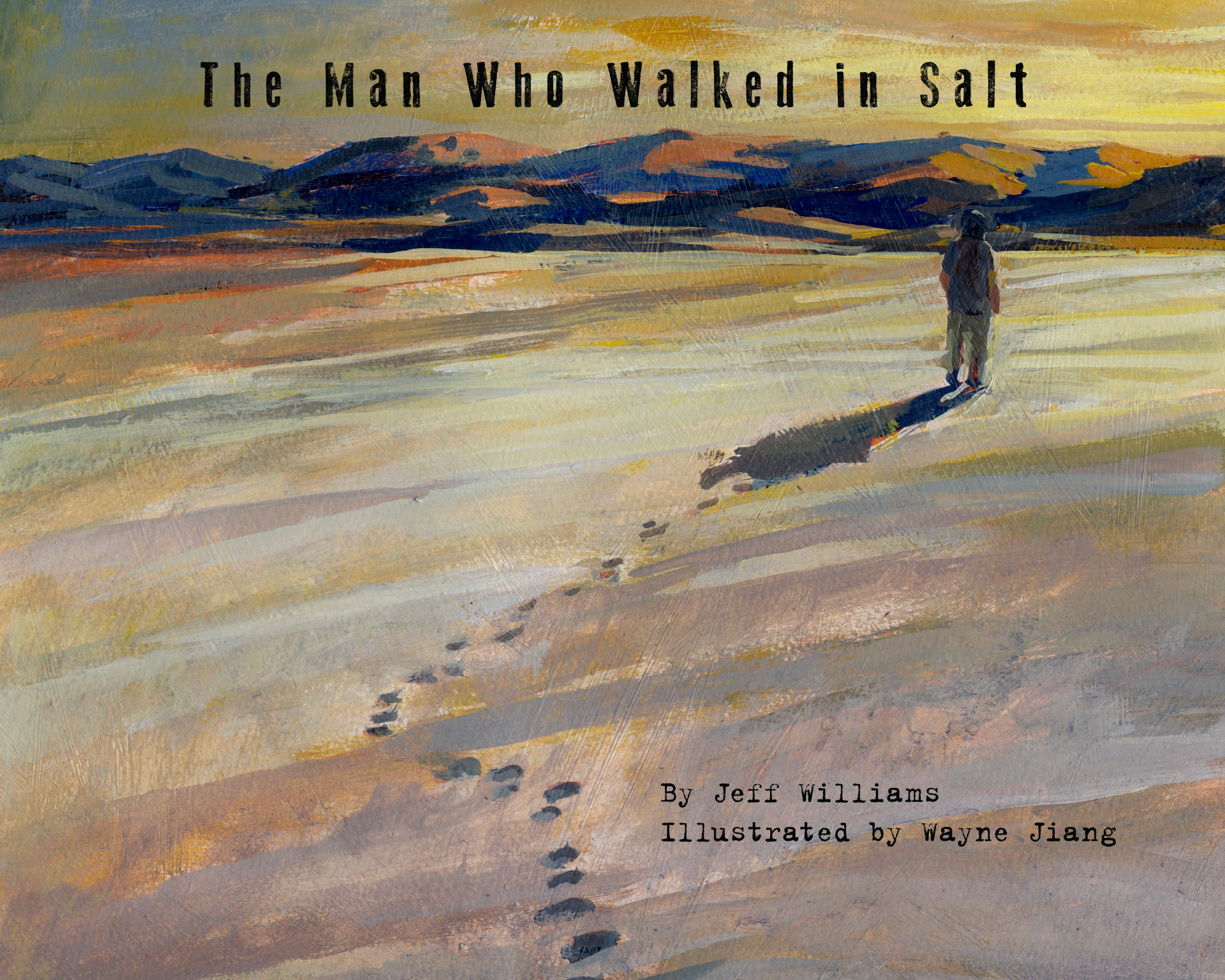


The Man Who Walked in Salt

By Jeff Williams

Illustrated by Wayne Jiang



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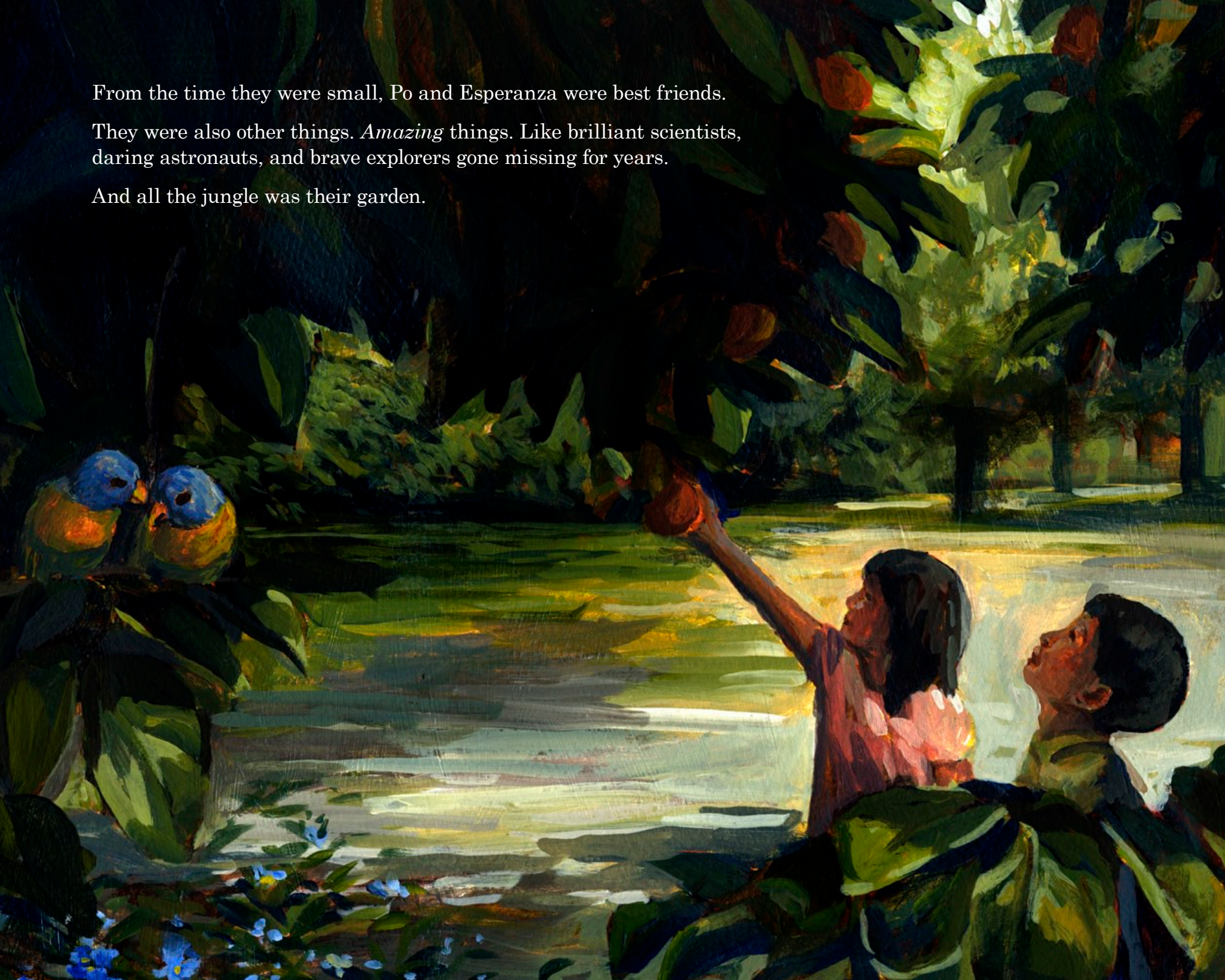
First Edition

The Man Who Walked in Salt

To Nancy, with love. And to Larry, who is missed with every step. — J.W.

To my loving wife Patricia. — W.J.

From the time they were small, Po and Esperanza were best friends.
They were also other things. *Amazing* things. Like brilliant scientists,
daring astronauts, and brave explorers gone missing for years.
And all the jungle was their garden.






One afternoon, they watched leaf-cutter ants, hard at work.

Esperanza's eyes glistened. "They're so small," she said. "And those loads are so heavy."

"What keeps them going?" asked Po.

"Hope," she whispered. "It's what keeps *everything* going."

A romantic painting of a young man and woman, Po and Esperanza, embracing under a large, bright full moon. The scene is set at night, with the moon casting a soft glow over the couple. The background is a deep blue sky with a few stars. The couple is in the foreground, looking at each other. The man is on the right, and the woman is on the left. They are both wearing light-colored clothing. The overall mood is intimate and tender.

