



SPRING 2023

VOL. VI

ISSUE II

The Comma

FORDHAM UNIVERSITY LINCOLN CENTER

THE COMMA

Fordham Lincoln Center's Literary &
Arts Collective

THE POETRY

- 7 **Rosaries** by Isabella Acuña
- 9 **And when your hair turns Earl Grey** by Emma Burden
- 10 **Canto 23** by Brianna Vaca
- 14 **One Man Show** by Alex Thaler
- 19 **Visibility** by Heaven Holford
- 22 **me or my body** by Michelina Smith
- 24 **Freerider** by Avery Loftis
- 30 **Love Letter to the Displaced** by Isabella Acuña
- 31 **Diving in Head First** by Heaven Holford
- 32 **You** by Kamau Nosakhere
- 34 **Scared of the Dark** by Alyssa Shonk

THE PROSE

- 4 **The Ocelot** by Brian Gibson
- 11 **Summer, Jackson** by Anna Helldorfer
- 16 **Summer in Adagio** by Sarah Fitcher
- 21 **2023, the farewell tour** by Emma Burden
- 26 **Breaking Point** by Hayley Ng

THE ART

- 2 **Collage** by Izzi Budetti
- 6 **Sweet Angel, Sweet Dance Moves** by Olivera Darden
- 8 **Photo** by Luisa Ferreira
- 10 **Photo** by Owen Mahoney
- 13 **Collage** by Izzi Budetti
- 14 **Views** by Alice Moreno
- 20 **alice, a self portrait** by Alice Moreno
- 23 **Carolina** by Anna Helldorfer
- 25 **Collage** by Izzi Budetti
- 32 **Hudson** by Alice Moreno

HIGH-HEELED HONEYS
FIGHTIN' FEMMES
CURVEY CORSET CUTIES
LONG-HAIRED LOVELIES



2 Collage by Izzi Budetti

GIRLS

G



GAGS

GIGGLE

The Ocelot

by *Brian Gibson*

The ocelots were hissing and raking their nails against their crate, exercising their acid young voices in protest. Sylvia had found them from a breeder several hours out of town, living in a trailer surrounded by cages full of squabbling ermines, spider monkeys, brackish peacocks. Inside the trailer, neon parrots puffed and squawked in argument with each other. In the midst of the clamor, the breeder held up one of the ocelot kittens, the strongest and healthiest of the bunch, and it kicked its tiny legs and mewed uselessly. Its eyes, only having opened a couple of weeks ago, were open to everything, wells of glossy ink transcribing details indiscriminately. Sylvia must have been in love. Seeing the ocelot kitten only confirmed it to her. Even at such a young age, the ocelot seemed to possess something inviolable about it, a sacred dignity that repelled its circumstances. The breeder offered her the kitten. Its fur was matted and pungent. In a cage upon the table, the ocelot's siblings crawled over each other and sucked against the blanket laid upon the floor of the cage.

Sylvia found that the ocelot grew to fit its enclosure. No longer penned up in a cage with its siblings, it grew wiry and athletic and mastered its once ungainly limbs to a dancer's precision. She bought the largest cat tree available for the corner of her apartment, but her table leg was soon shredded anyway. She regretted that she could not spend more time with it but it couldn't be helped. By way of apology, she hired a pet sitter to come by twice a day, an aging man who made a game of offering his stout fingers in a little wiggle across the carpet for the ocelot to chase and nip at. She offered him forty dollars per day. He accepted graciously, though she suspected only out of social obligation; he would have done it whether she paid him or not. "Ocelots aren't meant for apartments," the sitter said to Sylvia one day. "They aren't meant for pets at all, really." He shrugged, as if to say that he had not said anything at all. Playing the straight man,

the advantageously rational one. So that's how this would go. Sylvia shored herself up.

"What am I meant to do then?" Sylvia asked. "Surely you don't expect me to just turn her loose to the first buyer. She's attached to me. It would be cruel to abandon her now."

"It's none of my business what you do," he said. Sylvia saw that he was offering a compromise. How perfectly generous of him, how like a gentleman!

"It certainly isn't. But I know you mean well."

A strange night chill drained into the hall from beneath the door of her apartment, slowly flooding the air with cold. Sylvia opened the door hesitantly; the door latch clicked to life from rest in its alcove. She was in the habit of opening doors slowly, almost reverently, like every room she entered happened to be a crypt. The apartment was silent. None of the low mutters or growls that she had become accustomed to. She called the ocelot out from its hiding place, underneath the sofa, in the kitchen cabinets above the refrigerator, inside the wardrobe burrowed into fuzzy folds of clothing. But there in the bedroom, the window stood wide open, substanceless night radiating in. Sylvia ran to the window and banged it shut before anything more could escape or enter. The fire escape coiled along the walls of the apartment, a snake's ridged back. The ocelot was gone. It could only have been the sitter, that arrogant, meddling thief. She had not broken down at his feet, begging his forgiveness, and so he had opened the window and let the ocelot escape, damn the consequences, damn her very wellbeing. It was enough to punish Sylvia. Men—hypocritical sanctimonious men like him thought that they were just mouthpieces of some necessary law, some law they couldn't even name when asked. Sylvia knocked on his door, very nearly punching through.

