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"We Talked About the Light"

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We Talked About the Light

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B.A. English: Creative Writing, Saint Louis University, 2014

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Missouri—St. Louis
to Satisfy Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts: Creative Writing, Poetry

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Abstract

These poems are about conflicting racial and sexual identities; they flirt with radical denial, radical despair, and radical acceptance, but not necessarily in that order. Their forms are largely inspired by early-to-mid twentieth century African American poetry.

Regina Mae Frances Pittman Walls, 1944-2013

Ulysses Walls, 1942-

Part I

i am a wet dream i am a threat i am an offense

i am the defense i am the exception

oh its so good

to be *mulatta* tragic
& sexy hearing dark girls
whisper *wannabe* young
black & educated
a beige receipt with my name
printed in black
testifies i made it
on a white dime
& im fixing to be the cunt
to some fools *redbone*
fetish the color of every dessert
you can imagine
how breathless i am
when you whisper in my ear
how you love you a
high yaller with hazel eyes
& hair long like the Nile
& a dark well deep like the Nile
& a backside thicker than reeds
im so good at being
told how i look
better with my hair straight
with my back bent
with my ass fat
& ill take that
i dig drinking
from your wettest dream

when i walk

you'd let me be lonely?
— claudia rankine

i want to move to the other side
of the street before he gets
too close to me
with that blueblack body
& i think of how it will be
when he passes me & turns around
& when his blueblack arms
wrap around me from behind
& i think of how no one will see
his blueblack hands
cup the sides of my ribs

& i feel that feeling
we all feel when somebody dies
but the person dying
is the idea that you
are one complete person
& its the idea that
no one else can see
the black bones
sticking out of your skin
& its the idea that
your small brown body
is saved by walking white
& its the idea that
you are the exception
& the exception allows you
this perfect loneliness
its the loneliness of wanting
& its the loneliness of deciding

i want to move to the other side
before he reminds me
im black like him
& hes black like me
& im not ready
to lose that loneliness

the day you remember

an ashy homeboy
asks for your number

two heavy girls
gossip & throw glances

he follows your body
says you walk with a switch

they lean by a shop window
watching you like a bike wreck

his mouth spreads wide
across his blueblack face

one laughs with her eyes
& the other cups her mouth

& you say hes not the mouth
you want to press to yours

& he asks you why
& you say theres people here

& the ebony rolls her eyes
& the ebony tells her friend

*there some bougie bitches
round this city*

& the homeboy you turn down
calls you a racist

but no one says anything
about niggas

these women dont know

the way they look
past them

 i see how they hold their
mouths to white hips

they dont have a love
for these black bodies

they dont have enough mouths
they dont love you like i can

the short confessional

from the heart
of the angry redbone body

what is black america without her

two wet mouths
the one black the one talking white

Part II

i am inextricable i am hanging i am the quota

i am the branch i am the exception

Lowndes, 1918

for mary turner

I.

sticking out is my arm
is the staff of a dead tree
with its wrinkled twigs
bark knuckled & hailing

the feverish point
of the possums nose
that nuzzles up
as toward a parent

my blindness
cant tell you how
soft or spiked he is
but he coos like the river

the wind has stopped tonight
the river coos behind
the possum with its head high
 & tongue reaching

& the possum cuts
the wind & the possum
reaches for the salt
petrifying my eye

since the black rain
the bank has stilled
& a thrasher sticks
to the tip of my toe

from my nail
she plucks a worm
& rakes the writhing
torso to a nest

whose cry is loud
& its clicks solemn
for all its stomachs
tiny & folding in

thru my stomach a knife
sank & ripped from side
to side in the pullback
of skin

his small bones
have all fallen thru
the fold of me gyrating
wad of red & white

II.