One night, Po and Esperanza embraced under the stars.

“What do you want to be, Po?”

“Your husband.”

“Of course you do, silly!” she laughed. “I mean, what else?”

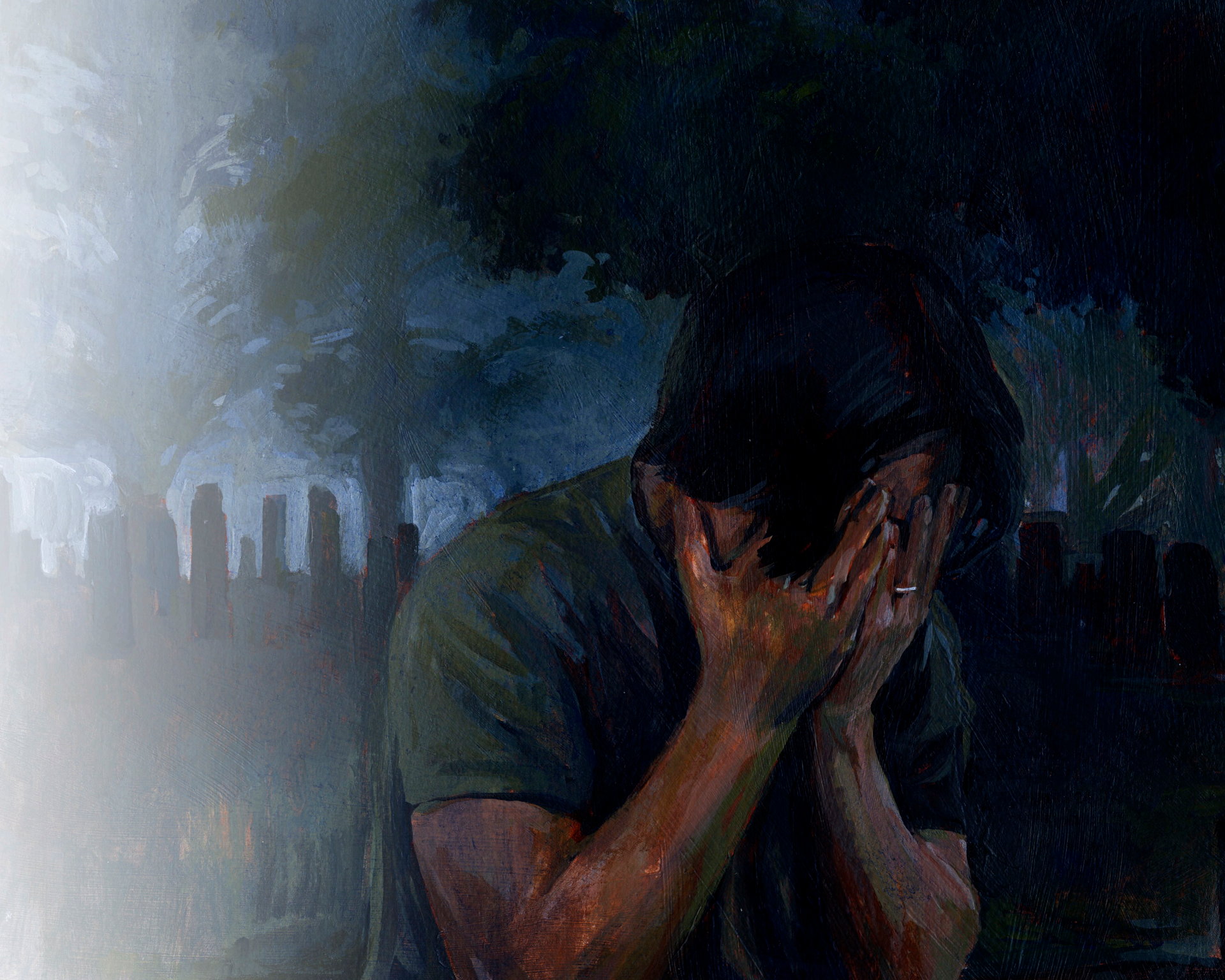
He laughed, too. “What else is there?”



