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Brooks, V.

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Under the fucking skin

A whore and her hotel room door

Victoria Brooks

Isserley, the heroine of Michel Faber's Under the Skin tells a truly intimate story of her body: inter-species flesh, blood, cumbersome breasts, inconvenient sexual drives, stray hairs, skin, disappointment, vulnerability and humour. She tells a story of her sometimes terrifying and perfunctory capture of men, while revealing the failure of her skin to cover the truth of her body. This is an achievement that accounts of sexuality and of the city rarely manage. The figure of the 'whore', 'the mistress', the sexually 'promiscuous' woman is often painted as a cold, non-maternal, sexually free and capable woman, who is adept at containing her 'affects', otherwise known as her emotions and vulnerabilities, under her skin, thereby presenting an easily consumable and pristinely fuckable surface. The city is a space that could easily be thought of as her 'playground', especially hotels, where their commercial, cold and solid surface are built to conceal the painful and joyous nature of her fucking. Urban hotels are one part of the 'tiles of the visible', which are complicit in the production of the surface effect of sexuality, and the painful rationalisation of fucking, yet simultaneously embodying a mine of historical fucking artefacts in the form of women's experiences. This piece tells a free-flowing story of one self-confessed whore and mistress, her encounter with hotels, and her failure in two respects: to contain her body beneath her skin, and at complicity with the city's deception.

Victoria Brooks BIO BIO BIO BIO

v.brooks@westminster.ac.uk

When the hotel room door slides shut, it makes this slick sucking noise (*or is it some breathy human whisper of some concept or other? Probably used as part of its construction — perhaps a lubricant*). The door slips snugly into its glove-like frame. The room is perfectly plush in (admittedly very tasteful) carpets of immanence, yet almost paradoxically, it is also full of the smells of fucking and treasured bodily intimacy. Upon the door closing, the room is steeped in the loudest silence. It's one absolute fucker of an abyss of silence too — like the silence that follows turning off the bath tap, but much heavier, like the sound after a pig is slaughtered. The silence is so loud that she cannot even hear his footsteps making their way down the deep red carpeted corridor. She can hear his breath though, as it leaves her body — making its transition from animal to human — it slows, from the rhythm of licking, nuzzling, warm squeezing, playful animal sounds, into a much faster, shallower inhalation and exhaling that will keep pace with the humans that will be on the train he catches, carrying away his (now disguised) fur-covered form. The moment the hotel room door slides shut, she feels this heavy slicing pain in the upper-left side of her chest. It cuts across her soul so badly,¹ that it makes her toes curl, and she rubs the spot with her right hand, as she curls into the foetal position in the bed clothes.

¹ The soul is where skins of all kinds fold together (animal, human, inhuman, substance), meaning a cut to the soul is not a mere perception, nor romantic 'abstraction', but material, bodily and physical. See Deleuze, G (2001) trans. Patton, P, *Difference and Repetition* (London, Continuum) p95 and De Miranda, L (2013) *Is a New Life Possible: Deleuze and the Lines*, *Deleuze Studies*, 7:1, 106-152, p2.

She clings to them, like she would cling to him. She brings them to her face, so she can breathe those fading fibres of him.

Her eyes moisten. It's not a slow cry, but one of those that turns her body into a piece of contorting wire wool. Metallic, sore, twisting into her veins she feels the hotel room door shut throughout her body. The contrast is too much for her to bear; from being as light as air, inhuman, happy, to being this metal-laced ugly human being again. Her limbs ache suddenly from being made to sleep on this bed made for humans, her eyes ache as they ooze these big ridiculous tears, only an animal could cry. She makes this noise like the animal she is – it is a cry, a screech, as the wire takes hold, tearing all the fur from her skin. In five minutes, the cleaning lady will knock on the door to eradicate all their traces and restore the surface of the room. In 10 minutes, she will be in the shower, to restore *her* surface. In 20 minutes, she will have to check-out, alone. In an hour, she will be at her office, looking depressingly human. In two hours, she will be eating lunch, talking to other human beings. He will be back there, not thinking of what happens on *her* side of that hotel room door, when it shuts.

