Images and reflections on study abroad
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Anyone who has participated in study abroad will tell you that one of the hardest parts of returning home is answering the question, “So how was it?” We are expected to understand right away what our experience meant and how it affected us. We can’t always reconstruct the day-to-day reality of living abroad, but we can share glimpses: reflections and anecdotes, photographs and observations. Whether it’s a landscape seen from a bus window, a linguistic mix-up, or a rocky boat ride, it’s these glimpses that stick with us, plugged in at some deep level to our memory and rising to the surface every now and again with surprising clarity.

In these pages there is no “big picture,” there are only individual moments that attempt to explain what it was about study abroad that shook us up and crawled under our skin. The experiences described by the writing and photographs in this year’s Passage range from mystical revelation to pure sensory delight and hit every note of confusion, embarrassment, and absurdity in between. Curiously enough, the feeling of disorientation expressed by these pieces often brings with it a moment of remarkable discovery, proving that it is possible to be lost and found at the same time.

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la première chose qu’ils m’ont montrée
c’était ma fenêtre—elle donnait
sur toute la ville—comme pour me dire
voilà, elle est à toi

mais en sortant de l’appartement, en pénétrant
dans les rues, j’ai regardé en haut et je me suis confondue
car les clochers des églises n’étaient pas les mêmes clochers
que j’avais vus tout à l’heure, de ma fenêtre, et elle en avait
plein de clochers et de flèches, cette ville

et toutes les fontaines, les nombreuses fontaines,
éttaient des bassins en pierre noire tout simples,
indiscernables et chantant au coin de chaque rue
leurs notes délicates

même les collines qui entouraient la ville se sont mises
à se dévorer, et enfin les nuages, les nuages identiques,
se sont assis lourdement et recouvraient tout le paysage

et au beau milieu de tout cela, les habitants de la ville
commençaient à me demander leur chemin.
j’ai dû m’excuser :

je ne suis pas d’ici

et j’ai pris une poire pour la laver dans la fontaine
mais je n’ai pas pu la retrouver.
Arrival

The first thing they showed me was my window—it looked out over the whole city—as if to say take it, it belongs to you

but when I left the apartment, when I penetrated the streets, I looked up and I was confused because the steeples weren’t the same steeples I had seen just a moment ago, and the city was full of steeples

and all the fountains, the many fountains, were simple basins made of black stone, indistinguishable and singing at the corner of each street their delicate notes

even the hills that surrounded the city began to devour each other, and finally the clouds, the identical clouds, sat down heavily and covered the landscape

and smack dab in the middle of all of this, the citizens began to ask me directions. I had to apologize:

I’m not from here

and I took a pear to wash it in the fountain but the fountain wasn’t where I thought it would be.
Guten Tag! It’s hard to believe it’s been a week; I feel like I got here yesterday. I thought it was time to say hello and fill you in on some interesting things I’ve learned and observed about Bonn, Germany and my time here thus far.

1. There are no ugly dogs. Ok, I know that most dogs are kind of cute, or decidedly not-ugly, but these dogs really take it up a notch. They’re also very well behaved and are allowed in stores and on buses and everywhere. They just tuck themselves under the seat or whatever and hang out and don’t bark.

2. I saw a man wearing Lederhosen and an otherwise normal outfit on his way home from work when I first arrived in Bonn. So every time I miss people and home and Kalamazoo, I think of him and appreciate where I am a bit more.

3. Mullets are quite fashionable. But I always knew that. Did you?

4. I go to school in a golden palace.

5. You can be arrested for crossing the street without a green light... but you can carry open containers of alcohol around pretty much anywhere.

6. Last weekend I went to the Ikea in Cologne. On the train on the way back, I saw this tough punk looking teenage boy carrying a toolbox. Upon further investigation, I discovered that it was full of chocolate chip muffins.

7. I have a Haustier (house animal, or pet, if you will) named Hans. He is a spider and he lives in the corner of my window. He’s German, so we still have some communication issues, but we get along pretty well.

8. People like to play with fire here.

9. Bonners love Beethoven. There are Beethoven statues in front of some stores, similar to the cows that were in Chicago. Each one is decorated differently.

10. People eat a whole lot of meat here. Everyone warned me, and as it turns out...it’s true.

11. Things I discovered upon moving into my apartment: Everyone takes their own roll of toilet paper with them into the bathroom. I don’t know if that’s a German thing or a the-people-in-my-apartment thing but...it’s weird. Also, I went to open the fridge, and instead it was a huge (3x2ft) block of ice. I opened the cabinet next to it...and it was the fridge.

12. In one of the main squares is the original Beethoven statue that all the others are based on. In front of that statue, a man often plays Beethoven songs on a grand piano (see #9).

