Autobiography of Red

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANNE CARSON

Anne Carson is a Canadian classicist, translator, poet, and essayist. An essential figure in the contemporary poetry scene, Carson is known for writing "unclassifiable" works that blend the genres of prose, poetry, and criticism. Her works frequently draw from Classical and Hellenistic literature, as well. Carson was born in Toronto, Ontario in 1950. A Latin instructor taught Carson Greek during lunch periods throughout high school, which inspired her to study Classics, and she went on to earn her BA, MA, and PhD in Classics from the University of Toronto. Carson published her first work of criticism, *Eros the Bittersweet*, in 1986. The poetic works *Glass, Irony, and God* (1992); Plainwater: Essays and Poetry (1995); and *Men in the Off Hours* (2001) followed. Although these works helped establish Carson as a unique voice in contemporary poetry, her most widely read works are the verse novels Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse (1998) and *The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos* (2001). She has also published numerous well-regarded translations of Classical writers, such as Euripides, Sophocles, and Sappho. Carson has received numerous awards and accolades throughout her career, including a Guggenheim Fellowship for Poetry in 1998 and a MacArthur Fellowship in 2000. She has taught in the Classics departments of universities throughout the United States and Canada, including Princeton University, the University of Michigan, and McGill University.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the sections that precede the main story of *Autobiography of Red*, Carson provides introductory materials that cover the literary and historical background of Stesichoros's *Geryoneis*, the lyric poem composed in the sixth century B.C.E. on which *Autobiography of Red* is based. *Geryoneis* itself is based on the Greek myth of Geryon, a three-bodied (sometimes only three-headed) monster with a human face who lives on the island of Erytheia. In Stesichoros's telling of the myth, Geryon has wings, six hands, and six feet. In the traditional telling of the myth, King Eurystheus orders Herakles, a famed Greek hero, to travel to Erytheia to steal Geryon's cattle as his tenth labor, part of the Twelve Labors of Herakles, a series of penances Eurystheus tasked Herakles with completing. There have been many retellings of the myth throughout history, but what sets Stesichoros's apart (as Carson emphasizes in the introductory sections of *Autobiography of Red*) is his decision to portray Geryon as a sympathetic character whose death is tragic. In *Geryoneis*, Stesichoros likens Geryon's death to a poppy leaning its head to one side as it wilts, shedding all its petals. The simile Stesichoros uses in his depiction of Geryon's death simultaneously creates sympathy for the fallen monster and pays homage to Homer, who in the *Iliad* compares the death of the monster Gorgythion to a wilted poppy.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In addition to *Autobiography of Red*, *The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos* (2001), also a verse novel, is among her most widely read works. Caron's poetic works Glass, Irony, and God (1992); *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry* (1995); and *Men in the Off Hours* (2001) also combine genres of poetry, prose, and criticism. Another critical key feature of *Autobiography of Red* is its inspiration from Greek mythology. Another notable adaptation of Greek mythology is Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018). Unlike *Autobiography of Red*, which has a contemporary setting, *Circe* takes place in Ancient Greece and draws from several myths, most notably the *Odyssey*, told from the perspective of the minor goddess Circe. In addition, Margaret Atwood's novella *The Penelopiad* (2005) is a feminist retelling of the *Odyssey* from the goddess Penelope's perspective. Atwood also draws inspiration from Greek mythology in her earlier novel, *The Robber Bride* (1993).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse
- **When Written:** 1990s
- **Where Written:** Canada
- **When Published:** 1998
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Verse Novel
- **Setting:** North America; Buenos Aires, Argentina; and Peru in the late 1990s
- **Climax:** After years of hiding his wings from the world, Geryon flies over the volcano in Jucu.
- **Antagonist:** Herakles, Geryon's Brother
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Intertextuality. *Autobiography of Red* contains numerous references to other works of art and criticism. In turn, other creative works have referenced it: *Autobiography of Red* and Carson's first published work of criticism, *Eros the Bittersweet*, were both referenced on a 2004 episode of the television series *The L Word*.

A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words. In constructing his titular autobiography, *Autobiography of Red*'s protagonist, Geryon, eschews written art forms in favor of visual modes of expression. In the same vein, Anne Carson has stated that "she considers herself a visual, not verbal artist."

PLOT SUMMARY

Autobiography of Red begins with an essay and appendices in which the author, Anne Carson, provides historical and literary contexts for Stesichoros's lyric poem *Geryoneis*. The poem is based on the Greek myth of Geryon, which is the direct inspiration for *Autobiography of Red*. Carson also introduces Stesichoros's poetic style, particularly his use of adjectives, and includes her translation of several of the remaining fragments of *Geryoneis*. These fragments outline the story of Geryon, a **red** monster who lives with his parents and dog on a red island until Herakles arrives and slays him with an arrow. Following these fragments, Carson addresses the story of Helen blinding Stesichoros in response to a slanderous poem he wrote about her, followed by a section that consists of a list of either/or statements in which she attempts to resolve the issue of Stesichoros' blindness.

The main story follows Geryon, a young, red-**winged** monster who grows up among normal humans on an island called "The Red Place." Geryon is ashamed of his monstrosity and struggles to fit in. Geryon adores Geryon's mother, but his older brother bullies and later sexually abuses him. This sexual abuse inspires Geryon to begin work on his autobiography to "set down all the inside things" in an act of self-preservation. The autobiography initially consists of visual art forms, such as sculpture. Even after Geryon learns to write, he chiefly turns to visual modes of expression, such as photography, to construct his autobiography.

When Geryon is 14, he meets a carefree and confident 16-year-old named Herakles. The boys quickly become inseparable, spending all their time painting graffiti onto the walls of buildings around town and discussing art. They eventually begin a sexual relationship. Geryon is smitten with Herakles but has doubts about the relationship, since Herakles has a more casual attitude toward sex and refuses to open up to Geryon. As Geryon spends more time with Herakles, he becomes more rebellious and starts to drift apart from his mother, who, in turn, worries about Geryon spending all his time with this mysterious boy whom she's never met. Geryon eventually accompanies Herakles to Hades, Herakles's hometown on the other side of the island, without telling his mother. In Hades, Herakles's grandmother shows Geryon a 15-minute exposure photograph she took of a **volcanic** eruption that took place on the island in 1923, and Geryon, Herakles, and Herakles's grandmother later visit the volcano featured in her photograph.

Late in Geryon's stay in Hades, Herakles devastates Geryon by ending their romantic relationship. Geryon returns home following the breakup and reconciles with his mother, from whom he had grown apart during his rebellious, lovesick adolescence. Unable to move on from Herakles, Geryon's life enters a blue period. He takes a 15-minute exposure photograph of a fly drowning in a pail of water during a storm and works a mundane job at a library. One day, Herakles calls Geryon to say he's been painting his grandmother's house with a boxer named Hart. He also tells Geryon about a "freedom dream" he had about Geryon, in which Geryon resurrected a drowned, yellow bird. Geryon wants to tell Herakles he would rather be with him than be free, but he keeps his thoughts to himself.

The narrative skips ahead in time. Geryon is now 22, living away from home, and packing for a trip to Buenos Aires. On the plane, he anguishes about time, a subject that perpetually terrifies him. In Buenos Aires, Geryon spends most of his time in Café Mitwelt, writing postcards home to his mother and brother. He meets a philosopher, "yellowbeard," who invites Geryon to attend his lecture on "emotionlessness" at the University of Buenos Aires. Although Geryon studied philosophy in college, the talk bores him. Geryon continues to ruminate on his favorite question, "What is time made of?" which he asks most people he meets. Later, Geryon meets another philosopher, Lazer, with whom he has a meaningful conversation about time, mortality, and "distances." Later that night, unable to sleep, Geryon wanders the streets of Buenos Aires and ends up at a tango club. Geryon dislikes tango music and dozes off several times. He fully wakes up after the club has emptied for the night and has a conversation with the tango singer about time, captivity, and guilt.

While browsing in a bookstore one Saturday night, Geryon runs into Herakles, who is in town with his new lover, Ancash. Geryon has lunch with Herakles and Ancash, a Peruvian man who is "as beautiful as a feather," and learns that they are traveling the world to record volcanoes for a documentary they are making about Emily Dickinson. Geryon anguishes over the fact that he's still attracted to Herakles. After lunch, they stop by a Harrods department store on their way to the post office. Herakles brazenly steals a wooden Tiger from the store as a birthday gift for Ancash's mother, whom he and Ancash are visiting in Lima. Geryon initially feels upset about being left out of their plans, but Herakles invites Geryon to tag along. Geryon accepts the offer and follows Herakles and Ancash to Lima. Herakles touches Geryon sexually on the plane ride while Ancash is asleep.

The men stay with Ancash's mother, sleeping on the roof of her wealthy employers' house. Geryon feels lonely and out of place in Lima and can't figure out how to photograph the city. It's winter in Peru, and the roof gets chilly at night. Ancash notices that Geryon is cold and tries to teach him to stay warm at night

by wrapping his bare body in a wool blanket. Ancash removes Geryon's overcoat despite Geryon's protests, thus revealing the wings Geryon has tried desperately to hide. However, Ancash finds Geryon's wings beautiful rather than monstrous, and strokes them tenderly. Ancash tells Geryon about the "*Yazcol Yazcamac*, or "the Ones Who Went and Saw and Came Back," mythic beings from the folklore of Jucu, a small village in a volcanic region near Ancash's mother's hometown of Huaraz. According to legend, Yazcol Yazcamac are beings who, after being thrown into the volcano as a sacrifice to the gods, emerge strong, winged, and immortal. Anthropologists call these beings "eyewitnesses." Herakles interrupts Ancash and Geryon's emotional exchange to announce that they will travel to Huaraz tomorrow.

Geryon, Herakles, Ancash, and Ancash's mother depart for Huaraz the next day. Geryon takes many photographs. In their hotel in Huaraz, Geryon and Herakles have sex. Geryon cries afterward, causing Herakles to leave the room in irritation. He later returns in a better mood, observing that "[Herakles] laughing and [Geryon] crying" is "just like the old days." Ancash finds out about the sexual encounter and hits Geryon in the garden outside their hotel, though he immediately sits down next to Geryon and tends to his wounds. Ancash asks Geryon if he loves Herakles. Geryon says that while he used to love Herakles, he doesn't any longer. He also admits that sex with Herakles feels "degrading." Before Ancash leaves, he tells Geryon he wants "to see [Geryon] use those wings." Herakles interrupts their conversation to tell them it's time to see the volcano.

Geryon, Herakles, and Ancash travel to see Icchantikas, the volcano in Jucu. Early the next morning, Geryon takes Ancash's tape recorder and records himself flying over the volcano, proclaiming, "This is for Ancash." Although Geryon doesn't have his camera with him, he decides he would have titled a photograph depicting this moment, "The Only Secret People Keep." Afterward, Herakles, Geryon, and Ancash roam the streets of Jucu and visit the "volcano in the wall," where men bake bread in holes in the slope of Icchantikas (flames from the active volcano heat the bread). Geryon's final photograph captures this scene. He watches the flames reflect across his, Herakles, and Ancash's faces and decides that they are "neighbors of fire," with "immortality on their faces, night on their back."

The novel ends with a hypothetical, absurd interview in which an interviewer questions Stesichoros about his poetic techniques. Stesichoros provides nonsensical, vague responses to the interviewer's questions.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Geryon – The protagonist, Geryon, is based on the monster Herakles slew in Greek mythology. The Geryon of the novel is a **red-winged** monster who lives on an island called "the Red Place," located somewhere in the Atlantic. Geryon is a shy, introspective boy who is ashamed of his monstrosity. Longing to fit in with the ordinary humans he lives among, Geryon avoids flying and hides his wings. Although Geryon is initially close with Geryon's mother, she fails to protect him from his older brother's sexual abuse. The abuse prompts Geryon to retreat inward, hiding his "inside" life from the "outside" world and inspiring him to create an autobiography, which ultimately takes the form of a photographic essay. When Geryon is 14, he meets an older, confident, and carefree boy named Herakles, and they become inseparable, eventually developing a sexual relationship. As Geryon spends more time with Herakles, he becomes rebellious and drifts further apart from his mother, eventually fleeing to Hades, Herakles's hometown. Although Geryon loves Herakles, Herakles doesn't reciprocate this love, valuing personal freedom over the "captivity" of being in a committed relationship. In Hades, Herakles's grandmother shows Geryon a photograph she took of a **volcanic** eruption that decimated Hades in 1923. She, Herakles, and Geryon visit the active volcano, and volcanoes become an artistic and intellectual focus for Geryon. Herakles suddenly breaks up with Geryon toward the end of his stay, devastating Geryon. Geryon is 22 the next time he sees Herakles, when he unexpectedly runs into him and his new lover, Ancash, on a trip to Buenos Aires. Geryon realizes he still has feelings for Herakles and accepts an invitation to follow the couple to Peru to visit Ancash's mother and see an active volcano in Jucu, a remote village. Although Geryon and Ancash compete for Herakles's affections, they have similarly reserved, gentle demeanors that put them at odds with brash Herakles. Despite Geryon ultimately betraying Ancash by having sex with Herakles, they develop an intimate connection. Furthermore, when Ancash sees Geryon's wings, he admires them, likening Geryon to a winged mythological creature from his indigenous Quechua culture. Ancash urges Geryon to "use those wings," something Geryon hasn't done in years. Geryon later flies over the active volcano Jucu, a gesture of both intimacy with Ancash and self-affirmation. Geryon's flight also helps him see that he no longer loves Herakles, who has never given him the intimacy he desires.

Herakles – In Greek mythology, Herakles is the hero who slays the monster Geryon. In Carson's adaptation of the myth, Herakles is Geryon's first love who later breaks his heart. They meet when both boys are teenagers and quickly become inseparable, eventually initiating a sexual relationship. Herakles is Geryon's opposite: he is carefree, confident, and free-spirited. While Geryon wants intimacy and understanding, Herakles has a more casual attitude toward sex and finds the commitment and closeness Geryon desires to be oppressive. Their differing ideologies create friction in their relationship,

since Herakles never tells Geryon what he's thinking, nor does he have any interest in knowing what's on Geryon's mind. Herakles values personal freedom above shared experience and often acts at the expense of others. For example, when Herakles and Geryon secretly reunite on a trip to Buenos Aires when they're in their twenties, Herakles betrays his new partner, Ancash, by initiating sex with Geryon. These opposite stances on freedom and love ultimately prompt Herakles to break up with Geryon toward the end of their visit to Herakles's home in Hades, where he lives with Herakles's grandmother and Herakles's mother. The breakup devastates Geryon but appears not to affect Herakles. When the one-time lovers reunite many years later in Buenos Aires, they realize they are still attracted to each other. However, Herakles becomes annoyed when Geryon cries after they have sex, criticizing Geryon's inability to separate emotional from physical intimacy, a problem he claims Geryon had back in "the old days," too. Herakles's cruelty and refusal to be emotionally vulnerable with Geryon make Geryon realize he no longer loves Geryon and, perhaps, never really knew him in the first place.

Ancash – Ancash is Herakles's lover when Herakles is in his twenties. He and Herakles are traveling the world recording **volcanoes** for a documentary about Emily Dickinson when they unexpectedly cross paths with Geryon in Buenos Aires. Ancash is Peruvian and, according to Geryon, "a man as beautiful as a live feather." He speaks Quechua, an indigenous language spoken in the Andes. His mother hails from Huaraz, a small village located in a volcanic region north of Lima, where he, Ancash's mother, Herakles, and Geryon later visit. Even though Ancash and Geryon compete for Herakles's affections, their similarly gentle, introspective dispositions repeatedly put them at odds with bold, extroverted Herakles. Over time, Ancash and Geryon form an intimate, meaningful bond, which persists even after Geryon betrays Ancash by having sex with Herakles. For example, when Ancash unwittingly removes Geryon's overcoat to reveal Geryon's **red wings**, he touches the wings gently rather than recoiling at what Geryon has long considered to be evidence of his monstrosity. Ancash then likens Geryon to the "*Yazcol Yazcamac*," or "the Ones Who Went and Saw and Came Back," mythic beings from indigenous folklore who were thrown into volcanos as sacrifices, only to emerge unscathed, immortal, and spared from death by flying to safety with their powerful wings. Ancash urges Geryon to "use those wings," a suggestion Geryon follows through with when he flies over the active volcano in Jucu in what is both an act of self-affirmation and an outward display of intimacy with Ancash.

Geryon's Mother – The novel doesn't offer many details about Geryon's mother besides Geryon's description of her in his autobiography as a "river that runs to the sea," and the fact that she smokes cigarettes. Nevertheless, Geryon is close to his mother and finds her presence calming and protective. When Geryon is a little boy, he cherishes the Tuesday nights when Geryon's father and brother leave for hockey practice, since he gets to spend the night with his mother. Despite their closeness, however, Geryon's mother fails to notice that Geryon's older brother is sexually abusing Geryon, nor does Geryon tell her about the abuse. This unspoken trauma seems to create distance between them, which only widens as Geryon approaches adolescence and begins spending all his time with Herakles, whom Geryon's mother never meets. At the height of Geryon's teenage rebelliousness, Geryon's mother claims to "hardly know [Geryon] anymore." Geryon retaliates against his mother's accusations by continuing to rebel, eventually running off to Herakles's hometown in Hades, a town on the other side of the island. Geryon's actions infuriate his mother, but she forgives him when he returns home after his and Herakles's breakup. She and Geryon make up and regain the closeness they had before Geryon started to drift away from her. They remain close into Geryon's twenties, evidenced by Geryon's weekly phone calls home and the postcards he sends his mother during his trip to Buenos Aires.

Geryon's Brother – Geryon's older brother is a bully who picks on and manipulates Geryon into engaging in sexual acts with him (and keeping quiet about it) by promising Geryon a "cat's eye" marble and other rewards. Geryon's mother never catches on to the sexual abuse, nor does Geryon tell her about it. The abuse Geryon suffers at the hands of his brother prompts Geryon to begin work on his autobiography as an act of preserving his "inside" world as his brother preys on his "outside" world. As destructive a force as his brother was to him, Geryon also has positive associations with his brother. For example, Geryon recalls a time during high school when his brother lent Geryon a sports jacket to wear to a high school dance and complimented his appearance. As adults, Geryon and his brother appear to have repaired their relationship to some degree, since Geryon writes his brother a postcard bearing the message "Wish you were here," during his trip to Buenos Aires. The novel reveals that Geryon's brother grows up to be a sports broadcaster for a radio station on the mainland.

Herakles's Grandmother – Herakles's grandmother lives with Herakles's mother and the rest of Herakles's family in Hades. She's a wise, chatty old woman who likes to tell long-winded stories about her travels to Argentina and her past as a photographer. When Geryon visits Hades, she shows him a 15-minute exposure photograph she took of a **volcano** that erupted on Hades in 1923, entitled "**Red** Patience." Geryon finds the photo equal parts "disturbing" for its portrayal of destruction, and fascinating for the way it shows him how one may use photography to impose the illusion of control over time. Geryon later captures his own 15-minute exposure photograph of a fly drowning in a pail of water. Geryon is also struck by the old woman's tales of Lava Man, who was

imprisoned in a local jail during the eruption and was the disaster's only known survivor. Toward the end of Geryon's stay in Hades, he, Herakles, and Herakles's grandmother visit the active volcano that was the subject of "Red Patience."

Ancash's Mother – Ancash's mother is a Peruvian woman who lives in Lima on the roof of the house of a wealthy couple who employ her as a maid. Her self-proclaimed "favorite place" is the rooftop garden where she grows marijuana and cooking herbs. She and Ancash speak Quechua, a family of indigenous languages spoken in the Andes. She is a kind, loving mother to Ancash. Although she is usually quiet, she occasionally voices her opinion with clarity, precision, and humor. Ancash's mother is from Huaraz, a small town in the mountains north of Lima, where the locals maintain old superstitious beliefs about **volcano** gods. She, Ancash, Herakles, and Geryon visit Huaraz toward the end of the novel.

