



I am trying to do the assignment

Claudia La Rocco

On the occasion of the exhibition SEVEN PLACES OF THE MIND fused space, San Francisco. On view 11 October 2018 to 23 January 2019

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

In 2017 Ralph Lemon gave me the task of writing about one small section of his 2010 work *How Can You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere?* In 2018 I started trying, working from memory, correspondence, and previous writings of mine, as well as this recording:

<https://www.ontheboards.tv/performance/dance/theater/how-can-you-stay>



*For Ralph, and for Sam.*

9/12/17

my dear!

how bout you TRY to write about the final duet (*No Room*) between O and I. Which was a “continuation-resolution” of sorts of the untitled duet we originally performed at St. Mark’s Danspace in 2009 (the memorial) and then in the MoMA Atrium in 2011 (*On Line*). With *No Room* we were sourcing the ancient Hare in the Moon tale. “Throwing the whole of our bodies in the jaws of generosity...” an attempt.

HCYSITH program notes attached.

xo  
r

I remember being in the church that night. I had been writing about dance for some six years by then, but I still felt like an outsider. Is that true? I don’t know, it sounds good. I have a foggy memory of being invited by Judy, of being not quite sure whether I should be there. I didn’t know you. And I knew this was a memorial of some sort. I knew you had lost someone. I didn’t know details. I still don’t know any details, beyond what I know through your art. Maybe those are all the details anyone needs. Maybe that’s just romance.

I remember bodies thrown and thrown. As if one could throw oneself out of oneself. A feeling of being hushed internally. Of being invited in. Of effort. Sweat and tears the sort of tears that leave a face ugly, mark it up with saliva and snot. Or did that come later, is that an overlay from me, a future memory coming in to complicate matters?

I remember there was only one sock.

Let’s read what I wrote. Let’s watch the tape.

No, I’m already wrong. Judy didn’t invite me. You did. In fall of 2008, just after we met, after I had already written about your work. So. I’ve known you for 10 years. I read some of our early email exchanges the other day. I was trying so hard to impress you.

I wrote about that night at the church, with your permission, in my 2008 year-end piece for the *Times*:

“We can only hope that Ralph Lemon and Okwui Okpokwasili’s brief, astonishing showing at Danspace Project in October signals that this inimitable, elegant pair is concocting something for New York audiences. Mr. Lemon concluded his staggering *Geography Trilogy* in 2005. More, please.”

You told me: it’s impossible to write democratically about different forms  
You told me: it’s impossible to write democratically

The bodies knock together. They do not rest.  
The bodies knock together. They do not rest.

More, please, he asks her. Does she give it?

Shuddering and heaving

“Does your practice/process have a belief system. And if so what is it?”

The body hinged, hinging  
The body hinged, hinging

Ankles, knees, hips  
Ankles, knees, hips

# The torso buckling Arms lifting up and out We were dancing with ghosts. You give me your back

The torso buckling

Arms lifting up and out

We were dancing with ghosts.

You give me your back

I am thinking of love for lost ones. Baldwin and America. Tarkovsky and Russia.

Arms lifting up and out

## Shuddering and heaving.

Shuddering and heaving.

## Dark stones tumbled in pale rivers.

Dark stones tumbled in pale rivers.

### 1:15 mark

The lights come up slowly not brightly the man is walking as if he doesn't see as if he doesn't need to see throws an arm out and the torso follows. Walks slowly upstage things are dim he is barefoot comes back down to us the light reflects his gaze a graceful parabola that rises and then diminishes. The restless walking before the thing the arm goes out the torso follows one sock is on as it is with little children he is not a child as it is with old men he is not an old man he has lost something but what the light is subterranean green think of *Stalker* think of *Solaris* there is silence everyone is gathered stands away shadow cast out walks downstage the neck thrown back the body circling. Simone Forti diving in and out of an improvisation the arm thrown out turning turning she joins her walk isn't quite so lost she finds her mark she is with him is she? They aren't together. Proximity isn't intimacy. Legs in a loose fourth torso balletic his for a minute a shirt you try on. Maximum occupancy 159. The knees come together. Her body becomes a slow accordion he is on hands and knees and head a yoga position that has melted that isn't about yoga anymore it's about what a body needs. His arm out his body prone. I can freeze this I freeze it as he is on his head, one arm curved around perhaps to protect, the other curved around his back, legs angled straight out. She stands arms up arms overhead not waving but drowning please don't shoot I think of the white cops who pulled over the young black man the other day on the FSU campus in Tallahassee while I was watching dancers improvise on the grass I am writing this from MANCC where Ralph just was I think of the Lichgate tree how when I was asking about it I was told there is also a hanging tree. Ralph traveling

