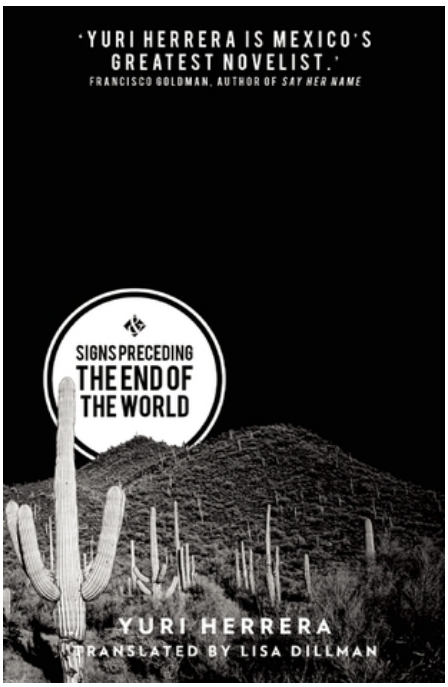

Signs Preceding the End of the World

Yuri Herrera , Lisa Dillman (Translation)

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Yuri Herrera explores the crossings and translations people make in their minds and language as they move from one country to another, especially when there's no going back.

Traversing this lonely territory is Makina, a young woman who knows only too well how to survive in a violent, macho world. Leaving behind her life in Mexico to search for her brother, she is smuggled into the USA carrying a pair of secret messages – one from her mother and one from the Mexican underworld.

Signs Preceding the End of the World Details

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Author	:	Yuri Herrera , Lisa Dillman (Translation)
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From Reader Review Signs Preceding the End of the World for online ebook

MJ Nicholls says

Sometimes us readers find ourselves drowning in superlatives, in the fawning pith clipped to the front and back and inside pages of new literature, forcing us to retreat into the hallowed recesses of the Buried Book Club, sniffing for unpraised truffles amid the chaff, and in most cases these superlatives raise our expectations to ludicrous levels before the cover has been admired or the blurb has been scanned, causing outrage at the over-pumped words that writers and critics are obligated to dole out from term to term to keep the pretence alive that Fresh and New and Vital Literature is still being written (if not the Grants and Council Funding will stop), and the inevitable disappointment at not being taken to the Nirvana that James Kirkenhead at *Kirkus Reviews* promised on the backflap. That is one cross we have to bear as readers. This lean and intelligent novella earns its superlatives (and yes, perhaps this anti-superlative preface is in itself a superlative, however, at least this anti-superlative-superlative avoids the words “stunning” and “greatest” in a sincere sentence, and perhaps even pricks your disinterest).

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I was headed out of the public library one day, having already checked out the book that came in on hold for me. I caught this book cover out of the corner of my eye and reversed my steps to pick it up. It is striking and the title sounded up my alley. Even when I realized it was not really a post-apocalyptic tale and more about border crossings between Mexico and the United States, I decided it was worth a shot. The book is slim, the chapters are short, and I had never heard of the author.

This is the first book by this author translated into English, and I hope there will be more. The character of Yakina seems fearless, but as with most literature and films from Latin America, I believe the violence is implied, between the lines. You need to know what the situation along the border and in the "Big Chilango" *is* to understand what she is risking and how much danger she puts herself in. Very memorable.

On the Reading Envy podcast posting July 7, I have a long discussion with my guest about translation, starting with this novel. I'll post a link the episode when it is live.

Teresa says

While this is a wonderful translation, I’m sure this novella works even better in its original Spanish. Language is one of its themes—*native* versus *latin* versus *anglo* versus a *new* hybrid tongue—reminding me of Elena Ferrante in that one respect only. It’s a deceptively simple work with Dantean and Greek mythological undertones, and I’m guessing other currents I’m not familiar with.

Not wanting to put it down, I read it in one night and feeling unsettled upon finishing, I immediately reread the first section. I haven't stopped thinking about the book since then—there are (subterranean) depths here. Perhaps I will reread it before I return it to the library; or perhaps I will be daring and, though it’s been too many years since my high-school and college Spanish courses, try to read it in its original language. I wavered between 4 and 5 stars, but anytime I want to reread a work so soon, I feel it deserves the full five.

