The Line Becomes a River

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FRANCISCO CANTÚ

Francisco Cantú was born in Santa Rosa, California, in 1985. His grandfather on his mother's side immigrated to the United States from Mexico as a child, and Cantú's mother worked to instill a sense of his Mexican heritage in him. Cantú's parents separated when he was young, and Cantú and his mother moved several times for her work as a park ranger before settling in Prescott, Arizona, where Cantú lived until he went to college in Washington, D.C. After studying the border at college, Cantú joined Border Patrol as a young graduate, hoping to gain a better understanding of the region and its politics. While working with the agency between 2008 and 2012, he spent two years in the field in Arizona and then moved into intelligence in Tucson and then El Paso, Texas. During these years, he became disillusioned with Border Patrol and the way it dehumanizes migrants. After leaving in 2012, he secured a Fulbright Scholarship and traveled to the Netherlands to study the status of asylum seekers. Later, he enrolled for an MFA in nonfiction creative writing at the University of Arizona and began to write about his time with Border Patrol. This was the book that would become *The Line Becomes a River*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The modern-day boundary between the United States and Mexico was defined largely by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848," Cantú writes, adding that in 1853, that boundary was modified: instead of following a river across Arizona, the border would be marked by a straight line of human design. Cantú considers the arbitrariness of the resulting border repeatedly in *The Line Becomes a River*. Cantú also notes that even after the border was established and painstakingly marked by a survey team, it was relatively porous until the 1990s, when the United States Border Patrol cracked down on border crossings in big cities such as El Paso, Texas, and San Diego, California, forcing desperate migrants to start crossing through the harsh desert instead. Cantú also discusses turbulent events that have unfolded at 100-year intervals in Mexico, killing hundreds of thousands of people: the Mexican War of Independence in 1810–1811, the Mexican Revolution in 1910–1920, and the drug war that broke out when President Calderón came to power in 2006, with policies that would stoke cartel violence.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Cantú references several contemporary works in *The Line Becomes a River*. He quotes from Sara Uribe's *Antígona González* (2012), a retelling of the myth of Antigone set amid the drug war in modern-day Mexico, which highlights the suffering of those whose loved ones have disappeared in the drug violence. Also quoted is *Dolerse* ("To Be In Pain," published in Mexico in 2011 but not yet available in English), which is an account of Mexico's pain written by Cristina Rivera-Garza, an author and professor at UC San Diego. Cantú also recommends as further reading one of the most celebrated books on immigration of recent years, Valeria Luiselli's *Tell Me How It Ends* (2017), which is structured around the 40 questions the author asks Latin American children facing deportation in her work as a volunteer. Though Cantú does not cite it, one of the most influential books on the topic of borders is Gloria E. Anzuldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), a semi-autobiographical work that charts borders of many kinds, such as those between people inside and outside the Latinx community, men and women, and homosexuals and heterosexuals.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Line Becomes a River*
- **When Written:** 2012–2016
- **Where Written:** Tucson, Arizona
- **When Published:** 2018
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Creative Nonfiction
- **Setting:** The borderlands of the American Southwest, specifically Texas and Arizona. Cantú also describes events in various Mexican cities, primarily Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana.
- **Climax:** After years of finding migrants dead in the desert, or finding them alive and processing them for deportation, Cantú is heartbroken when his friend José is forced to try crossing the desert himself in the summer in order to get from Mexico to his family in the United States.
- **Antagonist:** The dehumanizing power of United States border enforcement
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Controversy. On initial publication, *The Line Becomes a River* sparked controversy among border activists who felt that Cantú was profiting and building a name for himself on the basis of the suffering he inflicted on migrants as a Border Patrol agent. Cantú welcomed conversations with such opponents and was receptive to their views while maintaining that his book aims to improve the position of migrants by revealing

unflinchingly and from the inside the ways in which the system of border enforcement dehumanizes them.

Fact Check. Since publishing *The Line Becomes a River*, Cantú has worked as, among other things, a consultant to the entertainment industry, ensuring that stories focusing on the border are accurately portrayed.

PLOT SUMMARY

Fresh out of college, where he studied the U.S.–Mexico border, Francisco Cantú gets a job with the United States Border Patrol. As the grandson of a Mexican migrant and a young adult who has lived in the American Southwest almost all his life, Cantú has always had some level of understanding of the border, but he hopes working for Border Patrol will give him a clearer insight into the region and its politics.

He first begins to wonder about the nature of the work he's signed up for during his training, when his superior tells him traumatic stories from the field. The training is tough, and many of his classmates quit. Cantú's close relationship with his mother is already showing signs of strain, too: when she raises concerns about the morality and safety of working for Border Patrol, he becomes defensive.

Training ends with three months in the field, where Cantú works as part of a large group of new recruits. An agent's job is to locate people trying to cross the desert from Mexico into the United States illegally and to take them to the patrol station, where they are either processed and returned to Mexico or retained to face legal charges in the U.S. Cantú often chats in Spanish with the migrants he apprehends, asking them questions about where they've come from. His fellow trainees and superiors, however, are often disrespectful, for instance, urinating on migrants' belongings.

Cantú intersperses his personal stories of working the border with history. In particular, he explains the arduous and highly politicized process of determining and marking the border in the mid-19th century.

After graduating, Cantú encounters a steady stream of migrants, both dead and alive. There is often some intimacy to these encounters: Cantú is gentle and respectful and curious about the migrants' lives. However, he is already beginning to have bad, anxious dreams—dreaming, for instance, that he is grinding his **teeth** out. These dreams about his teeth worsen, and a dentist soon tells Cantú that he has developed a real problem with grinding his teeth. In another sign of his emotional distress, when his friend and coworker Morales is in a motorcycle accident, Cantú is scared to visit and then won't allow himself to cry.

One night, Cantú worries that a suspect has followed him home to wait on his street corner. Soon afterward, he goes to a firing range to practice shooting and deliberately shoots a small **bird**. As someone raised to love and respect nature—his mother was a park ranger, after all—Cantú is immediately shocked and frightened by his own behavior and what it might mean about the ways his job is changing him.

Having performed well as a field agent for two years, Cantú is promoted to an intelligence role in Tucson. His first intelligence post involves writing up reports of the significant events noted along the border, particularly anything involving gang and cartel members, large drug seizures, dead bodies, and any shootings involving Border Patrol agents. Cantú begins receiving daily emails detailing cartel activity, including gruesome photographs of bodies that have been mutilated and dismembered in cartel violence. His bad dreams increase in frequency and often involve the threat of violence or **wolves**, who come to symbolize the violence lurking in the human psyche.

The narrative becomes increasingly fragmented. Cantú intersperses his account of working in intelligence with newspaper articles, academic studies, and poems detailing the reality of life for Mexican migrants and the limited ways in which their plight is reported in the United States. He recounts stories about another agent named Cantú who dies in the field and of going to his great-aunt's funeral in San Diego, where he spends time with the Mexican side of his family.

Cantú's boss, Hayward, gets a promotion to a job in El Paso, Texas, and invites Cantú to apply for a position beneath him, which he gets. Hayward, Cantú, and Cantú's new coworkers Beto and Manuel soon travel to New Mexico to investigate possible drug trafficking scheme. Afterward, Cantú stays in New Mexico to visit his father's brother, who speaks about his love for nature and wilderness, but also of all the destruction of natural beauty he has carried out in his work as a contractor. Contemplating this contradiction, Cantú considers confessing his own fears and inner conflict but does not.

Cantú intermixes his personal story with accounts of the violence in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, which is just across the Rio Grande from his new home in El Paso, Texas. He cites articles about the femicides—murders of women—that began in the city in the 1990s, as well as articles about the violence and chaos that centered around the city starting in 2006, when Mexico's drug war escalated.

Cantú and Beto help Manuel move into his new house, and afterward, Beto and Cantú discuss their connections to Mexico. Both confess that though they have family ties below the border, neither of them has crossed the border since starting their work with Border Patrol. Meanwhile, Cantú's nightmares continue to escalate, increasing in both frequency and intensity. Now, he sometimes finds himself in Ciudad Juárez in his dreams.

After an agent shoots and kills a migrant, Cantú's boss,

Hayward, speaks to him of his own continued trauma and grief after shooting a migrant as a young agent in his early 20s. In this vein, Cantú presents research proving the existence of a gene linked to violent impulses, but he notes that the expression of the gene is triggered by trauma or abuse suffered during childhood.

He then describes the weekend he was supposed to take care of Beto's dog, but the dog escaped and tore open the throat of another local dog. Cantú feels deeply shaken by the violence. Departing from the anecdote about the dog, Cantú discusses moral injury, a condition most often ascribed to soldiers in which an individual is psychologically damaged by being forced to accept things they know are wrong.

Cantú, Manuel, and Beto are assigned, along with Hayward, to a surveillance job near where Cantú used to work in the field. At the end of one day's work, they find a migrant whose group has abandoned her. The woman's feet are badly blistered, and Cantú takes her to the station to process her and tend to her feet. In Spanish, she tells him that he has a lot of human goodness, but he disagrees.

Cantú tells his boss, Hayward, that he has decided to take a research scholarship he's been offered to study abroad, and that he doesn't plan to come back to the agency afterward.

The narrative jumps ahead several years. Cantú is now studying for an MFA in writing while working at a coffee shop. Through his work, he befriends a maintenance worker named José, who turns out to be undocumented. After traveling back to Mexico to be with his dying mother, José finds himself stuck below the border. He's separated from his wife and three sons, to whom he is devoted. He is caught trying to cross the border illegally, and he appears in court.

Cantú uses his contacts in border enforcement to help José's family see him and to support his legal case. Not knowing Cantú's professional background, José's court-appointed attorney, Walter, tells Cantú that most Border Patrol officers have lost their humanity and are callous in their dealings with migrants, whom they don't see as real people.

José and Cantú's boss at the coffee shop, Diane, arranges for an immigration lawyer to help with José's case. Cantú helps José's wife, Lupe, put together an extensive petition for José to remain in the country, which includes letters from José's wife, sons, pastor, and friends, all attesting to José's good character. José is deported nonetheless.

Soon afterward, Cantú hears from Lupe that José is in Mexico continuing to try to cross the border, and that human traffickers have been to her home to harass and extort her. Around this time, Cantú tells his mother about José and his anguish about all the people just like José that he's been responsible for deporting. His mother tells him that now he must figure out what to do with the violence he absorbed while working in Border Patrol. She encourages him to visit José in Mexico.

When Cantú visits José, José affirms that he will keep breaking the law to try to get into the United States, because he's a good father: he doesn't want to raise his sons in the midst of Mexico's violence, so he must find a way to be with them in the U.S. He loves the United States, but he thinks the border is barbaric.

The epilogue finds Cantú in Big Bend National Park watching a man cross the Rio Grande (which separates Mexico from the United States) on a horse. The man invites Cantú to breakfast in his village the next day, and Cantú accepts. Crossing the border is as simple as mounting the stranger's horse. Later that day, Cantú goes swimming in the river, and for a while, he forgets which country he's in at all.

In an author's note written in December 2018 and published with the paperback edition, Cantú addresses developments on the border since he wrote the book, namely the Trump administration's policy of separating families trying to cross the border. He notes that the United States at large has been horrified by the policy, but terrible violations have been perpetrated on the border for years—this isn't a new development. He calls for a widespread rejection of the culture of violence on the border and the ways in which it has been normalized.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Francisco Cantú – Francisco Cantú is the author, narrator, and protagonist of *The Line Becomes a River*, which charts his experiences as a field agent in the United States Border Patrol. He's the grandson of a Mexican migrant, and his parents separated when he was young. However, Cantú's mother was careful to preserve a sense of his Mexican heritage, and her work as a park ranger led her and Cantú to various spots around the American West and Southwest during his infancy (though he spent most of his childhood in Arizona), so he grew up with some understanding of the U.S.–Mexico border. As a young adult, after studying the border in college, Cantú gets a job as a Border Patrol agent, hoping to improve his understanding of the border through proximity. Although he enters the Border Patrol as a youthful idealist, confident that nothing he encounters there could shake his morality or sense of self, he painfully acquires a much more complex understanding of how institutions can damage the people within and around them. He suffers "moral injury"—the damage to the self that occurs when a person is forced to accept things they know are wrong—and his relationships grow strained, particularly his previously close relationship with his mother. He also begins to suffer from nightmares, especially ones involving **wolves** and grinding or shattering his **teeth**, that reflect his inner turmoil. Although he tends to be kind to the

migrants he catches trying to cross the border illegally, some of the men that Cantú works with make it a habit of urinating on migrants' belongings and setting fire to cactuses. Despite these blows to his idealism, Cantú manages to recover a fierce sense of justice and a renewed understanding of the value of human life after he leaves Border Patrol and gets heavily involved in the effort to secure a legal way over the border for his friend José. José is unsuccessful in returning to the U.S., and being a part of this long-winded and heartbreaking process gives Cantú a clearer insight into what happens to people after he processes them for deportation—something he never really had to think about as a field agent.

Cantú's Mother – Cantú's mother is the daughter of a Mexican migrant who came to the United States as a child and had no relationship with Cantú's mother until she was an adult. Her mother was a Midwesterner with German and Irish roots, who raised her to feel ashamed of her Mexican heritage. Cantú's mother's struggle with this shame led her to work hard to help Cantú embrace his heritage, for instance by giving him her own Mexican surname instead of his father's name. Cantú's parents separated when he was very young, and his mother raised him alone, resulting in a very close relationship. She loves nature deeply and worked as a park ranger during much of Cantú's youth. Because of her love of nature, she has an empathetic approach to life and works to value, and to help Cantú to value, the worth and beauty of life in all its forms. She tries to dissuade her son from working for Border Patrol, knowing that the experience could crush a young idealist like him, and she is a voice of concern and humanity during his time with the agency. Their relationship suffers while he works with Border Patrol—knowing how much she disapproves of his work, Cantú doesn't feel he can talk to his mother about his difficulties. Even so, Cantú spends holidays with her and calls her periodically throughout his time as an agent. After he leaves the agency, their relationship improves again, and his mother is a source of wisdom and support for Cantú as he navigates his guilt over his time in Border Patrol while helping his friend José with his immigration problems.

José – José is Cantú's close friend and Lupe's husband. Cantú meets José after leaving Border Patrol; José is a maintenance worker at the marketplace where Cantú works as a barista, and the two become fast friends. José is a devoted father and husband who tells Cantú about his three sons (Diego, José Junior, and Vicente) over the burritos they share every day. When José gets word that his mother is dying in Oaxaca, Mexico, he returns to be with her in her last days but then finds himself unable to get back to his family in the U.S., because he's undocumented and crossing the border has become much more difficult in the years since he arrived in the U.S. José is a devoted churchgoer and a beloved member of his community who works hard to provide for his family. His good character serves to highlight how arbitrary and unjust the immigration system is: the book highlights how his deportation does far more harm than good, since his absence is devastating for his three young boys and their mother. It's by getting to know José well that Cantú comes to recognize and appreciate the humanity of all the migrants he met and processed during his years in Border Patrol. Cantú does everything in his power to help José legally reenter the U.S., but he is ultimately unsuccessful.

Lupe — Lupe, José's wife, id an undocumented Mexican migrant living with him in the United States. She is a devoted wife and the mother of José's three sons: Diego, José Junior, and Vicente. Since she's not a legal resident of the United States, she's not able to go with Cantú to visit José in prison after he's caught trying to cross the border illegally. She is clearly heartbroken by José's plight and exhausted by having to care for their three sons alone. Her story symbolizes the ways in which border policy destroys families.

Cantú's Grandfather — Though he's long dead by the time Cantú joins Border Patrol, Cantú's grandfather is an important figure in his life, symbolizing his Mexican heritage and all its complexity. Cantu's mother didn't meet her father until she was an adult, and then she rejected him because he didn't live up to her dreams—he wasn't adventurous or strong, like the Mexican archetype she'd imagined, but was instead conservative and very committed to his family and home life. Only later did she realize that there is a strength in embracing one's roots in this conservative way.

Morales — Morales is one of Cantú's classmates at Border Patrol Academy, and they continue to work together once they graduate and go into the field. Soon after they graduate, Morales is in a traffic accident and ends up in hospital. When Cantú visits him, he feels overwhelmed by emotion but doesn't allow himself to cry, which motions to his growing emotional detachment.

Hayward — Hayward is Cantú's boss once he moves into intelligence work. He's a kind boss, and he takes Cantú under his wing. He has suffered some trauma during his work in Border Patrol, for instance when he killed a young migrant in his early years on the force. Hayward's main interest is not in improving border enforcement but in rising the ranks of the agency until he can relocate to Virginia, where his wife wants to live. As such, though he's kind, he comes to represent some of the institutionalization of border enforcement.

Beto — Beto is another of Cantú's coworkers in El Paso, Texas. He's a young man who grew up in both El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, as he has family both sides of the border. He and Cantú discuss their complicated feelings about having family and ties in Mexico after joining Border Patrol.

Cantú's Father — Cantú's father is absent from Cantú's life and from the action of the book. Cantú's parents separated when he was young, and when he visits his uncle, he finds

photographs of his father and his several young wives (and his children with those wives), indicating that Cantú's father wasn't a particularly strong or positive influence in his life.

Cantú's Uncle — Cantú visits his paternal uncle—his father's brother—while he's working in intelligence in El Paso. As a contractor, his uncle represents a person who has been able to destroy a natural landscape for work despite loving it so dearly, and as such he holds a mirror up to Cantú, who is internally grappling with the moral implications of his work in Border Patrol.

Cole — A more senior agent, Cole instructs Cantú and his fellow recruits immediately after they graduate. He's nicknamed "Black Death" because he once ran over and killed a man he called an "Indian" who was asleep in the road. Cole laughs heartily when he tells this story, but Cantú and the rest of the recruits are uncomfortable, presumably because of Cole's flippant racism and callous act of violence.

Walter — Walter is José's court-appointed attorney when he's first arrested trying to cross the border. Not knowing that Cantú is in Border Patrol, Walter tells Cantú that most Border Patrol agents are heartless. He thus represents a valuable external perspective on Border Patrol for Cantú but also for the reader, since the book is told mostly from so far inside the agency.

Hart — Hart is one of Cantú's classmates at Border Patrol Academy. He is a young black man from Detroit who used to work at an airport car rental booth. He indulges in some of the book's more disrespectful behavior towards migrants, such as urinating on migrants' possessions that are found abandoned in the desert.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Diego — Diego is José and Lupe's eldest son. As part of José's petition to remain in the U.S., Diego writes a heartfelt letter about how much he loves his dad. He symbolizes the damage that's done to young people when their parents are deported.

José Junior — José Junior is José and Lupe's middle son.

Vicente — Vicente is José and Lupe's youngest son.

Diane — Diane is José and Cantú's boss at the market where Cantú works as a barista. She is very fond of José and helps his immigration petition by finding him a lawyer (Elizabeth) and paying half of the legal fees.

Manuel — Manuel is Cantú's coworker at his intelligence role in El Paso. He is an older man of Mexican heritage.

Elizabeth Green — Elizabeth Green is the immigration lawyer that José's boss, Diane, hires to represent José when he's sent to court after being caught crossing the border illegally.

Mortenson — Mortenson is Cantú's "journeyman," meaning that Cantú is partnered with him after he graduates from his field training as a Border Patrol agent. The son of a policeman, Mortenson is only 23 years old and has never worked in any field outside of law enforcement.

Adam — Adam lives in a Native American reservation near the border, and he asks for Cantú's help when strange, menacing men appear in his village. He represents all the people who live on the borderlands whose lives are at risk from the crime that goes on there.

Robles — Robles is an instructor at the Border Patrol Academy. He's tough on the new recruits, but he's also sensitive, as he still harbors trauma from an incident in his early days in the agency when he was responsible for a migrant's death by drowning.

José's Pastor — José and Lupe's pastor goes with Lupe to José's trials and the meeting with his lawyer, thus proving José's standing as an upstanding member of his church community.

Santiago — Santiago is one of Cantú's classmates at Border Patrol Academy, who drops out at the beginning of the book. He's a 38-year-old father, husband, and accountant from Puerto Rico, who becomes a figure of ridicule when he struggles to keep up with the course.

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.

TRAUMA AND EMOTIONAL DETACHMENT

After studying the U.S.–Mexico border at college, Francisco Cantú takes a job with the United States Border Patrol, hoping that firsthand experience will help him understand the border better. However, he is unprepared for the reality of confronting death and desperation every day. His job as a field agent entails tracking migrants crossing the desert in harsh conditions, many of them fleeing danger at home, and processing anyone he finds alive into the legal system. He excels at his work and quickly climbs the agency's ranks; however, his personal relationships suffer and he begins to have nightmares. It is only many years after leaving Border Patrol that he can access the emotions he suppressed while working for the agency. Cantú observes a similar emotional detachment in others whose lives intersect with the border, suggesting that it's simply impossible to witness suffering on such a grand scale without shutting down emotionally. This fact creates a self-reinforcing cycle of pain, in which the magnitude of suffering at the border breeds detachment and complacency, which in turn allow the violence to continue.

Cantú struggles to sustain meaningful human relationships during his time as a border agent, because to do so would require him to draw upon the emotional parts of himself that he's shut down in order to do his daily work. When his fellow patrol officer Morales is in a motorcycle accident, Cantú visits him in the hospital but leaves when he starts feeling emotional. Standing in the parking lot, he writes, "My face became hot and I could feel moisture collecting in my eyes [...] I would not go back, I decided, I would not let the water gather into tears." Cantú's unwillingness to cry implies both that he has become used to suppressing his emotions and that he fears what might happen if he allows himself to feel them. Later—years after leaving Border Patrol—Cantú calls his mother, who can tell he's withholding something. "This feels like it used to," she tells him, explaining, "It's like when you were on the border [...] All those years I knew things were weighing on you, but you were so sensitive to my questions—I couldn't ask about it, I couldn't show concern, I could never reach you." The emotional burden of his work forced Cantú to suppress a core element of his humanity: his ability to sustain close relationships.

Cantú also describes others detaching from the suffering at the border, suggesting that this phenomenon is fairly universal in border-adjacent communities and thus an integral part of the way the border functions. Most notably, Cantú quotes from the writer Charles Bowden's interviews with a former *sicario*, a hitman employed by a drug cartel. The *sicario* explains that "almost as a rule, he and all the cartel men he knew and worked with were always high and drunk while carrying out their work"—work that involved killing and torturing people—and that this *sicario* often didn't fully realize what he'd done until he sobered up days later. By including this testimony of emotional repression, Cantú humanizes the *sicario* and shows that this kind of detachment from the suffering along the border is terribly common. Cantú also quotes a doctor who works at a morgue in Ciudad Juárez, where she processes the countless bodies that have been mutilated and killed in the city's drug violence. The doctor reveals that "in order to make it through the day she had to regard the cadavers as medical evidence, not human bodies"—meaning that in the face of unimaginable violence, she has to shut down her capacity for empathy in order to survive.

Over the course of his work, Cantú also begins to suffer from nightmares—a clear sign of repressed emotions struggling for expression—again emphasizing that those who live in proximity to the U.S.–Mexico border have to emotionally numb themselves in order to deal with the suffering around them. Cantú prefaces his account of his time in Border Patrol with a dream of visiting a **wolf** in a cave, writing, "The animal seems truly fearsome, but also wise." Later, wolves haunt his dreams, symbolizing a violence he has suppressed to his subconscious but which is "wise" in that he must reckon with it if he's to emerge whole from his experience. Later, Cantú introduces the psychoanalyst Jung's concept of "shadow": the repressed thoughts and emotions that silently shape a person's life. Cantú suggests that just as he personally will have to reckon with everything he's repressed, healing the tragedy at the border will require society to contend with its own shadow—namely, the humanity it has refused to see in all those whose lives have been ended or destroyed by the border. Thus Cantú illustrates that the repression of human and empathetic responses to the trouble at the border ravages both individual psyches and society at large.

