

hansom cab? Joan Didion makes a kind of seamless prose fiction out of this very fractured and personal way of looking at things.

In the end, the manner of telling, the indefinable ear for the tags and ribbons of a large arc of American life are blazing signatures of Joan Didion's genius for fiction, for prose. The method is the signature of a unique sensibility, but the heart of the matter lies in ideas, knowledge of human beings, and just knowledge itself acquired by a deep curiosity and intelligence.

JOAN DIDION

Medalist, writer, on sneakers, mudpies, and critical mass

A lot of us here do the same thing I do, which is make things. This impulse to make things is nearly universal: most all children have it. They make sand castles on the beach, they make mud patties in the yard, they make dams in the gutter, they take broken branches and make fences or fishing poles.

Eventually children realize, or are shown, that these things they have been making are essentially useless: the sand castles are uninhabitable, the mud patties inedible, the dam washes away, the fishing pole has no hook someone points out, and nobody wants the fence.

The instant of this realization—I remember it myself—is an instant of mortification, grave humiliation. It is the point at which most children stop making things and direct their energies toward finding a more conventionally useful occupation.

Some of us, for obscure reasons, don't do that. Maybe the instant of humiliation sufficiently enrages us to make us say to ourselves, *I'm going to show you!*

I did try to find a more conventionally useful occupation. I got out of Berkeley at age twenty-one and went to work for *Vogue*, which was a more real business than you might think. You see, I wasn't, when I started, writing for *Vogue*. I hadn't graduated to writing anything that actually appeared in the magazine. I was writing what used to be called merchandising copy, copy for stores to use when they set about trying to sell the merchandise fea-

tured in the magazine. We wrote little legends the stores were supposed to incorporate into their advertising and window displays. Every one of the legends began with the words: *Vogue Says*. Only one of these sticks in my mind. It was part of a selling kit for the January 1959 resort collections; there was a tie-in with a cruise line. The reason this one line sticks in my mind is that quite soon after I sent it out to the stores, it was rendered obsolete by real life. The line was *Vogue Says – Havana Cool Begins with Black*.

Vogue, of course, wasn't actually saying any of this. I was, still walking around in the sneakers left over from when the biggest fashion demand of my day was an eight o'clock seminar on *The Faerie Queen*. So there I was, suddenly and arbitrarily invested with the power to tell Nieman Marcus and I. Magnin how to move the merchandise.

What I got from this rather weird version of a conventionally useful occupation, was a secret and quite exhilarating sense of making up the world as I went along. And I think now it was this that gave me, as much as anything else did, the nerve to go back to making things, to start writing a novel. I'd wanted to write novels all my life. But once I got to Berkeley it was immediately impressed on me that all the novels necessary had already been written. That I could never hope to suspend a sentence the way Henry James could. That I could never dream of shattering a narrative the way Ford Maddox Ford had. That all the intercutting between scenes anybody could aspire ever to do had already been done in *Madame Bovary*.

Yet I still wanted to make things. I didn't have very many other talents. It was increasingly clear to me, every day I spent at *Vogue*, that I was faking it, that my sneakers were ultimately not going to cut it on Seventh Avenue. So I sat down one night and started a novel. I had no idea how to do something so sustained. So as the nights went on and I reached the limit of what I could do on one thread, I would just start another thread. I would paste these unrelated passages onto the wall of the apartment in the hope that I would look at them one night and they would all fall together and make a novel.

I didn't tell anybody what I was doing. I wasn't crazy. But one night a friend came over and he saw these typed pages taped on the wall and he asked what they were. I liked him, he knew a lot of things I didn't know, so I decided to tell him. "It's a novel," I said. "I'm writing a novel."

And he started to laugh. And I sat there in silence a while, watching him with some irritation, and finally I asked him what he found so amusing. What he said was this: "Just what this world needs, another novel."

I don't think I've ever started anything since when I haven't heard that laugh.

But all these years later I'm still doing it.

Obviously I keep doing it because I believe there is a point in doing it. I could talk here about the connection between language and politics, because I believe that there is one. I could talk here about the ways in which certain novels have provided a narrative for American life, because I believe that they have.

But that isn't the point of doing it.

Isn't why we make things.

However predictably those of us who make things complain about the isolation, the frustrations, most of us recognize that we have a kind of sick stalker's fixation on doing it. We don't dwell on this. If we are writers, we tend to minimize the possibility that the book *at hand* will ever be a book *in the hand*. We refer to it not as a book but as a "thing" (as in "I've been working on this thing" or "the thing I'm trying to do"), a recalcitrant presence in the household. We know that to finish the thing we must do exactly what we most fear doing: we must get into it, fix on it, go all the way with it, identify with it to that dangerously exposed point where the necessity for the thing's survival becomes inseparable from the necessity for one's own survival.

