2009 ICCIS Study Abroad Essay Contest Winners

Every spring the Isabella Cannon Centre for International Studies holds a photography and essay contest for study abroad participants. To qualify for this year’s contest, students had to have studied abroad during 2008. This year’s essay contest first place winner was Max Cantor and an honorable mention was given to Caroline Matthews. These are their stories...

The Winding Stair
by Max Cantor

A story of “finding myself” in Dublin comprised of imaginings and half-truths

In the asphalt city I’m at home. From the very start
Provided with every last sacrament:
   With newspapers. And tobacco. And brandy
   To the end mistrustful, lazy and content.
   - Bertolt Brecht, of Poor BB

A
s soon as I leave my apartment I know
I should have worn gloves. By now
I’m past the double gates of the front
entrance and don’t feel like swiping
my key to get back in. I tuck my
hands in my coat pockets, which are considerably
warmer than my jean pockets. It’s not my coat, but
I wear it anyway. Liz stole it a week ago at Hogan’s
on Aungier St., a dark, little joint that caters to the
PricewaterhouseCoopers crowd. The coat was a
men’s large so she gave it to me. I found a couple
business cards in the left pocket. The coat belonged
to a Philosophy professor at Trinity College, a
William something or other. I threw them out
because his address was on them and I wanted to be
sure I didn’t return it as penance. It’s the warmest
thing I own.

It’s already five and I feel like shit. I’ve become
a serious hypochondriac, convinced of all sorts
of crazy things that I can’t even define like brain
lesions. Something about this place makes me feel
diseased. Every time I leave my room it’s like I’m
going to catch something. I skipped dinner tonight.
I’m out of contact solution. I’m broke. My apartment
is cold, and I spent seven Euro on Neosporin for
Liz’s earring hole infection, which sounds disgusting
and looks even worse. I’m starting to hate it here.
It’s a shame that there aren’t any black people in
Dublin because it’s the perfect city for jazz. So many
smoky pubs and bars here are just dying for some jazz.
And everyone has the blues. You could drown in the blues
of this city, and I do, every step another lash on the
 cymbal or pluck of the bass.

It’s the grayest area of Dublin, and Dublin is devoid of
color. Dublin is the sun killer, an underwhelming,
underperforming grayscale of misfits and miscues.
The cymbal drags, the sax taps out and in comes
the piano solo. I keep walking, lost in

The weirdest thing about Dublin is the number
of kids running around. I don’t know where they’re
all coming from, Are the Irish Catholics still so
opposed to contraceptives? The sidewalks scream for
condoms with each little bastard stomping around.
There are kids everywhere; kids with potatoes in
their pockets, no shoes, knocking around a decade-old soccer ball. Kids everywhere, in wind jackets with bad haircuts and foul mouths, kids who run around in little hoodlum gangs, wind suit armies patrolling the streets and alleys, unchaperoned no matter what neighborhood or what hour, kids who spit at each other and feel you up for a wallet on the tram. So many wind pants too, I can’t stress that enough. Redheaded kids, pale blond kids, darting through foot traffic with hurling sticks looking like little mercenaries. Little future alcoholic kids outside the off-license asking me to buy them booze. Kids calling me a fat twat when I tell them I won’t. Snarling in their ugly New York Yankees wind suits. I wish I could figure out the whereabouts of their wind suit-wearing, neglectful parents. I don’t know what I would do if I met their parents but I think I would do something to straighten them out. I meet Sean at the Winding Stair, a hole-in-the-wall bookshop and café I love because it has a whole section of books about graffiti and street art that makes me feel hip, and it sells chai tea lattes named after famous authors that make me feel intellectually challenged. The Winding Stair is pompous and esoteric but in all the best ways. Above the checkout counter is a postcard with the words written on it, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. But then the Devil invented pictures.” Betina, who runs the place, has a nose ring and a stud below her eye that doctors screwed into the bone to keep in place. Consequently, their statue of perfection is perfectly straight. For all the aforementioned reasons, Sean hates the Winding Stair.

I put honey and sugar in my “Kerou-wacky Wild Orange Tea.” It’s important to put things like honey and sugar in your tea because it shows that you have specific drinking preferences, which shows that you are an experienced tea drinker and, by default, must be an intellectual. Sean doesn’t get tea, which is frustrating because I know he’s smart and I want him to look as smart as I do.

“I saw some guy take a shit on the bridge last night,” Sean tells me.

“Our bridge?” I ask.

“Nah, two down from ours. The one next to St. Patrick’s. Guy just dropped trou’ right there on the sidewalk.”

“Is it a sidewalk if it’s on a bridge?” I ask.

“What else would it be?”

“I don’t know. A bridge walk?”

Sean ignores me.

“At least it wasn’t our bridge.” I offer.

He nods.

Our bridge. I like the sound of that.

That’s the thing about cities; you have your places, your spots. There are a few constants. For example, I have my bridge. I have the Winding Stair. I have the Glimmer Man pub. You also have places that change every so often, usually food spots, particularly lunch. It’s even more important to make sure you meet people who have the same spots as you. Then when you see them too much, you know it’s time for a change. It’s dark by the time we leave. I’d forgotten about my appetite and its creeping back to me. I’ll try to ignore it for the walk home.

Every city is prettiest after dark. The high-rises and skyscrapers come alive like a grid of stars thrown sideways against a sheet of black velvet. Nighttime has a different effect here though because the buildings in Dublin are different than other cities. In Dublin the buildings are stunted and nondescript, but on any given night the ground is almost certain to be damp with rain, and the streetlights bounce off the pavement and glide through the narrow cracks in the cobblestone lanes.

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“Angel on the South Side” Dublin, Ireland by Max Cantor

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