

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Katabasis

Stephen S. Howie

Late one night, walking along the cobblestone streets of his neighborhood in a small town outside of Madrid, my brother tried to describe what it was like to stare into the eyes of a bull. We were both drunk. He stopped under a streetlight, pulled his black curls over his forehead, held them flat, furrowed his brow and jutted out his chin. He stared into my eyes. “It’s like fucking madness,” he said.

Growing up in the middle of the Midwest, I idolized my big brother. I admired his courage to leave the small college town where we grew up and venture off, first to New York and then to London and Madrid, pursuing his dreams and painting, always painting. Mark was a prodigy, a small-town hero, the local boy who made it big, the teenage artist whose paintings won contests and were re-printed in our hometown newspaper. When he was 18, he was hired by the local sports store to paint a 24-foot mural of athletes at the most prominent corner in town. When he came home from Europe, he dressed in suits, boots and a black overcoat. I was his kid brother, a squirt. He would look at me with loving eyes and muss up my perfectly feathered hair.

But while I was envious of his passion, awed by his talent and appreciative of his love, I also feared his recklessness. He was dangerous, always pushing the limits, going too far. From the time I was little, playing with Mark would always end with me getting hurt. So, I learned to be both attracted to his flame, but wary of his violence, wanting to be near him but also knowing to do so meant that I might get hurt.

In “Iron John,” Robert Bly, the American poet who inspired the men’s movement of the 80s and 90s, describes a rite of passage that involves “the Wild Man” who takes the boy from his mother’s realm and into the wilderness to find his true nature. While I now realize the sexism at the root of this tale, it strikes a chord with how I imagined my brother’s journey and our relationship when I was just coming into my own. He was the courageous one, who sloughed off the chains of expectations, the traditional idea of a middle-class American lifestyle – career, family, marriage – and ventured beyond the mainstream, living on the edge, refusing to give up or compromise, even if it meant living in poverty, mooching off friends, and hiding in his apartment as the landlord banged on the door, demanding the overdue rent. He had made a break from the

predictable to pursue his passion as an artist. He was venturing willingly and willfully through the fall that Bly describes, what the Greeks call “katabasis,” a trip to the underworld.

As I started to forge my own way in the world, I envied Mark’s freedom and regretted my own careful choices that moved me slowly up the ladder as a newsman, a general assignment reporter and a wire service grunt, writing radio feeds on the hour and chasing a different story every day. Once, after I ranted about being an underpaid reporter, Mark cut me off.

“Jesus, relax, Stephen,” he said. “You’re perfect.”

I could hear the criticism behind that compliment. I had not strayed far enough from the nest to really discover my passion or face my demons. While Mark was the prodigy, I was the perfect son. I earned straight As in high school and college, filed my own taxes every year at H&R Block, saved money from my meager salary, and fretted about the decline of my latest long-term relationship. Meanwhile, my brother was living in the moment. He squatted in vacant apartments, pursued the most beautiful woman in every bar, cursed the inept defense of his favorite football club and stumbled home with his comrades, arm in arm. He had his wounds and reveled in them the way Bly celebrates the despair of men.

When I visited Mark in Spain, we sat in the enclosed garden at his apartment in Colmenar Viejo, a small town outside of Madrid, eating squares of honeydew melon wrapped in paper-thin slices of jamon, sipping Modelo Especial and flipping through copies of “6 Toros 6.” The magazine featured colorful spreads of Spanish matadors, heads cocked to the side as they leaned forward and guided massive black bulls passed their bodies and toward a red cape held out beside them. My brother showed me his favorite photos, a bull leaping over a plaza wall into the stands as the crowd scattered, a matador hooked by his inner thigh and turned upside down, grasping the bull’s giant head as it trotted across the sand.

Mark had a pair of horns he had me hold so he could practice passes, guiding me toward a cape and then swinging me around him, hips pushed forward, spinning to an imaginary crowd and raising his free arm to recognize their imagined applause.

