

Painting the Wolf

If I paint a wild horse, you might not see the horse...but surely you will see the wildness!

—Pablo Picasso

There are no wolves in Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*. Everyone—from art critics to those summer tourists who flood the streets of Spain, hoping to check the famous painting off their lists of must-see attractions in Madrid—would say with absolute certainty, after looking closely in all the empty space between survivors of a terrible bombing, that there are no wolves in *Guernica*. While it appears to be certain that there are no wolves in the painting, I can still see them. I know that they are there, despite what anyone tells me is true.

I see the wildness.

These wolves have everyone fooled because they are so carefully hidden. They trail close behind the woman fleeing a fire. They kneel next to the fallen soldier who is no longer in his own body. They wait patiently for the mourning mother to lay down her dead child, feasting where the skin is thin and their prey is most vulnerable. I can feel them there. The shadows of their lanky bodies pass over the dead and the dying. They bite the neck of the screaming horse and tear its flesh down to the bone. They nip at the hooves of the bull and draw blood. They slink down desolate streets while Gernika burns to the ground.

I once knew a boy who asked me to paint him a wolf.

Before he asked me to paint him a wolf—years earlier when we were still in elementary school—I struck him across the face—*fuck you, Jamie*—my small, hard fist clipping the soft

bone in his nose. Out of the corner of my eye, as Jamie's head swung back, I was certain that I saw blood streaming—first from his nose and then his mouth—though any fifth grader who witnessed the fight on the playground that day, would have disagreed with me.

They would have all said that there was no blood streaming from Jamie's head.

On that day, those who witnessed the event would have said that Jamie—who was bigger than me—returned the blow much harder across my face, and that I was the one to first fall to the ground. They would have all agreed it was so funny—even the adults—the fact that Jamie kept calling me a bad name. It was all so silly on the playground that day—all so stupid, really—the fact that we both fell to the ground, a tangle of fists and kicking legs. It was all so funny that Jamie kept calling me *Jean, Jean, the sex machine*. It was all so funny, except that I was certain that I had seen blood.

Jean, Jean, the sex machine. Jean, Jean, the sex machine.

I certainly didn't know much about sex—that secretive wildness—when I was a child. I only knew what I had heard in the darkness, a naive mother and father making love late at night when they thought their daughter was sleeping. I recognized the sound of my father's quickening moans, then the sudden deep silence in our house that seemed to have no end, the same silence that came after their fighting when I felt alone and unloved as a child.

Then one night, as I was trying to fall asleep after my mother had returned home from the hospital, I heard a different kind of moaning from their bedroom. My father was crying.

When the great gasping rhythm of his grief had finally ended, passing and dissipating through the walls of our house, once again—in the deep silence that had no end—I was alone.

My mother had miscarried.

I continued to listen—hopefully—for the late-night moans of my parents making love, but I never heard them again in the darkness until, eventually, my mother—who did not realize that much more than a child had died within her—demanded that my father sleep in a separate bedroom for the rest of his life.

Everyone has some sort of dark side—not just children fighting on the playground—but most people are able to deal with their darkness in a way that is not too harmful. I know that I have certainly struggled with my own peculiar demons. They comprise a large part of my complicated personal mythology and often manifest themselves in times of stress or uncertainty. Pablo Picasso also had many demons that he wrestled with in his mind—wolves, of a sort—that occurred repeatedly in his artwork. In preparation for *Guernica*—Picasso’s masterpiece that guided me through a dark and difficult childhood—he clearly expressed these demons in drawings and sketches: a hysterical mother, a wounded horse and defiant bull, a ghost-like woman leaning out of a window.

Russell Martin, in his book *Picasso’s War*, explains that Picasso never used the typical images of war, such as bombs or airplanes. Instead, Martin argues, “It was his ongoing interest in the surrealistic linking of the conscious and unconscious that immediately turned him away from a documentary response to what transpired.” Because many of the images Picasso used in *Guernica* had their origins in the artist’s personal mythology—and not necessarily in the Spanish Civil War or the bombing of Gernika, specifically—the agony and suffering in the painting is universal.

