

CREATIVE NON-FICTION

STEPHEN S. HOWIE

Mira Flores

I dreamt that my two older brothers sacrificed a bull. They fought it all night in a ditch out behind the house while my mother, father and I slept in the same room. I woke early in the morning to the sound of movement in the house and went downstairs to find my eldest brother, Mark, walking into the family room of our home in Carbondale, Illinois. He had dirt on his shoes and I thought about what Mom would say, which was, "Look at that trail you're leaving. You go back to the door and take those things off." I followed the clumps of dirt into the hallway where Mark stood in front of a painting my other brother did of a naked woman on her knees with a bowl in her hand. My mother used to say she could see her own mother's face in the figure of that woman—Vera Watson in profile. It made me think of that black and white picture they always showed us at school of the beautiful young woman with her head turned away that was also the profile of an old hag with a straight line for a mouth and a feathery hat on her head. Once I saw the old hag, I could never make the young woman come back. Mark was wearing a white v-neck T-shirt. My dad had a whole stack of them in his third drawer. The shirt was wet all the way through and hanging off him. In his hands he held a long, wooden stick carved sharp at one end. At first, I thought it was topped by the bull's bloody head, but when I looked up, what I saw instead was a plaster cast of the animal's head. Mark did not look at me. He stuck the stick through the living room ceiling. That must be the ritual, I thought, and asked him if anyone had been hurt. He did not seem to hear.

Mid-August, Mira Flores, Spain, 1993

The black bull surged forward and Mark threw his cape over its head as if discarding his jacket at a dinner party. He turned to meet the other guests, and the bull drove into him with the force of a skidding car. Across the plaza, squat Spanish men with big bellies and red handkerchiefs around their necks stared down past their cigars into the ring. Behind them, rows of tourists in colorful T-shirts

strained forward or covered faces with hands. In the ring, lanky teenagers with tucked-in T-shirts watched from eye level along the edge of the sand, arms crossed. Behind them, circling the plaza, a wall of faces peered over the red barricade. All eyes strained toward the edge of the ring where black head and horns were moving through my white, stick body of a brother, pushing him soundlessly through the air. I stared at the scene through a camera, not taking pictures now, but watching the action on a tiny framed screen. The horn nearest to me was deformed, bent down next to the animal's head like a ram. As my brother glided across the bordered camera square, his armpit rested on that bent horn, hooked like a fish.

And then he was gone. The camera dropped, and I stared straight ahead wondering if I had imagined it. The image lingered: my brother's white shirt fluttering against the bull's black forehead, Mark turning his head up toward the sky and grimacing. It was the same expression I had seen the day before in one of Goya's paintings. At the center of the piece was a group of Moslem crusaders on horseback. They had been ambushed by a mob of Spanish peasants. One of the crusaders had the same grimace on his face as he was pulled off his horse from behind by two hands—surprise in the wide open eyes, a discomfort in the curl of the mouth, opened up like a question mark. He pulled his head back as if recoiling from his body. In my brother's face, through the camera, in that moment, I saw that same loss of balance, the same surprise in his eyes, his mouth curling open and up. The event had turned into something else before he was ready, from sport to trauma, one step too far, now out of control, beyond his control. Then he disappeared. My forefinger relaxed and absently the camera clicked.

"You know what my favorite part of the bull is?" Mark asked me once as we strode down an empty cobblestone street in his Spanish town late one night, in and out from under the street lamps, half drunk. He stopped me under one of the lights. "The way the black hair curls on their foreheads." He tugged down his own black curls, braided them together with his fingers and pressed them flat against his square, white forehead. "They curl in and out like fucking madness." He pushed his head forward and jutted his chin out at me,

holding down his curls with a flat hand and staring ominously from under them with cold black eyes.

