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This Was Not a Comic

A critical and creative investigation into the narrative strengths of
comics presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
of Masters in Creative Writing at Massey University, Albany,
Aotearoa

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Abstract

Comics can be a difficult medium to classify. They come in so many shapes and sizes: strip cartoons, separate issues of superhero comics, and even the stand-alone, book-length narratives which have come to be called ‘graphic novels.’

The critical component of this MCW thesis does not seek so much to classify comics as to look at the narrative strengths of the medium through the lens of their influence on the author, in particular, as both a comics consumer and creator.

The particular combination of words and pictures in sequence that characterises comics has the power to play with an audience’s sense of time, visual metaphor, and reality through repetition and closure. It is these three aspects of the form that both the critical (roughly 30%) and creative (70%) components of this Masters of Creative writing seek to explore.

The creative component of this MCW is a graphic novel in the style of a diary comic called *This Is Not a Pipe*. It explores how visual metaphor and repetition in comics can complicate the reader’s sense of the reality of the narrative. It is highly recommended that you read this work first for the exegesis in the critical essay to make sense.

The critical component, ‘This Was Not a Comic’ is in two parts. The first half analyses Bill Watterson’s *Calvin and Hobbes*, Dylan Horrock’s *Hicksville*, and Eleanor Davis’s *You & a Bike & a Road* in order to identify certain of the specific narrative qualities of comics. The second part is an explanation of how *This Is Not a Pipe* actually became a comic, rather than the novel it was originally intended to be, and the creative consequences of this decision.

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Critical component:

This Was Not a Comic

Part One - examining influences¹

a. What I like about *Calvin and Hobbes*

Calvin and Hobbes was formative for me.² Dad, having realised that I liked them, used to butcher the paper they had at work to bring them home to me. Only later did I wonder if he had waited for other people to read the paper first. My father worked 12 hour shifts, often nights. Now, I like to imagine him getting to the paper first at 5am and leaving a *Calvin and Hobbes*-shaped hole as a furtive labour of love.

I kept them in a scrapbook, carefully gluesticked in. It became a compulsion of sorts. They must have come from different papers because they weren't always the same dimensions and I sometimes ended up with double-ups. This was a quandary since I didn't want to throw them away but I already had them - I wasn't sure doubles required an extra book or if my particular set would be incomplete without them. In this way I was collecting comics before I really had money to collect them. I collected them in much the same way I collected

¹ I suggest reading my comic, *This Is Not A Pipe*, before reading this essay, since otherwise the second part (in particular) will not make much sense.

² Many comic creators seem to be able to credit a formative comic with getting them into the medium, more so than I ever hear authors naming a novel that got them into reading. Maybe it's just that one is expected to read novels and few parents push their children into comics.

stickers, pasting them into a scrapbook in rows before I could afford the compilations, pouring over them.

Such was my obsession with *Calvin and Hobbes*, that when my friend Catherine came to stay recently she had been unable to pass over *The Essential Calvin and Hobbes* in a second-hand shop without buying it for me even though she knew that I had gotten rid of my copy long ago for an unwieldy complete box set slip-case edition.

Imagination

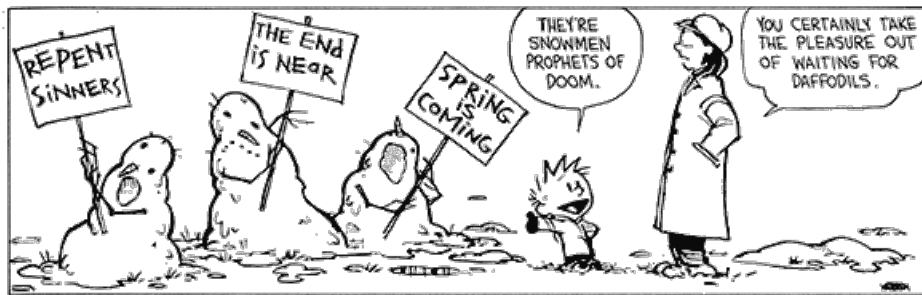


Figure 1 - March 8, 1993 (*The Complete Calvin and Hobbes Book 3*, 152)

Calvin and Hobbes appealed to me for a number of reasons through and beyond the humour. Watterson offered me a different way of looking at the world that seemed unique and offered a child a way of being adult. He is always inventing things and wild adventures that are as real for him as Hobbes and, because my ability to inhabit my own fantasies was largely gone by the time I started reading *Calvin and Hobbes*, Calvin was able to supply me that kind of wonder in the world. It's a bit sad to me now that I recognise that Calvin had more imagination than me. People generalise about children and their fantastic imaginations. Mine always seemed in deficit.

But Calvin's wonder is a cynical wonder. In the apocalyptic vision of snowmen, above (Fig. 1), Calvin greets mortality in a joyful way. The scene implies an entire society brought to its end by the changing of the seasons; the futile Cassandra-like snowmen in gruesome pain while others blithely move on. It makes me question what else I am dismissing in the world in favour of my own comfort. In this way, Watterson presents Calvin's imagination as a

constant bane to his parents' while celebrating its vitality. Reality is just not a fun place and Calvin keeps reminding his parents of the drudgery of life, their own lack of imagination, by seeing life in everything, even if that everything is only melting snowmen.

Wordiness

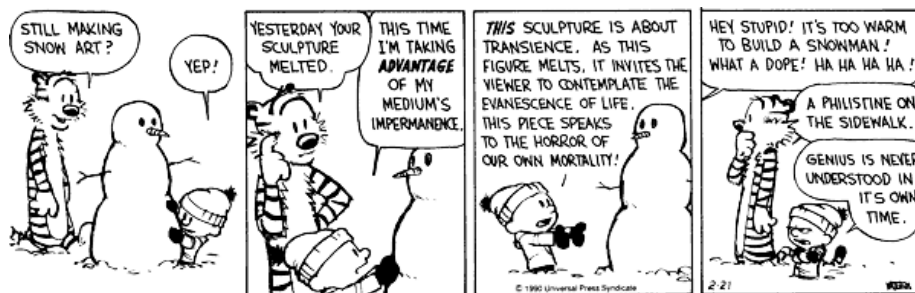


Figure 2 - February 21, 1990 (*The Complete Calvin and Hobbes Book 2*, 244)

Calvin is given to ranting. Part of the humour is in the satirical specificity of words like “transience”, “evanescence” and “mortality”. The tautology of using both ‘impermanence’ and ‘transience’ (Fig. 2) is even funnier to me as an adult but as a child the multi-age appeal of *Calvin and Hobbes* was lost on me. It was just clear to me that Calvin knew what he was talking about more than the people around him could know.

I didn’t realise that Watterson was making fun of art critics (*Tenth Anniversary*, 166). Instead, I always wanted his parents to be able to see what a genius he was and to turn around and join him in his reality but that was part of the tension, too. No one in the strip understood Calvin but Hobbes and no one else could see Hobbes but Calvin no matter how much I wanted them to.

I think this appeal was in keeping with my own delusions of grandeur as a pre-teen. My desire to be noticed and recognised attached itself to Calvin. Except, unlike Calvin, I was always trying to do the right thing. Calvin was only ever being himself.

Philosophy

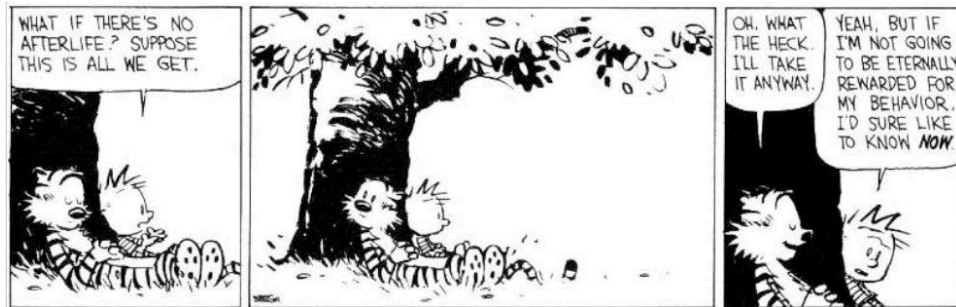


Figure 3 - June 21, 1993 (*The Complete Calvin and Hobbes Book 3*, 198)

Calvin and Hobbes quite often offers a humour which is more thought-provoking than laugh-out-loud. This is an extension of the wordiness, of the humour of having characters who speak more articulately than you would expect of a 6-year-old or a stuffed tiger. The way the characters are able to contemplate their mortality and what is important in life lends it a bitter-sweet tone.

In the strip above (Fig. 3), Hobbes' life-affirming statement is more important than the joke of Calvin's desire to have a 1:1 relationship between behaviour and reward. The quietness and length of the second panel draws out a moment of quiet companionship. I find these moments of quietness in comics particularly pleasing because they forefront the natural pauses in conversation and offer the reader their own thinking time.

The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book

The one thing I did not shed of my original *Calvin and Hobbes* paperback collection was the *Tenth Anniversary Book* because, for all its lofty claims, the complete edition slip-case version did not actually contain it. This book gave me my first explanation of authorial intent. I had no idea before then that there was even a process to making comic strips.

There are three insights in *The Tenth Anniversary Book* that I have come back to unconsciously or consciously in my comic making over the years.

- i. Watterson is not interested in pinning down the ‘reality’ of Hobbes.
- ii. Iteration requires escalation.
- iii. Watterson found the space constraints of the comic strip, well, constrictive.

i. The ‘reality’ of Hobbes.



Figure 4 - March 10, 1987 (*The Complete Calvin and Hobbes Book 1*, 242)

I can't think back to a time before I knew Watterson's take on the dual reality of Hobbes but I think that I had always thought that Hobbes' toy shape was some sort of cloaking device to save him from non-Calvins. Watterson explicitly says that "the nature of Hobbes' reality doesn't interest me, and each story goes out of its way to avoid resolving the issue" (*Tenth Anniversary*, 22). For Watterson, Hobbes is not a toy come to life or a product of Calvin's imagination. Instead different characters have a different experience of reality and the comic medium allows Watterson to 'draw that literally'.

This ability to complicate reality is one of the things I've really come to love about comics. Even if a comic takes on a different style for a fantasy sequence, everything within a comic has the same level of reality. This is partly because of the grammar of comics. The use of the frame creates a 'homogenous execution' even when the material is drawn in different styles or comes from different sources (Groensteen, *System* 42). Groensteen elaborates on this further in *Comics and Narration*,

The unique capacity to be able to illustrate with the same force of conviction the "real," the imagined, the thought, and the felt... can glide smoothly from an objective to a subjective register. (131)

More recently I've come to understand this in relation to Todorov's notion of 'the fantastic', which is the pause or hesitation a character and/or audience member experiences when trying to figure out if a strange text-event has a rational explanation or not. A rational explanation takes a reader into "the uncanny" as in 'the ghost was actually a gas leak' and a non-rational explanation takes the reader into the realms of "the marvelous" (or what we more traditionally think of as fantasy) as in 'there are ghosts and they are real'. If a text can keep a reader in that liminal space of not knowing the reality of a world, like *Calvin and Hobbes* does, that has a magical (or fantastic) effect.



Figure 5 - May 6, 1993 (*The Complete Calvin and Hobbes Book 3*, 177)

The complexity of Hobbes's reality is shown in this excerpt, above, from a strip where Calvin fantasizes about winning a poster competition (Fig. 5). Here Calvin recognises that other people don't see Hobbes as he does, while imagining that creating havoc with a fire engine is a good thing. Even Calvin's delusions of grandeur are complex.

ii. Iteration requires escalation

I loved Watterson's 'babysitter' strips and always wanted more of them but he describes them as getting harder with each story. This is because the gag needs to get bigger every time in order to keep paying off for the audience. Calvin

needs to get more devious, his parents more desperate and Rosalind more remunerated.³

Watterson says that he doesn't 'write stories with an ending in mind, because I want the story to develop a life of its own, and I want the resolution of the dilemma to surprise me (*Tenth Anniversary* 108). This kind of repetition, far from becoming tedious, gives a richness to an idea through self-contained increments.



Figure 6 - April 6, 1990 (*The Complete Calvin and Hobbes Book 2*, 262)

It becomes a comment on the wonder of creativity. In the Rosalind strip above (Fig. 6), Watterson combines another Calvin creation, Stupendous Man, with a return to his parents' ambivalence about having children to escalate the babysitter joke. Calvin's parents are unable to relax even when they get a night out.



Figure 7 - April 2, 1987 (*The Complete Calvin and Hobbes Book 1*, 251)

³ I came up against this problem when creating *The Blue Fury*, which is a comic about Janet Frame and Katherine Mansfield haunting a first-year teacher. There are only so many 'the main character is bad at teaching' jokes that can be made by dead literary heroes, while referencing the differences between modernism and post-modernism.

The jokes about the transmogrifier work this way as well. The ‘transmogrifier’ is a cardboard box which becomes technology because Calvin has written what it does on the side. This is Watterson’s genius. He takes a simple idea and pushes it in all directions. I particularly like the whimsy of it and the absolute commitment of Calvin to his ideas. The transmogrifier becomes a duplicator and that goes wrong because Calvin’s clones get him into trouble.

iii. Space constraints

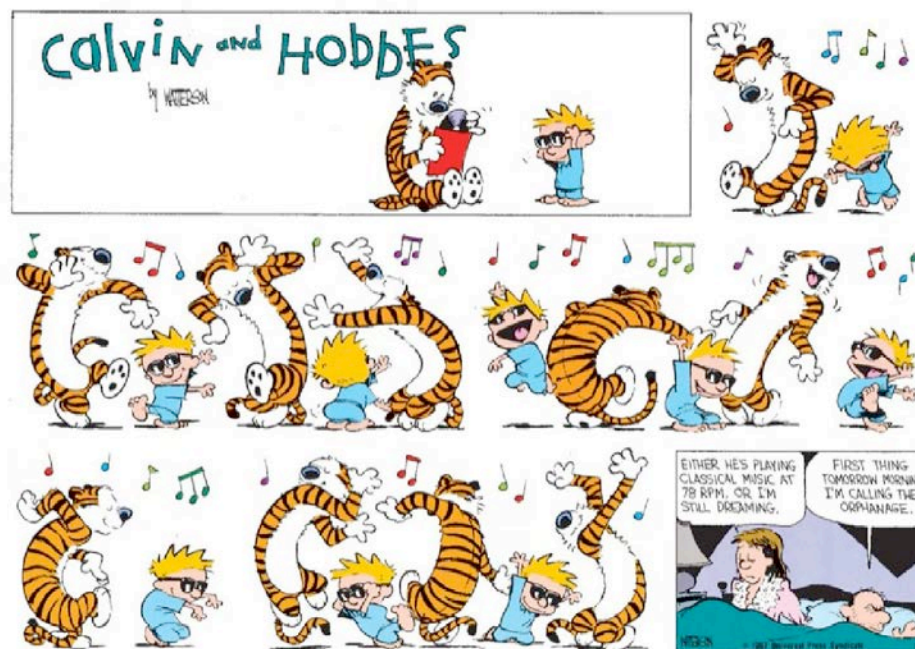


Figure 8 - Feb 1, 1987 (*The Complete Calvin and Hobbes Book 1*, 226)

The panel is such a key element of the rhythm comic. I love the box. It contains. It creates order. Many have commented on how the negative space between the frames in comics, the gutters, are an active part of the reading experience. Groensteen calls gutters and frames ‘analogous to that of punctuation marks’, offering meaning through separation of ideas (*System* 43).

For myself, I like the ability of the comic to use those gaps to stretch out a moment or to help a reader inhabit a moment with a character, in the way that the lengthened silent panel in the afterlife strip (Fig. 3) does with the panel. Although, as Groensteen points out in *The System of Comics*, it is important to

resist an exact correspondence between frame size and reading length. Comics are more flexible than that.

Watterson found the four-panel strip restrictive (*Tenth Anniversary*, 36). This was also a new concept to me for as a child I was unaware of any desire for creative freedom. Perhaps this reflects well on my parents and teachers. Or, perhaps it implies that I had no desire to push boundaries. The idea that the Sunday strip offered Watterson an ability to break out of the four-panel format drew my attention to the idea of panels.

In particular, the strip depicting Calvin and Hobbes dancing (Fig. 8, above) was the first place I considered how time was regulated in a comic. It emphasised the sense that many get with comics, that they are looking at snapshots from a film, except that in film the framing is an act which excludes whereas in comics nothing is removed because it is constructed from scratch (Groensteen, *System* 40). This means that the construction of the experience of time is entirely in the hands of the author.



Figure 9 - November 29, 1992 (*The Complete Calvin and Hobbes Book 3*, 108)

The dinosaur strip (Fig. 9), above, however, disrupts that sense of continuous time by breaking out of the conventional 'gridding' of comics. While the reading order of the overlapping and inset panels is easily understood, the varied size of panel ensures that each has a different attention weighting.

Larger panels naturally have more presence and denote importance but it is not as simple as that. More words in a panel will ensure that the reader spends more time there more than size necessarily will. In the dinosaur strip, the different sizes create an ordered mayhem, which provide the right surreal contrast for the 'it's Calvin's book-report' punchline.

Watterson, through his less constricted layouts, utilises the size and shape of the panel to help convey Calvin's unique narrative voice, while still letting the other characters temper it. The perspective of the comic medium, like other narration-light mediums, allows all characters to speak for themselves on their own terms, even if they are not the main character shaping the narrative. All of the characters act completely rationally according to their natures - they all think they are the sane character in a ship of fools. For this reason, I always found the long-suffering Miss Wormwood and Susie particularly compelling⁴.

I think that this is one of the greatest strengths of comics as a story-telling medium, the space or tension between the narrator, if there is one, the words of the characters and the visual presentation. It gives a reader room for a multiplicity of readings and for narrative 'reality' to always be under question.

⁴ Perhaps a teacher shouldn't admit to having Miss Wormwood as an influence.

b. What I like about *Hicksville* by Dylan Horrocks

I first read *Hicksville* because it was 'THE important New Zealand comic. It remains 'THE New Zealand comic'⁵ as no other comic written by a New Zealander has achieved the same cultural or literary significance, with the possible exception of *Dharma Punks* by Ant Sang⁶.

I read it specifically to review as part of a creative writing course I was doing while working at Gotham Comics. Embarrassingly, I didn't admit to liking it. This is typical of me in my early twenties. My analysis of anything turned to deconstruction, demolition, then dismissal. It was a rather juvenile hangover from teenagerhood, making not caring an art form or an attempt to make everything as small as I felt. My main criticism was that I didn't think the art made the characters distinctive enough, which is something I no longer believe, but, actually, inside, I found the story magical.

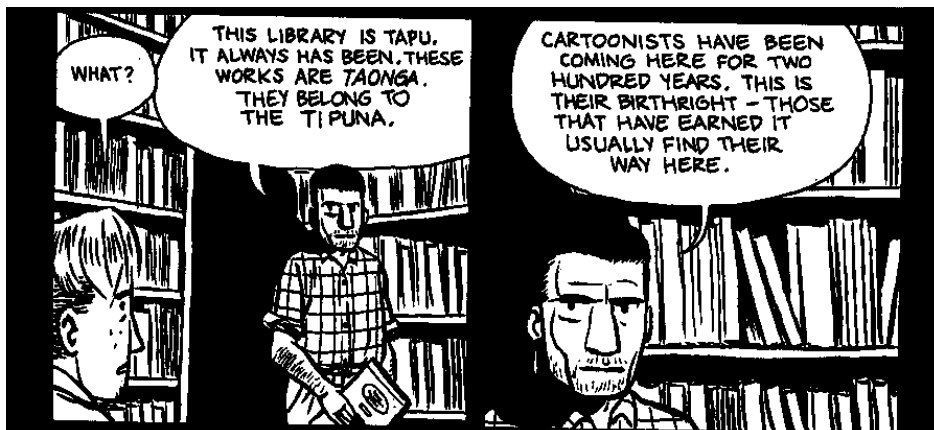


Figure 10 – *Hicksville*, 207 – Kupe and the library

It embodies the search for home Pākehā New Zealanders face; It gives them something to find because *Hicksville* takes New Zealand and makes it special,

⁵ Some would say graphic novel. A graphic novel, technically, is a comic that was not serialised first. It is a graphic work designed as a complete thing, like a novel. Mostly, however, it is a marketing term used to make the form seem more serious. We now have graphic memoirs that are called graphic novels; Collected editions of superhero comics also get called graphic novels just because they are books. It's not a great idea to get bogged down in the terminology for this reason. Parts of *Hicksville* were serialised first but it has long been regarded as an entire work.

⁶ That I know of, anyway.

which is a sentimental departure from the tendency towards gothic when describing small-town New Zealand. The small town which the comic is named for is a utopia where all its inhabitants love comics. It's what Featherston is now trying to be, but for books. The town harbours a secret but it isn't a dark one; At its heart it has a library taonga (Fig. 10).

'This is my favourite part; the library.'⁷ This magical library is made up of great unpublished comics, available only in Hicksville - perhaps past and present and future. It is a kind of comics-Mecca and all the great artists of the past have somehow found their way to it and contributed, "The other history of comics. The way it should have been" (206).

The antagonist, Dick Burger, has stolen a comic from the library and used it to launch himself into fame and renown. His exploitation of the taonga means that he can never return to the library or his hometown, an exile which he claims not to care about but clearly bridles him. In this way Horrocks makes Aotearoa the centre of an alternative world comic industry but also an alternative to the splashy trappings of the superhero genre.



Figure 11 – *Hicksville*, 86 (excerpts)

⁷ Well, both the library and Grace choosing Kupe, the keeper of the library, for her lover: but it is all connected.

Central to *Hicksville* is a kind of metaphysics that the comic medium enables (Figures 11 and 12). It is a reasonably common move for comics to be self-referential or contain stories within them that are written by the characters. These can reflect or even influence the main narrative and *Hicksville* is rich with such layers of narrative that loop back on themselves, like Ouroboros.



Figure 12– *Hicksville*, 85 (excerpts)

In a similar way to the complicated reality of Hobbes I mentioned earlier, these comics within comics, even when introduced as such, end up having a similar narrative value, in the way that our minds remember dreams in the same way as reality. This makes it easy for the fictions within the fictions to feel like the realist narrative on top, infusing it with magic.

Horrocks’ fictional comic-guru, Emil Copen (Fig. 11, panel 1), addresses this comic medium metaphysics, saying that all things have a relationship in space and that these relationships “transcend time” (Fig. 12) and going so far to say that he has ventured into “magic” (Fig. 13). This is the effect of the layering of comics within comic’s structure. It makes the reader draw these relationships in space, in the way we do between words or panels.



Figure 13 – *Hicksville*, 87 (excerpt)

One example of this layering is Sam Zabel's work within *Hicksville*. Sam Zabel has an anthology of comics in the middle of the book; He is the most Dylan Horrocks-esque figure in the comic (even more so if the later, *Sam Zabel and the Magic Pen* is taken into consideration) in that he rejects the phoniness of the US comic scene and returns home. Zabel's comics blur reality and fiction, making it hard to know where his comic and the main narrative starts or ends. This, of course, is the point. Comics are a sort of life force in Hicksville. The characters are the comics and the comics are them.

The mystery comics about Captain Cook and Hone Heke add to this sense of the narrative being in some sense supernatural and, like Hobbes in *Calvin and Hobbes*, whether or not there is magic at play is never pinned down. The structure of the story allows Hicksville to stay in the liminal moment of the fantastic.



Figure 14 – *Hicksville*, pp 234-235 (excerpts)

Captain Cook, Hone Heke and a N.Z. Co surveyor are trying to work out where New Zealand's North Island, e Ika-a-Maui (Maui's fish) is going. They eventually go looking for a lighthouse, which is the marker of the Hicksville library and also a marker of the spirit world. Once again, comics guide the way. Cook and Hone meet on a beach and realise the land is moving, disrupting space and time.

In the original prologue to *Hicksville* the character of Dylan Horrocks is being sent these comics by someone he doesn't know who claims to have met him and is being asked to return to a place he has never been (Fig. 15, below); Leonard Batts finds these same comics inexplicably while stranded outside Hicksville; At other moments they are just inserted into the narrative in their own right and sit on the same level of reality as the main narrative; The comic ends with them and is left open. The Cook/Hone comic, therefore, both initiates the narrative and bookends it. It is both on the outside - at the author level - and on the inside - for characters to read.

