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Interview With Carolyn Cooke

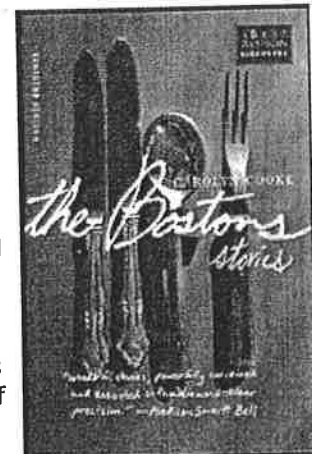
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Carolyn Cooke's short stories have been featured in *The Best American Short Stories* and *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards*. Cooke, a winner of fellowships from the National Endowment of the Arts and Yaddo and a graduate of Columbia's MFA program, has published fiction and nonfiction in the *Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, *The New England Review*, and *The Nation*. Her diverse journalistic experience includes writing for *The Nation*, editing for *Penthouse*, and working "as a muckracker for the *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, a socialist weekly." Cooke is also a founder of Pacific Community Charter School in Point Arena, California, and frequently writes on school reform issues. She lives in northern California with her husband, a poet, and her two children.

Q) Where does the title of your book, *The Bostons*, come from?

A) My grandfather made it up, I think. Since he was and is so self-deprecating, he used the term to describe his own kind—summer people, not tourists, who went to the coast of Maine from Boston and New York every summer and hoarded real estate through ridiculously intact generations. They lived an austere, cold-water life there, except they had boats and books, and generally they behaved as if they owned the place. As a Maine native—what my grandfather would call "a Maine girl"—I liked the sense of outsiders in a culture seeing themselves as harshly and critically as they imagined the insiders must see them. Henry James did that, of course, though less in *The Bostonians* than in *The Europeans*, in which the Old World and the New spend a few hundred pages gazing at each other with horror and interest. One of my favorite lines in literature is in that novel, where James's narrator observes, "There was something rather hard and narrow in Gertrude, and she never cried again."



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Q) How autobiographical are the stories in *The Bostons*, and in what ways?

A) I grew up on the coast of Maine and in the purlieu of Boston, and was always conscious of how warily those two different cultures

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regarded each other, yet how similar they were. Circumstances were different, but this had mostly to do with class, that weird distillation of money and history. People are the same everywhere, but it seems to me that New Englanders put an enormously high value on qualities of character that don't do them much good—duty, obedience, loyalty, diligence. I wanted to write about people who try to break away from those habits, who make real efforts to experience radical sensations and who reach for things—like beauty and pleasure—that they don't quite know how to use. My stories don't usually start with my personal stories. They start with beautiful junk, or with ugly junk, with details that resist but suggest significance.

Q) When did you begin writing?

A) When I was seven or eight. I used to write stories in which terrible things happened to a kid like me. It thrilled me to read them aloud to anyone who'd listen. I was so shy I could hardly speak, but I was a loud reader. I loved speaking in a bold voice that didn't have to be mine. My father died in a boating accident when he was thirty. My family, very tiny, powerful women, always told stories, usually over cocktails, the same two or three stories over and over. The stories were finished works, they were so polished. Always the same words, the same dramatic pauses, the same punchlines. Stories were a way of asking, What happened? What did it mean? Did we do it to ourselves? I learned then that "truth" and "reality" are inventable. They depend on who is telling the story, on the fact that someone is telling a story, on certain recognizable pressures of tone and language and voice, organized into a form that makes life seem organized and believable.

I was a secretive kid, myopic and ratlike. I remember going to a slaughterhouse in Boston, seeing hundreds of cats in dark cages. Somebody said they were chickens, but I knew what I saw—cats: tails, stripes, and yellow eyes. I think that's what writing is—allowing yourself to believe what you see without corrective lenses, to see what you see before somebody tells you what's really there, what a child or a nearsighted person or a sick or damaged person sees. If what you saw with your own eyes made sense—if you agreed with the general opinion of reality—you wouldn't need to write.

Q) Who are some writers who have made an impression on you?

