



Fresh air: a neighbor greets the morning, and a nearby barbershop

“They threaten you.”
“How do they do that?”
“They collect all the national identity cards in your entire village, and then tell you that if you don’t vote for them, they won’t give you your card back.”
“Okay. So political parties give you stuff and threaten you. Anything else?”
“They drive big trucks through the street and play loud music.”
“Anything else?”
“Nope.”
“No, that’s it.”
The trouble was, of course, that they were unaware of alternatives to the abysmal systems of their own country (if a system existed at all). They didn’t know that stealing identification cards is not considered a fair voting strategy. They didn’t know that in many countries, people don’t get killed for promoting union rights, and that in other places, when policemen kill poor people “by accident,” there is a consequence. They only knew the way things were in Cambodia. Most

days, my blackboard turned into a list of Alternatives: Alternative Political Systems. Alternative Food Distribution Ideas. Alternative Rules for Police. Alternative Education Plans.
Slowly, they began to get it. They made suggestions for water removal and road improvements in their own communities. They made their own reading lists and government diagrams. They came up to the board and made suggestions for how their school should work. And they began to ask questions, lots of intelligent questions, questions besides the ever-popular, “Do you have a boyfriend?”
And just as the lists grew longer and overflowed with class ideas, it was time for me to leave. They told me that I was the best teacher that they had ever had—a believable accusation given the woefully inadequate education of my colleagues and the strict “I talk, you listen” methodology to which Cambodian education subscribes. When I missed school for three weeks because of dengue fever, students

got on their bikes and rode through four miles of mudslides and potholes to visit me, carting along six cases of condensed milk to make sure that I “ate healthy food” so that I could “stay in Cambodia forever.” And they begged that I stay through their graduation next year, to help them at least have a chance of supporting their families on their own in the future, to avoid the very foreseeable realities of eventually returning to garbage picking.

BUT I HAD TO COME BACK. It was time to move on, to begin some semblance of a career, to live near friends, to have a social life and access to books. What my students didn’t see was that their education was a stopping point in my own, and that because of them, I had reached my goal. Something had *happened*. And now it was time to write about it. In America.
This week one of my students e-mailed me. He said, “To my most beautiful and very good teacher. I and my friends miss you very much. We need you to teach us because the way you teach is good and makes us understand well.”
I haven’t responded yet. What do you say to that from your New York City apartment? ♡

THE UNDERGRADUATE

Eyes Opened—But Averted

by REBECCA O'BRIEN '06

I MAKE DECISIONS on a whim, decisions prompted by sudden changes in interest—and subject to immediate retraction once I’ve recovered sense. But this time, when I came to, in early April, I had a second concentration, a 25-page tutorial

paper to write on Mohammad Iqbal, and round-trip tickets to Cairo. I had done an about-face in my course of study, shifting from American and British history and literature to a combination of British history and Near Eastern languages and civiliza-

tions, focusing on the twentieth-century Middle East. The decision to head off to Egypt for a summer to study Arabic was a commitment that most people would not take lightly, but having set my eye on an uncertain course, I started sailing at top

speed. The American University in Cairo (AUC) would be my home for seven weeks of Arabic courses punctuated by excursions around Egypt, followed by two weeks of travel (on my own, on a whim) through Jordan and Lebanon. With plans as uncertain as these, it is little wonder Egypt has been filled with sights and experiences I never anticipated when considering the requirements for my field of study.

It might have made sense to sit down and really *think* about my motivations before I embarked on a 12-hour flight for a two-month study program in a country whose language I didn't speak, in an unfamiliar culture, far from the comforts I know at home. There were plenty of opportunities to think twice: for instance, when the nurse at University Health Services threw up her hands at the thought of the vaccinations I might need. I might have benefited from a moment of reflection before I attempted to navigate a street bazaar—foolishly—in a skirt, or when I was first nudged by the bumper of a belligerent Cairene cab while picking my way gingerly across an intersection, or when I stopped to ask directions from a soldier casually twirling a semi-automatic in front of the Pakistani embassy. But I jumped on the Middle Eastern bandwagon with scarcely a second thought.

