

*Here and There*  
Issue 2: Shelter in Place





Logo by Mckenna Haire  
Cover art by Jennifer Hsia

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I want to live in a house  
Reb Ngu

that fills up, spills over, overheats. Where the table is heavy, laden with food, stained, crumbs all over. Glass cups with clear honeyed liquid and mugs with milky residue puddled at the bottom. A meowing cat interloping in the leftovers. A heaviness laying over the table, an accumulation of knit-picked arguments left unraveled. Where the talking animals go off to the room over, huddling together as they stare and occasionally yelp at a 13-inch screen for hours.

I want to live in a house where the hands return, their midnight bustle sweeping away the stale heaviness. One to the sink, which fills up with soapy bubbles; one to the table, its crusted veneer slowly disintegrating, and another to the floor, hands intermingled with feet as they pick up the remains of the day.

I want to live in a house run by a continuous exchange of gifts. The gift of waking up to a clean sink, kneaded dough on its way to the oven, the latest bounty from the garden.

I want to live in a house that is made and unmade and made again every day.

## Carpet Cole Vandenberg

The afternoon was bright, and I was indoors, staring at a gray stain on the carpet where a cat had puked the decade before. My parents told me that the pure white of this carpet had lasted roughly one week before the sick kitty defiled it. After that initial crime, the whole area fell into disrepair as an entire childhood passed through it. A few more cats, a few toddlers, and one dog all came and went, each contributing to the splotchy abstraction that was my bedroom floor. Nothing would beat the original, though. The pit of discolor was the size of a dinner plate and as hard to miss as a Christmas tree. And, like a Christmas tree, it stuck around long after its season had passed.

I was too little to know or care that the cat had ruined my parents' new carpet, but I can be sure that they did what they could to save their investment. By the time I inherited the room, that stain had survived cleaning, scrubbing, bleaching, screaming, and more. Of course, when my turn came I waged new war against the stain, even taking a pocketknife to it once – only to find that cutting the thing out would leave the carpet looking ragged, scratchy, and just as gray.

Over the years, I learned to live with my silent, ugly roommate. I would step around it each night, learning exactly which stride to lengthen as I made my way to bed in the dark. In the daytime, a small throw rug managed to hide most of it. Only the pandemic's strange, universal house arrest would finally exhaust my other distractions, leaving me with nothing to do but stare at my stain, a great dead pupil that stared unflinchingly back.

Our standoff lasted a few days, the duration of which I spent almost entirely in my bedroom as my family fought their own wars of isolation downstairs: my brother, who was just old enough to hate my parents but not quite old enough to do anything about it; my parents, who had long forgotten the rug upstairs and were now trying to clean up the mess of their overturned work lives; and me, quickly forgetting how to ignore the stain in my floor.

As I tried to squeeze a few more droplets of entertainment out of my books, my phone, and my guitar, the carpet began to scream. It, too, must have been growing bored, watching the old reruns of my life for days on end. As the two of us reached the end of our patience with each other, I was picking up my pocketknife again, driving it deep into the center of that old spot of vomit, tearing it clean from the floorboards below, and discovering that someone had gone through all the stupid trouble to paint those floorboards blue.

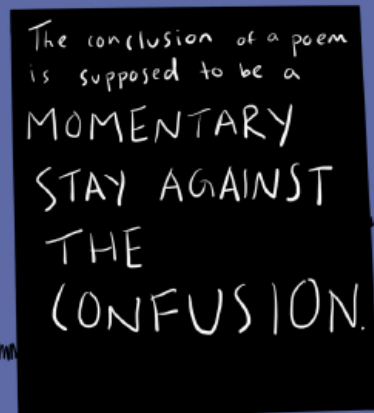
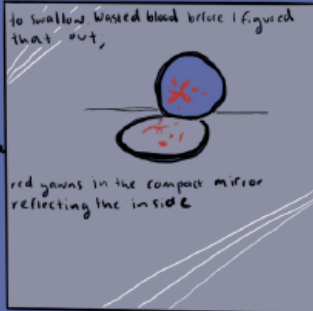
I wasn't thinking. Now there was rough wood and open staples in the center of my bedroom, and I still had to take all the furniture out before I could complete my

extermination of the carpet. Carefully, I emptied the bookcases, cleared out the dresser, disassembled the bed, and shipped everything out to my brother's room, promising profusely that I would have everything back in place for him before the weekend. Again, he was too young to do anything about it. When at last the shields and armor were gone, killing that carpet wasn't a terrible chore. It came up easily, defeated and dejected. I collected the staples in a tin cup and tossed them in the woods to rust away into nothing.

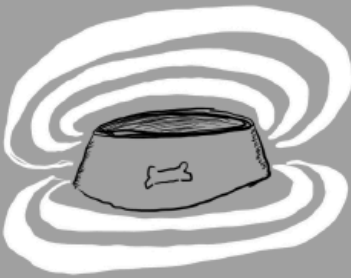
I was lucky that the pandemic has been so forgiving with deadlines. My bedroom, like sandcastles and Lego sets, took much more time to rebuild than it took to destroy. My relationship with carpet had ended in a flurry of foam and fibers, so I opted for a nice faux wood for the new flooring. It was unforgiving and not particularly excited to take up residence where the prior tenant had been so violently evicted, but eventually we reached a conclusion. With the floor settled, I relaxed; you can't be too optimistic with these things – my parents never should have gone with white.

