The Northern Desert

The Green Bottle
Ricardo Elizondo Elizondo

The settlement, hidden away in an isolated corner of the immense desert, had lost its population little by little. First to go were the men, those with sturdy legs and strong arms. Years before, they left in a flurry of revolutionary excitement, eager to fight for the right to own land. A happy affair all round, since nobody was fighting to own this stretch of land, the dry hilltops bereft of vegetation, the salt-bedeviled lowlands scorched by a sun fiercer than toothache. It was not long before the few men who

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returned had left again, taking with them their possessions, their wives and children. This was a time of famine. Once there were no strong backs to carry loads of lime and alum crystals, the wagons that had once brought piles of foodstuffs from the far side of the dry lake bed and gone back crammed with rocks ceased to make the journey. The times got so desperate that the old folks had to resort to old Indian customs, so largely forgotten that they had to virtually reinvent them. They relearned how to eat the tough roots of bushes that barely reached knee-height. They laid traps for snakes and burrowing vermin. One day when the sickly children looked more wretched than ever, the women got together and killed a wild mule that had come wandering along the canyon. Since that time, the more farsighted ones had taken to planting pumpkins and beans, constructing shelters from the fibers of maguey plants to protect the seedlings from the fiendish sun.

It was there she was born, though nobody could say exactly where or when. All they recalled was that she was the second daughter of the seven children her mother bore. She grew up scratching away at the hillside and grinding maize with a stone mortar. Hardened by carrying heavy jugs of water, her shoulders were as tough as a man’s, as were her legs and slender feet. With her masculine strength she could walk for hours on end, her head wrapped in a cloth and her mouth covered. If there was need, she was bold enough to go by herself to the farthest hilltop, until she was lost from sight. And go she did. From childhood on, she had grown used to death and to silence; she had seen many lives shrivel to nothing, both children’s and adults’. Sometimes, in the burning noonday, blinded by the
sun, she wondered what lay beyond the glittering levels of the sands. She had asked the wagon drivers, but their reply was always the same, that beyond the sands were vast stretches of thornbush, and beyond them more sands.

The drivers had been only as far as the railway station, but they claimed, relying on hearsay, that after a thirst-defying journey of hours piled on hours, there existed a place where everything was green and the rain fell every day. She had serious doubts about the existence of such a place. One of the drivers had presented her with a bottle of green glass, the most wonderful present of her childhood. She kept it wrapped in a clean cloth and every day held it before her eyes so that the dazzling dryness of the landscape took on the appearance of a total green.

She grew up quickly, always waiting for rain, always hacking away at the dry soil. At twelve, she knew how to raise an infant and what to do to avoid being a liability to her family. At fourteen, she recognized the presence of her man, and at fifteen, they settled down together. Her man was a fool, more stupid than a sun-struck hen, but she loved him and loved him well.

One windy morning, a little after the birth of her son, the drivers came with disturbing news. The men beyond the dry lands were talking of war, knives, battle cries, and horses. A grand struggle was in progress, men were gathering, there was free travel by train, the cause was a worthy one, and there was a guarantee of food and pay. Not to mention looting and other inviting perks, for there is truth in the old saying: “To the victor go the spoils.”

These promises brought an eager light into the eyes of the lime-burners. “To buy you a pretty piece of cloth,” they
said to their wives, “that’s why I want to go.” Stubborn and hard as pebbles, the women stared at the ground, but then their eyes met their men’s and they yielded. The following day, along with the wagons, the first batch of men set out, that evening a second batch, and on the third day the rest of the men. After two nights the community was stripped of husbands and brothers. They had promised to return soon, before the supply of corn ran out, but they failed to keep their word. Weeks went by and anxiety set in. Hunger stalked the hill country and before long the children were begging for food and playing less. Hunger was visible even in the restless glances of the old folks and in the torment of faces of the women. “Ghost of the drought, twisted root of mesquite,” they chanted, “go away, go away, go far from here.” But Hunger just laughed and every day danced its reckless dance of death. The only hope was that the wagons that came for the alum would bring food. While sinewy hands collected rocks, nervous eyes scanned the horizon in vain. The glittering piles of crystals and white stone grew higher and higher. One day they found an old woman crooning to herself where she lay cradled at the bottom of an empty container for beans. Then they left the salty rocks and set out for the acres of scrub and thorn. Their stomachs blazing with rage at their abandonment, they picked up machetes and chopped at anything that was edible. The older folks seized whatever came to hand. Rats, the knots of ropes, and dry vegetation kept them going for months, as, bit by painful bit, they once again turned into farmers.

