

# Aubade (Houston, 1985)

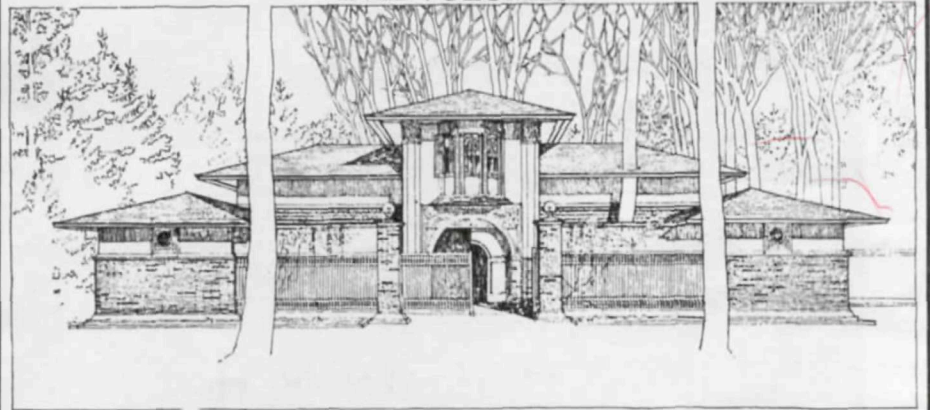
Susan Wood

Each year The Houston Festival Foundation, Inc. commissions a poem about Houston. The following poem was written by poet Susan Wood for the 1985 festival.

- I This far south November might just as well be summer some days, it's that green and hot. Leaves don't turn here, or fall, drifting down to be raked into bonfires of their own color. One morning we look up and - suddenly, it seems - find them gone, we don't know where. It's the way the diaphanous body of the sky seems to fill overnight with towers, its unblemished blue disappearing into mirrors of glass and steel. Like the future, they are beautifully anonymous, each face a face at the window as though the body is a box which holds the heart and is crowded with absence. In this climate, how shall we know we have been saved?
- II In the neighborhoods of Houston, we were children. Mornings we walked on air, moments our stilts cut a wide path through clouds of grass. I think of a grandfather who lived by his hands carefully planing the boards to make those wooden legs. He knew children want to be lifted up. We wanted to rise above our small selves, as though knowledge equalled height. We'd climb the body's ladder any way we could, even scale a tree's green cliff to watch a pair of lovers melt to shade. He was taller, and stronger, but when she raised her mouth to his, each face opened to the other like a door. Down below us, the garden ran wild, rioting azalea and oleander, the pure white flame of the lilies. High on those high limbs, everything seemed possible, that even if we held our breath, the flowers would go on blossoming.
- III Remember a night in deep summer, nineteen hundred sixty-nine? The television bloomed blue in the dark and outside a light hung like a pale disc in the dark fold of sky. Our city was walking on the moon! By morning, it had disappeared. We could not believe our eyes. I think of that when I walk at dawn along the wet streets, light beginning to leaf through the live oaks, the moon still a thin shadow of smoke in the clouds. Above the trees the towers rise, a painting's stylized idea of city, a version of the earth looked at from the moon. It's the way experience seen from a great distance seems somehow unreal, and more intense. Childhood, a particular summer day after rain. Mimosas, the trees shaking out their leaves, the faint sour fruit of earth. Description is the best you can do, but not enough. It's the feeling of the day you remember anyway, the way everything seemed secret and blameless at once. Just a hint on the early air of what you'd have to learn, that something final had begun, and nothing you could do would make it stop.
- IV This chapel might be anywhere, it is so anonymous. But it is here, in the middle of Houston, at the edge of a field, late in the century. Inside, in the darkness, the eyes begin, finally, to see. As though these canvases took all our light and gave it back. Sitting alone this morning, I think how much it must have hurt him, to hold his heart in his hand like that, to make of rage a grave and sorrowful music. But Rothko is here now, and King just outside the door. Newman's obelisk breaks its inscription across the still pool's surface: *Forgive them for they know not what they do. Can we forgive ourselves? He is out of bounds now. He rejoices in man's lovely, peculiar power to choose death and live -*
- V Driving east on I-10 at dawn, I see Houston loom, backlit by sun, red, a hundred copper obelisks cut off by cloud. They might be floating in a water blue sky. They might be on fire. I try to imagine this as the last morning: To look up, suddenly, and find a sky gone white and absolute. No time to say what disappears. I try to imagine it. We must imagine it to live. How far will the flash be seen? No father to forgive us, not knowing what we do.

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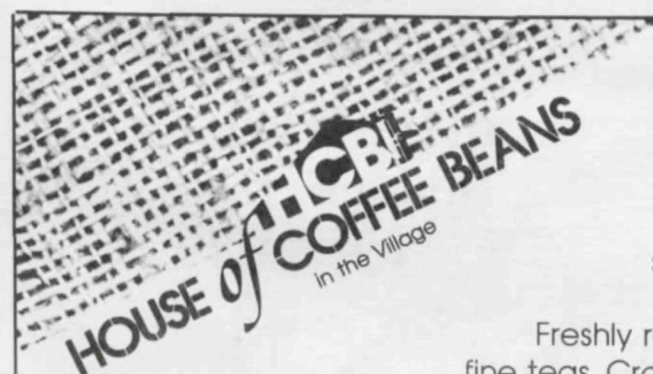
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