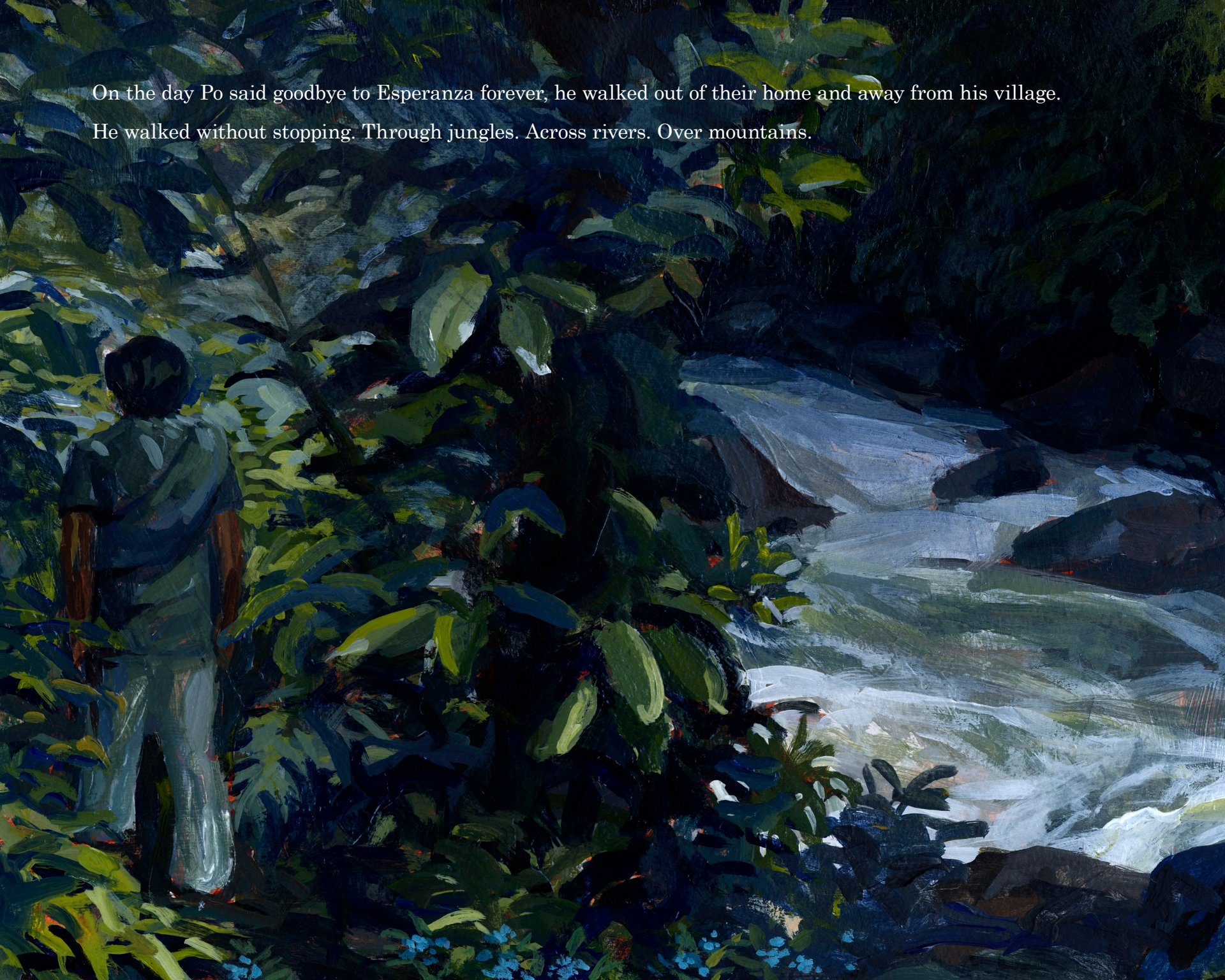
One beautiful day, Po and Esperanza were married.
He called her his flower. She called him her star.
They were happy.

But sometimes sad things happen, even to the gentle-hearted.

Sometimes the universe takes away your flower.

