THE EXCHANGE JOURNAL

The December Edition.



Evolving Identities

31/12/2025

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A Message From The Editors

Thank you to everyone who submitted photos and articles to the 2025/6 Exchange Journal: Evolving Identities!

Without the originality, honesty, humour, and creative insight that all contributors bring to their work, we would not be able to create this journal, a place for us all to stay connected throughout the exciting journey of our Year Abroad Experiences – thank you!

We hope the reading experience is as enjoyable as the creative process was – hearing all about these wild, whacky, personal, and utterly unique experiences, has been an absolute pleasure! We look forward to hearing about what's in store in the New Year...!

Until next time.....

The Exchange Journal Team!



Heimat: Home is a Funny Place

by Hannah Germaschewski
Berlin, Germany

It has been three months since I packed my most treasured possessions and flew over the Channel to start my year abroad, and I think it is fair to say that yes, I have changed. My German vocabulary has improved, I feel comfortable navigating myself through this big city, and I have grown far more confident in talking to people from all over the world. Most of all, it is experiences that mould identity most intensely, and since moving here I have been blessed with a whole host of new and unexpected experiences that have scratched my brain in the best possible way.

It is hard not to let your own identity be pulled into a slightly different shape, particularly when you find yourself in a city whose identity is so distinctive, yet also constantly evolving and abundant with vitality. It feels like some living, breathing, writhing creature whose next moves you can never quite predict. Berlin, famously described in a song by Hildegard Knef as having a face covered in freckles and a mouth that is too large, cannot really be shoved into one box. Indeed, I have had my fair share of experience with the so-called Berliner Schnauze. Some people are too friendly, and some are a little too comfortable with saying whatever unfiltered atrocities come to mind. Let's just say I have added some colourful language to the vocabulary list on my Notes app. And while Berlin may not be quite as picturesque as Edinburgh, it still seems to carry a lot of heart within its concrete. Like any lifelong Berliner, I feel that I have spent half my life on the U-Bahn, have grown accustomed to drinking gallons of Club-Mate without being able to distinguish whether I actually like the taste, and have designated a box in the corner for collecting Pfand bottles. So, as much as I have tried to deny it, I have slowly but surely begun to call this place home.



One thing I have learned since starting university is that home does not always have to be something tangible. It can stretch and change. And while I would like to refrain from regurgitating a reiterated version of "home is where the heart is", I do think the place you call home is almost always bound up with the people you know and meet.

One of my biggest challenges has been gaps in understanding during my lessons, something that is improving day by day, but this is simply the reality of studying in a language that is not your native tongue. I have often dealt with chaos on the S-Bahn and have developed a stifled hatred for the Deutsche Bahn, which I believe is a prerequisite for being considered German, and above all I have been missing my cat. Now that I think about it, I do not think I have seen a cat since I moved here. Although I have seen many foxes. And red, yes red, squirrels. Overjoyed.

As Christmas approaches, Berlin is becoming more and more festive, and more and more teeth-chatteringly freezing. The Christmas markets are in full swing. The smell of Glühwein and Thüringer Bratwurst lingers along the pavements, the trees, now skeletal without their wonderful leaves, are wrapped in fairy lights, and the bustling crowds of Christmas shoppers are just as overstimulating as they are in Edinburgh during the festive season. It is hard not to miss Edinburgh sometimes. It was the first place I ever called home after leaving my childhood town, fresh-faced, excited, and anxious about what was in store for me over the next four years.

Home is a funny word. In German, there is a word that encapsulates the complex and sentimental feelings we have for the place we were born, or the place we feel most attached to. This is our Heimat. It is often described as untranslatable, a word for one's native land but also for the place that gives you the most joy. It is sometimes even described as a place that cannot necessarily be pinned down on a map, but can instead be sewn into wherever you find a sense of belonging. And whether it is the sights, the scaffolded dome of the Berliner Dom, the sounds, the firm "zurück bleiben bitte!" before the doors of the U-Bahn close, or the smells, perhaps we should not delve into the smells of Berlin, Heimat is a place that can be learned. Or found. Ultimately, I believe I have found a little piece of my Heimat in Berlin.

Lucy Ismail, Nijmegen, Netherlands

AWAY FROM HOME, CLOSER TO ME

Self-growth, bettering myself and travel have been constant goals throughout my life. Yet somehow in my past two years at Edinburgh, I lost sight of those parts of myself. I became absorbed in trying to fit the mould of the so-called 'Edinburgh Uni Type' and in doing so, I slowly drifted from who I truly was, losing my self-confidence and sense of self along the way. That was why the idea of an exchange felt so important; an opportunity for a complete reset.

