



Until They Catch Fire

P O E M S

Deborah Cummins

Also by Deborah Cummins

P O E M S

Counting the Waves

Beyond the Reach

From the Road It Looks Like Paradise

E S S A Y S

Here and Away: Discovering Home on an Island in Maine

Until They Catch Fire

P O E M S

Deborah Cummins

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For Bob, always

and

in memory of my mother, my father
and of my brother, gone too soon

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*The dry twigs left of a vanished life whatever its fullness once was,
are rubbed together until they catch fire.
Until they make something.
Until they make a story.*

Patricia Hampl

One

So It Happens

Never a child, Eve woke one day
a grown woman beside a strange man
in a land not yet fully named.

No name yet for summer rain,
shadows among the clamoring leaves,
the plunge of bees purposeful in the lilies.

No knowledge of why flowers open
their colors to morning
or a heron lifts suddenly from the shallows.

Not yet a need to tilt her head back
to an iron sky just to feel
snow licking her face.

Nor, with unfamiliar restlessness,
to retreat beneath a tree that never yellows
and have a good cry.

But let's say she did.
And there, beneath that tree, is where
she was found. Where desire wasn't yet a word

but was known by her body. A hunger
unsated, in spite of all that abounded,
was within easy reach.

As was, so it happens, the apple,
the hiss in her ear. And let's say she knew
exactly what she was doing.

Not falling *from* but *into*. Not succumbing
but choosing. And now with the knowledge
to know the difference.

So Many Ways to Fall

The way I fell in love
with my husband. Or years before
had fallen away from the Catholic church
and so, was told, I'd fallen
from grace. How easy
to fall for a plate of *pommes frites*
sprinkled with sea salt or for sunsets
over the Bay and distant Camden Hills.
Probably countless all the ways
to fall short. To fall out of touch.
To allow a relationship to fall apart,
let it fall through the cracks
the way words, too often, fall on deaf ears.
Fall away. Fall from. Fall into
depression or addiction. So many times,
I've pictured my mother falling out of bed
the night her stroke announced itself
and life as she'd known it fell away.
But not once have I been able
to change it, put her back in bed,
take away that fall. As if
there was a way to fall back.
Fall so close to fail.

Last Photo

Taken moments after my brother pulled
into the parking lot to meet us,
unfolded himself from his little Mazda,
attempted to camouflage pain. Thinner now
but his skin more tan than jaundice yellow,
his cheeks fleshed out, hair trimmed, freshly washed.

His quick smile. The familiar quick hard hug.
Before, he'd have lifted me off my feet.
But none of that now. The quick gone out of it.
Beneath my encircling arms, his shoulder bones jutted,
my hands unable to retrieve the fit young man:
skier, marathon runner, hiker of mountain and desert.

The photo I had to take that instant,
as though time itself, unstoppered,
was running out, opportunities draining away.
Of mother, father, son back-dropped
against the restaurant's tangle of pink bougainvillea
taunting with obscene abundance.

The three of them grinning, as if this were any occasion,
as if in the months ahead, there'd be plenty of time
for memorializing of the picture-taking kind. Not once
did I think: this is the last time we'll do this.
It never entered my mind.

End Stage

Did any of his doctors actually tell him,
“You need to know you’re going to die soon?”
As though he was merely an actor still learning
his part and needing a director’s backstory
to better play his role in what was to come.

But requiring then, wouldn’t it, a scenery change
before the last act? Possibly some re-write of the script?
Giving more lines to his children?
Bringing up the lights on what needs
to bring them together on a favorite mountaintop
or rocky seashore for the last time?
Cuing sound effects of wind in the pines, the seethe
of waves over cobbles?

Or, instead, maybe a swerve to an old, familiar story.
No sudden dire pronouncement but accruing evidence
of unrelenting progression. Signs of advancing disease
trailing him but dropped like Gretel’s breadcrumbs
so that turning back to look, he no longer knew
where he was, how he got there.

Or make it an ancient story, the gods Greek.
The Fates waiting in the wings: weaving goddesses
spinning destiny’s threads assigned us at birth.
The cruelest not Lachesis measuring out
life’s allotted length, but Atropos
cutting it off with shears. A determination
we cannot escape, not alter or change.

Unless. Why not? Let’s welcome back
deus ex machina, a god not swooping from the sky,
but lowered with pulleys and crane.
And just like that, tragedy averted.
What the Fates destined unraveled.

