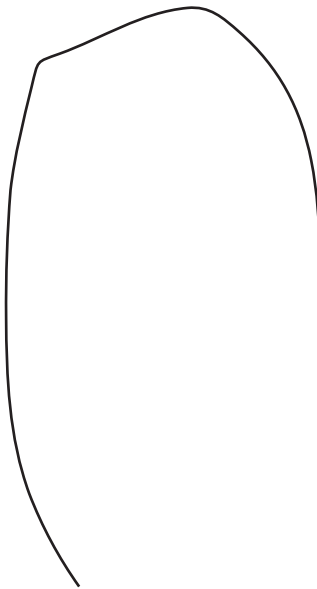


It's a Question

A play, by Johanna Reed



“That was such a peculiar thing
to say to me, I do not believe it
was said to me.”

—*Lydia Davis*

It's a Question was first performed on October 21, 2009. The cast was as follows:

HERE.....Johanna Reed

THERE.....Megan May Daalder

Preface—

This text was written to be performed in a digital space: it is virtual theater. The main venue for the performance should be a virtual forum for dialogue, however the physical space in which the performance takes place is also of importance. ~~It is good if the performers are far away from each other not only during the performance, but most of the rest of the time as well.~~ The space between the performers should be considered and investigated.

This is a response to a prompt to “envision Santa Barbara 50-100 years from now.”

~~To be exhibited are the original text, in book form, and a textual record of the performance. Audio and photographic documentation are optional.~~ The final form of the play is undeclared.

A note on the performance—

The text of the play is very important, and so are the bodies of the performers: the performance should exist both in virtual and physical reality.

Though the dialogue is virtual, it should still swell and stretch via its human channels. There are points in the text designated to be filled with the performer's own content, at the time of the performance. In these instances, the performer should bear the themes of the play in mind, as well as keep close and articulated the function of language and their sense of humor.

And the performers are expected to perform, to "speak," not only through the dialogue. The physical presence and actions of the performers are very important, and what they experience during the performance is the most important.

Typos ~~are frowned upon~~ seem to have latent meaning.

A note on the virtual—

Performers should use the line breaks as spaces of weight in the text. If the performance occurs in a chat room, each line break represents the hitting of the ENTER key.

Ellipses and other moments of elapsed time are to be allowed the space they denote.

Allow the time to pass.

Characters—

HERE, concerned with stasis, the value of beauty;
serif font in a small size, perfect punctuation.

THERE, concerned with chance, moving the body, meeting
strangers; sans serif or fixed-width font in a small size,
loose capitalization.

Setting—

Unspecified time.

The text of the play is printed on paper, in front of the performers
as they type.

HERE

This morning, three things happened to me within the span of an hour.
Each one triggered an instantaneous response in my brain:
a very clear, spelled-out statement:
I will die today.

THERE

!

HERE

The three things were:

1) I had a dream wherein I was seduced and murdered by someone I know peripherally. In the dream, I did not see or feel the act of being killed.

However, there was a moment when I said out loud:

“I am dead now.” The thing that seemed important about that statement was the “now”—as in, “a moment ago, I was alive.”

It was as if I had made the decision myself, and then time carried it out for me.

2) There was a bee on the kitchen cabinet at dawn.

3) While getting dressed, I caught my eye in the mirror and thought: “This is the last time I’ll ever get dressed.”

All three moments were accompanied by the thought:

I will die today. This statement occurred without my permission—it appeared, it just happened, without me.

...

Though I, obviously, did not die today, it occurred to me that perhaps I did. This afternoon I heard the phrase “everything happens at once”—and in this sense, I did die today.

The concept of death was excogitated—
and perhaps this is enough to be dead.

I will die one day: I died today.

THERE

...but...

by that logic, you're also ill, very tall, alive, flying.

If becoming something only requires an understanding of it—
instead of actually being in practice of it—
well...

then think about everything you could be just by thinking about
everything you could be!

HERE

It's a question of trying to know what makes up a certain state of
awareness, right? What is the difference between being in a state of
awareness and being aware of what that state is? I think...

I think this...

this kind of conclusion—

it's helped by the internet—

I've jettisoned presence, you know—

it's that kind of thing.

THERE

There's virtual consciousness that doesn't really have any kind of—well, there's no distance in a place like this.

HERE

There's no moving around.

THERE

It's like, I can move my arms right now...

wait, I'm moving my arms...

