

# fugue

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Fall 1996/Spring 1997



Special Issue:  
Raymond  
Federman



# fugue

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**RON McFARLAND**  
**EDITOR'S NOTES**

**D**uring the week of February 17, 1997 Raymond Federman taught a wildly popular creative writing course as a Distinguished Visiting Writer at the University of Idaho. Those of us who had gotten to know him through his writing and through our work on this special issue of *Fugue* were not surprised. We decided to open the second half of our double issue with our Federman interview because some of the information is potentially useful in understanding, or at least in appreciating, the selections from his work that follow. You'll also find one further work of his gracing the back cover of this issue. Moreover, several passages in the interview are creative moments (he calls them "fragments," whether they look like poems or prose) in their own right. The fragments, then, are from a book he has been writing at the rate of one entry per day over the past year (hence the proposed title, *366*, inasmuch as 1996 was a leap year). The fragments are followed by two fine essays, one by Professor Welch Everman of the University of Maine and the other by Professor Lance Olsen of the University of Idaho. Welcome, then, to the strange, bilingual, multivalent world of "Moinous" (I/me/we/us) as Raymond Federman calls himself.

In addition, you'll find our regular offering of works from a wide variety of skilled writers and talented newcomers in the first half of this double issue. Among them is one of particular note. Roberta Hill, who hails from the University of Wisconsin, was our Fall 1996 Distinguished Visiting Writer in poetry. We open the first half of our double issue with two of her works acquired for your enjoyment. ■

EDWIN MCGUIRE  
 EDITOR'S NOTE

FRIDMAN	.....
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...the first...  
 ...a while...  
 ...and...  
 ...to know...  
 ...this...  
 ...the...  
 ...because...  
 ...standing...  
 ...and...  
 ...back...  
 ...view...  
 ...they...  
 ...then...  
 ...get...  
 ...a...  
 ...cross...  
 ...and...  
 ...What...  
 ..."M...  
 ...In...  
 ...wide...  
 ...last...  
 ...Robert...  
 ...Fall...  
 ...for...  
 ...you...



---

**ROBERTA HILL**  
**CONCH**

I am the wave woman without eyes  
who built this pink spiral  
with my constant mirth,  
eluding every grasp as I samba  
through the sea. Its indigo gate  
feeds me small mute blooms  
of urchins and worms.  
I dwindle down to the bottom  
of breath and push from me a self  
of bountiful bones, colored with dawn  
and evening skies, meshed  
with the fleshy phosphore  
of my mothers.

So I spun in sand and foam  
with liquid pinks this fluted home  
that sea gods love. Then a hard thing  
gurgling in a coral wood  
grabbed me and broke me  
into air. My rooms keep faith  
with dawn and even tides. Beware  
when you sound this shell  
that I once was. Coiling water  
will come spinning its silver flesh.  
I'm nimble now in wind,  
a stormy petrel, tying threads  
of spindrift on the shore.  
My glare few dare escape.

# How She Got Away

ROBERTA HILL

I filed for divorce today,  
because you've treated me so bad.  
I stopped dancing in the living room,  
my life lapsing into manageable drudgery.

You edged me too far,  
saying with your sure innocence I needed  
to look at what I had done  
and do it again. You knew  
I could better myself this time.  
Better each time, over and over,  
the same worn-out dogged day  
of never going forward,  
never hearing any other voice  
say, let it splat and split, take it  
and improvise. Letting it go  
makes the world so messy.

No, no, no, Mr. Perfection,  
you piloted through these marriage skies,  
steering a most careful course  
so we did not see one unexpected rain,  
one tacky blizzard, one vagrant wind.  
Like a fool I believed you believed  
in creating, even while you baited me  
with accolades and told me I could get it right,  
so you'd be pleased and soon.

I'm not going to carry  
a broom and dustcloth any more.  
My floor can fill with papers. I won't  
care, not even when they come  
for my signature.  
I'm going to enjoy the next ten years  
without the golden earrings  
on my lobes, polished bright  
from the heat of a spiteful heart  
because I lived as you told me.

**KAREN SEASHORE**  
**BOUQUET**

I woke covered in petals. An Irish setter licked cake from my feet with beastly slurps, his tongue a snake between my toes. Drowsy, I lay blinking through the blur to stare at beads of dew, each balanced on its blade of grass. Honeybees bobbed drunkenly over the bed of nasturtiums where my head rested. When I sat up, the dog loped off, the reds of his coat almost hurting my eyes. Careful not to step on frosting gobs, the sugar-stiff blue flowers or the gooey clumps of white, I crossed the patio barefoot and walked to a sliding glass door. Stopped at the entrance, I smelled last night's champagne. I could hear the music of the party still, the low rumble of samba, the pluckings of string bass trapped inside my ears.

Their honeymoon was started, the two of them in a rented bed. The party was done for and I woke alone, covered in petals, their silky slip against my skin.

I returned to the nasturtiums and found a spigot, an inanimate rabbit with ears laid back against its cool brass coat. I ran sun-warmed water from the hose over my belly where peach-colored orchids ringed my waist in a looping belt. They wouldn't rinse off, neither they nor the baby's breath haloing my nipples in lacy cloud. Staring down my front, I stood confused, clothed in the fertility of a bridal bouquet. What now? What other choice did I have but to go with what fate had flung my way?

Black-eyed Susans climbed my thighs, their rays long points of yellows, reds, and orange. Cosmos and calendula ran riot up my arms. Like a living tattoo, clematis vined its way around me.

And, at the ends of every toe and finger, my nails quivered in the blush of rose petals. Possibly, I was beautiful.

I dropped the hose and ran down a green slope dotted in white clover. At the bottom I dived into a pond and under lily pads flat and still as sleep. Frogs bumped over my tongue, wiggled through my open mouth, their taste greenly amphibian. I came up for air. Standing with a long-handled net, a gardener in jute-colored breeches asked:

“What you up to, miss?”

“Taking a swim. I’m floating in all these petals.”

“It’s all the same,” he told me. “Ain’t nothing that’ll rid you of them.” He swirled his net on the surface. “Better flowers than weeds.”

He spoke with the regularity of breath.

At the far end of the lagoon I climbed out. I shrugged the daisied epaulets of my shoulders, muttered “see you later,” and plunged into a hedge of bridal wreath. I shoved through its stiff-arched branches, fighting for direction and unable to see, held back by tendons of grape vine that spiraled my ankle. Wide-mouthed, I bit grapes from their bunch and a sweet-sour darkness swallowed my teeth. Only then did I emerge into the openness of sun showing herself above a steep-walled cliff of shrubs, highlighting a path bedded in moss. Here the day hummed, full of leaves and insects, stippled with motes caught in the newborn shanks of sun. A wind came ruffling my delphinium bustle, cornflower blue; it dizzied me in perfumes of godetia and geranium. Outsized froths of icing on their sturdy backs, a column of ants crossed the path. I tilted my head back to nest on a warm collar of fuchsia; above me the honey locust too had set out blossoms. Questions bloomed in my mind about how I fit into all this—the vast tumult of petals, the orchestra of scents, the conversation between giant stems. I spat grape seeds into the silence, set them circling like a tower of gnats.

Strange, weird place, but, even if I could find my way, I wasn’t ready to leave. On the curving path I walked and walked, the pads of my feet pressing into moss, the moss springing against my soles. Inside my layered petals I felt secure, cradled in momentary happiness. From both sides of the trail, I sensed a gar-

shade. He wagged his hips against my stamen; his hairy body tickling at my pistil. He was small and fragile. At his extremities, quivering and indistinct.

His tongue uncoiled. I stretched upward to make myself tall and threatening; my petals waxy, hard as armor. Hovering on tiptoes, he stared with eyes large enough to cover half his face and I guessed he could barely see at such close range. He carried sharp threat like a weapon. A moment paused and I drew my lily's petals around her like a cloak.

"Are you convinced she's not for you?" Again, a word opened from inside me. "Pollinated."

"Clever, aren't you?" he answered. "Let me see again."

I struck another pose, and gaining confidence, grew until my lily stood above his head. At this he clasped my zinniaed knees and ordered:

"Kneel down. "

I knelt. With sticklike arms he gripped the spikes of my liatra hair and pulled back my head, exposing the tender lilacs beneath my chin. He bent over me, curious and tense, and lowered his tongue until it grazed my lily's stigma. I closed my tulip-shielded eyelids, wanting to think of other things.

"Keep them open."

I opened my eyes, the forget-me-nots of knowledge with lashes of scorpion grass. His hair, moussed into upright tendrils, stung at me. Suddenly, he let me go.

"You win," he said. "This time."

Like that, he vanished, empty baskets swinging at his thighs. Only the menacing odor of danger stayed behind. I swooned, my lily cringing in the heat. Taking heart from the brace of foxgloves at my ribs, courage from the cheeky brass of Oriental poppies, I pulled myself together. Stumbling, wilting, I set off, striding now with the purpose that comes with a decision to return. For hours, I think, I cantered through a labyrinth of green until I found my way back into the yard, where I spied the gardener in the shade, still at work. He was talking to himself in bursts, too caught up pulling chickweed to see my slice into the pond. It was water I needed now, its cool joy, the totality of its presence.

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• • •

**B**y nightfall, I was able to climb out, shedding the day's colors onto the dark lawn, a wake of bruised petals marking my return up the hill to the patio's edge where I pulled a cotton blouse over my naked crop of goosebumps and stepped into a rayon skirt. My body housed itself in the cotton bolls, in the woody cellulose of trees. I buckled the conches of a silver belt around my waist and strapped my feet into calfskin sandals. Dressed, I raked fingers through my dripping hair and left the backyard by the side gate, the last guest to depart. ■



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# THE OLD COSMOTHEATRE

FREDRICK ZYDEK

The Cosmo sign blinks  
its blue message  
to the stucco cafe  
across the street.  
Dietrich's Blue Angel  
stalks the halls inside.

Think of penny candy,  
Nyoka Jungle Girl  
swinging through the 9¢  
matinee, Little Dolly  
Daydream, pride of Idaho,  
walking the streets  
of Kellogg, night shrinking  
to a single bed.

And what of Little Boy Blue  
waking in Picasso's  
blue room only to find  
a German gargoyle  
nesting in his hair,  
and the line to the men's room  
a good six minutes long.

I wait among the coming  
attractions in the hollow  
of the wide white shell  
where the best explanations  
of light wait for the room  
to open its single eye.

# JOHN HAAG MAPLES APPLAUD

each breeze  
according to its excellence.  
While the longneedle pine rustles  
politely, it takes the thundergust  
to move the fastidious spruce.  
You can tell a tree  
by what it appreciates:  
birches dress for dinner,  
the willow bows to  
the taciturn hemlock,  
but the oak bows only  
to the ax.

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# THE BOY WHO DINED ON RAINBOWS

JOHN HAAG

By swift-flowing Switzer Creek  
as a twelve-year-old terror  
of tadpole and trout  
I learned the secret of flight.  
Belly-down on the broad planks  
I stared into that swiftness  
racing the bridge timbers  
four feet below my nose and knew  
that not the water but the magic  
platform on which I rode  
was moving, gliding upstream,  
and on spread arms I soared  
to places where my dreams  
could not be doubted.

Rising, with willow pole  
and skein of dripping rainbows,  
I strode the dirt road home, never  
touching the ground.

# EVERARDO TORREZ EVA LAND THE ACE OF CLUBS

So there we were bored out of our skulls on Saturday morning. In La Colonia, we had done it all from stealing quarters out of the coin-operated laundry machines to shooting sparrows with the sling-shot Checko's uncle Luz had brought from Mexico. We sneaked women's panties from clothes lines and hung them on doorknobs or car antennas. We couldn't count the bloody noses, fat lips and black eyes we'd gotten from fights with other kids in the camp. Once we even caught a jar full of hissing cockroaches and turned them loose in Sapo McGee's car.

He was La Colonia's landlord. His real name was Wilson, but we called him Sapo because his round face, curved mouth and bulging eyes made him look like a frog. Never to his face, though, since he had once kicked out a tenant for doing just that. "I heard Sapo talking the other night about this red-headed girl that dances naked for dollars down at The Ace of Clubs," said Checko. "Said she got tits big as watermelons and an ass smooth as a ripe nectarine."

Checko, known to others as Sergio Valas, was always getting crazy ideas. At sixteen, he was the oldest of the group, the self-appointed leader. He claimed to be the great-great grandson of Pancho Villa who had once raided a village in Northern Chihuahua and coupled with several of the women there. One of them supposedly bore Checko's great grandmother.

Checko's parents had divorced a few years back. His mother lived in Arizona, and his father had recently married a lady named Juana Soto who always wore Spandex shorts and liked bleaching

her hair blonde so she could look white. Only problem was her skin was darker than Rio Grande mud.

Juana was kind of an inside joke to us because she liked calling Checko Honey-buns and making him do weird stuff like bringing her towels while she took a shower or sending him to El Mercadito, Colonia's version of 7-Eleven, to buy her feminine hygiene products. To piss him off we'd say something like "Honey-buns, it's my time of the month. Run over to El Mercadito for me, pleeeeeeeeeez" in our best girly voices.

"She's probably so ugly that the guy who gives her the dollar asks for his change," said Bobby Sol, alias Rojas.

He was six months younger than Checko. We called him Rojas because he'd turn tomato red when he was pissed off or embarrassed or had been out in the sun too long. He always wore a black Def Leppard T-shirt—sometimes he'd wear it for an entire week—that he had won at the county fair. His most prized possession, though, was an old leather belt that his father used to whip him like a race horse with when Rojas was little. It was so big it looped twice around his waist.

He was shorter than both Checko and I and chubby even though we rarely saw him eat. The younger kids around the camp used to call him bald eagle because of a hairless spot on his mop-top head where his father had dumped battery acid when he thought Rojas had drank his Mezcal. He eventually grew the hair back. His mother was in jail somewhere, or dead. He wasn't sure.

"Sapo said she looks like Raquel Welch," answered Checko.

"Man, she's like a hundred years old," said Rojas.

"When she was younger, Dumbshit," said Checko.

"You're the dumbshit for believing anything that frog-faced panty sniffer says."

"What about the girl?" I said.

I was thirteen, the youngest of the three. Back then I was known by everyone in La Colonia as Kiki. Even my parents called me that. My real name was Enrique Presas.

"She dances every afternoon. Takes off everything, even her underwear. And if she likes you, she'll let you suck her titties."

"So?" said Rojas.

"I say we ride on over to Norland and sneak into The Ace of Clubs."

"That's stupid," said Rojas. "It's ten miles away. Plus they don't let kids into bars."

"Man, it's Saturday. They'll be so many people there, we won't even be noticed."

"We're more broke than the ten commandments," I said.

"No we ain't," said Checko, pulling out a wad of sweaty bills from one of his Traxx sneakers.

"Where did you get that?" I said, feeling the shudder of an erection ripple through me.

"Juana's alimony. She uses it buy her menthol cigarettes and chocolate covered cherries and *Playgirl* magazines. I watched her hide it one day in an old shoe box way in the back of her bedroom closet behind all her other junk. There must have been over a hundred dollars in there. I borrowed about seventy bucks."

"Let me see it," said Rojas.

"Shit no," said Checko. "Unless you all come with me to Norland. Then we'll split it fifty-fifty."

Rojas began to giggle.

"What's so funny?" said Checko.

"You can't split something three ways fifty-fifty. Now I know why you got an F in Halley Shoots' class last year."

Checko cocked his fist at Rojas. "You want to go or not?"

We all looked at each other. Checko pressed his mouth shut like he always did when he was nervous. He was tall and thick-chested, big as most kids' dads, with a finger-length strip of thin mustache. He was so handsome even the married ladies in the camp wet their lips and rustled their thighs when he walked by.

"I'll go," I said. Checko raised his hand to high-five me. I slapped it, loving the sound of our palms striking against each other.

"I don't know," said Rojas, kicking the dirt with a torn Traxx sneaker. "My dad will kill me if he finds out I left the camp."

"Suit yourself. More money for us, right Kiki."

"Come on Rojas," I said. I knew Checko was bluffing. "Remember when you told me you'd eat cockroaches and lick Sapo's armpits if you could see a real live naked girl?"

How many times had all three of us thought that, staring at the glossy pages of porn magazine layouts, yearning to touch the glistening, petal-soft bristles, of tasting peach-colored flesh and tasting its heat?

He shrugged. "We got to be back before dark. Last time I left the camp without my dad's permission he did a Julio Caesar Chavez on my kidneys."

"We'll be back before supper," said Checko.

"If this girl's as hot as you say she is," said Rojas. "I'll have something to spank it to for a week."

"You need to stop doing that shit. You're going to make it crooked," said Checko.

"It's always been crooked. Besides, guys with crooked ones have better sex."

"Yeah, if you're doing it with a camel," I said.

I saw their mouths open and heard what was to me the best sound in the world: Checko's high-pitched, yodely, blurts that made him seem debonair and fearless and Rojas' dry, goofy machine-gun assaults.

**W**e sneaked out around eleven and jumped the sewer canal, pulling our bikes across the mud through the swaying, billowy onion stalk-heads toward the highway. The camp looked different from the outside.

Isolated. Dormant.

Most of La Colonia worked the onion, sugar beet and cucumber fields spread throughout the Magic Valley, sometimes up to twelve hours a day. They'd come home in a bad mood, tired, hungry and start yelling at their kids, We understood, though. Everything they did was so maybe, just maybe we could have it a little bit better than they did someday.

La Migra never raided La Colonia. Some said it was because mostly families lived there. Others said Sapó paid the Migra off so they would leave La Colonia alone and he could continue bilking us. My mother thought it was her prayers to the *Virgen de Guadalupe*. Whatever the reason, we considered ourselves fortunate. Once outside the camp, however, we were fair game.

So, La Colonia was always overcrowded. Some even camped out in the parking lots, living out of their pickup trucks' camper shells. Of course they had to pay rent just like everybody else.

Out of the three, only Checko had lived outside the camp. His life's dream was to buy a metal detector and search for his great-great grandfather's buried gold. His uncle Luz, who was now

dead, had told him stories of when Pancho Villa stole gold bullion from trains, some of which he traded for weapons and food. The rest lay hidden somewhere in the mountains surrounding the village of Batopilas, Chihuahua.

Rojas had been born in the camp and didn't really want to live anywhere else. His only aspiration was to one day have enough money to buy La Colonia and kick Sapó McGee out on his ass. Then he'd fix the place up and let all the tenants live rent-free.

He was frightened of his own shadow, wouldn't even get up to go to the bathroom at night. This was mainly the fault of his father who, besides using Rojas as his personal punching bag, was known to have painted his face with black shoe polish during drinking binges and chased his only son around the apartment until he nearly passed out from fright. Rojas' sister Lucy spent most of her time at her friend Rosy's.

My parents and I came to the camp from Mexico a year after my birth. During the summer my father hoed sugar-beets and moved irrigation pipes. In winter he did various jobs around the valley like hand-washing cars for a dollar an hour plus tips or cleaning the equipment down at the sugar-beet refinery. Once in a while he'd get on a potato hauling crew, which was great because he'd take me along with him on weekends. I'd ride all day with him in the truck listening to old Beatles's songs on the AM stations. My mother baked Mexican sweetbread which she and her friend Sonia sold door-to-door in La Colonia for a quarter apiece. Like Checko, I am an only child.

The late August heat was stifling, dry and merciless, the air was so still you could hear the crows frolicking in a distant field or the tinny clatter of irrigation pipes banging against each other. A few times I thought I heard voices then realized it was probably my imagination. Traffic was rare, but we ducked into the shrub at the edge of the fields whenever we heard a car approaching.

La Migra hadn't been seen in months, but you could never be too careful. It was our bogeyman, what parents admonished their kids with, a nightmare demon come to life, there at every turn, always within a fingernail's grasp of us, it had become mystical, almost God-like to us. We planned our lives around it, where it had been seen, who it had picked up, always wondering if one day we'd open the front door and there it would be standing in its



puke-green uniform, revolver drawn, flaunting its gleaming, mustache grin. *You're under arrest, Mojado.*

Though I could not remember what Mexico was like, I thought it must have been a real shitty place for us to be so afraid of being shipped back.

We rode our bikes in a straight line with Checko in the lead, me right behind him and Rojas last. We'd stand on the pedals as we coasted down a hill, ducking our heads like professional racers, hoping our inertia would carry us over the next one. Rojas's bike would lose its chain every half mile or so. Checko and I took turns putting it back on for him.

"What do we want boys?" Checko would scream, and we'd all answer in unison, "Everybody say hey, we want some pussy," mimicking the refrain of a popular rap song.

As we rounded a sharp curve, Checko braked and jumped off his bike. He walked to the edge of the road and looked into the water-cut ravine twenty feet below. "This is the place," he said in a low, sleepy voice.

"What place?" said Rojas.

"Place where Uncle Luz got killed."

"I remember," said Rojas. "He was drunk and fell asleep at the wheel. You had a picture of him lying in the coffin. It gave me nightmares for a week."

Checko shook his head. "He was murdered," he said.

"How do you know?" I said.

"Guy who was at the bar that night told my dad some dudes were pushing him around, calling him wet-back and spic and beaner. Uncle Luz fought back and beat the shit out of one of them. They followed him, ran him off the road."

"Sheep shitballs," said Rojas.

