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Leviathan, Volume 8, Issue 2, June 2006, pp. 55-73 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



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Facing the Deep

An Interview with Thomas Farber

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The author of six books of fiction and six books of creative nonfiction, Thomas Farber has a sustained interest in the ocean, the literary Pacific, Pacific island writers, and Herman Melville. In *On Water* (1994), which begins with the line “Call me Queequeg,” Farber brings together his own stays in Hawai‘i and Fiji, his passion for surfing and diving, and extensive reading in literature, history, natural history, philosophy, and fluid mechanics, presenting a series of meditations on water and writing. In *The Face of the Deep* (1998), he continues the effort, describing his experiences in Costa Rica, Hawai‘i, California, and Samoa. Throughout these two books there runs a skein of allusions to Melville, in particular to *Typee*, *Mardi*, *Moby-Dick*, and *The Confidence-Man*, and other writers (among them, Shakespeare, Keats, Whitman, Arnold, London, Conrad, Woolf, and science-fiction novelist Stanislaw Lem). Farber’s Melville ties are not only literary but, as became clear during my interview with him, personal. His mother, Norma Farber, titled one of her last books of poetry *Something Further . . .* (1979). We reprint the opening and closing poems on pages 75-79: “Lagan,” which centers on a Melvillean image of treasure buried at sea, tethered to memory, waiting to be found; and “Something Further May Follow of This Masquerade,” a critique of social performance — “The strenuous pretense, / so practiced as to seem / conviction” — inspired by *The Confidence-Man*.

Thomas Farber has published essays, novels, short stories, and epigrams. His poetic prose has been widely reviewed and praised in *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The Nation*. He has held fellowships in fiction, non-fiction, and the study of colonial and post-colonial Pacific Island literature from the Guggenheim, Rockefeller, and Fulbright foundations and the National Endowment for the Arts. Farber spends much of his time in the Pacific: at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji, the East-West Center in Honolulu, the University of Hawai‘i, and especially in the waters off Diamond Head. Currently a senior lecturer in the English Department at the University of California, Berkeley, where he teaches creative writing and courses on the environment in fiction and non-fiction, he is also the publisher for *El León*

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Literary Arts, a non-profit that has brought out poetry, drama, photographs, and drawings. In two collaborations, *Through A Liquid Mirror* (1997) and *Other Oceans* (2001), Farber wrote introductions to the photographer Wayne Levin's luminous images of the world beneath the surface of the ocean and the border between ocean and air. Levin's pictures form the covers of both *On Water* and *The Face of the Deep*. Two of Levin's images are reproduced with this interview.

The interview was conducted in Berkeley, California, in October 2003. I began by asking Farber about his fascination with water, the phase of his career marked by these four books, and his work with Levin.¹

Thomas Farber: In the late 1980's, I already knew that I was going to try to write about water. But what did that mean, really, how was I going to do it? What was the genre? I had no idea at all. I had finished the stories in *Learning to Love It* [1993], including the novella "Public Anatomy," which is about the death of a writer's mother. Completing the book, I left everything on the table there, in terms of fiction. I had used up all my tricks. I knew I wasn't capable of going back to fiction anytime soon, if ever, particularly with what I thought I had achieved in "Public Anatomy" and in the title story "Learning to Love It." So, I took a rest, as usual. And the book was being sold by my agent, and then it went into production. Meanwhile, I was spending a lot of time again in Hawai'i. Slowly, it occurred to me that I could do a book on water. One of my former editors in New York City asked what I was thinking of working on next, and I told her, and she said, "oh, then you could do one on fire." A cute line, but I'm just not that interested in fire. Something I learned doing *Compared To What?* [1988], which is a meditation on the writing life, is that you can look at anything, and by bringing your writer's sensibility to bear on it, you can use a very freewheeling technique—I would say all the strategies of fiction, but it's more than that. You can go anywhere you want to go. So I sensed I was going to try to do that with water—but, still, I didn't know what that meant. As I was thinking about it and beginning to write some early sections, I saw Wayne Levin's black-and-white photographs. I was searching, and one of the things I was searching for was water art that seemed authentic to me. I had no syllabus or criteria, but I knew it when I saw it, the way that Supreme Court justices used to know what was pornography, what wasn't. I knew that when Pablo Neruda sees a Leviathan [in his poem of that title] he hasn't yet seen the whale. He's leaping to metaphor in a way that diminishes perception—the hunger for metaphor is facile, doesn't help us understand anything. That's not art. Art doesn't have to be hard, exactly, but it does have to be hard won. So

¹ For assistance with the audio files of the interview, I would like to thank Nelson Otter; for assistance with the transcription, I would like to thank Peter Goodwin.

when I saw Wayne Levin's photographs, I thought, *this is the real deal. I want to make sure that what I do in prose is as good as what this guy is doing.*

Samuel Otter: Where did you see the photographs?

