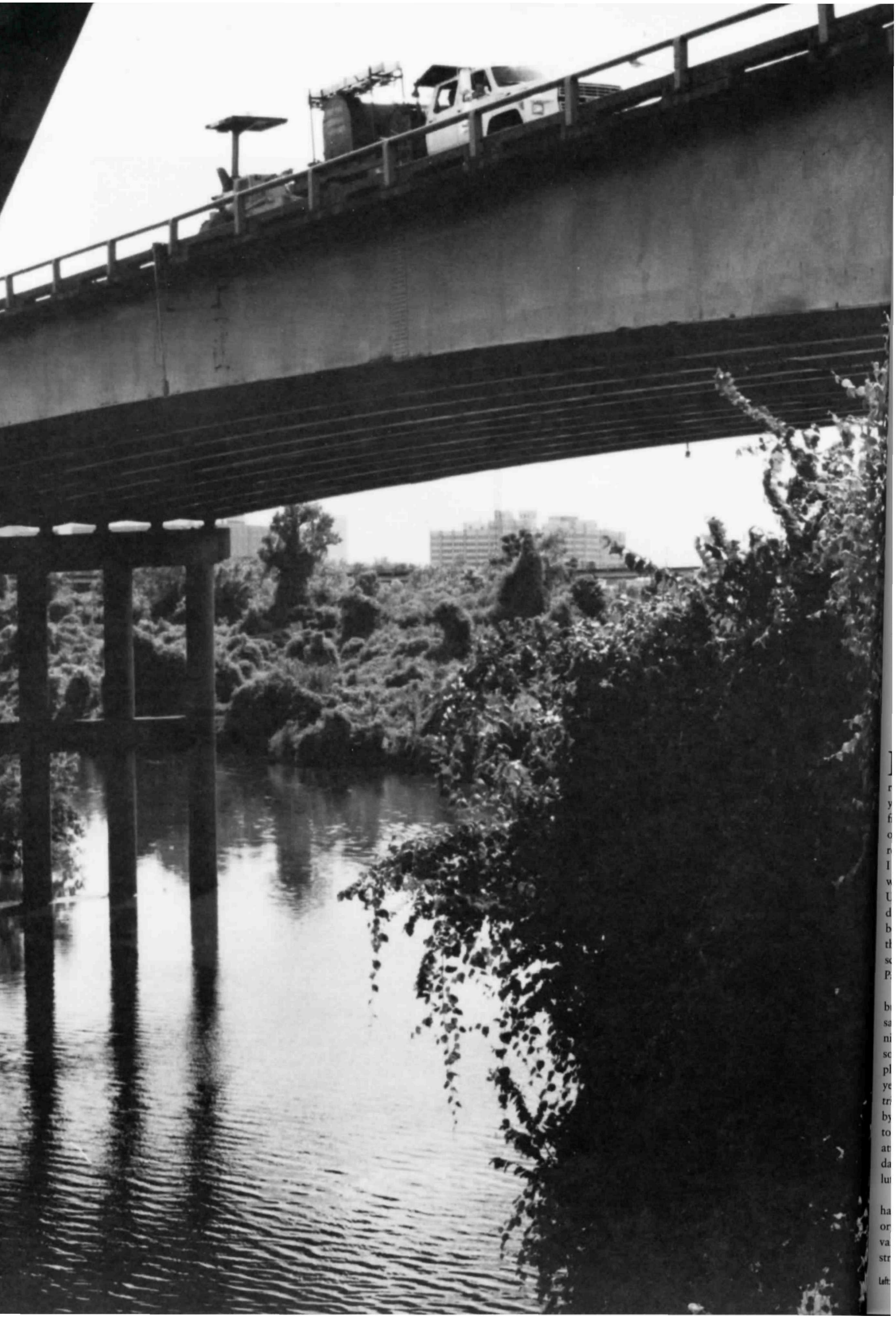

ON LEAVING TEXAS

Rosellen Brown

It's high summer and, even in Houston's most emphatic season, I am saying a reluctant good-bye to Texas after 15 years. Now that I am living a few blocks from the lake that gives Chicago its extraordinary physical uniqueness, I am reminded daily of one of the two charms I missed in Houston — mountains and water (the bayous hardly count). A University of Houston architecture student once illustrated a beguiling little book of Houston stories with photos of the city behind which he'd inked in a scrim of fictional mountains. ¡*Mira*! El Paso with skyscrapers!

One does learn to live without all but man-made beauty in Houston, to say, "That RepublicBank Building is real nice." Some days are lovely enough, some neighborhoods and vistas extremely pleasant. But, to be honest, in all my years there, every time I returned from a trip to a city more handsomely endowed by nature, I came home angry and had to wait until my life recaptured my attention, till the feel and look of my days became again relatively, not absolutely, tolerable.

