PORTER FOX

THE LONG GOOD-BYE MAN

THE INEXORABLE REDISCOVERY OF THE ABSTRACT-EXPRESSIONIST FICTION OF FIELDING DAWSON

DISCUSSED: *Black Mountain College, Geodesic Domes, Franz Kline, Sing Sing, Dustin Hoffman, Hawaiian Shirts, Baseball, Fathers, Projective Verse, Robert Creeley, Moonshine, Stan Musial, Krazy Kat*

It takes a great story to remember where you were when you read it, what the weather was doing, your position on the couch, which friend interrupted with requests for food and beer. For me, it was a twenty-eight-page piece aptly titled "The Greatest Story Ever Told," by Fielding Dawson. In this coming-of-age tale of a high school boy losing his virginity, then his mind, to a mischievous girl, Fielding's spiraling sentences drew me into his sensibility and out of mine:

> she had been assigned to sit in front of me in study hall on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.… I was in the next to last seat, back in the rear of the second row from the window which meant I could see out across the front lawn of Kirkwood High, and to Kirkwood Road beyond, and looking to my left, see the lawn descend into a circular hollow in front of Junior High where the fêtes were held, and the most beautiful girls in the world were crowned Queen of the May year after year, and the girls that weren't bit their lips, wept, embraced their Queen and prayed alongside their crazed parents on Sundays, in church, and every night at home like their parents too; they created a complicated and questionable God of success, and made requests, and asked forgiveness in a kind of dream to Him, in or kneeling beside their beds

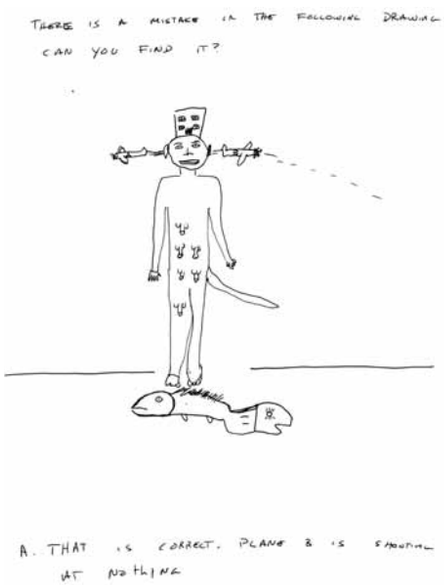
Fielding Dawson in Arizona, 1975

every night, they thus put themselves to sleep.

I read the story in my apartment. It'd just stopped raining. I was lying on my couch. I tried to explain the effect of Fielding's writing that night to the friend who called. How his stories took me inside a character's psyche where I could see the gears of jealousy, desire, and pride grind away. He wrote in the mode of thought—quick, discursive, with an overarching logic—and could slip in and out of a character's consciousness almost imperceptibly, often with a shifting point-of-view. The stories led me to an indeterminate place somewhere between scene and *conjuring* of scene. And not in a heavy-handed meta kind of way. The pieces were self-contained, living things, such that the making of the story—the presence of the author inside it—was as much a part of the narrative as the narrative itself.

> She was in her kitchen making eggs and bacon and coffee, the sun shone through the windows brightly and warmly, she made herself breakfast with motherly know-how yet she was unfamiliar with herself, her movements were shy, she was shy and she took the eggs out of the frying pan and put them cleanly on the plate as the toast popped out of the toaster… she buttered the toast and poured the coffee, a virgin world had come with her all her life, and having listened to all the barroom wise men, the living room prophets, the men of God and the husband of business-sense she had given up trying to salvage her unfound life from behind a strange shadowy wall…

I finished Fielding's selected stories, *Krazy Kat & 76 More,* in two days. I went on to read the rest of his work—memoirs, novels, poems, and stories—all published between 1950 and 2001. Many of his best pieces were short, often autobiographical. Some of the greatest were just a page or two. The writing was plain-faced, without contrived plots, bookish vocabulary, or literary allusions. Jacket blurbs and reviews by authors and critics like Robert Creeley, Russell Banks, Donald Phelps, and Andrei Codrescu proclaimed Fielding a "master stylist," an important voice in the post-post-modern scene. Creeley said of Fielding: "It was wonderful the way he wrote—a wild blend of absolutely common phrasing and language in an utterly shifting, often surreal context of statement." Toby Olson wrote in the *New York Times Book Review,* "[Dawson's] ear for speech is impeccable, but more startling is the way speech… is connected to thought, and how thought itself is formed in a seamless way in the author's prose… [his] prose is complex, driven and quick, and the reader constantly feels he is encountering the ruminations of the mind in ways he has never experienced before."



