

THE TRANSFORMATIONS

for two actors

by

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(Lights up on a man in comfortable, unshowy modern dress. This is LUCIUS. A projection says: "Palestine, 164 A.D. The middle years of the Roman Empire.")

LUCIUS

(to us)

No, wait wait wait. You want a really crazy story? I'll tell you one. Unbelievable stuff! I mean, people turned into animals. Animals turned into people. Sex. Magic. Danger. All of it, I swear to the gods, totally true. As I oughta know because it happened to me! Me! Lucius from Nowheresville! From Lower Outer Tunisia! Where things like this do not happen!

Okay, long story short, I was staying in the house of this witch... No no no, let me back up, start at the beginning.

So. I'm headed for Europe on business to meet this guy named Milo. Milo lives in Thessaly, in Greece. You know about Thessaly. Everybody does. The ancient home of magic? Supposed to be wall-to-wall witches, and wizards, and sorcerers. Milo's wife even has a reputation of being something of a witch herself.

And I'm a curious person. I figure this is my chance to see some real magic firsthand! Sure, sure, a lot of it

was supposed to be, you know, evil magic. So I'm a little scared but, wow, am I dying to get there.

At least the omens were good. I consulted an astrologer before I left, she said - according to this chicken she killed - that's how they do it, they kill a chicken and look into the dead chicken - she foretold that because of this trip I was literally gonna be worth a million n drachmas! How bad could that be? I was gonna be rich!

What else, I said to her, what else? She gazes really deep into the dead chicken and she says to me, "Lucius - the seed will bear double fruit."

Mmmmm. Yes! The seed will bear double fruit.

Whatever the hell that meant!

So anyway I ship outa Tunisia over to Greece, I'm ten miles out of Thessaly, who do I see coming the other way? Socrates! Not the philosopher, the olive-oil salesman. Anyway Socrates looks really weird. He's got what looks like a bad cut here -

(- the left side of the neck -)

- plus this massive bulge like a goiter, his clothes are all in rags, and he looks really really pale. "Socrates," I say to him, "is this the way to Thessaly?" He says -

"NO! NO! LUCIUS! DON'T GO THERE! SAVE YOURSELF!"

And Socrates tells me this crazy story. Turns out he also had some business in Thessaly, where he checked in at a hotel run by this old crone. Who, it turns out, was a witch. Bingo she throws a spell on him, she makes him sleep with her. So Socrates sleeps with her that night, and the next night... Basically she makes him her boy-toy. The problem is - for variety, he's not into witches, who knows - one day he ups and screws the witch's parlormaid.

Not a good move with a witch.

Midnight that night Socrates is asleep, the door to his room flies off the hinges, he's flung outa bed! And there's the old hag in the doorway with a sword...and a sponge. Yeah. This massive ugly sponge. He gets up, he says to her -

She waves her hand, suddenly he can't move. Frozen, like this. She slices off his clothes with the sword and starts waving it all around his dingus.

[Cackling, as the witch:] "Should I hack it off? No, it's your heart that's the problem, my pretty!"

And she stabs the sword down his neck, straight down through the jugular. Blood goes flying, Socrates can't move. Then she slides the blade back out and sticks her hand down into the wound, right?, she reaches down inside of Socrates...she scrabbles around in there, she pulls his heart out and tosses it across the room.

Yeah! His heart hits the wall, pfffflllp, it's laying there, still beating! He still can't move. Then! Then she takes the big ugly sponge and she stuffs it into the wound and she says, "There. Now live like that. With a sponge instead of a heart."

She waves her hand and disappears. Socrates grabs what's what's left of his clothes, he tears off down the road outa Thessaly.

Now, all the time he's telling me this, Socrates is getting paler and paler. Me? I bust out laughing. I say to him, "C'mon, man, I'm supposed to believe this stuff?"

He takes a breath to answer me, and PLOOOOEY! This bloody sponge goes flying out of his neck. Socrates falls down dead in the road.

So I head on towards Thessaly more curious than ever.

(AUGUSTINE ENTERS in a dark suit. A projection says: "North Africa, 497 A.D. Just before the fall of the Roman Empire.")

AUGUSTINE

Great God.

Great.

God.

Great is what you are, O God. Always active yet ever still. Nowhere to be found but ever-present. Your creation longs to praise you. We were created to honor and praise you. But we do not.

(To us:)

Why? Why is that, my brothers and sisters? Why do we so often know what we should be doing, but still don't do it? Like honoring and praising God?

On the other hand - how can we praise what we don't know? Or can't fathom? Or don't believe in? What is this "God" anyway? If God is present everywhere, why don't we feel God in us and around us every moment? And if God is God, how can we not praise God?

Why do we even have such questions? What is this inner dark we inhabit?

We come out of darkness. That's part of the problem. How did I get to this world? Was I someone else before I was Augustine? Or somewhere else before I arrived in the world? I don't remember it. People tell me I was born in a small town in Algeria but I don't remember that. I don't remember being at my mother's breast. At some point I must've started talking because I've watched other babies. Because I have - or had - a child of my own. God rest his soul.

I do know two things: my mother loved me and my teachers beat me. That was how I learned to pray. Not because I believed in God. I just wanted the beatings to stop. I was willing to ask for help even from a deity I didn't believe in.