Stesichoros – Stesichoros was an ancient Greek lyric poet. Carson based *Autobiography of Red* on surviving fragments of Stesichoros's poem, *Geryoneis*. The opening sections of *Autobiography of Red* provide a historical and literary context for Stesichoros's life and works. Carson also includes her own innovative translations of a selection of the surviving fragments of *Geryoneis*. The opening sections address the rumor that Stesichoros was blinded after writing a poem that slandered Helen of Troy, though his vision was said to have been restored after he wrote a Palinode (a poem in which the poet refutes claims made in a prior poem). The closing section of *Autobiography of Red* consists of a hypothetical, absurd interview in which the interviewer asks Stesichoros about his poetic technique.

Lava Man – According to Herakles's grandmother's story, Lava Man was the sole survivor of the 1923 volcanic eruption and decimated Hades. Lava Man was imprisoned in a local jail at the time of the eruption. Although he survived, the disaster left him badly scarred, and he spent the remainder of his life touring with the circus, purporting to be "molten matter returned from the core of the earth to tell [...] interior things."

Tango Singer – The tango singer performs at *Caminito*, a tango bar Geryon stumbles into one night in Buenos Aires. Geryon dislikes tango songs and fades in and out of consciousness during her performance. He awakens after the club has cleared out for the night, and he and the singer have a conversation about captivity, guilt, and nothingness.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Geryon's Grandmother – Geryon's grandmother moves in with Geryon's family after suffering a bad fall. This forces Geryon to share a room with his older brother, who subsequently begins to sexually abuse Geryon.

Babysitter – The babysitter watches Geryon and Geryon's brother when Geryon is young child.

The Yellowbeard – The yellowbeard is a philosopher from Irvine, California whom Geryon meets on his trip to Buenos Aires. He invites Geryon to attend his talk on "emotionlessness."

Lazer – Lazer is a philosopher whom Geryon meets at a bar in Buenos Aires. They have a brief but meaningful conversation about time, "distances," and mortality.

Herakles's Mother – Herakles's mother lives in Hades with the rest of Herakles's family.

Geryon's Father – Geryon's father doesn't have much of a role in the story. In Geryon's autobiography, he states that "[his] father / was gold."

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.

IDENTITY AND CREATIVITY

As its title suggests, *Autobiography of Red* is a book that deals with the formation of identity. Geryon, the protagonist, begins constructing his autobiography even before he learns to write, fashioning a sculpture out of a cigarette glued to a tomato in an attempt at self-expression. As Geryon grows older, his preferred tool for creative self-expression becomes a camera, and his autobiography takes the form of a photographic essay. Geryon's ongoing attempts at identity formation are artistic and interpretive. He is an artist rather than a documentarian. As such, his autobiography becomes a personal, subjective meditation on his experiences rather than a presentation of stable, objective, and unchanging facts. In this way, the novel suggests that a person's identity rests in their subjective, often creative interpretations of their life's experiences and their attempt to fashion those interpretations into a coherent whole.

The novel further emphasizes this idea in its formal structure as well. *Autobiography of Red* is Carson's retelling of the Greek myth of Geryon. The book opens with an essay and appendices concerning the Greek poet Stesichoros's adaptation of the myth of Geryon in his lyric poem *Geryoneis*, which serves as Carson's most direct inspiration. Carson's retelling of the surviving fragments of Stesichoros's poem takes even further interpretive license, turning an ancient lyric poem into a coming-of-age story about a young, **red-winged** monster boy growing up in 20th-century North America. These introductory materials blend genres of poetry, verse, and essay into a genre-bending, innovative work. The creativity of this compositional choice, combined with Geryon's creative endeavor of

constructing his autobiography, the work's central focus, highlights creativity and self-fashioning's central role in the construction of identity.

COMMUNICATION AND MYSTERY

Many of the tragedies of Geryon's life revolve around misunderstandings and failures to connect with others. When Geryon is a young child, his older brother sexually abuses him, threatening him if he says anything to their mother. Because of this forced inability to communicate to Geryon's mother and his mother's failure to listen for signs of abuse, Geryon's brother is allowed to continue this abusive behavior. The trauma of this experience, in turn, instills in Geryon a mistrust of others and an unwillingness to express his feelings. When Geryon meets Herakles, a charismatic, confident older boy, he falls deeply in love with him. However, he keeps his authentic feelings for Herakles hidden, and their short-lived relationship comes to be defined by the things they leave unsaid and the things they fail to hear in each other. When Geryon ruminates on the relationship years later upon unexpectedly reuniting with Herakles, he realizes that they had never really known each other: he had never known what Herakles was thinking, and "What Geryon was thinking Herakles never asked." The novel suggests that failures of communication are central to the human condition, as people are fundamentally separate from one other, unable to experience the same consciousness. But while separate consciousnesses can lead to feelings of misunderstanding and alienation, they also instill a drive to be understood, which ultimately imbues life with meaning. Geryon comes across this idea in a philosophy book he reads in a bookstore in Buenos Aires. The book speaks of never being able to tell what the color **red** means to another person, framing this conundrum as a "mystery," without which a person would "go mad." The "mystery" of separate consciousness necessitates a quest for self-expression that draws people to each other in an effort to communicate and narrow the distance between them.

TIME

"What is time made of?" is Geryon's favorite question. The yellowbeard, a philosopher Geryon meets on a trip to Buenos Aires, offers the unsatisfying answer that time is an "abstraction" that humans "impose upon motion." Implicit in such a view is that humans construct the idea of time to measure and "impose" structure onto the trajectory of their lives, which otherwise is beyond their ability to control. In quantifying the passage of time into hours, days, and years, humanity can reflect on time in a way that makes sense. What this explanation misses, however, is the palpable way the march of time connects to the human experience of mortality. Thinking of time as a mere abstraction obscures how directly time affects us all. As Geryon states, "A man moves through time. It means nothing except that, / like a harpoon, once thrown he will arrive." In other words, the forward motion of time universally results in the real, non-abstract consequence of death.

Geryon's question then becomes, if one cannot dismiss time as an "abstraction," how does one deal with a problem that is beyond one's ability to control? Geryon uses photography to impose the illusion of structure and control over time, most notably in the 15-minute exposure photograph he takes of a fly drowning in a pail of water. He learns of the idea from Herakles's grandmother, who shows him a 15-minute exposure photograph she took years ago during the eruption of a 1923 **volcano** that decimated Hades, Herakles's hometown. The photo, entitled "**Red** Patience," is striking because it shows the difference 15 minutes can make. Geryon finds the image disturbing, yet he can't take his eyes off it because it illustrates the core of his anxiety about time (its uncontrollability) as well as a potential solution to that problem. When Geryon later records his own 15-minute exposure of a fly drowning in a pail of water, he captures the process of the fly's death, which symbolically allows him to "move[] through time" on his own terms. In this way, photography gives Geryon the power to manipulate and reflect on time in a way that allows him to work through his anxieties surrounding death.

SELF AND WORLD

One of the central conflicts of *Autobiography of Red* is Geryon's quest for individual freedom. He is keenly aware of the fact that "there is no person without a world," and this statement ultimately becomes his—and the book's—thesis on how to navigate the larger world as a free individual. As a young child, Geryon fixates on the notion of "inside" versus "outside," particularly after his older brother sexually assaults him. He learns that while he can't stop others from assaulting his physical body, his "outside," he still has control over his sense of self, thoughts, and "inside." In this way, Geryon learns that true freedom requires individual agency, and he comes to see human connection and intimacy as necessary for achieving that personal freedom. As such, he longs to connect with others and achieve mutual understanding.

The book contrasts Geryon's view of freedom with Herakles's view, which holds that freedom simply constitutes not being beholden to others: having only oneself and one's desires to answer to and not being restrained by anyone else. His reason for breaking up with Geryon, for example, is because he wants both of them to be free, unencumbered by the responsibility of obligations to one another. He further demonstrates this theory of freedom when he decides to have sex with Geryon during their trip to Peru with no regard for how his actions will affect Ancash, his current partner. Geryon, meanwhile,

interprets their sexual encounter as "degrading" rather than freeing because he understands that there is no love or mutual understanding underlying the encounter. The novel juxtaposes Herakles's unexamined existence with Geryon's "captive" but meaningful interactions with others to suggest that a fulfilled life is derived not from unfettered freedom but from opening oneself to the world.

SYMBOLS

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

RED

The color red symbolizes Geryon's identity and the role creativity plays in constructing identity. In the introductory essay that precedes the main story, Carson (the author) writes that adjectives "are the latches of being," meaning an adjective provide insight into the characteristics of the noun that it describes. Geryon feels that his redness is his defining feature, so the color red becomes synonymous with his identity and personal quest for self-affirmation. For example, one of Geryon's first attempts at autobiography involves constructing a sculpture from a cigarette glued to a red tomato. Redness extends beyond Geryon's self, too: he lives on an island called "The Red Place," which is covered in "red dirt." **Volcanoes**, one of his core interests, also evoke the color red. When Geryon thinks about redness, he consciously or unconsciously meditates on who he is. Conversely, colors that are not red point away from Geryon's assumed sense of self. For example, when Herakles calls Geryon after their breakup to tell him about a "freedom" dream he had in which Geryon resurrects a drowned yellow bird, Geryon angrily thinks to himself, "he doesn't know me at all! Yellow!"

WINGS

Geryon's **red** wings symbolize his alienation and the freedom and self-affirmation he ultimately achieves through shared intimacy. Geryon is a red-winged monster growing up among normal humans, and he feels ashamed of his monstrosity. Because his wings, in particular, remind him of his otherness, he goes to great lengths to hide them, concealing them beneath an overcoat and refusing to fly. Throughout the novel, winged creatures function as stand-ins for Geryon, often conveying Geryon's current state of mind. For example, when Herakles calls Geryon to tell him about a dream he had about Geryon resurrecting a drowned yellow bird, the subtext of Herakles' dream is that Geryon will move beyond the heartbreak of their recent breakup and be restored through the freedom that the breakup affords them both. In another instance that also occurs after the breakup, Geryon captures a 15-minute exposure photograph of a fly drowning in a pail of water, symbolizing the despair he feels in the aftermath of the breakup and, more broadly, his inability to control his life.

By the end of the book, however, the very characteristic that once alienated Geryon becomes the thing that enables him to embrace his identity and achieve the shared intimacy he has long desired. After Geryon accidentally reveals his wings to Ancash in Peru, Geryon is surprised when Ancash reacts admiringly, likening Geryon and his wings to the "*Yazcol Yazcamac*" of indigenous Peruvian folklore, mythological creatures who use their wings to emerge unharmed and powerful from **volcanoes**. Later, Ancash urges Geryon to "use those wings," a request that Geryon later fulfills by flying over the volcano in Jucu in a dual act of shared intimacy with Ancash and self-affirmation.

VOLCANO

Volcanoes symbolize the ambiguity between the "inside" world and the "outside" world, and Geryon's struggle to navigate this liminal space. One of Geryon's central struggles throughout the novel is how to express his inner thoughts and develop meaningful, intimate relationships with others. After suffering abuse at the hands of his older brother, Geryon turns inward, rarely confiding his true thoughts and desires with others. Geryon explicitly compares "the cracks and fissures of his inner life" to the "lateral fissures called fire lips" of volcanoes. Unlike a "healthy volcano," however, which periodically purges itself of its inner "pressure," Geryon cannot regulate the expulsion of his "inner life." Volcanoes fascinate Geryon because he longs to master the divide between inside and outside and learn how to project his inner turmoil outward so that he can use it to express himself to others rather than alienate himself from them. Geryon also associates volcanoes with his passionate but tumultuous relationship with Herakles, since it was Herakles's grandmother's photograph of a volcanic eruption, "**Red** Patience," that first attracted him to volcanoes. On the same visit to Herakles's hometown of Hades when Herakles first saw the photograph, Geryon, Herakles, and Herakles' grandmother visited the volcano that was the subject of her photograph, as well. Geryon is also struck by Herakles's grandmother's story about Lava Man, the sole survivor of the 1923 volcanic eruption. Although Lava Man suffered severe burns, his residual scars symbolize the melding of his "inside" and "outside" worlds, something Geryon desperately longs to achieve in himself.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Knopf Doubleday edition of *Autobiography of Red* published in 1998.

Red Meat: What Difference Did Stesichoros Make? Quotes

Adjectives seem fairly innocent additions but look again. These small imported mechanisms are in charge of attaching everything in the world to its place in particularity. They are the latches of being.

Related Characters: Stesichoros, Geryon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs at the beginning of an introductory essay where Carson establishes a literary and historical context for her retelling of Stesichoros's poem *Geryoneis*. The essay underscores the importance of language and its ability to create meaning, focusing on how Stesichoros's innovative use of adjectives to impart multiple, unfixed meanings onto nouns departs from the classical tradition, which used adjectives to convey essential, fixed meanings.

Carson's description of adjectives as "latches of being" indicates that adjectives don't merely describe the world: they *create* it, providing a blueprint that informs each person of how to make sense of their own "place in particularity," or their existence as an individual relative to everything else. One of the book's main themes is how people come to know themselves by understanding their position relative to the exterior world. In other words, there is no self in a vacuum: everything we know about ourselves comes from what others observe, describe, and reflect back to us. Therefore, Carson's observation that adjectives are "in charge of attaching everything in the world to its place in particularity" indicates that adjectives create and maintain reality.

The claim that adjectives "are latches of being" refers to how a person's described sense of the world informs how they act and interact with others. Carson presents this idea to help answer the question posed in the essay's title: "What Difference Did Stesichoros Make?" In using adjectives to breathe new, unexamined meaning into words, Stesichoros creates a version of reality where meaning and identity can be self-determined and ever-changing rather than fixed and prescribed. Throughout the novel, this philosophy guides Geryon in his desire for self-affirmation: to be seen on his own terms rather than by his redness alone.

For no reason that anyone can name, Stesichoros began to undo the latches. Stesichoros released being. All the substances in the world went floating up. Suddenly there was nothing to interfere with horses being hollow hooved. Or a river being root silver.

Related Characters: Stesichoros, Geryon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

In the introductory essay that precedes the main story, Carson attempts to answer the question posed in the essay's title: "What Difference Did Stesichoros Make?" To answer this question, Carson turns to Stesichoros's innovative use of adjectives to "undo the latches" imposed on reality by the fixed meanings conventionally attached to words in the classical tradition.

This passage outlines how Stesichoros's writings use figurative language to "release[] being." She cites a few examples to show how Stesichoros's application of unusual adjectives allows for new interpretations of previously accepted modes of being. Carson states, "Suddenly there was nothing to interfere with horses being hollow hooved. or a river being root silver," using such examples to illustrate how Stesichoros's language invites his reader to rethink their conventional understanding of the world around them. The difference Stesichoros makes, Carson suggests, is that his adjectives invite the reader to imagine new ways the world can be rather than assigning rules to how it *ought* to be.

When Carson states that "Stesichoros released being," she refers to how Stesichoros "released" adjectives from merely reiterating the fixed, unwavering conventions imposed by a classical understanding of reality, repurposing them to be used to create and challenge meaning. This unfixed, "released" way of being presents itself in *Autobiography of Red* in Geryon's quest to define himself beyond the fixed, conventional role of monster that mythology has imposed on him.

Chapter 2 Quotes

Once she said the meaning
it would stay.

Related Characters: Geryon, Geryon's Mother, Geryon's Brother, Geryon's Grandmother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

When Geryon is a young boy, he asks his mother what the word "each" means. She uses the example of Geryon and his older brother having separate rooms to illustrate the concept that an individual has their own distinct consciousness and way of experiencing the world.

As a young child, Geryon turns to his mother to educate him about aspects of the world that he's unfamiliar with. As is always the case, "once she said the meaning / it would stay." This passage shows how significantly Geryon's mother shapes his sense of the world. It also illustrates Geryon's willingness to accept information at face value. When Geryon is young, he turns to straightforward, empirical facts to understand the world, such as reading the encyclopedia and obsessing over time.

Geryon's trust in his mother diminishes after Geryon asks his mother to define "each," though. Geryon's grandmother soon moves into their house, which forces Geryon to share his room with his older brother. The move invalidates the definition of "each" his mother gave him. Geryon's brother also begins to sexually abuse Geryon after moving into the same room, which further discredits this definition. Geryon is powerless to protect his personal agency from external violence, and it makes him feel like he's no longer a distinct individual who's in control of his own body and mind. This experience teaches Geryon that he cannot rely on his mother to teach him about the world, and from this point forward, her lessons no longer "stay." This transformation commences a broader shift in Geryon from trusting and open to skeptical and inverted.

Inside is mine, he thought.

Related Characters: Geryon (speaker), Geryon's Brother, Geryon's Grandmother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

When Geryon is a young child, his grandmother moves in with the family. The change in their household forces Geryon to share a room with his older brother, who proceeds to sexually abuse him. Geryon has only just begun to understand the boundaries that separate the self from others, and the abuse—a cruel and traumatic overstep of this boundary—shatters his developing understanding of where the self ends and others begin.

While the abuse blurs the lines between self and other, it strengthens what Geryon comes to understand as the "outside" world—the world he inhabits as a physical being with a body—and the "inside" world, the world of his thoughts and emotions. Geryon realizes that while he can't entirely control what happens to his outside world, he can take ownership of his inner life. "Inside is mine" is Geryon's empowered reclamation of the sense of self he has lost due to his brother's abuse. Recognizing the distinction between these two worlds motivates Geryon to begin work on his autobiography as an act of self-preservation.

Chapter 9 Quotes

Up against another human being one's own procedures take on definition.

Related Characters: Geryon, Geryon's Mother, Herakles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Geryon sits at the table with his mother, unable to answer her questions about his new friend Herakles, and reflects on how falling in love with Herakles has changed him. This quote points to how a person comes to understand themselves through their relationships with others.

As Geryon sits with his mother, he realizes that he cannot (or is unwilling to) find the words to describe his relationship with Herakles. Geryon's loss for words is the first time he explicitly acknowledges to himself how stilted his relationship with his mother has become, particularly since they were so close when Geryon was a young child. Geryon's new relationship with Herakles forces him to reevaluate his relationships with others and assess how those other relationships fail to fulfill him. Growing up,

venturing outside of his home, and falling in love causes Geryon to see himself in a new light, and his "procedures take on definition." In other words, the new environment Geryon is "up against" when he is with Herakles gives him a new idea of who he is, what he is interested in, and what he wants from others.

The strong connection Geryon forms (or believes he has formed) with Herakles, and the interests he develops through their conversations (such as photography) give Geryon a new sense of self. Geryon's new identity also illuminates how his mother has failed to see him for who he is and provide him with the intellectual and emotional attention that this new self desires.

"How does distance look?" is a simple direct question. It extends from a spaceless
within to the edge
of what can be loved.

Related Characters: Geryon, Geryon's Mother, Herakles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Geryon's mother has just confronted him about spending all this time with Herakles and becoming a stranger to her. Finding himself unable to respond to his mother aloud, Geryon turns inward to consider her concerns. "How does distance look?" he asks himself, referring to the figurative distance that has developed between himself and his mother.

Geryon proceeds to answer his own question, defining distance as "extend[ing] from a spaceless / within to the edge / of what can be loved." Geryon's observation describes distance as the substance that separates the "spaceless / within" of an individual's separate consciousness from those external others that "can be loved." Geryon views distance in a negative light, casting it as an obstacle that prevents a person from forming loving, understanding relationships with others. Because people have separate consciousnesses, there always exists an "edge," or barrier, that complicates a person's ability to understand and relate to others with a reliable degree of certainty.

It's also important to note that Geryon's ruminations about distance remain unspoken. His only outward response to his mother's concerns is to ask her if he can light her cigarette, an action that demonstrates his desire to reach out to her, even if he can't find the words to do so. With this offering, Geryon substitutes emotional distance for physical distance, physically reaching out to his mother to convey the inner sentiment of regret that he can't articulately express with words. When Geryon's mother responds by rejecting his offer, reasoning that she should smoke less, the reader can see that she, too, struggles to fully convey her sadness about growing apart from Geryon.

Chapter 14 Quotes

What if you took a fifteen-minute exposure of a man in jail, let's say the lava
has just reached his window?
he asked. *I think you are confusing subject and object, she said.*
Very likely, said Geryon.

