The Tale Knows More than its Teller

Behind the Scenes of The Boy with Nails for Eyes

by Shaun Gardiner

1

Where did the idea come from?

Who knows where ideas come from? Those strange fish lurking in the depths – they don't care about lures. They're wise to your hooks. They'll rise, if they ever do, not when you want them to – only when they want to.

But here goes.

It's 2008. Anna, my girlfriend – now my wife – and I have moved to Bristol. I'm working on an illustrated story I've had in my mind for some time. I'm on a full-page illustration. I've decided to try it as a comic.

I work quickly. Borders in raw ink. Outlines in pencil, then diluted inks to render. That done, I use splashes of acrylic and pencil to refine the details. It's finished. I step back, see what I've got.

"Shit," I say.

The page looks good.

By this time I've done a couple of short comics, five- or six-pagers for small press magazines. I know how much work goes into even a short comic. (It's a lot. No, more than you're thinking. *A lot*.) I really don't want to make this story into a comic, because that's going to take a massive amount of work. I don't know if I have it in me.

"Shit," I say.
The page looks good.

But the page looks really good. Better than that, it looks *right*. If I'm going to do the story at all, I realise, I'm going to have to do it as a comic.

That was the first page of *The Boy with Nails for Eyes*.

But even that's a long way down the road. Where did the story come from?

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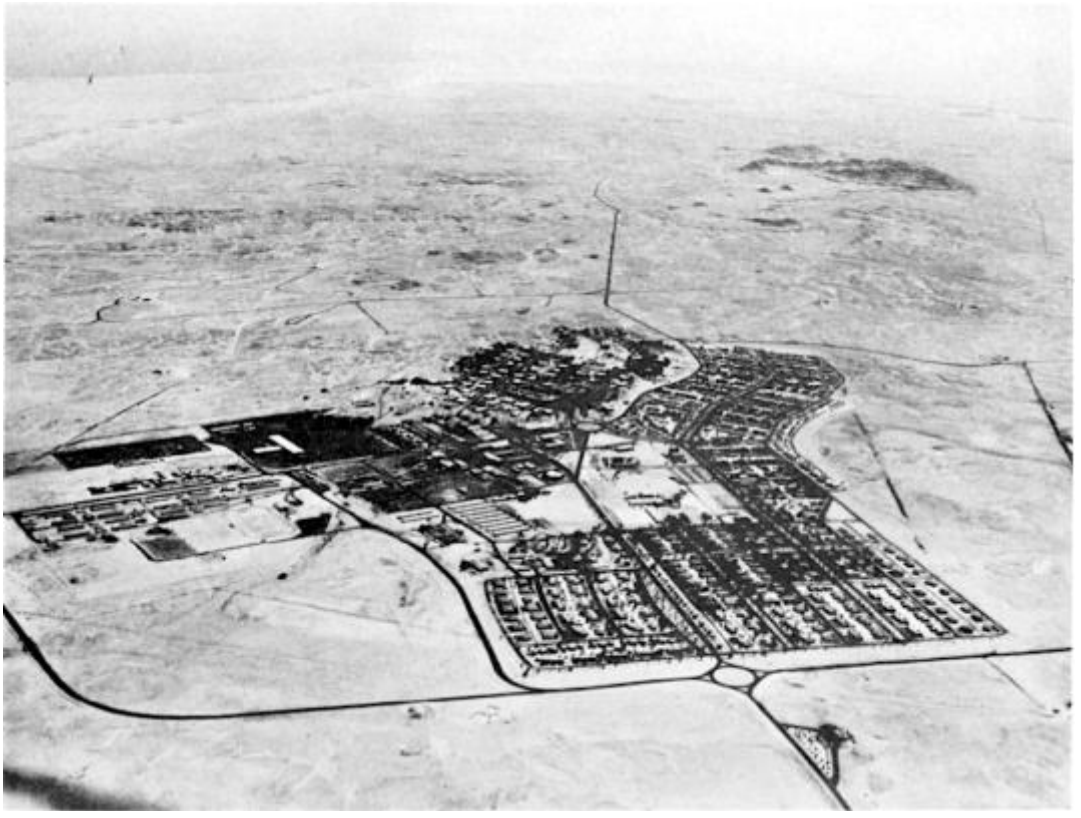
Rewind 17 years.

I'm living in Bahrain, in the Arabian Gulf. The village I live in, smack in the middle of the desert, is called Awali.

Awali was the first 'oil camp' built in the Gulf, to house workers at the nearby refinery. The houses are low bungalows with render like shark skin. The acacia trees have murderous thorns that play



Left: Awali in 1959.
Below: A Scud launcher.
Previous page: The first completed page of *The Boy with Nails for Eyes*.

noughts-and-crosses on your skin as you climb. At the edge of town a chain-link fence, first installed in the 1940s, marks the perimeter. I can remember a couple of times, cycling near that fence, dogs appearing out of the desert to follow me, barking, along the wild side of the perimeter. A weird place to grow up – but then, I didn't know that at the time.

Then the Gulf War happened.

I'm nine years old. Saddam rolls into Kuwait. Mere days later there are American GIs wandering around town. Helicopters, humvees. I hear the word 'Scud' for the first time. Rumours. Saddam's chemical weapons.

One day everyone is called to the town hall. We're issued gas masks. (Instead of the black, insectoid, stormtrooper-style helmets my parents get, I'm given a child's version, an utterly uncool plastic bag with an elasticated neck-hole and a fan-driven filter. I was royally pissed.) Back home, my parents put big Xs of tape across the windows, to prevent flying glass if there's an explosion.

My parents put big Xs of tape across the windows, to prevent flying glass if there's an explosion.

CNN feeds us our daily greens: night-vision footage of Iraqi installations growing larger in the crosshairs. Like adverts for the wars of the future. Which is, I suppose, what they were.

Every now and again Iraq launches a Scud. The radio or TV breaks from the regular schedule to a pre-recorded announcement. It

One night it actually happens. There's a Scud in the air, coming our way.

Above: Soldiers examine a downed Scud during the Iraq War.

begins with music. The music goes:

DUN! DUNDUNDUN! DUN! DUNDUNDUNDUN! DUNDUN! DUNDUNDUNDUN! DUNDUN!

The presenter appears. "Remain calm." If that's what they wanted, they should've used a different tune.

We wait to see which way the Scud's going. (By all accounts the Iraqis themselves have little idea.) Are we going to have to hustle into the safe room – my room, as it happens – with our masks? (Ugh. My plastic bag. If it came to it, maybe I'd rather suck gas.)

One night I wake up and it's actually happening. Everyone's in my room. My dad's stuffing a towel under the door. My mum's clutching our masks. My sister, barely two years old, is sniffling. There's a Scud in the air, coming our way.

It flies right over our town. A few miles away, Patriot missiles are launched. They catch the Scud in mid-air, blowing it into confetti.

A few days later, a family friend went into the desert and found (so he claimed) the crash site. He brought back a piece of twisted metal the size of my thumb. Scud, he said. A small piece of the war, curled up in my hand like a dead locust.

Another time, I was at a friend's house. We were building a den in the garden when, in the distance, we heard a siren. It was one of those classic World War 2-era droning wails, up and down without ever quite landing on a tone. I wasn't even aware of it at the time, but the siren had been installed on the old abandoned cinema at the centre of town. Inside, the radios and TVs would be booming. DUNDUNDUN.

My friend's mother comes outside to hustle us in – and only then do I realise I've come out without my gas mask.

We hurry through the house into their safe room. A brief glimpse of the ubiquitous X of tape over the window before the curtains are drawn (who knows why; they'll hardly prevent shrapnel, and it's not as if the Scuds can *see* us) and the room goes dim.

My friend's mum disappears and returns. "Here." She gives me a towel, heavy with water. I understand that I'm to put this over my head if it's a chemical attack. Full-on canary. For several minutes we sit in the dark, the whole family eyeing me nervously, waiting for the all-clear.

A frightening time.

A good time too. We got two weeks off school (cheers Saddam). I got to drive an enormous US Army forklift after my family made friends with soldiers at the nearby base. There were morale-boosting parties, pot lucks for the troops. My mum and I made cakes (cheers Betty Crocker).

But yeah. It was scary.

After the Kuwaiti oil fields were set ablaze by the retreating Iraqis, even hundreds of miles away we could see the

Above left: the Kuwait oil fires, March 1991. *Right*: the fires as seen from space.

discolouration in the sky, like a bruise. Dead flesh in need of amputation. Those fires began in January – they didn't end until November.

Everywhere, the colours changed. CNN went from the acid green of night-vision to bright billows of orange and red. We'd go to the beach to watch the sunsets – glories in the sky, nature's work augmented by the particles and gases in the air. You could smell them. A memory – wiping the back of my neck at the day's end, my palm streaked black.

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Fast forward seven years.

I'm at boarding school in England. I hate it. I don't belong at all. In English class, we're studying a poem about the poet's ghost coming back to haunt the lover who rejected him. (The stalkery ickness of this escapes me at the time.) The teacher points us to a picture on the wall, an illustration of the poem by a previous student. It's been done in ink on thin, fragile paper. The apparition from the poem, watery and sad, staring out at us with eyes that are long streaks of ink. I love the picture, though it doesn't match the tone of the poem at all. Every now and again over the next few years I try to produce my own version of it, but I can never catch the sad isolation in the original.

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Forward again – four years this time.

I'm at university, my second year. I'm studying English literature, after messing up my application to art school. The autumn term's not started yet, I'm alone in my shared house when, one afternoon, a friend of mine busts in, wild-eyed and panting, and tells me to turn on the bloody TV. When I do, the skyline of New York appears. Moments later the second plane flies into the South Tower.

If you were around in the 90s maybe you heard that 'end of history' bullshit so popular at the time. Fascism's dead, Communism's done. The West triumphant. Like Walter Sobchak in *The Big Lebowski*: "Our fucking troubles are over." (Spoiler: they aren't.) Nothing to do now, we're told, but wait for the whole world to wake up to liberal democracy. All happy little consumers (except, of course, the poor bastards making the things to be consumed). Amen.

I began to feel the same old feeling as when I was a kid. Black streaks of carbon on my hand.

September 11th 2001 was the end of all that. The end of the end of history. War again. But this time a War on Terror. War on an abstract? A war like that can't be won. No more than you can bomb out a fire, or scratch away a wound. I began to feel the same old feeling as when I was a kid. Black streaks of carbon on my hand.

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Dread's not a thing you get used to. What happens is, it walls you up. It immures you.

Fast forward another year.

Last year at university. I'm really getting to grips with my literature course by painting and drawing a lot, with occasional forays into *Grand Theft Auto*.

The Iraq war is on. The WMDs we were all promised would be found haven't been found, and won't be found. Security has been stepped up everywhere. The government has promised us ID cards so that we can all feel more safe. I'm getting used – long-haired, goateed, suspiciously foreign – to being followed by members of staff whenever I'm at a train station. One time I turn around and see a spotty guy, barely out of his teens, wearing a hi-viz vest and a nervous defence-of-the-realm expression, eyes on me, whispering into his walkie-talkie. Getting used to, well – dread.

(Just so you know, dread's not a thing you get used to. No. What happens is, it walls you up. It immures you. If it goes on long enough, you forget you're in that confinement. You redefine the horizon. No longer the line between earth and sky, now it's the flat, unyielding limit on all sides.)

One evening my housemates and I are hanging out. We're watching a DVD of Tool videos. (This is pre-YouTube, if you can imagine such a thing.) We put on the video for 'Sober' – and there, four minutes ten seconds into it, one of the weird mechanical creatures in the vid turns to the screen, the nail in its eye swivelling like an insect antenna.

I think to myself "Huh. It isn't like the nail is *in* his eye. It's more like the nail *is* his eye."

And

DUNDUNDUN

like that, there's an idea in the air. A

picture in my head. I wait to see which way it goes.

A young, frightened boy. His eyes are long black streaks. Sticking out of them, a pair of nails. A boy with nails for eyes.

That evening I do the first of several drawings in ink and acrylic. There he is. He hasn't got a name yet, or a story, but he's already the boy with nails for eyes. A few weeks later, I start on a rough idea of an illustrated story. A sick town on the edge of a war, a lonely kid, a journey into the dark.

I work on the story for the next few years. It's pretty rubbish, but I'm learning. Details gather gradually.

A few years later, living in York with Anna, our house is broken into. Some of my PC equipment is stolen, along with it all my artwork and all the drafts of the story. After a few painful days hunting all the second-hand shops in the city for my stolen work, I decide to start again.

This is, in retrospect, a good thing. I hone the story.

We move to Bristol. The story's kicked into gear. Lots of fluff has been jettisoned. Anna and I talk the story over a lot. She's been a part of it since almost the beginning - it wouldn't be what it is without her. Whenever I'm stuck, which is often, she's guaranteed to find the problem, if not the solution.

One day, against my better judgement, I try one page as a comic, just to see.

"Shit," I say.

It looks good.

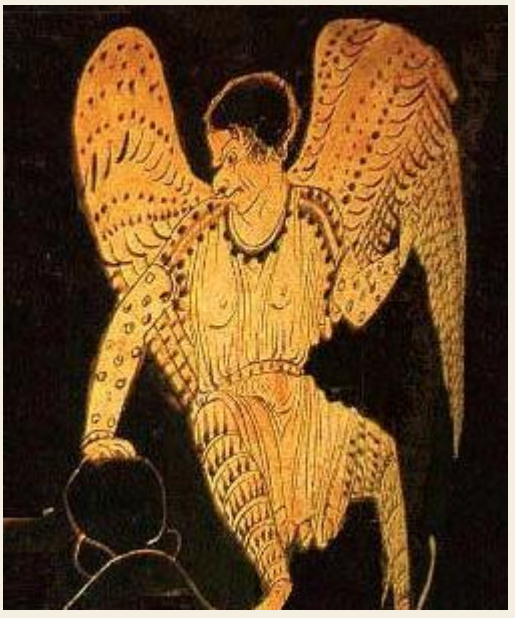
2

It moves!
The enhanced version of The Boy with Nails for Eyes

2010. Anna's away. I'm home alone for a few days. I'm taking a break because I'm exhausted. I decide to watch something – but what?

I don't want to watch a comedy because I'm alone. I don't want to watch a horror because ditto. Then I remember a DVD I picked up from a charity shop a few weeks back – a recording of an opera, *The Minotaur* by Harrison Birtwistle.

I picked it up on a whim, primarily because of my love for mythology, but I remember Birtwistle's name from book I've read recently, and I figure it might be a good watch. The pictures on the box promise something quite gruesome and intense, but inwardly I scoff. It's an opera. How scary can it be?



I'm terrified.
I love *it.*

An hour later I've gone foetal in my chair. I peer at the screen through my fingers.

There's a woman lying on stage. She's bleeding, moaning. Dying. The Minotaur's just finished goring her. The orchestra sounds like it's having a collective panic attack. As I watch, transfixed, another woman runs on stage. She's smeared in black make-up, her hair fixed in a oily punkish mess, one of her arms a huge black wing. She's a Ker, an ancient Greek death-spirit. She vaults on stage, throws her head back and screams –

I

mean

SCREAMS

– in a way that, presumably, only a classically trained singer can do – before she falls on the dying woman at the centre of the stage, rips out her heart and eats it.

I'm terrified.

I *love* it.

I've been thinking about it for a while, but this has decided me: I want to make a soundtrack for *The Boy with Nails for Eyes*.

Previous page: a painting of a Ker, ca. 400 BC

Below: *Lemminkäinen's Mother*, by Akseli Gallen-Kallela, showing the death of Lemminkäinen, one of the heroes of the Kalevala. The swan is visible in the background.
Bottom: Jean Sibelius

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When *The Boy with Nails for Eyes* is published, it won't just be as a book.

Alongside the book there will also be an enhanced digital version, incorporating original music, sound effects and animation. The idea is to take the best of what two mediums can offer – comics and animation – and combine them.

Here, I want to go into the development of the idea. (I'll get into the whys and wherefores in a later chapter.) As with my previous chapter, there'll be a bit of reminiscing.

Here we go.

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2008

I'm working on *The Boy*, as we've come to call it, in earnest. For now I'm still on the prologue. I've dug in hard, spending a lot of time on it. If I'm honest, it's reaching a point that it's almost unhealthy; the story is in my head constantly.

I've never made a long-form comic before. Learning on the job – a lot of back and forth: deletions, corrections, dead-ends. I'm blundering about, moving forward almost, it feels, by accident. I abandon a lot of pages as I realise that they simply don't work – not as images, but as elements in the story.

(I'm learning one of the most valuable, and therefore hardest, lessons I can learn: that something may be perfectly satisfactory in itself, but still insufficient as an element in a bigger structure – and therefore only fit for removal. In this sense story-building is, I imagine, like architecture; you're after an optimal ratio between weight and strength.)

One morning I'm pencilling. Anna's reading. We're looking for something to listen to on the radio.

"There," Anna says, indicating. "Sibelius. How about that?"

Jean Sibelius. One of the most prominent composers of the 20th century, and a Finnish national icon. As a Finn, Anna's known about him forever. It's possible – I'm not totally sure – that this is the first time I've heard of him. The radio programme is a showcase of some of his best-known pieces. On it goes.

The presenter tells us that the first piece will be a tone poem, *The Swan of Tuonela*. The piece depicts the swan that swims on the river surrounding Tuonela, the land of the dead, in the Finnish national epic, the Kalevala. I settle down to draw.

It's early morning, the shutters are closed. Cold, dark. And out of the dark glides this sound.

Above: an early image from *The Boy with Nails for Eyes*, back when the story was starting out. This page was ultimately removed from the story.

Picture it. It's early morning, the shutters are closed. Cold, dark.

And out of that dark glides this *sound*. (As I write this, remembering that moment, my neck hairs stand up.)

A single tone. It's played by the low strings, the double basses. It crests out of the thick dark silence like a whale lifting its back out of the water.

How can something so massive move so delicately? The grace of vast things.

There's a phrase in *The Faerie Queene* by Edmund Spenser that's said to have moved John Keats to tears: "the sea-shouldering whale". Yes. This sound's like that. Or like when the moon passes overhead, low enough for you, stretched tiptoe, to graze it with your fingers. The trails of your fingertips in moondust.

The tone moves seamlessly through the strings, climbing as it goes. First the cellos, who pass it to the violas. Because the strings in an orchestra are arranged in a semi-circle around its centre, the conductor, from right (low) to left (high), the movement *up* is also a movement *across*, sweeping from one edge of space to the other.

The violins lift it to its peak – quiet as it is, the sound's now stratospheric. It's like a swallow: delicate as it is – and, yes, you could crush it, without much effort, in one hand – if you tried to keep up with it once it's in the air, if you tried to match its movements with your clumsy, dense human body, you couldn't handle the G-forces. You'd black out.

We are, by now, all of – what? ten, fifteen seconds? – into the piece. Then the voice of the swan comes, an acidic, mournful iceberg of a sound.

I put down my pencil and listen. I'm entranced.

Above: An early, abandoned page from *The Boy with Nails for Eyes*.

2003

I've been spending a frankly irresponsible amount of time neither drawing, nor painting, nor even playing *GTA*, but instead messing around with a piece of music software which a friend was kind enough to pirate for me. It's my final year at university. I haven't been to a lecture in weeks.

(Some time down the line, visiting a friend in Yorkshire, bombing across the Dales in his little open-top MG, blasting *The Pixies at the BBC* at an unnecessary but nevertheless completely appropriate volume, I'll experience a nearly religious level of sudden-onset panic when he asks how long I've got before my final exams and I realise it's six weeks – *six* – *fucking* – *weeks* – and I know *nothing*.)

I've run into a friend at the student union. I pass her my headphones so she can listen to one of my tunes. After thirty seconds, give or take, she looks at me, eyes wide. "Bloody hell Shaun, you've really come on with this music stuff."

This makes me suspicious.

I take the headphones back. I realise I've messed up – she's not been listening to my music at all, but instead 'Afrika Shox' by Leftfield.

I mutter an explanation, find my track, and hand her back the headphones.

She listens thoughtfully for a minute. Then –

"Well," she says. "Another drink?"

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2004

I'm a graduate. Armed with my degree in English literature, I do the only sensible thing. I get a job in web design.

In the 90s, back when the internet was all fields, I taught myself some basic HTML. This was so I could create nerdishly detailed websites on Geocities about Warhammer and the *Alien* franchise. Now, in my new job, I brush

This is like being half-way through building a house only to find out that everyone's going to stop using foundations.

off these old skills and start getting to grips with fresh technologies like CSS and Flash.

The company I work for is newly established. There's not much money. In fact I'm getting paid just enough for me, in effect, to be working for the privilege of gradual starvation.

A year later Anna and I leave for York, where we share a house on a quiet little street with two DJs, one specialising in breakbeat, the other in gabber (if you don't know gabber, it's basically a nosebleed at 190 beats per minute). When it's clear I'll have to take a part-time job in order to fund my current job, I quit. But I've been learning all this time, and now I can do stuff online that my teenage self couldn't even have dreamed of.

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2009

Following the encounter with Sibelius, I've fallen into classical music in a big way, to the extent that I have dreams about it. My dad gives me a copy of Alex Ross' *The Rest is Noise*, a history of Western classical music in the 20th century. I devour it. (I learn a host of new names, among them Harrison Birtwistle – a little while later I'll see a DVD of an opera by him in a charity shop and, on a whim, pick it up.)

I buy a copy of *Music Theory for Dummies* and read it very carefully, making cryptic, spiderishly indecipherable notes in the margins.

I pick up the music software I used back in uni (I pay for my copy this time). I download a lot of orchestral samples and soundfonts, and start experimenting.

2010

I've finished the prologue of *The Boy with Nails for Eyes*, incorporating music and animation. Drawing on my web design skills, I've used the Flash format, and I'm really pleased with the results. I upload the prologue to a popular website for Flash-based creations – by the end of the first day it's had several thousand hits. People leave reviews, almost all of them highly positive. I float to the pub to celebrate.

I upload the following two chapters over the next few months. They get a similar response. I'm utterly thrilled.

Then, in April that year, Steve Jobs publishes his open letter 'Thoughts on Flash', outlining why he won't allow Flash to be used on Apple's new products – the iPad and the iPod. (Maybe you've heard of them.)

In web design circles the letter causes what is, I believe, technically known as a stage-four total clusterfuck.

Even before the dust clears everyone realises that this is the end of Flash. (A year and a half later Adobe, its maker, will announce that it's ceasing development.)

This is, in my situation, like being half-way through building a house only to find out that in the next few months everyone's going to stop using foundations.

Realising that I am, in effect, delivering my baby directly into a technology-coffin, I abandon the animated version to the digital dust, and concentrate on the comic alone.

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Above: a test page, establishing the look of the town.

2021

The Boy with Nails for Eyes has been picked up by Cast Iron Books after my previous publisher, mid-way through the publication process, decided to step back from graphic novels. I'm talking with Lizzie, the founder of Cast Iron Books, and mention that *The Boy* was originally going to be a part-animated.

"Really?" she says. "Tell me about that."

A few months later I'm teaching myself web stuff again, getting to grips with changes in technology. I'm also brushing up my animation and video-editing skills, and writing music at what is, for me, a ridiculous rate. The digital version of *The Boy with Nails for Eyes* is back on the cards, this time using new technologies. (Open source! Un-cancellable!) I have two chapters done, only four left to go before the whole thing's finished.

I'm quietly thrilled to be fulfilling my ambitions for the project a decade down the line, but there's a hurry. I have a few months to go before the Kickstarter's launched...

3
The Behemoths
A page stage by stage

I've convinced myself that if I can pull this page off, I can pull off the whole thing. It turns out that's premature – there's an entire bellicose, well-armed, brutish cohort of mistakes, blunders, reversals, waiting in ambush down the road – whole tranches of text to be deleted, entire pages cut out.

But one thing's true enough: this page is the climax of the prologue. Which means that it's a key moment to convince people that this is a story worth their most precious commodity – their time. Getting it right is essential.

In this update I want to go into detail on a single page of *The Boy with Nails for Eyes*. I've come to call this page 'The Behemoths', for reasons that are hopefully obvious. I'm going to go into through the process of bringing the page from initial sketch to final image.

Getting this right is essential.

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The Sketch

It begins with an initial sketch, done in Photoshop. My sketchwork doesn't follow a strict pattern – sometimes I do these things with pencil and paper, sometimes digitally. One of the great advantages of digital sketching is that variations and alterations can be tried on-the-fly – when I'm working on a complex image, that's a useful tool to have.

At this stage I'm working quickly. My aim is to capture, as much as the layout, the *energy* of the image. Hmm. 'Energy' is a vague word. Let me unpack that a little.

Actually – hold that thought. I have quite a bit to say on 'energy', it turns out, and I think this would be best turned to later.

So. The sketch complete, I'm ready to get to the image proper, beginning with –

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I am often least creative where I am most committeed, or least committed. The sweet spot between them is 'play'.

Left: the first sketch of the Behemoths.
Below: Yorkminster
Bottom: Yorkminster; this was the first image used to begin making the Behemoths.

The First Behemoth

One of the hardest things is starting.

Most of the images I've done for *The Boy with Nails for Eyes*, certainly the more complex images, haven't started deliberately – 'I'll do this' – but instead tentatively – 'Let me try this out.' Being frank, this is a way of minimising the risk of failure, which can sometimes paralyse me, but also a way of coming at things playfully. I am, I find, often least creative where I am most committed. The same is true for 'least committed'. If it's possible not to care enough, it's also possible to care too much. But there's a sweet spot in between those two, and that spot is labelled 'play'.

When I go in with that spirit – being involved without being intimately staked; a child's game, life and death stakes that don't matter, a war you can walk away from; commitment, as it were, without carry – the results are often the best. (I say all that as if that attitude was something that comes to me easily, instead of being, as it is, a very difficult state to get into, and *very* difficult to maintain.) So I began the first Behemoth by just messing around.

I had several photos of Yorkminster from when Anna and I lived in York. I began by cutting those up and re-assembling them in Photoshop. The result, before I even knew it, is the face of the first Behemoth. I follow up my mining other photos – the Hagia Sophia provides the curved dome of the skull, Bristol Cathedral provide the spires that are its ears. (Top tip: organise your photos. I must have spent days of my life hunting down photos in bizarre, labyrinthine folder structures that seem to be the work of a concussed toddler rather than an adult human being.)

Above left: close-up of the first Behemoth's face.
Above right: close-up of the body.
Below: the first complete Behemoth. Note the club, which didn't make it into the final image.