My brother has no balance in his passion. He lives in broad, courageous strokes, in love with a flamenco dancer, painting demonic bulls and heroic, ghostly matadors in a courtyard outside his apartment. A heavy round table is littered with his things: a crumpled pack of Fortuna cigarettes, a colorful bullfighting magazine, my camera. The thin mountain air is scented sweet by a honeysuckle bush that protrudes from the corner. It is the size of a Volkswagen Bug. At night, Mark dresses up, drapes a perfectly ironed white linen shirt over his muscular shoulders. He walks around with it open in the front. In his room, a single pair of pressed, black pants hangs safely above the jumble of someone who never thinks about putting things away. On the floor, stacks of bullfighting magazines rise out of cardboard boxes. From the corners, paintings on canvas are lined up the way they line up posters at poster shops, so you can flip through them one at a time. It's hard to find a place to step, and it's important to be careful. On the only table in the room, a metal contraption with tube legs, my brother clears a space. I stand back as he presents his work to me, leafing through his latest drawings of bulls rising up in fiery red tones, matadors in mid-pass, bulls trotting toward unseen figures, head bowed into a ghost-like human figure with a see-through cape, rising up and exploding blue through the other side, thick spittle flinging out from wide nostrils, cupped black mouth. While I sort through the drawings, Mark brings out others: a tall painting of a half-dressed madman running wildly across a rocky moonscape in the dead of night, a woman underwater, her breasts and stomach striped by the reflection of grass and trees, another underwater shot, a man this time with his hair raised and cheeks bulging with held air. I am amazed by the white stomach of the woman, the floating hair of the man, the arms of the madman dancing in the field through the shadows of night clouds and dark mountains. Mark listens to my comments from the bathroom as he slicks back his curly black hair and tucks in his shirt. While he gets ready, I stare for a long time at a drawing that is tacked up on the bare white wall. My eyes keep going back to it, even though it's not my favorite. It shows the head of a bull rising up, filling the paper with

its mass. It is red and pink and rises like steam, devil horns up, black at the tip. It disturbs me, looks back at me through small black eyes too wide apart. Something about the way it is separated from the act of bullfighting, from the scene I imagine around it, somehow it becomes something else, more dangerous, more threatening, almost human.

That night, we go to a restaurant where the owner greets Mark by name at the edge of a courtyard surrounded by white flowers. He claps "Marco" on the shoulder and leads us up to a heavy wooden table. While we sip beer and put thin slices of ham across French bread, a mounted screen above the bar flickers with a Real Madrid soccer game. The Spanish announcer sounds like he's calling a horse race. Scenes of bullfighters and live shots from above bullfighting plazas spread out across the wall, picadors on wide Belgian horses, matadors in full Suits of Lights, close-ups of passes in black and white, the bull's blood slicked down its side like water. Some of the pictures are autographed in sweeping black letters.

Mark tells me that he has figured something out about relationships. No matter what, he tells me, there's always someone who has the power and someone who doesn't. Next time, he says, next time I'm going to be the one with the power. I sip my beer, think about this. We are surrounded by images of bulls and matadors, acts of defiance and courage. Men doing what men do. I want to tell him I don't think it's that simple, that power is not something you have or don't have. I want to tell him I have learned something about this, I have come to a different place where power is not a clear-cut issue. I want to tell him I remember the time when he fell in love with a woman named Ellen and how she treated him so badly. I want to tell him that maybe he has to change the way he approaches these things for his relationships with women to get better. I can look at his face and tell he thinks hard about this, he has a hurt look in his eyes and he is leaning forward, pulling his hand through his hair because he can't think straight. I want to tell him none of us can. I want to tell him how hard it is not to be afraid.

"Fuck it," he says and sits back in his chair. Leaning back, his face has changed; his snarl tells me he has given up for now, says it doesn't matter, I will get by on my own despite this problem. But I

can tell it is haunting him, I can tell this scares him. And although I say nothing, let it fade away, it worries me.

Later, we meet up with Jose, a banderillo who sticks daggers into the muscular necks of Spanish bulls for a living. Jose is the type of fellow who seems to be living at a more energized level than the rest of the world, almost as if he was plugged in somewhere, juiced. His Spanish is so fast I can catch only the occasional word. It is such a challenge to understand him. When I do understand a word, I almost want to yell it out, as if the whole thing were a contest. "Toro!" I would yell. "Bastante." "Fuerte." Jose is young and handsome with a wide jaw and short hair that could have been pulled from a mold and placed on his head. When I watch him talk my eyes focus in on the muscles in his jaw, the way they ball up and relax, ball up and relax, when he's not talking. He puts his hand on my shoulder and squeezes, friendly while he talks, and I can tell he is saying something about me, but I can't make it out. Still, I smile because I like him and my brother bends over laughing and translates. "He says you are como un burro, like a donkey. It's a compliment, a way of saying you are strong." Jose looks at me again, clinches his jaw and pats his hand on my face.

