

LAUREN GROFF

## *Delicate Edible Birds*

FROM *Glimmer Train*

BECAUSE IT HAD RAINED and the rain had caught the black soot of the factories as they burned, Paris in the dark seemed covered by a dusky skin, almost as though it were living. The arches in the façades were the curve of a throat, the street corners elbows, and in the silence Bern could almost hear the warm thumpings of some heart deep beneath the residue of civilizations. Perhaps it was always there, but only audible now, in the dinless, abandoned city. As the last of the evacuees spun through the streets on their bicycles, they cast the puddles up into great wings of dark water behind them. Paris seemed so gentle as it awaited the Germans.

There was a fillip of sulfur and light as Parnell lit two cigarettes and placed one between Bern's lips. In the flare, she saw Viktor's eyes watching her in the rearview mirror and the pink rolls of the back of Frank's neck. Then the match went out again, and in the darkness she was no longer flesh, only the bright, hot smoke in her lungs.

It was all over: they had awoken in the middle of the night to unnatural silence, and rose to an abandoned hotel, the door of each empty room solemnly thrust open, the beds identically smooth. In the breakfast room, the geranium's soil was damp and their coffee was hot on the sideboard, but there was no one there but them. They were journalists; they had seen Czechoslovakia, Poland, Norway, Belgium; they knew what this meant. They hurried, then, and Viktor somehow procured the jeep, and Lucci bicycled off for the photo. Just an hour, murmured the little Italian, and he sailed off bravely toward the invasion while Frank spluttered and fussed, and

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Viktor grew stony, and Parnell rolled cigarette after cigarette, each as perfect as a machine's. They waited in the jeep and they waited.

Now the street gleamed with brighter light, but still no Lucci. She sensed the tarry massing at the edge of Paris where the Germans were undoubtedly pushing in and felt a wildness rise up in her. But there was Parnell's hand on her thigh, squeezing, and she was grateful, though comfort like this was not what she was hungry for. She had to do something; she wanted to shout; and so she said, voice low and furious, *Fucking Reynaud. Fucking Reynaud*, handing the city over to the Germans. A real man would stand and fight.

In the rearview mirror she saw Viktor wince. Bern was the first woman he'd ever heard curse so, he once told her, and it was as if a beautiful lily suddenly belched forth a terrible stench. From the looks of him, it seemed impossible that he'd never heard a woman curse; he was Russian and massive, had a head ugly as a buckshot pumpkin. One imagined that if the serfs had never been liberated, today he'd be a tough old field hand, swinging scythes and gulping down vodka like water. But, in fact, he was the son of some deposed nobleman and spoke perfect tutor English and governess French, and was known as a reporter of prose as taut and charged as electric wire. He had shadowed her since the Spanish war, and there were times she was sure that his silent presence had saved her from some shadowy danger. She knew she should resent it, but the way he looked at her, she couldn't.

Viktor, darling, she said, a serrated edge to her voice. Is there a problem?

But Viktor didn't say anything: it was Frank in his Kansas drawl who said, *If Reynaud fought, my dear, poof, up in smoke goes all your precious architecture. All the civilians, smithereens. He did the sensible thing, you know. Paris remains Paris. It's what I'd have done.*

It's cowardly, spat Bern.

Frank sighed and rubbed his fat hand over his head. *Oh Bernie. Don't you grow tired of being the everlasting firebrand? And where the hell is that little Eyetie of ours, that's what I want to know. Let's give him ten more minutes, then scam.*

Bern bristled. *There weren't enough women firebrands in the world as far as she was concerned, she said; Lucci was the best*

damn photographer in this damn war; and why the hell *Life* magazine paired Frank with Lucci was beyond her, when Frank could barely write a story without a dangling preposition and bland-as-buttermilk prose, when God knows she herself, by far the better journalist, even if she was a girl, had to bend over like a goddamn contortionist for *Collier's* even to let her tour the front lines, let alone do any exciting reporting.

But Frank wasn't listening, and interrupted. Viktor, we better get going, he said. Germans catch us, you know where you're all headed. Me, I'm the only one who'd go free.

Parnell blinked and rubbed his handsome forehead with a knuckle. What do you mean, Frank? he said softly.

I know it's hard, but make an effort, Parnell, said Frank. Viktor's a Commie, Orton's a Jew, you're a Brit, and they probably wouldn't let Lucci go, what with his wife causing all that trouble down in Italy. I'm inoffensive. He gave a snort-laugh and turned around, his face set for Bern's attack.

There was a pause, then Bern said, softly, Good god. Parnell gripped her thigh more tightly to hold her back, but the truth was that she was glad for this argument, for the dirty distractions of a fight, for just now two planes with swastikas on their wings roared overhead into the fields south of them, then separated, curved about, poured together like water into water, and came back over the jeep. The journalists, despite themselves, cringed. In the silence of the planes' wake, Bern took a breath, ready to lash some sense into Frank. But she didn't have the chance, because Parnell gave her thigh a smack and said, voice slipping from its cultivated heights back into its native Cockney, Bloody hell, if it isn't Lucci.

There he was now, tiny Lucci with the camera like a millstone around his neck, throwing down the bicycle so it clattered on the cobblestones, leaping into the jeep, saying, Gogogogogo. And Viktor threw the jeep forward even before they heard the drone behind them, and they shot out from the city into the tiny dirt road as the motorcycles came around the bend. Two hundred feet apart and even from that distance Bern could see the stark black of the German officers' armbands, the light-sucking matte of their boots, the glint in their hands from the pistols as they whined behind them, Viktor cursing in Russian and spinning the jeep over the dark and rutted road. Lucci was in her lap, hot with sweat and flushed and trembling, and Bern frowned and kept her head down

and watched the lace of Lucci's eyelashes on his cheeks. And then, over the roar of the engine and wind and pebble-clatter, as the motorcyclists rapidly lost their grasp on them, falling back, Lucci opened his eyes and said, Oh, Bernice, in his Italian way, Ber-eh-nee-che; Oh, Bernice, I have it. The best photo of the war. Nazis goose-stepping through the Arc de Triomphe. You shall see. Oh, it is the sublime photo. Oh, the one to make me live forever, he said, and Bern couldn't help it; she closed her eyes; she clutched Lucci's thin shoulders and threw her head back; and, hurtling into the steel-gray dawn, she laughed and she laughed.

The day was already bright where they stopped in the hemlock copse. Bern was stretched over the hood, basking in the sun like a cat. Viktor had never seen anything so beautiful. They were waiting for Lucci to finish vomiting in the ditch; ten miles south of the city he had discovered that the Germans had shot through one of his rolled-up trouser cuffs, and he slowly unrolled the fabric and fingered the six neat holes. Turned green. Viktor had to stop the car. Now Parnell and Frank were smoking, looking back at the city behind them, and for a moment, Viktor wondered if he could just take Bern and leave the rest behind; Lucci was all right, but Parnell and Frank he despised. Parnell for obvious reasons; Frank because he was a greasy toad. But he couldn't; they were not far enough out of Paris for abandonment to be anything but cruel. The last bicyclists they had passed were now passing them and an old woman with a chicken under her arm hobbled by, the chicken's head bobbing with each step. The Germans would be along soon. In the distance there were odd mechanical sounds.

Viktor flicked his eyes over Bern and thought that though she was the most beautiful woman he knew, she was not a true beauty. He should know; he himself was a warhog, but he had grown up around swans, long-necked sisters with velvety eyes and a mother whose grace was so legendary that, among her three-dozen rejected suitors in old noble Moscow, there were still men who wept when they remembered her. Bern was too dark a blond and too light a brunette, devoid of embonpoint, her face hawkish with its great nose, and her mouth like a pink knot tied under it. Too thin, also; war whittled her down, though she was always hungry, always eating. Still, even though she was almost plain when she slept, when she was vibrant it would take a strange man to find her unat-

tractive. In the sunshine, she radiated; her hair turned golden, her eyes green, and her skin seemed to pulse with health. In the sunshine, Viktor had to hold his hands in his pockets to keep from grabbing Bern's sole world-class attraction, her tidy rear, fleshed with a layer of smooth lard, firm and handy as a steering wheel.

The day Viktor met Bern, she was twenty-two, climbing up the stairs of a Spanish hotel just after witnessing her first battle. Her face was pink, her eyes sparked angrily. She was trembling, and shook his hand hard to introduce herself, then said, Damn! I mean, damn! and went into her room and tapped at her typewriter for an hour, until she came out to the veranda where he was waiting for her and pretending not to, and she thrust a piece of paper into his hands and demanded to know if it was good, because, you see, she was determined to be a war reporter, and she'd heard he was a good one. The man she came to Spain with, a lover, wasn't worth his weight in pig poo, and she had to learn from someone. Viktor read the article, and said it was a job well done, B. Orton, but what does B. stand for? And she said in her French horn of a voice, Ah, well, it means Bernice, but it also means that if I can fool *Collier's* into thinking I'm a man, I'm a war reporter for good, and don't you forget it. And Viktor said, To be sure. And she said he better goddamn not, because they were going to be buddies; watch out.

But they didn't become buddies yet: he went off to a different section of the front and when they met up again, it was in a hotel right after Guernica, and Viktor was having an awful time of it. He kept seeing flashes of things he tried to shunt away. Late at night he wept in the water closet, unable to stop himself, and tried to stuff his shirt in his mouth to muffle the sound, but couldn't. For fifteen minutes, there were two dark shadows in the crack under the door, Bern's feet, Bern's head on the door, listening. When she came in and took off her blouse and hitched up her skirt and smiled up at him, he couldn't think to say no.

