

Academically Speaking

Helen Gildfind

The higher up I climb this ladder,
the more I find myself tongue-tied,
foggy-eyed, and unable to say:
this is *this*, that is *that*.
Is this the getting of wisdom?
I don't know. I'm confused.
For instance, take this ladder:
they say it's made of ivory,
but I'm *sure* it's alabaster,
for gypsum scratches easily and look,
there are marks left here, on the rungs,
where my nails have clawed and
my hands have clung.
But they say it's ivory.

I used to love a typewritten page.
'Once upon a time'
I would disappear for hours and days
till my mother and father found me
(in the bath, on a swing, up a tree)
asleep, but posed with my book
in the act of reading.
I used to dream the books I read. Then,
I'd wake with a jolt, and scramble from my bed,
searching for the story that sleep had stolen from me.
But now, when I see a typewritten page,
I can only see thousands of letters, sparring

with their sharp black serifs.
They do not let me near.
They are not interested in nearness.
Sleep is no longer a thief,
but a drug, a relief, an escape: I am no longer excited
by the typewritten page of an unknown other.
I just see quotes that I should underline,
clevernesses that I could use as mine,
isms and criticisms that I should take and show to others
for I must let others know that I know what they know.
I, now, am the thief.

I used to love a blank white page:
not ivory or alabaster, just clean white paper.
But now, somehow, a blank page is only ever
a hurdle not jumped
a check box not checked
a statement unsaid.
Worse than this, in my head,
a new family of residents: *They*.
What will *they* say?
What will *they* think?
Not that I care about them
- who *are* they anyway? -
but I cannot ignore them,
for I am playing their game;
I cannot ignore them,
for they are paying my way.
How did I end up here, in *their* house eating *their* food?
The reasons are mundane:
I was avoiding other things,
like teaching teenagers how not to call their teacher a
fuckin' bitch whore.
I just fell in here, thinking ivory was like
those blank white pages that I once adored.
But *they're* not interested in how I speak, or what I see.
Why should they be?
You can't walk into some else's house and say:
Hey, be like me!
They have their own requirements, expectations, dissertations,
lots and lots of et ceteras.
They have their own language too,
a useful formula that they offer you
(though you can't refuse).

Their very own language: just like another country.
Or a cult.

-

Slowly, rung by rung, I see my childhood's
white pages diminishing below me.
We had our own language, me and my family,
but it depended on listening, listening as speaking.
It was useless for soliloquy.
No good for merely talking.

-

Slowly, rung by rung, I climb this ladder,
muttering to myself:
How did this happen? How did this happen?
Everywhere has become *their* place;
Everyone speaks in *their* language;
Everybody has *their* face.

-

That's life! Shut up! Don't bite the hand that feeds you!
One day, you might become a Very Important Person.
Someone might underline *your* quotable quotes!
You might find yourself in someone *else's* footnote!
Turn back to that ladder and climb it.
Who cares that the blank pages are theirs now?
Ask them what they want: provide it!
Who cares if their type written words don't move you?
Don't *read* them, climb them!
Ivory or alabaster, gypsum in your eyes,
turn back to that ladder:
climb it.

Copyright of AntiTHESIS is the property of University of Melbourne and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.