

the J-Bar Korral roughly resembles General Scott's dream of driving tanks down River Oaks Boulevard.

The most important character in McMurtry's presentation of the city is finally Emma Horton. It is not until the final section of this third novel that her central place in the trilogy becomes clear. When *Terms of Endearment* shifts from criticism of Houston and praise for Eastern cities to the death of Emma Horton, the move clarifies an equation which has been implied throughout the trilogy. Since his essay on Texas cities in *In A Narrow Grave*, McMurtry, like Danny Deck, has viewed Houston as a woman; Houston is "the most female of all Texas cities."⁶ Emma Horton, the central woman in the trilogy and in the life of Danny Deck, represents the city. Contrary to Aurora's hospital speech, Emma does not reflect her mother's Boston; she embodies instead elements of the Southwestern city where she spends most of her life. Fecund, maternal, loving Emma personifies what McMurtry feels are the best qualities of Houston. His own shift of allegiance from Houston to the urban East makes it necessary for Emma to die. Her death becomes an appropriate conclusion to the trilogy and Larry McMurtry's good-bye to Houston.

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COMPARED TO WHAT

BY BEVERLY LOWRY

Many of us have not been here long; many more of us are daily moving in; newspaper charts say thousands by the week, particularly in winter when northern blizzards hit. To newcomers, Houston is a hard city to find. It seems to ramble, and come to no point. It has a shapeless junior high look: all joints and limbs and misplaced weight; fat in funny bunches; a mind full of plans the body has no capacity to carry through.

Where is the heart of this city? Downtown? One Shell? Underwater in the bayous? Out on Post Oak? The Astrodomain? It might be the First Baptist Church. Sometimes, when our councilmen speak, it seems so. Might it be the ship channel? The medical center? Do surgeons hold in their hands our figurative hearts as well as our literal ones?

Hard to say. Drive the loop. From there you can see everything. This is such a flat place. Only the ship bridge looms and takes us up. Circling the inner city, you can see downtown from every direction, given a rare clear day. Silver buildings flash the sun back to your car.

The good news is the bad news. We are halfway between our kin cities, Manhattan and Los Angeles, in distance and in spirit. Like our western sister, we are a car city, always on the move. Driving the loop gets you nowhere; only back to the place you started from. Yet L.A. has its mountains, their jagged presence ever reminding citizens of their place. Like our haughty older kin up north, place offers no comment. New York feels like Mars. It has made its own nature. The rivers that make Manhattan an island are more refuse than flow.

We are something between the two of those and something of neither as well, located down where we are, in the heart of Interstate 10, midway between San Diego and Miami. Halfway to California will get you out of our state, no farther.

People just in from higher, drier climes are amazed. Where is the edge of the city? Something of nature to say, this far but no farther, you have gone far enough. Who is to say, with no mountain to bump against and no river to call us quits, no nearby city to refuse incorporation, You have gone far enough?

⁶McMurtry, *In A Narrow Grave*, p. 128.

And the air, mountaineers cry; this is swampishness. In movies you can tell you're in Texas when tumbleweed blows. Where did these banana trees come from? These palms?

What do you think you are, Florida?

The fact is, we are a gumbo-cowboy city with no notion when to quit and little reverence for the past, ours or anyone else's. The good news is the bad news, both at once. Our current solution is to move: the music is here, turn up the volume; dance.

Those of us who have come from more historical-minded places are as amazed as the mountaineers. We are used to a D.A.R., Sons-of-the-Confederacy frame of mind: who was your granddaddy and what did he do? Here, the first families keep changing. Stars in gossip columns are forever new, yesterday astronauts, today architects. People one generation up from railroad-hitching seem to be lifting cups with princes and high priests and shahs. What is this? Where is the daddy of our town?

The fact is, in a cowboy city, if you can ride it you win it. The gold buckle goes to whoever stays longest on the bronco or the steer. And nobody cares or asks who owns the horse or whose rodeo it is, or whose granddaddy built it. Ride. Prove you can. The prize is brand new, over and over. Families count for something but not much. We keep starting over. There is always the possibility of a new rodeo king. *Why not* is the password. Orphan cowboys line up, saddles in hand.

