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# Una and the Milk

Joel Orloff

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Una and the Milk

Joel Orloff

Advisor: Peter Antelyes

Spring, 2014

# UNA AND THE MILK



— Joel Orloff

# UNA AND THE MILK

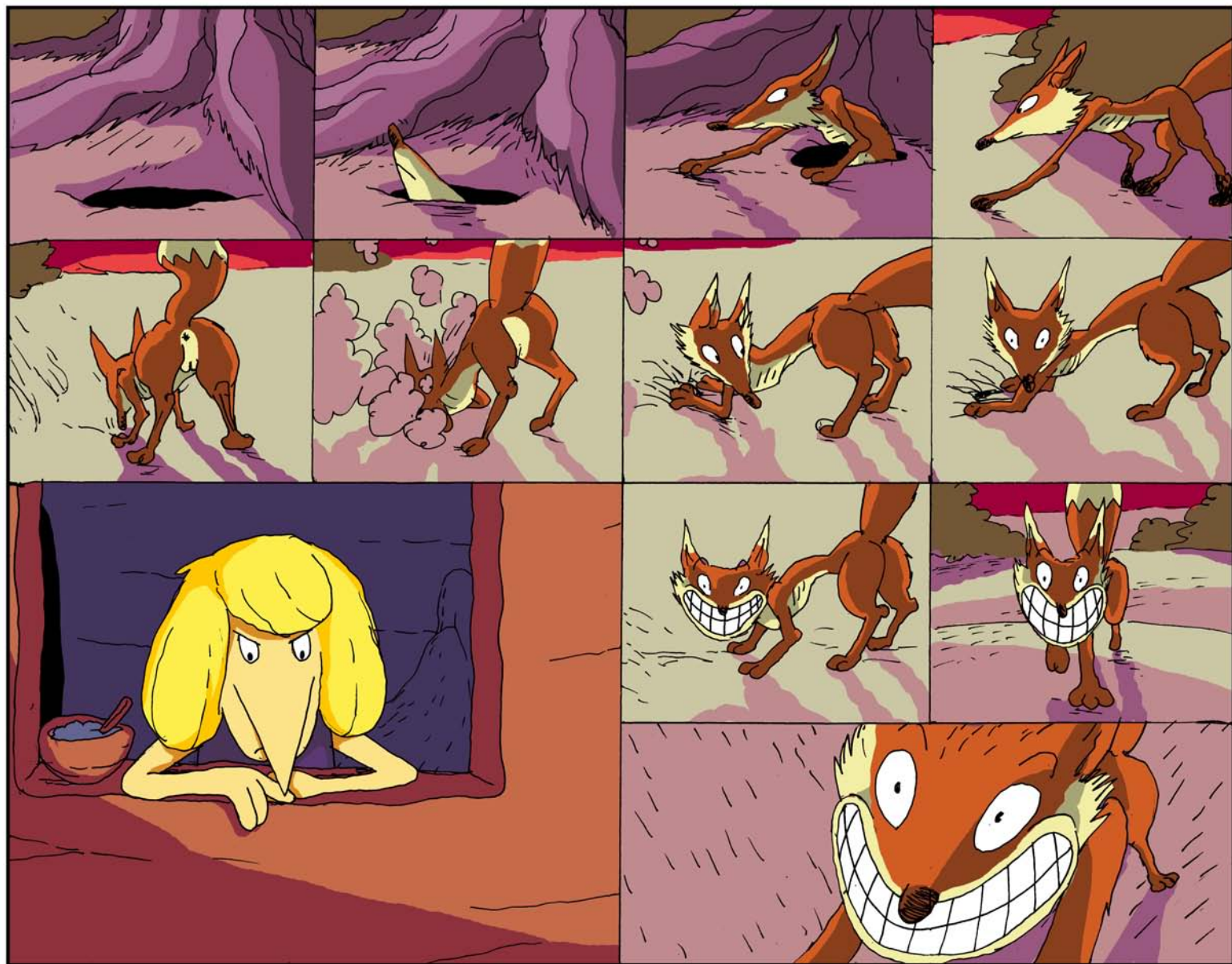


by Joel Orloff  
edited by Peter Antelyes

*For my parents*

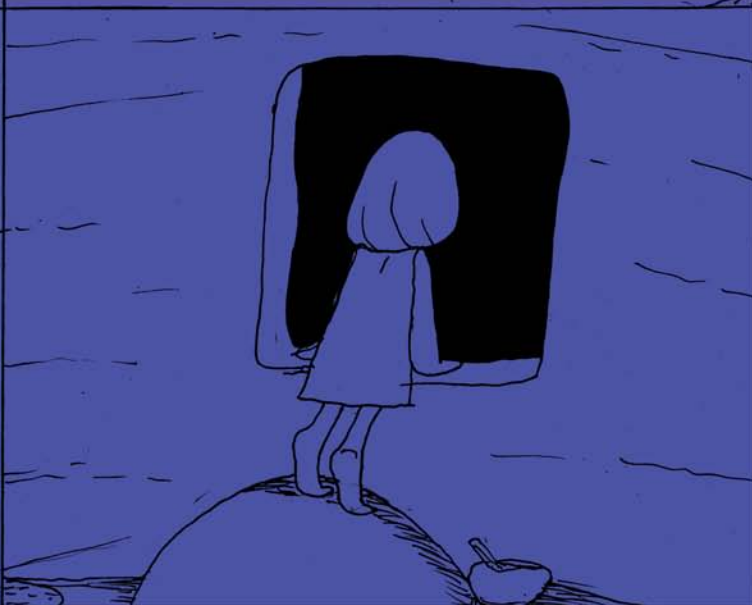
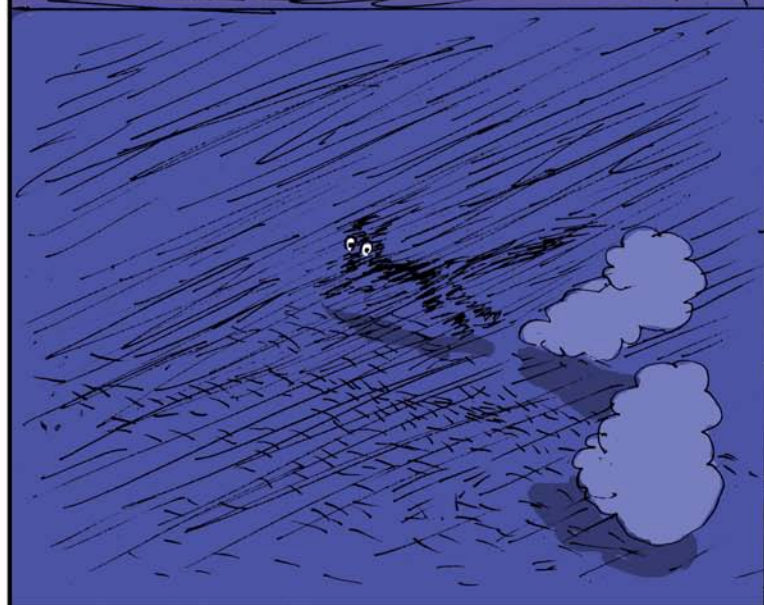






