Signs Preceding the End of the World

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF YURI HERRERA

Born and raised in the town of Actopan, Hidalgo, Yuri Herrera had writerly ambitions from an early age. But, believing the best writers generally studied something else, he moved to nearby Mexico City in 1989 to study Political Science at the prestigious UNAM (National Autonomous University of Mexico). He completed an M.A. in Creative Writing at the University of Texas, El Paso. Herrera cites his frequent journeys back and forth across the border (to study in El Paso and to visit his family in Juárez) as an important influence on his work. In 2009, he completed a Ph.D. in Hispanic Language and Literature at the University of California, Berkeley, and he published *Signs Proceeding the End of the World* in the same year. During graduate school, Herrera also founded and edited the short-lived literary magazine *el perro*. He had already won literary fame in Latin America with his first novel many years prior, in 2004, which won the previous year's Frontera de Palabras / Border of Words" Binational Novel Prize for young writers. Although yet to be translated to English, Herrera's most recent book is a work of nonfiction, *El Incendio de la Mina El Bordo* (*The Fire at El Bordo Mine*), which reconstructs an important, local forgotten history in Herrera's native state of Hidalgo. The political themes that run throughout Herrera's work point to his background in political science and firm belief that literature inescapably has political consequences. As of 2019, although he continues to write fiction, he also teaches at Tulane University and writes extensively for literary magazines, prominent newspapers, and academic journals alike.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Signs Proceeding the End of the World is inextricably embedded in the recent history of Mexican immigration to the United States. By emphasizing the indigenous roots of his protagonist Makina, Herrera points to the long, living history of indigenous civilization in present-day Mexico. It is impossible to understand *Signs Proceeding the End of the World* without looking at the historical template for Makina's journey: the Mexica (Aztec) underworld, Mictlán, which is understood only because of the sparse texts that survived the Spanish conquest of Tenochtitlán. There was no dearth of contact and exchange between the indigenous peoples of present-day Mexico and the American southwest, and indeed much of the current United States was Spanish and then Mexican territory until the Mexican-American war in 1846, which culminated in the United States forcing the Mexican government to cede huge swaths of land in the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. For more than a half-century, movement across the newly-created border was common and unrestricted, with Mexican labor forming a cornerstone of the Western United States' economy. Since the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929, however, the United States has strictly limited migration from Mexican migration with few exceptions. The current policy of violently deporting undocumented immigrants began in 1954, although it has expanded dramatically since the beginning of the Obama administration in 2009, a period during which immigration from Mexico also steeply dropped off due to a combination of socioeconomic factors. Emigration from Mexico to the United States remains common, and Herrera wrote his novel at the peak of this phenomenon. The constant flow of working-class male migrants from rural areas of Mexico to the United States in part accounts for the apparent barrenness of Makina's native town, in which there appear to be almost no men besides gangsters and the young men who work for them, many of whom have already gone to, and returned from, the United States.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Herrera's distinctive voice is, of course, best appreciated in his two other novels: *Trabajos del reino* (*Kingdom Cons*) and *La transmigración de los cuerpos* (*The Transmigration of Bodies*). As important influences and sources of inspiration, Herrera has cited the Brazilian writer Machado de Assis (best remembered for *Dom Casmurro*), American "hardboiled" detective literature (like the work of Raymond Chandler and Walter Mosley), the Mexican school of poets commonly known as Los Contemporáneos, and medieval literature like Fernando de Rojas's *La Celestina*, which Herrera considers significant because of its influence on the formation of literary genres. The literature about the U.S.-Mexico border, both scholarly and fictional, is incredibly extensive and impossible to adequately summarize through a short list. However, a few key fictional works on the subject include Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, Ana Castillo's *The Guardians*, James Carlos Blake's *In the Rogue Blood*, and Christina Henriquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans*. Important histories of the U.S.-Mexico border include Timothy J. Dunn's *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1978-1992*, and Claire Fox's *The Fence and the River: Culture and Politics at the U.S.-Mexico Border*. Gloria Anzaldúa's feminist classic *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* is also a landmark memoir and study of how the border produces hybrid identities. U.S. Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera's numerous books of poetry, fiction, and theater in Spanish, English, and often both have made a profound contributions to the articulation the Mexican American (or Chicanx) identity that

Herrera explores in *Signs Preceding the End of the World*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Signs Preceding the End of the World
- **When Published:** 2009
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Latin American
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** Mexico and the United States
- **Climax:** Makina descends to the "Obsidian Place" and receives a new identity before declaring herself "ready" for whatever is to come next.
- **Antagonist:** The trials of Makina's journey, U.S. security forces, racist police officers
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Forbidden Language. Many readers immediately note that, while *Signs Preceding* the End of the World is clearly a book about Mexico, the United States, and migration, none of those words ever appear in the book. Yuri Herrera has explained that this is a deliberate tactic to help readers see a world they think they already know with a new, critical distance. Before beginning each of his novels, he carefully draws up lists of words to use and words to avoid.

PLOT SUMMARY

Signs Preceding the End of the World opens with its protagonist, Makina, telling herself, cryptically enough, that she is dead. It soon becomes clear that she is predicting a death she manages to narrowly avoid, as she watches a large **sinkhole** open up before her and take an old man and his dog down with it. But Makina's opening line also points to the book's primary intertextual reference: Makina's journey throughout this novel follows the same structure of a journey through Mictlán, the underworld of the Mexica (Aztec) people. Each of the novel's chapters parallels one of the nine stages that a deceased soul must take along its years-long journey to its ultimate resting place. In a sense, then, readers can take Makina's first words—"I'm dead"—literally, for the purposes of this ancient allegory.

After Makina manages to outrun the sinkhole, she reveals the motivation behind her lengthy journey to come: her mother Cora has asked her to hand-deliver a message to her brother, who left the Village where they live a few years before to migrate north and try his luck in a country that is never named, but is clearly the United States. Before setting out on her journey, Makina visits three men, Mr. Double-U, Mr. Aitch, and Mr. Q, who are in search of assistance. While all three of these men are powerful, well-connected, and somehow involved in the local criminal underworld, all of them respect Makina because she plays a crucial function in their Village: she operates **the telephone switchboard**, connecting locals with faraway friends and family members, all in three languages—"latin tongue" (Spanish), the "new tongue" from the north or "anglo tongue" (English), and "native tongue" (the area's local Indigenous language). Mr. Double-U promises to help Makina get across the border, in return for a favor Cora did for him years prior. Mr. Aitch can help Makina find her brother, but insists she carry a mysterious package across the border for him. She agrees, insisting that "you don't stop to wonder about other people's business." Mr. Q promises to help Makina return home, as repayment for the important message-carrying work she has done for him in the past. The first chapter ends with Makina looking at the hall of mirrors in Mr. Q's restaurant before versing (leaving or moving on).

In Chapter Two, "The Water Crossing," Makina travels to the Big Chilango (Mexico City) in order to catch her bus north. She thinks about the boyfriend with whom she was wary to get too emotional, and the "little piece of land" her family may or may not own in the United States, which was her brother's initial motivation for migrating there. Cheered on by a friend, a young man tries to grope Makina on the bus, but she grabs his finger and nearly twists it off while offering a hushed warning. During the long bus ride, she contemplates the future and the unknown world across the border, and at its end she checks into a cheap hotel full of migrants "of many tongues," to whom she tells the little she knows about the United States. In the early morning, Makina sees a man signaling to her from across the river that separates the two countries. The man, named Chucho, brings Makina an inner-tube to cross the river, although they both fall in and he narrowly saves her from drowning. This scene symbolizes the first major test of the mythological journey to Mictlán: crossing a raging river (Apanohuaia) with the help of a Xoloitzcuintle dog.

In Chapter Three, "The Place Where the Hills Meet," Chucho drives Makina through a desert toward "two mountains colliding in the back of beyond" (another image Herrera takes directly from the Mictlán legend). Past those mountains, there is another driver waiting for her. Makina changes quickly in a shed and notes that she is attracted to Chucho, who is busy dealing with a potential crisis outside: a heavily-armed "anglo with dark glasses" has been following them and Chucho makes a phone call to report it. Although the man initially seems to be a border control officer trying to deport Chucho and Makina, Chucho has a different idea: the man, like Chucho, is a coyote who smuggles people across the border, and he is worried about the competition. The man stops, confronts, and starts shooting at Chucho and Makina as police cars approach in the distance. Chucho manages to hold the anglo off for long enough that Makina can run away, and she heads for the two mountains in the distance, not realizing for some time that she

has been shot—but her wound is so insignificant that it does not even bleed. She sees Chucho alive in the distance, talking to the police, and continues trudging forward.

In Chapter Four, "The Obsidian Mound," Makina makes it through the mountain pass and meets Mr. Aitch's Driver, who is silent and refuses to take Mr. Aitch's package. As they drive through the anglo city, Makina sees "signs prohibiting things" everywhere, people seemingly thrilled to purchase things at big stores, and Mexican immigrants working in all the restaurants. The driver drops her at a nondescript street corner, where an Old Man meets her and walks with her to finally deliver the package. They take a long route to distract the police, and meanwhile the Old Man informs Makina that her brother is alive, gives her the brother's address, and muses that he himself feels he is "just passing through" the United States even though he has been there for 50 years. They arrive at a baseball stadium, where "the anglos play a game to celebrate who they are" by running around their "bases all over the world"—he is referencing both the game itself, which is completely unfamiliar and strange to Makina, and the United States' military and cultural dominance in the rest of the world. Suddenly, the old man leaves and an old acquaintance of Mr. Aitch, Mr. P, shows up to accept the package.

In Chapter Five, "The Place Where the Wind Cuts like a Knife," Makina sings the praises of the Mexican people she meets in the United States, who manage to expertly combine their native culture with the anglo one, and thereby create an entirely new world, language, and perspective. After crossing an endless expanse of identical suburbs, which are built for cars and full of people hostile to her presence, Makina finally reaches the address given to her by the Old Man to find "sheer emptiness": a giant hole in the ground and nothing more.

Chapter Six, "The Place Where Flags Wave," begins with "a huge redheaded anglo" harassing Makina in what turns out to be a dream. She has passed the cold night in an ATM booth and continues searching for her brother in the morning. By chance, she comes across the boy who harassed her on the bus, and who is now working in a restaurant. He brings her inside to a matronly woman who remembers Makina's brother and gives Makina an address where her brother might be staying. Makina hunts the house down and learns that its previous inhabitants "moved. To another continent." Only one trace remains: their son, who still works at an army base nearby. Disappointed and distraught, Makina makes her way towards this base while planning what she might do if she never finds her brother. On the way, she sees a crowd of same-sex couples celebrating in front of a government building. Her reaction is split: she is thrilled that they can be open about their sexuality but does not understand why they "imitat[e] people who've always despised them" by trying to get married.

In Chapter Seven, "The Place Where People's Hearts Are Eaten," Makina arrives at the military base and is astonished to learn that the family's so-called remaining son is in fact her brother. He tells her "an incredible story": when he arrived in the United States, the woman from the restaurant referred him to a family that would recruit him for a particular assignment. This family's rebellious teenage son decided to join the Army on a whim, and the family wanted Makina's brother to assume his identity and take his place. They promised him money and legal papers—he could assume their son's identity forever. But they secretly believed he would die. When he returned alive and well, they gave Makina's brother the little money they could put together and then disappeared forever, leaving him with "money and a new name, but no clue what to do." Having completed his story, Makina's brother cuts off the conversation—he has to get back to work, and he gives Makina some cash and sends her off. She opens the letter from Cora, which she never delivered. It read: "Come on back now, we don't expect anything from you."

In the brief Chapter Eight, "The Snake that Lies in Wait," a self-proclaimed "patriotic" policeman forces Makina to kneel in a lineup among a number of "homegrown" Mexican men. He declares that the men and those like them ought to "fall in and ask permission" from more "civilized" whites, and he berates a young man for bringing a book of poetry. The policeman tears a page out of the book and asks the man to confess his crimes, but Makina takes the pen and paper from him and writes a long note in English. She points out the officer's own racism by writing on behalf of "we the barbarians," the Latinx people he believes should be locked into an inferior position in American society, worked to the bone but deprived of political rights and forced to submit to and imitate white people. Astonished by Makina's note, the officer abruptly walks away and frees the men—and Makina verses before the men have a chance to thank her.

The novel's mysterious final chapter is named after the ninth and final region of Mictlán, "The Obsidian Place with No Windows or Holes for the Smoke." In the Mexica mythology, this is the soul's final resting place, the site where one identity is shed and a person is regenerated as something new. The chapter begins with Makina suddenly running into Chucho, who says he has been "looking out for" her and directs her to a strange door. Makina enters and descends the staircase behinds it, which leads to another door, this time one with a sign above reading "Verse." She is suddenly confounded by this most familiar of words. Behind this door is a room full of people smoking, with no smells and no sounds except a vague trickle of water in the background. "A tall, thin man draped in a baggy leather jacket" hands Makina a file containing her new identity—she is initially overwhelmed but soon grows relieved. She sees her whole life flash before her and closes the book with a counterpart to her first line, telling herself, "I'm ready."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Makina – The novel's protagonist, whose journey from the Little Town where she lives across the border in search of her brother forms the backbone of the narrative. Her quest not only directly represents the difficult, perilous trip so many make every day from Mexico to the United States, but also adapts the traditional mythological story of the nine-phase journey to Mictlán, the Aztec **underworld**. As the novel begins with Makina announcing her own death, it is possible to read her as embodying the traditional archetype of a deceased soul seeking its place in the afterlife, as well as the modern archetype of undocumented migration. At once devoted to fulfilling her assignment and compassionate toward the people she meets throughout her journey, Makina overcomes the challenges she faces with fortitude: she nearly dies numerous times but scarcely bats an eyelash, saving others' lives but disappearing before they can thank her. Her role as a messenger extends beyond the fact that she delivers a note from her mother Cora to her brother and a package from Mr. Aitch to Mr. P. At home, Makina is in charge of running the Village's **switchboard**, which requires her to receive, make, and translate calls in three languages (Spanish, English, and her area's Indigenous language). Her facility with language in many ways defines her otherwise mysterious personality and even gets her out of tough situations, like when she saves herself and a large group of migrants from a self-declared "patriotic" policeman by writing him a note that holds a mirror to his racism. And yet, despite her ability to connect with and appeal to people from such varied backgrounds and social contexts, Makina maintains an emotional distance from everyone in her life except Cora. This is especially true of men, whose advances she repeatedly fights off in order to retain control of her life, decisions, and identity. Her name is also significant: it is an adaptation of the Indigenous Otomi language term *maki*, which means "stretched" or "extended." This points to both her far-reaching journey and her ability to "extend" herself across and among various cultures. But her name also evokes the Spanish word *máquina*, which means "machine" and gestures to her ruthless, emotionless efficiency, which also parallels Herrera's pared-down language.

Makina's Brother – Makina's journey is motivated by her enigmatic brother, who initially leaves the Little Town on a quest to prove that his family rightfully owns a contested plot of land nearby, but gets swept up in his own travels and ends up staying north of the U.S.-Mexico border for years. During his long stay up north, he sends just two or three short messages home. Cora sends Makina to find him and deliver a message of her own—which is actually just her handwritten plea for him to return home. When she finally tracks him down, Makina is astonished to discover that her brother is an active-duty soldier in the United States Army, living on a military base under someone else's identity. After he crossed the border, Makina's brother explains, an anglo family recruited him to take their son's place in the military, offering him a sum of money they never expected having to deliver, because they assumed Makina's brother would die in the war. Instead, he returned alive, accepted the little renumeration the family could muster, and continued living as their son. He has no plans to return home to Mexico, but has by no means embraced his new identity—when Makina leaves him to set out on what is supposed to be her own return journey, he has "money and a new name, but no clue what to do." Like his sister, he has a way with words—he is even helping fellow "homegrown" Mexicans perfect their English. Makina and her brother's anticlimactic meeting underlines the way transborder migration transforms people's sense of identity and relationships with their family. Literally inhabiting a new identity, Makina's brother loses track of what he was initially doing in the United States, but *also* sheds his old attachment to his family and sense of duty to them.

Cora – Makina's loving mother, who sends her across the border with a message for her brother. Makina's fierce loyalty to Cora accounts for her unshakable dedication to completing her mission. However, Cora actually only appears once in the story , during a flashback to the moment when she asked Makina to venture north. When she meets other maternal figures throughout her journey, Makina tends to compare them to Cora and find relief in the thought that she will soon return home to be with her. Of course, this never comes to be, and ultimately Cora's dedication to reuniting her family ends up forever distancing her from her children, whose identities are remade in the United States.

