

Below Ground

by Maria Theresa Stadtmueller

Sure, sure, Michelangelo. I get it. Genius...the colors...look at that line, a sculptor after all...such movement...the texture...The finger almost touching Adam...Four years on his back? No, that was a Charlton Heston thing...Look--so bright now since the restoration.

Twice I've been to the Sistine Chapel. The second time was not because my first viewing thrilled me but because I was curious why it didn't. Each time, of course, we merged from other galleries of the Vatican Museums to be herded through the chapel doorway, the shuffle and ahhh of a capacity crowd that keeps entering and moving through and leaving, with the tape loop of a recorded "Shhhhh!" every 15 seconds or so and "Respetto!" because this is, after all, a chapel, even if the 500 years of conclaves and their political deals—as colorful as these walls and a hell of a lot less holy—will forever stain the place.

Hardcore art history types here and there inspect the frescoes sidelined to the walls, but other painters did most of those. This place is about looking up. As soon as each new flock of entrants crosses the threshold, heads tilt back and eyes fix on the ceiling. We keep moving, oohing and aahing, pressed along by more moving people with heads tilted back. The first thing that comes to mind is those stories of big domesticated turkeys who have had their instinct so bred out of them that they'll look up at falling rain and drown. Actually, that's a myth. But hey—so is all this.

The Creation. Eden. Noah. The Libyan sibyl. Beautiful. Remarkable. And it all left me so unexpectedly flat. The second visit I got it—it's the demographics. There are around 300 figures on Michelangelo's ceiling. Leaving out the sun and planets and the light and dark and water, 290 and 1/3 of these 300 are the Supreme Being or human or some other sort of in-his-image spinoff, cherubim and the like. And there are 6-2/3 animals and about 3 plants. Two of these animals are sheep being sacrificed by Noah after a happy landing. Nearby and behind a gate, an ox and two horses try to look inconspicuous. With the exception of these and a doomed ass way off to the left during the deluge, there are no animals in the Noah and the Flood sections. No animals, two-by-two or otherwise.

In Eden, in prelapsarian Paradise, the only animal is a serpent, or at least the bottom two-thirds of a serpent—the head and torso are human. The only plant that isn't the Renaissance version of a parsley garnish is the apple tree, which has fig leaves. It's

Paradise, and the only nonhumans are, in fact, these Old Testament agents of cosmic rupture. As Joseph Campbell said, "There's no more dreary mythology in the world than that of the Old Testament."

What deity creates a universe that's .325 percent nonhumans? Leaving aside for a moment other sources for this exclusive membership, such as the Renaissance's renewed interest in the human figure, what levitates above us is the story of a neurotic relationship—a covenant, if you must—between a tribe and its deity, and to the exclusion of all other creatures. As earthy as many of its customs, and its Jewish predecessors' customs may be, the Catholic Church has always pushed transcendence (and most Protestants wouldn't even go beyond the white walls of Luther's *sola scriptura*). Take it from my late Uncle Fred, a Catholic monsignor trained in Germany, who would say about the Pueblo Indians who made up his New Mexico parish, and about the religious differences that ultimately got him dragged out of the pueblo at gunpoint, "Theirs is a *natural* religion, mit de sun and de Earth and all dat. Ours is a *supernatural* religion. It's above all dat." (I told Fred—we were kind of pals—that I didn't consider myself either Catholic or above all dat. He was pretty cool with it.)

No, it isn't only the close quarters and the press of tourists along the chapel floor that's so draining. The prophets and sibyls on the walls and the *ignudi* sufficing for beauty on the ceiling, and the saved and the damned and the power to judge in the *Last Judgment* behind us—it's suffocatingly human in here. It's people all the way down.

But not down far enough. If having a favorite word is of any use, mine is chthonic. Not just because of its Greeky digraph buck of the tongue that almost makes it past the front teeth, but because of its meaning. *Chthon* is one word for Earth, and probably predates the Greeks, but don't tell them that. Chthonic life happens below, in the dark, in a subterranean language. And as Joanna Macy says, good things happen in the dark.

Who has been more revered and then feared for crossing through both the light and the dark, both earth and air, than the serpent, the snake? Snakes thread the world together, piercing the surface, tunneling through a world thought to be blind, and rising up again. They can sense from deep under a rock or from high in a tree what is coming. They slough off what is no longer useful, what no longer fits. They can only move in a line that refuses to be straight. Any of these traits is dangerous to a belief system that wants to transcend the earthly, fix the source of spiritual belonging to an historical point thousands of years ago, and deny the curvature of life by drawing a straight line between the bliss of Eden and the bliss of heaven, with human history in between.

A snake bit me a few years ago. A group of us were paddling around in kayaks with a herpetologist, looking for a rare snake that we didn't find. The one I met was a harmless black water snake, coiled on the bank. We were learning how to pick up and handle such a character, but evidently he wasn't convinced that my flattened, moving palms were ground he could crawl on, and he bit me. He drew blood and vacated his wild stink all over me. It was thrilling.

- - -

It's a given in Rome that whatever surface you're walking on is just the latest version of some story or other. Which is true everywhere, but here earlier stories are constantly being excavated, constantly reminding of mortality, entropy, changes of heart and mind. Sometimes the stories are planted to keep things intact: the Colosseum, for example, was never the site of Christian martyrdom until an 18th century pope said it was. Declaring it a holy site finally stanching the public's looting of the structure for building materials.