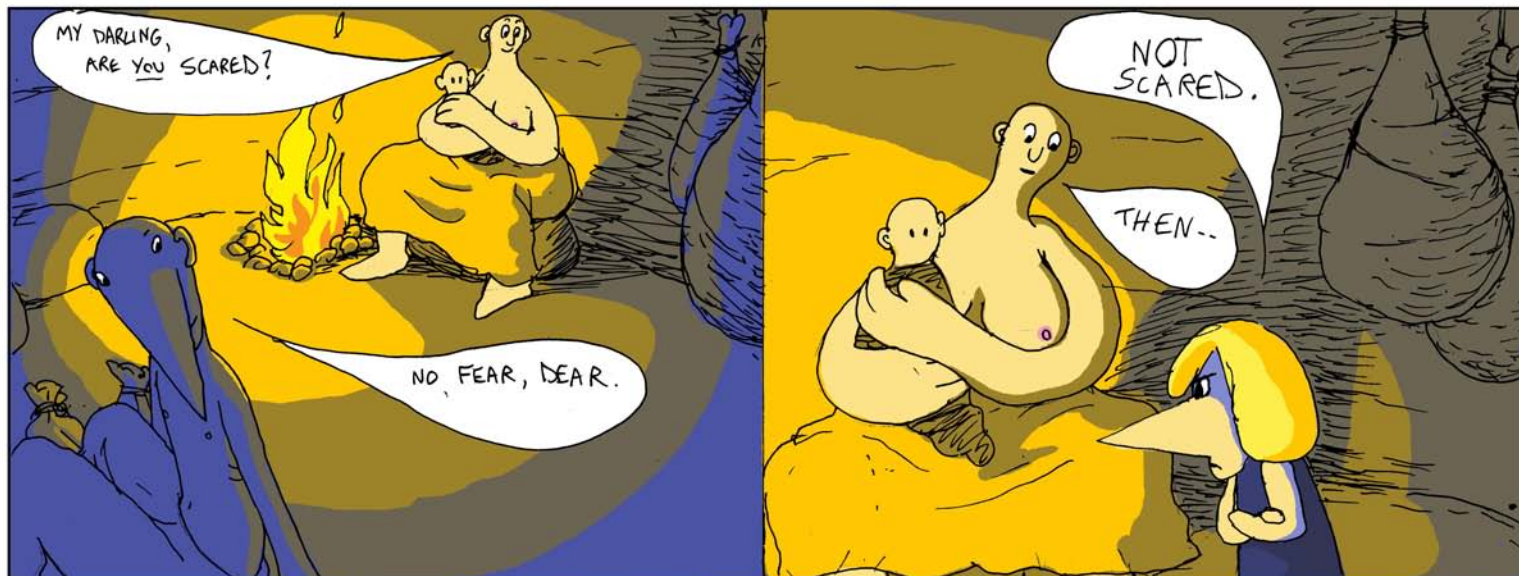
















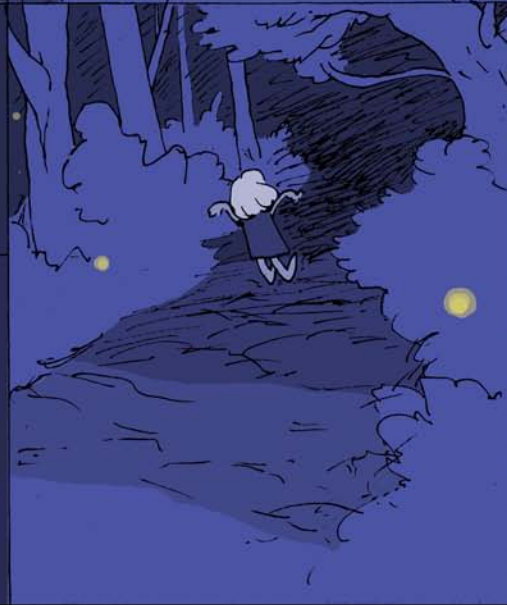




