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ORION BELTRAN Y LAS RAICES DEL UNIVERSO / ORION BELTRAN AND THE
ROOTS OF THE UNIVERSE: A NOVEL

A Thesis
by
ANA K. CHAPA

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major Subject: Creative Writing

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
May 2022

ORION BELTRAN Y LAS RAICES DEL UNIVERSO / ORION BELTRAN AND THE
ROOTS OF THE UNIVERSE: A NOVEL

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May 2022

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ABSTRACT

Chapa, Ana K., Orion Beltran y las raices del universe / Orion Beltran and the Roots of the Universe. Master of Fine Arts (MFA), May, 2022, 120 pp., references, 20 titles.

Orion Beltran y las raices del universe / Orion Beltran and the Roots of the Universe: A Novel, tells the story of a first-generation immigrant witch, Orion Beltran, and his reluctant mentor, Ema. Set against a background of a fictionalized Brownsville, Texas, this young adult novel is an exploration of the way a first-generation Mexican child looks for and finds his roots through mysticism and connections to the earth.

DEDICATION

A mi madre – Ana Velia – gracias Mami por ser quién eres, por imaginar mundos mejores, por navegar esta vida con tanta valentía.

A mi padre – Rodolfo, gracias Papi, por compartir tu curiosidad con tus hijas, por siempre impulsarnos a luchar por lo que deseamos, por recordarme siempre el valor del arte.

A mis hermanas – gracias por ser mi hogar en un mundo extraño – se merecen todo lo mejor de esta vida y todas las que nos toquen.

To my husband, Aaron, you are still the support beam and the eastern-facing window, you always will be.

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CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Orion Beltran y las raíces del universo / Orion Beltran and The Roots of The Universe is a bilingual, speculative fiction Young Adult novel set in a fictionalized Brownsville, Texas. The story follows Orion, a fifteen-year-old, first-generation Mexican immigrant with the ability to make plants grow simply by thinking of them. All his life, Orion has felt different and odd. His magic is a secret to everyone but his parents and his little sister, and this secret makes him feel separate from his peers, like an imposter always on the verge of being found out. This changes when he meets Ema, a strange girl with a strange family who is magic just like him.

Ema is a sixteen-year-old third-generation Mexican immigrant living with her Buelita and several aunts and uncles, who all live in the same house under the matriarch's roof. Ema is homeschooled and spends her days helping Buelita with chores, studying, and sending Cifuz, her cat, out on missions to search for her missing uncle Severiano.

The aim with *Orion Beltran y las raíces del universo / Orion Beltran and The Roots of The Universe* was to explore and express the in-betweenness that first- and second-generation Latinx immigrants can experience. There is a specific identity crisis that first- and second-generation Latinx immigrants are faced with as we begin to learn more about our heritage and our roots. Imposter syndrome takes hold as parents encourage their children to assimilate into a

society that is not unanimously welcoming. In youth, we practice our English and our minds work on overdrive to understand our US-born peers – their slang, their mannerisms, their tone, their references. To fit in is to survive, and our parents understand this. They start renting English movies with Spanish subtitles for family movie nights. Mom makes nuggets y macarroni for dinner after school.

As we get older, we begin to understand that this nation which gave our parents an opportunity for a better life, an escape from poverty, loss, and trauma, has a long and dark history of violence against our people – from lynching to mass deportations of second-generation US citizens. Then Donald Trump becomes president and it seems that he is saying what everyone has been thinking all this time – that you and your parents and their parents have overstayed your welcome. By this point, our ties to our birth nation, to Mexico, may be faded and distant. And the question emerges – who do we belong to? Who will teach us what it is to be us?

This is the question that is eating away at Orion. He is a young adult who already feels awkward and out of place as is the trait of adolescence. But on top of this, he is a strange being with mystical abilities that even his parents don't understand – much like first-generation parents don't quite relate to the identity crises of their first- and second-generation children. Instead, his parents instruct him to keep his difference secret – to blend in. This, they believe, will keep him and their family safe.

When he meets Ema, Orion meets a mentor. Ema has had more access to her roots and her heritage than Orion has. She is third-generation and has been raised by a larger family unit consisting of her grandmother, and her aunts and uncles. Ema quickly realizes that part of her calling is to share that knowledge with Orion, and in doing so, takes part in helping him to connect to his own roots.

YA Fiction in the U.S.-Mexico Borderland

While there is still a great disparity in the amount of mainstream Latinx YA fiction that is published, that disparity is even greater when you look at books set in the borderlands of Texas. One of the most successful Latinx YA fiction books published in the last five years is *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* by Erika L. Sanchez. Julia, the protagonist in *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, is a fifteen-year-old girl living in Chicago. Julia is a talented writer trying to process the sudden death of her sister, trying to navigate a tense relationship with her mother, an absent relationship with her father.

Another successful Latinx YA novel published in recent years is *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Universe* by Benjamin Aliré Saenz. *Aristotle and Dante* is a coming-of-age young adult novel set in El Paso. Throughout the novel, Aristotle and Dante, the two protagonists, both grapple with their sexuality as well as with their identities as Mexican teenagers. The book contains several very beautiful scenes where several of the characters go star-gazing in the desert. These are the moments that go untold when the U.S.-Mexico borderlands are written by those outside of them.

Orion Beltran takes place in a fictionalized version of Brownsville. In this book, I wanted to tap into the magical eeriness that this area can evoke. The palm trees whisper, murky resacas swallow pain, stray cats watch and listen.

The Brownsville wilderness

I also wanted to feature at least one of the various nature reserves that Brownsville is home to. In one of the latter scenes of the book, Ema takes Orion to the Resaca de la Palma State

Park for a training session. The sun sets and they stay out after dark. Orion marvels at the beauty of the Brownsville woods:

“He and Ema were alone in the woods. These wild Brownsville woods. These weren’t forests like the ones Hansel and Gretel had gotten lost in... Those woods sounded sparse, all clean lines, Christmas trees pointing up at a snowy sky. These woods were wild. These woods were the earth’s last defense. Here there were brambles and trees that grew wavy and crooked and sideways, branches tangling into each other, trees holding hands for miles, intent on keeping evil out. It made Orion wonder how anyone had ever got it in their heads that they could tame this land...”

In her essay “*El otro Mexico*”, Gloria Anzaldua makes reference to a poem by former Texas senator, William H. Wharton, which reads, “The justice and benevolence of God will forbid that...Texas should again become a howling wilderness trod only by savages, or...benighted by the ignorance and superstition, the anarchy and rapine of Mexican misrule... The wilderness of Texas has been redeemed by Anglo-American blood & enterprise.” With this narrative, Anzaldua says, “we were jerked out by the roots, truncated, disemboweled, dispossessed, and separated from our identity and our history” (Anzaldua, 30). Orion marvels at this “howling wilderness”, seeing it as protective and sacred. It’s in these wild woods of Brownsville that Ema and Orion connect with themselves and with their ancient history. They reject the “ ‘official’ reality of the rational” (Anzaldua 58) and embrace instead their own mysticism.

In “*El otro Mexico*”, Anzaldua references the annexation of Texas by the United States in 1848, when General Zachary Taylor raised the U.S. flag over the Resaca de la Palma Battlefield. Orion and Ema are young, and just starting out in their journey of discovery, so their experience

with the past is still very much at a personal, individual level. At the Resaca de la Palma State Park, Orion's experience in connecting with the earth is abstract and personal – he is barely beginning to understand what he is capable of and does not quite have the language yet to convey it. In this story, he is taking the very first steps to begin a journey of learning that will move out in broader scope, and deeper, more complex understanding.

Themes

Loneliness & Parent Relationships

Orion Beltran y las raices del universo / Orion Beltran and The Roots of The Universe explores the spiritual loneliness which children of Mexican immigrants can experience, existing in a crossroads of zealous, almost religious love for their parents and at the same time a frustrating disconnect from the world in which their parents grew up. This disconnect shows up in Orion's life as this magic that he wields but doesn't quite know its purpose or how to level up beyond growing herbs for his mom's cooking. He feels restless, like there's some invisible force calling him to grow, but he's not sure how. He wishes desperately that he could talk to someone like him, someone older, someone who might be able to guide him. But according to his parents, he is the only one with magic in his family. Even if there was someone like him, all of his relatives are in Mexico.

In *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, Julia is constantly at odds with her mother, who Julia feels holds impossible expectations for her. Her mother's expectations for her feel so far from the expectations she has for herself.

In *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, Aristotle has a closer relationship to his mother than to his father – but he finds them both to be a mystery in their own way. Ari goes through a period of having nightmares and he wakes up from one of them to find his father sitting on a rocking chair, watching over him. “*You were looking for me,*” he said. *I looked at him. “In your dream. You were looking for me.” “I’m always looking for you,” I whispered.* (Saenz, 63) At another point in the book, Ari marvels at Dante saying that he’s ‘crazy’ about his parents (Saenz, 23).

I think these two moments in particular express the love and longing that Orion simultaneously feels for his parents. He has an almost religious reverence for their wishes and instructions – obeying their rule about keeping his gift a secret even with the growing loneliness he feels. At the same time, he knows that there are aspects of their lives that he will never understand and aspects of his that they won’t either.

Toward the end of the book, in Chapter 37, the earth shows Orion some of his own roots. In his vision, Orion sees his parents as young children, standing with their own parents, and the silhouettes of their parents behind them. In an instant he sees all of his connections, “He could feel a hundred people in the clay with him.”

The sharing of knowledge

In *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, there is a scene where Ama asks Julia to heat up tortillas (Sanchez, 32). “How do I know when they’re done?” Julia asks. “You just know.” Ama responds. So much of heritage is transmitted through *convivencia* – through coexisting. This kind of knowledge transcends language. Immigrant children are sometimes

disconnected from extended family due to immigration, financial and other issues – they don't get to convivir with many relatives outside of the nuclear family unit. They may ask their parents for stories of their ancestors, why they do things the way they do – or how to know when a tortilla is done. And the response will be “You just know.”

As Orion's power begins to grow, he longs to connect with his family history. He wonders whether there may be a distant aunt or uncle or great-grandmother that would have been able to teach him and help him understand his unique abilities and identity. When he meets Ema, he witnesses in her what he desires for himself – access to family history and teachings.

In *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, Julia has dreams for her life that she doesn't see reflected in her parents' stories. Julia dreams of going to college in New York, a notion that is bewildering to her parents – why would she leave home? In a telling scene, Julia is at a cousin's birthday party and muses about an distant relative, Freddy, as he arrives at the party with his wife Alicia. “I've always been fascinated by them. Freddy graduated from the University of Illinois and works as an engineer downtown, and Alicia was a theater major at DePaul and works at Steppenwolf.... There's no one in my family like them. No one has ever gone to a real college. I always want to ask them a million questions.” (Sanchez, 80) Julia is looking for guidance and mentorship that her parents cannot provide.

Ema and Mexican Girls' Pain

Ema is a fifteen-year-old witch who has a habit of submerging herself in the local resacas as a way to cope with the building grief and rage inside of her. She evokes images of la Llorona, rising out of the water. The difference is that the ritual baptisms have become a way for her to survive her grief while she learns to understand it. At the park, Ema explains to Orion that she

believes that it was grief and anger that killed her mother, and she wonders whether her mother might have survived if Ema could have taught her to give her pain to the water.

Throughout my life, I have watched the women in my family swallow their pain, their grief, and their anger. Studies have shown that repressing anger can be linked to chronic pain, fatigue, and autoimmune diseases. My maternal grandmother developed cardiovascular issues at a very young age and would suffer episodes after arguments with her husband. In *Orion* Beltran, Buelita has told Ema that the women are cursed by their grief and Ema confesses to Orion that she believes she is breaking that curse.

In *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, Julia has been struggling with anxiety and depression for what seems like her whole life. The issues become aggravated after the death of her sister. Her mental health struggles culminate in a suicide attempt and recovery in a hospital. Julia begins weekly therapy sessions that provide her with the tools to process her grief as well as her relationship with her parents.

While Ema's practice of submersion has served her so far, there is a tension throughout that makes us wonder whether this will prove to be a sustainable practice. Screaming into a resaca hardly seems an appropriate substitute for therapy – but most immigrant families are either underinsured or uninsured. In 2019, a study found that 17.5% of Latinx children in Texas were uninsured (Doolittle) – which makes access to mental health treatment all the more difficult.

Baptisms & Hauntings: Subconscious images of folklore & religious ideologies

Soon after arriving in Brownsville from Matamoros, my parents started taking me to a Southern Baptist church-school on Sundays. They explain now that they felt I needed friends, and since it was a predominantly white church, they hoped I would pick up some English before I started kindergarten the next year at the same church-school. They wouldn't describe it as a tool for assimilation, but that is what it was – and it worked.

In early drafts of this novel, I wanted to explore the way religion played a role in my and my family's assimilation. In the original draft, there was a scene where a youth pastor at the Baptist church that the Beltran family attends mocks Orion and his little sister Irene for being “connected at the hip”, and not being independent enough – he didn't understand the concept of family-first, individuality second. In the end, the scene did not make it into the final draft, but the tension remains present in the imagery that emerged around Ema.

I continued to attend that church sometimes twice a week, every week, for my entire childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, and I am still untangling the problematic lessons learned under institutionalized religion. There is something very contradictory about the way that the predominantly white Christian culture I grew up around treated the mysticism that existed within its walls, and the mysticism that existed without. The church-sanctioned mysticism was praised, while every other form of mysticism was derided and mocked and even warned against as dangerous – “it sanctions only its own sacraments and rites” (Anzaldua 59). As Anzaldua states in “Entering Into the Serpent”, I too was “taught in Anglo school” to mock and scoff at Mexican folklore and “superstitions” (Anzaldua 58). In conflating the imagery of the Christian baptism and of the misunderstood La Llorona, I attempt to make the two – the religious

ideologies I grew up with and the Mexican spirituality and folklore of my family – coexist as tenuously as they have in me.

“The Danger of A Single Story”

I have wanted to be a writer since I learned to scrawl my name out on paper. I would watch movies and daydream alternate endings for them. Once I learned to write, I began writing my own versions of the stories I saw on screen, changing details and characters and adding plot twists for my own entertainment.

I didn’t realize I was essentially writing fanfiction. But this was my own writing school. In my teens, I would read books and become enamored with the feeling they gave me. To prolong that feeling as long as I could, I would write out little vignettes in the style of the book I had just read, borrowing characters and the gist of the plot.

As I got older and acquired more sophisticated writing skills, the stories became more original. I began explaining life to myself through these story concepts. I would begin writing them, full of curiosity and excitement, but then got stuck. I would begin the story in a very real, very visceral place of feeling and questions and then suddenly – like I had gotten to the edge of the playable map in a video game – I was stuck.

So I would abandon that story and start a new one – until the same thing happened with that one. Writing became a place of increasing frustration. This was beyond the dreaded writer’s block, which all writers become familiar with eventually.

I was missing an imperative tool – the ability to see my own world as worthy of novelization.

In her TED talk, “The Dangers of A Single Story”, Chimamanda Adichie says, “Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify.”

The first time it ever occurred to me that my world – the border town of Brownsville – could serve as an interesting and rich backdrop for the kind of concepts and questions I had been exploring through writing my whole life was during a seminar class on Americo Paredes. In this class, one of the required texts was *George Washington Gomez*.

George Washington Gomez is a coming-of-age novel set in a fictionalized version of Brownsville, Texas, named in the novel “Jonestown-on-the-Grande”. *George Washington Gomez* is more literary in tone than the young adult fiction that I grew up reading, but it holds the representation that I missed in the same.