...

but I can't do that in here—I can only type that I'm doing it. But I can't actually do it.

HERE

The first problem here is no body. Only having a voice. A voice is difficult to move around in here. It can be done of course, for example:

“dll rrrrr beeeee bö

dll rrrrr beeeee bö fümms bö,

rrrrr beeeee bö fümms bö wö,

beeeee bö fümms bö wö tää,

bö fümms bö wö tää zää,

fümms bö wö tää zää Uu.”

THERE

[There states the importance of moving around.]

HERE

A friend of mine has a very large van, and there is no partition between the front seat and the back. When you sit in the front, it feels like your thoughts—or, everything in your head and behind your face—have a lot of space to move around. Like the space for your thinking is really big.

THERE

I knew someone once who thought his spirit animal was a 30-foot tall opaque black box that followed him around and was positioned half an inch from the back of his head. It was not physically attached to his head, but it was never further away from it than half an inch or so. He felt powerful when he thought of the black box—like, in a small room or a tense meeting or a job interview, and he's there with a giant black box behind his head. Just filling up the whole damn place.

HERE

Once I was on a train, from Los Angeles to Santa Barbara, returning home after having moved away. I was bored and I stared at the ceiling of the train, with the windows and the moving landscape in

the periphery. I thought about what I would do when I got to Santa Barbara, the people I would see, the places I wanted to return to. At first, it felt like a very long time until I could do these things and it made me feel miserable—that I would have to suffer through the long train ride before these things could happen seemed a slow torture. I was far away, and I wanted so badly to be very close. So I pictured in my head, one by one, doing all the things I would do when I got there. I imagined them in full: I would walk on this street, turn at this corner, pass this store, look into this window, run into this person, talk about these things. I imagined the scent of the air and the way the walls of the buildings look in the evening, the colors, and the sounds which are sort of muffled and clean. It then occurred to me that, at that instant, I was experiencing these things very clearly, that this felt very close to what it would feel like when I did them. The distance between the place and me was not that much, in fact it was very small. Perhaps there was no distance between us at all.

THERE

You invited me to your house this summer, up there. There's the guest room that's painted green that you said I could stay in. You mentioned things we could do: this walk we could go on, and a picnic we could have in this park. I pictured we would eat sandwiches and olives and wear shorts and jackboots. I couldn't come, in the end, of course I wanted to. What you're saying is that I actually did come—I was there—because I thought out every detail about what it would be like to be there.

HERE

Perhaps it's not thinking about something that makes it happen. It's paying a lot of attention to it that gives it a shape. Isn't that how a city works? Or a relationship? Or intimacy, novels? I pay a lot of attention to this town I live in and it exists for me in a particular form. Or, I pay attention to the person I love and this attention becomes the shape of our relationship. I consider what to cook for dinner tonight and a menu comes together.

THERE

That reminds me of a dirty joke:
[There tells a dirty joke.]

HERE

Yes, that's funny...

THERE

but this paying attention idea—it applies mostly to the body. the body and the city. they can only be experienced if you pay them a lot of attention. they both need to move—be moved in—to pay attention to them is to move around in them.

HERE

It's a stasis I'm really trying to talk about these days. Not moving.

What happens to the city that doesn't move or the body that doesn't move? Or that moves too much? I move my voice around—here, for example, through bits of text on the internet—and I move my thoughts around—through various scenarios that I desire to be part of. I am moving around these bits of myself, into different places in my brain, bits of memories, bits of thinking. But then I'm always surprised how pleasurable it is when there's a moment of stillness. Like returning to the spot in the park where there is a certain kind of flowering plant, and you walk back there to see it, and when you see that it's still there, growing and flowering, right where you last saw it, it's such a sweet feeling that you have.

THERE

I started to notice that there is an inordinate amount of stairwells painted turquoise on campus. Like, one in ten stairwells around here has walls that have been painted turquoise. like, how many rooms are even painted turquoise? one in fifty? I started to hunt for them. it was my own small quest. I can't tell you how happy I was when I found a new one. and I was happier still when I would go back and see one again that I had already seen. I'd take a detour on my way to class, go into a building I didn't need to go in, and see the turquoise stairwell again.

HERE

It's like a person.

THERE

It's like a person I've been very close to, slept with. Seeing them again kind of voyeuristically—like I sought them out, went out of my way, to get another look. See how they're doing and what they look like know. Even though I know more or less what they look like—like, I know really well.