"Sylvia!" said the sitter. "Is something the matter? Why, you very nearly broke down my door just there."

"You tell me," Sylvia said, exhaling a long, ragged rope of venomous anger. "First you come into my house and tell me to get rid of my own pet. Then I come home and find my window open, my ocelot nowhere to be found? Does that sound like a coincidence to you?"

The sitter gestured ridiculously. "I don't know what you're talking about! I would never do anything of the sort." The man's face flickered signals of desperation, frantic search for his escape route.

"Whether or not I think you should own an ocelot in the first place, why would I want an ocelot running around the city? I don't want her to be hurt any more than you do. So please, calm down and we can start looking for her before animal control finds her."

So logical, wasn't it? But Sylvia knew there was another explanation, something so obvious but just not yet seen yet. And then there it was, the true horror of her situation suddenly in focus.

"I know what you did. You only opened the window to make me think she escaped. Then you took her yourself. I'll bet she's right there, isn't she?" A small sob escaped from Sylvia. Her ocelot was so close and yet unreachable, staring at the commotion from her hiding place in the unfamiliar landscape, eyes horribly alive. Perhaps she would recognize Sylvia's voice and come running out to her and she could carry her back into her apartment and lock the doors and windows.

The man stared in disbelief, finally and firmly put on the defense. Sylvia thought with gleeful spite that he must be unused to it. "I don't know how to convince you that I didn't do this."

"Let me look in your apartment," said Sylvia. The man let go of his door and Sylvia tore in. She did not bother with care or respect. She upturned tables, sent pillows across the living room—

hollowed out cabinets. The wreckage overtook the floors. Sylvia had already realized by the time she entered the bedroom that the ocelot was not here and her destruction was now truly mindless, only by habit. She was expected to finish, now, what she had started. How far could her ocelot have gotten? Nearly to the edge of the city if she ran, jumping across roofs and fire escapes, staying away from footpaths and from the view of animal control. She could cross through the suburbs and into rural America, vibrant with life and scurrying rodents burrowing beneath blades of wheat. She would stay out of the porchlights and away from the poisoned traps. She would hunt to eat and drink from broken hoses. Then, the houses would dissolve into nothing at all, an incomplete diffusion, and then trees would spring from the ground and multiply, foliage pressing down in shelter from all angles so that no eye could follow the ocelot any longer as she made her pilgrimage.



Sweet Angel, Sweet Dance Moves by Olivera Darden

Rosaries

by *Isabella Acuña*

Mi abuelo dances to Johnny Cash in a plastic urn.

His dust once defined by base carnality
sits tear-stained in a closet void of vitality.

What better than the body of a sinner to choose to burn?

Tucked away in the corner of a shelf,
behind a shoebox and above luscious furs,
his ashes repent and await a celestial rapture.

Next to him, by my abuela's forgiving hand, La Virgen herself.

Every night my abuela lays on her side and prays
over his spirit and hers and their holy reunion
forgetting that in her God's cold and unforgiving union,
out of two sinners, fate might not balance for both to be saved.

I remember watching her gentle prayers as a child
privately from behind a squeaky door frame,
crawling through the shadows in fear, in shame,
and weeping hot tears at a love in death heavenly reconciled.



Photo by Luisa Ferreira

And when your hair turns Earl Grey

by *Emma Burden*

And when your hair turns Earl Grey,
I'll be there waiting for you,
When you beg for my help,
I'll lay at your feet
Because I can listen,
And I can laugh,
And I can set it all aside

Eighteen years of nothing,
Yet there will be love for the rest of my life,
And there will be hatred,
And resentment piled high,
Because I'm too much like my father,
And you didn't even try

I'd give up anything,
Just to never see you cry
If you asked for lavender plucked from the fields,
I'd carry you to France,
Over the dark ocean,
And I'd console you and close your eyes

When your hair is shorter than it is now,
I will braid it back,
And I will dye it blonde again,

*And if I could give you the moon,
I would give you the moon*

Canto 23

by *Brianna Vaca*

you shared a cell with ourfather
a postcard I sent taped on the graying brick
your cervical a hook for chains and a crucifix
baroque, like what they claimed their minds were
on the seventh corner, you renounced
only their sacred bodies conserved underrobes
ornate to eyes, skin touching lead
their 9th level punishment yours in every life
but who told you that you were naked?



