



The Comma

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FORDHAM UNIVERSITY LINCOLN CENTER

THE COMMA

Fordham Lincoln Center's Literary & Arts Collective

VOL. VII ISS. I

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Cover Image: Anticipation by Hayley Ng

Sunflower Elegy

by *Hannah Smokler*

I mourn August sunflowers that never bloomed—
The world is more empty without them.
Fields are not for flowers, they belong
to deer and plane crashes and fire.
No sweet sparks of yellow,
just green and brown and gray
morality, not the kind from fiction, but
the messy kind, the ugly kind, the real kind.
I sort everything into categories:
soil/flower, sun/storm, good/bad,
but nothing is that simple on a day like
today, when the sky is heavy with rain and
fog lingers over the field and everyone is silver.

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Worlds Away by Nora Kinney

your poem irisé, sonorous sun and skies and then some at four

by *Ava Min*

I want your skin like the earth grows grass

I want your face the sanguine way dusk does dawn,
to clutch and cradle your body
sturdier than mine,
the way the night holds the moon

when did my whole body start to ache this way,

was it the music
or the drinks
slipping and twisting

through our veins somber in the sun

and you were there,
thin before early rain



or was it the night before, waves rocking your body a second time
but I was already gone
pretenses laid like my head on your chest, —ah

I wish I'd been sober that night
to have drunk your tears and sung you a lullaby
now I know there's been something muted, missed—I want

every thought you've suffered
every dream you've torn to shreds
every fear that's departed you
every violet inch of the heart that beats soft and willing beneath me

so I could gather them in the covers
and take the two of us back to that
room in pittsburgh, where it's always a winter morning
to go back and put my hands on you like a prayer
hear me,

thinking how could violence ever,
believing something like stopped time

Inviolat Youth by Olivia Iannaccone



Who will burn?

by *Alyssa Shonk*

When you took me out of the bubble wrap, your apartment didn't reflect your smile's person. It was a small, dark apartment due to your thick curtains covering your floor length living room window, preventing any light from entering your space. It smelled awfully of mildew. I understood why you needed me. You needed me to introduce light into your apartment. You needed me to bring something sweet-smelling. I now understood my job. I needed to repay you for noticing me.

You put me on your living room end table, next to your couch, directly in front of the giant black curtain. You left me there for days, while you spent most of your time in another room in your apartment. I heard noises, running water and a television, and I assumed it was your

bedroom. But, I was never allowed to enter that space. The space where your true personality emerged. I was in the space that guests see. The space you curate for intruders to view.

Finally, after a couple of days, you sat on the couch, took my top off, grabbed a match, and let my wick catch aflame. It was the first time I was ever lit by another person, and it was magical. I knew I could never return to who I was before my wick burned for you. I had never before felt such energy flow out of me. This whole new experience you introduced to me was breath-taking. It couldn't stop. You stayed next to me for too short a time, but then left me. I didn't mind though. I kept supporting the flame to change your living room into your warm, bright smile. I was okay burning alone if it meant this guest space was more like you.

Eventually, you came out of your room, blew out my flame, and left. You never asked me if you could extinguish my flame. It was the one thing that connected me to you, and then you left. You left me in your cold, dark apartment that was nothing like you.





between two worlds by Sarah Shafiq



Fled

by *Ada Heller*

The city made her naked,
scraped the skin from her palms,
demanded more and more and

That was sort of
what she liked about it.

It reminded her
of the boys she had loved
and the houses she had fled.

It was almost exactly
how she thought
It would be.

Adulterated

by *Hannah Smokler*

A puff of cotton-candy smog clouds the front
windshield of the car behind me as I step out of my own
and pull my bag from the backseat and lock
the doors and eye the couple talking and it isn't my
business but I wonder what they're talking about
and the boy takes another inhale hold exhale smoke

from a vehicle of destruction or teen romance or some other
secret thing to take to the graveyard to bury in the ground
I stole your breath in my car last winter when we sat
in my garage after we got home from dinner salt still
on my tongue and lips and my mom and brother came home
while your mouth was on mine and they never said

anything about it that unspoken incident but my saliva
tastes like regret and my cheeks are flushed and swollen
with heavy words excuses and apologies but I never say
anything about it or that I'm sorry or that I love the quiet
moments sitting in silence alone with you while I hold
my breath in my lungs unpolluted and pure.