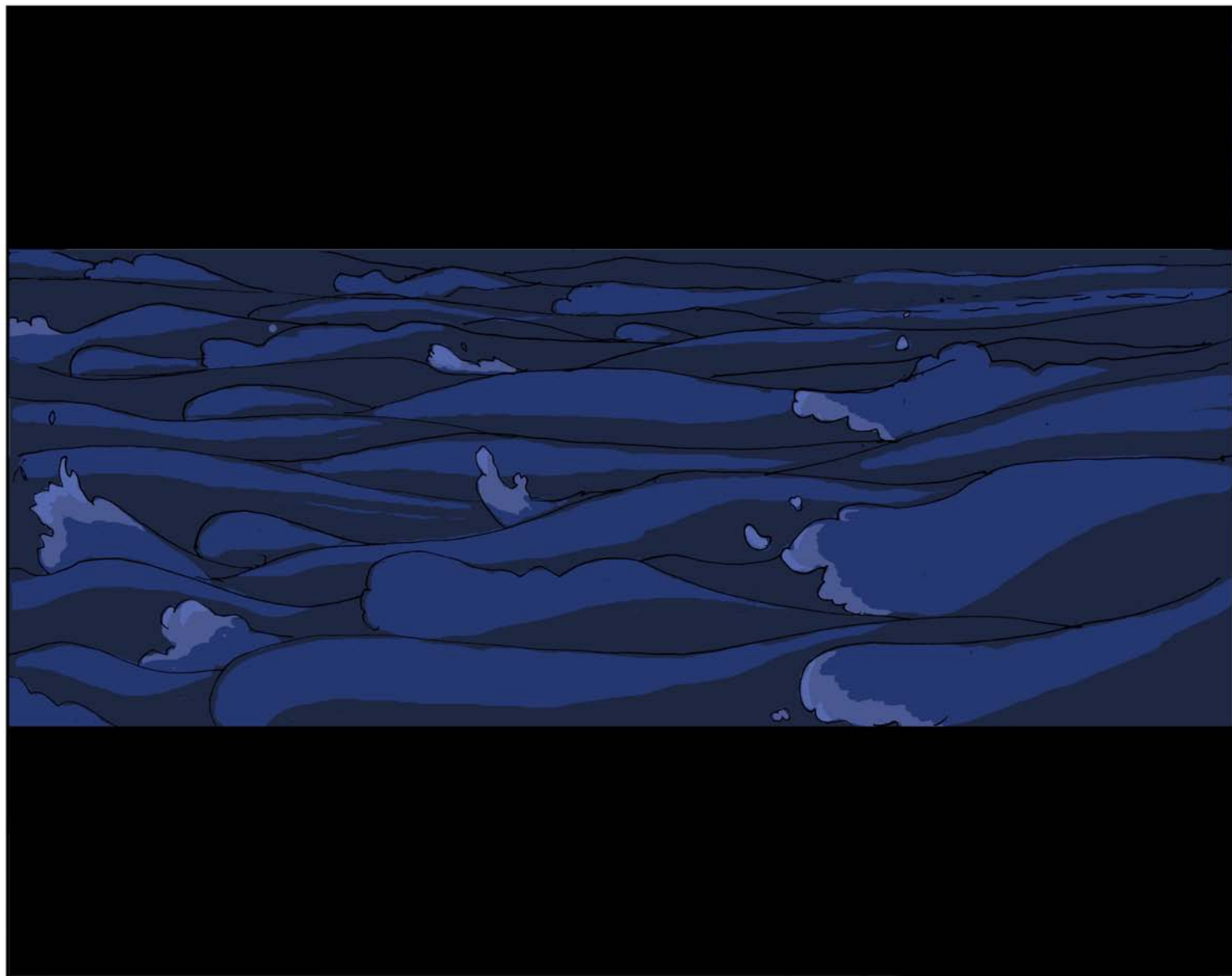




























