PRAISE FOR YURI HERRERA

"Yuri Herrera is Mexico's greatest novelist. His spare, poetic narratives and incomparable prose read like epics compacted into a single perfect punch – they ring your bell, your being, your soul."

Francisco Goldman

"Yuri Herrera must be a thousand years old. He must have travelled to hell, and heaven, and back again. He must have once been a girl, an animal, a rock, a boy, and a woman. Nothing else explains the vastness of his understanding."

Valeria Luiselli

"My favorite of the new Mexican writers."

John Powers, *NPR Fresh Air*

"Playful, prophetic, unnerving books that deserve to be read several times."

Eileen Battersby, *Irish Times*

"*Signs Preceding the End of the World* is short, suspenseful . . . outlandish and heartbreaking."

John Williams, *New York Times*

"Herrera's metaphors grasp the freedom, and the alarming disorientation, of transition and translation."

Maya Jaggi, *The Guardian*

"Herrera packs *The Transmigration of Bodies* with the sex, booze and nihilism of a better Simenon novella."

Sam Sacks, *Wall Street Journal*

"I was captured by *Kingdom Cons*. His writing style is like nobody else's, a unique turn of language, a kind of poetic slang . . . seeming to fall in my hands from an alternative sky."

Patti Smith

BOOKSELLERS ON YURI HERRERA'S TITLES

SIGNS PRECEDING THE END OF THE WORLD

"I am in awe-filled love with its heroine: Makina is a vibrantly real presence in a shadowy world of constant threat; her voice perfectly rendered; her unflappable poise tested, but never broken."

Gayle Lazda, London Review Bookshop, London

"Herrera gives us what all great literature should – poetic empathy for dire situations in a life more complex and dynamic than we imagined."

Lance Edmonds, Posman Books (Chelsea Market), New York

THE TRANSMIGRATION OF BODIES

"This is as noir should be, written with all the grit and grime of hard-boiled crime and all the literary merit we're beginning to expect from Herrera."

Tom Harris, Mr B's Emporium, Bath

"Fabulous. An everyday story of love, lust, disease and death. Indispensable."

Matthew Geden, Waterstones, Cork

KINGDOM CONS

"*Kingdom Cons* might be his best yet. Herrera delivers a stunning example of how art can dissolve boundaries and speak truth to power."

Matt Keliher, Subtext Books, St Paul

"Revelatory. I think Yuri Herrera has created his own genre. The mix of high and low culture, the argot of the streets with the poetic narrative – it's something else."

Mark Haber, Brazos Bookstore, Houston

A SILENT FURY

A SILENT FURY

THE EL BORDO MINE FIRE

Yuri Herrera

Translated by Lisa Dillman

SHEFFIELD – LONDON – NEW YORK

First published in English in 2020 by And Other Stories
Sheffield – London – New York
www.andotherstories.org

© 2018 by Yuri Herrera

First published as *El incendio de la mina El Bordo* by Editorial Periférica, Cáceres, Spain

The English edition is published by arrangement with Yuri Herrera c/o MB Agencia Literaria S.L.

English-language translation © Lisa Dillman, 2020

All rights reserved. The rights of Yuri Herrera to be identified as author of this work and of Lisa Dillman to be identified as the translator of this work have been asserted.

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN: 9781911508786
eBook ISBN: 9781911508793

Editor: Tara Tobler; Copy-editor: Linden Lawson; Proofreader: Sarah Terry; Typesetter: Tetragon, London; Typefaces: Linotype Neue Swift and Verlag; Cover design: Andrew Forteath. Printed and bound on acid-free, age-resistant Munken Premium by CPI Group Ltd, Croydon, UK.

This book has been selected to receive financial assistance from English PEN's PEN Translates programme, supported by Arts Council England. English PEN exists to promote literature and our understanding of it, to uphold writers' freedoms around the world, to campaign against the persecution and imprisonment of writers for stating their views, and to promote the friendly co-operation of writers and the free exchange of ideas. www.englishpen.org

And Other Stories gratefully acknowledge that our work is supported using public funding by Arts Council England.

Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

MIX
Paper from responsible sources
FSC® C020471

CONTENTS

El Bordo	9
That Day	13
The Wait	23
The Survivors	37
The Women's Fire	47
The Expert Report	57
The Grave	79
The Many Days that Followed	89
Acknowledgments	101

EL BORDO

The El Bordo mine, located in the mining district of Pachuca-Real del Monte, had ten levels, each named for its depth in meters underground: 142, 207, 255, 305, 365, 392, 415, 445, 465, and 525. These could be reached via three different shafts: El Bordo, La Luz, and Sacramento, the latter belonging to the Santa Ana mine.

