

## Listen, Auriliano

Michael McGuire

When you were born the cow ran dry,  
the hen stared empty at the sky,  
the bucket clattered at the bottom of the well  
and a child's soul started on its way to hell.

When *las mañanitas* are sung, Auriliano, the adult, asks himself: is it bad luck or *la fatalidad* that sings on some birthdays and not others?

Auriliano, the child, is beaten by his brothers. Later his father joins in.

Why?

Auriliano's father wipes the sweat from his eyes, refuses to answer his son's question.

I don't have to.

Auriliano looks at the ground, waits for the pain to let go. His father strains to catch his breath, to grab a word or two.

You look down.

Suddenly he has both, breath and words.

Where do you look down from born in the same house, mine, my father's?

Auriliano hauls himself four kilometers from the family *terreno*, hauls himself home to the family hovel.

Why?

Everyone but his father seems to know Auriliano is the one son who should not, like his brothers, tender a lifetime to *la tierra*, see his days devoured in dust.

Auriliano's big sister made it out. For some reason, she had gone to live with a relative as soon as childhood passed. Perhaps there had been no place for her in the two-room adobe, in the parents' room or the boys' room. Perhaps, sometime before his time, the mother had stood up for the sister, hadn't backed down. Now his sister stands and walks a little differently.

And now there is another and, at three, the little sister, *la preferida*, is her father's favorite. She sleeps between her mother and her father, rides the tractor with him, tends cows and horses. She stands, not a meter high, to watch the corn grow. The corn doesn't grow for Auriliano. Bent to it his back hurts, his hands tighten and curl. The horses stare. The cows look the other way. In time Auriliano understands. It is written on him in words so large the neighbors cannot fail to read them.

This one wants another life, one he is not likely to find.

The brothers are first to realize Auriliano is different. Slowly, cleverly, they begin to transfer the heaviest work to him, the smallest. When no one is looking, they kick him on his way. If his father fails to read the words written across the boy's forehead, he gets the gist of it from the brothers. If he fails to figure it out—Auriliano cannot imagine his father, who rarely puts two words together, thinking—he knows what to do.

If Auriliano, who is always tired, is slow to shovel manure, to lug water to his mother, his father takes off his belt, wraps one end around his fist. When he comes to see Auriliano the way his brothers do—a boy born in a place that might not be right for anyone ever, but certainly not for him now—he takes a length of hose. The brothers, finishing the job, join in.

And yet, however out of place, Auriliano finds an enterprise of his own, albeit one which will shrink him further in his father's eye. Skilled with no tool, graceless in the field, he finds he has no trouble turning pages.

His eyes moving by themselves, left, right, back, Auriliano discovers reading.

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Yet now was a time in which only a boy's way out might come to him.

It didn't come to him that night, face down between the rows, but one day when, once more, he had done more than he could and collapsed at the end of the milpa. It struck him that he and perhaps all things lived in a period that was passing...and his mind leapt to one that was not because it had not yet arrived, a period in which everything was sure to be different.

The future.

It leapt, soared on wings of *la literatura fantástica* and, for the moment, stayed there.

Grubby, much read comics gave form to the great escape. Hidden in dry stalks at the end of the day Auriliano wielded the most magical of swords. He was capable of brick-breaking blows. Of cinematic backward leaps well beyond the capacity of the human body. He told himself tales of virtue and malevolence, stories that ranged across creation and soared through the heavens toward that most magnetic and suspect of timeless structures, the stronghold at the end of time: *el castillo*. The castle, preferably silhouetted by a

crack of lightning upon the void. The stronghold that, by no failure of fancy, could be considered *el jacal*, the hovel at the end of daylight, when the land, for a couple of hours, lets go.

Years passed and one pastime flowed into another. Auriliano had no idea how color and animation might be employed to fake a future. The eye was as undiscerning before flashed simulations as it had been before cheap paper.

The body, meanwhile, labored, as *la tierra* took, without exception, from father, son, mother and daughter; from this generation, the next and the next; refused no mortal secretion; drank deep, dried and, without a mouth to wipe, drank again.

Auriliano did not look at his father for approval. He did not look at his bent if not quite broken mother. His brothers did not look at him. Their minds also elsewhere, he had become invisible. With Auriliano astray in unlikely episodes, it would seem each segment of the family had given up on the others. It was rumored his father had another family in another pueblo which he visited for lengthening periods, sometimes taking his youngest daughter, *la preferida*, with him. The wife mother, doubly deserted, could only work harder, swallowing any cry she might have cried and keeping, she thought, a story old as the overshadowing hills, deep within, until the head, revealing all, was nearly jerking from her body.