At a festival in a small Spanish town I saw Jose get insulted and tell a bullfighter in not so many words to fuck himself. We were in the city building of the town in a big room with wooden benches and dark murals painted on the walls. All the bullfighters were with their assistants, changing out of their suits of lights, which were carefully wrapped in linen and put down on cardboard molded to keep the shape. After the fight, Jose was fuming. He folded his clothes like a robot about to explode. Across the room, the banderillos and other participants in the fight changed and folded their clothes at various spots between the wooden benches. Steam from the sweat rose toward the ceiling. Some of the picadors, heavy men who stick spears into the bulls from horses, were talking across the room in gruff voices. One was louder than the rest, and he entertained the room while he undressed. Jose didn't laugh or say a word. When he had packed up his suit, he zipped up his bag and paced over to the young bullfighter with the American face and short, feathered brown

hair. The bullfighter could not have been more than sixteen years old but acted much older. By Spanish standards he was a celebrity, someone whose picture appeared in the paper, who met all the local dignitaries, who gave autographs outside the plaza and held up the ear of a bull in his hand after a good fight. In America, he might have been a politician or the handsome son of a butcher. He was the kind of boy who is adored by old women because it makes them think back to a younger, bravado version of their own husbands.

Jose stood square in front of him, talking quietly but forcefully, repeating the same phrase again and again. He gesticulated with tense hands. The young bullfighter was trying to comfort him, to put him at ease, while his assistant paused, waiting for the next piece of clothing. Jose would not be calmed. Finally he came back and finished arranging his bag, placed the pink and yellow cape, folded like a flag, on top. In the car, he shook his head and looked disgusted. Mark lit a cigarette and blew the smoke out the window. He explained that the young bullfighter had performed Jose's job, sticking the daggers into the back of the bull himself. Jose was there in the ring, but the bullfighter decided he would perform the role of the banderillo as well. Jose had told him to never call him again. He did not come all this way not to fight. Jose offered a Spanish expletive I did not know and we pulled away from the plaza with a jolt.

In the bar, Jose is telling Mark a story I cannot understand in Spanish about a woman in his apartment building. At least I cannot understand the words. The gestures I understand. He is prancing around, tapping Mark on the shoulder to make sure he sees how he looked at her or she looked at him. He looks down as if checking out the butt of a passing woman, and the story continues. On the wall is a pin-up Budweiser calendar next to a dusty dartboard. The Real Madrid game is still on television, only the volume is turned all the way down. The small figures kick the white ball in silence. We go across the street and look at teenage women until the bars close and I stumble home behind my brother and his friend, wondering how much money I just spent.

In the morning, Mark will awake, hang a dress shirt over his muscular frame and smoke Fortuna cigarettes while he finishes a dozen drawings three days before a show. In the evening, he studies

his drawings through a mirror with his back turned to get a fresh angle. He is no faker, my brother. He is no coward. Every day he takes on the bull, its single-minded vision. Every day he makes it charge, cape extended, legs together, hand on hip, frowning in concentration. When I am there, I play the bull, a horn in each hand, bent over the way he has taught me, charging forward and sweeping across the cape as he turns me, makes me charge again. What does it mean, I wonder, to have such a fascination with an animal that represents both masculinity and death, imagining yourself controlling its wild energy, directing it around you, putting yourself as close as you can to its body and horns.

"You have to understand, Stephen," Mark tells me on our way to the festival in Mira Flores, "when the bull enters the ring, it immediately becomes a life or death situation." He sticks his hand out in front of his face, muscles tensed, veins rolling into place along the back and follows it from side to side with his eyes. "Immediately."

Mark has always been the brash one of the family, the one who dropped out of college and moved to New York, the one who made Mom cry at the dinner table, the one who squatted at a condemned London apartment with Spanish prostitutes and then moved to Madrid to paint and fight bulls. And I can't help but feel that his character has developed as a result of, in resistance to, my parents. When we were young we heard stories about my father in his youth, how he boxed and lifted weights in Mississippi, muscle shots in the sunlight. That faded newspaper photo of Dad hunched over, having just connected a telling blow, his opponents face swung back toward the camera, snot and spit flung up into the air as my father stares on, cold and hard. John "Fisby" Howie, Golden Gloves runner-up in the state of Mississippi. The Bull. There were stilt fights in the sun, rubber-band gun wars, wrestle-offs between fathers and sons during the holidays in Alabama, Ping-Pong tournaments, football games. When my father was growing up in Jackson, Mississippi, his father, already weak from Parkinson's disease, would watch from the porch as Dad and his two big brothers competed to see who could do the most push-ups, chin-ups. Like the generation before us, we were three brothers, and I wanted to wrestle like my brothers, play

football like my brothers, lift weights and be the strongest, the tallest. That idea of manhood, that competitive physical drive was instilled in me from the moment someone called me Howie. It was part of the inheritance, passed on through brothers and cousins and fathers and uncles who believed in themselves and their prowess, their conquest. It was part of me, this root, but it was the part that blocked the rest of me, that took over my body and kept me from seeing anything more than the bodies around me.

