

The Love Song

Echoes of Duende

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I wrote this essay after a failed love attempt. For a year or so I'd been head over heels for a woman, and told myself stories about who she was to me, and who I hoped to be to her. But when I finally found the courage to tell her, our stories didn't align. Music has always been one of my most faithful weapons against life's greatest foes, anxiety and boredom. In this situation too, it became my refuge. To paraphrase Maya Angelou, I could crawl into the space between the notes and curl my back against the ache of heartbreak. By some winding path, this led me to Federico García Lorca's brilliant lecture "Juego y teoría del duende" and Nick Cave's equally brilliant lecture "The Secret Life of the Love Song." Those lectures taught me something about myself and what's inside me, about what I want and what I fear, and this essay is my attempt to absorb and reflect on those discoveries.

It happened to me a few months short of my thirty-first birthday. The autumn had unfolded as most autumns before it, but as the leaves were falling steadily from the trees, I felt my own strength slipping away, as though each leaf carried a small piece of me with it. I suffered from nausea, dizziness, shortness of breath and an inability to concentrate. These are common symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning, but in my case the problem turned out to be far bigger, and much more serious, than a lack of oxygen. I was in love and, as is well known, there ain't no cure for that.

We explain the world with words, but it's a truth universally acknowledged that the things most profoundly significant to us, as human beings, can only be experienced, not expressed. "The rest is," as Aldous Huxley writes, "always and everywhere silence." But after silence, what comes closest to express the inexpressible is music. The miracle of music's power to ignite an experience in the mind of the listener is a gift we neither understand nor deserve. Sometimes the experience flickers softly, other times it burns fiercely, as if the experience itself is brought back to its full force of life. Yet always, we are grateful to the artist who's able to "say clearly what I felt and thought, but have never been able to express, not even to myself." I'd never been in love before. I was an empty man without

any history or memory. So I was grateful for *Something's Gotten Hold of My Heart*, for I felt like something was keeping my soul and my senses apart. I was grateful for *I've Never Been In Love Before* because it all was too strange and strong, and I was full of foolish song. And I was grateful for *Lover, You Should've Come Over* because I wanted to give all my blood for the sweetness of her laughter.

In his brilliant lecture *Juego y teoría del duende*, Federico García Lorca attempts to shed some light on inexplicable gravitational pull certain works of art exert on the human spirit. "All the arts are capable of *duende*," he says, that "mysterious force that everyone feels and no philosopher has explained." Just like zero lives on the threshold between the positive and the negative, duende lives on the line between the intellect and the intuition. It emerges from within as an emotional reaction – such as the sensation of a frisson or the shedding of a tear – to an artistic expression, and it creates the conditions where art can be understood with little, if any, conscious effort, much like a sponge absorbing water. "All that has dark sounds has duende," says Lorca, "[and] those dark sounds are the mystery, the roots that cling to the mire that we all know, that we all ignore, but from which comes the very substance of art."

All love songs must contain duende. For the love song is a sad song. Nick Cave makes this point in his wonderful lecture *The Secret Life of a Love Song*. Those songs that claim to speak of love without having in their lines as much as single sigh or an ache cannot be trusted, he says, "for just as goodness cannot be trusted unless it has breathed the same air as evil... so within the fabric of the Love Song, within its melody, its lyric, one must sense an acknowledgement of its capacity for suffering." The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—whether in exhilaration or in despair – that's the issue. The love song is born in the longing of the soul and molded by the desire for love and comfort. A great love song is more acceptable and more convincing than fact itself. And in so doing, it must embrace the potential for pain. For love is a pleasure we suffer.

In his lecture, Nick Cave praises Lou Reed's *Perfect Day* as a sublime achievement of the genre. In near diary form, Reed takes us through the events that together make up a perfect day. He and his lover drink sangria in the park, feed animals in the zoo, go to the movies, and then go home together. It's a day that resonates with anyone with a pulse, and for a verse and a half it appears as a nostalgic, albeit slightly sentimental, depiction of a lovely day. But this picture is torn away by the lines that are lurking darkly at the end of the second verse. "You made me forget about myself," Lou nearly whispers; "I thought I was someone else, someone good." It's this lyrical gut-punch that turns this song into the masterpiece

of melancholia that it is. Not only do these lines ache with failure and shame, they also sting with the longing not only to be loved, but to be lovable.

