The Devil's Highway

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LUIS ALBERTO URREA

A 2005 Pulitzer Prize finalist for nonfiction (for *The Devil's Highway*) and a distinguished professor of creative writing at the University of Chicago, Luís Alberto Urrea was born in Tijuana in 1955 to a Mexican father and an American mother. Urrea holds degrees from the University of California San Diego and the University of Colorado Boulder, and has worked as a relief worker in Tijuana, a columnist, editor, cartoonist, and a professor at Harvard and the University of Louisiana Lafayette. He is the author of sixteen books of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, and his work has been anthologized in Best American Poetry, Norton Anthology of Latino Literature, and several collections of fiction and nonfiction writing about the American West and Latino identity.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The horror of the Wellton 26 incident, which many local officials still refer to as "the thing that happened," promised the possibility of meaningful reform of immigration policy between the U.S. and Mexico. However, when the 9/11 attacks rocked America just four months after the deaths of the Yuma 14, the idea of creating an open border suddenly seemed a political impossibility. In the wake of 9/11, hundreds of Border Patrol agents enlisted as air marshals, and human trafficking operations expanded all along the U.S.-Mexico border. The tension, red tape, and dehumanizing rhetoric of "illegality" only swelled after 9/11, and today the issue remains a fraught and unresolved issue marked by racism, desperation, violence, and a reluctance on both sides to consider meaningful policy changes.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Hard Line: Life and Death on the U.S.-Mexican Border by Ken Ellingwood, *Coyotes* by Ted Conover, and *Dead in Their Tracks* by John Annerino are all texts recommended by Urrea himself as complements to the story he tells in his own book. These texts offer similarly honest accounts of the lives of coyotes, "walkers," and Border Patrol agents. Annerino, a photojournalist on assignment for Newsweek, made the trek through the Mexico-Arizona desert with four Mexican immigrants in an attempt to document not the deaths but the lives of the walkers who risk everything to make it to America, while Conover posed as an immigrant and crossed the U.S.-Mexico border twice in order to observe firsthand the Coyotes and their "pollos." Ellingwood's book *Hard Line* features reporting directly inspired by the tragedy of the Yuma 14, and was published around the same time as *The Devil's Highway*. Ellingwood examines the banality of tragedy along the U.S.-Mexico border by interviewing border agents, "angry ranchers," and Native locals whose lives are impacted daily by the danger and divisions that the border creates.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Devil's Highway*
- **When Written:** Early 2000s
- **When Published:** 2004
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Nonfiction; investigative reporting
- **Setting:** Veracruz and Sonora (México) and the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge in Arizona
- **Climax:** The surviving members of the Wellton 26 are rescued by Border Patrol agents on the fourth day of being lost in the desert
- **Antagonist:** Jesús Lopez Ramos, aka "Mendez"; the US-Mexico border itself
- **Point of View:** Third-person

EXTRA CREDIT

The Aftermath. On his website, Urrea has posted a poem describing his experience of writing about such a harrowing tale. He describes the book as his "heavy metal album," and says it is "almost impossible to discuss anymore."

PLOT SUMMARY

Acclaimed writer Luís Alberto Urrea tells the story of the Wellton 26 (sometimes referred to as the Yuma 14), a group of illegal immigrants, mostly from the impoverished southern Mexican state of Veracruz, who became lost in the treacherous Yuma desert after a series of fatal mistakes made by their smuggler, or pollero, Jesús "Mendez" Lopez Ramos.

Urrea begins by recounting briefly some of the history of the "haunted" desert which is home to the **Cabeza Prieta** (or "dark-head") National Wildlife Refuge, and the particularly treacherous strip of desert known as the Devil's Highway. Urrea invokes ancient religious texts which mention a vast desert known as Desolation, beneath which all of the fallen angels are buried. Urrea posits that the Cabeza Prieta could be—and, to the Wellton 26, most certainly was—Desolation itself, a cursed and vengeful landscape which tortures and swallows all those who pass through it. Urrea then explains the

culture and practices of the U.S. Border Patrol office in Wellton, Arizona. He describes the ways in which the agents "cut for sign," or search for evidence of illegals in the desert, by paying close attention to the footprints and other detritus that immigrants leave behind on drags of smoothed-over sand created by Border Patrol agents. The Border Patrol rap is often monotonous and tiresome, and the agents are often distrustful of and cruel toward the illegal immigrants they apprehend out in the Yuma desert. Nonetheless, agents are sensitive to the death they encounter in their jobs, and find the most heinous crimes committed along the border to be the crimes of smugglers who abandon their groups of walkers in the desert.

Urrea describes the lives of several members of the Wellton 26 back in their home state of Veracruz, and the process by which they were recruited for the journey. Don Moi Garcia, a fixer for the notorious Cercas border gang, lured men with the promise of fortune and the ability to provide financially for their families. He then extorted large amounts of money from each of them, either up-front or in the form of loans, which he planned to collect by whatever means necessary with the help of his shadowy boss, Chespiro.

Meanwhile, up at the border, the teenager who would become the men's pollero, or smuggler, Jesús Lopez Ramos, enjoys the "gangster" lifestyle he has made for himself with the help of his smuggler friend, Maradona, who helped get him involved in the Cercas gang's business of border-crossing. Jesús is at the very bottom of the Cercas gang's pecking order, and is therefore seen as just as disposable as the "pollos," or immigrants, he leads across the border—though he himself feels that he is both a modern-day revolutionary and a true gangster.

Don Moi shepherds the men he has gathered from Veracruz to the northern border town of Sonoyta on a bus. He stashes the men in a fleabag motel, then a cramped safehouse, and absconds back to Veracruz, leaving the pollos to their fates. On May 19th, the day their journey is to begin, Jesús—using his codename, Mendez—and two associates known only as Santos and Lauro, collect the men from their safehouse and bring them to a bus station. There, Mendez bribes a bus driver to take the group to the border. Once dropped off, the men cross the border on foot, and take a van (driven by the shady El Negro, another member of the Cercas gang) to the start of their trail. The group is ahead of schedule—it is still light out. Rather than wait until dark, Mendez leads the group into the scorching, triple-digit temperatures of the desert.

The walk is difficult but going fine when, close to midnight, the walkers are suddenly blinded by bright lights. Mendez, uncharacteristically frightened, informs his pollos that la Migra—the Border Patrol—has come for them, and the entire group scatters into the brush, losing track of their spot on the trail. After Mendez feels there is no danger, he leads his group onward—either unaware of, or afraid to admit, the fact that he has led his group into "uncharted territory." As the group wanders through the night, they stray farther and farther off-course.

On the second day of their journey, the men, now hopelessly lost, begin to experience the early stages of heat death, or hyperthermia—a brutal and painful way to die, and the fate of many unfortunate souls who become lost in the desert. As water runs out and night approaches, Mendez leads his group even further into Desolation, now marching southwest. All the while, Mendez assures his pollos that there are only "a few more miles" to go. By the following morning, Mendez himself is convinced that the group is doomed. The group makes a new plan: Mendez will strike out on his own with one of his associates, Lauro, and bring back water, help, or both. Mendez likely demanded American dollars from his walkers in order to cover the costs of water or transportation, and left them behind with instructions to await his return.

Hours later, it becomes clear to the men that Mendez is not returning for them. They move forward on their own, walking into the night. By the following morning, having walked only ten miles in twelve hours, the first members of their group begin to die, and the men show signs of extreme disorientation. They resort to drinking their own urine and eating cacti in order to stave off the effects of dehydration, but it is clear that if they do not find help soon, they will all die. Mendez and Lauro struggle through the desert on their own until Lauro, exhausted, lies down to sleep, and Mendez soon follows suit.

A group of five men splinter off from the larger group and go for help. Eventually, as they approach a U.S. Military Bombing Range, they spot a Border Patrol truck and signal for help. They tell the Migra agent inside the car, Mike F., that there are more men stranded in the desert. Mike reports the situation to the Wellton station, and within ten minutes, a rescue mission is underway. Many are found dead, and some are discovered still alive.

At the Yuma Medical Center, the survivors are interrogated by the police. Their accounts are greatly varied and marked by deep confusion, but all identify Mendez as their smuggler. Rita Vargas, the Mexican consul in Calexico, arrives to aid in the investigation and to advocate for both the living and the dead. The survivors realize that telling their stories might enable them to stay in the United States, so they cooperate with the police.

After the Yuma 14—those who died in the desert—are examined and prepared for burial, they are sent back to Mexico, where they are greeted by a crowd of mourners. Vargas wonders whether these men's stories might have been different if the astronomical cost of their journey back to Mexico—totaling close to seventy thousand U.S. dollars—had been invested in their impoverished villages in the first place.

Mendez pleads guilty to twenty-five counts of smuggling in order to avoid the possibility of incurring the death penalty.

Meanwhile, the survivors demand immunity in exchange for their testimonies, and many are given homes and jobs in the United States. Urrea contemplates how the men's ordeal changed both "nothing and everything" about border politics. Reform was discussed between Presidents George W. Bush and Vicente Fox, but the events of 9/11 derailed any hopes of a reform process. In the wake of the Wellton 26's tragedy, violence and chaos have continued to rule the U.S.-Mexico border.

In an afterword written in 2014, ten years after the book's initial publication, Urrea reflects on his personal experiences writing the book—the relationships he formed with survivors, Border Patrol agents, U.S. and Mexican officials, and even his readers, far and wide. He explains his desire in writing the book was to bear witness to the stories of all involved in the complicated, dangerous world of the border—walkers, smugglers, and Migra alike.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Luís Alberto Urrea – The author of *The Devil's Highway*, Luís Alberto Urrea was himself born along the U.S.-Mexico border in 1955. In writing *The Devil's Highway*—originally a project given to him on assignment by an editor—Urrea sought to "bear witness" to the lives and struggles of smugglers, immigrants, and Border Patrol agents alike. The story of *The Devil's Highway* is filled with firsthand accounts taken from survivors and rescuers, but Urrea also spends a good deal of the text imagining and recreating interactions, situations, conversations, and even the ancient history of the Sonora desert itself. Urrea is an empathetic and involved narrator throughout the text whose goal is to bear witness to all sides of this story—not just the lives of the Wellton 26, but of their polleros (most notably Jesús "Mendez" Lopez Ramos), and the Border Patrol agents who rescued them.

Don Moi García – A recruiter for the notorious Cercas gang. Born Moises García, he earned the Spanish-language honorific "Don"—equivalent to "sir"—through his reputation in Veracruz and southern Mexico as a kind of benevolent Robin Hood figure who helped poor Mexicans make their way north to the border. In the employ of the shadowy Chespiro, Don Moi recruited the Wellton 26 and took enormous sums of money from each of them—between thirteen and twenty thousand pesos a head. Don Moi was the first to begin to dehumanize the Wellton 26 by exploiting their trust, seeing them only as desperate "pollos" willing to pay well beyond their means in order for a chance at better lives.

Reymundo Barreda, Sr. – The member of the Yuma 14 whose death inspired, for Urrea, "the most sorrow and conversation" of any of the walkers. Reymundo and his son, Reymundo Jr., set out together into the desert in hopes of spending a summer working orange groves in Florida, but both died on the journey. Reymundo Sr. was witness to his son's death as Reymundo Jr. died in his arms. Reymundo was found dead in the desert, very near to his child, and, years later, Urrea received a letter from a nephew of Reymundo Sr., thanking Urrea for writing the "truth" of his relatives' death.

Nahum Landa – One of the surviving Wellton 26, described by Urrea as a "natural leader." Nahum's testimony is frequently invoked throughout the pages of *The Devil's Highway*, and, as a survivor, he was instrumental in helping officials identify the bodies of the Yuma 14. Following his rescue, Nahum, along with the other survivors, agreed to provide testimony on the condition that they would be granted immunity. Thus, Nahum and his relatives were able to stay in Phoenix, and were given jobs in a refrigerated meatpacking factory so that they "would never have to work in the hot sun."

Daniel Cercas/"El Chespiro" – The Hidalgo-based head of the criminal gang which smuggled the Wellton 26 over the border. His nickname was derived from a "cloying little red cricket" which was a popular character on Mexican childrens' TV. All money the gang received and spent went through El Chespiro. He kept in contact with those below him only via cell phone in order to maintain a sense of mystery and power.

"El Moreno" – El Negro's driver. El Moreno—Spanish for "The Dark Man"—lived together "in criminal bliss" with El Negro, and was the driver who picked up the Wellton 26 on the U.S. side of the border in order to transport them to the start of the trail they would take through the desert and toward civilization.

Jesús Antonio Lopez Ramos/"Mendez" – The "pollero," or smuggler, of the Wellton 26, Jesús was just nineteen at the time of the ordeal, and had been swept up in the "gangster" lifestyle of border smuggling by his close friend, Rodrigo Maradona. Jesús was identifiable by the "rooster-like" swoop of red-dyed hair which hung in front of his face. Though Jesús—who adopted the alias "Mendez" once he began working out of San Luis—saw himself as a badass, a revolutionary, and a **Coyote**, he was actually more on the level of the "pollos" he was charged with transporting through the desert. Though Mendez's exact thoughts and motives will never be known because of his refusal to testify, it appears that he attempted to steal his pollos' money and abandon them to die after becoming hopelessly lost in the wilds of the **Cabeza Prieta**.

Rodrigo Maradona – Maradona and Jesús met while working in a brickyard in San Antonio. Frustrated with the minimal pay and the long, backbreaking hours, Jesús was intrigued by Maradona's side hustle, moonlighting as a pollero. Maradona got Jesús involved in the world of the Cercas gang, and the two worked as partners. On the day of the Wellton 26's trek, Jesús—at that point using the alias Mendez—was unable to rouse Maradona. Thus, two stand-ins, Lauro and Santos, were

called upon to do the job in his place.

Rita Vargas – The Mexican consul in Calexico, Vargas was called to Yuma on the day the Wellton 26 were found. Because Yuma had no consulate at that time, Calexico was responsible for the Yuma sector. Vargas, a "no-nonsense consul who brooked no foolishness," was a tireless and necessary advocate for the survivors as well as the dead. Vargas herself accompanied the bodies of the Yuma 14 to examination and preparation in Phoenix, and then arranged for a cargo jet to take them all back to Mexico. She flew with them, and lamented the fact that all the money it took to get them home—nearly seventy-thousand U.S. dollars—could have made an astounding difference in the lives of these individuals had it simply been invested in their villages' futures in the first place.

Santos and Lauro Santos and Lauro are two Sonoita-based polleros in the Cercas gang. When Jesús arrives in Sonoita, they teach him the treacherous new route he will take across the border. On the morning when the Wellton 26 are set to embark upon their journey out of Sonoita, Jesús is unable to get in touch with Maradona>/span> (the pollero who is supposed to accompany them on the journey), so Santos and Lauro are called in as replacements. After it becomes clear that the group is hopelessly lost, Santos breaks off with a group of five men in a desperate bid to make it back to Mexico alive, but no one ever sees the men from that group again or is able to locate their bodies. Lauro eventually dies of exposure to the elements after Lauro and Jesús break off from the larger group (ostensibly to find help but very likely intending to abandon their pollos).

Reymundo Jr. The son of Reymundo Sr., and one of the Wellton 26 who dies in the desert. Reymundo Jr. and his father were planning to make their way to Florida to spend the summer picking oranges in the hopes of earning enough money to put a new roof on their home. Reymundo Jr. dies in his father's arms on the fourth day of being lost in the desert.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Melchior Díaz – A Spanish conquistador who perished in Sonoita in the winter of 1541. Díaz's story serves as a cautionary tale for those who would try to conquer the "haunted" desert.

Luis Cercas – The Phoenix-based head of the criminal operation which was responsible for smuggling the Wellton 26 across the U.S.-Mexico border. A well-connected criminal and the brother of the Hidalgo-based Daniel Cercas, or "El Chespiro."

Evodio Manilla/"El Negro" – Allegedly the brother-in-law of Luis Cercas, "El Negro" worked his way up through the Cercas gang from his role as a former guide. He was a Coyote—above the polleros in the gang's pecking order, he was a "dreaded enforcer and manipulator" in the border town of Sonora.

