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In The Bullring

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IN THE BULLRING

The horse took the shock of the horns on its padded flank. The bull had nose-dived at the stirrup, but seemed to be nuzzling under it, feeling for purchase, and then the prongs took hold, and the bull tossed its head, and the horse was lifted and dropped so quickly that it never even moved a muscle, so quickly I couldn't go "unnh!" The horse was here and then it was there.

I'd been thrown, too. I was in a bullring in Madrid with a man who'd read Hemingway forty years ago. For him, being there was a dream come true. Why was *I* there, you are wondering. Why wasn't I the person who says, "Excuse me, but I prefer not to watch dressed-up men with pointed sticks gang up on a beast whose balls outweigh theirs?" That's who I'd been, and that's who I am, but more than once in my life, I've been knocked off my feet and dropped somewhere else.

About ninety years ago, another woman sat in a bullring, shoulder-to-shoulder with a happy man, in the spirit of adventure. When she was many decades older—just about the same age I am now—she wrote about it. She was a famous author by then, and a friend of hers—who at the time was editing the women's magazine *Mademoiselle*—said *give me anything and I'll publish it*. The essay appeared in 1955, in a special issue on the theme of "Adventure." Her point was that adventure is what happens to you, or what you invite when you throw yourself at danger, whereas *experience* is what you make of the happening or the tossing, what it tells you about yourself in the long run.

The essay is called "St. Augustine and the Bullfight," and it was written by Katherine Anne Porter, the great Modernist short story writer born nine years before Hemingway. In her stories, she's a razorblade, but the first time I read this essay, I felt goaded by a hatpin. The first few pages—well, listen to this: "The book business... is full of heroes who spend their time, money, and energy worrying other animals, manifestly their betters such as lions and tigers.... And always always, somebody is out climbing mountains, and writing books about it, which are read by quite millions of persons..."¹ Ever-so-chatty, ever-so-catty, a lady author debunking her male contemporaries—

1. Quotations from "St. Augustine and the Bullfight" are from *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), pp. 91–101.

as if she has a grudge against the boys who shoot tigers and scale mountains. *She's needling Hemingway*, I thought, and remembered that, in the late fifties, that mangy old lion was bestirring himself to remember the past.

Does she think she's the anti-Hemingway? I wondered. As a young woman, she traveled to Mexico "for the express purpose of attending a Revolution, and studying Mayan people art." There, she says, "[she] fell in with a most lordly gang of fashionable international hoodlums," among whom was Shelley, the devotee of bullfights. Her portrait of this crowd, and of this shady, careless, debonair Brit, is sharp as a quill. And Hemingwayesque. There's that breezy putdown of the dilettante. That contempt for—and fascination with—the globetrotting aristocrat. That guilty interest in the monied class. But I began to sense that the poised old lady was setting herself up. She had a confession to make. On a warm day in April, she allowed herself to be pressured, argued, and dared, by a hard-eyed *aficionado*, into watching a bullfight.

64 It was a cold day in March when I saw one, across the ocean, in Spain, a few years ago. The season was just beginning. Michael had arranged it in advance: the front-row seats in the shady half of the arena. A seat was a numbered section, the width of a child's butt, on a cement step, on which you placed a rented cushion. That's where we were when the horse was shaken loose from the earth. Next to me, Michael was leaning forward. The rider, wearing a thick quilted jacket, took the hit on a well-padded leg. His foot was encased in a gray metal box. Later, I would realize what Michael was seeing: a coordinated strategy for adapting to the unpredictable. Planted horse, padded man, charging bull—and connecting them, as perfectly cantilevered as the weapons in a painting by Uccello, the towering lance that pinned the bull's shoulder. For civilization to proceed, St. George must nail the dragon.

