

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/3

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Sol y Sombra: Sun and Shade

Raul Rivera, dressed in his *traje de luces* to take his final exam at Madrid's *Escuela de Tauromaquia*, struggles to adjust the final pieces of his "suit of lights." At fourteen he is the youngest of the students graduating from this school that prepares them for the life and art of bullfighting; among its star graduates shines José Cubero, known as "Yiyo" to the affectionate thousands who came to see him master the bulls with his hypnotic eye and lithe, sinuous body movements that drew a taut line from the sand to the sky, his arm and torso and legs one fluid stroke. Quite a goal for young Raul, who has not yet mastered the intricate folds of his parade cape.

I watch him with a student's eye; I am in Madrid to learn about the life and art of writing, with a focus on bullfighting, a far cry from the classes of first-year composition I teach in my regional university back in the U.S., (and where I have taught since Raul was a toddler. I am not the youngest member among *my* classmates.) This is actually the third time I have returned to school when my life threatened to unravel and leave me unclothed, the third time I have sought its distracting difficulty to test me. With school to shape and focus my energies, I reason that if I can figure out academic solutions, I can learn to sidestep dreadful routines of home, demands of eldercare, limitations of my own age; new challenges allow me to spin away from myself. This evening I'm here to watch Raul and his classmates, at the cusp of their young bullfighting careers, demonstrate their formal training, ready after this evening to enter the professional ring as *novilleros*.

Dressing in the "suit of lights" to meet the bulls is not an easy task. Raul wears tight white trousers sparkling with gold embroidery and red glass beads from calf to waist, his close-cropped black curly hair highlighting the freckles on his cheeks and nose; he squints against the late afternoon Madrid sun, still hot and bright at 7 p.m., as the older students mingle easily with their friends and family and the bullfighting *aficionados*, those who have come because they go to see the *corrida* whenever it is available. Two men in short sleeved shirts work in a small circle around him, smoothing his white silk around his shoulders, heavy with the gold embroidery that only the matador can wear, black and silver trim relegated to his supporting *cuadrillo*. Their voices are soft and low; Raul's jacket boasts large epaulets ringed with thick gold braid and fringe, but the underarms of the sleeves are open to ease his movement. Rigid as a box, the stiff jacket encloses him, and the tight pants work like a corset; how can he function in them with the grace of movement this pursuit calls for? He's in it for life and death, for the fluid arc of danger and exhilaration. I watch him follow the rituals of getting ready. Perhaps being ready is itself dangerous. Where does the confidence come from? I project onto Raul an image of myself—insecure, but committed to doing the hard thing. His preparation and *traje de luces* guide him; I depend on the structure of classes.

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Outside the bullfighting school's small metal *corrida* on the edge of the city, high-rise apartments and office buildings show just above the tree

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line; in a few minutes we'll share this ritual some have called the heart-beat of Spanish life that links more than 800 years of tradition, connecting knights from Iberia in southern Spain with the rural poor across the country; it was a seduction for Hemingway and an outrage to Franco; it is an opportunity for *duende*, that mysterious calling forth of chthonic forces, and an encounter some find, despite its obvious violence and inevitable conclusion in blood and death, a supreme expression of civilization, the arena wherein man subdues nature.

Dry fir needles sharpen the evening Madrid air with their scent even as they soften the steps of old men gathered around a circular wooden bar under the trees; the men lift cold beers, children chase each other, and women chat in small groups, their voices rising and falling together, a colored fabric woven of sound. At the gate to the school's ring, one of the men knots Raul's red tie and tucks it carefully into the sash that belts his tights. For a moment the boy is alone in the crowd, and as I watch from a distance he slips a piece of paper carefully into his vest. Perhaps it is a copy of the program for the exercises. It could be a good luck talisman; matadors are notoriously superstitious. Many avoid the color yellow; some years ago a young woman from Brooklyn enamored of the bullfight went eagerly to meet a matador, dressed for the occasion in her best dress—a yellow one. He refused to see her. Some don their attire in exactly the same order each time; some carry portable altars for spiritual icons from hotel to hotel and follow a careful ritual of prayers before each *corrida*. Francisco Rivera Ordenez, a current favorite in Spain, leaves the light on and candles burning in the room where he dresses. When he closes the door behind him, no one may enter that room until he returns to it, safe from his encounter with the bulls. Knowing they are about to enter an arena in which they have limited control, where skill and art are not always enough in the face of a charging, unpredictable animal, bullfighters exert control over what is possible to control. I recognize that impulse.

