

THE ONE-SIDED ISLAND

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In one of those exquisite short stories that Arthur C. Clarke wrote in his youth, he tells of a strange universe, “the last and the strangest jest of the Maker of Stars,” which had only one side – a three-dimensional extrapolation of the Moebius Strip, akin to the less familiar Klein Bottle. The tale concerns an uncommonly enterprising inhabitant of that universe’s sole planet, who one day decides to explore the other side of the very high wall that stands at the edge of his world. He builds a gigantic ramp and climbs to the top of the wall. Twilight greets him, and he steps forward to reach the wall’s other side. As he enters the unknown, at first it gets darker around him, then lighter, until he reaches ... the ramp whence he had set out.

I often think of this story, at least every time when, with a few moments to spare but not enough to start something useful, I fetch paper, scissors, and glue to fashion a few Moebius Strips and contemplate their – at least for me – ever-mysterious properties. I image being one of Edwin Abbot’s Flatlanders, let us say a dodecagon, who is magically transported from his home plain to a Moebius Strip. Would I notice any difference?

My fascination with objects that have only one side is an old one. As a child I was once told that only rainbows have one side, but the magic of that image faded when I studied optics in high school. What I searched for was something that could be seen from one side but not the other, something akin to the Euclidean circle around which Borges wove “The Disk,” one of his last stories. I admit that for some time in my early twenties I abandoned the search for a one-sided object, having fallen prey to the superstition that something cannot exist if our rationality proves its impossibility.

I know better now. Although I cannot claim to have come an object that is visible from one side only, I am happy to report that it has been given to me to visit a place that defies conventional notions of “front” and “back.”

On the south-eastern tip of the Union’s largest state lies the island of Revillagigedo; on the island’s western coast the town of Ketchikan, Alaska’s fourth-largest. The island was named by Captain Vancouver after Count Revilla Gigedo, a Viceroy of New Spain. Since in that part of the world almost all place names are either Russian or English, the island’s very name makes it exceptional. A case of *nomen est omen*? Or was it the other way round? I wonder.

I visited the island in the summer of 1980. Dense and low clouds cover the area most of the year, the rain never stops, and the days of my stay were no exception. I had studied the geography of the Alaska Panhandle carefully before going there, and my maps told me that Revillagigedo was separated from the mainland by a body of water known as the Behm Canal. When I arrived in Ketchikan, however, I soon discovered that reality was other.



For one thing, no road circled the island. From the town a coastal road extends a few miles in each direction, but they soon stop and one cannot go *around* Revillagigedo. I asked everybody I met whether they had actually been on the far side, whether anybody had seen *all* of this Behm Canal, not just its mouth. Nobody had. To be sure, everybody claimed to know someone who had circumnavigated the island on a boat, but for some reason I did not get to meet any of these intrepid souls. When pressed for reasons to explain this rather astonishing lack of curiosity, my interlocutors would invariably be evasive, noting that there really was nothing to see, and that somehow they had never got around to making the trip, which now, come to think of it, seemed indeed worthwhile making. A thoroughly conditioned mind is seldom aware of its conditioning, and in this simple absence of any interest in the “other side” I detected an indirect proof that somehow Revillagigedo was, like its name, different from all the other islands I had visited.

I was traveling light, my only pair of shoes had holes, and so I dared not brave the misty forest, with its sempiternally soggy soil covering the island outside Ketchikan. I left for Juneau with the mystery unresolved. My maps keep insisting that if I were to set out from Ketchikan and to march inland, I would end up facing the mainland, but I have come to mistrust maps. Of course I cannot prove it, but somehow I am convinced that if I were to undertake such a trip, I would emerge from the dark woods not on the shores of the Behm Canal but on the edge of Ketchikan, on the one and only side of the island of Revillagigedo.