In the '70s and '80s, Fielding was repeatedly lauded as one of the only living pioneers in fiction. In 1976 Dustin Hoffman read "The Greatest Story Ever Told" and met with Fielding at the Warner Communications Building at Rockefeller Center to talk about writing a script. Yet no one I knew had ever heard of Fielding Dawson.

With a bit of bird-dogging I discovered that much of Fielding's unorthodox style came from his training as a painter. He'd worked with Franz Kline, Philip Guston, and Joe Fiore from 1949 to 1952 at Black Mountain College, where he entered as a painter and graduated as a writer under the tutelage of Charles Olson. After college he followed the emerging abstract expressionist movement in New York. As a young artist, he bummed beers off Kline, Willem de Kooning, and Jackson Pollock at the Cedar Tavern, chased starry-eyed girls across Greenwich Village. During the day he painted and wrote, often visiting de Kooning's and

Kline's lofts, where it seemed a bottle of whiskey and pitcher of water were always waiting. When Fielding married, Kline was his best man.

Fielding openly idolized the "action painters," and their influence showed prominently in his work. He called them his fathers, and critics cited his rapid, chronologically jumbled story lines as a literary reflection of the expressionist movement. I too had romanticized the '50s downtown art scene in New York—albeit from a distance of forty years—and the more I read of Fielding and his time in Greenwich Village, the faster the fixation grew. The Beat era seemed a golden age of American art and literature—a time when artists could afford to live and work in New York with other writers, dancers, musicians, and philosophers. As a young M.F.A. fiction student in the city, I'd become disenchanted with the city's saturation by new wealth and the mall-ifying of Fielding's former Beat haunts. I longed for the grubby, unpredictable New York of old and appreciated Fielding's desire to attach himself to an elder tribe.

My obsession grew. I photocopied Fielding's work and mailed it to friends. I cut out a picture of him playing pool in a Hawaiian shirt and hung it on the wall of my cubicle. I read his stories (at an incredible pace) to a glassy-eyed and somewhat mystified crowd at a student reading. I openly lamented that he was unknown to them—while secretly reveling in that fact because it made him more mine. I began to see "our" connection as somehow characterizing *me* as a writer. His style was so close to the way I'd always wanted to make stories—lean, inventive, genuine—that the experience of reading him was equal parts admiration and affirmation that what I was trying to do was *good*.

Fielding was also my discovery (never mind that my teacher had introduced me to him); as much as I hurried to share my enthusiasm with friends, I made it clear that I would act as his attaché, taking them to him, lest they read him the wrong way or begin to think of him as their own private find.

On a rainy Tuesday afternoon, I sealed our union on a piece of notebook paper with a short—pathetic—list of similarities between us:

(1) We both liked baseball.
(2) We were both born in New York, raised elsewhere, and moved back.
(3) We were enthusiastic to the point of annoyance.
(4) We idolized.
(5) Our fathers were dead.
(6) We read Faulkner.
(7) The foundation collecting Fielding's work at the University of Connecticut shared the name of the building where I rented office space. (Though their namesakes were completely different and unrelated people.)

It was a sad fixation, admittedly, but one many aspiring writers have known, including Fielding himself. It has something to do with the identity the writer borrows from the admired author or artist's work. Like picking up an odd-shaped rock and putting it on his sill, the writer sees his new love as a means of defining *him* and his discerning sensibility, if not his art. So it's understandable how that passion can quickly morph into obsession: the beloved author is, in fact, an evolved, flawless, sanctioned likeness of the lover, himself. Charles Olson saw it in Ezra Pound; Fielding in Olson and Kline.

