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## Skin

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## Skin

### Abstract

Even at the age of seven I wanted to show some skin. We lived in Los Angeles, and my highbrow hippie parents had enrolled me in a tiny, rustic school nestled deep in Topanga Canyon, with horses and a two-story tree house where art classes were sometimes held. Maybe it was the freedom encouraged by our beachy lifestyle, or the shining thong-clad butt cheeks of rollerblading Santa Monica women, or the way Ariel looked when she hoisted herself up onto the rock, chest heaving, bright red hair wet against her stomach—but there was something out there that I wanted in on. Something powerful.

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November 22, 2013

## Skin

Nonfiction by Nina Boutsikaris

Even at the age of seven I wanted to show some skin. We lived in Los Angeles, and my highbrow hippie parents had enrolled me in a tiny, rustic school nestled deep in Topanga Canyon, with horses and a two-story tree house where art classes were sometimes held. Maybe it was the freedom encouraged by our beachy lifestyle, or the shining thong-clad butt cheeks of rollerblading Santa Monica women, or the way Ariel looked when she hoisted herself up onto the rock, chest heaving, bright red hair wet against her stomach—but there was something out there that I wanted in on. Something powerful.

\*

In first grade, after swim lessons at the outdoor pool (“Keep the P out of this OOL,” read a sign), I took a dare and ran out of the girls’ changing room with no shirt on. I wiggled my body in the thin morning sunlight and stuck my tongue out at the boys who were already waiting on the pavement. How thrilling to have such an audience! Not only was I henceforth known as the class daredevil, willing and able to take on the authority of Miss Carla, but I was also a girl. Being ushered quickly back inside and scolded for inappropriate behavior made me feel like I was doing something right, something girls were not supposed to do. And then, must do.

\*

That October, I sat at the kitchen table and made a list of Halloween costume ideas while my mom fried eggs: Pippi Longstocking (my reliable go-to until sin had kicked in), Amelia Bedelia, and any Disney Princess before 1993. (“I still don’t understand why you kids won’t go conceptual,” my father said from inside his crossword puzzle. “Why not a failing democracy or the depleting ozone?”) My mother would never have let me be seen in a store-bought costume, so I chose the one she thought we could make together. Amelia Bedelia, the confused maid from a series of children’s books, took everything literally and got everything wrong. I had just learned to read, and she made me laugh. But she wasn’t exactly the Little Mermaid. Amelia lacked those bouncing breasts, held in place by a couple of shells. She had no exposed, toned torso, no mass of graspable hair. No one fell in love with her. I didn’t want to look like every other seven-year-old girl; my mother’s dedication to homemade ingenuity had taught me that. But Amelia, in her plain black dress, high collar, and neat bun, somehow went against what Halloween suddenly seemed it could be—a shot at that feeling akin to my swim-class scandal, this time, perhaps, with permission.

Still my mom and I took a trip to the fabric store, and I helped her sew a bonnet and fasten plastic flowers in place with a hot glue gun, finishing the get-up in time for my school’s Halloween parade. My mother was pleased with what we’d created. In my classroom she snapped black-and-white photos while she helped me change into the leotard I’d chosen to wear underneath my long skirt. As the group of transformed children—complete with three bewigged Jasmynes, a knight, an astronaut with an oatmeal-canister oxygen pack, and several cowboys—made its way to the tree house where prizes would be given and candy bars administered, I took a chance and slipped the sleeves of my leotard down over my shoulders, exposing the smooth, pale rounds to the crisp Pacific autumn air. That felt right. Until my mother saw me and yanked the cloth back, hard.

“That’s not how the costume is supposed to look,” she said.

She was a free-spirited woman, and she’d never hid herself from my brother and me nor told us to put clothes on when we ran around naked in our own backyard. But this was something different. She saw what was happening, even if I wasn’t sure, and perhaps it was fear that drove her to shake me, those first fleeting glimpses of childhood leaving the body, falling away like loose feathers, landing one at a time on the front porch, another coming loose in the driveway, one here, a lonely artifact on the first-grade classroom floor.

\*

We moved to New York a year later, my parents split, and my lust for lust grew, pounding within me like a terrified herd. It rained all through my twelfth October, hot mosquito rain, where insects hover just above your head and just below your ankles, and your eyes itch from squinting and your wrists ache from swatting. It let up that Halloween afternoon, and the sky looked like a pomegranate before it went dark. I borrowed some black lipstick and a sequined mini skirt from my friend Sarah, slipped into a pair of cheap gauzy wings and shoes I didn't know how to walk in, because Sarah's big sister was letting us hang with her. A high-school boy with a bad crew cut that exposed a mysterious scar pulled me along by my hand ahead of the others, most of them much too old to be making these kinds of rounds. The streets smelled of pumpkin guts; damp, oily tar; and the moldy, wet leaves that were piled up in the gutters. I looked at the full moon and tucked my frizzy hair behind my ear because I knew I was being watched. That summer, just before I started seventh grade, my mother had caught me touching my hair when our waiter dropped off the calamari and glanced at my exposed thigh. "She's aware now," she had said to her friend, raising an eyebrow and tipping her wine glass in my direction. Had she forgotten how long ago *now* was?

All feeling left my face when the boy with the scar held my chin, guiding it until I was looking into his inky eyes. "Do you like Lemonheads?" he said, grinning, opening his lips to reveal the little yellow candy caught between his front teeth. He told me to take it from him if I wanted it, and I did.

Currently an MFA candidate at The University of Arizona where she is on the staff of *Sonora Review*. Read her work online at *Brevity*, *Phoebe*, and *apt*.