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ARTS 3223

*Bodies in the Land* Reflection

The land, in Marilyn Arsem's *Bodies in the Land*, is an obstacle, a place where the human reality of dislocation is settled. Arsem reads stories about death on the road, in an in-between space, where families are forced to leave their deceased, sometimes with the intention of returning to retrieve the body. It is likely that many were never able to, and their stories are the only material expression of the dead's presence. The main gesture of the performance is extricating those people from the land, both by remembering their individual stories, and symbolically journeying to separate their bodies from the land.

Listening to Arsem read stories is an intimate experience. She reads with expression in her voice, not coldness, and sometimes struggles with pronunciation, even asking the audience for help. Giving each story singular attention, and spending the long duration it takes to go through each in sequence, is necessary to pay respect to individuals, and not only treat them as a mass. She is doing the work of separating and presenting, when an audience suddenly dumped with the sheer mass of the stories couldn't be expected to. The act of removing the stones is also laborious, not only because each stone is heavy, but because as a whole they form a difficult landscape to traverse. Arsem has to be careful not to stumble, parallel to the difficulty of passage the real land presents. I saw the performance both near the start and a couple days later, so I could see the way the stones began to organize outside. She places them carefully, some in burial plot-like grids, others on chairs, and other meticulous patterns. I do not know what her intentions were with these structures, but her actions appeared to be thoroughly considered. Besides the

idea of exhuming and reburying these bodies, the act of taking a landscape and reorganizing it according to human intentions is a charged one.