



RAIN

ON A CONTINENT OF MANY SONGS, in a country shaped like the arm of a tall *guitarrista*, the rain drummed down on the town of Temuco.

Neftalí Reyes sat in his bed, propped up by pillows, and stared at the schoolwork in front of him. His teacher called it simple addition, but it was never simple for him. How he wished the numbers would disappear! He squeezed his eyes closed and then opened them.

The twos and threes lifted from the page and waved for the others to join them. The fives and sevens sprang upward, and finally, after much prodding, the fours, ones, and sixes came along. But the nines and zeros would not budge, so the others left them. They held hands in a long procession of tiny figures, flew across the room, and escaped through the window crack. Neftalí closed the book and smiled.

He certainly could not be expected to finish his homework with only the lazy zeros and nines lolling on the page.

He slowly stepped out of bed and to the window, leaning his forehead against the pane and

gazing into the backyard. He knew that he should rest in order to recuperate from his illness. He knew that when he wasn't resting, he should catch up on his studies. But there were so many distractions.

Outside, the winter world was gray and sodden. The earth turned to mud, and a small stream flowed through a hole in the ramshackle fence. At the moment, no one lived next door. Still, Neftalí always imagined a friend on the other side, waiting for him – someone who might enjoy watching flotsam drift downriver, who collected twisted sticks, liked to read, and was *not* good at mathematics, either.

He heard footsteps. Was it Father?

He had been away, working on the railroad for a week, and was due home today. Neftalí's heart pounded and his round brown eyes grew large with panic.

The footsteps came closer.

Clump.

Clump.

Clump.

Clump.

Neftalí reached up and smoothed his thick black hair. Was it out of place? He held up his hands and looked at his thin fingers. Were they clean enough?

The idea of having to confront Father made

his arms tingle and his skin feel as if it were shrinking. He took a deep breath and held it.

The footsteps passed his room and continued down the hall.

Neftalí exhaled.

It must have been Mamadre, his stepmother, in her wooden-heeled shoes. He listened until he was sure that no one was near, then he turned to the window again.

Raindrops strummed across the zinc roof. Water mysteriously trilled above him, worming its way indoors. Weepy puddles dripped from the ceiling, filling the pots that had been poised to catch them.

plip – plip

plop

bloop, bloop, bloop

oip, oip, oip, oip

plip – plip

plip – plip

plop

tin,

tin,

tin,

tin,

tin

plop

plip – plip

bloop, bloop, bloop

oip, oip, oip, oip

tin,

tin,

tin,

tin,

tin

plip – plip

plip – plip

plop

As Neftalí listened to the piano of wet notes, he looked up at the Andes mountains, hovering like a white-robed choir. He looked out at the river Cautín, pattering through the forest. He closed his eyes and wondered what lay beyond, past the places of Labranza, Boroa, and Ranquilco, where the sea plucked at the rugged land.

The window opened. A carpet of rain swept in and carried Neftalí to the distant ocean he had only seen in books. There, he was the captain of a ship, its prow slicing through the blue. Salt water sprayed his cheeks. His clothes fluttered against his body. He gripped the mast, looking back on his country, Chile.

*Neftalí? Who spoons the water
from the cloud to the snowcap to the river
and feeds it to the hungry ocean?*

