

Writing about the ungraspable: silence as the spatiality of corporeality

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Biography

Kirsi Heimonen, DA (Dance) is an artist-researcher currently acting as a university researcher at the Centre for Artistic Research (CfAR) at the University of the Arts, in Helsinki, Finland. In her artistic research during recent years, she has been intrigued by the issues of slowness, silence and insanity. She is a certified teacher of the Skinner Releasing Technique, a somatic practice that has heavily influenced her artistic research.

Abstract

Writing about the ungraspable: silence as the spatiality of corporeality circles around the notion of silence by letting language move and resonate something of the experiences of moving in the context of a somatic practice, the Skinner Releasing Technique. The article meanders around notions like spatiality, stillness, listening, letting go, and the disappearance of the known 'I' in approaching attainable silence in an artistic study.

Keywords

Silence, spatiality of corporeality, the Skinner Releasing Technique, writing

This article by an artist-researcher circles around silence as ungraspable, although lived in the flesh. It offers ways to approach silence while admitting that it can never be known. In particular, it illuminates how a specific orientation embedded in a somatic movement technique, the Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT) has changed the ways in which one can experience one's corporeality and the world. It is about how this technique influences the mover's way of experiencing in the lengthy process of practising it. This practice is taken as an artistic method in an artistic study of the notion of silence that opens up the spatiality of corporeality. The lived spatiality that continuously folds and unfolds in and around corporeality has led me, as a practitioner, to unknown realms of silence. And, in particular, it has blurred the outlines of the known I, paving new ways to be in contact with the world, including in artworks, such as a short video about approaching a tree that brings simplicity into movement.

Silence is understood not only as soundless but also as a fundamental phenomenon, an ontological condition that determines language, meaning, and communication (Kûle, 2002, p.116). The chosen theoretical background has been selected based on the idea of the resonance of corporeality, since lived experiences guide the way, and especially within the context of SRT¹ including theory it contains. However, conversations with writers like Simone Weil or Maurice Blanchot also serve as signposts in the article. Alongside SRT, writing is a method of inquiry, in which attuning to the spatiality of corporeality happens through language. In writing, the connection between experience and language is valued, and language is not present merely to inform or define a phenomenon, since it is also about meandering, and its resonance may offer something beyond individual experience (Pylkkö, 1998). This non-personal quality or intensity in experience is something that is embedded in this artistic study. I am not the sole authority of lived experiences, since art processes lead into obscure and contingent realms, where the boundaries of corporeality keep on shifting and disappearing. Experience is formed in the spatiality of corporeality through moving. This article is fragmentary in its structure and in its use of

reference literature, since the process of attuning and listening to voids and gaps in and around corporeality avoids linearity.

Since lived experiences with SRT escape linearity and coherence, they emerge as if out of nowhere yet leave traces of wonderment, questions without specific answers, only proposals. This somatic practice eventually directed me to things one cannot fully grasp and brought about disorientation, although it can be taken simply as a dance technique to improve alignment and the letting go of tension towards effortless movement (Skura, 1990). The technique foregrounds a first-person perspective; hence I can only tell of my own experiences of this corporeality, the reverberations from the flesh that is not known. While the circular, spiral movement in the present writing is not meant to confuse, notions of spatiality, stillness, listening, and letting go constantly recur in discussing lived silence. This spiral way of writing has its origin in the practice of SRT, in which the principles of the technique are cultivated over and over again, and while moving and writing differ in their realities, something emanates from one to the other (Heimonen, 2009).

However, to communicate something of the elusiveness of experiences with SRT, words are needed in approaching silence as the spatiality of corporeality. Or perhaps it is wholly unethical to write something of silence, since silence exists as underlying resource, the bedrock of existence that cannot be grasped or forced to appear, and that can even be betrayed by words.

Beginnings, only

Silence is impossible, yet that is why one desires it (Blanchot 1986, p. 11). This impossibility has led to approaching the unattainability of silence through corporeality, not, however, to grasping, holding or knowing it. This ungraspability of silence, and the notion of letting go in SRT has emptied me of things I thought I knew. It has questioned my habits of perception, moving and thinking. The contours of the known have blurred. To confess one's inadequacy, to

fall into an abyss and experience total disorientation has been far from a success story.