It was nearly a year before the first of the men seduced by the revolution came back. He arrived exhausted,
reduced to a skeleton, with nothing to show for his pains. He explained that things hadn’t turned out as they’d been led to believe. They had boarded a train and traveled for several days until, one evening, quite unexpectedly, a band of armed horsemen stopped the machine. Everything was confusion. Those who were able to jumped down from the train and ran off between the magueys and the cactuses. They escaped the bullets but probably not the desert itself. “The rest of us,” he went on, “kept quiet inside the wagons, which were as big as three huts put end to end. And it turned out to be the best move, because the horsemen asked us if we planned to put up any resistance, and which general we served, and who we were fighting for. The fact is we had no idea. All we want, we told them, are tortillas and beans and, if possible, something to spend on our wives and kids. They spread-eagled us on the rails and kept us there for a long time, until somebody more important arrived on a really big horse. From what we could see of him from the corners of our eyes, we figured he had to be the big boss. He kept staring at us. Then suddenly he tossed a rifle to one of us and the simpleton grasped it by the barrel. The big man burst out laughing and shouted that we were a bunch of fools and that we could relax our legs. It was nearly dark when they put us back on the train and by the time dawn was breaking, we arrived at a place where there were women and hot food. . . .

The whole night passed in the telling of his story. The woman and the old folks of the shabby settlement drank it all in with their eyes wide, anxious for still more news. By general agreement, nobody interrupted him; it was better to ask no questions, in case their informant lost his
patience and with a single gesture of his hand extinguished
the flickering light of their hopes. But then an old woman
spat loudly and called out, “And my three horses? Where
are they now?” Her question precipitated an avalanche of
other questions over the man, as grief and tears over-
whelmed the ears of his audience until they buzzed. She
didn’t ask him any questions but her man was mentioned
in passing. “Just as I thought,” she said to herself. “He was
such a fool.” Like the shadow of a vulture, she got up and
with her skinny son asleep in her arms, sat at the door of
her hut and chafed her ankles with her hands until she
made the dry skin squeak.

The transport wagons never came back. Very few men
returned. Those that did told her many things, but since
she already knew the fate of her man, they all sounded like
more of the same. She kept on working from before the
sun was up. She deepened the well, while her son, a tiny
thing, up above, yanked on the rope, which they had both
woven, and hauled up the damp, sandy soil in a pail fash-
ioned from a tortoise shell. Once, while looking for wild
honey, she came across a rabbit with its litter. Instead of
killing them, she chose to raise them. Miraculously, they
thrived. After that, things got easier. She used the excre-
ment of her dogs and rabbits to fertilize her small parcel
of cultivable soil. She surrounded it with tough, spiny
bushes to defend it against the onslaughts of the burning
wind. There she planted maize, pumpkins, and beans, and
fed a diet of grass and diced nopal cactus to the rabbits. In
a few years, she was harvesting enough to make gifts or to
barter. She then set her sights on a hen, but the only man
who owned hens refused to trade her one and even shut
them inside his hut to protect them. Finally, after many pleas from her, he agreed to trade one male and one female chick for four rabbits and a medium-sized bag of clean beans. The chicks cost her so much that for months she neglected her vegetable patch in order to watch over them. She used to send her son out into the tracts of thornbush to look for white worms and gray butterflies, and not until the chicks looked grown and vigorous, did she stop boiling the water they drank.