Photo by Owen Mahoney

Summer, Jackson

by Anna Helldorfer

Julie was living with ghosts.

They followed her every move, from her dreams, into the waking moments of quiet when her vision would blur and the scene in front of her would change. Sometimes their faces were friendly. Other times—most times—they were the cracked versions of what she remembered. A horrible arrangement of wide eyes and bloody teeth.

She did her best to keep them at bay.

When they were clear of the winter months, Julie took her family to live on a farm, on the outskirts of town. They had a barn and a new kitchen and yellow lace curtains.

It was nice.

She felt, for the first time in a long time, like she could breathe, away from her old house and the constant reminders of her loss. Of what she'd done. No one to lie to her, or to throw her a pitying glance when her brain took a break and no longer wished to connect to her vocal chords.

She could watch her son grow up in peace. She could tend to her sheep.

Eva seemed happy, too. They cooked and painted together, and laughed when their son *wooded* and *awed* at the twinkling windchimes on their porch. All of the horrors that kept Julie from sitting still for too long, Eva had lived through with her. Unlike Julie, she wore her loss like an old, favorite coat. She'd tug on memories for comfort, or say things like, *Darren was such an asshole*, without choking on the word *was*. It seemed... easy.

Julie felt like a stick in the mud.

Everybody wanted her to talk about it. To get it out.

Julie thought that made the memories sound like poison—like something she could squeeze out of her until they no longer hurt.

Talking was the last thing she wanted to do. And she worried that once she started, she wouldn't be able to stop.

"Maybe try writing it down," Eva had suggested one night, over dinner, when Julie failed to hide the shaking in her hands while she robotically spooned mashed potatoes into her mouth.

That had seemed promising, until the dead began to talk to *her*.

The conversation was always one sided, and reeked of accusation.

Your fault. You did this.

Usually, she listened as an acquiescence. It would make her head pound and her skin feel tight, but she thought that it was the least she could do to atone for the blood on her hands. While the world moved on, Julie stirred.

She slipped away like a late afternoon summer—slow and lazy, until she found herself blinking in the darkness, wondering where the time went.

Eva tried her best to keep Julie present.

"Let's go for a hike today," she said, early one morning, when the light had just begun to peek over the mountains and they lay in bed, listening to the birds chirp. A cool breeze from the window tickled the hair on Julie's arms. She felt normal. It felt like an indulgence.

"Okay," she said, and the morning stretched into early afternoon. They packed lunches and made their way to the worn trail behind the barn. She followed Eva—her son strapped to the front of her chest—through the forest and over the ridge, to the wide, blue lake that sat nestled in the neighboring valley. It reflected the same color as the sky as they set up a blanket by the shore.

They lay on their backs to look up at the clouds, their son tucked between them. He cooed, and Eva picked at a container of berries that they'd packed.

The moment was lit with a hazy sort of color.

"I started a new painting," Julie said, her voice quiet.

Eva propped herself up on an elbow. "Yeah? Of what?"

"Joe."

A small smile pulled at the corner of Eva's mouth.

"I'd like to see it," she said. "When you're ready."

"Okay."

Julie closed her eyes, breathing deep. She drifted, suspended somewhere between the lake and the sky, until something tugged at her mind.

She could no longer feel the sun on her skin.

When she sat up, everything was how it had been. Eva and their son lay on the blanket. The clouds rolled above them. But the color had been seeped from the world.

A ripple on the lake caught her eye, a few yards out from the shore.

Then they began to rise out of the water.

The faces of her dead stared with blank eyes as they surrounded them, chanting, *Julie, Julie*.

"Julie. Julie, wake up."

She bolted upright to find that she was still blinking in darkness.



Collage by Izzi Budetti

One Man Show

by *Isabella Acuña*

A glass clinks.

The applause begins.

The man takes a seat.

He sits in the front of fifty onlookers,

But hears only himself once the lights go out.

The performance starts.

He attempts a call and response in his first verse,

But hears no souls in his new universe—

A world emerging from the loneliest parts of his mind.

He panics, scavenging for a trace of the world suddenly left behind—

Screaming out in agony as the threads of his reality unwind.

He cries, shouts, and insists this isn't an act,

But rather he's gone deep into a place devoid of human contact—

Into a hell only in his mind that cannot distinguish fear from fact.

He begs for others to see his inner pains—

His for salvation from his inner darkness wanes—

As his internal ruins cannot match his external melodic refrains.

Did the partygoers go blind as he grew scared?

Was it all in his head that the world no longer cared?