She realised with horror that it was the door that made her grow the skin of a whore. It had crept up on her slowly. That door's aperture was of the most unfaithful kind. While it had opened earlier with such promise, showing her this little place where she could be an animal, at home for a little while in the arms of the creature she loved, it was really waiting to close again. She wondered if he and the door were in it together – a malevolent plan, indeed. Such a plan would keep her in her place, she thought, it all makes sense. It would ensure that she would feel at ease enough to remove her skin for him – one of these rooms even had a kitchen, she remembered. The closing of the door though, forces the return of her skin. That was why she had this metallic feeling! It was her skin growing back.² It was her mistress-uniform colonising her dermis, giving her a recognisable human identity, a concept to walk as, making everyone comfortable, apart from her.³ She was sure that so long as he knew this happened, it made it easier to put her through the pain, because he thought, like humans, that the skin was an armour too.

She thought about it some more. There was still some time before she had to check-out. There was this other room they were in, she remembered. Incidentally, this was a night preceding the most painful animal-human conversions ever. Before he arrived, she had shaved her legs, but very badly, meaning not only was some tell-tale animal fur present, but worse – her animal blood was flowing across this smooth human surface and spilling onto the bed clothes while they were fucking. How absurd she must have looked! An animal pretending to be a whore. Did he know his mistress was not a mistress at all, but actually a creature? If he didn't know (and she suspected he did – it was what made her fall in love with him) the blood gave it away.⁴ So too would the smell of her slippery pussy – there was no disguising that. Also badly shaved. The bestial juice of her slit was saturating not only her thighs, his cock and the bed sheets, but the air itself. It would be no surprise if it coated the

2 See throughout Faber, M (2014) *Under the Skin* (Edinburgh, Canongate Books) the consistent and painful references to Isserley's struggle with her severely altered form. Her body has been operated upon drastically from being a sophisticated and furry pig-like animal (or what she refers to as human) to being an odd-looking human (or what she refers to as 'vodsel' or animal) with perfect but uncomfortable prosthetic breasts. In this form, she suffers intense pain as a cost to appearing human. She must appear as such to fulfil her task on planet earth. Her true form often betrays her through the sprouting of fur in inconvenient places, her animal eyes and her strange appearance.

3 In Deleuze, G and Guattari, F (2011) trans. Burchell, G and Tomlinson, H, *What is Philosophy?* (London, Verso) p69, the authors folded concept and thinker together, meaning we can see the problematic dimension of concepts – they can seem abstract, playful and mouldable, yet heavy with the authority of the philosophers that crafted them. They are insidious, finding their way into the body and even into matter, helping to sustain the primacy and illusion of surface.

4 Amlis Vess, who is the object of Isserley's affections from her home planet is disturbed by Isserley's human form, yet also clearly in love with her. They sit together in Isserley's car, watching the snow fall for the first time, through the window. Despite her 'monstrous' appearance, he is drawn to her strange beauty.

very door conspiring against her while they fucked. No human pussy would ache and drip like that. Likewise, no whore could know the intricate folds of his cock like her. Those folds she had mapped with her tongue — the only reliable way. His body she mapped with her nose, as only animals do. The only time she used her eyes, was to drink — his sperm, his gaze, his sweat and the long contours of his body. She used her hands only to hear his pulse.⁵ Also covered in fur he was — she knew his skin had to grow back too, when he left. Was it as painful for him, as it was for her? Imagine if those people on the train saw — imagine if he accidentally left his skin behind! How funny that would be, she laughed to herself. Her pussy was good at mapping, too. The slippery inhuman strands, sometimes like mucus, some alien-like liquid it was, that she deposited as a way of knowing (not in the human, sense you must understand, but a surreal a-conceptual animal kind of 'knowing'). This worked especially well when he licked her. This tongue of his was stunningly animal too of course, but designed also to give the impression of humanity. To speak complicated words. These words were about animals, in a language that seemed unfamiliar, though spoken with what was unmistakably his voice. Her pussy knew the difference and just played and danced provocatively with these concepts he tickled her with. Sometimes she balanced them on her clitoris, seducing them, so they might topple. They hardly ever did though, even when he penetrated her at last. Yes, they were crushed a while, between their bodies, but the problem was, they ended up inside her — stuck they were, immovable. Outside of her body though, on this human door-like surface, they lubricated the perfumed ply-wood, ready for the door to shut again. Making it 'easier', faster, more efficient, more pristine, more recognisably a human skin.

