

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 with-
held 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
edge.
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.