



ELEVEN
COMICS
EXERCISES



U WON'T



BELIEVE U
MUST TRY



BY FIONN MCCABE

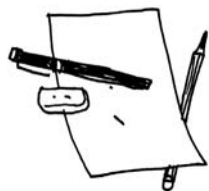




*Eleven Comics Exercises
U Won't Believe
U Must Try*

Prepare Yourself

What You Will Need



Supplies



Snacks



No Friends



A Fear Of The Sun

How This Book Works

1. This book has two components, comics exercises and the comics I've made based on those exercises.
2. All the instructions for the exercises are on white paper and all the comics are on yellow paper.
3. You'll see what I mean in a second, it's really pretty self explanatory.

Explanation and Disclaimer

This book is a collection of some of the comics exercises I've used and adapted and invented over the last few years. One was borrowed from a friend, some originated in the minds of former students, and the rest I made up for myself in order to learn from artists whose work I admire in an attempt to expand my own comics practice and understanding of the medium.

This book is an incomplete first attempt at organising a few of these exercises, comics, and thoughts, and includes many things I plan to change and flesh out a bit more some time in the future. It also includes twelve exercises, not eleven, but I completed the cover before I knew how many exercises would make it in. So it goes.

One other thing. If you try some of these exercises and turn them into comics, I'd love to see them. If you post them, tag me, or email them to me, or whatever, so I can take a look! I am very keen to see what you end up making.

Thanks for buying this thing.

xo



Parallel Narrative

(An exercise by Liz Macfarlane that I love more than any other)

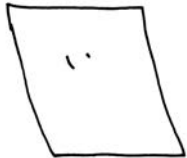
What You Need



Pencil (Or Pen)



Post-It Notes



Paper

What To Do

1. Think of a few distinctly positive, negative, or interesting memories from childhood.
2. Pick one and write about it for five to ten minutes.
3. Put that writing away and brainstorm a few everyday activities or situations, keep them mundane and relatable.
4. Pick one and turn it into a six panel comic using Post-It Notes.
5. Stick the Post-It Note panels down (in order) on a piece of paper, leaving a bit of space above each panel to use later.
6. Read back over the writing you did earlier about a childhood memory and then write six (or fewer) sentences that clearly capture the most important parts of the memory.
7. Apply your six (or fewer) sentences to your comic, writing the lines on the paper above each comic panel.
8. Read it. Does it make sense? Ideally the two narratives should create or imply some new meaning.
9. Rejig, rewrite, redraw as needed.

Thoughts

This is the first exercise I run when I am teaching a comics class because it so clearly illustrates the forgiving and flexible relationship between text and image in comics. When I first started making comics, I had a tendency to work very literally, and often the text and images would be doing the same story work rather than working additively and complimenting each other. When this exercise works, you can really feel the text and images connecting and becoming more than the sum of their parts. I think that this happens because the images begin to act as visual metaphor for the text, and/or the text begins to add a subtext to the images, implying a new meaning. This only really works if the text is adding something new to what is visually depicted. It doesn't work if the text just tells us what we're seeing.



MY FAMILY ADOPTED A RUNTY, 6 YEAR OLD RETRIEVER WHEN I WAS A TEENAGER.



SHE WAS SOFT AND GENTLE BUT SHE NEVER BARKED OR MADE A SOUND.



I ALWAYS WONDERED IF SOMETHING HORRIBLE HAD HAPPENED TO HER, OR IF IT WAS JUST HER NATURE.



OR MAYBE IT WAS SOMETHING TOTALLY RANDOM AND INNOCUOUS THAT CHANGED HER FOREVER.



HAVE A GREAT DAY AT SCHOOL, KIDDO. LOVE YOU.



LIFE IS SO COMPLEX AND MYSTERIOUS IT SCARES ME.



THE PAST FEW YEARS HAVE BEEN DIFFICULT.



I HAVEN'T REALLY FELT LIKE MYSELF IN ALL THAT TIME.



MY PARTNER THINKS I SHOULD SEE A THERAPIST.



I'M NOT AGAINST THE IDEA EXACTLY, BUT IT SCARES ME.



I WORRY ABOUT WHAT I WOULD SAY AND WHAT I MIGHT FIND OUT.



Rewrite, Redraw, Repeat

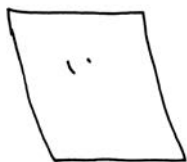
What You Need



Pencil (Or Pen)



Post-It Notes



Paper

What To Do

1. Make a short comic (4-6 panels), about something simple like a place that you love or an object that has special meaning to you. Use narration and, in this first draft, be as direct and literal as you can.
2. Using the same text, redraw your comic a few different ways. Here are some prompts: *Use only images of the environment with no figures.*
Find images that contradict the narration in some way.
Use abstract or shape-driven imagery.
Etc..
3. Using the same images, rewrite your text in a few different ways. Here are some prompts:
Rewrite your text to capture all senses but sight.
Rewrite your text from someone else's perspective.
Etc...
4. By now you are probably bored. Good. Entertain yourself by rewriting and redrawing a few more times.

Thoughts

I heard this artist say once that true creativity only happens in art when we exhaust all the familiar solutions to a problem, all the ways we've seen other people solve problems, and all the ways we learned to solve visual problems over the years. He said that it was only then, when we have completely run out of ideas, when we have nothing left to try, that we actually have to be creative and try something truly novel.

Sounds exhausting to me, but I kind of agree.

MY LITTLE BACKYARD IS PEACEFUL AND QUIET.



