

White Album (1921)

By Federico García Lorca (Spain)

Translated from the Spanish by Jerome Rothenberg

Eloísa López kept an album¹ in which she didn't write. And she died. Poor little thing! But I wrote something for her with white ink. I ask those who read it to pray for her soul. The Archbishop of Constantinople² has deigned to grant 100 days of indulgence³. Ah! If only you had known her...

First Page

(Cherry tree in flower)

In March
you go off to the moon.
Leave your shadow behind.
The prairies are turning
1.5 unreal.
They're raining white birds⁴.
And I'm stuck in your forest
& cry
"Open sesame!"⁵
(Could I still be a child?)
"Open sesame!"



cherry blossoms



Federico García Lorca
1898-1936

¹ a book with blank pages

² more commonly called the Patriarch of Constantinople, the head of the Eastern Orthodox church; the tone here is ironic-- far-off Constantinople (in modern day Turkey) would be a Spanish schoolgirl's notion of the exotic

³ in Catholic Theology, the full or partial remission of temporal punishment that is still due for sins even after absolution (requiring purification in Purgatory after death); the belief is that indulgences draw on the store-house of merit acquired by Jesus' sacrifice and the virtues and penances of the saints; they are granted for specific good works and prayers

⁴ In spring, the cherry tree is covered in white blossoms that fall gently in the wind.

⁵ the magical command used to open a treasure filled cave in the adventure tale "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" (found in European translations of the *1001 Nights*, a collection of Arabic folk tales; it was almost certainly added to the collection by the early French translator Antoine Galland); although not expressly childrens' literature, this story would be well-known by any educated child in the time period in which the poem was written

Second Page

(*Cygnus*⁶/*The Swan*)

Not Pan⁷
& not Leda⁸.

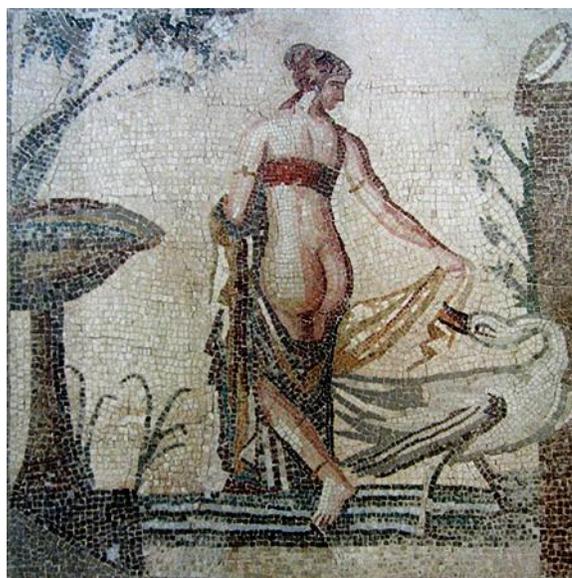
(The full moon
sleeps over your wings.)

2.5 Not forest
& not syrinx⁹.

(Through your feathers
cold night slipping by.)

Not blond¹⁰ flesh
2.10 & not kisses.

(Made of frost & of dreams, you
towing a boat for the dead.)



Leda and the Swan
Roman mosaic (2nd century C.E.)

Third Page

(*Conjurations*¹¹)

(*Snow stars*)

There are mountains
that want to be
water
& that conjure up stars



the god Pan
(with syrinx)

⁶ the Latin word for the Greek "Cycnus" (κύκνος), or "swan;" García Lorca uses the Spanish "Cisne" (swan) here, with no obvious connection beyond the animal; translator Jerome Rothenberg, however, obviously sees it as a reference to the constellation Cignus, identified with several swan characters in Greek mythology (usually the swan disguise Zeus used to seduce Leda [see note below] or the legendary musician Orpheus who was transformed into a swan upon his death); these stories (and the other mythological allusions in the stanza) would all be well-known to an educated Spanish schoolgirl in the time period in which the poem was written

⁷ in Greek mythology, god of fields and woods and shepherds and flocks; represented as a man with goat's legs and horns and ears; for the Greeks, satyrs like Pan strongly connoted an unrestrained, passionate sexuality, and they were often depicted in Greek art as possessing enormous, erect phalluses

⁸ In Greek mythology, Leda was a Spartan queen admired by the god Zeus, who raped her in the guise of a swan. Their consummation, on the same night as Leda lay with her husband Tyndareus, resulted in two eggs from which hatched Helen ("Helen of Troy"-- the most beautiful woman in the world), Clytemnestra (wife and eventual murderer of the Mycenaen king Agamemnon), and Castor and Pollux (mythical founders of Rome).