George Washington Gomez follows its eponymous protagonist, Gualinto Gomez, from birth to adulthood, as he grapples with his Texas Mexican identity and the often ill-fitting Anglo-American identity that is both forced onto him and kept just out of reach. His name, Gualinto, a Hispanicized version of ‘Washington’, is a metaphor for awkward-fitting identities that he must then tease out, try on, and some which he will eventually discard. In *Orion Beltran*, the protagonist was named by his mother after the first constellation she learned to identify in the night sky over the family ranch, where she dreamed of a better life for herself and for the children she might some day have. While Orion’s understanding of the complicated tension of his name is limited – “Orion liked his name, or he had, when he was a little kid. It felt special, heroic. Even if the hunter from the stories his mom told him was kind of a dick, he had a sword, he went on adventures — that was cool” – it is still something that doesn’t fit him easily. He

recalls a moment from childhood, which, just as for Gualinto, happens in his early school years – when children of Spanish-speaking households often first become aware of cultural differences. His teacher, Miss Garcia, corrects his pronunciation of his own name – correcting the Spanish ‘r’ sound. Orion comes to the conclusion that everyone, including Miss Garcia, has two names – the Spanish, and the English. This dichotomy serves as a metaphor for the dual existence that Orion will learn to (or struggle to) flow in and out of.

In a jarring scene in *George Washington Gomez*, Gualinto is heckled not only by his classmates, but by his teacher, Miss Cornelia, as well, for his mispronunciation of the word “equals”, which he pronounces as “eckels” (Paredes, 125). Then, when Gualinto signs his name the way his Uncle Feliciano taught him – Gualinto Gomez Garcia – Miss Cornelia makes Gualinto the target for his classmates’ ridicule again, announcing his name to now be “Mrs. Gualinto G. Garcia” (Paredes, 126). The anxiety of there always being a rule that you are not familiar with, and everybody else is, is one that all English language learners are familiar with.

Evolution of the Story

The concept for *Orion Beltran* first came to me around nine years ago, before attending an MFA program was even a notion for me. I wrote around 30,000 words and abandoned the project, like every other project before it. In doing research for this introduction, I read through some pages from those early drafts. The prose is stilted and lifeless – the English is archaic and foreign to me. I realize now that I believed this to be the language of literature and prose. I believed that stories had to feel foreign to the reader in order to be good.

The two protagonists in the original concept were white, European, one of them blond, both of them blue-eyed – the protagonists I’d seen in literature growing up, but no characters that

looked like me or any of the characters in my own life. Initial drafts were also lacking in a sense of place, as so much of my writing has been for a long time. I was uninspired.

It became clear to me that my goal should be first to romanticize the world I live in the way that, as a child, I had romanticized the worlds of the Boxcar Children, Harry Potter, of the Pevensies.

In *Orion Beltran*, there are elements of magic and mysticism throughout. The palm trees whisper to Orion as he makes his way down the street to Buelita's old blue house. Cifuz, Ema's cat, runs errands for her, searching for the missing Severiano, and bringing Ema to Orion's aid when his magic gets out of control. Ema submerges herself in the local bodies of water as a way of managing her grief and rage.

Drawing from multiple streams

In my second semester in the MFA program, I wrote my first poem in Spanish. It was a poem about my mother's upbringing and her father's (my grandfather's) alcoholism. Writing it in Spanish felt natural, because I was simply synthesizing and retelling the stories she had told me, which were all in Spanish, her language. After writing that poem, I wondered if I might ever be able to write fiction in Spanish. It's been a dream of mine – I want my parents to be able to read my stories.

But writing fiction in Spanish felt like another beast altogether. Fiction requires narrators with a vast enough vocabulary to tell the stories they've been tasked to tell. My own personal Spanish lexicon was too limited and awkward for a Spanish narrator, so the idea remained a dream.

In the second draft of *Orion Beltran*, where the story really began to take shape, I found myself reaching for Spanish in the dialogue between the kids (Orion and Ema) and their elders.

They speak English to each other, and with their peers, but they naturally switch to Spanish when talking to Cecilia, to Efrain, and to Buelita. This is the kind of code-switching I've been doing all my life – English at school, English with friends, English with my siblings, Spanish with my parents, with friends' parents. This is the same code-switching we do in the Rio Grande Valley on a daily basis.

In *Orion Beltran*, the Spanish is not translated. The meaning of the Spanish can be gathered from context, and in some cases may require a Google search – an easier task than keeping a thick Webster's dictionary at hand, which is how I read most books as a young reader. It was important to me that this book feel like it was written for readers like me and my sisters – who learned English from context and then continued to code-switch for the rest of our lives.

From the Battle of Resaca de La Palma to SpaceX

Troubled origins: Annexation of Texas and Occupation of Brownsville

In the 1840s, continent-wide expansion was the United States' spiritual mission. This concept, coined "Manifest Destiny", along with other factors, created national support – with some dissenters – for the annexation of Texas by the United States (Tucker xxvi). The annexation in 1845 soon brought Brownsville into the center stage of the Mexican-American War and helped cement foundations of prejudice and racism against Mexicans in Texas and the United States.

In January 1846, just a few weeks after the annexation, President James Polk ordered General Zachary Taylor to move his troops from New Orleans, Louisiana to Brownsville, Texas – a move designed to further pressure Mexico to accept Texas' annexation (xi). Taylor and the

Army of Occupation arrived in Brownsville on March 28 and began construction of what is now known as Fort Brown (xl). On May 8 and 9 of the same year, Taylor's Army of Occupation and General Mariano Arista's Army of the North fought the very first major battle of the Mexican-American War, the Battle of Palo Alto, and the next day the Battle of Resaca de la Palma – both of which resulted in defeat for Arista and his army (25).

1910-1920s violence

In her book, *The Injustice never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas*, Monica Muñoz Martinez recalls stumbling upon a tribute to the Texas Ranger at a Dairy Queen in Sabinal, which included disturbing images of what she later learned was a movie set depiction of eight men awaiting a lynching (Muñoz Martinez 228). While this incident took place four and a half hours away from Brownsville, it is representative of attitudes and violence that spread throughout the southwest, and of which Brownsville was not exempt.

During the Mexican Revolution, tensions along the border escalated. The *Refusing to Forget* project, which seeks to bring awareness to the state-sanctioned violence that targeted Mexicans living on the Texas-Mexico border, describes an event that resulted in “the hanging of four ethnic Mexicans and the shooting of four others”:

...on October 19 [1915], after a dramatic attack derailed a passenger train heading north from Brownsville, Rangers detained ten ethnic Mexicans nearby, quickly hanging four and shooting four others. Cameron County sheriff W.T. Vann blamed Ranger Captain Henry Ransom for the killings. Vann took two suspected men from Ransom and placed them into his custody and likely saved their lives. Both proved to be innocent of any involvement. (Refusing to Forget)

“Searching the Texas landscape for the remains of a loved one was an awful – and awfully familiar – ritual...” (Martinez Muñoz 6). “By 1918, the murder of ethnic Mexicans had become commonplace on the Texas-Mexico border...” where between 1848 and 1928, an estimated “232 ethnic Mexicans were lynched by vigilante groups of three or more people” (6). The historians who tabulate these numbers, however, advise that that we should not assume that the numbers are representative of the *actual* number of Mexicans killed by mobs in the United States (304).

Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s & 1950s

After the end of World War I, and then again after the stock market crash of 1929, mass deportations saw estimates that range from the hundreds to two million ethnic Mexicans and Mexican nationals embark on perilous journeys to various ports of entry, including Brownsville, on their way back to Mexico (Balderrama 149). The incredible disparity in the figures reported troubling and problematic, but not surprising.

After the end of the second World War, another mass deportation effort was initiated by Eisenhower’s administration. Under the guise of humanitarian concerns regarding abuse and exploitation of immigrant laborers, estimates report that “over one million people were deported to Mexico in 1954, and a further 242,000 the following year”, including an unknown number of American citizens (Heer).

From Bush to Trump

In the early 2000s, the George W. Bush administration introduced Operation Streamline, a collection of zero-tolerance immigration enforcement policies implemented throughout various ports of entry across the U.S.-Mexico border, including Brownsville (Lydgate 483). In 2005 and 2006, two more significant laws for the U.S.-Mexico border were “ushered in” - the Real ID Act of 2005 and Secure Fence Act of 2006. “The Real ID Act of 2005 granted the executive branch unprecedented power to waive any law that interferes with border security infrastructure, while the Secure Fence Act of 2006 mandated 700 miles of barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border.” (Simpson & Correa). The border wall has always been a source of controversy in the Lower Rio Grande Valley (and elsewhere). But these two laws set the stage for President Trump’s threats to private property (Esteve) as well as to treaties that protect nature preserves (Martinez).

SpaceX

In 2014, Elon Musk, owner of aerospace company SpaceX, officially announced that he would be moving his spacecraft manufacturing company to South Texas – specifically, Boca Chica Beach in Brownsville (Asher). Before the official announcement, the city launched various marketing efforts, lobbying to be chosen as the site amongst. While the move was pitched to Brownsville residents by city leadership as a priceless opportunity that would bring jobs and economic booms, many residents have grown increasingly uneasy with SpaceX’s presence.

Residents of Boca Chica Village have been pressured to sell their homes to SpaceX, and are frequently advised to leave their homes during test launches – for their own safety. Once couple who refused to sell received a warning from the company that “their property would

frequently fall into a hazard zone ‘in which no civilian would be permitted to remain’.” (Keates and Maremont)

In Brownsville, the most vocal support has come from city government, while advocacy groups maintain efforts to resist what is seen by some as a blatant attempt to colonize the area. In a recent incident, Brownsville Mayor, Trey Mendez, came under scrutiny for posting personal details of a local activist charged with defacing a mural to his public Facebook page. The mural itself – painted by a Los Angeles artist – has been a source of controversy, as it was paid for by money given to the city of Brownsville by the Musk Foundation, for the purpose of attracting employees from Silicon Valley to Brownsville. (Bova)

These concerns voiced by advocacy groups are not unfounded. Musk notoriously tweets out calls to engineers from California to relocate to “Starbase” and work for his company (Keates and Maremont). These calls have been a factor in driving up home prices (Bova) in an area where housing affordability is a myth (Perez).

Personal Histories

As the landscape of Brownsville and the surrounding areas is changing rapidly thanks to politicians hundreds of miles away who seek to use this area to fit the narratives that most benefit them, as well as the arrival of SpaceX and other aerospace ventures eager to stake their claim, there is a sense of urgency for us who have grown up here to tell our stories in our own words.

In February of 2021, a power grid failure in Texas caused the deaths of over 246 people (Diaz, 2022). At the time, my father-in-law was suffering from long COVID and relied on oxygen tanks to breathe. The freeze caused so much devastation in an area already reeling from the global

pandemic, and Texas leadership mostly pointed fingers and twisted the narratives in order to wash their hands of responsibility.

In Chapter 21, Buelita discovers the Ponderosa lemon tree that Orion grew in her yard the day before. It's in this moment that Orion and Ema realize that he is not simply making plants grow, he's bringing them back from the past, recalling them together with the earth's memory. Buelita explains that the tree had rotted and died in a February freeze from years before. The tree had been on the property when Buelita was a child. In this and many other areas of our nation, it is commonplace for tragic events like these to be rewritten and then simply written out of the collective memory. Buelita's moment picking lemons as she reminisced about her childhood exists as a time capsule, a record of the loss that we have experienced due to tragedy and failed leadership in the last two years.

This also brings up the theme of one of the roles of Orion's gift – the role of memory keeper, memory bearer. As the earth shares with him her memories, he can bring them to light and thus preserve and share them with the collective. Although he feels disconnected from his own family, he is beginning to understand that the connections still exist – even through distance and through time. As he learns more about his gift, and learns from Ema the significance of his gift, these connections become clearer and clearer to him.

Conclusion

In this age of misinformation, proper representation in literature and media continues to be a vital means to a more nuanced perception of our world. The Rio Grande Valley continues to make headlines as politicians seek to create and exploit the narratives that best serve them. The

rise of white supremacy as a domestic terrorist threat in the United States continues to have grave effects on our area. In early February of 2022, the National Butterfly Center was forced to close its doors indefinitely due to repeated threats from far-right conspiracists (Dey 2022). As SpaceX continues to exploit state and federally protected lands, Elon Musk's comment that there's "nobody around" is a painful but not surprising representation of how this area of South Texas is so often disregarded. Often, thinkers from far away have taken the liberty to tell our stories for us.

As writers and readers, we must continue to counteract the single story and add our voices to the narrative. Perhaps our best shot is to write small – to write the stories of our parents, of the street we grew up on, of our neighborhood, of our area code. The collective is made up of these small stories, after all – these small bits of memory. Perhaps this is how we stay connected to each other – how we add our patch to the quilt of the collective memory.

As more and more Latinx voices are added to the literary canon, it will be important that the U.S.-Mexico borderlands continue to take their place as well.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX

ORION BELTRAN Y LAS RAICES DEL UNIVERSO / ORION BELTRAN AND THE ROOTS OF THE UNIVERSE: A NOVEL

PART I. ORION

Chapter 1

Orion sticks his fingers deep in the mud. Even though it is mid-September, and half-past seven, the sun halfway through its descent, the mud is still warm. Summer in Brownsville extends well into October sometimes, and it appears that this year would not be the exception. The earth is warm, even after Orion has run the hose over it. There is not enough nighttime to cool it off.

His fingers wriggle in the thick clay, he tugs at root systems that keep the weeds in his mother's garden nice and fed. He tugs without pulling or breaking. It feels wrong to break them. He always leaves the weed-killing to his dad.

"Alright then," he says, taking a deep breath. He closes his eyes. He thinks of his mother's salsa verde. He had heard once that memories are lies – that our brains can't help but misremember things. But behind his closed eyes, he can see the chipped laminate countertop, just above his eye-level. He can see the thick worn apron tied around his mother's waist. He can see her looking down at him, smiling down at him. In slow-motion, she reaches down to him, a ladle in her hand, offering a taste. "Poquito," her voice echoes somewhere far away.

Something is pushing up against his palm, which is still deep in the mud. In his memory, he shifts his focus from the scratchy apron, from the cheap countertops to the salsa – to the taste. But his mind goes back to the apron. He can see his mom’s hands – they look so smooth, so young. Her hands reach for something on the shiny, laminate kitchen counter. Small, green, papery tomatillos.

His eyes went dark again. He was underground. The black earth around his fingers made them look pale in comparison. A small dot of light burst in the middle of all that darkness, growing bigger until Orion could see that it was actually green. The green ball of light grew between his fingers until he could feel it pushing against his palm.

He opened his eyes and took a small sharp breath of recognition – of recognizing where he actually was – in his parents’ backyard, looking for tomatillos – not underground among the lombrices, or standing waist-high to his mother in her kitchen.

A small bit of earth in the patch of mud where his hands had just been began to bubble and hiss. Orion sat back and watched.

A speck of green against the dark mud. The speck grew bigger until it had freed itself from the mud and a new tomatillo plant stood where there had only been mud just moments before.

Orion plucked the dirty, papery tomatillos. One by one, he hosed them off, until their paper husks were green and dew-dropped. He made a little pouch for them with the end of his shirt and carried his bounty inside.

Chapter 2

Don't come over here, don't come over here, don't come over here.

Orion's own voice echoed chant-like in his head, which he now lowered as he tried to sink into his desk and disappear from view. Out of the corner of his eye, he had seen Emilio enter the classroom. No one at school was particularly fond of Orion, but Emilio was the worst one. He was compulsive in his harassment of others and Orion was his favorite person to pick on.

"Beltran!" came Emilio's voice over the pre-morning bell classroom chatter. Orion groaned. Without lifting his head, he glanced around to look for the teacher, but found her to be nowhere in sight.