There was nothing philosophical about that headshake. Nothing natural in that shudder. Unless it was the normal rebound of a skull that would like to forget how often it had been boxed.

The boy, to this point, understood nothing of that which surrounded him, of the life he and his family lived. No more than he understood his need to blast off in a space capsule or step into a time machine and throw the switch.

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The first time Auriliano's father beat him, he worked harder; the second time, harder still. He milked before sunup, fed the animals after dark. On all fours he weeded the huddled stalks. He did not disdain a steep field or a half-starved horse or the plot in the pueblo that held a mud and straw structure and a couple of cows. However hard he worked, his father continued to scorn him, his brothers to despise him as before.

The third beating, the day he was caught reading at the end of the milpa, Auriliano's father took a board to him, hitting him harmlessly on the rear at first, finishing with a crack across the face that left his nose gushing.

Auriliano lay flat between the rows. His temples throbbed, his vision blurred. Day passed and darkness spread. The dimness on the ground before him only made the night darker. A night of resolution and resolve.

Henceforth Auriliano would be a feature of the landscape. He would work and, what's more, appear to work. He would not glance at his father for appreciation of a job well done or smalltalk with his brothers when they had to work together. Auriliano, the dissembler,

would keep his head down and his eyes glazed. He would be a back, a pair of hands.

Unnoticeable, he would be forgotten.

His father hadn't succeeded in taking him out of school. One day Auriliano, the adult, would vow: if something as insubstantial as language, as weightless as the word, would be absolutely interdicted, forbidden, he would read all the more intently, seek that which lay behind, tacit and inferred.

Later, secretly, when he was doing his homework, Auriliano would be more than doing it. He would read the stuff at the end of the chapter, at the end of the book, wonder at names that appeared more than once, underneath titles not to be found in a hundred kilometers, works never to be seen.

But, at the moment of the third beating, his hands had closed on the muck in front of his face, muck made of soil painfully dry for the time of year, and something of his own, something that flowed willingly and was willingly accepted. His hands held a kind of masa from which no tortillas would ever be patted, a mulch naturally fashioned of earth and human blood.

If the son had been offering excuses for the father, he would have said such soil would make anyone mad, any man trying to raise himself out of it. Squeezed through his own very different fingers, it was a mixture that would bear no corn, yet that, without anyone's knowledge, he would mold as he intended.

When he could bear to, he touched his face, discovered an oddly shaped nose, more like his mother's, and in the instant realized he had only shared her fate. Before Auriliano's time if not a board, his father had taken his fist to her. Why? Had the fastest walking woman in Pueblo Nuevo not been walking fast enough?

A woman who had kept her head down for as long as Auriliano could remember, working as hard as any woman could work. Harder. What was she? A stalk of muscle, bone, breast enough to nourish the newborn, backside sufficient to drive the legs on interminable errands. One chore following her. Another in front, receding. What perception, unvoiced and profound, lived behind those eyes? If his mother opened her mouth, what turn of phrase, explicit and unequivocal, would be added to her son's vocabulary?

Auriliano saw again her thinking face and, in the instant, knew. Not only his mother, but the burro with the bent nose, the dog so often kicked he lost the use of his back legs, had only received their share of that which, with ever-renewed impetus, must ride its own momentum down the ages and would, after delivering him his portion, propel itself into *la eternidad*. And Auriliano asked himself, where did it come from? Was some unholy harmony behind it all? Or was the cuff, the kick, inborn in the doubled fingers of the fist, the tensed foot? Or did it inhere in objects, in things: the raised stick, *por ejemplo*, or the boot?

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A day would come when Auriliano had made it out years be-

fore. He had his work, in which the right book nearly always leapt to hand, in which past and future might regard each other across a present mindful of both. Also, as the sister who preceded him had married well, so had Auriliano. The years contained as much freedom from pain as it was prudent to ask in this life. When news came that his father's time was up, return was not his first impulse, but he went.

The face had not suffered what the body had, though his nose troubled him. Auriliano hardly expected a word out of his father, but felt he had to ask.

What happened?

His father answered, his voice further away than he was.

Not long after you, I left. I found a, a trade, not dependent upon the strength of my back.

Or mine.

Auriliano sat on the one chair in the room, looking sideways at his father. His father spoke to the wall.

