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Confidences: A Rendering of Saint Augustine's Confessions

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St. Augustine

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Katie Hartsock translating St. Augustine

Confidences: A Rendering of Saint Augustine's *Confessions*

BOOK 1

Praising you, I begin, but how
did I begin to praise?
Deus meus, dear muse my God,
give me to know how men,

the fractured fraction of all creation
we are, first learn to talk
to you—does need of you precede
our knowing you, or must

we know to need? To call then praise,
or does praise shape the call?
But how to call without belief,
or believe before the ache

of soul and marrow's reach for you?
Oh Lord settle me down—
who seeks will find, who finds will praise,
who needs will know what is

needful. If sky and earth and we
can bear your signature,
why yearn for what composes us?
Why so much desire when

entirety surrounds entirely?
As if I'd like to find
one corner where you were not,
so I could call, "Here!,"

and as you spilled into that square
of concrete, finally
I could feel filled. Folly, Lord, yes,
and yet—I confess this voice

you lend me calls you within me,
and skies and earth and skies,
inflated full but not defined.
Is origin our end?

1: BREVIARIUM

I can't describe my infancy,
few words for wordless time;
it troubles men of rhetoric,
humbles a postured mind

to consider those thrashing tantrums
all thrown so thoughtlessly.
My own observations of babies
make me glad I'm grown.

As a child I felt my first fever
blow the hotbed bright red
in my limbs; such temperature portended
the burning torments to come.

I nearly died then, unbaptized—
my mother put off the water
to cool and save me later, when
I had done more to forgive,

to cleanse a fetid soul, absolve
decades of sin amassed.
Even in Virgilian schooldays,
in the afterglow of Troy,

I loved Dido's passion, and wept
for her pyre, how much more
than I loved you, my Lord, or mourned
the depth of our distance?

BOOK 3

Upon the sweltering stage of Carthage,
I walked hot coal floorboards and yearned
from depths of my soul never known until
afame. I loved to love, to love removed
from love; I loved to contemplate myself
as lover, loved the melting motion of
new bodies newly known, loved mine as one
of them, loved love stories that revealed me
protagonizing each object desired.
And when lovers shouted my name across
steamy crowds, oh, the gleaming embers stirred.
How sweet the bile, how sensual the chains!

A strange starvation, that of you, my God:
the worse nourished, all the less I hungered.
What pleasures know pain, what pains seed pleasure,
what nonsense sews nonexistence's veil.
Theatre-goers, we were the theatre—
the sighs I heaved from my seat, enraptured,
were no far cry from those in lovers' arms,
false love as cathartic as tragedies.
The Carthaginian I've still in me
exquisitely thrills, weeps to tell these tales;
I keep a snuffer close by his candle.

Were we perfect as you, compassion
would be moot, you who could never suffer.
Headlong in our sorrow and far behind
in your love, we suffer ourselves and fall
all over each other, and over again,
despite you who made us sufficient to stand.

3: BREVIARIUM

My mind remained too human in attempts
towards you, imagination chained to image.
I gave you arms and legs, a place in time,
a heart the universe drummed rhythms to;
I ran from this absurdity only
to Manicheans, whose absurdities
I cringe to list—weeping fruit, angels born
from burps, divine palatial suns and moons. . . .
For nine years thus blinded, I felt for you.

It's true, we're made to your image: the proof
will show itself only invisibly.
And now I look on distant mountain peaks,
not likening their size to you, their root;
I do not ask where winds come from, or how
long they must blow to stop and go again.
I praise the ground as grounded in you,
the skies and space as infinite gestures.
I lie by lakeside trees and gaze sideways
at walls of clouds and water, as if they
and the framed horizon were a hallway
to your door, as they are not, as they are.

Book 5

Outweeping ocean waves, my mother beat
her chest at Carthage, begrudging water
its route to Rome, where she'd accompany me
(Yes? she asked) if I would not stay. Her groans,
as she held me who would deceive her, whipped

my heart as I resolved to leave her, whipped
by grief of too great desire, carnal groan
of mothers to hold the boat their waters
of womb set sail. At the shrine of *beatus*
Cyprian she spent the night without me

and begged the saint to stay me, to keep me
near her always. I sailed off, my heartbeat
unknown to the ocean's, the ship a whip-
crack cresting dawn, and land shrank as water
and wind enfolded. And she woke to groan

and curse her trickster son, gone in the roan-
skinned sea of morning, seeking with groans me
whom she begot with groans, Eve's ancient beat.
She said a prayer, went home. The journey whipped
me into a fever no Roman water

could calm; wading in Stygian waters
whose waves would rise like hands to slap my hips,
I dreamt of blood-red beds and moons and groans
of human houses falling down around me,
refusing baptism, a living deadbeat.