NATURAL MIGRATION VS. HUMAN BOUNDARIES

The title *The Line Becomes a River* describes the U.S.–Mexico border: a straight line drawn arbitrarily through the desert until it meets the Rio Grande on the western edge of Texas, where the line becomes a river, flowing to the Gulf of Mexico. The river itself is a site of the natural migration of fish, and elsewhere, Cantú describes other natural migratory phenomena, such as those of **birds** and insects. With these details, Cantú underlines the contrast between the way that humans enforce hard and arbitrary borderlines and the way that creatures move fluidly and naturally between habitats. He argues that the very arbitrariness of human borders dooms them to failure, since they attempt to deny natural and undeniable migratory patterns. In turn, this makes Border Patrol agents like Cantú ultimately powerless soldiers in a futile war.

Cantú repeatedly describes natural migratory phenomena, such as stars, which would once have been navigational tools, and the migration of animals. On a visit to the national park where she used to work, Cantú's mother finds the dried shell of a dragonfly larva and holds it up to Cantú, telling him, "Dragonflies migrate as birds do [...] beating their papery wings for days on end across rolling plains, across long mountain chains, across the open sea." The timeless, expansive landscapes she describes serve as a reminder that migration is as old and natural as Earth itself. Later, while working as a patrol officer, Cantú sees a snake trying to cross the desert, stuck at the pedestrian fence that marks the border with Mexico. The snake repeatedly hits its head on a fence until Cantú guides it to an opening and it slithers through. The episode highlights how arbitrary human boundaries are compared to wildlife corridors—the routes animals have followed across landscapes since long before nation states were established.

Cantú also repeatedly notes that, like other nomadic creatures, humans used to cross the border easily, too, going back and forth until the escalation of border enforcement began in the 1990s. When he meets his coworker Manuel's parents, they reminisce about the trips they used to take into Mexico. "People would cross back and forth all day long, like the border

wasn't even there," Manuel's father explains. Cantú uses this contrast between the recent past and the present day to argue that the current violence and policing on the border, though taken for granted today, are not natural or intrinsic to the region. Cantú's own family history also highlights the ways boundaries rupture natural migrations. When Cantú's mother falls and hurts her ankle on a trip to Ciudad Juárez (just before Cantú starts work as a patrol officer), a Mexican man helps take care of Cantú's mother and tells them, "You're at home here." And yet, though Cantú and his mother's family traveled from Mexico to the United States just a few generations earlier, the countries are so divided physically and politically that they're not at home at all.

Cantú also describes the arduous, entirely arbitrary, and highly politicized process of determining and marking the present-day border between the U.S. and Mexico, thus questioning the validity of the very boundary he is paid to enforce. By highlighting how arduous the process of marking the border is for the first surveyors, he underscores exactly how unnatural it is to score a boundary into such a region. "The surveyors," he writes, "could not help but comment on the strangeness of their task and the extreme and unfamiliar nature of the landscape." They also remarked upon the "'arbitrarily chosen' nature of the boundary line and the 'impracticable nature of their work'"—precisely the improbable work that Cantú and so many others are paid to enforce, inflicting great and widespread misery in the process. By describing mapping the border onto the landscape as the assertion of "a boundary that had hitherto existed only on paper and in the furious minds of politicians," Cantú highlights that this enormous, misery-inducing obstacle was created in part out of the personal emotions of just a few men. Further, he suggests that all future attempts to uphold this boundary asserted out of fury will similarly be marked by suffering and fury. In this way, he reminds readers that the border has enshrined ongoing suffering for purely arbitrary reasons and will never be defensible as a purely rational phenomenon.

THE VALUE OF A HUMAN LIFE

While working for the United States Border Patrol, Francisco Cantú confronts the enormous scale of death on the U.S.–Mexico border. While working as a field agent in the desert, he finds the bodies of migrants who've died while trying to cross the desert into the U.S.—and, later, when he's stationed in an office in El Paso, Texas, he sees countless images of mutilated and murdered bodies belonging to victims of Mexico's drug violence just across the Rio Grande, in Ciudad Juárez. He can only continue to do his work and live in proximity to such death by "suspending knowledge and concern" about it—that is, by ceasing to treat each of the dead with the care they deserve as humans. He notes, too, that Mexican and U.S. cultures at large have developed strategies to minimize the trauma of this mass dying by negating the individual humanity of the dead. Years after leaving Border Patrol, Cantú becomes deeply involved in the plight of his friend José, an undocumented migrant whose life is destroyed when he leaves the United States to visit his dying mother in Mexico and is repeatedly captured by Border Patrol while trying to return to his wife and three kids in the U.S. This intimate knowledge of an individual migrant's case and the suffering the border causes in a family's life forces Cantú to think about the countless other migrants he'd found dead or been responsible for deporting throughout his time in Border Patrol, who now take on an unbearable weight. Cantú argues that the value of a human life is not relative to a person's nationality or other origins but is instead incalculable and even infinite. He also suggests that in order to fully value a life, humans need a sense of the subject's story and individuality—but that this is precisely what is denied to most people seeking to cross the border.

Throughout the book, the deaths and injuries of American citizens and patrol officers are treated with much more gravity than those of Latin American migrants, suggesting that American culture has become blind to migrants' equal humanity, simply because they're anonymous and "other." When a Border Patrol agent is killed, Cantú goes to work "to find the intel center teeming with uniformed agents and high-level command staff." The agency goes into overdrive seeking resolution and justice for the death of one staff member; meanwhile, an endless flow of dead migrants passes through its jurisdiction with barely any response. Similarly, when Cantú's friend Morales ends up in hospital after a traffic accident, his visiting room is filled with family, childhood friends, and coworkers—in stark contrast to the silent, anonymous deaths and injuries Cantú witnesses among migrants trying to cross the border.

Cantú often cites statistics about the lives lost in border crossings, drug violence, and human trafficking, while also noting that statistics alone dehumanize the dead and thus exacerbate the problem of migrants being seen as faceless masses. Worse still, even statistics omit the many humans who have simply disappeared in the humanitarian catastrophes on the border. In discussing the femicides (the killing of women) that began to escalate in Ciudad Juárez in the mid-1990s, Cantú describes the discovery of mass graves in which different women's body parts were mingled—"a literal amalgamation of individual victims into an undifferentiated mass." In their anonymity, the women lose all dignity and right to justice in the eyes of the authorities. Cantú also cites a study by cultural sociologist Jane Zavisca, which analyzed the most common metaphors journalists use in discussing migrant deaths. Zavisca found that "economic metaphors were predominant, characterizing migrant deaths as a 'cost,' 'calculation,' or 'gamble.'" This recurring metaphor dehumanizes

migrants by turning them into a currency, thus making their individual humanity and suffering easier to dismiss.

Cantú struggles to reconcile his heartbreak over José's case with his involvement in enforcing so many other family separations as a Border Patrol officer, recognizing that he himself had ceased to see the migrants he interacted with as individuals. The book's structure reflects the disproportionate weight Cantú lends José's story compared to other migrants': the third of its three sections focuses on José's story alone, leaving readers to imagine all the equally full and human stories that might surround the countless anonymous migrants in the two earlier sections. After leaving Border Patrol, Cantú struggles with being so invested in José's case when there are millions like him. His mother reassures him that caring for José is important because it's helping him remember the humanity of all migrants: "For his family, and for you, José *is* unique. Sure there might be thousands or millions of people in his position, but it's because of him that their situation is no longer abstract to you." The incalculable value of a life, his mother suggests, can't be appreciated through numbers alone.

NATURE, BEAUTY, AND HUMANITY

The desert landscape of the Southwestern United States forms a majestic backdrop to Cantú's life and work in Border Patrol. As the son of a former park ranger, Cantú appreciates and respects nature instinctively, and he pays close attention to the creatures and plants that surround him. Yet as his work with Border Patrol progresses, he witnesses and participates in acts that defile nature, and he finds his own connection with it growing complicated: sometimes, while looking at the desert, he can see only the horrors that have occurred there. After he leaves Border Patrol, his ability to appreciate natural beauty returns. In this way, Cantú argues that nature humanizes people, and that the loss of respect for nature and its beauty can signal a loss of appreciation for others' humanity.

The Line Becomes a River is peppered with acts of defilement of nature, each of them coming to represent Cantú's fears about what he or other humans are capable of. In his early days as a border agent, Cantú is out with a group of fellow agents when their superior sets fire to a cholla cactus. The men stand around watching it burn and laughing. Immediately after, the superior warns them to walk with their guns drawn because there's a mountain lion nearby, and Cantú feels "a profound and immediate fear—not of the danger posed to us by the animal, but of the idea that it might show itself to us, so many men armed and heedless." He's scared not of the animal but of what his coworkers might do to it given what they did to the cactus. Appearing near the beginning of his employment, this moment of disharmony with nature is an early signal of the loss of empathy and skewed moral perspective Cantú will struggle with during his time as an agent. Later, at a particularly stressful moment in his work, when Cantú feels helplessly trapped in the broken system of border enforcement, he visits a firing range. While he's practicing his target shooting, a small yellow **bird** lands above his target, and he impulsively shoots it. Immediately, he reports, "I began to feel sick and I wondered, for one brief moment, if I was going insane." The strength of this response indicates that to Cantú, his knee-jerk reaction to kill the bird signifies a deep darkness in his psyche.

Cantú's mother is opposed to her son's work as a Border Patrol agent, often trying to point out to him the psychological damage it could do him. By emphasizing his mother's connection to nature, for instance by highlighting her work as a park ranger, Cantú cements the book's link between empathy and the appreciation of nature. In the prologue, Cantú asks his mother why she joined the National Park Service, and she replies: "Because the wildlands were a place where I could understand myself." The answer ties the complexity of humans to the complexity of the natural environment, suggesting that to appreciate one is to appreciate the other. While struggling with his conscience after leaving Border Patrol, Cantú talks to his mother, who tells him a story from her youth of trying to rescue a ground squirrel from being fed to a snake—but then having to kill it after it dies in her care. In this way, she explicitly links the violence and callousness Cantú has been part of during his time in Border Patrol with the act of defiling nature by killing an animal: both acts are well-intentioned but ultimately violent.

In the epilogue, Cantú tenderly paints a beautiful scene from nature, ending the book with an indication that, after leaving Border Patrol, he is learning to reconnect with his empathy and full humanity. In the final line of the epilogue, Cantú writes, "All around me the landscape trembled and breathed as one." Here, "as one" implies the infinite interconnectedness of every element of nature. During his time in Border Patrol, Cantú found complexity and interconnection to be suffocating, because he was trapped in a human web of suffering. Now, having escaped that human system and regained his connection to nature, he remembers that the interconnectedness of all beings in its pure, natural form is beautiful and almost holy. This natural scene takes place on the Rio Grande, the river that separates Texas from Mexico. By ending the book at a natural border, Cantú implies that nature, in all its regenerative and connected complexity, will hold the key to resolving the border problem and all the suffering it has inflicted.

INSTITUTIONAL VIOLENCE

Cantú's story of working the U.S.–Mexico border is a story of institutionalization. He enters the United States Border Patrol as an idealistic young man hoping to learn about the border so he can someday use what he learns to help people. However, as he enters the machinery

of border enforcement, he grows ever more detached from the migrants he meets as well as his own friends and family, and he witnesses numerous acts of callousness and cruelty from his coworkers toward the migrants they intercept. Instead of getting a clearer picture of the border, he grows increasingly confused as he senses his own moral compass slipping. After leaving, he sees that he was naïve to assume that he would be able to hold fast to his personal ideals in the midst of an institution designed to enforce its own agenda at all costs. He realizes that institutional power is overwhelmingly potent, and that because it's an impersonal power located in organizational machinery rather than human hands, it is inherently violent in nature.

Over the course of his time in Border Patrol, Cantú watches Border Patrol bring out the worst in many of his coworkers and even in himself. In each instance, Cantú implies that herd mentality and the power enshrined in the institution exacerbate the agents' cruelty. During his early days as a border agent, Cantú and the group he's patrolling with come across some abandoned belongings in the desert. Cantú's coworkers ransack the belongings, and one agent, Hart, giggles as he urinates on some. The giggle suggests that he knows he's transgressing, and that he feels his status as an agent has given him license to do so. Later, toward the end of Cantú's account of his time in Border Patrol, he discusses "moral injury," a condition in which individuals "learn to accept the things [they] know are wrong." Cantú implies that Border Patrol is a broken institution that has integrated wrongdoing into its core functioning, thus inflicting moral injury on its agents by rendering them powerless to resist its wrongs. Cantú also points out the ways in which Border Patrol traumatizes its own agents, thus trapping them and the migrants they encounter in an ever-deeper cycle of suffering. After an agent shoots and kills someone, Cantú's boss, Hayward, speaks of his own lingering pain after shooting someone decades earlier. While he speaks, "an old and quiet pain [spreads] across his face the likes of which [Cantú] hopes [he] would never be made to carry."

Cantú probes the question of whether the violence he sees is rooted in the individual or the institutional, and ultimately decides that on the individual level, humans have goodness in them and are most often triggered to violence by institutional or broader social failings. He discusses the "warrior gene"—the evidence that some people (primarily men) carry a gene that predisposes them to aggression. However, he notes that the gene "can be triggered by childhood exposure to trauma," and that those who carry the gene but aren't abused in early life have a low risk of expressing it—suggesting that institutional and social failures are more powerful causes of violence than genetics. The testimony Cantú includes from a *sicario* (a drug cartel's hitman) reveals that he, too, suffers a kind of moral injury after being sucked into the institution of the cartel, and that he's been left traumatized by the work. In this way, Cantú suggests that it's institutions, not people (even the most violent people), that are heartless and inhumane.

The Line Becomes a River offers a rare insider's perspective on the institution of Border Patrol. However, Cantú also questions the trustworthiness of an insider's perspective on an institution that skews its members' moral frameworks, and so includes several external perspectives, too. While helping his friend José with his immigration problems, Cantú speaks to a court-appointed attorney, Walter, who doesn't know that Cantú used to be a border agent. "I've almost never seen these guys express any humanity, any emotion," the attorney says of border agents, adding, "How do you come home to your kids at night when you spend your day treating other humans like dogs?" The comment serves as a reminder that whether or not they experience inner turmoil like Cantú does, from an outsider's perspective, those within the institution of border enforcement are simply the perpetrators of inhumane acts. And earlier in the book, while Cantú bandages the damaged feet of a woman he has apprehended crossing the desert, she says, "Eres muy humanitario"—"You have a lot of human goodness." Cantú looks away and shakes his head, disagreeing and seeming ashamed. He is aware of all he's done as an agent that is inhumane and also of how inhumane the institution must be if the simple act of tending to someone's injury seems like a great humanitarian kindness.

SYMBOLS

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

BIRDS

In *The Line Becomes a River*, birds symbolize freedom and thus come to feel like a threat to Cantú, whose job as a field agent in the United States Border Patrol is to enforce restrictions. Birds first enter the book when Cantú's mother talks about their natural migration, before he goes to work for Border Patrol. As such, they're immediately established as a counterpoint to Cantú's anti-migratory work. Later, when he's working as a patrol agent and the stresses of the job begin to eat away at him, Cantú visits a shooting range and impulsively shoots a small yellow bird. He then immediately worries about his sanity and tenderly buries the bird. This moment suggests that Cantú's work has made him feel instinctively violent toward anything free or uncontrolled. Later, when he's feeling trapped in his office doing intelligence work, Cantú watches a bird land on a surveillance tower in Arizona, relayed through one of the feeds he watches. The bird seems to taunt him, daring him to return to the desert, to the border itself, and to "inhabit the quiet chaos churning in [his] mind." Here, the bird symbolizes the freedom to roam, which

Cantú gave up when he took his job in intelligence.

WOLVES

For Cantú, wolves represent violence as a shadow side of human nature that must be recognized and understood. He shares his first dream about wolves at the beginning of Part I—the section that charts his training as a Border Patrol agent and his time spent working in the desert. In the dream, after inspecting mounds of severed body parts, Cantú is told he must go see a wolf in a nearby cave. The wolf is frightening and huge, but Cantú holds out his hand, and the wolf approaches him and licks him. Later, Cantú recounts a story his mother used to tell him about Saint Francis and a wolf that was terrorizing a town by eating its animals and even people. When Saint Francis went to the wolf, the wolf ran at him in attack, but Saint Francis calmed it and struck up a deal: if the wolf would stop eating the town's livestock, the townspeople would promise to feed it every day. Like Cantú's dream, the story uses the wolf to symbolize a dark force that can only be tamed by friendship rather than retaliatory violence. Cantú continues to dream of wolves throughout his time with Border Patrol, including a nightmare at the end of his time in the agency in which he shoots a man and a young boy. He wakes up vowing to make peace with brother wolf—which is to say the violence within him that's haunting him. Later, Cantú quotes from Carl Jung on the necessity of accepting humans' shadow sides. Jung wrote, "When you dream of a savage bull, or a lion, or a wolf … this means: it wants to come to you" and advises that the best stance to take with such a nightmare figure would be "Please, come and devour me." This final consideration of wolves prefaces Part III, in which Cantú will reckon with his own and his culture's shadow sides by working with José on his immigration case and seeing for the first time the true scale of the violence he helped perpetrate as a member of Border Patrol.

TEETH

In *The Line Becomes a River*, teeth represent the extreme repressed stress and inner turmoil that Cantú experiences as a United States Border Patrol agent. As he gets increasingly entrenched in the world of Border Patrol, Cantú has repeated stress dreams involving teeth. In one dream, for instance, he grinds all his teeth out and holds them in his hands, but there's nobody for him to show them to. When he moves into intelligence work, he visits a dentist who tells him he's been grinding his teeth at night and asks whether his work is stressful. Cantú is evasive and even aggressive with the dentist, as if he can't admit even to himself how stressed he's been, because he's still in the midst of the stress. His intelligence work involves studying extremely graphic accounts of murder and mutilation perpetrated in Mexico's drug war.

Soon, Cantú is having so many stressful dreams involving teeth that he can't seem to wake up from them, though he's desperate to. The dreams seem to become less frequent in the book's third section, when Cantú has left Border Patrol, which seems to affirm that his choice to leave Border Patrol was a healthy one.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Riverhead edition of *The Line Becomes a River* published in 2018.

Prologue Quotes

❝ Dragonflies migrate as birds do, she told me, beating their papery wings for days on end across rolling plains, across long mountain chains, across the open sea.

Related Characters: Francisco Cantú (speaker), Cantú's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

While Francisco Cantú is a college student, he and his mother visit the National Park where she used to work. While walking the park, she finds a dragonfly's exoskeleton and describes the animal's migratory process to Cantú.

It's significant that this trip takes place before Cantú starts working as a Border Patrol agent. At this point, his relationship with his mother is very close, bonded in part over a shared love of nature. Throughout the book, the ability to appreciate nature and the fullness, beauty, and intricacy of its processes is associated with the ability to connect with one's empathy and full humanity. This quiet moment in nature—before Cantú begins the work that will come between him and his mother and separate him from his most humane impulses—speaks to this connection between nature and humanity. The calm tone also establishes a contrast between the natural migration Cantú's mother describes and the militarized border enforcement Cantú will describe in such unflinching terms later, which begins to highlight the arbitrariness and senselessness of U.S. border policy.

Part 1 Quotes

I wondered if he thought of his body as a tool for destruction or as one of safekeeping. I wondered, too, about my body, about what sort of tool it was becoming.

Related Characters: Francisco Cantú (speaker), Robles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Cantú is in an intense spin class run by senior agent Robles, who has just shared two stories: of a time he saved a migrant's life, and a time he caused a migrant's death. Robles's story—and his evident lingering trauma—about the migrant who died in his custody directly prompts Cantú's internal dialogue about what sort of tool his body is becoming. As an idealistic young man, fresh out of college, he had imagined that his work would revolve around safekeeping, and that he might be able to do good within the institution of Border Patrol. However, as he enters the institution, he is beginning to notice the pain it has inflicted on staff such as Robles and the harsh treatment of new recruits such as himself. These early hints of the institution's violence prompt his first hesitancy about the nature and morality of the work he has signed up for.

You must understand you are stepping into a system, an institution with little regard for people.

Related Characters: Cantú's Mother (speaker), Francisco Cantú

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

On Christmas Eve, Cantú and his mother, who has flown in for a visit, have a heated discussion about the nature of Border Patrol and his involvement with it as an agent. Cantú's mother is a voice of wisdom and humanity throughout the book, and this passage is no exception, as she implores Cantú to see Border Patrol for the impersonal system that it is. The longer Cantú spends working for Border Patrol, the more his relationship with his mother grows distant—and this passage marks an early stage in the rupture in their relationship. This distance is partly because Cantú's mother has moral qualms about the work and partly because she fears the institutionalization that Cantú is undergoing. As the book unfolds, it's clear that the work changes Cantú, causing him to detach from his own emotions in order to cope with the violence and tragedies that he witnesses every day.

Hay mucha desesperación, he told me, almost whispering. I tried to look at his face, but it was too dark.

Related Characters: Francisco Cantú (speaker), Morales

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

While working as new Border Patrol recruits, Francisco Cantú and his coworker Morales find 10 migrants trying to cross the desert. Among them is an old man from Michoacán, a region Cantú has visited. Cantú and the old man talk quietly while the group walks to the van, and the man tells Cantú how desperate things are where he's from. His comment is intended to explain why he's trying to cross the border despite the difficulties of doing so—though Cantú hasn't asked that question.

This quiet, almost tender interaction between Cantú and the old man stands in contrast to Cantú's fellow recruits' behavior portrayed a few pages earlier, in which they ransacked migrants' backpacks and spitefully urinated on their belongings. This contrast highlights the tension between Cantú's behavior as an individual and the behavior sanctioned by the institution he has entered—a tension that seems ominous, since Cantú is new to the institution and might yet be altered by it.

In addition, the man's description of the despair in his hometown highlights that the decision to risk one's life by trying to cross the border is never taken lightly. Rather, migrants fear equally for their lives if they remain.

There are days when I feel I am becoming good at what I do. And then I wonder, what does it mean to be good at this?

Related Characters: Francisco Cantú (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Cantú interrupts his account of working as a new recruit in Border Patrol to offer some reflections on his work. Part of what makes this passage so significant is that it's immediately preceded by Cantú's account of passing a mountain lion in the desert at night with the other new recruits and being afraid of what they might do to it. This quotation encapsulates the internal split Cantú suffers during his time in Border Patrol. He is good at his job, and aims to perform it well, and yet he feels increasingly dubious about the morality of the work. The observation foreshadows his later observations about "moral injury"—that is, the harm individuals suffer when they are forced to accept things they know are wrong. Even at this early stage of his training, Cantú is already questioning the nature of his work; before long, this dubiousness will develop into moral injury.

The quote also presents the collision between Cantú's youthful idealism and drive to perform well and the complexity of life and policy on the border. Already, the book offers a foreboding sense that that youthful idealism will be crushed under the border's intractable problems.

> In the course of their work along the international boundary, Emory's surveying parties erected [...] forty-seven monuments along the newly traced line from the Colorado River to the Rio Grande, asserting, for the very first time, the entirety of a boundary that had hitherto existed only on paper and in the furious minds of politicians.

Related Characters: Francisco Cantú (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout Part 1, Cantú intersperses his account of working for Border Patrol with historical interludes describing the process of marking the U.S.–Mexico border in the 19th century. This quotation concludes a passage on a series of treaties where the border was drawn and redrawn, followed by an account of an expedition that placed markers along the newly determined border line for the first time. By describing this laborious process of marking the U.S.–Mexico border, Cantú emphasizes that there's nothing natural or inevitable about the border—rather, it's an arbitrary line determined by politicians hundreds of years ago. Cantú suggests that this arbitrariness makes enforcing the border difficult and possibly pointless. In addition, by describing the minds of the politicians that determined the border as "furious," Cantú highlights that from its inception, the border has been a product of humankind's less appealing qualities, such as fury, greed, and territorialism. In this way, he further questions the border's legitimacy and usefulness.