TF: They were shown to me in Honolulu by the gifted poet and nature writer Frank Stewart, who was going to run them in his new literary journal *Manoa*. Wayne was kind of a starving artist. I called him up, pretending to be a buyer, more or less. He and his wife Mary had a lean and hungry look when I came over, clearly hoping I would purchase a print, and I was sorry to disabuse them of that notion. But I did explain to Wayne that I was a writer, said I'd send him my work, and perhaps we could collaborate on something. Subsequently, he invited me over to the Big Island, to their place on the Kona Coast, where Wayne was in the water every day in Kealakekua Bay doing incredibly labor-intensive photography. They had no money. His enterprise was the opposite of the *National Geographic*. He couldn't just show up in a jet boat somewhere—but he did know where he was. With a kayak and free diving, out offshore on his own, day after day, Wayne was taking these extraordinary pictures of dolphins and whales. I spent time with him there, and then we started getting magazine assignments and working as faculty on dive boats.

SO: Would this have been in the eighties?

TF: This was 1990 and after. Soon Wayne was ready to do the book that became *Through a Liquid Mirror* [1997]. Of course, trying to publish art photographs is quite a task. People were eager to do just his dolphin or whale work—commercially viable—but that's not what *he* was interested in. I admired his stubbornness, identified with it. Felt, in the South Pacific kin system, that we were aesthetic cousin-brothers. Finally, the book was published, a labor of love, and then we got other dive assignments. The upshot of the first book, a trip to Cocos Island, off Costa Rica, was for both Wayne and me a great anxiety that the ocean was dying. Out of that came a meditation on aquariums [*Other Oceans* (2001)]: we feared they would be the only oceans left.

SO: You said that when you saw Levin's photographs, they struck you as authentic. What in the photographs caught your attention and admiration?

TF: To begin with, let's take his body surfers in the waves—his early, now-famous photographs. Everyone in Hawai'i when they first saw those black-and-white images realized their distance from the tropes and idealizations of color surf photography. In Wayne's work, you see how extraordinarily powerful the ocean is and how engulfed in it the photographer is. Also, a sense

of mystery is constantly conveyed. Wayne didn't set out to do this; he's not a didactic artist. He's a street photographer, in the great tradition, who just happened to take his skills and obsession with refraction and reflection into the water because he had been raised as a water person by his parents. In Wayne, there's a real respect for the ocean, a knowledge and acceptance of how small a part of the ocean he is, that he's in the food chain. Many other people who make representations of the ocean just don't get it. They're in some other kind of argument.

SO: In the notes to *A Liquid Mirror*, Levin describes only a few of the photographs being taken above the surface. I thought of that when you described the photographer being engulfed in the ocean.

TF: And again, the low tech quality of it, the pummeling he was always taking and the great drive to get the photograph. Though again, he makes no claims. He's a very modest and self-effacing person on land, but resolute and driven in the water. Not reckless, but possessed. I've teased him on dive trips that I don't want to be his dive buddy because he really cannot stay focused on my safety. If he sees something moving in the water—and he has a great, great gift for that—he's gone, disappears as mysteriously as the marine creatures do. Come to think of it, he's one of them.

SO: What is your own fascination with water? Why devote a phase of your career to books about water, two of your own books and then two collaborations with Wayne Levin?

TF: When I finished *Learning to Love It*, as I say, I had exhausted my narrative and emotional resources in the endeavor, as one should. I was in no hurry to even think about another work of fiction. So that's one place I was. Another was that urban life in the eighties was killing me, or, my relation to urban life was killing me. I had begun to make a return to the Pacific out of great need. I didn't know I needed it, but I knew that I had to get out of town, so to speak, and I did. I went back to Hawai'i, began spending large chunks of time in Honolulu. I'm a person who's interested in what he sees around him. So there I was. I had begun to seek ways to bind myself to that community. I became a visiting professor at the University of Hawai'i. Applied for a Fulbright to the South Pacific, got it, went down there for a long stay. I was using my resourcefulness, the writer's survival skills, to be able to be myself in this place I now needed to be. I had that exhilarating feeling that nobody had ever looked at this world quite the way I could. There were some precedents. [Laughs.] People like Melville. But no one was talking about the Hawai'i I knew, just as, when writing *Who Wrote the Book of Love* [1977] as a young storyteller, I felt