A conversation with Kali

by *Salona Bhandari*

As I stand before you, I first see your garland of skulls and your blood smeared tongue, yet I can't help but focus on your eyes instead. Like mine, they are almond-shaped and slanted. The curls in your mongoloid hair lay the same way mine do and like my mother, you wear your tika with pride. The Devi Mahatmya tells us your skin is "dark as ink" yet as we begin to converse, I notice it is not much darker than mine.

Although your anger is deserved, how are you so unapologetic for your rage? I have always been told I am too passionate, too angry for a woman. I am sure you have experienced similar things.

I am curious how you define beauty as you have dark skin in a culture that denounces melanin. The Vamana Purana teaches us that your skin is a symbol of your divine soul. However, when I was called Kali growing up, I did not feel divine, I felt hideous.

My religion tells me you are beautiful, but my grandmother tells me you are unsightly.

I promise to give back beauty to your name. We have the same eyes, same hair, and same anger. If the world thinks you are hideous, what do they think of me?

in god's likeness

by *Sara Kumar*

when god crafted me she made me in her likeness
an ephemeral manifestation of the eternal
and she is yearning

please look at me, long for me
please tell me i'm soft when you take your grotesque fingers
that will never deserve my slenderness
and graze them down my stomach, up my thighs
do you feel the galaxy in my every molecule?
the pulsing, the heartbeat of our creator;
don't delude yourself into thinking that acceleration is your doing
you are replaceable
but divinity likes to be admired—
worship her.

beware—
my kisses permanently stain and
blood red wine spills out of my eyes—
down into the cheshire cat smile that doesn't reach the mania of my
fuck me eyes,
oh my, it's dripping down my chin and, wow, i really hate that
sensation—
but i love watching it sprinkle onto your chest
you use those same filthy hands
and push me to my knees
and all i can think about is
how pretty my disheveled hair must look;
maybe satan was involved in my making too.

i like when you watch me bathe
while i sink my teeth into spines of books i devour
and while i submerge myself under the water because drowning is
salvation and
when i arise i look you in the eye and sin overwhelms me all over
again
i lunge for you
an object in motion stays in motion and i am a force of nature,
a manipulator of males,
i didn't choose this existence, angels don't get free will,
i can't help that i was crafted by seduction herself

god made me in her likeness,
and i suppose she's a slut too



Shadowed Love by Olivia Iannaccone

A photograph of a bed with a crumpled pink blanket on a wooden floor next to a brick wall. The text is overlaid on the upper right portion of the image.

small violence

by *Sarah Shafiq*

the world's smallest violence is a
baby biting its mother's nipple
she winces, lips pressed tight, and
allows it to suckle

clementines

by *Ava Min*

we have a friend who shows up on diana's doorstep every few months.

she stays for a few weeks, plays the guitar and sings, and then drifts back off to india, or thailand, or the next place where the flowers change color.

I showed you the mug she brought me from her last place of flight. you asked me how does she go to college? and I explained to you what a nomad is, and why nomads do online college because they don't settle down.

and you asked me what is her major and I said general studies because I didn't know what else to say because I didn't know. you asked what general studies were and since I didn't know if general studies were a thing I said like high school but harder. I hoped you would stop asking questions because I wanted to show you the mug. it's a little pointy on the bottom and there are circles imprinted on the handle. the color is a london gray and I miss my friend whenever I smell lemongrass. she'll arrive at diana's doorstep again and you'll remember her as the "indian girl" but behind closed doors we all, together, pick photos from concerts and don earrings and brush eyeshadow with cheeto-dusted fingertips.

