

1 Poem

Salt and stone: A map on my skin

Barcelona's salt-crusted air still hums in me,
But my reflection's deeper than that sunlit sea.
For I brought whispers gathered, stone by stone,
From lands where ancient rivers turned to bone.

Egypt first: beneath the desert's molten crown,
Where pharaohs dreamed in sand-etched renown.
I touched a pyramid – not just a tomb's cold weight,
But **patience carved**, learning how giants wait.
That grit became a compass in my hand,
A slow foundation built on shifting sand.

Then **Romania**'s woods, where shadows hold their breath,
And Carpathian pines guard secrets cold as death.
A shepherd shared țuică, fire on the tongue,
Showed me resilience, fierce and tightly strung.
Like brambles clinging to the mountain's side,
I learned to root where comfort might subside.

Greece offered clarity, an Aegean light so sharp,
On white-washed cliffs where thyme perfumed the dark.
By ruins whispering myths I couldn't grasp,
I felt old wisdom in the ocean's clasp.
It washed my frantic thoughts, left calm and clear,
A polished pebble, holding purpose near.

Azerbaijan's flame – mud volcanoes sighed,
Near Baku's towers where old and new collide.
Fire dancers whirled in carpets' woven thread,
A heartbeat pulsed where ancient pathways led.
I felt that burn – not pain, but vibrant spark,
Igniting courage in the gathering dark.

Georgia's final grace, where Caucasus peaks fold time,
In Tbilisi's warmth, sipping amber wine.
A supra feast, toasts ringing loud and long,
Taught me that strength grows best where you belong.
Like vines on trellises, reaching for the sun,
My own roots deepened, growth had just begun.

So, Barcelona's challenge? Just the latest bloom
On branches strengthened crossing desert, hill, and room.
The "international" pulse? It's not a line I crossed,
But rivers merged within me, tempest-tossed.
I am the map now – Egypt's patience deep,
Romania's grit, the clarity Greeks keep,
Azerbaijan's fire, Georgia's binding vine –
A world internal, finally aligned.

2 Reflective commentary

2.1 Why a poem?

Poetry mirrors short-term mobility because both compress experience into vivid flashes that refuse neat chronology. A free-verse line break pauses the mental film exactly where a scent or color deserves extra attention, something prose struggles to do without sounding overwrought. Writing *Salt and Stone* also let me braid Arabic rhythms with the English I study in Romania, creating one voice that belongs to neither place yet speaks for them both. Each stanza functions like a contour line on a topographic map of identity, marking altitude changes in confidence and perspective. I wanted the reader to feel those sudden lifts, especially the Barcelona summit where years of layered geography finally folded into one coherent landscape.

2.2 Experience setting

The EUTOPIA Innovation Challenge in May 2025 unfolded across a seventy-hour learning arc. I spent twenty hours in early May reading systematic reviews on mental-health misinformation and drafting a pre-pitch outline. The Barcelona week itself accounted for forty hours, divided among ideation sprints, user-journey workshops, prototype coding and a final five-minute pitch delivered in a lecture hall overlooking the Mediterranean. A further ten hours in June went to grant-writing follow-ups for potential seed funding. Our team officially began with four members, but a disagreement on day three reduced us to three. The task, set by psychologists and public-health mentors, asked for a scalable counter to so-called fake-guru wellness advice. We responded with **MIST**, an AI influencer that blends peer-reviewed findings into thirty-second TikTok stories. Barcelona's pace felt catalytic rather than touristic; the multilingual buzz of Las Ramblas reminded me that credibility markers mutate across borders, so an evidence particle must be shaped for the local acoustic environment if it hopes to stick.

2.3 Intercultural tapestry

Stanzas I to III in the poem act as flashbacks that contextualize my presence in Spain. I spent twenty-one formative years beneath Cairo's "molten crown", where patience is carved literally into limestone blocks. Four subsequent years among the Carpathian pines of Romania taught me to bend rather than break, much like the brambles that hold soil on steep Transylvanian slopes. Shorter immersions filled the gaps with texture. Two weeks ferry-hopping around Greek islands showed me that conversation can drift like sea foam for hours before crystallizing into a single insight: if you wait, the point eventually surfaces. Two weeks in Azerbaijan, observing mud

volcanoes that sigh and ignite, revealed how spectacle can serve civic identity better than any speech. A month in Georgia, living inside the social ritual of the supra feast, demonstrated that belonging is generated through generosity, not mere proximity.

