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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 16th 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 saieth 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 20th, 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 was 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
the peace dark,
 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.

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 WORSER 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.”

{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 DOTTH 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.

**{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.*

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.

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)