I saw it in Fielding. And the obsession came coupled with a paranoia—the fear being that if he had the potency to affect me so completely, then other readers would no doubt be equally entranced. Once he was rediscovered by the masses, my exclusive relationship with him would cease to exist—meaning, my own newly enhanced identity would cease to exist. I'd become just another fan in a hoard of fans. My rapture indicated nothing particularly special about me.

There was a larger obstacle to overcome, though. I'd long imagined the day I might meet Fielding—the culmination of our "relationship" in my mind being the moment *I* could say something to *him*. So when I went looking for him and discovered he'd passed away three years before, I was crestfallen.

For a moment. I told the assistant director of the M.F.A. program I was attending that I'd chosen Fielding as the subject for the critical portion of my thesis, and he replied that he'd worked with

Fielding at the PEN Prison Writing Program and had known him well. What's more, he gave me the phone number and address of Fielding's partner and longtime collaborator, Susan Maldovan.

I called Susan the following week and she graciously invited me over. The timing was serendipitous. She was moving out of the Nineteenth Street loft Fielding had lived in for almost forty years (she for almost thirty). She said there was an incredible amount of stuff in the loft—books, records, boxes of unpublished writing. I said I'd worked as a mover once. She told me she had three weeks to vacate, how incredible it was that I called. I considered reciting my list of Fielding/Porter similarities, then thought better of it and offered to help.

Three days later I found myself standing in a dirty alcove of East Nineteenth Street, ringing Fielding's doorbell. ("Which buzzer?" I'd asked. "The bottom one," Susan had said.) I ascended three flights of wooden stairs, past a ceramic pot with an umbrella sticking out of it, toward Susan's voice. She opened the door and I stepped into the airy loft Fielding had chronicled, drank in, slept in since 1964. I shook her hand and took in the apartment in one long silence, finally seeing a piece of old New York firsthand and meeting my mentor, or the memory of him, Fielding Dawson, three years and three months after the morning he died.

Portrait of Fielding Dawson by Franz Kline, painted at Black Mountain College in the summer of 1952.

The story goes that when Fielding ("Fee") was a boy in Kirkwood, Missouri—he was born in New York during the Depression; his father moved often to find work—his mother gave him a typewriter and told him the world needed another Saroyan. By that time Fielding's father had dropped out of the picture: first back to New York, then dead of a brain tumor, Fielding eleven.

Fee spent his childhood with his mother, four aunts, and an uncle at the family home just outside St. Louis. Fee lived in a room on the ground floor with his uncle Essex. The family was an artistic one. They painted with watercolors and read poetry and fiction. Fee's mother worked as a secretary for the Episcopal minister down the road. One aunt tended the garden, another commuted to work in St. Louis, another stayed home and cooked. Fee and his older sister, Cara ("Ca"), waded through the sweetgrass and blueberry fields of Kirkwood, attended school, played with the neighborhood children, and learned what it was to grow up fatherless in the first days of World War II.

In Fee's third memoir, *Tiger Lilies* (1984), he writes of World War II America as a wondrous time to be a kid in the South. There weren't many men around to discipline the children, and the women were too busy working to chaperone. Fee and his gang—Lizard, Wimp, Cissie, Joey—passed afternoons playing guns in the yard, weeding dandelions for pennies, peeping in girls' windows, playing baseball, holding hands (Cissie) under a star-strewn Missourian sky. He was popular in high school. He was an artist and a baseball fanatic. He was obsessed with trees, teased by his friends for staying home to draw them. He was accepted to Black Mountain College in 1949. In his second memoir, *The Black Mountain Book,* he remembers hearing a voice while sitting in a Pullman car bound for the North Carolina college: "You are going to a place and you will change."