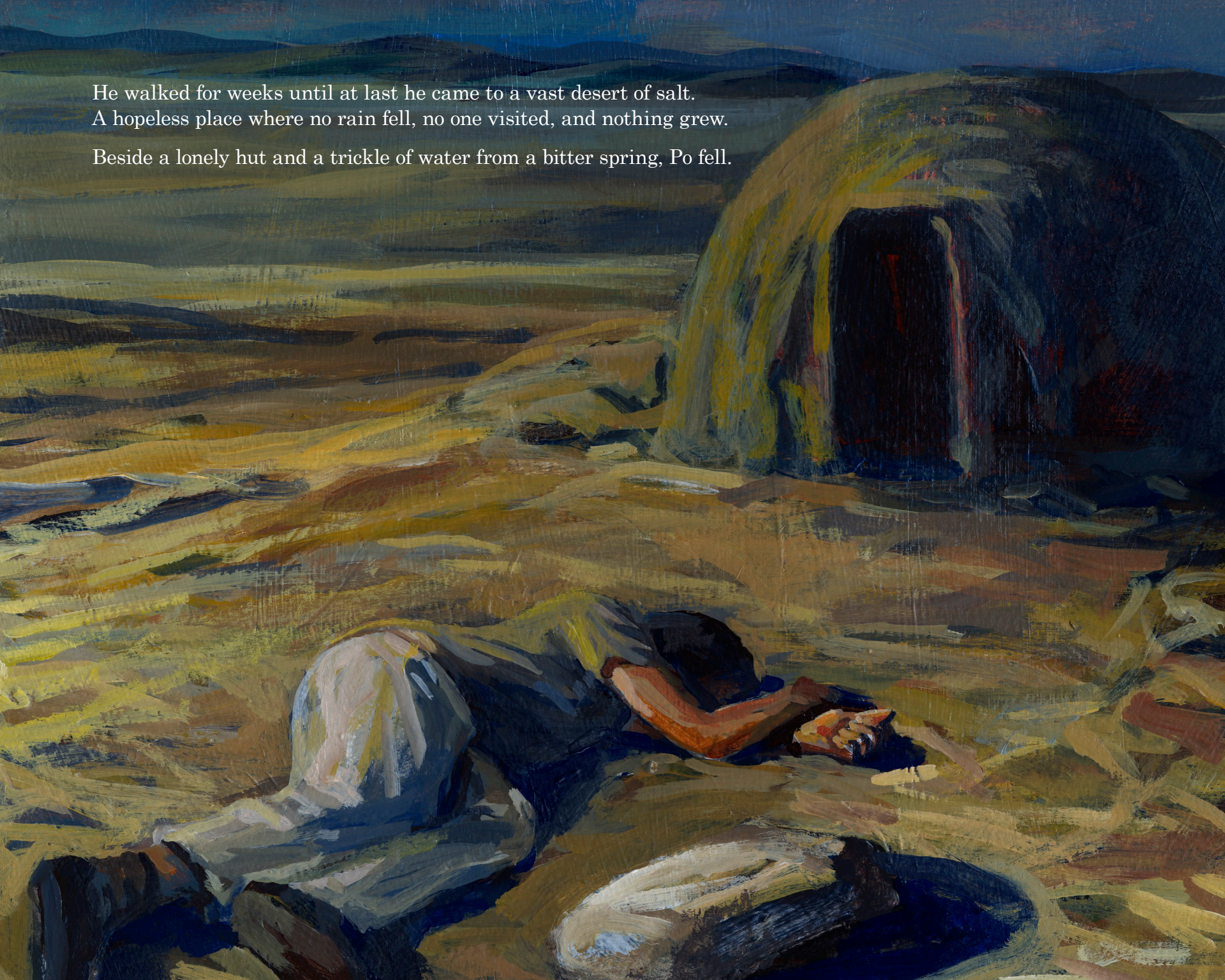


On the day Po said goodbye to Esperanza forever, he walked out of their home and away from his village.
He walked without stopping. Through jungles. Across rivers. Over mountains.