Mike F. – The Border Patrol, or Migra, agent who spotted the first five of the Wellton 26 to be rescued, and reported the situation to the Wellton station, thus kicking off the massive search party.

TERMS

Walker/Pollo – Walkers, or illegal immigrants crossing the desert by foot, are often throughout the text referred to as "pollos," or "cooked chicken" in Spanish.

Pollero – Polleros are smugglers who lead illegal immigrants across the border and into the desert. They dress in "bad clothes," like their pollos, in order to blend in (in case of capture). Urrea is careful to explain that, in the modern-day hierarchy of border gangs, what most Americans think of as the Coyote is actually termed a pollero, though Urrea does on occasion use the terms interchangeably.

Drag – A smoothed-over stretch of sand. The U.S. Border Patrol, or Migra, tie groups of tires together, hook the tires to the backs of trucks, and drive through the desert in order to create smooth strips of sand which can be used to cut sign—that is, to track the movements of illegal immigrants traversing the desert.

Signcutting – Signcutting, also referred to as cutting for sign, is a process by which U.S. Border Patrol agents hunt the desert for walkers. When sign—evidence of movement—shows up on one drag, Border Patrol signcutters will head to the next drag, and the next, until they have hit a drag in which no sign is present, and then begin moving back to their last sign. In this way, Border Patrol agents can box walkers in.

La Migra – The Spanish term for Border Patrol.

Hyperthermia – Also known as "heat death," hyperthermia is the six-stage process of the human body experiencing distress, shutting down, and eventually dying from prolonged exposure to high temperatures.

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.

DESOLATION AND DESPERATION

In the world of *The Devil's Highway*, desolation is a daily lived reality for the desperate, impoverished Mexican immigrants who, in May of 2001, set out to cross the U.S.-Mexico border. Seeking to escape the poverty and hopelessness that define their lives in Veracruz, the men

who would become the Wellton 26 take out loans, leave their families behind, and risk everything to travel to the border. Upon crossing it, they find themselves abandoned by their polleros, or smugglers, in a stretch of desert which has been known by many names throughout history—one of which is Desolation. In seeking to escape the state of mind and the lived experience of desolation, the men come to find themselves in a new state of desolation—that of the desert itself. The ancient desert is a vicious and at times seemingly living, breathing terrain with a will of its own. Throughout the text, Urrea argues that desolation and desperation are, perhaps, inescapable when it comes to the oft-misunderstood and scarcely-seen world of the U.S.-Mexico border.

Early on in the text, Urrea offers an unsparing portrait of the desolation which affects Veracruz—the southern Mexican state from which the majority of the Wellton 26 came—and the desperation that desolation inspires. A rural and tropical state, Veracruz was, in 2001, in a state of financial collapse. Many Veracruzians were "killing themselves" through difficult and demanding physical labor—often the only jobs available in an overfished, overfarmed region where the price of coffee—the main export—had collapsed. Though Coca-Cola and Pepsi factories offered jobs and this created "small waves of semiprosperity" throughout the years, in 2001 the cost of living and feeding a family were rising and rising. The sense of desperation this economic climate created is what drove many men from the region to seek passage into America—the majority of the Wellton 26 had enlisted in the scheme of a local recruiter for the Cercas smuggling game in order to earn enough money to provide their children with food and an education or to build new homes—or improve on the often shoddily-constructed homes they already lived in--for their wives and families. The desperation and desolation in Veracruz, however, would only be met with a new kind of desolation as the Wellton 26 arrived at the border.

The land where the United States meets Mexico is harsh, dangerous, and desolate. The great mythic desert of Desolation—a place where, according to some ancient religious texts, fallen angels are chained and buried beneath the sand—could, Urrea writes, very well be the Yuma desert itself. The **Cabeza Prieta** National Wildlife Refuge is situated within that desert, and the Devil's Highway is situated within the Cabeza Prieta. The Wellton 26 were told by their smugglers that they would need to pass through three separate deserts in order to reach salvation, and as their group grew more and more lost and began to suffer the slow and agonizing effects of heat death, or hyperthermia, their desperation to find water and civilization—and their desolation when they realized that that might never happen—only grew. In their desperation the men drank their own urine and tore spiny cacti apart with their bare hands in order to get at the lifesaving liquid inside. Desperation once again was all that was driving the men forward—and as they moved on, they only encountered more emotional desolation and deeper, more barren parts of the desert Desolation.

At the text's conclusion, Urrea—writing an Afterword penned ten years after the book's initial publication--considers the lives of those still living in Desolation: the Migra, or the Border Patrol, the locals, and the government officials with the power to effect change in the area. Though much has changed in the area, "the worst" of it has remained the same—and what changes have come, Urrea argues, have only been made in response to the feelings of desperation and desolation that grow out of bearing witness to the continued violence and death along the border. Emergency towers have been erected throughout the Cabeza Prieta which allow lost walkers to summon help from the Border Patrol—these were implemented after the Yuma 14's deaths highlighted graphically the extreme desolation of the area and the inhumane suffering of the illegal immigrants who become lost or are abandoned trying to traverse it. More Border Patrol officers have been installed not just in Wellton, the sector of the border where the Wellton 26 were found, but in other areas, as well—these new opportunities have been created in response to the violence of border gangs and drug smugglers, and the crimes of desperation and desolation they commit.

As Urrea's narrative unfolds, desolation the feeling and Desolation the place become inextricably intertwined. The Wellton 26, driven by desolation, arrive in Desolation, only to encounter more desolation. Desperate situations lead to experiences of desolation which then lead to an even greater, finally actionable sense of desperation. Urrea's argument that desperation and desolation form a vicious and torturous cycle which feeds endlessly upon itself is highlighted in the journey of the Wellton 26 from Veracruz to the border, in their torturous trek through the harsh desert, and in the reforms which were enacted in the wake of the country's bearing witness to their horrific ordeal.

MYTH, RELIGION, AND THE SPIRIT WORLD

The opening pages of *The Devil's Highway* read like ancient lore. As Luís Alberto Urrea describes the height of the Wellton 26's treacherous ordeal, he invokes ancient myths describing the imprisonment of fallen angels in the desert sand, as well as "dark and mysterious" desert spirits and gods who rule the wasteland with brutality and "retribution." The "noxious" and unforgiving natural world of the desert is described in heavy detail—"poisonous and alien" snakes, spiders, and scorpions, spiked trees and cacti, and the long-forgotten bones of the anonymous dead scattered throughout the waste lend an air of mystery, confusion, and inevitability to the narrative in its very first chapter. As the story progresses, Urrea invokes the myth of the giant black

head after which the **Cabeza Prieta** Wildlife Refuge is named as well as the centuries of mirages, miracles, and ghostly encounters which have become part of the desert's lore. Urrea employs myth as a storytelling device and as a method of scene-setting, but he also uses myth to ascribe a lore-like quality to the story of the Wellton 26. In this way, he demonstrates the universal nature of their ordeal, and demands that his readers regard their story with the same mix of reverence and respect that they give to myths. The desire to bear witness to ghost stories and ancient legends, Urrea argues, should extend to bearing witness to vital, contemporary stories about the U.S.-Mexico border. Similarly, the willingness to believe and revere a piece of ancient lore should extend to the willingness to believe and revere the stories and struggles of a desperate group of immigrants.

In writing about the circumstances surrounding the journey of the Wellton 26, Urrea calls attention to the ways in which their story bears certain similarities to stories from the Bible. He writes, "Jesus led the walkers gathered by Moses into the desert called Desolation." Don Moi Garcia—born Moises—gathered the twenty-six men together and took their pesos from them in exchange for passage into America. Jesús Lopez Ramos—who used the alias Mendez—was a smuggler, born (like Jesus of Nazareth) on December 25th. The mythic desert—Desolation—and the devastating ways in which it would "swallow" the men attempting to traverse it, is another element of the story of the 26 which lends it the proportions of a biblical tale. "We saw an exodus straight from the biblical template," Urrea writes of the aftermath of the 26's journey, "and it felt that no one was paying attention." Urrea focuses intensely on the story's mythical setting and biblical parallels as a way of demanding the world bear witness and "pay attention" to the horrors of the border.

In describing the increase in violence along the U.S.-Mexico border in the wake of the Wellton 26's harrowing ordeal, Urrea quotes a Mexican consul in Tuscon: "The media cares about the [deaths of the] Yuma 14 because of the large numbers. But this tragedy goes on every day. It never stops. If only one person dies out there, it is exactly the same horror story." As Urrea describes the horrors perpetrated just "five miles from the border"—the rape, torture, and slaughtering of women whose organs are then removed from their corpses, the violent deaths of Border Patrol agents caught in the crossfire of drug deals gone wrong—he notes that the killings, in their brutality and occasionally their ritualistic-seeming nature, "sound like [stories] from a book of urban myths or a bad horror movie." Urrea acknowledges the human attraction to myth and the human desire to bear witness to horror, and he laments that people only seem to pay attention to the violence along the border if it resembles lurid fictions and films. Urrea here acknowledges what he has done in his own work—making the 26's story more attractive by "mythologizing" it—even as he bemoans the fact that "nobody cares, nobody understands, [nobody] want[s] to know" what is truly happening along the border unless it smacks of a Dateline exposé or a Lifetime movie.

As Urrea "refracts" the tragedy of the Wellton 26 through the lens of myth, he reveals the power of myth to transform stories from the modern world into allegories reminiscent of Biblical legend or ancient lore. In drawing parallels between the journey of the Wellton of the 26 and the journey of the Hebrews through the desert, Urrea elevates their story to one of Biblical proportions, and demands his audience bear witness to their struggle and contemplate the complexities of their humanity. Myth is a conduit for moral teachings from culture to culture across the world. In mythologizing the story of the Wellton 26 while remaining true to the facts and the horrors of their journey, Urrea underscores the power and importance of simply "paying attention."

HUMANITY AND "ILLEGALITY"

In the early pages of The Devil's Highway, Luís Alberto Urrea writes that "'Getting bodies,' in Border Patrol lingo, didn't necessarily mean collecting corpses. Bodies were living people." He goes on to describe the ways in which the Border Patrol, or la Migra, refers to the "illegal aliens" they find wandering the **Cabeza Prieta** as "wets" (a shortening of the slur "wetbacks"), "tonks" (so called for "the stark sound of a flashlight breaking over a human head"), or simply as "illegals." Humanity and illegality, in the world of The Devil's Highway, are inversely proportional—that is to say, the more an immigrant's illegality is emphasized, the more their humanity is minimized. Urrea describes the ways in which Mexican and Latino immigrants are systematically stripped of their humanity and ultimately raises the question of how a person can be "illegal." Urrea's goal in writing the book was to "make [readers] think a little about those people who are 'illegal,'" and that as he set out to accomplish this goal he realized that "the story was really about all humans—all of us are lost wanderers." By universalizing the story of the Wellton 26, Urrea humanizes all migrants and challenges the dehumanizing language of illegality.

In Urrea's afterword, he reflects on encounters he has had and changes—or lack thereof—he has witnessed in the ten years since the book's 2004 publication. While officials on both sides of the border haves struggled, privately and publicly, with how to offer dignity and recognition of humanity to the "illegals" they are tasked with apprehending, the changes that have been made do little to address the root of the problem of the border—the desolation and desperation which drives many immigrants to seek passage to America in the first place. Though glimmering, easily-visible emergency towers and portable waystations filled with water have been erected throughout the desert, little has been invested in the human

lives on the Mexican side of the border. "More than two thousand people" died along the Mexican border just "in the half decade before [the Wellton 26,]" Urrea writes. Two thousand lives, two thousand sets of uncollected bones, two thousand "illegals" whose names and stories are forever lost to the world. The "stupidity" of border politics creates an endless cycle in which the perceived inhumanity of "illegals" is perpetuated and even deepened. Immigrants know that they will only be seen as "illegals," "tonks," or "wets"—they know they will be stripped of their humanity as soon as they set foot in the United States. Desperate to enter anyway, they place themselves in dangerous and potentially fatal circumstances. When they die in the desert, their stories die with them, and they become anonymous integers in a rising death toll.

The United States is founded on principles of equality which should, in theory, sanctify the humanity of refugees and immigrants, and yet the immigrants continue to be dehumanized by the United States' policies and language surrounding immigration. In this book, Luís Alberto Urrea tells a story of humanity and inhumanity. To think of a human being as "illegal" is to strip them of their rights, their dignity, and their complexity. Urrea is optimistic about the future of the border, and willing to endow his view of the border with grace and hope. He describes an anecdote in which "kids play volleyball across the border, using the barriers for nets"—he envisions a world in which the border is not a "hideous scar" but an "imaginary line"—not an excuse for the destruction or erasure of humanity, but an instrument of connection and a celebration of its complexity instead.

BEARING WITNESS

"The triumvirate of Desolation—walkers, smugglers, and Migra—were all worthy of witness," Luís Alberto Urrea writes in the Afterword to The Devil's Highway. His inspiration for the book was the act of bearing witness not just to the stories of the Wellton 26, but also to the stories of the people and circumstances that led them there. By taking a holistic approach to the act of bearing witness, Urrea argues that the only way to responsibly tell a story as complicated as that of Wellton 26 is to tell the whole story—the story of the place and its history; the story of its Native people and the story of those who live and die there now; the story of the men who died, the men who lived, the men who rescued them, and the men who set the whole tragedy in motion to begin with. Ultimately, Urrea even includes his own story—the story of how his radical approach to bearing witness came to be, and the story of how that witness has had political and social uses and benefits he never imagined, for himself and for the individuals whose stories he told.

His firsthand investigation into the lives of the Wellton 26 and the circumstances that led them into Desolation reveals as much about Urrea as it does about the subjects of his text. As he endeavors to carefully, thoughtfully, and respectfully bear witness to the tragedy of the Wellton 26, Urrea himself becomes a character in the book. The passages in which he thoughtfully and imaginatively explores the aspects of his characters' stories that, in some instances, Urrea never witnessed directly—their innermost thoughts, the intricacies of their daily routines, their ways in which they died—are tinged with Urrea's own writerly embellishments, and his curious, nonjudgmental brand of empathy. Urrea himself is folded into the pages of this narrative—the ways in which he describes Melchior Díaz's longing for home while on assignment in Desolation, Mendez's roaring headache on the morning of the fateful walk, or the screams of Reymundo Barreda, Sr., as his son died in his arms, all announce Urrea as not merely a witness to but a participant in the stories he bears witness to.

This approach to storytelling—considering the entire picture of an event, and using radical empathy in order to bear witness to even private or unremembered moments of it—allowed Urrea to accomplish his mission of allowing others to bear witness to the events of the Wellton 26's ordeal. In his Afterword to the text, Urrea writes that readers of his book have ranged from students to Border Patrol officials to family members of the 26. In one anecdote, Urrea reveals that, at a book-signing event in Oregon, a reader revealed to Urrea the fact that he was undocumented—the reader's wife, standing nearby, overheard and expressed her shock and disbelief. This is one small-scale piece of evidence which demonstrates how Urrea's own act of bearing witness has inspired others to seek out people to bear witness to their own stories. In another anecdote, Urrea describes how the Wellton Station, which was made "infamous" in large part due to *The Devil's Highway* itself, now employs about three hundred agents—at the time Urrea was researching the book, the station only employed thirty-two men. Urrea's act of witness lead to others bearing witness—and taking action. Though immigration numbers in the area have declined in the years since the Wellton 26, bearing witness to the severity of the situation in the Yuma desert effected actual political change—moreover, Urrea writes that he still corresponds with many Wellton agents, who continue to provide him with a "constant flow of witness" as to the goings-on in their sector.

