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Editor's Note

“I feel so isolated... but I still don't want to do anything.” I joked recently that this was the motto of quite a few of my colleagues, including myself. We started the Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literature program together in 2020. Many of us did not meet in person until a year later. Instead, we came to know each other through Zoom boxes, trying to offer support in an unstable online space, holding happy hours in those squares that sometimes froze, sometimes disappeared if someone was booted off WiFi. I taught my first class to 19 squares filled with faces. Gradually, throughout the course of the semester—when it was clear many of those faces were just so tired of performing on-screen—I gave students the option of turning off their cameras. I didn't like it, either. I was faced with a white glowing dot indicating my camera was on, staring back at me as I awkwardly tried to follow Zoom “protocol” and make eye contact with the camera, rather than give into my inclination to watch the disembodied voices on my screen. More and more black boxes with students' names appeared while their faces disappeared, and I understood. I was taking classes on Zoom, too, ending up with headaches and fatigue while trying to keep up the performance of “achieving student.”

I too started my training at UNC in 2020, but in medicine. I took lectures from my bedroom and microbiology lab in my kitchen. I had one in-person doctoring class, where we weren't allowed to examine each other's heads or faces for fear of illness. The only other time we saw each other was in the anatomy lab, introducing ourselves awkwardly over donors' bodies, who graciously let themselves be our teachers. We weren't allowed to shadow in the hospital, and yet we were told we were “healthcare providers” who needed to be back quarantining on Christmas day so that we could be safe to return to the lab. It was continuously disorienting, trying to figure out how to live amidst something I never imagined I'd see in my lifetime. Learning medicine without the sight or touch of other people's bodies; how could this be real? When vaccines were finally available, and I had the privilege of vaccinating older generations proudly showing their polio scars—it was the first time I felt connected to the reason I pursued medicine.

It was isolation: bodies told to quarantine. Bodies told that any contact would result in illness. Yet bodies still asked to be on camera and “on,” when all we wanted to do was collapse, cry, and be near one another. To see flesh, and not a computerized simulacrum of our friends and family. We wanted out.

Three years later, there is some freedom to be out, but the strain of isolation remains. This issue of *Iris*—an art and literary journal which calls the University of North Carolina School of Medicine its home—is dedicated to exploring the COVID pandemic and, in many ways, the resulting isolation. It's truly difficult to separate the two. Yet, across the space of words and pages, we have found connections to the stories and poetry shared herein. We have found we are not alone in our feelings of despair, anger, anxiety, and even hope. Hope that out of the isolation will grow stronger communities. It is our wish that this issue of *Iris* will offer such a community to our readers.

– *Mindy Buchanan-King & Cambray Smith for the Editors of Iris: the art and literary journal*