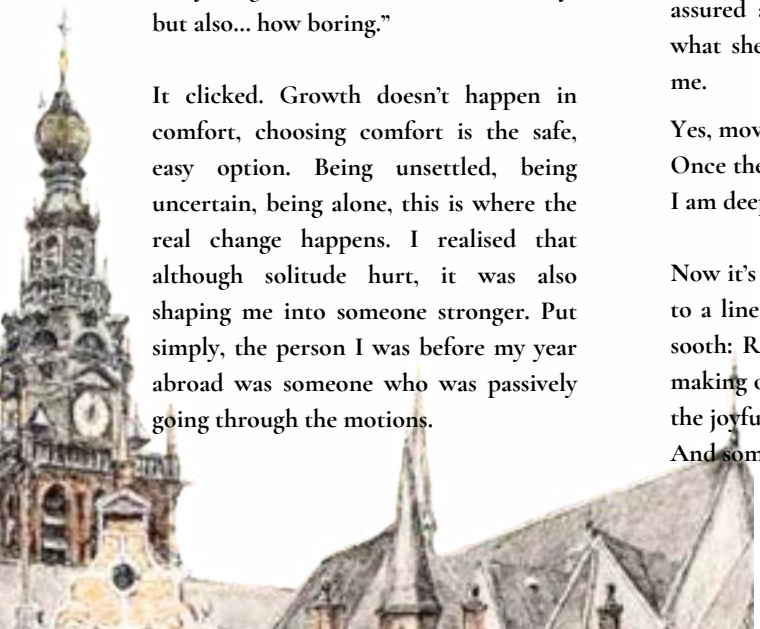
But my initial excitement quickly subsided. On my first day abroad, standing in my bare, undecorated student room, the reality settled heavily: I was going to be here for an entire year. A year felt like an eternity. Self-doubt crept in almost immediately. I had always imagined that the moment a chance arose, I would jump at the opportunity to go abroad, yet being at the start of that dream felt overwhelming - disheartening even.



The first two months passed. I found a great group of friends who helped cushion the initial shock of being so far from home, but something still felt out-of-kilter. I adore them, truly, but they couldn't recreate the familiarity I craved. I longed for the cheese and wine nights, the couches pushed together to make a makeshift bed, Netflix projected on the wall, the girls huddled beside me under about a dozen blankets. I even missed the unbearable chill of our Edinburgh flats; where it lacked literal warmth was made up for emotionally. Emotional warmth that I now craved so deeply.

After feeling like I would never settle in, I confided in a friend who was finishing her own exchange here in Nijmegen. I told her how homesick I felt, how unsteady, how unrooted. She agreed, home is comfortable. It's such a privilege to feel so anchored somewhere. But then she said something that shifted everything for me: "Comfort is lovely, but also... how boring."

It clicked. Growth doesn't happen in comfort, choosing comfort is the safe, easy option. Being unsettled, being uncertain, being alone, this is where the real change happens. I realised that although solitude hurt, it was also shaping me into someone stronger. Put simply, the person I was before my year abroad was someone who was passively going through the motions.



"Comfort is lovely, but also... how boring"

This year abroad has created personal goals that I feel so much more driven to achieve, it has allowed me to brutally examine myself and discover who I am and who I actually want to be. Being in a new environment, although daunting, allows one to figure themselves out without fear of judgement. Nijmegen is my own safe space to do literally anything. Trying sports that I wouldn't have attempted at Edinburgh and immersing myself into Dutch culture have been ways where I've pushed myself out of my comfort zone and closer to who I strive to be. After a bit of trial and error, a few scrapes here and there, I do indeed cycle everywhere. I reckon even the Dutch think I'm one of them. Getting a bike was something I said I wouldn't do when I moved here. I planned on walking or getting the bus to and from places – sticking to what I knew, what was comfortable – but now it's one of the many things I love about living here. However, I haven't quite warmed up to the idea of eating herring...

Reflecting on the previous two years, I don't think I ever allowed myself to be fully me. However, persevering through homesickness and choosing to embrace unfamiliarity – during moments when I genuinely considered booking the next flight back – has empowered me in ways I hadn't imagined. It has matured me, stretched me, reshaped me into a more self-assured and independent individual. Returning to the woman who does what she wants without fear of others' opinions – being unapologetically me.

Yes, moving abroad is over-romanticised, but I have finally understood why. Once the initial doubt passes, the experience becomes undeniably beautiful. I am deeply grateful to be experiencing it.

Now it's December, contemplation comes naturally. I find myself returning to a line I used to repeat whenever insecurity hit, a small attempt to self-sooth: Regardless of how this exchange experience unfolds, it will be the making of me. I will grow from the difficult moments, and I will grow from the joyful ones; either way, I will learn.
And somehow, that realisation has made all the difference.

K'GARI: THE POLITICS OF PLACE NAMES

K'gari is an island off the eastern coast of Queensland, Australia. Its identity is contentious, both in the politics of its ownership and in the tension between its colonial and traditional name.

