QUERENCIA: A LITTLE MACHO BULLSHIT IN TWO ACTS

Mark Blickley

IMAGE: Marlene Jurgo

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The title of this short memoir, Querencia, is a bullfighting term that describes the spot in the ring where a bull repeatedly returns. The more threatened a bull feels, the more often he returns to his spot. It's this predictability that allows the matador to more easily kill him.

I recently watched the much-heralded four-part PBS series on Ernest Hemingway by documentary filmmaker Ken Burns. It reminded me that when I was an older college undergraduate on the G.I. Bill, most of my English professors deified "Papa" Hemingway. Their enthusiasm and syllabus made me a fan as well. In fact, at the beginning of the Pandemic lockdown when I stocked up on new books to read while under New York City house arrest, my first purchase was the biography of an unusual 1929 friendship Ernest Hemingway had made in Spain. The title of this book by Bart Paul, *Double-Edged Sword: The Many Lives of Hemingway's Friend, The American Matador Sidney Franklin*.

Not only was Sidney Franklin a rare American professional bullfighter, but he was also a gay Jewish man from Brooklyn. His friendship with Hemingway surprised me as there are many scholars who have chronicled Papa's anti-Semitism and homophobia. This is among my favorite passages from the book: *When sitting in a Madrid café, Sidney Franklin was asked why he, a Jewish matador, wore a cross around his neck. Sidney shrugged at the obviousness of the question and said, "The bulls are Catholic."* Franklin sounded so much like a non-plussed Hemingway hero it became easy to understand why they became friends.

Forty-seven years ago, in 1974, I desired a taste of some secondhand Hemingway machismo. I might not have been a matador like Sidney Franklin, but I considered it a rite of manly passage to embrace this act of summertime slaughter without flinching, a bullring spectator's act of passive-aggressive grace under pressure.

ACT ONE

I was very excited to see my first bullfight. I was a twenty-one-year-old Vietnam veteran newly married to Patricia, my nineteen-year-old Colombian girlfriend in Barranquilla and was visiting some of her family in the capital of Bogota. We were presented with a pair of bullfighting tickets as a wedding gift. I was proudly told that the seats were located in the highly expensive shady section of the Plaza de Toros de Santamaría arena. My wife's relatives were excited to be the ones to introduce this New York gringo to the unique cultural tradition they inherited from Spain.

When we arrived at the bullfight stadium, the smell of sizzling meat rose up like carnivorous incense from all the vendors flipping beef on their grills and selling chunks of impaled steak on sticks. I bought two of these delicious meat lollipops. It was an extremely hot day and I was so grateful to be sitting in the shade. How more than half of the packed arena crowd could enjoy anything in the heat of that blistering sun was beyond me.

I enjoyed the gaudy pageantry of the entering bullring participants. The flamboyant, colorful costumes of the picadors, banderillos, matadors and even the horses gave the arena the feel of a circus performance on sand. Two Picadors enter the bullring on horseback, spears in hand, looking like an outtake from a Don Quixote film. They wore large brimmed beige hats and their horses are protected by embroidered pads of leather and canvass. Two Banderillos march in on foot. They are dressed like matadors without any of their gold embroideries. Matadors file in last and look magnificent in what is called their suit of light—a short jacket and a waistcoat richly beaded and embroidered in gold and silver along with skintight pants of colorful silk. They carry a specially decorated silk cape used just for the opening march and not for fighting the bull. Their headgear looks like a black upside-down Mickey Mouse hat. As they enter the ring, a brass band of colorfully clad musicians seated in the stands next to the processional entrance play loud trumpeted tunes.

The colorful costumes and exuberant horn blasts reminded me of my Bronx, New York home. My neighborhood is surrounded by a slew of Catholic Churches catering to our many Latin American and Italian residents. I lived in a fifth-floor tenement apartment with a kitchen window facing the street. Throughout the year I always enjoyed looking down at the colorful street celebrations honoring the feast days of patron saints from all the different towns and cities in Italy, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Central and South America from which my neighbors had migrated.

I loved watching the boisterous processions strolling through the streets. Thick muscled men would carry on decorated platforms of wood a large statue of their town's patron Saint, dressed in flashy robes and capes. The faces of these Saints were painted in vibrant flesh tones that ranged from beige to black. Marching behind the Saints were amateur horn musicians, guitarists and accordionists playing the raucous, homesick tunes from the places they had left behind. Priests often led these feast day processions, sprinkling holy water upon the participants and spectators.

