

*Chance in Louise Erdrich's
"The Beet Queen":
New Ways to Find a Family*

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THE SPIRIT OF trickster pervades Louise Erdrich's *The Beet Queen* in its comic world view, chorus of narrative voices, and light-as-air concept of family as community. In a comic view of the world, chance is both liberating force and invitation to change or to adapt. Gerald Vizenor connects the spirit of the trickster to chance in its possibilities of release:

Freedom is a sign, and the trickster is chance and freedom in a comic sign; comic freedom is a "doing," not an essence, not a museum being, not an aesthetic presence. The trickster as a semiotic sign is imagined in narrative voices, a communal rein to the unconscious, which is comic liberation. (13)

The spirit of trickster inhabits *The Beet Queen*, surfacing in the tension of lives freed by chance. The five narrators in the novel compose a human comedy as they deal with liberation and subsequent necessity to adapt: Mary Adare and her brother Karl join with Celestine James, Wallace Pfef, and Sita Kozka to send a communal voice¹ as they face the absurd or comic existence dealt to them. Mary, Karl, Wallace, Sita, and Celestine are set free into the realm of chance; their methods of adapting differ but each tries to accommodate to community. In his study of the meaning of comedy, Wylie Sypher says that whenever human beings take a close look at existence, they must take note of its absurdity, its irrationality, its inexplicability, the essence of which is comedy (195). The tellers in *The Beet Queen* meet absurdity and try to manage survival in the face of it; to the extent that they succeed, theirs is a comic response, both communal and adaptive. In comedy any success is temporary, "accomplished with the most modest of weapons: wit, luck, persuasion, and a bit of fanciful

inventiveness" (Meeker 26). One looks at small victories in comedy, which "is concerned with muddling through, not with progress or perfection" (Meeker 26). Erdrich's characters/narrators hold their own, living and encouraging themselves in a comedy of survival.²

In choosing air as the chief element of this novel, as water predominated in her *Love Medicine* (1984) and earth figured in her *Tracks* (1988),³ Erdrich calls attention to the lightness of ties that bind humans together. The central image of the web spun from air calls particular attention to the ephemeral nature of the family as a community. In a segment entitled "Celestine's Night," Celestine James, who is part Chippewa, notices a tiny white spider making its nest in her baby's hair:

It was a delicate thing, close to transparent, with long sheer legs. It moved so quickly that it seemed to vibrate, throwing out invisible strings and catching them, weaving its own tensile strand. Celestine watched as it began to happen. A web was forming, a complicated house, that Celestine could not bring herself to destroy. (176)

Vibrating strings create links that form a structure, matching Erdrich's method of orchestrating voices to shape a story that emphasizes both the fragility and the mutability of community, particularly the family, and the transience of human relationships, such as those between parents and children. The diaphanous appearance of the web corresponds to the network of loosely woven family communities in *The Beet Queen*.

Although Native characters are not emphasized in this novel, it is not without a strong Native presence, reminding the reader of Erdrich's concern for communal values, particularly in the exploration of ways that humans come together in order to survive, Natives and non-Natives alike. Kenneth Lincoln's interpretation of tribe is useful here because it can be extended to include non-tribal as well as tribal people: "Tribe means the basics of human community shared, lean to fat, a catalyst to the creation of common bonds against suffering" (8). The concept of the tribe as central unifying force against suffering is another way of expressing the comedy of human survival. In dealing with human issues of adapting and surviving, Erdrich creates a human comedy that essentially embraces the spirit of the tribe. *The Beet*

Queen considers issues that cut across both white and Native cultures and deals with concerns that human beings must face in order to maintain equilibrium. Chance, comedy, and survival are the significant elements of *The Beet Queen*, and they converge in the tension between the solitary condition and the communal condition.

Some of the characters in this novel break out of solitude to find a community and thereby ease suffering; others remain closed off from any real community membership. Sita Kozka and Karl Adare remain effectively disconnected from others; in one telling scene toward the end of the novel, Karl makes his way back to Argus to see Dot in the Beet Queen pageant. He has been blown along by the wind, at one point feeling himself suspended: "I hung motionless in speed above the earth" (320). On the way into the fairgrounds he spies the dead Sita, who has been propped up in the cab of Mary's truck, and speaks to her as if she were alive (321). Sita, who is literally dead, and Karl, who is dead to his family, are cut off from earth, released into air.

