

Leslie Marmon Silko 1948—

In 1872, Robert Marmon came as a trader to the Indian Pueblo at Laguna in New Mexico Territory, fifty miles west of Albuquerque. He married a Laguna woman and settled at the Pueblo, and there his great-granddaughter was born three-quarters of a century later. Because of her mixed ancestry—Laguna Indian, Hispanic, and white—Leslie Marmon Silko was an outsider, yet she was raised with the children of the Pueblo and absorbed the tales and myths told to her by her great-grandmother, from whom she took her interest in becoming a storyteller herself.

Silko attended the Indian school in Laguna until the fifth grade, at which time she was sent to study in Albuquerque. There she graduated from high school, entered the University of New Mexico, and graduated with honors in 1969. Afterward, she briefly attended law school at the University of New Mexico with the intention of preparing herself to defend the legal rights of Native Americans, but her fascination with storytelling and literature prompted her to transfer to the graduate school to study English. Propelled by her love of literature, she chose creative writing as her avocation and subsequently taught English and fiction writing at the University of New Mexico, Vassar College, and the University of Arizona.

Silko has said, "I am of mixed-breed ancestry, but what I know is Laguna." Most of her poetry and fiction is set at Laguna, and, following the tradition of the storyteller of the Pueblo culture, her narrative style is spare. Her writing displays a strong sense of the weather and the landscape: the mountains, streams, and valleys of the region. She concentrates on the everyday life of the people she knows, the distinct mythical, historical, and present-day worlds in which they simultaneously exist.

Silko wrote her first published story "The Man to Send Rain Clouds" (1969) for a class in creative writing at the University of New Mexico. Her first book, *Laguna Woman* (1974), traces the close relationship of the people to the landscape around the Laguna Pueblo. Her first novel and most critically praised work, *Ceremony* (1977), tells of the experiences of a World War II veteran named Tayo, who returns from the war and must struggle to readjust to the Native American life and customs he had left. The novel employs a series of flashbacks to render the horrors Tayo experienced while incarcerated in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp. On his release he is initially sent to a veterans' hospital in Los Angeles, where the doctors prove unable to diagnose or cure his illness. Back in Laguna, however, with the help of Old Betonie, a tribal elder, and Ts'eh, a medicine woman, his lengthy quest for healing and identity succeeds. Tayo comes to terms with both his identity and his wartime experiences and he begins his growth into manhood.

and photographs about the Laguna people, published under the title *Storyteller* in 1981. In 1986, an edited version of her correspondence with the poet James Wright appeared, under the title *Delicacy and the Strength of Lace*. Her most controversial work, *The Almanac of the Dead*, was published in 1991. A scathing novel, it describes the rage of Native Americans in the United States whose lives are dominated by the transplanted European culture that Silko portrays as a lethal disease. Believing that white culture and society are septic and doomed, Silko's Native Americans join similarly oppressed African Americans in setting out to retake North America with the force of modern firearms and with hexes and ancient witchcraft.

Silko's recent novel, *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999), is a mixture of myth, allegory, and Southwestern history. The reader watches as *Indigo*, the novel's child-heroine, unwittingly embarks on an exhilarating journey across America, throughout Europe and Brazil, and finally back to her native Southwest America. Repeatedly torn between competing cultures, in the end *Indigo* remains true to the traditions and values of her own tribe. As with *Storyteller* and *Ceremony*, *Gardens in the Dunes* confirms Silko's skill as a storyteller, portraying Native Americans today, living at the same time in the contemporary world of technology and materialism and in a separate world of traditions and ideals of America's first people.

FURTHER READING: P. Seyfersted, *Leslie Marmon Silko*, 1980; G. Saylor, *Leslie Marmon Silko*, 1997; H. Jaskowski, *Leslie Marmon Silko*, 1998; *Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko*, ed. E. Arnold, 2000; A. Aldama, *Disrupting Savagism: Intersecting Chicana/o, Mexican Immigrant, and Native American Struggles for Self-Representation*, 2001.

