



THE TEXAS REVIEW

EDITOR & POETRY EDITOR

Nick Lantz

FICTION EDITOR

Eric Miles Williamson

NONFICTION EDITOR

Greg Bottoms

REVIEWS EDITOR

Joe Haske

STAFF

Kim Davis & Claude Wooley

INTERNS

Catherine Smith

CONSULTING EDITORS

Rob Adams, Kim K. Bell, Katharine Gillespie, Don Graham,
Julie Hall, Nancy Hargrove, Ejner Jensen, Ken Roemer, Howard Segal,
Norman Shapiro, Ernest Suarez, Linda Webster

CLAY REYNOLDS

Reaching the Summit

A Confession and a Valediction

In a very short time, I will reach the mountaintop of life, which is to say, I am about to find myself fully retired. It's a peculiarly American thing, this notion of retirement, something born in the last part of the twentieth century; not every culture, even in well-developed, highly industrial societies observes it. Most cultures in the world can't imagine it. I count myself fortunate to have been born and lived all my life in a place that allowed for the possibility. To be honest, a large plurality of the American population won't enjoy it. Some will refuse it. Personally, I dread it.

The prospect of retirement is daunting. I mean, here I stand, close to the pinnacle of my life, near the summit of all I have accomplished and done. It's the end of something. I know that it could and *should* also be the beginning of something, but what?

I've worked hard all of my adult life, and although I've made a lot of blunders, some horrendous, I've been more honest and ethical than not. I've tried to live a good life and be productive. I've overcome adversity, worked my way over or around formidable obstacles—some quite daunting, some maliciously imposed on me—and kept perspective, I think. I should be able to stand, plant my feet, savor the view from my personal acme, and contemplate the comforts that now are mine to enjoy, a rest that's well-earned and much desired. But I can't.

I haven't the money to retire splendidly, to travel extensively, to indulge even the most modest of luxury whims, to fulfill my wilder dreams, no matter how improbable, at last. I fear that my future days will deteriorate into mediocrity unless I'm careful.

I am a writer, of course, and I have my writing and publishing to do and will continue to do, I hope, but that's not a full-time occupation even when I'm devoted to it full time. One cannot write all day every day every week forever. And the way legitimate publishing is going, professional

writing is increasingly becoming an exercise in futility. Fewer and fewer people read much of anything anymore, and there are fewer and fewer places, therefore, that publish reading matter in tangible formats. People post their thoughts and verbal inventions electronically, and they do that constantly and all over the place. Much of it is kind of like virtual graffiti, curious to look at from a distance but not something that invites close perusal. There's so much of it, it becomes the lingual equivalent of white noise. Meaningful publication of what one writes is getting harder and less worthwhile.

I am also an avid reader, but one can only read for so many hours a day, as well. I suppose there are book clubs wherein people all read a prescribed publication and then gather to discuss it, but that seems too much like what I've done for my primary living most all my life to be appealing. I somehow believe I might well find myself back in the classroom, instructing, rather than participating, although I could be wrong about that. I read quickly, and eclectically. I don't much like someone else telling me what to read and expecting me to have it read for discussion at some given point. That, too, seems more like what I've done most of my life rather than retirement and recreation.

I suppose I could develop a hobby, but I'm not a "hobbyshopper" or a craftsman or artisan of any sort; I have no talent for painting, pottery, glassblowing, weaving, woodworking, or photography, and I don't know what I'd do with anything I made, even if it turned out to be worth the effort to create. I shudder at the thought that I might assume the persona of a gypsy proprietor of a tented booth at arts and crafts shows, flea markets, and civic fairs, hawking my handicrafts or supposed artwork to casual passersby who look at me and wonder what I do for a living in real life. Probably they'd conclude that I was a victim of a layoff, downsizing or was fired and would take pity on me. I like collecting things, but I gave up on that long ago, when I realized that the things worth collecting—coins, stamps, specific kinds of bric-a-brac, memorabilia—fetch huge prices when their rarity reaches a level of actual value. There's also a lot of fraud involved in much of that, fakes and charlatans, meaning that I would have to develop a level of expertise and invest a lot of time in research of something I have no interest in.

