

Writing Center Journal

Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 8

1-1-1984

Writing Workshop I

Gardner McFall

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Recommended Citation

McFall, Gardner (1984) "Writing Workshop I," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1, Article 8.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1103>

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Writing Workshop I

Gardner McFall

The twelfth century Cistercian monastery
is known for its order, its vineyards,
and being open to tourists. Dropped
as it is among mountains, exposed
rock and pine, you have to make
an effort to see it. We walk
under the portal's relief, stone-
carved with meaning for the ecclesiastic.

We pass through the monks' one-time
dormitory, the single heated room
where they copied manuscripts by hand,
the collective refectory, and rest
where they gathered for prayer.
The hall is stony, cavernous, and cold
with rods of light flooding
through an open upstairs,

the clerestory, if I remember
my art history. The silence weighs
total, tranquil, deep, disturbed
suddenly by a rush of beating wings.
Is it possible birds make so much noise
without singing? They fly
again and again to the blue-red
rose window, then retreat

to the corinthian leaves.
I think of their small bodies
and the intractable glass. I tell them
about their mistake as if I could bring
daylight to birds. I wait
breath-held, stubborn, scared,
until they find the pockets of air
that will carry them out, that were there all along.