HALF THE YARD IS TAKEN UP BY A WIDE, SLOPING ROCK THAT SOAKS IN THE MORNING SUNSHINE AND IS A PERFECT PLACE TO SIT.



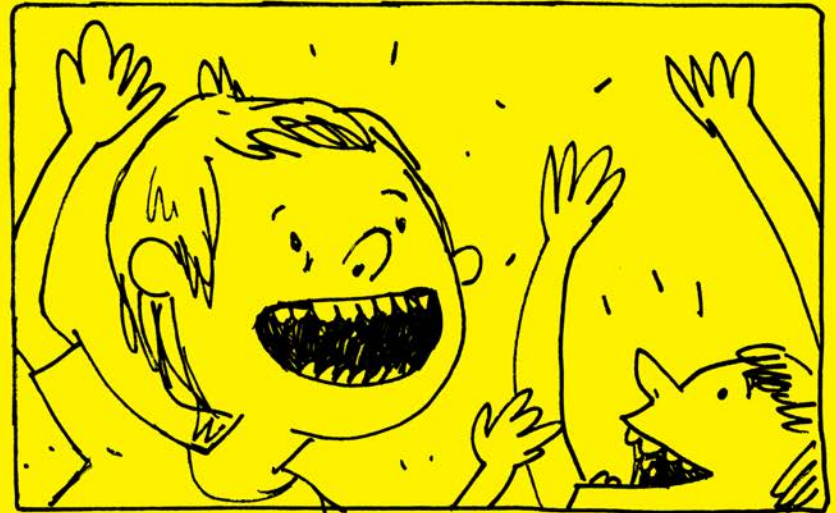
MY DOG USUALLY KEEPS ME COMPANY WHEN I
EAT LUNCH OUT THERE.



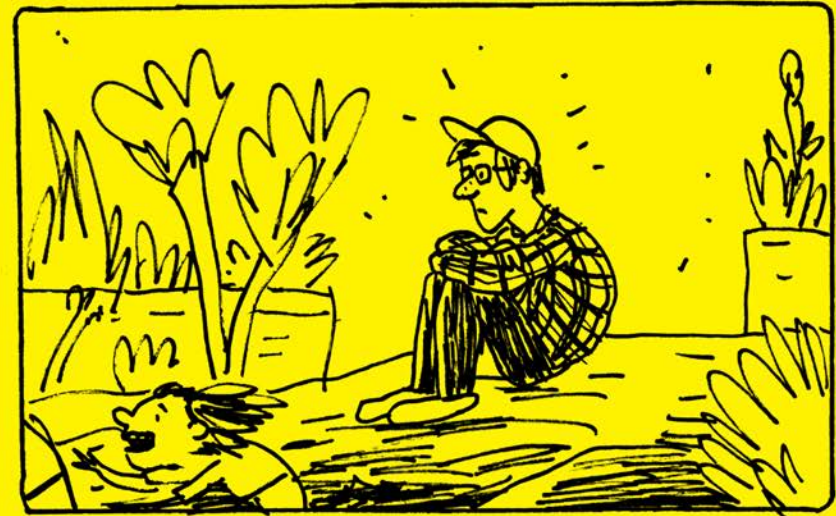
IT'S IMPORTANT TO HAVE A PLACE TO SLOW
DOWN AND REFLECT.



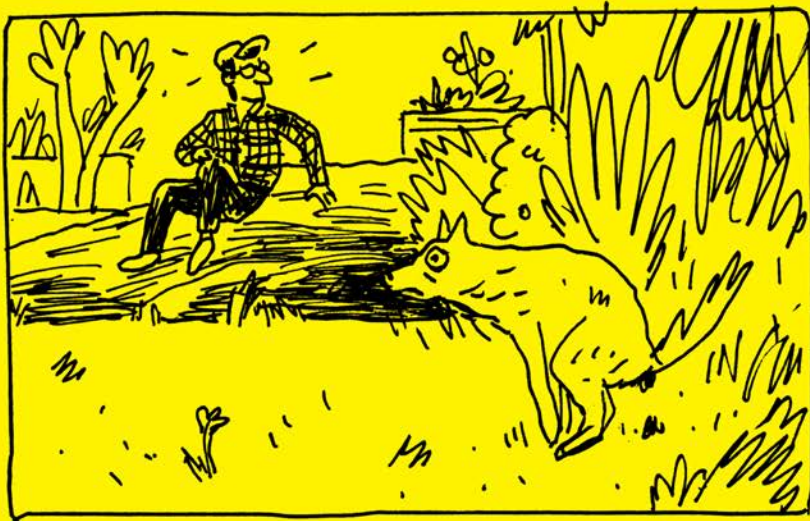
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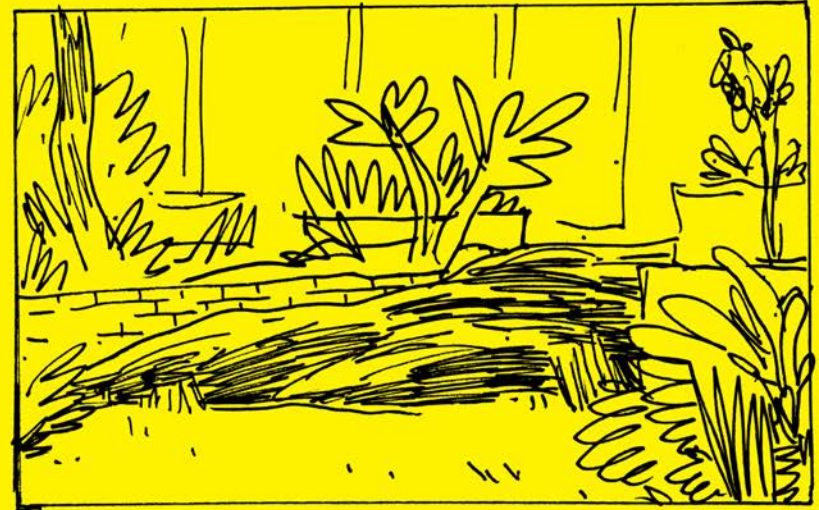
MY DOG USUALLY KEEPS ME COMPANY WHEN I EAT LUNCH OUT THERE.



