

Circling America

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Big Brother and the Holding Company is playing someplace down the street, and an ever-expanding crowd of fans and admirers, riding on a dark cloud of thick smoke and cigarette ash, threatens to clog the sidewalk. The singer howls, and the fuzz guitars screech; the audience, mostly teens and twenty-somethings, tune in and drop out. No one has ever heard Gershwin Bros. quite like this before. The year is 1967, and it is summertime in Haight-Ashbury, San Francisco, haven for runaways and dreamers—a time that will later be dubbed “The Summer of Love,” and a place where, in the words of Joan Didion, “the missing children were gathering, calling themselves ‘hippies’” (“Bethlehem” 76). Just a few weeks earlier, Didion had arrived here, wishing to explore but not knowing what to expect. This is the neighborhood she will investigate in her essay “Slouching Towards Bethlehem.” Surely she thinks this is a mysteriously likeable place—a place where one can escape “all the middle-class Freudian hang-ups” that have plagued society (78).

But something stinks. Beneath the day-glo painted automobiles, floral-print clothing and loud psychedelia churning out of amplifiers lies a “social hemorrhaging” so profuse that most did not know of its existence (“Bethlehem” 76). No amount of patchouli incense can obscure the rotteness of the children strewn out on the streets of Haight-Ashbury, dazed and distant, with track marks in their arms and LSD blotters on their tongues. These children and young adults are driven by a desire to live free of artificially imposed codes of conduct, to escape the oppression of values, morality, and ethics, and to eschew the lifestyle of their parents. However, their movement lacks direction and leadership: substance abuse becomes the means and end of that escape, fueling only apathy and ignorance. This kind of social abyss is a recurrent subject of Didion’s essays—a contagion-like crisis hidden from public view.

Didion writes to expose the inner workings of American culture—often the idiosyncrasies of Californian lifestyles—in ways that are not typically questioned. In “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” she studies the lifestyles of

the inhabitants of Haight-Ashbury to identify what mass media had failed to see: a “social vacuum” in which teens and their parents are inept at communicating with each other (122). She often studies her subjects by being immersed in them. Of the Haight-Ashbury, she writes, “[When] I first went to San Francisco in that cold late spring of 1967 I did not even know what I wanted to find out, and so I just stayed around awhile, and made a few friends” (76). Perhaps unknowingly, she mimics the aimlessness of the youth that she investigates. From the front lines, she observes a counterculture at odds with itself, a generation so dissatisfied with society that they are—perhaps unconsciously—driven to indifference. The youth protest is futile because “they do not believe in words . . . their only proficient vocabulary is in society’s platitudes” (109). And she paints a consistently bleak portrait of America at large, casting it as a place of hollow virtues and elemental fraud. In “7000 Romaine, Los Angeles 38,” Didion writes, “The secret point of money and power in America . . . [is] absolute personal freedom, mobility, privacy” (63). According to her, the desire for this mobility is universal: “[it is] the difference between what we say we want and what we do want, between what we officially admire and secretly desire” (64). To admit to the desire for privacy and, indirectly, the need for money and power is to go against the grain—to deny the cult’s norm, to metamorphose into unsociability. And yet, this desire is omnipresent. The paradox of this ubiquitous, shared secrecy is a large part of Didion’s American critique.

Although Didion, in characteristically journalistic manner, is intellectually embedded in her subject, she is also emotionally attached. In “Comrade Laski, C.P.U.S.A.,” she explores the daily activities of a communist preacher whose dedication, she hypothesizes, is the result of an acute sense of dread. She explains: “I know something about dread myself, and appreciate the elaborate systems with which some people manage to fill the void, appreciate all the opiates of the people, whether they are as accessible as alcohol and heroin and promiscuity or as hard to come by as faith in God or History” (56). She expresses empathy, but does not seem to feel it. Her emotional concern does not pour off the page so much as it bleeds through the typeface—through the sentences, the words she uses to maintain objectivity amidst the tempestuousness. The curious way in which Didion exudes both detachment and attachment transcends the thematic; we find it in her style, which despite an emotional undercurrent often veers toward intellectualized sterility.