Or yours or your brothers' and sisters' and mine and your mother's put together. Listen, Auriliano. I'll tell you a story. Before I found *la sustancia*, or it found me, I worked the land for others. In a hot land that drowned every year as the water broke roads and hurried through houses, in that "land" where walls never dried and people in floodtime wailed on their roofs, I cleared land or—when I was told to and though I didn't like it—I took land from those who had cleared it. It was way back there, beyond the law.

And so, I got a tract that had been someone else's but now was mine. I worked it. I worked it and one day I realized I was back where I'd started...only without you, your mother or your brothers. One day, when I made the trip to town, I saw. What shall I call him?

Auriliano, having never heard so much out of his father, stared at him. His father continued.

All right, let's call him the man of mud. I'd been making my way through the crowd, seeking the best price for what I could not do without, weighed down with what I'd found. I was blind to the many. Who cared about them? I'd been alone so long. Thousands swirled around me. Immobility caught my eye. I stopped. I saw. I think my mouth hung open.

A man of mud. A creature of the flood. A drowned tree with nowhere to go and no way to get there. Immovable. On a crate, a shoe box in front of him. If you dropped a coin in a slot in the box, he would begin to move. His arms would unfold. Like boughs. His legs remained rooted to the crate he stood on. His branches swirled slowly as if in a breeze, the breeze of so many passing, passing by.

He wore work clothes, the kind of hat men wear who work with animals, all of it coated with muck. Smooth as a statue, breathing so you could not see him breathe. You wondered how he knew someone had dropped a coin. In the slot in the box. Then you saw, in the smoothness of the mud, tiny holes for his ears, for the corners of his eyes.

A man with no other work. Surviving. It was one way of surviving. You asked yourself if a man at a standstill might be better off

than a man in everlasting motion, a man bent to hoe or plough, a man yelling at an animal.

And suddenly I knew. I knew I'd worked the mud till I was ready to lie down in it. I almost dropped my load of tools, tools I was going to use to dig my grave deeper than it was.

I knew I had to find something else. At first I didn't, then I did. I found work that bent no spine, that broke no back. The white lady, bless her.

Auriliano's father's eyes scan the room for *la bolsa*, the little bag he cannot even die without. Assured of its presence, he continues.

There was the man, of course. I was working for someone else again...the man with the gold plated automatic and the diamond studded cross, but this time I was out in front, a little out in front. Trouble is, I touched the, the goods. I came back unwell.

But rich.

Auriliano has spoken, but his father is considering the wall again, the ceiling, fingernails longer than they have ever been on hands that are still at last.

No. When I'd spent it, or it had spent me, I realized I'd done even worse than I had taking land from those who'd cleared it only to work it myself. The land had got me in the end, so had this. I came back.

You came back to let *mamá* cure you.

I know she can't.

Auriliano's father had spoken more in these minutes than in all the days of toil put together. On the brink of a hole in the earth the god of drudgery had not only granted him tongue, but a minute to look around him. He was looking right at his son and his son thought: you're thinking, aren't you? You must have handed it on, this human quirk. That must be what I got from you. Well, all right, if you're thinking, what is it? Out with it. And Auriliano opened his mouth.

I heard you wanted to see me.

Auriliano's father looked at each of the walls of the house in which he'd conceived three sons and two daughters, none of which, finally, had heard the call of *el terreno*, had been willing to stand as he had, head bowed, to receive the life sentence to the land, *la cadena perpetua*. Not even *la preferida*, his favorite.

She'd found something else, or something else had found her, even as the stalk she'd begun as curved and filled and strutted in another direction. She'd lost interest in the land long before and waved from the car that took her out of Pueblo Nuevo. Even as her father, hands occupied, watched his work and watched her leave from the corner of his eye.

The older sons who'd helped him beat his youngest son were longer gone. Then he himself was gone...and a lot of good it had done him.

He looked at Auriliano. The only one, apparently, to have come back. Assuming they'd been called, that it had been possible to locate each and every one. But Auriliano spoke first.

You want to apologize, don't you? You want to apologize for trying to do to me what the land did to you.

Auriliano's father continued to look at him, his expression unreadable.

Say it, *papá*. Say you're sorry for beating me, even as, I wouldn't be surprised, your father, on his deathbed, said he was sorry he beat you.

The word *papá*, unfamiliar in his mouth, encouraged him to try one he knew better.

That's why *mamá* tracked me down, isn't it? What's wrong, *papá*, wouldn't the others come?

His father looked at him, his expression still unreadable. Auriliano stood to go.