While she buried herself endlessly in work, the settlement was losing more and more of its population. At first she didn’t care and paid little attention. Somebody’s come, she observed, and tomorrow he’s leaving with his wife and kids; the grandmother refuses to go, because, most likely, she’ll die on the journey, but his husbandless sisters are going to go with him. Well, what do other people matter to my son and me? We have nobody in this world. As long as my son’s strong, we won’t go wanting for food. But then she detected that her son had a gleam in his eye and the same brave curiosity she herself had had as a girl, when she’d watched the transport wagons or smashed a snake’s head with a large rock. She was afraid, very afraid, and had no religion to comfort her, because she had been taught none. Her son was as taciturn as his father had been, but he was not as stupid, by no means as stupid. How could he be, when just by thinking about it, he’d come up with the idea of using channels to water the land and thanks to him, they had their own bees to give them honey all year round? That was why she was so afraid he might leave in a fit of emotion. He was all she had. But she wouldn’t hold him back if he wanted to go far away, though she would
shrivel away to nothing, working by herself, for there had to be a wider world out there, beyond the last dry hilltop.

One night when she and her son were out in the yard, playing hide-and-seek, they heard loud shrieks of women, which could have been either laments or laughter. The first thing they thought was that one of the elderly had died and they unhurriedly sought the source of the noise. To their great surprise, they saw, in the light of a tallow candle, two pairs of trousers and two shirts of a beauty and color they had never imagined. Around these novel garments, the whole population was circling, a population now so scanty it could have fitted into a single hut. She quickly recognized the visitors. One was her own brother, whom she had given up for dead, having had no news of him for years. It turned out that before the war had ended the pair had headed far north, and there had found work with a lady whose skin, they claimed, was very white and the color of whose eyes matched that of her precious bottle. Their bodies were in fine fettle, their cheeks full, unlike those who had made it back from the war. “You like my shirt so much,” said her brother, “that I’ll give it to you for your boy. And for you yourself here are some colored spectacles, so that you can keep on see everything yellow as if it were green.” They had brought with them two bags bulging with clothes and everybody got something. That night, of course, nobody slept. They told her so many things that her head started spinning. She thought it wisest to go outside, and she killed a rabbit, seasoning it with traditional herbs. Once it was boiled in water and salt, she served it on her finest plate, chipped at the edges and darkened by use. She offered it to the recent arrivals as the best thing that she
and the rest of the population of this salt-infested land had to offer.

The visitors stayed for two weeks. If she had known anything about the world at large, she would have found appropriate words to describe them, but she sought in vain, over and over again, among her restricted vocabulary for the adjectives right for them. They seemed to her like evangelists, preaching of a distant land of great promise and cursing bitterly the wretched patch of earth they’d been born in. Then what she had been fearing so much happened, and it hit her like a deafening blaze, even as it kindled the eyes of her son and changed him. Often, in those two weeks, she caught him watching her and she felt scorched by fear. Though she knew what he was thinking, what he was wanting, she distracted herself in order to avoid him. One afternoon, with everything in its place, with everything that needed doing already done, instead of remaining, as she usually did, in the shade of the hut, she told herself she needed to add another row of stones to the wall around the yard. “Better that than listen to what he’s liable to say,” she told herself. But the boy had already made up his mind. He waited for an hour, watching his mother’s figure shimmering in the heat, floating between the blasts of burning light coming in from the sands, when the desert was at its worst, at its most threatening and unnerving. She knew it, she felt an immense stone poised at the mouth of her stomach; she refused to look back at the hut; she refused to think another thought. As stubborn and as mindless as a mule, she loaded stone after rough stone into the basket that hung from her shoulder.

