



Litany for Your Muse (Variations on The Museum of Duende)

In a nod to her own inspiration, her affinity with the mythic figure Persephone and channeling her inner Whitman, Brenda Hillman gives us a rich poem to emulate, cover, or inspire a poem of our own in her book *In a Few Minutes Before Later*. The poem is:

The Working Sister of the Muses

The muses were distracted so they called their sister in
She flew from the east to the west to the middle
Someone had told her to bring the arrows
Someone had told her to bring libations & bolts of lightning & the charts
She arrived with good cheer & wore her hair long then
She brought a sketch of the weather & the wild hearts
Thus she worked for decades among star-gazers & word makers in a town
with green summers & a smooth black angel
She lived among those transfixed by sorrow & desire
She never told them art is the same as not art because it is not
She never told them not to write the wildest thing in the dark
She never gave the sleepers any reason not to sleep
She never told the silver children not to play
She knew whom to phone from the maze when the word makers made
trouble & when the lilies were held high

In summer the underworld pushed up seeds & her tall lover grew them as food

In autumn the pages swelled & shelves were built & word makers failed & some jokes did too

In winter the hero's epic shield was displayed & it told all stories except hers
She could see her face in the shield though she tried to have no face

In spring she rose early to walk when each leaf caught the sun

She celebrated prizes & mourned the deaths after their songs had gone
She did not cast down the lightning

She did not stamp the sad harrowing ledgers
 She loved the abstract ones the happy ones the ragged & the drunk
 She told them it was their energy & their dream energy went on
 She was the rosy-fingered sister working for the dawn

For CB

From Mirriam Webster:

muse

noun (2)

1 capitalized: any of the nine sister goddesses in Greek mythology presiding over song and poetry and the arts and sciences

Clio is the Greek Muse of history.

2: a source of inspiration

especially : a guiding genius

The writer's beloved wife was his muse.

3: poet

Muse on this: the word muse comes from the Anglo-French muser, meaning “to gape, to idle, to muse.” (Amuse has the same source.) The image evoked is one of a thinker so absorbed in thought as to be unconsciously open-mouthed. Those who muse on their pets’ musings might like to know that muser is ultimately from Latin musus, meaning “mouth of an animal” — also source of the word muzzle. The sister goddesses of Greek mythology known as the Muses have no etymological link: that word, which in lowercase refers to a source of inspiration, comes from Greek Mousa. The ultimate Greek origin of the word museum translates as “of the Muses.”

There are many ways to use Brenda’s poem to generate one of your own; one using your own personal mythology, your own luminous details and one that serves as a moment of discovery about yourself or your relation to the world.

There is the Cover Poem technique.



Or, you can start with a line from Brenda's poem as Robert Duncan did in: "<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46316/a-poem-beginning-with-a-line-by-pindar>."

You can write about your own relationship with the source of your poems. If you have not pondered this much, the exercise could yield some new realizations for you and your process. You can employ anaphora as Brenda does.

But for those of us who relate more to Spanish culture than Anglo culture, you may reject the notion of the Muse and prefer to see the act of writing as Federico García Lorca did, as a struggle with a demonic force called the Duende. Said Lorca: "Dark sounds, behind which in tender intimacy exist volcanoes, ants, zephyrs, and the vast night pressing its waist against the Milky Way."

As Jerome Rothenberg explained in a November 2001 interview:

Lorca, in a very wonderful essay that he wrote, I think, shortly after visiting New York and on his way back to Spain, in Cuba, trying to describe a sense of the powers that he felt in poetry. He used the word, "Duende" which is a kind of a figure in Spain like a troll, or a Leprechaun, or in the oldest and most powerful sense of the word, a fairy spirit. But he used it to describe a kind of poetry that fell to the poet as if being engaged in a struggle. And not invocation to a beloved muse, but a power battle with a kind of force of nature. And Lorca *knew* that it was a term that was used by the Flamenco singers and musicians with whom he was in very close contact. "Whatever has black sounds," he said, "has Duende." So that was the kind of power that he was trying to get into the poetry. Although, aside from that, he was also a very beautiful, elegant and graceful and, sometimes, a comic but witty poet.

Rothenberg also gives us a method to create poems that serve as homage to the poet whose vocabulary we borrow for a poem or two. In his *Lorca Variations*, he writes of taking nouns and adjectives from Lorca and creating new poems *The Lorca Variations* which: “both are and aren’t mine; are and aren’t Lorca.” You start by writing down the nouns and adjectives in Brenda’s poem, or maybe a few of her poems, and then use those as the raw materials to serve your muse poem or duende poem. The Brenda Variations has a nice ring to it. Write a poem to (or about) the ultimate source of your poems.

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10:31am
20-FEB-2023

Links:

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/muse>

<https://paulenelson.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Cover-Poem.pdf>

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46316/a-poem-beginning-with-a-line-by-pindar>

<https://poets.org/glossary/anaphora>

<https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Spanish/LorcaDuende.php>

<https://paulenelson.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Jerome-Rothenberg-Postface-to-The-Lorca-Variations.pdf>

<https://paulenelson.com/2013/01/18/jerome-rothenberg-nov-2001-interview/>

https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Rothenberg/Rockdrill-7/Rothenberg-Jerome_08_Lorca-Variation-XXXIII_Seedings_Rockdrill-7_2004.mp3