> Outside in the parking lot, trying to gather my strength, I thought about the tears in Cole's eyes, about Morales's far-off gaze, about his parents huddled in the corner [...] My face became hot and I could feel moisture collecting in my eyes. [...] I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I would not go back, I decided, I would not let the water gather into tears.

Related Characters: Francisco Cantú (speaker), Cole, Morales

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

After Morales is in a motorcycle accident, Cantú begrudgingly visits him in the hospital—not wanting to see him in a coma—and is immediately emotionally overwhelmed by the experience. However, Cantú forces himself to suppress his feelings rather than giving into vulnerability. This episode is clear evidence of the extreme extent to which Cantú has had to suppress his emotions in order to work as a Border Patrol agent. By this point in the book, Cantú has experienced many difficult things while working in the field, including witnessing deaths and meeting children who had been separated from family members while trying to cross. His job requires him to process these traumatic episodes without showing deep emotion. His inability to then show deep emotion during a personal episode—the injury of his friend—indicates that the work is fundamentally changing his heart, mind, and the way he moves through the world. This passage poses an implicit question about the impact on border enforcement and migrants' lives when Border Patrol officers are forced to detach from their own emotions and humanity in order to do their jobs.

> I dropped the little bird with one shot.

Related Characters: Francisco Cantú (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

Immediately before leaving his work as a Border Patrol field agent, Cantú visits a firing range. A small, yellow bird lands on his target, and he attempts to scare it off, then, instead, shoots it.

The love of nature is a core family value for Cantú and his mother, as demonstrated by the trip to the National Park that opens the book. In the book itself, nature symbolizes richness, complexity, and the fullness of human experience, and the love of nature thus represents a person's ability to inhabit their full humanity. Therefore, by killing this bird, Cantú reveals how far he has strayed from these core values over the course of his work as a Border Patrol agent. In addition, the use of the slang word "dropped," which has violent overtones of fighting or targeted attack, suggests that a violent stance has become reflexive and universal for Cantú—even in scenarios as in inappropriate as trying to make a small bird move out of the way. Immediately after shooting the bird, Cantú wonders if he's going insane, and buries it, emphasizing how symbolic this episode feels to him, as evidence of the change he has undergone.

Part 2 Quotes

❝ Saint Francis proposed a compact: in exchange for the wolf's promise to cease its killing of livestock and townspeople, the residents of Gubbio would feed the animal every day for the rest of its life. "Thought shalt no longer suffer hunger," he told the wolf, "as it is hunger which has made thee do so much evil."

Related Characters: Francisco Cantú (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

As Cantú embarks on a new phase of his career, working in intelligence, he tells a story his mother used to read him as a child about his namesake, Saint Francis. In the story, a village is plagued by a wolf who eats its livestock and even human residents. Saint Francis goes to visit the wolf at his lair, and though the wolf tries to attack him, Saint Francis stands calmly and makes the sign of the cross. Saint Francis makes a deal with the wolf that recognizes that the wolf is acting not out of malice, but out of hunger, and that tending to the wolf's hunger will curb the violence.

The story reflects Cantú's growing awareness that the work that Border Patrol engages in is futile: that a militarized response to hunger and other forms of suffering is both inhumane and doomed to failure, since it doesn't address the original problems of hunger and suffering. Thus, on one level the story is an appeal to remember the humanity of those who are driven to violence or to break the law by crossing the border and to respond in a way that values their lives.

The story also has psychological overtones in light of Cantú's later references to Jung. Read as a psychological parable, the story suggests that in order to heal from the violence he has absorbed as a Border Patrol agent, Cantú will have to directly face that violence and try to thoughtfully understand it rather than simply trying to repress it.

❝ After hanging up, I sat staring at the camera feeds on the massive screen in front of me, imagining all the bodies that I knew were out there, undiscovered under trees and in dry washes, slowly returning to the earth.

Related Characters: Francisco Cantú (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

While working at his new job in intelligence, Cantú receives a call from his former coworker Cole, who is reporting some dead bodies he and his men found in the field. After hanging up, Cantú is haunted by his knowledge of all the other dead bodies lying unfound in the desert. This moment highlights the scale of the suffering on the border and how helpless Cantú feels to curb it. The juxtaposition of the two individual deaths Cole has just reported with the unfathomable number of people who have disappeared in the desert reminds readers that each person who disappeared was an individual—that is, a real person rather

than an anonymous member of the masses—thus greatly heightening readers' sense of the scale of loss on the border.

The moment also highlights Cantú's sense of helplessness. Sitting behind a screen in his new job, he is able to watch camera feeds of the desert, but he can't effect any change there. Even the Border Patrol agents who remain in the field are unable to find all the bodies in the desert. The image of these bodies slowly returning to the earth makes the process of their disappearance and death seem as unstoppable as a force of nature, heightening the sense of human powerlessness, and yet the deaths are caused by human processes and are thus preventable. With this, the book suggests that the failure to prevent them represents not true inevitability but a human willingness to sacrifice these lives.

> I look out at the walls of the canyon and find that all beauty has drained from the landscape, that I am surrounded only by the sinister threat of violence, by faceless men and stacks of empty chests.

Related Characters: Francisco Cantú (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

During his time working in intelligence, Cantú's dreams become ever more intense and nightmarish. In this particular dream, he is working in the desert when he finds a group of faceless, drug-smuggling men. He chains them together and orders them to take him to their drug stash. He radios for backup, but nobody comes. He walks through the desert with them, becoming increasingly scared, until they arrive in a canyon stacked with chests, which are empty.

The vividness and heightened fear of this dream clearly reflect how heavily Cantú's work is weighing on his psyche. His unconscious mind is haunted by the threat of violence and by a sense that he is alone and unsupported (since he calls for backup and receives none). In turn, the fact that these fears emerge only in Cantú's dreams reflects the damaging way Border Patrol requires its agents to detach from their emotions, in order to keep doing their jobs. By including the dreams, Cantú reminds readers that it's impossible ever to fully escape a fear or trauma, and thus that Border Patrol might be staffed entirely by people who are actively repressing trauma.

The dream also illustrates the way the border strips individual lives of their value: the men's facelessness symbolizes the anonymity of so many of the people who die on the border, while the empty chests recall coffins that will never be filled because the bodies that should fill them will never be found.

> It is difficult, of course, to conceive of such numbers in any tangible and appropriate way. The number of border deaths, just like the number of drug war homicides, or the numbers that measure the death toll of the Mexican Revolution or the War of Independence, does little to account for all the ways that violence rips and ripples through a society, through the lives and minds of its inhabitants.

Related Characters: Francisco Cantú (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

While discussing the number of lives lost in drug violence in Mexico, Cantú presents the official death toll of 164,000, but he notes that this is likely a huge underestimate, and that it doesn't account for the many people who simply disappeared while crossing the border, fleeing drug violence. Neither does it account for the other ways that mass death and violence affects a society—in other words, the way it impacts the quality of even the lives that aren't lost. By juxtaposing the stark numbers of the official death count with a discussion of all the things those numbers obscure, Cantú points to one of the central theme of this book: the unfathomable value of each and every human life and the richness and nuance a life can hold. This idea of the value of a human life consequently points to the difficulty—even impossibility—of truly valuing all the lives lost on the border and in the violence of the border region.

> Antígona González asks: "What thing is the body when someone strips it of a name, a history, a family name? … When there is no face or trail or traces or signs … What thing is the body when it's lost?"

Related Characters: Francisco Cantú (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

Cantú quotes from *Antígona González*, a modern-day retelling of the Greek tragedy Antigone that's set in contemporary Mexico. Penned by Sara Uribe, the poem's central tragedy is the mass disappearance of people trying to cross the border from Mexico to the U.S., and how difficult it is for families to grieve people who have simply disappeared.

By including excerpts from Uribe's work, Cantú clearly positions the goings-on at the U.S.–Mexico border as a modern-day tragedy, comparable to the foundational tragedies of Western culture. This quotation highlights a point Cantú makes repeatedly through the book: that the anonymity of so many of those who disappear on the border makes it easier for policy-makers and everyday Americans to ignore the tragedy, and yet the anonymity is a tragedy in and of itself, denying scores of people the dignity of a burial and a death mourned by their loved ones and denying families the opportunity to mourn.

Almost as a rule, he and all the cartel men he knew and worked with were always high and drunk when carrying out their work. After killing or torturing a target, the *sicario* says, "I did not fully realize what I had done until two or three days later when I was finally sober. I realized how easy it was that the drugs and the world that I was in were controlling and manipulating me. I was no longer myself."

Related Characters: Francisco Cantú (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

Cantú relays an interview between a *sicario*—a cartel hit man—and the writer Charles Bowden. The *sicario* notes that in order to do his work, he had to find ways not to think about what he was doing, for instance by consuming drugs or alcohol. The role of *sicario* is extremely violent, consisting of regular assignments to murder, mutilate, and torture rivals. And yet the *sicario* is far from inhumane—he and his fellow *sicarios*, in fact, respond to the emotional trauma of their work much as Cantú processes the emotional violence of his own work: by detaching. For the *sicarios*, detaching means numbing oneself with drugs and alcohol. For Cantú, it means shutting down emotionally, such that his relationships—for instance his relationship with his mother—suffer, and his trauma fights to express itself in his dreams. By including this example of trauma and emotional detachment as experienced by someone at the most violent end of the suffering on the border, Cantú suggests that trauma and emotional detachment are epidemic in the region and are the natural result of the intense suffering found there.

My uncle began to recount all the natural things he had been made to destroy in the years he worked as a contractor in Santa Fe. At one job site he tore down a mighty pine tree and cut it into pieces. […] It's overwhelming sometimes, he said, to think of all the trees I've killed, all the scars I've left in the land.

Related Characters: Francisco Cantú (speaker), Cantú's Uncle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

After a work mission to Lordsburg, New Mexico, Cantú stays in the area to visit his uncle. His uncle takes Cantú to visit some wild land he has bought, hoping to build a house on it, and explains how much he loves the local landscape and trees—despite having had to destroy a lot of natural beauty in the course of his work as a contractor.

Throughout the book, the ability to appreciate nature is associated with characters like Cantú's mother, who inhabit their full humanity and take a rich and empathic view of life. Cantú's uncle's life of despoiling nature despite his own love for it reveals that even for those who instinctively harbor this full and humane appreciation of the natural world, work can cause them to act against their own deepest instincts and harm things they cherish and hold sacred. There is a clear parallel to the ways in which Cantú's work as a Border Patrol agent requires him to harm people despite his instinctive wish to help them. Ultimately, this creates a form of institutional violence or "moral injury," as Cantú calls it, caused by a workplace or institution repeatedly requiring workers to do things they know to be wrong.

> To live in the city of El Paso in those days was to hover at the edge of a crushing cruelty, to safely fill the lungs with air steeped in horror.

Related Characters: Francisco Cantú (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

While jogging through the city of El Paso, Texas, where he is living as an intelligence officer working with Border Patrol, Cantú looks at the city of Juárez on the hills opposite. At the time, Juárez was one of the most dangerous cities in the world, plagued by horrific drug and cartel violence, while El Paso was one of the safest in the United States—and yet these two cities are separated only by the Rio Grande, which also serves as the national border between the U.S. and Mexico.

Here, Cantú describes the willful ignorance that's necessary for those living safely in proximity to such grave violence. As an intelligence officer forced to see daily photos of murders and mutilations committed across the border, Cantú was well aware of the cruelty nearby, and yet in order to live his life, he had to repress his knowledge of it. The dynamic of psychological repression echoes the emotional detachment he first began performing as a field agent, trying to keep the trauma of the deaths and disappearances on the border at bay. Ultimately, this repression and refusal to fully countenance the suffering so near at hand diminishes an individual's humanity and capacity to feel empathy and sustain relationships—as demonstrated by the way Cantú's relationship with his mother suffers while he's working with Border Patrol. As such, the instinct to repress or turn away from the violence exacerbates the situation by curbing humane responses and interventions from those nearby.

> "We must be able not only to reckon the number of deaths but to reckon with each victim as an individual."

Related Characters: José, Francisco Cantú

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Cantú quotes the historian Timothy Snyder, who studies genocides that Hitler and Stalin perpetrated in Eastern Europe between 1930 and 1945. Snyder encourages his readers to think of the number of deaths that resulted from these genocides not as fourteen million, but rather "fourteen million *times one*." Snyder argues that this is one way to begin to reclaim the individuality of each of those who died, and thus fully reckon with the scale of the loss.

Cantú draws a parallel between the genocides Snyder studies and the mass death and disappearance currently playing out on the U.S.–Mexico border. Like Snyder, Cantú is at pains throughout the book to note that the statistics he sometimes cites about the number of deaths on the border and in drug wars can never fully hold the scale of the region's suffering. Like Snyder, Cantú aims to help his readers think of each death as multiplied by one. He provides this sense of individuality by including the stories of some of the migrants he meets, and, later, by describing José's situation in depth.

Both Snyder and Cantú suggest that the failure to account for the individuality of lives lost doesn't only leave the historical record inaccurate; it also makes space for a callousness that can make space for suffering to continue or be repeated.

Part 3 Quotes

> In order a begin a true reckoning with our inner situation, "we have to expose ourselves to the animal impulses of the unconscious without identifying with them and without 'running away.'"

Related Characters: José, Francisco Cantú

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

Part 3 of *The Line Becomes a River* describes episodes in Cantú's life after leaving Border Patrol. At the beginning of this section, Cantú discusses the work of the psychoanalyst Carl Jung, specifically Jung's theory of the shadow. In Jungian terms, a person's shadow is all the parts of their psyche that they repress or reject; typically, after rejecting these elements of themselves, people see them as "other" and are hostile to them when they encounter them in other people. Writing in the midst of the Cold War, Jung observed that a similar rejection was taking place on a mass scale, with entire nations disavowing their own inner darkness

and projecting it onto people of different nationalities.

Cantú implies that the U.S.–Mexico border encourages both the individual psychological and the broad, nationalist versions of shadow repression. Working so close to the border caused him to detach from his emotions and repress them and to develop a hardness, even a violence, that he would now like to disavow. In Part 3, he will chart the process of his coming to terms with that violence by closely observing the way it impacts people like his friend José. Meanwhile, his new outside perspective on Border Patrol allows him to fully appreciate that the darkness institutions like Border Patrol seek to keep out of the U.S. is in fact inscribed in the violence of those very institutions.

> Mostly I arrested migrants, I confessed. People looking for a better life.

Related Characters: Francisco Cantú (speaker), José

Related Themes:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

After leaving Border Patrol and going to work at a coffee shop, Cantú meets José, an undocumented migrant from Mexico. At first they avoid the subject of migration and Cantú's former job, until one day José asks Cantú if he ever arrested a drug smuggler. Cantú tells him he did, but that wasn't the major part of his work. The use of the word "confessed" indicates how ashamed Cantú now feels of the work he used to do. Having left the institution of Border Patrol, he is able to see clearly that arresting "people looking for a better life" was out of sync with his personal values, and that he spent several years or his life arresting the people he originally wanted to help. In addition, the simplicity of the phrase "people looking for a better life" highlights how undemanding and understandable migrants' needs often are, which only further undermines Border Patrol's mission to serve and protect.

> I tell you, Walter said, the Border Patrol, the marshals, it's like they forget about kindness. I've almost never seen these guys express any humanity, any emotion. I don't know how they do it. How do you come home to your kids at night when you spend your day treating other humans like dogs?

Related Characters: Walter (speaker), José, Francisco Cantú

Related Themes:

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

After José is caught trying to cross the border illegally and made to appear in court, Cantú meets with José's court-appointed lawyer, Walter. They meet at the courtroom, where Cantú is able to observe the behavior of Border Patrol agents and other people who work in the institutions of border enforcement. Not knowing that Cantú used to work for Border Patrol, Walter points out how callous and inhumane many of these workers are toward the migrants.

Cantú is able to see his former work in a new light—and to hear uncensored criticism of it—only after leaving the institution. As such, Walter's comment highlights one of the ways that institutional violence endures: by skewing the perceptions of those within the institution, such that they no longer recognize wrongdoing. One of the ways in which people's perceptions are skewed is through the necessary emotional detachment that people who repeatedly confront trauma (such as those who work in border enforcement) perform subconsciously and involuntarily. Cantú's own story indicates that if the agents rarely express any humanity, that might be at least in part because they themselves are traumatized and repressing their emotions. This vicious cycles perpetuates suffering by making it more difficult for the officers to recognize and appreciate the value of the human lives they encounter.

> Of course he has fear. La violencia, she said, la delincuencia, la corrupción.

Related Characters: Lupe (speaker), Elizabeth Green, Francisco Cantú, José

Related Themes:

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

During the battle to win José the right to remain in the U.S., Cantú goes with José's wife, Lupe, to visit Elizabeth, the lawyer working on his case. Elizabeth says the case will be hard, but one option would be to demonstrate that José fears returning to Mexico. Lupe says of course he fears it,

because of the violence, crime, and corruption, but Elizabeth says that isn't enough—in order to win the right to stay in the U.S., José would have to demonstrate that he had received death threats or was being personally targeted.

The exchange highlights how rigid the law is in dealing with migrants and the ways in which it is set up to reject the vast majority of people seeking to live in the U.S. The very legitimate fears Lupe cites, as well as the violence in Mexico that Cantú described earlier in the book, may seem to readers like adequate and reasonable reasons to seek to leave a place, and yet the legal institutions of border enforcement are unconcerned with everyday suffering, no matter how deep and intense. With this exchange, the book reveals a profound disconnect between human needs and the rigidity of the institutions they have to deal with.

> All these years, I told her, it's like I've been circling beneath a giant, my gaze fixed upon its foot resting at the ground. But now, I said, it's like I'm starting to crane my head upward, like I'm finally seeing the thing that crushes.

Related Characters: Francisco Cantú (speaker), José, Cantú's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

After hearing that José's petition to remain in the U.S. has been rejected and José is being deported, Cantú calls his mother. Heartbroken, he tells her about José for the first time and reveals that he feels he is finally beginning to see the sheer scale of the institution he was part of so long and the suffering it inflicts on people like José.

During his time in Border Patrol, Cantú grew distant from his mother. The necessity of repressing the difficult emotions that his work stirred up caused him to push her away too. The fact that he is now able to speak to her about his emotional pain over José, and about his misgivings about the institution of Border Patrol, indicate that he is beginning to heal the trauma and emotional detachment he suffered for his work.

Meanwhile, his observation that he is finally beginning to understand the power and size of the system he worked in underscores one of the ways institutions perpetuate their violence. By keeping workers focused on their own tasks and discouraging analysis of the functioning of the institution as a whole, institutions ensure that workers will continue to enact violent or morally questionable agendas. Only once he's left the institution can Cantú reckon with its full scale and implications.

> For his family and for you, José *is* unique. Sure there might be thousands or millions of people in his position, but it's because of him that their situation is no longer abstract to you. You are no longer severed from what it means to send someone back across the border. You know what's keeping him away, what keeps him from his family. It's something close to you, something that's become a part of you.

Related Characters: Cantú's Mother (speaker), José, Francisco Cantú

Related Themes:

Page Number: 229

Explanation and Analysis

After José has been deported, Cantú visits his mother for Christmas. While they talk about José and Cantú's involvement in his case, Cantú reveals his anguish over José's plight and that of the millions of other people with stories just like José's. He tells his mother he is struggling to reconcile the enormity of that anonymous suffering with the depth of his pain for José.

Cantú's mother's response encapsulates the book's central thesis about the value of a human life: that it's impossible to fully account for the true value of a life without story, meaning without some knowledge of the details of that life. By getting to know José—and in turn by sharing his story with readers—Cantú illuminates a full and rich human life and thus adds incalculable weight to the statistics cited earlier in the book about the number of people who have died, disappeared, and suffered in border violence and militarized border crossings. Each of those lives, Cantú implied, was as rich and full as José's. Now, Cantú must reckon with his own part in enforcing deadly laws against lives as incalculably valuable as José's.

> The part of you that is capable of violence, she said, maybe you wish to be rid of it, to wash yourself of it, but it's not that easy. […] You weren't just observing a reality, you were participating in it. You can't exist within a system for that long without being implicated, without absorbing its poison.

Related Characters: Cantú's Mother (speaker), Francisco Cantú

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 231

Explanation and Analysis

As the book draws to a close, Cantú and his mother discuss his involvement in Border Patrol and the ways in which it might have changed him. Having worked for a large institution herself, during her time as a park ranger at a National Park, Cantú's mother understands the ways in which institutions change their members and that this change is not easily reversed. Her observation that the violence Cantú observed and participated in has become part of him recalls the passages from Jung that Cantú quoted at the beginning of Part 3. Essentially, Cantú's mother suggests that Cantú will have to find a way to confront, live with, and even befriend the new darkness in him, just as the U.S. at large will have to come to terms with the violence in its own nature. By including this quotation from his mother in the closing pages of Part 3, Cantú leaves readers with the sense that for him and readers alike, healing the trauma of militarized border enforcement will entail acknowledging and working through the dark and violent impulses that lurk within each person.

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.

PROLOGUE

Just before Thanksgiving, Francisco Cantú and his mother drive through West Texas on their way to visit a National Park where she worked as a ranger when he was a young boy. They stop at salt flats and look at the Guadalupe Mountains.

Cantú and his mother bond over their shared love of nature, which enriches their relationship by inviting into it the depth and complexity of the natural world. Meanwhile, the mountains represent geological time, and the fleetingness of human land interventions such as borders.

They arrive at the park's visitor center, where an old friend of Cantú's mother greets them. Cantú's mother tells the friend that Cantú is studying the U.S.–Mexico border at college, and that they're on their way to visit Ciudad Juárez. The woman tells them to be careful because Juárez is dangerous.

The juxtaposition of college with the danger in Ciudad Juárez underscores how different life is for Cantú compared to people on the other side of the border.

Cantú and his mother hike through a canyon in the national park the next day. She acts like a ranger again, explaining the landscape and pointing out a dragonfly's shell, which she explains it would have shed in order to migrate. She wades into a stream and invites Cantú to join her.

Cantú's mother's attitude toward the dragonfly shell (and, more broadly, all of nature) is one of respect, reverence, and awe. Cantú includes this reverential account of natural migration as a counterpoint to the horrors of the human system of migration he will recount later.

Over Thanksgiving dinner later that night, Cantú asks his mother why she joined the National Park Service. She says she wanted to protect the landscape and help people love and care for nature, but that looking back on the experience, she isn't sure how she feels about the experience. She doesn't give more detail.

Cantú's mother's love of nature is associated with wisdom and humanity, thus adding weight to her later objections to his work with Border Patrol. Her ambivalence about her time as a park ranger, despite her love of nature, indicates that even an institution as seemingly benign as the National Park Service can have a complicated or negative impact on a person's interests and belief systems.

The next day, Cantú and his mother drive to El Paso, Texas. The owner of their motel says that he used to see the grass on the hillside opposite move every night, but it wasn't the wind, it was "wetbacks"—a slur for a Mexican living in the United States. The owner says he doesn't see the grass move anymore.

The changes in the movement of the grass reflect changes in border policy over the preceding years, as the border became more heavily militarized, cutting off people's gentle, natural migration. Meanwhile, the motel owner's vulgar language shows the ways people dehumanize those border crossers and devalue their lives.

The next morning, Cantú and his mother walk over a caged bridge over the Rio Grande into Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Among the flow of migrants, they see a family saying goodbye—the parents are hugging while their son cries. The customs agent waves Cantú and his mother through without asking for their passports.

The tearful departure scene demonstrates the heavy emotional toll the border takes on individuals and families, and thus the way it devalues human life.

As they walk through Juárez, Cantú's mother starts to feel overwhelmed and has to stop and sit. Cantú goes to a store to get her water and hears two women arguing about the upcoming election. One supports Calderón's "tough on crime" policies, while the other tells her she's mistaken.

Cantú's mother's country of origin is so unfamiliar to her that it overwhelms her, highlighting that the policing of the natural phenomenon of migration harms people by severing them from their roots.

Cantú and his mother decide to go to a nearby market to eat and rest. But while crossing the street to get there, she twists her ankle in a pothole and can't get up. Cantú panics about the traffic and unsuccessfully tries to drag her on, but passersby get out of their cars or cross the street to help.

