



QUESTIONS OF TRAVEL

SHAUN JOHNSON

“Should we have stayed at home, and thought of here?”

- Elizabeth Bishop, “Questions of Travel”

Long before I was a tutor, some odd years ago, I remember my first visit to Evergreen’s Writing Center. At that time the Writing Center was buried deep within the Library building beside neglected books and dusty offices. After one climbed the two sets of stairs necessary to gain even a spatial relationship to it, one had to squint to locate its faint, fluttering light at the end of a hauntingly long and dark hallway—a light that looked more like the steady, futile effort of a trapped firefly to escape a parallel dimension than a typical fluorescent bulb. Its door, plastered with various old pieces of paper and ornate decorations, seemed to demarcate the boundary between two entirely separate spaces. It softly opened as I approached, curiously beckoning me inside.

Is a space defined from the outside, or from within itself?

The tutors and students who conversed in the Center could have been innocent travelers who once tried to escape the Library, and then at one point, as a recourse or from some other desire, made a home in this room.

How is a writing center different from other spaces at a college?

Inside the Writing Center, dusty surfaces were washed in warm, dull orange and green, from hand-cut silhouettes in long sheets of colored tracing paper adhered to ceiling lights. Kitschy tables and vinyl-cushioned chairs scattered throughout the room were not reminiscent of the standard academic aesthetic of appropriated cafeteria furniture, but seemed to have dropped from a tear in the ceiling that connected the space to a ‘70s sitcom. A giant window on the far side of the Center gave those interested in peering outside an intimate view of a staunch, blank Library wall, but taped to its glass were the black and white portraits of revered writers whose ghosts meandered in the space.

I was greeted by a sinewy young man whom I came to know as “the Secretary,” and later, “Dan.” Dan barraged me with a routine set of questions, to which I answered, “Yes,” “Shaun,” “I don’t know,” “English,” and, “Reading.”

It seemed my last response caught him by surprise. “Oh, what are you working on?”

What are the values of a writing community?

“I have a question about reading.” I repeated myself, to appear on top of things.

I can’t narrate Dan’s silence, but I had felt safe to assume it was a smug, “This is a writing center.” I was aware of its name, but I never thought to bring a paper there. Something inside of me proscribed it. As Dan and my tutor, Juliana, cracked open my secret agenda, it was clear that my visit was a deliberate, in-and-out mission where I carried not a paper, and proudly so, but a question—a small quandary regarding reading...faster.

What can we learn by talking? Is talking about writing important to learning or writing? How can we learn together?

I summed up my dilemma, “That’s about it. I literally have to read six-hundred pages a week. I can’t keep up!” I then made what I had assumed would be a somewhat common request, “Do you have any books on speed reading?”

Juliana informed me that no, the Writing Center did not have any books on speedreading. Now that I’ve got some wisdom, I understand that speed-reading is a myth propogated by infomercials (for \$19.99!), and was not, as I had expected, the solution to my new workload as a college student. Her tone was compassionate, and then ebullient when she inquired, “How do you read?”

Where does personal voice exist within the institution?

How do you read?

How is it formed?

I repeated the question over to myself. *How do I read? Top to bottom, left to right... How do I read...?*

Who forms it, and who collaborates in its emergence?

Her question captured me in thinking about my own request, and then in thinking about my process of reading. As she admitted experiencing unease with onerous reading lists herself, I began to think of her as less of an “expert” per se, and I became more comfortable. She suggested that my problem may not be a matter of speed but of efficiency or focus, and as a somewhat rogue exploratory exercise, she asked me to summarize any chapter in my book by looking only at its title.

Unfortunately for us, I was reading *The Faerie Queene*, a fairly long poem by Edmund Spenser, with descriptive and formidable headers like “BOOK III,” and “TEXTUAL APPENDIX.”

If teachers remain teachers, will students remain students?

At the crest of the staircase, the firefly danced for seconds, disappeared entirely, and then emerged again. Its sporadic light illuminated a portal between the Library and the Writing Center. As its light vanished, I imagined it moving through the open door, in and out of the space I had just left. I thought to myself, a light this deep in the Library is not likely to be replaced anytime soon.

WORKS CITED

Bishop, Elizabeth. *The Complete Poems 1927–1979*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984.
Spenser, Edmund. *The Faerie Queene*. England: Penguin Classics, 1987.