“Floating.” (Photographer’s note: “The darker cloudlike forms are where the large wave is breaking. The lighter cloud forms are the foamy whitewater occurring after the break.”) Photograph by Wayne Levin in *Through a Liquid Mirror*, with an Introduction by Thomas Farber. Editions Limited, 1997.

no one had written about men and women in and out of love the way I was going to. Maybe this is ignorance, but also the kind of confidence it takes not to be affected by Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence." I don't generally feel any such thing: prose is just too much damn labor page by page, draft after draft, to worry about what someone else did. Maybe Bloom's idea applies more in fine arts, to painters. In any case, there I was in the Pacific. I needed it. I had this great feeling that almost nobody was writing about this world with candor, much less with skill. That's a powerful place to stand for an artist. I felt I owned it, owned the option of going forward to write about this world. Partially, as I've described in the essay ["The Literary Pacific"] about indigenous artists like Epeli Hau'ofa, there are tremendous social pressures on islanders in the Pacific. And I wasn't beholden to anyone, an unusual position of freedom in that neck of the woods. Those are small communities with a lot of eyes watching, a lot of censoriousness. The fact that Epeli Hau'ofa could write *Kisses in the Nederends* [1987] is *remarkable*. He had to eat a lot of shit—so to speak!—for that book.

SO: Would you say a bit about the book for readers who may not be familiar with it?

TF: Tongan Epeli Hau'ofa is a kind of compulsive antiauthoritarian. He's a citizen of the world: Ph.D. in anthropology from Australia—first Tongan Ph.D! Married to an Australian woman. A not untypical Pacific Island story in that generation of their emerging academic meritocracy. But he's also a satirist, and his first novel, *Kisses in the Nederends*, is about a man, Oilei Bomboki, who wakes up one morning in a small Pacific island with a pain in his ass. The story is a quest saga about his search to find a healer, any healer, native or western, who can help him. And in the course of this hilarious, Rabelaisian narrative, everyone in the Pacific is mocked, debunked. No one gets to stand outside this book. When it was published, many islanders—Tonga, like many South Pacific island nations, has its share of religiosity—professed to be terribly offended by the book, or wouldn't read it. So Epeli paid for his writing. Unlike Epeli, of course, I was an outsider—*haole* [Native Hawaiian], *palangi* [Samoan], *fa fisi* [Rotuman]—but I was an informed outsider, informed by the length of time I spent there, by the people I knew well, by the fact that I was curious and open to life there. I felt a great freedom. I had nothing to lose, as I thought.

SO: You have talked in your two books and also here today about the kind of freedom an outsider can bring, but you also wrote in the sections "The Literary Pacific" and "Haoles in Paradise" about what can happen to the

outsider in the Pacific and about the limits of outsider knowledge. Could you talk more about westerners in the Pacific?

TF: Well, the tropes are familiar, trite: beachcomber, missionary, outcast of the islands, *sadhu* with surfboard. Polynesian paralysis! Or think of the anthropologists: Mead, ambitious, deceived. Or Malinowski writing an arch, ironic, brilliant portrait of an island culture; his diaries while there meanwhile full of doubt and loathing for the locals. These are the paradigms, and you've got to be clever, or just a little honest with yourself, to escape them. There are many hazards to being an outsider in the Pacific—these tales are twice-told. In any case, I felt that I had nothing I *had* to get done there, didn't feel I had much to defend. I could look at—maybe because I'm a child of the sixties—and could see the power dynamics. Didn't have to identify with power, maybe because I'm a writer. Didn't even need a book, if there wasn't one. So many people are committed to product, and I didn't believe I needed to create product; but if I had something to say, I'd try to go to the heart of the matter. What I call the “good *haole* complex,” in which people identify with certain indigenous people, often activists, may involve a mistaken reading of the place in the community such natives occupy. And the impulse to be the good *haole*, the good outsider, at the expense of those other terrible *haoles* one is desperate to no longer resemble—this is also a trope of the Pacific.

SO: Several of the terms you have used evoke Melville's *Typee*. What is your sense of Melville as a *haole* in the Pacific in *Typee*?

