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JOAN DIDION

Where I Was From

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Where I Was From

Joan Didion

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This book is for my brother

James Jerrett Didion,

and for our mother and father,

Eduene Jerrett Didion

and

Frank Reese Didion,

with love

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Part One

My great-great-great-great-great-grandmother Elizabeth Scott was born in 1766, grew up on the Virginia and Carolina frontiers, at age sixteen married an eighteen-year-old veteran of the Revolution and the Cherokee expeditions named Benjamin Hardin IV, moved with him into Tennessee and Kentucky and died on still another frontier, the Oil Trough Bottom on the south bank of the White River in what is now Arkansas but was then Missouri Territory. Elizabeth Scott Hardin was remembered to have hidden in a cave with her children (there were said to have been eleven, only eight of which got recorded) during Indian fighting, and to have been so strong a swimmer that she could ford a river in flood with an infant in her arms. Either in her defense or for reasons of his own, her husband was said to have killed, not counting English soldiers or Cherokees, ten men. This may be true or it may be, in a local oral tradition inclined to stories that turn on decisive gestures, embroidery. I have it on the word of a cousin who researched the matter that the husband, our great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, “appears in the standard printed histories of Arkansas as Old Colonel Benjamin Hardin, the hero of so many Indian wars.” Elizabeth Scott Hardin had bright blue eyes and sick headaches. The White River on which she lived was the same White River on which, a century and a half later, James McDougal would locate his failed Whitewater development. This is a country at some level not as big as we like to say it is.

I know nothing else about Elizabeth Scott Hardin, but I have her recipe for corn bread, and also for India relish: her granddaughter brought these recipes west in 1846, traveling with the Donner-Reed party as far as the Humboldt Sink before cutting north for Oregon, where her husband, the Reverend Josephus Adamson Cornwall, was determined to be the first Cumberland Presbyterian circuit rider in what was then called Oregon country. Because the granddaughter, Nancy Hardin Cornwall, was my great-great-great-grandmother, I have besides her recipes, a piece of appliqué she made on the crossing. This appliqué, green and red calico on a muslin field, hangs now in my dining room in New York and hung before then in the living room of a house I had on the Pacific Ocean.

I also have a photograph of the stone marker placed on the site of the cabin in which Nancy Hardin Cornwall and her family spent the winter of 1846–47, still short of their destination in the Willamette Valley but unable to get their wagons through a steep defile on the Umpqua River without abandoning Josephus Cornwall’s books. (This option seems to have presented itself only to his daughters.) “Dedicated to the memory of Rev. J. A. Cornwall and family,” the engraving on the marker reads. “They built the first immigrant cabin in Douglas County near this site, hence the name Cabin Creek. The family wintered here in 1846—1847, were saved from extreme want by Israel Stoley, a nephew who was a good hunter. The Indians were friendly. The Cornwalls traveled part way westward with the ill-fated Donner Party.”

My mother was sent the photograph of this marker by her mother’s cousin Oliver Huston, a family historian so ardent that as recently as 1957 he was alerting descendants to “an occasion which no heir should miss,” the presentation to the Pacific University Museum of, among other artifacts, “the old potato masher which the Cornwall family brought across the plains in 1846.” Oliver Huston’s letter continued: “By this procedure, such items can then be seen by all Geiger and Cornwall heirs at any time in the future by simply visiting the

Museum.” I have not myself found occasion to visit the potato masher, but I do have a typescript of certain memories, elicited from one of Nancy Hardin Cornwall’s twelve children, Narcissa, of those months on what would later be called Cabin Creek:

We were about ten miles from the Umpqua River and the Indians living there would come and spend the greater part of the day. There was one who spoke English, and he told Mother the Rogue River Indians were coming to kill us. Mother told them if they troubled us, in the spring the Bostons (the Indian name for the white people) would come out and kill them all off. Whether this had any effect or not I don’t know, but anyway they did not kill us. But we always thought they would come one day for that purpose. One day Father was busy reading and did not notice the house was filling with strange Indians until Mother spoke about it.... As soon as Father noticed them he got up and got his pistols and asked the Indians to go out and see him shoot. They followed him out, but kept at a distance. The pistols were a great curiosity to them. I doubt if they had ever seen any before. As soon as they were all out of the cabin Mother barred the door and would not let them in any more. Father entertained them outside until evening, when they got on their ponies and rode away. They never returned to trouble us any more.

In another room of this house I had on the Pacific Ocean there hung a quilt from another crossing, a quilt made by my great-great-grandmother Elizabeth Anthony Reese on a wagon journey during which she buried one child, gave birth to another, twice contracted mountain fever, and took turns driving a yoke of oxen, a span of mules, and twenty-two head of loose stock. In this quilt of Elizabeth Reese’s were more stitches than I had ever seen in a quilt, blinding and pointless compaction of stitches, and it occurred to me as I hung it that she must have finished it one day in the middle of the crossing, somewhere in the wilderness of her own grief and illness, and just kept on stitching. From her daughter’s account:

Tom was sick with fever the first day of the crossing, no chance for a doctor. He was only sick a day or two when he died. He had to be buried right away, as the train of wagons was going right on. He was two years old, and we were glad to get a trunk to bury him in. A friend gave a trunk. My aunt, the following year, when her baby died, carried it for a long time in her arms without letting anyone know for fear they would bury the baby before coming to a station.

