[pp. 11–12] 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, 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.

Slippery bitch of a city, she said to herself. Always about to sink back into the cellar.

This was the first time the earth’s insanity had affected her. The Little Town was riddled with bullet holes and tunnels bored by five centuries of voracious silver lust, and from time to time some poor soul accidentally discovered just what a half-assed job they’d done of covering them over. A few houses had already been sent packing to the underworld, as had a soccer pitch and half an empty school. These things always happen to someone else, until they happen to you, she thought. She had a quick peek over the precipice, empathized with the poor soul on his way to hell. Happy trails, she said without irony, and then muttered Best be on with my errand.

Her mother, Cora, had called her and said Go and take this paper to your brother. I don’t like to send you, child, but who else can I trust it to, a man? Then she hugged her and
held her there on her lap without drama or tears, simply because that’s what Cora did: even if you were two steps away it was always as if you were on her lap, snuggled between her brown bosoms, in the shade of her fat, wide neck; she only had to speak to you for you to feel completely safe. And she’d said Go to the little town, talk to the top dogs, make nice and they’ll lend a hand with the trip.

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[pp. 18–19] You don’t lift other people’s petticoats.

You don’t stop to wonder about other people’s business.

You don’t decide which messages to deliver and which to let rot.

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

Those were the rules Makina abided by and that was why she was respected in the Village. She ran the switchboard with the only phone for miles and miles around. It rang, she answered, they asked for so and so, she said I’ll go get them, call back in a bit and your person will pick up, or I’ll tell you what time you can find them. Sometimes they called from nearby villages and she answered them in native tongue or latin tongue. Sometimes, more and more these days, they called from the North; these were the ones who’d already forgotten the local lingo, so she responded to them in their own new tongue. Makina spoke all three, and knew how to keep quiet in all three, too.

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[pp. 51–52] Rucksacks. What do people whose life stops here take with them? Makina could see their rucksacks crammed with time. Amulets, letters, sometimes a huapango violin, sometimes a jaranera harp. Jackets. People who left took jackets because they’d been told that if there was one thing they could be sure of over there, it was the freezing
cold, even if it was desert all the way. They hid what little money they had in their underwear and stuck a knife in their back pocket. Photos, photos, photos. They carried photos like promises but by the time they came back they were in tatters.

In hers, as soon as she’d agreed to go get the kid for Cora, she packed:

- a small blue metal flashlight, for the darkness she might encounter,
- one white blouse and one with colorful embroidery, in case she came across any parties,
- three pairs of panties so she’d always have a clean one even if it took a while to find a washhouse,
- a latin-anglo dictionary (those things were by old men and for old men, outdated the second they left the press, true, but they still helped, like the people who don’t really know where a street is and yet point you in the right direction),
- a picture her little sister had drawn in fat, round strokes that featured herself, Makina and Cora in ascending order, left to right and short to tall,
- a bar of xithé soap
- a lipstick that was more long-lasting than it was dark and,
- as provisions: amaranth cakes and peanut brittle.

She was coming right back, that’s why that was all she took.

Yuri Herrera is a Mexican writer and the author of three novels. Signs Preceding the End of the World is his second novel, the first translated into English. He is currently a professor at Tulane University in New Orleans.
This slim novel tells the story of a woman who crosses a border to bring a message to her brother. Her journey is both literal and mythological; while the story begins in what we assume is Mexico and ends somewhere in the United States, neither Mexico nor the United States are named. This refusal to name places is deliberate. In an interview, Herrera says, “I make a lot of lists before I prepare a book: lists of stories, lists of words I like, lists of words that I won’t use. That last one might be the most important list, and that has to do with the need to avoid clichés, to not repeat certain predigested concepts in place of problems or emotions that are much more complex than those concepts.”

Working within this constraint, Herrera creates a third-person narrator that attends to the details of landscape and people in a way that captures the specificity of the moment while it also leaves the story porous—outside of time and place. The result is both disorienting and deeply engaging, particularly given the poetic beauty of Herrera’s writing. The language is fresh and lush, and crystal clear in its descriptions—which work both on the literal and mythical/metaphorical level, deepening the mood and density of the story.

Look at the opening passage (pp. 11–12). Right away we see the confidence and understanding of the third-person narrator. This narrator is close to the main character, Makina: able to provide her opinions and thoughts, but also able to zoom back and show a broader view of the story. Look how much trust this narrator puts in the reader to engage in this shifting and unpredictable world, not even using the word “sinkhole” until the bottom of the opening paragraph. The narrator’s control of the scene captivates us
through spare, crystal-clear language that contrasts with the disorienting impact of the story itself.

The other two passages (pp. 18–19, 51–52) represent another technique employed throughout the book: the use of lists to reveal character. In these passages, too, we see the tremendous pleasure in using language that both disorients (because the common frame of reference, such as proper nouns, has been left out) and grounds (because of the specificity of what is observed) the reader. All three passages reveal Makina in different ways. In the first, through action and focused description of the world as she walks through it, we see her competence, her acceptance of fate, her agency. In the second, through a list of negations, we learn about her capabilities and capacities—all of which will matter on her journey. In the final passage, we learn about Makina through what she decides to take with her on her trip to the United States, which she insists will be only temporary.

**Assignment:** Pick just one of these three passages to use as your model. Create a third-person narrator who is confident and knowledgeable in telling about your character and his or her world. Use this narrator to reveal your character through an action-packed, disorienting scene (as in the first passage) or through lists (as in the other two passages). Whatever model you choose, have your narrator use specific details to reveal your character and his or her world, winning the reader’s trust by providing description that is crystal clear even if the material may be disorienting. Consider constraining yourself with a list of words you will not use because these are too evident or burdened with “predigested concepts in place of problems or emotions that are much more complex.”