

288 Lucy Black Bird

This figure is based on historical research and much empathy.

Lucy was 12-year-old enslaved Black girl, raped and impregnated by her master. She not only lost the baby, but also developed a devastating condition known as a vesicovaginal fistula. This necrotic opening between the bladder and vagina causes the uncontrollable release of a putrid stream of urine and intense, chronic pain. She was determined to be infertile soon after her diagnosis and deemed useless for “breeding” purposes or heavy labor.

Lucy was one of more than a dozen enslaved young women given to Dr. J. Marion Sims, a medical doctor who wanted to perfect a surgery to close these fistulas, a fairly common complication of childbirth in the 19th century. He operated—often more than 20 times—on suffering, enslaved Black women, without anesthesia and usually without their consent.

Lucy’s story helped to found the field of medical ethics. Dr. Sims, once touted as the father of modern gynecology, has been relegated to infamy. Ethicists consider such questions as the appropriateness of men determining levels of female pain, the dangers of confusing experimentation with therapeutic intent, and the tendency to deny Black women anesthesia or ignore their pain.

But back to Lucy Black Bird... I imagine her wishing to fly away from the imprisonment of slavery, to escape her physical pain, and to gain a measure of happiness and control over her body and her life.