I also abhor the idea that I might become one of those people who spends retirement surfing the web, looking constantly for sites of interest or mildly humorous jokes and cartoons to send along to everyone I know, cluttering up their inboxes until they consign my address to their blocked sender folders. I'm not interested in becoming a fixture on social media, ultimately recording the mundanities of my life, finally devolving to reporting what I ate for lunch or chronicling successful medical procedures or distributing copies of obituaries of forgotten people.

I don't want to join those old duffers sitting around the public golf clubs, playing cards and dominoes and watching TV and drinking beer between endless rounds of a stupid game that no one can master. I don't like hunting, and never did; I've always hated fishing, which I think is boring and troublesome. Such activities seem to be more about fooling around with the gear and junk associated with them than the actual doing of them; the object, it seems, is to produce a collection of dead things—game or fish—that require cleaning, preserving, and then cooking, if they're remotely edible. I lack the personal patience and manual dexterity to build boats in bottles or construct scale models, and jigsaw puzzles bore me silly. I could learn a language, but where would I use it?

Of course, I could volunteer and do charitable work, give my time to those in need. While I wouldn't mind doing that, I'm honestly not inclined toward it except out of a sense of moral and humanistic obligation. That sounds selfish, and I guess it is. But I spent most of my life giving of myself to thousands of young people, mentoring and advising, assisting and guiding. I know that's rewarding, but it's not rewarding enough to continue to do for the rest of my life.

I also can't see myself trooping around some third world village doling out medications or showing people how to cultivate beans and dig wells and worrying if I might be kidnapped or killed by some maniac who can't appreciate the generosity of charitable work, supposing, of course, that I don't succumb to some horrible illness or disease. There are organizations that build or remodel housing for the poor, but I'm not handy enough with tools to be of any use in construction—don't know an awl from an adze or a plane from a plumb bob. I detest gardening and most all yardwork, truly dislike anything that smacks of sweaty, hard labor. I had

writing is increasingly becoming an exercise in futility. Fewer and fewer people read much of anything anymore, and there are fewer and fewer places, therefore, that publish reading matter in tangible formats. People post their thoughts and verbal inventions electronically, and they do that constantly and all over the place. Much of it is kind of like virtual graffiti, curious to look at from a distance but not something that invites close perusal. There's so much of it, it becomes the lingual equivalent of white noise. Meaningful publication of what one writes is getting harder and less worthwhile.

I am also an avid reader, but one can only read for so many hours a day, as well. I suppose there are book clubs wherein people all read a prescribed publication and then gather to discuss it, but that seems too much like what I've done for my primary living most all my life to be appealing. I somehow believe I might well find myself back in the classroom, instructing, rather than participating, although I could be wrong about that. I read quickly, and eclectically. I don't much like someone else telling me what to read and expecting me to have it read for discussion at some given point. That, too, seems more like what I've done most of my life rather than retirement and recreation.

I suppose I could develop a hobby, but I'm not a "hobbyshopper" or a craftsman or artisan of any sort; I have no talent for painting, pottery, glassblowing, weaving, woodworking, or photography, and I don't know what I'd do with anything I made, even if it turned out to be worth the effort to create. I shudder at the thought that I might assume the persona of a gypsy proprietor of a tented booth at arts and crafts shows, flea markets, and civic fairs, hawking my handicrafts or supposed artwork to casual passersby who look at me and wonder what I do for a living in real life. Probably they'd conclude that I was a victim of a layoff, downsizing or was fired and would take pity on me. I like collecting things, but I gave up on that long ago, when I realized that the things worth collecting—coins, stamps, specific kinds of bric-a-brac, memorabilia—fetch huge prices when their rarity reaches a level of actual value. There's also a lot of fraud involved in much of that, fakes and charlatans, meaning that I would have to develop a level of expertise and invest a lot of time in research of something I have no interest in.

a surfeit of that growing up in West Texas where I plowed fields and dug post holes as a kid, carried hod for brick masons on construction sites, and wrestled animals for ranchers; all of that was a chief motivator to move me toward a profession from which I could actually retire someday without being worn out, crippled up, just plain weary.