There were few who attended Black Mountain College and didn't change. The school was founded in 1933 by John Andrew Rice in reac-

tion to conservatism in universities around the country. The aim was to integrate a liberal arts curriculum with communal living between teachers and students to create a multifarious, interdisciplinary educational experience. There were no grades. The school's logo was a circle within a circle. Students took classes in writing, drawing, a foreign language, philosophy, and music. Alongside their teachers, they worked the campus farm, cleared lots, and fixed leaky pipes. Food was scarce. Heat was sporadic. But radical ideas—Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome (first built on the campus), abstract expressionism, projective verse, and sexual experimentation—were abundant. The faculty roster included Olson, Creeley, M. C. Richards, Kline, de Kooning, Fuller, Fiore, John Cage, and Paul Goodman. William Carlos Williams and Albert Einstein sat on the board.

At 7:30 p.m. on Monday nights, Fielding took writing classes from Olson in the Studies Building. Olson was a massive man, in mind and appearance. Six foot seven and barrel-chested, he was a Melville scholar and the first poet to label himself "postmodern." He'd campaigned and worked for the Roosevelt administration before committing his life to poetry. His essay "Projective Verse" (published in 1950 as a pamphlet) is said by many to be the most salient writing on poetry in the last century.

Olson taught at a frenzied pace, scratching diagrams in blue chalk on a white board, chewing out students who didn't complete their assignments. He reiterated the edicts of Williams and Pound and preached the concept of projective verse: focus on language, not structure; cut out qualifiers, "one perception immediately and directly (leading) to a further perception." When someone brought moonshine to class, the students sat in a circle and continued the dialogue with mason jars, cigarettes, and more bellowing from Olson. At midnight, the whole crew raided the cafeteria for peanut butter sandwiches and milk.

In *The Black Mountain Book,* Fielding transcribes some of his notes from Olson's class:

> Mechanical—better word than contrived—for Faulkner.
>
> Melville who writes not to tell the truth but to give the evidences.
>
> Eckerman's conversations with Goethe—Everyman
>
> Milton to Melville and Goethe is boring (concept of Devil) Boring to Jews (conception of God)
>
> Metaphor is *not* what a thing is *like:* it's how it behaves!
>
> Wherever you can avoid a qualification, leave it out—however—it being—seeming

Fielding wrote constantly of missing his father and took Olson on as a surrogate parent. The poet accepted the part, albeit begrudgingly. He coached Fielding's writing and snapped at him when he fell behind. Fielding lured the older man to minor-league baseball games and passed evenings with Olson and his wife, Connie, on their porch overlooking the campus. The relationship was one that defined Fielding's transformation from painter to writer—Olson being the teacher who showed him how to make art with words. It was a lesson Fielding would invoke for the rest of his life, especially in the later years when he felt his writing was being rejected. Olson was his first sage, his second father. But as the next summer at Black Mountain would prove, he wouldn't be the last of either.

East Nineteenth Street had changed since Fielding first arrived in 1964. Dapper businessmen now cased the sidewalk where blue-collar workers and artists once loafed. Maître d's peeked from behind velvet curtains along a row of posh restaurants. The street side of Fielding's loft, now overlooking an upscale kitchen supply store, contained Susan and his bed and desks. A beach towel was slung over Fielding's chair as if he'd just stepped out of the apartment to grab a snack. His IBM Selectric typewriter sat on his desk waiting for him to return. As the day passed, sunlight moved over a collection of Fielding's photo collages, newspaper clippings from the *New York Post,* then to the opposite side and across the dusty bookshelves behind the bed—Saroyan, Olson, Pound, Williams, Faulkner,

Raymond Chandler.

Susan was a freelance editor by trade and often edited Fielding's work. She pointed to his workbench where he cut, pasted, drew, and painted his art; the tan file cabinets where he archived his writing and reviews; the chair where he listened to the radio while Susan made dinner; the banker's table where visiting writers and painters who populated their life together sat and talked. He drank Russian vodka on the rocks, she said, and loved shopping at Macy's. He pitched for the Max's Kansas City softball team and walked to the Union Square farmer's market to shoot the breeze with vendors. He was an idea person with notes papering his desk, but was often incapable of executing them. He also never stopped talking. "The long good-bye man," Susan called him.