The dog died in the winter and no one told me  
Sophia Marusic





My mother was in the kitchen this morning fingering raw hide and crying over finally throwing away all of our dog food and heart worm medicine. I cried



about the dog dying in this raw town he didn't believe in. Alone,

I slagged the food in the fireplace ceremonially.



I took the heart worm medicine

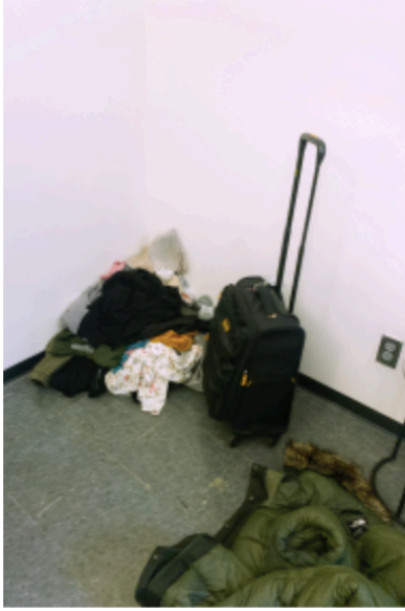


and threw up hours later at my desk

This may sound ridiculous, but we  
paid for the old dog to be cremated  
like the kibble, ash forever  
at home, forever Ours.

THE  
END.





two years in ten minutes

Abby Spare

I was hopped up on coffee, a Dunkin' Donuts iced taking the place of the Small World Nola I craved. Nassau had been unrecognizable when I visited it that morning, tables taped off with what amounted to caution tape, people avoiding each other like the plague – well it was the plague. Thinking of leaving Princeton, leaving behind everything I had known had clawed at my organs for the past week. Tears dried up, no matter how much heaving and screaming I did on the floor of my friends' rooms, I was unable to emote anymore.

My mom was coming in ten short minutes, and I had said goodbye to all my friends, kissed them and hugged them and planned for Facetimes and Zoom calls in the coming weeks. Scully 115 was the last to hold onto my joints and pull me back and down. By the last day this room, my home for all of junior year and .75 of senior year, was a Spartan imitation of its previous life. The yellow and teal that I had carefully decorated with paintings and decorative pillows were reduced to the stained green-gray tiled floor and the off-white chipping paint. My belongings, most having been packed away by my mother the previous day, were peeled back to one small bag, the winter coat my mom insisted that I keep with me “just in case it got cold tomorrow morning,” and the leftover laundry I had hidden in the corner where my beanbag had occupied, hoping it would disappear.

The room was filled with Command Strips of my memories and moments from the past two years. Over my bed were dots and blotches of panic attacks over midterm essays whose topics I'd already forgotten. Over my desk I had framed the moment I learned that both of my thesis productions were picked up by the Theater Department, and the overwhelming joy and love I felt then. In the recesses of my drawers were all the times that friends had poked their head in for a night in with a cliché romantic comedy, a bottle of wine, some face masks, and a de-facto therapy session. Scully 115 was a home to my best and worst, space for my heart and my mind to grow and learn, my Princeton world in 200 square feet.

I tried to peel these off of the walls and the floors, collecting all that was here into my last bag. I couldn't. My two years were embedded into the grout of the tile, and the cracks in the wall. They had burrowed themselves into the fiber of my room, or what was my room. Trying to wrench them from the place was an act of destruction. My memories would be torn and mutilated, victims of a war there was no reason to fight.

I could leave. I could leave these moments, and Scully, and Princeton, and go home. There was no need to nail myself to the floor and insist on squatting here engrossed in the past. I could take the growth, and the relationships I had built here with me, and set free these memories and moments. Saying goodbye to this room wasn't just closing a part of my life, shutting the door to what had been, it was a step into the uncertainty of what is and what could be.

Homecoming  
Cassandra James

I run my hands over the walls like  
A blind woman, searching the face of someone  
I once knew, finding familiar cartilage.  
Look how you've grown! — while I was away —  
I feel the stretch of age in your drywall,  
Skin cinched tight over bone.  
You're taller, too — the roof has risen, Christ-like —  
Your many rooms gangly with adolescence,  
Nonchalant and suffocating.  
Really, one almost wouldn't know you —  
The skin has grown over the crisscrossed stitches  
And I can hardly see a  
Scar, the place where I was ripped from you  
Like a cancer or a mole. Really, it's  
Almost as if you never had surgery, like you're  
Good as new!  
This new you, that doesn't include  
Me.  
Really, I wonder if you missed me.  
I know I've changed, my face  
Elongated by gravity. And I might  
Sound a little different, maybe whip-smart, almost like  
I know everything,  
But I don't.  
I don't know why I feel so strange in your arms.  
Am I too old, now, to be held?  
Or is it that you like me better at  
Arms-length, so that when I have to go again  
Your stitches won't pop  
And your body won't bleed.

## Shelter-In-Place

Aditi Desai

My body is a collection of wounds: one broken nose, two dislocated shoulders, and a curved spine. My body is a museum filled with past illnesses and pain. My body tells my story; when it is read, it reveals an intimate history of breakage and healing. Staring at my imperfections in the mirror, I am grateful to medicine for keeping my body alive when it was most vulnerable and broken.

But, I've learned that pain is not dissolved by medicine alone. While scientific precision and medical procedures may ease physiological burdens, pain lives on like a lingering odor, spilling out of closed stitches and completed surgeries. Pain is a vibrant and fluorescent hue. Pain is loud and vividly expressed. Though medicine may diminish physical pain, other dimensions of pain and illness continue to lodge themselves permanently into memories and emotions.