A) I admire fluent, strung-out voices that risk poetry and comedy and are rather dark in tone. Among contemporary writers, the short stories of Grace Paley, Lorrie Moore, Denis Johnson, Leonard Michaels, Junot Díaz. Among novelists, Joan Didion, Don DeLillo. Rather high-strung narratives that pull the tune right out of your head. Virginia Woolf. When I was younger, learning to read more greedily, trying to invent a sensibility I could bear to live with, my head was full of men. I read a lot of Updike—particularly the Rabbit books and the early short stories, and *Couples of course*, which I read with such steamy devotion in the library that the librarian called my mother to complain. Cheever. Poe. Edwin Arlington Robinson, who made such heartbreaking ditties and talked about "the ache to be sublime." I also loved—love—Henry James, who looked at Americans so cleverly, through about three windows. He was a wonderful spy, alien but interested—a real voyeur.

Q) What have you done for work to support your writing habit?

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A) In the 1980s I worked at *Penthouse* magazine—wrote advertising and publicity and was an occasional voiceover on radio. It was a very heady time in the sex business, the very final hours, it turned out, of the sexual revolution! My tuition at the MFA program at Columbia came from my salary at *Penthouse*. I had to take courses around lunchtime. Those were the days when you could take three-hour lunches and nobody would think twice, they just assumed you were doing coke and having sex. I also worked as an editor and a copywriter at a couple of other magazines in New York, *Omni* and *Avenue*. In the early nineties I moved with my husband to northern California, where I live now, and had two babies the way people do here—bellowing undrugged in a cabin in the woods. I worked for several years as an editorial assistant to Alexander Cockburn, the journalist and polemicist, and also as a muckraker for the *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, an anarcho-syndicalist country weekly put out by the brilliant editor and writer Bruce Anderson.

Q) Do you see yourself as a regional writer—as a particularly New England writer?

A) No. The struggle against conscience and rectitude is the main theme of *The Bostons*, I guess—though I never thought about that until now. But I've lived in northern California for almost a decade. I live in a town where it's considered rude to ask somebody's last name or where they come from—too historical. I think that's interesting too.

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CAROLYN COOKE

Bob Darling

FROM THE PARIS REVIEW

BOB DARLING spent the day and the evening on the fastest train in Europe. The train lugged slowly through yellow towns, then it began to pull together its force and go. The landscape slid past. In one stroke the train braced and broke through the air into a river of dinning sound. It climaxed at 380 kilometers per hour. Darling heard this news from a German across the aisle, but he sensed the speed in a deeper bone. His body was attuned to the subtle flux of high speed, to the jazz pulse, the fizz.

He closed his eyes, registered the scrape of the antimaccassar against his brittle hairs, and dozed. Dying tired him, so did the drugs he took to keep from urinating on the seat. But he never let himself go that far, to close his eyes, unless the buzz of speed was in him, the drone of engines, the *zhzhzh* of jets.

On the seat beside him lounged a young woman named Carla. So far she had not given him too many terrible disappointments. Otherwise, she was a baby, vague on facts and ahistorical; she talked too much, she pouted when she didn't get her way, she disliked opera, and she drank. But overall Darling felt they had been compatible. Paris, coming up, would be the last leg of their trip. Darling planned the Tuileries, the Orangerie, an afternoon at the Louvre, couscous in the Latin Quarter, two nights at the Hôtel Angletierre.

That would be the end of it, then, no further obligation. Back home they would pass each other on the usual streets, exchange shrill pleasantries, pat each other's dogs. Sometime, perhaps, in the future, he could take her out to dinner at their old place on Bleeker Street and afterward press himself upon her as a lover.

CAROLYN COOKE

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(With liquor enough, she had a sentimental heart.) But one day she would move, get a job, find a lover, change her life. She would look at her calendar and think she had not seen him on the street. But she would be afraid, so she would procrastinate about calling him until she was sure that he was dead. Then she would realize it must have happened a year, two years ago. And this way she would not mourn his passing.

