Merrill Street, what came to us to bear, in your own restless city, thankless, too, where, standing on the threshold year after year, no door opened for you; all I saw in that kind of dying, far away from home, a vision of my mother's lost town: two towns, two places stamped upon my senses — one without the other would not have meant as much, the city without the town, the town without the city — two places shaping my life, shaping my art, two places as we saw them, now wiped away, hers the little lost bitter town that hurt so much, yours the wild ungraspable one, that hurt, too.

The last time I came home I stayed high up in a new glass hotel overlooking a Freeway. From a window looking northwest over packed acres of houses, streets, shining buildings holding sunlight and cloud in their mirror walls, I saw way out what ought to be our old neighborhood on Merrill Street. A white cloud wrapped around it and was so low that it swaddled down into the thick green that must have been, as clearly as I could see from that distance, those ancient live oaks on Bayland Avenue that have not been uprooted.

Born in Trinity, Texas in 1915, **William Goyen** moved to Houston in 1923. He graduated from Sam Houston High School and received his B.A. and M.A. degrees in Comparative Literature from Rice University in 1937 and 1939. He has served on the faculties of Brown University, Columbia University, the New School for Social Research and Princeton University. This essay was presented as a talk at the Houston Public Library on April 24, 1978 as a part of its project entitled CITY! — OUR URBAN PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE, which was funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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HOUSTON, HOUSTON, HOUSTON: McMURTRY'S VIEW OF THE CITY

BY TERRELL DIXON

"Count yourself lucky you've got my Boston, my dear," she said. "And don't tell me it was only New Haven. If you had just had your father's Charleston I'd not count on you for very much."[1] Aurora Greenway makes this speech to her daughter, Emma, in *Terms of Endearment*, the final novel in what can be called Larry McMurtry's Houston trilogy. Emma has just given birth to her first child. Aurora is visiting her in the hospital where her habitual criticism of her daughter and her anger at becoming a grandmother abruptly give way to a rare moment of approval. The terms she uses to voice her endearment are almost as unusual as her tenderness. Instead of praising the baby for having "your grandmother's nose" or "your husband's chin," she lauds her daughter's lineage in terms of cities.

This speech is, of course, comic; Aurora's sudden, unexplained shifts in attitude are notorious and her total substitution of geography for physiognomy is typical hyperbole. But, despite the comedy and the exaggeration, her speech does deal with an important principle for McMurtry. His recent novels have attempted to come to terms with contemporary urban life, with the character of individual cities (especially Houston), and with the effect that this character can have on the lives of the people who live there. If the principle fits, however, the list of cities may seem a strange blessing to visit upon the person of Emma Horton. She is, after all, the one female who consistently loves Danny Deck, the writer-hero of *All My Friends Are Going To Be Strangers*, and she is the single central character who actually appears in all three of the Houston novels. A full understanding of Aurora's speech and what it means for McMurtry's complex and changing view of Houston requires a look at the first two novels of the trilogy, *Moving On* and *All My Friends Are Going To Be Strangers*.

The structure and content of *Moving On* are at once geographical and historical. As the novel takes Jim and Patsy Carpenter on the

[1] Larry McMurtry, *Terms of Endearment* (New York, 1975), p. 355. Subsequent references to this novel will be placed in parentheses in the text.

rodeo circuit and to Jim's uncle's ranch, to Houston, briefly to San Francisco, and then back to Houston, the movement also becomes a historical journey. On it, McMurtry presents the rural past as it existed when Texas and the West were ranch country, a view of the state's urban present, and a possible projection of an urban future modelled on California. "Texas," McMurtry has said, "is probably going to be a sort of kid brother to California."[2] As the last part of this novel makes clear, that kinship means both fear and hope. The novel defers this problem until the very last. It slowly works its way toward Houston, first giving us a view of the rodeo circuit and then establishing characters who define the difference between the country and the city.

The first view of the country in *Moving On* is the rodeo circuit, a way of life which McMurtry sees as characterized by mobility and physicality. The need to keep moving which is built into life on the rodeo circuit also, as the novel's title suggests, characterizes other segments of society. It is the sheer physical nature of the sport and of the men who practice it which separates the rodeo from city life. It can be argued that parts of the present day "business of cowboyism" are simply a parody of life on the range. McMurtry acknowledges this criticism through Patsy's observations of the hair nets placed on the cows' tails at the Astrodome stock show. Even so, the rodeo retains an importance and appeal for him, simply because it does have real ties to the cowboy life and because it is so distinctly physical. There is always the danger of physical harm, emphasized by Boot's accident and by Jim's broken limbs. There is also the threat of gratuitous violence. The cowboys attack Jim for photographing them and Sonny hogties Patsy for refusing him.

