

BLOOD IN THE SAND

Northern Spain Farewells Bullfighting

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Catalonia, Spain, September 2011. The morning breaks quietly, the sun rising from the Mediterranean like a god and slowly heating the sprawling metropolis; at noon it's almost painfully bright. By evening, though, the city has cooled to comfortable temperature – a relief, as our tickets are for the *sol* side of the *Plaza de Toros Monumental de Barcelona*: the Monumental Bull Ring of Barcelona.

We arrive early, unsure what to expect. Four oval domes tiled in white and blue sit sentinel on the Monumental's upper perimeter, watching over thousands of well-dressed ticket holders milling about: politicians, personalities from the Catalan bourgeoisie, and lifelong fans who can't believe this day has come.

Everything changed in June 2010, when Catalonia's parliament responded to a petition from 180,000 citizens and voted to abolish *las corridas de toros* – bullfighting – on the grounds of animal cruelty. The ban (Spain's second, and the first on the mainland) will formally come into effect on 1 January 2012, but today is the end of the season; the Monumental won't see another.

Barricades line both sides of the street and traffic has slowed to a crawl. Stony-faced police uniformed in red and glaucous blue

are directing pedestrian activity and keeping an eye on the camps stationed on opposite sides of the intersection.

On one side is a united front of 50 or so animal liberationists. They tout placards in staunch opposition to animal cruelty, forming a kind of gauntlet the punters must run as they make their way towards the Monumental for the 6pm start. *Shame! Shame!* On the other side are disorganised clusters of middle-aged men and a few women holding banners striped with the yellow and red of the Catalan flag. They read *Catalunya si es Taurin* ('Catalonia yes to bullfighting'), and *Viva Espana, Catalonia, y su fiesta nacional* ('Long live Spain, Catalonia, and the national fiesta').

Inside, the Monumental is packed to capacity, nearly 20,000. Next to us an old man with a cane wears a handkerchief on his head, tied at the corners to protect his bald pate. A woman wearing a red dress clambers up the stands, a gold-and-black fan in one hand, and a paper cup of beer in the other.

Throughout the course of the evening three *toreros* (bullfighters with swords and capes) will kill two bulls each, in six individual fights. They will be aided by a *cuadrilla*, or entourage, of two *picadors* (bullfighters on horseback), three *banderilleros* (bullfighters who use capes and barbed sticks) and a *mozo de espadas* (a sword page).

Each of the six bullfights proceeds through three stages with ritualised certainty. In the first stage, the *tercio de varas* (third of lances), the torero confronts the bull with his cape in order to observe its tendencies and ferocity. Then the *picadors* weaken the bull's neck muscles with lances. In the second stage, the *tercio de banderillas* (third of little flags), the *banderilleros* further weaken the bull by inserting flags (more like barbed sticks) into the bull's shoulders. In the third stage, the *tercio de muerte* (third of death), the torero enters the ring alone, and slays the bull with his sword.

The crowd leaps to its feet, cheering and applauding, only settling

with the release of the first bull, Dudanado, into the ring.

Dudanado is four and a half years old, and weighs a hulking 568 kilograms. Awaiting him is today's most senior *torero*, a well-respected fellow named Juan Mora, and Mora's three *banderilleros*, armed with bright magenta-and-gold capes. They use these to lure Dudanado into charging, enabling Mora to observe the bull. As Mora withdraws from the arena to consider his approach to killing Dudanado, his team gets on with the business of breaking the beast.

Two *picadors* armed with lances enter the arena. They ride sturdy draft horses that have been blindfolded, encased in thick red-and-gold padding, had their vocal cords cut and been sedated.

The *banderilleros* position Dudanado to catch sight of a horse. He does so and dutifully charges the oblivious horse, lowering his head and trying to gouge the horse's underbelly with his horns. One of the *picadors* strikes, stabbing his lance into Dudanado's shoulder muscles.

From the crowd, a man resembling Al Capone calls out 'Viva Espana!' Once upon a time, this was a slogan of General Francisco Franco's fascist Falange party. As a bead of uneasy laughter ripples through the crowd, Dudanado bucks and bounds away, his powerful neck weakened and deep red blood pouring down his back.

Heartfelt calls continue to echo around the ring: *Catalunya es Taurina!* Catalonia favours bullfights! *Barcelona es Espanola!* Barcelona is Spanish! These chants are in Spanish, not Catalan, and by far the loudest is the call for *libertad*: freedom.

According to the Spanish Interior Department, 10,000 bulls were killed in official bullrings in Spain in 2009. Throw in the unofficial kills made in training events and local festivals, and more than 40,000 bulls are killed every year. Some argue that bulls don't feel any pain during *la corrida*, while others consider it an honourable way for a beast as savage as a bull to die.