Afterwards, he kissed the delicate slice of her chin down from her ear and asked her to marry him. And she laughed roughly, and gave him a tweak of the ear and said, Oh, well, Viktor, dear, now you've made a terrible mistake, and she vanished down the dark hallway. It was a mistake; it hadn't happened again between them, though he'd watched time and again as she disappeared down other hallways with Parnell. And he had to swallow it because she was who she was, a woman so removed from the women of his

youth as to be a whole new gender. In her every small movement she was the woman of the future, a type that would swagger and curse, fall headlong, flaming into the hell of war, be as brave and tough as men, take the overflowing diarrhea of nervous frontline troops without grimacing, speak loudly and devastatingly, kick brain matter off her shoes and go unhurriedly on. When he looked at Bern, Viktor saw the future, and it was lovely and bright and as equal as things between men and women, between prole and patrician could be. And he also saw that any impulse to pin her down would only make her flutter away. Some days he hated her.

He must've sighed, because Bern shielded her eyes with one graceful hand.

Viktor, you're wearing ye olde death-head again, she said. What's the matter?

But instead of saying, for the hundredth time, Oh, Bern, why Parnell and not me; or, Oh, Bern, why won't you marry me, he gave a grimace and ground out his cigarette and said, We should be off, then, if we don't want the Krauts to catch us.

Now the others climbed up the embankment and Bern let herself slide off the hood, graceful, winking. Come on, chaps, she called out in her high honk. *Vite Vite*. We've got to make it to Tours before the Nazis bomb the bejeezus out of it.

In half an hour, the dampness had burned from the ground, and dust rose in a haze and saturated everything. The oaks that drooped over the avenue and the pocked road were so lovely in the dust cloud, they seemed to drip with honey. Strange, Parnell thought dreamily, that on a day like this there should be beauty left in the world. For a while they had been going increasingly slowly, passing thicker and thicker clumps of evacuees, whole families like pack-horses, even the smallest pulling little red wagons full of bedding or small dogs or even tinier children than they. Terrible shame, he thought, terribly sad.

But later he saw a number of parties in the fields huddled over blankets spread with food, picnicking as if the occasion were a merry one, and he murmured, How lovely, wishing himself out there, with his own little ones—how the girls would enjoy it!—and Elizabeth presiding over it all with her neat sandwiches and birdly chatter about gardens and whatnot. He longed for home, longed for the house in London and his shoes shined in the morning and

a proper cuppa. Looking out in the fields, he murmured again, Oh, how lovely, and hadn't thought he'd said it aloud until Bern turned her head to him and snorted, They're idiots, Parnell. Germans flew by they'd be blown to bits.

He stared at this brusque American, appalled as ever. Then she softened and cuddled against him, a good kitten, and he reminded himself that she never meant it, not really. She talked a terrible hard streak but was a dear thing inside. Reminded him of Elizabeth, in some vague way, not that Bern would ever do if he had a mind to introduce her to his wife. Elizabeth was so peculiar in that way, refusing to take tea with so-and-so for some such reason or other, and he knew that Bern in his wife's parlor would be a frightful thing; the snubbing going on over the tea and poor Bern never seeing it for a moment, honking on the way she does and getting on Elizabeth's nerves. And it was odd, wasn't it, how people changed; he was only a housepainter back in the day when he met Elizabeth, and she didn't hold it against him then, although she did make him take elocution lessons and make something of himself. He was about to follow this thought into another daydream of Elizabeth, young and naked and smelling of his house paints, when Bern interrupted, saying, So, did anyone think to bring food?

There was a long silence, until Parnell, wanting to be helpful, said, Well, rather, I brought that half a can of petrol, you know.

And I the jeep, said Viktor.

And I the stupendous photo, said Lucci.

And I the water, said Bern.

The back of Frank's neck turned red, but he said nothing. Bad-tempered fellow, Parnell thought, but doesn't seem to mean any real harm.

Frank? Bern prompted sweetly, but he just turned and said, Darling, you being the only female of the bunch, I thought provisions were your field.

Not now, said Lucci, throwing his hands into the air, but Bern seemed too tired to curse Frank to hell more than a few times. She bent down and rummaged in her valise and pulled out a bottle of Scotch, brandishing it like a tennis victor with a trophy.

Looks like the liquid lunch again, fellas, she grinned, and cracked the seal with her fingernail. I liberated this from the hotel bar this morning.

Now Parnell wanted to take her in his arms again. This was why

he invited her into his bed every night, propping the picture of his family up on the windowsill first, a plea for them to forgive him the sin he was about to commit; *this* feminine thought for the comfort of others. He felt a bubble of elation rise in him as he took a swig of the Scotch; this is why the men were out here in the fields, fighting: for their women, for knitting and stews and flower arrangements, all the wondrous small things that keep a fellow's life pleasant. If he weren't so blasted old, Parnell would fight for it, too. And Bern had a great womanly capacity for comfort, though she kept it hidden because she thought it made her seem less like a chap than she wanted to be. Silly duck. She shouldn't hide it; it was what he liked about her, and he resolved to tell her so, maybe sometime when they were alone and not so pressed for time.

Bathed in a warm dust and a warming buzz, Parnell drifted into a pleasant waking doze as they passed the growing numbers of refugees on foot, on bicycle, on carts pulled by peasant women like pendulous-breasted oxen. They went down that insignificant road from Paris, until it emptied out, at last, into one of the major south-bound arteries, to the northeast of Orléans and about sixty miles south of the city.

It was then that, pulling out onto the autoroute, Viktor cursed and stopped the jeep suddenly, jolting Parnell out of his lovely trance. Before them roiled a scene of such chaos that they, all veterans of chaos, had to take a moment to sit, absorbing, before they reacted. For instead of the neat, small clumps of refugees who had decided to take the small road they had just left, the autoroute was teeming, impossible: cars that had run out of gas were abandoned by the roadside, women in summer dresses had fainted in the heat and were fanned by wailing children, a teeming mass of man and mule and bicycle and machine was roiling down the road as far as their eyes could see, and everywhere around them were wounded people. An old woman, haute bourgeoisie by her chignon and her gray silk dress, had a dried magnolia of blood blooming on her chest. Two men carrying a makeshift stretcher bore a tiny boy, waxen and still, with a tourniquet on his thigh and nothing where his knee should have been. Filling the air was a faraway keening, hushed talk, the klaxons of the few cars that were still running.

And out in the fields beyond, as if this migration were not a hundred feet from them, the backs of an old farmer and his wife as they bent to pull weeds from their crop.

Shit, said Bern, and she flew out of the jeep, into the maw of humanity, asking questions, scribbling answers. Parnell cringed, feeling a tad sheepish: this was not precisely his beat; the British people were under attack enough, they didn't need more bad news, and so his orders were to write about resistance and bravery, not innocent civilians fired upon when they fled their homes. From where he sat in the jeep he heard *bombed, machine gunned, massacred*, the airplanes strafing the émigrés about twenty miles south of Paris. Numerous dead. A two-week-old baby shot in the throat. An old man had a heart attack, just witnessing the destruction. Parnell watched as under Bern's pen the story formed, neat and relentless, threads ordered from chaos.

Frank trailed slowly behind her, gleaning, having little success at asking questions himself: his French was poor, and people did not warm to him as they always did to Bern. Viktor glowered in the jeep, keeping it a meter behind Bern as she walked beside her subjects, protecting her; dear Lucci darted hither and thither, taking photographs until he returned to the car to hide his face in his jacket, unable to see any more. For a while, Bern held a baby so its mother could shift her bundle, and she held it awkwardly. But Parnell wanted to tell her she would make a marvelous mother; as she looked down into its soft fist of a face, he knew she would. His admiration only grew when, after a while, Bern held the hand of the boy in the stretcher when he awoke and sobbed soundlessly in pain.

When she at last returned to the car, when the first bats began swooping over the fields, heralding the long dusk, she wiped and wiped at her cuff where a small coin of the boy's blood had darkened it. And when she moved closer to Parnell and looked up into his face, he saw the kind of searing look she gave him when she wanted to take him into a corner and have her furious way with him. As always, he was taken aback, though he would have complied had there been any chance; but he looked around at the roiling mass of humanity, at the others in the car—poor Viktor, he tried not to be so obvious around him—and shook his head, just slightly.

And so, disappointed, Bern turned away and said, I have four stories just dying to be published. And no fucking wire to send them.

That is why we are going to Tours, darling, said Viktor.

That's our problem, said Bern. The people out there told me. The wires are cut in Tours, too, the government's fleeing to Bordeaux. Nowhere to sleep, even the barns forty kilometers out full of people. No food. No water. General panic. La-di-dah.

A long silence, broken at last by Lucci, saying, So what is it we're to do?

Frank unfolded the map, whistling the "Marseillaise," as he was wont to do when he wanted to calm himself. There's a road, he said, three miles to the east that's smaller than this one. Takes us to Bordeaux, looks like, if in a bit of a roundabout manner.

Bordeaux, said Parnell, thinking of good wines and soft beds. He hadn't eaten in a day and his hunger had been replaced by a dull ache. How he longed for the buttery melt of pheasant in cream sauce on his tongue. How fine it would be to take a warm bath, to sleep and sleep without awakening to the sound of artillery. So Parnell said, Oh, yes, let's go on to Bordeaux, and he wondered if he spoke more strongly than usual, for Bern looked at him, a smile flickering across her face, and Lucci made a little noise of approval.

It's decided, said Viktor. On we push, and he turned into a cart path through the nearest field. When that path dead-ended in a long, lush field of barley sprouts, he drove through the young crops and they left a path of broken plants in their wake. Parnell felt sorry for those small broken plants, he did. But when he was about to mention this to Bern, he felt a little foolish for it, and said nothing after all.