The warmth and communal spirit of the people of Juárez serves as an early counterpoint to the picture of the city that will emerge in the rest of the book, as it is engulfed by drug violence and becomes one of the deadliest places in the world. The kindness Cantú finds there underscores the residents' humanity and the tragedy of the mass deaths that will occur there.

One man helps Cantú carry his mother to the sidewalk where she can sit. Cantú thanks the man, but he replies that in Juárez, people take care of one another and invites them to come visit him and his mother at the market, saying they'll make them some quesadillas. Before leaving, he tells Cantú, "Aquí están en su casa"—"You're at home here."

Again, Cantú underscores how much people value human life in Juárez—and thus how tragic the city's later violence is. The man's comment that Cantú is "at home" in the city again underscores the arbitrariness of human borders, which sever people from their roots, since Cantú feels far from "at home" in the city, despite having Mexican origins.

PART 1

Cantú describes a dream in which he is in a cave sorting through severed body parts and looking for identifying features.

The violence and gore that make their way into Cantú's dreams indicate that the trauma of watching people die on the border has filtered through to his subconscious and is changing him as a person.

In the dream, Cantú is told to visit a **wolf** in a nearby cave. When he finds the wolf, he is terrified, but his mother gestures for him to offer the wolf his hand. The wolf puts its hands on Cantu's chest, leans close, and starts licking the inside of his mouth. Cantú wakes up.

By giving his hand to the wolf, which symbolizes violence, Cantú signals his understanding that the violence on the border and the violence he has internalized from working there will only worsen if repressed. Instead, he must befriend the "wolf"—to sit with all he's seen and experienced to try to make sense of it.

Cantú is driving across the grasslands of New Mexico to a night out with some of his classmates from Border Patrol Academy, when they hear that another classmate, Santiago, has dropped out of the program. Cantú calls him and tries to persuade him to stay, though Santiago is an underdog and a figure of ridicule, partly due to his thick Spanish accent. Santiago refuses, saying it's not the work for him.

Cantú and his classmates have entered into a period of institutionalization, which is immediately uncomfortable for some. For others, like Cantú, the effects of institutionalization will be slower and more insidious. Even now, there is an inherent violence in the ridiculing of a vulnerable member of the group.

Over drinks that night, Cantú's classmate Hart complains about his previous life in Detroit, where he was disrespected as a black man with tattoos working at a car rental booth at an airport. He complains about the winter in Detroit and says the heat in Arizona, where the new recruits will be stationed, sounds nice.

Cantú indicates that some of those who join Border Patrol have been socially disadvantaged before. This may predispose the organization to a certain amount of cruelty, as those previously disadvantaged individuals now gain social power that can be exploited.

Hart can't understand why anyone would want to cross the border, through the desert, in 115-degree heat. Finishing his beer, Cantú explains that migrants used to cross in the cities until politicians militarized the borders there, forcing migrants into more dangerous routes over mountains and through deserts.

The recent militarization of the border begins to flesh out the idea that there's nothing natural or essential about the boundary these men will be paid to enforce. Hart's ignorance of the background of the border suggests that those enforcing it often don't have the required context to understand the people they will apprehend.

Hart loses interest in Cantú's explanation, and their fellow recruit Morales seems quieted by it. Cantú apologizes, explaining that he studied the border in college. On the way home, Hart asks Morales about his family, and Morales describes life in his border town and his relatives below the border.

The jarring idea of Morales policing a border that divides his own family underscores that the U.S.–Mexico border is entirely arbitrary. And again, Cantú's fellow recruits' glaring disinterest in the information he shares suggests that the institution of Border Patrol could easily be perverted, since its officers seem uninterested in the context of the border.

A spin class is just beginning. Robles, a teacher at the Border Patrol Academy, is barking instructions at the trainee agents, pushing them to work harder on their stationary bicycles. He tells them their bodies are the most important tools they have, and that they will have to rely on them even after reaching exhaustion.

This punishing physical training reveals an institution with little interest in comfort or the limits of the human body—attributes that could also pave the way for cruelty and callousness inflicted on migrants.

Robles shares a story from his early days in Border Patrol, when he and his partner chased a group of migrants from El Salvador. After a tussle, Robles knocked one of the men into a canal, where he drowned. Telling the story, Robles grows detached from his surroundings. He adds that a few years later, he saved another drowning migrant, but he still thinks of the one he killed every day.

Robles displays a trauma response to his work in Border Patrol, foreshadowing the impact the work will have on Cantú's own psychological state and suggesting that the institution's violence harms agents and migrants alike. It's also possible that Robles's harshness with the recruits is informed by the trauma he's carrying, and thus that the institution of Border Patrol creates a self-reinforcing cycle of suffering.

Robles snaps out of the story and starts picking on a recruit again. Cantú watches Robles on his bicycle and wonders what kind of tool his own body is being made into.

This is the first sign that Cantú is becoming wary of the ways Border Patrol might use him and change him. He has no choice but to obey Robles, which means he is powerless to resist the change in himself.

One afternoon, the class gets a presentation from a firearms instructor. As a way to show the aspiring agents what they're up against, the instructor shows them grisly photos of bodies mutilated in Mexico's drug war.

The agents' training requires them to become accustomed to witnessing violence. This process of normalization muffles the agents' natural, empathic human responses to such suffering, thus ingraining a degree of callousness about the value of human life in the institution of Border Patrol.

Cantú lists the seven classmates who have left his Border Patrol Academy cohort of 50. One leaves for another job, one because he's injured, others because they can't stand the training.

The training is the first stage in the institutionalization of the new recruits, and the fact that some are unable to withstand the training indicates the overwhelming intensity of the institution of Border Patrol.

Hart's roommate, Dominguez, quits after repeatedly failing a test, and Cantú criticizes Hart for not supporting him. Hart points out that Cantú is being condescending: Dominguez has a degree and ran his own business, but he failed his test because he spent all night talking to his family.

Cantú enters Border Patrol as an idealistic young man, convinced he can help everyone, including Dominguez and the migrants he will meet. With Dominguez, he is already learning the limits of his own power, as he journeys into an institution that will make him feel utterly powerless.

Cantú's mother flies in from Arizona for Christmas, and she and Cantú go to stay at a cabin in the mountains. Late at night, over eggnog, the pair end up talking about Cantú's work, which his mother thinks is below him.

Cantú's close relationship with his mother is already becoming strained, signaling that he is slowly coming unmoored from his principles and sense of self—the first step toward the emotional detachment he will suffer in the Patrol.

Cantú tells his mother that he's tired of studying the border in books, like he did in college—he wants to understand it up-close, even if it's dangerous. Cantú's mother is incredulous: the border is already part of him, she says, because she worked hard to raise him with a sense of his Mexican heritage. Cantú replies that this isn't the same thing.

Cantú is struggling to understand what the border is. Neither his mother's ideas about natural migration and heritage nor the theory he learned in college feel adequate, because they don't account for the life-and-death status of the modern-day U.S.-Mexico border.

Cantú's mother points out that he's aligning himself with a paramilitary force, and Cantú replies that Border Patrol isn't full of white racists—half of his classmates are Hispanic. People join the agency, he says, because it offers stability and an opportunity to serve.

Cantú's mother fears him being caught up in an institution that is impersonal and powerful and thus inherently violent. Cantú's youthful idealism makes him deaf to these worries: he focuses only on the morality of individuals, not the institutional framework.

Although he doesn't agree with every aspect of U.S. border policy, Cantú says, he wants to understand it, and maybe someday he will study law and help to change policies. And as a bilingual agent who knows Mexican culture, he will be in a position to comfort and be kind to the migrants he apprehends.

Cantú again reveals his good intentions and youthful idealism: he believes that he will be unchanged by working in Border Patrol and emerge unscathed to continue his life. In truth, he will learn that the power of institutions has the power to crush any individual within them.

Cantú's mother tells him that he must remember he is joining an institution that doesn't care about people, but Cantú assures her that he won't forget where he's come from. They open a Christmas present each and go to bed.

Cantú's mother serves as a voice of wisdom, external to Border Patrol, and she is thus able to point out its pitfalls even as Cantú gets sucked in.

The next morning—Christmas Day—Cantú and his mother eat lunch in town then climb to a lookout tower, where his mother points out a cloud of sand swirling in the distance.

The cloud of sand symbolizes the difficulty Cantú will face in his coming years in Border Patrol, as he is changed by institutional violence. By pointing out the natural phenomenon, his mother is again positioned as a point of connection with wisdom and the natural world.


At Cantú's graduation ceremony, he and his classmates stand in full military-style uniform to hear speeches about the importance of their duties and to swear the oath of allegiance.

This formal ceremony represents the strict conventions of the institution of Border Patrol, which are violent because they obey their own internal logic, rather than serving the interests of migrants.

Two days after arriving at their patrol station, Cantú and his fellow new recruits are out with senior agent Cole when they find evidence of migrants. They comb the desert for five miles until they find several discarded bundles of drugs and backpacks filled with food and clothes. Cantú asks if they should try to find the migrants, and Cole says no—if they capture the drugs alone, without humans, they won't have to fill out as much paperwork.

Immediately after graduating, Cantú is presented with evidence that the Border Patrol officers' work is not always carried out in good faith. Cantú's youthful idealism is beginning to find friction with the way things are actually done in the agency.

Cantú watches his classmates laugh as they rip and urinate on the backpacks' contents. Cantú himself finds a prayer card of Saint Jude among the discarded belongings. As they head back to their vehicles, a tortoise stops to watch them.

The prayer card of Saint Jude highlights the migrants' humanity, while the recruits' vandalism of the belongings reveals that the institution of Border Patrol seems to make them feel they have license to ignore that humanity and disrespect the migrants. The tortoise that watches them suggests that such depraved behavior is unnatural and inhumane.



One night, the recruits surveil in the dark with Cole for several hours before laying a spike strip in the road and settling to watch from their vehicles. Cole explains that he got his nickname, "Black Death," by accidentally running over and killing an "Indian" asleep in the road. He laughs, and the recruits laugh uncomfortably.

Cole's laughter signals a profound disrespect for the value of a human life. The new recruits' uncomfortable laughter suggests that though they are still in closer touch with the value of human life, they are on their way toward being institutionalized to ignore that value.

Just after midnight, a truck passes, its tires catching on the spike strip. The agents follow and find the truck abandoned, containing just a few bundles of drugs. They search the hillside for the drivers but don't find them. Cole tells the recruits the truck is only a distraction, and Cantú knows he won't bother to report it to the tribal police whose jurisdiction they're in, because he won't want to deal with the paperwork.

Again, Cole's lax attitude to filing paperwork highlights that the Border Patrol does not always operate as it should: that sometimes its agents serve their own self-interest instead of the agency's stated goals.

One night after sunset, Morales spots 10 migrants. They disperse, but the recruits find them one by one. Cantú speaks to an older migrant from Michoacán, a region he has visited. The migrant tells Cantú how much desperation there is in Mexico.

This moment of connection with a migrant contrasts starkly with the disrespectful treatment of migrants seen elsewhere in the book, which reveals just how much institutionalization interferes with human connection.

At the station, Cantú processes the older man for deportation, and the man asks if there's any work for him to do. Cantú explains that he's about to be deported, but the man says he knows, but he's there to work and he wants to show Cantú that he's not a bad person. Cantú tells him that he knows.

This exchange reveals that the border line is not based on merit or justice. Instead, the book suggests that it's simply an arbitrary invention that keeps hardworking people from pursuing their goals and has no respect for the value of the human lives it impacts.

Out in the field again, sometime later, Cole squirts hand sanitizer over a cholla cactus and sets light to it. The recruits stand around as it burns, laughing and taking pictures.

As a senior officer, Cole is more thoroughly institutionalized than the recruits. His vandalism reveals that the process of institutionalization has cost him his respect for the beauty of nature—and, by extension, has cost him his humanity.

On another occasion, Cole radios behind to the recruits, who are wandering in a rowdy pack behind, to warn them there's a mountain lion nearby. When they hear the lion hiss close at hand, they draw their weapons, and Cantú is terrified—not of the lion but of his fellow recruits' carelessness and armed arrogance.

In Cantú's book, nature is associated with wisdom, complexity, and beauty, and therefore with humanity at its best. Cantú's fears about what his fellow recruits might do to this mountain lion signal his fears that as they advance into Border Patrol they are losing touch with their humanity.

In a reflective interlude, Cantú considers how he would explain to an outsider the things he is learning to do: such as the practice of slashing water bottles and destroying and urinating on belongings they find abandoned in the desert, in the hopes that this will persuade migrants to give up on progressing further and find a way to turn themselves in.

Cantú recognizes the immorality of the things he is expected to do in the course of a day's work, yet since he's powerless to oppose them, he has no choice but to swallow the institution's flimsy justifications. As he splits internally, he suffers moral injury—which is a kind of institutional violence perpetrated against people within the institution—and detachment from his own judgment, which makes it difficult for him to retain a sense of emotional wholeness.

Cantú observes that though he knows the logic behind this practice, he has nightmares about people dying slowly in the desert with no food and water and of finding their bodies decaying.

The fact that these worries have filtered into Cantú's dreams indicate that the feelings he's repressing in order to do his work are harming him subconsciously, and that this harm might someday spill over into his waking life.

In a historical interlude, Cantú writes of an Italian priest, Father Kino, who led the first European expedition to Baja California in 1706. The desert they cross (the same desert Cantú is now working in) seems like "a bad country" to the Europeans, but the Native people knew how to respect it.

Cantú highlights that the nation now policing the border has only occupied the land for a few centuries, thus underscoring the arbitrariness of the border. In addition, he suggests that the European cultures that colonized the region lacked the Native people's respect for the landscape and wildlife—and that this lack of respect tcontains the seed of disrespecting human life, too.

After finishing his field training, Cantú is paired with a young recruit named Mortenson, who stresses that with just four years' experience as an agent, he doesn't have the wisdom to be a good mentor, but the recent hiring push is speeding up everyone's ascent through the agency. Both Cantú and Mortenson are 23 years old.

The agents' youth and inexperience reveals the ways in which Border Patrol molds impressionable and sometimes idealistic young people to serve its ends—a form of institutionalization that can damage people who don't yet have sure senses of themselves and thus damage the people over whom they wield power.

Before dawn one morning, Mortenson takes Cantú to the official port of entry, where they see a young couple trying to cut a hole in the fence. The man escapes, but they catch the woman, who tells them it's her birthday: she's turning 23.

The shared age of Mortenson, Cantú, and the migrant they apprehend underscores how differently American culture values their lives. Though she's lived as long as Cantú, this woman is treated like she's worthless simply because of where she was born.

When Mortenson leaves Cantú alone with the woman briefly, she tells him that she's tried to cross four times already, but she promises to stay away this time. She gives Cantú her fake green card to hide from other agents, and he accepts it. On the drive to the station, she sings to them, and they enjoy it.

By appealing to Cantú for help, the woman signals that she recognizes some humanity in him—that he hasn't yet been fully institutionalized. As such, the rules of the institution of Border Patrol are revealed to be inhumane and to negate the value of human lives—and even more so when the woman shows her individuality by singing.

One night after he earns the authority to patrol alone, Cantú sits in the desert, watching three storms converge.

The converging storms symbolize the difficulties on the horizon for Cantú, as he progresses further into Border Patrol. Yet by watching the storms converge, he reveals that he's keeping in touch with his awe for nature and thus his humanity.

On another night, Cantú is sent to a local Native American reservation to follow reports of two migrants. He finds them in a church: they're a couple, exhausted after being abandoned in the desert by their guide and group. Cantú tells them that the border can be a very bad place, and the man says it's worse where they're from.

The man's response highlights that the journey across the border is never undertaken lightly. People know that they are taking their lives in their hands by crossing, and yet it's precisely because they value their loved ones' lives as well as their own that they decide to cross and escape the troubles at home.

Cantú sees that the woman is pregnant. She grew up in Iowa and speaks perfect English; she moved back to Mexico to take care of her family. It was her idea to try to cross back to the U.S. for the sake of their child.

The woman's story suggests how arbitrary the border is. Her previous, easier crossings made her unprepared for the new, militarized border that Cantú is paid to enforce, and in turn, these memories of more natural, porous borders make Cantú's job almost impossible.

The man asks Cantú to just take them back to Mexico without reporting them, but Cantú says he can't. While caging them in the van, Cantú introduces himself and asks their names. When he starts driving, he sees the woman crying in the rearview mirror, and for a moment, he feels very lost. At the station, he processes them for deportation and then later realizes he's forgotten their names.

Cantú carries out his duties as expected of a Border Patrol officer, and yet he feels a strong sense of friction with his human instincts. He feels lost because, through the process of institutionalization, he is losing touch with himself and his ability to connect with humans. Though he is not violent or cruel, he is changing internally as a result of working for an institution that shows itself to have little regard for people.

In another historical interlude, Cantú describes the process used to first mark the U.S.–Mexico border in the mid-1800s. Initially, the border was meant to follow the Gila River across Arizona, but the agreement was rewritten so that the border followed a straight line, adding 30,000 square miles to U.S. territories. The new commissioner, William H. Emory, oversaw the establishment of 47 new monuments along the California–Mexico border.

Be detailing the involved process of first marking the U.S.–Mexico border, including the decisions made in conference rooms thousands of miles away, Cantú highlights the extreme arbitrariness of the border he is paid to enforce, consequently calling into question the border's merit and the point of enforcing it.

Cantú is instructed to wait by the hospital bedside of a man who was caught after he fell ill crossing the desert in July heat. One of his crossing companions is dead, and another is in the ICU. Cantú talks to the man, who tells him in timid, bad Spanish that he comes from a Native farming village and was trying to cross to be with his daughter in California, the eldest of his seven children.

Families split by borders, like this migrant's, highlight the tension between people's natural migration and the militarized borders that separate them. As long as the border divides families, people will try to cross it, thus making jobs like Cantú's challenging, if not ultimately fruitless.

When the man is discharged, there is no shirt among his belongings. Cantú removes his undershirt and gives it to the man. On their way to the processing center, Cantú stops at a McDonald's and buys him a burger. As they drive, the man whispers about the jungle he came from.

Giving the man his shirt and buying him a burger appear as to be acts of generosity on Cantú's part—proof that Cantú hasn't lost sight of the value of this migrant's life and dignity. And yet despite his awareness of the value of migrants' lives, Cantú can only perform his acts of generosity within the context of his job—that is, while driving to the processing center, where the migrants' dreams will be shattered. This reveals the violence of institutional power, which undercuts individual humanity.

One day while looking for migrants in the desert, Cantú sees a snake trying and failing to get through the border fence. He guides it to an opening so it can cross.

The snake's difficult illustrates that the desert is a natural migratory landscape, and human attempts to control it are at best foolish and at worst actively harmful. When animals' migratory corridors are cut off (for instance by border walls), species can go extinct. By extension, separating human habitats with walls can also harm the human species.

While Cantú is driving near the border, a woman flags him down from the south side. She is distraught—her son has gone missing while trying to cross, and she asks Cantú if he can help. Later, he doesn't remember how he replied. That night, he calls his mother to let her know he's doing fine.

Cantú calls his mother because he projects himself into the position of this missing boy and imagines how distraught his own mother would be. As such, he reveals his awareness that the lives lost on the border every day are just as valuable as his own.

In another historical interlude, Cantú tells of a series of conventions in the 1880s that were necessitated by new settlements and mining along the border. The conventions called for more monuments along the border to more clearly demarcate the line. Once established, these monuments were separated by 2.6 miles on average, making this the first time in history that someone crossing from Mexico to the U.S. was likely to see evidence of a border.

Again, Cantú highlights the involved process of marking the border, thus insinuating that there's nothing natural or inherently true about the boundary, and therefore efforts to enforce it might be misguided. This is particularly true since the border had, until that point, been unmarked without major problems.

Morales and Cantú arrest two men in their mid-20s, walking through the desert at night. The men reveal they're from Oaxaca and invite the agents to try the Oaxacan delicacies they've brought. The four men stand around talking, laughing, and eating for a while until it's time to go to the processing center.

The migrants' generosity contrasts with the institutionalized rejection they meet in the United States, highlighting the impersonal violence of border enforcement. And the natural rapport between Morales and Cantú (U.S. citizens who both have Mexican family memberss) and these migrants highlights how commonplace migration is and how futile attempts to police it are.

At the end of a shift, Mortenson asks Cantú to stay late and help translate for two girls of nine and ten years old who've been picked up alone and are scared. Cantú tries to explain the situation to the girls but then tells Mortenson he can't help anymore and has to go home. Driving home, his hands start to shake, and he feels an urge to call his mother.

These young girls embody the innocence of most migrants Cantú meets, who are simply seeking a better life. His physical and emotional reaction to being unable to help them signifies how trapped he feels in border enforcement, and thus the damage institutionalization is doing to him. The strength of his reaction also signifies that he's suppressed a lot of emotion in order to get through each day, and that this emotion is now finding a release. This suppressed emotion perpetuates the cycle of pain found at the border.

One night long after sundown, Morales and Cantú respond to a report of migrants picked up by sensors. They station themselves at the bottom of a mountain pass and wait, but nobody comes. Eventually they decide to leave, but on their way to their vehicle they stop and are awe-struck by a satellite crossing the starry night sky. Cantú reflects that the migrants they were tracking are likely huddled around and watching the same stars.

Since people through the ages have used stars to navigate, this passage contextualizes migration as an age-old human practice and thus implicitly questions the validity of border enforcement work. In addition, the natural beauty and grandeur of the starry sky puts into perspective the small-mindedness of border enforcement and the guarding of resources that often drives it.

One day a call comes over the radio: a dead body has been found in the desert. Dreading the smell of a dead body in the summer heat, Cantú goes to the site, where he finds Hart waiting with two boys. They haven't been able to talk because Hart doesn't speak Spanish.

Cantú's response to the news of a death signals that working in Border Patrol has normalized death for him, which has made him less in touch with the value of a human life. In other words, Border Patrol is inflicting a form of violence on Cantú by severing him from his empathy and respect for life.

The two boys tell Cantú that the dead man is their uncle. He took various energy-enhancing substances, including "caffeine uppers," which migrants commonly use for energy, and not long after, he collapsed. Cantú gently examines the body, which is already stiffening with rigor mortis.

The militarization of the border forces migrants to cross in increasingly dangerous ways, for instance by relying on stimulants and crossing the desert during the height of summer, which results in inevitable deaths. This is one such way that an institution's rules can inflict violence on individuals.

The boys ask Cantú what will happen to their uncle: whether they can bring his body back to their village, or go to the hospital with him. Cantú says no, the consul will be responsible for repatriating the body, and maybe the boys can get some documentation when they go to the consul.

The bureaucratic handling of this migrant's death signals an institution that has lost sight of the humanity of the people it processes and their human needs, such as the opportunity to mourn their loved ones. In addition, the impersonal handling of the body suggests a lack of respect for migrants' lives and dignity.

Just as Cantú is beginning to worry that the boys won't in fact get a chance to go to the consul, Hart says transport is coming and requests their belts, shoelaces, and other personal effects.

Hart's procedural requirements interrupt Cantú's human concern for the boys' ability to grieve, thus enacting a familiar dynamic: the institution of border enforcement curtailing humanity and human instincts.


A junior agent arrives and starts taking photographs of the dead body. One of the boys stares absently. Cantú tries to explain that the photos are needed for the report, but the boy doesn't seem to process what he says.

Again, the boy's humanity, and Cantú's efforts to make space for it, are crushed under Border Patrol's institutional and bureaucratic requirements.

Cantú apologizes to the boys for their loss and tells them that if they ever cross again, they should never do it in summer because it's too hot, and they should never take the pills the guides give them. The boys thank him, and Cantú drives off into a storm, leaving Hart to guard the body.

The storm Cantú drives into symbolizes the continuation of fatal border crossing in the future. By likening this future trouble to a storm, Cantú highlights that migration is unstoppable because it's a powerful and natural phenomenon.

