Commit Lit

In search of higher education

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In 2012, at the age of 25, I quit my part-time jobs cooking and cleaning houses and, having dropped out during my first semester seven years earlier, went back to school. To help pay for the modest tuition at Indiana University Southeast in New Albany, Indiana, I took a work-study gig at the university library. The campus of IUS is small, and most students are commuters; the library was accordingly quiet, the work languid. So in the many slow periods between tasks, I read. Essays, stories, poems—whatever I could get my hands on. My reading was omnivorous and unstructured: like the critics in the first part of Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, I pursued knowledge like sleuths in a *roman noir*, or like the poet Juan García Madero from his *Savage Detectives*, for whom "every book in the world is out there waiting to be read by me." I followed a friend onto Twitter—the early 140-character years, with few journalists and politicians and no blue checkmarks—and there I came into contact for the first time with the world of magazines, small and large, that constituted the internal chatter of the educated American upper-middle class.

Amid this cacophony of culture-talk—heard from a remove, like music from a distant room—I began to discern a theme. I listened, equally interested and perplexed. It concerned the state of American higher education: plummeting enrollment in English, philosophy, history and other bookish, scholarly disciplines leading to the annulment of programs and the shuttering of departments; skyrocketing tuition and ballooning student debt; a pervasive sense of panic and despair. From graduate students in particular, one could sense an almost inexhaustible font of disappointment and bitterness. In light of the collapsing job market, deteriorating working conditions, the venomous pettiness of colleagues, the apathy of students and a general sense of purposelessness—against a backdrop of general educational austerity and the meteoric rise of digital media and technological capital—the life of the academic no longer seemed worth it. "Quit lit," as it came to be known, grew out of dozens of public letters of academic resignation and quickly concretized into a genre of recognizably confessional literature with its own signature tropes: the author was a bright and successful student at some prestigious and respected college or university; after acceptance into a top graduate program, their naïve love of learning was honed into disciplinary expertise; and after years of demoralization and several disappointments on the job market he or she fell on the sword. But not without making a fuss on the way out.

The quit-lit canon is varied. Many of the essays were quite personal, ranging in affect from giddy optimism to melancholy and despair. On the cheery side of the spectrum was Anne Helen Petersen's famous 2014 essay in *BuzzFeed*, which rejoiced in her abandonment of a Ph.D. in media studies for a career in internet journalism: "For the first time in years, I'm not anticipating the job season and the cycle of crushing rejection that accompanied it. Freedom from fear is incredibly liberating—intellectually, psychologically, *financially*." On the other: "I learned to live with the corrosive ambiguity of post-Ph.D. life," Andrew Kay bemoaned in this magazine, "a fate that English academia—which immediately indoctrinates its initiates with the Derridean notion that life is a condition of epistemological undecidability—had, fittingly enough,

equipped me for." Others attempted a more dispassionate, judicious analysis of the underlying conditions. Oliver Bateman's early entry in the canon, for instance, diagnosed five symptoms of the sickness in the viscera of higher education that will likely kill its host: bloated enrollments, the ineptitude of online education, mass adjunctification, the surrender to "alt-academia" and the perverse economics keeping the whole rotten structure afloat. "The real culprit is systemic," Bateman contended: "Our federally backed approach to subsidizing higher education through low-interest loans has created perverse incentives with disastrous consequences."

"Quitting," under such circumstances, was a rational decision and perhaps the only one that would not consign you to a life of subtle torture, as portrayed in that period's burgeoning genre of grad-school memoirs and novels. Dorothy, the protagonist of one of the best known of these novels, Christine Smallwood's 2021 *The Life of the Mind*, is languishing in "the limbo of contingency"—"a phrase she preferred to 'adjunct hell'"—teaching courses in English at an unnamed New York university. Her doctorate, conferred by a likewise unnamed competitive and high-status department, is growing stale as she drifts jobless into her thirties, the passion and promise of her grad-school years receding gradually into the abyss of her memory. At an academic conference in Las Vegas she runs into her former dissertation advisor, an overweening matriarch of the old guard who demands Dorothy join her in weeping over the sudden death of the advisor's university-press editor; over drinks later that evening, her successful and envied former classmate Elyse confides a romance as tangled as it is trivial, with Dorothy serving as a set piece for her meandering dramatic monologue. ("Whether she knew it or not, Elyse's story was a parable about academia and what it did to pleasure, how it took the most simple and innocent desires—to tell stories, and stories about stories—and made them ugly.") Returning to New York to a tragicomedy of broken printers, grade inflation and nagging job insecurity, she sighs with defeat: "Dorothy looked into the future and saw herself, forty, forty-five years old, a contingent member of the faculty, waiting on the printers, absorbing the admonishment of the croney librarian, and thought how naïve she had once been to believe there was anything glamorous about the life of the mind."

