

EXISTENTIAL ERRANDS

NORMAN MAILER

LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY — BOSTON — TORONTO

Bullfighting

Homage to El Loco

The mind returns to the comedy and the religious dedication of the bullfight. Late afternoons of color — hues of lavender, silver, pink, orange silk and gold in the *traje de luces* — now begin to play in one's mind against the small sharp impact on the eyes of horseballs falling like eggs between the frightened legs of the horse, and the flanks of the bull glistening with the sheen of a dark wet wood. And the blood. The bullfight always gets back to the blood. It pours in gouts down the forequarters of the bull, it wells from the hump of his *morrillo*, and moves in waves of bright red along the muscles of his chest and the heaving of his sides. If he has been killed poorly and

the sword goes through his lung, then the animal dies in vomitings of blood. If the matador is working close to the animal, the suit of lights becomes stained — the dark bloodstain is honorable, it is also steeped in horror. Should the taste of your favorite herb come from the death of some rare love, so the life of the bright red blood of an animal river pouring forth becomes some other life as it darkens down to the melancholy hues of an old dried blood which speaks in some lost primitive tongue about the mysteries of death, color, and corruption. The dried blood reminds you of the sordid glory of the bullfight, its hint of the Renaissance when noble figures stated their presence as they paraded through the marketplace and passed by cripples with stumps for legs, a stump for a tongue, and the lewdest grin of the day. Yes, the spectrum of the bullfight goes from courage to gangrene.

In Mexico, the hour before the fight is always the best hour of the week. It would be memorable not to sound like Hemingway, but in fact you would get happy the night before just thinking of that hour next day. Outside the Plaza Mexico, cheap cafés open only on Sunday, and huge as beer gardens, filled with the public (us tourists, hoodlums, pimps, pickpurses and molls, Mexican variety — which is to say the whores had headdresses and hindquarters not to be seen elsewhere on earth, for their hair rose vertically twelve inches from the head, and their posteriors projected horizontally twelve inches back into that space the rest of the whore had just marched through). The mariachis were out with their romantic haunting caterwauling of guitar, violin, songs of carnival and trumpet, their song told of hearts which were true and hearts which were broken, and the wail of the broken heart went right into the trumpet until there were times when drunk the right way on tequila or Mexican rum, it was perhaps the best sound heard this side of

Miles Davis. You hear a hint of all that in the Tijuana Brass.

You see, my friends, the wild hour was approaching. The horrors of the week in Mexico were coming to term. Indeed, no week in Mexico is without its horrors for every last Mexican alive — it is a city and a country where the bones of the dead seem to give the smell of their char to every desert wind and auto exhaust and frying tortilla. The mournfulness of unrequited injustice hangs a shroud across the centuries. Every Mexican is gloomy until the instant he becomes happy, and then he is a maniac. He howls, he whistles, smoke of murder passes off his pores, he bullies, he beseeches friendship, he is a clown, a brigand, a tragic figure suddenly merry. The intellectuals and the technicians of Mexico abominate their national character because it is always in the way. It puts the cracks in the plaster of new buildings, it forgets to cement the tiles, it leaves rags in the new pipes of new office buildings and forgets to put the gas cap back on the tank. So the intellectuals and the technicians hate the bullfight as well. You cannot meet a socialist in Mexico who approves of the running of the bulls. They are trying to turn Mexico into a modern country, and thus the same war goes on there that goes on in three-quarters of the world — battlefield is the new highways to the suburbs, and the corporation's office buildings, the walls of hospital white, and the myopic sheets of glass. In Mexico, like everywhere else, it is getting harder and harder to breathe in a mood through the pores of the city because more and more of the city is being covered with corporation architecture, with surgical dressing. To the vampires and banshees and dried blood on the curses of the cactus in the desert is added the horror of the new technology in an old murder-ridden land. And four o'clock on Sunday is the beginning of release for some of the horrors of the week. If many come close to feeling

the truth only by telling a lie, so Mexicans come close to love by watching the flow of blood on an animal's flanks and the certain death of the bull before the bravery and/or humiliation of the bullfighter.

