

Mirage raises questions about the city. I, too, came to Houston from a foreign country, and reading *Mirage* took me back to my arrival from France in 1959.



South Main Drive-In Theatre on Main Street at Willowbend, 1954

Inside the Houston Mirage

Elizabeth McBride

In Wolde-Ghiroghis Ayele's *Mirage*, the first volume published by Phillip Lopate's new Hothouse Press (1986), a black Ethiopian architecture student offers a brilliant, impressionistic view of cities in general and Houston and Mexico City in particular. For Ayele, any city is a Darwinian test – "One is constantly alert. Any slack in this vigilance can lead to severe consequences." Ayele notes the extreme isolation the city dweller suffers, quoting Valery, who claims, "The inhabitant of the great urban centers reverts to a state of savagery. . . of isolation." But although it is that isolation which grieves Ayele, it is also precisely what – in Houston at least – he seeks.

Ayele views the city with a cool, almost existential detachment born of his newness and foreignness here as well as his architectural training. But in spite of its distance, there is an excitement to this writing, an enticing feel or viewpoint of another culture never fully explained, yet somehow more pleasing than agitating.

Ayele records impressions and anecdotes with a wry intelligent voice, making quick stabs into the life of the city to turn up telling details. He is baffled, for example, by the fact that a building is being washed, finding such an activity strange, a waste. Another writer might qualify that viewpoint, but Ayele wisely allows himself an idiosyncratic bias, neglecting that balance which might, like a statistic, average things. And it's the bias, here, that we value. The work has authority because so many of his impressions seem true and because we savor the power of the individual voice.

At first Houston seems monolithic to Ayele, an odd expanse of concrete and glass, of late-night silence.

Ayele roams this desolate landscape by car, or more often by bus, knowing by heart the routes from downtown to the University of Houston, from the University of Houston to Hermann Park.

Gradually, through a series of disconnected adventures, he increases his contact, his explorations originating not only from his newness but from the needs of a single black male, drawn by that which is immediately visible.

Although Ayele usually remains detached, under his analytical eye lurks a

passion for detail. Ayele is emotionally joined to the city in a series of eccentric events, but most intensely through the OST drag races. Black citizens crowd and mill at MacGregor Park, the streets jammed with cars, "the music undeniably hot and the crowd even hotter. . . ." coquettish girls posing and flirting "openly from atop their Corvettes."

Once the traffic reaches a peak so it becomes literally impossible to move, then and only then has the desired condition been reached. [Finally,] as evening approaches the races begin. Old Spanish Trail is converted into a madman's racetrack.

Ayele values his observer role, interrupted when he reluctantly gives a ride to an angry hitchhiker because the man is Ethiopian too, far from home. This is a telling event. The rider talks all the time, venting his feelings in a "torrent of furor," which leaves Ayele flabbergasted. "If this incident had occurred in New York, or Washington, D.C., or any European capital, it might not have been quite as unsettling. But in Houston it comes as a rude awakening. This far away I want to be left alone: to sleep, or dream, or both."

Mirage raises questions about the city. I, too, came to Houston from a foreign country, and reading *Mirage* took me back to my arrival from France in 1959.

Having wandered all my life with my parents, I had a passionate need to settle. Nothing could shake my affection for Houston, my first home, not the heat that left automobile steering wheels excruciating to touch, not the air-conditioning that made me sick, not the crazy foolish use of fuel, requiring sweaters indoors in summer, cotton in winter. Not even the toads I stepped on, walking barefoot at night. Not even the cockroaches.

I remember the city in images bright and clear as a black-and-white film. In the late fifties, downtown Houston buzzed with motion, the Saturday destination of proper middle-class girls who rode the bus or drove in from the suburbs to shop at Foley's. You could get *anything* at the downtown Foley's. From sunglasses to lawnmowers. And I can still taste the cinnamon rolls in the Sakowitz tearoom,