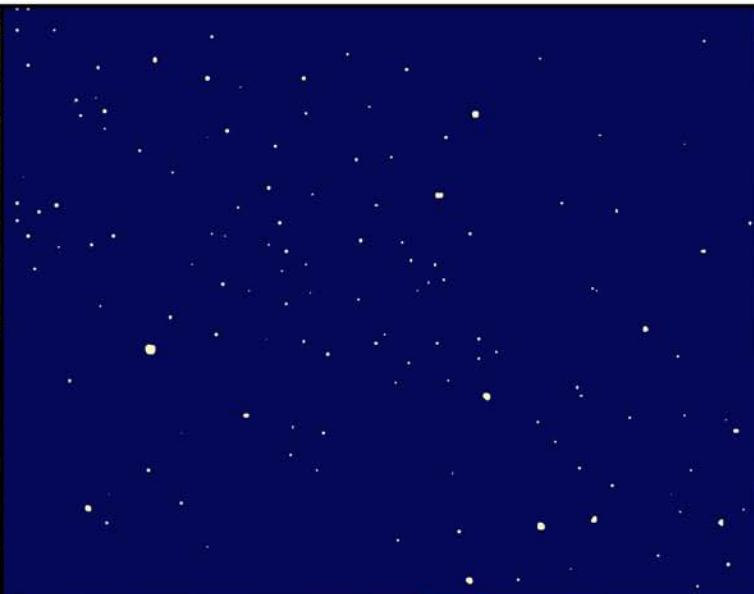










