

equivocally means a tree-martin. I often watch the seemingly weightless bounding of the *faina* from my bedroom window, but I would not like my heart to be trampled by a doe! Milo de Angelis's "*il riso in bianco*" (which as every Italian child knows means plain "boiled rice") becomes Lawrence Venuti's "laughter in white." I wonder how this translator would render Dante's "*Il dolce riso della mia donna*"? "My Lady's sweet risotto," perhaps? There are other dubious interpretations of the Italian, and the reader, unlike the translator in this case, should arm himself with a large dictionary.

As for the quality of the individual poets and their poems, to make brief judgments on them in a short review would be quite unfair and misleading. Readers may well judge them more favorably than I do.

*Peter Russell is an English poet living in Italy and author of Teorie e Altre Liriche.*

## Of Men and Beasts

by Gregory McNamee

**The Last Serious Thing: A Season at the Bullfights**

by Bruce Schoenfeld

New York: Simon & Schuster;  
238 pp., \$22.00



The old man has done a bit of everything that a journalist can do. He has been an opera critic, a war correspondent, a sportswriter. He prides himself most on the years he spent covering the bullfights of his native Sevilla. For some time now he has been mumbling to his American visitor, Bruce Schoenfeld, who recalls the old man "speaking Spanish with such a harsh and peculiar accent that I can't understand a word." He remains incomprehensible

until he stands before a group of fellow enthusiasts of the ancient sport of tauromachy. Then, in a voice as clear as day, he declares, "There have been too many words written about bullfighting already. . . . The last thing we aficionados need is another [book]."

That may be true in Spain, where the shelves brim with titles on the *corrida*. But because the sport is not practiced in the United States, American writers have spent a little ink writing about bullfighting, and there is plenty of room for new books on the subject. At the apex of our small literature stands Ernest Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon*, an indispensable consideration of the matador's art; then there yawns a great gap between it and a mound of lesser works, including the same writer's *Dangerous Summer* and the worshipful *Or I'll Dress You in Mourning*, by the team of Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre. Bruce Schoenfeld's *The Last Serious Thing* occupies that hitherto empty middle ground.

Schoenfeld writes without pretense, fully aware that he will not equal Hemingway's great treatise. Instead, he gives us plain-vanilla reportage on the people involved in bullfighting, from spectators to breeders to picadors. Unlike Hemingway, he seems to take little interest in technique; on the face of it, Schoenfeld wouldn't know a *paso doble* from a *veronica*, although he surely does. What he has is a keen eye for everyday detail, and his book is as much about post-Franco Spain as it is about the ritualistic dispatch of infuriated beef.

Schoenfeld recounts a year's sojourn in Sevilla, "the city of the bull." (It is also a city where, as any visitor will remember, no local ever seems to work or sleep, where the *resaca*, the hangover, is a paid holiday. Rio de Janeiro seems dour by comparison.) In the ancient city Schoenfeld finds no end of memorable characters with which to populate his book. Among them are Juan Antonio Ruiz, "the only true *máxima figura*

currently active in bullfighting today," who goes by the nickname *Espartaco*, or Spartacus; a slew of British and American expatriates, who have collectively developed an encyclopedic knowledge of tauromachy past and present, to the consternation of turf-guarding Spaniards; and a retired *banderillero* called Navarrito, given even under the sternest years of Fascist rule to proclaiming his communist beliefs to the nearest policeman. Their stories, skillfully woven into the narrative, give real life to Schoenfeld's book.

Schoenfeld is equally good on what might be called the politics of bullfighting. He notes that in Spain, democratic only since 1975, many identify the sport with the bloody pomp of the Franco regime and so shun it; only when a few leading officials of the Socialist Party began showing up at ringside in the mid-1980's did the sport regain something of its former popularity. Like their grandparents, Spanish teenagers now accord matadors the same adulation as they do movie stars, pop musicians, and soccer pros, a nice bit of cultural continuity. Schoenfeld also notes the class-conditioned aspects of the *corrida*, where the poor entertain the rich, where "for every El Cordobés who gains financial security there are tens of thousands of aspirants who never see the inside of a bullring."

Animal-rights activists, who are presumably politically correct enough to allow for multicultural relativity, have long decried bullfighting, one of the planet's oldest sports. Schoenfeld seems to be neutral on the subject; he admits to neither a queasiness at the sight of spilled blood nor a sub-rosa thrill at the spectacle of sequined suits and flashing swords. Indeed, throughout the narrative he is curiously detached, and only the characters who wander in and out of his pages give them any sparkle. He reserves the final paragraph of his yeomanlike study to reveal any passion for the essence of the sport: "A human psyche laid bare, and the courage you need, in a plaza filled with thousands of people, to stand alone with yourself and the truest reality of all, the ubiquitous presence of death." Would that the rest of *The Last Serious Thing* had attained such poetry.

*Freelance writer Gregory McNamee admits in certain company to enjoying a good bullfight.*

### The Battle on the Right: \$1

Murray Rothbard's demolition of Norman Podhoretz and Richard John Neuhaus is the hottest document on the Right since Joe McCarthy's list. For a sizzling copy, send \$1 to *The Rothbard-Rockwell Report*, P.O. Box 4091, Burlingame, Cal. 94011. **Bonus:** Rothbard's historic John Randolph Club presidential address, which Bill Buckley denounced and Pat Buchanan loved.