I could try to coach youth league sports or help troubled kids by escorting them to attractions and on recreational day trips, but I'm not much of a sportsman, and I have limited patience with other people's children and even less with their parents. That's not admirable, but it's honest.

The elderly and infirm make me uncomfortable, truly, and I don't want to become one of those annoying, creaky voices on the phone, bothering otherwise busy people with pleas for contributions. It's not that I'm unsympathetic, or uncaring, or even disinterested. I am just not motivated toward extreme personal sacrifice. That's also selfish, I guess, but it's how I feel, and that feeling would mean that whatever I gave in that regard would be given grudgingly.

I feel much the same way about political activism, fundraising and campaigning for those personally ambitious gomers who are sure that their vision will save the country, when what they mostly want is the cushy perquisites that come with elected office. Campaigning to give someone I only half believe in a shot at a luxury lifestyle and the vast wealth that comes with public office isn't very appealing.

I recognize that in spite of my self-centered objections, many of these endeavors are worthwhile. I might even enjoy engaging in them for a while, but not for very long. I know myself. The whole time I might be doing any of these things, my mind would be casting forward, trying to decide what I'll do next, later that day, tomorrow, next week, next year, and so on until the end of my days. I'm restless. Always have been. I can't relax. Never could. Whatever I'm doing at the moment is merely a means to get to the next thing to do. It's a hazard of growing up imbued with the Protestant ethic, maybe, or maybe as a grandchild of the Great Depression.

Like most of my generation, my parents were *children* of the Great Depression. They were reared up steeped in the notion that the only

salvation and satisfaction in life came from hard work and productivity. They didn't believe in relaxation, which they saw as sloth. They cherished rest, but they saw it as a temporary thing, a break between chores, a regrouping so they could resume a day-to-day struggle. They carried that into the more prosperous life they found later on, and it stayed with them. It wasn't that we were poor when I grew up. It was that we were industrious, even though none of my parents' industry, or mine, ever resulted in any great reward or comfortable wealth.

I was told from an early age that if I wasn't doing something useful, for myself or someone else, I needed to find something useful to do. My parents had no tolerance for people who didn't work, even those who were wealthy enough not to have to work. Idleness was not permitted in my childhood household; nor was indolence. My parents didn't think that one kind of work was better than another, so long as it was work, and they had no tolerance for people who could work but didn't. They made sure I wouldn't grow up to be one of them.

Retirement seems to be filled with the prospect of both idleness and indolence, and neither of my parents, when they arrived at it, enjoyed even a minute of it. They were always looking for something to do. It's not lost on me that the last thing my father did before he collapsed and died of a bad heart was to mow the lawn, something he had been specifically forbidden to do, and something he hated doing as much as I do.

I also know I don't *have* to retire. There's no mandatory age for it in my profession. And the truth is that I've probably acquired some measure of wisdom that might be valuable to those who are rising in the profession behind me, if they wanted it, which, I suspect, they don't. But I am aware that I am slowing down, making errors, overlooking things, having trouble recalling pertinent and important details. I have trouble adjusting to modern methods and advancing technologies, which I find to be too much trouble to learn and, frankly, impossible to master in the time I have left. I don't want to be a problem for people who count on me. At the same time, I'm intolerant of the helpful advice of younger colleagues, people who have nowhere near the experience I have and who are, actually, novices. At the same time, many of their suggestions and corrections are right on, indicating to me in my most introspective moments that

I'm becoming careless, prone to errors, given to making mistakes. This reinforces the notion that if I can't make a full contribution, it's time to quit, get out of the way, give someone else a turn.

