Color and Melancholy in Lorca’s “Blind Panorama of New York”

If it isn’t the birds covered with ash, if it isn’t the sobbing that strikes the windows of the wedding, it is the delicate creatures of the air. That spill fresh blood in the inextinguishable darkness. But no, it isn’t the birds, because the birds will soon become oxen. They could become white rocks with the moon’s help and they are always wounded boys before the judges lift the shroud.

The first stanza of Federico García Lorca’s poem “Blind Panorama of New York” (originally “Panorama ciego de Nueva York”) describes a series of specific, peculiar, and seemingly unrelated images and scenes. If it is not, he says, “the birds / covered with ash,” then it is some other thing: sobs at a wedding, “delicate creatures of the air,” “oxen,” “white rocks,” “wounded boys.” Lorca does not address what “it” is, but instead leads the reader towards an understanding of the rough outlines of this mysterious “it” through the different creatures, objects, and situations he delineates in this opening stanza. This particular section of the poem does not follow a strict sequence of events but the series of subtly interconnected images nevertheless successfully impart a specific and emotionally complex sense of sadness, mourning, and the destruction of innocence.

While it would be easy to think that the birds, the stones, the wounded boys were chosen at random--with nothing more than Lorca’s personal aesthetic tastes connecting them--there are, in fact, several points of interest that tie the varied descriptions into a unified whole. The first is Lorca’s usage of color--a single color. The pale ash that covers the birds, the traditionally white wedding, the moon-whitened rocks, the shrouds covering the “wounded boys:” all the things in this stanza are white or pale in some way. The only other colors even suggested are the “darkness” in which the “creatures of the air” dwell, and the red of the blood that they spill. This
usage of almost entirely uniform color not only encourages a visual implication of unity within the poem, but also insinuates a number of thematic meanings through the sense of “whiteness” within Lorca’s poem.

This whiteness is offset and complicated by a second common thread that runs between Lorca’s images: the destruction of things supposedly beautiful or pure. A wedding, intended to be a time of rejoicing, is disrupted by sorrow; birds are dirtied with ash; boys, emblematic of youth, energy, and vigor, are wounded and have become a spectacle, a piece of evidence for unemotional and uninvolved “judges.” In all of these examples, the common whiteness is a key element of the fundamental sorrow of the situation. The very whiteness of the ash debases the natural beauty of the birds. The paleness of the shrouds hiding the “wounded boys” serve to mark their lack of life, implying some form of suffering and destruction. The visual purity of the white is ruined or corrupted in some way in these descriptions, creating an association between it and a loss of beauty and innocence. Thus, the usage of specific visual imagery and the common factors linking separate instances of said imagery speak of the pain and the harrowing nature of the mourning process, and of the ultimate sadness at the heart of the speaker’s self.

Within the context of the rest of the poem, this first stanza stands out as being emblematic of several of the entire poem’s main themes. “Blind Panorama” deals both explicitly and implicitly with mourning and inner suffering: the “pain that accompanies death,” “the urge to murder someone that oppresses us every moment / [and] the metallic hum of suicide that revives us every morning.” In this light, the first stanza is an introduction to a meditation that Lorca elaborates on in the remaining four stanzas. However, considering the single phrase upon which the first stanza varies (“if it isn’t the birds,” “it is the delicate creatures of the air;” it is or it isn’t), along with its later repetition (“No, it isn’t the birds;” instead “it’s a capsule of air where
we suffer the whole world, / a tiny space alive in the crazy unison of light”), it might be argued that the first stanza proposes a solution to the “problem” of the speaker’s fundamental anguish, a solution that is rejected and replaced with a different solution. The “it” that Lorca suggests may in this case be defined as a kind of coping mechanism that the speaker hopes will motivate or somehow encourage him to suffer the indescribable pain that is life. The things that he suggests in the first stanza--birds, a wedding, all external from the self--are incapable of offering this raison d’être he seeks, because they are inevitably corrupted by some expression of worldly suffering--the ash, the sobbing “striking the windows”--no matter how beautiful or noble they may have originally been. What the speaker eventually concludes is that in order to survive the misery of the world one must seek a savior within oneself, a “tiny space” in which one may outlast the horror and the endless sorrow of being human and being alive.