## Letter From the Lower Right

by John Shelton Reed

### Shall We Gather by the River?



When I was invited last spring to be a judge at the Memphis in May World Championship Barbecue Cooking Contest some envious backbiters put it about that it wasn't because I'm well-known as a discriminating *ami de swine*, but because my sister knows the woman who picks the judges. I have just one thing to say to them: Eat your heart out.

Naturally I jumped on the chance like a dog on a rib bone. Everyone knows that the annual Memphis contest offers not just some of the best 'cue in the world but a complete barbecultural experience. Last year, for instance, I heard that the festival drew entire platoons of Elvis impersonators, not to mention a contestant billing himself as "M. C. Hamhock" who promoted his product with a rap jingle:

Don't need no knife, don't need  
no fork,  
Just wrap your lips around my  
pork.

So it was that I found myself winging over to Memphis one lovely Friday in May, eating American Airlines' peanuts and reading their copy of *Entertainment Weekly*, where I found a record review that began: "For many music fans north of the Mason-Dixon line, contemporary white Southern culture is nothing but an *Easy Rider* cliché of booze, bikes, and bad attitude." Yeeee-haw! In your face, Yankee music fans. Pig—sooey!

On the ground in Memphis, my sister and I walked down Beale Street toward the riverside park where the contest was being held, past the usual street vendors offering assorted Afro-schlock and Deadhead tie-dye. When we came to one selling plastic pig-snouts we knew we were getting close. Soon the unmistakable smell of hickory smoke assailed us and we rounded a bend into the park to behold one hundred and

eighty-odd tents, booths, pavilions, kiosks, huts, gazebos, and God knows what all else, stretched out before us, literally on the riverbank, just a few feet from the mighty Mississippi. It was an amazing sight, its surreality heightened by daredevil youths bungee-jumping from a crane on the bluff above us and by the tract I was given as I entered the park, a handy guide to "What to Do in Case You Miss the Rapture." (Just a tip: if you take any marks or prints on your forehead or hands you'll be sorry.)

We wandered about, gaping. Some mom-and-pop operations made do with folding lawn chairs and simple funeral home tents, but other teams had assembled two- and three-story structures with latticework, decks, statuary, and hanging plants. Each team had a name—I'll spare you, but something about barbecue seems to provoke bad puns—and some also had mottos, like "Hogs smell better barbecued" and "We serve no swine before it's [*sic*] time." Portable generators powered everything from electric fans to fountains and neon signs, and over their constant drone mighty sound systems pumped out music, mostly country, Cajun, or rap, but I also caught the strains of the Village People's "YMCA."

Each team had a smoker, of course, and some had two or three. They ranged from backyard Weber pots to a tractor-trailer behemoth billed as the world's largest portable barbecue cooker; most, however, were roughly coffin-sized, some of them obviously off-the-rack, but many pieced together from 55-gallon drums and stovepipe. Any doubts that barbecue contests are serious business were dispelled by the trophies on display: some teams had more brass than the U. S. Army. And everywhere you looked you saw the pig-totem of the People of the Swine.

Now, for years I've kept a mental log of barbecue joint signs. I've seen pigs reclining, running, and dancing; pigs with bibs, with knives and forks, with crowns and scepters. I've seen pigs as beauty contest winners and pigs in cowboy hats, one with a banjo. I've seen Mr. and Mrs. Pig dressed for a night on the town, and Mr. and Mrs. Pig as American Gothic. But I've never seen

pigs like I saw in Memphis. Pigs in chefs' hats and volunteer firemen's helmets. A pig in a Memphis State football uniform triumphant over some University of Tennessee pigs. A pig in a Superman suit rising from the flames. Lots of pigs drinking beer and, on the T-shirts of a team called the Rowdy Southern Swine, a whole trainload of partying pigs. A pig reclining in a skillet; another on a grill, drinking beer. Two pigs basting a little gnomish person on a spit. It's a hard call, but my favorite was probably some pigs with wings and halos, from a team called Hog Heaven.

This year Italy was being honored by the festival, so a number of teams struck what they took to be Italian notes. (I gather that last year's honoree, New Zealand, inspired mostly tasteless sheep jokes.) Some booths were decorated with hanging bunches of plastic grapes or simulated marble columns, and there were almost as many Italian flags as Confederate ones. T-shirts said "Ciao Down." And of course the pig-signs got into the act. Pigs ate pizza. Pigs wore handlebar mustaches. Pigs reclined in gondolas. Pigs stomped grapes. Pigs posed in gladiator gear and togas and Mafia outfits. A piece of doggerel posted in one booth combined the common themes of Italy, mortality, and beer:

Arrivederci my pug-nosed pal  
We'll meet again at a different  
locale  
You in your mud, me drinking a  
Bud  
Way up in the final corral.

If any actual Italians were present to receive this hands-across-the-sea homage I didn't run into them, although I did meet some Swedes, who were there to see how a barbecue contest is run before starting one of their own (a scary thought). I was disappointed not to see a single Elvis impersonator. Not one. On the other hand there were, considering the season, very few politicians, and there were no street mimes at all.

In the 90-degree Memphis heat, female attire ran to haltertops and cutoffs, often decorated behind with stickers saying things like "HOT," "Can't Touch This," "Roman Hands," and "USDA