But my not-so-brief sojourn in Texas has left fond indelible marks in my memory, and this seems a good moment for a valedictory recounting of what I've found striking there.

Close to home, the least dramatic, but the place whose loss gives me the deepest pain, is my neighborhood. My Saturday morning ritual included a long spell of sitting on the cement-and-brick steps of my little wooden bungalow, one of the gray-and-white Menil cottages with their vernacular "everyman" feel, that face the ascetic Rothko Chapel and the unadorned façades of the University of St. Thomas dormitories. The light that filtered through our large magnolia and pecan trees was perfectly softened; the temperature of the long comfortable season was ideal until late in May, when the smarmy season begins. A lovely informal peace prevailed around the loosely controlled space of the Menil "compound" — neatly cropped grass and park, home to countless happy dogs; the authority (moral as well as visual) of the Barnett Newman *Broken Obelisk* that stands over the chapel's dark-bottomed reflecting pool; and the relative silence of the university /museum block. The neighborhood is perfectly scaled; both private and public in feel, architecturally sub-unpretentious, casually but not carelessly tended: with all its oxymoronic implications, a lively oasis.

I spent many an hour there, surrounded by my cats, facing out, because neither the peace of my fenced yard, the dead calm of the suburbs, nor the intrusive urban buzz of the inner city can provide the interest of a street where many pass, but quietly, not in crowds, where something might happen — a wedding party breaking out through the doors of the Rothko (in latter years the scene of too many AIDS-related funerals); a passing friend out for a stroll; a busload of eager tourists looking down from their great height. Though it is hardly the most opulent, the corner at Branard and Yupon is the one I always considered the most favored in Houston.

My perambulations around the state were not thorough or particularly unusual, but I have twice written under challenge for the *New York Times*'s "Sophisticated Traveler" about places my provincial Eastern editor attempted to convince me did not exist. One is the Port of Houston. ("But Houston isn't a port!") That port was the culmination of an almost secret mosey in a canoe down Buffalo Bayou from way west in Katy, through burgeoning woods, amid birds and fishes, right under the roaring 610 Loop, so near and yet so far from Neiman's, between the only naturally steep banks in town, all the way into the city (a trip now interrupted by the stepped waterfalls in the back yard of the Wortham Center), and on to the rusty hulls of the big ships and industrial realities of the Turning Basin. All this is part of the unglamorous, not-for-sale Houston unseen by the casually dismissive eyes of convention-goers and passers-through-the airport-and-the-Galleria, like that New York editor.

The other watery domain, so close that it's nearly commutable, is the Big Thicket, unknown to a surprisingly large number of Houstonians. A peculiarly fragmented set of habitats east of the lyrically named Old and Lost rivers, the Thicket, with its deep darkness and fecundity, is an instructive discovery to anyone whose stereotyped vision of Texas makes the whole state desert and cottonwoods. Of all its many parts (separated now by the insensitive surgeries of commerce), for me the most memorable was a boggy meadow of pitcher plants, stretching their slender, pink-veined, carnivorous throats to the sky, literally as far as I could see. In general the entire area, beginning around the Brownwood subdivision in Baytown and the submerged communities nearby, long since abandoned to encroaching waters, has left my imagination piqued. Panthers crying in the forest, strangling ropy ty-ty vines looped tree to tree, waxy flesh-colored cypress knees poking out of a swamp — this is the Texas of seep and flood, not dust and sunlit fire, furtive,

Left: **Buffalo Bayou, Houston.** Photo by Alan Krathous, 1997

onely, haunting. It is hard not to believe he stories of ghostly presences alive and idden among the trees there. Beaumont photographer Keith Carter's enthralling book of photographs, *The Blue Man*, onors the mysterious place and its inabitants, and, yes, the feeling that it's overseen by invisible, intangible witnesses.

Big Bend, of course, deserves to be its own state, if not its own country. To this day, maybe ten years since my single visit, I cannot see a full moon without recalling the Christmas when we sat bathed in white light in the nearly intolerable heat of the hot springs at midnight, our hands diddling over the side of the brick enclosure that was once the foundation of a health resort building (ten cents a day, ve heard) into the icy Rio Grande. We leaped into our nightclothes to keep the warmth in and drove hell-bent back to our campsite and into our sleeping bags. Damn fools we were, too, camping out in December. A few weeks later we read that a couple of hikers perished out there in a sudden snowstorm.