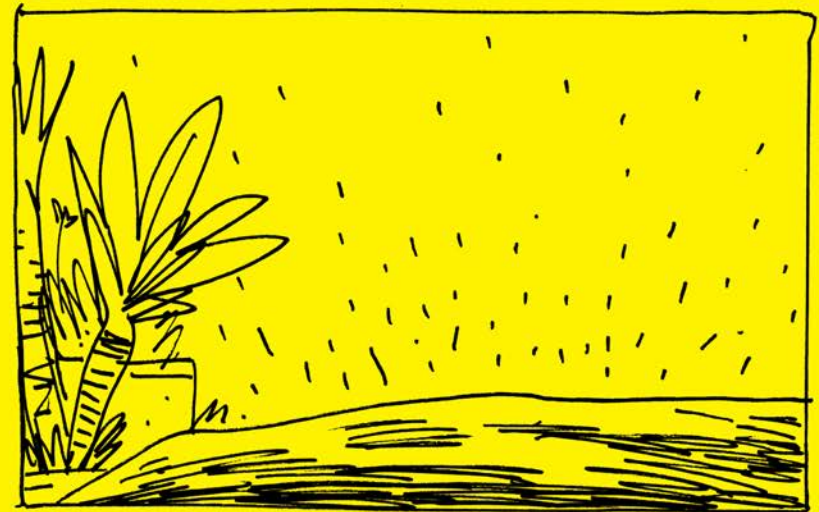
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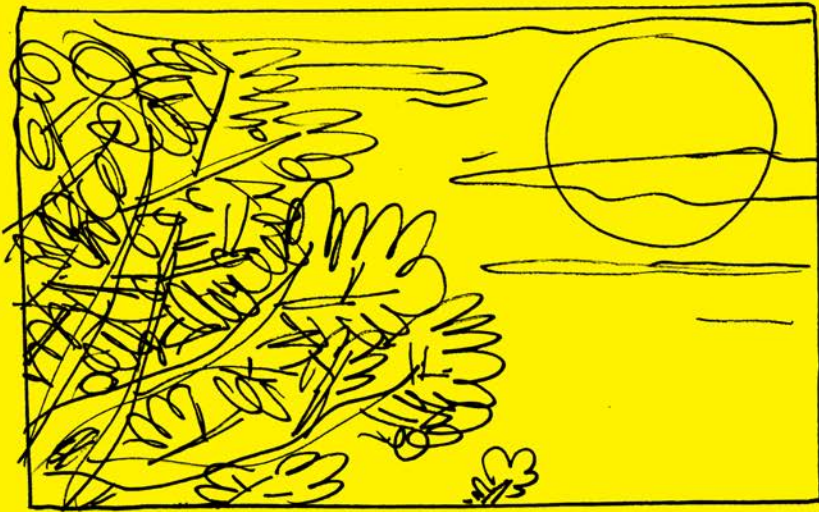
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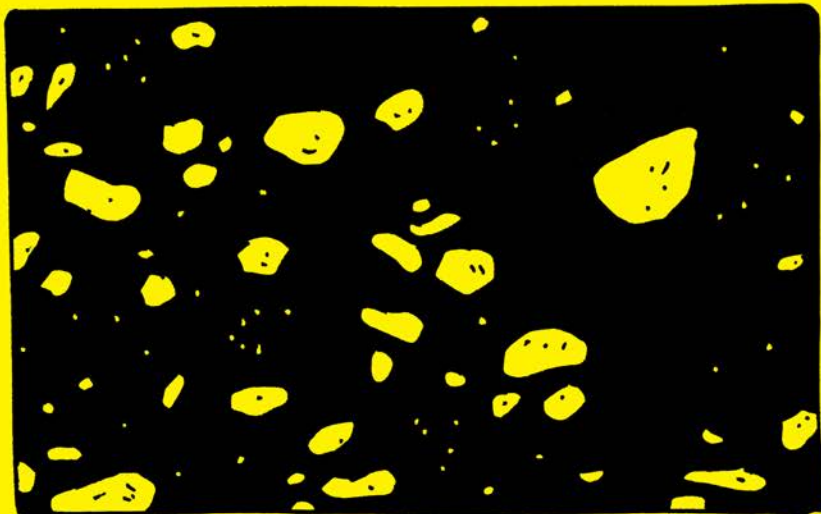
MY DOG USUALLY KEEPS ME COMPANY WHEN I
EAT LUNCH OUT THERE.



I CAN HEAR SCREECHING BIRDS AND THE FAINT
SQUEALING OF BRAKES FROM A TRAIN.



IT'S IMPORTANT TO HAVE A PLACE TO SLOW
DOWN AND REFLECT.



I CAN SMELL FOOD GRILLING.



