DAVE EGGERS

TALKS WITH

JOAN DIDION

"I'M INVISIBLE SCARLET O'NEIL IN WASHINGTON. I MEAN, IT DOESN'T HAVE ANY CURRENCY. BEING JOAN DIDION MEANS NOTHING."

Unfortunate decisions California citizens have made:
Electing two movie-star governors
Building prisons to create jobs
Neglecting the public school system in favor of short-term gains
Committing a lot of sane people to mental institutions

This interview took place in San Francisco, in the fall of 2003, as part of a series of onstage interviews presented by City Arts & Lectures. The venue was the Herbst Theatre, which seats about nine hundred. Didion had done interviews at the Herbst before, and while watching her previous event, I'd learned that she seemed to prefer to chat than to be asked to expound. Ponderous, open-ended questions—"Why do you write, Ms. Didion?"—were not going to work. So on this night I tried to keep the mood buoyant and conversational, especially given that the subject matter of her then-latest book, Where I Was From, *was not sunny.*

That book, by the way, is no less brilliant than The White Album

and Slouching Towards Bethlehem, *the collections of her pieces—part journalism, part cultural critique, part memoir—that established her as a writer of uncommon acuity and a voice that spoke to and about a certain generation at a critical point. Like those early books,* Where I Was From *showcases her perfectly calibrated style, and like all of her recent work, including* Political Fictions, *it has lost nothing on her reputation-making books of the late '60s and '70s. As always, her prose is both precise and fluid, cruelly accurate while often revealing the vulnerabilites of its author.*

Didion has, of course, written great novels too, and has said that each time she starts writing a novel, she re-reads Joseph Conrad's Victory. *Though the style of that book is a bit more rococo than Didion's minimalist prose, it's evident why it would seem to inspire books like* The Last Thing He Wanted *and* A Book of Common Prayer. Victory *concerns intrigue among travelers in the islands of the Far East, a cast of misfits of whom most are wanderers, abandoners. They leave husbands, children, their countries, and they get involved in very tricky business. These are the characters that populate Didion's fiction, and her heroines are among the most complex, even opaque, in contemporary fiction.*

Because Didion's prose is so extraordinarily sharp, some expect that in person Didion would be a kind of ranconteur, a spewer of devastating bons mots. But she's far more personable than that. She is a person, actually, very much a person, even though her name now has about it the sound of legend. The Legend of Joan Didion—*that could be a western, or a book by James Fenimore Cooper. "The Ballad of Joan Didion"—maybe a song by Bob Dylan? It means so much, that name, Joan Didion, even if she denies it.*

—Dave Eggers (Fall 2003)

DAVE EGGERS: So we're going to just get started. I have the questions printed on blue cards.

JOAN DIDION: It's beautiful type, too. [*Laughs*]

DE: That means they're going to be good. [*Laughter*] So we met about six or seven years ago when I interviewed you for *Salon*.

JD: Yes. And I didn't even—I wasn't on the net at the time. And I did not know what *Salon* was. As a matter of a fact, I wanted to cancel the interview because I had so many things to do and I thought, What is this? Why am I doing this? [*Laughs*]

DE: Yeah, and there were many years after that when people were still wondering. [*Laughter*]

JD: That was 1996. It was only seven years ago.

DE: At the time, one of my favorite answers that you gave was when I asked what you missed most about California. Do you remember what you said?

JD: No.

DE: Driving. You talked about how you missed that uninterrupted line of thought that you had when you drove. And you've written about it, about L.A.

JD: My husband and I moved to New York in 1988, and to negotiate going to the grocery store meant you had to go out on the street and deal with a lot of *people,* you know? You had to maybe run into a neighbor—certainly run into somebody in the elevator, run into a doorman. It took you out of your whole train of thought. Whereas if you walked out of your driveway and got in your car and went to the store, not a soul was going to enter your mindstream. You could just continue kind of focusing on what you were doing.

DE: You still have a California driver's license.

JD: I do.

DE: With a New York address on it.

JD: Yes, it does. Mm-hm. [*Laughter*] You know how I got it?

DE: No. How would that work?

JD: Well, my mother was living in Monterey and I was visiting her.