These women in my family would seem to have been pragmatic and in their deepest instincts clinically radical, given to breaking clean with everyone and everything they knew. They could shoot and they could handle stock and when their children outgrew their shoes they could learn from the Indians how to make moccasins. “An old lady in our wagon train taught my sister to make blood pudding,” Narcissa Cornwall recalled. “After killing a deer or steer you cut its throat and catch the blood. You add suet to this and a little salt, and meal or flour if you have it, and bake it. If you haven’t anything else to eat, it’s pretty good.” They tended to accommodate any means in pursuit of an uncertain end. They tended to avoid dwelling on just what that end might imply. When they could not think what else to do they moved another thousand miles, set out another garden: beans and squash and sweet pea

from seeds carried from the last place. The past could be jettisoned, children buried and parents left behind, but seeds got carried. They were women, these women in my family, without much time for second thoughts, without much inclination toward equivocation, and later, when there was time or inclination, there developed a tendency, which I came to see as endemic, toward slight and major derangements, apparently eccentric pronouncements, opaque bewilderment and moves to places not quite on the schedule.

Mother viewed character as being the mainspring of life, and, therefore, as regulating our lives here and indicating our destiny in the life to come. She had fixed and settled principles, aims and motives in life. Her general health was excellent and in middle life she appeared almost incapable of fatigue. Winter and summer, at all seasons and every day, except Sunday, her life was one ceaseless round of activity. The care of her family, to provide for hired help, to entertain visitors, and to entertain preachers and others during meetings which were frequent.

That was the view of Nancy Hardin Cornwall taken by her son Joseph, who was thirteen years old during the crossing. Nancy Hardin Cornwall's daughter Laura, two years old during the crossing, took a not dissimilar view: "Being a Daughter of the American Revolution, she was naturally a brave woman, never seeming afraid of Indians or shrinking from hardships."

A photograph:

A woman standing on a rock in the Sierra Nevada in perhaps 1905.

Actually it is not just a rock but a granite promontory: an igneous outcropping. I use words like "igneous" and "outcropping" because my grandfather, one of whose mining camps can be seen in the background of this photograph, taught me to use them. He also taught me to distinguish gold-bearing ores from the glittering but worthless serpentine I preferred as a child, an education to no point, since by that time gold was no more worth mining than serpentine and the distinction academic, or possibly wishful.

The photograph. The promontory. The camp in the background.

And the woman: Edna Magee Jerrett. She is Nancy Hardin Cornwall's great-granddaughter; she will in time be my grandmother. She is Black Irish, English, Welsh, possibly (this is uncertain) a fraction Jewish through her grandfather William Geiger, who liked to claim as an ancestor a German rabbi but was himself a Presbyterian missionary in the Sandwich Islands and along the Pacific coast; possibly (this is still more uncertain) a lesser fraction Indian, from some frontier somewhere, or maybe, because her skin darkens in the sun as she was told not to let it, she just likes to say that. She grew up in a house on the Oregon coast filled with the educational curiosities of the place and period: strings of shells and seeds from Tahiti, carved emu eggs, Satsuma vases, spears from the South Pacific, an alabaster miniature of the Taj Mahal and the baskets her mother was given by the local Indians. She is quite beautiful. She is also quite indulged, clearly given, although she knows enough about mountains to shake out her boots for snakes every morning, to more amenities than could have been offered in this mining camp in the Sierra Nevada at the time in question. In the photograph she is wearing, for example, a long suede skirt and jacket made for her by the most expensive tailor in San Francisco. "You couldn't pay for her *hats*," her father, a ship

captain, had told her suitors by way of discouragement, and perhaps they had all been discouraged but my grandfather, an innocent from the Georgetown Divide who read books.

It was an extravagance of spirit that would persist through her life. Herself a child, she knew what children wanted. When I was six and had the mumps she brought me, as solace, not a coloring book, not ice cream, not bubble bath, but an ounce of expensive perfume Elizabeth Arden "On Dit," in a crystal bottle sealed with gold thread. When I was eleven and declined to go any longer to church she gave me, as inducement, not the fear of God but a hat, not any hat, not a child's well-mannered cloche or beret, but a *hat*, gossamer Italian straw and French silk cornflowers and a heavy satin label that read "Lilly Dache." She made champagne punch for the grandchildren left to sit with her on New Year's Eve. During World War II she volunteered to help salvage the Central Valley tomato crop by working the line at the Del Monte cannery in Sacramento, took one look at the moving conveyer belt, got one of those sick headaches her great-grandmother brought west with the seeds, and spent that first and only day on the line with tears running down her face. As atonement, she spent the rest of the war knitting socks for the Red Cross to send to the front. The yarn she bought to knit these socks was cashmere, in regulation colors. She had vicuña coats, hand-milled soap, and not much money. A child could make her cry, and I am ashamed to say that I sometimes did.

