

and Atlanta, Tampa and Flagstaff, Birmingham and Oklahoma City, promises to confuse the issue of "southern" identity considerably.

There *are* elements which suggest a social and economic integrity in the region, from the slow emergence of the southern urban system in comparison with the systems in the North to the impact of freight rates and general transportation costs, not to mention major institutions like racial segregation, in setting the South apart. The work over the past ten years has provided a general framework for thinking of southern cities as southern, even if the definitions are not set in concrete. We can safely predict that research on southern cities will in the future focus more on elements of diversity and on the examination of particular cities and specific elements of the urbanization process, though one would always hope within a comparative framework or at least with comparative awareness.

Southern cities probably take their essential characteristics from the fact that they are *both* southern and urban, but the variations on these themes are quite large. Just as recent social history has pointed up the complexity and diversity of communities in America, future research on the urban South will probably confirm the fact that to comprehend one city is not to understand them all.

BLAINE A. BROWNELL is associate dean and co-director of the Graduate School, and associate professor of history and urban studies at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. He is editor of the *Journal of Urban History* and editor or author of several urban studies including *The Urban Ethos in the South, 1920-1930*. He is currently at work with George E. Mowry on a revised edition of *The Urban Nation, 1920-1980*.

WHILE YOU WERE AWAY (HOUSTON SEEN AND UNSEEN, 1923-1979)

*A Letter to Charles Provine Goyen, distinguished early Citizen
of that city*

BY WILLIAM GOYEN

Dear Father:

I have been asked to speak about the city you brought me to. Houston! I could not speak of Houston without speaking of you. For in the image of my boyhood and young manhood, Houston is you and you are Houston. Though you are, for me, one of the founding citizens of this new metropolis I see around me in 1978 when I come to deliver this communication, you did not "build" Houston; you had no realtor's "vision" of Houston's destiny. You did not even "grow" with Houston. For you were a "failed" man in a boomtown. Your earnings did not triple, or double, you gained no commercial power in a city of commerce. You did not own a bank or try to get one together (in a city of banks); you did not cut a new street through woods for a sub-division with your name on it, did not start an insurance agency, get the franchise for a car dealership, buy up some land by what might be an airport.

The Houston I saw, dear father, on my daily journeys through it by foot, from other people's automobiles by hitch-hiking, above all from the automobile you drove, was the Houston of the Nineteen-Twenties and Thirties. After that, from the Forties to the present, I left and came back, left and came back, year after year. You were always, until you died, waiting for me. My daily travels were spiritual journeys; that is, I was experiencing a place deeply, on my own secret terms, as I moved through it. Where I was going, why I was going there, and when, will compose this letter to you. I was not just a walker in a growing city. I was in a kind of flight from my place, a fugitive from the very scene I travelled; I saw later that I was, from the beginning, saying goodbye as I said hello, in the same breath — already giving up what was being given to me. And so the places I passed, on my way, the

houses and buildings, were symbols of my intimate feelings, the state of my mind, of someone longing (and planning) to get out of where he was into some other place. Dear father!

You brought me to the young city of Houston when I was eight years old, in 1923, and you guided me and led me through the changing place, I, "growing with Houston" as the slogans on billboards began to tell me, watching the changes from your company car (did you ever own one of your own?) on my daily schoolboy and job routes (you even drove me to pick up my first date and I remember that I asked you in my timidity and fear, to go in and get her for me.) But car-less in the sawmill town, we had walked to church through the fields or strode along on sandy roads to neighbors and kin, back up somewhere in a clearing. You walked the railroad tracks to the sawmill, walked through pastures to the store in town, walked me to the little doctor's office, walked me with my mother to Trinity school. Transferred to a new place, you were my driver, my conductor, chaperone to my early simple journeys; and in my later returnings you gave tours of the new, the wonders rising up and stretching out and over the city you loved and felt so much a part of, showed me year after year the replacement of old disappeared places, after I'd left your house and gone away — into a world that you could not comprehend, beyond Merrill Street, beyond Houston new or old, beyond Texas. Proud watcher of the city of Houston, your city passed over you, even while you were giving to it, never giving you back very much, taking more and more from you, a swift town passing over a man who could not catch hold of it.

