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LUCY NEGRO, REDUX

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

May, 2015

by

Caroline Randall Williams

May 2015

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## ABSTRACT

*Lucy Negro, Redux* is a collection of poetry that uses the lens of Shakespeare's "Dark Lady" sonnets to explore the way questions about and desire for the black female body have evolved over time, from Elizabethan England to the Jim Crow South to the present day. Research for the collection began with the discovery in early 2012 of a connection between the historical Elizabethan figure Black Luce—a notorious brothel owner—and William Shakespeare, by Professor Duncan Salkeld of the University of Chichester. A grant from the University of Mississippi yielded an opportunity for on-site research with Dr. Salkeld in order to explore Bridewell Prison records, now held in the Bethlem Hospital Archives in England. Galvanized by that research, the work evolved into a collection that experiments with form, dialect, the adoption of historical personas, and the very voices these personas project.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

These poems have appeared, in these or other versions, in the following journals:

*The Iowa Review*: “[For I have sworn thee fair],” “[My love is as a fever longing still],” “[Thy black is fairest in my judgment’s place],” “[And so the general of hot desire was, sleeping, by a virgin hand disarm’d.],” “[But, love, hate on, for now I know thy mind]”;  
*Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International*: “In March,” “Nude Study”.

I want to thank Dr. Duncan Salkeld for his indispensable hand in both bringing the historical Black Luce further into the light and helping me to meet her. Tremendous thanks also to Peter Richards, the steward of my undergraduate passage into poetry, with a special note of gratitude to Jorie Graham, Amy Hempel, and Ellen Dore Watson, who generously read, assessed, and encouraged my first collected effort. The further guidance of Beth Ann Fennelly, Ann Fisher Wirth and Chiyuma Elliot helped me bring the poems in this book from pen to paper to page. Dr. Ivo Kamps helped keep my poet’s feet firmly on Shakespeare ground.

Rachel Eliza Griffiths and Thomas Sayers Ellis, and my Mississippi mentor Derrick Harriell, wrote beautifully about the book, for the book; their words continue to humble and fortify me.

Finally, I am grateful to the Cave Canem workshop for hearing Lucy’s voice before I could, and to my mother Alice Randall, for hearing my voice before I could.

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**{Then will I swear that beauty herself is black,/And all they foul that thy complexion lack}  
William Shakespeare. Sonnet CXXXII**

Be brave and steal Miss Lucy

## BLACKLUCYNEGRO I

The idea of her  
warm brown  
body long stretching  
under his hands  
is a righteous want—  
she's become an Other  
way to talk about skin,  
the world-heavy mule  
of her, borne line by line  
down the page:  
run and tell everything,  
every truth you ever knew  
about BlackLucyNegro.  
Say she is the loose light.  
Say she is the root.  
Say she ate at his table.  
Say she ate at all. Say she.  
Say she. Say she.

In August of 2012, I got it into my head that Shakespeare had a black lover, and that this woman was the subject of sonnets 127 to 154. These sonnets have been called the “Dark Lady” sonnets for quite a while now, because of their focus (in contrast to the preceding 126, which are addressed to a “fair youth, and a “rival poet”) on a woman who consistently figures as “dark,” or “black,” in his descriptions of her.

Duncan Salkeld, a professor of English at the University of Chichester, put me on to the idea. I’d never met him; I discovered his work the way I discover much of the news in my life: from one of Britain’s most disreputable newspapers, *The Daily Mail*. The article, dubiously titled “Was Bard’s Lady a Woman of Ill Repute,” piqued my interest, so much so that I hunted Dr. Salkeld down online, and wrote to him.

## **BLACKLUCYNEGRO II**

Let me tell you about Black Lucy  
Lucy run a brothel  
Lucy got a lover  
Lucy own her body

She run many other

Lucy the bend behind the word  
The scent behind the sound  
The skin rubbed raw  
Behind the cry in the night

**TRANSUBSTANTIATE, REDUX  
OR, SUBLIMATING LUCY WHILST AT CHURCH**

How is it I have kissed seven different men named Michael?  
One the first to kiss my tight shut mouth,  
another the first to touch my naked breasts,  
and another again the first to show me that there can be power  
in getting down  
on my knees,  
and yet a different Michael to press my body  
hard in the night,  
    which changed everything.

They keep finding me,  
these men called *Who is Like God*—  
finding my mouth and body,  
and I am become sure  
that the name itself does not matter.  
The name is only a harbinger,

is only the closest articulation  
of the violent love I feel at prayer.

If I could, I would lift up in flight from my life,  
and leave that angel behind with his sword  
to fight for me—

I want a named, holy thing  
    to fuck my brains out,  
    to turn my need  
    to be filled up  
    and spread out  
    and hungry  
into some kind of Grace.

I want to cuss my lover's name in ecstasy  
and have it be the prayer I always hoped it was:  
*Fuck. Michael. Alleluia*  
*Harder. God. Amen.*

I want to have sex in a church and feel undivided—

communion is intercourse, after all,  
the taking of a man's body and blood into mine—

to feel undivided when I wrap my legs  
around some body I do not love  
just because he's a *big boy*,

and that is the only way  
a man ever seems in charge  
in this life.

It is the same want.  
It is the prayer I cannot pray alone.

Perhaps the best way I can describe Dr. Salkeld's reply to my query is to say that he seemed happily chagrined. The volumes that backed up his discovery were Elizabethan prison records from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. "The original documents of the Bridewell Hospital," he wrote me, "are held at Bethlem Royal Hospital, Beckenham, Kent and they will allow you to see them by appointment. If you came to England...we could make a visit there."

I flew to England in mid May of 2013 to meet Professor Salkeld, and, as it turns out, Lucy Negro.

It is an easy train ride from London to Chichester; I got on the train at Paddington station, disembarked on the quiet, cheerful platform in the university town, and sat down to wait at the perfunctory little coffee shop by the exit.

I'd just pulled Dr. Salkeld's book out of my bag and positioned myself studiously over it, pencil in hand, when the man himself peered through the glass doors of the café and waved at me.