I had to renew my license, so I went up to—I think it was Oceanside. And I said, "Uh, you know I'm not *actually* living in California right now; I'm living in New York. Can I put that address on?" She said, "Put wherever you want us to send it." [*Laughter*]

DE: And another thing, when we talked then, we talked about a book called *Holy Land,* written by D. J. Waldie, about Lakewood, California. And then shortly around that time you wrote about Lakewood yourself, and that would become the first piece—

JD: Part of *Where I Was From.* And in fact, when I wrote about Lakewood, it was 1993. It was a piece for the *New Yorker*—Tina Brown was then the editor and she was interested in this. When I said I wanted to do Lakewood, she was crazy for me to do Lakewood because there was this group of high-school boys called the Spur Posse who were all over shows like *Montel* at the time. They did this totally predictable and not very unusual thing for high-school boys: They kept a point system on girls they had slept with, right? And for this, this somehow gained them all this notoriety. But anyway, what interested me about Lakewood was that it was a defense-industry town, and the boys gave me a reason to go into a town where there was a Douglas plant that was clearly the only employer in town. And it was during the middle of the defense cutbacks, and so I thought that would be an interesting thing to do. And I met D. J. Waldie then, and he was doing this series of pieces—not *pieces,* they were pieces of a *novel,* it turned out—which he was publishing in little literary magazines. And he gave them to me and I was just *stunned*—I mean, they were so good.

DE: *Holy Land* is an incredible book. And the Lakewood section is one of the primary elements in *Where I Was From.*

JD: Well, what happened is, I finished that piece, and I realized that, even though it was eighteen thousand words long or whatever—I mean, it didn't run that long in the *New Yorker,* but that's how long I'd written it—that I hadn't *answered* the questions I had.

That it'd raised more questions about California than I'd answered. I hadn't even thought of it as about California when I started it; I thought of it as about the defense industry, right? The kind of withering of the defense industry in Southern California. But then it turned out to raise some kind of deeper questions about what California was about. So then I started doing some more reading and started playing around with the idea of doing—of trying to answer those other questions about what California was about. And finally—I didn't realize—it was only quite late, when I was writing this book, that I realized that was what Lakewood was about. The person who would explain what Lakewood was, was Henry George, who had written this before the Southern Pacific, when everybody in California was excited about the glories the railroad would bring. He wrote this piece—it was the first piece he ever wrote—for the *Overland Monthly* called "What the Railroad Will Bring Us." And Lakewood was really an answer to what the railroad had brought us. I mean, it was the answer to what the ideal... It's too complicated. [*Laughter*]

DE: Lakewood was like a Levittown. And it was supposed to be bigger than that, and it went up overnight and all the houses were identical.

JD: They all went on sale the same day. It was bigger than the original Levittown, actually. And it was designed around a regional shopping center. If you look at the *Thomas Guide* book—this is what got me excited about it—to this day, you see the shopping center in the middle of town. You see a public golf course, nine holes, over on the corner of the town. And then down below, you see the Douglas plant. This is a kind of really simple town. And the houses were all identical. I mean, I think there were something like eight basic models, but they were all pretty much alike. They came in various colors and you couldn't have two of the same color next door to each other.

DE: They had a choice of colors and models—

JD: Yeah, but you had to rotate them on a block. And they were really quite small. They were two- and three-bedrooms, but they were nine hundred and fifty to eleven hundred square feet, which is—I mean, I've lived in apartments which were eight hundred and fifty square feet, and it's not a lot of, you know, space. For a three-bedroom house.

DE: But the piece about Lakewood crystallized a lot of the issues that you've been writing about.

JD: *Opened* a lot of the issues. Yeah. I mean, really, it raised all these questions. That's why I started writing this.

DE: So in this book—you've been writing about California for so long, but never with such, I think, *finality*. You know, you really come to conclusions here. Basically, you mentioned the Southern Pacific Railroad and how California has this history of selling itself out for the short gain—you know, short-sightedly—selling its land to the Southern Pacific Railroad, for example. And in some ways, your book is fatalistic, because California hasn't changed that much in its shortsightedness. Can you talk about that, about the process of realizing that the state has always sort of been this way?

JD: Well, all these things kept happening. I kept thinking that this was evidence of how California had changed. I mean, one of the things that really deeply shocked me was when I realized that California no longer had a really functioning public school system. That its scores were now on a par with *Mississippi's*. And that the University of California system was no longer *valued* as it had been. And that the investment at the state level was not being made there. And yet we were building all these new prisons. I thought this was evidence of how California had changed, but it wasn't. I mean, I finally realized it was the same deal. It was selling the future, selling the state, in return for someone's agreement—short-term agreement—to enrich us. People want prisons in their

town because they think it'll bring jobs, right? Well, it doesn't even bring jobs, and what does it bring for the future?