Who would object to such a contrivance?
Who cares if such an obvious device is aimed
at banishing an all but certain outcome? Forget Horace
who warned against such lack of creativity, refused
the imposed improbable ending unless, as this surely is,
a knot shows up, is worthy of untangling.

14938 Oakdale Avenue

Far from our Chicago two-flat
sharing the block with Pat & Mat's tavern
and its revolving Hamm's beer signs.
Far from the corner Italian bakery stacked
with torpedo-shaped loaves and teetering piles
of seeded, anise cookies. And from the adjacent lot
struggling, still, to be prairie,
a neighbor's garden of strange greens
with, one spring, a tethered lamb, its connection
to Easter dinner I was too young to make.

Just beyond the city's southern industrial base
but far enough to be labelled suburban.
Oakdale Avenue: a name suggesting something bigger
but just a single block in a neighborhood
of straight, curbed streets safe enough
to ride my bike, trading cards popping in the spokes.
Of blocky brick bungalows, tidy front lawns,
shrubs so clipped they threatened the notion of severe.
Lives measured in ordinary triumphs
of well-mowed yards, washed pick-ups,
a steady job, decent grades in school.

Nearby, a murky river, offshoot of the Calumet
that miles east but well out of smelling distance
wound past paint factories, sulfurous slag heaps,
smoke stacks belching orange flames before narrowing,
growing sluggish, offering to the city kid I'd been
cat-tailed river banks, sun-basking snappers,
an occasional duck. And miracle of miracles,
all a short trek from my door.

Ours the newest house, a red brick ranch
claiming the elm-shaded corner, its construction
that for a time made us special.
Excavated dirt piles, bare floor boards inviting
neighborhood kids to pound and climb.

Their parents admiring the skills of my carpenter uncles,
my cement mason father who knew his way around
a churning Redi-Mix truck and, to my eyes,
magically transformed wet concrete into foundation,
buried walls against which the earth's weight leaned
and a house of light and comfort emerged.

More closely I watched my mother.
As the sun lowered, she silently wandered
the fragrant lumber frame, measuring, planning,
looking almost serene. Still so steadfast and certain.
As though our house's newly nailed studs and joists
could gain strength from her presence alone,
withstand whatever happened beneath its roof.

If a House Had Eyes

It would then want hands.
To hoist the blinds, pry loose
the fingers of grief, lead –
drag if it must – a woman from her bed
to witness another autumn's spectacle,
fallen leaves clamoring in a bright breeze,
how the world insists on re-arranging itself.

The house needs no ears
to know she is crying.
And why need a mouth?
Better to hold back any refrain.
Better a wordless silence reigns
with objects left behind and the certainty
the dead won't be returning to claim them.

Enough's already been said
in the shuddering house's expanding joints,
its creaks and moans, rattles and thrum,
in a midnight struggle against the pummel
of a storm itching for a fight,
that battle the house can win.

But in its heart – of course a house has one –
it knows when it must relent.
There's nothing it can do,
no locks to check, latches to secure,
to keep out illness, disease, or death.

Notes On The Poems

The opening epigraph is from Patricia Hampl's essay "The Need to Say It."

The reference to Horace in "End Stage" derives from his "Ars Poetica" in which he wrote that "a god not intervene unless a knot show up that be worthy of an untangler."

"To Be An Atheist" is for Jimmy Daley, in gratitude for his initial challenge and inspiration.

The quote by Nabokov used in "Windows" is from *Speak, Memory*.

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“Moth”

Maine Review:

“Overnight on the Interstate”

Orion:

“Moth”

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“Where’s Your Hammer, Dad?”

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“Coming Again to the Woods” and “Where’s Your Hammer, Dad?” also appeared in *Deep Water* of the *Maine Sunday Telegram*

“Walking Shaw Prairie After the Burn” is included in my chap-book, *From The Road It Looks Like Paradise*

Deborah Cummins is the author of a poetry chapbook, *From The Road It Looks Like Paradise*, two poetry collections, *Beyond the Reach* and *Counting the Waves*, and a collection of personal essays, *Here and Away: Discovering Home on an Island in Maine*. Her poems and essays have appeared in nine anthologies and more than sixty journals and magazines, including *Orion*, *Fourth Genre*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Yale Review* and *Shenandoah*. One of her essays was listed as Notable in *2013 Best American Essays*. Originally from Chicago, she was the first board chair of the Poetry Foundation. She currently serves as board president of Maine Writers & Publishers Alliance (MWPA). She and her husband reside in Portland and Deer Isle, Maine.