TEXT: Storyteller, 1981.

THE MAN TO SEND RAIN CLOUDS

They found him under a big cottonwood tree. His Levi jacket and pants were faded light blue so that he had been easy to find. The big cottonwood tree stood apart from a small grove of winterbare cottonwoods which grew in the wide, sandy arroyo. He had been dead for a day or more, and the sheep had wandered and scattered up and down the arroyo. Leon and his brother-in-law, Ken, gathered the sheep and left them in the pen at the sheep camp before they returned to the cottonwood tree. Leon waited under the tree while Ken drove the truck through the deep sand to the edge of the arroyo. He squinted up at the sun and unzipped his jacket—it sure was hot for this time of year. But high and northwest the blue mountains were still in snow. Ken came sliding down the low, crumbling bank about fifty yards down, and he was bringing the red blanket.

Before they wrapped the old man, Leon took a piece of string out of his pocket and tied a small gray feather in the old man's long white hair. Ken gave him the paint. Across the brown wrinkled forehead he drew a streak of white and along the high cheekbones he drew a strip of blue paint. He paused and watched Ken throw pinches of corn meal and pollen into the wind that fluttered the small gray feather. Then Leon painted with yellow under the old man's broad nose, and finally, when he had painted green across the chin, he smiled.

"Send us rain clouds, Grandfather." They laid the bundle in the back of the pickup and covered it with a heavy tarp before they started back to the pueblo.

They turned off the highway onto the sandy pueblo road. Not long after they passed the store and post office they saw Father Paul's car coming toward them. When he recognized their faces he slowed his car and waved for them to stop. The young priest rolled down the car window.

"Did you find old Teofilo?" he asked loudly.

Leon stopped the truck. "Good morning, Father. We were just out to the sheep camp. Everything is O.K. now."

"Thank God for that. Teofilo is a very old man. You really shouldn't allow him to stay at the sheep camp alone."

"No, he won't do that any more now."

"Well, I'm glad you understand. I hope I'll be seeing you at Mass this week—we missed you last Sunday. See if you can get old Teofilo to come with you." The priest smiled and waved at them as they drove away.

Louise and Teresa were waiting. The table was set for lunch, and the coffee was boiling on the black iron stove. Leon looked at Louise and then at Teresa.

"We found him under a cottonwood tree in the big arroyo near sheep camp. I guess he sat down to rest in the shade and never got up again." Leon walked toward the old man's bed. The red plaid shawl had been shaken and spread carefully over the bed, and a new brown flannel shirt and pair of stiff new Levi's were arranged neatly beside the pillow. Louise held the screen door open while Leon and Ken carried in the red blanket. He looked small and shriveled, and after they dressed him in the new shirt and pants he seemed more shrunken.

It was noontime now because the church bells rang the Angelus. They ate the beans with hot bread, and nobody said anything until after Teresa poured the coffee.

Ken stood up and put on his jacket. "I'll see about the gravediggers. Only the top layer of soil is frozen. I think it can be ready before dark."

Leon nodded his head and finished his coffee. After Ken had been gone for a while, the neighbors and clanspeople came quietly to embrace Teofilo's family and to leave food on the table because the gravediggers would come to eat when they were finished.

The sky in the west was full of pale yellow light. Louise stood outside with her hands in the pockets of Leon's green army jacket that was too big for her. The funeral was over, and the old men had taken their candles and medicine bags and were gone. She waited until the body was laid into the pickup before she said anything to Leon. She touched his arm, and he noticed that her hands were still dusky from the corn meal that she had sprinkled around the old man. When she spoke, Leon could not hear her.

"What did you say? I didn't hear you."

"I said that I had been thinking about something."

"About what?"

"About the priest sprinkling holy water for Grandpa. So he won't be thirsty." Leon stared at the new moccasins that Teofilo had made for the ceremonial dances in the summer. They were nearly hidden by the red blanket. It was getting colder, and the wind pushed gray dust down the narrow pueblo road. The sun was approaching the long mesa where it disappeared during the winter. Louise stood there shivering and watching his face. Then he zipped up his jacket and opened the truck door. "I'll see if he's there."