Related Characters: Herakles's Grandmother, Geryon (speaker), Herakles

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

Geryon is fascinated and disturbed by Herakles's grandmother's photograph, "Red Patience," a 15-minute exposure photograph that depicts a 1923 volcanic eruption that destroyed Hades (Herakles's hometown). Inspired to create his own 15-minute exposure photograph, Geryon floats the idea of a hypothetical photo "of a man in jail" as the "lava [...] reache[s] his window." Herakles's grandmother's suggestion that Geryon is "confusing subject and object" illuminates a distinction between how Geryon frames this hypothetical photograph of imminent death and what he actually meant to say.

Geryon insinuates that his photograph would be "of a man in jail"—that is, the man in jail would be the subject of his photograph. Herakles's grandmother speculates that Geryon's photograph isn't really about the man, however. In reality, it's more reasonable to assume that what Geryon finds so captivating about the man isn't the man himself, but what happened to him as the lava flowed toward him. Therefore, Geryon's hypothetical photograph's actual "subject" is the destructive process by which life becomes death. The man is merely the object through which Geryon explores the inevitability of mortality.

Another interpretation of Herakles's grandmother's speculation is that Geryon is projecting his own anxieties about alienation and the passage of time onto the subject of his photograph. Photography is the primary medium through which Geryon constructs his autobiography. He uses his camera to convey his private thoughts, emotions, and experiences that he cannot translate into language. When Herakles's grandmother suggests that Geryon is "confusing subject and object," she implies that Geryon's actual project in capturing a 15-minute exposure photograph is to explore his lack of control over the world around him.

Chapter 17 Quotes

All your designs are about captivity, it depresses me.

Related Characters: Herakles (speaker), Geryon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

Geryon and Herakles are painting graffiti around Herakles's hometown of Hades. Geryon has been painting a pair of wings with the phrase "LOVESLAVE" beneath them, an implicit nod to his devotion to Herakles. Herakles, whose graffiti depicts more subversive messages, takes issue with Geryon's messages, which "are all about captivity." Herakles's complaint sheds light on their opposite ideas about freedom, which ultimately leads Herakles to end their relationship.

Herakles values individual freedom and personal satisfaction. As such, he regards the commitment a monogamous relationship requires to be "depress[ing]" and burdensome. Embedded in Herakles's disdain for commitment is his belief that giving up part of oneself to serve and uplift others diminishes one's sense of self and quality of life. Geryon's graffiti "depresses" Herakles because he sees Geryon's attachment to him as oppressive rather than romantic. In contrast, Geryon believes that loving Herakles enriches his life, putting him more in touch with himself by introducing him to new interests, such as photography and volcanoes, that become central to the project of self-expression that he undertakes in his autobiography.

Chapter 18 Quotes

I am a drop of gold he would say
I am molten matter returned from the core of earth to tell you interior things

Related Characters: Herakles's Grandmother, Lava Man (speaker), Geryon, Ancash

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

Herakles's grandmother tells Geryon about Lava Man, the only survivor of the 1923 earthquake that destroyed Hades. Alive but physically scarred, Lava Man supposedly went on to tour with the circus. He would claim to spectators that he'd been to "the core of earth" and returned, now "made of molten matter," to tell ignorant mortals of the "interior things" he had learned during his travels to the Earth's core.

Lava Man embodies what Geryon most desires but cannot achieve: the ability to articulate his "interior" existence and be seen and validated by the outside world. Being "made of molten matter," the substance that exists deep inside a volcano, buried beneath Earth's crust symbolizes Lava Man's ability to project his inner life onto his outer skin.

Geryon longs to translate his inner experiences into communicable thought. However, an internalized sense of shame about his redness and his wings—both indicative of his underlying monstrosity—inhibits him from sharing an authentic version of himself with the outside world. Finally, this passage foreshadows Ancash's later observation that Geryon's wings remind him of the Yazcol Yazcamac, mythological winged beings from indigenous Peruvian folklore whose power and immortality allow them to survive being thrown into a volcano.

Chapter 19 Quotes

Reality is a sound, you have to tune in to it not just keep yelling.

Related Characters: Geryon, Herakles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

Each chapter of the main story of *Autobiography of Red* begins with a line of verse that outlines the central development or theme fleshed out in the chapter. This quote is the opening line of Chapter XIX. It expands on the idea that one's sense of "reality" and one's sense of self comes from one's experiences with the outside world. The passage underscores the idea that reality is participatory and interactive rather than something fixed that people can objectively observe and control.

When the book claims that "reality is a sound," it implies that a person's understanding of reality comes from how the outside world interacts with the individual. In order to know reality, one must "tune in" to that sound and "not just keep yelling." If one tries to see the world from a removed, self-centered perspective, they aren't really experiencing the world because they aren't "listen[ing]" to it. Such as view encapsulates the version of reality that Geryon tries to achieve through his photography: listening to and observing the reality and then interacting with it by imposing his own creative efforts onto it. In contrast, Herakles, who values individual freedom above intimacy with others, chooses to "keep yelling," imposing his own perspective onto reality and neither listening to others nor introspectively examining his own views to enrich and challenge them.

Chapter 22 Quotes

❝ *How do you think it feels*
growing up in a house full
of empty fruit bowls? His voice was high.
His eyes met hers and they began
to laugh. They laughed
until tears ran down. Then they sat quiet. Drifted back
to opposite walls.

Related Characters: Geryon (speaker), Geryon's Mother, Herakles, Geryon's Brother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68-69

Explanation and Analysis

Freshly heartbroken by Herakles's decision to end their relationship, Geryon returns home to his mother and confronts her about her emotional unavailability. He motions to the empty fruit bowl that has sat on their kitchen table since he was a young child and asks, "How do you think it feels / growing up in a house full / of empty fruit bowls?"

Geryon's question repurposes the empty fruit bowl as a metaphor for his mother's inability to protect him from his brother's abuse and provide him with the emotional sustenance he needs. After the abuse begins, Geryon grows distant from his mother, and she, in return, fails to connect with him. When Geryon laments "growing up in a house full / of empty fruit bowls," he addresses the emptiness he feels from this lack of emotional nourishment.

When Geryon and his mother make eye contact and "beg[i]n / to laugh," it shows that their love for each other has survived Geryon's tumultuous adolescence and Geryon's mother's failure to protect him. Even so, the novel is adamant that this moment of connection is temporary. As suddenly as they come together, they "drift[] back / to opposite walls," inhabiting their individual spaces, and the emptiness of the fruit bowl persists.

Chapter 24 Quotes

❝ Geryon's life entered a numb time, caught between the tongue and the taste.

Related Characters: Geryon, Herakles, Geryon's Brother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

Geryon returns home after his breakup with Herakles. The breakup devastates Geryon, whose "life enter[s] a numb time." Throughout his adolescence and early adulthood, Geryon's journey is to overcome the shame he feels about his monstrosity and develop intimate connections with others.

Geryon recognizes that his sense of self is an amalgamation of others' thoughts about him, so the breakup reinforces the negativity and self-doubt he has learned to internalize over a lifetime of being othered by his monstrous characteristics. The breakup makes him feel unworthy of love. He grows "numb" for the same reason he grew numb and turned inward after his brother sexually abused him: to protect himself from further devaluation and emotional pain.

When the novel describes Geryon as being "caught between the tongue and the taste," it's referencing the sexual encounter described in Chapter XVI, in which Geryon describes the "taste" of Herakles. For Geryon now, to be "caught between the tongue and the taste" refers to

the distance between Geryon's nostalgic, lovesick longing for the tactile memory of his "tongue" tasting Herakles and his inability to physically "taste" him again due to the breakup. Not being able to relive this specific memory contributes to Geryon's broader sense of alienation and distance from those around him.

> *Yellow?* said Geryon and he was thinking Yellow! Yellow! Even in dreams
> he doesn't know me at all! Yellow!

Related Characters: Geryon (speaker), Herakles

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

Geryon speaks with Herakles for the first time since their breakup. Herakles calls to tell Geryon about a dream he had in which Geryon resurrected a drowned yellow bird. This passage illustrates Geryon's inability to reconcile his love for Herakles with Herakles's inability to love or understand him back. It also shows how Geryon, too, fails to convey his true thoughts to Herakles.

The first indicator to Geryon that Herakles "doesn't know him at all" is that the bird in the dream is yellow. Geryon is appalled that Herakles's unconscious would tie Geryon to the color yellow because Geryon's redness is at the very core of his identity. "Yellow! Yellow! Even in dreams / he doesn't know me at all," laments Geryon inwardly, admitting to himself more explicitly than he's ever done before that Herakles has no interest in providing him the emotional nourishment and connection he desires. Moreover, Herakles believes that the figure in his dream who represented Geryon was the man who resurrected the bird—not the bird itself. This, too, is telling of how little Herakles knows about Geryon, because Geryon's wings are just as central to his sense of self as his redness.

Still, this passage shows that Herakles's unfamiliarity with Geryon can't be blamed on Herakles alone. While Herakles doesn't ask about Geryon's inner life, Geryon rarely volunteers to share any of his inner world with Herakles, either. In fact, the only word of this quote that Geryon voices aloud to Herakles is the first, italicized "Yellow." He doesn't voice his realization about Herakles not knowing him aloud, choosing to keep this to himself for fear of judgment and rejection.

Chapter 26 Quotes

> A man moves through time. It means nothing except that, like a harpoon, once thrown he will arrive.

Related Characters: Geryon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

Geryon reads about the Yamana, an indigenous people of Argentina, during his flight to Argentina. One passage from his guidebook mentions how the Yamana fashion harpoons out of whale jawbones, and Geryon applies this imagery to his long-held anxieties about the uncontrollable nature of time and the certainty of mortality.

Geryon observes how life, the trajectory by which "man moves through time," is essentially meaningless. That is, a person's life has no fixed, essential meaning beyond what one decides their life means. While a person can go to great lengths to be introspective and decide who they are, what they care about, and what they would like the culmination of their life's works to mean, this doesn't change the fact that life "means nothing." When Geryon considers how, like a harpoon, "once thrown he will arrive," he compares the laws of physics that govern a harpoon's trajectory through the air to human mortality.

Once a harpoon is thrown, the thrower can do nothing to prevent it from falling to the ground, nor can one suspend a harpoon in flight indefinitely. In the end, gravity pulls it down, and it "arrive[s]" at its final destination. The harpoon's trajectory mimics how all life leads to death, regardless of the particular path one took to lead them there. The certainty of death juxtaposed with the unfixed, unknowable nature of time that this passage conveys resonates with Geryon's earlier fixation on long-exposure film capturing a person's moment of death. Each case seems to suggest a desire to impose the same certainty of meaning onto time as Geryon has imposed on death.

Chapter 27 Quotes

> There is no person without a world.

Related Characters: Geryon, Geryon's Brother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is the opening line of Chapter XXVII, which introduces Café Mitwelt, the cafe where Geryon spends much of his time in Buenos Aires. Each chapter of *Autobiography of Red* begins with a single line of verse that typically outlines the core theme that the chapter explores. As this passage suggests, Chapter XXVII grapples with how people construct their sense of self from their relationship to the outside world. "There is no person without a world" means that a person cannot understand themselves outside of their relationships with others. Such a stance embodies the philosophy Geryon gravitates toward as an adult. Yet it marks a departure from the method of self-realization he favored in his youth, which was to conceal his inner life from the outside world in an attempt at self-preservation. This method was primarily a coping mechanism he developed in response to his brother sexual abusing him.

Café Mitwelt, after which the chapter is named, is the café where Geryon spends much of his time in Buenos Aires. Mitwelt references an existential concept developed by the 20th-century German philosopher Heidegger, and Geryon, who majored in philosophy in college, uses Heidegger's ideas as a lens through which to consider his existential conflicts. In basic terms, Mitwelt refers to the condition of one's social environment—the outside world in which a person engages with others. The symbolism of Cafe Mitwelt's name and the activities Geryon conducts there (writing letters home to family) suggests that Geryon is keenly aware of the fact that "there is no person without a world" and is trying to improve his unfulfilled existence in the social realm.

> It was not the fear of ridicule,
> to which everyday life as a winged red person had accommodated Geryon early in life,
> but this blank desertion of his own mind
> that threw him into despair.

Related Characters: Geryon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

Geryon urgently leaves Café Mitwelt in Buenos Aires after becoming paranoid that a waiter who approached his table had noticed his wings and redness and was going to call the police. Geryon was wrong—the waiter had only wanted to refill his coffee—and he admonishes himself for being so neurotic and afraid of judgment.

This passage deepens the reader's understanding of Geryon's alienation. While it's true that Geryon is self-conscious about how others see his wings, years of feeling different have "accommodated Geryon" to "the fear of ridicule." Here, Geryon explains that it's really "this blank desertion of his own mind / that thr[ows] him into despair." This means that he's more bothered by his mind's ability to suddenly turn on him, being relatively comfortable in his own skin one moment to feeling like an imposter the next.

The emotional crisis Geryon conveys in this passage is one based on his fear of an unstable sense of self that shifts according to his circumstances. It would be better if he could simply regard himself as a monster all the time. But because Geryon can only see himself through what the outside world, rather than on his own terms, he lacks the stability of fixed meaning and is subject to the whims of the unknowable, unpredictable outside world.

Chapter 29 Quotes

> *[…] Time isn't made of anything. It is an abstraction.*
> *Just a meaning that we*
> *impose upon motion.*

Related Characters: The Yellowbeard (speaker), Geryon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

Geryon meets "the yellowbeard," a philosophy professor, on a trip to Buenos Aires and asks him what has become Geryon's favorite question: "What is time made of?" The yellowbeard's response dissatisfies Geryon because it denies him the ability to assign a stable, quantifiable meaning to time. Throughout the novel, Geryon struggles with accepting the inevitability of uncertainty and the uncontrollable nature of time. In asking people this question, he is searching for a tangible answer—something he can internalize and quantify to make better sense of his place in the world and the trajectory of his life. Geryon believes that time is a gateway to a fixed, stable attachment

to reality.

However, the yellowbeard's answer eludes certainty, implying that time has no essential meaning. Rather, it's "an abstraction" that humanity projects onto life to give the illusion of organization, structure, and meaning. In asking this question, Geryon wants to be able to pin down his place in a world where he feels alienated from others. If he can achieve this level of control, he might be able to change his place in that world. However, the yellowbeard's answer implies that this alienation stems from Geryon's subjectivity—that it's not the world that needs changing, but Geryon himself.

Chapter 30 Quotes

It is because of her I began to notice moments of death. Children make you see distances.

Related Characters: Lazer (speaker), Geryon, Herakles's Grandmother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

Geryon meets a philosopher named Lazer, with whom he has a meaningful conversation about time, mortality, and "distances." The conversation touches on many of the central conflicts that plague Geryon throughout the novel—namely, how to reconcile his alienation and the uncontrollable, immeasurable nature of time.

Lazer speaks of his young daughter, who makes him "notice moments of death." He illustrates his point by describing a dream in which his daughter ascends one side of a mountain while he descends the other. The vast distance between their relative positions on the mountain symbolizes their different places in life: Lazer is relatively far along in his life, while his daughter is just beginning hers. Lazer's melding of distance with time resonates with Geryon's interest in 15-minute exposure photographs (Herakles's grandmother's "Red Patience," for example) that visually depict the transition of life into death.

Lazer's evocation of mountain imagery also resonates with the novel's use of volcanoes to symbolize the boundary between the self and others. The distance that separates Lazer on his descent down the mountain from his daughter on her ascent up the mountain makes it impossible for him to reach out to her and offer his own perspective on life. Their distinct experiences as separate individuals mean that there will always be a distance between them. Lazer's inability to connect with his daughter reflects the broader human experience: everyone ascends or descends the mountain at their own pace, maintaining a distance just large enough to ensure that nobody can call out for help or understanding.

Chapter 31 Quotes

You can't be alive and think about nothing.

Related Characters: Geryon (speaker), Tango Singer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

While speaking to a tango singer at a tango club in Buenos Aires, Geryon recalls visiting captive beluga whales at the aquarium as a child. He asks the tango singer what she thinks the captive whales think about, and she replies, "Nothing." Geryon challenges her answer, arguing, "You can't be alive and think about nothing."

The singer accuses Geryon of projecting his own feelings of guilt about their captivity onto the whales. Although Geryon rejects the accusation, it's fitting with Geryon's character to relate to a creature held in captivity. Geryon's insistence that the captive whales must have rich interior lives—or at least, cannot be "think[ing] about nothing"—may well be a projection of his own dissatisfaction with the separation between his inner self and the outside world.

The singer's words offend Geryon because they assume that a being who externally appears to "think about nothing" must lack a complex inner life and a conscious sense of self. Throughout the book, Geryon struggles to convey the complexities of his inner life to the outside world—this is what inspires much of his alienation and compels him to create his autobiography. The singer's suggestion that an inner life doesn't exist if it never breaches the surface of consciousness stokes Geryon's fears that if he doesn't find a way to display his inside life to the world, he'll disappear into nothingness.

Chapter 32 Quotes

"...I will never know how you see red and you will never know how I see it."

Related Characters: Geryon, Ancash

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

Geryon reads this statement in a book called *Philosophic Problems* in a bookstore in Buenos Aires. The statement resonates with Geryon, who feels alienated and ashamed of his red wings, a glaring reminder of his monstrosity. Beyond redness, the book also resonates with Geryon's broader anxieties about the distance that emerges between people due to their separate consciousnesses. This excerpt from *Philosophic Problems* fleshes out this concept, using the infinite number of ways to "see red" to demonstrate how having separate consciousness makes people essentially unknowable to one another.

But while distance, unfamiliarity, and uncertainty frequently cause Geryon to despair, the book Geryon reads in the store goes on to suggest that the inherent unknowability of others—the unfathomably vast possibility of ways to "see red"—is, in fact, what makes life meaningful. Moreover, opening oneself up to the world can occasionally lead people to mutual understanding. At the end of the novel, Geryon experiences such a moment of mutual understanding with Ancash, who admires the red wings Geryon is usually so ashamed of and encourages him to fly.

Chapter 37 Quotes

❝ *I'm a master of monsters aren't I?*

Related Characters: Herakles (speaker), Geryon, Ancash

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

Herakles climbs onto the roof and interrupts the moment of intimacy that Geryon and Ancash share after Ancash accidentally removes Geryon's overcoat to reveal his wings. In an effort to diffuse the seriousness, Herakles jokes, "I'm a master of monsters aren't I?" The moment highlights the cruelty that underlies Herakles's superficiality and cavalier attitude. It's also a critical moment in teaching Geryon to get over Herakles, and that the love he remembers sharing with Herakles likely never existed in the first place.

Herakles's remark is cruel and—whether intentionally or unintentionally—shatters the moment of self-affirmation Geryon has achieved through being seen and validated by Ancash. Ancash has just reacted to Geryon's wings not with fear and repulsion at the monstrosity of them, but lovingly, tenderly, and respectfully. Ancash compares Geryon's wings to mythic winged creatures called Yazcamac. People in his mother's village believe these creatures are immortal, able to withstand being thrown into a volcano as sacrifices to the gods.

Herakles's remark fetishizes Geryon's wings, reducing them to a mark of Geryon's underlying monstrosity and implying that he dominates Geryon sexually. In calling himself a "master," even in jest, Herakles weaponizes Geryon's emotions against him, effectively mocking Geryon for allowing love to render him powerless. The word "master" evokes Geryon and Herakles's opposite stances on individual freedom: in calling himself this, Herakles insinuates that his casual attitude toward relationships makes him more powerful than Geryon, whose desire for intimacy and love for Herakles hold him captive.

Chapter 38 Quotes

❝ What Geryon was thinking Herakles never asked. In the space between them
developed a dangerous cloud.

Related Characters: Geryon, Herakles, Ancash, Ancash's Mother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

On the drive to Huaraz with Herakles, Ancash, and Ancash's mother, Geryon considers how Herakles failed to express interest in Geryon's inner life when they were romantically involved years ago. His ruminations make him realize that the idyllic romance he has created in his mind in the years since the breakup has been a fantasy rather than a realistic depiction of their relationship, which was largely characterized by emotional distance and unhappiness.

