



O. Alan Weltzien\*

## SUCH, SUCH WERE THE JOYS

*O. Alan Weltzien, '74, having completed his Masters of Arts degree in English at the University of Virginia, is now working in Seattle as a janitor. ("Class Notes." Whitman College Alumni Magazine 1976)*

A family wedding returned us recently to Virginia, which my wife and I hadn't seen together since our departure a quarter century ago. I wanted to return to Charlottesville—"C'ville," to my Pacific Northwest family—and stalk the ghost of the graduate student I'd been forty years earlier. When first driving downtown we stopped and walked through what's now called Emancipation Park (before 2017, Lee Park or Market St. Park). Our younger son Joel, twenty-three and between jobs, had never stepped foot downstate, nor had he before seen a giant equestrian statue draped in black and securely tied at its base.

I returned partly to find out more about who I was during that endless trial-by-fire known as graduate school. Graduate student stories vary in plot and tone. Some read sentimentally and feature generous financial support and the sheltering embrace of one important professor or more, the kind with a reputation and host of connections who, after the bumpy rites of passage, calls or writes and, traditionally, lands the protégé her first position and glimpse of the promised land of tenure. You know the drill: supportive mentors, professional opportunities, faculty-hosted parties, conference introductions to publishers.

Mine isn't one of those stories.

On a drizzly November afternoon my old friend Frank, just retired from his UVA career (as Associate Dean of admissions, for the College of Arts and Sciences), drives us west along McCormick Road then swings north, through the "North Grounds" I hardly know, although I first lived at Copeley III in a generic suite with three other grad students. Frank, tall, lanky, with receding red hair, and I sat through several classes together and somehow kept our friendship alive. I've never seen Davenport Field, the state-of-the-art baseball stadium for which, Frank says, John Grisham, who lives nearby, ponied up \$25,000,000. Nor have I seen JPJ, the John Paul Jones (how typically patriotic) dome, which replaced the aging white clamshell we knew as U-Hall. Nothing too fancy for UVA which raises, I'm told, about one mil a day.

Before the ride, we walked the length of the Grounds from Old Cabell Hall to the Rotunda, a National Historic Landmark Site and UVA's signature building only recently restored to its original interior design and colors. Joel—3" taller than I and still figuring out his best direction for grad school—takes in the "East" and "West Lawns," those unique Jeffersonian Pavilions, the Ranges and gardens enclosed in the famously serpentine brick walls. Frank plays familiar guide to Mr. Jefferson's "Academical Village," as we knew it, explaining the purpose behind the perfect curves and the story of Edgar Allan Poe's freshman year—his only year—when we pause at his room on the "West Range," No. 13.

I never dressed well enough for UVA.

Joel tries to absorb the neat columns of off-white pillars, the big ash and maple trees still holding some of their leaves in late autumn. I pretend I've forgotten the Grounds' symmetric elegance and beauty. This place, part of me, hurts: buildings and people dress incredibly well hereabouts, as I discovered when I first arrived, age twenty-one, from Seattle, by bus and thumb. The Grounds are gorgeous, a kind of dream rectangle, long and narrow and only slightly terraced: the absolute core of Thomas Jefferson's University. Only a select few live in rooms on the East and West Lawns, as they're called: fifty-four single rooms open only to seniors

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through a highly selective application process. I trod this core for years, a harried outsider. I could have never come close to occupying a Lawn or Range room.

At UVA we speak about “The Grounds,” avoid the term *campus*. That’s for other places. Right now, I know and feel all over again, The Grounds are sacred.

Joel, gazing hard on the central lawn, confesses to Lynn (she later tells me) that he doubts he’d ever land in such a prestigious place. So I set the record straight for him. Pieces of this story I’ve also told to bright seniors in my undergraduate classes who want to attend grad school. I try for realism. Even apart from the unlikelihood of any decent—read tenure-track—academic career, I tell them I hope they find an easier ride than I.