She was bewildered by many of the events in her adult life. One of her seafaring brothers became unstable when his ship hit a mine crossing the Atlantic; the son of another committed suicide. She witnessed the abrupt slide into madness of her only sister. Raised to believe that her life would be, as her great-grandmother's was said to have been, one ceaseless round of fixed and settled principles, aims, motives, and activity, she could sometimes think of nothing to do but walk downtown, check out the Bon Marché for clothes she could not afford, buy a cracked crab for dinner and take a taxi home. She died when I was twenty-three and I have for her a petit-point evening bag, two watercolors she painted as a young girl in an Episcopal convent school (the watermelon still life, the mission she had never seen at San Juan Capistrano), twelve butter knives she had made at Shreve's in San Francisco, and fifty shares of Transamerica stock. I was instructed by her will to sell the stock for something I wanted and could not afford. "What will she have to look forward to," my mother scolded my grandmother on the occasions of the ounce of "On Dit," the Lilly Dache hat, the black scarf embroidered with jet to assuage the pain of dancing school. In the generational theater my mother, despite what I came to recognize as a recklessness quite outside my grandmother's range, had been assigned the role described in the stage directions as sensible. "She'll find something," my grandmother always said, a reassuring conclusion if not one entirely supported by her own experience.

Another photograph, another grandmother: Ethel Reese Didion, who I never knew. She caught fever during the waning days of the 1918 influenza epidemic and died, leaving her husband and two small boys, one of them my father, on the morning of the false armistice. Many times my father told me that she died thinking the war was over. He told me this each time as if it were a matter of considerable importance, and perhaps it was, since on reflection that is all he ever told me about what she thought on any subject. My great-aunt Nell, her younger sister, would say only that my grandmother had been "nervous," and "different." Different from what, I used to ask. Aunt Nell would light another cigarette, consign

immediately to a heavy quartz ashtray, and slide her big rings up and down her thin finger. Ethel was nervous, she would finally repeat. You could never tease Ethel. Ethel was, well, different.

In this photograph, taken in about 1904, Ethel is at a Grange picnic in Florin, at that time a farm settlement south of Sacramento. She has not yet married the man, my grandfather, whose startling taciturnity would remain so inexplicable to her family, the man to whom she sometimes referred as "Grandfather Didion" but never addressed directly, from the time she was a small child until the day he died in 1953, by any form more familiar than "Mr. Didion." She is still Ethel Reese in this picture and she is wearing a white shirtwaist and a straw hat. Her brothers and cousins, ranchers' sons with a bent for good times and a gift for losing things without rancor, laugh at something outside the camera's range. Aunt Nell, the smallest, darts among their legs. My grandmother smiles tentatively. Her eyes are shut against the sun or against the camera. I was said to have her eyes, "Reese eyes," eyes that reddened and watered at the first premonition of sun or primroses or raised voices, and I was also said to have some of her "difference," her way of being less than easy at that moment when the dancing starts, but there would be no way of knowing any of that from this picture of Ethel Reese at the Florin Grange picnic in about 1904. This is the memory of her aunt, Catherine Reese, a child during the Reese family's 1852 crossing, of the last stage and aftermath of the journey during which her mother made the quilt with the blinding compaction of stitches:

Came by Carson City climbing mountains all the time, to Lake Tahoe and on down. Lived in the mountains as Father was sick with chills and fever. Had to give up our stock driver and Mother looked after the stock. Found two or three families of old country folk and lived with them until we got located in a sheep herder's house and lived the winter with him until Father got a house built on the hill ranch near Florin, \$2 an acre government land. Father paid cash for 360 acres as he had sold the team and had some money. Went to raising grain and stock, had twelve cows and made and sold butter and eggs and chickens, once in a while a calf. Drove to Sacramento once a week to sell the stuff. Father and Dave did the churning, Mother and I did the milking. I walked six miles to school, to where the graveyard is now on Stockton Boulevard.

That first Reese ranch in Florin, enlarged after a few years from 360 to 640 acres, was in my adult life still owned by my family, or, more precisely, by a corporation called the Elizabeth Reese Estate Company, the shareholders in which were all members of my family. Occasionally, late at night, my father and brother and I would talk about buying out the interests of our cousins in what we still called "the hill ranch" (there was no actual "hill," but there was on the original acreage a rise of perhaps a foot), a move that would have pleased them, since most of them wanted to sell it. I was never able to ascertain whether my father's interest in holding this particular ranch was in any way sentimental; he spoke of it only as cold property in the short term but a potentially hot one in the long. My mother had no interest in keeping the hill ranch, or in fact any California land: California, she said, was too regulated, too taxed, too expensive. She spoke enthusiastically, on the other hand, about moving to the Australian outback.

"Eduene," my father would say, a remonstrance.

"I would," she would insist, reckless.

“Just leave California? Give it all up?”

“In a *minute*” she would say, the pure strain talking, Elizabeth Scott’s great-great-great-great-granddaughter. “Just *forget* it.”