The moment she arrived at the wall, with her back
always to the hut, she felt her son’s arms encircle her tightly and heard his undisguised sobbing in the nape of her neck. Then she broke down herself and violently let loose the feeling she had been withholding: that she was a rotten bitch, plagued with worms, and selfish. Her guts collapsed and she released all the kindness within her. Out there, right under the sun whose stupefying heat reduced her land to a desolate exhaustion, she gave him her understanding and held nothing back.

Once more she saw men setting out toward the railway tracks. She gave him a little bag filled with the prettiest stones the desert had to offer but did not speak to him, for it was as if all her blood had clotted in her mouth.

Astonished and nervous, the boy climbed aboard the train. In addition to what he was wearing—all of it given to him by his uncle, who was accompanying him—he carried a cotton cloth folded to make a bag, containing dried and ground up boiled maize, biscuits made of beans and honey, thick chunks of mineral salt, small pieces of cactus leaf to use as medicine for any aches and pains, and the little bag of pretty stones. As the only movement he was used to was that of his own legs, the rocking motion of the train put him through a hell of nausea for two whole days. His companions advised him to keep his eyes on the far distance as much as he could, but his eyes, accustomed to looking down—the only way to avoid being burned by the sun and the wind—stubbornly reverted to the dizzying whirl of cactuses and rock formations that raced by, straining them and churning his stomach. Eventually, the rattling motion of the planks and iron frames became part of his flesh and
his stomach adapted to taking in food while everything around him shook endlessly. Early one morning he heard the mighty machine squealing, first a little backward, then a little forward, then once again backward, and once again forward, and he felt so scared at the halting of the train that he woke his uncle. They had arrived.

There were so many houses, so many people, so many things crowding his mind that he couldn’t find words for them. Astonishment piled on astonishment. He could not understand that there was still more to come. They walked across a long bridge built of stone, wood, and iron, and surely that was the end of it. For a while he had been encountering things he’d never seen before and had no name for, but at least he had understood something of what the people were saying. But now, not even that. People were talking as if they were imitating the clashing of knives or the clinking of plates. To the trembling of the train that he still carried inside him was added the trembling of fear. A snake twisted and turned in his guts and a swarm of flies buzzed up from his stomach into his head. Along with other men like themselves, they entered a huge corral fitted with benches, where sat still more men like themselves.

There they stayed until there arrived the contractors with what his uncle called the application. “Don’t tell them any lies,” he added. “If they ask you what you know how to do, show them by making gestures. They’re going to strip you down, and then drench you with a stinking solution. You’ll feel it burn your skin, but don’t worry. Only the men who get disinfected are allowed through. They’re going to check you, back and front, your head, armpits, and
mouth, even your penis. Don’t be scared. It’s like buying horses. You have to check them thoroughly, to make sure you’re not being suckered. Probably they’ll take away your bundle, so give me anything you want me to take care of. I’m already on their list, so they’re going to disinfect me, and that’s all. Don’t open your mouth or your eyes, because the stuff is poisonous. I’ll see you at the exit.”

They kept him for twenty-four hours in a white building. His skin was plagued by a burning sensation, as if he’d been rolled in the lime of his home settlement. “Just wet your face,” they told him. “But don’t scratch, or you’ll open up burning sores.” They gave him meat and potatoes and something unfamiliar: a glass of milk. He couldn’t sleep. The itching was bad enough, but in the middle of the night, he suffered a stinking diarrhea, and his temperature soared and left him dizzy and faint. As stoic as his mother, he uttered no complaint. They woke up his uncle to tell him that the boy was in the toilet with his head between his legs. They took him to the hospital and gave him a white liquid that resembled the milk but tasted of powder. Even so he couldn’t sleep. The next noon they once again gave him meat and potatoes and a drink of herbs that he really liked. That evening they lined them all up and handed out bars of soap. He had never seen such torrents of water before. “Wet yourself thoroughly,” they told him, “and soap yourselves three times.” He did as he was told, but even so, a week later, his skin still felt on fire.