I knew it had to be Dr. Salkeld (a creditable picture of whom I could not find online) for two reasons: first, because the combined effect of his spectacles, tweed coat, grey sweater, and thinning hair was irresistibly professorial, the perfect realization of a charming cliché. The second and more particular reason for my certainty was my assumption that there could hardly be more than one man of this model coming to the train station in search of a black American girl with wild hair, high heeled boots, a suitcase, and a Shakespeare book.



## **BLACKLUCYNEGRO III**

after Jack Spicer

Lucy Negro  
I am you  
Lucy Negro  
You can become anything I say  
From page to clenched thigh  
From that day to this  
Lucy Negro  
(Varieties of Other-ness be damned)  
There is beauty in the dark  
Lucy

**AEMILIA LANYER WAS A WHITE GIRL**

for Avery Young

And how could it be Amelia,  
Amelia what's her name,  
what with Rose Flower herself—  
yes Black Lucy herself,

IN COG NEGRO—

and her black wires all up in his word?  
The dark lady is black! Black wires Black.  
*Colored ill* black. More black. Blacker.  
Blackamoor black.

## ANATOMY OF LUST

i.  
the red room  
of my body  
the pain that rattles  
me with sparking

a prick of  
blood on the tip  
on the tip  
a prick  
blood pricks  
the tip of  
the prick on a tip  
of blood  
the blood  
the tip of  
of of

ii.  
What part shame,  
the anatomy of lust?  
What part humiliation?  
What part exposure?  
What part transgression?

What part chthonic impulse?—

Bet Persephone got just a little bit wet  
toward the end of summer,  
and Hades  
on her mind.

Paleography is the study of handwriting styles that are no longer in use. Dr. Salkeld is somewhat of an expert in Paleography; this was the skill that allowed him to uncover details of Black Luce's story that had somehow been missed for centuries.

The remnants of Bridewell Prison remain where they sat during Shakespeare's time, in Clerkenwell, a now somewhat gentrified bit of central London that, in the late sixteenth century, served as a blossoming red light district. The prison played host to all manner of colorful Elizabethans, from maidservants who'd lost the washing to men found abed with their neighbors wives. This makes the prison records—most of which are verbatim accounts of the injured party's grievances taken down by the prison scribe on duty—

lively reading, once you get past the impossible script.

Dr. Salkeld's insights into Black Luce's life as a madam are a result of his years spent painstakingly transcribing the four remaining volumes of the prison's records. I say "remaining volumes" because there were originally five books, which we know by the numbering on the inner covers—1, 2, 3, 5. Legend has it that when London was burning in 1666, the record books were thrown out of the top floor windows of the prison onto barges waiting on the Thames, and that one volume missed its mark, and lies from that day to this at the bottom of the river.

## BLACK LUCE

### I. Early Research

Of lives burning still in salvaged books, all  
entries begin the same way: *This exiat sayeth that*

### II. Primary Documents

And this exiat sayeth that

Black Luce is a vilde bawde and lyveth by it and East and his wiffe and she agree together and devide the monye that is geven to the harlots and helpe to tryme them up with swete water and calles and cotes and things for the purpose fit for the degree of them that use them

—from Bridewell Prison Records, Volume 1

### III. Later Records

My exiat sayeth that

If Black Luce alias Baytham alias Luce Baynam alias Lucy Negro alias lewes eeaste might have been Shakespeare's Dark Lady then she is indeed the Dark Lady and is me also.

My exaiate sayeth that

I will dig and root about and trawl and query and wildly surmise until there is a place for you, Lucy. And it will be my place for having carved yours out, and altogether earned by you for us, and proved by me for us. Yes, I declare that beauty herself is black after all.

My exaiat sayeth that

Her black wires are where the World began, and all of it pouring out from atwixt her thighs.

Enough to make any man write that harder hallelujah:

Exhibit A	Exhibit B	Exhibit C
Thy black is fairest in my judgment's place	And this, also, has been one of the dark places of the earth.	Justlikeablackgirlhowcomeyoutastesogood

My exiat sayeth that

Lucy Negro is a seat at the table, is my knowing that he knew it all after all, is the black aesthetic writ large across a whitewashed Riverside brick.

**NUDE STUDY**  
**OR, SHORTLY BEFORE MEETING LUCY. A WHITE BOY.**

Once, in the night with maybe one lamp glowing,  
My shirt was finally raised over my head,  
My brassiere unclasped, tights rolled down  
And underwear offed—hip, knee, ankle.  
Then, what would you think of my body?  
Had you ever negotiated such coarse hair,  
Seen nipples dark and darker in their tensing,  
Breasts swaying sideways with the weight  
Of them? Did you know how much it was to ask,  
To be the first glimpse of a naked black body?  
Did you know the fear of being found fearful?  
And later, after you'd grown accustomed,  
Proved yourself equal to the task of my landscape,  
You laughed and said, let's play masters and slaves.  
I wore it lightly, said no, moved on,  
But it made me think about my teeth on the couch,  
Glowing white there in the light of the television  
Against my skin, made me grateful for my perfume  
Covering the smell of my body, made me wonder  
When it would be time again to get a relaxer  
Before my hair betrayed my best efforts  
To straighten it, made me alive to all the offenses  
Nature is prone to. When you said  
Let's play masters and slaves, you thought  
Role play. I thought black girl.

## A CHALLENGE TO LUCY'S GENTLEMAN CALLERS

Leave her loose  
    light  
            guttering,  
shake her blossom  
    hips  
            to shuddering,  
catch her coins-cold  
    breath  
            hovering —  
and earn you some  
    sugar tit  
            smothering  
*Lord* lay down  
            your suffering  
not one man  
    worthy, but  
            wondering,  
Lucy  
    *Negro*  
            loving.



**SUBLIMATING LUCY. CONSIDERING COURBET.**

after L'Origine du Monde

Her intimate variety

is less

infinite these days, plastied, short trimmed, clean like a child's—  
I sure hope Eve didn't have a restrained little  
tight pink little

gash like that. A tidy, languid  
and wispy little  
gash like that. Hope

her body folded out  
in tough, pliable furls:

Hello, Abel.

Hello, Cain.