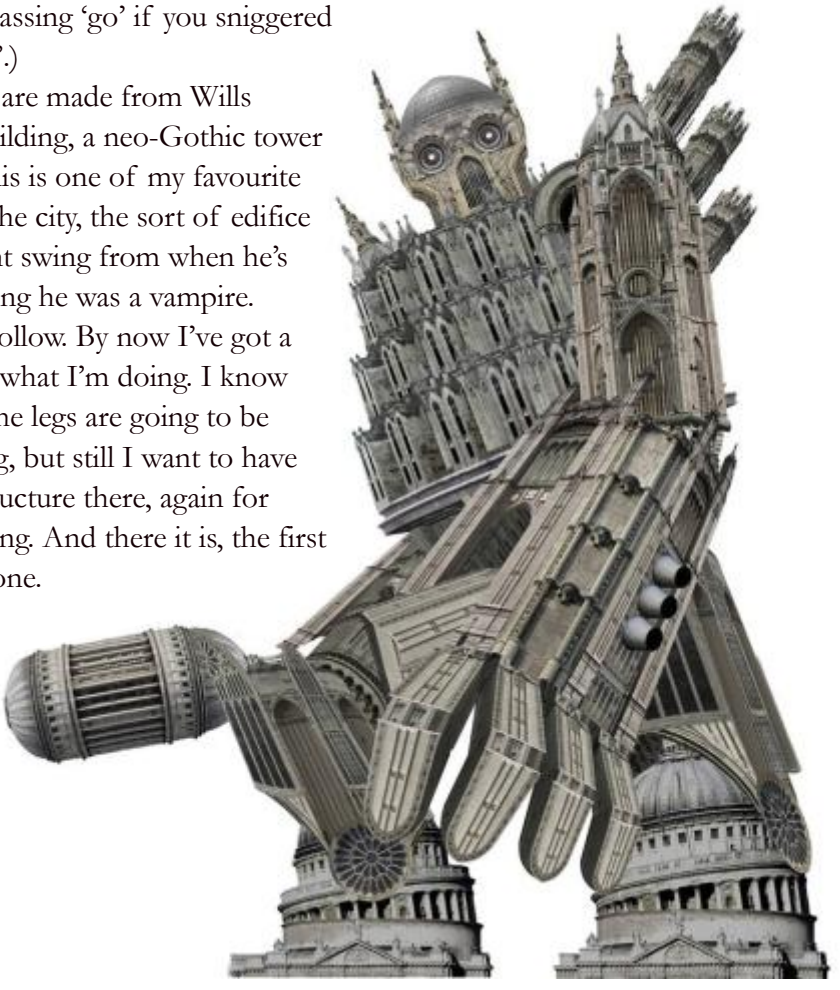
With the face complete, I realise I'm working at a ridiculous scale – if that face were printed out at full size, it alone would be a few metres high. I decide to stick with that scale, as this means that when I come to use the Behemoths in pages later on in *The Boy*, I'll have a high-resolution template to work from.

Moving on to the body, I work from lots of photos I took of the buttresses of Bristol Cathedral. (Proceed directly to jail without passing 'go' if you sniggered at 'buttresses'.)

The arms are made from Wills Memorial Building, a neo-Gothic tower in Bristol. This is one of my favourite buildings in the city, the sort of edifice Batman might swing from when he's secretly wishing he was a vampire.

The legs follow. By now I've got a flow, I know what I'm doing. I know the bulk of the legs are going to be hidden by fog, but still I want to have the whole structure there, again for future-proofing. And there it is, the first Behemoth done.

Below: Wills Memorial Building



I'm asking you to inhabit this place for a time; you won't be able to do that without being allowed to get acquainted.

The Town

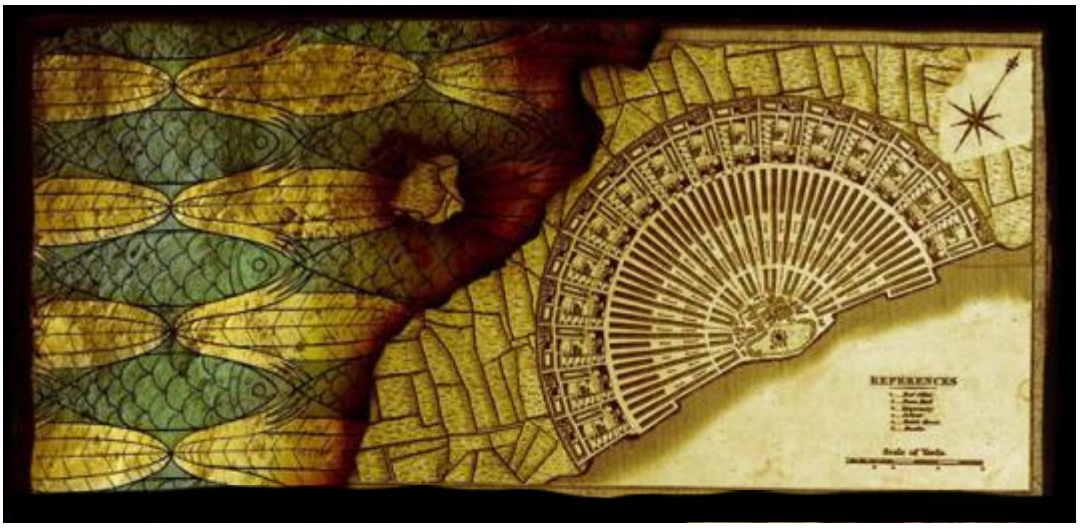
By this point I've realised that there's a problem with my original plan.

As said above, this image is a key moment to draw in the reader. Which means that this is no time to be coy – the reader has to be presented with all the information the moment will allow. This has to be a moment of heavy information saturation. So I'm going to have to show much more of the town than just a single street. The whole thing, or at least enough of it to give the reader a good idea as to its layout, needs to be shown. I'm asking you to inhabit this place for a time; you won't be able, let alone willing, to do that without being allowed to get acquainted.

Now, confession. Before I actually began creating the pages of the prologue, I hadn't got a good idea of how the town was laid out. Some things I knew – at the centre, on the slopes of hill ending in a sea-cliff there's the husk of an older, abandoned village; on the outskirts there's a semi-circle of factories with chimneys spewing smoke – but of what lay in between, I'm ignorant.

This has been a habit of mine, but thankfully one I'm getting over – getting stuck in before I'm totally sure what it is I'm aiming at. As said, starting is hard – but I've sometimes over-compensated by skipping several stages, usually the ones involving planning. (Top tip: this might seem like a time-saver. It isn't. Plan. Leave space for happy accidents or sudden insights, sure. But plan.)

My only role is to follow along. Artists don't make art; it's the other way around.



It was while making the pages of the prologue that I made the image above. I later cut it, when I realised that it told the a part of the history of the town that was unnecessary to the story at this stage. Too much, in other words – out it goes. But one thing useful about it was that I had, right there, a map of the town, complete with street names. Using this as a template, I sketched out an image of the town from a much higher and broader vantage than in the original sketch.

(I wish I'd taken pics of the image through the drawing stages, but, well, hindsight.)

The drawing was done on Bristol Board at A2 size (actually two sheets of A3 taped together). The pencil sketch was rendered in stages – first using inkwash, which is how I refer to diluted Indian ink. Going in stages using smaller and smaller brushes, this lays out the basic structures and shadows. My aim here is to arrive at a rough feeling of three-dimensionality; once I start to feel that I could put my hand around the edges within the image, I'm ready to move on.

I bring out the details using a variety of other media: pencil, chalk, charcoal, wax crayon and acrylic paint. There's a lot of back-and-forth between these, essentially playing with things until the image feels right. Which is to say, sooner or later there's a point where I step back and can't see anything that compels me back to the page again.

I don't know whether this is true for others, but for me every drawing or painting involves peaks and troughs of risk. At times the image feels almost like it could spin out of control, or that it's crossing a tightrope; the gentlest of exhalations could dislodge, send it tumbling, crashing (art is always done without a net) – while at other times it feels sure-footed, long-legged, knows exactly where it needs to go, my only role is to follow it along. (Artists don't make art; it's the other way around.)

This stage, filling in the detail, definitely falls into the latter zone – it's a time to enjoy myself, to really take pleasure in watching the piece emerge.

Once that's done it's time to go digital.

…

Colour

With the image scanned (a process involving much tedious rigmarole which I won't go into here), the first thing is colour. This always comes, first, in the form of an overlay in tawny brown – the colouring of every image for the comic begins with this shade, which I've used so consistently that I have the hex code off by heart for years.

After the colour's put in place, I do a little digital fussing – this is usually fairly minor, tweaks to the levels of the image, adding details or (more often than I'd like) fixing mistakes. For the Behemoths image, this actually involves a little digital painting, adding in the townsfolk in the streets. This was a time-saving decision – putting them in digitally meant that I could fill the streets in minutes rather than, well, a lot more minutes.

…

Clouds and sea

Next, the heavy-duty stuff. Clouds and sea are added, both from photos. I always use photos of my own when I'm doing photomanipulation stuff, or else make use of explicitly public domain stuff.

I once attended a comic workshop a long time back which was being given by, I think it's fair to say, a legend in the world of comics. They were telling us about their turn to digital, away from physical artwork, and mentioned that for occasional background stuff – sea, sky, so forth – you could just grab photos off the net and apply filters in Photoshop – no one would ever know.

They're probably right on that, but the notion still makes me wince. For one thing it's just *too easy* – the internet has

already devalued a great number of things by, paradoxically, making them more readily accessible. But those photos belong to someone. Applying filters to them won't change that any more than re-painting my neighbour's car will make it mine. In the end I use my own photos because a) I know what I need and I can go out and snap it, and b) I'm the easiest person in the world for me to get permission from; I can guarantee a reply within two, three days tops.

…

Even small discrepancies in blending and contrast can have a hugely outsize effect.

The Behemoths

This is the moment when all the major elements of the image are in place, so it's the time to get their positions exactly right – moving things about down the line will involve much more work if the process of blending and finessing has been started.

And that – blending, finessing – has often been the hardest thing with many of the images for *The Boy with Nails for Eyes*. Because I make use of both digital art and –

Hmm. I never really know what word to use in contrast to 'digital': 'traditional' sounds hidebound; 'physical' sounds, well, faintly ridiculous, like I put on lycra and a sweat-band before I start drawing (instead of my usual poncho and monocle). Let's say 'non-digital', even though I don't much like that either.

Because I use both digital and non-digital techniques in my image-making, one difficulty is making these techniques sit well alongside one another. A lot of this comes down to colouring, which is one reason I use a fairly limited palette in colouring *The Boy with Nails for Eyes*. But it also comes down to subtleties of blending and contrast in which even small discrepancies can have a hugely outsize effect.

For instance, with the Behemoths that most glaring problem is the lack of distance – the Behemoths looked, when I first dropped them into the image, as if they're at no distance whatsoever. They're simply floating on top; for all that they share a boundary, they're contained in the same frame, they float in a space completely separate to the rest of the image.

Obviously this is an important thing to overcome for the sake of the power of the image to be convincing – but there's more to it than that.

Top: The first round of blending.
Middle and bottom: Before and after applying the fog effect.

Alfred Hitchcock called the Z-axis – the line of depth – the axis of emotion. It is along this axis that we are approached: intimacy, threat, safety, are all measured along this axis. It is along this axis that we experience the pleasure of arrival, the fear of harm. To give an image depth is, in a certain sense, to give it emotional weight, heft. This may be why, for me, for all that I love some of it, abstract art, which insists on uniformity of depth along the picture plane, often seems so unmoving.

It's not just a matter of making the (digital) Behemoths feel a part of the same image as the (non-digital) town. Though they do. The Behemoths need to have the impression of distance in order to carry the feeling of vastness, because this creates the impression of their being a threat. A distance needs to be established, so that there is the possibility of it being traversed.

So much for the theory – in practice, I spend a lot of time lightening their shadows, flattening the dark spaces. This is to mimic the effects of distance, the loss of contrast, the dust in the atmosphere that makes far-off objects appear flatter and less defined than nearer ones. Once that's been done, even without a proper harmony between the digital and non-digital elements, the town and the Behemoths look like they're occupying the same space.

…

Final stages

Next, blending. To really bring the digital and non-digital elements together, I add a fog effect throughout the image.

Rather than do this with straight digital paint, I take another sheet of Bristol board and saturate it with several layers of inkwash. I do this very quickly, adding more wash before the previous layer has dried. This stresses the paper, warping it, adding a lot of distressed texture to the surface. I use this as a texture for the fog, which adds another level of subtle physicality to the image. (Almost all the decisions I'm making about this image are in the service of

Top: The fog applied.
Middle: After adding the crows and the smoke.
Bottom: How the smoke appears elsewhere in the book.

The image is complete, and all that remains is to add details that will bring it to life.

making it have depth and heft. The image has to have weight and presence if it's going to capture the reader, and convince them that *this world is so*.)

As well as the bank of fog that runs over the horizon of the image, obscuring the line between sea and clouds, I run tendrils of it along the streets of the town. The effect is subtle, but it helps the digital and non-digital worlds come together. Now, instead of being divided very clearly into digital and non-digital realms, there's a gradual movement from the bottom the picture (mainly non-digital) to the top (mainly digital).

From this point we're in the safe zone. The image is, for all intents and purpose, complete, and all that remains is to add details that will bring it to life. First of these are the crows, which are the other main story element in the prologue. I draw the crows in pencil and scan these into the image.

Once again, I use levelling effects to give the feeling of distance. As well as drawing the eye across the page, making sure that certain details of the town are captured by the reader, the crows give a much-needed feeling of movement to the image – I reinforce this by having the crows fly in the direction of reading, left to right. This adds to the sense of progression – we're seeing a process in action, something is changing in the town and we're witnessing the effects.

Final detail – the chimney smoke. This is very simple, just a matter of preparing a Photoshop brush – playing with scatter and opacity – before painting with my graphics tablet. But even here, there's some things to think over.

Elsewhere in the comic, I've presented the chimney smoke as thick columns of black, totally opaque.

Above: The final image.

Carrying this approach through to this image will, for obvious reasons, be less-than-useful. So instead I break the rules completely, not only making the smoke highly transparent, but also making it more transparent the nearer it is to the viewer. This is a complete cheat, but allows the image to be visible without huge lines of black across it.

And there's the finished image. I think, of all the images I put together for *The Boy with Nails for Eyes*, this is in the running for my favourite. Not just because the image succeeded – and there were several times when it nearly spun out of control, several more when I nearly gave up, convinced I couldn't land this bloated carcass in so fierce a cross-wind (and yes, the possibility of quitting an art project mid-way does sometimes have the feeling of deciding you can't land a plane when you're already in the bloody air) – but because it was the success of this image, the most ambitious I had attempted for this project, perhaps my most ambitious ever, which convinced me that I could complete the book as a whole, and at the level I aspired to.

Show me a lot of pages from *The Boy with Nails for Eyes* and, honestly, I'll immediately see a whole lot of mistakes and things that irk me. There were a lot of pages I simply moved on from, without the full satisfaction of completion. They were good enough, is all. But this page is almost devoid of that feeling. I am thoroughly happy with it.

When I draw, I try to capture not just the look, but also the texture and presence, *of the thing.*

'Energy'

Now. Earlier on I said that I wanted to unpack a few things about the word 'energy'. Let me get into that here.

What I said was, lemmesee: 'My aim is to capture, as much as the layout, the *energy* of the image.' I think by 'energy' I mean at least two things.

The first thing I mean is essentially practical: the movement of the viewer's eye as it encounters the image.

There are certain tricks that can be used in composition. For example, the human eye is always drawn, first and most powerfully, to recognisable human or animal features, especially faces. (The evolutionary reasons for doing this are pretty obvious – humans and animals are generally the most interesting parts of the environment for us because they represent the greatest threat or, conversely, I suppose, security.)

Second, points of high contrast also attract the eye – areas of dense activity where extremes of dark and light rub shoulders. If you want the viewer to pay attention to an area of a drawing, depict that area in greater detail than the rest, and make its light and darks more pronounced than in the rest.

But that's not specifically what I mean, that sort of trick. I mean something more like choreographing a dance.

Let me bring that down to earth a little. I want the viewer to explore the space of the image in a certain way. In this sense, every image is its own self-contained drama, with an opening outlay of the roles and the relationship (conflicting or harmonious) between them, then an increase of tension building to a climax.

In the case of the Behemoths, I want the reader's eye to begin with the largest of the Behemoths, before tracking along the rooftops below to (what I think of as) the second Behemoth on the left. This seems simple but in effect it's telling a story – in fact the entire prologue – in miniature. First the threat (the War), then the stakes (the town and the people in it), then a recapitulation of the threat in a more buried or distant register, so that the danger appears not only huge, elevated, but also broad, pervasive – everywhere. The impression I want to give is that, for the people of the town, the world and danger are becoming synonymous.

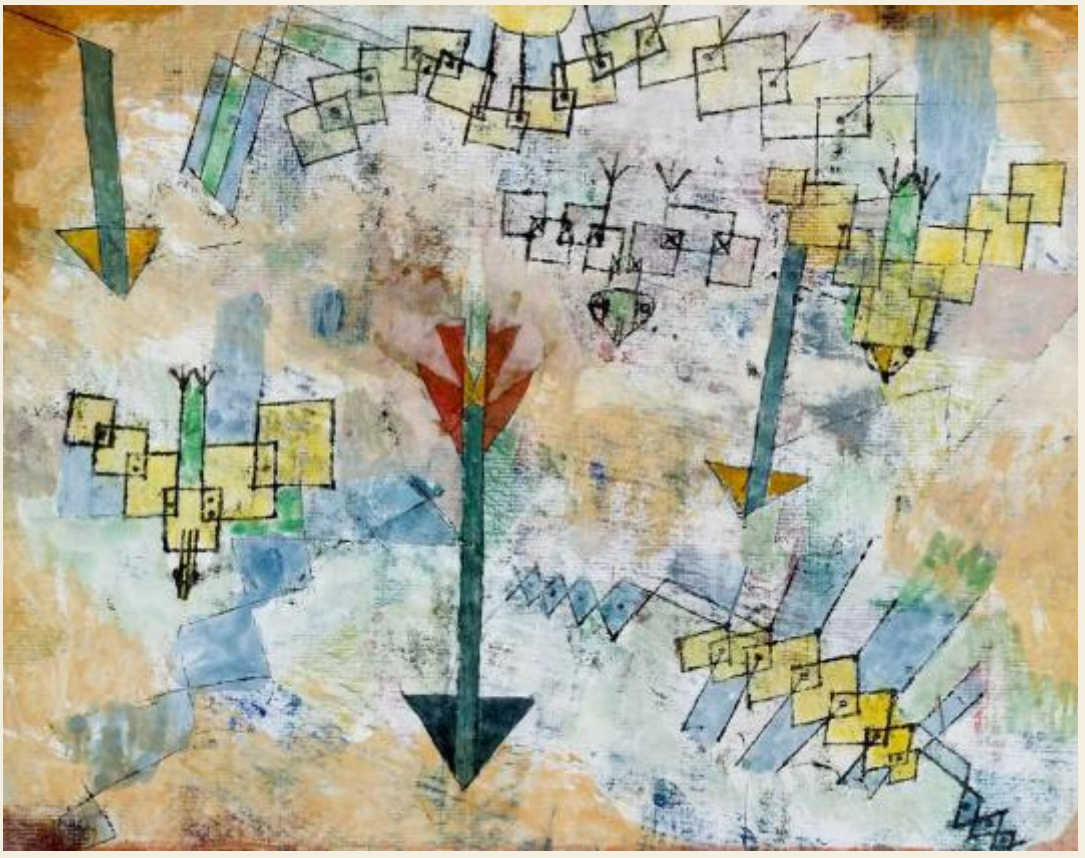
That's the first thing.

The second thing I mean by 'energy' is the need, when drawing, to capture more than the simple appearance of something.

Put another way: when I draw, I try to apply the principle of capturing not just the look, but also the texture and *presence*, of the thing.

So, for example, when drawing the rooftops in the sketch back at the beginning of this update, I used hard, aggressive strokes of the stylus, imitating the feel of the interlocking slates. By contrast, when I draw the tendrils of fogs coiling through the streets, I allow a soft, wispy movement to travel down my arm and be emitted through my hand. The idea is that I'm sculpting as much as outlining – the movements of my hand are an attempt to delineate the object in space, with the paper (the tablet, in this case) just happening to be there to capture those movements.

A few years ago Anna and I had the immense good fortune of making



Left: *Birds Swooping Down and Arrows* (1919) by Paul Klee.

friends with a woman who was a dramatic vocal coach – an amazing instructor and director, especially of Shakespeare. (She passed away not long after the beginning of the pandemic. I miss her terribly.) She taught us that a key part of her method of acting was waiting – waiting for the breath to, as she put it, drop in to the body. That drop of breath, that disturbance, would bring with it the thought that would then be carried out on the exhalation that followed, becoming speech. The idea was to make the action and the thought identical, rather than one following the other. This would lead to performances that were natural, unforced, present.

I feel the same way about drawing. The thought – if you want to call it 'thought' rather than 'feeling' or 'sensation' or 'impulse' – has to be identical with the action, if it is to be honest. The motion is compelled, not willed – I'm just along for the ride. I'm the instrument, not the director, of the action.

Paul Klee called drawing 'taking a line for a walk'. To me, drawing is conversing with space (which is, honestly, just a less strange and more dishonest way of saying 'that which is'), and allowing that conversation to be overheard.

4
Comics & Film
Some thoughts

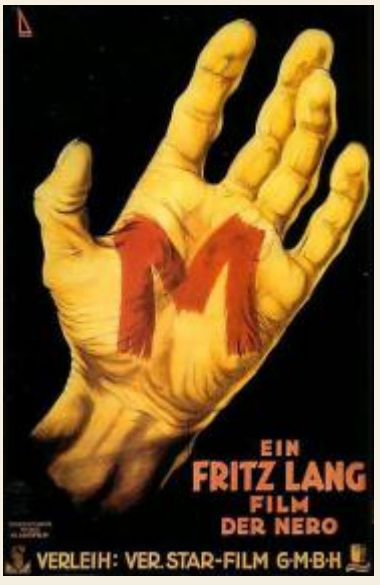
Reading my previous update about it, I imagine you'll have got the idea that the music is the most important part of the enhancements being made for the digital version of The Boy with Nails for Eyes. *That's not quite true – the music is, to me, a major factor in making the enhanced version, but far from being the only one. There's also the animation.*

But in any case, the question remains: why? Why add these things?

As said previously, the key aim of creating the enhanced version of *The Boy with Nails for Eyes* is to take advantage of certain capabilities of film and comics, and bring them together.

There's a natural inclination to consider film and comics to be generic neighbours. Hell, maybe even housemates.

This isn't just because the biggest film franchises in the world right now are based on comics, but because the comparison seems, on the face of it, so straightforwardly natural: both are visual media, making dramatic use of sequential imagery. ('Dramatic' should be heard in the widest sense – the presentation of an unstable situation tending to a climax; so what I'm talking about needn't be just a story, a fiction, but also a philosophical argument or a political statement.) What could be more natural than to consider comics and film, then, as media siblings?



There's a natural inclination to consider film and comics to be generic neighbours.

One issue is that this view tends to slide towards the idea that comics are, basically, deficient films. Films that lack something.

Again it seems perfectly natural to take this view; as opposed to films based on comics, how many comics can you think of that are based on films?

Excluding tie-ins like *Alien vs. Predator* or *The Thing*, which don't adapt a film but rather extend the universe of a film franchise, off the top of my head, I can think of one: *M* by Jon J. Muth, a re-imagining of Fritz Lang's film from 1931.

The choice of this film is an interesting one to adapt. *M* was Lang's first film that made use of sound. It has a multi-layered soundtrack, in contrast to most of the films of the time, which were more straightforwardly 'theatrical'; sound in cinema was young, and the natural tendency of directors making use of the new technology was to draw on the only existing medium that could then combine sound and moving image: theatre.

Lang went beyond that, exploiting the possibilities of sound to create something beyond the reach of theatre. For example the murderer in the film, played by Peter Lorre, frequently whistles the tune from Grieg's *In the Halls of the Mountain King*. This is leitmotif, the association of a musical phrase with a character or object or situation, a technique borrowed from opera. As the film progresses, even a few notes of the tune alert us to the presence of the murderer, whether on-screen or off. Later, Steven Spielberg would use the same technique to imply the hidden presence of a murderous fish. (You know the tune I mean.)

In the comic, Muth has to resort to something of a cheat. Instead of using the sound of the tune, he instead places a graphic of the musical score of *In the Halls...* over the page to indicate the murderer whistling – later, as in the film, that graphic reappears whenever the murderer is nearby.

The solution is elegant but, to me, dissatisfying. If we didn't know about the use of sound in Lang's film, would the graphic presentation of the music have the same impact? If you can't read music fluently (I can't), how can the tune have that visceral, immediate quality of music when it is heard? The graphic is more-or-less abstract, and hence arbitrary – it could be replaced with another image and still serve the same function, simply by being repeated whenever the murderer's around.

It seems perfectly natural to consider comics as being films that lack.

So, that's one film-to-comic adaptation. And it's the only one I can think of. Actually, wait – there's another one that occurs to me, Darren Aronofsky's 2005 graphic novel *The Fountain*, which was a beleaguered attempt by Aronofsky to salvage a rejected film script. (The film was later resurrected and released in 2006.) But does that count as an actual adaptation, film to comic? Or, rather, a last resort by a frustrated film-maker?

Hopefully you get my point. There will be other comics that come from films, for sure – but, now, take a minute to think of films that are adaptions of comics.

Thought of a few? Okay.

So, it seems perfectly natural, this being the slant of the relationship between these mediums, to consider comics, as said, as being films that *lack*. After all, one stage in the film-making process is the storyboard, the pre-visualisation of a film script prior to filming. A storyboard is pretty damn similar to a comic – this being the case, then surely its legitimate to consider the medium of comics in this way – something, in itself, deficient, awaiting the completion of a film.

Previous page: The poster for *M* by Fritz Lang. *Above*: From John J. Muth's adaptation of *M*.

Above: From *Watchmen* by Alan Moore, Dave Gibbons and John Higgins

How does that view express itself in critical treatments of the comics medium?

Take the quote below, from an article in the *Financial Times*. The article's by Nigel Andrews, the *FT*'s film critic, and is discussing the 2009 Zack Snyder film adaptation of *Watchmen*. Towards the end of the article, Andrews focuses on a three-panel sequence in Chapter Nine of the book – it's actually the last comics sequence in the chapter before the book breaks away to one of its regular text-based sequences.

"[The chapter] closes with three astonishing black frames bare but for a sprinkle of stars, a sense of foreboding and a diminuendo of speech balloons. This three-stage speech is uttered to his off-frame beloved by an off-frame superhero, taking a Martian sabbatical. [...] Final frame: silence, and void, and twinkling blackness.

Can Hollywood handle that? Can it handle the soar of thought and reach of eschatological feeling? Can it do justice to the book's succession of frozen images whose meanings wrestle for release, and whose gestures reach towards the dream of motion, like the unfinished sculptures of Michelangelo? In the best comic books and graphic novels, movement is the deferred magic that gives the pages their dormant power and dynamism. In the greatest cinema, stillness is the magic to which motion nostalgically, primally aspires to return. That is why the relationship between the two forms, though it may never be a marriage, will always be alive, mysterious and passionate as a romance."

(One thing I should note, before I get into the actual content of Andrews' argument, is that I'm not as enamoured of this moment in *Watchmen* as he is. Just prior to this page, Dr Manhattan, the speaker, has rhapsodised to his ex-lover ("off-screen beloved"?), Laurie Jupiter, aka Silk Spectre, about the unlikeliness of her birth. There's a lot hanging on this moment – Jupiter's been trying to convince the good doctor to return to, and save, the Earth. All her arguments fail. Manhattan, elevated as he is above human concerns, has shown dwindling

attachments to humanity throughout *Watchmen*; now these threads seem a mere breath away from total severance. It is his realisation of the apparent unlikeliness of Jupiter's birth that finally persuades Manhattan: "Your mother loves a man she has every reason to hate, and of that union, of the thousand million children competing for fertilization, it was you, only you, that emerged."