Mary Adare and Wallace hover on the edge of family, inhabiting a borderline place without full membership in any community. Mary has trouble relating to others at any level; Wallace over-accommodates in his attempts to embrace others, with the result that people are put off by his ingratiating ways. To enter into a community requires the ability to adapt and adjust oneself to others on a mutually agreeable basis. Nowhere is that ability more closely associated with survival than in the family, and nowhere is it more successful than in the ultimate relationship that emerges between Dot Adare and her mother Celestine. The family remains the central figure in *The Beet Queen* as it is in *Tracks* and *Love Medicine*.

Whereas in *Tracks* families break down and re-form in fragmentary units that somewhat resemble the originals, in *The Beet Queen* families are never really whole to begin with. The entire concept of family as a community is being re-defined; it is a community in the air. In this novel, a family can be reduced to a single member, not by holocaust, as in *Tracks*, but by chance or whim. At the beginning, the family of Mary and Karl Adare dissolves as their mother Adelaide flies off into the air with a

carnival stunt flier, leaving them with an unnamed baby brother. Mary makes her way into the family of her Aunt Fritzie, Uncle Pete, and cousin Sita; when that family evaporates, she attempts to form a family with Celestine and her daughter Dot. Karl Adare, who fathered Dot, is noticeably absent from this family. Wallace Pfef feels a connection with the family unit surrounding Dot because he helped deliver her; Dot's real name—Wallacette Darlene—comes from him, and he stood up for her at baptism. Celestine herself grew up without her parents (Regina Kashpaw and Dutch James from *Tracks*), but her older sister Isabel took care of her and her brother Russell Kashpaw. Russell eventually finds a family with Fleur and Eli, who care for him after he has a stroke. In the many variations of family communities, characters in *The Beet Queen* show themselves to be adaptive creatures who struggle to find a communal identity that will help them defy isolation and loneliness. Joseph Meeker says that the "comic mode of human behavior represented in literature is the closest art has come to describing man as an adaptive animal" (39). The character/narrators in *The Beet Queen* are linked to one another by the telling of the stories of how they try to adapt themselves to the conditions of their lives. In the process they make a community in the unity of their voices.

The communal aspect of the novel is orchestrated by the narrative structure. Possessing a more formal narrative design than *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen* exhibits a chapter organization in which the narratives of one or more identified tellers are followed by narratives told in the third person. In this established pattern, Anne Tyler sees a cohesiveness that seems to be missing in *Love Medicine*: "While the first book was actually a group of stories, a kind of patchwork quilt of family histories, the second is a single great interwoven tapestry. Pull one strand and the whole structure quivers" (4D). Despite the close weave of story lines in the narrative structure, however, community seems to be more amorphous in *The Beet Queen* than it is in *Love Medicine*, in part because of the consonance of voices. The reader receives the impression that there is less distinction among the voices than there is in *Love Medicine*, perhaps because all of the tellers present variations of the same story: that of adapting and sur-

viving. Russell Banks comments on point of view in *The Beet Queen*, remarking on the relationship between individuals and the whole group:

The chapters are alternately narrated by each of the main characters in a voice that belongs simultaneously to the character and to an impersonal, overseeing consciousness, so that the voices seem to blend, as in a chorus, without ever losing their remarkable individuality. (462)

First, Mary narrates the story of how she got to Argus, and an unknown teller relates the story of Karl's homosexual encounter in a boxcar that takes him away from Argus and from Mary. Sita Kozka, Celestine James, Karl Adare, and Wallace Pfef take up the story in turn, each chapter ending with a third-person account, culminating in the final narration by Dot Adare. As Banks notes, "[t]he effect is to deprive the book of a single hero, one character against whom all the others are defined, and to replace it with something like a community" (462-63). For lack of clearly established individual family units, *The Beet Queen*, according to Banks, features one large family in what he calls a "Brueghel-like realism" (461).

Vizenor invites the postmodern⁴ approach to understanding narrative by letting in the spirit of trickster: "a chance, a comic holotrope in a postmodern language game that uncovers the distinctions and ironies between narrative voices" (192). In her fiction, Erdrich creates a chorus of voices that join together in the comic struggle to survive; at the same time she shows individuals who turn away from community, their own personal needs creating barriers between themselves and others. The impulses to consent to community and to dissent from it are held together by a narrative structure that shivers precariously at times but never falls apart. The stories hold as the web holds, shaking and vibrating, continuing to be constructed, never finished.