It's the beginning of the world,  
that endless, human vessel,  
and what is mightier?

It will well your bucket,  
cannon your ammo,  
and black hole  
your universe—

just paw around in the idea of it.  
Rend apart the reality of it  
in the getting here.

**BLACK LUCE WOULD HAVE LOVED JOSEPHINE BAKER**

My venus,  
bronze venus,  
mons venus.  
Calling out,

la Baker said—  
*Two loves have I,  
my country  
and Paris.*

Say  
two loves.

Say  
I. Say my cunt.  
Say tree. Say  
my tree—

its kinky  
roots—  
say

I got  
two loves baby.  
My cunt.  
Yes. And  
my tree.

**{The statute of thy beauty thou wilt take,/Thou usurer, that put'st forth all to use,/ And sue  
a friend came debtor for my sake;/ So him I lose through my unkind abuse./Him have I  
lost; thou hast both him and me:/He pays the whole, and yet am I not free.}**

**William Shakespeare. Sonnet CXXXIV**

In the world of relative suffering,  
I could show you how regret is a fist  
a terrible fist—

“Girl, simple and easy  
ain't the same thing” —

there's no guarantee of anything like grace.  
Theirs no guarantee of anything like grace.

One of the most interesting things about Black Luce, as Dr. Salkeld points out in his book, is that she was never once arrested. She appears in the records as the shrewd, evasive mistress to a series of less fortunate women, and the happy, unprosecuted business partner to one Gilbert Easte, whose surname she took in her last appearance on the books. Her notoriety on the pages, and her absence behind bars, suggests that she knew people. Or that she knew people who knew people.

All of this is very well, but my impulse is to put forward a third option. The missing book contains all the records from 1579 to 1597—the years of Shakespeare’s late teens to early thirties—years during which Lucy was herself likely a vibrant grown woman with a successful business. It seems to me that if ever there was a time to be

arrested, it would have been somewhere  
right in the midst of that stretch.

**FROM VOLUME IV OF THE BRIDEWELL PRISON RECORDS.  
LONDON. 1579-1597.**

This exiat sayeth that  
William Shaxberd sent into this house by vertue aforesaide  
saieth that he was at Gilbert Eastes house in Turnmill street  
a grete while and had there much wyne and goode cheese  
and had thuse of a blackamoore bawde Easte kepte there  
also called Rose

This exiat sayeth that

Black Luce alias Lucy Negro is by one richard Burbage  
accused of takinge monies for divers services then not  
rendered to which the accused Negro taketh much  
exception and saieth further that burbage and numerous  
other confederates of The Theatre playhouse without  
Shorditch have been manye times in her companye without  
paying

This examine saith that

William Hatclyff a gentelman of Grayes Inn sent into this house by vertue aforesaide is here accused by Gilbert east of lying all nyghte with Black Luce Baytham alias Rose Flower in Baythams house and that baytham also is a bawde and has entertained a hundred men in her tyme and Easte said further that Haltclyff had upon quitting rose flower met one william Shaxberd without the house and that the two quarreled and made a grete disturbance in the street of which Shaxberd said he hath found Hatclyffe in Black Luce's company after this manner manie times of late

This examine sayeth that

William Shakepere is accused by William Hatcliff of performing lewde acts upon one Luce Flower in the curtain playhouse and this whilst the plaie was already commenced and that he Hatcliff saw Luce Flower leave the theatre singing and that Mstr Shakespeare never came again to the stage that nyghte

The crux of Dr. Salkeld's urge to pursue the Lucy Negro question was her name's appearance in the records of the Inns at Court on December 20<sup>th</sup>, 1594. She and a handful of her girls were invited to be the female guests of honor at the *Gesta Grayorum*, a series of revels put on by the young gentlemen studying law at what remains today the finest law school in London (Among the young gentleman, incidentally, was William Hatcliff, an aspiring lawyer and favorite scholarly candidate for the identity of the "Fair Youth" in the earlier sonnets).

That Shakespeare was there that night was highly likely. There is a concrete record of his being present for the month-long festivities a week later, putting up an early production of *The Comedy of Errors*. The thrill, for me, of putting these two clues together comes clear in reflecting upon the moment in



the play itself when Dromio of Syracuse describes the kitchen wench. He says, “It is written, they appear to men like angels of light; light is an effect of fire, and fire will burn; ergo, light wenches will burn; come not near her”(IV.ii.50-54). Duncan points out quite smartly that “Shakespeare could rely upon his audience know how the Italian word *luce* is translated, and sounded, in English. This pun on a light/loose wench who will “burn” strikingly echoes the mention of Lucy Negro...”. When you read Shakespeare widely, puns like this no longer seem like much of a stretch. And when you want something as badly as I want Black Luce to be the Dark Lady that Shakespeare loved, and loathed himself for loving, that little stretch becomes a welcome bridge.

**{Myself I'll forfeit, so that the other mine/ Thou wilt restore to be my comfort still:/ But  
thou wilt not, nor he will not be free...}**

**William Shakespeare. Sonnet CXXXIV**

**BLACK LUCE GOES TO SEE  
RICHARD II AND DOESN'T  
HEAR WHAT SHE THOUGHT  
SHE HEARD.**

***Bolingbroke.*** Are you contented  
to resign the crown?

***Richard II.*** Ay, no; no, ay...

I know no I.

I? No.

No eye knows—

I know. Know I. Ay.

**IN WHICH THE FAIR YOUTH LOVES BLACK LUCE**

William Hatclyffe thinks of Lucy Negro Before Bed

The other mine. The other. Mine. Other.  
Mine the other. The other mine. Other.  
Mine. Mine other. The other. Other Mine.  
Thee mine. Thee other. Mine. Mine. Mine.

**IN MARCH  
OR, SHORTLY BEFORE MEETING LUCY**

What is there to do  
with a stuffed orifice  
and an indigenous profile?

Shall we take it on a picnic,  
you and me and my  
wanting body and big

black nose? If not the picnic  
then a nice bath? If not now  
then next week-end?