If you’re in a Humanities doctoral program and racking up tens of thousands in debt, which I did not, your employment prospects suck anyway—it’s not like becoming a doctor or lawyer, where you might regain solvency and a life before middle age, even if you start \$150,000 in the hole. You might not find tenure-track, let alone tenure, before then for many reasons, among them that the massive Baby Boomer non-retirement that still blocks younger scholars from finding a good niche in academe.

Instead, programs like UVA’s doctoral English program are complicit in the steady overproduction that has created a generation of gypsy scholars—over half of academe by most current measures—who drive frantically between a class here and there, or log endless hours for online courses, their burnished credentials futile before the narrowing and ever-closing gate to tenure-track land. The new English Ph.D., harried and deep in debt, faces prospects at least as harrowing as Bunyan’s Christian.

I tell them it was hard to feel at home in such an intimidating scene. I had heard stories of East Coast snobbery, but I hadn’t been prepared in the slightest for the special haze of superiority clinging to The Grounds. Deep red neckties, Navy blazers, and pressed khaki trousers belong here. I used to stand on the Rotunda steps, drunk on magnolia blossoms in spring, and wonder who’d written this place as Scott Fitzgerald commemorated his Princeton in *This Side of Paradise*. I didn’t find paradise.

I was twenty-one and, as with most of us then, didn’t know what I didn’t know. For example, I knew nothing about a tradition of promising young scholars, maybe writers, going East: Bernard DeVoto from Ogden to Harvard, Wallace Stegner from Salt Lake City to Iowa, Norman Maclean from Missoula to Dartmouth.

I know I can never read enough or write and publish enough: core element of my UVA legacy.

My colleagues’ anecdotes of personal support and deep friendship and encouragement don’t surprise me anymore. Tales of partial or full funding from the first year. I hear fewer tales as dreary as mine. I found much joy in course reading and in old Alderman Library. Each course opened worlds apart from the professor. I even got married for the first time, although that grad school marriage, like so many others, was doomed. Still, a wife and a few friends and the nearby Blue Ridge and landscapes so pastoral they belong in what used to be called coffeetable books never masked the grim ambience of Wilson Hall, home of UVA’s outsized English Department for a generation. The moment I see Wilson Hall on that magic rectangle’s southeast corner (immediately east of Old Cabell and Cabell Halls), my memory banks open, most memories marked by hostility or indifference.

Grad school can mess you up, I tell students. Beneath the dream is buried a graveyard of broken relationships, marriages, wannabe careers, ABD victims. Divorces are as predictable as doctoral seminars. Wilson Hall stamped me with a lengthy inferiority complex that took a long time to overcome. Its hothouse vibe reeks of nasty, unspoken competition. It drove my first wife, a summa cum laude who’d written a hundred-page Bachelor’s honors thesis, and who bailed after her M.A., away from literary study.

I tell my inquiring students it was through obstinacy, not superior intellect, that I survived, finished, started a career, slowly re-covered self-confidence. I inherited a fat streak of stubbornness from my mother, who overcame plenty of adversity in her Depression teens and World War II twenties. My Eagle Scout (plus two “Palms”) determination put me up to the challenge, it turns out. The UVA years deepened a work ethic that still pushes me—a good thing. At UVA the decals, in the school colors of Navy blue and orange, read “The University.” In a state rife with colleges and universities, if you don’t know which school that means, don’t bother yourself. Similarly, an English professor—and in the 1970s we’re talking virtually all white males in Wilson Hall—was called Mr. So-and-So. No man without at least one Ivy degree need apply. And until after my departure in 1980, no women or racial minorities need apply, either, because they’d be voted off this island.



As a naïve college senior I applied to UVA along with four other grad schools. From the back of beyond, according to East Coast eyes, I must have been admitted as a token Northwesterner. I've stuck with that story. Even in the mid-70s—after UVA, a state university since its 1817 genesis, had finally admitted women for a few years—the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (GSAS) wanted at least token geographical distribution. A magna cum laude from a good college, I thought I was no slouch. Little did I know.

One older English professor I slightly knew expressed surprise that UVA had admitted me. His surprise matched mine, and he said I'd better go. I'd never travelled farther east than Wyoming. In retrospect, my geographical provincialism matched my ill preparation.

