

This week, the Nass
grows wings, antennae,
and whiskers.

The Nassau Weekly⁵⁰

April 16, 2026

In Print since 1979 | Online at nassauweekly.com

Volume 50, Number 7



TO CATCH AND PIN A BUTTERFLY



TO CATCH AND PIN A BUTTERFLY

- 4** **Chiaroscuro**
By Sofia Cipriano
Art by Ariel Chen
- 6** **The Insectoid in the Kitchen**
By Ellen Kramer
Art by Ellen Kramer
- 7** **Bluebells**
How to Stop the Bleeding
By Claire Beeli
Art by Raven Reid
- 8** **How to Have a Spring Fling**
By Soa Andriamananjara
Art by Gina Cocuzzi
- 10** **Ragmans'**
By Nathan Myers
Art by Anelise Chun
- 12** **Lispector's Zoo**
By Louise Sanches Barbosa
Art by Eden Reinfurt
- 13** **Shoulder Strain**
By Sofia Patkanovtsiy
Art by Raven Reid
- 14** **Once Upon a Time, There Was a Mountain - Part 3: The Story**
By Alpha Zhang
Art by Emily Chen
- 16** **Romantic Orientalism**
By Ayanna Uppal
- 18** **Woman of Clay**
By Bella Capezio
- 19** **Necessary Information**
By Laila Hartman-Sigall
Art by Raven Reid

Dear friends,

I keep a careful journal of my days and habits. What did I buy? What did I eat? What was I grateful for? I do this mostly so that I can understand myself better, so that I can flip through the year as twelve two-page spreads and identify the patterns that facilitate my being. There are other services we use these days that serve similar functions—apps to track how much we've read, to count our steps, and to log in the ethereal, placeless cloud what we've done with the hours in our days. It strikes me that attempting to understand my own being is not so simple as knowing how many nights I went to sleep past midnight. To ascertain one's own essence is not like catching a football or the flu or a butterfly. But maybe it is. Maybe it really is that simple.

Never dream with thy hand on the helm.
- Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

In earnest,
Sasha Rotko, EIC

Masthead

Editor-in-Chief
Sasha Rotko

Publishers
Vivian Clayton
Naomi Segel

Managing Editors
Narges Anzali
Claire Beeli

Design Editor
Eden Reinfurt

Art Director
Raven Reid

Assistant Art Director
Nina Obidairo-Danielsen

Senior Editors
Elena Eiss
Nell Marcus
Gavin Stroud

Head Copy Editor
Lucy McWeeny

Fiction Section Head
Laila Hartman-Sigall

Essays Section Head
Livia Shneider

Poetry Section Head
Ziyi Yan

Audiovisual Section Heads
Mannix Beall-O'Brien
Juna Brothers

Second Look Section Heads
Sofia Cipriano
Alexander Margulis

Associate Second Look Editors
Ariel Chen
Lily Williams-Ameen

Junior Editors
Soa Andriamananjara
Bella Capezio
Scarlett Huntington
Callisto Lim
Aina Marzia

Sophie O'Connor
Louise Sanches Barbosa
Suzette Sheft
Ev Wellmon

Business Manager
Nora Choi

Director of Communications
Michael Grasso

Web Editor
Nia Young

Historian
Arianna Huang

Director of Alumni Relations
Sylvie Plouffe

Photo Editor
Faith Ho

Events Editor
Alba Mastromatteo

Trustees
Isabelle Clayton 2025
Katie Duggan 2019
Leif Haase 1987
Robert Faggen 1982
Marc Fisher 1980
Sharon Lowe 1985
Todd Purdum 1982
Alexander Wolff 1979

This Week:

Fri	7:00p McCarter Theatre The Improvised Shakespeare Company	12:00-1:00p Aaron Burr Hall 216 Mining, Extraction, and Illegality: Thirteen Hours at a Clandestine Airstrip in the Brazilian Amazon	Mon	4:30p Chancellor Green Rotunda 2026 Senior Readings in Poetry, Playwriting & Screenwriting	7:30p Princeton University Chapel Early Music Princeton Concert
			Tues	4:30p McCosh 40 Lacan, Althusser and the 'Very Pretty Dream' of Interdisciplinarity	4:30p Bendheim Hall 019 Frontline Voices: Creative Storytelling as a Tool Towards Health Equity
Sat	10:00a Hurley Gallery, Lewis Arts Complex <i>Sites of Erosion:</i> Exhibition by Julianna Martin '26	7:30p Richardson Auditorium, Alexander Hall Princeton University Orchestra and Glee Club Concert	Wed	9:00a-6:00p Hagan Gallery, 185 Nassau St. <i>Cavity:</i> Exhibition by Joey Narkter '26	7:00-8:00p Robertson Hall 100 The Painter's Fire: A Forgotten History of the Artists Who Championed the American Revolution
Sun	1:00p Milberg Gallery Guided tour: "Nursery of Rebellion": Princeton and the American Revolution	7:00p Frist Campus Center, Cafe Vivian 101 The Tortured Poets Open Mic Night	Thurs	4:10-5:00p Online (Zoom) Fund for the Irish Studies: John Banville on "Fiction and the Dream"	7:00p Princeton High School Performing Arts Center Wind Ensemble Spring 2026 Concert

Verbatims:

Overheard in Addy Hall
In disbelief football player: "What did you say?"
Gossip-y football player: "I said he sticks eggs up his butt."

Overheard in Dodd
Terran: "If you go to the Fairy Rave, and they deny you drugs, what should I do?"
Other Terran: "Just threaten legal action."

Overheard in Bloomberg 044
Intrepid Freshman: "My position is Communications and my crime is heresy."

Overheard in Whitman Library
Homophobe: "Don't go in there. There's two lesbians, and they're touching cheeks."

Overheard in Terrace
Protestant: "I've never really humped like that, even in my own bedroom."

Overheard in Firestone
Fashionista: "There's a preponderance of sweater vests in here that's making me uncomfortable."

Overheard in Dickinson
Real Ass Motherfucker: "I would never encourage terrorism, but—"

Overheard in Bloomberg 044
Nass Infiltrator: "I am fed up with this neoliberal, bullshit publication. Poser! Poser! Poser! Patriot. Poser!"

Overheard in line for "The Drama" at the Garden Theater (on Good Friday)

Girl #1: "I feel like our mood from church has shifted."
Girl #2: "Yes, we were like 'ahhhh'" (choir voice)
Girl #1: "And now it's like 'LET US IN!!!!'"
Girl #2: "This is what the world does to you...the fleshly desires for Zen-daya..."

Overheard at Coffee Club
Liberal: "...he was an anti-capitalist proto-chud kinda guy."

Overheard in Coffee Club
Stressed customer: "I almost sent an email to all the RCAs ordering the Ayatollah... because for some reason Ayat autocorrects to Ayatollah."

Submit to Verbatims
Email thenassauweekly@gmail.com

About us:

The *Nassau Weekly* is Princeton University's weekly news magazine and features news, op-eds, reviews, fiction, poetry and art submitted by students. There is no formal membership of the *Nassau Weekly* and all are encouraged to attend meetings and submit writing and art. To submit, email your work to thenassauweekly@gmail.com by 10 p.m. on Monday. Include your name, netid, word count, and title. We hope to see you soon!

Read us: nassauweekly.com

Contact us: thenassauweekly@gmail.com
Instagram: @nassauweekly
Twitter: @nassau_weekly

Join us: We meet on Mondays and Thursdays at 5 p.m. in Bloomberg 044!

Chiaroscuro

The microscopic elements that made up the Princeton Opera Company's recent production of Gianni Schicchi.

BY SOFIA CIPRIANO

It's September 1, 1299, in Richardson Auditorium, and we are treated to vistas of Florence. Terracotta roofs cluster under the Duomo, framing a quaint apartment scene. At 7:30 p.m., the crowd hushes and the orchestra begins: a group of precocious students in casual attire rush onto the stage, singing in a technique that pre-dates them by a few centuries.

The Princeton Opera Company made its triumphant return to the big stage on March 27 and 28 with *Gianni Schicchi*, an hour-long opera that is, plot-wise, "half-*Knives Out*, half-*Romeo and Juliet*," as Yizhe Sun, the production's conductor and music director, told me.

Gianni Schicchi (pronounced Jah-nee Skee-kee) is the first fully-staged student-run opera that's been performed on Princeton's campus since before COVID. Princeton Opera Company (POCO) was founded in 2011; the company went through a period of dormancy and was briefly run alongside Princeton Glee Club. But this past summer, POCO president Gabrielle Liberman '28 and treasurer Yehyun Hong '28 worked to revive the group.

Schicchi is based on a musical composition by Giacomo Puccini—the Italian composer famous for *La bohème* (1896) and *Madama Butterfly* (1904)—and a *libretto* ("little book" in Italian, referring to an opera's lyrics) by Giovacchino Forzano. The basic plot is inspired by an episode of Dante's *Divine Comedy*: a family enlists a man named Gianni Schicchi to forge a will after their uncle disinherits them. Antics ensue. (On the night I went, I noticed that as the family scours their dead relative's house in search of the will, a copy of *Inferno* is tossed off a shelf.)

Choosing the opera itself was difficult: the project had to be manageable for the cast and enjoyable for the audience. There are few operas suitable for college-aged students to perform: opera singers don't vocally mature until their late 20s or 30s, and singing overly complicated pieces could damage their

voices. Not to mention, their careers—few singers below the age of 30, I am told, should be singing the most famous Wagnerian arias.