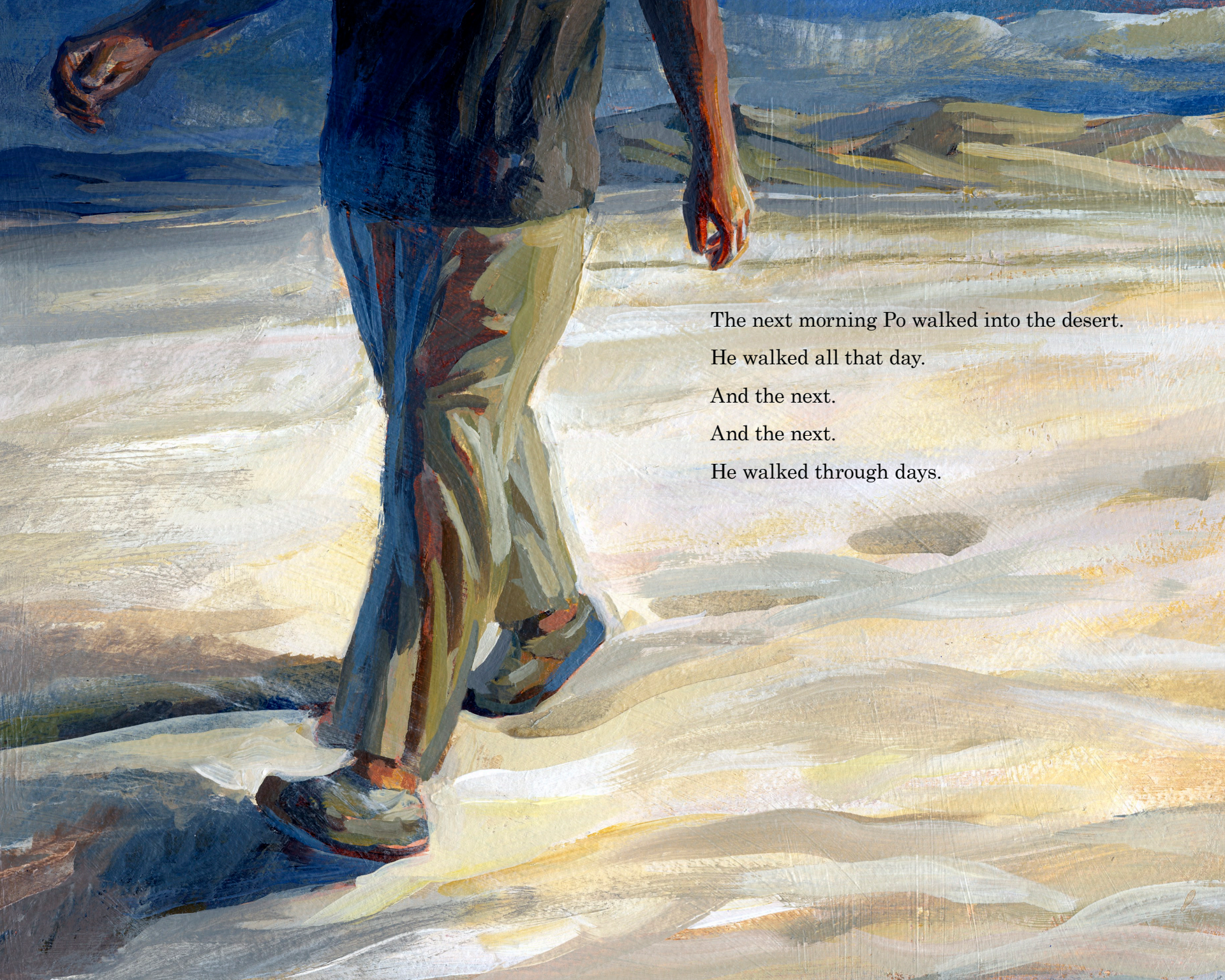
He walked for weeks until at last he came to a vast desert of salt.
A hopeless place where no rain fell, no one visited, and nothing grew.
Beside a lonely hut and a trickle of water from a bitter spring, Po fell.



A painting of a young man with dark hair, looking up at a starry night sky. The sky is a deep blue, filled with numerous small, bright stars of varying colors (yellow, white, blue). The man's face is illuminated by a soft light, and his expression is one of wonder and awe. The background is a dark, textured blue, suggesting a night sky. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

The clear desert night whispered him awake.

For the first time Po saw how the sky was an infinite garden.



The next morning Po walked into the desert.

He walked all that day.

And the next.

