

Cardinal Directions

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The volcanic crater dominating the skyline of the windward side of Oahu was formed some 75,000 to 100,000 years ago. The tectonic ash and pumice that settled and hardened into a postmagmatic edifice in the sky has long since grown over with the lush, softening vegetation of the island—the bright bulbous hibiscus, the phoenix-feathered ohia, the cascading sea colors of the blue jade vine over a magnolia carpet, an occasional red ginger or surprise silversword among the white plumeria fields. Even the nomenclature of the red, green, and gold crop of this place bursts out from Linnaeus' rigid, latinate system: *acacia koa*, *mucuna bennetti*, *clusia rosea*. Each name sparkles and smacks with the syllables of the place Joan Didion calls “. . . Paradise: 21° 19' N., 157° 52' W.”

“21° 19' N., 157° 52' W.,” the coordinates by which each year five million lei-bedecked tourists set their compasses. The coordinates of fresh cut flowers, and panoramic views of white sand beaches, and dreams of sticky-sweet papaya juice in the well-named Punchbowl crater. The coordinates of a place so striking in its quiet beauty as to make a person ease up and heave a sigh as wide and vast and warm as the Pacific itself.

They are also the coordinates that mark the location of a flag-draped coffin.

For “21° 19' N., 157° 52' W.” is the exact geographic location of the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific. Here is where they put the bodies of those who die too young in foreign wars. They bury them in rows of white sepulchral crosses and glazed granite headstones engraved with short, poignant biographies to match their shortened and poignant lives. In her “Letter from Paradise,” Didion notes, “They all seem to be twenty years old, the boys buried up there in the crater of an extinct volcano named Punchbowl, twenty and nineteen and eighteen and sometimes not that old” (193). Joan Didion walks among those who were brought home to the cemetery, and she watches as more come in each day from the Vietnam War.

But what of those who do not come home? Those missing in action too long for hope, those buried at sea, or those whose violent death left no remains? At the National Memorial Cemetery, their names—all 28,788 of them—are engraved on the marble wall of the ten Courts of the Missing. On this high hill, even the vanished have their place.

And Didion calls this place Paradise. 21° 19' N., 157° 52' W. Some would question the importance of these coordinates, would question how any physical place could be invested with such memorial significance. How can stone remind the living, how can soil remember souls? Didion is not among the questioners. For her, place is a preeminent part of the human condition.

The essays in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* are vivified with the imagination of the world—a world formed by the inextricable, indeed continental, link between physical geography and human geography. Of these two, physical geography is easiest to comprehend—it is topography, the lay of the land. Human geography is more complex—it is comprised of the people of any given place. We come to know the land by studying the way they inhabit it. In Didion's essays, these two diverse forms of geography are tied together with the same tragic, temporal threads.

The first of these tragic threads is very much involved with the present. It is setting, and it forms the syntactical and ideological sinew uniting the final sentence of her essay "On Morality":

Because when we start deceiving ourselves into thinking not that we want something or need something, not that it is a pragmatic necessity for us to have it, but that it is a moral imperative that we have it, then is when we join the fashionable madmen, and then is when the thin whine of hysteria is heard in the land, and then is when we are in bad trouble. (163)

At first glance this sentence is filled with the terms of the art of human geography: "need," "want," "pragmatic necessity," and "moral imperative." Each word or phrase represents a fluency of strong, imperative language that lends a certain earnestness, an internal conscience, to the sentence itself.

With this terseness, with these words, Didion erects a definite moral compunction—a set of principles that is held up only to be undermined by the following spate of words: "deceiving," "trouble," "fashionable madmen." These phrases lend a certain mendacious, willful self-deception to Didion's subjects. Phrases that, if one were to transplant them, form an apt and terrible description of the characters populating Bethlehem, all of whom, in one way or another, kill their dreams as they chase them. We are talking now of human geography. Consider Lucille Miller, the avaricious suburban house-

wife whose 495° F disagreement with her husband landed her before a jury of her peers “above whom Lucille Miller had wanted so badly to rise. That was the sin. . . . Lucille Miller was an erring woman, a woman who perhaps wanted too much” (“Dreamers” 22). Or the Haight Street drop-outs who reveal, in “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” that the center cannot, has not, and will not hold. Or even Didion herself, whose own despair utterly subsumes her in “Goodbye to All That.” There is an indelible stain marking the people and pages of Joan Didion’s book. But it also marks the land, the people.