Animal rights groups like *Prou!* (Enough!) achieved the ban by arguing against the non-inclusion of bulls and horses in the Catalan Law of Protection of Animals. The law condemns any kind of animal maltreatment and forbids any spectacle where an animal is ill-treated or killed – with the exception of bullfighting.

Earlier in the day, outside the Monumental, Angeles de la Puente had told us how ‘bullfighting is not part of our culture. Culture is to dance, to paint a painting. This is torture, and if Pablo Picasso liked it, well, that’s his problem.’

Picasso did like it. He first visited the bullring in Barcelona in 1900 and returned to the imagery of *la corrida* again and again, most famously in the 1937 painting *Guernica*, expressing his outrage and dismay at the bombing of the rebel stronghold by Hitler’s Luftwaffe during the Spanish Civil War. One of the twentieth century’s most powerful works of art, Picasso shows angular people and animals – a detached bull, a dismembered *torero* and his impaled and frantic horse – crying out in pain and terror as an unseen enemy wreaks destruction.

Ernest Hemingway was also an aficionado. He travelled extensively in Spain in the 1920s and 1930s, and surprised himself by developing a taste for *la corrida*. But we should not be surprised: death is a recurring theme in his work.

For Hemingway, the bullring was ‘the only place where you could see life and death, i.e. violent death, now that the wars were over’. He was learning to write, and considered violent death one of the simplest and most profound things of all. So intrigued by bullfighting’s machismo and its quasi-religious and highly emotive rendering of the dance between life and death, Hemingway wrote a book about it, *Death in the Afternoon*. In this book – part history, part memoir, part commentary – he observed bullfighting as:

not an equal contest or an attempt at an equal contest between a bull and a man. Rather, it is a tragedy; the death of the bull, which is played, more or less well, by the bull and the man involved and in which there is danger for the man and certain death for the bull.

Hemingway found a place for bullfighting within his own moral code:

What is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after... The bullfight is very fine to me, because I feel very fine while it is going on and have a feeling of life and death and mortality and immortality, and after it is over I feel very sad, but very fine.

Back in the Monumental, the three silver-suited *banderilleros* take turns to position themselves at the corner of the bull's vision, while the other two direct Dudanado's attention their way with waves of their capes. When he is sure the bull has him in his sights, one of the *banderilleros* raises himself up on his toes with a *banderilla* in each hand, positioned high above his head for attack.

Dudanado charges straight on. The *banderillero* runs at him, then skips to his side and stabs the sticks into the bull's shoulders. This happens three times over, until froth drips from Dudanado's mouth and his stomach heaves, his head lowered.

Hemingway had close friendships with several bullfighters, and if he were alive today, he'd surely develop an admiration for the second *torero* to grace the Monumental: José Tomás.

Tomás started bullfighting when he was just 11 years old. He is renowned for getting dangerously close to the bull during the passes, and has suffered several high profile gorings in the ring. The notoriously private *torero* retired without explanation in 2002, but came out of retirement in 2007, saying that 'living without bullfighting is not living'.

He is short, immensely proud, and greying at the temples. When he enters the ring to take on today's second bull the crowd goes *un poco loco*: a little crazy. Behind us, men stamp their feet, while a woman below us seems to swoon. Tomás struts around the arena, taking it all in his stride. He doffs his hat and then places it on the sand, symbolising his intention to own both the bull and the ring.

The man behind us saw Tomás perform in the South of France just last week. He tells us we are lucky to be seeing Tomás today, as he is the best bullfighter since Manolete.

'Tomás takes it to another level. Football has its Messi, and bullfighting has Tomás,' beams our neighbour.

We tell him we feel sad for the bull. He nods his head, then goes on to point out that the bull has had it pretty good for the past five years.

'He has been well fed and kept in perfect health. He has had no work to do; he has lived like a king! And now, just 20 minutes of suffering for a death by Tomás. It's a pretty good deal, no?'

The animal-cruelty appeal might have been the bones of the argument for the ban, but deep in its heart this debate is about identity. Many Catalan people and political leaders want to draw a line in the sand between their region and heartland Spain; the ban of bullfighting, a Spanish tradition, represents this.

Catalan-born and raised Serafin Marin is the third *torero* to grace the arena. An outspoken opponent of the ban, he is received with almost as much reverential enthusiasm as Tomás. Twenty-eight-year-old Marin is tall, for a *torero*, and lean. Today, he's performing with a colourful cape with *libertad* fanned across it.

By the time he enters the arena for the *tercio de muerte*, the sky above the Monumental has bruised a deep bluish-black. Cameras flash in the crowd, picking out the gold sequins on Marin's skin-tight suit.

He is alone with the sixth and final bull of the afternoon, Dudalegre.