Coincidentally, yet fittingly, exactly one day after the presidential election, I attended a program with Herrera (he’s a professor at a university here in New Orleans) and Jorge F. Hernández, also a Mexican writer. As you can imagine, the mood was one of somberness and bewilderment. Yet, there was one older man in the audience who was so astounded and full of joy to be able to talk to Herrera after reading this work of borders and conduits that I knew I had to read it too: such is the consolation of literature.

Seemita says

As a little girl, I had many fears. Born from reasonable and not-so-reasonable wombs of circumstances, I consciously (and consistently) fought their penetrating presence by erecting walls of logic and fortitude. With passing years, I saw many of them surrendering and receding into thin smoke, leaving me a fertile air concomitant of a progressive upbringing.

But some fears continue to seethe within the subdued bark of emotions like its ashen cousin in an extinguished bonfire: time and again, an unexpected gush of reminiscent wind victimizes the tranquil symmetry and bares the fear to rise like a blinding demon of ineluctable anaesthetic might. More than anything, it feels almost inhuman to be sentenced to *loneliness,* more so in this unforgiving world of depleted values and volatile anomalies.

And perhaps it is the incessant fight against this pungent foe that made Makina, my instant kin. A poor yet independent girl, all of teen blood, wise beyond her mysterious age, a braveheart toeing no boundaries yet short of filial potion, when sets out to find her brother who has been long gobbled up by the Mexico-US border without a trace, I wondered if all she would tread be a pallid array of tedious navigators with futile marks embedded in riotous paths. Doubling up as a messenger of her mother and the mafia (as a part of the deal) bore fatal marks on her survival. But her stark resemblance to a determined rock made her a fascinating and faintly optimistic traveler and I was sufficiently fuelled to follow her mission.

What becomes of Makina's expedition into an unknown terrain, spread across the supple body of this book, is to the credit of Herrera's prismatic brilliance. Herrera weaves a translucent coat around Makina through which her tribulations appear exemplary and pitiable from different angles.

> ***How even if they've got filthy mouths, they're fragile; and even if they're like little boys, they can really get under your skin.***
>
> ***You are a door, not the one who walks through.***
>
> ***We who are happy to die for you, what else could we do? We, the ones who are waiting for who knows what. We, the dark, the short, the greasy, the shifty, the fat, the anemic. We the barbarians.***

While hearing her heap pearls of advice in her little sister's mental safe was exemplary, witnessing her crumbling under her brother's clinical detachment was pitiable. While seeing the dissolution of her mother's voice in the crushing vestiges of her palms was pitiable, finding her unwavering voice echo in favour of strangers on the whimsical outline of the captives was exemplary.

Covering the blazing rays of shootouts, trafficking, underworld, conversion and immigration like a benevolent patch of cloud, Herrera brings a generous shower to Makina's personality, embellishing her with twinkling drops of sensitivity, radiant rivulets of courage, sparkling scent of wit and uplifting spirit of language.

> ***"More than the midpoint between homegrown and anglo their tongue is a nebulous territory between what is dying out and what is not yet born.***

In her tireless footsteps and listless pauses, in her unexpected friendships and expected partings, in her deadpan acceptances and audacious defiances, in her mortified realizations and amorphous hopes, I detected a tenebrous redemption; a redemption that may seem brushing against sanity but sometimes, a blemished sun is enough to look forward to a clear sky.

As she walked away to the other side of the border, I couldn't help but fix my gaze at her for a long time. And she looked back, one last time.

> ***"Later she stopped feeling the weight of uncertainty and guilt, she thought back to her people as though recalling the contours of a lovely landscape that was now fading away."***

Edwin Cruz says

Beware, there are some spoilers here.

In Aztec mythology, when Quetzalcoatl descends into the "land of the dead" (the underworld) his goal is to return the bones of ancestors to Earth to restore humanity. Towards the end of his journey, Mictlantecuhtli, the God of the underworld, sets a pit as a trap for Quetzalcoatl to fall into to prevent him from leaving the underworld. Signs Preceding the End of the World by Yuri Herrera begins with our protagonist, Makina, a contemporary Quetzalcoatl (who speaks three languages), nearly falling into a sinkhole:

"I'm dead, Makina said to herself, and hardly had she said it than her whole body began to contest that verdict and she flailed her feet frantically backward, each step mere inches from the sinkhole, until the precipice settled into a perfect circle and Makina was saved."