But first, the fanfare. The opening ceremony for Katherine Anne that day in Mexico was almost identical to the one for Hemingway in Pamplona and for us in Madrid. Like the coronation of kings, every detail was prescribed: the feathery plumes on the officials' hats; their short, snappy capes; the epaulets on the picadors, whose horses had, since 1928, worn a curtain of padding doubly thick at horn-level. Half closing my eyes, I squinted past the blue jeans and cell phones nearby, trying to imagine myself at Papa's elbow, or at Shelley's, being taught what to look for. But a parade is a parade, and soon I was bug-eyed. I didn't have to be told that the grounds crew, tipping their caps to the crowd, and the riders with their right arms akimbo, were as integral to the ceremony as the boys in brocade, the matadors themselves,

who ambled in the foreground. Katherine Anne refers to it as “the Grand March of the toreros.”

They neared us—prancing hooves and squared shoulders—and walked by. I, too, was riveted by the show, yet unable, on some level, to take it seriously. All around me were the citizens of Madrid, settling their windbreakers and their tote bags, leaning their heads around to chat, digging into purses, enjoying their day off. Nobody was bracing for primal tragedy. I didn’t know what was coming, but I smiled at the performers. Who wouldn’t? They were comfortable with the crowd. Occasionally, they gazed up at us, thinking of something else. And then I looked again at the padded horses and saw the wide band of dirty cloth stretched between the straps of the bridle, covering the two bulges that were eyes. The horses were blindfolded.

A man walked into the narrow concrete passageway between the railing in front of me and the wooden barrier to the arena. His head was level with my knee. In his arms were bolts of weighty cloth, canary yellow on one side, magenta on the other. Capes. He folded each one and draped it over the barrier. The last one was red on both sides and stiff across the top. He set a plastic bottle of water on the ledge near the foot of the barrier and went away.

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Then they were there. Two of them. At my knee. The closest was in aqua, his jacket almost completely encrusted with florets and arabesques of satiny white thread, and over each shoulder a heavy pad edged in mini pom-poms and filled with blisters of embroidery. He stood looking out at the arena. I knew about those black wing-nut hats, vaguely Napoleonic, with a bulge on each side. I didn’t know that just below it in the rear would be a black button of filigreed horsehair clipped to a boyish scalp with a bobby pin. The matadors were silent or talking quietly, almost languorously. In the movie of *The Sun Also Rises*, Ava Gardner gets her first look at the bullfighters and salivates over the rounded rear ends in tight silk. I glanced in that direction.

The bull entered the arena from the other side. He stopped, shook his head, and then trotted forward, stopped, considered, and then came on again, throat swinging, a bouncy mass of black muscle jogging on dainty pigs’ feet. He advanced with a lordly confidence, as if entering his own paddock. Then he saw the horse and trotted over. The matadors were waiting, I soon found out, to serve first of all as *banderilleros*. They circled the bull. Their job was to flash those magenta capes in its face, to irritate those heavy shoulders with itchy barbs, and crowd the bull toward the padded rider, until it barreled its blunt nose into the side of the blind horse. It happened.

Time skittered. The picador leaned over. The wooden shaft of the lance was gripped under his armpit and guided, almost delicately, between forefinger and thumb. Its fat, phallic point jabbed the bull's hide, prevented from sinking deeper by a collar of metal prongs. Beside me, Michael's attention was as fixed as the lance.

I thought it was hardly fair, three men flapping oversized pillowcases, going "Yah! Yah!" and dashing behind the wooden barrier in front of us whenever the bull turned to notice them. I thought it wasn't right, the man on the horse having that long pole, the horse getting jarred like that. I thought maybe the bull would have been mad enough to fight if he'd just been confronted, *toro a mano*.

There's no actual bullfight in Katherine Anne's essay. She says, airily, "I shan't describe a bullfight. By now surely there is no excuse for anyone who can read or even hear or see not to know pretty well what goes on in a bullring." Was she being kind—or nasty—to Hemingway? The truth is, she was squeamish. At first, she takes the high road: "I do not like the slaughtering of animals as sport." But then, with a redeeming candor, she admits she's a carnivore. Her morality and her taste buds refuse to cooperate. Throwing up her hands, she concludes, "[W]hatever else this world seemed to promise me, never once did it promise to be simple." Oh, Katherine Anne, I sighed when I first read the essay. That's not only a cop-out; it's banal.