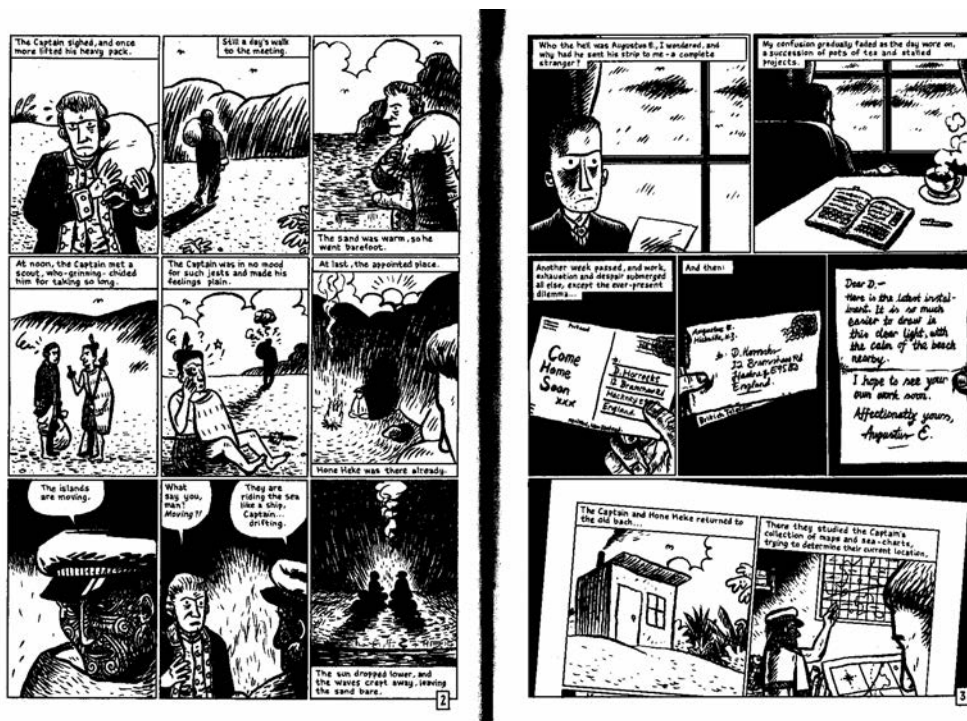


Figure 15- *Hicksville*, prologue

Even the excerpts from Dick Burger's stolen superhero comic gain this level of reality when put alongside the historical fictions of Zabel and Cook. We are reading a comic and suspending our disbelief that far. It is not too hard to extend that suspension of disbelief to another comic in the same book.

This reality blurring is partly a function of the reader being aware that comics 'have been drawn, that they are artifacts', regardless of whether or not a narrator is obviously present (Groensteen, *Narration* 85).

It is also to do with the way narrators function in comics as a medium.

Groensteen describes narrator in comics as a mix of 'monstrator' – the way the images are presented and 'reciter' – whoever is providing the words (*Narration* 94-95). The images and text can either work in tandem or provide different points of view. This potential gap between the 'recitor' and 'monstrator' reinforces the ability of comics to stay in the realm of the fantastic. This gap, as utilised by Horrocks, is never closed nor is it used in a cynical way to create dramatic irony. Instead, it lets the points of view of the characters sit alongside each other, leaving interpretation open to the reader.



Figure 16- *Hicksville*, 235 - The Hicksville lighthouse

For me, it all comes back to the Hicksville library. We get the sense that *Hicksville* comes from the library that is its subject, partly because there are many senses in which *Hicksville* is a collection of comics - unfinished as a whole. It was written in pieces, some of it published separately and its 2010 re-release has a new prologue, which acts as another appendage to the collection of fragments.

The Hicksville library, it seems, writes the narrative, or at least houses it, which makes the book more than just a collection of comics within comics. Instead, it is both a map and a beacon (Figures 14 and 16). In this reality, comics are everything. The form and the function. This is the most satisfying pleasure, as a reader, that I can have, when the way the story is told is integral to the story.

C. What I like about *You & a Bike & a Road* by Eleanor Davis

The narrative voice and structure of *You & a Bike & a Road* expanded my understanding of how the grammar of comics could be used to tell a story.

You & a Bike & a Road is a diary-comic about Davis' attempt to traverse the United States on a bike (Fig. 17). Davis' book meditates on both the emotional and physical journey, mixing quiet moments of landscape with thoughts about her life and the challenge of the ride. She returns again and again to her need to attempt the trip, her knee pain and her depression, in a way that immerses us in her thought processes without being self-indulgent.

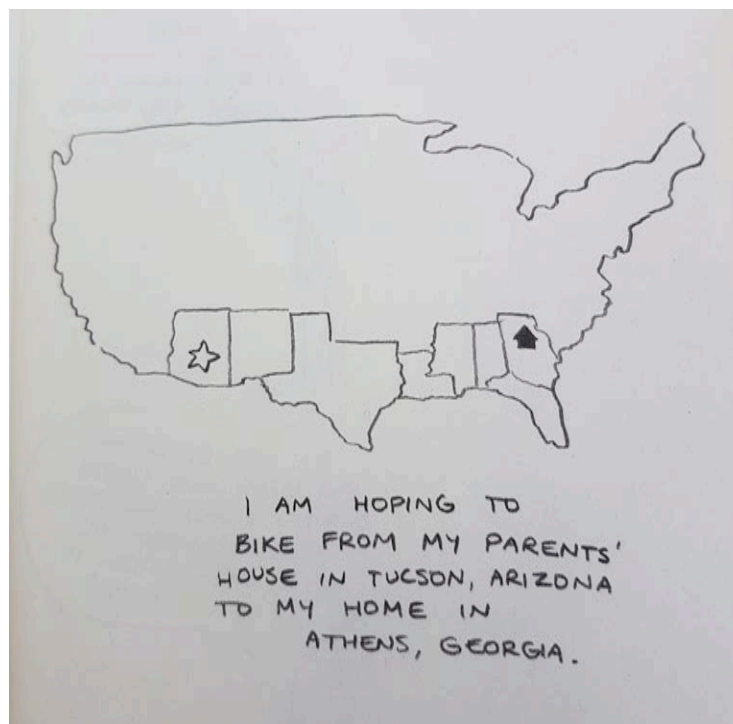


Figure 17 - *You & a Bike & a Road* – proposed journey

The diary structure is both simple and effective. It gives the reader a sense of unedited access while also being curated. Constructed from moments that are further apart in time than most narrative comics, it frees Davis from a rigid sequential narrative, utilising montage to create a sense of narrative progression.

In a world obsessed with autobiography, it feels fresh and light, despite the subject-matter, partly because it is very sparse in terms of the drawing. Davis lets her narrative breathe through generously using white space. She never uses frames, which means that all the space between the drawings acts as gutters, creating a fluid sense of time and evoking a stretching silence.



Figure 18 - *You & a Bike & a Road, "Day 15"*

The amount of white space evokes both her isolation of her activity and the beauty she finds in the Texas landscape. The graphite linework gives the images movement while still expressing a stark clarity.

In the pages above (Fig. 18) Davis plays with scale. The very big mountains are made small and the details of the grass are made big. This space creates beautiful balance between absurd and sublime, small and big. It also, once again, emphasises the ability of comics to flatten reality. Scale is entirely a matter of context because drawings are artifacts.

Davis' use of empty space highlights, for me, how important gaps are in comics and that sequential narrative does not need to be inside a box. Her use of space means that the type of closure that the audience must perform is continuous rather than discrete. If the borders between panels, whether there is a gutter or not, are a 'symbolic site of absence' (Groensteen, *System* 113) then Davis' choice to leave them out creates an inclusiveness.

In more conventional comics Groensteen says 'the gutter cancels the already read panel to let the next panel exist in its own right' (*System* 113). Davis' images, however, all get to exist somewhat simultaneously. The audience reads them as a coherent story because, as Steiner notes, 'the repetition of the subject informs us we are reading a story' (qtd. in Groensteen *Narration* 24) but the space between the audience and the narrator is decreased; The audience is invited into her narrative space because of the lack of barriers.



Figure 19 - *You & a Bike & a Road*, "Day 27"

Her lack of borders and boxes makes her concern with metaphorical borders even more interesting. Despite the story being punctuated with interactions with kind strangers (see Fig. 19) there is still the fear of the stranger that comes from being a lone traveller. Her journey involves travelling next to Mexico and crossing state borders; She often notes helicopters, border patrol, circling

above. By removing the borders from her comics she makes a comment on the invisible borders between people, especially between states and countries.

Autobiographical cartooning plays with self-expression in a unique way.

Hatfield notes that,

While the written text in a comic may confide in the reader much like unaccompanied, first-person prose, the graphic presence of the image at once distances and inflects the autobiographer's voice (117).

However, Davis' work does a good job of keeping the autobiographer's voice and the image close together, despite not being in a realistic drawing style⁸. The 'recitor' and the 'monstrator' seem to be in harmony.

The specific way she pairs images and the text is an essential part of this narrative voice. Hatfield says that 'comics tend to present rather than narrate – or... alternately present *and* narrate', that comics have an 'outside in' quality that first person narration does not (115). Davis' way of alternating, however, seems to defy this 'outside in' quality of comics. By alternating between the

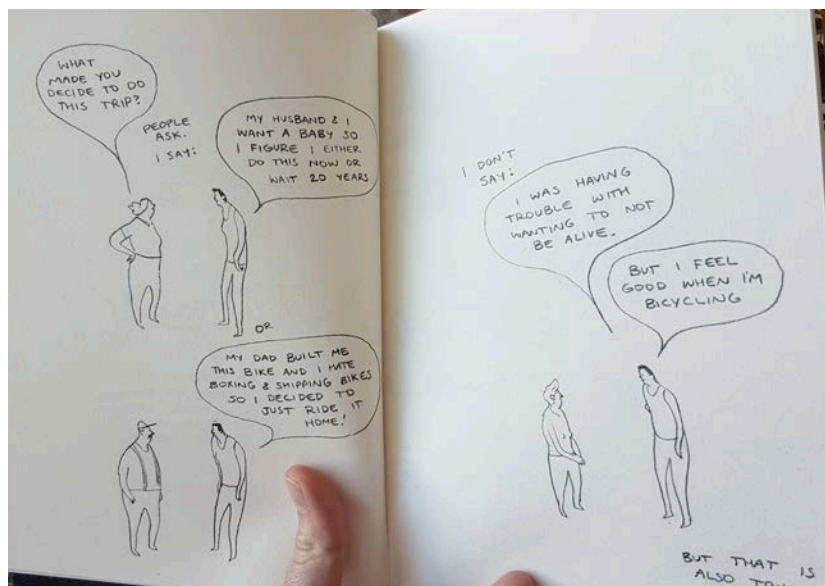


Figure 20 - *You & a Bike & a Road*, between "Day 2" and "Day 3"

⁸ The 'realism' of drawings in autobiographical comics has no actual bearing on their fidelity to the 'truth'.

narration of her journey and dialogue it means that the narration becomes both a commentary on and a counterpoint to the images.

Figure 20, from early in the comic, is a good example of this. The pictures are simple but the posture conveys a lot. The repetition of two figures on a blank background conveys an existential loneliness. The last image is 'imaginary' in the sense that it is an expression of something that she doesn't say. This blurs the speech balloon and the commentary, making it all part of her internal voice, mitigating the barrier the image creates between reader and the first person narration. It makes it more possible to see the image as part of the first person narration rather than something at odds with it.



Figure 21- *You & a Bike & a Road*, "Day 54"

Often, as in the image of her looking at the bridge, above, she doesn't use text at all, letting the image speak for itself. Like her skillful juxtaposition between internal and external voices, the image of the view from the bridge eclipses the humorous observation about only eating food 'shaped like dicks' (Fig. 21).

But what most blurs the boundary between outside and inside the narrator in *You & a Bike & a Road* is the use of second person. The title is in second person, blurring the 'I' and the 'us' as despite the subject of the book clearly being Davis.

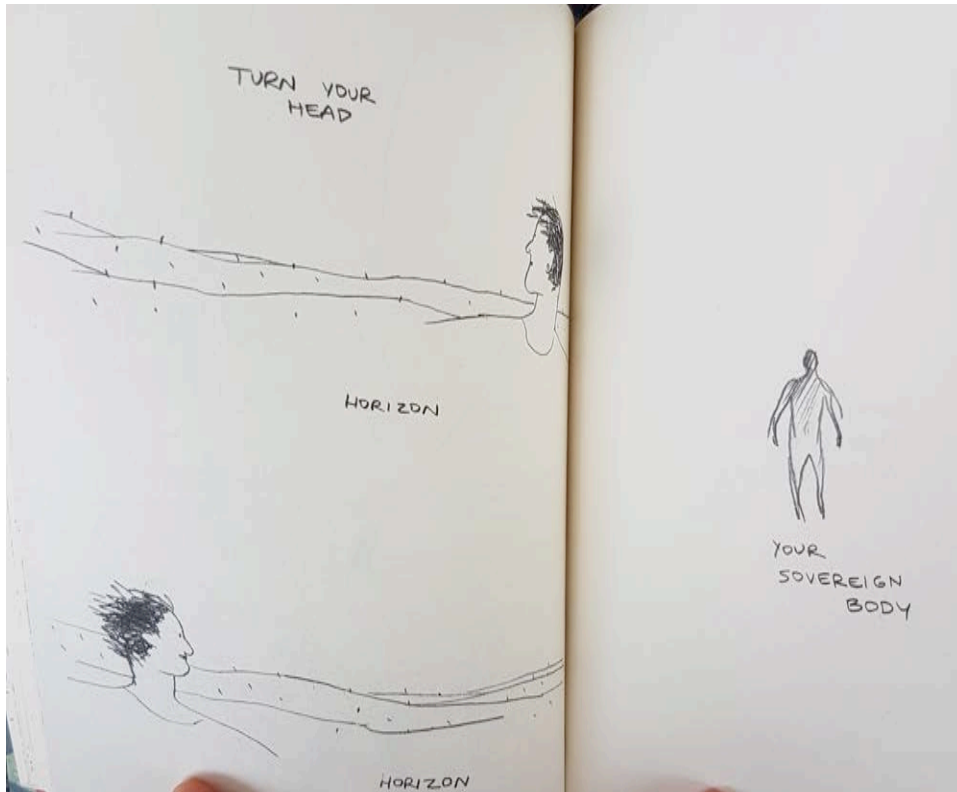


Figure 22 - *You & a Bike & a Road*, between "Day 32" and "Day 33"

In Fig. 22, above, the second person instructs the reader, making the journey as much the audience's as it is Davis'. This makes her struggle both more visceral and universal. Like the blurring of the large and small, like the blurring of borders, Davis blurs the boundary between reader and narrator.

This shows that comics can explore the consciousness of a narrator or character in a way that other media cannot. Comics can externalise internal fantasy and let an audience be inside the images in a character or narrator's 'head' at the same time.

Part Two – Why make a comic?

In this section I analyse the process of deciding my story was a comic and some of the technical decision-making that resulted from this discovery.

1. *This Is Not a Pipe* - before it was a comic

This Is Not a Pipe started its life as an experimental prose novel. It wanted to be one of those extremely clever and ambitious post-modern experimental first novels that are mostly about writing and hardly at all about character – fictions that privilege style over substance. It wanted to be the kind of first novel that Holden Caulfield would read while knowing that no-one else truly understood it as he did. But it really *should* have been a comic from the very beginning.

Unfortunately, this desire of mine to write a novel ignored the fact that my experience of writing prose was limited to a novella for children that functioned obliquely as an expression of my dissatisfaction with my marriage to everyone⁹ but me. Never mind that I found my own prose tortured and inconsistent or that I felt myself cringe every time I went to explain to someone what I was doing.

“It’s about a woman who is writing a comic and the comic is in the novel and we are meant to be unclear which reality is more real or whether the comic is writing her or if her maybe-boyfriend-partner-husband is writing her... It’s about the nature of story” was something I always swallowed the end of before saying “It’s *very* first-novel” to absolve myself of the fact that it sounded like I was just trying too hard.

Never did I say “It’s about this woman who has a pole through her arms and how she struggles with everyday life”. I expect this is because I didn’t want to

⁹ Okay ‘everyone’ was just my ex-husband. That is also where the line “Is that how you see me?” comes from.

open myself up to scrutiny. Of course, by saying it's a "fake diary comic", which is what it became, I inevitably open myself up to questions of memoir. The first person makes it hard to avoid that and my insistence on 'fake' makes it seem like I'm protesting too much. Although I'd like to point out that I don't have a pole through my arms. It would be hard to hide something like that.

I was certain, initially, that third-person prose was the only medium that would give me the ability to play with reality in the way I wanted to, leaving aside the fact that I wasn't even entirely sure what the pole looked like, a problem I didn't even know I was sidestepping until I came to draw it. What I was struggling with was how I was going to maintain this narrative of the everyday and sustain interest.

Domestic situations can be interesting if there's a family inheritance at stake, or if it's being written by Jane Austen, but the claustrophobia of Beth's life didn't ever seem like it could hold a narrative without something else, even with all the machinery of the pole and the balloons. So, originally, I was going to cross-cut to a high-fantasy narrative between the more 'realist' sections.



Figure 23

However, the world building required for that proved even harder than animating Beth's living-room office. *Those* were the characters I was more interested in, the ones that had grand conflict and adventures in balloons, not Beth. She was just an empty vessel for their more vibrant realities to exist inside. Yet in the final narrative as comic, the original fantasy narrative that was meant to be going on inside the pole is entirely absent and (as it has turned out) superfluous. Her emptiness was the most important and vital thing to convey. I didn't need to fill that gap.

a. The role of the Otter-dogs

Even before I realised *This Is Not a Pipe* should be a comic, a comic strip was still central to its plot. I knew that I wanted my protagonists to be making a comic. I thought that the comics could structure the story by commenting on elements of story structure. I like a layered narrative but also feel conflicted about them. While I am drawn to the metafictional nature of any story about making a story, it feels self-indulgent at the same time: a little too close to writing a first novel about writing a first novel.

I wasn't entirely sure which of my characters was going to be making the comic strip but intended it to be part of their power dynamic. At first I thought Beth's pole prevented her from being able to draw and that Kenneth was just putting her name on it, but that didn't really make sense with Kenneth's character. I also played with the idea of Kenneth not acknowledging that she was making the comic, which made him seem even more unfeeling than I wanted him to be. He exploits Beth's work enough without putting his name on her work.

In any case, the otter-dogs were far more central to the story when the rest was prose. Their creation was what the novel was meant to be about. I had intended it to be a thing that mended Kenneth and Beth's relationship because I wanted to write something about putting a dysfunctional relationship back together, something hopeful.

Once I started making them they took on a life of their own, independent of the novel. I made more and more when I should have been working on the novel. They became their own love story. And my passion for making them should, perhaps, have been a sign to me that making comics was what I wanted to be doing.

Otter-dogs, aesthetically, is quite sparse. The setting is a line. They are not particularly narrative-centred, more cerebral and philosophical. The two otter-

dogs are always reading. They exist almost entirely within what Scott McCloud would categorise as the “moment to moment” panel transition (*Understanding Comics* 70). This means that they require almost no closure for the audience on a narrative level. The metaphorical gaps between the panels are very small, which leaves the focus on the expressions and the dialogue.

The strips represent me having a conversation with myself to try to work through an idea and what turned out to be Beth’s idealisation of the Kenneth/Beth dynamic. Consequently, they are nameless and I never use gendered pronouns so that there can be a fluidity between the two.



Figure 24- "Deus Ex Machina"

b. Jokes about story structure in *Otter-dogs*

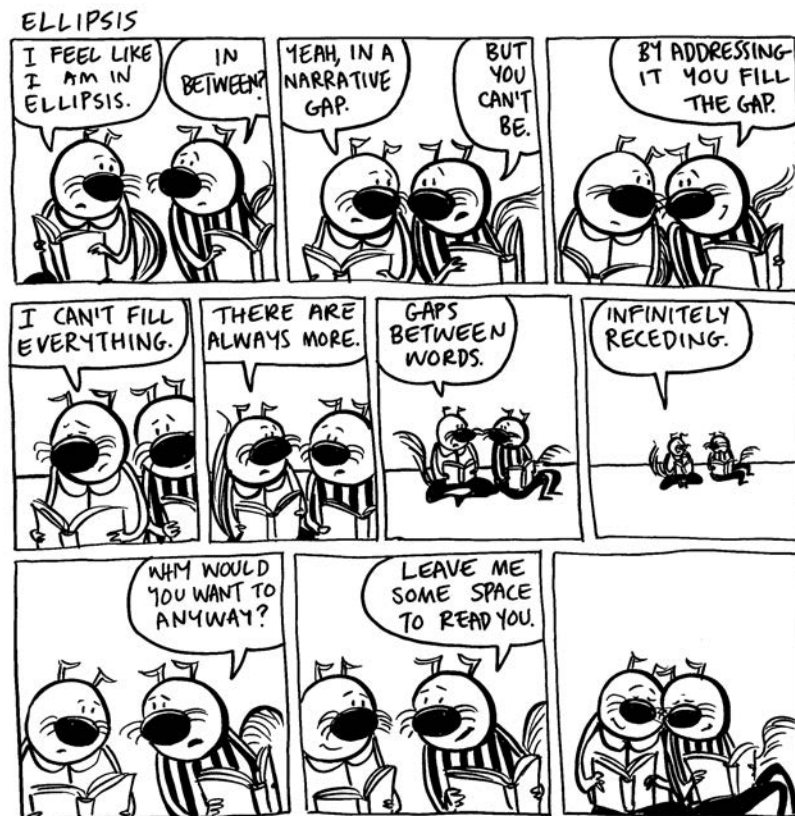


Figure 25 - "Ellipsis"

"Deus ex machina" (Fig. 24) was one of the first *Otter-dogs* I made. I had been thinking about the nature of endings and how we seek them in fiction. The ending has the special quality of bringing a narrative together and making it whole. A good ending, in my opinion, can make you view the rest of the text differently.

There is a gruesomeness in wishing for the ending that Peter Brooks outlines in his book *Reading for the Plot* in his discussion of Freud's masterplot. It is 'the death instinct, the drive towards the end' (102). He says that because we don't get to see our own endings in life, and, as a consequence, don't experience our lives as a complete narrative, we seek endings in story. The end of the story, while satisfying, brings a sense of loss with it because an experience is over because we experience 'the death of the reader in the text' (108). I wanted to express that in this strip.

When I first wrote the ‘deus ex machina’ strip, however, I had a different ending in mind and its role in the narrative was going to be to emphasise that Beth’s story was stuck in the middle and didn’t seem to be going anywhere. Now I use it to highlight Kenneth’s evolving thoughts about controlling narrative. He considers himself a god of story and he takes it upon himself to solve the narrative, rightly or wrongly.

On a technical level, comic strips offer a sense of ending far more often than other narrative forms. They have a joke and a release of tension. The diary comic form offers this sort of self-contained page, too. The author can keep offering completion, as Eleanor Davis does in *You & a Bike & a Road*, day by day and so the author can keep metaphorically killing the reader.



Figure 26- "Prolepsis"

“Ellipsis” and “Prolepsis” (Figures 22 and 26) came from reading Rimmon-Kenan’s book *Narrative Structure* and were conceived before the Beth and Kenneth story became a comic¹⁰. I hadn’t considered ellipsis as a narrative

¹⁰ I re-drew “Ellipsis” for *TINAP*, taking out the sex joke - Stripes: “Let me fill the gap.” Collar: “Dirty” - because it didn’t seem to be something Beth would actually put in, given her ambivalence about sex.

device before then, and my understanding of prolepsis and analepsis was limited to the idea of foreshadowing and flashbacks. Ellipsis felt like an appropriate thing to be thinking about with comic making, for the aforementioned reasons of gaps being an active part of the story in comics. I had fun matching up the words literally by having the framing receding and dividing up the speech over panels to emphasize the gaps and the moments between.

The concepts of prolepsis and analepsis informed Beth's understanding of reality from the beginning and eventually came up explicitly in Kenneth's blog. Beth's own ability to reconstruct her past, her self-analepsis, is called into question. She reaches back into the past and feels that the story there used to be different; She doesn't know the name of the cat but feels like she should – as if it has been inserted into her life; She has a sense that she didn't always have a pipe in her arms, which leaves open the possibility that Kenneth or she is rewriting her own story from the future or from the past. The original conceit was that the two characters were trying to write each other. It was a kind of strange literary-co-dependence.

Both "Prolepsis" and "Ellipsis" are also examples of how I wanted Beth to be drawing positivity and love into her relationship with Kenneth. She is seeing something, or willing something in her relationship that the audience don't see in her diary comic. She is completely committed to the idea that their relationship could work, or else is trying to mend it through the comic.

The tone of *Otter-dogs*, for this reason, is always bitter-sweet. There's an underlying sadness to their love, as if either one of them are not quite able to admit to it in case the other one says it isn't so.

Once I started *TINAP* as a comic, where to put the *Otter-dogs* became partly a matter of tone and partly a matter of Kenneth's blogs. My feeling was that

Beth was more productive with her comic than Kenneth was with his blog.¹¹ They don't always directly impact the plot. Instead, they give us an insight into what Beth is thinking.

2. Medium - changing a story from novel to comic

a. Prose vs drawing and text

Initially I was mining my prose version of the story for a lot of the voice over but as time went on that became less fruitful and I didn't ever feel the need to write more than dialogue after that. Prose and comics have different shapes and emphases. The illustrations shortcut a certain accuracy that is required by words but still take up space.

Sontag notes in *Against Interpretation* that "everyone is very quick to avow that style and content are indissoluble" despite the "old antithesis of style versus content" still being pervasive in criticism (15). I had never experienced the integration of style and content from the inside before. It was obvious to me that the style and content were intertwined but not how much form could dictate content.

