

The Beet Queen: “After the miraculous sheets of black ice came the floods, stranding boards and snaky knots of debris high in the branches, leaving brown leeches to dry like raisins on the sidewalks when the water receded, and leaving the smell of river mud, a rotten sweetness, in the backyards and gutters.”

Native American oral expression does not distinguish between prose and poetry, and like many Native American writers Erdrich works in several forms. “I began as a poet, writing poetry,” she has said. “I began to tell stories in poems.” The lyrical descriptions in her fiction resemble the language of her poems, and the characterizations and narratives in her poetry resemble those of her fiction. Her most recent poetry collection, *Original Fire* (2003), presents new poems together with work from two earlier collections, *Jacklight* and *Baptism of Desire* (1989). Among the previously published poems are “The Butcher’s Wife,” which has close affinities in setting and character to her novels, and “The Potchikoo Stories,” a group of prose poems about the mythical Potchikoo’s life and afterlife. “Grief,” a new poem, suggests the traditions of imagist poetry. But in the end such generic distinctions run counter to Erdrich’s fusion of storytelling modes.

Like her fiction, Erdrich’s poetry sometimes offers realistic accounts of small-town life and sometimes retells mythical stories. “I was Sleeping Where the Black Oaks Move” exemplifies her lyrical description and her mythical imagination. Many of the poems also reflect Erdrich’s awareness of the historical and ongoing devastations of Native American life, what she calls in the poem “Dear John Wayne” “the history that brought us all here.” Whatever forms her storytelling takes, its linguistic resources and mixture of grief, humor, anger, and tenderness deepen our understanding of the complexities of experience.

Dear John Wayne¹

August and the drive-in picture is packed.
 We lounge on the hood of the Pontiac
 surrounded by the slow-burning spirals they sell
 at the window, to vanquish the hordes of mosquitoes.
 Nothing works. They break through the smoke screen for blood. 5

Always the lookout spots the Indians first,
 spread north to south, barring progress.
 The Sioux or some other Plains bunch²
 in spectacular columns, ICBM missiles,³
 feathers bristling in the meaningful sunset. 10

The drum breaks. There will be no parlance.
 Only the arrows whining, a death-cloud of nerves
 swarming down on the settlers
 who die beautifully, tumbling like dust weeds
 into the history that brought us all here 15
 together: this wide screen beneath the sign of the bear.

1. American movie actor (1907–1979) who embodied the image of the strong, taciturn cowboy or soldier, and who in many ways personified the dominant American values of his era. He died of cancer.

2. The Sioux (Lakota) are a North American Plains Indian people.

3. Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles, developed starting in 1971.

The sky fills, acres of blue squint and eye
 that the crowd cheers. His face moves over us,
 a thick cloud of vengeance, pitted
 like the land that was once flesh. Each rut, 20
 each scar makes a promise: *It is*
not over, this fight, not as long as you resist.

Everything we see belongs to us.

A few laughing Indians fall over the hood
 slipping in the hot spilled butter. 25
The eye sees a lot, John, but the heart is so blind.
Death makes us owners of nothing.
 He smiles, a horizon of teeth
 the credits reel over, and then the white fields

again blowing in the true-to-life dark. 30
 The dark films over everything.
 We get into the car
 scratching our mosquito bites, speechless and small
 as people are when the movie is done.
 We are back in our skins. 35

How can we help but keep hearing his voice,
 the flip side of the sound track, still playing:
Come on, boys, we got them
where we want them, drunk, running.
They'll give us what we want, what we need. 40
 Even his disease was the idea of taking everything.
 Those cells, burning, doubling, splitting out of their skins.

1984

I Was Sleeping Where the Black Oaks Move

We watched from the house
 as the river grew, helpless
 and terrible in its unfamiliar body.
 Wrestling everything into it,
 the water wrapped around trees 5
 until their life-hold was broken.
 They went down, one by one,
 and the river dragged off their covering.

Nests of the herons, roots washed to bones,
 snags of soaked bark on the shoreline: 10
 a whole forest pulled through the teeth
 of the spillway. Trees surfacing
 singly, where the river poured off
 into arteries for fields below the reservation.