

1998.188.15.3 : *Intersex Person Lying on desk***‘No Image Available’**

Who. Are. You?

I wonder, if I could see you, would you fit the image I have for you in my mind? *Intersexed individual lying on a desk with legs raised and hands exposing genitals. On the desk is various scientific instruments and above is a wooden bookshelf.*

I know that you are in South Africa, that your photo was likely taken by (Sir?) George Albert Turner at the turn of the century, and that Turner was an expert on rinderpest and a Medical Superintendent at the Pretoria Leper Asylum from 1901 to 1908. I know that Turner was white, an expert on leprosy- something he contracted himself and that he eventually retired to Devon and died in 1915. That *you* were added to the collection in 1910, a donation from Turner himself.

I don't know you, though.

Who are you?

My immediate assumption is that you are likely black, someone who perhaps presents as female, but whose labia, clitoris or other ‘typical’ genitalia is shown in this image, alongside the rest of your intersex-body. (*Why do I assume this?*) There are other pictures, likely of you, in this collection. Your genitals being cup-ped by gloved hands, weighed and displayed as a medical peculiarity, or your body adorned with a necklace and a bracelet, you in front of a white background. You are on display, like many *Oddities of Nature*, but I cannot see you.

Is it my grotesque curiosity to *see* that drives my assumptions with you? Like when I try to -peak- a glimpse at displays being put up, changed, taken down, refurbished, at a museum – to try and look behind the curtain. I want to know what I cannot know.

But.

I think it is more than morbid curiosity, as to why I wonder who you are. It is a desire to see *the person*, not the description. ‘Intersexed Individual’.

Who are you?

You have no name, no identifiable features except that you are intersex in some manner. Are you young, or are you old? What life have you lived; will you live? How do you identify, what gender were you raised to confirm to?

Why do I almost envy you, living before surgery became the norm. You didn't encounter a Phall-O-Meter as a babe, yet you likely were subjected to prods and measurements and harsh lights as 'medical professionals' explored your body before you were old enough to explore it yourself. (*Were your parents supportive?*).

It almost makes me want to laugh. Not knowing you but knowing you all the same. You, being unrepresented to me visually now for whatever reason it is (*did someone complain? are the images that upsetting? Or have they just not had a chance to be uploaded yet?*) I wonder if you hid your body, or if your life was full if *prodding* and *poking* the whole time?

(Breathe)

Did you know that in the coming decade, someone would 'invent' a system of measuring newborn babies genitalia for determining sex, and if it was in a 'grey' zone, they'd perform surgery to alter it to an acceptable length? The 'Optimal Gender Policy', it was called. It still happens now, with or without parent's knowledge, a doctor can take away a baby with 'ambiguous gender' and alter their genitalia to fit the right proportions. The NHS still does this, to 'normalise' a child, it was only last year that it was discussed ending 'Differences in Sex Development' surgeries till children were old enough to consent. These surgeries can't be undone, and children are often never told that they've had these surgeries. [04:15] And often, these surgeries cause issues in later life, from loss of sensation to gender dysphoria (I know of a few people who, after coming out as transgender, it was revealed they were born intersex and the gender they identify as now was taken away from them without their ability to consent. Their identity was decided by someone who claimed they knew better).

(Breathe)

Are you angry at Turner, taking these photos of you? I can feel waves of humiliation, his baring drive to take these 'medical images', as you are forced to lay yourself, display yourself, and show your intimacies to the world. I wonder if these photos of you are truly medical, or if crude eroticism is enforced onto you, cup-ping you as you stand there. Were you treated like a peer, human being? I cannot see your eyes to tell.

(Breathe)

I'd like to imagine you, perhaps, portrayed as a *Sleeping Hermaphroditus*, instead of a person made to expose their genitals. Maybe, I am had let my assumptions run too long, too harsh, too negative. Perhaps Turner was kind with you, that these photos were not taken without consent, but instead were taken as a celebration of your body. Perhaps, these photographs were designed to celebrate your body, a modern *Hermaphroditus*, the jewels adorning your being to highlight your beauty.

But, I cannot help but be swayed away from these hopeful fancies. I am all too aware of how intersex people have been treated, throughout history and up to the very moments these words leave my li-ps.

(Breathe)

Despite South Africa being the first country to explicitly include intersex people in anti-discrimination laws, there are still reports of traditional healers, midwives and birth attendants attempting to kill babies that are visibly intersex, they are often seen as bad luck, taboo. And despite my desires, attempts, to see goodness in people, I know how colonialists treated those they decided to colonise- I know how rampant racism and exotic-exploitation-ism has been throughout history. I can only hope that you were not paraded around conferences, not displayed to be gawked at.

What is your name?

I wonder if Turner even knew your name, if he still remembered it when he donated his photographs to the collection. Did you get a chance to introduce yourself, or were you simply instructed (forced?) into position for these photos?

(Breathe)

I have wondered, whilst looking at this description, this *no image available*, this page, if it is for the best that I do not know you, do not know who you are. I wonder if these images being unavailable to me, on my computer, on my mobile phone, allows your resistance and dignity to remain, or if you would prefer for yourself to be shown to the world- let them know *who you are* and *what they took*, in these tiny 76-millimetre square photos, let them try to see how your intersex body presents itself. "*Squint at me, and look at my body, look me in the eyes as I expose my labia or clitoris or cunt or testes or dick, to you. Are you uncomfortable, yet?*"

(Breathe)

Some say an image captures your soul. Perhaps in not seeing *you*, you prevent us from claiming your soul too, alongside your vulnerabilities. Perhaps it is best that we do not know, who you are, after all.