To our advantage, there is no daddy. Brass rings are everywhere. Old-south cities, dependent so long on big daddies to tell them what they were and how to vote, now languish. Memphis fights old wars. New Orleans wakes up poorer with every new mayor. (Watch a Saints' home game, to see how full of rage and desperation many of its citizens are.) Atlanta seems to be our only near kin. Fifteen years ago, anyone contemplating a move to Texas was told, Dallas Dallas Dallas. Dallas was the only place. "Houston? Overgrown cowtown. Cow stuff on their boots. Go west till you smell it and south till you step in it and you're there." Yee-haw. It was true. Is. But now look. Who'd have thought it. Tacky us, leading the pack. Dallas would have thought it, is who. Cities with older money sometimes choose not to grow. Older money sometimes makes that choice. Cities on the make, however, run wild.

Cowboy wins over gumbo, though the earth here is spongy, not dirt. We are new enough in our growth to have escaped the big-daddy malaise. Sons of big daddies tend not to govern, or lead. They tend mostly to fall apart, and big daddies tend to believe they

will never die; the only legacy they leave is memory. A life: themselves. "I did it all for Memphis," they say. But when they are gone, their survivors find no will, no insurance, no second-in-command groomed to lead. Flunkies abound. Minnows. They thrash about, each trying to stretch his mouth big enough to swallow the rest and become the king big one. It doesn't work. They are all the same size.

Fact: this is not the South. Patriarchy depends on huge gaps between leaders and the led. Remember the size and power of the Baptist Church here, and that Baptist ministers come from the ranks; many of them start off with a part-time call, as they continue their shift-work until the size of the tithe sets them free. The Baptist preacher comes not from the mountaintop but from among the congregation.

Those of us who grew up in true deep-south, big-daddy towns shake our heads when someone includes this city in that broad, too loose and very faulty term, *Thu*, they say, *South*.

Forget it.

Houston is Houston

The rest is something else.

There is no Sunbelt.

There is not even a Southwest.

Or even, protect us now from lightning bolts as we say it, Texas.

Now. There is certainly a southern part of this country, where summers tend to be longer than in some other, more winterish parts, where therefore the sun doubtless shines longer. But belt? Who said Sunbelt? Aren't we nearer the cuff? Certainly we are located in the first edge of what might be called the southwest portion of our nation. Certainly there is a state named Texas. There is all of this and then there is Houston. Anything-goes Houston, wildcatters its first heroes. A rawboned soldier its namesake. Snake oil peddlers on every corner.

Regarding cities, this has always been the case; anyplace, anytime. England is one thing, London another. New York State would hand its big city over to Connecticut anytime Connecticut said the word. In fact, up there, Manhattan is called The City. If you live in Queens, you take the IRT into The City. Long Islanders like to brag how little they need The City anymore. Is Moscow Russia? Does the rest of Florida know what Miami thinks? Does it care?

Face it. There is the rest of the state, the rest of the sun-cuff, and there is Houston. The money is here. Jobs. Shiny buildings and

Loop 610. The action is here. An Austinite said, "But if I move to Houston . . ." and a wondering look came over his face. A boom-town state of mind: you never know what's going to happen next. Turn up the music, ride the horse. It's like a carnival: a crazy new tent at every turn, with wilder and wilder prizes to win.

Dallas doesn't want big-cityhood. Too much raunch, too many new ideas moving in. San Antonio might compete but it hasn't the nerve or the downright tacky gall. Austin? It is what it is going to be. Rah-rah and The Drag. A collegiate state of mind more than any other threatens to become a permanent condition, mainly because it just seems like too much *fun*. Adolescence, on the other hand, is too painful to stand for long. We have to go somewhere from here and who knows? We may turn into a grown-up place yet.

Rawness is necessary to early growth; *Why not?* the catalyst every city, early on, required. Crude? We are. Some of us have poodles with polished toenails. Fat stock claims the interest and donations of our wealthy. Our beginnings were crude, from our first major source of wealth. Now, as agent more than discoverer, we refine and crack other countries' crude, and ship it elsewhere. Our leaders are one generation up from crackerhood. They don't know what's not possible yet. So be it. Yee-haw.

In the heart of the interstate, this close to the coast, we are a watery place; the gumbo earth keeps shifting. The ship channel makes us international. "Funny people in Houston," a nurse from Whitney said and you knew right away what she meant. Foreigners, all those colors. As the economy goes, so goes everything else, art, opportunity, housing, the rest. Jobs first. So far, we are managing to hold our own on that score, though there are those of us in some neighborhoods who would say, "What growth? What city? What changes?" Their streets look the same, unlit and unglittered. We are a middle class city. We are what the country has been moving toward, the last ten years. We depend overmuch on technology, believing air conditioning and surgery and computers will save us and keep us. We may be a test case. Compared to what? may turn into us.