One day, we drove with his friend, Jose, the banderillero, to a bullfight in a tiny town called Mira Flores. We watched at eye level from behind barriers on the plaza sand as bulls not deemed worthy of the facing the matador were released into the ring. They trotted out one at a time, heads raised, searching at first for an escape route and then for something to charge. If my brother felt good about the bull, he stepped out from behind the barricade with his cape and did passes, while the crowd of drunken Spanish men cheered, “*Ole!*”



In high school, Mark had been the star wrestler, his wild black hair divided into square patches by the crisscrossing white straps of his wrestling headgear. We would go to the varsity meets when I was a boy and pound our feet on the bleachers as they called his name with the rising cadence of a WWF emcee. Mark would usually pin his opponent within the first 10 to 15 seconds of the match. After the ref pounded the mat three times, he would spring up and everyone in the bleachers would cheer.

Hoping to follow in my brother's footsteps, I joined a youth wrestling league in fourth grade. But I always found myself pitted against opponents on my own team at my own weight class who I could not seem to beat. The coach's son, with his red hair, freckles and taunting attitude, would tease me until I got mad. Then he would use my anger against me, let my momentum carry me to the mat, as he moved his body around behind me with the deliberateness of a spider encasing a struggling fly. Later, in high school, I found myself in the same weight class as a Greek Adonis. He was only a sophomore and I was a senior, which made it even more humiliating when, during wrestle-offs for a starting position, he pinned me while the rest of the team watched. Not long after that, I hyper-extended my back. The doctor said I could keep wrestling after physical therapy and rehab. I asked him not to include that on the note he was writing to my coach.

From wrestling, I followed my brother's path into football. I played center on the offensive line and went up against corn-fed farm boys 100 pounds heavier than me who growled before the start of every play. Don't get me wrong. I was far from Bly's image of the sensitive man. In fact, I reveled in the demonic violence of the game. In football, unlike wrestling, it was easier to disappear into the crowd, to have your own battles without being singled out.

Once, my brother, back from either London or Madrid, came to one of our Friday night home games. I was co-captain of the same team he played for eight years earlier. His football career ended when an offensive lineman clipped him from behind at the end of a play and broke his leg. Later that season, the local paper ran a black and white photo of my brother on crutches in his jersey yelling from the sidelines, still just as intense as he would have been if he were playing in the game himself, maybe more so.

At my game, eight years later, the punt snapper limped off the field midway through the third quarter with one arm hanging down lower than the other one – dislocated shoulder. The assistant coach, who had been a Navy SEAL in Vietnam and was rumored to have a metal plate implanted in his forehead, turned to the bench and shouted my name, "Howie!"

I had never snapped to a punter in a game. I went in, put my hands on the ball and looked back between my legs at the lone figure 15 yards behind me. He shouted, "Hut one! Hut two! Hike!" I pushed my hands back and watched as the ball sailed high over the leaping punter's outstretched hands. Then, everything went black. I woke up face down in the dirt with someone standing on my back. How long had I been out? I trotted to the sidelines and told my friend Chris I thought I had a concussion. "How many fingers am I holding up?" He asked.

Numbers, it seemed, were a problem. All the plays ended in a number that denoted where the running back was supposed to go – 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9 on one side of the ball, 0, 2, 4, 6, and 8 on the

other. For the life of me, I couldn't remember which side was odd and which was even. So, I blocked my guy straight ahead. For the whole game, I would go back to the huddle and no matter what the play was, I would block whoever was in front of me forward until the whistle blew.

After the game ended and I was walking back under the stadium steps toward the high school, Mark appeared at the edge of the railing calling my name. He was worked up. "You made that touchdown!" He held up his hands to show the way I had jacked up the nose tackle, pushing his fingers together and up. "The running back ran right by you," he shouted. I had my helmet off and steam was rising from my wet hair. I realized that I had done something important and my big brother was proud of me, but for the life of me I could not remember the play. That night, mom's friend who was a nurse came over. She checked my eyes, diagnosed me with a mild concussion, and put a cool towel on my forehead. I lay back on the living room couch and wept.

Even as a teenager, I began to realize Mark's version of masculine identity was part of me, but not all of me. I still looked up to my big brother as someone who was determined to do what he loved at all costs, but I was beginning to realize that my nature did not allow me to be quite as reckless, bold or brave. I was also beginning to realize that while his artistic abilities were impressive, Mark's ability to operate in the world was limited. He could draw a perfect hand but he couldn't manage a bank account or plan a trip to see us without mom and dad wiring him money at the last minute.

