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 window. 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 oceans, 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.