

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Wet Hair

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This is a touching journey of self discovery. Martina Nati's destination is Nottingham, England, a country 'as beautiful as it is cold and windy', where she cannot make up her mind if her real home is there, or back in Italy; until she realizes that there is 'absolutely no need to'. It is a stylistically bold account, in which the writer has hit the return key after every sentence, and in which every other sentence, or almost, begins with the personal pronoun I. But it works. And the wet hair? This provides the central metaphor for the account: you don't realize your hair is wet when you're under water, but 'once you get out, you find yourself carrying undeniable proof of your marine life to unknown shores.' Which is another way of saying, the experience abroad marks you, and you take it back home with you. Because yes, Martina left for England to find her way home; and she did, and it was 'exactly where I had left it.'

I left for England because I thought that, by leaving, I would somehow find my way home. A new home, a new culture to dwell into, new air to fill my lungs, new experiences to drunken my youth.

New, new. Everything had to be new. Everything away was as desirable as a shimmering diamond behind the glass of a window.

– You look so English – they said every time they looked at me, at the way I behaved and sat quietly among the guffaws at the restaurant. – You don't look Italian at all.

I heard that so many times I convinced myself it was true, and this new truth of mine grew stronger and stronger and it made its way upstream in my veins and in my mind.

I don't look Italian.

At all.

Then, what did I look like? Which one among the many places on this Earth was my real home? All I knew, was that Italy was not.

Then maybe it was England.

Now that I think about it, it was not the hope to find a new home that pushed me to leave. Maybe it was the need – the irresistible urge – to find myself.

Or maybe it was both.

I do not know at which point my homeland and my identity intertwined to the point of becoming one. I have never paid much attention to myself.

The problem is that after years and years of distractions, the only way to get to know something – even the most trivial information – about myself

was to borrow my reflection from the eyes that lay upon me.

I think that this is what made it so hard for me to understand where my place was. I borrowed other people's eyes so many times that I forgot how to use mine.

This was indeed a dangerous mechanism that spread in my being like an illness, aggravating itself until it beguiled my very vision of the world outside of me. I saw everything as if through an altering mirror.

I forgot how to look at my country, Italy, through my eyes and I could only see it through foreign stereotypes.

You don't look Italian.

At all.

Well, maybe I did not want to look like it. I did not want to be loud, to always be joking or to gesticulate every time I said something. I did not want to be recognized as the food fanatic or the fashion addicted.

I left my country behind, I hid my accent at every occasion, I blended in. Italy was now nothing but the chaotic land where my family lived: far, far away from me.

So I left.

And I understood.

After a few weeks abroad in a country as beautiful as it is windy and cold, I started to miss home. Now, do not misunderstand me, I have loved every second I spent in England. Nevertheless, I was nostalgic.

I missed the sun, the hills that surround my hometown and the sight of the mountains.

I found myself talking of Italy more and more, of its culture, of its language. I longed for someone to speak Italian with me, even if just for a minute. I remember my flatmates making fun of my enthusiasm every time I met an Italian when we went out.

I remember the moment I realised the truth that would help me start anew.

I was lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling. Thinking.

I was thinking about England, about my life there, and I was thinking about Italy. I could not bring myself to choose and I realised that there was absolutely no need to.

When I left I did not know what my place in the world was, I thought I was untouchable by all that was 'Italian'. What I have learnt is that you never realised that your hair is wet while being underwater and, once you get out, you find yourself carrying undeniable proof of your marine life to unknown shores.

Fitting in might be possible, but what is the price to pay? To get dry?

I have discovered a lot about myself and I have redefined myself on many - many - occasions.

I understood that denying part of who I am will never make me happy.

Once I realised that, I felt relieved. I felt good. I could finally enjoy what was around me without having to look for a new home in every place I saw, because I knew exactly where my heart lied.

I left for England because I thought that, by leaving, I would somehow find my way home.

And I did.

It was exactly where I had left it.