You were one of those young men come up out of a large poor family in a poor place, lumber people in your case, Mississippi in your case, that moved from work place to work place: mill towns. You started work early, after you finished the fifth grade. When your family moved to East Texas for the sawmill at Trinity, you found my mother there (she had been born there, her father was Postmaster there and her brother and sister worked in the Trinity Post Office — mail for 900 people). When the sawmill petered out, you moved us to Shreveport for a few months, then on to the small city of Houston where you could sell lumber for a Houston lumber company. You sold lumber for this company for over fifty years, and when you recently died, you were still in the employ of that company on your deathbed. You were the possessor of no pension, no company "benefits." At your death your annual salary was less than the cost of a good Cadillac. You had finally paid off, when I was forty, the mortgage on the house on Merrill Street, whose buying price was no more than the cost of a good Cadillac.

We lived briefly in two little houses before we settled down for the rest of my Houston life in Woodland Heights, on Merrill Street. For awhile we lived on Yale Street in the Heights, in what was called a duplex — a two-family house — and I remember especially the faint sour smell of gas always in the air; and I saw, when we went riding, the natural gas reservoir with lights strung on it at night, not far from our house, over around Thirteenth Street, I believe. (Later, the more pungent odor of a paper mill hung in our five rooms.) Next we lived on Morrison Street, off Bayland Avenue in Woodland Heights, in another duplex, and I remember our church just behind us, the Woodland Methodist Church on Houston Avenue to which I could get quickly through a vacant lot. Down the street was a boy whose father had a portion of the concession to rustproof parts for the Niels Esperson Building. I dipped a million bolts in a chocolate-colored liquid one summer for a dime an hour. Later when I saw the grand Esperson Building, with its blue-lit little pagoda on top, I felt a part of it, deep in its innards. In a few months you found for us the little two-bedroom frame house on Merrill Street, number 614, that was our home, enlarged to include a sleepingporch and a breakfast room, until you died, not long ago. Your Azalea and Lily garden was your pleasure there. We couldn't afford an electric fan for a long time. There was some machine in the attic that rumbled and roared and brought in bug-studded cool air. When we were being cooled off we could not hear what each other was saying.

In those days (1923-24) Woodland Heights was like a soft woods with little houses in close rows on dusty streets. There were few cars, we played in the street. Merrill Street was a little street that ran nine blocks long, east to west, and it was a neighborhood of shy immigrants from small towns, like us. Merrill Street ended at each end in a school, and from 1923 to 1929 my simple daily itinerary during school months led me down the sidewalk east to one of them, Travis Elementary School, and west to the other, James S. Hogg Junior High School. What I saw and felt as I walked through this neighborhood from the age of eight to fourteen became a part of the foundation of my writing for the rest of my life, whether I lived in Zurich or Chicago, Rome or New York. What caught me up so early and made me feel that I had to be a voice for it was the sense of exile, misplacement, the poverty, spiritual and material, of city living, the growing hell of automobiles, the loss of open nature of woods and rivers, the simple lyric yearning of people out of place. This was the lament I heard from these gentle uprooted people in their singing speech, their poignant outcry (my mother's joined them, often led them): "When we go back one day to Red River"; "When we all go home to Polk County." Or to Honey Grove,

or to Lovelady, Tyler, Big Springs. Houston in those early days seemed to me a place of the half-lost and the estranged, even the persecuted. The theme in mother's household, my dear father, was the very same. You know well how it was often gloomy and so sad, sometimes threatening to a young man like you, hardly thirty and feeling his thrust ("I'll just take the children and go back home and you can stay here in your Houston, without us. We'll be all right, don't you worry. At least we'll have a little breeze in the early mornings and be able to sleep without the sirens scaring us to death at midnight.") You consoled her, and us, and, looking to the new city, promised that it would be better, that we would buy an electric fan, and a Hoover, have a chickenyard and some chickens, a garden of peppers and greens and tomatoes like we had back home; that we would have us a car and ride through the city or park on Main Street in front of Munn's or Kresses and watch the people walking on the sidewalk; or ride back to Trinity to see the old place and all the kinfolks. Dear young man my father, you had your young spirit in you, keen-eyed and ready in a young city. You were going to grow with Houston, provide for us from the good things it had to offer, give us a new life in a new world. Houston! "Where seventeen railroads meet the sea," we heard them say it on the radio. You consoled, and made us promises. (Few materialized). The young city boomed and spread and rose up.

