
2006

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Recommended Citation

Bingham, Mandi (2006) "Things to Ponder," *Journal of Undergraduate Research at Minnesota State University, Mankato*: Vol. 6, Article 2.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56816/2378-6949.1109>

Available at: <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/jur/vol6/iss1/2>

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Things to Ponder

by Mandi Bingham

Mandi Bingham's short story Things to Ponder 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

Things to Ponder

By Mandi Bingham

I'm bored. I was told by my crush of the week to meet at the quaint little café on Main Street, and here I sit with no gorgeous man. I've been stood up. What happened to chivalry? I sit and look around the street which today basks in golden rays of sunlight, turning the entire city, which is normally a dull grey industrial place, into a warm yellow thriving city. It seems that the sun is the only reason that the few cozy coffee shops like this one were ever noticed. Cars crowd the streets, while people fill the sidewalks to capacity. Some people are dressed in warm shades of pink, orange, and yellow, wandering the streets on a bright day off. Some dressed in their business suits, stopping for a cup of coffee before starting another long day at work.

The day is too beautiful to waste...plus my date may still show up. I decide to finish my coffee and then leave if he hasn't shown up yet. I lazily gaze around me, giving the café a good look. There are four rows of three white wire tables. The wire wraps around artistically into flowers with unnaturally curvy stems to create the top of the table. The legs start bunched together in the middle and spread apart at the bottom to make it steady. The three matching chairs surround each table, growing uncomfortably warmer as the sun heats the naked metal. Bright fresh cut flowers of all colors stand in black plastic pots that line the outside of the store, except for in front of the door and underneath the window where a man sells coffee and magazines for those in too big of a hurry to go inside.

I should have bought a magazine, too. Sipping my coffee, I look around for something interesting. An old woman walking slowly towards a table on the outskirts of the café catches my eye. The old woman looks as though she must be around eighty, her hair white as a dove, face pale with deep wrinkles, as though her skin is trying to slide right off her face. She wore a light red flowered dress that hung down just above her ankles. Moving around with stubby legs and a slight limp, I don't know how she can even bare to walk on her own; it's taking her forever to even move a few feet. I feel impatient just looking at her.

A few tables separate me from her when she finally makes it to a chair. She is clenching a letter tightly in her frail, trembling fist. She takes a deep breath. Anxiety is written all over her face, as though she is afraid to open the letter. I wonder who sent her the letter and why it troubles her so much. From the few tables I sit away from her I can't read the writing on the envelope, but I can make out the gracefully hand written address, and as she pries the letter out, the paper that it is written on looked old, discolored, and worn. What is this letter? Is it a lost letter from a loved one finally making its way home? Or is it a letter that someone had written long ago and just recently gained the guts to send?

A tale starts unraveling in my head as her crooked, shaking fingers unfold the letter. Her name: Delores, once beautiful but now outdated, just like her. In her youth she was beautiful beyond compare and experienced great love. The letter, from her beloved that passed away long ago, was recently discovered in an abandoned mail carrier and sent out to Delores.

The letter was written in this very city, this very spot almost sixty years before, when her secret lover found out that he was being shipped overseas to fight in World War II. The letter held his fears, hopes, and a promise to come home that would never come to pass. He went missing in action, his whereabouts remain forever a mystery. The only piece of him left is this single letter.

My Dearest Delores,

I am leaving in a few minutes time for my Station, and I had to get these last few words of

good-bye out to you before I depart.

I am so sorry that I'm leaving, but the army needs as many people as they can get. If I could, I would be with you, but the war is far too great. I cannot sit by and watch the Nazis' evil spread over the land. What if it comes to America and puts you in danger? I will never allow it. I will fight, and help bring this dreadful war to an end.

From the first day that I met you, I knew you were the one for me. Your beauty goes without compare, more beautiful than any rose could ever dream to be. Your heart is as giving as a waterfall's shower. You accept me when no one else will, and you never stop believing in me. I want you to wait for me. Wait for me to return, and we will get married. Despite your father's ill-feelings towards me, I want us to be together, no matter what.