Page 1 quickly sucks you into action that feels surreal. In fact, I had to read the first two pages numerous times to understand exactly what was happening. After the first few pages, you accept the surreal nature of the story and know that what is going to happen in the story will bend reality.

Makina is a woman who speaks three languages: native (indigenous language), latin (spanish), and anglo/gabacho (English). Along with being trilingual, Makina is wise beyond her years, she mingles with dangerous gangsters, and possesses knowledge that makes her superior to her human counterparts (much like Quetzalcoatl, god of knowledge). For example, in one instance, Makina makes a fool of a wannabe-anglo who shows up to the village with a cellphone. The wannabe decides to show off his technology in front of the entire village and fails miserably:

"Makina held off bit then and said Maybe you should have bought a few cell towers, too? The poor guy turned red..."

The plot of the story entails Makina's journey to deliver a message to her brother, who left the village to claim land that his father had supposedly promised (turns out to be a lie). Makina sets out to find her brother in the USA and takes a journey that mimics Q's journey through Mictlan and the nine layers of the underworld. The first three stages of Makina's journey reference the path many Mexican immigrants take: village, town, big chilango (Mexico City). These are the stages most southern-Mexicans take on their way to the border, which can be interpreted to represent passage into the underworld.

Makina crosses the Mexican-American border and discovers snow and snowflakes, which serve as a metaphor for the cycles of life, the constantly changing nature of life, fleeting stages, etc., common in Aztec mythology:

"...and when it dissolved a few seconds later she wondered how it was that some things in the world -- some countries, some people -- could seem eternal when everything was actually like that miniature ice palace: one-of-a-kind, precious, fragile."

Makina begins to realize that Americans - who are described as "wooden" consumers - live a superficial life:

"...she noticed how miserable they looked in front of those little digital screens ... And how on versing out to the street they sought to make amends for their momentary one-up by becoming wooden again so as not to offend anyone."

Makina encounters fellow, hard-working Mexicans who seem to embody the ancient Aztec virtue of sacrifice. In Makina's description, the Mexican workers are simultaneously depicted as subservient workers and the "bolts" holding together society. "Work" seems to represent an acceptance of the nature of life (a "shared objective" and "no begging") and humanity's fleeting existence in this world.

Makina traverses several stages in her journey to find her brother (nine, to be exact). In the eight stage she starts to lose hope and her sense of purpose, which happens as she nears the final stage, the "abyss": "She'd been asking after her brother around the edges of the abyss..." She finally finds her brother and learns that he is, in many ways, stuck in the underworld and has no plans to return back to their Mexican village. Makina leaves her brother, knowing he's content, and reads the note (which she didn't actually deliver). It reads: "Come on back now, we don't expect anything from you." The message, obviously anticlimactic, turns out to be a minor detail in a much greater quest of mythical proportions.

Makina eventually reaches the final stage and this is where the line between myth and reality is completely blurred. The final stage, a place like a "sleepwalkers bedroom," defies the human senses, there are no smells and the sounds are strange. In this underworld (she takes a spiral staircase down) she is approached by a tall, thin man who hands her a file:

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

This "skinning" therefore represents a process of rebirth. Makina's rebirth seemingly represents a success for humanity, much in the same way that Q's rescuing of the ancient bones restored humanity. Our story is greater than a note or gangsters or finding her brother ... it turns out she is on an epic tale of eternal significance. We can assume all ends well and a new cycle begins with Makina saying: "...and when everything in the world fell silently [she] said to herself I'm ready."

This book is not really a leisurely read (something you can haphazardly read while laying down). Some parts will really make you think. Overall, I rate this a 5 simply for its beautiful language and ability to re-situate Aztec mythology within Mexican literature. While most Mexican writers have historically voiced a strong Mestizo voice (with Aztec "folklore" left in the periphery), Yuri Herrera roots his work in the "myths" that many of our ancestors once found solace in.

