

To See the World Through the Eyes of Another
Molly Black, 2019

Before studying abroad, the world seemed monstrously unattainable. Traveling was something I had dreamed of doing, but it was so expensive and seemingly far away that I thought the places I had only read about would remain in stories and history. As a lover of people, their pasts, and their cultures, when the opportunity came to pursue a semester abroad, I jumped at the chance. I grew up watching BBC television shows, religiously listening to the Beatles, and being fascinated by the English accent (something I have since come to understand is not a singular, unvarying phenomena). It seemed like a given that England was where I was headed. London itself beckoned for so many reasons, one being that it was the setting of so many stories, shows, and movies I love. Secondly, I simply love big cities. Something about the juxtaposition of old versus new, coupled with the historicity that is so vibrantly present in places where people are constantly moving and making decisions has resulted in me feeling anomalously at home in places like New York, Chicago, San Francisco, etc.

I grew up in a town in the middle of Kansas with a population of around 13,000 people. Everyone seemingly knows everyone, and your business is often not only your own. Where my love of cities came from growing up in a place quite the antithesis is still baffling to me, but the opportunity to travel across the ocean was going to be a way to meet new people who lived in dissimilar cultures, spoke languages not offered in my small-town high school, and who simply viewed the world from a perspective seemingly countercultural to my own. I have grown to become so bothered by generalizations, but in the Midwest people tend to think and act very similarly to one another no matter where you venture in that region of the United States. Variations are constantly present, I know so many people in Kansas with differing views than my own, (later on I'll even talk more about how I have learned to appreciate individuality), but if there was ever a place to blanket a culture across miles (or should I say kilometers), the Midwest fits the bill: Europe could not have been any more different.

During my time abroad, I lived right outside the M-25, seventeen or so miles north of London. There, I was studying at The University of Hertfordshire. They boast an enrollment similar to that of Kansas State University, around 24,000. *Twenty Percent* of those students are not from the United Kingdom. That is a *massive* portion of the student body bringing their own culture and traditions into the classroom. Even more diverse is London itself. It is a place of constant motion; everyone has places to go, people to see, and things to do. The city is one of the most ethnically diverse in the world and walking down a single street can expose you to dozens of languages in the span of a few minutes. Once you factor in the component that over fifty percent of London residents are not White English, that constant motion that defines the city becomes a whirlwind of perspective and culture. In Kansas, most people only speak English, but I cannot tell you how many people I met while abroad who are *at least* trilingual to some degree. Over the course of the semester, I traveled to eleven different countries, each so vastly different from the last. In Europe, it is so normal to hop on a plane, train, or ferry to travel a few hours, ending up in another country. Just to put it into perspective, if I drove two hours in Kansas I might find a *slightly larger* town, but I would still have a few more hours before I even crossed the state line. In Europe, culture is so accessible and available; It's just waiting to be

experienced. That is the mindset I tried to embrace while studying, and simply living, this past term.

To say that during this semester I met a few people that completely unhinged my world, is quite the understatement. People are so vastly complex, and I had the privilege of getting to befriend and talk to people who have lived lives I might never have the chance to experience. Words cannot do justice how thankful I am that all people think differently, have opinions, and view life distinctly from their neighbor. I hope that through sharing pieces of these people, the fabric of how we view the human experience becomes a bit brighter, our compassion for others exponentially increases, and our hyper-awareness of things happening outside our direct vicinity is heightened. Meet my friends:

Before I really dive into all of the international people I got to know over the months I was in England, I want to address perhaps the biggest grievance I had while traveling: Americans are sometimes very culturally egoistic. Now, I met dozens of Americans studying at my University, and I will acknowledge that this is more-or-less a conjectured statement - I am not even 100% sure people realize they're doing it- but many of the Americans had such a hard time *fully* stepping into new cultures. From what I gathered, they had a brilliant time, made so many great friends, and got to travel quite a bit - but, a theme was persistent. Perhaps it's due to the fact that Americans don't travel internationally quite as often as Europeans, but time after time I saw people wanting to be catered to. In America, the 'customer is always right', water is free at restaurants, and 'everyone' speaks English fluently. The expectation of a handful of people I met abroad was that these concepts should be universally applied; When the contrary was evident, they grew frustrated. One of the first things I learned, and perhaps one of the most valuable, is that when you step into a new place you need to realize that you're stepping into someone else's culture. Things will not be the same, and while that can honestly be such a frustrating experience, if you take a step back to really look at how and why those things are different than your own culture, you'll slowly begin to appreciate the lack of robotic monotony that categorizes the vastness of culture people possess globally. I'm sure I had expectations of what countries would be like and how people would speak and act within them, but from early on I left that confidence behind to dive head first into a semester of exploration and learning. I don't want to be told *how* I should experience something, I want to find out for myself.