In *Unweaving the Rainbow* evolutionary scientist and black-belt curmudgeon Richard Dawkins has made the same argument, calling each of our individual existences the result of an astronomical lottery:

"The instant at which a particular spermatozoon penetrated a particular egg was ... a moment of dizzying singularity. It was then that the odds against your becoming a person dropped from astronomical to single figures.

The lottery starts before we are conceived. Your parents had to meet, and the conception of each was as improbable as your own. And so on back, through your four grandparents and eight great grandparents, back to where it doesn't bear thinking about."

You, I, all of us: probabilistic miracles.

The issue with this view is that, from the point of view of God – that is, a being, like Dr Manhattan, who stands, as it were, outside of time and looks on all moments at once – all probabilities are always, already, firmly in the single figures. However improbable I might personally find the idea of such a being's existence, all probabilities, to God, are one. That which has been, is. That which is, is. That which will be, is.

God, or Dr Manhattan, finding the existence of a single human being to be miraculous – a judgement which hinge on the notion of probability – is something like you or I expressing astonishment that the stem should end with the flower, or that your arm should end in your wrist, your hand, your finger. Laurie Jupiter's existence is inevitable; it has been from the beginning of time. Like mine, like yours.

To think otherwise is to make the philosophical mistake that seems common among scientists: to consider the universe as being subject to the laws described by physics, rather than expressive of them. That we exist is an expression of the universe as inevitable as the circling of planets, the birth and death of stars. Astonishment at an outcome from unlikely odds lies in the purview of those whose perspectives are inherently limited; we humans travel over the hills and valleys of time, and it is because our views can never be more than partial that we are startled by unexpected landmarks, dropped by sudden cliffs, crushed by rocks, caught out by the weather. God has no such excuses.

But I digress.)

Presumably what Andrews says about *Watchmen* goes for all comics: "In the best comic books and graphic novels, movement is the deferred magic that gives the pages their dormant power and dynamism."

This treats comics – indeed, the "best comics" – as if the medium were somehow born asleep: their magic is 'deferred', their power and dynamism is 'dormant'. Comics, Andrews says, "reach towards the dream of motion," like Michelangelo's unfinished sculptures.

If it's their unfinished status that allows some of Michelangelo's sculptures to "reach toward the dream of motion"

then this seems to suggest that comics are inherently unfinished. Not in the usual sense that a work of art is incomplete without an audience, but incomplete in themselves: groping after, but never quite reaching, the motion to which they aspire. (An aspiration from which, in fact, comics are doubly removed – it's not motion but the dream of motion that they reach toward. What's the difference? Well, imagine, being hungry, the difference between reaching towards food and reaching towards a dream of food.) Even the presence of a reader can't fix that kind of incompleteness.

Film, by contrast, wants to return to stillness – it has a 'nostalgia' for stillness that it still aspires to. But there's no suggestion here that cinema is inherently incomplete, as comics are – Andrews seems to think that cinema, unlike comics, can accomplish its desire. He cites several films that seem to achieve this: *Battleship Potemkin*, *Citizen Kane*, *Bonnie & Clyde*, *The Wild Bunch*. (I'd add to this list *La Jetée*, a French science-fiction film which consists almost entirely of still photos, and which was remade by Terry Gilliam as *Twelve Monkeys*.) Motion, Andrews seems to assume, is superior to stillness – because motion can contain or invoke, rather than just gesture towards, stillness.

Above: Godspeed You! Black Emperor in concert.

If I've not misread this, the lurking idea is the one I've framed already – that comics must therefore be, compared to films, unfinished things. Things gesturing towards motion, but never arriving. Incomplete.

To my mind, this is – what's the word?

Wrong.

…

If motion is an advantage possessed by film, then comics, in sacrificing motion for stasis, have received something back more than worth that sacrifice: interaction. Reader involvement.

When you read a comic, you are engaged in the story in a way that passive, however-many-frames-per-second reception of a film cannot touch. Even the simple act of turning a page involves you in the narrative in a way that film transitions – smash-cuts, dissolves, fades – cannot hope to match. This is because the page-turn involves you – you perform it, directly, yourself.

The key element is time, the way it is treated by both mediums. In film, time is fixed – we move from one event to another at a steady rate. Time can be manipulated, yes – slow- or fast-motion, time-lapse – but these manipulations take place within the confines of that steady flow that is essential to the medium's functioning. Mess with the flow, and film itself falls apart.

Even the act of turning a page involves you in a way that film cannot hope to match.

(I went to see post-rock titans Godspeed You! Black Emperor in concert once. As part of the show they had someone feeding film footage through a projector, throwing images on

Left: From Junji Ito's *Uzumaki*.

the backdrop. The person at the projector was controlling the flow of film by hand, gripping the film-loop every now and again to slow the footage. When they did so the film, subjected to the heat of the projector's bulb, seared and melted, so that the images bubbled, warped, disappeared. The manipulation of time that film supposedly allows is a deception. It looked great, by the way.)

In comics, by contrast, time is variable. This is because the reader – and, in a different way, the creator – are in control of its movement. (We're getting into all sorts of weird philosophical terrain here, because of course time doesn't move, any more than water swims or air flies. Rather, time is the medium of movement; it is the bone along which the muscle of movement threads, and against which it exerts itself. But leave that aside for now.) The reader can pause over a page, even a particular panel. The creator too – be they a single person or a team of people – can influence the reader's rate of progress – the decision to pause here, or to hurry on – through lay-out, density of image or text, style of imagery.

Comics are, compared to film, a more collaborative medium – the creator offers cues, but it's up to the reader whether they are picked up or not, followed or not. It's for this reason that I feel that the common comparison between comics and film is, ultimately, overstressed. A better comparison, to my mind, is between comics and theatre.

Theatre involves a shared space between creator and recipient. The immediacy of response between actor and viewer can subtly, maybe even radically, alter the performance (take hecklers at a comedy gig, for instance). This isn't so in film, where the relationship between the creator and the recipient is more one-sided and, to my mind, more straightforwardly manipulative. The interaction between creator and reader in comics, tending as it does more towards collaboration, is a large part of their power, and perhaps their single greatest advantage over film and, yes, theatre, since comics allow an even greater level of audience involvement than theatre does. You can't turn back a stage show. You can't linger over one of its moments.

If you doubt this then I suggest reading comics by masters of the form. Another example off the top of my head: horror *mangaka* Junji Ito. He's one

creator who has perfected the use of reader involvement in his storytelling. This is especially in his use of page turns.

Often you know that when you turn the page in an Ito comic you're going to see something horrifying – and it's precisely in the act of turning the page that the horror – the narrative magic, your involvement in pushing the story on – resides.

Take the image above, from Ito's *Uzumaki*.

Before going any further, a brief description of where we're at in the story. The three characters in the image are a family: mother, father, son. The father, a potter, has lately been increasingly obsessed with spirals. Beginning by incorporating them into his pottery, he gradually begins to manifest the spiral in his body – at one point, for instance, he demonstrates that he's learnt to rotate his eyes in different directions. Finally he disappears, and his wife and son discover him as shown.

This double-page spread follows a page of build-up using a short sequence of small, silent panels. The impact of the sudden double-page is augmented by the fact that the reader's act of turning the page mirrors the physical action of the woman lifting the lid to discover the fate of her husband.

(Incidentally, note the placement of the man's hands and face, at the centre of the page, their density and contrast capturing our gaze so that we skip from one to the next. Then the way the man's eyes direct us down to his curled tongue, a spiral that has been rendered with an almost abstract 'graphicality', let's call it, so that we end our journey through the image with a final presentiment of the curse that has befallen – 'uzumaki' meaning 'spiral' in Japanese. This is a deliberately and intricately structured image. Finally, note Ito's genius move of keeping the old man's glasses on – he also excels at these small, surreal, blackly humourous details, which again only augment the horror.)

It's precisely in the act of turning the page that the horror – the narrative magic – resides.

Now, what doesn't come across in the image presented this is that there's a page-fold dividing the image in the original comic. Of course this is a practical consequence of the printed book. But there's a story-telling effect as well: dividing the image in this way acts as a further increase of tension – we begin with the horrified reaction of the mother and son before we move across to the thing that has horrified them: the husband/father coiled up in the bucket. (I should note here that the image has been reversed from its original orientation, as Westerners generally read from left to right, as opposed to the right to left of Japanese.)

This is, in effect, an act of time manipulation – we witness the reaction to the stimulus before we see the stimulus itself. The horror before the horror. This is, of course, perfectly within the reach of film – however what film struggles to do is show, as Ito does, both of these things (stimulus, reaction) at the same time, in their correct spatial relationship, yet with their temporal relationship reversed.

This is, at the same time, a method of presentation that is accurate to the way in which we perceive the world. Film, in moments such as this, builds tension

through artifice – we are given a reaction shot, before we are shown the thing that caused the reaction. This isn't the way in which we engage with reality; logically and at first sight at least, stimulus must precede reaction. But is that logical picture correct?

Ito presenting both of these together is, I would argue, more accurate to our lived experience of reality, in which we, say, apprehend a perception – say something frightening, a tiger jumping onto the bonnet of our car, a spider on our pillow – *at the same moment* as our response to it. Stimulus → response is an accurate scientific or 'mechanical' picture of surprise, but it doesn't capture the *immediacy* of the experience, in which our feelings of fear and revulsion – bringing about a direct, instinctive bodily retreat – are bundled together *with the thing* that caused them, indeed are so effectively bundled that we (at least, I) seem to react even *before* full conscious perception of the cause has arrived with us (me).

Ito's layout, through its temporal and spatial play, demonstrates that comics, unlike film, because they are able to present stimulus and response simultaneously, capture this aspect of experience – perhaps better than any other medium.

…

Okay, okay. But if this is so, and if reader involvement is one of the key advantages of comics, then isn't it a step backwards to include animation in comics? Doesn't that mean the loss of involvement?

I don't think so. I would argue that instead the use of animation (leaving aside the music issue for the moment) allows creators to play with notions of control.

If the need for the reader to turn the page to advance the story means that, returning to Junji Ito, we become involved in the horror of the story, then the ability to take away that involvement means that reader control itself can be added to the creator's toolbox, as another method in telling a story.

(I don't want to give too much away, and I'll only be discussing technique and not actual story, but still, to that extent – spoiler warning.) One chapter of *The Boy with Nails for Eyes* is a dream sequence. In that chapter, I've made much more use of animation than elsewhere. This isn't an accident – it's a deliberate decision, because for the reader to be less in control of the flow of events means that they will experience something more akin to the feeling of a dream, in which we often feel that we are out of control of events. This helps to evoke one of the paradoxical qualities of dreams – that we lack this control even though the world we inhabit in sleep is, more or less, in the absence of an external world, a product of our own selves. In dreams we are at the mercy of ourselves in a way that usually applies to the world at large. In dreams we are powerless before ourselves. The loss of full control during this part of the narrative allows the medium of comics, enhanced in this way, to "gesture towards" (as Andrews might put it) this facet of our dreaming lives. This granting or refusal of reader control – the control of control, let's say – is something I've deployed throughout the story, hopefully to similar effect.

One of my principles as a storyteller is not too say anything more than I have

to about my intentions in telling any particular story. If I have a particular view I want to get across, I'll write an essay (like this one). The tale its always more intelligent than its teller – why betray the trust I have to extend to the story in order to even tell it, for the sake of a misplaced hope for clarity which is, to me, in actuality, an overextended desire to corral and herd the response to it? With that in mind all I'll say is that, for me, one of the key themes of *The Boy with Nails for Eyes* is control, and the loss of it – the selective use of animation allowed me to invoke that theme in what is, I hope, an innovative way.

And what about the music? Well, let me begin with the observation that, if Muth had had music available to him when adapting M, he could have used *In the Halls of the Mountain King* directly, rather than having to resort to a graphical representation. The musical motif would have returned to the visceral quality of the film – as in *Jaws*, we know the danger is nearby in a bodily rather than a cerebral way. Hearing is not the same as decoding.

But to return to *The Boy*. Besides its emotional immediacy, music provides an additional method of structuring the story – the use of sound creates opportunities, along a totally new axis, to establish linkages and contrasts across the narrative.

An example. In the prologue of the story, the page above appears. I wrote a piece of music to set these words. (You can listen to it here.)

At first I intended for this music to accompany the image that inspired it. But eventually I decided against this. For one thing, I didn't want divide the reader's attention – this is a moment, hopefully, for close involvement in the story. The music would been a needless addition –

worse, potentially an actual distraction. Instead, the tune is going to appear at a later point in the story, a point where there are no words to distract from – over the poem, there'll only be a brief snippet, establishing the tune.

But beyond this, as it were, tactical regrouping, there's also a positive reason to do this – setting the tune at this later point establishes a connection between that moment in the story and the prologue. It implies, in a non-intrusive way, a relation between them. I'll leave it for those who read the enhanced version to decide what their relation might be, the only point I want to make here is that it is the addition of music that allows this to be done.

Another example. Bobby, the main character of the story, has a musical theme. That theme reappears at key moments through the story, sometimes in ways that are disguised. But changes in that theme, alterations in instrumentation or the level of discord, can be expressive of changes in the character that images alone cannot reach.

As such, music is there to compensate for something that neither film nor comics can do well. Interiority.

Both mediums are very good at showing us how a character looks, what they're doing, even what they're feeling. But neither are very good at getting us inside how they're feeling – and, by extension, how we might feel. That's one thing the music can do.

No amount of visual finesse or gimmickery will make up for the emotional reach of music. (What would *Jaws* be without the music? *Star Wars*, for that matter? *Psycho*? *M*?) And the reverse is true – a little music, if effective, will elevate even clumsy images to a place that reaches you.

I'm not saying that comics are unable to reach people. Of course that'd be nonsense. I've read comics that have horrified me (*From Hell*), frightened me (*Uzumaki*), enthralled me (*Are You My Mother?*) and, yes, reduced me to tears (*Laika*, which taught me the useful lesson of being careful what you read at work).

But, well, I'm a parent of this particular story. I want my child to have every possible advantage, before I do what every parent of an art-child must do: expose it to those elements that shall decide whether it may live or die.

In a less selfish register, I want to take advantage of new technologies to expand the possibilities of a medium I love.

Music is the most visceral of the arts – its business is not to elicit emotion through depiction or representation, but through something close to pure evocation. Who wouldn't want that for their art?

5
Words & Pictures
Some thoughts

The usual relationship between image and text in comics is that the image supplies the narrative, while the text either enhances or supplements that narrative.

Part of my intent with *The Boy with Nails for Eyes* is to challenge or interrogate several of the formal elements of what I guess can be called 'standard' comic storytelling. This wasn't my intention from the beginning – it developed in tandem with the story. Nor did I want to do this for its own sake – it was the best way I could conceive of telling the story I wanted to tell.

In these next chapters I want to go over some of these challenges, interrogations, whatever you want to tell them. Perhaps a better way of saying that would be 'I want to unpack a few of the ways I've deviated, often unconsciously, from the norm.'

But before I get to that I want to overview a brief overview of just what I take that norm to be. So, to that end, in this chapter I want to go over a few facets of the use of text in comic storytelling – in particular, speech balloons, thought bubbles and captions.

This is 'making strange', calling to the fore one of the conventions of comic book storytelling.

…

The usual relationship between image and text in comics is that the image supplies the narrative, while the text either enhances or supplements that narrative. This is either through word balloons, thought bubbles and sound effects, which are graphical renderings of what would otherwise be invisible or unavailable to visual representation such as speech, or else through captions, which don't typically 'make visual' in this way but rather offer narrative context from, as it were, the outside.

Let me make the point about visualisation clearer through an example. In his 2002 limited series

The Filth, Grant Morrison introduces a character called Max Thunderstone, a superhero, one of whose powers is the ability to, as he himself puts it, "manifest words in a cloud above my head."

"That's right," Thunderstone declares, "visible thought."

Now, on a formal level, this is inventive stuff. Morrison is engaging in defamiliarisation, an act of 'making strange' – he is calling to the fore one of the visual conventions of comic book storytelling, the thought bubble, by making the reader re-assess the significance of the bubble as it appears to us in the pages of *The Filth*. Morrison is returning the thought bubble itself to our attention, outside of the information it converts. Instead of understanding the thought bubble as a visual rendering of an aural phenomenon, we must suddenly understand it as a visual component of the universe into which we gaze through the panels. Abruptly, even though nothing has changed, we *see* the thought bubbles. This feeds into Morrison's larger project of enjoining – at times coercing – his readers into a sceptical (from the Greek *skeptesthai*, 'to look') attitude towards the nature of their own reality.

That said, to my eye, the strategy only partially succeeds. The reason being that there is no manifest, compelling reason, within the narrative of the moment, for Max Thunderstone to offer this explanation. By the time he reveals his 'visual thought' ability he's been 'conversing' with – well, monologuing at – someone for several pages. (And why is Max's interlocutor, so called, so stubbornly silent in the face of torture and, perhaps more painful, Max's interminable self-aggrandising, save that the story *requires* him to be so?) For the revelation to work for the audience there has to be this delay so that we are lulled into a typical understanding of what we see; but for Thunderstone's captive, by this stage, no explanation is necessary – he can *see* it. The explanation exists solely for the audience.

Above: From Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*.

In effect, Morrison's commitment to defamiliarisation (and this is a grounding commitment of his work) entails that he also has to engage in what I privately call an 'as-you-know-Carruthers' moment; deviatory exposition – the unnecessary going-out-of-their-way of a character in speech or act, purely to provide expository information to the reader. For me, such moments never fail to pull me out of the story. This wouldn't be so much of a problem if it weren't for the fact that, for me at least, this also undermines the defamiliarising effect, because at the moment the world is made strange, I am no longer *inhabiting* it; I am forced outside, I become a mere reader.

Exposition is a delicate art – the mastery of it involves the provision of detail to the reader in such a way that we never suspect we are being given those

Don't thoughts sprawl*? Wouldn't the thoughts of others come to us as our own do, a froth in varying degrees of chaos.*

details, along with a healthy respect for the ability and willingness of the reader to fill in the blanks; not to shove the reader into the woods of the narrative with a packed picnic but, rather, to guide them there, leaving them with an axe and a book on edible fungi. To me, this is a self-laid trap Morrison too often falls into – he seems so visited by ideas that he's unable or unwilling to take the time to weave them properly into the narratives that carry them, to disperse with restraint the spores, those hints and gestures that will allow the audience to find, harvest and digest them for themselves.

Criticism aside, the point that this episode hopefully illustrates is this – that thought bubbles are a technique by which comic creators can render something non-visual, visually. Speech balloons and sound effects are similar expedients, allowing visual narratives to include what are purely aural experiences in, let's say, real life. They are all, as such, *internal* to the world being presented by the comic, and take their place as representations *within* that world.

…

If speech balloons and thought bubbles are internal to the world of the comic, captions, by contrast, tend to stand outside that world, straddling it and the world of the reader, their addressee.

Captions serve, broadly, two functions, at my count. First, they offer narration, about which I'll speak later. Second, they serve to contextualise, temporally, what is occurring in the panels of the comic. This may be as simple as a caption reading 'Later that same day' or 'And so'. Or it may be as complex as a chunk of text, perhaps occupying the place of a full panel within the layout, describing events that aren't depicted in the story.

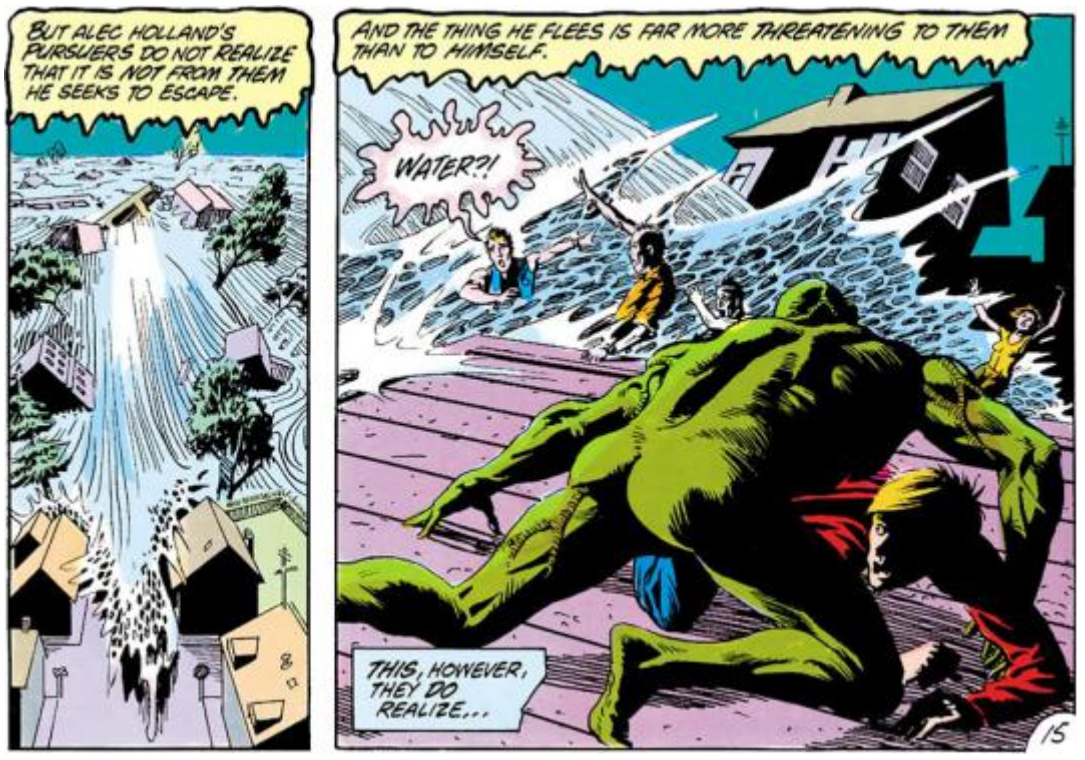
…

But before I get to these, I want to consider a different form of caption, which I call the thought-caption. These perform the work of thought bubbles, giving us access to the internal, unvoiced thoughts of a character, but using the (typically) rectangular format of the narratorial caption.

This approach is used, for example, in *Watchmen*, where Rorscharch's interior narrative is excused by making them excisions from his diary – it's also used in Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, in which no such excuse is used, we simply have Batman's thoughts given to us in caption format.

To me, this was done out of recognition of the problem with thought bubbles – that, as said above, as opposed to speech balloons, thought bubbles don't render anything that has a perceptual analogue in the real world. We can't *hear* a person's thoughts, as opposed to their speech.

(And if we could (over)hear a person's thoughts, would they take the form of well-rounded, rational, neatly constructed language, or even the mixed form of a rebus (according to Freud, incidentally, dreams *are* a rebus) which, even though combining words and images, remain *linear*, neat and contained in structure? Don't thoughts *sprawl*? Wouldn't the thoughts of others come to us as our own do, a froth in varying degrees of chaos, of competing impulses of various construction – visual, auditory, linguistic



Left and following page: From Alan Moore's run on *Swamp Thing*. Art by Steve Bisette and John Totleben.

– whose successive triumphs over one another – the stronger impulse overcoming the weak or ailing, the weak impulse attaching itself like a parasite to the stronger – gives only the illusion of linearity?)

Thought bubbles are, in essence, a fudge, an expedient that risks, through their lack of a real-world perceptual basis, undermining the reality of the world with which we are being presented. And, yes, to me this issue is compounded by the neatness with which they present internal monologues. As such, strategically, they are more prone to failure even where they succeed.

And so they were dropped – as far as I'm aware they're hardly used in modern comics. But the thought-caption – essentially a square thought bubble – has been retained. This is because the thought-caption has dropped, by the means of its graphic presentation, its analogy with speech – it visually divests itself of all claim to an actual or internal presence in the world of the story.

As a result thought-captions tend to bury the paradoxical effect that Max Thunderstone's 'visible thought' make explicit: present, yet un-founded on any actual presence. Instead they have the feeling of taking place *outside* the immediate time of the story, as if the character whose thoughts they voice were standing from a place subsequent to the story's completion and reflecting back upon it (as does, in a twist central to *Watchmen*'s conclusion, Rorsharch's journal).

But this approach brings with it other issues and limitations. For example, if more than one character's thought is presented in thought-caption, because of such captions apparent temporal placing outside the story, the cumulative effect is to undermine the narrative tension. This is by, as it were, over-populating the time subsequent to the story and rendering

the dangers of the narrative toothless. We may fairly assume the speakers live; and if they don't, chances are good that we, the audience, will feel deceived, rather than beguiled. ('The speaker lives' is subverted by Moore in *Watchmen*: by preventing Rorsharch from seeing the final curtain, he uses the limitations of the thought-caption in *support* of the plot's twists, rather than merely persisting to its detriment.)

It is interesting that the only character in *Watchmen* who's given pure, un-excused thought-captions – in contrast to Rorsharch's diary entries – is the story's only actual superhero or, perhaps, god: Dr Manhattan. Residing, as he does, outside time, the presentation of his internal thoughts in a manner implying narrative omniscience increases rather than undermines the tension; it reinforces his separation, based ultimately on the perception of time, from the other, human, all-too-human, characters.

Another example, this one cinematic, for contrast. In Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* both Ray Liotta's character and Lorraine Bracco's are given voice-overs. This implies that the temporal position from which we are being told the story isn't in the moment, but rather from a time subsequent to their abandoning the gangster lifestyle and giving evidence on their former friends and associates. We are being told the story after it is over; and it is a successful technique here because it is appropriate to the narrative, which involves the assessment of a glamourous yet hollow lifestyle after it has been abandoned; the charting of the magic kingdom after its collapse has been fled. (Would, say, a James Bond film, which turns with absolute immediacy from moment to moment, survive such a retrospective approach, however implied?)

What was sacrificed, ultimately, in the

abandonment of the thought bubble was the comic creator's easy or risk-free pretence to omniscience – stories became strongly tied to a central character or characters, whose viewpoint we more-or-less shared and stuck with. Or, as in the case of *Watchmen*, the risks had to be handled with care – or turned to the story's benefit.

…

The point is this: that in all these examples, the text presented within captions is more-or-less ancillary to the story. If the captions were taken away from a comic such as the *Swamp Thing* panels shown above, the story would remain relatively intact and readable. (In the case of *Watchmen*, the effect would be far more denuding – demonstrating the extent of Moore's abilities as a writer of comics – but the story would, nevertheless, remain.)

Take away the images, however, and the story has been reduced to something of a sparse, maybe even deficient, prose narrative.

So. Speech balloons and thought bubbles and sound effects are the textual elements that are, as said, 'internal' to comics – rendering things which are present within the world of the narrative, such as speech, but which can't be presented as they occur in reality. They are, as such, enhancements of the visual. In contrast, captions, which I've called external or narratorial, I call *supplements* of the visual.

In this phrase I'm drawing on an idea put forward by Jacques Derrida. Derrida referred to the 'supplement' as being simultaneously two things: something that completes another thing, but also something that challenges or threatens to replace it. (In doing this Derrida was taking advantage of a feature of the French term '*supplement*', which derives commonly from two verbs: *supplémenter* – to add on to – and *suppléer* – to substitute. The English term 'supplement', by contrast, has only one derivation, and hence tends to refer only to the first case.)