The surface of that room showed nothing of ups and downs. It presented perfectly as serene, unrelenting, stable and hard — not ever joyous, not ever laughing, nor shaky, jealous, hurt, nor struggling with its animality

No, he could not be complicit. She loves him, it's impossible, she decided. Perhaps he accidentally put those lubricating concepts on the hinges of the door. Maybe he intended them to be worlds, instead. Microcosms for her to find and watch, like snow-globes of homely scenes, or his sperm landing inside her womb, lazing on one of the cushions there, or sea creatures in an aquarium, floating among freshly made spaghetti, or a soup of beans in a transparent consommé.⁶ Perhaps they were not supposed to lubricate the door, but were secret gifts, which is why he wanted her to spread her juices — he just could not say. That tongue was too used to speaking about what humans called concepts — how silly! OK, so if concepts are so sophisticated, then she wanted to ask him (in his human form) what the concept was for the closing of the hotel room door. What was the concept for her pussy. What was the concept for her unconditional, uncompromising, unflinching desire. What was the concept for how it felt to have him inside her. What is the fucking concept? What is the concept for fucking? Fucking what is the fucking fucking concept? Maybe the real answer could be seen through the transparent surface of the snowglobes. He knows what's in there, he feels what's in there. That human skin is so badly designed, so ill-fitting, she saw through the surface immediately. Even the hotel room door is only made of some vulnerable kind of wood.⁷

⁵ To subvert the surface, an experiment (or to 'sing with your sinuses, see with your skin') akin to an animal use of senses is needed, see Deleuze, G (1997) trans. Smith, D and Greco, *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press) p167.

⁶ Each snowglobe is a bubble emanating from the soul folding into pleats of matter — an impossible world lifting its skirt and showing a flirtatious glimpse of its alternate reality, or otherwise, possibility. See Lypka, C and Sigler, D, *Sense and Incompossibility: Deleuze's The Fold and the Baroque Jane Austen*, rhizomes emerging studies in cultural knowledge, at <https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/033.e03>, accessed on 1 March 2018.

⁷ See Deleuze, G and Guattari, F (1988) *A Thousand Plateaus*, as cited by Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, A (2014) *Critical*

It was strange though how these surfaces had upon them no dust. There was no mould, no trace of skins before hers, no marks out of place, no droplets of condensation – just pure invulnerable stability. It was like the human skin, like the whore, like the mistress, like the human – it showed no imperfections. The surface of that room showed nothing of ups and downs. It presented perfectly as serene, unrelenting, stable and hard – not ever joyous, not ever laughing, nor shaky, jealous, hurt, nor struggling with its animality. She heard the knock at the door. It was the cleaning lady and she shouted to her to come back in 10 minutes – she heard her footsteps, but why not his? She sat up in this increasingly human bed and heard the air screeching as the smell of them together was already rushing out of any tiny crack it could find – a sure sign that she must begin the process of gathering what she could of the snowglobes on the hotel room door. After she had left this room and once she was home, she would curl up with them in her animal bed. Sometimes she would use them to soak up fluids leaking from her body. Some of them though, she found difficult to look at – they were either too bright or too dark; these ones, she smashed upon the floor in pain, or in anger – only for them to reconstitute.

Autopoiesis and the Materiality of Law, *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*, 27, 389-418, p410. Deleuze and Guattari write: 'it is a question of surrendering to the wood, then following where it leads by connecting operations to a materiality, instead of imposing a form on matter...'

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