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The Book of Human Skin

Written by Michelle Lovric

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THE BOOK OF HUMAN SKIN

'A witty, exciting
page-turner'
Daily Mail

'Funny, horrific,
subversive'
Joanne Harris



MICHELLE LOVRIC

B L O O M S B U R Y

THE BOOK OF
HUMAN SKIN

MICHELLE LOVRIC

B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • BERLIN • NEW YORK

Vile and contemptible is the book which every body likes.

Thomas Spooner of Lemon Street,
*A Compendious Treatise of the Diseases of the Skin,
from the Slightest Itching Humour in Particular Parts
only, to the most Inveterate Itch, 1724*

Part One

Gianni delle Boccole

I want to tell ye the story of Marcella Fasan, someone have got to do it.

Ye wunt believe it.

Ye'll say, 'No girl were ever so sinned agin, tis like Job in a dress. Tis a dirty lie, Gianni. Ye have took me for a fool.'

And I would say, Listen.

This is going to be a little uncomfortable.

Minguillo Fasan

If you ever see a portrait of a nun, you should know she was a dead woman when it was painted. Nuns may not have their portraits painted while they are alive, a nun's face being nobody's business, not even her own, not even her brother's.

If I had known that fact when I set out to discover what had happened to my sister, I would have saved myself a voyage and a disease, and I might never have laid a hand upon a fatal book of human skin, making cannibals of my nine remaining fingers.

Now it takes very little to disgust the Adorable Reader, so I'll not stay dwelling on all the unpleasantness of things for a small while yet, or after the very first chapter I'll risk having to open letters adrip with indignation along the lines of 'What a thing to say and me with a mouthful of hot wine and the wall just recently distempered white!'

And of course the first thing that the Dearly Beloved Reader asks Himself when He opens a book, and lets a voice have at Him, is – 'Do I wish to go on a long walk in the dark with *this* person?' He has a choice. So I (Minguillo Fasan, enchanted etcetera) shall be making every effort not to irk but to beguile. And to be mindful of my duty to give pleasure even in the recounting of disgusting memories. To smuggle in the sinewy meat, as it were, under the light, sweet pastry.

In this spirit, let us go back to the wishbone, to the clean fork of the beginning of things, when there are certain items that the Enquiring Reader really needs to know in order to dine well on the said meat of this story. The Dull Reader may at this point betake His stupid rectum to His preferred armchair in the Coffee House, and pick up His penny journal, satisfied in knowing that there is nothing between *these* covers for Him. So.

To begin with the fascinations.

The portrait of my sister Marcella arrived unexpectedly in Venice, having travelled by donkey down the scarcely credible slopes of El Misti in Peru, whence it was taken by boat to Valparaiso (of incomparably lush memory), where it was impounded for three days in a damp customs house. By the time her face was released from imprisonment, my sister's skin had pocked. Flakes had fallen even from the pupils of her eyes, leaving numerous tiny white highlights that gave the erroneous impression that she was not only living, but lively in the flesh.

My sister was never a lively girl. I saw to that. Marcella always looked like tuppence worth of dead, even when she was alive. Not at all the kind of thing I went for, myself.

What is that?

What?

The Reader has a wonderful story that the whole world would love to hear? La-di-da, etcetera and so forth. I know what. The Reader should scratch His scribbling itch and tell *His* tale by all means. And I'll just have a little nap.

A wonderful story? The whole world?

Mine is much better.

And I am not even born yet.

The two wretches who shall beget me are fumbling towards my conception, none too fast. They've already made a mistake: a girl called Riva.

And as for Marcella, the object and heroine of this entire tale? Well, for *her* the Eager Reader must wait even longer, but we'll find ways to fill up the time, eh?

Gianni delle Boccole

Ile regret it till my dying day if I live that long that I niver knowed to write a direy when I were young. Now I must remember myself of evry thing peace by peace, God-on-a-stick!

I were nothin more than a kitchen lad, borned under the kitchen table as it appened, for my Ma were a cook at the Palazzo Espagnol. My father were a itinnyant pedlar who wernt seen agin in these parts after he shone my Ma his wares, as ye mite say. Our kind Master Fernando Fasan hallowed her to keep me, e'en tho twere her second offents for I alreedy had a half-sister Cristina by a passin coalman.

