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Julián Matadero

The story of the Tomebamba River, told by the river itself

CARLOS DONOSO

The author's first short story · 2018

Inspired by the birth of Julián Matías, April 2016.

PART ONE

I was born a few million years ago

Millions of years ago, almost everything near the middle of the world was buried under ice. People who study such things call that time by a strange name: glaciation.

Back then, everything was frozen. The whole year was winter. But then, slowly, things began to change.

It started to grow a little warmer, and the ice on the peaks of what is now called Cajas National Park, in the area known as “Tres Cruces”, in the beautiful country of Ecuador, began to melt.

Drop by drop, the water flowed down the mountain, and that is how I was born — because I am a river. At first, like all small children, I was tiny and had no fixed path. Sometimes I went one way, sometimes another.

Sometimes I played with the trees, splashing them, and other times I splashed different trees somewhere else. But as I grew, my path through the mountain grew larger and more certain.

Soon I noticed that wherever I passed, things became more beautiful: the trees turned greener and fuller, bearing sweet, delicious fruit; the flowers were prettier when they were close to me; and many animals came to drink from me and bathe in my fresh water.

I knew every animal that came to drink and bathe, and the ones that preferred to live inside the water. But one day, a new kind of creature appeared — a strange one...

Why so strange? Because it clearly had four limbs, yet it walked on only two of them. And it had hair only on its head. Its eyes were beautiful, and it looked at everything with curiosity.

The first time I saw one of those beings, it came to the water and drank. Then it walked over to the flowers nearby, picked one, and placed it in the hair on its head, just above its round little ear. What odd behavior!

Later, that strange and lovely creature came back, with another one a little larger. They treated each other with great tenderness. I learned later that the first one was a female, and the other a male, of that strange, fascinating species.

They always came to gather fruit from the trees near my banks, but they were different from the other animals. They did many things the other animals never did.

For example, they would carry water back to their dens in bowls they made from the fruit of a certain plant. No other animal carried water like that! That is when I began to suspect that these beings were more intelligent than the rest.

My suspicion was confirmed when I heard them speak. They did not speak like the other animals; their language was more complex than yelps, growls or barks. They used words to name things, and one day I heard them say a very pretty one: “Tomebamba”. And I thought: “What can that Tomebamba be?”

It turned out it was me! Ha, ha, ha. They started calling me Tomebamba, and I still carry that name today.

Those beings were very clean. They bathed every day, and they were tender with their little ones, whom they call children.

The children of those beings were curious and quick. They asked questions about everything, wanting to understand how the world worked.

One day a little girl came with her mother, and after they bathed, while her mother brushed her thick hair, the girl looked at me with curiosity and began asking her mother questions:

“Mama, where does the river's water come from?”

“It comes from the mountain,” said the mother.

“And why does it never run out?” the girl asked.

“Because it always rains in the mountains, so the river always has water,” her mother explained.

“And where does the river go?” asked the girl.

“We don't know,” said her mother. “No one has traveled far enough to find out where the river ends.”

“When I grow up, I'm going to travel far, far away to see where the river ends,” said the girl.

“That sounds very nice,” said her mother, not taking her seriously.

That little girl was called Aina, and when she grew up she took a backpack and started walking downstream all by herself. I watched her, because I thought that at any moment she would tire and turn back to her village. But she kept walking, alone, for a long time.

Along the way I could hear Aina's stomach grumble. “Poor Aina, she must be hungry,” I thought.

So I asked one of the trees to drop a few of its fruits into the river. With my current I drifted them to the shore. When Aina saw them

she was overjoyed; she ran down to the bank, picked them up, and sat on a stone to eat. The poor girl was very hungry.

After much walking, Aina arrived at the place where I end. Where do I end? At a place where I meet my cousin, the Machángara river, and together we form the Cuenca river, which later joins the Paute river, and so we keep joining other rivers until at last all of us flow into the mightiest river in the world, the Amazon, which finishes very far from Ecuador, at the Atlantic ocean.

