

TO PROCEED, of course, we will take your bags. You can't take it with you, the porter giggled, although of course your purse will be fine. Do you have everything you need in there? I nodded. My passport, wallet, headphones, laptop along with various chapsticks, sunscreens and over-the-counter allergy and antidiarrheal daily use medications were all quickly at hand. The porter approached and took my large roller and my second bag (of the size called "carry on" although of course no one did so anymore. Back in the day I would always check it despite the risk of it disappearing because I just didn't want to deal with it and also I occasionally have a back problem that made it difficult for me to put the bag in the overhead compartment, not that I couldn't have

managed to put it in there but that I risked hurting my back worse in the process because I was always too proud to ask for help with such things. Also in the before-times I had an American Express card which promised to compensate you for lost luggage, although I actually luckily never even had the occasion to look into how the baggage insurance worked).

Anyhow, the porter had the tags ready and wrapped them around the handle of each bag then walked them towards the edge of the building, around a corner where I couldn't see. The gate attendant smiled warmly and greeted me by name, not the name my friends call me but a separate, "preferred" name I employ occasionally when dealing with large bureaucracies that I would prefer to stay spiritually isolated from. The gate attendant walked a few steps ahead of me, opening the door and gesturing for me to enter. In the ease of the whole operation I was reminded of the endless back and forths about "security" in the wake of the September Eleventh attacks, the nonsensical and arbitrary prohibitions, the removal of shoes, and thought about how vastly

superior this system was. Having submitted my paperwork to the Divine Office weeks ago, my presence today at this gate was anticipated. The gate attendant had seen a recent picture of me this morning in his briefing. And, Raleigh being my home, I used the gate fairly frequently and the computer responsible for personnel assignments had to the extent possible scheduled workers who remembered me and who I remembered.

The gate attendant, in the manner of a concierge, noted several daily specials in the cafe ahead of us in the right transept (in full cognizance of my religious and ethical dietary restrictions and allergies) and with a nod let the door to the narthex close behind me. The narthex like most of the gate was primarily in off-whites and creams, the walls of this area unadorned with paintings but the floor done in mosaics in the style of the Roman decadence but with the subject matter slightly contemporarized; one of the goddess of flight, one of a flock of birds, one of clouds being penetrated by a plane. I dipped my hand in the small font by the arch and applied the thin

ointment to my forehead. The smell of the holy water was incense, not-quite-there sandalwood and myrrh. Thin but pleasant. Unburdened and anointed I moved closer and closer to the proper mindset to appreciate the totalizing experience.

Entering the cathedral proper, I was stirred to a state of silent contemplation. Cuts in the off-white slanted roof above my head extended down the walls, cuts backed by large frosted windows that allowed sunlight to fill the space, supplemented here and there by small frosted glass cornices behind which burned candles which produced a light in temperature closer to daylight than to the redness of a conventional candle. To my right and left were raised beds of groomed sand, nine feet by nine feet, which in the center allowed beautiful "Bloodgood" Japanese maples to emerge, which were kept in a newly-sprouted state with the deep burgundy leaves all year long through some form of futuristic horticulture. The entryway beneath my feet was littered with shed maple seed pods, which as a child we called "helicopters," left there for effect as the rest of the space was



immaculate. At the foot of one tree was a guardian lion, a smaller form of one of the lions standing at the doors of the Art Institute of Chicago, and at the foot of the other a *komainu* or guardian dog-lion that would have looked more at home in a Japanese shrine but was nonetheless appropriate here at the gate to the gate. The lion was done in bronze which was turning green in the moisture of the space, and the *komainu* in an earthenware on which a light dusting of moss had begun to take hold.



