

## A Writer's Testament: Where Ideas Really Come From

by Clay Reynolds

I'm a writer. In something more than a manner of speaking, I suppose I've always been a writer. I didn't realize that for a long time. Indeed, what angers me most when I consider the point is that I was nearly four decades into my life before I could accept the fact of what I was. I seem to have wasted a lot of time. I spent almost half my life working toward being a scholar. My scholarship is still important to me, but it took a while for me to realize that what thrilled me about publishing research and criticism was less the content of what I had to say than the thrill of having people read my words and comment on the way I said it. Then I managed to publish some fiction; and although my success, such as it has been, is modest by any standard, I found myself at middle age and beginning a second career without having satisfactorily completed the first one.

I feel the pressure of time on me always. As my forties plod beside me, I recall the warnings of others about "mid-life" crises with apprehension. My biggest worry is whether I can tell all the stories I want to tell in the time I have left.

Of course, none of us really knows how much time he has left. Preston Jones, a writer, and a very good one in my opinion, didn't find out that he was a writer until he was only a couple of beers shy of the ulcer that killed him. It's fun to speculate on what he might have done had he had relocated from a beer joint to a fern bar and switched from Bud to Perrier. I suspect, though,

that he wouldn't have been a writer any more. Writers are notoriously self-destructive, and it's their habit to find their inspiration in the very elements that threaten them. I think it's part of their mystique.

Some writers discover or at least decide that they are writers early in life. In fact, their careers actually start before they have written or published anything. The world is full of writers who have never published. I know a man named Ben from Oklahoma. I met Ben at a party when I was in graduate school. He handed me his business card. It had his name, and beneath the name, it said "Writer."

"Oh," I said, embarrassed that I had never heard of him (English graduate students are supposed to know about writers.) "What have you written?"

"Nothing yet," he smiled at me. "I'm working on a couple of novels, though."

A couple of novels. It's like someone saying, "I'm not six-foot-five yet, but I'm working on a couple of inches." I decided right then that I would never call myself a writer until I had written--and published--something. I recognize that publication doesn't necessarily make a person a writer, but it's the only real validation I can understand. Without it, I am merely playing at writing, practicing well and hard, perhaps, but not yet in the game.

Then there are the writers who have instant--and young--success. That is, they have published their work. I don't like these writers very much. They tend to be cocky, overconfident, arrogant. They often write a lot about other writers, usually men, who are middle aged and frightened of growing older. What do they know? They haven't faced impotence or a shortness of breath from a moderately high staircase. They don't have to watch what they eat or worry about

the distance from their office to the john. They haven't looked into the mirror one morning and discovered that their hair is thinning as rapidly as their hips are making rain-gutters for their waists. They haven't found the value of comfortable shoes or that sleep is more fun than watching late-night TV. They are ignorant of ordered priorities that put night clubs and skiing vacations beneath a trip to the dentist or socking money away for the kids' college educations. They haven't come to terms with the notion that no matter how successful they are they will never own a Porsche convertible, because for such a car is impractical and silly for people their age.

Why don't they write about what they know? Why don't they write about buying their first legal drink? Their first sexual encounter? Their first vote? I know one young writer I met a couple of years ago right after his book came out. He was wearing a jeans jacket and dusty boots. He wrote a book about an artist--not a writer--who was middle aged and frightened of growing older. I tried to like him even so, and I bought his book, had him sign it. We had a couple of beers together. He drank his slowly, and I determined that he didn't much like beer. He was very young, I thought. He worked out and had clear skin and a full head of curly hair. His teeth were white and he didn't smoke, and he switched from beer to white wine on the second round. He drove a Porsche convertible. He lived with a twenty-two-year-old symphony orchestra cellist, who had legs that went from her well-shaped calves all the way up to her long, thin neck. Her mouth was gorgeous, and she had long, graceful fingers. She was without a doubt the sexiest woman I've ever seen. And she was in awe of him and of his role as a writer. She announced that they had no intention of marrying, because she and he each had their own lives to live. She

looked at him with a doe's eyes, though. "He's a wonderful writer," she assured me. When she looked at me, I felt like a "funny uncle."