the white folks gone home
to redfaced white women
hollering over hollering
babies backsides powdered

white powder sticking
to small & puckered things
without the need to run
to hotwash & bury skin

the white folks gone home
with redfaced white women
loving to make loving
babies backsides pink

white powder sticking
to small & peachsoft things
without the need to run
to swingtie & bury skin

the white folks gone home
like redfaced white women
needing the needy
babies backsides prized

white powder sticking
to small & special things
without the need to run
to char & bury skin

the white folks gone home
the redfaced white women
too all longing for the pulling
of nappyended rope

white powder sticking
to fat black & sappy things
without the sense to run
to swing punctured fruit

III.

the edge of folsom bridge ran me & mine
& ate a divot out of me

it was the coldest
 georgia

 nights are colder
than the peaches lead you to believe

men hot & hurrying their heated selves
for the pulling down of loud strong wives

& strong loud
 negroes

lives burning chiggers
against my skin

sapping bones i cant make
run for the two of us

we two & little river are all quiet now
its seen too much of me & mine

its seen too much
of chain gang lines
of black legs running
from lowndes county trees

IV.

hazel

chain gang clinksong
high like the bird
dirty mouthed like the possum

& the possum all cooing
to the river stuck
to the river too clear
dirty eared
 like my kin

mouths moving hungry
jaws unlocked & low
chain gang clinksong
 for hazel

*swing swing sister
its okay to weep
& tell the mourners too
that the river wont keep*

*swing swing brother
its time i start to weep
see we all been tricked
little river gone to sleep*

*swing swing mother
daddys underground
now we can go & see
if its jordan that he found*

chain gang clinksong
high like the bird
lonesome as the possum

& the possum stop cooing
to the river too thin
to the river too clear
 dirty eared
 as me

V.

too many of them when us two ran
shut eyed & strung to these here trees

these trees here blacker than i ever been

from the lip of folsom i count the trees
the blades bentsmashed below

 i see thru the flame too thin
& find five hundred more all told not to run

 i see thru the syrup black & puddle of my baby
& find myself in five hundred told not to run

 i see thru the film fire string & rope of me
falling to the iron black pot

at the river
 my body the black

pot full of onion
the chitterlings pulpy beige
 washed clear like water

VI.

the water too clear
cant rinse my body
of my man dead

the water too clear
cant rinse my sight
of my baby quiet

the water too clear
cant rinse the bridge
of these ropes of me

the water too clear
cant rinse the tree
of ropes come before me

the water too clear
cant rinse this river
of more dead

niggers

VII.

when the black body is grounded
how to teach about the blood
in summertime oranges & georgia
peach country blues loud like the river
the bluelipped me & the cobblerfaced small of me
& the low bone mound of my man dead
we all fallen thru the fold & bentsmashed
like the grass like the white underbelly
like the ground that dont carry us
like the ground they mark for me
like tobacco butt like cheek tobacco
like charred afterbirth
 these leeches pon my face
 wont talk back again
 wont talk back again
 wont talk back

VIII.

theyll be back
cool like the river

theyll shoo the bird
the possum will leave

theyll sew him
back inside of me

fine like chicken
wire ribbon

theyll wire us
niggers shut
inside each other
 kissing

the roots of treeswings
in these county mouths

IX.

when you climb the tree
& reach for fuzzskinned peaches
can you taste the char

X.

from where i been hanging
i see their blades
 dirty mouthed bottle & tobacco butt
fashion ground for me

i see their spades
scrape earth over me

branches folded
below the mass

i watch their spades
scrape the earth over me

my baby sunken
below tobacco mass
the underbelly of white boots

from where i been hanging
i know me & mine
 dirty mashed okra & settled black pot
know jordan is dead

potted body
to stewing black body

the afterbirth
the mouths of peaches
the chitterlings pulpy beige

cayenne coated
unsettled like the river

Part III

i am the light i am the bone i am the plummet

i am the mouth i am the exception

we talked about the light

the man in front of you
has made your blackness sexy
the way stars are
brightest when they die

the lot is empty
but for your car idling
& holding your two bodies
moving inside themselves