I'll fry some peach pies  
and bring Stoli, a book,  
and let's face it some music—

it is too hard to listen  
to someone else talk for so long  
and we'll get cold because of

Massachusetts in spring,  
which is never as warm as  
we mean it to be, and the pies

will turn you on  
because I have put almond extract  
in the filling— did you know

it was slave food? White boy,  
black girl, slave food, getting drunk  
on the grass, near the water:

it's a fine tradition to step along,  
and a good day to make  
attempts at sharing.

## BLACKLUCYNEGRO IV

I have walked Lucy's walk all of my life  
have walked where Lucy walked

right through London  
drank two scotches

followed a white man with an old map  
clicked black booted on brown stone  
all through Clerkenwell

on the same Clerkenwell stone after stone  
after stone

and stood and breathed  
the air in the same spot Lucy stood  
and breathed the air

I have walked Black Lucy's walk  
all my life breathed her air  
however long ago

it was almost as much  
as being with him as close  
to being with him almost as much

as knowing the answer to every question  
wanting answering

**{But slave to slavery my sweetest friend must be}**  
**William Shakespeare. Sonnet CXXXIII**

Every can't see  
To can't see  
Haint  
She's haunted

## THE BIDDIES SPEAK

“Lord don’t know  
don’t know  
what she do wit’ that man—

ain’t that ever the way—

them goin’ all about  
in our dark

like they afeared  
‘a some comeback spirit.

Ain’t no comeback spirit  
but a thousand thousand  
yaller babies

what look  
like they daddies  
gone too long in the sun—

from caint see  
to caint see.”

## MILK COW'S COME HOME BLUES

for Alberta Bontemps

grant o lord  
that in the hustle  
of life we  
forget not to be  
who we belong to  
who we also are

let us  
reckon the cow's head in the tub  
and reckon also the hand  
that severed it

reckoning also  
the run off cows—alberta's  
grandmama knew  
they old milkmother  
would call them back  
to the yard

and reckon  
yes  
call back also  
that home truth

how one cropped head  
draws three score back  
all the other flock  
to feed the fold



## COMFORT GIRL BLUES

Well he want me so bad he went and turned my bright skin blue  
Yes he want me to bad he had to turn my bright skin blue  
So tore up with wanting it was all he knew to do

Won't leave me be cause he can't find peace of his own  
No he cant see me at peace; ain't got none of his own  
Now we're two hurting bodies haunting his daddy's home

My folks see me get big, they hang their heads and ache  
Yeah they watch my belly grow and they hand they heads and ache  
I'm just smiling, resting now; ain't he took all he can take?

But that baby girl we made, he went and turned her new skin blue  
Yeah he knew just how to get me, went and turned her new skin blue  
He done took all of my joy; now I know what I gotta do

I ask my mama take the baby, I ask him real sweet to my bed  
Oh now mama take my baby girl, Ima wrap her daddy sweet, 'tween my legs  
Then I'll take a match and strike it and love us both to death.

## FIELD HOLLER

The bag trailing behind,  
a whitish exclamation mark  
pointing  
back to the house.

Baby girl

the anchor

to this earth,

this house,

the accidental crop,

the unwanted harvest yield.

## VITILIGO BLUES

*Got a light-skinned girl look like Michael Jackson*  
*Got a dark-skinned girl look like Michael Jackson*

Catallus the poet who wrote a definition of pain *Odi et amo* I hate and I love *Quare id faciam fortasse requires* Perhaps you wonder why I do it *Nescio* I do not know *Sed fieri sentio et excrucior* But it I feel and am benumbed by it Pain the natural extension of force on the body *Odi et amo et sentio et excrucior* Pain not the want but the reverberations of the want Pain the consequence of overwhelming force *nescio* if great sweet pleasure could bloom instead from the pressure that might explain the want for it better *quare id faciam fortasse requires* Pain an ironic cash for gold sign over a White Boy Word Shed Pain the sign glowing through every backyard show like no one ever walked under it a gate to selling lost loves away Pain it strikes every time like the news of Michael Jackson's death thought it was a joke when I first heard Michael every word come down about you a long time seemed like a joke out drinking the news felt true soon though *amo fieri sentio et excrucior* every one of your tunes shutting the club down like propofol for an alternating current *sentio odi amo* Pain the white in you seeping out onto your skin like that *odi et amo* reminds me of my half laugh at that sign for cash Pain I would've cut my face up too I would've stopped everything all my rapist forefathers crawling in patches onto my flesh like that I would've sliced my nose right off to spite them bleach my skin to show how frightening an invasion of whiteness can be

## **BROWN GIRL, RED BONE**

after "brown girl in the ring," a black children's song and pastime

*There's a brown girl in the ring, tra la la la la*  
*There's a brown girl in the ring, tra la la la la*  
*There's a brown girl in the ring, tra la la la la*  
*And she looks like the sugar in the plum, plum plum*

There's a red bone in the field, oh lord, oh lord, oh lord  
There's a red bone in the field, oh lord, oh lord, oh lord  
There's a red bone in the field, oh lord, oh lord, oh lord  
And she looks like the house girl in the house. His house.

*Now show me your motion, tra la la la la*  
*Now show me your motion, tra la la la la*  
*Now show me your motion, tra la la la la*  
*And she looks like the sugar in the plum, plum, plum*

Now don't say who your daddy is, hush girl, hush girl, hush, hush  
Now don't say who your daddy is, hush girl, hush girl, hush, hush  
Now don't say who your daddy is, hush girl, hush girl, hush, hush  
And she looks like the children in the house. His house.

Brown girl. Red Bone. Oh Lord. The house.  
In the plum. Your daddy is. Hush girl. Look.

## COMEBACK SPIRIT

The snow  
                  dark,  
the peace  
                  whispering, and

*Yes*  
went the comeback spirit  
once.

*Love,*  
                          it went,  
the comeback spirit,  
once.

                  Sharecropped:

the heart when  
                  dreaming can end  
so ghostly—

*Yes*  
went the comeback spirit.

*Yes I will remain  
with them  
what conjured me.*

## LUCY RUN IT

Skin the color  
of daddy done wrong  
by her mama  
long gone  
from his take space  
stay awake space  
baby break it  
space—

now Lucy's place  
is all safe spaces  
from the top of her roof  
to the work in the room  
up atwixt her legs  
when she takes them to bed—

yes that space  
is true safe too.  
Lucy run it.