This longing for place, spoken at dinner table and sobbed softly from beds in the nighttime, became Eden-like in my vision of it, a sweet place where everything would be all right again if only we could go back, of the familiar fields and the dear river and the river bank, the brethren trees and the gardens of vegetables, of East Texas flowers, the kinfolks in their houses up the dirt roads, the church meetings and the family reunions. I was infused with such a sense of a lost country, with such a feeling of being foreign and alien and transferred, against my will, that the city of Houston represented a kind of internment, Merrill Street a kind of inner city, in those early boyhood days. Naturally, my dear old man, I began to fabricate, to devise ways to break out of that captivity when I was able; and I, too, was growing along with Houston, with life itself, getting more and more courage to be free inside, and beginning to look for ways that would give me that inner freedom, if not yet outer. By the time my daily walks to the eastern end of Merrill Street had ended and I began my way toward the other end, to my junior high school, I was able to express a little of these feelings I had now taken on for myself, which had been given to me, indeed had been mine, too, from the very start, now I knew. And I was beginning to write down these feelings of homesickness, of loss of place, reveries of my beginnings, of a countryside that now seemed like the Garden itself,

like a country of Paradise. A world I had lost became the world of my dreams and a world to go out and search for when I could. It was the only solace I knew and the only beauty. The city got rawer, harsher. When a girl from our Sunday School at Woodland Methodist was knocked down by a car on Houston Avenue and lay dying in the Church vestibule, I cursed the city and wept for the peace of my town and vowed I would run away. I must tell you again, dear father, what you knew so well later and grieved over, that my search began for physical escape within the confines of my young city; and already I knew the bitter feeling of being torn between plans for flight and the certainty that I could not abandon you. Already the lifetime torment had begun: I couldn't leave and I couldn't stay. I used to talk to you about this. But it was only when I began to write about it that you began to understand, to take my book and sit away with it and begin to understand. And oh my beloved father you saw yourself in me, your plight in mine, when it was too late to change your own — if ever you could have.

Every morning at 7:45 we left Merrill Street, you and I in your company Chevrolet. Our destination was my high school, Central High School soon to be changed to Sam Houston Senior High. Our trip to school led us over a low lying road along the bayou that was often flooded, once so disastrously that the markets and warehouses along its side were water-wrecked ruins for some years after. We passed the S.P. Hospital, passed a structure whose sign read "Bemus Bag," rode by the shantytown built of fruit-crates and towsacks in the bayou bottoms shaggy with weeds and lush with trumpet vines, honeysuckle, blooming morning glory. "Lots of Cottonmouths in there," you told me. "Coming home some nights I've seen 'em crossing the road." We crossed a bridge over the muddy bayou and arrived at your office building in the Union National Bank Building on the corner of Main Street and Franklin Avenue. And let me recall with you, my father, the day we came upon your own father, the silent and defiant little man with the crooked foot and the Roman head and a pint in his back pocket, selling the *Houston Post* on that very corner, sitting on a nail keg — but not for long. We crossed Main Street and saw the old City Hall and when you got to Louisiana you turned on that and went, in the stinging tropical heat of early morning through a city sprouting up out of its own castaway like a new plant, past boarded-up facades, empty buildings under renovation. Something new was rousing and stirring, fast and visible. "Houston's going to be a big place, Son," you told me. "All kinds of opportunities. Get your education." But already, Sir, I was dreaming of escape, release, brightness, dazzle —

some unknown, unnameable beautiful thing. And there, at the colorless brick building that held what was called High School, you put me out and watched me go into the dark entrance.

In the afternoons I stepped into the little Watson streetcar at the corner of Main and Texas, from a little island in the middle of the street. Rice Hotel seemed the largest building I had ever seen; it was cool under the quiet arcades. The afterschool ride home on the Watson streetcar in the early Nineteen Thirties has been a part of my sleeping dreams for many years. We rocked along on narrow streets so close to the little houses on either side that we could see in the poor kitchens and shabby bedrooms. Two brothers drove the Watson streetcar and they were the riders' and the neighbors' friends. The little car made its way to noisy Washington Avenue then to wide Houston Avenue until somewhere near Luna Park it turned into a neighborhood of poor houses with tin roofs and clothesline washings and barking dogs running along with us, roosters crowing. When the little ringing car came out of the neighborhood like a local toy, it slowed to prepare itself for a trip that seemed always to be hazardous and frightening — like a tightrope walker poised before he begins his feat. The Watson streetcar felt its way upon what seemed the narrowest highest bridge in the world, a trestle over Buffalo Bayou and its wilderness below. Sometimes boys would be caught on the trestle and have to hang by their fingernails until we passed. When we had successfully accomplished this crossing, we came into a neighborhood that received us intimately like something of its own, and we rolled and rang on to the end of the line on very Merrill Street.