The island is frequently referred to as Fraser Island by white Australians who do not respect Aboriginal Australians' traditional ownership of the land. Tourists too continue to refer to it as Fraser Island, unaware of the violence that underpins the name. K'gari's imperial name memorialises Eliza Fraser, who perpetuated racist narratives of the native Butchulla people. After she and her husband were stranded on the island, she retold the story, twisting the narrative and unjustly painting its inhabitants as capturing the pair and treating them with brutality.

In 2023, the Queensland government reinstated the traditional name, which originates from an Aboriginal Dreamtime story in which a goddess named K'gari helped to create the land. She then transformed to become a part of it, with the lakes as her eyes and the sand as her skin.

K'gari means paradise, and the name is vital to the identity of the island and its people. Despite the decree reinstating K'gari's traditional name, signage around and on the island still refers to it as Fraser - a name founded in violence and oppression.

POSTCARD

THIS SPACE FOR ADDRESS ONLY



from,

Eloise Longstaff, Brisbane, Australia

A Shyer Side of Life

Aislinn McSharry
Augsburg, Germany

I have often been accused of being a "loud person". I have lived a lifetime of school reports commenting on how I "never stop talking", expressed opinions boldly (to a fault), and have regularly received feedback that I talk too quickly or too loudly. I have craved the mystery and intrigue that shyer people exude but have instead found (like many Humanities students at Edinburgh), I always fall more comfortably into the Bridget Jones-inspired "Frazzled English Woman" bracket - a thought or opinion always ready to be expressed. It has been surprising to see how this "loudness" has developed on my year abroad in Augsburg, Germany.

My experiences so far have been littered with immense joy: weekend trips to new cities, endless Mensa lunches, Munich on my doorstep, and weekly (TWO-EURO-BEER!) *Bierstube* visits – which always include rule-abiding games of Beer Pong, *Flunkyball*, or Table Football. Especially in a culture where drinking water is second-nature to drinking beer (in the most casual and cool way, of course), the year abroad experience so far has truly highlighted "the bright side of life". However, as a language student with a feeble dream of conquering German grammar, I have been confronted with a taste of shyness.

In English, I often use 100 words when I need 10, I can be relied upon to fill a silence, and I love to introduce myself to new people. In German, however, I have needed a little time to warm-up; the "settling-in" process included loosening my German vocal chords, decoding the right phrases in the right social situations (including the perplexing Bavarian greeting "*Servus*"), and giving myself a bit more grace: Confusion is Inevitable. At first, a shyer side of me emerged – not mysterious and intriguing like other shy people – but one who might not always jump to have the last word, or express every facet of my opinion; problems that still persist, often because I don't have the right words (....yet!). Balancing friendships with both German and other exchange students, my identity felt initially fractured: loud and forward in one language, shyer in another.









Throughout this, I have appreciated the nuances of nonverbal communication, slower speech, and learnt to appreciate the privileges of English as my mother tongue: pursuing German as a degree is a passion, unlike how English is a necessity for other international students. That being said, the frustrations of everyone speaking perfect English will never subside: my native language becomes all too obvious when I, for example, order something involving an English name (a Baileys Hot Chocolate being a favourite), and as stereotypes have prepared me to believe, the German level of English is impeccable.

This, along with stereotypes of German organisation and punctuality, (excluding *Deutsche Bahn*) exist for a reason, although these generalisations miss out how welcoming the people are. In Bavaria, the people have been very friendly, polite, and warm to newcomers. The liveliness of German culture has opened its arms to me, as has the international community at university in Augsburg.

So, with the friendship and patience of German friends (and often the help of good beer), I reclaim my loudness a little bit more every day. During the ongoing Christmas Market season – filled with a truly ridiculous level of *Glühwein* consumption – I embrace the new phase of the year abroad experience: at first shy to speak, I am now more confident, comfortable, and excited for everything yet to come.







Austria National Day shot on Phoenix film, 26/10/25









Lucy Quirk, Budapest, Hungary

BERGHAIN *TRYING TO GET IN (AND FIT IN)*

Poppy Twort, Berlin, Germany

A queue of people, clad in black from head to toe, winds its way back to the kiosk, snaking along the gravel path like a procession moth caterpillar. The humming of the bass bleeds through the brick walls of the former GDR power plant, better known as Berghain. I join the back of the line.

We form a cluster of intrepid techno hopefuls, eager to convince Sven, the notorious Berghain gatekeeper, that our pulses align with the cadence of the dance floor inside.

Amidst our genuine love of techno and desire to enter, is the quiet absurdity of our heightened self-consciousness, unsure if our usual attire will pass.

Instead, we have subtly altered our presentation in earnest imitation of Berghain regulars. A little more eyeliner than usual and a cold stare, both pieces of advice courtesy of Reddit's self-appointed prophets.