Orion leaned over the side of his desk on the pretense of pulling a notebook out of his backpack, hoping that Emilio had somehow become considerate overnight and, seeing that he was clearly busy, would save his ritualistic teasing for another time.

But when he put the notebook on his desk, Emilio was standing there beside it.

"Beltran!" He came up to Orion and put him in a headlock, squishing his ears against his head.

"Hey, Emilio," Orion mumbled.

Emilio's friends had now huddled around them too.

"How you doing today, Beltran?" Emilio asked, like he always did.

"Fine, Emilio," was Orion's forced reply. He smiled bitterly over Emilio's grip. "How are you?"

"I'm doing great. Wait — "

Orion rolled his eyes. It was the same routine, every time.

Emilio sniffed the air. “Do you smell that? Something smells really nice.”

Orion tried to squirm out of his hold but Emilio tightened his grip and pressed his face into Orion’s thick, curly hair.

Emilio sniffed again. “Like flowers. So nice.” He pulled Orion forward, offering him to his friends as if he were a candle or something. “Look, guys. Smell. He always smells so nice.”

Orion squirmed some more and wrenched himself free of Emilio. Most of the class had been watching, and Orion could feel it, his cheeks burning. But he rolled his eyes at Emilio and smirked at him.

“It’s because I actually shower every now and then. I don’t want to reek like you.”

Emilio laughed a fake, dry laugh. He shoved his armpit in one of his friend’s faces. “What do you think, do I reek?” The friend jumped back, holding a hand over his nose.

The bell rang and the teacher walked in, rushing. “Okay, class, in your seats, please — quickly, come on.”

Emilio held out his hand in a fist for Orion and waited expectantly.

“Emilio — ” the teacher called. “In your seat, now.”

Emilio didn’t move, but stared at Orion, smirking and waiting.

Orion’s own smirk faltered but he raised his fist and bumped Emilio’s.

Emilio grinned. “Eso.”

“*Emilio* —”

“Coming, coming.”

Emilio followed his friends to the other side of the room where they all sat in a cluster of desks and Orion tried not to sigh too loud.

Orion considered himself to be one of those people who didn't hate too many things, and he certainly tried not to hate people. But he *really* hated school. Really hated it.

He just didn't fit in. He would never fit in.

There was his name, for starters. *Orion*. His mom, Cecilia, had named him Orion after the first constellation she learned to identify in the night sky back when she was a teenager growing up on the family farm in Mexico. All she dreamed of then was leaving her little town and seeing the world and having babies that would have everything she didn't, and whom she'd shield from every wrong thing that had ever happened to her. When she learned that the stars had stories and names, she determined to learn them all, and Orion was her first, and so her firstborn took the hunter's name as well.

Orion liked his name, or he had, when he was a little kid. It felt special, heroic. Even if the hunter from the stories his mom told him was kind of a dick, he had a sword, he went on adventures — that was cool. But the name started losing its luster when Orion started kindergarten.

"Oh-ree-on?" A little girl had echoed after he introduced himself to the circle of kids sitting cross-legged on a colorful rug with anthropomorphic letters of the alphabet drawn on it.

"It's *Oh-rye-in*," the sweet, smiling teacher jumped in, correcting her and also Orion.

"It's Orión," Orion had repeated softly.

The teacher turned her sweet smile on him. "Oh, that's the Spanish way, but *Oh-rye-in* is the English way."

When all the kids had said their names, the teacher introduced herself as Miss Garcia, with a soft 'r' like the one she had given his name. The name echoed in Orion's head all day,

along with his own mother's voice, who had told him as she got him ready for his first day of school that morning, that his teacher's name was *Miss García*, and had rolled the 'r', like she did when she called him Orión.

That day, during family dinner, with his parents sitting across from each other at the table, Orion sitting between them, and his baby sister sitting in her highchair next to their mom, when his dad asked him what he had learned at school that day, Orion announced:

"Some people have two names — like me, and Miss García."

"Oh yeah? What are your other names?"

"I have my real name, Orión, and my other name, Orion," he said, mimicking the soft 'r' as best as he could. "Miss García's other name is Miss Garcia."

His mom laughed. "Los americanos así lo dicen porque no pueden decir la 'r'. Por eso te dicen Orion."

"Oh," said Orion.

But his parents couldn't really soften the 'r', either.

It took him a while to get used to it, but eventually he stopped introducing himself as Orión, and just went with Orion. Only his family called him Orión now. It was just easier. Orion had hoped that this would help him to be more inconspicuous. He'd hoped that, as he'd gotten used to his new name, they would too, and they would get used to him. But that was not the case at all.

There was something else about Orion that set him apart from his classmates, something they didn't know about — would never know about. Still, somehow, everyone around him picked up on it, almost as if, like Emilio, they could smell it on him.

Orion was a witch. That was the name he had landed on to describe what he did, what he was. He himself didn't really understand it. But he sometimes felt that, if his classmates knew this about him, they would understand why his fingernails were sometimes dirty, why he smelled like mud and flowers and tea. Like, maybe, if they knew, he would make a little more sense to them.

If Orion was honest with himself, or with his little sister Irene when she asked, or on those mental health surveys the school counselor gave out the week before finals at the end of every semester, he would admit that he was lonely. He was tired of having his only interactions at school be with his bully and his teachers.

But how was he supposed to make friends when he couldn't be honest about the biggest thing about him?

Sometimes, Orion felt like his family had forgotten just how absolutely bananas their lives were. Did they remember that not every family could ask their first-born son to wave his hands over the backyard and – just like that – have dinner ready? He wasn't so sure.

Orion's magic was the most interesting thing about him. It sucked not being able to talk about it with anyone outside his family. Especially now that it was possibly, definitely, messing with his mind. He was ninety-nine percent sure he had imagined that morning's ordeal.

Okay, ninety-five.

It had sounded so clear – but he'd never ever heard anything like that before. He felt good with ninety-five percent.

With that ninety-five percent good feeling, he cruised on through the rest of the school day, out the front doors at dismissal, and headed for the park down the block.

Chapter 3

Orion grabbed onto the chain-link fence and rattled it a bit.

“Eit!” he called to Irene. “La del libro!”

Irene, who had been sitting on a picnic table with a book on her lap, looked up, squinting toward the fence. Her eyes softened in recognition and she hopped off the table, dragging her backpack behind her.

When she reached him, he pulled her head in for a hug.

Irene clicked her tongue and pushed him away. “You’re all sweaty.”

Orion rolled his eyes. “Pos si, I have to walk all this way for you.”

Irene flashed a grin at him. “Are we getting raspas?”

Orion wiggled his eyebrows at her. “How much do you have?”

Irene reached into her pockets and pulled out loose change in each hand.

“A ver,” said Orion, tugging on her sleeve to get her to stop walking so they could count the money.

“Two twenty-five in this hand,” she announced, raising her left palm an inch above her right.

“And one seventy-five in this one,” said Orion pointing at her right hand. He reached into his own pockets and pulled out three wrinkled dollar bills.

“Raspas,” Irene fake cried, drawing out the ‘s’ at the end.

They reached the snack stand and pulled their cash out. Irene tiptoed and pulled herself up to reach the counter.

“Dos mangonadas, plis, con bastante chile.”

While they waited, Irene sat on a yellow parking block and pulled her book out. A black kitten crawled out from behind the raspa stand and timidly approached Orion.

“Hey, buddy,” Orion cooed at it, crouching down. The kitten snuggled up to his ankles, stretching its little face up, arching its spine in pleasure as Orion ran his fingers gently down its back. “Where’s your mom, huh?”

“Señorita, sus manguanadas.”

Orion said goodbye to the kitchen and took Irene’s book while she grabbed the manguanadas. She turned her back to him and he zipped the book up in her backpack.

As they walked, they focused on eating their manguanadas. It was important to get rid of all evidence of their existence before they got home. The black kitten followed behind them.

Their neighborhood was like a lot of the lower middle class neighborhoods in Brownsville. Orion liked that it was an older neighborhood, with big, old trees. He always felt the difference when they drove past some of the newer subdivisions – there were rarely any trees.

Their neighborhood was also dotted with palm trees – tall, skinny ones that might make you nervous if you’ve never seen a 30-foot palm tree sway back and forth in the wind.

The houses were all modest, most of them thirty to forty years old. All except one – the old, definitely haunted, Victorian-style house at the end of their street.

The house was the source of much speculation, and the protagonist of a lot of ghost stories told by Irene and Orion on nights when neither of them could sleep. It had wood siding that had once been white, rain gutters that were coming off their braces and hung low and heavy. To add to the mystery, no one knew who the real owner of the house was – there were always different people going in and out.

Orion was shoveling the last spoonful of his mangonada into his mouth when he saw something out of the corner of his eye. He blinked his eyes into focus – movement, in one of the windows. A girl standing behind it, looking straight at him.

“Irene, look!” he said, stopping in his tracks.

Irene was a few steps ahead. She looked back at him, then squinted up, following his gaze. When she saw what he was looking at, she clicked her tongue.

“Orion, what are you doing? Come on, stop staring at it. Someone could see you.”

“There was a girl!” he whispered. “She was looking at me.”

“Nope,” said Irene, and kept walking. “Nope. Nope. Nope.”

Orion looked up at the window again but the girl was gone. Beside him, the little black cat had sat down. His little face was tilted up toward the window. Almost as if it he had noticed him watching, the cat turned its face toward Orion, giving him a knowing look.

He had never gotten a knowing look from a cat.

A chill rippled down Orion’s spine, making him feel feverish in the ninety-degree heat. He glanced ahead and, confirming that Irene was way out of earshot, he turned back to the cat.

“You saw that, right?” He whispered.

But all strange knowingness seemed to have left the little cat. He stretched and trotted on, following after Irene.

Eventually, the cat parted from their path. Both Orion and Irene called to him but that only made him run faster, so they gave it up.

Chapter 4

Orion and Irene made it home with most of the evidence of their dessert before dinner gone, except for the tendrils of red that stained their lips.

Cecilia noticed immediately when they walked into the kitchen to kiss her hello.

She clicked her tongue as she offered her cheek to her children for a kiss, her hands busy with the pollo en salsa verde on the stove. Tomatillo husks littered the chipped countertop.

“Que comieron, chiflados? Eh?”

“Una botanita, mami,” Irene cooed.

Orion joined in, nodding. “Para que no se nos bajara el azúcar, ma.”

“Azúcar es lo que les va a dar,” Cecilia shook her head. “A ver – traigan platos para servirles.”

Orion and Irene ate in front of the TV, like they always did. They caught the last five minutes of the news, and then the novela started. That’s when Cecilia joined them. Efrain worked in Matamoros and wouldn’t be home until seven or eight.

“How was school?” Cecilia asked as the opening credits started and the sweeping theme played. She spoke quickly – a queue that they were to give their answers in a prompt manner.

“It was fine,” said Irene. “I have to write a book report on Old Yeller.”

“Cuál es ese?” Cecilia asked, keeping an eye on the credits.

“Es de un perro... está bien triste.”

“Mmm. Pues a echarle ganas, hija, para que su reporte sea el más bonito de todos.”

“Si, mami.”

“Y tu, Orión?”

Orion shrugged and shoveled bit of steaming chicken in salsa around his plate. “Bien,” he said with a sigh. “Igual que siempre.”

He could feel Cecilia watching him.

“Igual como?”

Orion sighed again, shrugged again. “Boring.”

Cecilia’s eyes lingered on him, even though the credits had already ended and last week’s drama had resumed on screen. “Well, you go to school to learn, mijó, not to have fun.”

“I know, I know.” He wanted to tell her that he *was* learning, that the learning wasn’t boring. It was everything else that was boring.

And boring was not the right word.

Lonely. The word was lonely.

But instead he asked her who that one guy was with the glasses, the one who had just barged in to the heroine’s home in the middle of her reconciliation with the love interest.

Cecilia either took the bait or took pity and turned her attention back to the TV.

“Ese es Fabian. Ya sabes, el metiche.”

Chapter 5

When they finished eating and the novela was over, Orion and Irene cleared their plates. Cecilia shooed them to their rooms to start on their homework.

Orion went to his room and turned on the little stereo. He dumped the contents of his backpack out on his bed and pulled out the notebook where he had his list of assignments for the night.

“All the odds,” he mumbled, remembering the teacher’s instructions, and started on his math homework. He finished quickly. Math wasn’t difficult for him. None of his schoolwork was. He didn’t get A’s, but he knew he could, maybe, if he tried a little harder. But he didn’t see the point. Not yet. He thought maybe one day he’d know what he wanted to do with his life and grades would start to matter. But that hadn’t happened so far.

If it was up to him, he would spend all of his time in the backyard, laying on the ground, soaking up all the ache that he felt when he touched the earth. Something called to him from below. It was always calling to him.

His parents didn’t understand. He had tried to explain it to them, but his parents worried that if they spoke to his teachers about it that they would label him hyperactive and want to medicate him. Orion hadn’t even questioned their logic, or the fact that teachers couldn’t medicate their students, because he knew a lot of his classmates were medicated.

He didn’t want medication. He wanted his parents to say, You know what? You’re right. We have always known you were special. You *are* different. You shouldn’t be in school like other kids. You should be out, in the world, learning about yourself.

It was always baffling to Orion how nonchalant his parents were about his magic.

He could grow *whole trees just by thinking of them for fuck’s sake.*

Yes, Cecilia always sighed and squeezed his arm. Efrain's eyes always glittered as he smiled and shook his head in awe.

But that was it.

There was no plan. No strategy for how to raise this strange child of theirs. No strategy other than to keep it a family secret.

Orion didn't blame them. But he did wish for something different.

He wished he could express to them the aching in his chest, in the pit of his stomach, every time he pressed his fingers in the mud.

On more than one occasion, he had muttered, "What's down there?" in their presence, in the backyard.

"Quien puede saber," they'd say, with hollow wonder in their voices.

Yo... he would think. *Yo podría saber.*

Homework finished, he made his way down the hall. He passed by Irene's room. Her door was open. She was lying in bed, her books spread out around her, the same setup as Orion's.

She caught him walking by and looked up sternly.

"Did you finish your homework?"

"Yeah."

"Did you do it *right*?"

"Right enough."

Irene rolled her eyes. "You never try."

Orion rolled his eyes dramatically back at her. "And you try hard enough for the both of us, so it evens out."

"You're dumb. Close the door, please."

Orion flashed a smile at her and obliged.

He passed the living room, where his mom was watching the late-night novela and sitting with a bowl of dry frijoles, cleaning them to cook overnight.

“Eit,” she called without looking up. “A donde vas?”

“Solo al patio,” he called back, his hand on the back door.

“Ya hiciste la tarea?”

“Si, ya.”

“Bueno... pero acuerdate – ”

“Ya se, discrecion.”

“Bueno. Ah – Orion.”

“Mande?”

“Me puedes conseguir cilantro para la comida de mañana?”

“Si, mami.”

He stepped out into the dark backyard. Things were pretty noisy in their neighborhood at all hours, but Orion mostly noticed it at night, probably because it seemed like the night should be quiet, or maybe because his own life was noisiest during the day.

All through the night, sirens could be heard going up and down the street. The train could be heard at 6 and then again at 11. Stray cats and dogs. Orion liked the sounds. They were comforting.

He closed the glass door and then the screen door behind him, gently. He wanted to give no reason for anyone to follow him out here.

The moon was full and round, a swollen yellow orb against a black sky. Orion sighed and scratched absently at the earth by his bare feet. Something like electricity buzzed beneath him.

He sat down, palms behind him, feet digging into the earth. The aching pull on his feet and his hands was instant, but dull. It would remain constant and dull like that, unless Orion responded to it, greeted it, rewarded it with his attention.