My crib were set below that kitchen table, so in my first years I saw mostly the broad bords of its underside insted o the sky. I have two memmaries, the one o my Ma's lovin face peepin under the cloth to kiss me reglar. And t'other of her *tortellini in brodo* that were a wonder prazed upndown the Grand Canal.

Our Ma were carrid oft by the Small-Pox when I had jist six years. That could of been very poor for me n my sister. Yet by the kindness of my Master Fernando Fasan, Cristina n I was not turned out nor yet sent to the nuns.

'But you are one of us, young chap!' that's what my Master sayed seriously oer his spectickles to sixyearold me. 'How could we do without you, Gianni?'

We was set to makin ourselves youthful by turning the spit on the fire and runnin for kindling.

Cristina doated on me, and all t'other laydies o the house were that kind too, especially the maid called Anna what were jist three years older n myself and were little, pretty, proper n fine.

By that time my Master Fernando Fasan ud took himself a andsome fat wife with a towering hairdo. My Master hisself were freakwently way in Peru, where he done his busyness. But all were did proper in his absents. There was the grate bankwets for t'other nobbles, balls in season, card tornyments and so on.

Like all laydies of her stashon, my Mistress Donata tookt an assistant husband what kindly presided when my Master were way, and een sumtimes when he come back, seein as how the assistant husband Piero Zen and the marrid husband Fernando Fasan was like the lovingest pare of brothers ye ever seen. The very walls thesselves was warm in them days with their feckshonit laffs n shouts, Sweet Little God!

A little daughter, Riva, were borned to my Master and Mistress. There was more bankwets, and grate snootfuls of wine for the servants too. My sister Cristina were straitway pointed number four nussmaid and twere a pleasure for her, for ye could hear the little one chucklin in her crib all hours o the day. In onour of the new babe, my Master Fernando had a garden o roses n lilacks planted in our courtyard. He leaved a space, sayin summing Ile not soon forgit, 'There will be more children, and more flowers for us.'

Swear I got more sweet memmaries from those times than ye got hairs. In retrospecked, twere as if we was makin o the Palazzo Espagnol a perfeck bower, a vegetable paradise on earth, for Marcella Fasan to be borned into.

We was more than sorry each time my Master Fernando had to sail agin for Peru. Twas vilent times in that far place. There was stories comin out o there to make yer hairs turn white n curl up yer toes.

Sor Loreta

I was warned against writing this.

I ask all you who read it not to think badly of me because I had the bold presumption to set down this text, given that I am utterly ignorant and without graces.

Should any Christian cast his eyes on this work, he must understand that it is not my own arrogance but the will of the Lord God that flows down upon the page through these worthless fingers. He should take sustenance from my words as he might swallow the Blessed Eucharist.

That same good Christian should naturally look on the testimony of the Venetian Cripple and her friends as the saliva of the Devil turned to ink and spat upon paper.

I shall start with the first of my significant memories. That was the long death of Tupac Amaru II. It lasted from ten in the morning till five in the

afternoon, which thoroughly pleased all devout persons. It happened in Cuzco, Peru, where I was born. It was 1781, and I had twelve years.

Tupac Amaru had revolted against the Spanish rulers and the Holy Mother Church of Peru. This peasant defied even the Inca nobility, who denounced him for an upstart. With his murderous campaigns Tupac Amaru had denuded whole Spanish towns of the servants of God. So now they made a holy example of him.

He was made to watch his wife, his eldest son, his uncle and his brother-in-law all tortured to death in the Plaza de Armas, a worse insult on account of that it was once the sacred square of the Incas themselves. Then the soldiers brought Tupac Amaru himself to the front of the wooden platform. The crowd roared, and me with them. A little Indian boy in front of us muttered, '*Chapetones pezuñentos!*'

Stink-hoofed Spaniards, is what the brat said. For those who are in league with the Devil often use his filthy epithets upon the Holy Innocent.

First they cut out Tupac Amaru's tongue.