They made the road by the time the sky had immolated itself in sunset. Bern would never admit it to the chaps, but she was beginning to shake with hunger; always a bad sign. As thin as she became in war, when she began to shake she needed to eat, or else suffer fits of nastiness. The jeep pressed on valiantly until the moon had risen, but it presently began to make a coughing sound and slowed to a crawl. There was an electric light glimmering ahead through the trees. Though they urged the engine along, the jeep died before they reached it. Parnell got out, uncomplaining, and Frank got out, complaining, and together they pushed until they reached the settlement.

There she saw a group of three stone buildings that, in the thin wash of moonlight, seemed to have sprung up organically from the

ground, as if a natural geologic formation or a mushroom ring. In the hard-packed dirt courtyard, two skinny dogs skulked and rattled their chains. One weak bulb hung over a door, which was thrust open when Viktor honked, and an immense, bullet-shaped body blocked the light pouring from within.

Oh, he is very large, said Lucci. He will be sure to have food.

Our savior, who art in hovel, said Frank, his sharp good humor returned.

When they saw, however, that the man had the unmistakable silhouette of a rifle in his hand, and that he spoke to two other creatures who came outside behind him, also with what appeared to be rifles, the reporters did not climb out of the jeep, as they had been about to do. They waited, still and quiet, in the car, until the man came up and pointed a flashlight at their faces, one by one. When he reached Bern, he paused, and she winced so in sudden blindness that she didn't notice that he was fondling a lock of her hair until he tugged on it. When she batted at his hand he had already pulled it away, and she was left clawing air.

Excuse me, sir, said Viktor in his impeccable French, but we are hungry and tired, and would gladly pay for some food and a place to rest. And some gas, if you've got any.

The man, still invisible in the darkness, grunted, and the soft voices of the two others murmured behind him. Yes, he said in an earthy, provincial French, yes, we've got all that. Come inside and bring what you've got.

Now they all slowly slid from the jeep and walked behind him, the two other strangers dark shadows at their backs. And when they were inside the cottage all Bern saw at first was a tiny old woman paring potatoes in a dark corner, a fairy-tale grandmother who smiled, though her eyes watered, rheumy. Bern's eyes adjusted in a moment, and only then did she see the small photograph of Hitler over the mantel, one plucked daisy and a guttering candle before it, as if the führer were some syphilitic-looking saint.

Bern spun toward their host and found him grinning down at her with his dark eyes and his oily but handsome face. His arm was jutted out, his hand upraised, and on his great biceps there was an armband embroidered with a crude swastika. Heil Hitler, he boomed. Today is a great day, is it not, my friends? Please, sit. Are you hungry? Call me Nicolas.

Bern didn't know how she bore it, but in the next moment she

was eating, and to her surprise it was good. A smooth white wine, hot bread, potage of carrot, even a small tin of potted meat. She scowled. It would do no one any good if she were to starve to death, but she didn't have to enjoy it. Viktor sent her warning glances from his side of the table, and Parnell kept his hand on her knee, for good measure; not as if she were really so stupid as to open her mouth and let fly; they were just making sure. By the fireplace at the far end of the room sat the two creatures who had come outside with their host to greet them, and now Bern had a hard time seeing any threat in them: they were two teenaged boys with guns in their arms, but so skinny and cringing they may as well have been girls cradling their dolls.

My sons, Nicolas had said, gesturing at them. My wife died many years ago. The boys kept their eyes averted, and on one of them Bern noticed the blue-green stamp of a fading black eye. The watery old woman kept peeling her potatoes, nodding and smiling vaguely.

For his part, their host was leaning back in his chair, watching the reporters eat and smiling his approval. When they had finished, and Frank had speared the last hunk of bread with his knife, Nicolas spoke again, softly. I am so glad my meal was to your liking, my friends. Now that you are satiated, I hope, we can come to an agreement, can we not? You mentioned that you could pay for my hospitality, did you not?

We did, said Viktor. We can. We have money. Francs, pounds, dollars. For supper tonight, of course, plus a roof over our heads, plus provisions for tomorrow. And enough fuel to get us to Bordeaux. Perhaps fifty francs would be a good deal. That is, if you please.

I do please, said Nicolas, smiling his charming smile. I do, indeed. I will give you all that you want, the food, the gas. But I do not, most unfortunately, accept currency from those places. Those countries will presently be crushed, and all that will be worthless. Just paper, a few tin coins. Now, if you had deutschmarks, that would be something, he said, and sighed a voluptuous sigh. How I am glad that I share this day with you, he said. I must admit that I have been dreaming of this day, my friends, for years.

Since the last war, said his mother from her potatoes. He has not let up about it. Germany this, Germany that. Takes a correspondence course. German. All sorts of books. Always a very smart boy.

I was a prisoner of war during the last one, Nicolas said, but, really, I was kept better there than here: they valued me more there, where I could not at first speak the language, than they do in my own country. We had schnitzel for luncheon every day. Schnitzel! A marvel of precision, the German mind. These boots here, he said, rapping his vast foot on the ground, are German-made, given to the prisoners, and they're still as good as the day I got them. I lived among those people and knew they were superior. The Germans rise, he said, dreamily. And with them a better race of man.

Oh, Christ, spat Bern, feeling herself flush with rage.

Indeed, said their host. Bern saw his eyes drop to her lap, where Parnell's hand was clutching her thigh too tightly, too high on her leg. Nicolas raised an eyebrow and gave her a private smile. Bern was not prepared for the pretty dimple in his cheek.

Viktor rushed in. Well, we have other goods. I've got a gold watch, he said, and put his father's watch on the table, looking sternly at the others. I'm sure we can rustle some more up.

Parnell gamely took the photographs of his family out of the silver frame, tucked them back into his pocket, and put the frame beside the watch. Then he added to the pile two diamond cuff links (*What, Bern thought, amused, even now, does he imagine he's doing with cuff links in a war?*), his engraved cigarette case, and a still wrapped bar of Pear's soap.

It's unused, he said with a significant glance at Nicolas.

I don't understand what's going on, said Frank in English, but he can have my flask if he wants it, and threw into the mix a horn-and-silver flask that he had kept hidden from all the other reporters until now. Parnell gave him an odd look; Frank only shrugged.

Bern threw in her gold bangle and it made a furious jingle on the pile.

Lucci fumbled, and found a pair of clean woolen socks in his pocket. All I have, he said cheerily in French. The watery old mother by the wood stove creaked out of her chair and hobbled up and took them, muttering how nice the wool was, how soft, what lovely socks they were, worth a lot, she was sure, and she patted Lucci on the head like a good child. The boys by the fireplace watched the pile hungrily, their eyes large in their faces.

Ah, sighed Nicolas, a pile of riches. Surely more than this family has ever seen in one place before. He played his hand around in the pile for a moment, moving this bit, then that, but shook his

head, and pushed them back toward the reporters, save for the socks, which the old woman stroked in her lap like a kitten. Alas, said Nicolas, this is not what I want, either.

Well what in bloody Christ's name does he want then, said Parnell in English. But Viktor shushed him, and it was only when Bern saw the face of her good, strong Viktor pale, as if washed with bluing, that she began to feel cold. Frank gave a small whistle, as if a kettle releasing the pressure of its steam. In the wake of this sound, Nicolas looked at Bern.

Her, he said.

Into the vast, frigid silence came a snicker; Nicolas's boys, eyes like darts.

Never, Bern said. Never, never, never.

Not forever, no, Nicolas said, seeming not to understand her. I'm not a sadist, young lady. For a night. No more. Then you will be on your way tomorrow. Plenty of gas to get you to Bordeaux. Plenty of food, my mother's delicious chicken. I have been far too long without female companionship, and I am a man with strong desires. You remind me of my wife, you know. Same hair. Same, excuse me, rear end. Lovely rear end. Now tell me, my cabbage; I know you're American, but is there a chance your people were German?

A sharp blow to her ankle: Lucci kicking her; and she knew he meant to remind her that this man was both bats and had a gun. And so she said, grimly, Oh, in a way.

I knew it, he said, sitting back with his charming smile. You are the purest Aryan I have seen for some time. I knew it when I saw you.

Oh, did you, said Bern, and couldn't help herself, saw herself telling this story to a whole dinner table of guests, saw herself shrieking one day with laughter, saying, My God, he was telling a Jewess she was the most Aryan creature he'd ever seen. Even now, she gave a high little bleat of delight. Viktor, she noticed, had grown huge, was sitting up in his chair as if ready to spring; Frank was gaping, bright red, having apparently understood; even Parnell's handsome brow was knotted and black. Lucci's eyes were bowed to his lap, as if in shame.

Your answer is no, Bern said. I would rather gnaw off my own foot.

Very well, said Nicolas, making his mouth twist painfully. You

may soon be doing so. I am sorry, but I'll have to keep all of you fine foreigners here until the Germans come, won't I. Prisoners. And who knows what they'll do when they find you.

You can't do that, said Viktor. We're reporters.

Oh, can't I, said Nicolas and it was not a question. Now, boys, he said to his sons. Lock them in the barn.

He stood and nodded at them all, thoughtfully, and said, Good night, and as he climbed the stairs they heard his footsteps on the boards above them, so heavy they feared that great rocks of plaster would fall down onto their heads. Then they moved, one by one, into the night, Lucci kissing the hand of the old woman in thanks for the meal.

The barn was one of the buildings of stone, dark and chill, more a cellar than a barn. Inside was a great mass of hay and a mound of potatoes and one ugly old donkey that bit at Lucci when he tried to make friends. The boys shoved the reporters inside and made a great to-do about running the chain through the handles outside and locking them in sturdily, and when the reporters were alone, with just a chink in the roof for a weak light, they settled into the hay in silence. But Parnell stood up presently and began to pace between the donkey and the door, and at last spat out, How disgusting, really. With that delivered, he sat down again.