One of the first people I met abroad was my friend Thomas. He is a twenty-five-year old strapping lad from the Netherlands who sports gold, octagonal glasses and a matching calculator watch. He recently decided to attend University after a few years of really 'enjoying' his life. After graduating from the equivalent of high school in the Netherlands (Don't ask me to explain the Dutch school system; I've had it explained countless times and it's still quite a bewilderment to me), he fully embraced his life slogan that he still quotes on the daily, 'I'm here for a good time, not a long time'. Let's just say he no longer has cartilage in his nose because substances not meant to be inhaled were done so, repeatedly. His drink of choice is vodka, with or without a mixer. After five years of pursuing this lifestyle of 'fun' he decided to go back to school. His drink of choice is still definitively vodka, but when I met him in January, he had been clean of substance abuse for at least a few months. Thomas is such a brilliant person. He's smart, business-minded, and such a great conversationalist. He knows a lot about seemingly everything, and he's not afraid to share his opinions backed by an assortment of evidence and examples. He's experienced quite a lot of life in his twenty-five years on the planet, and I think

that's taught him quite a lot about a good many things. He still likes to have drunken chats hanging-out around a table or a couch, but he's become such a generous human. I've never really fancied the taste of alcohol and after about the sixth time I turned down his offer of vodka, he started to offer juice, Coca-Cola, or even water instead: He noticed and took into consideration what was valuable to me, and for that I am grateful. He didn't seem to mind that everyone in his University friend group was about five years younger than him and was even willing to be a personal tour guide when a few of us traveled to his country early on in the semester. When another friend and I booked tickets to visit Amsterdam, it took little convincing to get Thomas to come with to show us around his home, even when we only gave him about three days notice. Because plane tickets were more expensive by that point, he and two of our other friends traveled for twelve hours each way on a coach, just to explore Amsterdam for a weekend. He showed us around Amsterdam and Haarlem (his town a short train ride away) and even introduced us to his Dutch friends, most of whom were around 6'4" and on average 27 years old. He is a contributing factor into how the average demographic age of my friend group rose by about six years while I was in Europe. The numerous life chats I had with Thomas are a great contributing factor into my growing fascination and appreciation of the Dutch people, culture, and language. He never hesitates to answer my questions and assures me he isn't annoyed with how inquisitive I am. For some reason while abroad I met an abnormal amount of Dutch people, and I'm incredibly lucky that Thomas was the one who first showed me his people.

Another Dutch I met while abroad was a girl named Michelle. Back in the Netherlands she actually studies at the same University as Thomas, but neither of them realized until they met while abroad. Slowly throughout the semester we drifted apart, but I vividly remember a conversation I had with her early on when I was in Amsterdam and she was back in London. Amsterdam was the first place I traveled out of the United Kingdom and thus my first ever experience in a country where the first language spoken by its residents is not English. Almost everyone undoubtedly will speak English if you need them to, but day-to-day conversation and banter happens in Dutch (duh). It was fine when Thomas was letting us basically follow him around while he tour-guided us through his country, but one of the days he visited his family, and we were left on our own.

I am a crazy-observant individual. Often that can be helpful, but other times it's quite a vice. Because of this, coupled with the aforementioned mindset a lot of Americans have when traveling, I took on the role of being the navigator. Another duh moment, but all of the street signs in the Netherlands are in Dutch. I, an American who speaks a singular language because I don't thrive in educational-Spanish, was a tad overwhelmed by the third day of trying to get around in a country that for some reason adds so many extra letters to their already-abnormally-long words. By the end of our third day, I felt like I was on the verge of being partially comatose and didn't really understand why. Looking back, I think that was perhaps the moment I experienced my first dose of 'culture shock'. I was mentally and physically exhausted because my attention-detailed brain had to be that much more in a constant state of hyper-awareness, because I didn't understand the language I was immersed in. Throughout the weekend I had been texting Michelle, and I mentioned how isolating it felt to be surrounded by people who don't speak your language.