My verdict is that the door policy, for the most part, is random. The prospect of rejection only increases Berghain's mystery, fuelling the conversation of Berlin newbies: "Have you got into Berghain yet?" and the heavily loaded follow up question of "Were you successful?" Still, I continue to attempt to bolster my chances.

The most obvious manifestation of this is my accumulation of onyx-coloured pieces, made dangerously accessible by European Vinted. My wardrobe certainly no longer fits into the two suitcases I came here with. I find myself wondering if I have a newfound appreciation for the shade and its versatility or whether this is my superficial attempt to conform to the Berlin milieu; the possibility of Berghain at any given moment, now dictating my sense of style.

Yet the Berliner's affinity to black clothing has been explained to me as more than a mere fashion trend, instead speaking to the city's emphasis on anonymity. No credit cards, only cash, no phones in the club, and an above average adoption of caps exemplifies one of the pillars of Berlin – a desire to embrace the freedom that accompanies being anonymous and untraceable. When my German class expressed their incredulity muddled with indignation at the lack of card machines in Germany's capital, our teacher's eyes widened – "How dare we be so short sighted," she preached, "and see this as an inconvenience, when this is part of the very social fabric of Berlin, one where we circumvent constant surveillance and the government's ability to trace our every move." And so, it seems to me, the darkened wardrobe is another filament of this protective forcefield that enables the so-called "City of Freedom" to sustain its incognito operations.





Back in the queue, Sven's omniscient nose sniffed me out as a three-month-old Berliner, knowing that the long black trench coat I donned was a recent Vinted pickup that was yet to grace the club cloakroom. "Heute nicht" he says with a gesture of the head to the side, signalling my fraudulent attempt to conform to the identity Berghain prescribes.

My friend who was a few paces behind in the line (another failed ploy to increase our chances), met the same fate as I did. Our subsequent analysis entailed of whether our hands should have been by our sides, our middle part a side part, or if we didn't ooze enough confidence as the three pairs of guarding eyes looked us up and down. Our understanding of this door policy remains aesthetic, which I'm sure a true Berliner would cite as our issue, but how revealing to your inner identity is a two-word answer and a glance at your outfit? Back to the drawing board we go, or in truth, to the Vinted saved searches.

4 MONTHS *in Georgetown*

A Reflection by Emma Le Breton, Washington D.C, USA

Arriving at Georgetown University felt less like a continuation of my studies and more like a reset. Although I live in New York, I had never really been a part of an American institution before, and my academic identity had always enlisted slightly outside of the traditional American school system (I went to a French school, had never taken AP exams or had American friends). Georgetown then, was my first immersion into it, and so far it has been an intense, challenging, and unexpectedly transformative experience.

Academically, the contrast with the University of Edinburgh was stark: classes here are demanding not just in content but in consistency. We are held accountable every week: readings must be done, participation is expected, and assessments are spread consistently and overwhelmingly throughout the semester. At first I was incredibly overwhelmed, and lamented to my friends back home about how I felt like I was in high school again. Over time, however, I began to enjoy the consistency, and I felt empowered—I felt a real and quantifiable eagerness to learn, that I really don't remember feeling since middle school.



Instead of everything hinging on midterms and finals, I have multiple chances to improve and engage continuously with the material. Georgetown's quality of learning too is truly awe-inspiring—my favorite Sociology class, Immigrants and New Societies, is taught by a Professor who works full-time at the Library of Congress, and regularly starts sentences with, "When I was briefing a Congressman about this…"

Beyond the classroom I've discovered a deep sense of student life that I didn't realise I had been missing (I understand now why Edinburgh really isn't up to par with student satisfaction). Experiencing Homecoming felt deeply surreal, and unapologetically American. Students show up to soccer, basketball, and even football games (though I was quickly informed Georgetown football is apparently a joke—sorry to my football player friend).

Of course, the first few months here were an emotional rollercoaster. The pressure of making friends again felt horribly similar to first year, which genuinely terrified me. Over time however, that fear eased as I found my people. Now I'm excited for our (horror:) two-week winter break, and more so for our second semester (and American spring break!)
This year abroad has reshaped my identity as a student and a person. I'll return to Edinburgh for Fourth Year with my great newfound academic habits, and a stronger sense of confidence, as well as memories and inside jokes that no one else will understand.





A Journey From Edinburgh to Dunedin

Antonia Haycocks, Dunedin, New Zealand

Moving to the other side of the world is no small feat, no matter which stage of your life you are in. Even so, on the 25th of June 2025, my bags were packed, and I was hugging my dad at our front door at about four o'clock in the morning, before heading to the airport for my very first long-haul flight. As is common, I was also tackling personal troubles in this period of my life, which added a heightened level of emotional intensity to this whole experience. This is not to say that I was not looking forward to my exchange; the idea of the endless possibilities that waited for me across the Pacific felt electric. Throughout my 13-hour flight from San Francisco, I could almost feel my proverbial slate being scrubbed clean. The ultimate fresh start.