(What would that be like? What if he didn't know, if the end of it was not-knowing, if not-knowing was the surprise? What if there was nothing afterward, and he didn't know? Where would the information go he had put into his head over the years — the names of kings, the taste of food, the memory of his mother and his father, that *Louvre* is early French for "leper," lava is mainly water, loose facts, what Thoreau said: "Our moulting season, like that of fowls, must be a crisis in our lives," the names of women, the names of small hotels? Would the contents of his busy head be wasted, lost?)

He opened his eyes. A crowd of old men on bicycles crashed by outside the window and were gone. Carla in the seat beside him leaned into the *Blue Guide*; the lemony point of her nose and the book vibrated perceptibly to the motion of the train. Her eyes were puffy, from sleep maybe. She still had on her dress from the evening before — it was an absurd dress for day — and some cosmetic residue sparkled on her throat. Her sharp perfume hung on the air. She could sit for hours that way, a packet of French cigarettes and a bottle of Perrier balanced on the seat beside her, her bare feet crossed in her lap. She read any trash for hours and ignored the view. Travel, Darling thought irritably, was a vacation for her.

"The *Train à Grande Vitesse*," she said now, out of nowhere.

"The TGV, yes, that's the train we're on now," he said.

"You called it the *Très Grande Vitesse*," said Carla, looking up at him, frowning. "Actually it's *train*, not *très*."

"That's what they call it informally, I guess," he said, looking across Carla's lap at the blur of France, "Very Great Speed."

"Informally they call it the TGV. And I know what *très* means, thank you."

She was a little bulldog, round face, skinny as a refugee, knees like knuckles in stripey tights. Long arms, down to her knees. Twenty, twenty-two. He was not an old man, Darling, but compared to her.

But in her eyes. From that first afternoon he thought he could get her into bed if he remembered to call her Carla, not Paula.

He had found her in a funny way, unconscious on another train. There were two of them almost exactly alike. It was a hot summer day; they looked as if they had been to the beach. Sun sparkled on the backs of their necks and the strings of their bathing suits dangled down, one red checked, the other pale blue. The strings held up the brassieres of their suits, the only word for it he knew.

They hung from the handtraps, limp as fringe. First one girl went down. The shoes of interested citizens chattered like sets of teeth around the head. Then the second girl dropped straight as a rope. The shoes, aroused by one girl unconscious, lost interest. Two girls down stank of conspiracy. No one besides Bob Darling wanted to be taken in.

He hiked his trousers so they would not be damaged by his knees and squatted to greet the girls when they woke. In the dangerous and unpredictable city, maybe this gesture had saved their lives. He ought to be able to get one of them into bed.

The first one opened her eyes, and he saw a flattening out of the tube of her pupils, her vision narrowing to familiar and unimaginative suspicions. "What did I, pass out?" she said.

"You seemed to fall," Darling said. The girl blinked at him. "My wallet still here?" She slapped her body with her hands, then quieted them in a leather pouch around her belly. "Miracle."

"You want air," he said. She shook her head. "I've got to go to work downtown." It was a shame, Darling thought, because the first girl really was the up-and-comer.

"What do you do? I mean that respectfully," Darling assured her, because he thought she might be a dancer, and Paula had been the most marvelously uninhibited dancer. His response to her dancing had always been sexual, but in the most respectful sense.

"Legal proofreading," said the girl.

The second girl opened her eyes and he looked away from the first girl into her face. She was a bulldog, but not bad looking.

The first girl changed trains to downtown. Darling marveled at how they kissed each other's cheeks, then one went off to read legal documents in an office, sand still sparkling on the back of her neck. That pale blue string.

He walked the second girl — Carla — up from the underground. He held her arm. He liked to think he knew the why and the how of the city. Did she know the Such-and-Such Café? The apple cake was the thing to eat. Did she like apple cake? He guided her into the café's perimeter by the arm.

But Carla didn't want apple cake. She said she was bored without drinks. She sat across a round table, behind a tumbler of yellow wine.

