

Bob Vardeman has done it all in science fiction and out of it— he's also written westerns, fantasies, and about anything else you can think of, including original Star Trek novelizations and, most recently, Hell Heart #5). He's particularly adept at melding himself into series books, but when he turns to something purely of his invention, watch out.

"Feedback" is a weird one—it's about sex (which means that you've already stopped reading this headnote started in on the tale that follows) but it's also about much more.

Feedback

Robert E. Vardeman

Visions of half-eaten junk food danced in Greer's head. He closed his eyes tightly, concentrated on only a few of the murky, indistinct fried tofu chips shaped into faux pork rinds. Too many extraneous images intruded. As he focused the best he could on the ever-shifting, tormentingly shouted words and mind-searing images, a migraine headache started to crawl back in the vast reaches of his mind and spreading until it was a dark web sticking like glue to his every thought, dragging down every synapse.

These tofu chips are shit! blasted into his mind, causing Greer to reel. His thin-fingered hand clung to the desk as new waves of pain built in intensity. He sensed the tsunami approaching and tried to break off and get out of the man's mind.

"Don't," came the cold words. "Don't you dare. We have to find out why the test group doesn't approve of Tofu Tasties."

Greer's watery eyes blinked open. Tears welled and ran down his cheeks. He did not wipe them away. The pain surged now and threatened to tear away his sanity.

"It's because they taste like crap," he grated out. "Did you receive that, or are you trying to weasel out of work again?"

"That's what he's thinking." Greer swallowed hard and finally wiped away the tears with a crisp linen handkerchief taken from his coat pocket. This always happened when he delved too deeply into a non-telepath's squalid, unfocused mind.

Why couldn't I get a telepath for a damned taste test? They wouldn't torture me like this with so much unmanageable fury. They focus themselves, he screamed mentally. The echoes of his own thoughts rebounded from distant unknown corners in his own mind and produced even more pain.

Are you all right, Greer? came a faint, distant thought as soothing as the other was grating. Controlled, soft, like a cool drink on a sweltering day.

"Kathee," he gasped out, not sure if he sent it telepathically or spoke aloud. Greer cowered under his breath when he heard Lawrence Macmillan snort in disgust. The head of research and marketing considered any telepathic contact other than with his precious test human "research elements" to be a waste of valuable assets. Find those markets. Get them to buy. Dig into consumers' deepest hidden thoughts and find out what they really think so they can be coaxed into buying Tofu Tasties shit chips.

"You are on company time," Macmillan said coldly. "No personal communication."

"My head hurts," Greer said.

Greer?

He took a deep, calming breath, but the migraine refused to fade. He absorbed not only the vile taste of fried-in-pork-grease tofu but also the pent-up anger of the test subject. The

felt intense guilt because he was being paid to sample a product he hated. He wanted to speak out negatively but felt it would be a betrayal of taking money to try what he was told was fine, tasty, healthful new comfort food. It was worse for Greer because he worked so hard to insinuate himself into the man's mind and had finally found what he thought of as a mental resonance. He meshed with the nontelepathy through extreme effort and then paid the price for it by absorbing the undisciplined output.

It was like struggling furiously to get a funnel into his mouth and then choking when a fifty-five-gallon drum was emptied into it. He hated the feeling; he hated commoners; he hated Macmillan most of all for forcing him to do this. Still, this was a better gig than most telepaths got, no matter how awful it might be.

He thought, *I'm hurting, Kathee, but I can make it through. Meet after work?*

Don't know, too many arrested today. I still have to interrogate witnesses. Sergeant Fates might make me work overtime.

Greer sniffed, wiped again at his eyes, and then tried to relax using some of those calming mantras Kathee recommended. It was hell being a telepath, or even a half one like he was. What must it be like for Kathee, able to receive *and* send? She had to worry about everyone near her who could pick up her telepathic transmissions, especially if she became a full one. All he had to worry about was receiving. He was sensitive enough to pry into nontelepaths' minds through great effort but could shut out the dull roar from those commoners if he got far enough away from their thronging crowds. It helped even more if he got drunk or distracted himself.

When would Macmillan get trained subjects?