I could never have understood it if someone tried to explain ahead of time, and in fact, I came to love the bullfight long before I comprehended the first thing about why I did. That was very much to the good. There are not too many experiences a radical American intellectual could encounter in those days (when the youngest generation was called the silent generation) which invaded his sure sense of his own intellectual categories. I did not like the first bullfights I saw, the formality of the ritual bored me, the fights appeared poor (indeed they were) and the human content of the spectacle came out atrocious. Narcissistic matadors, vain when they made a move, pouting like a girl stood up on Saturday night when the crowd turned on them, clumsy at killing, and the crowd, brutal to a man. In the Plaza Mexico, the Indians in the cheap seats buy a paper cup of beer and when they are done drinking, the walk to the W.C. is *miles* away, and besides they are usually feeling sullen, so they urinate in their paper cup and hurl it down in a cascade of harvest gold, Indian piss. If you are an American escorting an American girl who has blond hair, and you have tickets in *Sol*, you buy your girl a cheap sombrero at the gate, for otherwise she will be a prime target of attention. Indeed, you do well not to sit near an American escorting a blond whose head is uncovered, for the aim of a drunken Indian is no better than you when your aim is drunk. So no surprise if one's early detestation of the bullfight was fortified in kidney brew, Azteca.

Members of a minority group are always ready to take punishment, however, and I was damned if I was going to be excluded from still another cult. So I persisted in going to bullfights, and they were a series of lousy bullfights, and then the third or fourth time I got religion. It

was a windy afternoon, with threats of rain, and now and then again ten minutes of rain, poisonous black clouds overhead, the chill gloom of a black sky on Sundays in Mexico, and the particular torero (whose name I could not recall for anything) was a clod. He had a nasty build. Little spindly legs, too big a chest, a butt which was broad and stolid, real peasant ass, and a vulgar worried face with a gold tooth. He was engaged with an ugly bull who kept chopping at the muleta with his horns, and occasionally the bull would catch the muleta and fling it in the air and trample it and wonder why the object was either dead or not dead, the bull smelling a hint of his own blood (or the blood of some cousin) on the blood of the muleta, and the crowd would hoot, and the torero would go over to his sword handler at the barrera, and shake his head and come out with a new muleta, and the bull would chop, and the wind would zig the muleta out of control, and then the matador would drop it and scamper back to the barrera, and the crowd would jeer and the piss would fly in yellow arcs of rainbow through the rain all the way down from the cheap seats, and the whores would make farting sounds with their spoiled knowledgeable mouths, while the aficionados would roll their eyes, and the sound of Mexican laughter, that operative definition of the echo of total disgust, would shake along like jelly-gasoline through the crowd.

I got a look at the bullfighter who was the center of all this. He was not a man I could feel something for. He had a cheap pimp's face and a dull, thoroughgoing vanity. His face, however, was now in despair. There was something going on for him more humiliating than humiliation — as if his life were going to take a turn into something more dreadful than anything it had encountered until now. He was in trouble. The dead dull fight he was giving was going to be death for certain hopes in his psyche. Somehow it was going to be more final than the average dead dull fight to which he was obviously all too

accustomed. I was watching the despair of a profoundly mediocre man.

Well, he finally gave up any attempt to pass the bull, and he worked the animal forward with jerks of his muleta to left and right, a competent rather than a beautiful technique at best, and even to my untutored eye he was a mechanic at this, and more whistles, and then desperation all over that vain incompetent pimp's face, he profiled with his sword, and got it halfway in, and the animal took a few steps to one side and the other and fell over quickly.

The art of killing is the last skill you learn to judge in bullfighting, and the kill on this rainy afternoon left me less impressed than the crowd. Their jeers were replaced by applause (later I learned the crowd would always applaud a kill in the lung — all audiences are Broadway audiences) and the approbation continued sufficiently for the torero to take a tour of the ring. He got no ears, he certainly didn't deserve them, but he had his tour and he was happy, and in his happiness there was something suddenly likable about him, and I sensed that I was passing through some interesting emotions since I had felt contempt for a stranger and then a secret and most unsocialistic desire to see this type I did not like humiliated a little further, and then in turn I was quietly but most certainly overcome by his last-minute success sufficiently to find myself liking a kind of man I had never considered near to human before. So this bad bullfight in the rain had given a drop of humanity to a very dry area of my heart, and now I knew a little more and had something to think about which was no longer altogether in category.

We have presented the beginning of a history then — no, say it better — the origin of an addiction. For a drug's first appeal is always existential — our sense of life (once it is made alert by the sensation of its absence) is thereupon so full of need as the desire for a

breath of air. The sense of life comes alive in the happy days when the addict first encounters his drug. But all histories of addiction are the same — particularly in the beginning. They fall into the larger category of the history of a passion. So I will spare each and every one of us the titles of the books I read on the running of the bulls, save to mention the climactic purchase of a three-volume set in leather for fifty 1954 dollars (now doubtless in value one hundred) of *Los Toros* by Cossío. Since it was entirely in Spanish, a language I read with about as much ease and pleasure as Very Old English, *Los Toros* remains in my library as a cornerstone of my largest mental department — *The Bureau of Abandoned Projects*: I was going to write the novel about bullfight, dig!