TF: *Typee*. I could be wrong [laughs], but *Typee* is not my favorite of his books. It's a young man's book. It's cobbled together. One's sense is that as a writer, Melville is drawing on a lot of sources not his own, trying to sell a book, force a story. But I think the emotions he felt, particularly the flipping out, the freaking out in the Marquesas—I think that's true. What I admire about Melville as a writer in the making is when you see him go back to the emotions that seem most authentic in *Typee*, this young man's flawed first book. So when Melville goes back to these emotions, let's say in *Moby-Dick*, you see Queequeg emerge. In *Moby-Dick*, there is a great distance from the fear and the anxiety about dissolution of self—being eaten by cannibals!—expressed in *Typee*. That fear, which I think is spurious in terms of Melville's actual experience—just my guess—was, however, true to his emotional experience. By the time he creates the first Polynesian, really, in American fiction—that would be Queequeg—you see how far Melville's come, and what a deep drive he has to be authentic. I don't mean to give such a crude reading of *Typee*—

SO: Not at all. I'm sure you wouldn't be surprised to learn that some literary critics offer similar readings. What seems to you authentic about Queequeg?

TF: Oh, you know, he is the Other. And you know he's not Melville. And in the beginning you can't help but fall in love with Melville's attachment to Queequeg and the symbolic use he makes of him. Melville may go over the top in making his case for the redeeming possibilities of Queequeg—we probably won't get there by our Queequegs—but the hunger that's in that portrait to know the Other and to respect the Other is remarkable. Queequeg's an extraordinarily unusual creation in American letters.

SO: I've just been teaching *Moby-Dick*, and the students responded positively to the character in ways similar to those you are suggesting, with the sense that Melville appreciates Queequeg's differences.

TF: Hence the opening of my book *On Water*.

SO: You beat me to it. I was just going to ask you, why open *On Water* with the line "Call me Queequeg" and then repeat it toward the end of your book?

TF: Well, like Queequeg, I have a shaved head, no tattoos (or, not yet), but I thought this is the great imaginative act by an American writer, the greatest writer about the ocean that I know of (and I've read everything I can find). I wander through many, many books in my two water books. Each is a *vade mecum* about my reading, trying to pass on the buried treasure that I've found. So here's this great writer, and I wanted to celebrate him, and I do have a shaved head, so I thought, well, times have changed, right? It was the late twentieth century. The Other was now being heard from, and there was a new South Pacific literature with which I was conversant, a postcolonial literature I was excited to be discovering. So I thought, *I'll begin here*: "Call me Queequeg." This was to suggest another kind of narrative about the Pacific. Another p.o.v. Finally, I wanted to salute Queequeg, and by saluting him salute Melville, the author who created Queequeg, pipe and all.

SO: You mentioned that in *On Water* and in *The Face of the Deep* you wander through many books.

TF: As early as 1970, when I first went to Hawai'i, I would be in the water in the morning; and in midday, in the heat, in the afternoon, I'd be in the Wailuku Public Library, reading. I'm from a family of readers, and that's what you do. It's one way to inform yourself about things. And also, because

on that first trip I saw the evidence of the missionary's path so visible in the churches in Hawai'i, I couldn't believe I'd come all that distance from Boston, and there I was bumping up against these missionaries from terrain I know very well. What were the odds on that? So, you know, I marveled, and I started reading.

SO: Let's talk about your technique in *On Water* and also in *The Face of the Deep*. Your literary strategies for representing water remind me of Melville's efforts to get at the whale in *Moby-Dick*: "Etymology," "Extracts" taken from your reading, a series of relatively brief chapters or sections, proliferating allusions; one part meditation, one part memory, one part imagination, a large part, if not cetology, then hydrology. I learned fascinating things about water that I hadn't known before reading your book. I wanted to ask you in general about your technique and also if it seems reasonable, or odd, to suggest that water is your whale in the two books?

TF: In the mid-1980's, it becomes clear to me that something in the chemistry of my life is not working. Maybe being a writer is too hard, or maybe I'm writing my heart out. I need something else, and so I go back to the Pacific, really invest in the Pacific. So I'm there, and I'm curious—that's my nature—and I like stories, and I like to read. So in a way, I'm writing for the reader I am going to be years later. When I read these water books now, I am greatly informed. This is the treasure that I sought. I'm out there in the lineup of surfers, and I know that they're all afraid of drowning. So afraid of drowning (all surfers have this fear, despite their braggadocio) that none of them wants to know anything about it. Whereas I have the opposite impulse. If I'm afraid of something, my tendency is to find out more about it, and to see what it is I'm afraid of. What are its qualities? So I have in both books sections on the physiology of drowning. And I go back at it a second time, because I don't think I get it quite right the first time. That's the reason there are two water books. I finish *On Water*, and I'm not satisfied. I have this repetition compulsion, which is part of what it is to be an artist, right?

SO: What about *On Water* left you unsatisfied and led you to write *The Face of the Deep*?