"It is a stunning and terrifying experience to sit with the autopsy reports of fourteen men who are the nameless subjects of op-eds, TV jokes, raging radio blather, and know you will be their only witness," Urrea writes in the text's afterword. The thought of being the "only" witness to such a horrific story—and to contemplate the horrific incidents which take place day after day with not even one witness—drove Urrea towards his unique, big-picture stance on what it means to be a witness. As Urrea contemplated the isolation that the survivors must have had to contend with in the aftermath of their ordeal,

he recognized his own isolation, too—he was isolated in his status as one of the few people patient enough, angry enough, and desperate enough to make sure that the story of the Wellton 26 (and, by proxy, the story of the Devil's Highway itself and all the lives that have been lost in crossing it) would be told, seen, and heard in the way it deserved to be—in a way which validated and championed the "worthiness" not just of the stories of the dead, but of all involved. In his commitment to bearing witness to the entire ecosystem of the U.S.-Mexico border—immigrants, Coyotes, and Border Patrol agents alike—Urrea makes the argument that every facet of a story is "worthy" of being explored, and it is necessary to examine all sides of a thing in order to understand its complexity. Unable to bear witness to the plight of all immigrants, he instead uses this one story—the story of the Wellton 26—to enlighten his audience as to the severity of the tragedies that continue to unfold daily along the border, and, hopefully, to light a spark that would affect political and social change where the world of the border was concerned. To understand what happened in this "notorious" incident, Urrea knew it was necessary to witness the story in its entirety, and to have empathy for even those characters who might have initially seemed undeserving of it. In doing so, he was able to enact real change not only in his personal life but in the political and social sphere of the U.S.-Mexico border, solidifying his own argument that all stories are "worthy" of witness, and that bearing witness has the power to affect meaningful change.

SYMBOLS

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

LA CABEZA PRIETA

The Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge is the vast sprawl of desert which is home to the Devil's Highway, named the "dark-head desert" for the range of mountains that rise out of the flat plains of the Yuma desert. Urrea relates a tale, early on in the narrative, of a "source" close to him who once, on a drive through the desert, saw a large, dark head rise up out of the desert sand and laugh. The dark head in Urrea's source's story represents the spirit of the desert, and symbolizes the ways in which the desert seems to come alive and even express contempt for and malice towards those who attempt to traverse it only to become lost within it. As the Wellton 26 attempt to cross the vast desert, they become lost and disoriented due to the fatal mistakes of their smuggler, or pollero, Jesús "Mendez" Lopez Ramos. The desert takes on a character of its own as the men grow more and more lost, and many express anger at it and try to best it, even as they can feel it mocking and tricking them through mirages, endlessly repetitious hills and mountains, and scorching temperatures which literally bake many of the men alive. All this horror and treachery seems, within the narrative, to have been precipitated by the frightful mockery of the desert's dark head itself.

COYOTES AND CHICKENS

"Coyote" has long been the most common term in Mexico for someone who smuggles people across the border, but *The Devil's Highway* introduces readers to a new nomenclature, or "border slang." What most Americans think of as coyotes—the men who smuggle illegal immigrants across the border in cars, vans, or on long desert treks—are now most commonly known as polleros, while the illegals they transport are known as pollos. Urrea is careful to note that the word for chicken, the animal, in Spanish is "gallina," while the word for *cooked* chicken is "pollo." Thus, pollos are "cooked" before they even set foot in the desert, and polleros are tasked with shepherding them across the desert. Coyotes are higher up on the "food chain" of border gangs, just as coyotes are, in the natural world, far above chickens. The fact that those who traverse the expanse of the border are referred to by nicknames taken from the animal world symbolizes the dehumanizing culture of the smuggling business in general. Most vulnerable are the "cooked chickens" at the bottom of the food chain, whose lives are considered both worthless and compromised from the outset of any smuggling journey. Fierce and wily coyotes prey upon the smaller, more defenseless chickens—and the symbolism of these identities speaks to the ruthlessness as well as the seeming inevitability of such power dynamics along the border.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Little, Brown and Company edition of *The Devil's Highway* published in 2004.

Chapter 1 Quotes

They came down out of the screaming sun and broke onto the rough plains of the Cabeza Prieta wilderness, where the sun recommenced its burning. Cutting through this region, and lending its name to the terrible landscape, was the Devil's Highway, more death, another desert. They were in a vast trickery of sand. In many ancient religious texts, fallen angels were bound in chains and buried beneath a desert known only as Desolation. This could be the place.

Related Characters: Luís Alberto Urrea (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In the novel's first pages, Urrea establishes the heat and cruelty of the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, and personifies it as a place which longs to trick and imprison those who attempt to traverse it. By invoking both the esoteric nature of ancient myth and the harsh reality of the desert landscape, Urrea, right off the bat, creates a portrait of a place that is desolation personified—desolation itself come to life. Urrea begins at the end of the desert trek in order to heighten the drama and desperation of the narrative early on. As the few members of the Wellton 26 who are, at this late point in their journey, still able to walk in an attempt to find water or rescue, Urrea's language and imagery work together to make their situation seem utterly hopeless and symbolic of the desolation—both literal and metaphorical—that they have wandered into.

> If the North American continent was broad ("high, wide, and lonesome"), then Mexico was tall. High, narrow, and lonesome. Europeans conquering North America hustled west, where the open land lay. And the Europeans settling Mexico hustled north. Where the open land was. Immigration, the drive northward, is a white phenomenon. White Europeans conceived of and launched El Norte mania, just as white Europeans inhabiting the United States today bemoan it.

Related Characters: Luís Alberto Urrea (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

In a book which attempts to disentangle the complicated cultural and historical mechanics which drive contemporary border politics and practices, Urrea knows the importance of looking through history in order to find out the roots of modern thought about the border and all it represents. By outlining the obvious but easily-overlooked fact that "El Norte" (or "the north") is to Mexico what the West is to America, he draws parallels between the nations and acknowledges the common desires and humanity of people on both sides of the border. The drive for expansion and conquest, he argues, was instilled in Mexicans by the white Europeans who conquered their land. That drive toward open land continues to thrive in Mexico today, and as American politicians and citizens now vilify that desire, they fail to realize that not only is it a basic human drive, but one that their ancestors both drew a blueprint for and helped to intensify.

> "Getting bodies," in Border Patrol lingo, didn't necessarily mean collecting corpses. Bodies were living people. "Bodies" was one of the many names for them. Illegal aliens, dying of thirst more often than not, are called "wets" by agents. "Five wets" might have slipped out. "Wets" are also called "tonks," but the Border Patrol tries hard to keep that bon mot from civilians. It's a nasty habit in the ranks. Only a fellow border cop could appreciate the humor of calling people a name based on the stark sound of a flashlight breaking over a human head.

Related Characters: Luís Alberto Urrea (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Urrea recounts the often cruel slang the Border Patrol uses to communicate about the illegal immigrants they apprehend. In each of the nicknames, there is a startling disregard for the humanity of the people it describes. "Bodies," which ordinarily refers to the already-deceased, when applied to living human beings strips them of their humanity by objectifying them. "Wets," a shortening of the offensive slur "wetback," once again strips Mexican immigrants of their humanity by resorting to racist stereotyping. The even greater cruelty of using this term is its irony; Mexican immigrants entering the U.S. through this part of the country are often dehydrated, desperate for water. The term "tonk"—perhaps the most obscure and, certainly in Urrea's view, the ugliest—refers to the sound the Border Patrol's flashlights make as they strike a person over the head. This term reduces people to a target for violence, and completely erases any shred of humanity from the ways in which Border Patrol agents who use this term talk about the individuals they are charged not just with apprehending, but with rescuing.

You'd be hard pressed to meet a Border Patrol agent in either southern Arizona sector who had not encountered death. All the agents seem to agree that the worst deaths are the young women and the children. The deaths, however, that fill the agents with the deepest rage are the deaths of illegals lured into the wasteland and then abandoned by their Coyotes.

Related Characters: Luís Alberto Urrea (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Though Urrea has, in this chapter, discussed the ways in which some members of the Border Control mock or discount the humanity of illegal immigrants, in this passage, he highlights the concern and anger many Migra agents do in fact feel on behalf of the illegal immigrants who become lost in the deserts they patrol. Though the deaths of women and children affect them greatly, they are most enraged over the deaths of those immigrants who have been purposefully cheated and left to die by those entrusted with caring for them and shepherding them to safety. This stark contrast between this attitude and the attitudes of some other, crueler Border Patrol agents, highlights the hypocrisy and imbalance that rules the world of the border.

Somebody had to follow the tracks. They told the story. They went down into Mexico, back in time, and ahead into pauper's graves. Before the Yuma 14, there were the smugglers. Before the smugglers, there was the Border Patrol. Before the Border Patrol, there was the border conflict, before them all was Desolation itself.

Related Characters: Luís Alberto Urrea (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Luis Alberto Urrea illustrates the ways in which the tracks left behind by those who wander the desert record the place's history. The desert is personified in this passage as Desolation—an ancient and mythical desert beneath which fallen angels have long been rumored to be imprisoned. As immigrants, their smugglers, and the Border Patrol engage in an endless routine of chase, deception, and devastation, they leave their imprint on the historic and storied desert which has retained the footprints and remains of all who have passed through it. In this way, the desert has, in its personified form, borne witness to all the stories that have transpired within it since time immemorial.

Chapter 3 Quotes

From El Papalote, it seems like the myth of the big bad border is just a fairy tale. One step, and presto! You're in the EEUU. Los Estados Unidos. There's nothing there. No helicopters, no trucks, no soldiers. There's a tarantula, a creosote bush, a couple of beat saguaros dying of dry rot, some scattered bits of trash, old human and coyote turds in the bushes now mummified into little coal nuggets. Nothing. The smugglers tell the walkers it's just a day's walk to their pickup point. How bad can it be? A day of thirst, some physical struggle- they've lived like that all their lives.

Related Characters: Luís Alberto Urrea (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 57-58

Explanation and Analysis

El Papalote—in Spanish, "the kite"—was allegedly the point along the border at which the Wellton 26 crossed into the United States. A "tiny scatter of wrecks and huts," El Papalote is a quiet and mild section of the border which no doubt made the walkers feel as if all their fears about the crossing had been for nothing. At least for a moment, having feared the "myth" of the terrible border must have seemed like an overreaction. The men think they are prepared to face the desolation that lies ahead of them—after all, they are used to desolation and desperation, and one more day of struggle before finding themselves in the storied and prosperous "EEUU" seems, in this quiet moment, like no big deal.

The Mexican government's border sign near Sasabe doesn't actually say "Coyotes." It uses the hipper slang of the border. It says, "Los Polleros." A pollero would be a chicken-wrangler. The level of esteem the smugglers hold for their charges is stated plainly. They're simply chickens. Of course, if you know Spanish, you know that the word for "chicken" is gallina. "Pollo" is usually reserved for something else. A *pollo*, as in *arroz con pollo*, has been cooked.

Related Characters: Luís Alberto Urrea (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

The humanity of illegal immigrants is discounted along the border, just as it will be where they are headed—in the realm of the Border Patrol agents who refer to them as "tonks" and "wets." Another cruel nickname is employed by the smuggling gangs: "pollo," which refers to cooked chicken. Polleros, or guides, are hardly held in higher esteem than the "meat" they are charged with transporting. They are not even referred to as Coyotes, but as lowly chicken-wranglers, defined solely by the cargo they are tasked with transporting: illegal immigrants who are seen as burdensome, gullible, and already "cooked."

Chapter 8 Quotes

The cutters know many things about a person by the nature of his tracks… The men shuffled and stumbled along, wandering off path and straggling, but generally moving ahead. The knee scuff where a man fell, and the smeared tracks of the two companions who helped him up. Once the trackers got the tread marks of each shoe, they could follow the ever more delirious steps right up to the feet of each dead body. The sign told them much about each man. This guy walked alone the whole time. This guy walked with his brothers. This guy had his arm around his son some of the time their tracks interwove and braided together as they wandered. This guy tried to eat a cactus.

Related Characters: Luís Alberto Urrea (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 112-113

Explanation and Analysis

The signs that people who walk through the desert leave behind as they walk through it tell the stories of their lives, and allow signcutters—that is, Border Patrol agents who specialize in tracking and interpreting those signs—to bear witness to their journeys, no matter how banal, torturous, or in-between. As Urrea describes some of the sign patterns of the Wellton 26, he bears witness to the stories which the signcutters translated—stories of men who supported each other and walked together in solidarity, stories of men who struggled, stories of men who lost their minds, and each one a story of men who were desperate to survive their journey through Desolation.

Chapter 12 Quotes

They agreed to stick together and walk north. All of them. It had to be north. Mendez had gone north, the bastard, and he was saving himself. They'd follow Mendez. Once more, the men stood, and they walked. Now the illegals were cutting for sign.

Related Characters: Luís Alberto Urrea (speaker), Jesús Antonio Lopez Ramos/"Mendez"

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 158-159

Explanation and Analysis

Earlier in the text, Urrea referred to the north as the "direction of death" according to some of the Wellton 26's ancient, Native belief systems. Now, lost in Desolation, the men's worst fears have come true—they have journeyed north and found themselves in the land of death. The only way out, though, is through the desert, so they must travel even farther north if they hope to save themselves. In the second part of this passage, as if going against nature even further, the walkers adopt one of the practices of the dreaded and feared Migra—cutting for sign—in order to save their own lives and hopefully escape from Desolation alive.

Chapter 13 Quotes

"I do not know who was dying or how many because I too was dying."

Related Themes:

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation, taken from the accounts of one of the survivors of the Wellton 26, demonstrates the ways in which death and dying sap humanity, as well as the human ability to bear witness, away. Because the speaker also felt that he was dying, he was unable to focus on those around him—though everyone trapped in Desolation was in equal need of help. Tied in with themes of desolation, the terrible and isolating nature of the slow, torturous death that hyperthermia creates is highlighted by the speaker's assertion that he was dying. Even though he lived, his life seemed, at that moment, to be slipping away rapidly.

Chapter 14 Quotes

It is important to note that within ten minutes of finding the lost men, the Migra was already fully engaged in rescue. While Mike F. cut for more sign, the old boys were kicking off their desert race. The Border Patrol sped there so fast, with so many vehicles, over such vicious terrain, that they suffered twenty-six flat tires. Some agents drove on rims to get there.

Related Characters: Luís Alberto Urrea (speaker), Mike F.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

The image of Border Patrol agents driving desperately "on rims" to rescue survivors in the desert stands in stark contrast, no doubt, to the image of the Migra that Urrea's audience might hold in its mind. The Border Patrol, in a situation like this, engage protocol which values the preservation of human life above everything else. Engaging in a "Banzai Run" rescue mission, the Border Patrol and the BORSTAR (the trauma and rescue branch of the Migra) engaged in a full-throttle effort to rescue the missing men from Desolation. Though accounts of Border Patrol's treatment of "illegals" often veer toward the cruel or the simply indifferent (for example, stories of Migra teasing or even torturing walkers are not uncommon), in this situation, the Wellton Border Patrol flew into action in order to save human lives.

Chapter 15 Quotes

The survivors were suddenly paid professional narrators. At the beginning of their federal jobs, they were paid in room and board. They got cheap shoes and pants. T-shirts. As they sang, they learned they could get job advancement. Even a substantial raise. Like all good bards, they embellished and expanded their narratives. As long as they told their stories, they stayed. As long as they stayed, they had a chance to stay longer. Soon, they would surely earn money. It was the new millennium's edition of the American Dream.

Related Characters: Luís Alberto Urrea (speaker), Nahum Landa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Urrea describes the ways in which the Wellton 26 grew into the roles of witnesses to their own story. Realizing that their words had value, and that their testimony could directly influence their circumstances, the survivors of the ordeal discovered that the "American dream" they had set out to find was still possible—though it looked quite different, no doubt, from what they had imagined. The chance to stay and earn money in America is all many had wanted, and the opportunity to do so simply by virtue of sharing their own stories was something none of them could have foreseen—perhaps the only silver lining in the nightmare of their horrifying ordeal. However, Urrea presents the idea of buying time in America through testimony and storytelling as "the new edition of the American Dream" with more than a hint of sarcasm. He is skeptical of the systems which make situations like this necessary, such as the sensationalistic media. He seems to be implicitly criticizing the fact that it took so much pain and so much death in order for the survivors to be seen as full humans with important stories to tell—stories worthy of witness.

