



2026 JAMES WELCH PRIZE

WINNERS

selected by Santee Frazier

ALEXIS CLIFTON

*from A dissection of Ndé Biyáti', or the way my heart
dropped for Oak Flat, or how to be an NDN in the 21st century*

The skin that turns red turned towards the sun is skin that has been passed down through a lineage of people that extends beyond copper or oil. Here, in this world I live in now, the orange dirt is something given grief, it is something hated, something desired for change. The clay, they say, does not hold enough water, kills the crops, makes for a bad harvest in those summer months when the rain is a scarcity. But when I see the clay dirt, caked against shoes and boots, clinging towards us, as though wanting something, I can see a valley that stretches down into oak trees and sagebrush, into greasewood and willow, into rocks where the *isdzánzhááhí* took turns jumping the farthest distance from one to the other. I can see the first girl who took to her age, clad in buffalo skin and shells, waiting as the bright light broke past the mountain range that dips and turns like an old car. Once the light is full, encompassing the faces with their high cheekbones, their strong noses there is celebration, and for a moment it is no longer another thing we must get through.

CASANDRA LÓPEZ

from Chillona Feels Her Voice Break

Chillona often wants to cry when she is angry or scared. Or when she is lonely or tired. Or when the pain in her joints is relentless. Or when she is made to feel like a small / smashed sourberry / teroorpe' soraa'. / In the Tongva dictionary, there are three entries for cry: yuuk, yuyuunok, or yuyuunax. She prefers the simplest. There is a new entry for crybaby: ywii'ar. It is irregular, like she is. She ponders the pronunciation but recognizes the "ar," which functions like the English "er." To fight is:naawmax. A fighter is: naawme'ar. The 2018 entry for teacher is hyonaayn'ar. Chillona / Ywii'ar / is a / teacher / hyonaayn'ar / but sometimes she is / yapaakmok / tired / and doesn't want to teach or fight.

Art by Camas Logue



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