It was in front of the Selectric, though, that Fee spent most of his time: when he woke in the morning, before he went to sleep, the moment they returned from a trip. He wrote about people he met, his dreams, books he'd read, movies. "His writing was almost a centering exercise," she explained as we sat at the kitchen table. "It was something that he had to do, and I think it was just to be in touch with himself, all the different parts of himself. You know, that double. I don't know, maybe he thought if that wasn't dealt with or expressed, it could be scary."

Susan rattled off facts from Fielding's life while I gawked at his record collection, art, cupboards, knives, a wine glass. I recognized much of it from his stories and thought that in a weird, *Fielding-esque* way, I'd entered one of them. The baseball stories, the New York tales, the girls, painters, jealousy, love, insecurity. Almost every detail of his real life had been transformed into a narrative. Even his divided personality, Susan said, had manifested itself in his signature shifting point-of-view. His stories *were* Fee, she explained, in style and structure. Spontaneous, eccentric, deep, wild, bursting with energy. Or, as Creeley wrote in an essay after Fielding died, his life was as vital to his stories as his stories were to his life:

> I've never met anyone who was more particularly determined by his or her being a writer than was Fielding Dawson… Fee thought of writing as a completely engaged human activity, not as a privileged or obscurely isolated "literary art."… [He] went all the way into his work and lived there as specifically and articulately as any writer ever has. The "I" of his characteristic narratives is not at all a usual agency or prop. It's always, *I,* Fielding, here *and* there at one and the same time.

It was a warm day in June, 1952, when Fielding heard two new painters were coming to Black Mountain to teach. "One named Jack Tworkov, in July," his friend Dan Rice said, "and in August, Franz Kline."

"Are they good?" Fielding asked.

"They are *very* good."

The arrival of Kline at Black Mountain marked a radical shift in Fielding's life and art. The reverence he developed for the painter shaped him as an artist for the rest of his life, and the concepts he borrowed from Kline's work—beginning with the painter's fierce originality—helped develop Fielding's style as a writer. It was Kline's vigorous, calligraphic brushstrokes in his early black-and-white paintings that inspired Fielding to write in images. He began focusing on vivid, telling detail, dialogue and scene instead of exposition and plot. He transcended predictable show-don't-tell character development by changing point-of-view and entering a character's psyche. Also like Kline's work, every line in Fielding's stories seems to tumble into the next, making the pieces more abstract, choose-your-own-ending tales than following an overlying structure.

> After he married Jeanette, it was easier to let—her—he went along with her. He was thirty years old,

six feet tall, and a little fat. He had a good job, good enough, not as good as, he was sorry, he could do better, maybe, but Jeanette was pretty, their little home was nice, it might be—she had difficulty getting things in place, pictures, furniture—that magazine table, where she wanted, if she could find where she wanted it like Joan, Joan had a wonderful sense of—those drapes, did you ever see anything like those—oh, Dick, do you want—

The car ran fine, it wasn't—but got him where, the office where he worked was large with bright colors and modern furniture, Richard had a desk by the window.

Kline was just being recognized as a forerunner in the abstract expressionist movement and Fielding shadowed him all summer. He sat outside the small, white building Kline had been given for a studio and watched him work. He stole him away from faculty parties and begged to sit next to him on excursions to Peek's Tavern. The fondness was part hero-worship, part Fielding searching for identity, part paternal love. In *An Emotional Memoir of Franz Kline,* he goes into intimate—often embarrassing—detail of his fixation.

> Franz was a powerfully generous man, and he expected me to respond with due respect, yet in my youthful sensitivity I fell over backwards and staggered in my tracks by his generosity—as when he was talking to somebody, and at a subtle mention of a name, Musial, or Guston, Franz secretly passed me the softest smile and the most amazing wink. He knew how I felt about Guston, and was letting me know he knew, letting me know I knew that he knew that. He approved of close listening, and those moments were perfect in the back and forth exchange; complete, as I blushed in crimson, grinning, times when, I was compelled to move to his side, and there were times when he put his arm around my waist, and touched me and I was speechless, and near tears.