Across the whipped and beaten sea, she prayed
for me, whom she groaned so long to deliver
to the spirit on the water.

5: BREVIARIUM

Accept these admissions, this crafting hand
of this tongue that has tasted; these bones, from the feet's
intricacies to spinal line, conquer
to heal, my Dominus, brush the dust of roads
that burned my eyes and stained those days of years.

There are none who hide their face from yours, ears
covered like children singing la-la road
songs to forget the road, their ostrich feet
upon the ground they bury heads and hands
in. You are there; you witness all and conquer

unknowing hearts to knowledge, unconquered
wills becalmed. We fill our days, busy our hands
as even animals animate years,
measure by mortal definition feet
of distance, travel believing all roads

lead to other roads, and wander these hard roads
until we wonder. Once wanting, we're conquered
by you, our founder, who find us to hand
us back our lives—one day of any year,
you appear at the breakfast table, your feet

on a chair. Fallen to our knees at such feet
we weep at this guest we've kept how many years
in secret wallpapered-off rooms, in roads
of maps in drawers, in histories of conquered
foreign hearts, in the age lines of our hands.

Such were the roads and works of hands in my
twenty-ninth year; I was less defeated
and closer to my conqueror.

BOOK 6

My barefaced panegyrics for the beardless boy emperor
were goading me—frenetic I paced Milan, past a beggar
already drunk at noon, guffawing, feet propped on the gutter,
his face at ease, with dimpled smile.

Those eyes, outlined by wear of living hard, glittered merry,
and dirt-rimmed fingernails waved skyward telling stories
punctuated with clicks of coins, to buy more cheap cherry
wine to swill, and a little to spill.

To honors, money, marriage, I aspired and you chuckled,
Lord, at the grips ambition, anxiety, and opinion held
on me, and you presented him whose face spelled, if misspelled,
a happiness I could not access.

I sought pride and success through lies, and his pleasure arrived
through well-wishes of passers-by; bombastic-lipped I lived
mendacious, constant struggles, charitably he survived;
my comforts were killing, feckless.

He was having a good old time, worthless bum though he was,
and I, just as worthless, more miserable, without a buzz
to gladden head and freshen step, pretended higher cause
for my imperial pantomime.

What glory lies outside you, who rebreak our broken bones
to heal correctly? Equally inglorious that day, the both
of us, but joyful he pretended nothing, and would doze
off his poison. I'd wake with mine.

6: BREVIARIUM

There are days on Earth we're struck, Lord, by the thought we haven't done
a thing, and we're nearing thirty, and first felt the blazing sun,
the fever to create, fifteen years ago . . . Has it been that long?
Can you know that, what you can't feel?

A Catholic catechumen reading Academic doubt,
I reeled, wallowed in tomorrows, now a skeptic, now devout,
waiting to meet one man or moment or book to mete out
the truth, reveal in a flash the real.

Faustus was too fusty, the ambrosia of Ambrose imbibed
so rarely. We'd have formed a friends' republic but for wives,
and I'd have crowned Epicurus with the garland of the wise,
if not for my soul's afterlife.

And mother's visions of my marriage smelled strange to her tongue,
so she knew she dreamt her human wish, not your revelation.
My one love gone, I took a mistress of the interim,
unextinguished my dark delights.

I had good friends. Like Alypius, gladiatorial
fanatic! Cheering crowds, the bloodrush . . . of such spectacle
I cured his love, but he could wield no dialectical
sense against my fervid moods.

We wanted, wanting, truth. We wanted, wanting, to settle
down before the final door, like bodies who can't lie still
enough to sleep find repose in no position until
they brook no beds and lie in you.

BOOK 7

I descended the platform Plotinus marked,
the false summit with its glimpse
of height. But this is a vision of language—
words come closest to you,
my near and far Lord, least immanent
of arts, least mediated.