Aina saw where my channel ended and went home very happy to tell her family. Over time, the humans prospered and grew in number. This land was so beautiful that other humans moved here too, and they started to build a lovely city that still exists today. I'll tell you that story in the next chapter.

PART TWO

My beautiful city

My name is Tomebamba, and I am a beautiful river that carries fresh water to a lovely city in Ecuador.

Many centuries ago I met the first humans who lived around here. They were from a tribe called the cañaris. They were friendly beings who only took from me and from nature what they needed each day, and no more.

Then came other humans, just as kind as the cañaris, but they called themselves “incas”. I never understood why humans divide themselves into tribes and decide some are better than others — I have seen them all, and they are all equally beautiful and clever.

After the incas, other humans arrived who were a little paler than the incas and the cañaris, but also very kind. The only difference was that these pale ones did not bathe quite as often, and they built longer-lasting houses.

These ones called themselves Spaniards, and together with the indigenous people they built a small village they named the Todos los Santos neighborhood, which was the beginning of the beautiful city I now live in: my city, the city of Cuenca.

Because I am such a pretty river, every Spaniard wanted to live close to me. So very near my bank, in an area called El Barranco, they built the most beautiful houses in the city.

Some of those houses still stand. People say they are built in the French style — I've never been to France, but they look lovely to me.

Around that time, the humans realized I was a powerful river, so they thought of using my strength to do useful things. I loved that, because I love being useful. What did they do?

They built a beautiful wheat mill that turned with the power of my current. It looked magnificent! The first mill was built in 1539, and it worked so well that they built many more — so many that, in time, they could sell ground wheat to the Viceroyalty of Peru.

That is how the humans learned that they could use the power of nature to produce what they call “money”, a strange thing they had never needed before.

The mills were good because they used the power of nature without harming anyone. But, with time, humans began to extract wealth from nature without caring about the other people who lived nearby. That selfish way of thinking would bring serious consequences. I'll tell you about that in the next story.

PART THREE

My other name

I live in the beautiful city of Cuenca. I am one of the most beautiful rivers in Ecuador. My indigenous name is Tomebamba, and like everything indigenous or natural, that is my good name — my name when I am calm, relaxed, and at peace.

But long ago I was given another name by the city's first bishop, José María Carrión y Marfil, who, dressed in his bishop's robes in a solemn ceremony, baptized me with a new name: Julián Matadero.

Julián Matadero became my name for the moments when I get angry — when I lose my temper. Because sometimes rivers, too, lose their temper.

That happened long ago. Let me tell you about it.

Sometimes humans believe they are the owners of the world, the owners of nature. But the truth is that everything they have was given to them to take care of, not to soil.

Around the world there are men who think themselves more powerful than nature, and so, instead of caring for the earth, they pollute it, dirty it, as if this planet were not their own house.

That was what was happening some years ago. Some men, driven by a greed that left no room for anything else, were running mining operations downstream and dirtying my waters with poisons, without caring that, further downstream, other human beings drank that water and bathed their children in it.

Those selfish men did not care about other people. They only worried about earning money, even when it sickened or killed innocent people. With every reason in the world, I was very, very angry.

But then something happened that pushed me over the edge. Let me tell you.

I had a lovely little island, very close to the Centenario bridge. Birds would come there to make their nests, because it was a safe place to raise their young. As it was a tiny island, animals that ate birds could not reach it. So many bird species lived happily on that islet. What happened?

The humans planned to build a structure they would call La Casa de la Cultura Núcleo de Cuenca — right on that islet. Was there really no other place in Cuenca? Of course there was! But sometimes humans only think of themselves, and they can be terribly selfish. Did anyone think about the birds?

And, if they built that building there, do you know where all the trash and waste water would go? Into me. Was I going to allow that? No.

Those selfish humans were going to meet the fury of Julián Matadero. I had to teach them to respect nature.