My mother believed in God. Oh, did she believe. She went to church every day, sometimes twice a day. And speaking of beatings, I'll tell you something remarkable about Mom: her friends were always amazed because her face wasn't black and blue like theirs were from their husbands beating them. But then - they weren't saints, like Mom was.

My father? My father wanted me to get into law school at Carthage and make a lot of money. Period. If he was a Christian or a pagan, I never knew it.

You know what stopped the beatings at school? It wasn't prayer. Great enunciation. My only talent. I even got to put on a dress and a wig and do Queen Dido's big scene at a speech competition. "Aeneas! Oh my lord, my king, my savior, don't leave me! I beg you! I shall kill myself!"

(Mimes stabbing himself.)

And by the way: Is this what children should be learning?

What did I know? I was a boy. A demon. A born barbarian. You should've seen my father in the locker room the day he realized I was "a man," quote-unquote. Bragging to my mother about grandchildren they didn't even have yet!

My mother was terrified. She knew what I was. A born sinner. To her, I was just walking earth. Earth returning to earth. Some mothers tell you to find a nice girl and settle down? "Augustine," she'd say to me, "why don't you find God."

I laughed at her. It's not as if I liked myself the way I was. But I laughed at her - digging myself in even deeper.

LUCIUS

Okay, so I get to Thessaly, a town called Hypata, where I'm supposed to meet this guy Milo. Thing is, after all that "magic" build-up, the place looks totally normal! Streets. Taverns. Shops. Looks pretty boring, actually.

I find Milo's house - white marble, tower on top. Nice!

Inside, though? The place is a dump! Dust and mice and spiderwebs. Milo's in the dining room having supper, this shrunken old guy with a bowl of what looks like dog food. Doesn't offer me any, by the way. Obviously a miser.

Meanwhile standing there watching him, not eating, is the wife. Pamphilla. Very tall, very thin, very mysterious, in black silk with these weird gold designs. She gives me

this smouldering look and she says, "So how you do like Thessaly so far, Lucius...?"

Oh, MAN! If this is a witch - I'm all for it!

"Thessaly?" I say. "Very sweet. Though I'm a little worried about magic. You know. Witches, and so on?"
(Pamphilla's nodding, nodding.) "Back home people say even funerals aren't safe here. They say flocks of savage harpies fly in and bite the noses off dead bodies to get ingredients for spells."

She says: "These things happen." And she kinda floats out, pausing at the door to lick my ear and cup my balls.
"Later, Lucius."

And I get this MASSIVE hard-on.

There's a maid supposed to take me to my room. We get in the hall, she says, "Lucius, watch out for yourself. My mistress is a witch! She can turn you into a mouse, or a stone. She can blow you out like a candle. And whatever you do," the maid says, "do not go into the tower. That's where she does her magic."

The maid goes off. What do I do? I go to the tower!

It's just like I imagined. Dusty old scrolls, bottles with noses and ears in 'em, powdered herbs, test tubes, spikes from crucifixes with flesh still hanging off 'em. Oh, man. It's great!

Somebody's coming. I duck behind a skeleton.

Pamphilla glides in. She goes to her sorcery shelf, takes down a recipe, then what does she do? She takes off her clothes. Ohmigod. Ohmigod! And I'm already, you know. Then she scoops some gunk out of this gold box and smears it all over her, going like this [murmur murmur] - some kinda magic words I can't make out.

Then she spins her head like a hundred eighty degrees - looking right where I am! And says: "Who."

Ohmigod I think she's spotted me. I'm trying to hide behind the skeleton.

"Who," she says. "Who?"

Then her head flips back around and she starts to quiver all over. She's shrinking, somehow, and her arms start flapping. Her nose curves down, her eyes get bigger, her

toenails grow out into hooks and these feathers pop out all over her body and suddenly whhssshhht! She's an owl! And with a crazy BRWWAAAAAAKKKK! she flies out the window into the night.

Oh, MAN! Oh, man, did I want to be an owl. Go flying over the roofs like that? I take off my clothes, I open the gold box, I scoop out some gunk, I smear myself all over real good and I go [murmur murmur].

And I start to change! I'm quivering now, too! Only I'm not shrinking. I'm getting bigger. And bigger...and bigger... My nose starts pushing out, my ears get longer. My fingers and toes grow together, and something's sprouting out of me except instead of feathers, it's hair! Then I'm so big and heavy I fall down on all fours - and a tail goes shooting out of my ass!

The maid is standing in the doorway looking at me, doing this: [SCREAMS] "AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

I try to say to her "Who! Who!" but what I say is" "HEE-HAW! HEE-HAW!"

Then I see myself in a mirror and I go [weeping in despair] "HEE-HHHAAAAAHHHHHH!"

I'm a jackass! A donkey! My only consolation is - down there? - I'm donkey-size. Too bad the rest of me is donkey, too. As I certainly realize when I dump a ton of road apples there on the floor!

AUGUSTINE

There was a pear tree on the edge of our town. Every summer it was loaded with these small, green pears. Not very good pears. Hard and sour, practically inedible. One night my friends and I decided we'd rob the tree and steal the pears.

Until then we'd just made a lot of noise in the street, or whistled at women. This was different. This was real crime, this was theft! So we went down there at midnight, we rattled the tree, the pears fell down and we loaded our arms and ran off with the pears. Howling with laughter.

