The Way to Make Perfect Mountains

When the Dineh — the Navajo people — came into this world they saw no mountains here.

They had come climbing through a reed, up from the world below. Down there, they had their sacred mountains and they wanted mountains here.

First Man told the people, “I have brought them with me.”

And it was true because he had some sand from each one of those mountains wrapped up in his medicine bag. From that, First Man and First Woman said they could start new mountains.

To make the Mountain of the East they mixed sand from below with white shell and fastened mountain to earth with a zig-zag lightning flash. The Navajo color for East is white so they put white pigeon eggs on the summit of the new East Mountain. (Wild pigeons fly there now.)
The Mountain of the South was made
with sand and blue-green turquoise
and fastened with a great flint knife
shaped like the point of an arrow.
The color for South is blue
so they gave South Mountain bluebird eggs.
(Bluebirds fly there now.)

The Mountain of the West was made
with yellow-red sand and abalone shell
and fastened with a sunbeam.
Yellow is the color for West
so they gave West Mountain the eggs of the yellow warbler.
(Yellow warblers fly there now.)

The Mountain of the North was made
with black sand and jet
and fastened with a rainbow.
Black is the color for North
so they gave North Mountain blackbird eggs.
(Blackbirds fly there now.)

They put perfect plants and animals up there,
perfect rain and perfect mist.

Songs and chants were made for every mountain.
They have not changed since then.
(You hear them now.)
Here, in the firm poetic style that has established her as one of America’s finest authors for young readers, Byrd Baylor tells some of the best Native American stories of Southwestern mountains. As in all her work, her carefully crafted language reveals her love and respect for every part of this desert country—its people and plants and animals, its ancient stories and its mountains.

— Joe Hayes
Storyteller

The Way to Make Perfect Mountains is a true story. All people of wit and good sense who have lived among their towering embrace must know that “nothing is as real” or as true as the sacred song the mountains sing. To the people who remember the true stories and give honor to the beautiful mountains, and to Byrd Baylor who collects some of the stories here, dha wah’eh. Thank you.

— Paula Gunn Allen
(Laguna Pueblo)
poet and critic

At the edge of the mountain
A cloud hangs,
And there my heart, my heart, my heart
Hangs with it.

— from the Tohono O’odham