Antonomasia says

[4.5] There have been a lot of good reviews for this lately, yet the book took me by surprise. Presumably it was another serious, lyrical translated novella; I opened a story easily imagined as a graphic novel: basically realist with occasional undertones of the fantastical; a plausibly badass Mexican chick goes on a northbound quest to find her brother, who disappeared to the US chasing a possibly-scammy tale of inherited land.

Makina *ran the switchboard with the only phone for miles and miles around*, in a town with no mobile masts. She's a fixer who speaks three languages, she knows everyone and the right way to talk to them, she's helped fix rocky relationships via her phone; and she's worked out how to stay on the right side of the local gangsters without being a doormat: considerable achievement in a lawless region not exactly known for its gender equality.

The writing in the early chapters is tough, slangy and friendly (made me think how many literary novels use registers that don't suit their characters). It really reminded me of something - still can't remember what. There's usually serious stuff going down, but the way it's expressed can raise a grin.

Here came the hustle. Mr Aitch was the type who couldn't see a mule without wanting a ride. Mr. Aitch smiled and smiled, but he was still a reptile in pants. Who knew what the deal was with this heavy and her mother. She knew they weren't speaking, but put it down to his top-dog hubris. Someone had spread that he and Cora were related, someone else that they had a hatchet to bury, though she'd never asked, because if Cora hadn't told her it was for a reason. But Makina could smell the evil in the air. Here came the hustle.

I don't cry at many books or films, and when I do it's not because of a sad story, it's watching the underdog succeed or having a bloody good go at it: a great kid from a sink estate doing brilliantly in a documentary, brave people fighting a glorious battle against the odds in an action or war film, that sort of thing. (They're not always real underdogs: last thing before this I cried at was the final showdown in *Skyfall*, which I'd seen several times before.) But yes, I confess to welling up at this book at least twice.

The book also put into words something I recognised by instinct but had barely even thought let alone verbalised, and it created an epiphany of a sort related to a recent comment thread (one which I hesitated to post in case it got on the wrong side of some readers):
A lad sits down next to Makina on the coach out of town:
she knew that type of accident, the millimetric graze of her elbow prefaced ravenous manhandling... Barely bothering to fake it, he dropped his left hand onto his own left leg, languidly letting it sag onto the seat and brush her thigh on the way back up, no harm intended, of course.
Makina at this point bends his fingers back - something best not tried in a non-emergency in a more law-abiding country. But I always reacted that soon to unwanted space invaders, including those who weren't necessarily sexual: was outta there already, irritated seemingly on a hindbrain level; or an elbow or bag got in the way and stayed there; or when there was blatantly other space, firmly-to-stroppily suggested that the other party move. "Always" as in at least since 13, when I was bamboozled by my classmates' flirting back to an ugly, sleazy coach driver.
And this probably explains a lot about my not grokking what other people are on about if they say that groping at clubs, on public transport etc in this country is common.
Makina has the superior smarts to fight him off *and* later get him on side, making small-time gang-like allegiances of her own - because you never know when illegal immigrants will need to give one another a leg up (without a legover).

As the translator says in her endnote, the story uses *a mix of registers both low and high* - and moves towards the latter the further Makina travels into the USA. I preferred the slangy writing for its refreshing difference from so much other translated litfic, but t'other is also done very well. The register shifts reflect the migrants' code- and language-switching, s subject which is also discussed eloquently in the text.

The translator's note doesn't only shed light on this text, but on the process of translation: reading similar books in Engliah for tone, style and subject; reading background material such as Aztec mythology; changing translations of specific words; correspondence with the author.

Other reviewers, as well as that endnote, have already said plenty about the striking quality of the writing and the themes in this book - relevant more than ever at a time when immigration is rarely out of the news. Chapter titles sound like translations of placenames - one imagines new settlers to an area in ancient times naming places this way; these are full of traditional Aztec imagery. And that also reflects some North Americans' fear of an 'invasion' of migrants from the south.
Signs is not just one of those worthy books; opening with a spectacularly surreal scene, it's also a great short adventure. Very likeable but lacked whatever wow factor would make me give it the full five stars.

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s.penkevich says

You are a door, not the one who walks through.