Greer moaned again and pressed his hands to his temples. He knew that would never happen. Most people thought telepaths were something imaginary like Sasquatch and the Loch Ness Monster, no matter how the tabloids tried to cover the story.

"Greer!"

"Yes, sir."

"He verbally said he liked the snack all the way up the liability scale to a nine out of ten. Do you claim he was thinking that Tofu Tasties were less than, uh, palatable?"

"Shit, sir, he said they were shit."

"Mr. Nakamuri will not be happy. This makes it unanimous on all test subjects this week."

"Can I go? I don't feel very well." Greer could not care less what their district manager thought of the survey results.

"I am sure you will feel *much* better the instant you are out of the office," Macmillan said with a nasty twist in his voice.

"Whatever you say, sir," Greer said. The lacy webs of migraine now thickened and bubbled as if a rope net had been set on fire in his head.

But Macmillan was right about one thing. Once he got away from the commoners, he would feel better.

I think she was in earlier, the man behind the bar thought.

Greer looked around but did not see Kathee. The usual crowd had drifted in, the ones who were bored or too damaged by their work to tolerate the outside world much longer. He settled on the high stool and ordered his usual.

Hey, Greer, called Erickson. Greer thought of him as "numb nuts" after he realized Eric was his opposite, a transmitter and not a receiver. If there was a more worthless talent, Greer could not think of it. At least nontelepaths hired him to spy on each other. What did Erickson do? Implant thoughts? No amount of mental coercion could make anyone like Tofu Tasties.

"What do you want?" Greer asked in an unfriendly tone. His mind raced over all kinds of lewd possibilities for Erickson and reveled in knowing the man could not pick a single one. *I'm going to a screamer. Want to come? "What the hell is a screamer?" Some special, something you'll really like.*

Pictures leaked around what little control Erickson had in transmission, enticing Greer in spite of himself. He preferred solitary pleasures but Erickson was excited, and broadcast emotions along with the flood of kinky images. Greer knew he ought to keep his distance, but it had been a hard day, Kathy wasn't here, and he was perversely intrigued by what he received in Erickson's thoughts.

All telepaths were freaks to be exploited, but valuable ones to the police, corporations and to the government. Greer did not want to think what some of his colleagues were made to do for the black ops groups. The genetic tinkering had come from a different segment of the government, and to a large extent had remained the province of the spook, the spy, the saboteur . . . the assassin.

His head began throbbing again. He needed some R&R. Why wasn't Kathee here? She was plain looking, but she was a two-way. When they made love, Greer had no words for her. Feedback. Ecstasy. His passion fed hers and he picked up hers until they could not stand anymore.

What difference did looks make when they could rock the heavens with their fucking?

"I want to wait a while longer for Kathee," Greer said.

"She was in earlier, had to go back to work," Erickson said aloud. "Besides, you might want a nice girl like Kathee seeing this."

"A screamer?" Greer was intrigued, but had to fight his own better judgment. No matter what Erickson had anything to do with could be good. The man was a loser.

Then Greer reeled as a flood of new, more intense images hit him.

Erickson was so excited he could not control himself.

"You can stay here, but I want to get there for my special. . . show." "You're part of it," Greer blurted in astonishment. "They tie you up and—?"

Shut up! came Erickson's frantic thought. *I don't want everyone to know. You're a friend.*

Greer nodded, marveling at his bad luck to have a man like this consider him a friend.

Hating himself for it but not quite able to resist, Greer left with Erickson.

They headed down back alleys and past more than one alert tele-pathic sentry, but they reached an abandoned warehouse near the old airport at the edge of town.

From inside Greer felt excitement.

"This is it," Erickson said, rubbing his hands together. "You and me, *we've* got a special bond, don't we? You can really get off when I—"

Greer stared in wide-eyed fascination at Erickson. "I never thought you were like this."

So they tie me up and beat me, Erickson thought.

"You *want* everyone in the warehouse to pick up everything you're thinking and feeling. Even humiliation?"