As a person who *thrives* off of sitting, observing, and listening, Amsterdam really stretched me in a way I hadn't quite experienced before. Especially if people are tipsy, or simply joking around with their friends, the average Dutch person isn't going to think to first speak in English unless they know you're obviously not from their country. When I couldn't sit, observe, and listen, because I couldn't understand the situation even if I tried, I had to rely on other senses to compensate and was in a constant state of reliance on Maps and Google Translate to get me where I needed to go. After relaying this all to Michelle, her answer was simple: 'Now you know how I feel most of the time'. Conversationally, her English is quite strong. It definitely takes her longer than most Dutch people I know to find the right word or to really speak her thoughts out loud, but I hadn't really contributed all of that to the fact that her brain was constantly in motion to over-compensate a language barrier. When I traveled to Spain later in the semester, the little, and I stress *little*, Spanish I knew was definitely put to the test. I understood about 40% of what was going on around me in conversation, but couldn't reply to save my life. I think I realized that because I knew the little that I did, it was even that much more frustrating not being able to comprehend the fullness of what was going on around me. This, coupled with my experience in Amsterdam and subsequent conversation with Michelle, really changed my perspective as I traveled a lot more in the later parts of the semester. If you're speaking with someone whose native language isn't English, no matter how fluent they seem to be, be patient. As cheesy as it sounds speak slowly at first, and always approach conversations with an abundant amount of grace. Even in the minimal amount that I did, I experienced frustration through a language barrier. It happened over and over again throughout the semester, but I'm grateful my first encounter was early on, because it truly changed my perspective for the ones that came afterwards.

The first week at the University of Hertfordshire an event was put together at the campus bar labeled, 'Speed Friending'. From simply the title alone, it sounded like a literal hell for me, but with some convincing from some Americans I had met, I went. As it turned out, the event wasn't organized well. However, what initially seemed like a fiasco became a blessing in disguise. Instead of a quasi-speed dating set-up, a large group of international students simply sat around a giant table and chatted... for hours. This taught me an important lesson early on: organization is not the key to everything. I tend to organize everything; my thoughts, my things, my schedule. That doesn't fly when you find yourself surrounded by people, and even countries, who aren't type A. Increased flexibility and spontaneity slowly worked their way into how I began to think and make decisions; I'm still a great fan of lists and planning ahead, but I like to think that I look at the unknown in a bit of a different light nowadays.

The conversational spectacle lasted well into the evening, and by the end we had created a giant group message with most of the students we had met. Subsequent groups were created as the semester progressed, and friendships were definitely fluid for the following months, but I met a core group of my University friends that night. Because the international students arrived on campus around a week before the normal students returned from their holiday, almost none of the people I met were actually British. I'm not entirely sure why he was there, I never asked, but in that group of internationals was an eighteen year-old native-South-Londoner named Zet. He was a normal British student at the Uni and just happened to be there a week earlier than all of his friends. As the night drew to a close, he overheard a group of us talking about catching the train into London the next day and offered to show us around his city.

Zet is a brave soul; he took fourteen of us through London on a twelve mile jaunt to all of the major sights scattered throughout. The minute we arrived, I fell in love with his city. After that day, almost any free day I had where I wasn't traveling outside of the United Kingdom, I ventured into London. Given that I had chosen the University I did because of its proximity to London, I knew I wanted to spend every waking moment there, but I think because that first trip was such a vivid experience, London thereafter just felt exciting and comfortable. Talking to some of my friends at the end of the semester about their experiences with London honestly surprised me. Some had only gone into the actual city three or four times; by my count I had been there over twenty five. If you want to know where most of my savings went, look no further than train ticket stubs and coffee shop receipts; It was all undoubtedly worth it and those experiences were influenced by that first trip with my home boy, Zet.

Zet is an interesting guy. He's named after Nelson Mandela's gardener, and he always carries around a container of pasta in his bag for when he gets hungry. He has a dodgy knee due to a football (I'm sorry, *soccer*) injury, but you wouldn't ever know it's bothering him. He's studying model-design and has a knack for building things, thus his room is covered in a thin layer of sawdust because he's constantly tinkering and making things. Whenever he has an idle moment, he's sketching on a pad from his backpack. Perhaps his most distinct attribute is his hair: a magnificent afro that looks different almost every day, but is surely a sight to behold.