Kline took on the father role with more grace than Olson had. He stood behind Fielding at Black Mountain as Fielding drew, explained to him how the bones of the face swept *in* from the nose, then *up* to the eye socket. How a woman's leg bulged toward the knee when she sat. In New York, Fielding helped Kline look for new studio space. First on Ninth Street, then 32 East Tenth, 100 East Tenth, Avenue B, Sixth Avenue beside the Five Brothers Bar, then finally West Fourteenth Street near the Blarney Rose. When Fee spent the night he slept among Kline's canvases. During the day he helped him staple frames.

Franz introduced Fielding to the Tenth Street crowd, and Fee initiated himself immediately as a junior disciple. He mimicked Stan Musial's unorthodox batting stance for de Kooning and Kline in exchange for free drinks. One afternoon he sat with the two masters in de Kooning's studio while the older men showed each other new suits they'd bought—de Kooning sitting sideways in his chair, telling Kline his jacket wasn't too tight, no, just "lovely." One night Fee hashed over comics—Clifford McBride's *Napoleon and Uncle Elby,* George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*—with Pollock, Kline, de Kooning, and Guston. During another outing on Lexington Avenue, some men jumped Kline and Fee. They were saved by a wild, screaming Creeley, who, with "a black topcoat… black hair and a black mustache and goatee… threw his hands into the air, forked his fingers downward, and with his angry eye, exercised magic, with a shriek, 'EEEEEAAAAAAAIIIIIEEEE.'"

All the while, the painters' distinctive styles worked their way into Fielding's writing—their thrust and emotion evident in his early work. Where Olson had freed Fielding's prose with Melville, Pound, and projective verse, Kline, Guston, and de Kooning inspired him to write visually. Donald Phelps noted Fielding's descriptive and narrative technique: "He enlists the process-rhythms of painting and choreography in the rippling, guileless complexity of his typical prose." In a review of the 1982 edition of *Krazy Kat & 76 More,* Tom Clark wrote in the *San Francisco Chronicle,* "[Fielding's] outcome was the projectivist tale, doing for Dawson's medium what certain teachers and heroes—the grand scale expressionists Kline, Pollock and Olson—had previously done

for painting and poetry."

Fielding had introduced the tenets of abstract expressionism and projective verse to fiction, but his trials a writer had just begun. When the expressionist heyday blew over in the early '60s, almost as quickly as it'd blown in, Fielding was left alone. He was in the Cedar Tavern the night after Pollock died, August 12, 1956, comforting Kline at the end of the bar. ("He painted the whole sky; he rearranged the stars, and even the birds are appointed," Kline said.) He wrote about the night the Cedar burned to the ground: "How appropriate!" Then Kline died, then Olson. His two fathers.

Portrait of Charles Olson by Fielding Dawson. Collection of Jonathan Williams. Photograph by Reuben Cox.

Fee was devastated. After a two-year hiatus following Kline's death, in 1962, Fielding went back to writing. He began publishing books with Black Sparrow Press at an incredible pace: two between 1967–1969, ten in the '70s, five in the '80s, three in the '90s, then two more after 2000. Most were stories, a few memoirs, some novels. They were often met with silence, just a few reviews by Creeley and Banks asking readers why no one was noticing the only progressive, genuine prose being published in America. "This writer deserves to be much better known and read," Codrescu wrote in the *Baltimore Sun* in 1983. "It baffles me why someone like Raymond Carver, whose people are so terminally alienated, creepy and, ultimately, contrived, is so much better known."

It seemed Fielding's idolatry of Kline and Olson had proved a double-edged sword. He was accused of mimicking Olson's projective style and trying to ride Kline's coattails. Some critics claimed his work was self-serving. Others said it was too autobiographical, too accessible—simply nostalgia of a Beat-era tear through New York. His friend poet Hettie Jones cited a younger generation of writers and editors in the '70s and '80s that was more interested in what was new and young. Others thought of Fielding as a visual artist first, a writer second.

John Martin of Black Sparrow Press, who edited most of Fee's twenty-three books, probably knew Fielding's career best. Most of Martin's authors existed in the margins of the literary scene from the get-go, except for a few whom he discovered or picked up after they'd become well-known: Charles Bukowski (his founding author, in 1966), Joyce Carol Oates (from 1973), Paul Bowles (1968), and Creeley (1968). When I called him at his house in Santa Rosa, California—another *Fielding-esque* moment—he explained that you can't chart a writer's course like an actor's. "You can never make journalistic sense out of a writer's career," he said. "It's a very subtle, mysterious thing.…There is no beginning, middle and end. It is a continual process."