Lucy got work  
and more work  
coming in  
but it ain't a sin  
the way her mama  
learned sin,

cause Lucy's place  
with all its safe spaces  
bust up  
that man myth  
sugar tit  
thin lipped cuss  
and spit up  
that old thing  
that old  
that old  
comfort girl yoked  
bearing the world

pat your hair  
shine  
your pearl  
teeth smiling shit  
cause Lucy run it.

**FIELD NIGGER  
OR, SUBLIMATING LUCY. TIRED OF HEARING CERTAIN QUESTIONS.**

This scarf? I bought it at some airport, going somewhere.

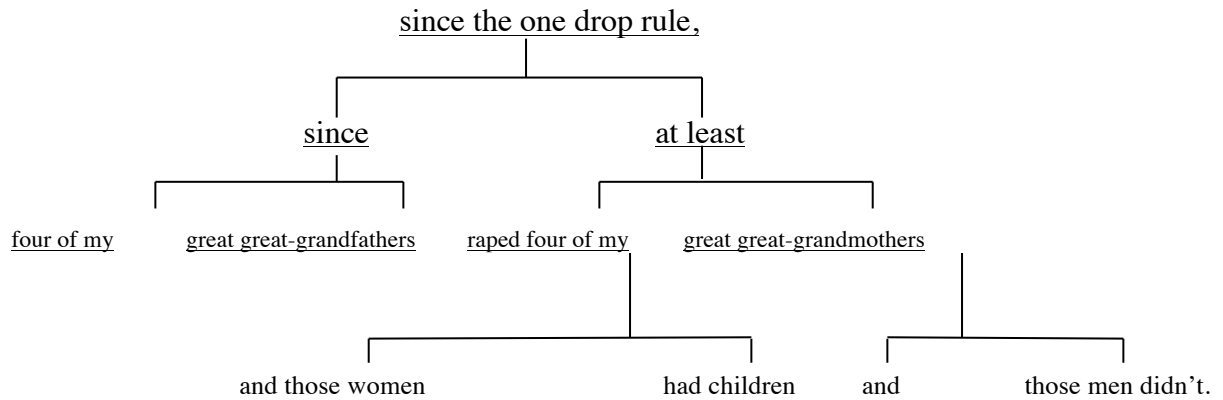
Could it have been Dublin?  
No, got there by boat.

And this belt and bag, well, isn't it wonderful to have a drawer  
to put each of these things  
away in?

Just trying to  
be wife material,

I have become quite the genealogist— it makes me able to explain how

I am not half black; I haven't been half black



Memory is a poor servant,

Just a field nigger like me,

ploughing

to put something  
on the page.



## BACKBONE

Nana would say, *Come here child. What kind of comb does your mother use?* And then I would sit between her legs, where the bluish, flowery dressing gown spread over the reddish, flowery wingback. Howl as she dragged that paddle brush through my naps and rounds. *Hush girl.* I would grimace and spit and let tears itch up the corners of my eyes, staying still though, as she smoothed my scalp with the sweat off her highball—Glenlivet, 11:00 am, every day, come breast or bone, brain or lung— and wove the tufts into a fluffy braid half down my back. *Cancer? Hell.*

She'd turn on the Vivaldi, pat her chemo bag, teach me Spades. Aunt Wendy curled her hair for late church, and Daddy looked on, long faced, at us all. I would reach for a card and, *Ashy. Turn around and let me get some of this on you.* The Vaseline was always in a jar next to the lamp, behind the whiskey and the remote control. *It looks like you've been crawling around in flour on your knees and elbows.* Nana made those joint bones glisten, she did,

died, and my cousin, out loud  
she wrote a menu, said—  
*I know how to make cheesecake,  
I know how to make shrimp,  
I can fix corn pone, potatoes.*

But me, I knew in secret  
how to make a shiny elbow  
    out of flour and Vaseline,  
how to make a rope hang  
    from my head  
    with screams and scotch sweat.

**{Till my bad angel fire my good one out}**  
**William Shakespeare. Sonnet CXLIV**

“Girl, you know you beautiful.”

Hmph.

“Where your husband?”

Ha!

“Can I follow you?”

No.

{FOR I HAVE SWORN THEE FAIR}

I.

And this,  
the morning of our quiet places,  
it has a with-ness  
in it.  
And he the mirror  
I wrap my hair in,  
his face the mirror I wrap my hair in,  
and the with-ness,  
and this is  
the good skin,  
*For I have sworn thee fair and thought thee bright*  
this the sin  
we sweat our skins for—  
*Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.*

{MY LOVE IS AS A FEVER LONGING STILL}

II.

My man? He the Promise King--

I can't open my mouth but he'll swear such and such.

Try and stop him, see where that get me,

Buyin' me shit he can't afford.

My love, the Promise King—

Why he make 'em, can't keep 'em,

I couldn't say. Figure he get

High on the way it

Bind us for a minute, till he

Lie, that's all his word is—

My man Love, the promise king:

I break it if I bought it,

I own it if I caught it,

I spend it if I got it.

{AND SO THE GENERAL OF HOT DESIRE WAS, SLEEPING, BY A VIRGIN HAND  
DISARM'D.}

III.

“Boy, put your hand on your neck.

That’s my foot on your throat.

Now squeeze it.

That is my foot,

on your throat.

Let me catch your hands on my baby girl again.”

Reckon that’s what her Daddy wisht he said, stedda,

“Oh, I didn’t—

Suh I’m sorry—

Finna run on—”

And Lucy think, *Daddy?*

And Lucy think, *No Shelter.*

And boy take her throat,

And make it his home.

{THE BETTER ANGEL IS A MAN RIGHT FAIR, THE WORSE SPIRIT A WOMAN  
COLORED ILL}

IV.

Love, in the Remote Perfective, is

“She been did him,  
and his White way, too.

She been swallowed  
all his blessings.  
Every time.