But month by month the turmoil was building. I recall scenes of street jams of trucks and cars, of beginning traffic lights in places, and accidents. Our Watson streetcar conductors said it was going to get worse and that eventually the automobile would drive the little streetcar off the street. Now my dream was changing, father. I longed for the splendid, the magical, the exciting, the melodramatic, the fantastical. Where would I find this in a city of plainness, in a neighborhood of lower middle-class exiles? I began forays on my bicycle out into a wilderness of thick woods and cliffs. This wilderness lay at the end of Eleventh Street, beyond Heights Boulevard. It took me no more than thirty minutes' bicycle ride to get to this wild place. There I took my notebook and wrote fantastical passages. It was in those days, Central High School days, that I began a hidden life of reaching out, most of which you never dreamt, dear father Charlie. I began to feel a new boldness, born out of hunger. I was secretly making my way to the Houston Conservatory of Music far out, it seemed, on Caroline Avenue, where I announced to Dr. Hoffman, the Director, that I had

ambitions to compose musical creations; and closer by to the Lamar Hotel Ballroom where Mrs. John Wesley Graham sat, as if she were expecting me, at a long narrow grand piano flanked by palm trees. I had to walk all the way across a shining slippery waxed ballroom floor to arrive at her, positioned at her Grand, flounced out in an organza evening gown with a large Gladiola corsage bristling under her chin. It was here, in this undreamed-of spacious hall, by these palms and at the side of this piano, that I heard the hoarse but tender voice of Mrs. Graham inform me of my talents, imperfections and potential. "You have a singing talent, Billy," she reminded me. "Only thing is, you'll have to do something about a bum operation on your tonsils. The damned doctor in your one-horse town left a piece of tonsil in your throat. It affects the action of your vocal chord, holds the bubble down. That bubble's got to rise, Billy." "Oh," I said. "Never mind honey," Mrs. John Wesley Graham went on. "We'll do what we can with a piece of tonsil sticking into your vocal cavity like the tip of an asparagus. Sing! *ah-ah-ah*." And oh I sang *ah-ah-ah*, dear dad. If you'd known this, or could have seen me there by the palm trees in the Lamar Ballroom, singing in Houston, age fifteen, what on earth would you have done? Nothing, I guess; but I'd have surely quit Mrs. John Wesley Graham's singing lessons and let the left-over tonsil have its way if you'd asked me to. Just as I did in the case of my secret music lessons at the Houston Conservatory of Music when you discovered my music book of Chopin Preludes (I had had about six lessons on the "Dewdrop," still can play about six lessons of it). It hurt you so, it was just — I said so, much later — the kind of thing you could not comprehend — that's it, my father, you just had no comprehension of it. You sat away from me for a long time, we were strangers for some days and nights; I was already entering a world you could not comprehend; you had no words for anyone. "Why's your daddy grieving?" my mother came to me to ask. I simply could not say. The morning I asked you to drive me to the Houston Conservatory of Music to turn my music in to Miss Tree, my piano teacher, and to tell Dr. Hoffman, the Director, that I would have to quit my composition class and he said, "It's too bad, Billy, because you have a lot of talent," that changed you. After that you were all right. Remember, dad?

In 1932 we began another daily morning trip together. You were proudly escorting me out a long distance to my university. Rice Institute! Straight out Main Street we'd go, gathering hitch-hiking students as we went past the main hitch-hiker's location, Main and Lamar. Arriving at the ivy-covered gate, you'd make a half-circle and stop there, at the entrance, at the long path that led far back to my place of learning that would change everything for us, make life

different from what it had been for you. You put me down, out of your automobile, onto the path tenderly but strictly; and you waited, watching me move away from you. When I'd turn around I'd see you there; I'd wave and you'd wave back. And far down the gravel walk I'd turn again and see you there, in the distance, see your old felt hat, see the shadowy shape of your company Chevrolet, dear dear father.