Dorothy is a familiar sort, in many ways the standard-issue product of real-life American graduate education today: a bright, earnest, bookish, but somewhat neurotic type bewitched by elite academia's twin promises of leisure and luxury. Leisure in living a life of learning, contemplation and creativity; luxury in living said life in an important and culturally relevant city, in a charming apartment with an envy-provoking view, carefully styled in a manner that communicates both intelligence and eccentricity. This was, for a time, the ideal of "the life of the professor," made possible by the higher-education gold rush set off by the GI Bill. With the influx of students after World War II, there were hardly enough Ph.D.s to fill the teaching positions needed at colleges and universities across the continent. (In the 1970s, for instance, Cornell University offered a fast-tracked bachelor's-to-doctorate program in an attempt to quickly satisfy this labor shortage.) For a scarce few decades, university professor was a plausible middle-

class career, and scholarship appeared a viable route for attaining bourgeois glamour. But this picture of graduate education as preparation for professional intellectualism enjoys an inertiatic afterlife, especially on elite campuses, even though the boom has long since come to a halt. The result has been many disappointed young people—who remain enchanted, despite its now-limited plausibility, by the idea of making a living while also doing work that improves the world, or at least their own souls.

In focusing so narrowly on the most rarefied class of students from the most exclusive colleges and universities, the quit-lit canon has contributed to a one-sided view of humanities education in the United States, and further obscured what happens on most American college campuses. From my perch at a largely preprofessional school with many "nontraditional" students, most of whom were on campus with a specific end in mind, I could only read this material with interested but distant sympathy, like reports from a far-off war. I was, I came to realize, in something like the academic hinterlands. Only one of IUS's seven master's programs—history—is in the humanities, but I never knew anyone to be enrolled in it. My professors certainly struggled with job insecurity and low pay, and student life had its share of indolence. But none of my classmates, as far as I could tell, considered themselves on a pathway toward the professoriate, let alone in prestige-accumulating careers like law or banking: many were older students like me, or retirees filling gaps in their knowledge. Yet it was not only the career aspirations of the quit-lit authors that struck me as alien; it was also their experience of humanistic education. Whereas the quit-lit canon depicted the academic humanities as a charnel house of competition and hopelessness, it was to become for me an oasis: a place where I could observe and contemplate, from however small a remove, the riddles of existence revealed in everyday life.

Like most Americans, I never received a good education. Good, that is, in the sense intended by upwardly mobile meritocrats, meaning well-known, prestigious and desired by impressive people. I was, as most are, spit out of a provincial public high school—Huntington High in Huntington, West Virginia—into the local public university on a state-funded full-ride scholarship for good-enough local graduates. I had decent grades and scored reasonably well on standardized tests (taken cold, at a teacher's suggestion), but paid very little attention in class; I skipped graduation to read books in the park. Hardly anyone I knew—neither my parents or siblings; none of my grandparents, aunts or uncles; none of my friends at the time—held a college degree. Universities, as far as I could understand them, were elaborate football Ponzi schemes and places to buy cheap weed. As soon as I stepped onto Marshall University's campus at eighteen years old I realized I had no idea why I was there in the first place: from my perspective of near-total ignorance, I'd reached a further tier of high school—loads of the same classmates, even—except this time money was involved and I wouldn't get in trouble for leaving. The whole thing confused and bored me. I didn't really know what I wanted, but I doubted I could find it there. I didn't last a month.