Afterwards, one can trace some conditions in this artistic study that serve as a way of attuning to silence. First, it was necessary to pause. SRT classes mostly start by lying on the floor, and listening to the instructions on realizing a particular kind of attunement, a way of being in the world, so that the principles of the technique such as letting go, multidirectional alignment, maintaining a watchful state, effortless effort and suppleness, gradually become embedded in corporeality and guide one's perceptions (Dempster, 1996; Lepkoff, 1999). The primary principle of SRT, which interlock with all the other principles, is letting go, which entails giving up one's habits and conventions, ranging from stiff muscles to ways of thinking, everything that prevents one perceiving what is unfolding in each moment (Heimonen, 2019). To let the 'I' disappear even momentarily – and to loosen its constraints – is an ethical act that provides space for non-knowledge. This is a continuing process: my practice of SRT has already lasted over 15 years, including teacher training in the technique. It also brings an alertness that encourages a questioning of one's actions time and time again. Pausing has given way to passivity as in-action, to attentive listening, waiting and letting one's movement emerge from one's perception (Heimonen, Kaverma & Vehviläinen, 2018).

Again, and again, as a site of unknown waters, dwelling in silent shadows, the principle of letting go is attached to this study, a kind of waiting without a goal in the manner of the characters in Samuel Becket's play *Waiting for Godot*. To approach silence or, better, to wait passively as in in-active action calls for letting go. Weil (2009, pp. 111–12) has described how to wait without seeking anything involves suspending one's thoughts. Despite uttering the invitation to silence, it may not appear.

This journey has been a meandering to nowhere, and yet perpetual movement from somewhere to nowhere happens; one is part of a happening that continuously unfolds in ways which are hidden before they are experienced. The abandonment of will and control is – and will re-

main – a difficult task. The notion of lived silence has shown me some ways of cultivating and dwelling in the spatiality of corporeality, and it has unsettled previous modes of experiencing.

One aspect of this technique is that I am (already and finally) taken over by it; I am being shaped by its way of being in the world that is specific and differs from other somatic practices like the Feldenkreis or Klein techniques that I have practised for longer than SRT. At first, the practice of SRT evaded corporeality. Eventually, however, its practice unsettled previous ways of experiencing, from which there is no way back. However, the criticism levelled at somatic practices of invoking self-centredness and their inability to offer means of applying the resulting corporeal knowledge in everyday life and social situations does not tally with my experiences (Eddy, 2002; Rouhiainen, 2008). On the contrary, SRT has transformed the way I am in the world, of the world, since the opening up of the self happens simultaneously internally and externally. And while the danger of falling into (new) habits exists, the technique remains alive in its corporeality, reminding one of its potential without conscious thought. The way of perceiving – or becoming the perception – has changed. It has become more intimate, detailed, airy.

Spatiality of corporeality

Spatiality exists as a lived notion of the silence of corporeality, and something of its importance is described in the following notes made after one SRT class:

And suddenly, almost at the end of the class, silence arrived moving in between corporealities, evolving, enlarging, landing without settling down. Slipping to dwell in my shaft-like space, which is no longer mine, making this spatiality something else, the separation and belonging dissolve, the traces of silence can be sensed in the air. Being in and of that stillness, just standing, is everything and nothing. The infinity of the caverns inside open to a horizon that is unheard, not felt, yet somehow lived.

It is as if something keeps on moving, resonating, lingering in the corridors, gaps and windows in the vastness of corporeality, making me transparent and at the same time part of it, suspended there somehow, yet witnessing how stillness is moving in and around me.

Through a spiralling process of SRT pedagogy, the finite and infinite spaces of corporeality are cultivated and continue opening out, revealing, for example, a vast space inside the skull, valleys of hips or spaces along the spine as cavernous spaces. These spaces are connected with the spaces around them. And each direction has equal value, no ups and downs exist in the technique; all directions invite one to explore them. Furthermore, the qualities of movement encourage softness, sponginess and, eventually, alertness. This cultivation of corporeal spaces is mainly realized through verbal instructions, through a specific vocabulary comprising poetic language, images akin to those in haiku poems, since they are short and send out a kind of resonance (Skura, 1990). Thus, during SRT classes this corporeal materiality transforms into e.g. shadow, moss, mist or rainforest.

