

In the Basilica of San Francesco · *Laurie Sheck*

In the quiet chamber that holds us
like a kind of moonlit night, we see them gathered
without rancor, these animals staring with great tenderness,
witnessing the birth of Christ.
Giotto has left them here;
the mild attentive faces of the donkey, lamb, and cow,
their heads inclining toward the blue-robed mother and her child.
Having come to feel such tenderness
there is nothing more they need to know.
Far behind them, a single pallid tree
fans its branches out in all directions,
deep into the mother sky. How frail it looks,
and yet it seems as if it's rooted there forever,
each golden leaf completely still,
small eye-shaped mirrors hanging in the silence,
covered with fine dust. And the lambs
look wholly past themselves, so calmly,
onto the massive rock that is the world. . . .
But the moment is frozen,
the tenderness kept without effort,
the thrall of birth and newness blanketing
each creature, spidering them in.
It is as if they had not yet woken.
As if a strange unearthly music lulled them,
sate and pure. But how soon the spell
must be broken, and the years accumulate their meanings,
and the child cry out beyond solace
as his mother turns, in her sorrow, toward the window,
the flayed leaves churning, twisting downward
in a tattered slowness, the wind dragging
its great trap across the ground.
And the father, too, will sigh with tiredness,
and the donkey tug his master's cart up the steep hills,
while flies clot near his eyes
and whip marks scar his skin. And yet,

as we look into this world brought to life
by Giotto's hand, it seems the donkey's eyes
must still hold kindness, they are so deeply kind,
no matter the knowledge of affliction burning in his body,
no matter the weariness, the meekness,
as he pulls the farmer's cart over rocks
and thorny vines, pressing hard into the forest's
haunted promise, deep into the mangled beauty of the world.

The Annunciation

This is the honest grace of her body:
that she is afraid, and in this moment does not
hide her fear. That as the pink-robed angel
bends before her pure with the power of lightness,
she wants to turn away, she cannot look
into the angel's graven face. Because the child
meant to form in her will change her.
Because all she has known will dissolve,
pulling back from her like water.
For there is so little softness in me,
she thinks, and my hands are simply empty,
my hands that don't know how to fill.
I am no more than these shadows now
darkening the garden, no more
than these rigid, frightened hands.
She bows her head; her arms are crossed
against her brittle ribs. The lilies
should have closed by now, she thinks,
and still they have not closed.
Look how they breathe, such white hungers,
white mouths. And she, who must enter
the fear of her waiting, the door
of her waiting, no longer wants to see them
breathing, their smoothness like the angel's
steady face. She would lie down on the stone floor
and curl up there without thinking.