

‘objectively’ describes. Comics theory in a sense perpetuates the kinds of comics that are produced and accepted academically. The ‘is’ becomes an ‘ought’: this is what a ‘comic’ should look like to be worthy of analysis.

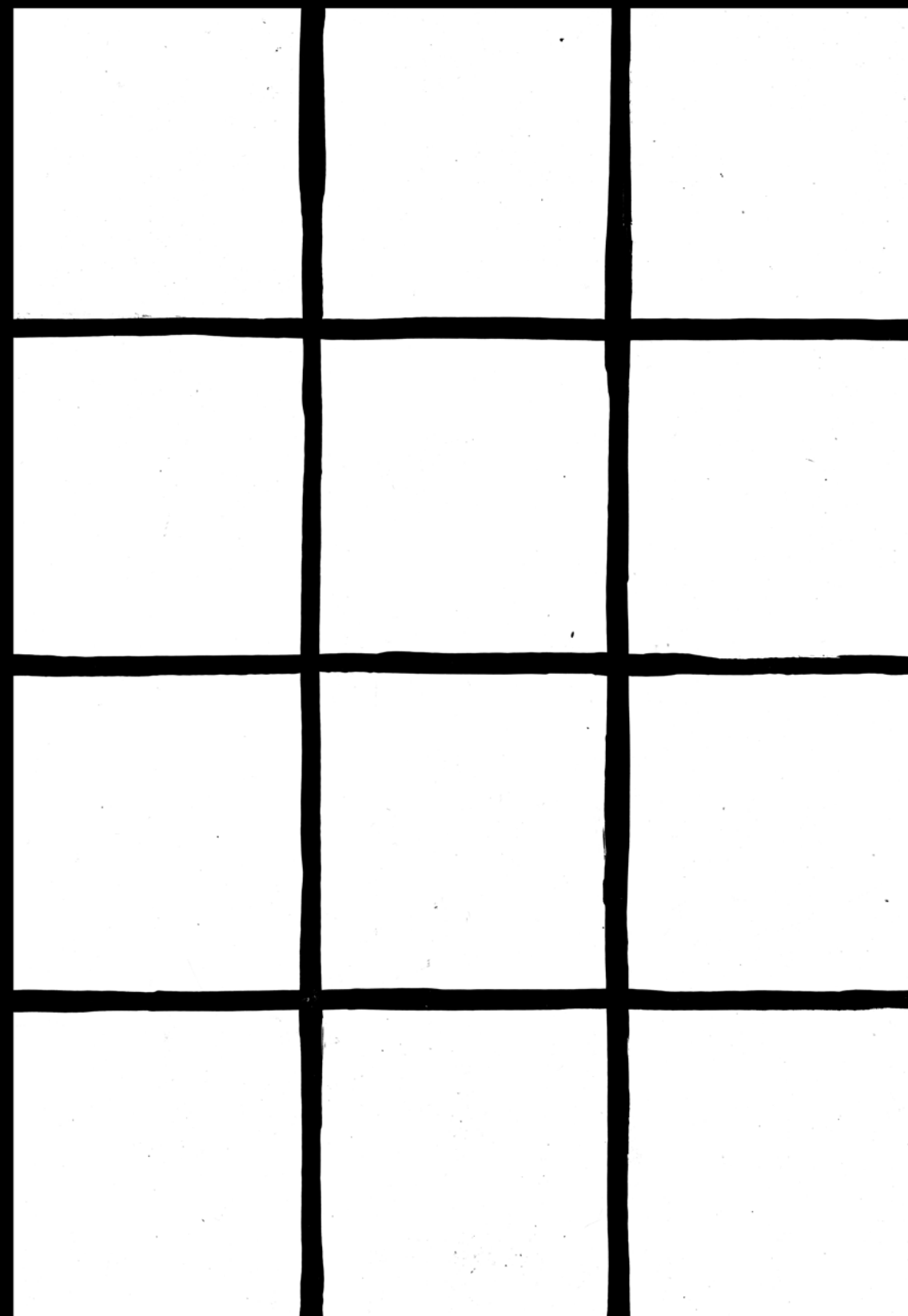
Against the association of comics with literature to garner cultural legitimacy as ‘graphic novels,’ a similar process of legitimation through proximity has taken place. Against literature, the genre of ‘abstract comics’ has been aligned with art historical discourse and the undisputed status of abstract art as one of the greatest Modernist achievements in visual arts, whose initial radicality has long since been exhausted through its museal consecration. The ‘aura’ of the avant-garde seems to have been passed onto these mainly non-figural comics, while at the same time revealing the supposed essence of the medium itself. Exemplars of comics at their purest, abstract comics ostensibly disclose the “formal mechanisms that underlie all comics, such as the graphic dynamism that leads the eye (and the mind) from panel to panel, or the aesthetically rich interplay between sequentiality and page layout” (Molotiu 2009, “Introduction,” n.p.). In this conception of abstraction as reduction to purity—echoing Clement Greenberg’s negative theology of painting as pure opticality and Flat Form—the essence of comics is revealed ex negativo: abstract comics are non-figurative and non-narrative, while at the same time only occupied with themselves, in an exclusively formal self-reflexivity.

In counterpoint, this book approaches abstraction as a way of affirming ‘the outside,’ as a means towards heterodoxy. Indifferent to its specificity, the medium is now an occasion for inventing other spaces that “push art forms beyond and beside themselves, causing their very languages, as though possessed with the force of other things, to start stuttering ‘and ... and ... and ...’” (Rajchman 1998, 60-61). Comics are not a ‘system’ with a ‘code’: rather, it names a material poetic/technic that is instantiated in correlation with socio-political variables, in which narrative comics (or its non-narrative nemesis, abstract comics) are but one possibility amongst many. The comics published in this book certainly speak to (stutter towards?) this constitutive outside: instead of formal purification, they evince an anarchic engagement with other media, with the political, with the past and present, with whatever at hand; odds and ends are assembled into a more or less continuous segment making abstraction palpable as dirty, lived, concrete.

We have no quarrel with definitions per se. If nothing else, they are useful: after all, they are there to be refunctioned, the matter for joyful *détournement*, an occasion for unlearning. What holds for reading Kafka equally holds for reading some of the comics in this

Renaud Thomas







CLIFF STERRETT'S JAZZ AGE ABSTRACTIONS

Katherine Roeder

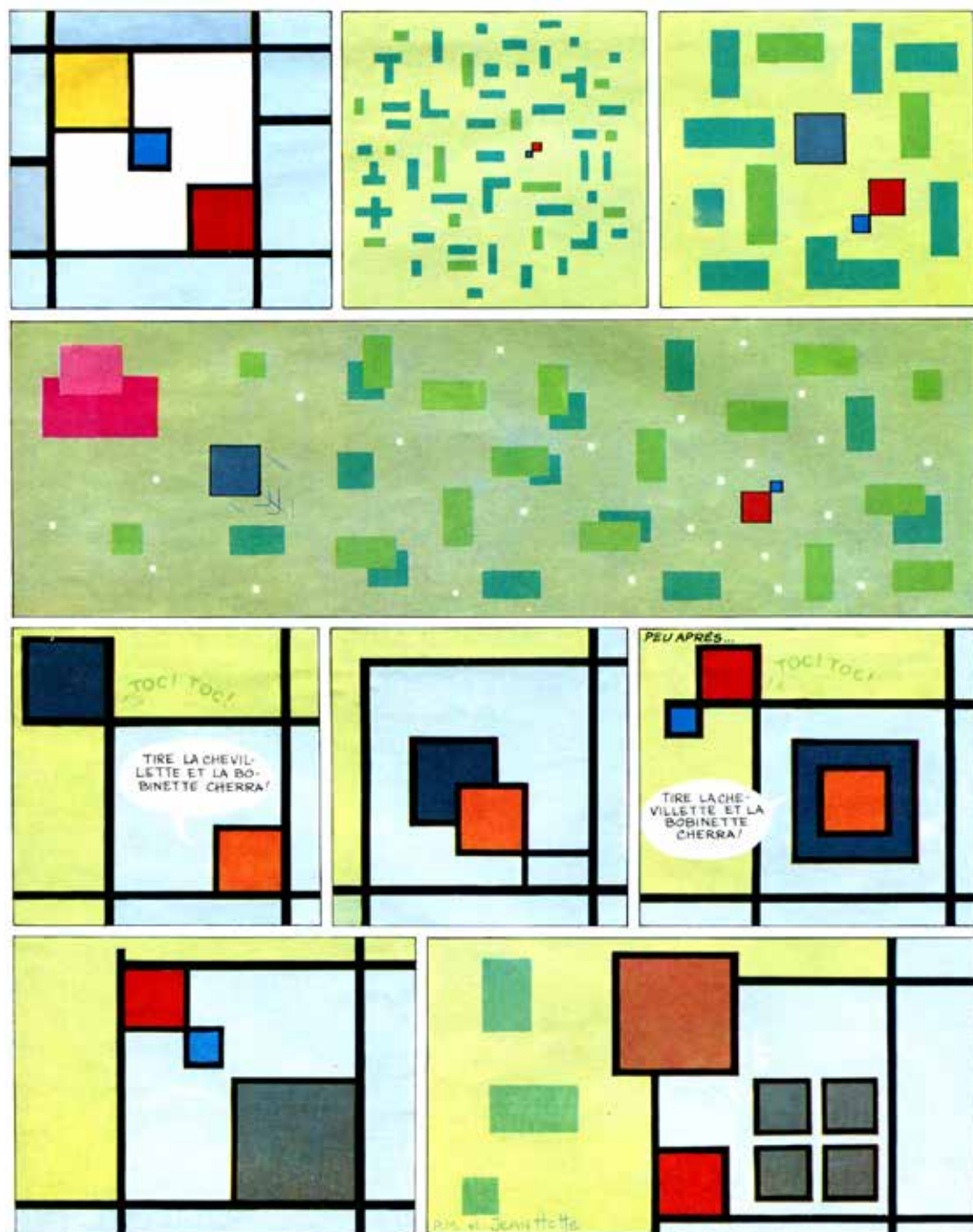
Cliff Sterrett's body of work, though repeatedly praised by cartoonists ranging from R. Crumb to Chris Ware, has not received the level of critical attention afforded to several of his noteworthy contemporaries, Winsor McCay and George Herriman among them. *Polly and her Pals*, the career-defining comic strip by Sterrett, peaked in its invocation of modernism, by way of its colourful, syncopated abstraction, in the nineteen twenties and thirties. This robust decade of experimentation has been linked to Sterrett's association with an artist's colony in Ogunquit, Maine, and with a six-month hiatus taken by the artist in 1925, during which time he travelled to Europe. Of further note in tracing the trajectory of Sterrett's abstract compositions are the ways in which the artist absorbed mass cultural influences, from photography and film, as well as popular music and advertising. Sterrett co-mingled these references into a comic strip that casually inoculated audiences to modernist ideas by using a mass media vernacular.