Looked at in this way, captions – I mean the straight, narratorial captions which don't offer any character's voice but rather the voice of an omniscient narrator, the voice, as it were, of the

Above: The same pages from *Swamp Thing*, with the captions removed.

writer – present a problematic device in comics. As in the panels taken from *Swamp Thing*, above, narratorial captions in traditional or mainstream comics act in the way of Derrida's supplements – they both complete and threaten to replace the narrative being presented in the images. They are either ancillary – the narrative is already complete in the images – or else destabilising – they risk overtaking and undermining the story's true visual basis.

Take, again, the panels from *Swamp Thing*. The captions serve little strictly necessary narrative purpose – they do not reveal any information that isn't already communicated by the images. This is why, to my mind, much of Moore's early comics work feels over-written in comparison to his later work.

This over-writing manifests itself not so much in an over-preponderance of words (though for my money there are at times too many), but rather in a lack of correspondence between the events the images depict and the reader's experience of them in time. Action sequences, which should, as I see it, encourage a rapid reading in keeping with the pace of the events themselves, are slowed up by narration, so that they take, in the reader's conception, a length of time out discrepant from the events themselves.

This isn't to say that such time distortions shouldn't be done, but that they should be done with care, with a view to their potential effects. I think one of the worst panel sequences I've ever read was in the Marvel Vs. DC crossover event in the mid-90s. Superman is facing down against the Hulk; they've been knocking seven shades of shit out of each other for a few pages before Superman, drawing back his fist for a killer blow, says (ahem):

"I'd prefer to consider you a friend, Hulk, but with everything that's at stake I don't think I can. For me to save my world, my universe and most of all the woman I love ... I have to *put you down*!"

That speech takes something between ten and fifteen seconds to deliver, I reckon. That's a glacial pace in the middle of a fight; presumably the Hulk is waiting politely. Even reading this as a teenager, the effect completely jarred. The intention, I imagine, is to build tension prior to the final blow, but this purpose would be better served by adopting the method often used in manga, of having a series of panels which are almost inert, building to a sudden explosion of violence. As it stands, the effect is ludicrous.

It feels unfair to compare most work to Shakespeare but, if you've a mind to, consider the structure of *Othello*. In that play the first two acts work very slowly, before the pace suddenly screams into fifth gear in act three, the (incredible) scene in which Iago transforms Othello from devoted husband to murderous (as he wrongly thinks it) cuckold. Here, unlike the Supes/Hulk face-off, the treatment of time works in concert with the dramatic intention.

A more effective use of this tension-building approach in comics can be found in the famous Judge Dredd panel in which he punches through the helmet of Judge Fear. The expository caption, which has no pressing narrative need, serves to briefly slow the reader down and thereby builds up tension that is immediately unwound in the main panel.

…

So far I've covered speech balloons, thought bubbles and thought-captions, and now narratorial captions. But there's one last form of caption I want to cover, which I actually find more interesting.

These are captions such as 'And so' – 'Later that day' – 'Elsewhere'. I call the function of these captions 'temporal contextualisation'. They situate the panel in which they appear in a time relative to the panel that preceded it.

To me this is fascinating, as the way these captions do this uncovers several unique facets of comics as a storytelling medium that are, to my mind, thoroughly under-appreciated.

First – observe that what is being contextualised by such captions as 'Later that day' isn't, strictly speaking, the panel in which they appear, nor the panel that preceded it, but rather the relation between the two. This means that, in effect, what such captions refer to and clarify is the gutter between these images.

Let's stick with 'Later that same day'. By means of that phrase we are being informed that the space between this panel and the one before it has an extended, non-negligible duration – we have passed a significant, if uncertain, amount of time between the last image and this. It is the between-ness of the gutter that has been altered.

Or let the caption read, say, 'meanwhile'. Again what is changed is the nature of the temporal relationship between the panels that are connected – we understand that the events depicted in this panel are occurring simultaneously with the previous panel. So we understand that the gutter separating the images doesn't imply a temporal division, but rather simultaneity.

(There is a similar technique in prose, whereby the temporal lapse between a character's speech is contextualised after their speech is delivered: "'I see,' she said, following a long silence." The difference is that what is contextualised lacks a definite visual component: the gutter; this is as prose tends to present time as a continuous stream instead of comics' depiction of it as discrete moments promoted out of an otherwise invisible or submerged flow.)

(Thinking out loud: might a comic proceed purely by means of such captions, a narrative that was purely composed of temporal manipulations?

'And so'; 'But yet'; 'A thousand years ago'; 'At the same time'; 'tomorrow'; 'Yesterday';

'Next door'; 'Light-years away'; 'Never'; 'Nigh'; 'Years hence'; 'At the beginning'; 'In the end')

This leads me on to that point I mentioned before, those under-appreciated aspects of comics as a visual story-telling medium. This is a little out of the way, but I hope it's something that you'll find as interesting as I do.

It's about gutters.

…

Comics are, by their use of gutters, a visual medium that includes in their formal language their own negation. What I mean by this is that comics proceed through the use of images – panels – set alongside the absence of images – gutters. It is the space between the images – as theorists such as Scott McCloud have pointed out – that allows those images to relate a sequence, and therefore to deliver a narrative. But consider further.

A traditional image – say, a portrait, whether photographic or painted – doesn't include the frame, the edge of the image, as part of itself. Instead the frame is that aspect of the structure that, precisely by being excluded from the image, allows the image to come into being. (I use the word 'aspect' instead of 'part' precisely because the frame is not a part of the image, but is the means by which an image comes forth to be looked at. 'Aspect' (from *ad-* 'to', *-spek* 'observe') entered the English language as an astrological term denoting the relative position of the planets as seen from earth – it is this connotation, of a certain distance from the thing looked at, and that position of looking as granting the form of the thing seen, that I mean to imply.)

The structure of the frame is, in a sense, a non-structure, residing outside of, however proximately to, the thing of which it is the frame; for the frame, the edge, of an image to manifest within the image itself would cause that image's collapse. It couldn't be borne. The frame is, as it were, the place of the image (as Aristotle put it when he grappled with this issue, everything that exists, every "sensible body" must exist *in a place*). It isn't part of the image, but nevertheless has to appear wherever the image is. This is even though – and because – the frame's or edge's appearance is a falling back, a non-appearance, a moving-aside to allow the thing of which it is the edge to manifest. The frame is the nearest thing to the image, yet can never enter the image, in order for there to be an image at all. On the other side of the frame, from the point of view of that which it contains, is a void – an undifferentiated universe held, for the duration of time in which we apprehend the image, in abeyance.

Comics, however, take this act of framing/placing and make it an integral and involved part of their language.

The page of a comic book is equivalent to the portrait, in that there must be a frame or place of the page that it must always occupy. But then there is the gutter – like the page-frame, a frontier to the void, but one which permits the partial entry of the void into the page, granting that void a positive role, a holding-apart of the panels that enables them to be panels. Comics permit the partial intrusion of the void, the absence, the negative, as a means of supporting and bringing forth the presences with which they go about their work.

It is because comics render time through the manipulation of space that they do this. It is the arrangement of panels on a page relating them, narratively, in time, that makes the void's intrusion a necessity. Unlike a portrait, which cannot involve the void its frame excludes, and survive, comics permit such an intrusion, in a controlled fashion, habitually.

This means that comics are, in essence, a rhythmical structure; like music, like poetry, the absence is integral to the formation of their rhythm. Yet the absences of comics, their gutters, are negatives more profound than the de-stressed syllables of English poetry that support and divide the stresses ("If *mu*sic *be* the *food* of *love*") or the echoing silences within music. Even John Cage's radical silent piece, *4'33"*, is radical precisely in that it reveals the presence within silence, the fullness of the aural environment even in the absence of

Right: Henry Matisse's *French Window at Collioure*; Barbara Hepworth's *Pelagos*.

intentional sound. Could *4'33"* be played in a true vacuum, even there it would be unable to erase those presences which emerge to populate the silent anechoic space: the listener's own heartbeat, the sizzling of the nerves in their ears.

Indeed the eruption of absence into presence, the acknowledgement of the void as the necessary partner of the body or form, is perhaps the hallmark of modernism and its successor movements. The poetry of TS Eliot, Sylvia Plath, Samuel Beckett, (even Shakespeare, in such audacious moments as the battle scene in *King Lear*, with Gloucester, the only character onstage, his eyes gouged out, groping with his ears after the progress of the offstage fight), the sculpture of Barbara Hepworth, the paintings of Piet Mondrian or Henri Matisse – all share a conscious awareness of silence, absence – in effect, life without the consolation of an afterlife to give meaning to life's inevitable truncation, with without the means of conciliating death. Such works enact (a struggle against/an invitation to) the void that must exist for the work to assert itself, failingly, against – as life does and must do against death – a struggle whose success, on either side, would destroy the possibility of the work itself. (All that is beautiful or precious that enters our lives does so with dust already on its feet; and though we may wash their feet, there is no keeping them; the dust remains beneath the skin.)

Yet the absences in the comics, their gutters – whether rendered in the white of the unmolested paper or, as in *The Boy with Nails for Eyes* or Gaiman and McKean's *Mr Punch*, streaks of raw black ink – are presentations of an absence possibly more profound than those of

modernism – because the act of reading a comic entirely elides them, even while they are active and hence present in the work.

An example. In Hannah Berry's *Adamtine*, the gutters – as in my book and *Mr Punch*, they are rendered mostly in pure black – gradually expand as the story progresses, shouldering the panels more and more apart. This of course builds a sense of claustrophobia, isolation and powerlessness for the characters – but taking this view is to examine the technique from the point of view of the panels. Looked at from the point of view of the gutters themselves, the gradual shift is one of expansion, gaining power, a dark fluorescence. Berry has recruited the negative nature of the gutters in comics to a narrative purpose – showing the gradual encroachment of the demonic supernatural force that is hunting the story's characters. Yet still the gutters in *Adamtine* do not take a truly positive status – they aren't presences, aren't absences – but a kind of shuffling, undead advance.

Beyond the dichotomies of visible and invisible, present and absent, the gutter is the alloy of these, a space of combined contraries in which the narrative takes place. And hence they are limitlessly malleable and fruitful. It is their mixed status which allows them to be endlessly contextualised by the use of captions – or turned to active use in the service of the story.

…

So. In the above I've tried to give a few ideas about how I feel feel comics make use of text and images, mapping something of what I'd call the standard or 'mainstream' relationship between them. In short, that can be summarised as I said at the outset: the images supply the narrative, while the text, in its various forms, is either an enhancement (speech balloons, thought bubbles and -captions, sound effects) or else a supplement (captions) to those images.

Next, before I get into my own work, I want to look at the work of someone who, while he isn't a comics creator, is nevertheless a visual storyteller of the highest order, and one who establishes an entirely different relationship between image and text – one of my idols: William Blake.

6

William Blake

Some techniques of a master visual storyteller

William Blake, one of my artisitic idols, provides a perfect example of an artist working in visual storytelling whose approach to image and text subverts the relationship usually found in modern comics. I'm up for any excuse to look at his work in depth, so I'm going to do that here, focussing on The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.

It is the 12th of August 1827, and William Blake is in his bed, drawing. Reduced to near penury, the couple are living in rented rooms in Fountain Court off the Strand in London. (It is now the site of the Savoy Hotel.)

One of Blake's last commissions was a set of illustrations to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. He had spent the last few days working on this project, but took time out from this labour to colour an impression of one of his earlier, and most popular, relief etchings: *The Ancient of Days*. This image, one of his most famous, was created in 1794, originally as the frontispiece to Europe, one of his prophetic books – but the image is powerful enough that Blake sold several stand-alone copies during his life.

He is colouring the printed image with watercolours. Finally he casts the paper away from him. "There," he says, "I cannot mend it."

He is working on The Ancient of Days. *Finally he casts it away from him. "There, he says, I cannot mend it."*

It has escaped neither William nor his wife, Catherine, that he is dying. She is beside the bed, weeping.

He turns to her. "Stay, Kate!" he says. "Keep just as you are – I shall draw your portrait, for you have ever been an angel to me." The Blakes spent one of their last shillings on a pencil, so that William could continue working on the Dante illustrations. Now he uses it to draw a portrait of his wife. (The drawing has since been lost.)

The couple have been steadfast companions for years. William taught Kate to read and write; she helped him in printing his works, hand-colouring some of the printed images. No children; some have conjectured that a miscarriage occasioned one of Blake's illuminated works, *The Book of Thel*. I imagine the works

were their children.

Now he finishes her portrait. He lays it down – it is the last thing he will ever draw – and begins to sing.

Throughout his life Blake is reported to have composed tunes to his verses. These verses have brought Blake to occupy a unique position in English literature – he has written some of the most anthologised poems in the history of the language ('The Tyger', 'The Lamb', 'The Chimney Sweep', 'The Sick Rose') and, in the form of his longer 'prophetic' books, has also written what the critic Northrop Frye called "what are in proportion to their merits the least-read body of poetry in the English language." Blake, in effect, stands as one of the most and least read poets in English literature.

In his own lifetime, he was an abject failure; *The Songs of Innocence and Experience*, possibly his most famous work, sold a little over thirty copies in his life. Other works hardly sold at all. Exhibitions went unattended. He was branded an eccentric or, more viciously, a madman. (Wordsworth agreed with this assessment, but added "there is something in the madness of this man which interests me more than the sanity of Lord Byron.")

It is six in the evening; August, so there is still light. There is light in Blake's face also, as he approaches death. A friend who is present later writes that "his eyes brightened, and he burst out into singing of the things he saw in Heaven." William tells Kate he will be with her always. When he died it was like, as one witness put it, "the sighing of a gentle breeze." Another, a lodger living in the same house as the Blakes who happened to be present, later wrote to a friend: "I have been present at the death, not of a man, but of a blessed angel."

…

That image is *The Ancient of Days*.

On first viewing, the depiction appears to be of God in the act of creation. In fact the image seems to illustrate a Bible verse, Proverbs 8, in which the figure of Wisdom describes God's creation of the world: "When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth."

There may be other sources, such as *The Book of Daniel* – "the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool: his throne was like the fiery flame, and his wheels as burning fire" – or Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

> in his hand
> He took the golden Compasses, prepar'd
> In Gods Eternal store, to circumscribe
> This Universe, and all created things:
> One foot he center'd, and the other turn'd
> Round through the vast profunditie obscure,
> And said, thus farr extend, thus farr thy bounds,
> This be thy just Circumference, O World.

So the image appears, on first viewing, to be straightforwardly devotional: God the creator. But on closer examination, questions beginning to arise.

Perhaps first among them is this: why is God creating with his left hand?

Tradition depictions of God creating depict him doing so with his right hand. In Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescos, Adam stretches out his left hand towards

Previous page: Blake's *The Ancient of Days*.

God, who reaches back with, yes, his right. Elsewhere in the frescoes, God is shown in the act of creating the sun and moon; the sun is created by his right hand; the moon, which Genesis dubs "the lesser light", his left.

The right hand has always had connotations of goodness – it is associated with 'dexterous' (ultimately derived from '*deks*', a Proto-Indo-European term meaning 'right'), which has connotations of skill and capability, while 'left' is associated with 'sinister', which has come to mean 'unfavourable', 'unlucky', 'malicious'. (There are other associations that assign moral values to left and right – 'widdershins', means to move in a circle in a leftwards direction, and derives from the Middle Low German '*weddersinnes*', which literally means 'against the way'. The opposite, deasil, again derives from '*deks*'.) So why would Blake depict God creating lefthandedly? In fact, why has he designed the image so that God's right hand is actually *hidden* from view, as if to emphasise that this creator is – what? – *sinister*?

Other questions follow.

Why are there clouds? If God is creating the universe, how is it that anything exists prior to that act? Perhaps they represent the Chaos that, according to Milton, pre-existed creation ("Matter unform'd and void")? But then why have the clouds been set so that they surround God, rather than below him, where Milton places "the black tartareous cold Infernal dregs", upon the Abyss?

What is the origin of the strong wind that moves God's hair? (This may be a reference to *Genesis* 1:2, which contains a Hebrew phrase usually translated as 'Spirit of God' but more accurately would be 'Wind of God'; but why does Blake depict this wind as an external force to God, rather than his emanation?)

Why has laid so much emphasis on the compasses, an instrument for measuring?

In fact, this isn't an image of God, but rather of a figure from Blake's own created mythology: Urizen.

Urizen is one of the four 'Zoas', who emerged following the fall of Blake's primordial man, Albion. (The word 'Zoa' – a Greek plural, but Blake uses it as a singular – means 'animals'; where it appears in *The Book of Revelation* it is translated as 'beasts', in *Ezekiel* as 'living creatures'.) Urizen is the Zoa representing, or embodying, reason, convention and law. (His name derives from the Greek term 'horizein' meaning 'limit', from which we get 'horizon' – and is also a pun: 'Your reason'.)

This is a figure not of creativity, but rather of abstraction and measurement; his act of creation is nothing of the sort, but is in fact an attempt to marshal the world into rigorously organised categories, governed by a single set of principles. Hence Blake's design is dominated by abstract shapes – not only the circle out of which Urizen leans, but also the triangle implied by the compasses. The movement of the image is strongly vertical, implying a conventional power structure to which we must, in the act of looking up, submit. The clouds Blake surrounds Urizen with are referred to in the poem named for him, *The Book of Urizen*:

> vast clouds of blood roll'd
> Round the dim rocks of Urizen, so nam'd
> That solitary one in Immensity

Left: Blake's *The Good and Evil Angels*.
Next page: Plate 3 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.*

This is typical of Blake's strategy – he presents an image which appears clear and easily understood, only to offer subtle hints that undermine this initial reading, pointing to something more complicated and manifold.

…

When I was a kid I loved *National Geographic* documentaries. Every now and again my parents would let me buy one; Bahrain had no real copyright law when I was a kid; the local video shop sold pirate copies, one dinar each. One documentary I picked up was about tigers. I was around seven, I think.

It opened with footage of a tiger stalking through Indian jungle; its eyes fixed on something out of shot. A close-up of its eye; a fly lands on its skin; the tiger blinks but its gaze stays steady. Back to a wide-shot, we see the tiger move slickly into swifter motion, moving in on its prey. The music builds. Then, suddenly, we cut to slow-motion. Now the tiger is advancing, eyes towards us. I remember the angle of this shot being slightly elevated, so that we see the muscles of its back, the lift and fall of its shoulders like a scales balancing. The voice-over returns:

> Tyger, tyger, burning bright
> In the forests of the night
> What immortal hand or eye
> Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Moving slow, lifting and placing paws, cat-care grace. Its gaze pulls it forward. (Cat-owners will know this moment – when the body of the animal seems to be articulated by its eyes, those eyes which remain set and level while the body flows, a wake, drawn behind them; a pattern in muscular water.)

> And what shoulder and what art
> Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
> And when thy heart began to beat
> What dread hand, what dread feet?

As the documentary continued, the voice-over, thankfully, revealed the provenance of those words; my introduction to Blake the poet. 'The

Tyger' was, through repeated watching of that documentary, the first poem I learned by heart.

Later, wanting to see the words on the page, I found a paperback copy of *The Collected Poems of William Blake* on our bookshelf at home, and pulled it down.

The image on the cover was *The Good and Evil Angels Struggling for Possession of a Child*.

This was my introduction to Blake the artist. The sightless, haggard face of the evil angel terrified me.

Years later, when I was eighteen, my parents bought me the catalogue of the Blake exhibition held at the Tate in 2000. Once again, *The Good and Evil Angels* were on the cover. I still have that book. It is

nearly falling to bits, water-damaged, spine broken. Much loved, I think the phrase goes.

I remember when I first opened it – a peculiar thing. I felt *huge* excitement, even though I can't remember any real contact with Blake after my first encounters with him as a kid. Yet I was delighted – I knew this, I knew this man, I wanted to know him. It felt like coming home.

…

The Blakes' marriage was long and, by all accounts, loving. There is a story, probably apocryphal, that one day a visitor came to the Blakes' house in Lambeth and, entering, found them sitting in the garden, naked, reciting *Paradise Lost* to one another.

"Come in," Blake said, "It's only Adam and Eve you know."

…

How does Blake's approach to image-making work in tandem with his texts? And what innovations might this approach have for creators of comics?

A brief recap. In visual storytelling, specifically comics, image is where the story is founded, and text acts as an addition to that foundation – this is whether as an enhancement (speech balloons, thought bubbles, etc.) or as a supplement (narration). Blake made no use of the former kind of text – all of his writing may be seen as, as I've termed it, supplemental: both a completion of and a challenge to the images. This ambiguity status is one that Blake sought to play upon in his work; in his work text and image endlessly complicate one another. To demonstrate this, I'm going to look at a couple of pages from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

Before diving in let me give a little background to *The Marriage*. This is a short book, only consisting of 27 pages of combined illustration and text. It is funny, sober, direct, indirect, satirical, committed, ironic, unironic, serious, playful and breathtakingly audacious (I'll be using this word a lot). According to the online Blake Archive (a great website) *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* "stands out for its combination of genres and its heterodox perspectives." It has influenced people as diverse as Patti Smith, Philip Pullman, Walt Whitman, WB Yeats, Aldous Huxley. As I write this, I'm listening to the 1998 album by experimental band Ulver, which combines black metal, hip-hop and electronica to set the entire book to music. (As one reviewer put it: "Recommended to those seeking a musical purging, all others beware." Cracking stuff.)

On the previous page is plate 3 of *The Marriage*. I'm going to skip the first paragraph on this plate; I'd love to unpack this, as the theological moves Blake is making here I find breath-takingly bold, but it would require a lot of contextualisation which isn't relevant here, and might require a fair amount of tedium. I'll restrict myself to noting that Blake is, here as throughout *The Marriage*, taking aim at Swedish mystic Emanual Swedenborg, who claimed to have charted the afterlife through conversations with celestial beings. Blake, who saw visions throughout his life – he was set screaming as a young child by the sight of God sticking his head through the window of his family's home – was taken with Swedenborg's view, especially

as Swedenborg placed, as Blake did, humankind at the centre of the cosmic drama. But later Blake repudiated this attraction, finding that Swedenborg had written "not one new truth", but only "all the old falsehoods." Part of Blake's aim in *The Marriage* is to assess the cosmic battle, heaven and hell in conflict until the end of days, from hell's point of view – and going further than Milton, who depicted Satan's fall and subsequent embrace of his antagonistic status ("All good to me is lost; Evil, be thou my Good"), instead assigning to Hell and its inhabitants a positive role in the universe. Put short, this is overturning the settled ideas of centuries of Christian theology and Western culture.

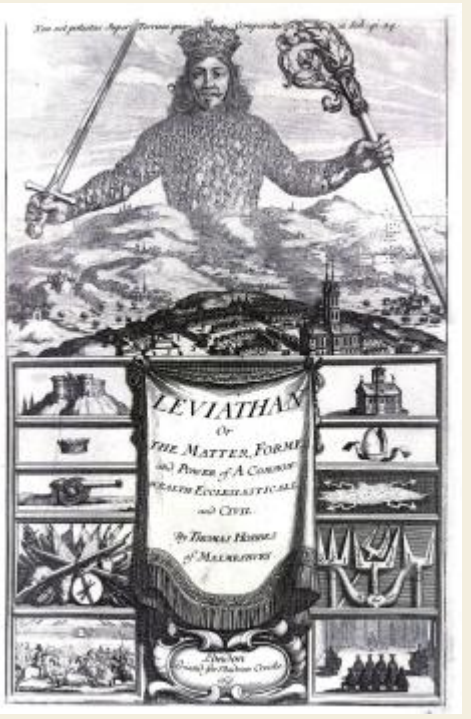
So. I'm going to start with the second paragraph, which continues along this audacious road:

> Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.
> From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason
> Evil is the active springing from Energy.
> Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell.

Blake's satirical tactic throughout *The Marriage* is to do as Swedenborg claimed – talk to non-human beings concerning the nature of the universe – but rather than talking to angels and other divinities, Blake turns in the other direction, and talks to devils; more than this, unlike Swedenborg he takes the devil's viewpoint, and describes the cosmic war as the other party sees it, recasting those factions typically called 'evil' in positive terms, and their war not only as just, but necessary.

So, having come this far let me address one potential issue, whether these pages count as a comic at all. The brief answer is: they don't. They don't make any use of the formal grammar of comics – speech balloons, panels. But I would still argue that they constitute a piece of visual narrative, a broad category, of which comics are a sub-category.

I don't like to offer definitions, but referring back to something I said earlier, I think one very rough, loose definition of visual narrative might be: any narrative which, in absence of its graphical content, fails to be recognisable as such. You'll maybe recall that earlier I said that, if you were to remove the captions from a comic story, retaining the pictures, the story would more-or-less remain legible as such. Flip that: a piece



Right top: The cover to Hobbes' *Leviathan*.
Right middle: Blake's *The Blasphemer*.
Right bottom: *Crucifixion* by David Gerard.

of visual storytelling is such where, if you remove the images, no story remains.

Blake's works are often presented shorn of their images. The idea seems to be that the images function as mere illustrations, additions to the texts which stand alone as their own entities. The fact that Blake coloured his images in different ways with each impression of the book might seem to support this view; if the images are integral to the work, then why tolerate or even positively pursue deviations? If the images change while the text does not, then doesn't his mark the text as primary, stable, reliable, and the images as fluid, unreliable, unstable – and hence ancillary?

This perhaps stems from our age of mass production, in which we are quite used to the idea of buying a 'unit' – one of countless thousands or even millions of copies of an unreachable original, each of them identical to the last? Blake, however, was aiming at a mode of production half-way between this mass production and the Medieval production of manuscripts, undertaken laboriously by hand, and with the result of no two volumes being identical. Hence he uses the term 'illumination' to describe his images, rather than illustration. It's interesting – to me at least – to note that both words share an ultimate derivation from the Proto-Indo-European term 'leuk', meaning 'light, brightness'. However, while 'illustration' has connotations of representation or appearance, 'illumination' carries connotations of enlightenment in a spiritual sense, which are absent from the former word. Blake chose the term vary carefully – the idea is that the illuminations constitute an essential part of the story being given to us.

Yet what of the changes between editions? While the temptation is to see this as a flaw, conditioned as we are to ideas of identity between units, again in terms of a fidelity to an unseen original from which we are barred by copyright law, in Blake's mode of production the differences between editions are in integral part of his overall aim – to reveal the universe as dynamically constituted, an endless dialectic between contraries; there is no original, inert, unchanging, from which units are emanated. Attraction. Repulsion. Only in a material dead universe must editions match one another in order to *be* editions – in a dynamic universe, a universe of eternal delight, a revived hell, no two editions can be the same.

So what are the images up to on these pages?

At the top of the first page – plate 3 – we see a woman in flames. No ground or means of support is visible – as often with Blake's figures, she appears to float weightlessly, or soar, in space. On first view, we may consider that she is one of the tormented in

hell – as with the Urizen image, this initial, as-it-were naive view of the image is undermined, both by the text, and by the image itself. Unlike the Urizen image, this image is strongly horizontal or lateral in its structure – instead of a universe of power relations which are generally signified by verticality we have a universe of horizontality, of equal and balanced contraries. (Consider, by way of contrast, the well-known cover of Hobbes' *Leviathan*, in which the vertical axis is the organising power of the image, dominated by the figure of the king, under whose head sits a body composed of many individuals whose identities have been subsumed beneath his authority. Alternatively, any number of Medieval or Renaissance paintings of the crucifixion, in which Christ is literally suspended above the earth. Finally, Blake's own image of *The Blasphemer*, in which the image has a strongly vertical composition, emphasised by the upraised arms of the men engaged in the stoning of their victim.)

