

Dance Me, Ghost

Letters about Ghosts, improvisation, memories and dancing

One need not be a chamber—to be haunted—

One need not be a House—

The Brain—has Corridors surpassing

Material Place—

Far safer, of a Midnight—meeting

External Ghost—

Than an Interior—confronting—

That cooler—Host—

Far safer, through an Abbey—gallop—

The Stones a'chase—

Than moonless—One's A'self encounter—

In lonesome place—

Ourself—behind Ourself—Concealed—

Should startle—most—

Assassin—hid in Our Apartment—

Be Horror's least—

The Prudent—carries a Revolver—

He bolts the Door,

O'erlooking a Superior Spectre

More near—

From The Poems of Emily Dickinson Variorum Edition, ed. R. W. Franklin, 3 vols (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1998).

To Corrado

I believe you have listened to me very little since we first met. Perhaps we weren't even aware that we would share a life together, or perhaps you simply didn't expect me to enter your life with such force and violence. In those solitary summers we were always together, spending our days exploring new paths through the woods, lying on freshly cut meadows reading books you thought would make you seem more intelligent in others' eyes, running and throwing ourselves into nettles because we had gotten lost and needed to get home before sunset or there would be trouble. I was with you, I still am today, but just as yesterday, we have spoken to each other tremendously little — not because I didn't want to (after all, I live inside you), but because you didn't want to hear anything beyond your own ideas. How much you sought me out on those nights when, surrounded by all those people you desperately wanted to love you, we were alone and alike, closer and equal. Only in those moments could I tell you how absent you were from the reality you lived in — there we were a single being and I finally felt conjoined.

Driving through the night on the way home, you dreamed of a thousand futures that would change your life — loves, friendships, no more loneliness and pain, no more being different, no more feeling like the only one. Seeing you like that always broke my heart, and I would spend my nights visiting those futures you gave yourself over to, because perhaps I could help you see something you hadn't (or didn't want to) see yet.

That's why sometimes you couldn't feel me inside you — but I would return soon, hoping to communicate what I had seen, even knowing how terribly incapable you are of listening to me. Over all these years, though, I have understood that the only way I have of speaking to you is to manifest myself through the presence or absence of others. Let me explain. Living your futures without being able to tell you about them is harrowing, and the only solution I've found is to make you see them through other people. To put you in communication with them, to place in their eyes those paths that lead you toward curiosity, toward action, toward being truly yourself. In short, I have decided to translate all of this into an instrument — social enough to give you the possibility of seeing with your own eyes all these futures you have lost, perhaps to reclaim them, or perhaps to finally let them go. How much you need it! As fond as I am of you, I too would need to be let go. I have a life too, after all! To live inside you as a memory and finally rest — that's what I'd want. But then again, how can I leave us alone. I am about to show you something. Have faith.

Your ghost

To Sara

We were playing at a very chic sushi restaurant in the center of Milan — the usual gig, decent pay, dinner included, definitely better than a lot of things we've done together. You had found that contact, perhaps because you've always managed to project more presence when it came to closing work deals. And it was always you who spoke with the manager, our "boss" who told us when to come, what to do, and how long to play. When at the end of one evening I tried to speak with him myself, to work out an arrangement for future gigs, I remember with absolute clarity his gaze after my words — long, silent — before turning toward you and answering my question. We laughed, shocked, for two weeks about this, and especially about how I joked that I was a ghost in your presence. As surreal as it was, I — invisible — truly felt it. All evening, I felt no presence of my own. All evening, playing alongside you, I kept wondering whether you could actually hear me, or whether my sound and my ideas had become part of my being a ghost — or simply a trace of me arriving from god knows where.

I wonder now how my non-presence made you feel. Whether for you I was there or not, or somewhere in between, as if something were pulling me elsewhere. It happened many other times — that I would suddenly vanish around you, even though you could see me, speak to me, touch me. Becoming a ghost is one of the reasons our friendship no longer has a place, a point of contact, even though I can feel your presence watching me with affection, anger, friendship, and passion. Did you feel it in our music too? Is it possible for sound to arrive, even when the one who produces it has lost their body?

Do you remember when we talked about Morton Feldman and his words about Rothko — about how he composed because he didn't yet know what music truly was? That evening I felt an even deeper question: not so much what making music really means, but whether my creative gesture was truly perceived in reality, or was merely an echo, a breath, a distant hum from someone who no longer exists. I also wonder how much you tried to be with the ghost I was in that moment, or whether it was simply easier to feel a presence without seeing it.

If I had spoken to you then about Derrida and his theory of hauntology, you would probably have been bored to death — but there is one thing I would have wanted you to feel: *"We must speak of the ghost, indeed to the ghost and with it."* Your words never reached the ghost I was, and perhaps that is why we couldn't hold on to each other the way we would have wanted.

