

2008

Frescoes from the Brancacci Chapel: (I) St. Peter Curing the Lame with His Shadow; (II) St. Peter Bringing Tabitha Back to Life; (III) Saints Peter and John Distributing Alms; (IV) St. Peter Raises the Son of Theophilus, Dead Fourteen Years; (V) The Serpent Approaches Eve in the Garden; (VI) The Serpent Speaks to Eve in the Garden; (VII) What the Serpent Showed Eve the First Night; (VIII) What the Serpent Showed Eve the Next Night; (IX) On the Expulsion from Paradise and Masaccio's Premature Death; (X) The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden

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Recommended Citation

Gibson, Stephen. "Frescoes from the Brancacci Chapel: (I) St. Peter Curing the Lame with His Shadow; (II) St. Peter Bringing Tabitha Back to Life; (III) Saints Peter and John Distributing Alms; (IV) St. Peter Raises the Son of Theophilus, Dead Fourteen Years; (V) The Serpent Approaches Eve in the Garden; (VI) The Serpent Speaks to Eve in the Garden; (VII) What the Serpent Showed Eve the First Night; (VIII) What the Serpent Showed Eve the Next Night; (IX) On the Expulsion from Paradise and Masaccio's Premature Death; (X) The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden." *The Iowa Review* 38.3 (2008): 49-58. Web.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.6475>

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Frescoes from the Brancacci Chapel

Florence, 2006

(i) *St. Peter Curing the Lame with His Shadow*

His legs are like sticks. My stepfather's leg
was a stick. As he walked down the sidewalk
dogs barked at him. My stepfather didn't talk,
not even when he drank. He never begged.
Not when the machine company he worked
for thirty years screwed him on his pension,
not when he married a woman with three sons.
He was a heavy machinery mechanic. Dirt
in the creases of his hands never came out,
except in the casket. I never understood that.

I don't believe the shadow of this saint
cured anyone of Poliomyelitis.
I'm in the Brancacci Chapel, fifteen of us
being watched by a guard as we watch paint.

(ii) *St. Peter Bringing Tabitha Back to Life*

In this fresco, everyone's astonished.
Tabitha is already sitting up—
she was dead, and now you can hear a pin drop
as those around her throw up their hands and gasp.
She's sitting, but she also appears confused—
like someone in a hospital who's woken up
and the last thing she remembers is an IV drip
and someone telling her to count backwards.

The month my mother died from liver cancer
she came to visit us in Florida.
One morning my son discovered her on the floor.
Sitting. She looked confused, she was angry,
and couldn't understand why someone would do this to her.
I thought she meant me.

(iii) *Saints Peter and John Distributing Alms*

The woman holds her child on one arm
and approaches him. I think she is
telling him off, that all this business
is guilt payment and that harm
done once is harm done forever.

*This is ointment, salve, a balm
on injury, she accuses him—you harm
us.* Peter keeps his eyes on her.

He better. I know her rage.
She wants her husband back from war.
She wants convulsive electroshock to restore
the man who left. It won't happen.
I know that woman.
I can guess that child's age.

(iv) *St. Peter Raises the Son of Theophilus, Dead Fourteen Years*

She believed. What did it cost her in her white uniform and hairnet and white stockings and shoes to let monsignor bless her and his toast and coffee every morning? To set his favorite artificial sweetener next to the sugar bowl? Her reward was not seeing him upset.

So when I went to the hospital the week before she died and she was ranting to no one about all the *motherfuckers* (that she saw only in mind because she couldn't see) I promised to tell the truth for her.

(v) *The Serpent Approaches Eve in the Garden*

Deprived of oxygen, her brain told
her right hand to lift the ghost spoon
and she did. As I watched her hold
nothing to her mouth, her lips latched on
to it, then she returned it to the bowl
of oatmeal, drowned in milk, the one
thing that was substantial at that table.
Her brain mimed life, but she was gone.

In the Brancacci Chapel I remembered.
I stared at the apple the serpent offers
Eve, which her palm opens to accept.
The serpent's head is Eve's head.
It's as if she looks into a mirror:
to accept life is to accept death.

(vi) *The Serpent Speaks to Eve in the Garden*

He whispered. It was dream-like, the voice washing over her—its sibilance—one word repeated—*yessss*—until her thighs parted and she opened her mouth. What choice did she have? It was forced—she was sure. One moment she had herself, her purpose, her sense of order and possession; the next moment, she was drowning in pleasure.

Incredible. How easy. How hard. It burned but only for an instant. Then it was gone. Warm. It was all warm—when she turned over to look at him, she was alone. The garden was empty—and different. She didn't understand what that meant.

(vii) *What the Serpent Showed Eve the First Night*

He shows her the universe, the iris
of God that she needs to pour meaning
into. And so she believes the thing
has meaning because she has given it this.
Within starry constellations, emptiness
becomes a circle, filled, like a ring,
a void that is made complete, a thing
added to, by her addition, not less.
She needs to believe that happiness
isn't just a momentary thing
in a lifetime without meaning.
The serpent pities her, who is pitiless
into the future and who, unlike God, keeps
promises—he tells her, *Sleep*.

(viii) *What the Serpent Showed Eve the Next Night*

What the serpent shows Eve is a mirror.
It is her face atop his corkscrew body,
it is her coiffed hairdo, but she doesn't see
it—nothing about him resembles her.
He speaks, and he knows in her answer
she is speaking out loud to herself—she
is deciding everything there is ever to be
and it is only herself speaking out loud to her.
That is why her head sits atop his body:
the present always looks into a mirror
and it is the past speaking to the future—
what was, is, and what is, is soon to be.
The serpent stops listening to her.
She doesn't know it, and that is the pity.

(ix) *On the Expulsion from Paradise and Masaccio's Premature Death*

I don't remember him beating her,
just that he did. The bedroom door
closed. Later, when I was older
I blamed everything on the war,
but not every man wiped the floor
with his wife. I hated him—and her.
I hated others; their lives were better,
happier, richer. Maybe they were.

My guidebook says Masaccio's ancestors
were probably cabinetmakers.
My father's grave plaque, embossed
in bronze letters, reads, *Tank destroyer*.
Brunelleschi wrote, "*Noi abbiamo fatto una gran perdita*"
("we have had a great loss").

(x) *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden*

Masaccio sizes up the moment:
Eve's shame, Adam's regret—
an angel brandishing a sword.
But what did our parents expect?
Our guard rises. Without a word
he herds us toward the chapel exit.
We deceive ourselves—the past
never changes. It defies our chaste
intentions, which are always lies.
The serpent did not give them bodies.
No matter how often or how fast
we play back the DVD in the player,
Adam always reaches out to her,
not to throw down the apple—to taste.