In the discourse of narrative voices in the novel the spirit of trickster prevails: by telling stories of how they made their individual ways in the world the narrators show themselves as adapters, "a communal sign in imagination," which, Vizenor maintains, constitutes "trickster" in modern literature. In his critical essay on *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, Louis Owens

observes that Vizenor identifies adaptation and change as central to survival in Native American cultures and, indeed, all cultures: "For all peoples, Vizenor seems to argue, but for the mixed blood in particular, adaptation and new self-imaginings are synonymous with psychic survival" (152). The ability to adapt to loss of family and to change to new circumstances constitutes survival in Erdrich's novel. Family stories create the central trope of *The Beet Queen*, and the tellers form the chorus in the sign of the trickster. Such a family story is narrated by Mary Adare, who possesses the spirit of trickster in that her life is set free by chance and she is able to adapt and survive. Mary is a part of the comic experience because she has a sceptical view of life and a sceptical attitude toward herself; her scepticism helps her to survive. A part of the trickster chorus in the novel, Mary Adare is a steady voice in this large family of narrators.

Although Mary is technically without a real family almost from the beginning, she tries to create a family wherever she finds herself. Mary recalls her life with her brother Karl and their mother Adelaide "in a lonely and isolated white house on the edge of Prairie Lake" (5). Their only visitor was Mr Ober, who appeared two or three times a week, arriving at night and parking surreptitiously in the barn. Mary remarks on the difference of her family, with only the three of them and Mr Ober, their only visitor. The family is so tenuous that when Mr Ober smothers in a grain-loading accident, the family loses its only means of continuance. Its house is in Mr Ober's name, "along with everything else except an automobile, which Adelaide sold the next morning" (7) after his death. Set loose by chance, the family that soon includes a new baby wanders the streets of Minneapolis as the mother ponders what to do. At an orphans' picnic Mary's first family dissolves. The baby brother that Adelaide hadn't bothered to name is plucked from Mary's arms as they wait in vain for their mother to return from an airplane ride with "THE GREAT OMAR, AERONAUGHT EXTRAORDINAIRE" (11).

Although Mary seems able to adapt to the loss of her mother by denying her existence, she encounters difficulty when she finds she cannot pay her way in the new environment. Mary becomes a sceptic when she opens the blue velvet box that supposedly

contains "the garnet necklace and the good yellow diamond" (15) and finds instead "pins, buttons, and one silent ticket of retrieval from a Minneapolis pawn shop" (15). Mary never takes anything at face value again.

Mary gauges her future by the determination to forget the past and the voices from the past, in which she has lost trust.⁵ Losing trust in the past is a form of disconnecting. Didier Coste comments on orphanhood as a technique of liberation in narrative:

Since there is nobody but himself to look after him, to look for him and take him back, he engages in a head-first fight (or collusion) with the world as-it-really-is without the protective cushion of parental love and directives. Learning at his expense, by trial and error, he will perhaps learn faster and more profoundly than other young people around him. (320)

Mary shows a quickness of wit in appraising her situation and she does learn a strategy of adapting; she survives because she is able to see home and family in alternate forms and because she understands almost immediately that she must integrate into the real world solidly and quickly. But she never truly succeeds in becoming part of either of the families she chooses—her Aunt Fritzie's family and the family comprising Celestine and Dot—because she wants to control them for her own purposes. Therefore she is always on the edge of community, struggling for a hold but never gaining a real place. Mary inhabits the border between belonging and not quite belonging, that space where comic freedom prevails, where, Vizenor tells us, trickster is alive in narrative.

Within that comic space Mary first tries to make herself necessary to Pete and Fritzie Kozka by taking the place of their daughter Sita, who "wanted to move down to Fargo and live by herself in a modern apartment and model clothes for DeLendricies" (76). Mary tells Fritzie that she is "more a mother" to her than her own mother, seeming to reinforce the aunt-niece bond, a special relationship that Erdrich explores in *Love Medicine* as well.⁶ The bond between Fritzie and Mary comes out of selfish need instead of real feeling. On Fritzie's part the relationship with Mary seems to be a way to get even with Adelaide, Mary's mother, for whom she has contempt. On Mary's part, the relationship represents

little beyond security, a way to outrun the boxcar that brought her to Argus and a way to fill up the empty blue box left her by her mother.

