

it's June
the February
of summer

alone in Oakland
cleaning white ash
from not-so-distant fires

off my windshield
with my sleeve
I think of you

far, old friend,
scribbling poems
in the park

to your wife
and saying them
happily to no one

do you remember
when we pledged
to always look?

we were sadder
than Chinese poets
of the Northern Song

like them
in desperate times
we drank a lake

sized amount of wine,
which made us strong
because we knew

no matter how much
everything matters
our poems can always

be read by anyone

(from *Father's Day*)

In October 1928, in Granada, Federico García Lorca strode up to a stage in the middle of wild applause. I have imagined it many times. The hall of the Granada Athenaeum decorated with flowers and tapestries. Many in the audience holding bouquets, their expectant faces turned up toward the stage. The candlelit magic of a ritual. They had come to hear Lorca, author of the book of poems and drawings *Romancero Gitano*, give a lecture on the poetic imagination. The black piano gleaming, so Lorca could stop at times to play and sing Andalusian folk songs he had learned as a child, growing up in a small town in the middle of the vega.

"Imagination, Inspiration, Evasion" is not even really a lecture. It is a reflection of Lorca's mind, an enactment of what it is like to think as a poet. He explores the idea that writing poetry is not about inventing, but discovering:

The human imagination invented giants in order to attribute to them the construction of great grottoes or enchanted cities. Later, reality taught us that those great caves are made by the drop of water. The pure, patient, eternal drop of water. In this case, as in many others, reality wins. After all, it is much more beautiful that a cave be a mysterious caprice of water—chained and ordered by eternal laws—than the whim of giants who have no other meaning than that of an explanation.

A mysterious caprice of water. This is the human mind encountering reality, and according to Lorca, it is far more beautiful than some arbitrary explanation, mere imagining.

Of the early twentieth-century French surrealists, Wallace Stevens wrote, "To make a clam play an accordion is to invent not discover." I love the surrealists, the hope they had that we could heal ourselves through dreaming. When we were children, we made no distinction between that dream world and our "real" experiences. We were filled with wonder. Of course we were also cruel. We lacked adult perspective. The purpose of poetry was to heal this great wound in our consciousness. We would become like children again, except also wise. By reconnecting the part of ourselves that dreams with the rest of us, we would remember that we are all human, that the entire world is alive. We would never start another war again. Of course, this did not work. But in that hope they wrote some of my favorite poems. The earth is blue like an orange. I have so often dreamed of you, my wife with thoughts of summer lightning.

Yet I think Stevens has a point, at least about an aspect of their poetry, and while I adore their freedom, I dread replicating such irrelevancy, as I equally dread an earnest moral hectoring. I do wish I could see that clam, though.

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I have always loved words for what they can do, and for all the different things they can mean. I love how they feel in my mouth. In that way, I am like all writers I know. I am also very like my son. Now that I have become the parent of a son who is working so hard to achieve fluency in language, my respect for communication in all aspects of my life has increased. The simple act of reaching out in writing to say something to you, and you hearing me, and then

responding, even if only in my imagination because you are far away and I will most likely never know you, feels even more holy to me.

Poetry gives us the great gift of allowing us to forget, momentarily, that communicating is mostly functional. If we allow language to drift away from us, and don't try to use but rather follow it, we can discover something. It is as if the imagination is more like a tool, or a sense like sight or hearing or memory, a deeper faculty, something that opens up the world to the poet and reader. When properly understood and deployed, the imagination can uncover truths that are not available elsewhere.

According to Lorca, a lesser poet settles for merely imagining. A great poet is inspired, that is, breathed into by some force outside themselves.

For me, imagination is synonymous with discovery.

I do not believe in creation but in discovery, and I don't believe in the seated artist but in the one who is walking down the road.

The poetic imagination travels and transforms things, giving them their purest meaning, and it defines relationships no one had suspected.

Poetry is like faith—it isn't meant to be understood but to be received in a state of grace.

In the lecture, Lorca also says:

The mechanics of the poetic imagination are always the same: a concentration, a leap, a flight, a return with the

treasure, and a classification and selection of what has been brought back.

First, the pure, empty desire to make something. A concentration, which is really a separation from the world, a decision to think about . . . nothing. Nothing to say, nothing to do, other than leap. A leap is a pushing away of the earth. No more, no, that is not how the world is, it cannot be like this any longer. An initial rejection, explicit or implicit, of some widely agreed-upon truth, or just the usual way of doing things. The beginning is a call to go a different way. The poem creates a new space of freedom in which to question and dream. In this way, poetry is by its nature oriented toward strangeness, revolution. What appears dire can be thrilling and beautiful and subject to change.

Some time passes. If I am lucky enough to forget everything else, this is the time of greatest pleasure. That place you go after the leap, and what happens there, Lorca does not name. It is particular to each of us. Someone (a student, a fellow poet, oneself) can only be directed there, or maybe with the utmost dispassionate gentleness pushed off the ledge, for them to discover that it is possible to soar for a while. But once one has leapt, and is flying, and hunting, what is instinctively, intuitively, feelingly chosen, and how, and where: that is the part of the process that cannot be taught, only provoked.

I want to sleep the sleep of the apples, Lorca writes. My heart of silk is filled with lights, with lost bells, with lilies and bees. I will go very far, farther than those hills.

More and more often I think the rare treasure I gather in writing poems is the awareness I would not have without writing them. Can that state of awareness be communicated through a poem? Can the poem be a secret machine, carried on a little scrap of paper or hidden in the mind, so one can always have a place to rest, to resist?

I also hope for the possibility of communion, both with the hidden parts of myself and with imagined readers. One can believe for a moment that one is no longer lonely. The poet, says Lorca, wants. "We all want. But this is his sin: to want. One shouldn't want, one should love." I want to be someone Lorca believes in, the poet walking the road, listening, but I am trapped inside by the terrible air.

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Richard Hugo writes, "When you start to write, you carry to the page one of two attitudes, though you may not be aware of it. One is that all music must conform to truth. The other, that all truth must conform to music. If you believe the first, you are making your job very difficult . . ."

When I first started to write poems, I carried both attitudes with me. I believed, on the one hand, that music must conform to truth: you start with what you want to say, and use "music" to convey it in the most powerful way. This sounds, when I think of it, dangerously like advertising, or propaganda. At the same time, I was looking to write not in order to convey a message, but to search for, and submit to, a different kind of music: a deeper order or significance, an intimated truth that could not otherwise be felt. And I believed this deeper order could only be found through intuition. I had to completely trust and defer to it. This presumably would lead to deeper, "poetic" knowledge.

This unresolved contradiction within me made things, as Hugo points out, very difficult. For hours I would sit, scratching my head, writing down a few words and then erasing them. Was I supposed to be saying something I already knew in the most beautiful possible way? Or trying to follow music, to find out what I did not know I believed? And if the latter, how was I supposed to write