⁹ panpipes (said to have played by the god Pan); a primitive wind instrument consisting of several parallel pipes bound together

¹⁰ García Lorca's choice of adjective here (*rubia*) is usually used to describe hair color

¹¹ A more literal translation of García Lorca's *Inventos* would be *Inventions*; similarly, in the fifth line of this section of the poem, the verb *inventan* (infinitive: *inventar*) would be more literally translated as *invent*, rather than *conjure*; however, to *invent* (as in to create) in Spanish could be used in the sense that the translator proposes (to describe a magical act)-- a connotation that the English *invention/invent* would usually not possess.

3.5 over their shoulders.

(Clouds)

And there are mountains
that want to have
wings

3.10 & that conjure up clouds,
like white clouds.¹²

Fourth Page

(Snow)

The stars
stripping down¹³:
now blouses of stars
line the fields.



Fifth Page

(At Dawn)

Day's crest
first appearing,
white crest
of a goldcolored cock.

5.5 Crest of my laugh
first appearing.
Gold crest
of a shadowy cock.

Final Page

Little ballad¹⁴ for dead Eloísa
(in the words of a student)

You were dead,
Eloísa,
like the dead at the end of all
novels.



¹² A more literal translation of the Spanish, "y se inventan las nubes / blancas," would be the less awkward, "& that conjure up [or *invent--* see note above] white clouds;" the translator obviously wishes to keep the structure parallel to the previous, "& that conjure up stars / over their shoulders," by breaking it into two lines (the literal, "& that conjure up clouds / [that are] white," would obviously be even more awkward in English).

¹³ The Spanish *desnudando* (infinitive: *desnudar*) means *to become naked*.

¹⁴ a song or poem that tells a story, usually with a recurrent refrain

6.5 I never did love you,
 sweet as you were!
 With words by Bécquer¹⁵
 or by Espronceda¹⁶,
 you dreamt of me handsome
 6.10 & longhaired,
 I who was kissing you
 & was never aware
 that I still had not told you
 "oh lips like a cherry!"
 6.15 What an awful romantic
 you were,
 drank down in secret
 your grandmother's vinegar,
 became like a tree,
 6.20 a mockorange, in springtime.
 And I was in love
 with another.



Mock-Orange (*Philadelphus*)

a genus of shrubs common in parts of southeast Europe (so-named because their flowers look and smell like orange blossoms)

(See how it hurts?)
 With another I wrote out
 6.25 a name in the sand.

When I got to your house
 you were dead,
 among candles and basil¹⁷.
 Just like in those novels.
 6.30 Your poor boat¹⁸ encircled
 by the girls from your school.
 You had drunk of the vinegar,
 the perpetual bottle.



Ophelia (1852) by John Everett Millais

Bim bom¹⁹
 6.35 the bells
 were mourning you
 tenderly.

Bim bom
 in the evening
 6.40 with an ache in your head.
 Maybe you dreamed
 of being Ophelia²⁰

¹⁵ Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer (1836-1870): an important (and prototypical) Spanish romantic poet; he has always been much admired by Spanish schoolgirls

¹⁶ José de Espronceda (1808-1842): an important (and prototypical) Spanish Romantic poet

¹⁷ an aromatic herb (used to disguise the smell of decay before embalming techniques had been perfected)

¹⁸ The Spanish *barquito* (boat) is a masculine noun, yet García Lorca feminizes it to *barquita*, perhaps suggesting that Eloísa López is herself the boat (a personification).

¹⁹ García Lorca uses *tilín talán*, a common Spanish schoolyard onomatopoeia similar to *ding dong*; in choosing to translate as *bim bom*, Jerome Rothenberg is able to alliterate with "bells" in the following line (just as García Lorca repeats the initial "t" sound of *tilín talán* in *tiernas* and *tarde* in subsequent lines).

²⁰ In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Ophelia is a Danish noblewoman who goes mad for the love of Hamlet; after climbing into a willow tree, the supporting branch breaks, and Ophelia plunges into a brook (where she drowns)

on a blue lake
afloat in warm water.

