

The Jaguars
That 
Prowl Our
Dreams

NEW AND SELECTED POEMS
1974 – 2018

Mary Mackey

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY D. NURKSE

MARSH HAWK PRESS
2018

Introduction

BY D. NURKSE

“Days and months are travelers of eternity,” said Basho, setting out on a last expedition. In *The Jaguars That Prowl Our Dreams*, a breathtaking “new and selected,” Mary Mackey, quintessential traveler, takes the reader to fascinating places: rural Kentucky, the Amazon, Yucatan, New York, California, ancient Japan, “a nice room with a view of the Taal volcano.” Always she’s alive to estrangement, “the trance of the south.” She’s a traveler hip enough to know there’s always another layer of the unknowable between her and her surroundings, however skillfully she decodes them — see the poem “Defective Instructions for Becoming a Shaman.”

Mackey, like Basho, is also traveling in time. She follows the arc of a lifetime, as you might follow the left bank of the Orinoco, thrilling to the strangeness of human identity as it comes to know itself, as it casts itself into a lover’s eyes, or a strangers, or a cat’s. Mackey’s lines are brilliantly honed to the visceral, playful, savage detail or epigram. Army ants make “their dead into bridges,” a woman in the wilderness twists her wedding ring into a fish hook and survives, a mother “taught me compassion because / she could not feel it.”

But behind the compelling surfaces, transcendental back stories assemble themselves: the self-creation of a psyche over

generations; the hidden history of an era, from the flowering of feminism through the endless death agony of the patriarchy; a blunt story of love in struggle, struggle in love, triumph and dispossession. As in the poem "Witness," there's a knack for exploring the horrific without rhetoric, without playing the disaster card. Always Mackey's eye is drawn to the marginalized, the poor, the outcast, the trivialized, the ones who stand at the center of the human adventure.

The Jaguars That Prowl Our Dreams is a dangerous and fortunate journey. Mary Mackey has created an oeuvre, wilder, more open to change with each passing year. Hers is a monumental achievement.

How They Got Here

in steerage
so hungry they ate the green slime
off the walls of the hold

indentured
grubbing the burdock out of the corn
with short-handled hoes
sucking on stones chewing weeds
sleeping with the cattle

sometimes when a tired, red-knuckled
woman turned toward a man he caught in her
face a glimpse of the bruised beauty
of a winter sunset

on the day they finally bought their freedom
burned their indentures
and left the coast of Virginia behind
to follow Mr. Boone through the Gap
their only possessions were
five wool blankets three bags of flour
half a pound of salt two iron skillets
an axe and a small leather bag
half-filled with seed corn

Great-Grandfather Horace Ebenezer Wanted Boys

but God didn't come through
so he gave all his daughters boys' names
Aunt Christopher and Aunt Ebenezer and Aunt Fenwick

when Ida Alice the youngest was born
he gave up and saddled her with two old maids' names
saying:

no one's gonna marry into a family of girls

Infinite Worlds

The limitless content of our universe might be only one instance of a large (and possibly infinite) number of other universes.

—Astronomer Seth Shostak,
Director of the Center for SETI Research

When you lift your fork an infinite number of you
all lift their forks at the same instant and an infinite number
are missing their mouths and an infinite number are choking
on the tines and an infinite number are being struck by meteors
and vaporized and an infinite number are being trampled by
cattle or time-traveling mammoths or naked strippers
who look like Martha Washington and an infinite number
of the strippers are sprouting purple wings just as Christ
is coming back in the form of an infinite number of small green aliens
who are explaining they are a poetry collective
that specializes in holographs
and apologizing for the cultural disruption their guy-on-the-cross
experiment made and that fork keeps rising and rising and destroying
everything in its path as you commit suicide an infinite number
of times and give birth to an infinite number of babies who drown
in an infinite number of great rivers 150 miles wide which suddenly
appear out of nowhere carrying schools of voracious piranhas
who devour an infinite number of your forks
before they turn into infinite numbers of gold, rats
hairpins and hockey sticks

because

when there are an infinite number of worlds anything can
happen and will an infinite number of times which is why
the idea of infinity like all things that have no limits
is impossible to grasp even in your own kitchen over a plate
of fried potatoes with a red-handled stainless steel
fork

L. Tells All

I wanted a man
but they were in
short supply
so when this big white
swan followed me home
and announced
“I Am Zeus, Lord of All Creation,”
I crooked my finger at him
and said
“come here, Bird Boy,
let’s give it a try.”

at first
I have to admit
it was fun
his soft breast
the excited squawk
the way he beat his wings
frantically
like an umpire gone bad
but basically
it was an act of
desperation

we had nothing in common
his feathers made me sneeze
I was afraid to fly
he was married
(of course
they all are)
and we even had religious differences

what can I say?

and then there were his other
women
Io, Europa, Semele
(not to mention the
sluttish little pens he picked up
in the park)

we started to have
terrible fights
I called him an overstuffed
pillow and threw seed
in his face
he threatened to migrate
the usual stuff

by spring
we'd both had enough

one night
while we were sitting
in a Greek restaurant
I told the old cob I'd always
be his friend
but I just couldn't handle
interspecies love

(I lied, of course
the truth was
I'd already started to see
a duck
on the side)

The Jaguars That Prowl Our Dreams

Up on the Orinoco, Rio Negro, Solimões,
Tocantins, Xingu, Javary
they're drinking the *bebida preta* / black drink
snake vine ayahuasca / yage / blood of the great anaconda
with the smoke of burning rainforests in their nostrils
and *o gosto de cinzas* / taste of ashes on their tongues

Eles estão comendo they're eating
purple snails powdered viper venom
lagartas esmagadas flowers that dye their lips
the color of blood singing of cities of blue glass
and the jaguars that prowl our dreams

O *que mais* / what else are they seeing?
O *que mais* / what else do they know?

they're not saying
they're not telling
they're calling on the ghost tribes instead

ghosts of the *Tupinambá, Tupiniquim, Aimoré*
lost upriver forever
lost in the burning world

A Reunião / The Conference

When I entered the hall
they filled my head with birds
macaws parrots chachalacas

I could feel them whistling crackling
bumping into one another behind
my sinuses the birds sang of love & death
poetry put in cages people
who only wrote to mimic the sounds
of their own voices rich women
who tried to buy prizes

but I wanted to hear the sounds of the
jungle the vast humming of sap
running through ten million trees
the slither of the *cascabel muda*
the hush of a lone dugout canoe
riding the current the silent running
of piranhas & pink dolphins
the ancient music of hot nights
drenched and burned
in the trilling of transparent frogs