both speaking for you
& writhing beneath you
are two mouths you want
to press to his

his mouth tells you the way
the street light hits you
makes you amber
a special kind of black

say to yourself *when*
we talked about the light
my blackness was—

& when the man in front of you
disintegrates & you plummet
from that space youve found
where the light touches you
just right
 there
remind yourself
about the light

youre halfway through with me

& weve been at this for hours
but i need to tell you some things
about a black body

ive been fighting
the need to tell you
about the boy
who called me *nigger*

& i need to hear you
tell me you aint like him

i need to tell you
about the boy
who threw me out
the backdoor swinging
a bat in my face

& i need to hear you
tell me you aint like him

i need to tell you
how your whiteness gets me

& how i lost track of the mouths
i left on west ave grinding
leather with a white
boy telling me to holler
loud enough for the world
to hear him take his first
black girl

i need you to tell me
you wont tell nobody else

what color i am
when we are skindeep
& my badgirl voice loud

i want you louder
tell me you wont
be another white boy
i regret

son

after lucille clifton

wide hips woulda done you good
when they knocked
into dressers & table corners

wide hips are calluses
they sway & switch & slide
through doorways
against mattresses

wide hips heat hallways
kick over ketchup bottles
& cushion toddler tears

you dont know calluses
the way i know them
you dont know nothin

about a womans calluses
on hips
on heels
under wet eyes
between thick black thighs

son
these hips
they too good
for you

when youre with him

& its crowded
& everyones mouth is moving
& you should be looking at him
youre too busy looking at
the woman next to him

as she talks & laughs
jostling the dip of skin
under the cheekbone
that you want to kiss
& you imagine plucking
her collarbone
with your tongue
& you wonder if that
glassy eyed sweetness
would still be there
if she came on your hand
& if her arms would splay
like the blonde sheet
draped over her shoulders
& your lips part
at the sight of her
tossing her head back
& dragging it forward
chinfirst & cutting the space
between her face
& your mouth

& your eyes
catch as she looks at you
& she turns to him
& she asks how long
youve known each other

sapphic

the first woman you ate
dinner with you imagined

your thigh keloids
would tell her how sick

you were at the time
wondering how to hold

your mouths in that stratum
between dyke & notdyke

but those keloids they mapped
the inches between

her face & your waist
band in the sapphic air

you covered her first mouth
as you bit your way through her

you slowed your jaw & saw
the halved black beetle body

you watched it speak
you kissed her second mouth

& thought about the light
& how it was too dim

to see the people
watching as you looked

for the openings
to each others mouths

the burning

theres a star coming for you

you watch her body
in the light

the whole world is a bout
of nervous laughter

as they tell you not to be
afraid of shooting stars

you say its not the ones shooting

you say its the ones you want to hold in your mouth

she is the hallway
you were afraid to follow

she is the small faces of women
you wanted to touch

she is the voices of boys
you wanted to ignite

she is the light
of your black body

& she is the dead end
of your plummet

at the end of your resolve
you watch her outline

cut the space
between her feet

& your feet
break out running

you think about the light
you stammer from your second mouth

you are the hallway
you are the faces

you are the voices
you are the exception
you are perfect

& swallow yourself
in nervous laughter

Part IV

i am the boy i am the girl i am the teeth

i am the mouths i am the exception

i am perfect

Mouthy Little Mixed Girl

*black boys tell us
we got good hair*

*& the girls tell us
we too uppity*

*& white boys call us
sexy for brown girls*

*they tell us to talk right
they tell us to talk white*

I.

tell me you want
my nigger tongue

say it plainlike

that the *g* at the end of a word
dont sound right

that *hollerin* is sweeter

ask me for the nigger
in my second mouth

II.

you called me *mulatto*
said i look like

i do i hate niggas
 i hate niggas
 the way i hate white folks

who say i pass
who say *thats cool* with them

III.