All ‘cause he *stay* knowing  
where to get his righteous meal—

He say,  
*A boy will do it.*  
*A man will like it.*

And he make it rain  
*pitchforks and niggerbabies*  
from a’twixt her thighs.”

**{THEN I WILL DECLARE THAT BEAUTY HERSELF IS BLACK}**

**V.**

Say she wild, that she live by it,  
                                that she like it,  
like that money, like that witness,  
                like that grotesque, and his *yes, yes*—  
                                and she dazzle him, when she monkey shine,  
'causa how *she* know that *he* know  
                                his people 'shamed  
of how he go  
                                for them darker juices, her darkness using  
                                him up  
                like ain't nobody watching.  
Always somebody watching you.  
                Even if ain't nobody down here watching you,  
God is.

{BUT, LOVE, HATE ON, FOR NOW I KNOW THY MIND}  
VI.

“Lucy, Lucy where you been?”

Living in *brown sugar* sin.

“Lucy, Lucy where’s you man?”

He come and *taste* me when he can.

“Lucy, Lucy ain’t you hitched?”

No, I’m just his *so good* bitch.

“Lucy, Lucy. Baby is you blue?”

Tch. I’m tired of feeling *blackgirl* used.

“Lucy, Lucy, that’s no kinda life.”

*Black girl* ain’t no kinda wife.

“Lucy, Lucy, how you stand it?”

It’s better than bein’ empty handed.

“Lucy, Lucy, even you’s God’s flesh.”

This world ain’t wanna see that yet.



**{IF HAIRS BE WIRES, BLACK WIRES GROW FROM HER HEAD}**  
**VII.**

My black wires and great big legs,  
great big head, eat the spirit up.  
Blast foundations.  
Shake the house down.  
Say, know me. Know me.  
Got the Missus skin and bone.  
And them other pretty things?  
Slim-hipped, flat chested,  
Cupid bow lipped—ha! Perky breasted?  
Them *other*.  
*Well girl*, he said. And *Thicker*.  
*And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare.*  
Yes. And *sweeter*, and *can't walk*. Mmmm. *Yes.*  
*As any she belied with false compare.*

{KNOWING THY HEART TORTURE ME WITH DISDAIN}

VIII.

The way my body *I don't want you*  
is my body  
*to be true* and nobody else's,  
and how I do I  
what I want to do  
without seeming selfish,  
that's the why and the how  
*I just wanna* come I divide myself:  
my heart from my head  
from my snatch from his stuff,  
*make love to you* so when I get it together  
*love to you* with him, or whoever,  
I stay belonging to me.

**{EAT UP THY CHARGE? IS THIS THY BODY'S END}**

**IX.**

Ada Bricktop stretch your legs,  
Drive 'em wild, and it get too much,  
Say, "I heard Bricktop  
    ate La Baker's cookies all up  
from time to time,  
    and that is how the world began"—  
Ha! Creation Myth.  
    My mistress' thighs  
are something like a tree.  
    My mistress' lips?  
Lord but they a thick cut of meat—  
tasties of the promised land.  
    Get thee to the New World  
    Through my middle passage.

{I AGAINST MYSELF WITH THEE PARTAKE}

X.

Breathe my air	Share my blood
Smooth pressed hair	Skin like mud

Redemption of a roundness.  
Reflection on a brown-ness.

Squeeze that leg—

Get it.

Press that belly—

Spread it.

*Don't put no more powder*

Wont' put none—

*In your biscuit mix you see*

I hear you—

*Cause your biscuit*

Tell me about my stuff, Bo—

*Is plenty big enough for me.*

**{FOR I HAVE SWORN THEE FAIR. MORE PERJURED EYE}**  
**XI.**

Want to spit and swag  
'Bout they labor and drag—  
Wondering how,  
How make an art of it  
And still keep that soul  
At the heart as a part of it?  
And Father, Father,  
Aren't you proud?  
Your girl's so precious,  
She comes so loud,  
    And all bright-skinned, light brown like a house slave.  
    And all fancy talk, sweet tongued like house slave.  
What is a witness with a perjured eye? Well I—my eyes  
Have seen a lot of broke-down houses.

**{BUT SLAVE TO SLAVERY MY SWEET'ST FRIEND MUST BE}  
XII.**

My plantation myth  
                  is a pillar of excess,  
    an auction block sweat test,  
                  a bar room sexist.

My plantation myth  
Sleeps lonesome, wondering, in a do-rag:

Will I ever sleep next to a white man  
    and my hair look right in the morning?

Pastor say,  
    "Ladies, if a man want you  
            when you lookin' rugged,  
    you ain't want that man."

He say,  
    "Keep correct council."

{WHEN ALL MY BEST DOTH WORSHIP THY DEFECT}  
XIII.

Thick as a fool, Amen:

“Whattodo, Miss Lucy?

You thick as a fool.”

See?

Thick as a fool, Defect:

*A touch of the tar brush,*

a nurse’s titty,

a banana skirt,

*a breedable filly—*

all one woman,

*but love, hate on.*

What to do with our defect?

Find that love compartment.

**{TILL MY BAD ANGEL FIRE MY GOOD ONE OUT}**

**XIV.**

A shiftless history: *Two loves I have.*

That shifty mystery: *Comfort. And Despair.*

That's right,

a house girl. A field hand.

*The better angel is a man right fair,*

*The worser spirit a woman colored ill—*

“Ooh-wee, baby wasn't that the way?”

Sick, and brown, and used, and tired,

With a nice warm snatch all black and wired.

“Unh-huh.”

Come on over here, boy.

Let mama get some of that comfort.

Put it up in this despair

I got going on.

.



{THE EXPENSE OF SPIRIT IN A WASTE OF SHAME IS LUST IN ACTION}

XV.

The mysteries of the world

spilling

out from between my thighs

and onto your face

and Jesus Christ,

what an accident,

showing you the truth of a woman like that,

like it was something any man ought to know.

We were all before-the-fall,

all happy fucks from rib bones,

and now here we are,

*Anno Domine* every single year after:

That's what you get for eating

that strange tree fruit.

{NOW IS BLACK BEAUTY'S SUCCESSIVE HEIR}  
XVI.

