

Social Distancing  
By Erica Goss

Since mid-March, when the coronavirus pandemic prompted the state of Oregon to order its residents to stay home, I've had a postcard of Georgia O'Keeffe's iconic painting propped up next to my desk. Right now, it represents everything I can't experience: freedom, discovery, wide-open spaces.

I love how the title sounds like a poem: "Ram's Head, Blue Morning Glory." When the news of the world overwhelms me, I distract myself by turning the title into haiku, e.g.:

ram's head  
blue morning  
glory

or

ram's  
head blue  
morning glory

I first saw this painting as a teen, in an art book I'd checked out from the library. I was instantly drawn to the strangeness of the painting: how the flower, tucked into the curve of the ram's horn, exudes a tantalizing mystery. Dimly I understood that the power of the painting was not in the objects alone but in their juxtaposition. I sensed the painter's hand, placing the flower the way a poet places a word.

Nowadays, I have plenty of time to stare at the painting. I keep discovering things. I just noticed the faint shadow under the left horn, which swoops up from the corner of the flower. I try to name the many shades of white in this painting: pearl, bone, chalk, lily, eggshell. The ram's skull seems to have a face-within-a-face, where small holes open above the massive eye sockets.

The horns loop in perfect curves away from each other, starting out close and ending up what appears to be a yard apart. That length is a metaphor for the times we're in. If the tips of the ram's horns are a yard apart, then two ram's horns would equal six feet.

That's the distance we're supposed to stay away from each other.

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