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The first time I used school for distraction, I was trying to get pregnant. I saw doctors, took my temperature and made charts, tried to relax. My body became a site for testing and experiment. Eventually I did what would become my pattern under stress. I went back to school, where rituals gave me power. I learned the words of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Yeats, and O'Neill, and I tucked them into myself like a talisman. Even as I pursued medical consultations, charts, and unpredictable treatments, the rituals of attending class, taking notes, studying, and writing sustained me. Later I endured needles, knives, lasers and hormones, and every month I re-enacted my private drama of life and death. In those days and for a long time I believed the structures of school protected me from the mysteries of conception by giving me something to control, and in some way perhaps they did. Now, I see a further appeal: as I stepped into the difficult territory of the mind I left behind the world as I had known it, entering the unknown.

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Near the gate to the school's *corrida*, blue and yellow tiles on a small white stucco building announce the "*Infermeria*." Matadors expect injuries and gorings in a career, however skilled the torero. One clear summer

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afternoon in 1985, the beloved Yiyo, 21 years old, performed brilliantly, then was gored through the heart by a bull he thought was dead. Having inserted the killing sword deep into the *morrillo*, the mound of muscle at the back of the bull's neck, and watched him fall, Yiyo turned his back and faced the crowd, his arm raised in victory. Then, inexplicably and to the fascinated horror of the watching crowd, the bull rose to his feet and charged the matador, who fell to the ground. The bull gored his object from the back and lifted his head, pulling the man to his feet. For an instant they stood together, man and bull, both dead, facing the crowd. Then they collapsed. In the wide openness of Plaza de Ventas in Madrid, a large bronze statue commemorates the event, on one side the figure of the matador in his glory, his back perilously close to the bull and its horns, and a group of peasants watching: one young man on his knees reaches helplessly toward the doomed pair, another turns away unable to bear the sight and a third, a woman beseeches the heavens in vain; on the reverse side, the figure of an angel kneels weeping over the empty suit hanging on the back of a chair. All matadors, *novilleros* or experts, lesser or well-known, with wealth and fame or without—all face the same dangers.

Raul and his classmates will meet young bulls tonight, smaller than those in the professional ring, but even under the watchful oversight of their instructor, they know the potential for injury. Young bulls or no, these animals have horns and are bred for aggression. Each spring at ganaderias where bulls are raised for the ring, the cows about to be bred are tested for *casta*: the fighting spirit necessary to perform well, believed to be inherited through the mother. In this proceeding, picadors on horseback take the cows on, one at a time to see their reaction to pain. Some of the animals try to escape the lances lightly nicking them; bellowing in protest they retreat to the far side of the ring to nurse their wounds. Others react by "running away in reverse," their flight/fight response triggered into a forward rush; enraged by the attack they make their own charge, determined to eradicate the source of the offense. These are the cows that are chosen for breeding. They in turn have emerged from a long line of special animals set aside for the corrida, a separate strain of *toro bravo* first identified three centuries ago and developed into several lines. Miura bulls, a strain of later generations, have the reputation for being deadliest, so belligerent they've dropped from recent use. One of them, "Islero," killed the favorite matador Manolete in August 1947, and "Avispado," from the same line, killed Paquirri in 1984. Yiyo, who was called to dispatch that animal, met his fate the following year, fulfilling the superstition that a matador who kills a murderous bull will himself die in the ring.