The Anglo Family – A white family—a mother, father, son, and daughter. They used to live in the house whose address Makina gets from a woman who works in a restaurant with the boy from the bus. This woman sent Makina's brother to work for the anglo family—in fact, what they wanted was someone to ship out to war in place of their son, who hastily signed up for the Army and could not undo his decision. Because Makina's brother is vulnerable and has no papers, the family convinces him to pose as their son and go off to war. Believing he will die, the family promises him their son's identity and a large sum of money they assume they will never have to deliver. When Makina's brother survives and returns from the war, the family is divided over whether or not to follow through on their promise—they ultimately give him some money (far less than promised) and let him keep their son's identity. This family's treatment of Makina's brother is an allegory for the devil's bargain of joining American society as a person of color: one must both endure racist discrimination and work tirelessly, even risking one's life, on behalf of prejudiced people. It is also a reference to the American government's discrimination and

pressures against poor and minority groups. Because the poor have no economic options or stability, they can be easily persuaded into signing up to defend American imperial interests abroad. Military service replaces the welfare state: like for so many poor Americans, for Makina's brother, the Army is his only opportunity at advancement in society—regardless of whether he agrees with its imperialist goals.

The "Patriotic" Policeman – A policeman who lines up a number of (mostly "homegrown") Mexican Americans and yells at them for failing to obey the commands of their white superiors and accept their place at the bottom of American society's racial hierarchy. He calls himself a "patriot," pointing to the way that white identity is conflated with American identity, turning racism and white supremacy into means of "defending" and "loving" the United States, while attempts to include diverse groups in American society are taken as seditious or "un-American." The policeman shows how public servants can turn their job—defending and supporting the people—into its opposite—deciding who gets to be included in "the people" and attacking those who fall outside of their definitions. Makina writes a long plea to the "patriotic" policeman. She points out his racist assumptions about Latinx people and their continuity with the history of slavery and racial caste in the United States, mocking his beliefs that Mexicans "deserve to be chained by neck and feet" and "are happy to die for you." This astonishes the policeman, who evidently did not expect the people he was oppressing to speak back to him. The policeman storms away, leaving his victims free but traumatized, a sentiment not unfamiliar to many Latinx people living in the United States.

Chucho – A coyote who works for Mr. Aitch and/or Mr. Q and facilitates Makina's crossing into the United States. He helps her across the river that forms the official border before driving her through the desert and fighting off the anglo rancher long enough for her to escape. He appears to get arrested or shot during this altercation, but he shows up again in the novel's last chapter, when he takes Makina to the door that leads to **the mysterious underground world** where the novel ends. Strapping, jovial, and chivalrous, Chucho might be a stereotypical male hero in any other story. But in the feminist narrative of the story, he is merely the journey's handmaiden: he specifically represents Xolotl, the god who takes the form of a dog and guides souls to the underworld (Mictlán) in many Indigenous Mexican religious traditions. Indeed, "Chucho" is a slang term for a dog—but also a nickname for someone named "Jesús," which points to the hybrid symbolism of his role as Makina's guide through the afterlife.

The Anglo Rancher – An enraged white man, "armed to the eyeballs," who pursues and shoots after Makina and Chucho as they traverse the desert in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. It is unclear whether he is motivated by racism or personal gain—Chucho suggests he has a competing business as a coyote and wants to defend his territory against the competition. The anglo rancher and Chucho get in a brawl and wrestle over his gun while Makina runs ahead at Chucho's insistence. Later, they both appear to get arrested by the police. While he unambiguously represents the violent xenophobia of many white Americans and the severe dangers migrants face while crossing the border, the anglo rancher also has an ambiguous relationship to justice and the law: he claims to be enforcing the law by preventing illegal migrants from entering the United States, but in fact *Chucho* calls the police on *the rancher* for illegally trying to take this law into his own hands and violently assaulting people he does not know. This conflict points to an enduring problem in American policy toward immigrants: undocumented people are treated as having no rights because they have no papers, and citizens and the government alike use immigrants' "illegal" status to justify committing crimes against them.

The Old Man – A Mexican man who guides Makina to the baseball stadium where she hands Mr. Aitch's package to Mr. P and helps her avoid detection by the police during her journey there. He also gives her an old address of her brother's, which turns out to literally be empty: there is no house there, just **a large hole in the ground**. Like Makina, the Old Man appears to get involved with Mr. Aitch and Mr. P's criminal network out of necessity and convenience, not out of malice or for profit. Although he has lived north of the border for 50 years and seems to have a long history working in the trafficking network, the Old Man insists he is "just passing through" the United States, which reflects the sense of rootlessness and unbelonging that confronts many immigrants. In an important monologue, the Old Man uses the American obsession with baseball—a sport that can appear senseless to those unfamiliar with it—as a metaphor for American exceptionalism and hostility towards outsiders. While in some ways a version of the archetypal wise old man character who guides a young protagonist toward their goals, Herrera's Old Man also undermines and inverts this archetype, as his form of wisdom is unsuited for his environment. He is profoundly unsure about his place in the world as a result, and he ultimately leads Makina to a dead end.

Mr. Aitch – A violent gang leader whom Makina meets at the Pulquería Raskolnikova after visiting Mr. Double-U. Aitch plays dominoes with his "thugs," but clearly respects Makina and quickly defers to her when she arrives. He offers her help crossing the border in exchange for her help delivering a mysterious package to his associates in the U.S. Makina accepts his offer because she needs the help and "you don't stop to wonder about other people's business." The implication is that Mr. Aitch's package contains drugs, and therefore his deal with Makina shows how the illegality of migration across the U.S.-Mexican border facilitates organized crime, and how many migrants with important personal motivations for crossing the

border but few resources are forced to turn to activities like drug smuggling in order to successfully do so.

Mr. Q – The third local mob boss Makina visits in the Little Town before setting out on her quest. A man of few words who always dresses in black and runs a restaurant called "Casino," Mr. Q is a rival of Mr. Aitch's, but secures his power by manipulating rather than threatening those around him. Makina previously worked for Mr. Q, helping him deliver messages during a contentious election, so he owes her a favor at the outset of the novel. He is supposed to make sure Makina can get back home after she delivers Cora's note to her brother.

The Boy from the Bus – A young man of roughly Makina's age who harasses her on her bus to the Big Chilango. Uninterested in his antics and unafraid to stand up for herself, she immediately fends him off by almost breaking his finger and threatening to do much worse if he bothers her again. Much later, Makina runs into him across the border, where he is working at a nondescript restaurant and introduces her to the woman who eventually leads her to her brother.

Makina's Little Sister – She never appears in the book, but Makina worries constantly about her safety and her future. Her desire to offer her little sister guidance and support is one of Makina's primary motivations for wanting to return home to Mexico (unlike her brother). Throughout her journey, Makina carries her little sister's drawing of their family in her backpack.

Mr. Double-U – A rotund man with ties to the criminal underworld who Makina meets in a steam room at the very beginning of the story. Cora once sheltered him during a difficult time, and for this he still owes her and Makina a favor. Accordingly, he sends Chucho to help Makina across the border.

Mr. Aitch's Driver – A mysterious man who dutifully picks Makina up after she evades the anglo rancher but refuses to talk to her or get involved with the package she is carrying for Mr. Aitch. Emotionally and personally opaque to the reader, he does nothing more or less than his job: dropping Makina on a nondescript street corner in some unnamed place north of the U.S.-Mexico border.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mr. P – An old associate of Mr. Double-U, Mr. Aitch, and Mr. Q, who left the Little Town because of a conflict with Mr. Aitch and is now based north of the border. Despite this old conflict, he and his goons receive Mr. Aitch's packet from Makina's at the baseball stadium.

TERMS

Verse ("Jarchar") – Yuri Herrera adapts the medieval term *jarcha* to form the verb *jarchar*, which is translated as "verse" in English. A *jarcha* (commonly spelled *kharja* in English) was the verse that ended a longer poem—the word's Arabic root literally means "exit," and hence Herrera uses the invented word *jarchar* when his protagonist **Makina** exits a location or conversation. *Jarchas* were usually written in a different voice from the rest of the poem—often a female one—and are historically significant because they were often written in Mozarabic, a hybrid, transitional language between Arabic and contemporary Spanish. Both of these features point to Makina's role as a powerful cultural mediator whose abilities are informed by gender. The translator of this English edition, Lisa Dillman, chose to use "verse" in place of *jarchar* because it preserves the original reference to poetry, and points to verbs like "transverse, reverse, converse."

Pulque – A traditional alcoholic drink made of fermented agave sap, which played an important mythological role in indigenous Mesoamerican religious rituals before the Spanish conquest of what is now Mexico.

The Big Chilango – Mexico City, Mexico's capital and by far its largest city. "Chilango" is a slang term for someone or something from Mexico City.

Coyote – A common term for people who live along the border and help smuggle migrants from Mexico to the United States.

Amaranth – A grain indigenous to Mexico that was a primary food staple before the Spanish conquest, and remains a common food in the country.

Homegrown – Translation of *paisano* ("from the country"), used to refer to Mexicans born and raised in Mexico.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

IMMIGRATION, MYTH, AND IDENTITY

Even if Herrera never labels it as such, Makina's journey from her small Mexican town north and across the U.S. border is immediately recognizable as a migration narrative. But Herrera's novel provides a fresh, critical perspective on the genre by exposing precisely how stories of migration have become an influential myth in rural Mexico, and basing his novel on a different myth: the Mexica **underworld** tale of Mictlán. In doing so, Herrera shows how the process of migration from a homeland to a new country fundamentally and irreversibly shifts one's identity, bringing one into a hybrid condition of living and mediating between

worlds that both destroys who one was and entails rebirth into a new, more complex form of being.

Herrera adds a broader context to the dangers of the harrowing journey across the border in order to highlight the difficulty of migration and, more importantly, demonstrate how migration narratives are such an ingrained and influential part of Mexican narrative culture that they have begun to, in turn, produce more migrants. Herrera knows that an endless stream of previous stories about the border set his readers' expectations for Makina's and deliberately has her come across every stereotypical figure and challenge of such a story. She meets with a series of gangsters, one of whom enlists her to deliver a package that probably contains drugs. She confronts endless risks: crossing the river to avoid border checks, escaping through the desert, the angry anglo rancher who shoots before asking questions, and the policeman who mistakes racism for "patriotism." Herrera uses these overwrought tropes because, besides being true, they allow him to expose the sense in which the *story* of Mexican migration to the United States has become more powerful than the *reality* of it, especially as a motivator for future migrants. In Makina's town—as in many towns across rural Mexico, Herrera notes—almost all of the men have left to go work in the United States. Makina follows her brother, who in turn followed a rumor he heard about his father: they both travel based on testimony and guesswork, influenced by the mythical tale of pursuing adventure, riches, and danger one takes on by going to the United States.

But Herrera juxtaposes the migration narrative alongside the much more unexpected Mictlán story, which allows him to reinterpret immigration stories, presenting migrants' experience as a kind of death and the border as a "place of re-creation," in addition to extending his argument about myth's prophetic function. The Mictlán myth fundamentally structures Herrera's novel, to the point of serving as a template. Each of the novel's nine chapters takes its name and much of its imagery from one of the nine stages that, according to the Mexica culture, a deceased soul must pass through to reach its final resting place. Indeed, Makina's first words are "I'm dead," which positions the novel as an allegory for the journey through the underworld. Notably, the Mexica underworld is about a gradual process of transformation from one thing into something else, rather than punishment or reward for people's worldly deeds. The last scene of the novel represents Makina its final stage. She feels a sense of nervous anticipation, for she realizes that everything is changing. She receives a folder with a new identity, shedding the baggage of her past to become something new and hybrid (Mexican American). For Makina and Herrera, then, the conventional myth about migration misses this crucial element: people do not stay themselves when they move from one country to another, but rather become something completely new.

While Makina clearly recognizes the economic appeal of the migration, she takes little personal interest in it, and instead focuses entirely on this shift in identity that migrants undertake: they become hybrid, products of not only two places (Mexico and the United States) but also of all the differences and frictions between these places. This hybrid condition means migrants must shed their old identities, just as a soul traveling through Mictlán must shed the characteristics that bind it to the world of the living. But immigrants also gain a new capacity: the ability to creatively generate new identities and perspectives by combining disparate experiences and registers of cultural understanding. Makina notes that many of her fellow migrants buy into the myth—they expect to undertake an arduous journey that will be repaid by better work in the United States. Regardless of whether the myth is actually true, Makina has little interest in it, which lets the reader challenge it for themselves and ask: is the only important consideration in moving from one country to another the material changes people undergo? What happens to people's identities, psyches, or souls when they reestablish themselves in a foreign land? Makina answers this question by celebrating the ambiguous condition of life as a migrant across the border, which she thinks produces a beautiful, hybrid way of being. She declares that Mexican Americans "are homegrown and they are anglo and both things with rabid intensity. Their gestures and tastes reveal both ancient memory and the wonderment of a new people." Their "intermediary tongue" is like "a hinge pivoting between two like but distant souls, […] a nebulous territory between what is dying out and what is not yet born." This last line unambiguously links Makina's discovery about the generative hybridity of the United States to her feelings of rebirth at the very end of the book.

By the end of the novel, it seems that Makina does not mind shedding her old, fixed identity in order to become a creative "link" or "hinge" between her two worlds or nations. Of course, Herrera represents this experience of an intermediary identity—the immigrant experience and the experience of a soul that is neither completely alive nor completely dead—not only as an empty space between worlds, but rather as an independent, powerfully creative, and playfully ambiguous way of being that can be the source of new understandings, cultures, and modes of human relation.

RACISM, INEQUALITY, AND SOCIAL CHANGE

When she crosses over into the United States, Makina immediately recognizes a profound contradiction in the status of Mexican immigrants: they are essential to the functioning of United States society, yet treated as unwanted intruders. People who leave Mexico for the United States are signing up to join the bottom echelons of

society, to suffer racism and work in exploitative conditions that guarantee them few economic rights. By portraying the discrimination and arduous conditions that immigrants face, Herrera suggests that the United States' fundamental values—independence, freedom, and equality—are often not awarded to the very groups who need them the most. However, by coming to understand these conditions and learn from social movements that have improved the status of other groups in the United States, Makina learns to see that Mexicans' oppression in the United States is changeable and worth fighting against.

Makina sees people like her everywhere in the United States, but quickly realizes that Mexican immigrants are doing the worst jobs in society and treated as invisible non-entities by white people. Most of the Mexican people Makina meets north of the border work as low-paid physical laborers, such as the boy who harasses her on the bus and whom she later sees taking the trash out from a restaurant in the early morning. When she first arrives, she learns to recognize "her compatriots," the people who work outdoors, in the city's public space, but are "just there to take orders." Although low-paid Mexican laborers are the most visible workers in the United States, they are invisible and powerless in a political sense. The most powerful story is Makina's brother's: a white family recruits him to join the Army in place of their terrified son, who signed up on a rebellious whim. This is both an egregious example of the way Mexican immigrants are often forced to take on undesirable positions laboring to support the white people who refuse to take them. Makina points out Mexican immigrants' position as an underclass in the letter she gives the "patriotic" policeman, describing them facetiously as "We who came to take your jobs, who dream of wiping your shit, who long to work all hours." Makina's description both references the actual economic desperation that drives people to migrate and highlights many white Americans' racist, contradictory, and profoundly distorted picture of Mexicans.

Indeed, the racism Makina experiences brings this contradiction to the fore: it is immediately and powerfully clear to her that white people do not want her (or people who look like her) in the United States. The policeman's rant about the (mostly homegrown) Mexicans he forces to kneel before him reveals his belief that Mexicans exist to "fall in [line] and ask permission [from white people]." He uses his belief in the supremacy of white culture—which he calls "civilized" in contrast to Mexican culture—to justify his violence. Makina goes on to dream about a white man calling her "scum," which shows how she internalizes a sense of racial injury from watching so many people treat her with suspicion and hostility. After being attacked so frequently, she now expects it, and this internalized sense of inferiority is what converts Mexicans from being an assailed minority (in some situations) into a permanent underclass (who expect to be seen as inferior in all situations). And Makina's outsider perspective of the United States adds further depth to Herrera's critical view of the contradiction between the United States' values and its treatment of Mexican immigrants, showing how it celebrates itself as freer than any other country, yet turns people with minoritized identities into an underclass of laborers who are poor by design.

