

Assignment: Write a reflective essay about a favorite place, “a holy spot” like E. B. White’s in “Once More to the Lake.”

### **On the Border in Borders**

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Do we really choose the places we love? Or maybe they choose us, peering at our faces, listening attentively to our voices, and reading the pages of our lives. They attract and seduce us; they tame us gradually day by day, step by step, until we are not able even to imagine ourselves without them. Then we can leave these places, but we are powerless to forget them because they become a part of us, and we ourselves become a part of them.

I keep in my memory my first date with one such special place. It was during my first days in this country. Everything was strange, unknown, and different from what I had been adjusted to before. I would wake up in the early morning to the voices of the fussy geese, I would walk down unaccustomedly empty streets, almost without pedestrians, and I would feel a lack of air because of the horrible heat and the intolerable humidity. Besides that, I could hardly speak English and was not able to understand what people were telling me. In that condition, almost by accident, I opened the door of Borders, where I found myself surrounded by books and the long-expected freshness, which, as I felt at that moment, came from those books. There were not many people. The quiet and pensive music penetrated me slowly from the second floor. I headed for the cozy café with the high ceiling that reminded me of the cupola of a cathedral. I ordered a cup of tea, and with the first gulps, I experienced the feeling of being at home.

Then, I tried to visit that place as often as I could. I did not have a car yet, but my relatives used to pick me up when they drove to the health club not far from Borders. They made fun of my attachment to an ordinary store. Chuckling, they invited me to join them, but I consistently preferred Borders. Why? Of course, I could study there, and from childhood I had fallen in love with books and music. But there was something else I was not able to explain. It seemed to me that opening the door of that store, I was not a stranger anymore, that I had discovered my own place where nobody and nothing could threaten or disturb me, and where I was not so vulnerable and unprotected from reality.

I did not have much time there, but I was never in a hurry. I liked, for example, to take any book from a shelf, open it at random, and try to read. It was not simple for me because of my English, but I was not afraid of misunderstanding: I imagined myself capable of reading something *between* the lines if not *in* the lines. I remember the first English poem I read from the beginning to the end without stopping. It was the very dramatic poem by W. H. Auden, “Song for St. Cecilia’s Day” (sec. 24), where the poet transforms his personal fear of losing his loved one into the objective form of the ballad. Reading it, I felt a special rapture thanks to just one rhyme which burned me from within:

O is it the parson they want, with white hair,  
Is it the parson, is it, is it?  
No, they are passing his gateway, dear,  
Without a visit. (222-23)

That double “is it” sounded for me so much like a cry of a wild bird suddenly penetrating the space of the store that I had to pull my head down, frightened of its touching me.

But from the very beginning, Borders was not for me just a place that had to do with books and music. It gave me a beautiful opportunity to observe people inside the store and the life outside. That is why I preferred the table near the window in the café, where I myself was “on the border” between the modern world of streets and the eternal world of culture. It seemed to me that centuries were looking at me from the bookshelves, while people were filing up the store and the café. I really liked to observe them from my place. All of the time, I tried to imagine their lives and to read their pasts, their thoughts, and feelings in their smiles, gestures, or gait. Of course, I had time to catch just scraps of their words, only profiles of their faces. But that was enough for my imagination to be awakened. Once, for example, I saw

an elderly man sitting at the table next to mine, holding a woman's hand gently. She was smiling, but she was sad at the same time. Such a combination of smile and sadness made her face especially attractive and expressive. Who were they? Maybe they were husband and wife. Lovers? Simply friends? I knew that I would never be able to learn the answer. But it seemed to me that their lives inexplicably had to do with my life. Besides that, I felt that if I had opened one of those books from the shelves around, I would have read their story.

In order to be honest, I need to confess that sometimes I hated my refuge, my dearest and loveliest place. The reason for that feeling was inside me. It appeared to me that I tried to hide from reality behind books and CDs, that I was just an incurable dreamer and contemplator who was not able to do what normal people did, and that I lived surrounded by phantoms and mirages, like that cry of the bird which I just "heard" once above the bookshelves. And those shelves seemed to me like a tremendous sandcastle that was about to fall down and cover me completely. "You should escape from here! You have to escape! You must!" I used to whisper to myself, but every time I found myself returning.

And now I am here again at my favorite table near the window, and it is my favorite time, the soft twilight when things lose their shapes and penetrate each other. Oh, how I like this play of the reflections when the bookshelves leave their usual places, reach the road, and stop in the middle of it. The fast-moving cars drive through the shelves that remain invisible to them. They drive through the pages and lines, rhymes and characters, through the centuries and countries, religions and doctrines, through the fire, tears, prayers, and curses, through the permanent despair and irresistible hope. No book has fallen! And who can answer where the border is between seeing and existing, between my imagination and reality, between ourselves and the places we choose?

#### Works Cited

Auden, W. H. "Song for St. Cecilia's Day." *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden*. New York: Random House, 1945. 203-39.

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