They Gave Us the Land

Juan Rulfo

Juan Rulfo (1918–1986) is considered one of Latin America's literary giants despite his meager productivity, which consists of only fifteen short stories and one slender novel. He was born in the tiny village of Apulco, Jalisco, in the waning days of the Mexican revolution. During the 1920s and 1930s, his home region became the scene of considerable violence related to agrarian and religious issues. His father and several uncles were murdered in 1925, and his mother died two years later, leaving him to be raised in an orphanage run by French Josephine nuns. While he is best known for his novel Pedro Páramo, *which has entered the canon of Latin American literature as one of the first works of "magical realism," his short stories provide powerful glimpses of the harsh realities of postrevolutionary Mexico. "They Gave Us the Land," which was first published in 1948, presents an almost surreal critique of the postrevolutionary agrarian reform, where government officials congratulate themselves on fulfilling the promises of the revolution by giving the worst farmland to the poorest people. These characters' unending and apparently pointless trek across a strange, desolate desert serves as a metaphor for the plight of Mexico's poor in the twentieth century.*

After walking so many hours without coming across even the shadow of a tree, or a seedling of a tree, or any kind of root, we hear dogs barking.

At times, along this road with no edges, it seemed like there'd be nothing afterward, that nothing could be found on the other side, at the end of this plain split with cracks and dry arroyos. But there is something. There's a town. You can hear the dogs barking and smell the smoke in the air and you relish that smell of people as if it was a hope.

But the town is still far off. It's the wind that brings it close.

We've been walking since dawn. Now it's something like four in the afternoon. Somebody looks up at the sky, strains his eyes to where the sun hangs, and says, "it's about four o'clock."

That was Melitón. Faustino, Esteban, and I are with him. There are four of us. I count them: two in front, and two behind. I look further back and don't see anybody. Then I say to myself, "There are four of us." Not long ago, at

about eleven, there were over twenty, but little by little they've been scattering away until just this knot of us is left.

Faustino says, "It may rain."

We all lift our faces and look at a heavy black cloud passing over our heads. And we think, "Maybe so."

We don't say what we're thinking. For some time now we haven't felt like talking. Because of the heat. Somewhere else we'd talk with pleasure, but here it's difficult. You talk here and the words get hot in your mouth with the heat from outside, and they dry up on your tongue until they take your breath away. That's the way things are here. That's why nobody feels like talking.

A big fat drop of water falls, making a hole in the earth and leaving a mark like spit. It's the only one that falls. We wait for others to fall and we roll our eyes looking for them. But there are no others. It isn't raining. Now if you look at the sky, you'll see the rain cloud moving off real fast in the distance. The wind that comes from the town pushes the cloud against the blue shadows of the hills. And the drop of water which fell here by mistake is gobbled up by the thirsty earth.

Who the devil made this plain so big? What's it good for, anyway?

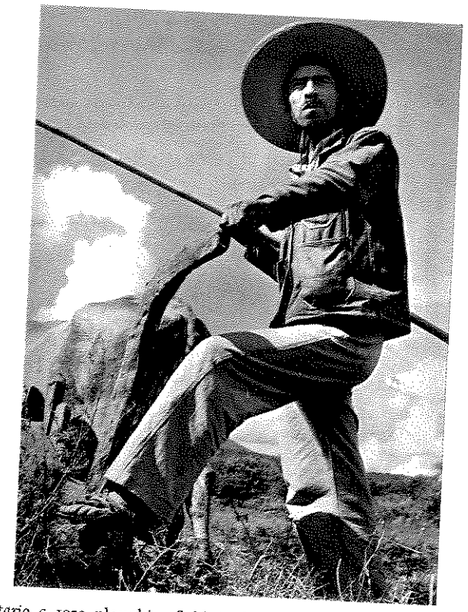
We started walking again; we'd stopped to watch it rain. It didn't rain. Now we start walking again. It occurs to me that we've walked more than the ground we've covered. That occurs to me. If it had rained, perhaps other things would've occurred to me. Anyway, I know that ever since I was a boy I've never seen it rain out on the plain—what you would really call rain.

No, the plain is no good for anything. There're no rabbits or birds. There's nothing. Except a few scrawny huizache trees and a patch or two of grass with the blades curled up; if it weren't for them, there wouldn't be anything.

And here we are. The four of us on foot. Before, we used to ride on horseback and carry a rifle slung over our shoulder. Now we don't even carry the rifle.