According to Bly, what must come after man's journey into the wilderness is a diminishment to what he calls "ashes." As he writes in *Iron John*: "If the man doesn't experience that diminishment sharply, he will retain his inflation, and continue to identify himself with all in him that can fly: his sexual drive, his mind, his refusal to commit himself, his addiction, his transcendence, his coolness." Over the years, Mark's act never seemed to change. While I was moving through the different stages of life and realizing that I had to adapt and grow, my brother remained fixed in his beliefs and his ways, staying out late, drinking and smoking, with a force that was never checked, like a bull. At 50, he was still getting drunk and pretending to be Mick Jagger. He still flirted with the prettiest woman in the bar, even though he was married, with salt and pepper hair, deep-set eyes, and a plaintive look on his face that suggested an underlying sadness.

The last time I went to visit my brother in Spain, I did so by bike. I cycled 1,200 miles, from London through France and up from the Costa Brava to Madrid under the sun Spaniards call "Lorenzo." It was so hot in mid-August in interior Spain that my traveling companion and I took to riding at night. When we arrived at my brother's adopted village outside of Madrid, he was

proud of my accomplishment, my fortitude. I had ended the trip at his apartment because I expected affirmation, recognition of my physical prowess. When we ran into his friends on the streets of his village, he recounted what I had done in Spanish while gripping the back of my neck, his little brother.

“*Fuerte, no?*”

They stepped back to take a second look at me. “*Como burro,*” they said. Like a mule.

When he took me to his studio to admire his latest paintings, the smell of oil-based paint was overwhelming. He flipped through canvases and displayed paintings for me to consider one at a time, pulled them out and placed them on a homemade three-legged stand with wheels. The light was always an issue for me, the way faces were smudged out and boundaries were dim and glossy between figures and their landscapes. He painted torsos of Christ on the cross, the body like twisting meat. Everything seemed like a flashback from a dark acid trip, transients gathered on a mountainside, looking out past the light of the fire circle toward the viewer, or a dark figure alone in the woods, dressed the way my brother dressed in a dark overcoat, the black collar turned up against the cold.

Why would someone capable of painting with such exact detail make his scenes purposefully blurry? Why would he blot out faces and empty expressions of their detail? Why was the landscape such a wasteland? It felt in a strange way like his ideal of a dreamlike purgatory. The subjects were all variations of my brother and his friends, but without faces, walking with a crowd of villagers up a hill, part of some kind of afterlife exodus, following entranced hordes toward a mythic force, a burning glow on the horizon. He pulled them out one at a time and lay them on a paint-spotted rolling table for me to take in and appreciate.

“Amazing,” I said. “Beautiful.”

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I had not seen my brother for years when mom suffered a massive stroke and suddenly died. Mark arrived for the memorial with a scar under his chin where a Spanish mugger had held his blade demanding money. Drunk and magnanimous, no doubt, Mark talked the guy out of robbing him, befriended him and offered to treat him to a slice of pizza at a place down the street. The mugger took him up on the offer and then, as they walked away from the restaurant and turned into a dark alley, he robbed my brother at knifepoint and left him with blood running down his throat.

Back in our hometown in the Midwest, Mark seemed even more reckless and dangerous than I remembered. One night, we went out drinking and ended up at the local bikers' bar. While I talked with a friend at the bar, my brother started dancing with a beautiful college student in front of her friends. At some point the student's friends started hassling Mark, until he finally told one of them to "fuck off" at which point a short guy with red hair ripped off his t-shirt, prepared to fight. I didn't know what was happening until, from across the crowded bar, I saw a woman we had met earlier that night mouthing to me, "your brother," and pointing to a spot where a circle had formed on the dance floor.

When I worked my way through the crowd, Mark stood doubled over across from this shirtless redheaded guy, laughing. The rest of the people on the dance floor had cleared out around the two of them. I grabbed my brother by his European overcoat and pulled him out of the bar and onto the downtown sidewalk. It was 1:30 in the morning. The stoplights were flashing red one way, yellow the other.