I am heartbroken to make this so short. I would rather be telling this to you, to your endearing face, but the bus is leaving. I have to go. Please wait for me, I promise one day we'll be together again.

~Yours Forever~

As Delores finishes reading the letter, a tear rolls down her cheek. She silently folds the faded paper and puts it carefully back into its envelope, and placing it in her purse. Taking a breath, she looks around and nods once to herself, wiping the tear away with her hand. And that was that. She toilsomely gets up out of the wire chair with her aged, tired body, and slowly shuffles back down the street again.

How much has this city changed since her youth? Does she look around at the world today and despair? Is the world colder and more selfish than it had been nearly sixty years ago? How has this city, this street changed? No longer are there old cars that are not only vehicles but pieces of art. No longer are you able to walk down the street and know everyone in sight. Does she miss the news that didn't show death, terror, and violence day and night? What was it like to have a president America trusted? I watch her fade from view down the street and wonder what she lives for in this newer and harsher world.

A businessman rushes by and wipes Delores and her tragic life from my imagination. I turn slightly so I'm now facing the sales window, casually watching the businessman. His suit looks crisp and new, his onyx hair gelled straight back, and he holds his head up straight and high as though his tie may be on too tight. He is on a mission, and the world is slowing him down.

The businessman comes to a halt at the end of a line. The outside on-the-go coffee and newspapers is best for a man on the move. The three or four people in front of him move at a good pace, but he taps his polished leather shoes in annoyance. Glancing at his Rolex every few seconds, he seems obsessed with time.

As the businessman, who I have named Roger, finally makes it the front of the line, the clerk gives him a warm smile, "How can I help you today, Sir?" and in return receives a hurried order and a cold stare.

"One cup of coffee, black. *The New York Times*," Roger looks at his watch again, a slight look of disgust on his face. "Time is money, boy. Time is money." Who's a boy? Roger can't be older than late twenties, probably no more than four years older than the clerk.

The clerk quickly rushes off to grab his order. *How dare the clerk make me stand and wait for my newspaper and coffee*, Roger must be thinking. *How dare he. Doesn't he know that I*

make more in an hour than he could ever dream to make in his entire life?

Roger takes his purchases and dumps the exact change on the counter while walking away. No smile, no thank you, not even a nod of acknowledgment. He doesn't even take a moment to hand the clerk the money. Roger has to dump the money on the counter as though handing it to the clerk would waste even more time. Roger rushes toward one of the towering skyscrapers down the street. I'm sure there is just a meeting that he is going to be perfectly on time for, but feels he has to fuss over it like it's the end of the world.

The clerk probably never even entered Roger's mind. He wouldn't remember him if the clerk walked up and punched Roger in the face. He is probably too busy thinking about his next deal, and how much money he can gain before this year is over. *Soon I'll own this whole city*, He'll say to himself sipping his coffee, black.

Where does a man like that live? In some high rise apartment close to work with a fancy gym in the lobby? I can see him spending every waking moment working, every ounce of time devoted to earning another dollar. And for what? What good is all that money if all you ever do is work? He seems like that's the way most people are now, or at least how they should be if they ever expect to get anywhere in life. 'If I can't gain anything from you, then let me be on my way.' No time for chit-chat, no time for nice. He is living the American Dream.

The man behind the counter, who looks like a normal college-aged student, is still smiling and greeting his customer's with an equal amount of joy, despite how people like Roger act. He is happy to see each and every one of them.

"Hello! How are you doing today? Wonderful! What can I get for you?" With each customer comes a different and always perky greeting. Squinting, I see that his name tag says Brad. Or Ben. I like the name Brad better. What keeps Brad smiling? I notice that almost none of his customer's have a smile on their faces as they approach the counter, except a brief barely there smile when they say hello and tell them what they need. Shot down time and time again, still he smiles. I don't see why people don't want to smile, he's not bad looking. Thin glasses with silver rims seem to fit his face perfectly, and his natural blonde hair comes down a little past his eyes.

Brad must be working here to pay for school, since he's wearing a grey college t-shirt under his dark green apron. A picture of two young twin girls, they look about six, is tacked onto the side of his register. They have his smile. I figure they are his little sisters, and he is working to pay for his college so his family can afford to send them to school when they get older. Brad already knows first hand that financial aid isn't going to cover everything.

