I was born in Palmerston North, New Zealand, in 1958 and grew up there in a typical white weatherboard house on the edge of town. New Zealand law defines a city as a town with more than 30,000 inhabitants, and so my hometown had been a city since 1927. I don’t know what its population was when I was born, but the number was probably not far below today’s total of 77,000 people. And so I grew up in a city—that was what I believed—though not a city as many people conceive of it. Behind the house across the street from ours there was a sheep farm. I used to walk past the fence of a dairy farm on the way to the nearest store. In New Zealand English a neighbourhood store is referred to as a ‘dairy’ because for a long time only these shops could sell dairy products and other perishable goods after normal trading hours. Long before knew about the complex mechanisms behind the origins of language, my location meant that this word made perfect sense to me. I still remember a large cow’s face coming down over the fence to examine the little boy passing by.

But I’m already giving a false impression. I didn’t grow up on a farm, milking cows before breakfast as my father did. I was never really familiar with farm animals: the sheep and dairy farms were soon replaced by housing developments as I grew older. My childhood environment was, in fact, suburban. But the scale of everything in Palmerston North was so small that my parents had no qualms about letting me ride the bus on my own at age ten into the centre of town and back—and, indeed, nothing bad ever happened. Yet I thought of my hometown as big. It was bigger than Shannon, Ashhurst and Sanson, the tiny, one-street towns out in the countryside, on each of the main roads out of Palmerston North, which we passed and disdained in our family car on the way to somewhere important.

When I was nineteen years old, I became a student at Canterbury University in Christchurch, in New Zealand’s South Island, and I felt that I’d arrived in a true city at last. I was beginning to feel too grown-up for Palmerston North. Christchurch is New Zealand’s third-largest city. Today it has 350,000 inhabitants, and back then it was certainly a larger and more interesting place than my hometown. I soon began thinking of
myself as ‘from Christchurch’. In my second-year at university my French-literature teacher introduced us to Jean-Paul Sartre’s Nausea, an exotic book which had a great influence on me at that time. I remember Sartre’s Parisian contempt for the provincial town in which the story’s main character, Roquentin, leads his humdrum existence. And so I was deeply confused—even shocked—when our teacher pointed out that Sartre would have thought of Christchurch as a provincial town. I’d yet to learn that size is relative. People everywhere can be sensitive about this. Nowadays I live in Osaka, Japan, and several years ago I visited London and remarked to some friends there on how nice and quiet London was after Osaka—I still remember the look of annoyance on their faces. Palmerston North might sound like a country town to people in Osaka, but it is New Zealand’s eighth-largest city out of a total of sixteen. It’s a place of some limited importance, and New Zealanders refer to it as provincial. ‘Provincial’ in New Zealand is a vague term for places that are not main centres like Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch or Dunedin. The Shorter Oxford Dictionary defines ‘province’ as referring to ‘parts of a country outside the capital’. Dr Johnson’s dictionary describes ‘provincial’ as ‘rude; unpolished’, but in this essay I don’t intend sticking properly to the dictionary definition of the word. In modern New Zealand usage, I think, any definition of the provinces seems to stop short of the bush and farms, and also of country towns like Shannon, Ashhurst and Sanson where farming really is central to people’s lives. In New Zealand the provinces are defined by a sense of their intermediacy: too small for cities, too big for country towns. I believe this may hold true for the rest of the modern world too: that nowadays ‘provincial’ comes somewhere between ‘urban’ and ‘rural’. And though ideas of large and small might be more extreme in Britain or Japan, where Palmerston North would be merely a place to drive through and disdain, I think the provinces exist in every country and can be named by local people.

If you accept my definition, then because provincial people grow up in an intermediate condition one of their main characteristics is their adaptability. They are, on the whole, more familiar with country ways than metropolitan types and quicker to adjust to farm living. In the same way, everyone is familiar with the long tradition of the provinces in a country supplying the metropolis with talented people—people who soon become thoroughly urban themselves. Stendhal and Balzac, two more exotic French novelists whom I studied and liked at university, both came to Paris from the provinces and became writers at the literary centre. I wanted to follow, in every sense of the phrase, in their footsteps. Stendhal never referred to his provincial Grenoble except with Parisian contempt, and Balzac’s massive Human Comedy is essentially a Paris-centred work. But
in their energetic determination to make good, and in their ability to examine city life and manners with a slightly naïve detachment, both writers retained some the strengths of their provincial background. Provincial people are adaptable because their intermediacy makes them feel invisible: they come from both everywhere and nowhere. They understand that, to city-dwellers, their accents are only a little rough and there’s no sheep dung on their shoes. They imagine that, to country-dwellers, they can seem only a little affected and without any special fear of dirt. Because it feels like no background at all, a provincial background can be a useful—provided you move out of the provinces.

There’s a recent poem by a New Zealand writer, James Brown, titled ‘I Come from Palmerston North’, which makes effective use of this idea of intermediacy—though I believe I like the poem for mainly sentimental reasons. Its tone switches between insecurity and self-compensatory pride, but neither is to be taken too seriously, I think. After the poet has begun by describing a series of distinctly small-town achievements, related to his own youth, the scale of Palmerston North suddenly expands to something more apparently metropolitan.

1994 was the year Palmerston North changed its subtitle from Rose City to Knowledge City, I do not know if Mayor Rieger was responsible for this or not.

Palmerston North sports a teachers college and a university, plus the Universal College of Learning, the International Pacific College and the Adidas Institute of Rugby,

Knowledge City probably wasn’t any one person’s idea.

In the next stanza the poem returns to small-town achievements once more: having a good stock-car team and being the hometown of a popular bass-guitar player. At last Brown begins to sum up being from Palmerston North in a way that requires the reader to decide on the poet’s attitude to his hometown.