Nor will I reminisce about the great bullfighters I saw, of the majesties of Arruza and the *machismo* of Procuna, the liquidities of Silverio and the solemnity of César Girón, no, we will not micturate the last of such memory to tell a later generation about El Ranchero and Ortiz of the Orticina, and Angel Peralta the Rejoneador, nor of Manolete, for he was dead long before I could with confidence distinguish a bull from a heifer or a steer, and no more can I talk of Luis Miguel and Antonio, for neither of them have I seen in a fight, so that all I know of Ordóñez is his reputation, and of Dominguín his style, for I caught his work in a movie once and it was not work the way he made it look. No, enough of these qualifications for *afición*. The fact is that I do not dwell on Arruza and Procuna and Silverio and Girón and Peralta and Ranchero because I did not see them that often and in fact most of them I saw but once. I was always in Mexico in the summer, you see, and the summer is the *temporada de novillos*, which is to say it is the time when the *novilladas* are held, which is to say it is the time of the novices.

Now the fellow who is pushing up this preface for you is a great lover of the bullfight — make on it no mistake.

For a great bullfight he would give up just about any other athletic or religious spectacle — the World Series in a minute, a pro football championship, a mass at the Vatican, perhaps even a great heavyweight championship — which, kids, is really saying it. No love like the love for four in the afternoon at the Plaza Mexico. Yet all the great matadors he saw were seen only at special festivals when they fought very small bulls for charity. The novillada is, after all, the time of the novilleros, and a novillero is a bullfighter approximately equal in rank to a Golden Gloves fighter. A very good novillero is like a very good Golden Gloves finalist. The Sugar Ray Robinsons and the Rocky Marcianos of the bullfighting world were glimpsed by me only when they came out of retirement long enough to give the equivalent of a snappy two-round exhibition. My love of bullfighting, and my experience of it as a spectator, was founded then by watching novilleros week after week over two separate summers in Mexico City. So I know as much about bullfighting as a man would know about boxing if he read a lot and heard a lot about great fighters and saw a few movies of them and one or two exhibitions, and also had the intense, if partial, fortune to follow two Golden Gloves tournaments all the way and to follow them with some lively if not always dependable instinct for discerning what was good and what was not so good in the talent before him.

After a while I got good at seeing the flaws and virtues in novilleros, and in fact I began to see so much of their character in their style, and began to learn so much about style by comprehending their character (for nearly everything good or bad about a novice bullfighter is revealed at a great rate) that I began to take the same furious interest and partisanship in the triumph of one style over another that is usually reserved for literary matters (is Philip Roth better than John Updike? — you know) or what indeed average Americans and some not so average might take over political figures. To watch a

bullfighter have an undeserved triumph on Sunday afternoon when you detest his style is not the worst preparation for listening to Everett Dirksen nominate Barry Goldwater or hearing Lyndon Johnson give a lecture on TV about Amurrican commitments to the free universe. Everything bad and God-awful about the style of life got into the style of bullfighters, as well as everything light, delightful, honorable and good.

At any rate, about the time I knew a lot about bullfighting, or as much as you could know watching nothing but novilleros week after week, I fell in love with a bullfighter. I never even met this bullfighter, I rush to tell you. I would not have wanted to meet him. Meeting him could only have spoiled the perfection of my love, so pure was my affection. And his name — not one in a thousand of you out there, dear general readers, can have heard of him — his name was El Loco. El Loco, the Crazy One. It is not a term of endearment in Mexico, where half the populace is crazy. To amplify the power of nomenclature, El Loco came from the provinces, he was God's own hick, and his real name was Amado Ramírez, which is like being a boy from Hicksville, Georgia, with a name like Beloved Remington. Yet there was a time when I thought Beloved Remington, which is to say Amado Ramírez, would become the greatest bullfighter in the whole world, and there were critics in Mexico City hoary with *afición* who held the same opinion (if not always in print). He came up one summer a dozen years ago like a rocket, but a rocket with one tube hot and one tube wet and he spun in circles all over the bullfighting world of Mexico City all through the summer and fall.

But we must tell more of what it is like to watch novilleros. You see, novice bullfighters fight bulls who are called *novillos*, and these bulls are a year younger and two to four hundred pounds lighter than the big fighting bulls up around a thousand pounds which matadors

must face. So they are less dangerous. They can still kill a man, but not often does that happen — they are more likely to pound and stomp and wound and bruise a novillero than to catch him and play him in the air and stab him up high on the horns the way a terrible full-grown fighting bull can do. In consequence, the analogy to the Golden Gloves is imperfect, for a talented novillero can at his best look as exciting as, or more exciting than, a talented matador — the novice's beast is smaller and less dangerous, so his lack of experience is compensated for by his relative comfort — he is in less danger of getting killed. (Indeed, to watch a consummate matador like Carlos Arruza work with a new young bull is like watching Norman Mailer box with his three-year-old son — absolute mastery is in the air.)