“ONE hundred years ago, our great-great-grandparents were pushing America’s frontier westward, to California.” So began the speech I wrote to deliver at my eighth-grade graduation from the Arden School, outside Sacramento. The subject was “Our California Heritage.” Developing a theme encouraged by my mother and grandfather, I continued, made rather more confident than I should have been by the fact that I was wearing a new dress of pale green organdy, and my mother’s crystal necklace:

They who came to California were not the self-satisfied, happy and content people, but the adventurous, the restless, and the daring. They were different even from those who settled in other western states. They didn’t come west for homes and security, but for adventure and money. They pushed in over the mountains and founded the biggest cities in the west. Up in the Mother Lode they mined gold by day and danced by night. San Francisco’s population multiplied almost twenty times, until 1906, when it burned to the ground, and was built up again nearly as quickly as it had burned. We had an irrigation problem, so we built the greatest dams the world has known. Now both desert and valley are producing food in enormous quantities. California has accomplished much in the past years. It would be easy for us to sit back and enjoy the results of the past. But we can’t do this. We can’t stop and become satisfied and content. We must live up to our heritage, go on to better and greater things for California.

That was June 1948.

The pale green of the organdy dress was a color that existed in the local landscape only for the few spring days when the rice first showed.

The crystal necklace was considered by my mother an effective way to counter the Valley heat.

Such was the bunkering effect of the local dreamtime that it would be some years before I recognized that certain aspects of “Our California Heritage” did not add up, starting with but by no means limited to the fact that I had delivered it to an audience of children and parents who had for the most part arrived in California during the 1930s, refugees from the Dust Bowl. It was after this realization that I began trying to find the “point” of California, to locate some message in its history. I picked up a book of revisionist studies on the subject but abandoned it on discovering that I was myself quoted, twice. You will have perhaps realized by now (a good deal earlier than I myself realized) that this book represents an exploration into my own confusions about the place and the way in which I grew up, my confusions as much about America as about California, misapprehensions and misunderstandings so much a part of who I became that I can still to this day confront them only obliquely.

A GOOD deal about California does not, on its own preferred terms, add up. The Sacramento River, the main source of surface water in a state where distrust of centralized governmental authority has historically passed for an ethic, has its headwaters in the far northern ranges of Siskiyou County. It picks up the waters of the McCloud and the Pit River above Redding, of the Feather and the Yuba and the Bear below Knight's Landing, of the American at Sacramento, of the San Joaquin below Steamboat Slough; and empties through San Francisco Bay into the Pacific, draining the deep snowpacks of the southern Cascades and the northern Sierra Nevada. "The river here is about 400 yards wide," one of my great-great-grandfathers, William Kilgore, whose daughter Myra married into the Reese family, wrote in the journal of his arrival in Sacramento in August of 1850. "The tide raises the water about 15 ft. and steamboats and vessels are here daily. From this place to San Francisco is about 150 miles by water. All of this distance the river has low banks and is subject to inundation for several miles back." That the land to which he intended eventually to bring his wife and two children was "subject to inundation for several miles back" seems not to have presented itself as an argument against immediate settlement. "This is one of the trying mornings for me, as I now have to leave my family, or back out," he had written in his journal four months before. "Suffice it to say, we started." Yet this river that had been from the beginning his destination was one regularly and predictably given, during all but the driest of those years before its flow was controlled or rearranged, to turning its valley into a shallow freshwater sea a hundred miles long and as wide as the distance between the coast ranges and the foothills of the Sierra Nevada: a pattern of flooding, the Army Corps of Engineers declared in 1927, more intense and intractable than that on any other American river system including the Mississippi.

This annual reappearance of a marsh that did not drain to the sea until late spring or summer was referred to locally not as flooding but as "the high water," a seasonal fact of life no more than an inconvenient but minor cost of the rich bottom land it created, and houses were routinely built with raised floors to accommodate it. Many Sacramento houses during my childhood had on their walls one or another lithograph showing the familiar downtown grid with streets of water, through which citizens could be seen going about their business by raft or rowboat. Some of these lithographs pictured the high water of 1850, after which a three-foot earthen levee between the river and the settlement was built. Others showed the high water of 1852, during which that first levee was washed out. Still others showed the high water of 1853 or 1860 or 1861 or 1862, nothing much changing except the increasing number of structures visible on the grid. "If you will take, on a map of California, Stockton, Sacramento, and San Francisco as guiding points, you will see that a large part of the land lying between these cities is marked 'swamp and overflowed,'" Charles Nordhoff, the grandfather of the co-author of *Mutiny on the Bounty*, wrote in his 1874 *Northern California, Oregon and the Sandwich Islands*:

Until within five or six years these lands attracted but little attention. It was known that they were extremely fertile, but it was thought that the cost and uncertainty of

reclaiming them were too great to warrant the enterprise. Of late, however, they have been rapidly bought up by capitalists, and their sagacity has been justified by the results on those tracts which have been reclaimed. These Tule lands ... are simply deposits of muck, a mixture of the wash or sediment brought down by the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers with the decayed vegetable matter resulting from an immense growth of various grasses, and of the reed called the "tule," which often grows ten feet high in a season, and decays every year.... The swamp and overflowed lands were given by Congress to the State, and the State has, in its turn, virtually given them to private persons. It has sold them for one dollar per acre, of which twenty percent was paid down, or twenty cents per acre; and this money, less some small charges for recording the transfer and for inspecting the reclamation, is returned by the State to the purchaser if he, within three years after the purchase, reclaims his land. That is to say, the State gives away the land on condition that it shall be reclaimed and brought into cultivation.