I'd settle for her forgiveness if I were you.

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But the deathbed scene was yet to be. In time to come. Now was now. His father was still the man. Auriliano was still the child. And yet one day, collapsed in his row of reverie at the end of the family plot, a breath of adulthood blew his way.

Suddenly he knew no dreamworld could be better than the stuff it was made of. Coarse paper, the latest handheld gizmo: it hardly mattered. Dull was dull, empty was empty. Auriliano sat up to rub a dirty face with dirty hands...and the scales of the unbelievable dragon fell before his eyes.

He was still, legally, in school. Half a day was required of him, the second half as the land had, generations ago, staked its claim to the first. One afternoon, on the way home, rain pushed him into the library next to the kitchen that provided a daily hot meal for *personas de la tercera edad*. The house of books was empty, except for children marched there by their teachers. It was odd, this juxtaposition of old and young, so like *el intersticio* Auriliano was about to find for himself, a moment between classroom and land, and sometimes, between land and classroom.

Auriliano stayed in *la biblioteca pública* longer than he intended to and, when the opportunity again presented itself, returned. Without quite realizing it, Auriliano's wits were about to leap the other way, from a fantastic future...over a present that, *gracias a Dios*, was undeniably passing...

To a time that had passed long ago.

The father had other interests in another pueblo. He did not notice *los interludios* Auriliano stole on one end or the other of the workday. Yet, stepping through these cracks in time, Auriliano had discovered an alternative to a disheartening day of donkeywork... to an unlikely future of unscientific fiction.

He had discovered the past.

And simply because, sheltered from the rain, a dusty book on a dusty table had caught his eye. *La historia de la revolución*. Containing the history of, among others, its child victims. Conceived between soldiers and the women who loaded their rifles and some-

times fired them. Children often enough orphaned at birth or soon after. Children gathered in institutions where, thought *el general Carranza*, they might benefit from military training. *Como carne de cañón*, they drilled with wooden rifles, cannon-fodder-to-be for the battlefield that drank blood and guzzled sweat in quantities comparable to the mud and dust of the milpa.

The revolution, he learned, had gone on ten years. The work on the land had never ended. Protracted combat. Everlasting hunger. But the book.

It was the pictures that captivated Auriliano. Children of various yet, within each photo, uniform ages at wooden tables, their bowls before them, or marched barefoot across yards of beaten earth. All of the photographed, without exception, whether or not they had avoided starvation or the expedited fate of the trench, now dead. One way or another, struck down.

Auriliano was not. Well, if he had been, he was getting up. Unlike those children, he would not die in battle. Mexico, he knew, was not at war, except perhaps, as always, with herself in a battle between a government unable or unwilling to tax business or businessmen and the cartels, a war between *los federalistas* and *los narcos*, as well as between cartel and cartel. *Por territorio*. The land again, in a way. He knew he would not die in this war. The excitement, the easy cash, held no appeal...even before he lived to watch a father's wasted form embrace *la cocaína* for the last time. Nor would he, like his father's father and the fathers who preceded him, die face down between the rows of corn or in the family hovel.

Auriliano, listening to the rain, had begun to consider the possibility that the dust of the earth settled over all. On the battlefield, on the bloodbath in the back streets and between the cars, in workplace and shack, on student and scholar, on the man who left as well as the man who stayed.

Suddenly, with past and future as much in balance as they ever are, Auriliano stepped into the present. He was ready to proceed. To make this life his life. One day, were he inclined to song upon his birthday, to celebrating his own improbable success, he might sing his own *mañanitas*.

*El día en que tu naciste  
nacieron todas las flores  
y en la pila del bautismo  
cantaron los ruseñores*

\* \* \*

A successful Auriliano did not beat his wife or his daughters who, naturally, worked as hard as his mother. Auriliano had one son, also named Auriliano though his *sobrenombre* was Nulo. He looked just like his capable father, this one but, due to some untraceable yet apparently transmissible trait, Nulo had no head for anything. He didn't read. The simplest chore was beyond him. His mind elsewhere, he would make a mess of it. As a boy he put things away

without covering them. Once, from school, he carried home a can of paint in his bag, *la bolsa* he liked to think of as his backpack. At home, he dropped it on the couch and dropped himself in front of the television, the latest pastime beneath his plunging thumbs.

Behind his back the couch changed color, then the rug. When Nulo stood to the transformed room, he knew there was no concealing it. There was no denying it. Auriliano, the father, returned.

Why?