Blood covers Dudalegre's shoulders; his stomach heaves with every laboured breath. Marin stalks him, an angel of death armed with a red cape and a shining steel sword. Marin shuffles towards the bull then arches his body backwards, provocatively fluttering the cape. Dudalegre lowers his horns and charges. Marin waves the cape backwards to draw Dudalegre forwards in chase, then wheels around and around, leading the bull through a series of passes that make the crowd alternately gasp in delight and fall quiet in breathless anticipation.

Dudalegre follows, confused and angry and exhausted. 'Ole!' cry the crowd with every brush of the bull's horns against the blood-stained cloth. 'Ole!'

This dance continues for several minutes, then Marin draws his sword, and the crowd shushes itself quiet. Dudalegre watches Marin. Marin watches Dudalegre. Marin stands side on, cape in front, sword held high and horizontal. He gives the cape a flourish and strides forwards as Dudalegre makes his final charge. They meet in the middle, and Marin plunges the sword into Dudalegre's back, up to the hilt, down into his heart.

The crowd erupts onto its feet. '*Catalan torero! Catalan torero!*'

When Hemingway wrote that bullfighting is not a sport in the Anglo-Saxon sense of the word, he was right. There is no shared agreement on a set of rules for conduct or fair play between parties. There is no objective system for measuring or grading skill or achievements, and there is no overt competition.

Yet we can consider the bull's death both a victory, and a prize. The slow physiological crippling of the bull by the *banderilleros* and *picadors* and the inevitability of its death means that any victory to be found in the torero's dispatching of the bull – which, by the end of the fight can hardly hold its head up and is losing a lot of blood – is hollow,



and largely symbolic. The *torero's* victory is in the grace and agility and daring he displays in his dance with the bull, an anachronistic symbol of mankind's dominion over its wild and dangerous nature, and his desire for omnipotence.

Bullfighting's proponents are more likely to think of it as an art form than a sport. It is represented in dance by the *Paso Doble*, and seen from afar *la corrida* is like a dance: a haunting and aesthetically beautiful spectacle. Death, when it is finally dealt, is a merciful prize awarded to the bull by the *torero*, a victory over suffering. When the kill is clean the death is glorious, but when the *torero* fails to meet his mark and must try again as the bull stands shuddering with pain and exhaustion and waiting to die, it is not.

Either way, in the end we are relieved to see the bull go.

What would Hemingway make of the ban? He undoubtedly sensed its ascent. 'Anything capable of arousing passion in its favour

will surely raise as much passion against it,' he wrote, pointing out that from a modern moral point of view, 'The whole bullfight is indefensible; there is much cruelty, and there is always danger ... and there is always death.'

Like Picasso, Hemingway identified with the horses, and expected to be horrified and sickened not by the ritualistic slaughter of the bulls, but by what he'd heard happened to the horses. Back then, they were unprotected and would usually be disembowelled by the bull. By the time Hemingway had completed *Death in the Afternoon*, this practice had been stamped out by the introduction of quilted padding around the body and belly of the horse. As Hemingway scornfully explains, it 'avoids those horrible sights which so disgust foreigners and tourists'.

For Hemingway, a man's man, Spain was a machismo paradise, and that the retaliation could come from within does not seem to have occurred to him. There is a degree of dismal profundity to be found in the writer's fascination with the *torero's* dominion over the death of the bull; Hemingway took his own life in the summer of 1961.

After Marin has plunged his sword into Dudalegre's heart, the *banderilleros* leap in. Dudalegre tries valiantly to pursue them, but it's over. The bull falls to the ground, head heavy, eyes glazing over. He teeters and slumps onto his side and a *banderillero* stabs a dagger into the back of his neck, wiggling it to finish him off. Dudalegre's legs quiver as the last dregs of life spasm out of him. Deep red blood stains the sand.

The crowd roars onto its feet, pulling white handkerchiefs from its pockets and waving them in the air. They flutter like pristine butterflies; a pretty petition to the President of the Monumental to award *el torero* the ear of the bull for an exceptional performance. It's as much an appeal for the arrest of bullfighting's swan song in Catalonia as it is for Marin, who receives the ears and the tail.

As Dudalegre is hogtied and dragged from the arena by horses pulling a dray, Marin circles the ring, holding the ears and tail aloft. The crowd flings flowers and flags in his direction. Marin kneels on the sand and kisses the ground, before sitting with his head in his hands.

People pour down into the ring. Some take photos of themselves in the arena. Others kneel and scoop sand into whatever they have that will hold it: paper cups, plastic bags, cigarette packets. In a final show of nostalgic hero worship, the *toreros* are hoisted onto the shoulders of the crowd and carried out of the arena.

Tomorrow, the flesh of the sacrificed bulls will command a premium price at the market. But the meat is not very nice, a woman tells us as we shuffle out of the Monumental. No? It's bitter, she says. Too much adrenalin.

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