

Madeline DeFrees (1919-2015)

By Don Colburn

Madeline DeFrees is an Oregon native and former nun whose poetry explores the borderlands between the religious and secular worlds and the complicated intersections of private and public lives. She has published two chapbooks and eight full-length collections of poems, along with two autobiographical books of nonfiction. She also has taught widely at universities in the Northwest and around the nation.

Born in Ontario, Oregon, in 1919, DeFrees moved with her family to Hillsboro in 1923. She wrote her first verse at age eleven to fulfill a seventh-grade assignment for a Mother's Day poem.

After graduating from St. Mary's Academy in Portland, DeFrees entered the order of Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary in 1937 and took the name Sister Mary Gilbert. She remained a nun until she was released from religious vows in 1973. During the late 1930s and 1940s, she taught at schools throughout Oregon—in Bend, Coos Bay, Portland, Medford, and The Dalles.

DeFrees received her B.A. in English from Marylhurst College in 1948 and her M.A. in journalism from the University of Oregon in 1951. She also studied poetry with Karl Shapiro at Portland State University. As a young writer, she said, the poets who influenced her the most were Gerard Manley Hopkins, Edwin Arlington Robinson, and Emily Dickinson.

Her first book of poems, *From the Darkroom*, came out in 1964 under the byline Sister Mary Gilbert. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, her poems continued to appear in literary magazines such as *The New Republic*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *Sewanee Review*. Her next book of poetry, *When Sky Lets Go*, was published in 1978.

"I lived for a long time in terror of some kind of mental breakdown," DeFrees told an interviewer in *Massachusetts Review* in 1982. "The poems were, in a sense, my lifeline because they provided a measure of release for my feelings. At the same time they compounded the problems because I felt guilty about my absolute need for writing."

Her poem "Everything Starts with the Fall," originally published in *Poetry Northwest* under the title "A Catch of Summer," appeared in *Best Poems of 1965*. The poem concludes:

Everything falls from grace:

stars, empires, sparrows.

I move in the swordlight play

of that downward journey.

"My poems," DeFrees told *Contemporary Authors*, "often begin with a new experience: a visit to the zoo, a tour of a newspaper plant, a foot reconstruction, or cataract surgery. Sometimes the 'trigger' is a phrase or sentence or sign: some language fragment that registers with particular intensity." Her favorite book was the dictionary, and she was even "known to buy a fourth collegiate dictionary when on vacation at the beach because I couldn't exist without one."

After 1950, DeFrees taught at Holy Names College in Spokane, the University of Montana, the University of Massachusetts, the University of Washington, the University of Victoria, and, most recently, Pacific University in Forest Grove. Since retiring from full-time teaching in 1985, she has held residencies at Bucknell University, Eastern Washington University, and Wichita State University. She lives in Portland.

Her many writing honors include the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize (2002), a Washington Book Award (2007), a Guggenheim Fellowship (1981), and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (1981). DeFrees died in November 2015 in Portland at age 95.

Sources

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