"How come nobody ever investigated?" I said.

"You think cops give a shit about how a Mexican dies around here?"

"I'm sorry, Man," I said.

"Got nothing to be sorry about. Just how it's laid out for some us, that's all. Nothing you can do about."

I looked down into the muddy, slow-running stream. It felt strange standing where someone had been killed. I tried to imag-

ine what Checko's uncle was thinking just before he died, if he'd had any idea, any premonition that morning when he opened his eyes that it was his last day. I thought how artificial he had looked lying stiffly in that coffin all dressed up in clothes that didn't belong on him. At that moment I felt completely alone and fragile, like the very wind might suddenly whisk the life right out of my body.

"People said they've seen his ghost," said Checko.

"Dude, don't start talking about ghosts or I'm going back right now," said Rojas.

"I don't believe it," said Checko. "My uncle ain't no ghost. He's up there in heaven helping God kick the asses of rowdy angels."

We rode on, stopping occasionally to drink from an irrigation sprinkler or water main. At one point Rojas ran off into a corn field to "squish some swirlies," as he liked to put it. Checko and I tried to flush him out by sneaking up on him pretending we were snakes, but gave ourselves away each time he ripped one because we couldn't keep from laughing.

Kimama Landfill was the halfway point between La Colonia and Norland and a popular looting spot. You could usually find radios that still worked, old tires for swings or for burning, bed frames, lumber, lamp shades and just about everything else if you looked long enough. One of my dad's friends once found an old transmission which he put into his Monte Carlo which ran for two years before he flew it into a telephone pole. One man's trash...as the saying goes.

As luck would have it, Rojas wanted to stop and look for some magazines. "Forget it," said Rojas. "We already lost time with you fertilizing the field back there."

"Come on, Man. My old one has the pages all stuck together."

"Haven't you ever heard of Kleenex?"

Rojas didn't hear him. He was already climbing one of the garbage heaps. "I found one," he said, holding the magazine up in the air. We dropped our bikes behind some tall sagebrush and joined him.

"This one's better than *Hustler*," he said flipping the tattered pages. *Saints and Sinners*. The photos were black and white, but

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more graphic than anything we had ever seen in *Playboy* or *Penthouse* or even *Hustler*. It was a gem of a find.

Had one of us looked up just once we would have seen the sleek, boat-shaped Impala pulling into the landfill through the back entrance. But we were too busy fancying the exploits of Bonan the Barbarian.

Cuervo Martinez was the most feared Colonia tenant. He, his scrawny sister Pearly, and three other hooligans: Humdinger, who liked branding parts of his body with a wire hanger hook which he heated with a butane lighter until it was red-hot; Foozball, a tall, pimply-faced white kid who had spent a year in mental ward for decapitating cats, and a chubby, owl-faced junior high drop-out they called Spam-Boy who never spoke would often pile into Cuervo's navy-blue '74 Impala and race around the camp drunk, picking fights with anybody that looked at them for more than two seconds, peeling out in people's lawns, pissing on doorsteps.

When a car or bike or TV set turned up missing in the camp, we all knew it was The Cuervos, as they like to be called, but there was nothing to be done. Even Sapó was afraid of them. Rumor had it Cuervo had fled to the Magic Valley from somewhere in Texas after killing a rival gang member and robbing several pawn shops. Lucky us.

"You trespassing, Chum," said Cuervo flicking his spent cigarette into the muck. "And that's my magazine."

"I found it," answered Rojas, his face flashing streaks of red.

"You deaf, Kotex," said Cuervo, pulling a knife from his back pocket. It was one of those cheesy ones with the grooved handle that they sell at the county fair. It was curved at the tip and razor-sharp with the letters J-E-S-U-S inscribed along the blade. We began to retreat, but Humdinger and Foozball came up behind us. Pearly was waiting in the Impala with her feet propped on the dash.

"It's mine," said Rojas again, his voice beginning to quiver.

"Listen you little spunk-fucked sack of twat juice. I ain't telling you again. Hand over the mag."

Pearly suddenly appeared next to Cuervo, sucking a Dum-dums lollipop, her bony, sallow face swaying left to right. She was my age, short and slender. Her hair, dark-blue in the sunlight, was slicked back and tied in a round bun at the back of her head. She

squinted, shielding her eyes from the glare of the day. They were a soft green, heartless, like those of a hawk. She smiled, brandishing a pair of blade-thin canine teeth sheathed beneath lips that reminded me of wet rose petals.

"Him," she said in a giddy voice, pointing to Rojas. "He wants to do bad things to my butt."

"That true, Mole Tit?" said Cuervo.

Rojas briskly shook his head. His jaw begin to tremble.

"Last squirt of dick cheese that said something about Pearly had to chase down Humdinger's Doberman to get his nut-sack back."

Humdinger snorted laughter.

Rojas was stone white. He was rocking back and forth in his shoes. The magazine dropped from his hand. God, don't let him start crying, I prayed.

Pearly pressed her mouth to Cuervo's ear and whispered. Cuervo smiled and handed her the knife.

"Chums," he said turning to me and Checko. "My baby sister wants to have a little fun with your friend. I advise you to split unless you want Humdinger, Foozball and Spam-boy to play musical dicks with your assholes."

Foozball and Humdinger squealed like hyenas. Spam-boy said nothing. Pearly stalked toward Rojas making circular cutting motions with the knife. Her fingers nails were long and pointed, freshly polished with red lacquer.

"My baloney has a first name...", she began to sing.

Rojas curled his face up and started to bawl. All four of them cackled. Pearly kissed his cheek, then bent down to pick up the magazine.

"That's his magazine," said Checko.

"Why don't you come and get it for his blubbering, flappy cunt" said Cuervo.

"Get rid of the knife, if you think you're man without it," said Checko.

"You think you can take me, Mutt-fuck," said Cuervo, flashing his two perfect rows of square-shaped teeth.

"Like a virgin on prom night," said Checko, curling one side of his mouth in a half-smile.

"You crazy?" I whispered to him.

Checko looked at me like he couldn't have cared less that he was about to go toe-to-toe with Cuervo Martinez who had once cracked open his own father's skull after he called Cuervo by his real name, Heremias. It was a look both reckless and noble.

Rojas wept dryly, mumbling something about Jesus and his father and nasty magazines. I noticed an iron pipe lying about five inches from my foot and made up my mind that if any of the others, including Pearly, decided to jump in, I was going to start dishing out some damage.

Cuervo handed his knife and muscle shirt to Pearly. His chest was smooth and shiny, his stomach rippled with two rows of bulging flesh packets. A tiny chrome star hung from a thin chain which impaled his nipple and glittered in the afternoon sunlight. He rubbed his palms over his bald, egg-shaped head while Checko back-pedaled onto a level spot of dirt between the garbage piles.

They circled each other like jealous birds. Cuervo was a few inches shorter than Checko, but twice as burly. Cuervo sized him up, head to toe, licking his lips. "What do you want me to do to him, Mija," he asked.

"Deliver him," said Pearly.

Cuervo gunned his foot into Checko's ribs. Foozball and Humdinger whooped as Checko gasped and fell forward. Pearly squawked with glee.

Cuervo shot his foot out again, catching Checko on the mouth, snapping his head backward and flinging him to the ground. Checko covered his face with his hands. Blood ran through his fingers. He reached for a chunk of concrete about the size of a football. As Cuervo leaned in on him, Checko swung the concrete chunk upward, driving it between Cuervo's thighs.

Cuervo howled and fell to his knees, cupping his crotch. He quickly recovered and pounced on Checko, who was still on the ground. Burying his knee in Checko's throat, he began pummeling his face, yelping with satisfaction each time his fist struck bull's-eye.

Checko squirmed and clawed at Cuervo's body, trying gain leverage and escape. He began making choking sounds, and his

face had turned a pale blue color. My heart was in overdrive. He's going to kill him, I thought. He's going to strangle him to death. I took a step toward the pipe.

Suddenly Checko grasped Cuervo's nipple ring and yanked it down, tearing it free. Cuervo shrieked and clutched at his breast as blood splattered his chest. Checko kicked him away and began to crawl toward us, but Cuervo caught him.

"The knife," he screamed to Pearly.

Pearly tossed it to him. Cuervo plucked it from the air, clenched Checko by the hair and wrenched his head back.

"Prepare to meet Jesus," he hissed into Checko's ear, holding the knife to his throat.

Just as I scooped the pipe into my hands, someone screamed "La Migra." It was Spam-boy, who was standing on top of a tire pile pointing toward the highway. First we all looked at him, incredulous that he had actually spoken. When the van came into view, everyone scattered. Pearly sprinted to the Impala and dove into the back seat. Humdinger wormed into an old refrigerator. Fozzball covered himself with a bent car hood, and I almost laughed to think that a white kid was hiding from La Migra. Spam-boy pulled a strip of tarp over himself.

"Cancel Christmas," said Cuervo before slithering underneath a large, wiry mattress.

Rojas and I grabbed Checko's arms and dragged him into a barley field behind the landfill where we lay flat on our stomachs. Warm moisture rose from the damp ground, and the mosquitoes began to swarm. I tried shooing them away, but they kept coming, charging every exposed patch of skin they could find.

When I couldn't bear the agony anymore, I started swatting at my neck, cheeks and arms. Soon the entire palm of my hand was red with blood. I lifted my head for fresh air and watched as the mint-colored van approached. "Get down," whispered Rojas who had a blood-engorged mosquito feasting on his eyelid, but I couldn't. I had never seen La Migra before.

Countless dark heads filled the back of the van, their faces pressed to the window glass. The man in the passenger seat swiveled his head like an owl as he scanned the area. His face was pink, and his blonde hair fluttered in the breeze. He wore shiny

fighter-pilot sunglasses and a light-brown mustache. For a second he seemed to be looking right at me. My heart froze as I thought that we'd been spotted. Yet the van gradually picked up speed and eventually disappeared behind a hill.

The Cuervos jumped into the Impala and sped away in the other direction. La Migra sure must be powerful, I thought, to make even Cuervo Martinez run away in fear.

I lay back down, listening to my heart thump against the moist ground, defending my face from the mosquitoes with my shirt. Rojas was still sobbing, but with less intensity now. Checko lay face down, whimpering. His blood had turned the dirt a dark purple color.

**W**e found a sprinkler and washed most of the blood off Checko's face, but the front of his shirt was saturated with it. His mouth was cut open and swollen. Some of his teeth were loose, and it hurt him to breathe.

"Ribs are probably busted," I said. "My dad caught a irrigation pipe in the chest once and felt the same thing."

"It's all my fault," sobbed Rojas. "I was the one that wanted to stop. If it hadn't been for me we'd be in Norland now and we never would have met up with that psycho."

"It ain't nobody's fault," said Checko. "It was supposed to happen. Just like Uncle Luz was supposed to get killed back there in that curve. You can't cheat destiny."

"So you still want to go to Norland?" I said.

"Fucking-ay I do," said Checko.

"Cuervo's still out there," said Rojas with a shudder.

"He won't coming looking for us," answered Checko. "He's hurt. And if he does, I'll tear out his other nipple."

"What about La Migra?" Rojas said.

"That van was full," I said. "They won't be back for another load today."

Rojas had stopped crying. His eyes were red and swollen, and snot was building up on his upper lip. I was sure he would want to go back and knew that would be the end of it. Even though Checko and I could have made it to Norland, without Rojas the trip was meaningless. We all knew it.

"Well?" said Checko. He and I looked at Rojas.

"All's I know is I want to see me some watermelon-size tits," he said and cracked a grin.

The going was slow the rest of the way because of Checko's injured ribs. Once in a while he'd start to teeter on his bicycle and Rojas and I had to steady him before he fell. His mouth bled, but he just let the blood seep down his chin and soak up in his shirt.

I couldn't get what Checko had said back at the landfill about destiny out of my head. Was there such a thing? Were we all headed down a certain, predetermined path which we could not avoid? Was it destiny that had sent us to Norland? If so, what did it have in store for us there? I remembered something my mother always said: Everything happens for a reason. I believed her. The more I thought about it, the more important our journey became. We couldn't go back. No matter what.

**N**orland had once been an outpost for farmers, sheep herders, and traders, complete with a schoolhouse and a post office, both of which had long since vanished, replaced by booze shacks, back-country prostitutes and small-time marijuana dealers, but they had been driven off by the local Mormon leadership. All that remained was a grocery store called The Oasis, The Oasis Diner which sold hamburgers as big as pizzas, a tiny cluster of shacks occupied by migrant Filipino families, illegals like us, and The Ace of Clubs.

Inside The Oasis it was cool and still. A small air-conditioner huffed quietly on the back wall. The sweet, pungent smell of laundry detergent, pastries and old cardboard hung in the air. The owner eyed us with contempt as we walked past the front counter. He watched us through the round, convex mirror perched like a huge eye on the ceiling as we walked to the ice cream freezer.

"What the hell happened to you, Boy?" said the owner as we laid our goods on the counter.

"Fell off my bike," said Checko.

The man's nose was covered with broken capillaries, his eyes sunk deeply in his head, which was mostly bald except for a few



transparent strands that seemed to dissolve in the fluorescent ceiling lights. He bared his gray, receding gums in a snarl as we handed him a handful of nickels and pennies.

"You don't come back in here until you clean yourself up, you hear," he said before we walked out the door.

We sat down on the front steps to eat our ice cream. I swallowed mine in large chunks. The sweet burn of the vanilla and fudge numbed my mouth and sent dreamy waves of ecstasy into my brain, making me feel like I was floating. Checko nibbled at his carefully. He soon gave up and tossed it half-eaten into the dust. Rojas picked the peanut chunks off the top and popped them in his mouth so meticulously that soon the ice cream and fudge had melted all over his hand.

"What now?" I said. Checko cocked his head toward The Ace of Clubs across the street.

"What about the money?" said Rojas. Checko took the money out of his shoe and gave us each twenty-three dollars. Rojas put the bills to his nose and sniffed them.

"Only pussy smells better than money."

"You ain't never smelled pussy in your life," said Checko.

"Sure I have. Smells like strawberries and honey mixed with Jack Daniels," said Rojas.

"No it don't you dumbshit," said Checko. "It smells like an armpit that ain't been washed in two days. Only pussy you smelled is your own."

I started laughing. Checko tried to smile, but quickly covered his mouth to shield his wounds. Rojas ripped open a packet of baseball cards, retrieved the gum and threw the rest away.

"Look," he said, licking the last of the ice cream off his fingers.

There was a sign on the front on the front wall of the store with a palm tree and the word OASIS painted on it. Next to the palm tree someone had sketched a woman with thick, shapely legs wrapped in a tight skirt, the tops of her breasts popping up through her blouse. She wore a large sun hat that hid her eyes. All you could see of her face was a thin nose, thick, sloppy-kiss lips and a pointy chin.

"They forgot the nipples," said Rojas. He had drunk half of his Dr. Pepper before offering us some. Seeing the opening of the

bottle covered with melted fudge, peanut chunks and bubble-gum slobber, Checko and I both declined.

FREE MENUUDO WITH PURCHASE OF BEER—EVA L PERFORMS TODAY read the roadside marquee that stood at the edge of the parking lot, which was empty except for a dusty Ford pickup with a missing grille and a muddy three-wheeled Honda ATV.

My eyes danced over the letters EVA L. The name caused a tingly sensation in my crotch. They were like magical letters, ingredients to a spell. I thought of the drawing on the storefront and felt myself get hard.

"You said this place would be crawling with people," said Rojas. "How we going to get in now?" Checko shrugged.

"What do you mean, you don't know?" screamed Rojas. "You drag us out here, get your teeth bashed in by a psycho along the way. The damn Migra almost caught us. My father's going to find out I left the camp and cut my sack off, and now you say you don't know how we're going to get in. What the fuck, Man."

"Nobody forced you to come," said Checko.

"Bullshit: Come on, Man. There's this girl that looks like Raquel Welch that takes her clothes off. I'll give you money if you come with me. Don't be a pussy."

"Shut it, Rojas," I said. "We'll think of a plan." He looked at me, his eyes black with contempt and doubt, but said nothing more.

A long wooden porch ran the front length of the bar on top of which stood a large, blue neon sign in the shape of an Ace of Clubs. The cinder block walls were covered with dripping, muddy stains and seemed to be melting in the afternoon sun. Three red, blue, and yellow windows about the size of a fist marked the front wall, but the glass was too thick to see through. The wooden door at the far right-hand side of the building was pock-marked with bullet holes. A brown, rust-eaten chain hung from the bolt-lock handle and clanked against the splintered wood when the breeze picked up.

We sat on the porch, feeling the vibrations of the music as it poured through the cinder block. A scattering dust-devil floated across the parking lot.

"Hey Checko," said Rojas.

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry for talking shit to you."

"Forget it."

"Thanks for sticking up for me."

"You stuck up for yourself. That took a lot of balls."

Even though it was still hot, summer was fading. You could tell in the lengthening shadows, the dark amber sunlight, in the wind's lonely howl. I watched ribbons of cloud swell, change shapes and dissolve in the sky above a purple mountainous horizon. They made me sleepy.

"If you could have any girl, who would it be?" said Rojas.

"Teddy Ketterling from eighth grade Health Class?" I said.

"One time she brushed right up against me during a fire drill. I used to write her poems and leave them in her locker, then I'd walk by and watch her reading them, her face all blushed and glittery."

"You write poems, Kiki?" said Checko. "I never knew that."

"Girls like getting poems from guys," I said. "Especially if they're anonymous."

"What good does it do sending them the poem if they don't know it's from you?"

"Betty Boop," said Rojas

"Who?" said Checko.

"You know. That cartoon girl with the big head, curly black hair, and tight skirts, always shaking her ass."

"You want to get laid by a cartoon?" said Checko. "I think your dad must have clocked you one too many times. I'd want an older woman. Someone grown up. Ripe. That's when they're the horniest."

"Like who?"

"Like that Home Ec teacher, Mrs. Breezee. She smelled so good, her own personal woman smell. Like coconuts freshly opened, or those purple flowers that grow in the desert under the sagebrush."

A gray Cougar jacked up in the back with tinted windows, large rear tires and glistening chrome rims suddenly pulled into the parking lot. A skinny Filipino with stringy, ash-colored hair,

matching mustache and goatee ala Fu Manchu stepped out. He was bare-chested and wore a brown leather hat with a pheasant's tail feather sticking up on the back, Bermuda shorts, and a pair of cowboy boots with grimy metal tips.

Swaying in the afternoon breeze, he vomited with such force that he covered the entire passenger door of the Cougar with it.

We jumped. The man glared across the parking lot at us.

"C'mere," he said in a gargled voice. We walked slowly toward him, ready to dash at the first indication of trouble.

"She on yet?" the Filipino said.

"Who?" said Rojas.

"Barbara Bush," said the man, licking his mustache clean. "Who do you think. Eva L, Man. I'm Mr. Yuck, by the way. See?"

He turned around and pointed to a small green tattoo of a caricature making a grossed-out face on the back of his neck.

"I'm all poison. Got shit coursing through my veins." His eyes were so red they looked like they were bleeding. He lowered them onto Checko. "Shit, Boy. Somebody run over your face?"

"Got in a fight," said Checko.

"Got just the thing for it," he said and crawled into the Cougar's back seat. He pulled out a fifth of vodka which he popped open and sucked on for a good five seconds.

"Here," he said handing it to Checko. "Blow on that."

Checko looked at the bottle with disgust. He took it from Mr. Yuck's trembling hand and slowly raised it to his mouth. Taking a sip, which dribbled down his chin, he wrinkled his face in agony. "More, more," said Mr. Yuck.

Checko took a bigger sip. Again the liquid dribbled down his chin, only this time I watched his Adam's Apple rise and fall as he swallowed a good portion of it, grimacing, then he handed the bottle back.

"You know Eva L?" he said.

"Some of her."

"We came to see her dance," I said.

"What are you doing out here, then? She in there."

"We ain't twenty-one," said Rojas.

"You ain't never too young to peek at hair pie, Son."

He suddenly leaned forward as if he was going to kiss us. "I

can't get you in," he said in a hoarse whisper, flooding our faces with his breath, a mixture of acid and alcohol.

"How?" said Rojas.

"You just walk right in behind me," said Mr. Yuck, coaxing the last few drops of vodka from the bottle. "I'm a fucking patron saint around here."

Smoke burned my nostrils and the sour, dank odor of stale beer and sweat saturated the darkness. Tables were strategically scattered around a narrow, rectangular stage at the center of the room with a bright spotlight hanging above it. Three blue, red and yellow-colored rays of sunlight pierced the darkness through the small windows and reminded me of a church. There was a small dance floor in one corner of the room and a jukebox in another. A fat Mexican man wearing a crumpled baseball cap and dark horn-rimmed sunglasses sat behind a wooden counter.

"Pay no attention to Leon," said Mr. Yuck. "Long as he sees money floating, he'll just sit back there like some vulture. Guy whores out his own daughters, you know."

The dilapidated jukebox shook with "Traveling Band" by Creedence Clearwater Revival as two farmers sat at their small, round tables below the stage drinking Budweiser from long-neck bottles.

He led us to the table near the center of the room. A short, metal guard rail surrounded the stage, which was bare except for a thick, smoothly polished steel rod with a pointy tip.

"What's that for," asked Rojas. The man chuckled.

