

Federico García Lorca

G Y P S Y
R O M A N C E S

POEM OF THE
D E E P S O N G

English translation
Dan Veach



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P O E M O F T H E
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INTRODUCTION

Federico García Lorca, one of Spain's finest poets and dramatists, was murdered in 1936 by Franco's Spanish Nationalists, who burned his books and banned their publication. Nevertheless, this unquenchable spirit would rise again after Franco's long dictatorship, to be hailed as one of the 20th century's greatest creative artists.

A multi-talented musician, artist, poet, director, actor, and dramatist, Lorca's friends regarded him with awe as a force of nature. The poet Jorge Guillén called him "an extraordinary creature...the very crossroads of Creation."

Salvador Dalí, a force of nature himself, recalled in his *Secret Life*: "The personality of Federico García Lorca produced an immense impression on me. The poetic phenomenon in its entirety and 'in the raw' presented itself before me suddenly in flesh and bone, confused, blood-red, viscous and sublime, quivering with a thousand fires of darkness and of subterranean biology...."

Federico García Lorca was born on June 5, 1898, and spent his first ten years in Fuente Vaqueros, a little farming town near Granada in southern Spain. This part of Spain is also known as Andalusia, an Arab name recalling its Moorish heritage. Here he absorbed a feeling for the Spanish countryside that was to inform all his work. The family moved to Granada, where he studied classical piano. Music, from the Impressionism of Debussy to the

blood and fire of Gypsy flamenco, would be an enduring passion and inspiration.

The great turning point of his life came in 1919, when he entered the *Residencia de Estudiantes* in Madrid. In this progressive college he encountered the greatest minds of Spain, including Miguel de Unamuno, José Ortega y Gasset, and fellow Andalusian poet Juan Ramon Jiménez, who became a mentor. He would be exposed to the broader currents of Europe by Albert Einstein, H. G. Wells, Paul Valéry, Madame Curie, and Le Corbusier. And he made friends with rising artists of his own generation, like Dalí and the filmmaker Luis Buñuel.

Inspired by the music of Granada's Gypsies, Lorca began work on a book of poems about flamenco, *Poema del Cante Jondo* (*Poem of the Deep Song*), in 1921. The next year he joined with composer Manuel de Falla to host a conference on flamenco in Granada, with performances by Spain's greatest flamenco singers and guitarists.

Inspired, Lorca began work on another book, combining Gypsy themes with the form of the *romances*, Spain's popular folk ballads. At the same time he was being exposed to Surrealism through his deepening friendship with Salvador Dalí. The result was the *Romancero Gitano* (*Gypsy Romances*), a book of startling images and elusive, enigmatic stories. Appearing in 1928, it would catapult Lorca to instant fame.

This popular attention proved an embarrassment to Lorca, who only wanted an empty room, free of all social pressure, to express himself. He saw the poet as being on the side of nature rather than society. He also feared being

typecast as a “Gypsy poet,” dealing in primitive folklore, rather than the broadly cultured artist that he was.

Fame put a strain on his friendships too. He was already struggling with his homosexual feelings toward Dalí, who did not reciprocate them. When Dalí and Buñuel made a film called *Un Chien Andalou* (*An Andalusian Dog*), Lorca was sure they were making fun of him.

Seeing how depressed he had become, Lorca’s family paid for a trip to New York in 1929. He studied at Columbia University and enjoyed spending time in Harlem, where he sympathized with the blacks, a race oppressed by the urban capitalist society which he abhorred. He found a bond between Negro spirituals and the *Cante Jondo*, the Deep Song of his native Andalusia.

He also found a model in America’s Walt Whitman, whose positive, masculine homosexuality he admired. Escaping the tight confines of the *romances*, Lorca’s *Poet in New York* luxuriates in spinning out long, loose, Whitmanesque lines, among them an “Ode to Walt Whitman.”

These were historic times. After witnessing Wall Street’s Great Crash of 1929, Lorca returned to Spain in 1930, just as her king was being overthrown and a democratic Spanish Republic established.