The creation of the entirely artificial environment that is now the Sacramento Valley was not achieved at one stroke, nor is it complete to this day. Bulletins on when and where the rivers would crest, on the conditions of levees and the addresses of evacuation centers remained into my adult life the spring commonplaces of Sacramento life, as did rumors that one or another levee had been (or was being, or would be) covertly dynamited by one or another agency looking to save one or another downstream community. During years when repeated storms rolling in from the Pacific coincide with an early melting of the Sierra snowpack, levees still break, sections of interstate highways get destabilized by the rising water table, and the big dams go to crisis mode, trying to save themselves by releasing water as they get it, unchecked, no control, the runoff from the pack running free to the sea.

Reclamation of the tule lands has been a war, for those waging it, in which no armaments could be too costly, no strategy too quixotic. By 1979, when the State of California published William L. Kahrl's *The California Water Atlas*, there were 980 miles of levee, 438 miles of canal. There were fifty miles of collecting canals and seepage ditches. There were three drainage pumping plants, five low-water check dams, thirty-one bridges, ninety-one gauging stations, and eight automatic shortwave water-stage transmitters. There were seven weir openings onto seven bypasses covering 101,000 acres. There were not only the big headwater dams, Shasta on the Sacramento and Folsom on the American and Oroville on the Feather, but all their predecessors and collateral dams, their after-bays and forebays and diversion canals. Thermalito and Lake Almanor and Frenchman Lake and Little Grass Valley on the Feather, New Bullard's Bar and Englebright and Jackson Meadows and Lake Spaulding on the Yuba, Camp Far West and Rollins and Lower Bear on the Bear, Nimbus and Slab Creek and L. Anderson on the American, Box Canyon and Keswick on the Sacramento. The cost of controlling or rearranging the Sacramento, which is to say the "reclamation" of the Sacramento Valley, was largely borne, like the cost of controlling or rearranging many other inconvenient features of California life, by the federal government.

This extreme reliance of California on federal money, so seemingly at odds with the emphasis on unfettered individualism that constitutes the local core belief, was a pattern set early on, and derived in part from the very individualism it would seem to belie. ("They didn't come west for homes and security, but for adventure and money," as "Our California

Heritage” put it.) Charles Nordhoff complained of California in 1874 that “a speculative spirit invades even the farm-house,” too often tempting its citizens “to go from one avocation to another, to do many things superficially, and to look for sudden fortunes by the chances of a shrewd venture, rather than be content to live by patient and continued labor.” There had been from the beginning virtually no notion of “pushing America’s frontier westward,” much to the eighth-grade conception of it notwithstanding: the American traders and trappers who began settling in California as early as 1826 were leaving their own country for a remote Mexican province, Alta California. Many became naturalized Mexican citizens. Many married into Mexican and Spanish families. A fair number received grants of land from the Mexican authorities. As late as 1846, American emigrants were starting west with the idea of reaching territory at least provisionally Mexican, only to find on their arrival that the Bear Flag Revolt and the Mexican War had placed Alta California under American military authority. There would remain—along with the other American spoil of that conquest, the territory that eventually became Nevada and Utah and New Mexico and Arizona and part of Colorado—until California was admitted to the union as a state in 1850.

Predicated as it was on this general notion of cutting loose and striking it rich, the California settlement had tended to attract drifters of loosely entrepreneurial inclination, the hunter-gatherers of the frontier rather than its cultivators, and to reward most fully those who perceived most quickly that the richest claim of all lay not in the minefields but in the West. It was a quartet of Sacramento shopkeepers, Charles Crocker and Leland Stanford and Collis P. Huntington and Mark Hopkins, who built the railroad that linked California with the world markets and opened the state to extensive settlement, but it was the citizens of the rest of the country who paid for it, through a federal cash subsidy (sixteen thousand dollars a mile in the valley and forty-eight thousand dollars a mile in the “mountains,” which were contractually defined as beginning six miles east of Sacramento) plus a federal land grant, ten or twenty checkerboarded square-mile sections, for each mile of track laid.

Nor did the role of the government stop with the construction of the railroad: the citizens of the rest of the country would also, in time, subsidize the crops the railroad carried, make possible the irrigation of millions of acres of essentially arid land, underwrite the rhythms of planting and not planting, and create, finally, a vast agricultural mechanism in a kind of market vacuum, quite remote from the normal necessity for measuring supply against demand and cost against return. As recently as 1993, eighty-two thousand acres in California were still planted in alfalfa, a low-value crop requiring more water than was then used in the households of all thirty million Californians. Almost a million and a half acres were planted in cotton, the state’s second largest consumer of water, a crop subsidized directly by the federal government. Four hundred thousand acres were planted in rice, the cultivation of which involves submerging the fields under six inches of water from mid-April until the August harvest, months during which, in California, no rain falls. The 1.6 million acre feet of water this required (an acre foot is roughly 326,000 gallons) was made available, even in drought years, for what amounted to a nominal subsidized price by the California State Water Project and the Central Valley Project, an agency of the federal government, which, through the commodity-support program of the Department of Agriculture, also subsidized the crop itself. Ninety percent of this California rice was glutinous medium-grain Japonica, a type not

popular in the United States but favored in both Japan and Korea, each of which banned the import of California rice. These are the kinds of contradictions on which Californians have tended to founder when they try to think about the place they come from.

