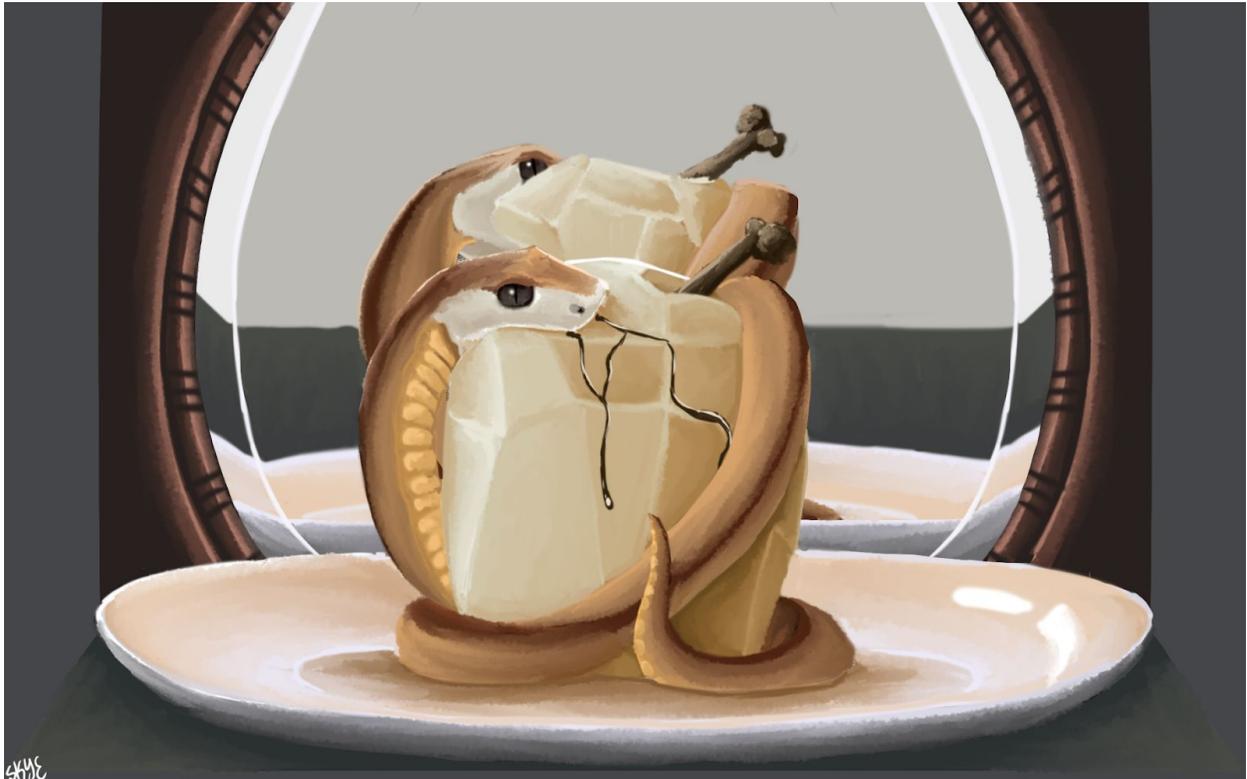


# on skin and its uses

By Lily



This research project was conducted as part of Polygence — an online research academy that introduces secondary school students to cutting-edge research under the guidance of leading academics.

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The dictionary definition of skin is terribly complicated, for a word so commonly used.

I think I can break it down, though.

There are two types of skin in this world: the kind that suits its wearer, and the kind that's meant to be peeled away.

Most people live in skins suited for them. They go about their days comfortably protected, cocooned safely in the arms of something that lightly caresses their flesh as it protects them. Most people go through the world carrying shields instead of burdens.

My skin is meant to be peeled away. It's a grimy film, covering my organs, refusing to let me bare my face to the world. It squeezes at me, blackening and rotting tissue, constricting my chest until I cannot fit another breath into my flattened lungs.

I don't want skin. I want to claw it off, I want to be *out*.

This degenerate desire doesn't make me special. It's hardly a *unique* problem, being trapped in your own skin.

All it makes me is *wrong*.

\*

Sometimes I think about my skin like it's not quite human.

(Like I'm not quite human.)

Maybe my skin is like that of an apple. Some people don't mind it - they take chunks out of the flesh no matter what covers it. Some people won't touch the apple until its skin is peeled away, but once it is open, raw, vulnerable, they will *bite*.

I don't want to be bitten.

Besides, apples always know what's underneath their own skin. There's always *flesh*, white and crunchy and delicious, and a *core*, solid and full of seeds to spit out.

Unfortunately, I do not have the privilege of being an apple.

I think, if I gave into the urge, if I claw off my own skin, underneath a layer of flesh and vein and bone, I will find nothing. A void, empty swirling space, an amorphous shape.

People will look at me, people will look *through* me. People won't see me.

(I want nothing more than to be seen, but I am too afraid to look. Leave me be, comfortably uncomfortable as my air slowly runs out. Leave me be, let me die safe and miserable.)

\*

Sometimes, I wish I was a snake, scraping off skin after skin. Nobody cares when snakes shed their skin as they grow - it's simply part of existing as a snake.

(People make such a strange fuss over the sloughing of human skin.)

I love snakes. I admire how their life is dedicated to the change, the expected shedding and scraping of their skin.

