

# Monique Truong on Poetry in Motion from Condé Nast Traveler on Concierge.com

The author of *The Book of Salt* on how Federico García Lorca helped her discover Spain—and her own hometown

I first traveled to Andalusia when I was 30 years old. I had been offered a residency at an artists' colony near the village of Mojacar, a tumble of white sugar cubes in the Sierra Cabrera, and so for a month I gladly traded in my (non-) life as a New York City attorney for a simple, spare room of my own where I could work on my first novel.

Located on the second floor of a renovated olive oil millhouse, my room was a narrow rectangle of light with a generous addendum: a tiled terrace with breathtaking views of the surrounding valley, which was a study in the contrasting landscapes of the region. On one side was a dun-colored scrubland dotted with creeping caper-berry bushes and low-lying cactuses. On the other, where man and water had intervened, were orange, olive, and almond groves and, scattered throughout, the weed trees of the region, figs and pomegranates. On this terrace I read for the first time the works of Federico García Lorca, the literary saint of Andalusia, who taught me the truest reason for traveling and for writing.

I began with *Poem of the Deep Song*, Lorca's love letter to the region, where he was born in 1898, in Fuente Vaqueros, a village a few miles from Granada. When I read, "Carry orange blossom, carry olives, / Andalusia, down to your seas," I saw how the scrubland stretched toward a pale blue line that was the Mediterranean. When I read, "The field / of olive trees / opens and closes / like a fan," I saw how the trees' silvery leaves came alive when the late-afternoon winds swept through the valley.

This was a pleasure of traveling that I had experienced before: I was reading a good book in situ, and it gave me the feeling of being emotionally and intellectually connected to my chosen destination. Lorca, though, had a surprise for me—for he would connect me as well to New York City, my point of departure and the place I dreaded returning to.

When Lorca was 30, he left Spain for the first time to study at Columbia University in New York City. During his stay, he wrote a collection of poems, *Poet in New York*, which was bleak, violent—an unrelenting critique of big-city life. Clearly, the city had taken Lorca by the throat and would not let him go. Even the heavens above provoked and menaced him there. Lorca lamented: "Bumping into my own face, different each day. / Cut down by the sky!" Of the claustrophobia of urban life, he wrote, "I was on the terrace, wrestling with the moon. / Swarms of windows riddled one of the night's thighs."

I had an edition of *Poet in New York* that included Lorca's letters to his family in Granada, and these were, in contrast, buoyant, full of hope, and replete with the details of his new life. He was amazed by the variety of people and nationalities. He sent home a photograph of

himself with a Mexican millionaire, a Hindu ballerina, and a Hawaiian pianist just to prove the point. He was smitten by the views from his dormitory room; on one side there was the green grass and statues of the playing fields at Columbia, and on the other an "immense boulevard" called Broadway. For me, the real proof that New York City was treating Lorca well was this sentence: "I have also begun to write, and think what I am writing is good."

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I never once asked myself which New York City was Lorca's reality and which was his fantasy. He reminded me that the city holds within it both extremes. It, too, is a landscape of contrasts, of curses and blessings. Lorca made me understand why I had to leave the city in order to write, and why he had to travel there to do the same. Creativity requires an open heart and unblinking eyes. After spending most of my twenties in New York and studying and practicing law there, I had shut myself down to everything but its rigor and its ability to demoralize. I had wrestled with the moon and been swarmed by the windows there. Lorca saw the city for all that it was. He was terrified and invigorated by it. He wrote well there precisely because he could not close his heart nor his eyes to it.

Lorca's thoughts, like all travelers', eventually turned homeward. In a letter to his mother and father, he wrote, "You probably think I am in a marvelous place, but I think that you are, too. You really are, you know." There we were. Lorca was on his borrowed terrace. I was on mine. We were having a miraculous dialogue across time about our experiences with the places that we knew best. *Poet in New York* has been my ideal travel read ever since. It is the book which taught me that the most honest way to travel and to write is not to escape where you come from but to see it in a new light.

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