

It's Because We're So Poor

by Juan Rulfo

translated from the Spanish by Ilan Stavans

Everything's going from bad to worse here. Last week Aunt Jacinta died, and on Saturday, after we buried her and the sadness began to fade away, it started raining like crazy. This upset my father since the entire barley harvest was drying in the sun shed. The downpour started suddenly, in great waves of water, giving us no time to stow even a handful; the only thing everyone who was at home at the time could do was to huddle under the shed and watch as the cold water fell from the sky and burned the yellow barley we had just harvested.

And just yesterday, my sister Tacha's twelfth birthday, we found out that the cow my father had given her for her saint's day had been swept down the river.

The river started to rise three nights ago in the middle of the night. Even though I was fast asleep, the thunderous noise woke me up. I jumped to my feet with the covers still in my hand, as though I thought the roof was caving in. Then I fell asleep again, because I realized it was only the sound of the river and because the sound lulled me to sleep.

When I got up, the morning sky was full of huge clouds and everything looked as if it had been raining nonstop. The noise from the river was louder than ever and had drawn closer. You could smell it the way you can smell a fire, the rotten smell of roiling water.

By the time I went outside, the river had already spilled over its banks and was slowly approaching the main street. It was quickly making its way into the house of the woman people call La Tambora. You could hear water splashing as it ran into the corral and as it exited through the gate in wide rivulets. La Tambora was walking back and forth in what had by then become a part of the river, tossing her hens into the street so they could hide someplace where the current wouldn't reach them.

On the other side, by the bend, the river must have washed away, who knows when, the tamarind tree that had been in Aunt Jacinta's sun shed, because there's no tamarind tree there now. It was the only one in town, and that's why people think that this is the highest the river has crested in years.

My sister and I went back in the afternoon to see the cascade of water that is steadily growing

thicker and darker and is already beyond the level where the bridge is supposed to be. We stayed there for hours and hours without getting bored with the whole thing. Later on we climbed up the ravine because we wanted to hear what people were saying, since down there, near the river, it's so loud you can only see mouths opening and closing as if they want to say something; but you can't hear a word. So we climbed up the ravine where people were looking at the river and assessing the damage. That's where we found out that the river had taken La Serpentina away, my sister Tacha's cow, because my father gave my sister the cow as a birthday present and it had one white ear and one red one and very beautiful eyes.

I don't quite know why La Serpentina decided to cross that river when she knew quite well that it wasn't the same river she was used to every day. La Serpentina wasn't that dumb. To let herself be killed like that she had to be sleepwalking. Most of the time it was up to me to wake her when I opened the corral door to let her out. If not, she might have spent the entire day there with her eyes closed, very still and sighing, the way cows sigh when they're asleep.

Something must have happened that kept her asleep. Maybe it happened that she woke up when she felt the heaviness of the water lapping at her flanks. Maybe that frightened her and she tried to go back, but when she turned around she was stuck and unable to move in that hard, black, mucky water. Maybe she roared asking for help. She roared like only God knows.

I asked a man who saw the cow being dragged downstream if he hadn't seen the calf that was with her. But the man said he didn't know if he had seen that. All he said was that the spotted cow went by with her legs in the air very close to where he was and that then she flipped over and you couldn't see the horns or the legs or any sign of the cow at all. There were plenty of tree trunks floating on the river, with their roots, and he was very busy trying to gather firewood, so he wasn't able to see if it was animals or tree trunks being carried away.

So we don't know if the calf is alive or if he followed his mother down the river. If he went with her, God help them both.

The problem at home is what is going to happen now that my sister Tacha is left with nothing. It took a lot for my father to get La Serpentina in the first place, from the time she was a calf, so my sister could have a bit of capital and wouldn't run away to become a whore the way my two older sisters had.

The way my father tells it, they both took the wrong road because our family was so poor and incorrigible. They sassed him from the time they were little. And as soon as they grew up, they started hanging out with the worst sort of men who taught them all types of awful things. They learned quickly and understood a man's whistling at all hours of the night. They would stay out till dawn. Sometimes when they were supposed to fetch water from the river, instead all of sudden they were right there in the corral, writhing on the floor, naked, each of them with a man on top of her.

Finally my father threw them out. He had stood as much as he could and when he couldn't take it anymore he showed them the door. They left for Ayutla or I don't know where, and now they are whores.

That's why my father is terrified that Tacha will end up like her two sisters, that she may feel the poverty of not having the cow and realize she no longer has anything to support her while she's still growing up and can still marry a decent man who will love her always. That's going to be difficult now. When she had the cow it was different. There surely would be someone with the spunk to marry her, if only to have that very beautiful cow.

Our only hope is that the calf is still alive. Perhaps he didn't think of crossing the river behind his mother. Because if he did, my sister Tacha is just this far away from becoming a whore. And mother doesn't want that.

My mother doesn't know why God has punished her by giving her such daughters, since in her family, from my grandmother on, there have never been bad people. Everybody was raised with the fear of God, and very obedient, and didn't offend anyone. Everyone was that way. Who knows where her two daughters learned such bad behavior? She can't figure it out. She wracks her brain and it isn't clear where she went wrong or what sin she committed to have given birth to one bad daughter after another. She can't figure it out. And every time she thinks of them, she weeps and says: "God help them."

My father says there's nothing to be done at this point. The one at risk is the daughter who is still here, Tacha, who keeps on growing and growing and whose breasts are already beginning to show, and which promise to be like her sisters': pointy and high and pert and attention-getting.

"Yes," he says, "they'll stare at her wherever she goes. It will all end badly; I can already see it will all end badly."

That's why my father is terrified.

Tacha cries when she thinks her cow won't come back because the river has killed it. She's right here at my side, in her pink dress, looking at the river from the top of the ravine, unable to stop crying. Streams of dirty water run down her face, as if the river were inside her.

I put my arms around her, trying to comfort her, but she doesn't understand. She cries even more. A sound similar to the one sweeping along the riverbanks emerges from her lips, making her shiver, and she trembles all over. The crest rises. The rotten smell from below speckles Tacha's wet face. Her two little breasts bob up and down, continually, as if they had suddenly begun to swell, bringing her ever closer to perdition.

Juan Rulfo (1917–1986) was one of Mexico's most important twentieth-century writers. Taciturn in his dealings with others and frugal in his literature, he published only two books: the novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955) and the collection of stories *El llano en llamas* (1953), which includes the story translated here by Ilan Stavans. Rulfo's influence in the Spanish world is enormous.

Ilan Stavans is the author of *The Hispanic Condition* (1995), *On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language* (2001), *Spanglish* (2003), and *Dictionary Days* (2005). He edited *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda* (2003), the three-volume *Isaac Bashevis Singer: Collected Stories* (2004), and *Becoming Americans: Four Centuries of Immigrant Writing* (2009). Stavans is the Lewis-Sebring Professor of Latin American and Latino Culture at Amherst College. (4/2010)