The big truck that transported them to the ranch—at two days’ distance from the border—was normally used to move pigs. The woodwork that made up the cage stank of old pig shit. He happened to be in the center of the stand-
ing human herd, which swayed from one side of the cage to the other, and through a gap in the bars he observed the marvel of constant greenness. His dark eyes learned many lessons, and all the while his hands longed to sink themselves into the juicy soil. He spent two months at the ranch harvesting potatoes, which they paid him for by the basket, then a month in the packing plant. He separated hundreds of potatoes into dark ones and light ones, and they paid him by the day. When that job was done, a truck took them to he-didn’t-know-where. There he clambered up a ladder and on every branch of the trees he left between three and five peaches, depending, and cut off the rest. Once again the job was done, and again in a truck, but this time seated, they were carried off to cooler ground, where the air was scented by an infinity of walnut trees. The stronger men beat the trees with a long pole while he collected the nuts in baskets. In the evenings and even into the night he cleaned the nuts, and for that they paid him double: by the basket for collecting the nuts, by the box for cleaning them.

His uncle presented him with a belt pouch made from snakeskin and he never took it off, for he kept his money in it. He learned to count and knew that these ten pieces of paper with a certain fellow on it were worth that single one with another fellow on it, and that ten of those were the equivalent of one of the very special papers that had a bald-headed, bespectacled fellow on it. He preferred these last ones, because they weren’t as bulky as the others and he could fit more of them into his belt.

He spent the whole winter on the walnut farm. Day after day he swept up leaves, put them in a grinder, and
then spread the compost over the huge orchard, which was fenced in all around its upper reaches. A layer of leaves, a layer of soil, a layer of leaves, a layer of soil, endlessly, until it drove everybody wild with tedium except him, because he liked to work. In the middle of winter, something happened that he could not understand, but they told him that these bills were worth nothing or that those others were worth something.

Distinguishing himself from the general run of workers, he kept on rising at first light and, with his rake in his hands, worked over the grounds of the orchard. One day his uncle told him he was going to the city and invited him along. He took the invitation as an order. They walked as far as a broad highway and kept on walking along its edge. A fellow countryman they did not know gave them a ride in his two-wheeled cart and kept on talking at them until the time they left him. His uncle took him to a house full of women and men who were smoking and dancing. After a while his uncle said, “I’m going to take a piss. Wait here for me.” His uncle kept taking a piss every half hour, until the boy felt like taking one, too. He followed his uncle and learned that pissing didn’t mean expelling liquid but imbibing it. To the rear of the washroom was a door. There the uncle knocked twice. The door slid back and out came two glasses of yellow liquid. It was immature brandy. “Here, take it,” said the uncle. “You need to learn about this. The guys at the top don’t want ordinary folks drinking. So they’ve prohibited booze. But there’s a way around everything. ’Specially when it comes to a drink.”

He would have preferred not to drink, simply because the stuff stung his throat, but his uncle was his uncle. Four
times they returned to the sliding door, but he could remember nothing after that, he heard himself telling the gentlemen who spoke like clashing knives. They were questioning him and very occasionally he understood something of what they said. He insisted that he had no memory of anything after the fourth drink. The men were the representatives of law and order, the janitor told him. They’d imprisoned everybody they’d caught, but a lot of people had gotten away. He inquired about his uncle, but nobody understood what he was saying. When they asked him what he was carrying in his belt, he showed them the blisters on his hands, and they read in his eyes his keen sense of honor. They told him that nothing bad was going to happen to him. They sent him to a school-cum-workshop, where they corrected those who’d left the straight and narrow. Once again he threw himself into work, and within the year, he had mastered the craft of rough woodworking, as well as the skill of talking with his tongue wrinkled. He did not lose hope of finding his uncle. One day they told him that he now had a saleable skill and they set about looking for a job for him. He was hired by mail by a man who lived very far away and sent money for his trip. He left a message for his mother’s brother, but nobody ever picked it up.

