James Panero consults Randell Jarrell’s classic novel upon revisiting his own Benton.

The absurdities of Benton were so absurd, and I myself was so thoroughly used to them, that they had come to seem to me, almost, the ordinary absurdities of existence. Like Gertrude, I cherished my grievances against God, but to some of them I had become very accustomed.

Sex, greed, envy, power, money: Gertrude knew that these were working away at Benton exactly as they work away everywhere else.

As far as I know, the great novel of graduate-student life has yet to be written. As for the life of the graduate student of art history, a subgenre of subgenres, one finds virgin literary terrain. Kingsley Amis gave us Dixon and Welch, and you could do worse for a model than that. Lucky Jim’s archetype of hapless lecturer and dense don may find a good home just about anywhere you are thirty, you are in your fourth year of researching the role of dwarfs in seventeenth-century Spanish portraiture (with a nod towards Veronese), you have spent a fruitless year dilating on Oriental motifs in Regency caricature, and your funding is up for annual review. Evelyn Waugh’s poor Paul Pennyfeather from Decline and Fall, sent down for indecent behavior (I expect you’ll be becoming a schoolmaster, sir. That’s what most of the gentlemen does, sir, that gets sent down for indecent behavior), might serve as fair warning for what happens when things turn south, and why a graduate student should avoid attention. David Lodge’s campus trilogy with Philip Swallow and Morris Zapp—Changing Places, Small World, and Nice Work—can also do a good turn to any young adjunct professor contending with his generation’s Stanley Fish.

But as a guide to studying the likes of art history years on end (which can include a visiting lectureship here or there), Randell Jarrell’s Pictures from an Institution is the closest one comes to Baedeker. Jarrell’s erudite putdown of Benton, based on the poet’s experience teaching at the progressive Sarah Lawrence College for Women in the late 1940s, should be awarded each year as the booby-prize to the most ill-treated graduate student in the realm—a consolation that life at
school has always been strange, and that progress can sometimes mean a stampede over your mangled corpse. The life of the mind may be all that and a bag of chips, but it is nothing up against the life of the stomach. The motivating factors of grad-life can be as base as they come.

At the opposite extreme to grad-life is the undergraduate. At the Benton where I studied art history as a graduate student, and which I had an occasion to revisit, the dew that collects on these princes and princesses is the ichor of Greek mythology. Here a fountain replenishes itself every year with fresh faces. A Rhine flows with red-cheeked Kewpies. Fashionable gamines smell of Kiehl’s. Blond tresses sprout Mikimoto. These undergraduates have been imbued with an admiration for their elders and a sinfully sophisticated libido. They are the reason Benton exists—at least forget Spanish portraiture and Regency caricature. They need teaching assistants, and whether you know it or not, for them you are to assist. At Benton they wanted you really to believe everything that they did, especially if they hadn’t told you what it was.

The daily psychodrama mostly unfolds in the afternoons, during office hours in the Brutalist building you called home. The slender legs and arms of future film-makers, auction-house workers, and assistants on the Council on Foreign Relations litter the corridors like limbs from sacrifice. Across from your temporary office, a professor in Chinese art slams her door pointedly at your arrival. You press into your fourth decade of life, but you have yet to be accorded the respect that comes from adulthood. The fact that you are the most educated, privileged person who is not a felon or insane to live this far below the poverty line is not lost on you. You take a pauper’s pride in penury, as though asceticism has focused you on your studies and weakened you from deviation. The queerness of the situation can be downright pleasurable.

When I dream I’m back at Benton it’s as if I were in a hothouse or a—or with the Lotus-Eaters. I can feel Benton all over me like a warm bath, and I try to move my arms and legs, and I can’t and I say to myself, “you’ve got to get out of here. You’ve got to get out of here!” and then I wake up.

To get out of here, you endure strange circumstances. Without teaching assistantships, study carrels, and library privileges, you and your fellow Nibelungs would be out of Nibelheim. Tenured faculty would be forced to grade papers. Alberich would be less than pleased. You can also forget researching Spanish dwarfs for the foreseeable future.

Sometimes friends ask what it was like to study at Benton, expecting stories of radicalism and ramparts. But of course progressivism on the inside can seem downright conservative. If Benton had had an administration building with pillars it could have carved over the pillars: Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you feel guilty. And as Gertrude notes: Americans are so conformist that even their dissident groups exhibit the most abject conformity.