I was envious of anyone whose career blossomed so quickly, who could use his talent to acquire a fine sports car and a beautiful, talented companion. Then I read his book. I didn't think it was very good. In fact, I wondered how it was ever published. Publication is hard, and this book was hard to read, for it was trite and badly written. He wrote things like "extend out" and "center around" and used "impact" as a verb when he wasn't talking about infected wisdom teeth. He had characters with names like "Lance" and "Marsha," and everyone drove Porsches and BMW's and had .38 revolvers handy and spent summers in the South of France and went to the opera and ate escargot and knew the differences between airliners. There was a lot of talk about stocks and bonds, and the main character was a Republican. There was a lot of sex, but none of it was normal, and everyone did drugs. I read several reviews of the book, and no one seemed to like it. I spoke to a number of people whose opinions I respected. They hated it. He made close to a quarter of a million dollars in residual sales, though, and he got a movie contract for nearly a hundred thousand more. I understand he traded his Porsche for a Ferrari.

I saw the young writer a few months later in New York. He was no longer wearing a jeans jacket and dusty boots. He had on a rag wool turtleneck and ostrich-skin boots all under a London Fog trench coat that was worn fashionably open with a silk scarf hanging loose around his shoulders. His hair was carefully mussed, and I noticed that he was trying with no success whatsoever to grow a beard. The cellist was with him. She still adored him. She looked at me as if I were a leper.

"How's it going?" I asked him.

"How do I get to Rockerfeller Center?" he replied. I was confused. Then I realized he was looking right through me. He was talking to the doorman. He didn't hear me, although we weren't but five feet apart. I heard later through a mutual friend that he was unhappy with me because he heard, correctly, that I refused to review his book. He said he thought I was jealous of him, of his success. He was right. Had I reviewed it, though, I wouldn't have let my jealousy color my opinion. It might have improved it, in fact.

Not all writers are young, and not all writers are published, and not all writers are successful. I know of several writers who have been working on manuscripts since before they were young and who will never be published; if they ever are, they will likely fail. I don't always know what keeps them going. They are good writers. They've studied the art and craft of writing, and they work hard at it. They attend all the workshops and read all the "how-to" manuals. As they grow older and collect a compost pile of rejection slips, they refuse to be discouraged. They aren't quixotic. They aren't foolish dreamers. They want to write, and publication is only one part of what their ambition. This isn't to say they don't want to be published. It's only to say that their priorities are on writing. It's what they do, and it's the only thing they want to do. In a way, any measure of success might spoil them.

I empathize with them terribly. It's awful to do anything without recognition. It's particularly awful to write something no one will ever read. But then again, if a writer starts believing that people may actually read everything he writes, he might not write at all, or at least he might not write honestly.

I know other writers who will never be writers. They call me up and write letters to me. They say "I've got a story here that just won't quit. It's about my grandfather. He was a pig farmer who came to Texas in a Model T Ford. His wife had a wooden leg and raised twenty-two children, all of whom became doctors and went to South America to cure dysentery. Two of them returned and became governors, and one bought an island in the Pacific and invaded Australia. It's got everything. It'll practically write itself."

"How much have you written on it?" I ask.

"Oh, I've roughed it out," they say, "but most of it's on tape." Then they offer to let me "finish" it for them. They tell me it's a best seller. They are sure of it. They are probably pleased to think so, but it never will be a best seller. That's because it will never be a book. It's their story, but they can't tell it. I can't tell it either. I have my own stories to tell, my own failure to worry about. They don't really want to be writers. They want to be authors. They have an idea that all they have to do is speak into a microphone and then let someone write it up. That's all there is to it, after all, that and fixing their grammar and cashing the royalty checks, of course.