EARLY CAREER

Born in Fergus, Minnesota, to a Scandinavian druggist, Sterrett's mother died when he was two years old. Cliff's father left him and his brother in the care of his aunt and grandparents, while the elder Sterrett went west in search of work. It has been noted that the extended and multigenerational family unit that raised Cliff and his brother loosely resemble the extended family of aunts and cousins, not to mention Maw and Paw Perkins, who populate *Polly and her Pals* (Heer 2010, 7). Sterrett was not an avid student, but had a propensity for drawing anywhere and everywhere. With the backing of a local minister, he left Minnesota at eighteen in order to study at the Chase Art School in New York. After two years of art school he was hired as a staff art assistant at the *New York Herald*.

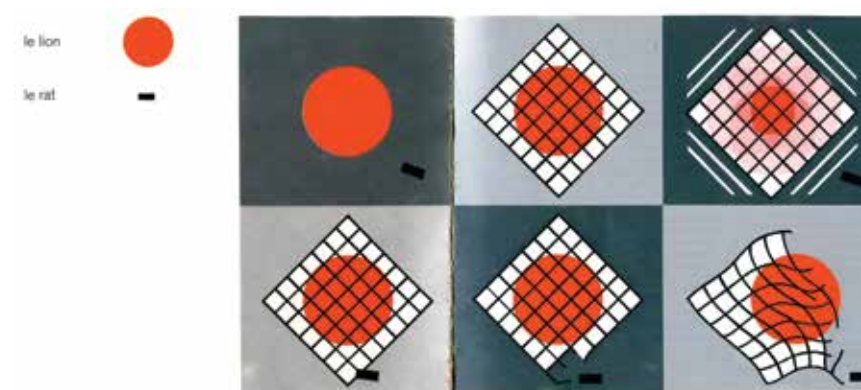
At the *New York Herald*, Sterrett counted Winsor McCay among his colleagues. McCay's influence is persistent in his work, as particularly evidenced by his attention to full-page design. While the artists were stylistically dissimilar, several points of commonality are clear. The heroine of *Polly and her Pals*, as in McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, is the comic's least interesting character. In both series, the titular characters serve primarily as ciphers or strawmen for other, more boisterous characters to riff off of within the comic. Sterrett's respect for

Piet Mondrian



Le lecteur interprète les compositions abstraites à travers la redondance des formes, les différents signes graphiques qui leur sont attachés et leur place dans le découpage du récit dont le déroulement diégétique est semblable sur toutes les planches de la série. Il déchiffre les cases et identifie les personnages et situations représentées. Le récit opère ainsi par une traduction des images. L'expérience semble avoir suffisamment intéressé l'auteur pour qu'il la réitère un an plus tard avec *Des carrés et des ronds*. Dans ce recueil

de fables de Lafontaine, l'auteur alterne des doubles pages de texte (les fables) et leur adaptation en strips composés uniquement de modèles géométriques. Les principaux protagonistes sont immédiatement identifiés à la figure qui les représente. Il se crée alors un aller-retour entre les transformations subies par ces figures géométriques et les parties du texte auxquelles elles se réfèrent. Les actions explosent et recomposent les images abstraites, produisant ainsi de nouvelles images. Ces perturbations sont associées aux conséquences d'une action de l'histoire. La succession de nouvelles compositions abstraites constitue la séquence du récit, décodée à la faveur de son association avec le texte précédemment lu. Les limites de l'exercice de Jean Ache se situent justement dans cette nécessité de l'écrit, pourtant clairement séparé des images : sans texte, les strips resteraient un mystère pour le lecteur.



En janvier 1989, Massimo Mattioli dessine pour la revue *Corto Maltese* un récit de six pages uniquement composées de formes géométriques (à l'exception de trois cases).³ Il développe une histoire d'amour entre un triangle rectangle bleu prénommé Arthur et Mcr., «une superbe triangle rectangle jaune», romance qui sera mise à mal par Gorgoy, un cube orange. Le lecteur entre dans un univers où les formes géométriques sont des personnages et ont toutes des fonctions narratives. Le mouvement d'identification est alors inversé par rapport aux planches de Jean Ache : dans *Des carrés et des ronds*, le lecteur doit reconnaître et identifier les personnages alors que dans *Love*, Mattioli dessine des compositions abstraites qu'il explicite dans un second temps. Prenons la dernière case de la première planche comme exemple.

Figure 2 Jean Ache, *Les débutants célèbres de la bande dessinée*, dans *Pilote* 692, page 41. © 1973 Dargaud.

Figure 3 Jean Ache, *Des carrés et des ronds*, pages 38-39. © 1974 Balland.

³ Cette histoire se trouve dans le recueil *B stories* publié par L'Association en 2008.