The excitement of rodeo life, the physical energy and strength it requires, are also associated with sex and on this topic the first sections of McMurtry's novel most thoroughly embody a kind of cowboy mystique. His characters can and do criticize the intelligence, manners and morality of the rodeo riders, but their sexuality — their virility and appeal to women — remains a constant and central theme for much of *Moving On*. Eleanor Guthrie provides the most dramatic version of this praise for cowboy sexuality when she relates her life story to Joe Percy, a Hollywood script writer. She tells him about her sexual awakening at age twenty-nine; Sonny Shanks took her to a secluded spot in Oak Cliff and, as she puts it, "brought me into being." Sonny, later to be World Champion Cowboy, masterfully seduces Eleanor and educates her sexually; for her, his sexuality and his cowboyism are one

[2]Larry McMurtry, *In A Narrow Grave: Essays on Texas* (New York, 1968), p. xiii.

and the same. On that night, she says, "I found out what a cowboy was."[3]

Cowboy sexuality, as the epitome of a certain traditional concept of masculinity, comes most clearly into focus through the contrasts between the two sets of men who compete for Patsy. Her two older would-be lovers come to stand for the differences between the cowboy whom Patsy sees as "uncivilized" and the civilized urban man. Sonny Shanks and William Duffin are alike in age, professional success, and lecherous inclinations. At early middle age, Sonny takes his trademark hearse with its portable bedroom from one rodeo to another. William Duffin, all-star academic performer, moves rapidly from university to university ignoring his wife and seducing students whenever possible. Their approaches to sex, however, set apart the two men and their modes of life. Sonny's attempted seduction of Patsy follows a pattern set by her encounters with a drunk cowboy. After she refuses the drunk's repeated requests for a date, he takes an angry leave, telling her: "I got better sense than to screw a woman as wordy as you are, anyway" (p. 14). Sonny's seduction attempt endures longer, but comes to a similar conclusion: "If I was ever lucky enough to get you in bed, I'd have to bring along a dictionary" (p. 327). The verbal intelligence which she uses to fend off these first two cowboys isn't really necessary with Bill Duffin. He does not have the physical prowess which attracts and frightens her, and he seems to want a verbal insulation from physical experience which resembles Patsy's own. For all his sexual suggestiveness and all his wife's talk about his conquests, he fades before Sonny at a dinner party. The one sexual scene in which he appears is also revealing. He stimulates his wife sexually with one hand, while lying in bed and concentrating on a book dealer's catalogue which he holds in the other hand.

This crucial contrast between body and brain structures Patsy's choices and changes in the first part of the book. Jim, her husband, is currently a graduate student in English, but basically he is a dilettante, able to convince himself that his next career will take him into real life. He is more timid than Patsy herself, but he shares her reliance on flip phrases and superficial discussion. Hank, her lover, has "a kind of presence that had more to do with physical confidence than intellect" (p. 257). He is the only graduate student from the West and is in appearance, dress and manners more cowboy than academic. Hank, as Patsy constantly mentions, has no skill at or interest in conversation.

[3]Larry McMurtry, *Moving On* (New York, 1970), p. 137. Subsequent references to this novel will be placed in parentheses in the text. For another discussion of Sonny see Charles D. Peavy, *Larry McMurtry* (Boston, 1977), especially pp. 76-77. This book also provides a solid overview of the trilogy in relation to McMurtry's earlier work.

Yet, as her marriage to Jim deteriorates, Hank is the man whom Patsy selects to seduce her. In their affair, Patsy undergoes a sexual awakening similar to that described by Eleanor.

Patsy's choice, although it is crucial to the novel, does not complete the whole country versus city aspect of *Moving On*. There is, in addition to this somewhat Laurentian duality between blood and brain, cowboy male and city man, one other crucial figure. The most important male from the country is not Sonny Shanks or Hank Malory. It is Jim's stepuncle, Roger Waggoner. Roger is considerably older than Sonny Shanks and he is a rancher living on his working cattle ranch near Vernon, Texas. When Patsy visits him, he is busy caring for a sick cow, taking care of his horse and, in one of the most memorable scenes in the book, forcing a wandering cow back to the herd. In that episode, with all the skillful whirling and cutting required to get the cow turned, Roger demonstrates his mastery of the physical skills which the rodeo cowboys can only copy out of context.

