

Lives of the Artists
JAMES LONGENBACH

1. *Resurrection*

In San Lorenzo, commissioned in 1428
By Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici, the load-bearing
Columns, pilasters, and arches are distinguished in color
From the walls: the church is legible space.

Construction of the nave was overseen by Cosimo, son of Giovanni.
Clement VII, grandson of Cosimo, commissioned the library
As well as the counter-façade of the church with
Its balcony for the exposition of relics. Unfinished at his death

The bronze reliefs of Donatello were designed
To be seen in sequence, at eye level.
In the panel depicting the resurrection

Cerements hang from Jesus's arms like leprous skin.
Disheveled, he carries the standard of victory
But stumbles over the bodies of the dead.

The surface of the bronze is animated
Only if you bring a flashlight,
As my teacher did in 1981. For a year
I lived in her large apartment in Trastevere.
In exchange for the room I walked her dog.

His name was Remo. Her husband had died. In San Lorenzo
She said two important things.
First, you ought to carry a flashlight.
Second, isn't this beautiful.

2. Ascension

As a child, Luca della Robbia plied his chisel
Until his fingers were numb.
At night he warmed them in a basket of shavings.

He made Euclid and Ptolemy in low relief.
For the cathedral, an organ loft—
Small children prancing, playing flutes,
Smiles passing across their faces like a ripple of air.

He scorned emphasis for the refinement of shadow,
The kind a pencil cannot show,
Unseen except in the strongest light.
At forty-seven, his children grown,
He abandoned stone for pottery,
Figures of plain white clay.
He dug for clay behind the barn.

To protect it from the injuries of time
He coated his clay with a mixture of litharge and tin,
Fusing it in a furnace of his own design.
For people who hadn't begun to think
Of themselves as different from children

He made the ascension of Jesus
White against a background of blue.
The upturned eyes of the apostles are yellow.

3. *Last Supper*

In John's account, Jesus appoints Judas
 The instrument of his passion
 By handing him a piece of bread dipped in oil.
 No less lovely than the messiah is Judas
 At the moment when Satan enters his mind.

On some of the apostles the significance of the bread is lost.
 Others understand that easily
 They could have received it too.
 Emotions vary between anger and surprise:
 Not opposites but complementaries,
 As if each figure were modeled on one man.

Preliminary sketches show this partly to be true.
 One model posed naked for both Timothy and James,
 And though the latter appears in the fresco
 Wizedened, bald, his body is a boy's—

A boy who in the sketch is smoldering,
 Flexed, hair messy as Rimbaud's.
 In the fresco he's clothed: same torso, same pose,
 The sexual body trapped in sudden knowledge
 That the body can no longer be used.
 To see the Last Supper of Andrea del Sarto

Take the number six from Piazza San Marco beyond
 The city walls, the railroad tracks.
 Rain, then sunlight, poppies
 Littering the fields—

4. *Annunciation*

In Florence, spring of 2004,
Our daughter made wings from cardboard.
We fastened them with string.
Because she'd seen the annunciation at San Marco

She knew that angels don't wear white;
She colored her wings with crayons, every color in the box.
She loved her medium the way a painter loves paint.

At my daughter's age I drew houses.
Floor plans, sections, elevations—
One with an enormous roof concealing several stories,
Intricate brickwork, tiny windows on the sides.
I dreamed that house as later, only once, I dreamed a poem.

An angel knelt at my bedside.
She spoke with a calmness I associate not with psychiatrists
But with parents, other kids' parents,
Houses that didn't smell of cleaning products or paint.

You're angry because everyone you love is dying.
You've known this since you were a child.

At the center of San Marco is a courtyard.
Around it, symmetrical rows of cells,
Small devotional paintings
By Fra Angelico or his followers.
Annunciation, adoration, transfiguration, descent.