This persistent, perpetual movement continues opening, and inner spaces continue falling, increasing the porousness of corporeality until the oscillation between self and site becomes clear and simple. And, simultaneously hovering in between the boundaries of the world and this lump of flesh, does this blurriness entail traces of silence? Lived emptiness, however, cannot be determined, yet nevertheless it takes place. In SRT, emptiness refers to a shape, stillness to motion, and silence to sound. Wrapped around by these notions, one is merging with and separating from the shattered disorientation, one has pared away one's habits, patterns. A pause. Screams, whispers, echoes and rusty voices emerge from somewhere.

Attentive listening

I turn toward words, to listen to them as if I could know something by inscribing them, to repeat them as if to confirm experiences that are elusive yet strongly lived in my bones. Perhaps the notion of silence in movement cannot be approached in terms of vagueness or accuracy. And yet. If only. Perhaps something oozes through the sentences, words, and between the lines. As if, like drowning, I am hanging onto some words: listening, attention, passivity, emptiness.

To pause and to listen to silence; to wait with no particular aim. Lucy Irigaray (2002, p. x) appraises listening, how listening-to is a pre-requisite for any encounter preceding knowing. Her attentive listening involves surrendering oneself to each event, exposure to the strange, and it is also ethical: it preserves the otherness of the other. Yet this previously known 'I' is vaguer and stranger than ever, and listening reaches around, not in any particular direction or towards any particular object or person, since it hovers around the spatiality of silence. The notion of listening proposed by Jean-Luc Nancy opens up the undefined self and movement in listening. He describes how listening means entering a spatiality where he is penetrated: it opens up, in and around, from and toward him, and through these various openings a "self" can take place (Nancy 2007, 14.) In listening I become a (non-) site of resonance, from which movement, writing or speech may emerge. And silence exists as groundless ground in between voids, in the fullness of emptiness.

Listening through corporeality is attentive to the self, yet attention to self requires abandoning the known 'I', and to enter unknown territory. Weil focuses on attention, wherein exists the link to the abandonment of the self. She describes how attention has to be so full that the 'I' disappears, and she advises turning one's attention to that which cannot be conceived (Weil, 1987, p. 107; Cameron 2007, pp. 109–110.) She is strict in her view of the need for self-annihilation of the 'I', stating, "Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and

ready to be penetrated by the object” (Weil, 2009, p. 62). Thus, in being penetrated, attention has the possibility to free one from the limitations of the self, enabling one to see outside of one’s perspective (Cameron, 2007). Perhaps through my journey in practising SRT, the known ‘I’ has become more obscure, transparent, and has slipped beyond the notion of personality.

The orientation – and disorientation that proceeds it – to and around silence can act as a sounding board that illuminates one’s everyday habits of living. The orientation to silence pushes toward the unknown until one is enveloped by it, emptied of some of the attachments of the known ‘I’. Weil’s notion of attention bears similarities to the releasing, the letting go, that occurs in moving, and can revitalize one’s perspectives by changing one’s relationship with the world. Moreover, Weil’s notion of self-annihilation and Nancy’s notion of resonance of the self describe something of the reverberation of lived experiences, since diminishing the authority of the will and control over the self leads to the continuous peeling away of previous habits of moving and ways of thinking until almost nothing is left.

“Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:

So the darkness shall be light, and the stillness the dancing.”

T.S. Eliot (1963, p.200)

These lines by T.S. Eliot reveal something crucial about the technique, about letting go and allowing movement to occur through stillness, through surrender to certain images – mostly of nature – “to experience something larger than self” as Joan Skinner, the founder of the technique, has stated (Skura, 1990). Being attuned to listening through corporeality brings almost biblical shadows of darkness into the voids of spatiality.

Listening in and through corporeality is continuous in movement, listening around and towards and hearing the unheard, unseen, untouched as well as the nonsense in which sense is found. The site through which all reverberations pass, this ‘I’, carries on breathing; its point

of departure and return cannot be located, since is neither the same nor other than the subject; binaries like object-subject become cancelled. The inner and outer landscapes intermingle. In perceiving, breathing and moving, corporeality transcends itself through its communion with the world (Leder, 1990, 172). Leaving only breath, space, shadows.

Falling

The technique induces transparency of the self, manifold shapes inside inner landscapes that question the 'I'. Verbal images are for immersing oneself in a state of being where disorientation occurs and through which a new experience can take place (Skura, 1990). Disorientation is linked with spatialities, and spatiality opens towards emptiness, as in the next description based on notes after an SRT class.

