

Duende

At a pre-concert talk for a new opera inspired by Lorca's life,
the conductor asks the composer, *What part does duende*
play in your work? And the man sitting beside me leans over

to ask, *What is duende?* I whisper, *a fierce magic, a melancholy spirit,*
believing that he will follow the social contract we have agreed upon
by sitting quietly in his chair. Instead, he pauses, then leans in

to joke, *Yesterday I thought I had duende, but it was gas.*
Perhaps it's impossible to feel an emotion without words
for it; perhaps *duende* burrows like a rare seed in the red soil

of Andalusia, only to rise through the mists of Galicia
until everyone in Spain swoons under its spell. But that's
not right: I know the seed grows here, too, because

my childhood in America had *duende* in spades, well before
I knew its name. Do not misinterpret this: I have no sad stories
about my labors over a lathe or hard years of factory work

in the city. My parents lived that life so that mine
would be so easy as to be nearly nonexistent. But every easy life
stands on the ghosts of those who suffered for it. I spent

longing for something I had never lost, learning
the look and sigh and sway from *mediterraneos*
like Mrs. Lobos, kind neighbor who, like all the women

of my youth, had giant eyes and breasts to match.
One summer, she hired me to assist her in secretary work
at the middle school, and though I can't imagine now

what I must have done to fill those hours, I do remember the afternoon that Mrs. Lobos brought her face to her hands and wept, wordlessly, for minutes. By this point in my life

it came as no surprise that an adult, familiar or strange, would weep before me. In films, it was Anna Magnani, pulling at her hair as she ran through the streets of Rome;

at parties it was the women at the table, raging against the woes of motherhood. But this was no party: this was fluorescence in every corridor, Lysol in the toilet stalls, and telephones

with red flaring buttons. In her sorrow Mrs. Lobos did not rant or rage, blame or curse. She merely whispered, *Mr. Lobos has left me. I guess he got tired of being married.* Though *tired*

wasn't the word I expected, it seems as accurate as any other feeling that can pull a man away. Imagine Aeneas being bored with Dido; imagine Jason wearying of Medea's

tricks. Imagine all the abandoned women of the world weeping inconsolably, each deep sigh a funeral of feeling for the men who've just had enough. Beyond us,

the sun-parched fields led to the track that no one used in summer, and to the shadows of the school, where young men rested after mowing acres of stiff crabgrass. Eventually,

Mr. Lobos came back without fanfare, and Mrs. Lobos never spoke of it again, but for months after that day, when I rode by their house on my bicycle, I would wonder as I passed

their closed front door: what wolves are they? What secret sorrow do they harbor? I knew then that American *duende* isn't the grief of a man's leaving, but the feeling that comes when he returns.