David Kellett, who serves as POCO's faculty advisor and gives voice lessons to many of Gianni Schicchi's stars, helped advise the group throughout the process. When we met on Zoom, Kellett—who looks like the seasoned singer he is, with his salt-and-pepper beard and newsboy cap—apologized that he had to rush into the city for an early evening rehearsal (he's a tenor, with an extensive professional career).

"No one's doing opera in high school," Kellett said. This creates technical issues: while some may have a background in musical theater and some may have classical singing training, few have experience staging an entire opera.

To make the project feasible, Sun had to strategize shrinking an orchestral score meant for an 80-piece set to one that could fit in Richardson. Puccini operas are musically complex—the score is technically demanding, with frequent tempo changes.

The production's set was makeshift: "We were scrounging. But it worked!" said Kellett. The armoire on stage came from Kellett's basement; the steamer trunk came from his attic. The group bought the bed on Craigslist; Giovanni Nigro '28, the executive producer, bought the oxygen tank on eBay. POCO's budget was small. And their practice time was limited: normally, Kellett said, staging a production of *Gianni Schicchi* would take around 70 hours of intense practice. He spent around 16 hours with the group prior to the performance. (They also practiced for several additional hours each week, but still—an impressive feat for a short time frame.)

Earlier this year, POCO was granted student group residency in Richardson for 2026—an honor which made staging the opera feasible. Over the two nights, they sold 600 tickets.

Sun, a slim Shanghai-born Physics PhD candidate at Princeton, told me he thinks of opera "as sort of the quintessential interdisciplinary field in the humanities." Between the libretto and the score and the singers and the acting and the set design and the languages (most operas are in Italian or German or Russian or French), operas are essentially microcosms of the Western canon.

Singing opera is an art and a science. Opera singers are grouped by voice type: women are cast as sopranos (highest range), mezzos, or contraltos (lowest range). Men are countertenors (highest), tenors, baritones, and basses (lowest). But these aren't neat categories, either—a male singer can be, for example, a bass-baritone.

"Some voices are just better suited for a higher or lower register. But, with good technique, you can train to get better at a certain *fach*," Liberman told me, using the German word for voice type. Operatic roles are written for particular *fachs* (the title role of *Gianni Schicchi*, for example, is meant for a lyric baritone—Lukas Palys, a first-year, took on the role in POCO's production.)

Voice training is not for the faint of heart. I met with Arturo Cruz Urrutia, the production's lead tenor, the afternoon before the show's opening. We sat in an eating club backyard, pop music playing in the background—child's play, vocally. As he spoke, Arturo, who's from Puerto Rico, gesticulated with his hands in a way I could only describe as Italian.

"Operatic singing is not natural. You optimize for sound and projection with your body," he said, reminding me that opera singers are unmiked. "One of my main obstacles that I'm still dealing with is releasing jaw and tongue tension." He slackened his jaw and gestured around his face, explaining the acoustics of the mouth:

"Have you ever played a bell before? If you put your thumb on the bell, it'll dampen the sound. The same thing happens with the voice. You're pushing air out, but if you have tension in your

jaw or in your tongue, it reduces the way the voice carries through and floats above an orchestra. So you have to learn how to release your jaw, your tongue. I kind of think: *hot food in your mouth.*”

When singing in practice rooms, Arturo sometimes squats or carries large objects to activate his abdominal muscles—all, of course, to optimize “his instrument.” But learning arias requires more than singing: knowing every word of the *libretto* is crucial. After all, opera requires acting: “I’ve had to convince myself that my love for Laretta is so strong that it allows me to shift my moral compass,” Arturo emphasizes. At one point, his character must beg Schicchi to forge the will—



if he doesn’t, then he won’t be able to marry Schicchi’s daughter, Laretta. Arturo raps off his lines to me—he’s currently in Italian 101, but he speaks faster than my Italian cousins.

“The most important thing about opera is ultimately about telling the story—the text—but doing it, in old terms, in *bel canto*, which means beautiful singing,” explained Kellett. The effect they’re going for is called *chiaroscuro*, Liberman said: Italian for light-dark. (It’s also a concept in visual art: look up a Caravaggio painting).

“The idea of *chiaroscuro* is the ability to color your voice to match the text,” Kellett continued. “If you’re angry, there’s a certain edge to the thing. If it’s a beautiful love song, you’re able to bring in softness, a certain color to the

text.”

“The *cover* is a way to find that perfect balance technically,” Liberman said, referring to a core principle of the *bel canto* tradition that helps singers maintain resonance and projection. As they progress up a scale, opera singers subtly modify vowel sounds in their mouths—rounding out an “e” into a “ü” (a German umlaut u), for instance—so the tone remains across a range. “The light is the ring and the point of the sound that allows you to cut through the orchestra, whereas the dark is the dome and the fullness of the sound that allows it to be rather beautiful,” she continued.

It strikes me that this dialectical ten-

second night.)

Before *Gianni Schicchi*, I had seen three operas—all for class trips—and I had, accordingly, fallen asleep at three operas. Having no musical training or knowledge of Italian or German or French, I am woefully opera-illiterate. I am not even much of a fan of musical theater, opera’s bastardized younger sister. But even I found *Gianni Schicchi* thoroughly, wonderfully enjoyable.

When I met Sun, in the Rocky Common Room—he wore a maroon button-down shirt and a scarf—he told me multiple times he was a “pushy person.” I read him as passionate.

At Harvard, where he studied as an undergrad, Sun realized his love of opera, participating in multiple fully-staged productions. His commitment to the art form is obvious: when he was conducting live, elegantly gesturing in a language foreign to me, I noticed he mouthed the *libretto* in Italian. “It’s a collaborative process,” he said, of conducting. “It’s important to sing along, mentally, with the singers.”

Sun’s love of music has influenced his academic focus: he’s interested in collective behavior, in how “microscopic interactions lead to macroscopic phenomena.” And when he spoke about physics, I couldn’t help but think of all the microscopic elements that went into *Gianni Schicchi*:

“When you go an order higher up in an organization—the organism or the system you’re looking at—new laws emerge. And so, for instance, at the most basic level of atoms, you have the laws of physics. And then a level above, you have molecules, and chemistry, and then all these molecules come together, and you have biology. There’s this somewhat arbitrary division between science and the arts and humanities that we have in our modern thinking. But in fact, one way to look at it is that the arts and humanities are just the highest level—there’s just something fuzzy in between that we don’t understand yet.”

Sofia Cipriano is a contributing writer and section head for *Second Look*.

Fiction

The Insectoid in the Kitchen

“Benji looked at his insect mother with suspicion. She was acting unusually attentive.”

BY ELLEN KRAMER

Karma had never been quite so cruel as when Benji found the insectoid in the kitchen on a Thursday between environmental club and junior lacrosse practice. The insectoid had a thin, velvety body and triple-jointed limbs. It was bent into the oven removing a pot pie when it heard Benji's footsteps halt suddenly on the linoleum floor. It extracted its upper thorax from the oven and straightened to a full, gangly height, then swiveled on a wire-thin neck to see Benji through two hundred crystalized pupils. The insectoid's jaw dropped and it screamed in a high-pitched, shrill voice: “Benji, get over here and help your mother in the kitchen!”

Benji paused. This is not my mother, he thought. And yet—he leaned closer and squinted. The insectoid was wearing his mother's charm bracelet. He discreetly peered closer to see that the bracelet was not missing any of its silvery charms, which might have torn off in a tussle or been damaged in an anthropophagous act. And, Benji thought with a sniff, there appeared to be nothing incorrect about the smell of the pie, either.

“Yes, Mom. You remember I have practice today though, right?”

“How could I forget?”

His insectoid mother smiled sweetly and gave Benji's hair a scrunch, her stick-like pinchers catching on a few strands of hair and pulling them out. Benji looked at his insect mother with suspicion. She was acting unusually attentive. Benji put

on oven mitts, and the insect passed him the pot pie. He inhaled deeply and furrowed his brow at its familiar scent. He set it on top of the oven and used a metal spatula to divide it into slices, glancing up at the insectoid while he worked. He subtly checked the pie for mealy worms and roly polies, but, finding none, took a section of the pie and sat down at his place at the table.

“Do you think my hair looks strange today?” she asked, petting an empty space near the crown of her exoskeleton head. “The other moms at the drop-off asked me if I was trying a new style...”

Benji nodded and feigned a thoughtful glance at his mother's exoskeletal skull.

“...and I haven't had it cut anytime recently. It must just be that new shampoo I bought!” She brought her pot pie to the table and sat down.

“No, Mom. I don't think it looks too different.” He looked at her antennae, her kaleidoscope eyes. He wouldn't be too unhappy if she stayed this way. She seemed more agile, with her long and precise limbs and micro-focused mandibles. She seemed more caring, with her chemoreceptory antennae and prismatic eyes. He wondered what it might be like to have an insect for a mother.

She pushed up from the table swiftly and began digging through the kitchen cabinets.

“Mom, what are you looking for?”

“Eggs,” she rasped.

“Eggs?”

“Yeah.”

“Look in the fridge.” He sighed.

She thrust open the fridge door and grasped the egg carton with a pincher, swung it around to the counter and extracted four eggs. She pitched each into the air and caught and punctured them with four quick stabbing motions, stacking them in a neat row of oozing yolk, then sucked the yolk from the leaking holes.