The moisture in the space was tightly controlled, I could feel, the temperature of the space around seventy-five degrees and the humidity high, which helped with my respiration (I am plagued by several mysterious apneas, all of which are aided by moisture). I had logged my preferences for temperature and humidity aeons ago on some form or other, and

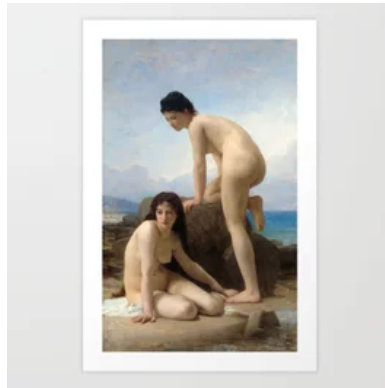
the computer remembered my preferences, of course, probably averaging them with those of the other attendees, although as in all matters the way it worked was slightly black-boxed to us. As I walked I noted a change in the sonic quality of the silence of the space, in the way my steps on the floor of large cut sandstone slabs reverberated, a change that accompanied the gradient in heat and moisture.



Today, I realized I was alone in the vast nave. I had some minutes before the service began and wasn't particularly hungry or thirsty, electing to take my time to examine the paintings which hung unframed on the walls enclosed by thin and perfectly transparent plexi into properly dehumidified preserving

environments of their own. There were twelve paintings in all, of a variety of sizes. The first on my left was a Monet riverbank, which in the set was the sole landscape (sole representational landscape, at least) as well as the smallest canvas in general. The others on the left side were five Bougureaus, all carefully selected for airiness containing a minimum of true blacks. Four of them were various nudes, set on truncated beaches and meadows, and the fifth was one of a young girl seated, directly addressing the viewer and removing her left sock, the other already off. Although I had seen them before I appreciated again the odd but ingenious gesture of displaying the Bougureaus removed from the frames they undoubtedly occupied for most of their lifespans, lightening them further and also allowing one to observe the clean edges with only occasional slips and breaths which the painter had left on the raw canvas edges underneath. Many of them had obviously been relined expertly, evidence of which was nice to observe in itself. In each canvas the airiness and unframed lightness of the landscape and by extension the nave I stood

in was set off by the concrete, sculptural forms the master employed.



On the right wall there were six late de Koonings. The windows on this wall were less frosted than the ones opposite, allowing, between the canvasses, glimpses of the rolling landscape outside of the gate and in the distance out the last window the waiting plane itself. The canvasses moved from an “early late” de Kooning with the more signature brushwork still intact as, down the hall, the bravura

disappeared entirely as the “later” paintings threatened to fully dissolve.



Slowly considering myself past the paintings and stepping from the threshold of the nave to the large rounded part in the center of the building which was roofed by an immense white dome. Complex numerical patterns were woven into the slats that supported each tier of the dome, patterns which were at once nearly imperceivable and instantly appreciable in their semiregularity. Light cascaded down between the slats.

To the right was a restaurant and market which continued the lighter color scheme of the rest of the building. The four tables in the

restaurant were as vacant as the rest of the building and the waitress smiled at me. Eating today? My stomach was slightly unsettled at the idea of a full meal. I browsed through the smaller grab-and-go market and looked into the deli case, pausing occasionally to appreciate the Picasso works on paper on the walls, all framed floating in thick white mattes in thin light pine frames.

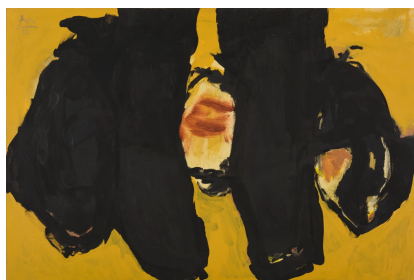
The works, some preparatory sketches and some more finished, along with some prints, spanned a period of his career from roughly 1925ish to the latter 30s, beginning with a neoclassical and Ingresesque *Maternite* and moving to the lewdness of the “bone period’s” various beach denizens and ending with some of the lesser seen (at least by me) minotaur prints. The works seemed to encompass some of the ideas of the curation of the nave, moving in the opposite direction, however, of the de Koonings: the neoclassical sketches, despite the heaviness of the figures depicted, were airy, and the *Minotauromachia* became dense and well-worked.



I bought small amounts of an assortment of cheeses and some slices of bread that corresponded. Would you like me to cut that for you? She deftly sliced the bread and cheese and placed it all inside a small biodegradable container, which I carried across the transept to the bar opposite the market in the far side of the transept.