People who don't know when to quit create more problems than they'll ever solve, and they also cultivate resentment. They become "codgers" in a true sense of the term, people who are accommodated but who actually are obstacles, dead wood, unproductive and obstinately planted in the path of progress. It's important to know when the game is over, when the mountain is conquered, when it's time to step aside, if not down, to make room for someone else.

Conversely, I watch people I know who have retired too early. They find their days filled with useless enterprise. They surf cable TV, looking in vain for amusement, or they busy themselves with endless research enterprises—genealogy, bird-watching, weather-tracking—that bore the socks off of people when they talk about them, as they do, and in insufferable detail. They are adrift, still seeking, never finding. They are lost in a kind of fun house, a mirrored maze that distorts their reflections more with every turn. They're actually looking for who they were more than enjoying who they are, and they are terrified of who they may become. It's sort of existential and just about as hopeless.

In a way, I have achieved all I set out to do, and more than I thought I ever would, a lot more than anyone thought I ever would. I've been told all my life to stop, turn around, go back, give up. I've ignored all of that and continued the climb, though. And now, the peak is in sight. The saying is that when Alexander discovered that he'd "marched off the map," had conquered all of the world that was known to be conquered, he sat in his tent and wept. He was in his twenties, though. He still had his looks, his vigor, and it was always possible to draw another map. For those of us who have long passed the point when we have decades left to achieve more, there's nowhere further to go.

I have earned the highest degree available in my profession and have achieved the highest academic rank that is possible, although I never got a chaired or named professorship, an unfortunate circumstance that does bother me, even though it's not something I can do anything about; I've made a career out of teaching and have taught thousands of students,

many of whom turned out to be marvelously successful, and I am regarded as a master of the classroom on all levels, although I've never won a teaching award in spite of a file cabinet full of notes and letters crediting my mentorship and tutelage as contributors to my charges' attainments; I've published twenty books and more than 1,000 other pieces of writing and can, mostly, publish almost at will, although I've never enjoyed very successful book sales, again something I cannot control; I have won national awards, am a competent and lauded public speaker about either teaching or writing or both, although I've never commanded a princely sum for talking about either; I have met a lot of famous people, many of whom have expressed respect, even admiration for me and for my work, although none of them did anything to promote it or sensationalize it, even though they could have. That's okay, though. Sometimes not getting a helping hand and moving forward anyway is better than being assisted; it's at least more satisfying.

Not incidentally, in the course of all that, I have reared up and seen grown and married two beautiful, intelligent, and well-educated and independent children, who are parents of beautiful children themselves and are fully qualified successful professionals in lucrative fields; I've sustained a marriage for forty-five years and counting and have the privilege of the love of a genuinely good woman, with whom I'm also in love and always will be; I am healthy, truthfully in the best physical condition of my life. I have no debilitating disease or malady, can eat what I want, and for the most part, do what I want, within nominal and decreasing limits that seem perfectly ordinary.

In all that, I should be thrilled, content, pleased. But I'm not. I feel anxious, eager to do something else, to find out what's next. But there is nothing next, at least nothing that excites me and motivates me to push on after a short rest to gather my wind. The summit is right there. There's no higher level in sight.

So what's the problem? I'm not rich? I'm not a free agent who can do whatever I want to do because of financial limitations? Am I ungrateful for a life mostly well-lived, one where I've managed so far to avoid being arrested or targeted for lawsuit and have never sued anyone; I've made mistakes, but I've never deliberately harmed anyone; I haven't been

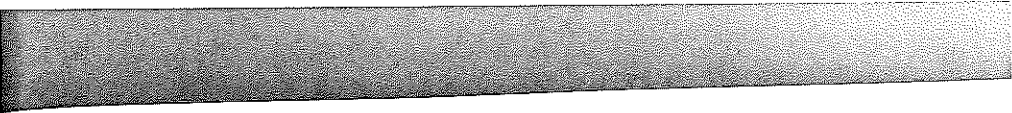
victim or predator, guilty of any malice, have no real enemies—although I'm under no illusions that everyone I know or ever have known likes me or even respects me—and, sadly, no real friends, although there are people I'm very close to and for whom I feel deep affection. Or is it a sense that that life isn't over, even though the best parts of it have been in the achieving of things, not the achievement itself?

