

# Beneath the Surface

*Magnolia Mulqueen*

I am a cuticle picker. In all seasons, wet and dry, summer through winter, my fingers are red and scabby from the habit. The hands, you see, are ideal objects to obsess over. They are always in sight, felt and feeling constantly, sweeping over surfaces. These palms are sweaty when holding others' hands, marked sometimes with affirmations, insults, grocery lists. The nails are sometimes chewed short or polished or grown into sharp and thin weapons. But it is the cuticles that I focus on.

The beds of my nails are forever dehydrated and cracking. The cuticles lift and pucker and stick out in points. They stand at attention and my drug is pulling them like weeds. Since childhood, I remember days spent obsessing over one hangnail. I would bite and pull with baby teeth the dried tag of flesh. Tips of the fingers red and pulsing, shiny with spit. It hurt. Like a canker sore, like an unscratchable itch, a burning rash. Now, despite the purchased moisturizers and nail kits, I have still perfected the art of unraveling my body by its loose threads.

These days it starts with the idle fidgeting. The twiddling of the thumbs. The phalangic fixation. Scratching nail against nail until the skin allows itself to sprout. When I see this result, I feign disappointment: *Another one?* I think *Good grief*. But

then the pick. The nails become tweezers and they grasp the skin and pull it back. Like the skin of the fruit exposing the tender meat below.

I pull with the tips of my fingers, I pull with my teeth, and if the cuticle breaks off while still remaining unlevel, with skin still loose and wiggly, then I pull it further still until the surface is smooth. Damn to the pain, and when there is blood, damn to that too. I apply pressure using tissues when it is accessible and the inside of sweater sleeves when it is not. Damn to cause and effects. Damn when the tips of my fingers are ever sore, ever aching, ever repulsive. I peel when I talk to my mother, and my doctor, and my professors, and my boss. I leave meetings while my blood pools in my palms, I smile and nod while wiping off my thumbs.

My fingers are repulsive. They are fuchsia and puffy. They are wounded and healed and wounded once more constantly. They conjure thoughts of infection. I wonder when I will get an infection. Hangnail infection. When blood turns to puss and puss turns to gray matter, it's like my brain leaks out of the ends of my hands. It would only make sense.

When regardless of the pain, regardless of the irritation, regardless of any rational thought I continue to destroy my flesh. I continue to let it stretch and twist like party streamers. I continue to cannibalize, to destroy myself. I destroy myself.

Peel back the skin. Search for something new beneath the surface.

Search for something concrete. Something that will remain fixed in place despite the anxiety. Despite the fidgeting. Despite the will to ruin. Search for skin that is supple and soft. Search for nails that grow long and strong. Search for pretty hands that don't crack or sweat or flake. Search for a new something, search for a new anything. Anything to hold onto, anything eternal. Search for something that doesn't die and live and die, but only lives and lives and lives. Search for a sensation besides pain. Beg.

I am begging. I am begging myself or maybe just my hands, or maybe just my fingers, or maybe just my skin, or maybe just my melting brain. I want to stop bleeding. Can you stop me from bleeding? Can you stop me from picking myself apart? Can you stop me from crumbling to pieces? Can you supply me with a balm or antidote? Can you repair me?