Why?

Why. What was I after? It couldn't have been pears. I wasn't hungry. And we had pears at home. We had good pears. My friends and I didn't even eat them. We threw the pears to some pigs on the way back.

So why steal the pears? Maybe I wanted to brag, as boys do. Maybe I wanted some excitement. Maybe I wanted to cock my snoot at those who'd disapprove if I got caught. Like my mother. "You see, Mom? I'm not what you think I am, or I think I am. I'm a criminal. I'm a pear thief."

Or maybe - and this is interesting - maybe I did it so I could feel bad, feel worse about myself than I already did. Confirm my worst fears about what I was. Maybe I was hooked on self-destruction. Maybe I wanted to destroy me.

I do know this: my young soul was turning into a desert. What is a desert? It's nothingness. It's a thirst. A want. And my God I wanted. I was young. I was on fire. Not even knowing what I wanted. Just wanting.

And so I, a would-be criminal, went to Carthage to study - of all things - Law. By studying Law I mean studying how to help people evade the law - and have them pay you for it.

You all know about Carthage. The melting pot of filth. It was in Carthage I began to sin in real earnest. I dove in head-first and sinned with all my God-given senses, with

my eyes and my ears and my nose and my mouth and my stomach. My father - dead by then - would have approved.

Then, somehow, 19 years old, I read a book by Cicero about philosophy. *Wow, man. Awesome! So, like, PROFOUND.*

Well, now I was suddenly on fire for truth.

Enlightenment. For "wisdom!" - whatever that was. I wanted to see the face of God, or the gods. See God himself! Isn't that the ultimate truth?

The problem was finding Him. I could see houses, tables, trees, mountains. Where did "God" fit in? All the space was taken! Or was God in the spaces in-between, somehow? And if God made all this - where was God before he made all this?

What was this "God," exactly? The more I thought about it, the more God seemed like Time: I knew what it was, but if you asked me I couldn't explain it.

I'll tell you what I imagined. You're going to laugh. I imagined the universe, the sky and the earth and everything in them, as a great sea, a vast ocean reaching out in all directions. And God - get ready - God was a huge sponge - no, really - God was a massive sponge as

wide and deep as the ocean it was soaking in. But invisible.

Well, as I say, I was just a beginner.

Then the same thing happened to me that often happens to wisdom-seekers.

I got suckered. I fell among con-men.

Mine was a group called the Manichaeans. You still see them, shouting on streetcorners. "Come to our meeting! Enter The Cave Of Occultitude!" I went to their meetings and thought I was pretty profound arguing with them about where evil comes from, whether God has hair and nails, or only hair or only nails, which laws we should obey...

I didn't know evil is just a failure of Good. I didn't know God can't have fingers. That Law is the eternal law in our hearts, given to us at birth.

No, I believed - thanks to them - that if you were an unbeliever and plucked a fig off a certain sacred tree, the tree would weep. Heavy stuff, man.

I also got into astrology in Carthage. Not the fake astrologers. No. Mine didn't cut open chickens. Mine used star charts. Mine used science.

You see, I'd come to this idea that whatever I did against myself - call it sin, call it stupidity - it wasn't me that did it. No. Something inside me, something other than me, made me do it.

Astrology was perfect. With horoscopes you're not making a mess of your life. It's Venus, or Mars, or Scorpio. You're not responsible. Or an idiot. It's "fate."

And then my mother moved to Carthage.

LUCIUS

HEE-HAW! Okay. So I'm a jackass. And the maid is standing in the doorway screaming.

Then she put her arms around my neck and started to cry for me and I thought, Oh, man, to be human right now!

Then the maid goes, "Wait! Wait, I know the antidote! All you have to do is eat some roses. Come on, I'll take you to the stable for the night and in the morning we'll find you some roses."

"HEE-HAW"!

The STABLE?!?

Yeah, well, it's not like she can take me to my bedroom!

So we creep down out of the tower quiet as we can - CLOP CLOP CLOP - and she leaves me in the stable. I haven't had any dinner, I'm really hungry - and there's this other jackass eating some oats out of a trough. And you know - those oats look kinda good! I figure, inter-animal sympathy, of course he'll share. I nudge him -

BAM! He gives me both barrels with his hoofs and goes back to his dinner. I'm thinking, you just wait till I get my roses, boy... Bang, zoom!

But wait. Up there! The stable's got a shrine to the patron goddess of four-footed animals, what's is the shrine decorated with? Roses! So I get up on my hind legs, I'm reaching my lips to the roses when -

A band of burglars busts into the stable!

"Grab those jackasses!" the leader says. "We can use 'em for transport!"

The thieves start emptying out the house, they're heaping boxes and furniture onto my back - while I'm trying to say, "Hey, I am a Roman citizen, I got my rights!" What I actually say is "HEE-HAW."

"EVERYBODY OUT!" the leader says. "GO!" And they're whipping me and the other jackass through the streets, out of town up into the hills. We climb till mid-morning. I'm exhausted. I'm thirsty. I'm starving.

But! We're passing through some village where the bandits take a lunch break, and what is hanging everywhere? Both sides of the road? Roses! Whole banks of 'em! The bandits aren't looking, so I slip off the path, I put my lips out...