Could all the innocence he once knew to be true be lost in a day?

Did the crowd grow angry as his voice began to fray?

What repressed fears emerged in him as his confidence was stripped away?

The man felt the crowd lose interest as his voice fell dull.

He felt his futility. His hopes of survival grew null.

He felt himself slip. His mind conjured up easy but costly ways out.

After dozens more unheard prayers to bring a him soul to save him from burnout,

He relinquishes the desire to fix his brain, suddenly too twisted about.

He sees a flash of light and his body reconnects to the party around him.

He looks around as his hands hold him to his chair for fear of losing touch with Earth again.

He tastes the tears that suddenly trickle down his cheek.

A choir of concerned partygoers storm the stage to retrieve the wrecked performer.

The crowds ask what went wrong while the man shakes and sobs.

The performance is over.

Summer in Adagio

by Sarah Fichter

It began with the violas. He could barely hear them at first- their soft ringing muffled by a quiet transcendence; thick in the air as if a beam of light cast through fog. Then came the flutes, airy in their nature yet somehow as substantial as the strings. It was written in measures of four, with each note eager to find its next. One, two, three four; One, two three four. One, two, three four; One, two three four. Then, knocking.

Richard awoke with a splitting headache- the kind that shot pain down the nape of his neck at the sound of each rap upon the front door of his studio. He rubbed his eyes to rid them of their hazy lens, revealing Union Square in near darkness- save for a handful of puddles of light from street lamps.

Shit, he thought, rubbing the skin on the side of his face where he had laid his head down nearly six hours ago to rest his eyes. The clock sitting on the desk to his right read quarter to eight. Richard's stomach sank: nearly fifty blocks uptown, the entirety of the New York Philharmonic was waiting for a conductor who should have begun rehearsal forty-five minutes ago. Again, a knock.

"Hey, Rich? Are you there? It's past a quarter to eight, and when you didn't show up to rehearsal, Benson sent me downtown in a cab to get you", the voice of a young man, younger than Richard at 21, came from the hallway. It was the voice of Jack Radley, a classmate of Richard's at Julliard. The two had met that past spring in Professor Benson's Lector on the use of Counterpoint in the Early Baroque Period, yet only really exchanged friendly smiles and erasers back then. Yet, by the time midterm exams approached, both had risen into the Professor's inner circle of 'prodigious and promising young musicians'.

Lunches were taken in the Professor's shoebox office, where he and Jack would bump elbows and shift their heavy armchairs to maneuver around the stacks of books, records, and loose-leaf staff

sheets that littered the floor. Heavy maroon curtains framed the room's only window, casting the room in a solemn shadow that necessitated the use of a victorian-era standing lamp even on the brightest of days. The three debated the differences between Brahms and Wagner; the influence of Italian Romanticism on the French Impressionist movement; Verdi's best opera.

He could understand Jack's place in such an intimate academic circle. By May, Richard had learned that the 20-year-old grew up in a suburb of Chicago, and had given his first professional piano recital at the age of ten. By 16, he had graduated high school at the top of his class, and moved to New York City to study classical composition at Juilliard. Yet, somehow it was Richard who was to make his conducting debut with the New York Philharmonic in just under 24 hours. He adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses, pressed down the cowlick that had formed in his hair, and opened the door. "How mad is he?"

"Well, how could he be mad with someone who got mugged on the subway and had to report the crime to the police?"

"What are you talking about, I didn't even take the subw—"

"Richard, that's the point," Jack smiled slightly, "grab your coat, and let's hail a cab."

Richard had all but forgotten about his pounding head in the rushed frenzy of Jack's sudden arrival, but quickly grabbed an aspirin and tossed it to the back of his throat. He had long accepted the headaches as a constant in his life- it seemed that he could always feel a rhythmic beating of blood beneath his temple. "63rd and Columbus, please," he said, crouching into the taxi. A sudden rush of pain- he closed his eyes.

"Are you ok?" Jack asked. The question hung in the air for a beat too long, before Richard replied, "Yeah. Just nervous, I suppose."

In actuality, it wasn't a lie. Richard had been up for days, haunted by a ghost of his own creation. He'd studied the piece ad nauseum; he could picture the baton in his hand and feel the extension of his chest at the swell of sound. There was just something missing, holding back the level of passion he first felt at the age of six- listening to his mother play Vivaldi on their living room piano. Hours spent drifting his fingers across ivory keys, studying harmonic dictation, erasing and rewriting melodies; but all Richard could feel now was the pit in his stomach.