He was old enough that she would not be shocked by the news of his death, or the idea of his illness. "Things break down," she would think with a shrug. But Darling was still young enough — and the news was fresh enough — that it came as a shock, a surprise. Barely two hours before he found her, his GP, Carnevali, had sighed deeply and told Darling to

Concentrate
on the probability
of mortality.

Darling had buttoned down his shirt, top to bottom. He covered up his lung, his large intestine, his small intestine, his appendicitis scar. He put on his sweater and his leather jacket. He was about to hail a taxi on Park when suddenly he wanted to live, live. His eyes flailed like arms, grasping at the colors of the city. He had crossed over to Lexington, and grabbed the subway downtown.

His apple cake lay in crumbs before him on a plate. "Let me show you something," he said, throwing out a spark of spit. He removed a black leather book and a fountain pen from inside his jacket pocket. A lozenge flew out too and rolled wildly into the gutter. He leaned over the book, showing it to her, partially blocking her view with his body, intent. "This is Dwight Sterling," he said, and pointed to a list of numbers. "First-rate accountant." He looked at Carla. "You don't do your own taxes, do you? This is his office, this is home — his wife's name is Paula, you'll like her, she is very uninhibited. This is their number in Springs. Dwight can get a message to me anytime. Now here is Jane, she is the astrologer who walks my dog — you can call her. This is Herb Witter, he's a philosopher. He left academia to sell industrial properties in Elizabeth, New Jersey. These are people who can get a message to me anytime," he said.

He closed the book and slid it across the table. "You take it. I know all these numbers." Her hand flickered on the table. "Please," he said. "Even if you don't want to leave a message I will know you *can't* leave a message."

"See your pen?" she said. He handed it over. She opened his little address book to a blank page near the Ms and rolled the pen across it experimentally. Then she drew an outline of the couple at the next table, and the table, and a vase with a few flowers in it.

Darling jiggled his leg. "You're an artist," he said. "Naah." She ran blue lines through her drawings. He watched her bear down on the nib. He smiled, sipped his coffee. "That's a hundred-and-fifty-dollar pen," he said.

Her face emptied. She slipped the cap on the pen and slid it across the table.

"No, no, you use it," he said. Her finger touched the marbled end.

Darling scraped his chair on the concrete, hobbled it over in a series of shrieks and told her his name. "You can call me Bob, or you can call me Darling. I mean that respectfully. Most people call me Darling. Not just women. Men."

"Darling," she said. "Like the girl in Peter Pan."

"What? Peter Pan?" Darling said excitedly.

"The girl's name — the one who goes to Never-Never Land with Peter Pan."

"Not Mary Martin?"

"No — I meant — the Disney," she said.

Darling sniffed. "Life is too short to talk about Walter Disney," he said.

"Fine," she said. She looked at the pen.

It was their first *frisson*. Darling savored it with coffee. Together they watched the couple she had drawn eat a big meal at the next table, two halves of chicken — but possibly not the same chicken. They sat across from each other, looking at their dinners. The man ate delicately, pulling the underdone meat away from the bone with the point of his knife and actually penetrating his mouth with the blade. He fixed his yellow eyes impersonally on the food. The woman ate quickly, as if other duties called to her. His thin white shirt strained to girdle him, and through the fabric the white

loops of his undershirt were legible. The woman wore a transparent blouse that magnified her white arms and the vastness of her brassiere. Once she stopped chewing, looked up at him and said something. The man didn't look at her, but barked out a laugh. "I'm not feeling flush tonight," he said.

They ate the skin off their chicken, buttered their bread and rolled it up so more fit into their mouths in one bite. When all the food was gone they wiped their lips with their napkins and waited with all their attention until the waiter came and cleared their plates away.

When the waiter came back with pie and coffee on a tray their hands flew up to make room for the dishes, fingers like birds' wings. They took turns using the cream and sugar. The woman stirred her coffee. "Everything I've dreamed of for forty years, it's coming true," she said loudly.

Darling squeezed Carla's hand. "Are you hungry?" he asked. "Oh, no. I never eat at night," she said.

