

KURT LELAND

The Temptation of St. Anthony (1552–53)

after Paolo Veronese

Titian is master here? I'm tired of hearing it.
He's filled the palaces and chapels of Venice.
Even I have to admit his palette, brushwork
rivet the gaze with a brilliance more than mortal.
But watch me do better. Take his famous altar,
St. Peter the Martyr—I'll paint St. Anthony.

See, the bell in the corner shows it's Anthony.
Look how I make his arthritic hand reach for it,
eluding his grasp. A quarter turn has altered
the old man's sprawl, stolen from Titian. Let Venice
marvel at my foreshortening. He stares in mortal
terror at the woman in gold: the devil's work,

which he knows by the clawlike fingernails she works
into his left hand. She lifts it (poor Anthony)
to her one bare breast—marmoreal, immortal
as any on a Titian Venus. They'll all want it
on their walls: Counts, princes, cardinals of Venice
love the erotic, especially on altars.

A nude, bearded, curly-locked brute further alters
the scene, torso dominating, as in a work
of Michelangelo. *Such violence!* Venice
will say as this young hellion strikes St. Anthony
with the severed leg of a goat. Or maybe it's
attached to a shoved-aside Pan-like immortal:

Pagan giving way to Christian immorality.
But the masterstroke's depicting on an altar
this crushed, crumpled bible. The old man clutches it,
trying to hold his place. It's Titian and his works.
And I'm that virile youth beating St. Anthony,
every arm muscle straining to prove to Venice

I'm not merely his successor. There's nothing nice
between rivals. I vie for immortality
and money. And the saints I paint, like Anthony,
are pieces I've played in a game of altering
the city-state's taste. Even when I'm busy, work
feels easy, I keep that goat-hoofed cudgel raised. It's

my brush, Titian. Venice may still love your altar.
Pray as you might, like helpless St. Anthony, it
does nothing. I deal a mortal blow with every work.