I clapped my hands when I saw that. I had so many feelings crowding my breast that I cannot write them all down. For even then I knew that whoever suffers the greatest pain feels God's sweetness the most. *Deo gratias.*

Then they harnessed four horses, one to each of Tupac Amaru's limbs. The horses failed to pull him apart, so the soldiers hanged, drew and quartered him instead. Afterwards they cut off his head. This inspired intense prayers and much shouting. I myself did both things, kneeling upon the ground and crossing myself. My father looked away. My mother covered her eyes, and in that moment I suspected a horrid thing: that there might be a trickle of Indian blood in her veins. Her dark beauty was so different from my own sore thing of a face.

From that time, I had no mother. Once I began to doubt her *limpieza de sangre* I could no longer look into her eyes or accept her caresses.

Parts of Tupac Amaru were strung up as a warning to anyone else who might have thought of freeing the *sambos* and rousing up the Indians. His head was sent to Tinta, where he was born, and given its own private hanging. Then it was impaled upon a stake. His traitor arms and legs were sent to four different towns for the same treatment. *Deo gratias.*

Gianni delle Boccole

Scuse me but I am slightly on one this evenin, Chicken-shitting God!

Ask pardon, ask pardon, sirs, madams. I am playing the thing dredful fine. I know ye'll think me wanting in the head.

Ye see. Twere one on them skinny slivers o Tupac Amaru as reached Venice all them years later wernt it? But by that time it had got isself bound round a book. Twere nowise one as would of been much injoyed by the original owner o the binding, savin his grease.

A filthy thing. That book were all kinds o evil. Ye wunt want it in the ouse. But my young Master Minguillo Fasan, with his bad blood and his desiccrating heart, he would jist love that book, wunt he? And he would get a feroshus plan for it and lead us all to Hell.

Yet back then in 1781 we still had a few good times left. Venice haint niver heard o Napoleon Bonypart, and Napoleon Bonypart haint yet dreamt o crushing ancient empires under his little foot. Kings' and Doges' heads was still resting stoutly on there shoulders without the least thought o falling blades.

The reverlushon in Peru were at last bloodily finishing and the Fasan silver mines was safe again, and the Fasan warehouse in Arequipa too. Here in Venice, the Palazzo Espagnol were tethert to the water like twernt going anywheres, but the sad truth were that a bad sea were arising.

From the inside.

Some few men like my old Master Fernando Fasan was still big on trade. But *they* had to float all the branchlets o there famlies with small doles n grate big partments. Whole hants-huncles-cuzzins-nevvies was borned, growed up n died, doing nought but stork the unearned ducat. Them parasites niver bethought thereselves on taking care o the partments what they had acquired without

a drop o swet on there own part. No more than a tapeworm thinks o sprucing up its humane host. I had nightshirts with more backbone n sents of duty than them relatives o my Master Fernando Fasan.

So een at our Palazzo Espagnol, specious rooms that was onct proud n painted slowly by slowly slid into dismal grottoes. When a room finely died in blaze o mould, them nobbles bedbugs jist shutted the door on it. More doors shut, intire floors was handed oer to the umidity. And so our whole city lay a-rutting, cankered with meanness and indolents.

We dint know it, only because we choosed not to know it.

There were no star to warn us; no signs nor wonders in the air to say: 'Watch out, things is going to the bad on a buggy.'

To say, 'Nothin, not happyness nor Venice, is for ever.'

The only thing we knowed were that my Mistress Donata Fasan were onct more with child and that her skin were irrupted with weals n wens like ye wunt believe. Swear it were the miserablist pregnancy. And Anna told us the strangest thing: the babe inside my Mistress were kickin that hard n cruel that her belly were black with bruises.

Doctor Santo Aldobrandini

The book of human skin is a large volume with many pages of villainy writ upon it.

There are people who are a disease, you know.

As I go my rounds, I still hear it said – even by their victims – that there are no truly evil persons born in the world: just misunderstood unfortunates. Some wrong done in early life has monstered such creatures quite against their will.

While I dress stab-wounds or roll poultices on beaten wives, I often wonder – *why* are we so lenient towards abominable human beings, yet we declare unequivocally against Cancer, for example, or the Small-Pox?

If we put out an illness, we rejoice. There is no lyric moment of regret for its passing.