Very few people know what it takes to be a writer, even fewer know what it takes to be an author. I didn't know. I don't know yet, but I'm trying hard to find out. I do know, however, that only a very few writers are in danger of becoming authors, and even fewer are in danger of making a living from their writing. Most writers write because they have to, not because they have some idea about fame and fortune. It's nice to be read --that's all the fame I ever wanted, or so I lied to myself. It would be nice to be rich, but I'd settle for paying my American Express bill. And that's not a lie.

A lot of people have the idea that writing a novel is a lot like building a boat in the basement or growing tomatoes in a window box. These people anger me. They make small of what I do, of what all writers do. Unlike the unpublished writers, these people are smarmy about it. Once a physician came up to me and said, as all these types of people eventually do, "I've always wanted to write a novel. One of these days, when I have time, I'm going to do it."

I was not in a good mood at the time, and I replied, "Well, you know, I've always wanted to take out an appendix. One of these days, when I have time, I'm going to do it."

I had no such illusions about being a writer. I was from a small town in Texas, and writers lived in New York. They still do. But I had this yen to tell stories, so I wrote science fiction tales in high school. This was because of Mrs. McSpadden, my typing teacher during my junior year at Quanah High School. I was a crackerjack typist. It's one of the few things involving manual dexterity I can do well. I'm fast and I'm accurate, for the most part. (I probably would have made a heck of a concert pianist if I had had the patience to study music. On the other hand, I play a lousy guitar.) In Mrs. McSpadden's class, I could complete and check a half-hour's exercise in about ten minutes. That left forty unfilled minutes. In any other class I would have read a book, but she insisted that we practice after we finished. I didn't want to practice, so I wrote science fiction stories. They were pretty awful, but they were fun because I could make up anything I didn't know. I invented "warp drive" years before Captain Kirk split his famous infinitive. But I wasn't a writer.

When science fiction ran out, I wrote poetry. My poetry was pretty awful, too, but it gave me practice resetting margin stops and tabs. I did submit a poem for the yearbook my senior

year, and it was published; but it was the only one submitted, so I had something of a lock on it. Still, it was the first time I ever thought about being a writer. But thinking about it didn't make me a writer either.

I was never very good in English in high school or college. My senior English teacher in high school made me write "I will not be a wise ass in class." five thousand times because I kept putting jokes in my essays. They were funny jokes, she told me, but she couldn't allow it. She was my first cousin, and I thought she was kidding. She wasn't. She made me write all those sentences, and she checked to make sure I didn't use carbons. It took me three weeks. I thought it would earn her forgiveness, and I put a joke or two in my next essay. She punished me by giving the Senior English award to someone else. "You'll never be a writer," she said.

In college, English mystified me. It didn't seem to have much to do with literature. Instead, it had to do with books that had to do with literature, and it was boring. The professors made reading assignments, then they went through the works and told us what we had read, and then they talked about the criticism. I began to understand that writers weren't very important. It was what was said about them that was important.

That's still true, and no one knows it better than a writer. It isn't whether people like a book or not that counts. It's whether the reviewers and critics like it or not. People who would never say an unkind thing to Charles Manson will walk up to a writer whose book has just been published and say, "I saw a review of your novel. They didn't like it much."

That's like saying to a parent, "I just heard some people talking about your son. They think he's the ugliest thing ever to crawl out from under a rock."



The grim reality is that the critics have all the power. They can decide with the stroke of a byte on a disk whether a book lives or dies. They will determine who will receive the next Pulitzer, the National Book Award, the Nobel Prize. A lot of people think it's the readers who determine a writer's success, and in some cases that's true, but not in very many. Most people don't read very many books. The average "voracious reader," if I can use the phrase, probably reads fewer than a dozen books a year, and only about a third of those are new ones, books that depend on sales--and reviews--to stay in print. The average American doesn't read any books at all. Even people who are pretty well educated don't read many books. They read reviews. They read the critics. It's pretty easy to see how powerful critics are. So, I abandoned any idle thoughts about being a writer. I became a critic.