For me, pain is a hazy gray zone that wedges distance between myself and my body. I view it as a hint of weakness because it interrupts my ability to rely on and trust in my body's stability. I want to shelter-in-place in this vessel. I want to wake up each morning and know that my body will be about the same as yesterday -- that it will not crumble, and that the pain will not spread from lower back to leg to mind like a parasite. But, I know that my body undergoes metamorphosis when it succumbs to illness and pain. It hunches over like a wilted flower and ends up nauseated, brimming with an anxiety I try to neglect. Through my experiences, it troubles me to think of how my body can change so drastically without my approval and how I can lose control over something that is mine.

Yet, despite the prevalence of pain in my identity, it is notoriously difficult to verbalize. With pain comes a sense of isolation from my own body which then urges me to search for the right rhetoric and language to describe pain. Unable to find words, I turn to descriptions of physical metaphors like "I hurt" and "this aches." Other times, I move to wincing, gnashing teeth, and shouting to convey my discomfort. I assume that such verbal and physical "pained expressions" can translate my muted feelings to loved ones and caregivers. I want to share my pain through physical motions and visible actions to ensure that my body can communicate for itself -- that it can be understood despite feeling vulnerable. But, can pain be shared? Is pain a communicable language which others can pick up, process, and experience for someone else? Do individuals want to share pain, or is it built to be a solo-experience? And finally, what are the limits of empathy?

Such questions have always bolded themselves in my mind as I grapple with pain as both a physical sensation and an everlasting emotional experience. I've learned to let these brewing, conflicted thoughts settle down. Instead of flirting with pain, I opt to

keep it as a hidden, silent stranger, denying the vacancy it leaves within my body. However, I've experienced a resurgence of these questions as bodies all around me succumb to infection and illness during the coronavirus pandemic.

Over the past few weeks, I've wrestled and made amends with pain and illness. After attending a few online health writing workshops, I've been able to interact with poets, students, writers, and teachers to discuss a range of literary works ranging from writer and physician Atul Gawande's narratives on mindful healing to Virginia Woolf's poem "On Illness." Though each workshop participant is locked into their own "Zoom box," our conversations are an open arena to discuss pain as a critical part of being human, finding shelter in one's body, and living.

After each weekly workshop, I add to my personal conception of pain, building on and revising my initial beliefs. I've realized that pain is like walking through a new landscape, colored not with trees and greenery, but with tones of past events and memories. This new landscape is not your body, but it's not entirely foreign either. It's your body from a few weeks ago, maybe even months, when the pain was so vivid that you felt no room to express any other emotion. We must navigate our past selves to understand the origin of pain and why it continues to live on within us.

Our bodies are full of stories – stories of pain, healing, resurgence, and resilience. Entering the intimate space of your body to search for these stories is like examining a home for objects passed down from generation to generation. It's the start to coming to terms with and expressing the pain that's lodged within our bodies. Though I still find verbalizing pain to be difficult, writing about the fragility of human bodies has encouraged me to reflect on what it means to be alive in and find shelter in an imperfect body. It is the blurriness of pain as both a physical sensation and an intangible memory that compels me to search for precision in language.

## One Thousand Times Over

Lila Harmar

I listen before I go downstairs for footsteps shuffling around the first floor, and I hope the kitchen is empty when I swing through the door. It is quiet; I am safe. I resign myself to lukewarm coffee and wait for the hours to pass before I let myself eat. My father's coffee lies on the table, half drunk and cold by now. My mom makes it decaf so as not to augment his anxiety; her efforts are largely ineffectual, but then again so is the mid-morning Ativan. My eyes are still puffed from hours of nocturnal ceiling-gazing. It is too early to run into my father – the day is too young for me to see the man who is only a past in my mind, only a present in his own. I can only hope that he has begun his first nap of the day. But in swings the door and in he steps, clothed in quarantine casual: pajama pants, duck socks, a button down. We have taken to laughing at his outfits, my brother and I, but alone in the feeble dawn his cacophony of colors doesn't feel funny.

He starts off with the stare that has molded itself onto his melting features, and I force myself to face his grey-stained eyes. He looks but does not see; he cannot tell who I am, but not even a question creases his eyes. Possibly he has gotten used to faceless faces passing through his home daily, addressing him familiarly, feeding him, medicating him. Maybe he is used to not knowing, or he has given up. His jaw hangs differently, to the side like he forgot how to hold it, like he forgot where the middle is. And my eyes flick from the fallen face which used to be my dad's to the refrigerator, because I can stand that not looking back at me.

"Are you Holly?"

"No, I'm Lila."

"Are you my daughter?"

"Yes."

"Do you know who I am?"

"Yes, you're my dad."

"What school do you go to?"

"Princeton."

"That's a good school."

"I agree."

"Well, you're a very beautiful girl. I'm going to go upstairs and take a nap."

"Ok."

He swings out of the room, but not before staring again. I can almost see the moment when my identity slips from him, and sometimes before he leaves he begins another question string, and sometimes he walks away to take a nap, and sometimes he simply stands there, staring, losing the room, losing me.

I found out on a Friday. We were expecting the Alzheimer's, not the prostate cancer. With her sinking smile my mom told me that she would be taking a leave from work, but years turned the leave into a life and she is at home now. I was going on a double date that night, and I met my friend early beforehand. She was the high school kind of best friend: we ran track together and had the same class schedule, but we competed constantly, and the way she cracked her wrists in BC Calc had started to annoy the shit out of me. I told her, though, because I never told people things, and it seemed like the time. She said shit, she didn't know what to say, but she was there, and I said yeah it was shit, and thanks. There was some silence. The date was bad; I left in the middle to walk around the night and cry with my brother. When I came back there was more silence.