Since that moment, my ghost has often come back to visit me — and so I wanted to build something that gives sonic form to those who have lost their body, or are losing it; something that makes you ask what meaning the music I produce has, whose sound it is that I hear, what the other feels watching me become a ghost, and what I feel watching them lose their body. Who knows — perhaps one day you too will be a ghost like me, maybe dancing together on my new toy.

To Temporanea, (Stefano, Sophie, Ignat, Timm, Mona and Clara)

I arrived in Basel in the midst of a deep identity crisis about who I was as a musician: composer? Guitarist? Improviser? Something else? I arrived in Basel also carrying all the hopes of finding answers to these questions — and with a speed I had never experienced before, I found a group of people with whom I am still today exploring one of those paths. The role of improviser never stuck to me with conviction, most likely due to a prejudice instilled in me by institutions that wanted a certain kind of direction, and by the few groups I frequented at the beginning of my studies — but I have always found fascinating the possibility of communicating and interacting freely, without a language or barriers defined by communities and places that don't belong to me. The inability to feel part of a group despite being physically present within it. And here my ghost kicks again, making itself heard ever more loudly! But it is I, on this point, who have found a solution that allows us to communicate — because without language barriers, sharing with others becomes a matter of listening practices, and through these practices my sound no longer dissolves into the echo of my immateriality, but plants itself firmly in the ground, and to the plant that grows from it, I hold on tight.

All this talk of improvisation would mean nothing had I not encountered a series of people with whom to share this growth — people who over time have become one of the groups with whom I feel the most affinity and in whom I believe deeply: Temporanea. Sharing a musical space with them has opened a profound dimension of identity for me, a dimension I still hold close today, aware that I and my ghost (or more precisely, I and my presence) can find a balance precisely within this improvisational space. Improvisation as instantaneous movement, totally present, as a performance of listening, of attention, of inhabited spaces. I wonder how my ghost inhabits these spaces — I can see it playful, free to explore, to rest, no longer always cast in the role of teacher, but of curious listener.

When we played at the Bird's Eye in Basel, for instance, I felt a sensation opposite to the one I feel when I am completely inhabited by the ghost — an abundance of presence (perhaps even too much at times), almost as if I could shake off the exhaustion of having no voice, no body, in so many everyday situations. I never sensed the ghosts of the others either, and I imagine now that they all went off together to celebrate their distance from their respective hosts — a sort of ethereal Saturday night.

The secret, I believe, ultimately lies in the gesture, in performance, in using my body to produce, in touching other producers like myself, in vibrating, in perceiving music. If my new instrument could speak, I am certain it would be happy to always be inhabited by different hands improvising upon it.

To Maya,

The day after my 29th birthday you asked me if I wanted to come and dance Balfolk with you. I, who had never been particularly interested in dance until recently — more from an analytical perspective, looking for new means of expression, than from any real engagement with dancing itself. My thesis concert, after all, featured three dancers improvising on a composition of mine dedicated to Calvino's fantastic animals, and it was precisely in one section of that concert that ghosts appeared. That evening I oscillated between agitation and a curiosity to share something entirely new with you — something in which I know for certain I am extremely clumsy and shy, to the point of disappearing into a corner most of the times I have gone dancing. But the desire that evening was different. It was a desire to feel my body, to touch the bodies of strangers of every shape, age, and size, to touch skin, to feel the air shift with every movement, to breathe in labored breaths and listen to laughter mixed with music.

While I danced with great difficulty and embarrassment, I kept telling myself that if I truly wanted to explore movement and the connections it has with sound and music, I needed to be an active part of these gestures — there was no other way. Here too, my ghost was asking for sharing, asking for a body, asking that dance (or better still, movement) be its own, be part of my story. Watching you disappear among the crowd and spin with an enviable confidence and elegance made me reflect on how much moving through a space can bring surprising emotions and memories to the surface — as if by touching other people, I became more aware of my body and consequently unlocked parts of my memory that would otherwise remain inaccessible.

Perhaps contact awakens the ghosts that dwell within me? Are memories not themselves the definition of something that is present, and at the same time absent? I wonder if all it takes is this funny spinning among bodies to discover something we don't quite know how to name. I like to think so. Just as I like to think that spinning faster and faster, dancing for hours, one can lose one's own body — and that only the ghost remains. Losing one's physicality, leaving only a trace of what was danced before.

I hope that when people dance on my instrument, they might lose themselves in the touch of another.

To Pikqo, Jules, Cristina, Delilah, André and who ever would like to research about Ghosts,

I am writing you this letter because I know you are curious people who love books, papers, thoughts, ideas, writing — and everything that digs deep inside us. I hope you will share these words with your own ghosts as much as I did with mine.

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