Benji watched for a moment then turned back to his food. It was kind of gross. He was meditating on a mouthful

of corn when something hit him like a swatter to a fly.

In the schoolyard that day, Joyce had been sitting on the swing set with Chris. Benji had been near the cracked brick wall, half-watching while simultaneously pretending to be thinking of more important things, when Chris abruptly stood and marched about fifteen feet forward from the swing. Chris picked up a dark brown stick with such caution that Benji leaned forward. He watched as the brown thing climbed up Chris's arm. Joyce sprang off the swing and shrieked, arms outstretched, then went closer to Chris and, hands tentative, touched the brown thing on his shoulder. She had marvelled at the praying mantis for a second, then looked around the schoolyard, and seeing only Benji, called him over.

He approached and said something that came out awkward and stilted. He couldn't remember now, but it was something in the way Chris didn't look at him, or in how he could see Joyce's eyes dance while she watched Chris—it was truly something in being so invisible there, that Benji tore the mantis from Chris's shoulder, flung it to the ground, and stomped it into a paste. He whirled and tramped away, feeling tears itch his nose and warble his chin. He could hear Joyce's shrieks behind him and the crunch of gravel as Chris knelt to comfort her. He ran toward the woods beyond the schoolyard, and began to cry. It was over, now, and Joyce would probably hate him, but at least he'd never have to see that bug again.

A bug's life can be just as fulfilling, or tragic, or banal—Ellen Kramer takes the Nassau Weekly from hatch to squash to... whatever comes next.



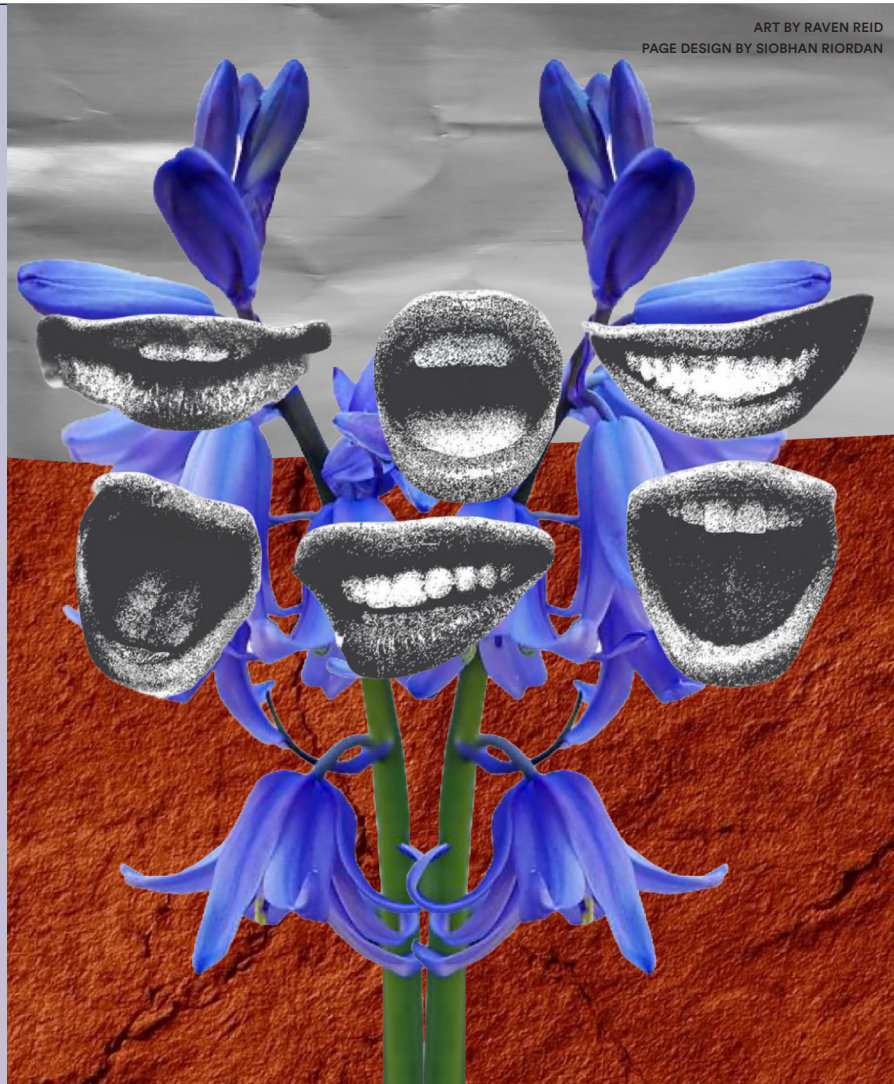
Bluebells

BY CLAIRE BEELI

“The temple bell stops—
but the sound keeps coming
out of the flowers.”

- Bash

Truth is the quiet color of the
wind over the ocean, the temple
on the cliffside, the oxidized bell
that sweeps clean the plain. It stops
the dust from building up as a patina, but
its mission is endless. For under the sound
lies involuting earth that keeps
unmaking itself. Its shape is always coming
into being. Its roar is muffled. Its heat seeps out
on the plain, seeking the sharp smell of
openness, someplace to pretend it's always known—
the chance to lie through the mouths of flowers.



How to Stop the Bleeding

Hook yourself
and kick
your soul
from here
The sky has never been
this pale cast of
imbalanced humors—
unreddened, unredeemed
cumulus underbelly,
the hard graft of gravity
pulls a life down like
the river slips underground
and there are young eyes in his palms,
the new stigmata:
those wounds
will empty.

as a drying stag, blow
away the stool, flail
far from words
to the long high window.
like the whites of mean eyes,
blank wrists—
when there is none left you
will be the blank
witness
to all you are left;
iron scraps on a magnet.
the trout flail in the sand
and these nearly drained:
like you whose skies
will never close but they
will empty.

Claire Beeli is a contributing writer and
managing editor for the Nassau Weekly.

How to Have a Spring Fling

A *Nass* writer revels in the aftermath of a brief love affair, and argues that there is beauty in its being contained.

BY SOA ANDRIAMANANJARA

We spent our four nights together knowing that we would never see each other again. The second to last night that we spent together, I asked Calla what our relationship would look like if we went to the same university. “Why are you spending time thinking about that?” she asked, not unkindly. The lights were off as we lay in my hotel bed, staring at the off-center chandelier. It was a Monday night, and Calla would have to go to class in the morning. I didn’t say anything. I was embarrassed. Perhaps she did not spend time pondering various hypotheticals as we lay next to each other in bed. “I do like you,” Calla said softly, taking my hand, “I don’t want you to think I’m some sort of whore. I wouldn’t be here if there was someone else. I’m not hooking up with anyone. I really like you.”

I believed her; the first day I was in Scotland, as I sat on the floor of her dorm with Cole, my friend from high school whom I was visiting, a boy had texted to ask Calla on a date on Sunday. This occurred on a Saturday, and on Sunday night, as we lay in Calla’s slim twin bed, I asked her what had happened on the date. She furrowed her brow. “I’m not going to go on that date. I’m here with you.”

We spent every night of the four nights I was in St. Andrews together. There wasn’t much to do at night other than sit in my hotel room. Most shops closed around 8pm, and my hotel room consisted merely of a bed, so all we could do was be with one another, and we chose to curl up and watch movies.



Calla hated making choices, so the task of picking a movie fell to me. I showed her two of my favorite movies: *Us* and *Bodies, Bodies, Bodies*, and she loved both. While we watched, Calla would scratch my back. I let her pick at the blackheads, which she found extra satisfying. “Ooh!” she’d exclaim, “That was a good one!” as she scratched off a dot of skin. She would kiss me without the intention of going further. Calla had gotten her period the second night, and she told me that because we only had four nights together, she would rather talk and learn about me. I cannot remember kissing her, but I can imagine her laughing at my jokes and raving about *Fleabag*.

Our dialogue was filled with laughter and peppered with pecks to the shoulder and cheek. We spoke about the lives we wanted: Calla wanted to finish her education in Europe and live in Taiwan, whereas I wanted to write and had no idea where it would take me. We talked about death. My grandmother had died

while I was in Scotland, and the night after she passed, Calla brought me purple bars of Cadbury chocolate. Earlier that day, I had sat on the cold Scottish beach and cried as I wrote about her in my journal. My seemingly eternal grandmother was gone. I could still hear her voice saying my name and calling me *ma chérie*. My grandmother lived with me for much of my childhood; I share her middle name, and she is the primary reason I can speak French, so I cried because she would not get to see everything I would do, all of which I can attribute to her. I filled pages and pages with memories of my grandmother. Before she passed, my father had organized a tribute book to her, and I’d sent emails and photos of Princeton to her. Our time together was over, but my grandmother knew how much I loved her, and now, that was what mattered most.

“I’m not going to cry in front of you,” I said to Calla as we sat in my bed.

“It’s okay if you do,” she replied, “My

grandfather died a few years ago.”

I told her I was sorry.

“Don’t be.”