The trip to Spain in 1993 was a culmination of my search for a more masculine identity, at least what I thought of as masculine, living the way my brother did, dangerous and brave. I had left my girlfriend, Leigh, quit a \$30,000 a year job, and broken a lease at a duplex on the outskirts of Madison, Wisconsin. My boss had thrown a going-away party. I had told my pot-smoking buddies good-bye, said farewell to Evan, my childhood friend. For the preceding four months, I had kept a grueling schedule, writing news from 2:30 A.M. till noon, Spanish from 1-2 P.M., 40 miles of bike riding, 3-6, and back to bed by 8. Spare time, when it came up, was absorbed reading books about bike tours, ordering detailed Spanish maps, buying \$50 biking shorts, shirts, rain jackets, gloves, shoes, pedals, tools, racks, saddle bags, a lightweight sleeping bag, a lightweight tent, and stretching. I had decided I wasn't coming back. It was time, I remember thinking, time to venture out, to take a chance, to live on the edge for a while, give up the steady job, leave the quiet Midwestern city, my parents' wishes "Be careful, darling," leave the safety net and find a place for myself among travelers, adventurers, ex-patriots. I wanted to live, I wanted to breathe life in.

"They look like they're running slow, but they catch up to you quick," my brother told me on the way to Mira Flores. We were going to run the bulls. I stared out of the car window at the violet mountains catching the first pink outlines of dawn and tried to unwind the knot in my gut. I recognized in the scenery the rocky dreamscapes in my brother's paintings, mountains of madness rising, bubbling under apocalyptic skies, piles of clay cannonballs smashed down into clumps of rock and grass, shades of violet fading to pink along the horizon. He is looking out the window now too, talking

about how to create that space between ranges, how he has been trying lately to figure out a way to show that space in his paintings, where one range stops and the one behind it begins. He explains to Jose in rapid Spanish, and I stare out at the sun coming up over the mountains and try to concentrate on that space. It seems misty and intangible. He translates for me and I tell him I can see what he means, but I can't. There is so much else to look at, without focusing, concentrating on the space between it all. I take a different approach, widen my eyes until they water, decide to soak up the whole picture at once, the hills, the sun, the spaces in-between, all at once like it is, there in front of me.

After a dizzying series of switchbacks up and down mountains, a square, green sign on the side of the road announces "MIRA FLORES." Later, I would hear Mark's Spanish friends joke about the name of the town. "Look," they would say, "flowers." It was the first play on words I had understood in Spanish, and I repeated it again and again in my mind, smiling at its simplicity, a simple inflection, a command toward what is beautiful. "Mira flores." Look at what's before you. Look, flowers. The plaza rises up in the cool, morning sunlight to our left, solid and squat, like a high school football field right in the middle of town. All around us, people are wandering across the streets and filing under its archways into shadow. The older men, thick in the middle and wearing red berets, pause at a concession stand outside, drink shots of liquor out of Dixie cups and gesticulate with cigars. A policeman with a yellow-checkered band around his hat motions for Jose to stop his zippy Volkswagen. Jose rolls down his window and I watch his square jaw move as he argues with the officer. We cannot park here. My brother and I get out while Jose goes to find a space. The air smells of sweet cigar smoke and rotting flowers, and there is a steady hum of voices, broken by loud exclamations and thunderous laughter. My brother leads me around the side of the stadium where it is quiet and climbs up onto the top of the fence. We hop onto the top of a wall. Below us, in a square enclosure as barren as a roofless ruin, is one of today's bulls. My brother talks with one of the handlers while I watch the bull. When I move along the wall, the animal follows my movement on the ground below me, stops when I stop. There is a strange connection there, a basic comprehension that is somehow thrilling. There is a

rail and I grab onto it and drop my leg down a foot or so into the pen, still well above the bull's reach, and swing it from side to side. The animal jolts forward and stops, the front hooves planting and sending an arc of dirt against the white wall. His back muscles seem tensed as he waits for another sign of movement, an angry blind fighter wondering where his opponent is hiding, watching intently for the shadows to shift. Mark comes back and together we scoot back down to the ground, to the pathway, closed off on either side by thick, square timber, joined together like Lincoln Logs. There is a nip to the air, and the shot of liquor my brother brings me does little to settle my stomach.