6.45 Bim bom.
Let them mourn for you
tenderly!

Bim bom
In the evening
6.50 with an ache in your head!

Álbum blanco

Por Federico García Lorca

Eloísa López tenía un álbum sin escribir. Y se ha muerto. ¡Pobrecita! Pero yo se lo escribo con tinta blanca. Ruego a los lectores una oración por su alma. El arzobispo de Constantinopla se ha dignado conceder 100 días de indulgencia. ¡Ah! Si ustedes la hubiesen conocido...

Primera página

(Cerezo en flor)

En Marzo
te marchas a la luna.
Dejas aquí tu sombra.
Las praderas se tornan
irreales.
Llueven pájaros blancos.
Y yo me pierdo en tu bosque
gritando:
¡Ábrete, sésamo!
¿Seré niño?
Gritando:
¡Ábrete, sésamo!

Segunda página

(Cisne)

Ni Pan
ni Leda.

(Sobre tus alas
se duerme la luna llena.)

Ni bosque
ni siringa.

(Por tu plumaje
resbala la noche fría.)

Ni carne rubia
ni besos.

(De escarcha y sueño remolcas
la barca de los muertos.)

Tercera página

(Inventos)

(Estrellas de la nieve)

Hay montañas
que quieren ser
de agua,
y se inventan estrellas
sobre la espalda.

(Nubes)

Y hay montañas
que quieren tener
alas,
y se inventan las nubes
blancas.

Cuarta página

(Nieve)

Las estrellas
se están desnudando.
Camisas de estrellas
caen sobre el campo.

Quinta página

(Amanece)

La cresta del día
asoma.
Cresta blanca
de un gallo de oro.

La cresta de mi risa
asoma.
Cresta de oro
de un gallo de sombra.

Última página

Baladilla de Eloísa muerta
(Palabras de un estudiante)

Estabas muerta,
como al final
de todas las novelas.
Yo no te amaba, Eloísa.
¡Y eras tan tierna!

Con música de Bécquer
o de Espronceda,
tú me soñabas guapo
con melena,
y yo te daba besos
sin darme cuenta
de que no te decía:
¡oh labios de cereza!
Qué gran romántica
eras.
Bebías vinagre a escondidas
de tu abuela.
Te pusiste como una
celinda de primavera.
Y yo estaba enamorado
de otra. ¿No ves qué pena?
De otra que estaba escribiendo
un nombre sobre la arena.

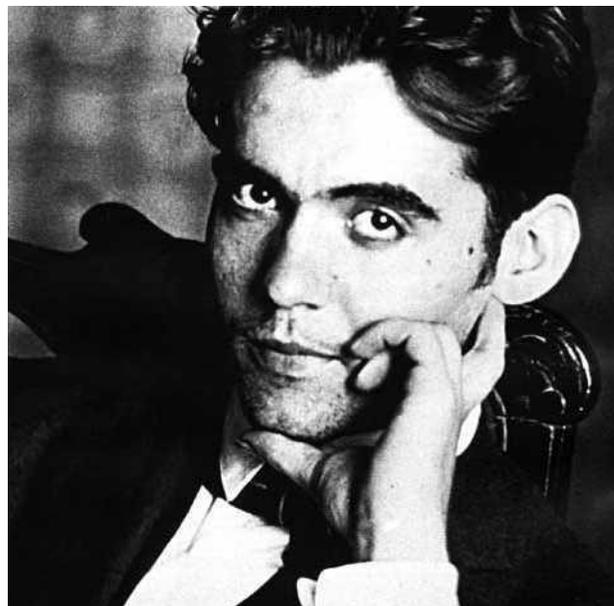
Cuando yo llegué a tu casa
estabas muerta
entre cirios y entre albahacas,
igual que en las novelas.
Rodeaban tu barquita
las niñas de tu escuela.
Habías bebido el vinagre
de la botella eterna.

Tilín talán
te lloraban
las campanas tiernas.

Talán tilín
en la tarde
con dolor de cabeza.
Quizás soñabas durmiendo
que eras Ofelia
sobre un lago azul de agua
calenturienta.

Tilín talán
¡que te lloren
las campanas tiernas!

¡Talán tilín
en la tarde
con dolor de cabeza!



Federico García Lorca