JOSIAH ROYCE, who was from 1885 until his death in 1916 a central figure in what later became known as the “golden period” of the Harvard philosophy department, was born in Grass Valley, not far from Sacramento, grew up there and in San Francisco, and in some sense spent the rest of his life trying to make coherent the discontinuities implicit in this inheritance. “My native town was a mining town in the Sierra Nevada—a place five or six years older than myself,” he said at a dinner given in his honor at the Walton Hotel in Philadelphia in 1915.

My earliest recollections include a very frequent wonder as to what my elders meant when they said that this was a new community. I frequently looked at the vestiges left by the former diggings of miners, saw that many pine logs were rotten, and that a miner’s grave was to be found in a lonely place not far from my own house. Plainly men had lived and died thereabouts. I dimly reflected that this sort of life had apparently been going on ever since men dwelt thereabouts. The logs and the grave looked old. The sunsets were beautiful. The wide prospects when one looked across the Sacramento Valley were impressive, and had long interested the people of whose love for my country I heard so much. What was there then in this place that ought to be called new, or for that matter crude? I wondered, and gradually came to feel that part of my life’s business was to find out what all this wonder meant.

Here we come close to a peculiar California confusion: what Royce had actually made it his “life’s business” to do, his work, did not resolve “what all this wonder meant.” Instead, Royce invented an idealized California, an ethical system in which “loyalty” was the basic virtue, the moral law essential to the creation of “community,” which was in turn man’s only salvation and by extension the redeeming essence of the California settlement. Yet the California community most deeply recalled by the author of this system was what he acknowledged to have been “a community of irresponsible strangers” (or, in another reference, “a blind and stupid and homeless generation of selfish wanderers”), a community not of the “loyal” but of “men who have left homes and families, who have fled from before the word of the Lord, and have sought safety from their old vexatious duties in a golden paradise.”

Such calls to dwell upon the place and its meaning (and, if the meaning proved intractable, to reinvent the place) had been general in California since the first American settlement, the very remoteness of which was sufficiently extreme to raise questions about why one was there, why one had come there, what the voyage would ultimately mean. The overland crossing itself had an aspect of quest: “One was going on a pilgrimage whose every suggestion was of the familiar sacred stories,” Royce wrote. “One sought a romantic and far-off golden land of promise, and one was in the wilderness of this world, often guided only by signs from heaven.... The clear blue was almost perpetually overhead; the pure mountain winds were about one; and again, even in the hot and parched deserts, a mysterious power provided the

few precious springs and streams of water.”

Each arriving traveler had been, by definition, reborn in the wilderness, a new creature in no way the same as the man or woman or even child who had left Independence or Sacramento or Joseph however many months before: the very decision to set forth on the journey had been a kind of death, involving the total abandonment of all previous life, mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters who would never again be seen, all sentiment banished, the most elementary comforts necessarily relinquished. “I had for months anticipated this hour, yet not till it came, did I realize the blank dreariness of seeing night come on without house or home to shelter us and our baby-girl,” Josiah Royces mother, Sarah, wrote of the day in 1842 on which she set off for Sacramento with her husband and first child.

The blank dreariness, Sarah Royce wrote.

Without house or home, Sarah Royce wrote.

Suffice it to say, we started, my great-great-grandfather William Kilgore wrote.

This moment of leaving, the death that must precede the rebirth, is a fixed element of the crossing story. Such stories are artlessly told. There survives in their repetition a problematic elision or inflation, a narrative flaw, a problem with point of view: the actual observer, the camera eye, is often hard to locate. This was Josephus Adamson Cornwall’s goodbye to his mother, as related by a son who seems to have heard the story from his mother, Nancy Hardin Cornwall, she of the fixed and settled principles, aims, and motives in life, who had not herself been present: “Just ready to go, he entered his mother’s parlor. She went out with him to his horse to say the last words and to see him depart. She told him that she would never again see him in this world, gave him her blessing, and commended him to God. He then mounted his horse and rode away, while she followed him with a last look, until he vanished from sight.”

Who witnessed this moment of departure? Was the camera on Josephus Cornwall’s mother following her son with the last look? Or on the son himself, glancing back as he vanished from sight? The gravity of the decisive break demands narrative. Conflicting details must be resolved, reworked into a plausible whole. Aging memories will be recorded as gospel. Children recount as the given of their personal and cultural history what neither they nor even their parents could possibly have known, for example the “providential interposition” that was said to have saved Josephus Cornwall’s life when he was an infant in Georgia: “It was a peculiarity of that section of the state that mad dogs were very common. One day when his parents were busy he was left in the house alone in his cradle. A mad dog entered the room, walked around it and went away, but never molested him.” What witness saw the mad dog enter the room? Did the witness take action, or merely observe and report, trusting in the “providential interposition” to save the baby?