It was dark in the back of the cab where the two men sat, but as they crossed through Times Square, Richard could see Jack's face: cheekbones illuminated by the soft blue glow of a Pepsi Ad. He was staring at Richard, and for a moment, both of their glances met. Richard sat up, shifting his shoulders towards the front of the cab with all of the dignity one could have after sleeping through the beginning of one of the most important rehearsals of his life. "Thank you, by the way," he cleared his throat, "for lying to Benson and covering my ass."

Jack chuckled, yet Richard could see there was something else there. Something Richard had seen etched across his own face before, but he couldn't quite place it. The way his eyebrows refused to relax fully, the hesitation in his smile.

"Well," Jack started, "honestly I was worried you had skipped town." There was humor in his voice, but something made Richard wonder if he was genuine. The conversation lulled, as Jack handed a twenty to the driver and opened the door. The humidity of early June seeped into the car, and Richard stepped out onto the freshly paved sidewalk next to his friend. He took a moment to think, and as the pair walked up the stairs to the plaza, he responded:

“I don’t really know why Benson gave this opportunity to me. It should be yours.”

Shit, his cheeks flushed as soon as the words came out of his mouth. Great way to sound like you’re begging for sympathy, he thought. They were in front of the fountain now, and Jack had stopped walking.

“I remember the first time I saw you,” he started. Richard turned around to face the young man, looking smaller now than he had ever seen him. “It was our first day of the Spring semester and we sat next to each other in Benson’s Counterpoint lecture- I didn’t give a shit about that class,” Richard raised an eyebrow and let out a small laugh. “No, really Richard. I took the class because I just so happened to have room in my schedule, and I had taken a class with Benson before- so I knew it couldn’t be all that unbearable. I don’t even particularly like the Baroque period.” At this point, Richard was utterly confused. He was about to respond when Jack asked him a question.

“Do you remember what you said about Vivaldi’s Summer in Adagio?” Richard shook his head. “I thought about the way you described the piece for weeks. I have yet to understand how your mind works, Richard Maxwell, but something tells me that you see the world with a sense of beauty that I wish I could even begin to comprehend. But in that one moment, you made me see it.” He looked as if he was about to jump out of his own skin. Suddenly, he raised his hands above his head, laughing, “You made me like the Baroque period, for God’s sake! I—”

At this, Richard felt his body moving before he even had time to comprehend that his palms were wrapping around Jack’s face, and his lips pressed against his friends. Richard felt violins, flutes, and a harp crescendo, a full orchestra resided in the freckles of Jack’s face. Jack’s face, he sighed. No no no, it’s Jack’s face. He pulled back, realizing what he had just done. They stared at each other for what Richard felt was an eternity, Jack’s unreadable expression lingering like a fermata over the pair. A rest, then Jack pulled the boy in.

Measures and measures passed before the pair separated again, their flushed cheeks lit ever so slightly by the light of the Metropolitan Opera’s chandelier, which cast a dim glow over the empty plaza through the building’s sweeping glass windows. Both smiled, and Richard reached out to grab Jack’s hand.

Inside the orchestral hall, the faint noise of violins strumming out the beginnings of *Le Quattro Stagioni* could be heard echoing against the surrounding buildings. In the dark, the two figures in front of the fountain began to walk toward the music.

Visibility

by *Heaven Holford*

My home is one room
With flowerpots in the windowsill,
A tick infested mattress
With a crazy quilt to cover it,
Bibles in lace and calico,
And magazine pictures on the wall.
With a roof that was a 'stretch of urban beach'
And a busy hallway full of interactive neighbors
Lit by a flickering gaslight that casts dark shadows.
The photos don't quite capture
All the love and light
That lives within these four walls.
Instead,
It focuses on the bad;
The black;
The poor.
We are forced to represent
The failure of the Negro class;
The segregation;
The embodiment of social problems.
These photographs coerce us into visibility
And make us bound to appear suffering
And carry the burden of representation.
We are forced into visibility
And made out to live in black and white.
This home is a representation of failure and diminution.
We are a representation of failure and diminution.



alice, as self portrait by Alice Moreno

2023, the farewell tour

by *Emma Burden*

She looks at me like there is still hope in the world and that she's holding onto it all. And laughs and laughs as she ties her Converse. She's the Union Jack and old CDs and warm quilts paired with the cold side of the pillow. She's diligence swamped by a mass of red hair. She's inside jokes and paper money and the smell of pine and woods. Tea, not coffee. Gratitude and empathy and hilarious notions.

She's strength personified, like the Greek god of war in the body of a teenage girl. And she smells like caramel lattes and the 11th grade English classroom. She drives as fast as she thinks, listens to music as loud as her mind. And, maybe it is all for the better, but that doesn't absolve her care. She pretends that nothing matters, but everything does. Aspartame and Radiohead and football games. Love and anxiety and music.