The setting sun, '*like a giant pool of drying blood*', casts lengthy human shaped shadows along the mountainside that bridges the past to the future, the old to the new, the dying to the living. Behold the great transmigration of souls, the hopeful and damned stripped of all but necessity slouching towards a nightmare of turmoil. One can only hope the storm clouds part upon a fresh world built on the sturdy bricks of the past and the bones of ancestors to safely house the new souls in this always imperfect, yet striving, world. Yuri Herrera takes our hand to deliver us through this crossing in *Signs Preceding the End of the World*, a tale of border crossing to bring back family permeated by an ominous tone of apocalyptic dread. Herrera champions language as the battalions fighting the dying monarchy of borderlines and obsolete cultural hegemony through his crisp stylistic tale where a crossing means leaving more behind than just your home.

Real adventures rough you up.

While most of us have not undergone a crossing as dire and dear as that of our heroine seeking out her brother in America on a trail of brutality, fear and sinister opposition in a devil's deal of the underworld activity, we all have experienced the sort of 'crossing' that beats the rhythm of life in *Signs*. Be it leaving behind your hometown for a new start (or being driven from your homeland), going away to college, starting a family, experiencing a crushing separation, etc, et al, we all must cross the test of a mountain to arrive at a new and uncertain future throughout our lives. This passing changes us, molds us like clay into the person we are becoming while we leave behind pieces of our souls with every footfall on the way. Sometimes we get to where we wished to go, sometimes we are lost in the fray. For every new beginning we must withstand the death throes of the past, which can haunt you in the night and and beset you with fear and regret, yet we must press forward. For the future and progress depends on the fearless who see through the apocalypse and begin anew.

> *They speak an intermediary tongue that Makina instantly warms to because it's like her: malleable, erasable, permeable; a hinge pivoting between two like but distant souls, and then two more, and then two more, never exactly the same ones; something that serves as a link.*

We are the conduits of change. We are the erasable and malleable, those that must shed our skin to see the dawn of a new era. Herrera paints a world of Mexicans crossing into America, shedding blood sweat and tears to earn a paycheck. Makina notices that in every restaurant are Mexican cooks and laughs that '*all food is Mexican food*'. The cultures are comingling, borrowing from one another and forging something new. Even by borrowing or adopting the language of the other we create something fresh from the cohesion: '*it's not another way of saying things, these are new things.*'

Herrera employs powerful stylistic choices that bring the novel to life and supply further commentary on his themes. Language. prose and poetry is what can save us, help us in dark times, etch our story into history, and be the piercing dagger into the hearts of our enemies. It is the sheer honesty of poetry that gets Makina through one of her toughest binds. This is a story brilliantly translated[1] and full of dialect and colloquialisms that bring the story to life in a fascinating immediacy. This is the language of life, not a stuffy academic reenactment though all the hallmarks of serious theory are present. There are unique line breaks that let the story flow like a river and make poetry out of the mundane. The José Saramago-like dialogue shucking off quotation marks and mashing multiple interlocutor's words into a single paragraph only offset by periods to denote a change of speaker, as well as the replete free indirect narration knitting Makina to the outside observer illuminates a world where borders, race, gender, heritage, native-tongue, etc. comingle in one classless unit called Humans.

Their tongue is a nebulous territory between what is dying and what is not yet born.

For the new world to start, the old must end. Herrera chronicles the ending of an era through dark, haunting apocalyptic imagery. Buildings become a void in the ground, '*expelled from this world.*', bigots are demonic fiery bearded gatekeepers, and to press forward she must leave behind all she knows and has to the wasteland of the past. Makina passes through the gates from her world to the new where change is afoot, and all is frightening and fresh. Herrera employs defamiliarization to perfection in making common American traditions seem barbaric and unnatural. The description of a baseball game, something '*anglos...play to celebrate who they are*', is accurate yet seemingly alien:

> *One of them whacks it, then sets off like it was a trip around the world. to every one of the bases out there, you know the anglos have bases all over the world, right? Well the one who whacked it runs from one to the next while the others keep taking swings to distract the enemies, and if he doesn't get caught he makes it home and his people welcome him with open arms and cheering.*

The passage is very telling of many aspects to the story, from the American military and colonialism, to the crossings people make to America and back, welcomed with open arms if they return.

