

***AMERICAN DIRT* (2019) by Jeanine Cummins**

Jeanine Cummins (born December 6, 1974) is an American author. She has written four books: a memoir titled *A Rip in Heaven* and three novels, *The Outside Boy*, *The Crooked Branch*, and *American Dirt*.



Cummins was born in Rota, Spain, where her father, Gene, was stationed as a member of the US Navy. Her mother, Kay, was a nurse. Cummins spent her childhood in Gaithersburg, Maryland and attended Towson University, where she majored in English and communications. In 1993 Cummins was a finalist in the Rose of Tralee festival, an international event that is celebrated among Irish communities all over the world; at each festival in Tralee, Ireland, a woman is crowned the Rose. After university she spent two years working as a bartender in Belfast, Northern Ireland, before moving back to the United States in 1997 and beginning work at Penguin in New York City. She worked in the publishing industry for 10 years. (Wikipedia)

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

In 2017, a migrant died every twenty-one hours along the United States–Mexico border. That number does not include the many migrants who simply disappear each year. Worldwide in 2017, as I was finishing this novel, a migrant died every ninety minutes, in the Mediterranean, in Central America, in the horn of Africa. Every hour and a half. So sixteen migrant deaths for each night I tuck my children into bed. When I first began my research in 2013, these estimates were difficult to find because no one was keeping track. Even now, the International Organization for Migration warns that the available statistics are “likely only a fraction of the real number of deaths” because so many migrants who vanish are never accounted for in the first place. So maybe the number is more like two hundred deaths for each load of laundry I do. There are currently around forty thousand people reported missing across Mexico, and investigators routinely find mass graves containing dozens, sometimes hundreds, of bodies.

It’s also true that in 2017, Mexico was the deadliest country in the world to be a journalist. The nationwide murder rate was the highest on record, and the overwhelming majority of those murders go unsolved, no matter if victims are migrants, priests, reporters, children, mayors, activists. The cartels operate with impunity. There’s no recourse for victims of violence.

migrant, immigrant, illegal alien. She learns that there are flags people use here, and those flags may be a warning or a welcome. She is learning. Bookstores, invariably, are a refuge. There's one in the town where they live, and the first time Lydia ventures in, it takes her breath away. She has to steady herself against a shelf. The smell of coffee and paper and ink. It's nothing like her little shop back home. It's stocked mostly with religious books, and instead of calendars and toys, they carry rosaries, Buddha figurines, yarmulkes. Still, the upright spines of the books are bedrock. Steady. There's an international poetry section. Hafiz. Heaney. Neruda. Lydia flips past the twenty love poems and reads "The Song of Despair." She reads it desperately, hungrily, bent over the book in the aisle of the quiet shop. Her fingers ready the next page while she devours the words. The book is water in the desert. It costs twelve dollars, but Lydia buys it anyway. She keeps it tucked into the waistband of her pants where she can feel it against her skin.

Lydia tries not to feel jealous when they wake up together and Luca tells her, his eyes still sticky with sleep, that Papi visited him in his dreams again last night. Lydia curls around him as if she can absorb the visit with her body.

"What did he say?" she asks Luca.

"He never says anything. He just sits with me. Or we walk together." Lydia's body throbs with longing. "That's good, *mijo*."

It's almost a mile to the library, and they walk there together on Saturday mornings. On their third visit, the librarian invites them to apply for library cards, and when Lydia declines, the woman switches to Spanish and tells her there's no danger to them, that they're entitled to them regardless of their immigration status. Lydia is dubious at first, but if you can't trust a librarian, who can you trust? She and Luca both get cards, and it's miraculous, restorative, life changing. Rebecca comes with them sometimes, but Soledad never does.

The sisters are enrolled in school now, too, and it's difficult for them. Not because their English is so minimal, or even because their schooling at home was rudimentary. They're both smart, quick to learn. But their lives have been so expansive, their traumas so adult. They are young women, and now they're meant to clip themselves into a three-ring

EPILOGUE

Fifty-three days, 2,645 miles from the site of the massacre.

