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Small Town Changes, excerpt
by Marissa Hansen

Marissa Hansen's short story Small Town Changes, excerpt 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)

Mariss 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.

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That morning, you wake up to dogs howling outside. Your border collie Happy is tied in the garage to keep him from running off and when he's tied, he's noisy. The bedroom is still dark; the blanket taped over the window makes sure of that. The room is impersonally decorated, with a dresser, lamp, a couple bookshelves you and your dad made over the summer, bed inherited from your grandpa's house, the bed in which you're pretty sure you were conceived. There are a few pictures taped to the walls but none are recent because it's been a while since you did anything with anyone. You get up, running fingers through dirty hair before pulling it into a ponytail. Looking in the mirror, it seems you put makeup on sometime yesterday. It still looks okay. The hoodie you have on smells like the pot from last night, but it's the only acceptable shirt you've got.

You dig through the pile of clothes in the corner for clean socks and are lucky to find a matching pair. Your dad's supposed to do laundry but he hasn't been around much lately, and even if he does a load he never folds or hangs anything up so it's hard to tell what's clean and what's not.

The house is empty; a note on some scrap paper taped to your door lets you know that your dad spent the night with his girlfriend in her apartment over Merrill's bar again. Fourth night in a row, you think, scowling and ripping the letter in half. At 24, the girlfriend's still a kid—her younger brother is two years younger than you, and there's only a twelve year difference between you and her son. Your dad was hardly around before, and now you never know when he's coming home.

You go into the kitchen to find something to eat. While searching through the poorly stocked cupboards you notice that the clock on the microwave says 7:23 and realize that school starts in seventeen minutes. It takes fifteen minutes to get there from your house. You dump Happy half a bag of kibble and start the car. Cinnamon Pop Tarts and a Red Bull serve as breakfast as your car kicks up dust on the way to school.

Welcome to Bentley, the faded city sign says. Celebrating our 110th Annual Cornhusker Days Celebration, July 23-26. North Central Secondary sits right inside the city. It was built in 1967 and hasn't had a renovation since. Like most rural Minnesota schools, it serves four surrounding communities and teaches grades 4-12. You've gone to class with the same fifteen kids since kindergarten, will graduate with them, and will probably die next door to them, too.

By the time you get to the school, all the parking spaces along the road are filled and you're forced to park in the VFW lot a block down. The air smells like manure—cow, you think, from the smell—someone must be spreading their field. The grain elevator across the street is busy this time of year with the harvest, with several trucks waiting in line to dump corn.

Your dad coming to shoot pool this weekend? Your dad's old friend Dean Stark shouts from his truck. We missed him on Saturday, pool ain't the same without Paul Sloane there.

Don't know, haven't seen him for a couple days, you shout back, trotting over the railroad tracks and waving. Think he's staying with his lady.

The bell rings before you reach the front door. Class has already started by the time you get there, and you try to be discreet about entering the room. Doesn't work, since the door's at the front of the room and everyone can see you walk in.

The teacher starts his lecture on *Lord of the Flies*, the book for the week. Conservative, he's made it clear that that he's teaching against his will and supplements the lecture on how the

book is a ‘downer’, with its dark themes of cannibalism and satanic rituals and that William Golding should burn in hell. Can you give us an example of plot symbolism in *Lord of the Flies*, Keira? he asks, catching you staring out the window in a long moment of boredom. All you can think to say is that you remember reading about some kid named Piggy and building a fire before you got hungry and your dad took you down to Nell’s Diner for barbecue pork sandwiches.

He sends you to the office.

The principal of North Central is a sphere with appendages, his shirt straining to stay buttoned over his swelled abdomen. You sit in his office, watching him pace back and forth behind his desk while he talks on the phone. His free hand is in his back pants pocket, and every once in a while you see his hand flex, squeezing his left buttock. After a few minutes, he hangs up, sits down, takes a few notes, and finally turns his attention you. After using his car keys to dig wax out of his ears, he says, I’m going to make you a deal. He leans back in his chair and rests his hands on the top of his stomach. Sometimes he rests soda cans there, but it doesn’t look like he’s made it to the machine yet today. He says, I’m sick of seeing you, and you’re sick of seeing me. There’s a new kid this week. Babysit him, make sure he gets treated okay and we’ll pretend this never happened.

You leave, feeling lucky. It’s only October and you’ve been to the office twice already. The new kid, Matt, is waiting outside the office for you, looking bored. Pretty hot, you think, shivering a little. It’s been a while since you felt this way. He’s average height, maybe a little shorter, with a chiseled face and lean body. He is dressed a lot nicer than most guys his age, around here at least. His eyes, a pale blue contrast to his dark brown hair, are what really stand out. Doesn’t look like he’s ever had to pick rocks or ride beans, from the look of things, which makes you more excited. You can feel how clean and soft and callous-free his fingers are when you shake his hand and have to make yourself let go.

Standing together, he can smell your hoodie. You know because you can smell it, too. He leans in and whispers in your ear, So . . . you wanna cut with me, or what?