In college I did not write an honors thesis, which deficiency matched my first-hand ignorance of the East Coast and the South. From Seattle I rode a Greyhound bus about 2,755 miles from Seattle to Charlottesville, but the closer I got to the ol' Commonwealth, the more I knew, in my bones, that I was aimed well south of the Mason-Dixon Line. At one event at an area high school near Charlottesville in 1976, the crowd remained seated for *The Star-Spangled Banner* but rose for *Dixie*. I'd never felt so far from home. For the first time in my life I learned to say "Washington State." In Washington State, that appellation usually referred to Washington State University; at UVA, only D.C. mattered. I was an exotic outlier.

In Washington State, suffused with tribal names for rivers and, sometimes, counties, a small city called "Charlottesville" tickled my mother's funny bone, as it did mine. Of course, I'd never heard of Queen Charlotte, King George III's consort, any more than I'd seen anything from the 18th century. Out in the "sticks" we could only boast of Ellensburg—the middle name of the founder's wife—and its university, but compared to the "Academical Village," Central Washington University was strictly bush league.

When I boarded that Greyhound to ride across the country, with freshly minted Bachelor's degree and insufficient money for planes, I actually thought I knew my discipline. In my freshman year of college, I'd decided I wanted to become an English professor—a fraught choice, my father feared. He always backed me, but he also harbored grave doubts about academic elitism, let alone a clear employment path.

I believed I had read widely and knew how to write an academic paper, but UVA abruptly disabused me of those notions. When I got my papers back that first term, they were heavily and conspicuously marked.

One obnoxious T.A. I shared a desk with in my third year asked me, our first day together, how many articles I had published, and in what? I didn't run out in front in this pack.

Mom advised me to dress better than I did because easterners, she said, dressed up more formally and more often than westerners. Others wore jeans and plenty wore shorts, but I never saw so many Docksidlers, khaki slacks, and sundresses. Always sartorially challenged, brand names meant nothing to me. Nor had I ever smelled as much aftershave or perfume. Some of these undergrads drank bourbon, not cheap beer. But that comes later. Humidity had never wet my skin. I'd never seen summer rain steam off a sidewalk. I'd been sheltered.

Here's how it worked for years if not decades in Wilson Hall. GSAS admitted a large class, say over fifty, of English grad students who thought themselves Ph.D. bound. Except we weren't. By the end of my first year I'd learned the routine. I believe the English Department met twice a year to review the file of each Master's student, and they dumped well over half. Each of us formally requested "permission to proceed," and many were "denied permission." Tough shit, as we say in Montana, but that's how it rolled. Master's students proved good cash cows. Maybe the system has changed so that aspiring grad students aren't culled and cut as badly as castrated steers.

Many of us can still remember the old hardass professor who tells students to look around at the faces on the first day of class because half of those faces will be gone before mid-term. Wilson Hall worked a slower version of that tradition of washing out. I realized right away that in this thick competition, we inevitably took one another's measure. At times this unspoken competition, a fetid odor, felt worse because it was less explicit than in college and high school.

It's difficult to sustain friendships in such an insidious atmosphere. In fact, one of my roommates, also a Wilson Hall competitor and, much later, an Elizabeth Bishop scholar, unceremoniously dumped me after that first spring semester without explanation, and it hurt.

It took persistence for me to reach C'ville, the sterile Copeley III buildings, and those classes. Greyhound buses used to include, above and to the right of the driver's seat, a metal plaque with a slot in the middle into which the current driver slid his nameplate. Below the name, the reassurance: "SAFE RELIABLE COURTEOUS." The drivers changed shifts every eight hours while I stay glued to my window seat for days.



When the bus circled down into the bowels of the Chicago station, I knew I'd reached another planet. I stayed a few days with two college friends, newly married, in Bloomington, Indiana, my true introduction to the Midwest. One violent thunderstorm, lightning flashing in a green sky, knocked me off my chair.

