

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource
from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



The Guitar

The weeping of the guitar
begins.
The goblets of dawn
are smashed.
The weeping of the guitar
begins.
Useless
to silence it.
Impossible
to silence it.
It weeps monotonously
as water weeps
as the wind weeps
over snowfields.
Impossible
to silence it.
It weeps for distant
things.
Hot southern sands
yearning for white camellias.
Weeps arrow without target
evening without morning
and the first dead bird
on the branch.
Oh, guitar!
Heart mortally wounded
by five swords.

Federico García Lorca¹

¹ "The Guitar" by Federico García Lorca, trans. Cola Franzen, from *Selected Poems*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Used by permission.

☞ Reflections

Federico García Lorca is considered Spain's greatest modern poet and the theme of Lorca's life's-work is rooted in the concept of *duende*: literally translated as "ghost" from the phrase *duen de casa*, or "master of the house." It was Lorca who first articulated something of the mysterious and evocative power that comes from a heightened and acute awareness of one's mortality, and the ways that power is communicated or, more accurately, *felt* beyond language in art, literature, and music. In his own words, "The duende is a power, not a work. It is a struggle, not a thought...The duende is not in the throat; the duende climbs up inside you..."

Though there is no direct equivalent in English, other more familiar synonyms might include melancholia, unsatisfiable longing, desire; *duende*, Lorca argued, is the soul of great art, a word as impossible to translate as the Portuguese *saudade* (a nostalgia for something that has perhaps not even happened and will surely never happen again) or the Russian *toska* (wordless sadness, spiritual anguish without cause, vague but aching restlessness).

I read once that Lorca's poems are as love songs, insofar as all love songs contain *duende*: neither the great love song nor the great poem is ever exclusively happy because it must first embrace the potential for (and even likelihood of) deep and lasting pain. The musician Nick Cave once said, "The writer who refuses to explore the darker regions of the heart will never be able to write convincingly about the wonder, the magic and the joy of love, for just as goodness cannot be trusted unless it has breathed the same air as evil—the enduring metaphor of Christ crucified between two criminals comes to mind here—so within the fabric of the Love Song, within its melody, its lyric, one must sense an acknowledgement of its capacity for suffering."²

The poem I have offered here, "The Guitar," is thought to be in many ways a kind of meditation on *duende*, using the sounds of a guitar as a vehicle for both description and definition. (It might be noted that the guitar is a recurring motif throughout Lorca's work and is an instrument essential in the world of Andalusian music and folklore, in which he would have been immersed from his earliest days.) To (over)simplify: It is not the body of the guitar alone but the five strings (or five swords, five wounds) that make music, have *duende*, contain the power to move us deeply. Without this wounding, no *duende*. But without *duende*, then what? It could be that *duende* carries within it the power to wound and to heal at the very same time.

As I enter this holy season of Lent, season of hunger, thirst, longing and hope, I have been rereading Lorca and finding some new meaning in the unsolvable problems of language. To be thinking anew of the "enduring metaphor" of yearning—an "arrow without target," "evening without morning"—is to live aware of that space between what we can say and what we cannot, what we know and what we trust, what we desire and what we grieve. There is the instrument, the body, we can hold and there is the music—the love—we cannot quite. We'll never fully *get it*, will we? But oh, that exquisite try, that artful essay, that poetry by which we live.

²Nick Cave, Speech: "The Secret Life of the Love Song." London, March 30, 1999

✧ About the Poet

Federico Garcia Lorca (1898-1936) is one of the most important Spanish artists of the 20th century. A poet, playwright, and theater director, he first studied law at the University of Granada before moving to Madrid to give his full attention to his writing. In the early 1920s, Lorca met a group of avant-garde artists, among them Salvador Dali, whose exploration of surrealism in art, theater and poetry became essential to Lorca's own work. In the early days of the Spanish Civil War and in the face of a fascist uprising, Lorca feared his liberalism, homosexuality and outspoken opposition endangered him; indeed, after a period of hiding, Lorca was found, arrested and executed by firing squad. Though it is believed he was buried in a shallow grave near Granada, his remains have never been found.



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