When I was in early elementary school, children in my classroom—particularly Jamie—liked to pull up a chair to my desk and watch me draw with crayons. They would wander over to my desk where I quietly put down lines on my paper that divided light from darkness and earth from sky. These were dividing lines that I needed to learn as much as everyone else in the classroom. We also understood, as young children, that we needed to learn the names of things—that these names gave us power over almost everything in the world—and so I would often point to my drawings and identify what I had created.

This is a brown house. This is the yellow sun, a white cloud, and green grass.

As young children we knew we needed these labels. We learned what separated us from everything else in the world and for this we were all thankful. It quieted our wildness. We learned that we were not the sun, the moon or the stars. We were not rivers and we were not mountains. We were not the tender shoots of trees rising from the ground nor any kind of wild animal with claws and sharp teeth. We were not wounded horses or angry bulls.

Certainly, we were not wolves.

It was more of a challenge, however, to define what we were as humans, not just two hastily scribbled ovals on paper—a head and torso—with stick arms and legs, but that timeless mystery of the soul. It was a challenge to define what drove us to be cruel to each other on the playground and what drove us to be cruel to ourselves. As we grew older, we learned that it was even harder to define what humans would bomb small defenseless cities or shoot children as they tried to flee their burning homes. In our elementary school classroom, however, my thick crayon lines seemed to be enough for all of us who were eager to learn our place in the world. My drawings were enough to separate us—at least for the time being—from animals.

When I was in high school, I desperately wanted to flee the war-torn country of my childhood, to exile myself and move far away from my parents who constantly fought. Fueled by this desperation, I spent late nights working on a portfolio to submit to art schools.

One afternoon, Jamie—who knew that I was an artist—started a conversation with me about painting on our bus ride home from school.

“So, I hear you're trying to get into art school,” he said, sliding into the seat behind me.

“Yeah, I’m working on my portfolio,” I replied, but did not turn around.

“That’s so cool.”

When I didn’t say anything else, Jamie continued.

“I wonder if you would do something for me.”

“What?” I asked reluctantly.

“Will you paint me a wolf?”

In that moment before Jamie struck me across the face—so many years ago when the afternoon light must have been just right—I saw blood on his face and he noticed something in me that I did not want anyone to know. I was all wildness, weakness, and vulnerability.

Wolves were scary.

I imagined them slinking in night forests with piercing yellow eyes. I imagined the cold silver sheen of their fur and the sharp claws that scratched faces. I imagined teeth that ripped apart skin. They preyed on the chaos in my *Guernica*, the terrifying painting of my childhood. I saw them there. They nipped at the heels of the frantic woman fleeing a burning building. They disemboweled a fallen soldier and feasted on a screaming horse. Wolves surrounded the grief-stricken mother in the painting—my mother—who cradled a dead child in her arms.

“I don’t know, Jaimie,” I said hesitantly. “I have a lot to do tonight.”

“Think about it,” he said. Jamie’s words were casual, but his tone was insistent.

Despite his request, when Jamie returned to the back of the bus to sit with his friends, I thought of other things.

I did not want to paint Jamie’s wolf.

Kirmen Uribe, in his novel *Bilbao New York Bilbao*, describes the art and life of Aurelio Arteta, a Basque painter beloved by everyone during the Spanish Civil War, regardless of political affiliation. When asked by Republicans—the legitimate democratic government in Spain—to paint the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War for the 1937 Paris World Exposition, Arteta chose family over art and fled to Mexico. He said that he had grown tired of the war, despite having painted *War Triptych* that same year, a work that art historians suggest may have been inspired by the bombing of Gernika.

When Arteta refused the Paris Exposition commission—a once-in-lifetime opportunity—the Republicans asked Picasso to take on the commission. Picasso accepted the request and painted *Guernica* after hearing news reports about the bombing of the small Basque town. The rest is history; Picasso is now famous and Arteta is virtually unknown. Uribe asks his readers who made the better choice. Some would say that love for family and friends should always be placed above art. Some would argue the opposite, that an artist’s obligation is to his or her creative gift and nothing else. In my life, I have always struggled with whether I should make art. Sometimes the creative life is too lonely and too painful. Then there are times when art and

family seem opposed to each other. Sometimes art seems like it does not matter. No one really cares whether I create a painting or write a poem. Why should I make myself so vulnerable?

Most of the time, though, I don't have a reason.