What makes Didion’s work different is the way she choreographs these people and places. The hallmark of her work is her ability to set the scene. Consider again the end of “On Morality”:

Because when we start deceiving ourselves into thinking not that we want something or need something, not that it is a pragmatic necessity for us to have it, but that it is a moral imperative that we have it, then is when we join the fashionable madmen, and then is when the thin whine of hysteria is heard in the land, and then is when we are in bad trouble. (163)

This is not simply a well-turned expression of anguish, but is instead a microcosm of Didion’s technique. First we have “the thin whine of hysteria” and the call of those “fashionable madmen” who draw to themselves the modes and means of greed. And then, this call is given context: “it is heard within the land.” No idea is bereft of a setting. The physical world acts as the *mise-en-scène* for human drama; it is the stage from which we voice our most eloquent despair. The tangible landscape of her work is a place the conscience must navigate, but it is also a place marked by those who inhabit it.

Navigating these landscapes is no easy task. Our navigations through the physical world are at best circuitous; we are sent “turning in the widening gyre” that seems to be endless (Yeats 1). In these navigations, the pathos of place takes a startling toll on those who pass through. For Didion, place can have a dramatic quality that is all its own—a quality allowing it to impart on those travelers whatever lessons, or warnings, it may make manifest.

In “Letter from Paradise, 21° 19’ N., 157° 52’ W.,” Didion renders one such place with startling immediacy. Disconsolate, and on something of a sabbatical from her own oppressive self, Didion takes a trip to Hawaii, inevitably ending up at Pearl Harbor where, staring into the tombstone gray waters, she breaks down in tears at the sight of the USS Arizona: “the rusted after-gun turret breaking the gray water, the flag at full mast because the Navy considers the Arizona still in commission, a full crew aboard, 1,102 men from forty-nine states. All I know about how other people respond is what I am told: that

everyone is quiet at the Arizona” (192). What is to be found at the Arizona is a convocation of images. The response these images produce—and there can be for Didion no doubt that everyone is called to the same response—rests on a recognition of the personal that is embedded in a titanic, impersonal slab of salt-washed steel. What is submerged in us comes up as we encounter the image, breaking through the gray waters to air the terror.

And then there is the wind. If the emotions washed up at Pearl Harbor can be described as tranquil terror, those blown by the wind are somehow more raw, nervous even with the trepidation of the desert sand. The hardlands of California are imperiled by “the hot dry Santa Ana wind that comes down through the passes at 100 miles an hour and whines through the eucalyptus windbreaks and works on the nerves” (“Dreamers” 3). The Santa Ana, California’s malignant cousin to the Swiss foehn, comes with violent force—often hurricane force—setting the sagebrush western hills ablaze. Didion cites the encroaching fires of 1956, 1961, and 1964 in her “Los Angeles Notebook” as holding a prominent place in the Californian imagination (219-20). But as always with Didion, there is something more. The wind does not simply figure in the Californian imagination—it twists it. When the wind comes over the land, “every voice seems a scream. It is the season of suicide and divorce and prickly dread, wherever the wind blows” (“Dreamers” 3). The wind has a powerful hold on human emotion. When it comes, “the baby frets. The maid sulks” (“Notebook” 217). It exhibits a hold so powerful that human behavioral patterns can be altered, taking a turn toward the malevolent. “In Los Angeles some teachers do not attempt to conduct formal classes during the Santa Ana, because children are unmanageable. In Switzerland the suicide rate goes up during the foehn, and in the courts of some Swiss cantons the wind is considered a mitigating circumstance for crime” (218). In short, this extreme force of nature acts as a catalyst in forming a chain reaction that trades violence for violence and leads one ever closer to the inevitable conclusion that “to live with the Santa Ana is to accept, consciously or unconsciously, a deeply mechanistic view of human behavior” (217).

Heretofore, Didion has advanced a very intransitive view of the world. It may act, as in the quiet confines of the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, as a wellspring for memory; so too may it act as the stage for human drama. But with the wind she reveals a conviction that that stage is participatory—that the tangible reality surrounding Bethlehem, wherever it may be, is not merely a simple backdrop, but is an energetic and formative environment. She calls us into the places that reverberate through us.

