

## **Grayce McCarley, TTS34**

*I am ancient. Those were the words that pierced my skull and ricocheted around like a sliver of shattered glass as I leaned against the sink tile. Staring at my reflection in the mirror, matted hair pulled back and tickling my neck, I analyzed my face. My skin was covered with layers of sweat and dirt, and my teeth still reflected against the afternoon light outside, but I didn't recognize myself. The air of Luderitz, Namibia was rich with humidity; my breath fogged up the mirror as I leaned closer to stare into the eyes of whatever echo of a human I could see. A doll, I finally decided. I reminded myself of a doll — granted, one that looked like it had been dragged through a barn and left to decay (leave it to essentially living outside for four months to ensure that), but a doll nonetheless. A creature that looked like me and acted like me, but was totally different from the person I'd come to recognize as myself my whole life.*

*In August of 2019, I embarked on a four month study abroad opportunity to Southern Africa with a program called The Traveling School (TTS). This program has a dogma deeply rooted in the belief of experiential education and the benefits students can reap from it. The setup was this: I was one of twelve girls selected from across North America to partake in the semester and raised over \$26,000 worth of tuition (including Merit scholarship) to pull it off. Four teachers joined us, and over the course of the next four months, they became our mentors, allies, and older sisters. I took six classes while abroad, each more thought-provoking and fascinating than the last. This was without a doubt the most rigorous and challenging academic setting I've ever been exposed to prior to joining TTS. Because I was required to leave my phone and computer at home, I went completely technology free for four months and all of my research resources came from our 'library' duffel bag that accompanied us. Along with my intense studies, I got to experience so much of the beautiful country at every stop we made. A few of my adventures included rafting down the Zambezi River, sleeping under the stars in the Makgadikgadi salt pans of Botswana, visiting the locations of concentration camps for history class in Namibia, and hiking the Garden Route in South Africa to overlook the rocky coast.*

*Even months after returning home and being able to reflect, the extremity of how I developed and grew as a young woman during my time abroad astounds me. Standing in that bathroom, staring into the eyes of an individual whom I barely recognized as myself, was the first time I'd been confronted with how breathtaking change can be. The set in my shoulders was firmer, my back straighter, and my gaze was unwavering. I didn't care how grimy I appeared; what I experienced that afternoon was the blooming realization that I had grown so much over the past few months in ways that I didn't even*

*realize I needed to grow. I had achieved a sense of confidence in my own academic intellect and abilities, a trait I had severely lacked prior to leaving on this trip. I felt empowered and wise and fearless. I'd aged a century in the past four months of my life, and rather than let it intimidate me, I folded the emotion like paper under my sternum and let it ruminate there. Now, nearly a year later, I still find myself clutching at that steady feeling in my chest whenever I need a reminder that my opinions are worthy, that my confidence is earned, and that as long as I can easily recognize myself in a mirror, there will always be ways for me to continue growing and learning as a young woman.*