Novilleros possess another virtue. Nobody can contest their *afición*. For every novillero who has a manager, and a rich man to house and feed him, and influential critics to bring him along on the sweet of a bribe or two, there are a hundred devoted all but unknown novilleros who hitch from *poblado* to *poblado* on back dirt roads for the hint of a chance to fight at some fiesta so small the results are not even phoned to Mexico City. Some of these kids spend years in the provinces living on nothing, half-starved in the desire to spend a life fighting bulls and they will fight anything — bulls who are overweight, calves who are under the legal limit, beasts who have fought before and so are sophisticated and dangerous. These provincial novilleros get hurt badly by wounds which show no blood, deep bruises in the liver and kidney from the flat of a horn, deep internal bleedings in the gut, something lively taken off the groin — a number of them die years later from malnutrition and chronic malfunctions of some number of those organs — their deaths get into no statistics on the fatalities of the bullfight.

A few of these provincial novilleros get enough fights

and enough experience and develop enough talent, however, to pick up a reputation of sorts. If they are very lucky and likable, or have connections, or hump themselves — as some will — to rich homosexuals in the capital, then they get their shot. Listen to this. At the beginning of the novillada, six new bullfighters are brought in every Sunday to fight one bull each in the Plaza Mexico. For six or eight weeks this goes on. Perhaps fifty fighters never seen before in Mexico City have their chance. Maybe ten will be seen again. The tension is enormous for each novillero. If he fails to have a triumph or attract outstanding attention, then his years in the provinces went for nothing. Back again he will go to the provinces as a punishment for failing to be superb. Perhaps he will never fight again in the Plaza Mexico. His entire life depends on this one fight. And even this fight depends on luck. For any novillero can catch a poor bull, a dull mediocre cowardly bull. When the animal does not charge, the bullfighter, unless possessed of genius, cannot look good.

Once a novillero came into the Plaza on such an occasion, was hit by the bull while making his first pass, a veronica, and the boy and cape sailed into the air and came down together in such a way that when the boy rolled over, the cape wrapped around him like a tortilla, and one wit in *Sol*, full of the harsh wine of Mexico's harsh grapes, yelled out, "*Suerte de Enchiladas*." The young bullfighter was named The Pass of the Enchiladas. His career could never be the same. He went on to fight that bull, did a decent honorable job — the crowd never stopped laughing. *Suerte de Enchiladas*. He was branded. He walked off in disgrace. The one thing you cannot be in any land where Spanish is spoken is a clown. I laughed with the rest. The bullfight is nine-tenths cruelty. The bullfight brews one's cruelty out of one's pores — it makes an elixir of cruelty. But it does something else. It reflects the proportions of life in

Latin lands. For in Mexico it does not seem unreasonable that a man should spend years learning a dangerous trade, be rapped once by a bull, and end up ruined, a Suerte de Enchiladas. It is unfair, but then life is monstrously unfair, one knows that, one of the few gleams in the muck of all this dubious Mexican majesty called existence is that one can on occasion laugh bitterly with the gods. In the Spanish-Indian blood, the substance of one's dignity is found in sharing the cruel vision of the gods. In fact, dignity can be found nowhere else. For courage is seen as the servant of the gods' cruel vision.

On to Beloved Remington. He arrived in Mexico City at the end of the beginning of the novillada in the summer of 1954. He was there, I think, on the next to last of the early Sundays when six bulls were there for six novilleros. (In the full season of the novillada, when the best new young men have been chosen, there are six bulls for only three toreros — each kid then has two bulls, two chances.) I was not yet in Mexico for Amado Ramírez's first Sunday, but I heard nothing else from my bullfighting friends from the day I got in. He had appeared as the last of six novilleros. It had been a terrible day. All of the novilleros had been bad. He apparently had been the last and the worst, and had looked so clumsy that the crowd in derision had begun to applaud him. There is no sign of displeasure greater among the Mexican bullfighting public than to turn their ovations upside down. But Ramírez had taken bows. Serious solemn bows. He had bowed so much he had hardly fought the bull. The Plaza Mexico had rung with merriment. It took him forever to kill the beast — he received a tumultuous ovation. He took a turn of the ring. A wit shouted "*Ole, El Loco.*" He was named. When they cheer incompetence they are ready to set fire to the stadium.

