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Dreaming in Steps

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Dreaming in Steps

By Kelly Biers

Kelly Biers' short story Dreaming in Steps was written as part of a creative writing group using the theme of Where we Live.

WHERE WE LIVE

Kelly Biers (English)

Mandi Bingham (English)

Marissa Hansen (English)

Nathan Klein (English)

Tyler Corbett, Graduate Student Mentor (English)

Richard Robbins, Faculty Member (English)

For our project, group members explored the theme Where We Live in its varied interpretations through fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. For my project, the theme Where We Live was addressed through creative nonfiction. I wanted to explore my own value as a writer, to myself and to my peers. The piece I wrote was influenced by my vision of personal events in my own life as well as the objective view of my narrator and her interpretation of the landscape I placed her in. As a creative writing theme, Where We Live suggests landscape, or physical, geographical location. As well, in a figurative sense the theme implies a current state of the world, or cultural view of specific/general world events. Also, Where We Live carries a state of mind quality, such as community or individual consciousness. As creative writers, by focusing on our theme and approaching the project from these different angles, we were able to examine our own lives and stories to achieve an objective view of the “landscape” in which we live. My goal was to produce a story that would challenge the narrator’s individual consciousness as well as my ability as a writer to create said challenges. As an additional challenge, our group has placed within each piece a series of reoccurring objects that unify our individual pieces. We attained our goals through observation, discussion, research, and workshop. Hoping that others gain from our awareness, we plan to present our writing at the conference, individually.

Dreaming in Steps

By Kelly Biers

I haven't spoken with my wife in over three years. I'm not sure why I still call her my wife—I signed the divorce papers at least two years ago. The newest edition of the phone book lists her under her maiden name. I've tried calling from a payphone a few times when I managed to save up some extra change, but whenever I start talking she hangs up. One time, my ten-year-old daughter Emma picked up the phone and we talked for a good ten minutes. She asked how I was doing, where I was, and when I'd come back. In three years, her mother hasn't convinced her that I am a horrible person. Perhaps I will get to see her again once I rebuild a stable, independent life.

* * * * *

People often complain about the filthiness of San Francisco streets. Sure there are newspapers, cigarette butts, and some various trash here and there, but that's not what people see. They see us. We are the filth and we line the streets. I never thought I'd become a part of this demographic, the homeless. *The homeless*—it's said so often, like we're one person. One problem. We beg, we steal, we smell, we sleep on sidewalks and park benches, and we take up space. We are loathed, especially those of us living here in The City.

When I first began living out here, I spent most of my time around Market Street in the downtown area. The streetcars, buses, and congested sidewalks make it a good area for walking; I can more or less blend in and disappear in the crowd. Food can be found nearby in soup kitchens during the day and shelters are available at night. The shelter I stayed at served food as well, but to get food I'd have to stay overnight, and to stay overnight, I'd have to sit through a sermon. Sometimes the sermon was nice and I could feel real compassion and not spite or pity from the preacher, but he was only there once every weekend. The rest of the week some other preacher came to tell us all about what horrible people we were. He often told us that God wanted us to wake up. To open our eyes to the filth we lived in and the families we've destroyed, not to mention the shame we've brought to The City. I couldn't sleep after that. I could hardly find motivation to move. So I quit going.

Market Street is dangerous at night. Panhandlers who fall asleep there are frequently robbed. In fact, very few people sleep anywhere downtown at night. For those of us not living in a shelter, nights are spent walking. Even during the day there's little time to rest. If I try to get some sleep, a cop or a storeowner or somebody will tell me to move. So I move, and I keep moving. I walk to the diner where a real friendly waitress named Bethany gives me a free cup of coffee every now and then. I walk to the internet café to check email and look for jobs. I walk nowhere to do nothing.

* * * * *

I was a real person once. I worked at a factory in South San Francisco for about eight years. During that time, my wife and I led a simple but pleasant life raising our daughter in a small house. Eventually, the company downsized, and I received a letter stating that they had to let me go. By that time, my wife's career took off and we were

able to continue living comfortably. Nevertheless, I tried finding another job so that our family could grow. I wanted Emma to have as many opportunities open to her as possible. But I couldn't hold a decent job, and I didn't know what to do. My life became stagnant. Depression set in and I became an alcoholic. I spent most of my time at bars, and I avoided going home whenever possible. As soon as I would return, my wife would be waiting in the kitchen and she'd approach me when I walked through the door. She'd ask me where I'd been and I'd start shouting. I don't remember much of it, but one night I threw her against the refrigerator. My wife and I divorced and I lost everything. I lived on my own for less than a year before I could no longer keep up with the rent. I was a real person once. Now I am homeless and that's all people see in me.

* * * * *

I've recently discovered that a nearby cathedral opens its doors every day to the homeless, providing them a place to sleep. I've known churches to offer sleeping space at night, but I believe this is the only institution I've seen do it during the day. We are allowed to sleep on the back pews while the daily proceedings take place. A few volunteers come to help people get into drug rehab or find low-cost housing, if such a thing exists in this city. One of the volunteers is a former homeless woman. She had a normal life like I did until she became a heroin addict. She sits next to me on one of the pews.