"That's the five-dollar trick," he said.

Leon brought a bottle of white tequila, a shot glass and a tall can of Coors Light which he slammed down in front of the Filipino.

"I better not see them snot-nosed punks drinking or all your asses are out of here," Leon said.

"Relax," answered the Filipino. "These are my nephews. They're just here for the show."

"I don't give a shit. I got enough problems without having to worry about getting busted for letting in minors. Just remember the show ain't free."

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"You just keep them Tall-boys coming, Sweetheart. I got a whole two weeks wages in my pocket waiting to get spent."

Leon mumbled something, then returned to his perch behind the counter. The Filipino fired two quick shots of tequila down his throat then chugged the Coors Light. When he had emptied the can he let it fall into his lap. His head remained tilted back. I watched his eyes roll around in their sockets until all you could see was the whites. His leather hat fell to the floor.

Creedence slowly died on the jukebox. Suddenly a voice rang out from the speakers above the stage.

"There are seven acknowledged Wonders of the World. You are about to witness the eighth. And believe me boys, the Grand Canyon ain't got nothing on her. For your viewing pleasure...she'll make you drool and rattle your tool...Miss...Eva...L."

A door in the back of the bar swung open, and a slim, feminine silhouette emerged, mimicking the hard-edged beat of "You Shook Me All Night Long" by AC/DC with her hips as she glided to the stage and climbed into the pool of yellow spotlight.

She wore a black negligee, through which you could see black panties that disappeared between her meaty buttocks. A pair of pale, gargantuan breasts with grape-sized nipples swung around with such force that I was afraid they'd suddenly rip off her chest. She was broad-hipped, slender at the waist with thick—though not fat—thighs and small feet that she kept pointed like a ballerina. Her face was masked by shadow, but I could see the fluorescent glow of her eyes beneath thick, looping waves of fire-red hair that hung all the way down to the small of her back.

The three of us stared up at her slinking form unable to breathe. The two farmers began throwing dollar bills which she quickly retrieved with inconspicuous flicks of her hand, at the stage. She teased them by drawing the bills up the length of her thigh or burying them between her enormous breasts. At the end of the song, the three of us remained motionless. A few sparse claps rang through the musty bar while Eva L stored her earnings in a small black bag she kept cinched to her waist.

The drippy guitar and hypnotic, voodoo-drum pulse of Santana's "Black Magic Woman" began to throb through the speak-

ers, and Eva L slipped her negligee to the floor, exposing the full magnificence of her breasts, which she began to caress with her long fingers, throwing her head back and shaking with her legs parted like she was in a trance, possessed by some lustful spirit.

"Oh, God," I heard Rojas utter.

Two more customers came in and sat down at the foot of the stage, holding stacks of one dollar bills like playing cards. Beside me Mr. Yuck sat unconscious, eyes open and glassy, mouth agape as if in the midst of a silent scream. A pool of urine was collecting beneath his chair.

Eva L drew close to the tippers, pulling their faces into her breasts which she tossed back and forth against the sides of their heads. The men cursed and snarled and shook.

Checko jabbed me hard in the ribs. He had pulled out his roll of money. He slipped a dollar bill from the roll and placed it between his teeth. He winked at me. Eva L dropped to her hands and knees and crawled toward Checko, her shoulders riding high and her glare poised and fearless. She dangled her breasts before Checko's eyes then snatched the dollar bill from his teeth with hers.

Rojas pulled out a five dollar bill, but Checko quickly jerked it away from him, holding up one finger. Rojas nodded and pulled out a dollar instead. Eva L knelt before him. Cupping her breasts in her hands, she ran both nipples across his cheeks, forehead and chin. He shuddered.

I held my dollar out to her with both hands. She must have thought this odd because a look of amusement crossed her face, which was now in full view. She had high cheekbones, a lean jaw, narrow chin and a short, tight nose that curved downward just slightly. Her scarlet lips were radiant and wet, her eyes macabre beneath the shadow of curled, feathery lashes. Her smile revealed a small gap between her two front teeth, and it was this that made her beautiful.

She plucked the dollar from my fingers, put it in her mouth then bent down as if to kiss me, fanning my face with it. She flung the dollar behind her and cradled my head against her breasts so that their fullness enveloped my face. The flesh was soft and warm, scented with the sweet tartness of her perspiration.

"Thank you," I said. She retreated, blowing me a kiss.

When the song ended, the room grew silent. Rojas was shifting in his seat, groaning and grabbing his crotch.

"Cool it, Man," said Checko.

"I'm going to explode," said Rojas. Checko giggled. He rarely giggled like that. It was a carefree sound, completely absent of malice, a sound that depicted his thoughts and emotions like no word could have.

The funky whisper of Prince's "Little Red Corvette" filled the room as Eva L turned her back toward us and bent over, slowly peeling her panties down to her ankles and kicking them across the stage. Checko flipped out a handful of dollar bills. Eva L sacheted toward him, dipping one hand and stroking the downy ringlets of auburn hair between her thighs and nibbling on the fingertips of the other.

She lowered her body pretending to sit on him and began rotating her buttocks around his face as she grasped them firmly with her hands. Checko smiled his full, toothy smile, forgetting the injuries to his mouth and said something to her. She smiled and said something back.

Rojas pulled out the five dollar bill again. This time Checko did not stop him. Eva L swiped it from his hands and pranced to the center of the stage, positioning herself above the steel rod. She lowered her body until the rod touched her between the thighs and hesitated. Her face contorted with both pain and pleasure and she tossed her hair wildly, squeezing and pulling her breasts, the rod slowly disappearing into her.

Mr. Yuck's chair was now empty. I searched the darkness for him, but he was gone. Only Leon remained at his post, undaunted, silent, motionless. More customers had arrived. One was quietly masturbating in a corner. Another waltzed with an imaginary partner on the tiny dance floor. The rest had gathered around the stage, hollering, drinking and hurling money at the stage as the thundering rush of the music swelled.

Eva L floated toward me, hands smartly parked on her hips. I held out a dollar to her and noticed that my hand was shaking. She extended her foot and picked the bill with her toes. She began stoking my cheek with her calf. Then she descended upon me. Her face came forward. It was shiny with sweat. Her eyes glowed. I felt



the warmth of flesh as she pressed my hands into her breasts. She then draped her hair on my shoulders, dragging it in a circular motion around my head. It smelled like peaches. I broke out in goose flesh as she bathed my face with her brisk, honey-sweet breath, her tantalizing mouth only centimeters from mine so that I could see the wet sparkle of her tongue.

"It's you, Kiki. It's you, Man," I heard Checko say. "Don't back down now."

She leaned back against the guard rail and propped her legs on my shoulders. My whole body clenched as her secret flesh bloomed into full view. I closed my eyes feeling the cool, silk-smooth skin that straddled me and drank the scent. It wasn't strawberries, and it wasn't dirty armpits. But it was everything else. Turned earth after a spring rainstorm, the irises in our back yard, cool water and fresh snow, autumn sunlight, Teddy Ketterling's clothes, warm food and breezes that come off the desert just after the sun goes down.

I opened my eyes and looked up. Her gaze was fixed on me, mouth pressed tightly. A bead of sweat trickled down her nose. She scooped up with the tip of her tongue which began to revolve round and round on her outstretched lips. The scent intensified so that it was no longer a scent but an energy, a force that had vaulted my consciousness into the sailing ribbons of cloud, disintegrated my body which was now part of the purple haze of the mountain range in the horizon.

Suddenly I saw Sapo McGee's toady face so close I could smell its cloying, raunchy breath, the blinding reflection of the Migra man's sunglasses like darts in my eyes, Cuervo's twisted mouth spewing rage, felt the glorious pressure of Teddy Ketterling's backside against my leg, her lips on my stomach. I saw my mother's fingers prodding gooey, white dough, twisting it into animal shapes, my father standing in an open field, arms raised. I heard Mr. Yuck's vomit-gargled chuckle and Checko's step-mom calling from behind a bedroom door, her candy-voice dripping with need.

Something inside me broke, releasing a warm, soothing wave of vibration across my body, a blue electric hum. My hand moved forward and stopped an inch from her flesh. I felt an invisible, impenetrable barrier there. Tears came hard and copious. I closed my eyes.

It was quiet now, except for the occasional clink of beer bottles and the slamming of a door. Off in the distance I heard the weepy violin of "Amarillo By Morning" by George Strait. When I opened my eyes, Eva L was gone.

**W**e rode out bikes home in silence. It was night when we got back to La Colonia. Just before we each went home, Rojas and I gave the money we had left back to Checko. Something like twelve dollars. Our parents never found out we left the camp. We never talked about our trip, of Cuervo or Mr. Yuck, or even Eva L. It was like we had returned different people, and everything else had become different as well. Our thoughts, our emotions, our very lives.

When school started Rojas and his sister moved in with their aunt after Rojas' father tried to set Lucy on fire because he came home and found her kissing with Rosy's older brother Ramon. The aunt lived in another county so Rojas had to change schools. I saw him one night during a basketball game, but he was hanging around with three other guys and didn't seem too interested in me.

Checko started dating this white girl who lived in town, but broke it off after her parents threatened to have him deported. Just before Christmas he showed up at my apartment. His eyes were all red and swollen like he'd been crying. He told me he had done something really bad at home, but wouldn't tell me what. He wouldn't even look at me. The image of Juana strolling around their apartment in her skimpy Spandex shorts with no bra on, smoking one of her menthol cigarettes came into my head. He stayed the night. A few weeks later he moved back to Arizona with his mother.

I began hitting the books hard so I could graduate and my father would help me buy a car like he'd promised. A friend of the family helped me get a job at a potato processing plant on weekends. In the summer I worked with my father in the fields. There wasn't time for much else.

Friends come and go and, as much as you want it to be, it's never the same even when you meet up again years later. People grow up and change and become too involved in their new lives to

want to regenerate the past. I guess it's the way it's supposed to be. Destiny, you might say. Maybe Checko was right after all.

I went back to The Ace of Clubs years later after I'd grown up, married and left the valley. I was driving around one day and suddenly found myself parked in front of the old place. The wooden porch, cinder block walls, and thick colored-glass windows were just as I had seen them on that afternoon many years before. The wooden door had been replaced by a heavy, awkward-looking steel one and the blue neon Ace of Clubs sign by a red one that flashed Live Girls.

I expected to see Leon sitting behind the counter like some gargoyle, but he wasn't. The new owner was a white woman with short, silver hair who looked like Bette Midler. I sat at the bar to have a beer. It was stale.

They'd hired three more dancers. Two Mexicans and a Filipino girl that looked to be no older than sixteen. The pointy steel rod in the middle of the stage was gone. The two Mexican girls performed simulated sex acts, while the Filipino girl did the five dollar trick with a beer bottle. I didn't give them any money.

Then Eva L came out. She appeared to be in her forties now, maybe even fifty. Her skin was listless and the brilliant radiance of her red hair had dimmed to a dull rust color. Her hips and breasts sagged. Her dance movements were jerky and ill-timed and she carried a limp. There was a gray scar on her chin and her left eye didn't open all the way. None of the patrons paid her much attention. Some of them even walked out.

I finished my beer, walked up to the tiny stage and laid down a dollar. She picked it up and bent down to blow breath on my face. Her eyes were shallow and out of focus, obscured by a deep, pleading sadness. She winked at me with her good eye. I tried to smile. ■

# THE DONUT MAKER

KRISTINE SOMERVILLE

Jo Plummer gave me make-up for my sixteenth birthday: ice-blue eye shadow, lipsticks the color of jams, and perfume she said smelled like White Shoulders. On weekends, we made donuts together from midnight to six. She fried them; I frosted and glazed. After I slid the last tray into the display case, she sat me down at the break table in the back room. She placed the tips of her fingers under my chin, tilted my face toward hers. Jo never wore make-up. Her face was weathered, guessing her age, impossible. "I'm a sequoia. If you want to know how old I am, count my rings," I once heard her say to GD, the breakfast cook who then asked if that was an invitation to get to know her. Jo worked a double shift. She stayed while I walked home with my face made-up, a bag of day-olds in one hand, the morning paper in the other, offerings for my father who was in the kitchen, sitting at the table with his back to me. "Who smells like a French whore?" he asked. He turned around. His face was white, without expression. ■

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# THE GRAVEDIGGER

KRISTINE SOMERVILLE

Slats James lived in a double-wide trailer behind the Shell Knob cemetery. People came from all over the county to see his trees, large, silver maples, branches capped with empty bottles. In the kitchen where it smelled of bacon grease, coffee grounds, and dust, the radio softly playing show tunes. He soaked the labels from the old flasks that I had brought him. "This one will make a nice addition," he said. He held the bottle up to the light. Through the thick glass, the kitchen blurred into light and dark shadows. There was a series of pops as though a gross of firecrackers had been set off. I stood with Slats on his front porch. We watched as a pick-up truck of boys I knew from school shot at the top of one tree and then another. Shards of colorful glass fell through the limbs, down around the tree's dark trunk. ■

LESA LUDERS  
LOSING THE WHITE PURSE

Beth Ann wasn't certain of my sexuality when she first met me, because my eyelashes were long: "I didn't think a lesbian would have such long eyelashes," she said.

She made her appearance in my life with the unrestrained exuberance of a Labrador puppy; bursting through the door of the women's center where I was quietly studying, she beamed at me as if meeting a long lost friend. "My name is Beth Ann," she said, settling into the empty space on the couch next to me. From a paper bag, she removed a homecooked roast beef sandwich, and took thick bites as she surveyed the titles in the bookcase that lined the wall: *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, *Rubyfruit Jungle*, *The Women's Room*.

"May I ask your name?" she said to me.

"Helen."

"I have a sister named Helen."

"But I don't normally go by it," I said. "Troi."

"As in Helen of Troy, the face that launched a thousand ships?"

"It's a nickname."

"You have very long eyelashes." She gazed around the room, turning back to rest her eyes on me. "You're fortunate," she said. "How were you so lucky to know what you wanted, so young?"

I felt a bittersweet sensation as I looked at her hair which clung to her skull like a red helmet; she wore polyester pants, white nurse shoes, clip on earrings. She didn't know me from Eve, yet she seemed to think it was safe to speak freely, obviously assuming that

all of us in the center were lesbians, when that was not the case; of the handful of women there that day, everyone except me was straight.

"I have a lot to make up for," she said. She studied the books on the wall, coming to rest on *The Joy of Lesbian Sex*. It had nearly taken a court order to get the book on the shelf. Now that it was there, it was seldom touched except by a few curious onlookers. "The joy of lesbian sex," Beth Ann said softly. "I didn't know they had such books." She took the book from the shelf and thumbed through the pages as if she were in the privacy of her own home. "My God, this is wonderful." Her face was the color of her hair as she turned a page. "No wonder men like us so much."

**A**s I walked to my classes, I could always make her out amongst the crowd of students—her white vinyl purse with its silver clasp reflected the sunlight like a signal mirror. When she passed by me, she would give a surreptitious smile and wink, as if we shared a great secret.

One morning, I had the women's center to myself and was happily studying in the silence when she came in, sat beside me, and said: "Good day, Troi." She had cut her hair; it was now spiked on top, short on the sides, and a thinly braided tail split the nape of her neck. "I told my hairdresser to give me a style that's attractive to women. What do you think of it?"

"It's..." My voice fell as I stared at her beaming eyes. "It's just fine."

Leaning toward me, she punched me on the shoulder. "You think a fort-year-old woman shouldn't be caught dead with such a haircut?"

Rubbing my arm, I said, "Age is irrelevant."

"Only someone in their twenties would say that." She flipped her hands through her hair. "What do you think of it? The truth."

"The truth—the truth is it's your head."

"I'll admit that it's a little hard to get used to. But I was trying to...you know, put out the message? My sister Helen nearly fainted when she saw it. She's afraid I'm going to put a tattoo of the Loch Ness creature on my back."

"Are you?"

"I'm not that radical." She set her purse on her lap and reached inside for a piece of gum, offered me one. "I don't want to spend the rest of my life alone, Troi. You know what I mean."

"Yes." As I looked at the white line that parted her red hair, I began to shake my head. "Maybe not. I don't really know you, after all."

"What's to know? I'm not attracted to men, never have been. Not that I hate them. I just don't particularly want one around. But I want *something* around. It took me a long time to decide that I wanted a woman. And then it took me another long while to decide to do something about it. So I showed up here." She patted herself on the head. "And then I got a haircut. But the thing is, I don't have the foggiest idea what to do next. So if you have any advice, I'd be more than grateful to accept it."

I set my chin in my hands as I stared at her. "I don't have any advice."

"Unless you were born yesterday, you've been at this longer than I have. Just anything, anything will do."

I gave the only advice I was capable of giving, complex in its simplicity: "Be yourself."

She punched me in the shoulder again, nearly knocking me off the couch. "You can do better than that." Her eyes were so innocent they made my head hurt. "Do you know what my dream is?" she asked. I didn't know, and I wasn't sure I wanted to know. "I want a woman to run naked in the rain with me. Do you think that's silly?" Focusing on my feet, I wished there was someone other than me sitting next to her, someone who got off on listening to self-revelations from a stranger. "Do you think that's a silly thing for a grown woman to want?"

I ran headlong toward sarcasm, hoping for the distance it would provide. "It's as interesting as whips and leather, I suppose."

Rather than derailing her, she climbed aboard the tracks like a non-stop train. "Whips and leather? People really do those things?"

"Rumor has it."

"No," she replied. "I'd rather run naked in the rain." I felt like a child in church who is desperately trying to restrain the laughter as she gazed at the spine of the sex manual, adoration brimming in



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her eyes, and said: "I want a big, busty woman to run naked with me in the rain. That's what I want."

**O**n her quest to meet a full-breasted woman, Beth Ann joined a lesbian-oriented reading group that met weekly. "Some of those books," she began, "I hate to say it but they make me...hot inside. I'm going to have to get this over with soon or I won't be able to stand it. You know what I mean."

It had become her favorite phrase—*you know what I mean*. It didn't take an Einstein to gather the surface understanding of her words, but I didn't know what motivations, beyond the sexual, lay beneath. I hadn't known her long enough to develop solid footing on the bridge between our separate selves, the bridge of coming and going that provided real understanding. But Beth Ann didn't seem to feel the same lack of intimacy with me. She felt such ease that she asked me to accompany her to the porn shop to help her select an X-rated lesbian video. I said no way, you're on your own in that department, and finally she stopped asking. Purely through serendipity I had been the first person she had come out to, and in her eyes that made me akin to a true friend.

One day after her reading group had a particularly inspiring discussion of a lesbian novel, she tried to offer me the book. On its cover were two women holding hands as they gazed into the deep blue sea: *Velvet Passion*. "You'd like this," she said.

"I don't think so." Lesbian detective stories, mysteries, sci-fi, and pot-boiler romances—it was no wonder Beth Ann wrapped herself around the fantasy of a full-breasted women running naked in a downpour that, in reality, would leave them coughing and shivering in the sheets of rain. I wondered why her recently acquired group of friends didn't introduce her to real-life stories of real-life women, rather than the one-dimensional characters in dime novels. We seek our own literature, but what we get are lesbian detectives who carry machismo inside their breasts, and romance novels that melt into nothingness from the heat of their steam.

Beth Ann's new feather earrings dangled against the sides of her wide neck. "Our reading group meets every Monday at seven-thirty. You should join us."

"I'm going to have to pass." The women on the cover of her novel wore looks of rapture, as if they had just met God. I turned the book face-down, and wondered what stake I had in Beth Ann that made me feel so irritated at her new friends who didn't seem to have the common sense to offer her *The Color Purple* as a small step toward understanding the schism that could break the face of rapture, the incredible effort it took to bring two lives together and keep them bonded.

"I have a book you might like," I said. "By Alice Walker."

"Is that the one where she writes to God? I tried to read it, but I couldn't understand the writing style. I like the kind of books where the story's more clear." She pressed her palm to the top of her head, as if resting it on a bed of nails. "If you saw me on the street, would you know I was a lesbian?"

I stared at her for a long while before I turned away. "Lose the white purse."

**B**eth Ann worried that she didn't have the sixth sense of recognition that allowed her to pick out a lesbian in a crowded room. "I think we should wear buttons or something," she said. "How can you be sure, if you go up to someone, that she's one of your own?" *Your Own*—it was a term she'd adopted, along with *My People*. I felt embarrassed for her when she used those terms. *My People*—as if the entire sub-culture were marching toward a mystical promised land.

She convinced me to meet her at the coffeeshop on Main, so she could practice picking out lesbians, as few and far between as they might be. I didn't feel comfortable, it was too much like going on a woman hunt—*I'm Not Afraid, Got Me A Gun, Bullets At My Side*—but Beth Ann's mixture of persistence and longing did me in.

I brought a textbook with me so I could study—not a chance. Sitting next to me at a table in the corner, Beth Ann said: "Is she one?" I followed her eyes to a woman who was holding a baby to her breast.

"For God sakes, Beth Ann."

"I hear lots of lesbians have babies nowadays."

"She's wearing a wedding ring."

"I hear lots of lesbians get married. Commitment ceremonies, they call it."

I crossed my arms to my chest as I leaned back in my chair. "Where do you hear these things?"

"My reading group. Other places." Beth Ann selected another unlikely woman who was sitting alone reading a magazine. "Is she one?"

