

The Woman with No Skin

by Sarah Layden

Far away or up close, she appeared just like anyone else, a young woman with pale arms and legs and a milk-face unblemished by a single freckle or pimple or blotch. Only when she turned a certain way did it become clear that what rested atop her muscle and bone was not skin, but a kind of permeable membrane that anything could pass through. She could not sit outside in spring, for the pollen would swirl in the air and attach itself to her very insides, moving in such a way that suggested her body was not even a barrier, that it was barely there at all.

Clothing helped, but sometimes the fibers lodged deep. And she did not want to completely cover herself. She wanted air. She wanted to let the world in. But the problem with the world was that it wanted to be let in all the way.

Her friend was a scientist and designed for her a special eco-friendly brown polymer suit. He had the garment specially fitted, yet it sagged at the waist and suggested the figure of a doughy gingerbread woman. She wore it to the mall. Teenagers with vulture-like scapula asked, "What's with the jumpsuit? Do you, like, drive a racecar?" For once their comments didn't travel directly through cardiac muscle, or wend their way around chutes of gray matter. The words stuck to the suit. The young woman felt cautious elation. She spent free evenings wandering the city in blank bliss. Within weeks, the polymer carried so much text it looked like a newspaper.

Curiously, she wanted to read her body, so she returned to the mall to stand before the three-way mirrors. She couldn't discern the crowded words stuck to the left shoulder, so she unzipped the suit, just a little, at the neck. Suddenly the flood of voices and words inched inside.

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But she didn't know who was speaking, she didn't know when the words had latched on. She grabbed the zipper, which stuck, so she yanked downward to loosen the teeth. Soon the brown polymer gaped open and she could see the membrane, the un-skin, pummeled by the accumulated gusher of words. An ocean in her ears, like listening to a conch shell attached to headphones with the volume on high. So loud she could hear nothing.

In the mirror she met her own eyes. The suit hung loosely around her waist, the zipper finally freed. Her body a bruise. She held the metal pull-tab lightly between two fingers. She silently asked her reflection a question, then watched and waited to see what she would do.