Is the woman suffering? Her expression is enigmatic, but certainly not pained – there is perhaps the ghost of a smile on her lips. Her arms are spread in a gesture of apparent welcome, even joyfulness. Her right leg is flexed, while her left leg (which appears strongly muscled) is powerfully extended, the toes active – this is not passivity. Between her legs a flame swerves up over her body – she appears to lean her head towards it; her hair mingles with the flames as they flow past her.

Elsewhere in *The Marriage*, Blake talks of "walking among the fires of Hell, delighted with the enjoyments of Genius" – however this "to Angels looked like torment and insanity". The image on this page enacts the tension between these two differing perspectives on Hell.

On first viewing, we may assess the image fleetingly, as a more-or-less standard depiction of a damned soul in Hell, tormented and insane. However, once we have read the text (it's worth noting that pictures are always understood with more immediacy than text, which is what makes such reconfigurations as these possible) and understood Blake's intent, we return to the image and

find that what seemed torture is now a depiction of enjoyment and delight. There is a strong physical component to this, with the emphasis on the muscularity of the female body – Blake equates the condition of Hell with imaginative and sexual enjoyment. We have been guided from the angel's view to the devil's, purely through the interplay of text and image. Once again that

word: audacity, to make the grounding emblem of hell's delight not only sexual delight and physical power, but these things manifest in female terms.

In the images below we have a continuation of this theme. As if making good on the sexual element of the main female figure, we have another female figure, her pose mirroring that of the

one above – her leg, in particularly, seems similarly powerful and strained. Unlike the upper figure she is cast in a cloudy setting rather than a fiery one, though the clouds' red tinge may indicate a continuing (delightful) hellish condition. Her arm is outstretched in a manner that appears to signify the pain of childbirth, but also mimics the upper figures apparently joyful gesture – her baby also spreads their arms in apparent joy. Recalling what I said above, while this page makes no use of formal comic language, such as framed panels, nevertheless we may see the two figures as depicting a single character, from the moment of conception to the subsequent delivery (reinforcing this notion is the colouring, with both figures' hair touched with bright yellow, and their mirroring postures).

To her right two figures, their genders indeterminate but possibly male and female from left to right, kiss – the nearer figure, who appears to be male, is in the act of vaulting past the more distant (female?) figure, who appears to recline on a red glowing cloud-bank. As with the other figures, the image is governed by horizontality rather than verticality – though we have one active figure, one passive, the image does not appear to be one of dominance – the male body is turned away from the female, their arms mirror one another, and their heads share a plane within the image. Are we to understand these figures as embodying passive and active, reason and energy, obedience and rebellion? Or are we supposed to see these figures as further emblems of the delights of Hell, through an emblem of physical union without the apparent intrusion of power? I prefer the latter, but the ambiguity remains. (We may be tipped towards my preferred assessment when we note the marginal figures Blake has included above this reclining couple, where two figures, by their dress once again apparently a woman and a man, standing on an abstract leaf-like form, holding hands. Again the image appears to be one of mutual respect and equality – but a note of caution may be sounded by the blue wash of colour surrounding them, in contrast to the page's dominant red. Elsewhere on the page, Blake has associated this blue with Heaven – it also appears just above the word at the beginning of the text, where a figure – an angel? – also takes flight. Is this actually an image of a couple whose enjoyment of one another has been bound and rendered passive by obedience to heavenly reason?)

…

William and Catherine married in her family's church, Saint Mary's in Battersea, in August 1782. They had met a year earlier, at the house of her parents. Blake related the story of a lover who had jilted him. Catherine felt pity for him, and said as much.

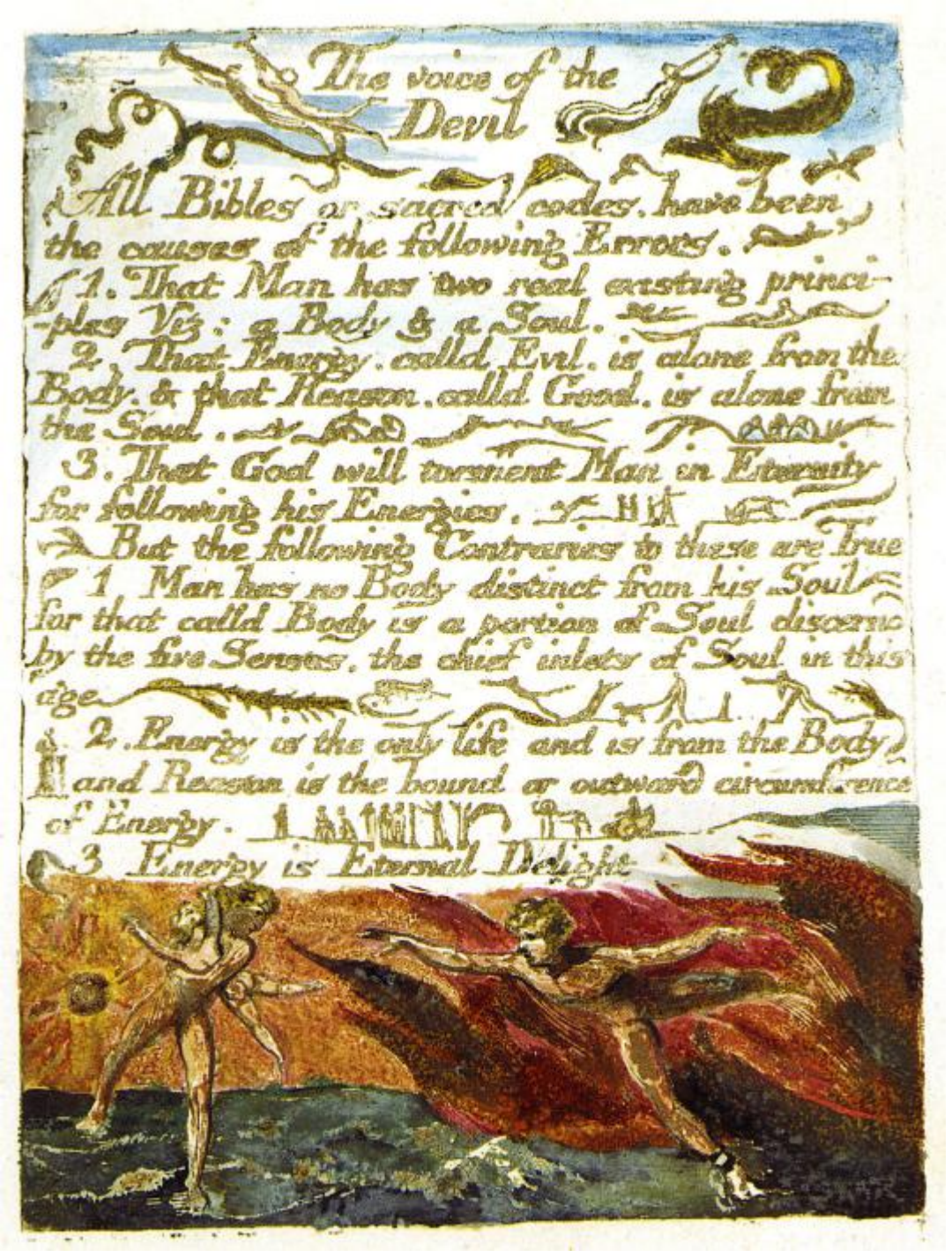
"Do you pity me?" William asked.

"Yes, I do, most sincerely."

"Then I love you for that."

"Well, and I love you."

As well as teaching her to read and write, William, it appears, also passes on to Catherine his ability to have visions. Following her husband's death, Catherine will speak to William regularly, consulting with him as to the management of her affairs. Upon her own deathbed she calls out to him as if he were only in the next room.



Right: Plate 4 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.*

…

Let's move to the next page.

This contains what might be called a bedrock statement concerning Blake's developing philosophy, which turns the standard or orthodox Christian conception of reality on its head. (And like it or not, to the extent that Western culture is dominated by Christianity, we reside still in a world in which the orthodox view persists, however much a senescant.) Like Swedenborg, Blake places humankind at the centre of the universe, and recasts heaven and hell as 'internal' states of humanity rather than external places, abodes of reward or punishment, joy or suffering. However, unlike Swedenborg, in tandem with their internal relocation, Blake recasts the *nature* of these places. Rather than being

the place of torment, Hell is the site of energy; as such Hell is not the dustbin or waste receptacle of the cosmos, and a place to be avoided through moral obedience, but rather is a wellspring of activity 'necessary to human existence'.

Blake is here using a tactic that was used by an early Christian movement, called the gnostics (in reality a variety of loosely related sects, rather than a formal movement). The gnostics' tactic was to add supplementary stories to the Biblical narrative, typically placing these stories pre-*Genesis*, giving a history of reality prior to creation. To do this recasts the entire Bible story, changing the significance of such events as the Creation, the Fall, the expulsion from Eden, right the way through to the end of things – and all this without touching or altering a single word of the orthodox Bible itself. Blake here is doing the same – offering a lens for Biblical interpretation that inverts the usual orthodox reading of the Bible, which he considered both oppressive and repressive. ("Both read the Bible day and night," he wrote elsewhere, "but they read black where I read white.")

The simple statements above are a primer on how to read the Bible in what Blake calls its 'infernal sense'. Blake is indicating how to read the Bible as the Devil would read it. Hence the next page is delivered, appropriately enough, in "The Voice of the Devil":

> All Bibles or sacred codes. have been the causes of the following Errors.
> 1. That Man has two real existing principles Viz: a Body & a Soul.
> 2. That Energy. called Evil. is alone from the Body. & that Reason. called Good. is alone from the Soul.
> 3. That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies.
> But the following Contraries to these are True
> 1. Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that called Body is a portion of Soul discernd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.
> 2, Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.
> 3. Energy is Eternal Delight

I love this. It is, in essence, overturning orthodox Christianity, Western notions of selfhood (the two are far from unrelated), conventional morality; two or three millennia of received wisdom, turned on its head. Actually, that seems misguided – better to say that Blake sets these things upright, and gives them the means to dance.

The body is not sinful, but, like Blake's Hell, energetic and delightful; nor is it distinct from the soul – that which experiences – but is rather a portion of it, even as it supplies it with energy. Blake builds in the notion of cultural change, in the idea that the 'chief inlets' of soul, being altered, or cleansed, will alter the perception of the body.

The view of the world presented is powerfully monistic as opposed to dualistic – that is, it conceives of the world as being composed of a single substrate, rather than two: the mental and the physical. (Descartes is the patron saint of this view, with his *res extensa*, material stuff, and *res cogitans*, thinking stuff, unrelated, un-connected and irreducible to one another.)

The dualistic view dominates our language. We speak it habitually, even if it

has lost much of its grip on our worldview; we are, today, more than ever prone to consider the universe as monistic, fundamentally one thing. Yet this monism tends to be reductive. We see the universe as a mechanical thing, a material device, governed by physical laws, grinding down to the universal flatness of heat death.

Blake repudiates that view: to him the universe is imaginative, not fundamentally material but 'ensouled'; yet even so he doesn't collapse the body entirely into soul. Though it is a portion of the soul yet the body remains the source of the soul's energy; it hasn't been entirely subsumed. Blake views the universe as dialectical in nature – not an inert thing of any variety, but rather an endless becoming, an activity, suspended between opposites ('contraries' as he puts it). Existence derives not from some basic substance that simply is, but from a constant state of interplay between contraries that, however apparently irreconcilable, are mutually engaged. (The marriage of the title shouldn't, as I see it, be seen as referring to an established state of affairs – 'we are married' – but rather the *ceremony* of marriage, the *act* of union – 'we are being married'. Or, perhaps, its consummation.)

…

John Varley, an astrologer and artist, and close friend of William's, is visiting Blake. The two would often meet at Blake's house, where Varley would attempt to summon spirits of mythological or historical figures, which Blake would then draw.

During this session, Blake was visited by a ghostly apparition – that of a flea. Varley passed Blake a pencil and paper, and he began to draw the portrait of the insect; such creatures, Blake averred, were inhabited by the souls of men who were 'by nature bloodthirsty to excess'.

Half-way through drawing the image Blake paused and began another portrait of the apparition; this was, he explained to Varley, because the spectre had now opened its mouth, and he was prevented from returning to the first drawing until it closed it again.

…

What about the images?

The main image on this plate shows three figures, suspended over a sea. On the left, one figure, an adult but of indeterminate gender, holds a child who appears to be fleeing into their arms. A sun is visible behind them. On the other side, another figure, this one apparently larger than the first, appears to be reaching towards them, or else is floating towards the pair with arms outspread. Once again their gender is indeterminate, but they seem more likely to be male. Flames flick up behind this figure, and the sea beneath their feet seems more


W Blake
Fecit

Opposite: *The Ghost of a Flea*.

choppy and disturbed. Around this figure's right foot is a shackle, apparently preventing them from approaching the other pair, who nevertheless appear to recoil.

As with the Urizen image and the illuminations on the previous plate, an initial reading appears to indicate an orthodox, conventional message: a child flees from a pursuing figure – presumably the evil angel – into the arms of an apparent saviour figure – the good angel. Behind the pair the sun would appear to stand in for the divine presence, blessing the scene, which appears to be one of redemption. But, as before, a different reading becomes apparent via the text.

Remember that Blake has here re-defined 'evil', to mean 'energy' and now 'eternal delight', while 'good' is the 'passive that obeys reason'. In this light, what we see doesn't appear to be a scene of redemption, but rather a disastrous split between reason and energy, in which energy, the larger and more active figure, occupying more space in the image, has been restrained and divided from reason, with which orthodox Christianity sees as 'alone from the soul'. The child, presumably the soul, infected by this ideology, views energy as the angels do – infernal – torments and insanity – and thus flees into the arms of reason and passivity.

The sun behind the united figures is darkly coloured (the dark sun is a favourite image of Blake's to depict a fallen or divided state; elsewhere in *The Marriage* he describes a sun 'black but shining', while in *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion* he writes 'Instead of morn arises a bright shadow, like an eye in the eastern cloud'.) The sun here may indicate a similarly fallen state; but likewise it could also signify the potential for wholeness and restoration of enchained energy – the fleeing child appears to be the only one who can see the sun (in this light, their outstretched arms appear to yearn towards the sun), but the 'good' angel stands between them and indeed seems to restrain them from it.

Of course, we've seen this before. *The Good and Evil Angels*. Blake produced this other, larger version of the image later in his life, perhaps indicating its importance to him.

In this version, Blake has kept the composition the same but reversed the layout, so that the 'evil' angel appears on the left instead of the right. The positioning of the version in *The Marriage* implied an overall hopelessness and stasis – the 'evil' angel struggles not only against the shackle but against the direction of reading, implying that their efforts to rejoin the soul and reason are doomed to fail, whereas this version places the 'evil' angel on the left. The increased optimism of this change is, however, countered by the sun, which now appears to be setting rather than rising – and this time none of the figures are able to see it.

In this larger version it appears that, as well as being restrained, the 'evil' angel also appears to be blind – they (though the body appears to bear a heavy male musculature, its gender is, again, indeterminate) appear to grope after the other figures and, if not shackled, would perhaps drift completely past them. The 'good' angel looks on with an expression of mingled horror and pity. It's notable that, unlike the image of the woman on plate 3, the flames in both versions of

Above: Plate 10 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.*

this composition are not involved in the body of the 'evil' angel, but instead form a backdrop to it. The body is no longer seen as the source of energy – infernal delight – but instead a thing that is shackled within energy's fiery torments – as the 'good' angel must perceive them.

What is the ultimate point of this? I'm more than happy simply to write about Blake, to have the excuse of examining his work closely, divulging his tactics and narrative strategies. His work, like all great work, is vivified, not deadened, by having its mechanics opened, examined, and then restored to their living operations. A knowledge of anatomy isn't necessary to have or move our bodies, but it gives a deeper appreciation of its capabilities, and a respect for it that enables it to further our aims for it healthily. In the same way, examining the ways in which visual storytelling operates – particularly in its outliers, those of its planets upon eccentric orbits, or else those without orbits, the exoplanets, drifting without catch through the vacuum – may make us alert to broader, maybe even grander, possibilities.

The case of *The Marriage* suggests that, when images have been relieved of their narrative responsibility in visual storytelling, this frees them to respond to the text – which in turn is no longer either enhancement or supplemental, but a co-actor of equal standing – to respond to the text in a manner that is powerfully ambivalent. Blake's images on these two plates of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* enact one form of that ambivalence, by appearing at first naively orthodox illustrations; however with closer examination, prompted by the revisions in the text, more complicated meanings can be found. Text and image in Blake enact the interplay of contraries, without

which is no progression. To me, this is a much more potent and interesting approach to visual narrative than the standard one of mainstream comics.

…

William is aged four, living at Broad Street with his family; he will remain here until he is 25.

Five years from now, he will see a flock of angels clustered in the branches of a tree in Peckham, "wings bespangling every bough like stars." Telling his parents of this vision, only his mother's intercession spares the boy from the beating his father means to give him for telling lies.

Now, suddenly, the house is riven with screams, for William has just seen God for the first time, peering in through the window. One of the first of many visions.

70 years later, immediately after his death, Blake's friend George Richmond, himself a painter, kissed him and then closed his eyes.

This was, he explained, 'to keep the visions in'.

7
The Tale Knows More Than Its Teller

William Blake, one of my artisitic idols, provides a perfect example of an artist working in visual storytelling whose approach to image and text subverts the relationship usually found in modern comics. I'm up for any excuse to look at his work in depth, so I'm going to do that here, focussing on The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.

The tale knows more than its teller.

No matter the abilities of its crafter, the tale will escape their intentions. It'll fall short, involute, deviate, perhaps even refuse them. Perhaps even exceed.

Just because I say 'this is what I had in mind' doesn't mean that the tale – ostensibly 'mine' – will agree.

This is a good thing. Or maybe 'good' isn't the word here. 'Fruitful,' maybe.

To conquer entirely lacks all poetry.

…

In modern English, we've collapsed the difference between two terms that are actually distinct: 'labyrinth' and 'maze'.

A maze, strictly speaking, is a structure that is multicursal, having many different paths branching off one another. A labyrinth, by contrast, and again strictly speaking, is a structure that is *uni*cursal; only one path, although that path is convoluted, turned about itself in a way that appears confusing.

Just because I say 'this is what I had in mind' doesn't mean that the tale – ostensibly mine – will agree.

For a good while I've found it interesting that the Minotaur was imprisoned in a labyrinth – I'm working on a story that involves the Minotaur, so lately I've been pondering the myth – because a labyrinth as said has only one path. As such being imprisoned in it is realistically impossible. All you have to do is follow the path in one direction and you'll either arrive at the centre, or the exit. If you arrive at the centre, you turn around – eventually you'll be out, no golden thread required.

What strikes me is that a labyrinth is only difficult to follow from, as it were, the air – from a

Above: *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* by Gustav Doré. *Right*: A labyrinth in the sketchbook of artist Villard de Honnecourt, circa 1230.

god's point of view. The twists and turns confuse the path, even without branches. Perhaps the intention of the labyrinth was to hide the Minotaur, Asterios, the abomination, from the sight of the gods, rather than to imprison him. Or to create a space in which mortals could successfully challenge the beast whose parents, Pasiphae daughter of Helios and the White Bull of Poseidon, paradoxically, were both divine in origin. Like Jacob in Genesis, wrestling with 'a man', later found to be a manifestation of the divine, beside a river. A river is labyrinthine – unicursal but convoluted. A space of godly disarray, where mortals and immortals may contend.

Something of us becomes uninhabitable. You can't re-occupy that former condition any more than the butterfly can re-enter the chrysalis and emerge in the reverse of time.

If a labyrinth is the emblem of the author enforcing a strict, unicursal meaning, the single idea, the allegory (such as Lewis' Narnia books or Orwell's *Animal Farm*), one reading to rule them all, then the maze is the proliferation of possible meanings – the difficulty, not of finding meaning, but of fixing it, making it certain. Confusion. The possibility of losing the way, not being to find either centre or exit.

In a labyrinth, we know we have solved it when we encounter a dead end – all that remains to us is to turn around and go back; the only project left to us is a more detailed charting of the way.

What is it, in a maze, that signifies the solution? Finding the centre? How can we identify such a thing, without standing outside or above the maze? How do we tell the difference between the centre and a mere dead end? Can we tell? Should we?

…

Earlier I described a decision is as being the outcome of a war in, as it were, the soul. A dispute between parties of the psyche, wherein one party, or cohort of parties, wins out over its opposition.

This contest might be in the manner of, say, Athenian democracy, with the outcome decided by majority vote. Or it might be of the Spartan variety, where the loudest rather than the most numerous voices decide the election. Or maybe one party decides to filibuster. (Ever tried to quit smoking? Then you'll know how that feels, to try to filibuster yourself.) Perhaps one impulse has come to dominate, and rules the entirety like a monarch, so that the others must achieve their aims only by convincing this ruling passion that it accomplishes itself through their proposals. Perhaps one faction, making promises so vague they cannot be broken or, indeed, fulfilled, maintains a vacuous, unproductive dominance for years on years. Or perhaps the various parties are all so enervated, so listless, that no competition takes place, and the successful party is merely of the moment, the one that currently speaks. Perhaps a cruel and long-standing autocracy or plutocracy is finally overcome through coup or subterfuge. Knives in the dark.

The rules of the conflict change constantly, and even the rules that currently stand may be broken without compunction by any of the participants.

Every impulse and counter-impulse wishes to domiante the entire chamber; the rules are obeyed only as far as to do so accords with this intent.

Above: *Jacob & the Angel* by Shaun Gardiner.

The psyche, like the universe, expresses laws, doesn't follow them. Every impulse and counter-impulse wishes to dominate the entire chamber; the rules are obeyed only as far as to do so accords with this intent.

And it's the survivor of this process, the maelstrom, this Horatio or this Creon or this Clytemnestra, encircled by the dead, viewed in retrospect, which we call our decision. We isolate and appropriate (maybe *mis*appropriate) the outcome of that struggle to some hovering angel, winging serene above the conflict, and call it our 'will', and imagine that it was the effort of this will, our ego's instrument, that elected the victor.

But even – *especially* – after the struggle is apparently concluded the contrary voices remain. A minority faction of the self retain its view, remains dissentious, even as the more powerful faction feathers in their supremacy.

If I am committed to this view, then it becomes untenable for me to also hold the view that my story has only a single meaning, one that I give it, or force upon it. The contrary voices remain.

They may exert their agitation in surreptitious ways; an ambiguous word-choice here, an incongruous detail there, something to complicate and undermine the efforts of the major powers to establish hegemony over the all. The landscape of creation is Boschian: contrary, irresolvable details, subtle and delicate grotesqueries, quiet as the flight of owls, lodge themselves, live, in out-of-the-way corners, adopt distant, eccentric orbits. They weave conspiracies against the sun. They pull the centre from its settled throne.

…

What's the point of all this?

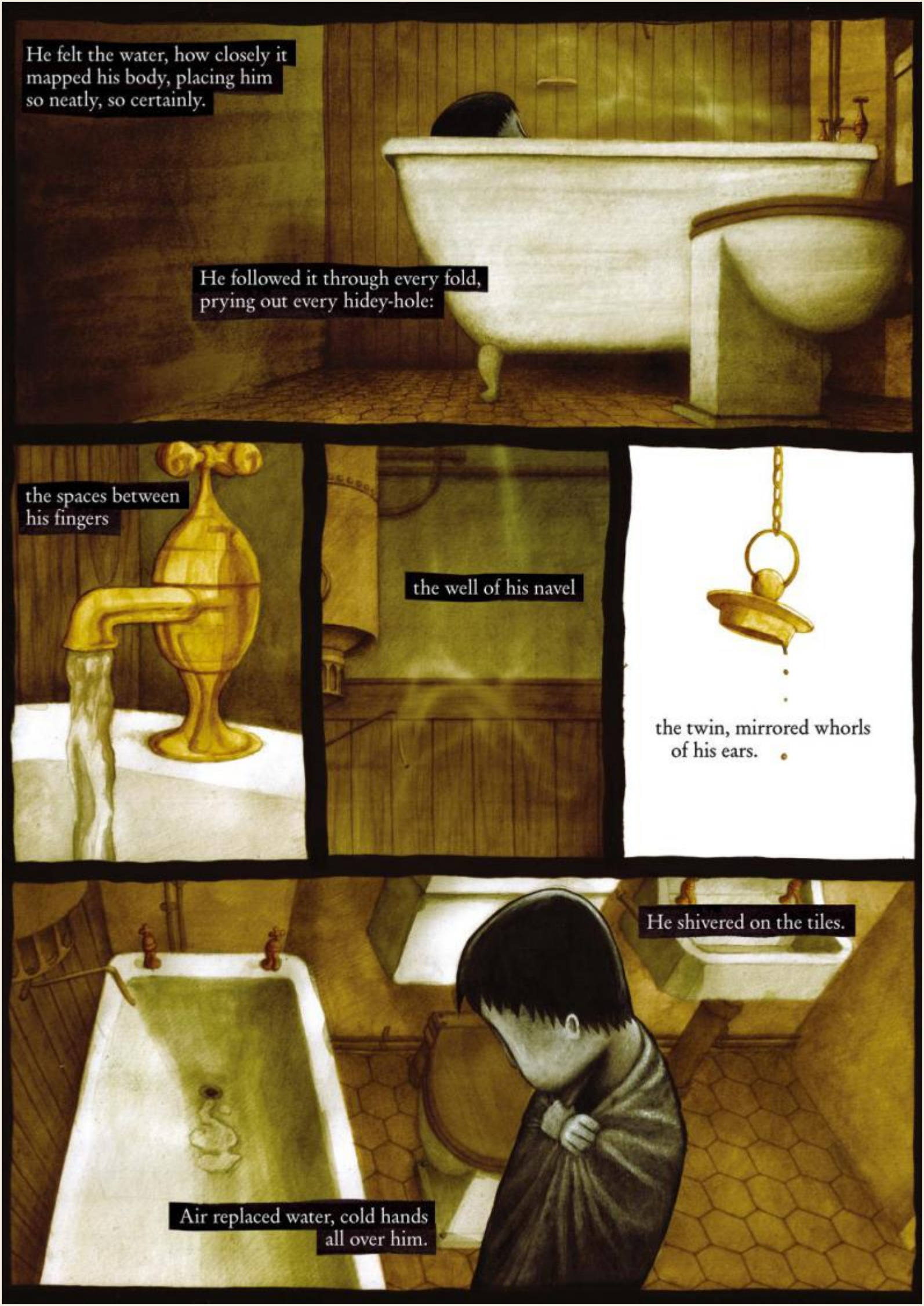
Well, now I'm going to tell you what I think is happening in a key section of *The Boy with Nails for Eyes* – six pages in the first chapter.

Here's the thing: don't listen. Or listen, but with an ear that chews carefully what it is offered, one that is suspicious, ready to spit or vomit.

The tale knows more than its teller.

