

love poem with ectoplasmic materializations

I am taking darkroom classes at a community art center in South Philadelphia. Each class is 12 consecutive hours long. Across 12 hours of standing quietly under the darkroom safelight to the ambient sound of burbling water, you get to know what other people are doing. One woman is taking photographs of bridges all over Pennsylvania. A man is developing landscapes he shot at Zion and Bryce Canyon. Another is printing giant portraits of his toddler picking a flower or having her hair braided.

My plan was to learn this process then set up my own darkroom at home, eliminating the trek to South Philly and difficult class schedule. But I have found myself reluctant to give up these 12-hour vigils of quiet making in the company of others. I like the feel of our shared expectancy at the developing bath as we watch our images appear.

I am self-conscious about my photos. When asked what they are, I give answers meant to conclude. “Uh, I’m very new at this,” or “I’m trying to learn the camera” or maybe, “I’m experimenting with Victorian spiritualist photos.”

There’s an answer I withhold because I’m discovering it as I go, and I don’t want to seem strange, even among these alchemists:

I am staging *Hamlet* in my attic.

∴ ∴ ∴

Check clock.
Use tongs to pick up print.
Let drip (do not shake).
Place gently in next bath.
Check clock.
Return tongs to lip of first bath tray.
Do not contaminate second bath with tongs from first bath.
Pick up tongs from lip of new bath tray.
Check clock.
Agitate.
Repeat.
Repeat.
Repeat.
Repeat.

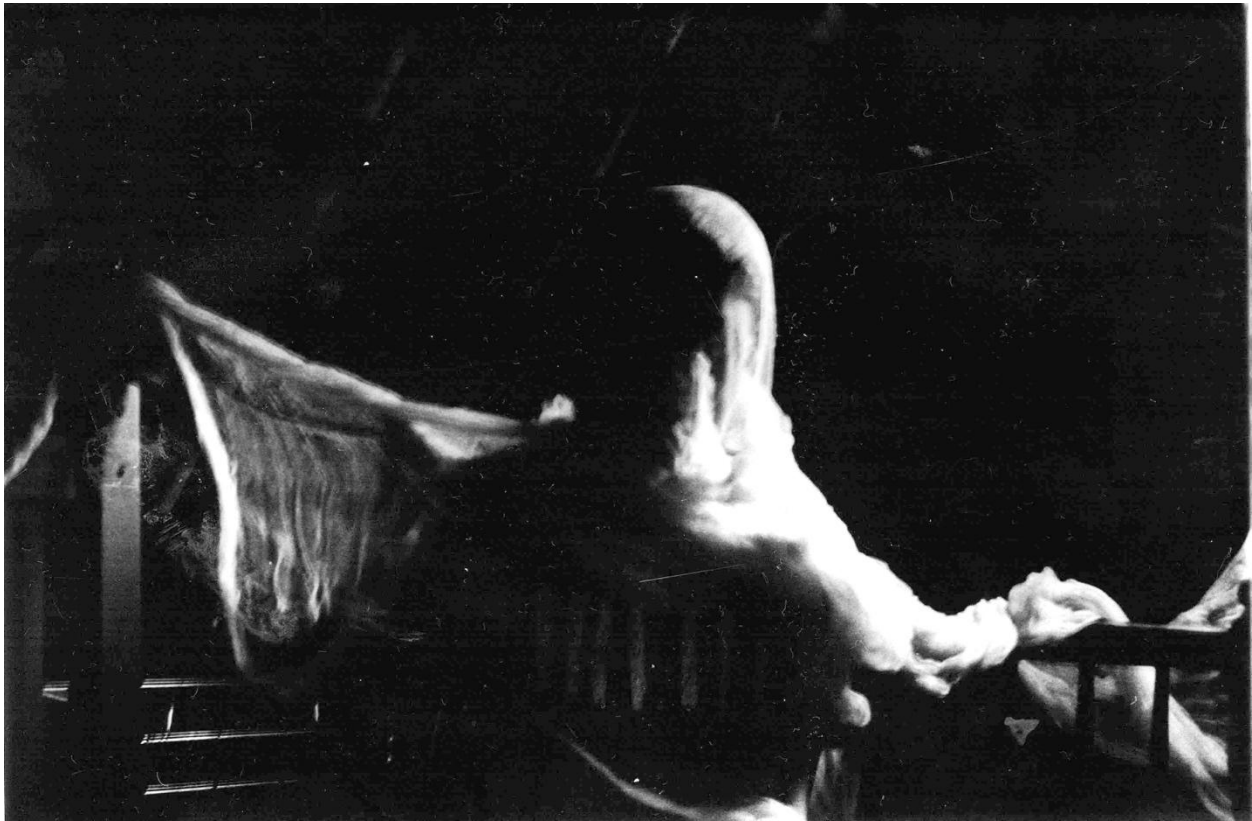
This is the correct procedure for communicating with the dead.