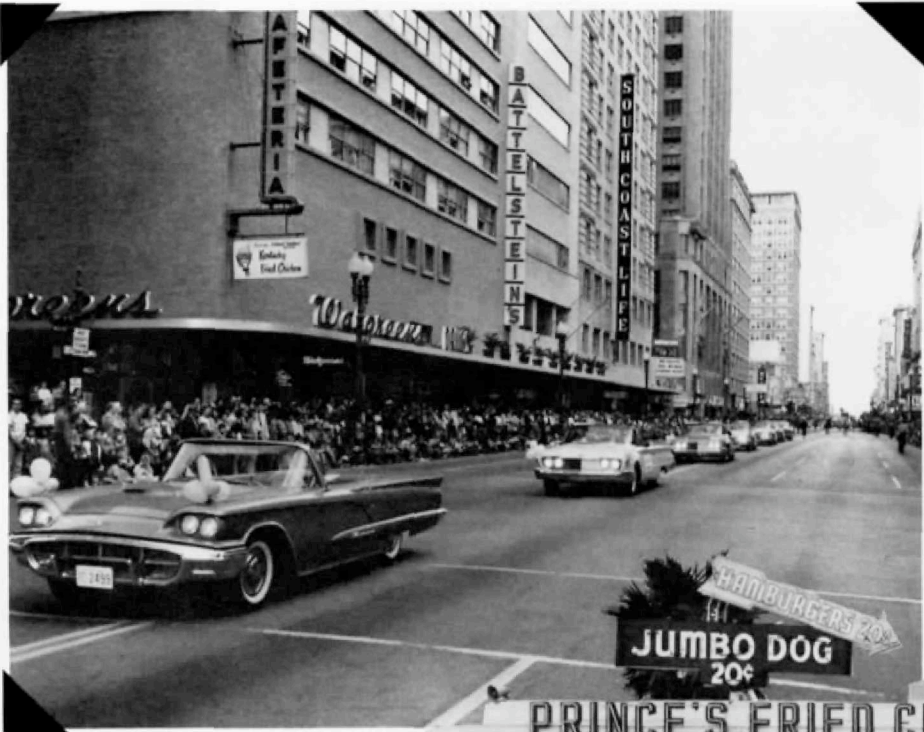
smell the chocolates in Neiman's, see the rows of somber, folded men's ties in Battelstein's.

Salespeople knew their merchandise, and they were polite. Good humor extended to the streets, where people smiled right out. Used to the cautious French, I was amazed at how the light caught in the smiles of strangers, that hard Houston sun suddenly softened. Now the light glints from the pointy glassy sides of famous buildings that can never match that famous Houston welcome. Houston taught me to love the light; it even made me love the heat. I can remember clearly the moment I decided: *From this day on, I will love this heat!*

Nighttime was magic. The lines at Loew's State, the Majestic, seemed to stretch for miles. Girls in soft sweaters and pleated skirts leaned on their dates' shoulders, or in narrow sheath dresses – my favorite a white sleeveless sharkskin with gold buttons. Heels went up and up until, in line for *The Graduate*, I barely was able to stand.

In four years of college, I never saw any drugs. The drinking age was 21 and we weren't embarrassed to end a date at 2K's for ice cream. And 2K's, in the Post Oak shopping center, was about as far out as Houston extended. When folk singing hit Houston, the place to be was The Purple Onion. Later still, we perched in the trees in a coffee house on Westheimer, feeling continental. I saw the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan show and my first mini-skirt on the mezzanine in the Rice library. At Rice, Saturday night was the only date night, all other nights reserved for *the grind*. A co-ed giving up grades to satisfy *angst* resorted on Sundays to cruising the Liberal Arts Reading Room – where studying was pretense. In the Science Reading Room it was serious business.

When I arrived in Houston, cattle still grazed by the drive-in where Willowbend crossed South Main. Having learned to neck at the army posts where my father was stationed, I knew nothing of drive-ins. And having lived in Europe where the driving age was 18, I knew nothing of driving. When I was still in high school, my uncle taught me to drive on the sleepy streets of Bellaire, along newly built Hillcroft and lower Voss, and out South Main on Sunday mornings when there was no traffic. Imagine – South Main



New car parade, Main Street, 1959

Bob Bailey Studios Inc.



Prince's Drive-In Restaurant, popular landing spot for cruisers in the '50s

Bob Bailey Studios Inc.



Bob Bailey Studios Inc.

without any traffic! When I could handle the wheel he set me free – to cruise Prince's and Bill Williams' like the rest of the high school girls, hoping to steal a glimpse of a college guy. Loving the streets, loving my freedom, I drove the city with my windows down and my doors unlocked at all hours, never afraid.

But part of my freedom and lack of fear came from my assumption, then unconscious, that as a white girl I was safe – that I'd better be safe – when I drove through the *barrios* or the ghettos. I should have known that. I had lived all over the world, but I was southern, my mother and father almost professionally southern. And although in the South I knew, the rural South we always returned to, where whites were almost as poor as blacks, whites could drink from the water fountain and use the bathroom at the filling station.

In Houston in 1960 the only blacks I met worked as domestics for my aunt or poured concrete for my uncle. Not even at Rice were there any blacks.

