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Subject Website Submission for Youth Inquiry

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Story:

There's so much to say about life in the country. Much of what you do end up saying depends on your mood. Half of me can dismiss my experiences of growing up in North-East Victoria as something that just had to be got through with before I could move to Melbourne, and then onwards to the rest of the world. Yet I take a certain delight in knowing the names of different pastures and how to hand-rear calves, or telling people about our encounters with the bushfires of 2003. I get a kick out of the look (best described as a mixture of pity, fear and bewilderment) that people in Melbourne give me when I say that I'm from the Indigo Valley, sort of between Yackandandah and Barnawartha, near Wodonga. My primary school had 15 kids and at one stage a third of them were first cousins. I love hammering around the countryside in my family's uneconomical Tarago, and I love bonfire-based celebrations as much as the next girl. Despite this I spent the best part of my teenage years daydreaming about moving away from there, and now I have: I'm living in Melbourne for my proverbial 'year off', working to get Youth Allowance and to be able to travel before I go to Uni. Most of my friends are staying in Wodonga for this year at least, working in the factories or McDonalds or the distribution centres or cafes. It is certainly more economical than living in the city, but I know that I could not live another year in that area.

There are several reasons why I don't wish to return to the country in my "youth". That isn't to say I rule out country life altogether: just that I don't see it as an ideal place to spend the next decade or so of my life. For me there simply is no good reason to stay: not socially, not academically, not for career progression. I've found the glorified city life to be sometimes overwhelming, draining and confusing in the six weeks I've so far lived in Melbourne. But in the same way, the clichéd positives about rural life (I'm sure you're familiar with them- the sense of stability, the knowing a lot of people, the comfortableness of it) are pleasant only in retrospect. I know how claustrophobic I felt growing up under those conditions. But then again, perhaps that's just adolescence. There are advantages and disadvantages no matter where you live, but in the city the critical mass of people means that you can find pretty much whatever it is you want. Additionally, the things city people take for granted- like bulk-billing doctors, public transport, excellent food and all the rest- are very exciting to me. The reasons that I chose to leave were as complex and as simple as most other people's: I wanted to see a different part of the world to the one where I've spent all my life.

In my experience, not many young people in rural areas have an emotional attachment to them. Growing up in the country does not engender a sense of loyalty or pride to it, and I think a lot of people feel isolated by the fact they have no say over the direction of their community. This may be getting a little esoteric, but I think that youth culture in rural areas has a very clearly defined mainstream, and not much else besides, although

of course this depends on the size of the town and the people in it. If you want something more than then you have to make it yourself, and most times it's just easier to go where the action already is.

The most important thing, for me, is that it's actually a good thing to get young people out of their hometowns for at least some period of their life. The reasons that many people "stay" (as opposed to "return") are, to me at least, problematic. It is comfortable to stay in the one place, and it's likely that no direct harm will come to you. But it is also limiting, mentally and socially. This is not exclusively a rural issue. It's probably just as bad for you to stay in Fitzroy for your entire life. People talk about small-town mentalities as being xenophobic and insular, and this seems like the direct result of people who have never lived anywhere else getting antsy with those who have. It happens- my mother tells a story of a client who was referred to a service based in Albury. He told mum that he had lived in Wodonga all his life and never been to Albury, and added something along the lines of "what's the use, love? I've got everything I need here". There needs to be a balance between making the country a liveable place for young people, and respecting them enough to let them make their own choices about where they live.

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