Every year for a decade, I trod the campus like a shade, haunting lectures and seminars, waiting invisibly during office hours, sipping stale coffee in college cafes, while my younger colleagues gabbled all around me, oblivious to my presence. My thinning hair and gray beard marked me as a man settled in his power, already bound to his position and his fate. My body, resplendent in the plumage of midlife, was often sheathed in the uniform of the workplace, shuttling as I was between my day job and my classes. I was a being between dimensions: a middle-aged graduate student.

I became accustomed to being mistaken for the professor on the first day of class. After a couple of academic terms, I observed, with amusement rather than shame, the unspoken questions flash across the face of my fellow students as we introduced ourselves: “But … you’re so old. Why are you a student?” “Will I be competing with you for a job?” “Don’t you already have a job?”

The academy is at once allergic to and helplessly dependent on its own peculiar conceptions of caste; in its constructions of power, it is, like its monastic forebears, utterly masculine, and masculinist. The university’s roots in the monastery go back beyond the early Christian conventicles to, among other fraternal orders, the cult of sacrifice—and thus, in Jewish tradition, to the taproot of sacred violence: the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac (Gen 22:1–20). In this brief, brutal narrative, Isaac’s self and selfhood are bound, destroyed, and reconstituted by his father, whose conception of and relationship with God is, in the same instant, also destroyed and made new.

The son’s role as the instrument of the father’s striving after immortality lives, in the West, in what Ernest Becker called our “causa sui” projects. Our unique capacities of thought and memory leave us terrified at the prospect of our own passing, so we are lashed—both with and without our consent—to altars of immortality: not just family, but lineage; not just work, but career. The urgency of career is especially acute in the academy, where we begin as
And even though I, too, submitted myself to the knife, in the eyes of my fellow students, because of how I looked, I must all along have been wielding a blade of my own.

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