Fondly, Sarah Guzy
The sound of the footsteps echo in the dark square as the ancient cobble stones are struck repeatedly by the brand-new designer heels purchased two cities ago and one country over.

The awe of these surprisingly modern cities we learned about in history class fades with every jaded corner and exploitation: churches-turned-nightclubs, churches-turned-hospitals, souvenir shops and museums included: come see the Holy Blood of Jesus Christ.

Narrow streets that would qualify as alleyways back home: men smoking in doorways, dimly lit windows to a family kitchen the back room of a store or a slaughterhouse—how would I know?
I pull my jacket tight
against the unfamiliar
wind that smells
of sewage and tastes
of pennies and try to keep
my eyes forward
and walk with
feigned confidence
toward my
supposed destination
and a bed.

A woman wearing a
heavy shawl that
looks like drapery
speaks to me
as I pass
but I
don’t understand and
don’t try to,
because by now
not speaking
the language
has come to feel
like a clump
of hair
stuck
in the back of
my throat.
South of the Shetland Islands
Aboard M/V Hjaltland

October 4, 2008

10:30 p.m.
We’re in it now. When the ship was closer to the islands, it was pretty calm, but we’ve reached wide-open water, and the sea is rolling. Long, slow waves you can feel moving from one end of the hull to the other. Up, up, up like climbing a hill, and the ship seems almost like it’s suspended in air for a split second before it crests the wave. Then your stomach drops. Crash, shudder, and the ship is bending—the hollow, creaking sound of stressed steel echoes above and below. There’s a gale-force broadside wind—you can hear it against the windows. We’re rolling on two axes now, shifting forward, back, and side-to-side.

11:15 p.m.
Just got hit by a big one. It knocked all the plates and silverware out of the cabinets and onto the floor of the galley. Big, big crash. Ran to the window and clasped my hands around my eyes, but I couldn’t see much, even with the cabin lights shining out. There’s no horizon, no fixed points. The whole world feels like it’s turning over on itself.

11:30 p.m.
I just went out on deck. The winds are so intense there’s a vacuum in the promenade, and you have to brace yourself against the steel rails on both sides to keep from going down. The gale roars, drowns out the sound of the ship’s engines, makes your ears ring. From the top of the sky to the sea below it’s pitch black, but you can make out other ships on the horizon—little lamplights, disappearing and reappearing. From out there, you can actually see the waves, careening out of the darkness, coming from out of nowhere—big, dark, twisting forms blocking out those little lights as they drive closer, then towering over you, reaching up toward the sky before crashing against the hull. We are rolling out here.
Hello again everyone!

Much has happened since my last email, so I figured it was time for an update. To start with, my Spanish has improved enough for me to realize that I signed my last email with “arms and kisses” rather than “hugs and kisses.” The word for arm, “brazo,” is deceptively similar to that of “abrazo” for hug. My language errors are rampant, but luckily my sense of humor has pulled me through thus far.

Humor came in handy again the weekend before last when I had an encounter with a free French toilet (they look like pods) in a park in Paris. Not being able to speak French was a definite disadvantage when I didn’t understand that the toilet needed to sanitize itself before I used it. The door kept automatically opening at the most inopportune moments, trying to get me to exit…suffice it to say that the people in line got quite a show while I laughed like crazy (with some embarrassment of course). The study abroad adventures have certainly begun…

Abrazos and besos (HUGS and kisses),

Jessica
¿Quién ha conocido Madrid?
Calles de ladrillo
Edificios de piedra
Murallas de guerra
Bailar hasta la madrugada
Beber y comer como joven
Nadie duerme bajo la luz
Artificial. Contemplar el sonido
De tacones cruzando la plaza mayor
No hay rima ni ritmo como las bocinas
En la Puerta del Sol llena
De jugadores y jueces.

Who has known Madrid?
Streets of brick
Buildings of stone
Murals of war
Dance until the sunrise
Eat and drink like youth
No one sleeps beneath
The artificial light
Contemplate the sound
Of heels crossing the plaza mayor
There is neither rhyme nor rhythm
Like horns in the Puerta del Sol
Full of players and judges.
October 11th 2008
Walked to campus during twilight. Saw a bat darting about and remembered how much I love them. A man in a kilt pushing a carriage of swaddling clothes. I saw the wolf of Sirius Black playfully prowling in the park. Then a trio of Grolsch-toting Scotsmen asked if I was German. I replied no. And they muttered, “Well that’s a first,” as they passed. I wonder if it’s because of my brightly colored hat. Or my melancholic disposition. It was probably because there are a lot of Germans about. A couple of girls pose for a picture ahead of me. I wonder if I’m in it. As they pass, I recognize the harsh throaty grumble of German and smile to myself. I followed a dusty brown moth bug today. Or rather, we were going the same way for a short while. I sorta wish he was still going the same way.