One of the ironies of Mary's telling is that she wills herself to forget the loss of mother and brothers: "They were part of a fading pattern that was beyond understanding and brought me no comfort" (21). But she can't stop the dreams: "At night they appeared: Karl, Mama, my baby brother, and Mr. Ober with his mouth full of grain. They tried to reach through air and earth. They tried to tell me there was rhyme and reason. But I put my hands over my ears" (21). In putting her hands over her ears, Mary has effectively cut off the past and therefore cannot ground her future on anything solid. According to Native belief, which views past, present, and future as a continuum, centring on the future without regard for the past would present a fragmented sense of self.⁷ Mary has only part of the picture. She puts her mind to work on making the butcher shop her "perfect home." But that perfection is wanting. There is a basic incongruity in Mary's life. Somewhere between the loss of her true home with her mother and brothers and the adoption of a new one, Mary has developed an oddness that she herself recognizes as a short-coming, something that puts distance between her and other people.

Mary's ability to forget the past and her efforts to adapt to a new family provide immediate protection and therefore survival, but almost as soon as she enters this new family it dissolves. Pete and Fritzie go away, and Sita flees the city, leaving Mary to concentrate on Celestine. Mary wills a sign of yet another family in her vision of the baby Celestine will have:

It was a girl, much larger than Mary's lost baby brother, but just as vigorous, and with a headful of blazing dark red curls.

She peered at Mary, her eyes the gray-blue of newborns, unfocused but willful already, and of a stubborn intensity that Mary recognized as her own. (143)

In her trance, Mary has envisioned a family, creating it out of the soft dark air as she lies in the grass listening to wild plums ripen, their thin stems breaking in the wind. The willing of a family is another strand of the web, light and shimmering and precarious.

In the imagining of a family to replace the original one she lost, Mary breaks out of the loneliness imposed on her by chance: "I did not choose solitude. Who would? It came on me like a kind of vocation" (69). From the vision of the family in Mary's trance, it is a short step to Mary's entrance into the family itself. It is as if Mary takes the place of Karl in the family that consists of Celestine the mother, Dot the baby, and Mary the aunt-father. Adapting to a new situation, Mary puts herself into the aunt's role with imagination and vigour, even to the point of re-naming the baby, Wallacette Darlene, by giving her the nickname Dot: "One round syllable, so much easier to say" (179). In re-naming the baby, Mary appropriates a special relationship with Dot, with whom she has felt a bond from the beginning: "I understood things about the baby that her mother could not accept. For instance, she was never meant to be a baby" (180). Mary grows eager to take over some of the parenting of Dot, as impatient with Dot's babyhood as Dot herself. She is glad when the baby stops nursing, grows teeth, demands food, and explodes "in an astonishing fast creep that took her across a room in seconds" (180). Furthermore, Mary sees a likeness to herself in Dot's physical appearance: "Pale, broad, and solid" (181). She also notes a similarity in "Dot's one-track mind and doubled fists" (182). Celestine the mother and Mary the aunt compete jealously for Dot's attention and love in a desperate attempt to be the mothers that neither of them had.

Mary invents a new version of the family, bulldozing her way in, assuming a conspiratorial role with Dot against her mother, subverting Celestine's attempts to discipline Dot, taking over birthday parties, imprisoning an offending teacher in the naughty box, buying Dot's dress for the Beet Queen pageant, creating a comic uproar wherever she goes. Sypher's comment about comedy as release illuminates Mary's part in the trickster chorus: "Comedy is a momentary and publicly useful resistance to authority and an escape from its pressures; and its mechanism is a free discharge of repressed psychic energy or resentment through laughter" (241-42). Comedy happens in the space between what Mary wants to accomplish and what actually happens. The incongruities between ideals and actualities shape comedy,

states Sypher. Within that incongruent space is the liberating spirit of trickster that Vizenor describes.

The family that is driven together around Dot comes to include Wallace Pfef, who is attracted to Dot by her fearlessness: "Dot had one trait that always drew me back. She feared nothing. Not darkness, heights, nor any type of reptile" (233). Wallace is attracted to Dot for another reason: she looks like Karl Adare, his first and only lover, to whom he is bound as a servant to a master. And because of that resemblance he can't let Dot in when she runs away from the Christmas pageant. Earlier, when Dot had tried to run away from home to live with her father, Wallace is the one to tell her that her father is worse than a bum: "He got your mother pregnant and ran away. He stole money from me and then went to Aunt Sita, took a handout, drove her into an asylum, then disappeared" (236). Appalled at what he has done, Wallace stops just at the point where he might have told Dot that her father hated her.