Watching this opening bullfight ritual of sound and color, it also reminded me of what I had witnessed at a local church in Barranquilla shortly before traveling to Bogota. I had never seen the happy revelry of the blessing of animals inside a church—dogs, cats, birds, chickens, donkeys—and I thought the flamboyant bullring pre-fight ritual was a kind of blessing of the bulls.

Accompanied by heavy trumpet fanfare, a gate opened at one end of the arena and a heavily costumed horseback rider, dressed like an ancient troubadour in a plumed hat, rode across the ring to an official seated in the stands, and doffed his hat. The official, who I was told was Bogota's mayor, responded by waving a white handkerchief. This meant he had given his permission for the fight to begin. I loved this dramatic and thrilling opening ceremony. It was far superior to the tossing of the ceremonial first pitch of a new baseball season at Yankee Stadium in the Bronx.

In the stands, a huge sign was held up that displayed the weight of the bull about to enter the ring. This particular bull weighed 744 kilos. For reasons I'd rather not elaborate, I knew how to translate the metric kilos into pounds, having learned years earlier that one kilo equals 2.2 pounds. When my hosts saw the weight of the bull, each giggled and said they had never seen a bull that large. It was claimed that I had brought good luck because I was about to witness a truly spectacular fight.

When this enormous bull exploded out of the gate, a collective gasp echoed through the arena, followed by loud applause and cheers. This animal was so insanely large it reminded me of cartoons I had watched as a kid where an enormous angry bull snorts and exhales huge clouds of smoke from its nostrils.

The spectator shouts of excitement quickly turned to jeers and screams questioning the manhood of the horseback Picadors who were unable to pierce the neck and hump off the *Toro Gigante* with their spears. When I asked my Colombian hosts about the taunts, I learned that spearing the bull wasn't just to get the bull more aggravated for the fight, but it was its death warrant as it begins the process where the bull is bled to death.

I was horrified. I grew up watching gladiator movies where the strongest and bravest combatant in the arena lives to fight another day. I thought if the bull took out the matador it was spared a trip to the meatpacking plant that day. In my ignorance, I believed I would be witnessing a fair fight between man and beast.

The Picadors, after numerous attempts to pierce the bull's flesh with their spears, rode away and returned with bigger spears. No blood splattered across the bull's back as the Picadors impotently slammed their larger spears into the animal. The crowd's shrieks turned hysterical and I could visibly see the Picadors' shame as they repeatedly failed to bloody the bull. The defiant bull shrugged off their thrusts and began attacking their horses. I couldn't see the eyes of the bull or the Picadors, but I could clearly see the fear in the eyes of the horses.

Suddenly, a third picador rode into the bullring carrying a long metal spear with a bottom half that looked like the curly cue of a pig's tail with a protruding thick pointed spike. Upon his first thrust of it into the bull's thick hump, a crackling flash of electricity was heard as a sizzling electric spark exploded into the bull's back. Blood was finally drawn from the belligerent beast. The use of this metal spear further enraged the angry crowd and their disapproval grew more raucous with each successful thrust of the electronic weapon. A real man does not need a metal machine to pierce a bull's muscles.

The entire arena smelled like cooked steak.

The rest of the fight is a blur to me and I didn't want to watch the systemic slaughter of the bloodied, dying bull. I wanted to look away, but I was aware of my hosts watching me for any signs of my turning into a frightened, ignorant gringo. That's when I noticed a fascinating phenomenon inside the bullring. Because of the summer light and the time of day, extremely long shadows were cast by all the bullring participants—the bull, matador, picadors, banderillos and even the horses. Instead of focusing my attention on the live action, I stared at these elongated, dancing shadows. It was like watching shadow puppetry which turned a bloody spectacle into a kind of surreal cartoon.

I don't recall how many bullfights were on the card that day, but aside from the dreamlike shadow puppetry I discovered, the image seared into my mind that day was the horse drawn circling of the dead bull corpses around the arena. I was about a year removed as an Air Force crew chief who supervised the loading of body bags into C-141 aircraft. My stint in Vietnam wasn't as a warrior, but a wholesaler of dead American flesh to be flown back to an Air Force Base in Delaware for funereal processing.

While we were exiting the bullfight arena, I was asked for my thoughts of my first bullfight experience. I didn't lie and said that I refused to believe torturing a dying animal, making it suffer an agonizing death, is any kind of an art form. That's when one of my hosts tore into me with well-rehearsed weapons of logic.