Despite Brad's money troubles, he's an honest and hard worker who tries to get through everyday with a smile on his face. He sees each day as a blessing and lives his life to the fullest. I'm sure he's the kind of person who doesn't let the little things get him down. Why can't everyone be as happy as Brad?

"Your total today comes to five dollars and sixty-four cents," Brad says with a bright smile.

"Oh, ok... umm...lemme find my change..." A young woman around Brad's age fumbles with her purse and pulls out five one dollar bills and a few cents. She starts turning quite red in the face as she finishes counting. "Oh dear, I'm a quarter short...could I um, put away the paper?"

Brad leans in a little with a smile, "Don't worry about it."

"Oh no, I couldn't!" She exclaims, looking like a ripe tomato.

“Don’t worry about it, Natalie. Really,” He gives her a warm smile and a wink, “I’ve got it covered.”

He has nothing but kindness in him. Natalie must be thinking as she quickly turns away with her purchase. By the look of embarrassment and gratitude on her face, I figure that she is just a frequent lower income customer. This must be why she comes to the coffee shop. I bet Brad is always kind to her and never looks at her impatiently, as day after day she digs in her purse for enough change to pay for her morning coffee and paper.

Natalie has curly brown hair and wears a white t-shirt with grey sweat pants. The look of shy longing that she gave to the clerk when she was in line was almost depressing. She so obviously wants to tell the clerk that she likes him, but holds herself back. When she reached the clerk her face lit up like a match when he smiled at her, then faded almost as fast when she walked away. The smile she gets from the good hearted clerk is probably the only smile she receives all day. Why doesn’t she just tell him how she really feels? Is she ashamed of her life right now, and is that what’s holding her back?

Natalie probably graduated from high school and went straight to work for the first company that would hire her. She must work at a job where she is under-appreciated for all of the work that she does, and her potential is unseen. All the promotions keep going to the college graduates. She puts 110% into her job, but doesn’t get rewarded for it because she opted not to go to college.

Natalie goes home each night to her single bedroom apartment with a squeaky door and walls with chipped paint. She has only her cat for company, and sits around in front of the TV all night, wondering where she is going in life and if it will ever get better. The only thing that she ever has to look forward to is the charming clerk at the coffee shop, who never fails to smile at her, and give her life a shimmer of light.

I looked around one last time to see if my date decided to show up, but I have no luck. My coffee is nearly gone, and still no Prince Charming. Giving the area one more look over again, a sign across the street catches my attention. It’s an advertisement for make-up, some obscure company is trying its luck in the vast field of make-up. *Be Prettier, Be Happier.* That was all it said. A generic picture of a women’s face with plump and gleaming lips and intense eyes pierce me.

Be prettier to be happier? Why isn’t it enough to be me? Was that why I was stood up today, because I’m not as pretty as the models in the magazines? No wonder everyone is depressed, or obsessed with the way they look and how they dress. The ad disgusts me, the world disgusts me. Why is everyone so obsessed with how we look instead of deeper issues in the world? Why doesn’t the sign say *Use Fuel Efficient Cars, Live In A Healthier World?*

I’ve had enough. People watching has gotten old and slightly depressing, and it’s quite obvious by now that my not so White Knight isn’t going to show. I get up from my table and walk by Brad smiling away and Natalie, who is sipping her coffee while watching the traffic creep by. Walking down the street I toss my cup to a trash can, but a breeze makes the cup just barely miss its target. I don’t bother to pick it up.

As I watch the windows of office buildings like mirrors, and I see my reflection in the glass, and reflexively reach up to fix my hair. I didn’t do a very good job with it this morning, I notice as I look closer. I rolled out of bed and just threw my hair up in a pony tail. I could use a bit more foundation too, I really skimped on it this morning.

Author biography: Amanda Bingham is a Creative Writing Major and a French Major at Minnesota State University. She is currently in her first year at MSU, and was a first time presenter for the Undergraduate Research Conference. She is the current treasurer for the MSU Creative Writing Club: Writers in the Dark.

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.