Hall's high-context theory explains why these lessons travelled home inside stories rather than statistics. Because I had absorbed such tacit cues, the Barcelona icebreaker on day one felt familiar. We rotated chairs every ninety seconds, sharing one belief about mental health. I listened first and spoke second, guided by what Bennett calls the ethnorelative stance. A Belgian illustrator described depression in desaturated hues, whereas a Slovenian medic debunked dopamine-detox fads as recycled stoicism. I noticed the recombinant nature of misinformation and pitched a myth-mapping layer for MIST so the algorithm could diagnose local narratives before rebutting them. In that moment, technology became an anthropologist, adapting tone and metaphor to each cultural micro-climate.

2.4 Critical moments and learning loops

Fracture to cohesion. Wednesday delivered a crisis when a teammate, uncomfortable with our group's "vibe", quietly left without giving a detailed reason. Her exit shrank us to three and threatened morale. Kolb's experiential cycle spun rapidly. The concrete event was her departure. Reflective observation: later that evening we gathered in a small tapas bar just off La Rambla, replaying her exit and accepting that her departure was probably about personal preference, not our project, as she may simply have preferred to join her friends in another team. Abstract conceptualization followed as we redrew our task board, redistributed her workload across the remaining three of us, and simplified the prototype so it could still be finished on time. Active experimentation saw us code through the night; by sunrise the prototype offered citations, confidence scores and opt-out toggles. Judge feedback on Thursday morning singled out those safeguards as a unique strength, turning a weakness into our differentiator. The episode taught me that conflict, if scaffolded by reflection, can power innovation rather than stall it.

Icebreaker epiphany. Monday's opening exercise paired me for ninety seconds with peers from twenty countries. A Norwegian dance therapist remarked, "Movement is mood made visible", a phrase I later embedded in our TikTok storyboard to illustrate body-based signs of anxiety. The speed-dating format compressed Bennett's developmental model of intercultural sensitivity into one evening, moving me from polite curiosity to empathetic listening in six rapid rounds. By the final swap I was harvesting metaphors, not small talk, and realizing that novelty, when mined rather than neutralized, drives creative leaps. This insight surfaces in stanza V where "accents beating as one" replaces Babel-like noise with collective rhythm.

Award ceremony. Friday's closing moment added an emotional crescendo. When the host read out "Category 3 winner: MIST", I felt a thermal wave of validation roll through the auditorium. Applause merged with camera flashes that turned the stage into a strobe of silver. For a heartbeat I sensed every prior journey snap into alignment, like magnets finding their poles. That sensation of internal coherence appears in the poem's final declaration, "I am the map now".

2.5 How the poem encodes insight

Imagery operates as a mnemonic code. The “salt-crusted air” of Barcelona preserves memory much like salt cures food, blocking decay. “Laptops glow like votive candles” frames technology as sacred yet fragile, reflecting our scramble to insert ethical guardrails. Physical objects became learning totems. The Greek pebble in my jacket pocket reminds me to strip jargon until an idea feels smooth. The Georgian vine symbolizes networks that support growth by interlacing, a reminder to build interdisciplinary teams. The closing metaphor “tinder, strike it kindly” suggests that intercultural friction produces creative sparks only when parties approach with respect. Thus, the poem is not decorative; it is structural, holding the analytical beams of this commentary in place.

2.6 Forward trajectory

Academic integration. I will pilot MIST in the autumn Digital Health module at Babeş-Bolyai, gathering Romanian student feedback on trust cues and refining the consent interface designed during the Barcelona crisis.

Service and mobility. Energized by the Challenge, I have enrolled in a EUTOPIA summer school on social innovation and applied to the European Solidarity Corps for a six-month youth mental health placement. One intercultural project per semester is my new baseline.

Peer mentoring. Borrowing Georgia’s ethos of communal toasting, I will host monthly reflective-journaling circles for friends and colleague students. The aim is to convert culture shock from a painful rupture into usable insight, echoing the fracture-to-cohesion lesson above.

Language outreach. Because Arabic and English shaped my own bridge-building, I plan to create an online glossary translating key mental-health terms between the two languages, reducing semantic drift that often fuels misinformation.

2.7 Closing reflection

When my plane banked over Transylvania, Barcelona’s salt, Baku’s flame and Tbilisi’s vine felt less like souvenirs than verbs: preserve, ignite, entwine. Intersection rather than simple addition now defines my competence. Cultures collide, kindle and crystallize, leaving me fluent in more than two spoken languages. I am learning the grammar of difference itself, and that living grammar keeps wisdom rising long after the applause fades.

3. References

1. Bennett, M. J. (1993). *Towards ethnorelativism: A developmental model of intercultural sensitivity*. In R. M. Paige (Ed.), *Education for the intercultural experience* (pp. 21-71). Intercultural Press.
2. Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond culture*. Anchor.
3. Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice-Hall.