TF: Well, I just wasn't talked out! Had more to say. For instance, I needed to speak more about the mania of travel. About the ocean and dissolution of the self. I wanted to better articulate dynamics like the "good *haole* complex," pass on stories like "Haoles in Paradise." Precising where I stood by explicating these ideas, tales. I hadn't got there before. Didn't have it clear. And

of course it's intoxicating when you're the artist. Everything Melville is doing in his digressions or his recurrent sequences on the whale: it's all suffused with irony and wit and meditation, right? So it's the telling that makes the difference. How do we apprehend anything? How do we know what we know? How do we talk about what we know? What's the appropriate language? The appropriate form? Why is it that I drop verbs out of so many sentences, feel free to do that? Why is it I'm using a certain vocabulary? With Melville or any good writer—and he's a great writer—it's an argument about how we talk about the things we're going to talk about. The story is the telling. It's not just the data rendered. I was in a state of high excitement making this argument to an unknowing world [laughs] about what I thought. But I must say, being this reader now, some years later, I'm pleased as punch with—what's that word? L-A-G-A-N: the stuff retrieved from the bottom. It's not flotsam and jetsam, but what you bring up from below. It's a word my mother found: lagan. So this is my lagan. Mother, where are you?

SO: Are you thanking her?

TF: Well, one should, you know.

SO: You said, "How do we apprehend anything?" Story seems part of it, but there are also other kinds of answers you give and other verbal strategies you use.

TF: You mean the information passed on in the quotes?

SO: Yes, that's part of it.

TF: Again, it's because I don't want to make these barriers and distinctions between what I think and what I write and what I know and what other people have said. Part of what I wanted to convey to the reader was, *I've done this reading. Walk with me through what I've learned, because you're going to want to know this stuff.* There are things said there by different writers that are priceless. It was a great joy to me to figure how to pass on such treasure. What form do I find to incorporate that and make it part of the fabric of what I'm writing, and to break down these walls between different ways of presenting knowledge or stories.

SO: This seems to be part of your interest in *Moby-Dick*. You have talked about the creation of Queequeg as a character, and his authenticity, and how important that was to you. But a lot of the passion in what you've just described—the retrieval of information, the refusal of barriers between what you know and what other people know, the sense of excitement in conveying



"Pilot Whales." Photograph by Wayne Levin in *Through a Liquid Mirror*, with an Introduction by Thomas Farber. Editions Limited, 1997.

your discoveries, and the incorporation of different stories and discourses—that seems characteristic of *Moby-Dick* also. I noticed that in *On Water* you translated and included a long quotation from the “Loomings” chapter of *Moby-Dick*.

TF: Oh, that “Loomings” chapter is just fantastic. When you read that, you know—we have these “masterpieces” and we have “dead white male writers” and we have all these strikes against certain texts now. But if you just slow down and read the opening of *Moby-Dick*, you see, well, *Oh, this is about a human being, who’s got a difficult nature, and when he can no longer stand the plight in which he finds himself as a human being, he goes to sea.* And we sense that it’s not going to be an easy voyage (or we already know it before reading because how the story ends is received knowledge). But when you reread the opening of “Loomings,” it’s a marvel because you feel the humanity of the character right away—you can’t miss it. And then Queequeg comes on stage so quickly—also fantastic: Queequeg, *enter stage right, recumbent.* [Laughs]

SO: When you reread *On Water* and thought about *Moby-Dick*, were there things that surprised you?

TF: Well, the book never stops provoking, inspiring. Think of great cetacean specialist Roger Payne’s reading of the effect of *Moby-Dick* on the consciousness of Western readers. He argues that the whale is going to save us. The whale is going to teach us to save the whale, and so ourselves, which is a very interesting reading of *Moby-Dick*, and one I’m still mulling. But I’d like to believe it.

SO: According to Payne, how will the whale save us?

TF: The whale enters our consciousness. It’s an incredible passage. [Farber reads a passage from Payne quoted in *The Face of the Deep*.] Melville “knew just how and by what steps whales would enter our minds, and how once inside they would metastasize and diffuse throughout the whole engine of human ingenuity, mastering and predisposing it to their purpose . . . that whales would reconstitute themselves, reintegrate at the point of origin of all the meridians of the imagination, its very pole, and there tie themselves forever into human consciousness by a kind of zenith knot . . . that when this process had completed itself the whale as symbol would have become the whale as puppeteer—would start orchestrating and manipulating, and directing the connections people perceive between themselves and the beating heart of nature . . . that whales can help humanity save itself—help us to make the

transition from *Save the Whales* to *Saved by the Whales*.” *Wow!* It’s a heck of a book to have that effect on a scientist, a century-and-a-half later, to impel him to that kind of response. Melville has legs. They may be sea legs . . . [laughs].