I spent about fifteen years becoming a critic, and I wrote a lot of criticism. I still do. I was a mean critic. I made fun of writers who made mistakes. I said things like "This book isn't worth using as a door stop or a boat anchor." I liked that. It had a "folksy ring" to it.

Then I became a writer myself, and my attitude changed.

I didn't think I would become a writer, and I didn't call myself a writer until I did. I remembered my friend Ben, and I thought of my "real writer" friends who continued to slave away without success. I had not studied to become a writer. I hadn't suffered. I hadn't been rejected. When writers would gather at parties, I would stand off to one side and wonder at them. They would look at me with eyes that said, "He's a critic. Be careful." Although, none of them had read my criticism.

But I had children, a wife who worked at night, and I was bored. I couldn't go to the

library to do the research a critic must do, and I found that reading, like hot meals and long showers and naps, isn't possible when there are diapers to change and feeding times to observe. Writing can be interrupted, though, for a few minutes, and rapid typing keeps daddies awake and alert to cries in the night.

So I started writing. And I became a writer.

Now when I go to parties, the critics stand off and look at me with eyes that say "He's a writer. Be careful." Although, only a few of them have read my novels.

The biggest problem a writer faces is all the questions he has to answer. Not questions from the media. I like those questions. They give me a chance to answer the critics who don't like my work. No matter how successful a writer becomes, there are always critics who don't like his work. Questions from the media are a chance to fight back. Of course, fewer people read interviews than read the critics, but it's about the only weapon a writer has.

I also like questions from students and people who have read my fiction. Sometimes I learn a great deal when I have to search my mind for answers to questions I've never thought of. I am still a critic, and I like to discover things I've done that were right, or wrong, or that might elevate my work to consideration as "literature." I still believe that what the writer says isn't as important as that which is said about him. I still believe that critics hold all the cards. But I now know that the best critic is a thoughtful reader, even when the reader doesn't like what he reads.

But some of the questions are impossible to answer. One is, "What's your book about?" I used to give "cute answers." I used to say, "Oh, about \$14.00," or "About four hundred pages long." It might get a smile, but the question didn't go away. The only honest response is, "Why

don't you buy a copy and find out?"

There are other nagging questions, too: "What's it like to be a writer?", "How can I become a writer?", or the worst of all, "How much money do you make as a writer?" No one believes that anyone who has published a book isn't rich and famous. The truth is that most writers haven't made enough to cover the cost of paper and ribbons and postage, and instead of being comfortable, they're running scared.

The biggest problem a writer faces is what to write about. "Where do you get your ideas?" is the most frequently asked question of a writer and the most annoying. If I knew where I got my ideas, I would put electrified barbed wire up all around it and ring it with mine fields. I would visit it often and regularly. I might even move in and guard it personally with an army of mercenaries. The honest answer is, "I don't know." And that makes me sound stupid.

When I started writing my first novel I didn't intend for it to be a novel. I was just continuing the habit I began in Mrs. McSpadden's typing class. I was killing time, or so I thought. I wrote about what I thought I knew. I wrote about a small town boy in a mean little town. He wasn't I, and it wasn't my home town; but it was very like my home town, especially the mean parts, and he was very like me, especially the small town boy parts. I continued to write about the little town and the boy for a long time. Eventually, a series of stories came out of it. I put them all together along with some other stories I had written, and I sent it to New York, and the editor I sent it to liked it well enough to publish it. My editor liked my next story even better, and he published it, too. It wasn't about a small town boy, but it was about the same small town.

I came to like that town, and I came to hate it as well. The more things I made up about it, the truer it all seemed to me. As I kept writing about it, it didn't seem so mean any more, and I found that there were as many good things about it as bad. I wanted to be honest about it, though, so I kept making up things, expanding things here, shrinking things there, altering the facts of reality as I went, all the time drawing on the truth of my memory but weaving that truth into a tapestry of lies that fit my imaginary small town.