At the end of his shift, Cantú sees Hart at the station, and Hart tells him there was nobody to collect the body, so he was instructed to just note the coordinates and leave it. They discuss what might happen to the body in the desert at night, and then they go home.

The treatment of the migrant's body has become a marker of Border Patrol's disrespect for the value of human life. Institutional failings mean that this man's body will be left to rot in the desert.


Cantú dreams that he is grinding his **teeth** out and searching for someone to show them to.

Again, Cantú's dreams reveal that his work is having a profound impact on his subconscious. In this dream, grinding his teeth symbolizes stress and repressed inner turmoil.

In another historical interlude, Cantú recounts reports from the first U.S. teams sent to survey the newly defined border in the 19th century. He notes that they invariably found the desert region "sterile" and even full of "loneliness and desolation," and that they commented on the arbitrariness of the border line they were paid to mark.

Again, Cantú uses historical accounts to highlight that there's nothing natural about the border: it was laboriously agreed upon and marked, and a profoundly unnatural phenomenon such as this is ultimately impossible to enforce in the face of humans' natural migratory patterns. In addition, the survey party's assessment of the landscape indicates the violence of colonialism: these people failed to see the desert's natural richness, meaning that they were altering and claiming land they did not understand.


Cantú describes a particular survey group of around 60 that set out from El Paso in 1892, along with a 50-strong military escort. Break-out groups studied new settlements along the border and noted that U.S. settlers tended to overreach and spill over the border, while Mexican officials were very courteous.

Again, Cantú highlights that this this laboriously marked border was manmade and artificially constructed—in other words, it goes against nature and the natural rhythms of life—and so enforcing it is ultimately fruitless.

Cantú notes the physical difficulty and danger of the task of marking the border. The survey group often passed gravesites of earlier travelers on the same route, and finding access to water was always difficult.

Cantú again stresses how laborious the task of marking the border was, thus calling into question the viability of enforcing it.

The survey group's work ends when they meet the Rio Grande, which forms a natural border between Texas and Mexico. Their report points out that the river naturally changed course over time, so despite their work to mark a firm border elsewhere, the border would never be entirely fixed.

This passage suggests that as a natural border, the Rio Grande contains more complexity and wisdom than the manmade border, and that remembering the complexity of nature can enhance one's humanity.

One night at the end of a shift, Cantú joins a group of agents chatting. Beech, a former prison guard, tells them about an inmate who cut himself compulsively, including on his penis. The other agents laugh and groan.

This instance of camaraderie between Border Patrol agents revolves around mocking a vulnerable person for whom an agent was formerly responsible—a clear example of how the environment within Border Patrol is one of callousness and bullying, which goes hand-in-hand with institutional violence.

Another agent, Navarro, tells of a young man he was stationed in Iraq with, who had a pierced penis and wanted to have surgical work to fork his penis. The agents groan and laugh until Navarro tells them that the man was blown up. Everyone falls silent in "awkward shame."

News of the man's death reminds the agents of the value of his life and makes them feel ashamed of having been momentarily swept up by Border Patrol's institutional callousness.

One day, Morales finds an overweight teenage boy—a migrant—alone and hysterical in the desert. Cantú arrives, and together they calm the boy down enough to get him to the truck, calling him *gordo*. The boy tells them he was planning to go to Oregon to sell heroin, and that being lost in the desert was the first time he'd ever prayed.

The boy's hysteria and prayer underscore his individuality and the magnitude of the loss of life on the border. In addition, by giving him the pejorative nickname gordo, *meaning "fat," Cantú and Morales reveal that they have succumbed—at least somewhat—to Border Patrol's tendency to treat migrants with disrespect.*

Morales is in a motorcycle accident, and Cantú is too scared to visit him in the hospital, afraid of seeing him vulnerable or confused. When he finally goes, more than a week later, Morales is surrounded by friends and family, but he seems changed, somehow distant. Cantú excuses himself as he feels tears start to form. Outside, he swallows his tears and resolves not to go back to the visiting room.

Cantú's unwillingness to cry indicates that he has become accustomed to suppressing his emotions as a result of his emotionally taxing work on the border. This, in turn, hampers his ability to live a full human life, for instance by crying for an injured friend. In addition, the contrast between the unceremonious deaths of migrants on the border and Morales's condition in a hospital, surrounded by friends and family, speaks to the different value given to human lives depending on what side of the U.S.–Mexico border a person comes from.

While driving through a local Native American reservation one day, Cantú is flagged down by a man named Adam and his wife, who tell him of strange occurrences in their quiet village on the reservation: strange cars passing through; menacing, unknown men knocking on the door and demanding food and water; and a Mexican and a Native American man going from door to door after their van broke down in the village.

Cantú indicates that the arbitrary imposition of manmade boundaries doesn't only affect migrants: these manmade, legally enforced borders encourage unlawful crossing and negatively impact surrounding communities, such as Adam's.

Cantú promises to go take a look at the van. Immediately afterward, he stops a vehicle containing a woman and two men. They are hostile, and one of them is drunk. Cantú calls their details in to the station and discovers one is wanted by the sheriff for drug smuggling. He handcuffs this man and, since they're on Native American land and the man is a tribe member, asks for assistance from the tribal police.

Cantú's powerlessness on the Native American reservation reveals how arbitrary his power is at all times. The limits of his jurisdiction highlight that the regulations he's enforcing aren't universal or informed by natural laws, thus calling into question their validity.

Cantú searches the other, tattooed man and the vehicle. The tattooed man is hostile. Cantú finds a knife but no other contraband, and so he is forced to release the tattooed man and the woman. Soon after, he discovers that the Native man's offence can't be prosecuted on the reservation, so he can't be arrested. Instead, the tribal police officer takes him to a cell to sober up.

Again, the limits of Cantú's power undermine the validity of his work, by highlighting how arbitrary his jurisdiction is. In addition, the tattooed man's hostility is further evidence of the violence of institutional power, which creates friction between the people in uniform and those they are paid to police.

Cantú goes on to Adam's village and sees the minivan he mentioned. It's empty, with evidence that people have abandoned it to head into the desert, but Cantú can't trace their tracks.

The effort to trace the people's tracks recalls wildlife hunting, again signaling that migration is a natural phenomenon that Cantú is powerless to control despite his job description.

Before ending his shift, Cantú calls Adam and says he couldn't find the men. He wants to tell Adam to gather up his family and move away from their village on the border, at the intersection of drug and smuggling routes, but instead he asks Adam why the village is known as the vampire village. Adam says he doesn't know and starts to laugh, and Cantú joins in but doesn't know why.

Here, Adam emphasizes how dangerous his life near the border has become. Human boundaries create criminal zones, Cantú implies, in ways that natural ones do not. In addition, the unexpected outburst of laughter suggests that, like Cantú, Adam is suppressing emotion related to the border, which sometimes finds a surprising expression.

That night, Cantú arrives home after his shift, at around two in the morning. He sees a tattooed man standing on his street corner, and Cantú gets scared that he's waiting for him. He drives around his neighborhood and checks that the man's gone before going home.

Cantú begins to feel that his own life is in danger. The fact that he doesn't know whether to trust his suspicion about this man indicates that his work has emotionally destabilized him, severing him from his instincts.

In his apartment, Cantú calls the police and tells them about the man waiting on the corner. When he tells them that he's an agent, they promise to send a police officer immediately.

The speed with which the police promise to send an officer when they learn that Cantú is an agent suggest that his life is valued more than a typical citizen's and certainly more than any of the migrants whose lives are lost daily on the border.

Alone at a firing range one afternoon, practicing his gun skills, Cantú sees a small yellow **bird** land on his target stand. He tries to scare it off but then shoots it instead. Afterwards, he worries that he's going insane, and he buries the bird.

Reverence for nature was a core component of Cantú's upbringing. Shooting the bird thus symbolizes not just a simple act of senseless violence, but his severance from the values that have formed a key part of his identity.

Cantú's mother visits for Christmas. On Christmas Eve, they stay up talking, and she asks Cantú if he likes his work. He is evasive and curt, deliberately avoiding telling her about his anxiety dreams and shooting the **bird**.

Cantú copes with the trauma of his work by suppressing his emotions, which also leaves him unable to have an open, honest relationship with his mother. As such, the trauma of the work deeply impoverishes his human experience and, by extension, his ability to act in a humane manner.

Cantú's mother tells him that she's worried about the way an institution can break a person and destroy their sense of purpose, and that she felt it happen to her even in the National Park Service. Cantú changes the subject.

Cantú's mother recognizes that institutions change people, often violently, and that Cantú's hopes of coming through Border Patrol unscathed were naïve. By changing the subject, Cantú tacitly suggests his agreement.

One night after dark, Cantú gets a report of a group of 20 migrants. He and his fellow agents go to the designated spot and follow the migrants' tracks but don't find them. Cantú becomes furious with himself knowing that they're out in the desert and he's powerless to help them.

Cantú's fury with himself suggests how dark his emotional state has become and how difficult the job of policing this manmade border is, leaving those paid to enforce it with a sense of deep futility.


PART 2

Cantú considers his namesake, St. Francis, his mother's favorite saint. He recounts a story she told him, in which a village is terrorized by a **wolf** that's eating its people and livestock. When St. Francis goes to the wolf, it tries to kill him, but he calms it and makes an offer: if the wolf stops eating people and animals, the village people will make sure it's always well fed. The wolf agrees.

The story symbolizes Cantú's dawning awareness that detaching from or trying to repress the violence on the border will always fail. Instead, he must learn to get to know the dark forces both within himself and in society at large.

At the dentist, Cantú learns that he's been grinding his **teeth**. He tells the dentist that he's a Border Patrol agent who's recently moved to the city to take on a job in intelligence after working as a field agent. The dentist asks if it's stressful, and Cantú says it isn't, but he gets agitated when the dentist presses him about whether it will be boring to be in an office.

Cantú's tooth-grinding is a clear symptom of the suppressed stress from his job finding an outlet. His refusal to admit his own stress signals how thoroughly he has learned to deny and detach from his emotions, and thus how thoroughly his work is severing him from his human experience.

Cantú's new boss, Hayward, shows him and five other newly promoted officers around the intelligence building. He details the job: gathering information from various sources to keep the agency abreast of the major occurrences in the region. The work might be boring, he says, but it offers good opportunities for advancement, as well as stability and an urban setting.

Entering an office marks a new phase in Cantú's institutionalization, in which he is cushioned from observing the deaths and tragedies on the border in person. However, in the contrast between his physical comfort in an office and the violence of Border Patrol's work, there is the potential for a more insidious form of emotional trauma, in which tragedy comes to seem not overwhelming (as it did in the field) but boring and commonplace.


Almost every day, Cantú receives emails from the Drug Enforcement Agency, detailing developments in the drug war. The emails contain graphic photographs of mutilated bodies and brief descriptions of scenes of extreme violence.

The scenes Cantú now sees in daily emails are far more gory than the real-life tragedies he saw in the field. They are also more difficult to process, because there's a sharp disconnect between the photographs and his surroundings in the office.

Cantú's dreams about his **teeth** get more varied and extreme. Eventually, they get to the point where he dreams that he's not dreaming, but rather he truly is clenching his teeth until they shatter in his mouth.

Again, Cantú's suppressed stress expresses itself in dreams about his teeth. Here, the dreams—and, by extension, his stress—seem to be escalating in intensity, suggesting that the move to office work has not alleviated his emotional distress at all.

Cantú quotes from a book called *Amexica: War Along the Borderline*, which details the symbolism behind the various kinds of mutilation that cartels carry out: for instance, if a body's tongue is cut out, it means they talked too much.

This moment speaks to the extent of death and violence along the border. The complex symbolism of cartel murders indicates a total loss of respect for the value of a human life, in which a body is simply a canvas on which to convey a message to one's enemies.

Cantú's mother visits, and after dinner one evening, she tells him stories that she heard from a local rancher: for instance, that men used to call and ask to buy land to ranch when really they wanted to hunt people along the border.

Cantú's mother offers a perspective from outside of Border Patrol—a perspective that is still connected to nature and humanity. By contrast, Cantú's perspective has been warped by institutionalization, as demonstrated by his earlier shooting of the bird.


The rancher believes the government is inhumane, Cantú's mother says, because instead of stopping people at the border, it allows them to cross and then lets them Border Patrol chase them in the United States until they die in the desert.

Again, Cantú's mother offers a valuable external perspective on the institution of Border Patrol. When communicated in her voice—which throughout the book is associated with nature, humanity, and empathy—the true inhumanity of the policy of allowing people to die in the desert has even more moral weight.


When Cantú's mother asks him whether this is true, Cantú replies that it's complicated. His mother is shocked by his complicity in this policy, and Cantú gets defensive.

By trying to justify a policy that his mother framed as inhumane and out of step with their values, Cantú reveals just how far he's been institutionalized by Border Patrol and how far it's shifted his moral compass.

Cantú's mother tells him she's just glad he's safely out of fieldwork now—that the rancher told her stories of how dangerous things could be in the border region. But Cantú expresses discontent with his move to intelligence work, saying that it feels like "a retreat."

Here, Cantú explicitly expresses the sense suggested earlier, that being in an office is more emotionally taxing than being in the field, rather than less, precisely because it lacks field work's immediacy. This, in turn, increases the work's capacity to make Cantú detach emotionally.

In a factual interlude, Cantú charts the commodification of people trying to cross the U.S.–Mexico border. Decades ago, people used to cross back and forth easily, but when border enforcement increased, traffickers stepped in, increasing their smuggling fees until almost the whole black market passed into the control of drug cartels. These days, Cantú writes, people are often held hostage at crowded "drop houses" in the U.S. after crossing until their relatives pay a ransom.

Cantú illustrates the way in which manmade borders, particularly militarized ones, can increase crime and suffering, while still failing to stop the natural phenomenon of migration. In addition, he suggests that the sheer scale of the institution of modern U.S. border enforcement has given rise to equally huge illegal institutions, such as cartels, which operate in the shadows of border enforcement's regulations. As such, one element of the border's institutional violence is in the violence of the institutions that spring up to counter it.

Hayward asks Cantú to write a report on a drug-trafficking cell. Cantú lists all his powers to investigate suspects, which include, he writes, the power to look up their photos online and stare into their eyes.

By considering the powers his job affords him, Cantú highlights how powerless he actually feels—since, for example, staring into the eyes of a photograph doesn't achieve anything. The underlying argument is that, for all its complexity and self-importance, the institution of Border Patrol has no power to improve life for anyone involved with it.

In another factual interlude, Cantú recounts details from a 2009 Associated Press article about the overcrowded morgues in Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez during the drug war. Morgue doctors describe the psychological difficulty of working on hundreds of mutilated bodies at a time. Many bodies were never claimed because the families feared the cartels—and the cartels themselves sometimes raided the morgues to reclaim bodies.

These scenes from inside a morgue indicate that at the height of Mexico's drug war, the value of a human life has been completely eroded. The bodies become endless mountains of flesh, which the doctors have to depersonalize in order to do their work. Like Cantú, their own interactions with violence along the border lead to trauma and emotional detachment.

One night, Cantú is working the overnight shift when his former coworker Cole calls to report two dead men and a third in hospital, whom his agents recovered that evening. After hanging up, Cantú imagines all the many bodies out in the desert.

Cantu's perspective shifts between small-scale tragedy (the death of two men) and large-scale tragedy (the uncountable dead bodies in the desert). The shifting scale hints at the impossibility of fathoming the value of one human life, when so many are being lost.

Cantú tells Hayward that he feels the real work is out there, and Hayward tells him it's helpful to understand the intelligence side too, and that he should get on with the report. Later, Cole calls again to report a large shipment of drugs his agents intercepted. They didn't apprehend any people, which Cantú knows Cole avoids doing in order to minimize paperwork.

Cantú struggles with his institutionalization: both with the knowledge that the institution he works for is perverted by rule-bending agents like Cole, and with the knowledge that he is advancing farther away from interacting with migrants and into Border Patrol's more abstract structural mechanisms. His discomfort indicates that he knows the work is changing him for the worse.

Cantú dreams of finding a group of smugglers in the desert, all faceless men. He handcuffs them and tries to make them lead him to their drug stash. He radios for backup but nobody responds.

Cantú's dreams about work reveal the stress and anxiety he is attempting to suppress in order to keep doing his job. This dream suggests that he feels threatened and unsupported, since nobody responds to his call for help.

In the dream, they walk through the desert until they reach a canyon piled with black chests, which Cantú starts searching, but they're all empty. He feels increasingly intimidated and asks the men where the bundles of drugs are, but they say he's already taken them.

Again, Cantú's dream reveals the stress he's under, which he suppresses until it explodes out of his subconscious in dreams. The dream suggests a general fear and an anxiety that he's not doing his job well enough.

One night Cantú is woken by his phone ringing. It's his mother, who is terrified because she heard a Border Patrol agent named Cantú had been killed. Cantú tells her that there's another Cantú, before it dawns on him that this death, too, is momentous.

This exchange reveals how cheapened human life has become in Cantú's eyes, as it takes him quite some time to register the tragedy of a death.

At work the next day, there are many high-level staff members at the intelligence office. Hayward fills Cantú in on the background to the shooting and the great many staff from Border Patrol and other agencies that are looking for one of the culprits who escaped.

The heightened response to the loss of a Border Patrol agent contrasts with the unceremonious responses to migrants' deaths in the desert. This contrast forms an implied argument about the injustice of treating human lives with such wildly varying degrees of respect.

Hayward tells Cantú to put together a rigorous report about the suspects who have already been arrested so that they can figure out "who's a scumbag and who's just a POW," meaning "plain old wet."

Hayward's casual use of a racist slur suggests that within the institution of Border Patrol, contempt for migrants is common and accepted—a condition that lays the groundwork for the mistreatment of migrants.

Soon after, Cantú's great-aunt Frances dies. At the memorial in San Diego, Cantú catches up with his cousins. They swap stories of Frances, including her insistence that their family was Spanish, not Mexican, despite being in Mexico for 400 years.

Cantú's family's history of migration highlights just how old and natural a phenomenon migration is, long predating the militarization of border enforcement. Additionally, Frances's insistence on the family's Spanish origins highlight the colonial power dynamics that led to the establishment of manmade national boundaries.

Frances's daughter tells the story of their family arriving in the United States: during the Mexican Revolution, Frances and her brother (Cantú's grandfather) were only children. Their family hopped on a freight train going north late at night, and in the morning they saw dead bodies hanging from the trees they passed.

The dead, hanging bodies recall the mutilated bodies of the present-day drug war, which Cantú witnesses every day at work. The echo suggests the sheer, unfathomable scale of lives lost in Mexico in recent centuries.

The next day, Cantú goes with his family to the family mausoleum. He tells them that though he is the only family member still called Cantú, he was originally supposed to be called "Joshua Tyler Cantú-Simmons." His cousins laugh at the "gringo name." Cantú agrees that if his mother hadn't changed it, he'd have been a different person.

Cantú's mixed cultural heritage highlights how natural and commonplace migration is, and how blunt an instrument manmade borders are in a world where so many people's identities are split across national boundaries.

Cantú goes to visit his grandfather in the mausoleum. He calls his mom, who asks him to speak to her father for her. His grandfather's nameplate is in a sunny hallway with a view of Tijuana. Cantú tells his grandfather he can see Mexico from here.

Again, Cantú highlights that his own family's heritage is split across the U.S.–Mexico border: his grandfather was born in Mexico and now lies at rest in the U.S., with a view of his native country.

In a historical interlude, Cantú quotes from a historian about the carnage and death toll of the Mexican Revolution and adds that in Mexico, some people believe that the country suffers 100-year cycles of disturbance: the War of Independence (which started in 1810) claimed 400,000 to 600,000 lives; the revolution, which started in 1910, claimed up to two million.

The belief that Mexico suffers 100-year cycles of disturbance contains an implicit acceptance of the inevitability of mass dying, suggesting that recurring tragedy can erode a people's belief in their right to life. They may not value their own lives less, but they feel powerless to defend them.

Cantú notes that the next wave of violence started early, in 2006, when president Calderón declared war on the drug cartels. By the end of his six years in power, the official murder toll was 100,000. Calderón claimed the deaths were mostly cartel members, but Cantú cites academic Molly Molloy's research showing only five percent of murders were investigated, and most victims were likely ordinary, poor people.

The failure to investigate murders during Mexico's drug war suggests both a lack of respect for the lives of the everyday poor people who died and a sense that large-scale dying is somehow inevitable or even unremarkable. Both explanations point to a society that has lost sight of the value of a human life.

By 2014, the official homicide toll had risen to 164,000—still an underestimate, according to researchers, and one that doesn't include the many people who had disappeared without trace.

In being left out of the official death tolls, the disappeared and uncounted are written out of history; the value of their lives is entirely negated.

Neither does it include those who have lost their lives crossing into the U.S. to escape violence in Mexico. Cantú notes this is a huge number of people, but again, an unknown number, since so many simply went missing. Neither can a death toll account for the many ways cultural violence changes life for those who don't die.

Again, Cantú notes that the situation on the border is one of complete disrespect for human life and its sanctity: partly because so many lives are left uncounted, and partly because even counting is a profoundly impoverished way to measure the uncountable value and needs of human life.

During a quiet shift at work, Cantú traces the story of an 18-year-old Ecuadorian boy, the sole survivor of a massacre of 72 people, who fled the scene and ran to a military checkpoint 10 miles away to report it. Reading the story at the office, Cantú starts to dissociate until Hayward notices and tells him to snap out of it.

Cantú dissociates because the information he's absorbing is too traumatic to process, and because there's such a disconnect between the violence of the story and the comfort of his surroundings. The episode marks one stage further in his traumatized emotional detachment.

In another interlude, Cantú lists the metaphors that journalists typically use to describe migrant deaths, as determined by an academic study: economic metaphors (such as the "cost" or "gamble" of crossing), violent metaphors (such as "armies of migrants" or "lethal policies"), and dehumanizing metaphors (for instance, describing migrants as hunted prey).

The language used to describe migrants obscures the tragedy of the deaths and disappearances on the border by diminishing migrants' individuality and humanity. This also normalizes the tragedy and all but ensures it will continue.

Hayward tells his team that he's accepted a job in El Paso and encourages Cantú to apply, saying it would allow him to start working in the field again.

Hayward's suggestion implies that the cure for Cantú's emotional struggles with his work is to progress further into the organization—a typically institutionalized response that will in fact entrap Cantú farther in the institution's damaging grip.

Sitting at his desk, Cantú sees a **prairie falcon** on a surveillance camera he's monitoring. It seems to look straight into the camera and dare him to take a job back in the field. Cantú wants to reply that he's afraid the violence won't affect him any longer.

Throughout the book, birds symbolize freedom. Here, Cantú's resistance to the bird's urging suggests how much freedom of spirit and mind he has lost as a result of his work in Border Patrol. In addition, his fear that the violence won't affect him is in fact a fear of the ways the work and its necessary emotional compartmentalization are changing him, trapping him in the border's cycle of pain.

Hayward greets Cantú at his new workplace in El Paso and introduces him to his new coworkers, Manuel and Beto. Hayward tells Cantú to be ready, because they'll be going on their first mission in two weeks.

Cantú has overridden his emotional misgivings about the new job, plunging himself into a demanding new work scenario. There's an implication that he's so detached from his own needs and instincts that he no longer knows how to listen to them—which, in turn, would be a sign of diminished connection to his particular humanity.

In another interlude, Cantú describes a retelling of the Greek tragedy Antigone, set in modern Mexico. Sara Uribe's *Antígona González* centers on the tragedy of so many people disappearing while crossing the border and remaining "unidentified and nameless" ever after.

Again, Cantú highlights the anonymity of people who disappear while crossing the border, drawing on poetry to illustrate how much life and value that anonymity obscures.

Hayward, Manuel, Beto, and Cantú arrive in Lordsburg, New Mexico, for a mission. They go to a Mexican restaurant for dinner, where an older couple thanks them for their service and a young boy stares at their guns and badges while his mother tries to draw him away, explaining that he wants to be a police officer when he's older.

