The Fruit of Their Labor

“We are Americans all who have toiled for this land, who have made it rich and free. But we must not demand from America, because she is still our unfinished dream. Instead we must sacrifice for her: let her grow into bright maturity through our labors. If necessary we must give up our lives that she might grow unencumbered.”

Their eyes glowed with a new faith. They nodded with deep reverence. This was what I had been looking for in America! To make my own kind understand this vast land from our own experiences. When I was sure that I had implanted the seed of my message, I gave my place to a Mexican. - from America is in the Heart by Carlos Bulosan, p. 312

Carlos Bulosan’s autobiographical text America is in the Heart dives deep into the layers of immigrant life in the 1940s and leaves readers with the hopeful sense that this intelligent, driven man has found redemption in a new land. Readers witness as, through endless hunger, fatigue, pain and fear, Bulosan constantly seeks a sense of home in America. In the passage above, he has emerged from his two-year stay at the hospital, broken in body but not in spirit. He has begun to travel again around the western United States, seeking a common thread in the immigrant experience, lecturing and teaching in farmland communities in order to uplift the downtrodden, oppressed workers. At this point, he is living awhile among pea pickers in Nipomo, with a fresh outlook on his fate in America and his place among the people. He has come to a realization, alluded to throughout his exhausting travels and perilous adventures, that the land itself ties these hard-working people together. The land itself which has been shaped by their hands and made fertile by their labors. Upon arrival in Nipomo, he feels his “old peasant heritage returning with fresh nourishment” (311). He chooses to embrace the peasant lifestyle of his childhood, with its implicit bond with the earth itself and the natural way his family related to the land and each other. Because this simple yet abundantly refreshing and peaceful life has
haunted his dreams and memories all his life, he sees it reflected around him in the lives he encounters and the sorrows he witnesses. He believes that if the working class could unite and feel proud of the land and their relationship to it, they would find a true home in America.

This bond with the land has been carried safely and valuably inside Bulosan across the wide ocean from his homeland, the Philippines. From the first page of the book, Bulosan presents a tranquil, pastoral setting with tall grass, mango trees, grazing animals, and upturned earth from his father’s plow. Readers immediately recognize his father’s love and respect for the land and the life it provides; and later while describing a Filipino leader on a lemon farm in San Fernando, Bulosan remarks, “he had the gentleness and the passion of my father when he spoke about the land” (273). This innate attachment to the land is challenged when the family is forced to sell their inherited land in order to financially support one son’s education, a decision that haunts Bulosan’s father forever. The loss of the land symbolizes the loss of an idyllic life of self-sufficiency in which hard work brings unquestionable rewards.

Bulosan constantly seeks out a similarly idyllic world in America, his new land. Shortly after his arrival, riding in the back of an old truck away from Seattle, watching the city lights fade, he is comforted by the sight of “reflections on the bright lake in Bremerton” (107) which remind him of his homeland and the feeling of connection to the earth and water. Throughout the book, Bulosan’s natural surroundings are consistently important to him as he adapts to his new surroundings, whether in the soft light and snow of Alaska, the apple trees of Washington, or the pea fields of California. He refers to feelings of familiarity in association with the land itself, the vistas from the speeding train through the central valley, the fragrance of bitter lemon or the California sunshine. This sense of familiarity and comfort with the land leads him to the sense that all these men working the land are so essentially connected to it, to the actual body of
America, that they are perfect representatives of true Americans.

But these workers in Bulosan’s “new land” of America show him a different world of laborers who, unlike his father, do not own the land they work on. In the passage I chose, Bulosan suggests a different kind of ownership, where those who sweat and bleed for this fertile soil, gently shaping it into its richness of possibility, must take pride in their work and feel a sense of shared ownership of the actual land they are working. He suggests that these immigrant workers are working toward an “unfinished dream” of America, which requires patience and self-sacrifice from these good earth-loving people. Bulosan’s message may be idealistic, based on the peacefulness he carries from his memories of his peasant life in the Philippines, but it satisfies his attempt to build fraternity among workers, to educate them about their contributions to this country, to foster a sense of understanding of the “vast land” among the immigrants who come here to work it. Bulosan’s speech above, which he refers to, fittingly, as the seed, is carried out by a Mexican worker, yet another immigrant worker who doubtlessly knows the land like he knows his own body. When Bulosan suggests sacrificing for “her,” the land, he never means the racist, brutal members of American society. The land itself is described as very different that the government or the people, familiar and good and powerful, an omnipresent benevolent force that connects all humans who respect it and care for it. Therein is the fraternity that Bulosan posits, therein is the redemption that can be found by any worker in this new land, with care and patience and determination, like the gentle dreams and passion of his father.