McMurtry makes it clear that there is considerable difference between the arena and the ranch. Because Roger's physical prowess has been committed to the land he loves, his life possesses a stability which the rodeo characters lack. This rootedness does not mean he is lethargic or immobile; he works long, hard days on his ranch. When Patsy's son Davey is born, he drives nearly a thousand miles in his old pick-up truck just to see him for one afternoon. The tie to the land brings forth the kind of affection evidenced in that drive, in his letters to Patsy, and in his memories of his wife who has been dead for eleven years. His faithfulness to her memory does not preclude him from mentioning her faults or their nightly quarrels, but he keeps all these factors in a calm balance of love which does not slide into sentimentality or cynicism.

Among all the major characters of *Moving On*, only Roger has this capacity for love and even he is not exempt from the loneliness which affects the others. Roger is lonely not only because he has remained loyal to the land and his wife, but also because he has lasted to a time when his way of life — one man working his small ranch — is not practiced or valued by many. This source of his loneliness provides a dignity which does not occur elsewhere in the novel, but it also means that our regard for him and his view of life has an elegiac aspect. His bequest making Patsy's son the ultimate heir of the ranch and his insistence the boy go horseback riding with him, shows his desire to keep his way of life alive. The novelist, however, knows this will not work. Roger, for all his nobility, is a symbol of the past, not really a model for the future.

The future, McMurtry knows, will develop from the present-day city and so, despite his fascination with Sonny's cowboy sexuality and

his admiration for Roger's balanced, mature masculinity, much of *Moving On* tries to come to terms with city life. City life for McMurtry, looking back at the early sixties, means Houston. When Patsy and Jim Carpenter leave Roger's ranch for home after their summer on the rodeo circuit, McMurtry underlines the importance of this location by entitling that section, "Houston, Houston, Houston."

McMurtry's presentation of the physical aspects of Houston comes from a steady and fairly unobtrusive accumulation of detail, rather than through any attempted overview or extended description. Some of the detail is, in fact, a simple naming of streets like Dunstan, Albans Road, West Main Street, South Boulevard, and places like the Museum of Fine Arts or the Astrodome. At most, this naming provides a flat kind of telephone book or street map representation of reality which he supplements with extensive references to climate. From the first few minutes of their return when Jim and Patsy are stuck in freeway traffic, the cloud and the heavy moist heat of the Gulf Coast are a constant feature of the novel. So, too, are the lush trees and gardens which grow in this atmosphere.

It is, however, the social reality of the city which absorbs most of McMurtry's attention. He pursues this examination largely through one specific group of people, graduate students and their wives (and one graduate professor and wife) in English at Rice University, and in one neighborhood, the area around Rice which the writer Danny Deck will later designate as "my part of Houston."[4] There is, in this population of the city, an important, although limited, sense of community. Jim, Flap, Hank, and Kenny do not view their common experiences as particularly pleasant ones; Patsy's description of their attitude is accurate enough: "Everyone else felt, or at least declared, that graduate school was really no place for them, that the life was unreal, the projects insane, the themes and theses worthless, the professors disagreeable, the social conventions artificial, the competitions silly" (p. 267). This attitude is not unique (the same complaints about graduate life could come from Austin, Madison, or New Haven), but it does fail to acknowledge the positive ties beneath the formality and the formal rigors of the graduate program. These people do share an interest in literature and books. Within this frame, there are diverse interests. Jim is essentially a collector. Flap is a limited, and Bill Duffin a total, academic careerist. Kenny is a would-be writer who keeps saying that Hemingway never went to graduate school. The community is tenuous; only Flap will finish his doctorate. It is also, as

[4] Larry McMurtry, *All My Friends Are Going To Be Strangers* (New York, 1972), p. 253. Subsequent references to the novel will be placed in parentheses in the text.

Flap's suicide attempt attests, no absolute bulwark against isolation. This group, despite Flap's harmless lusting after Patsy and Hank's affair with her, lacks the physical vitality and sexual competitiveness of the individuals on the rodeo circuit. It does have, however, more common elements, more sharing and more cohesion than are visible elsewhere in the city.