He climbed six flights of stairs to her one room of Chinese paper lanterns and museum posters and her futon on the floor, batted down with sheets and a quilt and ropes of lingerie and clothes. They sat on the futon, which was all of her furniture. There was an old coal fireplace with a flue out one side, but the blue rug ran into it. She served him a glass of yellow wine. Everything she had, she offered.

She played Stravinsky's *Firebird* on her boom box and rolled pink lipstick over her lips. When she stood and rolled her thin sweater up her arms and called him to her bed, he realized he was already there. The slug of strong sensations — desire, hope, *virility* — brought tears of sorrow to his eyes, which Carla mistook for gratitude.

He hoped to keep his bag of sensations light. Only the most intense sensations interested him. He had looked forward to this train because it was the fastest train. He had been very clear with Carla about this from the start. He wanted to ride the fastest train in Europe. That was one. Two was, he wanted to eat the wonderful six-course dinner they served on the train. If they went together, this was something he definitely wanted to do. He asked her all

about it before they left the city, while they were still in the planning stages.

"Fine Bob, whatever," Carla said when he asked.

Some afternoons they sat under a sun umbrella at the Such-and-Such Café. Her accent, when she ordered *caffè macchiato*, was perfect. Darling spread out the map like a tablecloth under their cups and crumbs and napkins and brought out sheets of onionskin scribbled over in pencil with the itinerary, flight numbers, train routes, and the names and telephone numbers and addresses of hotels. He noticed that Carla used these things carefully. She brushed his cake crumbs from the countries on the map.

She had never heard of Versailles, Père-Lachaise. She had never heard of Jim Morrison. Her ignorance was vast, ecumenical. He drew on the paper cloth with a mechanical pencil — he had given over his fountain pen and hadn't seen it since. He sketched dreamily, from memory.

"What's that?" she asked.

"It's a baguette, a kind of long French bread."

"Oh, Bob, I know *baguette*. I thought you were drawing a canoe." But then he thought she spoke Italian, from her seamless demand for *macchiato*. She shrugged and said she didn't know a word of it — just liked the bitterness. He wondered whether she had broken his pen, bearing down on the nib, or sold it. He would have liked to show her how the ink went in so that if the pen had stopped working she would not worry that she was to blame. His heart ached, imagining her humiliation and shy gratitude.

"You have to speak up — it won't be any good unless we do things you want to do," he told her. "We have to plan everything together. You have to tell me where you want to go, what you want to see."

Carla had never been there before. "I don't know," she said. Her white dress was ancient unto transparency. Her shoulders looked like two milk bottles.

He had read that the dinners on the train were sometimes oversubscribed. You could eat a *croque monsieur* in the bar car, but that wasn't the thing to do. The thing to do was to get the dinner on the train.

"Fine, whatever," Carla said. "I don't care what I eat."

He leaned across the table, angry, closed his fingers around Carla's wrist, and squeezed.

She pulled his hand off in a smooth, strong gesture that surprised him and pulled her arm into her lap. "I eat anything. Scraps," she said.

He sat up late at night on the floor, walled in by forty years' worth of the *New York Times* and creased hotel brochures. He called her at two o'clock in the morning. "Do you want to go to the Sabine Hills or the Villa d'Este at Tivoli? Tell me what you want to do."

There was a pause on the line, a certain flattening out in the expectant air. "Who is this, please?" she said.

And yet, in Europe, it turned out Carla had a terrible instinct for knowing exactly what she wanted to do. In Venice she saw the Lido from a speedboat and wanted to go there. "What is it?" she said, and he told her.

"Oh, Bob, I want to go and spend a day," she said.

But she had agreed already; he reminded her, buttoning his shirt, to walk with him through the Collezione Peggy Guggenheim, and to take a vaporetto to the cathedral at Torcello. Anyway, the last time he had been to the Lido, the water was full of white fuzzballs and nobody would swim.

"But I want to go to the Lido," she objected. "Just rent a beach chair if it isn't too expensive. I just want to be there, Bob." She jumped up and down on the bed, then jumped off and ran to the window and pulled back the heavy curtain.