"Do you have any idea how ridiculous this is?"

Beth Ann pushed her hands inside the front pockets of her brand new straight-legged Levis. "I need to learn how to do this."

"It's not something you can force. It develops in its own time."

"But what if I made the mistake of going up to a straight woman on accident and made a pass at her?"

I rested my chin on top of my textbook. "Could you do that, just walk up to a stranger and make a pass?"

"I've been waiting for this a long time," she said. "I need to get this virginity thing taken care of."

"Wouldn't you like to know a little bit about the person you sleep with before climbing inside the sheets? Like a last name, perhaps?"

"Not particularly." Her brows furrowed as she met my eyes. "You disapprove."

The irritation rose as I looked at her spiked head of hair. "I don't really give a fuck who you fuck."

"Yes you do, otherwise you wouldn't be looking at me like that."

"I just wonder what the point is."

"The point is initiation."

"Yeah, right," I replied. "How could I forget."

Kelly, a friend of mine, entered the coffeehouse and came to our table. Standing beside me, she rested her hand on my back as I leaned into the side of her body. Before we had the time to exchange a decent greeting, Beth Ann pulled Kelly's hand off my back and shook it as if milking a cow.

"My name is Beth Ann," she said. "I'm the new dyke in town."

One thing about Kelly—she made quick judgements about people and didn't feel the need to stay around long enough to see if she were right. I, on the other hand, tended to take my time testing the waters before I jumped in or out. Kelly managed to pry her hand

from Beth Ann's grip, and looked down at me with her mouth open in an oval shape, as if caught in the word: What? I didn't blame her as she got a cup of coffee to go and left me alone with Beth Ann.

Beth Ann watched her walk away. "Was that not a good thing to say...I'm the new dyke in town?"

"I would have introduced you had you given me half a chance."

"I was just trying to make conversation," she replied.

I didn't think she would have come up with the line on her own and wondered where she'd heard it. Maybe from the new friends she was keeping, a faction of the community that was a mix of militant feminists, rabid vegetarians, and sports fanatics. They were a very close knit group that didn't particularly interest me, for each, in her own collective way, had a brand of political correctness that exhausted me.

"Is Kelly an old girlfriend?" Beth Ann asked.

I replied in a sing-song, lilting voice: "She's a girl and she's my friend, so I guess that makes her a girlfriend."

"You know what I mean."

"She's my friend," I replied. "My friend."

As Beth Ann continued to incorrectly scope out every woman in the coffeehouse, I wished the town had a gay bar. I would have taken her there and dropped her off so that she could feast her eyes on Her People to her heart's content. But the last gay bar had closed down months before, a victim of the city's AIDs paranoia. As Beth Ann continued her litany—*Is she one of us?*—I wanted to take my book and leave, but felt responsible for her, as if I were my sister's keeper. Lose the white purse, I had told her. Lose the white purse.

I was in the coffeeshop downtown, studying, when I heard a tap on the window and saw Beth Ann standing in the street, a Guatemalan fanny pack strapped to her waist. She came inside and pulled out a chair at my table. She'd been a true gadabout in her first month of coming out—joining the reading group, a supper club, a pinochle circle.

"I don't have the stamina for this," she said, laughing. "I should have started much younger." She patted my hand. "But I'm happy, Troi. Like I've found something I didn't know I'd lost."

Staring at her square fingers, I asked: "What have you found?"

"A place where I belong. You don't feel it too?"

I rubbed the ache between my eyebrows. "Not particularly."

"You should come to the reading group. Or play cards with us. You'd know what I'm talking about. You'd feel it."

"There's no guarantee that I'd have anything in common with a single person there."

"But how can you be so isolated from your own kind?"

I tried to speak slowly, keeping my voice level: "It's like this, Beth Ann. Who I sleep with is not all that I am."

"It doesn't seem fair," she said. "I'm so happy and you're so unhappy."

"Did I say I was unhappy?"

"But here I am meeting all of these women—and some of them are interested and let me tell you that makes me feel fine—and here you are all alone." She reached into her fanny pack and put a dollar on the table when the waiter set a cup before her and filled it. "I was wondering... You don't have a woman hidden somewhere?"

"I'm not keeping a woman in my closet, Beth Ann."

"So there's no woman in your life?"

I wrapped my hands around my cup. "It's not as if lesbianism is a progressive disease—lesbians on a binge, on the wagon, practicing lesbians, recovering lesbians. I'm single at the moment, yes. But don't sign the papers putting me in recovery."

"That's how I was when I first came out," she said. "You know how an alcoholic is supposed to feel a little strange that first time he says those words—I'm an alcoholic. That's how I felt the first time I said I was a lesbian. Like an alcoholic admitting it." As was too often the case, she had misinterpreted me, but it wasn't worth the effort to break the faulty parallel and explain that lesbianism, unlike alcoholism, was not a disease. "The word around town is you're hot property," she said. "No one can understand why you're keeping yourself on the shelf."

"Hot property? You know, for a group of self-proclaimed feminists, your inner circle has a way of objectifying women."

"But if you had a partner—"

When I set my cup down, the coffee scalded my hand. "I can live with a woman, I can live without a woman. I can be happy with a woman, I can be miserable with a woman. Don't you see?"

"So you are unhappy?"

Exhausted, I dropped my head to the tabletop and tapped it against the wood. "That's not what I'm saying."

"I was worried that you were lonely, that's all."

Drawing a cross on my chest, I said, "I swear to God."

"To the Goddess."

"Oh fuck, you've been brainwashed." I rested my chin on the tabletop as I looked up at her "The Goddess. *Which* Goddess?"

"I don't remember her name, maybe the one who likes the snakes." Leaning down to tie the laces of her new boots, she peered at me over the edge of the table. "I can't manage to get laid, Troi, and I wonder if you have any advice." My thumb was turning red where the coffee had burned it, and I felt absolutely pissed off as she sat back up in her chair. "Like, you know, a good first line or something."

"Something like this—Hey, baby, I find you very attractive, what do you intend to do about it?"

"I don't think I could say that."

I blew on my thumb, trying to cool the burn. "In my experience, if you want to get laid it's not a very hard thing to do."

She tipped her chair on two legs, pulling away from me. "Everyone's got a partner. Or they're baby dykes, twenty years old. But if a twenty-year-old wanted a forty-year-old woman, I'd go for it. Is something wrong with that?"

"It will not change who you are."

She crashed the legs of the chair onto the floor. "I just want to know." She covered her eyes and when she removed her hands, the tears were streaming down her cheeks. "I need to know if I've made the right choice."

"You question your choice?" She pulled her head to her chest, hiding her face, as she nodded. "I didn't know," I said. "It never occurred to me you'd question your choice."

"Because I need to know...because if this is all just a fantasy in my head, if I really can't go through with it—do you know what that means?"

"Tell me."

"It means I'm going to spend the rest of my life alone. And I can't bear that, Troi. Forty years I've spent alone. I don't want it to

go on like this for forty more." Through the tears, her skin was transparent, colorless; I had no desire to tell her that even if she were to find a woman that day, she could still spend a large part of her life alone, for there were no guarantees. "I'm going to take my piece of the pie," she said. "I'm going to find out."

**B**eth Ann didn't show up at the women's center for a month, and I didn't try to track her down. I hoped that wherever she was, whatever she was doing, she was safe. And if she had found a woman who was willing to be a litmus test, I hoped they were having safe sex.

When she showed up at the women's center, the moment she passed through the door swinging the sack lunch at her side, I knew she had completed her "initiation." You could see it in her eyes. With no lead-in, no fanfare, she said: "It was wonderful, everything I dreamed it would be. You won't believe it, Troi, but she did it. She ran naked through the rain with me."

I crossed my hands behind my head as I leaned back on the couch. "Is that right?"

"Yes. And we've been together ever since." She patted my knee. "I came to invite you to our commitment ceremony."

"Oh, Beth Ann—You just met this woman and you're going to marry her?"

"Not a marriage," she said. "We don't believe in the patriarchy of the church. We're having a commitment ceremony in our backyard. Just a small gathering. Then after, a potluck. We're asking people to bring a vegetarian dish. I'd like you to come. Her name is Sequoia and she has a sister—"

"Named Larch."

"Named Debbie and you'd like her if you met her." From her sack, she removed a sprout sandwich rather than the usual roast beef. Taking a bite, she said, "Did you know that a lot of our beef is being raised in Brazil? They're destroying the rain forest to make grazing land. The planet is running out of oxygen, all for the sake of meat eaters."

Could this be the same woman who used to be unsure if it was proper to use the term dyke? "Who?" I said. "Who's destroying the rain forest?"

"I don't know," she replied. "Arby's." A sterling silver pendant of a double-edged axe hung from her neck, coming to rest in the shallow valley between her breasts: the symbol of the Amazons. "You'd like Sequoia. We're going to be married to the music of Chris Williamson."

"I wish you luck, Beth Ann."

"But you're not coming, are you?"

"No."

"Well," she said. "You can't blame me for trying."

**O**n the day of Beth Ann's ceremony, I sat in the coffeeshop, thumbing through the disordered sections of a newspaper left on the table. Like a pass-around lover, various parts of the paper were spread across the room, leaving me with the comics. When two o'clock rolled around, the hour of Beth Ann and Sequoia's wedding, it seemed appropriate to be reading *Doonesbury*.

I looked up from the paper to see my reflection in the sheet-glass window; my hair was long and light-colored, the same style for a decade. I remembered a time, years before, when my first lover, Kate, accompanied me to the hair stylist. I wanted a new style to match my leather coat, boots, jeans. A tough new look. But as the stylist explained the Z she would shave into the sides of my head, the spikes she would put on the top, the long tail that would fall down my back, I bolted from the shop. "Everyone we know has spiked hair," I said to Kate. "I don't want to look like everyone else." Kate slipped her hand in the back pocket of my jeans as we walked down an empty alleyway. "That's what I love about you," she said. "You're a non-conformist." In time, the leather and the boots—the trappings of identity—fell away, as I tried to find my own identity to replace them. But my hair remained the same—long and straight, falling down my back.

Turning my chair, I stared at the people passing on the street. A woman caught my eye as she strolled by; how Beth Ann would have been amazed to know that the sixth sense of recognition could be felt even through a window pane. I smiled as the woman came inside and took a table near my own. When she sat down, she met my eyes and held them for a brief instant before lowering her head to the newspaper. Finishing a section, she folded it atop her knee,



and said: "Could I borrow the comics page when you're done with it?" When I went to her table to give her the section, she offered me another in exchange.

We continued to trade sections, front page in exchange for back, business in exchange for entertainment, until it seemed simpler to sit down across from one another, face to face, and let the separate parts of the paper come together before us.

As she stared at the strip of *Doonesbury* at the bottom of the page, she began to shake her head. "I don't get it," she said. "Do you?"

"It's a matter of irony," I replied. "I can try to explain it." Leaning toward her, I covered the comic strip with my hand. "You see, it's this way—do you listen only to women's music as a protest against the white male power structure, does the word 'patriarchy' fall fleetingly from my your lips, do you eat only organically grown vegetables, do you believe that God is a woman, that Glenda is not the only good witch, and have you become so contained within the seriousness of your rhetoric that you've lost the last vestiges of humor?"

She cocked her head as she stared at me. "Are you crazy or just fed up?"

"Fed up, I hope."

"In that case, let me buy you a cup of coffee." ■

**E** DIANA ARMSTRONG  
**ESPERANDO**

The thin wood house smells like an attic  
in the afternoon heat of a cloudless sky.  
Espino limbs scratch back and forth across  
the corrugated roof in a monologue.  
An old irrigation ditch behind the house  
is bordered by a density of cañas, but  
no water has flowed through the ditch in years  
and the cañas are the color of manila.  
They rattle against each other in the wind,  
empty—or apparently so, for any green urge  
is well beneath the ground.  
Plastic bags skimming across the desert  
snag on the canebreak and flutter like moths.  
In front of the house is a dirt road  
that comes from the highway to Caldera.  
The house is surrounded by sand and silt  
on which it seems to float like a raft,  
temporarily caught in an eddy.  
The woman in the house opens the windows  
and the curtains fill like fins of big fish  
holding themselves stationary in slow water.  
The wind moves through front to back  
dissipating the odor of baked wood and  
leaving a new layer of dust on the table.  
It blows all day but the woman doesn't let it  
in until after the temperature has dropped.  
She mops the floor and wipes the table  
and harvests the bags from the canebreak.  
She lives with the scratching of espino limbs,  
a yellow cat, a tape player, and the wind.  
Now she rests her arms on the window sill  
and her chin is on her folded arms and her

eyes are on the road in front of the house.  
She is light-colored like the cañas and cat,  
and her eyes are green and unrevealing.  
She thinks someone is coming today to visit her,  
but she knows better than to smile yet.

The man in the white pick-up turned the other way,  
he drove into the wind, he drove toward the sea.

He is singing a song from his hometown:

De Coquimbo soy, y vengo cantando  
este wawancó, con sabor cubano.

Yo soy Coquimbano, con buena aventura  
y traigo en mis manos, la buena fortuna.

6 women there claim his charms bore fruit  
from a time of abandon, but he says only 2  
can be certain, his wife and a virgin.

The woman listens for the sound of tires on sand,  
a car door slamming, steps. Oh, let there be steps.

She stops reading and holds her breath,  
feeling the earth shift like a horse under the house...  
its mild, the raft is still in the cañas.

She inhales and returns to the book.

There is no wind at night and steps could  
be heard if you were very quiet, but  
the woman knows better than to smile yet.

I **STEVEN ALMOND**  
**PRAYER**

just storm  
 stops ~~se~~ sucking.  
 It wait.

The storm was a howler, enough to force most folks inside, all except the poets, who wandered the wet asphalt admiring nature's tantrum, kicking at debris and staring into puddles for inspiration. Getty was no poet, but he found the storm inspiring as well.

An outburst like this brought chaos to the fore and led the community to look toward supermarkets for reassurance, comforts, canned goods. An entire suburb of shoppers could be won over in a matter of hours. Thus Getty, manager of Food Palace, had been up most of the night, coiled in expectation. Now, with dawn breaking, he freed himself from his wife's arms—which grasped him almost exclusively in sleep—and leaped from bed.

Despite his best efforts, he recognized his marriage was fading. He had grown up in a sound, loveless home, the descendent of sententious ministers, and could only pretend to extend the sort of concern for which she was always fishing. He had a prosperous job and a firm moral code and sometimes, in the dark that followed one of their coital standoffs, with his wife snoring scornfully beside him, he would lie back and mutter "Fat-bitch-fat-bitch" with an ardor that startled him.

When Getty realized power was out, he stumbled about his home, muttering "Fuck-fuck-fuck." A cold shower followed, and a search for coffee which Getty considered both inevitable and demeaning. He called good-bye to his wife. She did not so much as stir.

Broken bits of the city littered the streets, loose wires dancing sparkily, directional signals twisted around on themselves and hanging, lightless, from electric nooses.

Getty had taken over day-to-day management of the Food Palace two years earlier, and overseen the recent relocation to a grandiose new building whose red-brick exterior and ivy-dappled spires made it appear more church than grocery store.

Getty considered the new Food Palace to be a kind of church—a profane notion, he knew. After all, he still went to church on a weekly basis, and understood that it was man’s job to separate the sacred from the secular, and so took crackers and wine into his stiff mouth and held fast to vague inclinations toward heaven. As much as he knew of his heart, though, he knew it wasn’t in church, that the space occupied among the righteous by the light of grace and devotion to liturgy was in him filled by visions of customers strolling the aisles of his store, fingering labels, exchanging money for sustenance with a serenity befitting the gainfully employed.

The new store was gargantuan, by far the biggest ever in the county, designed as a facsimile of village life—bakery, butcher, apothecary, all brimming with assurance under tracked lighting—and it operated with a brute efficiency traceable to Getty’s management style. It rose before him now, sharp and Gothic against the gunmetal sky, a survivor of the storm.

Getty saw the hassle immediately. He had a nose for hassles, knew when they were occurring, knew he didn’t want them occurring, particularly as they might impact shoppers, and was pleased to be in a position to prevent them by force of will.

His Lincoln Town Car (a vehicle likewise attuned to the undesirability of hassles) glided into the employee parking area and Getty walked briskly toward Turner, the night manager, who stood on the loading dock, addressing someone out of view.

The Food Palace, bright and overpowering, was singled out in a black landscape thanks to emergency generators which Getty had personally argued for at last year’s corporate meetings. This was good, very good, and despite the patches of ivy hanging like torn scabs from the facade, Getty knew the structure had fared exceptionally. He jumped the steps two at a time. Turner greeted Getty with a forced smile, said, “This man here, he want to talk with you,” and made himself disappear almost at once.

Getty was left to face a curious figure, stooped behind two full shopping carts. Great clouds of kinky white hair curled from the stranger's skull. His eyes were lodged beneath a blunt orbital ridge, as if someone had pushed them away from the world.

"Hello, sir. The Reverend Cecil Driemer here." The accent was from somewhere else, up North likely, and his voice was squally, tending to break like a teenager's. This made him sound hopeful.

"Jim Getty. Manager. What seems to be the problem?"

Driemer squinted up at Getty, who stood backlit. "Well, this storm for one. It seems to have terminated power in the surrounding area."

"Seems."

"Yes, well, it was my hope that your company might be of some assistance to my congregation. We were, as it should turn out, preparing for our annual Easter pageant when this inclement weather visited. I have, as a matter of fact, purchased a great many perishable items from your grocery store." Getty frowned. He hated it when customers referred to the Food Palace as a grocery store. "This was a cash purchase, made Thursday." Driemer withdrew a rumpled receipt. "Among the items purchased were ground beef, chicken parts, whole milk, and a great number of Creamsicles, for the children. It was my hope that we might be able to stow some of these perishables in your freezers. The Creamsicles and things, for the children."

Getty checked his watch. It was early, and he didn't have more than a cup of coffee inside him, but he felt buoyant. One word from him and the problems of the ragged creature below would be solved. For a moment the solution seemed just that simple, and Getty felt a pulse of some kind, terrifying and ripe, a softening in his bones. He hitched up his trousers. "What did you say the name of your church was?"

"The Church of Divine Benevolence." Driemer fished a business card from his wallet, handed it up to Getty, nails dirty and bitten. The card listed an address in San Marcos, Texas. In the right corner was a rendering of the crucifixion, Christ no larger than an ant, his attitude of surrender smudged, unrecognizable.

"Why doesn't this card have a local address?"

Driemer shifted from foot to foot. "Yes, a local address. You see"—here his voice broke—"we recently relocated from out West

and are still, technically, in search of a permanent home for our congregation, doing the Lord's work as circumstances permit for the—"

"So where is your church?"

"The facility? At this moment, I am operating the facility out of my home. *For the moment.*"

Getty wondered if the man was one of those storefront Pentecostals. He'd seen them on the news, fanatical people whose conception of religion ran hotter, sweatier, than God ever intended. He considered asking about a denomination, but just as quickly realized this would imply interest. He looked at the groceries over which Driemer hovered, sappy mounds of budget beef patties, pink chicken flesh, and felt queasy. The matter closed, as most did for Getty, with a silent, irrevocable click.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Driemer—"

"Cecil."

"I can't help you."

"But of course you can. You have emergency generators back there and, I presume, a whole battery of freezers. This won't take a minute, and it will brighten the lives of some dear children."

"I'm afraid not."

"But why not? Surely, you have space. Here then, I'll transport the perishables myself and pick them up the moment our power is restored. The very moment." Driemer jerked his carts toward the ramp. The wheels chirped.

Behind Driemer, a voice cried out: "Say-sill!" Getty could see her advancing, a little blond blob of a woman with runny mascara. She wore a tight smock and appeared pregnant. That or overly fond of beer. Presently, she began howling in Spanish.

Driemer wheeled on her and yelled right back. "Vamos back to el car!" and "Andale!" and "Ya!" and "Ese hombre es muy importante!" The woman began to cry and ran back to a beat up Chevy Citation and hurled herself inside. "One of our volunteers," Driemer explained. "She's so concerned. About the children. The Easter pageant. I want to thank you for helping us out."

"No."

"I thought we had a deal."

“Come any closer and I call security.” Getty thought about Gus, the guard on graveyard. Deaf and mildly arthritic. Driemer clattered to the foot of the ramp. A breeze kicked up and with it a nip of ammonia. Did this Driemer character have piss-stained clothing, or was this a leakage issue? Getty pulled out his cellular and punched 911.

Getty was usually reluctant to call the police. Cops were bad for business. But this morning the city was late in rising. The lot was nearly empty. People weren't thinking: shop. They were locked in the fluidity of overdue dreams, meeting old lovers in foreign castles, mounting blind horses, rising, miraculously, from barren ground into flight.

Getty was pleased, then, at the chance to call the cops. As a child he loved programs like *Dragnet* and *Adam 12*. He watched footage of especially contentious demonstrations, viewing the police in heroic terms, as angels sent to cinch a senseless world into civility.

“We have a disturbance,” he told the dispatcher. “Out here at the Food Palace. This is Jim Getty, the manager.”

He expected Driemer to be angry. Instead, the man drew his carts up short and leaned against them, as if in repose. He surveyed his groceries with woe. “I wonder,” Driemer said, “if you are a religious man, Mr. Getty?”