It is not particularly remarkable for someone—whether a troubled teenage boy or the embattled 1937 Spanish Republican government—to ask an artist to paint a specific person, object, or theme. This practice has gone on for centuries, most notably before the invention of photography when artists were commissioned to paint portraits of individuals. Artists often need the income from this type of work, but they tend to do it reluctantly, fearing that it will be at the expense of more authentic endeavors. When Picasso was asked to paint the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War, he had misgivings. Even though he strongly supported Republicans in their war against fascism, he did not want his art to become mere propaganda. He also hated commission work.

Jamie continued to ask me to paint his wolf. For a while, I tried to politely decline his requests, making up all kinds of excuses that sounded believable. I was either too busy with homework or too busy with chores at home. I was sick. I was tired. I didn't have enough art supplies or had forgotten to do it. Eventually, I said that I had no idea how to paint a wolf, but Jamie only became more demanding and persistent. When he began confronting me in other places, such as the hallways and cafeteria of our high school, I started ignoring him. I moved to another seat on the bus when he tried to sit next to me. I turned my back on him and walked in the opposite direction when he approached me at school, until—finally—he stopped asking me to paint his wolf.

Then, a few months later, Jamie took a gun to his head and killed himself.

It has long been known that art has the power to release suppressed emotions that might otherwise lead to anxiety, depression, or addiction. Pablo Picasso was fortunate to have both the courage and the ability to name both the darkness inside himself as well as the darkness inside all of us. Through the creation of *Guernica*, he shared a common humanity with all who experience any type of suffering in this world, whether it be the result of war, mental illness, or even the unexpected death of a child.

In order to express these inner demons, Picasso often used the image of a minotaur—a creature both man and animal—in his artwork. More precisely, Martin Russell in *Picasso's War* identifies this creature in one of Picasso's preliminary sketches for *Guernica* as a precursor to the angry bull in the final painting. Russell says of Picasso's creative process, "although it remained doubtful that he understood precisely what his bull-made-man 'meant' in symbolic terms, it seems impossible to have escaped the artist's notice that the wide and insistent eyes of the bull now looked increasingly like his own." This creature that was both man and animal could easily be another manifestation of the wolf that haunted Jamie so many years ago.

Picasso painted the wolf.

While attending art school, I worked as a security guard at the Cleveland Museum of Art. There I learned the skills of discreet surveillance, how to observe and evaluate a room full of people without raising suspicion. I learned to anticipate dangerous situations based on the body language of museum patrons, as I had learned—in my own childhood home—to anticipate danger based on the often subtle, but predictable actions of my parents. I knew what to do if someone exhibited threatening behavior, such as the sudden movement of a hand reaching for a

loaded gun, though in my experience—at least at the Cleveland Museum of Art—people only ever reached for harmless objects, such as a pencil, a sketchbook, or camera. I also knew how to confront a patron who moved too close to the artwork—whether by accident or intention—and crossed one of the infrared lines of the museum’s security system, each a boundary carefully drawn like those crayons lines I once put down on paper as a child.

One evening when I was working at the Cleveland Museum of Art, I was assigned to Special Exhibitions, a gallery that regularly displayed work not part of the museum’s permanent collection. On that particular weeknight, the room was—for the most part—empty of patrons. I was there along with another guard, Axel, whom I did not know anything about, other than the fact that—unbelievably—he had recently been released from prison.

Axel had a single silver stud that pierced the skin between his nose and upper lip. The piercing mesmerized me—where exactly had that bullet entered and exited Jamie’s head so long ago?—but that night, alone with Axel in the Special Exhibition gallery at the Cleveland Institute of Art, I avoided looking at the former convict’s face.

The hours went by slowly.

Each time Axel attempted a conversation with me about how the current exhibit of contemporary art did not measure up to his particular aesthetic or sensibility—a *fucking five-year-old could paint this shit*—I turned my back on him and moved to another part of the gallery. Eventually he stopped trying to talk to me.

Then a few hours later, after the majority of patrons had left for the evening, Axel—who had taken to muttering under his breath and shaking his head in disgust—walked up to a glowing electronic sculpture and proceeded to dismantle it from the wall.

