the
LITTLE INDIAN BASKET MAKER
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Papago Indians live in Arizona near the Mexican border. Their country is a flat and sandy desert. It is hot and dry. Nearby are foothills. Far away are purple mountains.

There are no rivers in the Papago country. There are many washes. Only in the rainy season are the washes full of water. There are no lakes in the Papago country. Sometimes there are water holes where rain water stays for a little while.

There is little grass in the Papago country. There are few trees. There are many kinds of bushes and leaf plants and wild flowers. There are many kinds of cacti, some small, some very tall. All the cacti have spines and flowers.

Most Papago people have two homes. They have one home in the foothills and another one near a wash or spring. When these people travel from one home to another, they take all of their things with them. They use baskets for boxes, trunks, and dishes. Baskets are easily carried and do not break. For this reason, the Papago people need many baskets.

Desert bushes and plants are good for making baskets. This is why Papago Indians are basket makers.
I am a Papago girl.
I am a girl of the Desert People
All women of the Desert People
are makers of baskets.
It is the work of their hands.
It is woman's work.
My grandmother told me
the making of baskets
is the work of our hearts
as well as our hands.
Yesterday my grandmother said,
“Look around our shelter.
Tell me what you see.”
I told her, “I see mats,
mats for the floor and to sit on,
mats for sleeping and for tables,
mats for drying the wild plants
and seeds and field grains.”
“I see baskets for food and clothing and grain and seeds. I see the sacred baskets that hold the medicine and the Holy Magic. “I see the coiled willow baskets and coiled yucca baskets. They are white with black design. They are all alike. They are all different.”
Last week we walked in the sand hills, my grandmother and I.
We were looking for the yucca plant, strong, hardy plant of the sand hills.
My grandmother said, “Baskets and mats are made by plaiting yucca leaves.
Meal bowls and water baskets are made by coiling bear grass and sewing the coils with willow or yucca.”
Sometimes we rested
in the small shade
of a scarlet tipped ocotillo bush,
or under the mesquite tree
with the green-white flowers,
or by a saguaro cactus
on the sandy hillside.
As we rested, my grandmother said,

“Willows are best for coiled baskets,
but they grow far from here.
We can get them only by trade.
So we often use the leaves
of the yucca plant
sewed around bear grass.”
My grandmother showed me her awls
for sewing baskets.
One was a cactus thorn
in a lump of piñon gum.
The other was a stick,
short and sharp-pointed.
My awl is made of steel.
My father bought it
at the trading post.
My grandmother and I began to walk again. As we walked along we saw a little fence made of cactus ribs and ocotillo stalks around a devil’s claw plant. This plant had tiny green claws to hold seed pods for the black designs in our baskets.
When we found a yucca plant,
we beat the leaves
from the plant’s thick stem
with our helping-sticks.
We tied the leaves in bundles
to carry back to our shelter.
My grandmother put her bundles
in the carrying-basket on her back.
I carried my bundles in my hand,
wrapped in a flour sack.
When we reached our shelter, we untied the leaves in our bundles.

We scraped away each thorn with a sharp knife.

Then with our fingernails and teeth, we split each leaf into long broad strips.

We put each leaf strip on the ground to bleach for many still, hot days, for many still, hot nights.
When the leaves were bleached,
my grandmother said,
“See this hole by our door?
Into it we will put dried leaf strips
of the yucca.
We will dampen them with water
and tonight,
while you are sleeping,
the water will make them soft.
Tomorrow you will begin your mat.”
Today I place three leaf strips on the ground before me.
Three more I put on top.
This is the center of my mat;
this is where I begin.
I plait one leaf strip over three.
Then one leaf strip under one and over two.
Then one strip under two and over one.
This is my pattern.
I turn the mat as I plait it.
When it is time to make the edges, my grandmother shows me how. She bends some leaf strips forward and plaits them in. She bends some leaf strips back and plaits them in. This makes a good strong edge with rounded corners. It will take me many days to make my mat.
My grandmother tells me
when I have finished my mat,
we will make a cradle board
for my baby brother.
We will make a carrying-basket
big enough for me.
We will make a coiled meal bowl,
white with black design.
We will make many baskets,
and I will be a basket maker.
“Designs,” says my grandmother, “are figures woven into baskets to make them pretty. They are made of dried black strips from the seed pods of the devil’s claw plant. There are three kinds of designs, that the Papago people use, the fret, the cross, the whirl. From one of these three kinds we shall make our own designs, first in our minds, then with our fingers.”
My mat is finished.
It is strong and good.
Its pattern is plain.
Its edges are straight.
My hands rest, my heart sings.
Now I know it is true,
  what my grandmother told me,
that the making of baskets
is the work of our hearts
as well as our hands.
A New Mexican by birth, Ann Nolan Clark has spent the greater part of her adult life working with and for the Indians of the Southwest.

She has been a teacher and a textbook writer for the United States Indian Service, also Head of the Department for the Preparation of Teaching Materials for Indian Schools. Part of her experience has included serving as Supervisor of Elementary Education on the Pima and Papago Indian reservations, as well as on reservations in the Pueblo area.

As a textbook writer for the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs—Central and South America, Mrs. Clark has worked in Guatemala, Costa Rica, Honduras, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, and San Salvador.

Mrs. Clark is the author of seven books dealing with Indian life and culture, published by The Viking Press. One of these, SECRET OF THE ANDES, was awarded the Newbery Medal for the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children published in 1952. Mrs. Clark has also done writing for Ginn & Company; University Publishing Company; Row, Peterson & Company, as well as for Childhood Education.

One of the outstanding contemporary Indian painters, Harrison Begay was born on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona. From 1934 until 1940, he studied arts and crafts at the U.S. Indian School in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He served with the U.S. Army in Europe from 1942 until 1945, returning to painting in 1946.

Mr. Begay has exhibited at the Arizona State Fair, the Gallup Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial, the Philbrook Art Center in Tulsa, the De Young Museum of San Francisco. His paintings may also be found in other galleries, museums, and private collections in this country and abroad.