I'm defined by two opposing creatures, individuals built up as humans just as I am, but existing on another plane. When I close my eyes, we're drinking hard lemonade at The 1975, or we're driving home from stale waffles and hard bacon at First Watch, and we're eating popsicles outside of the lot on Bonny Oaks Drive. We're speeding down the interstate blaring Taylor Swift because we're late to see the Peds, and God help us if we miss one of Josi's goals. We're cutting cinnamon rolls behind the counter of that damned Panera Bread and Kenny's got both earbuds in. And you've lost the cat again, or the car isn't starting, and one of us is missing their shift. I'm on the first flight home on the first day that I am able to escape New York.

We can lay out at the artificial beach, down the pike, buried under the cover of oak trees, with dirty sand that dries beneath our toes.

We can play mermaids in the pool.

The 1975. The Cure. Mitski. Phoebe Bridgers. Taylor Swift. The Smashing Pumpkins. boygenius.
Radiohead. bôa.

The soundtrack to the past three years.

One day we can return to London, and we can laugh at the French. And you'll join the Navy, and you'll move to Ohio, and somewhere along the line already, school days turned into summer break, turned me away at school, turned into two weeks in the fall for me to see you.

I don't want to know when the last time the three of us will be together will be, but I know that day is coming soon. It's sometime before the end of August, it's between The Cure in Atlanta and before the drive to Great Lakes, Illinois.

If I knew I would be happy somewhere, and I could travel to that place, it would be in a car with the
three of us.

me or my body

by *Michelina Smith*

i was in kindergarten
when I discovered that
my body
was an object.

during story time
a boy
put his hand up my skirt.
my teacher said he
was
just a silly boy.
boys do silly things.

i was only 6 years old
when my mom taught me
how to defend myself.
against men.
against silly boys.

she took a pillow off the couch
and told me to punch it. if a
boy ever
ever
touched
me like that again.
i was to deliver a blow
to his nuts.

i was 18
the first time i was catcalled.
i was walking back from the
grocery store.
it was raining.
it was nighttime.

an older man
was leaning against a trash can.
he whistled and said
“where you goin’, pink jacket?”

i gripped my keys
and kept walking
with my head down.
i reduced myself
the same way
he reduced me
to a silly piece of clothing.

now i’m 21
and trying out
the dating pool.
i thought i was
ready for the swim
but i didn’t
anticipate
this many sharks.

apparently
my flesh
is the most interesting
thing about me.

who decided that
my boobs
(some sacks of fat)
are more valuable
than my brain
(a hub of creativity)?
they must have been
very silly.

i understand the intrigue. my body can
breathe.
sing.
love.
run.
dance.
create.
my body is a fucking powerhouse.

but my body is also
manipulated.
invalidated.
objectified.
commodified.
utilized.
brutalized.
my body is a fucking nuisance.

so which is it:
am i defined
by my body?
or does my body
define me?

but that's not my decision.
you have to choose.
do you
want me?
or do you want my body?



Breaking Point

by Hayley Ng

Soldier Ward Writes Letters of Sympathy to Soldier Lunt's Lover, Eleanor Davis

1944–1945

The National War History Museum's upcoming exhibit, *Letters During WWII*, will contain recovered letters written by American soldiers. Letters sent home would normally have been screened and then censored for sensitive material by the Office of Censorship. In order to circumvent the censor, Soldier Joseph Ward wrote and hand-delivered letters to Soldier Charles Lunt's lover, Eleanor Davis, in Maine during his leave to express his condolences and details of Lunt's death. Eleanor Davis sent numerous letters over the next couple of months back to Ward during Ward's redeployment, but all of them were unanswered due to Ward's death during the Battle of Okinawa.

Read all of Ward's letters (in order) in full below.

"January 13th, 1945

Dear Ms. Davis, I should begin by describing my situation: the rain stopped an hour ago, a bit before the sun broke through the horizon. Nearby, soldiers upturn their boots to pour out the mud and rainwater, cursing our terrible luck right befo[re] [*water stain*] to leave. I, myself, am trying to

stay dry by sitting upon this half-empty ammo crate while using George's canteen to write against since it was within reach and mine is full of bullet holes.

I feel it significa[nt] [*water stain*] [des]cribe this moment in time to you because this marks the first time our letters came but Charlie is not here. I saw them pass over your letters when they were handing them out. If Charlie were here, he would hav[e] [*water stain*] [b]y the distributor until they got to your letters. He would have taken care not to tear the envelope flap when opening it. He would have read your letter once, then twice, then stare at it, thinking about what to write back. Usually, [*unsteady handwriting*] he would tell me, with the glee of a schoolboy telling his school-mates about his first kiss, what you wrote in those letters—nothing too embarrassing, do not worry. Sometimes he would ask for my input on what he wrote to ensure that it was not too frightening.

