

## Issue #56, Waiting

### Sleepless in Any City

#### Insomnia in Lorca's Madrid

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*Out in the world, no one sleeps. No one, no one.*

*No one sleeps.*

—Federico García Lorca, “Sleepless City (Brooklyn Bridge Nocturne)”

Madrid 2007. Sometime after 3 AM. In six hours, I'll be discussing the poetry of Federico García Lorca with a teacher who never smiles, not even to be polite. I see her pale, expressionless face and think of ice—not the kind that makes for a delightful glass of sangria but the sort that stings your palms when you scrape it from your car during winter. We'll be talking about Lorca's transformative collection *Poet in New York*. The poems were inspired by his time in New York City; Lorca moved there in 1929 to study at Columbia University. They reveal the loneliness that persists amidst the skyscrapers of a dehumanized city. He described the poems this way before they were published: “Interpretación personal, abstracción impersonal, sin lugar ni tiempo, de aquella ciudad mundo. Un símbolo patético: sufrimiento.” Or, translated into English: “Personal interpretation, impersonal abstraction, without place or time, of that city world. One pathetic symbol: suffering.”

Lorca's New York is my Madrid, where I am lonely. He fled romantic disappointments to study English in New York City when he was thirty-one. I left a loving relationship for Madrid, where I am studying Spanish. I am twenty-seven. Years ago, I lived in New York. I witnessed the suffering in the city's margins, which Lorca drew so profoundly with his poems, but at this moment, I cannot see beyond my own nightly trials. Here, in his country, the evening is my enemy.

I lie in a double bed with an unrelenting mattress in a room I rent from a señora, a

retired psychologist who manages partial smiles with pursed lips.

We live largely in silence by day, on the floor just below the top apartment.

Once darkness settles, the sounds begin.

I am awake, and I am angry. I burrow my fingernails into my cheeks to test whether the sleeping pill I swallowed hours ago has had any effect. Indeed, it has fallen short of its catatonic promise. For the past three weeks, around the same time every night, I've been hearing a *thump, thump*. Each night, I wait for it because I can't fall asleep knowing I will soon be awakened by a noise that could begin at any moment. I try to block it with a fan, foam ear plugs, pillows I wedge around my head, and a CD titled *Music for Sleep*—all of which, of course, just keeps me awake.

When I told my señora about the thumps, she said it was probably the man upstairs, who is middle-aged and lives with his mother, which was enough to arouse my suspicion that he does not have a wholly normal life and probably stays up late at night. My señora said she would ask his mother to tell him to keep quiet, but I don't know if she did. My señora is suspect, too; she did not even blink when I mentioned Francisco Franco, the Spanish dictator whose cronies killed Lorca in 1936. *Poet of New York* was published four years after Lorca's death. The poet's remains have never been found. Franco was responsible for widespread repression and brutality. At the least, mention of his name deserves a disgusted harrumph.

*Thump, thump*. I peel away the fort of pillows. I will never sleep. My life will end soon because you need sleep. I will get acne and circles under my eyes and be too tired to wash my hair. I will be ugly and dead, and I haven't even told my parents I want to be cremated.

I decrease the volume on the music. I cut the fan and stand on my bed, lifting an ear toward the ceiling, a hound in pajama pants.

*Thump, thump*.

Is it downstairs? Squatting, I press my ear to the cool floor. Nope. I mount my desk and begin slapping the ceiling, but flesh is no match for cement, and my red palm is irrelevant to the sound that is slowly draining me. Minutes of silence pass, and I return to bed, braced for the next auditory assault. I turn up the music, cram in the earplugs, switch on the fan, and pile pillows over my head.

*Thump, thump.*

I extract an earplug. I sit up and listen. Nothing. I wedge the plug back into my ear canal.

*Thump, thump.*

The beating is familiar. I squeeze my palms to my ears. I place a hand to my chest. The sound matches my heart. I am living “The Tell-Tale Heart.” Am I crazy? *Relax*, I think, which causes me not to. *Try not to think about sleeping*, I think, which means that’s precisely what I’m thinking.

I have spoken to a therapist. She gave me tests and put me into categories, but I already knew I was sleepless and anxious.

*Once in bed, the patient broods over the inability to sleep, the consequences of sleep loss, and the lack of mental control. All attempts to sleep fail.*

*. . . After such a cycle is established, insomnia becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that can persist indefinitely.*

—“Psychophysiologic insomnia” as defined by the University of Maryland Medical Center

*Are you bothered by at least three of the following?*

*Restlessness, feeling keyed-up or on edge.*

Check.

*Irritability.*

Check.

*Muscle tension.*

Check.

*Trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, or restless and unsatisfying sleep.*

Check.

*Your anxiety interfering with your daily life.*

Check.

—Excerpt from “Screening for Generalized Anxiety Disorder,” the Anxiety and Depression Association of America

*Thump, thump.*

I storm from my room, bare feet padding through the dark formal living room, and scale the stairs to the top floor. A thread of light announces that someone is awake behind the door. I hear a muffled beat. Is that the source of my torment? I am crazy, I decide, and turn to leave. I head down a flight of stairs. I stop and stare up at the door. No, he’s rude. The cycle repeats: upstairs, restraint, downstairs, resentment.

I want to sleep so I can talk about Lorca, their Lorca, who warned of the crocodile outside, waiting under the stars, and the iguanas that threaten to devour the dreamless. He wrote this of New York, but it is true of any city, any place full of people full of fear and pain.

“Those who are hurt will hurt without rest,” he wrote in “Sleepless City (Brooklyn Bridge Nocturne).”

We all must hurt, but eventually we must rest.

“Those who are frightened by death will carry it on their shoulders.”

It’s the in-between that seems to never end for the sleepless.

Standing outside the door, I begin to cry. I inhale confidence and knock softly. The door opens on a middle-aged man, bald but for fenders of dark hair.

“I’m so sorry,” I say. “Would it be possible for you to turn it down?”

He turns his music down to a whisper at midnight, he tells me, and invites me inside as proof. There is a murmur of bass and a hum of electricity.

“You know,” he says, “the neighbors downstairs have kids.” I apologize and return to my room. Sighing, I switch off the light and follow my recipe for an unsuccessful slumber.

*Thump, thump.*

I do not dream. I weep and wait for the dark to turn light. This is a torment I cannot survive. Poe might say I’m mad, but Lorca would understand; I am prey to the nocturnal creaks in my mind and weak to the city creatures that stir at night. I am lonely but not alone. No one is asleep in this city. No one. No one.