

Andrea Bradley

Reflection on *Bodies in the Land*

Marilyn Arsem's *Bodies in the Land* performance that we saw at The Momentary was immensely powerful, leaving me thinking about it all week. Here is what I saw: Marilyn Arsem sitting at a wooden table in a room that looked like it was once used for loading or unloading large things. The room was white, painted cinder block, about 15 to 20 feet long and 10 to 12 feet wide with a platform about 4 feet above the floor, so that the as the viewer, you are looking down into the room with the table. At the far end of the room was a glass wall with a glass door that led out to a small courtyard. The floor was covered with rocks of varied sizes. When I walked into the room and sat in one of only 4 chairs on the platform, Arsem was reading aloud from a black three-ring binder. At first it sounded like she was just reading from a list. She was reading about people who had died but their names were not known. As I sat and listened, I realized the list was the account of people who died on the trail of tears, specifically in Arkansas and Benton County. After a few moments of reading from the list she turned the page and sat at the table silently. Then she started reading again, this time a short account written in the first person of someone who was able to recount some of their experiences on the trail of tears. Arsem read about people dying and there being no time or means to bury them properly or with any sort of ceremony. One that stood out to me particularly was about someone dying and they just had to lay the body between two trees that had fallen and cover them with leaves. After this reading, Arsem stopped and sat at the table silently. After a moment of silence, she got up from her chair and started walking the length of the room. Her steps were unstable as she walked on the rocks, and I was quite concerned that she might fall. She walked about half the length of the room and stopped and picked up a rock and moved it. I saw then for the first time that there were several small stacks of rock in the middle of the room. After placing the rock in its new location, she walked slowly back to the table, took a small drink of water, turned the page in the binder and started reading again. The next story was a particularly sad

one about a family on the trail of tears in which a man was left behind because he had cholera. His wife and 3 children refused to leave him to die alone and so they left the wagons and stayed with him until he died the next day. At the end of reading this story, Arsem got up and started walking on the rocks again. This time she picked up a large rock and carried it outside! That was when I noticed that there was a chair outside in the courtyard with a single rock on it. Arsem placed the rock on the ground outside and then came back in, walked unsteadily over the rocks again and sat down to read.

I was really moved by this performance. I felt like there was a lot of power in acknowledging all the people who had died and could not be properly acknowledged at the time of their death. The trail of tears was obviously a terrible event. The systematic removal and relocation of the people native to this area was cruel. I felt like Arsem's dangerous walk through the rocks was an acknowledgment of the dangerous walk of those on the trail of tears. It seemed like she was creating small rock monuments with the rocks she moved when she got up after reading. The walk felt dangerous but also ceremonious.

The title of the performance *Bodies in the Land* refers to the actual bodies of people whose remains are part of this very land we live on. I have been with a lot of people at the end of their life. In my line of work, critical care nursing, death is always near, like a shadow. When I thought about this performance, I felt a sense of connection to the land. The land and I have seen and been with many people in the moment of their last breath. The land has seen infinitely more than me and, in that way, the land feels like a mentor or a mother. Someone who has seen and understands so much more than me and understands what it is like to be the only one in the room when that last breath is breathed.

I feel like Arsem is giving viewers a chance to acknowledge the dead. Ceremony and ritual have been incredibly important for us in mourning the dead. Arsem offered that for those who were denied that on the trail of tears and gave us a chance to mourn too.