THE SUN IS WARM ON MY ARMS WHERE IT LEAKS THROUGH THE LEAVES OVERHEAD.



MAYBE I WON'T GO BACK TO WORK TODAY AFTER ALL.



MY NEIGHBOUR IS THE LAZIEST MOTHER FUCKER I KNOW.



EVERY TIME I LOOK OUT THE WINDOW HE'S OUT IN HIS BACKYARD GETTING SUNBURNED.



I'LL BET HE'S OUT THERE RIGHT NOW,
EYES CLOSED, "SOAKING UP THE RAYS."



WHAT A FUCKING IDIOT.



MY LITTLE BACKYARD IS PEACEFUL AND QUIET.



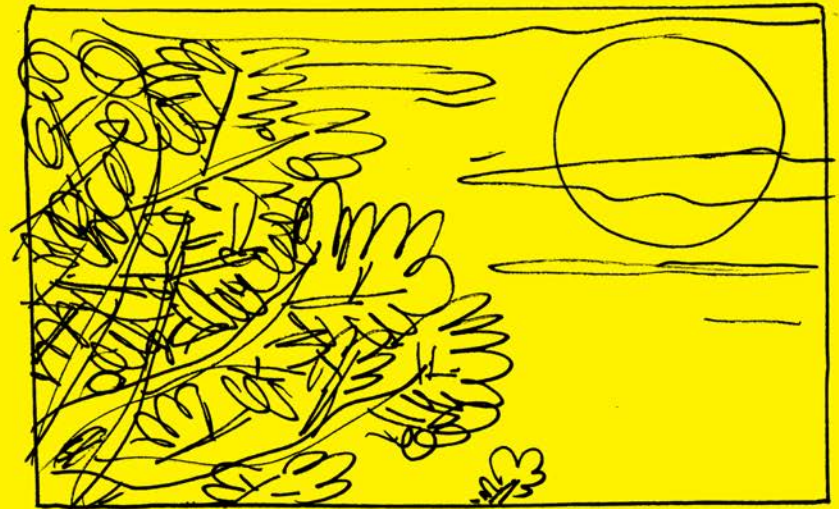
HALF THE YARD IS TAKEN UP BY A WIDE, SLOPING
ROCK THAT SOAKS IN THE MORNING SUNSHINE
AND IS A PERFECT PLACE TO SIT.



MY DOG USUALLY KEEPS ME COMPANY WHEN I
EAT LUNCH OUT THERE.



THERE IS A ROCK IN MY BACKYARD



IT'S IMPORTANT TO HAVE A PLACE TO SLOW
DOWN AND REFLECT.



THE ROCK IS BIG





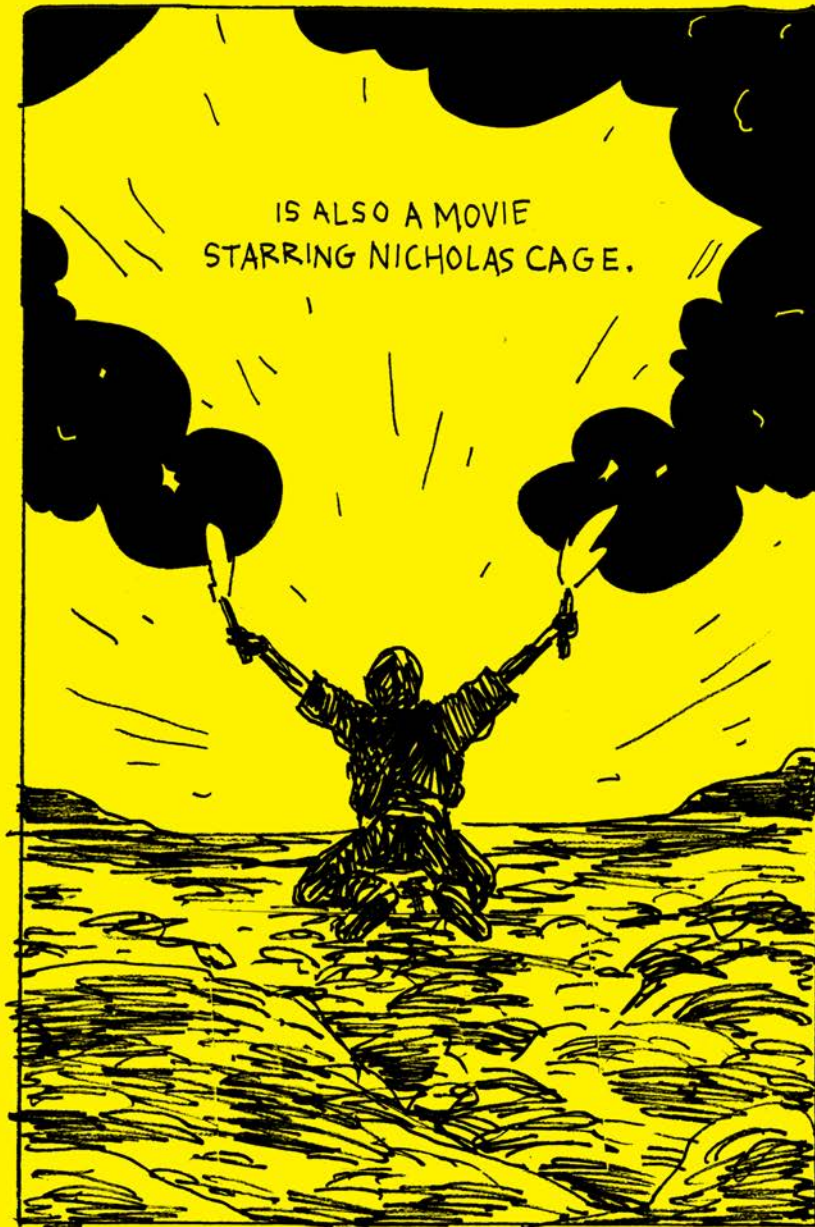
DWAYNE "THE ROCK" JOHNSON



I CAN HEAR SCREECHING BIRDS AND THE FAINT
SQUEALING OF BRAKES FROM A TRAIN.