Mark asks me if I'm nervous. I nod. "Look, Stephen," he says, putting out his Da Vinci finger, and pointing it crookedly toward the plaza entrance. "The most important thing, see, is that when you get into the plaza, you go immediately either to the right or the left." He puts out the rest of his fingers and moves his hand like a fin from side to side. "Whatever you do, don't go straight ahead. Because that's what the bulls will do, they'll go straight into the ring, see?" I nod again and he smiles his crooked smile at me. His eyes are filled with a sad but happy love, some understanding, I imagine, that I am his kid brother and he is worried because he doesn't want me to get hurt.

I tell my lover, Maria, that Mark is always talking at me, that he never listens. I tell her that he wants only to hear himself, to give me advice about living my life that he should be thinking about himself, in his life. But she says there's more to it than that. She says there's another element there that I can't see, a part of my brother that is trying to impress me, that is dependent on my reassurance. She says he needs me.

"Don't worry," Mark tells me. I must have looked scared. "Everyone else will be going to the side too, so just follow them." That's the last thing I remember before I found myself running. I did not hear the first two flares shoot up over the plaza, warning shots that end with the opening of the gate. I did not wait to see the bulls crash into the fence at the end of the straight-away. I just turned toward the plaza and started running. Everyone had their hands out, trying to maintain their ground as they moved back, or held out for that final moment to run, staring back to the bulls. I did not want to look back, I did not

want to see the bulls. But I could tell they were getting closer by the changing expressions on the faces around me as the group moved back in hops and then burst into a sprint, expressions like I have never seen before in my life: faces scrunched up into walnuts and raisins, brows furrowed and mouths contorted, lips drawn back in apprehension, or curled to one side, sucking in the electric air, and all of them, every face, every eye, looking back behind me to the rising clatter that was building up to the point where it was all I heard, so full and complete that it was almost like hearing nothing at all. Hands were pushing me, pulling me, grabbing my shoulders. I found my hands were out too, keeping my area safe from legs, arms, torsos, fingers. When it seemed the tension could get no higher, we bunched up in a group and exploded through the bottleneck into the plaza, veering immediately to the right, out of the sunlight and back into the shade.

I ran all the way to the edge of the plaza and began to jump the wall, but stopped when I saw that the other boys were standing there, watching the center of the ring. I squinted out into the sunlight. There, at the center, I saw a single figure down on the ground as the herd of bulls and cows rushed by and stopped in the middle of the plaza beyond him. The victim, the only guy who had run straight, was on his hands and knees in a rising cloud of dust. There was a communal gasp from the crowd. That poor guy, I thought. But something in me wanted the drama taken to the next level, wanted to see that guy get it, get gored, get flipped up into the air. Instead, he stood up dazed and limped away to the far side of the plaza. The crowd cheered and the bulls were led en masse back into the chute, back down the path from which they had just come. I ran across the plaza to find Mark, excited I had made it into the plaza.

"Did you see that guy get it?" I asked. He was dusting himself off beside Jose, testing his leg.

"That was me, you fucker," he said. He was pissed, his hair wild and his white shirt clotted with streaks of dirt. He patted my shirt pocket.

"Give me a cigarette," he said.

"Why did you go straight?"

He said he didn't know what happened, only that all of a sudden everyone else was gone from around him, and he was running

straight toward the far end of the plaza. I said I saw him kneeling down on his hands and knees getting trampled. He bent over laughing and translated for Jose, who shook his head and smiled.

"That's the worst way you can be, on your hands and knees. Jesus Christ," Mark said.

That summer, in Pamplona, an American tourist was caught while running the bulls, knocked down, scooped up by her belt and dragged down the cobblestone street. Back in my brother's village, Mark and his Spanish friends laugh about the woman. She was smiling, my brother translates, jogging along like she was in the New York Marathon. My brother imitates, jogging in place and smiling with his head cocked up, acting out the scene. He imitates the runners around her, showing the fear and turmoil as the bull approached. I imagined them zipping by the woman as she jogged, staring ahead. Later, at my brother's apartment, I see the video of the run, and my brother points wildly to the screen. "There she is! See her!" He smiles his goofy smile, and moves his hands in a jogging motion. I can see her white shirt trapped between the bodies around her, and suddenly everyone clears out like water rushing around a rock and she is left there in the middle. But her face is blurry and I cannot tell that she is smiling when she falls forward with an unseen weight and catches herself by her hands on the cobblestones, as the source of the jolt appears behind her, black as a silhouette. The bull curls its head down into her while a circle of men swish their shirts trying to get its attention. She rolls up into a ball and covers her head as the bull waits there twisting its head and then moving off down the street, dragging her by the belt, her head knocking against the cobblestones, until her body finally drops by the curb.