The little boy's attraction to the officers' guns and badges reveals that in border regions, militarized, violent border enforcement are normalized and even lionized—thus perpetuating the institutional violence of border enforcement. The boy's reverence seems even more jarring in the context of a Mexican restaurant—a site that nods to the importance of Mexican culture and Mexican migrants in the United States.

The next day, the team works in the field, driving around and surveying the area. Cantú feels "giddy" to be back in the field. That night, he dreams again of a cave littered with body parts and a **wolf** circling the dark. Cantú gets up to write the dreams in a notebook in the bathroom while Beto, his roommate, sleeps.

In Cantú's dreams, wolves symbolize the violent side of human nature that must be acknowledged and neutralized rather than repressed. Following a day back in the field, this dream suggests that Cantú is subconsciously glad to once more be confronting the violence of his work head-on rather than from behind a computer screen, where he can so easily compartmentalize it.

At breakfast the next morning, Cantú's coworkers make fun of him, accusing him of masturbating in the bathroom in the night. He makes fun of them in return.

The camaraderie between agents relies on light-hearted mutual mocking. Part of the institution's violence is the way its culture deters members from processing their trauma by talking openly and honestly about their experiences.


Later that day, Manuel, Beto, and Cantú drive toward the border for the day's work. Images from his dream still circle in Cantú's mind. He wonders what the **wolf** symbolizes: he knows wolves used to roam this area but were deemed too dangerous and were exterminated, and that conservation projects are now returning them to this land in small numbers.

In this book, wolves are associated with the violent shadow side of human nature. The story of their extermination suggests a cultural unwillingness to acknowledge this universal shadow side, while the careful conservation projects Cantú mentions suggest some hope that repressed elements of human nature might be reintegrated, either in Cantú or in society at large.

Beto takes a clearly upsetting call from his mom, but he doesn't tell Manuel or Cantú what it's about. They pass a lot of wildlife—antelopes and coatimundi (raccoon-like animals)—before stopping for lunch. Finally, Beto tells Cantú that his cousin died the day before in Juárez. Beto tells Cantú a few stories about his cousin and then comments on the wildlife they've been seeing, including a butterfly he saw the day before and can't stop thinking about.

Beto becomes more conscious of the wildlife around him after hearing of his cousin's death because nature humanizes people and reminds them of the full richness and complexity of the human experience. In the context of a book in which human life is so often devalued, nature becomes a crucial reminder of the true worth of life.

One night of this mission, when all four agents are off duty, they drive up into the mountains and go to two bars. Beto makes out with a woman he meets named Suzy, Manuel tells Cantú that he's about to become the first person in his family to own a house, and Hayward reminisces about meeting his wife in high school in Virginia. The night seems full of "happiness and promise."

Only in connecting with his coworkers as humans, rather than in their professional capacities, does Cantú feel a sense of happiness and promise. The evening points to how institutions usually dehumanize people by requiring them to leave their personal lives out of their interactions in the name of professionalism.

Back at work, Manuel, Beto, and Cantú listen to their own progress along a dirt road being narrated via radio by cartel scouts in the neighborhood. The next night, they hear more drama: an armed convoy in Mexico is raising panic among scouts until another man comes on the radio to say they have permission to pass. Cantú imagines the cartel ranch they're heading to and knows he must never go there.

This passage highlights the illicit, unofficial land boundaries (determined by cartels) that flank the official U.S.–Mexico border. Cantú suggests that whether it's done by cartels or governments, claiming territory is always about control and power, and thus that such arbitrary and unnatural boundaries will also contain the possibility of violence.

In another interlude, Cantú describes the writer Charles Bowden's interviews with a former *sicario* (a cartel's hit man). The *sicario* notes that he and his fellow *sicarios* were always high or drunk while doing their work, so that they couldn't think about what they were doing.

The sicario*'s testimony shows that even those who perpetrate the most extreme violence of Mexico's drug war are emotionally affected by it. These* sicarios *have to work while high or drunk in order to shield their psyches from the violence—an extreme form of the emotional detachment readers see in Cantú as he struggles to navigate the trauma of his work. The implication is that trauma and emotional detachment are universal among those touched by the violence on the border.*


The *sicario* also describes the cartels' methods of destroying bodies to obscure their identities, and he says that there are many more mass graves than have ever been discovered—and that "it is impossible to say" how many people have been buried in this way.

People buried in mass graves are anonymous; they are denied any individuality, and as such, their lives seem less valuable. This passage reinforces the book's claim that the tragedies on the border are reinforced and perpetuated by the impossibility of valuing every individual life lost—both because of the sheer number of deaths and because so many people remain unaccounted for.

When the mission in Lordsburg ends, Cantú's coworkers go back to El Paso while he stays behind to visit his uncle on his father's side, whom he hasn't seen in years. In the morning, Cantú wakes to find his uncle gone and looks through his things, finding photographs of his own father and his "many past wives," as well as pictures of his own half-siblings by those wives. He finds a picture of himself and his mother. Cantú looks outside to see his uncle jogging. A degenerative disease is eating his muscle tissue, and he runs strangely.

Here, Cantú is reckoning with his own identity. From his uncle's possessions, he gets a new perspective on his own life, in which he is just one of his father's many children. The effect makes him slightly anonymous and strange to himself, just as the migrants he encounters are strange to him. The passage thus becomes an implicit commentary on the way humans understand others, in which value is contingent on how much of a person's individual story is known.

Cantú's uncle takes him to see the land he has bought to build a house, which he likes because it's wild and remote. Afterward, on the way to a nearby trailhead, Cantú's uncle speaks romantically about the local trees, saying he was drawn to the area by the sycamores and describing an apple orchard he found locally on his honeymoon and has never found again since. As they hike, Cantú's uncle tells him about all the natural things he had to destroy for his work as a contractor, saying he sometimes feels overwhelmed by the destruction.

In this book, reverence for nature is associated with living in full humanity and an appreciation for life in all its forms. By revealing that he complied with the professional requirement to harm nature, despite his reverence for it, Cantú's uncle underscores Cantú's own experiences in Border Patrol: that the structures of work and society can cause a person to act against their own values—and harm them psychologically in doing so, as indicated by Cantú's uncle's comment about feeling overwhelmed.


Cantú wants to tell his uncle about the far worse acts of destruction of the natural landscape he has seen while working in the desert, but he doesn't. Cantú thinks about how strange it is that his uncle can destroy the landscape despite loving it so much.

By not telling his uncle about the destruction he has seen while working with Border Patrol, Cantú reveals that he's still emotionally suppressing that destruction because it's too painful to confront. In addition, Cantú's bewilderment about his uncle's behavior reveals that he can't yet see the parallel with his own: that he, too, is destroying something he loves (i.e., the cultural and personal exchanges between Mexico and the United States).

Cantú's uncle asks him how his work is, and Cantú wants to tell him that the violence is overwhelming him, but instead he answers that work is good. On the way back to the car, he worries that he has the same degenerative disease as his uncle, and that there's something in his blood that will destroy him.

Cantú's inability to express his troubles at work signals emotional detachment and repression—his coping strategies for dealing with the pain of border enforcement. His immediate fear about having a degenerative disease indicates both how psychologically damaging this repression is and that he has internalized the suffering on the border, convincing himself that there is something wrong with him *rather than the institution of Border Patrol.*

Back at home in El Paso, Cantú jogs through the streets, looking at Juárez on the hillside opposite. He reflects on the fact that in order to live in El Paso during those violent days in Juárez, people had to set aside what they knew about the atrocities that went on just across the river.

Cantú notes that the emotional detachment necessary for his work as a Border Patrol agent is also widespread in the general population. Living in such proximity to the tragedies and violence in Juárez, the whole city of El Paso has to emotionally detach from the suffering in order to live their lives—and in so doing, they perpetuated the suffering.

Looking at Juárez from the top of the hill he has jogged to, Cantú remembers the kindness he has personally experienced in Juárez and feels a longing to go back, but he knows he won't.

The U.S.–Mexico border seeks to establish a binary: "us and them," "here and there." Having crossed the border fluidly throughout his life, Cantú understands that such an arbitrary binary overlooks the humanity of people on either sides of the line—and yet he knows that he won't go back because he, too, has internalized this cultural lesson.

In another historical interlude, Cantú draws from historian David Dorado Romo's account of El Paso during the Mexican Revolution. El Paso residents gathered on the tops of buildings to watch the fighting in Juárez through binoculars, and after the battle, they ran sightseeing tours to the "ruins" of the Mexican city.

Cantú offers a contrast to the present-day emotional detachment from the violence in Juárez: evidence that, in the past, citizens of El Paso have been more callous, seeing the loss of life in Juárez as a source of entertainment. The incident stands as proof that the human capacity to ignore the value of others' lives is not a new phenomenon.

Cantú notes that a year before the revolution, Halley's Comet had passed through the sky, and his own family (including his grandfather as a fetus) might have gathered on a rooftop elsewhere in Mexico to gaze in a different type of awe.

Stars are often interpreted as clues to destiny or aids to help people navigate. By imagining his own family stargazing in Mexico many years ago, Cantú illustrates a more gentle, inspiring side of the age-old phenomenon of migration: people experiencing awe and a sense of destiny before seeking a new life in another country. This is the kind of migration that has been curtailed by the militarization of the border.

One night, Beto invites Cantú to a nightclub with his friends. Beto advises him not to look at a particular woman, whom he says is "with a narco." Cantú dances with another woman all night, who tells him she's been disturbed by a wealthy older couple at the club who tried to persuade her to leave with them. At the end of the night, Cantú can't find this woman.

Beto's comment about the "narco" and Cantú's concern about the woman highlight the sense of perpetual threat in areas along the border. The episode suggests that nobody and nothing are ever fully safe here, which consequently suggests how devalued human life has become for some people in these areas.

In another interlude, Cantú considers the femicides, or killing of women, that began to escalate in Juárez in the 1990s. Women began to be abducted, raped, tortured, and murdered, and their bodies were dumped in the desert or the street, negating their humanity.

The serial murders and disappearances of women in Mexico are evidence of the devaluation of human life. Moreover, the murders fit into a self-perpetuating cycle in which society never confronts or metabolizes the tragedies, so the victims are dehumanized, life loses yet more value, and the likelihood of more murders increases.

Cantú cites researchers including Molly Molloy, who observed that the narratives that emerged around these murdered women were often sexualized and painted them as powerless, when in fact they were often their families' sole breadwinners.

The narratives Molloy highlights are designed in part to lessen the tragedy of these women's deaths by insinuating that they deserved their fates or were worthless in society. Victim blaming and diminishing the value of lost lives are some the ways societies avoid assuming responsibility for their own ills, thus perpetuating cycles of loss and suffering.

One man was arrested for the murders, Cantú writes, but the crimes didn't stop. The city began to seem like a "battleground" for women, thus minimizing their individual danger and loss of life. The police did not seriously investigate the crimes and were even complicit in deliberately unfair prosecutions, perhaps as a cover-up—a fact borne out by the findings of a visiting UN committee.

Again, Cantú reveals the ways in which failing to value and seek justice for human life and death locks a society in cycles of suffering. In this instance, the danger is specifically aimed at the women of Mexico, who increasingly become targets after their society reveals how little it values their lives. However, also Cantú implies a parallel to the loss of migrant lives on the border, where loss of life is stoked by callous treatment.

In 2004, Cantú writes, an investigation by a team from Argentina found a "willfully inept justice system" and mass graves for women in which body parts of different women were often mixed up.

The mixing of body parts from different women signals that these women have been stripped of all individuality and dignity. Much like the migrants who disappear on the border, these women's lives are treated as valueless.

This violence, Cantú writes, was a "blueprint" for the violence of the drug war, of which Juárez ended up being the epicenter. By 2010, Juárez was the "murder capital of the world" for men and women alike, while across the river, El Paso, Texas, was announced as the safest city in the United States.

Here, Cantú presents two perspectives on the devaluation of human life. First, he argues, once tragedy and death have been normalized in a society, more are likely to follow, as they did in the form of Mexico's drug war. Second, he notes that the devaluation of human life is never universal: those in more powerful social categories (such as U.S. citizens in El Paso) rarely have their lives devalued in the way that more vulnerable groups do.

In 2012, Cantú writes, Juárez was hit by another, even bigger wave of femicides. By now, however, violence in the region had become so normalized that journalists and campaigners couldn't get people to care.

Cantú highlights that the devaluation of human life is widespread. And again, he highlights that tragedy can initiate a self-reinforcing cycle, in which individuals and societies detach emotionally from suffering, thus allowing more suffering to occur.

One day, Manuel asks Beto and Cantú to help him move. Over pizza afterward, they talk to Manuel's parents, who are from Mexico. They remember the days when people could cross back and forth "like the border wasn't even there." They even used to go to Juárez, she says. But they don't go there anymore.

Manuel's mother's memories of the border highlight that there is nothing essential or inevitable about the current militarized border, and that it hasn't even been around that long. As such, Cantú questions the validity of militarization.

Driving back from Manuel's house, Beto and Cantú talk about their lives before they joined Border Patrol. Beto says he felt his choices were to join a cartel or join the patrol, and now he won't leave the agency because he has a mortgage and opportunities for advancement.

This conversation illustrates how society can trap people in institutions, even when those institutions harm them or their communities, by offering no valid alternatives. In this way, the violence of the institution of Border Patrol is reinforced by broader social injustices.

Cantú says he's considering his options, including going back to school. He says he entered Border Patrol hoping to understand the border better, but instead he only has more questions.

This comment highlights the gulf between the naïve, idealistic Cantú who entered Border Patrol, and the more jaded person he has become. This difference has been wrought by the harshness and violence of the institution of Border Patrol, which, Cantú implicitly argues, is far more powerful than any individual.

Beto says he grew up in Juárez and El Paso and used to cross the border often, but he hasn't gone since joining the patrol because it "never felt smart." Cantú says he hasn't either, though neither of them quite knows why they haven't.

Again, Cantú notes how much border enforcement has changed in recent decades, implicitly suggesting that the current state of militarized enforcement is unnecessary. In addition, he notes the ways in which manmade borders sever families and individual identities, such as Beto's.

Cantú dreams that he is in Juárez with Manuel and Beto, partying and kissing girls in the street, when they notice men coming down the road, killing and kidnapping everyone. Manuel, Beto, and Cantú go to their car and speed off, and people come out onto the streets again as morning begins. In his dream, Cantú wonders how they live with the fear.

As with Cantú's other dreams, the disturbed tone here suggests repressed trauma and stress finding an expression through his subconscious—thus signaling the profound emotional and psychological impact of his work. In addition, the specifics of the dream—the violence that occurs in the midst of a party—suggests that Cantú has come to feel there is no element of life that's safe from violence. Again, this suggests that his work is taking a heavy toll on his life and conception of the world.

In another interlude, Cantú discusses the work of historian Timothy Snyder, who studies the genocides perpetrated in Eastern Europe between 1930 and 1945. Snyder notes that death-toll statistics negate the individuality of each victim and pleads with his fellow academics to "turn the numbers back into people."

Here, Cantú returns to the theme of the value of a human life, arguing that cases where death is widespread enough to be reported in statistics are precisely where individuality and human stories must be respected most, in order to fully weigh the import of the mass tragedy.

Over lunch one day, Hayward tells Cantú that an agent at his old station shot and killed a migrant, and he asks if Cantú knows the agent and how he's doing. He tells Cantú that he himself killed a migrant in his early days, when he was in his early 20s, and has never gotten over it.

Hayward's confession reveals the violence that institutions like Border Patrol can perpetrate against those inside as well as outside them. In addition, there's a secondary, implicit question about whether an institution like Border Patrol can feasibly do its job fairly if it's staffed by individuals who have been traumatized in the course of their work. Cantú suggests that institutions can traumatize their members, who then perpetuate the suffering of non-members.


Cantú discusses research from a Dutch university regarding a gene that's linked to violence, known as the "warrior gene." About a third of all men carry the gene, Cantú writes, but, crucially, the gene is typically only expressed (i.e., activated) by traumatic childhood experiences. Scientists have not specified whether a whole society experiencing trauma over many decades would trigger the gene.

This research emphasizes that social institutions that perpetuate poverty, inequality, and other injustices are much more culpable for violence than individual psychology. In addition, Cantú implies that the intergenerational trauma of colonialism, racism, and other inequalities might create conditions in which violence in inevitable.


One weekend, Beto asks Cantú to look after his dog while he goes out of town. Cantú goes out, leaving the dog in the yard, and the dog escapes. Cantú finds the dog at the shelter, bloody and covered in bite marks. He has been in a fight and torn another dog's throat. Cantú visits the other dog's owner, apologizes, and promises to pay the vet bills. He is badly shaken by the violence.

By revealing violence's universality in the animal kingdom, this incident somewhat contradicts the idea that violence is largely attributable to institutional failings. However, Cantú implies that it's a base, animal instinct—and by extension that, given the right conditions, humans can and should override it.

Cantú discusses the concept of "moral injury," a psychological condition common among soldiers, in which individuals feel disconnected from themselves after being forced to participate in and accept things they know are wrong.

Institutions are inherently violent, Cantú implies, because they create environments in which rules are more important than a person's moral compass. As a result, they require people to betray their own values, causing damage to their psyches—and thus, possibly, damage to the people whose lives they impact in the course of their work.

Cantú's team heads to his old station for a mission. One night, the group finds a migrant who's lost her group. Hayward asks Cantú to take her to the base. She's limping badly. Manuel respectfully helps her into the car, and on the ride, Cantú tries to make small talk with her, but can't think of anything to say, except for telling her she can use the informal "tú" form of address with him.

In the context of their work with Border Patrol, whose agents so often dehumanize the migrants they encounter, Manuel and Cantú's kindness to this woman seems like a remarkable sign of respect for the value of her life. However, Cantú's inability to make small talk with her illuminates the power imbalance between them, which devalues the woman's life, no matter how personally affable Cantú and Manuel are.

Driving to the base with the migrant, Cantú feels a strange sense of freedom in the desert, even though he knows the horror that happens there. He looks in the rearview mirror and wonders what the woman sees and feels. He's certain it's not freedom.

Throughout this book, nature is associated with wisdom and the full range of human experience—however, here, Cantú suggests that only those privileged enough to enjoy nature freely can access this sense of wisdom and freedom.

At the station, Cantú takes the woman's details and asks if he can help with her feet, which are covered in huge blisters. He cleans, disinfects, and bandages them, and the woman says, "Eres muy humanitario"—"You have a lot of human goodness." Cantú tells her that's not true.

Cantú's discomfort with the woman's gratitude indicates his awareness of the power imbalance between them: he may value her humanity, but he has chosen to work for an institution that does not, and he must bear the responsibility for that.


Cantú returns to the story of the *sicario* that Charles Bowden interviewed. Like Cantú, the *sicario* suffered from nightmares. Sometimes, he says, he would wake up aiming his gun or holding his wife by the throat. At this point, he realized that his work had changed him, and he "was no longer any good."

Cantú implicitly compares himself to the sicario, *suggesting that he believes his work with the institution of Border Patrol to have been damaging and violent, both to others (like the* sicario's*) and, as a result, to his own psyche.*


At this point, the *sicario* says, he decided to leave his work. He fled with his family. Early in his new life, he says, he went to church, and he was so moved he cried for five or six hours. As he cried, the church people cried with him and touched him.

This passage suggests Cantú's hope that he may one day, like the sicario, *find relief from the psychic wounds of his work. By extension, it reveals his hope that the cycles of pain and emotional trauma incurred at institutions like Border Patrol are not inevitable and can be stopped.*

After spending a day with his team at the firing range, Cantú asks to speak to Hayward. He tells him he's leaving the patrol; he's been offered a scholarship to study abroad. Hayward offers to keep a job open for him, but Cantú refuses, saying, "It's not the work for me."

Cantú uses the exact sentence used by a recruit who quit the agency during their training, suggesting that he, too, wishes he had realized earlier on that this wasn't "the work for him," and thus saved himself the pain of institutionalization in such a problematic agency.

Cantú discusses an essay by Cristina Rivera Garza about Mexican pain. Pain, he summarizes, is pervasive in Mexico and "has the power to destroy and to produce its own reality." That reality, he writes, is often filled with fear and distrust.

Again, Cantú highlights the ways in which trauma perpetuates pain. A society that has experienced great pain, he suggests, is predisposed to experience and perceive even more pain in the future.

Cantú discusses another Rivera Garza essay, in which she speculates that war will always exist until humans can imagine something more exciting than it. She frames this act of imagining as a radical, revolutionary act.

This passage implies that the end of violence lies in the human capacity to draw from more elevated human instincts such as those for creativity and imagination.

Cantú dreams that he is in the desert when he gets caught in a shootout between a man and a boy. He shoots them both and then starts to panic, worried that he will never escape violence. Cantú checks the bodies and the boy is still alive. He begs Cantú to kill him, but Cantú walks away instead.

Again, Cantú's dreams reveal how much his work with Border Patrol has impacted his subconscious psychological and emotional health, seeming to trap him in a cycle of pain. His fear that he will never escape the violence also speaks to the cyclical nature of his pain.

Cantú wakes and cries, sensing the familiar **wolf** nearby. He longs to reach out his hand to the wolf and befriend it.

However, in waking, Cantú seems to remember that escaping the cycle of pain is possible, but will require him to accept and confront the difficult emotions he has suppressed during the course of his work—including his own violent instincts.

PART 3

Cantú discusses ideas from the psychoanalyst Carl Jung. At the end of his life, during the Cold War, Jung wrote that people had grown to project their own shadows—all the dark things about themselves that they repressed—onto "the other," which in the context of the Cold War meant people on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

Cantú implies that Jung's arguments are applicable to the modern-day treatment of migrants in the United States. Every human contains darkness, he suggests, and in the present day in the United States, many people project their own darkness onto migrants, particularly those from Mexico and other Latin American countries. Cantú argues by implication that the U.S.'s inhumane treatment of migrants will not end until the American people recognize and learn to stop repressing their own inner darkness.

Jung added that the governments of modern nation states encourage this "othering" attitude, aiming to bolster their own power by atomizing their populations into an "us" and "them" mindset, and encouraging them not to reckon with the darkness in themselves and their own societies that lingered after World War II.

Again, Cantú implies that the dynamic Jung describes also applies in the present day in the U.S. and Mexico. Specifically, he argues that the human instinct to repress the shadow side of the psyche has been co-opted by the institutions of power in the United States—such as the government and its agencies, including Border Patrol—in order to sustain the existing power dynamic by uniting citizens around an external enemy.

However, Jung wrote, shadow is universal to every individual and every society. In his view, the only route to wholeness involves reconciling one's own light and dark sides. On the level of individual psychology, dreams can help with this, since they allow repressed feelings to be expressed. If you dream of a "savage bull, or a lion, or a **wolf**," Jung wrote, the best response is to say to it: "Please, come and devour me."

Thus far, this book has suggested that Border Patrol necessary leaves its members emotionally damaged, because they're forced to repress the trauma they witness regularly in their work. Here, at the start of the book's third and final section, Cantú implicitly states his intention to break this cycle for himself, by reconciling his shadow side, including the trauma he has repressed as a Border Patrol agent. The statement of intent is made yet more explicit by Jung's example of a dream of a wolf, which echoes the wolf dreams Cantú has reported throughout the book.

Cantú is at the coffee shop where he now works. He arrives each morning at 6:30 a.m. and carefully sets up the shop, ready for customers. The coffee shop is in a shared plaza, and Cantú describes some of the other workers he meets there, including a maintenance man from Oaxaca named José.

Cantú takes pride in his work, and his description of it reveals his relief to be outside of the institution of Border Patrol, with its oppressive restrictions and the violence it perpetrates against others and its own members.

José and Cantú become friendly. José is considerate, asking Cantú about his life, including his mother and his graduate studies. In turn, he tells Cantú proudly about his wife and three sons.