In reverie, I finish my coffee, rinse out the cup and put it in the dishwasher in the hope of maintaining household harmony. I could never understand how I could become so many things she wanted and still my mom found reasons to yell at me. Maybe by this point it has become a habit, like when she runs her fingers through the growing gray patch in her hair, or rests her hands on her ample stomach. I sometimes think that my brother prepared her to be upset with her children, and inertia rolled her rage through to me. But I have rabbit holes, spots where I bury myself and breathe and pretend I'm away. The pantry is one, my room another, so I pull my door tight, just like I used to, to hide from the house. I leave a sweat print of my back on the yoga mat and while away the day, missing the years when I could run away. Even then, though, no matter what my mileage, no matter how fast my times, I looped back home every time. My feet carried me faithfully away, but led me ever homewards.

It is seven now, and I can hear rage through the clanging of pans and clunking of pots placed too heavily on the counter. I descend the stairs I chronically fell down as a child, fearing the guilt that greets me, dreading the misplaced yells and the echoing silence. We wade through the animosity, though, my mom and I; I crush the garlic mince the onions stir the lentils and we are amicable again. She says thank you, that was all I had to do, it's better when we work together. I nod. And my dad walks in and asks if dinner is ready, and exasperation blows back in on the wind he brings through the door. No, it won't be ready for another fifteen minutes, my mom says, eyes on the burners. My father stands there, asks if there is anything he can do to help, the way he never used to before he forgot who he was, and she says no, thank you, we have it under control.

He cannot do much to help, truthfully. He still knows how to open the refrigerator, but he cannot identify anything in it, not even the things at the front, not even the ketchup. He knows how to walk to the bottom of the street and back, but he has taken to warning neighbors about police visits and dinner parties with the Beatles, so my mom tries to rein him in. Sometimes he is gone for a long time, and we wonder if he forgot the two hundred meter walk home. But he will show up, winded from the small hill, and ring the doorbell of the open front door, and we will let him in.

Dinner in our family was always performative, a dance of etiquette, slip-ups, remonstrances, rebellion, debates, and silence. Now it has morphed into bizarro-dinner, a patchwork of stilted conversation and interrogation as my father constantly tries to find out with whom he is sitting, where they go to school, and what they do there. The only times I see my dad as I remember him are when either my brother or I scrounge something funny to say. When my father laughs, it sounds the same; there is almost energy again in his ever-feebling frame, and I remember when there was awareness and appreciation for wit behind that sound. It used to feel like an achievement when I could get him to laugh. Now it rings like a reminder of all that has fled from him.

Dinner wraps up and my brother and I clear. It used to be everyone for themselves, and my dad would remind us to “scrape and rinse and put it [our dishes] in the d.w. [the dishwasher],” but now he does not remember that we used plates and he does not know where the dishwasher is. So Josiah and I scrape and rinse and load the d.w., and disperse throughout our small house. I sit in the kitchen because I have tired of my room. Today he cannot recall how to turn on the television, so my father comes to join me.

“Hey dad, what’s up?” I ask to cut short his stare.

“I was just thinking about getting some dessert.” He pulls ice cream out of the freezer and begins eating it out of the carton. “Are you Lila?”

Sometimes after it has been repeated incessantly in the recent past, he can get a grip on my name. “Yes.” We go through the rigmarole, the line of questions that holds him in time like a slipping anchor, as he makes his way through the butter pecan. He stands, abruptly, informs me that he is going to bed now, but he wishes me goodnight. Thank you, I say, goodnight. And then he walks over to my side of the table, and I shrink into myself as he leans over to give me a hug. It is a weak hug that I return to him.

“I hope you know that I love you,” he says, looking down at me, his shaking hand on my shoulder.

“I do.” And I look down, as I always do, because I have been trying to be honest, and I cannot tell if I am lying when I say, “I love you too.” And he shuffles out of the room as I pick up the ice cream he left melting on the table. I sit for a moment more in the dim quiet of the kitchen, wondering when I will follow him out.



Water Colors  
Anika Khakoo



## A Little Off the Top Mel Hornyak

**[Trigger warning: self-harm, suicide]**

Raymond had never cut his hair until he got to college.

This wasn't for lack of trying – it seemed like as soon as he could hold safety scissors, they were being wrestled away from him before they could close around a single dark curl. He remembered a time in seventh grade when the girl who sat behind him in Algebra began cutting off small amounts out of boredom, just a few strands every class. He had pretended not to notice, because even then he felt like it fell around his face and hid him from everyone who looked at him.

When his mother found out, she was furious, marching him to the school's superintendent and making him file a report of physical bullying. He hadn't seen the girl in his Algebra class after that. His mother hadn't even let him fix the jagged ends where her inexpert scissors had left it uneven. The way his mother's eyes wrinkled at the edges as she rubbed his shorn locks through her fingers made him stop asking for a haircut for years afterwards, even when he stared into the mirror at night and wondered why he felt like he had to remove either his hair or his entire skin.

Therefore, when he went off to college, the first thing he did was schedule an appointment with the barber. He tried to act as though he knew exactly what he was doing, as though he'd been getting his hair cut all his life. The knee-length braid gave him away pretty quickly, as well as the fact that he sat down confidently in the chair without realizing he had to sign in first. He would never forget that first, dangerous snip, the metallic rasp of the barber's scissors that seemed to take place somewhere inside his head. He thought, watching his face take shape in the mirror, that it must be something like what David saw as Michelangelo carved him from that block of marble – it felt like he had been waiting inside that cloud of hair his entire life, and with each cut he was being excavated piece by piece.