Now your human villain stalks the world much the way the Small-Pox roams the blood and wrecks the body's integument. He hurts. He disfigures. He kills. He'll do it again, if not stopped. So why do we hesitate to 'cure' his evil? Do we try to understand the feelings of the Small-Pox scab? Do we perfume the stink of the Small-Pox pustule with excuses?

There are people who are a disease, and it is purely our indulgence that makes a plague out of them.

No one talks of things like this. But I have always liked to write them down and have them keep company with other musings of mine.

In Peru there are nuns who keep fleas in bottles for the companionship of something lively in their quiet cells. So did these written thoughts of mine serve me for many years. In the absence of mother, father, sister or brother, I was always grateful for the quill and the flutters of paper seeming alive under my fingers, especially in the lonely hours when there were no more patients to tend, and in the aching years when I was denied the company of she whose thoughts are my book and whose heart is my Host.

Sor Loreta

Our town of Cuzco was stacked high with the craggy follies of the Incas – forts and palaces dedicated to their barbarous gods. How those graceless offerings must have disgusted our true Creator!

With the death of Tupac Amaru II, a quietness began to fall in Peru. At first, little spasms of revolt still shuddered through the ignorant valleys, rather as a dead snake still moves, not understanding that God has wished it dead. But gradually everyone grew quiet, from the Indians, the mixed-blood *mestizos*, the African *sambos* to the real white Spanish like myself. Inca portraits, names, dances, clothes and their pagan funeral rites were outlawed, so that they might cease to be sorry for being conquered and instead grow to love the

gentle dominion of the Spanish and the Mother Church. But the Indians were too ill-bred to understand that it was all over with their gods. Secretly, some still clung to the old infidel ways.

It was not long after they cut up Tupac Amaru that I was taken by a little Indian servant girl to see her family hovel. No doubt she hoped to excite some charity by her poverty. However, she claimed she wanted to show me something particular. She was filled to the brim with excitement. Inside the house, she opened a cupboard under the stairs and my eyes fell upon a mummy with the skin still on and the teeth grinning through leather lips. He was sitting up on his haunches and dressed in splendid rags.

'Is my great-grandpa,' she declared, thumping his shoulder affectionately. A little lump of dried gristle fell off in a puff of sour air.

'Why does your great-grandfather sit up like that when he is dead?' I enquired innocently. 'Should he not lie down in his grave like a Christian?'

The servant told me, 'Because he comes to dinner by us when the dinner is good. All us grandpas do so.'

Then she picked up a seashell and blew a soft sad note through it. I shook my head because it was one of the forbidden *pututo* trumpets that the Indians used in their heathen mourning.

Mistaking my expression for awe, the servant girl next gave me a gruesome tale of the peasant daughters chosen for the honour of sacrifice. 'Them girls was called *capacocha*,' she breathed reverently through her gapped teeth. These *capacochas* were taken from their families at the age of four and sent to the priestesses to be raised.

She told me a scandalous thing then: the Inca house of the priestesses, who were called Virgins of the Sun, once stood in exactly the same place occupied by our own Christian convent of Santa Catalina! The two buildings, one heathen, one holy, shared the same foundations. Where pure young novices now fasted and scourged themselves for the glory of God, the pagan girls used to be fattened up for sacrifice with llama stew and maize.

My servant licked her lips, 'They aten meat most every day!'

After that they cut their hair off, apparently, and took them on a long journey up a mountain to a shrine.

'Then did they murder the little girls?' I whispered.

'Oh no, they girls did it of theyselves. They was give maize beer and coca leaves to make em feel sleep-sleep and byenbye they was left lone.'

'So they starved to death?'

'Some of em got sick before they died. So high up there, the *puna*, you know. Make everyone sick sometime. Like the old uns. They must clean big vomits off my great-grandpa when he did die,' she observed, pointing to a dried green mess like lichen on the mummy's sleeve.

I left that house with a horrible vision of the great-grandfather's corpse at table with a napkin wrapped under his ragged chin while they poured soup through him on to the floor. But then I remembered that those people were too poor and vulgar to use a napkin.