The question reminded Getty of his wife's inquisitions. There was something in it that seemed directed not at religion, but some vaguer measure of human conduct. “That's none of your business.”

“‘The poor ye will always have.’ That is your take on matters of religious concern?”

Behind him, Getty could hear the hyena laughter of stock boys. He flipped his cellular open and dialed the store's intercom code. “Floyd Turner! Floyd Turner, report to the loading dock!”

“You don't pray much, do you? You should pray, Mr. Getty. You should pray.”

Inside, the Food Palace was a mess. The emergency generators had kicked in, but the breads had mysteriously failed to rise, and the ice creams had gone mushy. A display of pickles had



been felled on aisle thirteen, a freak draft Turner insisted, though Getty suspected human error. Not half the staff had reported for duty and the deliveries were late, leaving bare spots in the shelves that chilled Getty.

This was not an office day. This was a floor day. He needed to be seen by the staff, to make his presence *known*. He knifed up and down the aisles, scowling, his sleek, black cellular in hand, speaking with slow menace to the union lummoxes who staffed his distributors:

"Those sound like excuses to me."

And, "I thought we had a contract."

And, "I guess I'll have to take this upstairs then."

The first shoppers were already lining up outside the automatic doors when he heard his name: "Jim Getty to the loading dock. Jim Getty."

**D**riemer had not moved, though the patrolman, an unduly friendly young man named Darby Floe, was there already. "What a night, huh?" Darby said. He looked at both Driemer and Getty and smiled, as if they were three guys shooting the breeze.

"I was thinking of takin' off," Turner said. "Been on overtime since midnight. My wife, she's gonna be worried."

"You go ahead and handle restocking," Getty said. "She'll be fine."

Driemer told Darby, "I ministered to a Harvey Floe once. That was over in Nogales." His horns of hair bobbed in the wind. The pair seemed to have been conversing before Getty arrived.

"I can't say I know any cousins out that way," Floe said.

Getty cleared his throat. "I asked this gentlemen to leave the premises and he refused. What's that, trespassing?"

"If I may explain, officer." Driemer's voice seemed to have grown deeper, more assured. "I came here seeking aid for my congregation. The hurricane, you see, caused a power failure, and I feared that the perishable items I had purchased for our annual Easter celebration would spoil. I merely asked Mr. Getty if I might be able to avail myself of freezer space."

Floe looked up at Getty. "That doesn't sound like a bad idea. That is, if it's alright with you."

"As I explained to Mr. Driemer an hour ago, we have customers, thousands of customers, who will be relying on us for the next few days."

"I wouldn't have inquired," Driemer said. "If not for the children. We've got children, families, who hope to attend."

"That was *some* hurricane," Floe said.

That the local newscasters had pronounced the storm a hurricane struck Getty as laughable. His wife had run around the house, taping windows and fretting over the possibility of structural damage. Yet she slept clean through the weather, wasn't awake for a single clatter.

"You would assume that an operation this large would have enough room for two small carts of food." Driemer directed his comments at Floe.

"I'm not sure why I'm responsible for Mr. Driemer's assumptions," Getty said.

Driemer looked at Getty, then at the sky. "All I'm saying is that a man doing the Lord's work should merit some charity."

A few of the stock boys, having caught sight of the cop, wandered over from their tasks. They stood behind Getty. Sensing that a private drama was becoming public, he wheeled and fixed them with a look so sharp the more timid among them recoiled. His body felt hot.

"I want Mr. Driemer arrested for trespassing," Getty hissed.

"Gosh, sir," Floe said, "is that really necessary?"

"Not only is it necessary, officer. It's the law you are sworn to uphold."

Getty got home late. His wife was in front of the TV, seemed trapped there. After a time, the set zapped off and she padded into the kitchen. She piled his plate with leftovers. "How was your day?"

The day had been remarkable. Shoppers had come by the score, hectic but relieved, lined like happy refugees under plentiful displays. Getty's performance had been, by his reckoning, flawless, and he found himself elated at his wife's query, ready, for the mo-

ment, to forgive her various sins, her sour mood and weight gain, her relentless disregard of his sacrifice.

By the time he told her about Driemer, he was hopeful they might be headed toward the same side of the bed. He narrated the whole encounter, even managing an imitation of Driemer, that creepy, creaking voice.

"I don't get it. Why couldn't you help the guy?"

Getty parried his wife with patience. "That's not the way it works, honey. You don't just go around making crazy demands."

"He wasn't some kind of a terrorist. He was a minister who wanted to throw a party for children."

"Not the point." Getty shook his head. "If I let one guy use the freezers, what would stop the rest of world from asking?"

"The rest of the world?" His wife laughed.

The phone rang and Getty hurried into the next room to snatch up the receiver. He returned a minute later and, with great relish, mixed himself a highball.

"Who was it?"

Getty swirled his drink. "Officer Floe."

"What did he want?"

Getty took a slow sip. "He informed me that our little angel of God, Cecil Driemer, is wanted in another state for crimes against children. In Utah." Getty pondered what "crimes against children" might mean. It sounded bad, very bad, and this reassured Getty. Single-handedly, and employing only his innate sense of wrong and right, he had thwarted a dangerous criminal. He expected, now, some contrition from his wife.

Instead, she shrieked, "What does that have to do with anything?" heaved his plate into the sink, and fled.

Getty watched her, and he may have heard her sob. For a moment he thought about their wedding, the way she had blubbered at the altar, and, later, clinging to him, gulping air, had torn at his flesh, as if she wanted to reach inside *his* body, chanting, "Oh God" and "Yes" and "Oh-God-Jimmy-please-won't-you-please-Jimmy-please?"

The bedroom door slammed and Getty sat at the table emptying and filling his glass, comforting himself with thoughts of Driemer. Driemer in lockup. Driemer in isolation. The cops would

have to confiscate his property, of course. And there would be Darby Floe, lugging those disgusting chicken breasts into the property room, where they would rot.

Soon enough, Getty began regarding the storm—the night of which proved the last time he shared a bed with his wife—as a turning point. Not only had he shepherded Food Palace through those difficult hours, laying predicate for promotions, but he had freed himself of a pointless union.

What's more, and somewhat less intentionally, the storm had triggered in Getty a spiritual reawakening. Increasingly, he thought about what Driemer had said, about prayer.

Getty took religion seriously, didn't know what else to do with it, and when the weather turned nasty he made his stabs at prayer. Alone in the office, with its mighty view and Cordova leather, he would walk to the window and sink to his knees. He would stare at the bruised clouds and sideways rain and address requests to God, matters relating most often to his professional life, but also, on occasion, to his own mood, the veil of sweat that clung to him nights, the disquieting dreams.

The whole ritual felt foolish, humiliating, asking someone for something you couldn't provide yourself, something your own deficits deprived you of. And yet, despite how it made him feel, he found it was something he did anyway. He closed his eyes and clasped his hands and his entire body sometimes shook. Then it was over, and he rose quickly to his feet, and went on with his day. ■

**W** ELIZABETH SCHURMAN  
**A** T E R

There's a certain piece of the hills,  
a square chunk that stands up like huge teeth,  
that is the one spot on our lands I enjoy.  
My enjoyment is in taking off my clothes and  
rubbing the land on my back.  
My sisters say I was born a cat,  
and somehow switched into a human body.  
This hasn't ever fit me right.  
I go to get water for the family  
from the spring-fed river,  
into the tin kettle.  
Across the sky is painted a small pink,  
a great orange, and other colors.  
I miss the body I used to have.  
If it was a cat body, I miss the four feet,  
but then now I think it is only my young body I miss.  
My sisters and I talk in our house, and I see  
our skins are old, they cascade down our faces like water.  
Our stories are old, too.  
No one is alive who hasn't heard them.  
But my granddaughter tells me convincingly  
That this is true of her stories, too.  
That water is not something that has age,  
that it only travels at different speeds,  
in different vessels,  
for different reasons.  
When the river freezes I will take a knife  
and cut the ice to tease a cat out of it.

# DENNIS HELD MARILYN

Thank god you died when you did,  
or you'd have wound up owning  
the Florida Marlins, jiggling and bloated  
and afraid of yourself, stunningly  
drunk of course on Boodles gin  
and browned in the tanning booth  
of self-admiration, strolling out  
onto the playing field with  
two fat weiner dogs on diamond-  
studded leashes and reeling  
through the infield among the listless  
vets and star-popped rookies,  
all of whom (it's rumored)  
you'll ball before the season's  
half over, wobbling thick amid  
the leering boos you've learned  
to ignore, John-boy Kennedy  
panting from the dugout,  
a made-for-TV movie on  
the docket, guest star  
on "Evening Shade."

Or no.

Maybe you'd have saved yourself,  
gone dignified, sober and out  
of the public eye, Norma at the hospice  
once a week, quietly caring  
for the others we've removed  
by leaving off the love,  
and maybe you'd have met Alex,  
maybe he'd have known  
that someone was there  
who could say I love you,  
someone who cared,  
not me, but someone.

**RON MCFARLAND**  
**INTERROGATING RAYMOND FEDERMAN**

**B**ecause Raymond Federman was slated to visit the University of Idaho as a Distinguished Visiting Writer the week of 17 February 1997, the editorial board of *Fugue* and I, acting as faculty advisor, invited him to send some of his work to us. On 16 October 1996 we received a dozen "pieces of writing—or fragments, as I prefer to call the poems or little prose pieces I have been writing lately." These are part of a book in progress entitled 366, which reflects his daily work during the past year, which was a leap-year. Once we realized the scope of his project, we had the temerity to solicit additional "fragments," and he very graciously complied. Our selections from Mr. Federman's work are featured in this issue.

*Fugue* is presently being edited by three members of the University of Idaho's first MFA class (J. C. Hendee, Kris Kurrus, and Eric Isaacson) plus one non-MFA (Kit Craine). All of them contributed questions used in the following "interrogation," which I conducted by e-mail.

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Right away we wanted to know whether Mr. Federman wanted the fragments to be published in any particular order, or perhaps by genre with poems in one section and prose in another.

As for the order in which the fragments should appear—any order will do. Random is fine. Since I make no distinction between genres—poetry, fiction, critifiction, surfiction, it's all writing to me. In fact, you could use as a title for all the pieces: *Fragments of Writing*. (23 Nov. 1996, 10:35)



Later, I wrote and suggested that some students in my class on editing and publishing thought they perceived some order in the work you had sent.

In fact if your students see some kind of order in what I sent—good for them. I delight in chaos and incoherence, not to mention discontinuity and fragmentation. Those were, I believe, the key terms of postmodernism before postmodernism sold out to commercialism. Do you know that Burger King is soon coming out with a postmodern Whopper? So feel free to organize the fragments according to any arcane and esoteric order you and your students see in them. (25 Nov. 1996, 16:19)

• • • • •

Well, no, the postmodern Whopper was new to me. (Federman's response of 25 November indicated that his bibliographer had uncovered no fewer than 32 interviews, so we felt rather intimidated but decided to forge ahead anyway.) We asked about what we described as his "primordial" experience in the closet, where he hid from the Gestapo in Paris in 1942. His parents and two sisters were seized and perished in the concentration camps.

Concerning the primordial (closet) experience. I have written and said too much about it, and I am now trying to bypass it in both directions—looking at what happened before (that's the new novel that just came out in Paris which I wrote in French. No mention of the closet in it) and what has been forgotten or blocked afterward (that's the more elliptical stuff I am writing now.) (25 Nov. 1996, 16:19)

• • • • •

Do you see humor as a major component in your work? (Of course we assumed he would say yes, but we were curious as to how he might elaborate on the subject, and we were delighted with the results. When we asked about the conversation, Mr. Federman said he had "invented it on the spot" and we were welcome to use it, so we did.)

Here is a little exchange I once had with Samuel Beckett about laughter. Let's say that it took place on February 20, 1976, at La Closerie des Lilas in Paris, about 9:32 PM.

Ray [smoking a Gauloise]: Sam, you know that if I did not

write with laughter, if there was no laughter in my writing, I would probably jump out of the window, or blow my brains out, or else simply walk away from the writing undertaking.

Sam [also smoking a Gauloise]: Cher Raymond, it is easier to write than to laugh, because laughter is essentially philosophical.

Ray [while swallowing a fresh oyster]: don't make me laugh.

Sam [digging into his pate de foie gras]: who is laughing, and in any case, I was only laughing the laugh laughing at the laugh.

Ray [looking up from his steak au poivre]: are you drunk?

Sam [stirring his espresso]:..... [silence]

Ray [sucking his spoon full of creme caramel]: are you asleep?

Sam [putting a match to the Gauloise in his mouth]: have I ever been awake?

Ray [asking Sam for a match for his Gauloise]: Sam, what time is it?

Sam [shrugging his shoulder]: you ask me for the time. You certainly got the wrong guy.

Ray [taking out his notebook]: when do we see each other again?

Sam [with a look of consternation on his face]: how about yesterday. (26 Nov. 1996, 17:41)

• • • • •

We posed one of the inevitable questions of all interviews: What writers have most influenced you? We also asked whether he had much time for reading, and whether he read much poetry. I mentioned the UI's production of *Twelfth Night* in passing.

Ah the inevitable question of which writers have found their way into my writing. I love to answer that one, but the list is long. I'll give you two lists. List one—the distant writers (indirect influence or impact). List two—the closer writers (direct influence or impact)

1. Rabelais, Montaigne, Molière, Racine, la Fontaine, Diderot, Rousseau, Baudelaire of course, and Rimbaud, yes Rimbaud, Stendhal...so far the French...Dostoevsky, Conrad, Thomas Mann for a while, Shakespeare like everyone else...good enough for now.

2. Rimbaud, Proust, Celine, Kafka, Joyce like everyone else, and of course Beckett. Among my contemporaries, not influence, but affinities: George Chambers, Ronald Sukenick, Walter Abish, Donald Barthelme, Italo Calvino, Robbe-Grillet, Kurt Vonnegut, Steve Katz, Marianne Hauser, Christian Prigent.

These are of course partial lists.

As for reading, these days, less and less. Writing interferes with reading, and these days I am writing. Except for the books my friends write (published or unpublished). The last great novel I read was in French, by my good friend Christian Prigent—unknown in America.

Poetry? Usually I read a few lines of a poem and if something doesn't click immediately I give up. I am a great admirer of John Ashbery—even translated a couple of his poems. I thought I had read Paul Celan, but this year I invited John Felstiner from Stanford to Buffalo, and became quite friendly with him. His book on Celan is superb. I reread Celan very closely. I am amazed to discover how much I missed the first time. A very great poet. The other poet I read recently who floored me is Ingeborg Bachmann. I had never read her poetry before. I read everything. She is absolutely fantastic.

Ah the theater. My first love. I wanted to be an actor when I was young and romantic. Did I mention that I wrote a play this year, and that I hope perhaps we can find time during my visit in Moscow to a dramatic reading of the play. I already mentioned that to Lance. Anyway Erica (my wife, Austrian born) and I go to the theater all the time, but we take our theater seriously. If the performance is bad we walk out. Oh by the way, we are also opera fanatics—the heavy stuff.

But above all we go to the theater to see my daughter—Simone (34 last Saturday on Pearl Harbor Day)—who is a theater director. She is currently teaching acting and directing as a visiting lecturer at Bowdoin College. Normally she directs in New York, off off off Broadway. Very avant-garde stuff. She spent two years at Harvard and directed six plays for ART, The American Repertory Theater. She is the best. I am not saying this because she's my daughter. She knows what she's doing. And of course, we have seen all her plays—she has directed Beckett plays, Genet, Chekhov, Lorca, Goldoni,

Molière, and dozens of other contemporary playwrights, male or female. She is a true feminist. She absolutely wants to direct my play when the time comes.

Meanwhile my play, entitled *The Precipice*, will be adapted into a radio play in Germany and staged in Vienna (in German of course). The play is in English. Next April, in San Diego, on the occasion of the publication of the *Federman Casebook* (to be published by San Diego State University Press) there will be a performance of the play—probably directed by my daughter.

And while I am at it, I should mention that yesterday I received in the mail copies of my new novel—*La Furrure de ma tante Rachel*—yes, I wrote that one in French—published in Paris by Les Editions Circe. Stop me if you can. Once you get Federman going he is unstoppable. That's what my wife says. (11 Dec. 1996, 17:57)

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**The next day we decided to stick Mr. Federman with a tough question: Do you think of yourself as operating from any particular moral, ethical (philosophical? metaphysical?) premise or set of premises, and if so, what are they? Maybe another way of putting this question is to ask, "What is most important to you?"**

Confronting this question, I panicked. What do I know about morality and ethics? I could tell you more about red radishes. First thing I did then, was to rush to my wife and ask her what I should do, what I should say about the moral, ethical, philosophical, metaphysical premises with which I operate, and she said to me: say something that sounds serious.

First then, let me make my position clear. I am an incurable optimist, and an incurable foreigner. I am an imaginary atheist Jew. I believe in mobility—in any direction. I have given up hope of ever getting where I am supposed to be going. I no longer complain or feel depressed because I am where I am. Were it to be elsewhere I would probably complain and be depressed for being there. If this is the night, I will be there. I will arrive first, before everyone, and leave after everyone has departed. I want to be everywhere at the same time. Does that present a moral obligation? I would not want to debate that point with anyone who believes in moral obligations. As for the philosophical: I always answer a question with another question so that I may forget the original ques-

tion. Did you say metaphysical? What's that? Or to put it in simpler terms. What is most important to me? Laughter, but then laughter, as my friend Sam once put it to me, is a philosophical act. And besides, laughter or tears, comes out the same in the end. Or even better. As I once tried to explain to a nazi: I will survive even if it kills me. (12 Dec. 1996, 19:13—same for next two questions)

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**We decided to ease up a little on the next question: What's your idea of a good time? (Not that we were promising him that when he came out here.)**

What is my idea of a good time? Depends what time it is. But to be more precise. I once wrote a list of all the things that have given me pleasure in life: my wife my children my late dog Sam who died at the age of 15 food wine cheese especially books jazz tennis golf theater sex of course friends love nature—shall I go on? You know, what people call “the good things in life.” Oh, I almost forgot...the grandchildren...and also the books I wrote.

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**Another easy one might be in order: Have you ever been to Idaho before, and what's the attraction? It could be the money, we surmised, or maybe the chance to visit his old friend, Lance Olsen, who teaches at the UI and has an essay in this issue on Federman's work.**

Oh yes, we once crossed the entire state of Idaho by car. This was when the kids were still kids—and we visited all the sights, and we saw the beauty of the black moon crater (I stole some rocks there, even though the sign said it is forbidden to take volcanic rocks from this site) and we saw buffaloes and we even ate some buffalo steaks in a great fancy restaurant somewhere I forget where, and all swore (the kids too) that someday we would come back to this beautiful state because we had so much fun there and we saw so many unforgettable things, I forget what these unforgettable things were, but I tell you, they were unforgettable.

Would I go to Idaho for the money? Are you guys kidding? A long time ago, in fact it was in 1966, I was in Paris, and one day having lunch with Samuel Beckett, this is true, I told him that I had just started writing a novel, which eventually was published

under the title *Double or Nothing*, and so I said to Sam: Sam I started writing a novel. And Sam said to me: Raymond if you write for money do something else and then, after a little moment of typical beckettian silence he added...and never compromise your work. You understand why the Idaho money means so much to me. I've been writing for peanuts all these years.

Of course I want to see my good friend Lance and his lovely wife Andi. But that's not the main reason. The main reason I want to come to Idaho is because I am told it's very cold there in February. Cold makes me warm. Last time I was there it was summer. Since I am not sure I have answered that last question to your and my satisfaction, I asked my wife what I should say, and she said: tell the truth. You are going to Idaho to have your ego massaged. Oh, and also because I like to interact with students. In fact, yesterday when I sent you the list of the people who have influenced my work, I forgot to mention the most important people—my students, especially those in my creative writing classes who force me to be, as a writer, just a little better than they are, or else.

• • • • •

We decided it was about time for another of those “canned,” obligatory questions: What is your writing process? He would answer “briefly,” Federman said, because he was in the process of grading 47 term papers on experimental fiction.

When I was young and romantic I used to write at night with candlelight. In those days I thought I was a poet. But then I got married—36 years ago to Erica (my best critic and my current literary agent, and more) and she said: oh no. At night you sleep next to me. And so now I write every morning. That means I am there, every morning, from 8 to 1 more or less, often more, in front of the computer (used to be an IBM Selectric, and before that an old beat-up Olivetti, and before that a fountain pen, and before that my nails, and then I postmodernized myself with a computer, first a Wang, and now, wow what a machine, it writes by itself). Yes, I am there everyday, except when I am not there. Usually on Sunday when I watch football. I am a football fanatic. After all the Buffalo Bills went to the Super Bowl 4 times in a row. So they lost. Big deal. I think they lost on purpose so they could go back the next year, and the next, and the next. Now I write directly on the screen.

That doesn't mean that something is written every day. Sometimes I just rewrite what I wrote the day before. Or sometimes I just write letters to writer-friends. I am a great letter writer. My correspondence will someday make me famous—100 years from now. And will probably make some of my friends rich. In fact, a critic, whose name shall remain anonymous, recently sold a batch of my letters to him for \$3000. Can you believe that.