But bloody deaths in the ring are not a thing of the distant past; in 1992, banderillero Manolo Montoliú died by "Cabatisto." Dark liquid fury goaded them all, red and hot. Raul knows this history, all of Spain does. And yet I imagine his impulse to become greater than himself, to step beyond what is known, to access the paradox of control and mystery. Inhabiting that liminal space where both destruction and exaltation wait, must be worth the risk.

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Raul fidgets with his tie. A torero's suit is unmistakable: its ornate, box-like jacket stops just short of the ribcage, perched atop embroidered

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silk tights ending in pink stockings and black slippers. The suit places him (or her) among those who deal with death intimately, who administer it, and who by a combination of courage and skill and fate, avoid it for themselves. It instantly announces the wearer as someone called out and set apart from the world.

I had seen my first *traje de luces* at close range just days before, drawn by its ornate splendor and seemingly mystical power. One matador now retired from the ring says that for him donning the suit is like being "*con Dios.*" He married the American from Brooklyn who wore the yellow dress, and for her, the suits' jewel tones became the fantasia of interior decoration, half a dozen jackets hanging to air on the backs of her dining table chairs, an aesthetic feast. I stood before the shop window of Justo Algaba just off Plaza del Sol, one of two places in Madrid where they are made, the afternoon sun like a cape across my back; behind the glass a brocade suit flashed gold and red beside a capote of deep pink lined in bold yellow. The jacket hung on the back of a wooden chair and across its caned seat lay folded, with the precision necessary to avoid creasing the heavy gold embroidery, its pants. At its bottom edge arranged almost casually as if they had just been slipped off, sat two pairs of black shoes: women's with high heels and a strap across the instep, and men's with flat soles, decorated with openwork across the toe. Beside them lay more accouterments of the trade: silk rosettes, tooled leather hatboxes and two crossed *banderillos* about three feet long with barbed metal points on one end and green paper curled into wig-like swirls on the other. I peered as if the black braided *coleta* coiled into a tight knot held secret knowledge.

Buzzed in through a smoked glass door, I could see immediately that the space was intended for bullfighters. End tables holding bullfighting magazines flanked a green leather love seat; bolts of silk shone just visible through the door of the workroom. It had the air of a Degas painting, all preparation and anticipation. Suits for both adults and children, a sign said, are the handwork of two months, the intricate paisley scrolls and flowers in designs more than 300 years old. I felt unsure about being there; my access to this world was as a writing student, certainly not one who knows its brutal grace from experience. Still, like the insiders to this shop, writers feel the potential for entry into another world, and the threat of destruction, of offering oneself to dangerous vulnerability at the hands of that which we love.

On long shelves behind the counter hung awards and posters from multiple bullfights, signed by the toreros who had worn the suits made here. Here's where they come, the top matadors, to order as many as a dozen of these constructions at the beginning of a season; travel and sweat and blood take their toll on the hand embroidery. Less successful toreros and beginners unable to afford the \$1875 for each one might work in used or borrowed suits, feeling the weight of both accumulated sweat and the good or bad fortune of the torero who wore them before. That afternoon I wanted to feel the heft of the fabric and smell the metal of the swords. I picked up a *capote de paseo* folded on the counter, surprised by its nearly ten pounds. Its heavy pink broadcloth lined with yellow, its edges neatly hemmed, a collar top-stitched in white. These are the capes that the bulls see first, that the *banderilleros* drag along the sand to see how the bull follows; they are wide and cumbersome, and to see them lift suddenly at the

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end of a pass as if floating on an invisible graceful spiral around the hips and shoulders of toreros is to participate in the paradox of beauty and brutality of the corrida. Then I spied a *muleta* on the shelf, the red capes used to dominate the bull, to draw it forward in a hypnotic sweep. Holding it, I inserted an imaginary sword into its top hem, moved it along the tile floor of the shop, imagined dragging its unfinished edge in a red semi-circle on golden sand. Its frayed ends seemed curiously incomplete. I had learned a lot about bullfighting these past weeks, but it, too, was incomplete. How did all these pieces fit together? What synergy of fabric and will yielded the ability to stare into the eyes of a charging bull of 1200 pounds and stand perfectly still? How do we get to be "*con Dios*," to be in both this world and another, beyond ourselves, beyond the limits of the known?