It's not the little adobe house in the desert Lydia imagined. But there is the yellow school bus, and Luca does board it every morning with a clean backpack and a new pair of sneakers. He doesn't wear Papi's hat anymore because it's too special. It's taken on a museum quality. It stays on top of his blue dresser along with his other treasures: Abuela's rosary and an eraser shaped like a dragon that Rebeca got him. Luca's hair is neatly cut and shampooed to smell like Papi's now, with a trace of mint. The bus comes to the end of their tree-lined block, and when Luca gets on it, he does so with two Honduran children, an Ecuadorian girl, a Somali boy, and three *estadounidenses*. Lydia slips her finger inside Sebastián's ring every morning when that bus pulls away. *Today will not be the last day I ever see our child.*

She has work cleaning houses. Her mother would have thought this the greatest irony. Lydia, whose house was never quite clean enough. The money's not good, but it's a start. They live with the girls' cousin César and his girlfriend. The girlfriend's *tía* lives here, too, and everyone contributes what they can. They take turns shopping and cooking.

Lydia's English is a help, but there are many different languages in *el norte*. There are codes Lydia hasn't yet learned to decipher, subtle differences between words that mean almost, but not quite the same thing:

binder each day. They're meant to hang their jackets in lockers and flirt with boys in the hallways. They're supposed to regress into shapes that were never familiar to them. They don't understand the teenage expectations of *el norte*.

Lydia is coming home from work one day when a boy seated in front of her stands up to pull the stop-cord on the bus. As he reaches overhead, his wrist emerges slightly from his sleeve and Lydia notes the presence of a tattoo there in the shape of an X: a sickle and spade. The stop-cord dings, the bus slows. Lydia quails in her seat. As the bus hisses and lurches, accelerating away from the boy, she watches through the window while he pulls his hoodie over his head. Most days Lydia struggles to accept how peripheral her life has become; today, she's grateful to feel invisible. It's impossible not to wonder about Javier then. Usually she locks him out of her mind, but there are moments when he slips in through the keyhole. She wonders if he's sorry for what he did to her. If he feels justified. She wonders if he feels anything now, or if he's shut it all down, if Marta's death was too much for him, so he found a loophole, a way to opt out of humanity. She is stronger than he is; she feels every molecule of her loss and she endures it. She is not diluted, but amplified. Her love for Luca is bigger, louder. Lydia is vivid with life.

At school, Lydia meets with the principal, who wants to talk about Luca's aptitude for geography.

"There's an annual geography bee," the woman had said on the phone. "I think we should enroll him."

Lydia goes to fill in the paperwork. She sits in a comfortable chair across the desk from the principal, a woman about her own age. In the distance she hears a bell ring, and suddenly the view from the window is filled with swarming children. They shriek and run and climb and swing, and all that beautiful, happy noise is a strange backdrop to what the principal is saying.

"I didn't realize your son was undocumented." The woman swivels the chair beneath her, straining to get the words out. Lydia can tell this is uncomfortable for her. "I'm sorry; he won't be eligible to win the prize."

It's absurd, Lydia knows, to feel crushed over a geography bee. It should mean nothing when weighed against the meaningful recent traumas of their life. She gazes out the window at the squealing children. The principal joins her momentarily in her reverie, and then speaks quietly in the room, crossing a line she's not supposed to cross. It's a border she's disregarded many times before.

"My parents were undocumented immigrants from the Philippines," she says to Lydia. "They brought me here when I was younger than Luca."

Lydia doesn't know how to respond. Is this a kind of solidarity? Should she feel encouraged? What she feels is exhausted. Itchy. Her hands are chapped.

"I know some good immigration attorneys if you need help."

In the fenced back garden of their little home on the tree-lined street, they bury thirteen painted stones. Beto's is sky blue. Adrián's is a *balón de fútbol*. Luca visits Papi's buried stone every day after school. He tells his father's buried stone about his new life in Maryland, how much he likes sharing a room with Mami. How he loves Rebeca more than he loves Soledad, and sometimes he feels bad about that, but not too bad, because the whole rest of the world loves Soledad. She doesn't need his love like Rebeca does. He tells Papi about his teacher and the games he plays with his new friend Eric at recess. Kickball. Four square. Luca cries often. But he also talks, he laughs, he reads. He lives. Soledad and Rebeca visit their father's stone less frequently, but slowly they're beginning to spend time out there. Last week when Lydia was weeding, she found a playing card, the king of hearts, leaning against the base of their father's cross. Once in a while when Lydia stands at the kitchen window washing dishes, she sees one of the girls sitting quietly out there in the grass. Sometimes they move their lips as if in prayer.

They still sleep with the lights on, or Luca does. Lydia mostly doesn't sleep. She sits up in bed beside him, Luca now occupying the space where Sebastián once slept. She rubs his hair with one hand and hopes he's dreaming again of his *papi*. She hopes that one night soon, Sebastián might slip out of their son's dream and into her own, as if he's a physical presence, atoms and particles in the room that can migrate from Luca's brain into