Chapter 16 Quotes

Since that May of 2001, the filth and depravity of the border churns ahead in a parade of horrors. The slaughtered dead turn to leather on the Devil's Highway, and their brothers and sisters rot to sludge tucked in car trunks and sealed in railroad cars. The big beasts and the little predators continue to feed on the poor and innocent. Hope began to glimmer for a short period as presidents Fox and Bush courted each other. A kind of border accord loomed, and the sacrifice of the Yuma 14 helped stir the leaders of each nation to pity. But the atrocities of 9/11 killed Border Perestroika. An open border suddenly seemed like an act of war or a flagrant display of foolishness.

Related Characters: Luís Alberto Urrea (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Urrea laments the missed opportunity for border reform which arose in 2001. As the concept of Border "Perestroika," or restructuring, gained traction on both sides, there was a "glimmer" of hope, and anticipation everywhere of lasting change for the better—all because of the tragedy of the Yuma 14, and their senseless deaths. It seemed that their sacrifice, however unwilling or unwitting it was, would not have been in vain if it could have resulted in such a reform. However, Urrea argues that the catastrophic events of 9/11 sidelined—seemingly, for good—any possibility of "an open border" between the United States and Mexico. The perceived "foolishness" of opening, restructuring, and reforming the border has continued to affect the border to this day, as "parade" of violence, "filth, and desperation" continue to give rise to both desolation and desperation in Mexico.

In ancient days, the Rain God was fed by the tears of the innocent. For any rain to fall now, it will take gallons of tears, rivers. In the desert, the drops evaporate before they hit the ground.

Related Characters: Luís Alberto Urrea (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

In this deeply metaphorical passage, Luis Alberto Urrea invokes the ancient myth of the Rain God in order to demonstrate the diminishing returns on tragedy which affect the world of the border. As more and more "deadly" incidents pile up, the "Rain God" becomes harder and harder to appease. The "Rain God" in this metaphor represents public opinion and patience with U.S.-Mexico border issues. The evaporation of the drops even "before they hit the ground" signifies the inability to bear witness to the uncountable number of horrors that are perpetrated all along the border each and every day. The tragedies are so many and so dense that they can't possibly be "caught." Urrea hopes that rain will still fall—in other words, that people will still find a way to shed tears over the tragedies that plague illegal immigrants—but he knows that it is harder than ever to make people care.

"Five miles from the border, nobody knows. Nobody cares. Nobody understands. They don't want to know."

Related Characters: Luís Alberto Urrea

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

Luis Alberto Urrea quotes a member of the Border Patrol he interviewed in this striking passage. The border cops know that "nobody knows" what really goes on in the desolate and crime-ridden lands they patrol, and some abuse this fact by treating the illegals they catch with contempt or cruelty, while some simply accept it as a sad or difficult fact of the job, and others attempt to combat it by building emergency towers or adding trauma and rescue personnel to their units. Without knowledge of the situation of the border—without bearing witness to what goes on there—nobody has the chance to "care" or to "understand." However, the border cop interviewed here ends his resigned statement with the assertion that nobody "want[s] to know" what is happening at the border, either. If nobody wants to bear witness to or validate the humanity of the people whose lives are made and broken by the border, none of the change that is so sorely needed on the border will ever get underway.

Afterword Quotes

Part of the idea was to foment discussion. Make us think a little about those people who are "like, illegal." But the deeper idea was to bear witness—we saw an exodus straight from the biblical template, and it felt that no one was paying attention. As I started the work, I will confess, it was all about the good men who died. But it didn't take long to see that the story was really about all humans—all of us in those ancient deserts are lost wanderers.

Related Characters: Luís Alberto Urrea (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

Urrea's mission in writing his book was to create a productive discussion around the issue of the U.S.-Mexico border. This mission could not have existed without another mission: to bear witness to the stories of the dead. In doing that, however, Urrea realized that their humanity was not the only humanity being denied, and their stories were not the only narratives in need of an empathetic witness. In realizing that everyone along the border—smugglers, Migra, and "lost wanderers" of all kinds—deserved to have a witness to their stories, Urrea's book took on a new mission: to radically and indiscriminately validate the experiences of the individuals who live, work, hustle, sin, and die along the border. By acknowledging and uplifting their humanity, Urrea was able to highlight the ways in which "ancient deserts" of the soul are everywhere, and that all "lost wanderers" are, at heart, the same.

Every week, in some motel, in the back of some burger joint, in some brothel or in some field, a woman is weeping in a horror we cannot comprehend because we aren't listening. After all, she's "illegal." Not even human.

Related Characters: Luís Alberto Urrea (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 228

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Urrea urges his audience to consider the stories that aren't witnessed—the stories that no one cares to witness, because they involve people that some consider "not even human." Labeling someone "illegal" strips them of their humanity—strips them, in the public perception, of all the fears and hopes that every human on earth carries, day in and day out. Branding someone illegal makes them other and inferior. This creates a perceived hierarchy of humanity, and this in turn leads to the horrors of violence along the border simply continuing largely unnoticed. Human beings are suffering daily, and yet the public continues to choose to turn away from that suffering because of the idea that these people's "illegality" makes their stories unworthy of witness.

Item: a Mexican Beta Group immigration cop asked me if the situation in the U.S.—the suffering of the undocumented—would be improved if we called them by other terms. What if they are called "refugees"? "Pilgrims"? He was a philosopher. "In God's world," he said, "no man is illegal." Every night, he locked himself inside the police station so the cocaine cowboys from the desert couldn't kill him.

Related Characters: Luís Alberto Urrea (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 230

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Urrea discloses an encounter with a Mexican official from the Beta Group, or Grupos Beta, who are charged with offering water, aid, and information to lost or at-risk immigrants. Each night, this man "lock[s] himself inside" to protect himself from the chaos and violence that rule the border, yet he contemplates endlessly how to relieve "the suffering of the undocumented." Despite the violence he witnesses day after day, he is still able to acknowledge the humanity of all parties involved in the world in the border—and longs for a better world for all of them. His suggestion of referring to undocumented immigrants simply as "refugees" or "pilgrims" instead of as "illegals" demonstrates his great compassion for the men he is tasked with saving from "cocaine cowboys" and other dangerous forces along the border.

> The border makes me happy. Hard to believe. But, after all, I'm from there. Is the border all hate and fear and bad craziness? No. Of course not. Just like the Border Patrol agents aren't all racist monsters looking to crack beaner heads. Just like the smugglers aren't all savage beasts looking to slaughter innocents for filthy lucre…well, not all of them. Just like the walkers aren't slobbering rapists and murderers—in spite of the blazing sign we float over their heads: ILLEGAL.

Related Characters: Luís Alberto Urrea (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 233

Explanation and Analysis

Urrea's mission to bear witness and to help all three groups which define the border—the Migra, the smugglers, and the "illegals"—is born of his own desire to show the shades of grey that define not just humanity along the border, but humanity everywhere. By acknowledging stereotypes and then refusing to deal in them, Urrea urges his audience to complicate their own notions of issues relating to the U.S.-Mexico border. It is an in-between space, a meeting place, and a world which is frequently and deeply misunderstood. Urrea, writing this missive ten years after his book's initial publication, implores his readers to continue to contemplate and challenge the idea of "illegality" and the culture of xenophobia. No human being is illegal, just as no human being is perfect. Thinking of the border in terms of stereotypes makes arriving at true understanding an impossibility. Bearing witness to the stories of all those who traverse the border allows for a reckoning with emotions of "hate and fear" that cloud peoples' ability to see the other with clarity and compassion.

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 RULES OF THE GAME

Five men, "burned nearly black" by the sun, stumble through a mountainous desert. The men, disoriented by dehydration and hyperthermia, "see God and devils" all around them—they have resorted to drinking their own urine to stay alive and are "beyond rational thought." They imagine the lush landscapes of their homes as they tear into cacti, desperate for water. Their sense of direction hopelessly impaired, they walk westward toward Yuma.

Urrea begins the narrative "in media res," or in the middle of the action, in order to set the scene of desolation and desperation in which the surviving members of the Wellton 26 have found themselves. Without any backstory to contextualize the action, readers are forced to inhabit the world of the story as these dehydrated travelers do: disoriented and without bearings.

The men are in the **Cabeza Prieta** (Dark-Head) National Wild Life Refuge, at the southernmost end of the US Air Force's Barry Goldwater bombing range. Another more "terrible" stretch of desert cuts through the Cabeza Prieta—the Devil's Highway. The narrator, Luís Alberto Urrea, notes that in ancient religious texts, "fallen angels were bound in chains and buried beneath a desert known as Desolation." This stretch of desert, Urrea says, could be Desolation itself.

Urrea describes the mythic desolation of the area in which the men have become trapped, inviting readers to consider the notion that the Cabeza Prieta could be the legendary desert where fallen angels have been imprisoned for millennia. In this way, he imbues the terrain with an otherworldly quality from the outset, and gives his story mythic proportions.

The men see mirages and "deceptive" tricks of the landscape which urge them on toward an imagined oasis. There is no water or shade, and the men have been pricked with cactus spines and cut on rocks. They pass abandoned army tanks as they leave the mountain pass and face the flat plain of the preserve. The temperature is 110 degrees Fahrenheit.

Urrea heightens the atmosphere of pain, suffering, and desolation in the Cabeza Prieta with the aim of exposing his readers (to the extent that it is possible to do so through language) to the horrors faced by the subjects of his novel and others like them.

The first white man known to die on the Devil's Highway, Urrea writes, died on January 18th, 1541, though "as long as there have been people, there have been deaths in the western desert." He claims that "desert spirits of a dark and mysterious nature" have always been present on its trails, and that the Devil's Highway is a place of "retribution," not of salvation.

The Devil's Highway, Urrea writes, has always had the mythic and seemingly vengeful atmosphere it possesses to this day. Innumerable lives have been claimed by this desert, in a manner similar to or even worse than the way the Wellton 26 are currently suffering. In other words, Urrea is suggesting that the story he is about tell is timeless.

Urrea recounts the myths of the people native to this land—the Tohono O'Odham tribe. Their creation myth tells the story of the birth of the Elder Brother, I'itoi, who watches over the desert from a windy cave and "resents uninvited visitors." According to legend, an evil witch spirit, Ho'ok, hides in the mountains, and the mischievous coyote spirit Ban rules the plains. The myths of another local tribe, the Yaqui, speak of "tiny men" who live underground, and of how the devil, Yuku, once controlled all the corn that grew. Mexican "hoodoo" legends, too, are prevalent in the area, telling of the wailing ghost of a woman and the feral, vampiric wolves known as Chupacabras ("goat suckers") that roam the night.

The area is rife with legends of mythic figures who control the elements of the desert and influence the passage of travelers who attempt to walk through it. Ancient myth melds with newer Mexican superstition in order to create a vast array of spirits—none of which, it seems, are concerned with the safety or the humanity of those who pass through their desert. Each story, it seems, is another way of accounting for the extreme hostility of the environment.

The landscape and wildlife are "noxious," Urrea writes. What few plants live in the desert are spiked and dangerous, and the "poisonous and alien" wildlife includes rattlesnakes, scorpions, black widows, tarantulas, coral snakes, Gila monsters, and even killer bees.

Even the natural world in this desert is cruel, harsh, and potentially fatal. Nothing about this land welcomes the people who visit it.

Other tribes, such as the Hohokam, have vanished from the region, though their etchings and ruins remain. Old footprints, some of which are "old beyond dating," still mark the landscape, telling stories of "long-dead cowboys" and the "phantom Hohokam themselves." Carefully arranged rock piles and boulders rolled into straight lines aim wanderers toward watering holes and mark ancient graves. Some rock piles have been placed by the Border Patrol signcutters, or trackers, who refuse to divulge what the piles signify.

The old meets with the new at some points in the desert—ancient etchings and ruins, with no one alive to bear witness to their meanings, have been co-opted by the Border Patrol—the force that now, despite all the legend and lore and all the unwelcoming wildlife, is what truly rules this landscape.

Little or no records were kept of the area before the arrival of white men, who had a "mania" for keeping records. As they "civiliz[ed]" the frontier and built the Wild West, they perhaps did not realize that they were not only writing their own history—they were writing the history of Mexico, as well.

This passage demonstrates how history is often thrust upon people by those who are attempting to colonize and "civilize" them—their humanity is erased, and their stories are never recorded.

The North American continent is broad, Urrea writes, and those who sought to conquer it moved west toward open land. In Mexico, a tall and narrow country, the open land lay in the north, and that is where the Europeans settling Mexico "hustled." Urrea writes that "the drive northward is a white phenomenon."

Urrea describes how the phenomenon of immigration northward out of Mexico began with the white settlers who colonized it—not with the original inhabitants of Mexico itself—thus pointing to another way in which the region's rich history continues to influence it to this day.

Urrea travels back in time to the Sonoita (in Spanish, spelled Sonoyta) of 1541, which, even then, was "the unwilling host of killers and wanderers." A Spanish conquistador called Melchior Díaz led a patrol through Sonoita, though the Spanish did not plan to settle there—they were fearful of the natives, whom they believed were "hostile" cannibals. Díaz was bound for the Sea of Cortez. He kept sheep at his settlement in a small brush corral, and wild dogs had been attacking them in the night. Díaz, miserable to be stuck in Sonoita, had slaughtered the native people of the region mercilessly. Urrea writes, "this rout of natives serves as the preface to the story of death that begins with Díaz." As Díaz rode through his settlement one day, he noticed a dog in the sheep pen. He entered the pen, threw a lance at the dog, and then, somehow, impaled himself on his own weapon. It took twenty days for Díaz to die—twenty days until "the fallen angels of Desolation came out of the **Cabeza Prieta**, folded their hands over him, and smiled."

The legend of Melchior Díaz is invoked here to demonstrate how even the most powerful conquistador was laid to waste by the harsh world of the Cabeza Prieta. Although his death was accidental, the combination of the hostile wildlife and terrain—and perhaps the spirits of the desert itself—ultimately claimed Díaz's life. Thus, Urrea again suggests that the brutal environment of the desert has a will of its own—and that will is to crush the life of any human that dares to try to conquer it.

The land was haunted before Díaz's death, Urrea writes, and continued to be haunted afterward by "Catholic apparitions" that plagued the tribes. As Jesuits infiltrated the area, the natives fought back against oppression, but it wasn't until the 19th century that "the modern era of death really got rolling." As the gold rush began, more and more white Arizonans and Texans died on the Devil's Highway, and Urrea writes that their wagon-wheel tracks remain in the desert to this day.

By saying that the land of the desert has always been "haunted," Urrea draws a parallel between white European colonizers and the vengeful spirits he has described. Only their tracks remain—but the tracks have lasted throughout the years, almost as a warning sign to those foolish enough to attempt to cross the desert after so many centuries of hauntings and horrors.

Urrea describes how "a source close to this story" once observed the titular **Cabeza Prieta** itself out in the desert. As Urrea's "source" drove through the desert one "brutal" afternoon, he saw the ground split open, and a "black human head" rose up from the ground to laugh at the passing traveler.

In this passage, the Cabeza Prieta—according to Urrea's "source"—comes to life in order to mock travelers. The dark head represents the spirit of the desert and its contempt for those who try to traverse it.

Urrea returns to his description of the five men lost in the desert. As they come upon a dirt road, they are unaware that it is called the Vidrios Drag. They are now praying to be found by the Migra, or the Border Patrol, whom they had "walked into hell trying to escape." They cannot decide whether they should continue on the road or head for a nearby mountain range, and as they "shuffle around," unable to make a decision in their exhausted state, a white truck approaches, and then men run toward it. A Border Patrol agent, Mike F., had been cutting for sign and, unable to find anything, was planning on turning around when he spotted the lost walkers.

Exhausted, delirious, and on the verge of death, these travelers now pray for an encounter with the Border Patrol—the very entity they hoped to evade when they endeavored to cross the border illegally. This complete reversal shows how desperate the brutal desert has made them.

Mike F. knows that people wandering the desert are almost always up to something, and believes that the more "casual and innocent" someone tries to look, the more dangerous they might be. Though these men don't appear to be a threat, Mike F. gestures for the men to stay where they are and radios the nearby Wellton Station to tell them he has "five bodies on Vidrios Drag." Bodies, Urrea says, are how Border Patrol agents often refer to living people. Among the other cruel nicknames for illegal aliens are "wets" and "tonks," named for the sound of a flashlight smacking a human head.