I didn't want to sentimentalize the town. There were good people there, and, I discovered when I began wrote about them, there were funny people there, too. At the time I was writing, though, I didn't think I was a writer. I never thought anyone would read my writing. So I was frank and honest and open. It tends to make trouble for me, now. People in small towns that become the models for writers are sensitive about having their secrets--even those that are made up--revealed.

Another question writers hear a lot is "What are you going to do next?" This is an ironic question, and I know that the inquirer has a compliment in mind when the sentence is formed, that what he really means is that he liked the first book and is looking forward to another one. But it always disturbs a writer to have someone ask "What's next?" It's like saying, "What have you done for me lately?"

For most writers, publishing a book, one book, is the goal of a lifetime. That quickly gives way to ambition, of course, but in the back of a writer's mind is always the insecurity, the recollection of feeling that his book will never be published, that he will always write in a personal vacuum. Rejection is part of the business. A book, even a second book, or a third or a

fourth, can be rejected by an agent, an editor, the critics, or even the public. Indeed, that sort of thing happens more often than it doesn't. Most writers think that writing one book, or even two, should be enough. But it's not. We live in a consumer's society. People want more of what they like, but they usually want it to be "new and improved," and when writing is concerned, that's scary.

Personally, I'm not writing about the same small town right now. I worry that I might not be able to write about it again. I would like to, but that mysterious place where my ideas come from hasn't yielded many good ones about the town, and I can't seem to think up any new lies to tell about it. So I decided to "go home," not to my mythical town, but to the real one. I hoped that I would find some ideas there. And I did.

One of the ideas I found was about the history of the town and its region. I grew up there, spent eighteen years there, and the only historical incident I ever heard of that took place there was that Cynthia Ann Parker was recaptured nearby. Sul Ross was killing Indian women and children one morning when, supposedly, he saw her blue eyes and took her, the wife of a chief and the mother of the "Last Chief" of the Comanche, back to her people from whom she had been captured decades earlier. She died--it's said, of grief, but another story is that she starved herself to death--quickly after she was restored to the Christian bosom of her loved ones. People from that part of Texas, I've learned, even Comanche, don't like too much change, and history is something to be trotted out and dusted off during on "Western Day."

But history can also be full of lies. I later learned that both stories about Cynthia Ann were untrue; she most likely died of pneumonia. To this day I haven't visited the "battle sight,"

though, not out of perversity, but rather because I never could find it. The historical marker was erected after I left, and I've never had the time to search for it. I'm told, however, that the place where they put it is actually several miles from the capture site since the Pease River changed course and the actual location is now in the wrong county.

I was undeterred by such anomalies of history, though. I started writing about the region and its settlement once more. I thought about the kind of people it took to settle an area that Cynthia Ann's son, Quanah Parker, had said was good for nothing but "scorpions, red ants, and rattlesnakes," a place where it could be 80° and drizzling in the morning, blowing a duststorm in the afternoon, and snowing by midnight. A place where drought, flood, tornados, and wheat-killing hail, prairie fires and insect plagues vied with mesquite, Johnson grass, and scrub cedar to keep the forces of agriculture and civilization out and away long after the Comanche had given up the chore as a bad job and went to Oklahoma to raise cattle and drill for oil. I was surprised to find that buffalo used to roam all over the area, for the only buffalo I ever saw were in California. I learned that the shortest railroad in the world was once there, the Acme Tap Line. I learned that the only railroad ever owned by an Indian, the Quanah, Acme, and Pacific, was there. It was a shock to me. My father worked for the "Q" for nearly thirty years.

I also found out, again later on, that Quanah Parker never owned a dime's worth of stock in that railroad. It was another lie.

