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Essay #5

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### The Commoner in Joan Didion

I do not know Joan Didion, but she certainly knows me.

As someone who is afflicted with a thirst for spontaneity, aspiring to be a writer, I remember exactly that; I want to *be* a writer. Perhaps if I flew to California—this instant—I could meet Joan Didion. As it is I am in Wisconsin, in my mother’s house, in the basement, remembering that Didion—an actual writer—has spent her most passionate hours, “arranging words on a piece of paper” (Muller, 225). From the reclined position of my couch’s creamy sandstone upholstery, we are separated by a snowy trek through the frigid Midwest—one I probably would not attempt—and an arid jaunt through the desolate desert landscape of eastern California—one I probably would not survive—and yet the pages of, “Why I Write,” speak to me as if the book’s binding has bound her voice to the paper. Instead of writing I have spent the last three hours in precious adornment.

“Why I Write,” a self-examination as to why Didion writes, and the “images that shimmer around the edges” (Muller, 225). The shimmer visits us all in some form or another—predominately as a brief flash, a blur, a mental photograph. To focus the photographs, Didion advises us to “just lie low and let them develop,” “stay quiet,” “don’t talk to many people,” and, “keep your nervous system from shorting out” (Muller, 225). “Look hard enough, and you can’t

miss the shimmer. It's there," (Muller, 225) she says, begging us to repeat the affirmation, *our patience needs more patience*—and even then we may never see the entire image the way Didion sees it. Joan Didion has an auditory presence worthy of engendering an imaginative appearance—impressive given the fact that she has not entertained me, and probably never will, with an actual physical presence. In a second essay ("In Bed"), I heard of, in the suffering of migraines, "mild hallucinations," temporary blindness, "gastrointestinal disturbance, a painful sensitivity to all sensory stimuli, an abrupt overpowering fatigue, a strokelike aphasia, and a crippling inability to make even the most routine connections" (Muller, 221). Didion, a great investigator of the shimmer, does not simply *have* a migraine. Her words multiply into quirky offspring that we might glance at for a few seconds, turning away to avoid staring at something unusual while she encourages its development until it encapsulates the entire internal fortress we have garrisoned for the sake of cognitive privacy. Suddenly she is inside the fort, and we can see her with astounding clarity.

Clarity is the quality, and reason, Didion seeks as the superimposed pictures that overlap the ink. Whether, "the lights are on in the bevatron" (Muller, 225), or not (in reference to "Why I Write," referring to her days as a student at the University of California, Berkeley), she only investigates the lighting for their physical attributes—how they looked. Repeatedly she obsesses over the corporeal imagery; on a Greyhound bus en route from Sacramento, where she traveled to Berkeley every Friday—one summer—to fulfill an English course requirement, she recalls, "the way the tinted windows on the Greyhound bus cast the oil refineries around Carquinez Straits into a grayed and absolutely sinister light" (Muller, 225). She even recalls the "exact rancidity of the butter in the city of San Francisco's dining car," (Muller, 225) and we see the unmistakable practice of compulsion. Joan Didion specializes in the noticing of the

noticeable passed over by everyone else—or at least the majority that never care to notice. Best described in her own words: “I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see, and what it means,” (Muller, 225) she insists on diving right in, head first—pen last—even if it is the shallow end.

Even the shallow end has water that needs exploring—apparent by Didion’s essay “Holy Water.” Not many individuals—if any at all—can say they lounge around with a nagging curiosity of where their water comes from (a faucet?). As we know already, when Didion thinks it she chases down its meaning in pursuit void of abandonment. Maybe her residency in the relatively dry state of California, where water is revered during the summer months, makes her thought process common. I think not. Who else can claim a notable interest “not in the politics of water but in the waterworks themselves, in the movement of water through aqueducts and siphons and pumps and forebays and afterbays and weirs and drains, in plumbing on the grand scale”? (Didion, 59). Who else can put themselves to sleep imagining “the water dropping a thousand feet into the turbines at Churchill Falls in Labrador”? (Didion, 59). In this essay, “Holy Water,” Didion conducts follow-up in-person research to stimulate her compulsion; her shimmer of the waterworks.

Here is where it comes together for me: I envision Didion as she tracks the water to its origin, where she meets the onset of a migraine, “the sudden irrational irritation and the flush of blood into the cerebral arteries” (Muller, 220). To avert the migraine, she scrambles to the faucet and swallows down certain drugs, “methysergide, or Sansert” (Muller, 221). She knows where the water has ended, but the shimmer of where it started forces her over the threshold. “What is going on in these pictures in my mind?” (Muller, 225). She asks, and suddenly she has a full-blown migraine, banishing herself to bed for the day, “insensible to the world” (Muller, 220).

When the migraine passes, we have no doubt the process repeats itself until she is satisfied with her arrangement of words for the sake of clarifying the shimmer.

Didion uses many stylistic devices—so do a plethora of other essayists. What is found in these three essays is a voice, unique in a profound sense, common in the expenditure of moments between sunrise and sunset but unique from pen-up to pen-down. Common sense would elaborate upon “common” as the time not spent arranging words on a piece of paper, or navigating the pipes that are the heterodoxy of water control in California (as she writes about in her two essays, “Why I Write,” and, “Holy Water.”) Migraines are not uncommon among the commoner; my cousin lives with migraines. As far as the wondering of where our water comes from, our shimmer fades after glancing at the pipes beneath the sink—evidence enough for the commoner. Didion is a writer with a great voice and an uncanny ability to decipher the shimmer—the shimmer we all see, if only for a fraction of a second.

We do not know Joan Didion, but she certainly knows us.

## Works Cited

Muller, Gilbert H., and Alan F. Crooks. *Major Modern Essayists*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994. Print.

Didion, Joan. *The White Album*. New York: Noonday, 1990. Print.