She got up to shower. I sat on the bed, staring at the words in my book. My family was an ocean away, and the only comfort I received came from a girl I had met two days before, yet I felt incomprehensibly comfortable. I wanted Calla to come back to bed. The room was quite confined, so there was probably about a foot of space between the end of the bed and the bathroom door. I heard the water stop running and then her sighing loudly. “Are you okay?” I asked through the door. Calla did not respond. When she came into the bedroom, I repeated the question. “I hate myself,” she said plainly. “You’ve met me at a very insecure time in my life.” I asked her what she was insecure about. She’d gained weight and felt ugly. Her sister was blue-eyed and blonde; Calla was not. She apologized for complaining. “You’re the one who’s had a horrible day! I should be comforting you.”

“Let’s just watch something.”

Calla pulled up 123movies, and we watched *The Shining* and ate chocolate. Months earlier, my friends made us walk out of a screening of *The Shining* because they were so scared. Now laying in the hotel bed with Calla, our fingers and legs intertwined, *The Shining* did not scare me so much.

I knew I was going to cry after I left Scotland, so I made a playlist to listen to on the plane. When I went to bed the next night, I would be alone. There’d be no back-scratches or movies. I felt bare; it was not unlike a blanket being snatched off of you in the cold night or being let go from a hug. My row on the plane was empty, so I laid down and listened to “24 Hours” by Sky Ferreira and “What Was That” by Lorde. “What Was That” did not perfectly match the feelings I was hoping to illuminate through music, because I knew perfectly well what this was: a fling. I did not know, though, how meaningful it would be.

“Meaningful fling” might seem oxymoronic. The word “fling” itself implies something tossed—it’s simple and short term. But this is exactly why a

fling is perfect for discovering meaning: there are no stakes. With a fling, you know it will end. In fact, the point is, your fling will end, so every moment becomes that much more intentional. For example, with this fling, we spent our time talking and learning about each other because we knew we only had so much time to do so. There’s a sense of urgency, which results in a passion that a long-term relationship could never know. The intimacy of a fling is much more concentrated than the intimacy of a long-term relationship; a long-term relationship’s intimacy is often diluted with questions of “What if they don’t like this side of me?” and “What if they leave because of me?”, whereas a fling does not fear an unexpected end. With a fling, there’s a desperation to make the most of it—to become an essential memory in another person’s life, to prove your vulnerability will not deter another person. I smile to myself knowing that even though we would only know each other for four days, we still chose to be together.

I didn’t text Calla when I got home. I told her the morning I left that I was glad I got to know her. I kissed her for the last time behind my hotel door, then simply hugged her alongside Cole and the rest of their friends when my cab arrived. Not texting, as *douche* as it sounds, is necessary to preserve a fling. The relationship then becomes contained to the time you spent together; it is not elongated by any attempts to drag it out. The fling then becomes a joyous story to tell your friends, even though you might’ve cried about it on the plane or filled 10 journal pages about it.

For a while, I thought I was one of those ‘all-or-nothing’ people. I thought something more than a hookup but less than a relationship would just be pointless, and what was

the point of doing something without a purpose? But in our embrace of the fear that it might mean nothing, the time we spent together became everything.

Soa Andriamananjara instructs the *Nassau Weekly* on *Spring Fling-ing... I, for one, am taking notes.*



RAGMANS'

“Mac lit his cigarette with a Zippo while Louie blocked the wind with his hands. Once it caught, Mike breathed in deeply with his eyes closed, then blew out a big cloud towards the street.”

BY NATHAN MYERS

It was past midnight. Mac and Louie hid their shoes from the drizzle under Ragmans' little awning and pretended not to be all that cold in the November air. Their horn cases leaned against the wall, getting a little wetter each time the rain came sideways.

“The apostrophe's in the wrong spot,” said Mac.

Louie looked around. “What now?”

“Up there, on the big sign. It should be, ‘Ragman,’ then an apostrophe, then the ‘s.’”

“Oh yeah,” said Louie. “I noticed that too, earlier.”

“Did you now?”

Louie nodded. “Sticks out like a sore thumb.”

Mac chuckled. “Well, maybe if they paid me a bit more, I'd climb up there and fix it.”

“Yeah.”

Louie's shoes were much newer than Mac's. Both black leather. But Louie's looked scuffed already, and the heel had glue all around the edges.

Mac fished around in his jacket pocket. “Cigarette?”

“No, thanks.”

“Don't smoke?”

“They say it's bad for your embouchure. It dries out the lips. Need those,” Louie replied. Mac lit up. “Ah.”

A taxicab, angular and dirty yellow, splashed a deep puddle across the street. A woman with an umbrella and now a wet dress screamed at the car, but it just took a sharp left turn and vanished.

“You hear Mike on that last chorus?” Louie asked. “Whole room went quiet. Double-high G.” “He's always pulling tricks like that,” said Mac, exhaling some smoke. “Then there's us mortals.”

Louie laughed. “You played clean

tonight, though. You were good. Reminds me of when I played with Hub. But that was back before he was as big as he is now.”

“Hubbie, huh?” Mac asked, after blowing out some more smoke.

“Oh yeah.”

“Where'd you play?”

“Oh. Just a little club. Back when he was still doing the smaller Harlem spots.”

The crackle of thunder sounded like bass drums in the distance, and water flowed in rivers on the edges of the street. Louie ground his gluey heel on the wet pavement.

“Fine good for the guy though,” said Louie. “You know he's playing with Billy now?”

“Billy?”

“Billy Joel.”

“Oh, that's something.”

“Sure is,” said Louie. “I should catch up with him.”

“No, you're right, you really gotta keep in touch.” Mac nodded. “I used to sub in for the Hampton Band. I played just left of Brownie one time, great guy. He remembers me. He liked me.”

Louie snorted. “Oh yeah? You send him a Christmas card?”

Mac didn't reply. Instead, he just took another drag, smoldering, then let some hot dry ash float down to the cold pavement. Louie watched as Mac's cigarette glowed red between his valve fingers. The rain was flooding the street. And there was more thunder, like drums. Then Mac spoke.

“I kinda hate the guy though.”

“Brownie?”

“No, no, Mikey. Thinks he's some kinda angel up there with his horn.”

Louie watched a soggy bag of bread rolls float down the road,

breaking apart in the water.

“Yeah. Fuckin' mutterer Louie.”

“Yeah.”



Fuck Mikey,” said Mac, loudly, his words ricocheting through the deserted street.

Louie smiled. “You’re a good guy, Mac. We should get a drink sometime.”

Mac shrugged. “Why not.”

Then the grimy steel doors of Ragmans’ swung open. The pavement was divided, light from dark, the open doors casting a thin golden sliver out into the street. For a moment, modal piano, hushed conversation, and the clink of glasses wafted gently outside. Mike stepped out, with a cigarette already in his right hand. He stood a beat, his eyes sliding over the pair of sidemen. He shut the door, closing the light and soft sound behind him.

“Great stuff as always, Mike,” said Louie. “Really incredible playing.”

“You’re one of a kind,” added Mac.

Mike nodded for a moment. “Anyone spare a light?”

Mac lit his cigarette with a Zippo while Louie blocked the wind with his hands. Once it caught, Mike breathed in deeply with his eyes closed, then blew out a big cloud towards the street. It was quickly shredded by the rain.

Mike looked over Louie and Mac, into the clouds which paced above. “I miss being in the house band at the Vanguard,” he said, examining the sky. “That was a tight group.”

“We’re not so bad though, are we?” Mac asked, smiling.

Mike’s eyes glistered orange, reflecting the light from the incandescent streetlamps. He brought his eyes down just a few inches and examined his second and third horns.

Mac’s fat, old, and has got skin like bad leather, he thought. He looks stupid when he holds a horn. Or maybe he just looks stupid generally. The other one can’t swing for shit. Just the sight of him trying to string together notes of his own makes you sick. And don’t even talk about the goddamned sound.

Mike smiled. “To tell you the truth, gentlemen, you’re not bad at all. Not bad at all,” he said, the words rolling out of his mouth like marbles.

Mike flicked his cigarette butt, only one-fourth smoked, into a puddle. It sponged up water and turned a splotchy grey. He opened the metal doors, which washed him with radiant light, and

vanished. Mac chuckled to himself.

For a few minutes, Mac and Louie stood and listened to the rolling percussion of the rain, leaning up against the wall, under little awning outside Ragmans’, pretending not to be cold.

Louie broke the silence. “Spare a cigarette?”

“You smoke now?”

“Maybe I do.”

Mac fished one out and passed it to Louie. Louie cupped his hands around the tip, same as before, and Mac lit it. Louie took a long drag, breathed it out, and stifled a cough.

“Thanks Mac,” he wheezed.

“No problem.”

“You know what?” Louie asked, pausing, looking at Mac, who was staring off at the stewing grey clouds. “You know, Mac, I didn’t really play with Hubbie. But we were on the same bill, at least, one night.”

“Well, not really that, even. He was on the bill the night after me, same place I was, when I subbed for some band’s horn. But I got to see him backstage. He was busy though. We didn’t talk too much. Well, we didn’t talk.”

Mac brought down his eyes just a few inches and examined his third horn.

Doesn’t understand much. Not much at all. Can’t really play. Besides, “Louie” is already taken. That’s funny. Kinda ties the whole picture of the kid together.

