

## Aficionados

Jessie H. Cochran

I didn't want to go.

"The Plaza de Toros in Mexico City seats forty-seven thousand," my husband read from his ever-present guide book. "Legal admission prices vary from a few pennies to five hundred dollars."

"How much did you pay for ours?"

"To tell you the truth I'm not quite sure, but it wasn't five hundred dollars because we don't have that much. Here, let me see."

He took out his great fat wad of peso notes and began to count up.

"Never mind," I said quickly. He was likely to do his figuring aloud and I do not, or will not, as he prefers to put it, understand rates of exchange. "Forty-seven thousand blood-thirsty savages. They ought to have an S.P.C.A. down here. The poor bulls! They don't stand a chance."

I have a great love for all animals, including bulls, and have to think of something else when I eat a steak. I didn't want to see a bullfight. Senseless slaughter. And, too, I had once started "Death in the Afternoon" and had become so annoyed at Hemingway's high-handed attitude toward the tender-hearted that I couldn't finish it. I had hated his way of becoming one with the Spanish peons, when I imagined they were sniggering at him behind his back. Wait till you're asked to join the club, I had thought.

"I'll tell you what," Dick said, laying aside the book. "We'll go, but the minute you get sick we'll leave. I promise. Okay?"

So at 3:30 we were hailing a cab in front of the hotel. As usual, the driver turned to me on the assumption I was a Mexican (and with the usual little leer that suggested I was Dick's Mexican "amiga") but Dick cried out "A la Plaza de toros" in the peculiar Chinese sing-song he reserves for any foreign language, and we were off.

The first thing I noticed was that I shouldn't have worn high heels. We walked miles through the tremendous crowds of shoving, brawling Mexicans and staggered down the almost vertical precipice of seats to our own, which were down near the railing. Down so close and on the shady side of the bullring looked like too much money to me, but I let it pass.

"Good Lord, look at that!" Dick exclaimed, pointing. In the center of the bullring was a giant replica of a Pepsi-Cola bottle. "No wonder they resent us."

"Colorful old world pageantry," I said. I didn't like it already. Next to me were a group of Mexican men, dressed in festive white suits, passing around a pigskin full of tequila. The game seemed to be to see who could hold it farthest away from his mouth and aim the squirt accurately. The suits were becoming less and less white,

and I sensed trouble because Mexicans are notoriously bad at holding their whiskey. The Indian blood, I suppose.

High up on the other side of the arena the band started playing. It sounded like a New Orleans jazz band being led by a circus conductor but it was somehow thrilling. A group of men came and pulled away the Pepsi-Cola bottle, with much jeering from the crowd. The band switched its themes in mid-tune, the big gates directly opposite us swung open, and the parade of bullfighters entered. It was impressive, I had to admit. Matadors are surely the most beautiful of men, and the most arrogant. They swept grandly around the ring, keeping a stately pace, followed by their banderilleros and mounted picadors. Bringing up the rear were the chulos driving three mule teams.

"Cuadrillas," said the Mexican to my right, chattily. "Is named cuadrillas."

He hadn't missed that Dick and I were speaking in English to one another. Wanting to present the best possible front for the United States I smiled and said, "Is pretty. Bueno. Lindo." We beamed and nodded at each other. All but one of the cuadrillas left the ring and the band fell silent. It was about to begin, and I tensed myself.

With a mighty roar the bull was released into the ring, and he looked like black death. A strange wave of wild, fierce emotion swept through me, almost impossible to describe. This wasn't the picturesque, humped Brahmas of my childhood; this was evil, black evil. He galloped thunderously around the ring, his roar sounding as if he were in a cave; it had a weird, echoing quality about it. I hadn't counted on the bull being cruel. I thought, "The bull is cruel, vicious; he *should* be killed." He wasn't goaded, he was looking for trouble.

I have always had a deep distrust of any sort of mob violence. It is incomprehensible to me. I dislike reading about war; my loathing for it contains an element of personal horror, not so much at the slaughter but at the massive, violent emotion that makes the slaughter possible. I have difficulty cheering home teams. I do not care which side wins. I stay out of clubs not only because I am abjectly bad at working for an organization but because I intensely dislike it. My loyalty is always to the individual, and I know I carry it to idiotic extremes but I can't help it.