The comic form freed me up to let Beth and Kenneth talk to each other without navigating the mechanics of dialogue, but also with less of the need for continuity of time and space that a play or film requires. And, as casual as I tend to be at specifying setting in comics¹², I am even less interested in describing space in writing. In comics, the reader can just infer that the person has moved without it being jarring¹³ which meant I no longer had to describe such things. Perhaps this is laziness but I don't think so.

¹¹ I find it reasonably amusing that his crazed rants end up being the only prose that remained intact for the comic.

¹² I did make an effort to attempt more setting as I went along, but at first was just content to relish the minimalism of my chosen format.

¹³ Not that Beth and Kenneth actually do move around all that much.

b. Empty space and panel structure



Figure 27

The inspiration for the form and structure of *This Is Not a Pipe*, as I mentioned above, was Davis' comic, *You & a Bike & a Road*. It seemed immediately appropriate for telling Beth's story. I *wanted* the comic to be quiet. I wanted to focus on expressions and having lots of white space allows that.

While I never dated Beth's work, a diary comic has the ability to be fragmented and operate as a comic strip, which was something I had experience drawing, without being suffocated by the need for regular panels; By approaching Beth's



Figure 28

story as a comic-diary I was free to have any layout that I wanted. I was free to zero in on moments without having to explicitly connect them.

That said, I am still very uncomfortable stepping outside the frame. Early on in *This Is Not a Pipe* I tried to have some unfinished bodies - the supermarket page (Fig. 27) and Beth asking Kenneth about the pole (Fig. 28) are a couple of examples - but every time I look at them I want to put a frame around them – the frame is even implied by where the drawing cuts off. It's possible that I will eventually succumb to this impulse.

There's a freedom of movement outside the panel, an uncontainedness, that works for a diary comic but isn't aesthetically pleasing to me. I moved more towards boxing the words as I went as well. Groensteen says that 'to close the panel is to enclose a fragment of space-time belonging to the diegesis, to signify coherence' (*System* 40) so the desire to frame is also a desire to contain the story.

So, unlike Davis, whose lack of borders in *You & a Bike & a Road* invites the audience into the empty space with the narrative, I used the white space in combination with the frames to emphasise the rigidity of Beth's existence and her lack of access to that open space.

c. Envisioning the pole

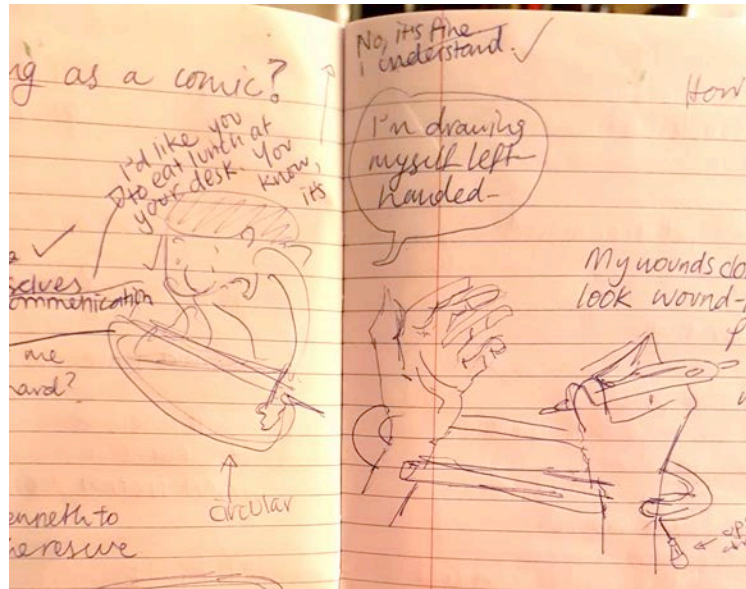


Figure 29 - pole concept sketches and dialogue notes

I had described the pole as a straight line, like a ladder rung in my prose draft but when I came to draw it I considered it being a loop. I've included (Fig. 29) a section of my first page of ballpoint sketches where I explore the pole as a loop that goes through the wrists – I discarded this idea because it ended up looking too much like stigmata. While the pole was meant to embody the notion of the abject, the gag reflex one gets from something that exists on a border, it was not meant to be biblical.

My thinking around the pole being a loop was partly to do with the world of the balloons inside the pole, which I still thought might form part of the completed work¹⁴. The original title, *The People Outside the Pole*, was meant to imply that there was also a world *inside* the pole. It was meant to be ambiguous about which was in and which was out.

¹⁴ I did draw an entire version of the fantasy sequence. It was condensed and exposition heavy and made little sense to anyone but me, except for the fact that it destroyed the wonder associated with the balloons and ruined the story. Leaving the gap turned out to be much better. I had to resist the impulse to fill it in.

Making the pole a loop made me imagine it as some sort of Moebius strip in reality, with 'outside' being relative to where you were standing, a bit like Horrocks' library in *Hicksville* --- the library which is both housed and which houses the world. I wanted the setting inside the pole to exist as if Beth was inside the pole. In some ways I thought of being inside the pole like being in the "belly of the whale" in Joseph Campbell's monomyth, which is the part of the story where the hero is swallowed by danger and appears to have died (83). It is often seen as a womb metaphor, before the hero is 'reborn' and gains the power over their world.

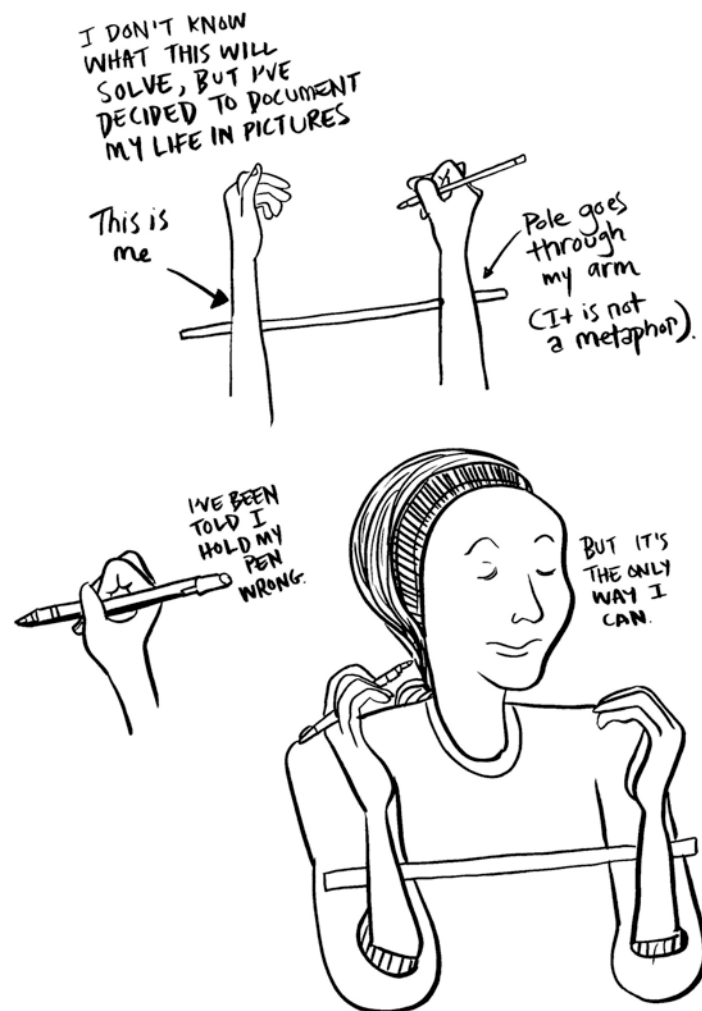


Figure 30 - Page 1 of *This Is Not a Pipe*

The pole represented how both worlds were trapped by each other in their own little hermetic circles. This conceptual or structural concern became less

interesting, or less possible, in the comic because I was going to have to draw the membrane between the two worlds. As soon as the pole was a visual thing, its reality was fixed.

In a novel, my audience may have been free to interpret the pole as a figment of Beth's imagination, even with the third-person point of view. In a comic, it couldn't be avoided. Beth was going to show it to us on the first page (Fig. 30).

I decided that having the pole as a straight line was the best idea because graphically it looked better than any kind of loop and it was less problematic if I didn't always draw it perfectly. Drawing circles in perspective is hard, even if they aren't trying to be realistic. The excuse of Beth's drawing limitations was only going to be able to take me so far. I still wanted her drawings to have *some* consistency. The pole does tend to drift up and down her forearm a bit as well as getting longer and shorter but making it a circle would have meant that it probably would have changed shape as well. A straight line is less ambiguous than a circle.

The first thing that became obvious, after I fixed the problem of not knowing what the pole looked like, was that it became even more important for the pole not to be explained than it had been when the comic had been a novel. As soon as the comic became about why the pole is there, it became a different sort of story. It became a story about a world where people can have poles through their arms. The pole had to occupy a magical-realist space, one where the fantastic was just accepted.¹⁵

Because of the way I chose to draw the pole, I knew the reader would be wondering, "Why doesn't she take it out?" I hope that I managed to keep this tension there through the entire story. I didn't want it to be clear whether she could or couldn't take it out. She says that she can't but that could be because

¹⁵ My love of magical-realism comes, first, from my love of Janet Frame, particularly *Living in the Maniototo* and *The Carpathians*.

she thinks people are living in the pole or that she is afraid to or that she physically can't – that it is actually part of her.

d. Is the pole a metaphor? No, it isn't



Figure 31 - "The Treachery of Images" by René Magritte

For *This Is Not a Pipe* I wanted a metaphor made literal. This is why Beth tells us straight out that it is a 'literal' pole through her arms. This is both because I'm being pedantic and in order to emphasise that it's a pole rather than a pipe. I didn't want to have Watterson's Hobbes problem. I didn't want there to be any doubt that this thing had a physical reality, despite the metaphorical potential.

That doesn't mean it doesn't also have metaphorical potential. Like Hobbes, I think the pole has multiple realities and, while I'm not particularly interested in pinning them down, I *am* interested in what they are and that means I'm interested in the idea that other people could be interested in them. I like the idea that the audience has to ask themselves, "Could it be a metaphor, and (if so) for what?" This way the pole gets to have multiple meanings at once. As Iser says of reading "We are forced to make our own selections from the perspectives offered" (232). I can have my cake and eat it too. I'm even happy

for the reader to decide the pole isn't there if they have to. But they would be wrong. It is there.

The title plays on Magritte's "The treachery of images" (Fig. 31), which is also a literal statement. "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" means "This is not a pipe". It is meant to draw attention to the idea that we are not looking at a pipe. We are looking at a painting of a pipe. When I first was shown it in high school as part of a Media Studies class the teacher asked us "If it isn't a pipe, what is it?"

I chose "This Is Not a Pipe" as a title to reinforce the question of the pole's reality but also because I never call it a pipe. It is always a pole. It is a pole both because it is at the centre of thing, and because it is a pole in shape.

If it isn't a metaphor, perhaps it's a pipe.

e. Changing the ending

When the *TINAP* was a novel, my intention was for Beth to take the pole out and then to put it back in. The ending was going to be straightforwardly depressing, with her choosing to be crippled, perhaps to save a world of creatures living inside the pole but also perhaps because she didn't know how to be whole. I don't, now, think this idea ever would have worked, but the change of medium to comics, and the consequent pinning down of the reality of the pipe helped me to reconsider this. I now wanted the ending to be hopeful.

The pipe is a complicated part of Beth's identity. It cripples her but it also makes her who she is. At its core, it is a source of wonder, but it tends to make her seem mentally ill.

3. Process - making the comic

a. The act of drawing

When I decided that I would draw *TINAP* as a diary comic I decided to do it day by day, in the way that *You & a Bike & a Road* had been created. This, to me, would automatically add a level of authenticity. Over time, more complex comics made their way in, but they were always completed within the day. It was a practical way of making sure that it got done, as I have a full-time job, but it also meant that the narrative could unfold for me in something like real time.

Beth mentions her drawing on the very first page. She wants to document her life. When she says 'I don't know what this will solve' it implies her hope that it will be helpful in some way (Fig. 30). There's an aspect of therapy to her drawing.



Figure 32

I didn't really like doing the pages about drawing because they felt a little lazy. Also, I don't find my own drawing process particularly interesting so I thought that the audience might see them as fillers. They got to consist mostly of writing about and drawing my own hands. Unfortunately, the first-person P.O.V. in these meant they were the drawings where I had the most awareness of Beth's physicality.



Figure 33

Often, while drawing the rest, I would lock my arms into her position, but there was something even more visceral about drawing her drawing her own



Figure 34 - Twink

hands. It was also the time when I was most aware of her pain. Some of my readers have mentioned experiencing the feeling of locking up while reading Beth's story, of tensing into a position as if they too had a pole through their arms. I find it very interesting to know it isn't just me. It seems a very powerful thing, but an uncomfortable one to expect of readers.

I ended up thinking that the drawing pages were a nice visual break. Rather than being filler, they offered the audience a more open page. There didn't end up being too many of them since they had to give us an insight into Beth's mind and cross-over with my drawing experience in some way. There was going to be one about the cat hair getting into Beth's drawings like cat hair got into mine but it turned out to be more appropriate to give that line to Kenneth in the end.

The page where Beth talks about getting a headache from drawing (Fig. 33) is explicitly about this experience of drawing where I will myself to be the thing I'm drawing. It's the closest I get to acting but I don't think that the expressions that I make come anywhere near approximating the thing I'm drawing.

I did not allow myself to use white-out so that I couldn't be too much of a perfectionist, day by day – so I would get things drawn. But some drawings were bad enough to require on the spot white-out. I never redrew anything from scratch, though. The white-out (Fig. 34) page scan shows where I have whited out what Beth was drawing. I wanted to create a droste effect, a mise-en-abyme of her drawing the drawing within the drawing, but it wasn't looking right because her drawing didn't have enough of a different drawing style to indicate a further level of fiction.



Figure 35 – roughs and planning

b. Planning: Thumbnails and notes

Although I wanted the comic to look like a diary, for some of the strips I did draw up thumbnails and I did plan in advance. The comics were drawn in blue pencil first, which doesn't scan, and then inked over afterwards. I kept an exercise book where I brainstormed and sketched out potential layouts. Some of these, as you can see above (Fig. 35) with the anemones, just say 'x4' or, as with Beth exhausted after hanging the pictures, I only sketched the harder picture.

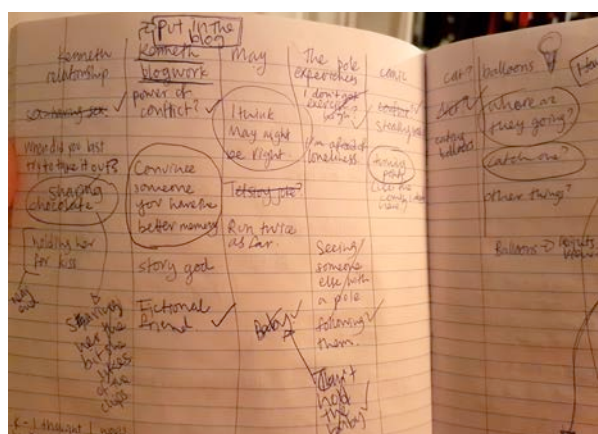


Figure 36 – lists of ideas

I ended up with lists of the different strands of narrative (Fig. 36). I made the lists over and over as I added new ideas, so I could still keep a sense of the whole. They were almost all drawn in order, too. I only changed a few around, mainly *Otter-dogs*, some of which I took out to control the pace of the Beth/Kenneth narrative or to keep similar ideas far enough apart if they weren't meant to develop something in the previous strip.

c. Planning: Iteration requires escalation

While the pole is not a gag as such, I do think of all of the pages as separate units and, like a comic strip, the pages had to work both as their own complete stories and as parts of the whole story. I was writing the comic the way I have written comic strips in the past, as a complete idea a day, but the further I got through, the harder it became to do a 'the pole makes things hard' page.

I was conscious of the fact that I really didn't want it to end up being a litany of complaints: shopping is hard, keeping things clean is hard, sleeping is hard, cooking is hard, running is hard, despite the importance of all of these things for the texture of the comic. Each one of them had to do more than this: in effect it had to fill a new niche.

Beth's pain is important. It's always there. It also had to be backgrounded at times for the story to happen at all, so I created more threads that had to obey these same rules. My approach was always one of trying to make the stakes incrementally higher.

The nice thing about the diary comic form is that it afforded me the ability to return to ideas and explore them in slightly different ways without having to progress the actual plot. Everyday life *does* have patterns to return to. It is iterative. One of the things that makes Beth and Kenneth's relationship real is the cyclical way they return to the same concerns without progressing.

4. Reading comics

The assertion that comics are a thing that people find hard to understand is at odds with the story often told about them; that they are a simple medium, a medium that many are surprised to discover “aren’t for kids anymore”¹⁶.

Hamish Clayton’s review of the reissue of *Hicksville* in *NZ Books* (14) mentions twice that the narrative of *Hicksville* might be a challenge for readers, with its layering and intertextuality. My friend Laurie admitted to me that they didn’t know if they were reading comics right; I’ve also had students who didn’t know how to read them.



Figure 37

One student, when I gave out a section of *Reinventing Comics* in a Media Studies class, remarked that people think things will be fun if they put pictures with them but they’re wrong. This student has no gender, face or name in my memory, just this opinion, because they expressed something which seemed extremely novel to me at the time. Comics have always made sense to me. Doesn’t everyone read *Calvin and Hobbes*? Doesn’t the way we read them follow the rules of the picture books we first learned to read from?

¹⁶ See any mainstream TV magazine piece about comics. The phrase will inevitably turn up there as if comics hadn’t been replaced by TV and moved outside children’s purchasing power long before the reporter was born.

Laurie's issue was an anxiety about whether or not they were spending enough time looking at the panels. The temporal experience of the comic didn't come easy. They thought that they were missing something or not doing it right. This is because comics chop up time into frames or panels, which means that they can far more easily traverse time and alter pace in a way which is much more subtle than film or prose.



Figure 38 – Lost Book

Everyone watches films at the same speed but a comic panel almost always implies more time than is actually there. Comics require closure or, as Scott McCloud considers them, “comics [are] closure” (67). The way reading completes them requires more of a process of inference to ‘close’ the gap between panels than other more contiguous media.

My own comics very much privilege moments¹⁷ of indefinite length. This makes the panels like mini-TARDIS's - “bigger on the inside than the outside”. For example, in the page above (Fig. 37), where Beth is rearranging the art, the first panel implies that she is reaching and hanging the picture up. I didn't use movement lines, I didn't show the two steps in the process. It has to be inferred.

¹⁷ Scott McCloud's analysis of comics in *Understanding Comics* suggests that most comic transitions are action to action, followed by subject to subject, followed by scene to scene (pp.75-77)

In the first panel of the lost book sequence (Fig. 38), Beth's dialogue gives a better sense of the length of time that the panel might last for, but that also means that at least her mouth must be moving. A reader could also infer that she is looking through the shelves. In the cat sequence (Fig. 39), we can tell that the cat is cleaning its paws, even though the image is almost the same in the first and third panel. And, because we have a sense of how balloons work in nature, we also get a sense of the balloons on the cat's head tugging at their tethering point.



Figure 39

I think that it is this dynamic stillness in the comic medium which helps it create stories of wonder and to poise on the knife-edge of the fantastic. As I said above: TARDIS. The pictures are bigger on the inside.¹⁸

a. Playing with the reading experience

In the Western World, comics are read left to right, top to bottom. They are usually organised in a grid in a way where the sequencing is obvious.

With the page below (Fig. 40) I was trying to complicate that. There are two simultaneous narratives: the conversation between Beth and Kenneth about story as god, and the one about the cat licking the pole. If I had chosen to have the column of smaller squares line up with the bigger panels it would have been easier to assume that the order went – two big panels, then two small – but because they are off-set it becomes clear that, while they do have a relationship to each other, it is not strictly chronological. Instead, they exist simultaneously.

¹⁸ Thierry Groensteen would say that it is important to make a distinction between single panels 'evoking' a story and telling a story. It is the evocation that I refer to. The story comes from the juxtaposition of panels in sequence (*Narration* 23).

Whether a reader looks at the Kenneth narrative, then the cat narrative, or tries to read them chronologically, the two threads come together at the end in a way that is intended to get the reader to look at the page again.



Figure 40 – Kenneth objects to the cat

This open non-linear experience of time is one that I think is quite unique to the visual grammar of comics. The super-clunky effect of a split screen in film will imply that events are happening at the same time and will not offer any sort of feedback loops because a film controls the pace at which it is experienced by the viewer.

Here, however, the reader can choose both the order and the pace. They can even keep the two narratives separate and decide that Beth has been left alone and the cat has come back to sit on her if they wish to. This is very much what Dylan Horrocks' character, Emil Copen, is talking about when he says

stories too are basically concerned with spatial relationships. The proximity of bodies. Time is simply what interferes with that (86 – See Fig. 12).

Comics can disrupt time.

This page plays with point of view as well because although Beth is ostensibly drawing this as a diary comic, the small panels down the side, at least those that concern the cat, can be seen either as Beth's perspective or Kenneth's – either as Kenneth being distracted from his argument by the cat, or as Beth absenting herself from the conversation and focusing on the cat. Beth recedes from her own comic, putting the cat and Kenneth front and centre.

This is also designed to help the reader question if what they are reading actually *is* the diary comic Beth is supposed to be creating as, later, the cat returns a page before she notices her. Beth is a character who is aware of narrative conventions and perhaps she is playing dumb or letting it read as wish-fulfilment, since the return of the cat is something that she so clearly desires. It could also be, however, that the comic is from another point of view, even Kenneth's, which is masquerading as her point of view. I wouldn't put it past Kenneth to do such a thing. He does so want to be in control of the narrative.

Conclusion

The aim of analysing examples of the comic form and the technical properties of comics in relation to my own work was to help the reader understand comics and my comic better at the same time. Examining the comics that have influenced me in relation to my own work certainly emphasised, for me, how much of my interest in fiction is the blurring of ‘reality’ and fiction within fiction. It enabled me to identify and critically examine what I think the strengths of comics are, namely the quality that they have of compressing and stretching time simultaneously.

I want to make fiction that results in the audience feeling the Māori quality of *wehi*¹⁹, of wow, that makes a person want to make work to give back in return. My first excursion into writing extended narrative fiction may not have ended up precisely *as* that, but I have learned a lot about what makes an idea into something that functions as a work of art – for me, at any rate.

I have learned that, while I would still like to be able to create a complete fantasy world, narratives that take the world I’m in and make them special are finally more meaningful to me, something which the comics medium does incredibly well. I sincerely hope that this examination of comics and my creative process brings insight into the creative opportunities that comics can offer within narrative fiction.

¹⁹ Wehi can be positive or negative. I want wehi to be taken here in the positive sense.