There is the saying, "It's lonely at the top," but I think I misunderstood that. I thought it was about the isolation that comes with sole responsibility and authority; it may be, instead, that in the end, when you reach the apex, you realize that you're the only one there. It's your mountaintop, but you had to get there by yourself, and once there, you're alone. There's no one who can appreciate the view as you see it or who can understand what it took to get there. In other words, there's no one to share it with, because no one else can appreciate what it means to you individually. And, in the end, it doesn't mean that much. You did it because you could, maybe in a way because you had to. And now, it's done. So what? You can't do it again, and what would be the point of that? And there's not enough time to do something else, at least not so well.

Part of the issue is age, of course. Most of what I ever wanted to do and never did or somehow thought that I would eventually do, someday, I now either cannot do because I'm too old and lack the athleticism and zest of youth, or because I now see it as foolish and no longer appealing. Some people take up skydiving or scuba-diving, parasailing, surfing, and so forth in their autumnal years. I have older friends who have invested in speedboats and airplanes, who buy Jet Skis and snowmobiles. I think those are dumb activities, thrilling for a moment, but way too much trouble, too expensive, and too dangerous to consider seriously, even for the young. They're just stupid for the old.

People are tolerant of that kind of thing, and if you're old enough and what you do is dangerous or strenuous enough, you'll make the evening news, with people momentarily impressed finally clucking their tongues at the ridiculousness of it all.

Even if I could afford travel to many places I always wanted to see, I am too old to care about the blandishments and bohemian attractions



that originally were part of their original appeal. No one wants to see an old man cavorting with twenty-year-olds on a Parisian disco's dance floor, or swimming in Roman fountains, or biking across the Pyrenees, hitchhiking through the Andes, or drinking himself silly in a German beer hall while singing along with a oompah band; and I truly don't want to dance, not any longer; drinking to excess just makes me sleepy and a little sick, and although I own a quality road bike, cycling is just not comfortable, and my feet would never tolerate long treks.

Of course, I would love to be at the top of the Andes, or of the Rockies or the Alps—or even the Carpathians or the Urals (real mountains, those)—but I have no interest in hiking up them or, for that matter, in skiing down them. Years of tennis have turned my knees into something resembling cracked cookies, and my levels of endurance have shrunk with age. Turned ankles, broken bones, sleeping on the ground, dirty clothes, frigid temperatures, dousing rainstorms, gale-force winds, untreated water, and eating tasteless freeze-dried food around a primitive campfire and defecating in the woods no longer hold much appeal.

I'd like to see the Great Wall of China, but I know I don't have the stamina to walk very much of it, and only walking part of it seems to be too abridged an experience to warrant the trouble of traveling there. I'd love to see The Winter Palace or the beaches of the Riviera, Vesuvius in eruption or the snow-topped peak of Kilimanjaro, the vast wilderness of Alaskan glaciers and the savannahs and rain forests of South America, but such trips are expensive and difficult. I'm not the sort for nude beaches and sophisticated casinos. I can't afford the luxury accommodations, so if I went, I'd spend a lot of time wishing I could get out of the third-class hotel and eat in a decent café. I could climb the Leaning Tower of Pisa or tramp the distance of Hadrian's Wall or ride what's left of the Orient Express, but I'm not as excited about doing those things as I once was, and it would be too dangerous a venture to risk security for.