Everyone had to do something for themselves.

Alas, the progress towards the future is hunted like a rabbit by wolves, ravenous teeth hellbent on self satisfaction at the blood-loss of others. Makina's brother, and countless others who made the crossing to seek brighter horizons find themselves not only at the mercy of those who despise their kind simply for the nationality, but those who will wring blood from a stone for profit. Makina's brother is skinned of his identity to take that of an American boy, symbolic of the way that the new world doesn't want the melting pot they preach, but assimilation into their own bereft of the culture of old. '*We are the barbarians,*' Makina writes. The ones who dream the American dream, work the hard hours in filthy jobs, the backbone of the society, are the same the 'patriotic'. white upper class shuns and spits upon. Their assimilation reeks of the imperialism of old, of Missionaries sailing the seas with religious conversion as a cover for their thirst in gold and slavery.

> *They live in fear of the lights going out, as if every day wasn't already made of lightning and blackouts. They need us. They want to live forever but still can't see that for that to work they need to change color and number. But it's already happening.*

We must not cling to the world we know, as it is dying within our fingertips, but embrace the future, embrace the union of humanity that can evaporate cultural and political borderlines because only together can we cross the thresholds of a brighter future, not apart.

Make the world anew

Sings Preceding the End of the World moves swiftly and subtly with even the most brutal and emotionally charged moments fleeting the winds like a ghost in your peripheral vision. It is part of a soon-to-be past that is a necessity for a future and we cannot cling to anything if we want to get there. Even a bullet through the ribs must be forgotten and glossed over if our goal is to be achieved. Herrera's novel is a stunning portrait of stylization and linguistic brilliance that serves as a battlecry for a more open minded world in which we do not judge one another by outward appearance or culture, but welcome one and all into the party of humanity. We all have our mountains and borders to cross, lets welcome those who make it with open arms. They are the true heros in this world they are fighting for.

3.75/5

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

[1] *Signs Preceding the End of the World* must have been no small task to translate. The style and language is so pertinent to the understanding of the story and Lisa Dillman pulls it off with flair, retaining the original intent of the prose after all the mashing and grinding of the cogworks of translation and bestowing Herrera's gift unto English speaking readers in a way they can process accurately. Dillman claims she read the story several times over, each read paying specific attention to different key themes to best analyze the translation, and consulted the prose of similar works (both stylistically and thematically) to further understand the relationship between theme and prose. She states that Cormac McCarthy's The Road was the most beneficial text she approached for translation purposes, which may mean something to some of you. The sparseness and lack of traditional punctuation or form that provides a unique fluidity to the novel seem akin in the two books—both addressing a new post-apocalypse world though in very different manners—and the pairing is quite interesting to contemplate.

? jamieson ? says

> I'm dead Makina said to herself when everything lurched: a man with a cane was crossing the street, a dull groan suddenly surged through the asphalt, the man stood still as if waiting for someone to repeat the question and then the earth opened up beneath his feet: it swallowed the man, and with him a car and a dog, all the oxygen around and even the screams of passers-by. I'm dead

Signs Preceding the End of the World is such a short book, but the story and the epic journey of the main character feels like it fills so much more then 124 pages. We follow Makina, a Mexican woman from a place she calls "Little Town", who's going to cross the border into America to try and find her brother, who's been

lost in America. (Later, we learn he is not lost but captive to the American Dream) Makina has to cross the border, but it's the other borders that really matter - the borders between white Americans and nonwhite American's, the borders between language, and the way that colonialism and imperialism has othered Makina, her culture, and her people, forcing them to the periphery. Scenes in which Makina sees white restaurants selling "All Mexican Foods", or scenes in which her and other people of colour are targeted by a policeman, the plight of her brother, the sexualisation of and commodification of her body due to it's ethnicity. These are the real borders that Makina encounters.

Makina's story echoes the journey taken by the dead in Mexican & Aztec mythology. Each chapter allegorises a different stage of the underworld, thus Makina's opening line "I'm dead", is more then just a figure of speech, within the text it if figurative of her journey - Mexico to America, death to afterlife.

