The Jaguars That Prowl Our Dreams

New and Selected Poems
1974 – 2018

Mary Mackey

With an Introduction by D. Nurkse

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“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
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 yous 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 yous 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 slutish 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 Tupinambà, 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