"You know," she says, "when I was out here on the streets, someone told me that druggies like me were some of the hardest to get cleaned up."

I chuckle. She seems too gentle to have been a hardcore drug user. "How'd you get out?"

"I went to one of those shelters downtown and they got me into rehab and found me a job and everything. You should check it out." She pulls a notepad and a pen out of her pocket and starts writing the name of the shelter.

I shake my head. "I've been to one. I don't like the way the preachers talked to me."

She rips out the slip of paper and hands it to me. "They aren't all the same."

This is true. The weekend preacher at the mission smiled much more often and more sincerely than the other. I look over the address of the shelter. It's called the Homeless Resource Center. "I guess I could take a look."

"Besides," she says nodding, "you don't have to listen to any preachers there." I thank her. Tomorrow I might try to find it.

What day is it anyway? I think it's Tuesday. The cathedral is busy today. Too many people are snoring and I can't sleep. It's nice to have some time to just relax though. I clean up in the washroom, and I sit in a pew and stare at the Virgin Mary. Every day there's a lot of time to think. Sometimes I think about Emma, and sometimes I think about what I'm going to do the next day. Right now I'm thinking about how life was meant to be lived. Do I need a house in order to enjoy life? I'd like to think I don't, but then I think of Emma and I change my mind.

I don't remember falling asleep, but I wake up to the rustling of garbage sacks and the zipping of sleeping bags. It's dark outside and the cool air is blowing into the cathedral. The priests need to lock up for the night, so it's time for us to leave. We gather our belongings and wander outside. Some disperse in different directions right away, and

some linger at the steps, especially the old ones. I sit for a moment and try to decide where to go.

I stare at a lamppost and a man I met here a couple days ago comes up to me and says *hello*. His name is Lloyd, and he is kind but miserable. I ask him how he is doing and he says he is fine but he misses his family. He has a job working part-time as a janitor for some nearby office buildings. He makes enough to keep himself alive and clean, but he can't afford to rent an apartment. He says he is saving money, but I don't believe him. I get up and tell him that I'm going to be on my way, glaring at a clock tower as though I'm in a hurry. I've decided where to go. I'm getting away from here. Away from Lloyd. Away from this city. I'm convinced that there's only one way out. I head downtown.

The Homeless Resource Center isn't far away, but I'm guessing that it will be closed by the time I get there if it isn't already. I look at the address on the slip of paper and I realize that it's not too far from the diner I frequent. I walk in and see Bethany behind the counter. She sees me as I approach the counter and she smiles. I wish she was my daughter. As I sit at the counter, she brings a cup and pot of coffee over. Her eyes are bright and wide. "Hey you!" She fills the cup and slides it toward me. "It's been awhile. What have you been up to?"

"I decided to wander around different parts of the city." I sip my coffee.

"Like where?"

"Here and there. I spent some time up at the Haight last week." Haight-Ashbury is a district where people try to relive the 60's. The walls have graffiti portraits of reggae icons, mushrooms, and yin-yangs. Old hippies and young musicians populate the street. "There's some nice people there."

"My brother used to live there." Bethany's voice is high and mousy, much like Emma's. "He lives in Grenoble, France now. He says there are parts of it that remind him of the Haight."

"Really. Are there lots of homeless people too?" I stir my coffee with a spoon.

Bethany hesitates for a moment. "I think so. He doesn't really talk about them. He only mentioned them once when he was telling me about a time he saw a middle-class woman offer a liter of milk to a homeless woman. The homeless woman looked at the milk then back at the other woman and said, '*Milk?* What am I supposed to do with *that?*' The middle-class woman took back the milk and stormed down the sidewalk—"

"Well what *was* she supposed to do with a liter of milk?"

She raises her eyebrows. "That's what *I* said. My brother said she should have just taken it and been grateful for it." She sighs. Another customer walks in and sits next to me at the counter. Bethany smiles to me and waits on the new customer. As I finish my coffee, the man sitting next to me tries to glance at me without moving his head or making eye contact, as though I were a feral dog. Bethany returns with the pot of coffee and fills a cup for him. She offers to refill mine but I tell her I'm not staying much longer and I thank her anyway. She makes me think too much about Emma. I finish my coffee and say goodbye. I wander around downtown for the rest of the night until the Homeless Resource Center opens in the morning.

* * * * *

I never really paid that much attention to homeless people before. They never bothered me and I never felt that they were of any concern to me. Whenever I saw a homeless person I usually ignored them. If I ever did make eye contact, I would quickly look away, often in the opposite direction. I felt bad for them, but I didn't feel like there was anything I could do for them. I guess I thought I could just pretend they weren't there. I wouldn't have to worry about them, then. Sometimes when I'm sitting on a park bench, gazing down the bike path, I see somebody walk by and I imagine it's my former self. When they see me and they turn their head, I see myself doing the same thing. I feel shame and anger for both who I was and who I am now. I'm no longer sure that I ever was a real person, but I hope I will be soon.