Wait a minute. No. What am I, crazy?! If suddenly I'm not a donkey, I'm Lucius again, they'll think I must be a sorcerer [finger across his throat] or a spy [finger across his throat]. I'm dead!

So I ignore the roses for now.

Instead, since I'm starving, I slip into somebody's vegetable garden and fill up on raw carrots, raw radishes, raw rhubarb. Not my usual diet, and it don't sit any too well. The vegetables are going rumblerrumblerrumble in my guts when I hear, "HEY, YOU! JACKASS!"

The owner of the garden comes flying at me, he starts laying into me with a belt buckle, now the wife comes at me with a club screaming bloody murder, then the whole village is coming at me with dogs and sticks, I'm getting it left and right, BUT! (thank you, vegetables), I turn my back on 'em and PPFFFFFFLOOOO I shoot this green shit out of my ass and drive 'em all away.

Well, by now I've had enough of this. I see the banditos coming back, I figure I'll go on strike. Just let 'em try and move me! I plant my feet. I take a stance.

The other jackass sees me, he gets the same idea. He digs his hoofs in, he even tosses off his load - so the bandits, they figure "okay." They cut his hamstrings and dump him over a cliff, still breathing.

Well, my hoofs became wings! Those bandits had to chase me up the goddamn mountain!

AUGUSTINE

Yes. My mother moved to Carthage - but she wouldn't live with me. She wouldn't even eat with me. It didn't matter that I had a good job now, teaching Law.

To her, I was a blasphemer. I was also living with a girl who was pregnant with my son. My mother grieved for me as if I were dead.

Then one night my mother had a dream.

She saw herself standing and weeping on a large wooden ruler - like a springboard hung out in outer space. And she saw a young man floating toward her who asked her what was wrong. She said she was weeping because of her son and the young man told her to stop, because - and these are his words - "Wherever you are, he is." And then in the dream she turned around and saw that I was standing next to her. There, beside her, on the ruler in outer space.

She told me her dream and I laughed. She just shook her finger at me. One day, she said, one day you'll be out there on that ruler with me.

"Sure, Ma. Sure..."

I had a friend in Carthage. The first close friend I'd ever had. What we enjoyed we both enjoyed, what we disliked we both disliked. We drank together, played soccer together.

His family was Christian but he wasn't baptized. I was tempting him my way, into the Manichaeian quicksands. I wanted him to be just like me. Why not. I loved him. Isn't that what we want from those we love, that they be just as lost as we are?

And then my friend got sick.

Who can plumb the mazes of God's judgment?

Day and night I sat by his bedside. Holding his hand. Lying to him, saying he was going to live. When he was in a coma, about to die, his family brought in a priest to baptize him. I didn't care. It wouldn't change anything.

The next day my friend was suddenly sitting up in bed and talking. Lucid and healthy, himself again. When he told me he'd been baptized, I howled, I said, "Can you believe it? They sprinkle some water over an unconscious body - "

He told me to shut up. He said if I wanted to be his friend, I had to shut up. I let it go, figuring I'd wait till he was strong again, then argue him out of this mood.

I never got the chance. A few days later, the fever came back and he died.

My good friend. My other self. He'd gone - where? And become what? Time and again I looked around for him. Not there. I was just a half of something now.

And wherever I looked, there was death. My house was death, my city was death, life was a living death. Augustine was a place I couldn't bear to go to but couldn't get away from.

The paradox was, I loathed life without my friend but I didn't want to die. In fact I felt this constant dread that death was going to swoop down and take me. It had swallowed my friend. I was next.

LUCIUS

Top of the mountain, we reach the robbers' cave. While the bandits unloading the loot, this nice old lady comes

out, she gives me some oats, pats my nose, rubs my stomach, talks to me. The human touch. I loved her!

Then I hear, "Help me, help me, please! will someone help me?"

It's another part of the gang riding up with a girl in a bridal gown. A girl named Charity. They tie her up next to me, the bandit who brought her says, "Rich bitch, we don't wanna hurt ya. We just want your parents' money! Now sit there and shut up!"

He says to the others, "Well, boys, we're in the clear on the Milo job! Everybody thinks the mastermind was some guy named Lucius. Yeah. Sucker shows up claiming to be a businessman, the house gets robbed, now nobody can find the guy. They ever find him, they'll hang him for sure!"

And the kindly old lady, she pats my ass and says, "Let's celebrate, boys! Pour us a drink and soon as I sharpen my axe IT'S TIME FOR DONKEY STEW!"

And I'm thinking, WHAT. THE. HELL?!?!

So while they're getting drunk and the old lady's sharpening her axe, with my teeth I untie my rope, then I untie Charity's rope...

The minute we're free, the old bitch comes running out with a hatchet and grabs ahold of my bridle. I'm dragging the hag around in circles, she's swinging the axe at my neck when, ta da! the bride sees her chance, chopchopchop she kicks away the crone, jumps on my back, off we go down the mountain! Free at last!

AUGUSTINE

Nothing freed me. Nothing brought relief. Drink, dice games, dinner parties. Sleeping powders. The light of day was torture.

I had become a question. A puzzle unto myself.

Looking for answers, I turned my attention to arts and culture. I even wrote a few books on aesthetics, I forget how many. I lectured about music, food, the science of colors.

No help there.

When beauty wore thin I turned my mind to the human mind.
Published unreadable discourses on Aristotle...