I CAN SMELL FOOD GRILLING.



IS ALSO A MOVIE
STARRING NICHOLAS CAGE.

THE SUN IS WARM ON MY ARMS WHERE IT LEAKS
THROUGH THE LEAVES OVERHEAD.



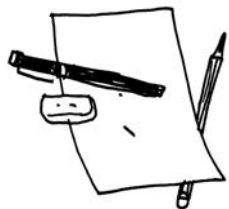
MAYBE
I WON'T GO BACK TO WORK TODAY AFTER ALL.



Meaningful Thoughts

(Adapted from an exercise by David Muir,
inspired by the Kuleshov Effect)

What You Need



The Usual



Trust

What To Do

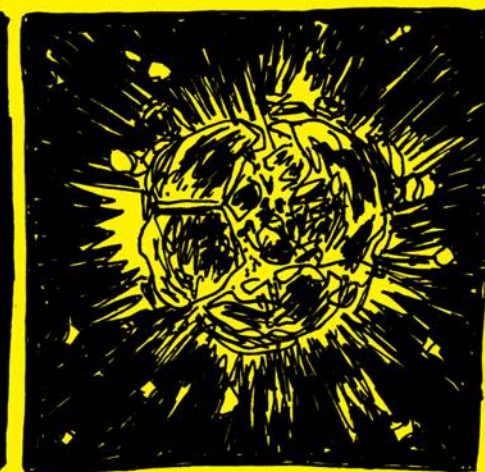
1. Establish a scene with two characters over a few panels, ending on a close up on one of them.
2. Draw a panel of something random, whatever comes to mind.
3. Back to your characters, and then a close up of your other character.
4. Draw another random thing.
5. Fill in more panels as needed to make the comic feel like it implies a meaning.

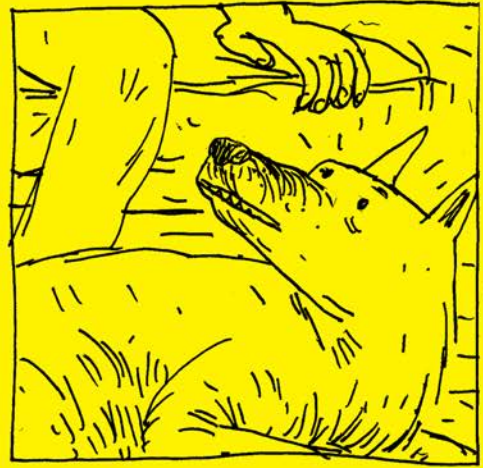
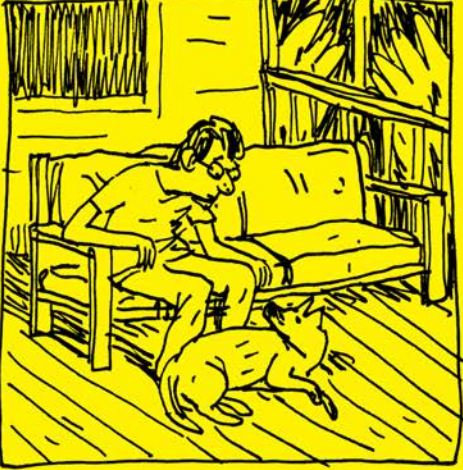
Thoughts

The gutter (the space between panels) is where a reader creates a meaningful connection between two moments. Closure is how we create a seamless narrative out of a sequence of panels. It's why comics work.

Lev Kuleshov, a Russian filmmaker and theorist, posed this question to filmmakers in 1910: "What makes cinema a distinct artform, separate from photography, literature or theatre?" In answer to his own question, Kuleshov said that a film is a cognitive event in which viewers derive more meaning from the interaction of two sequential shots than from a single shot in isolation. He tried to prove this by showing the same image of a man edited together with different images, showing that the various juxtapositions implied different things about the man.

The same thing is true of comics, and this exercise is a version of Kuleshov's proof. By showing something (anything), and then something else (anything else), we ask readers to create meaning using closure. We don't need to know what that meaning will be, or even have an intent behind it, it will still occur. Humans are compulsive makers of meaning. We can't help it.





Something You Miss

(Inspired by the work of Nadine Redlich and Pablo Holmberg)

What You Need



Pencil (Or Pen)



Post-It Notes



Paper

What To Do

1. Write a single sentence about something you miss.
2. Repeat one composition over three panels.
3. Draw another panel, only this time, something is different.
4. Incorporate your sentence somewhere in your panels.
5. Look at what you made, expand or contract, rewrite and redraw as needed.

Thoughts

A panel is essentially a moment in time, and when panels are repeated, the time we spend in that moment lengthens. I often find that when images are repeated, especially images of nature, I become more receptive to emotional content. It's like I am lulled, through that repetition, into a more open mindset. I think this happens because I am not worried about following plot, or taking in dialogue or narration, and so I am left to feel and experience the moment in a more present way.