It has been roughly 6 months since I arrived in Dunedin, and I am so grateful for the effect this experience has had on my identity. The memory of my arrival is still vivid; the first to move into my new flat on a very cold, very rainy Dunedin day, feeling very alone. However, this was not necessarily a bad feeling. With everyone I know and love being damn near a million miles away, I was obligated to learn to enjoy my own company. Being in a situation like this forced me to grapple with my newfound independence like never before. It came like a tidal wave, and before I realised I was swirling in its currents, it delivered me at the shore of the end of the semester, with a sense of strength and confidence I'm not sure I've felt before.

Otepoti Dunedin boasts a rich cultural history, from Māori tribes dating back to 1280AD and the subsequent Scottish settlers, giving Dunedin the reputation as the 'Edinburgh of the South' (they even share the name, with Dùn Èideann being the Scottish Gaelic name for Edinburgh). Young people from all over New Zealand and the rest of the world come here to study, making up 20% of the city's population, creating a strong student culture. As an exchange student, I found myself in a bubble with basically only other exchange students, which, interestingly, created more culture shock than the general Kiwi culture.

It may sound obvious, but everyone coming from such different backgrounds all over the world created a smorgasbord of international personalities. As a girl from a small town in the middle of England, I had never really experienced anything like this before. A startling realisation from being surrounded by these other international students is that most of them come from a different tax bracket. It has been so intriguing to be surrounded by people who go to private liberal arts colleges and can spend every weekend going on trips that cost hundreds of dollars. Most people I've met have been so lovely, but the cultural and social divide is undeniable.

Within this context, after a few days of settling in on my own, I was thrown into the deep end of the exchange student social pool. In the beginning, I remember feeling as shy as ever, but my survival instincts must have kicked in, and I was firing on all cylinders socially for the next few weeks. This is reflected in the long-lasting friendships I have made this semester, in which I feel like I have been almost fully myself from the beginning. I recently started a new job, and I have noticed it there as well. I am discovering that after I introduce myself to someone new, it's becoming much easier for me to be myself.

I'm not the version of myself from my teenage years that cared too much about what others thought, and not the one from my early university career that was riddled with doubt and insecurity, but the version of myself that I genuinely am currently. To be frank, I'm not sure how this has happened, and I wish I were more aware of it whilst it was happening (and I hope it continues), but I will forever be grateful to Dunedin and the beautiful and proud country of New Zealand for helping me on my journey out of my shell.





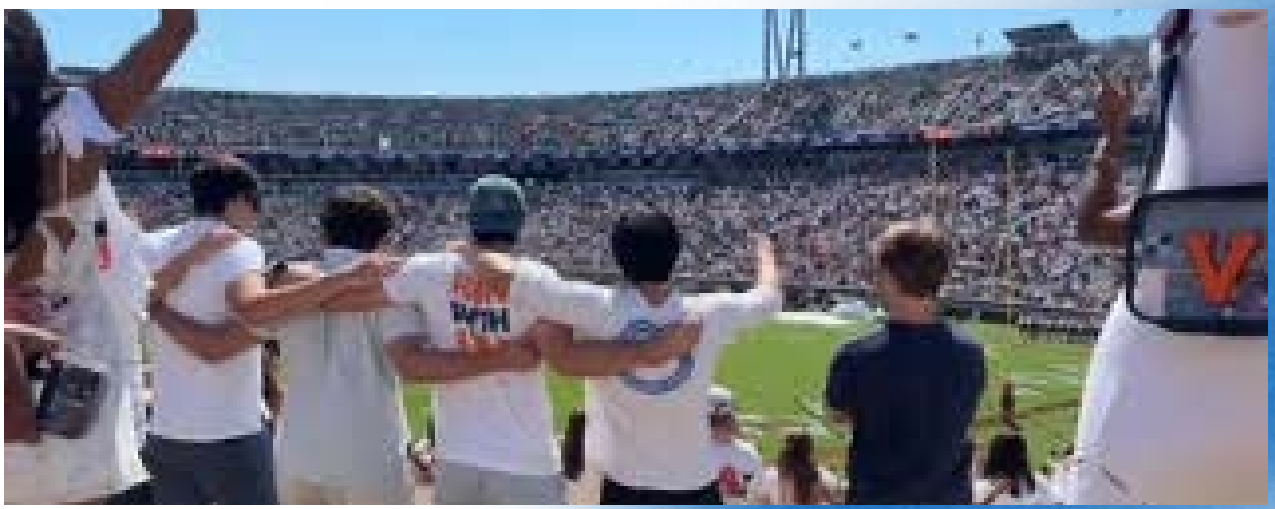
Julie Barry, Charlottesville, USA

An American Way of Belonging

You would have to be blind to take longer than your first day to realise how important Greek life and school spirit are at an American university like UVA. In what is, to an Irish girl, the middle of nowhere in Virginia, wedged between the Blue Ridge Mountains and the ocean that touches home, sits a university that could not, at first glance, feel more different from Edinburgh. Frat houses filled with more student bands than a Disney Channel original movie do not exactly remind me of a night out on Cowgate. Saturdays, when shops close and 20,000 students march towards the football stadium dressed in matching colours, feel slightly more extravagant than when my friends and I head to Pear Tree for an Arsenal match, unless we are playing Spurs. Being part of a fraternity or sorority, and making your school a personality trait, are vital to the American college experience.