The video cuts back to the Spanish announcer and then to the woman again, lying on a stretcher while a man in a Red Cross uniform holds a blood-soaked cloth to the back of her head. She is awake. She smiles at the camera, a weak wave as if to say, "I'm all right."

"Did she live?" I ask my brother. He says the woman was taken to the hospital, but suffered no permanent damage. But the question seems to disturb him. As he flicks off the VCR his mood has changed from jovial to melancholy.

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It was not yet 9:30 A.M. The Spanish sun, locals call it "Lorenzo," was bright, but the air was still cool. In an hour's time, the sky over Mira Flores would have turned from blue to white. Jose and Mark stared across the plaza, both square jawed, Jose like an American sports commentator or soccer player, my brother's sleeve rolled up to reveal a thick arm too white for someone so long in Spain. Both wore jeans, and both had pink and yellow capes draped over their shoulders. They were inside the plaza, close enough to the thick wooden partition so they could duck behind if necessary when the next bull was brought out. Mark's black jeans contrasted sharply with the white skin of his forearms and bicep. He cupped his hand over his eyes and showed his teeth in a smile that was not a smile. He is here in Spain because of this, I remember thinking, here for this moment. But the expression on his face was pained, distraught.

"Are you going to fight today?" I asked. Mark didn't seem to hear.

It has always been this way, I have always felt somewhat ignored by my oldest brother. I am eight years younger than him. He saw me as a child and then he left, moved to Saint Louis when I was twelve, to New York when I was fifteen, to London when I was seventeen, to Madrid when I was nineteen.

Inside Mark's apartment in Colmenar Viejo, the stone floors are cold. Mark makes espresso in a steel contraption shaped like an hourglass with a spout on top, and lights a Spanish cigarette. "So tell me, Stephen, how are you doing?" he says, but I know that any answer I give will only graze his consciousness. I know my brother. He is more focused on the expression in my voice, more on the rhythm of my words than the words themselves, trying to see through the words without hearing them. Hearing for my brother is a distraction from what is real, listening is more with his eyes, the way things move and change, what is revealed in an image.

"Oh, you know, living in Madison, working for Wheeler from 2 A.M. to noon and then taking Spanish in the afternoons. And then there's Leigh . . ."

"Yeah, and how is she?" He asks, but I can tell he's not listening. We have moved to his drawing room and he twists his head from side

to side, studying the image of the bullfighter in charcoal that bursts from the white paper before us. Sharp wedges of afternoon sunlight bolt through the wrought iron bars of an open window and paint looping S-shaped shadows across the floor. Mark sets himself like a dancer, puts his hand up straight in front of him, thumb out to the side in a perfect L and closes one eye. Thick blue veins slide over the broom bones that spread out across the back of his hand and settle there in the crevasses. I go on about Leigh, the girlfriend I left in Madison, while my brother moves forward and back, touching up details on the bullfighter's Suit of Lights, hundreds of shaded bubbles that loop over the near shoulder and swing down to the flexed muscles of the bullfighter's hand. I finish talking, fade out into indecision. He moves up to the drawing, and then steps back, eyes the spot he has just touched up and takes a drag off a cigarette smoldering in an ashtray on the paint-smearred table by my side.

"You gotta know what you want, Stephen," he says, turning to me solemnly. When I look despondent he scruffs my hair with his free hand. To my brother, I have always been a child.

Mark asks me if I've been playing music. I tell him I was playing with a great harmonica player, but it didn't go anywhere. I don't know if he's listening; I can sense him fading back into his picture, drawing lines I cannot see, making changes I cannot recognize on the bullfighter's shoulder and arm. "How does it look right there?" he says, stepping back and drawing a line with his cigarette in the air down the curve in the bullfighter's arm. I tell him it looks fine, but in my mind I am noticing all the smudges at the edge of the paper, how the figure is so unfinished outside of the area he's working on, wishing the face was more defined, wanting to draw out the legs where they stop at the knees. And I find myself wondering how he can focus on that one spot in the middle when the edges of the paper are curling in where they are not taped down, the borders ripped like newspaper. I imagine the tiny triangular rips at the edge winding dangerously toward the progress that is being made in the middle, with every touch-up, every smudge, always advancing. And it bothers me that he can focus on that one space, on that one tiny square of detail, when there is so much left around it that is choppy and undone, left there unchecked, unnoticed.