Another bus dropped me at Amherst, Virginia, about sixty miles south of C'ville along beautiful winding Highway 29. It was midday in late August, temps around ninety, and comparable humidity. I stood on the highway shoulder, my grey polyester slacks dampening with sweat, umbrella and portable typewriter case in hand, thumb out. I love to tell that I hitched my final sixty miles to grad school. That's my personal iconic image of my arrival: overdressed, dripping and smelly, hitching with two props. A bumpkin at a humid crossroads.

At UVA in graduate English, critical theory reigned. Other than a year-long undergraduate survey of historical literary criticism, I was out of it. Stanley Fish? Mikhail Bakhtin? Jacques Derrida? Jacques Lacan? As Marian the Librarian's Irish mother apologized in *The Music Man*, "Parthon me for livin' but I never rread it."

Three classes constituted a full load, and like all the other newbies I quickly realized that each class equaled more than two undergraduate classes. The grade scheme included DI ("Distinction"), HP+ and HP ("High Pass"). Anything less than HP+ meant trouble. I remember taking "American Narrative Prose" with David Levin, a scholar of 19th-century belletristic American historiography. Levin, who'd come to UVA from Stanford, always acted kinder and more humane, at least to me, than most others. A few years later, my then-wife and I housesat for the Levins, and as their gardener I separated weed roots from clumped clay; in the next three years he served as my dissertation advisor when I dug into Nathaniel Hawthorne doing pretty much the same thing.

That first year I also took "18th-Century British Novel" from Martin Battestin who smoked in class, as did every smoker back then in that tobacco state. Battestin drove a Bentley and seemed to exude Old Money from somewhere. A Princeton grad, he'd played on their baseball team, and occasionally he'd put down his book or notes, pick up an imaginary bat, and swing, medium speed and flat, with good follow through. I sat in an airless, windowless room with about thirty-five others. We met before anyone's happy hour from 3:30-5:00 p.m., a common slump time for many M.A. classes when the energies of every human body sag.

Whenever I now sit in a meeting scheduled at that same time, I rise and leave by 4:30.

Another professor, Anthony Winner, sucked on his cigarettes as though bogarting a joint. A small man, his chronic inhalations sounded across the room. He taught a four-semester sequence in the history of the novel. In Winner's course, I received ideas I've carried in my intellectual tool kit ever since, but Winner, a nervous guy, didn't show the love. Most didn't. He drove my wife straight out of grad school.

I dug in. The peculiarly stale dry air of the stacks in Alderman Library greeted my nostrils most days as I settled into a carrel. Occasionally I watched old Dumas Malone totter back to his private office to finish *The Sage of Monticello* (1981), the fifth and final volume of his monumental Jefferson biography. I'd never seen such an old scholar.

I learned something new about the balance between primary and secondary texts: the more literary criticism, the merrier. My focus shifted to ranks and stacks of secondary sources, although now and then, I still glimpsed a novel or play through the fog.

The Department looked down upon rhetoric and composition, as did most English Departments for another dismal generation. Some still do. Rhetoric and Composition, they judged an altogether lower field than the rare soil of textual criticism, or better yet, the newest literary theory: semiotics, reader response, deconstruction, whatever.

Wilson Hall nodded to creative writers. Poet Gregory Orr and novelist John Casey had offices. I didn't walk those hallways while novelist George Garrett was around. But a masterful short story writer, Peter Taylor, was around, and I regret never taking a class from him. Regardless, theory mattered most. After all, the English Department boasted such luminaries as E. D. Hirsch, Jr., who published a book called *The Philosophy of Composition* (1981—after E. A. Poe's essay) and who, a few years after I left, gained more than a little notoriety for his *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1988). The latter helped fuel the intellectual culture wars of a generation ago.

There's a direct connection between this program's privileging of theory with its often impenetrable air, and the loss of respect for public intellectuals as the tide of criticism against the Ivory Tower rose in the 1980s and 1990s. One Renaissance drama professor admitted one day, with rare candor, that academe, at least Wilson Hall's version of it, is a coterie club because high-powered critics and theorists increasingly wrote



exclusively for one another and modeled contempt for connection with much larger audiences far beyond the tower. It's hard to conceive such stupid pride.