Geryon uses volcanic imagery to describe his and Herakles's doomed relationship: "in the space between

them developed a dangerous cloud," he remarks. This metaphor compares their emotional distance to the cloud of steam that precedes a volcanic eruption or the smoke that follows the expulsion of lava. This choice of words suggests that Geryon now sees Herakles's refusal to relate to him beyond a superficial level as violent and destructive.

Just as a "dangerous cloud" ominously foreshadows the destruction that a volcanic eruption causes, so too did Geryon and Herakles's emotional distance foreshadow their ultimate breakup. Here, the novel suggests that a failure to meld one's inner and outer worlds is unsustainable. Shutting oneself off from the world and eschewing emotional vulnerability causes internal pressure to build up until the "dangerous cloud" of alienation erupts.

Chapter 39 Quotes

A volcano is not a mountain like others. Raising a camera to one's face has effects
no one can calculate in advance.

Related Characters: Geryon, Ancash, Ancash's Mother, Herakles

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

Geryon visits Huaraz, Ancash's mother's hometown, with Herakles and Ancash. Although Geryon feels lonely and unseen because his companions are speaking either Spanish or Quechua, neither of which he can speak or understand, he decides that the trip is worth it for the photographs it allows him to take, especially of the volcano. This passage is significant because it explicitly casts photography as Geryon's means of communicating with the outside world and letting his inner world be known. Although he cannot share his thoughts—his inner world—with his companions verbally, he can express himself through photography, the primary medium he uses to construct his autobiography.

The phrase "A volcano is not a mountain like others" reflects Geryon's realization that he sees himself as like the volcano: he, too, has inner thoughts (lava) that are not always released, and he too can appear threatening to the outside world because of his monstrosity. When he remarks, "Raising a camera to one's face has effects / no one can calculate in advance," he's referring to his unexpected affinity with the volcano. Geryon uses autobiography and photography to express his inner life to the outside world. Simultaneously, his photography reflects the world back at him: when Geryon points his lens toward the volcano, he sees his current feelings of alienation reflected in this geographic formation that is "not a mountain like others." This scene further develops the volcano as a symbol of the problem of people's unknowability and Geryon's quest for authentic connection.

Chapter 45 Quotes

There is one thing I want from you.
Tell me.
Want to see you use those wings.

Related Characters: Ancash, Geryon (speaker), Herakles

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

In the garden of their hotel in Huaraz, Ancash confronts Geryon about having sex with Herakles. Although Ancash is initially angry about the betrayal and hits Geryon, he immediately calms down, tends to Geryon's wounds, and engages him in an honest conversation that leads Geryon to confront the reality that he has fallen out of love with Herakles.

Before parting ways, Ancash tells Herakles that he "want[s] to see [him] use those wings," recalling an earlier interaction between the two men where Ancash accidentally saw the wings Geryon usually hides from the world. Ancash reacted tenderly to the wings and saw them as a sign of power relevant to the mythological beliefs of people from his mother's hometown in the volcanic region north of Lima. When Ancash tells Geryon to "use those wings," he conveys his wish that Geryon will show his true self to the world—the self he was never comfortable being when he was around Herakles.

Ancash's remark foreshadows the penultimate chapter of *Autobiography of Red*, in which Geryon heeds Ancash's advice to "use those wings." Geryon ultimately flies over the volcano in Jucu in a display of appreciation for the moments of recognition between himself and Ancash on the roof in Lima when Ancash first sees Geryon's wings and later, when Ancash encourages Geryon to fly.

Chapter 46 Quotes

This is for Ancash, he calls to the earth diminishing below.
This is a memory of our
beauty.

Related Characters: Geryon (speaker), Ancash, Herakles

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes from the penultimate chapter of Geryon's story, when he heeds Ancash's advice and uses his wings to soar over the volcano in Jucu. This is an important moment for Geryon as a character because it's the first time the novel depicts him flying, which symbolizes the successful melding of Geryon's inner self and outer self. At long last, he displays his monstrosity in an act of public self-affirmation. Midflight, Geryon peers down at "the earth diminishing below" and dedicates his flight to Ancash as "a memory of [their] beauty."

For much of the novel, Geryon struggles to accept his monstrous self and form genuine connections with others. When Ancash first saw the wings that Geryon tired so hard to hide from the world for fear of rejection, he surprised Geryon by touching the wings tenderly. Ancash even attached personal significance to the wings, insinuating that Geryon might be a Yazcol Yazcamac, a mythical winged creature from indigenous Peruvian folklore that can survive being thrown into a volcano.

Geryon's interaction with Ancash represented a moment of seeing and being seen: he felt recognized and understood when Ancash touched his wings and insinuated that they were beautiful and rich with mythological significance. The interaction also opened Geryon's eyes to the possibility that wisdom and truth don't have a fixed meaning, as he had once believed when he was a child fixated on time, facts, and surfaces. Ancash's admiration of his wings showed Geryon that beauty is a reciprocal process of separate selves recognizing each other's beauty and reflecting that acknowledgment back to each other.

Chapter 47 Quotes

We are amazing beings,
Geryon is thinking. We are neighbors of fire.
And now time is rushing towards them
where they stand side by side with arms touching, immortality
on their faces, night at their back.

Related Characters: Geryon (speaker), Ancash, Herakles, Stesichoros

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

This is the final line of Geryon's story (and of the book, excluding the brief interview of Stesichoros that comes afterward). Geryon, Herakles, and Ancash stand before men baking bread in a hole in the volcano's slope in Jucu. Geryon considers the flames flickering inside the slope and has a moment of appreciation for his companions. "We are amazing beings," he reflects, referring to himself and the people surrounding him as "neighbors of fire." They are "neighbors of fire" and have "immortality on their faces" by virtue of the flames that flicker across each of their faces. The shadow that the fire reflects on Geryon, Ancash, and Herakles's faces is a visual representation of how we sees ourselves through the image that the outside world reflects back to us. In other words, other people's perceptions of us inform our self-concept.

Geryon's final observation celebrates the experience of living openly and vulnerably among other people. Whereas the penultimate chapter sees Geryon finally spreading his wings, flying, and embracing his monstrosity in an act of self-affirmation, this final scene celebrates living socially and affirming oneself through relationships. Although Geryon, Herakles, and Ancash have separate consciousnesses that inevitably forge a deep gulf between their inner worlds—described here as a "night at their backs"—they can come close to "touching" and illuminating this dark chasm through the light of their shared experiences, flickering on their faces.

Lastly, the volcanic imagery and use of the term "immortality" establish a clear connection between this passage and the Emily Dickinson poem (#1748) that serves as the novel's epigraph. Dickinson's poem uses the image of an inactive volcano to explore themes of concealment, uncertainty, and the relationship of the self to the world, all of which resonate in this final scene.

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.

RED MEAT: WHAT DIFFERENCE DID STESICHOROS MAKE?

Autobiography of Red opens with an introductory essay about Stesichoros, the poet who wrote *Geryoneis*, a lyric poem about the myth of Geryon. Stesichoros was born around 650 B.C.E. in Himera, a city on Sicily's north coast. He lived near refugees who spoke Chalcidian and Doric. These refugees were "hungry for language." Stesichoros filled 26 books with his language, though only fragments remain today. He also received glowing praise from critics. In particular, Hermogenes commended his use of adjectives.

Carson's description of the refugees as "hungry for language" introduces the idea that language and creativity play a central role in creating unstable, changing meaning. Describing "language" as something one can be "hungry for" frames it as nourishing and essential to existence. Language doesn't simply describe the world—it renders it real and meaningful.

Anne Carson (the author) considers the function of the adjective to answer the question, "What difference did Stesichoros make?" *Adjective* comes from the Greek word *epitheon*, which means "placed on top," or "added," or "foreign." Although adjectives might seem like minor additions, Carson argues that they "are in charge of attaching everything in the world to its place in particularity" and "are the latches of being."

When Carson calls adjectives "latches of being," she refers to how adjectives relate to meaning, in that they influence how a person ought to view the world. Carson's claim that adjectives "are in charge of attaching everything in the world to its place in particularity" refers to how adjectives make individual beings distinct by differentiating them from the external world. Adjectives help people create meaning and organization.

Carson considers all the "ways to be." For example, the world of Homer's epics is "stable" and grounded in tradition. He describes nouns using the same adjective, which conveys the essence of the noun most accurately: for example, "blood is black," or "death is bad." Stesichoros's comes from this tradition and went in a different direction from Homer. Whereas Homer's adjectives gave a fixed meaning, Stesichoros's "released being," describing horses as "hollow hooved," or hell "as deep as the sun is high."

The "way[] to be" that Homer establishes through his use of adjectives is "stable" and fixed. He uses adjectives to reinforce traditional, conventional understandings of how the world works. Classical adjectives are "stable" in that they provide a fixed meaning. In Homer's epics, descriptions such as "blood is black" and "death is bad" reflect essential, immutable truths about blood and death, respectively. Stesichoros's use of adjectives, in contrast, "release[s] being" from conventional constraints. He uses adjectives to describe reality figuratively, offering a new, equally real way of looking at the world and establishing meaning through perspective. Unlike Homer's fixed adjectives, Stesichoros's adjectives do not attempt to prescribe how the world is; instead, they describe how one might perceive it. The meaning Stesichoros's adjectives offer is uncertain and shifting.

Carson shifts her attention to Geryon, the Greek mythic figure on whom Stesichoros wrote an extended lyric poem. Only fragments of the poem remain today. The poem tells of a winged **red** monster who lived on the island Erytheia, which means "The Red Place." The monster raises red cattle until the poem's hero, Herakles, arrives and kills the monster for his cattle. The "conventional" telling of the myth might pertain to the triumph of "culture over monstrosity." Stesichoros, however, takes a different approach and tells the myth primarily from Geryon, the monster's, perspective.

In Geryoneis, *Stesichoros breaks from tradition by presenting Geryon's story to challenge "conventional" tellings of the myth, which typically offer a morality tale that celebrates "culture over monstrosity." Stesichoros challenges this version of reality by proposing a version of the story that portrays Geryon, the myth's monster, in a sympathetic light. Stesichoros complicates the story rather than essentializing it. Whereas earlier tellings in the Homeric tradition ask the reader to believe that Herakles is essentially good and Geryon is essentially bad, Stesichoros leaves room for mystery and interpretation.*

Carson invites the reader to consider "what difference did Stesichoros make" for them, though she cautions that understanding the poet's work isn't easy. In fact, reading the surviving fragments, one has the sense of a cohesive narrative poem that Stesichoros completed, only to rip it to pieces.

Carson's wording, "what difference did Stesichoros make" is highly intentional. To entertain the idea that Stesichoros can "make" a difference implies that language and perspective can "make" changes—can alter reality.

RED MEAT: FRAGMENTS OF STESICHOROS

Carson presents 16 fragments of Stesichoros's poem *Geryoneis*, translated by Carson. In "I. Geryon," the poet describes Geryon, the monster, detailing the **redness** that characterizes his life: for example, his snout is red, the wind and landscape are red, and he dreams red dreams.

Carson's translation emphasizes the various red features of Geryon's world to establish how external elements of redness have influenced his identity. What Carson notably avoids doing is attributing Geryon's redness to some essential truth about the way he is. Geryon isn't essentially red but has, perhaps, grown to associate himself with redness because of the red world that surrounds him.

In "II. Meanwhile He Came," Herakles spots **red** smoke and makes his way toward Geryon. In "III. Geryon's Parents," Geryon's parents send him to his room for wearing his mask at the dinner table, while Geryon wishes he could stay downstairs and read. In "IV. Geryon's Death Begins," Geryon looks on his murdered cattle and knows he'll be next. In "V. Geryon's Reversible Destiny," Geryon's mother comforts him. In "VI. Meanwhile in Heaven," Athena and Zeus observe the ensuing scene from their perch in heaven. In "VII. Geryon's Weekend," Geryon leaves a bar with a centaur who invites him into his home and offers him wine. The centaur invites Geryon to sit beside him on the couch, but Geryon is afraid.

Carson's translation of these fragments of Geryoneis *is innovative and creative. She modernizes the myth by implicitly placing the poem's action in the present day. Because Geryon is associated with redness, for Herakles to be drawn to red smoke implies that he is drawn or attracted to Geryon. This foreshadows a change Carson plans to make to the original myth in her retelling, putting more work into developing an intimate relationship between Geryon and Herakles than is conventionally part of the myth. Another element of Stesichoros's poem Carson emphasizes in her translation is the influence of power dynamics. For example, there's an air of sexual aggression and intimidation in Geryon's encounter with the centaur.*

"VIII. Geryon's Father" describes Geryon's father, who "sucks words" and "stand[s] in the doorway." The next fragment, "IX. Geryon's War Record," describes Geryon lying on the ground, covering his ears so he won't hear the petrifying sound of horses. "X. Schooling" describes how in Geryon's time, family had more control than the state. The poet describes Geryon's mother escorting him to school.

Carson's translation further establishes words and language as tangible and real by describing Geryon's father as "suck[ing] words" from the air. Such a description renders words material—as something one can detect and consume. These fragments are also crucial in establishing Geryon as a sympathetic subject. The conventional myth holds that Geryon is a monster, yet Carson's translation presents him as relatively powerless and meek, afraid of the sounds of battle and dependent on his parents.

In "XI. Right," Geryon sits beside his dog and wonders how many little boys think they are monsters. "XII. Wings" depicts Geryon's **red** dog running along a beach. "XIII. Herakles' Killing Club" depicts Herakles killing Geryon's dog. In "XIV. Herakles' Arrow," Herakles then turns to Geryon and shoots him in the head with an arrow, killing him. "XV. Total Things Known About Geryon" describes the deceased Geryon: he loved lightning, he lived with his mother, a Nymph, and his father, a "gold Cutting tool." According to Stesichoros, Geryon was red, winged, and had six hands and six feet. One day, Herakles, jealous of Geryon's cattle, killed Geryon and his dog to take his cattle. In "XVI. Geryon's End," the poet writes about how Geryon's red world continues on without Geryon.

Carson's translation further develops Geryon as a sympathetic character by considering his interior life. Rather than simply presenting Geryon as a monster, she explores Geryon's personal struggle with the shame of being seen as a monster. This scene also introduces the controllable nature of time. Geryon's "Total Things Known About Geryon" is unique in its dismantling of conventional time, since it seemingly predicts Geryon's eventual death at Herakles's hands, though this event has yet to occur. Geryon's attempt to play with the logical constraints of time suggests an attempt to impose order and control on time, which he otherwise has no control over. Lastly, Carson's translation presents Herakles's slaying of Geryon as particularly cruel in its senselessness. In classical mythology, Herakles's task is to steal Geryon's cattle, not kill Geryon, yet he ends up slaying Geryon for seemingly no reason at all. Underscoring Herakles's senseless slaying of Geryon reverses their roles, rendering Herakles (the conventional hero) a cold-blooded killer and Geryon (the conventional monster) a tragic victim.

APPENDIX A: TESTIMONIA ON THE QUESTION OF STESICHOROS' BLINDING BY HELEN

In Appendix A, Carson offers three accounts of the rumor that Stesichoros was blinded for writing unfavorably of Helen of Troy. The first account, Suidas s.v. *Palinodia*, explains how Stesichoros got his sight back after writing Helen an encomium called "The Palinode." The second account, Isokrates Helen 64, dictates that Helen blinded Stesichoros to assert her own power after the poet began his poem "Helen" with blasphemous material. The third account, "Plato Phaedrus 243a," explains that mythology commonly punishes criminals. Homer hadn't understood this, but Stesichoros had, so he wasn't surprised when he was blinded for slandering Helen and began immediate work on "Palinode."

A palinode is an ode whose rhetorical purpose is to redact claims the poet made in a previous ode. Stesichoros's "Palinode" refuted the slanderous claims he made about Helen of Troy's sexual indiscretions in his previous poem about her. That Stesichoros (supposedly) had his vision restored after writing the palinode symbolically reaffirms the idea that language has the power to alter reality.

APPENDIX B: THE PALINODE OF STESICHOROS BY STESICHOROS

Appendix B contains the aforementioned "Palinode" Stesichoros wrote in response to being blinded for slandering Helen. In it, the poet lists that all the things he claimed Helen had done in his poem had not actually happened.

Carson's decision to include a fragment of Stesichoros's "Palinode" is typical of her writing, which combines different genres together in a hybrid collage of prose, verse, fiction, nonfiction, and essay.

APPENDIX C: CLEARING UP THE QUESTION OF STESICHOROS' BLINDING BY HELEN

Appendix C consists of a list of 21 opposing possibilities for details associated with Stesichoros's rumored blinding. For example, 1. reads, "Either Stesichoros was a blind man or he was not." 2. states that either Stesichoros's blindness was temporary or permanent. Other opposing possibilities Appendix C raises are whether or not Helen caused Stesichoros's blindness, whether or not Helen's actions were justified, and whether or not Stesichoros made slanderous claims about Helen's sexual misconduct.

The either/or statements Carson presents in Appendix C are called disjunctive syllogisms. In classical logic, disjunctive syllogisms are a type of argument in which one infers the truth of one statement by inferring the falsehood of an opposing statement. In Carson's first disjunctive syllogism, for example, if one infers that Stesichoros was not not *a blind man, one then can infer that he* was *a blind man. The inference that Stesichoros was blind allows Carson to make an inference about the second disjunctive syllogism, and that inference informs the following syllogism, and so on, through the rest of the sequence.*

Midway through the list, Carson considers whether the rumors about Stesichoros are lies. If this is the case, she suggests, "we are now in reverse" in our reasoning, which will bring us back to the beginning of our inquiry, where we may meet Stesichoros. The list continues to present opposing options. For example, Carson states that if we meet Stesichoros, we will either ask him about Helen, or we will remain silent. If we choose to ask, Stesichoros will either lie or tell the truth, and we will either believe or doubt him. If Stesichoros admits to lying, his admission will either go unnoticed or attract Helen's attention.

Carson throws a wrench in the conventional logic she initially presented by making an inference about the equal likelihood of either option being a lie, creating a system in which inferring deception leads the reader backward until they know nothing about Stesichoros, rather than forward toward a fixed answer about Stesichoros's blindness. In so doing, Carson divorces certainty from truth and "detach[ing] being," much as she claims Stesichoros has done with adjectives. In the absence of certainty, reality becomes tenuous and unstable rather than fixed and reassuring. This is the type of thinking Carson asks her reader to have while reading Autobiography of Red.

CHAPTER 1. JUSTICE

Geryon walks to school with his older brother, who likes to examine the stones he found on the way there. Geryon always struggles to find the door that leads to the Kindergarten wing of the school building, and his brother thinks he's "stupid" and has grown impatient with him. At first, Geryon's mother had to escort him to school, but now, she's passed on the task to Geryon's older brother. Today, he abandons Geryon outside the school.

This scene is essential in establishing Geryon's relationship with his older brother. That Geryon's brother doesn't receive a proper name implies a distance between him and Geryon. Furthermore, Geryon's brother's decision to abandon Geryon and call him "stupid" portrays him as an aggressive bully.

Geryon looks inward at the "fires of his mind" and tries to visualize a map. Deciding that "justice is pure," Geryon walks along the side of the building and stands outside the windows of the Kindergarten wing, waiting for someone to spot him and help him find his way inside. He stands silently, not knocking on the glass. He feels a penny in his pocket as the first snow falls around him.

The phrase "fires of his mind" implies that Geryon has internalized the redness that characterizes his world. It also suggests that Geryon has a very active, intense inner life, proving that his older brother's assessment that he is stupid is incorrect. Lastly, this scene introduces the distinction between inside and outside, something Geryon appears to have difficulty with, as evidenced by his inability to find a way into the classroom, as well as the juxtaposition between Geryon's unassuming demeanor and his "fire[y]" inner thoughts.

CHAPTER 2. EACH

When Geryon is little, he loves sleeping, but mostly he loves waking up. Each new day marks the start of a new world. The word "each" has always puzzled Geryon. He can't understand what it means. One day he asked his mother, who compared it to how Geryon and his brother *each* have their own room.