In this passage, Urrea describes the ways in which the nicknames and code words the Border Patrol uses to describe the illegal immigrants they capture strips those individuals of their humanity, and focuses on "illegality" as their one defining trait. Calling living people "bodies" further betrays not just the prejudice of Border Patrol agents, but the fact that this desert, too, is capable of stripping anyone unlucky enough to cross it of their humanity.

There are stories all along the border of Border Patrol officers abusing their power—assaulting women they find, shooting **coyotes**, or smugglers, in the head. There are rumors that Texas Rangers handcuff the "illegals" they find and toss them into irrigation canals to drown. To immigrants, Urrea notes, there is no difference between the Border Patrol, the Rangers, and any other "hunt squad." There is "ill will on all sides."

The men believe they are rescued, but Urrea knows that in the backs of their minds they must also be frightened. He attempts to bear witness to this dichotomy, and to explain the fear and "ill will" that defines relations between the Border Patrol and the immigrants they often rescue from the desert.

The disoriented men tell Mike F. that there are somewhere between seventeen and seventy men lost in the desert behind them, all dying. Mike F. gives the men water, which they drink and regurgitate. The men continue to guzzle water as Mike F. informs the Wellton Station of their claims, and, on the other end of the radio, "the guys at Wellton [realize] the apocalypse had finally come."

Urrea implies that the Wellton officers have been waiting for the "apocalypse"—that is, a cataclysmic and devastating event—and that it has at last arrived. The sheer number of men who might be lost in the desert is something that the Wellton station has never seen, and may not be prepared to deal with.

Southern Arizona, Urrea writes, has been divided into two Border Patrol sections. Fifteen hundred agents patrol the eastern Tuscon sector, and three hundred patrol Yuma. There is a "chaos of stupidity" which rules the border, and jurisdiction between Arizona and California is often blurred. Border security had been ramped up in the late nineties, but smaller, "rougher" places to cross had become "hot spots" in the wake of that reform. Two hundred thousand immigrants passed through just one part of the Tuscon sector each year, and just as many had died in the crossing. The "unofficial policy," Urrea writes, was to let the dead lie where they had fallen and leave their remains uncollected in order to cut down on paperwork and avoid generating case files for remains that might be a hundred years old.

The "chaos of stupidity" which rules the border contributes to shoddy work on the part of the Border Patrol and an endless stream of deaths coming out of Mexico, as desperate immigrants attempt to cross the desert only to find themselves lost or abandoned in Desolation. The fact that the Border Patrol agents don't even collect all the bodies they find—don't even bear witness, officially and legally, to their deaths or their lives—demonstrates the volume of deaths which aren't seen as "worthy" of witness or care.

Urrea writes that it would be difficult to find a Border Patrol agent in Arizona who had not encountered death. Many agents feel that the worst deaths are the young women and children, but many feel the "deepest rage" when illegals die after having been abandoned by their smugglers.

Although the Border Patrol is certainly problematic in the way it talks about the illegal immigrants it is charged with apprehending, Urrea is careful to show that Patrol officers are still able to recognize the humanity of immigrants, pointing out that they are often the only ones to bear witness to the horrors that take the lives of immigrants every day.

Urrea describes a day in the life of a Border Patrol officer in Wellton. Many drive between twenty and seventy miles to work; many are ex-military; all of them speak Spanish, and several are Mexican-American. Wellton Station, Urrea writes, is "considered a good place to work," and notes that "the old boys there are plain-spoken and politically incorrect." Border Patrol officers know they are disliked, and go to great lengths to avoid getting tangled up in trouble. Human rights groups pay close attention to Border Patrol, as evidenced by the fact that they are "constantly lodging complaints," so agents take care to "watch [themselves]" around the immigrants they apprehend. Most agents patrol alone, and always bring plenty of water with them on their potentially dangerous routes, for themselves and for anyone they might apprehend. Some agents, for fun, shoot at old army tanks, rattlesnakes, and rabbits. Some even play pranks on the illegals they arrest.

By bearing witness to the lives and routines of the men who work the Wellton station, Urrea complicates his earlier characterization of Border Patrol officers as at best politically incorrect and at worst cruel individuals who discount the humanity of the "illegals" they find wandering the desert. Urrea is interested in bearing witness to the lives and experiences of all the players in the story he is telling. Although his book is far more sympathetic toward and focused on the people who attempt to cross the U.S.-Mexico border than those who patrol it, here he focuses on the Wellton agents in an effort to illuminate all sides of the issue.

Border agents create "drags" by attaching car tires to the backs of trucks and dragging them through the desert. When these strips of smoothed-over sand are disrupted by foot traffic, the Border Patrol is able to "cut sign"—they can see where an illegal might have tried to jump over the drag or brush their tracks away with a branch. Signcutters—or just "cutters"—know the land by heart, and can read it "like a text." Along with surreptitiously placed sensors which send messages to base, displaced pebbles, twigs, and dirt (called "hither thither") help to tell the story of a "walker's" journey. Cutters can discern what time of night walkers crossed a drag by observing the movement of insects, lizards, and rats ("bug-sign"). Cutters move northward from drag to drag until they find one that is undisturbed. In this way, they can "box walkers in" between drags. The walkers Mike F. encountered had strayed so far from the drags that they were considered "off the map."

Urrea reveals the vigilance at the core of work of the Border Patrol. The drags they create not only help agents track the walkers, they also tell the story of the walkers' journey. Drags allow Border Patrol agents to tell where walkers are coming from, where they're headed, and what their condition is. Urrea, who is himself very interested in the journeys of those who attempt to cross this desert, is all too aware of the ways in which these histories are often impossible to recover. Therefore, he's intensely interested in the methodologies employed by Border Patrol to "read" the landscape for signs of the immigrants' comings and goings, which are otherwise so often swallowed by the desert and lost to history, leaving the "illegals" nameless.

As signcutters worked backwards from the Vidrios Drag, they began to find corpses. Fourteen men had died, and twelve more men were rescued alive. The dead were referred to as the Yuma 14, and as the media got hold of the story, everyone wanted to know what had happened. The tracks, Urrea says, told the story of the men's journey.

The Border Patrol agents were able to reconstruct the stories of the dead through their tracks—the only remaining connection to the men's lives and humanity.

Some Wellton officers resent that the dead are called, to this day, the "Yuma 14." One officer, Officer Friendly, insists that they should be called the Wellton 14—but because walkers are identified by sector, Wellton's role in the investigation was erased. The Wellton 26, Friendly concludes, is the proper name for the men who were found.

The desire to "claim" the dead as their property, so to speak, belies the desire of the Wellton station to have their side of the story heard.

Urrea describes the "groaning shelves" of the Tuscon consulate, where all the paperwork of the Wellton 26 was processed. There were so many reports that they were difficult to file, especially as the reports came in during the time of year known as "death season." Not just Mexicans die crossing the border—Chinese and Russian refugees enter the U.S. this way, too, or are otherwise smuggled through Canada. Muslim missionaries in southern Mexico who can "pass" as Mexicans often come over the border, as well, and many Border Patrol officers are suspicious that al Qaeda members—possibly coming from a training ground somewhere in Brazil—are being brought across after paying smugglers off at an astounding price of fifty thousand dollars apiece.

In this passage Urrea bears witness to the lesser-known stories of those who cross the border. There are many people who are desperate for passage into the U.S.—people who come from everywhere, and who want to cross the border for a vast array of reasons—whose stories are virtually unknown to history. Urrea thus shows that the reality on the border is far more complex than many may understand.

Urrea recalls sorting through the postmortem packets for each of the Yuma 14. The portraits of their corpses reveal terrifying, withered faces, and Urrea wonders if these portraits are the first photographs the men have ever "posed" for. The victims' belongings are also enclosed in their packets. Urrea notes that all the bags in which these belongings are kept stink of death, and that the women working at the Consulate light candles to disguise the stench.

In bearing witness to the deaths of the Yuma 14, Urrea is also, in a way, able to bear witness to their lives. The people who work at the Consulate have such a massive volume of files that they are unable to give proper care and respect to each life that is documented there. The candles represent the ways in which they must mask the "stench of death" which pervades not just their workspace, but their lives.

Some of the Wellton 26, Urrea writes, were indigenous, making Spanish their second language. Most them came from the tropical Southern Mexico state of Veracruz, and most were farmers and coffee-growers. Some survivors insist to this day that many more men were on their journey than were ever found, and that their remains are still lying in the desert. Urrea writes that "what we take for granted in the United States as being Mexican, to those from southern Mexico, is almost completely foreign," and that these rural Mexicans were thus "aliens before they ever crossed the line."

In illustrating the ways in which the Wellton 26 were "aliens before they ever crossed the [border]line," Urrea sets up the next section of his text, which delves into the circumstances of isolation, desolation, and desperation which led the men to embark on this dangerous journey through one of the most hostile regions in the world.

CHAPTER 2: IN VERACRUZ

Urrea describes the landscape and history of Veracruz, whose name means "true cross." Despite its Catholic-sounding name, its "native roots run deep." The coastal region is hilly and mountainous. Veracruz, at the time the Wellton 26 crossed into the U.S., was in a state of economic collapse. Though "waves of semiprosperity" had surged through the region (Coca-Cola and Pepsi factories hired many workers from Veracruz,) things "weren't going well." Latino immigrants from the south—Guatemalans and Hondurans—had come north into Mexico. Prices were rising, and families struggled to feed themselves. People had more children in an effort to add able-bodied workers to their family and thus increase their income, to little avail. An obsession with American culture and the prosperity that was possible there seemed to have gripped many in the region, and this, combined with spreading waves of fever and malaria as well as government corruption and political violence, drove many people in Veracruz to "look north."

In describing the economic devastation of Veracruz, Urrea introduces his readers to the deep sense of desperation that drove many of the Wellton 26 northward. As poverty took hold of the region, many felt more and more isolated and gripped by desolation, leading them to seek passage to the border, where they would, unknowingly, only encounter more desolation in the form of a brutally inhospitable desert. Urrea's mention of large American corporations like Coca-Cola and Pepsi shows how the lives of people living in seemingly remote places are impacted by U.S. business and politics long before they reach the U.S.-Mexico border.

Don Moi García, a recruiter and fixer for the **Coyotes** of Sonora, was a "walking ad for the good life." He had an American car and American cigarettes, and was seen as a "man of substance." His birth name was Moises—"Don" is an honorific, equivalent to "sir." Don Moi was a local, seen by many in Veracruz as a "Robin Hood figure." Don Moi was approached by the Bautistas, men who would become the Wellton 26, desperate for passage to Arizona. Don Moi explained that he would charge twenty thousand pesos for the journey, but assured them they could save money "if [they were] men enough to walk in the desert instead of catching a ride." The men agreed, and Don Moi lowered his rate to thirteen thousand pesos. Don Moi worked with his fearsome boss, Chespiro, to offer the men loans, knowing that Chespiro's wrath was such that they would be paid back in full in no time.

The revered but shady Don Moi painted himself as a benevolent figure, when in fact he was unwilling to consider the humanity of the desperate men of whom he was taking advantage. Any experienced coyote (that is, someone who smuggles people across the border) understands that attempting to walk across the Cabeza Prieta is extremely dangerous, whether or not one is "man" enough to try it. Men like Don Moi and Chespiro amass their fortunes by preying on the desperate.

Reymundo Barreda approached Don Moi, along with his son Reymundo Jr. Both were hoping to make their way to Florida to spend the summer picking oranges—they wanted to build a new roof on their home. Reymundo Sr. was nervous to take the trip with his son, but signed them both up with Don Moi nonetheless. Meanwhile, Nahum Landa, Reymundo Sr.'s brother-in-law, also signed up—they were family, and they would look out for one another. Nahum signed his sons up with him, as well. Others joined, all hoping to arrive in America and work hard to afford things they wanted in their lives in Veracruz: adoption fees, school tuition, home improvement. Don Moi "drove from town to town," adding desperate men to his roster, and called his boss Chespiro to report that things were "going well."

As Don Moi collected desperate men throughout the countryside of Veracruz, he reported to his boss that things were "going well"—an ironic and even despicable statement, considering the impoverished and desperate backdrop of the state. Don Moi and his boss were only concerned with taking these men's money—they had no regard for their well-being, despite the fact that they witnessed families—fathers and sons—signing up in the hope of building better lives for their wives, parents, and children.

CHAPTER 3: THE COYOTE AND THE CHICKEN

The Border Patrol and the Mexican consulate are connected, Urrea writes, by two things: each side has a deep distrust of its own government, and each side has a "simmering hatred" for human smugglers, known as polleros or **Coyotes** depending on their rank within any given smuggling gang.

The polleros are perhaps the point of the "triumvirate" of illegals, smugglers, and Border Patrol that are hardest to bear witness to empathetically. Their business is the business of exploitation and suffering—but, as Urrea will demonstrate, many polleros too are desperate men taken advantage of by ruthless people with no regard for their humanity, either.

The Mexican government has placed a sign in Sasabe, a border town south of the U.S., which explains, in Spanish, that **Coyotes** "don't care about your safety or the safety of your family," and warns would-be immigrants not to "pay them off with [their] lives." The sign is ineffectual, not least because many walkers can't read it, and yet it is "the only thing Mexico is doing to try to stop them from crossing." Often, the Mexican army men who patrol the border have been paid off by Coyotes. The Mexican government previously had offered immigrants "survival kits" filled with water, snacks, and even condoms, but the American government had caused an "uproar" over what they saw as the Mexican government condoning illegal immigration rather than just attempting to look out for its citizens' well-being.

The Mexican government and police are, within one passage, depicted as both corrupt and benevolent. There are many shades of gray within this story, and Urrea is determined to examine them all. As Mexican border police accept bribes and look the other way, the Mexican government attempts to ensure that its citizens are safe—while, on the other side of the border, Americans interpret this act of kindness and compassion as an endorsement of illegal immigration, when in reality it is an attempt to prevent the unnecessary loss of life.

The Wellton 26 did not cross at Sasabe. They crossed in an area where there was likely only a bit of sagging barbed wire—or perhaps no physical border at all—standing between them and the States. Towns like Sasabe, Urrea writes, exist only for illegal entry. There, buses and vans "full of walkers" line up at the border each day. In Sasabe, reportedly, as many as fifteen hundred walkers a day have been known to pass through. Illegal entry is a veritable industry along this roughly two-thousand mile stretch of border, and **Coyotes** "hawk destinations like crack dealers in the Bronx sell drugs." Border slang, however, refers to Coyotes as "Los Polleros," or chicken-wranglers, and to walkers as "pollos." *Pollo*, in Spanish, means "cooked **chicken**."

The illusion that it is easy to enter into the United States via towns like Sasabe—towns in which the police look the other way and in which the border is not well-protected—creates a mania and an industry in these otherwise abandoned towns. Human lives are trafficked with no attention to humanity itself, and even the "Coyotes"—the polleros—are swept up in a trade which completely ignores human dignity.

Luis and Daniel Cercas were the brothers who ran the gang which lured the Wellton 26 into the desert. Daniel worked in Mexico and was known as El Chespiro—Luis worked in Phoenix, and had a vast network of contacts all across the States. The **Coyote** in the case of the Wellton 26 was known as El Negro, though his real name was Evodio Manilla, and he was allegedly Luis Cercas's brother-in-law. His driver was known as El Moreno. El Negro and El Moreno reported to Chespiro, but oversaw their own "small army" of drivers, guards, and guias, or guides. Urrea points out that today's guias, or polleros, are what most people "used to think of as Coyotes," but within the entire Cercas operation, guias are at the very bottom of the ladder.

Urrea helps his audience to better understand the complicated mechanics of the U.S.-Mexico border underworld. The terminology has evolved from what it used to be, and as the men near to the top have risen in status and importance, the men at the bottom have become more and more disposable—barely a step above the "cooked chicken" they are charged with transporting. This desecration of humanity creates a dangerous culture in which extortion and abandonment are completely commonplace.