The goal of this exercise is to put the reader into an open mindset... and then to sucker punch them with something emotional.



Offset Narrative

(Inspired by a section of Charles Forsman's comic, I Am Not Okay With This)

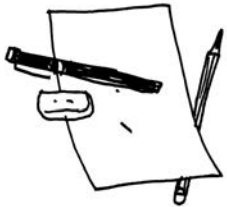
What You Need



Pencil (Or Pen)



Post-It Notes



Paper

What To Do

1. Think of a few distinctly positive, negative, or interesting memories from childhood.
2. Pick one and write about it for five or ten minutes.
3. Put that writing away and do some more brain storming, this time listing a few everyday situations or activities.
4. Pick one and turn it into a six panel comic using Post-It Notes.
5. Stick the Post-It Note panels down (in order) on a piece of paper, leaving a bit of space above each panel to use later.
6. Read back over the writing you did earlier about a childhood memory. Now write six (or fewer) sentences that clearly capture the most important parts of the memory.
7. Apply your six (or fewer) sentences to your comic, writing the lines on the paper above each comic panel.
8. Read it. Does it make sense? Ideally the two narratives (the textual narrative and the visual narrative) should create or imply some new meaning.
9. Rejig, rewrite, redraw as needed.

Thoughts

The goal of this exercise is to create a comic in which the narration and events depicted visually happen at two different times; one in the present, and one in the past. The trick though, is not letting the reader in on that knowledge until the end. Hopefully, when that information arrives, there is a satisfying payoff that both clarifies the story, and prompts the reader to revisit the story they just finished reading.

I like having to work as a reader, I like having to piece things together and build meaning, so long as that hard work is rewarded.



MY MOM TOLD ME THAT, IF I DIDN'T FEEL WELL, I SHOULD STAY IN THE CAR.



WHILE THE ADULTS ORDERED RICE AND LENTILS IN BULK, MY BROTHER PLAYED IN THE GRAVEYARD NEXT TO THE CHURCH.



HEY KID!
YOUR BROTHER
IS HURT!



I KNOW!



Feel These Feelings

What You Need



Pencil (Or Pen)



Post-It Notes



Paper



A Human Heart

What To Do

1. Think of a recent situation in which you had an extreme emotional response.
2. Create an emotional arc by writing down each emotion you experienced in that situation.
3. Create one panel for each emotion and write the emotion in the top left.
4. Using only abstract mark making, try to capture each emotion visually.
5. Title your work so that it makes sense, the more specific you can be, the better.

Thoughts

I think that when we look at a drawing we are subconsciously aware of the body that made it. I don't mean who made it, or what that person looked like, but rather as one human to another, how a human body having to move around to make marks on a page. I think we understand intuitively how calm and focused a body must be to create a clean, straight line, and how tense, energetic a body needs to be to make a rough scribble. And because of this understanding, mark making carries an inherent emotional charge that can be read clearly and predictably. This exercise is about exploring that intuitive understanding and trying to make it visible so that it can be used more consciously.



Patterns of Experience

(Adapted from an exercise by Mia Landy, inspired by the comics of Avocado Ibuprofen)

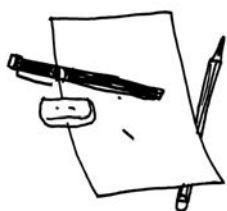
What You Need



Pencil (Or Pen)



Post-It Notes



Paper

What To Do

1. Write down 5 objects or experiences that you don't like or that make you feel unsettled.
2. Pick one, and write about your a situation involving your chosen object or experience - be sure to include how each it made you feel. Then, adapt your writing to use as narration - with no more than one sentence per panel - and use your narration as a script for a comic.
3. Start your comic with literal imagery, but quickly transition into abstraction. Try to capture the feelings you experience in your narration through your mark making. At least half your comic should be abstract.
4. As you progress toward the end of your comic, see if you can begin mixing abstraction and representational imagery. See if you can use the abstract mark making to imply a feeling or viewpoint about the representational imagery.

Thoughts

I don't usually love purely abstract comics. I think this is because, while they are often inventive and creative visually, they tend to be light on story and specificity. I think this exercise is a good way to use abstraction purposefully in a narrative by using the abstract visuals to represent the emotional content of a story, without losing the specificity that literal visuals add to a comic.

What can I say, as a reader, I like to have my hand held.



ALL THOSE MOMENTS WITH
MY KIDS, MY PARTNER, MY
PARENTS THAT I CAN ONLY
IMAGINE.



BUT THEN, EVERY SO OFTEN,
I'LL FIND A PACKAGE AT
THE DOOR.



INSIDE, THERE IS USUALLY A
BOOK, ONE PERFECTLY
SUITED TO MY TASTE.



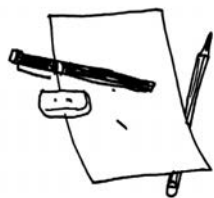
WHEN I DO A BIT OF DIGGING,
I ALMOST ALWAYS FIND THAT
IT'S FROM ME.



Mundane Magic

(Inspired by Rachel Ang's *Dream Diaries* and the writing of Etgar Keret)

What You Need



Drawing Stuff



A Sense



Of Mystery

What To Do

1. Think of a few everyday situations and pick one.
2. Establish the situation in a few panels, using yourself as the subject.
3. Once the situation is established, add some strangeness into the next few panels. Here are some examples:
Open a door into an unexpected space // Find an incongruous object // Notice a significant change in scale // The laws of physics malfunction // A strange creature arrives // Your task is inexplicably difficult // You have a sudden, strange realisation // Etc...
4. Think about what the weirdness might mean, and try to end your story without screwing up that meaning.
5. Rejig, rewrite, redraw as needed.