What happened to the idea of senior English academics communicating with the interested public? Or what happened to the interested public? We've been suffering from well-aimed slings and arrows ever since. We deserve some of the criticism—maybe most of it.

While I reveled in most of the reading, for an office visit I girded my loins, damped down my nerves. It wasn't so much that I disliked the predictable sight of book-filled shelves on several walls as it was my disdain for the chill around most professors' desks. I entered, at best, as a temporary bother. Ray Nelson, an Americanist, had a small plaque on his desk corner that quoted Herman Melville's *Bartleby's* famous refrain: "I would prefer not to." I mistook that as, "I would prefer not to see or talk with you, because you're wasting my time." I wasn't the only one who felt this way. There were exceptions like Stephen Railton, a 19th-century Americanist then beginning his career, from whom I learned volumes. Or Leo Damrosch, Jr., with whom I studied William Blake, among others, but who left UVA in 1983 to spend most of his prolific career at Harvard. On the other hand, some faculty members like Irwin Ehrenpreis, a Jonathan Swift specialist who seemed to rival his idol in spleen, couldn't be bothered with Master's students, or so the scuttlebutt went. Individuals like Ehrenpreis would eat you for breakfast and quietly belch you out at tea time.

How did the UVA English Department ever gain such power and prestige? Part of the answer, I gradually learned, concerned the career of former University President Edgar F. Shannon, Jr., a Tennyson scholar and a Virginia gentleman. After fifteen years at the helm, he stepped down months before my arrival in a kind stranger's car. President Shannon recruited a number of big names with big reputations.

In this hothouse building, I quickly smelled the habits of arrogance. Turns out that I—who'd been called a "pompous ass" in 10th grade and who often sounded off to cover the usual insecurities—actually knew little about arrogance until Wilson Hall offered a crash course. I often tell my occasional ambitious seniors that grad school was intellectual boot camp that stretched on for years, a military OCS for airheads. *Semper cogito*, baby. The 'humane' of Humanities remained mostly absent.

Soon after my arrival the Department decided to enter the 20th-century and hire their first minority faculty, a handsome young African-American named Ted Mason, but he was promptly denied tenure. And Janice Carlyle, a Victorianist who won the graduate students' Teacher of the Year Award, was denied tenure the following year. Another young hire who became a personal friend, Kenny Marotta, didn't even apply for tenure. If that's how young faculty were treated, I figured my prospects in the Big Show were dim.

After two semesters and a summer session, M.A. in hand, I learned that I was not "denied," but rather "delayed permission to proceed." This purgatorial verdict fell upon a select minority. In other words, "You've probably got what it takes, but we're going to leave you hanging a while longer. And you can pay more tuition, of course." I returned to my parents' home, tail between my legs, searching for any kind of job in wet Seattle: an M.A. without experience. Through a connection of my father's, I worked as a third-shift janitor at North Seattle Community College. I cleaned women's toilets at 4:00 a.m., not long after the "lunch half hour." Some other bastard with a Master's in Art History worked on this motley crew, but he never opened up.

We all need reality checks. God knows I—a formerly overweight middle class kid from a white suburb—was overdue. Mine sent me back to UVA as fast as the plane could carry me. Now engaged, I was finally "permitted to proceed" but having second thoughts. A second doctoral track had been established, though: a Ph.D. in "Language, Literature, and Pedagogy." I chose it, which meant my "preliminary oral exams" and dissertation took a somewhat different shape from others. One of the primary architects of this program, an Americanist named Harold ("Hal") Kolb, Jr., who befriended me, published an article called "Watering Up the Ph.D.," and that made sense. After all, I was lighting up no sky as an original intellect or a buff young theorist. Still, my genuine passion for teaching had been growing, despite it all.

Few colleagues paid much attention to a track addressing the art of teaching. Far be it for graduate faculty to pay any sustained such attention then or now—an abiding disgrace.