His mother hated it, but there was nothing much she could do about it now. She asked for the braid he had cut, which he was more than happy to hand over. When he came home for holidays they could still laugh and joke over a meal. But after a few glasses of wine, his mother's expression would change, her eyes tracing his face with the same look she gave meat at the grocery store when she thought the butcher was shortchanging her. He knew what would come next, and had to prevent himself from mouthing the words along with her – “A shame. A damn shame.”

Despite all that, he believed his life was fine. A week with his family here or there was nothing compared to his life at college. He declaimed poetry by Sappho and Catullus, wearing a midnight blue suit that flashed violet in the harsh spotlights of the student

theater. He spent hours on the lowest floor of the library, walking between stacks of books, imagining that each spine he touched was the hand of the author who wrote it. The six-month lending limit dazzled him, and his tiny dorm room began to generate a collection of volumes far beyond its capacity. He went out on Thursday nights, and danced with men and women with teeth that glowed in the blacklight, who ran their hands through his hair and told him he was handsome. He stayed up until dawn arguing philosophy with his roommates over a bottle of cheap bitter wine, and went to bed with anger and alcohol boiling in his stomach but a deeper contentment than he had ever known suffusing his heart. He felt emotions he had only read about in books; the highest flights of love and lust, the depths of despair, the constant worry about whether he was becoming all he was supposed to be.

And then, of course, the virus happened.

People said it came from China. People said it came from eating bats, and joked about the unfortunate creature that had been found in the old lecture hall weeks before. People said it would never reach them out here, or said that everyone already had it, or said one of the least popular professors had gotten it from licking a subway pole. The evening the dean sent out the email, there were almost riots. Students smashed bottles in the streets, threw parties in their dorms despite the warnings, ran up and down the main drag of campus tearing down posters and laughing with their friends so they wouldn't scream.

Raymond walked out to the middle of the football field and lay down, looking up at the sky that he wouldn't be able to see from the suburbs where his mother lived. He knew the stars by heart – Sirius, above the neuroscience building, and Arcturus by the bandstand, and Vega and Altair glimmering on either side of the Milky Way. A meteor or two darted across the void, but he had no patience for shooting stars. No wishes would save him from this; no amount of drinking or rabble-rousing would cover up the loss that filled him in pulses, turning his body alternately hot and cold.

He packed up his clothing – button-down shirts and khakis and tight black jeans and blazers. The skirts he packed last, even though they had been crumpled at the bottom of his dresser all semester. Yes, classes would continue, the dean reassured them, but they simply couldn't stay on campus for their own safety. This virus could kill people, you know. He joked with his friends that he'd rather be dead on campus than alive in Virginia. He wasn't entirely sure what he was joking about.

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Raymond spent his first week home organizing his room. There was something unsettling about the crosses nailed to the walls, the certificate of his baptism gathering dust in the window, the piles of old school papers and textbooks he no longer used. It started with merely clearing off his desk, but soon he began to strip the space of clutter like a madman. His mother lingered in the door to his room sometimes, watching with

slitted eyes to make sure he didn't throw away anything "important." Each morning he would stumble into the kitchen to find something he had tried to toss last night – a photo of him as a kid, an old pink hair tie with lace roses – left accusingly on his place at the table, like the offerings of a particularly malevolent cat. Arguments flared up, but died just as quickly, as the news crept in around the locked doors and shuttered windows:

A thousand dead. Three thousand. Non-essential businesses are closing indefinitely. Citizens outside without a reason can be charged with a misdemeanor.

His world grew smaller and smaller, limited to the friends he had made in high school, then to nobody but himself and his mother, locked away in his house while the sun rose and set outside and the virus stalked the streets.

And then, of course, there was the matter of his hair.

He noticed it barely a few days after he got back: his hair was beginning to grow far faster than it did at college. Before, he could go months between haircuts, but now it was already down to his eyebrows. He decided to measure it to make sure, holding out the same piece day after day and writing it down in his notebook. His mother caught him once and laughed.

"It's not going to grow out any faster, you know," she said smugly. "I told you you'd regret that ugly crew cut."

He tried to ignore her. The numbers in his notebook didn't make sense; sometimes they were larger, sometimes they were smaller. They certainly didn't indicate what he could see with his own two eyes: that his hair was becoming a thicket, curling out around his head in unruly clumps that he could almost hear getting longer anytime he wasn't looking. Soon, he really could hear it, a constant, raspy hum like a recording he had once heard of red blood cells passing through a vein. He put on music to drown it out, but sometimes it kept him up long into the night.

Classes started again. That was good; it meant he could wear his button-down shirts sometimes, because his mother wouldn't bother him while he was in class, and it gave him something to do other than try to find corners of his room that hadn't already been cleaned to the bare wood. Besides, he could see himself in his computer's camera, and his hair didn't make any noise while he was watching it. It was only when it was unobserved that it started to grow. His English professor sent him a very kind but unhelpful email about how intently he watched the screen without paying much attention in class, and suggested that perhaps blocking certain websites during class time would help. He began to place a mirror behind his computer, so that even when there wasn't a class going on he could watch his hair. And surely enough, the numbers in his notebook began to level off. He was thrilled by this scientific discovery – as far as

he knew, nobody else had found that hair growth was influenced by observation! It was fascinating, maybe even publishable. He began entering his data into a spreadsheet, making graphs and calculating p values.

