

**Judith Roche.** *Wisdom of the Body*. Seattle: Black Heron Press, 2007. 94 pp. \$14.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-930773-81-6.



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What is the difference between nature writing and autobiography? Poet Judith Roche's themes are the body as earth; the earth as mother; the animality of human mothering; the lover's body as new land; the sex of plants and the flowering of human love; and mortality, earth's final claim on us all. So where do we place her? This third collection of Roche's poetry, which won the American Book Award, makes such questions irrelevant. *Wisdom of the Body* reveals Roche as an important poet for whom humans cannot be separated from the natural world and for whom, therefore, the conventional boundary between genres such as the pastoral and the confessional must be destroyed. She is a nature poet, a poet of deep ecology. She is also a personal poet, a poet of deep humanity.

This masterfully composed book relies on several repeating images that appear variously in human and other-than-human guises. In the first poem, Roche describes a childhood near-death experience of drowning that was less frightening than embracing. Later her deaf son Robin tries to call her a mermaid but signs "Fish Girl": "The

wavy sign for *fish*: *girl* sign, a bonnet string on the cheek" (p. 17). Then the fish-girl-poet becomes salmon, "silver-sided beauties/streaking iridescent rivulets ... /Earth of birth in the body inherent/intelligence of instinctual emotion," the fish's head-long plunge reminding her of how she "would still leap off--/ or up--/the right available cliff/for love" (pp. 51-52).

And finally the human submerges utterly into fish, the holy salmon of the Northwest, in an evocative series of poems that have been installed on the Hiram M. Chittenden Locks in Ballard, Washington. There, a public arts project provides recorded versions of these poems to those who peer through the underwater windows to see the fish leaping towards their spawning grounds. The poems further blur the line between fish and human, with the salmon becoming heroic actors who speak directly of memories and longings. Salmon shares a continuum with the mermaid-fishgirl, rather than being an alien antithesis.

Similarly, the strongly maternal human woman and the mythic earth-mother-goddess merge throughout the book and, as in all great feminine

mythologies, merge as well into the figure of death. Because a mother's gift to her children is not only life but death, goddesses of birth are often goddesses of death as well, and in Roche's thealogy,[1] both are connected with the vital force of creativity; both goddess and woman stand as symbols of the earth itself. In *Wisdom of the Body*, the mother is the poet. In an intensely moving sequence, Roche addresses her son Robin, who has Downs' Syndrome, as a "singular and unexpected" child who teaches her "what love might learn/from the commonplace equation,/the internal rhythm in the dance/when the dancer does not hear our music" (p. 15). The poem's form is literally organic; its twenty-three verses are in couplet form except the twenty-first, which has an extra line, just as Robin has an extra chromosome at that location, a mutation called "trisomy."

In another poem, the poet merges with the great Greek goddess of motherhood, Demeter, as she holds her own daughter giving birth and feels "chrysanthemums and asters/ ... flash from the earth" as new life crowns (p. 24). These floral images are appropriate to the story of a goddess whose daughter was stolen away while picking narcissus, and the complex meanings of flowers are explored in the section entitled "Botany," its theme the connection of sex and death, of beauty and fear. In the voluptuous "Solstice Garden," the reproductive intention of the flowers is evoked as bees "sip sweetness at the core/disappear inside the speckled fold" (p. 39). But the bee transforms itself into a doomed pilot, a man whose "slow descent" involves "your fragrant sex/mingling, finally, with smell of cancer" (p. 44).

Technically elaborate though in accessible language, Roche's poems are a necessary corrective to dualistic thinking that positions humanity outside--or worse, above--the planetary system of animals, plants and fish. There are no "nature images" in her poems, only nature, standing for itself as we stand within it. As she says in her defining poem, "Credo," she believes in "the cave paint-

ings at Lascaux,/The beauty of the clavicle,/The journal of the salmon" (p. 35), all of them equal evidence of earth's awesome creative energy.

Note

[1]. "Thealogy" is the feminine form of "theology."

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