Zet grew up in South London, specifically in an area called Catford. He's lived there his entire life, so he doesn't really know much different. South London already has a reputation for not being the safest area of the city, and Catford especially gets a bad rep, but Zet loves his home. One weekend he took me and some friends to his house, a really small flat on a street with 75 others just alike. His house is exactly in the middle, so despite which end of the road the bus drops him off at, he has a walk either way. His room doesn't fit much other than his bed, a trend that leaks into the rest of the flat as a whole, but his parents are such creative people that the house throws out brilliant, eclectic vibes. Cyan blue walls frame the living room, hand-crafted ships hang from the ceilings, and paintings done by Zet's father hang on many a wall.

His dad works in the set department for the West End production of *The Lion King*, while his mom teaches dance to elementary-aged students. His parents still live together in the flat, but they really aren't... 'together'. It's hard to listen to Zet talk about it, because you can tell it really bothers him. His mom and dad are never home at the same time, they don't honestly even speak. They more-or-less cohabit. The reason? The housing situation in London is atrocious. His parents bought the flat around 17 years ago for a modest £170,000. Now, the same microscopic flat situated in one of the worst areas of London is worth over a half-million. His parents who both have decent-paying jobs still can't afford to move; They can't afford to separate. Ergo, they continue to co-habituate. All in all their life is an eye-opening experience for sure, because the same amount of money in my state would buy a mansion and perhaps a few cars to top it off.

The most vivid conversation I had with Zet revolved around the reputation of his area in Catford; During the day when we went to visit his mom and flat, it seemed perhaps a bit run-down, but very normal otherwise. Zet cautioned that it's not the safest area once it starts to approach night. Zet is at least 6'2", and he's black. He's the kind of person society has unfortunately told us to avoid if we're walking home alone, in the dark. Now, the thing that shocked me was Zet said he often genuinely feels unsafe in his own neighborhood at night.

There have been numerous reports of stabbings near where he lives, so he's constantly watching his back to avoid getting caught up in an unfortunate situation that doesn't have anything to do with him. If it's dark, he puts in headphones, pulls up his hood, stands a bit taller, and does whatever else he can trying to seem at least a bit scarier than the other 'dodgy' people walking around in the same place. Let me reiterate, he's only eighteen. Talking to Zet sometimes just breaks my heart, because for him this is his constant reality. Despite it all, he's genuinely one of the most compassionate people I've ever met. The world needs more Zet's, that's for sure.

I previously mentioned how the average age of my friendships increased by about six years or so when I moved to England; Hillsong Church is a big contributing factor. I'm really involved with student ministries and church in the States, so finding something similar in England was important to me. I met a few friends my age through a small Christian group at the University of Hertfordshire, but I really wanted to experience church in London itself. In Kansas I have a friend who had previously studied in London as an architecture student. His suggestion was that I check out Hillsong; If not for a permanent church home, at least for the music.

If you're unfamiliar, Hillsong is a global church that started in Australia. They have locations across the world, several worship bands, and are the creative minds behind a good majority of modern worship music sung in more contemporary churches. The Hillsong I attended in London is located in the magnificently-beautiful Dominion Theatre; on weekdays, it's still home to West End shows, but Sundays are reserved for Hillsong. None of my international friends were all that interested in church, so Hillsong was initially a solo ordeal. The minute I walked in the doors of the theatre for the first time, I was greeted by so many people. Before traveling abroad, I had a preconceived notion that mega-churches like Hillsong weren't my speed: They weren't personal, they only cared about attendance and money, and the messages were habitually shallow. Hillsong flipped that notion up-side down and rocked my world for the few months attended. That first Sunday I met a magnificence soul named Victoria; She has perhaps the biggest heart of any individual I've ever encountered, and through her I found a group of people I can genuinely call friends despite them all being five to ten years my senior. Through Victoria I met my friend Sol, an Icelandic Fashion Designer living in London while she completes her schooling. Through Victoria I also met my friend Aidan who invited me to watch true English football on numerous occasions (If Liverpool is playing, he'll be glued to the television for ninety straight minutes, so don't even think about trying to engage in a conversation). He's a brilliant soul who is half Irish, half Welsh, lives in England, but went to University in the States: His accent is consequently by far my favorite I've ever heard, and he has superb taste in music. Hillsong was a blessing in more ways than I can count, and it was perhaps my hardest goodbye at the end of my time abroad. Aside from the 'adults' that befriended me, Hillsong was also the reason I encountered two of my favorite people I met during my time in England; Yes, they're also Dutch. I told you I loved the Netherlands.

