

## **Skinned**

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**Author's Note:** "Skinned" is a lyrical essay I wrote for a Creative Nonfiction course at the University of California, Santa Barbara. It was inspired by a childhood photo of my older sister and I which encapsulates my admiration of and dependency on her when we were younger. Weaving together the boundaries between dysphoria, body dysmorphia, and a medicalized approach to womanhood and beauty through a therapy questionnaire, the essay explores the difficulty of becoming a woman after a girlhood spent as another's shadow.

If I had to start with something, I would say our hair. I think it just picks up the sun.



*Q: What do you like about yourself?*

When we were little, you always answered questions for me. The two of us wanted apple juice. We both liked a jillion barrettes stuck in our hair. Womanhood, I thought, must be measured by solitude; afraid of growing up, I tried never to be separate from you.

*A: I like that I have a sister.*

That's good enough for me.

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If I was handed a ball of clay, I could carve out my entire face like those blind artists do. I'd drag the skin below my chin up into my cheek, flip the same piece of leather neatly over my lips. Then split and sandwich the halves together like two dead stingrays. It's the ease that comes

with practice, with touching skin, picking it to pieces; reading braille in nineteen fissures spread out across a forehead.

(My face is covered in gullies, too dry to mend themselves proportionally. There are pink, wormy things hiding in my eyebrows. Tight little balls held beneath the skin that I can roll between my fingers like nonpareils.)

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*Q: Where do you feel shame?*

The skin itself is a fraction of my problems.

First is this place, sitting double-cross-legged, twisted against myself on the blue loveseat in the medical office. I tangle my hair tie around my wrist until it snaps in half.

Minutes before, the therapist handed me a card with the word SHAME tattooed in the middle as if I could peel the letters off the paper and stick them somewhere against me, but I didn't know quite where to put them. There are too many places, and it's a placeless feeling.

One is my chest. An integral part of womanhood, but it feels like an insult to my body. The thought, I suppose, of always holding my own skin—never trailing behind it—used to be a comfort, but now it's erupted forward without me, making room for itself. Like two tiny pregnancies I didn't consent to.

(The first time I shopped for a bra, trailing after you, I didn't need it. I can still stroke the hollow of my sternum, touch a pocket of remembrance up my shirt sleeve. The lady held my arms up, took one look and shook her head. *Flat as a ribbon*, ninety pounds of pure skeleton, with hip bones like soda tabs.)

I guess I'll write down:

*A: The Macy's dressing room.*

How my skin hangs differently. I scowl at the mirrors in there and these meaningless editions, juggling twenty-seven options above the item limit.

At home, with the lights off, I dug out a tape measure and wrapped it around my middle, pressing the edge into the skin for optimum tightness and pronouncing all the fat I didn't think I had. On the laptop by my bed, a speechless woman mouthed directions to *straighten the band, cover the nipples*. Upright, bent over, lying on the carpet where they melted back in, I demeaned myself with evolution's defining asset. I wrote the combinations on a paper scrap, then threw it out when I reached the store. Sticking to generalizations (*small*), I combed my hair over the sides of my face, trying to disguise the humiliation. The more time I took, the more store attendants might notice that somewhere under my clothing, I was hiding a body.

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*Q: Do you compare your body to others?*

Does anyone not? I was born ten pounds heavy, and the nurse thought I would be *big (fat) but look how that turned out*. You were small, premature, making room for me. They thought you'd be tiny. What should I make of that?

(When I was fifteen and on the tennis team, I could smooth my hands over my entire torso and feel it cave inward, never out. The tank top was skin flat, holding nothing down. My legs dropped out of the skirt like two chewed popsicle sticks. When I sprinted for the ball, nothing shook. I liked how I didn't fit a shirt. How I could let it slide off.)

I like desexing and forgetting myself. I feel like I can take my skin back. Now that I cover it all with a jacket, you say I'm dressing up to hide but I'm not—I'm trying to let my better self out. Press everything back in until my skin rests against my bones, against all the liquids mixing and boiling in me. To be the flat little sister, not the fat little baby, what the laws of nature had always intended me to be.

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The therapist asks if we look alike. Maybe I'm talking about you too much. I'm taller by a good four inches, and my cheeks pillow out when I smile while yours stay intact. I have nineteen fissures. You only have one.

But in the right light at the right time, when we're walking together and that proximity, that lack of absence, makes me feel a fraction good about myself, our eyes are the same color as our hair, as if the skin is just a casing around the women inside that breaks apart in pieces to let them through. When your boyfriend met me, he said he would've known we were sisters if he saw us on the street. Our hair is so distinct, we could almost be twins. I didn't believe him, but I do like it when I look like you.

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*Q: Do you want a relationship?*

In the seven years since your skin cleared, since you erupted, you've had three boyfriends. I've never kissed, never held a hand. It might be nice to be desired, to be preferred—unwrapped and digested—but that would mean giving my skin away. The skin that's meant to be a casing of me.

You say I could have it if I want it. But I dress to hide myself. I could spend an hour trying to find a shirt to wear, only to hide it with a sweater, or not leave the house at all. Too tight and I feel too feminine. Too loose, and I know I'm an imposter. There's nothing in my closet I could wear on a date.

Should I say:

*A: Yes.*

If I could be tiny again. Scrape them off, or come to terms with it. Maybe I should read about war and depress myself to the point where a body feels like a luxury. Maybe then, even not-quite-beautiful, I could stand to have my skin held by someone else.

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At the end of the questionnaire, the therapist hands me a card to turn over and over, with her name and a phone number. Then a little orange maraca of pills, and a fold-out list of potential complications.

It says my skin might break out, and I might gain weight.

I google the pills at home. Across the Internet, a thousand anxious people are asking each other questions their sisters can't answer, like if taking medication will irrevocably change their personalities. This is the silliest thing I've ever heard. I hope I start becoming someone else quickly. That's been a lifelong dream.

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*Q: What do you like about yourself?*

I like being with you. Feeling more like a sister than a woman, forgetting I have a body when it's accompanied by yours.

You would say that's not an answer. That life is defined by presence. But it's an absent, skinless existence that I crave.

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In the Macy's dressing room, wanting to scrape it all off, I pull my hair to the side to clip the back together, as tightly as possible until it feels like cosplay. I try to think of something distinctly me, that I can keep for myself. I need one single thing to praise.

Still thinking.

But I do like our hair. I think it just picks up the sun.