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PRISCILLA JOLLY

Skins, Surfaces, and Other Worlds

It was around the kitchen table—the one that my mother wanted to throw away because it was too old, the one under which old dried coconuts awaited to be split open—that I told my mother about those times when my skin felt like it had insects crawling all over it, phantom frissons for which there were no causes. My brother, who was sitting at the table next to both of us, expressed his doubts whether sane people had such experiences.

My adolescence was marked by my body's oversensitivity to its environment, which often manifested on my skin. A memorable incident is how the soles of both my feet became golden gooey pus-filled cushions which I couldn't set down on the ground. I had to be picked up and carried; my grandfather carried me to the dermatologist's where I hated how people stared at my feet. We were told that it was some kind of allergic reaction. After taking the prescribed pills, I watched as the skin on my feet knit itself back again, the wounds closing in on themselves, skin withdrawing into itself, little collapsing suns which gradually vanished. Because of the scars, my right foot looks as though someone took a half-moon shaped bite from one side of my foot. Eventually, doctors would cut a small portion of my skin from my right foot for a biopsy and tell me that I had eczema.

One of my childhood rituals was going to see allergy specialists and famous dermatologists with my mother. We took buses to different cities, waited in lines to have my feet looked at. To calm my skin, one dermatologist recommended immersing my feet in hot water with salt, which my mother insisted on making me do all through my adolescence—steaming water in a bright orange basin. I would hover my feet over the hot water, my skin appalled at the heat, and then plunge my feet straight in. I sat with my feet in hot water until they pruned. Afterwards, I would apply the ointments prescribed by the dermatologist, who also recommended that I wrap my feet in plastic to lighten the scars. So, for a time, I went to bed with plastic crinkling whenever I moved my feet. To this day, when I stand under extra-hot showers my partner jokes about my heat-resistant skin. Little does he know about the training I've had to subjecting my skin to heat throughout my adolescence.

My mother says that my agitated, itchy skin, constantly calling out for attention, came to me through my grandmother whose eczema had discoloured her feet so much that the skin looked black instead of brown. My grandmother experimented with all kinds of medications; the most memorable of these phases was when she tried naturopathy, which involved treks to the neighbour's yard where she picked leaves from the lone wood apple tree. The leaves went into the blender and my grandmother drank the bright green juice. She would scratch her skin

because of how itchy it was, but she would slap my hand away when she caught me doing the same.

The soles of my feet were especially alive, always itchy. I used whatever I could find to scratch the itch, whether it be sharp edges of furniture, old blunt knives, and unsharpened pencils. One of my biggest fears remains that I'd be like the woman who scratched her way into her skull, just that I'd burrow deep into my feet to see how deep the itch runs. Every time my skin itches, it feels as though there is an animus that moves under the skin, just beyond my reach. It seems natural to wonder whether I'll be able to get ahold of whatever animates my skin if I went deep enough. Right now, on my desk, there is a plastic spoon with a tapered end that came with my takeaway order; it has just the right sharpness to scratch my feet. The itch is also the reason why I obsessively cut my nails, with a frequency that others sometimes find alarming. Once, I cut my nails too close and for the rest of the week it felt as though my middle finger had developed a throbbing heart which pumped pain whenever I moved the finger. At the clinic, the doctor told me my finger was infected and that this was common when people cut their nails too close. He asked if I'd cut my nails recently and I lied, saying no.

Along the years, the itch didn't stay in my foot; it moved into my palms and other places on my skin, marked by flare-ups and rashes. As a result of my skin's proclivities, I dismissed the first few times I woke up with itchy arms in my new studio apartment as something regular. I thought I was being paranoid about insects crawling on my skin. Then a friend spoke to me about how her apartment had a bedbug infestation and how she woke up with bites. I had briefly entertained the possibility of bedbugs, which I had dismissed earlier because my partner slept in the same bed and was itch free, further strengthening the case for this being just another instance of my skin acting up. Internet forums would later tell me that different people react to bites in different ways, with some people not experiencing anything at all. Dismissing my itchy arms in the mornings was my first mistake, because when I lifted my bedcovers to check, I found telling evidence of bedbugs in the seams.

It was hard for me to find an apartment; I had moved to Canada from a different country, hence had neither references nor a credit history. Anxious about finding a place before the term began, I said yes to the first place that I saw after responding to a Kijiji ad. My landlord accepted rent in cash; there was no lease, though I was assured that I would not be kicked out. After I found the bedbugs, I bagged everything up and then called the landlord, who said I'd have to wait for a few days for the exterminator. Very quickly, my bed, which was comforting to burrow into in the dead of winter, became an object of fear. I started sleeping on the couch instead. The forums would tell me that this was my second mistake, because by moving I took the bugs with me to the couch as well. As a result, despite moving to the couch, I was still waking up with itchy arms and an itchy neck, but in an ironic twist, never my feet. In the meantime, I made multiple trips to the laundry, with quarters clinking in my pocket. I put my clothes in the dryer for an hour, and then bagged them in black garbage bags.

As I waited for the exterminator, I went on Internet forums, which led me down several rabbit holes. Someone posted that rubbing alcohol was an excellent method to prevent bedbug bites.