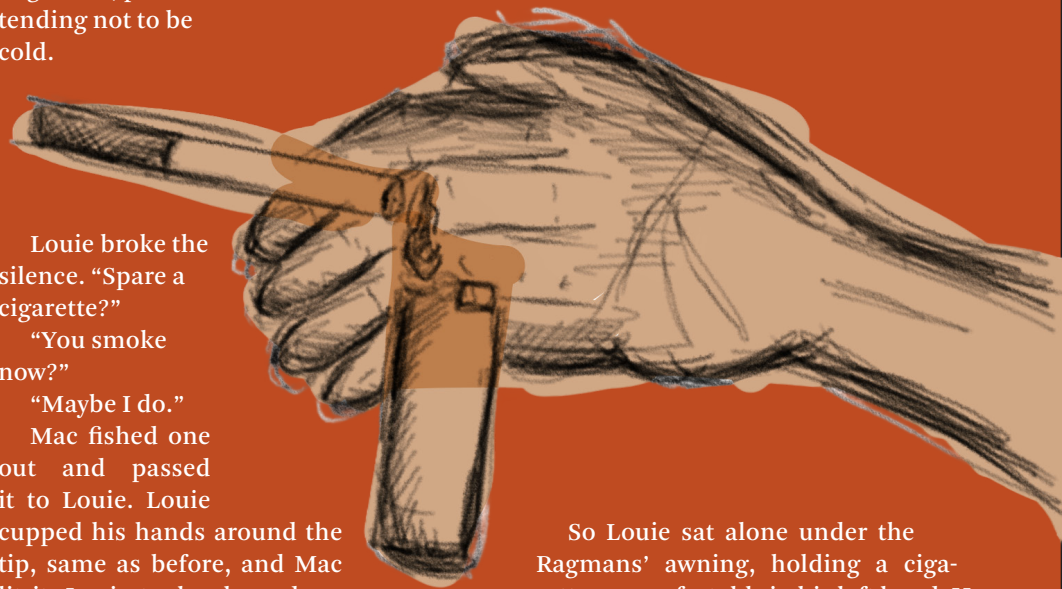
“So then I guess you’re not sending him a Christmas card,” Mac said, a smile stretched thinly across his face.

“Oh. Yeah. I guess not,” replied Louie, laughing a few times, offbeat. “Maybe when I’ve, uh, learned to play as well as you? I think I’d be able to get his address, then, like you probably did with Brownie?”

Mac stared at Louie for a moment,

then dropped his cigarette butt, burnt out, into the same puddle. It filled with water and sank. He grabbed his case. “Yeah. Goodnight, Louie.”

Mac walked off into the rain.



So Louie sat alone under the Ragmans’ awning, holding a cigarette uncomfortably in his left hand. He took another hit, slighter than the last, and blew out a little cloud, which hung in the air around him. He still coughed. But one breath at a time, Louie smoked, stifling the irritation in his lungs, even though there wasn’t anyone anywhere around to see. And then, once it burned out, he tossed it into the puddle with the other two, where the three butts gorged on water, until they were so soggy that the paper disintegrated, sloughing into the concrete.

Nathan Myers *takes the Nassau Weekly outside for a smoke. It’s okay, we only smoke one a day, and at rush hour, so everyone can see us.*



Lispector's Zoo

On the cats, cockroaches, and other creatures central to Clarice Lispector's work.

BY LOUISE SANCHES BARBOSA

We could open a zoo with all the animals that appear throughout Clarice Lispector's works. A magnificent parade of creatures would fill the space, from luminous jellyfish to ancient tortoises. Not only would grand beasts that appeal to our desire for the exotic be there. Cats and cockroaches would also reside in the zoo, but free from cages. They are too common for the spectacle established through the fence that separates beasts from humans. The zoo would also have a strict visiting policy. Tickets would only be accessible for the tortured artists, the mothers with empty nests, the poor migrants, the drivers of luxury yellow cars who run over them, and those who submerge themselves into their narratives. While holding a popcorn bag, I would watch as the cats and cockroaches interacted with them. Based on two of her narratives, "Love" and *The Passion According to G.H.*, that contact would prove both disastrous and informative. The zoo would flood. Visitors would enter the sea of the self and swim until they reached the seafloor. There, they would find a treasure chest containing the most repressed parts of their identity. Some would drown. Others would return to the surface.

A Siamese cat sitting on a large tree would stare at Ana, a middle-class housewife. She is the protagonist of the short story "Love." In it, she begins to question her life after seeing a blind man on a

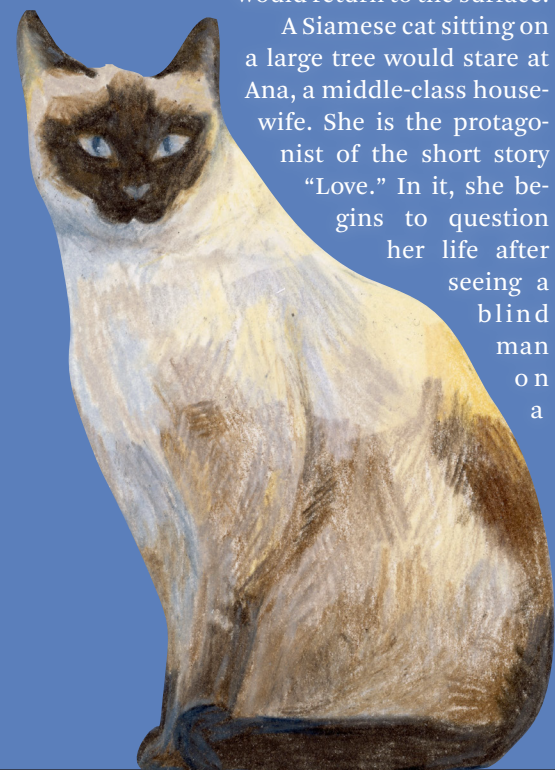
streetcar. As is typical in Lispector's literature, the ordinary triggers greater reflections about our humanity. What matters most is not the brief moment in which she sees the blind man, but how the visual encounter, similar to those we have when riding a crowded train home, contributed towards Ana's encounter with herself. A sincere inner look at who we are and what we do is rarely pleasant, as it demolishes the delusions we construct for ourselves and that are often a strategy of survival. *She is just busy*, thinks the young man being ghosted by his romantic interest. *I believe in the power of investment banking to solve inequality*, says the banker who attempts to find a greater meaning within the endless spreadsheets with endless numbers. Or, in the case of Ana, *I feel fulfilled by dedicating my entire life to taking care of the home*. Still impacted by the encounter with the blind man, she enters a garden, where she sees a cat. The reference to the animal is brief. Lispector only says: "A cat was in the central path. Its fur was soft. In a new silent walk, it disappeared." The cat's movement mirrors its independent nature, entering and leaving the garden of its own volition. The behaviour is the opposite of Ana's, where every minute is directed towards the construction of order within a domestic space composed of screaming kids and perpetual kitchen noises. The cat represents everything she does not have, and, as a result, it further exacerbates the crisis she is in. The feline figure compels her to stare at an animalistic freedom she lacked, but that she nevertheless longed for. While Ana continues to drown, the Siamese cat jumps to the top of a wall.

The zoo's cockroaches swim around a woman whose hands were once covered in clay. They were born in *The Passion According to G.H.* This Lispector novel introduces us to G.H., a sculptor who desired to dedicate her day to cleaning a room in her house that once belonged to a maid. The control Ana attempted to have in the domestic space reappears in this narrative. G.H. longs for the cleaning. She wants water to remove the thin dust that covers the room's furniture and the stains that mark its walls. All the evidence that reminds her that the room was once occupied. The afternoon could have been comforting, composed of an endless scrubbing that would have

produced in the protagonist a cathartic effect similar to that of Sophocles' tragedies. However, the presence of a cockroach interrupts the cleaning. The animal is repulsive to most, as it offends our aesthetic sense, with its hair-covered antennae, pungent odor, and greasy skin. As a result, encounters with cockroaches are usually interrupted by a high-pitched scream, an expression of the terror in the face of what is incomprehensible. Lispector breaks this pattern through her protagonist. The vision of the animal, with its Spartan brown shield, forces G.H. to enter the depths of her being, subverting the "harmonious coherence" she longed for. By being transported into a plane of nature, the repressed elements of her being are released, and she is finally able to recognize "this unknown and happy and unconscious matter that was finally: me! me, whatever that might be." Through the encounter with the cockroach, she recognizes the nauseating pleasure of the encounter with a self freed from social constraints. G.H.'s nature is dissected and explodes into fragments in front of our eyes, similarly to how a cockroach exposes its entrails to us after we strike it with a sandal.

Although ordinary, cats and cockroaches are central to Lispector's literature. They serve as symbols that prompt a defiance of the established order that existed in the characters' lives, forcing them to explore what exists beyond the label of a housewife or an upper-middle-class sculptor. The movement becomes almost recursive. The readers see the animals in the zoo. The protagonists see the animals in their story. As a result, the characters are finally able to see themselves, as if they were now the attractions of the zoo, which we, as readers, also observe. Depending on how open we are when reading the narrative, we can also become trapped in a cage, where we analyze ourselves while what we once called reality is disintegrated. As the zoo closes after its flood, using the evening to return to a similar version of its original shape, we all leave a bit more animalized. Meanwhile, the cockroaches reproduce, and the cats stretch.

Louise Sanches Barbosa is a contributing writer and junior editor for the Nassau Weekly



Shoulder Strain

BY SOFIA PATKANOVTSIY

The golden sand of
a cemetery wound
claws with rancor,
rests its plaster-filled
palms on your
provident shoulders,
steers you into this
braided soil
and, Lord,
it molds you
like a Scythian collar,
its latch unsealed.