El Loco was the sensation of the week. A clown had fought a bull in the Plaza Mexico and gotten out alive. The promoters put him on the following week as a sev-

enth bullfighter, an extra added attraction. He was not considered worth the dignity of appearing on the regular card. For the first time that season, the Plaza was sold out. It was also the first fight I was to see of my second season.

Six young novilleros fought six mediocre bulls that day, and gave six mediocre fights. The crowd grew more and more sullen. When there is no good bullfight, there is no catharsis. One's money has been spent, the drinks are wearing down, and there has been no illumination, no moment to burn away all that spiritual sewer gas from the horrors of the week. Dull violence breeds, and with it, contempt for all bullfighters. An ugly Mexican bullfighting crowd has the temper of an old-fashioned street corner in Harlem after the police wagon has rounded up the nearest five studs and hauled them away.

Out came the clown, El Loco. The special seventh bullfighter. He was an apparition. He had a skinny body and a funny ugly face with little eyes set close together, a big nose, and a little mouth. He had very black Indian hair, and a tuft in the rear of his head stood up like the spike of an antenna. He had very skinny legs and they were bent at the knee so that he gave the impression of trudging along with a lunchbox in his hand. He had a comic ass. It went straight back like a duck's tail feathers. His suit fit poorly. He was some sort of grafting between Ray Bolger and Charlie Chaplin. And he had the sense of self-importance to come out before the bull, he was indeed given a turn of the ring before he even saw the bull. An honor granted him for his appearance the week before. He was altogether solemn. It did not seem comic to him. He had the kind of somber extravagant ceremoniousness of a village mayor in a mountain town come out to greet the highest officials of the government. His knees stuck out in front and his buttocks in back. The Plaza rocked and rocked. Much applause followed by circulating zephyrs of laughter. And under it all, like

a croaking of frogs, the beginnings of the biggest thickest Bronx raspberry anybody living ever heard.

Amado Ramírez went out to receive the bull. His first pass was a yard away from the animal, his second was six feet. He looked like a fifty-five-year-old peon ready to retire. The third pass caught his cape, and as it flew away on the horns, El Loco loped over to the barrera with a gait like a kangaroo. A thunderstorm of boos was on its way. He held out his arm horizontally, an injunction to the crowd, fingers spread, palm down, a mild deprecatory peasant gesture, as if to say, "Wait, you haven't seen nothing yet." The lip-farters began to smack. Amado went back out. He botched one pass, looked poor on a basic veronica. Boos, laughter, even the cops in the aisle were laughing. *Que payaso!*

His next pass had a name, but few even of the *afición* knew it, for it was an old-fashioned pass of great intricacy which spoke of the era of Belmonte and El Gallo and Joselito. It was a pass of considerable danger, plus much formal content (for a flash it looked like he was inclining to kiss a lady's hand, his cape draped over his back, while the bull went roaring by his unprotected ass). If I remember, it was called a *gallicina*, and no one had seen it in five years. It consisted of whirling in a reverse *serpentina* counterclockwise into the bull, so that the cape was wrapped around your body just like the Suerte de Enchiladas, except you were vertical, but the timing was such that the bull went by at the moment your back was to him and you could not see his horns. Then the whirling continued, and the cape flared out again. Amado was clumsy in his approach and stepped on his cape when he was done, but there was one moment of lightning in the middle when you saw clear sky after days of fog and smelled the ozone, there was an instant of heaven — finest thing I had yet seen in the bullfight — and in a sob of torture and release, "Olé" came in a panic of disbelief from one parched Mexican

throat near to me. El Loco did the same pass one more time and then again. On the second pass, a thousand cried "Olé," and on the third, the Plaza exploded and fifty thousand men and women gave up the word at the same time. Something merry and corny as a gypsy violin flowed out of his cape.

After that, nothing but comedy again. He tried a dozen fancy passes, none worked well. They were all wild, solemn, courtly, and he was there with his peasant bump of an ass and his knobby knees. The crowd laughed with tears in their eyes. With the muleta he looked absurd, a man about to miss a train and so running with his suitcase. It took him forever to kill and he stood out like an old lady talking to a barking dog, but he could do no wrong now for this crowd — they laughed, they applauded, they gave him a tour of the ring. For something had happened in those three passes which no one could comprehend. It was as if someone like me had gotten in the ring with Cassius Clay and for twenty seconds had clearly outboxed him. The only explanation was divine intervention. So El Loco was back to fight two bulls next week.