October 17th 2008
I am Battledykes.
I am shelves full of dead men’s medals.
I am terrible sleepless stomach cramps.
I am the manskirts of World War II.
I am writing in a bathroom stall.
I am the man hacking in the sink.
I am sitting on the memory of Alastair Brown and his wife Patzi.
I am dealing with English faucets, American know-it-alls and self-stubbornness.
I am opening some bananas like a woman’s coin purse.
I am Batman Battle Rolls shipped from home.
I am reluctant to open Barnum’s animal crackers.
I am the gossamer slime trail from the slug on my sleeve.
October 20th 2008
Walking to class and it starts raining. The sun is still shining. This is a bi-annual occurrence back home, but I’ve been here a month and it’s happened twice already. It’s just the sort of thing that may start the end of the world. Or at least my version of it. It becomes far more apparent when I scale the seventh floor of the MacRobert’s Building and see the whitecaps over the skyline. Lovely. It is the end. On a similar note, I saw a truck for a bottled water brand called Eden. There was a beautiful woman on the back of it holding a bottle. Oddly enough, she even looked like an Eve. I have some other pungent memory but unfortunately it’s eclipsed by the image of leaves swirling in a gyroscopic globe that’s about to be submerged in water.
Walking Home

Jenna Hertz | Thailand

After weeks of rising at the mercy of local roosters, I awoke one morning and found the world reverberating with a rare silence. Sliding out of my bunk bed, my eyes met a friend’s and together we tiptoed out of the room of sleeping women into the damp world of rice fields.

In a trance-like state, we traced our way through the jungle plants we were learning to identify, embracing the familiar banana trees and avoiding the menacing rattan that sliced at our bare limbs. The emerging sun bathed the forest floor in its restorative light. We walked for walking’s sake, with no determined course or destination.

Walking was my form of meditation in Thailand, a way to process a foreign world on my own terms. As we moved forward, I let my mind wander across my first few months abroad and my building sense of guilt. Everywhere I went, wonderful people had unquestioningly incorporated me into their lives. Homes were offered, but I had not felt at home. It was as if I had been going through the motions of an intricate dance but lacked the vital force that made it a genuine expression.

The jungle trail commanded my attention, and my thoughts refocused on the new path before me. The way was beat low into the ground, scarred by motorcycle tracks, remnants of local farmers bringing their fruit to market. Dense trees covered both sides of the muddy trail, their dark green jungle leaves creating a shaded tunnel.

Walking through this metamorphic passage, I was overwhelmed with the feeling that I could be anywhere in the world. The path recalled the simplicity of the woodchip-blanketed Michigan trails of my childhood, the intricacy of Japanese gardens, and the mystery of an Israeli grove. I felt these disparate threads of my life twisting together into an elegant knot. For the first time, I felt at home.
In Hindi, people greet and take leave of each other with the word “Namaste,” or literally “The God in me recognizes the God in you,” saying it while pressing their palms together as if praying. What a perfectly poignant and beautiful thing to say…and yet I think that perhaps our problem is that we do not recognize the God in ourselves, whether that God recognizes the God in everyone else or not. We must first become conscious of our own individual divinity before we can see the divinity in others. The great Hindu sages knew it; they said we are living in a world of illusions, a world that makes us think that we are all different, and that this is our reality. But in Truth, we are all part of a greater Reality, that of Brahman, or Oneness: the Energy that IS.
It is five o’clock in the morning, the roosters are crowing, and I am searching blindly for my glasses and a flashlight. I sleepily make my way into the kitchen and sit down as close to the fire as I can, pour a glass of water, and greet my Karen host family. Jenna is here too, and as we rub the sleep out of our eyes we prepare for yet another day of adventure. We are in Ban Huay Tong Khoe, a Karen village in the MaeHongSon province of Northern Thailand. The mornings begin early here, and they are characterized by sounds and smells far more than words. At first it is the roosters and pigs, and then the smell of the fire. Soon the women are outside pounding and winnowing rice in a comforting rhythm. They will let me try to do these tasks, but inevitably the result will be everyone laughing at me and my ineptitude. This morning, instead of making a fool of myself, I make my way to the steps that lead up to my house and watch the morning unfold.

By six o’clock, all the neighbors are outside in the streets laughing and talking together. It is still cold, but we are bundled up in wool socks and hats and the sun is starting to come up and warm the air. Soon the kids will be off to school and it will be time for us to convince our host families to allow us to accompany them to the rice fields. This is always challenging, as they want to be hospitable and let us rest, but we are there to learn and participate, leading to a constant battle. This morning, we soon realize, is going to be more difficult than usual.