Yet, as Makina observes how other marginalized groups react to discrimination, she sees that migrants can challenge their status and mistreatment through political resistance. This first happens when she learns about the existence of African Americans—initially, she does not understand who they are or how they live in a nation usually imagined as white, but she soon sees that their status is comparable to Mexicans. Later, she knocks on the door of a house that she hopes is her brother's, and a black man opens the door. She is confused, and the man is initially offended, before he realizes they both see what is transgressive—and therefore progressive—about his owning a house in a white neighborhood. They laugh it off and Makina realizes that African Americans are "the key to her quest," which points to the way African American struggles for civil rights serve as an influence, template, and source of solidarity for those of other groups like Latinx immigrants. Makina also sees possibilities for change when she encounters a large crowd of same-gender couples waving rainbow flags outside a government building (a clear reference to same-sex marriage). Makina grows conflicted: she is "dazzled by the beauty" of this public spectacle of pride but cannot understand why queer people imitate the straight people who oppress them—just like Mexican immigrants want to live the same lives as the middle-class white people who exploit, underpay, and insult them. By conforming to a certain extent, she realizes, immigrants and other oppressed groups can subtly gain greater social standing within an oppressive society, but they must not lose sight of their own political goals in the process.

Herrera ultimately shows how discrimination is embedded in the everyday politics of race in the United States: Latinx people, like those of many other backgrounds, are deemed eternal outsiders and thought of as unable to be gainfully assimilated into the United States. Especially when they lack documentation, Mexican immigrants are treated as unredeemable and disposable by the same people whose comfortable lives largely depend on Mexican immigrant labor. And yet Makina also clearly sees paths forward toward equality, both through solidarity with other movements and through her efforts to help narrate the experiences of Mexican immigrants to the white American citizens who discount them.

FAMILY, HERITAGE, AND SENSE OF SELF

Herrera's writing and Makina's story are steeped in an intensely local vision of rural Mexico, one with deep ties to the land, language, and culture as they

have existed since many centuries before the Spanish invaded the Americas. Makina's sense of duty to her town and grounding in her local culture are closely related to her deep loyalty to her family—one that seems unflappable for almost the entire book, until it becomes suddenly impossible for her to preserve at the novel's end. Like her brother, then, Makina goes north to save her family, but ends up sacrificing her family in order to stay in the north. Makina's story illustrates that one's familial and cultural ties are important to preserve, but are often deeply fragile and thrown aside in the process for migration, although this does not make them impossible to recover later on.

Mexican Indigenous culture is at the forefront of Makina's sense of self, rather than the Latinized urban culture that is strongly associated with modernity and continues to carry social prestige in Mexico and much of the rest of Latin America. In this novel, following tradition means sustaining a denigrated and fragile cultural identity, but people are inherently products of tradition and therefore often perpetuate it without even realizing the significance of what they are doing. From the start, the narration notes how Mexico's long history of colonialism and violence has, quite literally, undermined the Little Town where Makina lives: people's search for silver has left a patchwork of holes beneath the town, and **sinkholes** periodically open up, drawing people, structures, and animals down into the "underworld." Of course, it is impossible to understand this book without realizing that Makina's entire journey is based on the template of Mictlán, the underworld according to the Mexica people. Each chapter of Makina's journey parallels a stage that deceased souls must pass through in order to reach their final resting place in Mexica mythology, and by using this story as the basis for his novel, Herrera shows how indigenous culture plays a foundational, archetypal role for the people of Mexico, even if they tend to forget it. There are also numerous references to local indigenous languages, ingredients, and recipes. Makina drinks pulque and carries products made of ingredients like xinthé and amaranth, all of which are historically important indigenous staples. And at work on the **switchboard**, Makina speaks the local indigenous language on the phone. Like the Mictlán frame story within the broader narrative of the book, these specific examples are largely buried in the novel's plot, but show how the fabric of Makina's world (and rural Mexico broadly) is deeply shaped by indigenous influences that predate Spanish rule.

Makina is profoundly loyal to both this indigenous culture and to her family, which are closely tied to one another. Like many young adults, she hopes to contribute to her native community, and Herrera suggests that this is a noble desire. Throughout the story, Makina insists that she will come back home to take care of her little sister and report on her brother to her mother Cora. Her strong attachment to home and her family accounts for her sense of urgency throughout the book: unlike most migrants, she does not think of staying or working in the north, but only of doing her duty and then returning to care for her family. She thinks of herself as embedded in the community that reared her, rather than as a separate individual. Makina's sense of duty extends to her work at the switchboard: she feels responsible for connecting those who only speak the indigenous language to their relatives who might not speak it at all. Makina feels responsible for keeping the traditional world alive in a modern era, and associates returning home with affirming and supporting family and culture.

And yet, despite her sincere desire to return to Mexico, Makina tragically and inexplicably does not: like her brother, she is forced to sever their ties with their family and stay in the United States, a painful experience that shows the fragility of family and tradition in circumstances that provide strong motives for migration and modernization. At the beginning of the novel, Makina is deathly afraid of following in her brother's footsteps and becoming "lost or captivated" in a place like the Big Chilango. She clearly realizes the appeal of staying in another place, which creates the tension between the possible opportunities she can gain through migration and the existing attachments she has to her family. Although Makina's brother started out trying to find roots for his family (the land that was supposedly his father's), he ends up doing the opposite and losing his sense of self, literally sacrificing his name for the new one offered to him by the white family that trades him their son's papers in exchange for his military service in their son's place. At first, he does not realize that he is choosing himself over the collective back in Mexico. And the same thing happens to Makina at the end of the book—she ends up getting a new identity of her own, with new papers that destine her to stay in the north. As with her brother, this is not an intentional change of plans, but something unexpected and transformative that threatens her very sense of self. If even the most loyal family-oriented migrant ends up staying on the other side despite her best intentions, then Herrera seems to be suggesting that migration does fundamentally undermine traditions and the family, at the same time as they make it possible to support them financially. Herrera's characters' abandonment of this culture becomes his own means of preserving it, just as these characters' willingness to sacrifice their close connections to their loved ones might, in the long run, end up actually supporting their families.

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

The power of Yuri Herrera's prose and the power of his narrator, Makina, are both intimately linked to a facility with language: they share a profound instinct for when to use and withhold words, how to communicate old ideas through new language (and vice versa), and how to navigate the multilingual landscape of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Herrera's deliberately pared-down prose

and Makina's capacity to form connections through translation highlight language's emotional weight, showing how transformed language can in turn transform the world.

Makina's role as a translator, by both profession and temperament, illuminates language's power to create relations where none existed before. In the village where she lives, she operates the local **telephone switchboard**, facilitating (and, when necessary, translating) calls in Spanish, English, and the local indigenous language among people in her area, their friends and families in the Big Chilango and other cities, and their relatives abroad in the United States. Without her, this web of communication would be impossible; she sustains and brings into being relationships across linguistic difference. Narratively, Makina also functions to unify disparate worlds and linguistic traditions: as a character adept in three languages and the three cultural contexts they signify (indigenous Mexico, Latinized Mexico, and the United States), her story itself becomes triple: a new incarnation of the traditional Mexica (Aztec) **underworld** tale, a story about migration and family in rural Mexico, and the narrative of a recent, embattled immigrant in the United States. The most important moment when Makina uses language to unify is when she writes a letter that convinces the "patriotic" policeman to leave her and the other immigrants he is harassing in peace. By writing from the perspective of "we the barbarians," who (in Makina's portrayal of the policeman's mindset) "don't know how to keep quiet" and "deserve to be chained by neck and feet," she forces the policeman to see her and her fellow migrants as full human beings with their own experiences, hardships, and emotional lives, rather than as subhuman invaders or a faceless pool of labor. Arguably, this is less because of what she says than the very fact that she is capable of speaking back to him in his language, which shows him that she understands the assumptions in his head and implores him to try and understand her experience in turn.

The novel also frequently treats language itself as an important object and plot device, highlighting its power to shape Makina's experiences. The purpose of Makina's journey is to deliver her mother Cora's letter to her brother. This letter, Makina discovers, is merely one sentence: "Come on back now, we don't expect anything from you." In carrying this letter to the U.S., Makina again becomes a vessel for language. This short sentence, scribbled down by Cora herself, represents motherly love with an immediacy that Makina could never capture by merely reporting Cora's earlier words. In a clear parallel, Makina's brother gains a new identity by learning to copy the signature and life story of the boy he is supposed to impersonate in the U.S. Army. The identity he assumes on paper, through writing, transforms his own identity in real life. This process repeats in the final chapter, when mysterious bureaucrats in the underground world where the novel ends hand Makina new papers that signify her transformation into a new person. This is clearly a metaphor for gaining "papers" (residency or citizenship) in the United States and points to the way that written language can dominate people, to the point of determining and transforming their identities. This conclusion is announced in advance by a sign Makina sees above the door to the underground cavern. It reads, "Verse," which translates to the invented Spanish word *jarchar*, Herrera's principal neologism in this book. The sign "Verse" above the door announces to Makina that, in leaving the world from which she has come, through the very process of her journey across a threshold and into a new space, she will transform from something hybrid or liminal into something new. And yet, tellingly, she also muses that she has forgotten the word's meaning in every language—which is itself evidence of her transformation.

Beyond the invention of *jarchar*, throughout his novel Hererra carefully deploys language in order to transform his readers' understanding of the world he writes about. His prose is deliberately sparse and even otherworldly at times. He believes this use of language "open[s] some space for the reader to resignify the text in his or her own terms," much like Makina uses language to create new life possibilities for those around her. Herrera also deliberately avoids using many terms like "the United States," "Mexico," "Mexico City," "the Rio Grande," "English," "Spanish," and "drug/narco-trafficking," because these words' meanings are already fixed and emotionally-charged. Similarly, he also refuses to name the vast majority of his characters. Naming these places, people, and topics would allow the reader to cloud their thinking with connotations and preconceptions. By leaving them nameless, Herrera leaves this connotative baggage aside and forces readers to reconsider objects they already know, to transform their understanding of the world and create something new. Although Hererra has frequently explained this point in interviews, he also voices this directly in the novel, when Makina begins to understand how Mexicans in the United States create an interlanguage between English and Spanish, which offers them a new perspective on the world. Herrera writes that their speech is "not another way of saying things: these are new things. The world is happening anew, Makina realizes; promising other things, signifying other things, producing different objects." This directly speaks to the transformative power of language, which is creative in life as well as on the page.

The delicateness of Herrera's intentionally sparse language made translating his book, especially into the "anglo tongue," a deceptively challenging task. Just as Makina both wields language to influence those around her and allows language to transform her own reality, Herrera's writing translate the well-worn narrative territory of the U.S.-Mexico border into something ripe for new modes of understanding the immigrant experience.

GENDER ROLES

Given the traditionally masculine narrative conventions of fiction about borders and migration, it is significant that Herrera puts a young woman at the center of his radical reinterpretation of the genre. Equally comfortable and competent in traditionally male and female gender roles, Makina refuses to heed the world's call for separate, gendered spheres. By rejecting this distinction, Herrera shows that feminist writers need not choose between elevating concerns considered traditionally feminine or merely proving that heroines can be as masculine as men. Instead, Herrera demonstrates what it looks like for a woman to actively move through the world without any doubts about her right to enter male-dominated spaces or interest in tolerating anyone who does not take her seriously because of her gender, highlighting the necessity of rejecting strict gender roles.

Herrera self-consciously mocks the masculine conventions of border fiction and patriarchal social structures of rural Mexico by introducing them into his story and then deconstructing them. The purpose of Makina's trip northward—her need to contact her wayward brother—actually satirizes the gendered conventions of migration and border narratives. Makina's brother goes north in search of the traditional symbols of male authority: land and work. Their mother, Cora, sends Makina to make up for his failure because she thinks, "who else can I trust it to, a man?" Through this family history, Herrera both shows why people conventionally migrate and why those people tend to be men, but then shows this script failing and a woman coming to the rescue. This suggests that the norm of male migration is merely an idea and a pattern with no necessary foundation in reality: women can migrate and make new lives for themselves just as well as men can. Similarly, Herrera uses the character of Chucho to caricature the hyper-macho heroes common in literature about migration and the border. Attractive, chivalrous, and extensively knowledgeable about the borderlands, Chucho would play this leading role in a conventional story. But in *this* novel, he is merely an ancillary figure who guides Makina forward: achieving a masculine ideal does not necessarily save the day.

Beyond writing a backstory that makes room for a woman in a world conventionally dominated by men, Herrera writes a protagonist who feels no qualms about crossing into spaces (both physical and literary) not originally created for her. This allows him to point out the illogic of separate gender spheres not only in literature, but in the world at large. Most importantly, Makina manages to be more masculine than the men she meets throughout the book: she pursues her goal relentlessly, with a superhuman toughness both physically and emotionally, and scarcely pauses even in moments of crisis. Herrera has no interest in reserving old-school tropes of manliness for men, but rather depicts and celebrates a woman who embodies them better than any of the male characters.

Makina is also comfortable in male spheres. The three gangsters she meets in the first chapter, Mr. Double-U, Mr. Aitch, and Mr. Q, all respect her deeply. Even though she is the only woman in the spaces she shares with them, this fact does not at all affect how she navigates these spaces: she drinks, smokes, and talks smack with the men without hesitation. By offering Makina as a model, Herrera shows that there should be no question about women's right to enter, speak, and matter in traditionally male realms. Another example of this principle occurs at the beginning of the second chapter, when a boy on the bus tries to grope Makina. She responds by nearly breaking the boy's finger as a warning against harassing women. In doing so, she demonstrates how a power imbalance—the implicit threat of violence—is what allows men to objectify and assault women without consequence, and then she responds quickly and decisively by upending this power imbalance and showing the boy what it is like for someone to feel like they are entitled to do what they want with his body.

While Makina's ability to usurp the traits of a conventional male hero allows Herrera to challenge the misogynistic assumptions of both his literary genre and the world at large, his ultimate message about gender is not that women can (or should) sacrifice their femininity to be as manly as men, but rather that there should be no strict distinction between masculinity and femininity as such. In conjunction with Chucho, Makina is able to shed her own preconceptions about her obligations toward men. For example, when Chucho is fighting the Anglo rancher who shoots Makina, her instinct is to stay: she "[is]n't used to having people say Run away." But she soon realizes that she must prioritize her independence, for she is the protagonist and Chucho her support system. She honestly and openly reflects on sexual desire, learning to feel "tension without fear" after meeting Chucho. Suggesting that women's desire is usually colored by fear of the men in their lives, Herrera again uses Makina to paint a portrait of a woman openly embracing her femininity and sexuality. And Makina also retains heroic traits more conventionally associated with femininity: she helps build communicative bridges, fights for the integrity of her family, and makes connections with almost everyone she encounters without expecting anything in return. She does not have to sacrifice these characteristics to embody traditionally male ones, and she never consciously "switches" between different personalities or ways of treating people based on gender. Instead of occupying both sides of the gender binary, she charts a path beyond it.

The senseless oppression of dividing the world into masculine and feminine spheres—and, in turn, the inanity of dividing literature into manly stories for men and womanly stories for women—is not a drawn-out conclusion, important plot turn, or world-shattering epiphany in this book. Rather, it is a starting point, a principle of Makina's existence and an assumption of the novel's perspective that overcoming strict gender divisions

should be an active undertaking, rather than a passive state of mind.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

UNDERGROUND SPACES

In the novel, underground spaces—holes, tunnels, and chambers—represent the opposite yet parallel worlds of the Mexico and the United States, as well as the transformative journey that migrants undergo to cross the border between these two nations. The book's nine-chapter structure parallels the traditional Aztec Mictlán myth, in which dead souls undergo a nine-stage journey in the underworld as they transition from life to death. It is no coincidence, then, that the novel opens with a sinkhole absorbing an old man and his dog in the Little Town, transporting them what Makina calls both "to the underworld" and "Hell." This abrupt reminder of the parallel world of suffering and struggle below the surface of everyday life; the unpredictability of the events that bring people down to the sinkhole foreshadows the volatile and unexpected circumstances that guide Makina's journey. Makina also reveals that she only ever travels to the Big Chilango (Mexico City) underground, lest she get "lost forever." To travel in the secret, parallel world beneath Mexico City means evading capture by the place, moving through it only as a phantom. And when Makina finally reaches end of her journey from Mexico to the U.S., she must descend to a mysterious chamber, "The Obsidian Place with No Windows or Holes for the Smoke," which takes its name directly from the corresponding section of Mictlán. This strange, underground world may or not be her final resting place, as the novel also implies that she stays in the United States, which is its own sort of parallel world for Makina: the mythical destination to which so many of her compatriots in the Village traveled, never to return.

THE TELEPHONE SWITCHBOARD

At home in the Village, Makina works at the telephone switchboard, which is "the only phone for miles," receiving incoming calls and connecting their dialers with the locals they wish to contact. The people in her rural village would be unable to communicate were it not for Makina's efforts, and the switchboard thus represents the possibility of people finding common ground despite the linguistic and geographical barriers that separate them, as well as Makina's literal and figurative role as an intermediary figure among these disparate groups of people. It is also a symbol of tradition—while the rest of the modern world has transitioned to mobile phones and cell towers, the switchboard remains a staple in this insular community. Its enduring importance for the villagers reflects the stark contrast between the impersonal, fast-paced culture of the U.S. and the intimate, close-knit communities that make up rural Mexico. The switchboard, which allows Makina to translate among English, Spanish, and the local Indigenous language, thus represents the strong sense of duty Makina feels to preserve her village's unique culture and facilitate the relationships that keep it alive: she has to return to keep everyone in touch, because "only she spoke all three tongues and only she had mastered the poker face for bad news and the nonchalance with which certain names, oh, so long yearned for, had to be pronounced."