At night, he dreamt about the hair. In his nightmares, it became snakes, biting onto his ears and his throat, whispering in the voice his mother had after too many glasses of wine. They twined themselves into his eye sockets and down his windpipe, chittering and laughing as they began to suck his blood, sending it in rivulets down the inside of his skull until he was drowning in his own viscera. Sometimes he woke up from those dreams already standing in the bathroom, hands bloody from picking apart a razor to get at the sharp blade inside. When his mother asked about the marks, he told her he was washing his hands too much, and she advised him to use cold water instead of hot.

He worked on papers for his classes, and tried to study, but it felt like time had become unmoored from the days it governed. He worked for thirty minutes at eight o'clock and looked up and it was midnight. His nightly dinners with his mother became shorter and less violent; not because there were fewer things to fight about, but because her double shifts at the emergency room sucked the energy out of her, and he couldn't bring himself to care about the criticisms she muttered enough to summon anything but exhausted denial. He couldn't talk to her about his hair; he knew what she would say – "Just let it grow out! Who knows, maybe you'll like it."

After a few weeks of classes, the numbers in his second notebook started to go up again. His hair was brushing his collar now, and almost hid his ears. He was frustrated – wasn't he watching it well enough? He paged through his notebook, scribbling out entire columns when they refused to make sense. He began measuring it more frequently, whenever he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. Using this constant monitoring, he soon found the culprit – on average, the morning numbers were no different from the night numbers, but suddenly jumped almost a full quarter-inch the next morning. It must be growing at night, when nobody could see it.

He wished, not for the first time, that he was still at college and could get someone he had met at those neon-tinted parties to hold him tight at night and watch his hair. Trapped in isolation, he had to make do with himself. He set alarms on his phone for every thirty minutes from 10:00 PM until 6:00 AM. It took some practice to start falling asleep with his headphones on so he wouldn't wake up his mother, and they still came off sometimes and the numbers would jump again, but after a while it became a comfortable routine – a half hour nap, half an hour of watching himself in the mirror, staring at the twisting strands and making sure they didn't move.

He got another email from his English professor, asking him about an essay he had missed. He knew why it was missing; it was due the night after his hair had grown another half inch in less than 24 hours. He thought about telling her about his discovery, but knew that she would probably tell one of the other professors. Then that

professor would want to publish it under his own name, with Raymond as some data monkey in the footnotes. Instead, he apologized, citing the virus and the situation, and sent it in a few days later with extra sources to make up for the delay.

Soon, he learned that it was easier to just avoid sleeping instead of trying to get up every thirty minutes to watch his hair. It wasn't hard; he would sit in a hard-backed chair, nails digging into his palms and his lights on as bright as they could go as he stared into the mirror, watching the window behind him change from sunset to sunrise. He stole his sleep in naps after his mom got home, crashing on the couch while she watched television in the evenings, so she could watch his hair instead. She seemed to think it was a bonding moment, and he wasn't about to tell her the real reason, so it worked out as well as he thought it could.

It was during one of these late-night vigils that he decided to cut it for the first time. To hell with what his mother would say, to hell with his inexperience – he couldn't keep living like this, sleeping only an hour or so every day, watching it all night. He begged his mother for a proper set of hair clippers, and uncharacteristically, she gave in and bought him some on the way home from work. Perhaps she, too, saw the wildness in his eyes, and thought that his hair was less important than his grades.

There was nothing liberating about the cut this time; all it did was fill him with a frenzy for more. His first few strokes were wild, uncontrolled, just trying to hack it back into the way it was before. Then, some places were uneven, and he had to go in again and fix them, round out the corners. By the time he was done it was a good deal shorter than it had ever been – but when he rubbed his hands through it, a tingle of satisfaction grew in his palms. That would show it.

For the first time in months, he slept soundly.

The next morning, his mother raised her eyebrows at his new haircut over her morning coffee, but made no remarks. When he went to go measure after breakfast he was horrified. It must have grown an inch – no – two inches! It was almost as long as it had been before he had cut it at all! He held out a piece and tried to measure it, but his hands were shaking so badly he couldn't read the ruler. It didn't matter; he knew what he was seeing. It gleamed like an oil slick, laughing at his helplessness, a malevolent god angered but amused by the fact that he thought he could defy it. He took another chunk in his hands and buzzed it off, but that only seemed to entertain it more, and another piece curled out from behind his ear.

He stared at it. That curl definitely hadn't been there moments before. It was taunting him, bobbing alluringly in the yellow light. Bile and fury rose in his throat. That was it, then- the hair was tormenting him. Of course it could grow while he was watching it. Why had he ever believed otherwise? It just wanted to give him some hope, to pretend that he could control it.



There was only one thing he could do – get rid of it entirely. He switched the shaver for its thinnest blade and began running it back along his head, sending a shower of black filaments onto his shoulders. When he'd done it four or five times, and his head was smooth as a cue ball, he finally lay the razor down, shaking. That would show it who was boss. His hair couldn't grow if there was none left.

The next morning, he didn't even join his mother for breakfast, murmuring an excuse to her astonished face. In the bathroom, he peered into the mirror again, and found a ghastly disappointment – his head was covered in stubble again, a soft black fuzz that was definitely far longer than it should have been. A sickening realization settled in his stomach. His hair would keep growing as long as there were follicles in his scalp.

With a shaky breath, he switched the buzzer for the razor he once used to use to shave his legs. He set it against his scalp, and removed the tiny dots of stubble. Then, he set it again, pressing it deeper with his other hand, and pulled away a layer of skin. It burned as he tried to get a look at it in the mirror, closely inspecting the raw, red strip as blood began to bloom in it and run towards his eyes. Not a single hair left. He set it on another patch of his scalp.