He slid back slowly, until his back was flat on the ground.

Orion...

He snapped back up like a set-off mousetrap. He swallowed and looked around. The wooden fence that surrounded the backyard had been built for privacy – to keep curious eyes from Orion and his extracurricular activities. He looked over his shoulder, back toward the door. Maybe Irene was playing a prank on him – or maybe his dad had come home and had thought it would be funny to spook him.

Slowly, the muscles in his neck and shoulders started to unwind a little bit. He took a deep breath and lay back down.

The voice tickled his skull and seeped into his brain.

It was a quiet voice – or maybe it was a dozen quiet voices all whispering together. The voices whispered feverishly, and it felt like his brain was being physically pulled against his skull, toward the center of the earth.

The strangest thing was – it didn't hurt. As the voices whispered faster and faster, the darkness behind his closed eyes became deeper, darker, nearly absolute. He was diving willingly. In the darkness, he could see a promise, just out of reach, like the protruding luminescence of an anglerfish, leading him farther and farther into the depths of the earth.

The promise of understanding, of clarity.

The voices promised with frenzied breaths to tell him their secret. They just had to go a little deeper, get a little closer to the heart of things, to the root of it all –

“EIT!”

Stars burst behind his eyelids and his eyes watered as he blinked them up at the yellow moon.

And just to the left of the moon, a girl with narrow, dark eyes was blinking down at him.

PART II. EMA

Chapter 6

The park was mostly empty that evening. A middle school soccer team was practicing in one of the empty fields, and a viejita was power-walking along the trail. The sun was beginning to set but the night promised to remain balmy.

The resaca that surrounded the eastern border of the park was still and glassy, mirroring the sky as the sun leaked its last onto it. If someone were to look toward the resaca from the playground that stood faded and graffitied in the center of the park, they would see a nearly perfect mirror dotted with ducks and herons and a couple of gallinules. They might also note that the far end of the resaca was crowded with brush, the mirror interrupted, and entirely hidden from view.

And if this individual ventured from the park and rounded the resaca to get a view of the brush from the other side, they would have seen a disturbance in the water and – after closer inspection and a shock – would have realized that the disturbance was in fact a person, a girl.

Underwater, Ema's eyes and mouth were open wide. She watched her voice bubble in the light green water as she screamed. She held the scream for as long as she could, grief and rage a gushing offering to her resaca mother. When the last bubble of oxygen left her, she swallowed three big gulps of salty, silty water. Her lungs refilled with air and the screams resumed.

Finally, peace returned little by little. Ema took one last impossible underwater breath and lifted her head, breaking through the already jagged surface of the water. Her long dark hair clung to her face like a heavy curtain of seagrass. Her feet searched the shifting resaca

floor for a foothold. Struggling to find her balance with the added weight of her soaking clothes, she stood up, the resaca water reaching to her chest.

She pulled herself to the shore, startling a cormorant that had been hiding in the tall grass of the muddy shore.

“Sorry,” she muttered to it, grunting as she heaved herself out of the water and started the trek back home.

Chapter 7

“Ya mejor?” Tia Carla asked when Ema and her soggy dress walked into the dark foyer of Buelita’s old Victorian house.

Ema’s hands were no longer shaking in rage, but she was still angry, so when she looked at Tia Carla to respond, she did not soften her glare.

“Algo,” she answered.

Tia Carla was sitting at the dining table, hemming a pair of work pants for her husband, Tio Igancio. She huffed at Ema’s response and continued working.

“Ya regreso Ema?” Came Buelita’s voice from the kitchen.

“Ya,” Tia Carla called back, and jerked her head at Ema. “Andale, te hablan.”

Ema had already been planning to look for Buelita in the kitchen, but now that Tia Carla had made it seem like it was her idea, she almost didn’t want to. But she was mostly angry at Tia Carla and the others, and she knew that if she made Buelita wait she would be angry too, and she didn’t want that. So she swallowed her pride and crossed the dark dining room to the kitchen.

The windows in the kitchen let in the most light of all the rooms in the house. Ema always felt the need to blink a couple of times to clear the sunbursts in her eyes when she stepped in.

Buelita was standing on her footstool in front of the gas stove, where three different pots were going. It was the only way she could reach and cook. She always had been a short woman, but age had made her shorter. Ema had inherited her small stature and, when she saw Buelita up on the stool, stirring pots, she wondered if she would ever need a stool to cook.

“Ya te calmaste, niña chiflada?”

Ema took a deep breath. She could taste the silt in her mouth every time she breathed and remembered the resaca mother drinking up all of her grief.

“Un poco,” she said.

“Good,” said Buelita. She poured a bit of the broth she was cooking in the smallest pot into a bowl and stepped down from her stool. She offered it to Ema. “Here. Pruebalo.”

Ema brought the bowl to her lips. The steam smelled like the herbs that Buelita used when anyone had any kind of stomach virus. Buelita was waiting, so she drank.

“Es un poquito de comino y gengibre,” Buelita announced, turning back to the stove. “Ya sé lo que fuiste a hacer. Peligro y te llenes de gusanos con tanta agua sucia que te tomas.”

“Cuando me he llenado de gusanos? Nunca.”

“Como quiera,” Buelita turned around and pointed at Ema with the spoon. “Tomele, mija.”

Ema resisted the urge to roll her eyes and downed the bowl, feeling the ginger and cumin heating up her insides.

“Si no se enojara tanto...” Buelita sang quietly.

Taste the salt in your breath, taste the mud.

“I just don’t understand how you can all be so calm about this,” Ema said. Her heart skipped a beat and then it evened. She pictured warm resaca water pouring over it. Her voice remained steady. “Severiano has been missing for months now, and you aren’t even just a little bit worried, Buelita?”

Buelita stepped down from her footstool and wiped her hands on her apron. She pulled Ema toward the small kitchen table and sat down. Ema sat across from her.

“Mira, hija. Tú no te acuerdas, porque estabas chiquita. Pero Severiano es así. A veces se desaparece, y luego regresa. Él es libre. Ese chamaco mío siempre ha sido así.” Buelita reached across the table and squeezed Ema’s hand. “Yo también me enojaba. Pero ya no. Me resigné.”

Ema squeezed Buelita’s hand too. She understood what Buelita was saying, but she knew she was wrong.

Severiano, Cheve. The youngest of her mother’s siblings, the youngest of Buelita’s sons.

Severiano was not just wandering around, like Buelita thought. He wouldn’t have just left her like that. They were best friends, inseparable.

If he had wanted to leave so badly he would have told her. He would have taken her with him.

Buelita patted her hand and stood back up. “Vayase a cambiar, andele. Ya me dejó un charco aquí.”

Chapter 8

Ema left Buelita in the kitchen and climbed up the creaky old stairs to her room, muscle memory making sure she stepped over the broken step just before the landing.

The second story of Buelita's house was home not only to Ema's bedroom, but Tia Isela's and Tia Daniela's bedrooms as well. Ema's room was behind the third and last door, the one farthest from the landing.

She closed the door behind her and wrenched herself out of the soaking dress. She tossed it in a plastic basket in the corner and pulled a dry version of the same dress over her head.

She walked over to the only window in her room. The sky outside was turning lilac with a scattering of clouds outlined in neon. Ema looked down and saw the usual suspects – a couple of stray dogs, a couple of neighborhood kids swerving around potholes on their bikes.

She brought her face closer to the window, noticing a boy and a girl passing by with mangonadas. The Styrofoam cups were dripping red chamoy onto their hands, making their fingers look bloody. Trailing behind the boy was a little black cat.

The boy and the cat turned their faces to the window then and she froze halfway between wanting to whip the curtain closed and wanting to wave. So she just stared back at them.

When the boy looked away, Ema bolted from the window. She listened as the boy shouted something to the girl.

When she finally crept back up to the window, the boy, the girl, and the cat were gone.

Chapter 9

“Ema! Ya llego tu gato y tiene hambre!” Tia Carla called from the dining room.

Ema jumped to her feet and opened the kitchen door to let Cifuz in. The little black cat purred contentedly and rubbed its side against Ema’s ankles as he walked in.

“Tienes hambre?” Ema cooed at the kitten. She grabbed a slice of deli meat from the fridge and crouched down to offer it to Cifuz.

Cifuz skipped over to her and delicately took the snack from Ema’s hands, expertly avoiding her fingers.

“Ya deja ser a ese gato, Emita,” Buelita pleaded, shaking her head as she sprinkled some consome in the biggest pot.

“No le estoy haciendo nada.”

“Ya todos sabemos que lo mandas a husmear, Ema,” Tio Ignacio added from the kitchen doorway. A dull commotion followed behind him. The tios had arrived.

“Sientate, andale,” said Buelita, waving Tio Ignacio toward the table and waving at Ema to clear her empty bowl.

As Tio Ignacio sat down, Tio Nayo, Tio Julian and Tio Martin trailed in behind him. They looked sweaty and flushed. They all worked for a roofing company and always came home looking sunburned and a little harried.

“Quien anda husmeando?” Tio Martin asked as the four Tios took their seat.

“El Cifuz, me imagino,” Tio Nayo piped in, and wiggled his eyebrows at Ema.

She felt her cheeks burn. So they knew. She took Cifuz in her arms and nuzzled him.

Tio Nayo's eyes found hers again. "Deja de buscarlo, hija. Cuando menos lo esperes, él va a regresar. Ya verás. Cifuz no lo va a encontrar."

"Ya le dije," Buelita piped in, shaking her head as she placed steaming bowls of caldo de pollo in front of Tio Nayo.

"No le hace daño a nadie," said Ema, letting Cifuz hop out of her arms. All this talk about him was making him jumpy. She helped Buelita serve the tios.

"No, Cifuz ni a las moscas. Pero si lo dejas andar de callejero le puede pasar algo," said Tio Nayo.

Ema felt her stomach shrink at the thought of anything happening to her little black cat. She had found him when she was five years old. He was a little runty kitten that had wandered under Buelita's house. She'd known he was special from the very first moment she saw him, and it had been Severiano who had explained to her that Cifuz was meant to be her companion and her guide. Severiano explained to her that Cifuz and Ema were meant to grow up together, and that they'd both help each other do just that.

Cifuz looked like a kitten still, but he was eleven years old now – nearly an old man. But Severiano had said that she and Cifuz were meant to grow up together, and she was not done growing up yet.

So she had to believe that Cifuz would be okay.

Because she wasn't so sure the same was true of Severiano, and she was running out of options.

Chapter 10

Ema, despierta. Wake up.

Ema woke up to Cifuz sitting on her chest, his yellow eyes glowing urgently in her moonlit bedroom.

“Que paso?” She croaked. She grabbed the old brass clock on her nightstand and brought it close to her face. It was half-past three. A thought crossed her mind and her heart skipped a beat. “Did you find him?”

Cifuz meowed mournfully. No, he had not. He hopped off her chest and walked nervous circles on the foot of her bed.

Ema understood. She put the clock back on the nightstand, pulled her boots out from under her bed, and quietly followed Cifuz down the stairs and out the door.

Cifuz led her out of Buelita’s house and, when she stopped on the porch steps to put on her boots, he paced to make sure she didn’t take too long.

When she had laced up, Cifuz led her down the street, past sleepy houses anointed in the yellow glow of streetlights. In the distance, Ema could hear faint sirens and, closer, the calming chirping of crickets.

“Where are we going?” She whispered. Cifuz responded by picking up his pace.

They were almost at the end of the block when Cifuz ducked behind a big ébano tree in front of a brick house. Ema looked around before crouching and following after him.

She followed Cifuz along the side of the house and saw that the backyard was surrounded by a tall wooden fence. The neighboring house’s backyard was open, and Cifuz continued his path along it. Whatever he needed her to see was behind the fenced-in yard.

When she caught up to him, Cifuz was sliding his way under the fence. As his little rump disappeared under it, the wide fence panel he had slid under swayed slightly. Curious, Ema pushed at it. It was loose.

She pushed it aside and shimmied her way through. On the other side was a chaotic backyard, crowded with young and old trees, shrubs, and vines. It was beautiful.

It took her a moment to spot Cifuz among all the plants, but she finally spotted him near the center of the backyard, under what looked like a skinny lime tree. She tiptoed over to him, wondering what in the world Cifuz could want with a lime tree. That's when she saw the source of his distress.

A boy, lying face up on the grass, his arms by his side, hands knuckles-deep in the mud.

Cifuz was standing by the boy's head, purring and pacing.

"What is this? What's going on?" Ema whispered to him, but Cifuz's response was to pace faster.

Ema looked back and forth from Cifuz to the boy, hoping Cifuz might offer something other than urgency.

There was some powerful magic happening, that much she could tell. But what kind, she wasn't sure. She had never felt anything like what she was feeling now that she was crouching so near to the boy. The earth beneath her was vibrating.

Cifuz's tail was now stiff and pointed, and he was starting to hiss. Ema didn't know what else to do, so she shouted.

"EIT!"

PART III. LAS RAICES

Chapter 11

Orion's body shot up – like a mousetrap again – and it took him a moment to recognize that the shrill noise he was hearing was his own gasping for breath.

The girl moved aside and barely avoided being headbutted.

“Sorry,” he choked out. Stars burst behind his eyelids and he suddenly felt like he might throw up. “I don’t know...what’s going on.”

The girl leaned away but reached a hand out and tapped his knee.

“Knees, up. Put your head down.”

Orion obeyed because he felt awful and because she sounded like she knew what she was talking about. Slowly, his head began to clear and his breath returned to normal.

He noticed the mud on his hands for the first time and felt his cheeks burn as he wiped them on his pajama pants. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

And then his newly-cleared head filled up with questions competing for his attention. What had just happened? Who was this girl? Why was that little black cat staring at him so intently? Wait – was that the same cat from the raspas?

One of his questions made it out. “Who are you?”

The girl blinked at him for a moment. Then, as if she’d just come back from a far-off place, her eyes widened in recognition. “Ema. My name is Ema.”

Orion wanted to ask her how she’d gotten into his backyard but then he started wondering about how much she had seen and his heart started racing again.

“Well, Ema. It’s nice to meet you. Thank you for snapping me out of... of that nightmare. I must have dozed off or something.”

“It’s three in the morning. In your backyard.”

“Yeah, you see. I couldn’t sleep? So I came out here – I like to come out here on nights when I can’t sleep. But I *was* tired, so I guess I *did* fall asleep – ”

“Your hands were in the mud.”

“Were they? I don’t – ”

“I felt the magic.”

“The...” Orion’s voice caught in his throat. *Shit.*

“It was powerful. And it looked like you were in over your head.”

Orion’s brain was short-circuiting. “You said magic.”

“I did.”

“You know... about... my magic?” Orion suddenly felt light-headed again. “My parents are going to kill me.”

Ema’s nose scrunched. The black cat hopped around Orion to sit next to her and it assumed a similar look of distaste. “Well, it’s not *your* magic. But... yes, I know magic.”

“Wow. That’s crazy. I mean – this is really cool. Really cool –”

A light turned on in the house and Orion, Ema, and the cat stiffened. Orion turned to Ema.

“I have to go in now. Can we talk tomorrow?”

Ema picked the cat up and Orion followed her to the fence. “Yes, come to my house after you get out of school.”

Orion nodded eagerly, glancing back over his shoulder at the light in the house. His dad's shadow was moving slowly behind the curtains in the backlit kitchen window.

He held the loose panel aside while Ema climbed through, the cat still curled up in her arms. "Okay, yeah. Where do you live?"

"The old blue house down the road."

"The blue house...?"

"Yeah, you won't miss it. And, just some advice, don't play with mud again until we talk."

Orion swallowed. "I'll see you tomorrow then."

"See you."