It was a sawmill, a very small one, compared to the huge forests that surrounded it. As soon as he arrived, without anyone telling him and instead of sitting around like the rest of the workmen, he began picking up the wood shavings and bark scattered in the clearing in front of the workshop. Then he organized the barrels round the back. “My God, you’re a good ‘un,” the old man told him, as he
worked. “I can see we’re gonna get along real well.” He did not understand much, but from the man’s tone and smile he knew he was welcome.

By the end of the month, he had replaced three of his own countrymen in the trust of his employer. In twelve months’ time, he was the supervisor of those who spoke his language. The boss took him to the bank and explained, as best he could, that there they paid you for letting them look after your money. He understood and before the incredulous eyes of the manager emptied out his pouch, stuffed with the results of four years’ work. “A tidy sum you got there, boy!” said the man. The name of his mother was registered as his beneficiary, she who lived in the settlement of lime, alum, and silence, at the far side of the wide river, in a wrinkle of the desert under the hammering sun, where the people spoke her language and she was waiting for him.

Three more autumns went by, and his bank account kept on growing. One sunny noonday, while the white men were whining about the heat, and the blond owner of the mill was lunching on corn on the cob, mashed potatoes, and fried meat, came a sudden cry, “Boss, boss, the logs have rolled!” Then alarms and shouts and the snapping of metal supports. There was nothing they could do. The supervisor who’d come from the far side of the wide river, the one who was all work and never less than quietly confident, was spouting blood from a rip in his stomach, as he lay trapped between the sweet-smelling might of the cedar logs.

The boss tripled the amount the dead boy had in the bank. His name and that of his mother were added to the
long lists that hung in the offices of the border to the south. They remained there for many years. But the fact was that nobody ever read those lists.

In the early fifties the bank near the sawmill was absorbed by a powerful banking chain. The auditors discovered on their arrival that the account had tripled over the last thirty years. Interest paid on the original amount was now in its turn earning interest. The beneficiary had made no claim. So it went on, year after year. Whereas the sum had been a respectable amount in the beginning, it was now a hefty capital. They consulted the old owner of the mill, and he informed them of the searches for the beneficiary conducted in those first years, all of them fruitless. He authorized the use of the interest to finance a formal search for the sole owner of the money. The banking chain hired the services of an agency that specialized in locating property and persons. The investigator who visited the sawmill found few data, basically nothing of significance beyond those written in the document that named as beneficiary a certain woman in a lime-producing settlement on the far side of the wide river. There was no alternative but to travel, as early as possible, to the desert mentioned and from there, somehow or other, conduct a search.

A local man was hired by the foreign investigator to travel through the settlements of the desert. “You can take all the time you want,” the foreigner told him. “You’re looking for a woman who may be already dead. It doesn’t matter to me whether she’s alive or not. All I need is a clear statement of evidence. They pay me the same whether you find her living or dead. Right now I’ve had it up to here
with all this flying dust. All I need now is to start shitting williwaws and rattlesnakes!"