DE: But now everything's changed. We had a recall, and we have a new governor, he was an action star—I think we've been really far-sighted about that, at least. [*Laughter*] So you must be thinking optimistically, now. Finally there's a break, and we're thinking of the future—looking ahead. [*Laughter*] But you commented on Arnold's election somewhere, I think. I didn't see it firsthand, but didn't you say, "Nothing good can come of this."? [*Laughter*]

JD: I probably did. [*Laughter*] I was so sort of thrilled over the weekend: I saw in the *Los Angeles Times* that part of the way the budget had been balanced by Gray Davis included getting rid of a huge number of state jobs. But as things progressed, he didn't—Gray Davis didn't—have a chance to get rid of those people. I mean, he could do it now, but he's not going to. And so it will fall to Arnold Schwarzenegger, who will have to make a decision: either to follow through on the job cuts or to find that money someplace else. Where will that money come from? And he keeps talking about bringing *new business* in. Where is this new business coming from?

DE: Well, it was interesting: you talk about how California has this history of individualism and self-reliance, but from the beginning the state has depended pretty heavily on federal money.

JD: Yeah.

DE: And here, Bush came to the state, and Arnold was crowing about how George will come back and give us some money and he'll bail us out. He called himself the Collectinator.

JD: And he himself was deeply into that individual effort, yes. He's almost an exemplar of the kind of error that we've seen over the years in California. [*Laughs*]

DE: Well, the whole map is right here in your book, the blueprint

for how this state is run. It's amazing that—well, I don't know. If everybody had read this, I think we might have had a different result with the whole recall effort. It's all there.

Let's back up a little bit and talk about the writing of your book. California has always been a very personal subject for you, and you've woven together the state itself and your upbringing here. And at the same time, this book is sort of about the loss of a certain California that you knew.

JD: Yeah, well, I don't think I could have written it before my parents died. I don't mean that we would have had a fight about it—we wouldn't have had a fight about it at all. But I just couldn't have done it, because it was not their idea. That's one thing. The other thing is that the death of my parents started me thinking more about what my own relationship to California was. Because it kind of threw it up for grabs. You know, when your parents die, you're not exactly *from* the place you were from. I don't know, it's just an odd—it's an odd thing.

DE: Early in the book you trace the paths of many of your ancestors in coming to California. And it connects a lot with the heroines in many of your novels. I think you find sort of the DNA for them in this passage that describes many of your—[*DE gives JD the passage in question*]

JD: Everybody in my family moved on the frontier. I mean, they moved on the frontier, through several centuries. Wherever the frontier was, that's where they were. [*Reading*]

> 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 peas from seeds carried from the last place. The past could be jettisoned, children buried and parents left behind, but seeds got carried.

DE: And when we spoke many years ago we talked about connections between the heroines in *A Book of Common Prayer* and *Run River,* and that passage connected a lot of them together, these women that were—

JD: Even the woman in the last novel—Elena McMahon, in *The Last Thing He Wanted*—she was similar in some ways.

DE: Right. When you were writing *Where I Was From,* did you realize the connections between all those characters in your novels, that their DNA was that of the frontier women in your family's history?

JD: No. No. No, I didn't.

DE: So we just, right now, we just did it. We just figured it out. [*Laughter*] Wow, that was good. That was easy. [*Laughter*] But so there's this idea of "I'm debunking the myth of California" that runs throughout the book, and in many different ways. But you've also said that you see this book as sort of a love letter to California. Can you explain that?

JD: Well, you don't bother getting mad at people you don't love, right? I mean, you just, you don't. I mean, why would I spend all that time trying to figure it out if I didn't have a feeling for it?

DE: There's a passage near the end, when you're driving from Monterey to Berkeley and your mother's asking, "Are we on the right

road? This doesn't look familiar, are we on the right road?" And you keep reassuring her that you're on 101 North, that this is the correct road. And then she finally says, "Then where did it all go?"

JD: Mm-hm.

DE: And there's also a passage, way back, from *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* that went, "All that is constant about the California of my childhood is the rate at which it disappears."

