

## **Olivia Reynolds, TTS33**

*I stopped at the doorway to the Humanities classroom, staring at my classmates sitting in their neatly aligned desks, listening to my teacher scratching notes across the chalkboard, and I felt frozen in time. It was my first day back after four months studying in South America. The same L.L. Bean backpacks spilled out of cubbies and the same books were still left in the lost and found. School looked just as it did when I left but suddenly felt entirely different. As I stood in the doorway, flashbacks from the last twenty-four hours washed over me -- waking up to the hum of La Paz's aerial tramway, frantically sprinting across the tarmac, sorrowfully waving goodbye through blurred vision. Overwhelmed by emotions, I pivoted from the classroom towards the bathroom to collect myself. Returning back home after a semester traveling through Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, was jarring and disorienting. My love of travel and adventure started when I moved to Barcelona for two years in middle school. Having never lived in a city before, my surroundings felt overwhelming and endlessly intriguing. Suddenly, with everything a short subway stop away, I was granted access to seemingly the entire world. I'd scooter to soccer games on school nights, share oranges with the usuals at the park, and stay on the subway just to listen to the pop-up accordion players. Change, in people, scenery, and routine, fueled me and I jumped at the chance to go abroad again in high school. During my semester in South America, I was pushed beyond my comfort zone on a daily basis, which further developed my appetite for new experiences and an urge to explore different cultures. My classes, which were experiential and place-based, provided me with the space to grow and learn in new ways. Comparing the flavors of edible ants in the Ecuadorian Amazon Rainforest, discussing Pizarro's conquest while exploring ancient Incan ruins outside Cusco, Peru, and observing the glacial striations hiking through the Bolivian Andes, ignited a hunger for learning that I hadn't felt before. Coming home to the familiarity of suburban Maine left me feeling restless and unsatisfied. Why did I feel so upside down when this was my home, the place where I was born and raised? No one seemed to understand the shift in me. I spent most of the following summer alone. Without people around me who could relate to my experiences and complicated emotions, I felt lost. I spent hours independently journaling, deconstructing my experience in South America in an attempt to develop a deeper awareness of how I had changed and grown. As an extrovert, this adjustment was unfamiliar but created an opportunity for deep reflection and time to figure out who I was back at home. For the first time, I learned to be comfortable in my own company. Establishing a firm sense of self sparked newfound confidence and strength. In March, with the global pandemic unfolding and the transition to online instruction, I was home for the foreseeable future but, surprisingly, I did not feel restless. I began visiting the ocean routinely. Lacking any real structure to my day, my coastal excursions grounded me. I brought a book, a*

*journal, occasionally a friend, and got lost watching the surging waves for hours. I left feeling refreshed, invigorated, and at peace. I, for once, yearned for consistency and rootedness and I found it. My visits to the ocean helped me redefine what home meant to me. Through my travels overseas, I had come to think of life on the road as being home. For years, I had sought out every opportunity to do something irregular, far away and unfamiliar, to travel and explore. Now, I recognized the value of stability and routine -- everything I had avoided for so long. I felt centered in Maine, at the ocean, and settled into a new feeling of home.*