And yet, although Didion’s writing is consistently terse and often repetitive, it can be poetic in its sparseness and symmetry. In “7000 Romaine, Los Angeles 38,” she writes that the place looks “like a faded movie exterior, a pas-

tel building with chipped *art moderne* detailing, the windows now either boarded or paned with chicken-wire glass and, at the entrance, among the dusty oleander, a rubber mat that reads welcome” (59). Her sentences do not flow; they unravel, streaming sights, sounds, or people into tissue-like environments that cadence into perfectly tense contradictions. Dull, decaying buildings become vibrant symbols of cultural quirks; what was once terminally silent and unimportant becomes colorfully incongruous. Perhaps, then, Didion has deemed herself responsible for making us aware of what we were once unaware of. In “Marrying Absurd,” she writes, “Las Vegas seems to offer something other than ‘convenience’; it is merchandising ‘niceness,’ the facsimile of ritual, to children who do not know how else to find it, how to make the arrangements, how to do it ‘right’” (73). Didion’s rhetoric peels away truisms, layer by layer, revealing a richly contradictory and largely ignored interior.

But despite its brevity, Didion’s writing is emotive. She manages to be affecting without being florid or grandiloquent; the space she keeps between words can be an instrument far more dramatic and telling than the words themselves. In “Goodbye To All That,” Didion recounts the time when she lived in New York:

When I first saw New York I was twenty, and it was summertime, and I got off a DC-7 at the old Idlewild temporary terminal in a new dress which had seemed very smart in Sacramento but seemed less smart already, even in the old Idlewild temporary terminal, and the warm air smelled of mildew and some instinct, programmed by all the movies I had ever seen and all the songs I had ever sung about New York, informed me that it would never be quite the same again. (206)

Here, and elsewhere, her whirling ruminations are characterized by the absence of any distinct emotional claims. Yet her descriptions of surrounding environmental attributes are curiously evocative of her own temperament at the time. It is clear that she is assured yet anxious, collected yet naïve. Her decision to identify the internal through the external mirrors her impulse to identify the hidden contradictions beneath cultural caprice. She works from the outside in, circling her prey in hawk-like fashion, stitching together substance and observation into a claim while remaining distanced.

Didion’s drive to debunk makes her an astutely effective critic: she quarters societal customs, revealing their foundations in irony or paradox. Concurrently, though, her critical circulations bring the depths of her personality to the surface, as if by centrifugal force. In “On Self-Respect,” she

writes of her rejection from Phi Beta Kappa: “[although] even the humorless nineteen-year-old that I was must have recognized that the situation lacked real tragic structure, the day that I did not make Phi Beta Kappa nonetheless marked the end of something, and innocence may well be the word for it” (127). While not explicitly stated, we sense her disappointment through her detached, intellectualized rendering of the situation. Her approach is meditative: she carefully collects her thoughts on the page, piecing distinctly disjointed experiences into a whole whose sum is greater than its parts. The culmination of her subtle, suffused pessimism is more significant than her individual observations. Of her time in New York, she writes, “I still believed in possibilities then, still had the sense, so peculiar to New York, that something extraordinary would happen any minute, any day, any month” (“Goodbye” 209). She seems to discount her optimism as rare, youthful naïveté; it is almost as if she courts despair. But her gloominess only surfaces through her careful observation. She does not confess; instead, she explicates through precise, evocative descriptions. Woe is the product of her attentive societal dissection.

Perhaps, then, she calls us to confront that which seems dubiously resolute, to question the validity of all that gleams too intensely, for there are often, as Didion reveals, deep tensions at its source. She warns us solemnly of that which rots from the inside out: the superficially immaculate surfaces that fool us all, at some time or another, with their illusory charm. Didion takes us into the shadowland to show us to ourselves, offering no bromides. And yet, she casts her own spell with subtlety and precision, too—a spell of detached observation, perfect and gleaming in its own way. As she reveals what lies beneath, we glimpse what lies within her.

WORKS CITED

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“7000 Romaine, Los Angeles 38.” 59-64.
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“Goodbye To All That.” 205-18.
“Marrying Absurd.” 70-74.
“On Self-Respect.” 127-33.
“Slouching Towards Bethlehem.” 75-116.