

BOOKS IN BRIEF: Things to Keep

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Emilia Phillips, *Signaletics* (Akron, OH: University of Akron Press, 2013, 86 pp, \$14.95 paper)

Jamaal May, *Hum* (Farmington, ME: Alice James Books, 2013, 91 pp, \$15.95 paper)

I was raised in Maine's Big North Woods—a place of pine forests and potato farms, and not much else. During my girlhood in this wilderness dotted with tiny towns near the Canadian border, the shoe factory and the french-fry plant were the biggest employers; neither paid a living wage. Folks struggled against poverty and long, cold winters, not to mention geographic and cultural isolation. The interstate ends an hour south of my hometown. I'd never been anywhere, I thought, and until I was nearly grown, I didn't believe there were living writers or artists, let alone that I could be one. Once I got out, I meant to stay gone, feeling I'd left behind only scarcity.

It didn't take long before I knew I'd been wrong. Jostled by crowds on Madison Avenue or pressed against strangers on the train back to Yonkers, I longed for stretches of untouched snow glowing beneath a cobalt sky, for the smell of fried trout, the vegetable fur of a fiddlehead unfurling on my tongue. My poems were full of deer eyes shining on midnight roads, of uncles, each with a beer between his legs and a harmonica keening between his lips. They were full of salvage, all that sweet, broken stuff I'd overlooked or undervalued. I felt a sudden urgency to collect from my past what I could, to take possession of every brilliant thing and much, too, of the bitter, the hard. In Emilia Phillips' *Signaletics* and Jamaal May's *Hum*, I find fellow scavengers, bent on sifting difficult pasts and places, a personal archeology aimed at saving—and transforming—artifacts, so they may serve to create a livable present, a viable self.



In *Signaletics*, the speaker of the poems and those who people them attempt a series of saving measures against the tendency of details to escape, of meaning to evaporate. Several poems feature jars that contain some object avulsed from the body—a tumor, a bullet, a tooth. In "Subject in the Position of the Soldier with No Arms," Phillips writes:

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.

The poem catalogs physical losses and their attendant substitutes or consolations: “Here, for an ear, a halved shell / and calf leather for a stopgap tongue.” As a measure of the self one learns—or refuses—to trade for currency, teeth act as symbols of compromise and the inevitable breakdown of the body. Efforts to hold that body together figure as futile traps: “Here’s a shackle for your ankle, a pin to hold / your elbow together, three screws for a broken heel.” In the end, what’s most real, most pressing, isn’t these fasteners or the remaining parts of the diminished body but “the fist clenched at the end of a phantom arm.” The speaker emphasizes what’s missing, but also the pain and anger that memorialize loss.

Such memorial is powerfully evoked in “Vanitas (Latent Print),” in which the speaker’s father—an expert in police forensics—desperately tries to take the fingerprints of his young son in the moments after that son’s death. All attempts to take them directly, using an ink “so heavy it flooded / the ridges,” fail; the “record / wanted” seems “impossible” to obtain as the boy’s body begins to deteriorate. Finally, the speaker suggests her father press her brother’s fingers to a soda can and dust for prints later, and we see that the poet (like the police) has her methods of saving and recording, but that they, like any effort to hold onto the past, feel distressingly ephemeral.

Throughout *Signalitics*, named for Alphonse Bertillon’s nineteenth-century system of measuring the facial features of criminals, Phillips insists on this vulnerability—of bodies, of meaning—while reflecting on her father’s attempts to establish some permanent record as a means of staving off danger. In “Latent Print,” he drives her to his office to take her fingerprints “one Sunday / after the divorce,” and we gather that the dissolution of their family leaves him fearing she’s all the more vulnerable to mishap, specifically kidnapping. Of the prints,

he tells her, “*These are yours— / they don’t change,*” and the heartbreak we feel as readers arises because, while we know in one sense he’s right, Phillips makes quite clear throughout the collection how flimsy this notion is.

In a move central to Phillips’ poetics, the story of this fingerprinting is braided with a description of the work of Thomas Eakins, among the first painters to use a camera in a quest for verisimilitude, a certain precise “record wanted.” Specifically, the poem reflects in its ekphrastic sections on his *Thomas Eakins Carries a Woman*. Phillips describes Eakins’ model as appearing “helpless with / her fallen head, neck // exposed” and refers to her as “deadweight” that “grows heavier / & heavier in his arms.” The connections between the model and Eakins and young Phillips and her father go wholly unspoken. Phillips manages deftly to link art and autobiography via juxtaposition, so we are inspired (rather than directed) to reflect on the similarity of the prints her father takes and those Eakins makes: both men attempt to hold something fleeting, to protect something vulnerable (the moment itself, really), by means of ink on paper. When the poet says of Eakins that he will “Never let go, he will never” and then quotes her father as saying, “*I will find you,*” we understand the desperate longing to hold on, but we know, too, that he will let go—he’ll have to.