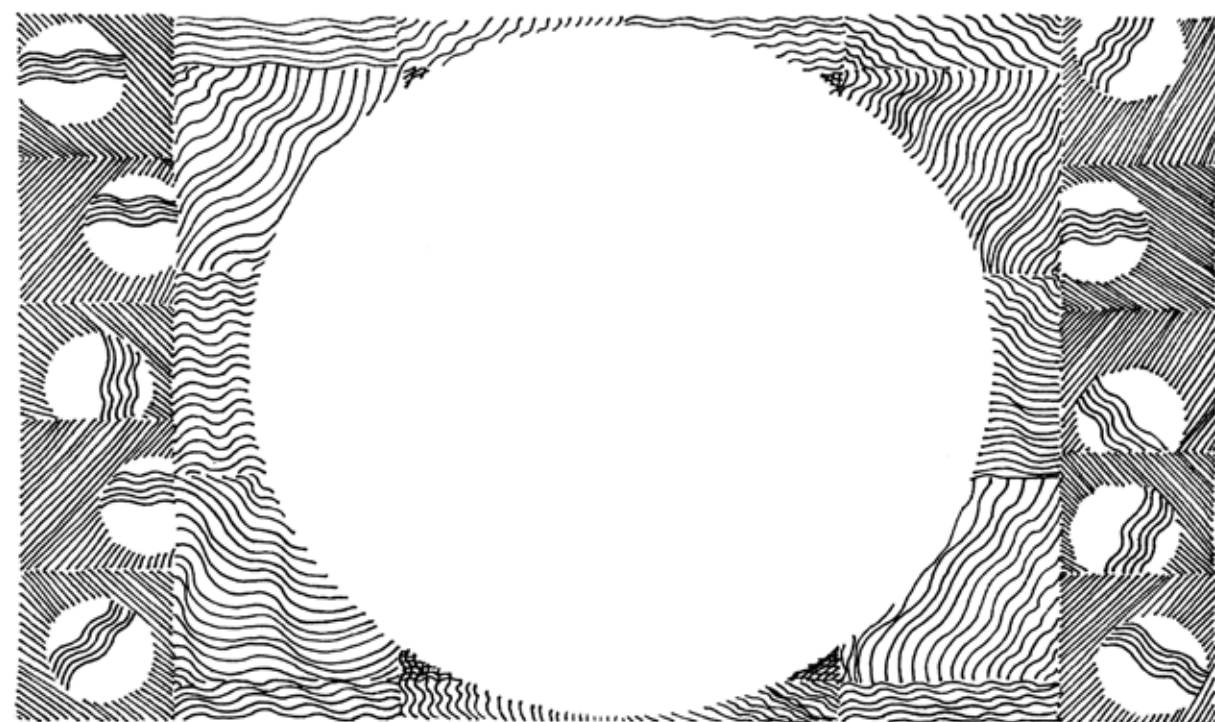
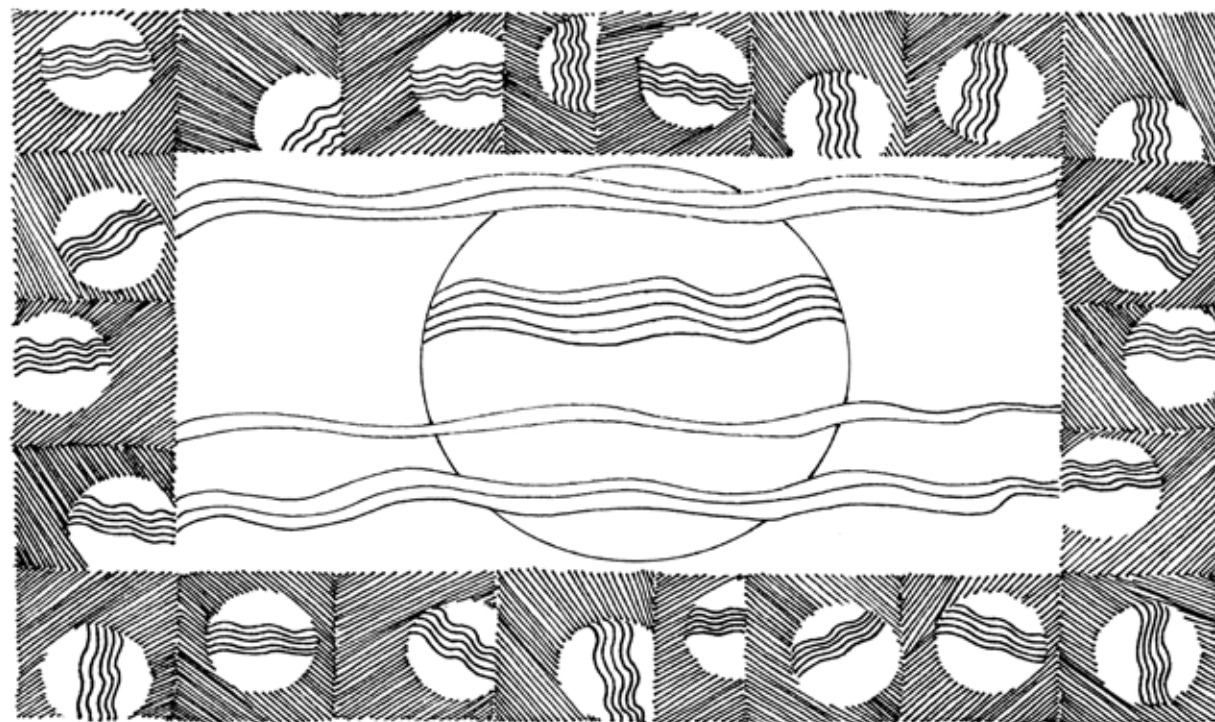
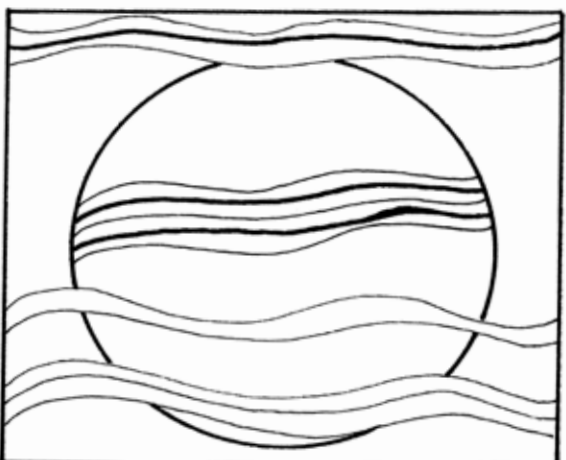
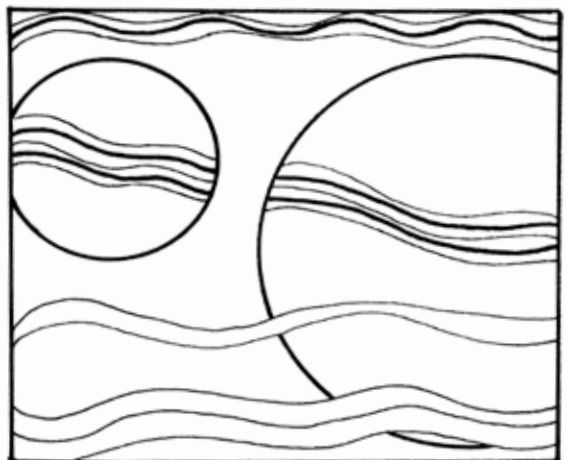
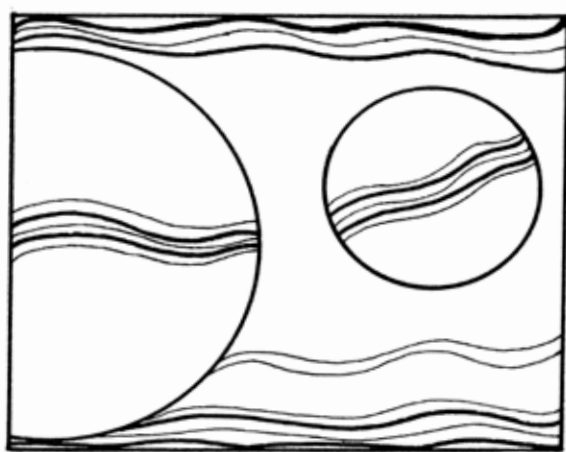