The novel expands on the idea of multiple, unstable ways of being Carson introduced in her opening essay: the world's meaning isn't static and shifts with each new day, so it's so exciting for Geryon to wake up each morning. Geryon's fixation on the word "each" indicates that he is learning to distinguish between himself and the outside world.

One day, Geryon's grandmother comes to live with them after suffering a bad fall, forcing Geryon to move into his brother's room for several months. Geryon complains about the smell in his brother's room. They bicker back and forth. Many nights, he can hear his brother "pulling on his stick" in the bottom bunk bed. Geryon asks him why he does this, and his brother asks Geryon to show him his, offering to give him a cat's-eye marble if he does. Geryon has always wanted a cat's-eye and agrees. Geryon's older brother warms him not to tell their mother. When Geryon lets his older brother do whatever he wants, he's suddenly nice to Geryon. Afterward, Geryon returns to his top bunk, puts his pajama bottoms back on, and thinks, "inside is mine."

Geryon's brother is sexually abusing him, and this abuse complicates Geryon's new understanding of self versus other. The abuse teaches Geryon to see the outside world as a sinister force one must hide from rather than an enriching opportunity to connect with others. When Geryon states that "inside is mine," he indicates that he has learned to turn inward in an act of self-preservation. While he has no control over the harm his outer self incurs from the outside world, he does have the power to protect and preserve his inner life. This scene is important because it shows how Geryon's brother's act of sexual violence against Geryon stunts Geryon's development, teaching him to fear participating in the outside world among other people, which is necessary for a meaningful, fulfilled life.

The next day, the brothers go to the beach. Geryon's brother finds a dollar and gives it to Geryon. Geryon finds a piece of a war helmet and hides it from his brother. On this day, Geryon begins working on his autobiography, "set[ting] down all inside things," and excluding "outside things."

In writing his autobiography, Geryon is trying to strengthen and magnify the "inside things" he can control, guarding them against "outside things," such as his brother's abuse. Geryon believes that guarding his inner life against the outside world will be a self-affirming experience that will make his identity stronger and more authentic.

CHAPTER 3. RHINESTONES

Geryon's mother scolds Geryon for picking at a wound on his lip. After she leaves, the air in the kitchen feels oppressive to Geryon, and he tries not to cry. Geryon's brother enters the kitchen. He teases and berates Geryon when Geryon asks him the time, refusing to answer Geryon's question before coming up behind him and grabbing him in a chokehold.

Geryon sees his mother as his protector, which is why the air feels oppressive once she leaves: he no longer has a physical barrier between himself and his brother. This passage also introduces Geryon's fixation on knowing the time, which suggests a relationship between time and control. It's as though knowing the time—knowing how much longer he must wait for his mother, his protector, to return—gives Geryon the allusion that he can control how much harm his brother is allowed to inflict on him. The outside world is threatening and unpredictable, but a firm grasp on time—the force that propels all beings forward—offers an opportunity for Geryon to exercise more control over his experiences.

The babysitter enters the room, and Geryon's brother moves away from Geryon. The babysitter accuses Geryon of sulking. Geryon asks her the time, and she replies that it's nearly 8:00—his bedtime. She offers to read to Geryon to help him get to sleep. Geryon selects a book about Loons so that the books his mother normally reads him remain sacred and only heard in her voice.

This passage further develops the concepts Carson presented in the book's opening essay, namely the ability of language (particularly adjectives) to create reality and alter ways of being. Geryon thinks that hearing his favorite books read in the babysitter's voice will literally tarnish or degrade the books' sentimental value to him.

The babysitter reads to Geryon in Geryon and his brother's room. Geryon's brother enters and snaps Geryon's leg with a rubber band. He asks Geryon what his favorite weapon is. Geryon's is the catapult. The babysitter's favorite is the garotte, which offers a "quick but painful death." Geryon says his favorite is a cage. Geryon's brother mocks him, arguing that a cage isn't a weapon.

Geryon's brother continues to inflict pain on Geryon's outer self, hurting him with a rubber band. That Geryon identifies a cage as his favorite weapon illustrates the impact his brother's abuse has had on him. Being trapped in his inside world—the direct result of the abuse—is a stifling experience that has taught Geryon how destructive and powerful alienation and captivity can be.

CHAPTER 4. TUESDAY

Geryon likes Tuesdays best. On the second Tuesday of each winter month, Geryon's father and brother are away at hockey practice, leaving Geryon alone with his mother. They turn on all the lights in the house and eat Geryon's favorite meal: buttered toast and canned peaches. Geryon and his mother eat on supper trays in the living room. Geryon's mother smokes, reads magazines, and talks on the phone. Geryon works on his autobiography by gluing a cigarette to a **tomato** to make a sculpture. He rips up a $10 bill to use as hair. Geryon's mother compliments the sculpture but suggests that he maybe use a $1 bill next time.

Geryon's father and brother going to hockey practice is an amusing detail that situates Carson's retelling of the classical myth of Geryon firmly outside of Ancient Greece and in a place that more closely resembles 20th-century life in her native Canada. Geryon's sculpture represents an early attempt to construct an autobiography. His decision to use a tomato as a stand-in for himself underscores how centrally redness factors into his sense of self. This scene also further develops Geryon's close relationship with his mother, who encourages his attempts at self-expression.

CHAPTER 5. SCREENDOOR

Geryon's mother stands at the ironing board, lights a cigarette, and watches Geryon. Geryon's mother repeatedly tells him it's time to go to school, but Geryon refuses. Geryon's mother tells him school would be tough if he were weak, but he's not. She adjusts his **red wings** and urges him out the door.

The detail of Geryon's mother adjusting his wings comes from Carson's translation of one of the remaining fragments of Stesichoros's Geryoneis. *Geryon's mother's tender touch indicates that she loves Geryon for the very aspect of himself—his monstrosity—for which he feels most ashamed. Geryon's mother is unlike the other characters that the book has introduced thus far, in that she affirms and values Geryon's existence.*

CHAPTER 6. IDEAS

Geryon finally learns how to write. His mother's friend, Maria, gives him a notebook from Japan. Geryon writes "Autobiography" on the cover. He titles the first page "Total Facts Known About Geryon" and lists everything he knows about himself: he is a **red** monster who lives on the Red Place, an island in the Atlantic. His mother is "a river that runs to the sea the Red Joy River," and his father is "gold." He has six hands, six feet, and has **wings**. He has "strange red cattle." One day, Herakles gets jealous of the cattle and kills Geryon for them. He asks himself why Herakles killed him and comes up with three possibilities: 1, he is "just violent"; 2, it was his 10th Labor; and 3, he believed "Geryon was Death otherwise he could live forever." Lastly, Geryon writes that Herakles killed Geryon's little red dog.

Geryon's "Total Facts Known About Geryon" list references Carson's translation of Stesichoros's Geryoneis. *The list fulfills a similar function in Carson's retelling of Stesichoros's poem underscores how centrally redness factors into Geryon's identity and challenges logical, conventional understandings of time by suggesting that Geryon predicts his ultimate slaying (in the original myth) by Herakles. Geryon's list also eschews fixed, static meaning for subjective interpretation and uncertainty, as evidenced by his multiple explanations for his slaying. Herakles's reasons for killing Geryon range from senselessly cruel ("just violent") to superstitious (he thought "Geryon was Death otherwise he could live forever.")*

At a parent-teacher conference that Geryon attends with his mother, the teacher asks Geryon's mother where he gets his ideas and if he ever writes happy endings. Geryon adds to his autobiography a new ending: "All over the world the beautiful **red** breezes went on blowing hand / in hand."

Geryon's new ending also comes from Carson's translation of Geryoneis. *The ending is ambiguous but hopeful, gesturing toward the continuing forward motion of time that persists after death. Geryon tries to make peace with time, something that usually troubles him. Geryon's rather poetic addendum, in which he describes how "All over the world the beautiful red breezes went on blowing hand / in hand," demonstrates his tenancy to see himself—his inner world—as separate from the outside world. Because he regards his inside world and the outside world as distinct, he knows the latter will continue living after he dies.*

CHAPTER 7. CHANGE

Geryon reaches adolescence. He meets Herakles at the Bus Depot late one Friday night. Herakles gets off a bus that has just arrived from New Mexico as Geryon enters the bus depot to call home. They lock eyes meaningfully. Geryon asks Herakles for change from a dollar. Herakles doesn't have any but offers him a quarter for free, since he "believe[s] in being gracious." Noticing that Geryon's hands are cold, Herakles places them under his shirt to warm them.

Herakles travels the country by bus and appears to be something of a drifter, which implies that he is a free spirit. These characteristics make him quite unlike Geryon, who is more subdued, anxious, and skeptical of the larger world. Herakles's action in placing Geryon's hands under his shirt to warm them is physically and emotionally intimate. There's an erotic connotation to his action, too, which might foreshadow the start of a romantic relationship.

CHAPTER 8. CLICK

At home, Geryon's mother asks Geryon about the new kid he's been hanging out with all the time. She asks whether Geryon's new friend is older, if he's in school, and if he lives in the trailer park. Geryon remains silent, aiming a camera at her throat as she talks and refusing to answer her many questions. Geryon's mother cautions him not to trust people who only come out at night. She admits that while she trusts him, she worries about him, nonetheless. Geryon's brother comes into the kitchen and announces that he's going downtown. He leaves, slamming the door behind him. Geryon exits the kitchen soundlessly.

Geryon appears to have grown distant from his mother as an adolescent, using his camera as a shield that protects him from answering her questions. He even seems to align himself with his brother now, evidenced by his decision to follow him to the beach rather than stay behind and answer his mother's questions.

CHAPTER 9. SPACE AND TIME

Geryon has been seeing Herakles every day, and he feels "loose and shiny" when he's with him. Geryon's mother complains that he's changed. Geryon considers how love makes him cruel. Geryon's mother notes that she's placed some freshly laundered shirts in his room, hinting at the intentionally torn, disheveled t-shirt he's wearing. Geryon places his camera in his pocket. His mother asks him what he likes so much about Herakles anyway. Geryon thinks of many things he can't say aloud to his mother and offers that he and Herakles like to discuss art. Geryon's mother looks past him as he speaks. He considers the question, "How does distance look?" and asks his mother if he can light her cigarette, pulling a pack of matches from his pocket. His mother says no, thank you.

Geryon's observation about feeling "loose and shiny" when he's with Herakles implies that the relationship has caused him to release the tight grip he usually maintains on his inner life. After his brother began abusing him when Geryon was a young child, Geryon closed in on himself and decided to protect his inside life from the world. Now, he's more open to sharing that self with others. Still, Geryon's struggle to open up to his mother and say aloud the things he likes about Herakles shows that Geryon is still unwilling to be vulnerable about certain things. When he looks at his mother and considers the question "How does distance look?" he's acknowledging how stiff and unfamiliar they have become to each other. He's trying to make sense of that distance by likening it to a physical distance that one can more easily quantify and understand.

CHAPTER 10. SEX QUESTIONS

Geryon and Herakles are parked on the side of the highway. Geryon says he should go home soon. Herakles talks about being the kind of person "who will never be satisfied," and Geryon recognizes that Herakles is trying to talk about sex with this remark. Geryon is 14 to Herakles's 16. Once, Herakles argued that sex is how you get close to someone. Geryon asks Herakles if he thinks about sex every day. The question offends Herakles, who considers it an "accusation." He suddenly turns on the car and turns back onto the road to drive Geryon home. They don't touch.

This passage shows that Geryon and Herakles's relationship isn't quite as blissful as it had first seemed. The relationship fulfills a different purpose for Herakles, who is primarily interested in sex and has a cavalier attitude about it. His stern response to Geryon's question, which he deems an "accusation," implies that Herakles knows that Geryon is less open to casual sex and is perhaps judgmental—consciously or unconsciously—of Herakles's casual attitude. There's irony here, too, since Herakles claims to use sex to get closer to others, yet the topic of sex drives a wedge between himself and Geryon.

CHAPTER 11. HADES

Geryon and Herakles graffiti "SPIRIT RULES SECRETLY ALONE THE BODY ACHIEVES NOTHING" on a high school wall. Afterward, Geryon writes some excuse onto a note to explain his whereabouts to his mother and tacks the note on the fridge. Then, he and Herakles set off for Herakles's hometown of Hades, which is a four-hour drive to the other side of the island. Herakles asks Geryon if he has ever seen a **volcano**. He tells Geryon about the volcano in Hades that last exploded in 1923. Herakles's grandmother had seen it. She spoke of the air growing hot and whiskey bottles bursting into flames. The town had one survivor, Lava Man, who had been imprisoned in the local jail.

Geryon and Herakles's graffiti message is opaque but seems to gesture toward the divide between the inside and outside worlds, which Geryon is fixated on. "The body achieves nothing" places the outside self as less capable than the inside self, or the "spirit." However, the lack of punctuation in the message leaves it open to interpretation. For example, one might also argue that the message emphasizes the word "alone," implying that the body can be powerful, but only if it joins forces with others. Regardless of the interpretation one chooses, the message points to the richness of the inner life and a disconnect between inside and outside.

CHAPTER 12. LAVA

Geryon wakes up. It's the middle of the night, and the air is hot. He lies still in bed and imagines what it would be like to be a woman waiting alone in the dark as a rapist walks toward her, ascending the stairs "slow as **lava**." Geryon enters the consciousness of the woman and wonders if the rapist is listening to her, too.

This surreal scene features Geryon assuming an imperiled woman's consciousness. The scene further humanizes Geryon, rendering him a person capable of sympathizing with other people's suffering. It's also a nod to classical mythology. In Greek mythology, Zeus rapes Herakles's mother, Alcmene. He does so by shapeshifting to assume the form of Alcmene's husband, Amphitryon, who is away for a military task. Carson's retelling of the myth is abstracted and modernized, but this passage nonetheless grounds the story in its classical roots. It's unclear, though, if this is actually happening, or if Geryon is only dreaming.

CHAPTER 13. SOMNABULA

Geryon wakes up and hears the sound of Herakles's family talking downstairs. He walks downstairs and approaches the back porch. He sees Herakles sleepily lying on the grass. Meanwhile, Geryon can see Herakles's grandmother eating toast and talking about her brother's death. Herakles mutters, "Now we are inserting sap of the queen of the night you will feel a pinch then a black flow." A **red** butterfly drifts through the air, attached to a black one. Geryon remarks how the red butterfly is helping the black one, but Herakles corrects him, using coarse language as he insists that the butterflies are mating. Herakles's grandmother scolds him. Herakles smiles at Geryon and asks if Geryon would like to see a **volcano**.

"Somnabula," the title of this chapter, refers to sleepwalking, suggesting that Geryon's dream from last night may have actually happened, or that he at least sleepwalked into Herakles's mother's room. Geryon and Herakles's contrasting interpretations of the relationship between the red and black butterflies reflect their differing attitudes about their own relationship. Geryon sees himself in the red butterfly and interprets his tagging along with Herakles as interpersonally and emotionally enriching. In contrast, Herakles sees the butterflies as engaged in a sex act because he's mainly interested in physical satisfaction.

CHAPTER 14. RED PATIENCE

Geryon finds the photograph Herakles's grandmother took of the 1923 eruption "disturbing," though he doesn't know why. She had labeled the photograph "**Red** Patience." The photo is a 15-minute exposure that captured the ash and lava as it rolled down the **volcano** and eviscerated everything in its path. Geryon doesn't know why he's so fascinated by the photo, as it's not particularly well-composed. He muses aloud about capturing a 15-minute exposure of a man in jail as the lava reaches his cell window. Herakles's grandmother tells Geryon he is "confusing subject and object."

The title "Red Patience" gestures toward the relationship between photography, time, and control. Herakles's grandmother's 15-minute exposure (a layered photograph that condenses 15 minutes into a single frame) photograph gives the illusion of a slowed-down eruption. It's as though using the camera lens as a mediator gives her the power to manipulate time. When she suggests that Geryon is "confusing subject and object" in asking about the man in jail, she's pointing out that while Geryon is proposing that he'd like to photograph the man as his subject, what he's really interested in is the process by which life becomes death.

CHAPTER 15. PAIR

Geryon's **wings** rub painfully against each other. He fashions a makeshift brace out of a wooden plank he finds in the basement. Herakles notices his dismal mood and asks if he's okay. Geryon fakes a smile and says he's fine. They make plans to drive to the **volcano** tomorrow so Geryon can take pictures. Geryon pulls his jacket over his head, covering his face. Herakles asks him what's wrong once more, but Geryon only says he "sometimes need[s] a little privacy."

Geryon uses a brace to pin down his wings, underscoring how ashamed of them he is: he would rather suffer physical wounds to than internalize the monstrous part of his identity. Geryon seems to resist the notion of a static, fixed notion of reality because that would mean he is essentially, irreparably monstrous by virtue of his wings and incapable of becoming anything else. When Geryon tells Herakles he "sometimes need[s] a little privacy," he is enacting a wall between the two of them, cutting off Herakles's view of his internalized shame.

CHAPTER 16. GROOMING

Geryon has sex with Herakles. It makes him feel "clear and powerful" rather than wounded. He imagines himself as "a magnetic person like Matisse or Charlie Parker." Afterward, they go to the Bus Depot for food. They rehearse their song, "Joy to the World." Herakles moves Geryon's head to his lap and pretends he is a gorilla, grooming him. The waitress arrives with their food and asks, "Newlyweds?"

Geryon's reaction to feeling "clear and powerful" after sex recalls his earlier observation of how his relationship with Herakles makes him feel loose and shiny. His positive reaction to sex shows how intimacy with others can strengthen rather than diminish the self. His sense of self magnifies to the point that he feels "magnetic,"—as though he's an artist like "Matisse or Charlie Parker," whose art and music, respectively, immortalize them in history. Intimacy with Herakles—an act that requires the typically inverted Geryon to gesture outward—makes Geryon feel so confident in his sense of self that he feels almost immortal.

CHAPTER 17. WALLS

Geryon and Herakles paint graffiti later that night. Geryon paints a pair of **red** wings and the word "LOVESLAVE" on the garage of a priest's house. Herakles spots some other graffiti that reads "CAPitalISM SUCKS" and writes "CUT HERE" over it. They return to Herakles's car and drive to the freeway, pulling over at the tunnel to do more graffiti. Herakles suggests they write something cheerful. He explains that all of Geryon's graffiti is "about captivity" and makes him feel glum. This makes Geryon "fe[el] his limits returning." He says nothing to Herakles. He remembers when he was a little boy, and a dog ate all his ice cream, leaving him surprised and holding an empty cone. When Geryon continues not to speak, Herakles suggests they go home. They are too tired to sing "Joy to the World," and the drive feels endless.

Geryon's "LOVESLAVE" message, accompanied by a pair of red wings that are a clear symbol for himself, reinforces the idea of captivity that has captivated him since childhood. While Geryon's love for Herakles holds him captive, he relishes the opportunity to connect with another person, something he hasn't done since he decided to turn inward after experiencing his first incident of sexual abuse. Herakles, who is interested in individual freedom, feels depressed by Geryon's message because he thinks that being beholden to others sets a person back and leaves them unable to be personally satisfied. He thinks that the self is strengthened by fulfilling his selfish needs, not by convening with others and fulfilling promises made to them. When the boys don't sing their song, it shows that their opposite views on "captivity" drive a wedge between them. It foreshadows that perhaps their relationship is fated to end prematurely.

CHAPTER 18. SHE

It's dark by the time the boys return to Herakles's house. Geryon goes to Herakles's mother's room to use the phone to call home. When he gets there, he feels as though he has been there before and remembers his dream about the rapist the other night.

This is another odd moment that insinuates that perhaps Geryon really did sleepwalk to Herakles's mother's room the other night. There's an undercurrent of violence and mystery to this surreal moment of recognition. Perhaps it symbolizes Geryon's persistent fear that his monstrosity makes him capable of despicable acts of violence, a fear he exercises subconsciously by sleepwalking.

Geryon heads back downstairs without calling Geryon's mother. He joins Herakles and Herakles's grandmother on the front porch, where they are discussing Virginia Woolf and Freud. The grandmother tells a story about a small dog she had in Argentina who drowned. The phone rings, and Herakles goes inside to answer it.