By the '90s, Fielding was a historical detail in a movement long gone. He refocused his energy on prison writing workshops, which he championed with near fanaticism. From 1990 to 1995 he chaired the PEN Prison Writing Committee. He taught at Sing Sing and Attica, wrote essays and stories about the experience, and read prisoners' work on a radio show. He incorporated photo collages in his stories and vowed—for the sake of artistic metathesis—never to write in the first person again.

Martin saw these moves as distractions from writing. He said it seemed Fielding pursued them "to fill up what was missing in his writing life." There was an obvious turn in his prose. A subtle angst at his ostensible rejection began showing through, the final blow coming in 1995. It was that winter that Martin refused a novel about a prison teaching experience. Dawson never published with Black Sparrow again.

"He sent me a book that I didn't think was publishable," Martin said. "It was too bad. I would stay with an author as long as, in my opinion, it was strong.… Sometimes writers begin to lose that spirit that they had in the beginning. As that spirit wanes, he became more interested in the *way* he was doing things.… I probably should have published that last book. If I could do it again, I would have."

There's something odd about moving out of homes—how the instant you think you're finished is exactly the point you realize you've just begun. There's an analogy to writing there—how writing the last line of a story often reveals what the first should be. The story of moving Susan, and thus Fielding, was not a brief one. And, like Fielding's narratives, it ended in a wild flourish of action. They'd rented the loft, not owned it, for forty years. In a fitting end to their time on Nineteenth Street, the landlord had sold the building to a developer who planned to transform it into condominiums. (Susan was moving to Brooklyn.) The day before she was meant to be out, the apartment looked very much as it had the morning I first showed up, except for eight large stacks of half-filled boxes.

With two friends of Susan's, Winnie and Paul, and a last-minute push, we boxed and wrapped the objects of Susan's and Fielding's lives. My first assignment was the art books—a terrible managerial decision by Susan—and over the next two hours I flipped through oversized collections of Guston, de Kooning, and Kline and lethargically placed them in boxes. Some of the books were old, some new, all with yellow sticky notes as bookmarkers or inscriptions scrawled in the margin.

Next were the CDs and records—a worse decision—and for another two hours I listened intermittently to Paul talk about busting hi-fi stores when he worked as a consumer affairs investigator, while stashing Fielding's records in a massive appliance container. Sonny Rollins, Count Basie, Red Garland, Miles Davis. Then the walls: a Mexican death mask, a mobile of butterflies, a reading lamp screwed to the bookshelf, a Christmas tree stand, blown-up pictures of the Bush girls from the *Post* ("Double Trouble"), seashells, coral, the striped baseball bat they used at Black Mountain, a clear crystal hung from a paper clip. Then the books: John D. MacDonald, A. S. Byatt, Louis Zukofsky, Russell Banks, the complete writings of Agatha Christie. Fee's U.S. Army dog tags fell out of one book. Another was inscribed "Given by Allen Ginsberg, 1991."

Susan perused and packed as we worked, no doubt saying good-bye in a way. She'd supported Fee through many lean writing years. She'd published and written the introduction to his last book. The University of Connecticut had already purchased Fielding's papers and ephemera, and she and an assistant had organized and boxed all of his correspondence and unpublished writing weeks before. She let me read some of it, and in it I found much of his old magic. But in the later works there was also resentment. One piece was labeled "A Call for New Fiction." Another ended in the hand-scrawled words, "and this is why my writing has been rejected." In his essays on prison reform, the theme sometimes drifted from the evils of incarceration to conspiracy theory of the U.S. government and even suspected corruption in publishing houses.