It ought not to have been so, but it was. The barren lot where she had waited was turning into a stinking filthiness without relief. At the beginning it hadn't been that way. She hadn't known how or at what moment her son would come home, but in the peaceful mornings when the silence of the suffocating sun trap brought into the winding channels of her ear only the murmurs of her own life, she felt in the depths of her soul the breeze of a moonlit night and the strange warmth of one who waits with hope. It was later, perhaps after she buried hope, that the mornings started to acquire a bitter taste and the nights savored of abandonment. She was never short of work. Then she was cursed with a back she dislocated while breaking up waste ground for planting. As people left, she had acquired more land, but all of it of poor quality and scorched dry like her own. When her brother came, he told her to burn the weeds and all she could manage of the scrub and to toss the ashes onto the furrows, because ashes aided cultivation. Several times she did so, until she realized that the ash was good only for pumpkins, and after that she confined the use of ashes to the pumpkin patch. She also found more water and had the option of a better-tasting well. Apart from its superior taste, its clarity turned out to improve the boiling of beans. The cleaner the water, the sooner the beans went soft, she found. So she got more plates, more cooking bowls, and more cloths. From the huts that were abandoned, she went around selecting the best of what
was left, lengths of iron, sections of metal sheeting, here and there a plank. Day after day, over the years, she labored, toting, dragging, and twisting stuff in hopeful enterprises. She added to her hut a broad canopy woven from maguey fiber and under it placed the rabbit hutch. On the south side, the coolest, she built a hen run and put a roof over it. From the two original chicks she now had ten laying hens and two roosters. Every three weeks she killed a chicken and except for the time her fowls were infested with parasites, she never went short of eggs to eat. On the departure of her son, she increased her workload and finished the day exhausted, drained by the sun and wind. The night was her refuge. She kept so busy by day that no sooner had darkness fallen than she was fast asleep, freed from thoughts about waiting, saved from tormenting her heart with suppositions.

All that remained were the elderly, the people with faces the color of sand and hair dusty with lime. Convinced that they would die there and that nothing or nobody would ever liberate them from the red-hot frying pan in which they lived, they formed a gloomy brotherhood and began to dig their own graves, an assembly of aged shadows wasted by the sun. Once the work of providing their daily sustenance was over, two or three of them used to go together and determinedly break through the hard layers of lime that formed the subsoil of the tiny cemetery in the mournful hillside. Between twisted roots and ashy shrubs, they opened up, handful by handful, what had once been the epitome of their hopes and was now to be their tombs. A damned earth, damned for never having yielded them an ounce of sweetness. A savage land, haunted by devils,
which repaid every caress by spitting back thistles and lacerating thorns. Cursed, totally cursed, roundly cursed, like those noons of torturing fire that enveloped them, day after day. Not one of their number had ever known the gift of fresh fruit or the luxury of plunging into water and rolling in its transparent waves. It had never crossed their minds that such things existed.

For ten years the holes in the yellow earth were not used. They remained as they were, open to the heat. Then, one death followed another, and in one year three were buried. From then on, in the dingy half-light of their hovels, the fixed stare of saddened eyes awaited the long-expected visit of death. She alone resisted the resigned meaning of her neighbors’ gestures. She dug her grave, because they all had done it, but while she heaved up the sharp rocks, she swore to herself, by all her years of solitude, that she would never use it. She had the strength to wait for her son. Even if it meant enduring horrors, it didn’t matter to her, as long as he came back to see her. As a child, they had told her that elderly Indians used to prolong their lives by eating, while still warm, the pregnant wombs of female animals. “Well, I’ll do even that, when the vultures start to gather,” she told herself. “I’ll eat the wombs of my rabbits, even though I feel the birth canal opening, even though I sense the young animals writhing in my mouth, and myself weeping inwardly. I have to live long enough to see him come back. There, over there where the train goes by, that’s the way he’ll come, loaded down with his own kids, and he’ll take me away with him, because I don’t want to die alone. . . .”

Her energy stayed with her for long afterward, even
when only two of them remained alive in the settlement, and the other, a man, was spying on her to see if she could still get out of bed in the morning. Solid in her conviction and hope, she was sure that she’d be the one to drag the neighbor she’d known all her life over to the hillside. And so it turned out. One evening she missed the trembling candle flame that indicated the presence of the man. She became aware that all afternoon she had been hearing a commotion among his hungry hens. Suddenly she was gasping for air; in her own inner ear she heard the rattle of chilling death, and her legs froze in terror. She found him stiff, with a thread of bloody spittle dangling from his mouth. A huge lizard was already sucking at his eyeballs.

She made a stretcher and in the morning dragged him to the hillside of oblivion. She came back, feeling as if she had turned to stone, her teeth reduced to sand, her hopes almost in ashes.