While I have been living and working and going to school, my brother has been studying the bull. When he left the country, I was the center of my high school football team. Now, I am a writer. And all that time, while I was eating dorm food, dropping acid and running over the hoods of cars, studying Foucault's theory of madness, Shakespeare's comedies, moving to the northwest (hippies and potheads), to California (perfume and makeup), to Wisconsin (cheese and beer), all that time he has been here, painting and fighting and breathing and living this ritual-sport. This image he's connected himself with, killing the bull and creating it again in his paintings, what does it mean? They are images so easily reduced to fantasy. And maybe that's what it is in the end. Part of me respects that he has taken a fantasy and made it real. Still, I question the extent he will go to live it, and I worry about the inevitable cost.

Mark steps from behind the partition at the edge of the plaza and spreads his cape. The bull is large and black and its right horn is bent down next to its face. For the most part, these morning festivals consist of young, thin Spanish boys getting the bull's attention and then running from it and leaping over the fence to safety. Today, my brother is one of the few aficionados who have brought their capes. He is the first of the day to step out and try to attract the bull's attention. I stand behind the wall, poised to take pictures, a tense ball in my stomach. My cheeks are flushed, and I wonder at my brother's ability, what makes him do this. While my mind is clamoring to keep up, to keep clear, the black bull notices my brother's movement and begins to trot toward him across the golden plaza sand. When it is 10 yards away, the bull bends its head down and charges the cape. Mark is not quite ready for the speed, but draws the bull around wide as the crowd shouts "Olé!"

My mind is racing as I snap picture after picture. Why is he doing this, why does he need to do this, what makes him need to stand in front of that bull, in front of me, in front of all these people and guide a 1,500 pound animal around with a cape? What kind of power is that, what kind of identity, what glory, what hero? Where? There in the ring? That's just my brother, that's just my crazy brother, taking on a culture, becoming part of something, using his obsession to feed

his art, his passion to quench his thirst for life, something intangible, something perfectly clear, but only there, in the middle, there on the bull's forehead, the answer to a riddle that no one has asked but him, the space between the mountains that no one can see.

The most important thing, my brother tells me, as we sit out on in the courtyard rolling strips of smoked ham around honeydew melon, is for the bullfighter not to move his feet during the pass. That is how you tell, he says, pointing his food at me, whether a matador is brave or not, how still he stands, how close his body is to the bull as it passes. But I wonder, watching him hold the cape out in front of his body as the bull paws the sand back with his front hoof, if this is really bravery. This is Mark I'm talking about. This is the brother with the strong Howie chin and curly black hair molded to his head. This is the brother who always hit too hard when I was a boy, his little brother. This is the brother who always made me cry, but who I favored, whose team I had to be on. This is the brother who would tell me the way things were, who was always interested but seldom attentive. Mark was the one acting out an impossible catch in the end-zone, a spectacular one-handed, finger-tip grab, diving for the ball, grinding his knuckles into my side slowly, slow-motion tackle, recreated with all the intensity he saw in the action, all the true gut feelings and slow, grinding pain of football heroes. And me giggling "No, Mark," squealing, "Don't!" But he would keep moving toward me, mouthing something to imagined teammates and holding me there by the wrist so that I couldn't squirm away as he slowly barreled into me, slowly crunched me down on the carpet, rolling over me, head to foot, knee in my side to make sure I understood the intensity, how the game felt.

Mark came to see one football game of mine when I was in high school. He was home from London and we were playing the Herrin Bulldogs. The field was muddy and the guy across from me was growling like an animal, skull and crossbones stickers on the front of his maroon helmet, cross-eyed in expectation. I was chewing on my mouthpiece, waiting for a split second when I would push the ball back between my legs and explode into him, roll my hips up under me and push his shoulder pads up into his fat chin, fake high and take

out his legs in a crab block, slinging elbows and shoulders like punches, chopping my feet in the mud. I was an animal too, I could do this, this act, I could let myself go into this mode of being, stare into my empty helmet before the game, walk silently, stoically to the field in all my gear, hand and elbow pads in my helmet, first two fingers taped white between the knuckles.