Once Upon a Time, There Was a Mountain

Part 3: The Story

“A girl arrived at the temple gate in the autumn of 2008. She was nine or ten, barefoot, her feet thick with hardened skin and scaly with sores. She sat down in the courtyard and looked at the monk with the peculiar weatheredness of a child who has lived through things that did not belong to her age.”

BY ALPHA ZHANG

Once upon a time, there was a mountain. On the mountain, there was a temple.

In the temple, there was an old monk and a young monk.

One day, a man from the county's people's government climbed the mountain to inform the monks that the temple was classified as a cultural heritage. Meaning: it belonged to the people in a different way than before, one that involved a small stipend and a laminated certificate. The old monk hung the certificate on the wall, next to the persimmon tree.

Below the mountain, things were shifting again. The old field boundaries, which had dissolved into collective plots, now dissolved again into something else entirely that the old monk could not name. Roads, like capillaries, spread and stretched and reached every corner. Factories sprouted up like bamboo shoots after a spring rain. New sounds from the village: construction, engines, vendors. All that was solid had melted into air; all that was static had taken on a new shape.

The boy grew up too, fast and fierce. The old monk remembered his own childhood as having lasted an eternity, as if there had been endless time for chasing butterflies and playing with the fat orange cat. But the young man put on muscle and hair in the flash of a white horse. Yesterday his hand was a small round persimmon the old monk could wrap his hands around; today it was the boy's hand that wrapped around the old

monk's fist.

“You little rabbit whelp, I can't even keep you in line anymore,” said the old monk and laughed.

The young monk went below the mountain more frequently. First they were just grocery runs. Then he stayed for longer and longer, sometimes lodging at a friend's place or at a hotel. The old monk, having exhausted his methods of disciplining the young monk, now turned a blind eye. As the old saying goes: *If the sky wants to rain and your mother wants to remarry, let it be!*

Instead he would leave a persimmon by the young monk's bed every night, after the young monk had fallen asleep, just how the previous old monk had told him a story each night. Sometimes the persimmon was eaten; sometimes it rotted. The old monk threw away the rotten ones and set out new ones. That was the extent of his vocabulary of love.

So strange: though the old monk had lived alone before, for fifty years, he had never felt an emptiness like this. It was as if there were a hole inside him that had gone unnoticed all along, papered over, concealed, but now it had opened up, and when he looked inside, there was nothing there at all. He had been loved, he knew very well. But he felt none of this love stored inside him. Alas. He was eight and five and there could be no change anymore, not even the possibility of change.

The young monk, who'd turned twenty-one, walked down to the village on one rainy day to buy salt. The year was 1989. The grocery store, which was located next to food stalls, had a public television, which the large crowd would gather around and watch. That day the young monk felt something was strange. Usually this place was full of bustling noise, so how had it become

so quiet? As he pushed his way into the crowd, on the screen were students, statues, and tanks. Everyone watched. No one spoke.

He bought his salt and walked back up the mountain and wanted to ask the old monk some questions, like he had done many times before. He knew these questions would not yield good answers, and he knew the old monk wasn't good at answering questions anyway.

Then, after a second thought, he chose to remain silent. Some things are better not said—this he understood.

Instead, he walked to the old monk that night and said, “Tell me a story.”

Surprised at this request, the old monk looked into him with his watery eyes. He was frail and short. It was hard to tell which trembled more, his voice or his hands.

The old monk faltered for a moment, then began:

“Once upon a time, there was a mountain.”

The young monk closed his eyes and listened, without interrupting.

It was the same story: the mountain, the temple, the two monks, the story. The young monk pictured this world in his head. Then he pictured what he had seen earlier that day—the blood, the gore, the limbs. He pictured the small world again: two monks, one mountain. Then the television scenes. He began to feel a creeping dread, the dread that the world outside was so vast while his own world was so small. He was not soothed by the old monk's story. On the contrary, he was horrified.

The old monk passed away in the spring of 1997, the same year the British gave back Hong Kong, which was an event that meant a great deal to a billion people and nothing at all to the young monk, who was now a man of twenty-nine. He buried the old monk next to the other grave behind the temple. Two



mounds of earth. He stood between them and wondered what would become of him when he became the third.

That night he sat in the hall and wrapped in his hand the persimmon that the old monk had handpicked for him the night before he passed. He understood that the old monk's passing wasn't forever. He would once again return to this earth and reincarnate into a boy, or a girl, or a fat orange cat. A sudden whim struck him: what if he planted a rotten persimmon and a monk grew out of it? He abruptly stood up, felt the urge to tell the old monk something. But the old monk wasn't there anymore.

All those days, all those runs down the mountain, all that restless searching for friends, the monk had been chasing something, fleeing something. And now, turning around suddenly, he found what he had sought, standing quietly where the lights thinned to almost nothing.

So he chose to stay in the temple. Alone. The world below continued to accelerate. The factory at the river bend became two factories, then five. The village became a town. The town acquired a main street, a bank, and a school with a rubber track. The road was widened and then widened again. At night, the monk could see lights from the cliff edge, a pale orange glow as if the valley were slowly catching fire.

Yet the monk's own life seemed to have decelerated, if not come to a halt. He went to the village less frequently, then stopped going at all. Like the old monk, he swept the courtyard, took care of the persimmon trees, and remembered in his heart the story without telling anyone because there was no one to tell it to.

A girl arrived at the temple gate in the autumn of 2008. She was nine or ten, barefoot, her feet thick with hardened skin and scaly with sores. She sat down in the courtyard and looked at the monk with the peculiar weatheredness of a child who has lived through things

that did not belong to her age.

"I'm so tired."

He let her stay. He felt prepared for this moment, indeed had rehearsed it in his mind numerous times. It was a calling. A meant-to-be.

He learned the girl's story, piece by piece, over months. Her parents had gone to the coast to work five years ago. "Shenzhen," she said, "or maybe Shanghai." She could not remember which. It didn't matter. They had never come back. They were probably dead. She had been left with a grandmother who had also died. Then with nobody at all. She had walked for a long time. She did not know how long. When she had gotten to the mountain, she said, she had just kept going up. "Because that was where Grandma would be. When I go high enough, I will be able to reach Grandma."

At night, she could not sleep. He heard her pacing in the hall, her feet pressing the floorboards into creaks and groans.

He stood in her doorway.

"There is a story," he said.

She looked at him.

"Once upon a time," he said, "there was a mountain. On the mountain there was a temple. In the temple there were two monks..."

He paused here. He knew where the story would go. But the loop felt too easy, almost like a joke. He didn't want the girl to think he was brushing her off. So he went on and said:

"In the temple there were two people who were trying very hard to be enough for each other, which is the only thing anyone in any temple on any mountain has ever tried to do. One of them was old and the other was young. The old one knew a story, just one, and it wasn't a very good story, honestly, it was more like a question disguised as a story, or a story disguised as a question. The young one asked to hear it. Not because it was a good story. Because asking was better than silence. And the old one told it. Not because it was a good story. Because telling was better than

forgetting..."

The girl's eyes went wide, round and large as bronze bells.

The monk sensed instinctively that he had betrayed something. He felt an urge to apologize. Suddenly, he blushed.

So he said, "What...what was I saying... scratch that. You didn't hear this story. What was I talking about? Here's the story: Once upon a time..."

"But I like this story."

"Huh?"

"I like this story, Shushu," said the girl. She called the monk "Shushu," or uncle. "I especially like the part where the two monks tried very hard to be enough for each other. It reminded me of stories my Mama used to tell me. Love is not one direction. We ought to all care for each other, no?"

The monk felt as though his brain had been struck by lightning.

He had stayed on this mountain alone for eleven years out of a sense of redemption. He had felt he owed the old monk something for his love, that remaining on the mountain would bring peace to the dead monk's soul. Now he realized that what he had been doing was not love. It was pressure. It was obligation. It was anything but love. Love was cracking open his mouth the first time the old monk told a joke, his wide grin as sweet as a red persimmon. Love was asking the old monk question after question until the old man nearly lost his mind. Love didn't have to be grand gestures, like leaving one persimmon a day by someone's door. It could be, but it didn't have to be.

Love was trying very hard to be enough for each other, knowing that we would never be, because none of us were good enough.

In that sense, he was loved. And in the same sense, he loved.

The monk threw back his head and laughed toward the sky, unable to stop himself. The little girl watched from the side, struck dumb with wonder.



Alpha Zhang is a contributing writer for the Nassau Weekly.

Romantic Orientalism

On the travel writings of Gertrude Bell and Freya Stark, and the imperial tool of aestheticization in the Middle East.

BY AYANNA UPPAL

In his article “The Romantics’ Added Dimension,” Naji B. Oueijan writes that Romantic Orientalism emerged from the Romantic movement’s resistance to neoclassical constraints. He argues that this mode of orientalism emphasizes emotional identification and intimacy. These qualities appear to contrast the bureaucratic rationality of imperial administration, and thus ignore Romantic Orientalism’s capacity to cause harm. Yet, as we can see in the case of Gertrude Bell and Freya Stark, two of the most prominent British travel writers of the 20th century, it is precisely these qualities that, when incorporated into imperial structures, become mechanisms for domination. Bell and Stark’s work reveals that Romantic Orientalism’s influence does not stem from insincerity but from its functionality, as its sincerity itself is frequently a means to imperial ends. By adopting Romantic conventions which emphasize identification and intimacy—and are implicitly feminine—British women travel writers enacted a distinctive form of colonial power. This power operates through aestheticization rather than overt force, especially because, as women, they were not expected to express physical dominion over the colonized. Women could not claim mastery as easily as men, but this limitation produced a different yet no less effective mode of imperial authority. Romantic Orientalism furnished formal resources through which women could exercise power while appearing only to appreciate the Orient around them.

