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.