Doesn't matter, I had no idea what I was talking about. I
stumbled along, being what I'd always been: a piece of
walking earth. Earth returning to earth.

But even when you're stumbling, you can't help bumping
into God. You see, God was with me all the time. But I.
Was not. With God!

(Evangelical preacher:)

You called out to me, Jesus, but did I hear you?

You cast your sweet, sweet fragrance on me, but did I
breathe it in?

No!

You touched me, Lord, but did I feel you?

No, I did not!

Jesus!

Jesus!

JESUS!

I decided to move to Italy. Why not. More money. More prestige. And the students there didn't throw benches. At least, I hoped not.

Oh, the scene on the dock when I was leaving Carthage... My mother hanging on me, begging me to take her with me. "Augustine, my heart, my life, you can't leave me!" She was doing my Queen Dido speech all over again.

God forgive me, I tricked her. I told her I'd arrange passage for her and slipped away alone at dawn. Escaped - or so I thought - to Milan.

Ambrose, the Christian bishop, was a huge sensation in Milan just then. People were flocking to him speak, huge crowds filling his church every day to hear his sermons. Not all of them Christians. There were pagans. Manichaeans like me. I was a good speaker, what with my fabulous enunciation, but I had to admit: Ambrose was amazing.

You know people would gather just to watch Ambrose sit and read? Because Ambrose didn't read out loud, the way we do. No. Ambrose read silently. Only his eyes moving

across the page. I saw it many times myself - not surprisingly, since I soon become part of his circle.

You see, I was his target for conversion. I was the hard case. Ambrose had proofs, and proofs were what I'd wanted. Something that wasn't a giant invisible sponge. I still had questions. Like the trinity, which seemed some kind of magic trick. And where was God before the universe?

Why couldn't I believe what Ambrose was showing me, proving to me, lucidly? About God, and Jesus Christ our Savior?

Because I was in a glue-trap called myself.

And then my mother arrived.

LUCIUS

You shoulda seen the celebration when I pulled up at her house with Charity on my back. The family, the servants, neighbors, everybody pours round us. I'm a hero!

So Charity's father calls a family meeting on how to honor me. Yeah! They decide I need rest, I need sunshine

and good food and country living - where? On the family stud farm.

Oh man, oh man! At long last love! Sure, I'm a jackass, but I'm gonna have my own harem! Plus a stable with all the modern conveniences! And maybe even roses!

What a send-off. There's hugs and kisses. Confetti. Only their estate manager, who's taking me to the stud farm - he doesn't take me to the stud farm. No. He sells me to some broken-down mill where they put a yoke on me. I have to work 15 hours a day walking around in mud pulling fifty tons of granite! This is not the daily grindstone. It's a literal grindstone!

Plus - no roses in sight.

So I do a slow-down. Work stoppage. Screw 'em!

The mill owner, now he calls a family council, he says, "This jackass isn't worth the garbage we feed him. Let's kill him and throw his guts to the dogs."

"No, no!" - this is the family grandfather - "don't kill him! Castrate him! Makes 'em nice and docile. Tie him up outside, I'll go get the clippers."

They don't know I can hear all this and, me, I'm thinking: To be or not to be, brother. Wishing I could just die. Hoping I could die. DYING to die.

I'm going through all this tied up to a tree - what do I spot just then, growing right in front of my nose?

Poison laurel.

Perfect! My very own cup of hemlock! Fast-acting, too! The old man's walking out of the house with a pair of hedgeclippers yay-big, I'm reaching my lips to bite off some poison, thinking "goodbye, cruel world!" when -

You're not gonna believe this -

A BEAR comes running outa the woods straight for the old man! I rear up, I bust my rope, I go tearing off - horizontal in the air, all four legs off the ground!

AUGUSTINE

I shot up the social ladder in Milan. Attracted attention. Made a lot of money. The city even tapped me to give the annual eulogy to the emperor at the arena. A massive honor, of course.

I was miserable.

The morning of the day, I headed for the event with my friend Alypius, a fellow wisdom seeker. Alypius was vainly trying to cheer me up when I hear:

"Good morning, Cap'n! Spare change?"

It was a drunken beggar sitting in the street, chatting up the passersby and rattling the coppers in his cup and laughing away, as if life could not be better.

I said to Alypius, "Look at this man. He's got nothing and he's happy!"

Alypius said, "Come on, Gus, he's drunk. Who would you rather be, you or him?"

And I said "Me, of course. But why? Why would anybody want to be me? Me, me, me, me, ME....!"

He basically had to drag me to the arena, where I gave my eulogy and was presented to the emperor and blah blah blah.

That night I came up with a plan. Alypius and I would quit our jobs and dedicate our lives to reading and thinking and discussion. To spirituality. And chastity. No distractions. No women.

There was just one hitch. My girlfriend. If I was serious about this, I had to cut her off.

So I did. She left and I kept my son with me. Now I was free to quit my job and take up the contemplative life.

Did I quit my job?

No.

Did I take up the contemplative life?

No. I took up with another girl. And another. And another.

My will. My will was chained by sex. That physical desire was more powerful than my inner will. Night and day I'd pray, Dear God, please, make me chaste. Just not yet.