If I remember, he did little with either bull, and killed the second one just before the third *aviso*. In a good season, his career would have been over. But it was a dreadful season. A couple of weeks of uneventful bullfights and El Loco was invited back. He looked awful in his first fight, green of face, timid, unbelievably awkward with the cape, morose and abominably prudent with the muleta. He killed badly. So badly in fact that he was still killing the bull when the third *aviso* sounded. The bull was let out alive. A dull sullen silence riddled with Mexican whistles. The crowd had had a bellyful of laughs with him. They were now getting very bored with the joke.

But the second bull he liked. Those crazy formal courtly passes, the *gallicinas*, whirled out again, and the horns

went by his back six inches away. Olé. He went to put the banderillas in himself and botched the job, had to run very fast on the last pair to escape the bull and looked like a chicken as he ran. The catcalls tuned up again. The crowd was like a bored lion uncertain whether to eat entrails or lick a face. Then he came out with the muleta and did a fine series of *derechazos*, the best seen in several weeks, and to everyone's amazement, he killed on the first *estocada*. They gave him an ear. He was the *triunfador* of the day.

This was the afternoon which confirmed the beginning of a career. After that, most of the fights are mixed in memory because he had so many, and they were never without incident, and they took place years ago. All through the summer of 1954, he fought just about every week, and every week something happened which shattered the comprehension of the most veteran bullfighting critic. They decided after this first triumph that he was a mediocre novillero with nothing particular to recommend him except a mysterious flair for the *gallicina*, and a competence with the *derechazo*. Otherwise, he was uninspired with the cape and weak with the muleta. So the following week he gave an exhibition with the muleta. He did four *pases de pecho* so close and luminous (a pass is luminous when your body seems to lift with breath as it goes by) that the horns flirted with his heart. He did *derechazos* better than the week before, and finished with *manoletinas*. Again he killed well. They gave him two ears. Then his second bull went out alive. A *fracaso*.

Now the critics said he was promising with the muleta but weak with the cape. He could not do a veronica of any value. So in one of the following weeks he gave five of the slowest, most luminous, most soaring veronicas anyone had ever seen.

Yet, for three weeks in a row, if he cut ears on one bull, he let the other go out alive. A bullfighter is not supposed to let his animal outlive three avisos. Indeed if the

animal is not killed before the first aviso, the torero is in disgrace already. Two avisos is like the sound of the knell of the bell in the poorhouse, and a bullfighter who hears the third aviso and has to let his bull go out alive is properly ready for hara-kiri. No sight, you see, is worse. It takes something like three to five minutes from the first aviso to the last, and in that time the kill becomes a pigsticking. Because the torero has tried two, three, four, five times, even more, to go in over the horns, and he has hit bone, and he has left the sword half in but in some abominable place like the middle of the back or the flank, or he has had a perfect thrust and the bull does not die and minutes go by waiting for it to die and the peons run up with their capes and try to flick the sword out by swirling cloth around the pommel guard and giving a crude Latin yank — nothing is cruder than a peon in a sweat for his boss. Sometimes they kick the bull in the nuts in the hope it will go down, and the crowd hoots. Sometimes the bull sinks to its knees and the puntillero comes in to sever its neck with a thrust of his dagger, but the stab is off-center, the spinal cord is not severed. Instead it is stimulated by the shock and the dying bull gets up and wanders all over the ring looking for its *querencia* while blood drains and drips from its wounds and the bullfighter, looking ready to cry, trots along like a farmer accompanying his mule down the road. And the next aviso blows. Such scenes are a nightmare for the torero. He will awaken from dreams where he is stabbing and stabbing over the horns with the *descabellar* and the bull does not drop but keeps jerking his head. Well, you receive this communication, I'm sure. A bull going out alive because the torero was not able to kill him in the allotted time is a sight about as bloody and attractive as a victim getting out of a smashed car and stumbling down the road, and the matador is about as popular as the man who caused the accident. The average torero can afford less than one occasion a year when three avisos are

heard. El Loco was allowing an average of one bull a week to go out unkilld. One may get an idea of how good he was when he was good, if you appreciate a prize-fighter who is so good that he is forgiven even if every other fight he decides to climb out of the ring and quit.