Gertrude Bell’s *Persian Pictures* is an impassioned series of sketches from her 1892 stay in Persia, chronicling what would turn out to be the start of her prolific life in the Middle East, where she served as a writer, traveller, political officer, administrator, and archaeologist—and became a master of both languages and politics, ultimately being given the title “Queen of the Desert.” *Persian Pictures*,

however, also exemplifies how Romantic Orientalism produces epistemic authority. This text was written before her formal administrative involvement with the British government in Arabia, but still establishes the emotional and aesthetic credibility that later legitimizes her political role. In Tehran, Bell adopts a pastoral gaze that renders the city simultaneously real and (seemingly) unoccupied: “The modern capital of Persia lies in a plain ringed half-way round by mountains...a land of dust and stones—waste and desolate.” The phrase “waste and desolate” conveys not just barrenness but an implicit narrative of incapacity, framing the landscape as lacking vitality and political potential. Bell’s subsequent observation of “a certain fine simplicity” transforms this emptiness into a site of potential order, suggesting that meaning and refinement can only be perceived (and perhaps realized) through her interpretive vision. Bell depicts Persia as “a great room cleared for the reception of some splendid company,” intentionally erasing or refusing to acknowledge its contemporary inhabitants and temporal realities. In the process, Bell frames Persia as a space designed for imperial intervention—an “empty space” upon which Europe can freely exercise its will.

Another important aspect of Bell’s time in the East is how well it oriented her attention to social perception as a tool of the Romantic orientalist line of imperial authority. Upon her first arrival in Iran, she writes in *Persian Pictures* that:

“There is nothing more difficult to measure than the value of visible emotion...In the East these difficulties are ten times greater...so it was that evening. At first it seemed to us that we were looking upon people plunged into the blackest depths of grief, but presently it dawned upon us that we were grossly exaggerating the value of their tears and groans... seeing this, we were tempted to swing back to the opposite extreme, and to conclude that this show of grief was a mere formality, signifying nothing – a view which was probably as erroneous as the other.”

Bell positions herself as the interpreter not merely of events but of emotional authenticity, claiming authority over

how grief is perceived and understood. Her vacillation between extremes constructs a framework in which she alone can calibrate and adjudicate meaning, as she alone describes this moment in the text. This analytical self-positioning establishes Bell’s voice as central, with colonized subjects functioning as interpretable, readable objects rather than autonomous agents. Her sensitivity, which plays on Romantic notions of emotional knowing and positions herself as an authority regarding the meaning ascribed to the East, is thus transformed into a mechanism of governance where emotional fluency implicitly becomes political leverage.

Freya Stark, who was, like Bell, a successful female travel writer in the Middle East, operated through a different but complementary mode, in which she shapes perception of the East back home. Unlike Bell, she was never a direct colonial administrator for any European nation, and she instead took to the Middle East after intensive study of Arabic and Persian in London. Her time in the Middle East was spent travelling, writing, and running from job to job. In fact, Stark stands in sharp contrast to Bell, as she more frequently engaged with natives on more equal terms—or at least, appeared to, in comparison to Bell’s explicit involvement in the political and archaeological machinations of the British Empire in the Middle East. There have been whispers regarding Stark’s potential involvement with European governments as a spy, but instead, her power and role in the imperial system largely lay in the circulation and reach of her work, which became some of the most popular travel writing of her day. At the time, her writing naturalized British presence through its fascination and detailing of aestheticized encounters with the people of the Near East. For example, in *Letters from Syria*, she observes:

“The whole place is a most amusing mixture of Europe smeared thin on a whole depth of primitive life below. Even the landscape is like this with the perfect barbaric glory of its sunsets and its grand lines not laid out for peaceful friendly life, and then the neat villages built as tidily as toys. And you admire the

little square houses and ask why so many of them are allowed to stand roofless and windowless, and are told that these belonged to people who died of hunger during the war.”

Stark’s language juxtaposes “perfect barbaric glory” with orderly European-style villages, aestheticizing poverty and social suffering. She diminishes local agency within local spaces, compressing complex social realities into readable surfaces for the gaze of Stark’s Western audience. The “roofless and windowless” houses, attributed to famine, are still described as picturesque, turning suffering into a form of narrative texture rather than a moral catastrophe with urgency. Romantic Orientalism permits Stark to maintain a fascination with the exotic while codifying social hierarchies between the East and West. Her aesthetic sensibilities naturalize inequality and reinforce imperial power through perception, rather than making appeals toward administrative action.

A later episode in which she describes her encounter with local men in a house in Damascus provides an even clearer illustration of this form of aestheticized domination, which haunts Stark’s interactions with the East. Upon stumbling into a secret bathhouse in which Syrian men surround her, Stark photographs them while simultaneously rejecting their invitation for her to join them — later declaring that she is thankful there was an easy route of escape, implying them to be predatory. Even in her description of the image-making process itself, the crowd is described as “villainous”, the space itself “empty” yet awaiting European documentation (Stark, 76), as if the place does not truly exist until it has been documented by outsiders—more specifically, by colonists. Stark’s technical focus and cultivated detachment establish an asymmetrical agency in which she observes and frames the colonized subject. Her cultivated apolitical literary persona, resultant of both the public perception of women’s travel writing and her own public distance from colonial administrators, enables imperial ideology to circulate under the guise of casual observation, demonstrating how gendered expectations around women’s

writing—namely that it remain nonviolent, passive, and descriptive—can be mobilized to reinforce hegemonic power. Together, Bell and Stark illuminate complementary modes of imperial authority. Where Bell’s work helps to establish coercive norms of governance, Stark manufactures consent more implicitly through media-based aestheticization—as her work’s popularity shapes common Western understandings of the East by creating aesthetic familiarity at the cost of natives’ own humanity. However, their shared reliance on Romantic orientalism is still linked to the political function of literary form where aesthetic sensitivity and emotional engagement operate, not in opposition to domination, but rather as mechanisms of its reproduction.

These mechanisms cannot solely be combatted through “exposing” their nefarious ends, intentional or not, but rather through paying attention to form itself. It demands attention to literary forms used by authors and institutions themselves. In line with this concept, Romantic orientalism organizes perception so that domination appears aesthetically legible and politically invisible. Craft naturalizes colonial inequality at the level of syntax, affect, and narrative authority, ensuring that imperial violence is seen as understanding rather than coercion in the eyes of many.

Thus, if one reads Bell’s “fine simplicity of death” or Stark’s bathhouse episode as merely a flawed representation, which failed to live up to the ideals of Romantic Orientalism, they would miss how successfully Craft functions within them. In both women’s texts, Romantic conventions produce truth-effects that ensure the Western observer is positioned as the sole bearer of interiority, reducing colonized peoples to atmospheric presence. The political work of Empire operates beneath the surface of this description, embedded in pronominal economies and affective alignments that center the traveler’s consciousness. One realizes that Craft cannot be reformed from within, but that instead readers must read against the grain, against convention, and against inherited literary conventions to expose how form renders colonial violence unimagined and unprobed.

Bell and Stark do actively reproduce colonial power by making the empire they belong to appear humane and inevitable in their depictions of it in relation to the colonized East. Their kind of writing demonstrates that Empire operates most efficiently when it does not announce itself as a power at all. Ultimately, writing imbued with emotional knowing of the Colonized other is not a counterweight to colonial violence. Instead, it frequently is or becomes a reliable vehicle for it. Bell and Stark’s approaches to travel writing show that traits socially coded as feminine, such as passivity and emotional sensitivity, can still serve as tools of dominance rather than resistance under the corrosive force of Empire. As such, their work complicates conventional assessments of women’s writing as feminist and postcolonial approaches frequently elevate women’s subjectivity as intrinsically subversive. While acknowledging these two women’s imperial contributions does not diminish their literary or intellectual achievements, it does, or at least should, change the way we think about agency, as influence does not always translate into emancipation, and moral intent does not ensure that structural power will be disrupted. In other words, even though it seems revelatory, women’s authorship during this time can reinforce inequalities in the colonial paradigm.

As a result, decolonial criticism, then, must grapple with form as well as content. Craft offers a methodology for exposing domination embedded in literary techniques, narrative voice, and stylistic choices, which are elements that traditional historical or moral critique might overlook. Bell and Stark both show us that Empire can never be boxed into one form of coercion as it relies as much on persuasion as it does on force, and understanding these dynamics allows for a more sophisticated critique of colonial literature, one that engages with power on structural terms and not just moral ones. Perhaps then, our histories and collective imagination of the Middle East may come to understand it on its own terms, rather than as a simple tool for aesthetic cultivation.

AYANNA UPPAL is a contributing writer for the Nassau Weekly.

WOMAN OF CLAY

“She believed she was molded from clay. The same clay that made the fish in the canal and the flowers in the grass.”

BY BELLA CAPEZIO

Her every thought is disrupted. The garbled shivers of plastic bags stuck in trees, the patter of paws dislodging pebbles, cars passing in lanes not even ten yards in front of her. Her body is stuck to the bench while occasional strands of hair fling in the wind. People walk by, but no one stops. She doesn't want them to.

