

## Grandmother

Grandmother pushes her lips together,  
two wild canyons overgrown with shadows and sandstorms.  
Something smells sour—  
milk, or mutton, left out in the sun too long.  
Come, she motions with her hand,  
a willow branch bent slyly by the western wind.  
Her fraying blue blouse feels cool and stretched  
like frybread dough  
under my small fingers. I pry a loose ball  
of tangled cotton from her left shoulder.  
She asks me to speak, she commands,  
in a voice that warbles like the canyon's rivers.  
I remember shadows cast across the mesa at dusk.

*Ya'a'tée*, I whisper, humming against her ear.  
Eyes so brown they seem blue  
press moisture upon her papery eyelids.  
Through her gray crown, she cannot hear me;  
she floats back to Grandfather, *nali, adeezhi*.

Smoke pulls at my vision, pulls  
at her eyes, silty gray with age  
and glistening sorrow.  
Empty words die upon empty ears  
as the children fall from Grandmother's eyes.  
Summer sends angelic sugar peas spilling  
from her womb that will curdle  
and crackle in fall.  
Sweet grass dances in an August wind,  
Wind chimes churning, soft sheep grazing—

But something is burning—  
our people, or words, left in the sun too long.  
Death descends upon cursed vowels,  
oppressed utterers, feverish vibrations that rise  
from our defiant throats.  
He snatches them up in sharp white jaws,  
shivering hands soaped carefully  
with rusting metal—

cement block teeth glint in the sun—  
he is not lumbering,  
but greedy. He is bone disguised  
in a pilgrim's white cap of impudence.

He met Grandmother when she was young  
and strong from tasting our honeydew songs.  
Now she holds my wrists  
with clutching fingers, sticky  
with words that escape us.