Shortly thereafter I left town to join the swashbuckling, gregarious world of postmillennial punk rock and anarchism, which was then still vigorous from the energy of the antiwar and anti-globalization movements of the early 2000s. It was a highly literary milieu with its own vernacular intellectual culture: books and zines constantly circulating, most everyone always writing and reading. Poems, novels, communiques and manifestos were as essential to living as bread and water; titles and authors' names were always in the air. Reading groups were held in coffee shops, libraries, public parks, punk-house living rooms, left-wing bookstores or basically anywhere there were chairs and a low cost of entry; roll into any medium-sized American city for the first decade of the 21st century and you could stumble upon some kind of anarchist project whose primary activity was constant engagement with, and argumentation about, the written word. Reading was omnivorous and unfocused but done with passion: I read Italian insurrectionary poetry with punks and primitivists in Kentucky, Foucault with a factory worker and college professor in San Francisco, labor history and existentialist philosophy in Buffalo. In Oklahoma City, a reading group on the short fiction of Ted Kaczynski eventually produced a "Ship of Fools"-themed variety show, complete with songs and costumes.

But ultraleftism isn't all fun and games, of course, nor is it all clandestine scholarship and cabaret. One campaign to prevent the bulldozing of a nature preserve for a superhighway ended with two friends arrested by federal agents and threatened with racketeering felonies; a handful of others were jailed by local police in a desperate, last-ditch attempt at a construction blockade. The whole thing seemed, in the last analysis, more a means of transferring bail money from activists to the police than changing minds or achieving concrete positive change. Then in 2011, my best friend relapsed on a teenage heroin addiction and wound up brain-dead in an Oregon hospital. I moved with a few friends to a farm in southern Kentucky, but less than two years later the most zealous of the bunch forced everyone out after we vetoed his plan to line the perimeter with guard towers because we'd grown to like our neighbors. Clearly, some reconsideration was in order.

So I decamped to the friendliest, most beautiful and most habitable city I'd discovered along the way—Louisville, Kentucky—and began to rethink my life. Of course, this endeavor demanded more reading, and here I tried to carry on the habits of communal study that I'd enjoyed in the anarchist trenches. Success was limited. I posted flyers for a reading group on the contemporary short story—Cortázar, Borges, David Foster Wallace, Tao Lin—in every coffee shop on Bardstown Road; two or three others attended each meeting, always already close friends, but interest declined after a few months. In a quiet stretch during one of my menial part-time jobs—kitchen work, cleaning houses—it dawned on me that I had hardly anyone left to talk to about books or ideas. My coworkers, unsurprisingly, were uninterested in these matters, and many of my old anarchist comrades were suspicious of any pivot away from political action toward the life of the mind, having concluded that ruminating on literature was frivolous, bourgeois. Others had shelved intellectual life in favor of pursuing a career,

which made sense: I, too, was having trouble reconciling clock-punching and contemplation. But I couldn't help wanting more of the latter. One day, puzzling over where a person in my position might go to find others with whom to read, think and talk, it suddenly it dawned on me: I guess this is what college is for.

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Indiana University Southeast will never be high in college rankings; its graduates are not found in prominent positions of leadership or influence; its alumni do not carry a memorable demonym like "Yalies," "Smithies" or "Johnnies." Its uninspiring campus has never been, and will never be, used as a setting for a film, television show or novel about college life. It invites no awe, pretends no grandeur and assumes no superiority. No songs or rituals live forever in the hearts of its graduates; not one of its halls can be called hallowed. Campus grounds are free of "the college experience": there are hardly any dorms, and the closest bar is a low-key brewpub in a strip mall a few miles down a major highway. Half of the student body is "nontraditional"; a third are first-generation college students. There is no football team.

The school was founded in 1968, when its precursor, the Indiana University Jefferson Extension Center, began minting nurses and teachers on its own instead of sending juniors to finish their degrees in Bloomington. In 1973, it moved to a new 177-acre, middle-of-nowhere campus north of New Albany, guided by the spirit of the suburb and its promise of endless expansion. It was a decidedly bad era for university architecture, and the imposing and angular modernist brick buildings—surely intended to call to mind buzzwords like "progress" and "innovation"—have always sat uncomfortably among the gently pointed hills of southern Indiana's lush and rolling Knobstone Escarpment. Like most American institutions of higher learning, IUS boasts a largely unmemorable campus in a largely unmemorable place. But it was the cheapest school around to get a four-year degree, and with the fewest hurdles to jump through.