∴ ∴ ∴

There is only one actor, my fourteen-year-old son, Adam. I am the director, or am I the Ghost? There are too many ghosts to keep track of. It’s possible that all of us are Hamlet.

∴ ∴ ∴

“Eva C. produced only phenomena of materialization, which included so-called ectoplasmic images or forms. Plunged into a state of trance, accompanied by cries of pain, fits, and convulsions—whose violence recalled that of giving birth (the term ‘mediumistic labor’ was used)—the young woman would extrude, mainly from her mouth, but also sometimes from her navel or between her legs, a continually evolving ectoplasmic substance. At first this substance was barely visible, ‘optically diffuse.’ It began as ‘cloud- or vapor-like shapes,’ then turned into ‘amorphous coagulated masses’ or an ‘extremely fine, membranous veil, like a cobweb.’ [...] It had a ‘viscous, reptilian consistency’ and remained closely attached to the medium, both physically and psychically. In the final stage of its development it was possible to glimpse figurative forms within it, resembling limbs or heads. The latter at first looked like flat portraits, then would acquire volume, ultimately appearing in the form of three-dimensional faces. On rare occasions the materialization would evolve fully to form an entire body.”¹



∴ ∴ ∴

Our house was built in 1931, a mock Tudor. The attic is huge and dark with only two small windows, one crowded by our boxes of things. I choose an area under the other, empty but for an

¹ Andreas Fischer, “The Reciprocal Adaptation of Optics and Phenomena: The Photographic Recording of Materializations” in *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*, ed. Clément Chéroux et al. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004), 171-216, 178. Fischer quotes phrases from Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, *Materialisations-Phänomene* (Munich: Verlag Ernst Reinhardt, 1914).

old bench and Adam's disassembled crib and mattress. We tried to donate this years ago, but it's hard to give away a used crib. (because a used crib has no safelight.)

I ask Adam if it's weird to leave his crib in the photographic frame. He says it's weird.

Location: as found.

Setting: an attic in the suburbs or a platform in Elsinore.

Set: under a window, a crib, a spirit cabinet.



∴ ∴ ∴

“Performance genealogies draw on the idea of expressive movements as mnemonic reserves, including patterned movements made and remembered by bodies, residual movements retained

implicitly in images or words (or in the silences between them), and imaginary movements dreamed in minds not prior to language but constitutive of it.”²

∴ ∴ ∴

Adam is a musician. When he found this out in eighth grade, after drifting through middle school in search of himself and others like him, I wept with relief. Our years of pleading for him to speak up

(born with a tongue-tie that had to be cut free

) and now he fills the house with nimble guitar and a powerful, rasping baritone, all guts and gravel. Relief coming out my eyes and nose:

This boy is going to be okay. Not all boys will be, but this one will.



∴ ∴ ∴

Take light meter reading near primary subject.
Observe possible range for f-stops and shutter speeds.

² Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), 26.

Choose f-stop and shutter speed. This choice may or may not be the right one. You will not know until a different day and room.

Speak chosen f-stop and shutter speed aloud repeatedly so as not to lose hold of them. Unspoken, they can disappear.

If the mouth forgets.

Return to tripod, repeating.

Turn off light meter and turn on flashlight.

Adjust f-stop and shutter speed using flashlight.

Say the words and do the things while saying. This improves efficacy of incantation.

If the hand forgets, there is nothing but darkness. Or nothing but light.

Turn off flashlight.

Whisper into camera.

Look through viewfinder.

Adjust focus.

Tell Hamlet not to move.

Press shutter release.

∴ ∴ ∴

He will listen to a song on repeat for a week as we drive back and forth to school. Then it will enter the repertoire, and he will play it till it's his. This week the song is "Something in the Way" from Nirvana's *MTV Unplugged* recording. I ask him what he thinks the song is about. "A homeless person," he answers. "Yes. I wonder if it's also using homelessness as a metaphor?" "For what?" he asks.