Erickson nodded, barely hiding his excitement. Greer felt his heart pound a little faster. Telepaths were all potential voyeurs, but generally avoided it among commoners since it was so difficult and distasteful. Not to mention, most of them were ordered to snoop as part of their jobs. At the end of a long day, getting out of a commoner's head was more important than diving back to eavesdrop. Among themselves, it was considered impolite in their mostly commoner society, where offenses were settled more violently than in the commoner world. When Greer *knew* the depths of another man's thoughts, it provided a potent rationale for using force to decide an argument. After all, it was never impersonal.

"I wanted to be an actor," Erickson explained. "My company wouldn't let me. They wanted me to beam out motivational thoughts to their workers. For all the good that does. Like fudge or musk stuffed into the head. That doesn't matter anymore. This . . . is better. It's what *I* want to do."

Erickson opened the metal door, and they slipped inside. Guards stood on either side of the entrance, checking telepathically to be sure they belonged. Erickson obviously did. Greer wasn't so sure about himself, but the guards let him pass. He *heard* their acknowledgment of his telepathic abilities.

The warehouse was dusty and dark, with only a few spotlights shining on a man-arm-thick metal post equipped with shackles. Greer scanned the crowd. There were perhaps a dozen spectators, all men, which wasn't unusual. The XY chromosome combination produced ninety-nine male telepaths for every female. While men were mostly receivers, a few were only transmitters like Erickson. Greer had never found both talents in one man. That combination seemed reserved for women.

Too bad Kathee wasn't here. Greer would have enjoyed *feeling* what she did as she took in the anticipation of the crowd, their enthusiasm, their perverse excitement as she rebroadcasted with her own slant. He felt dirty and discovered he liked it. Even worse, he thought Kathee might too.

Greer was suddenly pushed out of the way as two men, stripped to the waist and sweating, grabbed Erickson and dragged him off. Greer recoiled at Erickson's response: fear-anticipation that became something more than sexual as the shackles locked around his wrists.

Erickson's shirt was ripped away, and a slow, methodical lashing began.

Every crack of the whip caused Erickson to send out agonizing waves of mental pain. Agonizing for him, but also curiously enjoyable for the spectators. Greer found himself transfixed, hypnotized by the sweet-and-sour mixture of emotions flooding from Erickson's mind.

Erickson obviously loved the pain and degradation of others receiving his deepest, darkest thoughts.

As much as Greer, to his surprise, discovered he loved sharing it.

That's disgusting, Kathee thought.

Greer caught a hint of possible betrayal in her thought. As light as a feather falling, a butterfly wing brushing his cheek, he felt her consider telling the vice squad about

screamer.

Kathee worked for the robbery division but was often lent out to other departments for the interrogation of difficult or important witnesses. If the courts ever decided that using a telepath to squeeze information out of a defendant was legal, she would be even more in demand.

As much as Greer hated his job, he felt that what Kathee did— sinking into the minds of people who might be rapists and murderers— was worse. How did she tolerate it?

Is it worse than letting that fool Erickson degrade himself like that?

It was something he wanted to do, Greer thought. Even commoners for blocks around here were off on it. I saw some of them reeling as we left the warehouse. They didn't know what happened, but they had gotten enough from Erickson's transmission to experience a thrill.

It shouldn't be something you want to eavesdrop on, she shot back.

But Kathee, this isn't eavesdropping. Erickson knew I was there. He knew even if I didn't want to . . . share.

It sounded feeble, but Greer laced his thoughts with some of the excitement he had experienced. He felt her wavering. Kathee knew what was moral, but this transcended the ordinary. This was uniquely telepathic. Was it wrong to share that which is freely given?

Erickson is going to get into trouble.

"How?" Greer asked aloud. He stared into her eyes and wondered what it might be like if she had been there, to take in Erickson's pain and stark emotional response and filter and magnify it through her own mind.

That might be the experience of a lifetime.

Are you so bored?

Bored, tired, disgusted, all of that, he thought. Greer caught her fleeting agreement.

What happens if Erickson is seriously injured? He's a powerful sender. You know how dangerous it can be for a telepath to be close when someone is hurt.

No, I don't, Greer replied. This was one of the questions that had never been answered to his satisfaction. While he had not pursued the query too aggressively, he had never found a telepath who had been with anyone who had died, who had been mentally linked to the corpse of a person. There were so few telepaths—and those who might have been in a position to tell him had died with the nontelepaths around them in a variety of accidents.