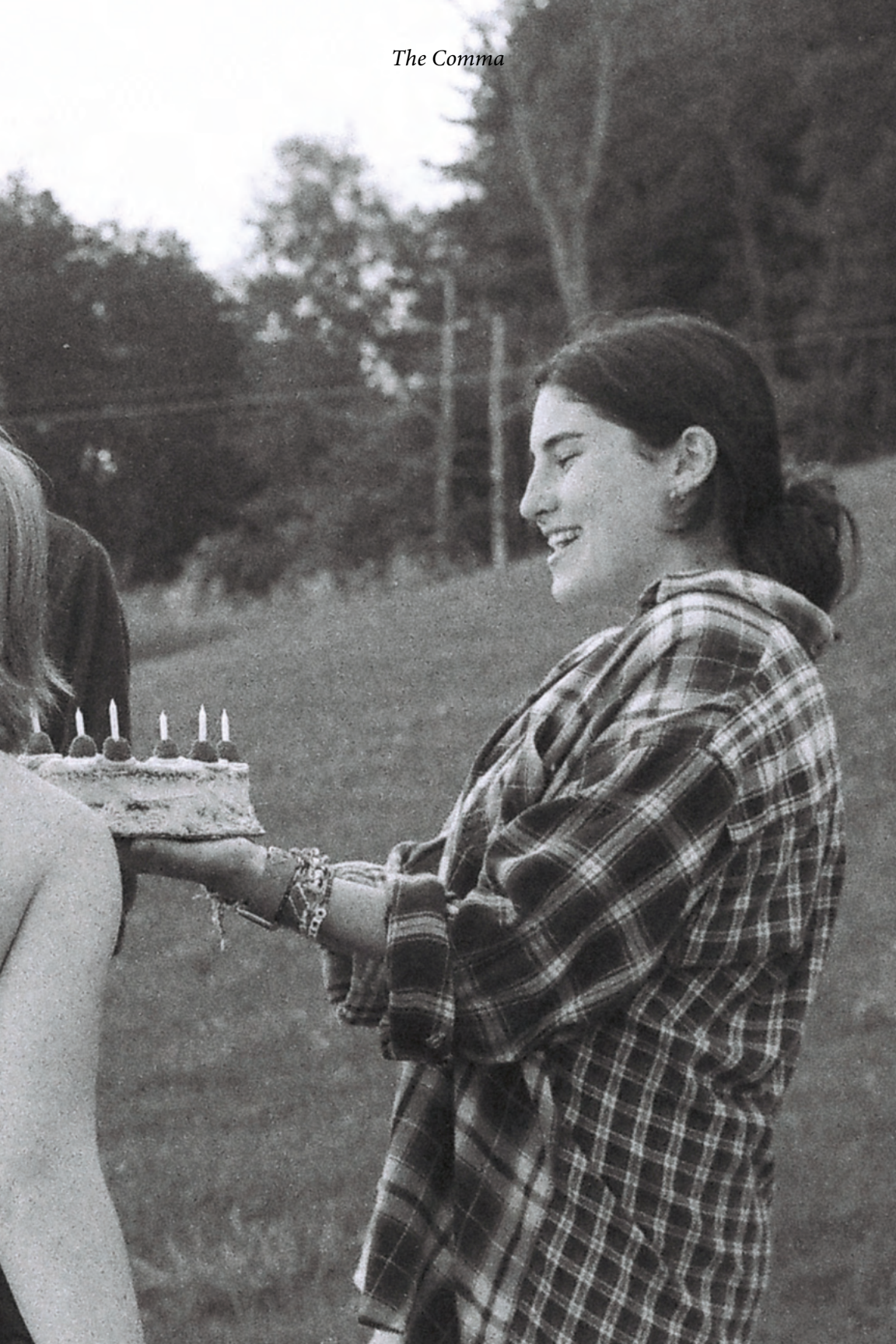
and while I want to tell you everything she is, like the way she locks me in with her eyes while listening to my stories from the seasons past, I can't. because she'll always be "indian girl". because a clementine is just an orange, because the TV remote is broken, and a child is only as large as the womb it grew in even after it leaves.

but now I have this incredible moment, this blessing, this pointy gray mug with my favorite tea in it.

and I feel extraordinary sorrow for you, umma.

do you have any mugs from people you've loved?