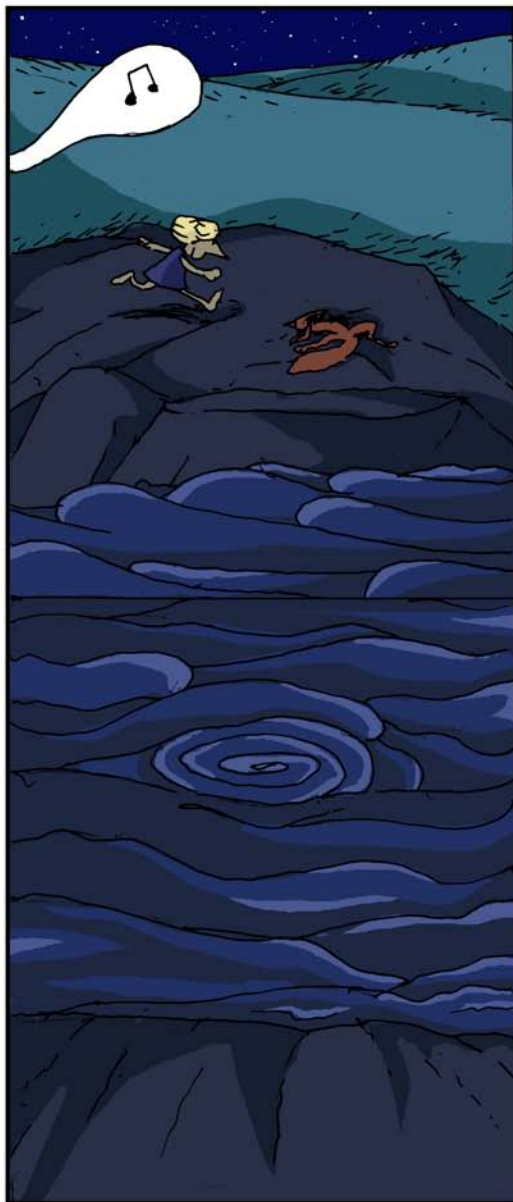




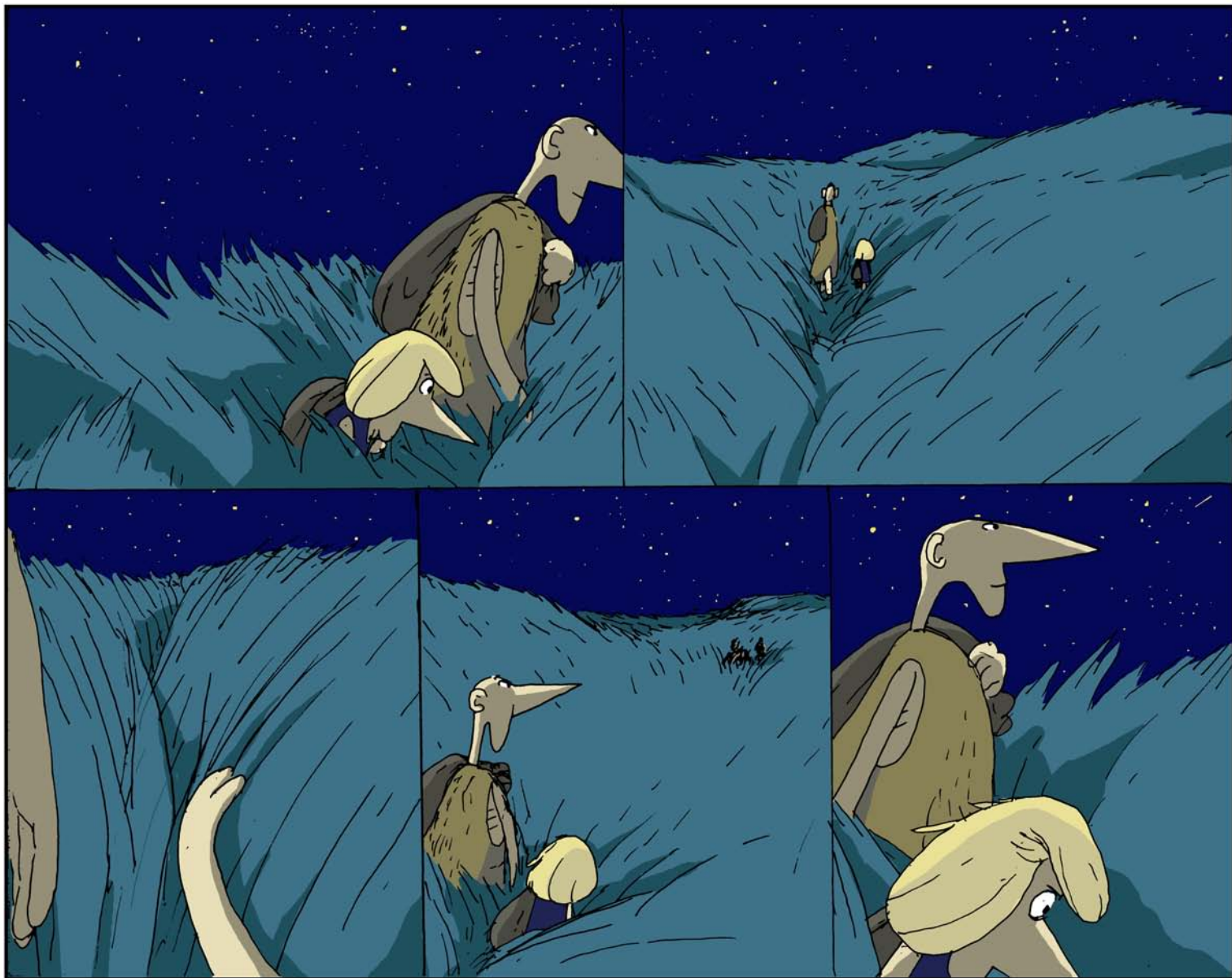