Yet it was through generations of just such apparently omniscient narrators that the crossing stories became elevated to a kind of single master odyssey, its stations of veneration fixed. There were the Platte, the Sandy, the Big and Little Sandys. There was the Green River, Fort Hall, Independence Rock, The Sweetwater. There were the Humboldt, the Humboldt Sink, the Hastings cut-off. The names were so deeply embedded in the stories I heard as a child that when I happened at age twenty to see the Green River, through the windows of a train crossing Wyoming, I was astonished by this apparent evidence that it actually existed, a fact on the ground, there to be seen—entirely unearned—by anyone passing by. Just as the

were stations of veneration, so there were objects of veneration, relics of those who had made the redeeming journey. "The old potato masher which the Cornwall family brought across the plains in 1846" was not the only family totem given by my grandmother's cousin to the Pacific University Museum in 1957. "After consulting with certain of the heirs," Olive Huston wrote, the cousins had also determined "that it will be advisable to turn over to the Museum at that time the small desk sent Grandfather in 1840 by William Johnson from Hawaii, and also certain mementoes of Grandmother Geiger," specifically "the blouse which formed part of her wedding costume" and "the old shawl or shoulder wrap she wore in her later years." So Saxon Brown, the heroine of Jack London's curious "California" novel *The Valley of the Moon*, could hold in her hands her mother's red satin corset ("the pioneer finery of a frontier woman who had crossed the plains") and see pass before her, "from East to West, across a continent, the great hegira of the land-hungry Anglo-Saxon. It was part and fiber of her. She had been nursed on its traditions and its facts from the lips of those who had taken part."

As repeated, this was an odyssey the most important aspect of which was that it offered moral or spiritual "tests," or challenges, with fatal consequences for failure. Josiah Royce and his parents, traveling with only their two-year-old daughter, three other emigrants, and a manuscript list of landmarks that stopped at the Humboldt Sink, found themselves lost on the Carson desert, "confused, almost stupefied," "dazed," "half-senseless," suffering for a period "the same fatal horror of desolation and death that had assailed the Donner Party in the Truckee pass." Children who died of cholera got buried on the trail. Women who believed they could keep some token of their mother's house (the rosewood chest, the flat silver) learned to jettison memory and keep moving. Sentiment, like grief and dissent, cost time. Hesitation, a moment spent looking back, and the grail was forfeited. Independence Rock, west of Fort Laramie on the Sweetwater River, was so named because the traveler who had not reached that point by the Fourth of July, Independence Day, would not reach the Sierra Nevada before snow closed the passes.

The diaries of emigrants refer to the Sierra Nevada as "the most dreaded moment," "the Great Bugaboo," the source of "sleepless nights," "disturbed dreams." *Without house or home* Sarah Royce and her husband and child abandoned their wagon and made it through the Sierra, with the help of a United States Army relief party, only ten days before the passes closed. Even while the passes remained open, there would be snow. There would be the repeated need to ford and again ford the Truckee or the Carson. There would be the repeated need to unload and reload the wagons. There would be recent graves, wrecked wagons, and at Donner Lake, after the winter of 1846–47, human as well as animal bones, and the trees notched to show the depth of the fatal winters snowpack. This is the entry in William Kilgore's diary for August 1, 1852:

Ice and frost this morning. Four miles to Red Lake. This is ... the head of Salmon Trout, or Carson River. It is a small lake and is within one mi. of the summit of the Sierra Nevada. From this lake to the summit the ascent is very great, some places being almost perpendicular.... Four mi. from the summit we cross a small creek, a tributary of the Sacramento.... At this creek we stop to noon. Here we help inter a young man who died last night of bilious fever. He was from Michigan. His name was Joseph Ricker. His parents reside in the state of Maine. Here we ascend another ridge

of this mt. It is higher than the one we have just passed, being 9,339 ft. above the sea. From the foot to the summit it is five miles, and in ascending and descending we travel over four miles of snow, and it from two to 20 ft. deep.... 21 miles today.

To read these crossing accounts and diaries is to be struck by the regularity with which certain apprehension of darkness enters the quest, a shadow of moral ambiguity that becomes steadily more pervasive until that moment when the traveler realizes that the worst of the Sierra is behind him. "The Summit is crossed!" one such diary reads. "We are in California. Far away in the haze the dim outlines of the Sacramento Valley are discernible! We are on the down grade now and our famished animals may pull us through. We are in the midst of huge pines, so large as to challenge belief. Hutton is dead. Others are worse. I am better." By this point, in every such journey, there would have been the accidents, the broken bones, the infected and even the amputated hands and feet. There would have been the fevers. Sara Royce remembered staying awake all night after a man in her party died of cholera, and hearing the wind whip his winding sheet like "some vindictive creature struggling restlessly in bonds." There would have been the hurried burials, in graves often unmarked and sometimes deliberately obliterated. "Before leaving the Humboldt River there was one death, Miss Mary Campbell," Nancy Hardin Cornwall's son Joseph recalled. "She was buried right off our road and the whole train of wagons was driven over her grave to conceal it from the Indians. Miss Campbell died of mountain fever, and Mother by waiting on her caught the fever and for a long time she lingered, apparently between life and death, but at last recovered. Miss Campbell was an orphan, her mother having died at Green River."