CHAPTER 4: EL GUÍA

Urrea writes that three guides led the Wellton 26 into the desert. One will never be known, one is known by a code name alone, and one achieved "infamy." Guides (or polleros) earn about a hundred dollars a head for leading groups over the border. They never reveal their names and go only by code names, and they wear "bad clothes" so that they blend in with their pollos, should the group be caught or apprehended. Many guides dope their walkers with cocaine or diet pills in order to make them walk faster, disregarding the fact that they might then die of a heart attack during the journey. The one thing the Wellton 26's guide have to their credit is the fact that they did not dope their pollos.

The guides who are charged with the difficult and delicate task of shepherding desperate illegal immigrants over the border are often just as desperate as their "pollos," evidenced by the way they treat their charges to ensure that they themselves are protected above all else. In a world where there is a lot of money to be earned in these "mass exodus" marches, it is about the quantity of human lives transported, and never about the quality of care for or attention to those lives.

The leader of the Wellton 26 was a nineteen-year-old from Guadalajara. He wore his hair "in a silly punk rock style with a red-dyed forelock hanging over his eye." He earned the nickname "Rooster Boy," and though he went by Mendez, his real name was Jesús Antonio Lopez Ramos, and he was born on December 25th. Urrea marvels at the stunning coincidences and biblical allegories of the Wellton 26's journey: "Jesús led the walkers gathered by Moses into the desert called Desolation."

This introduction to Mendez comes on the tails of having been introduced to the cutthroat and demeaning world of the "polleros." Urrea introduces him as a silly-looking teen, but also acknowledges the great mythic tradition in which he's situated—by virtue of his name, his date of birth, and the other legendary coincidences surrounding the journey of the Wellton 26.

There are innumerable "heinous" stories of walkers being abandoned, abused, or otherwise compromised by their polleros. In Mendez's letter to the court, he insists that, when setting out on the Wellton 26's journey, he never imagined that the tragedy that befell them would happen. But Mendez, Urrea writes, surely knew of the horrors that were so routine along the border.

Though Jesús may have insisted that he never could have known what might befall his desperate group of "pollos," he was of course very well aware of the dangers all along the border, and had more than likely borne witness to instances of the desperation and desolation which rule the region.

CHAPTER 5: JESÚS WALKS AMONG US

Urrea reviews video footage of the Wellton 26 survivors at the sheriff's department. In the videos, the men have just been rescued, and they are still in the hospital, and still deeply disoriented. Officers ask them questions anyway, but they are unable to offer very much helpful information—other than to identify Mendez as their pollero.

Even in their disoriented states immediately post-rescue, the men are able to identify Jesús—known to them by his alias Mendez—as the one responsible for so much of their suffering.

Jesús—aka Mendez—had come illegally from Guadalajara to work in a San Antonio brickyard. He hated the backbreaking work, and, in 2000, met Rodrigo Maradona—a fellow brickyard worker who had an interesting side hustle. Jesús's testimony would later "shift" away from this narrative, though, and towards one in which "Chespiro himself appeared like the devil in the brickyard and whispered temptations" in Jesús's ear.

Mendez was once an "illegal" himself, and though he did return to the Mexican side of the border, once there he finds himself deeper than ever in the illegal business of smuggling. Myth and legend are invoked as Mendez struggles to remember—or lies outright about—how he came to be involved in the Cercas gang, and under allegiance to the shadowy Chespiro.

Maradona told Jesús that he was making a thousand dollars a week moonlighting as a Coyote, and offered to get Jesús involved in the hustle and living life as a "gangster." Maradona omitted the fact that the trade in Nogales had been forced west by Migra crackdowns, and that Jesús would be working in a "mean" little town below the Yuma border. Jesús was still enthused, and told Maradona he wanted in.

Despite the change in location from Nogales, Jesús was still enthusiastic about the prospect of life as a "gangster." He wanted to witness Maradona's world, and, as just another "illegal" himself, wanted to make a name for himself in the often faceless and nameless world of the border.

Jesús liked "bold" music which lamented how land had been "stolen at gunpoint" from Natives. Urrea speculates that Jesús told himself that, as a smuggler, he was "a kind of civil rights activist" and a "liberator of the poor and the downtrodden." Soon, Jesús had a "macho" hustle, an apartment, a girlfriend, and money to spare. He saw himself reflected in the songs he was listening to on the radio, and loved "living outside the law." Urrea lists the many forces at work along the border looking to catch illegals, including human rights groups who wander around hoping to "save dying walkers," as well as prospectors, drug smugglers, journalists, INS agents, park rangers, military police, and splinter groups of "patriot militias." "With so many hunters trying to catch Jesús," Urrea writes, "it's a wonder he managed to get lost."

Jesús created a narrative of his new life which centered around his involvement in the struggles of Mexicans and the dicey world of the border. Though Jesús would later attest to having gotten lost in the desert, Urrea points out the irony—and the suspicious nature—of that claim, given that the world of smugglers is subject to constant scrutiny.

In San Luis, on an early run, Maradona and Jesús loaded illegals onto a long-haul bus to Sonoita. From there they walked the thirty miles to Wellton. Maradona showed Jesús how to use the landscape to navigate, and the two-day walk went off without a hitch. Their pollos all made their buses to Phoenix.

Jesús's early efforts as a smuggler were successful, and his confidence in his abilities grew as a result. If it can all be so easy, perhaps it was not entirely naïve of him not to have anticipated the horrific tragedy that would befall the Wellton 26.

The Border Patrol was on the Cercas gang's tail, and Jesús was caught a couple of times. His name began cropping up in border reports, and he and Maradona were both transferred from San Luis to Sonoita. The boys decided to make the most of it, and though they were concerned about navigating a new desert, El Negro promised that a couple of locals would "show them the ropes," and convinced them that there was "nothing to worry about."

Although polleros like Jesús are at the bottom of the pecking order and thus stand to benefit the least from each group of walkers they smuggle across the border, they are more at risk of getting caught or killed than anyone else in the Cerca gang.

CHAPTER 6: IN SONOITA

In Sonoita, Jesús and Maradona took rooms in a stinking hovel of a border hotel. El Negro hooked the two of them up with their "teachers," who went by the names of Santos and Lauro—though these were only aliases. The new route out of Sonoita was treacherous, but Jesús proudly saw it as "just more damn desert." Their walk was now anywhere between thirty-five and sixty-five miles long, and the land was "crumpled and spiked with peaks and mounts." In the unfamiliar terrain, Jesús and Maradona did not know where to find water. Otherwise, Jesús and Maradona enjoyed Sonoita. After a little while, Jesús found a new girlfriend and soon left the hotel to move in with her—he adopted her last name, Mendez, as his alias.

Jesús's journey continues as he adjusts to his new town, his new life, and his new route through the desert—more desolate and inhumane than the last, but still one he feels he can navigate with no problem. His concerns are bigger than just the walks, though—he is making a life for himself, the "gangster" life he'd long dreamed of.

El Negro had the entire business of routing the smugglers down to "a science." After the walkers arrived in Sonoita by bus, they would stay in one of the fleabag hotels until Mendez, Maradona, Santos, or Lauro met them the night before the run to bring them over to a "ramshackle" safehouse.

The trafficking and smuggling of human lives is a "science" to the gangs, who know how to maximize revenue while minimizing risk. The human lives of the people they are transporting are nowhere in the equation—even the safehouses aren't safe.

The Saturday before the Wellton 26 ordeal, Mendez was arrested after an otherwise successful walk at a "nameless outpost" near the town of Ajo while waiting for their pickup. Because of his new alias, Mendez was not held, and was sent back to San Luis along with a group of three brothers who had twice failed to make it into the United States. El Negro offered the brothers—the Manzano boys—a spot on the next walk, which would be on May 19th.

In hindsight, everything leading up to the Wellton 26's ordeal seems fated. If Mendez had been apprehended during the bust rather than being sent back to San Luis, things would have been different for these three brothers.

Meanwhile, in Veracruz, Don Moi was on his way up to Sonoita with all his recruits. The bus trip was two thousand miles, but the attitudes on board were optimistic, and though "in some of their ancient beliefs, north was the direction of death," Don Moi's group marveled at the Mexican countryside on their journey north. At last, the group arrived in Sonoita, where they were rushed into the hotel. The following morning, they were again rushed over to the safehouse and told to be ready at a moment's notice. By the time they arrived at the safehouse, Don Moi was already back "on the bus, heading home."

The journey northward was no doubt frightening and unsettling in many ways for the members of the Wellton 26, but their optimism about the opportunities awaiting them in America seemed to drown out any fear. Even in Sonoita, moving between fleabag motel and ramshackle safehouse, having been abandoned by the man who had promised to take the journey with them, there was no time for trepidation.

CHAPTER 7: A PEPSI FOR THE APOCALYPSE

Urrea imagines Mendez waking up on the morning of May 19th—the day of the Wellton 26's walk through the desert. The Saturday morning is hot, and Mendez nurses his hangover with a breakfast of beans. He says goodbye to his girlfriend, Celia, and heads out onto the stinking street. He goes to Maradona's house and tries to rouse him by knocking on the front door, but cannot. Mendez calls El Negro to tell him that Maradona is either gone or so drunk he can't be woken, and El Negro calls Santos and Lauro to fill in. Urrea notes that "it says a lot about Maradona that he has to be replaced by two other polleros." Mendez boards a bus and heads downtown.

As Urrea imagines Mendez's morning on the day of the fateful walk, he allows his audience to bear witness to Mendez's life and routine free of judgement. As Mendez sets out to collect Maradona and is unable to, the variables that will eventually lead to disaster seem to be falling into place, unbeknown to Mendez. With so many variables in play, Urrea seems to suggest that circumstances may have been different had the more experienced Maradona been along for the journey.

At the safehouse, the walkers are beginning to wake up. They eat a meager breakfast, then Mendez, Santos, and Lauro arrive. The polleros advise the walkers to go over to the store and buy water. Mendez tells the walkers to meet him at the bus station. At the corner store, the walkers buy waters along with candy, chocolate, and sodas.

The walkers seriously underestimate how brutal conditions would be—and what kind of provisions they would need. No one steered them in the right direction, either—the fact that they brought candy and sodas rather than real food and copious amounts of water shows both that no one had prepared them, and that no one was looking out for them.

At the bus station, Mendez urges the men to "look normal" while he bribes a bus driver. The walkers must pay fifty pesos each for passage to the border, and the bus driver takes their money without a word. Mendez warns the men that they will soon arrive at a checkpoint, and that if any of them are questioned as to their destination, they should say they are headed to San Luis. After successfully passing the checkpoint, Mendez instructs the driver to drop them off in a sandy spot just south of a rest area. It is one thirty in the afternoon, and the border is less than one hundred yards away. The men get off the bus and run through the sand to the border, where they step over a rusty barbed wire fence. Mendez welcomes them to the United States.

The beginning of the trip goes off largely without a hitch, and the men arrive in the United States via an abandoned border crossing where everyone—drivers and officials—seem to be open to bribery and looking in the opposite direction. The magnitude of the human trafficking business desensitizes all involved, it would seem, to the plight of those who stand to lose the most out of the exchange.

After five minutes, Mendez stops the men and tells them they are going to take another ride. Mendez walks down a road and disappears—he comes back a few minutes later in a van driven by El Moreno. Later, Urrea writes, the survivors will give differing accounts of what kind of van it was, and differing accounts of how many men piled in—some survivors claim at least seventy men had been in their group.

The many steps of this journey have been engineered by the smuggling gangs, it seems, in order to disorient walkers and make it more difficult for them to identify anyone involved, or to accurately remember the circumstances of their journey.

The men endure an uncomfortable ride that lasts a total of ninety minutes, though some survivors would later claim it took over four hours. Once the van arrives at a "big rock" which signals entry to the path they will walk, they disembark once again. Mendez briefs them on what their trip will hold: he promises that they will walk only at night, and only for a few hours at a time. They will wait out the sun in whatever brush they can find. Mendez tells the men that each of them is responsible for his own water, and once again insists that it is just a few hours' walk to their next pickup spot.

The exaggerated statements about the time the men spent in the van, as well as how many men were packed in, demonstrate the how the traumatic journey impacted the memories of the people, who were deeply uncomfortable and mistreated. Mendez makes the journey seem like it will be an easy, straight shot, though it's unclear to what extent he believes this himself.

What Mendez does not tell the walkers is that they have arrived at the big rock a couple hours ahead of schedule—normally, they would arrive just as the sun was going down, and walk into the night, but now the men face an extra couple hours of exposure to the triple-digit heat. As the men set off on foot, Urrea writes, "their Pepsis [are] already warm."

The first hitch in the journey has been met, unbeknownst to the walkers—because they are starting out too early, they are at a disadvantage as they begin baking in the heat early on in their walk.

CHAPTER 8: BAD STEP AT BLUEBIRD

The men climb a steep hill. Although most of them are in good shape, the trek is still proving "brutal." Some of the men joke and tease one another as they struggle to catch their breaths—Reymundo Sr. attempts to help his son, Reymundo Jr., with the ascent. Mendez knows that the "surest way to beat La Migra [is] to keep to the high country" and avoid the flat planes of the desert. As night falls, the men reach the top of the hill, and Mendez points out another peak on the horizon. He assures the men that the second desert they must pass through is beyond that hill, and their pickup point will be just another short journey away. The men continue marching.

The men are struggling, but have not yet realized how dire their situation could become—and in fact will become—in the span of just a moment, with just a few wrong steps. The men are still optimistic, as is Mendez, who assures them confidently that the trip is going well—and for the most part, it is.

At around 11:30 p.m., Mendez would later claim, the men were caught off-guard by bright lights. Mendez told the men it was La Migra, and all of them scattered. However, this "mysterious" event raises a lot of questions. Urrea wonders why Mendez would panic if he thought he saw a Border Patrol vehicle, as he had "certainly ducked and hidden from scores of headlights in his career." Urrea insists that running back into the desert was "a suicidal gesture." He also speculates that perhaps "civilian border patrols" were out that night, attempting to entertain themselves by chasing walkers. Urrea states that, whatever may have happened, a Border Patrol vehicle would never have shone a spotlight at a group of illegals and not pursued them. The only thing that can be known for sure is that Mendez panicked.

Urrea dissects this second and very major misstep in the men's journey. Mendez alleges his innocence, shock, and fear, but Urrea argues that he would have found himself in this situation many times before, and would not—or at least should not—have reacted with such panic. By scattering his "pollos" back into the desert, Mendez threw them off track, and in doing so condemned them all to death.

As the group hunkers in the brush, waiting out the beams, it begins to rain. Many of the men would later recall feeling spooked but optimistic—they had, they thought, successfully outrun the Migra, and many of them took the rest stop to enjoy the snacks they had brought for the journey. Mendez reassures the men that the highway is right over the hill, and that they should resume their walk toward it—however, in reality, the highway was not nearby. After midnight, the men continue walking, following Mendez. They do not know that he is in "uncharted territory," though Mendez probably did and assumed he could work his way back to the path.

The men were unaware of how dire their situation had just become. They thought things were still going well, and that they had in fact triumphed over a difficulty. Mendez was not honest with his "pollos"—though Urrea points out that he more than likely realized that they were turned-around and off-course—and continued to lead them through Desolation nonetheless.

The signcutters who traced Mendez's route in the days following the rescue of the survivors referred to him as an "asshole." The tracks reveal Mendez walking ahead as if he knew the way, and the men shuffling and struggling behind him. As the tracks became more "delirious" and showed more and more signs of men stumbling and falling, the cutters were able to piece together what went wrong as the walkers made their way through no man's land.

The signcutters—the men who interpret the stories of desert walkers—see delirium, stupidity, and perhaps even trickery in Mendez's tracks. He was irresponsible, and led his men onward even as their paths veered dangerously off-course.

Though Mendez thought he was headed north, he was actually headed slightly off-track: north-northwest. Mendez continually cut to the left each time he encountered a rock or a cactus, eventually pointing his group northwest, and caused them all to veer dangerously far from their path. Mendez insisted all the while that there were "just a few miles left to walk." By Sunday morning, the men had walked forty miles in the dark. Dawn was approaching, and with it a heatwave.

