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**Patches of humanity:
a writer, his ranch, and the
art of storytelling**

In 1974, John Graves published *Hard Scrabble*, a wide-ranging series of essays about his ranch near Glen Rose. The writing – “observations on a patch of land,” as he described it – meanders his property beautifully. He offers some armchair history, a lay of the land itself, and spends his time showing you the trees and describing all the birdsong and guessing at why the creek runs differently now than it did before. You’re walking with him, really, and trusting the gentle clip of your nicely-paced tour guide – happy that he seems particularly adept and knowing when to chat and when to let the world speak for itself.

Fourteen years earlier, Graves did something similar in *Goodbye to a River*. It was his homage to a portion of the Brazos River that he had known and loved quite intimately, one that appeared ready to change course with the construction of a series of dams. So, he took his dog, hopped in a canoe, and spent a few weeks traveling. You’re with him as he hunts, you feel the chill of autumn and the warmth of his fire – it’s as if he handed you a paddle, too, and asked for a little help from time to time.

He did it all again a few years later in *From a Limestone Ledge*, which, on its cover, was described perfectly: a celebration of “the casual but constant observation of detail, the noticingness of rural life.” More essays, more description, more questions, more thoughts. It was almost as if Graves spent his life quietly watching and hearing, comfortably quiet in his pauses between books, and offering up what I would consider to be the most magical writing about “place” I have come across.

When I moved to rural Texas

(Beeville, more specifically) to begin my work as a public defender – what Graves may describe as when I “put my boots to earth with a mingled set of feelings” (*Hard Scrabble*, p. 44) – I was continually searching for the words that seemed to flow so easily from Graves. I was trying to understand a world I hadn’t known before, and his sentences became the soundtrack to my curiosities – it was as if he had decided to do something that felt resonant: tip the balance in favor of listening and looking and wondering.

On people: “There were cattle kings and horse thieves and half breeds and whole sons of bitches and preachers in droves and sinners in swarms.” (*Goodbye to a River*, p.200).

On the lovely dynamic between rain and land: “Hence, it depends not only on rainfall year by year but also on the way the land receives and handles the rain.” (*Hard Scrabble*, p.53).

On aging and time: “‘Maybe it is, at that,’ said his grandfather, nudging dark loose earth with his toe and feeling in old hurts the certainty of rain. ‘We feed the dirt, and the dirt feeds us.’” (*Hard Scrabble*, p. 139).

Rural Texas mystique is (and always will be) a mine for creative plundering. There is a fierce identity to it, and a romance that accompanies its exploration. And, I firmly believe that defense lawyers whose practice carries them into the hard scrabble of Texas, will do well spending time with the likes of John Graves. He is not there to give you the answer, but he does prod you along to truly soak in what’s around.

His genius is to give the lesser known a profound, authentic, feeling identity. With him, you are not between other places, not described in reference

to elsewhere, not on a road between somewhere you might know (Fort Worth) and somewhere else you might know (Abilene) – you are in Somervell County, and being there is just right. There is a depth of humanity that exists in each of Graves’ paragraphs, and with a level of simplicity that is reassuring. We, as lawyers, are also at our best when we can take in the complexities that lie before us and speak about them with some combination of plainness and straightforwardness and minimalism.

That Graves writes about rural Texas – and, therefore, the idea that his writing is applicable to it alone – is to miss out on what he teaches about the ways in which we can all find identity (and, in turn, humanity) no matter where our place is. In her brilliant collection *On Photography*, Susan Sontag offers a mission that defense lawyers can certainly borrow: “There is one thing the photograph must contain, the humanity of the moment.” (p. 122). The humanity of the moment, the humanity of our client – the re-insertion of these photographs into a process built upon its proficiency at stripping away those very things – that is our non-stop mission.

Joe Stephens is the Chief of the Concho Valley Regional Public Defender’s Office in San Angelo – his office covers seven rural counties. Before that, Joe spent time at the public defender’s office in both the Hill Country and Bee County. He has also worked on appellate and post-conviction issues under Justin Brown in Baltimore – an attorney most known for his work representing Adnan Syed from the “Serial” podcast. Joe went to UT Law, and received his undergraduate degree from Vanderbilt, where he was on scholarship. He is also an 11-time Ironman triathlete, a TCDLA Board Member, and can be reached at jstephens@cvpdo.org.