Just about 300 yards away from the Colosseum crowds and phony gladiators, up the Via Labicana, is a place where you can be alone with several eras at once and with their edges. The Basilica of San Clemente is calm and quiet, and while it's known for its mosaics and its excavated depths, the proximity of Rome's more glittering star antiquities probably saves it from the usual crush. The city offers many churches to tempt a sucker for mosaics, but this is the only one I've visited more than once.

Instead of the usual apostles, prophets, and redeemers, static and almost suspended in air, San Clemente's apse draws from an earlier style—certainly much earlier than the street-level medieval church that houses it. In a language of precision and gleam this mosaic conjures the tree of life rising from four rivers. Harts drink from the rivers, an acanthus vine roots there and then spreads across the wall in spirals connecting to spirals, in fractals of green life against a gold backdrop, growing into scenes of a woman feeding chickens and ducks, a man tending sheep, monks with holy books, peacocks, doves, storks, bowls and cascades of fruit and flowers. A cross rises in the middle, surrounded by doves; it doesn't force attention on itself as crosses so often do. With this much life and greenery it's possible to focus on something else.

No one moves you along here. No one repeatedly asks for silence. In seven or eight visits, I've sat here for hours without bother and have taken slow walks across the apse to watch the light shift on the tesserae. The tiles' colors change to make creature upon creature, as if each tessera holds a nucleus to code a different living message.

But there's always that call coming from below—off to the right side, under low, arched passageways, and down the stone steps. Knowing what's below saps the appeal of the paintings in the basilica chapels and on the stairway walls that pass the defunct 4th century church on the next level down. These are mostly stories of saints and benefactors. St. Clement himself, the fourth pope, appears in some of his legends: Romans banished him to mines in the Crimea, but he made so many converts there that they hauled him out into the Black Sea, chained him to an anvil, and threw him overboard. Or maybe not. (Custom didn't press for truth; thanks to the anvil, Clement is the patron saint of blacksmiths.) Angels built an underwater tomb for his remains, revealed every year by an ebbing tide (the angels had pretty fancy taste in drapes). A Black Sea wave swept a child away, but he was found unharmed in Clement's angelic tomb when the tide receded the following year. Clement was Jewish and a former slave, converted by St. Peter. Or maybe not.

Keep going down.

A worn stone slab stands on the stairway landing. A mounted iron bar holds the slab in the center and allows it to be turned over. One side remembers the dead in elegant squared letters: "to the Departed Spirits: Marcus Aurelius Sabinus, also called the little rover. A most beloved child..." The other side, rustic and irregular: "to Surus, resting in peace. Erected by his brother Euticianus."

Marcus Aurelius Sabinus was a pagan; Surus was a Christian. Surus' world, or what it later became, is upstairs in the basilica. Downstairs is Sabinus' world, a cave-like complex dedicated to worshipping Mithras the Invincible Sun God. And under that, barely visible under a grate, is the stream that for centuries flooded this Mithraum until one of a succession of Irish priests with a passion for digging connected it to the Cloaca Maxima, the ancient sewer system that drains into the Tiber.

That Janus of a slab watches the coming and going of belief. Down past it, and headed down the hallway toward the Mithraum, you can hear something that's initially hard to label. The air is damp and stony but there's movement in it. Something is moving. There's a fourth level—or a first, actually—beneath this one, but that's not it. Remnants of a house or *insula*, an apartment building, lie as packed rubble below, a casualty of Nero's Fire in 64 CE. That's not going anywhere, at least not until the African Plate, the occasional knocker on Italy's tectonic door, forces entry and the whole town buckles.

Maybe Prior Joseph heard it too. San Clemente has been the charge of Irish Dominican priests since the 1600s, and in the mid-nineteenth, one of them, Joseph Mulooly, began digging. The Irish are accustomed to stones, after all. Prior Joseph had help from an archeologist and from the Vatican, but even when the money ran out he kept digging until he was forced to stop. There, beneath his excavations, was an underground lake. Not until a later prior's drain drew down the water did the bones of the 4th century church rise up through the muck. And below that, the waterlogged Mithraum. What the prior had, in his church, was a flooded basement of a different belief.

Mithras the Invincible Sun God has long been forgotten. His cult, which some suggest started in Persia, left underground structures all over the Roman world, especially once its boundaries expanded to sweep barbarians into the vast military. Mithraism appealed to common people initially, with his message of fidelity, justice, and protection. In simulated caves like this, his followers met to be initiated into seven layers of mysteries, to celebrate his birth from a rock on December 25, his slaying of a sacred bull, and his celebratory feast with Apollo. Before Constantine favored Christianity as Rome's official religion, Mithras gave that other Levantine cult considerable competition.

A secret religion of tiered initiation doesn't leave much evidence of doctrines. Does it matter? One interesting figure standing here, and typically found in mithraea, is a lion-headed man wrapped with a snake from toe to head. This snake is considered a guardian

of boundaries, and researchers suggest the lion-headed man stands for time and the changes it brings.

That moving sound is much more present here. Around the corner is the cult's classroom, where there's nobody to mind if you sit on the stone benches and listen for some mystery you haven't heard yet. Around the corner from the school is a grate in the floor. The glint of water is barely visible through the bars about 15 feet below. But the water doesn't trickle, it rushes, almost growls, like an underground animal who might someday spring from the cage.

Maria Theresa Stadtmueller has been a classical music presenter, a stand-up comic, and a writer of college propaganda. She is interested in permaculture and going feral.