

PEEL

Every day I peel something without purpose. Not because it's a compulsion, but because we're always peeling things without noticing. Oranges, bananas, apples, plastic wrap, expiration stickers, aluminum foil. If the skin or wrapping tears unevenly, it's a bad omen. This morning, I've peeled my egg before I even realize what I've done, the whites peeking out, naked and wholesome under shed skin.

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The plastic tree was only forty-nine dollars. It stands next to another fake plant, something that could have been perennial. Sometimes I think the tree admires winter more than I do, staring loudly out the living-room window. Its tinsel and bells are stitched onto its branches, but we've never put it away to notice.

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My mother's packages sit expectantly on the front steps when I get home, as though they might let themselves in. Their mailing stickers still put her address as ours, even though she'll be at her new job in China for the next three years. I peel the stickers off and roll them in my hands, the adhesive pulling gently on the skin of my palm.

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My friend texts me about a show I should watch, one of the many recommendations he's given. We share a connection in gender that makes the friendship seem more intimate than it is. I think about my inability to provide things for him, to contribute anything meaningful. I ignore his message and wonder how I have so little to do.

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Every time it snows, the cars push a muddy line of slush through the road that runs near our backyard. The soiled landscape is like a painting torn up by teeth, white dirtied by tobacco or chocolate. The chiaroscuro of branches, hills, people. The headlights erratic through the trees.

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My mother still calls sometimes to inquire after the state of things. *Have you been eating well? Has it been too long since we've talked?*

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Over the weekend I acquire a hangnail. It gets caught on a belt loop as I get dressed. I peel it back enough to use scissors, but I accidentally nip off a piece of flesh.

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The seams of my backpack have remained intact. It's the zipper that's broken. My friend was the first to notice. I have to be wary of carrying too much weight or the zipper will pop open like stitches on the forearm of some great beast, ripping under strain and contortion.

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My friend waves in the crowded hallway and walks over, looking out of place. His curls, mottled skin, and pink cuticles are thick, like eraser shavings that bunch up in the middle of the page. He tells me about a new friend he's made – they're on the debate team together. I smile and pick at my hangnail as he blends in with the crowd.

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I've found an outlet in sketching the boundaries of objects, enclosing them in dark lines. Their outlines overlap to make dense jumbles, thin and tangled. The whites shine through the cracks.

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I try to pick an episode to watch. My friend said I'd like the one where the family is separated by a snowstorm. My mother calls in the middle of a scene where half the family is trapped in the car while the other half is stuck at home. The more the mom tries to drive out of the snowbank, the more the wheels spin in place, peeling back layers of slush.

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This morning it's the pebbles of lint on my bed sheet. They stick to each other like Velcro when I pinch them between my fingers. I peel them off one by one into the trashcan, but they don't seem to want to take the plunge: the cotton strands hold onto each other in dramatic embrace. The lint balls clump together like snow.

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Chinese brands of nuts and sunflower seeds sit on the kitchen counter. My father insists the snacks my mother brings home on her visits back are not even as good as the ones he can buy from 7-Eleven. He ends up eating my chips instead, forgetting to put the dip back in the fridge, mold forming in thin lines around the crumbs.

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My curtain is hardly a curtain. It's a silk bedsheet, yellowing, and thick enough to mute midday but thin enough to let mornings in. At night, when cars turn into the road behind our

house, tree branches imprint their shadows on the pale canvas, the headlights confined within my window frame.

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My old drawings still hang in the den. The most recent one is of a frog, stenciled over fading gray paper. It lurks out from under a membrane of water, eyes delicately filled in.

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She'll be visiting for the holidays and asks if I need anything.

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My teeth pick at my lips, trying to snag a layer of exposed skin. I peel the skin with my front teeth, coaxing the strip off and leaving blood beading. The wound stings every time I go out in the cold air. When a thin layer of skin grows to cover it, I run my tongue over the frayed patch and it opens like a zipper.

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My friend waves at me in the halls, half-smiling from afar, saying something I can't understand. Most days I can't make him out in the crowds of people that melt by.

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"All I Want for Christmas Is You" plays over the speakers as I get a filling. The drill keeps rhythm with Mariah's singing as spit fills up the cavity of my mouth and seeps down my chin. *Stay still, please, or I'll have to start over again.*

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I still buy sketchbooks because the pages are rough and uneven. I like the way they collect graphite quickly and smudge at the corners. In my current sketchbook, deep indentations layer the surface of the paper where I've pressed down too heavily. The imprints run several pages deep, causing the pages to clump together. I slowly peel them apart and blow on the graphite so the images don't smear.

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Citrus juice runs down my wrist, collecting at my elbow. I dig into the orange too deeply and nectar flicks onto my cheeks. Later that day, an extra orange I brought for lunch crumples onto itself from the weight of my books. The juices slosh around the bottom of my backpack, staining my papers in tart, muddy watercolors.

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On the way to pick up my mother from the airport, I peel at my cuticles without thinking. Streetlights flash by as snow collects on the window in thin sheets. I imagine her as an outline, her features becoming clearer until they're vivid enough to see.