Without the help of a real trail, signposts, or lighting, it was impossible for Mendez to see how far off-track he was taking his men—perhaps unknowingly, judging by his uneven tracks and unusual movement patterns.

CHAPTER 9: KILLED BY THE LIGHT

At six in the morning, the desert starts to heat up. Animals awaken, and the men worry aloud that they are lost. Mendez reassures them that they are on track. The night temperatures had hovered in the eighties, and in the early stages of dawn the air is already bearable. However, heat slams into the men suddenly and brutally as morning arrives. Mendez makes yet another fatal error: he urges the men to walk on in the light, perhaps unaware that "they had already begun to die."

The night was hot, but bearable. As dawn explodes across the desert, the men are confronted by a brutal heat wave. They are literally beginning to be "killed by the light."

Urrea relays a series of anecdotes which describe the deaths of unwitting visitors to this stretch of desert. In 2002, a couple named Lisa and Martin headed into the desert in their RV—they drove their dune buggy out into the heat, when it stalled and left them stranded. Martin left for help, while Lisa waited for him to return. Martin only made it two hundred yards, and Lisa cooked to death in the dune buggy waiting for help. That same summer, another couple hiked out into the **Cabeza Prieta** without enough water and perished, again, just yards from one another.

Urrea tells horrific and tragic stories of travelers who found themselves stranded in Desolation. Many made it only very short distances toward help before collapsing, demonstrating the brutality of the desert and the difficulty of finding one's way through the vast expanse of it.

Urrea begins to describe the stages of hyperthermia, or heat death. He notes that "your death is dictated by factors outside of your control and beyond accurate prediction," such as hydration before the event, fitness, and genetics. There are six known stages of hyperthermia. During stage one, Heat Stress, one experiences general discomfort, thirst, and perhaps heat rash. Urrea writes that "the Wellton 26 felt this immediately upon climbing their first hill." During stage two, Heat Fatigue, the body turns into a "swamp-cooler," and sweats profusely in order to attempt to cool down. Sunburns appear along the scalp, face, and neck. The more water one drinks in this stage, the faster the water is pulled back out into the air, and the body begins to dry out. During stage three, Heat Syncope, the body develops a fever, though the skin grows colder, and disorientation sets in. During stage four, Heat Cramps, the body, which has been dumping out salts through sweat, begins to lose function. Cramps and aches set in.

In this passage—one of the book's most brutal and vivid—Urrea describes in graphic detail the painful stages of heat death. He does so unsparingly in order to force his audience to bear witness to the unimaginable pain, trauma, and suffering the Wellton 26 went through. He does this as a way of indicting the smuggling gangs for their inhuman treatment of illegal immigrants, and also as a way of demonstrating how the desert—and nature more generally—is a great equalizer.

During stage five of heat death, Heat Exhaustion, fever spikes and one may experience flu-like symptoms such as nausea and vomiting. The skin continues to cool, and the body's fluid level drops. "Those in good shape will faint" during this stage, as the body attempts to do "damage control" by rerouting oxygen and fluid to the brain. During the final stage, Heat Stroke, the body's "swamp-cooler" breaks down as one's internal temperature hits about 108 degrees. Blood vessels burst, skin sensitizes, and disorientation reaches an all-time high—many walkers at this stage are found naked, burrowed in soil, or with their mouths full of sand. Muscles rot, and internal organs cook from within as the body, system by system, shuts down. Unaware of all of this, Urrea writes, "the men headed deeper into the desert."

Pollo or pollero, immigrant or American, ancient wanderer or modern-day walker, the desert consumes everyone in the same way. The mythic deaths Urrea alluded to in the early chapters of the novel take on a new weight as he implores his audience to imagine the specifics of heat death, and to bear witness to the suffering that the Wellton 26 would soon face.

CHAPTER 10: THE LONG WALK

On Sunday, May 20th, at 6:00 a.m., chaos descends upon the Wellton 26. The men are deep in the **Cabeza Prieta**. If Mendez had known where to look, Urrea writes, he could have found "several watering spots." The men grow angry even as they begin to despair, but continue walking, following Mendez. Mendez repeatedly tries to lead the men over the Growler Mountains, believing they were all that stood between their group and the salvation of Ajo. He is well aware that if their group does not make it to Ajo, they will die, and his frustration and fear both grow. Mendez's trail, by midmorning, grows confused and jerky, and the group's "integrity as a unit" is greatly compromised. Many straggle behind, and each rest stop becomes more difficult to recover from. Mendez comes to a gap in the mountains and leads the group through it, only to find another "wall of burning rock."

As Mendez panics for a second time, he leads his men across more and more dangerous terrain. The desert is seemingly playing "tricks" on him, keeping him from traversing the mountains which separated the 26 from their only hope of salvation. As the men begin to suffer more greatly, they are unable to keep up—and when they finally make it through the mountains only to encounter an even greater obstacle, it becomes very clear to them that things have veered from the disorienting into the gravely dangerous.

Some men begin to run out of water, and what water remains between them has grown as hot as the desert all around them. At noon, the group stops to rest, and Mendez recommends they rest until nightfall—again, he assures everyone that there are "just a few more miles" left to go, though at this point, they understand that he is wrong.

Though Mendez assured the men they wouldn't walk through daylight, he has effectively doomed them by forcing them to march onward while the sun is out. He attempts to course-correct by offering them an extended rest and assuring them that they'll only continue again under cover of nightfall, but at this point his assurances are worth little.

After nightfall, the desert remains as hot as it was during the day. Mendez orders the men to their feet, and "inexplicably" makes a forty-five degree turn to the left and marches the men southwest, in the opposite direction of where they need to be heading. Desperation mounts, and many more men begin to run out of water. The men comfort each other with memories of home.

Whereas the night before was cool in comparison to the daylight temperatures, the heat of the day has now lingered past sundown, and the men must set off anyway. As Mendez leads the men even more sharply off course, they are too disoriented to understand what is happening to them.

By 8 p.m., Mendez's "suicidal hike" veers south. All of the men's water bottles, at this point, are empty. They are headed in the exact opposite direction of their supposed destination, such that their trail forms a large U shape. Some of the men have realized how lost they are, and Santos, one of the polleros, suggests they all attempt to head back to Mexico—the journey will have been a failure, but at least the men will live. Mendez refuses, and thus a splinter group forms. Accounts vary, but somewhere between three and five men decide to go with Santos back to Mexico. Urrea writes that no trace of this group has ever been found.

Santos's desperation to survive by returning to Mexico—even if it would mean a failed journey—still did not manage to save him and his splinter group from the desert. Mendez has begun to steer his group in the opposite direction of salvation, but he presses on nonetheless, more than likely completely unaware of just how lost they actually are.

At 9 p.m., the desert temperature is still at ninety degrees. Some men begin to fall behind, and one walker announces that two companions have become lost from the group. Mendez tells the group that the lost men can "suck [his] cock," and carries on. The two lost walkers eventually manage to rejoin the group, but the men are still hopelessly lost. It seems that their journey is "repeating itself" endlessly. When they find themselves in another "maze of mountains," Mendez stops the group to rest, once again assuring them that there are only "a few more miles" to go.

Mendez's disregard for the two lost pollos at this point is almost justifiable—as he himself, along with every member of the larger group, are suffering and beginning to die. Nonetheless, his cruel and harsh language when notified of two missing individuals belies a lack of regard for human life, and a stubborn resistance to the fact that he has gotten his group "hopelessly" lost.

CHAPTER 11: THEIR NAMES

Urrea offers the names and firsthand accounts of the Wellton 26. José de Jesús Rodriguez was "mad" to be venturing to the U.S. Enrique Landeros García was thirty years old, from a coffee village, and was walking for his wife and son—hoping to earn money in the U.S. that would "change [their] lives." Reyno Bartolo Hernandez was a thirty-seven-year-old coffee farmer who had worn matching green socks and pants on the trek in order to "look nice" when he got to the States. Lorenzo Ortiz Hernandez was walking to the U.S. in hopes of being able to afford to raise his five children. Reymundo Barreda Maruri, at fifty-six, was the "grandpa of the group." He had been to the U.S. once before, and was now journeying with his son, Reymundo Jr.

As in the passage concerning hyperthermia and the stages of heat death, Urrea uses this passage to force his audience to bear witness to the names and lives of the men who suffered and died in the desert.

Nahum Landa Ortiz brought many relatives with him. Oritz's nephew, José Antonio Bautista, would later describe the "enchantments and deceptions" of the Cercas gang. Edgar Adrian Martinez was just sixteen, and was hoping to earn enough money to marry his girlfriend, Claudia. Edgar's uncle, José Isidro Colorado, and his godfather, Victor Flores Badillo, endured the ordeal together. Mario Castillo had been to the U.S. before, and was returning in order to earn enough money to "break away from his parents' help"—he wanted to open a corner store back in Veracruz. Claudio Marin, Heriberto Tapia, and Javier Santillan stuck together as Javier began to slip into deep disorientation. Rafael Temich González was a severe-looking corn farmer who longed to earn enough money to support his large extended family, who all slept together in one house. Julian Ambros Malaga, brother-in-law of Rafael Temich, wanted to earn money "to build cement walls for his mother's house." The González Manzano brothers, Isidro, Mario and Efraín, were a "crazy" group of jokers. Lauro, one of the polleros, was alone—nobody, not even Mendez, ever knew his real name.

Urrea wants his readers to understand the men's motivations—their desperation, their love of family, their pride and their desire to work hard. In illustrating the familial connections between members of the group, he offers a portrait of a group not of unconcerned strangers but of deeply connected people who set out together in hopes of bettering their lives together. Urrea highlights the ways in which the men helped one another even in their most dire moments, and the ways in which they bore witness to one another's pain and suffering.

CHAPTER 12: BROKEN PROMISE

By the morning of Monday, May 21st, even Mendez is "convinced that they were all going to die." The men have begun to consume cactus and drink their own urine in an attempt to stay hydrated. Accounts of the ordeal from this point on vary greatly. Either Mendez called the group to a meeting, or the group had a meeting and then brought their demands to Mendez. Either way, all agreed that they were doomed if Mendez did not strike out on his own in an attempt to find help or water. Mendez first told the group he would go alone, then insisted on taking his partner, Lauro. Whether the group "pressed their money on him and asked him to get water, a vehicle, and a driver," or whether Mendez demanded or extorted money from the men, he took somewhere between seventy and three hundred U.S. dollars for his own journey and departed, instructing the men to wait in one spot for him to return.

As the third day of the journey breaks, it seems all hope is lost. The men are disoriented, dehydrated, and in pain, and though what is about to happen to them is very important, the survivors will struggle to remember the sequence of events. Whatever happened—wherever the blame may or may not lie—Mendez took his pollos' money (being careful to accept only U.S. dollars, not worthless pesos) and left them for dead.

The men wait for Mendez's return, tormented by heat, thirst, and pain. Before 9 a.m., the temperature is in the nineties. By the afternoon, the men have begun to feel it is obvious that Mendez is not returning to them, and once again strike out northward on their own. Dogged by mirages and violent, frightening hallucinations, the men stumble through the desert.

The men realize that they have been abandoned, and rather than stay where they are and die, they attempt to fight on in hopes of finding salvation in the vicious desert.

Mendez and Lauro, meanwhile, are making good time on their own journey north. Urrea speculates that the two of them knew the walkers would be dead by the time they reached help, and planned to save only themselves, thinking that they had already done all they could.

Though it is unclear whether Mendez really intended to find his walkers help or whether he intended to abandon them and save himself, his actions were the same regardless of intent: he left his men behind with no real regard for their lives.

CHAPTER 13: THE TREES AND THE SUN

After climbing a mountain, the abandoned walkers spot a lone Migra truck patrolling the desert. They scramble toward it, but there is no way to get to it. They have walked only ten miles in twelve hours. They come upon some brush, and decide to start a wildfire to signal for help. Nobody comes, though, and the men again find themselves waiting in vain, some praying for death.

Missing what many saw as their last chance of hope, the walkers began "praying for death" and for an end to the pain, desolation, and dehumanization from which they could no longer imagine an escape.

Dawn of Tuesday, May 22nd brings with it temperatures in the triple digits. The men walk on, and the first members of the group begin to die. Disoriented, few men even realize that their large group has splintered into several smaller ones. Urrea writes that there is evidence of the fact that, because so many men were fainting and falling, it was impossible for them to realize which of their group had died. The men begin to hallucinate, and some call for their mothers. Many continue to eat cacti in order to attempt to fend off dehydration.

The fourth day of the journey begins, and so do the group's first casualties. The men become disorganized, but hardly notice their disorganization—many are delirious, though some cling to sense and survival instinct.

Reymundo Jr. dies in his father's arms. One man attempts to bury himself in the sand and is "barbecued" in the dirt. Julian Malaga tears up his money, and Reymundo Sr., too, throws his money into the air, crying and wailing. One man removes all his clothes, folds them neatly, lies on his back, crosses his ankles, and dies.

As the men go mad and die, some of them cling to life while others seemingly calmly—even gladly—embrace death as the last form of salvation available to them.

CHAPTER 14: HELICOPTERS

Meanwhile, Mendez and Lauro struggle through the desert on their own. Although they have traversed a great distance in a short time and are actually relatively close to salvation, Lauro is fading fast. He sits down to rest, and falls asleep. Mendez gets down on the ground to shake Lauro awake, but cannot. When Mendez himself tries to stand, he finds that his legs have given out, and he cannot. He begins to crawl forward, until the effort exhausts him, and he too falls asleep beneath a bush.

Mendez and Lauro, too, fall victim to the desert. Though they have been making great time and are near rescue, the journey is just too much, and they are unable to push on any farther.

It is now Wednesday, May 23rd. More men in the main group have fallen to the ground, and a small "commando" group of five, led by the Manzano brothers, makes a "final dash for salvation." They continue to eat cactuses as they go, looking desperately for anyone from the Border Patrol. They approach the Barry Goldwater Bombing Range, aware that they are "dying," when Mike F. spots them.

The men have been in the desert since Saturday afternoon—many are dead and almost none are still able to move. The Manzano brothers—who are now on their third journey through this desert—are perhaps more desperate than anyone for help, and they finally find it.

Mario tells Mike F. that there are more men in the hills, and that one of them is his brother. Mike calls in a "Banzai Run" for as many officers as possible. Within ten minutes of Mike F. finding the men and giving them water, the Migra are already "fully engaged" in a rescue mission. Mike F., with the lost walkers in his car, drives through the desert, cutting for more sign. Far above him, a Marine pilot in a helicopter spots ten bodies on the ground—nine are alive, and are loaded into choppers, disoriented and exhausted. Border Patrol agents and officials from the sheriff's department all join in the search, mobilizing to save whomever they still can.

The realization that there are huge numbers of men dying in the desert mobilizes the Wellton unit and sends them flying off into the desert. Many are saved due to the desperate efforts of the Border Patrol, and the lives of the Wellton 26 are at last valued and deemed worth saving. In this way, Urrea shows the Border Patrol in a heroic light, at least at this moment.

While "cutters, Marines, cops, EMTs, [and] rangers" hunt all night for other survivors, Mendez remains asleep under a bush. When he and Lauro are finally found, Lauro is dead. Edgar Adrien Martinez, who has been lying in the heat for days, dies just as a rescue helicopter lands on the ground nearby. Elsewhere, more and more dead bodies are found.

Many lives were lost, some just as rescue and hope were arriving. The senseless number of deaths—and the cruelty and unfairness of the timing of many of them—are almost mythic in scope.

CHAPTER 15: AFTERMATH

The doctors at the Yuma Medical Center, on the morning of May 23rd, were overwhelmed by the number of bodies arriving. The Border Patrol has attempted to "palm the survivors off on the hospital in Yuma without arresting them," in order to ensure that the medical bills will be the hospital's responsibility, and not the government's. (Illegal immigrants, Urrea writes, make up 23% of unpaid bills in hospitals throughout the southwest.) One of the 26's doctors, David Haynes, told reporters that the men arrived looking a lot like Ancient Egyptian mummies. Nine men were in fair condition, two were serious, and one was critical. The men were placed in rooms, sometimes together and sometimes alone, and interrogations began.

