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Helen Noble

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263 West End Ave
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NYC 10023
July 5, 1991

TO: THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON LABOR AND HUMAN RESOURCES
91 JUL 15 AM 10:25

FROM: HELEN NOBLE

RE: THE UNSUITABILITY OF THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION'S NOMINATION
OF CAROL IANNONE TO A SEAT ON THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE
HUMANITIES

I have backed away from the unseemly business of getting involved in this fray, but as it has hotted up, I feel that I would be derelict not to send you pertinent notes and excerpts from unmailed letters I wrote last summer when Carol Iannone and I, at my casual suggestion, shared a car for a week to drive down from Basel to Lake Como and Lago Maggiore, a trip I have made three times before amongst fifteen two- to three-month trips about Europe, two entirely by car and four, since 1985, in cars rented only for a week or two. [In case my Congressmen think I have not done right by My Country 'Tis of Thee, I have also driven across it, coast to coast, five times, each time by a different route.]

I feel it is entirely beside the point to tell about myself here, but I am told that I must tell my credentials: I had an unusually educational marriage that included--among the arts and sciences of house-wifery--twenty years of learning subtropical horticulture on a semi-desert hillside in Southern California, reading The New Yorker and The New York Times Book Review since 1937, and doing landscaping by invitation even after marriage, when I also got a B.A. and an M.A. in English, with a lot of Art History thrown in.

For several years in New York I had minor jobs on magazines. I then taught Freshman and, twice, Sophomore English in New York City Community Colleges for ten years, nine of them after Open Admissions, which suddenly gave me a class of twenty-nine people who couldn't read on what soon came to be called a second-grade level, and what I thought to be the smartest boy in Kingsborough sitting in the back corner. An old hand asked this boy's name. "No," he said, "he's the third smartest." The smartest turned up in my sophomore English class. He was large and Black and wore a sumptuous orange leather jacket. He was, as the old hand had said, a Faulkner expert. One short answer from him rendered my three pages of Faulkner notes worthless. I simply asked him to repeat his answer.

Summers and in amongst this, I worked in various schools in volunteer remedial-reading programs. In one at all-boys Haaren High School, I realized that these Black and Hispanic boys had never once met themselves or their experiences in any book that had been set before them. So I began searching Black literature for things that might generate the enormous effort it takes to learn to read after sitting about in school for

even four years, let alone twelve, in the limbo of not knowing how to read.

The family of one of our boys had been burned out of apartments they had lived in nine times. The last we knew, his family had been assigned to the infamous Grenada Hotel, kitty-corner from The Brooklyn Academy of Music. What do you think that does to a big, gentle kid's learning ability? To his sense of stability? To his image of himself, an image he has never seen on the page of a book? The search through Black prose--much of it not for the first time--showed it to be much too difficult for our boys to sound out a syllable at a time. So, not to supplant our trusty reader, which dealt in an oral but numbing, fashion with all the irrationalities of English spelling, but as a kind of dessert, I began typing out race poems. I started with very short, narrow, unthreatening-looking poems of Langston Hughes. I carefully never mentioned the word poem. But one day when a savvy street kid's teacher came to pick up his students, this kid, who spoke to his peers mostly in six or eight four-letter words, threw back his shoulders and said, "Man, I been readin' poetry!" I cringed and tried to look invisible. A college boy came in on his own for weeks to read Hughes's "Negro Mother" onto tape. At the end he refused the tape. "No, I just wanted to get it right." Even so, I had to fail him a second time in remedial English.

The woman I worked under knew I was constantly searching Barnes and Noble and various publishers for stuff that didn't look too babyish, but was simple enough for our boys and for my community college classes to struggle through. So one day she said, "Look, I get our boys books about sports. But boys this age need love stories. My boys did."--She had three of them, one at Harvard, one at Yale, and one at Stanford.--"You get them love stories."--Well, the state of love stories! They were impossible. So I began plundering English and American literature for love poems for our kids. The result became a duplicated, stapled-together, half-sheet collection of fifty-five poems under the headings of "Love," "Not all fun," and "Stories." It has a lot of Black poets, but not one of my students, at high school or community college had ever heard of Langston Hughes or any other Black writers. One boy at NYCCC, despite the author's name at the end of each poem, thought I had written all these poems.--I have this on tape!--Also to my astonishment, the love poems Black and Hispanic community college girls most often chose to read aloud were Sara Teasdale's. The thinner stapled-together collection of race poems is entitled "Brave Wings" from George Herbert (1593-1633)

God gave my soul brave wings;
put not those feathers
Into a bed, to sleep out all
ill weathers.