i tried to get buck with the girl
calling me *white girl*

i tried to tell you
it was the blonde

bitch next to you
i must have looked

so small my hands
cutting the light

between our mouths
hollering names

about names
we never called each other

IV.

your shoulder is the blackness
probing my second mouth

you are the light
i wish id kept in my cheek

Part V

i am exiting i am relearning i am the end

i am the loudest i am the exception

i am perfect

with a white boy

every eye is pressing
your skin

looking for the reason
for your hand in his

those eyes fantasize the black
body you parade around in

whole faces whispering
as you walk by

you passing girl
you are certain

you are so good
you are so damn perfect

learning how to be black in a midwest nightclub

it doesnt occur to you
youre the only one

smelling like hot combs
& blue magic

or that your hair took
longer than everyone elses

when its 10 pm
you & your girlfriends

spill onto the street
heels stabbing puddles

with dollars & phones
& id cards stuffed in your chests

your dress
is the highest & lowest

cut straight down
your cleavage grinning & open

so you smile with both mouths
at a blonde

shooting whiskey with his greek letters
you wonder which

mouth he will like better
under the green light

the club goer looks
at your head

instead of your mouths
youve been sweating

for an hour fetty & biggie
have beat black beats

against your scalp
undoing your latest attempt

to bleach yourself
to blend like silence

like white music
combs your ear drums

& youre not sure
if hes asked for a taste

or escape
in the lull of a bass riff

you hear him ask
if you want

to introduce him
to your friend

yanking her platinum
ponytail into a bun

indiscretions of a bisexual in heat

to the blonde i caught
licking her thumb in the copy room

come into me
like heat into summer dresses

rake your hands
over the base of my throat

& cross the peninsula
between my breasts

edge your face to the band
that covers my tattoo

hook your teeth
& drag it down with you

the way a cat harvests
a wet red rat heart

i want you to breathe
through your mouth

till theres enough of me
to drown in

leave me as still as i was
before i found you here

mouthng a swatch of skin
& sliding it over paperwork

relearning how to eat in public

the waitress next to you
twirls a pen with three fingers

& you bet they taste smooth
like lavender or honey or milk

when its time to rest
a tired knobby knee

she cocks her hip toward you
as if to hand you her bones

& she starts to rattle
off a list of new side items

& frothy crushed berry
nonsense youll never actually try

her voice pools in your ear
like syrup in the bed of a spoon

& she twists her gum with her tongue
& she asks you what you want
& she waits for an answer

but you hold it between two mouths

The Loudest Dead End

I.

it was the end of the war
between me & my second mouth

i wanted it
the way stars wait to burn
their black bodies

we had been too busy
talking about the light

& how good
it made my black body look

& i didnt notice the hunger
in my second mouth

as i think about the light
im trying this again im sitting
on the edge of the sink

im learning a language
for the color of my skin

theres my first mouth
the one with the dead end
theres my second mouth
the one eating stars

in my teeth i can count
women
the women ive wanted
the women ive wanted to be
& the men ive wanted
to be women for me

if youre wondering how
ive made it so long

we talked about the light
but ive decided
its too much for me

II.

i am asking my body
to go out blooming

i have mapped the faces
& the names of those faces

im going to leave
my curled fingernails

burnt hair from the stove
stencils of black soap

before i escape my body
ill spread it across the window

watch my neighbors
dissolve at the sight of me

the breast bigger than its sister
the white keloids

& oh itll be so good
to shave my second skin

when we talked about
the light i lost

that mouth under a streetlamp
they said the light

made me pretty
& blacker than i ever been

ask how i made it
with this many mouths

with this slice wire
across my brain

III.

ive always wanted
to fall from a building
afraid of the morning

i might not have
the best mechanics
or guess the right time

but i know about the light
i have gravity in my mouths
i have the weight of dead stars

i am perfect
for plummeting to my dead end
& i have the best mouths

for swallowing the light
bouncing from windows
as i head toward the ground

IV.