So I had a conversation with the clouds and with the mountains of Cajas National Park, and with their help, I began to grow until I became a giant of a river.

On April 3, 1950, I came down the mountain like a giant, dragging huge boulders that rolled along with me. I made a tremendous, frightening noise. I did that on purpose, so that people

would flee their homes before I arrived. And many did flee in time, and saved their lives.

I was very angry because the humans did not respect nature, but I did not want to hurt many people either. I only wanted to teach them a lesson. So when, in my giant form, I came near the elder home and the San Vicente de Paúl hospital in the place called “Tres Tiendas”, I split my channel in two to spare the elderly and the sick, because they would not have been able to flee at the sound of the roar.

I did destroy many other buildings and houses: the Santa María de El Vergel chapel, the San Roque parish house, and fourteen of the sixteen bridges that connected the city. I was very upset with the humans. Still, I decided to leave two bridges standing — the Centenario and Mariano Moreno bridges — so the city would not be entirely cut off.

My fury began to ease when I saw the faces of the people gathered on the balustrades at the end of Tarqui street, watching in astonishment the flood my anger was causing. I could see in their eyes the fear that nature's power had inspired in them. Humans need to remember that nature is very powerful, and they cannot abuse her without consequences.

Some bridges I destroyed entirely; others I did not. From the Vado bridge I only took down one side, which they later rebuilt. And I left part of the Todos Santos bridge standing, as a witness to my fury for the generations that followed. Today that bridge is known as “Puente Roto” (The Broken Bridge) — you can visit it and get an idea of how big a river can grow when it is angry.

Now “Puente Roto” is a very famous bridge, used for many important events in Cuenca. When I see it, I tell myself: “Truly, when

I broke it, I broke it beautifully.”

No one in Cuenca expected a flood of that size. But now its people are aware that nature is very powerful, and that it cannot be abused.

With time, it seems they forgot the lesson I gave them that day. So in the nearby town of Paute, humans were once again abusing nature. That would bring grave consequences — because my wife was going to get very upset with them. Ah... if you think I'm fierce, you have to meet my wife. When she gets angry, you'd better run. Let's go meet her.

PART FOUR

Julián's wife: La Josefina

My dear wife is called La Josefina. And what a temper she has!

Humans have to learn that everything they do to nature has consequences. If they try to make quick money by harming her, they will face the fury of the mountains, the rivers, and the seas.

An example of that happened with my wife, La Josefina. Let me tell you.

Twenty kilometers east of the city of Cuenca lies La Josefina, my wife, near the town of Paute. For a long time she put up with men taking stone and sand from the river with no control. All they cared about was the money they made by extracting and selling the stone and sand. They didn't care about the stability of the Tamuga hill, which grew weaker every time they took more.

If they had been smarter and less selfish, they would have taken precautions to protect the Tamuga hill from a landslide. But men believe nature exists to serve them, to make them rich. They don't mind taking and taking from nature without giving anything back. They think nature is their slave.

Well, they were wrong about my wife. When she gets angry, she really gets angry. And her rage does not pass easily.

It happened in 1993. The clouds brought heavy rain, and a part of the weakened Tamuga hill collapsed, forming an enormous dam — a hundred meters tall and eight hundred meters long — that blocked the water. As a result, the giant lake that formed grew so large that it

flooded crops, roads, businesses, vacation homes, and many houses and buildings.

When the enormous reservoir finally burst, it swept away everything in its path. But La Josefina was still furious, and for a month the lands of Paute lay under water.

What happened with La Josefina is still considered the most severe hydrogeological event ever recorded in Ecuador. It was a terrible thing, broadcast on television news all over the world.

The people of Paute climbed the nearby hills, and from there they watched the fury of La Josefina.

When my wife's anger finally subsided, the waters began to recede, and the people started cleaning the streets and the houses still standing, full of mud.