I've always thought that taking away our rifles was a good thing. Around these parts it's dangerous to go around armed. You can get killed without warning if you're seen with your thirty-thirty strapped on. But horses are another matter. If we'd come on horses we would already be tasting the green river water, and walking our full stomachs around the streets of the town to settle our dinner. We'd already have done that if we still had all those horses. But they took away our horses with the rifles.

I turn in every direction and look at the plain. So much land all for nothing. Your eyes slide when they don't find anything to light on. Just a few lizards stick their heads out of their holes, and as soon as they feel the roasting sun quickly hide themselves again in the small shade of a rock. But when we have



Ejidatario, c. 1950, ploughing fields in the traditional way. (Photo by Fritz Heyle. Reprinted by permission of Henle Archive Trust.)

to work here, what can we do to keep cool from the sun?—because they gave us this crust of rocky ground for planting.

They told us, "From the town up to here belongs to you."

We asked, "The Plain?"

"Yes, the plain. All the Big Plain."

We opened our mouths to say that we didn't want the plain, that we wanted what was by the river. From the river up to where, through the meadows, the trees called casuarinas are, and the pastures and the good land. Not this tough cow's hide they call the Plain.

But they didn't let us say these things. The official hadn't come to converse with us. He put the papers in our hands and told us, "Don't be afraid to have so much land just for yourselves."

"But the Plain, sir—"

"There are thousands and thousands of plots of land."

"But there's no water. There's not even a mouthful of water."

"How about the rainy season? Nobody told you you'd get irrigated land. As soon as it rains out there, the corn will spring up as if you were pulling it."

"But, sir, the earth is all washed away and hard. We don't think the plow will cut into the earth of the Plain that's like a rock quarry. You'd have to make holes with the pick-axe to plant the seed, and even then you can't be sure that anything will come up; no corn or anything else will come up."

"You can state that in writing. And now you can go. You should be attacking the large-estate owners and not the government that is giving you the land."

"Wait, sir. We haven't said anything against the Center. It's all against the Plain—You can't do anything when there's nothing to work with—That's what we're saying—Wait and let us explain. Look, we'll start back where we were—"

But he refused to listen to us.

So they've given us this land. And in this sizzling frying pan they want us to plant some kind of seeds to see if something will take root and come up. But nothing will come up here. Not even buzzards. You see them out here once in a while, very high, flying fast, trying to get away as soon as possible from this hard white earth, where nothing moves and where you walk as if losing ground.

Melitón says, "This is the land they've given us."

Faustino says, "What?"

I don't say anything. I think, Melitón doesn't have his head screwed on right. It must be the heat that makes him talk like that—the heat that's cut through his hat and made his head hot. And if not, why does he say what he's saying? What land have they given us, Melitón? There isn't even enough here for the wind to blow up a dust cloud.

Melitón says again, "It must be good for something—for something, even just for running mares."

"What mares?" Esteban asks him.

I hadn't noticed Esteban very closely. Now that he's speaking I notice him. He's wearing a coat that reaches down to his navel, and under his coat something that looks like a hen's head is peering out.

Yes, it's a red hen that Esteban is carrying under his coat. You can see her sleepy eyes and open beak as if she was yawning. I ask him, "Hey, Teban, where'd you pick up that hen?"

"She's mine!" he says.

"You didn't have her before. Where'd you buy her, huh?"

"I didn't buy her, she's from my chickenyard."

"Then you brought her for food, didn't you?"

"No, I brought her along to take care of her. Nobody was left at my house to feed her; that's why I brought her. Whenever I go anyplace very far I take her along."

"Hidden there she's going to smother. Better bring her out in the air."

He places her under his arm and blows the hot air from his mouth on her. Then he says, "We're reaching the cliff."

I don't hear what Esteban is saying any more. We've got in line to go down the barranca and he's at the very front. He has a hold of the hen by her legs and he swings her to and fro so he won't hit her head against the rocks."

As we descend, the land becomes good. A cloud of dust rises from us as if we were a mule train descending, but we like getting all dusty. We like it. After tromping for eleven hours on the hard plain, we're pleased to be wrapped in that thing that jumps over us and tastes like earth.

Above the river, over the green tops of the casuarina trees, fly flocks of green chachalacas. That's something else we like.

Now we can hear the dogs barking, near us, because the wind coming from the town re-echoes in the barranca and fills it with all its noises.

Esteban clutches his hen to him again when we approach the first houses. He unties her legs so she can shake off the numbness, and then he and his hen disappear behind some tepemezquite trees.

"Here's where I stop off," Esteban tells us.

We move on further into the town.

The land they've given us is back up yonder.