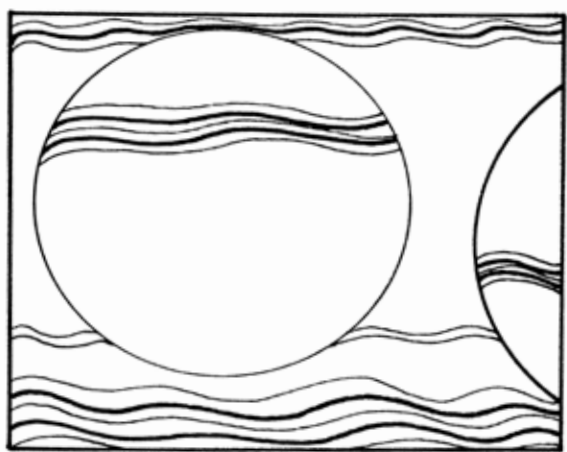
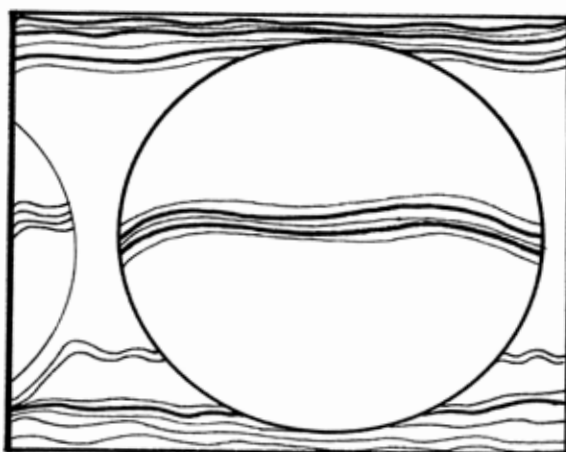
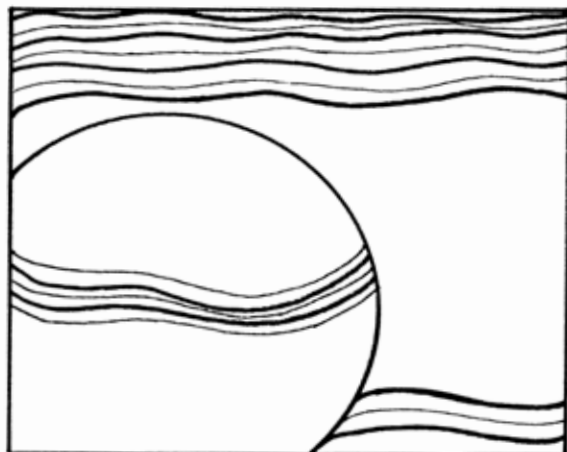
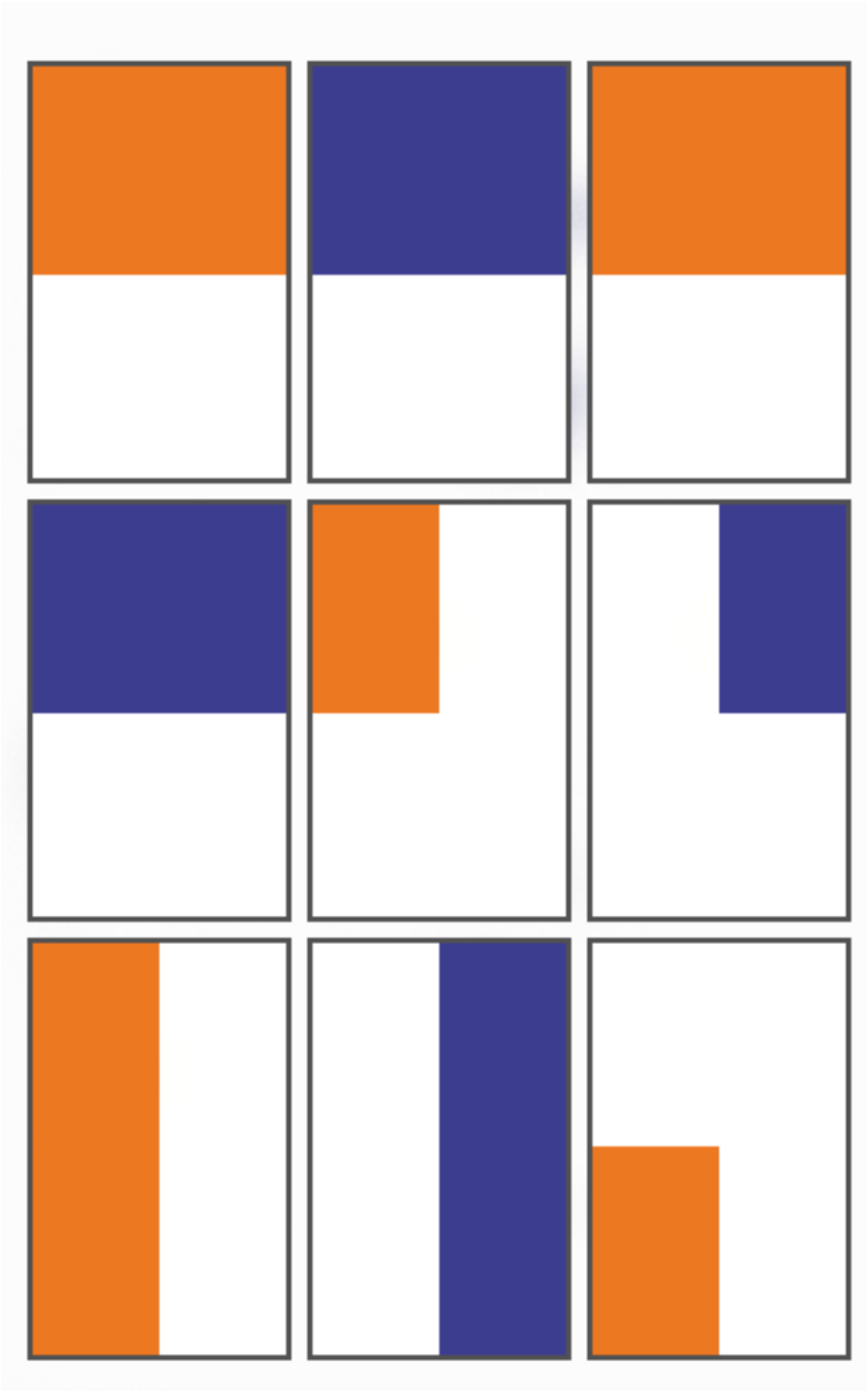
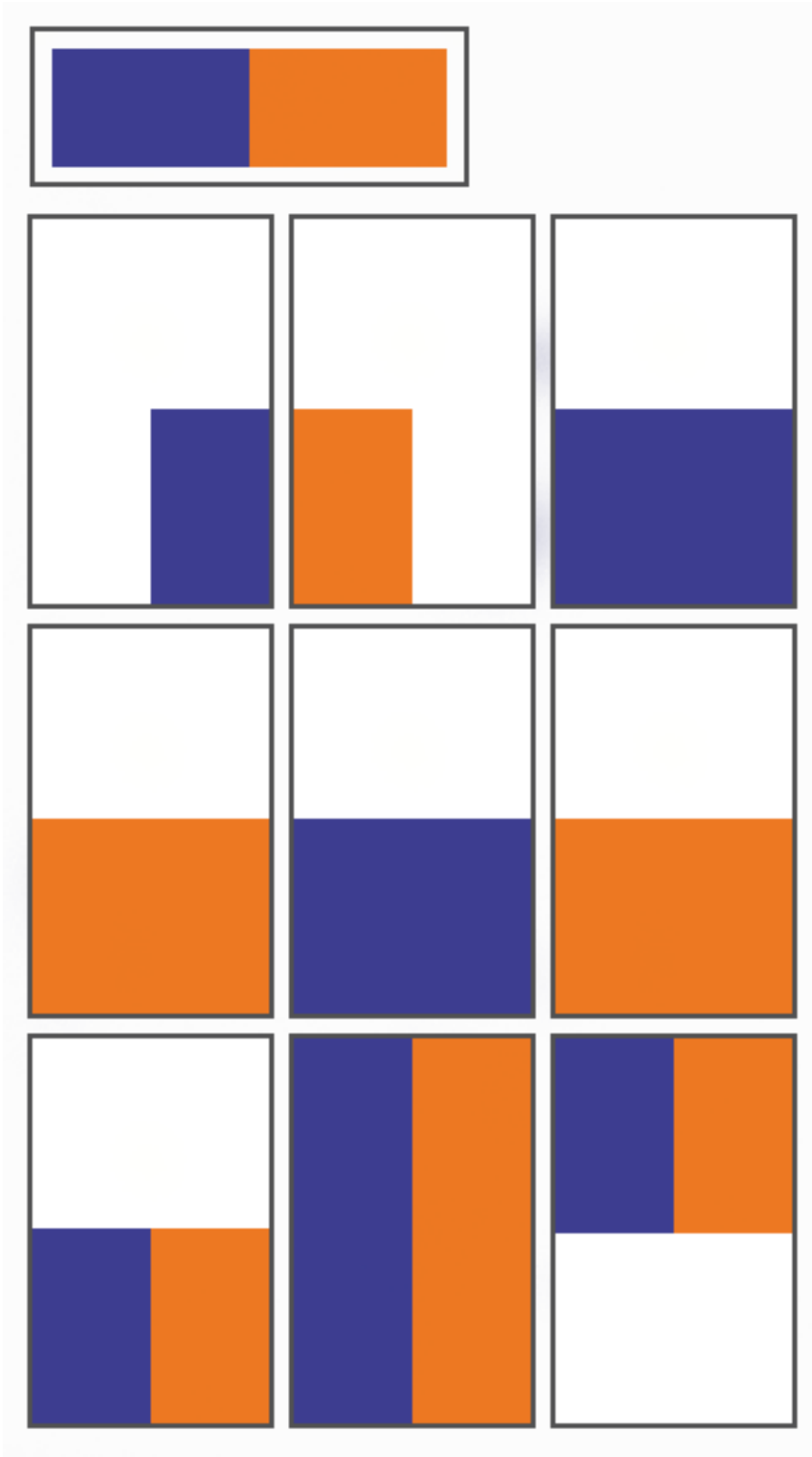