Even though it still makes me cringe to hear a frat guy call one of his friends his "brother", I admire how deliberately they create tight-knit communities that last beyond university. At home, community feels less guaranteed. In Edinburgh, it is something you actively search for, something you opt into through effort, shared interests, or pure chance. If you are lazy, unlucky, or even just too intimidated to put yourself out there, you could very easily graduate without ever finding people you truly click with. At UVA, it feels like you would have to make a conscious effort to avoid finding community, given how many opportunities are placed in front of you. The activities fair on the first day was straight out of Pitch Perfect, with any club you could think of, and many more besides.

Even if you do not have a niche interest and simply want to meet people on your wavelength, there is always Greek life. You can almost rely on the fact that most girls you meet will drop some variation of Greek letters into your first conversation, usually followed by how they made "lifelong friends at Kappa". It took putting all my movie stereotypes aside before I began to believe them, and to realise that being a sorority girl is not synonymous with being blonde and awful. Greek life really does seem to be a way to find people you fit in with, and people you will always have a connection to, however cringe I still find it.



“It feels different because it is an entire university coming together.”





The obsession with lifelong connections does not stop there. My brother, who used his visit to UVA as an excuse to buy some college merchandise, is frequently stopped on the tube in London by strangers asking if he is a "Hoo" too. As I type this, I can hear the UVA "Go Hoos" chant echoing outside and see strangers embracing after a winning touchdown. While it may sound like I am describing a Premier League fanbase, it feels different because it is an entire university coming together.

When I go to get a drink at half-time, my marketing professor is standing in front of me, the girl who always raises her hand in class is behind me, and they are wearing matching T-shirts, along with everybody else in line, including myself. But this is not just students supporting a team out of obligation.

They are genuinely invested in their mediocre American football team and, judging by the number of alumni who return for games, continue to care for the rest of their lives. Their camaraderie extends well beyond graduation, with alumni continuing to seek out anyone connected to UVA, like my brother, even if he is only wearing the hoodie because he thought it looked nice.

Even though I still cannot imagine Greek life ever losing its reputation for immaturity back in Edinburgh, or making an appearance at the Bristo Square societies fair, I do think there is something we could benefit from in the way UVA treats community as something to be built easily, purposefully, and valued for life. That said, I also believe this attitude towards community is inherent to American college culture and its tendency to make everything loud and visible.

While I enjoy that for now, I cannot help but miss the more significant and solid circles at home, where friendships are formed naturally, unexpectedly, and meaningfully, not because you go to the same school or have been assigned to the same sorority house. So, although I would not want an exact replication of UVA back home, I have learned a lot from the way they socialise, and it is cool to be able to say I have experienced something I once thought only existed in the movies.

Photo by Aaron Burden on Unsplash

All The World's A Stage

by Nicky Helfgott, Paris, France

Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said that "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world." Thus, in English, I am omnipotent. I bend English to my will, melding and welding intricate sentences together in a mellifluous blend. A linguistic astronaut. Yet, with French, after requesting *"un pain au chocolat, s'îl vous plaît"* for the eighty-fourth consecutive day, my world is abruptly slammed shut as I leave the misty doorway of the aromatic local *boulangerie*.

"All the world's a stage." In the West End edition, I specialise in comedic improvisation and Drake-inspired soliloquies. On the Parisian stage, the script is more set in stone, and slower. I wouldn't be winning any Tonys anytime soon.

So in these two plays, I inhabit two identities. Performing my English self in French doesn't quite work. I, like many concepts in French, am untranslatable. *Dépaysement* — literally 'un-country-ing' — describes in one word the subtle estrangement of being out of place. *Joie de vivre* refers to the effervescent enjoyment of life. *L'esprit d'escalier* is my personal favourite. There is a Seinfeld episode (The Comeback) in which George bends over backwards to deliver a joke to a colleague that he thought of too late to deliver live in the moment. That is *l'esprit d'escalier*, literally the "wit of the staircase": you are struck with a flash of genius wit after the moment has slipped away, often whilst walking down the stairs to leave the party. Some concepts, like some versions of ourselves, only make sense on one side of a language.

