



8-4-2020

Topophilia

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Recommended Citation

Benton, Chloie R. (2020) "Topophilia," *Cedarville Review*: Vol. 20 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedarvillereview/vol20/iss1/16>

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Description

This piece was written in response to a relocation and considers the implications of "home."

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Nonfiction

TOPOPHILIA

CHLOIE BENTON

I was raised on a 20-acre plot of land nestled in central Kansas. A winding gravel drive led to a sprawling ranch style house, Cleary-built barn, and hand sawn red and white chicken coop in the middle of cultivated patchwork fields. The 3500 trees enveloping the property bore witness to sacrifice as my parents meticulously constructed the home they had dreamed after attending open houses on Sunday afternoons, reviewing floor plans at the kitchen table, living in a leaky 900 square foot rental house and becoming Home Depot loyalty members. They chose to build their life in a wheat field halfway between Buhler and Inman with a gentle sloping hill and rich, dark soil; creating a Kansan's paradise their children would be proud to call home.

I've proud to be a born and raised Kansan. It meant driving the dusty backroads with windows cranked down in an old F150 while Johnny Cash murmured through the CD player, watching John Deere tractors lumber across pastures and breathing in crisp, unadulterated night air. Learning how to split a log, shoot a gun, start a chainsaw, run a square mile and track a coyote. Every Friday night, two Ford F-150s backed into the Fast Lane Express Car Wash and a dozen

people sat on the tailgates drinking cheap beer while crowds cheer for their hometown team a block away. The next morning, sun-wrinkled men with salt-and pepper hair would be up before the sun, sitting at the small-town diner drinking Maxwell House coffee with their dusty, beat-up trucks lined at the curb. The rhythms of life were centered around football season, harvest season, hunting season, off-season, tornado season. The weather determined the days, and solid oak pews with red foam padding were chockfull on Sunday morning.

We used to walk to the end of the gravel driveway every evening to fetch the mail, tugging the Red Flyer wagon with Caleb, Grace, and a coffee can of fish food bouncing inside. On the way, dad flung the food in the pond while I wore his polarized sunglasses to watch the thick catfish bodies approach the surface with gaping mouths. When a storm came, we sat on the front porch, the static of a Royals baseball game sputtering from the battery-operated radio, sipping iced tea and rocking in squeaky chairs while watching the thunderheads roll across the flat plains. The first crack of thunder followed by fat warm raindrops plopping happily onto the thirsty ground, the veins of soil

soaking up the moisture eagerly and rivulets of runoff going to the pond. When the fiery sun set over the prairie and darkness settled in for the night, we would convene on the back deck, roasting s'mores over a fire pit, and pointing out the Milky Way galaxy, Orion, Andromeda, the Big Dipper, the Little Dipper, Cassiopeia, Venus and Mercury. Often, we observed a half dozen shooting stars; closing our eyes to ponder the wishes.

The insulated house walls witnessed the successes and failures of a family, the death of pets and oppressive diagnoses, shriveled hearts and doors slammed in anger, angry tires spitting gravel down the driveway, a little girl spying on her older sister kissing a boy, three children sitting at the bay window anxiously waiting for dad's car to turn in the drive, and a dinner table with five seats filled in the evening.

The last time I saw the end of our driveway, there was a For Sale sign pasted onto wire markers with a smiling relator staring into my rearview mirror. There was a new job with a relocation package pulling us to Missouri, invading our home, taking pictures and cramming items into boxes with hastily scribbled labels on them to be tossed into the back of a box truck.



When my veins run warm with sweet red wine I miss the home I left behind. For me, the security of home slipped silently into the night, like the one-time lover leaving in the wee hours of morning, the dog whimpering and dying beneath the vast oak, the taillights bouncing down the driveway with tires spitting out gravel, the sudden absence of simulated mountains on the heart monitor by the hospital bed.

Home is an intimate refuge for the human heart, the place your mind wanders when the pains of life weigh heavy on bruised shoulders. Somewhere of belonging where you are wanted and welcome. The sanctuary of peace we spend lifetimes pursuing or feebly attempting to recreate. A dwelling enriched with the fragrance of cookies and candles, welcoming walls bedecked with pictures of happy people, leather couches covered in felt pillows, and the animated voices of those we call family.

I may spend the rest of my life endeavoring to recreate the security felt in that inviolable place. The soil was rich in Kansas, and my roots grew deep. The tumultuous moves made me feel like

a tree with roots chopped off, reassigned and placed in a puddle of watery soil, expected to regenerate. But I'm not accustomed to this soil. It is shallow and the neighbor's pipes are getting in the way of growth. Their dog snarls and bites at my protective bark, exposing and draining the life left within.

Some scholars call my attachment to the 20-acre plot of land in Kansas topophilia. The word comes from a Greek combination of the roots place + love, which they theorize equals some association of cultural and personal identity. When I meet someone new, shake their hand and begin pleasant introductions, I proudly label myself as "from Kansas." I am familiar with the Kansas season changes, the idealistic "Ad Astra Per Aspera" motto found on the state flag, the peaceful, unassuming life discovered between prairie grass and barbed wire fencing. My home seems a relic plucked out of a Little House on the Prairie book or a cut-out from a Better Home and Garden magazine. I am not sure if home will be recovered or recreated, but I know part of my life and love is buried deep in rich, Kansas soil, and I doubt that will ever change.