Because there were no security alarms in that particular part of the gallery—no infrared motion detectors indicating that a line had been crossed—when Axel lifted the art off its hooks, the only alarm that went off was the one in my head. It took him a few minutes, but eventually he succeeded in disconnecting the sculpture from its power source and that is when everything went dark. I retreated to the other end of the gallery, pretending that I had never seen him tamper with the art.

I am not sure what happened after that moment in the art museum; my memory also seems to have gone dark. Axel and I must have eventually closed the gallery together. We must have made a final pass through the room and turned off the ceiling lights. I never did tell anyone what happened that night in the Special Exhibition gallery because I was too ashamed of my inaction, but a few weeks later Axel was fired for pushing a female sergeant down a flight of stairs in the museum.

On February 28, 1974, Tony Shafrazi, an Iranian artist and member of the Art Workers' Coalition—an organization that pressured art museums to implement political and economic reforms—ran up to Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, and spray painted in bright red words *Kill Lies All*. When patrons began yelling, a museum guard responded and grabbed Shafrazi who then dropped the can of spray paint. Shafrazi was removed from the gallery and the New York City police department was contacted. In the meantime, museum curators closed off the third floor of the museum where *Guernica* was displayed. Because the painting had been sealed with a heavy coat of varnish years earlier, a team of conservators and technicians were able to use an organic solvent to remove the vandalism without any lasting damage to the canvas.

Now, so many years since I worked at the Cleveland Museum of Art, I wonder what I would have done if I had been the guard assigned to protect Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* at the Museum of Modern Art on that day it was vandalized. Would I have stopped Shafrazi from defacing a painting that was not only a beacon of peace during my childhood, but also one of the great masterpieces of the world? I think I would have turned my back on him and walked away.

Several years after Jamie's death, the hand that I had used to hit him on the playground in fifth grade was the same hand that I used to destroy my artwork. I had a hard time sleeping at night when I lived in Chicago. There were always so many sirens in the distance, so many emergency vehicles weaving through traffic and running red lights to save the lives of people struck down by violence. The bullets seemed to come from nowhere. They passed through living room walls and hit drivers on expressways. They pitted store fronts and shattered car windows at traffic intersections. The bullets defied time and space.

During one of my sleepless nights in Chicago—when the bullets would not stop in my head—I destroyed all of my artwork. I threw it in a back-alley dumpster where the scavengers of the city—like the wolf I refused to bring to life—waited for me. I listened in the darkness for the sound of shattering glass as my framed art hit the bottom of the metal bin. I threw away my sketchbooks, journals, and poetry, along with all my lettuce scraps, coffee grounds, eggshells, and empty vodka bottles—all those things that everyone would agree are completely worthless. I pressed my heel against the frames of my paintings. I split the wood and tore the canvas. Under those unforgiving sodium vapor streetlights in the back alley, I ripped in half the photographs that I had spent so many hours bringing to life in the darkroom, those chemical pictures of myself that rose and swayed in developer trays like ghostly apparitions.

Whether normal or neurotic, my process of creating art—where light is divided from darkness at the beginning of a new world—is almost always balanced by some sort of violence and destruction of equal power and intensity. While making art has always been for me a matter of survival, destroying what I create—paradoxically—has also been for me a matter of survival. Sometimes nothing I ever do seems good enough. Sometimes I am not able to express what I envision. Usually, though, I destroy my art because I no longer want to take part in the creative process. When I am too afraid, the work is too difficult, or my memories are too painful—like that point in my life when I lived in Chicago and threw away my art in a dumpster—I lose the will to name my emotions and experiences, to draw the confident lines of a child that once gave me power over everything in the world.

Eventually, I forgot about *Guernica*. The painting that had meant so much to me when I was a child, remained for years in an old art history book that I kept on a makeshift shelf constructed with lumber and milk crates in my Chicago apartments. *Guernica's* despairing mother, dead child, and angry bull—like the figures of my own childhood—remained silently preserved between the pages of the book. When I happened to notice that the cover of the book was aging, I threw away the dust jacket because it was ripped and faded.

Guernica fell silent for another few years.

I continued to move the painting from apartment to apartment in cardboard storage boxes—up and down narrow flights of stairs in the hot and humid summers—until, eventually, I threw out the textbook because it weighed too much. It was too heavy to carry and I no longer wanted to move it from place to place. I wanted to be carefree.