Chapter 12

When Buelita woke up the next morning, she was surprised to find that Ema already had the café de olla on the stove, ready for her tíos to come down for breakfast.

“Y eso?” said Buelita, grinning mischievously. “Te caíste de la cama?”

“Algo así,” said Ema, pouring a cup of café for Buelita.

The truth was, she hadn’t slept at all after coming back home. Her mind had kept her up with questions.

The boy from last night – she hadn’t even gotten his name. It was the same boy Cifuz was trailing when she looked out the window, so he must have felt the boy’s connection to magic even before he came and woke her up. Or had Cifuz picked up on something that might lead them to Cheve?

Something told her that wasn’t the case, that Cifuz had just seen that the boy was in trouble and called her for help, which was making Ema regret having told the boy to come look for her.

Share the knowledge that has made its way to you.

Cheve’s voice echoed softly in her memory. And as much as she wanted to shut it out, Cheve was the only person who she had always listened to.

Even with him who-knew-where, she knew his voice was looking out for her.

He was the one who had taught her the power of her own magic. When her dad died, she took refuge in her mom. When her mom died, she took refuge in Cheve.

Cheve would have been excited to help someone new. Ema wasn’t so eager, but right now, it was all she had.

Chapter 13

After school the next day, Orion told Cecilia that he had to collect bugs for a project and would be walking around the neighborhood if she needed him. He figured he'd be near enough to hear her if she went looking for him.

He left the house with his backpack on and a Ziploc bag in his hands – for the bugs he was supposed to be catching – and set out for the old blue house. His legs felt rubbery under him, like they were suddenly unaccustomed to his weight. Everything felt like a dream – the sky that afternoon was bright blue and the temperature had dropped two degrees, which might not seem like much but in Brownsville was enough to cause a shift in the atmosphere. Every tree he passed seemed to be calling to him, every rustled leaf a whisper. The palm trees – if he looked closely – were bowing toward him, an invitation.

Halfway to his destination he felt his stomach drop as it occurred to him that perhaps all of the events of the last twenty-four hours or so had been, in fact, a dream. The previous night kept coming to him in fragments, and the more he tried to focus and recall what had happened, the more the details seemed to scurry away.

The one thing he remembered clearly was the girl with the dark eyes, the cat in her arms, and her telling him to look for her at the blue house.

He came nearly to the end of the block and there it was in all its dilapidated glory.

Looking at it now, Orion felt as though he was noticing details he had not noticed before. The low wooden fence that surrounded the house was covered in brambles that crept along the walkway, leading visitors up to the porch steps but suggesting caution.

Orion stole a glance up at the windows on the second floor, wondering if it was too late to turn back around and pretend the events from the night before had not really happened. The gauzy white curtains were drawn and still. It wasn't too late to change his mind.

But she had mentioned magic.

She had seemed so unfazed at the sight of him, entranced by who-knew-what, knuckles-deep in the mud. Concerned, yes – but that was different.

She was like him. She had to be.

And it wasn't courage but loneliness that propelled Orion to walk up the creaky, cracking porch steps and knock on the splintered blue door.

Chapter 14

“Están tocando?” Tia Carla asked, looking up from her mending. She was always mending something.

Buelita looked up from the bowl of frijoles she and Ema were cleaning. “Estamos esperando a alguien?”

Ema pushed her chair back. “Es para mí.”

Without looking, she knew Buelita and Tia Carla had exchanged smug looks. She rolled her eyes because she knew they couldn’t see her.

“Uy uy,” Tía Carla muttered.

Ema’s heart started racing as she crossed the dining room to the foyer. Maybe she had made a huge mistake in inviting this boy. Maybe she should just pretend she hadn’t heard him knocking. But he would knock again. She could just ignore him until he gave up.

No one’s going to teach us the important things unless we teach each other, Ema.

Something warm rubbed against her ankles under the dress of her skirt. Cifuz was nuzzling her. He, too, knew what she had to do.

She scooped him up and opened the door.

And there he was, about a head taller than her, with a mop of thick curly hair, and dark eyes that looked both embarrassed and terrified.

He swallowed and smiled. “Uh, hi.”

Ema stepped aside and pulled the door open a little wider and the boy stepped into the foyer.

Buelita and Tia Carla were watching from the dining room.

Ema knew she wouldn't be able to take the boy up to her room without introducing him to them first.

She made her way back to the dining room and, as she suspected he would, the boy trailed closely behind her.

"Mi abuelita Carmen, mi tía Carla," Ema announced. Behind her, the boy ducked his head, smiling nervously.

"Buenas tardes," he said, and added, "Orión."

Orión, Ema noted.

Buelita was watching the boy with interest. She glanced at Ema, as if looking for an answer there, then looked back to the boy.

"Mucho gusto, Orión," she said, giving him one of those skeptic smiles that Ema knew so well. She turned to her granddaughter. "De donde conoces a este muchacho?"

Ema told her the truth. "Cifuz nos presentó."

Buelita's eyes widened slightly and Tia Carla clicked her tongue, shaking her head as she returned to her mending. Behind Ema, the boy made a strange choking sound.

Buelita blinked her displeasure away as best as she could. "Que van a hacer?"

Ema rocked Cifuz in her arms. "Platicar." She knew she'd be in trouble with Buelita later for that vague answer. But it was the best answer she could give at the moment.

Buelita's nostrils flared but she turned her attention back to the frijoles. "Bueno. Nada de cerrar la puerta. Si les da hambre, prepárense algo de la cocina."

"Gracias," said Ema, and started her march up the staircase.

Behind her, she heard a nervous jumble of, "Mucho gusto, gracias, con permiso," and then the boy was stumbling up the steps after her.

Chapter 15

Orion excused himself as fast as he could. The girl – Ema – had already disappeared into another room, and the old blue house was so dark he wasn't sure he would be able to find her if she went too far.

Ema's abuelita must have noticed his panic because she pointed at a dark doorway behind him. He thanked her and almost tripped over his own feet turning around to follow.

Through the dark doorway was another small foyer with a door on the farthest wall and a rickety-looking staircase on the left-hand side. Ema and the cat were already halfway up the stairs.

When she reached the second-floor landing, she called back to him. "Careful with the top step."

If she hadn't warned him, Orion's foot would have gone straight through. "Thanks," he said breathlessly.

The only light on the second-floor landing came from a stubby, half-melted candle sitting on a ceramic plate on a chair against the wall. Orion looked around for light bulbs on the ceiling but there were only empty light sockets.

"Old house. Old wiring. Candles do the trick."

Ema was watching him from the end of the landing, her somber face flickering orange. He smiled sheepishly and she pointed at the door next to her.

"In here."

He followed her inside and found himself in a sparse bedroom with wooden floors and wooden walls. A square of evening light settled halfway on the floor and halfway on the bed, pouring in through the one window in the room.

Something he had already known but hadn't quite made its way up from his subconscious spilled out of his mouth.

"It *was* you! In the window yesterday!"

Ema and the cat looked back at him from their seat on the bed.

Orion laughed and pointed at the cat. "And that cat! He followed me and my sister from the raspa stand yesterday, too!"

Ema kissed the cat on the nose and then let him hop out of her arms. "His name is Cifuz."

Orion waved. "Hi, Cifuz." He blinked. "Wait – did you tell your tia and your abuelita that *this* Cifuz introduced us?"

"Yes, why?"

For a moment, all Orion could do was blink. He looked around the room. He didn't know much about teenage girls, other than what he knew about Irene. But this room did not say teenager to him. The furniture was somber and sparse – a big wooden bed, made with a thick patchwork quilt; next to the bed, a nightstand with a brass clock. By the window, a wooden chair like the one out on the landing. And lastly, in a corner, on the floor, an assortment of drippy candles sitting on assorted ceramic plates.

His eyes landed on the owner of the room again. She had been watching him look around her room. She was pretty somber-looking too, with her dark long hair, and the dark blue dress that made her look like a ghost girl trapped in a Victorian murder story.

"So... your family knows about magic, then?"

"Yes. Yours doesn't?"

Orion kept the conversation going as well as he could with all the buzzing going on in his head. “I mean, they know about my magic – as in they know I have it. They don’t really know about anything else.” He cleared his throat. “I mean, *I* don’t know about anything else.”

Ema’s nose scrunched up again like it had last night, like she’d smelled something rotten. Orion suddenly felt very aware of his hands hanging clumsily by his sides.

“Did you...think you were the only one with magic?”

“No, I mean – I figured I couldn’t be the only one. I’ve just never met anyone else that knew about it.” Orion didn’t really think about he would never know if anyone else knew, because he wasn’t allowed to talk about it.

Ema sat on the bed by the quickly elongating square of sunlight and absently placed her fingers on it as the light faded. “My whole family is magic in some way or another. I guess it feels like just normal life to me.”

A bitter sort of chuckle escaped Orion, and it surprised him. Ema looked at him inquisitively. “Sorry – ” he explained. “It’s just that it doesn’t feel normal at all to me. But my family acts like it is? I don’t think it’s normal in the least. It’s fucking weird and, well, cool, I guess.”

Ema shifted on the bed to face him. “So what exactly is it that you do? Why were you out in your garden like that last night?”

And before his parents’ voices or Irene’s could pipe up in his head, he bounced his eyebrows at the Victorian ghost girl sitting on the bed.

“You wanna see?”

Chapter 16

Ema led the boy down the stairs, through the kitchen, and out the back door into the fenced-in backyard.

Buelita's yard was big – bigger than a lot of the newer houses in the neighborhood. The family legend was that Buelita's dad had won the lottery when Buelita was just a little girl. He had used the money to buy the big blue house and to move his wife and children from Mexico to Brownsville. But in less than five years the money had run out. And Buelita's dad had to work himself to the bone just to keep the house, then his sons and his only daughter had to do the same. Now, only Buelita and the house remained.

Ema turned to look at Orion, who was standing by the door behind her, looking dazed. The sight of the evening sun falling on his face, setting his brown eyes on fire, caught her off guard. She noticed the gilded glint of gold on his skin, which had looked blue under last night's moon.

“Okay, show me,” said Ema, breaking her reverie.

Orion turned to her as if he had forgotten where he was. “Oh. Uh, it needs to be somewhere hidden.”

Ema looked around the yard. The fence surrounding it was not as tall as the one around Orion's yard – still, she doubted they needed to worry. Except for around Halloween, when kids got curious, most of the neighbors stayed clear of Buelita's house.

Still, she sensed Orion was feeling a little paranoid, so she pointed at the crumbling toolshed in the farthest corner of the yard. It was guarded by a large lemon tree. “Behind the shed?”

Orion nodded at her and they crossed the yard in silence. When they rounded the shed, Ema looked up to see that Orion's gilded face\ had turned gray and he was sweating a little bit.

The words *Are you okay?* caught in her throat, and *You don't have to do this* got stuck behind them, and before she knew it, Orion had crouched behind the shed and stuck his fingers in the mud.

Chapter 17

The blue house's backyard was three or four times bigger than his, but it had maybe a third of the amount of plants. Standing by the door, looking out at the yard over Ema's shoulder, Orion wondered what Ema must have thought looking at the chaos of his backyard.

Ema pointed out a crumbling shed that might offer some privacy and he followed her to it. His stomach was in knots. Was he really doing this?

They rounded the shed and came to a pair of huge Ponderosa lemon trees. Ema stopped and turned back to him, waiting. She gave him a funny look, like she wanted to say something.

But Orion felt like it was now or never. He might throw up but he was five seconds away from chickening out.

So he crouched under the lemon tree, stuck his fingers in the dirt, and closed his eyes. He tried to focus on the tree, on the yellow, bumpy fruit, but he could feel Ema's eyes on him, and then he could hear his mother's voice *de esto no se habla con nadie*.

The faint spot of yellow that had been forming in the distant darkness of his mind burst and faded.

He sighed and opened his eyes. Ema's eyes were right where he had imagined them – above him, expectant but restrained.

"I can't focus," he explained before she could ask.

Ema moved across from him and squatted, avoiding the thorns that littered the ground. She searched his eyes and Orion felt something catch in his throat.

"Don't think about me... don't think about anyone else."

Orion swallowed the lump in his throat. He had a vague thought like *easier said than done* but it faded into the background as a comforting, familiar darkness filled his mind.

The faint spot of yellow reappeared in the middle of it all. It grew larger and larger, until Orion could see every dip and bump on the lemon's surface.

Something brushed against the palm of his hand and a small, sharp gasp made him open his eyes.

Under his fingers, a sapling was pushing its way out of the earth, creating little waves of dirt in its wake. Across from him, Ema watched the sapling with wide eyes.

Orion watched her watching the sapling, trying to discern the look on her face. Was it wonder? Was it horror? As the sapling became a young tree, Ema's eyes met his through the gaps in the branches.

"You... this is... amazing."

Wonder. Something inside Orion melted. His bones felt soft and he felt himself smile a dumb, embarrassing kind of smile.

Chapter 18

“The first time I made a plant grow was when I was three years old. I was obsessed with oranges and I was walking around the backyard. I think we had just moved from Matamoros, so my parents were both out there, working on the yard, and they had me there with them to watch me. My dad was putting in grass and my mom was watering the fruit trees. In my mind, I was exploring. We hadn’t had a backyard in Matamoros, so this new house felt enormous. I was going around turning over every rock, looking for caracoles and watching the rollie polies run away.

“Then, out of nowhere, the taste, the smell, of oranges hit me, like someone had opened a firehose of fresh orange juice on my face. And I felt this pull toward the damp earth under the rock I had just lifted. I stuck my fingers inside and a few moments later, an orange tree was climbing up out of the earth and my parents were freaking out, pulling me away from it. I don’t remember everything but my parents say the tree was filled with oranges within minutes.”

Orion sat across from her as he talked, a brand new Ponderosa lemon tree standing between them. His eyes were on the base of the tree. She noticed that his fingers were in constant movement, rubbing gentle, absent-minded circles on the earth.

“I guess it kept happening so they built a fence around the backyard and they drilled it into me that I shouldn’t let anyone know or see what I could do – that it was dangerous for people to find out. They were nervous about sending me to school. But I think deep down they knew I was too scared of getting in trouble to disobey them in any way.”

“You really think no one knows?” Ema asked, genuinely curious.

Orion looked up at her and she saw a brief moment of fear in his eyes. Then he laughed, which Ema found confusing.

“I mean, I hope no one knows.”

“Why?”

Now it was Orion who looked confused. “I mean, I don’t know. I think my parents are right. I think it would be a mess for people to find out.”

“Why?”

“Because – I don’t think people would get it. It would freak them out. People tend to hate what they fear, and they fear what they don’t understand.”

“But it’s who you are. Whether you’re deliberately showing people what you can do or not – you’re magic, and it’s kind of obvious.” Orion blushed and Ema felt heat creep up her own cheeks. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

Orion looked away, sheepish. “There’s this guy at school – Emilio. He started this dumb joke a couple of years ago, where he sniffs me and says I smell like flowers. I think he’s just being an idiot but I always wonder if he can actually smell the earth on me and all the things I grow. And part of me wishes I could tell him what it is he’s actually smelling. Part of me always wants to show him.”

Ema recognized something in the boy’s voice, in the curling of his lip. There was a pain there that was all too familiar to her these days. A phantom taste of resaca kissed her tongue.

Chapter 19

Ema didn't give much away in terms of emotion or facial expression – or at least nothing that Orion felt confident to read – but that didn't stop him from trying.

He had caught the wonder, and it had filled him with relief first and then a shot of exhilarating hope.

Then over her face had come something like impatience, then pity, then pain.

She was staring at the ponderosa tree, which was now heavy with new fruit. She blinked three times, as if blinking away a thought, and shifted her position to look more directly at Orion.