The El Bordo caught fire on the morning of March 10, 1920. At least eighty-seven people were killed.

Traces of this history are few: the Pachuca 1920–66 case file, a handful of news stories, and a metal plaque that talks about something else. The file and news stories do not simply convey the events but are *fragments* of the events; they are part of the tragedy and the way its official version was imposed. In these texts there appear both favored men, who were never at risk of being so much as scratched by a prickly question, and men and women who were doomed from the outset. But there are also oral accounts, given by miners and their families, and it was through these that I learned about the fire; there are at least two *crónicas*, one by Félix Castillo, the other

by José Luis Islas; and a novel by Rodolfo Benavides. All were written years afterwards.

This book, like those accounts, refuses the judicial truth that reduces this history to a file in an archive. But none of these words are mine. I reconstruct the El Bordo fire using the names, dates, and events that coincide in these accounts, insofar as coincidence is possible, and where the accounts disagree I use what appears to be most credible; I also call attention to some of the extraordinary contradictions and omissions in sources from that period that contributed to a persistent silence. Silence is not the absence of history, it's a history hidden beneath shapes that must be deciphered.

THAT DAY

The bells never rang, the ones that were there expressly for that kind of event, even though, as the agent from the public prosecutor's office noted months later, they were indeed functioning properly.

There were some who later said that they first smelled smoke at two o'clock in the morning, but it was at six that Delfino Rendón raised the cry of alarm, once he had finished cleaning the chutes on level 415. He had just extracted several loads of metal on 525 when he detected an unfamiliar smell and decided to go up, and then up some more, and on reaching 365 and approaching the shaft wellhead he noticed something that smelled like woodsmoke, and that the level was too hot. He saw no flames of any kind, nor did he need to in order to know that someplace they were already licking the mine shaft, so he raised the cry of alarm. Which was more of an act than a cry, because the first thing he did was to send down the cages to get people out, and then notify the stations by telephone, telling them to inform everyone to get out now, right now, immediately. That's what he did, as any

self-respecting man would have done: worry about his fellow workers before worrying about machines or stopping to wonder how this could have happened. And the cages went up and down perhaps eight times, bringing up ten miners per trip at most. Delfino kept sending down cages, which disappeared into the unbearable clouds of smoke filling the shaft, and those cages came back up, but then they came up empty.

Agustín Hernández, cager, would later say it was at the seven o'clock whistle that the fire got really fierce. But the first flames could have broken out much earlier, or perhaps they were what caused the smoke he smelled at four thirty or five, when he stopped on level 365. Still, when Hernández asked Antonio López de Nava what was going on, the deputy foreman replied, "Can't you tell? They just blasted, so the air's full of powder dust." And since he convinced himself that it must, of course, have been the blast, he paid no more attention until, at six o'clock, he smelled smoke on 415 and went all the way up to the collar to ask, but they didn't know anything about it. While he was up there, the 525 deputy foreman, José Linares, belled for the cage. Agustín descended again, and on his way down the smoke was so strong as he passed level 207 that he nearly passed out, but made it to level 525 and stayed there with Linares and his men until they were able to get almost everyone out over the course of several trips.

Linares, for his part, had spent the night working the stope with twenty-seven men, and then at six o'clock

had gone down to the office on 525 to hand in his report, which was when he smelled the smoke; and from there, on level 525, he called 415, but no one answered.

Edmundo Olascoaga also smelled smoke at about six o'clock that morning, after spending his night shift working on levels 207 and 255 with ninety-four men under his command. In fact, he was on 207 when he smelled it and descended to 255 but saw nothing; he returned to 207, surveyed the level, and then went down La Luz shaft to 415, where he found López de Nava, who by this point perhaps no longer believed, as he had an hour and a half earlier, that it was just powder dust from a blast; together the two of them went up to 305, where the smoke was thicker, and then down to 392, "where the fire was" (that's what Olascoaga said, but he didn't say why, and no one else claimed to have seen flames there); and López de Nava stayed there, on level 392, to disconnect the piping. Olascoaga then returned to the surface and informed White, the administrator; they descended together to the deepest level, and on their way up heard López de Nava shouting to them but were unable to stop the cage's violent ascent. Hours later, when Olascoaga recounted all of this in his statement, it was clear that he still held out hope that López de Nava and his men were taking shelter in a crosscut that connected to the Sacramento shaft, because after he and White emerged they sent the cage back down four more times so that López de Nava could escape, but four times it came back empty.