I was a 25-year-old hothead seasoned by years of riding freight trains, construction and agricultural work and living among urban decay; I was wholly ignorant of the basics of college registration, let alone the disciplinary organization of knowledge and its taxonomy of majors and minors. Upon enrollment, I had two immediate objectives: finding others to talk and think with about the broadest range of subjects, and learning another language. I assumed that the best way to achieve these things would be to study history: it seemed loose enough to accommodate the full range of human effort, and I could imagine it requiring reading texts in other languages (and possibly traveling to distant countries to find them). Just weeks into an introductory philosophy course my first semester, however, I encountered for the first time the parable of the cave from Plato's *Republic*: the "image of our nature in education and want of education," in which escaping the shadows of acquiring the truth of things demands the suffering of the learner. Seeking after truth, in Plato's parable, is not a process of dispassionately collecting facts about the world; it involves being dragged unwittingly

upwards and getting blinded by the light, only to return to the darkness and suffer threats of violence from one's erstwhile peers. Loving wisdom, Plato shows, is not just about acquiring knowledge: it is about being utterly transformed in the pursuit of truth, which is the essence of education. It seemed miraculous to me that nestled beneath the university's byzantine architecture of departments, offices, majors and administrators sat this precious and ancient pearl of wisdom, waiting to be discovered.

Over the next four years I received a respectable training in the German language and the history of philosophy from a small group of poorly remunerated, terribly overworked but intelligent and committed professors. Our small philosophy club hosted reading groups and film screenings; one professor in his free time led a study of Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* in its entirety. In a place like IUS—in-state tuition, as I write this, is less than eight thousand dollars a year—it was possible to carry out this activity with little concern for forecasts about future employment, considerations about the state of American politics or worries about the reputation I'd gain as the kind of person with a humanities degree. Most jobs that require a college education are, after all, rather unspecific in their demands: the credential is simply a proxy for mid-level literacy and a familiarity with basic professional norms. Nor did I have to contend, as many humanities students do elsewhere, with the relative prestige and promise of STEM or the social sciences, those beacons that lure students of a speculative demeanor into more "practical" or "impactful" degree like political science, economics or biology. A philosophy degree from Stanford, Princeton, the University of Chicago, the University of Virginia or the like could feasibly be understood as a step toward a career in law, politics, journalism, consulting or a number of other reasonably lucrative, higher-status professions. At a school like mine, all diplomas are equally void of status, and thus all students are equally free.

Under the dull gray ceiling panels of IUS's Knobview Hall, devoted teachers introduced me to minds far greater than my own: Aristotle, Aquinas, Arendt. The most elementary aspects of life were revealed to me as objects worthy of philosophical reflection: the qualities of a person, the meaning of friendship, the nature of action. "We posit the work of a human being as a certain life," Aristotle writes in the *Ethics*, "and this is an activity of soul and actions accompanied by reason, the work of a serious man being to do these things well and nobly, and each thing is brought to completion well in accord with the virtue proper to it." The clarity of such a formulation of the very nature of human life was relief to a troubled soul. But the encounter with the tradition of philosophy also lay one of the first essential perplexities at my feet: the conflicting ends of action and contemplation, the uneasy relationship between moral and intellectual virtue, the fundamental tension in political and intellectual life. I was shown, in other words, what it looks like to philosophize.

This kind of activity—developing an intellectual grasp of one's life, one's place in the cosmos and the permanent problems of thought—is not easy: as Socrates made clear, education toward this goal is often undergone unwillingly and accompanied by confusion and pain. But, precisely on account of its difficulty, it is the most important

activity the university can occasion—especially as the world beyond the campus grows increasingly one-dimensional and ever more feverish. Already in 1831, and just a week before his death, Hegel despaired of "the inevitable distraction caused by the magnitude and multitude of contemporary interests" which made difficult "the dispassionate calm of a knowledge dedicated to thought alone." His great adversary Kierkegaard, in an oft-quoted passage, strikes a similar chord: "For even if the word of God were proclaimed in the modern world, how could one hear it with so much noise? Therefore, create silence!"