After church on Sundays people from Hillsong always go hang out at a coffee and juice bar a few blocks from the Dominion. It's a chance for friends to catch up and a chance for people new to church to meet others who are involved. Per the prompting of Victoria, Sol and I began talking with two guys who were just visiting the church: Jelte and Jordy. They were only in London for the weekend, but given how the flight time from Amsterdam to London is only 45 minutes, it wasn't all that surprising they booked a spur-of-the-moment trip. The two had met at

their church back in the Netherlands only about three weeks prior to their trip to London; they hit it off and on a whim found insanely cheap round-trip tickets to London. Jordy does graphic design work, and Jelte is a full-time photographer. I only talked with them for around thirty minutes because I had plans elsewhere in the city, but instagram accounts were followed because I wanted to see their creative work. This all happened fairly early on in the semester; I went about my life, they went back to theirs. Seemingly end of story.

Fast-forward to the end of May when University finals are in full swing. The English schooling system through me for a loop, honestly in general. Each class only happens once a week, and they're exponentially geared more towards a self-taught approach to education. I surprise myself by saying this, but I am not sure I love their system. It's ostensibly a perfect match for my personality: I'm extremely independent, I love to read, I enjoy having free time to do what I want - when I want - but, I think most of the learning I did this semester ultimately happened *outside* of the classroom. Grades for courses consist of only one or two components, some combination of a project, paper, or an exam at the end of the term. Because this is the case, there is almost zero way to track the progression of your learning throughout the semester. Teachers in the United States will give quizzes, tests, papers, and projects *in addition* to the final. Sometimes it's an excessive amount of work, but at least you can track if you are following what the teacher has been lecturing. Projects and papers in England are inordinately specific, and you often only have a dyad of opportunities to prove you know what you are doing. I could give you painstaking details about Ireland's specific state-building policies to garner their new identity after becoming an independent country in the 1930s, but ask me anything about the other dozen states we covered in an entire course on the Inter-War period, and I'm at a loss. Hence, my frustration.

Another structural difference between U.S. Uni versus the U.K.'s, is exams are proctored by an outside group of people, and they're spread out over a period of three weeks. The way my exam schedule worked out meant I had an entire week off in between two of my tests. I wouldn't wish the exorbitantly long exam period on educational institutions in the United States, but it works to your advantage if you still have places to travel towards the end of your semester abroad. The nature of my final exam was such that even if I had studied for my entire week off, straight, it wouldn't really have helped the end result. Because I was confident in the material, I was looking to travel for that week instead. My other University friends had already made plans that clashed with the days I had free, and idea after idea kept falling through. Somehow during this time I began talking again with my two Dutch friends I had met months before, and the idea was proposed: 'Come back to The Netherlands!'. Because I'm unashamedly obsessed with their country for some inexplicable reason, I was down. Everything seemed to fall into place. Where I had been previously anxious - regarding things like who I was going to travel with, where I was going to go, when, costs, etc. - these details came together rapidly. The biggest component was actually convincing my parents that my two friends weren't serial killers. I fully saw their concern: I personally had met these two people for a total of only thirty minutes and would be traveling back to the country where I had a quasi-panic attack because everything is in Dutch. The situation was ludicrous, but I had incomprehensible peace about the entire situation, and I somehow convinced my parents that these guys were real people, *normal* people, who weren't going to kill me the minute I arrived. It ended up becoming quite possibly my favorite week I lived abroad.

This second trip to the Netherlands was inversely more relaxed than the first. Even though I had only been in the country for a few days the first time around, the second trip instantly felt more comfortable. I knew my way around the airport, I at least knew what train I needed to be on despite not recognizing - or being able to pronounce - any town names, and I went in with the mindset that not knowing the language wasn't the end of the world. In fact, between my first and second times in the Netherlands I had been to Ireland, Italy, and Spain, all of which conduct a good majority of their business in languages other than English. My first trip to the Netherlands was such a significant experience, still one of my favorites, but I had been mentally uprooted because it was the first time I experienced a culture where people thought and acted so vastly differently than me. Looking back on all that I experienced during the months in between my visits, I've realized that sometimes the difference in culture lies *substantially* more with the individuals of a place than with the country itself.

