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PROLOGUE

AMO AMAS AMAT

Who do you love? Who *do* you love,
when the man you married goes off
for months on end, quelling rebellions
at the frontiers, or playing hot-shot senator in Rome;
his flashy villa on the Palatine Hill, home
to another woman, I hear,
one who has borne him offspring.
My days are spent roaming this house,
its vast mosaic walls full of the scenes on Olympus,
for my husband loves melodrama.
They say his mistress is an actress,
a flaxen-Fräulein type, from Germania Superior.
Oh, everyone envied me, *Illa Bella Negreeta!*
born in the back of a shop on Gracechurch Street,
who got hitched to a Roman nobleman,
whose parents sailed out of Khartoum on a barge,
no burnished throne, no poop of beaten gold,
but packed with vomiting brats
and cows releasing warm turds
on to their bare feet. Thus perfumed,
they made it to Londinium on a donkey,
with only a thin purse and a fat dream.

Here in the drizzle of this wild west town
Dad wandered the streets looking for work,

but there was no room at the inn,
so he set up shop on the kerb

and sold sweet cakes which Mum made.
(He's told me this story a mille times.)

Now he owns several shops, selling everything
from vino to shoes, veggies to tools,

and he employs all sorts to work in them,
a Syrian, Tunisian, Jew, Persian,

hopefuls just off the olive barge from Gaul,
in fact anyone who'll work for pebbles.

When Felix came after me, Dad was in ecstasy,
father-in-law to Lucius Aurelius Felix, no less.

I was spotted at the baths of Cheapside,
just budding, and my fate was sealed

by a man thrice my age and thrice my girth,
all at sweet eleven – even then Dad

thought I was getting past it.

Then I was sent off to a snooty Roman bitch

called Clarissa for decorum classes,
learnt how to talk, eat and fart,

how to get my amo amas amat right, and ditch
my second-generation plebby creole.

Zuleika accepta est.

Zuleika delicata est.

Zuleika bloody goody-two shoes est.

But I dreamt of creating mosaics,
of remaking my town with bright stones and glass.

But no! Numquam! It's not allowed.

Sure, Felix brings me presents, when he deigns

to come west. I've had Chinese silk, a marble
figurine from Turkey, gold earrings

shaped like dolphins, and I have the deepest
fondness for my husband, of course,

sort of, though he spills over me like dough
and I'm tempted to call Cook mid coitus

to come trim his sides so that he fits me.

Then it's puff and *Ciao, baby!*

Solitudoh, solitudee, solitudargh!

I

LONDINIUM TOUR GUIDE (UNOFFICIAL)

One minute it's hopscotch in bare feet,
next you're four foot up in a sedan in case
your pink stockings get dirty. No one
prepared me for marriage. Me and Alba
were the wild girls of Londinium,
sought to discover the secrets
of its hidden hearts, still too young
to withhold more than we revealed,
to join this merry cast of actors.
She was like a rag doll who'd lost its stuffing:
spiky brown hair kept short 'cos of nits;
everyone said she was either anorexic
or had worms, but Alba was so busy
chasing the dulcis vita that she just burnt
everything she ate before it turned to fat.
She'd drag me out on dangerous escapades,
we were partners in crime, banditos, renegades
she said there was more to life
than playing with friggin' dolls, like causing
trouble and discovering what grown-ups
did in private without getting caught.
We were gonna steal from the rich,

give to the poor, keep seventy-five per cent
for ourselves and live in one of them mansions
with a thousand slaves feeding us cakes,
all day every day, but until such time . . . Her dad
owned the butcher's next door but one.
Mine couldn't care less what I did.

His precious Catullus got the abacus and wax,
I got the sewing kit and tweezers.

He was *even* bought a ponytail for his curly
little head, so's he fitted in at school
with all those trendy Roman kids.
Bless his sockless feet. *Imagine.*

Some days we'd tour the tenements
of Aldersgate. He'd trail behind
like a giant sloth, his big muddy eyes
under sleepy hoods (just like his father's),
and plead with us to slow down;
I'd tell him to *futuo-off, you little runt,*
leaving him behind as we raced towards
the slums, swarming with immigrants,
freed slaves and factory workers (usual suspects).
We'd play Knock-Down-Ginger, throw stones,
break windows, then leg-it down an alley
outa-sight, arrive home breathless
and itching with flea bites and jigger-foot.
What with the alfresco sewerage running

between paving stones, now
in my neighbourhood, summer evenings
were spiced, trout fried on stalls, fresh
out of the Thames, you could eat air
or run home for supper in the back-a-yard
Dad called an atrium. That's
if the rush-hour traffic allowed, carts
clogged up the main drag to the Forum, unloading
produce from up-country or abroad.
Sometimes, I'd hear a solitary flute through an open
window, and stop breathing.
Later we'd sneak out for the vicarious thrill
of the carnal experience. Like two toms,
we'd prowl the darkened alleys, our noses
sniffing out the devastating odour of sex.
Peeping through candle-lit shutters,
we were amazed at the adult need to strip off
and stick things in each other.
Men and women, women and women,
men and men, multiples of all sorts
groaning in pain. Absolutely fascinatio!
And then we encountered death,
Lucan Africanus, the baker of Fenchurch.
I was the daughter he never had, he said
(though his eyes spelt *wife*),
gave us fresh bread dipped in honey.

Our thanks? To raid his store one night,
find his great, black, rigor mortis self
in a cloud of flour, two burnt buns for cheeks,
too much yeast in his bowels, emptied
on the floor. That stopped our missions,
for a while. Some nights we'd go to the river,
sit on the beach, look out towards
the marshy islands of Southwark,
and beyond to the jungle that was Britannia,
teeming with spirits and untamed humans.
We'd try to imagine the world beyond the city,
that country a lifetime away that Mum
called home and Dad called prison;
the city of Roma which everyone
went on about as if it were so bloody mirabilis.
We'd talk about the off-duty soldiers
who loitered in our town, everywhere,
they were everywhere, watching for lumps
on our chests, to see if our hips grew away
from our waists, always picking me out,
plucking at me in the market,
Is our little aubergine ready?
'No, I'm not, you stinking pervs,' I'd growl,
skedaddling hotfoot out of their reach.
Sometimes we'd hear grunting
on the beach and imagine some illicit