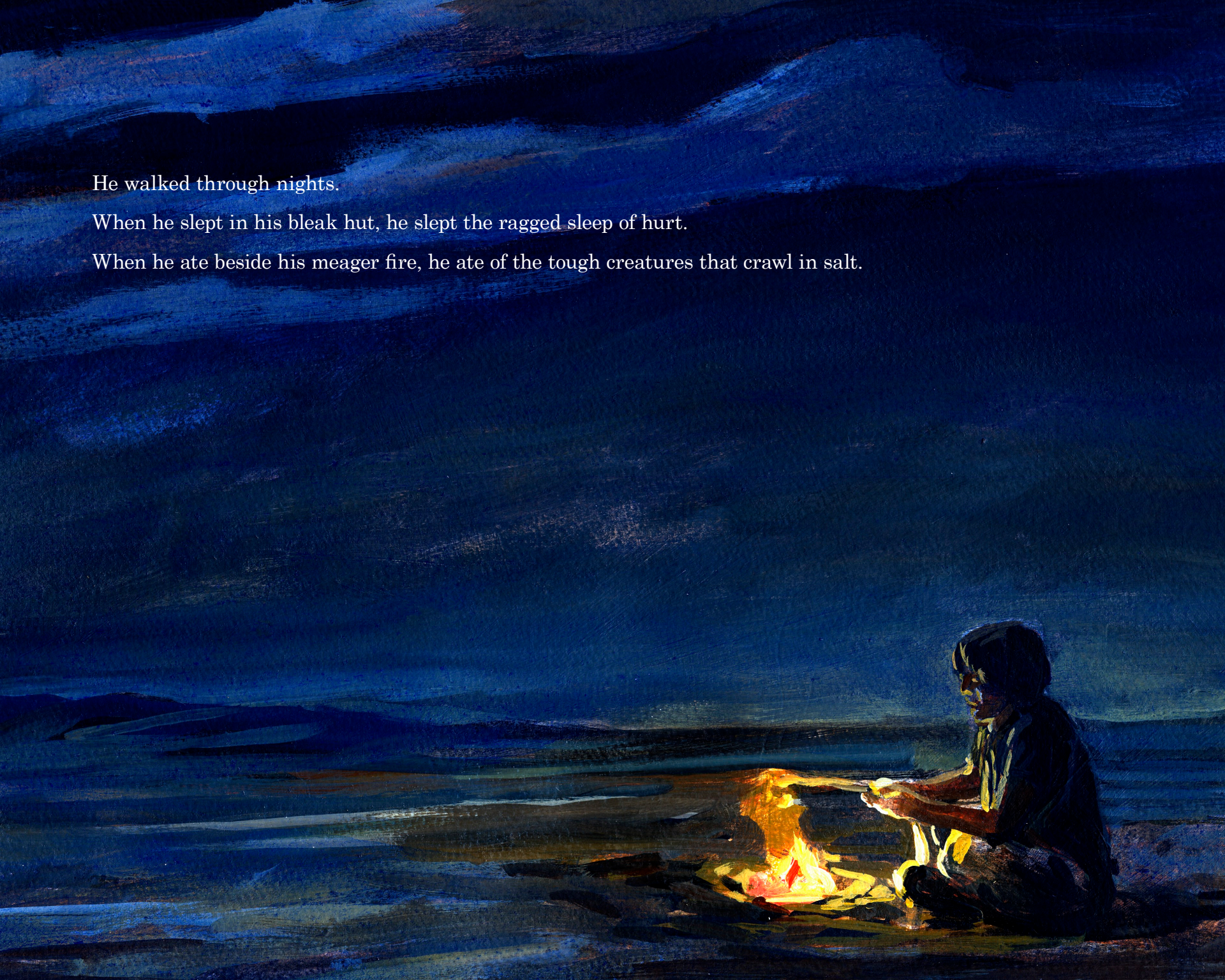
And the next.

