

St Augustine's Lover

"She said, I've liked long walks since I've found movies"

-Andrew Bird

After he told her, she gave him a blank scroll. "What's this for?" he asked. Her robe spread in folded circles on the brocade chair. She crossed both feet, not sexually, not submissively, not firmly, just normally. Like a cat, soft furred paws placed carefully atop each other. "I'll write you a love letter," he said. "A post love letter. A Loss Letter."

"Close enough," and he saw her eyes were dewy, not wet but moist like a piece of fruit. "It's for reasons." The boy was crouched behind the pillar. His curly hair sprung between the porcelain detailing. "Adeodatus," her voice rises. "You have Greek. Aristotle is my favorite; read it, and we'll talk about it."

"Reasons," she said, head bending over one smooth hand, picking a flake of nail. "Your a rhetorician. The first page for a thesis, the second for a first body paragraph, and so on and each according to his own."

Augustine wrote his reasons, he could write reasons for hours. They filled the page like gods, lines of words chiseled darkly on the parchment. They flew out of his pen like birds, birds strung across a tree, stretched over blank air. Their tense wings flailed against the paper like a window.

At dawn, he kissed her on the eyes, one for day and one for night. Dark when closed, slanted with sunbeams when open. He asks her how she is and how is Carthage and how is the Pythagorus coming, and she stretches out in chair, and says good, interesting, how are you? And her face moves with intelligent light, sunlight shifting up her cheek like a stalking cat. "My students are learning Plato," he would say, "And they're so confused about the forms I can't believe it. I'll just wait until they start getting drunk enough to see everything as an abstraction." If she had a tail, she would collect it curled beneath her feet, or shuttle it through both hands like a rope.

“Teach Adeodatus,” she says, after fifteen or twenty minutes, “If you don’t have much time to visit, teach Adeodatus.” The boy’s hair falls like an unruly stream, covering his wary, peering eyes, his soft surprised mouth. Adeodatus crept into his room when Augustine came, or listened, face clenched to neck, on the stairs.

“Here, we’ll start with something easy - write about your town.” So he wrote about Carthage, three terse sentences, “Carthage is in Africa, but it is ruled by Rome. Carthage gets supplies by boat on the Majarda. Our house is in North Carthage.” Adeodatus stares up at him with blank, wild eyes. He’s seven years old; he learned Greek at five. “Good job. Any more to say about Carthage?” The boy shakes his head imperceptibly, curls shifting like seaweed. There is no more to say.

The lyre streams sleek and polished as cat fur draped over slick muscle. It is the same shape as a peach, with the same subtly detailed stripes. When Augustine’s parents aren’t home he cuts the peaches open, removes the pit, and ties string around the sticky flesh. It is always impossible to actually play.

In school, he crouches at the edge of the playground. His fingers thumb the strings, hand falling across the three chords his uncle taught him to play. He strides through the halls, picking out tinny tunes, humming tunes just loud enough to notice. Boys approach, ring him with questions and chiming praise. “Hey! Lute Boy! Show me how to play.” “Do you want to play for a job?” “Where do you get a lute?” And a thin, muscle strung boy, a head taller than the rest: “Are you going to use it to woo women? You should woo Mary.” Mary is cloud rippled hair, pillar sharp face, eyes swimming with blue specked fish. Mary’s talk falls like a rainstorm, words smooth and certain as drops.

He breaths in, hands clutched around knees, squints both eyes together. “I’ll be like the sirens,” he calls, harshly; “No one will be able to resist my feminine charm.” The boys whoop, hands clapping knees, clashing in leaping falls. “Go for it, Lute Boy!”

“Lute Boy, it’s so obvious. I don’t know why he brings that lute everywhere.” The girls ripple past, Mary in the lead. Their feet pack the wet earth, crush grass to the soil.

“He wants to woo women, that’s what he said. That’s so stupid.”

“He’s stupid,” says Mary, sending raindrops scattered out of a puddle.

“Marriage is important. For you as a person. For all the virtues you study.” His mother does not really believe in the virtues, but she knows how to appeal to his conscience. She is a Christian, smashed all his father’s stone carvings of gods, swept the dirty shards out the window. She collapses on two bent knees, like a broken winged bird, to pray.

“Not yet. I know, but I still have something to learn as a free man, a single man. My students require attention; my classes keep me busy all day. I still have scrolls I have not studied, which I may soon be compelled to teach. I-” His mother catches his sweeping arm in one thick wrinkled palm.