If Phillips were merely asserting that the moment passes no matter what we do, we might be tempted to respond that this goes without saying or at least that it’s been said a million times. One defense against such a charge might be that no one can be faulted for grappling, in art, with the central existential crisis of human life: the death and dissolution not just of self but of all we hold dear. Indeed there is some of this in *Signaletics*, but it’s offered with such intelligence, restraint, and lyricism that it feels like news. In the long poem “The Study Heads,” Phillips recounts her father’s accidental shooting of himself in the leg—“The blood was fathomless, the femoral grazed”—but reveals she mistook the phrase for “*ephemeral* artery,” which might well have served as title for the collection, had this leitmotif of impermanence been its dominant note.

As the book’s actual title suggests, however, it’s the effort to read that becomes Phillips’ central concern. First, clearly,

the poet reflects on her father's profession—forensics, the endeavor to read the traces and faces of criminals in order to curtail crime. Eventually, bertillonage was displaced by a more reliable technology, fingerprinting, which Phillips also reveals as imperfect. All languages have their limits, these poems tell us, interrogating a wide range of efforts to establish or communicate identities through postcards, portraits, photographs, sculptures, and audio recordings.

The speaker's father himself is the text that most frustrates her own desire to decipher, to know. "*In vacuo: Universal Studios*" portrays the two waiting in line for an amusement, where she passes the time attempting, and failing, to read him. She laments, "Each time we open the mind, / it dies like a movie / astronaut in a holey spacesuit." She measures her father's love as the distance between his "old silence" and "his new," all his communiqués oddly empty, like the mementos he sends when he travels—"personless photos, mountains / in a war-country he sends / without caption."

In the final lines of the collection, having received from her father a postcard of Afghan ruins, Phillips writes:

I never wrote back, never

sent what I'd written,

for the father I've looted,
the ruined city

I could reach out to but never touch.

Here, the speaker's effort to know a closed-off father is personal and quite literal, but it also dramatizes a more general human (and writerly) struggle, our shared desire to know the world, the past, those we love, the self—and the essential unknowability of all these things.

A poet of the post-confessional lyric, Phillips also expresses ambivalence about what she'll reveal, in writing, of herself. Raised to understand that we have the right to remain silent, she chooses sometimes to remain absent "from the knowledge // of others" ("*Ars Poetica* [Latent Print]"). In the end, though, she seems to recommend we "break cover," ending the poem "*Latent Print: Pale Suits*" with what seems a straightforward call to arms

but which I can't help reading as a call to write: "Bow & pick up // your weapon. Now anything blunt will do."



If Phillips means to calibrate the degree to which we can penetrate the world and each other, Jamaal May seems concerned with the degree to which the world infuses us. The poems in *Hum* read as his attempts to have a say in how and how much the stuff of his world inhabits him and those he loves. In other words, if Phillips' father is the ruined city she lovingly loots, Detroit is May's, and the city is often, for good or ill, the stuff of self.

In "Still Life," the boy who acts as protagonist in much of the book appears in a series of still shots, wearing self-fashioned armor and wielding makeshift weapons. In one stanza he's got "roof shingles / duct taped to shins and forearms"; in another he wears a bath-towel cape and hides an exacto knife in his sock. May tells us this boy, living in "the shuttered district, / a factory of shattered vials" attempts "pushing a fire door wide," an image of escape from some place about to burn. The boy has a "tiny voice / and crooked cursive handwriting," both of which sound meager but prefigure the poet's capacity to be heard and read. In a move that makes us hope the boy will become the poet, his watchful eye and discerning vision his saving grace, May writes:

[He] takes notes on where
overpass paint hides rust,
where the cyan bubbles up

into a patchwork of pock
and crumbling disease,
a thief in the bridge's body

The boy sees—and records—decay, disorder, evidence of the corruption of bodies and buildings, and this very record hints at his potential to survive, even to transform, his life and the life of the city.

Though my rural, northern New England upbringing was different in many ways from the urban Detroit childhood I imagine as I read May's poems, I feel a kinship with the speaker of *Hum* because he's engaged in an effort to understand what the city took from him, celebrate what it provided, and finally to take the measure of how much of that history to carry forward.

Having returned to what he once tried to escape, he seems to know—crucially—that he’s not helpless there, that he can to some extent now mediate what he keeps and what he keeps at a distance. And May’s speaker advises those he addresses to do the same.