There was another long silence, then Bern burst out, Filthy. Filthy, filthy. I would commit hari-kari. Spectacular fucking brute. Never in my life would I sleep with a fascist.

From his corner, Frank cleared his throat. No, Bern, he said. No question. I would shoot you myself if you did it. For the principle of the thing. If there's anything we Americans know, it's principles. His voice in the darkness held a tremble, and Bern, who was never quite clear where she stood with him, felt a small easing inside of her.

No, said Parnell, nothing of the sort can happen, of course. Barbaric, really. So what, old chaps, do we do?

Bern said, Well, we sure as hell can't wait for the Germans, and they will be here, and sometime soon. And we can't escape, not at least without the gasoline.

I say, said Viktor, so quietly they could barely hear him, we murder the son of a bitch in his bed. And his two whelps. And leave the mother trussed outside for the vultures.

Wonderful, wonderful, murmured Parnell, standing then sitting

again. Your fury, Viktor, it's wonderful. In his agitation, he fumbled for a cigarette and failed to light it three times before it glowed a sudden orange in the dark.

Yes, but, said Lucci. But how is it we escape this place?

And you forget, said Frank, that there are three of them, and they all have guns.

After this, a black silence enveloped them. They all sank deeply into their thoughts. Without conferring with anyone, Lucci eventually rose and made a thick bed of hay, and they lay down together for the warmth. Bern was in the middle, between Viktor and Lucci, Frank and Parnell on the outside; and when Frank began to snore and Lucci's nose let out a sleeping squeak, Viktor turned to Bern, and put his arms around her. There, safe against his smell of body and sweat and his own clove-like undertones, she realized how unsurprised she was.

Even as she was now—unbathed, unkempt, exhausted—Bern knew she had it, that same old something. She'd had her first great love affair at sixteen, was still notorious from it. The man in question had been three times her age, the mayor of Philadelphia, but even so they blamed her, a child. The father of a schoolmate, he had given her a ride home from school one day in his chauffeured car, and that was that. Over the year she was involved with him, his wife grew skinny and sour, his daughter turned the entire school against Bern, and her lover took her to Montreal for a week while her parents were visiting family in Newport News. She was enraptured; she felt free. She took it as her due when her lover fed her vast meals and put her in bespoke lingerie and took her to burlesque shows, and, the last night, to a dinner party given by the kinds of friends who would be amused by a sixteen-year-old mistress. In that gilt and velvet world of closed curtains and secrets circling like electricity, there was another girl there not much older than Bern, but uncertain and clumsy with her hands, her face painted in roses like a porcelain doll.

Bern had still been vibrating with her strange new joy when the butlers set the silver domes in front of them. The lights had dimmed, and the lids were whisked away. There, on the plates, Bern saw the tiniest bird carcasses imaginable, browned and glistening with butter. There was a collective gasp: *L'ortolan*, a woman murmured, her voice thick with longing.

A finch, whispered her lover, bathing her ear in his wine-warmed



breath. Caught, blinded, and fattened with millet, then drowned in Armagnac and roasted whole. A delicacy, he said, and smiled, and she had never noticed until then that his eyeteeth were yellowed and extraordinarily long.

With the gravity of a religious ceremony, her tablemates flicked out fresh white napkins and veiled their faces with them. The porcelain girl held hers like a mantilla for a moment before she dropped it over her face. Bern did not: she watched, holding her breath, as each person reached for his own small bird and made it disappear behind the veil. For a long time, at least fifteen minutes, there were the wet sounds of chewing, small bones cracking, a lady's voluptuous moan.

A stillness came into Bern as she observed this, a chill, as if she were watching from a very distant place. The bird on her own plate cooled and congealed, and she didn't even look at it when she wrapped it in her napkin and placed it gently in her evening bag. She watched as the others, radiant with badness or shamefaced and shaky, came from behind their napkins, wiped their lips. A tiny bone—a wishbone, a foot—stuck to the carmine lipstick of some opera singer. Bern saw thin wet streaks in the porcelain girl's cheek powder, saw she was still holding something in her mouth, and Bern gazed hard at her until the other turned away, flushing for real under her paint.

Later that night Bern let the tiny carcass drop from the hotel balcony, setting it free, she thought, though it dropped like a lead weight to the ground for some prowling beast to eat. Like that, she who had been perhaps too amenable, too obedient—why else could she be seduced—felt herself harden. When she returned to Philadelphia, Bern never spoke to the man again, and the story formed the foundation of the first piece of fiction she ever wrote, in a hiatus between wars. After the magazine ran it, people in Paris and New York began to call her *L'ortolan* behind her back. Bern Orton; Bern Ortolan. It made a certain awful sense, Bern herself could admit.

Now, so close to Viktor's peculiar scent, Bern felt something stirring in her again, and with her silent, cool hands undid his belt. This is what she needed, a man coming alive in her arms, such comfort; and though she preferred Parnell—there was no complication in him, and he was gentle and sweet to Viktor's large rough-

ness—when Viktor put his hand on her waist and slid it under the band to hold her rear, she let him, eager. She loved this, and not because she ever had much pleasure from it; it was a gift, the men wanted it, and it was their gratitude that made it good; the way that Bern was the white-hot center of another person's world for those minutes or hours; the way for a moment it made them both forget everything but this other skin, to forget the shattered souls drifting over the world; how it was cracking in half.

But Viktor put his two hot hands on hers and stopped them. She could see a tiny glint in his dark eyes as he looked at her. He lifted her hands to his mouth and kissed them both, on the palms and on the backs. Then he turned her about so that her back was facing him, and he held her gently around the chaste arc of her ribcage, his arm for her pillow, the deep beat of his heart a current, eventually drifting her off to sleep.

Frank was up earlier than everyone else because his blasted hands wouldn't stop shaking. Hungry, too. The others, like useless logs in the hay, Bern all cuddled up with that crazy Russky Viktor. In the back, the donkey stinking in his own muck. It made his skin crawl. And when he went to the doors and peered out into the half-dark, he saw them along the road, the refugees. Pale as death, a huddle of them, waiting.

Frank remembered an assignment he once took to Haiti long ago, during a time of peace when he was young, not the fat sad sack he was now. He remembered the stories, the fear in the people's faces when they talked of the warlords who would steal souls and turn the emptied bodies into slaves. Those people out there, moving in the dust and dawn, seemed to have their very souls leached from them; zombies, he thought, of war. When they sensed someone awake in the cottage, they knocked on the door, and when nobody answered, two of them moved on. The last, a young man, waited for an hour, until the sun rose fully, and then half-heartedly stole a chicken from the yard. The son with the bruised eye stepped from the roadside and cocked his rifle under the man's chin. The man released it and limped away.

Crazy, crazy, Frank muttered, what war makes people become. Animals.

There was a rustle and he peered behind him, saw Bern sitting

up with her lovely, sleepy eyes, hay in her hair. Frank? she said uncertainly.

What I wouldn't give, he said, for a fucking drink. His voice was shaking, too, he noticed. Bern stood, and Frank's heart lifted a bit, as she moved toward him, but then the group in the hay began to stir and his mood turned dark again. Always, always the others around. And he no match for Parnell, handsome as he was, or Viktor, who simply sweated virility. Or even Lucci, with his easy charm; and he'd seen it, there's something going on there, too, between Bern and the photographer. He might as well forget about it. Not that a cold bitch like Bern would be good for him, drive a cold dagger through his heart, more likely than not. There was something so phony about her. He'd better forget it.

But as they all rose and stretched and tried to forage for food and watched the sunbeams slowly rake across the floor of the barn, and still no Nicolas, none of the sons, not even the weepy old hag, no food but the scent of some kind of ham wafting from the cottage, he couldn't forget about it. Needled him, Bern, always. There was that one time in Oslo, anyhow, when they were drunk on aquavit, and everyone else had gone to bed. Normally Frank resorted to whores, all peroxide and bosom, but that night, when the electricity shorted out and they lit the flickering candles, there was something so dark and appealing about Bern that he put his hand on her rear and raised his eyebrow. She went still and seemed to think, and then carefully raised hers back. Bern had tasted of alcohol and copper, and afterward, rumped and sweating, he wept and confessed that he dreamt of killing himself. Usually it's a noose, he'd said. Sometimes a gun. Sometimes I step deliberately on a land mine.

It was this that got him. That he'd said this, and to her of all people. That she'd taken it and stored it away and might use it someday. And that he couldn't shake the idea that maybe she'd only done it out of pity, slept with him. That's what he couldn't take. The pity. Frank turned away, counting his breaths through the morning to stay steady.

All day, Lucci sat staring through a crack at the clouds skimming across the delicate sky. Viktor did fifty pull-ups on a beam. Parnell smoked the last of his cigarettes and flipped the photographs of his family over and over again like playing cards. Outside, there were the sounds of a few more passersby. A strange

French owl somewhere. Someone working nearby, the clang of wood and metal.

In the midmorning, Frank couldn't take his hunger and bit into one of the raw potatoes from the sacks, but spat it out again when he saw it was black at its heart.

Before noon there was a rumble in the sky, and the way that Viktor winced, Frank understood that he had recognized the sounds as Nazi planes. If the Nazis could fly this far south without firing, he knew their troops would be only a few days away. And then the camps, which he had heard of. Bullets in the head, inmates thin as bones. He was not so sure now that he would get away scot-free.