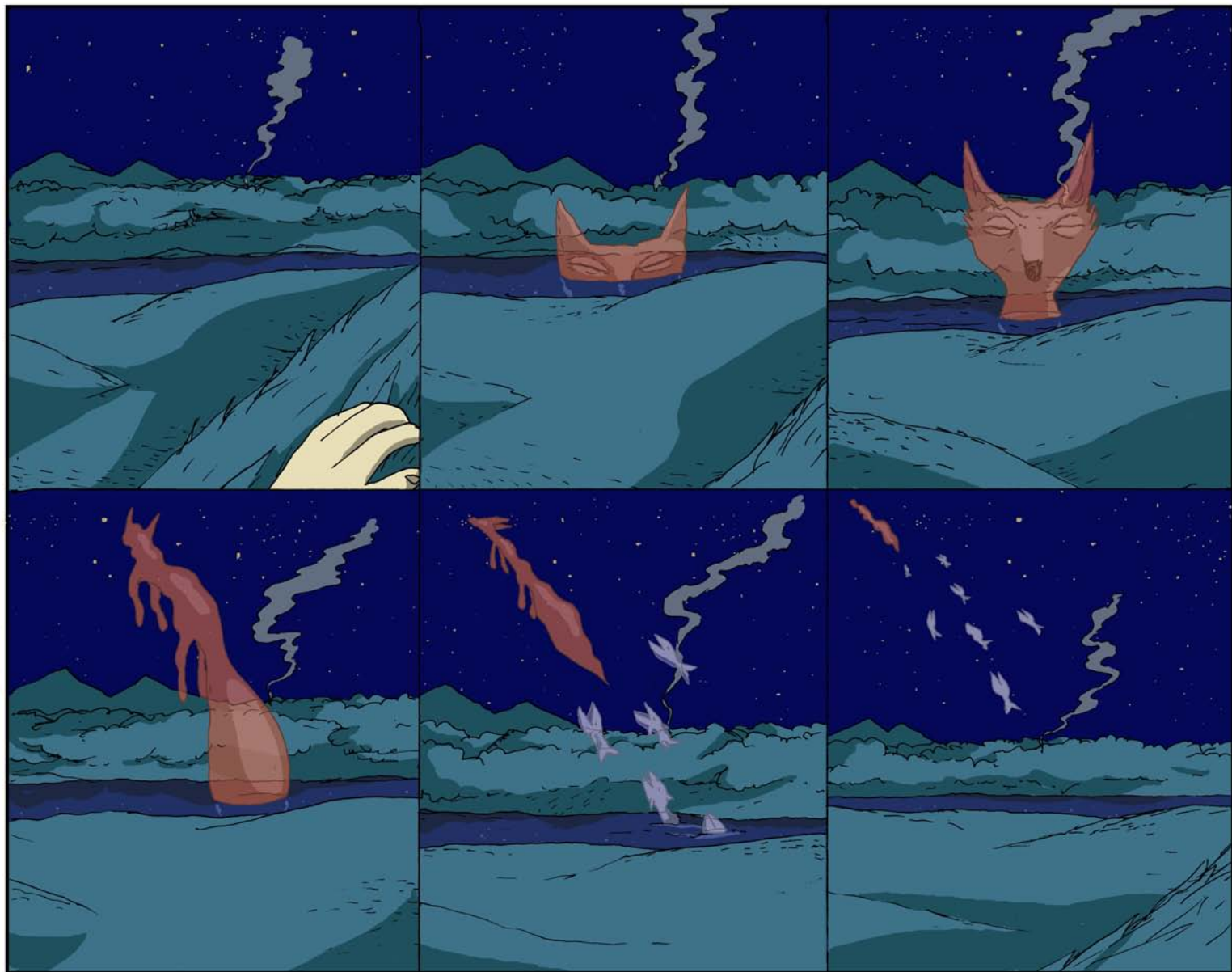
















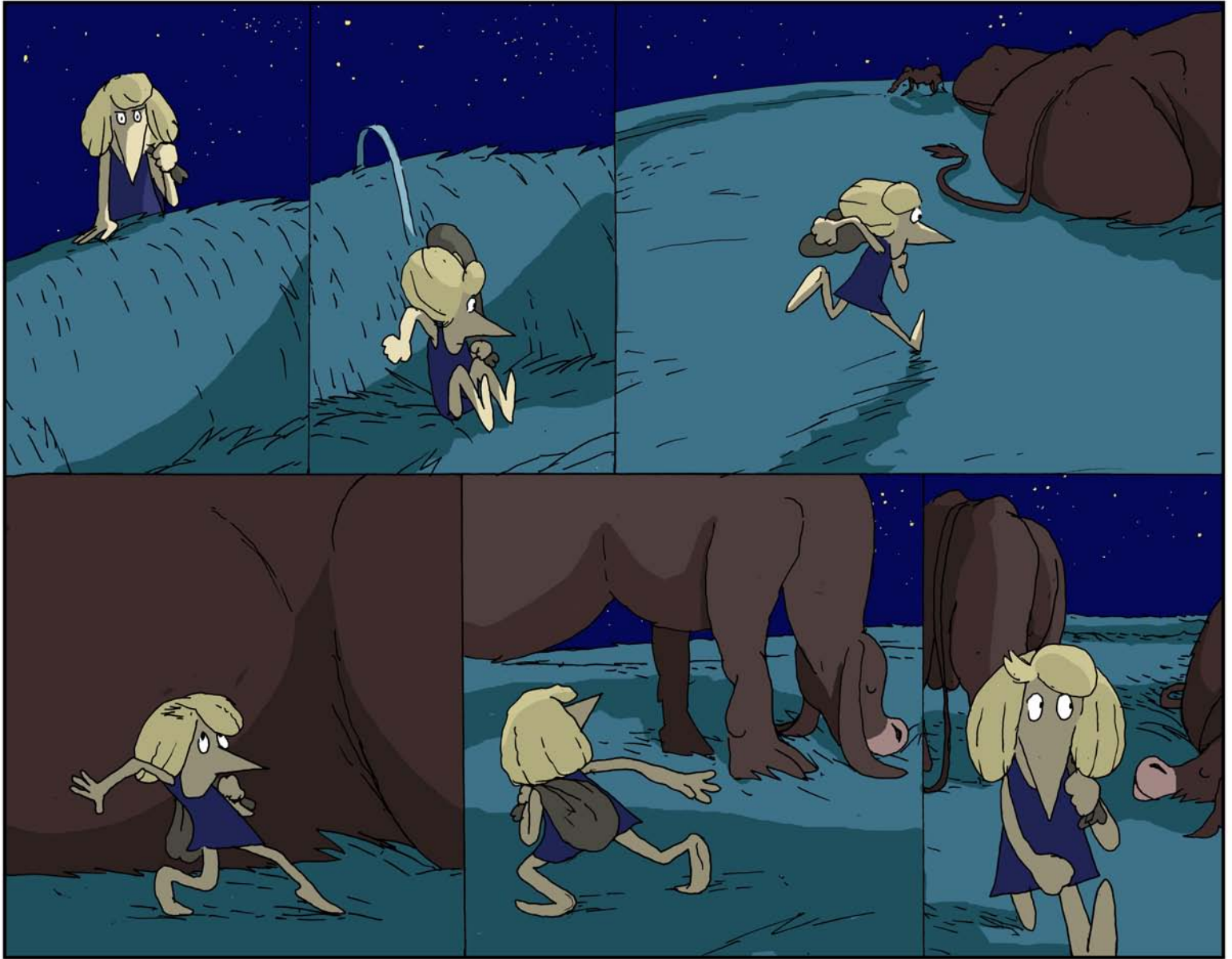


















