



The Anthropology of Turquoise: Meditations on Landscape, Art, and Spirit

Ellen Meloy

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Of all the things I wondered about on this land, I wondered the hardest about the seduction of certain geographies that feel like home—not by story or blood but merely by their forms and colors. How our perceptions are our only internal map of the world, how there are places that claim you and places that warn you away. How you can fall in love with the light.

—*Ellen Meloy*

Neurobiologists say that our sensitivity to color begins when we are infants. For artist-naturalist Ellen Meloy, who has spent most of her life in wild, remote places, an intoxication with light and color—sometimes subliminal, often fierce—has expressed itself as a profound attachment to landscape. It has been rightly said: Color is the first principle of Place.

In this luminous mix of memoir, natural history, and eccentric adventure, Meloy uses turquoise—the color and the gem—as a metaphor for a way to make sense of the world from the clues of nature. From the Sierra Nevada, the Mojave Desert, the Yucatan Peninsula, and the Bahamas to her home ground on the high plateaus and in the deep canyons of the Southwest, we journey with Meloy through diverse habitats of supersensual light, through places of beauty and places of desecration. With keen vision and sharp wit she introduces us to deserts, canyons, turquoise seas, and ancestral mountains, as well as to comedian plants, psychiatrist mules, and Persians who consider turquoise the equivalent of a bulletproof vest. Meloy describes women held to the desert by sheer gravity, and she mourns the passing of her oldest neighbors, the Navajo “velvet grandmothers” whose attire and aesthetics absorb the vivid palette of their homeland. There is a swim across the Mojave, a harrowing error on a solo trip down a wild river, and a birthday party with wild sheep.

Throughout, Meloy invites us to appreciate along with her the environments, creatures, and objects that celebrate what we often take for granted: “our own spirits, the eternity of all things.”

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