Signaletics

Emilia Phillips

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“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 fractaled 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.