

Querencia - Georgia Heard, Writing Toward Home (Heinemann 1995)

A few summers ago I experienced my first--and last--bullfight, in a small French town near the Spanish border, where Picasso once lived. When the gate to the ring opened, the beautiful, confused bull burst in like wind, radiating power as he circled amid the shouts of the spectators. The matadors hid behind walls like scared children, studying the bull carefully. The banderillero approached on his horse and pierced the bull's neck with the banderillas—barbed swords. The swords hung from the bull, blood streamed down his shoulders. It was then I learned about querencia.

In Spanish, querencia describes a place where one feels safe, a place from which one's strength of character is drawn, a place where one feels at home. It comes from the verb *querer*, which means to desire, to want.

The wounded bull retreated to a spot to the left of the gate through which he had entered, to rest, it seemed. He had found his querencia: a place where he felt safe and was therefore at his most dangerous. The matador tries not to let the bull find this place, because it increases the danger to himself. For the bull, it is a place where he believes he can survive this unfair game. Unfortunately and cruelly, he almost never does. It is said that if the same bull were to fight more than once in the ring, every matador would die; once an animal learns the game and stands in his power, he cannot be defeated.

Animals have querencia by instinct. The golden plover knows every year where to fly when it migrates. Rattlesnakes know by the temperature when to lie dormant. In winter, sparrows and chickadees know where their food is and return to the same spot again and again. Querencia is a matter of survival. A nest, a mole's tunnel, is querencia.

Humans have querencia, too. We know where we feel most at home. Our bodies tell us, if we listen. There are certain seasons during which we feel more at ease. Certain times of day when we feel safe and more relaxed. Certain climates. Terrain. Even the clothes we wear make us feel more at home.

When I meet people I like to ask them what their querencia is. Some know immediately: mountains, the city, near the ocean. But many don't know. Having a sense of where we feel most at home is a way of keeping grounded; it can give us that sense of rootedness and safety. Some people's querencia is linked with nature: the sound of wind in the pines, the call of a loon, the salty smell of the ocean. Some feel most at home in a crowded cafe or in a public library, voices humming softly around them.

Recently, I was talking to my friend Don, telling him about querencia. He said, "Yes, *querer*--it means the wanting place." He helped me realize that for writers, that burning urge to write is our querencia. In order to feel at home we have to be writing. We feel awful if we haven't written in a week, if we don't write in our journals every day. Writing is a way of finding and keeping our home.

At home, in daylight, I retreat to my study to write, to gather strength, to fill up again. I feel most at home during the day, sitting in my writing chair with my feet up, a cup of coffee or tea on the desk. It's difficult for me to find my querencia and write at night.

When I don't have quiet in my life I sometimes ignore the pull toward that chair: it seems more important to make phone calls and pay bills. But I'm ignoring the voice that will lead me to safety, take me home. My body knows it. I feel cranky and life seems dull. The more I write, the more I have the urge to write, and the closer I come to finding my way home.

