From the Life of St. Peter

(Brancacci Chapel, Florence)

1. His Shadow

(Acts 5:15)

They brought us out on the pavement then, our pallets and cots, the poorest barely decent in their bedclothes. And facing

as best we could the sun, so whether
he would or no his passing shadow might pass over us and we be healed. As if

some ghastly catalogue of everything you fear the flesh might one day have in store for you should suddenly block your way back home.

But look
how the painter has lovingly rendered the clubs of my knees. Gall-knots, hooves of callus you would surely look away from in the
ordinary
course of things, calves
like an afterthought trailing behind. I wonder
will I get to keep some sign of this when I’m made
whole.

I’ve come to think
the body scorns hypothesis, hasn’t it
paid for its losses
in kind? While we are writ in water. My
advantage here

was learning so early how little the world will
spare us. Now
this rumored cure:
You see
the peeling fresco? It was once as chaste as you.
2. The Death of Ananias

(Acts 5:1-10)

There must have been something withheld as if
you know the story you’ll
know has been said about me.

I saw what we all saw: goats and cattle,
grain,
one ancient and three newer family
houses and finally

the second-best vineyard for miles around
converted
into silver and simply
laid on the ground at their feet.

And namely the one called Peter: how
is it
that one among equals will seem
to have harnessed the moon

and stars. I understood the next
part, how the
logic went: we hadn’t been
savages all our lives, we’d helped

the poor before. But this was something
else, was like
the dizzying vista above the gorge:
you think you’ve been quite
happy, your loved ones are waiting to
welcome you
home and you can taste the broken rocks
below through all your broken
teeth, you know the terror won’t be
over until
you’ve thrown your one allotted life
away. And so

I stepped back, just a little, from the
dge.
What kind of reckoning after all requires
this all-or-nothing? Hadn’t I
torn the lovely acres from my heart?
Which he
esteemed as so much filth. The least
that would keep the cold off, that’s

all I’d intended to put aside. You
see?
And cold came up to seize me.
3. The Tribute Money

(Matthew 17:24-27)

Then, said my Master, are the children free. Which you might think would tell us what to do

but we had caught the scent of parable. So hook, so fish, the money in its mouth,

the mucus and blood on the money. I paid the collector as I’d been told and part

was the lesson and part was speaking truth to power and still there’s part left over.

From whom, he said, do the kings of the earth extract their tribute?

Shining in its mouth as shines the golden hair you see to my left in the picture. From the stranger, we said. But he

my Master loved said nothing, nothing but beauty was ever required of him. Then are

the children free. Now look, I’m not immune to this, I like
to work the likeness out:
for pieces of money read
gifts of the earth, for hook
read yours for the asking. But as to
the one with golden hair, read what?
That some shall leap while others
crawl? That even
the best of love is partial?
The fish that flashed a thousand
colors, though you throw
him back, will drown.
Which makes me think
the gills in their air-scorched frenzy must
extract some tribute too.
4. The Expulsion

*(with: The Earthly Paradise, Saint Peter in Prison, Saint Peter Released; Genesis 3:22-24, Acts 12:6-10)*

So whether you read from left
to right (sent howling
from the garden where
the stories all begin) or simply
wander as gaps in the crowd
permit, the pillars of the
chapel will have told you
how to navigate. On one side
the pair of them driven like
cattle, her face with its
sockets of grief. And on
the other side the premise still
unspoilt. Or is it promise? Where
the sword and angel
haven’t yet obscured
the sky. You’re thinking it’s all
been lost on me, you’ve smiled
to find me sleeping while
the prisoner goes free.
But some must rest while others
watch, I’ve sorted the whole thing out. Four panels, yes?

A child could do the algebra: made free, in chains, in chains, made free. Remorse, which you call history, set in motion by the paradox. How many people contribute as much? My sword, unlike the angel’s, sheathed, my charge an open door. The saint required to suffer where you see him, extramurally.
5. The Baptism of the Neophytes

(Acts 2:37-41)

He knelt because the others knelt. And nothing was odd about that except, unlike the others, he seemed to know nothing of shame. Which quite astonished me. Not brazened-it-out, or wrapped-himself-in-pridefulness (the surest sign of struggle), simply free, by what conjunction of insight or ignorance I am still at a loss to imagine, from the universal misery of fitting-in-the-body. We were many on the hillside, the waters ran shallow for him as for everyone else, we thought this meant nothing to hide. And it was then I knew the messenger. For some of us, the treachery’s half the getting there, we have to be flayed by our own bad faith. And hence the scene of washing. You’ll remember we still thought it had no limit, that the water and the air it came from came unendingly, and clean. We thought we had fouled ourselves alone. And then the young one
came and knelt and I could see
    the whole equation, what
we’d gained by it and what we had agreed
to lose. We’d meant to do better by
    those who came after,
that was both the pity and the point.