

Short Assignment Prompt: Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway*

"Cutters read the land like a text. They search the manuscript of the ground for irregularities in its narration. They know the plots and the images by heart. They can see where the punctuation goes. They are landscape grammarians, got the PhD in reading dirt."

(Rules of the Game, Urrea).

Passage: final section in "Bad Step at Bluebird," from "Then there were his legs" to the end of the chapter.

Paraphrase: In past tense, Urrea narrates Mendez's moves after the lights at Bluebird Pass triggered him to change his course. Using evidence from the cutters, the author reveals that Mendez "always cuts to the left," leading him to travel northwest, and suggests that, given enough time, he could unknowingly lead the walkers in a circle. By reading the clues in the dirt, cutters know that the walkers had traveled roughly forty miles, "mostly at night," and that they were in a go forward/retreat pattern in the Growler mountains, to which Urrea layers the story about Mendez and his insistence that they had "just a few' miles left to walk."

Observe:

- Urrea litters the passage with well-timed, short, sometimes fragmented sentences (North. He veered. Spines. Fifteen miles northwest.)
- He elevates his language when narrating jarring facts (savage little maze; lights . . . blotted out; chollas hooked into their flesh; whip-slash branches cut; stumbling in the pitch black)
- He relies on a kind of land forensics to persuade the readers of the speculated facts; the passage tracks a largely reconstructed history, but gains credibility based on science, literally the math of movement on the desert floor.
- Urrea maintains perspective using third-person, past-tense narration, focusing in on Mendez and his choices/patterns; here, the walkers are in the background, passive, suffering followers, and Mendez maintains the reins.
- The passage begins with a specific focus: "Then there were his legs."
- The passage ends with a foreshadowing: "Dawn was coming, and with it, a heat wave."

Contextualize:

- Cutters/cutting: to understand this passage, readers need to keep in mind how these movements have been tracked and to trust in the credibility of these readings.
- Many of the walkers died.
- This book seeks to contextualize and narrate a multitude of perspectives in order to provide the audience with a nuanced understanding of not only the reason the walkers come to the U.S., but also of the work and motivations of the border patrol and the guides, and the nature of the land itself.
- The discourse of the border, including the political and social arguments made from both sides of the debate.
- The notion of borders in the first place, as an imagined line, a construct of "community" and "nationhood."
- The currency of the border: 1. Money. The lack of it. The tracking of it. Who benefits from it? Who "deserves" it? Who "earns" it? Who makes it and how and how much? / 2. Human

life. Who is valued? Who isn't? What informs our understanding of or participation in that dynamic?

Analyze:

1. Urrea's reliance on land forensics—the cutters' reading of what happened—is significant because he establishes credibility for his narration, gaining the reader's trust through scientific analysis, evidence not grounded in mere speculation or political rhetoric.
2. The focus on Mendez in this passage calls attention to a nature versus man scenario, which is significant because, even though Mendez leads many of these men to their deaths, he is also a victim of the landscape, of the heat, and of the imagined lines in the sand that delineate Mexico and the U.S.
3. The fact that many of the walkers eventually die, and that Mendez himself almost succumbs to the murderous heat, is significant because the audience knows the stakes and can therefore invest in the narrated history. Part of what Urrea does in this passage is feed the curiosity of the reader, and that, in turn, makes the audience participate in the walk; ultimately, that level of investment makes readers more complicit in, or at least more informed about, future border issues and/or catastrophes.
4. Urrea's use of elevated language—"savage little maze," "whiplash branches"—has the effect of lighting up the reader's emotional radar, which is significant because this emotional response takes place in context of human experience, of the walkers who want to live and provide for their families, rather than in the context and fervor of rhetoric about stolen taxes and benefits, or of shallow, unnuanced descriptions of border crossings.