What is this monster? "The will"? If I tell my hand to move, it moves. But if I tell my self to do what's right

- ? Nothing. Is the will inside my mind? Part of my mind?
 If it is, how can it tell my mind what to do? If it's
 outside the mind, where is it?

Do I have a body and a mind and a will? Plus a soul? And
 who's the boss? Maybe the will only partly wills. How
 could that be? I'm doing the willing! It's all me.

Was there no way out of this tangle? And where was God
 before the universe?

LUCIUS

So I escape the bear and the hedgeclippers, this guy
 finds me wandering the roads and he adopts me! He puts me
 up in a comfy barn, I get clean straw to sleep on,
 organic muessli for breakfast, some very nice donkeys for
 company. His groom curries us every day, polishes our
 teeth. The good life! Right?

Then one day the guy leads us into the town square and
 stands on a box.

"Gather round, folks! For sale! A bunch of goodlookin'
 animals if I ever seen 'em! What'll it be, sir, the one
 on the end? Yours for 300 drachmas! Sold!"

The guy's doing his spiel, the crowd is pushing in, people are poking their fingers in my mouth to check my teeth. Finally I'm the last one on the block.

"Now who's up for this specimen? Only 100 drachmas! Okay, he's not much for looks but he's got great manners. This is not a jackass, this is a gentleman in a donkey skin! Yours for 50 drachmas. Yours for 25 drachmas. Will somebody offer me something for this worthless son-of-a-bitch? You there! The eunuch! You interested?"

He's talking to an old man in a saffron robe.

The old castrato says "In the name of Cybelle the supreme goddess - to whom all praise - I will give you 10 drachmas for this animal!"

"SOLD!"

So I get sold to a pack of wandering eunuchs. Yeah. Castratos who chose castration. To each his own, right?

We did shows in the street for money. They'd dance around, play tambourines, juggle, eat fire, walk a tightrope - you know, hippie stuff. This while I stood there painted gold with a statue on my back of Cybelle

the supreme goddess, to whom all praise. Then we'd hit the next town.

Better than a grindstone, right? And they were nice people! Maybe it was all the weed.

Anyway, they got picked up for shoplifting. I go back on the block, I get bought by this bachelor farmer for 50 sesterces. He's got two acres and a little hut way up in, like, Macedonia.

Sure, he's poor, but life's okay up there! Too bad winter was coming on, so there was no hope of any roses till spring...

But then. Then - !

AUGUSTINE

One day Ponticianus dropped over, a friend of ours who worked at court. Ponty had a great piece of dish for us.

A colleague of his had joined a monastery. Just like that. He told his friends, "I'm starting a new life," gave up his job, sold all his goods and went off to pray on a mountain in Turkey. Devoting himself 24/7 to God. The Christian god.

"Maybe there's something in this Christianity," Ponty said. "Who knows?"

After he left, I went a little berserk.

"Alypius, did you hear that? We're always asking what is truth. I know the truth! You know the truth! Jesus of Nazareth is the truth! The Christian god is the only god and why don't we do something about that? Why is it always tomorrow, why don't I do it now? Now, now, now, now?!"

I ran out into our garden with him right behind me and this - this inner storm washed over me. I started sobbing. These great big racking sobs erupting from out of my soul. Nothing Alypius said could stop me. I sobbed. I sobbed...

And suddenly.

Suddenly, between my sobs, I heard a voice from over the wall of the house next door. A boy's or a girl's voice, I couldn't tell. But singing - for some reason - the words "Take up and read. Take up and read." So bizarre. But the voice went on, over and over. "Take up and read."

And there on a bench in the garden was a Testament. I opened it at random and these are the words I read:

"Clothe yourself in the Lord and make no provision."

I went straight to my mother. Of course.

I babbled out what had happened, the voice in the garden, I showed her the passage...

My mother could not contain herself.

I was beside her on that ruler now, standing shoulder to shoulder. But not in a dream. In life.

LUCIUS

You ever spend a winter in Macedonia? Brutal? Wowie. And then, one dark and icy night, KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK. My master opens the door and somebody falls in half-dead. Some traveler frozen solid. My farmer takes the guy in, makes the guy some chicken soup, lends the guy his cot to sleep in, revives him, a week later we take the guy back to his place.

Oh, MAN, what a place!

Turns out this guy is a big producer who's up in the mountains for the skiing. Got this big country house. He says to my farmer, "My friend, you're staying here tonight. I'm having a dinner and I want you to be my guest of honor."

But the farmer, he says to the guy, "Sir, good sir, may my only friend, may my jackass be part of this?"

The producer loves it! He says, Sure, we'll set him a place! And that night in the dining room they set me up at a table with a bucketful of Bactrian barley in front of me. Oh man was it good! For barley.

Meanwhile all these society types are blowing in. Jewels, and furs. And there in the middle of it all is my humble farmer. But when they see me, awes did they go crazy! I'm a conversation piece!

It's drinks time now and all these fantastic hors d'oeuvres are going around. Sure, I've got my Bulgarian barley, but I want some of that stuff. So when a servant passes, I stick my fat nose out, I lick up a whole platterful of crackers and brie.

Oh, man, did they go crazy then!

Our host, he says, "Mr. Jackass, would you care for some caviar?"

I nod my head yes. They HOWL!

"Bring our guest some caviar!"

The servants bring me two different kinds of caviar. I sniff 'em, I shake my head "no" to the sevruga and go for the beluga.

