

From the Other Side of Night/Del otro lado de la noche: New and Selected Poems

Francisco X. Alarcón

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A vital tradition in Spanish poetry unites politics, eroticism, and surrealism in a way few poets writing in English have attempted, let alone managed. Francisco Alarcón's poems join those of Pablo Neruda, Cesar Vallejo, Federico Garcia Lorca, and others in this tradition, while bringing his own distinctive background and voice to this vital, engaged, moving volume.

Born in Los Angeles, raised in Guadalajara, Mexico, now a professor at the University of California at Davis, Alarcón writes fluently in both Spanish and English and draws freely on the riches and complexities of Chicano history and culture. Most of these poems are presented in both languages, and some mingle them, offering their own "border" awareness on several levels—there are Aztec invocations, references to Spanish poetry as far back as the great sixteenth-century poet San Juan de la Cruz, and even hints of the minimalist poetics of recent U. S. writers such as William Carlos Williams and Robert Creeley.

Mainly in short, crisp lines, Alarcón writes of love and poverty, transgressive and otherwise. His eloquence is equal to the problem of writing political poems that avoid mere propaganda, as in the dazzling, brief "Flags": "stupid / rags / soaked in / blood." "The Other Day I Ran into Garcia Lorca" claims brotherhood with his great predecessor: "suddenly / he stood / walked / directly / to my table // and planted / a kiss like / an Andalusian / sun / on my lips."

The homoerotic poems here are as touching and lyrical as the political ones are pointed. Perhaps the highlight of the volume is the sequence of unrhymed sonnets "De amor oscuro / Of Dark Love," with English translations by Francisco Aragón, in which desire and commitment fuse into an ecstatic, insistent vision that refuses to abandon the communal world even for the sake of the beloved. "[B]rother, it's business as usual," the poem ends: "we the poor are still likely prey-love, / if not for everyone, isn't enough."

JEFF GUNDY (May / June 2002)

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