…


In every life there is a moment that teaches that the world and the child in it are not the same thing.
This was Bobby's moment.
He went back inside.
He went upstairs for his bath.


He felt the water, how closely it mapped his body, placing him so neatly, so certainly.
He followed it through every fold, prying out every hidey-hole:
the spaces between his fingers
the well of his navel
the twin, mirrored whorls of his ears.
He shivered on the tiles.
Air replaced water, cold hands all over him.

Let's begin.

Two pages. Ten panels total, five panels on each page.

The overall approach to these pages was to offer something relatively grounded following an elaborate fantasy sequence that came before. Back to earth after a time in the clouds. The panels are laid out to reflect this – rather than the regular beat that is the general hallmark of the more fantastical sequences, there's variety here. Things seem settled, sedate. A predominance of horizontally composed panels creates a feeling of gentle expansion, space to reflect.

Bobby has his bath.

…

In every life there are moments of crisis. Moments that effect a profound change in the person who experiences them. Some are taught; others can only be learned. Some of these are unique to each of us, but others are common, maybe even universal. Death, sex. (And ultimately both of these things relate to a comprehension of our finitude, our containment. How much of the fear of death comes from the notion that the universe continues without you, without those who are lost? How much of the joy of sex comes from the possibility of a union across what seems to stand between us?).

And here? A thick band of ash. Fire fell from heaven. Catastrophe. A boundary event.

Crises such as these bed down in the strata that compose us; dig. Here the stone is joyful with fossils; life exploded in a surfeit of its propellant, it explored new forms, brazen new strategies of existence. Here something indigestible settled in rocky cisterns, becoming oil, coal, hydrocarbons for later extraction and use, but that use constructive or destructive – who can say? And here? A thick band of ash. Fire fell from heaven. Catastrophe. A boundary event.

There's a quality to moments like these. Totalisation.

It's like language. Piece by piece you learn it. A word here, a word there. You make sounds in repetition, and then you, magically, quite magically, grasp that these sounds, these certain repetitions, are attributable to certain things out there in the world. And then, abruptly – there must be a moment – there arrives the deeper understanding, that everything that *is* may be thus represented. That language extends over everything. Even though we may lack the words for this or that, whatever, for any particular item or experience, nevertheless the *system* of language, the *principle* of representation, extends without limit, over all existence. Upon this understanding, the system ramifies infinitely and immediately. It becomes total.

Just as it's possible to re-construct or hypothesise a time without language, it's possible to hypothesise a time prior to learning about death, about sex, about anything new and fundamental. But it's impossible to re-inhabit that condition.

To reconstruct a time without an awareness which is now possessed requires, in the moment of reconstruction, an unavoidable foregrounding of that of which we propose to, as it were, remember forgetting. You can't think about not

thinking about it without thinking about it.

You can't re-occupy that former condition any more than the butterfly can re-enter the chrysalis and emerge in the reverse of time. Something of us becomes uninhabitable. Meltdown. An angel with a flaming sword. An exclusion zone of the soul.

…

A key aspect of this sequence is the change in medium after the first three panels. These opening panels, all on one row, are drawn in pencil, while the remainder are fully rendered in various media.

The use of pencil in the first row is a continuation from the previous page, which ends a sequence where Bobby was sat on the doorstep, drawing. Early versions of the first three panels were actually fully rendered – no pencil, on its own, was involved. But the change of medium felt important enough that I didn't want to lose it within the page turn, so I drew some new panels in pencil to replace the old designs.

You can't re-occupy that former condition any more than the butterfly can re-enter the chrysalis and emerge in the reverse of time.

Pencil has been associated throughout this chapter with exterior spaces, more fully rendered art with interior ones. This sequence continues that differentiation. But here the use of pencil also fits the medium with the events they depict – Bobby takes his own pencil outside to draw and things switch to pencil, switching back when he returns inside. Any artistic endeavour involves risk – it means to go outside.

Pencil is inherently more fragile than ink or paint. Unlike ink pencil, of course, can be smeared or erased, or overwritten with heavier stuff, paint or other pigments. As such, pencil communicates a feeling of vulnerability but also the possibility of correction, of taking back the awkward or clumsy or misplaced action. This is something Bobby, for his own reasons, desperately needs.

But there are, as Bobby finds, limits to this erasure – the idea of infinite correctability, of being able to return the paper, once marked, to a pristine state, is a false one. Even erased marks leave traces.

…

Freud suggested that the interaction of perception and memory could be likened to a toy of his time: the 'Mystic Writing Pad'. This toy consisted of a flat, rectangular piece of resin or wax, over which was laid a transparent sheet. The sheet itself consisted of two layers: the upper layer was celluloid while the bottom layer was waxed paper. When the stylus supplied with the pad was used to apply pressure to the sheet this forced the waxed paper on the underside to stick to the block below, causing a mark to appear. When the image was no longer wanted, it could be erased by pulling the sheet away from the wax, breaking the contact between them.

The sheet, Freud suggested, was analogous to what he called 'perception

consciousness', the part of the mind in connection with the world, the recipient of sensory input. After that sensory input has ended, it is erased from the perception consciousness, as when the sheet is pulled away from the wax block. As such perception consciousness has no capacity for storing its input, but only provides a medium upon which sensory stimuli, as it were, impress themselves.

However Freud noted of the Mystic Writing Pad that marks made on the sheet left impressions in the wax below: 'the permanent trace of what was written is retained upon the wax slab itself and is legible in suitable lights.' The wax block, he suggested, is analogous to memory; sense impressions, after being erased from perception consciousness, are retained in a permanent – though, Freud says, not inalterable – record.

Now, Freud argued that the senses ventured into the world by means of what he called 'cathectic innervations' – 'cathectic' meaning 'invested with mental energy', innervation meaning 'to supply nerves to an organ or part of the body'. The idea seems to be of nerves, akin to tendrils or tentacles, which are not bodily but are composed of mental energy.

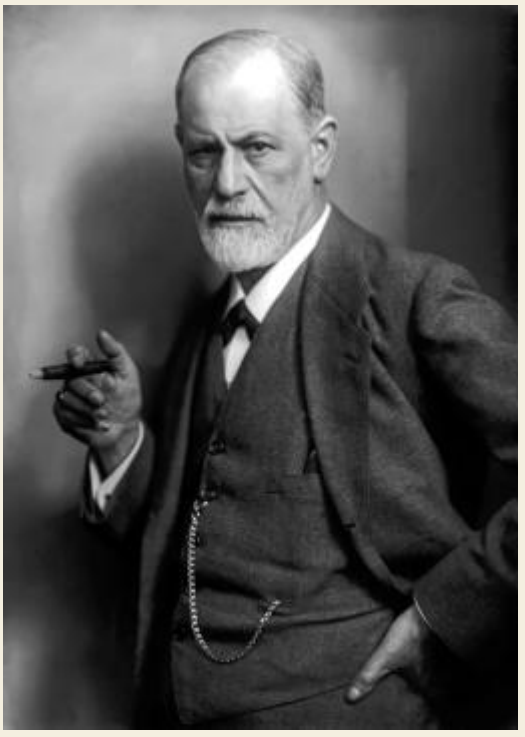
Freud's picture seems to imply that the sensory relationship between the individual and the universe is founded on trauma.

These cathectic innervations are 'sent out and withdrawn in rapid periodic impulses from within into the [perception consciousness]'. As long as the perception consciousness is charged in this way, it receives – and is conscious of – sensory perceptions. But as soon as the charge or innervation is withdrawn, perception ceases.

In terms of the Mystic Writing Pad, the presence of the charge is analogous to contact between the upper sheet and the wax block, permitting marks to be made on the sheet; the withdrawal of the charge, predictably, is as when the sheet is lifted, causing those marks to disappear from perception while being retained in the memory. (Where the analogy fails, as Freud notes, is that in the case of the pad the periodic impulses have an external origin instead of an internal one.)

'It is as though', Freud says, 'the unconscious stretches out feelers [...] towards the external world and hastily withdraws them as soon as they have sampled the excitations coming from it.'

Freud's picture seems to imply that the sensory relationship between the individual and the universe is founded on trauma (a word whose root lies in an ancient term meaning 'rub'). The unconscious 'hastily withdraws' as soon as its feelers have encountered the constant excitations of the world. Thus erasure is not only a means of enabling the perception consciousness to work continuously despite having a limited capacity; it is also a way of preserving the psyche from over-exposure to a universe that, it seems, is inherently traumatic. The term 'feelers' (some translations seem to prefer 'antennas'; the word in the original German is 'Fühlers') implies a means of exploring while keeping distance, a means of interacting with the environment while preserving the main body from unnecessary risk. Animals possessing tentacles – octopodes, squid, polyps – often have the ability to



regenerate these limbs should they be lost.

Freud suggested that this periodic process of approach and withdrawal lay behind the 'origin of the concept of time'. The word 'concept' might be misleading. The original German term 'Zeitvorstellung' seems to indicate by 'vorstellung' an activity of the imagination rather than the intellect, which is implied in the English 'concept'. 'Time-fantasy'. It isn't the intellectual *concept* but the imaginative *experience* of time that is originated, Freud seems to be arguing. (I don't speak German so I'm relying on translation dictionaries here. I may well be wrong.) Not time as thought; time as felt, as *lived*.

Trauma, as Freud has it, has a part in the establishment of the experience of time and space themselves.

Likewise space. The image of the feelers implies a basic division into 'self' and 'not-self', the rudiments of spatial awareness which calibrate relative terms such as 'near' and 'far'. As such it seems that, as Freud has it, trauma, or the possibility of trauma, has an integral part in the establishment of the experience of time and space themselves. Approach and withdrawal; the tentative rhythm of apprehension. It's trauma all the way down.

The condition of being within such a universe is an inevitable and unrelenting exposure.

The condition of being within such a universe is an inevitable and unrelenting exposure. This is perhaps why Freud elects to use touch – feelers – rather than sight as the ultimate basis of his metaphor – touch, unlike sight, can't be occluded. You can't blink existence. Compounding this, the impressions visited upon us by the universe are indelible, permanent. Even erased marks leave traces.

There is only one means of escape from a universe conceived of in these terms. Freud has already named it. (And I invoke Freud here not because I think he's right, about anything in particular, but because I think he exemplifies a general disposition deeply rooted in Western culture, to conceive of the world as negative in its foundation, a vale of tears and autumn rains.) Withdrawal.

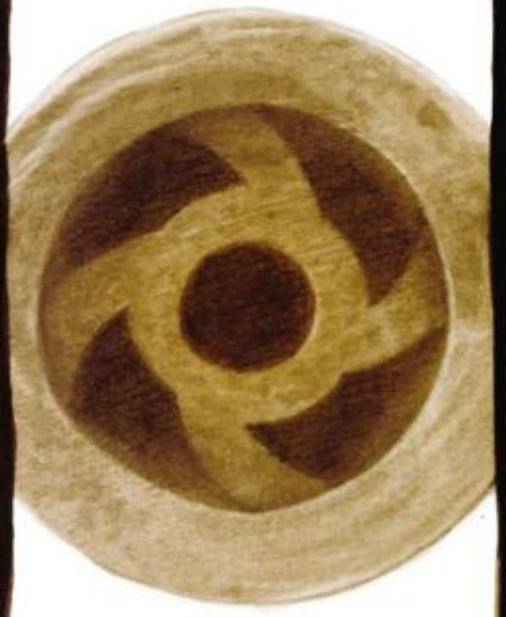
If to engage with the universe is to be inevitably exposed to trauma, the remedy is *dis*engagement. If to be embodied is to be exposed the only escape is into disembodiment.

Bobby is becoming aware of his exposure, the relentless advance of the world around him, the inability to find a vacuum, a space or time without excitation. Leaving the water, he cannot but submit to the molestations of the air.

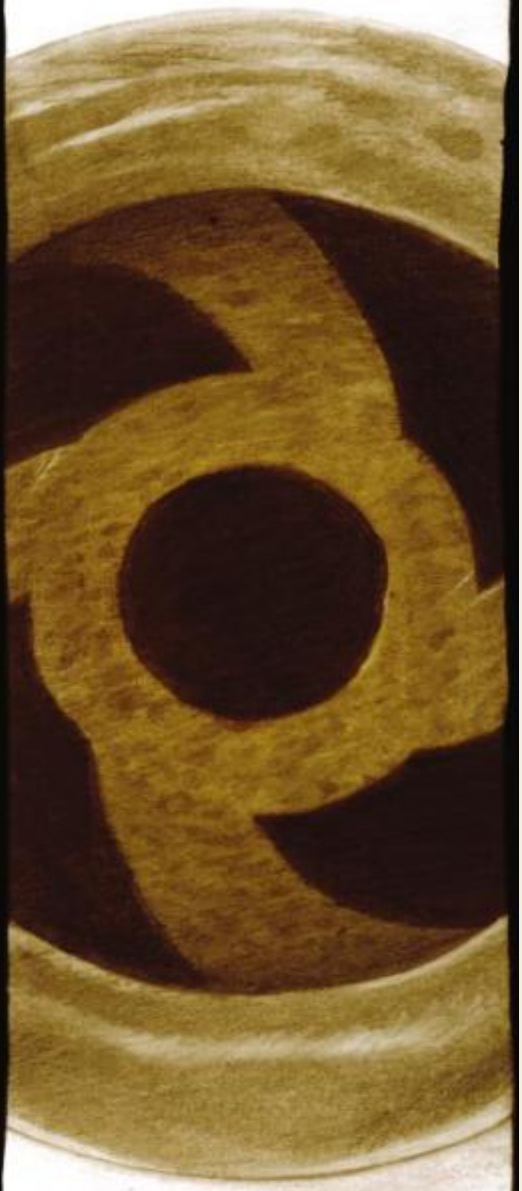
…

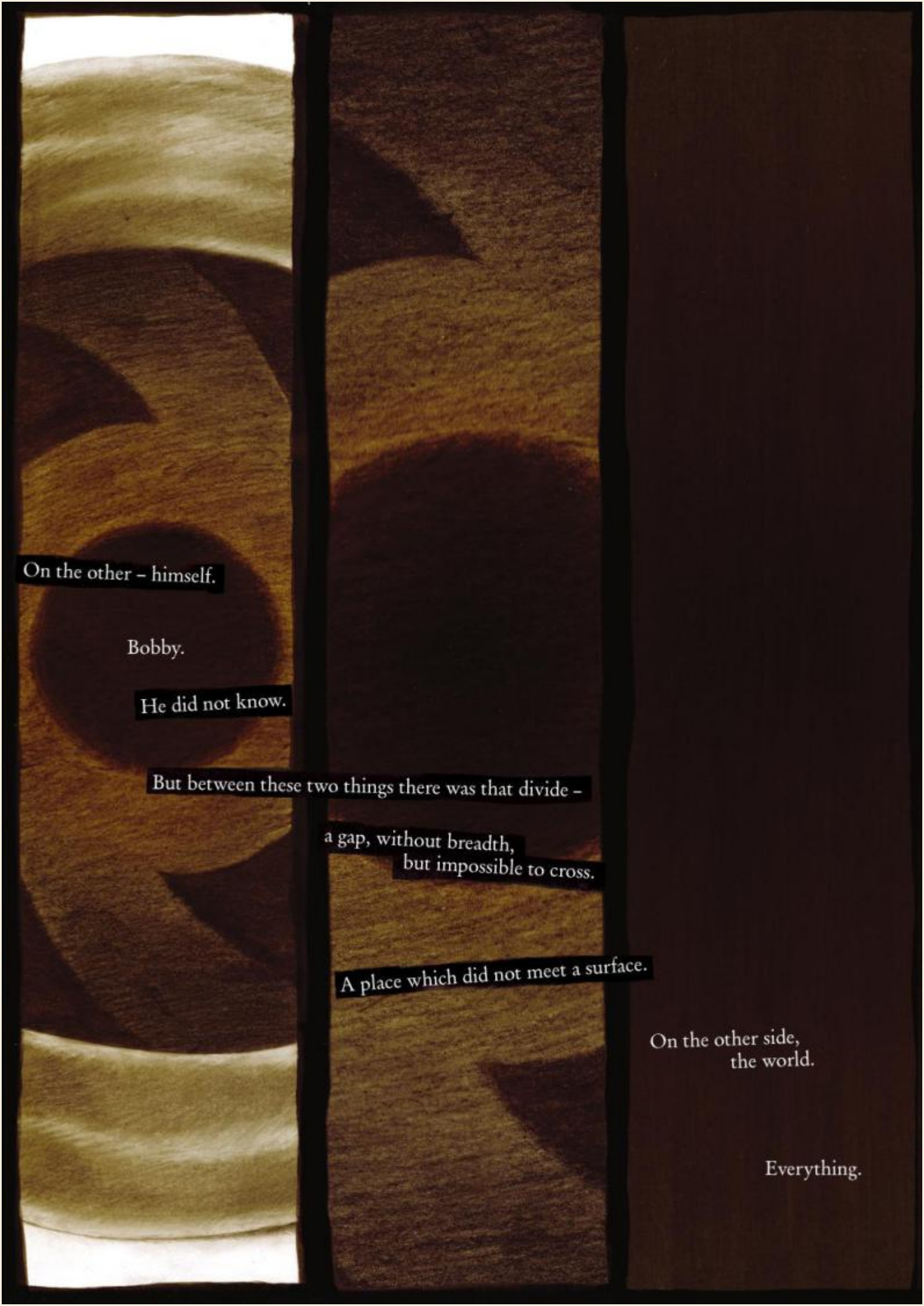
He felt his body
like the water, the air,
gather around him.

For the first time, he saw
the divide.



On one side of it, the world,
his own body with it.




On the other – himself.
Bobby.
He did not know.
But between these two things there was that divide –
a gap, without breadth,
but impossible to cross.
A place which did not meet a surface.
On the other side,
the world.
Everything.

Two things at least should be noticeable about this sequence, in contrast to the preceding pages.

First, no Bobby – from appearing prominently in the previous sequence (he appears six out ten panels) he is now absent. (An early version of this sequence featured a different first panel, in which Bobby was present, looking down at the bath plug, but that was taken out.) The body is gone.

Second, from a varied layout we have switched to regularity, a rhythm that is rigid, metronomic – no *swing*. Time without catch.

This, along with the narrow, vertical panels, should indicate a sudden narrowing of focus, as when an otherwise innocuous detail of the world grips our attention and won't let go. At such times the world seems to be the true possessor of the faculty of attention; it is as if it has swung its intent onto us, has lain hold of, as it were, the loose end of our awareness. Pulling it tight, it moors us to this particular stanchion – from which only the world, and not ourselves, may cast us.

The exclusion of Bobby from the images, coupled with a narrowing focus into a single detail – the drain at which Bobby was gazing in the final panel of the previous sequence – means that we have gone from observing Bobby to occupying him. From witnessing him *in* the world we have moved to share his perspective *on* the world.

But as the page progresses that identification with Bobby is gradually complicated. If the first panel takes up Bobby's perspective from the last panel on the previous page, the motion implied in the panels that follow, zooming into the drain, can't be depicting an action taken by Bobby. It is impossible; people, unless something has gone very wrong somewhere, don't fit down bath drains.

…

This is an important moment so let me dig in.

Once again I'm going to draw on cinema because, as far as I've seen, such camera movements – extended zooms, dollies, tracking – are less common in comics than they are in cinema. (An exception that comes to mind is, again, *Watchmen*, which opens with an extended zooming out, up from a bloody splatter on a New York street to where a cop gazes down on the impact point: 'Hmm. That's quite a drop.')

From witnessing Bobby in *the world we have moved to share his perspective* on *the world.*

A long time ago I was talked into watching the 2003 remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. I'm a horror fan generally, though tending to what I call the 'creeping shits' end of the spectrum; I dislike gornography and so-called 'torture porn'.

That said, I like the original *Massacre* – but the remake fell utterly flat with me, to the extent that I can remember little of it. One thing I do remember sums up my problem with it.

It's a sequence early in the film, when the doomed group of victims-to-be, travelling by van, pick up a traumatised hitchhiker who utters nonsensical warnings about 'a bad man' before shooting herself in the mouth with a revolver.

Leaving aside the troubling implications of this apparent reversal of the 'final girl' trope (there's so much else troubling about the sequence that I can't go into it or I'll be on for pages), the stylistic treatment of the event undermines whatever visceral effect it might have had.

After a series of quick cuts – the fallen, smoking revolver, the stunned onlookers – there is a sustained shot: the camera appears to track back from the front of the van (the hitchhiker was sat in the very back seat), past one then two rows of shocked witnesses, through the wound in the dead woman's head, and then on, out through the hole that the bullet has also blown in the rear window of the van.

Give it its due. It's an audacious shot. It also completely robs the effectiveness of the sequence.

If any film is grounded in awkward, material, squishy reality it's the original *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. There's suprisingly little gore in the film – a number of the murders take place off-screen, and where they do occur onscreen the bloodshed itself is kept pretty much out of sight. Rather than throwing bodily fluids at the screen, the film operates by other means to make us aware of our lumpish physicality, the vulnerable meatishness of our bodies. It does this through use of the camera.

The camera in the original *Massacre* has presence. It – in my memory of the film at least – is never far from the action, always seems close by, lurking low to the ground, ready to pounce on what it observes. (That first shot of Leatherface, taken from nearly prone to the ground, moving up to meet that face that is a face, but isn't...)

The camera is a predator stalking beyond the circle of light; its eyes reflect the fire back at us.

The events of the original *Massacre* are utterly outlandish, preposterous, but they have a groundedness which is built on the implied physicality of their means of production. The camera *feels real*, feels *present* – it takes up space – and yet it is unobtrusive. And so the things it captures feel real and present also. The camera is a predator stalking beyond the circle of light; its eyes reflect the fire back at us.

By contrast the tracking shot I've described in the *Massacre* remake is one that feels impossible. Its very audacity is what undermines it. An audacious camera movement alerts us to the camera's presence – we become aware of the camera's involvement in what it shows us, its physical there-ness.

Yet what the apparent impossibility of the shot in the Massacre remake actually makes us aware of is, paradoxically, the opposite of this: the camera's *absence*. The shot we've seen could only have been accomplished with the intervention of CGI – a camera that *isn't there*. Far from being a mechanical device with weight and presence, the camera is, precisely to the extent that it obtrudes, dematerialised. And thus what it has caught for us is, likewise, shorn of all weight, all mass. The predator is dispelled from the darkness; we feel oddly reassured. The eyes are gone. Instead the night is filled with pyrotechnics.

Compare a similar shot in *The Matrix*. We zoom in with the camera towards a monitor, showing Neo in a holding cell, awaiting interrogation by Agent Smith. As the camera approaches the monitor

the digital grain of the screen becomes visible. The surface of it morphs, bulges, seems to grasp at us. The image liquifies bubblishly as we pass through it and then – we're in the cell itself. *Or are we*?

Deployed in a film about the unreality of the seemingly real, the immateriality of apparent flesh ('I know this steak doesn't exist'), this shot, identical in terms of obtruding the camera, making us aware of its non-physicality, *works*. It reinforces rather than undermining our involvement in the story. And this is for exactly the same reason the similar shot failed in the *Massacre* remake – its apparent impossibility. Because that impossibility is, here, thematically appropriate.

I've used a similar type of shot here, moving the 'camera' through an aperture unable to conceivably admit it. My purpose in doing this hangs somewhere between the tracking shots in *The Matrix* and the *Massacre* remake.

We begin by sharing Bobby's point-of-view. We share in his corporeality, which has been emphasised on the previous pages. We are in his body. But as the page progresses that connection to Bobby becomes more and more untenable until, in the final panel, where we have passed through the plughole, it must break. And yet the con-tinuity of the panels, the inertia that has been established, insists on a likewise continuity in our identification with Bobby.

So two things happen simultaneously – we remain with Bobby, but we are removed from him. We have transitioned from a physical space to a mental one; in the last panel, the images slip out of an illustrative register and into a metaphorical one.

We are following Bobby on a descent into – well, what exactly?

…

What if, one by one, your senses were switched off?

Begin with the headliners: sight, sound, smell. They leave the stage. But also the support acts: proprioception, nociception, thermoception. Everything off, like someone going along the fusebox, click click click.

With each loss, the attention grips desperately to the remainder, retreating to the dry land. Steps back, steps back, steps back. But eventually the tide rises over and there is nothing.

In the 1938 antiwar novel *Johnny Got His Gun* by Dalton Trumbo, Joe Bonham, a young American soldier, wakes up in hospital. Joe has been serving in World War I. He gradually realises that not only has he lost all his limbs, but that the artillery shell that took them also took much of his head – his eyes, ears, nose, mouth, tongue. His survival is a horrific miracle. All that remains to him is touch, and the other inherent bodily senses such as equilibrioception. (This sense, however, only causes him discomfort, as the loss of his limbs has imbalanced his body, leaving him with the vertiginous feeling that he is always tipping backwards.)

The horror is akin to pseudocoma – locked-in syndrome – the possibility of being trapped in the body without being able to move or communicate. But Joe's experience is far worse. To locked-in syndrome it adds something of the grotesque experiments of psychologist Harry Harlow, who in the 1970s sought to induce depression in animals by

Above: Dalton Trumbo's mugshot. He spent 11 months in prison for contempt of Congress after refusing to cooperate with the the House Un-American Activities Committee. Speaking later he said '[I]t was a completely just verdict. I had contempt for that Congress and have had contempt for it ever since.'

Even when the senses fail, grow dim, that impoverished matter, that misty gruel, fills full the cup.

placing them for days, weeks and even months in a 'vertical chamber apparatus' (which he called the 'pit of despair'). This chamber consisted of nothing more than stainless steel box with rounded edges. The animal – usually a rhesus monkey – was placed in this chamber, with adequate food and water, but no stimulation, not even light. The floor was mesh; even the animal's waste was immediately removed. No stimulus of any kind. Within days the monkey had stopped moving and remained huddled in a corner. Harlow, shockingly (I confess to an unyielding fury towards him for this) carried out similar experiments on monkeys that were newborn.

It's like this – only, for Joe Bonham, the pit of despair is his own body.

What I'm getting at is that there is, or seems to be, an as-it-were vessel of experience which is not diminished in the loss of experience. Blake, as so often, said it best: one thought fills immensity. Even when the senses fail, grow dim, narrow, curdle, dwindle to a grey even fog next-door to nothingness – even then that impoverished matter, that misty gruel, fills full the cup. That cup, so called, does not seem to be identifiable with the 'I' of self-reflective awareness; I can recall, if only vaguely, moments of experience wherein no 'I' was present; the quiet moments just after waking, for example, half of the brain sunk in warm tar. Reflection without self-reflection. Call it a soul, if you like – I do not (unless it is to understand that word as Blake understood it). But experience – the situation of apprehending, not that there *is something*, but rather that something *is*; the cup that is filled, the reflective surface of the body that is still not the body or part of it – is not diminished. A worm feeds it as well as does a summer. It hungers. And, like all things that hunger, it can starve.

…

What does it mean, to be 'in' the body?

Put another way: where am I? Not in terms of my position in space, my location as a body, a set of nested concentrics – house country continent planet – but rather my location *in relation to* my body.