Pandemonium, right?

"Mr. Jackass, would you care for some wine? Faustian or Falernian?"

Of course I nod for the Falernian. They pour me some in a tin pan, I check the bouquet, I take a sip, I roll it around. Nod to the sommelier, it's okay.

Astonishment!

So it goes on. Some pheasant under glass? (Oh, yes please.) Vegetables? (No thank you.) Roasted dormice? (I'll take a dozen.)

Finally the host, he shouts out to my farmer, "Sir, I will give you a hundred thousand drachmas for your talented jackass!"

But then another voice says: "A million."

It's this woman. No. This lady. I mean - wow - gorgeous. All in gold. Diamonds and pearls. She comes over to me, she cups my nose and looks in my eyes and says, "For this beautiful creature? A million drachmas."

Sold again! For exactly the price my astrologer back home told me!

The party's over, the lady takes me home - like I'm the party swag! Not before a tearful parting from my friend the farmer - who now is rich as hell.

Man, I thought the producer's house was something. The lady's place is a palace. Only she doesn't have 'em lead me out back to the barn. Uh-uh.

They take me into the palace.

Into...her bedroom!

Okay. So. What can I say? It was love. Very tender, very generous. She called me her dove, her sparrow. She also called out I WANT YOU I NEED YOU YES YES YES! And we had a wonderful, memorable night. Yeah, one wonderful and memorable January night...that lasted into April.

Midnight suppers in front of the fire. Daytime, she'd read me the classics and we'd binge out.

Unfortunately, come spring, knock knock, there's our friend the producer. Now the season is on, he has plans for me in one of his spectacles in town. He says to her, Do you want it getting around who your foot-footed lover is?

Basically, he blackmails her into selling me to him.

Another tearful parting, this time her and me.

But hey. We'll always have Macedonia, right?

AUGUSTINE

I decided to return home. Back in Algeria, in company with Alypius and my son and my mother, we could put on the yoke of Jesus. Finally, we'd devote ourselves to God.

But there was one extraordinary day, just before we left the port of Rome...

My mother and I were standing at a window of our inn, looking out over the sea. Mother was particularly joyful that day. Animated. Open. Talking about her past as girl.

But gradually we left the past behind, looking toward what was to come, the trip we were preparing for. We talked about living in truth, and salvation, about the lives of the saints. About heaven. About God. And so we rose, up and up, through the sun and stars.

And little by little, standing together there at that window, our thoughts met and merged and left the world behind. We transcended words, transcended ourselves, everything. We went in and out of each other's minds without any effort - one soul, one single double soul, feeling and hoping and believing together, lit by a wisdom we never could have produced ourselves. A wisdom

that was showered upon us in the everlasting instant of that hour.

Ascending higher and higher, we touched the face of wisdom. The silence there. The vast silence. Touched, maybe, the eternal life we longed for in that moment of understanding. Saw through. Felt it. Felt God. Yes. Understood. "Once you were darkness, now you are light," the apostle says and we were that light! For a brief moment. We were that light...

Gradually, we returned into ourselves. To the clamor of daily speech, where words have beginnings and endings...

The next morning my mother died.

She collapses just after breakfast. I was about to call a doctor but she stopped me. She said, "No. Yu're going to lay your mother to rest here." I said, "But Ma, remember how you always wanted to be buried next to Dad?"

She said, "God will know where to find me."

So in her fifty-sixth year, my thirty-third year, the soul of Monnica, loving wife and mother, was released.

I closed her eyes with this hand.

LUCIUS

So Mr. Bigshot Producer, he ships me off to the city, where I am to appear - get this - in a variety act with a hooker in the Colosseum. Yep. Just what you're thinking. First on the bill, some gladiators, then some religious mumbojumbo, then we come on. The hooker will demonstrate my skills, get me to pick the beluga instead of the sevruga, then she will enjoy my donkeyhood in front of the emperor and all of Rome.

For the hooker, this is up. It's the Big Time! For me, it's the ultimate humiliation. The bottom of my life.

So I'm in the wings of the Colosseum, waiting for some Christians and lions to finish their bit. Disgusting, by the way. It's raining. The hooker is primping. Nice woman. A total professional, I have to say. The religious mumbojumbo comes on. We're next, we move up into the wings to make our entrance.

But I can't do it anymore. I've had it. I'm done.

So I lift up my big fat nose and though I never been much of a believer, I send up a silent prayer: "O Venus, O

Minerva, O Cybelle, Whoever - I've paid for my stupidity, haven't I? Release me! Please! Release me to my friends and my family, make me the Lucius I used to be. I'm begging you!"

And suddenly the clouds overhead open out and there is this...woman. A woman in the sky wearing a brilliant crown like a mirror except there are like cornstalks growing out of her head. The woman with the cornstalks says to me:

"Hello, Lucius."

I say, "Hello!"

She says, "I am Isis, the truly supreme goddess. Mightiest of deities, mother of the universe and mistress of all creatures living and dead."

"Yes, Isis, yes?" I say.

"Lucius," says Isis, "I have heard your prayer. My priest awaits you and your salvation is at hand."

"Thank you, supreme goddess!" I say. "What can I do for you?"

She says: "Honor me. Love all creatures, human and non-human."

I say, "Okay, Isis! I will!"