Houston changed. A boy I fell in love with became a member of CORE, an organizer, a draft avoider, a figure of danger. And having begun, the changes continued – Rice was integrated, and the public schools. The University of Houston became an international gathering place. Black people could walk freely into a restaurant, black children could play in the schoolyard across my street.

Since 1957 the difference is striking. In that year, the black artist John Biggers was not admitted into The Museum of Fine Arts show of his own work. If painting well is the best revenge, Biggers got his on Martin Luther King's birthday this year when his work was mounted in a brilliant display at the Transco Tower. Still, the triumph will not be complete until the children playing in the schoolyard across my street can *live* on this street.

That brings me to neighborhoods. In mine, a community of white middle-class families located in Southgate, bounded by University and Holcombe boulevards, Greenbriar and Travis streets, I experience a specific sense of neighborhood which, for Ayele, might not be possible. Block to block,

Southgate varies. On my sedate block, older neighbors who've watched my children grow up are now reluctant to open their doors at night. On another, evenings blaze with dinner parties, and the street is littered with big wheels, skateboards, rolling baseballs, and young mothers brave enough in this feminist world to care for their own children. But we're all drawn together by common concerns – in ice cream socials, wine-tasting parties, garden walks, book clubs, and civic club meetings.

Admittedly, mine is a privileged life, but my experience tells me that the fact of a neighborhood is established not merely by money but by common interests, usually children. It is probably Ayele's freedom to roam – like mine when I first arrived – that determines the city he knows.

What I know is that I love this city. I love the particulars which someone born here and bored by it all might scorn, and which newcomers to Houston might never uncover.

But most of all, I love the familiarity. For over a quarter century now, I have watched this city building, at least everything west of the loop, and I have watched it slumping back on itself. In spite of everyone's efforts, as we give in to the outer stretches, the center decays, becoming more stingy by day, more silent by night. Stangely enough, those impressive buildings we build refuse to save us. One example: the present Alley Theatre has never matched the electric excitement of the old productions on Berry Avenue. One exception: the downtown Houston Public Library, the most inviting public space in Houston.

Of course, we expect to find in a city different worlds; it is no surprise that I live in one Houston and Wolde Ayele in another. We are liquids layered in a test tube, our different densities holding us separate. Ayele points out that "One can hardly experience the same sense of civic pride and involvement from one's car as from waiting in lines to board buses and traveling on the subways." But even the public transportation, he says, the one thing we have in common, has offered little contact. I concur – in six days on the subways in New York I talked to more people than when riding the bus in Houston for a full year. Yet we need to

meet, if not as familiar equals, as accomplices in the same drama.

What holds us apart is not just race, class, the way we dress. It's a matrix, the way the layers we occupy intersect with our individual requirements. I know Houston and I am known, am recognized – and sometimes even I can feel crowded, and long to disappear. At times I accomplish that by driving different streets, visiting different places of business, cultural encounters being well-named, taking place so often across a counter.

If we can manipulate our wanderings to keep us separate, can we manipulate them so we can come together? Traditionally, cities have celebrated in fairs, in games, in parades, in the rituals of marriage and death, in the fine formal air of cathedrals. Classes *had* to touch because in spite of conflict they were dependent on each other.

Now events bring us together for significant moments – the concerts in the park, the Jarre light show – and then dismiss us.

Ayele suggests that what we need are boulevards, that Houston will remain a backdrop until we set a stage "whence the play begins." In a sense, *Mirage* begins that drama by choosing small events and presenting them against the backdrop of an essentially empty city.

Right now, planners are carving out a new park in Market Square, one which could draw people or, like the new Cullen Sculpture Garden, repel them. People who will never drive downtown to sit on a bench might be drawn to a grandstand or gazebo, with music and laughter, the feel of a Houston crowd. For it is not true, as Ayele claims, that "the collective mass lacks human characteristics." Think of the difference: New Orleans and Houston, Houston and San Antonio, and savor the separate flavors.

It is the strength of *Mirage* that it can draw from the reader an intense and thoughtful response, one that continues into the future. Ayele calls Houston "A city yet unsure of itself, tempting all those who live here to define it according to their own terms. That is the part of the glory of Houston," he says, which is also "unnervingly elusive."

When I could handle the wheel he set me free – to cruise Prince's and Bill Williams' like the rest of the high school girls, hoping to steal a glimpse of a college guy.

What I hope is that Ayele's book might initiate a different kind of thinking about the city – something less academic than deciding if buildings are postmodern or mere copy.

The most cogent question is how can we grasp this city in all its disappointments and beauty? What we need to know is what is working? What is missing? What can we do to shake us up in our various densities so we may cross the lines that divide us? ■



The author's daughter in '50s-style dress, corner of Main and Preston, 1987

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