I come from Palmerston North. We are a modest people,
but we are fiercely proud of the bustling, go-ahead city
at the heart of the Manawatu plains.

How much is Brown being sincere here? To talk of Palmerston North’s citizens as a ‘people’—note his use of the definite article—is clearly an over-the-top claim, and yet the town’s citizens do share their common experience.

For the reader, deciding on the exact balance of the poet’s opinion is difficult because of the difficulty in gauging Palmerston North’s size from the information the poet provides. Readers in Auckland, for example, know that none of the educational organisations
mentioned is large or important by New Zealand standards, particularly those with the most grandiose names. But a New Yorker, reading this poem, might reasonably conclude that Palmerston North’s people are indeed being ‘modest’, because a city with five educational institutions probably is a ‘bustling, go-ahead’ place, without much irony intended by the poet. And so to what degree the conclusion is ironic or sincere depends on how much outside knowledge of Knowledge City you can bring to the poem. The ambivalence of the ending reflects, of course, ambivalent views of a provincial place: as seen by the people who live there and by outsiders. But I note that James Brown lives in Wellington nowadays.

I think this sort of classification can apply at the level of nations, as well. New Zealand is certainly a provincial nation, because it’s not large enough to compare with Britain or the nations of continental Europe, but it’s too big to group with Samoa or Tahiti. Having a rural-based economy, New Zealand is always at the bottom of any ranking of developed nations, not comfortably part of the first world, but obviously not part of the developing world either. The ‘poor white trash of Asia’ was an expression used in the 1980s that caught our sense of insecurity. And though my casual and perhaps naïve categorisation of my whole country as provincial is at odds with the over-compensatory pride which many New Zealanders display, most of my fellow countrymen would agree on their status in relation to other countries, if pressed. The relativism of size makes all this slippery, but it does matter. It’s fashionable to talk these days about New Zealand being a Pacific nation—we claim to have cut our ties to the British after wanting so desperately and for so long to be connected with them—but New Zealand has noticeably few points of comparison with the islands of the Pacific. I don’t think that New Zealanders really want to define themselves among Fijians and Kanaks, and the result is ambivalence and provincialism.

Along with provincial intermediacy as a nation also comes a sense of invisibility. When I was growing up, it was a commonplace to say that New Zealand didn’t have a culture. At my primary school, further along the road from those farms I mentioned and the dairy, we were once put into groups and set the task of describing attributes of other countries. I remember we happily talked about India’s hungry multitudes, the huge cars owned by Americans and Japanese people’s kimonos; we were naively mixing population size, economics and culture. But describing New Zealand in any way stumped our group. It’s long been argued by New Zealand academics that, as a nation of mostly British immigrants, we simply haven’t been able to see our new land, because we brought with us a British sense of geographical and historical perspective. That’s true, of course, but even
when I was a boy we knew what Britain was. We could describe its attributes—cockney people, double-decker buses, Scottish kilts—and so we were never as blind to New Zealand's differences from Britain as has often been claimed. It wasn't that we saw ourselves as British, but rather that we couldn't see ourselves as New Zealanders. Our fresh, seven-or-eight-year-old minds examined our world and could see nothing that was not middling, nothing out of the ordinary, and we had no established heritage to help us. In fact, there's not much of a wider heritage anywhere that examines the specific qualities of provincialism, and certainly not as I've defined it. Provincialism is extremely rare as a central topic in literature, and it's usually been distinguished by the adversarial approach writers have taken to the subject. Among many other innovations, Flaubert's Madame Bovary is probably the first novel to try to get to the heart of provincial life. Flaubert, who was born outside Paris in Rouen, found in the provinces the perfect targets for his hatred of mediocrity. Writing from Emma Bovary's provincial, middling viewpoint (which we readers are expected to judge as inadequate to civilised life), Flaubert contrives the steady decline of her fortunes with a relentless cruelty. Later George Eliot, in the aptly named Middlemarch, tries to go a step further in examining the various ways provincial society might shape character. But the result is still misery for everyone in her fictional town who does not step outside that society's mores. In the twentieth century it's true that a large number of writers, from James Joyce through to J.M. Coetzee, have chosen to write critically about their provincial backgrounds—we even have a literary tradition called the 'regional novel'—but such writers have seldom tried to analyse the provincial condition in itself and its boundaries. They typically portray the provinces as a trap, to be escaped from before real living can start—usually in the metropolis though sometimes in a rural arcadia.

Can the provinces change? Only with a change of scale: by becoming larger and cosmopolitan, and thus not provincial at all. Prior to the twentieth century, Henry James wrote mysteriously that to be an American is a complex fate and then chose to focus his novels not on American provincial society but on provincial Americans, naïve and energetic people of European origin, living abroad. However, in the twentieth century mass immigration from around the world changed America. The idea of American culture being still somehow British based, or even connected to western Europe, became more and more untenable. American provincialism faded when America ceased to be a place characterised by its sense of intermediacy and invisibility. Writers, looking out of their windows at people passing by, realised they were facing something distinctive and new. It's no surprise that America's view of itself developed in the cosmopolitan metropolis.
Academics have frequently observed that even cowboys, as we all conceive of them, are the invention of writers and film-makers in cities. The ‘cowboy’ world is a romantic metropolitan notion imposed onto life, and everyone knows that its glamour derives from Hollywood. I knew that too, long before I could understand the mechanism behind the concept’s origin. And that’s why it was the game of ‘cowboys’ that I played as a little boy in the city of Palmerston North, surrounded by cows and sheep but trying to imagine myself into exotic places, other times and other cultures, where real life might start.