In my first two books, I had dealt with the decline of the area. I talked about the last passenger train, the Zephyr, which came through the year after I left for college; I spoke of burned out and boarded up buildings; I wrote of the seamier side of life, the hidden sex,

hypocrisy, and fear that gripped a community that looked fruitlessly for hope in a faith that seemed to be as ignorant of them as they were that there was a world outside their region, a world that ignored them as well. What I was learning, though, was of something else. I learned of shootouts on Main Street, of murder in remote pastures, of suicides in gas stations, of socialists who preached on street corners. I learned of a time when hope had promise to bolster it, of a place that survived a dustbowl and depression, two world wars and government farm programs, oilfield blight, used up cotton fields, and poor wheat harvests, that found their heroes in jerseys, pads, and pimples every Friday night in the fall, and that, in spite of the fact that the century-old, fieldstone buildings of downtown were crumbling around them, still believed that where they were was the best place they could be.

I realized, to my surprise, that when I grew up there, I also thought that it was the best place I could be. I hated it, certainly, in the way any youngster hates what is familiar and longs to know what lies beyond the mountains--or, in my case, beyond the Wichita River. I had seen Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth, and San Antonio. I had dreamed of New York. I wanted to leave worse than anything. I never wanted to come back.

Through my writing, though, I returned. I discovered that there was more substance to the place than I ever thought was there, and even though I have no desire to go back, permanently, I find that I am drawn to it as a prodigal, as one who has seen the outside world and found it wanting. The urban setting may be, as some have asserted, the proper subject for contemporary fiction, but I've never found the grimy boulevards of metropolitan Texas to be as interesting as the dust-blown streets of my small town. Human relationships, good ones and bad

ones, tend to be magnified there, and the significance of human action tends to be greater. There might be eight million stories in the naked city, but somehow none of them seems as interesting to me as the couple of hundred that can be found in my imaginary small town.

In his wonderful memoir, Lost in West Texas, Jim W. Corder calls the region that contains my towns, the real and the imaginary, "lost." He notes that it lies on a line of demarcation that extends south through Jack County to I-20, west to just above Abilene, and then north to the Red River and home again. It is an unknown region. Neither Caprock nor grassland, it is pockmarked with cedar breaks and river sloughs, swamps and mysterious caves, sandy, quicksand-filled rivers and badlands, gypsum that lies on the ground like snow and invades the native water to the point that soap won't lather. Along the state highways that infrequently crisscross the region, small towns sit like starving sentinels of a bygone age, a time within living memory when farmers drove wagons and plowed with mules, and bankers were the only ones allowed to wear vests, when no one but preachers worked on Sundays, and Saturday night filled Main Street, when salesmen traveled by train, ate in diners, and stayed in fleabag hotels and called such whistle stops "bergs" with a derisive curl of their mustachioed lips, when the only law worth worrying about was the sheriff, and when the biggest scandal anyone knew about or dared to mention was the pint bottles behind the Coke machine in the domino parlor. It was a time when the head cheerleader's unexpected pregnancy was a cause for shame, and the worst crime a football boy could be accused of was mixing peppermint schnapps with a lime coke. It was an era when the banker was both the worst enemy and the best friend a town could have, when homosexuals were called "old bachelors" and lesbians were called "spinster sisters."



It was a time when a first kiss was a teenager's greatest ambition--and fear--when dinner was served at noon, ice-cream was hand-cranked, and Saturday afternoon meant "western," a time when "out there" referred to a world no one understood or, truly, wanted much of anything to do with. Now much of that has changed, or had it? That's what I wanted to come home to, that's what I wanted to write about.

Towns in that region were "Huck Finn" kinds of places when I grew up. Only we knew of places to hunt more than fish, places to steal a melon instead of a raft. A river, to my generation, was something you could walk across, if you didn't get stuck in quicksand. A forest was something resembling a plum thicket that had grown up in a CCC shelter-break. The first time I saw the Mississippi, I couldn't believe it, and I'm still not sure that the Great Southern Forest is natural.

