Treatise on the Skin

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Galen understood it as permeable membrane, being less anxious about bodily integrity. Instead the fluids had to pass in and out, suavely achieving humoral balance—skin as enabling desirable openness.

Then Paracelsus thickened the skin: world became riddled with external agents, “where all diseases lurk and dwell,” assailing one’s personal stronghold. Glorious Renaissance expansions bequeathed unease of new poisons.

But if a closed container, how is it that the tumor grew there? Whence a body’s security? Any thought of skin as vigilant cover feels over. Maybe harassing causer instead: beastly suit whose hardness fostered self-pollution.

Thus the emperor Severus, constructing hospitals in Rome, declared his laboring subjects sufferers of “putrefaction.” Thick, clammy matter stopped their pores, trapping within unhealthy exhalations like a rapist not alone in an elevator.
Man’s being born so accessible (ceasable?) was for Erasmus a promising point of contrast with all animal ferocities—bull’s horns, lion’s claws, the boar’s gnashing tusks. Man alone came forth “all naked, without any armure,

with most softest fleshe and skynne, this creature alone borne al to love and amitie, faste knytte together by good turns done of one to an other.” It’s enough to make one willingly vulnerable, this mild evidence of our perishing natures at least ensuring an affection, riskiest porousness, interdependence. Aristotle’s calling us “ticklish animals” belongs here somewhere, described as such because of skin’s sensitivity, because our fineness recognizes warmth.

Yet Helkiah Crooke, anatomist and court physician to King James I, would give up any giggles for additional bulwarks for our quaint framing. The skin, for him, was a casement of nourishment, “so soft and exquisite of sense,” by which it warns inward parts of approaching dangers:
“The world is a Sea, accidents and diverse
occurrences are waves, wherein our life’s small
boat is tossed, beaten up and down.” That sounds
about right, the skin as frightened warder off
of hazards for soul’s appointed (anointed?) encampment.

Speaking of, where does the soul reside?
In the Cartesian brain, or liver
as others nearly as intelligent
once believed? Maybe the soul disperses
organ-oriented geniuses: pancreatic
soul or little soul in the colon.

Or its accessory? (Adversary?) Is flesh fortress,
vessel, or penitentiary that encloses whatever
sovereign, substance, or inmate
remains within? Its leased (leashed?) nature
makes touchingly clumsy that unnamed,
inhabitant, intangible and invisible.