

The Flying Dutchman of Gate 78

My latest business trip forced me to confront an unpleasant metaphysical fact. After a trip from LAX to SFO and back, I know what happens to those unfortunate enough to die with unfinished business on Earth. It turns out that you don't haunt your loved ones or stay where a horrible event occurred. The not-quite-damned are doomed to shamble hopelessly from gate to gate trying to get on a standby flight out of SFO in the rain.

This is obviously not Hell. The experience isn't so much torturous as enervating. The penitent slog listlessly from gate to gate, listening to the same litanies of boarding instructions repeat themselves endlessly. No one in the troop of zombies trudging from gate to gate really has any hope left after being passed over more than two or three times, but they follow the automatically-forwarded standby lists through the terminal just to deny Fate the last bitter joke of having their name called for a seat after they had given up. Whatever theologian invented Purgatory without having been through SFO was prescient indeed.

The frustration is magnified by its evident needlessness. I've been to the East where planes fly in the rain. It takes some combination of greed and incompetence to magnify the admitted problems that weather can cause to these heights. I don't know what the first cause is. I've heard it postulated that there are runways at SFO too close to use in bad weather and that traffic is planned as though they're always available. I know better optimizations of flight crew routes can be done so that a single delay doesn't result in most planes being without crews. The most plausible explanation is that the place suffers from California's chronic denial of weather.

I have never been in a watertight building in Los Angeles, with the remarkable exception of my house. I don't know how I drew the exception that proves the rule, but it was a very pleasant surprise. The reason is no mystery; rain is really infrequent there, so leaks can go unnoticed for months. Still, that doesn't explain people's inability to drive when a few drops fall.

I've heard that if you leave domesticated turkeys outside in the rain, they'll be so fascinated by the water falling from the sky that by staring up open-mouthed, for too long, they'll drown. In my less charitable moments, I imagine this happening to LA drivers.

I don't want to give the impression that Californians are completely helpless; in fact, the opposite is true. When faced with disasters of Biblical proportions, for example, the Earth shaking and cracking open, they do remarkably well. The reconstruction of the freeway system after the Northridge earthquake is one of the few public works projects in recent memory to be completed on-time and under-budget. When the apocalypse comes, California's ready. As long as it's not preceded by a Spring shower.