

THE WOMAN WITH NO SKIN / THE WOMAN WHO WAS A HOUSE

By Sarah Layden

The Woman with No Skin

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.

I adore you. Don't make this any harder. While your piece has obvious merit, it's simply not right for us. Please come in immediately to discuss your blood work. You're stunning. Cruelty-Free Chickens, \$4.99/lb.! We regret to inform you that your brother...

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.

The Woman Who Was a House

There was a woman who was a house.

Not as big as. Was. A house. A vinyl-sided exterior coating her limbs, a sloped roof over her head. Her insides made of wood paneling, framed dusty pictures hanging on the wall of her chest cavity. Clinging to the back of her pelvis, a collection of Civil War-era spoons, family heirlooms.

A projector shone its light from her lungs, powered by her breath. The projector played home movies and vacation slides. Kodachrome past lives. A version of herself that she scarcely remembered, a clapboarded teenager ambling stiffly along the beach on a family vacation. Back in her cottage days. Now she stayed put, having grown into something closer to a Victorian.

Her attic brain stored forgotten things nobody wanted anymore. Wardrobes filled with her parents' mothballed clothes, decades of polyester and lamé. They'd taken the Civil War uniforms. Her little brother Abe's tricycle, unused for decades. Boxes upon boxes, black-markered "Memories" in her mother's scrawl, filled with photo albums, scrapbooks and postcards. All the old newspaper clippings about her, with screamly, bold headlines.

All the lives lived in this house. Her family, sheltered for free and saving on mortgage payments, now come and gone, migrating to the Caribbean without her. "You can't exactly move a house," they said. "Here. Have these spoons."

She'd seen houses moved before: power lines lowered as a loaded flatbed trailer inched down the pike. She imagined the warm-belly feeling of a family still inside, a fire in the fireplace and smoke snaking up the chimney, though of course that would be unsafe. The family would be driving behind the flatbed in a station wagon. The fire would have been extinguished the night before. Her own family had burned many fires in her fireplace, esophageal soot that still rose up, now bitter.

Probably you could move a house on a boat, down to a Caribbean island. Maybe. "But how would we pay for that?" the family asked. "Be reasonable."

"We could sell the spoons," the woman suggested.

"Those spoons have been in the family for years! You should display them in your house with pride!"

And so she did. They clinked when she shifted and settled, reminding her that she was not particularly interested in Civil War history. Her family planned the first underwater reenactments;

Abe had gotten SCUBA certified. The island had no re-enactors, no connection to the Civil War, up until now. Which made the gifting of the spoons all the more poignant.

Home alone, she breathed and ran the projector. Her parents smiling beside the heavy artillery cannon, Mama in her petticoats and Papa in his blue uniform and cap. Abe as a baby, the tickle of him scooting across her wooden floorboards. She saw herself, growing taller each year, adding square footage alongside the flaming red maple. For years her house-proud parents had stepped outside to film her. Now she could only imagine the projector light pouring from her windows, which nobody filmed, nobody saw.