

A Personal Statement by Deborah Cummins

author of *Beyond the Reach*

\$13.95

84 pages, paperback

ISBN: 9781886157385

Much of my book is about loss. How do we go on in the face of so much irrevocable loss--of health, youth, community, place, of those we love--without being overwhelmed by grief? Conscious of our impending death, but without irrefutable proof of the divine, what are we to make of our yearning for transcendence? Our longing for absolute truth, empirical knowledge?

The title of my book, *Beyond the Reach*, speaks, I think, to these questions. Beyond suggests an opening out, a looking forward to some distance place or point. Beyond an end, beyond the grasp of our hand or mind, beyond our range of understanding. Reach can be interpreted as the act of stretching for something, a thrusting out. It is also, in the landscape, an expanse of water visible between shores. Beyond this kind of reach suggests that something resides beyond the shores, beyond what is visible to the human eye.

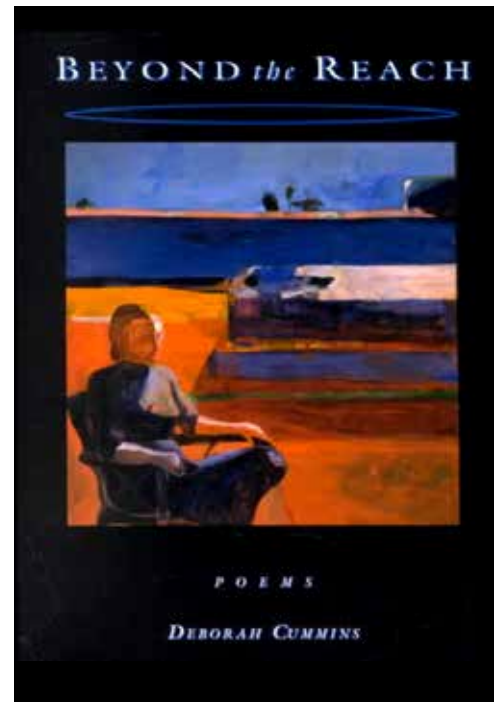
Much of my work is set in, looks to or is inspired by the natural world. In it, I find what for me is closest to the sacred or divine, to what, if not a god, is an essence or presence that becomes part of my experience as a human in a world of beautiful and terrifying magnificence. In the tangible reality of trees or, perhaps more so, in whatever rustles their leaves, I glimpse "evidence of things not seen." I can catch sign of a god, such as Whitman heard and beheld in every object yet understood "not in the least." Or of Berryman's "Master of beauty, craftsman of the snowflake."

In recent years, my poems reflect my increasing interest in landscapes of water and coastlines. The coast is a place of ceaseless dialogue between two elements, two realms, between one concrete physical world and another that, viewed from the shore, is more ephemeral, mercurial, less knowable. I've been influenced by the work of poets Mark Doty and Elizabeth Bishop, as well as the small Nocturne paintings of James McNeill Whistler in which the separations of shore and water, the distant horizon line bifurcating sea and sky but all dissolve, and those worlds merge.

I'm particularly drawn to bodies of water with tidal activity. As some of my poems reflect, tides suggest permanence and impermanence. They call attention to what vanishes and what remains. Tides offer solace. Though the tide ebbs and there is a kind of loss, it is temporary. What goes away or is taken, returns--always different and yet the same. In the constancy of tides, I find, too, the evidence of a larger cosmos, of some larger hand or gear at work, be it the result of the Big Bang or the Big Guy. Relentless, with indifference, it all goes on without, in spite of, and long after us.

I believe my poems also reflect my love of language and its music, of what language can and cannot do. I am fascinated with naming. This is, specific names, the exact right word for things. Yes, naming suggests a kind of power, even if false or fleeting, but naming also praises, honors, celebrates. "The moral basis of Poetry is the accurate naming of the things of God," said Frank O'Connor, meaning, he went on to say, "about the same thing that Conrad meant when he said that his aim as an artist was to render the highest possible justice to the visible universe."

In naming, I also find comfort and strength, a way of understanding the world, of feeling connected, less alone. We look at a vast night sky and we not only connect the blankness between stars into recognizable shapes, we name them. Still, for all our naming, there is that blankness between stars, that dark absence. There is, still, the silence that wells



up between the words of poems. The incomprehensible, what cannot be explained or named, lies beyond the reach of language. The mysterious remains mysterious.

And yet, how we long for truth in our single precious moment, our small pocket of time in this physical realm. Perhaps poetry's greatest purpose is its attempt to discover meaning, to put into words what can't be described or explained. To speak the unsayable. Just the very act of writing a poem is mysterious--where a poem comes from, how it is made, how it sings its music, the ear as much as heart or head or eye discovering what word follows another. I agree with Simone Weil who defined prayer as "absolute unmixed attention." And I agree with other contemporary poets--Charles Wright, Ed Hirsch, Mark Jarman among them--who claim that the making of poetry, that concentrated act, is a kind of prayer, a contemplation of the divine and its attendant mysteries.



www.umkc.edu/bkmk