There would have been, darkest of all, the betrayals, the suggestions that the crossing might not after all be a noble odyssey, might instead be a mean scrambling for survival, a blind flight on the part of Josiah Royce's "blind and stupid and homeless generation of selfish wanderers." Not all emigrants, to take just one example, cared for all orphans. It was on the Little Sandy that an emigrant named Bernard J. Reid, who had put down two hundred dollars to secure a place on an 1849 crossing, saw first "an emigrant wagon apparently abandoned by its owners" and then "a rude head-board indicating a new grave," which turned out to be that of the Reverend Robert Gilmore and his wife Mary, who had died the same day of cholera. This account comes to us from Reid's diary, which was found by his family in the 1950s, entrusted to Mary McDougall Gordon for editing, and published in 1983 by the Stanford University Press as *Overland to California with the Pioneer Line*. On turning from the grave to the apparently abandoned wagon, Reid tells us, he was "surprised to see a neatly dressed girl of about 17, sitting on the wagon tongue, her feet resting on the grass, and her eyes apparently directed at vacancy."

She seemed like one dazed or in a dream and did not seem to notice me till I spoke to her. I then learned from her in reply to my questions that she was Miss Gilmore, whose parents had died two days before; that her brother, younger than herself, was sick in the wagon, probably with cholera; that their oxen were lost or stolen by the Indians; and that the train they had been traveling with, after waiting for three days on account of the sickness and death of her parents, had gone on that morning, fearful, if they delayed longer, of being caught by winter in the Sierra Nevada mountains.... The people of her train had told her that probably her oxen would yet be found, or at

any rate some other train coming along with oxen to spare would take her and her brother and their wagon along.

“Who could tell the deep sense of bereavement, distress and desolation that weighed on that poor girl’s heart, there in the wilderness with no telling what fate was in store for her and her sick brother?” Reid asks his readers and surely also himself. Such memories might have seemed difficult to reconcile with the conviction that one had successfully met the tests or challenges required to enter the new life. The redemptive power of the crossing was nonetheless, the fixed idea of the California settlement, and one that raised a further question: for what exactly, and at what cost, had one been redeemed? When you jettison others so as not to be “caught by winter in the Sierra Nevada mountains,” do you deserve not to be caught? When you survive at the cost of Miss Gilmore and her brother, do you survive at all?

I WAS born in Sacramento, and lived in California most of my life. I learned to swim in the Sacramento and the American, before the dams. I learned to drive on the levees up and downriver from Sacramento. Yet California has remained in some way impenetrable to me, a wearying enigma, as it has to many of us who are from there. We worry it, correct and revise it, try and fail to define our relationship to it and its relationship to the rest of the country. We make declamatory breaks with it, as Josiah Royce did when he left Berkeley for Harvard. “There is no philosophy in California—from Siskiyou to Ft. Yuma, and from the Golden Gate to the summit of the Sierras,” he had written to William James, who eventually responded to this *cri de coeur* with the offer from Harvard. We make equally declamatory returns, as Frank Norris did, determined before his thirtieth birthday “to do some great work with the West and California as a background, and which will be at the same time thoroughly American. The intention, Norris wrote to William Dean Howells, who had reviewed *McTeague* favorably, was “to write three novels around the one subject of *Wheat*. First, a story of California (the producer), second, a story of Chicago (the distributor), third, a story of Europe (the consumer) and in each to keep the idea of this huge Niagara of wheat rolling from West to East. I think a big Epic trilogy could be made out of such a subject, that at the same time would be modern and thoroughly American. The idea is so big that it frightens me at times but I have about made up my mind to have a try at it.”

Frank Norris’s experience with his subject appears to have been exclusively literary. He was raised in Chicago and then San Francisco, where he met the young woman he would eventually marry at a debutante dance. He spent a year in Paris, studying art and writing medieval romance, *Yvernelle, A Tale of Feudal France*, which his mother arranged to have published. He spent four years at Berkeley without taking the courses necessary for a degree, then a year as a non-degree student at Harvard. He covered the prelude to the Boer War for *Collier’s* and *The San Francisco Chronicle*, the Santiago campaign in Cuba for *McClure’s*. At the time he was seized by the trilogy-of-wheat notion, he was living in New York, at 6 Washington Square South.

The Octopus, published in 1901 and based on what was at the time quite recent history of the San Joaquin Valley, was, in the best sense, worked up: through well-situated friends Ernest Peixotto and his wife (the Peixottos were a prominent San Francisco Jewish family) and Ernest Peixotto’s older sister Jessica, an economist, was one of the first women on the faculty of the University of California), Norris managed an introduction to a couple who ran five thousand acres of wheat in San Benito County, and arranged to spend the summer of 1899 on their ranch near Hollister. San Benito County presented a gentler, more coastal landscape than the San Joaquin, which was where Norris intended to set his novel (“San Juan de Guadalajara,” the mission in *The Octopus*, was a borrow from Mission San Juan Bautista near Hollister, there being no missions in the San Joaquin), but it was nonetheless a setting in which an attentive reporter could absorb the mechanics of a big wheat operation.

The Octopus opens on a day in “the last half of September, the very end of the dry season

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