Commoners had their distinctive urban myths, and telepaths had their own.

There are so few of us—you should be careful. Erickson is not quite right in the head. And he might have died.

Greer sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly. That had occurred to him, and it excited him as much as the flood of pain and desire from the shackled Erickson as the men took to whipping him.

"Yeah," he said, studying her closely. She was worse than plain, she was downright unattractive. But Kathee's appeal lay in other directions. Greer had heard of only three telepaths who could both send and receive thoughts, and they might be part of the city's structure, because no one he knew had ever met them.

He was lucky Kathee had chosen him among all the other telepaths.

Damn right you're lucky, came her thought. And this is so out of character for you.

"I can't explain it," Greer admitted. "I was repelled and attracted at the same time."

More attracted than repelled, or you would have left.

He had no answer to that. She was right.

"Have you heard about things like this going on?" he asked out loud.

Rumors. Always rumors.

"Screamers might be fairly new," Greer said. "There have been so few of us telepaths there are more all the time."

Receivers, Kathy thought bitterly. "And men," she said aloud. Her eyes blinked as she stared at him from inches away. They were naked and lying alongside one another in bed, but they might as well have been a thousand miles apart.

"And men," he said, grinning. "Just like you like." He moved closer and began making love to her.

After a moment of hesitation, she responded.

And somehow, as he climaxed, his thoughts were not on her passion being fed telepathically into his brain, but of Erickson.

Erickson could have died.

What would that have felt like?

He tried everything in the next two weeks, but nothing matched the thrill Greer had felt from the screamer. It began taking on an almost mythic proportion in his thoughts, even pushing aside sex with Kathee.

Greer became obsessed.

He hunted for Erickson, but the man had vanished. No one had seen him or even caught a vagrant thought from him. Sitting at the bar one night, Greer decided that Erickson had done this on purpose to annoy him. Nothing about the man was pleasant. They would never be friends, despite what Erickson thought.

But, because of the screamer, Greer now acknowledged a bond between them that he could not deny: Erickson had enjoyed sending out waves of pain, and Greer had liked sharing it.

Maybe it's because you didn't have to worry about physical scars on your own body. Kathee said, sitting down beside him at the bar.

"It's more than that," Greer said, eager to continue their discussion of the matter. He had been talking about little else with Kathee since the screamer. The more he talked about it, the better his memory of it became. Too much of the screamer was like a will-o'-the-wisp, but not there when he looked too hard. Or like fairy gold: if he reached out and tried to touch it, it evaporated.

For all you know, Erickson might be dead, Kathee thought.

I checked the hospitals. No one has seen or heard about him.

"Greer," Kathee said as she moved closer, putting a hand on his arm. "Don't you see anything wrong with all this?"

"No," Greer said, almost angrily. "We've been through it a hundred times. If you'd been there, you would have felt the same way." He paused and looked into Kathee's face. A smile crept onto his lips. "You *would* have enjoyed it, wouldn't you? Is that what's bothering you?"

It's so good when we make love.

What would it be like if dozens of people magnified those feelings and returned the

you? he asked.

Kathee shivered and tried to push the thought away. Greer caught snippets matter how she tried to deny it. She was as intrigued as he had been—and also as repelled by the powerful combination.

Let's find him, Greer suggested. "Or another screamer. There were enough people there it can't be a one-shot occurrence."

She looked at him, disapproval on her face. But he saw into her mind.

Hand in hand, they left to find a screamer.

I recognize most of them here, Kathee said, surprised. *I suppose that shouldn't strike me as unusual, since I have contact with so many officially.*

Finding this screamer had been easy, and here were hundreds and hundreds of telepaths gathering for the same reason he and Kathee were. Some of the crowd he had seen before at the bar and at social gatherings. Most were complete strangers to him, but he caught some of their arousal at the idea of sharing the sadomasochist exhibition.

I don't believe this, Kathee said, but there was the faintest hint of anticipation behind her words.

Greer wet his lips. Three posts were erected in the middle of the clearing in the junkyard. There were no spotlights.

We're late, he thought. *I think it's going to start—*

The mingling assemblage became suddenly focused, moving closer as three men were led through the crowd directly to the posts, shackled, their shirts stripped from their backs.