If the people there were "lost," they didn't know it or care very much. The only salvation they sought was in church, not in geography. If you knew how to get into Wichita Falls to shop at Sears for Christmas, over the Red River to "trash hill" to buy a pint of Oklahoma whiskey to "naughty up" the egg nog, and down to Fort Worth for the Fat Stock Show and Rodeo or to Dallas for the State Fair, that was all the direction you needed. County roads had numbers, but no one knew them. They were the "Country Club Road," "The Groesbeck Road," "Medicine Mound Road," "The Lake Road," "Wolf Hunt Road," "Beasley's Cave Road," and "The Airport Road." Who needed numbers in a place where everyone knew where he was all the time? "You go out to Connally's farm an' take a left at the watermelon patch." Never mind that it's February and a melon patch looked pretty much like any other field. If you don't know where Connally's

melon patch was, you have no business running around the county in the first place.

At least one writer I know says that he is a "herder of words." I think most writers are "herders of souls." Not shepherds--evangelism isn't their purpose. Instead they gather souls together less for counting than for assessing. The small towns of West Texas--we always called it West Texas (it was, after all, west of Fort Worth)--are less places than they are collections of souls. Some of the best souls found peace in the cemeteries there. Some fled never to return. And some are still there. But a few left and come back from time to time to consider the truer values of a place that's invisible to the skiers on their way to and from the snowcaps of Colorado and street markets of Santa Fe. These, I think, are the writers, and in their return is where their ideas come from; in the lies they tell about their memories is where the truth of their fiction may be found.

So I recently revisited my small town. I had been there infrequently throughout the years both before and since becoming a writer. My mother still lives there. Usually, though, I would go and "hide" at her house, secreting myself away from those who I might know or recognize. I didn't realize it until this last visit, but I didn't want to see any change. I suppose I shared that with the Comanche. During this visit, it snowed. My wife, a Yankee-bred girl who regards anyplace with fewer than two malls a small town, insisted we take a walk on an icy morning. I strolled through the "downtown" area--two brick-paved blocks of century-old buildings, most of which boast newer fronts on the street level at least. The snow hid a lot of defect and ruin from my eyes, but it also revealed something worse. I saw the old Dinner Bell Cafe where travelers ate while waiting for a train, the Liberty Hotel, where thousands of weary pilgrims found a

night's rest on their journeys. Both were crumbling as was one of the two depots suffered to remain standing and spared the bulldozer and wrecking ball's terror. I discovered a hundred-year-old building which had once been the only hotel in town. It was a warehouse of some sort for a while. Now, though, all the floors have collapsed, but the rickety wooden fire escape is still in place, testimony to the pragmatism of a by-gone era that thought any way out of a burning building was better than none, whether it was "up to code" or not.

I was disturbed by much that I saw during my snowy walk. Places I remembered were gone, shut down, boarded up, gutted by fire or demolition, changed. There was a real estate office where my daddy took me for fifty-cent "burr" haircuts every June first. A dry-cleaners had invaded the drug store's space where we used to sit in booths and drink soda-fountain Cokes and milkshakes. The Teen Canteen, which had formerly been a Church of Christ before they sold it to the city and built a new one, was boarded up. I learned to dance in there, tasted my first sip of wine in the parking lot, fell in love, had my heart broken more than once. It was in ruin, and honeysuckle vines covered the old porch where once an outraged coalition of Baptist and Church of Christ parents descended on a Valentine's Day dance and raided it and jerked their mortified and sinful children home by their indiscreet ears while the band continued to play and the Methodists laughed. Someone had plowed up and planted a winter garden in the vacant lot where I learned to hit Tommy Nelson's slider--if you got it over the holly hedge of Old Man Waterby's back yard, it was a ground rule homer, but you had to buy a new ball. I figure Old Man Waterby probably collected a couple of hundred baseballs in those days. We didn't need Freddy Kruger or

Jason. We were terrified enough of him. The rumor was that he had axed murdered and cut up his wife and mailed her in little pieces packed in dry ice, back to her father in Tennessee, Railway Express. Everyone knew it, but because he was rich, no one would arrest him.