I wanted to forget my past.

Guernica had become a burden, and so—despite how much the painting had meant to me years ago—I threw it away in a dumpster. No longer wishing to reflect on my past, I determined that—in exile—the only real remedy for never having felt loved, was to deny myself love in the future. I continued to wander from apartment to apartment in Chicago, the city in which—at least for the time being—I still lived.

There would always be something missing from my life.

For a period of generations in the Basque Country, *Guernica* hung proudly in most homes, not only as a reminder of the devastation of Gernika during the Spanish Civil War, but in defiance of Francisco Franco's fascist regime; it was a symbol of Basque cultural pride. I wonder how many Basques have since removed Picasso's great masterpiece from their walls because the painting has faded, shown its age, or—even worse—has been reproduced so many times on souvenir postcards and coffee cups that it has lost all personal significance. I wonder how many Basques have since lifted the painting from its sturdy hooks and removed it from a wall in their home, only to discover a dark shadow underneath, that of an unmarked grave still haunted by a restless spirit. There the wall has not faded, but retains its original color. How many Basques—tired of storing *Guernica* in a closet or moving it from place to place—have thrown the painting away in a city dumpster? How many wish for a different future or no longer want to remember their past? How many do not know their past?

While some might wonder if Basque culture would have so successfully survived the era of Francisco Franco had Picasso not painted *Guernica*, I still think about Jamie and wonder how things might have been different. If I had agreed to paint Jaimie's wolf—actually divided it from his body as I had divided darkness from light when I was a small child drawing the sun, the

moon and the stars for my classmates—he might still be alive and I might not now be so afraid to express myself. Perhaps if I had coaxed that angry animal out into the open and exposed it for what it was, I might have given Jamie a little hope. It was all too much of a risk, though. I was too afraid and too angry. I did not want to make myself vulnerable.

Sharing my art with others was so much easier when I was a child.

Many years have passed since I fought with a troubled boy on the playground and refused to paint his wolf. Many years have also passed since my mother miscarried and that same troubled boy killed himself. I have walked away from vandalism at the Cleveland Museum of Art and destroyed all my artwork in a city filled with the sound of gunshots. I have aged since throwing away my beloved *Guernica* in a city dumpster, naively assuming it was too heavy to carry and too much to move in my nomadic life.

Now in the middle of my life—when I must carry those things that weigh nothing but are much heavier than old art history books—I have again turned to *Guernica*, but with the insight of a child. I am once again drawing the borders that divide light from darkness, those fragile boundaries that separate all of us from nothingness. I am now using what I once tried to destroy—all my wildness, weakness, and vulnerability—to again render those lines of a child, those lines that I once knew so clearly separated all of us from animals. This time, though, I am not using the tools of a child. This time I am using words to name the darkness.

It has a silver sheen and piercing eyes.

Bibliography

- Arteta, Aurelio. *War Triptych*. 1937, Bilbao Fine Arts Museum. <https://www.museobilbao.com/in/exposiciones/triptico-de-la-guerra-205>. Uploaded 17 January 2021.
- Kaufman, Michael T. “‘Guernica’ Survives a Spray-Paint Attack by Vandals.” *The New York Times*. 1 March, 1974. <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/03/01/archives/guernica-survives-a-spraypaint-attack-by-vandal-floor-is-sealed-off.html>. Accessed 9 July, 2021.
- Martin, Russell. *Picasso’s War: The Destruction of Guernica, and the Masterpiece That Changed the World*. Dutton, 2002.
- Picasso, Pablo. *Guernica*. 1937, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.
- Smallwood, William L. *The Day Guernica was Bombed: A Story Told by Witnesses and Survivors*. Gernikako Bakearen Museoa Fundazioa. Gernika-Lumoko Udala, 2012.
- “Tony Shafrazi.” *Rethinking Guernica*. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. 2021. <https://guernica.museoreinasofia.es/en/taxonomy/term/5342>. Accessed 10 July, 2021.
- Uribe, Kirmen. *Bilbao–NewYork–Bilbao*. Translated by Elizabeth Macklin, Bridgend, Wales, Seren Discoveries, 2002.