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I am notorious in my family for being a light-seeker. I suspect I'm an undiagnosed SAD (seasonal affective disorder) sufferer. In any event, I rarely work at a desk because I'm doomed to follow illumination around the house, setting myself down before the brightest window as the light changes overhead. So Texas is a series of light and dark spots for me: open highway, all sky, too stark in summer to be stared into; the endless beach at Mustang Island, where everything is white — gulls, sand, horizon; the butterfly museum in Houston, rain forest in a silo, sunny and damp, glowing vegetation and gilted delicate wings; my daily dappled walk up and down the live oak corridors of North and South boulevards, light/shade, light/shade in stripes and polka dots on the cobbled paths.

My memories of Rice are of a beautiful deserted campus, like a lovely face kept too sheltered for character lines. The University of Houston I remember as a serviceable, unintrusive habitat dutifully planted and tended, unobjectionable and uninspired, epitome of the word "pleasant." This is not a matter of class; no one, after all, would call the University of Texas campus inspired.

I have a sense of the desultoriness of Montrose, of old thick red lilies, graceless, worn around the edges; wood rotting in the subtropical dampness; so much ramshackle deterioration east of Montrose, and so many valiant homeowners gussying up their houses with Victorian doors and effortful gardens north of Alabama. The drive to Intercontinental Airport on Highway 59, with its dilapidated houses and homemade commerce (palm readers, Pentecostal churches, shaky little businesses), was in such contrast to the endlessly unscrolling name-brand clones making Interstate 45 so depressing that I stayed off it on the way to the airport except under duress.

Houston is where I first saw good restaurants in concrete shopping malls; a house with a huge plastic mustang rearing on its lawn; and neighborhoods with dry-cleaners on every block. Whole plazas, where every store feels like a trivial luxury, provide parking that is ugly and ubiquitous and free, which has made me unfit for Chicago, where I must now commit what feels like my entire salary to unburden myself of my car just to eat a meal or see a movie. Texas is where I saw my first heart-stopping sunsets, and blankets of blue and orange and yellow along the highways in spring. Those bluebonnets of Lady Bird Johnson's are arguably the most important contribution of any First Lady since Eleanor Roosevelt.

Houston is where a concrete-sided bayou runs stinking alongside all those streets that begin with Braes. Though I'm not sure I believe it, I've been told that Brae is not fake Scottish but somebody's name — Bray. Houston is where Glenwood Cemetery makes a park of genuine and serious beauty, right in the shadow of the skyscrapers and the far less elegant plots of Sixth Ward. Houston is where my heart seizes up when I drive around the otherwise undistinguished corner of Richmond and Buffalo Speedway near the Summit, where the Rockets gave me supreme moments of joy when I hadn't realized I could care so much about a ball and a hoop — partly, perhaps, because the thrust of the big city was there with us, CLUTCH CITY signs in our car windows. I devoutly hope the Rockets don't abandon the Summit, which is a comfortable and modest building with terrific sightlines.

Trade-offs: I wish a greater variety of heat-hardy flowers could survive in Texas gardens. I never got over my suspicion that more people ought to try, at least, to nurture a less conservative horticultural mix. I wish there were decent radio stations in Houston. Talk-free KUHF is nothing less than a scandal compared to nearly every station in the NPR network. But there are marvelous cafeterias.

How does one compare? I wish there were more solid old houses, and I'm hardly the first to dream of a live downtown accessible by decent public transportation. Nonetheless, Houston is the most convenient huge city in the nation. This is not just a matter of space and speed of movement: when a repairman says he'll be there, he shows up on time. Unless you're stuck on a freeway, Houston gets out of your way. Possibly, if it had a more aggressively interesting profile, it would be more intrusive. New York and Chicago pay for their texture: they do get in your way.

When we drove north toward Chicago, Texas held us nearly half the way. Buildings along the highway border were humble, low-rent, wood-sided. Signs promised things I hadn't thought about needing: "World's Finest Cold Weld!" Little churches beckoned us with clever invitations to salvation: "Forget about Jesus if you can only come to Him weakly." Why will friends-at-a-distance never learn there aren't many cowboys here? Or conversely, how do they reconcile these rather disparate misapprehensions — that Houston is only slick glass building and oil-rich tycoons living in absurd palaces furnished with art they don't understand? And why will those friends never comprehend how it is that, its reputation not withstanding (glitz, crime roaches, mechanical bulls and the Church of Football, oil wells on every lawn, refinery fires, presidential assassins with telescopic sights on their rifles, a lot of West Texas lope and drawl) — we can already miss it so deeply? ■
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Highway 105 Liberty County. Photo © Keith Carter, 1990

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not dust and sunlit fire, furtive, lonely, haunting.
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