* * * * *

For about a year and a half I make my way through the waiting lists and workshops and interviews and counseling until I finally have a steady job. The Homeless Resource Center hired me to do simple office work. The pay is low, but I'm approved to rent one of the low-income housing units recently installed in The City. I have a roof. I have walls and privacy. I feel a great relief, but I still miss Emma. I feel closer to her than ever and I can't sleep. I make phone calls but my wife—ex-wife won't talk to me. One time she let me talk for a bit. She listened to me explain what I've accomplished in the last couple years. She hung up when I asked if I could talk to Emma, but she *listened*.

My former counselor informs me that the Center would like to promote me to a counseling position. I would work with cases similar to my own—mostly clean with the exception of minor alcoholism. The pay would be better, but they can't promise it would be much more to start out with. I agree without hesitation and my training starts immediately. Soon after, I take on a couple cases and the higher-ups are pleased with my work. I am pleased as well.

When men and women wearing ratty and grungy clothes walk into the counseling office with a numb look of apathy and shame, I know what they need to hear. If they know that in the future they can have something they desperately want, whether it be a home, a new life, or a family, they will do whatever they can to get it. They just need to know that it's possible—and that somebody wants to help them.

After taking on cases as they come in for a few months, the Center announces a new, ambitious program that is being launched. With the help of a couple national organizations, they are renting out small office spaces across the country in order to tackle homelessness in rural areas. I'm offered a counseling position in the Rapid City, South Dakota office, and I am torn. I've wanted so much to leave The City and start over somewhere else. Only the thought of seeing Emma again has kept me from hitchhiking to the next town. I am given only a week to accept or decline the offer. I call my ex-wife. She answers, but hangs up as soon as she hears my voice. This is important, damnit. I call again. No answer. I leave a message telling her I'm moving to South Dakota.

* * * * *

Only a handful of us work at the Rapid City office, and our district covers the entire western side of the state as well as parts of Nebraska and Wyoming. The majority of our work lies in Rapid City itself. Many Sioux come here from the Pine Ridge

reservation, which has very few jobs available and is the most impoverished county in the U.S., in hopes of finding a better life. In other parts of the state, people who can't afford to have a home usually live with relatives. My family has given up hope on me, but here, families are quite close. I think, though, that some are only supportive of their homeless kin because they feel *obligated* to be supportive. The frigid South Dakota winters, though somewhat short, can be deadly for somebody without the proper clothing or shelter. The summer heat is dry and oppressive. To leave a relative on the streets would be far too cruel.

My work here is similar to what I did in San Francisco, although I've started dealing with a few drug addicts. Meth is a problem in this area, so I've had to take on some tougher cases. I've also started handling more youth cases. Most of them are lucky and can find relatives to stay with, but for the few who've been shunned by their families, the streets are incredibly dangerous. One of my current cases is a neurotic seventeen year old high school dropout named Dylan who has been on the streets in Rapid for about three months. Before we found him, just a couple of weeks ago, he was being chased out of parks and other public places by the cops and other homeless people. Being young makes him an easy target, so he could hardly lie down to rest, day or night, without fearing arrest or robbery.

Dylan is much calmer now. He smiles and keeps everyone in the office entertained. He seems to enjoy spending time with me. I've found a part-time job for him, but he still lingers around the office whenever he gets the chance. He even helps us out with small tasks and projects. He eventually decides to get his GED, so he applies for Job Corps and is accepted. In the short time I knew him, Dylan partially filled the void in my heart where Emma is missing, and I almost hate to see him go. The Job Corps campus is relatively near, so I'll certainly see him from time to time, but I still feel empty.

* * * * *

Emma. I'm almost certain I'll be able to recognize her, but since she hasn't seen me in over nine years, I decided to make a sign for her. The flight has landed, and the passengers begin filing through the security gates. For years, her mother refused to let us meet, but as Emma grew older, she tracked me down and contacted me. We frequently talked over the phone for the last few years, and now that she's turned eighteen, her mother can't stop her from visiting me. As I wait for her to arrive, I watch the faces that filter into the waiting area. They are faces that I would probably have hated and feared once. They are happy and comfortable, returning from vacations and reuniting with families. Yet, they are also realizing that they shouldn't take what they have for granted. I can tell by the tears in their eyes as they receive hugs that they are thankful to have someone welcoming them home. Maybe even thankful to have a home. I see a face I have only dreamed about for years. I hardly feel awake.

Author's biography:

Kelly Biers has completed his first year at MSU. He is seeking bachelor's degrees in English creative writing and French. He has been published twice in SLAM, and will become an editor in his sophomore year. After graduating, he plans to apply to a graduate program to receive an MFA in creative writing.

Faculty mentor biography: Richard Robbins is Professor of English and Director of the Creative Writing Program. Dr. Robbins would like to give Tyler Corbett, graduate student in creative writing, all the credit for mentoring the students involved in the creative writing presentation.

Graduate student mentor biography: Tyler Corbett is an MFA candidate in the Creative Writing program at Minnesota State University, Mankato. He is the current editor of *The Corresponder: A Fan Letter of Minnesota Authors*, an assistant to the Good Thunder Reading Series, and teaches composition at MSU.