Kathee squeezed his hand.

Greer felt the excitement mounting and shared it in much the same way he did with Kathee when they were making love. But this was different, had different layers and emotions and was infinitely more varied and complex.

Philosophical emotions? Kathee asked.

Don't analyze it. Just enjoy it.

I don't know that I can. It is so . . . so unnatural.

That's what makes it exciting, Greer said. *Look! The man chained at the far post. That's Erickson!*

He held her in his arms as the first whip rose and lashed against Erickson's bare flesh and Kathee moved closer, only a few feet away, and received Erickson's full mental anguish and ecstasy.

Kathee tensed and then held Greer closer.

I've never felt anything like this, she admitted.

You like it.

Yes.

The crowd grew in size and the intensity of the emotion flowing from the shackled men increased. Erickson did not seem to recognize Greer—he was too deeply relishing the pain he received. The emotions were pure, laser-sharp, shared by everyone in the junkyard.

This was illicit, wrong, forbidden—and ever so much more exciting because of the shared weakness.

The shared transgression.

The shared sexual excitement.

Closer, Kathee thought. *If we get closer, it will be more intense.*

They moved to Erickson's side. So did others. Those in the crowd touched now, shoulders rubbing and bodies jerking in response to every lash.

The three men using the whips began striking their blows in unison on their victims' backs. This caused the flood of emotion to magnify a hundredfold, in synch like a laser beam powering up. Greer and Kathee moved even closer until they could almost touch Erickson. He looked at them, his eyes wild and bright with transcendence.

They both felt his rapture.

This is amazing. Kathee's thoughts were intense. *I had no idea—*

Greer felt weak in the knees. This was very wrong, he was suddenly sure. He knew he should leave, but instead he moved even closer, as eager as a boy at his first peep show.

More!

Greer wasn't sure if the crowd thought this or if Kathee sent it. The men chained to the posts sobbed and moaned as they took every lash. Only Erickson could project his thoughts clearly.

He wanted more, too.

More!

A feedback began that drew Greer even closer. Kathee was beside him. Her face was pale and strained. He realized she was accepting the telepathic outpouring and then retransmitting it, filtered of extraneous thoughts so the emotion became stronger and more stimulating.

Pure pain.

Pure pleasure.

Greer's body began to respond. Around him he heard other men *crying* out, but he could not move. He turned to the heat, the telepathic heat that drew him like a moth to flame.

More! he got from Kathee. She directed and shaped and magnified the emotional outpouring of the crowd. He saw how pale she had become, how indistinct and ghostlike. Her hands slipped as she pressed even closer to him. He liked the feel of her body against his, the way his thoughts surged and beat against his like ocean waves rising at the start of a storm.

More!

Greer wanted more. He held Kathee and felt the others in the group crowd toward him. Before, when Erickson had been the sacrificial lamb, it had been thrilling. But not like this.

This was something new.

Kathee, he thought. *You are the difference tonight!*

Greer felt the hundreds in the crowd suck in their collective breath as the feedback built to a new intensity. From the three being whipped, to the receivers and Kathee, through Kathee and him, the emotion filtered and magnified for everyone—even those shackled to the posts—to relish. Excitement mounted and fed the crowd and Kathee and him. A link formed between Erickson and Kathee, stronger and more potent than anything Greer had ever felt before.

Dizzily, Greer felt a migraine at the back of his head begin. He ignored it. The feelings cascading into his body and soul were too intense for mere pain now.

Greer, Kathee thought. *I—*

Words were no longer enough as the pressures within grew, pressures of guilt, lust, and illicit sharing.

Greer screamed. He felt as if he had been launched on a rocket. His mental echoes quivered forth and resonated with the others that fed Kathee.

Feedback.

Growing intensity.

Tidal wave.

Out of control.

Out of control!

Greer experienced a freaky second where he knew they would all die from ecstasy. He discovered what it meant to be a telepath.

Over and up and around and ever increasing, their exhilaration grew until they were consumed in a huge flame of stark rapture that destroyed them all—and then began snuffing out the lesser lights of nontelepaths.

The world did not end in fire or ice.

It ended in orgasm.