The passing of time became an obsession with her. She measured it by the molting of the hens and the flowering of the nopal cactus. Every night she seated herself in the yard, clutching a large bundle of rags in her arms and talking aloud to it. Sleep was harder and harder to come by, even when she worked hard. She spent the night watching the stars or imagining the children her son had fathered.

From the moment he came into sight in the far distance, she had been observing him, a tiny point in the monotony of the desert. She was drawing water, and long shadows were beginning to creep across the soil, while the breeze from the white-hot desert was also beginning its daily
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stroll. Her chest opened with emotion, and she felt the gap between her breasts threatening to burst with palpitations. All her muscles quivering with emotion, she raced to welcome him, without a cloth to protect her head, laughing like a lunatic and deaf with excitement. She ran weeping, burning him up with her eyes, treading between the jagged rocks and not feeling the thousands of scratching thorns. “My boy is coming!” Her hair and all her skin were alive as if with ants. Her throat had closed painfully. Her legs forced a way through the scrub and her thighs brushed aside the broad, glistening tips of the magueys.

Her eyes were used to scanning the distance. Long before the visitor, enfeebled by the sun, could make out anything distinct on the horizon of growing shadows, she already knew that she was not seeing the son of her memories, and a shocking taste of iron paralyzed her, leaving her like a hieroglyph sketched against the cobalt-blue distance where the night was beginning. She went back the way she had come, very slowly, and pulled coals from the fireplace and in the front of the yard lit a huge bonfire of dried maize stalks so the stranger might have a guide and his persistent thirst would be finally slaked.

“That’s not my name and I don’t know her,” she assured him. “Nobody of that name lives round here. I’ve been living by myself for years now, just me and my rabbits and my hens. If there was anybody here with that name, I’d tell you, but there isn’t, there’s nobody. . . .”

Astonishment and pity filled the visitor’s face. He had arrived sunburned, the corners of his mouth white with dust, his forehead reddened, and his hands cracking open
like the earth under a drought. She knew full well the tor-
tures of thirst and the agonies suffered by those who, after
walking under that sun, swallowed water in reckless gulps,
so she periodically gave him small sips of water with a
grain or two of salt in order to extinguish, little by little,
the fire raging inside him. She moistened some clean strips
of old rags and placed them on his forearms, forehead, and
the soles of his feet. She refused to let him speak or move.
She kept on giving him water until the man said that the
only way he could drink any more would be to vomit up
what was already inside him. The blazing fire was a heap
of ashes before she told him he was free to move and talk.

For the first time in many years, she prepared a hot sup-
per. When she was alone, any uneaten food turned rancid
in the pan, converted to vinegar and bubbles by the intense
heat. The man talked to her about a migrant worker who
had died at the age of twenty-four. He'd left a fortune to
his mother, about twenty years before, and it was his job
now to find the woman. "If she lived here once,” she
answered, “she doesn’t now. She must be dead as dust, with
her bones turned to saltpeter. There’s nobody here, they all
died long ago, there’s nobody here.”

After supper, the man fell asleep, and she stayed there,
looking at him, feeling hollow inside. Then she set the rab-
bits free and scattered the hens among the ashy ruins of the
abandoned settlement. She made up a parcel of cooked
maize kernels, biscuits of beans with honey, a small
flask of water, and a handful of the local salt. Before the early
sun got hot, the man set out. She gave him the packet of
foodstuffs, along with some old sunglasses, and, carefully
wrapped in spotless linen, an old green bottle.
With the pain of years knotting every joint, she slid down into a sitting position. So many years of being there, breathing fire, sucking up water while crouched to the earth, caring for her sterile land . . .

Next to the railway tracks lay an emerald bottle, shattered into a dozen fragments. Back on the cursed outcrop of alum and lime, hidden away in a wrinkle of the desert, a woman allowed herself to die as she faced the shimmering glare of the hot sands, faced the heat that had reduced her skin to paper and hardened her eyes to stone. She was dry, inside and out.

Translated by Geoff Hargreaves