SO: You may have a title for your next book.

TF: You see the exhilaration I had in finding a passage like that in Roger Payne. But oh, and down what torturous paths I had to wind to get to Roger Payne! It was all pleasure to find him, but it took years of reading to hit that passage, to make notes, to find a place in subsequent writing that would occasion my deep response to it. At the end of a dive trip on the Kona Coast that Wayne Levin and I made as faculty on shipboard, I’m just blown away by the conjunction of volcanic and oceanic, possessed by notions of dissolution, a very Melvillean response. Poor Pip! “Left behind on the sea, like a hurried traveller’s trunk.” That’s a great passage. You know I quote that in *On Water*. It’s an extraordinary piece of writing. I’ve read it many, many times.

SO: You’re talking about Pip’s plunge into the ocean [in Chapter 93 of *Moby-Dick*, “The Castaway”].

TF: Yes, and what happens to poor Pip when he’s left out there, and he’s afloat, but he goes mad because he perceives what a speck he is on the face of creation. A bit like the book of Job, what happens to Pip: it’s bigger than we are. And of course my attention to the ocean is inevitably a consideration of essential things, forces of nature larger than ourselves, of beauty, transience, death. You cannot pay attention to the ocean and keep it practical because larger forces are going to intrude on you. One of the great things about Melville is that he’s driven to open himself to his response. There Melville sits, on shipboard in a working community of people, all order and hierarchy, but he’s musing about faith and eternal verities. I didn’t set out to do that. I’m not a religious person, though as I wrote, I did hear myself one day, paddling out on to surf, saying, “Thank you.” To whom was I speaking? I must have been speaking to some recipient of my thanks. Without having intended to, finding myself in warm ocean, I was engaging this extraordinarily large force. I thought to name its specific qualities. What’s the name of that fish? What is that light that I’m seeing? Color of that water? “Make me no lazy love,” my mother wrote, “Move me from case to case.” I inherited her hunger to name—and so appreciate, correctly and appropriately value—the concrete miracle. But also, though I didn’t know I was doing it, I of course was considering the (almost) unsayable. How you do this and still return to tell a story—well,

poor Pip doesn't. But I did. So did Melville, and that interests me about certain writers: to be lucky enough to return and tell your story. I think Melville saw enough in many different domains to have been silenced. Remarkably, Melville creates a character who shows what the other Melville might have been: a Pip silenced by eternal verities. As maybe Melville did shut up for a while. I mean, we don't know; everyone argues this, right? Updike makes the very practical argument that Melville simply used up his writer's capital in his water books [in "Melville's Withdrawal," collected in *Hugging the Shore*]. Others argue Melville merely shifted genre, to poetry. But what's striking, if we take the prose we have, is that what Melville's looking at clearly overwhelms him, but not to the point of being struck dumb. When you get that conjunction of intense feeling and yet the survival of the impulse for story, you can get some great storytelling.

SO: Are there particular aspects of Melville's writing about water that interest you? You've talked about Pip and his sense of something vaster than himself, and that certainly is one of the powers of that passage in "The Cast-away." But I'm wondering if, given your interest in the visual representation of water in Levin's photographs and your own efforts to capture water from all sorts of perspectives, using a variety of verbal strategies, I'm wondering if there are other aspects of Melville's representation of water—storm or calm, or relations between surface and depth—that interest you?

TF: I think of the relentlessly brilliant, very concrete descriptions of water, over and over again, the specificity. Melville has such detailed knowledge of water, and water is so hard to articulate. I'd be out there for years on my surfboard, off Diamond Head and my other frequent water destinations in Honolulu, and I'd be there at dawn, alone, the only person out on the ocean at first light. Often I'd be there for an hour before another surfer would slowly crawl out, like a water spider, come my way. During that time alone, I'd just be looking. Looking in a very receptive fashion. Slowly rising and falling on the swell, the sun about to come up around Diamond Head, sunrise there. But sometimes I would get into more active looking, try to name what I might see. What word describes this light, what kind of bird is that, what is the pattern of its flight? So then I was also working, while there on the water to surf, filing things in the back of my head, until later when I came back on shore and I would go to my apartment and "download"—make notes. I don't know anything about Melville's writing techniques, whether he kept notebooks on all of those voyages and all of that, or whether this is all reconstructed or imagined later. I'd be interested because clearly he was in those two kinds of head a lot of the time.