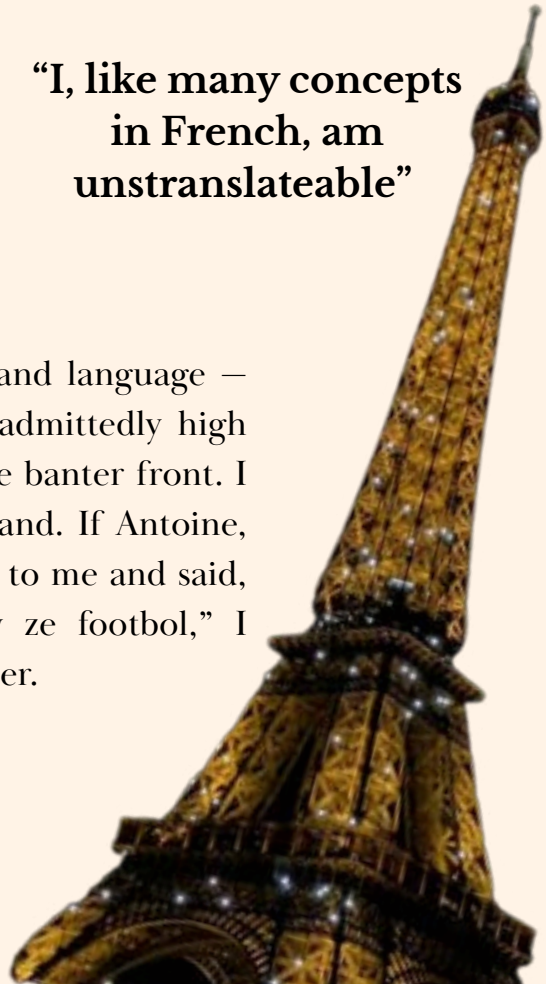
"I, like many concepts in French, am unstranslateable"

As a result, my borrowed tongue requires me to be far more measured and composed with my lexicon. No rushing into sentences. No off-the-cuff remarks. Not even any freestyling (yet).

This can be put down to two things: culture and language — with slight emphasis on the latter, given my admittedly high level that is still not up to scratch on the native banter front. I often imagine the equivalent scenario in England. If Antoine, the exchange student from Grenoble, came up to me and said, "Ello, my name eez, uh, Antoine and I luv ze footbol," I wouldn't rush to make him my new best pal either.







But I am not disheartened by this. Failure is the quickest way to success. And I've had plenty of linguistic failures here. Take the time when I was flowing effortlessly through a conversation with a classmate. All was sailing smoothly. That is until he upped the pace and said something not quite to my tempo.

"Quoi?" I blundered.
A mutual peer interjected: *"He said you speak really good French."*
"Ah... merci."
Bah voila, the Helfgottian paradox. Fluent enough to be praised, not fluent enough to understand the praise itself.

Or when, cycling home on a Lime, I stopped at a red light (like no true Parisian ever). A group of men stood on the pavement beside me drinking. One of them shouted over something to do with a *"velo"* and a *"feu rouge"*. I half-smiled and rode through the still-red light.

A collective groan followed. Only five seconds later did I process what had been said: You're the first cyclist I've seen respect the red light. *L'esprit d'escalier...*
Those — by no means the only cumbersome linguistic moments — have helped me improve and shape my French identity.

Kafka said, "I was ashamed of myself when I realised life was a costume party, and I had attended with my real face." That's the beauty of life. You can adopt many "selves" or "faces" to construct the one true self. My Anglophone self could learn a lot from my calculated Francophone nature, and vice-versa.

Each mistake broadens the horizons of my worlds. Each small triumph and every misunderstood compliment are all vital steps in learning how to act beyond the limits of my native language. I've already mastered the linguistic equivalent of Super Mario Bros World 1 and so there is merit in failing at Bowser's Castle. If all the world's a stage, then mastering new tongues simply gives me more worlds to play in.







C A N A D A

Beyond The City

Varshika Mecheri
Toronto, Canada

My exchange experience so far has made the arbitrariness of splitting the year into semesters all too apparent. For me, the splitting up of Semester One more accurately represents my experience. There's the early part of the exchange experience that's arguably the most overwhelming, confusing amalgamation of emotions – then comes late October, which, for me, is best characterised through the exploration of "The True North" beyond Toronto. My year abroad has taken on a new persona because of it, and in the knowing that I've barely scratched the surface.

I felt the peace of beautiful Alberta in Banff. Having not seen thick snow since I was six years old, the nostalgia was a rush. The hikes were harder in the freezing weather, and the drive home and the warm pub night at the end of it – so much more satisfying. I called my sister, admitting that I had found a place that satisfied my inner child, made me feel more whole. I told her that the city is nice and all, but the mountain air has filled my bones in a way I'll never be able to shake.