Thoughts

The goal here is to explore stories where the rules of reality are abandoned, where anything can happen, where magic is mundane and the everyday is surreal, all the while maintaining a sense of emotional truth. This exercise is not a math problem, where all you need to do is complete the steps and add up the parts. This exercise is more like trying to find objects in a dark room. Feel your way along, pick things up as you go and see if any of them might be interesting or useful.

Better yet, see if you can find a flashlight... made of hair.



Reward Interrupted

(Inspired by a comic in Pablo Holmberg's amazing book, Eden)

What You Need



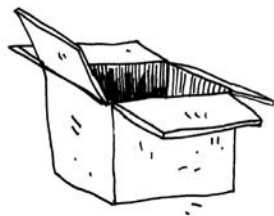
Pencil (Or Pen)



Post-It Notes



Paper



Life Experience

What To Do

1. List a few small, everyday things that prevent relaxation or contentment.
2. Create a simple sequence where a solution is found and relaxation is achieved, only to be ruined again almost immediately.
3. Keep it as short and direct as you can and use one location.

Thoughts

Pablo Holmberg's comics feel whimsical and clear and look like they are a breeze to make. He seems to pare things down to their simplest, most poetic form. They are light-hearted and meaningful, funny and melancholy all at once.

I made a story about a barking dog.

Making comics is really hard.





Nice Job, Dummy

(Inspired by the work of Michael Deforge)

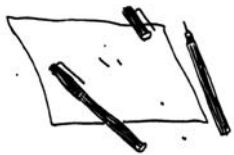
What You Need



Pencil (Or Pen)



Post-It Notes



Paper And Whatever



A Problem

What To Do

1. List five issues you are having difficulty solving (personal, financial, societal, etc...) and then pick one. Try to pick one that you can visualise.
2. In four or five panels, describe the problem (exaggerate and lie as needed). Be as true to your characters as you can, especially if things get out of hand.
3. Invent an unlikely solution to the problem. It can be anything, but it should be unlikely. A novel solution.
4. Add a few panels describing how this new person/thing/ action solves the problem.
5. Add a few more panels in which your solution goes awry.

Thoughts

Something I love about Michael Deforge's comics is how situations evolve in completely unexpected ways. You get the sense reading his work that he was as excited as his readers to see what was going to happen at the end. No matter how crazy things seem to get in his stories though, they feel true. Not factual, but honest, true to the characters and the worlds he builds.

When I work on stories that I have completely mapped out in my head, stories whose endings I know in advance, I am less interested in making them. I find that creating goals or constraints for myself that ensure that I cannot predict a story's path helps keep me interested in my work, and motivated to see it through.



WE PULLED OUR SON OUT OF SCHOOL AND MOVED IN WITH MY MOTHER-IN-LAW TO WAIT.



WHEN NEWS FINALLY ARRIVED FROM OUR BORNEAN ALLIES WE WERE EXCITED AND NERVOUS.



IN OUR ABSENCE, THE ANTS HAD STOPPED FIGHTING AND REACHED A MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL UNDERSTANDING.



MY MOTHER-IN-LAW'S HOUSE IS SPACIOUS AND EVERYONE IS HAPPY WITH THIS ARRANGEMENT.



Piss On Something Everybody Loves

(Inspired by Lisa Hanawalt's Illustrated movie reviews)

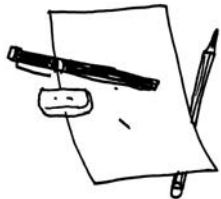
What You Need



Pencil (Or Pen)



Post-It Notes



Paper



A Grudge

What To Do

1. Pick a popular film or show about which you have strong feelings.
2. Write down all the things you've longed to say about your chosen film or show.
3. Turn your rant into a comic.

Thought

Lisa Hanawalt is very funny and I like her work.

I LIKE THE GUY TOO, BUT RUBEUS HAGRID SHOULD BE FIRED (AND PROBABLY IN JAIL).



THE FIRST THING HE DOES IS TAKE LITTLE, TRAUMATISED HARRY ON A FLYING MOTORBIKE.



THEN, WHEN HE FINDS HARRY LATER, HE SHAZAMS HIS COUSIN DUDLEY FOR EATING SOME CAKE.



THE KID IS A JERK, BUT COME ON! HE'S A KID, AND A MUGGLE, AND CAKE IS DELICIOUS.



AND LATER, HAGRID GETS DRUNK AND TRADES SCHOOL SECRETS TO A CREEPY STRANGER FOR A DRAGON EGG.



WHAT IF THAT CREEPY STRANGER WAS A PEDOPHILE AND NOT JUST A DEATH EATER DISGUISED AS A SCHOOL TEACHER WITH TWO FACES?



AND DOES HAGRID AT LEAST
PUT THE EGG SOMEWHERE SAFE?
NO! HE BRINGS IT TO SCHOOL!



OH, AND REMEMBER THE GIANT
FREAKY, CARNIVOROUS SPIDER
IN THE WOODS?



I HATE TO AGREE WITH RITA
SKEETER, BUT HAGRID IS
DANGEROUS AND INCOMPETENT.