Naturally the Holy Mother Church frowned on the Indians' keeping and worshipping their ancestors in the house. The Christian *conquistadores* had hunted down nearly all those mummies hundreds of years ago, so it was exceedingly rare to find one now. I was happy in more ways than I can write down because I knew God had chosen me to specially extirpate this idolatry. Indeed, in my twelve-year-old eyes, my servant's deceased great-grandfather personified to a nicety a Graven Image. I hastened to my Confessor and told him what I had seen.

The officers of God had a special way to treat those infidel mummies. They broke them. They bent them out of shape, they wrenched out the teeth, they made them look pitiable and defeated, so the Indians could not think highly enough of them to worship them any more. In the same way, when the Spanish took all the gold from the Inca temples, it was not at all motivated by a lust for treasure, but because our Holy Fathers wished to show the Andeans that those heathen deities were worthless.

The servant girl did not return to our house for one week. When she did, she showed a beaten face. She dared not look at me, but she sat outside my door and wept her story through the keyhole. Her father had raised his hand against her. This was because my Confessor and his officers had told him how they came by their information, before they thrashed the great-grandfather to clumps of bone and hair and dropped him into a chamber pot with the shards of the *pututo* shell that would never more utter its pagan moans.

'I thought you was my friend,' the servant girl moaned. 'I took you to mine.'

So Satan tempts the righteous to pity the wrong. I knelt on my side of the door and poked my little finger through the keyhole right into her eye. She fell backwards and crawled away, sobbing humbly. I was pleased to see she had learned a little of the ways of Our Lord.

It was in those days that I began to read the life of Santa Rosa of Lima with more than simple fervour in my heart. Santa Rosa was the very first

saint of the New World. Unlike myself, she was cursed with physical beauty. They called her Rosa because her complexion was as petals, and her cheeks bloomed an adorable pink. Her lovely face carried the weight of her family's earthly ambitions: she was supposed to marry a fortune.

Everyone loved her looks but Rosa despised them, for she did not wish to marry anyone except God.

She barely slept, constantly fasted, abjured all flesh. She mortified her delicate skin with continual floggings and a hair shirt. Her family chastised her and even tried to stop her with stern edicts. This only inspired Rosa to more ardent acts of worship.

One of her innovations was to rub lye into her hands, and pepper into her face. She cut off her flowing hair, thrusting a wreath of roses over her shorn head. Inside the flowers Rosa concealed a brace of iron spikes. Later, she dared to skewer her head with a long pin.

Finally, when she was twenty and her beauty was ruined, her family submitted to her will. She became a Dominican tertiary. Taking a vow of poverty, she left her comfortable bedchamber to live in a small grotto in the garden. There she undertook good deeds for the Christian poor and tended to the deserving sick with her own hands.

She rarely ate or drank, except for a draught of gall infused with bitter herbs that deadened every sensation in her mouth. Even as she raked her flowers, or made lace to sell for the destitute, she dragged around a heavy wooden cross fastened to her back. Soon she began to tell of visions, divine visitations and voices in her head. Once, when she gazed for hours in rapture at a painting of Christ, she caused His face to grow wet with perspiration.

People laughed at her. Her own family denounced her behaviour as a form of madness. Even this she endured with fortitude, gladly taking on the ridicule of the world as another penance to bring her closer to her Holy Bridegroom.

Eventually Rosa could no longer walk or even stand upright. In her last weeks she took to a marriage bed she had designed herself, consisting of stones, sharp shards of broken pottery, jagged pieces of glass and thorns.

God permitted her to use herself like this until she was thirty-one, when He finally rendered His most devout Virgin unto Himself. The people of Lima immediately regretted their nasty hilarity about Rosa and rushed to behold her pure, shattered body. So many people crowded the Cathedral that it took days to get her corpse to burial. Before long, those same people who had mocked her began to comprehend the miracle of Rosa's life. She was canonized the

patron saint of Lima, of Peru, of gardeners and florists, and all people who are derided for their religious fervour. She became famous all over the world, and her painted image was hung in great churches everywhere, even as far away as that wickedest of cities, Venice.

For so the immoral always lust after the beauty of true goodness, even in the midst of their most flagrant iniquity.

