems of love and nature. Clearly, the Andalusian Arabs who composed them found Andalusia a kind of paradise. The sight and sound of water were a pure delight to those Arabs from the parched land of North Africa. And they were masters in the use of water: water from the well for drinking, the same water for washing oneself, then washing eating-utensils and clothes and, finally, for irrigation. Modern ecologists could learn a lot from them. Underpinning this respect for water, and indeed respect for nature in general, is the Islamic belief that Allah created nature for the benefit of mankind, not as a mere thing to be exploited irresponsibly and disrespectfully in any way, with man’s mere convenience as the only principle of use.

Unlike the Greek love poems, these lyrics are not erotic, at least not explicitly so. The loved one is as likely to be a teenage youth as a young girl. Again, one is reminded of the Love Poems of the *Greek Anthology*. The issue of paedophilia or homosexuality would not be appropriate for me to address here. Human sexuality has always manifested itself differently at different times in different cultures. As with much of Lorca’s poetry, it seems to me best to
keep an open mind when reading the poems, thus avoiding any reductionism. There is a decorous ambiguity in both Lorca and these Andalusian Arabic lyrics that allows the poems to be read simply as love poems.

To what degree, one may ask, was Lorca, and in particular the *Tamarit* poems, influenced by Emilio García Gómez’s prose versions? Rafael Alberti, who surely knew what Lorca was about and who greatly admired García Gómez’s book, has written that “it was a revelation for me and had a great influence on my work, but above all influenced the work of Federico García Lorca.” Certainly Lorca would have loved their visual, imagistic quality, their packed beauty. He would also have loved their rich evocations of the Andalusia he himself passionately loved. He would, too, have loved their unabashed sensuality. More than that, it is hard to say.

Emilio García Gómez’s anthology was divided into three sections, based on three regions of Andalusia and, as topography is of some importance to the poems, we considered it best to retain this division.
1. Poets of Western Andalusia

1. The Young Pigeon

Nothing troubled me more than a young pigeon that cooed on a bough, between the island and the river.

Its collar was the colour of pistachio, its breast of lapis lazuli, its neck iridescent, its back chestnut and so, too, the tip of its wing-feathers.

Over the ruby of its pupil it flickered eyelids of pearl, and a line of gold hemmed its eyelids.

The sharp point of its beak was black, like the tip of a silver calamus dipped in ink.

It was perching on the arak branch like a throne, hiding its throat in the fold of its wing.

But, seeing my tears flow, my sadness scared it, and, straightening up on the green branch, it unfolded its wings and flapped them in flight, bearing off my heart. To where? I don't know.

by Abu al‑Hasan ‘Ali ibn Ḥiṣn, secretary of al‑Mu‘tamid of Seville (11th century)
2. The Reflection of Wine

The reflection of wine passed through light reddens the fingers of the wine-bearer as the juniper dyes the muzzle of the antelope.

by the same

3. The Lily and the Rose

He drinks the wine beside the fragrant lily that has blossomed, and it shapes your morning gathering when the rose opens.

Both, it seems, have been suckled on the udders of the sky; the former on milk, the latter on blood.

They are two friends: the former has rebelled against camphor, king of whiteness; the latter defies the pomegranate, king of redness, and rightly so.

One is like a small idol exposed to whomever passes by; the other like the cheek slapped on the sad morning of separation.

Or, if you prefer, the former is a handful of little silver tubes, and the latter a coal whose embers the wind stirred and inflamed.

by Abū Bakr Muhammad ibn al-Qutiyya, courtier of Mu‘tadid of Seville (11th century)
4. The Nut

It is a casing formed of two pieces so bonded it is beautiful to look at: they are like eyelids closed in sleep.

If a knife slits it apart you would say it is a pupil made convex by sheer looking.

And its inside is like that of the ear with its whorls and nooks.

by the same

5. Farewell

When on the morning that they left we bid farewell, full of sadness for the forthcoming absence,

I saw on the camels' flanks the palanquins in which they departed, beautiful as moons, covered by their golden veils.

Beneath the veils the scorpions of their forelocks slithered over the roses of their fragrant cheek.

They are scorpions harmless to the cheek they trace, and, instead, pierce the heart of the sad lover.

by Ibn Jakh of Badajoz
(11th century)
6. Shyness

When, like the wine-bearer who serves glasses around, you offer to those around you the wine of your cheeks, burning with shyness, I am not slow to drink it;

this wine is made generous by the eyes of those who, when they look at you, make you blush, while the former is made generous by the grape harvesters’ feet.

by the Sevillian vizir, Abū al-Walīd Ismā‘īl ibn Muḥammad, nicknamed Ḥabīb (d. ca. 1048)

7. From the Eulogy of Idris II of Málaga

Now the first brightness of dawn lights up for me. Give me a drink before the muezzin intones his “Allah is great.”

Mixing wine with water, on its surface bubbles play like pearls that float at first and then become like the rings that hang from the camel’s nostrils.

It is delightful to drink with noble and generous pages who exchange myrtles of courtesy among themselves.

Besides, they drink a different wine on the cheek of the wine-bearer
beautiful as a gazelle;
a cheek on which the rose and jasmine bloom.

It is fantastic to ponder the jet of their hair
above the ivory of their brow.