The lights at Bleyer Field were yellow. Our uniforms glowed under them. Flames of steam snaked from the heads of my teammates when they trotted back to the sidelines and removed their helmets in frustration. I was standing on the sidelines and Brad Fisch came running over, out from under the lights, stumbling back toward the bench, hunched over like Igor and holding onto his right arm which looked too long, hanging down from his jersey in the rain. Steam was wafting off of his head and his face was scrunched into a grimace. Someone next to me said, "Brad dislocated his shoulder." And the coach said "Howie!" and so I had to go out and punt-snap for the first time and the next thing I know I'm lying on the ground and I can't remember if the odd numbers mean the play is going to the left or to the right, and I say to my friend Chris on the sidelines, "I think I've got a concussion," and he says in his country hick voice, "How many fingers?" And I drive my man forward the whole game, not knowing where the play is going, and not caring about much of anything except trying to remember what I have forgotten.

And after the game, when I was walking under the bleachers trying to think, Mark was there at the edge of the stands, leaning down to me and telling me about a great moment, real glory, when we were on the goal line and me and the guy I was blocking locked up like two gladiators and stayed there poised like a pyramid, an archway, and the quarterback ran right by us, brushed right by into the end-zone.

"You made that touchdown, Stephen, "Mark told me as steam rose from my head.

Later, my mom had her friend, a nurse, come over to the house. When she put her hand on my forehead, it was like she had opened a valve that let the emotions sweep back into the front part of my head, everything flowing together where her hand was, warm between my temples. I started to cry in convulsive bursts. I'm sorry, I told her

when I could finally catch my breath, but I'm so confused. And I remember how disturbed I felt, how disoriented, unable to read or sit still without feeling an overwhelming remorse roll over me. That feeling is what stays with me ten years later, and with it, the memory of my big brother telling me in his own way that he was proud of me, that I had done something that was heroic and glorious, I had acted like a man.

The bull begins to trot again, head down charge and my brother's legs are together as the cape flies back and the long front-heavy body scrapes by against the sand, pulling up short. My brother backs up, shaking his head. I take another picture. The bull surges forward again and my brother braces his leg as it whirls by, snapping another picture, more proof of his courage, his bravery. But he pulls in his back arm as the bull goes by and it stops too quickly, too suddenly. In an instant it is right in front of him, too close, standing there upright, waiting for the shadows to shift. "Mark!" I yell. But it is too late, and it carries him back in the air, and everything slows down, my brother's body sliding past my field of vision, turning his head back to the ground, eyes wide, mouth open. One final picture with that torn expression, head pulling back from body. Goya, I think. And then the cape on the sand in a bundle. Click.

The camera drops down. I lean forward over the fence. At the edge of the ring, I can see the black beast over him, tail swishing, turning him on the ground, and I push back into the crowd, around the barrier. "Mi hermano, mi hermano!" I scream, as I push the Spanish men out of the way. Jose is there trying to get the attention of the bull with his cape, and tears are running down my cheeks. "Mark!" But I can only see his legs, his black jeans, the bull wedging his horn there, trying to push it through, and my mind is whirling, slowly whirling around the plaza, around the village, the town, the country, spinning above the scene. I am ready to jump into the ring, my leg up on the fence, but my body stops and the bull turns toward Jose, and my brother is lying down on the ground, flat on his stomach, a rip in his jeans, his arms up over his head. And he pushes himself slowly up to his knees as I jump up over the fence and he stumbles back behind the partition. And I cry, I laugh.

"Mark, Mark, are you okay?" But he does not answer. And I hug him as the Spanish men laugh. And I realize, watching my brother dust himself off, that he is not scared, but mad, grabbing his cape back from Jose, bending down to look at the hole in his jeans, just a scratch, and under his arm, the same. Thank God for those shaved horns, I think, laughing nervously.

Later, my brother looks over the pictures with Jose, and Jose points to the final picture, the one where the bull is a black blur coming around him, and he points to the elbow and says "Americano." And my brother says, "Jesus." He tells me that his arm was bent, that he pulled the bull right around in front of him instead of swinging it out wide so it would turn fast and stop and he could adjust for the next pass. Later that day we take pictures of his wounds. He stands shirtless with his arms up to reveal a blue and yellow scrape like a flame licking his torso below his armpit. Another shot, from below, shows the ripped skin, dried blood on his inner thigh. On his face is a sad smile, part squinting into the sun and part something else. In a final shot, he hangs by his arms from a bar spanning the top of his doorway. His arms are taut, out in a "V" that stretches his torso across ribs and muscles to the place where the wound is pulling at the skin. In this shot, the sadness is in his eyes, a tired sadness that disagrees with the smile on his face, a slight turn to his head. Behind him, off to the side and unnoticed, the giant honeysuckle bush is fully in bloom.