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the And Other Stories edition of *Signs Preceding the End of the World* published in 2015.

Chapter 1 Quotes

I'm dead, Makina said to herself when everything lurched: a man with a cane was crossing the street, a dull groan suddenly surged through the asphalt, the man stood still as if waiting for someone to repeat the question and then the earth opened up beneath his feet: it swallowed the man, and with him a car and a dog, all the oxygen around and even the screams of passers-by. I'm dead, Makina said to herself, and hardly had she said it than her whole body began to contest that verdict and she flailed her feet frantically backward, each step mere inches from the sinkhole, until the precipice settled into a perfect circle and Makina was saved.

Slippery bitch of a city, she said to herself. Always about to sink back into the cellar.

The Little Town was riddled with bullet holes and tunnels bored by five centuries of voracious silver lust, and from time to time some poor soul accidentally discovered just what a half-assed job they'd done of covering them over.

Related Characters: Makina

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 11-2

Explanation and Analysis

The novel's first lines announce three of its principal concerns: death and the underworld, Makina's perilous journey, and Mexico's contentious, hybrid history and present. Between Makina's first words, "I'm dead," and the imagery of the old man falling into the underworld beneath the Little Town, this passage establishes the allegorical significance of Makina's journey, which consistently parallels the stages of the Mexica and Aztec underworld, Mictlán. The old man and the dog are clearly headed there in this chapter—and Herrera directly references the fact that the Mexica used to bury people with a dog because they believed the dog-god Xolotl helped the deceased survive the first challenge of the underworld (crossing a raging river).

Throughout the book, Makina can be interpreted as confronting Mictlán's challenges, but she is also fighting for her very survival—she nearly drowns, gets shot, freezes to death sleeping outside, and gets arrested. This scene is, then, par for the course, in terms of both Makina's challenges and her abrupt, matter-of-fact way of confronting them. And finally, Makina makes it clear that she knows her Little Town's history, and Herrera makes it clear that this history, although not always a dominant force in people's lives, does occasionally come back to haunt them. The sinkhole both represents the way the Spanish destroyed—in this case, literally *undermined*—Indigenous Mexican culture and the way that Indigenous culture still in many ways serves as a template for contemporary life in Mexico. The death of one culture at the hands of the other is the nation's foundational crime, and one that Makina reenacts as her journey north slowly but steadily transforms and undoes her identity.

> You don't lift other people's petticoats.
>
> You don't stop to wonder about other people's business.
>
> You don't decide which messages to deliver and which to let rot.
>
> You are the door, not the one who walks through it.

Related Characters: Mr. Aitch, Makina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Makina spends the first chapter visiting a series of local gangsters: the friendly Mr. Double-U, the menacing Mr. Aitch, and the tacit, wise Mr. Q. Double-U and Q owe her favors, but Aitch does not, and in exchange for his assistance helping her find her brother in the United States, Makina agrees to deliver a mysterious packet wrapped in cloth to Aitch's associates somewhere north of the border. Herrera implies that this packet contains something illegal—probably drugs—but Makina scarcely cares: she is interested in completing her own mission and finding her brother, not staying morally pure. She is merely the messenger, the liaison that links two worlds.

Makina's mindset, as Herrera lays it out in this passage, is significant for two principal reasons. First, it helps explain the extraordinary respect she—a young woman—is afforded by everyone in her community, including powerful men associated with the criminal underworld. They know she is loyal and efficient, that she does not stop to ask unnecessary questions, that she has no qualms about blending into the background. This is a relatively ruthless stance, one that many might expect of unscrupulous criminals—and, above all, men—but not necessarily of a young woman seeking to reunite her family. At the same time, it is precisely Makina's ruthlessness that gives her the resources to fulfill this goal.

Secondly, this passage is important because it points to the way Makina's identity transforms throughout the book. Initially, she thinks of herself as "the door, not the one who walks through it," as a link between things—whether the different languages she speaks, the two countries she visits, or her family in Mexico and her estranged brother. Like a hole in the border, she makes crossing between worlds possible, but is only a functionary and messenger: her desires and ideas scarcely matter, and the two realms she connects do not initially mix to produce something new in her. Although it takes a long time and series of challenges for her to create this new, hybrid existence, it is perhaps her primary achievement by the end of the book. As it were, instead of continuing to serve as the door between two spaces, Makina tears down the wall separating one from the other.

> Sometimes they called from nearby villages and she answered them in native tongue or latin tongue. Sometimes, more and more these days, they called from the North; these were the ones who'd often already forgotten the local lingo, so she responded to them in their own new tongue. Makina spoke all three, and knew how to keep quiet in all three, too.

Related Characters: Makina

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

The narration reveals why Makina is so respected in her area, to the point of being able to show up and demand the immediate attention of three prominent gangsters in the Little Town. She is responsible for running the area's telephone switchboard, so any calls into or out of the Village and Little Town have to go through her. This points to not only her powerful role as a link between people and cultures, but also the importance of her multilingualism in her capacity to serve as such a link. Able to translate among Spanish, English, and her community's unnamed Indigenous language, she is able to put people in relation, sustaining families and friendships across a great geographical distance.

This points to the way that patterns of migration have a powerful effect on rural Mexico: some people have "already forgotten the local lingo" and only speak English, while some sustain the Indigenous language and culture their ancestors have transmitted for millennia. Of course, with its continual allusion to Mictlán and elements of Indigenous Mexican culture, Herrera's novel attempts to break with the simplistic assumption that Indigenous cultures (and languages) are of the past, and that European-based ones (those that require speaking Spanish and English) belong to the future or signify progress. Nevertheless, this is the way many of the people around Makina perceive the three languages and cultures among which they are caught, but her ability to give equal weight and consideration to all three allows her to break down the assumed supremacy of English over Spanish, and Spanish over the Indigenous language.

❝ She looked into the mirrors: in front of her was her back: she looked behind but found only the never-ending front, curving forward, as if inviting her to step through its thresholds. If she crossed them all, eventually, after many bends, she'd reach the right place; but it was a place she didn't trust.

Related Characters: Mr. Q, Makina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the first chapter, after visiting the three Misters and completing the arrangements for her journey, Makina pauses to look at Mr. Q's hall of mirrors as she exits his restaurant, Casino (a name that already points to the element of uncertainty, chance, and risk that accompanies Makina throughout her journey).

The imagery of this mirror—which, of course, stands for self-awareness and self-reflection—foreshadows the way Makina's senses of identity and time transform throughout the book, as she proceeds along her journey. Back and forward are switched, which might refer to the way she continues moving forward and changing despite her attempts to preserve and return to her family and community, or the way her journey is a distinctly modern story (that of migration from rural Mexico to the United States) but repeats or fulfills ancient archetypes (that of Mictlán). The "curving front" puts the end of her journey out of sight, and the "thresholds" evoke the distinct stages of her journey—the nine chapters, which follow the nine sections of Mictlán. The twists and turns of her difficult, uncertain journey—in this passage, the "bends" that she may or may not succeed in crossing—will lead her to an uncertain, unfamiliar, and untrustworthy future that is nevertheless the "right" one for her (a future in the United States, or eternal rest in the Obsidian Place of the final chapter).

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ She couldn't get lost. Every time she came to the Big Chilango she trod softly, because that was not the place she wanted to leave her mark, and she told herself repeatedly that she couldn't get lost, and by get lost she meant not a detour or a sidetrack but lost for real, lost forever in the hills of hills cementing the horizon: or lost in the awe of all the living flesh that had built and paid for palaces. That was why she chose to travel underground to the other bus depot. Trains ran around the entire circulatory system but never left the body: down there the heavy air would do her no harm, and she ran no risk of becoming captivated. And she mustn't get lost or captivated, too many people were waiting for her.

Related Characters: Makina

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Early on in the narrative, Makina has already made significant progress in her journey. She has left the Little Town and reached Mexico City—which, as is typical of his work, Herrera calls not by its name but only by an unmistakable euphemism, "The Big Chilango." Makina's fear of "get[ting] lost or captivated" suggests that she already is struggling internally about the prospect of radically changing her life through immigration: she recognizes the appeal of living in a place like the Big Chilango, where she worries not only about literally "get[ting] lost" along her journey, but also thinks she might lose herself in the pleasures of the place, and "get lost" in the urban crowd of "living flesh" and "cement." Her sense of distinctiveness and identity in her Village contrasts with the thrilling and dangerous possibility of complete anonymity in the city, which she can so easily obtain if only she is willing to leave her family behind. Of course, her decision "to travel underground" again gestures to the central role Herrera gives underground spaces in this novel, both because they point to the Mictlán narrative that runs parallel to the novel's plot and because they draw out the contrast between the various worlds that are always co-present, only at different levels or within different people, in any given place.

❝ Makina turned to him, stared into his eyes so he'd know that her next move was no accident, pressed a finger to her lips, shhhh, eh, and with the other hand yanked the middle finger of the hand he'd touched her with almost all the way back to an inch from the top of his wrist; it took her one second. The adventurer fell to his knees in pain, jammed into the tight space between his seat and the one in front, and opened his mouth to scream, but before the order reached his brain Makina had already insisted, finger to lips, shhhh, eh; she let him get used to the idea that a woman had jacked him up and then whispered, leaning close, I don't like being pawed by fucking strangers, if you can believe it.

Related Characters: The Boy from the Bus, Makina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

After Makina boards the bus for the border, a pair of hooligans starts eyeing her. One of them comes over, sits next to her, and starts touching her, and she immediately responds by nearly breaking his finger as a warning. This passage exemplifies her no-holds-barred attitude about breaking gender roles, and specifically her refusal to deal with men's harassment. Whereas many women might tolerate this kind of behavior out of fear, politeness, or sympathy, Makina immediately shows the boy what it is like for someone else to violate his body without his consent. She even turns it into a broader lesson about patriarchy, for the boy has to "get used to the idea that a woman had jacked him up" and, presumably, start to see women as more than sexual objects.

❝ Me? I tell you. I'm gonna start off on the right foot; don't know if makeup will help but at least no one can say I showed up scruffy, you know?

Related Characters: Makina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

The night before she crosses the border, Makina checks into a hotel in a nondescript town that hugs the Mexican side of the river. With immigrants from all walks of life and linguistic backgrounds, the place offers Makina ample opportunities to translate and teach. When she goes to take a shower after the long bus ride, a "woman in her second youth" walks into the bathroom and, inexplicably, starts going through Makina's bag. Makina notices but does not worry, and soon the woman pulls out Makina's lipstick and starts applying it. She knows that Makina watches her but does not address her directly. Instead, the woman looks into the mirror and says this quote, speaking volumes about the mindset and motivations of those who immigrate from Latin America to the United States.

The woman's "second youth" already points to her anticipation of a new life in the United States—she is rejuvenated merely by the promise of migration and the benefits it might bring—and the lipstick is an important part of her effort to seize this promise. Even though it obviously does not matter how she looks when she crosses the border, she seems to feel as though she will be presenting herself to a new place and way of life for the first time, and

that her appearance will at least metaphorically influence this new land's receptiveness to her—if nothing else, it will affect her own sense of self when she crosses over. This underlines the ritualistic and transformative aspect of crossing the border, which for migrants figures as a sharp break between the past and the future, carrying often-unfulfilled promises of prosperity, class mobility, and perhaps even physical beauty. At the same time, the concealing aspect of makeup also suggests that there is something lost—something that must be intentionally disguised or covered up—in the process of pursuing this dream.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ You just took your last trip, coyote.

I'm no coyote, Chucho said.

Ha! I seen you crossing folks, the man said. And looks like now I caught you in the act.

Not the act I'm denying, said Chucho, tho I'm no coyote.

The anglo's expression indicated that he was engaged in a mighty struggle with the nuances of the concept. He scanned Chucho's face for a few seconds, waiting for clarification. And now, yessir, chose to point the gun at them.

What I'm denying, Chucho went on, Is that you caught us.

Related Characters: The Anglo Rancher, Chucho (speaker), Makina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48-9

Explanation and Analysis

As Chucho brings Makina north, from the border through the desert and towards the city, a heavily-armed white rancher crosses paths with them and starts closely following them. Soon, he catches up to them and confronts Chucho, who believes the man is not a volunteer patrolling the border or a racist "patriot," but rather competition—according to Chucho, the rancher also helps smuggle people across the border, and wants to keep Chucho out of his territory.

Regardless of why the rancher confronts Chucho, this brief exchange between them—before they start wrestling over the rancher's gun—highlights the moral and cultural ambiguity around the process of crossing the border and the people ("coyotes") who help others across. From one point of view, coyotes are criminal human smugglers, menaces to the migrants they purport to help and the United States alike. From another, they help people fulfill their dreams of migrating. When Chucho denies being a coyote but admits that he is "crossing folks," he points to the racist assumptions linking the term and concept coyote to criminality and irresponsible profit-seeking. The anglo's "mighty struggle with the nuances of the concept" affirm that he seems to hold these assumptions that all those who help people cross are criminals. In contrast to that perception, Chucho is helping Makina cross because of personal networks that bind them, and he is not accepting payment. And ironically, of course, *Chucho* calls the police to break up this situation and, as far as Makina can tell, never suffers any legal consequences.

❝ Rucksacks. What do people whose life stops here take with them? Makina could see their rucksacks crammed with time. [...] Photos, photos, photos. They carried photos like promises but by the time they came back they were in tatters.

In hers, as soon as she'd agreed to go get the kid for Cora, she packed:

a small blue metal flashlight, for the darkness she might encounter,

one white blouse and one with colorful embroidery, in case she came across any parties,

three pairs of panties so she'd always have a clean one even if it took a while to find a washhouse,

a latin-anglo dictionary [...],

a picture her little sister had drawn in fat, round strokes that featured herself, Makina and Cora in ascending order, left to right and short to tall,

a bar of *xithé* soap,

a lipstick that was more long-lasting than it was dark and,

as provisions: amaranth cakes and peanut brittle.

She was coming right back, that's why that was all she took.

Related Characters: Makina's Little Sister, Cora, Makina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51-2

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the third chapter, after Makina takes off towards the two mountains in the distance, the narrator interjects with this commentary on baggage and identity,

which speaks volumes about Makina herself and migrants more broadly. In general, many of the things that people bring are indexical of both personal and cultural identity: the instruments they carry are distinctly Mexican, their "photos, photos, photos" a means of remembering a home they intend to leave behind without severing personal and familial ties. They carry practical survival tools—cold-weather clothing and knives—because they know about the dangers of the journey, but Makina, puzzlingly, does not. Perhaps this means she is fearless, perhaps she is underprepared, or perhaps because of her journey's mythical and allegorical character the reader should trust fate to guide her safely to the end of her path.

Unlike the reminders of home that most migrants carry, Makina's only one—her sister's drawing—reminds her of her desire to *return*. The drawing is an emotional rather than physical representation of the family—interestingly, without Makina's brother, who left some years earlier and whom Makina's sister might not even remember. It is also the reader's most intimate window into the life and perspective of Makina's sister, who never appears in the book except as a central motivation for Makina's return to Mexico.

Otherwise, Makina's possessions point to her major concerns on the journey, providing a rare window into her consciousness and sense vulnerability. She worries about darkness (certainly metaphorical as well as literal), being underdressed for a party, not having a chance to wash, and, of course, hunger. Notably, *xithé* and amaranth, two important plants Indigenous to Mexico, remind the reader where Makina's roots are.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ When she reached the top of the saddle between the two mountains it began to snow. Makina had never seen snow before and the first thing that struck her as she stopped to watch the weightless crystals raining down was that something was burning. One came to perch on her eyelashes; it looked like a stack of crosses or the map of a palace, a solid and intricate marvel at any rate, and when it dissolved a few seconds later she wondered how it was that some things in the world—some countries, some people—could seem eternal when everything was actually like that miniature ice palace: one-of-a-kind, precious, fragile. She felt a sudden stab of disappointment but also a slight subsiding of the fear that had been building since she'd versed from home.

Related Characters: Makina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

This passage depicts one of the few moments when Makina stops for any reason during her journey. The cause is justifiable: she has "never seen snow before" and experiences cold as indistinguishable from heat. The snowflake's complexity and disappearance are clear metaphors for both identity generally and the gradual transformation of Makina's identity in particular. Both infinitely complex and ephemeral, miniscule compared to the world and full of life in themselves, individuals can be a source of infinite fascination, with new features emerging the more deeply someone observes them. Makina's thoughts also provide a commentary on the novel's underworld allegory—she is recognizing that human life is itself temporary and fleeting.