This appears at the bottom of the first page, topped by Langston

Hughes's "Question and Answer". At the bottom of page three, topped by Hughes's "Dream Deferred" and the poem that begins "Hold fast to dreams," is Proverbs 13:12:

Hope deferred maketh the heart sick:
but when the desire cometh, it is a
tree of life.

It is important that the Senators on the Committee on Labor and Human Resources not appoint to the NEH Council on the Humanities many more people like Carol Iannone and her backers, several of whom are already on the Council. The Council decides how to spend tax dollars on NEH grants. In the interest of Human Resources, it is well then, not to appoint people who would rather let die or spend 50,000 tax dollars a year to imprison for life each member of a whole race rather than occasionally grant tax dollars to NEH projects aimed at healing the sick in heart of our nation.

Mike Miller, in a review of Roger Kimball's book, Tenured Radicals, asks, "Shouldn't the unwritten stories of women, serfs, slaves, and workers (and those that are written in letters, books, diaries, and journals) also be part of the humanities?" Then he says:

...The explosive opening enrollment...demands of faculties that they find ways to reach and motivate students who were not part of the student body of 20 years ago. That means starting with the life experiences of those students. To start there doesn't mean to end there. I have every confidence that these students can appreciate and learn from Plato, Cicero, and Shakespeare. But it is presumptuous and elitist to start there. [The underlining is mine.]

To show that Carol Iannone would be adamantly opposed to granting any funds to such transitional material, here is an exchange we had last summer high above Bellagio, where our two tall French windows looked out upon perhaps as beautiful a view as exists of sky, lakes, mountains, and villas.

C.I. [on the couch, part of the time cleaning between her teeth with 30-inch lengths of dental floss.]
...My family!...Here we had this nice Italian neighborhood in Harlem. It had been there for generations! These lovely Italian families! And they had to move!...They [the city?] built public housing. Crime came in. Irresponsible people!

Me. The way the Anglos moved out of Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn when the Jews moved in, and the Jews moved out when the Blacks moved in, and now the Blacks are moving out because the Hispanics are moving in.

C.I. ...We should just end relief.

Me. And let them die? What about the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill"? What about Jesus' commandment, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself"?...and to love mercy,

C.I. But they have no sense of responsibility! Teenage children having babies! They are drug-addicted! They make toilets of the streets! They have broken down the educational system in the United States!

Me. No! Schools of Education have done that....

C.I. ...Statistics show....I have this friend. He's famous! His statistics show that Blacks have been harmed by affirmative action and all these programs.

Me. What color is your statistician?

C.I. They steal!

Me. Samuel Johnson says there will be crime as long as there is poverty.

C.I. But other people go out and get re-training.

Me. But these jobless, these homeless people, are not just Blacks. All the industries--steel, the auto industry, the whites in...

C.I. You liberals! We've got to return to traditional family values! The only way to do that is just to cut off relief.

Me. But you don't know history! What about when the British fenced off the land, and unskilled farm workers poured into London? These were't Blacks. They were whites. And Hogarth showed them lying about the streets of London in squalor, their desperation drowned in gin and in making babies. Hogarth shows the babies crawling about unheeded amongst no matter which gin-mothers, and--necessarily--gin-fathers. The children who survived infancy lived in ash heaps to keep warm.

C.I. [In her impervious-to-history, non-sequitor way] We've got to restore family values! End relief! End divorce!

Me. You know all about family life, all about marriages that should never end in divorce. Isn't it time you get married and start having children? Test the validity of your opinions? Time's a-wasting, girl.

C.I. But it's the only way. To save the family!

Me. Look. When my family first moved to Southern California, dead broke, in 1923, we lived a couple of blocks from the

Southern Pacific railroad tracks, and tramps came begging at our back door. These were white men. They had taken to the road, left their families because they couldn't support them, the way Blacks have done now for some time because whites won't hire them, and people like you would deny them even a grain of affirmative action.

C.I. They don't show up for work. They...

Me. Carol, stop! Just stop. It's like finding out I'm travelling with a member of the Ku Klux Klan. We've just got to stop. Both of us. If we don't, I'll just leave you here on the top of this hill. I can do it, because you can't drive.

Before that exchange took place, indeed, the morning after we arrived, I was stunned to hear this teacher of Dante and Homer call the trunk of a tree something as bizarre as a leaf. I think it was not leaf, but whatever it was it blew my mind; and we began at once, amongst the fallen leaves and fleshy petals of the Magnolia trees we were walking under, short lessons in basic plant terminology. One day, as I headed toward a tree at the side of the road, after she thought our five minutes were up, she balked in the manner of a duchess fed up with bugs. "Come now," I mocked, "It behooves a professor of Dante and Homer to make the acquaintance of an oak and an acorn."