To cultivate such silence for the sake of thought and reflection should be one of the goals of any institution that claims to care about safeguarding knowledge today. Instead, all too often, our universities—especially the "good" ones—strive to mimic the pace and tenor of the world, to show the young people walking their campuses that the life of learning need not be stuffy or studious, and perhaps requires no reading or reflection at all. The football games, music festivals and on-campus amusement parks are there to remind them that the chief end of student life is not the pursuit of truth and wisdom, but fun. As universities became more interested in selling students a product than in educating them, Mark Edmundson writes in *Why Teach?,* "On came expensive student centers, lavish gyms, gourmet dining, and slews of student service workers, deans and deanlets to cater to the whims of the customers." In circumstances such as these, the kind of learning that allows for serious investigation into fundamental things might be better conducted not at highly competitive elite institutions, but in more humble environs where conversation is possible but hardly anything happens. One such place, I'd offer, is the imperfect but nonetheless quiet and nourishing environment of the hinterlands humanities department.

Study at a school like this is almost entirely free of the temptations toward money and power that have always threatened to corrupt the task of pursuing wisdom. It is perhaps the closest a person can get today to the condition of *schole* idealized by the philosophers of ancient Greece. If such an education is preparation for anything, it can only be for the very activity of thinking itself.

The pandemic landed in Chicago early in 2020. I'd moved there the previous fall with my then-fiancée: she was enrolled at a university there, while I worked at a bookstore near the quad. Of several dozen job applications, it was my only callback. My attempts at making connections on campus were largely failures, though I established a few early friendships by way of the internet. By early January 2020, it was clear that whatever was unfolding in Wuhan would soon be making its way around Chicago; we'd been in town for barely half a year before we were asked to stay inside in perpetuity, attenuating whatever meager bonds of community we'd managed to establish. I'd expected the shutdown of public life to make me lonely and worried about money. I had not expected it to make me want to go to grad school.

Let me explain. In the years since graduating from IUS I'd attended a highly atypical master's program, the Graduate Institute at St. John's College in Annapolis. It would strain the meaning of words to call this program "grad school": it is not a place to cultivate disciplinary know-how or achieve what counts as "expertise" among academics; it is a Great Books program meant to utterly despecialize students and broaden their horizon of intellectual concern to the whole range of human inquiry. After graduation I spent a year as a schoolteacher back in Kentucky, where I fell in love with teaching, but not exactly with the precise conditions of my job. So when Chicago beckoned, I was willing—but now, with the skewer coming loose in the heart of the world, and with us planted dumbstruck in the middle of an unfamiliar megalopolis, I felt we'd made a mistake.

From the bunker of our third-floor walkup, I turned, as I had before in moments of trouble, to books: plague literature, theorists of political crisis, advocates of the life of the mind in difficult circumstances. What I discovered in the process, more urgently and recognizably than glimmers of comprehension, were the limitations of my own understanding. "Philosophy is overwhelmingly complicated," Max Horkheimer once wrote to a friend, "its procedure depressingly slow." The essential things are difficult to understand, especially with little preparation and while working on one's own. Autodidacticism had led me to desire education but had not exactly given me one: that took teachers who could help disabuse me of my opinions and pull me, inch by inch, out of my cave. My education, such as it was, still felt inadequate. My intellectual affairs seemed about as promising as my job prospects.

Grad school, according to quit lit, was simply a bad deal: "Time is money," Bateman argued, "and we must spend it wisely ... the academy is no longer an investment of time worth making." But what if your time *isn't* money? If your prime waking hours are spent at or near minimum wage, then maybe a few years at a student stipend is not much of a financial downgrade—and would be worth it, nonetheless, for the intellectual and social rewards that might follow. For forms of thinking that are essentially research disciplines, and whose telos is essentially professional, perhaps this is still a bad trade-off. But philosophy is more than this: it is a way of life, a comportment of one's concern and attention toward the pursuit of truth. It is what Socrates was condemned to death for defending, and what Boethius would call upon for consolation while awaiting execution. It seemed to me that in the right environment, under the guidance of the right teachers and alongside the right classmates, disciplinary training in philosophy might contribute, however obliquely, to the philosophic way of life. So, in spite of the warnings, I moved to New Orleans in the fall of 2022 to start a doctoral program in philosophy at Tulane University.

As I write this I've completed two years of my program, and I have certainly seen some things that support the prevailing pessimism about the future of the academic humanities. Tulane is a regional elite university with annual tuition in the ballpark of $70,000 per year, not including room and board. Fraternities and sororities dominate campus life: their frequent parties leave neighborhood streets strewn with bottles, cans

and nitrous-oxide canisters, and leave students drowsy and languid for class, drooping listless in their chairs like neglected orchids in a hothouse. Even for those who are eager for less distracted pursuits, the school's price tag presents a formidable obstacle. During my first semester of teaching, two bright freshmen asked if I'd be willing to discuss with them, in their free time, Plato's cave parable. We met in the library after class, and for about an hour and a half we slowly and carefully examined five pages of the *Republic*'s Book VII, guided by their probing thoughts and questions. But when I asked them about their plans for their next few years of study, they told me that the humanities were not an option, according to their parents. "Nice Jewish boys like us," they said, "have to major in things like business or law."