JD: Yeah. Well, at the time I wrote that line, very little of it had disappeared compared with the amount that has disappeared now. I think I was thinking specifically about the *one subdivision* that had been built that was visible from the road between Sacramento and Berkeley. Well, now it's a little bit more built up than that. [*Laughs*] What Mother was talking about when we were driving up from Monterey, that had happened just in a few years. I mean, suddenly, suddenly, suddenly everything had disappeared—suddenly all the open space on 101 south of San Jose was gone. I mean, it had been gone north of San Jose for some time. First Morgan Hill went. Then Gilroy went. Salinas may be next. We were just north of Salinas when Mother was so troubled.

DE: There's a man that you cite in one of the pieces, Lincoln Steffens, who talks about deep ecology, the belief that humans are inevitably going to destroy themselves, and so we shouldn't worry so much about things like recycling. Are you fatalistic about the future of California?

JD: Well, you know, if you extrapolated from the history, you would not be optimistic. But I keep thinking that we're all capable of learning, you know? That somehow we will, we will see—we'll realize the value of what we have and actually make a commitment to invest in the university, keep some open land, you know, just some basic things.

DE: Switching back: Tonight Michael Moore is speaking at San

Francisco State, and you and I talked a little bit before about the political climate right now. You've always been—to I'm sure everyone here—an exemplar of someone who can find nuance and who doesn't necessarily look for the black and the white and the easy answers in your political writing. But right now we're at a point where there is a shrillness to the debate. You turn on the TV and find MSNBC and Chris Matthews and everything else, all so loud and abusive. What's your political diet? What do you watch? What do you read?

JD: Oh, I read a lot. You know, I get five newspapers. But in order to follow what's going on, you actually have to look at television at certain points, because otherwise you don't realize how *toxic* it's become. You get no sense of the confrontational level of everything. I don't know what it is. The obvious answer is it's 24/7 television, it's cable. But how cable took the form of people shouting at each other, I don't know.

DE: In a way, it's a positive thing that Michael Moore is being read so widely, and that Al Franken has a number one book. But then these books keep reacting to each other. I don't know when it's going to end. And I don't know who's *buying all of the books*—

JD: But somebody is. There's a secret there. Ann Coulter's book, for example—is she the *Treason* or the *Liar* one? I can't—

DE: There's a *lie* somewhere in there.

JD: Yeah.

DE: And her face on the cover, which is nice.

JD: It has a little—there's a little code icon next to it on the best-seller list in the *New York Times*, which indicates that a lot of its sales have been in bulk. [*Laughter*]

DE: Oh, that's true.

JD: And so that's where some of it's coming from. But who the

bulk is, I don't—[*Laughter*]

DE: No, that's how it works. But now, *Fixed Ideas,* which is your short book that New York Review Books put out, begins on the stage we're sitting on, when you were here in 2001, in September.

JD: Yeah, it was just after. It was like a week after the event.

DE: Right, and it talks about you touring in the weeks after 9/11 and fearing the quality of discourse. And the people that you met along the road were all afraid of the inability to speak out after that and—

JD: I don't know if they were afraid. They were speaking out, they were absolutely speaking out. I mean, I was amazed. I had sort of arrived from New York like a zombie to do this book tour, which seemed like the least relevant thing anybody could possibly be doing, and to my amazement, every place I went people were making connections between our political life—which is what the book was—I was promoting *Political Fictions.* There are many connections between our political life and what happened on September 11. Connections I hadn't even thought to make. I was still so numb. And so then I got back to New York after two weeks, and I discovered that everybody had stopped talking in New York. I mean it was—everybody had flags out instead. And the *New York Times* was running "Portraits of Grief," which were these little sentimental stories about—little vignettes about the dead. I mean it was kind of—it was a scary, scary thing.

DE: In *Fixed Ideas,* you wrote that the people you spoke to recognized that "even then, with flames still visible in lower Manhattan... the words 'bipartisanship' and 'national unity' had come to mean acquiescence to the administration's pre-existing agenda—for example, the imperative for further tax cuts, the necessity for Arctic drilling, the systematic elimination of regulatory and union protections, even the funding for the missile shield." Do you feel that the quality of debate has gotten better since then?

JD: No. I mean, the president is still using—is now using September 11 when he's asked about *campaign funding.* [*Laughter*] No, it's true. He was asked why it was necessary for him to raise *x* million dollars, or whatever it was, for his primary campaign when he was unopposed, and he said that he remembered the way this country was, that he'll never forget September 11. [*Laughter*] And that it was important for him to remain in office, too. [*Laughter*]

DE: Do you have plans to cover the next campaign?