I do not drink when I write. In fact, I never drink. I am a non-drinker. But wow did I smoke lots of Gauloises in my days. I gave up smoking 10 years ago. And now, when I get depressed, or exhilarated, I smoke a joint. My students sometimes give me a little pot to thank me for liberating their minds. Oh, I almost forgot. I always write barefoot. I cannot think with shoes on. And since writing is a form of thinking, I think, with shoes on I am hopeless. The book I am working on now, called *Loose Shoes*, has an epigraph: "All my life my feet have been killing me." That's why, I think, I write barefoot. And beside, as Stendhal once said: to think is to suffer. And since my feet make me suffer, I write without shoes. Does that make sense to you?

I never revise. I write and write some more, between the lines, between the words, above the lines, below the lines, behind the words. My writing does not go only from left to right, it goes in all directions, up and down, sideways, forward, backward, etc. I write until the piece says: I can't take it any more. Or else until I reach total fatigue and disgust. (14 Dec. 1996, 10:52, same for next two questions)

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**Do you think the sort of writing you are doing will be prevalent in another ten or twenty years?**

Will my stuff be prevalent? Interesting word. Does that mean economically valuable? in 10 or 20? No. Because I will be understood, as Stendahl himself said of his work, 80 years after I have changed tense. I have been assured of this by many of my fans.

• • • • •

With no thought to any potentially invidious transitions, we next asked, "What is the worst thing you've ever written and had published?" (In the world of canned or "inevitable" interview questions, we would argue that this one is not.)

The worst little thing I published. I am sure I could make a long list, but the one that comes to mind immediately is a little poem—poem? or story?—I once contributed to a little anthology of dog stories. I think I wrote the piece in 3 minutes. [See below.]

### THE ANARCHIST

A dog once came to me  
and with a deep voice  
spoke thusly:

You humans are idiots!

You humans are idiots!

I was neither shocked  
nor surprised at that  
but after he walked away  
his tail up in the air  
swaying his dog ass at me  
I wondered whether or not  
that dog should be exterminated?

• • • • •

On the 16th of December we dumped three questions on Mr. Federman, but instead of replying to them right away, he posed a question of his own: Why had he not placed James Joyce on the list of those writers who had influenced him? But as it happens, he *did* include Joyce in his list. We did not call this oversight to his attention, but decided to print his response anyway.

I must ponder the questions—so I'll get back to you in a moment—but for now I have an answer for a question you failed to ask after I sent you my list—you did not notice that Joyce was missing from that list. How could Federman be what he is today without Joyce. Quite right. So here is the question you should have asked:

Q: Mister Federman what about Joyce?

A: Joyce was a mountain (Kafka a valley—Beckett a sea—Federman the wind) yes Joyce was a peak a literary peak that one must climb at least once in one's life but one need



not climb it again because one will find the same thing the same linguistic scenery up there one found the first time (in Kafka on a second descent into the valley one finds wild flowers—in Beckett's waves if one listens again one hears music—in Federman in a second voltigement one becomes infected with the virus).

Q: (hesitantly) oh you mean....

A: Unfortunately (or perhaps inevitably) everything written after *The Wake* was written in *The Wake of the Wake*.

Q: (anxiously) *Everything?*

A: Yes! Joyce is a dead end. Un cunt-de-sac. Un salaud in the sartrian sense of the term. He killed all possibilities for anyone after him to go any further or any higher. He was a dictator. He dictated.

Q: You mean...?

A: Joyce is a fascist novelist—I don't mean in his politics or his religion—I mean in his writing—his writing excludes those who cannot read it—those who have not learned piously the Joycean catechism of writing (Kafka does not exclude he includes—Beckett does not exclude he makes disappear—Federman does not exclude he disinfects).

• • • • •

**At this critical juncture we suddenly began exchanging thoughts on football, both of us being fans, and I proposed to send him a copy of my poems for some reason doubtless having to do with my ego. We print his comments for reasons we assume are apparent.**

Please do send me a copy of your recent book of poems, and ask Singular Speech Press if perchance it might be interested to see the manuscript of *The Twilight of the Bums*—a collection of micro-fiction about two old bums known as B One and B Two or else Um & Laut or else Sam & Ace or else B Plus & B Minus, but also as the two old farts, the two old geezers, etc., etc. Yes TB as it is known to friends was written for the past two years by Chambers & Federman—two old friends who for the past 15 years have been writing a letter a day to each other, and George Chambers is unknown in America. Probably the best writer America produced since Faulkner. You don't believe me read "The Last Man Stand-

ing" (*Fiction Collective 2*). Anyway the book keeps getting rejected by various small and big presses because these big presses and the small ones too (please excuse the digression, I'll get to the questions in a moment, but I got to get this off my chest) because they don't know what it is—it's neither regular short stories, nor regular poems, nor anything like that, it's short pieces—fragments perhaps—taking various forms—call it free form—about two old bums. But above all it is a book about friendship and about two friends watching each other getting old and starting to cultivate senilities. Literary journals have been grabbing these pieces of TB like mad. *Iowa Review* published half a dozen, *Tri-Quarterly* another half dozen with illustrations (yes the book can be had illustrated with little drawings by the authors), *Kansas Quarterly* grabbed a dozen, *Private* was the first to publish the bums, and there are another half a dozen magazines with bums in them, but no book. And will you believe, Ron, Suhrkamp, my German publisher (the Random House of Germany) is publishing the German translation of *The Twilight of the Bums* under the title *Die Pennerdämmerung* or is it *Die Bum Rap*. Oh well. You think all that critical acclaim you claim is coming my way helps. (16 Dec 1996, 16:01, same for the next three questions)

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**This, as Mr. Federman supposed, led him to one of the questions we had recently asked: What is your response to the increased critical acclaim that appears to be coming your way these days?**

Concerning the critical acclaim—long overdue—which appears to be coming my way these days—I have not yet felt the tremor. But my wife who is more sensitive to things like acclaim than I am said to me the other day: it's too bad it didn't happen 10 years ago when we could have taken advantage of it. My wife is the business person in our family. I don't know what kind of advantages she meant, but I could surely use a bit of...a bit more...I mean...recognition.

• • • • •

**If you had to select just one of your works to last beyond your time, a work by which you would be remembered, what would it be and why would you choose that one?**

If I had to pick just one of my works...by which I would be remembered (fondly...) what would it be and why? My DAUGHTER, of course. And why? It's obvious. Now if somehow I could sneak one of my books with my Daughter on the deserted island then I would take...let me think...this is very important...I was going to say *The Twofold Vibration* (it would have to be a book, the rest is just finger exercise stuff, one of the novels in fact).

Damn damn damn—just when I was going to say that it would not be *The Twofold Vibration* the damn second e-mail disappeared. I wanted to say *The Voice in the Closet*...but then, I hesitated. And finally, well it would have to be *La Fourrure de ma tante Rachel*, the novel I wrote in French for reasons which could be explained if needed—and which just appeared in France and which is going to be attacked so violently—because it is the final settlement of accounts with the French—with the French of 1940-45—and with my family—on my mother's side. A long and complicated story. Yes If I can sneak that book inside one of the pockets of my daughter's coat when we go to our deserted island that's the one.

Why? Not because it is better than the others—*Double or Nothing* is another favorite and a possible choice. Though *Take it or Leave It* is so much more intricate and jubilant and blasphemous. And there is the lovely sonate d'amour—*Smiles on Washington Square*...Just because *To Whom It May Concern* made me suffer so much that's the one I should take. But what about *Amer Eldorado* that totally neglected little masterpiece.

You see what a difficult position youse guys out there in Idaho cozy in your questioning room have put me in. I'm all confused now.

• • • • •

We were elated at the prospect of having thrown Mr. Federman into a state of confusion, if only for the moment. In his e-mail of 18 December in response to our question about possible typos in the fragments he sent us, he responded, almost predictably by this time, "All the typos in the stuff I send you are inadvertent except those which are not." We decided not to accept responsibility for oddities in his text. His speculation that this special symposium issue of *Fugue* would make

him famous caused gales of laughter in the editorial offices. We asked about his interest in jazz.

Jazz: I played tenor sax (but also some alto and even the clarinet) in the marching band of Northern High School in Detroit—an all black high school except for a couple of white kids. I was older than most kids then, and still white. Now I am not sure which color I am. I played in Detroit and some in New York, and when I was in the army. But then my sax landed in a pawnshop on sixth avenue in New York and that was the end of my life as a jazz musician. Back then I played Bebop. My masters were (besides Charlie Parker) Coleman Hawkins and Wardell Gray. The big mouths of the saxophone. I don't know which cohorts in jazz you mean, but back then in Detroit at Northern High I knew kids called Tommy Flanagan, The Heath Brothers, Roland Hannah, Kenny Burrell, Frank Forster, and others who all became famous if not rich. They were much younger than me, but they were already great. I was older and never great but I blew my guts out between 1947-49. We had jam sessions all over the place, but mostly at the Blue Bird on Dexter Boulevard in Detroit (see section entitled "Remembering Charlie Parker or how to get it out of your system" in *Take it or Leave It*. Now I sometimes go down to my basement where I keep an old refurbished tenor sax and I blow against the wall, but I can't stand the shrieks that come out of that thing. Mostly I play jazz in my writing, my writing is jazz. I always play jazz when I write, I mean I play my old records, the tapes, the CDs. Without jazz my life would be nothing.

But I should mention that I have a band in Germany called Art de Fakt (in Aachen) and with my jazz band we did two tours of Germany. No I don't play the sax, I play with words—poetry and jazz. We even have a CD. Yes, last year we recorded a CD. In fact, I will send you a copy. I'll send you a cassette (I am running short of the CD) I re-recorded from the CD. It's called *Surfiction Jazz*. Great stuff. Great musicians. That's your Christmas present.

If you don't like it give it to your daughter. How old is your daughter? That will give me an idea of how old you are—more or less. Mine was 34 on Pearl Arbor day, a few days ago.

Feel free to edit, cut, delete, or even amplify what I send you. Language belongs to everyone in the same amount, what one does with it is a matter of personal choice.

That's all for now. I just counted—28 more term papers to correct. These are the undergraduate papers. Then I have 14 term papers from the graduate seminar. Will I survive. As of now I am officially on sabbatical until next September, so why am I killing myself?

Did I mention that a CD of *The Voice in the Closet* will be arriving here from Minneapolis sometime this week. Yes some young guys in Minneapolis started a company that produces literary CD's. They call their company VOYS, and *The Voice in the Closet* (a recording I did of the entire text for the German radio—in English, of course) is their first CD.

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I enjoyed the interview. I am surprised, however that your students did not ask about my sexual life. Usually that's the first question I am always asked. After all, I am told my books are very sexy. (18 Dec. 1996, 10:26) ■

# RAYMOND FEDERMAN FEDERMAN

Federman loves his name, if only because it's another word that he can play with. Federman loves to play. He plays with anything he can get his hands on. If there is nothing there, then he plays with his name.

When someone notes that it is a strange family name for a Frenchman, he points out that his father's family was Russian. That's what he says, but he's not sure himself if it's correct, because Federman often confuses Poland with Russia in his mind and in his writing. Federman never studied geography when he was in school, he never got to that subject, he was forced out of school, for reasons which Federman is always reluctant to elucidate.

Federman never seems to notice that Federman is a pretty strange name for a Russian, too. [How ignorant can a guy be?]

The name Federman is a polylingual pun. *Feder* is German for **feather**, and so *Federmann* would be *featherman—der Mensch von Feder*. In French, since Federman often speaks to himself in French, *feather* is *plume* which, of course, is also *pen* or *portepenne*—but that's too obvious.

By a rather roundabout linguistic route [known as the leap-frog technique] Federman becomes the *penman* [*Homme de Plume* for those who know him in French, *Hombre della Pluma* for those who know him only in Spanish]. *The Penman*, a very joycean name which

contains within it Ray's vocation as a kind of etymological guarantee.

No, rather, a very beckettian name, because of the cringing scatological humor that surfaces from this transatlantic leap into the reverse of farness, as Old Sam Beckett once put it. **Fart-erman**, as some of his friends call him.

**Federman**: a name, a pun that contains within it not only Ray's vocation, but Moinous' misfortunes, too. Moinous: the secret name Federman gives himself when he pretends to be a spy, or a musketeer, or a paratrooper, or a jazz musician, or a French lover, or an experimental writer.

Yes, that's what Federman sometimes calls himself, **Moinous**, and if you ask him, who's Moinous? he tells you: oh just a word, a name I made up. It means, me/us. By the way, it's also the name on the license plate of his wife's car.

His wife, when people ask her, who's Moinous? always answers: Moinous! That's the guy who bought the car.

Moinous is o-m-i-n-o-u-s.

But the *feder/feather/plume/moinous/et al* also has about it a sense of flight, of voltigement and lightness, a birdlike quality, of escape, of escapade, of disappearance and reappearance within itself, of being both present and absent at the same time. Of being here and elsewhere and everywhere. Now and always and forever.

From *Federman* to *Namredef* [another name Federman is fond of using] there is but a stroke of the pen—*la plume*—yes, a little reverse twist of the wrist, and: voilà, Federman is here and there at the same time, laughing madly because, once again, Federman succeeded in doing a little linguistic somersault in his own name. A great leap-frog over the Atlantic. That's how much Federman loves his name.

He would do anything for it, anything to preserve it, even if it means breaking his neck doing linguistic somersaults within his own name. That's how flexible the name Federman is.

After all, Federman will tell you, my father was not only a Russian, he was a Russian Cossack. Perhaps the only Jewish Cossack in the entire Russian Cossack Army ever. And in Russian they called my father: Dimitri Fyodor Konstantin Merdov Ivanovitch Federmanov.

And he will even tell you that one of his ancestors was nobility, the Baron Nicolas von Federman, a 16th century German Conquistador, who died an unfortunate death by drowning while paddling a rowboat down some infested river in the jungles of the New World—a rowboat full of treasures, gold, precious stones, ancient statues, bibelots, even money, or whatever rare currency was used for money in those days. Yes, Federman's glorious ancestor, Le Baron Nicolas de Féderman, as he was known in France when he resided at the court of Henry the Fourth, before he sailed to the New World in conquest of fame and fortune, drowned rowing down some infested river in the jungles of some yet unnamed country. That's what Federman will tell you, if you ask him where the name Federman comes from, and what it means.

His wife [whose name shall not be investigated today, a name loaded with beautiful possibilities—**Hubscher** was her maiden name, which means more beautiful] always tells him that Federman does not mean Penman, that it has nothing to do with *la plume* and with his vocation as a writer, that simply the name came from what his ancestors were doing back in the old country. And what were Federman's ancestors doing in the old country? His wife explains, plucking chicken feathers in the steppes of Russia or the Ghettos of Poland. That's all you are, his lovely wife always tells him [not sarcastically, not meanly, **no**, on the contrary, gently, lovingly, affectionately]—a featherplucker.

But Federman gets mad when people call him a featherplucker. I would prefer to be a chickenfucker than a featherplucker, he shouts at them. And he really means it.



That's how much Federman loves his name. Federman would kill the guy who would fuck with his mane.

He gets so mad when in the German Press [where his name often appears because of his reputation as a famous *Schriftsteller*—yes, Federman is a famous writer in Germany] they spell Federman, Federmann, with an extra n. That really bugs him to be so easily assimilated into German Kultur—with a K.

Federman is proud of his name. Even if you offered him a million dollars, ten million dollars, he would not sell you his name, he would not change it. That's how proud he is of his name. How much he respects his own name. But Federman is worried, because he is the last Federman in his family. The end of the line. All the other Federmans have already changed tense. And Federman has no son by that name.

Ah, but he has a daughter, and his daughter—the kid as he calls her, or puce, or pipsy, or mademoiselle Federman, or Professor Federman [yes, Professor Federman, his lovely daughter is also a professor, but that's another story which has nothing to do, or perhaps has everything to do with the name Federman]—even though she is now old enough to tell Federman what she thinks of him, his daughter is so proud of the name Federman, that she will never, never, she says, even if she were to be tortured, change that name, or assume another name. She is all Federman. That is why Federman loves his name and loves those who carry that name. ■

# RAYMOND FEDERMAN PORTRAITS

between us  
it's all  
double or nothing  
with him  
it's horseplay  
always playing with words  
me it's more real fictitious  
I mean  
lost  
between  
here and nowhere  
cut in half  
him on the contrary  
full length  
me only the head  
half in darkness  
him the head tilted to the side  
resting on one hand  
me looking blankly ahead  
him the light from above  
shadowing his obstinacy  
me dreamily caught  
between tears and laughter  
him looking into our eyes  
with compassion  
and a touch of cynicism  
me staring into the void to be filled  
him already receding  
into the final sentence  
me getting ready to leap  
into the precipice  
here we are

stirring still  
 playing  
 double or nothing

# THE COMPETITION

RAYMOND FEDERMAN

Seven years old. You are in school. An all boy school—*une école de garçons*. Yes, a French school. You were born in France. It's not your fault. You had no voice in this decision.

During *récréation* the older boys—eleven and twelve years old—go to the far end of the yard near the big wall to play. You go with them even though they always make fun of you because you are rickety and clumsy. That too is not your fault. The older boys let you play with them because they like to laugh at you.

In the far corner of the yard near the big wall, where the *Pion* in charge of watching the boys during *récréation* cannot see what's going on, the tallest boy draws a line on the wall above his head with a piece of white chalk, then he draws another line on the ground about *trois mètres* from the wall. Then the boys, half a dozen of them, beside you, start the competition to see who can pee the highest above the line on the wall. You never win.

Only once did you succeed in peeing above the white line, but that's because you stood close to the wall, about one meter away, and also because you held back all the *pipi* you had in you since the night before in anticipation of the competition. You were excited to have managed for the first time to pee above the line, to pee into the sky, even if you did not win the competition that day.

The other boys said you cheated because you crossed the line on

the ground. Only those who pee on the wall from the line on the ground are qualified. Those who cross the line are disqualified. That day you were disqualified as a high altitude *pisseur*. ■

# EATING BOOKS

RAYMOND FEDERMAN

If it ever becomes necessary for you to eat a book, out of despair or out of some primal need, then eat the telephone book, for it is the only book in your library which came free. Except, of course, for the books you stole.

*Voler un livre*, Voltaire once said, or was it Diderot who said that, André Gide said it too, but I know he stole that saying from someone else, *voler un livre*, Voltaire, of course, said it in French, I am quoting him verbatim, *voler un livre*, yes I am sure it was Voltaire who said that, but I am willing to stand corrected if someone knows better, in any case, *voler un livre*, that anti-Semite Voltaire once said, oh you didn't know that Voltaire was an anti-Semite, oh yes, a real hater of Jews, even though he claimed to be an atheist, does that make sense to you, how can an atheist hate Jews, Jews are the best atheists in the world, anyway, *voler un livre*, Voltaire said, I think he said that to Newton when he bumped into Newton in the streets of London during his exile in England, therefore he may not have said it in French, but in English, yes, of course, in English, so I was right in the first place, to write, *to steal a book*, yes I first wrote what Voltaire said to Newton in English, *to steal a book*, but I deleted the statement, *to steal a book*, and instead wrote, *voler un livre*, in French, but in fact I should have written, *to steal a book*, because when Voltaire bumped into Newton on Piccadilly Square, yes, now I remember that it was on Piccadilly Square, he spoke to him in English, of course, because Newton did not understand French, at least that's what I have been told, and Voltaire when he bumped

into Newton saw that Newton had a book bulging out of his coat pocket, the top of the book showing just a little out of the pocket, as if Newton had shoved the book in his pocket hurriedly, stealthily, not wanting anyone to notice that he had stolen the book, I am, of course, speculating here, but from the look on Newton's face when Voltaire bumped into him, one can assume that he had stolen the book, probably in a bookstore on Piccadilly Square, the fact that the book which was sticking out of Newton's pocket was stolen cannot be confirmed, but nonetheless, when Voltaire bumped into Newton, and Newton turned to Voltaire to curse him for his civil clumsiness, Voltaire noticed the book half-hidden in Newton's pocket and that's when he said to him, recognizing whom he had bumped into, *voler un livre n'est pas un crime*, dear Sir, oops, mistake, he said it in English, not in French, yes, Voltaire must have spoken in English on Piccadilly Square when he bumped into Newton, Voltaire did speak English, badly, and with a thick accent, but he did speak English, that much has been confirmed, so when he bumped into Newton and noticed the book sticking out of Newton's pocket he said, *to steal a book is not a crime*, oh by the way, the first part of what Voltaire said to Newton has been authenticated, *to steal a book is not a crime*, what has not been authenticated is the last part of his statement, *as long as one reads the book*, but if one accepts the entire statement, regardless of the fact that it cannot be totally attributed to Voltaire, then besides eating the telephone book when the situation becomes desperate, one can also eat the stolen books in one's library as long as one has read those books, for this we must be grateful to Voltaire, even though he was a bastard, an anti-Semite who hated Jews. ■

# VAN GOGH RAYMOND AMIDST THE FEDERMAN FLOWERS

I am writing this  
to get your attention  
and tell you  
of the sweet pain  
of that mad man  
lost amidst the flowers  
an artist to whom no one  
ever said:  
*That's nice  
what you're doing there*  
*I want one of those  
for my mother*



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RAYMOND FEDERMAN  
**CONCERNING THE NOVEL EVERYONE  
WANTS TO WRITE**

Everybody is writing a novel these days nobody knows why but still everybody is writing a novel anyway there are those who write for money and those who write for glory and those who write for peanuts and those who write for fun and those who write for business and those who write for nothing and those who write for themselves and those who don't give a shit if anybody ever reads the novel they have written and those who don't write at all and those who are thinking of writing a novel but never write it and those who once upon a time thought of writing a novel but now don't give a damn if they ever write it and those who think that someday they will write a novel and those who have given up writing the novel they were writing and those who are starting all over again the novel they gave up writing long ago and there are those who write poetry instead of writing a novel or who write essays cookbooks telephone books grammars tickets checks dirty jokes graffiti in shithouses and naturally there are those who never think of writing a novel and those who gave up disgusted even before starting and those who stopped in the middle of writing a novel and those who will never try to write a novel and yet continue to pretend that they will and those who have already written one or two or three or four or five or six or even seven unpublished novels and now write poems or essays or telephone books or cookbooks or reviews of novels and those who decided to quit everything job wife kids security to write a novel and naturally those who have never thought they were capable of writing a novel and yet attempted to write one and those who knew they

could not write a novel but wrote the piece of shit anyway and those who did not try to write a novel because they knew they could not write a novel and those who gave up trying to write a novel out of despair and those who never gave up and continued to write a fucking novel which they could not finish and those who went at it again after they stopped and those who failed miserably and those who failed at first but succeeded later then failed again and those who burned the novel they had written and others who went on writing another novel after they burned the first novel they had written and others who wrote novels and kept them in a garbage can and even though they were no good kept taking them out of the garbage can to send them to publishers who threw them into other garbage cans and others who threw themselves into the garbage can with the novel they had written and others who after years of sweating and bitching and waiting and writing decided to give up everything and committed suicide and others who discovered that the novel they had written was not bad after all and sent it to a publisher who made a best-seller out of it and then it was adapted into a bad movie and the poor writers were criticized for allowing their work to be exploited and others who keep taking out the novel they threw into the garbage can in order to throw it back into the garbage can and others who convinced themselves that they had written a masterpiece and went around trying to convince other people of this fact and others who never thought anything and others who thought they thought they had written a good novel but nobody else thought so and others who were not really sure if they had written a good novel and therefore could not bring themselves to show it to others for an opinion and others who could not admit to themselves that they had written a piece of shit and others who gave up thinking that the novel they had written was good and so on until finally one day (I believe it was July 16, 1999) the novel was declared dead and so everybody gave up writing novels

....