"The bull doesn't suffer!" he said. "Any animal who suffers is afraid, but bulls are never frightened because they want to fight. Millions of animals are killed every day and do you believe their deaths are nonviolent? People don't care how the animals they eat are killed. No one in their right mind would eat a creature who died of natural causes. That would be very unhealthy. Besides, a matador could get killed doing the work he loves to do. What about factor workers who get killed by machinery at a job they hate? Is the injured factory worker on the same level as an injured artist who is gored by a bull?"

Then he closed with the most lethal parting shot of all. "Did you enjoy the *carne de res un palo* (beef on the stick)?"

I nodded while thinking of how much I truly love hamburgers.
"Where the hell do you think that meat came from?"
When Patricia and I returned home from the arena, I vowed that I would never return to another bullfight. She had seen bullfights before and found them boring.

ACT TWO

This Act will be as short as the participants I will presently be describing. By the time Patricia and I returned to Barranquilla from Bogota, news had spread to family and friends that I was indeed a stereotypical gringo who did not have the cojones to appreciate the art, skill and exquisite beauty of the bullfight. I was so teased about it because I saw bullfighting as not only murder, but filled with a love for murder. I reiterated my vow to never attend another *corrida*.

Many months later my Colombian friends, who had unmercifully taunted me about my unmanly reaction to bullfighting, offered to take me to a local bullfight set up in a makeshift ring that featured *Los Enanitos Toreros – Espectaculo Comico*. In no uncertain terms I told them all to go fuck themselves. That's when they explained that this was a completely different variation on the man versus beast spectacle. This bullfight was populated by clown matadors who were all dwarves/midgets and "fought" young bull calves in a totally absurd and screamingly funny slapstick manner.

I was skeptical and asked if they killed the calves and was told of course they don't kill the baby bulls—they're way too valuable to destroy before they reach mature growth. I asked Patricia if she had ever attended a bullfight that featured *matadors enanos*. She said she hadn't but was always told how funny their performances were. What appealed to me was that it seemed as if this slapstick bullfight extravaganza was a kind of mockery of the machismo I was being ridiculed for not possessing. I accepted their offer to buy me a ticket, as The Three Stooges and Charlie Chaplin had long ago nurtured in me a love for slapstick humor.

Today, dwarf/midget matadors would be considered the ultimate in political incorrectness, as it could be rightfully claimed that their performance was holding up people with disabilities to ridicule. But in 1974, we were decades away from such culturally enlighten sensibilities.

My Colombian compadres spoke the truth. The bullfighting dwarfs were a silly collection of skilled slapstick clowns, many in gaudy drag outfits featuring bosoms that would make Dolly Parton feel insecure, and not ashamed to fondle them, or have them fondled, to the laughs of the delighted crowd. Mixing vulgarity with childish jesting, they tumbled and danced and executed delightful pratfalls. My favorite were the performers who came into the arena regally dressed as picadors with cardboard spears, wearing horse body puppet costumes where their human legs and feet replaced horse hooves as they pranced about the bullring.

Festive music underscored their frenetic, tumbling acrobatics. Peals of laughter echoed from the crowd, a far cry from the blood sport shrieks at the Bogota bullring. These tiny performers' extended slapstick antics were sans any bull calves. Instead, many clowns pretended to be charging bulls, who instead of being speared or stabbed, received well-timed kicks in the butt as they charged past.

The crowd's laughter abruptly ended with the appearance of the first baby bull in the ring. An extremely short, proud matador strode in wearing the same kind of impressive suit of light a full-sized matador would wear. This diminutive bullfighter addressed the charging baby bull with all the regal flourish of a normal- sized toreador. His sweeps of the cape and theatrical falling to one knee as he controlled the charging calf was truly a feat of extraordinary athleticism.

Shouts of *Olé* accompanied each grand gesture of his billowing red muleta until he suddenly brandished a small double-edged sword from that red cape. He plunged the sword between the baby bull's shoulders with theatrical flourish, killing him. The crowd, with many children in attendance, roared their approval with whistles, applause and shouts of "*Bien Hechol*"

I jumped out of my seat and screamed. "*Puta madre*! at my Colombian comrades, who were all convulsing with laughter as I stormed away from the funhouse slaughter.

And yeah, I like veal. Is that a problem?