Erdrich shows a family driven together in the one that crowds around Dot. With each member locked into his or her own agenda, the family fails to give Dot air to breathe. Then Wallace, Mary, and Celestine become frightened by the monster they have created. They are together because of Dot, and they nearly smother her in the desire to meet their own needs through her. Wallace observes: "More than anything we had in common, Dot's spite drove Celestine, Mary, and me together" (301). As she grows, they become shocked at what they have created: "Dot wore fishnet stockings and a vinyl skirt to classes, teased her hair into a nest, came home with merchandise she couldn't have purchased on her minimum wage at the Argus Theater" (301). Like any parent, Wallace worries over Dot and her companions. He wants so desperately to give Dot the confidence that he thinks will change her life that he presents her with a 20-pound shot so she can use up her energy and make a place for herself in sports competition. When that doesn't work, he becomes consumed by the idea of Dot as the Beet Queen, devoting an entire year of his life to making it happen.

Wallace's impulses are communal, but his actions are self-isolating. He is the beet crop promoter and fraternal organiza-

tion member, roles that give him civic power. Wallace uses membership in several of the town's civic groups—"Chamber of Commerce, Sugar Beet Promoters, Optimists, Knights of Columbus, park board and other organizations too numerous to mention" (160)—to turn the valley into fields of beets. He joins organizations not to relate to other human beings but to gain power: "Eagles, Moose, Kiwanis, Elk. I need to belong" (160). Significantly Wallace adapts to the impersonal communities that bear the names of original totems that in Chippewa tradition gave individuals personal connection and community identity. However, these fraternal communities to which Wallace belongs do not link him to other people in any human way. They simply function as a means to reach people in order to accomplish self-centred aims, in this case industrial growth, a way to promote agri-business, for Wallace sees the beet as "the perfect marriage between nature and technology" (161). In fact, these groups and even the enterprise of the beet itself take the place of his own family in a kind of organic exchange. In perceiving the land in a utilitarian way, Wallace misses the beauty of it, reminding the reader of N. Scott Momaday's observation that Western civilization will ultimately destroy the earth by exploiting it for its economic value (69). Ecologically and personally, Wallace spends resources to get more resources, with the result that he loses individual identity as well as family identity.

Wallace's story is one that takes place along a geographical border and a psychical border as well. Russell Banks describes the setting as

the flat, sparsely populated farm country where eastern North Dakota turns into western Minnesota, the literal and figurative border country where Chippewa tribal lands and lives grind against the land and lives of smalltime white farmers, who in turn are swallowed by agribusiness. (460-61)

Geographical and cultural borders create edges of existence that render communities vulnerable. Individuals may be cut off from the protection of the family at those junctions. Furthermore, in the case of Wallace, when there is no real family to provide support, the individual may be cut loose, released into the air without a means of grounding.

In his enactment of the comedy of adapting and surviving, Wallace protects himself from public knowledge that he is homosexual. As far as the town is concerned, Wallace's only companion is a prominently displayed photograph of a woman whom he doesn't know: "I bought her many years ago at one of those sad Minnesota farm auctions. She was among the empty canning jars, pincushions, butter dishes, and chipped vases in a box I bid out for five dollars" (159). The photograph has become a legend in town: "Poor Pfef's dead sweetheart" (159). It masks Wallace's homosexuality, preserves him from marriage, and makes him an acceptable dinner partner for all the Argussian widows. Without membership in Dot's extended family, Wallace can claim no real links to anyone. He is without a family in every sense, disconnected in his isolation but pretending to belong.

Wallace's futile attempts to find a way to belong lead him to Dot in a comedy of chance that originated in his homosexual encounter with Karl Adare. Neither Wallace nor Karl is capable of the self-imagining it takes to create meaningful connecting and belonging. In the comedy of chance, Karl never took anything and therefore never had anything to give to a family: whatever he might have offered was taken away when his mother left him and Mary and the new baby at the Orphans' Picnic at the fairgrounds in Minneapolis. Karl sums up his meaningless life: "I was part of the senseless landscape. A pulse, a strip, of light. I give nothing, take nothing, mean nothing, hold nothing" (318). He was set free in the grandstand scene just as Mary was, but Karl kept on running. He gave up trying to find someone to be close to after the rejection by Giles St. Ambrose. When Karl professes love for his boxcar companion, Giles dismisses their lovemaking: "Oh, Jesus, it wasn't anything. It happens. Don't get all worked up over it, okay?" (25). By the time that Fleur Pillager⁸ delivers Karl to the church on the reservation, after having healed his broken ankles and cured him of pneumonia, Karl has become passive about himself and his future: "I'd been cast off so many times that by then it didn't matter" (55). Sent to the Orphanage at St. Jerome's in Minneapolis, the scene of his mother's flight from the family, Karl eventually enters the seminary where chance encounters are his only ways of connecting: "Between the

lines of sacred texts, I rendezvoused with thin hard hoboes who had slept in the bushes" (55).