Frank listened to the mother come out and scold her chickens; he heard Nicolas and the boys clomp back into the house for the midday meal. And he listened to each tiny noise as Nicolas unlocked the chain on the barn and thrust open the door. In the overbright sun, Nicolas was not quite so frightening. Just a peasant farmer, and not a bad-looking one at that. Young enough, younger than Frank, at least. He gabbled something inquisitive in French toward Bern, and she spat back her answer, saying, *Cochon*, which Frank knew meant pig. So: the answer still no. He felt his insides twist at this, a fury rise up in him when Nicolas laughed and gabbled something else, then slammed the door shut again, locking them in the dark.

Germans are advancing on Orléans, Viktor said for Frank's benefit.

I got it, said Frank, but he hadn't, though he couldn't let Viktor know that.

Damn Bern. She was starting to get on his nerves. Frankly, in the light of day, he didn't see what all the fuss was about. She'd slept with everyone and his brother, so why one more peasant meant anything at all, he didn't know. Phony, prissy bitch: the first time he knew he was going to report on this war (how young he seemed then, my god, not that long ago, either), the fellows back at *Life* raised their eyebrows. Say hello to Bern Orton for us, Frankie-boy, they'd said. We hear she's a hot number, and when he said, What do you mean?, sincerely admiring a woman whose moxie alone let her do what only men did, they laughed. Showed him a photograph of a young lady. Said, She looks all prim and proper, distant cousin to Eleanor Roosevelt, Main Line, all that. But don't be fooled. And they told him about the mayor she'd seduced at six-

teen; the marriages she'd broken up; the painter who'd shot himself in the heart for her. Pussy of gold, they said. Gives it away for free.

Lucky bastard, they all said, and clapped him hard on the back.

By evening, Frank was shuddering, making the wall behind him rattle. Felt about to die. He had nothing in America, no family, no wife, no children, nothing but his job and baseball and a small house near a decent brewery, but he just wanted it all to be over. When night fell again and the moon rose in the chink in the roof and it became painfully evident that there would be no dinner, either, Frank began to curse. The curses rattled out of his mouth like gravel, like spittle, he couldn't stop them, he let himself go. He cursed Nicolas, the boys, the dogs, the chickens, the old hag; he worked himself up to curse France, the world, the United States of America, his mother, who urged him to be a reporter, his father, who had gotten him his first job, the *Kansas City Star*, *Life* magazine, his editor, God, President Roosevelt and his ugly old wife, and—because Bern jumped in roaring to defend Eleanor, it was inevitable—in the end he spun about and began to curse Bern.

Dammit, girl, he said, just do it. Just do it and get it over with and we can go. I'm dying here. I feel like a fucking beehive was set loose in me. Just do it. Please, please; we can go and we'll never talk about it again and I can have a fucking drink.

Viktor grabbed Frank by the collar and shoved him up against the wall. Frank struggled, but could not breathe. The barn, already dark, went darker. And then, without saying anything, Viktor let him go and Frank slid to the ground and wheezed there sullenly for a long time, watching the straw before his eyes dance with his breath, watching Bern at the far end of the room, as she combed and combed her hair like a cat licking itself calm.

He was in the garden in Fiesole eating figs and Cinzia was there, her hair short like a boy's and blown by the warm wind. She opened her mouth, about to say something important—Lucci's very limbs tingled—when Parnell sat up beside him, shouting incomprehensible, strange words. Lucci sprang up in the darkness of the donkey-smelling barn, his heart splitting in his chest. Oh, he cried. Viktor lit a match.

In the spit and flare they saw Parnell's face, blank, seized by fear. Then he was weeping, his handsome face in a rictus of pain. No, he

said, no, no, no, and Bern was beside him, holding his face, saying softly, Parnell, wake up, wake up, it's okay, sweetheart, it's a dream, and Frank scrambled to the wall, and Lucci sat down again, wearily, and the donkey kicked, and Viktor lit another match when the first burned out in his fingers.

Parnell rested his head on Bern's shoulder until he stopped weeping, until his breath came naturally again. He told them what he had dreamt: ranks of soldiers, black as beetles, marching in lockstep down the Strand, a child swung by its heels against a wall so its brains splattered out. London burning. Bombs falling like hailstones on the Houses of Parliament.

I want to go home, Parnell said. Please, Bern. Just let us go home.

See, said Frank from the wall, where he sat, shuddering. See, Bern. You're hurting all of us, you know. Your *morals*, he said, are hurting all of us.

Viktor moved toward Frank, but Lucci stepped between them. Frank's ill, he said quietly. He knows not what he talks. Viktor glowered down at him and Lucci steeled himself for a blow, wondered if it would kill him, but Viktor turned and sat abruptly.

When they settled again, Lucci could no longer sleep. In his mouth he still tasted figs, and he could almost smell Cinzia's hair. He thought of her as she would be now, if she were alive, in the camp at Bolzano. Probably gaunt, no longer pregnant. Still as fierce as she was as a partisan, going into the night, doing what she needed to do against the fascists. All that time Lucci had tried not to worry, stood with his chemicals pulling images from the baths in his red light, but growing more frantic as their child began to show. And one bright afternoon he watched as, far down a street too long for him to run, she was hustled into a dark car and taken.

And now, the Germans coming, perhaps even a few miles down the road. A great ugly ink stain on France, spreading. And when they overtook this barn, who's to say where they would go. Perhaps Lucci would walk into the camp and see Cinzia look up from whatever work it is they make women do; sewing, perhaps, or weeding, and she'd blanch, be furious with him for being caught. But this was wishful thinking, Lucci knew; he'd more likely be killed on the spot. Journalism was no impediment to evil. And only the willful say they do not know what's happening in Europe anymore.

And yet, he thought, there are still people like Bern, and this is

good. White-hot people, people with a core of iron. Lucci had met Bern long before the war, when she was a debutante visiting Europe on the arm of some man. They met at a nightclub and she charmed him. That night, Cinzia, in the presence of a woman so beautiful, held forth to dazzle herself and danced the way that only Cinzia could dance. Bern turned to Lucci in the dim flickering light and brilliant bleat of horns and said, Giancarlo Bertolucci, your wife is spectacular. And he said, This I know, Berenice, and she threw back her head and laughed her smoke-filled laugh. Later, in his despair with Cinzia gone, when he took the job to photograph the looming war, they met up again in Czechoslovakia. When one night he knocked on her door, she opened it a crack and said, Oh, Lucci. Oh, darling, no. You see, I make it a point of honor not to see the husbands of women I adore. And he said, I understand, but it is probable I am a widow. And she said, Widower. And don't think that. Never Cinzia, she's a strong one—you can't let yourself think that, and she opened her door a little wider and gave him a long, soft kiss on his mouth. There, she said, now I know she's alive, and closed her door.

They were going to die there, in the barn. Starve. Already, they were at the end of the water in the donkey's bucket and he had seen Parnell try to eat the oats. A terrible shame to die now; it made him want to weep for the glorious world out there, that he would not be able to live and see it grow healthy again. To find Cinzia, or to avenge her. Now, in the bleak night, he hoped his heart would break and kill him before the Germans found him.

Lucci heard a scraping at the door and sat up. Probably rats; still, he crawled over to see. It was morning, but still dark, and he pressed his eye to a crack and saw the teary old woman creep back across the yard and close the cottage door with exquisite care. Lucci was heartened; there was still good in the world, perhaps. Then he smelled a smell that made him heady, crêpes, and he could isolate each of the ingredients as he never could before: butter, sugar, flour, milk, even a little rum. He felt the ground until he found the plate, and pressed his fingers into a soft stack two inches high. If he were Frank, he would eat them himself. He wasn't Frank, so he said, loudly, Excuse, and the others grumbled in the hay. Chaps, he said, and they sat up. Breakfast is served, said Lucci. Courtesy of Madame Lachrymose.

It was enough to keep them alive, not enough to make them satisfied, and by dawn they were starving again. Nicolas came early to take the donkey to the fields and recoiled at their smell, frowned. My cabbage, he called to Bern, have you come to any new conclusions? But Bern sent a scathing stream of curses in French at him and Nicolas chuckled and led the donkey into the light and locked them in again.

Frank and Parnell sat together by the wall now and conferred quietly. Lucci did not like this at all. He sat beside Bern and stroked her hair, telling her little tales that his mother had told him as a child so that she would not have to see the others in their low discussions. Viktor paced back and forth. Lucci wasn't looking at him when Viktor suddenly, around noon, turned pale, sank to his knees, and fainted.

Though Frank looked close to death, he was quick enough as Bern knelt over Viktor. He stood over her and shook her shoulder roughly. Listen, he said. You don't have to prove anything to us, you know. You're the most courageous woman we all know.

The most courageous *person*, rather, called Parnell from the wall.

I've seen you with my own two eyes, said Frank. I've seen you kick a wounded man from a door so a cottage full of women could escape. I've seen you walk through brains and guts and viscera without gagging. If you could do those things, you could sleep with Nicolas to set us free. It'd only take an hour. One hour of courage and then we can go.

It's not about courage, gentlemen, said Bern. Shut your traps.

Viktor stirred on the ground and blinked his eyes, confused, drawn and pale, and she leaned over him again, cradling his pitted face. Lucci felt ill, looking at Viktor as low as this.

Nicolas is not even that bad-looking, said Parnell, in a rush. A bit greasy, but overall quite all right. It'd be a kindness to him, actually. He hasn't had a woman in years and years, he said. Think of yourself as doing a kindness, Bernie.

And listen, said Frank. You can write about it when you're done. Imagine: a short story. Like that one you did, "L'ortolan," that won all the prizes. It's material. Be a good chap, Bern. Be a good sport.

Lucci leapt up, shouted, Enough, she will not do it. That is enough. He pushed Frank back, and though Frank was far larger

than Lucci, he stumbled a little. There was a long pause, and Lucci thought he could hear everything there was to hear in the world: distant planes, the shuffle of a weary family on the road outside, the inquisitive wind rustling under the skirts of the trees, voices hushed and murmuring, moving in, moving out, like one great tide. He could hear, somewhere, singing, and thought it was his imagination. No: it was Frank, whistling the "Marseillaise" softly under his breath. Lucci looked toward Viktor, who was struggling to sit up. When he looked back, a curious glint had come into Frank's face.