Since human emotions are stirred by individual stories more than statistics, José's story will illuminate the true scale of suffering inflicted by border enforcement in a way that the anonymous migrants Cantú met at work never could. By introducing him as a kind, generous, considerate man, Cantú begins the process of revealing the incalculable value of José's life—and by extension all the other lives lost or destroyed by the U.S.–Mexico border.

José knows that Cantú used to work in Border Patrol but rarely asks about it, and, suspecting from a certain gravity in his manner that José has had his own immigration problems, Cantú doesn't ask José about his immigration status.

Cantú and José reveal their awareness of the violence of institutions like Border Patrol, preferring to interact simply as humans without any legal or institutional framework complicating their relationship.

One day at the end of Cantú's shift, José asks him why he left Border Patrol, guessing that the money must be better than what he earns at a coffee shop. Cantú is awkward, finally saying the work wasn't right for him.

Cantú's awkwardness suggests that he still hasn't learned to accept and integrate all the complicated emotions he suppressed during his time in Border Patrol.

Cantú adds that he's studying writing now to try to understand what he'd seen on the border. Finally José understands the decision to leave, enigmatically saying he's seen many things, too, and could write many books about them.

Cantú's need to process his experiences in Border Patrol by writing suggests how much the institution altered him, destroying his youthful idealism and leaving him with many questions. Readers might consider that Cantú is rare and lucky as an example of an agent who left the patrol and found the time and space to process what he'd seen and done. Since most agents remain in border patrol, there's an implicit suggestion that the institution is staffed by people struggling to understand their own experiences—which could negatively impact their treatment of migrants.

José and Cantú often discuss the drug wars, violence, and chaos in Mexico. When the drug lord El Chapo Guzmán is arrested in 2014, José studies photos online, telling Cantú he doesn't look like a drug lord; he doesn't look that bad. Cantú tells him: "Violent people look like everyone else."

Cantú's response echoes the ideas he quoted from Jung at the start of this section: violence is not an unusual or exotic trait, but one lurking inside many humans. Though he sounds jaded, his response also implies that he is beginning to try to heal his own emotional detachment from the truth of violence, and thus to reintegrate his whole human experience.

After this comment, José asks Cantú directly about his time in Border Patrol for the first time: did Cantú ever find drugs or arrest "narcos" (people in the drug trade)? Cantú says yes, but mostly he just arrested migrants, "people looking for a better life."

Cantú's frank response reveals the way institutions perpetrate violence. From within the institution, Cantú couldn't clearly articulate his objections to it; now, from outside, he can see clearly the moral problems with the work. By clouding their members' judgment, institutions are able to keep perpetrating morally suspect actions indefinitely.

Every morning, José shares his breakfast with Cantú. One day, he brings Oaxacan food that his wife cooked, and Cantú tells him of the time he arrested two men from Oaxaca and they gave him their food. José is very excited to hear about food from his home.

José's kindness and affection for his homeland make him a likeable, rounded character and a clear reminder of people's individual humanity and worth.

Cantú tells José that they also shared their mezcal, and José grows serious, saying that he used to drink too much, but he's been sober for 15 years now—since his first son was born. Cantú goes on to say that every day for two years, José came and shared his breakfast with him.

Again, Cantú includes details of José's character that increase readers' affinity for him, both by accentuating his individuality and by revealing his sense of responsibility and kindness. Ultimately, Cantú's efforts to capture José's character make readers more aware of how much is lost when José and people like him have their lives destroyed by the border.

One day, Cantú asks José about where he's from. José describes a peaceful village in the jungle, where the violence of the drug war hasn't reached yet. Later that day, José shows Cantú the local church and his mother's house on Google Earth, smiling fondly as he reminisces.

The picture José paints of a peaceful region is at odds with the American stereotype of Mexico as a solely dangerous place. José's fondness for his hometown and the rich life he describes there amplify the sense of the value of his life—and the lives of every other Mexican migrant to the U.S.—and thus the sense of what is lost when migrants' lives are destroyed or ended on the border.

In an interlude from his account of José, Cantú describes his first trip to Mexico. He was too young to remember, but his mother took him after splitting up with his father, wanting Cantú to know the border and not fear it and wanting to show him and herself that she could trust people enough to travel safely as a single woman.

Like José's reminiscences, this interlude reveals a more peaceful side of Mexico. In addition, the episode reveals Cantú's mother facing her own repressed fears by traveling alone—which suggests the universality of the repressed fears that can lead to violence.


Cantú describes how accepted his mother felt in the small town they visited, where the local mothers took her into their group, and archaeological workers at some local ruins allowed her and Cantú to walk through the site even though it was closed. The workers played cowboys and Indians with Cantú, and his mother said she felt completely calm and trusting of the place and the people.

The kindness Cantú and his mother found in Mexico serves to heighten readers' awareness of the equal humanity of those who live on the other side of the U.S.–Mexico border, and by extension, to heighten their awareness of the value of the human lives that the border is destroying.

One hot summer's day, José doesn't come to work. Cantú and Jose's boss, Diane, tells Cantú that he went back to Oaxaca for two weeks to be with his dying mother. Diane says she understands completely: it was very important to her to be with her own mother when she died.

The book depicts José's instinct to return to Mexico to be with his dying mother as an entirely natural and understandable one. As such, the manmade border that separates him from his family seems like an unnecessary hurdle.

Two weeks later, Cantú asks Diane about José, and she tells him he's having trouble re-entering the country. Diane suspects he is undocumented. Cantú seems distracted by the news, telling Diane that "getting back across isn't what it used to be."

Cantú again highlights that migration used to be simpler, and that the militarization of the border is in no way natural or inevitable. In this way, he calls into question the current regime of militarized border enforcement.

Diane tells Cantú that the last she heard, José was at the border, trying to cross. Cantú immediately grows very worried, since it's the middle of summer and too hot to cross safely. He closes his eyes and sees images of swollen bodies and blackened skin. He whispers "not José" to himself.

When he closes his eyes, Cantú experiences a flashback—a common symptom of trauma. This resurgence of his trauma indicates that though he has left Border Patrol, he remains emotionally damaged by his work. In addition, by mumbling "not José," he highlights that José has become very important to him. This moment speaks to the idea that it's impossible to fully grasp the value of a human life without an understanding of the person's individuality, which is denied to the migrants who die anonymously on the border.

Cantú calls José's home and talks to his son, then his wife, Lupe. Lupe tells him José was arrested by Border Patrol trying to cross the border and has a court hearing later that day. She sounds exhausted.

As readers get to know José's family, their sense of the value of his life is heightened yet further, making the tragedy of his impending fate more acute.

Cantú calls Morales and asks about the court process for a friend. Morales makes fun of him, saying, "a few years out of the patrol and suddenly all your friends are *mojados*" (meaning "wets," a slur for a Mexican living in the U.S.). It takes Cantú a while to think of a comeback.

Cantú cannot immediately think of a comeback because he is in the process of deinstitutionalization—that is, of extricating himself from the behaviors he adopted in order to survive his work, even though he found it morally objectionable, like using racist slurs.

Cantú asks if the court process will be open to the public, and Morales says yes, that protestors often go along. He tells Cantú that José's family will be safe to go though they might not be documented, and he explains where to sit in the courthouse so that José will see him, since they won't be able to speak.

The information Morales provides is valuable to José's family and would never be available to most migrants. This episode thus underscores the imbalance between the value Cantú places on José's life and the way that most other migrants who pass through Border Patrol are treated like they're anonymous and worthless.

Cantú meets Lupe, her and José's three sons, and their pastor outside the courtroom. In the courtroom, he recognizes the familiar old scent of bodies that have been toiling through the desert for days. Despite this scent, the courtroom is grand, like a cathedral, and the judge sits at the front in black robes, beneath the seal of the United States of America.

The disparity between the grand room and the disheveled migrants highlights the power imbalance between the institutions of border enforcement and the individual migrants.

Cantú and José's family sit, and the judge addresses all 40 of the defendants at once about their charges: two crimes, of which one charge will be dropped if they plead guilty to the other. The men strain to hear the judge, but he asks them to stand up if they understand, and they all stand.

By addressing all the migrants at once, and having them signal their comprehension as a group, the judge fails to afford them any individuality—thus also ruling out any chance of compassionate treatment.

The judge discusses the possible penalties the men face. Cantú catches the eye of a Border Patrol agent, who glares at him like an enemy while the judge tells the migrants that their sentences are lenient this time, but if they're caught trying to cross the border illegally again, they could serve years in prison.

Here, Cantú has an opportunity to be a third-party observer of the institution he used to work for. The Border Patrol agent's glare reveals that those within the institution of Border Patrol feel that the world is hostile to them—a sure sign that they are aware, on some level, of the morally dubious nature of the work they do.

The defendants go up to the judge five at a time, chained to one another and with their wrists bound. The judge rapidly asks each defendant the necessary questions, while court-appointed attorneys flit between their multiple clients.

Again, the mass treatment of the migrants and the sharing of court-appointed attorneys indicates the lack of value ascribed to each of their individual cases and individual lives.

After questioning each defendant about their plea, the judge announces the sentence: 30 days imprisonment for each in the state detention center. One of the few women in the group says she's pregnant, and the judge simply says he will add a note to her file.

The mass sentencing again suggests a lack of respect for the defendants' lives. This impression is heightened by the lack of respect the judge pays even to a mother and unborn child.

Watching the defendants, Cantú thinks about how he himself has arrested many people to send them here, and the people he arrested always looked different than these defendants: less diminished. He concludes that out in the desert, they still had some flicker of hope, or life, whereas here, in the grand courtroom, among foreign, suited men, that spark has been lost.

The loss of the spark in the defendants is evidence of institutional violence: the way in which the grinding machinery of border enforcement crushes the life and hope from them. In addition, Cantú's reflection on the number of people he has sent here reminds readers that, while he was caught up in the institution of Border Patrol, he also saw people as anonymous rather than individuals.

Though they can only see the defendants' backs, José's pastor and family see him in the lineup. Lupe is devastated and starts rocking. When José turns, Cantú sees how lost and hopeless he looks. When he sees his family, he is so shocked that he starts shaking.

José and his family's powerful emotional responses are a reminder of all of the defendants' humanity and the incalculable value of each of their lives.

A week later, Cantú meets José's court-appointed attorney, Walter, back at the courtroom. José is the only one of the 40 defendants to get a follow-up hearing—the rest went directly to prison. Walter has been thinking about José's case—it's a very common story, but it's unusual for someone in José's position to have so much support at the courthouse.

Again, José's special treatment only serves to underscore how inhumanely the other migrants are treated, in being lumped together as an anonymous mass. This is especially true since the level of support José receives is essentially an accident of fate, resulting from his working with Cantú.

José's sons run down the courthouse hallway. Cantú brought them to the hearing, since Lupe is undocumented and can't safely go to court. Walter says seeing them makes him think of his own son, and that no father should be kept from his family in this way.

Again, readers' acquaintance with José's sons heightens their sense of the value of José's life, and thus of the scale of the tragedy of the U.S.–Mexico border, where parents like José are separated from their families daily.

Cantú looks at the courthouse and realizes that he has little idea what happens here despite sending many migrants here over the years.

The book overwhelmingly suggests that, during his time in Border Patrol, Cantú functioned as a cog in a machine who did not see the other parts of the machine. Compartmentalizing people in this way, so that they don't see the full picture they're involved in, is one way in which institutions ensure their members will keep executing the mission, even if it's harmful.

Cantú asks Walter why he intervened in José's case, and Walter says it's because unlike most migrants, José has children in the United States, which gives him a claim to citizenship. He hopes to give José a chance to find a real immigration lawyer, which Cantú confirms his friends have done. Walter explains that José will have to serve his time in prison; then he'll be free to launch a legal case for citizenship.

Cantú's question highlights that most migrants' cases are processed without any intervention on their behalf—they are treated as anonymous, rather than as individuals. The intervention on José's behalf only highlights that the system of border enforcement does not value the individual lives of most people that pass through it.

Not knowing Cantú used to work for Border Patrol, Walter says a lot of people in the immigration system, including Border Patrol, lose sight of people's humanity. Cantú mentions that he's friends with Morales, and Walter says he knows him from the courthouse and thinks he's callous.

Cantú gets an outsider's perspective on the organization that changed him, and of which he was an integral part. The disparity between his own perspective on Border Patrol and Walter's reveals one of the core dangers of institutionalization: that it twists individuals' abilities to make clear judgments about the institutions of which they are a part.

Walter says he once represented a Border Patrol agent who was framed for brutality by his colleagues for showing too much compassion to migrants. He says the agents he knows never "express any humanity," and wonders aloud, "How do you come home to your kids at night when you spend your day treating other humans like dogs?"

Walter voices one of the book's central arguments: that the institution of Border Patrol fails to give migrants the respect of full humanity. Unlike Cantú (who blames the institution of Border Patrol, rather than individual officers, for mistreatment), Walter doesn't account for the trauma many Border Patrol agents suffer on the job, which locks them into cycles of pain and suffering.

Along with José's sons, Cantú again watches José at the courthouse, pleading guilty to illegal entry, which is the first step toward the process of applying for citizenship. The judge repeats the exact words used at the sentencing a week earlier.

The judge's repetition again underscores the cookie-cutter nature of the treatment of migrants, and thus the fact that, in the eyes of the justice system, migrants are anonymous and interchangeable.

Outside the courtroom, Walter tells Cantú that if José hadn't gone home to see his dying mother, he might have been protected under President Obama's new immigration laws, which grant provisional status to U.S. citizens as long as they don't have a criminal record.

Walter's comment highlights the arbitrariness of the U.S.–Mexico border and the laws that govern it. Ultimately, this arbitrariness undermines the validity of border enforcement, since, the book argues, there's no natural or intrinsic logic to it.

A U.S. marshal leaves the courtroom and approaches José's sons. He gives Diego his marshal pin and says he's sorry about his dad. Walter is surprised by the show of compassion.

This sign of compassion from one of the officials Walter recently accused of being heartless bolsters the thesis Cantú proposes over the course of the book: that for the most part, individuals are more compassionate and less culpable in cruelty than the institutions they serve.

In an interlude, Cantú discusses his mother's background. Her mother was Irish and German, and her father was Mexican but left when she was young. Her mother raised her to be ashamed of her Mexican identity and to think of it as lazy.

Cantú's mother's prejudices rely on generalizations—she lumps Mexican people into one anonymous group in order to reject them. This mirrors the "othering" dynamic Cantú describes in the rest of the book, in which U.S. culture lives with its mistreatment of Mexican migrants by denying their individuality. Here, readers see how the failure to appreciate people's individuality harms interpersonal relationships and identities, too.

Cantú's mother had a single photograph of her father, in traditional Mexican dress. She romanticized him as a kind of ideal Mexican archetype: adventurous and strong. At 17, she drove to his home and met him, finding a man who never took any risks and lived just miles from his siblings. She was still ashamed to be Mexican, though now for different reasons.

Cantú's mother indulges a different form of "othering" and generalization, in which she idealizes her father's Mexican identity. Her shame when she finally meets him reveals that even this more positive form of generalization is harmful to other cultures, and that the only way to not do harm is to appreciate that people are individuals and not part of a monolith.

However, later, as an adult and a park ranger, Cantú's mother came to understand that loyalty to a place and to traditions—the kind of conservatism she'd rejected in her father—could be strengths, making people feel rooted and love the land.

Cantú's mother is again associated with nature, which in turn is associated with emotional maturity. It was her love of the land that taught Cantú's mother to love her heritage—suggesting that living in full humanity often begins with a love of nature.

Cantú's mother confessed to a friend her lifelong shame of being Mexican. The friend tells her it's always this way: the second generation of migrants often rejects or feels distant from their parents' culture, as they try to integrate into the new culture. In later life, they often feel a lack of something like authenticity. Cantú's mother tells Cantú she wanted to make sure he only ever felt pride in his heritage.

The generational structure of migrant integration reminds readers that borders aren't the only form of exclusion that migrants have to contend with. The structure of human society also often works to exclude. However, this exclusion is more permeable and less fatal than borders like the one between the U.S. and Mexico.

Cantú goes to a meeting with José's immigration lawyer, Elizabeth, as well as Lupe, their pastor, and Diane. Elizabeth says José's situation isn't rare, but it's rare for someone in his position to have so much support.

Again, by noting how rare José's level of support is, Cantú underscores the anonymity and lack of individual value with which most migrants are treated in the justice system.

Elizabeth tells the group that José's case will be hard. He has no chance of being granted legal status, and because he was deported in 1996, his options are limited.

The immovable obstacles in José's path emphasize that he has been absorbed into the impersonal institution of border enforcement, which is rigidly unconcerned with his personal needs and humanity.

Elizabeth asks Lupe about José's character and history, such as whether he has ever been in trouble with the law. Lupe says he used to drink but hasn't in 15 years.

In order to argue for José's right to stay in the country, his legal team will have to supply personal details about him and essentially establish something that has been denied him throughout the immigration proceedings: the value of his individual human life.

Elizabeth tells Lupe their first option is to try applying for asylum, which would require proof that he fears returning to Mexico. Lupe says of course he fears returning, because of the violence and corruption, but Elizabeth corrects her: ordinary fear isn't enough. He would have to prove extraordinary, personal danger, such as death threats from cartels.

Again, the rigid legal requirements placed on José and his family underscore how impersonal the institution of border enforcement is. It's unconcerned with his humanity and wellbeing and only concerns itself with whether its own rigid requirements are met.

The second option, Elizabeth says, is to ask for deferred deportation under President Obama's executive actions, though the fact José has been legally removed from the country more than once will make this difficult. Elizabeth repeats that the best-case scenario will simply be for José to return to living in the shadows with no work permit.

José prides himself on being a hard worker. The lack of legal options for a hard worker and devoted father to keep working again points to the mechanical treatment migrants receive from border enforcement, which here reveals itself to be unconcerned with individuals or their potential to contribute to society.

Elizabeth tells Lupe she will need documentation proving how long José has been living in the U.S. (30 years), documentation about their sons, and letters from people who know José, attesting to his good character and to how hard his deportation would be for his family. She will also need half the $4,000 fee upfront, of which Diane offers to pay half. The pastor says the church will help pay the rest.

The request for personal information again emphasizes that José's only hope is to distinguish himself from the anonymous masses of migrants deported every day. As such, the legal system itself shows that in order to truly appreciate the value of a human life, people need some sense of an individual's story—which agencies like Border Patrol typically deny them.

Elizabeth says if the case fails, José will be deported with a five-year ban on re-entry. And if he tries to enter again, there will be more jail time and longer re-entry bans each time he's caught. Finally, Elizabeth gives Lupe José's prison details, though Lupe won't be able to visit herself because she's undocumented.

The re-entry bans Elizabeth mentions would effectively keep José from his family—just as the rules on prison visitation keep him from his wife. If the value of a human life is in its human ties and the love it holds, here, the migratory system denies the value of José's life by keeping him separate from his loved ones.

One morning before dawn, Cantú drives through the trailer park where José's family lives. He picks up José's oldest son, Diego, and they go to the prison where José is being held. Though they arrive at the time posted on the website, the guard on duty tells them they're two hours early.

The confusion over visiting hours is another example of an institution following its own internal logic and regulations to the detriment of the individuals humans whose lives it affects.

Cantú and Diego go to a local diner to wait, but when they return at 9 a.m., the specified time, visitation has been canceled because of a riot in the prison.

Again, the episode highlights the ways institutions keep people separate—not just through regulations but also through the internal drama they create, which keeps people on the inside isolated from those on the outside.

Cantú meets Lupe after working a shift at the coffee shop and helps her sort through a huge bag of the documents Elizabeth requested. Sorting through the extensive paperwork, Cantú pieces together a picture of José's life since he arrived in the U.S. 30 years ago.

As more details of José's life in the U.S. emerge, the tragedy of his situation becomes more apparent. Thus Cantú emphasizes that story is an essential component of empathy, and that the anonymity with which most migrants are treated makes it easy to dehumanize and devalue them.

As Cantú and Lupe leave the plaza, a woman greets Lupe and reveals that Cantú used to be in Border Patrol. Lupe is surprised. The woman says Cantú is helping now to make up for his previous work, and Cantú wonders if he really is trying to pay a reparation. He wonders what true "redemption" would look like.

Cantú's question about what redemption would look like suggests that redemption might not be possible. There's an implication that no matter how many good deeds he does now, Cantú's time in the institution of Border Patrol changed him—even despite his youthful optimism that he would emerge unscathed.

Cantú knocks on José's family's door in the morning again. He collects Diego and José Junior to visit their father in prison and drives to the facility with them again.

Cantú's growing closeness with José's family makes José an ever richer and fuller character, underscoring the value of his life, which the border threatens to destroy.

After passing through various security checks, Cantú, Diego, and José Junior are taken to sit in a waiting room, where two women are already waiting, exchanging banal small talk. Cantú passes the time by looking at the posters in the room, many of them highlighting staff members of the Corrections Corporation of America. He considers what he has in common with these people, including the ways their work damages the spirit.

The sterile waiting-room environment—and the security checks required to access it—are dehumanizing, serving as a reminder that the institution of law enforcement is not concerned with individual humanity. In this context, the posters of staff members are jarring, revealing the human face of an inhuman institution. It's only now that he's left Border Patrol that Cantú can see clearly that he, too, was forced to play this role for an inhuman institution.

After passing through even more bureaucracy, they arrive at the building where José is being held. José Junior says he doesn't know if he can handle talking to his dad in jail, but they press on.

José Junior's emotional struggle is a reminder that in weighing the value of a migrant's life, society must also account for the lives and wellbeing of their loved ones, including young children.

At the doorway to the visiting room, they're told they have 45 minutes to talk, through a phone on the wall. The guard sharing this information speaks only to Cantú and the two women visiting their loved ones; he doesn't look at the boys once.

The impersonal treatment that José's sons receive, the 45-minute time cap, and the phone they must speak through are all distancing, dehumanizing factors. They underscore that these human relationships are now mediated and institutionalized by the inhuman structure of law enforcement.

Cantú watches José talk to his sons, smiling and tilting his head, but he can't hear anything he says behind the glass. Cantú also notices other mundane details, like the guard heating up his lunch in a microwave and snippets of the other visitors' conversations.

The image of José talking so close but remaining silent highlights the power of manmade boundaries. Though the boundary between José and Cantú is only made of glass, it separates them entirely, just as the U.S.–Mexico border separates people.

After talking to his sons, José asks to speak to Cantú. The scene ends with them greeting each other warmly over the phone device, and Cantú calls José his brother.

This moving moment of intimacy between the two friends increases the reader's investment in José's plight, thus further demonstrating the importance of story, background, and human ties in appreciating the value of a given individual's life.

While Cantú is at work one day, Lupe drops off a bundle of letters—testimonies to José's character from members of his community. She seems nervous around Cantú since learning he used to be in Border Patrol.

The testimonies to José's upstanding character provide a fuller picture of him and his life—something most migrants don't get when they come up against Border Patrol.

After his shift, Cantú drives to the lawyer Elizabeth's office, and sits in the parking lot reading the letters. In letter after letter, friends, family members, and members of José's church community describe him as a family man, a religious man, a hard worker, and someone who always has a smile on his face.

The testimonials widen the reader's perspective on José, giving a sense of a man who is valuable to his community and family in countless ways. As such, the immigration system's treatment of his as valueless seems even more senseless.

Lupe's letter describes José as a devoted husband and father and says they want the best for their sons, which is to live in the U.S., where the boys have lived their whole lives.

In emphasizing how the U.S. is her sons' home and José shouldn't be kept from them, Lupe speaks to the idea that borders are at times cruel and arbitrary constructions that needlessly keep people separated from one another.

José's sons write letters directly to their father, expressing how much they love and miss him. His eldest son Diego writes of his father's hard work for the family and how much they rely on him, and he pledges to score goals in José's honor at his soccer matches.

Again, this evidence of the deep love for José underscores the value of his life, which has been denied by the impersonal immigration system in which he finds himself trapped.

Cantú is driving home from a shift at the coffee shop when Diego texts him to say his father's case has been unsuccessful and he will be deported. The lawyer, Elizabeth, confirms, and notes that the authorities will not explain why the case was rejected. Elizabeth adds that José's case had more supporting evidence than any other she has ever seen.