“So last night – what exactly happened?”

Orion felt a chill run down his spine as he remembered the real reason why he was here. He felt so at ease around Ema that for a moment he had forgotten that he had just met her the night before – that the real reason he was here was because she had happened upon him and what she'd seen had probably freaked her out.

“Right. Last night. Well, what I said is true – I do go out on nights when I can't sleep. It's calming, feeling the power coming from the earth. But last night was different. I could *hear* things. Not with my ears... but I could feel this buzzing – ” Orion rolled his shoulders out, remembering the feeling – “like hundreds of tiny voices whispering just under my scalp. And when I lay down, it was like something was calling me, pulling me down into the earth. I couldn't get up – or maybe I didn't want to. I'm not sure. I guess they were one and the same.”

Ema's face was blank. “And this had never happened before?”

Orion shook his head.

Ema eyes rested on him but he could tell that she wasn't actually looking at him. Her mind was somewhere else.

“And who is your teacher? Who’s mentored you?”

Orion felt his stomach shrink. A mentor? Had she not been listening when he said he had *never* talked to anyone about his secret?

“No mentor,” he said quietly. Something bumped his knee and he looked down, startled. He hadn’t noticed Cifuz coming up to them, but here he was, nuzzling his knee. Orion stroked the space between his ears like he had that day at the raspa stand and the cat purred contentedly.

When he looked up, Ema was watching Cifuz with a look of frustration.

“Everything okay...?”

For a moment, Ema’s eyes stayed on Cifuz, who responded with a meow. Then, she stood up decisively.

“You need a teacher.”

“Well, yeah, but – hold on,” Orion stammered, scooping Cifuz up and scrambling to follow after Ema, who was heading back to the house. “Wait – I know – a teacher would be nice, but – do you have someone in mind?”

“Me.”

Chapter 20

Ema walked quickly back into the house, not slowing down even when she could hear Orion struggling to keep up with her without tripping over his own feet.

She had said it. She had made the commitment. The words had been spoken. She couldn't take them back now.

"You – " Orion kept stammering behind her. "You're going to teach me? What are you going to teach me?"

Finally, exasperated – either with herself or with Orion, she wasn't sure – she turned around. Orion stopped in his tracks.

"You are connected to some powerful magic," she bit off, keeping her voice low but cutting so he knew this was serious. "I learned from my uncle. He learned from my mom. She learned from her sisters and Buelita. With something so powerful as this, the right thing to do is learn it well."

Orion seemed appropriately sobered and Ema felt her shoulders relax a bit. He lowered Cifuz onto the floor and straightened slowly.

"Okay," he said. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

She walked him back through the foyer, which was now empty, and out the front door.

"Same time tomorrow," she said.

Orion gave her one of his awkward, sheepish smiles and ducked his head in agreement.

"Tomorrow."

Chapter 21

Walking out of the old blue house, Orion felt very similar to how he had felt walking in – floaty and light, slightly disembodied, like the world was a dream and the uneven sidewalk under his feet was bouncy and strange.

It was very similar yet very, very different.

Orion did not know it yet but in his mind, his life was beginning to take a very specific form – before Ema and the blue house, and after.

The palm trees weren't whispering as loudly now, but out of the corner of his eye he could feel them swaying and leaning slightly toward him, watching with kind interest.

His secret was out. It was just one other person who knew now, but she might as well be the only person in the world. That was how she felt to Orion. It was Ema now, and then everybody else. She had seen what he could do and the world had not come crashing down.

At least not yet.

Cecilia's voice startled him when he walked into the house.

"Como te fue?"

Panic entered his body as he scrambled to remember what story he had told Cecilia when he left.

Bugs. Insects. "Bien!" He shouted, then, reconsidering, added, "Bueno – mas o menos!" Just in case she asked to see his loot.

"A ver – ven," she called from the kitchen.

Reluctantly, he dropped his backpack by the door and went to meet her.

She was washing dishes with the little TV playing the evening entertainment chisme show. She leaned her face toward him for a kiss.

“Encontraste lo que necesitabas?”

Orion started putting the clean dishes away to give himself an excuse not to look Cecilia in the eye. “Si, creo... aunque tal vez tenga que volver a salir mañana después de clases... todavía me faltaron unos cuantos más.”

“Mmm bueno. ¿Y la demás tarea?”

“Ahorita la hago.”

“Váyase ya a hacerla ándele.”

Orion finished putting the clean dishes away and hurried to his room before Cecilia could ask any more questions.

Chapter 22

When Orion knocked on the door the next day, Ema led him quickly up to her room before Buelita or any of the tias could say anything.

She immediately sensed that Orion was nervous – more nervous than yesterday, maybe – or maybe she was paying more attention today. When they got to her room, she sat on the bed like she had the day before. He stood by the window, looking out.

His nervousness was making her nervous too.

She thought of Cheve – of the way he made her feel calm and safe whenever he was going to teach her something new. She was always hungry to learn, but she would feel nervous and Cheve would end up having to remind her that it was her who had asked him to teach her that day's particular lesson.

Ema, he would say. What are you scared of, eh? You're scared of being smarter? Of getting stronger?

Ema swallowed. She studied Orion's hands on the windowsill.

"Are you nervous?"

He turned his big brown eyes on her, startled, his mouth slightly agape in that perpetual confused smile. "Yeah."

"What are you scared of?"

Orion shrugged. "I have no idea what to expect."

Fair, thought Ema.

"Let's see if the earth will speak to you today."

Chapter 23

Orion followed Ema down the stairs and out into the backyard. She must have remembered his request for privacy because she went straight to the spot behind the shed, where the brand new Ponderosa lemon tree now stood, throwing her shade all around.

He knelt down by the tree and Ema followed suit. He expected her to give him instructions but she just watched him.

“Should I just – ” he waved his hands over the earth “ – I just, go?”

Ema shook her head. “Not yet.” She raised her right hand and held it beside her face. Instinctively, Orion mimicked the movement.

This was apparently exactly what he was supposed to do, and Ema lowered her hand onto the earth. The movement was slow and deliberate. As Orion’s own hand mirrored Ema’s, he felt something warm and strong responding from the earth.

“Do you feel something?” Ema asked, though it almost seemed as if she already knew the answer.

Orion nodded. “It’s like the earth recognizes you – us.”

“That’s because you are familiar to her.”

“And you?”

“Yes, me too.”

Orion had a thought. “Can I see... can I see what you do?”

Ema shook her head. “Not today.”

Orion felt a twinge of embarrassment and loneliness pluck at his gut. He shouldn’t have presumed. He was the student, Ema the teacher. She didn’t have to share anything with him that she didn’t want to.

“Sorry,” Ema added curtly, which somehow felt worse.

Orion scrambled to move on. “So – what should I do next?”

Ema was about to answer when a broken voice interrupted them.

“Y eso - ?”

Orion looked over his shoulder to find Buelita standing in the middle of the yard, staring at the Ponderosa lemon with almost pained confusion.

The lines of Buelita’s face seemed more defined in the light – or maybe Orion was just noticing them for the first time, really seeing them today. The nostrils of her wide nose were flared slightly, and her coiffed white hair was frizzing at the crown.

Suddenly, Buelita’s eyes turned to Ema.

“Ema, de donde sacaste este árbol?”

Ema’s eyes darted to Orion for a moment and she opened her mouth but nothing came out.

“Fui yo,” Orion offered, knowing he would probably regret it later. He stood up. It felt disrespectful to be sitting when Buelita was standing. Ema stood up too.

Buelita looked from Ema to Orion and Orion could almost see the understanding coming over her face. The lines on her forehead even looked like they had smoothed out a little bit.

“Eres brujo tu tambien, muchacho?” she asked him.

The words just kept spilling out of him. “Si, senora.”

Buelita gave Ema a look whose meaning he was unfamiliar with. Her eyes lingering on Ema, she asked him, “Como le hiciste?”

Orion felt like he was about to pass or fail a test. He felt so inadequate. “Uhhh... Bueno, no lo entiendo muy bien todavia pero puedo hacer que crezcan plantas, si me concentro y pienso en ellas.”

The lines on Buelita’s face were back. She set her eyes on him and shook her head, somber. She walked slowly up to them and stopped when she was standing right in front of the Ponderosa tree.

“No, mijito,” she said, her voice low and raspy. “Lo que usted hace es traer de vuelta el pasado.”

Chapter 24

As she listened to Buelita tell them about the Ponderosa lemon that had been on the property since her parents bought the house until the mid-February freeze that had caused so much devastation just a few years ago, Ema couldn't believe she hadn't recognized the tree when it pushed out of the ground under Orion's hands.

As Buelita reminisced, Ema's mind drifted to afternoons spent following Cheve around, collecting the giant lemons that had fallen from the tree, and inevitably getting an espina stuck in her hand.

"La helada ese año estuvo fea. No nos la esperábamos – fueron días sin luz. Me acuerdo que tu mama estuvo hirviendo agua a cada rato para que te sentaras cerca de lo calientito. Y acá en el jardín se me murieron tantas plantas."

Ema's mind was brought back to the present at the mention of her mom. Her eyes landed on Orion, who was still standing beside Buelita, hanging onto her every word. She followed his gaze to Buelita's dark face and was surprised to see tears in her eyes.

"Pero este fue el que mas me pudo," she whispered. She reached up with a small, muscled arm and touched a fat, yellow lemon that was hanging just above her head. "Este árbol estuvo aquí toda mi vida. Yo salía de niña a recoger limones con mi papa y con mi madre. Con estos limones preparábamos limonadas para la comida después de la iglesia. En el verano mi madre la congelaba y nos hacía raspados." She took a shuddering breath and turned to Orion. Then, shocking Ema, she reached a hand up and touched it to his cheek. "Ay, muchacho."

Chapter 25

Buelita's hand touched Orion's cheek and hot tears instantly welled up in his eyes.

Buelita's eyes were filled with tears too and she just patted his cheek when she saw his eyes.

"Ustedes sigan en lo suyo," she said. "Ya habrá tiempo para platicar." She smiled a little and Orion was struck by how much like a little kid she looked for a moment. "Voy a recoger unos limones. Van a estar amargos pero no importa."

She moved away from them and began inspecting each lemon, one by one. Orion was enthralled by her slow, methodical movements. He felt like his world had broken open. There are no words in his mind. There is just the feeling of his rib cage pulling apart in one sudden movement. This whole time Growing herbs for his mother's recipes for teas when someone was sick, what he was really doing was bringing the past into the present.

A touch on his shoulders startled him. He swiped at his eyes and turned to Ema. With a nod of her head She motioned for him to follow her. He wanted to stay with Buelita. He wanted to stay and witness the miracle that she was witnessing. Listening to her talk about picking lemons with her parents had felt so magical so sacred. His own history seemed so nebulous, so hazy, so interrupted. To think of someone as old as Buelita, with her snowy white hair and the deep lines on her face, having roots so deep in a place felt mythological to him. He felt like he was three years old again, exploring his his new backyard, pressing his hands to the mud, and letting a firehose of orange juice open on his face.

But there was a second tap on his shoulder, this time slightly more emphatic. And he remembered that he was a student and Ema the teacher and he should probably not keep his teacher waiting.

Chapter 26

They walked to the park in silence. Ema could almost feel the energy buzzing off of Orion. She stole glances at him as they walked. He was staring straight ahead, but looking at nothing. His eyebrows were furrowed.

She didn't have a real reason for leading them this way, other than her own mind was racing and she needed to walk and be close to the water.

She led him past the graffitied playground and around to the side of the resaca that was shrouded in brush.

When they reached the tall grass, Ema had to take Orion's hand and guide him down to the spot that she liked near the edge of the water. He seemed like he was barely paying attention to his surroundings.

When she found the spot, she pulled his hand down until he got the hint and sat down next to her.

"Are you okay?" she asked, finally.

Orion's eyes were bright and shiny. A tear escaped the corner of his eye and he swiped at it quickly.

He nodded. "Yeah, I am." He laughed but his eyebrows knotted again and he shook his head. "I don't know. It's just. A lot. You know?" He laughed again. "This whole time I've been growing plants for my family's dinner. I had no clue. I had no idea those plants were, like... you know?" The laughter faded and he looked earnestly at Ema. "Do you think it's true? They were already there – I just brought them back?"

Ema could feel the pull of the water behind her. She felt so out of her depth. She wished so badly that Cheve were here. She wished she could bring Orion to Cheve. Cheve would know what to do. He would know what to say to Orion, and he would know what the next step should be.

She reached a hand behind her and dipped her finger in the cool water. It was not as powerful as her usual immersions but, still, she was comforted.

“Yes,” she said to Orion. “Buelita remembered it. I think it’s true.”

Chapter 27

“Don’t try to understand it. Not yet. It’s too much and your head will just get in the way.”

Orion pressed his fingers into the resaca-soaked earth, trying to follow Ema’s instructions. He knew she must be right. His mind had felt woozy since they had left Buelita with the lemon tree. He kept running over it in his head, but even if after all the strangeness he had seen in his life, he couldn’t make sense of it.

“Just feel the earth right now,” said Ema. “Focus only on that. Feel it under your fingernails. Smell it until you can taste it, until that’s all your thinking of.”

He closed his eyes and filled his lungs with the musty smell. His fingers dug deeper into the earth.

How old is this place? What’s below the mud?

A wave of fear surged inside of him and he drew his hand back.

Ema was looking at him with concern. “What?”

“This feels wrong,” he croaked. “I’m not the right person for this. I just help my mom with dinner. That’s all.”

Before he could really think about what he was doing, he was scrambling to his feet. Ema spoke steadily to him.

“Orion – it’s okay. I know it’s a lot. But it’s important – ”

Orion shook his head, wiping his hands on his pants and then immediately recoiling at how sacrilegious it felt.

“I’m sorry – thank you, for everything. I need to go. Sorry.”

And with that he turned around and ran.

He didn't stop until he got home. Inside, he shouted a breathless catch-all greeting to the family and went straight to his room.

He locked the door, plopped face down on the bed, and cried.

Chapter 28

Fuck.

Ema watched Orion run along the edge of the resaca, past the playground, and out the gate that surrounded the park.

What do I do now? Do I follow after him? Do I wait? Will he come back?

She could feel that familiar heat rising up inside her, twisting and turning between her ribs. She closed her eyes and breathed slow and deep.

What do I do?

Fuck, why is this on me? Fuck, fuck, fuck.

The sun was setting, the sky going from pink to purple to dim lavender. Under the cover of night, she got to her feet, hot tears running down her face, and walked into the water.

Chapter 29

When Orion and Irene got home from school the next day, Irene went straight to her room to study for a test. Orion found Cecilia in the kitchen and gave her the elote en vaso they had brought her.

Her look of delight quickly turned to disapproval, but Orion knew she wasn't very committed to it.

"Ay, chiflados. Se fueron a las raspas otra vez," she chided, but took the elote from Orion nonetheless.

Orion gave her a kiss on the cheek that he knew would right his wrongs.

"Chiflado," Cecilia repeated. "Oye, tienes mucha tarea? Me ayudas a limpiar los frijoles?"

They took two bags of dry beans and a big bowl to the dining table and sat down.

With the evening entertainment news on the television, and the soft scrape of dry frijoles being slid across the table, Orion's mind was on Ema and Buelita and the Ponderosa tree and on all the things that weren't what they had seemed.

"Mami?"

Cecilia's hands moved quickly, separating the good frijoles from the little pebbles and the little clumps of dirt. "Que paso, mijo?"

Orion tried to make his tone as nonchalant as possible. He wasn't sure why he needed to be nonchalant, but he was feeling on edge and didn't want Cecilia to pick up on that. "Crees que algún día regresemos a México?"

"A Valle Hermoso?"