The people of Paute learned the lesson that my wife taught them. They stopped abusing the base of the Tamuga hill and began planting flowers to beautify the land.

La Josefina was so pleased with the flowers that she made them bloom even more beautifully. So beautifully that the men started selling them, and now they export flowers to other parts of the world.

Because, if humans use nature wisely, they can make money without harming her. Now they sell flowers and La Josefina is very happy.

But there are more things that show how humans can learn to use nature well. Let's see them.

PART FIVE

They learned the lesson

Humans are intelligent enough to use the power of nature in their favor, as long as they respect and care for their planet. I was very happy when, many years ago, they used my strength to turn a wheat mill. How good it is to feel useful!

But when humans abuse nature, they unfortunately have to suffer painful consequences. In the case of the Ecuadorians, something good has happened:

The people of Ecuador have been clever, and they have learned the lessons nature has taught them.

That is why La Josefina is now full of flower plantations, and why, in 1999, Cuenca became the first Ecuadorian city to clean its wastewater in a giant treatment plant, 45 hectares wide, ten kilometers from the city.

In that plant, the dirty waters are treated in six large oxygenation lagoons, where special bacteria and chemicals clean the water before it is returned, clean, to the river. What a marvelous thing!

It is because of that effort that I, the Tomebamba river, am still a beautiful, clean, crystal-clear river that runs through the middle of the city. Many cities of the world have rivers, but they are polluted. How sad that the people of those cities have not taken care of them.

I love it when people come to bathe in the river. It reminds me of how, long ago, the cañaris used to come to bathe in my waters. I believe the Ecuadorians of today are worthy descendants of those

first inhabitants, who took from nature only what they needed, without soiling her.

But I'll let you in on a secret: today's Ecuadorians do another thing the cañaris also did — they like to tell me their problems. In the next story I'll tell you about that.

PART SIX

I am everyone's psychologist

Ecuadorians are people of warm feelings — I know them well. And many times, when they have a problem and want to share it with someone, they share it with me.

It makes me very happy that they tell me their problems. You already know I love being useful and helping people. I am also very old and have a lot of experience, so I can give them good advice. Do you want to know how I do it? Let me tell you.

Some time ago a young man came to me and told me he didn't know whether to leave on a journey or not. He was afraid to leave the safety he had here. What if everything went wrong?

I have learned that people who have the chance to travel always learn new and interesting things. It is true that sometimes they go through hard moments, but those moments make them better human beings. How was I going to tell him he should travel?

I asked one of the nearby trees to drop the leaf that looked most like an airplane, and I asked the wind to blow so the leaf would land in the man's hands. And so we did.

When the man saw the leaf flying around him and landing right in his hands, he understood the message, and he left in good spirits.

Some time later he came back and told me how well the trip had gone. I was so happy for him!

Another time, there was a couple who used to come and talk by the river. They talked so much that I came to know them both well —

they were good young people.

But one day she came alone to tell me that her boyfriend had asked her to marry him, and she didn't know whether to say yes. What if everything went wrong?

Since I already knew him, I knew it was worth giving him a chance. But... how was I going to tell her to marry him?

I asked a pair of birds to perch close to her and stroke each other tenderly. They were two birds of beautiful colors, like the many that live in Ecuador. When she saw them, she was moved, and she made her decision.

A few years later the couple came back with a beautiful baby. I think they called him Julián Matías.

Humans are very intelligent. They do not need to soil the earth and suffer the consequences of pollution. Many of them are working hard to help clean the planet.

Those efforts will bring many benefits for future generations, because the children of today are learning to care for the planet, and when they become adults, they will make good decisions for a beautiful earth — as beautiful as Cuenca, my small big city.

COLOPHON

*Julián Matadero was written in 2018 by Carlos Donoso, in Cuenca,
Ecuador.*

*It is the author's first short story and the intimate origin of the Hierro
y Vacío universe.*

Available at carlos-donoso.com.