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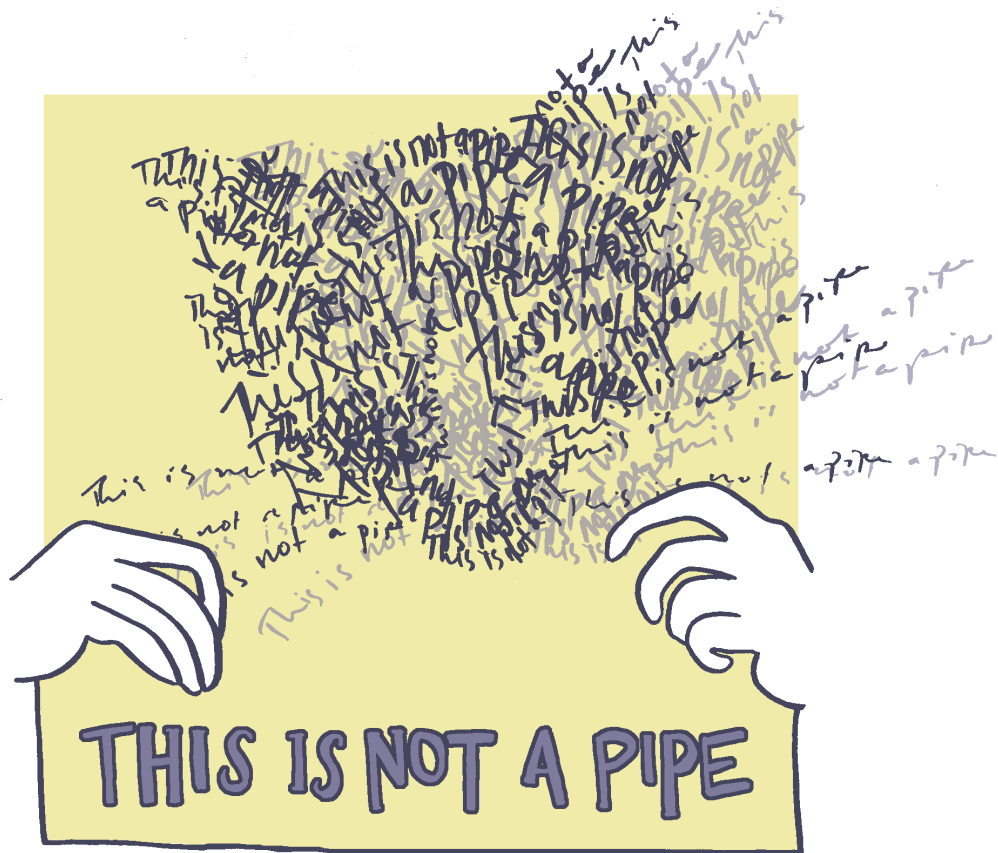
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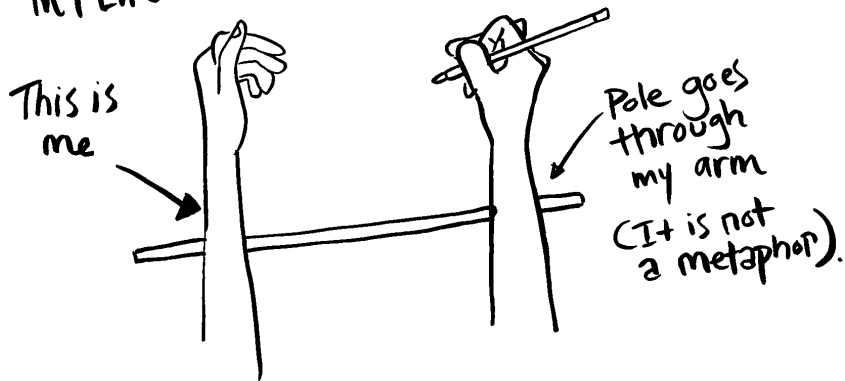
Creative component: *This Is Not a Pipe*

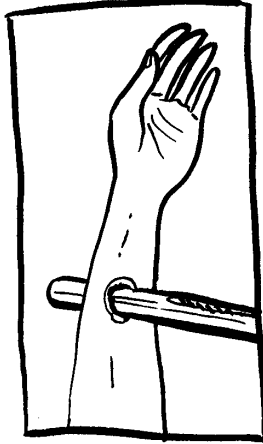




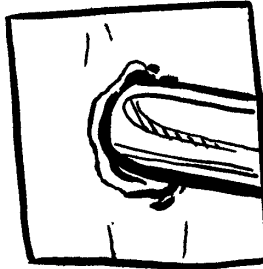
For Mozenrath

I DON'T KNOW
WHAT THIS WILL
SOLVE, BUT I'VE
DECIDED TO DOCUMENT
MY LIFE IN PICTURES



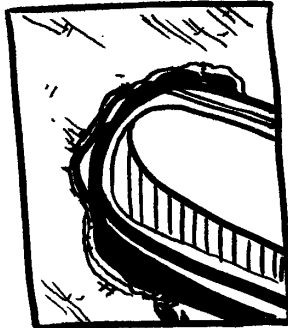


It's hard to draw the pole both because of the pole and because drawing metal is hard.



As I draw my skin flexes around the pole.

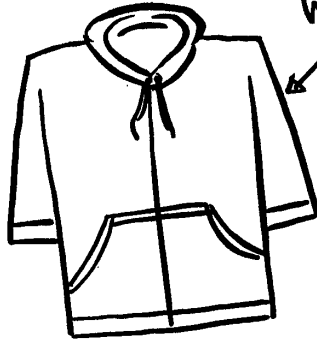
It cracks and oozes.



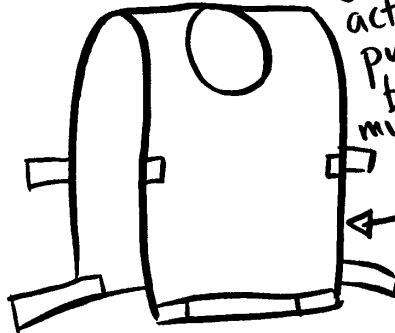
There never seems to be enough blood.



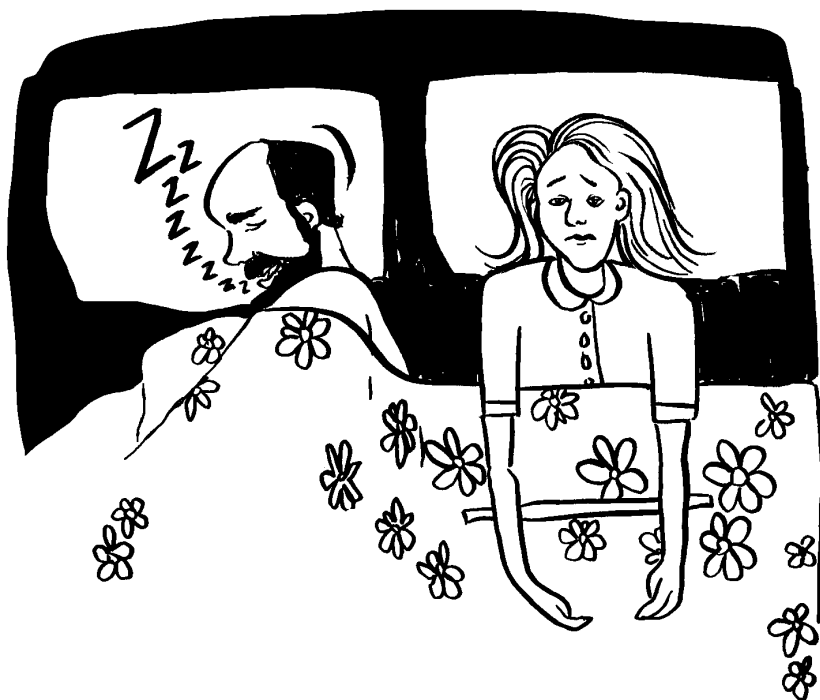
Tops that
I wish
I could
wear



The kind of
thing I can
actually
put on
by myself



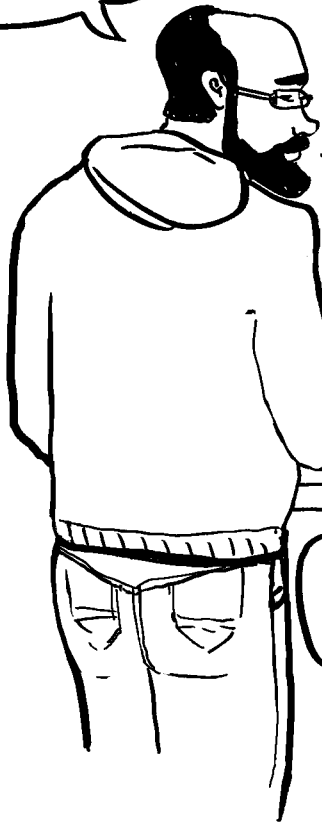
I SHALL DRAW
MYSELF IN MY
FANTASY ATTIRE.



SOME NIGHTS I
LIE AWAKE
WORRYING ABOUT
WHAT I WOULD
DO IF HE
LEFT ME.

I DON'T
SUPPOSE YOU
COULD GET
SOMETHING TO
COVER THAT
THING WHILE
WE SLEEP?

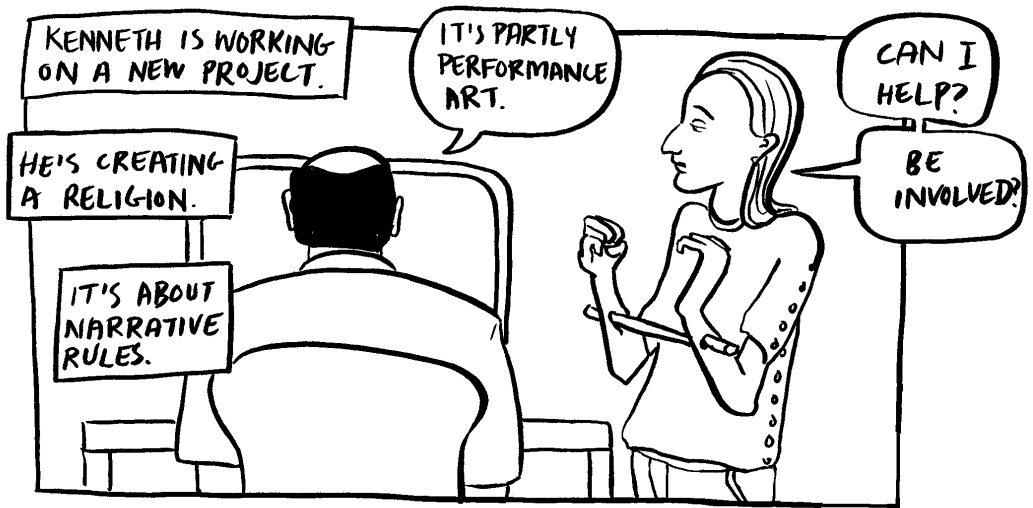
IT'S JUST
THAT IT
JABBED
ME LAST
NIGHT.



I KNOW
YOU DON'T
MEAN TO

HE'S RIGHT

I CAN'T
BLAME HIM



An introduction to The Church of Narrative

Many of you have often joked that I should start my own religion. Well, look, I'm doing it. First deacon of The Church of Narrative. Holy-man extraordinaire.

No seriously, this was the best idea you have ever had but not for the reason you think - Although, those who find wisdom are often mocked for lack of understanding. The reason is love of story. We all need story. It is our master. It is how we understand the world. And, more recently, despite the derisive tone I used to refer to the gods of narrative, I've come to believe that this was part of the journey towards them. We all mock what we don't understand but, like Chekov's gun, the gods of narrative have fired. They've shot me in the heart and I've come to realise that narrative is the reason for all things. You will too. You think I'm joking but that is part of the narrative too. I am Shakespeare's fool who sees the truth.

But this is more than just an intellectual epiphany. I have come to understand that once you can understand the narrative, you can control it. You can shape the world around you in its image. This isn't just the rewriting of the past that we are all wont to do to make ourselves look good. This isn't some self-deluding memory trick. Once you can commune with the gods of narrative you can write the future.

I bet you're thinking. Sure Kenneth, why haven't you made yourself rich, then? You're missing the point. When you understand the narrative source truly, you'll understand that it can only work through cause and effect. It has to make sense within the laws of its own world. It isn't so simple to alter those rules.

Yours humbly in narrative,

Kenneth

Comments:

@7MUTHAS: What a scux-masta.

@6xkidden: Go fuch urself.

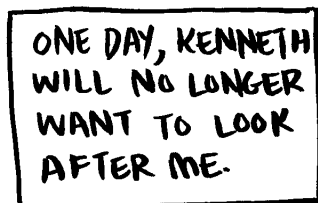
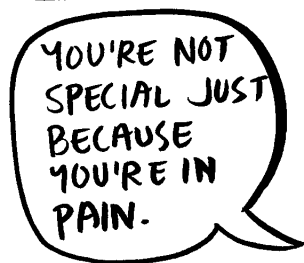
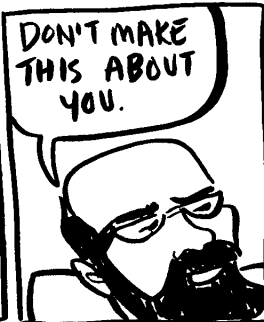
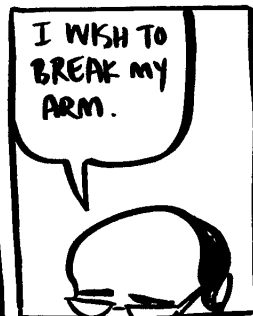
@DaveWyatt: Don't read the comments!

@Stefanshouse: Hi Kenneth, this is the narrative gods. We are angry that you have revealed us to the world and will smite you. Nah, just jokes. This is Stefan. Are you okay, mate?

@Theoangst: Is anybody in my narrative with me? Help, I'm all alone.

@Chekovrulz: I think you mean Chekhov.

Comments are closed.



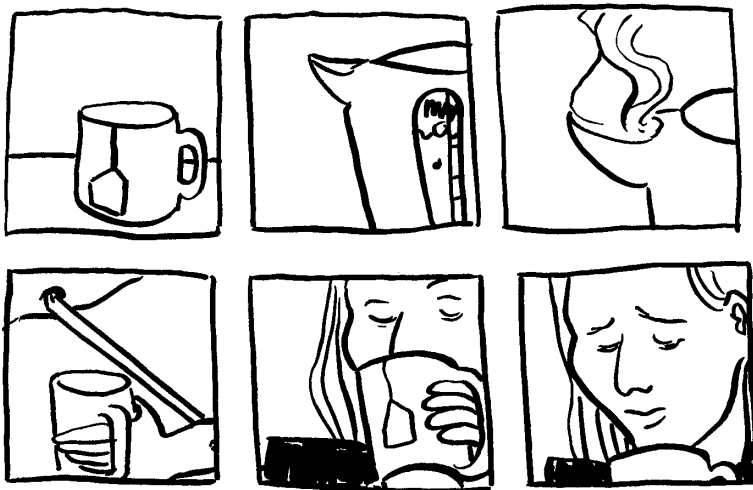
IN THE SUPERMARKET



MOST PEOPLE
TRY NOT TO
MAKE EYE
CONTACT.

SOMETIMES I ASK KENNETH ABOUT
WHEN THE POLE APPEARED.





WHEN IT'S
COLD, I
WISH I
COULD HOLD
A CUP OF
TEA WITH
TWO HANDS.



This is not an artwork

This is not an artwork. I know that, given my history, people think that I am trying to make fun of them. Such is the role of humour in our world. But as I said in the last post, the fool can speak the truth.

Like art, there is an intentionality here, but unlike art, I'm hoping for a level of authenticity. I'm not saying that art can't be authentic. Art can create authentic connections and real feelings. It can help us understand our place in the world. On the venn diagram there is a definite intersection between art and narrative, particularly when the art is about more than form and material. What I'm trying to get at is that narrative is far more a way of life than art. I'm sure some people can live art but all of us live narrative. It is a shared experience so even though we understand it differently, it is still a real part of us, governing our existence.

I look at what I've written, and to me, it makes this seem more like an artwork, contrived and defensive. All the art speak is wrapping my meaning up in a bow and spitting it into the void. I must practice what I preach. To move towards controlling the narrative, I must accept that this narrative can look like art and not be it.

I don't get to define art or narrative. They get to define me.

Yours humbly in narrative,
Kenneth.

Comments:

@Stefanshouse: Hi Kenneth, we should catch up. I haven't seen you in ages.

@Beth: I can vouch for him. This definitely isn't an artwork.

@Kennarate: You aren't helping, Beth.

@Theangst: So how do I join? Do I get a membership card? I'm serious. I would really like one.

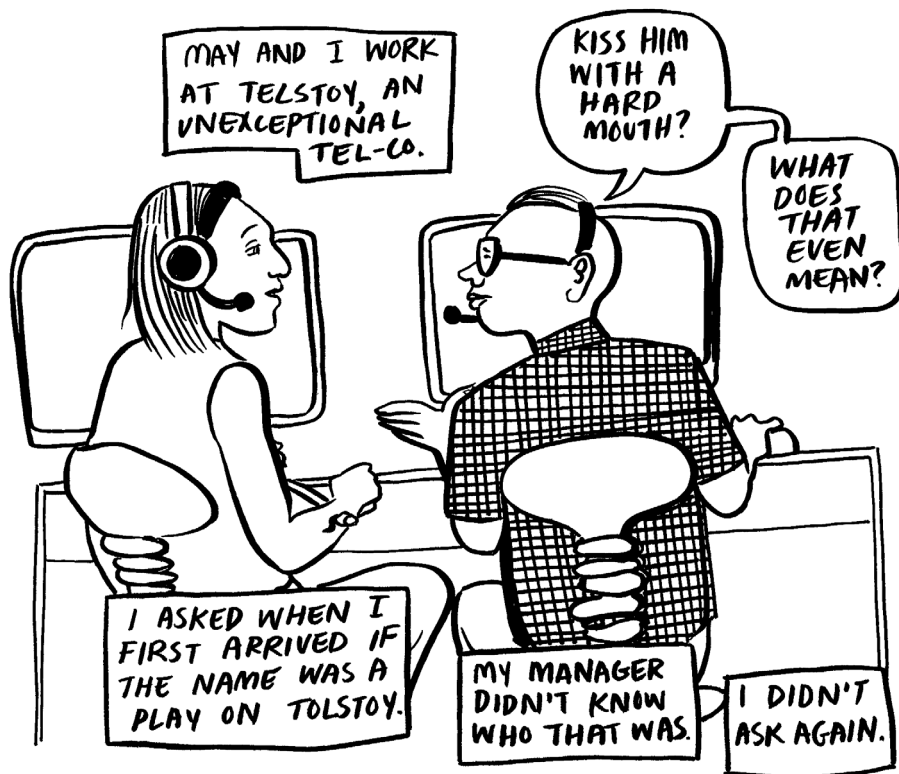
@Artface: Well, it isn't good art.

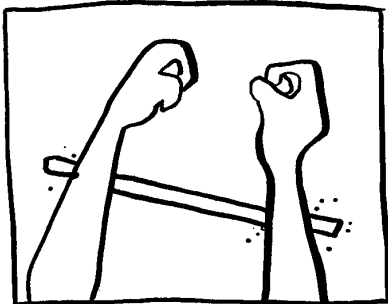
@Heb: Where'd everything go?

@Cron: Dolphin.

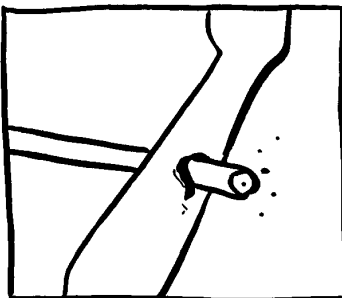
Comments are closed.



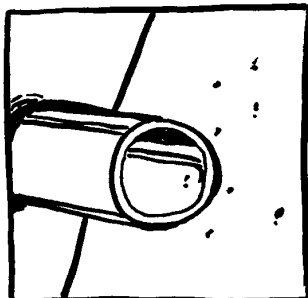




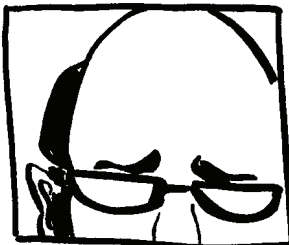
SOMETIMES I THINK
I SEE SPECKS AROUND
THE EDGES OF THE
POLE.



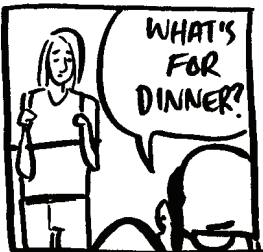
I THINK BUGS
ARE ATTRACTED
TO THE BLOOD.



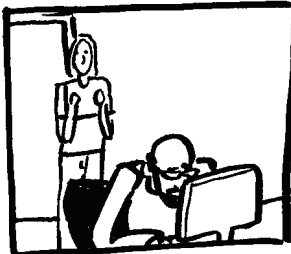
I THINK THEY
ARE BUGS.



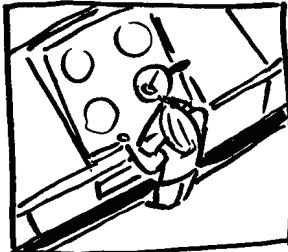
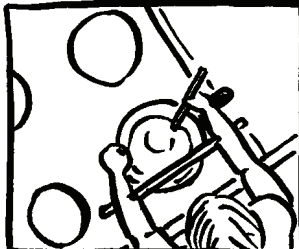
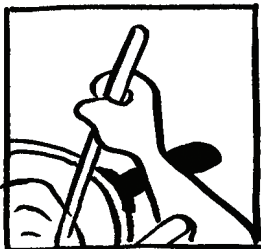
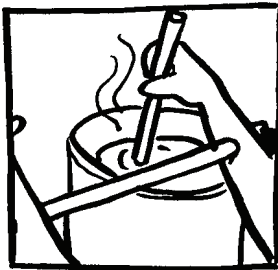
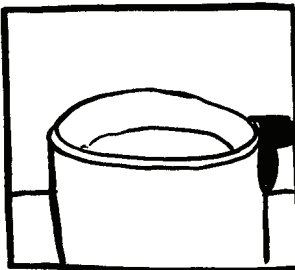
KENNETH
IS FOCUSED
ON HIS ART
PROJECT.



HE'S
OBSESSED
WITH PAGE
VIEWS.



I HEAT
SOUP.

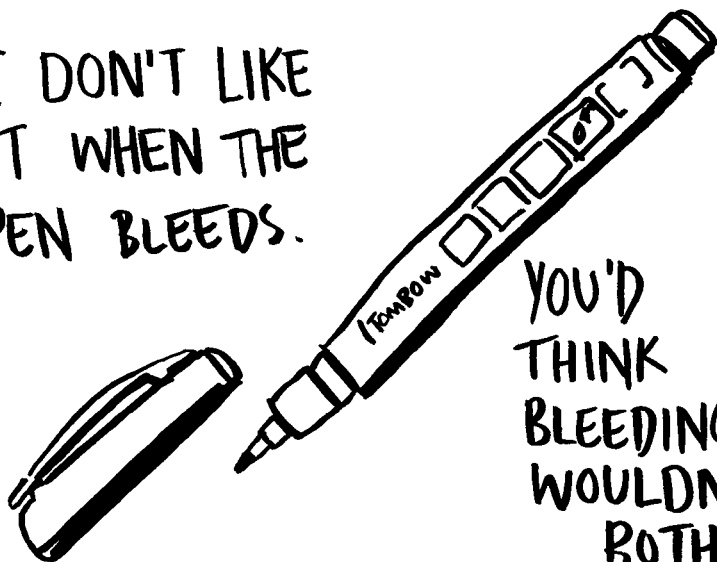


I DON'T
BURN
MYSELF



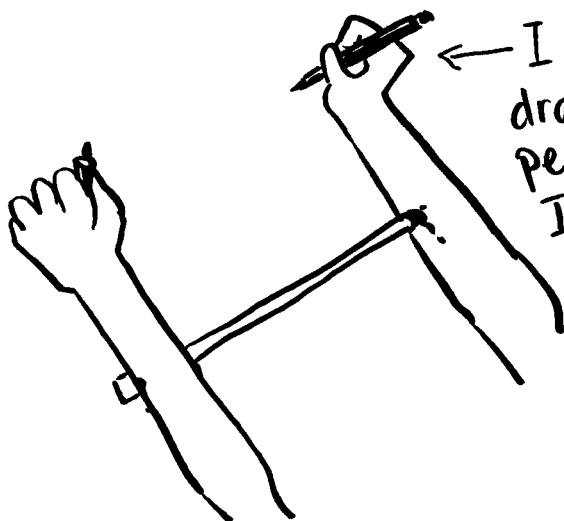
BETH? DID
YOU SAY
SOMETHING?

I DON'T LIKE
IT WHEN THE
PEN BLEEDS.



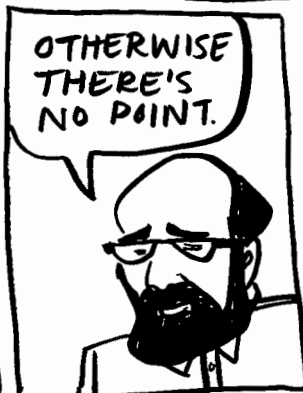
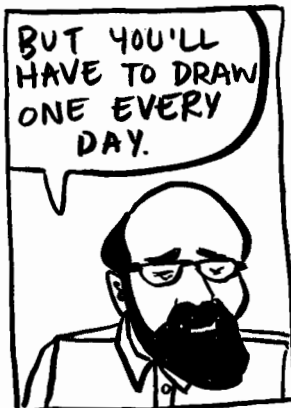
YOU'D
THINK
BLEEDING
WOULDN'T
BOTHER
ME.

(This was meant to demonstrate what that looks
like and now I can't find a single pen to bleed
for me).



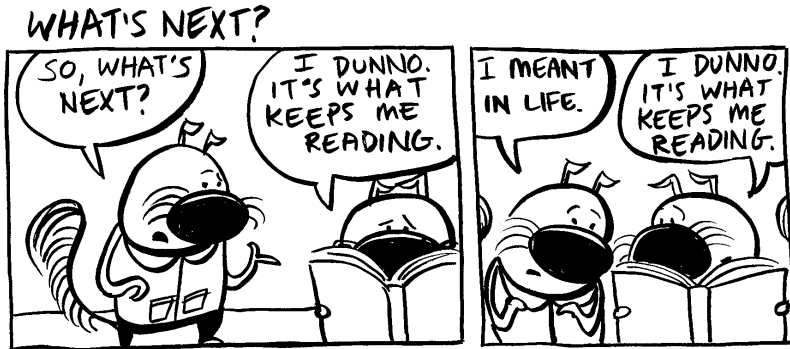
← I resisting
drawing my
pen drawing.
It is a
surprisingly
strong
desire.

KENNETH WANTS ME TO DRAW
A COMIC FOR HIS WEBSITE.



IT'S NICE TO
BE INCLUDED.

What's next?



I'd like to welcome Beth as first follower of The Church of Narrative. Beth will be contributing a guest comic strip outlining the key principles of our calling. These will be our commandments, if you will.

“What’s next?” is the simplest thing that the gods of narrative can offer us in our lives. It is the gift of time. It is the gift of wonder. It is the way we read the world. In The West Wing, Jed Bartlet often closed out an episode asking “What’s next?” We must do this. It is the way we push forward. It presses us against the future. Asking “What’s next?” is the first step you need to make on your narrative journey because it is the first action towards knowing what is.