Falling, falling and falling. Waiting for the ground to arrive, a futile hope. Realizing that this lump of flesh will never hit the ground, neither softly nor harshly. This thought creates a hitherto unexperienced void, total darkness. Hope dies. Nothing. Am I still breathing? I exhale emptiness. To be nowhere, to be nobody, brings calmness. Joy suffuses this fragmented entity: I am leaning on nothing. This emptiness soaks up the contours of this corporeality, and partly transforms it. This nothingness brings utmost comfort. Nothing supports me, and I am being transported by this vastness. The emptiness is a void, a spaciousness that acts as a resistance to all that surrounds it. Am I now part of silence?

In falling, meanings fade. This state also welcomes darkness, to become darker than ever. Time disappears, present, past and future as well as unknown presents and pasts fuse, melt away. Somewhere a falling into a hole through the universe has happened, and something of it continues to resonate in the flesh, to fall without touching ground, no landing, only falling. The

moment of realising the ground – including the non-ground – of nothingness, to lean towards nothing, opens as a vast space in multiple directions. This reveals that one is not trapped in only one reality. In the act of falling, somewhere in between these moments, being appears as non-being.

These caves and caverns inside corporeality have been interlocked, intertwined, and have created distances within materiality. This corporeality falls continuously into the gaps of emptiness and silence, or do the latter form a huge web-like net, an abyss, again and again? The falling described above was a memorable event. Nevertheless, spatialities of corporeality are continuously available; they are there to remind one of their presence by being attuned and alert. Falling, the thought of leaning back on nothing, in accepting non-ground as ground, brings an odd sense of safety in public situations like giving presentations.

Nevertheless, the need to reach for communication also exists. Communication, as Georges Bataille formulates it, requires a wound, incompleteness. He describes how communication happens in the overlapping of these lacerations, of mine and yours (Bataille, 1988, p. 30). The exploration of the corporeality of silence in the context of SRT has pared away numerous manners of moving and, in its vast spatiality, led to vulnerability within oneself, as there is hardly anything to hang onto any more. Perhaps this is one doorway to communication, as Bataille expresses it.

Words about the experience of falling emerge from somewhere:

voids expand, the boundaries of the skin blur,
breath moves quietly through the landscapes,
in and out of this happening
and, in falling darkness, falls,
softness around, in, out
there and here

is this a lesson about dying?

The impossibility of writing

One day in November, these lines appeared:

Today this room is full of unbreathed thoughts, even the shadows of plants have lost their quality, lost their connection with the environment. Hardly any words today. Steady rain, immobile clouds. Yet the skin yearns for the odour of silence as communion. If only one could slide through language.

The above words emerged slowly through the movements of fingers. The attention was lacklustre, slow. Hardly anything happened during those moments. The previous descriptions of attention and passivity are informed by slowness. Pausing invites a diminution in tempo, wondering; there is no haste to draw conclusions. Passivity in movement demands that I loosen the strings of the 'I'. Boulous Walker (2017) introduces slowness in the context of reading, how the quality of attention allows openness, and sinking into the world. This also applies to writing; perhaps fewer words would be needed in calling for silence to appear in on its own terms.

Do these words indicate the limits of my reality, and thus the limits of lived silence? Yet the notion of silence is not totally silenced, since it is present as one thread among others in many writings; Merleau-Ponty, for example, has described silence in terms of spatiality as a fold in the flesh of language, existing on the reverse side of language, as a cavern of language (Hotanen, 2008, p. 139). Emmanuel Levinas refers to the French expression, *il y a*, meaning something is, but we do not know what it is, it is impersonal, and Levinas calls it the noise of silence. One can hear it when placing a clamshell to the ear: as if emptiness was full and silence was sound. (Levinas, 1996, pp. 52–53.) Martin Heidegger (2001, p. 205) described language as the peal of stillness; and in the field of dance, Steve Paxton has performed Small Dances,

where he stands and listens to small movements in his body. In music, John Cage experimented with the meaning of silence in music – in his work entitled 4' 33 – where eventually the way in which the pianist is attuned, and ready to perform while not playing a note, along with the sounds made by the audience, always create a unique atmosphere. Cage extended the notion of silence to speaking and writing in his book *Silence* (1973). In one chapter, the lecture on nothing, he states: “I am here, and there is nothing to say,” and continues “What we require is silence; but what silence requires is that I go on talking” (Cage, 1973, p. 109). He spread the words out on page; the long empty spaces in between slow down reading.