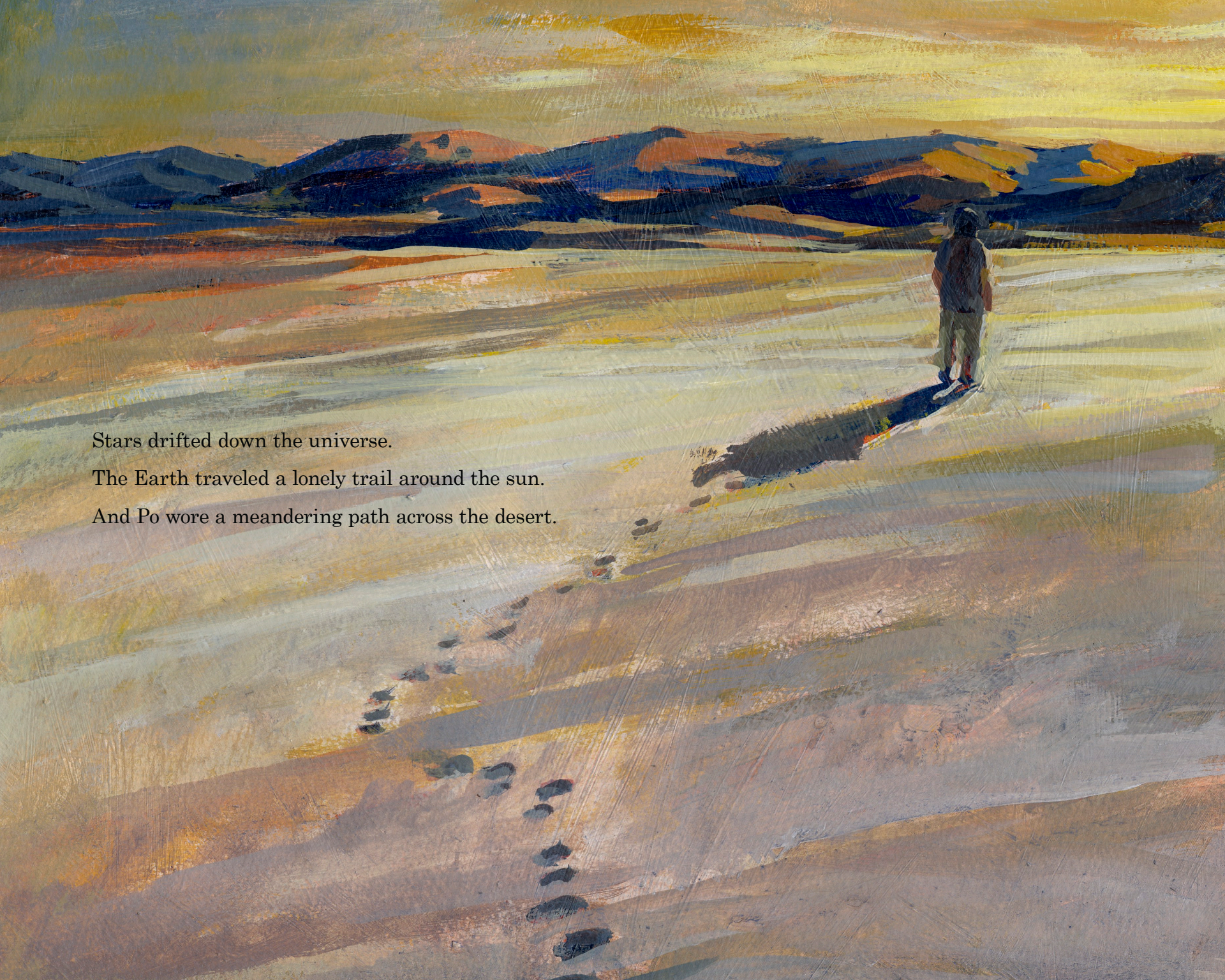
He walked through days.

He walked through nights.

When he slept in his bleak hut, he slept the ragged sleep of hurt.

When he ate beside his meager fire, he ate of the tough creatures that crawl in salt.



A painting of a vast, colorful desert landscape. In the foreground, a person stands on a wide, flat expanse of sand, looking out towards the horizon. A long, dark shadow is cast behind them. A trail of footprints leads away from the person, curving across the sand. The background features rolling hills and mountains in shades of blue, orange, and yellow, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The sky is a mix of warm colors, with horizontal brushstrokes. The overall style is expressive and painterly.

Stars drifted down the universe.
The Earth traveled a lonely trail around the sun.
And Po wore a meandering path across the desert.



For a very long time.



Until there came a midnight when Po's sadness became too heavy.


He shouted at the stars.

"Am I too small?"

The universe was silent silent silent.

Then something touched him. A leaf-cutter ant, crawling across his foot.

Po carried the small thing to safety.

A painting of a person standing on a desert shore, looking out at a vast, colorful, and textured landscape under a dramatic sky. The person is seen from behind, wearing a dark tunic and a head covering, and is holding a long wooden staff. The landscape is composed of horizontal bands of color, ranging from dark greens and browns in the foreground to bright yellows and oranges in the middle ground, and a sky filled with dark, swirling clouds. The overall style is expressive and painterly, with visible brushstrokes and a rich, textured surface.

That night, for the first time, rain fell
on the desert of salt.

Po woke up.



When he stepped out into that new morning, Po saw something. An *amazing* thing. A forget-me-not.

His eyes glistened. He lifted the flower and held it to his heart.

“You kept me going,” he whispered.

Po walked out of the desert that day.

When he reached the mountain pass, he looked out across the desert one last time.

It was then he saw the pattern that his walking had made.



One beautiful word.



Then Po, the man who walked in salt, went home at last.
To make a garden.