In the top drawer of my bureau I assembled lye, pepper and a long pin for my thin hair.

The death of Tupac Amaru continued to live in my heart. I rehearsed the scene again and again in my mind: the knife dropping through his tongue, the messengers carrying ragged pieces of him in five directions. I got a little length of chain from the blacksmith and I hit myself with it when I thought about Tupac Amaru, but only in the secret places of my body. For I did not yet want anyone to know that I would be a nun and scourge myself for the rest of my life.

When I was nearly thirteen years old, and my mother presented my trousseau chest, I judged it timely to announce my decision.

My mother and father were surprised. My father's textile mill flourished. My fine dowry was often spoken of. My mother exclaimed, 'Isabel Rosa!' – for that was my name in those days – 'You will hate to be sealed up in a cloister.'

And I declared loudly, 'I would like it above all things, to be enclosed in the love of the Lord Jesus Christ.'

I changed my tone to a persuasive one: 'I shall pray all day and into the night to lessen *your* time in Purgatory.'

They exchanged glances muddled with guilt. My parents were imperfect in their pious observances. I had more than once confessed on their behalf.

My mother, to whom fashion was religion, protested, 'You will own nothing. Everything will be the property of the convent. Even your clothing will come from the common wardrobe.'

'I shall not notice what I wear. I shall be like a child at its mother's breast without the slightest care or thought for mundane things. All shall be provided.'

'You may one day have . . . longings that would be fatally repressed in such an atmosphere,' my mother coughed delicately, tinkling her bracelets.

I answered, 'The sweet Lord loves me so much that He will never allow me to serve and be subject to men, concerning myself with base matters like housekeeping and cooking. He does not wish my body riven by childbirth. He wants me joined to no one but Himself.'

‘Come child, you are not so ugly that you shall not find a husband in Cuzco eventually,’ my father told me. ‘We shall see to it, somehow.’

‘You profane the pure spirit of the Lord,’ I admonished them. ‘Our most Holy Father adores all His creatures, even the plainest in His sight.’

‘The nuns may be unkind to you,’ my father stated baldly. ‘Yours is not an easy face to love, Isabel.’

I said, ‘It is most likely that they will envy me for God’s mark on my face. The Scriptures have shown that the holiest souls have always been assailed by the Devil’s wickedness in the form of envy. Yet those who are persecuted are ever gloriously sustained by our Beloved Father, and indeed chosen for His Favourites.’

My parents remained in terrible anguish for they did not want to lose a child. They had no other. My own feelings suffered vexing pricks for I wished all the pain to be on my part only.

My mother came to me cajolingly, and asked once more, ‘Would you not like to be married, Isabel? And have children to love you?’

And I replied, ‘To me marriage would be like the martyrdom that the ancient tyrants inflicted upon the Holy Ones – by tying them to putrid corpses until the horror, melting corruption and frightful stink brought about a slow, dreadful death.’

I refused to study such sinful subjects as French and arithmetic, and read only my Bible and my Life of Santa Rosa. I demanded to confess every day and announced all my defects scrupulously. I rejoiced in the penance for my every lapse. I was so steeped in obedience to our most Holy God that if my Confessor had commanded ‘Put your hand in the fire!’, I would have rushed to do so and left it there until the last cinder dropped off the stub of my wrist. Indeed, I regretted that my Confessor put me to such pallid penances as he did.

I dragged my mattress away and slept on a bare plank. I ate little more than the communion wafer. I found it disgusting to abandon prayer in order to take bodily food. I would eat only at the direct order of my Confessor, and even then reluctantly. People in the street stared at the jutting bones of my face, perhaps already aware that they were beholding the most spiritual virgin in Cuzco, if not all Peru. My pangs of hunger were like church bells tolling in my stomach: I exulted in them and my mastery over them.

I felt distant from other human beings, as if I already occupied a higher region. When other people spoke to me I saw white puffs of air come out of their mouths, like cotton. I could not hear them properly unless they spoke to

me of God. I continued to scourge myself, and spent many hours in a state of oblivious ecstasy.

Then my bloodied linen was discovered by the servant girl, who took it to my parents.

The next day my Confessor told me, 'You must go easy and temper your great fervour.'