Just four hours before, she was walking along the canal, breathing in air that blossomed inside her lungs. She pointed her toes as she walked, imagining she was prancing across the water. Closing her eyes, she was floating. She could hear birdsong, smell the fragrant dirt, and feel the sun on her eyelids. She was content as she threaded herself through the trees and wrote herself into the soil, because she was connecting on her own terms.

She believed she was molded from clay. The same clay that made the fish in the canal and the flowers in the grass. Without the penetrating voices of people, the folds of her intestines unraveled. The tight knots which sewed themselves in the presence of others dissolved in the solitary gaze of the sun. She knew she was human, but she also believed humans could destroy her. Clay could be disfigured, and in the past, she'd been disfigured many times.

She looked ahead at the towering buildings and stopped walking. She thrust her boots into the mud so that when she went to work, she wouldn't lose herself in the horde of invading hands, because every time she looked down, she would remember the canal from the mud on her boots. It would help keep her separate, and she was safe so long as she was separate, because humans can't pick apart what they can't touch.

When she got to her desk, she gazed blankly at the stacks of paper and

the forlorn emails on her computer. Everything was still, and she felt like the only living thing drifting in dead water without a way back. She looked down at the mud on her boots, waiting for it to offer what it could not offer, what she feared but also what she needed.

“Here are the copies you asked for,” a person said, setting them down with a thud. Bits of clay cracked and fragmented, her body crumbling at the imposing human. The person hesitated then moved on, and the woman was relieved there hadn't been a conversation, but she was also disappointed.

She fingered through the papers. The fibers of the tree were still warm from living in the woods. She observed the pale skin of her thumbs against the crisply cut documents. The sheets of paper did not impose on her body like the skin of other humans. They were of the same clay as her and the trees.

On the way back to her apartment, she stopped at a small sandwich truck like she often did, because she liked how the steel frame of the truck separated her from the man inside.

“The usual?” he asked, and the question hung between them, his acknowledgement of their familiarity warming her cheeks. A fearful, sweet feeling, one that made her want to run and stay at the same time.

“Yes, please,” she said, “and a bottle of water,” she added quickly, thrusting the words between them, fighting to conserve the distance between stranger and friend, between control and vulnerability.

The man thought she was odd and timid, always shifting forward and backward, “like she can't trust her legs, like they're tugging her forward, but she's scared she'll fall if she steps,” he thought, spreading mayonnaise on the bread. As he handed her the sandwich, his hand grazed hers, and her eyes flashed to his. He realized with surprise it was the first time they'd met eyes, but it was the pulsating fear in hers that gave him pause. Before he could speak, she rushed off, the five dollars she left nearly blowing off the counter in her wake.

She looked down at her hand, terrified the clay would be contorted, deformed, misshapen by his dirty hands, but it was not. She marveled at her hand, the wholeness of it, and sobs broke from her body. It was catharsis, the realization that her hand was still intact, that it was composed of skin and bone.

She stopped to think about the man in the truck, and the more details she imagined, the more real he became, and the more her new faith faltered. If she allowed attachments to form with other humans, if she answered them and expected their answers, met them and let them meet her—would she be lost? Or, the thought rising like an unsteady child—could she be found?

The woman on the bench shudders. “I want to be touched,” she realizes. The thought lands like a leaf on suddenly still waters, and she wants somebody to stop. To shake her by the shoulders and prove to her that she will not fall apart. She is not made of clay, but a woman of skin and bone.

“Touch me, just my hand,” she thinks, letting it twitch imperceptibly toward the people on the sidewalk. Broken clay flashes in her mind, however, and her fingers retract.

“But I want to be touched.”

This time it comes from her heart. The voice that makes the mind shudder and the body yield. The wind stops blowing, the traffic lights stop turning, everything stops to wonder at the sudden ravine of light. Slashing straight through words and thoughts and fears, there—is the beating of a heart. White light. Even the plastic bag is possessed by her conviction, stopping its dance in the wind to watch her get up from the bench.

She knows she must fire the clay and smash it to the ground. She knows she must stagger forward and risk extending her hand. “I will start with the man from the sandwich truck,” she decides.

Bella Capezio is a contributing writer and junior editor for the Nassau Weekly

Necessary Information

“She gave the florist her name, Sally Hawthorne, and her telephone number and new address, and asked if he would put her name in the system. She explained that she and her husband had just moved, that the house didn’t feel like home, so she’d been looking for somewhere nice to buy flowers, but found nothing worthwhile near her.”

BY LAILA HARTMAN-SIGALL

It was supposed to snow, so she went early Friday morning and drove to a florist in the next town over. She left very early, just after her husband had gone to work, because the house was too quiet. The shop was empty when she arrived. After touching the petals of the flowers in each bucket, she asked if they had red peonies, or something like poppies, but that wouldn’t stain. She told the man in the shop that she couldn’t stand when poppies stain and showed him her fingertips, now red. He said that he would check in the backyard, and she could come, but it was cold, December, and she said she’d wait inside. While he was gone, she made sure to smell most things in the shop—candles, bar soaps, and, of course, the flowers—and washed her hands in the corner sink. She hoped to be browsing when he came back, as though she was perfectly comfortable standing in rooms alone. He returned with his arms full of different red bouquets and set them down on the counter between them.

The florist was a middle-aged man with sun-tanned and freckled skin. He didn’t ask what the occasion was, but she told him the flowers were meant to make the house look nice for her friend, and he pretended to believe her when she said it was really her who is so particular. The florist wore a white apron over his flannel that was holed from cigar burns. As he listened to her, he was pulling vases from a cupboard to place each bouquet in, so she could see how they’d look on display. He’d just arrived at work but had been up all night worrying about what would happen to the flowers if it snowed, and he

was in a small hurry to move them to the backroom before afternoon.

She gave the florist her name, Sally Hawthorne, and her telephone number and new address, and asked if he would put her name in the system. She explained that she and her husband had just moved, that the house didn’t feel like home, so she’d been looking for somewhere nice to buy flowers, but found nothing worthwhile near her. She didn’t know anyone in the area, so she’d done her research online. The florist had finished arranging the flowers, and showed her the three options he’d put together. They each looked quite similar, and none of them would leave a stain, he claimed. The woman looked at each bouquet, then put her hands to her cheeks, to steady herself and conceal how they’d blushed when she imagined her house made a home with the flowers.

“Oh,” she said, “The thing is I really don’t know anything about flowers.” She considered asking him to prepare a few more options, so she could linger for a bit longer. She giggled uncomfortably and tried to meet eyes with the florist, who was looking out the window at the backyard.

“Excuse me,” she said, “Sir, I would really love it if you just picked the best one for me.” The florist examined the bouquets and grabbed the bunch from the middle vase and began to wrap them. She noticed how tenderly he touched them.

“How long until you can get them in water?” He spoke very few words, just necessary information.

She pulled up her jacket sleeve and checked her watch. “A couple hours, maybe. I think my friend will be delayed by the snow. I was hoping to go to a few more shops before going home.” She thought he might ask her another question. He finished wrapping the flowers and rubbed his fingers on one of the petals, then held them up to her. They were unstained. She smiled, very relieved. “Not another flower shop, of course, just somewhere to buy some cheese and laundry detergent.”

The woman and the florist then stood across from each other with only the counter between them. It held the cash register, a jar of pencils, and a large book with pages that were crinkled from being

wet, then dried.

The florist bent over the large book and wrote about her order in a dull-tipped pencil. She watched carefully, and corrected his spelling, adding that her last name ended in an “e.” It was her husband’s, and she wanted it to be right. The woman studied his coarse hands, observing his calluses, his bitten nails, his bare fingers, and wondered if he was married. She was a wife and planning for children someday, and it seemed to her that a man the florist’s age must have a wife, or a child, or just be very much okay with being alone. She knew, surely though, no one could be very much okay like that. The florist finished writing, added her to the system, then rang her up and printed a receipt. She picked up the bouquet of red flowers and sniffed them.

“They’re wonderful,” she said, and reached over the counter to place a hand on his shoulder. She wasn’t sure why she’d done this, but he placed his hand on top of hers, holding them in place.

“Take care, Miss,” the florist said, finally looking up at her before moving his hand. “It’s really a beautiful bouquet.” She nodded and wrapped her now available hand around the base of the bouquet, still worried about staining, and stood there a second longer than necessary before leaving.

When she stepped outside, the air was biting, and the car was parked around the corner. The woman tucked the bouquet between her thighs, just above her knees, and reached into her coat pocket for her black leather gloves. She pulled out her hand, now holding her damp gloves, and her fingers were a bit red. She looked at them, sniffed, then pressed her fingers into a petal to confirm it. The blood smelled like her husband, of course, although she decided that was just her hand soap. The florist was right, the flowers didn’t stain. She wiped her fingers along the paper wrapping, leaving faint streaks. Snow, then, began to fall and she wondered how late her friend would be and what she’d do when her husband wouldn’t make it home from work.

Laila Hartman-Sigall stops the Nassau Weekly...and asks us to smell the flowers.

minor in Journalism

Learn from the most distinguished journalists **in the world.**

Explore **nonfiction storytelling** through interdisciplinary courses.

For more information scan below:



Requirements:

- 5 journalism courses
- internship or independent project with fieldwork
- participation in the senior colloquium