Herakles's grandmother and Herakles's discussion of Freud is another indirect nod toward Geryon's possible unconscious sleepwalking and the unconscious shame he bears of being a monster.

Geryon asks Herakles's grandmother about what became of the Lava Man. Herakles's grandmother explains that the man was severely burned and went on to tour the United States with the Barnum Circus. He would claim to be made of molten matter and had "returned from the core of the earth to tell you interior things." Suddenly, Herakles returns from inside to tell Geryon that his mother has called and is angry and would like to talk to Geryon.

Lava Man is a compelling figure to Geryon because he has achieved what Geryon longs to but cannot: the ability "to tell [the world] interior things," to successfully convey inside knowledge to the outside world and dissolve the boundary that separates himself from the world. As it stands, Geryon is too afraid of rejection and of letting known his monstrosity to effectively share his inside world with the outside. Lava Man is important, too, because he develops the relationship between volcanoes and the inside/outside world dichotomy that torments Geryon.

CHAPTER 19. FROM THE ARCHAIC TO THE FAST SELF

Geryon wakes from a dream and listens to the sounds of Hades around him. He likes to think about his autobiography during this period between sleeping and wakefulness when he has better insight into his soul. He thinks about how the soul's skin is "like the terrestrial crust of the earth, which is proportionately ten times thinner than an eggshell." He thinks about his autobiography, which has since morphed into a photographic essay.

Geryon likes to think about his autobiography in the period between sleeping and wakefulness because the ambiguity of this time parallels the divide between inside world (unconscious) and outside world (waking self). His autobiography will most successfully convey his true self in this liminal space because his true self is his inside world, which, in his wakeful state, he remains too afraid to show to the world. Geryon's observation that the soul's skin is "like the terrestrial crust of the earth" again establishes a comparison between volcanos, which come from tectonic plates in the earth's crust, to the dichotomy between inner and outer lives.

Herakles enters the room carrying a tray of two cups and some bananas. Herakles repeats stories his grandmother has been telling him, including one about the last question on the electricians' union exam in Buenos Aires being "What is the Holy Ghost?" Herakles's grandmother joked that the question was "truly electrical." Geryon offers "what time of day did Krakatoa erupt" as an alternate last question; he's been reading about **volcanoes** in the encyclopedia.

Herakles's questions are more abstract and conceptual whereas Geryon's are static and objective. Geryon's interest in volcanoes conveys the comfort he finds in a fixed, unchanging notion of reality. This notion is comforting because it creates the illusion of control, perhaps.

Herakles changes the subject to Geryon's mother's phone call last night. He asks if Geryon should be getting home soon. Geryon chews his banana and thinks about how to respond. Herakles tells him there are daily buses to take him back. Geryon feels that "a **red** wall had sliced the air in half" as Herakles says he'll probably stay behind and help his grandmother paint the house. Geryon tells Herakles that he's a good painter, but his voice breaks as he speaks. Herakles reminds him that they'll always be friends before instructing Herakles to get dressed: he and his grandmother are taking Geryon to see a **volcano** today. In Geryon's autobiography, the page about today will feature a photograph of a red rabbit tied with a white ribbon labeled "Jealous of My Little Sensation."

Herakles breaks up with Geryon, ending the uncomfortable message with the age-old reassurance that they can still be friends. Herakles handles the interaction calmly as though it doesn't affect him at all, but the news is earth shattering to Geryon, who feels as though "a red wall had sliced the air in half." This reflects Geryon's shame about himself and his monstrosity. He views the breakup as Herakles's rejection of his monstrosity. The "red wall," redness signifying Geryon's monstrosity, is what drives a wedge between them and prohibits the development of further intimacy. While Geryon blames himself for the breakup, in reality, it's Herakles's desire for individual freedom and general shallowness that has initiated the breakup.

CHAPTER 20. AA

Geryon drifts in and out of sleep as he, Herakles, and Herakles's grandmother drive to the **volcano**. Herakles and his grandmother are talking about feminism and life in Hades. Geryon thinks about what he's read about volcanoes in the encyclopedia.

Geryon tries to distract himself with mindless facts about volcanoes to forget his misery. Static, reliable notions of truth he reads in the encyclopedia ground him when his entire life is falling apart in the aftermath of the breakup.

They reach the **volcano** and get out of the car. The landscape around them is entirely bare. Herakles's grandmother explains that the lava dome is mostly glass, or rhyolite obsidian. She thinks it's "beautiful," and "has a kind of pulse as you look at it." She also explains that the rubble is made by the breakage that occurs when the glass chills at a fast rate. Herakles and his grandmother sing "Joy to the World" on the drive down, but Geryon remains silent.

Herakles's grandmother's observation that the ground "has a kind of pulse" points to the theme of time. Nature lives in time, in an ever forward-moving "pulse" that continues onward with or without humanity's interference. When Geryon doesn't join in on Herakles and his grandmother's song, it reflects Geryon's continued alienation. He no longer feels that he is a part of their world after the breakup.

CHAPTER 21. MEMORY BURN

Geryon and Herakles return from the video store in the midst of an argument. Geryon claims to be disturbed by photography, and Herakles claims Geryon doesn't know what photography is. He argues, "Photography is a way of playing with perceptual relationships." They shift their focus to the stars. Herakles tells Geryon the stars aren't all really there—that some were extinguished years ago. Geryon doesn't believe this, but Herakles argues that it's a fact. They make their way to the back porch and sit far apart. Herakles refuses to drop the argument. When a man touches a star with his bare hands and suffers only a "memory burn," he'll believe Herakles's claim.

Herakles's argument about what photography is *exactly why photography bothers Geryon: because it "play[s] with perceptual relationships," manipulating time and space, just as "Red Patience" does. Geryon is uncomfortable with concepts of truth he can't measure or quantify. In the same vein, the idea that stars he can physically see might not exist anymore exacerbates his feeling of powerlessness because it means he can't trust his eyes to tell him anything about the world with any degree of certainty. His comment about "memory burn" also points out that Herakles's theoretical, abstract logic is less important than practical logic. If a star burns you—even if it doesn't technically exist anymore—the burn is still real.*

Herakles's grandmother comes outside and tells the boys a story about going to the 1936 St. Croix Olympics to photograph skiers. Herakles goes inside. Geryon and Herakles's grandmother talk about her other photograph, "**Red** Patience." She's upset it's hanging in the kitchen, where it is too dark to appreciate. Herakles asks about the **lava** at the bottom of the photograph, and she explains that the "little red drops" are her signature. They consider the photograph some more, noting how disturbing it is.

Herakles's grandmother's comment about the "little red drops" being her signature interweaves art and disaster. In considering the lava to be her signature, she's indicating that she values aesthetic significance over the actual destructive consequences the volcano wrought. These scene also reinforces the anxiety Geryon just expressed in his argument with Herakles, in which he argued that photography's ability to manipulate time and distance disturbs him. As much as Geryon fears powerlessness, he's equally disturbed by the power to alter realty, to transform violence and destruction into an ordered, composed, and controlled frame.

Herakles's grandmother quotes Yeats, "Gaiety transfiguring all that dread." Geryon says Yeats was actually talking about politics, but Herakles's grandmother claims he was talking about a **volcano**. They talk about the silence of photographs. Herakles returns, and Geryon tells him his grandmother was teaching him about silence. Herakles leads his grandmother upstairs to go to sleep.

Herakles's grandmother's remark is a quote from a Yeats poem, "Lapis Lazuli." One of the central themes of the poem is how art transforms "all that dread" into beautiful, affirming experiences. This is why the photograph is disturbing: because while photography might seem like a form of documentary, it is actually just as capable of manipulating time, distances, and reality to present reality according to the artist's demands. This is essentially the argument that Geryon and Herakles were having earlier. This discussion between Geryon and Herakles's grandmother shows that Geryon's disturbance at photography is a consequence of his knowledge of what it is and what it can do, not that he misunderstands it. It reflects his ongoing unease with time and distance.

CHAPTER 22. FRUIT BOWL

Geryon returns home on a bus. He spent most of the trip in tears. When he arrives, Geryon's mother is sitting at the kitchen table, smoking silently before the fruit bowl. "Nice shirt," she tells him, referencing his **red** t-shirt that bears the word "TENDER" in white script. He tells her Herakles gave it to him. Feeling himself speak the name sends a wave of pain rushing over him. He sits down at the table with his mother and asks her why the fruit bowl is always empty. "How do you think it feels growing up in a house full of empty fruit bowls," he asks her angrily. They stare at each other and begin to laugh until they cry. Then, they change the subject to catch up on various things, such as laundry and Geryon's brother's drug use. Eventually, Geryon goes upstairs to go to bed.

Geryon's question symbolically points to the distance that his developed between himself and his mother, and his mother's inability to provide him with the emotional nourishment he needed in adolescence. For the first time, we witness Geryon attempting to express to his mother how her inability to protect him from his brother's abuse harmed him and stunted his growth. While on the one hand this scene is a positive development in Geryon and his mother's relationship, indicating that they might be able to repair the damage the years have done to their relationship, the brevity of their moment of connection also underscores how temporary and fleeting genuine human intimacy is—how rare it is to speak and be heard and understood by another. Mystery and ignorance of others is the default state. The external world is ever separate from the self.

CHAPTER 23. WATER

Geryon is now a self-professed "brokenheart." He remembers his breakup every morning, and fresh waves of grief overwhelm him. He goes downstairs and looks for his dog before remembering they haven't had a dog in years. It's raining outside. Geryon stands before the sink and tries not to cry. He finds his camera and walks outside into the rainstorm. He takes a 15-minute exposure of a fly floating in a bucket of water. At the beginning of the exposure, the fly is alive, but it has drowned by the end. Geryon titles the photograph, "If He Sleep He Shall Do Well."

The fly photograph is Geryon's attempt to document and quantify mortality—to isolate and control the moment life becomes death. That Geryon photographs a fly, specifically, is a nod toward himself, since the novel repeatedly situates Geryon's wings as a symbol for Geryon himself. Geryon's misery is conveyed in the drowning of the fly, as it symbolizes how he's drowning in misery after the breakup.

CHAPTER 24. FREEDOM

Geryon enters a dark period of his life. He works in a library sorting government files. The librarians think he's smart and talented. When Geryon's mother asks him about his coworkers, he can't remember if they're men or women. He references some photographs he took of them, but the photos are only of their feet. One photo depicts a naked foot resting on an open filing cabinet. Geryon explains that the foot belongs to the assistant head librarian's sister. Geryon's mother asks if she's a nice girl, and Geryon scowls at her.

Geryon's inability to distinguish between his coworkers and his decision to fixate on their feet reflects his diminished affirmation of self as a result of his depression. It develops the idea that our sense of self is an internalization of what others reflect back to us. Because Geryon can't ruminate on himself, he can't see others. It's a vicious cycle where not having a clear sense of self puts him at a disadvantage, unable to connect to others and unable to receive their assessment of him and internalize that.

The phone rings, and Geryon answers it. It's Herakles. They engage in some small talk. Herakles mentions doing some graffiti with Hart, whom Geryon hasn't met. Herakles then changes the subject to his real reason for calling: he'd dreamed about Geryon. In Herakles's dream, Geryon was an old Indian man. He was standing on the back porch beside a pail of water containing a drowned yellow bird. Geryon lifted the bird by its **wings**, flung it into the air, and the bird came alive. Geryon can't believe the bird was yellow and decides Herakles has never known him.

Herakles's casual comment about his new friend Hart shows how differently he's easily he's handling the breakup. He appears to be completely over Geryon, whereas Geryon has descended into a death-obsessed state of melancholy. This exchange between Geryon and Herakles is significant because it shows Geryon how little Herakles really knows about him. If Herakles knew Geryon at all, he would know to associate Geryon with the winged bird rather than the old man, since wings are the characteristic by which Geryon centrally defines himself. He would also know that the bird should be red, not yellow.

Herakles tells Geryon the dream is "a freedom dream," which is what Herakles wants for Geryon, as his friend. Geryon almost tells Herakles he wants to be with him, not to be free, but swallows his words. They end their conversation. Geryon angrily leaves the house, telling his mother he's headed to the beach.

Herakles's desire for Geryon to be free reflects Herakles's valuation of individual freedom over responsibility to the outside world. He thinks honoring one's personal desires is more self-affirming than connecting with others. Geryon believes the opposite is true, yet he holds back his true feelings and denies himself the chance to connect with Herakles, feeling the rejection that would come when Herakles turns him down once more.

It's dark outside when Geryon returns. He goes to his room, undresses, and observes himself in the mirror. He lies down in bed and cries until he can't cry anymore, then he falls asleep. He wakes up in the middle of the night feeling angry. He pictures Herakles going about his life without Geryon and laments "wrong love."

Geryon's lamentation about "wrong love" shows that he understands intellectually how ill-suited Herakles's ideas about freedom are to Geryon's need for intimacy and mutual respect. Yet, on an emotional level, he can't make himself understand that Herakles is bad for him. The mythic figure Herakles might have slew Geryon, but this Herakles wounds him romantically.

CHAPTER 25. TUNNEL

Geryon is packing. He's now 22 and living on the mainland. Geryon's mother calls to express her worries about this upcoming trip to Buenos Aires. He picks up the phone and talks to her, promising to be careful and call her when he arrives. He tells her not to smoke so much.

One may now look back and regard Herakles's grandmother's stories about Argentina as foreshadowing Geryon's later trip to Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina. This indicates that Geryon's relationship with Herakles continues to influence his decisions well after the breakup. Geryon's advice that his mother shouldn't smoke so much demonstrates his simultaneous desire for closeness and inability to connect with her. He wants to tell her he cares about her but remains unable to articulate this sentiment with language. As a compromise, he tells her not to smoke so much in a gesture that nods toward caring without explicitly revealing itself as such.

CHAPTER 26. AEROPLANE

The airplane flies through the clouds. Geryon remembers seeing a dog seized by rabies, its body jerking around on the ground. Geryon had walked away when the owner had placed a gun to the dog's head, though now, "he wished he had stayed to see it go free." Geryon reads about harpoons made of whale skulls from the beaches of Tierra del Fuego. He reads about the indigenous people of Tierra del Fuego, the Yamana, whose name is a noun that means "people not animals," and a verb, "to live, breathe, be happy, recover from sickness, become sane." The Yamanas' poverty made Darwin think they were uncivilized and not worth studying, but they had 15 words for clouds. Today, the Yamana are extinct, their population eviscerated by measles.

Geryon's memory about the rabid dog is dark and reflects his current mental state. He appears to equate freedom with death, his desire to "stay[] to see it go free" referring to death as freedom. Geryon has mentioned having a dog several times throughout the book, yet he always misremembers details about it, such as incorrectly thinking the dog is still alive when it is not. Carson's translation of Geryoneis *asserts that Herakles killed Geryon's dog. Perhaps the repeated references to a dog serve to ground Carson's retelling of the story in its mythological origins.*

The video screen in front of Geryon shows that the plane will arrive at Geryon's layaway in Bermuda at 10 minutes to 2:00. Geryon thinks about how much he fears time. He returns to his guide book and reads about harpoons the Yamana would make from whale jaw bones. Geryon considers how the only certainty of someone who "moves through time" is that, eventually, "like a harpoon, once thrown he will arrive." Geryon falls asleep.

Geryon's harpoon metaphor further develops the thesis that his anxieties about time are tied to a fear of being out of control. No matter how he throws the harpoon or conducts his life, the final destinations of the harpoon and himself remain the same: the harpoon crashes onto the beach, and life ends in death.

CHAPTER 27. MITWELT

Geryon, the "**red** monster," sits at a table in Café Mitwelt writing Heidegger onto postcards he has just bought. He writes to Geryon's brother, who is now a sports broadcaster at a radio station. He wonders if the restaurant workers will throw him out for writing in German rather than Spanish. He thinks they must be able to sense that he is writing in German. Just then, a waiter makes his way toward him. Geryon panics, but the waiter only asks if he would like another espresso. Flustered, Geryon exits the café.

Being in a foreign country exacerbates Geryon's anxieties about his monstrosity. In Buenos Aires, his nationality and monstrosity work together to alienate him from others. He demonstrates his alienation by his neurotic, paranoid interaction with the waiter. The word "Mitwelt" is a term the philosopher Heidegger developed to refer to the way one exists in a social environment. That Geryon spends his days in a place called Café Mitwelt writing postcards to family members to whom he is not particularly close symbolizes his simultaneous desire and struggle to overcome his alienation.

Geryon wonders if he's gone mad. He remembers a science project he worked on as a child, which focused on the sounds of colors. Everyone he interviewed for the project told him they'd never heard the sound of roses crying underneath the burning glare of the afternoon sun. His teacher had told him he should interview roses, not people. The last page of his project had contained a photo of Geryon's mother's rosebush, which was on fire. Geryon stops daydreaming and walks off into the crowded streets of Buenos Aires.

Geryon's monstrosity makes him feel inhuman, and from a young age he has found it easier to relate to nature than to other people.

CHAPTER 28. SKEPTICISM

It's nearly dawn. Geryon has been walking for an hour. He steps inside Café Mitwelt and writes a postcard to Geryon's mother, describing all the girls there as being "cigarette girls." A man, whom Geryon calls a "yellowbeard," asks to join Geryon and pulls out a chair before Geryon can respond. Geryon thinks the man's mouth looks like a small nipple. The man asks Geryon if he is from the U.S. Geryon says no. The man asks Geryon if he's in town for an academic conference and mentions that there's a big philosophy conference on Skepticism happening in town. "Ancient or modern?" asks Geryon, despite his efforts to remain uninterested.

Geryon's comment about the "cigarette girls" to his mother fulfills a similar purpose as the comment he made about not smoking in his earlier phone call to her. It's an attempt to relate to her by bringing up one of her habits, but without actually saying anything honest that would put him in a vulnerable position of having that honesty be rejected or misunderstood. Geryon wants close relationships with his family but doesn't know how. Geryon's' decision to refer to the philosopher as the "yellowbeard" implies a certain skepticism about the man—or, at least, that Geryon doesn't feel an initial closeness or comfort around him, since Geryon associates with the color red, not yellow.

The yellowbeard tells Geryon that he flew in from Irvine and is giving a talk at 3:00 about Emotionlessness, or, as the ancients called it, *ataraxia*. He tells Geryon that he wants to study "the erotics of doubt […] as a precondition […] of the proper search for truth." Geryon and the yellowbeard leave the café. The yellowbeard invites Geryon to come to his talk, and Geryon asks if he can bring his camera.

Ataraxia *is a concept from Ancient Greek philosophy first used by Phyrro and, later, the Stoics. It refers to a state of tranquility that occurs when one is free from distress and worry. This is the state of mind Geryon has longed to achieve his whole life, so this is a significant moment of development in the book and perhaps foreshadows a resolution to some of his interpersonal problems.*

CHAPTER 29. SLOPES

Geryon is sociable despite being a monster. He and the yellowbeard take a taxi to the man's talk. Geryon notices the man's thigh brushing against his own as the car bounds down the busy streets. The yellowbeard tells Geryon about researching law codes in Spain, explaining that he's interested in how people decide what laws are just. His favorite law code is Hammurabi because it's so ethically unambiguous. As an example, he offers the law that says stealing during a fire is punishable by being thrown in the fire.

It appears that self-doubt is mostly what inhibits Geryon from overcoming his loneliness. People regularly approach him, but he assumes they will be put off by his monstrosity and so assumes an identity characterized by social alienation and loneliness. Hammurabi's code is an example of lex talionis, *an ancient law of retribution. The colloquial phrase "an eye for an eye" is often used to explain the system, which, in broad terms, requires a person who commits a crime to suffer a punishment equal to the original crime they committed. Hammurabi's code should appeal to Geryon, too, since its logic relies upon a stable, fixed definition of truth and justice with little room for misunderstanding or interpretation.*

Geryon and the yellowbeard arrive at the University of Buenos Aires. They head to the Faculty Lounge, which is mostly unfurnished due to the university's lack of money. Outside the lounge, a banner reads, "Help Us Keep Track of Professors Detained or Disappeared." Geryon suddenly remembers seeing captured beluga whales as a child. He had nightmares about the whales in his bedroom that night. Geryon turns to the yellowbeard and asks, "What is time made of?" The yellowbeard tells Geryon that time is "an abstraction" that humans "impose on motion," but Geryon is dissatisfied with this answer.