The bough of their figure
is curved above their hips’ pile of sand,
and the night from their hair
rises above the clear dawn of their face.

The wings of air have been dampened
by the water of dawn-roses
for those who rise early to drink.

The dew drips from the narcissus
like tears that glide from eyelids.

The Pleiades die out on the horizon
like a bough of jasmine in bloom.

The wing of darkness moves away from the dawn
as a raven flies
unveiling its hidden white eggs.

And all eyes turn away, dazzled,
at the emergence of the sun.

The sun, that is the face of Idris, son of Yaha,
son of Ali, son of Hammud,
prince of believers.

by Ibn Muqanna‘ of Lisbon (11th century)
8. From the Eulogy of Muʿtadid of Seville

Wine-bearer, serve the glass around because already the zephyr has risen, and Venus has already deflected the reins of its nocturnal journey.

Dawn has now brought us its white camphor when the night has separated us from its black amber.

The garden is a beautiful woman dressed in the tunic of its flowers and adorned with its necklace of dewy pearls,

or, rather, like a noble page who reddens with the blush of roses and is emboldened with the down of the myrtle.

The garden—where the river resembles a white hand stretched out over a green tunic—

is stirred by the zephyr: you would think it the sword of Ben Abbad dispersing armies.

Ben Abbad! In his distress, when the air is cloaked in an ashen tunic, the bounty of his hand is fruitful,

and he chooses, for the bestowal of his gifts, the already nubile virgin, the naked steed and the sable adorned with gems.

A king who when kings lead en masse to the drinking trough cannot quench their thirst until he returns;

fresher over their hearts than the dew-fall; pleasanter over their eyelids than the sweet heaviness of sleep!
He makes the steel of glory sparkle, 
nor does he depart from the fire of fight 
but to approach the fire of the hearth 
lighted for his guests;

a king who admires you physically and morally 
as the garden is beautiful 
seen from afar as much as close-up.

When being at your side, the Kawthar of your generosity 
pours me out, I am sure to find myself in Paradise.

Have you fructified your lance 
with the heads of enemy kings 
seeing that the branch pleases when it is in bloom,

and you have dyed your coat-of-mail 
with the blood of heroes 
because the beautiful maiden is dressed in red?

My poem is, for you, like a garden the zephyr visited 
and over which the frost bent till it bloomed.

With your name I have dressed it in a tunic of gold; 
with your eulogy I have crumbled over it the best musk.

Who will compete with me? Your name is aloe 
I have burned in the fuse of my genius.

by the celebrated Ibn ‘Ammār of Silves, 
vizier of Mu‘tamīd of Seville (d. 1086)

9. The Beloved

She was a little gazelle 
who gazing with narcissi 
extends lilies and smiles with daisies.
Her earrings beckon me
and her bracelets prick up
their ears to listen to the melody of her girdle.

by the same

10. Reading

My pupil redeems what is captured on the page:
whiteness to whiteness and blackness to blackness.

by the same

11. Evocation of Silves

Here, Abū Bakr, greet my homes in Silves
and ask them if, as I think, they still remember me.

Greet the Palacio de las Barandas
on behalf of a young page
who feels perpetual nostalgia for the citadel.

Warriors like lions and white gazelles live there,
and in such beautiful woods and in such beautiful dens!

How many a night I spent amusing myself in their shade
with women of opulent hips and tall stature:

White and swarthy, they had on my soul
the effect of gleaming swords and dark lances!

How many a night I spent deliciously beside a river-bend
with a maiden whose bracelet emulated the curve of the current!

Time passed pouring for me the wine of her gaze,
and, at other times, the wine from her glass,
and some others, the wine of her mouth.
The strings of her lute wounded by the plectrum
made me tremble
as if hearing the melody of swords
in the tendons of an enemy’s neck.

Removing her golden cloak
she revealed her figure,
a blossoming bough of willow
as its bud opens to display its flower.

by King Mu‘tamid of Seville (reigned 1068–1091)

12. Fiesta Night

In truth I drank wine that spilled in gleams
while the night unfolded its mantle of darkness,

until the full moon rose in Gemini
as a king in the apogee of his pomp and splendour.

The brilliant early stars rose in rivalry
to encircle it with their refulgence and complete their own.

And when the moon wanted to pass to the West
it raised Orion above itself like a canopy,

and the stars advanced at their sides
as battalions that hoist the Pleiades as flags.

So I am on the earth,
among squadrons and beautiful women
who unite splendour with high rank.

If the cuirasses of the warriors disperse darkness,
the maidens’ glasses of wine fill us with clarity.

And if the female salves sing
accompanying themselves with the lyre,
the swords of my young warriors
do not thus cease singing also on enemy helmets.

by the same

13. To His Chain, a Prisoner in Aghmāt

Chain of mine, do you not know I have surrendered to you?
Why, then, are you not moved to pity or compassion?

My blood was your drink
and already you ate my flesh.
Don’t crush my bones.

My son Abū Hashim, seeing me encircled by you,
moves off with his heart in pain.

Have pity on a little innocent child
who never feared to have to come and plead with you.

Have pity on his little sisters who are like him
and whom you forced to swallow poison and colocynth.

There are among them some who are aware,
and I fear that weeping will blind them.

But the others still understand nothing
and do not open their mouth except to suckle.

by the same