To my very self, to my innermost
aspect you led me then,
yourself the door you opened wide.
I entered and saw by the eye
of my soul, above my soul's eye,
indescribable light.

Not the light of streets and forests,
of bodies' or planets' glow,
nor some grander version of sun
so multiplied it blinds
or swallows. A light apart, not above
my mind, as oil surfaces

water, or skies impose the earth
that bounds them. A light better
than me below, than me it made,
its inheritor, its Son.
Who knows truth, knows this light; who knows
this light, eternity.

Love knows this light, its residence.
Oh truth eternal,
love true, eternity beloved—You
are my God, you I breathe
my days and nights. You shook my sight,
and I shook, awestruck with grace.

In you I saw the light of what is;
I saw what I not yet was.
I asked, "Is truth nothing, diffused
through no places of space,
not finite nor infinite?" Far away,
you called, "I am who is."

My heart did hear, from lands of ghosts
of ideas, semblances
that indicate but are not you.
Thus diluted we abide
this fickle earth, to be translated to
unalterable life.

7: BREVIARIUM

To understand ourselves in you,
your Word—made manifest
in man, made good in walking God—
appeared to us, a mirror.
Verbum Dei reverberates me;
your news, once known, stays new.

The incarnation of given love—
why is it hard to bear?
I shunned the meekness to possess
what his weakness could teach,
and thought your Son above all men,
when he was one among.

You conceal from men whom men deem wise
what you reveal to babes.
By manifold paths I wandered,
and by as many came
home to you whose hand drew the routes:
first Plotinus, then Paul.

First the Son took the Father's form,
a thought our forms can't take.
Then he became man, likeness shaped
in a world of likenesses
for whom he walked and fell and rose
to show what lives in man.

I weep to think how hard it was
(it is?) to understand,
then weep to praise, trembling with joy,
my soul a spiderweb
your winds blow down to build again,
a stubborn little shield.

The shady summits climbed afford
a glimpse of destined kingdom,
whose doors are reached not by the path
where thieving dragons wait
but by the true protected road
heaven's deserters hate.

BOOK 8

As there is no pleasure in food and drink
unless hunger and thirst prevail—
see the drunk eat salt and lovers refrain,
the earthly tongue by the bit lip
denied, delayed to please all the more—
just so, my errant trail to you,
as I moaned and snoozed and caught my yawns
in the bodied heat of beds.
How long had I asked how much longer
before I could devote my whole,
my lusty soul, to you? I could take
no more of myself, of doubting
even my doubts, and frenzied I fled
to the garden, where want translates.

A vision of chastity unhinged
me there—what strikes like true desire?
Talking to myself in psalms, the tongue
to speak to you, feverish now
for your measureless cool, my Lord,
upon the brink of sanity
I seemed somewhat mad, monstrous-eyed.
Alypius, a man with whom
a man who needs company can be
alone, sat as I ran to fall
at the roots of a tree and wept at my past,
the hands and locks it laid on me,
the grand procrastinator prostrate
beneath boughs of figs and fig leaves.

And then I heard the chants of children,
with no children in sight—“Pick up
and read, pick up and read”—eerie song!
and with an ancient love of signs
I opened upon Paul to the Romans:
“Keep no truck with inebriation,

coupling, or contention, but put on
the garb of Christ and have no care
for carnal cravings." I cannot write
that much about the peace I gained then,
its nakedness. We told my mother;
she blessed my faith as far better
than grandchildren, and those things she thought
she wanted begotten of me.

8: BREVIARIUM

I so feared you would answer my prayers,
you who transmute our grief to joy—
Dear God, part of me did love my grief.
I begged, “Make me chaste, oh Maker,
but not yet, not yet.” How must we look,
immutable one, your unfixed
and mixed up crazy creatures for whom
the deeper goes our abyss, so
the sweeter our bliss—but do we get
it from you? Does the parent adore
the prodigal child’s broken return,
the long-shouldered parcel of sins
well-traveled, more than the constancy
of the world-poor one who remained?

Love me then, as the congregation
applauded Victorinus when
he renounced the pagan gods so long
worshipped at his altars in smoke.
Let the story of my unseen song
be told, as gospels convert clerks
to monks and their fiancées to nuns.
Love Alypius, too—long chaste
but empty of belief (opposite
of me), he picked up Paul where I
left off and read, “Receive even him,
infirm in faith”: instantly he
turned too. Thus we quit all lusts except
incorporeal thrills of you.