It was the start of a new life for Lorca. He was appointed Director of *La Barraca*, a theater troupe whose mission was to bring Spanish plays, free of charge, to rural towns and villages all over Spain. Impressed by theater’s ability to speak directly to the people and advocate for social change, Lorca now turned to drama as his main focus.

“Theater,” Lorca says, “is poetry that rises from the book and becomes human enough to talk and shout, weep and despair.” During this time he would write and produce three now classic plays about rural Spain: *Blood Wedding*, *Yerma*, and *The House of Bernarda Alba*.

Blood Wedding, like the *Romancero Gitano*, was an instant success. In 1933 Lorca was invited to Buenos Aires, Argentina, to stage the play. There he also gave a famous lecture, “Theory and Play of the *Duende*,” in which he said that poetic inspiration (the *duende*) depends on a vivid awareness of death, a strong connection to the nation’s soil, and a realization of the limits of reason.

Conservative enemies of the Spanish Republic launched an uprising, led by General Francisco Franco, in 1936. Franco’s Nationalist forces, with help from Hitler and Mussolini, took southern Spain and Granada, where Lorca was living at the time. The city’s Socialist mayor, Lorca’s brother-in-law, was assassinated and dragged through the streets on August 18, the same day that Lorca himself was arrested. On August 19, Lorca was taken outside the city, beaten savagely, and shot. To this day, his body has never been found.

Federico García Lorca was among the first victims of a massive purge of Spanish intellectuals carried out by Franco’s regime. Lorca’s books were burned in Granada’s Carmen Square, and their publication was banned. It was not until the end of Franco’s long dictatorship, in 1975, that it was safe to speak of Lorca’s life and death.

THE GYPSY *Romances*

The Spanish *romance* (often translated as “ballad”) is a form of popular folk poetry that goes back to the Middle Ages. *Romance* refers not to love, but the fact that they are composed in the Spanish language, descended from *Roman* Latin. The romances, sung by wandering minstrels, included popular stories and scenes from epic poems like *The Cid*. They also served as a kind of folk “newspaper,” celebrating current heroes and events.

Needing to make an immediate impact, the minstrels cut and condensed their stories, keeping only the core dramatic situation. As the tales floated free of their contexts, some acquired a mysterious, allusive quality, greatly admired by Spain’s more literary poets. Learned imitations of Spain’s romances were already being performed at the court of Ferdinand and Isabella. Many of Lope de Vega’s classic plays took their plots and forms from the romances.

So Lorca was following a great tradition when he adapted the romance for his Gypsy poems. Its short lines were the perfect setting for his stark, surrealistic images. He wanted the sense of story that the romances provided, but also their elusive, dreamlike quality.

But if these romances are dreamlike, they are not at all vague or abstract. Lorca’s images, though often baffling to the mind, are perfectly apt and precise, like the moon’s “breasts of hard tin” in the very first poem. These Gypsy romances resemble one of Dalí’s paintings, where things surreal –and indeed impossible– are still depicted with startling clarity.

Traditional Spanish romances are printed without verse divisions. Lorca does divide his romances into sections, indicated here by asterisks. I was amazed, however, by how perfectly most of these poems fall into verses of four lines each, reflecting the changes of subject or speaker. When it seemed appropriate, I have added “breathing spaces” where these divisions occur naturally.

THE GYPSIES

Lorca felt for Andalusia’s Gypsies the way he would feel for the blacks of Harlem.

Here was a group resisting modern, materialistic civilization, a race closer to nature and real human feeling—and thus closer to music and poetry. As a poet and artist, Lorca felt like an outcast in modern society himself. He had a deep sympathy for this race that refused to modernize or assimilate, refused to give up their age-old culture, above all their music.

The Gypsies arrived in Spain around 1500 (just as the Jews and Moors were being expelled), after a long migration from northern India. The name “Gypsy” was given to them by Europeans, who mistakenly believed they came from Egypt. Their own name for themselves, the *Rom*, may be related to the Sanskrit *Dom*, meaning “low-caste people who make their living by music.”

