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The Turquoise Ledge. By Leslie Marmon Silko. New York: Viking, 2010. New York: Penguin, 2011. 336 pages. \$25.95 cloth, \$16.00 paper.

Leslie Marmon Silko's *The Turquoise Ledge* is a memoir of place that evokes the earth-focused loveliness of her earlier reflective prose in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* (1996), *Sacred Water* (prose poems, 1993), *The Delicacy and Strength of Lace* (1986), and *Storyteller* (1981). In this sometimes quirky, occasionally obsessive narrative, Silko is inspiringly in love with the horses, dogs, macaws, snakes, rats, wild birds, rocks (turquoise, specifically), flowers, land, trees, and stars that live with and around her. In a departure from her earlier prose, however, the people in her life are seldom mentioned after Part One, since, as she states in the preface, her intention was not "to write about others but instead to construct a self-portrait" (1).

The memoir starts in childhood, covering what for Silko's readers is the mostly familiar ground of her relationships with family growing up at Laguna Pueblo, but with some poignant new personal information that offers further insight into how Silko's imagination developed. In the first two pages of chapter 5, for example, Silko discusses her preference for solitude as a child, and her enjoyment of what she experienced as the more peaceful world of animals. Immediately following that reflective point, she then reveals she only found out in her twenties that her mother had given up for adoption a baby boy who was born before Silko. Because his absence had haunted her mother so deeply throughout her life, this half-brother was, by extension, also a formative presence for Silko and her sister, creating their lives through their mother's depression and alcoholism connected to this irremediable loss. We conclude from these brief two pages that all of these intertwining aspects—exploring the natural world, seeking peace, living with unspoken grief, and being influenced by intense familial relationships—helped nudge Silko into her lifelong habit of solitary rumination, storytelling, and life inextricably intertwined with nature and animal companions.

Though the narrative briefly goes on to discuss her young adulthood and two marriages, the bulk of the remainder of Silko's memoir has to do with her thirty-plus years in the Tucson Mountains. The memories of her reclusive artist's life since 1978 are sometimes "eccentric" (169), with numerous redundancies and some other issues that could have been edited out—both of these, incidentally, are also compositional/editorial features of her far more obsessive and often-misread novel *Almanac of the Dead* (1991). Despite its editorial shortcomings, the prose of *The Turquoise Ledge* provides a soothing and engrossing solitary experience with Silko and her passions in her chosen mountain landscape.

One of Silko's fascinations in the memoir is Nahuatl culture, especially the language. About a third of the way into the book, for example, she lists Nahuatl words that begin with "c" and have to do with stars, snakes, and

dreams (139), then a hundred pages later, she browses the “c’s again in another foray into her Nahuatl dictionaries (242). Throughout *The Turquoise Ledge*, the representations of her interest in Nahuatl people, language, and beliefs offer insight not only into Silko’s thinking, but also into the ideas that form the frame and heart of *Almanac of the Dead* and, to an extent, also inform her third novel, *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999). At the core of her vision in these works and her memoir is Silko’s understanding—as a Laguna woman and student of Nahuatl, Hopi, and other indigenous cultures—of the conjoined, embodied realms of matter, weather, flesh, story, spirit, dream, and celestial being, an all-compassing conceptualization of interrelatedness.

Related to the idea of stories as powerful entities is a concept Silko comes back to throughout her oeuvre: “Stories are valuable repositories for details and information of use to future generations,” she states in *The Turquoise Ledge* (27). Anecdotes of lived events, like those peppered throughout this book, are significant as impressions on Silko’s consciousness, rather than as static and provable “facts” she has collected to offer authority to her work. As such, these brief narrative moments offer us a window into Silko’s imaginative motivations, as well as suggesting an indigenous perspective on events that is distinct from a “mainstream” white view. For example, near the beginning of Part Two of the text, Silko briefly discusses that rattlesnake venom is used by the Rarámuri (Tarahumara) to treat cancerous tumors, and is used by other peoples for a range of additional medicinal purposes. She ends this short paragraph by mentioning the story of cowboy Clark Stanley, better known as the “Rattlesnake King.” Stanley, the original charlatan “snake oil salesman,” “claimed to have lived among the Hopi and . . . killed and processed hundreds of snakes” (82). Silko misrepresents Stanley as being arrested for fraud at the Chicago 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, while his act (handling and killing snakes) actually was popular at the expo (and possibly a direct precursor to the wildly popular and environmentally unsound “Rattlesnake Roundups” that began in the 1920s and occur annually today in seven states). Stanley went on to manufacture his medicinal oil, and it was not until 1917 that he was exposed as a fraud and charged with violating the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act.

Silko’s tiny anecdote suggests the distinct significance that Western capitalist promotional events like the world’s fairs have held for indigenous peoples, which is only beginning to be brought to the fore in scholarship (see, as one related example, a 2004 special issue of *Philippine Studies* 52.4, “World’s Fair 1904,” that includes articles from the perspective of Philipinos who traveled to work at the fair and from their descendants). At the fairs, indigenous peoples from all over the world were performatively co-opted (as in the above case of the decidedly non-Hopi snake oil grifter), and displayed and photographed under the guise of anthropological edification for the white masses. Disenfranchised from

humanity, they were relegated to the status of anachronistic savages vanishing in the wake of white progress, as was literally acted out in Buffalo Bill's Wild West just outside the 1893 Expo in his "Drama of Civilization." However, indigenous people *wanted* to participate in the fairs as a way to see the world, observe white culture, and profit from whites' curiosity. (Geronimo is a famous example of this. A poignant fictional representation of Native Americans in Wild West-type shows is James Welch's 2000 *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*.) In Silko's remembered version of the Rattlesnake King story, what seems to have been impressed on her mind is the generally fraudulent nature of these hugely influential (nearly a quarter of the United States population attended the 1893 Expo) entrepreneurial fairs. According to Silko's memory of how Stanley's snake oil story ends, the misrepresentation of indigenous knowledge and practices in that case was so flagrant that even the white authorities noticed, and took action.

Brief anecdotes like the one above and discussion of radioactive fallout and desecration of the land at Laguna in the 1950s (69–75), along with a steady stream of observations on all the life in her immediate surroundings, serve to assert Silko's strong environmental justice perspective. Though Silko states that, before she started *The Turquoise Ledge*, she "wanted as much as possible to avoid unpleasantness and strife and politics," her politics absolutely do enter the text, subtly, as in the Rattlesnake King story, as well as more obviously (170). From the point at which she makes the above pronouncement and through this last half of the book, Silko is concerned with a new neighbor who has just built a McMansion up the hill from her home. He repeatedly bulldozes the nearby arroyo for landscaping materials. Though Silko apparently never speaks directly to this "machine man" (318), she, understandably, obsesses over his actions that gouge and shift the natural surroundings she so loves. After wishing him dead several times, and referring to him as a "dickhead" once (269), she finally comes to terms with his actions by settling for the comfort of knowing that the arroyo, with its powerful seasonal wash, will naturally reclaim itself and heal the damage over time. Somewhat abruptly, she immediately follows this affirmation with a statement about this being "a good place to end" the memoir, and does so (319).

In *The Turquoise Ledge*, Silko admits that "the process we call 'memory,' even recent memory, involves imagination" (1). She is not interested in representing autobiographical "truth," but, rather, as a fiction writer, is most comfortable making herself "a fictional character" through "bits and pieces" of memory and her rich imagination (1). Often humorously, and always genuinely in *The Turquoise Ledge*, Silko shares impressions of her inner world with us, offering up her loving observations of the natural and spiritual world with which she lives in deep relation.

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