For a period, criticism of El Loco solidified. He had brilliant details, he was able on occasion to kill with inspiration, he had huge talent, but he lacked the indispensable ingredient of the bullfighter, he did not know how to get a good performance out of a bad bull. He lacked tenacity. So Ramírez created the most bizarre *faena* in anyone's memory, a fight which came near to shattering the rules of bullfighting. For on a given Sunday, he caught a very bad bull, and worked with him in all the dull, technical, unaesthetic ways a bullfighter has to work with an unpromising beast, and chopped him to left and to right, and kept going into the bull's *querencia* and coaxing him out and this went on for minutes, while the public demonstrated its displeasure. And El Loco paid no attention and kept working with the bull, and then finally got the bull to charge and he made a few fine passes. But then the first *aviso* sounded and everyone groaned. Because finally the bull was going good, and yet Amado would have to kill him now. But Amado had his bull in shape and he was not going to give him up yet, and so with everyone on the scent of the loss of each second, he made *derechazos* and the pass with the *muleta* which looks like the *gaonera* with the cape, and he did a deliberate *adorno* or two and the second *aviso* sounded and he made an effort to kill and failed, but stayed very cool and built up the crowd again by taking the bull through a series of *naturales*, and with twenty seconds left before the third *aviso* and the Plaza in pandemonium he went in to kill and had a perfect *estocada* and the bull moved around softly and with dignity and died about ten seconds after the third *aviso*, but no one could hear the trumpet for the crowd was in a delirium of thunder, and

every white handkerchief in the place was out. And Amado was smiling, which is why you could love him, because his pinched ugly little peasant face was full of a kid's decent happiness when he smiled. And a minute later there was almost a riot against the judges for they were not going to give him tail or two ears or even an ear — how could they if the bull had died after the third aviso? — and yet the tension of fighting the bull on the very edge of his time had given a quality to this fight which had more than a hint of the historic, for new emotions had been felt. The bullfighting public has a taste for new emotions equaled only by the lust of a lady for new pleasures.

This record of triumphs is in danger of becoming as predictable as any record of triumphs since Caesar. Let us keep it alive with an account of the fiascos. Amado was simply unlike any bullfighter who had ever come along. When he had a great fight, or even a great pass, it was unlike the passes of other fine novilleros — the passes of El Loco were better than anything you had ever seen. It was as if you were looking at the sky and suddenly a bird materialized in the air. And a moment later disappeared again. His work was frightening. It was simple, lyrical, light, illumined, but it came from nowhere and then was gone. When El Loco was bad, he was not mediocre or dull, he was simply the worst, most inept, and most comical bullfighter anyone had ever seen. He seemed to have no technique to fall back on. He would hold his cape like a shroud, his legs would bend at the knees, his sad ass seemed to have an eye for the exit, his expression was morose as Fernandel, and his feet kept tripping. He looked like a praying mantis on its hind legs. And when he was afraid he had a nerveless incapacity to kill which was so hopeless that the moment he stepped out to face his animal you knew he could not go near this particular bull. Yet when he was good, the comic body suddenly straightened, indeed took on the

camber of the best back any Spanish aristocrat chose to display, the buttocks retired into themselves like a masterpiece of poise, and the cape and the muleta moved slowly as full sails, or whirled like the wing of that mysterious bird. It was as if El Loco came to be every comic Mexican who ever breathed the finest Spanish grace into his pores. For five odd minutes he was as completely transformed as Charlie Chaplin's tramp doing a consummate impersonation of the one and only Valentino, long-lost Rudolph.

Let me tell then of Amado's best fight. It came past the middle of that fine summer when he had an adventure every week in the Plaza and we had adventures watching him, for he had fights so mysterious that the gods of the bulls and the ghosts of dead matadors must have come with the mothers and the witches of the centuries, homage to Lorca! to see the miracles he performed. Listen! One day he had a sweet little bull with nice horns, regular, pleasantly curved, and the bull ran with gaiety, even abandon. Now we have to stop off here for an imperative explanation. I beg your attention, but it is essential to discuss the attitudes of *afición* to the natural. To them the natural is the equivalent of the full parallel turn in skiing or a scrambling T-formation quarterback or a hook off a jab — it cannot be done well by all athletes no matter how good they are in other ways, and the natural is, as well, a dangerous pass, perhaps the most dangerous there is. The cloth of the muleta has no sword to extend its width. Now the cloth is held in the left hand, the sword in the right, and so the target of the muleta which is presented for the bull's attraction is half as large as it was before and the bullfighter's body is thus so much bigger and so much more worthy of curiosity to the beast — besides the bull is wiser now, he may be ready to suspect it is the man who torments him and not the swirling sinister chaos of the cloth in which he would bury his head. Moreover — and here is the mystique of the natural —

the bullfighter has a psychic communion with the bull. Obviously. People who are not psychic do not conceive of fighting bulls. So the torero fights the bull from his psyche first. And with the muleta he fights him usually with his right hand from a position of authority. Switching the cloth to the left hand exposes his psyche as well as his body. He feels less authority — in compensation his instinct plays closer to the bull. But he is so vulnerable! So a natural inspires a bullfighting public to hold their breath, for danger and beauty come closest to meeting right here.