FIGURE 4



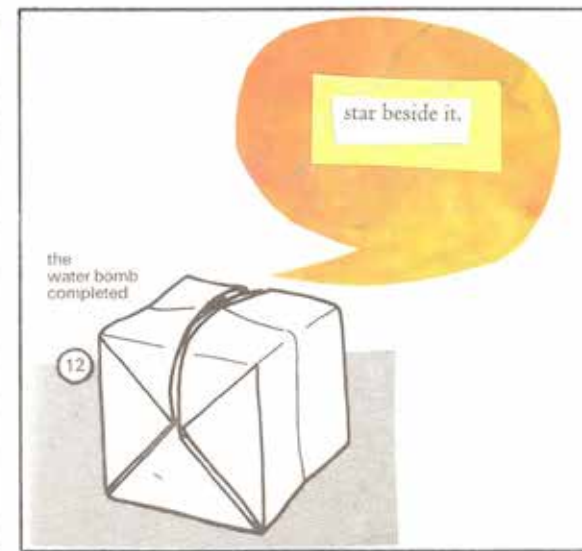
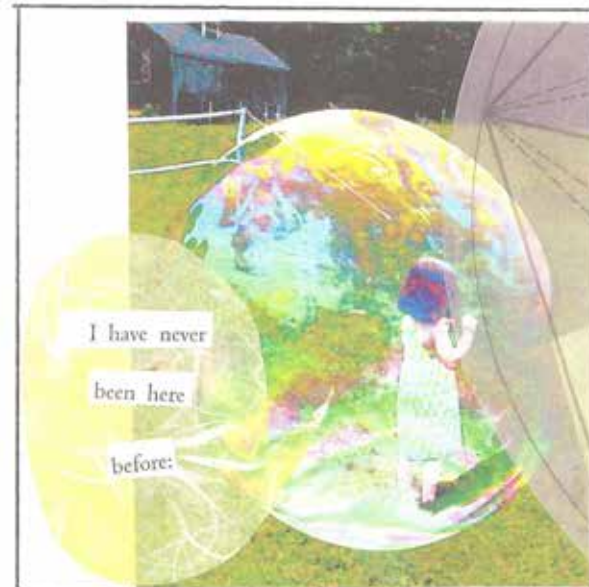
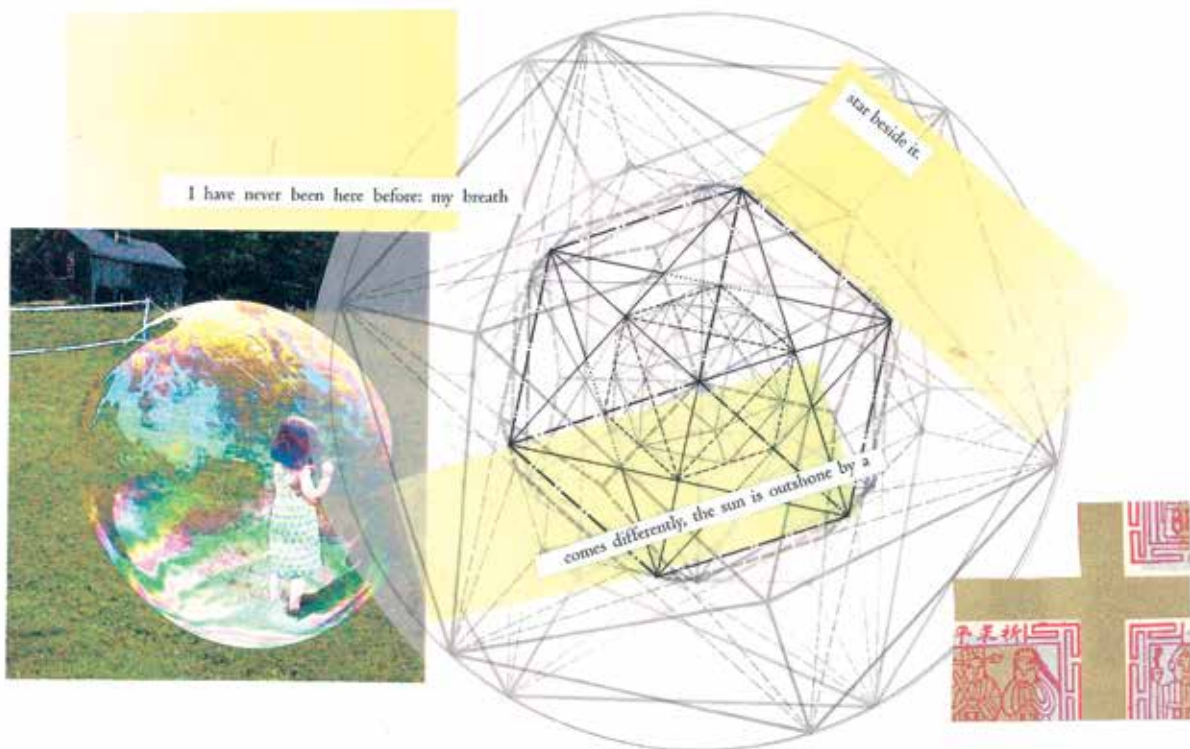