Makina's emotional reaction is telling: it is the first stage in her realization that she will come to want different things as a result of her journey, that her earlier commitment to returning to her roots might not last forever, and indeed might not even be the best way of serving her family and community. Disappointed in her slipping mindset but without the fear of letting the inevitable take its course, she enters the next stage of her journey with a mind open to the possibilities that this new land will offer her.

❝ The city was an edgy arrangement of cement particles and yellow paint. Signs prohibiting things thronged the streets, leading citizens to see themselves as ever protected, safe, friendly, innocent, proud, and intermittently bewildered, blithe, and buoyant; salt of the only earth worth knowing. They flourished in supermarkets, cornucopias where you could have more than everyone else or something different or a newer brand or a loaf of bread a little bigger than everyone else's. Makina just dented cans and sniffed bottles and thought it best to verse, and it was when she saw the anglogaggle at the self-checkouts that she noticed how miserable they looked in front of those little digital screens, and the way they nearly-nearly jumped every time the machine went bleep! at each item. And how on versing out to the street they sought to make amends for their momentary one-up by becoming wooden again so as not to offend anyone.

Related Characters: Mr. Aitch's Driver, Makina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56-7

Explanation and Analysis

These are Makina's first observations about the new land in the north: it is regimented, full of sharp lines, and governed by abstract rules and invisible powers—notably, the government that makes signs, and the market that creates "supermarkets" and "cornucopias". Its people seem strangely passive and reactionary: they live as though playing a video game and seem completely unfamiliar with the existence of the rest of the world. They are, in a sense, unfree because of their abundance and "wooden" because they have never had to choose for themselves what to be. Unlike Makina and those like her, they do not seem used to making difficult decisions or fighting animosity beyond the check-out line.

In contrast, Makina's Village and Little Town are created and defined *by*, not *for*, their inhabitants. Everyone knows one another but few feel "protected [and] safe" by default. For Makina, then, the United States looks more than foreign: it looks inhuman, indulgent, illogical, and robotic. This presents an interesting challenge for the reader, who might expect migrants to immediately laud the United States as a promised land of abundance—and it likely confuses migrants themselves, who realize that such abundance is impersonal, repetitive, exhausting, and not at all what they were expecting.

> The stadium loomed before them. So, what do they use that for?
> They play, said the old man. Every week the anglos play a game to celebrate who they are. He stopped, raised his cane and fanned the air. One of them whacks it, then sets off like it was a trip around the world, to every one of the bases out there, you know the anglos have bases all over the world, right? Well the one who whacked it runs from one to the next while the others keep taking swings to distract their enemies, and if he doesn't get caught he makes it home and his people welcome him with open arms and cheering.

Related Characters: The Old Man (speaker), Makina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59-60

Explanation and Analysis

When Makina gets to the city, she meets the Old Man who takes her to deliver Mr. Aitch's package. The site for this drop-off is the ultimate symbol of U.S. culture: a baseball stadium. Shocked by the scale of the structure, Makina asks the Old Man for some explanation, and this quote is how he responds. The bases on the field are like the "[military] bases all over the world," and Americans run around them just to prove they can, because they already dictate what the rest of the world can and cannot do. This is the point of Americans' national pride—running in circles, promoting the interests of who knows whom, all the while celebrating themselves to keep themselves going. In view of how they treat people like Makina and the Old Man at home, this begins to look even more egregious. So, merging the national game with the national pastime of imperialism, the Old Man offers a sweeping condemnation of the United States' role in the world at the same time as he foreshadows a setting that proves crucial to the next portion of Makina's quest: the military base.

Chapter 5 Quotes

> They are homegrown and they are anglo and both things with rabid intensity; with restrained fervor they can be the meekest and at the same time the most querulous of citizens, albeit grumbling under their breath. Their gestures and tastes reveal both ancient memory and the wonderment of a new people. And then they speak. They speak an intermediary tongue that Makina instantly warms to because it's like her: malleable, erasable, permeable; a hinge pivoting between two like but distant souls, and then two more, and then two more, never exactly the same ones; something that serves as a link.

Related Characters: Makina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

This passage captures Makina's thinking about the Mexican Americans she encounters after crossing the border—the people who, despite her reservations about many of the other people, places, and norms she encounters up north, end up winning the United States over for her. She pushes past conventional thinking about identity in the United States: the people she meets do not have to choose one side or the other, and their duality does not dilute either of their complementary sides. They are not half one and half the other, but rather "both things with rabid intensity;" they embody and celebrate contradictions and diversity, living

out the best of both worlds and creating a safe enclave in a hostile environment.

These characteristics appeal to Makina not only because they prove it is possible to live in the United States without trying either to become part of the mechanical "anglogaggle" or to endure rejection and racism. They also show Makina a deep affinity between Mexican Americans and herself, since her identity is largely based on her ability to connect people across their differences and to thus inhabit different worlds at the same time. For the first time, then, Makina sees a place for herself in the United States and a community of people that shares her ability to serve as a "hinge" or "link." In short, she uncovers the possibility of belonging in the United States.

❝ Using in one tongue the word for a thing in the other makes the attributes of both resound: if you say Give me fire when they say Give me a light, what is not to be learned about fire, light and the act of giving? It's not another way of saying things: these are new things. The world happening anew, Makina realizes; promising other things, signifying other things, producing different objects. Who knows if they'll last, who knows if these names will be adopted by all, she thinks, but there they are, doing their damnedest.

Related Characters: Makina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

As Makina continues to observe and contemplate the Mexican Americans she encounters during her search for her brother, she comes to realize that their particular use of language is crucial, both a distinctive part of their identity and a distinctive strategy they use to creatively reshape themselves and the world around them. Herrera uses this passage to, in part, present his broader argument about the role and structure of language: specifically, he thinks that talking about old things in new ways can offer new perspectives on those things and ultimately change them entirely. Language alone can "produc[e] different objects" when deployed correctly, he argues. Of course, this is also a cogent argument for writing as a profession and literature as a discipline: Herrera hopes that his own novel ways of representing the U.S.-Mexico border through language can change the way people relate to that border, and the countries it separates.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Scum, she heard as she climbed the eighth hill from which, she was sure, she'd catch sight other brother. You lookin to get what you deserve, you scum? She opened her eyes. A huge redheaded anglo who stank of tobacco was staring at her. Makina knew the bastard was just itching to kick her or fuck her and got slowly to her feet without taking her eyes off him, because when you turn your back in fear is when you're at the greatest risk of getting your ass kicked; she opened the door and versed.

Related Characters: Makina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

These lines are the work of Makina's imagination: she is dreaming about the seemingly interminable search for her brother that she continues as soon as she wakes. But this dream further blurs the distinction between waking life and sleep—conscious and unconscious, which implies also the life Makina appears to be living and the underworld she appears to be traveling through—by having Makina "[open] her eyes" in the middle. (The "[eight] hill[s]" she imagines are another place Herrera takes straight from the Mictlán story, so her dream draws a further parallel between modern border narratives and this traditional myth.)

The words the "huge redheaded anglo" shoots at Makina are significant because they indicate how Makina has internalized the racism and discrimination she has suffered throughout her time north of the border. The racism has now dug into her unconscious, become a pattern for her to anticipate, and therefore exert influence whether the people who perpetrate it are around or not. Makina now expects people in the United States to treat her as inferior (and men to bolster their usual sexist harassment by also demeaning her for her ethnicity). Beyond adding another challenge to Makina's journey, this shows how racism translates into a norm that structures people's sense of identity and relations to one another in places like the United States, and helps explain the inferior position that Makina sees her fellow Mexican people occupying in her new surroundings.

❝ The door opened and there stood a small man with glasses, wrapped in a purple bathrobe. He was black. Never in her life had she seen so many black people up close, and all of a sudden they seemed to be the key to her quest.

Related Characters: Makina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

After her disappointment in the previous chapter, now Makina manages to get ahold of a second address for her brother, and this time the house she is seeking really exists—it is large, pink, and suburban. Unfortunately, however, it is not her brother's. Instead, she opens the door to meet this man "wrapped a purple bathrobe," and both she and the man are initially taken aback: they simultaneously realize that they expected to see white people, not each other. Although she has only ever seen African-Americans for about three days, Makina already understands United States' racist social hierarchy: she now understands that African-Americans are not expected to live in respectable suburban neighborhoods (although she might not realize that, for almost all of the country's history, they were also literally legally prohibited from doing so). So she is surprised to see the black homeowner, who is surprised to see her surprise at seeing him. Fortunately, they soon realize their mutual error and laugh it off. In short, Makina sees that black and Latinx Americans are comparably ostracized and oppressed, which is why she takes "black people […] to be the key to her quest."

❝ Plus, all families had started off in some mysterious way: to repopulate the earth, or by accident, or by force, or out of boredom; and it's all a mystery what each will become.

Related Characters: Makina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

On her way to the military base that Makina reaches, where a soldier can hopefully help lead her to her brother, she begins to wonder about what family means at all. Although she is purportedly thinking about the family who used to live in the house she just visited—and whose son purportedly stayed back at the military base while the rest of her family disappeared—Makina begins wondering parenthetically about her own family, and what makes families stick together or break up. She realizes that, despite her adamant loyalty to her mother and sister, she has little sense of what a family is supposed to be good for, and why people across the world have decided to organize themselves into families. Despite being a central tenet of her identity and the purpose of her quest to the U.S., family transforms into a giant question mark for Makina, who has now managed to live without hers for some time. What have she and Cora really lost from her brother's departure, besides an emotional attachment? Is there any possibility that it could be better for them all *not* to reunite? Makina does not take any definitive stance on these questions, which are beginning to embroil her, nonetheless.

This passage also foreshadows the rest of the book in two ways. First, this other family, of course, is a foil for hers—in both, the eldest son has broken away from the rest for unclear reasons, and so it should be little surprise to the astute reader that this eldest son turns out to be her brother. And secondly, Makina's sense that "it's all a mystery what each [family] will become" points to the end of the novel, when she, like her brother, ends up giving up on her pledge to return home and instead following the path that has been set up for her whether in the United States or in the underworld (ultimately, it is difficult to discern which).

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ Neither one at first recognized the specter of the other. In fact, Makina stood up, greeted him and began to express her gratitude and ask a question before picking up on the soldier's uncanny resemblance to her brother and the unmistakable way in which they differed; he had the same sloping forehead and stiff hair, but looked hardier, and more washed-out. In that fraction of a second she realized her mistake, and that this was her brother, but also that that didn't undo the mistake.

Related Characters: The Anglo Family , Makina's Brother, Makina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87-8

Explanation and Analysis

When Makina gets to the military base, she is astonished to realize that the soldier she is supposed to meet is actually her brother—a white family hired him to take their irresponsible son's identity when the boy signed himself up for the army. Everyone thinks that her brother is this native-born American man, whom he really has become for all intents and purposes, official and informal alike. This speaks, of course, to the way people change irreversibly through

migration, but also the rupture that this change engenders: Makina's brother takes on a devil's bargain not only in choosing to go to war to become an American, but also because he has to completely erase who he used to be and give up all hope of returning home.

It is, then, deeply significant that Makina and her brother do not "[recognize] the specter of the other" when they meet in the United States: they have changed not only internally, it seems, but also physically, to the point of being unrecognizable. This misrecognition, like Makina's brother's shift in identity, is irreversible and makes the distance between them clear. Of course, it is not only Makina who fails to recognize her brother, now dressed as the soldier he has become. It is arguably even more surprising that Makina's brother does not recognize her—although they have both aged a few years, she is still dressed in plain clothes, and it would not be unreasonable to interpret the passage as suggesting that her appearance, too, has changed during her short time in the United States, further distancing her from her family.

> It's not like in the movies, he said. I know that here everything seems like in the movies, but it's not like that there. You spend days and days shut in and it's like nothing's going on at all and then one day you go out but you don't know who you're fighting or where you're going to find them. And suddenly you hear your homie died that morning and no one saw where the bullet came from, or you come across a bomb nobody saw get thrown, but there it was, waiting for you. So you gotta go look for them. But when you find them they're not doing jack and you just gotta believe it was them, they were the ones, otherwise you go nuts.

Related Characters: Makina's Brother (speaker), Makina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

When Makina asks her brother about the war, he is initially hesitant to give any real details about his experiences, but soon thereafter offers this commentary on his military service. Whereas those on the outside see the army as the heroic defenders of American values and interests, from the inside, military service is an exercise in absurdity and necessity: absurdity because nobody understands who or why they are fighting, and necessity because, like Makina's brother, most soldiers joined the military out of need, due to a lack of economic prospects. American patriotism, Makina's brother suggests, is hollow, a feeling manufactured to keep a military machine running.

The passage recalls the Old Man's previous portrayal of baseball as a game in which people run around the bases just so they can get back to where they started. Similarly, the soldiers are often forced to go through seemingly senseless motions to achieve an uncertain goal. The military gives its enlistees two options: "believe" the most convenient narrative, or "go nuts." Makina's brother makes it clear that the promise of America—not only the economic promise it holds for migrants, but also the promise of liberty, freedom, and power it offers its own citizens—is a lie and farce, but a convenient one that gets people to sign up for jobs nobody should want or be forced to perform.

> He's homegrown, he said. Joined up just like me, but still doesn't speak the lingo. Whereas me, I learned it, so every time we see each other he wants to practice. He speaks all one day in past tense, all one day in present, all one day in future, so he can learn his verbs. Today was the future.

Related Characters: Makina's Brother (speaker), Makina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

Just before the end of their conversation, Makina and her brother are approached by another soldier, who tells Makina's brother a cryptic, oddly specific story about the future. Makina's brother soon clarifies: the other soldier was talking about the previous night, but is speaking entirely in the future tense because he is still learning English. In contrast, Makina's brother has quickly learned English, seemingly to the point of blending in with native speakers. Perhaps his and Makina's shared facility with language and willingness to help others who struggle with the same proves that, despite all the new divisions between them, they are still bonded as siblings.

This passage is not only significant because it shows the importance of language both for the subset of immigrants who seek to assimilate to white American culture in the United States and for the capacity to make deep social connections more generally. It also matters because of how it ends: "today was the future." Makina's brother literally means that his fellow soldier was practicing the future tense

in their brief interaction, but there is no doubt that, as in so much of Herrera's prose, there are multiple layers to this statement. Specifically, by telling Makina that "today was the future," her brother suggests that she will follow his same path, becoming someone else if only by accident.

❝ I guess that's what happens to everybody who comes, he continued. We forget what we came for, but there's this reflex to act like we still have some secret plan.

Why not leave, then?

Not now. Too late. I already fought for these people. There must be something they fight so hard for. So I'm staying in the army while I figure out what it is.

Related Characters: Makina's Brother (speaker), Makina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

Just before they part ways, Makina's brother pauses for a long moment and then mutters this first line, admitting that, despite his apparent newfound success—money and citizenship—he really has no idea what he is doing or why he is in the United States. She offers the obvious alternative of leaving, but he admits that leaving would be as pointless as staying. His admission that he is lost, even though he has more than most immigrants would hope for, allows Herrera to question the conventional narrative of immigration, which is both full of intention—it says that people move to a new place with a "secret plan," a clear sense of purpose—and interprets upward class mobility as synonymous with success. Makina's brother's sense of doubt also underlines the ambivalence of his role in the U.S. military: not only does he still not understand what he spent so long fighting for, but the very fact that he fought convinces him to wait for some meaning to eventually present itself. Although the reader might already realize that this meaning will probably never come around, Makina's brother's very existence depends on his actions having had meaning (either as a migration story or a war story).

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ We are to blame for this destruction, we who don't speak your tongue and don't know how to keep quiet either. We who didn't come by boat, who dirty up your doorsteps with our dust, who break your barbed wire. We who came to take your jobs, who dream of wiping your shit, who long to work all hours. We who fill your shiny clean streets with the smell of food, who brought you violence you'd never known, who deliver your dope, who deserve to be chained by neck and feet. We who are happy to die for you, what else could we do? We, the ones who are waiting for who knows what. We, the dark, the short, the greasy, the shifty, the fat, the anemic. We the barbarians.

Related Characters: Makina (speaker), The "Patriotic" Policeman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99-100

Explanation and Analysis

A policeman who proclaims himself a "patriot" stops Makina and a number of other immigrants in the street, makes them line up on the ground, and starts berating them for refusing to "fall in and ask permission" in the United States. When he notices that one of the men has brought a book of poetry, the policeman tears out a page and dares the man to write a confession of his crimes against the United States, but the man is too anxious and Makina takes his place. This quote is the striking message that she writes to the policeman.