She stood still for this, but then said grudgingly, "We have oaks in New York, don't we?"

"Yes, but this is a Mediterranean oak. Look, it says so right there on that label on the trunk. Its acorns, its leaves and its habits are different." We went into how. She deigned to pocket a couple of fallen leaves and acorns. We went through a similar routine when we came upon a bay tree, the laurel of laureate degrees.

She meets new information with arrogance, as if it were beneath her to know such things: as when she said grandly, "Why should I know how to drive? I grew up in Manhattan."

And when I realized she had never seen the great convoluted outcroppings of once-molten magma in Central Park, she replied superciliously, "Riverside is really my park."

But knowing nothing or very little about a subject doesn't keep her from speaking about it with unshakeable authority:

The second morning, suffering from too much togetherness, we tacitly went our own ways on a boat trip down to Como, but these two exchanges took place when we did briefly sit together:

Once, she lifted her head out of my Michelin Guide to say with imperial authority, "Helen, trees don't grow out of rock!"

"O-oh? And what are those trees growing out of?"--a mountain of white rock, as one could plainly see.

And nearing Como we slid between a congested umber and ochre jumble of happily unarchitected Italian houses, clinging to almost perpendicular hills and crowding along the shore. Many houses were probably quite old, but even more had come along since the railroad age. One house, which some misguided soul had painted white, stood out jarringly, causing Carol to notice it and to misinterpret its pair of stock, Roman-arched windows atop two very tall, skinny windows, hidden by white louvered shutters, and, along its flat roof, four turret-shaped chimney pots. This house launched Carol into a diatribe against postmodern architecture, which she took for granted I espoused.

C.I. It is post modern. I do know a bit about architecture. I went to this lecture...

Me. It is a typical Mediterranean carpentered--or rather masoned--house. See that tiny gothic castle there at water level? Someone either built that, or instructed his builder to build that, vision of a dream castle.

C.I. But that house back there was post modern. Chippendale and all those things stuck on.

Me. But that particular house was built before post modern, or even modern, came into existence.

Whereupon, Carol Iannone, puffed up with hubris, said, "People PAY me for my opinion!"

Me. [Quietly.] About architecture?--One lecture doth not an expert make.--About botany? About geology?

C.I. [Grim, and breathing deeply.] No. About literature.

Me. About horticulture? Remember 'Trees don't grow out of rock'?

C.I. Stop saying that! That house back there....Oh, you never allow me my opinion. You're always trying to influence me.

Me. And you don't allow me a rebuttal.

C.I. Oh, there's no talking to you liberals

This exchange took place before the exchange about race. Does she mis-associate any slight knowledge of earth sciences with liberals the way she mis-associates Roman-arched windows on a modest lake-side Italian house with post modern? I never once mentioned the word liberal.

I did not see the MacNeil/Lehrer broadcast about Carol Iannone's controversial appointment to the advisory council of the National Endowment for the Humanities, but I have read the transcript. And as I come upon Mrs. Cheney's interruptions of the Rutgers professor, Ms. Stimpson, I feel I am cooped up again for a life-long week with Carol Iannone. Mrs. Cheney keeps interrupting, and even refuses to allow MacNeil to referee the discussion. MacNeil has to say repeatedly, "Let her make her point, Mrs. Cheney."

But nothing stops her. Instead she complains of the Rutgers professor, "She takes so long to make it. I need--"

And MacNeil says, "Well, you had quite a lot of time to make your point, so let her--"

I was so incensed at the end of the first reading that I counted the lines of each. Mrs. Cheney, who, it seems clear to me, is trying to pack the National Endowment for the Humanities with the likes of Carol Iannone and herself, had 117 lines. And Ms. Stimpson had 97 lines, twenty fewer. Considering that the lines are long and in very small print, that's a lot of words; and many of Ms. Stimpson's were cut off in mid utterance.

I beg you to read carefully Carol Iannone's words on RACE (pp 3-5), and to remember her puffed up words, "People pay me for my opinion!" They are relevant to this appointment, even as these interjections of hers to some half-awake remarks I made are relevant:

"Oh, gas! There is no shortage of gas."

"Oh, water! There is no shortage of water. That's all political."

And, re mopping up unavoidable two-inch floods from our curtainless shower with paper towels, which I carefully pretended not to notice for fear the floods wouldn't be mopped up at all, or would again be mopped up with my bathtowel: "...all those trees you liberals think I'm wasting."

She is a woman of very strong opinions, not easily dislodged by evidence, by history, by logical argument.

She is also embarrassingly uncivil, inhumane--this teacher of humanities--to waiters, chambermaids, clerks, and almost everyone else she encounters.

Walter Kable
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