"What did that guy want me to do, recommend a personal trainer?" my brother said. He tried to joke but he was obviously roused up, ready to go.

I was pissed. "What the fuck, Mark?" But he was inside his head.

"Jesus, did you see that guy? Give me a fucking break, man."

Three days later, when we left after mom's memorial, my brother remained at our childhood house to clean up. My wife Maria wrote a list and went over it with him. Empty the refrigerator. Get all the beer out of the metal barrel out back so it doesn't freeze and explode. Turn the lights out when you leave. Lock the door.

When the housekeeper called a few days later, she sounded like she was in shock. "Is someone still here?" she asked. Newspapers littered the floors. All the lights in the house were on. The refrigerator was overflowing with memorial leftovers. The oven was on broil. "The oven was on broil?" I freaked out and called my brother in Spain. I yelled at him like I never had in my life. "You're fucking up!" I said. "If mom and dad were alive, they would tell you the same thing!" I told him he was a dangerous bully. I said he was incapable of thinking about anyone but himself. Then, before he could respond, I hung up.

I had new responsibilities as executor of my parents' estate. Suddenly, Mark's antics seemed less fun and more consequential. He insisted that we wait to clean out and sell the house, the same house he had almost burned to the ground a few weeks earlier. He wanted to fly to his hometown one more time, to stay at his childhood home with his Spanish wife and son. He had a vision

locked in his mind of how it should go. The home-selling season is in the spring, I told him. “You can’t live there. You can’t stay there.” He was incensed. “Why not? Why does everything have to happen so fast?”

At that point, I had come to see my brother as an obstacle and a threat to my new responsibilities as my parents’ executor. He had almost burnt the house down, the house I was charged with cleaning and selling. Now he was threatening to screw everything up and come to the Midwest with his Spanish wife and toddler. He was going to bring crazy back into the process. At that point, I had grown weary of his flask-gulping, bar-fighting ways, enough of his Mick Jagger imitations, late-night pool playing, cigarette smoking, drunk-driving self.

Mark felt slighted because I was his little brother, but I was in charge. He demanded to be consulted about everything I was doing – selling homes, distributing money, liquidating assets. But he was hopeless with anything that had to do with the mainstream world he had abandoned. He had made his choice and carved out his artist’s life. How could he take part in conversations about property taxes or real estate agents when he couldn’t be trusted to turn off the oven? At first, I tried to explain things – how the academic hiring calendar affects the real estate market, what happens to insurance premiums when a house is designated “uninhabited.” He demanded to see a record of all the deposits into mom’s accounts. He insisted that I mail him copies of all the real estate transactions. He found a way to assert himself into the process, even if it was merely symbolic.

Determined to sell the house before Mark could screw up the process, I flew home over spring break to clean it out without him. Along with my wife and my middle brother, we sorted through boxes of Christmas decorations and carted dusty rollaway beds out of the attic. We took carloads of clothes, board games, baskets and kitchenware to Goodwill. We filled the car with books for the local library – a set of leather-bound Britannica encyclopedias, philosophy textbooks, novels by Richard Russo and paperbacks by Jack London. We found crutches and letterman jackets, home movies on film that we didn’t have the right camera to view.

I was on my way out the door when my parents’ phone rang. It was Mark calling from Spain and he was pissed. “How could you do all that without me?” He insisted he was still coming in June with his family. I told him we had been very conscientious and put his things in a corner of the garage to sort through. “So, I should be thanking you?” He asked, incredulous. My head was pounding. “We did what we had to do. You don’t seem to understand how this process works. We couldn’t have you living here when we’re trying to sell the house.” “Why not?” He asked. “What is the fucking hurry?”

I could have tried to explain everything again – the home insurance premiums for uninhabited homes, the way the selling season works in a college town, how academics get hired in February and then look for homes in March, April and May. I could have tried to accommodate my oldest brother despite his lack of accommodation toward me or anyone else, but I had been working straight for nine days, stumbling across possessions from my childhood, struggling with decisions about what to do with a lifetime of scholarly work that our father had so meticulously classified and preserved. I didn't have the energy, physical or emotional, to argue with my incensed Spanish brother.