When Jenna and I suggest, along with our neighbors Autumn and Sae, that we go to the field together our host families quickly reassure us that it’s not necessary and that we should just stay home. They insist that we must be tired, which we say we’re not. Then they say that we might get hurt, because Sae cut her finger yesterday. We assure them we’ll be careful. Finally, as a last resort, they tell us, “You should stay home and wash your shoes.” The four of us exchange horrified glances, wondering if we actually understood them correctly. By now there are four Americans and about six Karen gathered in the street outside our house, and we are all staring at each other in sheer disbelief. Not knowing what else to do, Jenna runs to fetch P Toto, our Karen instructor who can perhaps make it more clear that we really do want to go to the field and have absolutely no interest in washing our shoes.

With the help of P Toto, we understand that they are going to the rice field that is far away, and that’s why we can’t go. Although they are probably lying, we accept this and move on. But now we have nothing to do this morning. That’s when we see a tiny old woman walking barefoot with a basket on her head. “Go with her,” says P Toto. We can’t believe she is serious. She wants all four of us to go with this little woman to do goodness only knows what, and the old lady probably doesn’t want us either, but she won’t say anything. So away we go, up the hill to collect firewood with our new friend.

We have barely left the village limits when this woman tries to get rid of us as well. We are passing a rice field when she tells us to go harvest rice. We tell her we don’t know a single person in that field, but she won’t have it. We are not invited to get firewood with her, so we better make the best of the situation. Although we can’t believe we’ve been rejected again, we settle into harvesting rice with these complete strangers, and everyone is pretty happy.

Later in the afternoon we will attempt to winnow rice. This process is great, because I’m almost positive it is impossible for foreigners to do it. You’re supposed to beat the rice in a rhythm to separate out the parts you can’t eat. The Karen women can do it beautifully, while we spill rice all over the dirt and they crack up. Before the night is over, I will probably hit my head on a ceiling that is too low, Jenna will charm our host family with her Thai and wit, and a six-year-old will show me the proper use of a machete. Somehow, however, there isn’t anywhere else I would rather be.
Querido Quito

Sí, me has llamado nombres feos.
Me has dado comida tóxica, que hacía
fuegos y ríos de mi cuerpo.
Me has olvidado en la línea de los buses,
me has golpeado de ramas y me has picado con moscos,
y siempre me dejas en la lluvia sin paraguas.

Pero en la noche, mi amado, eres
lo más peligroso. Vestido en la niebla,
caminando armado, con tu banda de pájaros de brujos,
tus murciélagos silvestres, por los olores de basura
y flores blancas e intoxicantes.

Yo sé lo que estás haciendo mientras estoy durmiendo,
como has dibujado tu bandera en mis músculos,
has puesto mariposas en mi estómago
que salen por mi boca como palabras extrañas.
Como tus hormigas están marchando
por mi columna vertebral,
cargando pedazos de periódicos
y las cáscaras de mandarinas
para hacerme un nuevo corazón,
en el otro lado de mi cuerpo,
cuyos latidos son lentos, fuertes
haciendo un sonido como los taxis en la lluvia,
que va a traicionar el resto de mis órganos
cuando me voy, y me despertará
con pánico de un descanso tranquilo,
pensando que he oído las tormentas
viniendo del valle, pensando que
 tengo que correr a refugio.

Dear Quito

Yes, you have called me ugly names.
You have given me toxic foods
that have made fire and river of my body.
You have forgotten me in the line of buses,
you have hit me with branches and bitten me with flies,
and always leave me without an umbrella in the rain.

But it’s in the night, my love, that you are
the most dangerous: dressed in fog,
armed and walking with your gang of witch birds
and wild bats through the smells of garbage
and the white, intoxicating flowers.

I know what you are doing while I am asleep,
how you have drawn your flag on my muscles,
how you put butterflies in my stomach
that leave through my mouth as strange words.
How your ants are marching
up the column of my vertebrae,
carrying pieces of newspaper
and the peels of oranges
to build me a new heart,
for the other side of my body,
whose beats are slow and strong,
making a sound like taxis in the rain,
that will betray the rest of the organs
when I leave, and will wake me
from a soft, calm sleep with panic,
thinking I have heard the storms
coming in from the valley,
thinking I have to run for cover.
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“Bonne nuit, merci beaucoup.” French
“Merci, à demain, goodbye.” French
“Ba Baneen!” Wolof
“Oui, ba Baneen, inch Allah” French, Wolof, Arabic
“Inch Allah” Arabic
“Ciao” Italian
“Ok, goodnight!” English