I saw him during that visit. He was old, frail, and kind of pathetically harmless as he inched his way down an icy walk to retrieve his Fort Worth Star Telegram. His sweater was ratty, and the house that we had all thought of as opulent and befitting a man of great wealth was in need of paint and a new roof. He had a fifteen-year-old Chevrolet rusting in the driveway. How could I have been afraid of him? I started to ask him if he still had all those baseballs, but I didn't. I was afraid he might also still have an axe hidden away somewhere, and I remain convinced that he spends his night counting his money.

The capper, I suppose, was walking past the high school. In small towns, life centers on the high school. My high school was a turn-of-the-century, three-story affair with hard wood floors and huge sash windows for a land which thought air conditioning was a dip in a stock tank and standing naked in the summer wind. There was a huge masonry arch some ancient senior class had paid to have built, and it looked like a school. But it was gone. In its place was a cold yellow brick and steel brick building with no windows, no expansive quad, and only one story. It had no character, no sense of tradition. Even the arch was gone.

Later that day I visited the cemetery where my father and grandfather and other family members are buried. It too seemed cleaner, smaller, less ominous and oppressive than I remembered it. The story is that the cemetery was founded on the spot where Indians had killed and scalped a cowboy. His grave was the first one. I've never been able to find it, and I couldn't

find it under the snow that day, either. Someone had put some plastic flowers on my grandfather's grave. They were red, once, but in the snow they looked pink and faded. The granite headstones announced dates and names, but they didn't talk about years of back-breaking toil my father put in on an ungrateful and unforgiving railroad. My grandfather's stone said nothing of the fact that he was a wrangler and a horseman, or that his father had fought in the War Against Northern Aggression before being burned out in Arkansas and coming to Texas to raise horses. None of the stones there, in fact, bespoke the family histories of those who lay beneath them. I knew there were good people there, bad people as well, and their lives were as much a part of the memories I had of the small town as were my own.

In short, the town wasn't there any more. It's likely that it never was there, not as I remember it and imagine it in my writing. It's as much a part of a mythic past as Old Man Waterby's supposedly checkered life, as much a part of the fabric of imagination as the significance of a ratty, weed-grown patch of earth we called a quad at the high school. In my memory--and in my writing--the buildings are taller, the summers hotter, the winters colder, the winds stronger than they'll ever be again. The people are better, and worse, than they ever were, their secrets darker, their lives entirely more interesting.

But somehow, the place still exists in my mind, and somehow, I continue to believe, it's more fascinating than the glass and steel, concrete and neon of any urban setting. In my mind, there's more of a story to tell there than I'll ever discover in Dallas or Houston, New York or Los Angeles. There, indiscretions and conflict are commonplace, unremarkable, and expected. In a small town, what would be a ripple in the metropolis rolls with the force of a tidal wave as it

envelopes the sensibilities and excites the outrage or admiration of all. There's a kind of brutality there that urbanites for all their ghettos, barrios, and crime can never understand; there's also a kind of acceptance and forgiveness that few city dwellers ever experience.

As a writer, then, that is my subject. I won't say that I won't write about the cities I know, the cities I have visited. Indeed, I have set scenes already in San Antonio, Dallas, and Houston, and New York. But I feel obliged to tell stories about what made me become a writer in the first place, about a place that is as infinite in its variety as it is static in its sense of time and change.

So, regardless of whether they drive Porches or pickups, of whether they deal with male menopause or milo harvesting, of whether they prefer London Fog and L. L. Bean to leather jackets and bullhide boots, of whether they drink Perrier and martinis instead of Lone Star and a "Col' Cok-cola," all writers must find their ideas in the stuff of what they know, what they have done, else, what they create will be fabricated, false. Whether they publish or not, whether they succeed or not, the motivation that must guide writers must be found in the fabric of their imaginations. They will find fulfillment and tell their best and truest stories when they rely on the genuineness of their memories.