

A Fraud, That's What I Am

{A PERSONAL NARRATIVE}

Gold Key, 2025 Pennsylvania Scholastic Writing Awards

Each year, the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards recognize outstanding works by high school students on a regional and national level. Students earning a Gold Key on the regional level are automatically considered for national honors.

"...and [I] cannot really call myself an Indian, an American or an Englishman."

Pico Iyer "Why We Travel"

Despite the lack of an Oxford comma, I find I have never related to anything as much as I have this sentence. I am a citizen of Canada, a descendant of a Chinese family that goes back thousands of years, and a resident of Pottstown, Pennsylvania doing a school year abroad in Italy. Yet, I cannot say that I belong wholly to any one of these aspects of my being. It is only the combination of such factors that make me who I am. To ask me which part of me I identify with more would be to ask me which limbs I identify more with: my arms or my legs? It sounds ridiculous, I am aware, but that is precisely my point. I cannot live without my poutine and my ice hockey as much as I cannot live without Chinese New Year and boiling tea on a hot summer day or the buffalo chicken mac and cheese panini from Wawa. I would not be complete.

It is interesting to see that in being a mix of the three cultures I am alienated in all of them rather than having three places to call home.

On the first day of pre-season this year our coach asked each of us to introduce ourselves and say where we are from.

"I'm from Limerick, PA,"

"I was born in Beijing,"

"I grew up in LA,"

We went around the circle. As I waited for my turn, I raked my fingers through the rough carpet beneath my hands, counting how many blue threads separated one red thread from another. My nails caught on each one, parting the sea of color, making it easy for me to figure out precisely how many individual strands there were. One blue, two blue, three blue...eight blue, nine blue—red. I listened as each person gave simple answers to the deceptively simple question our coach had posed. To them, all those things were synonymous. To be from, to be born, and to live somewhere meant the same thing. But for me, each one represented something different, another chapter of my life that makes me who I am. Each one required context and



"After School"

explanation so when it came time for me to answer I simply said: "I live in Pottstown right now."

To say anything else would induce hours of conversation and questioning that I am all too tired of now. We ask people where they are from to gain a better understanding of who they are as a person—except when people ask me, they either leave knowing only a fraction of my being or they leave confused by the fact that I was born in London, Ontario, where I lived for the first five months of my life before moving to Vancouver, BC, for five years before living in Shanghai for seven years before moving back to Canada, this time staying in Ottawa, for two years before heading to Pennsylvania for high school. By the end of it all, the only thing they can remember is that there is a London in Canada.

I am still not entirely sure how all these moments have led to me being here in Italy, doing a school year

abroad. I remember in the early days of my classics journey an SYA representative had come to my school to introduce the program to us.

I had just climbed up three flights of stairs to get to the language floor of the Athey Academic Center. I shifted uncomfortably under my navy-colored cotton blazer - only two months into my new school, I was still unused to the sensation. I dropped my backpack onto my small grey desk, ready to take a seat.

"Don't sit down just yet, Liz," advised my Latin teacher at the time, "we're about to head over to Mr. Smith's classroom to listen to a presentation." Gesturing with his arms so that his walnut brown leather elbow patches creaked with his movements, he explained to us that it was for a study abroad program called School Year Abroad (SYA). There were eight of us in that Latin 1 class. Once we had all arrived, we made our way down the hallway and filed into Mr. Delucia's classroom. Some of us took seats with the class already in there and the rest stood in the back when the chairs had run out. There was a woman at the front of the room, presumably the one giving the presentation, deep in conversation with Mr. Smith. The space between us filled with whispers as we waited for her talk to begin.

This was not my first encounter with SYA, and it would not be the last. My two prefects that year, Jane and Bella, had been in SYA Spain and SYA France respectively the year prior, and it seemed all they could do was say amazing things about the program. During our first week they told us to all apply when we were given the chance. "There's nothing else like it," they raved. Surely, they were exaggerating.

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I shifted in my seat as the woman introduced herself and began to speak. My friend Cecile was right next to me.

What's for lunch? she asked.

I whispered back to her. Not sure. I hope it's chicken tenders.

We did, in fact, have chicken tenders for lunch. I don't really remember much else, but here I am now, in Viterbo, so something from that day must have left a mark on me.

As I write this, I am sitting at a desk in Aula E. The window is open, and the breeze is causing my hair to drift into my eyes. I think the major motivation behind me coming here is that I love the classics. What better place to study Latin and Ancient Greek than the place where it was spoken thousands of years ago? I am constantly awed by the influence of the classical world on present-day Viterbo and its surrounding towns. Each time I visit one of the countless churches within a five-minute walk from school what stands out most to me is how much Latin there is.

Still, each time I open my textbook and analyze Caesar instead of Confucius I cannot help but feel as though I am a traitor. In being here, I have found a wealth of knowledge regarding the ancient Western world, but in turn I have left behind my identity as a Chinese. A fraud, that's what I am. Why am I studying the root language of English? Why am I not studying Traditional Chinese? Why am I not studying modern-day Chinese? I can barely even text my parents without putting their messages through Google Translate. Each step I take walking into my Latin class, into my Greek class, into the Etruscan tombs I am volunteering at, into Bar 103, and into Café Cavour is a step away from my ancestors, my grandparents, and my parents—from my history.

Typically, you understand more about a person the longer you know them for. I am the opposite. Wait, you're Canadian? Do you go to school in Canada? Do



"Alone Among People"

you live in Pennsylvania? You go to school in Pennsylvania? How does that work? Do you still have your house in Canada? Do you have a house in Pennsylvania? The longer I am friends with someone the more confused they are by me.

But what no one understands is that I am as puzzling to myself as I am to everyone else. I cannot explain myself to you because I do not know how to explain myself to me. I am at once from both everywhere and nowhere at all.

Will my story ever be completely understood? Will I ever be completely understood?

I suppose we'll have to wait and see.

The names in this piece have been changed to maintain the anonymity of the people mentioned.