JD: I don't have any plans to cover it. No, I just don't have the heart to cover it. I mean, I might read about it and then write about it, but I'm not going to get on those planes now. [*Laughs*]

DE: No?

JD: No.

DE: Was there a point in your career when being Joan Didion got in the way of your being a reporter? When you couldn't hide anymore, you couldn't just observe?

JD: I think I can usually hide. Especially around politics. I'm Invisible Scarlet O'Neil in Washington. I mean, it doesn't have any currency. Being Joan Didion means nothing. [*Laughs*]

DE: There's a great passage in *The White Album,* in a piece you were doing about Nancy Reagan. And who was that for? And why?

JD: I had a column every other week for the *Saturday Evening Post,* a magazine that no longer exists. So I decided to go to Sacramento, to interview Nancy Reagan, who had become the governor's wife.

DE: And there was a camera crew there, and you were there, and there was a lot of discussion of how to make her seem like she was having a normal day.

JD: Yeah, the camera crew was there to see what she was doing on an ordinary Tuesday morning in Sacramento. This was, like, her

first year in Sacramento. And I was there to see what she was doing on an ordinary Tuesday morning in Sacramento. [*Laughs*] So we were all kind of watching each other. And then she said, "I might be picking... I might be picking..." and the cameraman asked her if she might be picking roses. And she said, "I might be *picking* them, but I won't be *using* them!" [*Laughter*]

DE: I never got that part. Did you get it? I never understood what that meant.

JD: It was just—she wasn't having a dinner party. She didn't have dinner parties in Sacramento. She only had them in the *Pacific Palisades,* so she wouldn't be *using* the flowers. I think that's what *she* meant, but what I heard was, it was, you know, sort of a bad actress's line. [*Laughter*] More animation than was required.

DE: You wrote about a trip with Bush Sr., when he was vice president, going to Israel and Jordan. They would always have to have the right backdrop. In Jordan, Bush's people made sure that there was an American flag in every frame, and a *camel.*

JD: A camel. [*Laughter*] I guess that was to clarify the setting, you know?

DE: And at one point they said they wanted Bush to be looking through binoculars at enemy territory. Who knows why. So they give him a pair of binoculars, and then they realized the direction he was looking was Israel. [*Laughter*] When you were following Dukakis, and when they had him playing ball, you wrote that it was "insider baseball." That was also a title of one of the pieces.

JD: "Insider baseball," yeah. It was astonishing.

DE: Yeah. Because they wanted to make them seem real, so everywhere they would go, Dukakis and one of his guys would play baseball—play catch outside the airplane.

JD: On the tarmac, yeah.

DE: And then you would be invited to watch—

JD: Right, and then if anybody missed it—I don't mean if *I* missed it, I could have missed it and they wouldn't have even noticed, but if one of the *networks* missed it, they wanted everybody to film it, right—if anybody missed it, they would do it again. [*Laughter*]

DE: And why does everybody—you're astonished by it when you're covering these campaigns, but everybody goes along with the same sort of events. "OK, now we're going to go out, and the candidate is going to eat broccoli, and that's going to lead the next day's news." But everybody goes along with it. They're trading access; they want the access and then in exchange, the campaign gives them this moment.

JD: Yes. You don't want to get thrown off the campaign. That's the key thing about covering a campaign, for people who cover them, is you can't—

DE: You don't want to get thrown off the plane.

JD: Right. You want to be there. So it's a trade for access. In case something happens, right? But nothing is going to happen—

DE: Well, somebody's going to fall off a platform one of these days, right?

JD: Somebody did, remember?

DE: That was Dole.

JD: Yeah, in Chico.

DE: OK. Now we're going to do a quick speed round. With these questions, you're allowed to answer only *yes* or *no*. [*Laughter*] OK, here we go. Will there be another recall, this one of Arnold?

JD: No.

DE: Should there be one?

JD: No, I don't believe in recalls.

DE: Just yes or no, please. [*Laughter*] Will you ever move back to California?

JD: I can't answer that *yes* or *no*. [*Laughter*]

DE: Can you believe how well this interview is going? [*Laughter*]

JD: Yes.

DE: Have you written a screenplay where you were happy with the final product?

JD: Yes.

DE: What was that? You're allowed to answer.

JD: *True Confessions.*

DE: Is that the one with—

JD: De Niro and Duvall.