Most of the scholars as teachers stacked up decently, but some had not been blessed with aptitude. Some bumbled, inept most days. But if you're "brilliant," what the hell, right? What rankles is the attitude of dismissal, as though "mere" teaching, poor handmaiden to research and books, matters little or less than nothing. What's changed? We live with this sorry legacy. American higher education remains enslaved to the old German research university model, no matter the campus. Our neglect of pedagogy's foundational importance and our concurrent over-valuation of scholarship is ass-backwards, and some current criticism



about higher ed addresses the abiding imbalance. Most of us in the biz don't work at UVAs or the Ivies or even the IA flagships. But the spotlights never shift away from them.

Cotton-mouthed, when I entered my own classroom as a scared graduate instructor that first steamy day, I fumbled in front of thirty freshmen, gradually realizing they were taking notes and regarded me as some authority, so I decided I'd better act the part. I took a couple of teaching composition courses, which helped more than the cursory overview provided, just once or twice, by a senior faculty member. In subsequent terms I found my sea legs, discovered I had been right about myself. I shipped out from UVA in Fall 1980, ABD, to complete a full-time (one-year) teaching internship, a degree requirement (still paying UVA credits in absentia).

Although I'd married in UVA's gorgeous neo-Gothic chapel (just west of Jefferson's Rotunda, UVA's most famous building), paid state taxes, and sported VA license plates on my wife's Chevy Vega, UVA refused to grant me in-state tuition, despite repeated applications. All those semesters I remained, legally, an outsider, my out-of-state tuition fees a confirmation of my status.

If grad school poses a long obstacle course, one demanding tens of thousands of dollars annually, copious sweat equity, and balls, at UVA the "preliminary oral exams," as with such pivot points in other grad programs, loom as one high hurdle. Back then we studied for three exams, forty-five minutes a pop, three faculty per exam. That was it: the grand checkpoint before "proceeding" to the dissertation. On my genre exam (the novel), Daniel Albright, a very bright young faculty member, opened with, "What is a novel?" and I stumbled answers and examples for some while, sinking inside. Though passing the other two, I failed that exam and, deeply angry at myself, spent the summer re-studying, passing it four months later.

Because I needed a teaching internship, I applied for an opening at Ferrum College, in Virginia's Franklin County: about 135 miles and ten light-years southwest of UVA. Places like Ferrum seldom if ever appeared on the radar screen in C'ville, and if they did, Wilson Hall folks chuckled contemptuously. I taught five introductory courses a semester while writing and revising my dissertation. I chalk my safe passage through the ABD graveyard to stubbornness, but self-doubt as both scholar and writer plagued me for years. Some legacy.

I missed the spring 1982 graduation. I would have 'walked' that famous rectangle in my brand new doctoral regalia, and my folks would have flown across the country. I received my bound dissertation that summer and officially graduated in August—part of the much smaller summer crop. I'd finished everything two months before turning thirty but never participated in graduation. My absence fit my outsider story.

Ferrum College had generously hired me as an Assistant Professor, tenure-track. No Ph.D.-in-hand requirement back then. That year on the job market, I'd received two or three other offers, all freshman comp. The lone African-American woman among us received ten MLA interviews and multiple tenure-track offers, I was told. I believe she's spent her career at Princeton. I felt fortunate to land the Ferrum job, where I spent my first decade in recovery. I attended no conferences, published no articles for a few years. Then two NEH summer seminars helped me solidify a professional identity and sense of worth. More than anything, those two seminar directors, Joe Williams at the University of Chicago and Ed Dryden at University of Arizona, respectively, restored my creds. I'd become a junior colleague, no longer a one among a crowd of peons. I hold so many warm memories of Williams and Dryden.

In retrospect, the Ferrum gig reflected salad days. I doubt I'd make it now—legacy of decades of English Ph.D. overproduction. As many have stated, the present state of affairs is unconscionable. According to the MLA Report on the Survey of Earned Doctorates (in English), I landed a job midway through a fourteen-year slide, from 1414 openings posted in 1973 to less than half that number, 668 openings in 1987. Since then, when you throw in Ph.D.s in rhetoric/composition and creative writing, the IA institutions are churning out an average of 1200 per year. What would the prospects for a new Ph.D. be if there were half that number? Something well less than 100-400 applications per opening, which means one might have a remote chance. Edward Abbey succinctly defines the overproduction malaise: "Growth for the sake of growth is the logic of the cancer cell."