This is to take up the long-standing question of the location of the self. Descartes' pineal, the point of contact between thinking stuff and extended stuff, mind and body. Plato's incorruptible *logos*, housed in the brain and preserved from the corrupting influence of the *thymos* and the *epithemitikon*, the lower, corruptible parts of the soul, by the isthmus of the neck. Aristotle's rational soul, exclusive to humans, seated within the heart. And so on, and so on. Many candidates have been offered; none have stood.

Some, such as Dan Dennett, are sceptical of the very idea of a physical location of the self:

> You enter the brain through the eye, march up the optic nerve, round and round in the cortex, looking behind every neuron, and then, before you know it, you emerge into daylight on the spike of a motor nerve impulse, scratching your head and wondering where the self is.

As the eye is, so it sees. Electing a *how* prelimits the field of possible *wheres*. Expecting a machine, one finds a machine. Perhaps that's the issue.

It doesn't matter what, but it is something that terrifies you. Perhaps it's been there all along.

Imagine this: you wake one night in your bed.

Something in the room woke you, a noise or the sensation of movement, a vague not-being-alone-ness. Your eyes adjust to the dimness, but still you see no sign of any intrusion. And then something appears at the foot of the bed.

It doesn't matter what, but it is something that terrifies you. Perhaps it's been there all along, and you only just saw it. As you watch the thing moves, raises an appendage and places it on the bed; the blanket has lifted over your feet in the night, you feel its touch on your bare ankle. The thing shifts, advances like rising mud. Another appendage lands, pulling the blanket tight over your legs. And another, this time just above your knee. It's on the bed. You hear the frame creak under the thing's bodyweight. It moves towards you.

Consider this – how strange it is to say that it moves towards you. The creature, whatever it is, has already made contact with your body, on your ankle, then your knee. Therefore, if your self were, for example, evenly dispersed over your body, it would be immaterial what the creature did following that touch – it would already be as close as it could be to you. No further movement would be necessary, because no further advance would be possible. Likewise if the self had no physical location at all. And yet, as it comes closer – it comes closer.

This is actually an altered (and embellished) version of an experiment conducted at Yale. Participants were shown various cartoons of a girl, Mary, with an insect flying around different parts of her body. They were asked to indicate in which image the insect was closest to Mary. The tendency was found in both children and adults to identify the insect as being closest to Mary when it was near her head, especially her eyes.

The experiment was repeated, but this time the image of Mary was replaced with one of an alien whose face was in its chest. Once again, participants tended to identify the insect as being closer to the alien when it was near its eyes.

This would imply that the physical location of the self – that to which things approach or retreat – at least as such a thing is perceived, relates to the eyes. The organisers of the study noted that the tendency to this identification was particularly strong among children, which would imply that this was not something 'enculturated' or learned, but rather innate.

In one of his lectures the philosopher Alan Watts said that 'As far as I can tell, people generally think of themselves as being... something-or-other, located between the ears and just behind the eyes.' This seems to accord with the findings of the Yale study, but note that Watts' statement rides upon an apparently general assumption that the self must be *within* the body. This assumption even extends to sceptics such as Dennett, who explore within the body to identify the location of the self, albeit fruitlessly (and, in some cases at least, with bad faith).

Let's try this. Without moving your head, only moving your eyes, look down. Now look left. Now right.

Notice that, when you looked down you could – assuming your experience of embodiment is akin to mine – see part of your face. Just barely – the immediate crest of the maxilla covered by the skin of your cheeks; perhaps, behind that, the

distant fleshy crest of your lips. Looking left and right, the edges of your zygomatics, the eye sockets, where they curve up to the brow ridge, the prominence that marks the edge of the vast plain of the frontal bone. Left and right – the nasal septum and the septal cartilage with their thin film of skin.

If the location of your self were*, say, between the ears and behind* your eyes, all these things would be imperceptible.

Imagine a window whose exterior is flush with the surface of the wall that houses it. Standing back from such a window you would be unable to see outside surface of the wall. The only way you would be able to see the wall is if you opened the window, and stuck your head through that opening. How then is it, sticking with this analogy, that I am able to move my eyes and see the external features of the wall that houses them?

My relationship with my eyes – my body, in fact – is not one of interiority, but radical exteriority. My position with respect to my body is not interior, but immediately exterior. So immediate, in fact, that when my eyes close, it is as my self has become trapped like a fly between the glass of the window and the shutters that enclose it.

I occupy a position immediately proximate to my eyes; it is impossible for me to be closer, without being inside. But I am not inside.

My body – at least, to my own experience of it – is not a thing I inhabit, a citadel or bastion, but rather a ground on which I stand, on which I *presence*, forth into the universe.

…

There is a school of theology known as 'Apophatic' or 'negative theology', which describes God only via negativa – that is, only by making statements concerning what God is not. God is not material, God is not personal, and so on. At the end of all such statements we have, in a negative sense, defined God. (I wince at the flavour of every assertion concerning the nature of the monotheistic God, but some I find less unpalatable than others; I find this circling, sharkish manner of approaching the idea far more to my taste than bold, not to say impudent, positive assertions concerning God's interests, intentions, gender identifications, moral obsessions and/or political leanings.) Perhaps this remnant, this silence at the end of a process that cannot be ended, is the 'Superior Name of God' conceived of in Sufism – an unattainable divine name which, invoked, cannot but be answered.

I see a parallel with certain forms of sculpture – I have in mind that mode of sculpture which is subtractive rather than additive. The use of tools to remove what is unwanted from the starting material – as opposed to, say, sculpting with clay, which in the main proceeds by accretion, the addition of material, to achieve the form.

The curious thing about subtractive sculpture is that, strictly speaking, what the sculptor is working on is that part of the material which is *not* the image. She proceeds by removing, and removing, and removing, unveiling the form that was hidden. Even the act of polishing is a process of removal; she proceeds *via negativa*. The material – as in that which is worked or acted upon, that which is altered – of the subtractive sculptor is not the form, but rather the *place* of the

form – the innermost boundary of all that which is not the sculpture.

As with God, to name or conceive all that which you are not is to sculpt you, to arrive at you, to name you with your superior name, the one that is not spoken, but which resides in the silence that remains after all else has been said; the name which you cannot but answer.

…

Certain of the ancient Greeks proposed a theory of vision that is referred to as the 'emission' or 'extramission' theory of vision. According to this theory, held by Plato and Euclid among others, the human eye didn't receive light but, as Plato has it in Timaeus:

> So much of fire as would not burn, but gave a gentle light, [the gods] formed into a substance akin to the light of every-day life; and the pure fire which is within us and related thereto they made to flow through the eyes in a stream smooth and dense.

This is, of course, not true – there is no physical process of emission from the eyes. But I find it useful as a means of visualising my position, which at a stretch might be called, I suppose, the emission or extramission theory of the self.

The self is not to be found within the body; it cannot be isolated within the biological mechanism. It is not an organ, structure or inhabitant of the body.

The place of my self is the outermost surface of the world, the innermost boundary of all that is not me, where it touches my eyes.

Experientially speaking, there is no 'within' for my body. I do not mean that my body doesn't have an interior – of course it does. When my stomach aches, that ache is within my body. When I am nervous or excited, I experience a roiling sensation as of a disturbed sea just below my ribcage. But what I mean is that that interior stands in relation to my experiencing self as something that is located, as is the rest of the universe, *before* it.

My body is differentiated from the rest of existence not by dint of being separate or distinct from it, but only by dint of the special sensory access I have to it. My body constitutes a richer, a more dense region in experience – supplemented by nociception, proprioception, and so on – than the rest of the universe, limited as the latter is to the 'distant' senses – sight, smell, hearing. It is epistemologically privileged, but this isn't the same as being distinct.

There is, speaking out of my self, no division in what is. No interior, no exterior. Only variations in density within a field of *before*. The world is a problem, in the strict original sense of the word – 'pro-ballein': that which is thrown before. To speak of my self as having an interior and an exterior is not to speak of my self out of myself, but rather to adopt a notional third-person view upon myself. To look at me from the outside. It is to speak of myself precisely not as my self. As other. ('You enter the brain through the optic nerve...')

Consider Freud's image. Not his explicit image, the Mystic Writing Pad, but the implicit one: the protean unconscious reaching with its feelers out into the sea of being from which, encountering a stimulus, it immediately withdraws. Yet no withdrawal is possible; the self stands on the threshold (but of

what? it is precisely that we cannot know) but cannot pass across it. The apertures of the body are lined with salt; no passage across them is permitted. We have not been invited. How then can we withdraw?

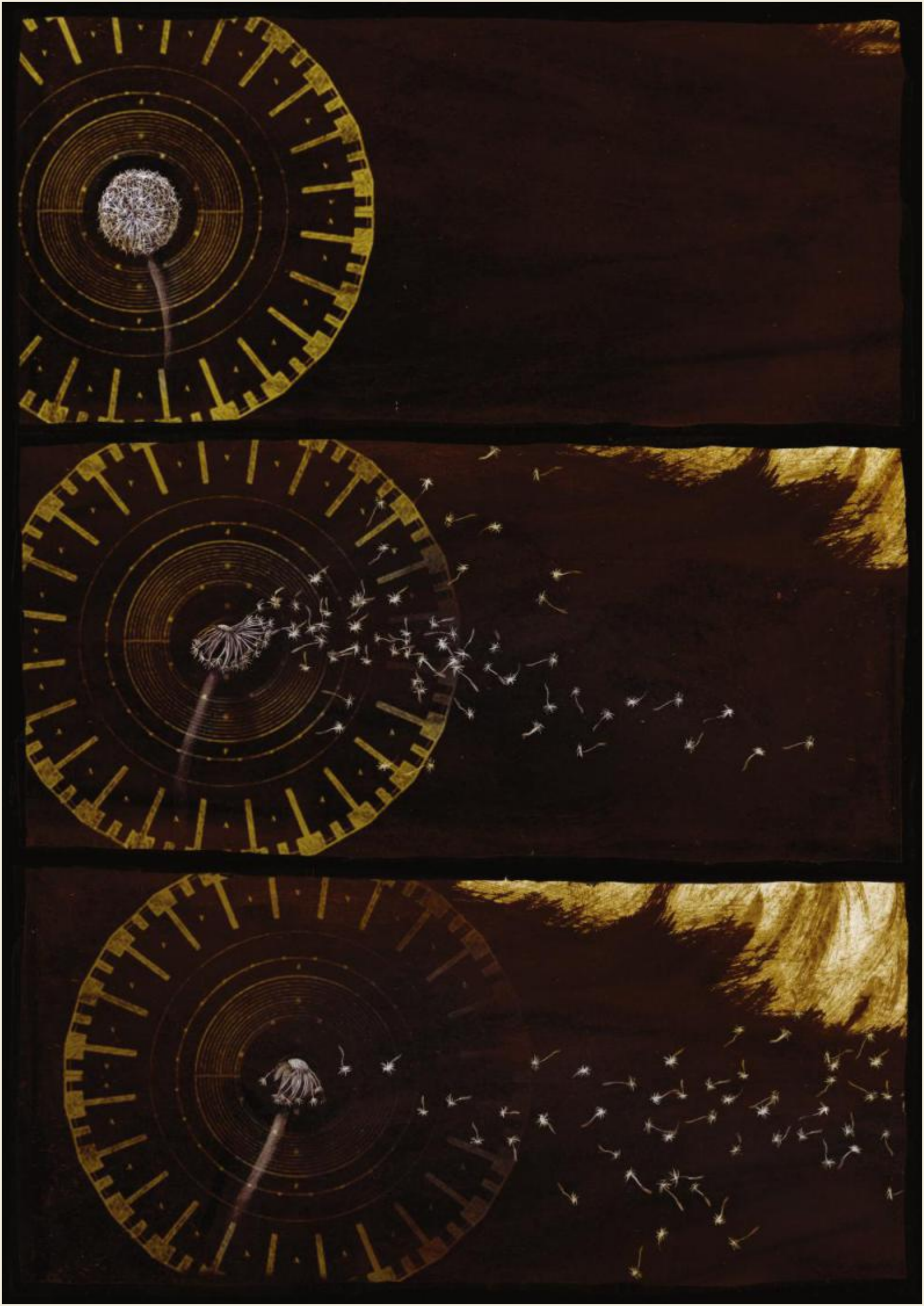
Note, again, that in the Yale experiment children, as opposed to adults, exhibited a stronger tendency to perceive the insect as being closer when near the eye, whether of Mary or the aliens. As the experimenters noted, this implies that the identification of the self as being bound up with the eyes does not derive from culture, but is innate.

But that being so, might that not in turn imply that the tendency becoming weaker in adults is, conversely, owing to something learned or culturally acquired? Do we develop a view of ourselves that permits us to escape ourselves, to withdraw like Freud's unconscious, away from the dangerous world – which we are not exposed to but rather constituted *within*?

The move is twofold. First, we consider ourselves not out of our selves, but rather from the viewpoint of a notional other. In this way we reconstruct ourselves in the third-person, as things of interior and exterior. Thus we establish a structure that admits of the possibility of retreat.

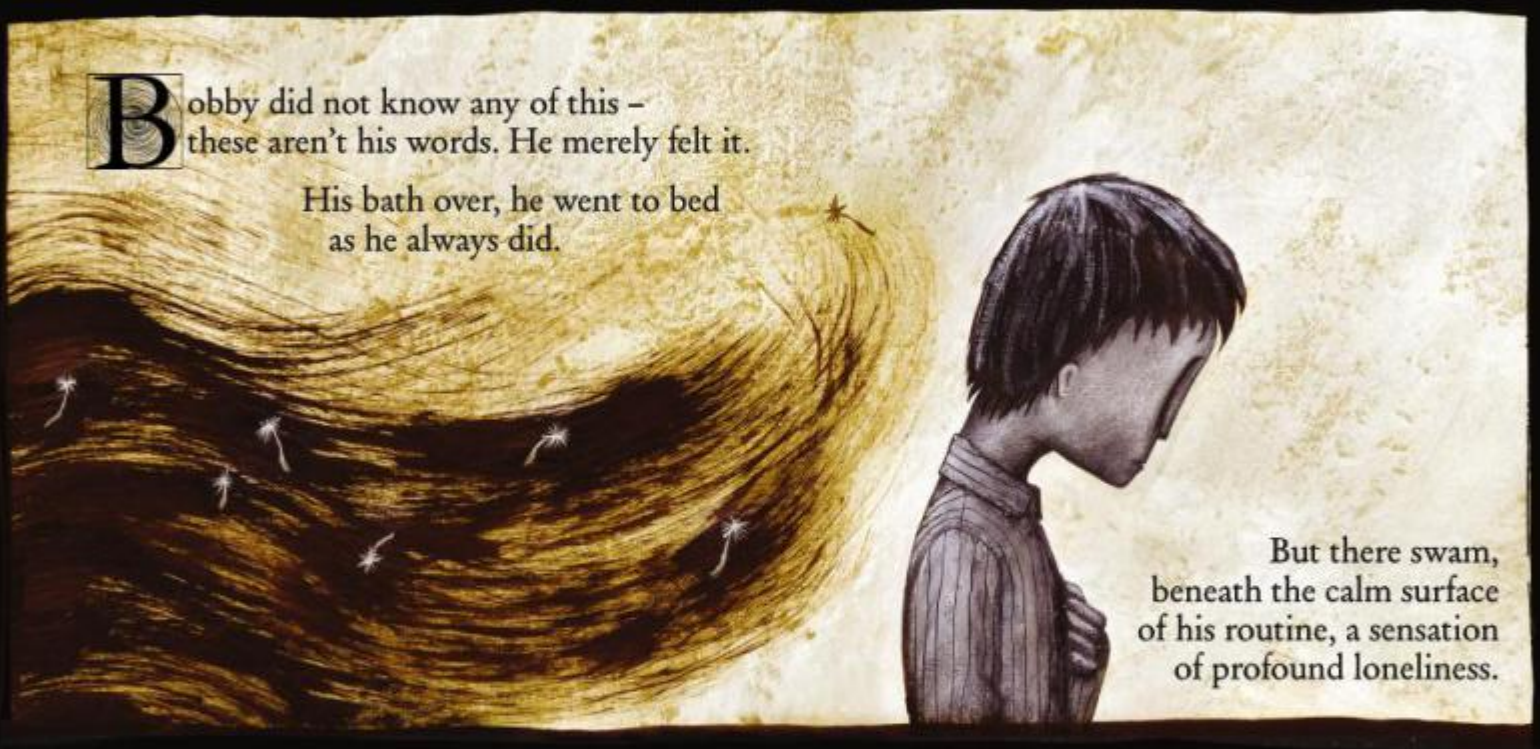
We seek sanctuary in a church of our own construction from the dangerous authority of the king. Ontological fugitives. Our old one being dangerous and oppressive, we crave asylum in a new place; and the name of this new kingdom is – disembodiment. A soul, a mind. Withdrawal into immateriality. Like a snail into its shell.

Down the plughole, into the void.



Bobby did not know any of this –
these aren't his words. He merely felt it.

His bath over, he went to bed
as he always did.



But there swam,
beneath the calm surface
of his routine, a sensation
of profound loneliness.

That night,
a few weeks ago,
the dreams began.

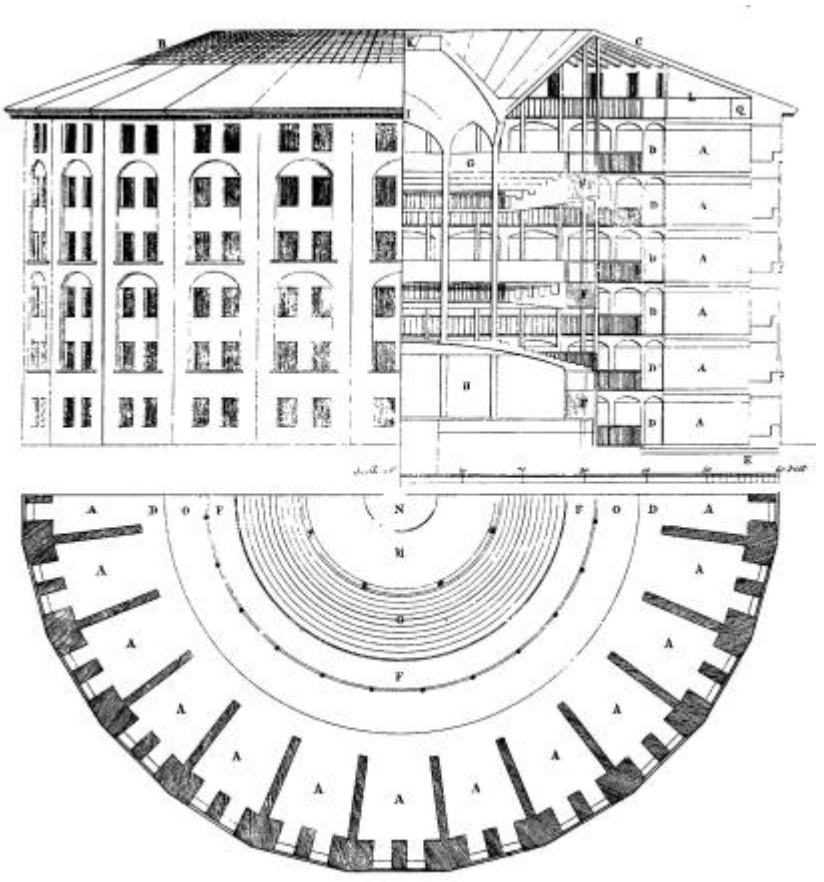
Six panels, all of them horizontal. This is in contrast to the previous sequence, where the panels were all vertical and narrow. The sudden change of orientation implies a fresh availability of space, but also time – things have slowed down and expanded. From restriction to capacity, being able to breathe again. Yet that same change also communicates volatility – just because things seem to have become more stable and open for now doesn't mean that they will stay that way.

This sequence seems to begin within the void that ended the previous sequence. But things have changed – now we can glimpse an edge to this space, a small spit of light in the upper right corner of the panel. What was previously boundless has been contained. As the sequence progresses this region of light expands (or the darkness contracts) – the frontier between these zones becomes more ragged, more contested. Is this new stability already breaking down?

…

Within this void is a dandelion. We find it at the seed stage, ready to disperse.

A cuspate feeling and readiness attend every beginning – but with these also come their more troubling companions: inevitability – being committed to a course, end unknown, that must be carried through – and instability – an inability to remain where you are. A wish – which dandelions traditionally grant – takes on its special character by dint of the fact that its non-fulfillment is more probable than its fulfillment; we wish to change our condition, but in that same breath acknowledge – or aver – that it is not in our power to do so.



Above: Bentham's Panopticon, drawn by English architect Willey Reveley in 1791.

In making a wish we cocoon the desire that prompted the act, yet also weaken the power of that desire to emerge by its own strength. Like the dandelion, we await the wind to deliver us. Or else a breath from friendly lips – lips that have just muttered a wish of their own.

…

Around the dandelion is an elaborate halo. This halo is derived from a diagram of what is called the panopticon.

The panopticon is an architectural and institutional principle outlined by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham, regarded as one of the founders of modern utilitarianism.

The panopticon is a prison whose radial design enables a single overseer,

placed at the centre of the structure, to watch over multiple inmates, lodged in cells around the perimeter. This is without the inmates being able to tell if they are being observed – and also preventing them from observing or communicating with one another. Here's how Bentham himself outlined the concept, in 1798:

> The building circular—A cage, glazed—a glass lantern [...]—The prisoners in their cells, occupying the circumference—The officers in the centre. By blinds and other contrivances, the inspectors concealed from the observation of the prisoners: hence the sentiment of a sort of omnipresence—The whole circuit reviewable with little, or if necessary, without any, change of place. One station in the inspection part affording the most perfect view of every cell.

The inability to tell when they are being watched tends to make the inmates behave as if they were being watched all the time – hence the panopticon exerts a pressure on its inhabitants, the overseer included, to regulate their own behaviour.

There's a correlation between the principles of utilitarianism – the most ethical action is that which brings the greatest benefit to the greatest number – and the design of the panopticon. It brings the 'benefit' of authority to the greatest number by means of the least possible expenditure: a single observer. Indeed, the uncertainty of the panopticon's inmates means that in fact the 'benefit' may be brought to them without the presence of an overseer at all. Authority resides in the structure of the building and the way that structure trains those occupying it to certain behaviours.

Though Bentham intended the panopticon to be in principle applicable to schools, hospitals and colleges as well as prisons, it is as a prison that it is most widely understood. After Bentham's death the design was applied, for instance, in the construction of poor houses, with the master's room placed at the centre, the occupants segregated around the periphery.

Michel Foucault adopted the panopticon as the symbol of modern authority, in which the impossibility of knowing whether and when one was observed entailed an at-all-times awareness of and acquiesce to authority. Rather than having to be enforced by violence, discipline was internalised by the subject. (To make that idea concrete, consider this. Britain is one of the most heavily surveilled countries in the world, second only to China; as of 2011, there were an estimated 1.8 million CCTV cameras in the country, one for every 32 people. The same study estimated that, on a typical day, the average resident of the British isles will be observed by 70 CCTV cameras. A decade has passed; the numbers will have changed. You never know when you're being watched; you're always being watched.)

…

To me, the panopticon is symbolic of a consequence of the process of withdrawal I outlined above.

The aim of the withdrawal was a matter of self-preservation; in the face of a hostile and dangerous universe the self conceives of itself in such a way that it is able to retreat from the flow of the

world, to strand itself. The process is founded upon the action of observation: first, the self takes up a notional view upon itself, inaugurating exterior and interior; then it withdraws into that interior.

From here, behind these ramparts and arrowslits, the master's place, it turns its gaze back out upon the world. Yet in this withdrawal it has not only changed itself, but changed the world also: 'The prisoners in their cells, occupying the circumference—The officers in the centre. By blinds and other contrivances, the inspectors concealed from the observation of the prisoners: hence the sentiment of a sort of omnipresence.'

This 'panopticonisation' of the world tends to discover, or re-discover, or *invent*, the world as inert, peripheral, atomic. A coagulation of mere material, distant from its observer, the master, whose attention now passes over it with unconstrained authority ('the most perfect view'), and which can therefore only relate to the world in terms of power. A superior, one to be at best tolerated, otherwise resisted (yet in the only way matter can resist: passive inertia, a lifeless recalcitrance) – but never an equal, never one bound by joy or reciprocal love.

Wherever the master, the officer, the turnkey attends it expects to find a quiescent cell, a unit of nature apart from all others, over which it exerts itself in a unidirectional manner. And even where it does *not* look it expects the world to awaits its gaze in a sustained, docile quiescence. A Snow White world, locked in its glass coffin, awaiting the watcher's kiss that will bring it to life – and into the watcher's possession.

The worst terror of this master-view is to find the cells, the atoms on the periphery, in communication with one another – worse still, in revolt against its centrality and authority. The possibility of hidden purposes; conspiracies, breathing along roots, chemical signals, mycelial networks. But the poverty of this view is not to understand that the master is trapped also, has lodged itself in a position that *feels* powerful, free,

There is no such thing as a single cage; there can never be fewer than two cages.

elevated, solely because the master always has the comparative poverty of its prisoners in view. Yet it is the master's gaze that creates and sustains this poverty, the vertical chamber apparatus, the pit of despair, by which it can excuse its own self-imposed impoverishment as a comparative plenitude.

There is no such thing as a single cage; there can never be fewer than two cages. A cage constitutes a division into two enclosures, one of which is designated as 'free', not by appeal merely to its grander spatial dimensions but rather to its density of incident; more happens there. It is only that the coffin, on this side, *seems* larger.

It remains a coffin.

…

Well.

This, then, is what's happening on these pages – a retreat into interiority, away from the universe; the establishment of a division, in order to seek security behind it. The remainder of the book is an elaboration and exploration of that process and its consequences; the rest of the story, as it proceeds onwards from this first volume, will be concerned, at root, with whether this divide can be overcome.

At least, that's my idea. The story will have others. I hope you find them.

I mean that sincerely. If you read the story and draw different conclusions, find different meanings in it, then that is between you and it.

This doesn't mean that I would accept what you think or, if I *did* accept it, that I'd endorse it – your take might appall me. But it's not up to me to counter it. Or rather, it is, but not simply out of an exercise of authority. One of the points I'm trying to make here is that my authority settles nothing. If your reading is an attempt to foist your views onto the story, to break it, make it your mere beast of intellectual or political burden, it's up to the story, not me, to resist that.

The tale knows more than its teller. More than the reader too. And if the tale bucks under you, throws you off, hoofs

you in the gut on your way down, then so be it and all to the good. But that isn't the same as me refusing to let you ride it or telling where to let it take you. I don't have that authority. Nor do want it.