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Night Shift

by *Brian Gibson*

It was now two in the morning, and the few remaining customers stalked the sales floor of the convenience store, utterly lost to their own thoughts. Tara had first observed this effect in her second week working the convenience store night shift. Something about the blank linoleum glow of the store and the washed-out neon packaging arranged in rows lulled them into a sleepwalking stupor. Outside, the occasional passing headlight scanned its way across the windows. Tara, too, was beginning to feel the first signs of exhaustion setting in. She was unused to working such long hours, but it was necessary after the sudden departure of Tim. Two weeks ago, he had simply stopped turning up to any of his shifts. She had seen Tim at church with his family last Sunday but he had skillfully evaded all of Tara's attempts to approach him, out of embarrassment, most likely. And he ought to have been embarrassed. It gave her some comfort to know that he would feel shame for leaving the rest of the already overworked employees with all of his work without so much as an explanation.

Tara pulled out a scrap of receipt paper from beneath the register, covered nearly from end to end in different handwriting. This was the store communication system. Shifts never overlapped and employees were always more than eager to go home as soon as

contractually permissible, which meant that none of the employees knew one another beyond exchanging hellos and goodbyes. Except for the receipt paper. Most of it was filled with boring humdrum, orders to restock the dairy cases, notes of which customers had gotten themselves banned today, but there were also more salacious details. Two of the tweaker regulars were hooking up now, much to the chagrin of the third, who lamented at length his long spell of sexlessness. A man had ordered every hotdog from the case and proceeded to eat them all right in front of the counter. There were also several indecipherable entries, presumably from Tim, who was known to have had a doctor's handwriting on minimum wage.

Slowly, the customers filtered out as closing time inched closer. By 2:45, the lot was empty and the store descended into a deep tranquility, as if nothing living had ever set foot inside. Tara left the register and began locking the doors and making the rounds. However, when she reached the laundry aisle, she realized that she had made a mistake. There was still a customer in the store, a woman with matted hair and an elaborate matrix of tattoos along her arms and neck.

"Oh! I'm so sorry, ma'am," said Tara. "I had no idea there was anyone still in here."

The woman stood unresponsive for a moment and Tara wondered if she had overdosed on something. "I need the strongest detergent you have," the woman finally said. "Which one is the strongest?"

"I have no idea. They should all be fairly similar. There should also be detergents specifically for stain removal, if that's what you need."

"I need the strongest," the woman repeated. "Which is the strongest?"

Tara pulled a bottle of detergent from the shelf at random. “Oh, then you definitely need this one. My family swears by it.”

“No, no Tide,” the woman said. “It is not good enough.”

Tara was beginning to feel like laughing in this woman’s face. “As I said, I have no idea which one is the strongest,” she said coldly. “For God’s sakes, just pick one. They’re all good.”

“You are a student, yes?” the woman asked.

“I am. Why do you ask?”

“Because I am curious. Why do you work?”

“The same reason anyone else does, I suppose,” Tara said, only slightly thrown by the non sequitur. Although, she was steadily growing wary of this woman, this customer who was now interrogating her on her life story in a half-dark convenience store with every exit locked.

“Nobody works for the same reasons,” said the woman. “Why do you work?”

She worked because she needed the money. Not in the same way as the truly poor in her town, but because she needed it to keep up with Jenny and Rose. Jenny was one of the few at Tara’s high school who had a car and every week, she would drive Rose and Tara from school into the national reserve forest encircling the town to get high. There was a service road leading to a vista that Jenny believed she had discovered, although Tara—along with every other graduate of Milton P. Dermott High School—had known about it for years. Nevertheless, Jenny and Rose made it into something new, somehow imbuing the view with a crackling mystery that it had not previously held for her. When the three of them were there, it seemed they were not looking out over the town, but over a pit full of strangers she would never meet. This perception may have arisen from the fact that they were always high on something or other by the time they arrived

at the vista, hence her need for money. As a bonus, Tara's employment at the store gave her and her friends functionally unlimited access to alcohol.

"So that I can do what I want to do," Tara responded.

"Do you work for your freedom, then?"

"I guess. Are you ready to check out? Please, it's late and I'd like to go home."

The woman laughed, a mellifluous sound like glasses clinking. She had finally selected six bottles of All, which she heaved onto the counter with a great thud. As Tara bagged the detergent, she no longer wondered about this woman. She was probably crazy, yes, but benignly so; rather, she seemed unusually lucid and polite for the night crowd. Tara walked the woman to the door and began unlocking it for her.

