

Signalitics

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Signaletics

Emilia Phillips



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for Jeremy & in memory of Nick

“the recidivist, without daring to contest his present personality, denies his past identity, and repudiates the previous arrests and sentences which are attributed to him, seeking to put them on the back of a brother or cousin who has disappeared, or else of some unknown person resembling him exactly.”

—Alphonse Bertillon, *Signaletic Instructions including the theory and practice of Anthropometrical Identification*

“when you placed one of these incomprehensible, monstrous objects so that it was reflected in the incomprehensible, monstrous mirror, a marvelous thing happened; minus by minus equaled plus, everything was restored, everything was fine, and the shapeless speckledness became in the mirror a wonderful, sensible image; flowers, a ship, a person, a landscape.”

—Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*

Subject in the Position of the Soldier with No Arms

Fill out your frame. Balancing is an act of forgetting.
Here are stones for your pocket and lead for the toe

of your shoe. Here, for an ear, a halved shell
and calf leather for a stopgap tongue. My father kept

the jar that rattled with the slug tweezed from his thigh—
metal on the X-ray like blood inside a mosquito

locked in cretaceous amber. Here's the missing finger
of the porcelain Christ—delicate as an eyelash, a blue

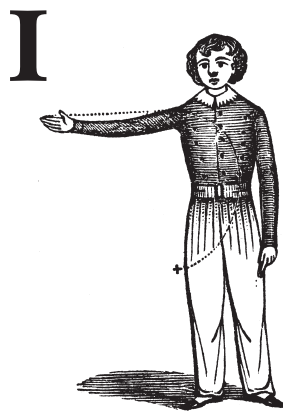
flake of paint from his robe. Don't ask where the teeth are
you exchanged for coins as a child. Your first lesson

in compromise. And what was next—Discipline?
Duty? In the mouth of my mother, a molar dissolves

like soap. Here's a shackle for your ankle, a pin to hold
your elbow together, three screws for a broken heel.

You must hold still. There's a storm in the western sky.
Beneath god's empty shoulder socket, you're a hailstone

of nerves, the fist clenched at the end of a phantom arm.



Teratoma

*a benign tumor that often develops other recognizable
features of the body*

A lump above her hipbone M. had me
touch in the girls' bathroom as she lifted
her uniform Oxford, size of an unripe
peach, as hard, she mistook for a knot
from a volleyball fall. The doctors gave her
the jar to hold when she came out from under—
three teeth, fully formed, a tuft of black hair,
a lung, peanut-sized, that trembled like a yolk
when she raised it to look. No one was to know.
Her desk empty for a week. We began each Bible class
with a prayer & nominated our requests
as if for awards. I was silent. She was gone
so we prayed for her. We prayed for all
the absent—the girl who went missing
for a month at the end, near graduation.
The word was mono. But once we ripped into
summer, we saw her out with the baby & he was
beautiful, as secrets go. *Touch here,*
my friend told me. *Be easy.* Over her right kidney
the teratoma hovered. She cried when I pressed
it with my thumb. I made my first boyfriend

fuck me through silk panties as if this would keep
me pure. But then I didn't care about being pure. I wanted to be
nothing, to come out

of my uniform, hipbones shrugging off
the grey skirt, I wanted to rise through the collar
like blue flame from a Bunsen burner,

leave so that no one knew, my clothes holding
the shape I gave them in the desk. *They'll fall*
off, she said, when I looped my fingers

with rubber bands until blood starved, white—
I was a stranger to myself. My one Hindu friend shoved
her books to the floor when our world

religion teacher said her many gods with their many arms
would dissolve like salt. Here, we lifted one another, our voices
scalpel-edged. We began with a prayer, & there we ended it.

Vanitas (Latent Print)

The nurse's ink would not do: so heavy it flooded
the ridges to smudge the white paper my father
pressed each of my brother's fingers to. A record

wanted, the made engraving like shoe-tread on the steely
moon & into a pendant for his wife, N.'s mother—
this, the last dotage, son to father. How impossible

creation was then, watching from my corner, as he bent
over the bed, my child-sibling paling in
lips & cheeks & hollowed chest, & darkening finally

across his backside, crown of his head, as the veins fractured
indigo toward the empty ears. *How long will you break me
in pieces with words?* When my father, shaking & saying

over & over, *This will not work—it's too heavy*, & wept again
as the ink wept from the sponge, the nurse at my request
brought an aluminum can to which we pressed the hands

for prints my father, unfathered, would lift later with dust.