"Aja."

"Por qué quieres regresar a Valle Hermoso? ¿A poco te acuerdas?"

“Pues no... No es que quiera regresar... Bueno, no sé. Solo pregunto.”

“Pero por qué? ¿Para que?”

“Nada mas,” Orion felt himself getting whiny.” “Solo quiero saber.”

Cecilia took a spoonful of her elote en vaso. “No sé, mijo. Es que ya fue mucho tiempo. Yo no quiero regresar. El pasado es el pasado. A mi me gusta la vida que llevo aquí.”

“Y no extrañas tu vida allá?”

Cecilia scrunched up her nose and shook her head. “Ay, mijo. Pues es que claro que hay bonitos recuerdos. Pero yo tuve una vida muy difícil en el rancho. Hay cosas que se extrañan, claro. Pero mi vida la tengo aquí.”

This was not a satisfying answer.

Chapter 29

It had been a week since Orion had run off at the park, and there had been no sign of him. Buelita had asked her about him when she had come home that night, dress soaked through. She looked disappointed when Ema told her he probably wouldn't be coming back.

“Y eso?” Buelita had asked.

Ema had shrugged and tried to make her way up to her room without having to ask any more questions, but Buelita made her wait for her famous post-resaca tea, just in case.

She spent the days that followed helping with the lonches for her tios, doing her homeschool assignments, and picking up lemons from under the Ponderosa tree.

It struck her how sharply she felt Orion's absence after having spent only two evenings with him, just a few hours. The truth was, he really did feel like a kind of connection to Cheve. She knew she was probably making it up to make herself feel better.

But she had felt better. A tiny bit better. But she had felt it.

Chapter 30

It had been a week since Orion had last seen Ema. He tried to tell himself that he didn't miss her, that he was just missing the excitement of having something new to do.

But even Irene noticed that something was off.

"You've been weirder than usual," she said on their way to school.

"Have I?" Orion was trying to muster up some enthusiasm, but was coming up empty.

"You know, I was thinking... I've found most of my friends because of shared interests," she said casually as they neared the middle school. "Like Emily? We started talking in the third grade because she saw my *Nightmare Before Christmas* notebook. That's her favorite movie."

"Uh-huh."

"And Katia. *We* became friends at the beginning of the year because we were always the only ones answering questions in science class. The teacher was always telling us to let other people answer. It was funny."

"That's funny."

Irene sighed loudly and stopped in front of him. "Orion, seriously, what's wrong with you?"

As was becoming their custom, the words spilled out of him. "What's wrong with me is that I think I was actually kind of making a friend and then I ruined it."

Irene's eyes got bigger. "What? Who?"

Orion sighed. "It's a long story – " He was interrupted by the first bell ringing out from the middle school.

Irene looked back toward the school, bouncing on her heels a little bit. She had five minutes to get to class before she was counted as late. “Dang it. Okay – tell me after school, okay? But in the meantime – stay strong!” She kept shouting over her shoulder as she ran toward the front doors. “Everything is probably okay! Remember – todo tiene solucion!”

“Menos la muerte,” he finished the saying for her as she disappeared into the crowd of middle schoolers.

Chapter 31

It was eight fifteen in the morning when the knock on the door came. Ema was in the kitchen, washing up after breakfast, and didn't really pay much attention. Sometimes one of the tias would have things delivered, or friends of Buelita from the pulga would come trade things with her.

She only became interested when she heard Buelita talking to whoever was at the door, and a quiet voice responding.

She opened the kitchen door an inch and peered through. She could barely see anything through the sliver of space, but she could make out the backlit silhouette of a messy head of curls over Buelita's coiffed white hair.

"Ema!" came Buelita's voice. "Muchacha, te buscan!"

Ema took a deep breath and came out of the kitchen. She noticed Orion shifting his weight as she approached.

"Hi," he said when she was standing beside Buelita.

Buelita shook her head as she made her way back to the kitchen. "Le digo, Ema, que no se deje sonsacar."

Buelita was right. He was supposed to be in school.

"Aren't you supposed to be in school?" she asked.

Orion nodded seriously. His goofy, dissonant grins weren't making an appearance. "Yes, but I wanted to see if we could talk."

Ema had a moment's panic about what words she would even say, but she knew they needed to talk, so she agreed.

Chapter 32

Ema agreed to go on a walk with him. He wasn't sure exactly where they would go but he was feeling antsy and walking seemed like a good idea.

"So what do you want to talk about?" Ema asked as they rounded the corner and stepped onto the main street that Orion and Irene took every morning to get to school.

Orion resisted the urge to give Ema the kind of irritated look he might have given Irene if she asked a question like that. *Remember you're trying to win a friend back here, buddy, remember that.*

"I...I'm sorry I left like that the other day. I shouldn't have just left like that. I was just freaked out.

"I know."

"But you're right. I need to learn. I want to learn. It's just..."

"It's scary. And it's a lot."

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

Chapter 33

“I think I know what we’re supposed to do,” said Ema, as Orion handed her the cherry raspa he had bought for her with his lunch money, and it was mostly true. “And I think we can do it all today.”

The idea had pieced itself together in her mind over the last few days. She had been missing Orion and missing Cheve. When she went to bed at night, Cheve’s words swirled in the noise of her drowsy mind.

Share the knowledge that has made its way to you.

She didn’t have to figure out what to teach Orion. She just had to teach him what he knew and trust that it would be what he needed.

Orion joined her with a chamoyada.

She took a deep breath. “Are you ready to commit to skipping an entire day of school?”

Orion nodded slowly as he shoved a spoonful of raspa in his mouth. “As long as I’m back in time to pick up Irene from school.”

“Okay. Good. Let’s go.”

Chapter 34

Ema seemed different as she pulled on his hand, weaving around downtown. Like she had a new energy.

Orion, for one, was trying not to think about how he had never skipped school before, and about how he had never ventured away from home without his parents' consent, let alone without their knowledge. Granted, they were really only a few blocks away from the school. But for his parents, he might as well have gotten on a bus to Kansas.

"Where are we going?" He finally asked Ema, stumbling a little to keep up.

"We're going to a place where the earth is loud."

And though the words made him nervous, he tried to focus on Ema's fingers intertwined with his, tried to make her newfound momentum and intention his own. He felt compelled to close his eyes and he did, letting Ema's hand guide him along.

The wind almost felt like it was picking up as it rushed through his hair, washed over his face. The hiss and crunch of the leaves speeding by got louder in his ears. The smell of late summer becoming autumn filled his lungs.

"Oh my god, Orion, open your eyes, you're going to get yourself killed."

Orion opened his eyes. They were stopped at an intersection where Ema was looking both ways, waiting to cross the street. When they were safely on the other side of the street, she let go of his hand.

"We need a taxi."

They had arrived at the bus station, where taxis also parked and circled, looking for customers.

Ema stood on the curb and waved a driver over. He gave her a nod and pulled up to them.

“Pa donde, mija?” he asked through his rolled-down window.

“A Resaca de la Palma, por favor.”

She climbed into the backseat and Orion climbed in after her.

“A ver, mija. Por donde queda eso,” the driver said, opening his glove compartment and pulling out a booklet. He opened the booklet up over the steering wheel and Orion realized it was a map.

“1000 New Carmen Avenue,” said Ema.

“Andele, asi mas facil,” the driver said absently, scanning the map. “A ver – aqui esta la pulga... andele ya.”

He folded up his map, stuffed it back into the glove compartment, and started driving.

Orion watched Ema settle into her seat, trying to gauge whether she would want to talk in such a quiet place, with the driver in the car.

His anxiety about being away from home was growing again so he took a chance. He leaned over to Ema. “So what is Resaca de la Palma?” he whispered.

“It’s a sanctuary. My uncle and I used to go there on Sundays after spending the morning selling at the pulga.” Her eyes were on the window as she spoke. “It’s quiet, kind of remote. It’s a good place for – ” her eyes flashed to Orion then settled back on the window. “For being in nature.”

Orion had so many questions, but he realized that there was only so much they could say in the taxi. He let his eyes settle on the window as well.

The ride took around twenty minutes. Ema and Orion split the cab fare, though it wasn't an even split – Orion had spent most of his money at the raspas that morning.

They got down and Ema stuffed ten dollars in a little metal box that hung from the entrance sign.

“This way,” she said, and led them down a brushy trail.

Chapter 35

“I am going to tell you a story.”

The words activated a painful cracking under her sternum.

She had found a spot shrouded in the wild branches of a huisache. The rio was nearby. She had sat down in a shady spot on the trail. She would have preferred to go off the trail but she knew she couldn't instill bad habits in Orion.

Cheve had taught her that.

And that was whose story she was about to share, so it felt all the more important to honor his ways.

Orion lowered himself onto the ground and sat cross-legged in front of her, a model student.

“I've told you that my uncle was the one who taught me.”

“Yes.”

“I didn't tell you that he's disappeared,” she said, and saying out loud made her want to throw herself face down on the ground and scream and cry and beat the ground like a child. But instead she made herself hold Orion's gaze as understanding and a shadow of pain came over his eyes. She paused to give him a moment to interject a question or a word of empathy if he so desired. She had noticed that he was a very active listener.

When he didn't say anything and only held her gaze in expectation, she continued.

“The last time I saw him was three months ago. Everyone in my family says he's done this before, that I shouldn't worry,” She felt her throat tightening and swallowed to loosen the knot. “But after a day of not seeing him, I got a really bad feeling.” She pressed her knuckles into

her eyes to stop the burning. She took a deep breath. “But that’s not really what I want to tell you. Not really. I want to tell you about some of the times I had with him.”

“Okay,” said Orion, nodding solemnly.

Chapter 36

Orion shifted his weight on his seat. He wanted to make sure he gave Ema his full attention while also keeping an eye out for rattlesnakes, which she had instructed him to do.

Ema's tone and demeanor were very different today. He couldn't put his finger on what it was exactly, but it was contagious. He wanted to be sure not to interrupt her or get in her way.

So he kept his eyes on hers and prayed that his peripheral vision would alert him to any danger.

"When I was very young, my dad died. I don't remember him. But I know it broke my mom's heart. She never talked about it. I almost never saw her cry, not really. But she was angry. At the world, at life, for being so unfair to her. I don't blame her. I just wish she had cried or yelled. I know it was her shut-up rage that made her so sick. She got sicker and sicker until she was also gone."

Ema's gaze flickered to her hands.

"That shut-up rage has made so many of the women in my family sick. Buelita called it a curse but... I don't know if that's the right word for it. Maybe it is. Either way, I think I'm breaking it. I first figured out that I was drawn to the water when I was six years old. My mom had already gotten sick. It was bad. Cheve started spending a lot of time together then. He's ten years older than me so he would make me help him with his chores. I had forgotten but we actually used to pick lemons from the Ponderosa for Buelita."

"There was one day that my mom was not doing well and Cheve asked Tio Nayo if he could borrow his car so he could take me to the beach. Tio Nayo said yes so we went. We didn't get to go to the beach a lot so we were really excited, we got snacks and everything. I don't know what happened when we got there, because we really had been having a great time. We fed the

seagulls, we made sandcastles, we buried each other in the sand. I think in the back of my mind I knew something bad was going to happen, and the whole time this anger had just been simmering in the background. Out of nowhere I felt it boil over. It felt like my stomach had split open, and the seams kept ripping down my legs and up my arms. I started screaming and I couldn't stop and Cheve was panicking, trying to calm me down. I don't remember having any coherent thoughts, I just remember the feeling of the tide pulling me toward it. I ran to the shore, like I knew that relief was found there. I could hear Cheve yelling at me and tripping in the sand to try to stop me, but the pain was so intense and the water kept pulling me. As soon as the waves crashed into my legs, I felt the pain begin to dull. It felt like my anger was being pulled out of me and into the water. When I finally calmed down enough to look for Cheve, he was standing in the water too, staring at me with tears on his face."

Ema swiped at her face as she spoke.

"We sat on our towels as he explained to me that he had felt the power of that moment. He said the word witch for the first time, and told me that the word was misunderstood, and all I had to know was that I was powerful, and that what I had just experienced was sacred, and that it was my responsibility to take care of my power and my connection to nature and, specifically, the water. I asked him if he would teach me and he said he would try. When we got back to Buelita's house, my mom was gone.

"My anger got stronger and wilder. I felt like I needed to keep it in, scared to lose control like I had that day at the beach. But Cheve took me to the beach and I let the water take my grief. He taught me other things. But giving my rage to the water became the thing that saved me. Eventually I started going to the resaca at the park on my own. That was when I submerged myself entirely for the first time."

He had been so hanging on to every word of Ema's, that he forgot his commitment to not interrupting. "In the resacas?" he blurted out, his nose scrunched of its own accord.

Ema gave him an irritated look and he gave her an apologetic one. "Yes. They're not as smelly as you'd think. They only smell bad when fish die. I'll show you one day."

"Okay. I believe you."

"Anyway, the point of this story is that... our power can save our lives. I've always wondered if I could have saved my mom's life if I had taught her to give her grief to the water. But Cheve says that it's useless to think about that. I do want to teach Buelita, though, and my tias. They live in so much quiet pain."

She looked at him intently.

"The water calls me to take my grief and my rage, and I make the choice to give it to her. And every time I do, it's like I get to know her better, and our connection is stronger. The earth calls to you for a reason, and it may take a while for you to figure that reason out. But what matters is that you understand that that connection might save your life."

Orion giggled nervously in spite of himself. "No pressure."

Chapter 37

Ema ignored Orion's nervous giggles. She felt exhausted and raw, but there was an urgency in the air that she couldn't shake.

"We're going to practice connection now," she said to him, and his face sobered again. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

She focused on the sound of the rio gently whispering just a few feet away. She homed in on it until it was all she heard. Then, slowly, she could hear Orion too. The rushing of his blood, the pounding of his heart, his quiet breaths.

"Orion," she said.

"Yeah?" came his quiet response.

"Why did you say yes to coming over to Buelita's house that night?"

"The night we met?"

"Yeah."

His voice filled the darkness behind her eyelids. "Well, I don't know..." he started, hesitating. "I guess because I was freaked out by what had happened. And you seemed to have answers. And I've never had answers."

She opened her eyes and saw that he was looking at her with that incongruent goofy grin that she'd seen so many times already in such a short time of knowing him. And then, almost out of nowhere, his eyes welled up, and his grin got goofier.

He swiped at his eyes, his face turning red. "Oh my god, I don't know what that's about, sorry –" he stammered.

"It's okay," said Ema. "If you feel like crying, cry. It doesn't bother me."

Orion looked like he had composed himself for a moment. But the moment passed and he was crying again. Sobs choked his words.

“I came because I was lonely,” he whispered. “I was so lonely.”

Chapter 38

Orion felt alive. Alive under his fingernails. Alive at the roots of his hair.

He and Ema were alone in the woods. These wild Brownsville woods. These weren't forests like the ones Hansel and Gretel had gotten lost in. At least he didn't think they were.

Those woods sounded sparse, all clean lines, Christmas trees pointing up at a snowy sky. These woods were wild. These woods were the earth's last defense. Here there were brambles and trees that grew wavy and crooked and sideways, branches tangling into each other, trees holding hands for miles, intent on keeping evil out.

It made Orion wonder how anyone had ever got it in their heads that they could tame this land. It made him wonder what Brownsville might have looked like before the buildings and the roads.

Ema glanced back at him and she was smiling. Orion wondered if she felt alive at the root of her hair too. His scalp was tingling. He wanted to laugh, but he didn't want to make a sound. He was a guest. A timid guest. One wrong move and he would be an intruder.

The moment felt bursting with energy. With consequence.

They were feeling their way through the darkness. The blue glow of the moon made the world into varying hues of silver darkness, of silver night.