Geryon's memory of the beluga whales reveals that his fixation on captivity and freedom has persisted into adulthood. Geryon is dissatisfied with the yellowbeard's answer that time is "an abstraction" that humans "impose on motion" because it's theoretical and unconcerned with the actual experience of living in time. It arguably doesn't matter that time is an abstraction if someone is consciously, unavoidably experiencing time. Furthermore, the yellowbeard's answer fails to account for mortality, an unavoidable consequence of time that is at the heart of Geryon's anxieties surrounding it.

Geryon and the yellowbeard make their way into a classroom where yellowbeard delivers his talk. Geryon tries to pay attention to the yellowbeard's lecture about Pascal, but his thoughts wander to his mother. He remembers a winter afternoon when he and his mother had watched the day turn into night. The yellowbeard talks about black and white, and Geryon resolves to "get some new information about **red**." Geryon soon grows bored and wonders if the day will ever be over, which is "his favorite question."

Geryon's memory of his mother seems to come as a consequence of thinking about time. Watching the sky transform the world from day to night encapsulates what time is made of, more so than the yellowbeard's answer about time being an "abstraction." Geryon's decision to learn more about the color red signifies a decision to settle on a clearer sense of self.

CHAPTER 30. DISTANCES

Geryon is in his hotel room developing photographs. He has long asked the question, "What is time made of?" and asks it to many people he encounters. Geryon thinks about the yellowbeard's answer yesterday, about time being "an abstraction," and it bothers him. Just then, Geryon looks at the wall clock and sees that it's almost 6:00.

That Geryon continues to mull over the question of what time is made of while he develops photographs points to the connection between time, photography, and control. It semes likely that capturing fleeting moments by photographing them makes Geryon feel more in control of time's passage and his experiences.

Geryon accompanies the yellowbeard and the other philosophers to a bar 10 minutes later. The yellowbeard proudly leads the pack. At the bar, Geryon talks with another philosopher named Lazer. Lazer and Geryon discuss God, doubt, and skepticism. Lazer offers Geryon some of his olives and talks about his four-year-old daughter. He explains how children make a person "see distances." He recalls writing in his journal as his daughter stood next to him, drawing pictures. They were outside, surrounded by acacia trees. He saw the shadow of a bird flit past, which made him ruminate how he is on one side of a hill, making his descent, while he watches his daughter start her own climb.

Lazer's observation that children make people "see distances" establishes a connection between time, distance, and mortality. Lazer's example of seeing himself making a descent down a hill as his daughter ascends the other side shows how the psychological distance that separates people in time can be conveyed symbolically through physical distance. This is in line with what Geryon tries to do with photography: manipulate distance to show a way to quantify or illustrate time and, in so doing, control and understand it.

Lazer gets up to leave and tells Geryon he has enjoyed their conversation. Geryon remains behind and listens to the other philosophers talk. Hearing their conversations and political jokes makes him grin broadly. Then, just as Geryon realizes he's starving, a platter of sandwiches appears, which he decides is a "miracle." Geryon professes himself to be a "philosopher of sandwiches," of "things good on the inside."

Geryon's constant hunger symbolizes his hunger for a fulfilled interpersonal life and human connection. His remark about being a "philosopher of sandwiches" simultaneously points to this hunger for connection and his personal quest for self-fulfillment—for "things [that are] good on the inside."

Back at his hotel room that night, Geryon takes a black-and-white photograph of himself naked and in the fetal position, his **wings** spread wide across the bed. "No Tail!" he titles it.

Geryon's bold decision to spread his wings across the bed suggests that his meaningful conversation with Lazer has instilled in him a new level of confidence and self-recognition. Counterintuitively, it takes directing his attention outward, toward a social life with others, to better understand and accept his inner life.

CHAPTER 31. TANGO

Geryon wakes in the middle of the night and feels panicked. He observes the empty street from his hotel room window. He imagines the **lava** that flows miles below the street and wonders when someone "become[s] unreal." He also thinks about Heidegger's thoughts on moods, how humanity would see themselves as interconnected with the world were it not for moods. Geryon weeps.

Geryon's fixation on the lava that flows beneath the city reflects an anxiety about the conflict between outer public life and hidden inner life. He's gesturing toward his own unease with his unpredictable, shifting moods and anxieties. When he wonders when someone "become[s] unreal," he's wondering how out of touch with one's moods one has to be to lose their sense of self.

Geryon leaves his hotel room and heads toward the harbor. He hears voices coming from a tango club called Caminito and wanders inside. **Red** kitchen tables line the borders of the bar. An old, frail trio of musicians play music as though they are one person. Geryon is disappointed when a tango singer comes on stage and disrupts their music. She sings a tango song, which Geryon doesn't particularly like.

The tango bar is rife with imagery and symbolism that evokes the classic Greek mythology on which Autobiography of Red *is based.* Caminito *is Spanish for "narrow lane," which perhaps evokes the River Styx, the passageway to Hades (the underworld). Likewise, the dimly lit tango bar evokes Hades, the god of the mythological underworld by the same name. The three musicians playing as one is likely an allusion to Cerberus, the three-headed dog that guards the gates of the underworld, and that Herakles slayed for his 12th labor (two labors after the 10th labor, in which he slayed Geryon in classical mythology.) The musicians resonate with Geryon, perhaps because, in the classical tradition, they are all Herakles's victims.*

Geryon falls asleep. When he wakes, the bar is empty, and the lights are off. The tango singer is sweeping the floor and walks toward him. Geryon realizes he has woken with an erection and isn't wearing any pants, and he hurries to cover himself. The woman sits down next to him and lights a cigarette. He tries to lie about liking the music, but the woman shrugs it off.

Geryon's inability to stay awake or leave the tango bar also aligns the bar with Hades, which entraps people. It's unclear if Geryon's pantlessness actually happens, but given the ease with which he slips in and out of consciousness at the bar, it plausible that it's a dream that reflects his unconscious social anxieties and fear of ostracization and loneliness.

Geryon suddenly remembers a school dance. He'd been sweating through his brother's sports jacket and not danced with anyone. When he returned home, his brother was making bologna sandwiches in the kitchen and asked if he'd done any dope at the dance. As he carried his sandwiches out of the kitchen, he told Geryon the sports jacket looked good on him. Geryon stayed behind and cleaned up his brother's mess in the kitchen.

Geryon and his brother seem to want to be close to each other: they exchange affectionate gestures, such as Geryon's brother lending him the sports jacket and complimenting him, and Geryon cleaning up his brother's mess in the kitchen. Yet Geryon remains unable to directly convey his desire for connection and intimacy—he has to go about it in these roundabout, disguised ways.

Geryon returns to the present. He's still sitting across from the tango singer and asks her if she thinks about beluga whales in captivity and what she thinks they think about in there. When she replies, "nothing," Geryon retorts that it's impossible to be alive and think of nothing. The woman says Geryon is just seeing his own guilt when he projects thoughts onto the whales. She tells him she's a psychoanalyst. The tango singer looks at Geryon for a few moments and asks, "Who can a monster blame for being **red**?" When Geryon doesn't hear her, she doesn't repeat her question, instead suggesting it's time he leaves.

Geryon's' fixation on the whales underscores his anxieties about captivity. The tango singer's accusation that his sympathy for the whales is simply a projection of his own guilt for keeping them in captivity might point to Geryon's misplaced guilt about his monstrosity. Just as Geryon isn't directly response for whales in captivity, nor is he responsible for his monstrosity or redness. He blames himself for the way he is because he doesn't know who else to blame. He also feels insecure about his inability to meld his inner world with his outer world. He fears that, like the whales, his silence may be interpreted as evidence of a "nothing," forgettable inner life.

CHAPTER 32. KISS

Geryon sits in his hotel room and thinks about "the cracks and fissures of his inner life," comparing them to a blocked volcanic vent causing lateral fissures. He doesn't want to become someone too fixated on their woes. He redirects his attention toward the book he's reading, *Philosophic Problems*, reading about how different people will never know how the other sees the color **red**. He reads on, and the book states that "to deny the existence of red is to deny the existence of mystery," which could make someone go crazy.

In ruminating on "the cracks and fissures of his inner life," Geryon directly likens the separation between the inside and outside world—between the self and the social, public world—as Earth's crust, which acts as a barrier between the surface and the lava that flows beneath. Just as a blocked volcanic vent causes lateral fissures, a person unable to expel their inner life and project it to the outside world will explode and destruct. The book Geryon reads about redness obviously resonates on a personal level. Besides this, it also gives him a new perspective from which to consider the fact that other people are fundamentally unknowable, and that we can never fully express our inner life to others. The book makes the point that it's better to live in mystery and accept it than to deny its existence outright. Perhaps Geryon's quest for fixed, stable truth is misguided—he may need to learn to accept mystery and the impossibility of finding real, definitive truth.

Geryon puts his book down and heads outside. It's Saturday night, and the streets of Buenos Aires are bustling. He walks to a bookshop and heads to the English books section. He picks up a self-help book called *Oblivion the Price of Sanity?* The book explains how depression "is one of the unknown modes of being," since it's like a world without a self.

Whereas the other book emphasized the importance of the outside world in knowing the self, this self-help book emphasizes the necessity of the self to understand the world. It's a reciprocal relationship where one cannot thrive without the other. "Modes of being" also references Autobiography of Red*'s opening essay, where Carson talks about how adjectives create ways of being.*

Geryon hears a kissing sound behind him and looks up from his reading. Outside, a workman makes a kissing sound with his mouth each time a bird swoops down in front of him. Geryon thinks the kissing makes the bird happy. On his way out of the bookshop, he bumps into a man. He looks up to apologize and sees that the man is Herakles.

The man and the bird recall the dream Herakles had about Geryon resurrecting then bird. This directly foreshadows Geryon's unexpected reunion with Herakles, which, apparently, is the first time he's seen him since the breakup.

CHAPTER 33. FAST-FORWARD

Later that day, Geryon joins Herakles and his companion, Ancash, at Café Mitwelt. Herakles tells Geryon that he and Ancash are traveling throughout South America to record **volcanoes** for a documentary about Emily Dickinson. Ancash hands Geryon a tape recorder and headphones, explaining that it's Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines. Geryon hears something like "a hoarse animal spraying pain from the back of its throat." Geryon thinks the sound is "hot as a color inside." Herakles explains that they were there during monsoon season, and the volcanic ash and rain were mixing in the air. There are gunshots, too, since the government had to send in the army to convince people to evacuate.

It's symbolic that Geryon convenes with Herakles and Ancash at Café Mitwelt: its name reflects Geryon's desire for intimacy with others, which Herakles hadn't been able to fulfill. Perhaps Geryon's decision to take them there implies that he is still interested in Herakles. The documentary about Emily Dickinson recalls the epigraph that precedes the novel, which is Dickinson's poem #1748. This poem explores many of the novel's main themes, including the default state of mystery and unknowing that underlies human existence.

Geryon listens as Ancash narrates the recorded sounds, explaining how the air is so hot "it burns the **wings** off of birds." The word "wings" makes Geryon and Herakles stare straight into each other's eyes. Ancash continues to narrate as the tape recorder plays the sounds of a tsunami hitting a beach in Japan. However, Geryon takes the earphones off and gets up to leave. He has a hard time taking his eyes off Herakles. Herakles tells him they're staying at the City Hotel and that he should call. Geryon says okay and leaves the café.

Herakles has seen Geryon in intimate situations and knows about his wings. Ancash unknowingly strikes a chord that appears to reawaken the passion that once existed between Herakles and Geryon by mentioning a secret that the two of them know. It's interesting that Geryon is unable to tell Herakles much of what goes on in his inside world, yet the thing that binds them, a secret thing, is something Geryon can't help and is ashamed of—his wings, a symptom of his monstrosity. This hints at the idea that we don't have control over what connects us to other people.

CHAPTER 34. HARRODS

Geryon stares at a blank TV screen in his hotel room. It's been two days since he saw Herakles, and he still hasn't called him. He isn't thinking about Herakles and Ancash in their hotel room, or how Herakles used to like to make love in the morning. Geryon gets up and takes a cold shower. He ruminates on an Emily Dickinson poem about a peach. Suddenly, the phone rings. It's Herakles asking if he's hungry.

Geryon's implicitly jealous thoughts about Ancash and Herakles in their hotel room betrays Geryon's lingering feelings for Herakles. It will be interesting to see how Geryon's unresolved issues form the past will be reexamined in a new light years later, when he appears to be making a more conscious effort to redirect his attentions away from his inner life and toward the outside world he learned to avoid as a child.

Not long after, Geryon is eating at Café Mitwelt with Ancash, who is from Peru and "as beautiful as a live feather." He explains that his name comes from Quechua, an indigenous language spoken in the Andes. He's from Huaraz, located in the mountains north of Lima. Ancash's mother moved to Lima after terrorists took over Huaraz. Now, she works as a cook for a wealthy couple who let her live on their roof. Herakles returns to the table and tells Geryon he knows a Quechua song. He proceeds to sing the "cupi checa" song that Ancash taught him. Herakles's singing makes Geryon and Ancash feel uncomfortable. Herakles finishes and starts translating the words, but Ancash quickly suggests they do Quechua lessons some other time. Besides, he has to find the post office.

Geryon describes Ancash using wing imagery, observing that he is "as beautiful as a live feather." In employing such imagery, Geryon positions Ancash as his foil: Ancash is a beautiful, winged creature, while Geryon is a monster. Likewise, Herakles loves Ancash but rejects Geryon. However, the awkward moment where Herakles starts to sing the Quechua song aligns Geryon and Ancash as kindred spirits, united in their reserved, introspective demeanors that are so different from Herakles's brash, extroverted personality. Herakles's fervent singing and disregard for Ancash's discomfort could arguably suggest that Ancash is a cultural accessory that Herakles keeps around to be interesting, not someone he is actually interested in getting to know. In this way, the relationship is somewhat similar to his romance with Geryon: he likes pretty, interesting people and things, but on a purely superficial and selfish level.

Geryon, Herakles, and Ancash walk through the streets. They see women who turn out to be men dressed in fur coats and feel "a hunger." Geryon mentions the song again and tells Ancash he thought he heard Ancash's name in the middle of it. He asks him to translate it, but Ancash pauses before explaining that the song is challenging to translate. Before he can say much more, Herakles turns around, exclaiming that they've reached their destination: Harrods of London.

Herakles might be bolder and more socially extroverted than Geryon and Ancash, but his homosexuality forces him and his companions to express their desire for the men in fur coats as a muted "hunger" that they are socially prohibited from expressing aloud. Ancash's reticence to translate the Quechua song is not unlike Geryon's reticence to be forthcoming emotionally. Both cases involve an inability to meld their inner and outer lives and a fear of speaking only to be wrong or misunderstood.

There's a carousel display of wooden animals inside the store. Herakles spots a tiger and decides it must be Tezca, the tiger god, and would make an excellent present for Ancash's mother's birthday. He pulls out a knife and starts sawing at the leather strap that binds the tiger to the carousel. When Herakles is preoccupied with the tiger, Geryon asks Ancash if he can photograph him sometime. When Ancash reasons with Herakles that there's no way they can get the wooden animal on the plane, Geryon realizes they're going to leave him behind when they travel to Peru. Herakles finishes sawing at the tiger's reins. He hits the fuse box, immersing the store in darkness, and he runs from the store. Ancash and Geryon trail reluctantly behind him.

Geryon's desire to photograph Ancash seems possibly erotic, based on the earlier moment of connection they had in Café Mitwelt. It also implies a desire to immortalize Ancash's youthful beauty, perhaps. This scene with the wooden tiger further creates a distance between Herakles and the other two men, emphasizing their reserved, introspective demeanors by placing Herakles in a scene that exacerbates his carefree attitude and tendency to act impulsively.

CHAPTER 35. GLADYS

Geryon sits between Herakles and Ancash on the plane to Peru and feels aroused. He hadn't realized that the book he bought in the airport in Buenos Aires was pornographic. Worse, he feels ashamed to feel aroused by sentences about a woman named Gladys. Herakles and Ancash both appear to be asleep. Geryon tosses the book aside and decides to pretend to be asleep so he can rest his head on Herakles's shoulder. Suddenly, he feels Herakles's hand on his thigh, making its way to his zipper. He presses his mouth against Herakles's and gives in to him. "Gladys!" he thinks.

Geryon is so lacking in a fixed, stable identity that his erotic responses aren't even his own. He feels aroused by forces that act on him and then goes along with them, lacking the agency to turn them away because he's so lonely.

CHAPTER 36. ROOF

It's Saturday morning in Lima. Geryon stands on the roof of the house, surrounded by chimneys and clotheslines. Ancash joins him, but their eyes don't meet. Last night, he, Geryon, and Herakles slept on the roof in sleeping bags. Ancash's mother has the roof divided into separate living spaces; there's a library, separate sleeping spaces, and a ladder leading down to the kitchen. In another corner of the roof, Ancash's mother grows marijuana to sell and herbs to cook with.

The literally compartmentalized layout of the roof symbolizes the alienation and loneliness Geryon feels from being the third wheel on this spontaneous trip to Peru.

Ancash stands beside Geryon and stares down at the city. Traffic fills the streets, and Geryon can hear dogs howling. Geryon remarks how life here seems much slower. Ancash agrees, stating that Argentinians always have somewhere they need to be. Their conversation ends when the electrical cord that stretches across the roof sparks violently. Ancash attributes this to someone turning on the kettle in the kitchen. Suddenly, Herakles appears at the bottom of the ladder, a papaya in his hand, juice running down his face and chest.

Geryon's remark about the slowness of Peru resonates with the book's broader exploration of time. It's striking to Geryon that Peruvians seem unhurried because his impulse is to take every action he can to organize, control, and understand it. This is evidenced by his impulse to constantly photograph his life, breaking down units of time into intentional, composed frames. Herakles's sudden, erotic presence with mango juice dripping down his bare chest interrupts a possibly intimate interaction between Ancash and Geryon. For all Herakles's proclamations of freedom, he certainly appears determined to control the fun others are allowed to have.

Herakles asks Geryon if he's seen the roomful of parrots at the front of the house. The birds are enormous. Last week, apparently, one killed the cat belonging to Marguerite, the wife of the wealthy American for whom Ancash's mother works. Ancash suggests that guerillas might also have killed the cat. He recalls how they did this in Huaraz one weekend, as "a gesture." Ancash and Herakles disappear into the house to get some duct tape to fix the faulty wire. Geryon remains behind, feeling cold and hungry. He wonders what he's doing here in Lima.

The parrots are yet another example of a winged creature the novel introduces to act as a stand-in for the red-winged Geryon. Here, perhaps, the captivity of these wild, beautiful birds in a house reflects Geryon's anxieties about being trapped. His fears have likely been reinvigorated by reuniting with Herakles, whom he still loves. At the same time, reuniting with Herakles has resulted in a sharp dip in Geryon's mood and sense of self. Now more than ever, his desire for Herakles traps him in a cage, because as an adult, he's more discerning of how the relationship is harmful to him.

CHAPTER 37. EYEWITNESSES

Geryon walks along the seawall and watches people before heading back to the roof. He wonders how best to photograph Lima but doesn't have any ideas. He goes back out to walk, wandering along the seawall and down alleyways. He wanders to a park where some llamas are grazing on the sparse grass. He laments to the llamas about being a nobody. Geryon returns to the house. He looks through the front window at the 50 parrots diving and swooping through the air and thinks "a conscious waterfall" would be a good title for a photograph.

Geryon's inability to photograph Lima reflects his feeling out of place there. He also feels symbolically out of time because reuniting with Herakles, someone from his past whom he thought was no longer in his life, has disoriented him, interrupting the trajectory he thought his life would follow. In this heightened state of isolation, the parrots are the living creatures Geryon relates to the most, though even them finds it hard to relate to, for these winged creatures, unlike Geryon, belong to a flock. They use their wings consciously and publicly and are not ashamed of them. Geryon's hypothetical title, "a conscious waterfall," reflects this freedom of the birds in flight.