They more than lived up to that name, bringing a wild and wonderful music wherever they settled. But, fiercely loyal to their way of life, they also remained a caste apart, living on the fringes of society. In Spain, as else-

where, the price they paid was exclusion and scorn –and an undeclared war with the Spanish Civil Guard.

The Gypsies who lived in Granada did give up their nomadic caravans –where else would you want to go, after all? Some of them settled in caves, carved out of the soft volcanic pumice hills across from the Alhambra. Although they had the world’s best view, they were literal “cave-men” now, which did nothing to help their image as primitives.

But their music and dancing proved irresistibly attractive. To this day, the Gypsy caves of Granada are the place to go to hear authentic flamenco. Ironically, these cozy and perfectly insulated dwellings now command top dollar on the Granada housing market.

To celebrate authentic Gypsy music, and protect it from the taint of commercialization, Lorca and Manuel de Falla organized their Conference on the Deep Song in Granada. At the same time, Lorca was deeply immersed in his own poetic tribute to flamenco.

POEM OF THE DEEP SONG

In this book Lorca celebrates the music of the Gypsies and its place in the richly-layered culture of his native Andalusia. Flamenco’s roots go back to Moorish Spain. (The intricate carvings of the Alhambra are certainly music in stone.) Into this culture, deeply infused with Oriental flavor, came the Gypsies. Their Indian music, filtered through Persia, Byzantium, and the Balkans, was strikingly exotic.

Among the forms of flamenco that have come down to us, those believed to be older and more authentically Gypsy are known as the Deep Song (*Cante Jondo*). They share a 12-beat rhythmic cycle different from anything in Western music, where 2, 3, and 4-beat patterns prevail. Lorca structures his book around four major styles of flamenco.

The most typical style of flamenco is the *Soleá*. The name is Andalusian for *soledad*, or loneliness. The *Soleá* lives up to its name, often dealing with heartbreak in love. Its twelve beat rhythmic cycle, or *compás*, has accents on beats 3, 6, 8, 10, and 12. Try clapping this rhythm in groups of three to hear its rather jazzy, offbeat sound:

*soft soft Loud / soft soft Loud / soft Loud soft /
Loud soft Loud.*

The *Sigüiriya* was originally sung by Gypsy blacksmiths at their forges, which figure prominently in the *Gypsy Romances*. It can be sung to the beat of a hammer on an anvil, with or without a guitar accompaniment. The deepest of Deep Songs, the *Sigüiriya* is slow, sorrowful, and almost unbearably intense.

The *Petenera*, the story goes, began with a female flamenco singer known as *La Petenera*, so seductive that she was called “the damnation of men.” Some *Petenera* songs decry (fondly, no doubt) her malicious charm. Lorca’s poem also celebrates *La Petenera*, at whose funeral, he says, “there were no good girls.”

The *Saeta* is not Gypsy in origin, though some of its songs have been strongly influenced by flamenco. Sung from the balconies during Holy Week, as statues of Jesus,

Mary, and the saints are carried through the streets below, it may justly be called the Catholic Deep Song. The name *Saeta* means “arrow,” for the piercing sorrow it inspires. (Lorca puns on the two meanings frequently.) This ancient form may have Moorish and Hebrew roots as well, making it a synthesis of Andalusia’s cultures.

In other sections of his *Deep Song*, Lorca pays tribute to the flamenco singers he knew, the cities that nurtured this music, the cafés where it was played, and the instruments that played it. And finally, to the spirit of the Gypsies, eternally in conflict with the staid, conservative society around them—exemplified here, as in the *Gypsy Romances*, by the Spanish Civil Guard. Thanks to Lorca, the Gypsies win this round, at least.

GYPSY ROMANCES

“ROMANCE OF THE MOON, THE MOON”

Gypsies did both blacksmithing (making objects like horseshoes and knives of iron and steel) and white-smithing, making and repairing objects of tin—whence the moon’s “hard tin breasts.” Gypsy blacksmiths and their forges appear frequently in these romances.