And then the sky closes up and the world comes back to me. And everything... Everything feels good. The rain is stopped, now there's sun, a soft breeze. And I'm aware of everything. It's like I can hear the birds twittering all the way off by the Tiber. I can hear the leafs on trees popping open on the Palatine Hill. Not just the trees with fruit, the bare ones that are happy just to give shade!

But then I look into the arena, what do I see out there? A guy in a white smock and what is he holding? A garland of roses. Red roses, yellow roses, white roses, and he's, he's looking at me, like those roses were specially meant for me. He's gotta be the priest she was talking about!

AUGUSTINE

My son burst into tears when my mother breathed her last. I shushed him. I said, "Why should we grieve? She's found eternal rest." Then Alypius began to sing "I shall sing of your justice and mercy, O Lord" and we joined in.

I seemed so calm, people thought I must be all right. I didn't weep when we carried the body out, I didn't weep at the grave, I didn't weep when she was lowered in. Earth returning to earth...

Actually, I was in a very bad way. Like Ambrose reading silently, it was all going on in here. I had told my son not to grieve. Yet I was grieving.

If my mother had found rest, why was I so torn? And if I knew the truth now, if I'd recognized the sole and supreme deity, why was I so tortured?

The world itself was in turmoil at that time. There were rumblings from Germany. Alien tribes crossing the border. Boys were being drafted, refugees flooding into Rome. Rumors had it the Empire was going to split in two. Everyone was afraid.

And then one night lying awake out on the roof trying to sleep, there came to me that hymn of Bishop Ambrose. "Oh God, who clothes the day with radiant light..."

And just as the moon gives comfort to the night, that song gave me comfort.

The questions went away. Looking up at the sky I realized it was as idle to wonder where God was before the universe as it was to wonder where I was before I was born.

Dawn came and I'd passed through it. Mother was restored to me just as she had been. A saint. A pain in the neck. A woman without a bruise who'd wept a sea of tears for me. Monnica, the great invisible sponge.

LUCIUS

There's my savior! The guy out in the center with the roses! So I move out into the arena - without the hooker, without the chorus boys, right over the Christian blood and guts and lion shit - I walk right up to the bald guy, I pucker up my donkey lips...

...and he feeds me the crown of roses! O, MAN, were those roses sweet! And...

WHOOOOOM!!!!

All my bristles start to fall away, blowing away on the breeze like little silver needles. Then my whole body starts to compress, my innards kinda go shhluurp, my

neck shrinks down, my hooves they break out into fingers and toes, my nose and ears shrink back, then finally my tail gets sucked up into the crack of my ass!

And I stand up, off of four feet onto two feet. In place of a jackass - the man you see before you now. Naked as the day I was born. In the middle of Rome!

Well, the reaction in the Colosseum is colossal! Even the hooker - who just lost a job - is amazed! I'm paraded around in my birthday suit, the emperor, he waves to me - could barely see him, but he waved - people are yelling and shouting and throwing money at me. I'm a hit!

So now the question is: what am I supposed to do?

Now that I'm not a jackass, what can I do with my life and not be ashamed?

AUGUSTINE

These days people come to me with questions.

"Bishop," they say, "why do all these evils happen to me, or to my loved ones, or to good people?"

I tell them those things aren't evils. Evil is something you do, not something that happens to you. Those things are just tests.

Then they ask me, "Bishop, why do I live in such confusion? Why is there this abyss inside me?"

My brothers and sisters, my friends, I have that abyss just like you. Still have it. To this day. But I know and I promise you: the door out of it shall be opened.

The door shall be opened. The door. Shall. Be opened. And we who have suffered shall all be crowned by God, the god, great God, God who is always active yet ever still, nowhere to be found but ever-present, who seeks us out that we may seek him out - and praise him. Yes. Let us praise him.

In Jesus Christ our Savior.

LUCIUS

Long story short?

I followed Isis. Joined up. So, whatever town you're in? I'm the jerk in the street handing out literature about

the truly supreme goddess. Take a pamphlet sometime, you might learn something.

I also set up as a lawyer, traveling from town to town. Having been a celebrity for a time, I attracted a clientele, made enough to get by doing small claims, worker disputes and so on. Meanwhile going around telling my story to suckers like you for a few shekels.

Thing is, one day in the street - this was in Verona - I see a guy kicking his dog. Course, it's not his dog. We don't own animals. We share the world with them. So I gave the guy hell and the dog followed me.

I now have 53 dogs, 18 cats, 40 parakeets, plus the ferrets, the cockatoo. The jackasses. They're all outside. Feed 'em something on the way out, will ya?

It's my small way to honor Isis, the truly supreme deity to whom (and I really mean this) all praise. Even though I went through some serious road apples there before she helped me out.

But I'm grateful to her. Also grateful to the donkey that let me live in his skin and walk on his hooves, got me to see all these places and meet all these different people

and watch the ways of humanity - who didn't even know I was looking.

So I guess my astrologer was right twice over. I was worth a million drachmas for a time. And the seed really did bear double fruit - i.e., me and my jackass. Now the ass is in my past I get to see that.

Wow. So. Like I told you: a pretty crazy story, right? Basically I only got one thing to add: HEE-HAW!

AUGUSTINE

Amen.

(LIGHTS FADE. END OF PLAY.)