Yours humbly in narrative,
Kenneth.

Comments:

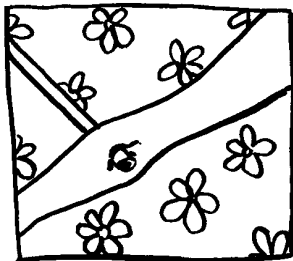
@Theangst: I like the comic, Beth.

@Artface: Um, “What’s Next?”

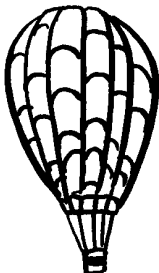
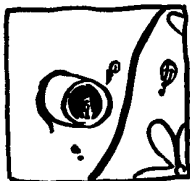
@Cron: Eat dolphin.

@Stefanshouse: Beth’s not drawing that.

Comments are closed.

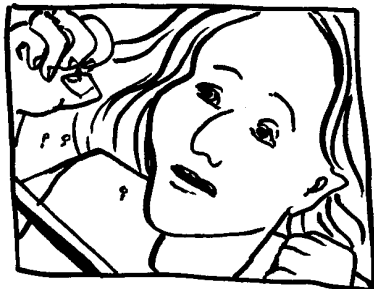
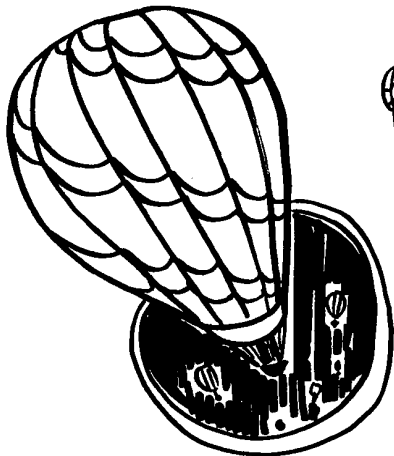


LAST NIGHT THE
BUGS FROM MY
POLE WOKE ME UP.



I THOUGHT
THEY WERE
BITING ME.

THEY'RE
NOT BUGS.





TODAY I STAND
IN THE SHOWER
UNTIL THE
WATER RUNS
COLD.

I DON'T
GET
CLEAN.

I NEVER
FEEL
CLEAN.

I WONDER HOW
THIS AFFECTS
THE BALLOONS.



DID YOU
USE UP
THE HOT
WATER,
AGAIN?



YES.



I'LL HAVE
TO CLEAN
YOU WITH
COLD
WATER,
THEN.



I'M
CLEAN
ENOUGH.

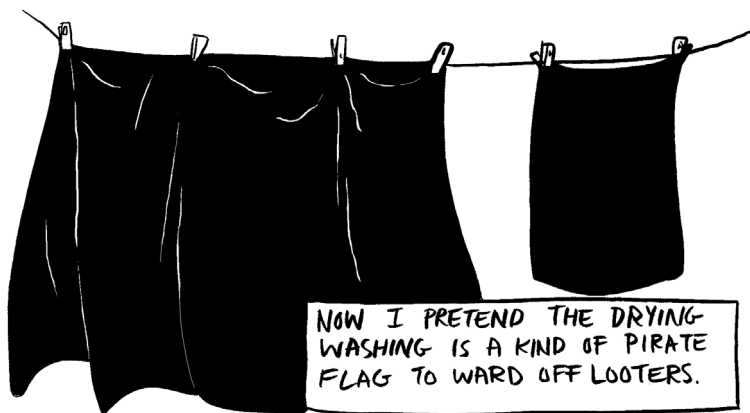


I'M GLAD
I SHOWERED
THIS
MORNING.

HE SAYS THIS AS
IF HE WOULD
EVER DO
OTHERWISE.

SOMETIMES LIFE IS GOOD.





CALL TO ADVENTURE





THE CAT MAKES READING
HARDER THAN THE POLE
DOES.

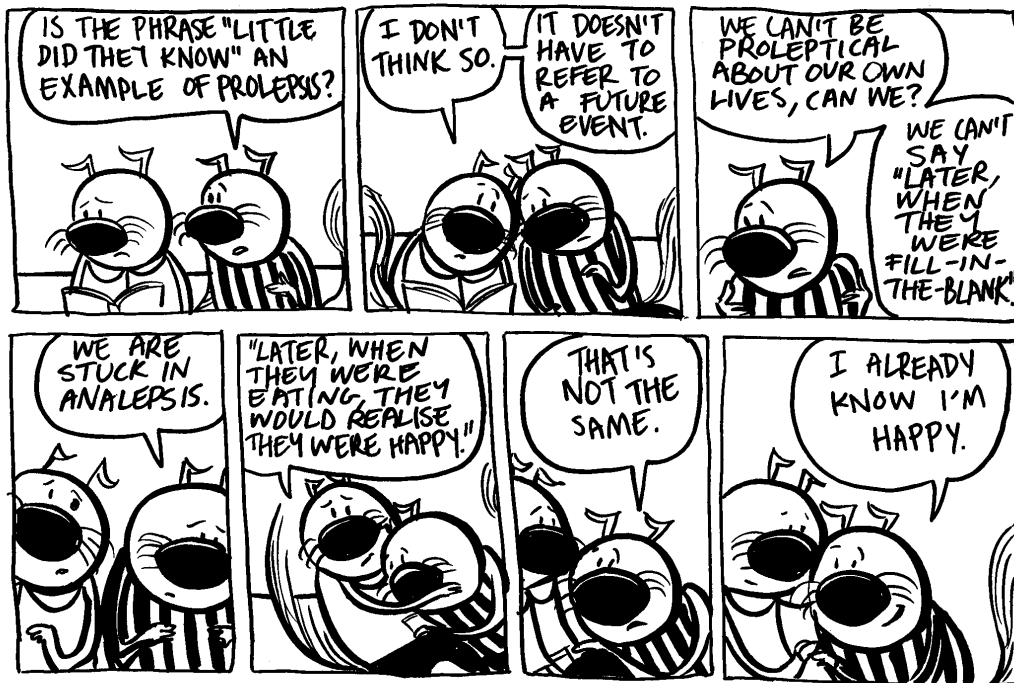
I ALWAYS FEEL
LIKE I'M SPELLING
POLE WRONG.

THE WORD
LOOKS WRONG.

Prolepsis

Prolepsis is the story element which sees the future. It is the point of realising your future has already been told. If you throw in a bit of dramatic irony, a denial of that future, it becomes an “I told you so”, a reminder of our lack of control. It is one of the most important elements of narrative to master in our own lives.

PROLEPSIS



PROLEPSIS - TELLING THE FUTURE BEFORE ITS TIME.
ANALEPSIS - NARRATION OF A STORY EVENT AFTER LATER EVENTS IN THE STORY HAVE BEEN TOLD.

The opposite, analepsis, we do all the time. We are always looking back to our past. It's as if we live in the flashback. I think, to engage with the narrative of our lives, we need to make more predictions. Start small, with things that you can definitely make happen, then build up to more ambitious predictions. The trick is to keep them within the logic of your own story. You can't break the rules narrative. If you

cannot suspend your own disbelief, it will not work.

This is not to put the blame on you for not wanting something enough or praying hard enough. I've said before that this isn't about wish fulfilment. But this is not a faith where you are the problem if something you want doesn't happen. We can want things outside the logical scope of our narrative. What we have to do is get ourselves into a position where the things we want for our narrative make sense. So, I guess this is a reframing of goal setting. It is narrative goal setting. We need to anticipate our own story.

A nice byproduct of this is that we become invested in our own stories and, by knowing what happens next, we want to know how.

Yours humbly in narrative,
Kenneth

Comments:

@Stefanshouse: That totally happened to me.

@Kennarate: Which part?

@Theangst: Oh look, I'm Stefan. I can remember stuff.

@Stefanshouse: No, I totally predicted the future.

@Cron: Dolphin?

@Theangst: Who is this guy?

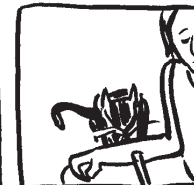
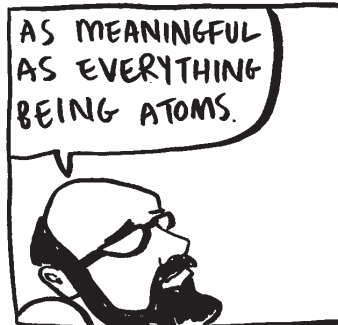
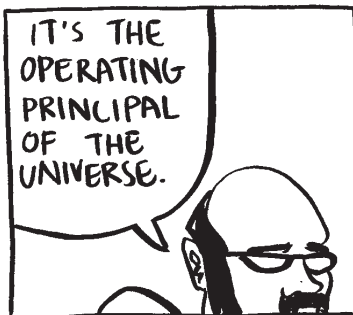
@Kennarate: Some sort of bot. I haven't worked out how to block it.

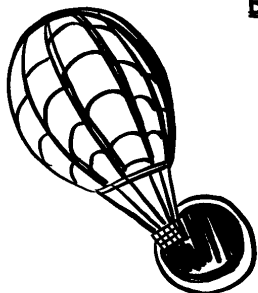
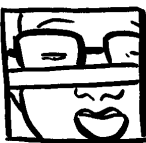
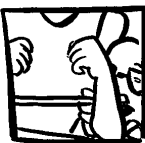
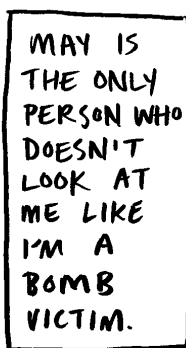
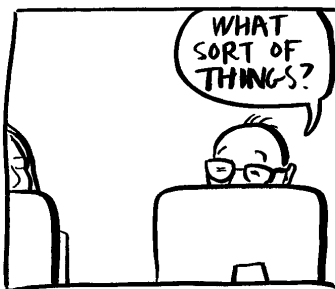
@Theangst: Maybe it's telling the future.

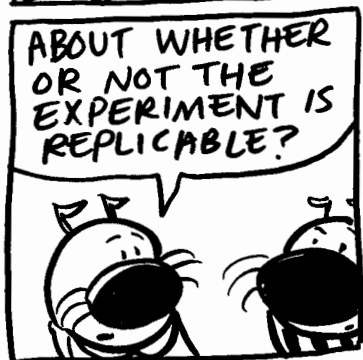
@RoyAl: This could do with a dragon. I predict dragons.

Comments are closed.









* FREDERICK II
1194-1250
HOLY ROMAN EMPEROR
AND KING OF SICILY



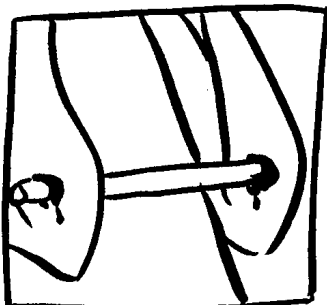
I DON'T KNOW WHEN I STOPPED BELIEVING HIM.

I DON'T KNOW WHEN I STOPPED WANTING TO.

THINGS I'M NOT GOOD AT DRAWING
(AN INCOMPLETE LIST).



THE CAT.



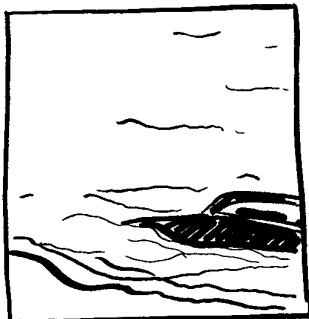
HOW AND
WHERE THE
POLE CONNECTS
WITH MY
SKIN.



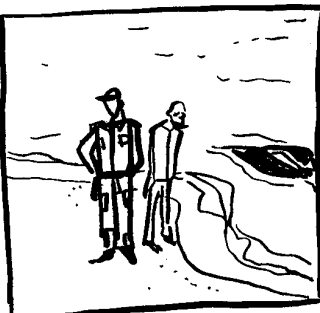
ANY SORT OF
ACTION; ME
RUNNING.







TODAY I SAW A
CAR IN THESEA;
JUST A LITTLE
WAY IN.



TWO MEN WERE
LOOKING AT IT.



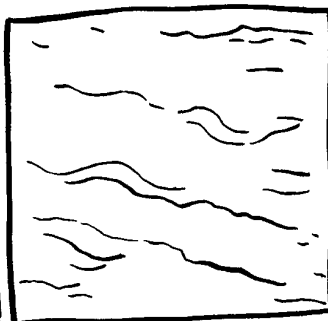
ONE WAS A POLICE-
MAN, THE OTHER,
I ASSUME, WAS
THE OWNER.



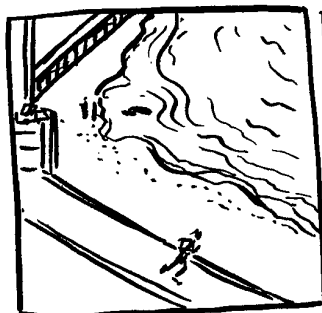
I ONLY CAUGHT
A GLIMPSE AS I
RAN PAST.



THEY SEEMED
FROZEN.



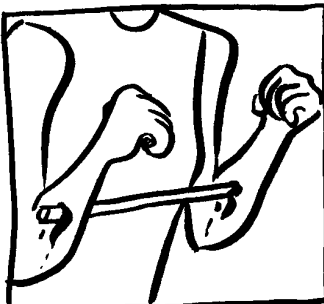
AS IF THEY WERE
WAITING FOR THE
CAR TO SOLVE
ITSELF.



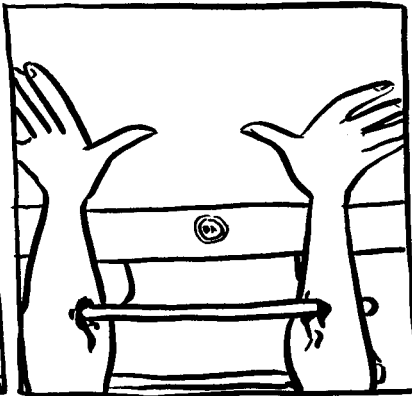
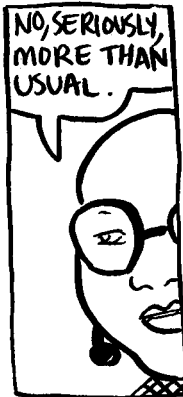
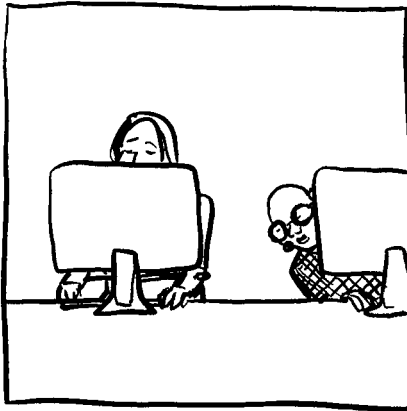
I IMAGINE
THEY WERE
WAITING FOR
THE TOW TRUCK.

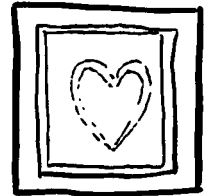
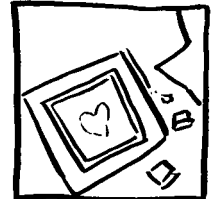
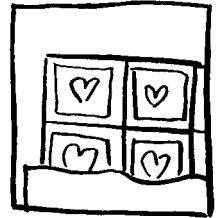
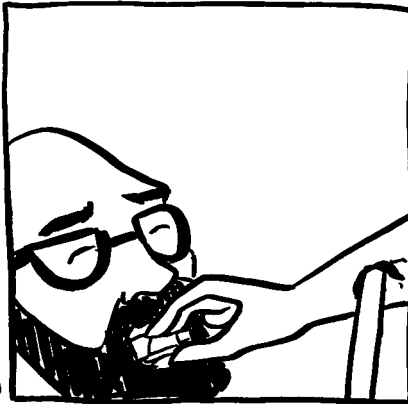


OR TO NOT BE
THEMSELVES
IN THAT PLACE.



WHILE ACCEPTING
THEY COULD
NOT BE UNDONE.





In the beginning there was the word

LANGUAGE IS A SKIN



This seems an obvious enough place to take a new religion for what new religion is not built on the foundations of what has come before? There's proof of the power of narrative, particularly a narrative of hope, in the translated words of Christianity, in the book of John. Certainly those who can articulate God in words, create God, but that creates a question for me. Is something greater than the sum of its parts? Are words God, in themselves, or do they make up a building block which can become God? The phrase does go, "In the beginning there was the word and the word was with God", so, if you think that it has been translated right, and that presents another problem in itself, that preposition 'with' becomes rather important. Words, in John's

story, hang out with God. (I am aware that “The Word” may be meant to be Jesus but I’m not going to trouble myself with that for the purposes of this argument.)

I’m going to go with the idea that, just because I can only write in English, doesn’t mean that any words won’t do. I think words, of any sort, are a place to put value, which would imply that the value comes from us, that we create the value. I’m worried that this may mean that words are meaningless, if they can mean anything. Although, this is empowering, that language can do whatever we want it to. This we already knew; that language was ours to command. We command the thing that was with God. It all gets rather hermetic.

When I was small, I thought that the impossibility of there being nothing created something. I thought that matter had created itself. I think that is what language does; It becomes. It’s in the transaction of language, between beings, between people that it holds its power. Language is the constant background noise of the universe, filling in the gaps that don’t make sense. Einstein’s ignored ether is language. Dark matter is language. Atoms are language. We must find a way to tap into that transaction and the impossibility of there being nothing. Not just be with The Word, be The Word.

Yours humbly in narrative,
Kenneth.

Comments:

@Stefanshouse: Is that how you can pretend Beth is drawing this?

@Kennarate: Maybe I created you.

@Theangst: That’s perverse.

Comments are closed.

I PROMISED
MYSELF I
WOULDN'T
USE TWINK.

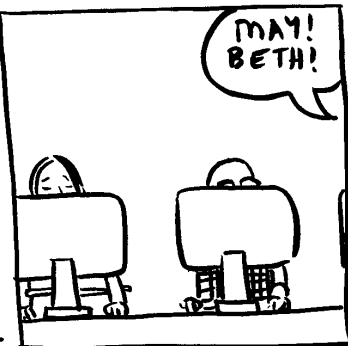
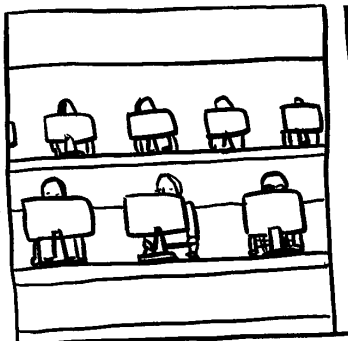
I HAVE
ALREADY
BROKEN
THAT
PROMISE.



LANGUAGE IS A SKIN part 2

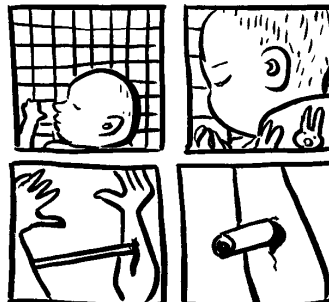
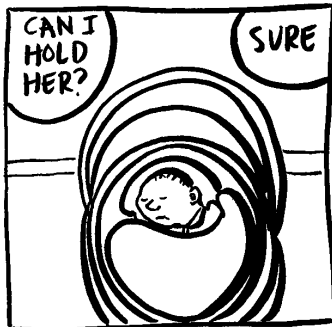




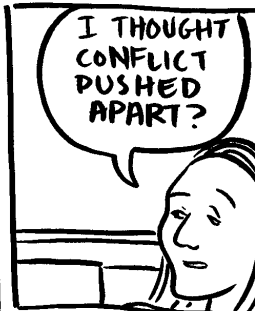
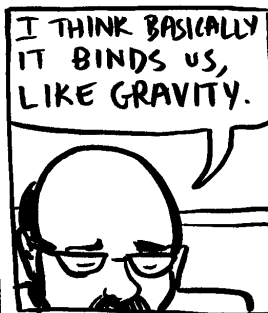


MOST PEOPLE
WHO WORK AT
TELSTOY SEEM
BLANK AND EMPTY
BUT I LIKE TO
THINK THEY ARE
JUST PRETENDING.

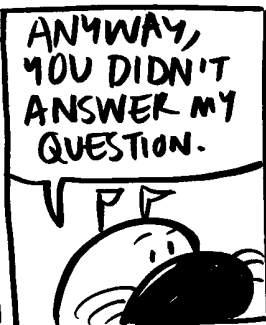
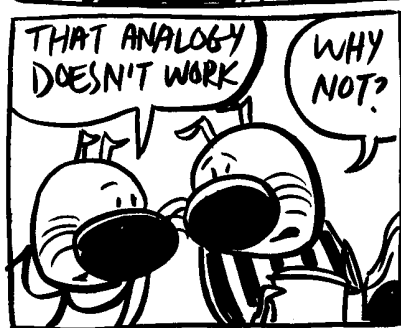
I STILL THINK
OF TOLSTOY
EVERYTIME
I SEE THE
NAME OF MY
WORK.

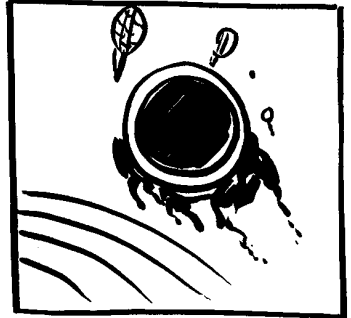
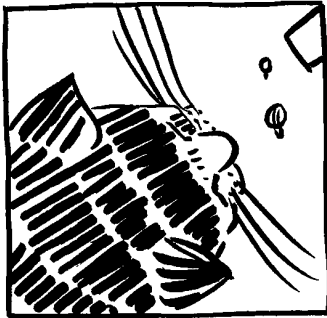
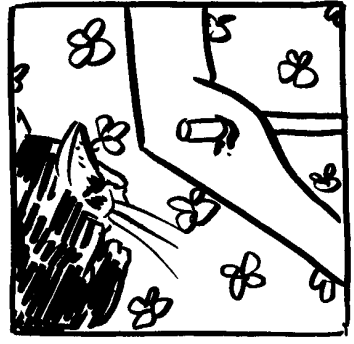
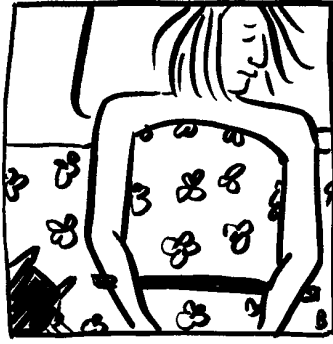
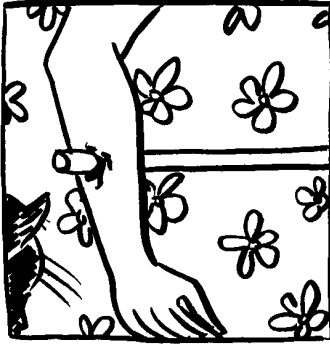


I'VE NEVER
ACTUALLY READ
TOLSTOY. I
DOUBT I
EVER WILL.

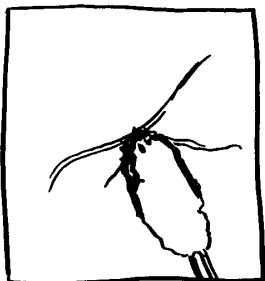
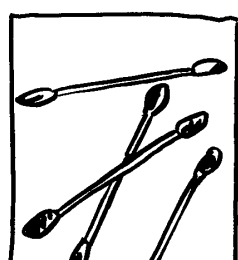
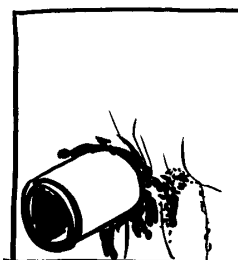
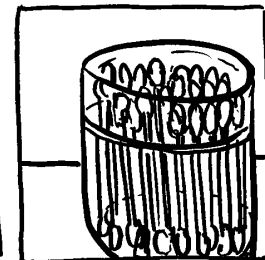
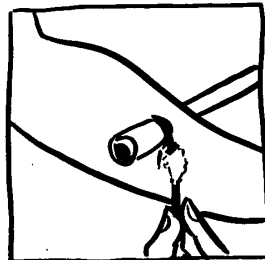
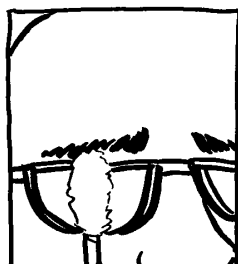


CONFLICT FOR CONFLICT'S SAKE

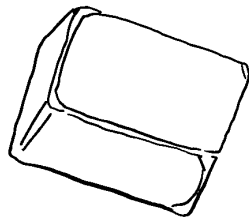




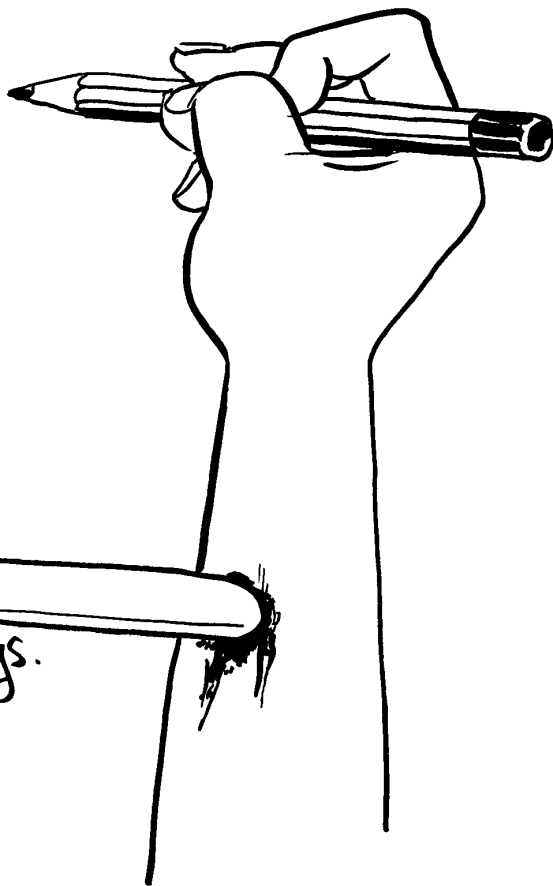




SOMETIMES
DRAWING GIVES
ME A HEADACHE.



