

Also by Tracy K. Smith  
*The Body's Question*



# Duende



POEMS BY

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The *duende* does not come at all unless he sees that death is possible. The *duende* must know beforehand that he can serenade death's house and rock those branches we all wear, branches that do not have, will never have, any consolation.

FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA  
*Play and Theory of the Duende*

# History

## Prologue

This is a poem about the itch  
That stirs a nation at night.

This is a poem about all we'll do  
Not to scratch—

Where fatigue is great, the mind  
Will invent entire stories to protect sleep.

Dark stories. Deep fight.  
Syntax of nonsense.

Our prone shape has slept a long time.  
Our night, many nights.

This is a story in the poem's own voice.  
This is epic.



## Part One: Gods and Monsters

The Eagle dreams light,  
Dreams molten heat, dreams words

Like *bark*, *fir* and great mountains  
Appear under the shadows of great trees.

The Eagle dreams *fox*, and that amber shape  
Appears in a glade. Dreams *egg*,

And the fox is cradling  
A fragile world between sharp teeth.

All gods do this.  
Flesh is the first literature.

There is Pan Gu. Dog-god.  
His only verb: to grow.

And when he dies, history happens.  
His body becomes Word:

Blood, eye, tendon, teeth  
Become river, moon, path, ore.

Marrow becomes jade. Sperm, pearl.  
The vermin of his body: you and me.

Elsewhere and at the same time,  
Some sentient scrap of first flame,

Of being ablaze, rages on,  
Hissing air, coughing still more air,

Sighing rough sighs around the ideas  
Of *man*, *woman*, *snake*, *fruit*.

We all know the story  
Of that god. Written in smoke

And set down atop other stories.  
(How many others? Countless others.)

There is the element of Earth to consider:  
Fast globe driven by the children of gods.

Driven blind, driven with fatigue, fear,  
With night sweats and hoarse laughter.

Driven forward, stalled, dragged back.  
Driven mad, because the ones

Who drive it are not gods themselves.



### Part Two: The New World

There were always these fingers  
Winding cotton and wool—  
Momentary clouds—into thread.

Was always that diminishing. Words  
Whittled and stretched into meaning.  
And meaning here is: line.

What the fish rugs ar. What is crossed.  
Thin split between Eyer and After.  
And what, in going, is lost.

Was always the language of pigment:  
Indigo, yolk, dirt red. This meant  
Belonging. What the women wove:

Stark wonder. Hours and hours.  
Mystery. Misery. On their knees.  
A remedy for cold.

There were houses not meant to strand  
Forever. But not for the reasons  
We were told.



### Part Three: Occupation

Every poem is the story of itself.  
Pure conflict. Its own undoing.  
Breeze of dreams, then certain death.

This poem is Creole. *Kreyol*.  
This poem is a boat. *Bato*.

This poem floats on the horizon  
All day, all night. Has leaks  
And a hundred bodies at prayer.  
This poem is not going to make it.

And this poem is the army  
left behind when the *bato*  
Sails. This poem is full  
Of soldiers. *Soldas*.  
When the *bato* is turned back,  
The people it carries,  
Those who survive, will be  
Made to wish for death.  
The *soldas* know how to do this.  
How to make a person  
Wish for death. The *soldas*  
Know how to do this  
Because many of them believe  
They have already died once before.

There are secret police  
Who don't want the poem to continue,  
But they're not sure  
It is important enough to silence.  
They go home to wives  
Who expect to be taken out,  
Made love to, offered  
Expensive gifts. They are bored,  
The police and their wives.  
They eat, turn on the TV, swallow  
Scotch, wine. In bed, they say nothing,  
Feigning sleep. And the house,  
A new house, croons to itself.  
Its voice seeps out and off,



Or:

You unwrap foil from around last night's rack of lamb.  
It sits like a mountain of light next to the sink.  
Something inside you wants out. You calculate  
Minutes and seconds on smooth keys.  
There is humming, and a beeping when the food is hot.  
Above your head, a bulb hangs upside down  
Like an idea in reverse, tungsten filament  
Sagging between prongs. Your heart sways  
Like a rattered flag from the bones in your chest.  
You don't think of Eisenhower, long dead,  
His voice flapping away on a scrap of newsreel  
From decades ago. But the silence around you  
Knows he was right:

*You have a row of dominoes set up,  
You knock over the first one,  
And what will happen to the last one  
Is the certainty that it will go over  
very quickly.*

Or:

You settle into the plush seat  
And the darkness swells, the screen  
No longer silent, white. Outside  
No longer today, no longer now.  
Place names and years appear,

disappear like forbidden thoughts.  
*Chile. Cambodia. Kent State.*

Why do they watch back coolly?  
Why, when the lights come up,  
Does a new part of you ache?  
Was that you this whole time,  
Running, hands in the air?  
You all these years, marching  
Under the weight of a gun?

We has swallowed *Us* and *Them*.  
You will be the next to go.



Part Five: Twentieth Century

Sometimes, this poem wants to wander  
Into a department store and watch itself  
Transformed in a trinity of mirrors.  
Sometimes this poem wants to pop pills.  
Sometimes in this poem, the stereo's blaring  
While the TV's on mute.  
Sometimes this poem walks the street  
And doesn't give a shit.



Sometimes this poem tells itself nothing matters,  
All's a joke. Relax, it says, *everything's*  
Taken care of.

(A poem can lie.)



### Part Six: Cosmology

Once there was a great cloud  
Of primeval matter. Atoms and atoms.  
By believing, we made it the world.  
We named the animals out of need.  
Made ourselves human out of need.  
There were other inventions.  
Plunder and damage. Insatiable fire.



### Epilogue: The Seventh Day

There are ways of naming the wound.  
There are ways of entering the dream  
The way a painter enters a studio:  
To spill.

## Flores Woman

*A species of tiny human has been discovered, which lived on the remote Indonesian island of Flores just 18,000 years ago. . . . Researchers have so far unearthed remains from eight individuals who were just one [meter] tall, with grapefruit-sized skulls. These astonishing little people . . . made tools, hunted tiny elephants and lived at the same time as modern humans who were colonizing the area.*

NATURE, OCTOBER 2004

Light: lifted, I stretch my brief body.  
Color: blaze of day behind blank eyes.  
Sound: birds stab greedy beaks  
Into trunk and seed, spill husk  
Onto the heap where my dreaming  
And my loving live.  
Every day I wake to this.  
Tracks follow the heavy beasts  
Back to where they huddle, herd.  
Hunt: a dance against hunger.  
Music: feast and fear.  
This island becomes us.

Trees cap our sky. It rustles with delight  
In a voice green as lustr. Reptiles

Drag night from their tails,  
Live by the dark. A rage of waves

Protects the horizon, which we would devour.  
One day I want to dive in and drift,

Legs and arms wracked with danger.  
Like a dark star. I want to last.