
Glimpses of the political economy

Because We Are So Poor

Juan Rulfo

Everything is going from bad to worse around here. Last week my Aunt Jacinta died, and on Saturday, after we'd buried her and weren't feeling quite so bad, it started to rain. That made my father angry, because the whole barley crop was drying in the sun, and the storm came up so fast we didn't have a chance to get any of it under cover. All we could do was huddle under the lean-to, watching the rain destroy the whole crop.

And just yesterday, when my sister Tacha was twelve years old we found out that the river carried away the cow my father gave her for her birthday. The river started to rise three nights ago before dawn. I was sound asleep, but it made so much noise dragging at its banks that I woke up and jumped out of bed with the covers in my hand, as if I'd dreamed the roof were caving in. Afterward I went back to bed because I knew it was just the sound of the river, and pretty soon it put me to sleep again.

When I got up the sky was full of black clouds, and the noise of the river was even louder. It sounded close, and it had the rotten smell flood-water has, like the stink of a trash-fire.

By the time I went to take a look, the river was already up over its banks" It was rising little by little all along the street and running into the house of that woman they call The Drum. You could hear the

splash of the water going into the corral and out the gate. The Drum was hurrying back and forth, throwing her chickens into the street so they could find someplace to hide where the current wouldn't reach them.

Over on the other side near the bend, the river must have carried off the tamarind tree at the edge of my aunt Jacinta's corral, because you couldn't see it any more. It was the only tamarind in the village, so everybody knows this is the biggest flood that's come down the river in years.

My sister and I went back in the afternoon to look at it again. The water was dirtier and thicker, and it was well up over where the bridge used to be. We stayed there for hours, just watching, without getting tired. Then we walked up along the ravine to hear what the people were saying. Down below, near the river, the water made so much noise you could see their mouths opening and shutting but you couldn't hear a word. They were looking at the river up along the ravine, too, and trying to figure out how much damage it had done. Up there I found out that the river carried off La Serpentina, the cow my father gave Tacha for her birthday. La Serpentina had one white ear and one red ear, and beautiful eyes.

I don't know why she ever decided to try crossing that river when she must have known it wasn't the same river any more. La Serpentina wasn't that restless. She must have been walking in her sleep, 'to let herself get drowned like that for no reason at

all. When I'd open the corral gate in the morning she'd have stood there all day with her eyes shut, sighing the way a cow does when she's asleep.

So that's what must have happened to her, she must have been asleep. Perhaps it occurred to her to wake up when she felt the water pounding at her ribs. She'd have got frightened then and tried to come back, but the water would have knocked her down and turned her over and over. I suppose she bellowed for help. She could bellow like God only knows how.

We found a man who saw her when the river dragged her off, and I asked him if she didn't have a little calf with her. He said he didn't remember. He just remembered he saw a spotted cow go past him with its hooves in the air, and then it sank and he couldn't see its hooves or horns or anything. He was so busy pulling tree-trunks and branches out of the water, for firewood, he didn't have time to watch whether it came up again.

So now we don't know if the calf is still alive or if it followed its mother into the river. God help the two of them if it did. The troubles we've had in our house can happen all over again, now that my sister Tacha hasn't got anything left. What I mean is that my father worked hard to buy La Serpentina when she was still a calf, so he could give her to Tacha so she'd have a little capital and wouldn't grow up to be a whore like my other two sisters.

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According to my father, they went bad because we are so poor. They weren't contented, they started grumbling when they were just girls, and as soon as they grew up they started to go around with the worst kind of men, learning everything bad. They learned fast, too. They understood those soft whistles when the men stood outside and called them in the middle of the night, and later they even went off in the daytime. They'd go to the river for water every minute or two, and sometimes you'd even surprise them right in the corral, both of them rolling around naked with a man on top.

Finally, my father chased them out of the house. He put up with them as long as he could, but then he couldn't stand it any longer and he chased them right down the street. They went to Ayutla or someplace, I'm not sure where. But I know they went bad.

That's why my father is so worried about Tacha. He doesn't want her to turn out like her two sisters, he wants her to grow up to be decent and marry a good man, and La Serpentina would have been a security for her while she was growing up. With the cow she wouldn't keep thinking how poor we are. That's going to be difficult now. Almost anybody would have had the courage to marry her, if only to get her beautiful cow.

The only hope is that the calf is still alive. Please God it didn't decide to go into the river with its mother. Because if that's what happened, my sister

Tacha is just a little way away from turning bad, and my mother doesn't want that.

My mother says she doesn't know why God punished her so much by giving her such daughters. There's never been a bad woman in her family from her grandmother up to now. They were all brought up to fear God and be obedient and respectful. She tries to remember what she's ever done to deserve giving birth to one whore after another, but she can't remember any sin or evil she's ever committed. Every time she thinks about those two she cries, and says, "May God be good to them."

But my father says there's no use thinking about them, they're just bad. The thing to worry about is that Tacha's still left. She's growing fast, and her breasts are beginning to look like her sisters', sharp-pointed and high up and anxious to be looked at.

"Yes," my father says, "anybody that looks at her, she gives him an eyeful. You just wait, she'll end up bad like the others." So Tacha is my father's biggest worry.

And Tacha is crying now, because she knows the river killed La Serpentina. She's here beside me, in her rose-colored dress, looking at the river and crying about her cow. The little streams of dirty water keep running down her face, and you'd think she had the very river itself inside her.

I put my arm around her and try to comfort her, but she can't understand. She just cries harder, and her sobs sound like the river tugging at its banks. Now she's trembling all over. The flood keeps rising, and the dirty spray from the river splashes on her face. Her two little tits are moving up and down as she sobs, as if they were beginning to swell out so as to start destroying her.

Juan Rulfo (1917– 1986) was a Mexican novelist, short story writer, and photographer. Rulfo's large reputation rests on two books, the short novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955), and a collection of short stories, *The Burning Plain – El Llano en Llamas* (1953).