Ken stopped the pickup at the church, and Leon got out; and then Ken drove down the hill to the graveyard where people were waiting. Leon knocked at the old carved door with its symbols of the Lamb. While he waited he looked up at the twin bells from the king of Spain with the last sunlight pouring around them in their tower.

The priest opened the door and smiled when he saw who it was. "Come in! What brings you here this evening?"

The priest walked toward the kitchen, and Leon stood with his cap in his hand, playing with the earflaps and examining the living room—the brown sofa, the green armchair, and the brass lamp that hung down from the ceiling by links of chain. The priest dragged a chair out of the kitchen and offered it to Leon.

"No thank you, Father. I only came to ask you if you would bring your holy water to the graveyard."

The priest turned away from Leon and looked out the window at the patio full of shadows and the dining-room windows of the nuns' cloister across the patio. The curtains were heavy, and the light from within faintly penetrated; it was impossible to see the nuns inside eating supper. "Why didn't you tell me he was dead? I could have brought the Last Rites anyway."

Leon smiled. "It wasn't necessary, Father."

The priest stared down at his scuffed brown loafers and the worn hem of his cassock. "For a Christian burial it was necessary."

His voice was distant, and Leon thought that his blue eyes looked tired. "It's O.K., Father, we just want him to have plenty of water."

The priest sank down into the green chair and picked up a glossy missionary magazine. He turned the colored pages full of lepers and pagans without looking at them.

"You know I can't do that, Leon. There should have been the Last Rites and a funeral Mass at the very least."

Leon put on his green cap and pulled the flaps down over his ears. "It's getting late, Father. I've got to go."

When Leon opened the door Father Paul stood up and said, "Wait." He left the room and came back wearing a long brown overcoat. He followed Leon out the door and across the dim churchyard to the adobe steps in front of the church. They both stooped to fit through the low adobe entrance. And when they started down the hill to the graveyard only half of the sun was visible above the mesa.

The priest approached the grave slowly, wondering how they had managed to dig into the frozen ground; and then he remembered that this was New Mexico, and saw the pile of cold loose sand beside the hole. The people stood close to each other with little clouds of steam puffing from their faces. The priest looked at them and saw a pile of jackets, gloves, and scarves in the yellow, dry tumbleweeds that grew in the graveyard. He looked at the red blanket, not sure that Teofilo was so small, wondering if it wasn't some perverse Indian trick—something they did in March to ensure a good harvest—wondering if maybe old Teofilo was actually at sheep camp corraling the sheep for the night. But there he was, facing into a cold dry wind and squinting at the last sunlight, ready to bury a red wool blanket while the faces of his parishioners were in shadow with the last warmth of the sun on their backs.

His fingers were stiff, and it took him a long time to twist the lid off the holy water. Drops of water fell on the red blanket and soaked into dark icy

spots. He sprinkled the grave and the water disappeared almost before it touched the dim, cold sand; it reminded him of something—he tried to remember what it was, because he thought if he could remember he might understand this. He sprinkled more water; he shook the container until it was empty, and the water fell through the light from sundown like August rain that fell while the sun was still shining, almost evaporating before it touched the wilted squash flowers.

The wind pulled at the priest's brown Franciscan robe and swirled away the corn meal and pollen that had been sprinkled on the blanket. They lowered the bundle into the ground, and they didn't bother to untie the stiff pieces of new rope that were tied around the ends of the blanket. The sun was gone, and over on the highway the eastbound lane was full of headlights. The priest walked away slowly. Leon watched him climb the hill, and when he had disappeared within the tall, thick walls, Leon turned to look up at the high blue mountains in the deep snow that reflected a faint red light from the west. He felt good because it was finished, and he was happy about the sprinkling of the holy water; now the old man could send them big thunderclouds for sure.

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"This is just to say" response
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