On a more mundane level, I'd love to have a sports car, a convertible, but I have nowhere to drive it, no one to show it off to or take for a spin, no hairpin switchbacks to race it around; the same holds for motorcycles and sail boats. My wife assures me she wouldn't join me in most of these activities, anyway, so I'd have to hurry back and cook supper.

I do like the culinary arts, but cooking for one or two is no challenge or achievement. Dinner parties are out, too. Everyone has dietary priorities that make menu-planning a complex nightmare for any chef. Our last attempt confronted me with the challenge of creating five separate menus to please six invited guests. It's easier to just order an array of pizzas, or maybe, for the vegans, gather some weeds from the garden and boil them up. Between the gluten-free, low-carb, no-calorie, no-meat, no-fish, no-chicken, no-dairy, etc. priorities, food has lost its social appeal.

And God only knows you can't relax with a cigar and glass of port afterwards. Not if you don't want to do it standing outside and have no plans to drive yourself home.

It's a conundrum. I sometimes think that my life from here out will be a series of gaps between visits to see my grandchildren, and that will annoy my grandchildren; if I stay too long or offer too much unsolicited advice, it will annoy my children as well. When I visit, I sit outside a lot, even in inclement weather. I smoke tobacco. It's my only remaining vice. Someone once said, "Cultivate your vices; they steady a man." I think that's wise. But when you're down to one and it's known to be deadly and is socially reprehensible to boot, that's a sobering consideration. I sometimes wonder if it's a death wish.

I don't think we were meant to live this long. I recently read that in the year of my birth, the average life expectancy for an American male was fifty-seven years. That might have been long enough. There might have been some value in the maintenance of that average without all this bother of extending life into later years. It's not that I'm eager to die, although death holds no dread for me, in particular. It's that life in later years offers no appealing challenges. There are, instead, a lot of perils. There's incapacitation, mental or physical, for one thing: disease or injury that can put one into a seemingly endless pattern of awakening, sitting blindly and deafly and mutely, then being put to bed, all punctuated by bland meals, assisted shower-baths, adult diaper changes, and increasingly rare visits from folks you can't recognize or remember. There's something unappealing about spending all day sitting alone in a hallway, strapped to a chair, drooling onto your bib, and wondering why

you're still alive.

I know some people live into their hundreds and remain alert and active, but they're not typical. More often I see, from time to time, some old coot on a TV report who has found a new and inspired purpose after "that certain age" when he might well have just sought a comfortable chair on a porch overlooking a scenic vista. I envy that, but I also know that after a few minutes of drinking in the view, I'd be bored. I'd want to know what there was to do next. I also know that when they are out of earshot, younger people talk about how such folks are sort of pathetic, in the way, incapable of making a meaningful contribution. They admire their generosity of spirit, their sense of tenacity and positive energy, but they sort of wish the old-timers would just find a bench on the sidelines and let those who know what they're doing hold sway while they look on quietly and, with any luck, take a nap, maybe die peacefully in the process.

So the mountaintop looms, then, just above the next rise for me. I don't have to make much more effort to achieve it. And then I'll be there. I wonder how long I'll *have* to be there? I can survey the world I've conquered, or at least that portion of it that is visible, and then look back on the pathway I've taken and consider what it took to get there. I can glance with ill-concealed envy at the higher peaks where others have or will stand that I was unable to reach, and I can look down at lower plateaus where others were forced to stop, well short of the summit and I can feel—what? proud? superior? condescending? relieved that I wasn't halted, discouraged, stopped? I suppose all this is possible, and it would occupy a few minutes, but such contemplations can't last forever.

After you reach the top, after you take a good look around, maybe a swig of cool water and, if you're brave and independently minded enough, maybe smoke a quality cigar and take a sip of good brandy, it's time to ... what? We don't climb down. We just sit and wait and hope against hope that maybe some new challenge will beckon, some new work require our labors, some new peak will magically appear, and that in approaching the trail that leads up to it, we don't misstep and turn an ankle, or, worse, wander too close to the edge and fall before we get there.