SO: To our knowledge, there aren't Melville notebooks from the voyages in the early 1840's. Later, when he goes to England and the Continent (pre-*Moby-Dick*), or when he goes to England, the Holy Land, and Europe (post-*Moby-Dick*), there are journals. Your speculation about the "two minds" is suggestive: the experiencing mind in the present and the mind that files away for later retrieval, the gathering-of-information mind.

TF: The other compelling thing about Melville is that he's an iconic figure in the myth of American letters—genius versus bourgeois society kind of thing. As I remember it, Updike tries to debunk this reading of Melville's career, saying Melville actually did pretty well, was a stubborn guy, wrote these increasingly obscure books, and that's the way it goes. Plus, Melville used up his writer's capital: the ocean. I don't know if any of Updike's reading holds water, but when I went to the Pacific that was the received wisdom about Melville's life and art: great writer ends up with a job as a customs officer. So that, too, is in my mind when I'm a wanderer in the Pacific. I'm a writer, and I've finished another work of fiction, but I don't know if there will be another book because I have a commitment *not* to know such things. I'm not a "professional writer." I'm a human being who has written books and may write another, or I may turn away from it for a lot of good reasons. So Melville is there for me in this other role, as one of the templates for the experience of art in America. When I'm writing the water books, I don't have a destination for those books; I don't know they'll be published, "publishable"; and I don't know I'll actually finish them, you see. Melville surely was operating on something like the same terrain. There's no parachute or safety net or tenure for a writer. Right or wrong, I had reason to think of Melville's writing life as in part a story of failure—this great artist who is silenced, right?

SO: It's a standard version that, as you might expect, many Melville scholars dispute.

TF: I might agree with them now, but you can see the traditional reading could give a writer pause. In any case, the other template in Melville for me is *The Confidence-Man*, which I invoke [in the "Souvenirs" section of "Going to Samoa," in *The Face of the Deep*]. The vision is so bleak in that almost unreadable book. So this, too, is in my mind, where that great writer goes. There's *Moby-Dick* and there's *The Confidence-Man*, and if that's where writing leads you, to *The Confidence-Man* and to silence, then what kind of *métier* is it? In the mid-1980's (when I turned forty), I took stock of my vocation in a non-fiction book, *Compared to What?* As the title suggests, it's a rather mordant and wry look at the vocation. *The Confidence-Man*: well, a very dark book.

What's all that mean for the wanderer in the Pacific, where you meet so many characters who could be right off Melville's steamboat on the Mississippi.

SO: The *Fidèle*?

TF: Yes, right off the *Fidèle*. They're on United Airlines now. And I tell that story—it's in *The Face of the Deep*.

SO: That's a particularly interesting section about the disorientations and reorientations of travel.

TF: Yes, that live turtle being butchered in Suva, Fiji, and my Doppelgänger Bruno, the circus performer. I mean, how strange to be in a place like Suva, Fiji, where everyone—there's no TV at the time, they've not seen, say, Michael Jordan—and because I have a shaved head in this place with big hair and a theatre which shows martial arts movies, people seem to assume I'm a karate expert as I wander around Suva. "American Shaolin" is playing in town when I arrive. Children in particular are staring and staring at me; you know, it's just nuts. It's part of what travel is: space for a lot of misapprehensions. Not only do I go through that cycle of being beheld until all seventy thousand residents of Suva have seen me, but it turns out I have a Doppelgänger. I resist believing this, just assume that the people who keep saying the word "Bruno" as I pass are making some observation in Fijian, until it finally dawns on me that Bruno is a name, a Western name. A person for whom I'm being taken, mistaken? Or the turtle in the market, on the most ordinary day, and the local people have come in with their produce from the countryside, they're butchering out the turtle the way you do, which is, when it's alive. But you can't watch that and not see the turtle suffering, this extraordinary creature. And so, to then go from the market to the home of a man who has Lou Gehrig's disease, and he's wasting away and there's nothing to do about it, and on to someone else who speaks to me as though I am Bruno, my Doppelgänger. Well, none of this can be said to be what Fiji is, but does have to do with what it's like to wander in Fiji. And the writer's job, it seems to me, if he survives such experiences, is to find a way to talk about them and say, *This is how we live. We don't live some other way. This is what happened in Suva; this is what that moment was like*. It's not the only moment, it isn't any attempt to be authoritative about Suva, Fiji, but it is how it felt.

SO: Concrete and authentic.

TF: Yes. And then to celebrate it, because I lived to tell the story, and I believe in this wonderful power and music of language. So that's the other thing I'm doing in these crazy stories. I'm saying, *Look, watch these magic tricks*. And

I'm also saying, *And this is how you do it. If you really care to talk about life, this is how. I'm showing you something important, you know: listen.* Megalomaniacal, but then there it is: that's how writers are. Creating a rival universe, aren't they? It's not for nothing that Shakespeare creates Prospero, has him break that wand at the end of his magic show.