Makina's letter is important not only because it demonstrates her fearlessness in challenging authority and the power of her multilingualism, but also because it allows her (and, by extension, Herrera) to explicitly identify and call out the racist ideology of American society and show that this racism is not limited to private individuals, but also infects agents of the state like the policeman. Makina manages to at once point out the racist tropes used against Mexicans—they are "dirty" and "smel[ly]," do not speak English and "deliver [...] dope"—and show the policeman the adverse conditions they face in the United States: low wages and "barbed wire," an unfamiliar language and culture, and above all, the racist nonsense of people who think Mexicans "deserve to be chained" like the slaves whose labor built the United States. Makina makes this historical allusion, not only to slavery, but all the way back to the earliest recorded moments of European history, for in its original context the word "barbarian" was the ancient Greeks' way of conflating foreignness with inferiority. She recognizes and rejects American racism, historical and present, and forces the police officer to see the damage his

mindset causes the people in front of him, whose humanity he somehow seems to have lost the ability to see.

Chapter 9 Quotes

Over the door was a sign that said *Verse*. She tried to remember how to say verse in any of her tongues but couldn't. This was the only word that came to her lips. Verse.

Related Characters: Chucho, Makina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

In the last chapter, Chucho guides Makina to a strange door that leads her to an even more mysterious spiral staircase. She descends to find another door at the bottom, and above it is this sign, which can only be understood by making a detour through the book's original language. Indeed, "*Verse*" is one of many cases in which understanding this book requires paying attention to its process of translation. The original Spanish term, *jarchar*, is a verb coined by Herrera out of the Spanish term *jarcha*, a word that refers to the closing verse of a poem during the medieval era when Arabic was the literary language of what is now Spain. In many cases, these closing verses were unusual for two reasons: they were in Mozarabic (a mix of Arabic and Latin that became a kind of ancestor language to modern Spanish), and they were written in a female voice, while the rest of the poem would be written in a male one. As a way of ending a text, then, *jarchas* used voices that were usually erased from poetry at the time. And they are also important evidence of the long development process that created the contemporary Spanish language.

For these two reasons, Herrera uses *jarcha* throughout the text when a character leaves one space and moves to another. Rather than taking the space that a person is exiting as its reference point, *jarchar* focuses on the person's own perspective, and the way that transitioning from one place to the next inevitably changes a person. In other terms, the word condenses the transformative power of the voyage with the creative power of language. It is therefore significant that Makina forgets her signature word: it means, in fact, that she is in the process of *versing*, of losing her past identity and forming a new one by means of crossing the threshold from this world to the underground world behind this door. If at the beginning of the novel she was "the door, not the one who walks through it," now the door is beckoning *her* to *verse*.

Makina took the file and looked at its contents. There she was, with another name, another birthplace. Her photo, new numbers, new trade, new home. I've been skinned, she whispered.

When she looked up the man was no longer there and she tipped briefly into panic, she felt for a second—or for many seconds; she couldn't tell because she didn't have a watch, nobody had a watch—that the turmoil of so many new things crowding in on the old ones was more than she could take; but a second—or many—later she stopped feeling the weight of uncertainty and guilt; she thought back to her people as though recalling the contours of a lovely landscape that was now fading away: the Village, the Little Town, the Big Chilango, all those colors, and she saw that what was happening was not a cataclysm; she understood with all of her body and all of her memory, she truly understood, and when everything in the world fell silent finally said to herself I'm ready.

Related Characters: Makina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 106-7

Explanation and Analysis

The novel's closing passage again condenses the imagery of Mictlán—a strange man and woman, representing the god and goddess of death, handing Makina her new identity—with that of the migration narrative—dressed in a parody of business casual and acting with the formality of disinterested bureaucrats, these people also appear to be immigration officers giving Makina her "papers." The chamber she has reached clearly represents Mictlán's fateful last stage, the chamber full of smoke in which souls find their eternal rest. This accounts for the way that time seems to freeze in this passage, with seconds becoming uncountable and "nobody [having] a watch." Makina's life flashes before her eyes, an experience typical of those who make it through Mictlán, but also typical of European notions about death.

While it is unclear whether the end of Makina's story should be interpreted as finding an eternal home in this underground chamber, getting the opportunity to stay in the United States, or both, the parallel between these possible readings is the most explicit in this passage. Indeed, this parallel suggests that Makina has finally achieved the hybrid identity she lauded and identified with in the fifth

chapter. Although she never planned for it, then, Makina meets a fate that seemed indelibly set out for her, and over which she had no control. And therefore she ends with "I'm ready," a line that parallels her first words in the book: "I'm dead."

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: THE EARTH

Makina tells herself that she is dead—a **sinkhole** has just opened up in the street and swallowed a man, car, and dog. It almost engulfs her, too, but she outruns it. Makina's "slippery bitch of a city," The Little Town, was an old silver mining center, and parts of it periodically cave into the "underworld" that lays below. This is Makina's first time seeing this happen, and she "empathize[s] with the poor soul [the old man] on his way to hell" before going on with the task her mother Cora had given her: to deliver her brother a paper. As usual, Cora embraced Makina and comforted her before sending her off.

The novel's first sentences, written in Herrera's signature, informal lingo, are full of imagery associated with death and the underworld, which point to the novel's basis in the ancient tale of Mictlán (the Mexica, or Aztec, underworld). While in the novel Makina outruns and survives the sinkhole, it is also possible to read this moment as the symbolic death that begins her journey through an allegorical underworld. Her Little Town is also infused with history, ravaged and undermined by the Spanish who only left their mark through force. Herrera wastes no time in introducing Makina's mission—but only in time will the reader learn where and why she is going.

Following Makina's "longing for water," she visits Mr. Double-U at the baths, passing the "proud, sanguine" sentry with whom she once had awkward sex. He nearly tries to stop her, but she storms past and meets the rotund Mr. Double-U in the steam room, where he is reading the newspaper. He offers her a beer and they chat about Cora, who once sheltered Mr. Double-U when he "was on the run" and remains in his debt. Makina mentions her "assignment" and Double-U confirms that she is "off to the other side." His man will "get [her] across," he explains, and they share an agreeable silence. Knowing she is not supposed to be with Mr. Double-U, Makina thanks him and "verse[s]" (or leaves).

According to narrative conventions, Mr. Double-U and Makina should belong to opposite worlds, as Makina is a young girl and the mysterious Mr. Double-U is clearly a gangster figure with ties to a criminal underworld. But Makina is unfazed by the apparent challenges of meeting with him and navigating his male-dominated world. Their ties are deep, passed down a generation on the principle that family members can redeem one another's favors, and this further shows how embedded Makina is in the social world of her area. Finally, it becomes clear that she is planning to cross the border from Mexico to the United States to deliver Cora's message, a journey that has very real political connotations for readers who are familiar with the fraught issue of immigration in the U.S.

Makina then goes to visit Mr. Aitch. His guard once courted Makina, but reportedly murdered a woman once, and dodged the question when she asked him about it. She meets him outside the "Pulquería Raskolnikova" and asks to enter. He grudgingly agrees, blocks the door for some time, and finally lets her in. Makina passes the drunks and opens a curtain to find "Mr. Aitch playing dominoes with three of his thugs," who have no names or defining characteristics except for their pistols.

Mr. Aitch seems much more threatening and dangerous than Mr. Double-U: Herrera playfully characterizes him as a stereotypical Mexican gangster, and his references to nameless and faceless thugs (who represent a kind of cold, depersonalized violence) poke fun at these stereotypical depictions while also conjuring the sense of danger they are created to transmit. Similarly, the name of Aitch's establishment is a playful joke on classic literature: it refers to the protagonist of Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment, who (like Makina is about to do) makes a kind of moral deal with the devil, committing a crime in the hopes of jumpstarting a new life.

Makina asks Aitch where to find her brother and confirms that she is "gonna cross." Aitch orders Makina pulque in a language she does not understand and insists that he will help her. She knows he wants a favor in return and remembers his fraught relationship with Cora, and that there must be a good reason she does not know the details. Aitch asks her to "deliver something" in exchange for information about her brother. The barman brings Makina her pulque but she sends him away, demanding a different kind. He brings it. Mr. Aitch's thug brings Makina a small cloth-wrapped packet and then sends her away with it after insisting she drink.

Makina's harsh words to the barman demonstrate that she is deeply respected—perhaps even feared—in the Village. Although Makina does not know (and nobody ever reveals) what is in the packet the thug gives her, the clear implication is that it contains something illegal, presumably drugs, which Makina must help him smuggle across the border in exchange for Mr. Aitch's help. Makina has no doubts about doing what is necessary to get to her brother and fulfill her promise to her mother—Herrera therefore implies that Makina's crime is far from black-and-white.

"You don't stop to wonder about other people's business," Makina believes, which is "why she was respected in the Village." She operates the Village's only **telephone switchboard**, answering calls and fetching the residents so they can receive them. She has to answer the phone in "native tongue or latin tongue," or even the "new tongue" that they speak in "the North."

At last, the reader learns about Makina's role in the social world in which she is clearly so embedded. Although her job might look mundane to readers used to advanced technology, in fact it is crucial to the functioning of her rural village. Her multilingualism suggests a capacity to bridge communicative divides and connect people to one another, and those around her appear to repay her with loyalty and respect.

Makina then goes to visit Mr. Q at his restaurant, Casino. She used to shuttle messages between Q and Aitch when violence nearly erupted between their rival bands during the elections. The messages and envelopes she delivered convinced candidates to quit, and pushed people to make decisions. At least according to the locals, Mr. Q never stoops to violence, and regardless Makina has no qualms about playing part in his politics. Makina has planned the crossing and knows how to get to her brother, so she is visiting Mr. Q to make sure she can get back. One of her friends spent too long in the North and returned to find their home "somehow all different," their old friends and relatives strangely foreign.

As at the switchboard, Makina's role with Q and Aitch was to create lines of communication that could resolve an important, tense situation. This won her protection and respect, and her strong desire to return to the Village suggests that her investment in the community is probably even deeper than the gangsters'. Indeed, while most migrants to the United States hope to stay and work for higher wages, Makina wants just the opposite: to get home as fast as possible and reunite herself with her family and community. Already used to friends leaving, she realizes that migration can fundamentally change people's desires and senses of self, giving a sense of fragility to the rural Mexican culture to which she is so attached.

Makina approaches Mr. Q, who always wears all black. He silently gestures for her to sit, and a waiter brings her coffee. Makina tells him of her plans to cross, and Q already knows and begins telling her how difficult the journey will be, but that she will "wind up where [she] need[s] to be." He tells her that "there will be people to take care of everything you require" and she verses. "In the mirrored hall" on her way out, she thinks about Q's efficient, poised manner: he wastes no words. She looks at herself and around the hall of mirrors, seeing her back ahead of her and the way forward behind her. This path "invit[es] her to step through its thresholds," and if she manages to do so, she will "reach the right place," even if she cannot trust that place.

Although Mr. Q appears to be guaranteeing that he will help Makina return home, in reality he never says any such thing, only that she will end up where she truly belongs—he seems to have a foresight that she lacks about her own fate. When she looks in the mirror, which itself represents self-awareness and a reflection on identity, Makina sees her back and front—perhaps her past and future—inverted, and her journey now neatly divided into thresholds (like the nine-stage journey through Mictlán which parallels the nine chapters of the novel). The mirror's distortion of her body foreshadows the way her journey will transform her identity.

CHAPTER 2: THE WATER CROSSING

Whenever she visits "the Big Chilango," Makina travels **underground**, by the subway trains. Otherwise she risks "get[ting] lost or captivated" in the city—she is needed at home, where she is the only person who can properly run **the switchboard** in all three languages, and where her little sister needs her guidance.

"The Big Chilango" is Mexico City, and Herrera's euphemism for it points to the way he deliberately avoids place names throughout this book in an attempt to mythologize the familiar and thus strip readers of their preconceptions about various places, groups, and cultures. Makina's decision to travel underground, in a subterranean world parallel to Mexico City, is a means of resisting this temptation and refusing to give up her duties to her family and community.

Makina also has a boyfriend of sorts—although "they'd never discussed it, [...] he act[s] so much like a boyfriend" that she calls him one. She casually brought him to bed the day of the elections, and after he went to and came back from the Big Chilango, they started sleeping together every weekend. When it seemed like he wanted to talk about their relationship, she always "kiss[ed] him with extra-dirty lust just to keep his mouth shut." They nearly break this silence the night before Makina's departure, but she tells him they will "talk when [she] get[s] back" and he verses "with the weariness of a man who knows he's being played and can't do a thing about it."

Independent to a fault, Makina is nonchalant about love and sex, perhaps in part because the pattern of migration from her town makes committed relationships difficult—it is impossible to know if or when one's significant other will abruptly leave to move North. It's also likely that she maintains an emotional distance from men in order to prevent them from controlling her.

Three years before Makina's journey, "one of Mr. Aitch's thugs" convinced her brother "that they owned a little piece of land" across the river. Makina's brother set out to claim it, and he never came back—he only sent occasional notes.

The reader finally learns about Makina's brother's motives for moving north: although he went to prove his family's blood right to a plot of land, he ended up cutting ties with his family, with little warning. Just as it disrupts romantic love, migration shatters families. His quest to prove his right to land north of the border also subtly references the fact that most of the land comprising the Western United States belonged to Mexico prior to the Mexican-American War in the mid-19th century.

As Makina waits to buy a bus ticket, two young men harass her. They take the same bus, and one of them sits next to her and begins intentionally brushing up against her. She makes a "shh" gesture and then twists the boy's finger until it nearly breaks and he nearly screams in pain. She sends him back to his friend, threatening that she will ruin his hand for good the next time. Crying, he "stagger[s] back to his seat," and she falls asleep watching "the gray city fleeing past" out the bus window.

While this scene shows how patriarchy is deeply entrenched in Makina's worlds, it also provides a roadmap for resisting it. The boys are probably used to getting away with groping women, but Makina insists that sexual violence not be normalized and instead shows the boy what it feels like for another person to act as though they are entitled to his body.

In the night, Makina wakes up while the rest of the bus passengers sleep. She suspects "she'd dreamed of lost cities" and gazes out on the familiar countryside, wondering "what the hell might be festering out there: what grows and what rots when you're looking the other way." She imagines that "a whole slew of new things" might suddenly and unexpectedly reveal itself to her.

Makina is both thrilled and terrified to journey into the unknown, an experience she knows will change her but hopes will not upset her existing sense of identity. Her dreams of "lost cities" again point to the hidden and forgotten worlds that populate Makina's universe: both the worlds of Indigenous Mexico that, forgotten by much of the world, are central to her identity, and the invisible underworld that, for the Mexica, coexists with what most people consider reality.

The young men leave her alone for the rest of the trip, until "the bus reache[s] the end of the land, at almost midnight the following day." Makina checks into one of the cheap hotels lining the river, and enters "a very sizeable room" full of bunk beds and "people of many tongues," mostly single men. She goes to the bathroom and takes a shower. A "woman in her second youth" enters the bathroom, pulls Makina's lipstick out of her rucksack, and starts putting it on. Fully aware that Makina sees her, the woman "smack[s] her lips together" and tells herself in the mirror, "Me? I tell you, I'm gonna start off on the right foot [...] no one can say I showed up scruffy, you know?" Makina compliments her and the woman thanks her, returns the lipstick, and verses.

Although again unnamed, this border town is clearly somewhere on the Río Grande that forms the border between Texas and a handful of states in Northern Mexico. The woman who uses Makina's lipstick in this passage exemplifies the stereotypical hopes of migrants from Mexico to the United States. Literally rejuvenated by the prospect of starting a new life ("in her second youth"), she wants to look as good as possible when she crosses the border, as though she is presenting herself to a new land for the first time. While Makina and the woman both recognize that she is stealing, the prospect of condemning her never crosses Makina's mind—she willingly shares what is hers with the woman, reflecting a deeper sense of solidarity and community that makes what would ordinarily be a faux pas seem trivial.

Makina spends the night awake, like so many others "waiting for their contact," and advises fellow travelers who have questions about language, or about what to do when they cross over. She goes outside and sees two "small groups" preparing to cross, and two "anglo" men debating how much to charge them. They agree to "put these scrubs out as bait" while they help another, better-paying group cross. She warns the group that they are about to get scammed, and they move on.

Although she has largely kept to herself during the novel thus far, Makina now starts going out of her way to aid those in need—especially those who need help navigating a language barrier. It becomes clear that she is a translator not only by profession, but also by disposition, and that she sees this role as a means of putting disparate groups and experiences into communication with one another.

At sunrise, Makina sits on the riverbank and notices a man waving a light. She realizes that the man is trying to communicate with her and waves back. The man pulls out "an enormous inner tube" and "tiny oar," and starts crossing the river. As he approaches and then climbs out of the river, Makina notices his suntan, greying beard, height, and strong build. He jokes that she is "going over for a lil land"—she laughs and explains that she is going because of her "stupid" brother's quest "for a little land." The man introduces himself as Chucho and offers her a cigarette. Makina asks how he recognized her—"they sent me a picture," he says. She is surprised he does not take the opportunity to "make some comment about her looks."