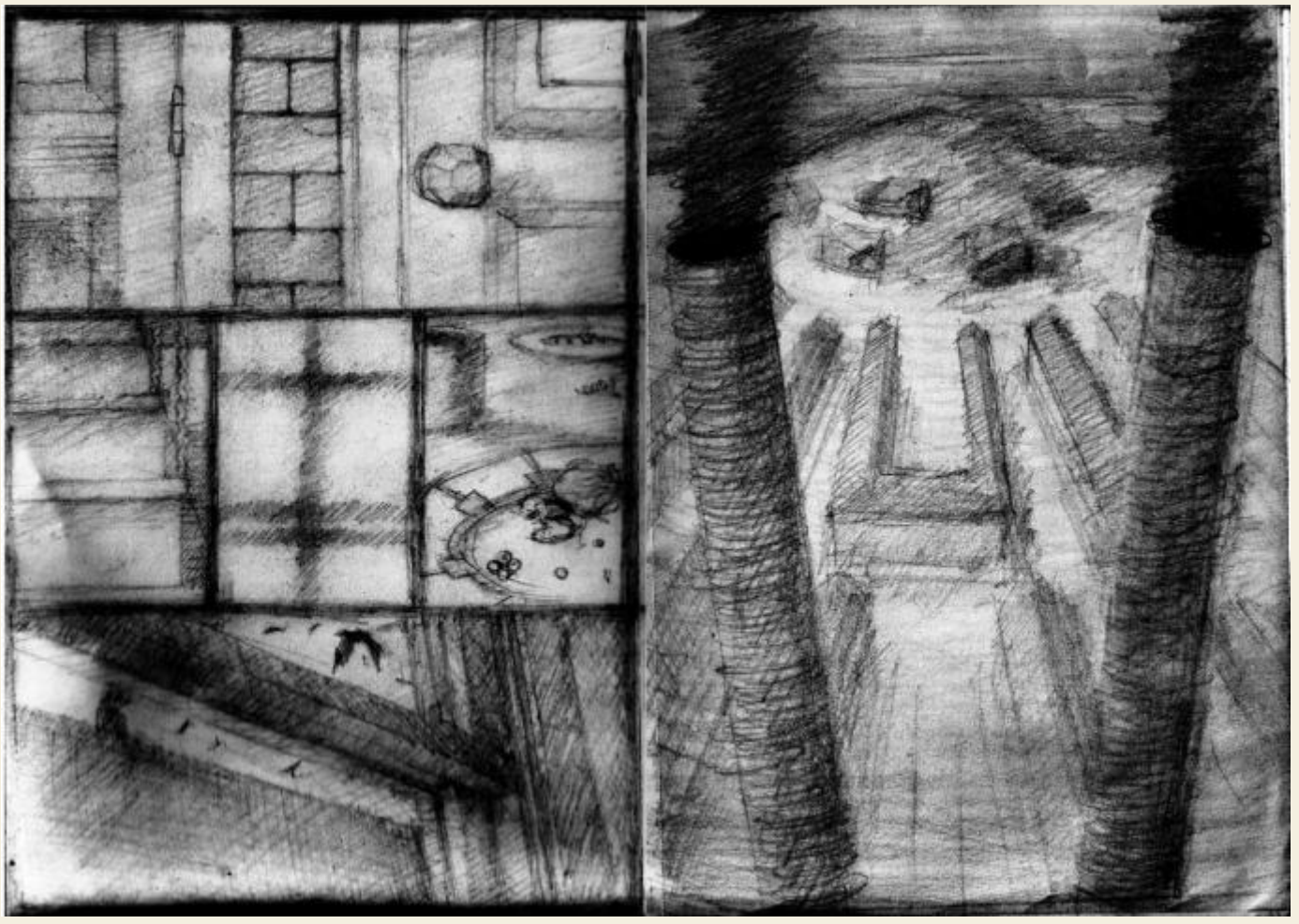
So. I've made my case. Now I encourage you to forget all about it. Just read the story, and see what you think.

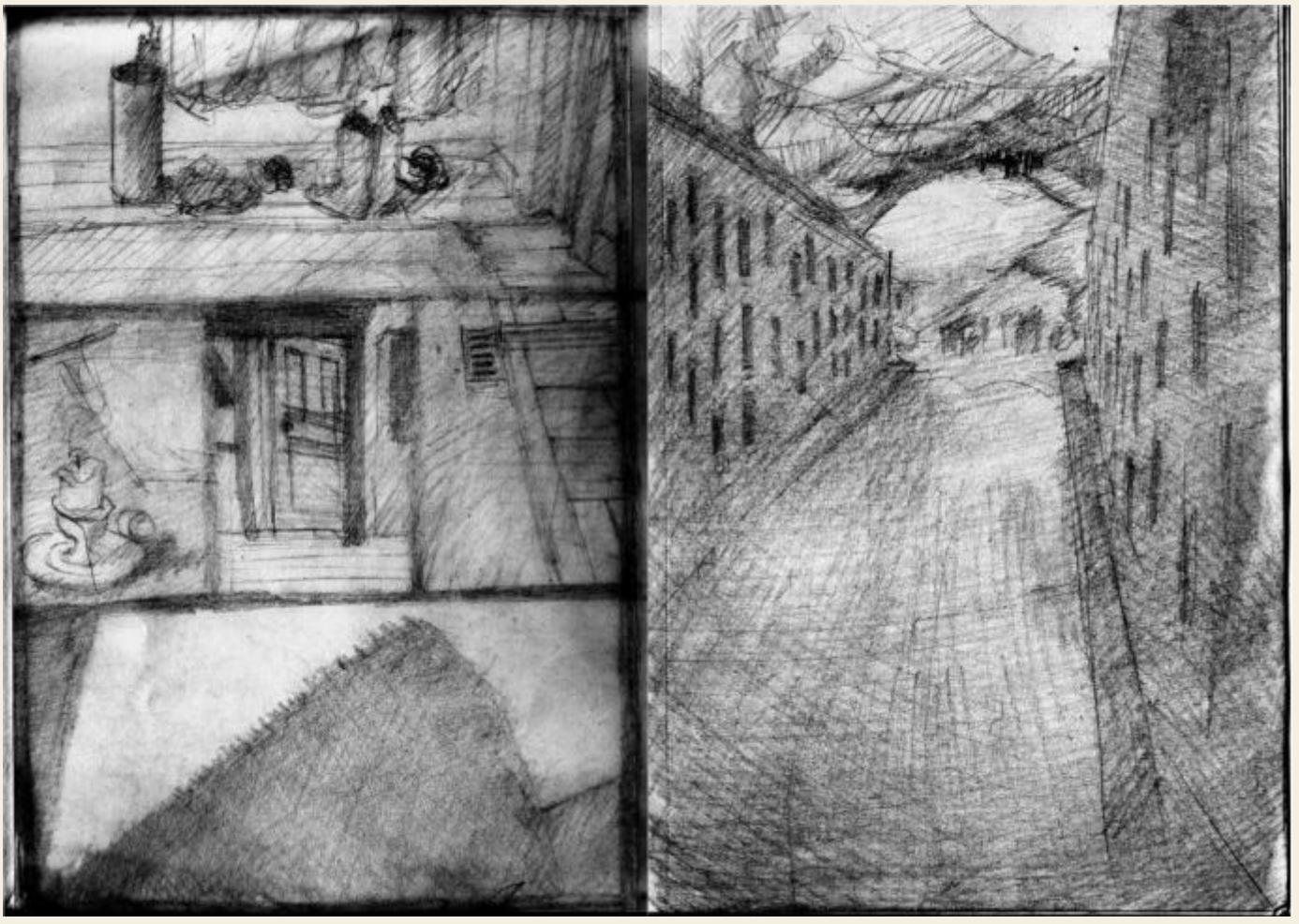
Or don't – it's your ticket, after all. But I didn't bring the tale up just to kill it now, as it finally leaves me.

Facing: One of the first test designs for *The Boy with Nails for Eyes*, from 2008. Bobby's design isn't fully developed yet. Even at the early stage the panopticon is a prominent part of the image.

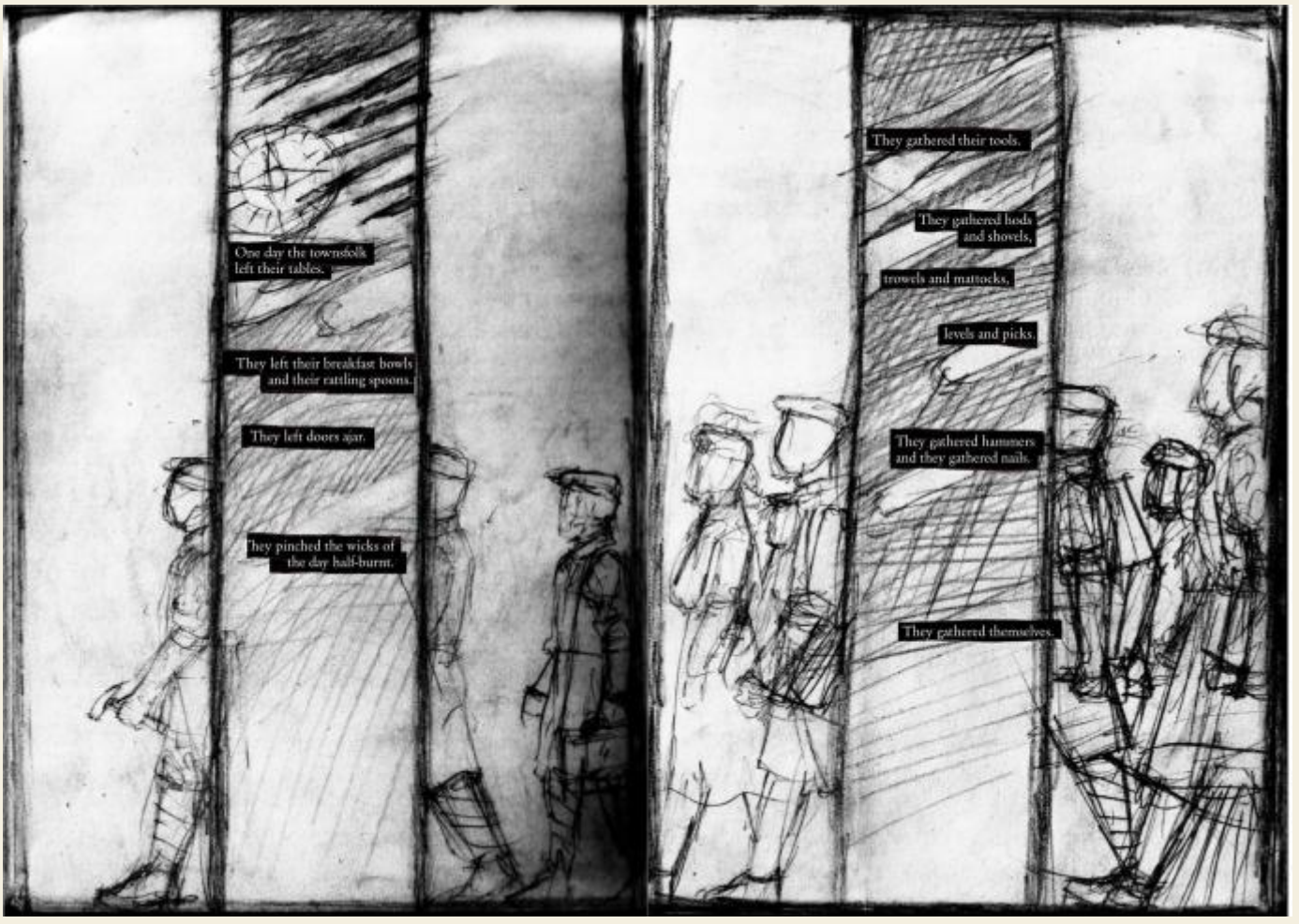
Afterword
Volume 2
A preview

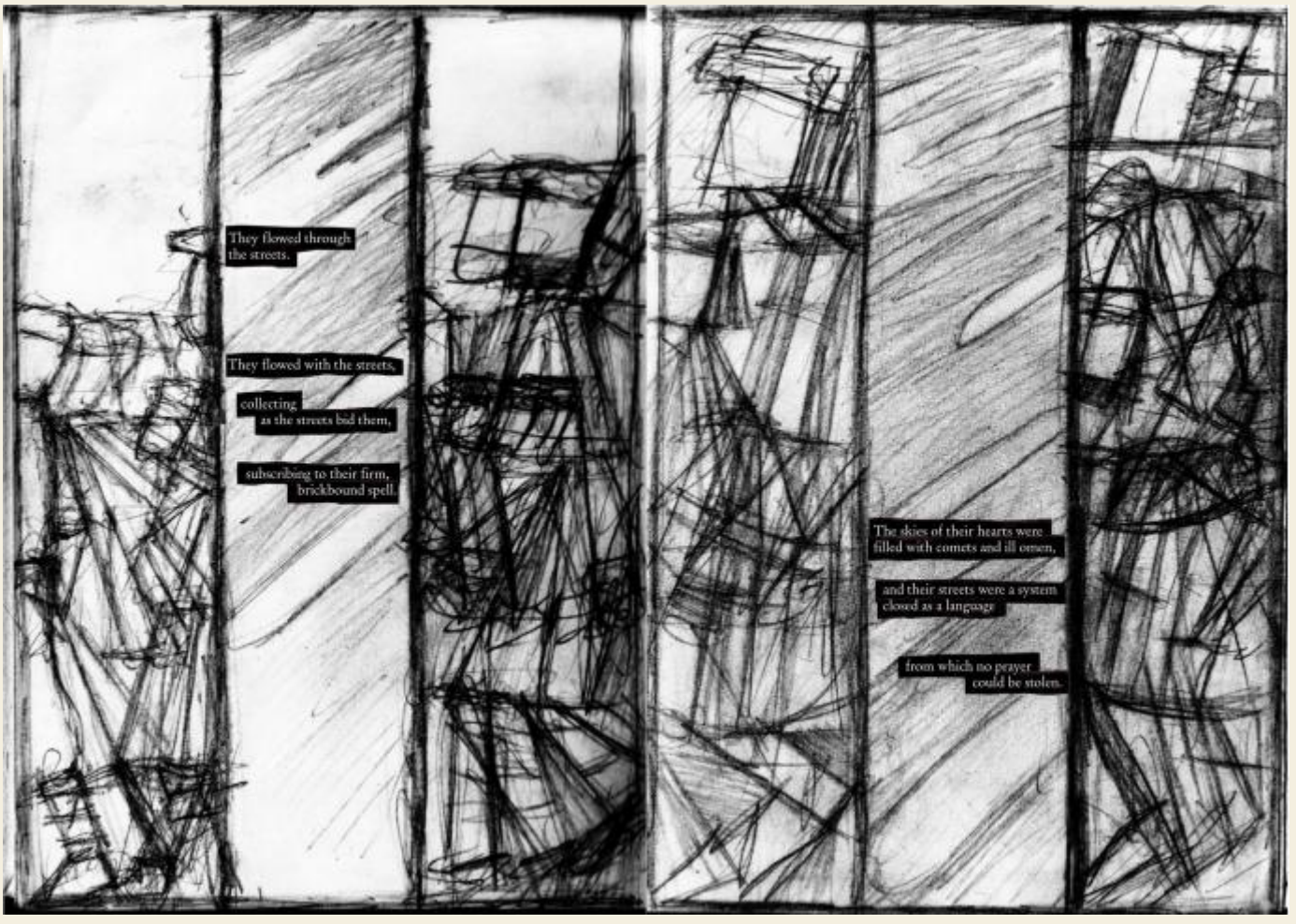
I wanted to close things out with a few pages from my sketchbook, showing planned layouts for the next volume of The Boy with Nails for Eyes. *This volume will be called 'Mary'. Like the first volume, it opens with a prologue; these are sketches for that prologue.*

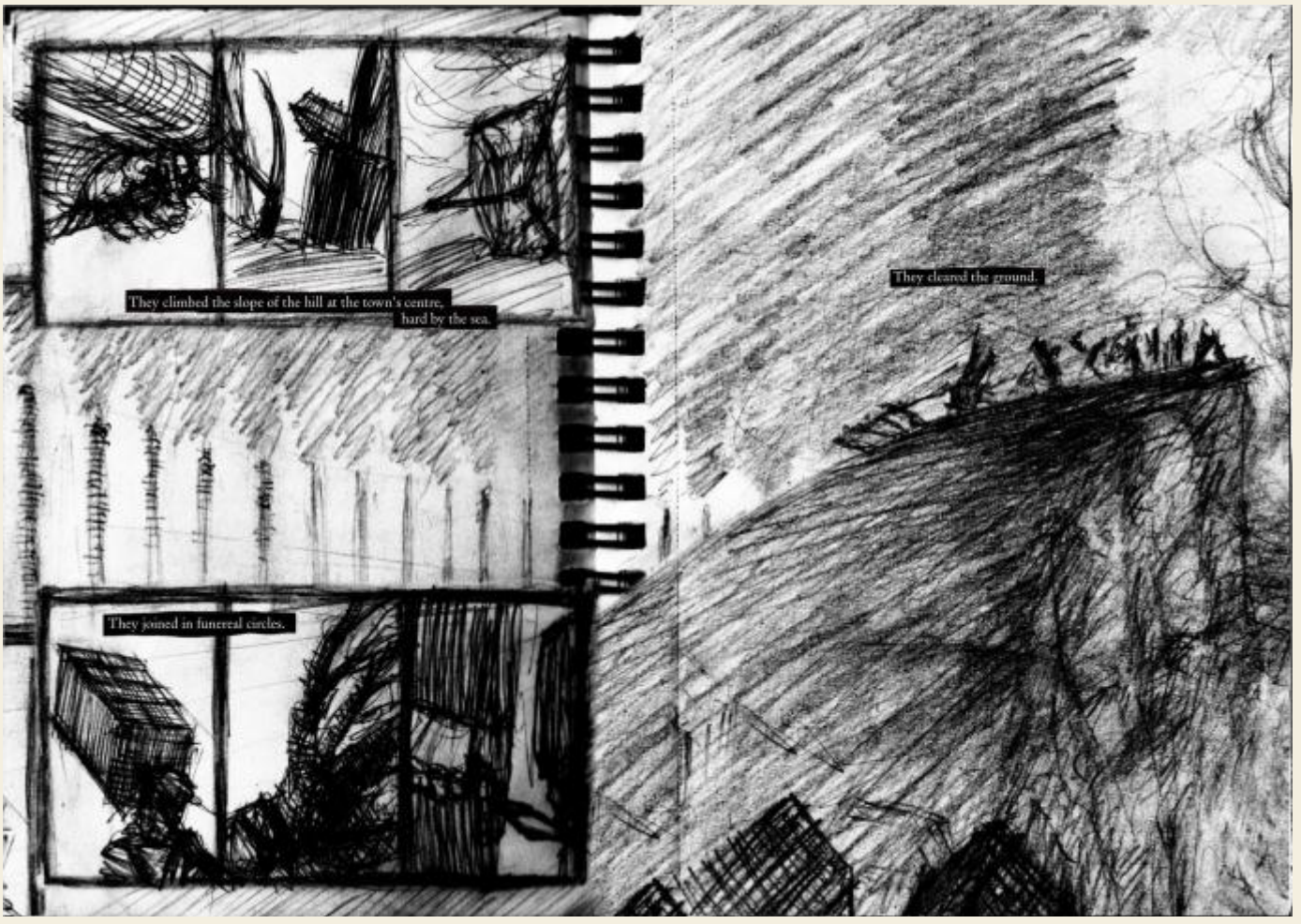




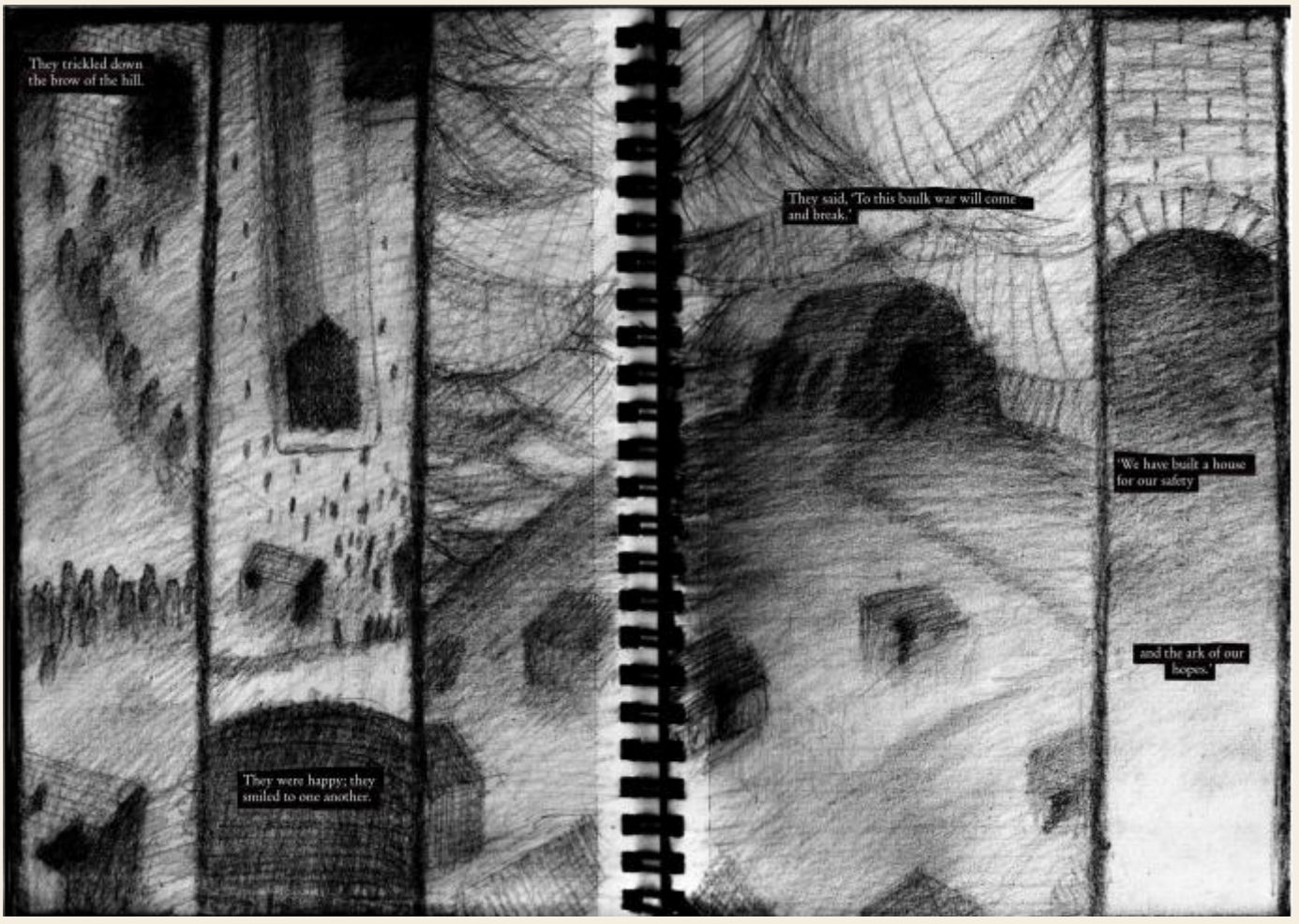

things proved insupportable.

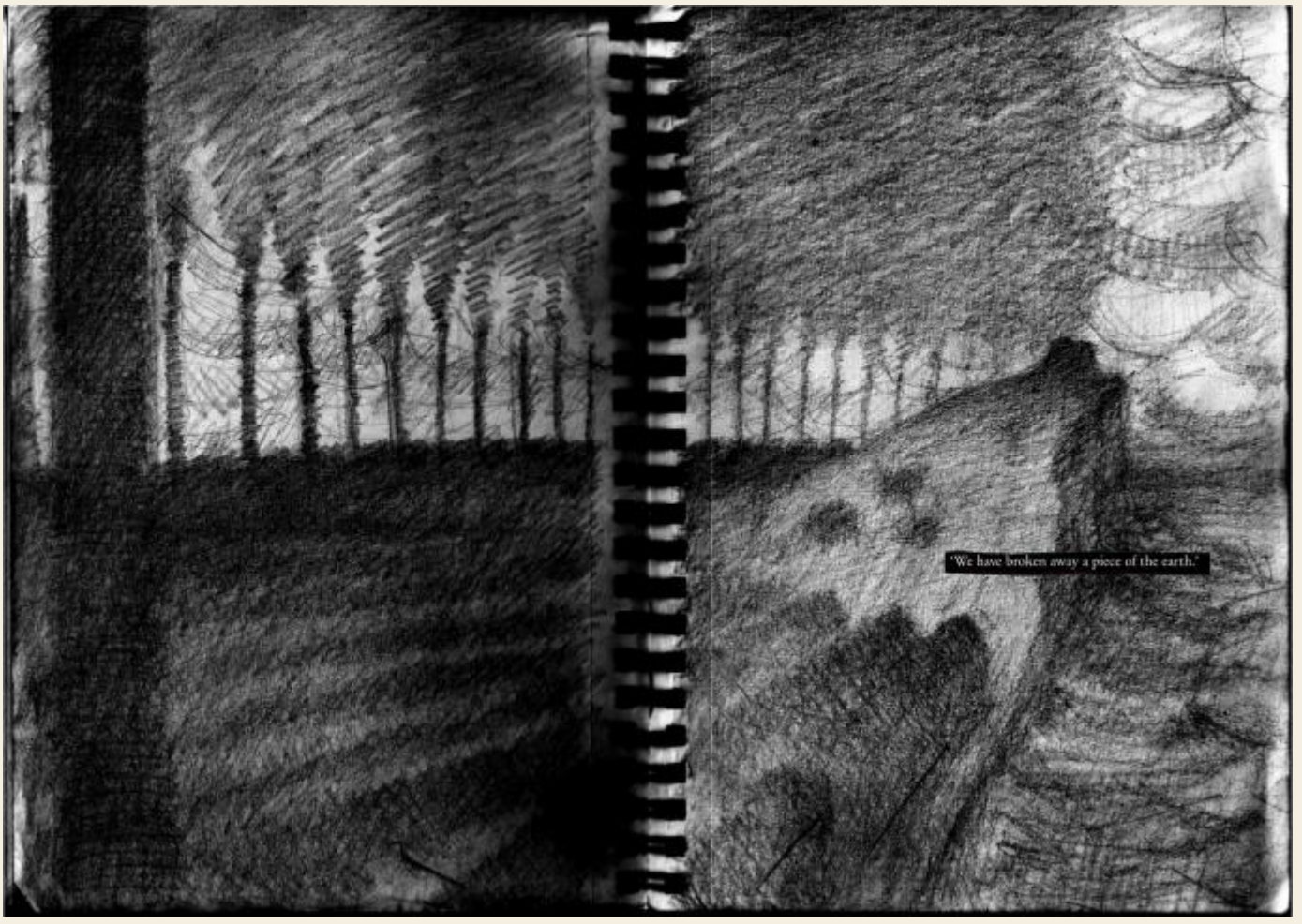

One day the townsfolk left their tables.
They left their breakfast bowls and their rattling spoons.
They left doors ajar.
They pinched the wicks of the day half-burnt.
They gathered their tools.
They gathered hods and shovels,
trowels and mattocks,
levels and picks.
They gathered hammers and they gathered nails.
They gathered themselves.


They flowed through the streets.
They flowed with the streets,
collecting as the streets bid them,
subscribing to their firm, brickbound spell.
The skies of their hearts were filled with comets and ill omen,
and their streets were a system closed as a language
from which no prayer could be stolen.


They climbed the slope of the hill at the town's centre, hard by the sea.
They joined in funereal circles.
They cleared the ground.


They dug the foundations.
They laid brick upon brick, a dozen deep.
They worked in silence.
They built in the sound of iron.
They built the bunker.


They trickled down the brow of the hill.
They were happy; they smiled to one another.
They said, 'To this baulk war will come and break.'
'We have built a house for our safety
and the ark of our hopes.'


'We have broken away a piece of the earth.'