Among my colleagues, however, the mood is strikingly different from what was foreshadowed in the quit-lit canon. I'd come here expecting the despondency, rivalry and status-jockeying I'd long read was characteristic of graduate school, and was prepared to hunker down accordingly in monkish solitude. And certainly one hears such stories among the grad students on campus: of interdepartmental infighting, dismissive and hostile mentors, high program-abandonment rates. The quit-lit tropes are, of course, real. But they're also not the whole story. When I landed in New Orleans the summer before the academic year began, I was invited by a collection of kind and thoughtful colleagues—with help from our advisor—to tag along to a conference in Georgia; we spent a weekend in conversation both friendly and serious, high and low, with them helping orient me to life at the university. Weeks later, in the first seminar of the year—a course on Plato's *Philebus*—our teacher asked us to introduce ourselves and say why we enrolled in such a class. The first student, after saying his name and year, tossed up his hands and answered in a half-joking, half-serious way that suggested genuine earnestness: "I guess I'm here to look for wisdom."

Though our work is demanding, our pay meager and our prospects for future employment uncertain, we have, we all seem to agree, one of the best jobs a person could imagine: we get to spend a few years in the company of great books, thoughtful colleagues and brilliant teachers, and have the privilege of introducing young minds—however obstinate—to philosophy. There are, to be sure, downsides: hostile and indifferent administrators, the difficulty of making ends meet, the general uncertainty of the future. But within our enclave, grad life doesn't feel as bleak as advertised. Perhaps one reason is that many of us, at least in the younger cohorts, seem to have absorbed the lessons and warnings of quit lit: everyone has post-graduation plans B, C and D, in lieu of academic employment, and is more or less happy to pursue these if necessary. For those of us who are finding fulfillment amid the difficulties, it is because our work is in service of something greater than our careers: the essentially human activity of questioning fundamental things and puzzling through perplexity, and the centuries-long continuous enterprise of such inquisitiveness to which we hope to make our own small contribution.

I don't doubt that the authors of the quit-lit canon experienced something of this sense of things during their studies. But if they did, the professional disappointment

they experienced got in the way of saying so, as if the memory of past happiness would cause too much pain in the present. But disappointment can only follow an expectation of the opposite. My early education, whether among the anarchists or the Hoosiers, was free of the promise of material reward; grad school has been much the same. Here in the twilight of the academic humanities, just as it was in the hinterlands, wisdom is a far more realistic aspiration than a salary.

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I walked the campus of IUS this past summer, amid a heat wave that had befallen the region. The windows of the dark red-brick buildings dripped with condensation, like a clammy patient laid up with fever; the parking lots' asphalt vastness shimmered beneath the relentless sun. In the eight years since I'd graduated, little had changed: the library book-drop by the bus stop was gone, replaced by a few wilted pansies in a planter; a new outdoor stage went up behind Ogle Hall, a money-saving strategy for avoiding commencement venue rental fees; a few more barracks-like "lodges"—the administration's effort to make a commuter school residential, by providing a "total college experience"—had sprouted on back campus. Aside from my interloping, the only detectable activity around me was a construction crew lazily painting a maintenance shed. Already a forgettable place, in the summer it feels abandoned. But nearly a decade later, I could still conjure memories of my education here: the dullness of bureaucracy, the thrill of discovery, the slow transformation of my inner life like a snakelike shedding of skin. "We, with a glimpse of things," wrote William Percy of reading Aristotle in the crisp mountain air of Sewanee, "would tiptoe out of the classroom, feeling luminous"; we in New Albany, leaving our drab fluorescence for the fescue and cement outside, felt no different.