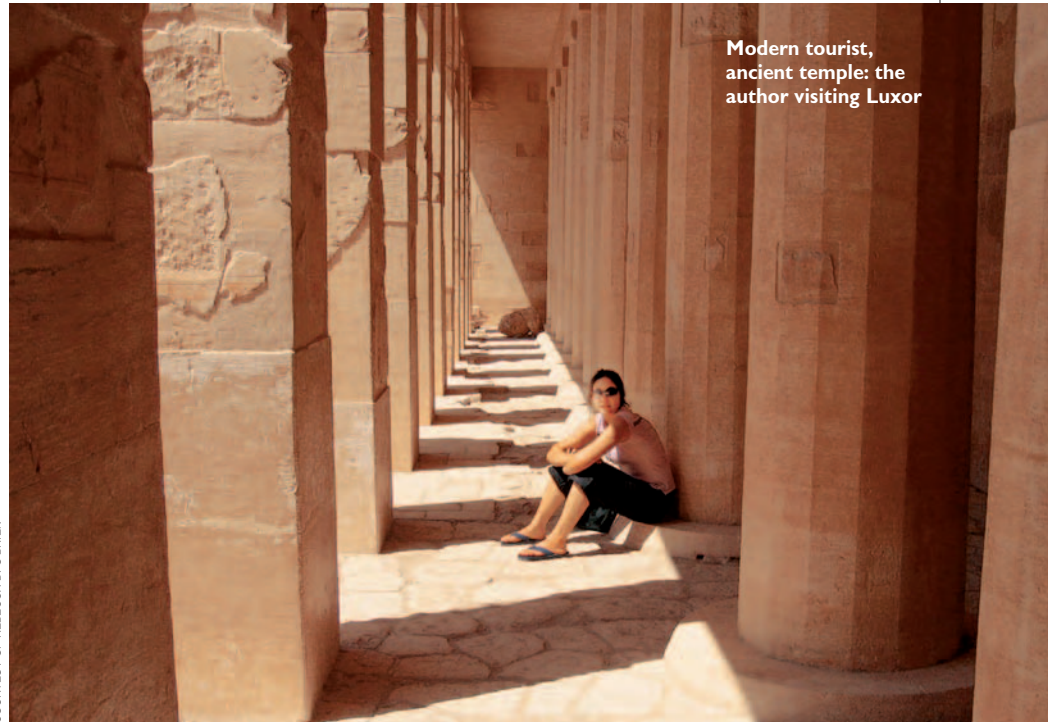
My interest, to be fair, did not come out of nowhere. I took a religious-history course in my senior year of high school (a course unexpectedly complicated by September 11 and its aftershocks). When I traveled to Spain several years ago, I was fascinated by the remnants of Islamic influence there. Current events only catalyzed the change from what had been a casual interest in politics to a studied fascination with the intricacies of Middle Eastern governments, Islamic movements, and regional social phenomena. Like many of my peers, I was decidedly influenced by global politics.

But as much as academic and personal experience have engendered this curiosity, it was my lack of knowledge about Islam and the Middle East that truly prompted my change of studies. To be unaware of the culture, the language, and the history of the region that had so great a role in my life—and promised to be of greater impor-

tance in world politics—was to disenfranchise myself and, more importantly, perpetuate the cultural ignorance I considered so inexcusable. I picked up my study of the Middle East from a sense of duty and personal necessity.

Whatever our diverse motivations, I was not alone in my endeavors at the Arabic Language Institute. About 50 of us, ages 19 through 30, had enrolled in the program, mostly living in a dormitory in Zamalek, a wealthy neighborhood in Cairo. We shuttled back and forth in mini buses to the campus, where we took upwards of four hours of class a day, plus electives and folk dance, calligraphy, and

REGARDLESS of what I thought I would find, my trip took on a life and relevance of its own. I found myself learning two new alphabets: elementary Arabic turns out to be easier to master than the street smarts required to negotiate the streets of Cairo. Just as speaking a new language demands constant mental effort, moving through the city required concerted focus to cope with a series of culture shocks—compounded by the constant strain of existence in a place so foreign to my way of life that every day left me exhausted and feeling farther from home than ever. This was a language immersion program, but it felt like a crash course in cultural alienation.



Modern tourist, ancient temple: the author visiting Luxor

media courses. Among my fellow students were Ellis, the former naval officer, and Will, the ultra-liberal international-relations major, and Nashwa, an Egyptian-American who speaks Egyptian-dialect Arabic but wants to learn grammar. The program attracts dozens of future diplomats and would-be politicians, but there were also Ph.D. students in art history, some master's candidates in Egyptology, even a smattering of comparative-literature majors and women's-studies concentrators. Our fluency in Arabic, too, ranged from none to somewhat advanced. I came not knowing a single letter, let alone a word, of Arabic.