Karl adapts by becoming solitary, disconnecting from permanent relationships. He is unencumbered by any possession that will remind him of loss: "All my life I travelled light. I made a habit of throwing out worn clothes, books I finished, even Celestine's notes" (316). Then suddenly Karl hungers like a glutton for everything he left behind: "I wanted the whole world of people who belonged to each other and owned things and cooked food and remembered old songs" (317). Like Mary and like Wallace, Karl is consumed with the idea of connecting, but he has never found a real way to do that. His mission is to drive back to Argus on the day of the Beet Queen Parade to try to reclaim a family. Always in a car, Karl has led the life of a salesman; he has peddled everything from cutlery to Bibles. Set free by chance at the orphans' picnic, Karl has been drifting ever since. The image of Karl that dominates is one in which he is suspended in the air, wheels spinning, "motionless in speed above the earth like a fixed star" (320). He comes back to Argus to see Dot and ends by reuniting with Wallace, whom he rescues from a dunking pool where he lands when Dot pitches a softball at him. The last image of Karl is consistent with his readiness to move out once more and it is suggested by his car parked outside Wallace's house: "It's an old lean model, with sprung shocks. It is bruised with unpainted weld marks, coated with thick dry dust. The car is backed into its parking place, ready for a smooth exit" (338). The implication is that he will doubtless move off into border country again, weightless and unencumbered, without any ties to place or family. Like Wallace, Karl has no means of grounding; thus his release into the open air of the countryside with only the highway below him seems inevitable.

Sita Kozka vies with Karl in her inability to adapt and to become a part of a family. She can hardly wait to leave Fritzie, Pete, and Mary for the city of Fargo, where she can pursue her dream "to live by herself in a modern apartment and model clothes for DeLendrecies" (76) and where she will also work behind the men's hat counter, poised to meet "a young rising professional." Sita's imagining constructs a fairy-tale life made possible by chance:

They would marry. He would buy her a house near the county courthouse, on the street of railroad mansions not far from Island Park. Every winter she would walk down the hill to skate. She would wear powder blue tights and a short dress with puffs of rabbit fur at the sleeves, collar, and all around a flared hem that would lift as she twirled. (76)

Sita's self-imagining remains in the realm of the fairy-tale. She has cut herself off from her family to pursue her dream in Fargo, where, after devoting time to keeping slim, attending charm school, and applying pulverized apricot kernels to keep her skin wrinkle-free, she eventually begins to worry that the dream will not come true. Now that she is 30 years old, "something more should have happened" (84). Adapting and changing have always presented difficulties for Sita. Only in dreams does chance offer possibilities that require no adapting or adjusting; but Sita's dreams feature grotesque memories that prevent her from self-imagining.

Released by chance, Sita separates from family in a hurry to get away from the butcher shop, which she hates. She makes herself an orphan. Sita's image of home is in her dreams:

Coffee can after coffee can full of gizzards. . . . I had to turn each gizzard inside out and wash it in a pan of water. All the gravel and hard seed fell out into the bottom. Sometimes I found bits of metal and broken glass. Once I found a brilliant. (28)

Always attracted to glitter, Sita is discouraged when the little sparkling stone gleaned from the turkey gizzard turns out to be worthless, not a diamond at all. The only diamond Sita has the possibility of owning is the cow's diamond, "the hard rounded lens inside a cow's eye that shines when you look through it at the light, almost like an opal" (29). And she loses that to Mary when Sita's father, out of pity for Mary and her empty jewel box, hands it over to her.

Sita tries to construct a version of herself unsupported by family or friends, and her self-imagining is all geared to the appearance of Mr Right, who "refused to show his face and the months ticked by" (84). Finally she settles for Jimmie Bohl, who represents a last chance for Sita but who ironically sends her back to where she started in terms of her self-imagining. The image of Sita that haunts her telling is the one presented by the third-

person narrator, who describes the abduction of Sita on her wedding day by Jimmy's cousins and brothers, "loaded on sloe gin and schnapps" (97). They leave her on a remote section of Highway 30, where she stumbles into an Indian bar, stunning the patrons in her appearance as a rolling ball of white net: "And the white ball *was* frightening, for while the wind tumbled it about and the patrons of the bar dodged to avoid danger, it kept up a muffled and inhuman croaking" (100). By the time Sita comes to rest everyone can see that she is a bride: she appeared "normal in all respects except that her face was loose and raging, distorted, working horribly in silence" (100).