Later that day I learned that Indiana University's new president, Pamela Whitten, had ordered, under guidance from the board of trustees, a "pause" on certain humanities majors at all regional campuses. At IUS, this applied only to philosophy, German and French—and though they have not fired any faculty and current students will be able to finish out their degrees, the future of these programs is almost certainly grim. Grief lodged like a boulder in my stomach: the two departments that had, less than a decade ago, made such a significant impact on the course of my life and shaped me as a thinker were now in the process of being dismantled. I called my former teacher Leigh Viner, one of the department's two remaining full-time professors, to get her take on the situation. "Our society doesn't think working-class people deserve a life of the mind," she told me, "but it's bigger than university administrators. They're just doing the work of the corporate politicians who have been cutting funding to public higher ed for years, shifting the costs to students and their families."

"Shit," my grandmother used to say, sagelike, "rolls downhill." She meant that the bright ideas cooked up in boardrooms, statehouses and other offices full of geniuses in suits tend to ooze down onto the rest of us, whether we like it or not. The dictum

holds for our institutions of learning too. Having lost the sense that education is for any other purpose than acquiring a credential on the way to moneymaking, many of our elites have decided that this is what education always has been, and thus what it should be everywhere, for everyone. The consequences of this are felt at elite colleges, where resources and students alike continue to flow out of humanities programs and into business and computer science courses, but it is felt most acutely in the academic hinterlands, where the impact has left a blast crater.

Small liberal arts colleges like Iowa Wesleyan, Holy Names University in California and the nearly two-hundred-year-old Cazenovia College near Syracuse have shuttered; Shimer College in Illinois, Mills College in California and Marlboro College in Vermont have had to merge with larger and more successful universities; dozens of colleges—Marymount in Virginia, Bellarmine in Kentucky, Lasell University in Massachusetts and many others—have eliminated humanities majors and closed departments in a desperate and imprudent effort to balance their books. Numerous state-university systems—including Connecticut, West Virginia, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, North Carolina, Wisconsin and New Jersey—have reported significant budget shortfalls in recent years. The recent liquidation of WVU's entire World Languages and Literatures department and the cessation of most language instruction on campus in favor of "alternative methods of delivery such as a partnership with an online language app or online partnership with a fellow Big 12 university" is a foreboding omen for the future of "back row" humanities education.

Indeed, the age of humanities in the hinterlands may well be coming to an end. Perhaps, as these institutions disappear, we can realize that for a short time we had something very special—and something from which students and teachers at more elite schools, with far greater resources, might learn. "If the study of literature is to be defended," wrote the classicist D. S. Carne-Ross in 1979, in the face of an all-too-familiar depreciation of the *artes liberales*, then we must "create, within the confusions of our society, enclaves where the life of the mind is ordered around exemplary texts, around the canon of sacred texts that every true culture requires." For several centuries, this was understood to be the proper goal of the university: not the mere organization of information, but the safekeeping of a particular type of knowledge which is more essential, more important, and higher (hence, of course, "higher education"). "The true college will ever have one goal," wrote W. E. B. Du Bois more than a century ago, against the same confusion of education with training: "not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes." Such knowledge doesn't require the newest laboratories or highest-tech equipment; one needs only a few good books, a gathering place for reading and discussion, and a knowledgeable, patient teacher to guide the course of study.

It is no surprise that this kind of education would fare poorly under an increasingly market-driven model of education. But to the extent that such resources do exist today, they may still be most reliably discovered and enjoyed, ironically, in the much-maligned institution of graduate school. Of course, that is not the only place they can

be found, but my own experiences showed me just how hard it is to sustain spaces for contemplation and inquiry in our highly atomized and frenetic public sphere. Within the walls of academia, many problems remain: a graduate program in the humanities may indeed be a poor preparation for the job market (whether in academia or out of it), the trade-off of time and future earnings not worth making for many. And it is certainly not without its own distractions, whether the usual ones of modern campus life or the career-focused status games that pervade the annals of quit lit. But if you're already committed to the enterprise of thought for its own sake—if you've already been dragged a bit up Plato's rocky slope—then in the arrangement of the world as it is given today, there are few better gigs. Such opportunities have not always existed, and they're growing scarcer every year; it is possible they will cease existing altogether in the not-too-distant future. But for now, for the many puzzled souls unhappy with their cave, they continue to represent one of the few available passageways to the surface.

This essay appears in a special section in issue 33, "Education and Society." Click here to read the other three essays in the section, by Elisa Gonzalez, Agnes Callard and Jennie Lightweis-Goff.

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