Although Makina has no idea what to expect, fate—or the men from the Little Town—have set up a path across the river for her. Here, Chucho is presented as a stereotype of a traditional migration narrative's protagonist: the macho patriarch who makes it across the border and succeeds in the U.S. using his physical strength. Personable and caring rather than greedy, manipulative, or sexually opportunistic, he is also the opposite of the typical coyote (human smuggler) encountered in such narratives. Herrera pokes fun at this ironic reversal in Chucho's character—a manly hero transformed into a woman's assistant—with this first image of Chucho crossing the river in a comically small, ill-fitting inner tube.

Makina asks Chucho if it is right for them to cross during the day, but he explains that border security is "tied up somewhere else." They get in the inner tube together and she notices him "lean in close and sniff her hair." The current drags them away and tears them from the inner tube—Makina struggles to swim but soon gives up and trusts that "she'[ll] wind up where she need[s] to be." Chucho heaves her out onto the other riverbank. Lying on the ground, Makina decides that the sky looks different on this side. Chucho promises her that the "next part's easier."

In a scene right out of a conventional romance or fantasy novel, Chucho saves Makina from drowning—but this does not consummate a relationship or even represent an act of love, for it is simply his job. In fact, this scene has an entirely different significance: Chucho (whose name is a slang term for "dog" in Mexico) represents the dog Xolotl from the Mictlán myth, a divine figure who was charged with helping souls cross the dangerous river Apanohuacalhuia, similar to Charon ferrying the dead across the River Styx in Greek mythology.

CHAPTER 3: THE PLACE WHERE THE HILLS MEET

Makina sees nothing, and then "two mountains colliding in the back of beyond." Chucho informs her that, past these mountains, she will find a truck to "take [her] on [her] way." She sees what appears to be a pregnant women resting under a tree and considers this a good sign for her journey. But then she realizes it is a dead man "swollen with putrefaction, his eyes and tongue pecked out by buzzards." Chucho tells Makina about a time he helped a man cross back to visit his dying wife—they got lost on the way, and the man's wife was dead by the time the man returned.

Herrera's prose is bare except for this chapter's signature topographical symbol—the "two mountains colliding"—which he takes directly from the Mictlán narrative. The corpse Makina encounters acts as a symbol on several different levels: it represents the dangers of the journey into the United States, invokes the book's constant reference to death and the underworld, and the signifies the transformation of something seemingly innocuous and beautiful into a horrid, barren reality. In this sense, the transformation from a living person to a corpse points to how immigrants' hopes can be unceremoniously stamped out and left to die by racism and the brutality of life as a migrant worker in the U.S.

Makina remembers when "one of the first to strike it rich after going north" returned to the Village. He showed off his clothes and mobile phone, which he used to try and get revenge against Makina for "fuck[ing] him over." He showed the Village how to use the phone and said it meant Makina was "going to be out of a job," but the phone did not work. Makina joked that he "should have bought a few cell towers, too."

This vignette concretely shows the reader Makina's prominence in the Village, as well as the way it seems to infuriate so many of the young men she spurns and probably out-earns. The lack of cell towers explains why Makina's rural area still has a telephone switchboard after the rest of the world has spent so many years married to modern telecommunications technology.

A black truck with searchlights is following Makina and Chucho. Its driver is "an anglo with dark glasses" whose "eyes [shoot] bullets through the two windows." They stop at the shack where Makina is supposed to change before boarding the truck beyond the mountains, and Chucho makes a phone call. "In anglo tongue," Chucho tells someone he calls "officer" that he has "the info I promised," and to "be careful, [because] he's armed to the eyeballs." Makina undresses inside while Chucho guards the door and the gun-wielding anglo waits beside his truck. Standing naked for a long moment, Makina feels "tension without fear" and realizes she feels no guilt about desiring Chucho.

The anglo's sudden appearance points to another enduring danger in the desert of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands: the nationalistic militias, both formal and informal, who make it their mission to keep migrants out of the United States. In a not altogether unrealistic scenario, Chucho ends up on the side of law and order against a vigilante who assumes that he has the right to use even lethal force to keep Makina out of the United States. As Chucho protects Makina, her attraction toward him is novel and important because, perhaps for the first time, it is untinged by power or shame: she feels attraction to him as an equal, knowing that neither side has ulterior motives.

Makina gets dressed and asks Chucho about his phone conversation. He explains that he thinks the anglo outside has "his own lil undercover business," and is less worried about Makina and Chucho "not having papers" than about them "muscling in on his act." Or "maybe the dumbfuck is just in up to his neck," Chucho speculates. "If the shit hits the fan," he tells her to just "head for that mountain pass and stay on the trail." When Chucho turns his back to walk toward the door, Makina hides Cora's note and Mr. Aitch's package in her jacket.

Chucho reveals that there is no real difference, legal or moral, between his job and the anglo's. The anglo is motivated not by racism or patriotism gone out of hand, but merely by his own business interests, which reflects the way American capitalism effects racial exclusion more broadly.

Outside, the revolver-wielding anglo rancher confronts Chucho and Makina: "You just took your last trip, coyote." Chucho declares that the man has not caught them in the act, and the man points his gun at them. At once, they notice a pair of police trucks approaching them—and Chucho grabs the distracted anglo rancher's arm. The rancher shoots but misses, and the police cars stop nearby as the rancher and Chucho fall to the ground, where they wrestle over the gun. Chucho tells Makina to run, but she assumes he is yelling for help and approaches him. "[Not] used to having people say Run away," Makina tries to help Chucho fight off the man, but Chucho gets the upper hand and Makina decides to run off toward the mountains.

Chucho and the anglo's confrontation reflects a difference in thinking about what people like Chucho actually do: while the anglo sees him as a criminal human smuggler, Chucho believes he is helping people realize their dreams and working to unite families. With the police approaching, it is unclear who is right and wrong in the confrontation. Makina's realization that she must go on and let Chucho fight her battle is a reversal of gender roles, as he is essentially supporting her as she goes forth as the hero of the story. Makina is used to embodying this supporter role, caring for her family or helping villagers communicate at the switchboard. But here, she realizes for the first time that her own journey is the priority, as opposed to a standard border tale in which Chucho would be the protagonist and she would be there to support him.

From a distance, Makina turns around and sees the police aiming their guns at Chucho, who is laying on the ground with his hands behind his head, and the unconscious anglo rancher. She realizes that she has been shot, but her wound neither hurts nor bleeds. She looks back to see Chucho talking to the police and imagines he is "talking, more than anything, about her." So she continues walking uphill.

Makina's mysterious resistance to the bullet makes her seem even more like a mythical or superhuman figure, and this again illustrates the allegorical parallel of her story with the Mictlán myth. Leaving Chucho affects her more than getting shot. But again, as though of necessity, the people she meets along her journey must fulfill their purposes and fall away so that she can continue pushing forward as the hero of the narrative.

"Rucksacks," the narrator wonders, "what do people whose life stops here take with them?" For Makina, people's rucksacks are "crammed with time" and full of things that help them remember: "amulets, letters," small instruments, and always photos. People usually bring jackets for the freezing nights, and hide money and knives just in case. In her own rucksack, Makina carries a flashlight, a nice white blouse "in case she [comes] across any parties," extra clean underwear, a dictionary, her little sister's drawing of their family, soap, lipstick, and "as provisions: amaranth cakes and peanut brittle." There is so little because she knows she will be "coming right back" home.

In this diversion at the end of the chapter, Herrera uses the rucksack as a symbol of memory and identity. Makina's lack of survival gear demonstrates her fearlessness about the journey and confidence that it is only temporary. Indeed, the fact that she carries none of the typical items implies a sharp distinction between her and other migrants. Makina's little sister's drawing implies the girl's importance to Makina, who in many ways lives to provide her with a role model. Amaranth, an important Indigenous food, also points to her desire to stay rooted to home.

CHAPTER 4: THE OBSIDIAN MOUND

Makina gets to the pass between the two mountains, where it is snowing. It is her first time seeing snow, and she watches it melt as she wonders why "some things in the world—some countries, some people—could seem eternal when everything [is] actually [...] one-of-a-kind, precious, fragile."

Makina's observation about seemingly eternal things actually being gestures the role this dichotomy plays in her story. Each stage of her journey and, ultimately, of the identity with which she started her migration, are fluid and fleeting. The basis of her story, by contrast, is a seemingly eternal myth that has outlived the people who created it, and, at that, a myth about the eternal life of the dead.

Beyond the mountains, Makina meets Mr. Aitch's man with the truck. They do not talk during the journey, and Makina "look[s] out [the window] without seeing" and reminds herself that she needs to return home to **the switchboard**, to help everyone who needs to "communicat[e] with their kith and kin."

In stark contrast to Chucho, Mr. Aitch's man does nothing more and nothing less than the job he is sent for. Makina recommits to returning home just as she is about to enter the city, which will provide her with a tangible sense of the difference between Mexico and the United States for the first time.

The city Makina reaches is full of "signs prohibiting things," which appear intended for "citizens to see themselves as ever protected." Its supermarkets promise that "you could have more than everyone else or something different or a newer brand." Makina notices anglo shoppers "nearly-nearly jump[ing]" at the self-checkout aisle, but also the "fleeting looks of recognition" from "her compatriots": the immigrant laborers who populate the city's public space, but are "just there to take orders." The restaurants are full of novel recipes, "rapturous fried feasts" and "food that was strange but with something familiar mixed in." Although the restaurant managers look at her strangely, she soon realizes that their workers are all also Mexicans. "All cooking is Mexican cooking," she jokingly decides.

It is telling that Makina first notices the regulation and systemization of daily life in the United States—everyone has to follow the same rules, and everyone pursues the same luxuries through the same economic means. Whereas life in Mexico was about survival and community, it is immediately clear that life in the Untied States is about accumulation and consumption. Makina sees not diversity but hierarchy: there is an obvious social divide between white people and Mexicans, who respectively represent the consumers and producers of everyday material goods. She also sees the flipside of the pilgrimage so many of her friends and acquaintances have made from the Village: the Mexicans working menial jobs are the people who have successfully crossed the border, but these jobs seem like paltry rewards in comparison to their effort and expectations. At the same time as these discoveries shock Makina, they also seem to draw her in with their sense of novelty and possibility.

Makina takes out Mr. Aitch's package and shows it to the driver, but he insists that "you don't give nothing to me" and instead leaves her on a random, empty street corner where people are supposed to meet her and "tell [her] where to take it." An old man outside a flower store tells her to "go clean up" inside the shop. She washes and notices that her wound "hardly even [stings]." Back outside, the old man shows her that cops are following them and explains that they will "walk till they get sidetracked." As they walk toward the stadium, where Makina will hand over the package, the car disappears and returns.

The flippant driver's indifference means Makina is again left in an unfamiliar place, without guidance, reliant on the three men to whom she has entrusted her safety. Even this far from home, she is utterly dependent on the ties and trust she forged back in the Village. Makina's ongoing connection to her roots is subtly reflected in the fact that she washes and changes during the same stages of her journey as deceased souls were supposed to on their trip through Mictlán in the traditional myth.

The old man begins to tell Makina about her brother, who is "alive and kicking," but "changed." Makina's brother also helped Mr. Aitch transport a package, and "things got rough." But he got through it and "went off on his business." The old man gives Makina a piece of paper with her brother's address. The car turns away again, although Makina and the old man do not know if they are in the clear. They have reached the stadium, where "it's got to be done." The man explains that "the anglos play a game [in the stadium] to celebrate who they are." They run around the bases—they "have bases all over the world"—and try to make it back home without their enemies catching them. Makina asks if the man likes the game—he insists he is "just passing through" the North, although he has been there for 50 years.

Makina's brother clearly went through the same difficult stages as her, which allows the reader to see Makina's journey as an archetypal one. This evokes the sense that diverse migration experiences are collapsed into singular narratives that then encourage more people to migrate. The old man's allegorical commentary on baseball points to how the sport is strange and alien to those unfamiliar with it, how baseball is a symbol of American identity, and the way American establishes that identity in relation to other countries. The "bases all over the world" are therefore a reference to U.S. military imperialism. The old man's feeling that he is "just passing through" shows how many Latinx people living in the United States feel alienated from and rejected by mainstream white culture, and generally how home can be as much a feeling as a physical place.

The man whistles and walks off. A kid directs Makina to walk down a long hallway, "toward the light." At the end, she sees "two rival visions of beauty:" the "immense green diamond" of the field and the "obsidian mound" of thousands of chairs above it. A number of men approach her, "all black but some blacker than others," with various builds and hairstyles but all "with faces that clearly conveyed they were serious motherfuckers." A man promises to her "in latin tongue" that the men are "not such tough sonsofbitches," and he turns out to be "Mr. P, the fourth top dog, [who] had fled the Little Town after a turf war with Mr. Aitch." Makina realizes she might be in trouble, but Mr. P promises her she has "nothing to fear" because he and Aitch have reconciled.

Entering a highly-ordered, artificial, massive space that could not be more different from her Village, Makina sees "two rival versions of beauty" between the field (where the action happens and the attention is directed) and the stands (which represent the anonymity of the ordered, homogenous crowd). The description suggests that this is Makina's first time encountering African Americans, and that this specific racial category is culturally bound, historical rather than natural. Mr. P's presence shows Makina that there is no strict binary between staying in Mexico or going to the United States, but rather that the two are linked by active networks and constant movement between the two.

Mr. P, who constantly pats the knife that hangs off his belt. He takes Makina's package, tells his associates that "we're cool," in anglo tongue, and then propositions that Makina "come work for" him. She says she is "here for my brother," and he looks around before exiting the stadium with all his men, leaving Makina all alone.

In contrast to Mr. Double-U, Mr. Aitch, and Mr. Q., Mr. P looks sinister and manipulative. The key difference is, of course, that he does not know or respect Makina, whom he instead treats as an object, both sexually and financially. This points to one of the most difficult choices migrants are forced to make when they relocate north of the border: a reputation, community, and sense of mutual trust at home, or utter anonymity in the United States.

CHAPTER 5: THE PLACE WHERE THE WIND CUTS LIKE A KNIFE

"They"—Mexicans who live in the North—are "homegrown and they are anglo and both things with rabid intensity." Balancing silence and grievances, "ancient memory and the wonderment of a new people," Spanish and English, they remind Makina of her own "intermediary," "malleable, erasable, permeable" self. Like her, they are "something that serves as a link." Their language constantly has "a shrewd metamorphosis, a self-defensive shift" between their two tongues, until they merge them, "using in one tongue the word for a thing in the other." Theirs is "not another way of saying things," but instead "these are new things." Through them, "the world is happening anew."

The poetic introduction to this chapter shows how Mexican Americans' identities are not merely a duality of two different traditions, or even a hybrid between the two. Rather, the experience of immigration provides an absolutely new lens, language, and culture. These are all predicated on Makina's ability to flexibly exist and communicate between *fixed worlds, rather than only embodying one or the other. Herrera's references to how migrants' language recreates the world points to the way he continually puts deliberate distance between the reader and familiar objects (like countries he refuses to name) in order to make readers challenge and reframe their worldviews.*

The address the old man gave Makina names another city, but there is no gap between that one and the one Makina is in. Everything looks the same, for "the cities had no center," and people keep directing her from "some bleak tundra [...] to another bleak tundra." Wandering from one city to another, from a suburb to a different one with the same name, and finally to a statue and to a nearby street, Makina gets to the address just before sunset.

Translated into English, passage is an example of how Herrera manages to rewrite the familiar to make it foreign and thus call the status quo into question. Makina's strange experience of the city allows those used to living in the United States to view their country's urban landscape from an outsider's perspective. The city seems built to prioritize private space over public, to be navigated by car and not by foot, and its uniform suburbs are undistinguishable from one another. New and shiny but empty of people and life, it feels like a "bleak tundra" to Makina, who is used to the tight-knit community of her Village.

Makina's brother had sent "two or three messages" back home. In the first he reported that "everything's so stiff" up north, that people celebrate strangely and hold a "turkey feast" where "all you do is eat and eat." He was lonely but had "lots of stuff" and promised to bring some home. But in his second message, he simply said: "I'm fine, I have a job now." If there was a third message, it could have said: "I said I was fine so stop asking."

Makina's brother's messages grew increasingly stoic and cold, representing a transformation in the U.S. It shows that her brother became more like the United States Makina sees now: uniform and regimented, with every place and every person just like the ones a few towns over. His personality was seemingly replaced with massive quantities of food and "stuff." It also shows how, even if he was uncomfortable with this foreign place at first, he gradually learned to prefer it over his homeland, and thus began giving up on his pledge to take care of his family.