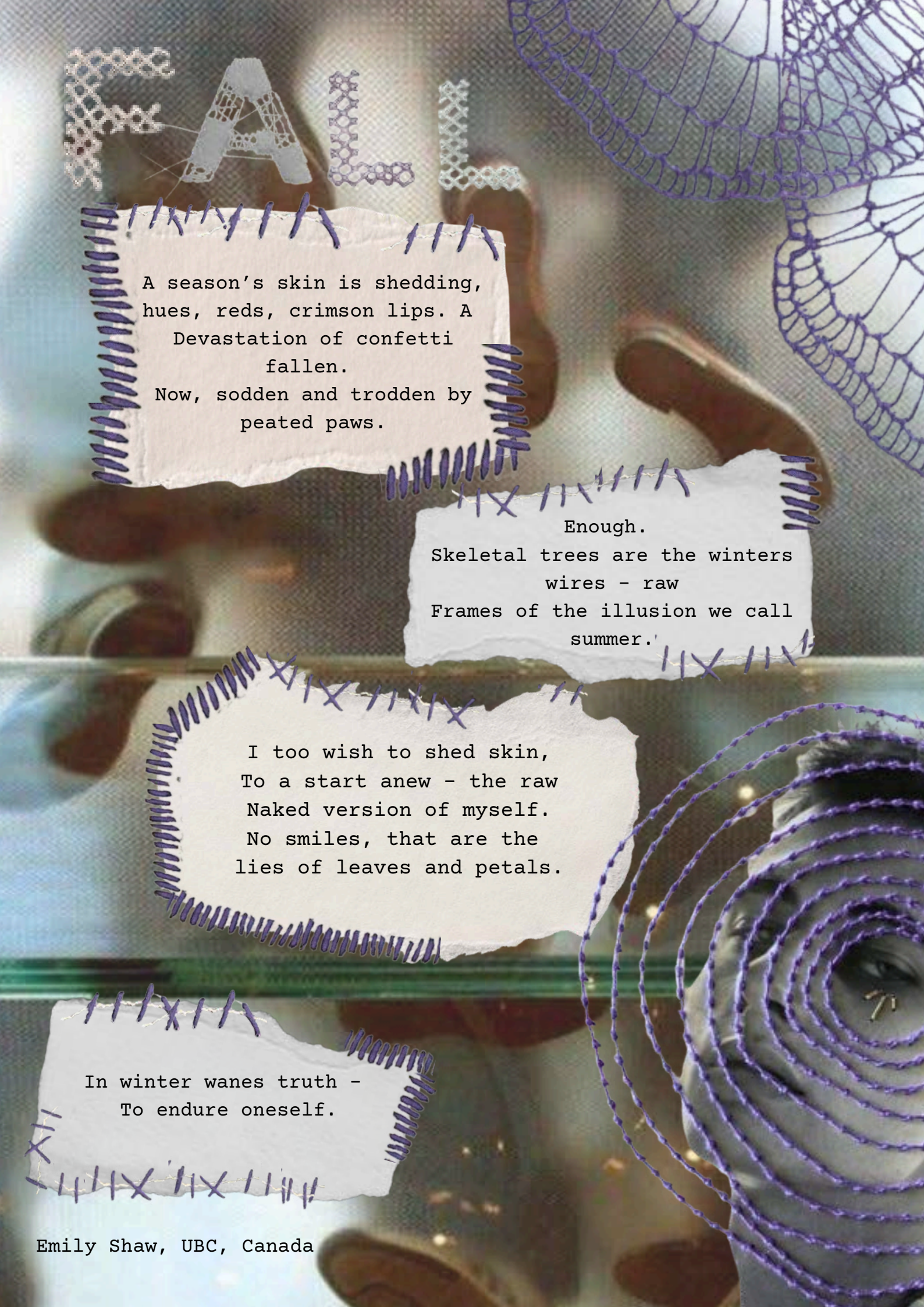
Winter, 2025

On the most memorable morning, we strolled over to the bakery across the way, where the owner complimented my French. Similar satisfaction took shape in sharing meals with new friends with whom I had the shared connection of Scotland. And now, the shared excitement of having experienced the vastness of the Canadian Rockies for the first time.



The day we hiked “Big Beehive”, there was no one except the odd local, out in what was their backyard, their daily hike with their significant other and/or cheery Newfoundland. Stuck with makeshift toilets and cold wraps in a mountain we’ll probably have to slide down, life felt worth living. We take in Lake Louise at the top and can’t help but stand in deafening silence.

Back and knowing my way around campus, the city, the Canadian accent, which has become all too familiar, my flatmate from Buffalo has lined the walls of our flat with Bills posters, and soon enough, their friends are mine. We talk about how I say “corridor” and they “hallway” – how the term “uni” is used sparsely, disputes around the term “pub” and “bar” making it into every conversation.



Emily Shaw, UBC, Canada

Until next time....



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