Sometimes, in the act of writing, one's breath, light and shadows leave traces and reverberate in one's bones for a fleeting moment. Such a moment is to dive into an unknown realm and forget oneself, the event. The emerging text is forgotten, it simply passes through corporeality, since it has never belonged to the writer. Language exceeds the writer, who disappears along with the emerging text. Blanchot acknowledges the writer as one who only finds and realizes him/herself through his work, since before it s/he is nothing. The work exists only when it made and unmade by colliding with other realities. Moreover, he stresses how language begins with the void, and he acknowledges silence in his view of language and writing as an endless resifting of words without content, as silence that is speech empty of words, leaving only an echo. (Blanchot, 1999.)

Does one's words resonate and leave enough possibility for communication? Are there enough fissures or fractures? Mackendrick (2004, p.143) writes that body and word continue calling to one another, although it is only in silence that the call can be heard, and describes how body and language do not coincide, even though they are mutually necessary. Such writing is just a call, a proposal from the bones for something to be shared that nevertheless keeps its secret. This aroundness is consoling, it keeps all directions open and available around one's corporeality, and this spiral movement is always only at the frontier of meaning, never attaining

it.

And now, silence, ungraspable as it is, continues escaping in the flow of words. It is only in and through the spatiality of corporeality that something may resonate, something unheard be called forth, given space to linger. The instructions on SRT include words like ‘perhaps’, ‘maybe’. They propose, shed light on pathways, possibilities, yet without aiming to push one into a certain mode of action. Those tiny but big words contain a plenitude of directions, open up space and other possible realities. Without being specifically defined, the unnamed quality of silence brings an odd intimacy with it.

In SRT classes, the cultivation of manifold spaces has sometimes induced muteness. During those moments, speech escaped yet writing continued; writing and/or drawing after each class are part of the technique, the aim being to process the event, to dwell in each lived event through another medium. Writing has a paradoxical nature: it may sever or open up possibilities; a tension exists between these effects. The violence of writing has been discussed by Blanchot (1993, p. 28), who reminds how, etymologically, writing is a cutting movement, a tear, and the tool for writing, the stylet, was also for making incisions.

The violent cut makes a wound that can be thought of not only as severing but also as cutting an opening to the world, including the possibility of letting oneself loose (Mackendrick, 2004, pp.152,155; Bataille, 1988, p. 27). Furthermore, it might be possible to obscure the meaning of silence completely by cutting and slicing, since by the violence it perpetrates on language, writing cuts language up to make spaces for silence (Mackendrick, 2001, p. 22). And yet, if only obscurity could appear as obscurity itself, Blanchot ponders, relating obscurity to language so that it leaves a taste of strangeness instead of measuring experiences according previously experienced concepts (Alanko 2002, 163). Is it possible to let silence be as it is, let it prevail as an ungraspable experience existing outside of determination, that is, as undetermined although lived in the flesh and in the bones as a reverberation of the not-known, as corporeal knowledge

that remains in the state of becoming, partial, and unnamed?

Still(ness)

The complexity of the notion of silence has brought simplicity. How simple dare I be? Movement has diminished; it has been risky to be simple, not to hide behind movements, not even behind vulnerability. Just to find one's alignment, since it brings effortless movement, lessens tension.

The technique introduces concepts like moving stillness and dynamic stillness. Somehow lived silence has emerged strongly while the 'I' has been enveloped by stillness in movement. Breathing has opened various spaces inside this leaking, porous container, this corporeality, and silence has merged with the breath of the sea that probes the boundaries of spatiality. The contours of corporeality as well as the frontier of meaning become porous; something is being transgressed that draws one's attention to one's surroundings, the 'I' slides into oblivion, at least for a moment. This notion of stillness – which does not mean the absence of motion or sound – requires detaching from learned modes of movement, to allow spaces to open up and to listen. The shift of attention away from the 'I' brings one's surroundings vividly to the forefront of perception. To be of the site, not just belong to it (Heimonen, 2019). No centres, no priorities or dualities, only the density of lived silence.

Still (2017), a short video lasting 4 minutes and 34 seconds orientates around trees, stillness in movement and inaction. It is about approaching a lime tree, disappearing, and departing from it. To maintain the same viewing angle, the camera is mounted on a tripod. Passivity in movement, attuning to the ungraspable while moving, has happened in the process. Perhaps it has taught me to just be simple, and to listen.