Eventually they stopped in a small clearing. Orion knew he loved Ema then.

If he didn't love her he was tied to her, connected by this time they had spent together, sharing their secrets with each other, their magic. His eyes burned as he watched her, looking up at the moon's silvery glow. Her sharp chin tilted up. The shadows of branches scratching at her eyes, pulling at her hair.

She was humming softly under her breath.

“This is our inheritance, Orion,” she said. “This earth. Sunsets. The nighttime. Sunrises. Our inheritance is knowing the air we breathe, the earth under our feet. People like us – we may not feel like we belong all the time. But we do. And the more you know a place, the more that feels real.”

And under her humming and the singing crickets and the whispering branches, he could hear something else.

“I hear something,” he said.

Ema came to his side and took his hand. She sat down where they stood and he knelt down too.

He closed his eyes and released Ema’s hand but she held on. A flutter of gratitude rippled through him. With his right hand interlaced with Ema’s, he pressed his left into the earth between them.

Orion...

The response was almost immediate.

Orión... hijo de Cecilia y Efrain... tus raíces son mis raíces...

The words shot through him like electricity, making him gasp. His eyes flashed open. Ema watched him with something akin to concern.

“What happened? Are you okay?” She asked, her fingers tightening around his.

He nodded and he felt tears burning his eyes again. He didn’t wipe them away this time, but let them spill over the brim and roll down his face freely.

He closed his eyes again and pressed his left hand into the earth again.

But it was quiet. He laughed through his tears.

“I think I need to go home. I need to try something.”

Chapter 39

Ema led Orion back out of the park, the whole time praying under her breath that they would be able to get a ride back home.

They had to walk quite a bit but eventually they came to a bus stop and were able to get on a bus that would take them back downtown.

Neither of them said anything about it, but she knew that they both knew that they were about to be in huge trouble. She had never been gone from home so late, at least not without someone knowing.

They made it to downtown and walked in silence. When she stole glances at Orion, he looked dazed. She wondered if he was regretting staying out so late. But then he would chuckle a little to himself and shake his head.

As they neared their street, he seemed to become less dazed and more nervous.

“You okay?” She asked him.

He nodded. “Yeah. Just... I don’t know, nervous, I think.”

“I’m going to be in huge trouble too,” Ema said.

“Shit, yeah, that too.”

“Wait, what are you nervous about?”

Orion stopped and looked at her. She stopped too.

“Will you come to my house with me? I want to try something.”

Ema looked ahead. Buelita’s house was in view, just half a block away. She was already out this late, what more damage could a detour do?

“Okay.”

Chapter 40

They made it to Orion's house and Orion led them around the back as quietly as he could. He knew Cecilia and Efrain were going to kill him. He knew they were probably close to filing a missing person report if they hadn't filed one already.

But he also knew that something was calling him back home, something old and powerful and sacred. He had begun to feel it at Resaca de la Palma, and the feeling had just gotten stronger as the night went on. It almost felt like his bones were being pulled forward of their own accord.

He quietly closed the gate behind Ema and paused beside her.

His parents' wild backyard stood before him. The wilderness that he had brought forth over the years, thinking that everything he brought up was coming up by chance, because he was thinking of it. As he looked at it now he felt a new awe. It made his head feel light and his knees feel weak.

He closed his eyes and breathed deep as he'd seen Ema do. He focused on the whispering of the breeze in the trees, on the weight of the dense, warm air on his bare arms.

Orion.

The voice guided him along, pulling on a spot between his ribs, until he was in the middle of the backyard, shrouded in lemons and oranges and moras.

Orion.

The voice called him again. He laid down on his back the way he had the night Ema found him. He closed his eyes. The sound of Ema coming closer and sitting beside him barely registered in his ears.

Chapter 41

Orion laid down and closed his eyes, and Ema quietly knelt beside him.

She felt the same way she had that night she found him – frightened, excited, and hopeful.

Frightened because the magic was clearly powerful. She could already feel it emanating from the spot where Orion lay, his face turned up to the stars, his eyes closed.

Excited because their meeting felt significant, momentous, destined.

And hopeful because Cifuz had brought her to Orion while out looking for Cheve.

And although the idea that Cifuz had brought her to Orion because he could somehow help her find Cheve no longer felt real, being around Orion still felt like connecting with Cheve. It made her feel like she shouldn't give up yet.

She watched Orion closely. At first, nothing happened. She watched his chest rise and fall. His face clear of any signs of distress. She realized he might be trying to quiet himself as they had practiced at the park and the thought made her feel proud and connected to him.

In an inhale, his fingers sank into the earth. It was slow and deliberate, the way she'd seen him stick his fingers into the earth at Buelita's house the day he brought back the lemon tree.

He exhaled slowly and his fingers sank deeper, to the knuckle.

Then, Ema watched transfixed as Orion's hands disappeared entirely into the dark earth.

Chapter 42

Orion felt soft under his skin. Soft inside his bones. The caress of the wind was intense and sharp. His bones felt tender, malleable. He stuck his index finger into the mud and the rest of his hand followed until he was elbow deep in clay. The earth made way for him. It opened up and received his touch. It welcomed her son as if he were a child, a baby, naked and wailing. The earth made way for him. He wept into the prickly grass, into the clay, his face just a breath away from the ground. The earth was pulling him slowly deeper into herself. His elbows were in. Warm earth slid around against his skin. Then it was his biceps. Then the warm, wet clay was reaching his armpits. He felt his toes sinking in. He wiggled them. Tentatively. Gently. Slowly. The earth received one foot, then the other, his ankles, his shins, his knees. He was in the fetal position – truly a newborn, a baby, a creature of the earth, returning to her. His skin felt old, moldy, wrinkled, elastic.

He wailed into the earth. He closed his eyes and he was under. Clay filled his screaming mouth.

Metal, electricity.

Wonder.

Power.

Violence.

Death.

The earth contained it all.

She was feeding him. Nourishing him with millennia of pain. His bones, his skin – it all turned to water and in turn nourished the earth.

He gave her his thoughts and then he had none. He gave her his fears and then he had none. His hopes, his dreams, his questions.

They were all hers now.

He was hers. And everybody's.

His moldy skin melted down. The earthworms ate him, digested him, and said thank you. They held his hands as they nibbled on his fingernails, and whispered promises to fertilize his mother's garden for him, so that even at the end of the world, she would never go hungry, and she would never lack beauty in her garden.

They promised to fertilize Ema's grandmother's garden, too, so that she could keep selling her vegetables at the pulga and maybe Ema could go to college if she wanted.

She would want. Orion knew. If it wasn't college, she would want to study either way.

She was so smart.

The earthworms kissed his knuckles before they ate them, kissed every inch of him before consuming him. They sang him a lullaby. They sounded like his dad. With his eyes open in the earth, he could see pink and green glow-in-the-dark stars suspended above him. His father's voice surrounded him, soft and flat and multiplied by thousands.

His father's thousand voices were singing Nessun Dorma, the only song he ever heard Efrain sing. The voices were choking back tears.

While they sang and cried, Cecilia pointed at the glow-in-the-dark stars, drawing lines of blue fire between them – a new constellation – a goddess who bore her name. She told him the story of the goddess Cecilia, who as a child had overcome so much adversity and had sworn to show her children new worlds different from the ones she had known.

The blue fire grew until it consumed everything in sight.

Under his sternum, a flood of loss, of hope, of fear, of blind faith. In the mud that caked his eyes, he saw his parents together. They looked so young. Like children.

They were holding hands and crying.

“You miss your parents,” Orion cried with them. “They’re so far away from you.”

He saw Mama and his Buelito – his mother’s parents – standing beside her. Behind Efrain stood Mama Tita and Buelito Tito, who Orion had never met. They also looked young. The two couples stood at least a head taller than their children. They circled them and held them so that Orion could only see his grandparents’ backs.

He saw Irene. She was a baby first. But she was aging at impossible speed, her features morphing into those of an adult.

The earthworms had nearly consumed all of him. They were nibbling near his ears. They promised to take care of Irene too.

Then, Cecilia’s constellations of fire were back. They surrounded him in the darkness. Nearly all that was left of him was bone. The blue flames licked at what remained of him.

These were the roots of the universe, what the earth had been trying to communicate to him. These were the roots that connected him to his mother, to his father, to his grandparents. He saw his grandparents’ parents too. And his great-great grandparents were standing behind them too, although he could only see a shadow of them. But he could feel them. He could feel a hundred people in the clay with him.

They had all joined his father’s thousand voices in singing, but the song had changed.

Señora Santana, por que llora mi niño?

Por una manzana, que se le ha perdido.

Iremos a la huerta, cortaremos dos.

Una para mi niño, y otra para dios.

Chapter 43

Ema had really tried to stay quiet. She had waited. And waited.

She had watched, frozen, as Orion disappeared into the earth. First his hands, then his feet, his legs, and then his face went under.

The terror had risen slowly at first until suddenly her heart was pounding and she was screaming.

It felt like forever, watching the mound of disturbed earth in the middle of Orion's backyard, her own screams in her ears, until finally someone came out of the house.

Orion's dad, Efrain, came out first.

He stood in front of her with bloodshot eyes, yelling, "Que paso?"

Orion's mom came out after him. Her eyes were also bloodshot. "Hija, que tienes?" she yelled.

For a moment, all Ema could do was point at the spot in the earth.

Then, the words came. "Su hijo."

And that snapped her out of it. She dropped to her knees and clawed at the earth.

"Su hijo!" she cried. "Se lo trago la tierra!"

Cecilia screamed and she and Efrain helped Ema dig.

Chapter 44

When Orion opened his eyes, they felt dry and gritty, but he could see a blurry Cecilia and Efrain looking down at him.

They both screamed and cried, their voices drained with relief.

His lungs filled like they were taking their very first breath, the sound was like a scream.

Cecilia and Efrain held him. Cecilia was crying, saying his name over and over, and Efrain was holding her, saying, ya, ya, ya paso, while Orion filled his lungs.

He held his hands up to his face and was shocked to see his fingers all there. Returned to him whole.

New.

PART IV. EL UNIVERSO

Chapter 45

After they dug Orion back up and she saw that he was okay, Ema had run back home. As she had expected, Buelita was waiting for her in the dining room.

She had yelled at her about following in Cheve's footsteps. Ema had cried, not because of Buelita's yelling but because she was so relieved that Orion was alive. But her tears softened Buelita and she sent her up to bed with a promise of grounding until she was as old as Buelita.

The next day Ema had tried going to see Orion, but Buelita had caught her and sent her back up to her room.

So Ema sent Cifuz out instead to check on him.

Chapter 46

Cecilia and Efrain weren't talking to Orion.

After they had brought him inside, they had let him sleep all night and the next day. And then they had come into his room, somber and hurt.

"A ver," Efrain had said. "Explicanos que paso."

He told them all about meeting Ema, about how she had saved him from going under that first night. He told them about going over to Buelita's house and realizing that all the plants he had ever brought forth he had actually brought *back* – that they were a piece of the past.

He cried as he told them about how devastatingly lonely he had been feeling. About how he had felt this way for years.

He told them about deciding to skip school to learn from Ema, and about going with her to Resaca de la Palma. He told them about realizing that the earth had a message for him in the backyard. He told them about how he had asked Ema not to intervene.

They tried to be understanding. He could tell they were trying, really trying.

But he could also see that they were scared. And he couldn't blame them.

They gave him a heartbreaking lecture about how he had broken their trust, and it would take a long time to earn it back.

They called the school and said he was sick and was going to be out for a week, because he was. He was exhausted. He felt like he had turned one hundred years old overnight. Cecilia picked up his schoolwork and brought it to him.

He wished he could talk to Ema. He hadn't seen her since he closed his eyes and laid down that night in the backyard.

But he was grounded, indefinitely. And he figured she was too.

He was only allowed into the backyard, and it was all he really had energy for.

His parents had warned him against growing anything for a while, but he didn't think they need to worry.

The earth seemed to have gone quiet. Not completely silent, just quiet.

Two days after the incident, he was sitting in a corner of the yard, stroking the earth, his eyes closed and his back resting against the fence. Listening.

A purring broke the stillness.

Before he even opened his eyes, he knew what he would see.

He smiled. "Hey, Cifuz."

Chapter 47

“Ema! Tiene hambre tu gato!” Tia Carla called from the dining room.

Ema finished drying the dishes from her lunch and grabbed a piece of chicken from the fridge.

She peeked out into the dining room and held the door open for Cifuz to join her in the kitchen.

She knelt down to feed him and stroke his fur. Cifuz took her offering and that’s when she noticed the little folded square of paper tucked into his collar.

Ema looked up to make sure Buelita, who was sweeping nearby, didn’t see, and scooped Cifuz up in her arms.

“Voy a estar en mi cuarto por si me necesitan,” she announced to Buelita and to Tia Carla as she passed her in the dining room.

She rushed up the stairs and into her room, closing the door behind her.

She set Cifuz down on the bed and sat down. He curled up next to her, letting her remove the little paper square.

It had been folded so many times that as soon as she removed it, the thick note sprung open into a rectangle. It was a sheet of grid paper torn out of a notebook. She smoothed it out on the bed and the neat blue ink made her smile.

I really hope this makes it to you. How is Cifuz so smart? I ran inside for pen and paper and when I came back outside, he was waiting for me. He looked a little annoyed, but he waited. And that’s important.

Anyway. How are you? Are you grounded? I'm grounded. I'm sorry I got us in trouble. And I'm sorry I scared you. My parents said you were scared. They were really freaked out. I think I was scared too. Honestly, I don't remember a lot. I just remember the feelings. I can't wait to tell you about it soon. If my parents don't unground me soon I guess I'll have to write you about it.

But I think I know what the earth was trying to tell me. I think she's been trying to tell me one thing my whole life. I wonder if that's what my 'power' was – just the earth trying to drive a message home for me. You know it's been quiet ever since? It doesn't feel completely silent. But it's definitely different. It's not calling to me like it was. I don't know how I feel about that yet.

You know what does suck? My parents aren't talking to me. I don't think they're doing it on purpose. I think they're just caught up with their own worries about me and my life. It's ironic though. I saw them, while I was under. I feel like I know them so deeply now – on such a different level than I did before that night. And now they won't talk to me. I don't think it will be forever. That would really suck.

I'm really glad you sent Cifuz. I've wanted to go see you, but, well, GROUNDED. I don't know for how long. Right now I'm afraid to ask.

I haven't been going to school. I'm too tired still from that night, and I think my parents are okay with me staying home while they figure out what to do with me. I feel bad that they're so stressed out, and I don't blame them. But I don't regret anything. I really, really don't Ema.

I am so glad you found me that first night. I am so glad I met you and Buelita and Cifuz. Thank you for taking me to Resaca de la Palma and for telling me about your mom and about Cheve.

I saw so many people that night I went under. I saw my parents. I saw you. I saw my grandparents and family I never met.

I saw my roots, Ema. I wish I could show you. They were my roots but they were also the roots of everything. They were connected to my parents and to Irene, but to you too. And I don't know what he looks like but there was a guy there and I just have this feeling that it was Cheve.

When I woke up I had this new feeling that I couldn't put into words.

I finally figured it out today. I don't feel alone anymore. That's the feeling.

I belong. To you. To the earth. To everyone.

Write back soon?

- Orión, hijo de la tierra, con raíces por todo el universo.

The End

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ana K. Chapa is a first-generation Mexican immigrant residing in Brownsville, Texas. She graduated from The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley with a Bachelor of Business Administration in December 2017. She earned a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from the same institution in May 2022. Her writing focuses on identity and heritage, within the genres of young adult and speculative fiction. She can be contacted at ak.chapa@gmail.com.