But today is not one of those days. Because Char[lie] [*water stain*] [h]ere.

Until I arrive back in America, [*handwriting returns to normal*] I thought that it might perhaps interest you to know what was going on in [written faintly] the time after Char[lie]. At the very least, if I were to close my eyes, the sound of my pencil against paper may fool me into thinking that it was not I, but Charlie, sitting beside me, writing letters to you.

Joseph Ward"

"February 6th, 1945

Dear Ms. Davis, I hear soldiers talking about a point system that would determine who would get sent home first. You could apparently get more points if you have a family waiting at home, have been overseas for a while, or have been in a lot of battles. I bet Charlie would [*unsteady handwriting*] have jumped been ecstatic if he heard about this; he was always talking about how he wished to be with you again once the [*illegible word struck out*] was over. I am confident he would have been among the first to leave too. He was, after all, here for longer than I was—I only joined two years ago, right after they let high school students join.

[*handwriting returns to normal*] As for myself, I have no children of my own, nor have I seen enough action to say that I deserve more points than some of the other soldiers who have also been fighting longer. I imagine it will be a while before I can return. I pray, even though I know my prayers will not reach you, that you can bear to wait just a little longer for my letters, though I imagine that would not be a problem for you, if Charlie is was truthful about your patient demeanor.

[*Several lines of text had been crossed out*] I hesitate over including this in fear of frightening you, but I feel it just that you know the truth. I wrote in my first letter that I struggled to remember the events of the Battle of Hürtgen Forest, but truthfully, that was an understatement. Some of my [*unsteady handwriting*] memories from the battle have only just started returning these past couple of months. I realize I had given you a brief, but inaccurate account of the [*handwriting grows more*

shaky] circumstances surrounding Charlie's death. I said that Charlie had died instantaneously when the mortar struck, but he only got hit because he pushed me away. ~~if Charlie had not done~~ It took ~~2~~⁸ 4 minutes before he bled out. Please forgive me. I hope you will

[*bottom half of the letter is illegible*]"

"March 2 4th, 19445

Dear Ms. Davis, a mortar nearly struck me the other day and I had thought it had somehow took my legs out until George [*unsteady handwriting*] pulled me back to my feet. I realize that my legs had simply given out when I heard the mortar. George thinks I have become ill and should go report it, but I [*shrapnel burn*] sudden fall is attributed to my lack of sleep. Truthfully, my sleep has been plagued by nightmares these past few months. I can never recall what nightmares I [*shrapnel burn*] have them if my waking [*shrapnel burn*] of the night in a cold sweat is any indication.

I feel an obligation [*shrapnel burn*] no matter how painful it may be to recall what happened that day, what happened [*shrapnel burn*] minutes Charlie was bleeding out. [*Several lines of text have been heavily crossed out*] I was trying to reach ~~to~~ him to try [*shrapnel burn*] a nearby fox hole but he was too far [*shrapnel burn*] Germans were basically on top of [*shrapnel burn*] didn't look good but I [*shrapnel burn*] for a medic but there were so many wounded [*shrapnel burn*] all busy."

"[*unsteady handwriting*] December 2nd ~~5th 6th~~? 7th, 1944

~~Char~~ Ms Davis I ran out of my foxhol[e] when I felt something hot pepper my leg. I ~~am falling~~ fell but used a fallen tree as cover to crawl to where Charlie ~~is was is~~
why did he have to push m I should ha
Charlie I am He Everyone is screaming
Ms Davis He looked at me with no eyes and asked me to tell you if I was hurt because he can't hear"

"December 7th, 19[*water stain*]

Ms Davis I held his upper half as he di[ed] [*water stain*] [bec]ause the other half was still sloughing of[f] [*water stain*] [tre]es"

"April 3rd, 1945

Dear Ms. Davis, They said I could go home immediately if I agreed to transfer to the Pacific theater. Five years ago, at the start of this accursed war, I could never imagine how a man would ever say no to such a proposition. Five months ago, I understood why a man would never, in his right mind, say

The Comma

yes. But I am beginning to suspect that George was right, that I am ill, and that, perhaps, I am no longer of sound mind.

I am on the train to Maine as I write this final letter—to my left, were I to look out the window, I am sure I would grow tearful at seeing the beautiful landscape passing by. But as of now I cannot bring myself to look away from this paper. Once I arrive, I shall drop these letters off in your mailbox. By the time you open your mailbox and see these letters, I will likely be on my way home to Virginia to spend time with my mother before I get redeployed. The medics said that I am still fit for battle, though I can hardly see how that might be given how shaky my aim is now, how slow I must write to make my handwriting legible, and the darkening shadows beneath my eyes. I hope that whatever ails me will go away sooner rather than later.

