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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.

Creative Response to the end of Urrea's "Bad Step at Bluebird" chapter:

Formal elements and features:

1. POV: 3rd person, past tense, interspersed with short, choppy sentences
2. Begin with a specific focus and end with a foreshadowing
3. Nod to semiotics—the study of signs as a way to understand/find meaning (cutters/cutting)

Before and After

First, there were the shoes. He always wore the same ones—black, lace-less, and, she suspected, lined with elevator insoles. That's just it. He always wore them, but he wasn't that day. Maybe they were under his desk. She should've known something wasn't right. She should've asked him. The blinds were closed, too. The light was off. His eyes were off.

She traced every blink, every gesture in her memory incessantly. She remembered his right hand squeezing her chin too hard. His scarlet couch. What she lost there. The contents of his jeans pockets—a Case knife, a supermarket receipt, medicine he had not taken. The horrible silence echoing down the hall when she left. The contents of her stomach on the sidewalk.

"Don't do it." She said this to her former self, who did not hear her. "Look. See him lock the door. Hear it click into place." Nothing changed anything.

His screen saver was Burt Reynolds and Sally Field. Right before the Bandit took off his hat, which he only does for two reasons. Innocuous.

Nothing moved her. Not his second-day musk. Not the hazy quality of his voice, thick with abstraction, like a tongue compressed. Not her own intuition. She thought, "My rationality is irrational." At least according to all the men she knew. The lessons had done their work. They kept her still. They endangered her.

Had she gone for help afterward, they could have read the signs on her body. He didn't bruise her, but he did leave DNA. There was that. But what about the cracks inside her mind now, etched like question marks in invisible places, the ones no scientist could reach or read, as trustworthy as tea leaves. Meaning not at all.

After it happened, help was no longer helpful anyway. Help only counts in the once upon a time before the curtain, before the story courses through veins. Help means a future salvation. Never a past. Fuck help.

Besides, it doesn't account for the help he gave her. Before, he helped her feel smart, almost brilliant, sexy, wanted, funny.

Then came after. He helped her feel foolish. Childish. Crazy as a loon. Naïve. Split in two: before; after.

He helped himself.

No. Help don't mean shit.

"You should have left." "You should have known." "You had no business going there." "He does a lot of good, too." "He won the Wallace Stevens Award, for fuck sake" "He has children." "He wouldn't do *that*." "You must have misunderstood." She told herself these things. No need to consult outsiders. Not when the insider is broken.

The story lost its crux outside her own body anyway. Nothing could translate her own ruminating mind. In her sleep, she cautioned her past self: "You will sit on your bathroom floor for hours at a time. You will try to talk yourself back to the concrete steps leading to his double doors. Stop. Turn around." But those always come too late. Everything after is too late.

After. Knotted distortions colonized her thoughts. On repeat: his hand grabbed her hand, moved it to his . . . penis? dick? Words do not *mean* anymore.

After. No word is the right one.

Then came the self-interrogations.

First, the facts: Did he tell her she should leave? No. Did she say no? Yes. Had she been scared? No. Had he threatened her? No. Did he hurt her? Yes.

Then, the speculation. Had *he* been crying out for help? Did *she* miss the signs? Was there some way *she* could've been better to *him*? Helped *him*? Stopped *him*? Stopped *herself*? Had she *deserved* it? Had *she* wanted it?

"Do you love me?" She had asked him that.

"Love's got nothing to do with it. I don't even like you," he'd said. "This is chemical. It's chemical!"

"I don't want you like this," she'd said.

"What? You mean you want to make love? Is that what you mean?" A voice can sneer. Sneer sounded made up, an exaggeration. It is the opposite of that.

He must've laughed at her, when he remembered. *If* he remembered.

Even her recall lost traction, lost sense. She knows he hugged her after, like they'd just shot a game of pool or something. He grabbed his stuff. She had nothing to grab. Nothing to hold on to. Before was gone. After was vapor.

She never told. Every exhale, a lost detail. Every inhale, a confused blending of oxygen and shame. Exhale. Start again.

She wanted to die. Wants to die. She read a line about that: Do you really want to die, or do you just want to stop hurting?

Yes.