DE: Oh, right. And—

JD: And it was directed by... I know him as well as I know my own name: Ulu Grosbard. We had a good time on it, and I was happy with it. In fact, I see it on television and it still makes me cry.

DE: So it was written by just you and your husband?

JD: Yeah. In fact, we did all the changes during shooting; we did them on the weekend. Ulu would come over—we were shooting in Los Angeles and he would come over and we would make the changes while he sat there on Sunday afternoon. It was really easy.

DE: So you were on set the whole time?

JD: No, we weren't on set. We were at a house in Brentwood. [*Laughs*] But Sundays they had off, so he would come over on Sunday and we would do it.

DE: OK, a few more in the speed round. Can Wes Clark beat

George Bush?

JD: If he were nominated, yeah.

DE: Can Howard Dean beat George Bush?

JD: I doubt it.

DE: And finally: really, though, can you believe how well this is going? [*Laughter*]

JD: Yes.

DE: There's a line in the new book where you say, "Not much about California, on its own preferred terms, has encouraged its children to see themselves as connected to one another." Can you explain that?

JD: People in Northern California grew up with the whole founding myth of California, the whole crossing story, et cetera. Southern California was founded on a different story. The only time when I felt, really, a big connection between Northern and Southern California—and I've lived in both—was when PSA was flying. [*Laughter*] No, I mean, literally, PSA connected the state where you could fly—

DE: Explain what PSA is.

JD: Pacific Southwest Airways. You weren't here then, probably. They had these planes with these big smiles painted on them. And you could fly from Sacramento to Los Angeles for I think sixteen dollars, and you could fly from Los Angeles to San Francisco for twelve. And there was what they called a Midnight Flyer, so you could fly up for dinner, in San Francisco, and then fly home, to Los Angeles, or vice versa. I mean, it gave a great sense of mobility around the state, which has been—which we never had before, and I haven't felt it since. I mean, going from Los Angeles to San Francisco on a plane now is so unpleasant that my brother always drives—you know, he does this all the time.

DE: So you're talking mostly regionally there, between coastal, inland, north, south.

JD: There were a lot of things I was thinking about there, I suppose. I was also thinking, the idea, the ethic that everybody kind of believed represented California, was one of extreme individualism, and we did not feel very responsible for others in the community. Community wasn't a big idea.

DE: And that's something you feel is prevalent throughout this state? Is that something grounded in the myth of California?

JD: In the way it was settled, yeah. I mean the kinds of people who settled it. The idea was, basically, California was settled by people who wanted to strike it rich, in a way, at the simplest level. And *as* individuals. This ethic kind of took hold; it became a big point of pride even though everyone in the state was heavily dependent on federal government. We didn't feel very responsible for those around us. One of the things that really knocked me out when I was writing this book was the thing about the committal to mental hospitals in the early days of the state. And right into the early twentieth century, people were committed at a higher rate than almost anywhere else in the country. And it was explained that they were kind of unhinged by the ups and downs of life on the frontier, in the gold camps... This wasn't it, I don't think. It was just an extreme disregard for, and a refusal to tolerate, the people around them. I mean, people were being committed in San Francisco for—one older woman was committed by her sister. This was a study done by somebody who had gotten hold of all these records. One woman was committed by her sister because she had lost all interest in crocheting. [*Laughter*]

DE: And the national committal rate was, what, 3,900 people committed one year. And 2,600 of them were from California, or something like that.

JD: Yeah, I mean huge, huge numbers. And they were committed

basically for life. I mean, it wasn't one of those forty-eight-hour deals.

DE: We talked about a passage that I was going to ask you to read, and you asked me to read it, that I think sums up a lot of what is central—both your love of the state and then ambivalence, and also the sense of loss. After your mother died, you flew back to California, and this occurs late in the book. Do you want to read it, or should I?

JD: You read it.

DE: "Flying to Monterey I had a sharp apprehension of the many times before when I had, like Lincoln Steffens, 'come back,' flown west, followed the sun, each time experiencing a lightening of spirit as the land below opened up, the checkerboards of the Midwestern plains giving way to the vast empty reach between the Rockies and the Sierra Nevada; then *home, there, where I was from, me,* California. It would be a while before I realized that 'me' is what we think when our parents die, even at my age, *who will look out for me now, who will remember me as I was, who will know what happens to me now, where will I be from.*" ✯

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