The minute I stepped off the plane I was greeted by Jordy. We went to a music festival straight away where we met up with Jelte, and I was introduced to so many of their friends that it took me a while to even remember half of their names. Honestly, the week was so normal. We went to a youth night at their church, I went to Amsterdam for a day when they had to work, I stayed in an actual *house* (flat, whatever). I won't lie and say the language 'barrier' - for lack of a better term - didn't lead to some isolationist moments when we were in larger groups, but their friends are some of the most gracious and loving people you'll ever meet in your life and thus definitely tried to up their English-speaking moments when I was around. It was such a polar experience to my first trip to the Netherlands. I sound like a broken record, because I genuinely appreciated and loved my first time to good old Holland, but this time I guess I felt that I was simply able to live life with them for a week.

The Netherlands definitely has a significant bicycle culture, they really like their pancakes, and for some unfathomable reason like eating salted - black licorice and herring. However, my new group of friends' personal lives fully shape their personal cultures and subsequently how they view the world; They're significantly more my speed than the first group of Dutch I met months before. The culture of a country isn't comprehensive and static; preconceived notions will do you no good, because just as every individual is unique, so therefore is personal culture: Amsterdam culture differs from that of Zwolle which differs from that of Maastricht. Even more introspectively, the individual people who live in those places can live lives significantly contrary to their neighbors living in the same place. If you find people you click with and truly enjoy being around, a trip across the world seems less daunting, more inviting, and makes saying goodbye a particularly heart-wrenching experience. Let me just say, FaceTime is such a brilliant invention.

The next three people I met while traveling throughout Europe were introduced to me by a friend I've known since second grade. Her name is Hannah, and she has spent the last two summers in Athens, Greece and Leipzig, Germany working with Muslim refugees. She is such a relational person with a heart for ministry and people, thus making friends wherever she goes. When she was first in Athens, she met a young girl named Katerina whose mother helped organize a sports camp for children of refugees. At the end of my semester, Hannah flew to Europe and we traveled ten days together across four countries; One of the places we visited was Athens. We met up with Katerina, now 17, and she showed us around her city. Again, I feel like a broken record when describing the folk I kept meeting, but Katerina is one of the warmest

individuals I have ever encountered. She has such love for everyone she meets, regardless of who they might be. The religious breakdown of Greece is heavily one-sided: over 90% of its population proclaims Orthodoxy. Katerina is in a unique position: she is an Evangelical Christian. Non-Catholic Christians who don't practice Orthodoxy only make up around three percent of Greece's population, and Katerina told us a bit about her experience in such a small minority. For her, it feels as if every aspect of the society in which she lives is proclaiming that her religious views and practices are flawed and misguided. However, despite this, she stands firm in her faith and proclaims love right back to the intimidation.

The second Athenian I met was an older lady named Sofia. She was a neighbor of one of Hannah's other friends, Fran, whom Hannah met her first time to Greece. Sofia is a Greek Orthodox, and speaks no English. She stepped into somewhat of a grandmotherly role to Fran's children, taught them some Greek, and was simply a friend. When Hannah and I met up with Sofia in Athens, we went to see a movie in an outdoor movie theatre. We figured it would be a safe option because while the movie was in English, it had Greek subtitles. Trying to communicate with Sofia consisted of speaking extremely slowly, using simple words and a lot of repetition. Even that was tirelessly trying on Sofia's limited English knowledge, so we always ended up resorting to texting through Google Translate. Hannah had spent *physical* face to face time with Sofia on many occasions, but due to the language barrier had never had an actual *conversation* face to face.

The day after the movie we saw Katerina again and all talked a bit about Sofia, whom Katerina had never met. Being the endearing person that she is, Katerina insisted upon meeting Sofia and volunteered to act as a translator. Despite being separated by generations, religion, and language, Hannah and Sofia were finally able to 'speak' face to face. The four of us sat in a cafe for hours, completely overwhelmed by how many pieces of definite cultures were converging to bring such a beautiful moment to light. It is in certain moments like these that the world doesn't feel so awfully big. Individual cultures are so beautifully intricate and distinct, but there have been several instances in the last few months where I have come to realize that common ties of humanity true to all of the world's idiosyncrasies result in somewhat of a cultural paint palette. Think of cultures as colors: there are certain primary colors from which all others deviate. Distinct shades and hues can be discovered and created, yes. But, all are ultimately variations of a finite number of common colors. In an analogous way, our world is full of shades and hues of culture. But, there must be certain factors - like the finite primary colors - that allow for the situation with Hannah, Katerina, Sofia, and I that crossed unthinkable boundaries. I think it's quite a challenge to remove yourself from your personal hue in order to see the bigger picture, because we're often comfortable where we are. However, life is so much more than living in a world that looks like Picasso's 'Blue Period'. I won't get any more 'metaphysical- Bob Ross' than I already have, but I'm certain our world would look a whole lot more beautiful if we were aware of how many other colors - hues, shades and all - that exist outside of our comfort zone, as well as discovering what commonalities tie even the most juxtapositioned of peoples together.