When *Moving On* emerges from this milieu into other segments of Houston, it does so with varying success. On those occasions when the central characters go to a different part of Houston, we sometimes learn about the area as well as the character; the trip to Galveston by Patsy and Jim is one example of this. More often than not, however, the effort to put together a panoramic view of the city simply does not work. One illustration of this is the trip which Jim and Kenny make to the whorehouse in Richmond, Texas. Jim's motivation for that trip is believable and so is the guilt with which he returns. His actual encounter with the teen-age Mexican prostitute is unconvincing however; Nina and her surroundings are too stereotyped to be effective. A similar shortcoming marks the scene with Pee Wee Raskin at the Gulf-Air Lounge. This bar on Telephone Road is populated by "the wretched of Southeast Houston" (p. 302). Yet Pee Wee's return there when he is overwhelmed by the social triumph of dinner at Patsy's, gives us only a sense of slapstick comedy. A man at the Lounge, lost in the city, feels cheated by the absence of beans in his chili, shoots up the place and leaves. The tone for this slapstick is as detached as the tone for the stereotyped whorehouse scene. These characters and these segments of the city seem to have the same place in the novel as the man from East Texas who sells newly manufactured "relics" because there aren't any real ones left. They all appear to be added to the narrative for local color. There is diversity, but no depth of interaction, no sense that Pee Wee and Patsy, Jim and Nina are, in any real sense, interconnected. The novel makes forays out of the Rice area, but it never really establishes contact with these other parts of the city.

This inability to connect seems finally to be a function of the city, as well as of the novelist. If McMurtry, in *Moving On*, fails to make certain crucial elements of the urban environment seem real, the cause can be partially attributed to Houston as well as to his literary imagination. McMurtry embodies this view of the area in one crucial dinner party scene. Here he presents some of the most important and complex characters in the novel, so it is clear that an inability to make imaginative identification with them is not the real issue. But, despite the diversity of the people — Sonny, Bill and Lee Duffin, Joe Percy, Dixie McCormack, Jim and Patsy — nothing happens. They are a microcosm of various important aspects of the region and the city. The

evening comes and goes, however, with no confrontation, no exchanges and without any recognition of differences. These people coexist, but they do not ever really meet. The diversity of the dinner, like the diversity of the city, leads nowhere. Instead of a sharper sense of individual or group identity, the atmosphere of the city, as it appears here, is amorphous. *Moving On*, for all its obvious affection for Houston, embodies some disappointment that the city has not yet found itself.

This disappointment should be seen, however, in the context of two other urban areas important to the novel, Dallas and San Francisco. Patsy's parents represent the results of life in Dallas, a city which McMurtry feels is uniformly "cold, clean, impersonal, and efficient."[5] Patsy's father is an anxious oil millionaire and her mother is an anxious middle-class housewife, trying desperately to exert maternal control long after her girls have left home. The parents' inability to be concerned with anything but the most superficial aspects of Patsy's or her sister Miri's life shows McMurtry's view of the human poverty underneath the city's affluence.

The comparisons to California are more complex. *Moving On* really presents three different Californias, one of which is represented by the graduate student, Clara Clark. In her affairs with Hank and Jim, she enacts an efficient hedonism which is not intentionally cruel, but which is chilling both in its mindlessness and in its lack of passion. Her needs are metabolic only; for her the new sexual freedom means she can take a detached, ironic view of love as "the big show." The other two sides of California culture emerge when Patsy goes West to rescue Miri, and they are more closely tied to the specific locales of San Francisco. There is the ugly and brutal side of Haight-Ashbury in the sixties. Miri's lover, Stone, abuses her verbally and physically. As Patsy and her friends chase her, they must walk past a group of Hell's Angels performing a bizarre sexual show in a nearby park.

The other side of San Francisco is represented by a kind young couple, Melissa and her friend Barry, who help Patsy find her sister. Patsy feels strange when she first meets this couple, but she soon recognizes that it is because "it was so long since she had been with people who were happy together that it was hard to get used to" (p. 733). The resason *Moving On* gives for this happiness adds another dimension to the kinds of masculinity dealt with earlier in the novel. Patsy asks Melissa why all the California boys are so shy. She gets the answer: "A lot of guys are like that out here. They don't know quite what to do

[5]Larry McMurtry, "The Texas Moon and Elsewhere," *The Atlantic Monthly* (March, 1975), p. 32.

with girls. Some of them try to come on, but most of them just sort of hang around being brotherly" (p. 736).