... but

## CONCERNING THE POEM EVERYONE HAS WRITTEN

everybody has written a poem at one time or another but nobody knows why still everybody has written a least one poem during one's lifetime and so on and so on blah blah blah ...

*continued*] ■

[not to be

# RAYMOND FEDERMAN

## BUT ...

but think of it think of it...he says to me the other in me...right there in the middle of the street...the other in me...yes once in a while we harangue each other...he & me...or whatever name we go under...Sam & Ace...B one & B two or is it B plus & B minus...but whatever the names we do talk to each other when we need to...even if we would prefer not to...and so he says to me...but think of it think of it...what over the years we did we did simply for our own diversion...ah talk to me about having fun...I never laughed so much in my life...as a way to play...how you like that...to enjoy one another's company...ah come on say it direct...to screw each other...long distance...yes that's what it was...and me all the while thinking it was...from the reverse of farness...as old Sam once put it...to compete with each other...damn right to compete...and remember...always...always the small one winning the race...to outdo one another as jazz saxophonists will...or as old farts in decline do...dueling at sea with their fishing poles...remember...think of it think of it...how me & you...and you & me...enjoyed one another's company...in the great vacuum of creation...to drive off the freaking despair of being writers...that's a good one...writers...ah yeah writers...scribblers rather...noodlers...to do something that meant precisely nothing...absolutely nothing...as you in me & me in you confronted the necessity to act in the face of the impossibility to act in spite of the obligation to act...you go make sense out of that ... go ahead ... you to move now...you to play...get your fat ass going and stop throwing all that shit my way about diversion... ■

# YELLOW HUMILIATION

RAYMOND FEDERMAN

# LA JAUNE HUMILIATION

my mother wept  
quietly  
that cold winter day  
while she sewed  
on all our clothes  
the yellow  
humiliation

then she said  
her eyes dry now  
as she straightened  
on my shoulders  
the soiled coat  
I wore to school  
just let your scarf  
hang over it  
this way  
nobody will notice

ma mère pleurait  
en silence  
ce jour d'hiver froid  
pendant qu'elle cousait  
sur tous nos vêtements  
la jaune  
humiliation

puis elle me dit  
les yeux secs maintenant  
tandis qu'elle m'aidait  
à enfiler mon manteau  
souillé  
pour aller à l'école  
laisse pendre ton écharpe  
dessus comme ça  
personne  
ne remarquera

# RAYMOND FEDERMAN IN THE PLACE OF ASHES

*for George Chambers*

Someday I'll go  
to the place of ashes  
and sit beside the ashes  
of my mother and father  
I'll sit in the dark  
and watch the glow  
of the coal fire  
through the tiny  
mica windows  
of the salamander-stove  
then holding my breath  
I'll carry the chamber pot  
downstairs to empty it  
in the courtyard  
and again I'll sit  
beside the ashes  
and try to scoop them  
in the palm of my hand  
so they can speak to me  
and tell me what happened

**FINAL ESCAPE** RAYMOND FEDERMAN

How will it happen  
the final exitus  
will it be violent  
will it hurt  
or will it be quiet  
full of silence

Will the sordid images  
that have haunted us  
be suddenly erased  
or will they be replayed  
endlessly replayed  
in virtual reality

Will we fall  
or will we rise  
or simply pass through  
as one goes through  
an open door  
to enter a room

Perhaps it will be  
an escape  
another escape  
from the little box  
where it all started  
among empty skins

But this time it will be  
the final escape  
from the great cunt  
of existence  
and this time  
without any gurgling

Will the stolen sugar be  
as sweet as the first time  
and what of the moon  
tiptoeing on the roof  
will she smile upon us  
or remain indifferent

Will there be words  
left to describe what  
is taking place  
words and silences  
or will there be only  
cries and whispers

# WELCH EVERMAN PORTRAITS OF FEDERMAN



I've always liked the photo of Federman on the dustjacket of *The Twofold Vibration*; it shows Ray simply looking into the camera, smiling. It's an outdoor shot, and the blurry street scene behind Federman's head could be anywhere.

The first time I ever visited the Federman home, I saw that same photo hanging in a frame on the wall of the living room. As it turns out, the picture on *The Twofold Vibration* had been cropped from the original. Now, looking at the complete photograph, I could see that Federman was sitting at one of those outdoor cafe tables in Paris. I could also see that the person sitting opposite him—also looking into the camera but not smiling—was Samuel Beckett.

It's only fitting that Beckett should be lurking within this particular photo of Federman. After all, *The Twofold Vibration* takes its title from a line in Beckett's *The Lost Ones*—"But the persistence of the twofold vibration suggests that in this old abode all is not yet quite for the best"<sup>1</sup>—and virtually everything the main character in Federman's novel says is a Beckett quotation.

Perhaps Beckett should be in all of Federman's portraits, just as he is in all of Federman's texts. After all, without Beckett, there would be no Federman.

I'm not suggesting here that Federman was influenced by Beckett. The word "influence" simply doesn't express the rela-

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett, *The Lost Ones*, trans. Samuel Beckett (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1972), p 61



tionship I'm trying to get at. For one thing, most writers try to conceal their influences in their efforts to appear original—"Oh, yes, I read his stuff a long time ago." This certainly isn't the case with Federman whose first published book, *Journey to Chaos*, was an early critical study of Beckett's fiction and who, openly and without shame, has been plagiarizing his friend's texts ever since.

The Beckett-Federman connection seems to be causal rather than influential. Because Beckett's work is what it is, Federman's writing is what it is. Oh, Federman probably would have been a writer even if Samuel Beckett had never existed, but he wouldn't have been the writer he is.

Many scholars and critics have addressed Beckett's work—in sheer volume of books, papers, essays, and bibliographies, Beckett scholarship rivals scholarship on Shakespeare. Even so, Federman is one of the few readers who has truly understood the enormous importance of Beckett's writing to the present and future practice of literature. While Beckett scholarship usually tries to determine what it is that a Beckett text is saying, Federman understands that every Beckett text in fact questions whether it is possible to say anything at all, whether saying is to continue to be a possibility.

And so, from book to book, over a period of three decades, Federman has written and written and written in response to one specific question. After Beckett, how is writing possible?



The portrait on the back cover of *Double or Nothing* offers Federman as the dark, grim, brooding bohemian artist. He wears his shirt open at the neck, a sweater, and a jacket. He is bundled up against the cold, as if the picture had been taken in an unheated attic in an unsavory district of the city. It is, in a sense, an image from the '50s—cool and hip, knowing but understated like the sound of the Gerry Mulligan/Chet Baker Quartet. No, darker than that, more like Miles. The shadows are so thick that one eye is completely hidden. The subject isn't smiling.

After you've read *Double or Nothing*, you turn back to the portrait and say to yourself. "This isn't the guy who wrote this book."

The style here is explosive, hilarious, twisted, almost out of the control. The words are scattered all over the place. There is nothing cool or understated about this text. Sure, *Double or Nothing* is paranoid and claustrophobic, but it's still positive, optimistic. It is certainly not a light novel, but it is a novel that lets in the light.

Even so, as in all of Federman's texts, the darkness is there, too. Look into the shadows behind each page, and you can see the SS soldiers just entering the courtyard.



The snapshot was taken by Kiki Kosinski in Lodz, Poland in 1995 at a conference in honor of her late husband Jerzy. It shows Federman, Polish critic Jurek Kutnik, and me standing together in front of the University of Lodz conference center, a beautiful place out in the county where pigs and chickens roam freely along the narrow road. We stand next to a sign that reads "UNIVERSYTET LODZKI." The three of us are smiling rather foolishly, the way you do when someone points a camera at you and says: "Say cheese."

This is a tourist photo, the kind that young married couples have taken in front of Niagara Falls. It's a document, a bit of evidence that proves we were where we were at that particular time—that's why we're standing in front of the sign. I'm glad to have this picture that shows me together with two long-time friends.

Federman's fictions are documents of this sort, too. Not documentary evidence of the events recounted there, of course—those might or might not have happened, and, in the end, it makes no difference whether Federman's stories are what we might want to call "true" or not. No, what the writings document is the act of writing, the fact that, at some time in the past, Federman sat before a piece of paper, a typewriter, a word processor, or a computer and put the words together. This is why, in Federman's self-reflexive texts, the act of writing must show through in the writing itself—because the writing is more important than what is written.

The written is the proof that Federman was there to mark those pages that, without him, would have remained eternally blank.

Artist Harvey Breverman has done/is still doing a series of mixed media works entitled *The Federman Cycle*. These are works in some sense "about" the Holocaust, although, as in Federman's *The Voice in the Closet*, the actual event never appears. Breverman's works are about what remains after the disaster. "Fragments of stained photographs, unreadable ripped documents, undecipherable symbols, numbers and dates, official seals, illegible signatures, and the ever present yellow humiliation"—I'm quoting here from Federman's notes to Breverman's exhibition, *The Federman Cycle (A Portion Thereof)*, which opened at the Milton J. Weill Art Gallery in New York in March, 1997.

What is one to do with what remains? Breverman focuses on the left-overs, the bits and pieces of debris that Federman lists above, and he orders and re-orders them in various combinations and permutations within a strictly defined space (30" x 22") that is repeated again and again. The hope, it seems, is that, if the artist juggles, rearranges, reconfigures these various photographs, documents, seals, and yellow stars often enough, eventually he will hit upon exactly that combination which will tell the story of what happened, which will explain everything. Breverman knows, of course, that this will not happen, that each work is only a fragment of a total work—a portion thereof—that can never be completed and that each fragment is only what it is—not an explanation but another question. Thus, like Federman's work and like Beckett's before him, Breverman's cycle is an exercise in failure—an exercise which, nevertheless, he has the courage to undertake.

Like prisoners, the individual pieces have no titles, no names, only numbers. The surface of "Untitled #2" is smudged with grays, browns, and reds—dirt and blood. In the upper right-hand corner, we find an official, stamped document dated "16.7.1942"—two days after Bastille Day—and marked with four X's.

*the whole story crossed out my whole family parenthetically xxx  
into typographical symbols while I endure my survival from its  
implausible beginning to its unthinkable end*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Federman, *The Voice in the Closet* (Madison, WI: Coda Press, 1979), unpaginated.

The dominant image here is a dirty yellow Star of David at the lower center of the piece. An artist's paintbrush rests across one point of the star, and a pencil lies nearby to the left. A hand (Federman's? Breverman's?), wearing a wedding ring, appears in the lower left corner of the work with its fingers extended. It is impossible to tell whether the hand is reaching for the brush, the pencil, or the star itself, but, in fact, it doesn't matter. The distance between hand and objects cannot be bridged.



**D**ana Ranga's portrait, entitled "Das Leben ist eine Collage," is an interesting bit of Federmania. It's a photograph of photographs arranged in more or less orderly fashion in front of a row of books. The photos within the photo are mostly of Federman, of course.

There is an interesting range of subjects here. At the far left, we find a portrait of the Federman family—a young and dapper Raymond with long dark hair, his lovely wife Erica, and the kids. This is one of those studio portraits like they do at Sears—everybody dresses up and poses in front of a fake backdrop of a glowing fireplace or a window looking out over an idyllic autumnal scene. Generally at one of these sessions, you have a hell of a time keeping the kids in line and smiling long enough for the photographer to take the shot. Ray and Erica seem to have handled the children very well on this particular occasion.

In the center of "Das Leben," there is a picture of Federman doing a book signing somewhere. In this one, he looks more like the Federman of today—short gray hair, no tie—but you can see it's still the same guy we met in the family shot a moment ago. If anything, Federman has gotten better looking over the years.

Continuing from left to right, we discover a picture of Federman in Poland in 1981, followed by six small shots that look like photo proofs—two of Erica and four of Ray. One of these is the *Double or Nothing* portrait discussed above, uncropped. The other three of Raymond look as if they were taken during the same photo session but were rejected for use on the *DoN* cover. In two of these, he is smiling. In the third, he looks mildly surprised.

There are also a few items scattered across the table in front of the nine photographs—a Scotch tape dispenser, a roll of paper, an ashtray full of cigarette butts. For the record, Federman quit smoking in the mid-to-late 1980s, though he had a serious Nicorette gum habit for awhile.

Ranga's picto-bio proposes a kind of infinite series. I could take "Das Leben ist eine Collage," line it up on a table along with all the other Federman portraits I'm discussing here, and take a picture of that configuration. Then I could take that picture, line it up with other photographs of Federman that I have on hand—Federman doing a reading in Berlin, Federman standing in my backyard in Buffalo, Federman's high school graduation picture, Federman holding my eleven-month-old son in my living room in Maine—and take a picture of that new collage, etc., etc., etc.

But where would this get me? Ranga's photograph about photographs is an interesting reflection of Federman's own obsessive writings about writing, but there is something missing. There are no photographs of Federman here. There are only photographs of photographs. Federman himself has escaped the camera. Of course, this is also how Federman's so-called autobiographical writings work. There is no Federman in the text—there is only, on occasion, the word "Federman."

I have written elsewhere that Federman always slips away from anything anyone says about him. He also slips away from anything he has to say about himself.



**T**he 1979 bilingual edition of *The Voice in the Closet* offers two portraits of Federman, drawings done by Eric Karpeles, one as frontispiece to the English version, the other as a kind of visual preface to the French. In these portraits, the features are Federman's, that much is certain. But the faces—one in three-quarter profile, the other full on and looking out from the page—are very old, older than Federman was when the book first appeared, older than he is now. Why?

It comes as no surprise to Federman's readers that *The Voice in the Closet* is a self-reflexive fiction, but here it is not the author who

reflects on the text he is writing. The voice which speaks is that of the boy in the closet, a fictional character who comments, from within, on the very text that creates him: "his fingers on the machine make me. (Voice)" The voice intends to tell, at long last, the story the writer has failed to tell again and again: "never getting it straight...his fictions can no longer match the reality of my past. (Voice)"

The story itself seems simple enough. It is July 16, 1942—two days after Bastille Day—in Paris. German soldiers enter the courtyard of an apartment building. On the third floor, a mother awakens her twelve-year-old son and pushes him into a closet on the landing outside their rooms. While the confused and frightened boy hides, the soldiers enter the home and take his mother, his father, and his two sisters away. He will never see them again. They will die, and he will survive.

Is this Federman's story? If by that question one means, is the story true? Is this what happened to Federman?, there is no way to know. But this is certainly Federman's story. He has told it again and again, in works that pre-date *The Voice in the Closet*—like the 1958 poem "Escape"—and in works that come after. Sometimes he only refers to the story indirectly—"Particularly in my case...closets have a very special (symbolic) meaning."<sup>3</sup> Sometimes he tells it in detail or turns it over to someone else, as when the Old Man tells the story in *The Twofold Vibration*—"I don't like the last part of this story, he said, I'll have to work on it."<sup>4</sup> In fact, in an early typescript of *The Twofold Vibration*—I've got a copy lying around here somewhere—the text of *The Voice in the Closet* was included in full as one of the Old Man's works, but later Federman replaced it with the chapter on the Old Man's visit to the Dachau museum. In *To Whom It May Concern*, Federman raises the question of the story yet again: "How to begin in order to recount the essential without tumbling into sentimentality, and yet with just the right emotional impact?"<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Federman, *Double or Nothing* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1971), p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Federman, *The Twofold Vibration* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 69.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond Federman, *To Whom It May Concern* (Normal, IL: Fiction Collective Two, 1990), p. 18.

There seems to be no answer to this question, and so the story is never told. Or rather, it is told again and again but never completely. The proper story, told to the end, would explain who the boy is and why he survived when his family and millions of others did not. It would make sense of "that unforgivable enormity, (*To Whom*, p. 17)" personally and culturally. But of course this story cannot be told. The story form—"a ready-made model (*To Whom*, p. 18)"—will not hold it. As a story, it cannot even begin.

In *The Voice in the Closet*, Federman turns the story over to the voice of the story itself, to the boy—"I say I for the first time." (*Voice*) The boy promises to make good on the story the writer has never managed to tell—"no more false starts. (*Voice*)" But the voice also fails to tell the story and expends its words in search of an impossible beginning. The writer, who "waits for me to unfold (*Voice*)," waits only for another failure.

Does this explain Karpeles' drawings? These are portraits of the writer waiting, grown old listening to the voice as it tells its endless story that can never begin.



**D**irk Gortler's portrait of Federman is one of a series the artist has done of American writers. In it, Ray sits off to the right before a broad window, smiling slightly, dressed in his snappy German leather coat. Frenchy's Buick Special from *Take It Or Leave It* is parked right outside, ready for a quick getaway, if that should be necessary.

In fact, there are five portraits of Federman in this painting, though only the one on the right is finished. The others are incomplete sketches of Federman's face arranged side by side from the far left to the center of the picture space. Rather than erasing or painting over these four preliminary sketches, Gortler has chosen to cross out each one with a crude X.

The artist understands his subject's work. The sketches are false starts which remain in the portrait, as Federman's false starts remain in—and indeed are—his texts. The X's both obscure Federman's face and yet, by leading to the finished portrait on the right, make him who he is.

The difference is that Gortler's false starts result in a completed work, something that never happens in Federman's fiction. For Gortler, the failed beginnings lead to the real thing, the whole story, the portrait. But, of course, there is no real thing, no Federman in this painting, only representations of Federmen. The real Federman—whoever that might be—has escaped, slipped away. He is no more in the portrait than he is in any of his texts. The whole story is never told. And Federman is always somewhere/someone else. ■



# LANCE OLSEN ESCAPE VELOCITY OF THE HYPERTEXTUAL PREFIGURATION, OR:

**Hypertext fiction**, a non-linear computer-based mode of writing which came to the literary foreground in 1987 with the appearance of Michael Joyce's *Afternoon: A Story*, raises fundamental questions about fiction, the idea of the book, and even the nature of free choice among readers. In this mode, no hard or stable copy of narrative exists. Rather the reader uses a computer to explore an interlinking web of *lexia*, or story spaces, in an interactive way, literally developing his or her own version of a text, which may include music and graphics as

How to Stop  
Worrying

and  
Love  
the  
Feather  
Man

well as **typographical pyrotechnics**, contradicting plot elements, and **opportunities** for the reader to contribute character names, descriptions, and **shards of action**. After each reading experience, the reader can choose to save or abandon the **forking paths** he or she has just chosen to f

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# The result

is a mode of narration that proposes, as George P. Landow suggests in *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (1992), that "we must

abandon conceptual systems founded upon ideas of center, margin, hierarchy, and linearity and

replace them with ones of multi-

linearity, nodes, links, and networks."

With hypertext fiction, even clear distinctions

between one text and another can eventually blur into

a constellation of in-tertextuality. Consequently,

as Landow and others have argued, hyper-

text fiction enacts the deconstructive turn in

very tangible form.