Of all of the characters in *The Beet Queen*, Celestine James comes the closest to the communal and adaptive response of which Meeker writes. One storyteller in this human comedy of tellers, she struggles to adapt and to accommodate to the conditions she finds. She experiences heartache and disappointment in relationships with others, but her relationship with her daughter Dot shows an outer-directed impulse that sets her apart from the inward focus of the other characters. In Meeker's view of human endeavour, "[a]ll creatures must fulfill whatever is potentially within them in accordance with the environment that is actually around them" (191). Celestine achieves selfhood by directing her energy toward the communal mode of living and away from the isolationist state.

Celestine speaks realistically about herself and the people she came from. Her parents, Dutch and Regina, died early, leaving Isabel to raise Celestine and her brother Russell. Her simple statement of Isabel's caring speaks of sacrifice in an outer-directed impulse: "She's all we have, and she takes care of us by holding down jobs with farmers, cooking, and sometimes even threshing along with the men" (43). Both Russell and Celestine are affected by the loss of Isabel, "who married into a Sioux family and moved down to South Dakota" (111-12). But there is a realistic acceptance of chance in Celestine's voice:

We hear she has died of a beating, or in a car wreck, some way that's violent. But nothing else. We hear nothing from her husband, and if she had any children we never hear from them. Russell goes down there that weekend, but the funeral is long past. He comes home,

telling me it's like she fell off the earth. There is no trace of her, no word. (112)

Celestine's distance from the Chippewa traditions does not prevent her from remembering her sister, who carried "the banner in the Saint Catherine's Procession every year, looking huge and sorrowful, but pure" (44). Memory of the past and her own present reality join harmoniously for Celestine: "My mother was big too. It seems like I got all of my father's coloring, but am growing very quickly into my mother's size" (44).

Celestine possesses the ability to remember her origin, to adapt and to accommodate to reality. Her memories of her mother's size and Isabel's tall power give Celestine a sense of herself that results in a realistic appraisal: "I tower. My face is too broad. My teeth look fierce when I grin, a trait from my mother's side" (115). Through Isabel, her older sister, and her mother, Celestine derives enough strength to send Karl packing when he oppresses her and to mother Dot despite uncertainties and doubts concerning her ability to parent: "In the love books a baby never comes of it all, so again I am not prepared" (139).

Still, Celestine's passion for Dot overcomes any lack of preparation for motherhood. Celestine adapts to this new being in her life, mingling her care of the baby with daily activities in a smooth integration:

She stole time to be with Dot as if they were lovers. Days, it was half hours of nursing in the shop's back room, sometimes with the raw smell of blood on her hands. In the evenings, Celestine had the baby all to herself at home. As she read her novels, talked on the telephone, or cooked or sat, Dot slept nearby in a laundry basket, breathing in fits and starts. (175)

Celestine's world changes with Dot's coming, but she experiences no disjunction in the adjustment to her baby. The bonding between mother and daughter seems complete: "In those days and nights, Celestine's mind was flooded, green as jade. Her love for the baby hung around her in clear, blowing sheets" (175).

Celestine's agony in raising Dot shows a persistence of that early love despite great trials. She feels Dot's great disappointments and understands that her own impulses to give Dot everything she can may not be the wisest course:

The nuns don't know what to do with Dot, and I don't either. So I do the wrong thing and give her everything until there is nothing left. I try to be the mother I never had, to the daughter I never was. I see too much of myself in Dot. I know how it is. I was too big for all the boys. But I never went so far as to beat them senseless, which Dot has done. (215)

Celestine's realistic appraisal of herself as a mother carries over to her attempts to understand Dot as she appears to others. Celestine is always grounded in what actually is, as opposed to what might be preferable. She accepts Dot the way she is.

Celestine's narratives, with her rendering of Dot's and her own trials, affirm balance in the family. Meeker writes that "literary comedy depicts the loss of equilibrium and its recovery" (25). The aborted attempts by Mary, Wallace, and Karl to serve as parents to Dot succumb to Celestine's sometimes uncertain but selfless efforts to mother her child. The relationship between Dot and her mother is at heart a relationship based on the selfless love of a parent for a child. Dot settles in with her mother after the grotesque Beet Queen Pageant from which she has fled in the haunting re-enactment of Adelaide's flight from her family. The last scene reminds us that a child's understanding surpasses the most terrible events. Dot eats the toast and eggs her mother has prepared as they talk over everything that has happened: "I want to lean into her the way wheat leans into wind, but instead I walk upstairs and lie down in my bed alone" (338). In the final image of air commingling with love, Dot expresses her own and her mother's mutual need: "I breathe it in, and I think of her lying in the next room, her covers thrown back too, eyes wide open, waiting" (338). Human beings wait for love that is as necessary as the air we breathe.