The severity of the injuries and trauma the men sustained is palpable as they are assessed by doctors at a local hospital. Even in this moment of rescue, there are unseen factors and hidden agendas at play, as the various officials involved play with the walkers' fates based on what is most convenient for the government.

By 11:30 a.m. on the 23rd, Rita Vargas—the Mexican consul in Calexico—is on the case. Because Yuma, "and by extension Wellton," had no consulate at the time, Vargas was responsible for the situation, and within minutes of receiving a phone call from Yuma, she had begun to "hunt down Mexican authorities all over the world." Urrea describes Vargas as "charming and funny" but decidedly "no-nonsense," and unafraid to "stand up to both the Border Patrol and her superiors." An intrepid and patient woman, she had, years before, led an investigation which revealed that a Border Police officer had shot a group of walkers in the back, despite having claimed that he acted in self-defense.

Urrea conveys Vargas's commitment to justice and humanity by relaying an anecdote in which she stood up for what was right rather than what was easy. As Vargas springs into action, the entire Mexican government is informed of the situation in Yuma, demonstrating the unprecedented nature of such a large event on the border.

As the police interrogations begin, the men are uncertain of what they should say—and some are still acting insane from the walk. Nahum identifies Mendez, "the guy with the rooster hair," as the pollero who abandoned them, despite refusing to give any details of his and his companions' journey to and across the border. The cops make their way through interrogations of the various survivors, collecting what testimony they can—all of which, of course, incriminates Mendez.

The men begin to share what they have witnessed with the investigators, and finally, their stories—and by proxy, their humanity—are seen as worthy of consideration and useful.

Rita Vargas arrives to supervise the police interrogations, while still hounding Mexican officials and warning them to expect "many bodies." The survivors, all officially arrested now, will be rehydrated and stabilized, and then sent to Phoenix to await further interrogation and processing. They are suddenly "paid professional narrators," and, realizing that they would be allowed to stay as long as they continued to tell their stories, they begin to "embellish and expand" the story of their journey through the desert.

As the men realize that their status as storytellers of the "myth" of their ordeal will grant them temporary stay and more privileges, they commit to telling their stories in full. In this way, Urrea shows the process by which true stories quickly become mythologized.

Justice catches up with Mendez when the U.S. attorney for the District of Arizona vows to take him down. Mendez composes a letter expressing his contrition, apologizing to the living and the dead, and attempting to declare his innocence. The letter is ineffective, and the U.S. attorney concludes that Mendez recklessly deceived and endangered the group, and that "the inherent risks of this undertaking were foreseeable" to Mendez even if they were not to the walkers.

As Mendez is charged, he attempts once again to save himself by spinning a myth of his own innocence and suffering. Once again, his self-centeredness backfires, and the courts are able to see clearly through his façade of naïveté.

The bodies of the dead are shipped to medical examiners in Tuscon. Rita Vargas accompanies them. Urrea describes the "cool, smooth, speedy" ride the bodies take. It is relaxed and out of the way of the harsh sun, and "the entire trip that had killed them" took only a couple of hours by car. Urrea describes the rustling of the body bags within the cool, dark car as sighs of relief at the fact that, finally, the bodies will soon be "going home."

Rita Vargas's commitment to justice and to honoring the humanity of the dead is evidenced in this passage as she accompanies them on each step of their journey, bearing witness to them and to their suffering even in death.

CHAPTER 16: HOME

The Mexican president, Vicente Fox, sends the Mexican chief of Migratory Affairs, the poet Juan Hernandez, to meet with the survivors. Hernandez tells them that they are "heroes of the republic." Meanwhile, American guards keep watch over Mendez like "valuable prey." Mendez knows his life is over, though he is only nineteen years old. Earlier, he refused to rat out any of the Cercas gang, and takes pride in his loyalty, though he feels more and more that "the raised bars of his hospital bed look like the bars of a jail cell."

Mendez's loyalty to the Cercas gang outweighs his own desire for freedom. He knows his life is "over," and that he is nothing more than "prey" now, just like the "cooked chickens" he abandoned in the desert.

Medical examiners confirm that the Yuma 14 died of exposure and hyperthermia, and then they are taken to a funeral home. Preparing the bodies for shipment costs over a thousand dollars per body, not including the cost of coffins and shipping trays. The total cost the dead have incurred is twenty-five thousand dollars, and they have not even been sent home yet.

The Yuma 14 are being treated humanely and spared no expense in death—whereas in life, many of them lived desperate and impoverished existences in which their humanity was constantly denied or discounted.

The dead are flown home to Veracruz. When the plane lands and begins taxiing to the terminals, Vargas notices that there are crowds of people waiting on the tarmac. Veracruz had "created a public relations mega-event out of the return of their martyred heroes." The governor is in attendance, as are reporters, photographers, and bands. As she deplanes, Vargas is overtaken by the surging crowds, and as she attempts to stand back up she watches each coffin carried from the plane and placed inside the hearses waiting for them. Vargas meets with the Yuma 14's families, and watches as a young woman reads a prepared statement for the cameras on their behalf. Vargas is disgusted with the way that "every moment of the arrival had been stage managed." At her hotel that night, unable to sleep, Vargas calculates that the flight for the dead had cost sixty-eight thousand dollars, and wonders what would have happened "if somebody had simply invested that amount in their villages to begin with."

The combination of very real grief on the part of the Mexican people and the sensationalism of the ordeal on the part of the Mexican government frustrates and deeply upsets Rita Vargas, who is left to wonder what these men's lives—and the lives of millions of Mexicans—would look like if the world simply recognized their humanity and invested in their lives and futures instead of footing the bill for such an elaborate funereal procession.

The survivors "ping-pong" through the system. Mendez goes to jail in Phoenix, and continues to stonewall interviewers—even agents from the Mexican government. His appointed lawyer attempts to construct a case on his behalf, trying to imply that the Border Patrol agents who lit the walkers up at Bluebird Pass did so intentionally, and were the same agents who rescued the men in the desert at the end of their ordeal. He paints a picture of "a vast borderland conspiracy at work." Mendez likes his defender's approach, and continues to insist that, in taking his walkers' money, he had only set out to save them, insisting that he isn't like all the other polleros who leave their pollos to die. Urrea writes that when news of Mendez's statements reached officials in Wellton, "some of them laughed out loud."

Mendez continues to attempt to save himself, even if his lawyer's allegations are far from the truth. His journey has never been about bearing witness to justice or the truth—it has only ever been about Mendez and Mendez alone.

Meanwhile, the survivors continue to share the details of their ordeal, and "an unprecedented wave of investigation" is launched in Mexico. Members and associates of the Cercas gang are caught and brought down. El Negro escapes, but is now a wanted man.

As the world bears witness to the scope of the devastation, trauma, and loss of life that have taken place as a result of this ordeal, an investigation of "unprecedented" scale begins to take place, raising the question of whether any lasting change will finally come about in the aftermath of this catastrophe.

In November, Mendez pleads guilty to 25 counts of smuggling. Each count carries a heavy fine, and a possible death penalty. In exchange for avoiding the maximum death penalty, Mendez admits to everything.

Mendez saves himself from the death penalty by confessing. He folds under pressure and fear of the loss of his own life.

The survivors stick together and demand immunity in exchange for their testimony. Nahum and his relatives are able to stay in Phoenix, and are given an apartment and gainful employment in a meat-packing plant out of the hot sun.

The public importance of what the survivors went through is affirmed as they are given lives and opportunities based on the value of their testimony.

Urrea writes that, today, "the filth and depravity of the border churns ahead in a parade of horrors," though, for a moment, there was a glimmer of hope as Presidents Fox and Bush discussed the potential for border reform. The events of 9/11, however, derailed any such possibility. As the U.S. went to war, many Border Patrol agents became air marshals and enlisted in the army. Waves of illegal immigrants continued to flood over the border as the Border Patrol thinned.

The letdown after the promise of border reform has led to a seeming increase in depravity and horror along the border. As the world turned its attention to the Middle East, border issues completely fell by the wayside.

Gang and cartel violence continues along the border, Urrea writes, and quotes the Mexican consul in Tucson asserting that "the media only cares about the Yuma 14 because of the large numbers," and continues to ignore the everyday, individual tragedy and violence that still occurs. American Border Patrol agents are shot by warring drug smugglers, pollos bake alive in the trunks of cars as they attempt to cross the border, FBI agents are beaten to death by Mexican train robbers, a Mexican immigrant drowns "on live television trying to swim across the Rio Grande." Urrea writes that "the Yuma 14 changed nothing, and they changed everything."

The Yuma 14, and the public attention their story received, was important, but the often just-as-horrific stories that continue to unfold along the border each and every day are just as important and just as worthy of attention. The Yuma 14's deaths were a major opportunity for reform and rebuilding, but instead of leading to lasting change, violence has, if anything, gotten even worse.

Yuma and Wellton Border Patrol understood that they needed to take a proactive rather than reactive stance on saving the lives of those who become lost on the Devil's Highway. They upped the number of BORSTAR (Border Patrol Search, Trauma, and Rescue) agents on patrol, brought portable army buildings right to the middle of the Devil's Highway, and designed "lifesaving towers" which serve as emergency checkpoints. Lost walkers who come upon the tall, glimmering towers—which are visible day and night—are greeted with instruction in Spanish and in English advising them to push a button in order to summon the Border Patrol, who will arrive in one hour or less. In the year after the Yuma 14, Urrea writes, the Yuma sector "managed to reduce the season's death rate to nine."

The small reforms that have happened along the Arizona border are important and life-saving. The impact of the Yuma 14's stories made a difference along this stretch of the border, and has helped their story from being repeated as frequently or as horrifically, but these measures do nothing to change the conditions which would lead a person to cross the border illegally, nor to change the politically reality for illegal immigrants in the U.S.

Urrea considers the hard facts and figures of immigration. Far fewer Mexicans are coming over the border than "politicians and talk show hosts" would have Americans believe. Even illegal workers pay their taxes by default—the numbers are shaved off their paychecks automatically—and American jobs are not at risk. In fact, studies reveal that Arizona "gets $8 billion in economic impact annually from the relationship with Mexico."

Urrea wants his audience to understand that rhetoric which claims that Mexican immigrants are "stealing jobs" or hindering the American economy or the American identity are not only false but damaging. This kind of thinking only perpetuates and deepens horror stories like that of the Yuma 14.

Back in the Tuscon consulate's office, the afternoon grows late. The Yuma 14's personal effects are filed away "to be forgotten" as a woman in search of her missing husband, despondent, hears that he has been found dead and is currently "on the slab." A secretary comforts her, asking her to forgive the employees at the consul for their cold, matter-of-fact manner—"We deal with death so often in here that we forget," she says, and another employee takes the crying woman by the arm to go see her husband's body. The secretary blows out the candles which were lit to ward off the stink of death that emanated from the Yuma 14's effects as dusk falls outside.

Urrea ends the book on a fairly pessimistic note, as he considers the ways in which deaths like the Yuma 14's have become so commonplace that they no longer have a real effect on the people who deal with the aftermath of such deaths every single day. He implies that it is perhaps unwise for these stories to become so frequently told and sensationalized that they come to seem dull or routine.

AFTERWORD: TEN YEARS ON

Ten years have passed since the publication of *The Devil's Highway*, and thirteen have passed since the deaths of the Yuma 14. "Everything has changed," Urrea writes, "and the worst of it remains the same."

Urrea is able to look at his work from a distance, and objectively reflect on how things have—or haven't— changed since he published the book.

Urrea was "surprised" to watch his book take off, and take on a life of its own as it became required reading at many high schools and colleges across the country. Urrea remembers a question from someone he sarcastically refers to as a "helpful young man" who, in a group discussion of the book, asked: "Why should we read a book about people who shouldn't even be here? They're like, illegal."

In this passage, Urrea sarcastically describes one prejudiced reader as "helpful"—he does so to demonstrate how some people were able to read his book, bear witness to the stories of the Wellton 26, and still be unable to see past their "illegal" status to recognize their humanity.

While the idea behind the book's creation was to generate discussion, Urrea reveals that the deeper idea eventually became one of bearing witness to "an exodus straight from the biblical template," to which nobody seemed to be paying any attention. As Urrea dropped his personal agenda for the book and allowed it to become a story about all of humanity, he began to realize the ways in which blame is often mislaid in border issues, especially where the Border Patrol is concerned.

Urrea shifted his primary desire for the book from one of simply stirring the pot to one of empathetically bearing witness to a story of mythical proportions—a story that was being ignored because its protagonists were "illegal" and thus seen by many as devoid of humanity. Bearing witness to the story of the Wellton 26 made Urrea realize how important it was to patiently listen to all sides of the story with the same empathy he was giving to the walkers.

Though in his initial research on and contact with the Border Patrol, the agents were suspicious of Urrea, he notes that it was a "holy" experience to eventually have the rescuers open up to him. He writes that the "triumvirate of Desolation—walkers, smugglers, and Migra—all were worthy of witness."

Urrea's radical commitment to bearing witness pays off in his"holy" experience of being let in not just to the world of the Border Patrol but to the world of the border itself was.

Urrea wonders if the border is a region or simply "an idea nobody can agree on." He laments that radio talk show hosts still attempt to "horrify their listeners," acting as though there is a "biblical flood of 'illegals'" coming across the border. The immigration debate is about regulating illegals—that is, human beings—rather than the border itself. More than anything, Urrea laments that all of this is still going on despite the fact that "illegal immigration has fallen by over 70 percent" in the ten years since his book was initially published.

Urrea is upset that the humanity of migrants is still being discredited all along the border, and that those in charge of affecting change where border regulation is concerned are focusing on the wrong aspects of the battle to keep desperate and innocent individuals from losing their lives at the U.S.-Mexico border.

The Wellton Station has grown, in ten years, from a thirty-two agent operation to a three-hundred agent one, though with waning illegal immigration numbers there has been a "drop-off in clients." Urrea describes Border Patrol agents as "warriors," and expresses his gratitude for the fact that so many have been supportive of his book and have provided him with "a constant flow of witness."

Urrea remains grateful to the agents who helped him to complete his project of bearing witness to all the moving parts of the border issue, and grateful even more so for the "constant flow of witness" that many agents have continued to provide him with. Urrea uses this passage to argue that everyone longs to have their stories witnessed.

Urrea considers the current state of smuggling. Now that "some villages in Mexico are devoid of working men," it is now mostly women and children crossing the border out of necessity. Over one third of women who cross the border are raped or sexually assaulted at some point on their journey, and, often, women are led over the border with their children only to have the children "dragged back to Mexico" and kept for ransom, such that the mother must work to buy her children back once she arrives in America. Now, the drug cartels control the smuggling routes.

Horrors of mythic proportions continue to unfold along the border. The issue is shifting, Urrea argues, but lawmakers are hung up on decade-old misconceptions about immigration because of their reluctance to bear witness to immigrants' stories or to consider the humanity of those desperate people who attempt to cross the border each and every day.

Urrea briefly notes that he left out his own personal experiences along the border during the research and writing of *The Devil's Highway*. He left them out, initially, because he felt it would be a "sin" to write about them alongside the stories of those who risked everything to come to America. He reveals that he had accidentally crossed paths with Don Moi before he even knew who he was, and that he learned a great deal from Border Patrol Agents, though, unfortunately, Urrea has "lost track" of the survivors. He also revealed that Reymundo Sr.'s nephew wrote to him after the book's publication, expressing gratitude to Urrea for writing the truth of what happened to his uncle, and confessing that he himself had made the same journey his uncle did—and survived. Reymundo's nephew now holds a Ph.D., and is a professor and scholar in world economics. He hopes to "save the border" and "heal relations" between the U.S. and Mexico.

Urrea's reluctance to use his book as a platform for relaying his own stories shows his deep commitment to bearing witness to the stories of those who have lost their lives along the Devil's Highway. His revelations about his communication with the Barreda family show even more deeply how important his book has been, and how the struggle of immigrants to claim their own humanity in a world which does not want to witness their stories continues. Urrea ends his afterword on a note of hope—a clear departure from the book's actual ending, published ten years earlier.

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