

## The Mother's Tongue

HEID E. ERDRICH, author of *Fishing for Myth* poems from New Rivers Press and co-editor of *Sister Nations* anthology from the Minnesota Historical Society Press, has won awards from The Loft Literary Center, Minnesota State Arts Board, Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers, and the Archibald Bush Foundation. She founded Birchbark Books Press with her sister, author Louise Erdrich. Her degrees are from Dartmouth College and Johns Hopkins University. A member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibway, she was raised in Wahpeton, North Dakota where her parents taught at the Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school. She teaches at The University of St. Thomas.



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# The Mother's Tongue

HEID E. ERDRICH



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*For John, Jules Ezra, and Eliza Jonis,  
who taught me the mother's tongue.*



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## Offering: Words

*Gichimookomaanimō: speaks American, speaks the Long Knives' language*

Mother, if you look it up, is *source*,  
(fount and fountainhead— origin,  
provenance and provenience,  
root) and *wellspring*.  
Near her in the dictionary you will find  
we all spring *mother-naked*,  
(bare, stripped, unclothed, undressed, and raw)  
with nothing but *mother-wit*  
(brains, brain-power, sense) our *native wit*  
with which we someday might *mother*,  
(nurse, care for, serve, and wait on)  
if we don't first look it up and discover  
the fullness of its meaning.

Such interesting language, this *tongue*,  
(our diction, idiom, speech, and vernacular)  
also *sign language*,  
(gesture language)  
and *contact language*,  
which was English or Ojibwe,  
either way; both spoke forward our *mother country*,  
our *motherland* (see also fatherland,  
our home, our homeland, our land)  
called *soil* in English our *mother tongue*,  
our *native language* that is not my *Native language*  
not the *mother language* Ojibwe:  
wellspring of many tongues, nurse, origin, and source.



# 1 Honey Sweet



## Craving Honey

Not the African bird, not the Honey Guide  
who dives the honey badger,  
or any human who comes near.  
Not the bird who leads beasts  
to the bee tree, then begs its share.

Not the bird calling "*Eat with me!*"  
whose people, now forced from the bush,  
ignore its cry in the rush of African suburbs.

No, not the bird, but the printed path,  
the iris landing strip marked to show bees  
right into the nectary, to drops  
deep in throat-open flowers.

Not what we expected—that bees need a map.  
Still our search for sweetness can go hard,  
the signs often uncertain, the comb,  
when we find it, locked in a wax tough to crack.

Not what we always thought,  
that the blue flag unfurling meant to lure us,  
when all along the iris wanted only bees.

Not the bird, not the flower.  
No mystic hint of what it is we want.  
Only a lane in print on furred petals.  
Only the beeline. Only what points the way to.

## The Way To

In the dimly lit cosmos of the body  
one egg turns planet-like, its gravity  
draws currents through a woman  
like tide pull in caves by the sea.

Try to keep such images revolving  
when even benevolent passion  
seems too close, ironic, unnatural.

Not one of your girlfriends will ever  
describe the actual moment:  
How her eyes might have wavered,  
tilted to his, her chin a perfect emblem,  
sweet offering of someone wholly else,  
and a bondage gone to willingly.

Certainly no one mentions  
the little fear cries. Aloud or silent,  
who knows for sure.  
Some women hear both at once  
*Not me!* And the twin call *Let me!*

The risk of stage fright's greater  
the bigger the production.  
Forget what it is you mean to do.  
Make dinner, pay bills, wash the car.

The moment will come upon you.  
He closes your eyes with kisses.  
Aims his love and you pray he misses,  
then you un-pray for days.

## She Dances

The drum begins and she  
raises her hand to lift  
the female-feathered fan.  
She moves slowly, heavy  
in her buckskin, heavy  
with the possibility of life.  
Her neat fringe beats along  
with the drum as she steps.  
Full sun in full leather and  
she wills herself not to sweat.  
I pray the long days in the arena,  
nights sleeping on the ground,  
make her ready to dance labor.

Though it's my right, I never dance.  
Not in a shawl, with fluid moving fringes,  
not with beads offered up leggings,  
no satin-worked ribbons or cones sewn  
in V-shapes have ever drawn an arrow down  
my hips to point the way to being woman.

But I once dreamed my friend a dress:  
one in slipping honey colors of satin  
with black bands. Its music came with,  
its cones jangling and flashing near each  
flower-print cloth outfit then on to the next.  
And now I dream her another dress,  
the one for labor, a traditional deep blue,  
the midnight wool blue shot with red  
that all her ancestors would recognize,  
the heavy dress of history,  
the one made of flags  
and ration blankets and blood.

# The Hive Improvisation

*(dream in clarinet)*

I hold out my arms,  
take up the hive.  
Their buzz shocks  
through me alive  
and I believe them.  
In the blueness of a tank,  
they come at me numb.  
They say they are the drum  
and I believe them.  
The look on them is fever.  
They shake me through forever.  
The shy gut of me relents.  
The hooks they shoot bend.  
I hold out my hands, attend them.  
The look of them is never-ending.  
The things they say are blank  
and I believe them.  
The blue light they cast remains.  
The look of them reminds me.  
The sound of them surrounds me.  
The things they say are true  
and I believe them.  
Their flowers flood my veins.  
The hum of them remains.  
They tell me I'm the same  
and I believe them.