

MUSINGS

WHY IT NEVER GETS
DARK IN HOUSTON

Adventures in Late Night Dog Walking



HOUSTON WAS MY FIRST REAL CITY. UP UNTIL then, I had lived in suburbs and suburbs of suburbs all clustered around the north side of the Atlanta metro area, safe little subdivisions with one main entrance and roads named after flowers I didn't know or Civil War battles I didn't remember. Houston, by contrast, sprawled out like a lover on a couch, its broken sidewalks promising to take me somewhere, to show me something. My first week there I walked the five miles in midday August heat from my apartment at Montrose Boulevard and Richmond Avenue to the campus of the University of Houston. I arrived sunburnt, sweat-drenched, and smelling of bus exhaust, but thrilled by the idea that it had worked, that in a city like this I could follow a line on a map, step after step, and eventually get where I was going. I walked to a bright yellow Guatemalan restaurant and drank iced watermelon juice, I walked beneath the low, friendly branches of water oaks and studied the Magrittes at the Menil, I walked to movie theaters and sat through dark matinees only to walk out again, surprised and blinded by a sun that still had not gone down.

After a year I got a dog, and my walking took on a new quality. I no longer needed the excuse of a destination. With a dog at the other end of the leash, I could walk neighborhoods that weren't mine, stop in front of houses I could never afford, peer through windows and wrought iron fences, all while my shepherd Tess sniffed the recycle bins. Soon we moved up to the Heights and began walking more at night, sometimes long after sundown, sometimes in the small hours of the morning. The sidestreets were still, the traffic on Interstate 10 just a whisper among frog calls. Oak roots upheaved the concrete in sharp, tectonic shapes. Underfoot acorns popped like hail. The sky would be a deep purple at the horizon, but it worked its way up into a lovely shade of orange that glowed so I could almost read by it.

I know this is light pollution, I know that I'm not supposed to love it, but I did, and I do.

The strings of tar in the middle of Oxford Street looked like a drip painting under that sky. The banana trees that drooped over fences with their ruby-blushed buds dusky and sexual, took on the shapes of exotic bird heads. Around the corner from

my lowslung house on 6 1/2 Street, the window display of the piñata shop became the scene of a suicide pact as shadowy paper princesses and stiff, dark Power Rangers all hung by their necks from the rafters. Add to this the green of the sodium lights that sprayed down at the corners, and the whole neighborhood took on the aspect of some surreal set. I felt like I was backstage at a play, that the neat little houses were all empty, just there for show. At any minute, I would stumble across a stagehand who would be dismantling a gable or lifting a chimney with one hand because it had been made out of cardboard.

But then I'd see some sign of life, another sleepy fellow with some other wide-eyed dog, or a station wagon flinging the next day's newspaper, a bus with its windows like so many TV screens, and I would know I wasn't alone, that this only felt, at times, wonderfully fake, that the city was in fact teeming, always, and dreaming right along with me, through the night. - David Bernardy