The bar, paneled in a dark wood, was also empty - I was truly alone in the gate today. I sat down opposite the bartender and ordered a beer, a stout thicker and with more flavor and body than a Guinness but not quite to the point of the American pastry-stout category. The beer was instead of sweet very slightly *spiced*, with

notes of clove and allspice, almost chai-like. The bartender poured it into a glass hard, aerating it well. The dark opacity of the beer in the glass complemented the darker decor of the bar with its black marble countertop and ebony stools, plushly upholstered in a variety of fabrics ranging in color and feel from a green corduroy to a dark mustard velvet. The mix of fabrics casualized the otherwise intimidating space, which was hung with three Motherwells, one per wall, much too close to the viewer in the small space. The paintings ranged chronologically from throughout his entire career but were all marked by predominating black figures, from an earlier one with gray-browns to an eighties one with a nearly day-glo but broken orange.





As I sat I nibbled at my bread and cheese and began to lose myself in the dark of the figures. I got out my laptop, jotting in shorthand a few ideas I'd had in the inspiring space. The first cheese I tried was an American goat cheese, cave finished, with a strip of ash down the center. The complementary bread had small not-quite-craisins embedded in it, a little fresher but still drier than a fresh cranberry. A sip of the spiced beer finished the bite nicely. I wrote in my notekeeping app about things not being metaphors. An utter contempt for metaphor, I thought. The next cheese was an italian *tartufo*, not as soft as the preceding one, with veins of black truffle. The bread for this one was a simple crusty sourdough, offering the clean experience of the cheese itself. Another spiced sip washed it down as well as it had primed it. I also ate a few of the marcona almonds the waitress across the hall had thoughtfully included. My experience here, I thought, maybe disavows even some of the essential metaphors of flight itself. There is no sense of moving to the unknown or penetrating beyond where man is allowed. It is utterly routine and banal. The

final cheese, however, was anything but. A very advanced-in-age American robiola whose taste had once I assumed been sour or tangy had now descended (ascended?) into full-blown funk. On a piece of a salty toast coarse with sunflower and other seeds, toast which almost but not quite held its own against the strong soft cheese, the flavor was quite moving.

The beer was a well-concealed nine points of alcohol by volume. Overall, I was profoundly satisfied by my snack, which I finished just as the gentle bell calling me to mass rang. I tipped the bartender and as I passed directed an appreciative head-nod to the waitress who had selected the cheeses so adroitly. I sat down in the front pew and listened to the brief mass. The contemplation, the beer, the smells and sights all washed over me along with the Latin. When the priest directed us to rise, I made brief eye contact with him before he placed the eucharist on my tongue.

I swallowed it and left the gate through the back door behind the altar. Now in the rolling meadow I had seen out of the windows behind the de Koonings, I ambled down the scenic path

as the Valium-like effects of the wafer began to take hold. Surrounded on all sides by the beauty of the forest park, feeling truly blessed in the early autumn air, I thought ruefully of a time when tired from a long week of work I misread the chaotic and unprofessional wayfinding signage at the old Denver airport and accidentally walked all the way to bag claim, a trip which was intended to be taken with the airport's small local AirTram system. It was late as night and the terminals were largely emptied, and as I wove through the various empty terminals alone I grew more and more irrationally worried that I had slipped into some kind of infinite airport, that I would never find bag claim. Now, years later here in the forest park, I *wanted* to walk, and did so with relish, picking my way down the shaded path through the trees.

The final approach cut across a hill which overlooked the runway, where the plane waited for me in all its glory. Down below a couple with children and an elderly gentleman (who had come from their own demographic's gates) were waiting to walk up the stairs to the plane's entry.

I felt blessed again to have had the gate to myself, the sole single homosexual, thirty to fifty years old traveling at this time on this day. A few people closer to my own age walked together in a group a little before me, laughing together, probably walking from one of the other gates I had passed enroute. For myself, the drugs were dulling me more and more and I quickened my pace slightly, although I wasn't worried at all and the walk was still exceedingly pleasant.

At the base of the stairs a flight attendant greeted me with a smile and as I found my seat upstairs and laid down, the same flight attendant swabbed my arm and inserted the IV. I carefully fitted my CPAP mask into my nose. A few hours later I awoke in Boston, as though waking from the best sleep I had ever had.