Frank said, slowly, Why the hell not, Bern. Everybody knows you're a slut.

Shut up, said Viktor, voice deadly quiet, but Frank gave his sour little smile. Oh, Viktor, I'm surprised you didn't know, he said. She sleeps with just about everyone she meets. I could name hundreds of men.

I do know, Viktor said, rubbing his head wearily. She's had a few lovers. It is her right, as it is yours. As it is Parnell's, and Lucci's, and mine, Frank. At least, unlike Parnell, she's not married. Bern, at least, is not a hypocrite.

Ha! A few lovers, well, said Parnell, his voice turning Cockney, ugly. Don't you wonder, Viktor, why she won't sleep with you? I do, very much. She fucks me, you know.

I know, said Viktor, sagging. I know.

She sleeps with everyone, said Parnell. She slept with Frank, if you can believe it.

What is that supposed to mean? said Frank, but nobody heard him because now it seemed as if there were a hole ripped into the air in the barn, and Bern was alone in the middle of it. She reached out to take Viktor's face in her hands, speaking low and seriously, but Viktor shook her off.

Frank, he said, very slowly. Frank. I knew about Parnell. He's handsome, it's uncomplicated. But Frank, Bern? Him?

Bern sighed and tried to find the sauciness in her voice again, but it came out strained. I don't understand it myself. I guess I felt sorry for him, she said.

Viktor stared at her, and though it was dim in the barn, Lucci thought he saw his eyes fill. Well, Viktor said. I suppose you felt sorry for me, too.

No, said Bern, but he had already turned away, already walked to the muck and stink of the donkey's area. Viktor, she said, but he raised his hand to quiet her.

Do what needs to be done, Bern, he said. It shouldn't make a difference to you, now.

They were all looking at Bern, all of the men. She took a step back and leaned against the door to catch her breath. And Lucci saw that Viktor had changed something, had turned something with his words, and Lucci couldn't resist the change. He saw the light again in Fiesole, in his garden. He saw Cinzia; he saw a million small colors of that world, and he longed, suddenly, to be in them. He longed.

In a minute, Bern stepped closer to Lucci, searched his face. She tried to take his hand. But Lucci couldn't breathe anymore. He stepped away, he turned his back.

Bern blinked, and her voice came out raggedly. *Et tu*, Lucci, she said with a grim little smile. Then she took a deep breath and waited at the door until one of Nicolas's sons passed by, and called to him in a muted voice and told him to fetch his father. The minutes that she stood there, with her back to the men in the room, seemed like weeks, like months to Lucci. Her hair was lit golden in a sunbeam that fell in a long strip down her delicate back, down her plump behind. He wanted, terribly, to say, Stop, to say Bern's name, to stroke her soft cheek where it was bitten by the light, but in the end, he didn't do anything at all.

A sooty dusk. It had begun to drizzle, and the men waited in the jeep. Under the seats were boxes of food; terrine, bread, cheese, pickles, bottles of wine, plus a full canister of gas. They had washed themselves with water the teary old woman had heated for them; they had eaten their fill beside a fire to warm their bones. The old woman would not look at them, though she wore Lucci's woolen socks in her clogs. She held out food with a closed face, turned those perpetually watering eyes away. The two sons had paced in and out of the house with their excitement, loading the jeep with provisions. At one point, they had both disappeared upstairs, and reappeared an hour later and sat whittling by the fireplace, like dogs licking their paws, satisfied.

In the car, Viktor held his face in his hands. Frank held a bottle

and his normal pink flush had already regrown across his cheeks. Parnell held an unlit cigarette and stared at his hands. Lucci held his camera, but did not take a photo.

At long last, the door of the cottage opened, and Bern came out. She had lost a great deal of weight in the last few days, and her clothing hung on her; she moved as if sore, and her lip seemed torn and bleeding, as if she had bitten through it. She climbed up beside Parnell, who glanced sideways at her, his warm eyes liquid and fearful. Viktor turned on the engine and looked at Bern in the mirror, willing her to look back; Lucci, tentatively, put his hand on her cheek. Her skin was icy and white as wax. The world seemed to slow for a moment—there was the moon like a half-closed eye—the wind had died and so everything seemed to hold its breath. But Bern would not look at Viktor, and grabbed Lucci's hand and threw it back at him.

Don't, she said, very softly. Don't touch me. Don't look at me. Go.

They didn't at first, though. They remained silent. A hawk darted suddenly down. There was the wail of a distant plane. At last, Bern again said, Go, and Viktor started up the jeep. Frank cleared his throat and turned his face toward the sky. Parnell swallowed. The engine throbbed and the jeep pulled away from the cottage, into the trees. And for hours they drove, in silence, southwest, toward a certain kind of safety.

Questions to help stimulate discussion of “Delicate Edible Birds.”

1. What would change about this story if Groff had chosen a different point of view?
  - 1<sup>st</sup> person (Bern)
  - 1<sup>st</sup> person (Parnell)
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> person (Bern)
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> person (Parnell)
  
2. If you accept the description of this story as being written in 3<sup>rd</sup> person omniscient point of view, how close does the author get us to:
  - Bern?
  - Parnell?
  - Frank?
  - Victor?
  - Lucci?
  
3. Agree or disagree: Groff’s style is about as far from Hemingway’s as you can get. If the story were a Christmas tree, Groff’s would be full of ornaments and lights. Hemingway’s spare and decidedly un-ornamental. Do you think Hemingway would’ve been capable of writing a story like this? Think about Hills Like White Elephants. How does the “girl” in Hemingway’s story compare to Bern in Groff’s?
  
4. I contend that Groff’s point of view choice is what allows her such great sway in the use craft elements like simile and metaphor, and the use of elaborate stretches of exposition and conceits that weave allegory, personification, symbols and allusions together to create a “heightened” realism—the same way sonic tricks work in radio and film. How sound designers can enhance the effect of the snap of a twig, the creak of a door, a fist on a chin, the firing of a gun, the whoosh of a sword, to create a more powerful emotional impact. What do you think?

RICHARD RUSSO

## In Defense of Omniscience

Part of the problem with trying to teach anybody anything is that we who know how to do it forget what it was we didn't know. Having arrived at understanding for ourselves, we forget what the problems were, what we were confused by, what was getting in our way. It's like teaching someone to drive a stick shift. It doesn't seem that complicated after you've been doing it for ten or fifteen years. You don't think about it anymore. Your left foot knows where to find the clutch, when to depress it, when to let up and how fast, how much gas to feed with the right foot, when to slip the shift out of one gear and into the next, where the various gears are, where your eyes should be when all this happens (on the road, not on the diagram they give you on the ball of the stick, not on the floor beneath the dash where the clutch was the last time you looked, before it moved, so that you can no longer locate it).

My father, who taught me how to drive a stick shift one summer afternoon when I'd come home from the university to work road construction with him, was one of the world's worst teachers in that, once he'd mastered any difficulty, he no longer considered it to *be* difficult. Difficult was how he characterized anything he *hadn't* mastered. Driving a stick, he told me that afternoon, was something any goddamn idiot could do. Half an hour later he had to pick up his carelessly thrown down gauntlet and admit he was wrong. There was one goddamn idiot who couldn't seem to learn, no matter how loudly instructions were bellowed at him. My father couldn't seem to grasp that I was wired in parallel, that, when my left foot came off the clutch, my right instinctively left the gas. Part of it, too, was that he'd started me off at the foot of a steep hill, his reasoning being that I would encounter hills eventually, and he didn't want my instruction to be deficient in this regard. Finally, the gearbox was slippery, and I kept locating reverse by accident, grinding the transmission frightfully. I can still remember my father's frustration at this, it seemed to him, most unnatural of mistakes. "Jesus Christ," he complained. "Can't you *feel* it?"

This is the problem in a nutshell. Once you've learned how to do something, you do it by feel. In familiar situations the wrong thing *feels* unnatural. Right feels right, wrong feels wrong. Easy. The timing, the



hill, the slippery gearbox, once mastered, become familiar, and we forget what it's like to lurch along the road, other motorists swerving into the passing lane when they come upon us and recognize us for what we are—novices—sailing by, honking derision, often flipping us the bird. We forget that to be a novice is to be in unfamiliar situations pretty much all the time.

Omniscience, my friends—you see I've finally sidled up to my subject—is a slippery gearbox, and most apprentice writers prefer to drive the more “automatic” prose transmissions: first person literary, close third person. And these work perfectly well in most situations, getting writers where they want to go. Some authors will write through entire careers without ever tackling true omniscience and will write very well indeed. Ah, but the stick is a wonderful thing, and there's nothing quite like it once you've learned, and in this essay I'll try to explain why.

First, some background. A surprising percentage of the literary novels being published today are told from an omniscient point of view. I confess that I have not done anything like a scientific study. I have simply been struck by a disparity that I believe would be borne out by formal research—that professional writers are far more likely to opt for omniscience than are novice and apprentice writers. In lieu of statistics, here's some compelling anecdotal evidence. When I teach Introduction to Fiction Writing to undergraduates, one of the exercises that I and many other writing teachers employ to teach point of view is to have students write the first page of a story from several different points of view (not character viewpoints but literary points of view). When I first started teaching, I went over the various broad options for telling stories: first person literary, dramatic monologue, close third person, effaced, omniscient and, grudgingly, stream of consciousness/interior monologue. After explaining how they all were supposed to work, I told students to pick three. Or pick four, depending on how ambitious I was feeling. Until I noticed that, when the assignment came in, everybody avoided omniscience. Everybody. Beginners are drawn to the flashy, on the one hand, and the simple, on the other. They all want to try the seldom used dramatic monologue form because, I suspect, one of the two or three novels they've read is *Catcher in the Rye*, a book richer in technique and style than substance. Beginners are even drawn, despite my warnings, to stream of consciousness, which they see as a license for incoherence. They like the effaced point of view because they don't have to enter their characters' thoughts and close third person because it seems to answer that old workshop question, “Whose story is this?” and they enjoy literary first person because they like the sound of their own voices

or the idea of mimicking other voices. Full-blown omniscience? No takers. They don't see the margin in it.