"I doubt you can even get your lunch out there," he said. "I thought we could sit at a table at the Piazza San Marco."

"Oh, Bob, I don't want to eat!" Carla said. "I could just go out on the boat taxi and meet you later."

They stood barefoot on the rug, facing each other across the unmade bed.

"If that's what you would like to do," he said.

"It is, it is," she said.

And it was done.

He spent the day on foot, a blind day of moving through the crowds at the Piazza San Marco, leaning on the arm of the vaporetto, sliding through the viscous water to the mudflats, on foot again across the Bridge of Sighs. Always water swelled under him, undulating, filthy blackness. He smelled his own sweat through the leather jacket and tasted in his mouth the temperature of his boil-

ing insides. After lunch in a trattoria in Dorsoduro he went out in the air and coughed two drops of blood on a Kleenex. He folded the Kleenex into the pocket of his leather jacket and went on to the piazza, where he threw the Kleenex away.

Hours later he opened the door to his room with his key. The ether of wine was like a fog, an Oriental smokiness. Carla was sitting straddled across the bed with just the top of the bikini on that she had bought in a newsstand at the beginning of their trip, before they left the United States, even. Even then he had been shocked by that crudeness, that lack of care. He remembered paying a hotel bill while she went off into the newsstand, sliding a card from his wallet, signing his name. That unpleasantness, a woman beside him with a bag in one hand and a bottle of mouthwash in the other, having some trouble about her bill, putting the bottle of mouthwash down on the cashier's polished desk, and raking a hand through her bag, her hair ugly around the neck of her coat, muttering "*Merde, merde...*"

Carla's skin was burnt red around the bathing suit top and she had long scratch marks up and down her back. She turned slowly away from the sound of running water to look at him in the door. Twisting her chin over her shoulder pulled cords in her throat which opened her mouth. She seemed to be manipulated by strings.

Some bleary look in her eyes got in the way of his concern for her.

He folded his leather jacket over his arm. He stood in the doorway with the door in one hand. "I may just meet you downstairs," he said.

Carla rolled her eyes and turned away. He went out, closing the door behind him. He bought a postcard at the front desk and sat down at a narrow writing desk.

"Dear Paula," he wrote. "It is now six o'clock Sunday evening. The clock atop the Italian steps has struck those hours with an ancient quality. An array of birds with a multiplicity of sounds is announcing their departure this evening. The light is muted and pink, the city overall is waiting." He read it over — it all seemed beside the point somehow. She had been so direct with him in her postcard from Helsinki, the small block letters: "You are an elf, darling. But I am not really interested in elves."

He folded the card over and over itself and slipped it into his

pocket just as Carla appeared in the doorway. She had on her small black thrift-store dress; she had pushed her yellow hair back behind tiny pearls in her ears. But under her eyes looked yellow-blue. They had Pellegrino water together, then dinner at a place on one of the canals, pasta first, then calamari in ink and, at Darling's suggestion, three bottles of wine. "How many bottles do we need?" Darling asked Carla. "I mean that respectfully. I want to get drunk too." They drank fast out of tiny green glasses. Bob Darling shouted, "I'm drunk! Powl! Life is a glorious mist!"

He ordered cake and a gondola, and then the ancient wooden walls began to close in around him. His vision closed down on her dress, which seemed to have no front or back. Someone had laid a round plate of cake on her chest (between her breasts, nipples like eyes), which one of the waiters passed to the gondolier on the boat after he passed Carla, who was laughing, out.

She held his arm on the ride back to the hotel. Looking out over the black water, he pictured the way he would open the world to her, the blown-glass choker he would fit around her neck, the lire liquid in his hand, pouring into her. His fingers spread around the knuckle of her knee.

"You want to know what my landlady said about you, Bob?"

"If you like," he said.

"It was the time you told that terrible joke, remember? She said, 'I don't trust one single thing about that man.'" She squeezed his arm.