According to J. F. Berry, the American superintendent of the company, José Linares was the last man out. Linares had called level 415 to warn them before getting his men out of 525, and he had kept calling, he said, because at the time he didn't know what had happened to the men but he did know there was still time to get them out. Until he had to stop waiting and leave with his crew.

He was the last to make it out, but not the last to try. An engineer by the name of Eduardo Cisneros said he'd seen brain matter and shredded clothing on one of the cage ropes, no doubt that of someone who'd seen the passing car and attempted to catch it on its way up to the surface.

It took very little time for the authorities to conclude that it was too late for help, even though nobody knew for certain how many miners were still underground. A company representative by the name of Silbert first said there were 400 people working, then that there were 346, not 400, and that of those only forty-two had not made it out. But by midday Berry was assuming and declaring and signing in the margins to confirm that the total number of dead was ten, because he'd seen the last worker, whose name was Linares, make it out; he also said that the fire was already out, despite the fact that carbide canisters could still be heard exploding.

It was already out, said Berry in his midday statement, and immediately thereafter explained that in order to ensure that "the fire was completely extinguished" (despite

being "already out") they would hermetically seal the El Bordo shaft, and then hermetically seal the La Luz shaft, and then once there was no more smoke they'd initiate their descent from there, see what the fire had done, and bring up the corpses.

It's unclear what time it was when they decided there was no one left alive, but by noon there was already a plan in place to bring up as a "corpse" anyone still in the mine. The report in which mine administrators notify the authorities that a fire broke out and that "all possible measures were taken" to put it out lists no time, but it was received at ten minutes past eleven in the morning. In that report there is no mention of having sealed or sealing or being about to seal the mine.

Despite there being no official time when the shafts were sealed with people still inside the mine, there is one statement, taken by a reporter for *El Universal* from miner Delfino Rendón, who said that just "twenty minutes after the miners' rescue began, out of the blue the supervisors gave the order to halt operations, and the entrances were closed." This means they would have sealed the shafts at just after seven twenty, before many of the men were even aware that they needed to get out, given that it was seven o'clock when cager Agustín Hernández, who was in charge of getting people down and bringing them up, confirmed that the smell was indeed smoke.

(It would take days for them to verify the exact number of men still inside, and of those they would never learn

how many were still alive when the shafts were sealed. Yet in very little time they managed to calculate what it cost to have the mine closed: soon after the fire, Mariano Soto, an engineer who saw to the affairs of mine owner Andrés Fernández — "a Spanish tycoon," as *Excélsior* called him — told *El Universal* that this was "not some common mine fire but a very serious incident whose ramifications cannot yet be measured." He then went on to declare that the mine extracted 14,000 tons of metal per month, valued at 500,000 to 600,000 pesos, and that it would take three months, minimum, for normal production to resume.)

So the shafts were sealed at seven twenty, or at ten, or at noon, or at four. And Judge Manuel Navarro ordered an investigation, but not about that, not about who closed the shafts or at what time, or what criteria the administrators had used to ensure that the last miners made it out, but about the cause of the fire. That was the purpose of the preliminary investigation opened in the very hours when they might have reasoned the most pressing question was how many people could still be alive inside the mine. But the decision to begin the investigations with this other objective came about in what seemed almost a natural fashion, the result of a series of rational consultations.

The judge heard Berry's statement, and Berry had heard Doctors Manuel Asiáin and Guillermo Espínola, who were of the opinion that, due to the carbonic gas trapped in the mine, it could not be expected that any workers still down below at twelve o'clock were alive, since "it

would take no longer than five minutes for them to die in that gas." So he authorized them to seal the shafts, which had likely already been sealed. The question as to whether the number of dead miners was ten or forty-two, therefore, was merely academic: by twelve o'clock they had already decided that all of those still underground were dead, as there was no other possibility.

Six days later, when the mouths of the shafts were opened, as promised, and they went in to bring up the corpses, not only did they discover that there were eighty-seven men – not ten or forty-two – but that seven of the miners on level 207 were still alive.