The moment I read it, I went to the supermarket and bought a bottle of rubbing alcohol, which came with warnings about how the contents of the bottle were flammable and the fumes toxic. Every night, before I wrapped myself like a burrito with a comforter, I put liberal amounts of rubbing alcohol on my exposed skin. The alcohol felt cool against my heated skin; I had to restrain myself from dabbing the alcohol over and over.

Sleeping became difficult because what was previously paranoia had become real: insects could crawl on my skin and drink my blood. I kept imagining swarms of bugs—definitely an exaggeration—waiting for the cover of the dark to come out. I'd once lived in a house with a rat infestation. Each night after going to bed, I'd hear a gnawing sound through the walls, which I imagined was the sound of rats burrowing through concrete. Can rats burrow through concrete? It did not matter; the sound kept me up and I'd kick on the wall in a feeble attempt to make the sound stop. I lay awake thinking about all these; even when I fell asleep, I'd wake in the middle of the night and look all around me with the flashlight on my phone. When I found bugs on the couch, my paranoia returned.

When the exterminator finally came and sprayed the apartment, I was relieved; I closed the page. I unpacked everything from the black garbage bags which had grown into a shapeless mass on my floor. This was my third mistake, if we are still keeping count. A few days after the exterminator's visit, I found another bug. It was time to make those laundry trips again. This time I double bagged all of my clothes, paranoid about holes manifesting in the bags. I called the landlord again, who told me to wait. He said the bugs had probably come over from the adjoining apartment which had a roach and bedbug infestation. While I was at home, I had violent fantasies of torching everything to get rid of the bugs, which thanks to the time I was spending on online forums, I learnt had already been done by someone.

I became afraid of being on the bed and on the couch. The only place I could relax was a plastic chair which had metallic legs. When I went outside, I became obsessed with surfaces: door handles, holding poles on the metro, banisters in the library, and carpeted floors at the university. What was behind all those surfaces? What life went on in those surfaces away from human eyes? It was the dead of winter; snow blanketed the landscape; each time I went outside, I could only think of what was under that white carpet of snow. What marred the impression of whiteness projected by surfaces? My obsession with surfaces also resulted in a hyper-focalization on my skin—skins in general. I wondered whether my brown skin was the thing people noticed about me. In graduate school, I was learning that race wasn't just an epidermal phenomenon, and that it manifests itself in several other ways, but my fixation with skin remained. How pigmented skin serves as one of the first steps of racialization. I've had people come up to me and say, "you speak French so well for an Indian" or a variation of "how do you speak such good English?" phrased as a polite statement. If I put on another skin, will these questions still be asked of me? What skin does one have to don to not explain facets of one's existence?

In Greek mythology, the first of the twelve labours that Hercules undertakes is the killing of the Nemean lion. Hercules shoots the lion with his arrows, only to realize that the lion's skin is

impermeable as the arrows bounce back. He eventually strangles the lion to death. Afterwards, Hercules tries to skin the lion, but his knife fails to cut the skin. Athena helps Hercules by suggesting that he use one of the lion's claws to skin it. He succeeds and dons the lion's pelt, making him impervious to everything, the second skin sealing his edges. Can donning another skin solidify one's edges? A graduate seminar I was part of would also teach me that impervious edges of the body were a fiction; they didn't exist. Despite learning all this and also about interspecies companionship, every night as I went to bed, I wished for the Nemean lion's pelt to cloak myself with. I waited for the second visit from the exterminator, while constantly checking the traps set by the exterminator in the apartment, with my heart plummeting each time I found bugs in the traps. I was planning to move from the place before the bedbug crisis and had already found an apartment in a different part of the city. I moved with all my belongings in black garbage bags.

The first few days after my move, I was still paranoid about the bugs coming with me. My obsession with surfaces remained, or rather my fear of surfaces. When I took the public transport, I couldn't put my backpack down on the floor. I wouldn't put it down on the carpeted floor of the room where graduate seminars were held. When I came home, I left my backpack on cold tile, not the wooden floor. Any pricks or tingling of my skin and black flecks on the floor triggered a new wave of anxiety. I have since then stopped scrutinizing the specks on the floor, but I still cannot put my backpack down in public places. My closet remains separated between inside/outside clothes and clean/contaminated clothes. My skin remains the same, calling out with its multiple itches. The pandemic has further heightened my fixation with surfaces, teeming microworlds that can so easily intersect with our own with unpredictable results, with the human left changed in the wake of that encounter. I do not have the wherewithal to speculate what the other side of this encounter looks like. What is it like to be a bedbug or the coronavirus?

I want to return to where I began this essay: my childhood home. My mother, who maintains that my skin, with its numerous protestations at unknown factors in the environment, connects me and grandmother, is also connected to me through a different set of allergies. My mother has a serious respiratory allergy, while mine is a milder form of the same with perennial sneezing, sniffing, and a runny nose. The antihistamines that I am constantly prescribed to calm my skin's itch also calms my allergy symptoms. Perhaps both these inheritances are not as separate as my mother would like to believe. They are all, after all, surfaces waiting to collide with each other, producing strange results.

PRISCILLA JOLLY is a doctoral student at Concordia University. She enjoys reading about strange environments and how humans are altered by different landscapes. She also likes learning new languages.