around this country, his countermemorials. I have never sought out a hanging tree I am sure I have seen them. I should seek one out that is a thing all white people should do. He falls over the body cannot sustain such an angle she is shaking she is shaking he turns over and over in the laundry machine straightens his collar deep lunge arms back arms slumping. All of the stories we avoid. On one foot, pant leg pulled up sock stripped off sock held limp kiss my hand, let me sink down let me hold my legs rigid. I am kneeling she is kneeling he is kneeling. The sock becomes a precious thing no that's not quite right take your glasses off throw yourself back the body cannot stay with these forces she jumps she falls he puts the sock back on. We become unsighted. We don't like to talk about religion. You keep trying to catch the air I am sinking down under the weight of this history I am knocking on the ground let me in let me in. Now there have been so many more losses. The body splayed on the floor. The quiet of the room. Yes he says. Oh yes. Hoo. Whoa. Yes. She sits up. He sits up. She leaves, he stays. He is still sitting his glasses are back on something has been resolved. Has something been resolved. The man is still sitting. Some battles cannot be fought by an army of two. He gets up. Darkness. End.

Trickster metaphor mascot avatar

Trickster metaphor mascot avatar

You lay sprawled

I unzipped my metaphor I wanted to be formally elegant, delicately spun.

Let's trade pockets.

The dance's structure is gossamer.

Gossamer, a fine, filmy substance consisting of cobwebs spun by small spiders, which is seen especially in autumn.

Dance critics use gossamer too often we can't help ourselves there are no new steps only new combinations I am frozen midfall my body stops awkwardly she is sprawled in the corner we forget to look at her we forget to look away

...

I had forgotten my other sock or no I had lost it I shudder quietly down your long thin frame

It just happens // that's how I feel the duet got quieter and quieter and finally it wasn't anything at all except we all knew it was we all agreed in our heads

The ghost emerges his feet slap the marley he is outlined in white he is wearing white he is not white

The man is still sitting. Some battles cannot be fought by an army of two. He gets up. Darkness. End.

A **lychgate**, also spelled **lichgate**, lycugate, lyke-gate or as two separate words lych gate, (from Old English lic, corpse) is a gateway covered with a roof found at the entrance to a traditional English or English-style churchyard. It is also called a resurrection gate.

Trickster metaphor mascot avatar

When you could no longer walk you crawled When you could no longer crawl you just hung out, looking the way you look, testing the air. I was crying again I straightened my collar my legs were long and skinny and my knees slowly hinged.

You arced your body back. The love story had an ending.

“Ralph certainly knows how to begin a dance, but I'm not sure he knows how to end one,” is what Merce Cunningham said about Ralph Lemon's work many years ago. I know this because Ralph Lemon told me. I don't know the context — the date, the dance(s) in question.

I remapped your history onto my body. I remapped your body onto my memory. I remapped your memory onto my history.

All of a sudden we were wrestling. I couldn't get you off me I didn't want to. Crazy, crazier. Beautifully wrong. This time there wasn't birdsong. There was only darkness. Inevitable. Deserved.

This duet is the final one.

I google hanging tree Tallahassee I find “This is the Hanging Tree in Monticello, Florida. Located at the Intersection of Hwy 90. Most southern town seats from pre Civil War to the mid 1930's had what locals referred to as the 'hanging tree' These trees were positioned adjunct to county court houses (A stone's throw away) as most southerners would say. Monticello is no exception; their hanging tree from days gone by still stands proudly in the city square. Hangings would take place Thursday afternoons and storekeepers would close their shops to attend. This became a practice for the first hanging and although public hangings are a thing of the past, this historic old town still closes it's [sic] shops on Thursday afternoon.”

Whoever wrote those words wrote them in 2014 there is a picture there are four smiling white women standing in front of the tree. Beveling that hip

What do you do with those lines I read them to S. he quotes back to me “Southern gentle lady do not swoon” I look it up it is “Silhouette” by Langston Hughes:

Southern gentle lady,  
Do not swoon.  
They've just hung a black man  
In the dark of the moon.

They've hung a black man  
To a roadside tree  
In the dark of the moon  
For the world to see  
How Dixie protects  
Its white womanhood.

Southern gentle lady,  
Be good!  
Be good!

—*The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, p. 305

All of a sudden we were wrestling. Brer rabbit was nowhere to be seen. I couldn't get you off me I didn't want to. Crazy, crazier. Beautifully wrong. This time there wasn't birdsong. There was only darkness. Inevitable. Deserved.