He follows your passenger-seat directions to an abandoned farm site a few miles south of your house. There’s a run-down trailer next to a pile of old tires and a barn overgrown with bluestem and Indian grass. Behind the barn are several stationary cars your dad uses for spare parts and a broken-down tractor. The land is your dad’s, and since nobody’s home, your presence will go unnoticed. The only neighbor is Russell Harper, who runs the cattle lot outside town and keeps his own herd in the next field over.

Harper owns most of the land in this area. One of his electric fences divides his lot from your dad’s, and he keeps the lines ticking. The fences don’t always stop the cattle from thinking about going through—that is, until they get a shock hot enough to restart a heart. Harper doesn’t use regulators on his fences, which would send shocks in pulses rather than the continuous jolt the fence lets loose now. Your dad accidentally brushed against one once, going after a hog that got loose, when he used to keep hogs out here. Still has the scar on his arm. But you know that as long as a person’s got enough sense to stay away from the wires there’s no real risk.

You climb through a broken window in the barn and go up into the loft where a bottle of Southern Comfort waits. The loft is a familiar place for you, almost a refuge, and you can’t help but breathe in the musty smell of dry grass and sawdust. Bales of hay and forgotten sacks of grain line the walls, where generations of kids in your family have left their mark: *P.S. + L.M. = 4-Ever*, *S.H.B. Loves J.P.R.*, and *Fuck Love*. Empty bottles line the window, labels faded and peeling in the sun, shadows stretching long across the floor. You watch the dust particles dance in the sunlight when Matt crawls through, interrupting the flurries.

You sit leaning on a bale of hay, Matt directly across on a dusty horse blanket. Passing the bottle back and forth, you talk about schools, parties, friends, cars, Matt's family moving from the Cities after his mom remarried and insisted she was "a little bit country", your mom leaving and your dad taking up with the girl bartender from Merrill's. Matt's dad left when he was a kid, only comes around once every couple of years. You tell him that he's lucky for that; it's been years since you last saw your mom.

He asks about your friends. Don't have any, really, you say. I want something more than what I have, and nobody else does. They'd be happy marrying their high school sweethearts, popping out some kids, living on the farm forever. You lean your head back, remember people who used to be your friends, remember the calls becoming fewer and fewer in number, and remember the day the calls stopped all together. Your eyes start to burn, so you close them to make it stop. A tear squeezes between your eyelids but your sleeve catches it in time. I'm tired of being here, you say. Everyone's the same, they'll always be the same, but I want something different.

Don't, Matt says. I'm here because my parents wanted a change. If I could have things the way they were before, everything would be perfect.

Neither worries about offending the other, talking after the bottle is gone, no longer reliant on this one shared experience.

One afternoon, you go to Matt's place to hang out. You know where his house is; the town's so small that you even know that your third-grade teacher lived there before he died. The place stood empty for years and was beginning to look pretty crappy, but it looks as though someone's done a lot of work to fix it up recently, landscaping the yard, residing the house. Probably one of the nicest houses in town now.

Matt leads you downstairs. His younger brother Dave is sitting on the couch and watching *The Price is Right* with the lights off. You notice how similar the brothers look; Matt's more compact and serious looking and Dave's taller but anyone could see they're brothers. You've seen Dave around school. He's a little shy, sometimes effeminate, but seems nice.

Matt punches Dave on the shoulder and asks if you're hungry, because he is. He goes upstairs and leaves you alone with Dave. You try to make conversation, but Dave turns pink and says nothing, which is disappointing because you were hoping to ask Dave personal questions about his brother. Matt comes back and changes the channel. You're amazed at what's on; not many people in your town have more than public access channels.

Everything's going all right until Barry, Dave and Matt's stepdad, comes home. You don't know much about him except that he works at the hospital, which you learned from Amber. Matt seems indifferent about him.

Barry comes down the stairs in his birthday suit, holding a beer. When he notices you're there, he doesn't even blush. Hey, he says, cracking open the can. Haven't seen you around before. He stands to your left, and if you lean the right way you can hide his exposed area with Matt's nose. Barry keeps fidgeting, which makes it hard for you to keep him covered.

He sits on the couch between you and Matt. He hasn't showered and you can smell the earthy male odor between his legs. He also smells like he knocked a few brewskys back on the way home. You try to move away, but Dave's to your right and there's no room. Panic hits as Barry leans forward to set his beer on the coffee table, the black forest growing in his ass exposed. You meet Matt's eye, which relaxes you a little, until Barry leans back and puts his arms around you and Matt, pulling you close.

Barry watches television for a while, sitting uncomfortably close and totally unashamed of his flaccid pale eggs resting on his dark nest of tightly curled hair. When his beer's gone, he heads back upstairs.

All Matt says to you is, And you wanted something different.

Author's Biography

Marissa Hansen graduated in May 2006 with a bachelor's degree in Creative Writing and a minor in Anthropology. She was an editor for the Student Literary Arts Magazine, reviewed books for the *Corresponder*, was published in the *Blue Earth Review*, and intered in the MSU Media Relations Department as the Internal Communications editor. She was also a founding member and vice president of the RSO 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.