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What follows is not. In those days, the horses weren't padded. Here's what she saw: "He rushed at the waiting horse [that was]...standing at the proper angle for the convenience of his horns, the picador making only the smallest pretense of staving him off, and disemboweled the horse with one sweep of his head. The horse trod in his own guts." Katherine Anne covered her eyes, but Shelley forced her fingers apart. He insisted she have the courage of her amusements, if not of her convictions. He made her look. Her words: "I did look and I did face it, though not for years and years." Not, in other words, until she wrote about it. In *The Sun Also Rises*, Jake Barnes tells Brett Ashley *not* to look at the entrails—but he knows she isn't good at facing anything. In the movie, Ava Gardner is allowed to concentrate on Romero's physique. The Technicolor horses are fully padded.

No guts were spilled in front of me. I never closed my eyes. But I saw bloodshed. Initially, it was just a gleam on the bull's shoulder. Most of the fighting happened further away. Yes, I'd seen it before, in photographs, on film, in Hemingway's prose. There were the graceful passes, the elegant

swirls of the cape, the pivoting curve of the—God, what was that!—the teal-and-gold body, the hatless dark head went flying over the bull's shoulder, was caught under its feet, crumpled so fast I couldn't cry out, but then the bull was chased away, and the man grew upright. It was time-lapse photography in reverse. A man had been ground into the dirt, and now he was on tiptoes, arms raised, hands molded to a sword.

I stared in fascination when he returned to us, resurrected, with bright gashes of red on his white collar, and a shadow of dark rust on his jaw. I didn't know if it was his blood or the bull's. Was he ashamed or annoyed or just glad to be alive? He was a young man, with short curly hair. His face was lean, angular—like an extra's in a crowd scene by El Greco. My skin was cold with concentration. I knew the bull would be killed soon, but the scales had tipped, just briefly, toward an even chance for the doomed one. It had been, for a moment, what it claimed to be: a stylized re-enactment of our contest with mortality, won by courage and skill until, one day, we lose. For just a second there, the bull could have won.

Of course the game was still rigged, but for a moment I almost understood why Hemingway, that wounded, alienated Midwesterner, had been drawn to this pre-Roman passion play. He'd seen mangled bodies in a war zone. Wouldn't it have been a relief of sorts, a clarifying drama, to see these gorgeous young men dally with darkness on the hoof, baiting it, fooling it, cavorting in the face of it, needing, every so often, to be reminded that the skill only mattered if the game was for real? I looked at Michael. When we'd talked about this trip to Madrid, he'd said, "I've waited forty years to see a bullfight."

He'd grown up in Iowa, and if he could have managed it, he would have gone to Spain, as he later went west, and across other oceans, to see what the world was like. He would have come for the bullfights, but also for the Goyas, the late ones, where modernity is peeled back. That's what Katherine Anne thought she was doing, too, in Mexico. She was going to align herself with raw experience through pre-Colombian art, but in fact she was there, like other young intellectuals of her day, to catalogue the primitive for the enlightenment of her friends. She was a minor functionary in a Socialist revolution. She was advancing her career as an idealist—and Shelley called her bluff. He was disgustingly logical: if you're interested in the primal, if you're a student of local culture, and above all, if you care about "the people," you must go to a bullfight.

So there she is at last, perched beside her mentor, hating herself, but excited, too, her palms buzzing with adrenalin. When the sword hits the mark, she screams with the crowd. This is it—the moment of revelation: “this had death in it,” she tells us, “and it was the death in it that I loved. . . . How could I face the cold fact that at heart I was just a killer, like any other, that some deep corner of my soul consented not just willingly but with rapture?”