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"This supreme indecision which gathers in itself all contradictions without deluding them. This, I believe, is what Postmodernism was all about: A Supreme Indecision!"  
 —Raymond Federman, "Before Postmodernism and After (Part I)," *Critifiction*

DECONSTRUCTION: A postmodern mode of radical skepticism that challenges all we once took for granted about language and experience.

"Realist fiction, says Sukenick, 'tends to deny its technological reality.' It does so by conventionalizing space right out of existence. Nothing must interfere with fiction's representation of reality, so the physical dimensions of the book must be rendered functionally invisible."

—Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*

Non-electronic **prototypes** of hypertext fiction, however, appeared nearly half a century before Michael Joyce's *Afternoon*—with the magnum opus of another Joyce: *James*. The only element lacking from such **prefigurations** that would allow them to take the full narratological leap out of hard-copy and into digital form was the appropriate computer technology. Post-structuralist theoretician Roland Barthes, for instance, imagines an "ideal text" in *S/Z* (1970) in which "the many and in-  
 out any one of able to sur-  
 rest; this **galaxy** of not a struc-  
 signifieds; it ning; it is  
 we gain access to it by several entries, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one." **Ironically**, and instructively, Barthes' text had been extant for decades before he invented it; per usual, in other words, critical theory ran twenty-five to thirty years behind the narrative idea it seemed to be taking credit for . . . a good place to stop and recall that **Derrida&Co.** didn't invent the deconstructed novel; rather, the deconstructed novel invented Derrida&Co., and **Charcot** quoted by **Freud** quoted by D. M. Thomas in *The White Hotel* (1981): "**Theory is good**, but it doesn't



## Interlude: A Nostalgic Reconsideration

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- ✓ James Joyce: **Finnegans Wake**: 1939: Virtually plotless, circularly structured, Celtically mythological, 600+ paged linguistic explosion that is impossible to read as a traditional novel of character and action . . . but see it as a hypertextual one, where the reader can dip in and out at will, and, voilà, a rhapsodic delight that looks forward to The Feather Man's fiction, which looks back to Apollinaire's concrete poetry in *Calligrammes* (1918).
  - ✓ William S. Burroughs: **Naked Lunch**: 1959: Fiction for Burroughs, as it is for The Feather Man, is a plastic art related to the Action Painting of Jackson Pollock, the music of John Cage, and the montage of modernist film. While NL purports to be a record of a man's addiction to opiates, his apomorphine treatment, and his cure, it is also a larger exploration of cultural and aesthetic addiction in the form of an anti-narrative cold turkey from the linear realistic novel. Again, like hypertext fiction, the reader is invited to "cut into *Naked Lunch* at any insect point. . . . the pieces can be had in any order being tied up back and forth, in and out fore and aft like an interesting sex arrangement."
  - ✓ Julio Cortazar: **Hopscotch**: 1963: A jazz musician like The Feather Man, Cortazar presents the reader here with a 155-chaptered novel that "consists of many books, but two books above all": 1) the first can be read "in a normal fashion" and ends with chapter 56; 2) the second must be read in a sequence indicated in the "Table of Instructions" and begins with chapter 73—both readings revolve around Horacio Oliveira whose ambition is to fragment his personality, like Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow* will succeed in doing ten years hence, in such a way that his life becomes a series of present moments.
  - ✓ Robert Coover: "The Babysitter" (**Pricksongs & Descants**): 1969: Written by the head of the hypertext center at Brown University, "The Babysitter" begins as a work

- ✓ of suburban domestic realism only to elide into an experimental investigation that offers contradicting plot elements that may be actual events or the imaginings of the characters or author himself.
- ✓ All of which, of course, help inform The Feather Man's:

pla(y)giarism

*Double or Nothing* (1971), a concrete, comic, heavily allusive and pun-packed novel displaying a quinafocal vision: 1) an "unmarried, unattached, and quite irresponsible" writerly Robinson Crusoe locks sparsely furnished is-New York City for exactly ning on October 1, in story of 2) a shy, naive Jewish boy's arrival in ter the end of World whose stories are "nar-stubborn and deter-aged man," who in turn Federmanian compos-in turn is overseen by reader. In this way, becomes a novel about composing, more inter-ative process than a believes, along with the overseer, that "what is that he is a bridge and not a goal." Existence, in other words, as The Feather Man's mentor Samuel Beckett understood, is a pastime, a passing of time, a filling of hours between birth and death that might have been filled in a nearly infinite number of other ways. It's not for nothing, then, that the narrator of the young Jewish man's (whose name might be Boris, although that remains unclear, since the narrator keeps fiddling with it) story is a gambler, nor that the idea of gambling pervades the text, since gambling functions as an emblem of risk-taking and game-playing here, a ludic mode that both suggests rules and suggests rules are meant to be bent, if not broken. And it's not for nothing that the young Jewish man is an immigrant from the Old World to the New. Just as he explores fresh geographical and cultural territory, so too does The Feather



equivalent of himself in a land room in New 365 days, begin-order to record the nineteen-year-old America shortly af-War Two—both of rated" by 3) "a mined middle-is overseen by 4) a ite of them all, who 5) the implied *Double or Nothing* recording, writing, ested in the cre-created product. It Federmanian great in a man is

Man explore a fresh narratological one . . . which, of course, is not to imply *Double or Nothing* is little more than crossword carnival. Rather, it is ultimately a rich celebration of the human imagination,

a deconstructive investigation of the novel-writing process,

a love-affair with language

the small ahistorical details that comprise daily life

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a paean to the power of human freedom on an off the page by a writer who witnessed the apotheosis of its absence, losing his parents and sisters in

THE HOLOCAUST

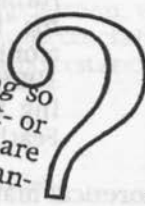
While the narrator nuances words, meticulously thinking his way through his cramped minimalist universe, obsessing over the cost of noodles or the way(s) to cook potatoes (reminiscent of Beckett's Molloy obsessing over the position of his sucking stones) The Feather Man reminds us by means of the typographical and narrative abandon of his text that "man is indeed free to choose his own destiny, free to propose and design" — if not that, then what?

WHAT IS A PAGE?

© The Feather Man configures *Double or Nothing* so that **desire is never fulfilled** by means of plot- or character-completion; emblematic of this strategy are the unfulfilled and unfulfilling **sex scenes** that transpire throughout the text.

what's the difference, exactly, between fiction & criticism & why?

©©©©©



where does fiction end & autobiography begin?

tangible

what does it mean to READ a text?

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?????????

form



what is a novel?

??? ◁

"In other words when you read a story what you are really reading are the answers to unformulated questions. So all that crap about fiction writing its for the birds. Only traditional and bad fiction writers do it that way usually. The normal way. The real sensitive imaginative inventive progressive guys do it differently. Or at least they try even if they fail in the end."

-Double or Nothing

The Feather Man received his first **computer**, "a prehistoric Wang word processor," when he was awarded an NEA Fellowship in 1986. Although it took him some time to get over his "**timidity**" in the face of that rough electronic beast, and although it would be early 1996 before he hooked up to and began surfing the World Wide Web in earnest, The Feather Man augurs **hypertext fiction** in his

theoretical manifesto "Surfiction: A Position," which was first published in the *Partisan Review* in 1973. There, in an act of **spiritual autobiography** that informs much of his critifiction,

he essentially glosses *Double or Nothing* by claiming that we must "**renew our system of reading**," which has become "restrictive and boring," by innovating the "**paginal syntax**" of our texts.

To accomplish this, we must

**short-circuit**

our traditional reading strategies that propel us from the upper lefthand corner of the page to the lower right in a "preordained" manner.

We must **reinvent the page**,

**the space  
of reading,**

by embracing **new** typographical prospects,  
shapes and designs,  
new relations among textual parts,  
multiple possibilities of plot and character,  
**and even what we mean  
when we say the word "book,"**



thereby engendering "a sense of **free participation** in the writing/reading process, in order to give the reader an element of choice (active choice) in the ordering of the discourse and the **discovery** of its **meaning**." This aesthetic move, according to Federman, will better echo the arbitrary, non-linear, discontinuous, unpredictable, illogical, digressive, free-yet-chaotic experience we understand as **postmodern life**.

"Now some people might say that this situation is not very encouraging but one must reply that it is not meant to encourage those who say that."  
— *Double or Nothing*



**Interlude:  
A List of  
Hypertextual  
Elements in  
*Double or Nothing***

- ⇒ **bold face** to highlight key words or phrases, giving them what hypertext writers refer to as "texture"
- ⇒ **unpredictable quantum leaps** between two or more storylines, thereby creating an analog for hypertextual narrative uncertainty
- ⇒ **typographical/configurative play**, including lists, footnotes, symbols, math, interviews, diagrams, etc. in an attempt to rupture conventional linear reading strategies and foreground the technology of the page
- ⇒ **conflating prose/poetry**, as well as fiction/criticism/autobiography, to question trad genre distinctions

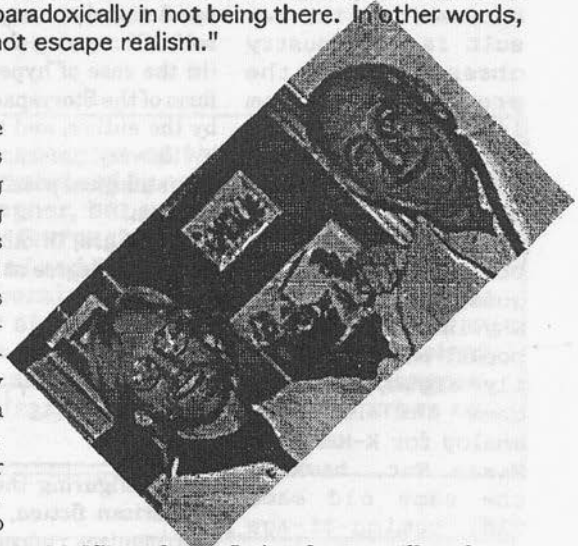
⇒ **digressive narrative structure** where the overarching plotline isn't as important as the individual page before the reader at a given moment, a technique that anticipates of the power of the single hypertextual lexia . . . as well as a gesture that transforms fiction into a plastic art with similarities to Abstract Expressionism (see below . . .); ⇒ **abrupt shifts in point of view** that approximate the abrupt shifts resulting from moving from one hypertextual lexia to another, often with dramatic changes in perspective; ⇒ **metafictional contemplation and enaction of readerly freedom** "of choosing willingly or randomly" elements of the text, from name to plot—all of which adds up to ⇒ **an overall musical rather than linear narrative structure**, more reminiscent of jazz improvisation (The Feather Man's involvement with and love for jazz is well known) than conventional fiction-writing tactics, with its repetition of phrases, images and obsessions (the icon of **noodles** floating through the text, overlapping in apparent chaotic abandon, is emblematic of this)—which structure creates the hypertextual impression that the reader can dip into the book at any point for a paginal snippet, since narrative forward force isn't what guides the reading experience any more than it does in lyric poetry. Hence one finds a ⇒ **new hypertextual realism** more in sync with the hyperbolic televisual rhythms of late-millennial existence than what one might in the quite safe narratological nostalgia of domestic urban or small regionalist stories that harken back to quieter, steadier, more predictable ontological and epistemological times: a kind

of essentially nineteenth-century story (1) that New York publishing has recently embraced with economic abandon (2), not unlike, perhaps, the way Europeans did the "exotics" discovered (3) in and imported from the New World or Africa in the past.

(1) And yet *The Feather Man* is aware of the inherent contradictions associated with the attempt to write beyond so-called realism: "Can it be said," one of his narrators asks in *Double or Nothing*, "that by denouncing the fraudulence of a novel which tends to totalize existence and misses its multidimensionality, the critical work frees us from the illusion of realism? I rather believe that it encloses us in it. Because the goal remains the same: it is always a question of expressing, of translating something which is already there—even if to be already there, in this new perspective, consists paradoxically in not being there. In other words, the novel, in a sense, cannot escape realism."

**(2) A Sidebaroid Rant**

New York publishers are cutting their lists right and left, laying off editors, trimming the fat. The nation's 30,000 bookstores, too. Philip Roth estimates the audience for "serious" fiction, whatever that is, currently runs no more than a disheartening 120,000. Nan Talese, a major editor at Doubleday, puts it closer to 4,000. In any case, a first novel that sells more than 5,000 copies is viewed by publishers, who have paid its author an advance against royalties of well less than \$10,000,



(3) "Since the surfictional story will not have a beginning, middle, and end," *The Feather Man* concludes, "it will not lend itself to a continuous and totalizing form of reading. It will refuse resolution and closure. It will always remain an open discourse."

While in a sense this is true enough with respect to *The Feather Man's* project,

as a raving success. In the last decade or so, most major US publishers have been absorbed by huge conglomerates—Random House, for instance, by Newhouse, Doubleday by Bertelsmann, Simon and Schuster by Paramount, Penguin and Dutton by Pearson, Harper and Row by Murdoch, Putnam by Matsushita. The result is an industry obsessed with the proverbial bottom line. Sonny Mehta, head of Knopf, sums up the situation best when he asks: "Why should I publish books if they aren't going to make money?" Why indeed. Waldenbooks, one could easily argue, has become the literary analog for K-Mart and Pizza Hut, hawking the same old same old: coming-of-age stories, relationships-on-the-rocks stories, political-intrigue stories, life-in-the-woods stories, et ho-hum cetera et ho-hum cetera et ho hum cet-

and hypertext fiction in general, particularly when set next to works of traditional nineteenth-century realism, one shouldn't forget that the illusion of **free choice** and open discourse in surfiction and hypertext fiction is finally to some extent just that: **an illusion**. As much as a writer may wish to impart a sense of autonomy and self-determination to his reader, the writer is always, it almost goes without saying, the ultimate shaper of the text, the endmost provider of possibilities.

Granted, reading hypertext fiction and its hardcopy analog feels a good deal less "preordained" and "restrictive" than reading their linear fictional ancestors, but behind the thing itself still remains the **map of the thing itself** (in the case of hypertext fiction this takes the form of the Storyspace writing program) created by the author, and that map of the thing itself by its very presence delimits choice, restricts narratological possibility, and regulates human freedom.

We are, in other words, discussing a difference in degree at the end of the day, and not kind.

## CONCLUSION:

By prefiguring the hypertextual instant in American fiction, *The Feather Man's* work harmonizes conceptually with a number of other currents on the contemporary scene.

### **The Avant-Pop**

A name appropriated by Larry McCaffery and Ronald Sukenick from a Lester Bowie jazz album to describe that impetus in our culture that both pushes the avant-enveloppe and embraces—however ambivalently—a pop aesthetic. Not only do many Avant-Pop obsessions surface in The Feather Man's work, from technical improvisation to bullet-train anti-narrative speed, but also the defining need to use and abuse pop maneuvers to subvert a perceived numbed popular complacency.

### **Aesthetics of the Ugly**

A vision currently embraced by such practitioners as Kathy Acker and Mark Leyner, but which tracks back through the texts of William Burroughs and the T. S. Eliot of Thames scenes in *The Waste Land*, the destructive robotics of Survival Research Laboratories, and Dadaist movement, to the the launchpad of Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) with its conflicted exploration of the violent, darkly sexual, decadent, discordant, socially disagreeable underside of fragmented industrialized urban experience.

### **Abstract Expressionism**

"I think I came in contact with abstraction still in my mother's womb," The Feather Man recently wrote me. "I looked around, and what I saw there was like an abstract painting, and I liked it. There was a lot of red there, and some purple and some yellow. And it was pulsating. And I knew that this was the reality I wanted to live in."

**Get to the Point**

"Besides the sequence of events does not matter and believe me if I analyze if I build hypotheses if I temporize it is less by scruples that I might let something get lost of what comes to my mind in bulk than to allow myself to play a little game as frivolous as it is inoffensive."

—*Double or Nothing*

**THIS IS NOT THE  
BEGINNING**  
are the first words of  
the novel which begins,  
like many hypertext fic-  
tions, **in medias res.**

**Clyfford Still (1904-1980)**

One of The Feather Man's favorite painters, Still embraces many of the convictions of **Abstract Expressionism**, a loosely unified "school" focused mainly in New York after the Second World War. Instructively, Still wrote his M.F.A thesis at the State College of Washington in Pullman, WA, in 1935 on Paul Cézanne, a seminal Post-Impressionist less interested in the conventional realistic representation of nature than in the analysis of its **basic geometric structures** on the canvas—in other words, in extreme formal experimentation. Still, along with other Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline, emphasized the physical act of painting rather than its aesthetic product, the existential quest for authentic being through the creative act, a spirit of revolt against traditional approaches and prescribed procedures, and a mandate for spontaneous expression. The same, of course, could have been said by **Samuel Beckett**, whose work has often been suggested as the literary analog of Abstract Expressionism, and by **Raymond Federman**, much of whose production could be seen as the fictional and poetic equivalent of Action Painting, where, as Still once commented, "the Act, intrinsic and absolute, was [a piece of art's] meaning, and the bearer of its passion." Federman, who first met Still's paintings in Buffalo, NY, in 1964, produces concrete texts in which he performs formal investigations through typographical play and the spatial reconfiguration of the page that transform writing into a **plastic art**.

**Holocaust & Metafiction**

These are obvious connections & thus needn't be mentioned here.

## Conclusion Redux: Convulsive Beauty

a.) Contemplating The Feather Man's *Double or Nothing* has led us into a **multifoliate aesthetic space** that asks for dialogue, polyphony, exchange, inclusiveness, an opening up and out to narratological and existential possibility.

b.) Literary history is not only a series of ruptures, but also a **complex network of continuities**, re-presentations, re-evaluations, re-collections, an on-going circus of interesting minds in motion.

c.) The history of **Convulsive Beauty** ("Beauty must be convulsive," Andre Breton wrote, "or it will not be.") is the history of continuing alternatives, diverse voices that sing diverse indie counterpoint against the overly sweet dominant **pop melody called The Mainstream**, diamond-toothed Termite Art whose function is to gnaw away at the marble foundation of those conventional citadels which line the Madison Avenue of consciousness.

d.) **Convulsive Beauty** thinks itself back through a hypothetical trajectory of vanguard art, appropriating from the past while nibbling always forward, from the fifties, sixties, seventies, eighties, and nineties: through the Avant-Pop, Surfiction, Metafiction, Punk, Cyberpunk, RiboFunk, the Multimedia Moment, the Deconstructive Turn, the Novel of Excess & Regress & Digress, Language Poetry, Beat fiction, Faction, Magical Realism, the Nouveau Roman, the New Wave, and so on, back through Lettrism, Surrealism, Dadaism, Expressionism, Decadence, Imagism, Vorticism, Futurism, and Symbolism...and back again, finally, to the doorstep of that paradigmless paradigm of **Romanticism** (think of Blake's schizoid visions, or, better, of the presence of Frankenstein's monster—the latter an appropriated, electrocuted, existentially and socially and epistemologically alien icon of the **extreme instant** in the arts)

with its thematics and formalistics of trespass, revolution, Dionysian border-breaking, psychotic breach, brilliant rage, paranoid rant, with its exploration of the illogical, the unconscious, the inner-world, the drastic aesthetico-spiritual brink experienced by the Aztec sacrifice who wants his heart to be removed because of what he'll see and feel.

Or,

to express this

problem

of summary

yet another

way,





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# CONTRIBUTOR'S NOTES

A recent graduate of the MFA program at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, **Steven Almond** has placed stories in *Georgia Review* and *Red Cedar Review*.

**Diana Armstrong** has lived in Moscow for years, but her son says that she is currently climbing mountains in South America.

**Welch Everman** teaches English at the University of Maine in Orono and has published books on cult horror and science fiction films and Jerzy Kosinski as well as his own collection of short fiction, *The Harry and Sylvia Stories* (1992).

**John Haag's** new collection of poetry, *Stones Don't Float*, has recently been published by Ohio State University Press.

**Dennis Held** holds an MFA from the University of Montana and teaches creative writing at Lewis-Clark State College in Lewiston, ID.

**Roberta Hill**, who teaches at the University of Wisconsin, was the University of Idaho's "Distinguished Visiting Writer" in poetry during the Fall 1996 semester.

New Victoria Press published **Lesa Luders'** novel *Lady God* last year when she was teaching fiction writing at Eastern Washington University.

**Chris Nelson**, our cover artist for this issue, is currently working on a Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of Idaho. Her current focuses are mixed media sculpture from the kitchen and nontoxic printmaking techniques. She also operates Artemis Design, a freelance graphic design business, and actively exhibits her work throughout the country.

**Lance Olsen** teaches speculative fiction and creative writing at the University of Idaho and will return soon as faculty adviser to *Fugue*. His most recent novels are *Burnt* and *Time Famine*, both published in 1996.

This is the first publication for **Elizabeth K. Schurman**, who hails from Kansas.

**Karen Seashore** lives and writes in Sandpoint, ID, and is a frequenter of the Centrum Summer Writing Workshops at Port Townsend, WA.

**Kristine Somerville's** prose poems are part of a collection entitled *Drowning*. She has work forthcoming in *Poem*, *Yarrow*, and *American Literary Review*.

**Everardo Torrez** currently resides in Moscow, ID, and once received honorary mention in the USC Edward L. Boas Short Fiction Contest in 1995.

**Fredrick Zydek** has had work published in *Prairie Schooner*, *Poetry Northwest*, and others. He raises soybeans on a small farm in Nebraska.



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Raymond Federman

fugue