“Look, Augustine. I just want you to try to understand your life as a whole.” She draws a circle in the air, gestures at the wide Thagaste street. A middle aged, thick handed farmer propels a cart forward, a eleven or twelve year old boy striding in lanky steps beside him. A tree shakes, a crowd of unfallen dates clamoring for space. “There will always be more scrolls to read, there will not always be more people to love.” Her robe streams in rippled streams behind her, draping the street in white sunspots. She presses chapped lips to his cheek.

The first time he met her, he understood Zeno’s paradox. He took one falling, sideways step, then a half pace, then could proceed no further. How he eventually reached the end of the room, where she observed the proceedings with detached, flicking eyes, was a miracle without recallable explanation. He told her so. He told her he was studying Zeno, but he doesn’t like it much, he thinks it is 50% unsupported assumptions and logical distortions and sophistry without empirical basis. Her smile reflects the curve of her wineglass. “I agree,” she mouths around the glass.

They walk back to her house, lie together on a fierce swinging hammock. He tells her that all of Aristotle’s four virtues are only love, love for her. Justice is love of you, and through you the love of all people,” he explains, hand pressing fervent between her legs. “Courage is the love

to protect you. Prudence is the love to judge what will hurt you. Freedom is the love to choose to be with you forever.”

“Freedom isn’t an Aristotelean virtue,” she says, and he comes.

After the sex, she curls her knees to her chest, swelling with long breaths. “You study Plato,” she says, more a statement than a question.

“Yes, I’m teaching three classes Plato,” His hand twines through her hair, which parts and forms rapid as fire.

“Do you really believe in the forms? In pure perfection?” She presses his hand down with careful force.

“If they do exist, they’d better be you,” The alcohol slouches through his mud-clogged veins. His head throbs in lengthening pulses, like a violin note held for too long.

“Seriously.” She folds both hands under her hair. He watches her nails catch mirrored moonlight.

“Yes, yes of course I do.” Beneath her head, her hands seem to turn a lock, strike flint against stone, shut the heavy door of being alone.

“I might get married.” Ambrose watches through slanted green eyes, entwining creased hands together. He shouldn’t have asked; he knows Ambrose will not give any advice, nothing definitive, just play with his fingers and watch. The halls fill with students, murmuring in stretched voices, flattening shirts and rubbing eyes.

“Married? Has your mother chosen the bride?” His eyes flick from student to student, marking the passers by, then back to Augustine.

“Of course. Maybe it’s time for me to settle down.” Augustine’s hand taps out a quiet rhythm on his thick woven robe. Sweaty robe, formal robe.

“Marriage doesn’t do that to you,” Ambrose’s smile flickers like a cat’s tongue. “It can make you a fish tank, filled with flashing doubts. It can make you a river, and clog you with dancing sand grains. But it’ll never settle you down.” He brushes his face with a quick gesture. “That’s what I tell my students. Like the speech?”

His teeth sink through the pear like thick water. The pear's juice is bland as paper pulp. He tastes nothing. "Lead us not into temptation," he mouths the words, familiar shapes. "But deliver us from evil. Deliver us from evil." The garden is empty, a pure white dove preening absentmindedly at the bird bath. The worst act of sin is murder, but death is just nothing. A hollow, wooden skull, filled with stale air. The trees lean like bent needles, leaves dangling. The sun is white fuzzed and distant. "But deliver us from evil. Deliver us from evil." The words unfurl in his chest, stretching like waking cats. He swallows a bite of pear. He wonders if he should fast. He wonders if the heat will last, if there will be a rainstorm. A sun faded moon hangs in the sky, heavy and empty. He feels the round empty expand, into the corners of his stomach, pressing both his feet to the floor. He will fill it up with words, like he is always done, build a house out of words, deliver himself from evil.

His steps bridge the gaps between worn white pillars. His shoes grease the floor. His body swims with talk, pithy love songs and flowing essays. It should be short, stark, meaningful, not too many winding inroads. The shortest can be the most universal. For the last three weeks, he has lived witticism to witticism, winning sympathy with clever talk. The hall vibrates, floor sending spikes of static through his sandals. Pillars stand like bare bones, washed sterile by the sea. *Do you believe in forms?* The building's clean skeleton rises like an answer.

- Lucy Weltner

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