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The next day, his mother woke up later than usual. Her shift at the ER last night had been exhausting, emotionally and physically. They were no longer allowing visitors, and two elderly patients had suffocated to death with only her by their side, checking their oxygen levels and praying they took another breath. She had pushed both of their bodies to the morgue, but it wasn't accepting any more dead, already glutted with patients from earlier in the day. In the end, she had lain Bernice and Harold in the hallway, crossing their arms over their chests in the last small gesture of human kindness she could give them. After a night like that, she always wanted to sleep in, sometimes all day if she could. Sometimes she wanted to sleep forever.

As she padded upstairs, she became aware that the house was a bit different. Usually Raymond put on music as he made breakfast and left her some coffee in the pot and a few scrambled eggs. However, the light wasn't even on in the kitchen, and the radio was silent. Listening closely, she couldn't hear the tinny chatter of his classes either. An inexplicable dread seized her heart, and she passed by the darkened kitchen, creeping upstairs to his room. She knocked gently on his door, then louder, then finally opened it. His computer was dark, headphones stacked neatly next to it, that mirror he had carried up here a few weeks ago reflecting his empty bed. Her pulse jumped to her throat.

"Hello? Where are you? What's going on?" she called, searching the next room down the hall for him. When she lay her hand on the bathroom door, she found it locked fast. She hammered on it, calling out what she thought was his name, unable to hear any

response. She ran outside, praying that she wouldn't find any trace of him below the bathroom window. Thankfully, it was shut tight, but the light remained on. She called up towards it until the neighbors came outside, but there was no answer.

The policeman took over an hour to arrive. He'd been inundated with calls since the virus had hit – domestic abuse was skyrocketing, with everyone trapped inside their homes. He assumed this hysterical woman was more of the same, and looked at her with narrowed eyes that implied he had heard it all before. He listened to her story, knocked at the bathroom door himself, and finally grabbed a screwdriver out of his trunk and took off the doorknob.

The policeman slipped on something as he walked in – a thin red strip, spotted with microscopic black hair. There was a headless man kneeling before the mirror – no, not exactly headless. The head was there, once the forensic team gathered it all up. Here was half an eye, there was a sliver of nose, there was a fragment of ear, carved into fillets thinner than microscope slides, so thin you could see through them when you held them up to the light. The poor kid's mother eventually had to be banished from the scene, tugging at the policemen's uniforms as they tried to photograph the room.

"I bought the clippers!" she cried, unable to tear her eyes from the scene. "I just thought she wanted to take a little off the top!"



## The Fly

Natalia Arbelaez Solano

There is a fly in my room tonight. Its small black body buzzes frantically around the room, hopelessly looking for escape, but the windows are covered with curtains and the door is closed. It gravitates to a small lamp on my nightstand, an instinctual memory of sunlight, and flies under the lampshade, its softened silhouette zooming in and out. In its frenzy, it cannot see the three fly corpses on my carpet that I haven't bothered to clean.

Flies always come to my room. With two windows that provide the most sunlight in the house, my room is a perfect place for life (plants always thrive here) but also a false hope for life. I chose my room because of my love for sunlight.

It's almost 1:00 am. When I'm asleep, will the fly walk over my face? I imagine myself, unaware of its little dirty legs on my eyelids, on my lips. "Sleep is the cousin of death": In the morning, I am alive but the fly is faintly stirring on the carpet, and then completely still...

When it's my time, I'd like to die in the morning too. That way, I can see the sun once more, feel its gentle rays through the window welcoming me into another day. They say at the end all you have is memories, but I don't want to see a lamp to remember the sun.

## IX-I-I Brittani Telfair

*What's your emergency?* It's a room in a townhouse. This was all farmland once, all of it—I couldn't tell you what they grew. Soy, corn, cattle, it doesn't make a difference. It was all razed to make room for malls and apartments. What about the forest, further out? That's being cut down too, to make room for more malls and apartments. If you don't want to go to Tom Leonard's, you can keep driving and go to the shopping center with Trader Joe's and Five Below and Ulta. If you don't want to go to Trader Joe's, you can go up the street to Wegman's and Cabela and Brazil Texas Steakhouse. It's a capitalist dreamland. You can see the back of the Trader Joe's from his townhouse. You can walk to it too, if you're fine with strolling by the dumpster and smoking employees on break. Most people living around here just drive.

*Ma'am, what's going on?* His townhouse faces the fountain. It's an artificial fountain in an artificial lake, across from a busy intersection where an accident happens at least twice a month because people are in such a rush here. He would always be in such a rush. Pick me up from my house, take the highway, and soon enough he'd be sticking his key into the lock, *click*, open. The dog would come to the top of the stairs to yowl at me—not the little aloof one, but the big sensitive one. It would sound like he was singing or screaming, and he would wag his tail so hard his entire back end went side to side with it. Once we got up the stairs the dog would let me pat his head and then curl up in a gray upholstered armchair next to the window and to the side of the television. The television was half as big as the wall. *Hot Fuzz*: British buddy cop movie/comedy murder mystery. *The Road to El Dorado*: cartoon about colonialism with an ill-concealed blowjob scene. *Hartless*: Kevin Hart's Netflix comedy special, before or after he said whatever career-ending thing you're wondering about. *Painting with Bob Ross*: after I said I needed a break from Neil deGrasse Tyson talking about astrophysics. He always picked what to watch, though he asked me first. I didn't have much of an opinion.

