



*Note: This story was published in Issue 01 of the Que Será zine, put together by Izel Villarba. You can see the full version of the zine and the rest of his work [here](#).*

## **You Step Off the Plane Already - Billy Richling**

You step off the plane already drenched in reverence and nostalgia. You're back from a semester abroad and it's like, where do you even start?

You travelled the world, made memories in alluring locales including (and limited to) western Europe, central Europe, even northern Europe. There you are: studying the local language, wandering the streets, becoming immersed in cultures different from your own. You throw yourself into it, really try to dig in, to squeeze so hard you get some of it under your fingernails and never wash your hands again.

And you learn so much. You can't believe how well these cities work, how clean the metros are, how beautiful everything is, how it's all got that 'Old World' aesthetic. I mean, don't get it confused, you know everything's not perfect there. Bullfighting in Spain, for example. Horrific, you tell your friend over breakfast sausages at some East Village diner. I left after the first bull. But, you figure, Spain is a land of contradictions, and you have to take the bad with the good. Honestly, America could learn a thing or two from these guys. You know you have.

It's tough to articulate exactly how you change. Your classes are lame so you mostly blow them off, but you spend a lot of time just thinking, about your life, the kind of person you want to be, all the things you were afraid to think about back home. The wine is much cheaper there so you drink it all the time, and then you have deep conversations with your friends about sunsets and Tame Impala, or how dealing with that Ryanair lady taught you what it means to be independent. You and your friends make a bunch of those Chinese lantern things and toss them into the sky and watch them float away. On a weekend trip to Mallorca, you jump off a big rock into a freshwater lake.

In March, you strike up a brief but passionate romance with a grad student named Natalie, who you refer to as "a local girl" in conversations with your friends from home, even though she's from Michigan, because she's in Barcelona for a year-long fellowship. When it's time for her to leave, you share a tearful goodbye and talk about how you'll meet up sometime back in the States. You send her a Spotify playlist you put together. The whole experience is very meaningful.

“This is all very meaningful,” you say later, as Kyle shows you GoPro footage of a trip to Munich. You don’t really like EDM but you use an Avicii song for the soundtrack because it’s the only music you can think of that’s as epic as your experiences. You’re going to remember all this for a long time.

Now, you’re back in New York, and you’re seeing the city, your city, in a whole new light. It’s so weird, you tell your friends. Things are just like, so different here. The lights, the noise. The bagels. Some of it you missed. But other stuff you’re now seeing with fresh eyes, European eyes, like you’ve been nearsighted for years and you’re trying on a pair of European designer eyeglasses for the first time.

Why is the subway so fucking dirty, you ask your friend, as the two of you take an Uber to a kickback in East Williamsburg. And like, the trains never fucking come. You’ve gotta see the Paris Metro at some point, beautiful as fuck, dude. Oh and, by the way, it’s pronounced platha, you tell your friend when he asks you if you saw the Plaza de Santa Ana in Madrid, where he went in eighth grade with his family. You always pronounce names of places with the proper accent because you really respect other cultures.

Speaking of culture, you’re increasingly concerned about local issues, like gentrification in Brooklyn. Banksy was right, you tell your friend over vegetarian burrito bowls; Wall Street runs this city. The two of you discuss the ways in which you’re fighting to preserve New York’s authentic culture. I mean, sure, you don’t know your city council person’s name, and you’ve never been to a community board meeting (you’re not sure what a community board is), and you’ve never set foot inside a city public school, public housing project or public library, and you’ve never been to three of the five boroughs, and you’re not sure who Robert Moses is (you think you read some of his stuff in high school). But you use words like neoliberalism and heteropatriarchy a lot, so you figure you’re doing what you can to support the struggle.

The struggle, though, isn’t just local; you’re a global citizen and you care about global issues. You’re very concerned about the situation in the Middle East. Abroad, you read an excerpt from *Orientalism* by Edward Said, and in April you took a weekend trip to Morocco, where you rode camels and bartered for exotic pottery at the souq. In Tangier, you walked between the medina and the ville nouvelle and thought about how the city is a land of contradictions. You suppose it’s fair to say you’ve decolonized your mind.

Still, even with all these new passions and concerns, now that you’re home, things don’t feel quite the way you thought they would. The euphoria of traveling fades,

obviously, but so do the quiet self-conspirations that come with living in a place you don't understand. Mundane tasks take on a strange sense of finality. You start to feel as though a vital chapter in your life story has come and gone too quickly. Even when you've only been home a couple weeks, the whole semester feels like it's hurtling into the distant past.

The reds and yellows of your memory get warmer, fuzzier and less clearly defined. You linger at parties, mostly because you're drunk but also because doing so makes the night feel longer. You use your camera like a flashlight, taking pictures of the same people over and over, hoping you'll catch your own footsteps in the corner of an image.

You figure all the traveling has made you more sophisticated and multicultural, and maybe home just isn't doing it for you anymore. I mean, don't get me wrong, you're pumped to be back in the States, where you've got Duane Reade and peanut butter, but those things mean less to you than they used to or, even worse, they feel the same as they did before you left.

Two months in, you start to reminisce more often. Prague, dude, you say to whoever will listen, great fucking city. Beer is cheaper than water, it's great, fuck, like Disney World on crack. You try to make sangria in your kitchen, but it tastes like someone poured diesel into a bottle of Fanta Fruit Twist. Near the end of July, you stumble across Natalie's Twitter; some guy is serial-favoriting her tweets. His name is 'Fresco' and he's got three followers, but you assume the worst. You almost write an angry message, but instead you masturbate and put together another Spotify playlist.

Classes start up again in the fall, and they're terrible. Quantitative Approaches To Political Science makes you want to slam your head against a wall. The work is more rigorous at home than it was abroad, which is probably a good thing. But you hate the rigidity of your daily schedule, and the three-hour seminars rip you to shreds.

Soon enough, you fall behind on course readings, and in a moment of weakness, you ask a freshman year fling if you can come over to copy notes for the class you're in together. Halfway to her place, you get a four-part text about youth, the movie Her, and the reasons she just can't bear to see your face right now. You're engrossed enough in the message to walk head-on into a parked car, which sends your phone flying. Replacing the shattered screen costs ninety dollars.

You blame it all on your sleep schedule, on the suburb you were raised in, even the music you've been listening to. You get images stuck in your head, ones you tried

and failed to capture on film, of the block where you lived or the view facing south from the park. A couple kids that lived nearby, kids from your program, know the view you're thinking of, and the memory blooms in your conversations.

You speculate about the neighborhood below the park, which you never saw from ground level, and the angular tv antennae tacked onto the homes there. You flesh out the streets with storefronts and bike racks from other cities, and populate it with kids you knew in middle school. You imagine them older, gathered around a metro station, making jokes in a language you don't understand, and you start to wonder if studying abroad is the most American thing you've ever done.

In January, to celebrate a year since you left for Europe, you share a photo on Facebook. Your friends call it blurry, poorly composed; you call it hallucinatory. You get forty-three likes, and that's pretty much the end of it.