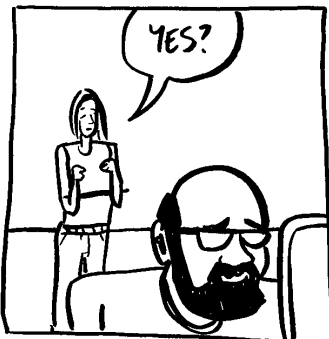
THEN I REALISE
THAT I'VE BEEN
MAKING THE FACES
I'M TRYING TO
DRAW.



I've become my drawings.



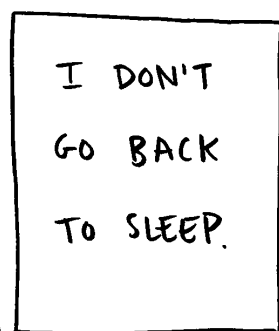
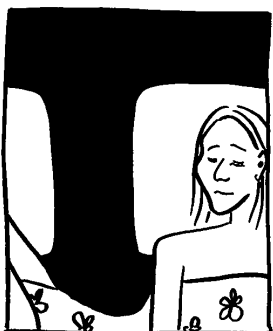
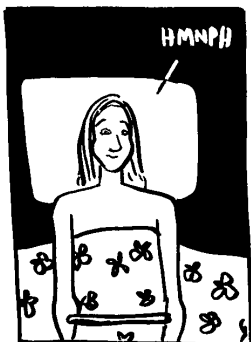
I RELAX MY FACE.

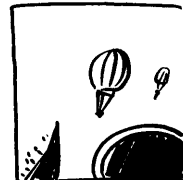


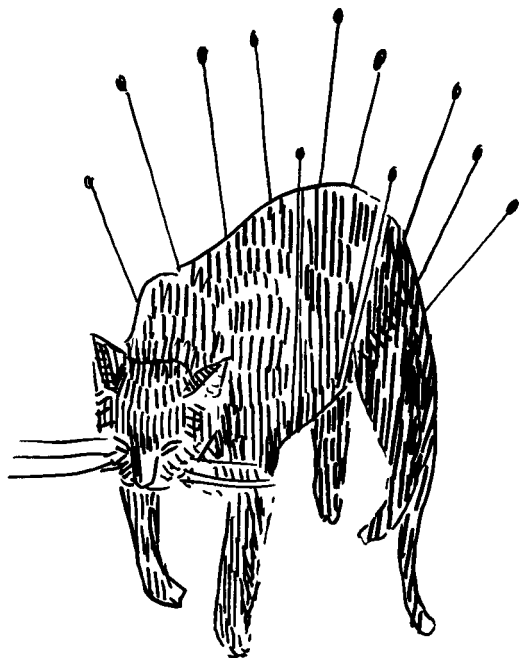
KENNETH WON'T TELL ME THE HITS ON HIS WEBSITE. HE SAYS THAT'S NOT THE POINT.

BUT HE THINKS MY COMIC IS IMPORTANT FOR BRINGING PEOPLE BACK DAILY.

I'M AFRAID THAT IF I STOP HE WILL LEAVE ME.





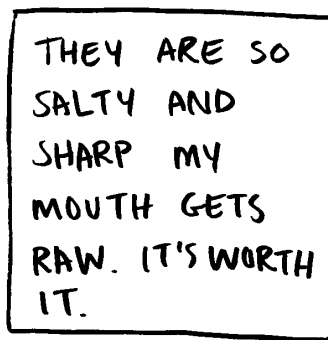
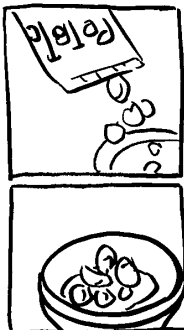


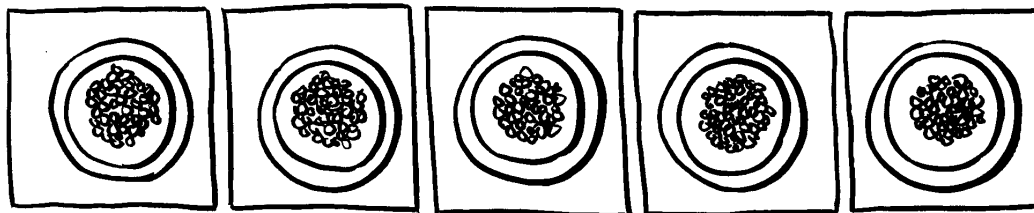
HERMETIC

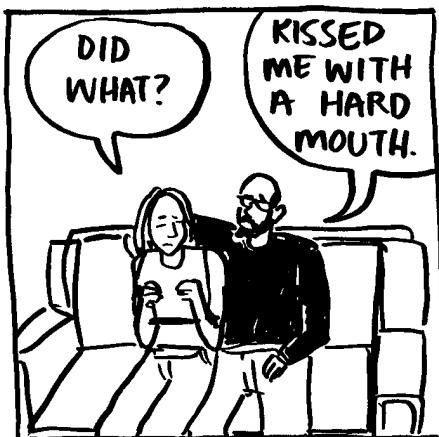


SO, WHAT'S THE IDEA?









IF YOU GO FAR
ENOUGH UP,
NOTHING LOOKS
REAL.

THE CITY.

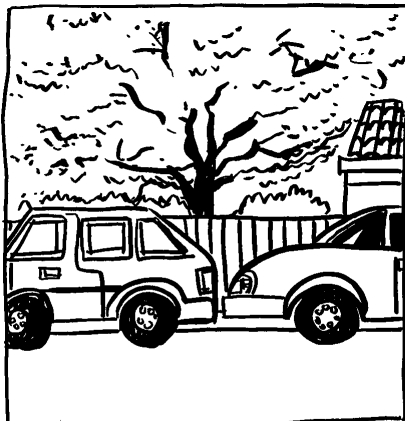
THE
WATER.

IT ALL
LOOKS
LIKE
TOYS.

I DON'T GET
EXERCISE HIGHS.

I WONDER
WHY NOT.

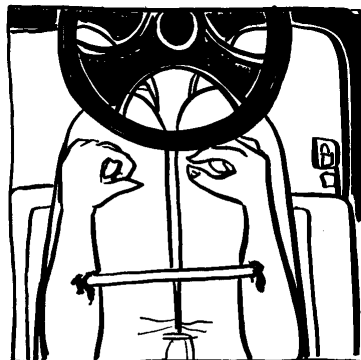
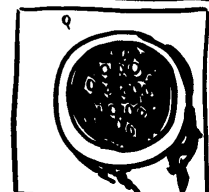
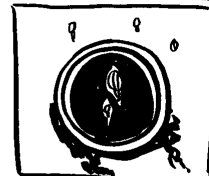
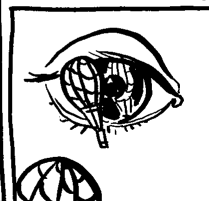




TODAY I REVERSED INTO
A PARKED CAR.

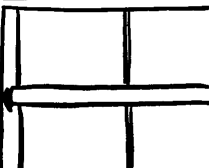


THERE WAS NO DAMAGE
THAT I COULD SEE.



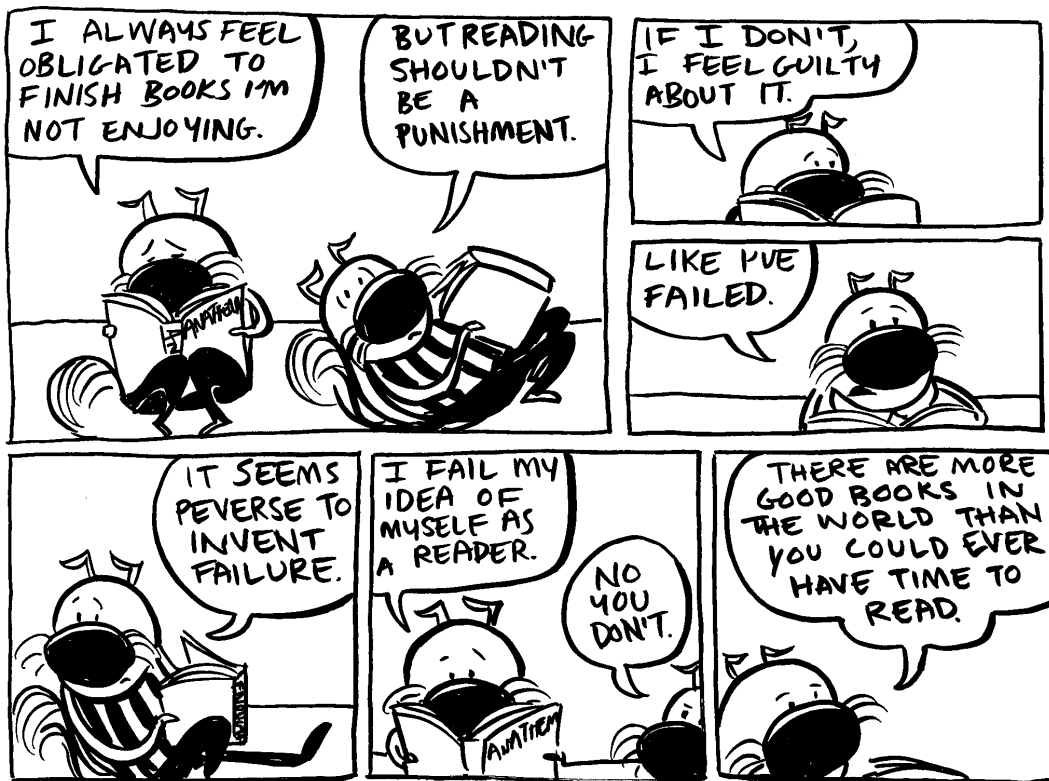
IT'S INCREDIBLE THAT
SUCH A THING COULD
LEAVE NO MARK.

I'D LIKE TO
GIVE SOME
SORT OF
EXCUSE.

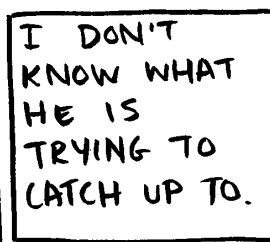
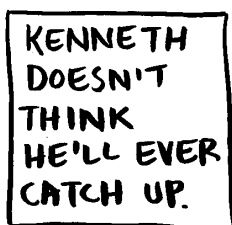


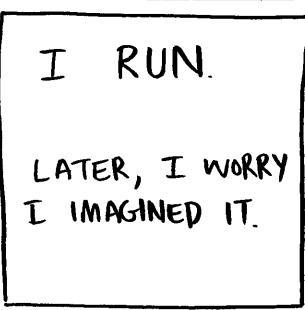
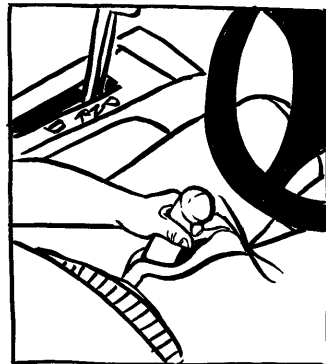
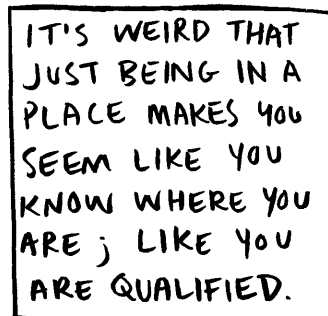
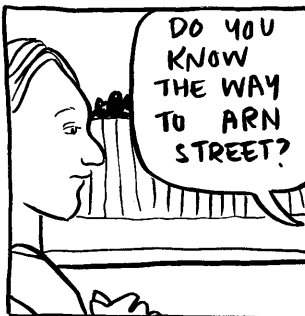
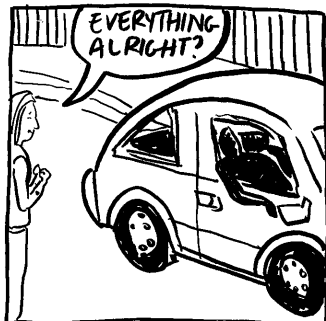
BUT THE
TRUTH IS,
I WASN'T
PAYING
ATTENTION.

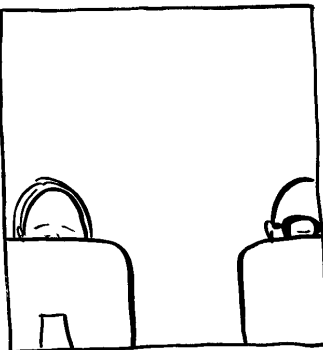
I WONDER IF I WOULD HAVE
LEFT A NOTE IF THERE HAD
BEEN DAMAGE.



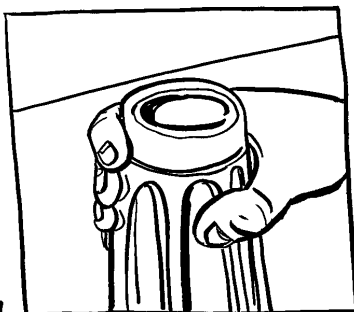
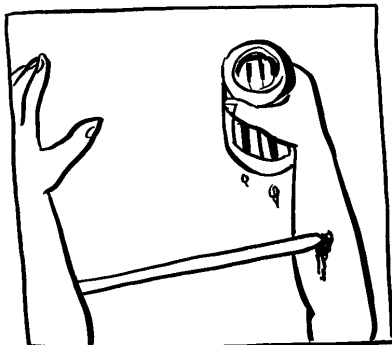






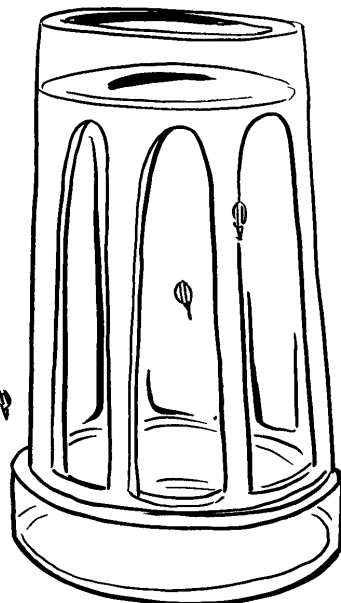


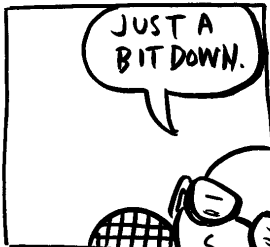
SOMETIMES
I TRY TO
CATCH THE
BALLOONS.

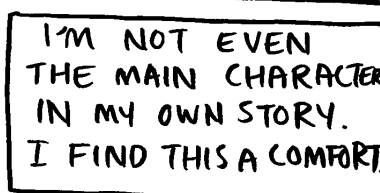
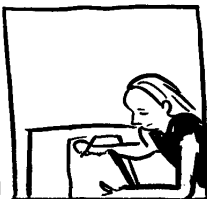
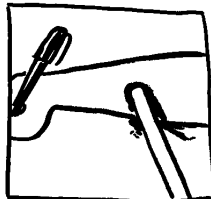
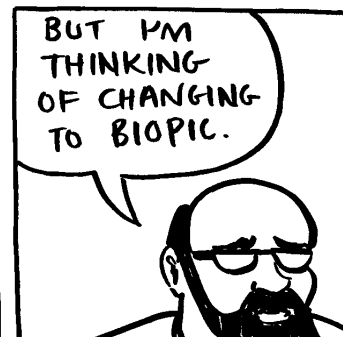


I
ALWAYS
MISS.

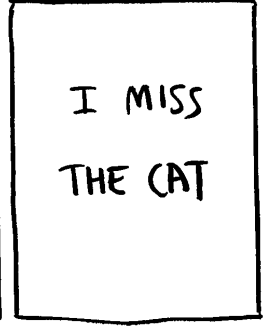
I WONDER
WHERE THEY
ARE GOING.

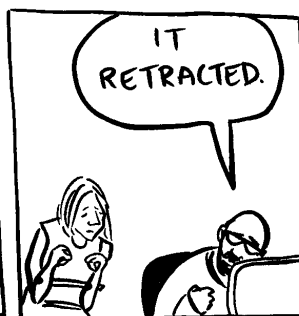
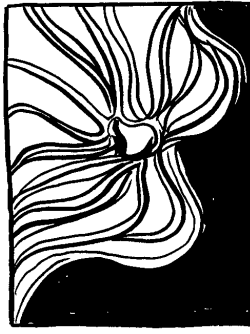
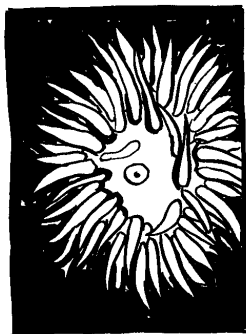




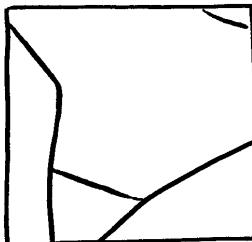
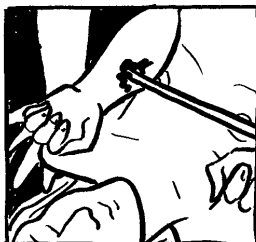




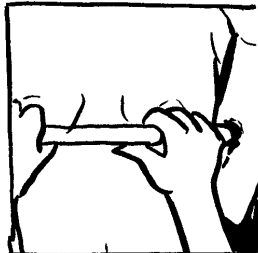
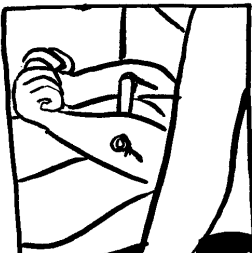








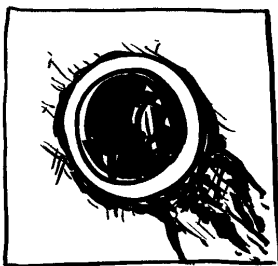
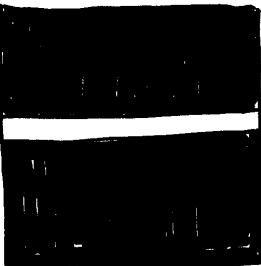
THERE'S A
MEDITATIVE
QUALITY
TO SEX.



I DON'T
HAVE TO
BE ME FOR
THOSE
MOMENTS.



I STOP
EXISTING



I WONDER
WHERE
I GO.





Deus ex machina

Dayis ex mack-kin-a. I spell it out phonetically, only because Billy Corgin pronounces it machine-a and it is embarrassing to catch incorrect pronunciations. Not that it matters if it is the transaction of meaning to word where the power lies, rather than in the word itself. Still. People get offended when their pronunciation is corrected. They feel harassed and belittled rather than bettered so this is a pre-emptive strike. A distracting pre-emptive strike.



God in the machine. I have thought about this narrative agent long and hard. Within the narratives we create, it is meant to be a clumsy, foolish thing. It defies cause and effect or, at least, it keeps cause and

effect where the audience can't see it coming in order to retain narrative tension. If we knew that God was coming to save all, we wouldn't be interested in how we got to that point, or would we? I see this as the main problem with religions that are waiting for an end of times. (Yes, I know, I shouldn't bag on other religions, especially when mine sits on top of them. Well, at least in the sense that all religions have a story, and story governs our world.) But I also see how the desire for a conclusion is compelling and exciting. The promise of deus ex machina is excitement, of climax, of the world not going on forever.

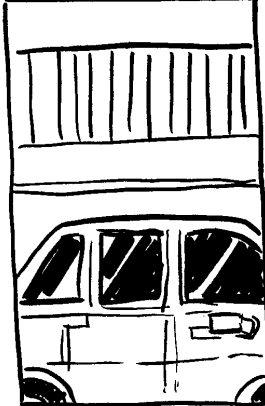
The problem with this, of course, is that if you wish for deus ex machina in your own life, for resolution, then you are wishing for the end, so, like in fiction, deus ex machina should be avoided in everyday life. Even if we wish to conquer this narrative gift of the spirit, we must not because fixing everything also means it is the end.

Yours humbly in narrative,
Kenneth.

Comments are closed.



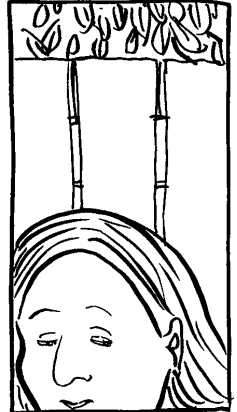
I MAKE MYSELF
RUN.



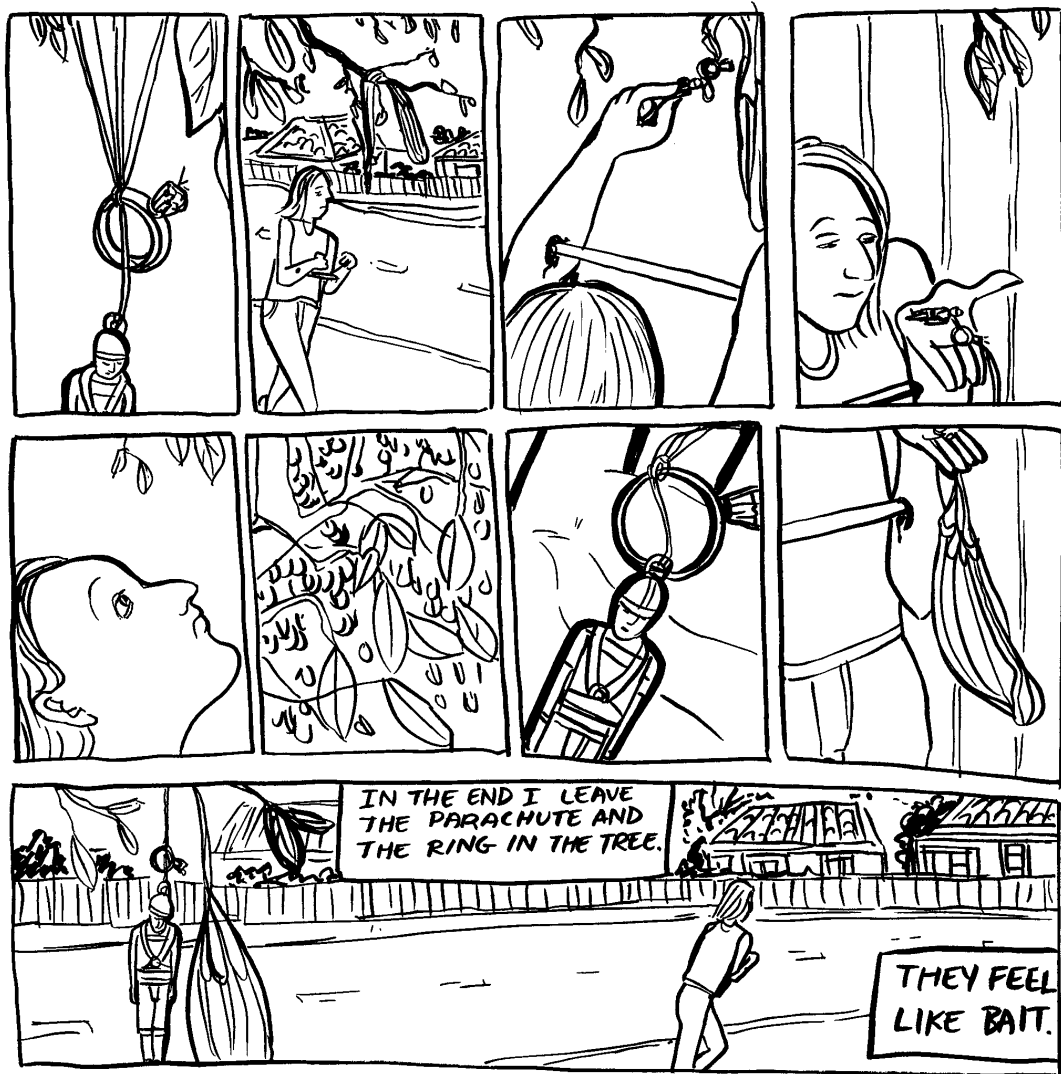
I LOOK IN EVERY
CAR FOR THE MAN.