Days at Rice, a quiet awesome place of only three buildings standing in a meadow on the edge of town. The end of Main Street was not far beyond — there was Bellaire Boulevard, and beyond was prairie and mud roads. Across from Rice, across Main Street was Hermann Park, a wilderness where I spent most of my days during the first year. You never knew that most every day after I saw your automobile drive away, I turned away from that cold campus and went back on the gravel path, in flight. In the empty park I sat under trees or wandered through the empty spaces. It was usually raining, soft Gulf rain, warm and melancholy. From the little zoo a couple of lions uttered a forlorn roar. Their sound often fell over my reading in the silent stacks of the library in the days after when I had abandoned my wilderness for a corner with a table and books (you had triumphed, dear father, though you never knew what a close call you suffered, your boy of the wilderness had a close call). Studying at late night in the room on Merrill Street, I heard the sound of the freight trains haunting the quiet neighborhood. It urged me, as the distant roar of the lions had stirred me. And as I learned and grew and matured, I saw my peers training for commerce in a growing city of opportunity; I felt estranged; I had found, in the library and classrooms of my university, poetry, words for feeling, what seemed like salvation for me. I heard the lion's call and the trains' sad whistle. You, dear young Charles P. Goyen, slept on in the back room: we had come a little way, together, more than we both knew. But *you* had brought me, under your gentle force, to what would free me, and free me from what bound you. *You* armed me for my beginnings. Thank you, Sir.

Not only Rice University but S. Hurok and the City Auditorium freed me for the great world. As an usher — Rice students were given free admission with this job — I saw from aisles, from the back of the house, from high balcony seats, what I at first could not believe to be true: the San Carlo Opera Company. *La Bohème*, *Madam Butterfly*, *Tosca*, and the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo! *Les Sylphides*, *Giselle*, *Gaieté Parisienne*. When the performance of Danilova and Eglevsky was over and they had departed, I wandered through rainy Houston in a trance, feeling alone, as if lovers had left me. Their world would be my world. What was Houston? What was Rice, Merrill Street? A city of automobiles and oil, a neighborhood of sadness and drabness. (But

both had given me my feeling — and both were giving me, day by day, now, my freedom.)

You stood in the street, Franklin Street, behind your office in November, 1939 and saw me, flanked by hundreds of young men, march away from you. It was the war. I had been drafted. As I marched away, I didn't dare acknowledge your fear and your heartbreak — nor my own. That was the beginning of my leavings and returnings, forevermore. In the years that followed, of going away and coming back, going away, coming back (“Why don't you stay here, Son? Sure wish you'd come on back. Don't know why you have to live all over the world, Houston's got everything any place else has”) in all those years until you died you'd give me a tour of our changing city. Spokesman for a flourishing city, the conscience of it, you'd show me the changes and wonders on the way to Merrill Street. (Merrill Street hadn't changed, our house was the same. Each year it was clearer that you were not going to move to a larger house in a new part of town, that you hung back in your old neighborhood — where few of your old neighbors lived: they had moved to new subdivisions, to modern little air conditioned brick homes, you lingered back in the old place.) You told me to look up in the night at aerial strips of cement hanging, unended, over an old Henke and Pillot's grocery store; we were suddenly speeding on elevated pavement below which I saw landscaped bayou banks; suddenly we descended onto a little street of whitewashed houses and canna lilies. Each time, more had risen up out of the bayous. The new laid its shadow on the old. Each time the whirling shapes that seemed to be built of automobiles, folding under and over and running on like a river of fuming cars and trucks, turned over and around my old place like a living stream that was pulling down into its current the little houses, the backyards, the chinaberry trees, the drug-stores and barbershops and barbecue stands. “When did they do that?” I asked you. And you answered, “While you were away.”

Yes, my beloved father, so much happened, so much changed so much vanished forever, while I was away. And while I was away one time you vanished, vanished out of Houston in the twinkling of an eye, and one of my returnings was to honor your burial in the ground of your cherished city, out on the way we used to drive to the Ship Channel on a Sunday afternoon. The airplanes you used to meet, that brought me back so many times, fly over your grave in a wooded cemetery.

I've written you this letter, beloved man, to tell you that this is what my stories, which sometimes hurt you then, are about, and that now it is very clear that what they are about is what you gave me, what we shared, hard and unhappy, what we had come to in our life on

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 McMurry'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 McMurry. 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 McMurry'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

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