I can't remember what he was saying exactly or how I was responding, but I remember at one point he said, "You might as well conclude that last statement with, 'Whatever.'" And that is what I was thinking at that moment. *Do what you're going to do and I'll do what I'm supposed to do and I'll try to make sure you don't sabotage the home sale in the process. Whatever.*

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More than 10 years have passed since then. Our childhood home is sold, the distributions have been made, the estate settled. On the rare occasions when I speak with Mark, he remains charming and passionate, interested in my life, but in ways I don't expect, ways that catch me off guard. I know I hurt Mark deeply by emptying our childhood home without him. He would have reveled in the nostalgia of that process, of going through boxes and finding things he remembered, colorful, smooth granite he had put through the electric rock polisher, the tiny painted football players he would arrange on the vibrating metal playing field with goalposts at each end.

Robert Bly points out that the goal of a young man's initiation is not *to be* the Wild Man, but *to be with* the Wild Man, who is a guide out of the comfortable and into a new world of independence and choice. Maybe Mark was my Wild Man, my Iron John, as I ventured out of the protective home where we both grew up and began to test my limits and discover my purpose. In Spain, he took me under his wing and guided me through a masculine realm where the ultimate test of manhood was to stand before a 1,600-pound bull and direct its charge around you, to brush up against death as it moved past, to feel its power without being impaled by its horn, to look into black eyes that lack reflection or compassion, like madness.

In the Greek version of "katabasis," the hero ventures into the supernatural underworld, but the trip down is followed by an ascent, an "anabasis" which brings him back to the world of the living. Odysseus ventures to the land of the dead where he encounters the souls of his predecessors, kings, queens and Gods. But what makes his venture complete is his return to the land of the living and his journey back to Ithaca, informed by the souls who have given him advice

and warnings of who will betray him and a clear sense of his destiny. The underworld is a place to learn and listen, but it is not a place to dwell.

I used to think, Mark will never change, that he had chosen to dwell in the land of the dead, as my other brother once described it, “willful self-destructiveness.” But maybe that’s my own projection of the bull-obsessed version of Mark from 20 years ago. Maybe he has finally grown into his role as a father and husband in the land of the sun.

Now that I am no longer responsible for his well-being or his inheritance, Mark has gone back to his role as my charismatic, loving, enthusiastic big brother. I can see what his wife means when she told me once, in his defense, “Mark is nothing but love,” because my brother has a purity to him that drives his personality and shows through in the beauty of his artwork, which has changed and morphed into haunting landscapes and portraits of blues musicians. He is no longer obsessed with bulls.

On my last Skype call with Mark and his family, my brother doubles over laughing at an American saying that doesn’t strike me as particularly insightful or funny. He calls over his wife and repeats it to her in Spanish, “*Me dice que*, he’s an easy read.” I imitate the Southern accent of one of our Alabama cousins. Again, Mark doubles over. I enjoy making him laugh, even though we are far apart and have grown into different people. I still find myself trying to impress him, to get his attention by being demonstrative, to tell a story that he will find impressive or revealing.

Underneath this surface banter, I worry about Mark’s unchecked addictions, that he is still smoking and drinking and going out to the bars even though he is in his 60s, married and raising a teenager. The flip side of this worry is envy. I envy his singular path, how he has stayed true to his creative self, while I have given in to the pressures of making a living and put my own creativity on the side, an afterthought, something I try to squeeze in at the end of the night. I don’t ask him whether he’s still fighting bulls. His son looks just like Mark did at that age – black curly hair, skinny arms, dark inset eyes. I ask my nephew about his favorite subject in school and his favorite sports. He sits on the couch between his mom and dad and tells me about playing soccer and what type of music he likes. Mark says he can’t imagine living anywhere else. He’s lucky, he says.

“The people here are loving, the land is beautiful, the sun is warm,” Mark says. “I have my studio, a great apartment, my family, our dog, Molly.”

On cue, a black and white border collie appears next to my big brother, puts his front paws on Mark’s leg and licks the side of his face. Everyone laughs.