HE'S NOT
THERE.



STILL, I
DON'T LIKE
TO STOP.







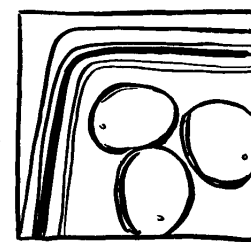
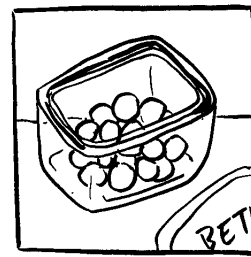
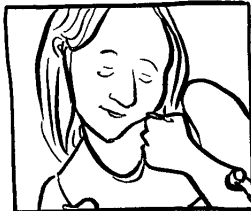
THE FALLACY OF SUNK COSTS







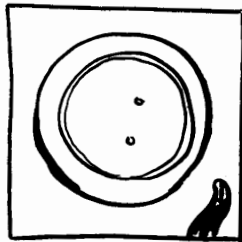
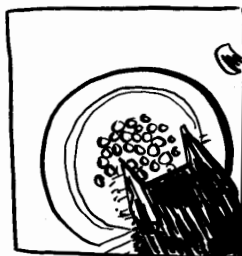
MY NEW SUPERVISOR PREFERS ME TO EAT MY LUNCH AT MY DESK.

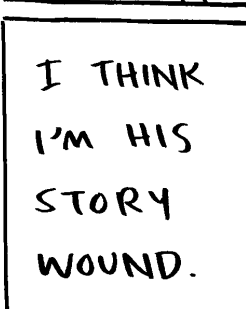
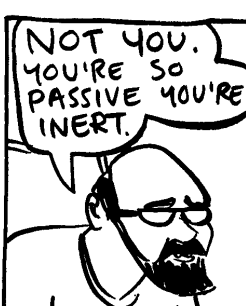
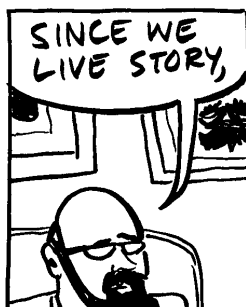
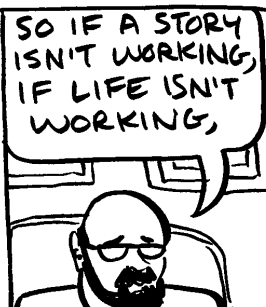
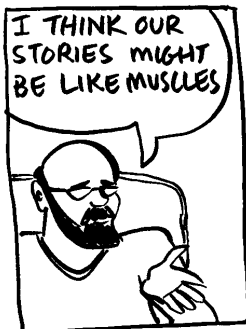


SOMETIMES, MAY WILL EAT WITH ME.



THESE ARE THE
IMPORTANT
QUESTIONS.





Narrative begets narrative

I think the best kind of art is art that makes me want to make art, that makes me see it as possible. I'm not talking about that tired dismissal of "I could do that" because the simple fact is you didn't and neither did I. That's not art that builds art, that shuts it down. It's an attitude to art that diminishes it because it seems accessible. Instead, I'm talking about art that begets art in me, that lets me see the creative in myself. It's additive rather than a block.

UNGENDERED POINT OF VIEW



This has brought me to the idea that The Church of Narrative can be

art and faith. It works in a similar way. This can be a work of art that makes more of itself. Perhaps others will see this and realise they can make their own church of narrative and learn to govern their own set of tropes.

This is exciting to me, the idea that we are all artists and authors of our own existence. Art doesn't mimic life. Narrative doesn't mimic life. It is life.

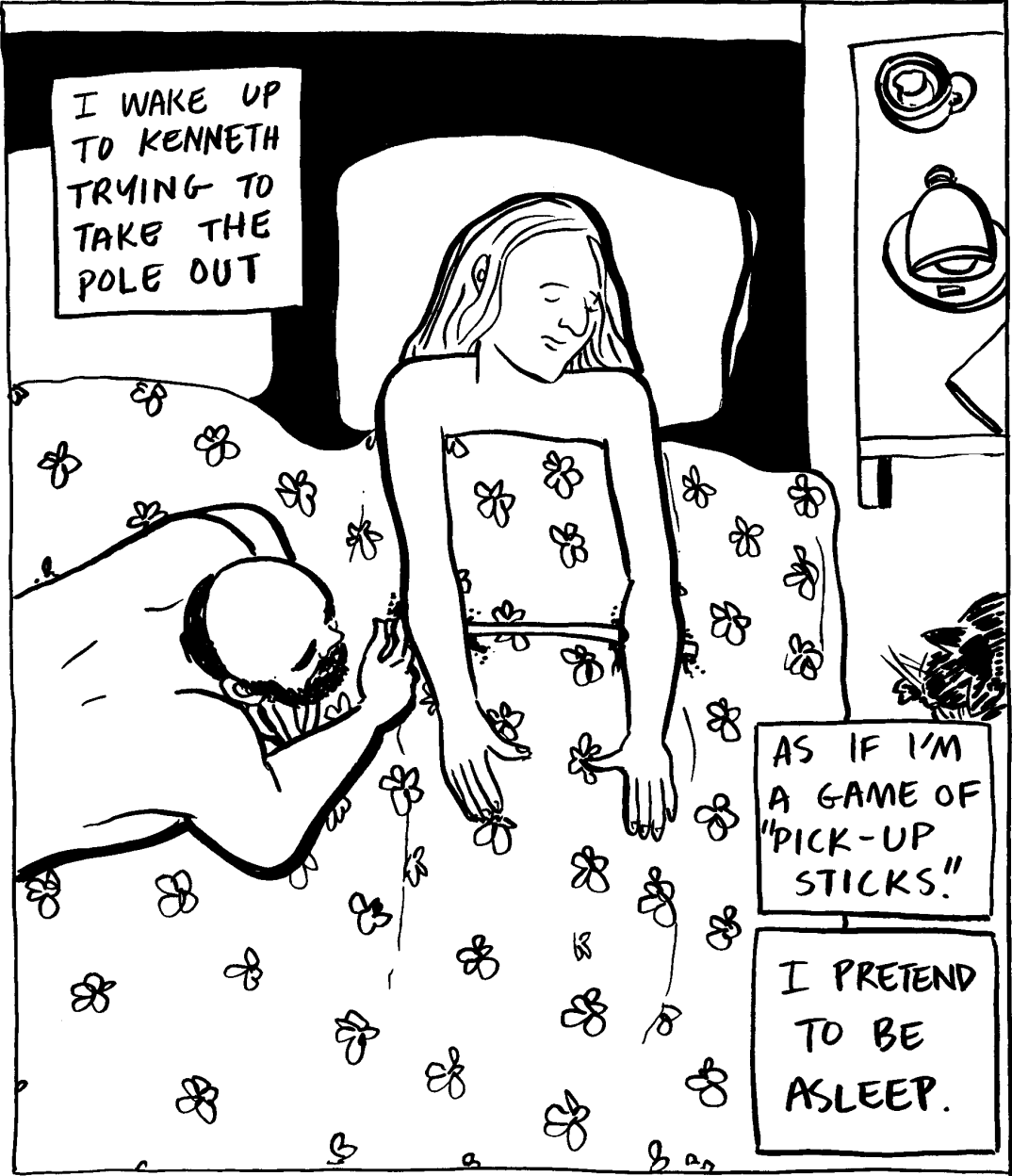
Yours humbly in narrative,

Kenneth

Comments:

@Kennarrate: I've had some queries about the closed comments and been accused of controlling the narrative. This is just a practical thing. I don't have time to moderate the comments and run the church. You can contact me through the contact form.

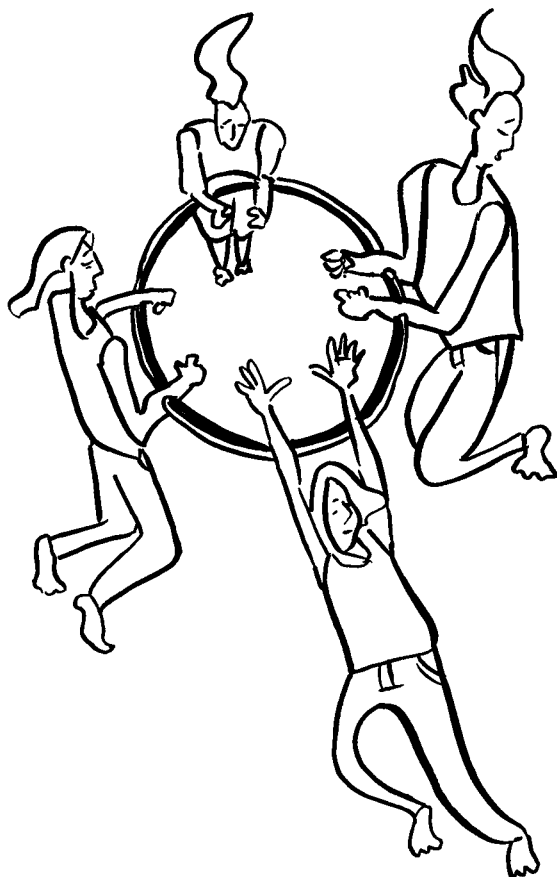
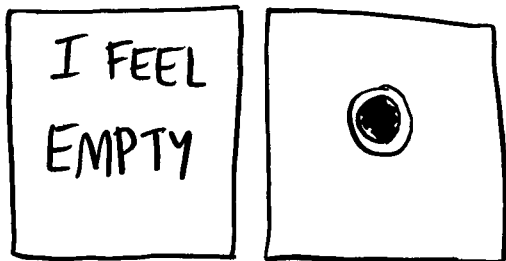
Comments are closed.



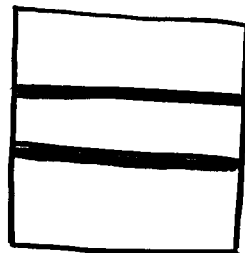
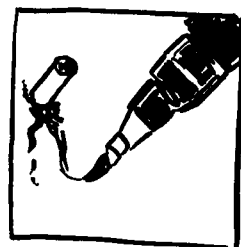
I WAKE UP
TO KENNETH
TRYING TO
TAKE THE
POLE OUT

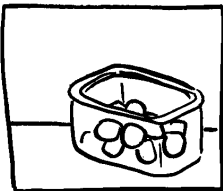
AS IF I'M
A GAME OF
"PICK-UP
STICKS."

I PRETEND
TO BE
ASLEEP.

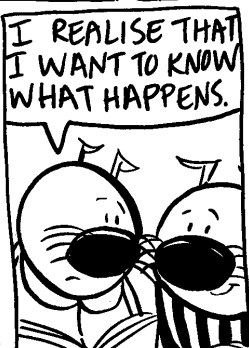
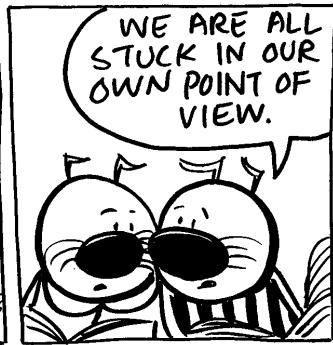


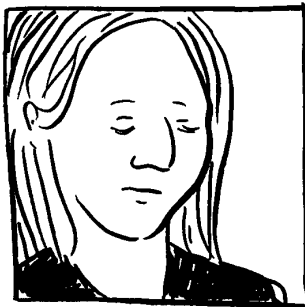
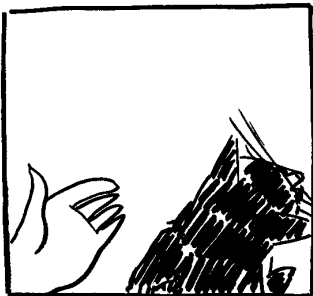
I don't
know why
I thought
writing down
my life would
make me
feel more
REAL.





I'M ME





I WANT THE BOOGLE TILES TO TELL THE FUTURE



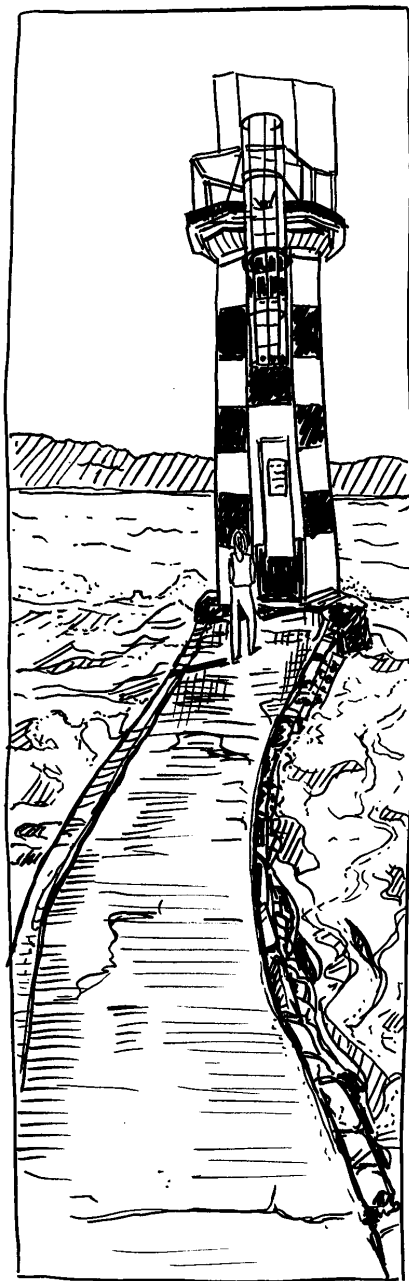
BUT THEY KEEP BEING LETTERS,

DISCONNECTED,



WITHOUT
MEANING.





THERE'S A
LIGHTHOUSE
THAT I RUN
PAST EVERY
SO OFTEN.

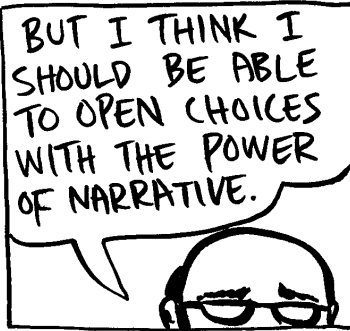
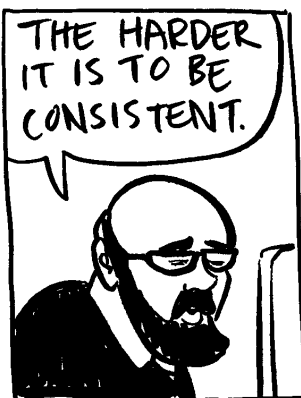
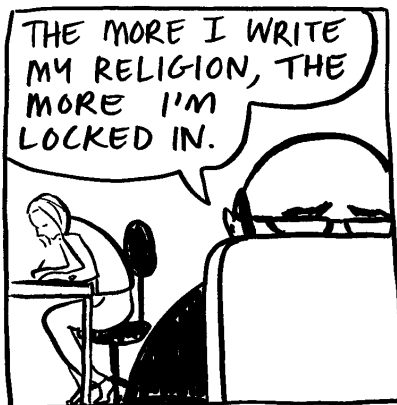


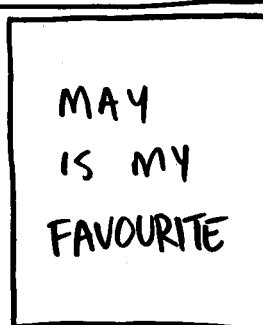
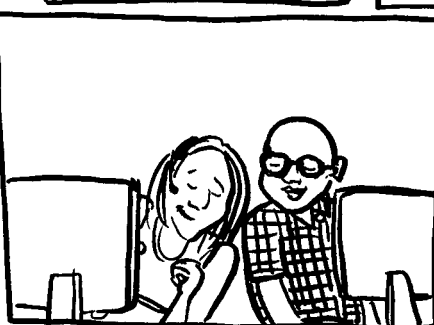
I COULDN'T
READ THE
SIGN FROM
ACROSS THE
CAUSEWAY.



STRANGE, THAT
THE SIGN IS
A LURE FOR
THE THING
IT WANTS
TO PREVENT.



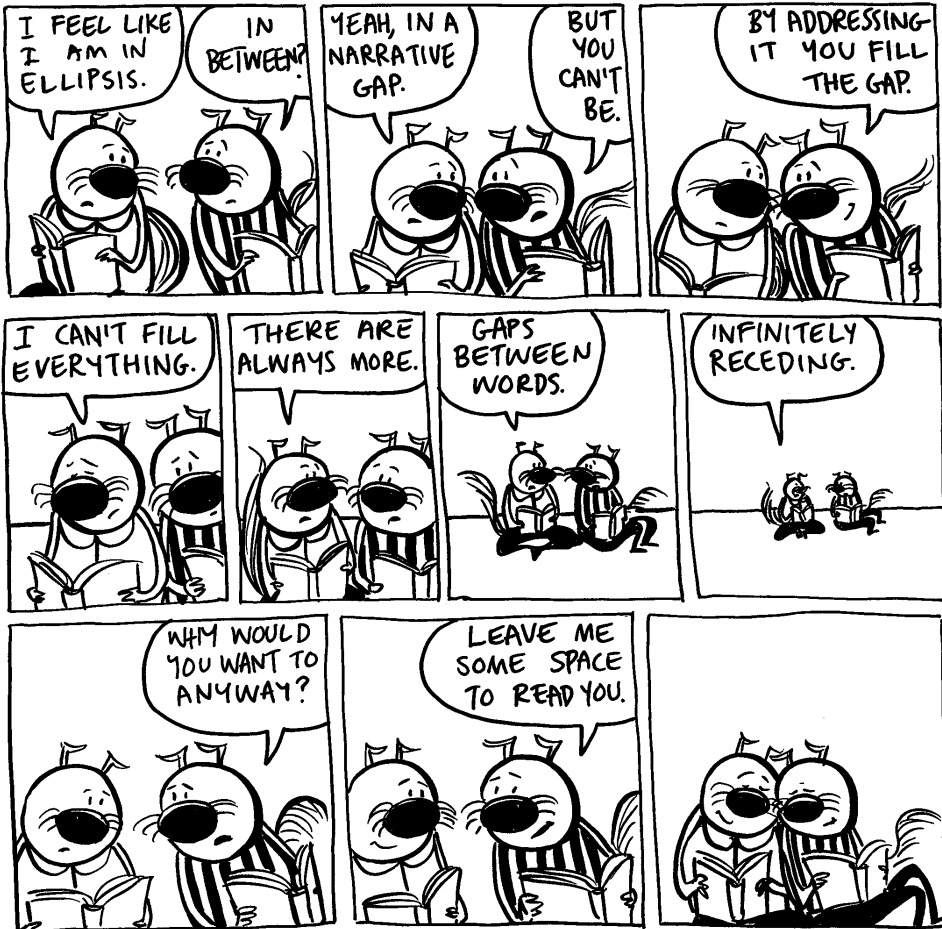




Ellipsis

Narratives cannot put everything in. They leave things out. This is either minutia; the ablutions, less often the eating, more often the sleeping - I guess sleeping is the closest we get to experiencing narrative ellipsis in our lives; or it is the thing for the reader to fill in - the thing the narrator withholds or skips over; or it is the event edited entirely.

ELLIPSIS



The thing I'm interested in is the thing edited entirely. Can we alter our lives merely by forgetting? Of course, then you have to convince others that your recollection of events is the correct one, which isn't really forgetting, it is convincing others to forget.

Our memory is granular so our existence is made up of moments anyway. Almost everything passes into ellipsis, to forgetting. So, I think the thing that we have to remember, is to create lives that exist in moments which are not ellipsis-worthy. We need to be aware of our narrative plot-points.

Yours humbly in narrative,
Kenneth

Comments are closed.

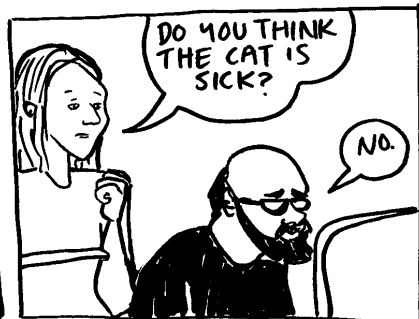
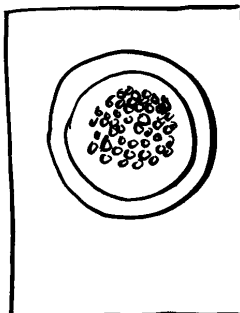
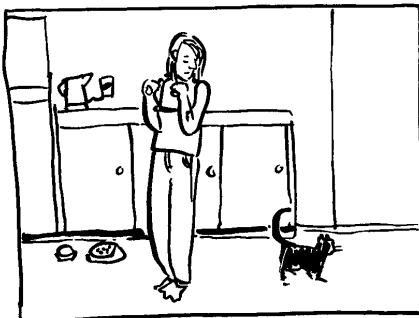
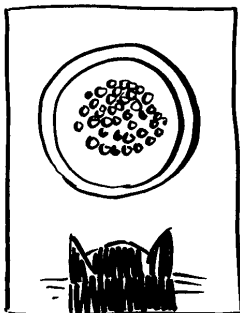
BEFORE an idea passes
the brain/pen
barrier

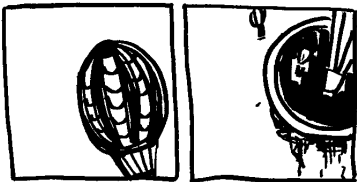


ONCE
it does I am
left with
a **NAGGING**
feeling of
inadequacy,
of unfulfilled
potential.

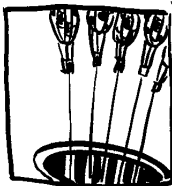
TODAY, WE SORTED
KENNETH'S CLOTHES.





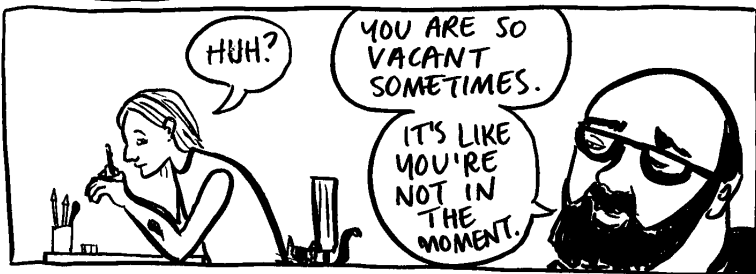


WHAT
ARE
THEY
DOING?



BETH

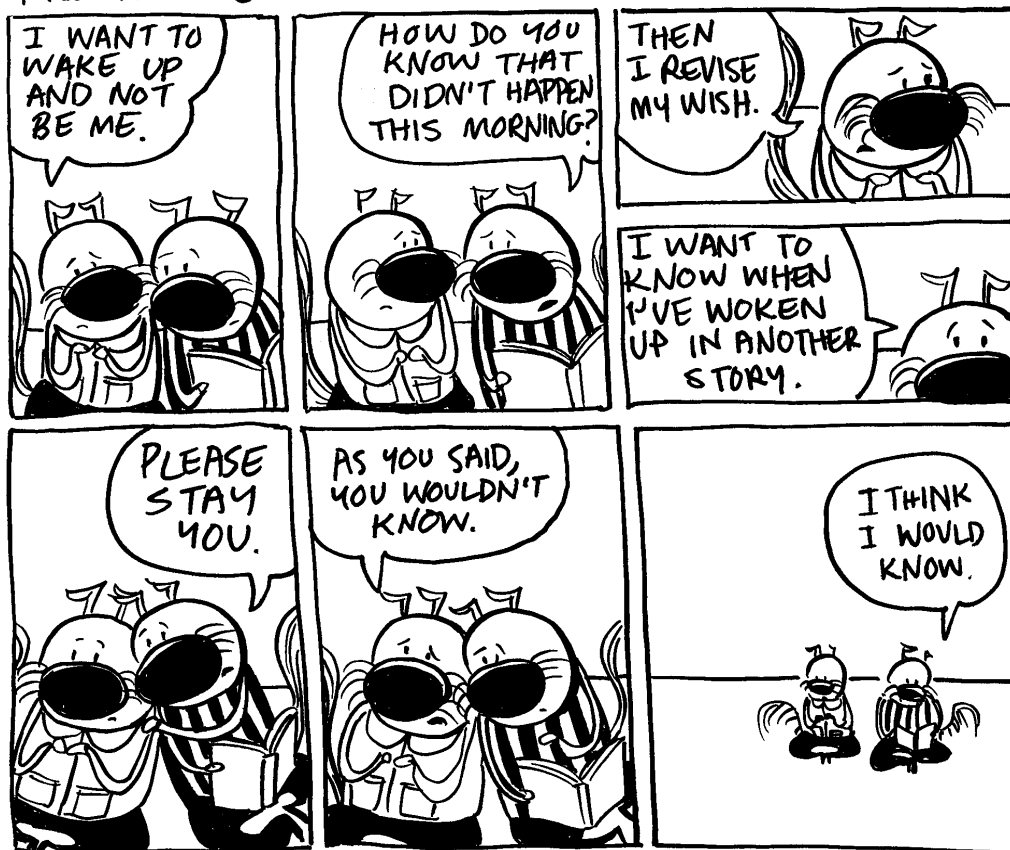
BETH



Story commons

I never understood the idea of god speaking to a person, mainly because I don't believe in god but as I go down this road of secular religion I'm understanding more how it happens. For me, even though I am trying to understand story to achieve enlightenment it seems that the story, more and more, is writing me. It seems to me that the more time one spends time with a set of ideas the more they speak to them.

