

The NEA And Me

SPARROW

February 29, 2002

"I'm applying for an NEA grant," my friend Emmy tells me as we lunch on soup at the B & H Dairy Restaurant in lower Manhattan. (I have potato soup; she has borscht.)

These six words prove beguiling — and inescapable, over time.

March 4

My National Endowment for the Arts application guidelines booklet arrives at my home in Phoenicia, New York. I am not *certain* I'm applying; I'm just considering it.

March 5

Under "Mission," the booklet says:

The National Endowment for the Arts, an investment in America's living cultural heritage, serves the public good by *nurturing* the expression of human creativity, *supporting* the cultivation of community spirit, and *fostering* recognition and appreciation of the **excellence** and **diversity** of our nation's artistic accomplishments.

Since both *excellence* and *diversity* are in boldface, one can only assume that if you are excellent but not diverse, you're only as good as someone who is diverse but not excellent — while the excellent *and* diverse have the best chance of all.

Well, I am diverse. In any group (except perhaps a group of old Marxist hippies) I represent diversity. First of all, I am half Pennsylvania Dutch and half Jewish. It is very unusual for Jewish men to marry Pennsylvania Dutchwomen, in part because they almost never meet. Certainly, they rarely met in 1948, when my parents first became acquainted — my father was a union organizer at the RCA plant where my mother labored.

I am diverse in other ways, too. Religiously, for example. I am an agnostic, a devoted student of yoga, a conservative Jew, an existentialist, and a skeptic — plus, I have converted

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to Christianity three times. Politically, I am anticapitalist, yet my hobby is writing self-help books which I hope will make me rich. Even my diet is diverse: though mostly vegan, I am wildly indulgent when it comes to Wise potato chips.

March 6

Apparently you must not tell the NEA: "I want the money because I don't like working. I find employment a little tedious." Instead, you must invent some grand project goal the grant will help you achieve. Here is what I concoct:

I am interested in writing a book about Abraham Lincoln's brother, but I live in a small town and have very little money for travel. This grant would allow me to visit libraries in New York City and at SUNY in New Paltz. Also, I need to read to expand my literary education.

It sounds outrageous, but it is true. I was going to add other books I hope to write — one about the local Underground Railroad, and one about George Washington Carver. (As I considered these, some evil Tempter said: *Maybe they'll think you're black; then they'll definitely give you the money.*)

But would they believe I could write three books in one year? It doesn't sound very professional. So I mention the one book I most believe I will write.

March 7

I struggle with the question of whether to put a red-and-white striped paper clip on the three copies of my application form. Does it look too radical? Finally I decide, *I am a poet, God damn it. The least they can allow me is a peppermint-colored paper clip!*

March 8

To prove my eligibility, I must submit "twenty or more different poems or pages of poetry in five or more literary journals, anthologies, or publications which regularly include poetry as a portion of their format." But what exactly do they consider a "literary journal"? My most recent publication was in *Emo* (30 Colonial Avenue, Lancaster, NY 14086), which is stapled together by Natalie Basinski, who I think is nineteen. It con-



tains my poem “Ton Anus”:

In 8.2 years,
a ton of feces
passes through
the anus.

I decide against including it.

Searching a pile of unread magazines, I remember that I have been published in the *Cafe Review* (c/o Yes Books, 20 Danforth Street, Portland, ME 04101) — a nice, perfect-bound little journal (though the cover does depict a skeleton playing a violin). I turn to my entries:

Cum Fort

Out of my cum I built a fort.
Now I stand on the parapet, watching for enemies.

Zen Sex Koans, '98

1. As the Mayor closes topless bars,

- the President explains his blow jobs on TV.
- 2. “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar” — Sigmund Freud. True or false?
- 3. Who saves semen-stained dresses?
- 4. Imagine Linda Tripp’s sex life.

My god! I think, as I read these. *I am a fucking pornographer!* These are not the best poems, I decide, to submit to the George W. Bush administration when asking for funds.

(end of excerpt)