As in any institution with a healthy department of semiotics and a school of modern culture and media, by the nature of subject matter alone a department of art history can seem old-fashioned, no matter how radical the instruction. Compared to the larger field of art history, Benton’s department might even be tame. The assumption of progressiveness often leads to a complacency
in appropriating the latest in what's new. Radicalism ten years out of date can be as decorous as tea and biscuits. Likewise, the same graduate students who might lament the radicalization of art history still bemoan Benton's retardation in radical teaching. To take an unintended lesson from Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals*, if tenure will result from radicalism, then radical they must become. Accommodation is the surest path out of Benton and perhaps the only way to get a job. The border between idealism and a life out of poverty is one that graduate students eagerly line up to cross.

In fact, at Benton, the biggest faux pas is not rooted in bad politics but in bad manners. Almost all the people there were agreed about everything, and glad to be agreed, and right to be agreed. No one likes to have bulls run in the china shop. From the most senior tenured faculty member down to the most meager first-year grad student, relationships are built on codependence—and often mistrust. The faculty might yank your funding at any moment. You might try to unionize your fellow grad-students or make a general stink. Meanwhile, everyone badmouths each other in a cosmic circle of who-slept-with-whom-a-decade-ago gossip. It would make a spinster blush. And so it goes.

But somewhere along the line something gives, and most often it is the art that gives.

If you had given a Benton student a pencil and a piece of paper, and asked her to draw something, she would have looked at you in helpless astonishment: it would have been plain to her that you knew nothing about art.

To put it another way, as Waugh writes in *Brideshead Revisited*: "Charles," said Cordelia, "Modern Art is all bosh, isn't it?"

"Great bosh."

Art needs defending from a great deal of bosh—not necessarily the bosh of Modern Art, which I rather enjoy—but from the many accepted practices of what one might call anti-art. Every day, the next generation of art historians are rendered incapable of doing a thing about it.

Anti-art was part of my reason for visiting old Benton. I had been invited to give a talk—not by Benton, but by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute—on why I had left the school's art history program without taking a degree.[1] It was something of a sore subject for everyone involved (in particular, my mother). *Brideshead*, of all books, provided a point of departure for my thinking. A subtext on art underlies this novel, especially if you consider Charles's early comparison between Collins, the embryo don, and Sebastian.

Without venturing into the superlatives of *Against Interpretation*, Susan Sontag's essay *Against the revenge of the intellect*, I came to wonder if good art history could depend on whether a practice revives art or fossilizes art between what one might call the Flyte and Collins approaches. I also wondered whether one could see a correlation between the regenerative properties of scholarship
and the generosity (or lack thereof) of the professoriate—both words coming out of the same root for "birth." This is a touchy subject. But when you believe that the achievement of art adds up to more than the sum of the social and material circumstances of its creation, as do I, you have to think that your sense of economy is different from that of a parsimonious don whose approach is to divide up the spoils of production and take most of it for keeps.

The temperament of a critic is, alas, the opposite of today's art historian, and art history could use more critics. I had forgotten how enfeebling the "open" atmosphere of the university had become until I returned to Benton. As an art critic for this magazine, I rarely encounter a hostile gallery or museum. Except for the boorish Whitney, almost everyone welcomes the attention of a review, however critical. But at a progressive school like Benton, where all the important truths of life have been agreed upon beforehand and heaven is fast on its way to earth, no one wants to hear a peep. Upon the announcement of my talk, rumor has it, the faculty at Benton confabulated, and somewhere along the line it was understood that one professor from the department would attend. Two professors would have confessed genuine interest; zero professors, a sign of intimidation. But one was just enough to keep an eye on things, enforce the silent treatment, and radiate bad vibes.

And so it went off as it did. The talk was loaded with praise for Benton (Benton had accepted me, funded me, and imparted the lesson that academia wasn't for everyone). But minds had been made up. When I approached the lone professor afterwards and offered what we in the real world might call good manners (an extended hand, a "thanks for coming"), the professor responded "it's your trip," turned, and spontaneously combusted. The grad students meanwhile slunk down the side aisles. Although a number of them had sent words of encouragement before my talk, few asked questions after it. All of them—friends and colleagues, I had supposed—declined an invitation to dinner, usually by means of the old mafia trick of speaking with hand cupped over mouth. Whispering, cigarette-smoking shadows, the embryo dons slipped into the night, surely never to make eye contact with me again. They have their priorities at Benton, and criticism isn't one of them. Doubtless they wondered where I went wrong.

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1. "Why I left Brown," a talk by James Panero, was delivered on November 9th in 102 Wilson Hall, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island. Go back to the text.

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