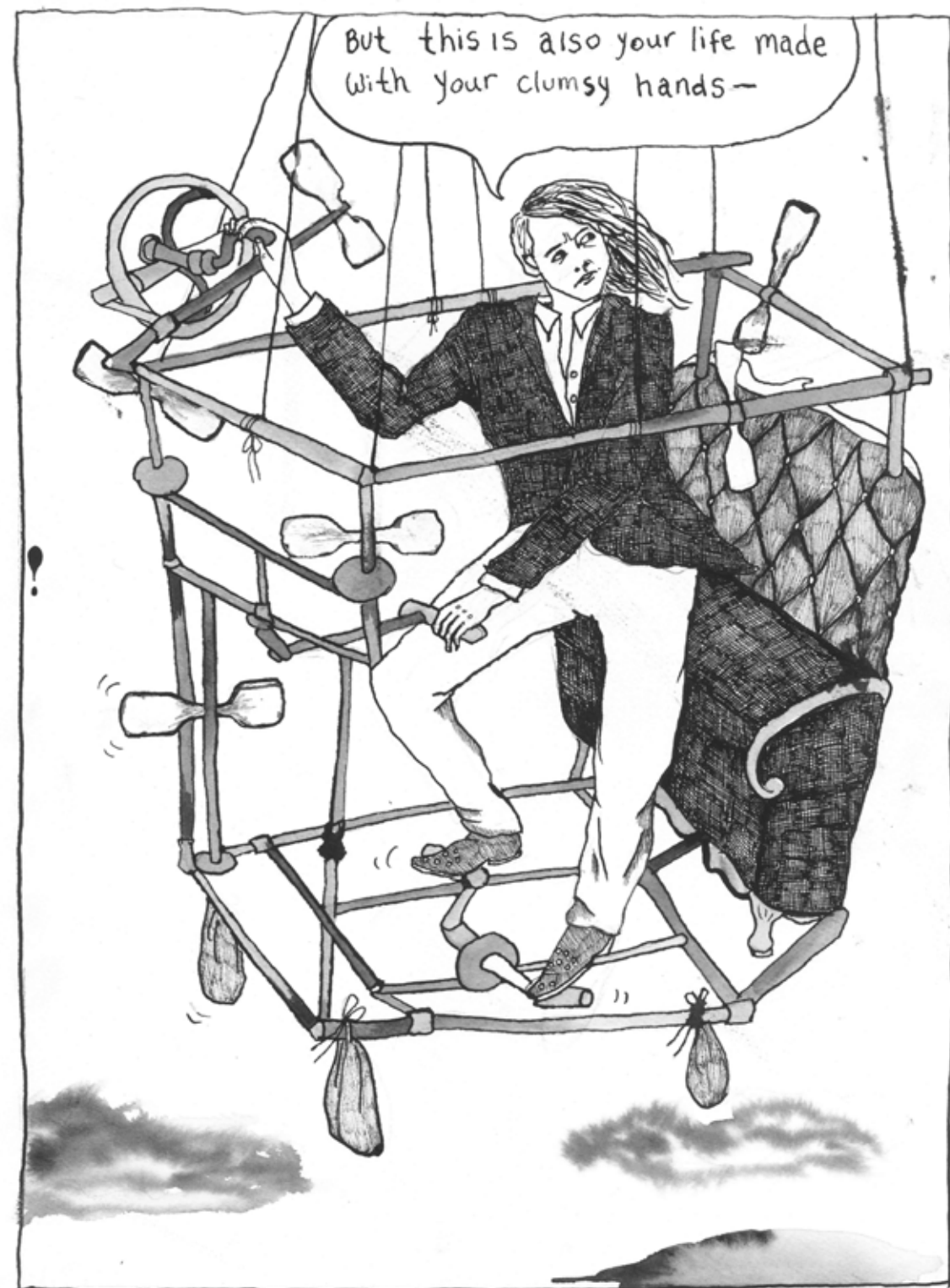
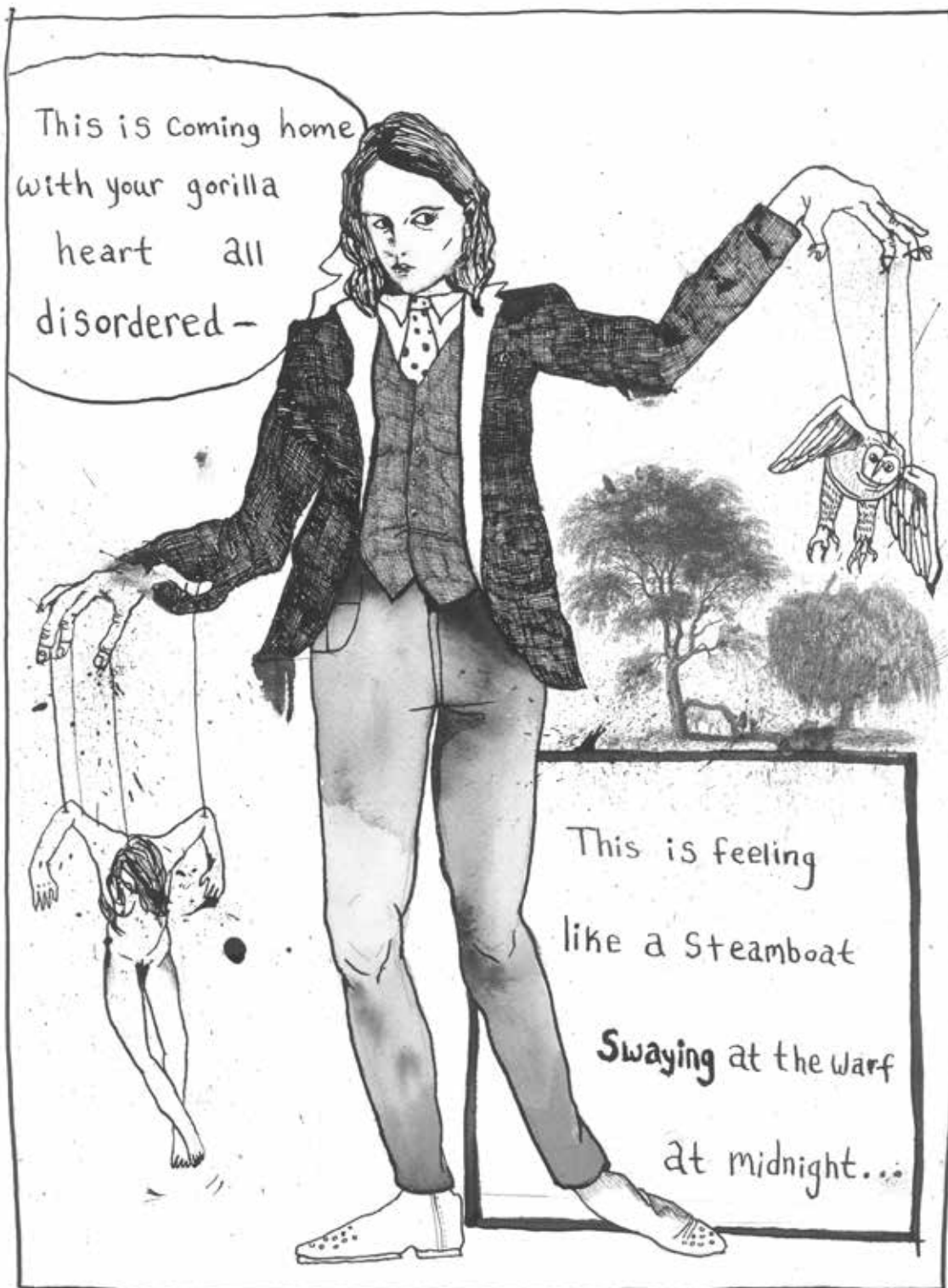
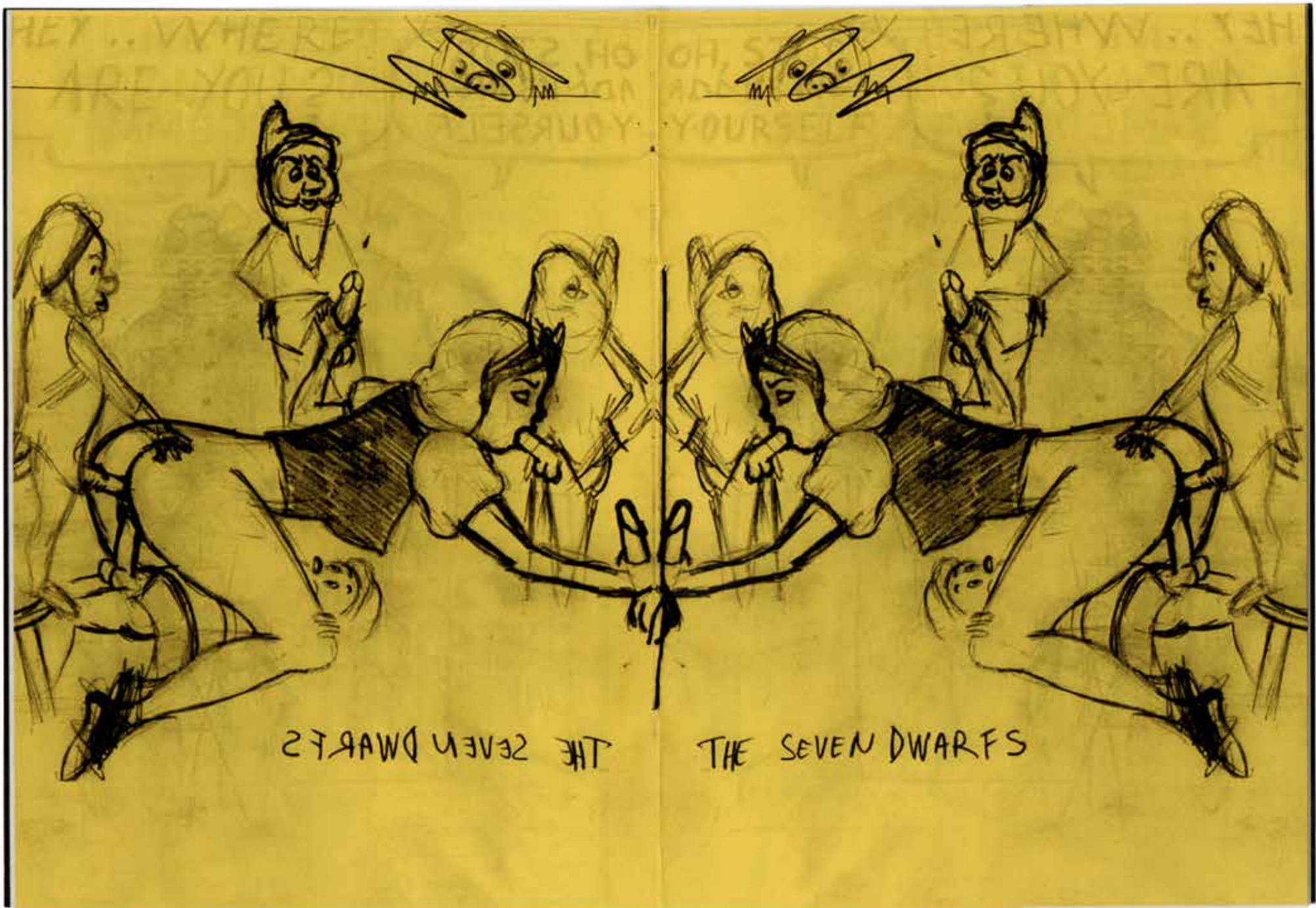