im trying this again
im on the edge of the sink
im learning the color of my chest
im about to switch my hips through a doorway
im about to press my body against the window
 ive got a face that keeps people inside of me

one of my mouths is the loudest dead end of a star
one of my mouths is the fractured light of the window

i zoom past waving at the faces ive left nameless
they never found me nestled in the neck bones
 of this body i cant stand

it is the blackest mouth i manage
it is the mouth kissing women
it is the mouth piercing tongues

it is the voices of rude boys
it is the sigh of small faces
it is the loneliness of black

 ive contracted
this sickness sucked its flavor & stuck it in my hair

i am my mouths
the loudest dead end of a burning star

talk white white tongue

I.

when they ask you what you is
remember say white

when you raise your hand in class
remember talk white

when the boys pinch your ass
remember giggle white

when one puts his hand inside you
remember scream white

when the girls pull your hair
remember cry white

when the club is turned up
remember move
 like a nigger

but when they mouth off at you
remember mouth white

mouthy lil mixed girl
remember mouth white

II.

*you dont talk
& thats why i like you*

like a nigger

III.

yeah
ill go out with you
lift up my skirt
my panties

i reckon
maybe even
slide & drop
to the side

i dont moan
n i bet youll like that

like a nigger

i dont dress
nah
i dont move at all

like a nigger
matta fac
like a nigger

tell me how good i wear this
tell me how good i wear this
tell me how good it is baby

niggerlessness
whitethroatedness

watch me move

baby dont
i move white

push me on my side
thats good
thats mine

feel that
hair

tell me how good i feel
with my small
white tongue

when we lit & loud

Part VI

i am a wet dream

i am a threat i am an offense

i am the defense i am the light i am the plummet

i am the mouth i am the boy i am the girl i am relearning

i am the end i am the loudest i am the exception

i am perfect & mouthy & ohsogood

Boulevard Heights, 2016

I.

i found my body
grounded & shutmouthed
behind these trees

here blacker than i
ever been roped along
the sewagesick river
running down the street

i see thru these ropes of me
hanged in the attic
in the boarding house
of welltodo & white

& puddle of my mouth
& finding myself in five
blocks of bodies
who dont want me here

my body	the dead
end of a star	unsettled
like the river	

II.

the waters unclear
cant rinse our bodies
of our men dead

the waters unclear
cant rinse our sight
of our babies quiet

the waters unclear
cant rinse the bridge
of these ropes of us

the waters unclear
cant rinse these trees
of ropes come before us

the waters unclear
cant rinse this river
of more dead
 black boys

III.

at the end of grief

how to teach about the blood

in oranges & georgia

peach country blues

im watching the protest

group exhaust the street

wondering who theyve come for & if theyd stop for me

how to teach about the fire

in heels & black knees

im considering my uncle

& his black body

beneath police vans

wondering who theyve come for & if theyd stop for me

im seeing the afterbirth

of black bodies stenciled

where black girls play

hopscotch & poppin popcorn

in the street watching policemen stand their ground

how to teach them about the bone

powder in chalk & news hanged

with black boys theyll never kiss

wondering who theyve come for & if theyd stop for me

im asking my uncle

if his gloves & white coat

keep his black body safe

wondering whos there & if theyd stop for him

he tells me about his black body

how it stands open like a gate

wondering who will notice & if theyll stop for him

he tells me how fire stands its ground

how our fear is in the pores

how our mouths need to sound

he tells me how to carry

mercy at the end of grief

this is the consequence of emergency

im looking for my body

in the situated black

of a backlit body

im asking it how to be

this is the mercy at the end of my grief

IV.

theyll find me here
nestled in the floorboards

theyll tell the others
i was the exception

to fine white bodies
redbonefine
niggerlessfine
whitetonguefine

V.

when you cross the bridge
& reach the census white road
wear our black bodies

this passing body
is my denied black body
lightskinned & drowning

unsettled
like the river

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