



Baptism of Desire

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Louise Erdrich peoples the fluid, shifting landscape of her poetry with Catholic saints and figures from classical myth and Native American legend: Saint Clare, the nine-headed Hydra, and the Chippewa trickster Potchikoo appear in these pages. Boundaries dissolve; the dead and the living share the same space, ghosts holy and otherwise.

In her notes to the book, Erdrich comments that most of the poems in the collection were written between the hours of two and four o'clock in the morning, during insomnia brought on by pregnancy. A number of voices in the poems painfully draw breath as if for the first time. The perspective may alternate between that of mother ("The Fence," "Birth") and child ("The Return," "The Flood"). Such fluidity of identity can be both terrifying and exhilarating, can provoke experiences of doubt and illumination. In "Hydra," Erdrich draws on the ambivalent imagery of the serpent as seducer and as initiator into the sacred mysteries; in the poem, the creature acts as muse: "you are my poetry ... Your place/ is at my ear." As created by the poet's imagination, the world is a seductive place; one is "lured" into birth.

Erdrich notes that the German biochemist August Kekule von Stradonitz derived the ring structure of benzene with the help of a dream in which a snake was swallowing its tail. It is in a dreamlike, suggestible state that the metamorphosis of shapes and identities and the confounding of time and space occur, approximating the ritual of baptism. In the surreal landscape of dreams, the mundane and fantastical coexist: There are "mosquitoes/ dancing on the head of a pin." This interpenetration of the material and spiritual worlds characterizes both the sacramental and the poetic imagination.

Erdrich's use of religious imagery and the meditative quality of her rhythms contribute to the spiritual force of her poems. The reader struggles with them as if with Proteus, till true shapes are revealed and questions answered.

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