This concept of a confident and gentle masculinity is left behind for awhile, but it surfaces again in Houston at the very end of the novel. Eric, a first-year graduate student from Menlo Park, California is, as Patsy realizes, one of those "young Californians" who constitute a "new breed." Like the cowboys, he is healthy and at ease with himself physically; but he is a tennis player, not a cowboy. He is shy, easily embarrassed, not aggressive. The novel closes with Patsy watching this "beaut" of a young man walk down Dunstan Street with her younger sister. She sees his enjoyment of Miri and muses how good it will be when he gets around to "bringing that blood back home, back to the place it nourished, the country that it fed" (p. 790).

This dream is a nice one, but it is too vague and too much in conflict with other important elements in *Moving On*. Roger's ranch is the novel's only real alternative to urban life and, even if it did somehow survive into the future, it does not seem the place for Eric and Miri. To enact Patsy's dream would mean transplanting West Coast sexual role re-definition to West Texas and proclaiming a gentle new world for that tough ground. Obviously her dream, for all its attractiveness, is at odds with the novel's reality. Patsy's position at the first of the novel — slumped in a car in a rodeo parking lot, reading *Catch 22* — is not as affectedly literary as it may first appear; it is a commentary on the cultural situation depicted by the novel. McMurtry's characters simultaneously long for the lost life of the land and acknowledge that the growth of cities is inevitable. They are at once attracted to and alienated from cities and from the specific city of Houston. Through them, *Moving On* expresses its own version of our cultural double bind.

In its general theme and structure, *All My Friends Are Going To Be Strangers* has important points of resemblance to *Moving On*. Danny Deck, the novelist-narrator of this piece, adopts the same response to twentieth-century life which characterizes much of *Moving On*: continual movement. He describes his existence as "no life," but "sort of a long confused drive" (p. 231). The pattern of Danny's travels also follows a rough outline set by Jim and Patsy. Danny's story begins in Austin, shifts to Houston, moves from there to California, and back to Houston and then breaks the parallels in his last drive to the Rio Grande. Within this somewhat similar framework, however, McMurtry embodies a new perspective on Houston. For the first part of the novel, Danny feels close to the city. His love for Houston appears as a deeper and longer lasting love than his feeling for his wife, Sally, and his girlfriend, Jill. Just as he learns that his novel

has been accepted, Danny lets himself be dislodged from the city. He leaves it, however, as if it were a lover and a friend:

> Houston was my companion on that walk. She had been my mistress, but after a thousand nights together, just the two of us, we were calling it off. It was a warm, moist, mushy, smelly night, the way her best nights were. The things most people hated about her were the things I loved: her heat, her dampness, her sumpy smells. She wasn't beautiful, but neither was I. I liked her heat and her looseness and her smells. Those things were her substance, and if she had been cool and dry and odorless I wouldn't have cared to love her these years. We were calling it off, but I could still love her. She still reached me, when I went walking with her. Her mists were always a little sexy. I felt, in leaving her, the kind of fond gentleness I never got to feel with Sally (pp. 62-63).

His trip to California has no lasting effect on him. He feels homesick for Houston while he is there and he leaves San Francisco with only a brief moment of regret that he didn't get to know the city. He returns glad that Houston "smelled as spunky as ever" (p. 213).

His relationship to the city has nonetheless changed. During Danny's first stay in the city, his life involved a deterioration of his relationship with Sally and a series of encounters with bizarre Houston characters. These characters have in common the reduction of their lives to one phobia, often rooted in narrowly conceived middle class values, and an attempt to inflict their mania on the usually passive Danny. The landlord, Mr. Fitzherbert, for example, lurks outside Danny's apartment yelling "no fucking" every time he hears the bedsprings squeak. Mrs. Norwich, the librarian, runs Danny out of the Rice University Library whenever possible. She accompanies her evictions with critical commentary on his intellect; his grooming, she feels, is so bad that his intellect can not be good. Such characters are not exactly harmless, but their behavior is at worst only a nuisance.

After his return, Danny's different status changes his experience of the city. The publication of his novel has, as he notes, made him an "author," not just a "writer." Houston, however, does not recognize artistic accomplishment. An autograph party for Danny takes place in a bookstore where the owner keeps "good books on his shelves and no one bought them." The only person who shows up is the mother of an old friend. Disinterest later becomes mixed with active hostility when Danny tries to see his new daughter. Sally's parents attack him and

"his goddam book talk" and chase him out of the hospital. Danny retreats until Sally's father hits him and then he retaliates with words; he drives the parents back by reciting his entire and considerable vocabulary for sexual acts and organs. Winning that battle, however, means he must leave the city to avoid arrest. After he accepts Emma Horton's offer of food, understanding, and sexual warmth, he drives away to throw himself and his second novel in the Rio Grande. What McMurtry gives us in the history of Danny's relationship to Houston is an allegory of the artist in the city. There is a more clearly defined community implied here than in *Moving On*, but for the artist that identity is at best a nuisance and at worst a menace. In McMurtry's mixture of attraction toward and alienation from Houston, alienation finally predominates.