No, no, I assure you. That didn’t happen to me. I wasn’t swept into ecstasy, but I was riveted to the moment. Michael and I looked at each other: *so this is what it’s like, people really do this*. We were under enchantment, seeing pictures come to life, not quite believing it—the silken rosettes, the hairy hide, the spray of sand, the pointed gray flag of the bull’s tongue as he panted and waited and charged. Before leaving the field, the matador had finished what he started. From across the arena, I’d seen the arched back, taut as a drawn bow, and the release of the sword into the bull. The animal had sagged, knelt down, toppled over. It was done for. There was moderate applause.

68 Katherine Anne’s adventure occurred on opening day at the arena, and there was plenty of noise. When she lets out her scream, it’s lost in the crowd, but it’s heard by Shelley. He’s gloriously vindicated. “Didn’t I tell you?” he shouts in her ear. She’s stunned by her savagery. And then she finds herself reading St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. In fourth-century Rome, she meets a young friend of the author’s, a high-minded soul, who refuses to join the gang at the Colosseum. He doesn’t want to see gladiators disembowel each other. Until, of course, he *does* go. Then he can’t get enough of it. *What a relief*, thinks Katherine Anne. *I’m not a freak*.

Eventually, as she would explain in other essays, she reached the end of her engagement with Mexico. Diego Rivera; land reform; nativism; bullfights. Passion was life’s motor, but never its meaning. Rather smugly, she faulted Hemingway for being trapped in his twenties. She believed herself capable of moving on, and yet here she was in mid-century, writing for *Mademoiselle*, turning her fame into a commodity, just as *he* did. Adventure became experience, and experience became art, and art became memory. At the end of the essay, she circles back—with a storyteller’s instinct—to the moment of truth. She’d screamed, and then. . . . She’s close to the last sentence. The crowd roars. She abandons herself to the kill. In her excitement, she “kiss[es] Shelley on the cheekbone.”

It’s the seal on her story. So she doesn’t tell us what happened next, when the crowd settles back, its orgasm over. Let me tell you what happened in

Madrid. The bull keeled over on its side. Men in blue shirts scampered over. They fastened something to the horns, a rope with a hook on the free end. The line was hitched to thicker ropes attached to curved side-bars, strapped to the necks of two mules. Flags waved from their shoulders. Their legs strained, they got traction, and soon they were rushing toward the exit, men sprinting beside them. The bull went skidding through the dust. The rear legs were splayed, unnaturally, pitifully. What had happened to *el toro*, the ultimate adversary? Death wasn't even the Great *Nada*. It was a huge black bug they were whisking out of sight. A cry was jolted from me, silently, at the indecency of that scurrying.

The arena was being cleared for the next *corrida*. There would be six battles that day, two bulls per matador. Six chances for the bull to win, six victories for human daring. While the matadors were waiting so close to us, I saw the offhandedness of men following a routine, but also the tension that anchored them at the navel. They leaned rigidly at ease, waiting to be heroes. There is no finery like the costume of a bullfighter. My eyes were engorged with it. Turquoise-blue, coal-black, foam-white, poppy-red—the rich colors peek through the embroidery, those interlocking patterns in white or gold thread like filaments of light. The outfits are museum pieces, worn in the knowledge of the dirt and the sweat and the blood that will ruin them. The young men had dressed up for me, for all of us, for the bull. The skin on my arms tightened.

In my experience, though, Death doesn't charge like a bull. It slithers in like a fog, and nobody looks beautiful. Once, it sat on the head of a ninety-year-old man, frail and birdlike on the pillow, stealing his breath away. It seeped into the brain cells of a middle-aged brother, until he fastened a rope to a fixture in the ceiling and climbed on I'll never know what, and jumped I refuse to think how. If I'd had a chance! Don't think I wouldn't drive a sword between the eyes of that shadow if it came for this man sitting next to me. If only I could. It is, just possibly, the anguish of impotence, not a secretive bloodlust, we bring to the arena. We dress it up like a popinjay and send it out to tease fate. Metaphorically and philosophically, it was Hemingway who understood that. Katherine Anne was much smarter, but the old man was simpler, and cried in his sleep.