On the way out of the gondola she slipped and her leg sank into the black liquid up to her knee. Walking up the narrow stairs to their room, he heard the sucking sound of her shoe. Then she was asleep, painful looking, red. He tried not to look at her, at the red marks on her back. Instead he lay back on his pillow, unable as ever to sleep in silence, and turned pages in the blank book he had bought for her to record her trip. "He was his own whole world," she had written. "He wore neat black suits, bikini underwear. Every day he sent his pajamas down to be washed — why? — and they came back ironed. He saved anything that had words on it — theater tickets, programs, newspapers, napkins — but he never read anything. He carried a skin change purse that I wanted. He could walk for hours without stopping, but only in the city. He gave out his telephone numbers to everyone."

Her hand flopped out and lay on his arm. He looked at her

things from the day, tossed out like ropes at sea — her bikini bottom, the black dress, the plate and fork and the remains of the cake they had eaten on the boat, the Oriental smell of her perfume, the ether of wine. He read more, snatches here and there — her block letters were full of effort but difficult to read. "Asked if he could cut me just a little bit on the thigh with his nail scissors." (His eye shot up, electric, red, but fell again to the page.) "In an amber room / he kissed my mouth / nibbled my mouth like an ant / carried me away / like crumbs." He let Carla's hand lie on his arm until it felt heavy, then he moved it away.

The argument was about the difference between naked and nude. They had it in France, in the countryside, over dinner in a small hotel. His cutlet had a crust on it, and it swam in a sauce. He drank wine from a leaden pitcher.

"My friend Paula one time gave a dinner party," he said, mentioning Paula carefully, by name. "All her husband's clients, all their Oriental rugs unrolled, and she just came into the room and unzipped this jumpsuit she was wearing and it just fell around her feet like a puddle. I'll never forget it. She was naked, she was statuesque, celebrating, inviting, brave. To say she was nude is an insult."

"What did people do?" Carla asked.

"Of course no one did anything. We were far too respectful. A woman like Paula naked in a room like that is almost untouchable."

"But what was it for?" Carla asked.

"You mean, did she want to be an object of art or an object of sex? Isn't that what you mean — you think these things are different?"

Carla said, "Poor Paula."

"Why?" He could hear the mockery in his voice. Spit formed in the corner of his mouth. Was it finer to be painted by Picasso than to stand naked at a window? Which picture would be finer, better?

But the word he used was wrong, she argued. You would never say a child was nude — it would be an offense to the child, it would be obscene. Nudity corrupted nakedness with eyes, she said, climbing up onto her high horse, conservative as a child.

Would she prefer the lighter and more moral state? he asked her, mocking. Which was the more "natural" state? If nudity was more artful than nakedness, wasn't it also less natural? So it followed,

since she was always interested in being more natural, that she would rather get naked than get nude.

"I am not interested in being more natural," she said.

He sent his dinner back twice. It was an impossible place. He went upstairs to the loo; through a hole in the floor he saw the top of her head, saw her spear a corner of his cutlet with her fork. Flies, flies. Standing over the urinal, he understood he was dying of foie gras and sauternes. Their room down the hall — she had flung the casement open and let in all the flies. But what could it matter? He buttoned up his pants and hell, hell, did not wash his hands.

After dinner she wanted to go for a walk — through the fields of sunflowers.

"All right," he said. He wanted to hurt her so she would remember him. But it was hard to walk without seeing his feet, through the wide yellow heads bobbling in his. His hand attached to her damp shoulder with a sound of suction.

"Your eyes are so Freud," she said.

"What did you say?"

"Freud. In German it means cold."

He took hold of the other shoulder.

"Do you think you tricked me? Do you think you're crafty?" she burst out. She pushed him off, away. He fell back, pulling the heavy-headed flowers down with him. He pulled at her arm with his hand, pulling her to him, calling her to bring him up. He felt the wide universe between him and the world. She yanked wildly at his arm and there was the door of the pension, the closed white stone.

The train reeled north at great speed. Carla opened her eyes, stretched her arms and yawned. She looked out of the window. "What time is it?" she asked.

"Five o'clock," he said. "We have dinner in half an hour."

