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.