Figure 3 Martha Kuhlman, "I have never been here before," collage. © 2015 Martha Kuhlman.

Figure 4 Martha Kuhlman, "I have never been here before," comic. © 2015 Martha Kuhlman.



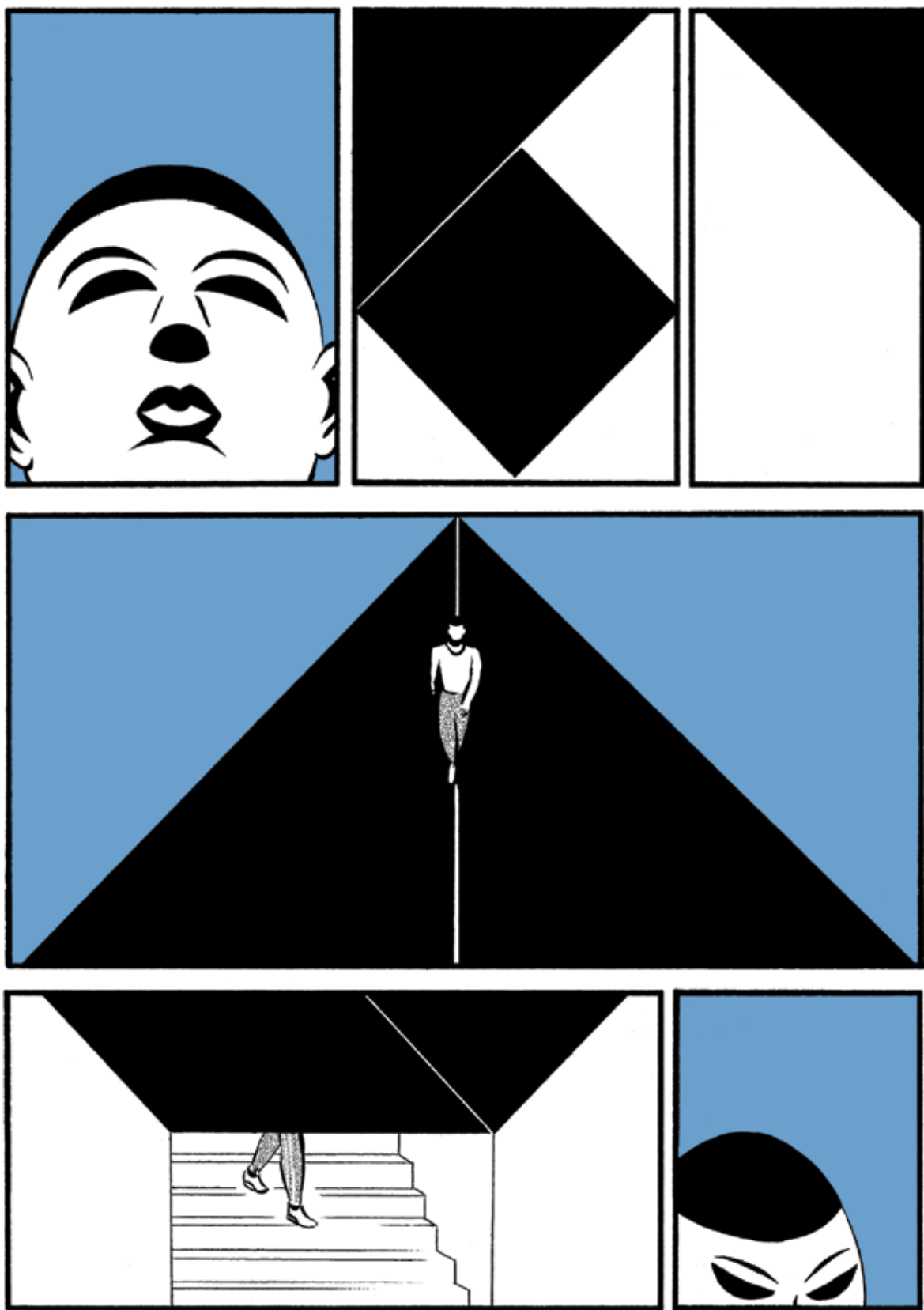


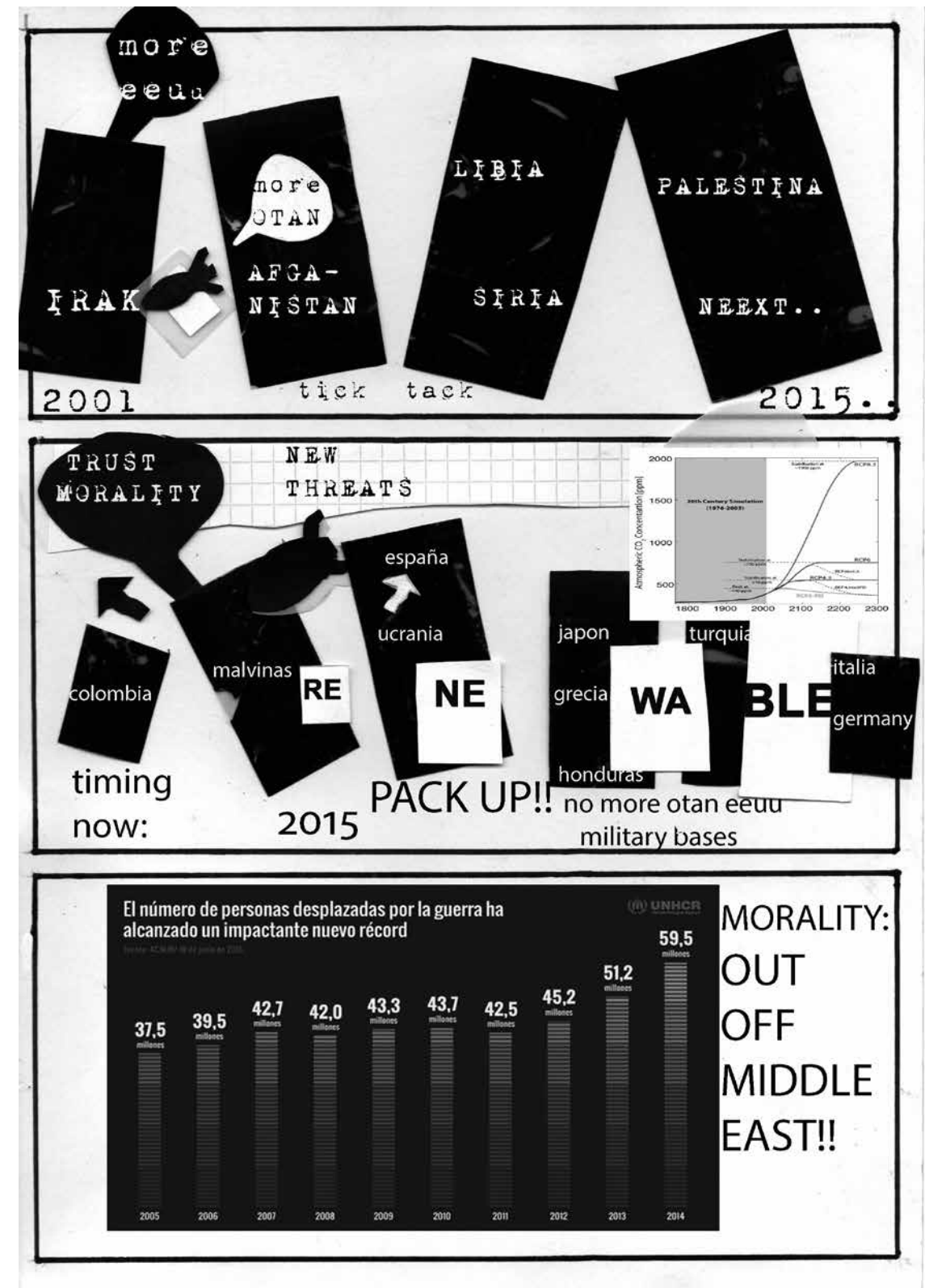
OH, STOP
ADMIRING
YOURSELF