I was, perhaps, a little too confident about what I thought were well-honed traveling skills. I have never been a finicky eater, I'm healthy, and I'm surprisingly amenable to a low-maintenance, reduced-cost lifestyle. But I was not prepared for the exertion of life in Cairo, the caution required for basic everyday activities, from washing vegetables to crossing the street. Nor was I mentally prepared to confront the contradictions and social contrasts I encountered here. Male soldiers, in pristine white uniforms, machine guns hung casually at their sides, hold hands and kiss in the streets—but many wives, enveloped in black burkas, trail

COURTESY OF REBECCA D. O'BRIEN

JOHN HARVARD'S JOURNAL

their husbands in public. Shops that sell scandalous underwear hang their wares in their street windows, next to posters of Britney Spears, but an unveiled head and nude knees invite stares, catcalls, and mutterings of disapproval.

Although I half hoped to debunk Western conceptions of the Middle East, I found that the social and cultural position of women consigned me to a role I'd never anticipated. Many Egyptians are extremely hospitable, but Cairo is not a city for a young American woman with no Arabic to explore alone, and so I had limited mobility beyond the streets surrounding the dorms. A fellow student put it well when he said that Egypt almost dehumanizes visitors, regardless of how

culturally sensitive or well-traveled they may be. Perhaps it was a matter of miscommunication, but it seemed to many of us that we were often forced to stifle our instincts for compassion, our curiosity, our friendliness. We were taught, by experience and by the authorities at AUC, to avert our eyes from men, to ignore beggars, and second-guess offers of hospitality and friendship. Almost in spite of myself, I became prickly toward most people as a defense mechanism. Egypt, while opening my eyes, also made me avert them. Several people on this trip said that being in Cairo, more than any other place they'd visited, made them realize how lucky they were to be American citizens. I found myself more defensive than ever be-

fore about the American way of life, and eager to return to it.

FOR ALL THOSE STRAINS, in the sixth week of my residence, I began to understand Egypt not as a foreign and hostile place, but as a place where other people live their lives. In a conversation in Cairo, a family friend—an Egyptian who was born there shortly after World War II and subsequently lived in America and Western Europe—attributed much of Egypt's culture to a complex fostered by years of foreign influence. “‘Who are we?’ becomes the central question for many Egyptians,” he said. “And rather than embrace the different influences we have here, we are constantly seeking to erase the past.” For the younger generation, erasing the past often means clinging to symbols of their Muslim faith and casting aside the Western cultural influences that marked their parents' generation. As my Egyptian acquaintance said, it is not uncommon for young girls to discuss hijabs (their headscarves) merely as a matter of fashion and peer pressure—an observation that I have also heard younger Egyptians make. There is a sense of reverence and nostalgia among the older generation for the way Cairo used to be, before Nasser built the Aswan Dam, before globalization, before overpopulation. Much has changed here, but not all at the same pace, as the idiosyncrasies that one encounters daily attest. And what I had perceived as glaring inequality and incongruity were manifestations of this Egyptian “complex.”

It took me quite some time to realize that my instinct to compare the Egyptian way with my own was fundamentally flawed. I am convinced now that there are aspects of Cairo that make no sense to the citizens themselves: taxi drivers fume at the donkeys and carts that still clog city streets, and slow table service irks even the locals. Life here, in short, is not so foreign, and it is sometimes quite beautiful: I was touched by the sight of young children playing in their parents' stores, the late night calm of Zamalek, even the rise of the early morning smog over the Nile. It is hard to enjoy that when being carted around to various monuments or when holed up in a dormitory with *Al-Kitaab Part One*. Understanding Egypt—or, un-

Harvard Magazine's Berta Greenwald Ledecky Undergraduate Fellows for this academic year are third-year student Nathan J. Heller and senior Amelia E. Lester. The Fellows, who join the editorial staff during the year, contribute to the magazine in numerous ways, including their service as “Undergraduate” columnists. Heller, of San Francisco, a resident of Currier House, concentrates in history and literature. A member of the *Crimson* staff, he has most recently reported on Cambridge and on the effects of post-9/11 legislation on the University, and has written three articles for *Harvard Magazine* in the past five issues. This past summer, he interned at the *Atlantic Monthly*. Lester, of Sydney, Australia, is the magazine's first international Fellow. The Adams House resident also works on the *Crimson*, where she is a columnist and past editor of the weekly magazine supplement. She is concentrating in English and American literature and language. In keeping with her multicontinental status, Lester served as the *Let's Go* resident correspondent in Paris during the summer. Support for the Fellowship is provided by Jonathan J. Ledecky '79, M.B.A. '83, who has named it in honor of his mother (please see page 2).