Geryon returns to the roof. Ancash appears holding a blanket and notices Geryon shivering. He offers to teach him how to wrap himself in the blanket to stay warm during the cold winter night. As Ancash instructs Geryon to remove his overcoat, Herakles grins and asks if they're trying to have fun without him. When Ancash explains that he's trying to teach Geryon how to wrap himself in the blanket, Herakles suggests he knows other ways to stay warm. The mood becomes tense as Ancash moves toward Herakles and asks him to "let things be." Annoyed, Herakles tells Ancash he's going back into the house to smoke dope with Ancash's mother.

Geryon doesn't want to remove his coat because he's afraid of what Ancash will say when he sees the wings he's hiding underneath it. Ironically, Geryon's fear of alienation and social rejection persuades him to reject the attempt at compassion implicit in Ancash's moves to help him keep warm. This scene is also important in developing the tense mood that is growing among the three men, who are in an uncomfortable love triangle. Lastly, this passage further shows how Herakles rejects intimacy and introspection in the way he chooses to make a crude joke about Ancash coming on to Geryon instead of leaving the men alone to bond.

Ancash and Geryon remain on the roof. Once more, Geryon instructs Ancash to remove his coat, explaining that the blanket is made from wool and will insulate him if they wrap it properly. Geryon stops him, pleading with him to let him do it himself. Ancash grows annoyed, thinking Geryon is just being difficult. Ancash approaches Geryon and pulls down his overcoat, revealing Geryon's **red** wings, which Ancash hasn't seen before. Ancash runs his fingers along them, admiring them. "*Yazcamac*," he whispers.

Ancash reacts differently to Geryon's wings than Geryon had anticipated. The gentleness with which Ancash touches Geryon's wings makes this a somewhat erotic moment. The opposite of what Geryon had thought would happen has happened: revealing his wings has actually brought him the connection he'd thought they would discourage.

Ancash orders Geryon to sit beside him and tells him about a mountain village north of Huaraz called Jucu. In Jucu, a volcanic region, they have odd beliefs. In ancient times, people worshipped the **volcano** as a god and sacrificed people by throwing them into the volcano. Those people that emerged alive were called *Yazcol Yazcamac*, or "the Ones Who Went and Saw and Came Back." Anthropologists call them "eyewitnesses." The way the eyewitnesses come back, explains Ancash, is with **wings**.

Geryon is receptive to Ancash's touch because he finally feels seen. It's a transformative moment for him. Furthermore, Ancash's explanation about the Yazcol Yazcamac *recasts Geryon's wings from a source of shame to something with beautiful historical and cultural significance, and as a sign of strength and powerful rather than shame and monstrosity.*

Herakles appears on the roof and informs him that they're going to Huaraz tomorrow: Ancash's mother wants to show him the town. They'll stay there for the weekend. Suddenly, Herakles notices Geryon's exposed **wings** and jokes about being "a master of monsters." Geryon mumbles at him to stop. Herakles goes back into the house to call the rental agency. After he leaves, Ancash tells Geryon to be careful in Huaraz, since people there are always looking for eyewitnesses. Before Ancash goes downstairs, he smiles and tells Geryon he can sleep with him tonight, clarifying that he really does just mean sleep.

In what has become a pattern, Herakles emerges to interrupt this tender, affirming interaction between Ancash and Geryon. He further establishes himself as incapable of emotional vulnerability or introspection by lightening the mood. By claiming to be "a master of monsters," he's seemingly fetishizing Geryon's wings and also relegating Geryon back to the position he has always believed he belongs in: a monster to be ogled at, ostracized, and shamed.

After Ancash leaves, Geryon stares at the Pacific Ocean, which looks **red** and gives off a feeling of "desire." He looks at couples walking along the seawall and finds that he can't envy them, since all he wants is to leave this place. He crawls into his sleeping bag and sleeps through the night.

Geryon's desire to leave stands in stark contrast to the connection with Ancash he just experienced. Herakles crushes Geryon's confidence. It's clear that this is the way Herakles "slays" Geryon in Carson's retelling of the myth: by beating him down, humiliating him, and rejecting him.

CHAPTER 38. CAR

Geryon sits in the backseat as he, Ancash, Ancash's mother, and Herakles prepare to drive to Huaraz. Last night, he dreamed about young, "strangely lovely" dinosaur-like creatures running through a forest of thorns and imagines titling a photograph of the scene "Human Valentines." Herakles loudly remarks on how he snagged an air-conditioned rental car. Ancash's mother is silent but climbs into the driver's seat.

Geryon's dream of "strangely lovely" dinosaur-creatures symbolizes the possibility that he might begin to see himself and his own creature-like qualities in a new, "strangely lovely" light after Ancash sees him for who he is and accepts him. The title he offers the photograph of the dream, "Human Valentines," further points to the themes of love, affection, and connection that underly his dream.

The travelers leave Lima and begin to ascend a winding road up a mountain. They're entirely alone on the road, and Herakles is uncharacteristically quiet. Geryon considers how he had no idea what Herakles was thinking, even when they were dating. Meanwhile, Herakles had not bothered to ask what Geryon was thinking. Herakles had once voiced a fantasy about having sex in a car, and Geryon wonders if he's thinking about that now. The car goes over a rocky patch of road, and Ancash's mother swears. They continue onward, and the day slowly fades into night.

The journey into a volcanic region mirrors the earlier trip Geryon took to see the volcano in Hades with Herakles and Herakles's grandmother. Whereas that trip ended in loneliness and heartbreak for Geryon, perhaps this journey will have a more positive outcome. Certainly, Geryon's realization that Herakles has never asked nor seemed to care about Geryon's inner life points to the possibility that Geryon is moving on from Herakles and learning to find validation, acceptance, and affirmation in people like Ancash.

CHAPTER 39. HUARAZ

Geryon, Herakles, Ancash, and Ancash's mother reach Huaraz. The elevation is high enough to give a person an erratic heartbeat. They check into Hotel Turistico. The following day, they drink a local recipe for coffee made with cow's blood. Geryon peers around the dining room and observes that they are the only guests. Ancash explains that tourists are too afraid to come to Peru anymore. Afterward, they leave the hotel to explore the town. Vendors line the streets to sell all kinds of goods, from calculators to socks to tombstones. Ancash and Ancash's mother speak Quechua to each other or Spanish to Herakles. Geryon feels left out but decides that the photographs he's managed to take are worth it. He reflects on how "A volcano is not a mountain like others. Raising a camera to one's face has effects / no one can calculate in advance."

This passage underscores photography's significance to Geryon as a mode of communication and expression he can use when conventional language fails him. Geryon's remark about the volcano not being "a mountain like others" implicitly compares himself (the typical subject of his autobiographical photographs) to the volcano. They are both unlike others: the volcano erupts, has a hidden inner world that can erupt when it's not regularly expelled. Geryon's comparison of himself to the volcano implies that the self-affirmation he desires lies in understanding or meditating on volcanoes.

CHAPTER 40. PHOTOGRAPHS: ORIGIN OF TIME

This chapter describes a photograph Geryon calls "Origin of Time." In the photograph, four people sit at a table. It takes Geryon a long time to set up his camera for the photo because he feels stoned and aloof. A sudden feeling of wanting to be in love washes over him, followed by a feeling of "wrongness." "What was that?" asks someone, "centuries later."

This surreal scene bends the physical constraints of time, place, and distance. Because it describes a photograph Geryon takes, this chapter is an attempt to flesh out exactly the sort of manipulation of time that is possible in photography. The fact that someone asks, "What was that?" centuries after the photographic was taken shows the immortal quality that photography takes on. Lastly, the feeling of "wrongness" Geryon feels provides further evidence that he's realizing his love for Herakles is ultimately harmful to him.

CHAPTER 41. PHOTOGRAPHS: JEATS

This photograph depicts a close-up image of Geryon's pant leg. Geryon points his camera out the car window as he, Ancash, Ancash's mother, and Herakles make their way up a mountain. Geryon cries out each time the car goes over a bump, but nobody pays attention. Herakles and Ancash are talking about Yeats in the front seat. In his accented English, Ancash pronounces Yeats "Jeats," and Herakles keeps correcting him. Ancash can't tell the difference and pronounces yellow "jellow" as well. Herakles grows impatient. "English is a bitch," states Ancash's mother.

This conversation about Yeats parallels Geryon's earlier conversation with Herakles's grandmother about the Yeats poem "Lapis Lazuli." It shows how Herakles is too concerned with superficiality (Ancash not pronouncing the name correctly) which prevents him from having a meaningful conversation about Yeats's poetry. It also shows that Herakles doesn't seem to respect Ancash very much, either. He disregards his partners, not seeing them as people whom he affects, only people who can satisfy or annoy him. He lacks introspection and a willingness to reciprocate.

Suddenly, Ancash slams on the brakes as four armed soldiers appear out of nowhere and surround the car. Quietly, Ancash's mother pushes Geryon's camera between his knees, where it is out of view.

This scene is the photograph described at the start of the chapter. It's interesting how candid photographs are different from the meticulously composed photographs Geryon normally takes. This sudden, accidental, unexpected photograph is an example of time imposing onto photography rather than photography manipulating time.

CHAPTER 42. PHOTOGRAPHS: THE MEEK

This photograph depicts two burros grazing in a field. Geryon considers the burros, which are all there is to see outside his car window. Geryon and Ancash's mother are waiting in the car. The police have taken Ancash and Herakles into a small adobe house somewhere down the road. Ancash's mother mutters angrily under her breath. She seems bolder than usual today, which inspires Geryon to ask, "What is it about burros?" Ancash's mother replies, "Guess they're waiting to inherit the earth," and she laughs. Her laugh stays in Geryon's mind for the remainder of the day.

Geryon fixates on the burros because he relates to them, feeling as unwanted and outcast as these forlorn, grazing animals. Ancash's mother jokingly references the Beatitudes from the Christian Bible when she muses that the burros are "waiting to inherit the earth." This particular line claims that the meek are blessed and will "inherit the earth." Ancash's mother's joke forces Geryon to reconsider his plight. Perhaps his differences aren't a symptom of his wretchedness but evidence that he is deserving of redemption and renewal. This might foreshadow Geryon's eventual affirmation of self and coming to terms with his monstrosity.

CHAPTER 43. PHOTOGRAPHS: I AM A BEAST

This photograph depicts a guinea pig lying on a plate surrounded by cabbage and yams. The animal's freshly cooked flesh sizzles. She stares at Geryon. Herakles, Ancash, Ancash's mother, and the four soldiers who invited them to join them for lunch eat ravenously, but Geryon doesn't have a single bite and can't wait for the meal to end.

It's interesting that Geryon doesn't eat the guinea pig, since constant hunger is one of his defining characteristics. Geryon doesn't eat the guinea pig because, like the burros from the previous chapter, he relates to her, feeling like a beast who is little use to other people beyond what they can use him for. He feels consumed by the outside world.

One of the soldiers tell Herakles that the town of Juco is built into the slope of Icchantikas, an active **volcano**. The locals bake bread in holes that form in the side of the volcano. Herakles doesn't believe him, but Ancash's mother says it's true. When they get up to leave, everyone's reflection is visible in the black eye of the guinea pig.

This poignant moment where everyone is reflected in the guinea pig's black eye illustrates how the self is affirmed in how it is reflected back to us in the eyes of others. That Geryon chooses to photograph this scene shows that he is becoming more confident being among other people and seeing himself in their eyes. His inside and outside worlds are combining in the manner necessary for self-actualization.

CHAPTER 44. PHOTOGRAPHS: THE OLD DAYS

This photograph depicts Herakles's naked back. When they used to make love, Geryon would touch each bone on Herakles's back. After they have sex this time, Geryon starts to cry. He wants to tell Herakles that he used to love him, but now he doesn't know him, but he remains silent. Geryon talks about how people are "apart [...] in time together," but Herakles cuts him off. "Can't you ever just fuck and not think," he asks Geryon. Herakles leaves the room. When he returns, he notes how today is just like old times, with Herakles "laughing and [Geryon] crying."

The way Geryon would touch each bone in Herakles's back mirrors the way Ancash touched Geryon's wings on the roof in Lima. Geryon cries because he realizes that he has been turning to love and recognition from a person who has always been unwilling to give him the emotional nourishment and honesty he needs. Herakles's cruel condemnation of Geryon not being able to separate sex from his thoughts and emotions is what led to their initial breakup, and it remains a point of contention that prevents them from growing close as adults. Herakles's remark about their sexual encounter being like old times reaffirms that Herakles has never offered to provide Geryon with the intimacy he desires—Geryon is simply projecting his desire to be loved onto Herakles, hoping he will love him back.

CHAPTER 45. PHOTOGRAPHS: LIKE AND NOT LIKE

Geryon considers that the photograph he took of Herakles's back doesn't actually depict "old times." He gets out of bed and walks into the hotel garden. Ancash is there, sitting on a bench. Geryon says good morning, but Ancash ignores him. Suddenly, their eyes meet, and Ancash hits Geryon across his face. He hits him again, this time with the other hand, impressing Geryon with his ambidextrousness. Geryon doesn't hit him back.

Geryon's unwillingness to believe that the photo he took of Geryon's back depicts "old times" reflects his unwillingness to let go of Herakles. He wants to believe that Herakles's cruelty now is different than it was when they were younger. He wants at least to have an untarnished memory of their young romance. His acceptance of Ancash's violence toward him, though, implies that he is aware, if only consciously, that he is being foolish in pursuing Herakles: that Herakles has never been capable of giving Herakles the love he desires.

After a pause, Ancash instructs Geryon to sit next to him on the bench. He asks Geryon if Geryon loves Herakles. Geryon pauses before explaining that he loves the old Herakles who only exists in his dreams—the Herakles he used to know. Ancash asks what it's like having sex with Herakles now, and Geryon admits that it's "degrading" before apologizing to Ancash.

Geryon remains unwilling to fully admit that Herakles was never a good partner to him, yet he does admit that sex with Herakles is "degrading," and that he loves the Herakles who has only ever existed in his dreams. This implies that he's gradually accepting that his love for Herakles has been a projection of his desire to be loved rather than actual, reciprocal love between the two of them.

Ancash says nothing and gets up. He begins to walk away but turns around to tell Geryon that the only thing he wants from Geryon is "to see [Geryon] use those **wings**." Geryon and Ancash stare at each other until Herakles emerges, extroverted and bold as ever. Herakles notices the tense mood in the air as Ancash silently returns to the hotel. Herakles tells Geryon it's time to travel to the **volcano**. Geryon looks at his face, which is white and resembles an old man's face. Later on, as he develops the photograph of Herakles's back, Geryon decides that the photograph "is a photograph of the future." He feels that he is "watching likeness come groping out of the bones."

Ancash's wish for Geryon to "use those wings" means he wants to see Geryon recognize and embrace his inner life. That Ancash wants to see Geryon use his wings is an important word choice, pointing to the fact that it's as important for Geryon to physically show himself to others and be seen in their eyes as it is for him to accept himself on his own. Geryon's final realization that the photograph of Herakles's back is "of the future" shows that he is coming to terms with the end of their romance. The photograph manipulates time to show the decline of the affair. It allows him to self-reflect and get over Herakles, which he is not able to do in normal life when he is so wrapped up in passion.

CHAPTER 46. PHOTOGRAPHS: #1748

This photograph depicts a hypothetical photograph that Geryon never took. Geryon stands beside Ancash's bed, where Ancash lies, half asleep. Geryon has a tape recorder in his hands and asks Ancash if the battery will last for a few hours. Ancash says it will.

#1748 alludes to the Emily Dickinson poem that serves the novel's epigraph. The poem uses the image of a "reticent volcano" to explore themes of uncertainty and concealment, both of which Dickinson suggests are inescapable features of the human experience that one must learn to with. In choosing not to photograph himself, Geryon indicates that he is willing to accept uncertainty: to exist organically across distance and time without the compulsion to impose structure and meaning onto it.

It's been years since Geryon last flew, but he wants to give Ancash something by which to remember him. Geryon takes flight, soaring through the air toward Icchantikas's crater. Geryon turns the recorder to capture "a memory of our beauty" for Ancash. As he flies, Geryon gazes down at the earth below. He smiles for his camera, capturing a picture he would title "The Only Secret People Keep."

The "memory of or beauty" Geryon refers to here is the moment of genuine connection he experiences when Ancash saw and validated his wings. Being seen in the eyes of another enables Geryon to affirm his own identity. "The Only Secret People Keep" are the final words of the Dickinson poem (#1748). In the poem, "the only secret people keep" is immortality.

CHAPTER 47. THE FLASHES IN WHICH A MAN POSSESSES HIMSELF

Herakles, Geryon, and Ancash spent the day fighting but now roam the streets of Jucu on this cold, dark night. They turn a corner and reach their destination: "**Volcano** in a wall." They watch men form balls of dough and place them into holes in the slope of the volcano. Geryon falls behind Herakles and Geryon. Ancash gestures toward the fire. Herakles responds, "beautiful," thinking Ancash refers to some passing men. Geryon watches the fire and thinks that they are "neighbors of fire" and that "time is rushing toward them" as they have "immortality on their faces, night on their back."

This is the phenomenon the soldiers mentioned in Chapter XLIII: bakers cooking bread in the slope of the active volcano. Herakles's mistake in thinking Ancash is calling the passing men beautiful further highlights his superficiality. Geryon's final reflection, that he, Ancash, and Herakles are "neighbors of fire," is a meditation on the themes explored in the Dickinson poem. He sees "immortality" and "beauty" in the way he and his "neighbors of fire" reflect that beauty back toward each other. The previous chapter featured Geryon experiencing individual self-affirmation. But in the end, he realizes that in order to truly feel secure, he also needs other people to fully know and accept him for who he is.

INTERVIEW (STESICHOROS)

This chapter relays an interview with Stesichoros. The interviewer asks Stesichoros about the "concealment drama" at play in his work, which explores how people respond to the knowledge that critical knowledge is withheld from them. The interview describes this as an "aesthetic of blindness." Stesichoros responds by discussing blindness but explains that to do so, he must start with what he saw, beginning in 1907. He describes paintings that covered the walls from floor to ceiling, explaining, "I saw what I saw," followed by a series of nonsensical, circuitous assertions about seeing.

The identity of Stesichoros's interviewer is not made clear, but one might interpret them as a stand-in for Carson herself. The interviewer poses questions that are intentionally vague and opaque. In fact, they are even topically about "concealment" and opacity: "aesthetic of blindness" and "concealment drama" are about withholding—the absence of truth or certainty. Stesichoros responds with equally opaque answers. This demonstrates (comically) the novel's concluding idea, which is that self-affirmation, knowledge, and truth are arrived at by seeing oneself and the world through other people's eyes. Stesichoros can only offer the interviewer as revealing an answer as the question the interviewer asked him. The interviewer doesn't get insightful answers from Stesichoros because their questions were vague in the first place.

Stesichoros claims that he used to be responsible for the world's seeing; if he blinked, therefore, the world would go blind. Because of this, he didn't blink from 1907 until the start of the war. Stesichoros suddenly demands that they change the subject. The interviewer suggests talking about description. Stesichoros replies that "the difference between a **volcano** and a guinea pig is not a description." Next, the interviewer tries to discuss Geryon, the hero of Stesichoros's poem. Stesichoros states that Geryon is **red** and suggests "a link between geology and character" but can't begin to know what that link is. When the interviewer suggests they talk about Helen, Stesichoros claims that "there is no Helen." The interview says their time is up. Stesichoros thanks him for not mentioning "the little red dog." The interviewer promises to do so next time. "That's three," replies Stesichoros.

The point of this hypothetical interview is to answer the question Carson posed in the beginning of the novel: what difference did Stesichoros make? The interviewer seems to be trying to guide Stesichoros to admit that his blindness has made the difference, has affected his compositional techniques in some formal way. Yet while Stesichoros claims to talk about seeing, all his answers involve unseeing or blindness. His refusal to answer any questions reflects the idea that language is a tool people use to create meaning and make sense of the world—without clear, descriptive language, things seem nonsensical and random. This passage also reaffirms the fact that no one can ever fully access or understand another person's inner thoughts and experiences.

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