In “Pomegranate Means Grenade,” May, like Phillips, offers a pained but hopeful call to arms, in this case to Jontae, a boy of eleven. Like many in the collection the poem begins with instructions: “Hold a pomegranate in your palm. / [...] Remember granada / means pomegranate and granada / means grenade because grenade / takes its name from the fruit.” Here we have a brief meditation on linguistic imperialism—a weapon appropriating its name from a fruit. But May also reveals the transformative and revelatory power of language, a weapon he will ask Jontae to choose over the grenade. Reflecting on the military’s practice of visiting schools to enlist young soldiers, the speaker hopes the boy will come to “carry verse as countermeasure to recruitment videos.” In a gesture of tenderness and solidarity, the poet addresses the child, extending to him a choice—and a power—that Jontae may not have understood he possessed, this “calligraphy of revolt”:

You stand nameless in front of a tank against
those who would rather see you pull a pin
from a grenade than pull a pen
from your backpack. Jontae,
they are afraid.

Here May asks Jontae to recognize the personal and political power of the pen, to turn the weapon back into fruit, a gesture of salvage that recurs throughout the collection.

If Jontae must learn to honor his own vision in order to avoid a deadly substitution, so must the speaker of these poems, who continually tries to distinguish inner voice from outer noise. The “hum” in May’s book is very often the voice of a mechanized world that speaks incessantly but appears unwilling or unable to listen. In “Hum of the Machine God,” a boy waits outside a garment factory for his mother to finish work. May tells us, “There isn’t much to discuss with the Machine / God, though its voice is hard to ignore.” The boy spends much of the poem wishing for the sea, emblem of escape and otherworldliness, but he can barely hear its siren call over the noise of machines.

Angry at a father who tries to school him to practicality and presence through violence (“*Boy, don’t ignore / me. A lip split open. Shovel.*”), the boy wishes for the snowblower to “take Father’s hand.” When it actually takes the man’s thumb, the boy wants to retract a voice and power that, like Jontae, he didn’t know he possessed: “*Ignore // my prayer, goes his stupid little prayer, please ignore / my voice.*” His mother, a skilled seamstress, taps her knitting needle in the waiting room, and the speaker imagines she wants to try her hand at reattaching his father’s severed thumb, but “the Machine God [. . .] ignores / the needle’s morse code prayer.”

May often configures the city as a trap—a “shuttered district,” a dark and jagged “room [he] could never leave.” But to focus too much on his depiction of Detroit as hellscape would represent both an oversimplification and an outright error. In *Hum*, May renders with intense lyricism details of decay that make the landscape rich if not beautiful. Its bubbling cyan and patchwork of pock, its smoke and crows and dirty snow, its shattered windshields and needles call us to attend their texture and reward us with their vivid bas-relief. May romanticizes nothing—but neither is Detroit, in any simple way, the villain of this book. Such an interpretation would ignore how internal the city becomes. The hum of the title isn’t simply around the speaker; it’s very much in him, and we understand, too, that May’s home is in his blood and bones. The poems enact and express ambivalence about this fact. The speaker of “The Hum of Zug Island” tells us his very body “is a building full of machines,” and in the collection’s gorgeous, heartbreaking final poem, “Ask What I’ve Been,” May writes, “There are days / I mourn being built // from this”—the “this” he refers to being wet cement, gravel, gravestone:

When I was a construction
crane, my balled fists

toppled buildings of boys,
I rifled through the pockets

of their ruins.
Ask what I’ve been. Detroit

is a stretch of highway littered
with windshield,

a boy picking the remains
of a window from his hair.

So clear here is the melding of boy and place—what he’s been and where he’s been one and the same. The line break after “Ask what I’ve been. Detroit” tells us all we need to know, and then we know it again when we see the boy picking remnants of Detroit from his hair. Some of what the city gets into him has to be picked out, discarded because it’s dangerous, ugly, silencing, but May tells us, “though all say the shelter is sparse [. . .] there is space here for bones— / a ribcage, brimming like yours.”

Detroit wrought May, who wrought *Hum*. The city put a song in him, and in his “excavation for spare parts,” I find much I recognize and even more for which I am grateful.



In *An American Childhood*, Annie Dillard says of her writing process, “Noticing and remembering everything would trap bright scenes to light and fill the blank and darkening past which was already piling up behind me.” She adds, “As a life’s work, I would remember everything—everything against loss.” Collectively, as we sift our experiences for what’s worth keeping, we enlarge the world for one another, so that I am, as I read, the policeman’s daughter in Tennessee becoming nothing “in the back of my father’s city-issue” or gingerly thumbing the bulge above my schoolmate’s kidney, where, painful and secret, “the teratoma hovered.” Or I am May’s “The Girl Who Builds Rockets from Bricks,” filling jelly jars with “broken glass, gravel, and fire ants.” As writers and readers, we are, as Phillips has it, “haunt[ing] our own lives with flashlights,” yes, but not so as to see only ourselves, save only ourselves. At the end of May’s “Aichmophobia / Fear of Needles,” the speaker intones, “I have come / to stitch all / this torn sky back together,” and I think, Yes. Yes, you have.