No telling. At this stage, the future is a who-knows affair. On these green twiglike legs, we do not walk steady or straight. But at least we are on our feet and moving. Sometimes we even dance.

A Houston resident, visiting Manhattan, attends a fancy highflown cocktail party thrown in fancy Fifth Avenue digs for a fancy highflown magazine, big in its own eyes at least. Meeting the

magazine's editor, the Houstonian is given a serious once-over, then asked, "Is that what they're wearing in Houston?"

Is what?

That.

This?

What's going on down there? the editor wanted to know. Does it get dark at night there too? New York in particular can't get over us. As if we were some foreign place whose ways and tastes could only be wondered at. The Casablanca of our time. Strange Houston; exotic; what's going on? Is it for real? Should we love it? Or what? Have they cleaned up their act down there?

No. We haven't. We wear purple and red side by side and dye our hair henna. Green suits, bad ties.

Fifteen years ago, a showbiz personality announces on television from Manhattan that the lower part of this country is anathema to the rest. "We could dump it all into the Gulf," she declares. "We'd be better off." Applause. Now that same showbiz personality lives here, in Houston, and sings and talks to us, through our very own air waves, over our very own television screens.

A party is given, for some visiting literary folk. The table is full, there is ping-pong and dancing. The music is high. Black soul and white country music punch out their easy 1-2 beat. Music and dancing are the high point. Everyone participates. "I haven't been to a party like this in years," one New Yorker declares, in a tone that clearly means, Don't you know the time for parties like this is over? What is this anyway, the Sunbelt? "Not like literary parties we give." Yee-haw.

We don't know. If we're lucky, we won't find out for a while. We'll turn up the music and cut loose. Our own music. Let others stand around and talk. Compared to what is also the danger. We must be careful to make our own *what*, not accept somebody else's based on a thousand well-worn received ideas. Market researchers are arriving by droves, and theorists and analysts; curators of our funny raw culture, come to tell us what we are.

The City, by nature, is a conglomeration; everything at once. Still. Perhaps the time has come to slow down and take a look. There is no need to clean the poodle's nails. Only, we might begin to move into the next stage now.

Certain things must be faced.

We are not pretty, admit it, at first glance.

Drive the loop and look.

Go away for a while to some spot of easy beauty, Colorado, say, or Montana, and you will come back amazed. You touch down at Intercontinental, take I-45 in. This bad? Did it always look like Used Car City? Like Hey-You-Stop-Here . . . no, Here? Billboards advertise townhouses starting at an ungodly price, a Beverly Hills trick, bragging how high the starting price is. There are too many U-comegitits and convenience stores with 'n in their names. Too many naked lady emporiums. With no zoning, you could wake up tomorrow with an All-Nude Revue in your backyard. From Aspen, we return amazed. What is here? Why are we here?

Visitors have said:

"I don't like Houston but the people are terrific."

"Great trees."

"At first I hated it but . . ."

"I keep looking for the city but it never turns up."

"Great trees."

Too few parks, too much traffic. Traffic is the greatest burden, the single aggravating thing that drives some of us to begin thinking of moving away. It isn't fun anymore. What used to be a quick trip to the store now takes up the entire evening news.

Streets stop then start up again. Take Perthshire. It dead-ends. Drive back out to Memorial, drive a few blocks, turn in. Perthshire again. After two more blocks, it dead-ends. Drive back out to Memorial. On and on.

Every place has its devils.

"I wish I was back in Memphis," a disconsolate newcomer sighs. "In Memphis, only filthy people have roaches."

Among the rich of us there are roaches and among the poor of us as well. Being close to waterways is a boon; shipping our great industry, but water feeds our pests and irritants too. Swamp is at our heart, pulling some of our earth away. Our devils are junglish: roaches and mosquitoes, mildew and asthma, rats, floods, rot, houses that in the damp earth crack beneath our feet.

Great trees however. Great people.

Get off the loop; drive into the neighborhoods. Like Manhattan, our real beauty requires a closer look. In Memorial, pines like snooty uncles reach for the sky; literal forests are out there, with houses tucked away. Closer in, the trees have fatter trunks, deeper roots . . . nourishing trees, with shade enough to sit under, and branches big enough to climb. Stunty cedars to the west look like sticks in the wind, compared to our oaks and ash, our huge, bearing pecans.