Nick Cave has also devoted much of his artistic life to this particular genre of songwriting. In his remarkable song *Into My Arms*, he tells the story of a non-believer who is so hopelessly lost that he turns to God to express himself, for he doesn't know what else to do but to hope that some benevolent force can bring him and his lover back together. This is clearly logical nonsense, but as Cave himself says, the love song should echo love itself and love is, after all, a form of madness. This is a song about lost love and the unquenchable longing that it leaves in its wake, yet there's a ray of light in the sadness, a few sparks of melancholic optimism in the last verse: "But I believe in Love/ And I know that you do too/ And I believe in some kind of path/ That we can walk down, me and you." And in effect, *Into My Arms* becomes a song that resonates with both the susurrations of sorrow and the tintinnabulation of hope.

It's impossible to speak of duende without mentioning Leonard Cohen. *Hallelujah*, one of his most celebrated love songs, is largely about failed and painful relationships. The song references the biblical stories of David and Bathsheba, as well as Samson and Delilah, and in so doing it becomes a song about both betraying and being betrayed in the name of love. But Cohen presents the idea that these failed and painful relationships are no less true or holy than successful ones. Beauty, he says, exists in real emotions, regardless of whether it's "a broken or a holy hallelujah." And this is also the way he chooses to end his song. In a song that largely depicts the agonies and unspeakable pains of love, Cohen finishes by saying that even though it all went wrong, he is willing to take the risk and go through it all again to give love another chance.

Robert Frost once wrote, in a characteristically short essay titled *The Figure a Poem Makes*, that a poem "begins in delight and ends in wisdom." I think that's true for songs too. But songs are meant to be sung, not read. Looking back at the songs that I have repeatedly sought out and listened to, a certain clarity prevails. I see that it was the melody that first captured me, but it's the lyrics that have kept me captive. Mazzy Star's *Fade Into You* is one such song. Behind its gorgeous and enchanting instrumental, it hides a love lyric of truly devastating proportions. From one angle, the song suggests that love can be all-consuming, and that, in the one-sided longing of the yearner, she – like the Little Mermaid, who in drinking the potion sacrificed her voice for legs – can lose the very parts of herself that made her who she was. From a different angle, it appears that the other person – the "You" in the song – is also lost in some kind of darkness from

which he cannot escape. In this view, the narrator's pain seem to stem from that she's unable to reach out to the other person and pull him out of the shadows; and the idea presented – dark, sinister and sad – is that her love for him will never be enough.

Part of what makes *Fade Into You* so great is that it works on both levels. It's possible to relate to both the one who's walking in the valley of the shadows and the one who's chasing them. And, significantly, this is an integral part of all great art. You think your pain and suffering are unprecedented, that you're all alone, but then you hear a song or you read a book and you realize that something which you thought only happened you has happened to someone else. You realize, as James Baldwin poignantly put it, that the things that tormented you the most are the very things that connect you with all the people who are alive, or who has ever lived. This is why art is important. It should tell what it's like to be alive.

The love song, then, is a plant; not a flame. Like a dandelion seed disperses with the wind, so too do the darks sounds that Lorca talks about float through our ears in search for fertile ground in our hearts, where they can sprout and break through our minds, like the flower sprung from the dandelion seed can break through asphalt. Its roots lie the inexplicable longing that dwells in us all, that which the Portuguese call *saudade* and the Romanians call *dor*, and the desire to be brought out the darkness and into the light, as if Orpheus descended into the underworld for us and never turned himself around. This is life for most of us. Everyone is sad. But that is okay. I am happy to be sad. I'll stand tall with the trees and wait for the spring.