It was naturales Amado chose to perform with this bull. He had not done many this season. The last refuge of his detractors was that he could not do naturales well. So here on this day he gave his demonstration. Watch if you can.

He began his faena by making no exploratory pass, no *pase de muerte*, no *derechazos*, he never chopped, no, he went up to this sweet bull and started his faena with a series of naturales, with a series of five naturales which were all linked and all beautiful and had the Plaza in pandemonium because where could he go from there? And Amado came up sweetly to the bull, and did five more naturales as good as the first five, and then did five more without moving from his spot — they were superb — and then furled his muleta until it was the size of this page and he passed the bull five more times in the same way, the horns going around his left wrist. The man and the bull looked in love with each other. And then after these twenty naturales, Amado did five more with almost no muleta at all, five series of five naturales had he performed, twenty-five naturales — it is not much easier than making love twenty-five times in a row — and then he knelt and kissed the bull on the forehead he was so happy, and got up delicately, and went to the barrera for his sword, came back, profiled to get ready for the kill. Everyone was sitting on a collective fuse. If

he managed to kill on the first estocada this could well be the best faena anyone had ever seen a novillero perform, who knew, it was all near to unbelievable, and then just as he profiled, the bull charged prematurely, and Amado, determined to get the kill, did not skip away but held ground, received the charge, stood there with the sword, turned the bull's head with the muleta, and the bull impaled himself on the point of the torero's blade which went right into the proper space between the shoulders, and the bull ran right up on it into his death, took several steps to the side, gave a toss of his head at heaven, and fell. Amado had killed *recibiendo*. He had killed standing still, receiving the bull while the bull charged. No one had seen that in years. So they gave him everything that day, ears, tail, *vueltas* without limit — they were ready to give him the bull.

He concluded the summer in a burst of honors. He had more great fights. Afterward they gave him a day where he fought six bulls all by himself, and he went on to take his *alternativa* and become a full fledged matador. But he was a Mexican down to the bones. The honors all turned damp for him. I was not there the day he fought six bulls, I had had to go back to America and never saw him fight again. I heard about him only in letters and in bullfighting newspapers. But the day he took on the six bulls I was told he did not have a single good fight, and the day he took his *alternativa* to become a matador, both his bulls went out alive, a disgrace too great even for Amado. He fought a seventh bull. Gypsy magic might save him again. But the bull was big and dull and El Loco had no luck and no magic and just succeeded in killing him in a bad difficult dull fight. It was obvious he was afraid of the big bulls. So he relinquished his *alternativa* and went back to the provinces to try to regain his reputation and his nerve. And no one ever heard much of him again. Or at least I never did, but then I have not been back to Mexico. Now I suspect I'm one of the very few

who remember the happiness of seeing him fight. He was so bad when he was bad that he gave the impression you could fight a bull yourself and do no worse. So when he was good, you felt as if you were good too, and that was something no other torero ever gave me, for when they were good they looked impenetrable, they were like gods, but when Beloved Remington was good, the whole human race was good — he spoke of the great distance a man can go from the worst in himself to the best, and that finally is what the bullfight might be all about, for in dark bloody tropical lands possessed of poverty and desert and swamp, filth and treachery, slovenliness, and the fat lizards of all the worst lust, the excretory lust to shove one's own poison into others, the one thing which can keep the sweet nerve of life alive is the knowledge that a man cannot be judged by what he is every day, but only in his greatest moment, for that is the moment when he shows what he was intended to be. It is a romantic self-pitying impractical approach to the twentieth century's demand for predictable ethics, high production, dependability of function, and categorization of impulse, but it is the Latin approach. Their allegiance is to the genius of the blood. So they judge a man by what he is at his best.

By that logic, I will always have love for El Loco because he taught me how to love the bullfight, and how to penetrate some of its secrets. And finally he taught me something about the mystery of form. He gave me the clue that form is the record of a war. Because he never had the ability most bullfighters, like most artists, possess to be false with their art, tasty yet phony, he taught something about life with every move he made, including the paradox that courage can be found in men whose conflict is caught between their ambition and their cowardice. He even taught me how to look for form in other places. Do you see the curve of a beautiful breast? It is not necessarily a gift of God — it may be the record life

left on a lady of the balance of forces between her desire, her modesty, her ambition, her timidity, her maternity, and her sense of an impulse which cannot be denied. If we were wise enough, bold enough, and scholars from head to motorcyclist's boot, we could extract the real history of Europe from the form elucidated between man and beast that we glimpse again in recall of the bullfight. Indeed where is a writer or a lover without a knowledge of what goes on behind that cloth where shapes are born? *Olé, Amado!*