BOOK 11

Yours are the days, and the night, too, is yours,
my Lord, and dense eternal books of earth
and heaven's heaven. My prayers remain yours,
you who know my need, and those deer are yours,
in Scripture's obscure woods, the roes who long
to prove curative these hard words of yours—
we watch them ruminate on your laws, yours
the gold flanks glimmering through leaves of time.
I unravel your Word and look for time
in the twine; that is most perfectly yours
and may only be mine if mortal tongues
interpret the pearls you refine on tongues.

Grant what I love, for love. Grant that my tongue
may speak your tongue as it longs to be yours.
In the beginning you made, so your tongue
told Moses, heaven and earth, fiery tongues
of cloud and stone. Moses wrote and left earth
but if I'd heard your story from his tongue
I would know its truth, no matter his tongue—
Hebrew, Greek, barbarian—or how long
or little he spoke words of men who long.
In the little house of my head the tongue
of your Son tells me what's true over time,
and at the last he'll tell the truth of time.

You anticipate all times, but not in time.
Creator, words could not fall from your tongue
to spark our world of matter on which time
here depends, where material words need time
to pass, eternal draughtsman, to be yours
and ours. In the beginning of our time
you made heaven and earth, heaven which time
cannot touch, and the slugs and steeds of earth's
mutability. You made! heaven and earth.

It strikes my heart without hurt every time,
fearing what I'm so far from as I long
for and love its nearness, which I've loved long.

To be he who knows what is time! As long
as no one asks, I know. There was no time
when there was no time. What minute is long,
what year? A sound still sounding can't be long,
can't be measured till it ends on our tongue.
Time wants surprises and can wait a long
time. My shepherd, let me call nothing long
except distance from our pastures to yours,
how long our bleats carry over greens of yours.
As I speak my heart beats and I speak long
and splash in tides and timetables of earth,
await the moon's wane, her mouth full of earth.

The mouth expects the past labors of earth
to resurface in rhythms we mark long
or short and fall into future songs of earth.
To recite a psalm is to remake earth,
refashioning the whole by one part in time.
The sun will rise, I say, and then the earth
outdoes me, tilts her chin and dawning tongue.
My heart's a lantern as real as my tongue
in my mouth as I serve and alter earth,
as changed I change in my time, unlike yours
where unchanged you change, make all you've made yours.

I could know time if you said, "This is yours,"
as you gave me to know a psalm, my tongue
its vessel reinvented, and then time
would sing me. But time dissolves those who long
to intimate you in their time on earth.

BOOK 13

My Lord of mercy, radiate
your light on me, my words
of which you have no need, a gate
to your unfenced pastures.

Open the firmament, its creed,
your book in cloudy form,
which angels teach us how to read
by matchsticks' astral scores.

Let there be light, you said, and light
of no sentence became—
Who heard the crack, saw tongues of night
split with the branding flame?

Run everywhere, you holy fires,
you beauties, keep me warm,
your arms to hug my life, a bird
alive with living worm.

The Holy Spirit, genesis
of love, your density
diffused, recognizes the abyss,
highborn above its seethe.

The apple bitten, the garden burst
with dandelion seeds
that floated through the doors and cursed
their now transparent need.

The earth retreated from ocean,
its flotsam flux of salt:
first baptism of the first forgiven,
where every day we walk.

Your Word checks wayward departures
and puts us to the plough
of Christ your Son, and so secures
the gentle snake and cow.

All beauty crafted by your tools,
your tools can devastate;
all feet who walk your beautiful
highways will terminate.

My weight, my love. I love my grave—
I carved a carriage there,
and the wheels in the stone will stay in place
when I will go nowhere.

Your ministers beget young sons
and cypress girls who sigh
to tend your gospels, bid your kingdom
increase and multiply.

Wholly lovely, holy Lord,
the seventh day proceeds;
your church preserves the life of words
converted from carnality.

The bride of the city waits in a room,
her tears her daily bread,
to rejoice at the voice of her bridegroom
who sings her love unheard.

No man nor angel for angel or man
can spread the seed you plant,
my Lord. Take up this book of mine—
Is not your want its want?