Makina's journey is taxing: she has to figure out how to pronounce the address, "to cleave her way through the cold," and surpass "barricades that held people back for the benefit of cars." She must also try to communicate with people who share none of her tongues and confront "the monuments of another history," not to mention people's "disdain" and "suspicious looks."

In the bleak, homogeneous landscape of the American city, Makina feels that she *is the only thing to stand out: the world is indifferent to itself but actively hostile to her, and she has no doubt that she will be treated differently because of what she looks like and the language she speaks.*

Makina arrives to find "sheer emptiness": machines are digging a **hole** under whatever used to be at the address, which seems to have been "pulled out by the roots, expelled from the world." But an "irritated anglo" tells her that "there was nothing here to begin with."

After trudging through a city characterized by "sheer emptiness," Makina finds the same emptiness where she is supposed to find her brother. The huge hole in the ground at the address signals to Makina that she should drop her expectations, that everything and everyone has changed on this side of the border. Suddenly, it is no longer clear that she can trust the Misters from the Little Town, whose services have failed her for the first time.

CHAPTER 6: THE PLACE WHERE FLAGS WAVE

"A huge redheaded anglo" harasses Makina on "the eighth hill." She has been asking "anybody she hear[s] speaking latin tongue" if they have seen her brother, but has no luck. She spends the freezing night sleeping in an ATM booth and dreams of scaling various different hills. The redhead on the eighth hill is actually part of this dream, and startles her awake. It is the early morning, and Makina returns to wandering around in search of any possible information about her brother.

Makina's dream is deeply significant because it shows that she has internalized a sense of inferiority: she now moves through the world expecting to suffer racial discrimination. For the first time, Makina is not only lost, but also directionless. The eight frozen hills are another important stage in the Mictlán journey.

Makina meets the boy whose finger she nearly broke on the bus. He brings her inside the restaurant where he works and introduces her to a woman who reminds Makina of Cora. The woman explains that she cared for Makina's brother when he first arrived a year before. Makina's brother left to work for "an anglo woman," and the woman gives Makina the address. She says she recognized Makina because her brother said his sister was "smart and schooled."

In a perfect coincidence, Makina has already won the guidance she needs: by previously showing the boy she wasn't his inferior, she seems to have made him feel guilty enough that he takes her inside the restaurant as an apology. Even when her guides fail, it seems there are clearly other people looking out for Makina, who appear somehow fated to help her successfully finish her quest.

Leaving the boy from the bus behind, Makina runs to the address the woman gave her. She encounters a large pink house, and a black man "wrapped in a purple bathrobe" answers the door. She pauses to think about how she is now "see[ing] so many black people up close" and how they are "the key to her quest." Sensing her hesitancy, the man apologizes for not being the white person she expected. But he and Makina soon end up laughing together, until he informs her that the house's old occupants have "moved. To another continent." Convinced "she wouldn't be able to verse from this one last dead end," Makina fantasizes about committing suicide and going to hell. But as she prepares to leave, the man informs her that "there's one left": the old family's son is a soldier at the nearby army base.

Makina's sense that black people are "key to her quest" points to the close link between the experiences of African American and Latinx people in the United States: both have been historically subjugated and are often still treated as inferior, so the two groups can learn from and contribute to the other's quest for civil rights. Although she has only been north of the border for a few days, she clearly recognizes this connection and sees that she is by no means alone in feeling ostracized and rejected in the United States.

Makina contemplates the meaning of "Family," something never as happy in real life as it is supposed to be. There are all sorts, but none are perfect or "only fun-loving." The family is a "mysterious" institution, and it is impossible to predict what will happen to each family in the future. Makina remembers mediating between quarrelling lovers at **the switchboard**, relaying their messages back and forth and softening their harsh words, which eventually helped get them back together.

Although she spent the first half of the novel firmly committed to reuniting and supporting her family, now Makina calls into question the very meaning of family as an institution. She recognizes that it is an ideal, not a reality, and that perhaps a family's division into individuals is not the worst thing in the world, since by branching out and finding love, one can remake a new family. Makina at once helps explain her brother's decision to stay in the north, signals that she is also undergoing a gradual transformation, and illustrates the difference between the collectivist culture of rural Mexico and the more individualist culture of the U.S.


En route to the army base, Makina sees a crowd of rainbow flag-toting same-sex couples celebrating their weddings on the steps of an important building. She is "dazzled by the beauty" but wonders why marriage is so important. She thinks of the gay people in her own life and how she has helped them communicate and celebrate their "loving that could not speak its name." But here, gay people are "acting just the same" as those in "normal," heterosexual marriages. Maybe, she thinks, they believe in marriage because they are used to "good [marriages] where people don't split up." So they end up "imitating people who've always despised them." Or maybe they "just want the papers" so they can "fit in" after sticking out for so long. When she gets to the military base, there is another series of flags, which are exactly the same.

This passage is a fitting rebuttal to Makina's musings on the nature of family. The LGBT community in the U.S. was fighting for (and later won) the right to legal same-sex marriage during the period when Herrera wrote this book. Whereas Makina takes her family for granted—even if it is divided and unhappy—many people are not even allowed to form families. As when she learned to see African American people as the "key to her quest," this encounter shows Makina that people are actively fighting the kind of discrimination she experiences, and that her initial disappointment should be accompanied by hope. But she also faces a dilemma: is it better to assimilate and win respect from the mainstream, or to fight and change what counts as mainstream? There is certainly a concrete political advantage in a Mexican immigrant having "the papers" to assimilate, but this does not mean the fight is over. And, of course, the string of rainbow flags contrasts sharply with the uniform, regimented flags outside the military base, further establishing the contrast between mainstream American society and its marginalized groups.


CHAPTER 7: THE PLACE WHERE PEOPLE'S HEARTS ARE EATEN

Waiting to enter the military base, Makina realizes she has no good options if her brother turns out to be dead or untraceable. After a few minutes, the uniformed soldier she is looking for comes to talk with her—and turns out to be "her very own brother." But at first, Makina does not recognize him—he is "hardier, and more washed-out," than her brother had been, although she soon sees the resemblance and recognizes her error. They verse outside and "walk awhile in silence." He asks about her search for him and about Cora. Instead of passing along Cora's message, Makina asks her brother about the land they claimed.

Makina's astonishing change of fortune comes the first time she goes to an address hoping she will find someone other than *her brother there. Her first moments with her brother make it clear that her comments about family at the end of the last chapter were prophetic: his identity, too, has changed, and they scarcely seem like family anymore. She almost fails to recognize him because of how he has changed in the United States, and he is strangely cold and formal when greeting her and asking about their mother, whom he has not seen nor heard from in years. Curiously, Makina follows his lead, taking on the same disposition and hinting that she might be in store for a transformation, too.*


Makina's brother tells Makina "an incredible story." A woman employed him to "save" her family by "help[ing]" her "bad-tempered" son. This son was of a similar age as Makina's brother, and he had recently signed up for the army "to prove his worth as a man." He was about to go across the world and "fight against who knew what people." The frightened boy "acted like a child," and Makina's brother "didn't speak enough of their [anglo] tongue" to tell the boy about his own backstory. Of course, the family was paying Makina's brother (or, if he died, his family) to take their son's place in the army—and then to take on his identity forever. He heartily agreed.

This "incredible story" offers a profound commentary on American racism. Makina's brother takes the job a white person refuses to do, cleaning up for the boy's immature mistake because the family is not courageous enough to hold their son responsible for his decisions. He ends up in the most unlikely job imaginable for a Mexican immigrant: an American soldier, charged with defending the interests of the very country that initially rejected and spit him out.


Makina's brother "felt an unspeakable fear" when he shipped out for the war, which he reluctantly tells Makina was "not like in the movies." It involved a lot of waiting, and then a few surprise acts of violence. When a fellow soldier died, it was impossible to know who killed them—but the rest have to retaliate, so choose an enemy and "just gotta believe it was them." Makina's brother never got hurt, and after a few months he returned to the house of the family who sent him there. They were "astonished to see him there," because they assumed they had sent him to his death. They also did not have the money—the father told him the family could not keep its promise, but the mother insisted on doing so. They gave him what they could and moved far away.

Makina's brother's story is also an important commentary on American militarism—both its effects overseas and its consequences for the people it turns into soldiers. Makina's brother's mission is just as ill-defined and pointless as the process by which he became a soldier: there is no insight into whom he is supposed to fight, why he is supposed to fight them, or what the war is supposed to defend or achieve. Rather, like the scores of Mexican laborers whom Makina sees dutifully obeying their white bosses, Makina's brother and his fellow soldiers become pure functionaries, deprived of human agency or even the dignity of knowing whether their job serves any purpose. In other words, Makina's brother must subject himself entirely to the whims of the U.S. government and throw away his own identity in order to win his place in its society. And the family who sent him to war later reveals their true colors: they thought they were sending him to his death and had no qualms about doing so, nor about falsely promising him a glory and payment it would never deliver. Just like the lackluster experience of migrants who successfully make it to the United States, Makina's brother's success is bittersweet and disappointing.

As Makina's brother walks with her, they meet another soldier who briefly describes his previous night at the bar, but in the future tense. When this soldier leaves, Makina's brother explains that he is "homegrown" but still learning English, and practices by speaking entirely in the past, present, and future tenses on alternate days.

Makina and her brother are united by their abilities with language and use of these abilities to benefit others. The soldier's description of his previous night entirely in the future tense suggests alienation and displacement from the present, pointing to the way that Makina and her brother's very different experiences are linked and become mixed. This passage also lets Herrera comment more directly on his strategy of playing games with language to force people to reconsider their perspectives.

Makina's brother now has "money and a new name, but no clue what to do." Like everyone else who crosses the border, he "forget[s] what [he] came for." And he is not ready to leave, because he "already fought for these people." He and Makina return to the barracks, where he gives her some cash for her journey back. He hugs her and asks her to send a kiss to Cora, but his nonchalant way of doing so makes Makina feel like "he [is] ripping out her heart." Makina's brothers returns inside the barracks, and Makina pulls out the undelivered message Cora gave her to deliver to him. For the first time, she opens it. It says, "Come on back now, we don't expect anything from you."

Although he has achieved a level of integration and belonging that would make the vast majority of migrants jealous—not only does he have a stable, well-paying job, but he is a citizen*—Makina's brother remains completely lost and confused. He is both enabled and stymied by his new, intermediary place in the world. He feels loyal because he has "fought," not vice-versa; by extension, it seems he feels and wants to be American only because he has been driven here by events beyond his control. This also offers interesting insight into Makina's own brewing conflict over what to do from this point forward. The fact that she never delivers Cora's letter suggests that she is ready, however reluctantly, to let her brother go.*

CHAPTER 8: THE SNAKE THAT LIES IN WAIT

Soon after Makina sets out from the barracks, "a horribly pasty policeman" runs into her and makes her kneel with a lineup of Mexican men who "all were or looked homegrown." The policeman declares himself a "patriot," berates them for not being "civilized," and tells them to "fall in and ask permission." He notices that one man has a book—it is a book of poetry, and he mocks the man for "com[ing] with no money, no papers, but hey, poems." The policeman tears out a page of the book and tells the man to write a confession of "what [he] did wrong," but the man is so anxious that he cannot bring himself to write.

The policeman's virulent racism confirms Makina's fear about the United States: for many white people, "American" means white, and therefore "patriot[ism]" means defending white supremacy, even with violence, and preventing immigrants who seek to become Americans from doing so. It is no accident or coincidence that the racist in question here is a police officer, as systemic racism and police brutality against minorities are significant political issues in the U.S. In a sense, suffering this kind of brutality becomes a sort of baptism into American life for Makina and the other Mexicans whom the officer lines up. The crux of the officer's complaint to the book-toting migrant is that he is needed to provide labor and follow white people's orders, not to think for himself. Of course, this subservience runs contrary to Makina's rebellious nature.

Makina grabs the man's paper and pencil, confusing the policeman, and then writes for a long while. The policeman grabs the paper and reads a confession on behalf of "we [who] are to blame for this destruction, we who don't speak your tongue and don't know how to keep quiet." She references a variety of racist stereotypes against Latinx people, who supposedly "deserve to be chained by neck and feet," and "are happy to die for you, what else could we do?" No longer so righteous, the cop reads her last line with a concerned whisper: "We the barbarians." He then talks into his radio and abruptly leaves, freeing everyone in the lineup. The men try to thank Makina for saving them, but she is already walking far ahead down the road.

The overarching message is once again that language can transform human relations, make the familiar strange, and vice-versa, by building bridges between groups and creating mutual recognition between people who do not recognize one another's humanity. Makina's abilities as a communicator and translator again save the day: she manages to show the police officer the errors of his ways, and also that she and her fellow migrants are capable of talking back to him. The policeman seems to dehumanize them because they are incapable of answering back in his language, and Makina shows him that they are just as intelligent and emotionally complex as him. This forces the officer to empathize with the migrants' experiences, whether he likes it or not. Makina she uses the word "barbarians" not only because of its emotional weight, but also, undeniably, because of its history—the word comes from an ancient Greek term for anyone who was not a citizen, and so points out the political origins of racism, the racism underscoring the policeman's florid speeches about "culture," and Europeans' long history of inventing reasons to denigrate those outside their communities.

CHAPTER 9: THE OBSIDIAN PLACE WITH NO WINDOWS OR HOLES FOR THE SMOKE

Makina walks persistently, pushing herself forward despite not knowing how or when she will make it home. Passing through a park, she meets Chucho, who has been "looking out for" her throughout her journey. He knows her whole story and tells her not to indulge her confusion and fear about this new land, where people "live in fear of the lights going out" and "want to live forever" but do not understand that "they need to change color and number," which is "already happening." He tells Makina to follow him and leads her down a labyrinth of streets.

Having crossed the border but not completed her mission in the United States, it seems that Makina's work is done and it is time for her to return to Mexico, as she always wanted. Chucho's presence confirms that the three Misters have been watching over her throughout her journey—now it is time for the assistance of Mr. Q, who promised to get Makina "where [she] need[s] to be" in the first chapter. Chucho's mysterious advice to Makina highlights the United States' glorification of modernity, which renders Americans unsustainably dependent on things like electricity and fixated with perpetuating their disproportionate wealth and power. It is possible to read his comment about "chang[ing] in color and number" as a comment about demographics, or about the underworld, which offers people's only true chance at existing eternally.

Chucho and Makina reach a door, and he promises that the people behind it will "give [her] a hand." She opens it, feels a cold breeze, and finds a long spiral staircase. She descends it and finds a different door, which is answered by "a handsome old woman." Before entering, Makina sees a sign above the door that reads "Verse" and realizes she cannot remember the equivalent word in "any of her tongues." The old woman gives her a cigarette and invites her inside, to a "specific yet inexact, somehow unreal and yet vivid" room full of people smoking. There is no ventilation but also no smell. Makina is suddenly afraid, convinced "something's about to happen." But she relaxes before noticing that only one thing is audible: "the sound of running water." She has not bathed in a long time, she remembers, but knows she does not smell.

Descending the staircase, Makina's loss of language is the first sign that she is becoming something completely new. The sign, "verse," explicitly points to Herrera's most important neologism and announces that Makina will be changing phase when she passes through the door, exiting and transforming, leaving in order to leave who she was behind. Even more than any other section in the novel, this scene is full of imagery straight out of the Mictlán myth. At the end of their nine-phase journey through the underworld, deceased souls reached the place named in this chapter's title, "The Obsidian Place with No Windows or Holes for the Smoke," where the god and goddess of death also lived and bid souls to rest for the rest of eternity. In Herrera's retelling, the smoke that obscures the vision of the dead in Mictlán becomes cigarette smoke, and the nine rivers that must be crossed become the unmistakable sound of water that signals Makina's arrival.

"A tall, thin man draped in a baggy leather jacket" brings Makina a file with her photo but a totally new identity: a new name, phone number, job, and address. She remarks, "I've been skinned." The man is already gone, and this new world is overwhelming, with "so many new things crowding in on the old ones." But soon, again, she grows relieved and loses "the weight of uncertainty and guilt." Makina remembers her old life that is "now fading away: the Village, the Little Town and the Big Chilango." She grows to understand that this is all "not a cataclysm." As "everything in the world [falls] silent," Makina tells herself, "I'm ready."

The novel's mysterious conclusion does not wrap up any of the questions readers are likely to have about Makina's fate. Although she seemed eager to head home, now she has, like her brother, been given a new identity. The strangely-dressed people who "skin" her identity appear to be bureaucrats, but also represent the god and goddess of death. The implication is that Makina will stay where she is—whether the United States or this underground chamber where souls rest eternally in Mictlán. Makina ends the novel with words that parallel her first ones—not "I'm dead," but "I'm ready," suggesting that she has come full circle through her transformative journey into her new, hybrid Mexican American identity.

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