So there is no way to explain how I felt, except atavism. The crouching jungle of racial memory reached up and clawed me down and I hated the bull and loved the matador. He was brave, he was young, and he was immensely beautiful. His suit of lights was no longer childish but was suddenly the only thing he could have worn; it was a daring way to dress when face to face with death. I remembered primitive drawings of bulls on the walls of caves, drawn more delicately and with greater care than any other animal pictured. Why. The symbol of fertility, perhaps, but why should fertility be

at once terrifying and awe-inspiring? Is the great, black, snorting, pawing bull of the bullring a symbol of our own terrible need, our own drive, and just this once, perhaps, we may kill it, may lay the demon of our instinct? I would not, like Hemingway, call the bull brave. The matador was brave; the bull was pure. Whatever he was, he was purely that.

As the banderillas were placed, with much danger, the crowd rose to its feet shouting "Ole!" I rose with them, screaming with the rest. Far above us a bugle sounded, proudly clear.

"Ahora," said my Mexican friend, "el matador."

The matador swung his cape at the bull, and the picadors moved into the ring, their horses wearing quilted mattresses. At once the bull swung into the horses, using his horns. I screamed softly and the Mexican, looking concerned, passed me the skin of tequila. I drank gratefully, and all along the row of seats brown faces nodded and smiled at me. I was being as bad as Hemingway.

"Is okay," said the Mexican. "Horse okay."

And so he was. I noticed then he was wearing blinders, and couldn't even see the bull. Another trumpet call sounded, signalling the kill, the Hour of Truth. The matador walked sedately, ramrod straight, to a box at the right of us and removed his hat, bowing. Then he tossed it lightly to a girl in the box and turned to face the bull who awaited him, head downthrust, across the ring. The matador strode to the center, stamped in the sand, and grunted "Ah! Ah! Toro!" Over the short little sword used for the kill he swung his cape. The arena was absolutely quiet. The matador's words came quite clear through the chilly afternoon air, though he spoke softly and to the bull alone. The bull charged. Not so fast, not with the rapacious avidity he had displayed earlier, but with a deadliness that could not be mistaken. It was man or bull, it was good or evil. Someone was going to be killed. There is no use writing about it, because it can never be explained. It is not a bull who is to be killed, it is an abstract: I say it is pure evil. It is not a man who will, perhaps, kill him, or be killed trying, it is bravery. It is not a crowd of Mexicans, mostly drunk, watching; it is humanity. The phrase nearest it is Hour of Truth, and this does not explain.

Twice the bull passed under the cape. The matador moved his hips ever so gently to one side; his feet in the little effeminate ballet shoes did not move. A great surging shout came from the crowd. A third time the bull backed off, head lowered. He no longer bellowed. His lumbering hoofbeats thudded loudly in the sand. He was coming straight for the matador, who did not move. As the horns grazed his side the sword, free now of the cape, flashed momentarily in the sun and then was plunged into the hump of the bull. He staggered, his front legs gave way and he dropped, ever so slowly; dead. There was very little blood.

As the chulos and the mules came to cart away the carcass, the band struck up again, the matador strutted around the ring and we

shook hands with our Mexican friends, triumphant. There were five more bulls to be killed and we settled back in our seats, true aficionados.

## Cows Don't Pull Wagons

Toni Aberson

**M**ILKING cows is honest work, I said; after all, cows have to be milked. And so I milked cows and laughed at my sticky hands and rubbed my toes through the pasture grass. But then I heard I had a mission in life. I heard I owed a debt to the world. I was supposed to look up to the stars and hitch my wagon and, they said, cows don't pull wagons.

So I put on my shoes and went to a teaparty and ate little cookies because these were "nice" and learned about neuralgia and gentility and was called "My dear!" But all the time I thought about the kitchen maid peeling lemons and I saw long-haired, pink-ribboned Tabby sneak out to rub fur with Mrs. Petty's tom.

So I pulled my hair into a chignon and went to a coffee break and drank coffee to "keep me going." They called me T.A. and we talked about plane flights and ticker tapes, and long scarlet fingernails always clicked on desks or typewriter keys and I left there too after stopping to talk with the janitor about the best time to plant asters.

Finally, I went to a vodka blast where nobody knew anyone's name and they called me doll and baby and leaned heavily on my shoulder and close to my face while they talked about futility.

And now I want to know—since cows don't pull wagons, who will milk cows?

### BY A SLEEPING CHILD

Ah, sweet he lies; his tiny bed  
Walls him from the world of lead:  
Where his hateful brothers sneer,  
And no sister sheds a tear.

I sorrow for the soul that breaks  
When innocence is lost.—He wakes!  
Into his merry eyes I stare,  
And see the lizards lounging there.

—ROBERT MERRIX