*Ma'am, I'm sorry, I don't understand.* There was a mirror on the wall parallel to the television. Circular. I looked in it once and thought, "*Who is that?*" I was still sitting on the sofa, gray and covered with the Pier Imports throw pillows middle-aged women can't get enough of. The sofa was an L-shape but not bulky. The entire room was shades of gray, cream, and blue: silver frame on the mirror, gray walls, cream and blue rug, blue wall baubles. You could see the entryway to the kitchen. Once he bridal-style picked me up, started jogging, and rammed my head straight into that wall. Even while mildly concussed, I was enchanted by how *nice* the living room was. How *modern*. There was the upstairs-upstairs floor, with all the bedrooms and his lizard's terrarium, but he only took me up there once. To look and then go back downstairs-upstairs. I was fine with that. The sofa was comfortable. I lived in a fixer-upper no one in my family had the motivation to fix up. Silver vases and worthless throw pillows were satisfying in comparison.

*Ma'am, this is an emergency number.* He had thumbs like Megan Fox. He said I was the only person, other than him, who was allowed to touch his hair. I thought that it was gelled stupid high and that pompadours only worked on greasers in the movies, but I didn't say that. I mostly listened. He liked his car and swapping out girlfriends as often as he had to fill up the tank. He wanted to be an Air Force pilot, but he was too short and his vision wasn't good enough. He said getting B's showed that he was stupid. He made jokes about not having a father and told me about how his mother broke plates and went feral some nights because of the madness of being abandoned with two kids: once she even started beating "the shit out of" him while he was driving. A different time, his mother made us dinner and served me a plate of roasted potatoes and asparagus since I was a vegetarian. We made conversation about the summer programs I'd participated in and my college search and extracurriculars. He chewed his steak and waited for her to go to bed.

*I'm going to have to hang up soon. Other people need to use this line.* Have you ever read *Their Eyes Were Watching God*? In the beginning, Zora Neale Hurston says women forget in order to keep living. Hang up. I can't tell you what happened in the room. I don't even remember. There's a word in German, *vergessenzeit*, for a situation you don't live in while it's happening, or even after. It's a crystalline moment of pain that's so surreal the brain folds it into halves and then quarters and then sixteenths and then thirty-secondths until it's so small that you can trick yourself into thinking it never even happened. *Vergessenzeit*. I made that word up. I don't speak German. *Vergessenzeit*. I made him up. *Vergessenzeit*. The living room never existed. *Vergessenzeit*. The townhouse didn't either. *Vergessenzeit*. It's all still farmland. *Vergessenzeit*. *Vergessenzeit*. *Vergessenzeit*.

## Meet the Contributors

**Jennifer Hsia** is COS major '21 from Taiwan who's passionate about supporting women in STEM. She was introduced to this lit review by her lovely friend Isabel Griffith-Gorgati '21!

**Reb Ngu** graduated in 2020 with a major in English and certificate in Ethnographic Studies. She is spending the summer in New York City with her family, reading books for pleasure again, and finally learning how to drive.

**Cole Vandenberg** '24 hopes to study English with a certificate in Creative Writing. Social distancing has given him the chance to get back in touch with creative writing through the Writing About Family workshops. He is excited to share his work and looks forward to the rest of his time in the Princeton English community!

**Sophia Marusic** is a senior in the English department. She is currently working on a collection of short fiction for her thesis, but her writing can also be found in the increasingly personal captions of Poetry@Princeton Instagram posts (@princetonpoetry).

**Abby Spare** graduated as Class of 2020 in the English Department, with minors in European Cultural Studies, Theater, and Music Theater. Over the summer before she starts working at a hedge fund administration firm, she's been catching up with all of the books sitting on her bookshelf and participating in the English Department's book club and the Writing About Family workshop. It's really given her the opportunity to return to fiction writing, after solely writing plays over the past few years. She thanks everyone for reading her work!

**Cassandra James** '23 is a prospective English major from Celebration, Florida. She grew up in a family of Greeks, Italians, and Colombians, which means she had to tell stories to survive. Her dream life involves writing novels and traveling the world, preferably at the same time.

**Aditi Desai** is a first-year student (Class of 2024) hoping to pursue Neuroscience and Creative Writing. She loved participating in the English Department's Summer Outreach programs and finding a community of writers, listeners, and communicators! She's looking forward to taking Creative Writing and English courses at Princeton.

**Lila Harmar** is a member of the Class of 2022 in the Neuroscience Department. Though not a member of the English Department, she loves to write and has been spurred to write more after taking the Humanities Sequence and LCA creative writing classes.

**Anika Khakoo** is an Art & Archaeology Major (Art History track) from the Bay Area in the Class of 2023. Her favorite memory with the English Department is the class she

took freshman fall on 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Fiction. The book list was incredible, and she felt like it gave her exposure to a number of authors she's continued to love and read for pleasure.

**Mel Hornyak '23** plans to study either Psychology or English (she took Science and Literature this year and loved it!) She writes for *Figments* and *Tiger Magazine* as well, so if you like her story feel free to check out those publications too!

**Natalia Arbelaez Solano** is a junior in the Comparative Literature Department. Over the summer, she participated in the English Department's Writing about Family workshops, and she is so excited to share that work with you!

**Brittani Telfair** is a member of the class of 2022 from Richmond, VA. She is majoring in the School of Public and International Affairs and hopes to pursue a certificate in Creative Writing. She is the treasurer of Songline Slam Poetry.