Patsy Carpenter's confusion and Danny Deck's despair represent two stages in McMurtry's attitudes toward Houston. The first two parts of the trilogy are alike, however, in their focus on the lives of young people in relation to the city. *Terms of Endearment*, the final novel in the trilogy, is the first to focus on middle-age in this particular urban environment. Its central character, Aurora Greenway, is the most outspoken critic of Houston among McMurtry's major characters. She, like McMurtry in one of his essays, strikes out at Houston, criticizing it for failures which were not even at issue in the two earlier works. She says, "no self-respecting French restaurant would have allowed itself to be in Houston anyway" (p. 58), and McMurtry complains that Houston consumers spend at Saks and Lord and Taylor without realizing "that the real goodies are back on Fifth Avenue, where they have been all along." The criticisms of both character and author assign an importance to the urban East which was not present earlier. The basic voice is that of the provincial turned nationally minded sophisticate and thus concerned to dissociate himself from provinciality by pointing his finger at it. If, however, McMurtry's comment appears to assume that dress shops are a valid measure of a city's culture, it can also perhaps be associated with something which comes from a deeper, more profound dissatisfaction with the city. McMurtry knows what Aurora feels but never articulates, the disabling absence of a viable culture in her life.

This emerges more effectively in the quality of Aurora Greenway's life than in her overt criticism of the city's restaurants. Her devotion to her Renoir painting may be seen as a central symbol for her life. The painting serves sometimes as a window to memories of her past, and sometimes as a symbol of Aurora's need to exert control in her relationships with men. It hangs in her bedroom so that Aurora, like the traditional male with his "etchings," can invite or hint at inviting her

suitors to bed. Its most important function, however, may be to emphasize the absence of a sustaining local culture. Intelligent and educated, Aurora must, aside from her Renoir, occupy herself with her home and her suitors. In the absence of a vitality which comes from shared goals, art and myth, she creates an artificial vitality by criticizing Emma and alternately eliciting and rejecting the competitive claims of the men around her.

This behavior might be ascribed to Aurora's shallowness, if it were not for what we see in those male characters who compete for her. General Hector Scott has a raspy voice, an erect posture and dreams about driving tanks down River Oaks Boulevard. Alberto showers Aurora with flowers, displays a great deal of highly emotional sentimentality and talks about Genoa. The most poignant member of this group is Vernon, the novel's only tenuous connection with the cowboy tradition. He is essentially a nervous oil man, so rootless that he does not even spend much time in the hotel room which is his home. He chooses, instead, to sleep in his car, on top of a parking garage in downtown Houston. What each of these men have in common is a case of arrested growth which makes them easy prey for Aurora. What they have in common with Aurora is an attempt to live the middle of their lives in an urban environment which is culturally deficient. In *All My Friends Are Going To Be Strangers*, Houston is seen as antithetical to the artist. *Terms of Endearment* turns the angle of vision, showing what effect the absence of an artistic and cultural tradition has on Houston's inhabitants.

This final novel of the trilogy, like *Moving On*, tries to present a panoramic view of Houston. It moves back and forth from Aurora and her suitors to her maid Rosie and Rosie's husband Royce, from the comfort of River Oaks to the desperate chaos of Lyons Avenue. The characterization of Rosie is successful. For most of the novel, Rosie's life appears as a genuine waste of her energy, willingness to work, and determination. But this sympathetic and complex characterization ultimately is absorbed by a familiar form of slapstick comedy. The humor climaxes in a scene in which Royce demonstrates his renewed interest in Rosie by driving a truck through the wall and across the dance floor of the J-Bar Korral. This scene, technically perfect in pace and detail, deals with the urban poor in a stereotyped way; it suggests that they are more suitable for funny stories than complex development. In *Terms of Endearment*, however, this treatment is not as discriminatory as in *Moving On*. The presentation of characters who are caricatures of what they might be cuts across class lines; arrested growth has its origin in the urban environment of Houston rather than the inherent limitations of a certain class. Royce's mad drive through

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

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?