Makina is a brilliant main character. In a memorable scene she breaks the middle finger of a man who touches her on a bus - she is both frightening but also relatable, and her struggles as a Mexican woman, especially in America, are really well explored. You can tell Yuri Herrera really threw his ideas and passion into this, that it was something he really wanted to *get out there*

I also think the chapter titles are just amazing. I will list below. The writing throughout is honestly beautiful (and I loved the translators note explaining their translation choices) but the chapter heads were my favourite

• 1: THE EARTH
• 2: THE WATER CROSSING
• 3: THE PLACE WHERE THE HILLS MEET
• 4: THE OBSIDIAN MOUND
• 5: THE PLACE WHERE THE WIND CUTS LIKE A KNIFE
• 6: THE PLACE WHERE FLAGS WAVE
• 7: THE PLACE WHERE PEOPLE'S HEARTS ARE EATEN
• 8: THE SNAKE THAT LIES IN WAIT
• 9: THE OBSIDIAN PLACE WITH NO WINDOWS OR HOLES FOR THE SMOKE

I definitely would love to read Yuri Herrera's other translated works. This, and the other Mexican literature I studied, Amulet, were some of my favourite books in this unit. This book was both terrifying and mesmerising, the writing is beautiful, the characters strong, the scenes rich.

> They live in fear of the lights going out, as if every day wasn’t already made of lightning and blackouts. They need us. They want to live forever but still can’t see that for that to work they need to change color and number. But it’s already happening.

I wish I had the ability to write a good and coherent review of this book, but here is one I really fucking love

I have FINISHED all the books in my 2017 English units ! Only short stories now yeessss

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Hugh says

I read this short but powerful and poetic novella because it has been chosen for a group read by the **21st**

Century Literature group.

The story tells of a young Mexican woman Makina, who travels across the border illegally in search of her brother. In order to do this she has to deal with various criminal gangs. This is just the start, and she meets a number of challenges, and remains a feisty but sympathetic heroine. As such she represents various universal truths of the migrant experience and exposes the hypocrisy of the hosts who denigrate and harass them while benefiting from their labour.

The book must have been a difficult challenge for the translator, so much so that she felt she had to explain some of her decisions in an afterword. In particular Herrera uses a mixture of slang and allusive poetic descriptions, and uses certain words in strange ways. In order to replicate this, the words used in the translation often seem very strange, particularly to a non-American ear, but the overall effect is powerful and the ending is moving.

Alienor ✘ French Frowner ✘ says

> **"Things are tough all over, but here I'm all mixed up, I just don't understand this place. Don't let it get you down. They don't understand it either, they live in fear of the lights going out, as if every day wasn't already made of lightning and backouts. They need us."**

3.5 stars. Signs Preceding the End of the World reads like an atmospheric and - at times - very powerful tale whose splendid bits fight with its quieter ones, more fuzzy, that unfortunately lost me a little along the way. It seems the kind of book that would definitely benefit from a reread, I think, to fully appreciate it, especially because of its allegorical construction.

Maxwell says

This is quite a powerful, short novel. Dealing with borders, both literal and figurative, Yuri Herrera's *Signs Preceding the End of the World* crosses back and forth between reality and myth. It has epic proportions but feels intimate. Makina, our main character, is taking a journey--as so many protagonists do--but hers feels fresh, exciting, and harrowing. It deals with a surprising amount of topics & themes in such few pages, and Herrera masterfully handles the prose. I only wish it had been a bit longer because I was enjoying it so much before it ended (abruptly, for me, since I was reading on my ebook and assumed I had much more left, when it ended at 72%). **4 stars**

Trish says

In a few pages we discover a new kind of language: "an intermediary tongue that Makina instantly warms to…malleable, erasable, permeable…something that serves as a link." It is not latin, nor anglo but in a "nebulous territory between what is dying out and what is not yet born."

Herrera immerses us in a cross-border search for a lost brother, not heard of or heard from for too long. Makina, the sister, goes to find him, and does--but "only when [she'd] stopped looking." The journey should

be terrifying, but neither brother nor sister are afraid. Their lives hold terrors enough at home: Makina survives a sinkhole on her first steps of her journey, heels backward pedaling to avoid being sent to the deep, the cellar.