The imbalance between the effort that went into creating José's case and its curt dismissal further emphasizes the impersonality of border enforcement. Because these institutions operate on a large-scale and mechanical level, they are incapable of properly valuing the human lives that pass through them.


In the evening, Lupe asks Cantú to call the lawyer so that José can visit their son, who has broken him arm, in hospital before he's deported. Cantú has to explain that it's too late—José is already on the way to the border.

The brutal mechanism of border enforcement splinters José's family much like his son's splintered arm.

Later that night, Cantú walks his neighborhood and calls his mother. She senses he is being evasive, like when he was in Border Patrol, and says she can't face their relationship changing again.

Cantú's manner has changed because he is suffering emotionally, just like he did in Border Patrol. This conversation reveals that his work in Border Patrol caused him to shut down emotionally, harming his ability to relate to people with full humanity, whether they were migrants or his closest family members.

At last, Cantú opens up, telling her that his friend has been deported. He feels like he can't breathe. He tells her he feels he's been circling a giant for years, and he's only now looking up to see the true size of "the thing that crushes."

The emotional power of Cantú's response suggests that he's now processing emotions long suppressed during his time in Border Patrol—a process of stepping back into his full humanity that was impossible while he was required to act as a border agent. In addition, the image of the giant reveals that he's only now allowing himself to consciously reckon with the super-human scale and power of the institution of which he was a part.

Sometime later, Cantú speaks to Lupe on the phone. She tells him José is staying on the border, preparing to cross again. Cantú wants to tell her he shouldn't try, but he knows José has no other options.

José's repeated attempts to cross begin to seem increasingly futile. His lack of alternative options emphasizes the impersonal, larger-than-human violence of the institution of Border Patrol, in whose workings José is now jammed.

A week later, they speak again. Lupe tells Cantú an uncle took the two eldest sons to visit José, and that José is planning to cross that weekend.

Again, José's repeated attempts to cross emphasize that he is powerless, stuck in the machinations of an institution that's much larger than him.

Days later, Lupe tells Cantú that José was due to cross, but she hasn't heard from him in days. A few days after this, she tells him his group was chased by Border Patrol, but José escaped and is back in Mexico, recovering.

Again, José's increasingly desperate attempts to cross reveal how trapped he is in the institution of border enforcement. The chase he escapes from highlights the personal danger he faces every time he tries to circumvent the system and return to his family.

Cantú dreams that he is at the coffee bar when he sees José wandering aimlessly. He goes to him and sees that his face is dark and old. He tells Cantú he's been in the desert.

Once again, Cantú's emotional pain and trauma bubbles up in a dream—he can't escape the deep impact José has had on him.

Cantú runs into Diane, who asks him to take some gift certificates to Lupe and her sons for Christmas. When Cantú takes the gift, Lupe doesn't want to accept it. While Cantú is with Lupe, she tells him José has been caught by Border Patrol again and bused to far away in Mexico. She adds that there has been some trouble with coyotes—the human traffickers who bring people across the border. Men came to Lupe's door demanding $1,000 to get José out of a safe house, and she gave it to them, but when she spoke to José later, he said he had never been in a safe house.

Lupe and José's family are descending ever farther into two powerful institutions, each violent in its own way. The legal institution of U.S. border enforcement will continue to separate José from his family in ever more severe ways—an act of emotional violence. In desperation, they turn instead to the alternative institution of illegal human trafficking, whose violence is more overt. José's case illustrates how the emotional violence of the legal institution creates and feeds the much more violent illegal institution that aims to circumvent it.

Lupe adds that when José confronted the men who had smuggled him, they threatened to kill him if they saw him again. Now, he's back near the border, but he's scared to go out much in case he runs into the men.

The violent institutions in which José is trapped increasingly limit his freedom. Now, in addition to being banned from entering the U.S., his movements in Mexico are circumscribed by the cartels and human traffickers there. This is one function of institutional violence: to squeeze the freedom from daily life.

Cantú asks Lupe if José is planning to cross again, and she says yes, but he wants to wait until he meets someone he trusts. Cantú wishes he had the courage to smuggle José through the desert himself and bring him all the way home.

The great value Cantú places on José's life is evident in the disparity between his treatment of the migrants he found in the desert while working as an agent and his desire to carry Cantú through the desert himself. The comparison underscores the book's argument that to truly value a life, people need to know its story and individuality.

That Christmas, Cantú stays with his mother. On Christmas Eve, as they stay up talking and drinking eggnog, she says he seems distant again, and he tells her he's hurting over José and his part in the machine that crushes people like him.

On the Christmas Eves when Cantú was working for Border Patrol, his conversations with his mother often became frosty because his work had caused him to shut down emotionally. His emotional openness here reveals that, at least for him, it's only possible to sustain a fully open, close human relationship after leaving an institution as damaging as Border Patrol.

Cantú's mother tells him it's fine to feel sad about José, but Cantú says José is just one person, and this happens to millions of people. Cantú's mother agrees, but adds that it's fine to feel sad over José because this sadness, and the particulars of José's story, are what make those millions of others real for Cantú.

The impossibility of fully valuing the countless lives lost on the border is a key theme of this book. Here, Cantú's mother highlights the importance of individuality, implying that it's impossible to truly honor an anonymous life, and thus that empathy and story are as important as statistics in reckoning the human cost of border enforcement.

Cantú's mother tells him a story about her first job, which was at a desert museum. As an animal lover, she tried to rescue a ground squirrel due to be fed to the snakes, but it ended up slowly dying in her care, and she had to kill it in order to end its suffering. She says the point is that humans learn violence by watching it, and then it enters them, becoming part of who they are.

This story of an attempt to care for nature that ended in violence mirrors Cantú's good-faith attempt to learn about the border, which ended with his embroilment in a violent institution. Cantú's mother implies that this is a common, maybe universal pattern: that all humans are involved in some institution that teaches them violence, even if only the broad institution of society. The story is given extra weight by Cantú's mother's deep love of nature, which marks her out as a voice of wisdom in the book.

Cantú's mother tells Cantú that he won't be able to rid himself easily of the violence he's absorbed into himself, and so instead he'll have to find some meaningful purpose for it.

Cantú's mother argues that the violence institutions instill cannot be unlearned, and thus that institutional violence is an even more complex problem than it might seem, at first glance. The solution she proposes draws on the theme of trauma and emotional detachment: to recover from institutional violence, she argues, an individual must accept themselves fully, including any suppressed violence or trauma.

Cantú tells his mother about his dream of José returning, and she tells him maybe he needs to go to José and listen to his story.

By encouraging Cantú to listen to his dream, Cantú's mother implicitly argues for the validity and value of the subconscious. Cantú's openness to his mother in this moment is a sign that the trauma and emotional detachment he suffered during his time in Border Patrol will now have a chance to heal.

A new section begins, now in José's voice. He says that where he's staying now, you have to be very careful what you say and do, because the local narcos (people involved in the drug trade) run the place.

The rigidity of the narcos' territory suggests that it's not just governments that erect damaging manmade boundaries.

José says he has thought of bringing Lupe and his sons to live in Mexico, but the boys don't want to move, and as a good father he knows he could never bring his boys there. He says young children play murder games in a local school playground. He doesn't want his children to absorb violence in this way.

José's observations reveal another way in which institutional violence can terrorize people: Mexico's illegal institutions, such as cartels, have enshrined a culture of violence beyond their own ranks and in the wider population.

It's all too easy for young people to fall into the drug trade in Mexico, too, José adds. The country is full of young people with potential who have ended up in the drug trade, and a government simply can't care for its people when the country is controlled by the mafia. For these reasons, he says, he will never bring his sons to live in this country.

Again, José highlights the institutional failings that have damaged his country. Here, he highlights the violence inflicted on a nation when a legal institution fails and is replaced by an illicit one. The contrast between the individual young people with potential and the machinery of the drug trade suggests how difficult it is for an individual to withstand or resist the reach of such a powerful institution.

In the United States, José says, the system is organized and not corrupt, so that people can get an education and not die in hunger. This is why he teaches his children to respect authority.

Though José praises the orderliness of American institutions, his words contain a painful irony: the institutions he praises are responsible for excluding him. This is a reminder of the core problem with institutions: they encourage people to act against their own instincts and interests.

José tells his story of working at a Chipotle, working his way up the ranks from maintenance worker to main cook, and befriending the local policemen who ate there.

José's story is, in many ways, the story of the American dream: a man who worked his way up from the bottom to lead a good life. José presents the story as evidence that U.S. culture values individual lives by encouraging such advancement—and yet there's an irony in the fact that the U.S. is now refusing to allow this hardworking man to re-enter and continue to lead his valuable life.

Diego wants to switch classes because he thinks his teacher is racist, José says, but José told him he has to keep working hard to become someone in life, and that he can't give up because he thinks someone is against him.

José's attitude suggests that he has internalized the U.S.'s institutional racism, taking personal responsibility for the violent way in which U.S. society excludes and suppresses racial and other minorities.

José shares his deep belief that families should be together. He says that he met many other people in jail who, like him, got stuck across the border after visiting a dying family member. He's seen people get depressed or sick after being separated from their families, like his and Lupe's family has been.

Within a family, there is an incalculable value to each individual's life—hence how family separation can make people sick and depressed. By being willing to separate families, the U.S. government shows its comparative disregard for the value of human lives.

José says politicians in the U.S. believe that deporting a parent will make the whole family return to Mexico, but in fact, the most devoted parents would not bring their families to Mexico because it's too dangerous, and so they will instead keep trying to get back to their family in the U.S. He says "the U.S. is making criminals out of those who could become its very best citizens."

José's comments reveal the way institutions such as border enforcement follow their own rules rather than observing and working with the logic of migrants' situations. This creates a form of violence, in which both individuals and nations are damaged and made poorer by rules that are not grounded in the logic or reality.

José says he owes a lot to the U.S. and is grateful to it, but he must keep trying to cross the border out of love for his family. He feels that the government is tearing his family apart.

José's comments highlight the disconnect between institutional rules, such as migration bans, and family love. As long as an institution like Border Patrol fails to account for the human instinct to love, he suggests, its task of enforcing migration will be impossible, and it will condemn people to lawlessness.

José says he loves his mother and had no choice but to be with her while she was dying, and that it's barbaric that he's being punished because he loved his mother.

Again, José highlights the inherent violence of institutions when they fail to account for the human instinct and need to love.

José talks about how much harder it is to cross the border now than it used to be. He says he has considered running drugs for a cartel, because it's cheaper than paying human traffickers. The risks of doing this are very high, though: he could be arrested as a drug trafficker and ruin any chance of getting legal status in the U.S., while also setting a cartel against him.

The incredibly high stakes of the decisions José is now being forced to consider reveal how few options the system has left him. The rigid impersonality of the system is one form of violence inflicted by the institution of border enforcement, since it forces people like José into dangerous acts.

José says that in some places, the only way to get someone to guide you across the border is to carry drugs for them, because the cartels also control human trafficking. He says there are many mass graves in the desert: the bodies of people who refused to carry drugs.

José now describes a more explicit example of institutional disregard for the value of a human life: the mass deaths that the cartels inflict. Combined with callous treatment from Border Patrol, the cartels' behavior creates a scenario of inescapable violence for migrants looking to build a better life north of the border.

José says that he met a man in jail who crossed in a group that started with 85 people and gradually dwindled. A girl of five years old died, and her mother died a few hours later. When they were collected in trucks, two migrants fell off a truck that was chased by police and were never heard of again.

The trickling deaths and disappearances of these migrants illustrate on a detailed, individual level the trickling loss of life that plays out constantly on the border. It's a human-scale representation of the lack of respect for the value of human life that is rife among the various institutions that rule the region.

The same man told José he was taken to a drop house, which was raided by police. The smugglers were arrested and the migrants were processed for deportation. The man told the arresting agents about the girl and the mother who died in the desert, and they found the bodies, which were already decomposing. The man told José that though he was a peaceful family man, if he ever met the human traffickers, he would kill them.

By going to retrieve the bodies from the desert, the agents showed some respect for the value of the girl and her mother's lives. However, they are employed by the system that forced them into their deadly circumstances, thus revealing that even when individuals are capable of empathy and respect, these qualities can't be held by an institution.

José tells Cantú that though he risks his life every time, he has no choice but to keep trying to cross. He says he dreams that he's with his family, but then he wakes up and remembers he's in Mexico. He says he would—and will—do anything to rejoin his family, and he will keep trying to cross until he makes it.

Again, José traces the disconnect between institutional rule, such as that imposed by Border Patrol, and the human capacity and need for love. Earlier in the book, readers saw Cantú's spirit being crushed by the institution of Border Patrol; here, however, readers see the inverse scenario: a love strong enough to withstand whatever restrictions institutions place in its way.

EPILOGUE

Cantú is in Big Bend National Park one hot evening when he sees a man on a horse riding across the Rio Grande.

The Rio Grande marks the natural boundary between Texas and Mexico. This man's ease in riding across the river contrasts with the extreme difficulty of crossing the manmade border that Cantú was paid to enforce earlier in the book. In this way, Cantú again reminds his readers that there's nothing inherently deadly about migration or crossing borders—humans have simply made it that way.

The man asks Cantú if he's with border enforcement, and Cantú says no. Cantú asks the man about his village, and the man says it's very safe: there's no trouble from drug cartels or border enforcement. He invites Cantú to breakfast the next morning.

The lack of violence compared to Juárez suggests that border enforcement itself breeds violence in border regions by creating the necessity for people to circumvent the laws of border crossing. As such, Cantú implies that institutions can create a self-perpetuating cycle of violence.

The next morning, Cantú mounts the man's horse and rides with him over the river, into Mexico. He reflects on how much he's trusting this stranger and how peaceful the village is. The man tells him people in the village look out for one another, so the violence of the surrounding area hasn't reached them.

Cantú discovers that just as violence breeds violence, trust and a sense that one's life is valued are self-perpetuating, too. This episode lays bare how counterproductive violent and forceful institutions are in attempting to achieve peace and healthy communities.


The man takes Cantú back across the river, into the United States. Cantú asks him about the border crossing—whether there are cameras or sensors—and braces himself for the sounds of vehicles or men. But he hears only the river.

In this book, nature's beauty is often a gateway to wisdom and humanity's full potential. Here, the natural sounds of the river serve as a reminder that there's nothing essential or natural about the militarized border, and that nature has far better, gentler, wiser models of boundaries.


Later that day, Cantú swims in the Rio Grande, noticing the fish and birds flying overhead. He crosses the river over and over, until for a moment he forgets which country he's standing in.

Cantú ends the book with a reminder that natural boundaries, unlike manmade ones, are living, porous, and beautiful: a benchmark humans should aspire to in thinking about boundaries and borders.


AUTHOR'S NOTE

In an author's note written in December 2018 and published in the paperback edition of *The Line Becomes a River*, Cantú writes that while working on the book, he always imagined it would be a document of a particularly bad time, and that the situation on the border would improve. He writes that this has proven untrue, and it's just as naïve as his hope that he could subvert the institution of Border Patrol from within without being changed by its violence. And since Cantú wrote the book, the border has become ever more militarized, until it entered a state of crisis.

Cantú reveals that even his ample, intimate experience of the violence of Border Patrol didn't prepare him for the full potential for violence demonstrated by the institution of border enforcement. This suggests that the violence of institutions might always be greater than humans are able to conceive of.

Cantú notes that violence on the border has long been normalized and thus accepted by the people of the United States. Then, in the summer of 2018, the Trump administration implemented a "zero tolerance" immigration policy in which, among other things, children were caged and separated from their parents. The photographs of these children that appeared in the press forced an overdue public reckoning with border policy.

The normalization of violence on the border equates to a collective failure in the United States to recognize the value of the human lives lost there. The fact that it was photographs of individual children that prompted a resurgence of interest supports the argument Cantú makes throughout the book that the value of lives cannot be conveyed in statistics, but rather only through an appreciation for individual lives.

Americans responded to these photos because children are seen as innocent, Cantú writes, so "othering" them seems particularly callous. But he notes that the dehumanizing policy is not isolated: it's just an escalation of long-running cruelty.

Cantú emphasizes that even in valuing the children's lives that are newly impacted on the border, U.S. society is failing to recognize and value all those who lost their lives in normalized oblivion before the 2018 family-separation controversy.

Cantú notes that in writing the book, he hoped to give his account of his experiences and allow readers to draw their own moral conclusions. He set out to explore three kinds of border violence: in part one, violence resulting from border enforcement; in part two, the violence of the drug war and migrants' lives being commodified by traffickers; and in part three, the violence wrought by the threat migrants always feel, even after establishing themselves in the United States. Writing the book was an opportunity to process the ways he himself normalized violence while working as an agent.

Distance from his time in Border Patrol has allowed Cantú to fully appreciate the quantity and variety of violence he normalized through emotional detachment while working for the institution.

After leaving Border Patrol, Cantú spent time in the border regions as a civilian. Only then did he truly see the military infrastructure and patrol presence that makes the area so ominous, particularly for those with darker skin. This normalization of military presence has led to the border region being claimed as a "transitional terrain."

Cantú vividly portrays one of the ways institutional violence perpetuates itself: by fully claiming a region, such that the general population dismisses it as a militarized zone, and thus loses curiosity and empathy about what happens there.

But the border landscape was not always transitional or liminal. In fact, this status was imposed by colonizing powers. Cantú quotes the Native American scholar Jack D. Forbes, who attributes the violence of colonial and post-colonial American to "the *wétiko* disease"—colonizers being possessed by a "cannibalistic psychosis" for consumption, aggression, and exploitation.

In this interpretation, the first wrong of colonizing forces was to disregard and disrespect the beauty and richness of the landscapes they found, instead seeing them as commodities. In this way, the failure to appreciate the beauty of nature is directly linked to the failure to appreciate the value of life.

Forbes goes on to say that the *wétiko* disease has simply become more subtle in modern times, most often manifesting as a dull sense of fear in the dominant nation that leads people to normalize acts of terror and oppression, such as the militarization of the border.

Cantú suggests that the failure to value the human lives lost on the border is, in part, the result of the fearful tone and distractions found in modern American culture.

Forbes's definition of the *wétiko* disease also accounts for the urge to "de-sanctify" holy or sacred places. Cantú points out that this is exactly what has happened in the border region, where revered desert land has been claimed as a liminal, militarized zone.

Again, Cantú notes that the failure to appreciate landscape and the beauty of nature is a society's first step toward turning its back on the value of human lives.

Cantú presents the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's ideas about the concept of the "state of exception," which governments have used for centuries to diminish people's rights amid perceived crises. Cantú notes that the whole U.S.–Mexico border can now be seen as a vast "zone of exception," where many human rights are suspended and laws applied differently.

Here, Cantú speaks to the great power imbalance between institutions and individuals, and he suggests that the disproportionate power of institutions in fact allows them to claim yet more power for themselves. The creation of "zones of exception" allows institutions to step beyond even the basic guidelines protecting individuals against their power under normal circumstances.

Cantú notes that the deadly militarization of the border began in the 1990s, when the "Prevention Through Deterrence" policy came into effect. Under the policy, border towns were strictly policed, but the border was mostly unenforced in the desert, since officials believed the inhospitable conditions would deter crossing there. Even when it became clear that many people were dying while trying to cross in the desert, the institutions of border enforcement did not consider changing the policy.

Border enforcement's failure to correct the policy that was leading to mass deaths reveals both its lack of concern for the value of human lives, and that it is entirely comfortable using violence and death to achieve its ends.

This policy, Cantú writes, equates to the deliberate killing and disappearance of many thousands of migrants. He cites evidence that Border Patrol officers left many deaths off the official records, erasing those people's lives.

Again, Cantú highlights that human lives cannot be truly valued in anonymity, and thus that the anonymity with which Border Patrol treats migrants equates to disdain for the value of their lives.

Although Border Patrol now carries out rescue missions in the desert, and its agents (including Cantú) are trained in emergency medical care, Cantú writes that these measures cannot atone for the fact that the agency itself causes the death and injury it then sometimes seeks to address. He adds that many individuals in the agency also personally endanger migrants' lives through unethical behavior such as destroying water supplies.

Cantú details another form of institutional violence: the attempt to paper over, with placatory gestures, deeply violent and even fatal policies. In the case of Border Patrol, he adds, this more subtle violence sits alongside overt acts of cruelty to migrants.

The rhetoric within Border Patrol and increasingly in the U.S. population at large frames migrants as criminals or illegal, Cantú writes, positioning border enforcement agents as soldiers and equipping them as such, while migrants become their enemies.

Rhetoric can be a matter of life and death: that a culture of disrespect for the lives of a particular group is easily weaponized into a force that can kill them.

Writing from the midst of the 2018 controversy around child separation, Cantú notes that describing that moment as a "crisis" is questionable, since it implies that it's isolated—that it wasn't preceded by many horrific events, all of which could have been an opportunity to change course.

Here, Cantú emphasizes that U.S. society has been failing to value migrants' lives—and turning a blind eye on their suffering and death—for a very long time.

Cantú adds that migrants are denied even the right to an identity and a self by the way in which the U.S. and other dominant powers prioritize passports, visas, and other documents as the tickets to identity. These documents, he notes, give their bearers a "verified self," to use the words of British journalist Frances Stonor Saunders. Most migrants are thus denied a verified self—the right to be recorded in history and to move freely.

Again, Cantú highlights that the institutions of power in the United States and other powerful nations deny the value of human lives—not simply through endangering those lives with dangerous policies, but by adopting norms that effectively write migrants out of existence.

Cantú describes a speech given by Pope Francis on the Italian island of Lampedusa, where many migrants arrive from North Africa. Pope Francis commemorated migrant deaths and referred to the migrants as "brothers and sisters of ours" rather than as "others." Pope Francis decried the global indifference to the migrants' suffering and the failure to grieve for these migrant deaths—a failure made possible by the migrants' anonymity.

Through the words of Pope Francis, Cantú stresses that the failure to appreciate the value of human life comes down to two dynamics: the failure to see migrants as individuals, and the way in which they are "othered" by more fortunate nations.

Rejecting the cultural blindness to migrants' suffering and death will begin with grieving them, speaking their names, and listening to them, Cantú writes. He quotes the Mexican intellectual Sayak Valencia, who writes that it is essential to stop seeing border regions as distant and inherently violent. Cantú references the case of a migrant named Aurelio, who told social anthropologist Jorge Durand that, after being captured and deported while crossing the border dozens of times, he simply saw himself as trash on the ocean, constantly being tossed around. Aurelio's view of himself as trash, Cantú writes, is a direct result of the way he has been treated by the U.S.

Again, Cantú emphasizes that valuing human life entails seeing suffering people as individuals, and recognizing that they are not trash, nor somehow inherently more able to withstand violence, but are instead humans with just the same sensitivities and needs as those born in safer regions.

And yet it's not enough to simply have empathy, Cantú writes. In order to stop the suffering, empathy must be translated into action. People around the world must vow to protect life above laws, and convince others to do the same.

The book thus far has aimed to stir empathy in readers, particularly through José's life story. Now, Cantú adds that in order to truly value human life, readers must put that empathy into action.

Finally, Cantú writes that during his time in a violent institution, he learned that small impulses and interactions can begin to rehumanize people and systems. That despite the power of the institutions that rule us, we also have power—the power to refuse to participate in the institutions and their attempts to normalize violence.

Having spent much of the book detailing the ways in which institutions—in particular the institution of Border Patrol—violently trample individual power, Cantú ends with a note of hope that collectively, individuals can overpower the violent institutions that cause so much harm.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Robins, Ellie. "*The Line Becomes a River.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 26 Jun 2020. Web. 18 Nov 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Robins, Ellie. "*The Line Becomes a River.*" LitCharts LLC, June 26, 2020. Retrieved November 18, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-line-becomes-a-river.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Line Becomes a River* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Cantú, Francisco. The Line Becomes a River. Riverhead. 2018.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Cantú, Francisco. The Line Becomes a River. New York: Riverhead. 2018.