But these are, after all, beginners. Surely more seasoned apprentices would not share the beginners' prejudice. To find out, I consulted the 1990 Residency Worksheets of the Warren Wilson MFA Program, which contained the fiction of thirty-five talented, intelligent writers, most of whom have been writing long enough to have become discouraged for whole months at a time. Out of thirty-five, how many, gentle listeners, would select the voice of choice of Henry Fielding and nearly the whole eighteenth century, the point of view most suited to the wide canvases of the nineteenth-century Victorian novel, the point of view that has never been anything but the mainstay of storytelling in our own century, regardless of the literary movement then in vogue (experimentalism, minimalism, postmodernism, any other “ism”)? How many of these stories would be told by an omniscient narrator?

By my count, four. I did not count stories that began with an omniscient paragraph before zooming in, camera fashion, to close third or limited third person. I did count stories that hadn't mastered omniscience but, rather, seemed to be striving in that direction, the omniscience unintentionally leaking away at times. Four out of thirty-five. That statistic alone may be meaningless, but consider this. In the first workshop of this Warren Wilson residency one of the stories on the worksheet concerned three brothers attending in shifts their dying father in a hospital. The story was told in the form of notebook entries, each son offering his thoughts and observations to his brothers. The story built nicely to a satisfying emotional conclusion, and the workshop consensus seemed to be that the story was successful despite some difficulties of execution. The notebook entries, more than one reader pointed out, got more interesting toward the end as the brothers became less reticent and more honest in what they wrote in the notebook. Also, it was said, the author seemed to have considerable difficulty in releasing what Steven Dobyns has referred to as the secondary information of the story—descriptions of the hospital room and hospital procedure—because these brothers would have little reason to describe a room or discuss a procedure in a notebook entry intended for their brothers, who know what the room looks like and are themselves witnessing medical “process.” Also, these brothers tended not to tell us, until very late in the story, some pretty important things about themselves. They had no reason to, because they knew each other.

Since we had identified but offered no remedy to these difficulties, I asked how the author might have done the story differently to allow eas-

ier access to the needed information. Quickly, there were hands. One person suggested selecting one of the brothers, letting him be the principal storyteller who would perform that function, in addition to writing his own notebook entries. This idea (providing a close third-person point of view) was immediately rejected and for valid reasons. It would upset the balance of the story, which gave equal time to each brother, suggesting their equal importance as characters. Another hand. Why not let the dying father tell the story, let the notebooks be secondary? That would keep the relative balance by making no brother more important than the others. True, but it would diminish them and their conflicts collectively. Also, the father was comatose. This solution too was rejected. Let one of the nurses tell the story, someone threw out in desperation. The person next to me groaned. Nurses have even less reason to describe hospital rooms, and no nurse would be privy to the kind of personal information about these brothers that has to get revealed somehow.

Dead end. Impatience in the room. Could anyone, I asked, think of a natural way to tell the story that would surrender necessary information about the brothers and the setting and the situation, without upsetting the careful character balance of the story as it existed? "Well," someone said, "I liked the notebook entries," thus effectively diverting the subject. (And, indeed, the notebook entries were looking more attractive again, their problems notwithstanding.)

Obviously, I was hoping that someone would see an omniscient narrator as the solution to the specific problems raised by the author's chosen method, but no one saw it, not even as an option. Omniscience, I freely admit, might have towed in its wake another different set of problems. The author's notebook entries, though they wouldn't have been my choice, might still be the best choice for her. That's not the point. The point is that omniscience, for many apprentice writers, is rejected even before it's considered.

There are reasons: (1) omniscient narrators tell a lot, and telling is something that students of fiction writing have been warned against early and often; (2) omniscience is an outside, not an inside view, and the clichés of our profession seem to disapprove. Get inside your characters, we recommend. Become your characters. See through their eyes; (3) omniscience feels old-fashioned, even stilted—Henry Fielding addressing us as Gentle Reader; (4) omniscience is the most arrogant of techniques, inviting the writer to play God and placing the burden of wisdom in all matters that pertain to the story squarely on the shoulders of the author. When we're misinformed, stupid, bigoted, clumsy, we can't blame any of it on the character we've "become."

But before I examine these issues, let's, just for fun, define *omniscience*

and illustrate what it achieves. I'll begin at the beginning, with examples of the three major third-person points of view I was given in my first fiction writing course:

1. Bob kissed Ellen. (Effaced. We don't know what the characters are thinking or feeling.)
2. Bob kissed Ellen, but he was thinking of Sue. (Close third person. We go into the thoughts of one of the characters.)
3. Bob kissed Ellen, but he was thinking of Sue, and Ellen was thinking of Tom. (Omniscient. We go into the thoughts of more than one character.)

Okay. Simple enough. Omniscience allows the writer to know more and reveal more. The problem is that the example is unlikely to convert many writers to omniscience. Who'd want to write such a sentence? Worse, the example doesn't begin to convey or illustrate the real advantages of omniscience. So, let's examine a couple of sentences that will. Here John Steinbeck, in *Cannery Row*, describes Dora Flood, madam of the local whorehouse: "Dora Flood is a great woman. A great big woman with flaming orange hair and a taste for Nile green evening dresses." Here we begin to see the true advantages of omniscience. First, there's the convenience of being able to describe Dora from the outside—her flaming orange hair, her Nile green dresses. It's clearly an outside view, because Dora would never see or describe herself this way. But even more important is the matter of voice. Omniscient narrators, even when they seem matter of fact, convey attitude. It's not so much the author speaking to us as it is the author in a particular pose. Here Steinbeck's attitude is sardonic, clever, distant, and yet affectionate. When in the first sentence he tells us that Dora is a great woman, the word *great*, modifying a noun, seems to convey a judgment about her character. In the second sentence, when the same word *great* modifies another adjective (*big*), we realize that in addition to learning something about the character of Dora Flood, we've also learned something about the "character" John Steinbeck has become, or the pose he has struck, to tell the story. He's copped an attitude that may or may not be the same as other omniscient narrators he uses to tell other stories.

Omniscient narration, then (at least full-blown omniscience), exhibits the following traits. It looks at characters from the outside but can "see" inside, directly into thoughts and feelings. It transcends time and space. The omniscient narrator can be in as many places as he or she needs to be and possesses knowledge of all moments—past, present, and future—and is free to reveal it. (Of course, there are varying degrees of omni-

science in literature, though examining them would be the subject of another essay.) And, finally, there is always a narrator, a voice that embodies a clearly defined attitude, an authorial pose, a consistent and recognizable way of seeing and understanding. By way of illustration, consider the following passages from Jon Hassler's wonderful novel *Grand Opening*:

The moment he set foot in homeroom, Brendan was offered a stick of gum by a shifty-eyed boy named Dodger Hicks, who had been lying in wait for a friend. Among the twenty-four boys and girls of the seventh grade, Dodger had not even one friend, the parents of Plum having warned their children away from him because his father was a convict, his mother drank, and Dodger himself stole things from stores—crayons, comic books, candy.

Dodger was older and taller than the rest of the seventh grade, having taken nine years of school to get there. A poor reader, he was taunted for what his classmates assumed was stupidity and had spent every recess and noon hour of his life lingering at the edge of a game. His face was dark, his cheekbones prominent. He had a habit of nodding his head when he spoke, and of squinting and showing his long teeth when he listened. His dark hair, which hung unevenly about his ears, he trimmed himself, using a pair of small shears pilfered from art class. As he gave Brendan a stick of grape gum . . . he said he had stolen it that very morning from Kermit's Grocery, the door being unlocked and no one inside.

"That's our store," said Brendan. "My mother and Dad bought it."

"No kidding?" asked Dodger. He gave Brendan the rest of the pack.

After school Brendan lets Dodger tag along home with him. Dodger examines with interest all of Brendan's toys and is particularly fascinated by a boomerang that Brendan has been unable to make return. Dodger has better luck.

The boomerang sailed up and away, spinning as it climbed, and at its apogee—incredibly high and small—it tilted almost vertical as it wheeled around and began its return flight, picking up speed and spinning faster and faster and heading straight for their heads and passing over them as they threw themselves flat and crashing through the kitchen window. At the sound of the breaking glass, Dodger was up and running. He never glanced back or said goodbye.

The noise woke Grandfather, who called from his window

upstairs, "Where are we, lad, and what was that noise like a china closet tipping over on its face?" This being Grandfather's second awakening in this unfamiliar house, he was of the opinion—as he had been for awhile this morning—that he and his wife and two daughters were lodging in a tourist home en route West, retracing a trip he had made in 1921 to visit relatives. At breakfast it had taken three cups of coffee and a stern word from Catherine to convince him this wasn't a stopover in Billings.

"We live here," Brendan shouted up at him. Then softer, "And my friend broke a window."

"We live here?"

"Plum! Remember?"

Grandfather backed away from the window, smartly rapping his skull with a knuckle—usually a sign that a surge of fresh blood was making a swing through his brain and carrying off his delusions.