The Beet Queen explores the limits of human connecting. Comedy happens along border territory where individuals try to adapt to survive. Sometimes physical survival is painful, especially when it offers no psychical easing of wounds that emerge in daily consciousness or in haunting dreams. In the comedy of survival, Mary and Karl Adare are so deeply affected by their mother's abandonment of them that they cannot relate to others, but they try. Sita's nature effectively cuts her off from connecting; and Wallace Pfef's nature, combined with his ner-

vous, restless heritage, prevents him from developing a truly communal spirit. Probably Wallace's connecting is foreclosed by the homophobic society in which he lives. Only the mother-daughter relationship emerges as strong and vital community. Celestine and Dot have broken out of isolation to survive in lives that remain individually intact and communally directed.

NOTES

- ¹ Lincoln recalls that among the Lakota in the northern plains where he was raised "sending a voice" invoked the sensible and mysterious powers that "move the world" (1). Further, he notes that this "regard for a voice of power remains pan-Indian, despite relative differences over time and degrees of acculturation to modern, non-Indian ways" (2). In *The Beet Queen*, resonance of the tribal past comes in the voices of a community expanded to include both white and Native people, emphasizing the interrelatedness of all beings.
- ² In his study of literary ecology, Meeker points out that Dante's *Divine Comedy* is an extended definition of humanity's place in the universe in its undertaking to describe "a way of life which adapts man to the given biological and cultural circumstances of existence" (39).
Meeker contends that "Dante's comedy of salvation translates in our time into the comedy of survival" (39). The tradition of comedy that we see in a modern writer necessitates the invention of structures that show human endurance, such as the multi-narrator form that Erdrich uses in her novels.
- ³ Wong questioned Erdrich and Michael Dorris about the significance of the elements in their work. Erdrich responded: "We really think of each book as being tied to one of the four elements. There's a lot of other imagery as well" (210). Dorris also indicates that the dominant imagery of each work is not totally pervasive, but there is a predominant emphasis: "Oh, sure. It's not neat. But *Beet Queen*, as you will see, is clearly air" (210).
- ⁴ Vizenor explains the inadequacy of social science theories such as behaviourism, functionalism, and new materialism in their tendency to treat narrative in an isolationist, linear way (189). He sees the modernist approach, in its insistence on individualism, as self-defeating for Natives:
The trickster in modernist literature was invented to be an individual, or at least the metaphor of individualism; this image supported the notion of the vanishing tribes. Certain individuals survived discoveries, lethal pathogens, studies and relocations (but not their cultures) and were assimilated as exceptional in modern aesthetic and political theories. (193)
The emphasis on a private, unique vision of the world, propagated by modernist aesthetics, does not illuminate trickster narratives in which "the listeners and readers imagine their liberation" (194). Vizenor emphasizes that the trickster is "a communal sign, a comic holotrope and a discourse; not a real person or a tragic metaphor in an isolated monologue" (196).
- ⁵ In *Native American Renaissance*, Lincoln points out that in traditional Native cultures, the past is incorporated into the present by story. Thus stories "historically mark and recount events worth remembering, so that culture extends history as collective experience, across the spaces between peoples, over time that separates the living and the dead" (223). For all people then, a sense of the past informs the present and future time in a continuum. Being cut off from the past when her mother abandons her and then determined to put any memory out of her mind, Mary Adare loses the chance to imagine herself.

- 6 Mary tries to bond with her Aunt Fritzie more out of a concern for her own survival than for any real feeling for her. Then Mary tries to develop a relationship with her niece Dot Adare, more to satisfy her own needs to parent than to give anything to the relationship. These abortive attempts to connect in the aunt-niece relationship in *The Beet Queen* contrast with Albertine's feeling for June in *Love Medicine*, a relationship that Albertine describes as based on mutual affection and giving.
- 7 In forgetting the past, Mary is denying the fundamental integration of human beings. Paula Gunn Allen notes the difference between white and Native ways of perceiving reality in the Western tendency to see space as linear and time as sequential: "the Indian universe moves and breathes continuously, and the Western universe is fixed and static" (7).
- 8 Fleur Pillager and Eli appear only briefly in this novel. Fleur cares for Karl when she finds him with broken ankles after his leap from the boxcar. Fleur and Eli care for Russell when he suffers a stroke.

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