

# The Oval

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Volume 9  
Issue 2 *Staff Issue*

Article 14

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2016

## Charlotte Amalie

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### Recommended Citation

Coburn, Courtney (2016) "Charlotte Amalie," *The Oval*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/oval/vol9/iss2/14>

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# ***CHARLOTTE AMALIE***

COURTNEY COBURN

We stomped on the sidewalk. Our flip-flops slopped through the rainwater like slow, fat paddles. A yellow umbrella reached back to cover my head and I crowded under it. I turned my face up to meet the amused eyes of someone who I was desperate to discern. His full eyebrows arched over closed lids as he bent to kiss me. Around us were other trotting couples frantic to escape as their dresses and moods were beginning to ruin. Thanksgiving dinner had been dampened, the buffet line unprotected and unnoticed by the forces of nature. Our moods however were unwavering, because the thing is—it doesn't matter what the hell the weather is like when you're on an adventure. The mountains only look more marvelous when they are suffocating in storm clouds. The palm trees more erratic, temperamental even, while they blow spasmodically overhead. A Caribbean spell fell over the island and I felt lucky to be enchanted. How did I get here?

My sisters would be in California with their father, maybe contemplating roller-skating on the beach, or perhaps they'd be in the midst of watching mid-day mass on the television with a grandmother who I do not claim. I imagine them sitting around a lightly worn wooden table with four matching wood chairs, rain streaking their window. They might tell her stories, and the eighty-year-old may come to know my brother and me through those stories, or maybe they don't and maybe she doesn't. Some strange characters she could believe we were, the invisible others. I wonder if they say the grace our mom taught us or if there is some secret prayer they subscribe to when they are with that other family. I wonder what they remembered to be thankful for.

The Ritz Carlton resort we were at named their suites after flowers, as we raced up the hill we passed a blooming garden of buildings. They were beautiful, each with a balcony and a view

of the cerulean ocean. Somewhere around Dahlia, I kicked a green iguana the size of a pencil; it flew down the concrete path near a swamp. I imagine that the manufactured swamp's purpose was to catch the rainwater in an attempt to control flash floods. A smell was being dragged out of that swamp by the storm, the kind of smell that makes you imagine things unseen. I looked at the cesspool and pictured all of the four foot long iguanas who disappeared with the rain, escaped into it, and gathered around their massive leader. They were feeding on tourist trash and plotting. Before I could become too aware of the effect our tourism might be having on the land, the thought disappeared as an umbrella was thrust into my hands, apparently a frog needed to be caught. The sound of sloshing and croaking vibrated in the air and sounded more joyful than any rain I could remember. A surge of warmth shot through my chest and I felt how I use to when my mother would gather us all in her bed to listen to the rain hit our old tin roof. Back then, I never would've thought that when we all grew up we would elect to spend the holidays away from each other. I felt guilty being there without them, experiencing the luxury and relaxation that had never been available to us, it didn't seem fair. Thinking about opportunity, I decided to not question this one too much, and joined Wolfgang in his effort to capture one of the hundred burping frogs that surrounded us.

My mother and brother would be driving away from our tiny home town to find something to do, most likely they would settle on going somewhere with a movie theater, talking about how much they wished we were with them. Every year she's abandoned so her daughters can be thankful for some other family and every year her first born son is there to keep her company. They may have finished up at Jaker's Steakhouse and her fourth critical martini would leave my brother to drive her through whatever small storm would await them in the dreary canyon. Wiper blades would drag across a wet window shield as the two sang along to The Avett Brothers, at least that's what I picture, and I'm struck by how much I wish I was there. She'd ask him to drive her down a certain road past an unfamiliar house and he'll not know what I know, that you need to look for the red car. She'd look herself and when it isn't there she'd tell him to turn around, in front of the house, and take her home. Fat raindrops will fall from the gutter as they walk upstairs. Having been left alone all day, Kasey the cattle dog will be waiting to celebrate what's left of the holiday with them, I'm sure he's thankful for their company.

Wolfgang and I made it to the Begonia complex and before unlocking our room said "Hello" to the three housekeepers that took cover underneath an archway. Their dark skin wasn't glistening with the thick inescapable sweat that laid on their foreheads like dew, the moisture wasn't

isolated anymore to just underneath their arms and their upper lips. Tonight, they were soaked straight through, the rain might as well have bathed us all together, like when all of my siblings use to be able to fit in the tub at the same time. They didn't shake with shivers but with laughter as they watched the two of us crash into our room to take cover. The air conditioner, left on high at all times, assaulted us. I stripped off the previously dry dress I had selected for our Thanksgiving feast and tugged on a pair of dry coral underwear. I grabbed my pack of Parliament Lights and slinked out onto the covered balcony and into the warm mist.

I had flown from Montana to Miami and from Miami to St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands. St. Thomas in the middle of an ocean so big it could swallow a continent in a gulp. An ocean who's size could only be matched by the Sky which seemed, tonight, to contain just as much water. A sky which it seemed we lived inside the belly of instead of under as if it had already swallowed us in a gulp, someday long ago. I could've been washed out, thousands of miles away from the Rocky Mountains, without the world ever noticing. I wasn't though; I was welcomed instead, not only by the strange island but also by the strangers who had so generously brought me there. What could I have done to deserve this?

Once when I was very young we took a trip to Calgary, Canada, it was one of the few vacations my single mother would take us on. She was so fraught with anxiety that she forgot quickly that it was a vacation at all. The four days we spent there were filled with budgeting and planning and constant head counts. Us kids ignored her fear of heights and forced her to ride a gondola over the town with us. A few cities over and a couple stories above everyone, she was able to take a breath and experience something other than the life that was forced upon her, I saw a flash of that adventurous spirit that we had done such an effective job of killing in her.

I dropped the ass end of my cigarette into a Coke can the way I'd watched my mother do in her twenties. When she was my age she had just given birth to the first of four children that would be born in the next three years of her young life. I think if she had never had us that some handsome man might have taken her here, all expenses paid. If she had been free, where would she have flown? Maybe she'll fly one day, with the help of her oldest daughter and a Xanax, maybe we'll fly right back to this storm. Maybe then, standing in the middle of the ocean, on an island and with its people who could reject us but don't, I'll be able to give her a sliver of the life she gave me.