We're all marked, in some way, by trench warfare. The flu epidemic of 1918 left Porter sickly and whitened her hair prematurely, and there's the legendary shrapnel that scarred Hemingway for life. My *corrida* was at home, in a

room late at night. I was sitting in a wine-colored chair, trying to restart the world without my brilliant, warm-hearted, nature-loving brother, who would choose to be gored before harming the bull. I was wandering in a fog, but a voice from the other chair kept talking to me for hours, acquainting me with sorrow, and with reason and compassion, till I saw in the dark. Porter was not so lucky, nor was Hemingway.

Did you know, they actually did meet once, for a few minutes, in Paris, at the epicenter of Modernism. It was in Sylvia Beach's bookstore in 1933 or '34. Porter wrote about what happened in a sketch for *Ladies' Home Journal* around 1963. Hemingway had killed himself two years earlier, a wreck of a man. At the time she met him, he was young, healthy, vigorous—already a famous author. She was virtually unknown—except to Sylvia Beach.

70 · Of course it was raining that evening in Paris when Katherine Anne ducked into the bookstore. There was a table in the center of the room, sloshed over with books. She was an elegant woman with the face of a Madonna, and I imagine her poking through the volumes with one finger. In came Sylvia, with a gawky radiance and a smile that said, *tell me which of your fellow-geniuSES you want to meet* . . . but just then the door flew open. What came in was a hat pouring water from its brim, and a raincoat shedding drops in a circle on the floor. Sylvia extended her bony arms and with one hand grasped a big mitt from under the wet poncho and with the other took those delicate fingers and pronounced this man and this woman "the two best modern American writers." She wanted them, she said, "to know each other."² Then the phone rang in the back room, and she left the two geniuses alone.

Neither of them said a word. She thought him a pitiful male animal, and he thought her a "literary" female. He turned and walked out, dissolving in the rain. Perhaps a handshake was impossible, but I wish they had looked each other in the eye. Neither had looked away from the twentieth century. Both had survived their ideologies and discovered something older. It had to do with facing what frightened you—death, yes, of course, but also loneliness and failure. They made terrible mistakes in their personal lives, and both became caricatures, but there was about them something irreducible, a sticking point on which they founded their better selves.

2. "A Little Incident in the Rue de l'Odéon," *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter*, p. 106.

Differently defined in each case, differently expressed, it was for each of them a kind of loyalty to the courage of the human race, to its love of clean lines and its appetite for drama. They stir in me a pang of nostalgia. I think perhaps I went to the bullfight not just to relive their adventure, not just out of solidarity with Michael, and surely not out of some voyeuristic hankering for blood. What I went for is perhaps harder to admit. I think I went out of wonder at the extremes to which human beings have gone to throw the gauntlet back at all that makes us grieve, embroidering the glove, encircling the arena, and playing for keeps.

The bullring in Madrid is at the end of the Metro line. Hours before, we had climbed up a stairway into a chilly afternoon. We'd found ourselves in a wide clearing, with people standing about in groups, and here and there a red umbrella over a table filled with water bottles. The sudden expansiveness and the scale of what towered over us gave me a touch of vertigo, and I reached for Michael's elbow, as I had, and would, many times.

The façade of the building is pinkish-brown, with elaborate Moorish designs etched in brick or painted on ceramic medallions. The entrance is an archway many times the height of man, with an elegant rounded top, pinched in where it sits on the passageway. It is an ancient, multicultural design, both airy and powerful, its beauty meant to dazzle and assuage, to place a human stamp on the passing of time. The eye travels up, past a balcony the size of a church, up to a row of blue-and-white insets, a crenellated skyline, four golden globes, a tossing flag, and the words *Plaza de Toros*.

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