

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 coal mine. 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 pocketknife. 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. ■