SO: At the end of "Going to Samoa," Melville's *Confidence-Man* comes up specifically. You meet a character on the plane.

TF: Yes, the narc—or the alleged narc.

SO: The alleged narc. As you said earlier, the narc could have stepped off Melville's Mississippi riverboat. You take out of your luggage a book of Melville's.

TF: *The Confidence-Man*.

SO: Yes, *The Confidence-Man*. You write that you're interested in it because of Melville's writings about the Pacific and also because it stands as a cautionary tale about being a writer in America.

TF: And because of my mother, the writer, her book of poems called *Something Further* . . . [1979], the line taken from Melville: "Something further may follow of this Masquerade," which of course is how *The Confidence-Man* ends. My mother had a terribly strong sense of irony, and was fearless. In her late poetry—she published many, many books—there is a mercilessly wide-eyed look at the world. She knew very well what she was doing by invoking Melville and that masquerade.

SO: What do you think she meant by giving you a copy of her book, inscribed "For Tom—this Masquerade"? In a way, *The Confidence-Man* seems to be a family token.

TF: In the biographical note about the author for *Something Further*, it says Norma Farber has played the following roles: mother, grandmother, widow, poet, singer . . . And she, in old age, was insisting we understand that some of life is theater—we try to play the parts we're given as well as we can. We may not like the parts; that's an aspect of her message. She certainly didn't like aging any more than most people, nor did she seek out being a widow. She had a great ironic sense, and a rapier wit, and so was also reminding me of what my mother tongue is. Not an unmixed blessing. I can remember when she died—when I was forty. That was the death of my second parent, so now this family language was gone, really. Even though I had siblings, that was the end of that story, that kind of elocution. Which compelled me to write

the book that became *Compared to What?*, an examination of the qualities of a writer's life. It was a meditation on language, but also, something further!—a meditation on the use I made of my mother tongue. And how is that going to continue, if I'm the last of my kind, last of those "Mohicans"? How am I going to continue talking in that diction without that context? Very episodic writing was all I could muster to try to get at these issues. I didn't take them head on, I looked at them slant, as another poet enjoined us to, and boy, was she right about that.

SO: The ways in which you describe *Compared to What?*—as a meditation on language, episodically structured, confronting the question of how you were going to continue, lighting a match in the dark—invoke *The Confidence-Man*. In a complicated transaction, your mother titles her book with a phrase taken from *The Confidence-Man*, gives it to you with an inscription that fills out that last line, and you write a book that in some ways comes at a juncture in your career similar to the juncture in Melville's career. A crisis: confronting silence, reflecting as deeply as you can, trying to answer the question of how you can go on.

TF: Absolutely. But again, this word "career." Now it turns out I've written all these books, and Melville wrote all those books, but from the inside it didn't look like a career at all. The word is *ex post facto*, doesn't illuminate the doing from the worm's-eye view. To me, it appeared as writing one book, then some kind of process of deciding whether there would be need to be another book. Whether there could be another book. I gather that various people tried to stop Melville at some point from his foolish enterprise, what they saw as his destructive enterprise. I think all artists come to a moment when at the very least they know the cost of what they're doing. Consider Robert Lowell's line from "Dolphin": "my eyes have seen what my hand did." Too close a relationship with the "collaborating muse." Too ruthless in pursuit of his art. Maybe Melville should have worked more to be a good person, instead of being so recklessly hungry for his prose. I have a friend, Leo Litwak, a fine writer [of novels and nonfiction such as *Waiting for the News* and *The Medic*], who is keenly aware of the cost of writing. But then he knows the cost of not writing, too.

Melville was a deep diver. God knows what he thought of his place in a world that didn't quite get what he was up to. Must have been hard. What did he make of it all? How do you toss off books like *Moby-Dick* and *The Confidence-Man*, and then you're just there talking about the sale of your books to your publisher? So, go get a job? Must've been weird. The kind of defiant self-celebration we see in the famous letter to Hawthorne, "I have written a

wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb,” which I love to quote, but how did he dare do it? And when people didn’t get it, how did he deal with that? When I wrote *The Beholder* [2002], well, that’s the kind of book that as you write, you can hear footsteps over your shoulder the whole time—if you care to listen. An artist is a person who doesn’t listen to the voices that he knows are coming. But how did Melville do it, and what did he make of that conversation about his work, and/or the lack of response. Either way, it must have been amazing. Deep stuff.