“Hand them hips!  
    Wag them knees!  
Mind them dips  
    At the Cakewalk please!”  
Can't touch my thickness,  
Can't stand my witness—  
Can I get a,  
    Can I get a,  
        get a  
            Gullah  
                gutta  
    Mule-uh  
Oh my stars, this world!  
Oh, walk around in it, sugar.

**{THY BLACK IS FAIREST IN MY JUDGMENT'S PLACE}**

“Pray inquire after & secure my Negresse. She is certainly at The Swan.” —Denis Edwards,1602.

**XVII.**

Feels *mmm-good*,  
being looked for my dear,  
my nothing,  
                    my diddy-wah-diddy. What's that?  
That we don't none of us,                      *diddy-wah*,  
                    know our own words for things  
*wah-diddy is*    anymore.  
Maybe we can signify them back,  
  fall out, and pray ,  
  and inquire after  
                    that jazzy dig, that sweet and low,  
                    that scat and jive, that endless flow—  
been went to The Swan.  
Juke joint up the road.

**{SHE THAT MAKES ME SIN AWARDS ME PAIN}  
XVIII.**

Only like it  
when he get it  
where it hurt it  
hurt to hit it  
hurt to make  
that old fear  
shake down.  
That old  
that old—

he hurt it  
I want it  
he own it—  
that fear that shake the hurt down.

When Dr. Salkeld and I parted ways towards the end of May, I was thrilled and disappointed in equal measure. I was thrilled to have confidence as I revisited my hunt through the sonnets for fragments that might lead me to some insight into how Shakespeare viewed a “black” female form, thrilled to find new language to describe myself, even. I was disappointed because, in the end, all he and I can really do is conjure, and suspect. As Duncan puts it, “The mystery of the ‘dark lady’...continues to remain dark, though the question of her historical identity is unlikely to go away. We cannot conclude that Shakespeare and Black Luce were lovers, but they certainly shared acquaintances.” This felt too dry to me. I felt beset by the weight of uncertainty. So I went back to the original works, the Dark Lady sonnets, with the intention of finding evidence enough that I might be

satisfied. Shakespeare's words had been enough for me before, and I will make them enough again.

**{Beshrew that heart that makes my heart to groan for that deep wound it gives my friend  
and me}**

**William Shakespeare. Sonnet CXXXIII**

How to bless, how give in return,  
when the favor is not an object  
but an unexpected place in the heart?  
When our beloved are only tamed  
by things that rot them?

**BLACK LUCE GOES TO SEE *OTHELLO* AND BECOMES MILDLY INDIGNANT**

The stage small story  
speech lines winding  
through me like so much heat in the blood  
words like heat in the blood  
words heat the blood  
blood fumbling  
heart tendering and hate  
the skin a loathsome  
a sharpish buzz in the blood  
and it pricks it  
up pricks the wooden O  
the skin it hammers the boards  
with un-love and wonder  
and this Dick  
Burbage wearing my hard thing  
my pricked skin for the love  
of a crowd using the crowd hate  
for white man call back love



**BLACK LUCE GOES TO SEE *MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING* AND THINKS SOME  
PEOPLE DON'T HAVE ENOUGH REAL THINGS TO WORRY ABOUT**

Beshrew his  
    groaning heart  
and all its  
haltings,

its wonder who,  
    and how,  
    and iffings.

Its notings

of nothings

    noting nothing,

nothing.

Nothing of nothing

    in the street,  
    in the bed,

in the strange  
and cankered

    hearts

of men.

**BLACK LUCE GOES TO SEE HENRY V AND IT MAKES HER PRESS HER LEGS  
TOGETHER**

The old wood  
round pricks the skin  
of his feet skin  
my skin wood brown  
around him  
this wooden O—  
my wooden O— what  
may we cram within  
this wood brown O  
but him that wrote to life  
the fall of Agincourt

**WHEN I FANTASIZE ABOUT HIM AND BLACK LUCE LATE AT NIGHT**

Say he came to her place one night

say he said

*Not that one*

*Not that one*

*no*

*no*

*some other.*

*No. Ay. Yes, other*

of her, oh her

*Yes, her.*

No. Her place.

No other.

Lucy doesn't work like  
that any more.

This is Lucy's place.

*Thee* he said.

"Nay, no not I," she said.

"Some other."

*Yes other*, he said

*Thou art the Other of my desiring*  
he said. *And my need confounds me.*

**ROSE FLOWER WRITES HIM A SONNET  
OR, {I MYSELF AM MORTGAGED TO [MY] WILL}**

Once he bent him down to me,  
he bent and  
                  his words came  
with him. His blood  
                  word—  
*his. beauty. black.—*  
                  His writ word,  
all breathing between us  
all doing that old  
that old  
that old thing between us.  
                  Never made him pay,  
never after the words came  
                  first, held ransom sin.

He was terribly precise, that Shakespeare, and from all the words to call her by, he wrote her *black*.

The burden of proof falls upon the truest believer. The question of Black Lucy is not then, whether or not she is the Dark Lady, but how to prove it.

[Thy Black is fairest in my judgment's place]  
William Shakespeare. Sonnet CXXXI

Time fed the tale—  
    that almost fat nest—  
*she was you,*  
    *Lucy,*  
    I cried.  
Time fed the tale,  
    and three score cows  
    came back to the fold.  
Time fed the tale  
    and she was you,  
Lucy—  
    Milkmother. Rose Flower.  
Comeback spirit. Negro.

## THIS EXIAT SAYETH THAT

This exiat sayeth that

We are fit for the degree of them that use us.

This exiat sayeth that

Lucy is burning. Think of her burning loose light wax and wick and brown skin sweat slicked.  
See the room where he paid to know her. Where he paid to

paid to  
paid to know her. A rat in the  
room and a velvet stage gown gone to seed.

This exiat sayeth that

Mick. Bob. Bowie. All my favorite rock stars have black babies.

This exiat sayeth that

Lucy got hot fire. I am fit for her degree if she can use me. More fire. More fire and lick shot.