ROMANCE OF THE MOON, THE MOON

for Conchita García Lorca

The Moon came to the blacksmith's forge
with her bustle of spikenard flowers.
The boy is gazing, gazing.
The boy is gazing at her.

In the swirling air
the Moon sways her arms
revealing, lewd and pure
her hard tin breasts.

"Run, Moon! Run Moon, run!
If the Gypsies come
they will turn your heart
into white rings and necklaces."

"Child, let me dance.
When the Gypsies come
they will find you upon the anvil,
your little eyes closed."

"Run, Moon! Run Moon, run!
I can feel their horses now."

“Child, let me be. Do not step
upon my starched whiteness.”

The horseman came closer,
beating the drum of the plains.
Inside the blacksmith’s forge
the boy’s eyes are closed.

* * *

Through the olive grove came
the Gypsies of bronze and of dreams.
Their heads held high,
their eyes half shut.

How the owl hooted,
oh, how she sang in the tree!
The Moon sails through the sky
holding a child by the hand.

Inside the forge they are weeping.
The Gypsies are crying aloud.
The air is watching, watching.
The air is keeping watch.

“THE UNFAITHFUL WIFE”

The “night of Santiago” is the festival of St. James (*San Diego or San Tiago*), the patron saint of Spain. Full of sexual images and metaphor, this is one of Lorca’s most strikingly beautiful poems. With sly irony, Lorca has the Gypsy give his lover a sewing basket “the color of straw,” harking back to the straw-colored needlepoint cloth of the Gypsy nun.

THE UNFAITHFUL WIFE

*for Lydia Cabrera
and her little black one*

And so I took her to the river
believing that she was a maiden.
But she already had a husband.

It was the night of Santiago
and almost as if we'd arranged it.
The streetlights went out
and the crickets lit up.

On the last street corner
I touched her sleeping breasts
and they opened for me
like a bouquet of hyacinths.

The starch of her skirt
made a sound in my ear
like a piece of silk
ripped by ten knife blades.

Without silver light in their cups
the trees have grown.
A horizon of dogs
is barking, far from the river.

* * *

Passing by blackberries,
rushes and thorn trees,
under the thicket of her hair
I hollowed a bed of sand.

I took off my tie.
She took off her dress.
I, my gun belt and revolver.
She, her four undergarments.

Neither spikenards nor sea shells
have skin so fine,
nor crystals in moonlight
such glow and shine.

Her thighs sprang away
like fish surprised,
partly cold
part on fire.

That night I rode
the best of roads, mounting
a mare of mother-of-pearl
without stirrups, unbridled.

Being a man, I will not reveal
the things she said to me.
The light of understanding
has taught me courtesy.

Stained with kisses and sand
I brought her back from the river.
The swords of the iris
were swaying in the breeze.

I behaved like the man I am,
like a true-born Gypsy.
I gave her a large sewing basket
of satin the color of straw.

I did not want to fall in love
because, though she had a husband
she told me she was a maiden
when I took her to the river.

POEM OF THE DEEP SONG

THE GUITAR

The guitar
begins to weep.
The wineglasses of dawn
are shattered.
The guitar
begins to weep.
It is useless to silence it.
It is impossible
to silence it.
Monotonous lament
like the weeping of water,
like the wind weeps
over the snow.
It is impossible to silence it,
weeping for things far away.
Sand of the hot South
asking for white camellias.
Cry of an arrow without a target
afternoon without morning
and the first dead bird
on the branch.
Oh guitar!
Heart fatally wounded
by five swords.

PORTRAIT OF THE *Petenera*

for Eugenio Montes

BELL

(Bass String)

In the yellow tower
tolls a bell.

On the yellow wind
the bell tones bloom.

In the yellow tower
the bell stops ringing.

The wind in the dust
is a ship's silver prow.

THE ROAD

One hundred horsemen
dressed in mourning.
Where will they go
through the orange grove's
stretched-out sky?

