

On Homesickness: A Plea

Jesse Donaldson

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Jesse Donaldson's *On Homesickness* is a lovely, nostalgic tribute to the author's boyhood home, delivered in a series of brief and poetic vignettes.

Donaldson and his wife may have repotted themselves in Oregonian soil, but the author cannot help but look over his shoulder toward Kentucky. It is a place where cosmos grew more easily, where the ghosts of pioneers and native populations still direct the formation of the locals' identities, and to which he formed an intricate connection. He wishes his "dark lady" would love it, too; he longs to return.

His book is full of disclosures designed to convey, even transfer, his sense of home to her. One mini-essay comes for each Kentucky county, mixing lyricism with history with myth, moving across the state with purpose. The work becomes a self-conscious "elegy for boyhood things."

Donaldson's text is a celebration of everything Kentucky. It lifts up the stories of those who settled and shaped it as an American state; it records the marks made by those who lived in and formed it before it was taken over. Jesse James is a persistent personality in the text; Donaldson drinks to him in spirit, saluting and mimicking his untamed nature. Daniel Boone and Wendell Berry are among the other Kentuckians who factor in—pointedly, with their wives, who either reluctantly or willingly made new homes there with their men.

Longing permeates Donaldson's lines, transferring to his readership; it is certain to inspire a lament or two for whatever they, themselves, have left behind. He reaches out to make his love for home his wife's love, too—a hopeful and hopeless task: "I am trying to say something to you through Kentucky, though I have reduced it to a symbol." Language is intimate, searing, and at times almost biblical. His enduring affection is infectious.

Ultimately, the kind of homesickness that Donaldson captures is a condition without a cure. "The stories we tell ourselves crumble if we pick at them," he admits. "Pull the thread and the narrative unravels." Still, it's a thread worth following through this ardent and alluring book, whether happy resolutions are possible or not.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (September/October 2017)

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