> "Slippery bitch of a city," she says to herself.

She carries little—she is coming right back—but she has a lipstick "more long-lasting than it was dark" which another woman uses without asking. "You look very pretty," Makina says to the other woman.

In the scrub from a distance Makina mistakes a bloated body with its eyes pecked out for a pregnant woman. From a distance, the corpse looks like a good omen. The crossing has ogres, the border ranchers who carry heavy pistols and angry attitudes. She is coming to look for her brother—she is coming right back.

> "I don’t know what you think you lost but you ain’t going to find it here," declared the irritated anglo.

The brother is not easy to find. He has moved on but in one café the proprietress recognizes Makina: "Told me he had a sister who just by looking at her you could tell she was smart and schooled." A new direction, a slip of an address, another false lead, until finally, when she was ready to give up hope, there he was.

He has no intention to returning home, of reading his mother’s crooked scrawl saying "Come on back now, we don't expect anything from you." Makina moves then in a direction away, anywhere away but is led back to the underground space that nearly swallowed her at the start of her journey.

Deceptively slight, this novella has the weight of character unafraid and unbowed. Makina does what she needs to do and she's a smart girl. She takes opportunity when it drifts by. Issues of migration and immigration, seen from this ground level (really, cellar level) have a claustrophobic feel. How could it be otherwise? The language used seems a mixture of latin and anglo but understandable and perhaps more descriptive for that.

& other stories is a press I did not think I’d come across before, but this group has published Deborah Levy’s outstanding novel Swimming Home and a number of other Levy titles. The exciting author list for **& other stories** include important literature and writers from around the world who wish to support the non-profit philosophy of this publishing house. Check out their webpage.

A WWNO radio interview with Herrara.

Roy Lotz says

I was pleasantly surprised by this book—one chosen by my book club—partially because I didn’t know a thing about it when I opened it up. The description of this work calls it a “novel,” but it is short even for a novella. It’s easily possible to get through this in two hours.

As one might expect of a book this short, the plot is simple: a Mexican woman illegally crosses the border in search of her brother. The main appeal is thus the style, which I thought demonstrated considerable skill. At times phantasmagoric, at times touching, at times startlingly real, Herrera manages to construct a text that is

both writerly and accessible—no mean feat. In fact, the book was good enough that I wished it was far longer; I suspect that Herrera has much more to say on this subject.

Nancy Oakes says

I say in my journal entry about this novel and about The Transmigration of Bodies that if I was ever going to consider becoming a writer (which I'm not, because I couldn't write my way out of a box), I'd want to model myself after Yuri Herrera. He has managed to deliver a beyond-powerful story here in just 107 pages (the rest is taken up by the translator's notes) by keeping his prose sparse and through a unique, beautifully-crafted use of language. Both books are excellent; neither needs any further elaboration to convey what Herrera wants to say.

This book charts the journey of a young girl, Makina, from a small town in Mexico to over the border in search of her brother. As with Transmigration of Bodies, the novel opens on a surreal note -- here, it's the literal exposure of the underworld, as a sinkhole opens and swallows a man, a car and a dog in a town that is "riddled with bullet holes and tunnels bored by five centuries of voracious silver dust." As Makina watches him go down into the earth, we watch her moving ever so slowly away from the edge of the hole, back to a place of relative safety. Her journey to find her brother is covered in nine chapters, bringing to my mind Virgil guiding Dante through the nine circles. As she moves from point to point we are brought into a story of immigration and its uncertainties, crime and violence, borders, and so much more, all so nicely done in such a short space.

It's just stunning, really...there's not much more I can say about it, except to highly, highly recommend it. I love this author.

Hadrian says

They speak an intermediary tongue that Makina instantly warms to because it’s like her: malleable, erasable, permeable; a hinge pivoting between like but distant souls, and then two more, and then two more, never exactly the same ones; something that serves as a link. More than the midpoint between homegrown and anglo their tongue is a nebulous territory between what is dying out and what is not yet born.

Short, intense, psychologically rich, drenched in religious allegory, toying with language, a story of crossing over. The ending surprised me even though I almost expected it- few stories do that anymore.