Fact: there are more Little League organizations in Houston than in any other city in the country. What to make of that? More fathers here are out on the diamond, teaching their sons how to play the game they have decided is the game to play.

Remember: the refineries, out beyond the loop. Not within our city limits and yet they are part of us. Ugly, we say. Ugly, visitors who are shown them remark. Their effluvia fill the air. Every eight hours a new shift of workers arrives. The flares burn all night. Glad we don't have them, people from Winterhat say.

But drive the loop at night. Are they? Ugly? They are what we are, what we as a nation, all of us, have come to be. The crude comes in; the refineries crack it apart and send it out, in varying forms and guises. And what do we do with the part of us we have come to need but wish not to see or admit to? Cast it out? Call it ugly? Say, glad we don't have them up home in the Winterhat?

Even those of us who are relative newcomers here start to rankle.

Send us your lobsters, roused up, we want to say. Then we will refine you your crude. Call us ugly!

It comes to that. Even those of us who consider ourselves highminded; humane; even, perish the thought, liberal. Still. So many jokes have been made. Now look. She who said shovel the Gulf Coast into the sea now bathes in its sun. We don't want to be compared to anyone else's idea of who we are or what we must become. Or do we? The seduction is old, and hard to resist. Everybody wants to be loved.

But some of us are suspicious. The new cowboy chic is a borrowed pose. Everybody down here doesn't go to armadillo festivals or wear cactus blooms in their hair. Fancy fashion designers from Brooklyn have their pictures in major magazines, touting the new western look. Moviemakers come to our beer joints to record local mores. Good old boys are in style. Fringe is in style. Beer and Dr. Pepper. Jalapenos. The New York Texan — he and she who, riding the crest of this wave, have declared themselves Texans at heart if not in body, being as how they've chosen to leave — is most in style of all. "All the talented ones left," one arrogant former Texan is quoted as having said. And how many times lately have you read the quote nobody ever said, "I didn't dress western in Texas because everybody did it there, but here . . ." They parade down Second Avenue, in belt buckles and tall hats and pearl-snapped western shirts, extenuating their drawl so far it swims the Hudson. Harvard graduates, whose parents were proud to send them away, now sound like Chill Wills. Chaps, no doubt, will be big next fall.

It has to be all right not to like Dr. Pepper. What they are wearing in Houston is whatever any one of us happens to have on. Yet and still, be aware: Bloomingdale's is watching.

Part of the reason for all this attention is the deepest curiosity about the crassest of all things: Money. There seems to be a lot of it in Houston. It makes people interested. Deep Throat had it down. Look where the money is.

We are in a state of becoming. And we are in need of some things. Greatness, for one, and vision. A check . . . now that we're moving . . . on the wildcatter's dream. We need a great newspaper, or magazine, with solid writers who can look at us — at our art, for example — and compare it with the best. There was a time when artists here were something like the legendary talking dog: never mind what it says; wonder enough it can speak at all. Anyone who could paint or get up on point was applauded, no matter the quality of the brush stroke or *relevé*.

We are past that time. Still. Criticism has not kept up. We, perhaps, have not. We tend, still, to rely on old habits, to lean back in the face of complaint on good old Texasitis and drawl from here to Conroe, Aw Shucks.

We are not Texas. The city is itself. Regionalism no longer applies.

Perhaps it is time to slow the beat down a little; hear the song out before we sing it; choose which tune we want to dance to.

The new silver buildings suit us perfectly. They reflect us back on ourselves so we can see what we are. As yet, we aren't sure. Fundamentalist testiness, as a defense, no longer will serve.

Time to move on. We do not have to love our ballet or every artist who paints here or every land-owner who suggests a new mall, to prove how loyal we are. In adolescence, children are supposed to move from concrete to abstract thinking. At this junior high state of our growth, it is time for us to think back on ourselves and out of what we have been, try to put together some vision of what we want to be.

The problem is *we*. Who are *we* and what is *us*? The self is still in process. It will take time to find out.

But some of us former deep-southerners and some of us relocated winterhatters are thrilled by the challenge of that. Those of us who suspect that the *what of old compared to's* may be jaded to the point of utter boredom and impotence look forward to the creation of new tunes, new dances: the birth of new broncos to bust.

Only: watch out.

Anything is possible. The heart of the city is possibility: no telling what. Snake oil and painted puppy nails. Why not?

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