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Some time ago my friends Katherine and her husband, Michael, an Episcopal priest, asked me to be one of the godmothers for their daughter's baptism. That afternoon I sat in their living room and wept for long moments, unable to reply. Katherine knew my struggle, knew that I was both thrilled and jealous at Maggie's birth, knew that I was not feeling spiritual. The clock ticked on the mantle, people came and went through the room, the evening light gathered into pools on the coffee table, and I simply wept. Finally I asked what I had to do, what I had to say to participate in the ceremony. Michael, my priest and friend, replied, "You don't have to *believe* it." To him, being *con Dios* was instantiated through acts of will as much as spiritual visitation; showing up in honesty, if not faith, counted for something. I was shocked—and liberated. Freed from the responsibility of belief, I could enter the structure of the ritual itself, sustained by the emotional connection to people I loved.

Rituals we practice provide the illusion of control, as in superstitions, and paradoxically also the means to the unknown. They are at once an effort to create order from chaos and to open ourselves to what lies beyond order. The torero who puts on the suit of lights becomes larger than he was. The matador who married the young woman from Brooklyn in love with the bullfight says that for him donning the suit is "*todos transformado*." With each piece—the salmon-pink colored stockings and black slippers, the tight-fitting trousers that he must be helped into, the white pleated shirt and red string tie, the embroidered jacket, the braided *coleta*, the wool felt *mantera*, the parade cape—a bullfighter crosses into a state where he can access mystery. Thus attired, as he passes through the gates of the arena, parades before the crowd and the dignitaries, faces his bull, and drives the sword home, he occupies and gives those of us who watch access to the threshold between life and death.

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I went through with the baptismal service for my friends. Dressed in my church-going best, I confronted the baptismal font across from Michael in his priestly vestments: a white satin chasuble, heavy with gold embroidery, his white alb girdled with a tasseled linen cincture, a white linen maniple draped like a napkin over his left forearm, a white baptismal stole around his neck, each piece a part of church liturgy and history, each piece part of the priestly function. With the others in the late morning light, standing in the small wooden church building near the front door,

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I repeated the responses. I watched myself on the edge of the circle as if from a distance, aware that I was following a form I didn't fully inhabit, wearing an ill-fitting suit. But I was held by the sharp incense, the splash of the water, the gray marble of the font, the pale light through wavy glass windows, the robes of the priest and the words we spoke together. To say that I was elevated beyond my own grief in the greater celebration of life is too easy, and not true. I remained stiff and angry and self-pitying. But something in those rituals connected me to centuries of tradition and belief in a fabric woven from thousands of prayers and acts of faith, irrespective of my confidence in them. It would be years before I began to understand the framework of ritual as a structure, the formality of the language, the movements, the vestments, the measured sequence of events as a door. On one side of it we live in what we know and try to control; on the other we enter a realm beyond naming. It is terrifying, this unknowable mystery, and yet we seek it from our deepest level as a release from the confines of control and responsibility.

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The men assisting Raul return with the boy's parade *capote*, the heavy satin cape that all of the toreros wear for their entrance. They drape it over his shoulders and as he holds his left arm bent at the elbow, they wrap the end around him in a kind of sling, pleating the heavy fabric into folds that the boy can grasp against his chest. They do not laugh or joke but their touch is gentle. Then the other side, bringing the cape under the right arm and again pleating, tucking the tightly rolled end into the left side, so that the boy looks as if he is carrying an infant, which at the same time holds him in a tight embrace. He stands for a moment with his head down, lost in his thoughts. What is he thinking? Remembering his teacher's words of advice? Steeling his emotions against fear? His body against failure? What is at stake is the ability to stand still in the ring and face danger.