Indeed, one of the first things Grandfather recalls, once his delusions are carried off, is his beloved wife, long dead, and his life on the railroad:

Thirty years married and twenty years a widower. . . . Thirty years building railroad lines, then nearly twenty years as a brakeman. In those years a brakeman was exactly what his title implied. Besides throwing switches in the railyards and keeping tally of the box cars dropped off and picked up, a brakeman scurried along the tops of the cars, often while they were in motion, to turn the wheels that set the brakes. Treacherous work. He had seen a brakeman killed one icy afternoon in the St. Paul yards. His own freight was pulling out, heading west; he was standing on the rear platform of the caboose and looking off to his left at another freight pulling in. He saw the brakeman standing on a cattle car of the inbound freight. The man wore a long black coat and black mittens. He noticed Grandfather and waved, and then as he turned and was about to leap the gap between cars he slipped. Down he went, striking his head on a coupling and then dropping to the track, and the wheels of the cattle car passed over his legs, or rather passed through them, for they were cut clean off just below the hip. Grandfather, riding away, signaled his engineer to stop and he jumped from his caboose and ran through the sleet to the other train, which continued to move, wheel after steel wheel rolling over the bloodsoaked pants and coattails. Grandfather pulled the man away. He was out cold, had been knocked out before he hit the ground, thank God. Grandfather waved and shouted but the train continued to crawl through the yard, and when the caboose finally

rumbled by, there on the back platform stood the second brakeman looking down in disbelief at his dying partner, whose loss of blood was so lavish it spouted like a fountain from his stumps and he lost his life before he came to.

Ah, the damn trains. The wonderful damn trains.

2 While I don't wish to belabor the obvious, allow me to point out some of the features and advantages of Hassler's omniscient point of view. Perhaps most important, no other point of view offers such immediate access to the story's necessary information. Dodger Hicks comes to life as a result of this access. We not only see him standing there, "a shifty-eyed boy," in time present, but we also have access to his past, to the events of his young life that have made him shifty-eyed—the fact that he has no friends, that the other children have been prejudiced against him by their parents. We know that Dodger steals things, and we know what he steals. We know not only that he's swiped a pair of scissors but that he uses them to trim his own hair, an intimate detail that powerfully suggests the realities of Dodger's life: that in his family there's no money for haircuts and that nobody cares enough for Dodger to trim his hair. Because of an omniscient narrator's ability to transcend time and space, to examine the present and the past within the same short paragraph, we learn an amazing amount about Dodger very quickly. No other point of view gives a writer such easy, natural access to the things that need to be revealed. If you don't believe it, reread the sections of *The Great Gatsby* that go into Gatsby's past, things that need to be revealed to us but that Nick Carraway has no access or only strained access to. *Gatsby* is a great novel, a transcendent novel, but the transitions into and out of the past, the explanations of how Nick came to learn such things after Gatsby's death are often tortured, sometimes simply lacking. You can see the writer struggling with the artistic implications of his choice. I have no doubt that first person was the right choice for Fitzgerald, but in the wake of that choice were real problems, including access to necessary information.

Hassler's omniscience also allows the narrative baton to be passed with great ease from one character to the next. The chapter excerpted here moves gracefully and naturally from Dodger to Brendan to Grandfather without any of the devices required by more limited and limiting points of view. Neither a new chapter nor a space break is required. Nor is any explanation needed. One moment we're told what Brendan is seeing and thinking when the boomerang comes zooming back at the boys. The next paragraph begins, "The noise woke Grandfather," and we are introduced to a new consciousness. The outside view not only

gives us access to Grandfather's inner thoughts but is able to evaluate them, see them for the delusions they are.

Not being restricted by time and space also has the effect of encouraging digressions. If the spell works, we see the story of the man dismembered by the train as part of Grandfather's personal history, but more interesting is the ease with which that digression is slipped into the larger narrative. It is followed by two more train stories (not quoted here), each recalled by Grandfather and each as rich and enjoyable as the one quoted earlier. Think of them as Grandfather's stories if you choose, if you enjoy that illusion, but in reality they are Jon Hassler's stories. The author clearly knows a lot about trains and train lore, and he's chosen a point of view that will allow him to reveal what he knows in the most natural way. Omniscience means, of course, all knowing, and it favors writers who know things and are confident about what they know and generous enough to want to share their knowledge.

And, finally, Hassler's omniscience allows him stylistic freedom. Effortless though the storytelling seems, Hassler's "narrator" is having great fun with the language, and the person speaking to us (Jon Hassler? Jon Hassler in a particular frame of mind or mood?) has a consistent and recognizable attitude. When we first meet Dodger Hicks he is not awaiting a friend but, rather, "lying in wait of a friend." Friendship by ambush. Grandfather's confusion is dispelled not by fresh blood to the brain but, rather, fresh blood "making a swing through his brain." The man whose legs are amputated by the train suffers a "lavish" loss of blood. Omniscience is neither voiceless nor mechanical in its telling. Indeed, it offers as much opportunity and latitude to exercise a writer's love of language as any other point of view, indeed more than many.

Having seen some of the things omniscience can do, let's return to the kinds of objections I often hear from students when I suggest omniscience as a possible solution to a story's problems: (1) *Omniscient narration stresses telling, not showing.* True. But there's nothing wrong with telling, provided it's balanced with showing. The trick is to know when to tell, when to show. It should be remembered that we're storytellers, not story showers, and fiction writing is not film. Novels are not prescreenplays. In a screenplay everything must be shown. There's no such law in fiction. And, often, telling the reader things is a test of what the writer actually knows, and it can also reveal what he or she doesn't know. The more limited (and limiting) points of view can offer an attractive (though dangerous) refuge. If the writer knows next to nothing about, say, law, it's tempting to tell the story from the point of view of a character who's equally ignorant. (2) *Omniscience doesn't allow you to be truly inside your characters. We don't see through their eyes.* True again. But

sometimes there's nothing to be gained from being inside. The metaphor of "becoming our characters" derives, again, from the screen (and the stage). You must lose yourself in order to become your character. Great actors will do almost anything to become their characters. On a recent "Saturday Night Live" skit "Robert DeNiro" has several segments of his spine removed so he can play a shorter man. But "being" and "understanding" are not the same. We can understand murderers without becoming murderers. If being inside were the best way to understand something, we'd all major in self-knowledge, whereas few of us do, even those who seem to have taken up permanent residence in confessional mode. (3) *Omniscience feels old-fashioned.* Well, gentle reader, who gives a damn? Are we talking old-fashioned in the sense of being part of an extended, rich literary tradition? There are worse things. That which is trendy, for instance, is a worse thing. (4) *Omniscience encourages the writer to intrude into the fiction, and authorial intrusion is to be avoided. Omniscience is thus an arrogant technique.* Let's take the last point first. Poet Elinor Wilner has joked about rewriting the Bible in her poems. Pretty arrogant behavior, right? Except that arrogance is part of the equation. We aren't writers to be timid. If playing God scares you, there are other professions. And who says authors shouldn't intrude into fiction? What they shouldn't do, it seems to me, is intrude clumsily or stupidly or unwittingly. Who could object to the presence of the omniscient narrator in the following passage from Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*, in which Mack and the boys go hunting frogs?

During the millennia that frogs and men have lived in the same world, it is probable that men have hunted frogs. And during that time a pattern of hunt and parry has developed. The man with net or bow or lance or gun creeps noiselessly, as he thinks, toward the frog. The pattern requires the frog to sit still, sit very still and wait. The rules of the game require the frog to wait until the final flicker of a second, when the net is descending, when the lance is in the air, when the finger squeezes the trigger, then the frog jumps, plops into the water, swims to the bottom and waits until the man goes away. That is the way it is done, the way it has always been done. Frogs have every right to expect it will always be done that way. Now and then the net is too quick, the lance pierces, the gun flicks and that frog is gone, but it is all fair and in the framework. Frogs don't resent that.

Not content to speak for all Mankind, Steinbeck wants to speak for frogs as well.

So, then, what am I advocating? That you should write more stories

employing omniscient point of view? No. At least not exactly. The real reason that apprentice writers first shy away from omniscience, then gradually gravitate toward it, is a reason few beginners suspect or could articulate. Omniscience, in the end, is a mature writer's technique. Our being drawn to it has something to do with years, with experience of life, with the gradual accumulation of knowledge and pain and wisdom. ~~Omniscience not only invents a world; it tells us how that world works and how we should feel about the way it works.~~ Few writers at twenty-five or even thirty are ready to assume such a mantle. Omniscience is permission to speak and to speak with authority we know we really don't have, about a world that in our century (any century?) is too complex to know. Ultimately, omniscience forces us to pretend we know more than we do, and we're afraid we'll get caught. We're afraid we won't know as much as we need to and that our imaginations will not supply the lack, for omniscience places a premium on both knowledge and imagination.

But it's a sweet, lovely, rich, generous stick shift of a technique, and ~~it'll take you places you can't go with an automatic transmission.~~ The first few times you try it, it'll buck you all over the narrative road and send you fleeing back to the vehicle you already know how to drive, wondering what perversity would make anyone want to make a hard job harder. But many of you will return, and those who master the technique will come to enjoy the more complex involvement with and control over the machine.

After I finished my novel *The Risk Pool*, a long first-person narrative, I began two other books,<sup>1</sup> one in first person, the other close third. I've since switched both into omniscient, where I hope they'll stay. I've granted myself permission to speak, taken a deep breath, and prayed that what I speak will be knowledgeable and true and wise. If it isn't, I can always go back to close third and blame the characters. I turned forty this year. I've begun to understand the attraction of telling people what frogs think.

<sup>1</sup> These novels, published after the original lecture was given, are *Nobody's Fool* (New York: Random House, 1993) and *Straight Man* (New York: Random House, 1997).