

When I was Young in the Mountains

By: Cynthia Rylant

When I was young in the mountains,
Grandfather came home in the evening
covered with the black dust of a coalmine.
Only his lips were clean, and he used them
to kiss the top of my head.

When I was young in the mountains,
Grandmother spread the table with hot
corn bread, pinto beans and fried okra.

Later, in the middle of the night, she
walked through the grass with me to the
johnny-house and held my hand in the
dark. I promised never to eat more than
one serving of okra again.

When I was young in the mountains,
we walked across the cow pasture and
through the woods, carrying our towels.
The swimming hole was dark and muddy,
and we sometimes saw snakes, but we
jumped in anyway.

On our way home, we stopped at
Mr. Crawford's for a mound of white
butter. Mr. Crawford and Mrs. Crawford
looked alike and always smelled of sweet
milk.

When I was young in the mountains,
we pumped pails of water from the well at
the bottom of the hill, and heated the
water to fill round tin tubs for our baths.

Afterward we stood in front of the
old black stove, shivering and giggling,
while Grandmother heated cocoa on top.

When I was young in the mountains,
we went to church in the schoolhouse on
Sundays, and sometimes walked with the
congregation through the cow pasture to
the dark swimming hole, for baptisms.

My cousin Peter was laid back into the
water, and his white shirt stuck to him,
and my Grandmother cried.

When I was young in the mountains,
we listened to frogs sing at dusk and
awoke to cowbells outside our windows.
Sometimes a black snake came in the
yard, and my Grandmother would
threaten it with a hoe.

If it did not leave, she used the hoe to kill
it. Four of us once draped a very long
snake, dead of course, across our necks
for a photograph.

When I was young in the mountains,
we sat on the porch swing in the
evenings, and Grandfather sharpened my
pencils with his pocket knife.
Grandmother sometimes shelled beans
and sometimes braided my hair. The dogs
lay around us, and the stars sparkled in
the sky. A bobwhite whistled in the
forest. *Bob-bob-bobwhite!*

When I was young in the mountains,
I never wanted to go to the ocean, and I
never wanted to go to the desert. I never
wanted to go anywhere else in the world,
for I was in the mountains.
And that was always enough.