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Leavetakings: Essays by Corinna Cook

Review by Anne Haven McDonnell

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What does it mean to write about place in a time when so many of us are migratory, when we might fall in love and find belonging to places layered in colonial history and ravaged in the industrial

appetites of the present? To whom, human and more than human, do we owe our debts and how do we immerse our bodies in the reciprocal gifts of wild places? These are questions that haunt me, and I'm grateful to have encountered such a trustworthy and compassionate guide through the tangle of such questions in Corinna Cook's debut collection *Leavetakings*, a collection of gorgeous poetic essays.

As I read this book, I laughed out loud, I cried, and I felt the deep stirrings of my own longings and love of wild landscapes. As the essays travel to and from her Southeast Alaska home, Cook explores what it means to belong to the human and more-than-human communities of place. She offers a generous, penetrating vision, both vulnerable and intelligent, honest and courageous. Her insightful curiosity shines at once towards subtle interior and interpersonal landscapes and towards the intimate and large forces of a living outer landscape. This outer landscape of coastal Alaska is wild, alive, and one to which Cook feels an animal tug to return to the "rainy, mountainous, stolen land we love."

One of the things I admire and trust most in Cook's richly textured writing about this northern land is the bluntness and complexity with which she acknowledges her own place as a settler in stolen Indigenous lands, while also claiming and being claimed by the waters and forests and creatures of the coastal Alaskan rainforest. With disarming candor, for example, she writes of the industrial extractive ravages in the north: "I am enraged by the simplest facts of the system and by the depth of my complicity in it."

In the essay "Fluid Places," Cook describes a journey as a child when she paddled her kayak out into the open water of Cross Sound, out of the protected waters of her home cove. In the swells, she encountered a group of Stellar sea lions, and she watches as "they rose, level with my boat, then level with my torso, then with the space above my head, suspended in the aqueous slope and breaking its surface to breathe their growly gravelly breaths and stare down at me." As she crests the waves, she looks out to the horizon and realizes: "This experience made me, created me." The essays are woven with such lyrical-physical moments of reciprocal encounter, belonging and merging with place.

In the first essay "A Traverse," Cook writes about traveling north by pickup truck across the continent to take in the 4,000-mile geological, ecological, and cultural changes across the landscape. Alaskans have a perspective of roads that we in the Lower 48 take for granted. When your home town is only reachable by boat or air, you see roads differently, and Cook helps us to see "this great net of asphalt cast over the continent" differently, too. She brings her multi-vision to asphalt as "both democratic and a severe limitation." Of her home town of Juneau, Alaska, she writes, "We are all shaped by a rainy and proud and complicated town that wears no asphalt leash."

Cook's essays have the complexity, thematic leaps, and lyricism of poetry, and I found myself enchanted by images and descriptions throughout the collection. Driving north alone and tired, looking for a place to sleep, Cook writes, "I wish I was a mollusk. A bivalve. I want a strong shell suctioned shut where I can seal in with my own perfect juices." In her essay, "Otter Meditation," she begins: "Someone cries out from the water. She thrusts her head and shoulders upward and lingers in the air for a still, silent moment, then peels off sideways." We enter this vivid image with disorientation and concern. Who is this someone and what has happened? She leaves us here a good while before we realize the "someone" is a mother otter, crying for her lost pup, snatched up earlier by an eagle. The orientation deepens our discomfort, blurring concern for what we assume must be human into the complex concern for a grieving mother otter, just as much a "someone" as the human we imagined.

Throughout these essays, Cook dives straight into the irreconcilable complexity, helping us reckon and feel more deeply there. The otter has lost her pup. The eagle has fed her babies. And we are left to reflect on something many Alaskans are intimate with—all the deaths that feed us and our loved ones, the grief and intimacy of knowing who and what we eat to live. Cook leans into this "ongoing conversation," and with her guidance, we lean in too.

As Cook's vision takes in intimate images of creatures and place, she also renders human relationships in startlingly fresh ways. As she enters the industrial box st[illegible] of Grand Prairie, Alberta, situated in the expanse of the boreal forest, she pulls int[illegible] a

car dealership to replace a broken headlight. The man she encounters in the sales department becomes a friend in the way only a stranger can, and this connection is rendered in poetry: "My words are flushed pink from forward motion and leave clear turquoise in their wake. Right away I like him because he speaks in colors too, in grounded golden-brown.... Together our colors look like a pale dawn over the earth's spring thaw."

Cook likewise seamlessly weaves scientific knowledge into the encounter of place. As she describes her seasonal fieldwork at a salmon weir a few miles up a watershed in Prince William Sound, she describes counting salmon and tweezing salmon scales and otoliths, which we learn "are free-floating ear bones, each one roughly the size and shape of an oat of oatmeal, and because they grow in annual concentric rings—like a tree—biologists can 'read' otoliths to decipher clues about a salmon's past." The essays throughout *Leavetakings* zoom in to such intimate details and then zoom way out, giving us layered glimpses of relationship to the landscape and to people to which she is tethered.

Wherever we find ourselves, Cook shows us how to bring body, heart, intelligence, historical context, and honest reckoning to the layered landscapes of home.

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Read poetry by Anne Haven McDonnell appearing in *Terrain.org*: four poems, Letter to America poem, four poems, two poems, and the two poems that won *Terrain.org's* 5th Annual Poetry Contest

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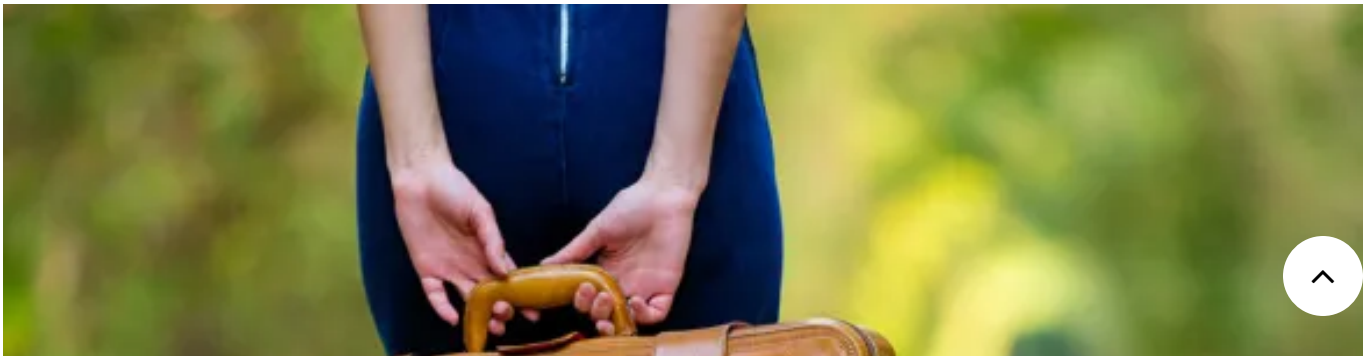

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