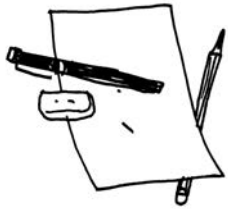
DON'T GET MAD, YOU KNOW IN
YOUR HEART THAT I'M RIGHT.



Something Every Day

(Inspired by Mandy Ord's comic, When One Person Dies The Whole World is Over, and Mathew Dick's exercise, Homework For Life)

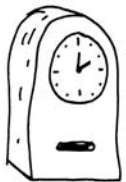
What You Need



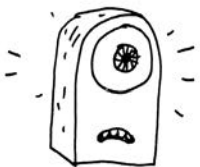
Drawing Stuff



A Computer



Time



More Time

What To Do Every Day

1. At the end of each day, take five minutes to write about one moment or one thing that happened. It doesn't have to be profound, just something that sticks out. If that thing makes you feel feelings, even better. Write down any dialogue or details you feel might slip your mind, but just do it quickly, you don't need full sentences - just enough to remember what happened.
2. Copy it into a spreadsheet for later use.

What To Do When You Can

1. Comb through your spreadsheet and pick something to turn into a comic.
2. Make a short, loose comic about the moment you've chosen. Do not make it look pretty, just try to clearly capture the feeling and meaning of the moment. Work at a size and use materials that are comfortable for you. Go easy on the self criticism, just make them.

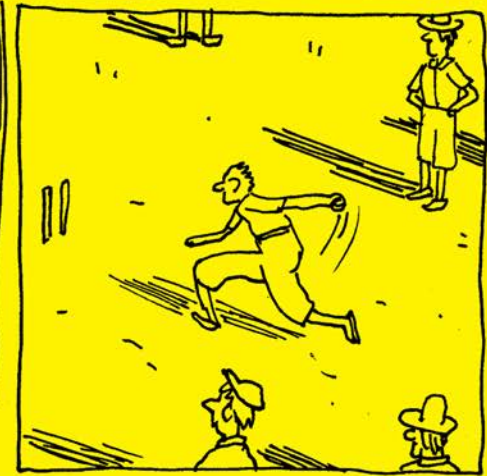
Thoughts

At first this exercise can feel exhausting, but it's worth it. After about two weeks of writing something down every day, and drawing a few times a week, I started to get a sense of which moments and situations would make interesting stories to tell and draw.

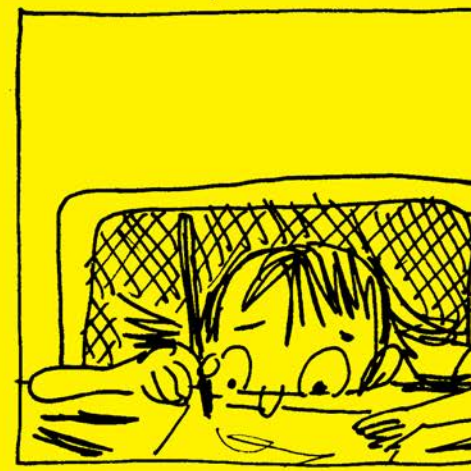
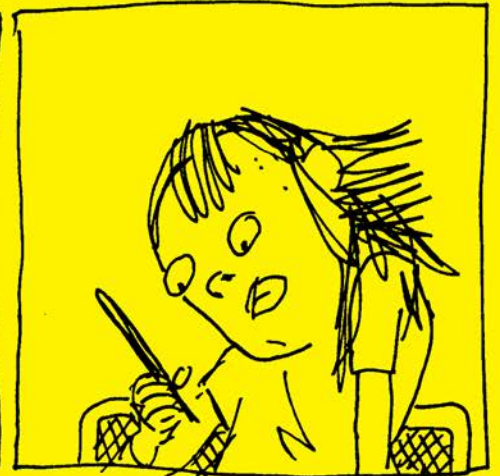
There is an interesting cumulative effect with this exercise as well. Taken individually, each story is self contained, a little snapshot of life, but read together they begin to paint a more dynamic picture, where themes and interests connect and imply deeper, more complex meanings. Mandy Ord's book (mentioned above) is a great example of that kind of cumulative, emergent meaning.

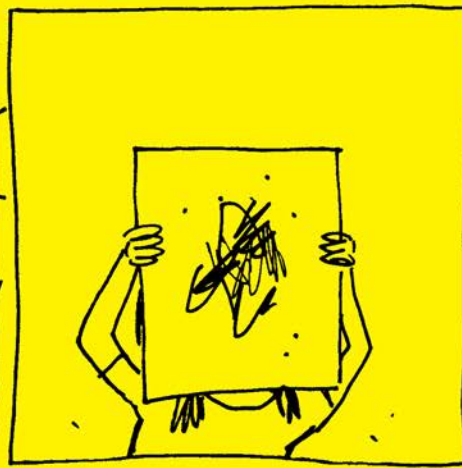
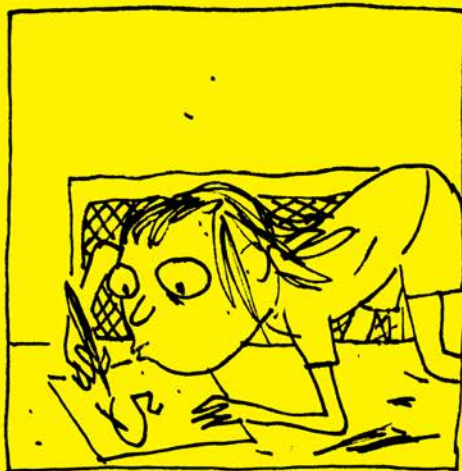
























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