A silent Nulo looked at his father, his face contorted from forehead to chin. When Auriliano spoke, it was as if another voice had found its place in his throat. Out of breath, he could hardly form the words.

I, I haven't time, to punish you.

Nulo had no idea why he'd left the open can of paint in his backpack or why he'd done a number of other things he sometimes found himself doing when it was already too late. And sometimes, before he'd done anything wrong, he found himself wondering what was wrong with him. Or with things.

Things! He hated them. Nulo could sense them, *objetos inanimados*, waiting to pit their wills against his.

Nulo was in his teens before he did something, whatever it was, plainly irredeemable. By the time he was a man he'd gone over it so many times there was no point in going over it again. But he did. Nightly. Decades after Auriliano, the father, had died in some foolish forgetfulness of his own, Nulo would wake sweating.

It was always the same. His father, a towering shadow, though Nulo had outgrown the man before he died, was coming at him. A board in his hand, his intention clear. To smash Nulo's nose across his face. Even as, he remembered, his father's face as well as that of his grandmother had been strangely pushed to the side.

In Nulo's interminable night, the stick is raised. The eyes of father and son meet. And then? Try as he might, Nulo cannot remember. Had his father hit him? Had what he, the son, done, warranted the blow that may, or may not, have followed?

A second of childhood so charged it entered adulthood and spread across eternity. A boy's eternity to be followed by a man's. Once upon a time Auriliano, his father, had told him, he had been in love with the future. And time was when it was the past. For Nulo, a moment that had once been future and for many more years had been past, had come to swallow all in an eternal present.

Why *papá*? What have I done? Tell me, please. I cannot remember.

Nulo, the adult, asked the question he had not asked as a child. He asked it, not in the light of day when, perhaps, he might have answered it, but at night, when the shadow loomed that might have been the ghost of all the years preceding his own. Years that would have their due, even from those, perhaps especially from those, who could not remember.

Nulo's son had no such nickname. This Auriliano, due to some forgotten hereditary correspondence, would be grace personified. He would never incur a father's wrath. He would never hear

the story his grandfather had told his father, of the years he was away, working a land of mud and muddy water, though there was every possibility that some remnant or residue, if unremembered, might, in the fullness of time, visit itself upon his own son, the son who would be out of place anywhere, awkward as only the awkward can be, and so soon after the event, the preposterous misfortune, readying himself to accept the unacceptable shock, the inevitable jolt, perhaps on his knees, but raising his eyes to the raised hand, braced.

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Listen, Auriliano.

This is the first Auriliano, Auriliano the father talking to the Auriliano who made it out, off the land, and who, given his fascination with past and future, ought to have been able to stop at least one hand from casting its shadow.

Listen.

This I saw in the same town I saw the man of mud, the town where I bought tools for the land that had found a tool in me. Listen. This is the story of the head.

I'm walking back, having just seen the man of mud, carrying new tools that seemed heavier, even more worn out, than the old. I almost step on her before I see her. She's all head. Literally. A head on the sidewalk where thousands pass every day, if not every hour, but somehow neither I, nor any of the others, have sent her rolling.

She is. Let me say it clearly so you can see. A woman without hands, without legs. She does have one foot directly beneath her. This foot enables her, the head, to "stand" without falling over, stand upright you might say, though "standing" she is no higher than your shin.

The torso beneath is barely larger than the head.

You wonder, since ribcage rests upon the foot beneath, where is...well...all that? Crammed into her chest? Does the foot...the one foot...does it come right out of her as if she, too, is giving birth to something it would be better to not let live, no matter what the church has to say; no matter what she, the mother who bore and loves what she has borne, thinks and feels?

A woman without breasts or arms, who can neither nurse nor hold the child, even if, crowded in, are the requisites; even if some man might bring himself to play his part in the act of creation or re-creation.

And yet, a thinking face upon the head reveals a thinking creature looking up at you and, and wondering what you are thinking. And you, you know you're thinking: who let you live? Would you, given the choice, have chosen these days, these months, these years..?

Listen, Auriliano.

You carry back no answers to the land. You carry your bag of tools to dig yourself deeper. You carry your memory of the man of mud and of the head, visions of which you were granted along

with your escape from one life, then another, along with your trip to town. And you know now, as you squeeze yourself into the boat that will take you on your last trip to your own swamp of ill-got mire, you know the man of mud is you, always was, and that the head, like the past, the present, the future that eyes you no matter how, how different, how free you may conceive yourself to have been or to be, the head, Auriliano, is mother of us all.