I google hare in the moon and I find a “Moon Rabbit” Wikipedia page:

The moon rabbit in folklore is a rabbit that lives on the Moon, based on pareidolia that identifies the markings of the Moon as a rabbit. The folklore originated in China. Then the story spread to other cultures, prominently in Asian folklore and Aztec mythology.<sup>[1][2]</sup> In East Asia, it is seen pounding with a mortar and pestle, but the contents of the mortar differ among Chinese, Japanese, and Korean folklore. In Chinese folklore, it is often portrayed as a companion of the Moon goddess Chang'e, constantly pounding the elixir of life for her; but in Japanese and Korean versions, it is pounding the ingredients for rice cake. In some Chinese versions the rabbit pounds medicine for the mortals.

The Lichgate tree is a live oak on the Lichgate property in Tallahassee, a tiny fairytale tucked into the middle of town, created in the 1950s by a white woman, a literature professor, Laura Jepsen. “To conquer time, to preserve the essence of the past, to escape into reality, these were my triple desires when I started to build Lichgate.” The tree was a sapling in Shakespeare’s time, I read online. I read a line of poetry, maybe Jepsen’s, comparing the arc of its limbs to a southern belle in a billowing skirt. The tudor cottage she built looks as though it has fallen into disuse. The day we were there, drinking S.’s improvised cocktails, two co-eds came and walked their pet ferrets around the lawns. I peed behind the house, behind the stone labyrinth, squatting in the brown underbrush.

But I am getting far afield I return to the man turning in the half-dark, pacing, his brown skin lit as if by the red of the setting sun his eyes downcast his arms hanging. What space is a theater for. The jaws of the world now have him he bares his neck to the jaws of the world he stands still and marks his place on the earth before moving forward to us

I am trying to do the assignment. I am waiting for you to join me. You will exhort me to get up. I will be able to get up. I am waiting for you.

I am waiting for you.

Inevitable. Deserved.

Your body is hinged in nine places. Ankles, knees, chest, shoulder, shoulder, elbow, elbow, wrist, wrist. He is kneeling in the air one arm up not waving but please officer don’t.

How do I hold this weight? The young artist asked. You give something else back into the world, the older artist answered.

That’s how, that’s how. When you could no longer walk you crawled. When you could no longer crawl you just hung out, looking the way you look. There was distance between us. I slowly fell apart. I stretched my arms out on the ground, the four points of those limbs as far as they would go. I remember being in the fields. You stood your ground. Your shadow held hers. You were shaking, shaking. My head thrown back my body tumbled like a dark rock in a pale river I cast myself along two horizontal lines I could not hold it I could not hold. Leg up foot brushing the earth.

Place your body on the earth. Lie on your face. Pull yourself up slowly. You can’t find any certain rest. Curl into yourself. Put my memory into your history. I am become.

Tilt on one knee weathervane I do something erstwhile. You jump up you fall down I get dressed. There’s nothing there to grab. My love.

In the South. Death made into a pageant. Place your body on the earth.

I jump up I am thrown I am tumbled. You sink into stillness. Try to put the past dance into this moment. I am working on the assignment, Ralph. Yes. Oh yes. Hoo. Whoa. Yes.

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“Not waving but drowning,” is something Stevie Smith once declared.

“There are no new steps, only new combinations,” is something George Balanchine once declared.

My definition of “gossamer” is taken from:

<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/gossamer>

My definition of “lychgate” is taken from: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lychgate>

The hanging tree quote comes from here:

<http://floridatallahasseemissionexperience.blogspot.com/2014/05/the-hanging-tree.html>

My Lichgate information comes from here:

<http://friendsoflaura.org/>

<http://www.tallahasseeemagazine.com/September-October-2013/The-Story-of-Lichgate-Laura-Jepsen-and-the-Struggle-to-Continue-Her-Legacy/>

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Claudia La Rocco is the author of the selected writings *The Best Most Useless Dress* (Badlands Unlimited) and the novel *petit cadeau* (The Chocolate Factory Theater). animals & giraffes, her duo with musician/composer Phillip Greenleaf and an ongoing roster of collaborators, has released the albums *July* (with various musicians; Edgetone Records) and *Landlocked Beach* (with Wobbly; Creative Sources). Her poetry and prose appear in such anthologies as *6x6 #34: I Like Softness* (Ugly Duckling Presse), *Imagined Theatres: Writing for a Theoretical Stage* (Daniel Sack, ed; Routledge), and *On Value* (Ralph Lemon, ed; Triple Canopy), and she has bylines in numerous publications, including *Artforum*, *BOMB*, and *The New York Times*, where she was a critic from 2005–2015.

Image, Ralph Lemon: *How Can You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere?* 2010. Photo by Cameron Wittig, courtesy Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.