I describe depression. We talk about Kurt Cobain. I want to spare him the ending, but he already knows it.

That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once.

∴ ∴ ∴



Is not parchment made of sheepskins?

Ghost cries under the stage.

∴ ∴ ∴

“The Hamilton photographs were taken during a period of experimentation beginning in 1923 and continuing into the 1940s, when the family came to believe that human personalities could survive death and that [...] discarnate spirits could communicate with the living. [...] The ‘spirit’ communications transcribed were often playful, teasing comments between the father and the deceased son, Arthur, who succumbed to influenza when he was three years old but who continued to grow up in the spirit world. These intimate conversations and the photographs of the Hamilton children [...] give us [...] a sense of grieving practices after the devastating losses [*sic*] of the influenza pandemic. [...] Hamilton was steadfast that controlled experimentation could be used to test for discarnate transcendental personalities communicating through a medium, and he released photographs out into the world as evidence.”³

³ Serena Keshavjee, “Science and Sentiment in the Hamilton Family Fonds,” *The Art of Ectoplasm: Encounters with Winnipeg’s Ghost Photographs*, ed. Serena Keshavjee (Manitoba: U of Manitoba P, 2023), 1-20, 2, 7, 8.

∴ ∴ ∴

Adam works on the song. Several days in, he tells me he is afraid he might have depression.

I am not afraid he might have depression, but he is clearly shaken. I fold him into the pose we made when he was small, drawing him into me and closing around him, though he is taller than I am now and bigger-boned. I explain that he has been playing a song written by a profoundly depressed person and singing that person's words over and over, and sometimes when you do this—when you let someone else's words and feelings and movements inside you—it becomes difficult to tell the difference between you and them. I explain that this is empathy, and it's miraculous and delicate. When you make art, I explain, you must be careful about where you end and someone else begins.



∴ ∴ ∴

VOICE OF CRIB

But look, amazement on thy sweet son sits.
O, step between him and his fighting soul.
Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works.
Speak to him, Gertrude.

∴ ∴ ∴

“For [Albert von Schrenck-Notzing], the suspect nature of the ectoplasmic substance was to be regarded as a characteristic of the mediumistic creative process itself. [...] The fact that some of the materializations appeared to have been retouched, drawn, or even painted, could be explained, according to him, by the ‘action of an unknown law of nature.’ Indeed, he deduced from this that mediumistic activity was akin to the process of artistic creation, and that the formation of materializations proceeded from a [...] desire to produce art on the part of the medium. Schrenck-Notzing thus described some ideoplasties [...] as the fruit of a ‘supreme artistic intelligence.’”⁴



∴ ∴ ∴

when you make art
or when you love someone
more than your own
anythingeverything

∴ ∴ ∴

⁴ Fischer 179-80.

We have been collaborating for fourteen years and nine months. I tell him what I imagine I am doing or trying to do and why. He is patient with me, cotton in his mouth and nose, the attic uncomfortably cold.

When we begin the last roll of film, he hauls three guitars up the stairs, along with other carefully chosen props, to stage scenes of his direction. It's his turn, in the attic's waning light, to theorize with pictures.

I photograph. His compositions collect the idiom of our work into his own:

Ectoplasm, umbilical cord. Tether. Parasite. Puppet string. Lightning bolt.

To touch and be touched. To move through.



∴ ∴ ∴

“The repertoire [...] enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge. Repertoire, etymologically ‘a treasure, an inventory,’ also allows for individual agency, referring also to ‘the finder, discoverer,’ and meaning ‘to find out.’ The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there,’ being a part of the transmission. As opposed to the supposedly stable objects in the archive, the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same. The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning.”⁵

∴ ∴ ∴

I pray thee stay with us. Go not to



⁵ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), 20.

∴ ∴ ∴

developer 1 min 30 sec (agitate)

stop bath 30 sec (agitate)

fixer 1 min for test strips (agitate); 3 min for full fix (not necessary to agitate)

final wash 5 min

∴ ∴ ∴

I want you to hear his voice so that you can feel him the way I do.

You will never feel him the way I do.



∴ ∴ ∴

Notes

Photos taken with vintage Canon F-1 camera (c. 1980), Ilford HP5 Plus 35mm black and white film, ISO 400, from November 2025 – January 2026. Hand-processed in darkroom. Original prints 6x9”.

Thanks to teacher-photographer Ahmed Salvador, Fleisher Art Memorial, and Kate Bolton Bonnici.