ANOTHER ME



I've had an epiphany. There's a Le Guin novel, *The Lathe of Heaven*, where

the protagonist's dreams can change reality but only they, and anyone in the presence of their dreaming, are aware of it. At first I was thinking about whether the world and possibility could be continually shifting under us, and what it would mean if we didn't know it. Would it mean anything? If some version of our consciousness just picks up where another left off when we wake up with all the continuity of the past, does that even matter if we were a different consciousness in a different reality yesterday?

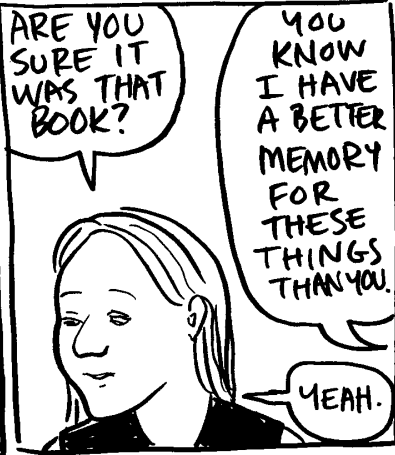
Here's the epiphany. Here's why it matters. If we don't know if we wake up as the same person tomorrow, we must conceptualise our stories through a "veil of ignorance". If we could be anybody tomorrow, it is in our best interests to be good to everyone, to minimise conflict, in case we are someone else tomorrow. Or, at least, to resolve conflicts if we can to take tension out of the world. This brought me to the idea that in the Church of Narrative, we aren't trying to make our lives stories that people may want to read, those driven by conflict. Instead, for my preference, we need to have a more modernist, exploratory, aesthetic experience.

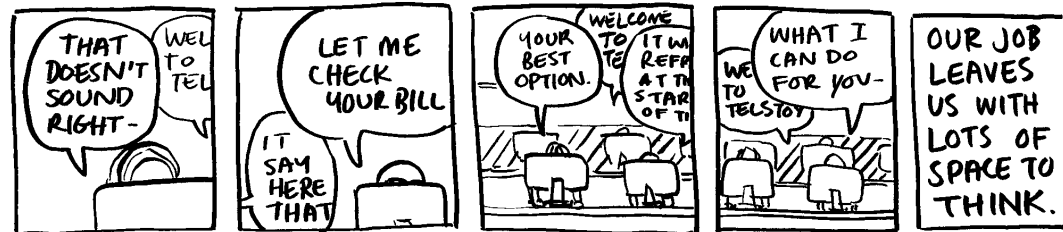
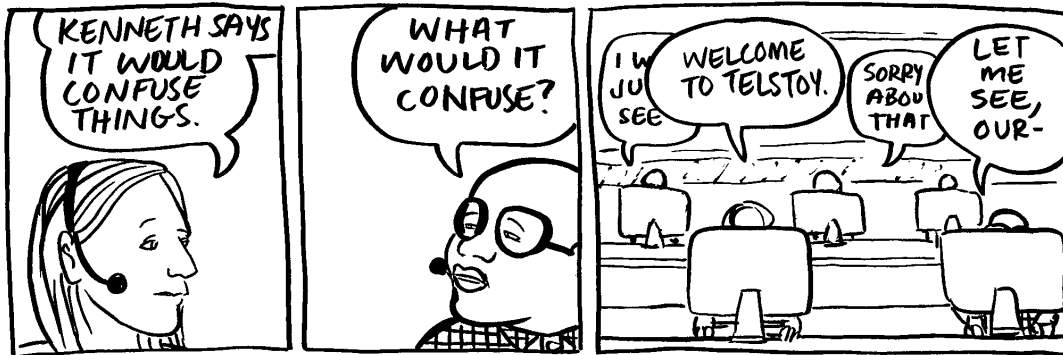
I did consider that if we lived our lives as if we wouldn't be the same person tomorrow, that some could make the choice to trash those lives. Lives as a story resource could suffer the tragedy of the commons with no one taking role as a care-taker. However, since we only experience ourselves in first person, this seems unlikely as we are automatically invested in the story agent that we inhabit.

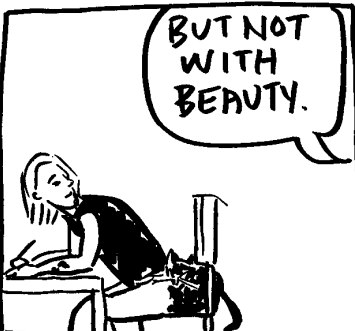
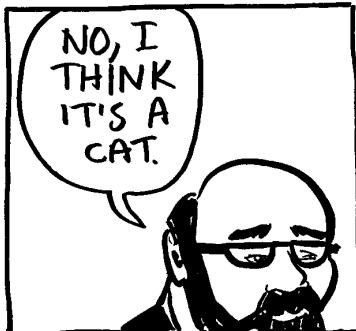
Yours humbly in narrative,

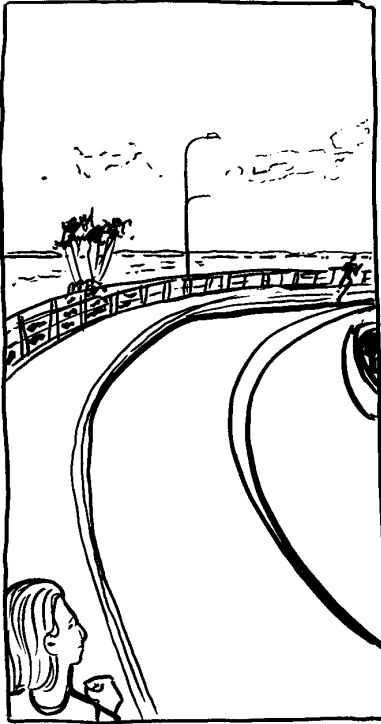
Kenneth

Comments are closed.





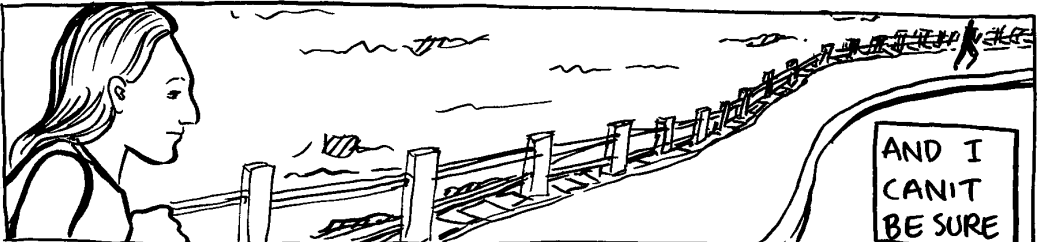




I THINK
I SEE
SOMEONE
LIKE ME.



BUT SHE'S
TOO FAR
AWAY.



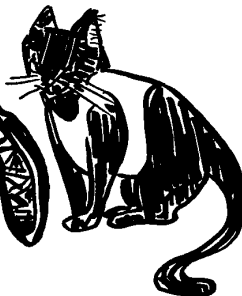
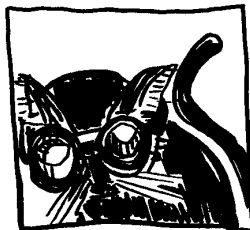
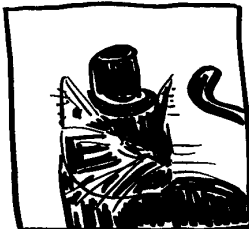
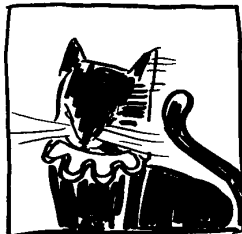
AND I
CAN'T
BE SURE

I've realised
that my fantasy
outfits have not
been fantastic at
all.

I ASPIRE
TO THE
MUNDANE.

I'd like
to say
this
is
only a failure
of drawing
ability,
BUT
REALLY it's a
failure of
imagination.

OUTFIT
I WOULDN'T
ACTUALLY
WANT TO
WEAR.







Story interference

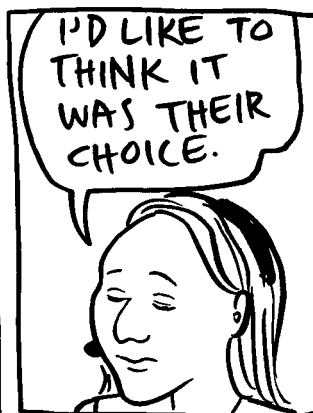
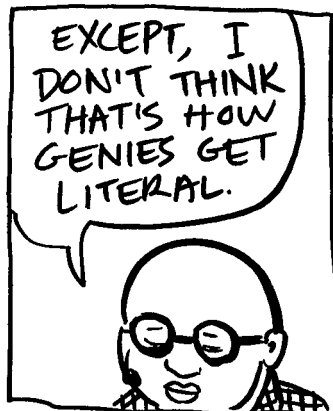
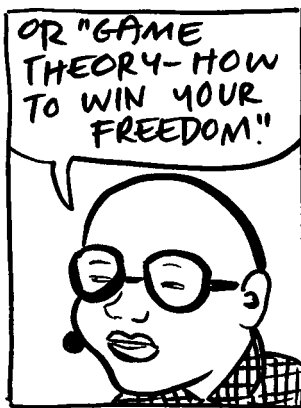
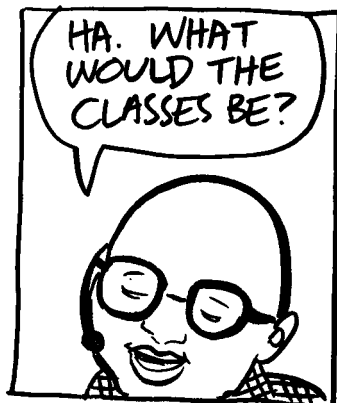
I've spoken a lot about how we control our own narratives but not about how our narratives intersect with others. If, as I tend to say, story comes first and story governs all, what are the ethics of interfering with other people's stories and genres? Whose intention gets precedence? Who gets to be the active protagonist? (Not that all protagonists are active, mind you, but that is what we aspire to be). I'm questioning whether it is my role as the deacon of The Church of Narrative to save people from their own story choices or to let narratives play out to their perfect conclusion - to follow their story logic.

I'm working from the premise that stories can be changed but it doesn't follow that just because something can be changed that it should. Happy endings would have less impact if we never experienced unhappy ones. But I don't like that either. I don't like the idea that our happiness is predicated on the relative unhappy alternative. There's that bit in *Stranger Than Fiction* where Dustin Hoffman's character bemoans the happy ending. Why do we elevate the things that don't end well? I think that we have to work against this. I think that we have to believe that everyone can have a happy story.



Yours humbly in narrative,
Kenneth

Comments are closed.



THERE
SEEM TO
BE FEWER
BALLOONS.



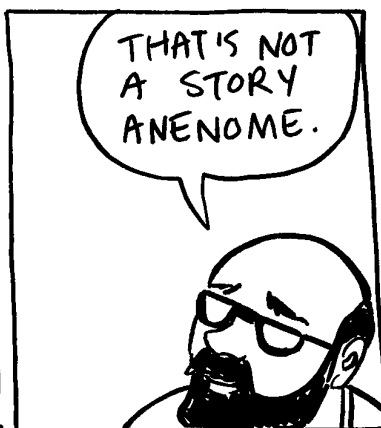
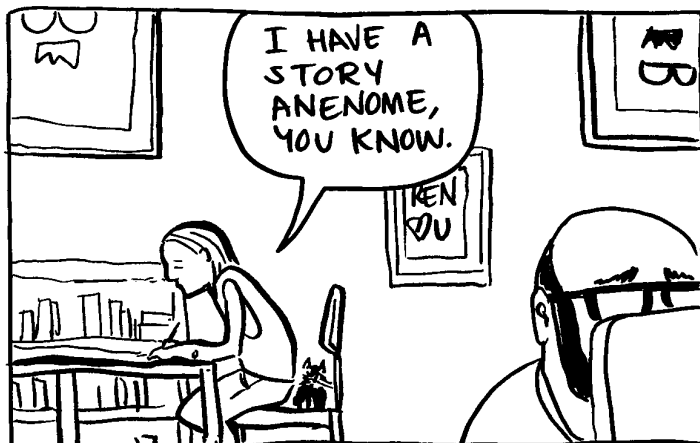
I WONDER
IF THE
CAT ATE
THEM.

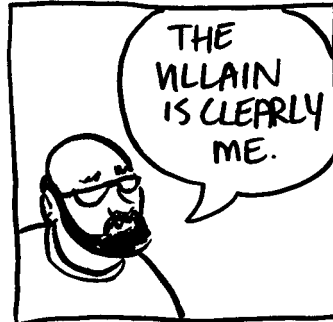
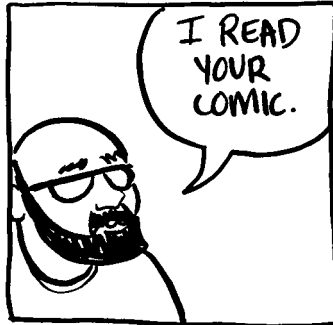




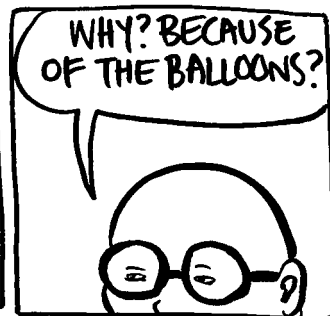
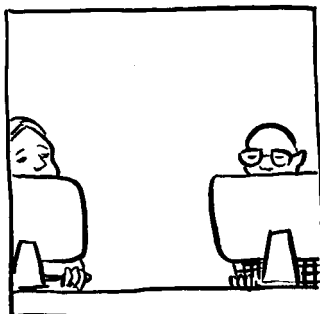


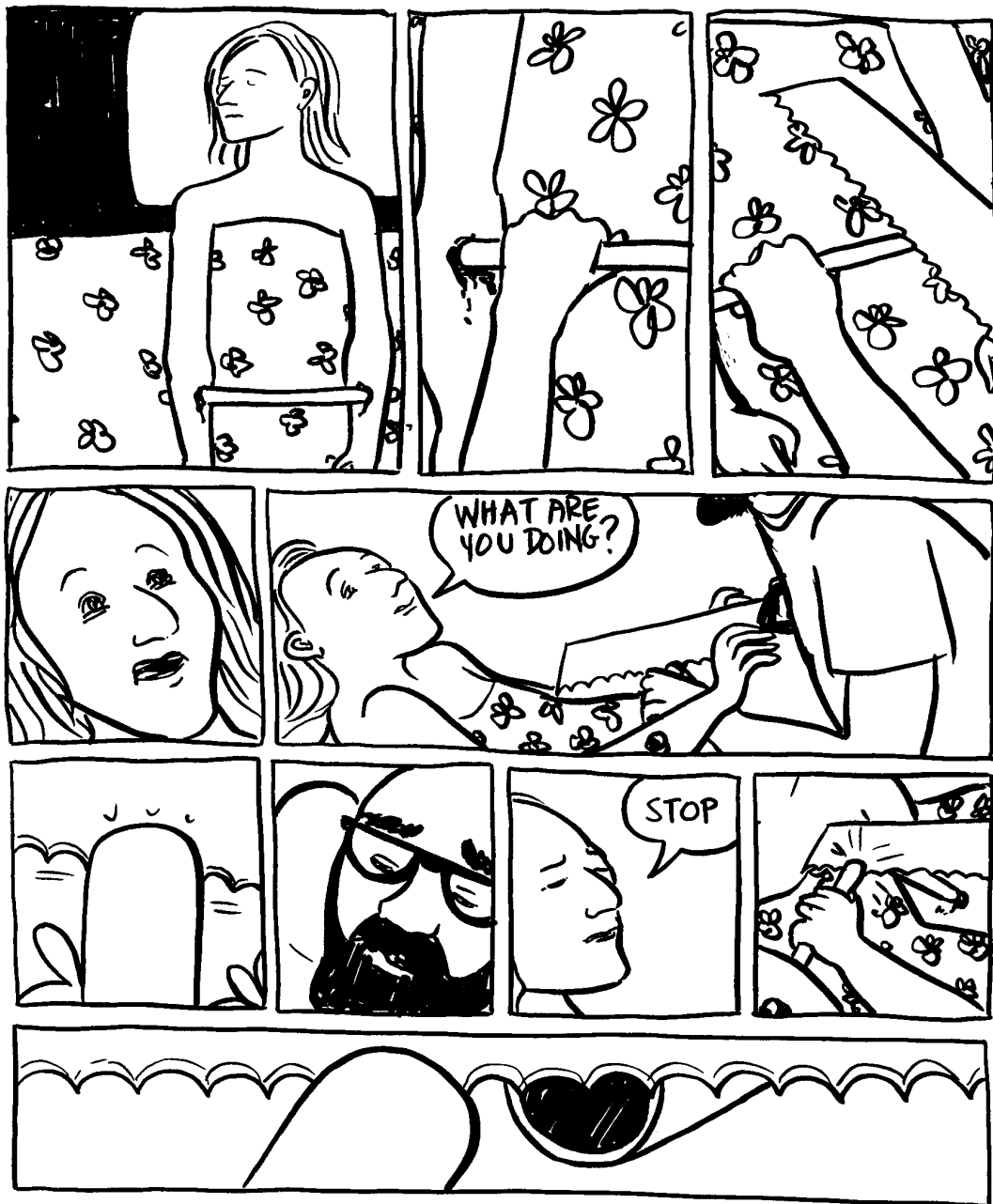


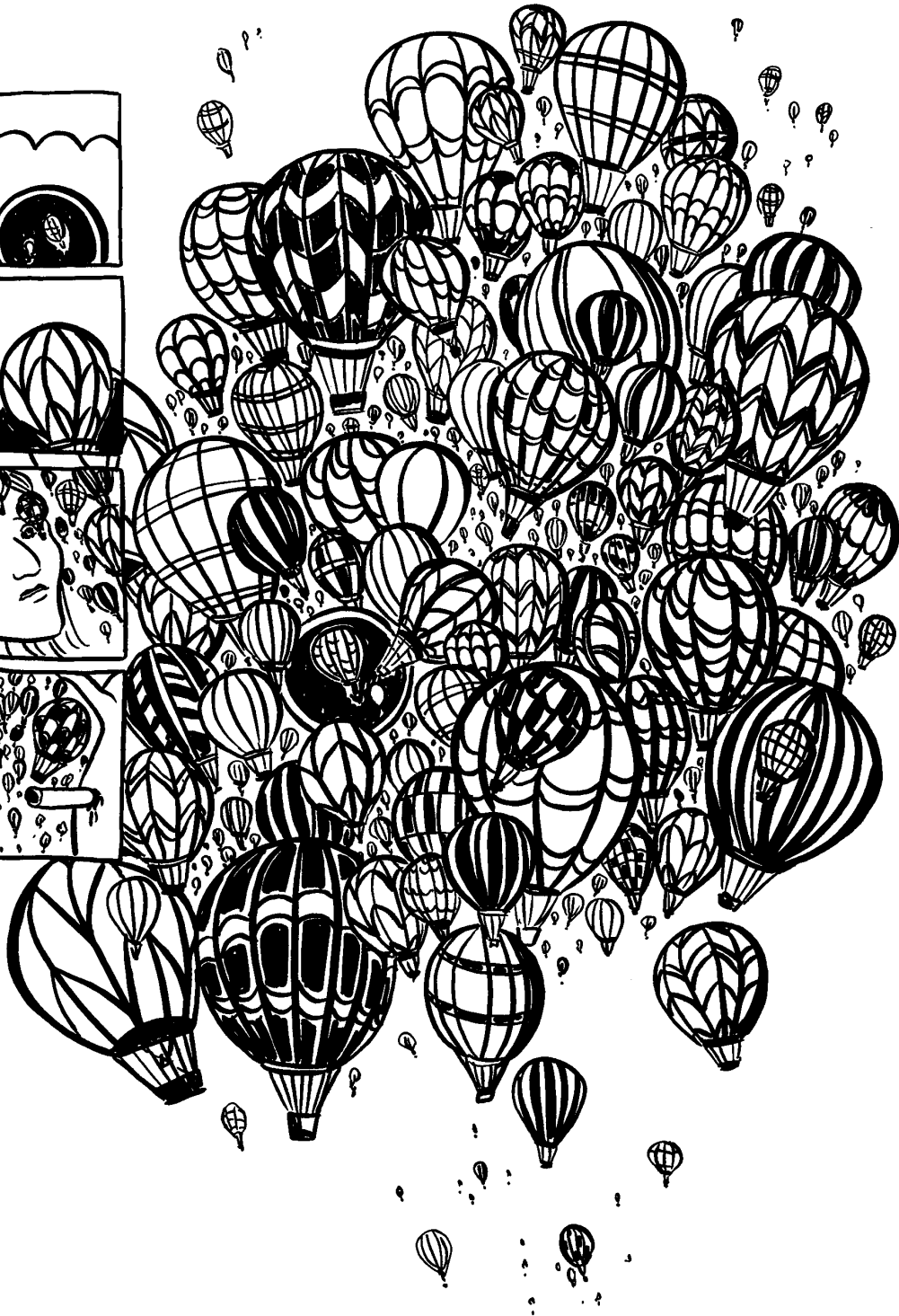
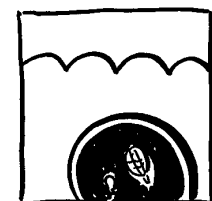




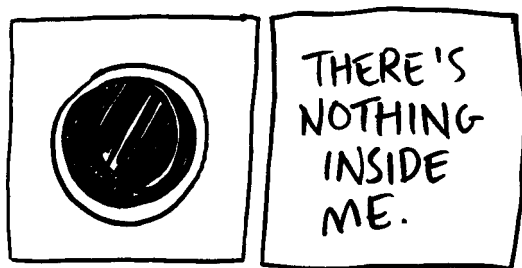


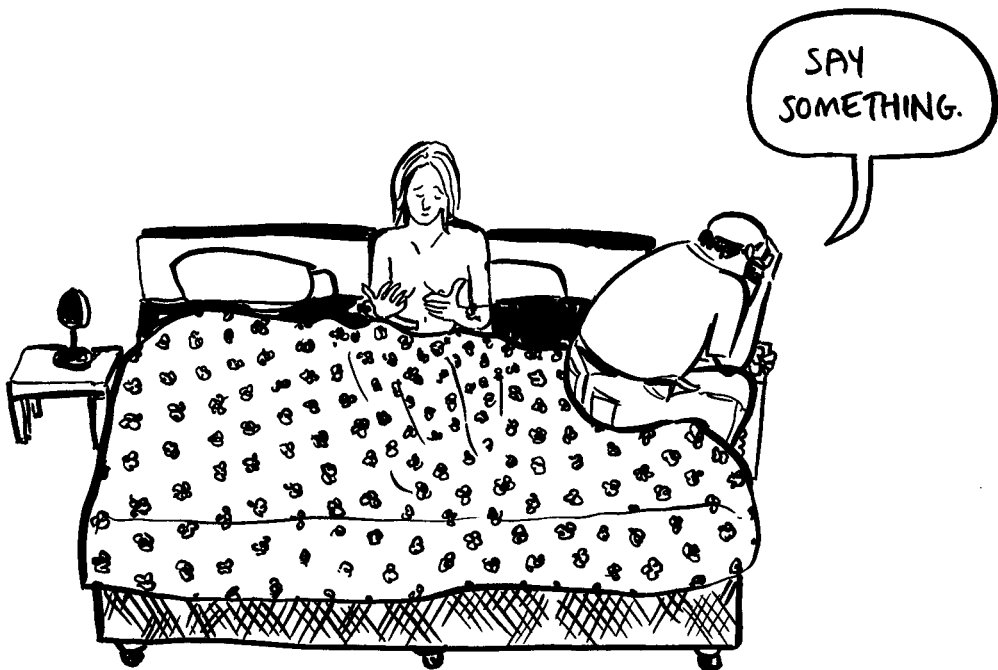












Extended cognition



I recently came across the idea of extended cognition. This is the idea that brain function can happen not in the brain. We can think of our narratives, when we externalise them, as parts of our consciousness. This means that the ultimate goal of The Church of Narrative, can't just be to use narrative principles to guide our own existence, but must be to create narratives. This is the true step to immortality, living on through story.

I now realise that this religion has its own consciousness. I think it is writing me.

Go forth and make story.

Yours humbly in narrative,
Kenneth

Comments are closed.