She sat up now, serious, and rolled orange lipstick over her lips, examining her mouth in a pocket mirror inscribed, she had told him, to her mother by a lover: "A little bit every day." She closed the mirror and dropped it into one of her shapeless bags. "Oh, I can't eat at five-thirty, can you Bob? Let's go and have a drink in the bar."

It was unbelievable. He could have pulled out her eyes.

"I asked you a month ago about eating dinner on this train," he said.

"Don't you see what this is? All they are going to do is throw a tray at you," she said.

The train overtook its whistle. All sound now was behind his ears. He had an image of himself in black space, pinned on the back of a rocket. He put his arms down like two great weights on the arm-rests, to steady himself.

"Please, eat this dinner with me," he said.

"Look," said Carla. "Why can't we just go into the bar car and have a drink and a sandwich or something later, when we get hungry? I can't stand being crammed in this car like a sardine. Wouldn't it be more interesting to go and have a drink and look out the windows and talk to people?"

"I don't want to," Darling said. "What I want to do is what we arranged a month ago. I want to eat the dinner they serve on this train. I want to sit right here and eat the dinner they serve on the train!"

"Oh, I don't," she said.

"You wanted to a month ago when you said you would," he said.

"Oh, Bob, for God's sake, a month ago." She raked her hair with a hand and looked over the tops of the seats at the people sitting in seats all around them, at the oblivious heads.

"Eat dinner with me tonight. Please, Carla, just do it," he said.

"Why do you want me to do something I don't want to do? Why would you want that?" she said. Her eyes went everywhere but to him.

He looked at Carla until she ran out of places to look, until she couldn't go anywhere, until she looked at him. He sat in her path, in the aisle seat. Carla had the window. Her eyes floated over him.

"I don't see the point of asking me to sit here and eat my dinner on a tray when I am not hungry and I don't want to do it."

"Could you do something for me just because I ask you to, or do you think dinner is too much to ask? Because it wasn't too much to ask a month ago when I asked you. According to you it wasn't," he said. He looked at his fingers vibrating in his lap, melded into a warped hideous undifferentiated hand, a paw.

Her eyes glazed over. She looked past him.

He hugged his knees to his seat's edge and let her climb over him into the aisle. She stood up and stretched herself out limb by limb

like an animal. He looked up, and she rolled her green eyes over him.

"I need francs," she said.

He reached into his shirt and pulled out the skin purse she had coveted. "Take it," he said.

She caressed the skin between her fingers, tears in her eyes. "Look, Bob, I'm sorry I've been this big disappointment to you on your trip," she said. "I did my best, okay?"

He looked into her face for any sign, but there was none.

"Okay, Bob?" Carla said again.

"Take the river Styx to hell!" he said.

She walked backward toward the bar car, against the speed and pull of the train. Her fingers moved over the skin purse; it was the scrotum of a lamb. A steward brought two trays — chicken breasts in white sauce, yellow beans, apple tarts.

He sat quietly, penned into his seat by his tray. He looked across the seat Carla had left and at the tray on the folding table in front of it, and beyond that, out of the window at the blur of France. He considered moving into her seat, but then considered the empty seat to be part of his view: not-Carla. He tasted his unpromising dinner and discovered that he was hungry, but still discerning.

He ate his dinner slowly, looking carefully across the empty seat at the blur, and at Carla's chicken, at her yellow bones. All right: it was the fastest train in Europe. The food was above average. Everything was moving. The landscape outside looked as if it were underwater, wet, bleeding green-yellow-blue. He gripped a tray in each hand and in one motion switched his empty tray with hers. He ate the second dinner more quickly than the first, kept the fork gripped in his hand and moving back and forth between the tray and his mouth until he had to confess he was glad she had left. He scooped up Carla's apple tart, then wiped the ooze from his lips with a napkin, virtuous. He looked at the outside from the inside of the train. There was no comparison between this train and other trains he had ridden. He was like a fish being carried upriver in a current faster than a fish could swim. In the cradle of this unanswerable motion, Bob Darling rested and slept. The river poured into his eyes.