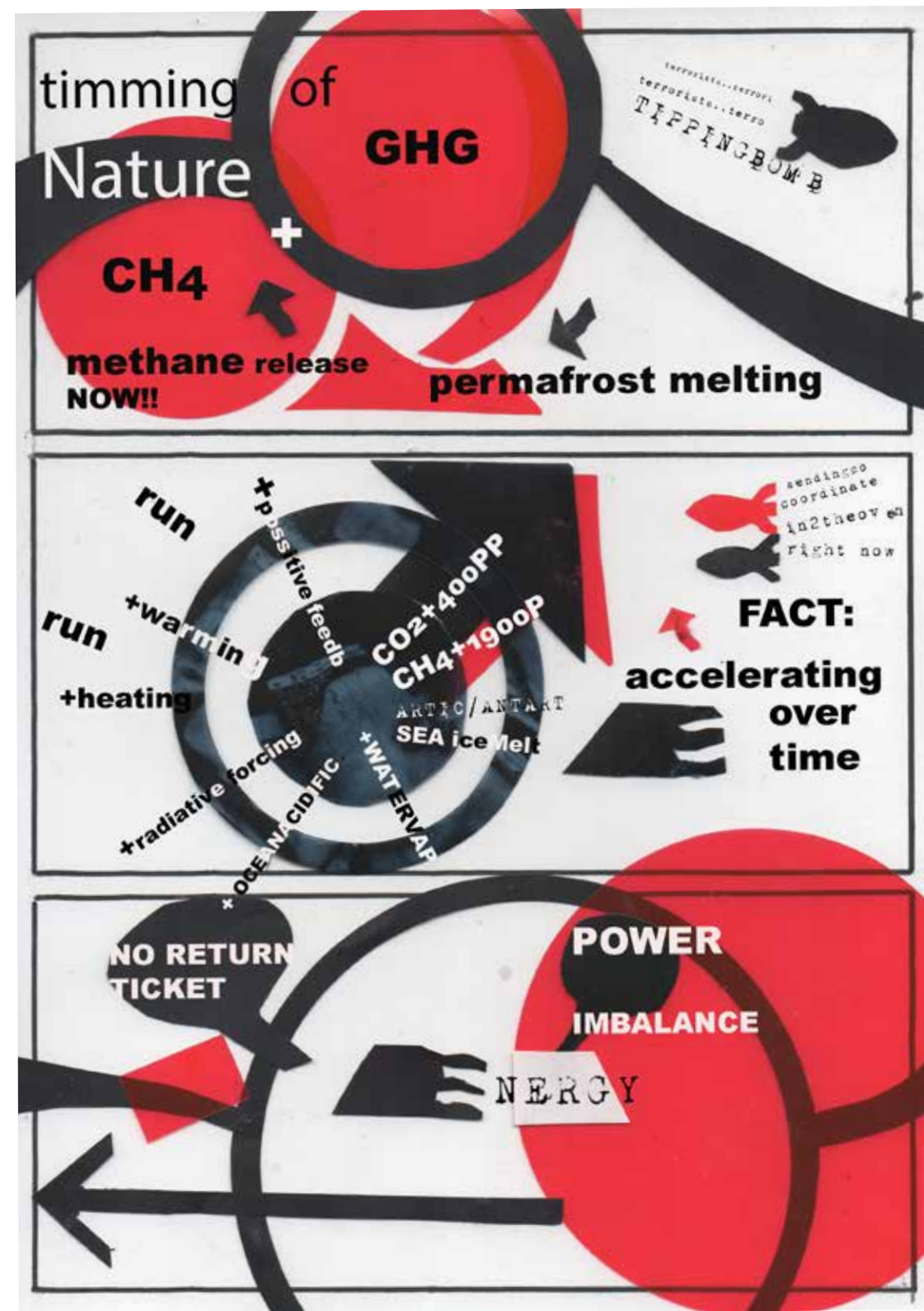


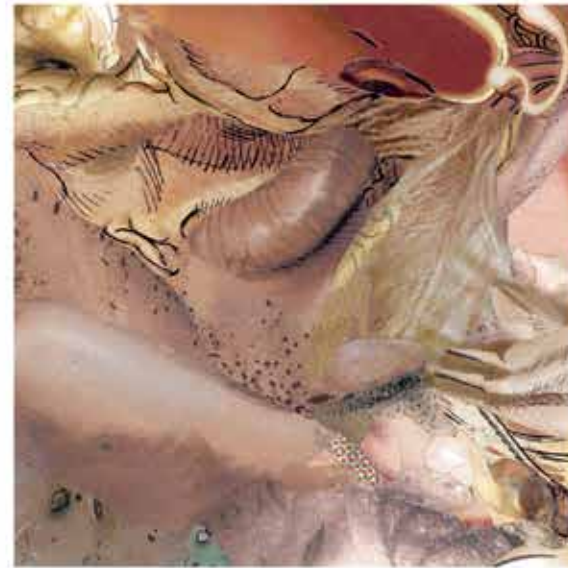
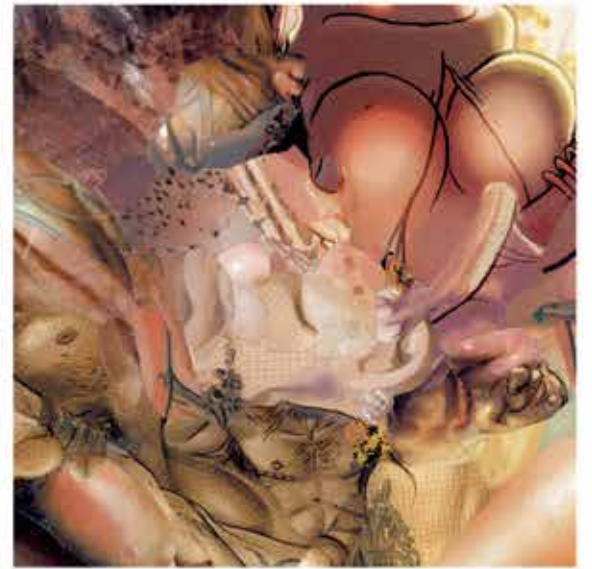
I GIVE UP

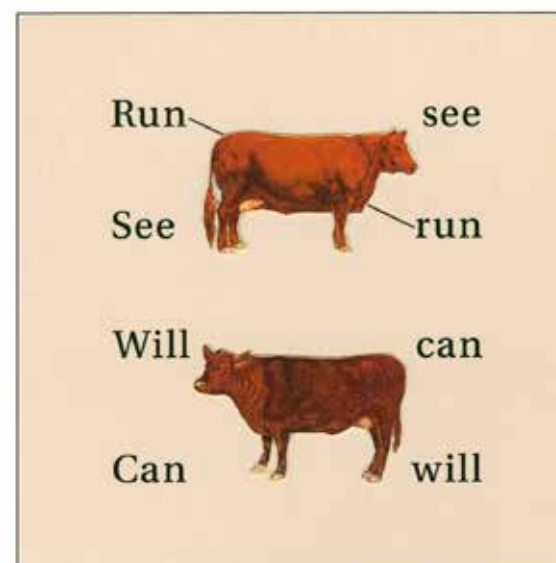


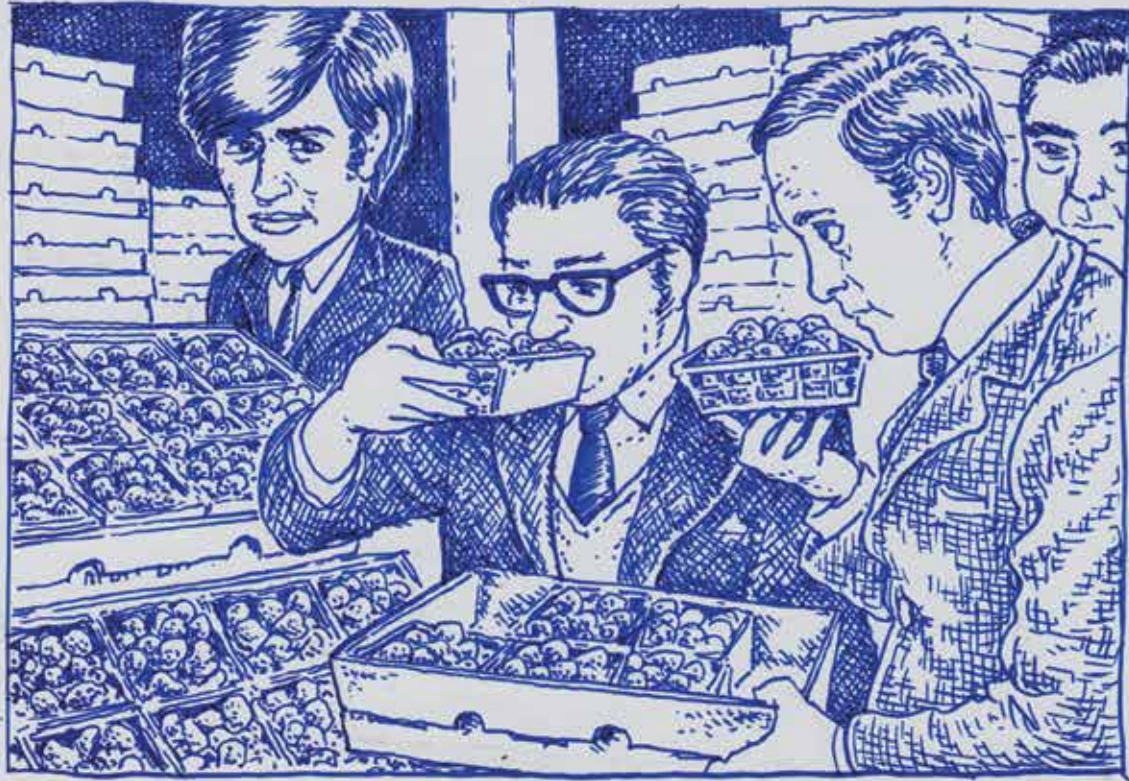
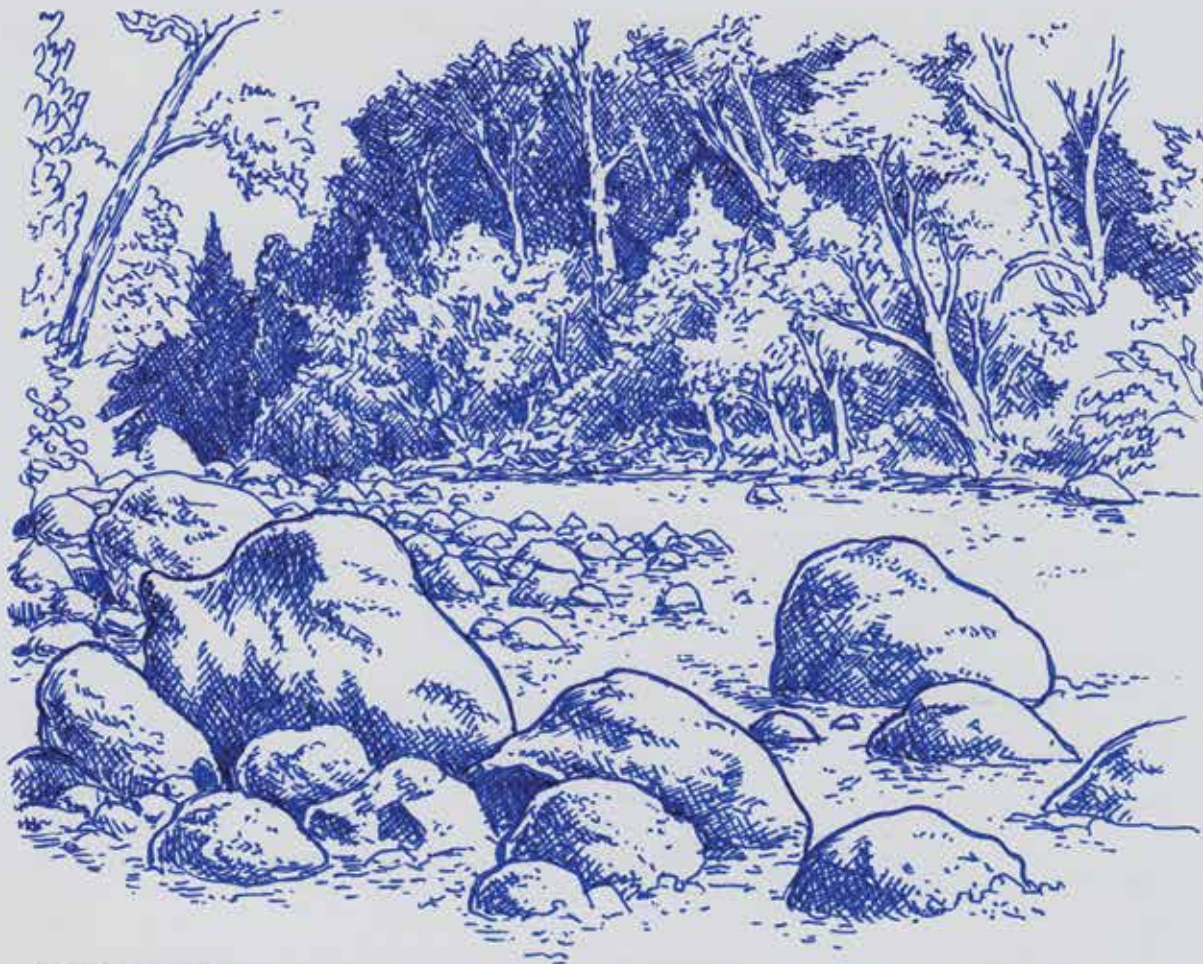












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