

# Leslie Marmon Silko

## Ceremony

### Excerpt

The white ranchers called this place North Top, but he remembered it by the story Josiah had told him about a hunter who walked into a grassy meadow up here and found a mountain-lion cub chasing butterflies; as long as the hunter sang a song to the cub, it continued to play. But when the hunter thought of the cub's mother and was afraid, the mountain-lion cub was startled, and ran away. The Laguna people had always hunted up there. They went up the slopes of the cone-shaped peaks in the summer, when the deer were reddish brown, the hair short and shining while they browsed in meadows above the treeline to avoid the heat. In late fall, as the deer moved down with each snowstorm, the people hunted the foothills and *cerros* and the grassy dry lake flats of the big plateau. And finally, in the winter, when the deer had heavy dark gray coats and the bitter snow winds drove them down twisting narrow trails, the Laguna hunters found them, fat from acorns and piñons growing in the narrow steep canyons below the rim.

All but a small part of the mountain had been taken. The reservation boundary included only a canyon above Encinal and a few miles of timber on the plateau. The rest of the land was taken by the National Forest and by the state which later sold it to white ranchers who came from Texas in the early 1900s. In the twenties and thirties the logging companies hired full-time hunters who fed entire logging camps, taking ten or fifteen deer each week and fifty wild turkeys in one month. The loggers shot the bears and mountain lions for sport. And it was then the Laguna people understood that the land had been taken, because they couldn't stop these white people from coming to destroy the animals and the land. It was then that the holy men at Laguna and Acoma warned the people that the balance of the world had been

disturbed and the people could expect droughts and harder days to come.

White ranchers pastured cattle there, especially during the dry years when no grass grew below the mountain. They fattened them on the plateau during the summer, and brought them down to the buyers in late fall. Tayo rode past while-faced Herefords standing around a windmill; they stared at him and the horse stupidly. He did not expect to find Josiah's cattle near Herefords, because the spotted cattle were so rangy and wild; but without Betonie he wouldn't have hoped to find the cattle at all. Until the previous night, Old Betonie's vision of stars, cattle, a woman, and a mountain had seemed remote; he had been wary, especially after he found the stars, and they were in the north. It seemed more likely to find the spotted cattle in the south, far far in the south—the direction they had always gone. The last time Josiah had seen them, the cattle had been wandering southwest along the boundary between the reservation and state land. When Tayo told Robert he was going north, up into the mountains to look for the cattle, Robert shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. "Maybe," he said, "maybe. I guess once somebody got them, they could have taken them just about anywhere." So he had gone, not expecting to find anything more the winter constellation in the north sky overhead; but suddenly Betonie's vision was a story he could feel happening—from the stars and the woman, the mountain and the cattle would come.

Tayo stopped the mare by a pine tree on the ridge near a scrub-oak thicket. He tied the lariat rope around her neck and slipped off the bridle to let her graze. He untied the food sack from behind the saddle and walked over to the tree. Layers of reddish brown pine



needles sank softly under his feet, and he brushed aside the pine cones before he sat down. From where he sat, the world looked as if it were more than half blue sky closing around like a dome. The sun was leaning into the southwest sky. He chewed the jerky as carefully as the mare chewed the grass, pushing against cords of gristle with his tongue, feeling the slippery fibers give way between his teeth. He swallowed the last piece of jerky and felt it roll with urgency and excitement in his belly.

The Texans who bought the land fenced it and posted signs in English and Spanish warning trespassers to keep out. But the people from the land grants and the people from Laguna and Acoma ignored the signs and hunted deer; occasionally, the Mexicans took a cow. So later, ranchers hired men to patrol on horseback, carrying .30-30s in saddle scabbards. But the armed riders made little difference because there were miles of fence and two or three hunters could easily slip between them. Still, he would have to be careful. When he located the cattle he would drive them back. He had the bill of sale from Ulibarri buttoned in his shirt pocket just in case.

He got up feeling happy and excited. He would take the cattle home again, and they would follow the plans Josiah had made and raise a new breed of cattle that could live in spite of the drought and hard weather. He tied the lunch sack under the bedroll and pulled the bridle back over the mare's ears. He rode west along the south rim of the plateau, watching for sudden movements that were speckled white. The barbed wire fence paralleled the rim, and he could see bits of belly hair the deer left on the barbed wire where their trails crossed the fence. Fences had never stopped the speckled cattle either, but there was no sign they had been there. So he rode north, looking for another fences that might be holding them.

He rode miles across dry lake flats and over rocky *cerros* until he came to a high fence of heavy-gauge steel mesh with three strands of barbed wire across the top. It was a fence that could hold the spotted cattle. The white man, Floyd Lee, called it a wolf-proof fence; but he had poisoned and shot all the wolves in the hills, and the people knew what the fence was for: a thousand dollars a mile to keep Indians and Mexicans out; a thousand dollars a miles to lock the mountain in steel wire, to make the land his.