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Long after standing at the baptismal font, I found myself again in graduate school, this time, with a foundering marriage. One afternoon early in my new literature program, I sat across the desk from my professor to discuss my class presentation that afternoon. He was a small man with black hair thinning on top, wire rimmed glasses, and eyes behind the glasses narrow and small despite the power of the lenses to magnify, and he handled papers and books with propriety; they were his property and what was in them was his, too. As he quizzed me on our text, I stumbled through the answers. "You missed a lot," he said. "You missed a lot." Then, questions on my background. It had been ten years since I last took classes. This seminar was designed for someone who had taken his earlier course on Naturalism; people needed to come to its study with some groundwork already done. "You have a lot to catch up on," he said, peering into my face. "Can you do this work?" I didn't answer; I didn't know. I went home and put myself to bed, where I stayed for three days before I took myself to the library and "ran away in reverse" into the work.

One evening after class I was slow to gather my papers from the seminar room, now emptied of everyone but the two of us. Outside, the fall semester had become November and it was cold. My professor gathered his papers and books and stopped briefly to look at me. "How is it go-

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ing?" he asked, with enough gentleness to make me notice. "How are you doing?" The question caught me off guard; the opening into my personal effort made me, for an instant, aware of myself as a person who was struggling in a strange place with difficult material in a process that threatened to undo me, and invited me to believe that someone else cared about that struggle. Tears sprang to my eyes in a flush of gratitude, and I wanted to tell him how I was, how I really was. Stammering, I started to speak, when something in his face told me that to make myself vulnerable here was not a good idea.

"I'm working it out," I said, passing a metaphorical cape beside me. I needed to let him know that I could handle it all, that I was the kind of student who belonged there in that program. "It's coming together, bit by bit." I think of Raul as I remember this. What is at stake is the ability to stand still in the ring and face danger.

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Raul waits for his bull in the ring. As the youngest of the six students being tested, he is last on the cartel. I watch him from my wooden seat, chosen for its shade. *Sombra* is desirable at a bullfight, out of the scorching Spanish sun. Seats in the punishing *sol* are cheap ones; more moderately priced tickets give you seats that start out in the sun and gradually become enveloped in comforting shade as the evening moves. In the shade, sharp edges soften and you can open your eyes more widely; you can watch without dark glasses. A class favorite makes a good, swift kill, and the friendly audience cheers wildly, waving white handkerchiefs toward the president's box, asking for a trophy for the torero. The elderly man in the box nods, and the boy is presented with two hooves. Because we are at school and not a professional ring, the hooves are not freshly cut from his bull, but well-worn and familiar shapes. He takes a celebratory lap around the ring, strutting in pride, holding a hoof aloft in each hand as he faces the waving, cheering crowd. Sitting among them, I feel none of his confidence in the future. At home I face work I no longer thrill to, and I have taken on the care of my aging mother. Beyond responsibility for her emotional and physical well-being, demands not insignificant, her frailty warns me that my own options have an expiration date; I can hear the footman snicker. So, past fifty, single and child-free, I am a student again, seeking a writing degree. This time the impulse toward school is not to find control in the face of an uncooperative body, or even a dissolving marriage. This time I want the other side of the door. I want *todos transformado*. I'm stepping into new ground, testing my creativity rather than my intellect, and I am terrified. Its rituals call for rigorous practice and unflinching confrontation, and lead potentially to a mystical encounter with the unknown. I believed I came here to study writing; maybe I have come to Spain after all to discover a mystery.

At last Raul moves to the center of the ring. Late afternoon sun catches the red beads and gold threaded embroidery on his *traje de luces* in a sudden flash of light and then drops into shade at a line between us. He may be ready for this contest in heart and mind and body, full of faith in his training and desire for transcendence; perhaps he is unsure. His slipped steps cross the yellow sand and stir it briefly, and he plants himself in the path the bull will take when it charges through the gate.