The last extraordinary person I met through Hannah, was Ghofran. 'Fran' is a refugee who met Hannah when they were both living in Athens. Originally from Iraq, Fran and her family moved to Athens as refugees. After a few years there, they relocated to Germany. She is a single mother raising three children and a devout Shia Muslim. When we visited her in

Germany, we happened to be there during the month of Ramadan. For Muslims, this means no food or drink from sun-up to sun-down. I can't fathom fasting for such a long period of time, on top of trying to take care of three children who need to be taken to school, fed, and kept busy, whilst also being a host to two guests, whilst *also* stopping to pray five times a day; To say she is a super-human is putting it lightly.

Fran's life has been uprooted so many times, forcing her to relocate her entire family, yet she remains thankful and full of unprompted hope and joy. I'm not entirely sure if she even has a place she would definitively call her 'home', having become such a multicultural person trying her best to fit into a new space that's not quite right every time she has to move. Her three children are such compelling personalities, largely because of who their mother is, but also as a result of having lived in so many places. While the youngest only speaks Arabic, the oldest two speak Arabic and almost-fluent English in addition to German and bits of Greek. Given that the oldest is eleven years younger than me, I think I need to brush up on my language-speaking abilities. Their space is limited, their personal possessions are few, but their spirit and life is abundant. Talk about a situation where culture collides, I spent two days with another American Christian, an Iraqi-Muslim-single-mother and her three children, in Germany. It's a friendship that from an outside perspective seems unlikely, and to some iniquitous. Hannah and Fran's relationship is so much more than simply a friendship; it's somewhere between a mother-daughter relationship, a sisterhood, and a strictly platonic soulmate situation. Yet, from the moment I arrived, I was welcomed both into Fran's house, and this relationship, with open arms. She cooked us Middle Eastern food, took us around Leipzig, allowed us into every aspect of her life - new and old - and simply stayed up talking with us until the early hours of the morning. Even from the brief time I got to spend with Fran and her family, it further cemented the fact that friendships crossing unconventional boundaries are some of the most precious and beautiful to be had. Wherever you find yourself, situations are what you make of them and whether you choose to let joy in or not.

To try and fully communicate all that I learned through the humans and happenstances I encountered abroad would take so many words I do not possess. I have tried to convey my thankfulness and wonder for my time abroad by talking through my friendships, but people are so rich and full of stories, perspectives, and ideas, that mere words cannot do them full justice. Through my friend Sam I learned that taking a gap year, or three, to figure out your life can be rewarding. He also further exposed me to true English football culture, and is now a kindred spirit in supporting teams that we know will inevitably lose, yet are loved anyways (Can I hear it for the Royals and Ipswich Town F.C.???). Through my friend Dela I learned that boldness can be so admirable, and that even if you don't hold all of the same strong convictions and opinions, conversation is still such a welcome and non-divisive component of a friendship. Esther taught me unrelenting joy, Jesse taught me kindness, Harrison taught me genuineness. Jeanne taught me laughter, Charlie taught me quiet confidence, and Alex taught me that sometimes it's okay to leave your posh job working for the film studio producing the new Lion King movie, to move to Wales simply to go bouldering and work at a hostel.

It doesn't matter how many, or few, conversations I had with people during my time in Europe; I am undoubtedly in their debt for shaping how different of a person I became when I stepped off the plane in May than I had been when I stepped on it back in January. Being back has been the biggest adjustment of my life, and I am confident I left at least some part of me

back across the ocean. It's the most bittersweet feeling in the world to know that your friends are continuing to live the life you left behind, miles and hours away. However, to have tasted how much the world and its people have to offer, my eyes are now seeing so many new shades and hues every time I turn the corner.