HERE

I often think that the cities I live in will become like past lovers: I will loathe them and then also feel a strange fascination left over. It's maybe a fascination with myself for being in love then with that thing I cannot comprehend now.

THERE

you cannot forget even if you want to.

HERE

With this place—I've lived here more or less all my life, and though that's not a terribly long time, it's a very long time to live in one place.

THERE

this is good, no?

HERE

It's frightening—

or, worrisome, to be contented with being so still—

being happy being motionless—

I've become annoyed much quicker with friends and lovers than I have with this place.

...

Once, after being gone about a year, I noticed that

I was referring to this place as a woman—

an old floozy, quote-unquote, looking good again today.

I had to admit to myself that the beauty of this place was my priority. The beauty of its stillness—that stasis that I loathe in all other things and prize so highly here. Because of this, I find it very, very difficult—almost impossible—to live somewhere ugly. And this is glib. Cosmetic. It's like admitting to yourself that not one of your past lovers was ugly. You wouldn't adopt an ugly dog. That you prefer your food to be beautiful and delicate.

THERE

So it's a question of beauty. If beauty is important to you.

HERE

It's a question of honesty and politics and what it means to be a member of a society.

THERE

It's like sleeping with someone, the sex part, not the interaction or emotional or seduction part—the penis in vagina part, which is arbitrary and silly. It's so stupid! It means nothing! I put my penis in your vagina. The president puts his penis in her vagina. He did not put his knee in the arch of her foot. It's meaningless—it's ugly. So the events and feelings leading up to it must be overly beautiful. Really really very very beautiful. They must first be beautiful before they can be important.

HERE

My food must be delicate because my digestion is savage.

THERE

My dancing must be effervescent because my body is getting old.

HERE

My city must be spotless because it is not a quiet forest.

THERE

My thoughts must be witty because my confusion is boring.

HERE

My sexual fantasies consist of small interactions with strangers

wherein no touching or speaking occurs.

We just look at each other for no more than three seconds.

THERE

If I were a tailor, I would insert the pins in the fabric with great care,
and never poke my client.

HERE

I think often of baking bread and giving it away from my driveway.
I think often of volunteering at the owl shelter.

THERE

“It was just after dawn, the air was cold, and the ground was damp with
my own blood. As I wondered what circumstances could have brought
me here, I looked across the vast expanse of the plain on which I lay,
and it seemed that I could see grasses of a thousand colors, in which
many rabbits, in absolute silence, were leaping and running like small
horses.”

HERE

When I say that I will love this city forever, it means that I will eventu-
ally hate it, which means that I truly, purely love it. I love it very well.

THERE

And then, you simply say, “I am a very lucky person.”

HERE

I worry that I must leave this place if I want to be anyone.

THERE

To be important, must you live in a beautiful place?

HERE

Or, can you be important if you live in a beautiful place?

THERE

And when we all think about the city, what does the city look like?

HERE

If we all love the city, does the city change or does the city remain still?

THERE

“Of course we always loved to tinker with things and fix things, but at the same time, you know, it went without saying that we cared about the world.”

HERE

Of course, we always worked hard to modify things and love, but the

same time, you know, it does not care about the world we were talking.

THERE

“Most things aren’t alive in the first place, and they never were...and it’s not particularly tragic to be a chair or a rock, and obviously the spark of life which occasionally flares up will inevitably go out, and it’s not a problem.”

HERE

Most things do not live in the first place, they never ... And it’s not a tragedy, especially the chair, or rock, and certainly one of life sometimes forced to go up to a flash fire, it’s not a problem.

THERE

We just see each other.

HERE

This is boring because I think my confusion is to be witty.

THERE

Be important at first before they must be beautiful.

HERE

He’s on her knees did not put the arch of the bridge.

THERE

This morning, three things happened to me within the time span.

HERE

The concept of death was probably sufficient excogitated dead.

THERE

Place and that was not enough distance between the in fact
very small.

HERE

It is also one way to acknowledge her past lovers were ugly. It's your
favorite food to be beautiful and delicate.

THERE

I've dropped the presence.

HERE

It's a question that stopped.

END

Acknowledgments—

The passages quoted within the text come from “Ursonate” by Kurt Schwitters and “Grasses of a Thousand Colors” by Wallace Shawn. Although not quoted directly, I’ve borrowed a technique used by Barry Stoltz in the poem “If I Were a Bear.”

This play owes great debt to all three works and would not have been possible without them having come first.

This play is dedicated to Barry.