This exiat sayeth that

Lucy the love hooker. Gold hooker. Heart of Clerkenwell Rose Flower my heart hook her. Lover  
love her well Lucy. The answer Lucy the new look question and truth of all the things a dark  
lady can be Lucy can do can run can love can make take eat fuck sleep dreaming is a truth that  
happened only to the soul.

## LUCY'S EXIAT SAYETH THAT

This exiat sayeth that

I am wild, and that I live by it, and that I like it; like the money, and the witness, and the grotesque, and the yes, yes.

This exiat sayeth that

I am not a partridge, or a ruby. I am a potato, a beetroot. Not a precious bird or jewel, but a dirt-dug tube. Rustle me, rub me all over, and I will muddle your interiors with flecks of brown earth. You will sigh at your soiled hands and then you will put them in your pockets to pay for it.

This exiat sayeth that

You will come again to scour my body with your worthy, emolient palm creases *because I am* that round, strange, colored victual, and further, this examine sayeth that you will dirt grit your nails to gather me up and by God we will both be sustained. By God if you warm and eat me, I will nourish and fatten you.



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## VITA

### Academic Studies

- ◆ MFA in Poetry, University of Mississippi (degree expected May 2015)
  - ◆ Cumulative University of Mississippi GPA: 4.0
- ◆ Harvard College Class of 2010, BA in English and American Literature and Language.
  - ◆ Cumulative Harvard GPA with Oxford Grades: 3.52
- ◆ Awarded the distinction ***Magna Cum Laude*** for Thesis from the English and American Literature and Languages department, Jorie Graham and Amy Hempel thesis readers.
  - ◆ Thesis, entitled *Prelapsarian*, was a collection of 37 poems, five of which have since been published
- ◆ Oxford University Visiting Student—a highly competitive status, with 2 to 3 students accepted per college, per term—on the recommendation of Stephen Greenblatt (Spring Semester 2009)
- ◆ Graduated ***Magna Cum Laude*** with distinction in the Humanities and the Performing Arts from St. Paul's School, Concord, New Hampshire (June 2006)

### Experience

#### Teaching

- ◆ Visiting Assistant Professor of English, West Virginia University (Fall 2015)
- ◆ Instructor of Record, University of MS:
  - ◆ Introduction to Creative Writing (Fall 2014)
  - ◆ Compositional Writing, two sections, University of MS (Spring 2014)
- ◆ Teaching Assistant:
  - ◆ English 221: Survey of World Literature to 1650 – Tim Earley (Spring 2015)
  - ◆ English 223: Early American Literature – Caroline Wigginton (Fall 2013)
  - ◆ English 385: Studies in Shakespeare – Ivo Kamps (Spring 2013)
  - ◆ English 224: American Literature from the Civil War to the Present – Robert Rea (Fall 2012)
- ◆ Teaching Assistant, Camp Copperhead Songwriting Camp (Summer 2014)
  - ◆ Developed the poetics and workshop aspects of syllabus for Grammy Winning songwriting Steve Earle and administered program with approximately 100 students ranging from an international pop star to a Harvard Business School graduate.
- ◆ Teach For America Corps Member (2010-2012)
  - ◆ Taught 1 year of Ninth Grade English full time at Ruleville Central High School, Ruleville, MS (2011-2012)
  - ◆ Taught 1 year of First Grade full time at James C. Rosser Elementary School, Moorhead, MS (2010-2011)
- ◆ Paid SAT and Reading Comprehension tutor (Summer 2006, 2007, 2008)

## Leadership and Development

- ◆ Executive Board (Position: Dionysus), *The Harvard Advocate* (2008-2009)
- ◆ Business Board, *The Harvard Advocate* (2007 – 2010)

## Publications

### ◆ Books:

- ◆ Memoir/Cook Book - *Soul\*Food\*Love: A Hundred Years of Cooking in One Black Family*, co-written with Alice Randall, Random House (2015 forthcoming)
- ◆ Poetry Collection - *Lucy Negro, Redux*, Ampersand Books (April 2015 forthcoming)
- ◆ Novel - *The Diary of BB Bright, Possible Princess*, co-written with Alice Randall, Turner Publishing (2012)
  - ◆ Winner: The Harlem Book Fair Phyllis Wheatley Award for Best Young Adult Fiction (2013)
  - ◆ Finalist: NAACP Image Award for Best Young Adult Fiction (2013)

### ◆ Articles

- ◆ Article - “The Next Generation of Soul Food,” *Southern Living*, (February 2015 forthcoming)
- ◆ Cover Article- “Too Old to Die Young - Justin Townes Earle,” *Native Magazine* (February 2013)

### ◆ Poetry

- ◆ “[For I have sworn thee fair],” “[My love is as a fever longing still],” “[Thy black is fairest in my judgment’s place],” “[And so the general of hot desire was, sleeping, by a virgin hand disarm’d],” “[The better angel is a man right fair, the worser spirit a woman colored ill],” “[But, love, hate on, for now I know thy mind],” *The Iowa Review* (2015 Forthcoming)
- ◆ “Transubstantiate,” “Book of Common Prayer,” “Wane and Wax,” “Nude Study,” *Palimpsest | A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International*, Vol. 1, Issue 2
- ◆ “Kitchen Door,” *The Massachusetts Review* Vol. 53, Issue 2

## Awards Summary/Support

- ◆ Peter Aschoff Award for Best Music Writing 2014 from the University of Mississippi Center for Southern Studies - “If Jocasta Sang the Blues: Motherlovers, Manbabies, and Blues-ed Family Values” (Spring 2014)
- ◆ Cave Canem Fellowship (Summer 2013, 2014)
- ◆ Awarded *The Charles Edward Horman Prize* for a poem that best represents the life and ideals of Harvard Alumnus Charles Edward Horman with a \$1,000 stipend, Harvard English Department (Spring 2009)
- ◆ Harvard Institute of Politics Grant to work in Washington, D.C. for Congressman Jim Cooper (Summer 2008)
- ◆ Intern, 35 Sound Studio – performed research under G. Marq Roswell for the soundtrack of Denzel Washington’s *The Great Debaters* (Summer 2007)
- ◆ Intern for MTV Films on the Paramount lot (Summer 2006)