After two years at Ferrum, I felt I knew something about being a professor-teacher. I had started growing into my career despite my legacy of unworthiness, as though a slightly rank odor clung to me. Yet when I returned to Wilson Hall to collect signatures on the dissertation's title page, the same cold superiority greeted me as I cringed in and out of a few offices. A middle-of-the-pack beggar, I'd never distinguished himself. I had never kissed ass, kissed rings, or slept with anyone.



I'd already ordered my doctoral regalia from Oak Hall Cap & Gown (Roanoke, VA). Back then you chose either "the Jeffersonian" or "the Madisonian." My choice? the Jeffersonian, of course. In the past two decades I've worn it more comfortably. At commencements ever since, colleagues admire the plush, dark velvet trim and particularly the 17k gold tassels swaying atop my pillow. Once a year at commencement I appear as a prosperous merchant sitting for my Rembrandt portrait.

Only in my career's second half have I felt more than a mediocre Wilson Hall graduate. My Masters and Ph.D. diplomas, handsomely framed, hang high on a wall facing my desk in my fancy, book-lined office, one fancier than most of my professors'. These diplomas measure 22 ½" x 17 ½." UVA doesn't do small. Sometimes I gaze at them, shake my head.

Obstinacy won the game. I lived through a bad model of graduate education, one that explains some of the current crises in dropping graduate humanities enrollments and academic job placements, and marginalized reputation. My later pride in UVA survival and citizenship in no way lessens my criticism of its program in intimidation and arrogance. Aren't grad programs supposed to be less self-infatuated?

Once I moved to Montana I picked up the pace, publishing more articles; by the early 2000s, I finally began writing books that actually got published. With one book I hit the big time, University of Chicago Press, and reveled in my fifteen minutes of fame. I've always been slow.

Before then, I'd read a couple of books by Terry Caesar, an iconoclastic friend from one of those NEH seminars: *Conspiring with Forms: Life in Academic Texts* (1992) and *Traveling through the Boondocks: In and Out of Academic Hierarchy* (2000). These books take a hard, harsh look at the sociology of higher education, what Caesar calls the politics of institutional affiliation. From them I better understood how far down the academic pyramid the Ferrum Colleges and the University of Montana Westerns (the two schools where I've spent my career) actually are situated. The fact that most of us in academe work in places like mine in no way lessens the chronic gaze upon and infatuation with the Ivies and a few others like UVA—one of the first Southern Ivies.

That Medusa gaze remains fixed due to external audiences and markets. Nothing, allegedly, matches the view from the pyramid's top. Of course, hard to see way down inside, where most of us live. The pyramid model really bothers me as it routinely ignores the vast majority of academic settings and labor.

So when we strolled the sacred rectangle those late autumn days and Joel was taking it all in, I walked as an estranged familiar. I walk with pride as though my career and those big diplomas prove I did belong, after all. Is this just the clichéd plot from an intellectual West Point or Annapolis I endured? Another hack story of enshrined intimidation? I felt in doubt for too long. I tell him, "I hope you have an easier ride once you're in a Master's program." I tell him, "You'll find a more supportive place, I know it."

Grad programs like UVA's should dial it down. Looking back, I doubt the rarified atmosphere in C'ville is worth it. I've been lucky to have a career at all, let alone one that has flourished. I've always aimed high, and the UVA crucible proved it. I haven't concerned myself with "institutional affiliation" for a long time. I'm happy I survived the grueling apprenticeship and only wish it could have been more hospitable. How about foregrounding the 'humane' in Humanities Ph.D. programs including regular reality checks regarding job prospects and generous, alternative career track planning and assistance? Wouldn't that be "watering up the Ph.D.?"