

The Footsteps of Our Ghosts

*To return and escape and return and escape again.* At the tail-end of 2023, a year that, despite its continued proximity, seems to have taken place decades ago, I published an essay titled 'The Reminiscence Bump'. The title of that text, now the title of this exhibition, refers to the well-documented tendency for adults to preserve a disproportionate number of memories originating in adolescence and early adulthood. Were you to trace your 'life-span retrieval curve', a graph visualising the quantity of autobiographical memories encoded at various ages, you would find within the smooth waves of the line three distinct stages of life: childhood amnesia, a shallow incline from birth to age five; the reminiscence bump, an exaggerated peak nestled between the teens and mid-twenties; and a protracted period of forgetting, articulated through an inevitable decline from the thirties to the present, when the recency effect takes hold. For reasons that remain contested, it is within that central stage, that essential yet terrifying realm of adolescence, that life imprints itself upon us with the most pressure. Perhaps it's because, during those developmental years, we feel the world more keenly. Perhaps it's because we're learning what it is to feel. Or perhaps it's because we know we'll need to feel that way in the future.

These reminiscences are (re)ignited, often unintentionally, by an array of innocuous things. A sensation, a sentence, a surname overheard. A smell, a sound, a song. Indeed, that original essay was, in so many words, a text on music and memory, on music and going back, on music as home. *To return and escape and return and escape again.* That line, embedded in a concluding paragraph written through and in response to the Pennsylvanian pop-punk band The Wonder Years and the writer Hanif Abdurraqib, established music as a place in which to seek and take refuge from the present: 'Music, our chosen music, allows us to come back home, even at a distance, even for a moment. It allows us to locate ourselves, to reaffirm our place.' *To return and escape and return and escape again.* Upon reflection (alas, having reminisced), I realise that I was never writing about home, not in isolation. I was writing, rather, by way of that pendulous, recurring phrase, by way of an over-romanticisation of the psychological phenomenon that is the reminiscence bump, by way of a catalogue of arranged words that failed to conceal an underlying sense of longing, about homesickness.

Homesickness, to be homesick: it is a misnomer. It suggests, in those foundational four letters, in those two vowels and two consonants set down with such precision, in the image you now have of your parents waving to you from either side of your front door, a front door that is itself flanked by shrubbery or mud-laden boots or terracotta requiems for family pets long passed, that we are talking of a place. A residence. A dwelling. A better time within solid walls. ('We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection', Gaston Bachelard writes. 'Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home.') But when we are homesick, we aren't thinking of the hearth, the dining room table, the childhood bedroom that wears the memory of the tape that once fixed now-forgotten posters to the walls. Rather, we are homesick for early iterations of ourselves: versions we have grown distant from; versions whose paths we have opted not to follow; versions we have sacrificed in favour of whatever life has left us feeling homesick in the first place. We aren't longing for the posters on the walls, but the person who fixed the tape on each of their corners.

If this sounds overly melancholic, it is by design: to be homesick is to be nostalgic; to be nostalgic, that most egregious of human conditions, is to lament that which was, and may one day have been, but is no longer. (As is well known but worth reiterating, the entwined roots of the word nostalgia are *nostos* [return] and *algos* [pain].) It is to fraternise, wilfully or otherwise, with ghosts. It is for this reason that the likes of John Hodgman too hastily denounce nostalgia as 'a toxic impulse': 'It is the twinned, yearning delusion that (a) the past was better (it wasn't) and (b) it can be recaptured.' For the thing about ghosts, even those who are friendly, even those who, having shimmered their way through your chest, bring warmth to your heart, is that they can only ever be if they cannot be any longer. They only are if they are not. They are not. They are an absence, personified. They (are a) lack. Thus, to ruminate on childhood or adolescence, to rifle through disintegrating memories (of images, sounds or scents; of TV shows, movies, concerts, radio broadcasts or objects discarded; of loved ones lost when perhaps they should not have been), is to acknowledge the enduring presence of that

absence – thereby, counterintuitively, giving presence to absence and absence to presence. It is to concede that where there once was something, or most likely someone, almost certainly someone, there has now opened up a void that, not for want of trying, you simply cannot bring yourself to fill – not to the edges.

But there is something, surely, to be gleaned from our chronic refusal, or perhaps our deeply human inability, to abandon our ghosts. (For if you show me a person who lives solely in the present, I will show you a heartless being and I will call him a liar.) Undoubtedly, we reminisce in order to learn more about ourselves. To reconnect and reassure. To bring comfort at times of discontinuity. But our willingness to walk amongst these past versions of our selves, to live vicariously through the variety of lives that were ultimately unfulfilled, also belies a restlessness with the possibilities, the potential or the potency of the present. ‘The kind of melancholia I’m talking about’, writes Mark Fisher, a man who knew melancholia more intimately than most, ‘consists not in giving up on desire but in refusing to yield’. He continues: ‘It consists, that is to say, in a refusal to adjust to what current conditions call “reality” – even if the cost of that refusal is that you feel like an outcast in your own time.’ In this sense, one might argue that reminiscence, nostalgia, haunting, homesickness, or any other synonym, when conducted wilfully, is in fact a rebellious act at its core, one that belies a discontentment with both the present and its purported incontestability – a refusal to yield, as Fisher says. The question then, is what are you rebelling against, and in whose name?

In a word: time. In a sentence: to entertain ghosts is to pose a small yet essential challenge to the presumed linearity of time itself, to the authority of ongoingness, to the parochial nature of ‘the present’. To revisit – thus reanimate – that which has been lost, those myriad futures that have not come to pass, in spite of the suffering that is inherent to that act, in spite of the painful admission or realisation that we have figuratively put to death a thing that deserved to live for far longer, is to declare that one’s immediate situation is, in some way, in a brave way, lacking. It is to find within the past something that could alter or augment the present, thereby casting doubt over its very status as a truly ‘past’ thing. It is to understand that time is out of joint. Time is all over. Dyschronia rules. Or, as Friedrich Hölderlin wrote in a fragment that sought me out while constructing this text, ‘Mein Herz schwimmt in Zeit.’ *My heart swims in time*. Swims in time. Not present time, nor a short moment therein, but time in all of its complete and all-encompassing all-overness. *All of the time, all of the time*. The poet Anne Carson, in response to Hölderlin’s sentence, writes: ‘time now it is in layers, I move through the layers, I move through the layers and I find one connected to another by staircases that surprise me because I didn’t build any staircases’. We do not build them, but they are there, always, one connected to another connected to another, the patina of their steps growing increasingly faded under the footsteps of our ghosts: reluctant to let us, or to be let, go.

Harry Thorne