Not to Cordova or Seville
will they come.
Nor to Granada that sighs
for the sea.
These dreaming horses
will carry them
to the labyrinth of crosses
where the song is trembling.
Pierced by seven *ays!*
where will they go,
the hundred Andalusian horsemen
of the orange grove?

THE SIX STRINGS

The guitar
makes dreams cry.
The sobbing
of lost souls
escapes its
round mouth.
And like the tarantula
spins a great star
to trap the sighs
which float in its black
pool of wood.

DANCE
IN THE GARDEN OF LA PETENERA

In the night of the garden
six Gypsies
dressed in white
are dancing.

In the night of the garden
crowned
with jasmine
and paper roses

In the night of the garden
their teeth,
mother-of-pearl,
inscribe the burnt dark.

In the night of the garden
their violet shadows
lengthen
into the sky.

DEATH OF *La Petenera*

In the white house lies dying
the damnation of men.

A hundred horses are prancing.

Their riders are dead.

Under the lamps'
shaking stars
her silk skirt is trembling
between her copper thighs.

*A hundred horses are prancing.
Their riders are dead.*

Long, sharp-edged shadows
stretch from the troubled horizon.
The bass string of the guitar
is broken.

*A hundred horses are prancing.
Their riders are dead.*

GUITAR SOLO

*Ay, Gypsy Petenera!
Ay, ay, Petenera!*

At your burial there were no
good girls.
Girls who give the dead Christ
their locks of hair
and wear white mantillas
to the fair.

Those who buried you
were sinister folk.
Folk with their hearts
in their heads,
who followed you, weeping,
through the back alleys.

Ay, Gypsy Petenera!
Ay, ay, Petenera!

DE PROFUNDIS

The hundred lovers
sleep forever
beneath the dry earth.
Andalusia,
long red roads.
Cordova,
green olive trees
to hang a hundred crosses
in their memory.
The hundred lovers
sleep eternally.

KNELL

In the yellow towers
toll the bells.

On the yellow winds
the bell tones bloom.

Down the road
Death goes crowned
with wilted orange blossoms.
She sings and sings
a song
on her white guitar,
sings and sings and sings.

In the yellow towers
the bells stop ringing.

The wind in the dust
is a ship's silver prow.

DANCE

La Carmen is dancing
through the streets of Seville
with white hair
and shining eyes.

Girls,
close the curtains!

Around her head
a yellow serpent coils
and she dreams as she dances
of lovers of days gone by.

Girls,
close the curtains!

The streets are empty.
In their depths, one can sense
the hearts of Andalusia
looking for their old thorns.

Girls,
close the curtains!

This is the first book in English to include *both* collections of García Lorca's famed Gypsy poetry. *Gypsy Romances* (*Romancero Gitano*) is, of course, the world's best-known book of Spanish poetry. Less known but equally entrancing is Lorca's tribute to flamenco, *Poem of the Deep Song* (*Poema del Cante Jondo*). This celebration of Spain's quintessential music is as fragrant as Manuel de Falla's *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*. Trained as a classical pianist, Lorca's first love and lifelong passion was music. This version, by a prize-winning poet who is also an orchestral musician and composer, captures as never before the music of Lorca's verse.

Dan Veach, founding editor of *Atlanta Review*, has won the Willis Barnstone Translation Prize and an Independent Publishers Book Award for his translations from Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, and Anglo-Saxon. His translation of all the major Anglo-Saxon poetry, *Beowulf & Beyond*, recently appeared from Lockwood Press. His own poetry, collected in *Elephant Water* and *Lunchboxes*, has been published and performed worldwide, including Oxford University, the Atheneum in Madrid, the American University in Cairo, and People's University in Beijing. He studied Spanish History and Literature at Harvard with Jorge Luís Borges, Stephen Gilman, and Juan Marichal.

Cover image: based on the illustration for the Concurso de Cante Jondo - Granada, 1922 - by Manuel Ángeles Ortiz (1895-1984)

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