I remember talking to the sculptor Robert Graham when he was working—this was in 1988—on a project which involved a figure of, or monument to, Duke Ellington, meant to be placed at the northeast entrance to Central Park. What struck me was that he had begun the project the same way a writer would begin a project, by finding out all he could,

by immersing himself in the world of the subject. He had played Duke Ellington's music all day in the studio, played it until those themes and variations and voicings became part of his own working vocabulary. He had talked to Ellington's sister. He had talked to Ellington's son. He had been looking for what he called "visual gossip," by which he meant the detail he needed to start the real work. He learned for example that Duke Ellington always wore four-inch cuffs with heart-shaped cufflinks. So he got the names of Ellington's tailors, and found they were all dead. "Finally," I remember him saying, "I took the measurements and the gossip into Mariani, in Beverly Hills, and they made it. A perfect Duke Ellington suit." Then he studied it.

This interested me because it is just the way we all begin a piece of work: we assimilate the gossip. The first definition of the verb "to gossip" is, in the OED, "to give a name to," or to specify, which is central not only to Robert Graham's process but to the process of "making" any object, whether the object to be made is a poem or a novel or a piece of music or art. First the thing must be imagined, and the detail reach critical mass; the problems, and the connections that ultimately solve the problems, come later, proceed from the specific.

A whole lot was going on in the Graham studio the day we talked about this. One crew was making waxes, another was cutting them up for the digitizer that would transmit them to disk for cutting—precisely enlarged or reduced—on a Bridgeport lathe. Yet many possibilities remained open. He still didn't know exactly how the platform would work out. He still didn't know exactly how the figures would attach to the platform. The project, in other words, had reached that critical mass when everything that was happening referred to it, fed it, became part of it. For all those of us who make things, this is the good time, the time when the thing still belongs to us.

The novel I finished this year, which is called *The Last Thing He Wanted* and will be published next month, is my tenth book, fifth novel. I began each of the novels with the same intention: just to do it,



Joan Didion shows the medal to a young friend.

make something out of nothing and make the thing work, assimilate enough gossip to lay some cards on the table and make myself play them. My only "method" has been to write something down—a fragment of a scene, a snatch of dialogue, something, anything. At this stage I have no characters, I have no story, I have nothing except a certain amount of experience which has taught me that much of writing any novel will be a waiting game, a matter of trying against all odds to keep the thing from stalling, a tedious business of starting over from page one, trying to locate another layer, another thread to pull, one more card to turn over. Sometimes—in spite of all the tricks you know—the thing will still stall, run out, and all you can do then is flee, go do something else. I remember this happening again and again when I was working on *Democracy*. At one point, in lieu of confronting that recalcitrant novel even one more day, I went to El Salvador, and spent the better part of a year writing a long report on the American presence there. Each time I left *Democracy* I returned—after months, even a year—with more dread. Still, I had come to like certain of the characters, and couldn't quite bring myself to let them go. I liked the places in which the novel seemed to be taking place—it was set largely in Honolulu and Southeast Asia.

I especially liked doing the fall of Saigon, and drew up hour-by-hour chronologies of the final weeks, charts and maps and time lines. In the end not every reader noticed the fall of Saigon, since I did it offstage, but I knew it was there, and that was how I came to think of *Democracy*, as my novel about the fall of Saigon.

In the case of *The Last Thing He Wanted*, the first cards I laid down seemed to determine that this would be a novel of plot, a novel the texture of which would derive from the withholding and revealing of information.

The Last Thing He Wanted would be the title. That much I knew. One of the first notes I wrote was, "The day they took the deposition, he..." That was all there was. Then:

A backwater embassy under some kind of siege, there is someone (an American) from outside. A woman? Engaged in some kind of doubtful dealing?

I was getting closer to it.

X realized that she was making a delivery in however many elongated seconds there were between the time she opened the box and found it empty and the time it happened.

Well, of course I didn't know who "he" was, who "she" was, what the "delivery" was, why was she making it, why did she realize too late that she was making it? What was the box, where was she, why was it empty? What was it that happened here? Unless you are a writer you would not believe how much of this novel I had to write before I knew the answer to those questions, but I will tell you this: I finished the novel on January 23, 1996. It was December 23, 1995, before I discovered that there was no delivery, there was no box, that one last deal of the cards could throw up another meaning. . .

. . . To reach that day—not the day you finish but the day you deal the cards again and get it—the day you know that the thing is finally yours to make—there is the point of doing it.