Another one of my favorite things about snakes is that they're terribly, *violently* real. You cannot deny the existence of something that has sunk its fangs into the veins of your ankle, its deadly venom ending your life even as you crush its head under your boot.

It's very important that snakes are real. Realness - undeniable *existence* without apology, is an essential component of being a snake.

Sometimes, I wish a snake would bite me, give me the courage to strip my skin away. The venom would rush through my veins, making my see-through body opaque as it traces through tissue and muscle. It would outline my existence; it would *force* them to see me.

I wish snakes could infect me with their realness.

(I wish I could look in the mirror and *see* my *own* realness, instead of the sickly, watered-down reflection of somebody who has worn a mask too long to remember what's underneath.)

\*

"Your skin is a gift," is what they say to me. "Treasure it."

“Don’t you *dare* decorate the body you will live in forever,” is what they *really* mean.

“I was told to suffer, and I did. Please help me feel safe. Please force yourself to suffer too.” Is what they really, *truly* mean.

(Not that they’ll admit it to anybody, even themselves)

They do get very upset when you choose not to suffer.

It fascinates me, as I sit here, fighting the urge to tear my face off, the desire to inflict this suffering on others. I wonder... does the hurt make them happy? Does the pain satisfy them, in some strange sort of way?

“Your skin is a *gift*,” they say again, packing so much meaning into a four-letter word as their nails sink into my shoulder.

A gift to who? Certainly not me, for if it was truly a gift to me, I would be allowed to tear at it as I liked.

From who?

Who has forced me into something I was never meant to wear? Who is so cruel, to saddle me with a burden, to place me in a constricting, suffocating prison, and call it a *gift*?

And how *dare* they tell me to *treasure it*?

You do not tell a mouse to treasure the snake constricting it.

“Your skin is a *gift*,” they say again. They’re getting scared now. “Clear and lovely.”

They lean in closer. “*Don’t fuck it up.*”

It makes me want to laugh. And cry a little, maybe.

My skin is so far from clear. It is cloudy and suffocating and heavy and miserable, and I want to *rip it off*.

But I won’t. I’m a coward, and my fear will be the death of me.

(Perhaps a slow, quiet, unremarkable end will be fitting. So many people suffocate in their own skins. Maybe I should join them. A sort of community can be found in shared suffering, after all.)

\*

Sometimes, I slide into feeling almost comfortable.

I suppose a better word is apathetic.

Or maybe numb.

Yes, numb is a good word.

(Numb is perhaps more terrifying than the desire to peel my own face off and watch the blood pool in the palms of my hands.

Numb means I don't care.

Numb kills.)

*This is fine*, I remind myself, absently scratching at my arm. *This is safe. I am happy.*

I lie back and press the heels of my hands into my eyes. I can't feel them. My skin has blocked all sensation. I can only feel the scraping, flaky texture against my flesh.

I hate it.

*I hate it.*

Suddenly, I can't take it anymore.

My nostrils flare as I try to suck in a breath, to calm down, to not do anything *rash*.

My ribs refuse to rise. My lungs are trapped by a layer of constricting, suffocating skin.

*I am trapped.*

I am trapped.

I am *trapped*.

I bring my hands from my eyes to my scalp, to run my fingers through my hair, to try and distract myself, but somehow my fingers aren't listening to me. My hands slip down to the sides of my face, brushing my tightly closed eyelids on their way down.

My nails sink into the skin of my cheeks and I *tear*.

The first split is on the bridge of my nose. It's not painful - it feels more like peeling dried glue off my arms than anything else.

I follow the seam of my nose, down the center of my face and neck, reaching all the way to my collarbone.

*I'm still trapped.*

Frantically, I claw at my own flesh, splitting the skin of my chest in two. My ribs pop out - like a butterfly from a chrysalis - and expand fully, for the first time in my entire life.

I wonder if this is what snakes feel like, when they shed. Does it feel good, to be free of your old skin but only find more scales underneath?

I suppose snakes don't care much for their shedding. It must be more irritating than anything else.

Maybe I don't want to be a snake, because *fuck*, this feels *so good*.

\*

The room is quiet.

Blood trickles down my face, dripping into my open mouth.

My old skin lays in ribbons across the floor. I am sprawled out, appearing a corpse to all but the most watchful.

My breaths are slow as I drag myself to my dresser and claw my way up the front using the handles on the drawers as handholds.

The dresser once belonged (still belongs, really, the living never seem to have any claim on the objects of the dead) to my grandmother. I hope she doesn't terribly mind the blood dripping down the front, wherever she is.

My hands ache, terribly. They've always worked so hard for me. I'm glad I have them.

*Please, all I ask of you, hands, is one more task. One more impossible feat, and then we can rest, forever.*

I have no eyelids, so when I pull myself high enough to look into the mirror, past my bare jaw with jutting, crooked teeth, I see myself right away.

The muscles of my cheeks clench, as if to pull back the lips I don't have anymore.

I am trying to smile.

It doesn't look like a smile to anybody else - it looks like the ghastly grimace of something that should have been dead years ago, but it's *my* smile.

It's my smile and it looks *so much better* without the cloying, clinging skin covering it.

Copper crosses my tongue. I smile.

I smile, because I look in the mirror and see that underneath my skin, I am beautiful.