If you wish to send any letters, I will be open to receiving them, however reluctant I may be to answer. Not because I find you dreadful (from the letters you sent to him, you seem to be a wonderful person), but because I feel inadequate to talk anymore about him. But regardless of how I may feel, I was the only one with him in his last moments, so if I can help you through your grief, please let me know.

Sincerely, Joseph Ward”

The physical letters will be on display in our upcoming exhibit, *Letters During WWII*, on the museum’s second floor, west wing in honor of our brave soldiers.

Love Letter to the Displaced

by *Isabella Acuña*

I see them when I close my eyes at the draw of another hateful day,
souls sifting through the dirt of Dante's fifth circle of rage,
searching for a place to let their callused tear ducts melt, decay,
and surrender to the futility of tired ribs and age.

I live in a brethren of patriotic orphanage.

Eternal infants screaming for where to pay homage,
mourning ancestors turned farmers, gold sifters
once free in the robbed land of Alamo drifters.

What does it mean to spit fire at an ancestor's loss?

Lush organs of green and arteries of sand and capillaries of moss,
a country's body made into a war amputee.

I cry falsely believing a People's blood was bled for me.

I cry, for when this twisted spine lays to its final cot,
its lonely tears will have nowhere honest to claim as its tomb,
no place to plant roots of sorrow, untie its corrupted knots,
left rotten by terrestrial grief, a displaced syndrome.

diving in head first

by *Heaven Holford*

and feeling the water
break at the tip of my fingers
then the rush of water engulfing
my whole body.

the feeling of being fully submerged,
holding my breath as i
sink to the bottom
eyes closed, heart racing.

hearing the muffled splashes of children
from the far end and feeling
the bubbles burst and float
by as they rush to the surface.

i know how to swim
but for a moment i wonder
what would happen if i suddenly
couldn't and i
drowned.

i am a diver and you are the pool,
i dove in head first and now i can't
remember how to swim / which way is up and
i wonder if i will ever
reach the surface
again



08.5.22

you

by *Kamau Nosakhere*

When the rough wind
blows through the trees
And the bees
can't reach the future fruit
The blossoms look to you

When rocks and stones
Feel dull, dark, and dim
They bask in your light
So that they may shine

When stars die in the night sky
And they slowly lose their light
It travels to earth
To live on in your eyes

When my heart grows cold
And my fingers go stiff
I long and wish
To hold
You

Scared of the Dark

by *Alyssa Shonk*

I didn't realize she was gone—
She left
without telling me.
I thought she was close,
like when the sun hides behind clouds,
but she was a dandelion
flying forcefully where the wind blows,
traveling deep into the oblivion.

The oblivion that the living only visit
in dreams
or times of sorrow.
When the weight engulfing their thoughts,
becomes too heavy to bear
and scatters one's life to depths
they never expected to reach,
forces their heads to fall.

I didn't realize she was gone—
until I became
an old jack-in-the-box.
The tired spring crumbling
under the pressure,
forcing me to remain hidden
inside the box, where no one can hear me shout,
bringing me into the oblivion of the forgotten.

A cold, crisp darkness encircles her,
but tries to comfort me,
as the hard floor turned to frost covered grass,
her door changed to a sturdy oak tree,
the ceiling dissolved into an overcast sky.
The four walls forced their way up to the stars,
as my pounding grew louder and louder,
allowed nothing to escape.
Forbid me to enter.

I realized she was gone.
Like ash swept away
by the cold breeze on a summer day;
Only left with a vague image
of her pretty pink dress,
or the memories of a wide-eyed child,
who believed the best in everyone,
forcing a smile on her face
to flash those who wronged her.

The oblivion took away my imagination,
my fantasy of a perfect life,
my Happiness.
But my little girl,
scared
of the cold darkness consuming her,
found peace with secretly disappearing
because she resents the person
outside of the wall.



THE COMMA SPRING 2023 | Volume VI Issue II

A Note from the Editors

The Comma owes a warm thank you to everyone who has contributed to our community this semester. We were so happy to welcome an entirely new Editorial Board, and many new members! It's such a pleasure to share ideas with you at our weekly meetings (from workshops, to favorite songs, to *very* important Trisha Paytas videos). 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 Spring 2023 is a window into our hearts through self-exploration and memory.

With love,
Anna & Emma

Editor in Chief | Anna Helldorfer

Managing Editor | Emma Burden

Treasurer | Brian Gibson

Layout Editors | Anna Helldorfer & Emma Burden

Editorial Board | Hayley Ng, Alyssa Shonk, Miranda Saenz de Viteri

Faculty Advisor | Elizabeth Stone