"What is your name?" asked the woman.

"Oh, right. It's Bonnie." Tara always used a fake name on the job. One of the older women had advised her on it a few months ago and she immediately found it oddly comforting, a minor act of rebellion that did wonders to soothe her nerves. Besides, all the myths she had read so eagerly as a child agreed on the fact that names held unknown power.

"Thank you, Bonnie. I will let you know whether this detergent works."





Picture me. I am...

by *Hayley Ng*

I

1. seven.
2. immaterial, in a dream.
 - a. You were taking me home from school. around me, a white fog, soft and smothering.
 - i. i couldn't see above Your nose. the top half of Your face had been obscured by white.
 - b. i fell, and You kept walking. maybe You didn't notice.
 - i. i called out, and maybe You didn't hear me. maybe the fog crawled into my mouth and ate my voice.
 - ii. maybe You just didn't care.
3. in my bed, alone, awake, and gasping.
4. crying.
 - a. the darkness felt too open, too overwhelming, too much.
5. crawling under my bed, where the wooden bed frame, the carpet, and my breathing pressed on my body and my senses. where everything felt safer, closer, realer.
 - a. realer than You.

II

6. thirteen.
7. writing a thank You letter to my friends for being there for me.
 - a. they think it was a suicide note and they tell our school counselor. i am forced into counseling for three months.
 - i. You said i shouldn't go since it's a waste of time. that there's no point. don't waste their time, You said. don't waste their time worrying about something that isn't there.
 - ii. i still went. it'd be even more suspicious if i didn't show up at all.
8. unassuming.
 - a. saying all the right things and nothing that would keep me there for longer than i needed to be.
 - b. The frosted glass window keeps others from looking into the office.
 - i. to those curious, i become faceless.
9. a potted plant. the wooden slats. a painting; a landscape, or perhaps, a still-life.
 - a. Even when the small office and warmth of the heater and soft chairs reminded me of the space beneath my bed.
 - i. in there, i feel larger than myself larger than my body could reasonably accommodate.
10. an optical illusion.

III

11. seventeen.
12. dating a girl.
 - a. and You didn't know.
13. happy, for a few months, but then we broke up.
 - a. i come home that day and You open the door for me.
 - i. You ask me why i look so upset.
 - b. i say it's nothing. just stress, as usual. my voice echoes a bit in the mudroom and seems to come from the small shoe closet.
 - i. stress has been my main excuse these past few years.
 - ii. there's nothing to be stressed about, You say. just don't be so serious all the time.
14. heading for the bathroom.
 - a. i turn on the hot water and focus on the steam brushing against my face.
15. opening my eyes and looking at the fogged-up mirror above the sink.
 - a. i cannot see myself clearly in it.
 - i. that is how it should be. that is how it must be.

IV

16. nineteen.

17. eating a pack of rainbow gummies next to my sister on the floor.

a. my sister handed them to me from her halloween basket after she went trick-or-treating.

i. she was never a fan of gummies.

b. You come in from the kitchen and wrinkle Your nose at them, at us.

i. You tell us rainbows are only for gay people.

1. this is not the first time You've said that.

c. but then You said You would never accept us if we were gay or lesbian or bisexual.

i. You tell my sister to give me another candy. a chocolate.

18. leaving to go to my room.

a. You ask me where i'm going and i say i'm tired and want to sleep.

19. hiding under the bed again.

20. there's not as much space under there since it's being used for storage for boxes of our old belongings.

21. between a box of old papers and clothes.

22. away from You.

23. closer to me.

a. the white fog is in my lungs, in my head, in my eyes, and in me.

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A note from our editors:

The Comma owes a warm thank you to everyone who has contributed to our community this semester. We were so happy to welcome so many new Editorial Board members, and many new club members! It's such a pleasure to share ideas with you at our weekly meetings. There is so much talent within our family of writers and artists, and we are so proud of all of your creations.

Boldness and creativity are displayed beautifully in all of your work. The Comma Fall 2023 is a window into our hearts through self-exploration and memory.

With love,
The Comma

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