He asked me to bring him my whips and chains. When I did so he was dumbfounded at how many they were, and how cruel was their construction. He ordered that I might not scourge myself without permission from him. I stated God's truth: 'There is prejudice in the minds of ignorant people against these devout practices, but I had not expected to find it in a priest.'

He locked my whips and chains in his cupboard and sent me home. My parents spoke to me then in grave, reproving tones, and I saw that my Confessor had acted in collusion with them.

I grew sad and vague for some time after that betrayal. I had so many miseries that I could not write them all down. I was shocked to realize that all these people less devout than myself were in fact *envious* of my special gifts.

I woke in the night and twisted and kneaded my skin as hard as I could without making myself gasp – for the little Indian servant had been put to sleep in my room with instructions to raise an alarm if I began to scourge myself. That girl told my parents that she had seen me touching myself under my blankets. They gave orders that at night I was to be trussed up like a roasting bird, with my four limbs tied to the bedheads just as if I was Tupac Amaru with the horses. My Life of Santa Rosa was taken away from me.

I contented myself with Santa Catalina. She knew she was married to Christ, for she received a vision in which she wore as a wedding ring the Holy Prepuce that was circumcised from His body. When she was just a child she threw herself into the boiling waters of a spring near her house in order to burn the skin of her face and body and so discourage human suitors. She ate almost nothing and barely slept. So respected was this virgin, unlike myself, that she ended up telling Popes what to do.

When they took my Santa Catalina away too, my soul rebelled inside my body. I scrubbed my face with the pepper and lye that I had hidden in my bureau drawer. With my head on fire, I ran into the kitchen and plunged my face in a *caldera* of boiling water, at the same time sticking the long pin into my right ear. I fainted before I could see what I had done.

The first thing I remember after that is a little hand reaching under the covers of my bed. It belonged to the Indian servant girl.

'Lemme look at you,' she said, lifting the sheet to see my face.

'Dunt see nuffink different,' she observed. 'You was always ugly right through like a hole in the ground.'

But the damage must have been considerable, for even my mother could not bear to look at me any more. God had marked me out, and my mother's soul was too weak to behold the miracle. My parents now acceded to my wishes. I was taken away from Cuzco and sent, under the protection of a reliable *arriero*, to the convent of Santa Catalina in the fabled white city of Arequipa.

Doctor Santo Aldobrandini

Perhaps this is why I have always loved the skin: because it is both the story and the storyteller. My own book shall be prefaced with a touching paradigm.

Most days I deal with the living, but once, in Peru, I was brought the body of a little girl found up on the higher reaches of El Misti mountain. The magistrates wished me to pronounce on the manner of her death before they buried her. An apprentice surgeon panted to anatomize her, for there was no medical school in Arequipa at that time and the doctors had to learn their trades in wet ways.

I laid the little girl out on my bench. I had read of such cases, yet it still shocked me to see a child so mistreated.

A death from starvation manifests as follows: a shrivelled integument coated with a brown, bad-smelling excretion. Beneath the paper-like epidermis, surgeon's fingers will locate muscles in a state of atrophy. Without even cutting, the surgeon knows that he shall find the gall-bladder bloated with bile but the liver under-sized. The heart and lungs will be bloodless, sunken; the empty stomach collapsed and ulcerated. The bowel, if extracted, shall show itself void, shrivelled and translucent.

I could not bear to think of the girl's body being ransacked now.

A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Michelle Lovric is the author of three novels – *Carnevale*, *The Floating Book* (winner of a London Arts Award and chosen as a WH Smith Read of the Week) and *The Remedy* (longlisted for the 2005 Orange Prize for Fiction) – as well as two children’s novels, *The Undrowned Child* and *The Mourning Emporium*. She combines her fiction work with editing, designing and producing literary anthologies including her own translations of Latin and Italian poetry. Her book *Love Letters* was a *New York Times* bestseller.

Lovric divides her time between London and Venice, and holds workshops in both places with published writers of poetry and prose, fiction and memoir.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

NOVELS

Carnevale

The Floating Book

The Remedy

NOVELS FOR CHILDREN

The Undrowned Child

The Mourning Emporium

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