Some words about the process described above:

Still approaching the lime tree, still not knowing what this is all about, still won-

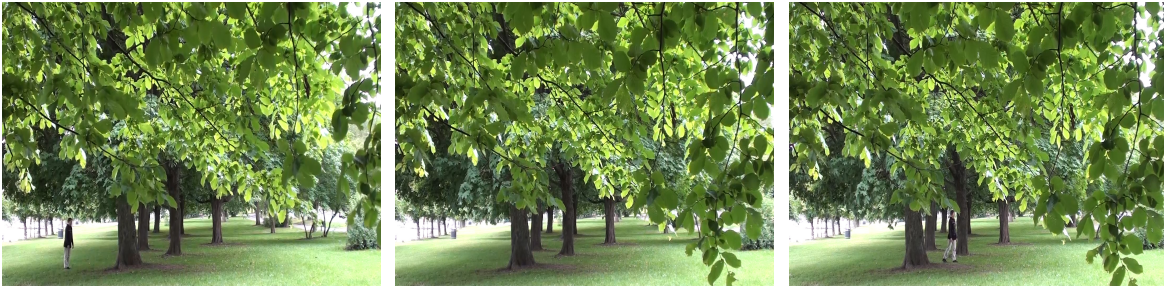


Figure 1–3. Photos from the process of making *Still*. Photographer Reetta Wikström-Tuominen.

dering, approaching and retreating from the lime tree in the morning, in evening, in sunshine, in rain. Still adding the layers of visiting, inhaling the proximity of that particular tree, that particular site under those conditions. Still the shadows of trees create sites to inhabit without possessing them. Still pausing, moving and pausing. Still visiting and re-visiting, being the same and different at the same time. Still that tree keeps on surprising me by inviting me and pushing me away. Still the silence of corporeality challenges, alters my perspective, moves through the spatiality of this corporeality that is not fully mine. Still being played on the rhythms of walking and allowing movements to happen. Still the resonance of this particular site shakes this lump of flesh, a resonance that travels through it, leaving traces in infinite spaces. Still to be aligned with the elusive, the not-known, and yet being in connection with walls, trees, you, wind, earth. And today, stillness still is and is not possible in this corporeality in the proximity of the lime tree. Still searching for an encounter with it by being still. Still breathing; breathing still.

Stillness is also calmness with time and space at hand: to be immersed in a lake while swimming without discerning one's contours from those of the water, to be attuned to the movement of ripples on the surface of the lake until it is still after a swim, or to listen to the almost inaudible sound of snow falling to the ground. Simplicity, clarity, and just letting one's breath roam

through the spatiality of corporeality by itself. The autonomy of the breath that is cultivated in SRT is not bound to the mover's action, one does not need to get out of breath by moving at any speed. Furthermore, when the 'I' becomes the site, the breathing has enabled a certain distance from the 'I'; this differs from Weil's stricter view: "When I am in any place, I disturb the silence of heaven and earth by my breathing and the beating of my heart" (Weil, 1987, p. 37).

Scattered traces

The impossible challenge of approaching silence continues to appeal. The scattered, fragmentary sentences that occur throughout this article offer perhaps only a hint of the manifold silences attained along this curving and spiralling research path. Space has been offered to language to show and resonate something of the corporeal experiences that are beyond the individual mover in the context of SRT. And now, again to cite T. S. Eliot (1963, p. 222): "to arrive where we started". Yet still not knowing what it is about, just allowing silence to resonate from the spatiality of corporeality. Silence(s) in spatiality has offered a calm distance, an attitude of detached availability in which attachments to the 'I' have loosened, and one is in contact with the world and its realities by becoming the site. I recall Skinner's words about releasing the self: "Releasing begins with allowing oneself to be in the darkness – and to be still²" Movements enveloped by silence continue quivering without offering particular answers; the unnamed quality of silence preserves its secret, yet it is somehow lived in fleeting moments of intimacy.

And language continues searching, meandering through its various rhythms and pauses. Perhaps certainties fade, again and again, and each occasion leaves a trace at the site, on and around the flesh. Something is and it is not. To pause, breathe and hear the unknown. As if each word was the beginning of another silence, each word more silent than the one before it. – Is something being silenced?

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Notes

¹More about the technique: <http://www.skinnerreleasing.com/aboutsrt.html>

²From material given during SRT teacher training 2016–2017.