The way Didion appropriates these vistas and translates them into the written word reveals her idiosyncratic mind and the way her own experience shapes her vision. Didion's sentences reveal the nature of the participatory landscapes. Her descriptive work shows us the power of the forces that move us about and bind us to the land itself. The most revealing passages begin first with the short, stout, blue-collar phrase, and then, when all is ready and enough energy is pent up, out comes the seething epic sentence—the type of sentence that seems to wash up with the surf, shake itself off, and slowly pick up speed, growing, amalgamating, aggrandizing until it stretches out and encompasses the vast, incomprehensible span of the Sierra Nevada Mountains or the San Bernardino Valley of the Mojave Desert—sentences that cannot and do not and should not end until they are wrestled down to meet the sunset with the closing black mark of dead-end punctuation. And then all is calm.

Such sentences come along only every so often—distinguished by their scope and ambition, an ambition that seeks to distill in them all of experience. Consider this passage from “Notes from a Native Daughter”; she gives us “a view of history [that] casts a melancholia over those who participate in it”:

In fact that is what I want to tell you about: what it is like to come from a place like Sacramento. If I could make you understand that, I could make you understand California and perhaps something else besides for Sacramento is California, and California is a place in which a boom mentality and a sense of Chekhovian loss meet in uneasy suspension; in which the mind is troubled by some buried but ineradicable suspicion that things had better work here, because here, beneath that immense bleached sky is where we run out of continent. (172)

This passage cuts right to the heart of what Didion so badly wants to do: convey through place something of the essence of history as she understands it. But we see here too another of her concerns. Didion is also pointing us toward an instinctive sense of seeking, something restless about the human spirit. Her sentences seize on her willful desire to give direction (if not a final destination) to the directionless coursing that characterizes those who people her landscapes. Didion, like her subjects, also searches; we see signs of it in every single one of her essays. All twenty of them begin with place. Place appears either smack in the middle of the first sentence, or lurking not far off in the second. From “Where the Kissing Never Stops” to “The Sea Coast of Despair,” from “7000 Romaine, Los Angeles 38” down to “Guaymas, Sonora,”

each essay announces, *here is where we begin*: “this is a story about love and death in the golden land, and begins with the country” (“Dreamers” 3).

This is Didion’s methodology—to seek out the root of “love” or “death” or impenetrable despair by exploring physical place. The ethic behind this methodology seems clear; it is the same as the one advanced by William Carlos Williams in his poem “A Sort of Song”: “No ideas / but in things” (9-10). For Didion the thing that evokes and unites her ideas is the confrontation between physical geography and human geography. Her preoccupation with this confrontation and her quirky style capture the memorial quality of place, the containing (often confining) power of place, and even the dramatic, formative power of place. But there is another quality of the physical world that informs these three, and that is the inherent sense that as we confront the physical and emotional power of place, we are perpetually running up against boundaries and frontiers. Our minds are challenged by them.

For Didion the most important place on earth is “where we run out of continent”; there we are forced to redefine and renegotiate our own boundaries (“Daughter” 172). Her characters are challenged with frontiers—real, physical frontiers—whether it be Lucille Miller with her back up against the wall of her exurban desert mirage, or the people of Los Angeles facing down the white-hot gusts of the Santa Ana, or even the author herself, grappling for the comfort of familiar cardinal directions while living in New York with “colonials in a far country” (“Goodbye” 231). All of these people meet with their own private boundaries and limitations, and they discover that boundaries matter because they beg to be broken, extended, and re-formed. They must learn to move on. It is only when pushing back against these boundaries that Didion and her characters understand their humanness, discover its range and its limits, and are reminded that “the wind shows us how close to the edge we are” (“Notebook” 221).

It can only have been this exhilaration with the edge that drove Didion to choose a line from W. B. Yeats as the title of her collection. That title belies her passionate conviction that we must always be slouching *towards* Bethlehem. Even if what awaits is terrifying in its uncertainty, even if “the falcon cannot hear the falconer” and “the centre cannot hold” (Yeats 2-3), there must be movement on that terrain we stain with our presence. Born always to be seeking and pushing our limits, the land marks us too.

Often, Didion’s characters are blind to the path of their progress. Living in a world where belief has receded, they find themselves lost, stumbling over their own despair. She seeks to clear away the clutter, providing their rudderless mind (and ours) with landmarks, slowly building a scene, showing us

where and what we are. Her subjects do not exist in a void—they navigate paths, push up against the boundaries, seek edges—whether on the streets of the Upper West Side, on a highway through the wind-scraped desert, or coming to rest in the Punchbowl. Didion gives us direction by reminding us of the power of geographical and human space, by making us aware of the traces we leave of ourselves while journeying towards paradise, wherever that may turn out to be.

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