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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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*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.