At the source: atop the southern side of the Aswan Dam on the Nile



COURTESY OF REBECCA D. O'BRIEN

derstanding that you cannot understand Egypt—is impossible until you begin to see life here not as a tourist attraction, a nuisance, or a threat to your own culture, but as a different reality.

That insight gained, being here has changed the way I see the world, even if I decide not to pursue studies in the Middle East beyond my undergraduate years, or ultimately put my Arabic on the back burner. Being able to laugh at Egyptian

Egypt did not mean setting aside personal standards, but setting aside the lens through which I analyzed my surroundings. These adjustments have made their mark.

Confronted every day with new challenges, often frustrated by deeply ingrained aspects of Egyptian culture and life, my plans stymied by troubles with translation and basic human interactions and needs, I was forced to find stability

and confidence in my own capacity to navigate situations—albeit with frantic hand gestures. But all that ultimately became more than a matter of survival. One night toward the end of my stay in Cairo, weary from hours of studying, a friend and I went for a walk by the Nile—daring, for the first time, to wander beyond our neighborhood at night—and talked with some older men who were fishing. They were relaxing, smoking cigarettes, and drinking tea. It was no longer a matter of us and them, but an unspoken understanding. On the Nile, in front of an American chain hotel, we felt at home with our T-shirts and veils. ▾

Having scaled Mount Sinai, camped in the White Desert, tasted koshari, and explored Elephantini Island, Berta Greenwald Ledecy Undergraduate Fellow Rebecca D. O'Brien is glad she didn't get a desk job this summer.

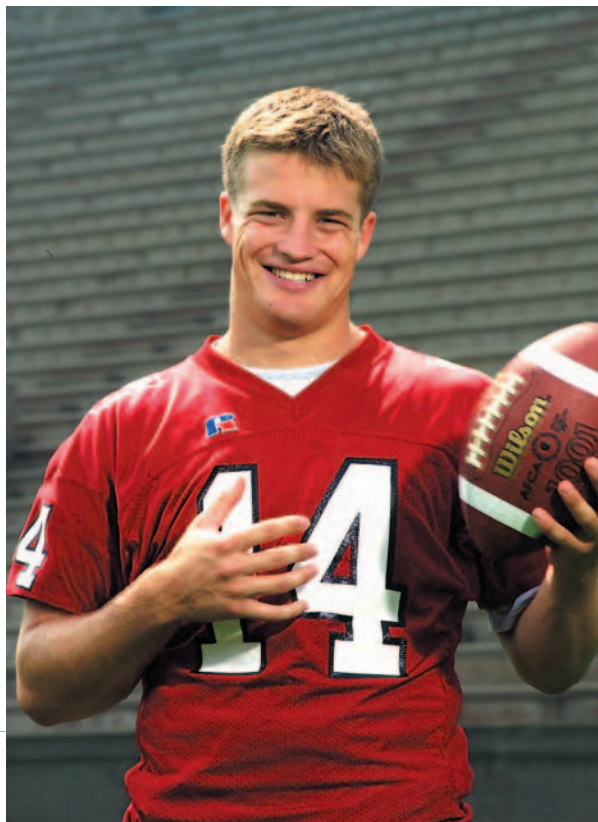
SPORTS

Saturday Afternoon Improv

Quarterback Ryan Fitzpatrick thrives on “backyard ball.”

THOUGH THE Harvard football team runs one of the most sophisticated offensive sets in the country, the team also likes to play what they call “backyard ball”—the kind of football that once started with plays drawn with a stick in the dirt, or invisibly diagrammed on the quarterback’s left palm. “Sometimes, you have to make up plays as you go,” quarterback Ryan Fitzpatrick '05 says cheerily. “Scrambling around is a huge part of our offense. You sit in the film room and design an offensive attack, and then on Saturday our biggest gains come from broken plays, making things happen. It’s so frustrating for the other teams’ coaches. I love that

Quarterback Ryan Fitzpatrick '05. His ability to throw, scramble, and run creates havoc for opposing defenses.



style—that’s the way I love to play the game.”

Fitzpatrick shines in that improvisational mode because he may well be the most versatile quarterback in the Ivy League: he can pass from the pocket or roll out and—at 6 feet, 3 inches, and 220 pounds—run with bruising power. “I’ve never been one to shy away from contact,” he says. “I always try to initiate the contact and run over anyone who tries to tackle me.” Head football coach Tim Murphy, now in his eleventh year, says, “I’ve never had anybody in my career who’s as versatile as Ryan. He’s the most effective quarterback I’ve coached in terms of athletic ability, mental and physical toughness, and the ability to