Susan explained how the success of his contemporaries Creeley, Olson, and Banks was hard on Fielding. It left him waiting for accolades that rarely came. He'd had a falling-out with many of them, she said, including a painful break with Creeley in public at Naropa Institute. Fee was more comfortable as a student or a teacher—son or father—not as an equal, she said. Friends commented that he didn't cover his resentment well. It contradicted the bright-eyed visionary he'd once been, yet it became a part of his character.

It also introduced a new angle to my obsession. If Fielding's writing—and legacy—was emblematic of the writing life I wanted to lead, then I too was headed for obscurity. Disaffection would naturally follow. I found myself making lists of jobs I could subsist on. I convinced myself that fame and recognition weren't necessary for a successful writing career. I scoffed at contemporary writers read by more than a handful of people.

I even went so far as to proclaim to a friend that my personal measure of success would be if "no one ever read my work!" It was ludicrous. I hadn't even published a book. Impending failure had become a part of my idolatry, and I'd become preemptively embittered by it. The adoption of identity was complete.

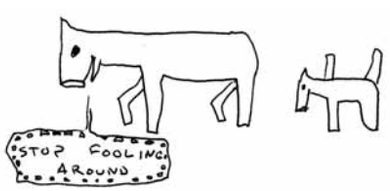
I arrived early on the last day of packing to finish the bedroom bookshelf, then handed the job off to the movers. It was a relief. My thesis was due in a week, graduation was the week after. My family would be visiting for a celebratory dinner. After Susan and I taped the last box shut, I washed the dust off my hands, put a few books Susan had given me into my backpack, gathered my things, and said good-bye. She waved and shuffled back to the bedroom to finish packing. Walking down the stairs, I saw we'd forgotten the ceramic pot with the umbrella in it. It was sitting in the hallway as it had been the first day I arrived.

On my first visit to the loft, Susan sent me away with an essay Russell Banks had written after Fielding died. She photocopied the piece for me on a small machine Fielding used to make photo collages. She trimmed the white space off the edges with a pair of scissors before handing it to me. "It's good," she said. I read it that afternoon, still starstruck from having been in Fielding's loft, seen his handwriting, his drawings, flipped through his books.

The realization that I was about to graduate had recently dawned on me, that the sanctum I'd been writing from for two years would soon vanish. As a student, failure had been expected. It didn't define me as a writer; breakthroughs did. But I understood that as a working author I'd be scrutinized for every word sent out. Reflecting on the arc of Fielding's career, it seemed the constant critique could deaden an author's adventurousness and style—fewer chances taken meant less chance of failure. It was perhaps why Fielding's prose tapered toward the end. No assumed identity or fatherly sage could protect a writer from it.

I was on the couch again when I read Banks's essay, feet propped on the coffee table. It was sunny. No calls. The piece concerned the first time Banks had read Fielding. It was in the mid-'60s, when Banks was in Chapel Hill. He was a young writer. His friends were literary-magazine editors, poets, fiction writers. He described how they regretted not having gone to Black Mountain College, how if they had, they surely would have followed in the steps of the great writers who attended the school. The greatest of which, in his estimation, was Fielding.

> We passed Dawson's stories around like contraband.... When you're that young, you have to mythologize your elders, if for no other reason than to set standards for your own future work, standards high enough to sustain you later, when your apprenticeship is over and, still, no one thinks you're worth publishing or reading.



I put the essay down, went to the kitchen, and poured a glass of water. The sink was overflowing with pint glasses and plates. There was an invitation to a professor's book release party on the counter and an assortment of student loan consolidation offers. Stacked beside the microwave were four of Fielding's books. On the fridge, a picture of my nephew standing on a putting green. I walked back to the couch and read the last paragraph again.

> He wrote at least half-a-dozen stories that will last for many generations—and who among us writing stories could ask for more? Someday, maybe a hundred years from now, a bunch of college kids who dream of becoming writers will stumble onto them, will find their minds blown by the mid-twentieth-century mid-American melody heard there, and will have their hearts expanded by the decency and the affectionate regard for humanity found there, and those kids will start passing the stories of Fielding Dawson around like contraband, and they'll say, "Read these, man. This guy is *legendary*." ✯

To see previously unpublished fiction and artworks by Fielding Dawson, please visit believermag.com/dawson.