

WTE column of Feb 4, 2013. Editor's headline: "Stealing back pride from academia"

Graduate students are the grist of English departments, the justification for its existence. We are the great unwashed who teach the labor-intensive courses the tenured ones disdain—in my case, first-year composition. We also represent the barbarians at the gate. With aspirations to morph into privileged insiders, we're forever threatening the status quo. The insiders' interest, of course, lies in keeping us out. Thus they impose exams and requirements that foster neither insight nor learning. Forget joy. My doctoral writing was deemed unacceptable.

I had experienced the insider-outsider binary once before, when I squeezed through a master's program at University of California. Yet surely a doctoral program in the gracious South would be more congenial?

Academia, I now know, is as rigidly stratified in Tennessee as it is in California. To attain tenure takes years of bootlicking and groveling, years of determination to get ahead no matter the cost. By the time the individual has "arrived," he or she is thoroughly demoralized. Thus, when a graduate student wishes to advance in the ranks, the likely response is the academic equivalent of, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn." One time I bitterly complained on the phone to my ex-husband. "There's nothing human about the humanities, nothing liberating about the liberal arts."

Pegged early on as someone who doesn't fit in, I had to contend with obstacles purposely designed to make me give up, or so it seemed. But if my profs thought I'd shamefacedly slink away, they had another thing coming. I knew myself to be far more savvy than was testable. In Europe I had lived in East and West Germany and France, eventually working as translator. In California I helped my husband create and maintain a law office, raised our children, practiced belly dancing, wrote poetry, studied Spanish. All this counted as nothing in the ivory tower.

I decided to avenge myself by absconding with a piece of classroom equipment. A lectern, to be exact. Which I did—and escaped by a hair being arrested by campus police.

I needed a lectern so as to absolve paper-grading and doctoral reading standing up. The stress of English studies had saddled me with terrible backaches. I could not bear sitting for prolonged periods. Lying down was agony.

But not any old clunky podium would do. No, I desired one of the sleek jobs from the brand-new business building: aluminum frame, heavy casters, adjustable pedestal.

It was a good bet that the building was under surveillance. Its classrooms featured electronics that must have cost a bundle. I didn't care. The specter loomed that I would return to California and live with Darold in our one-time home, which he

refused to sell. I'd join the ranks of "freeway flyers," lecturers who teach a course or two at several colleges or universities. They spend much of their time on the road, racing from one employer to the next.

It's a demeaning existence. There's no pension plan or health coverage. Your car becomes your office, loaded with boxes of papers to be graded at night, on weekends. At your places of teaching, no space exists where you might meet with students in office hour. Yet I have known young PhDs submitting to the outrage year after year. When you're raising a family, your choices are limited. Undergraduates, of course, are short-changed as well.

To set my plan in motion, I brought my Toyota stationwagon to campus. (I usually walked to get there.) It was broad daylight when I parked in front of the business building and, dressed in skirt and heels, stepped inside. I dashed into the designated classroom and wheeled out the lectern. At my car I asked a passing student to help me load it. Off I went.

Pretty soon a campus-cop vehicle was following me two cars back. What to do? I slowed down, trying to think. Turning around was no option in the narrow lane. The slow going irritated the cops; they sped up and raced past me. I saw what they were after: they would intercept me at the next crossing.

To the left of me a one-way street opened up. It was the wrong direction but I knew it well—the stretch was short and used mostly for foot traffic. I swung left, raced down the wrong way, luckily without encountering an oncoming vehicle. Cursing the carelessness and nonchalance that got me into this fix, I entered a lane leading to a different exit than the one where the police was waiting to ambush me . . . and was home free. For hours after I was shaking with rage, excitement, and fear.

Stealing the lectern and getting away with it turned out to be a much-needed shot in the arm. I sat for repeat exams, essentially duplicating the essays my profs deemed insufficiently learned the first time around, on obscure points of linguistics and literature that had no bearing whatsoever on what I was teaching and would continue to teach. I hated it.

Then I revised my floundering dissertation to make it agreeable to the profs. There, too, I loathed the writing—I, who in any other setting delights in the spoken and written word. Once my profs' signatures had dried on the thing, it landed in the trash. But I now had a doctorate and could escape an abominable existence.

Once my backaches subsided I returned the lectern. Not to my hated alma mater but to its less affluent sister institution where I then taught. One evening after classes I wheeled the lectern into a building, though at a distance from the humanities, and left it in an empty classroom.