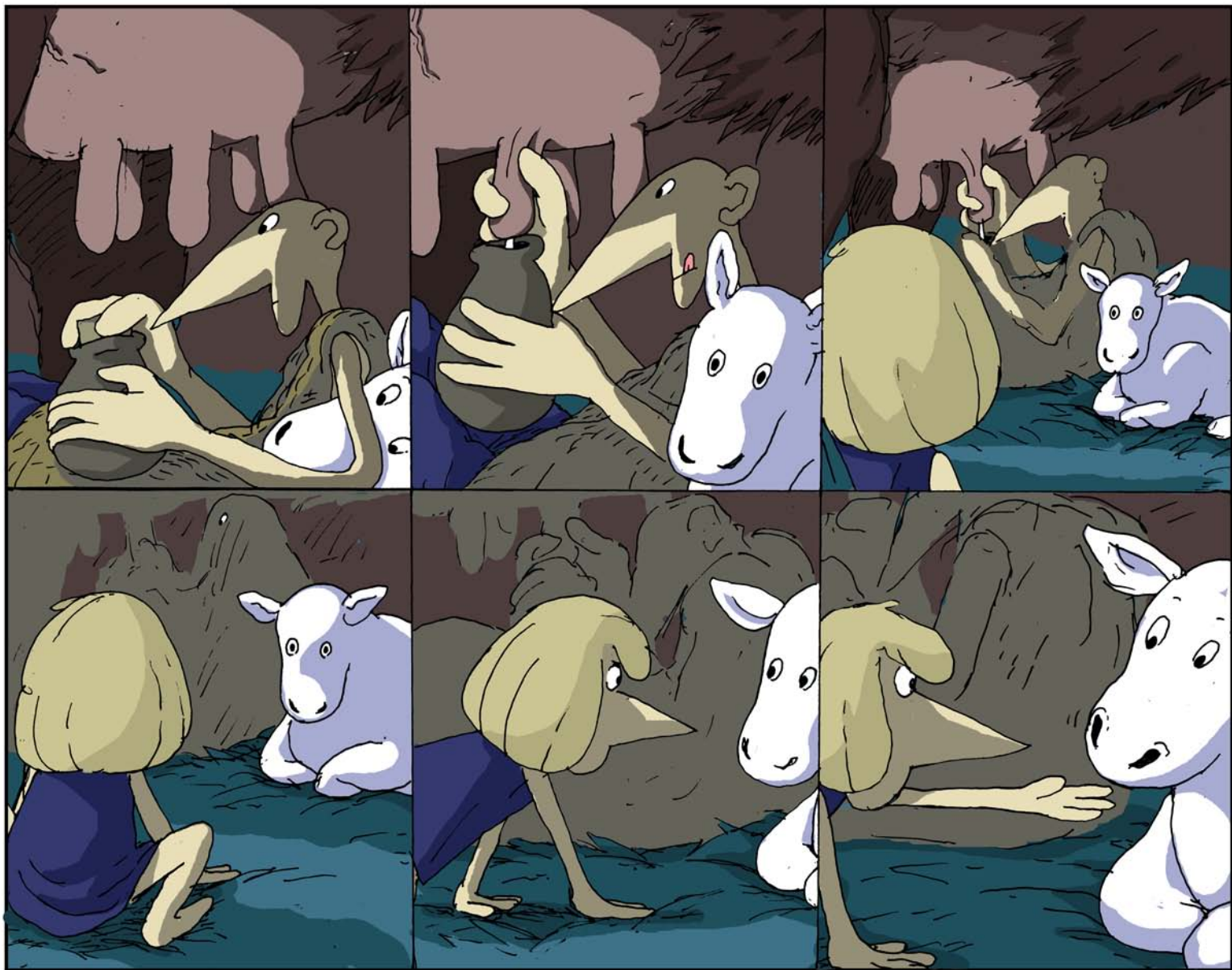




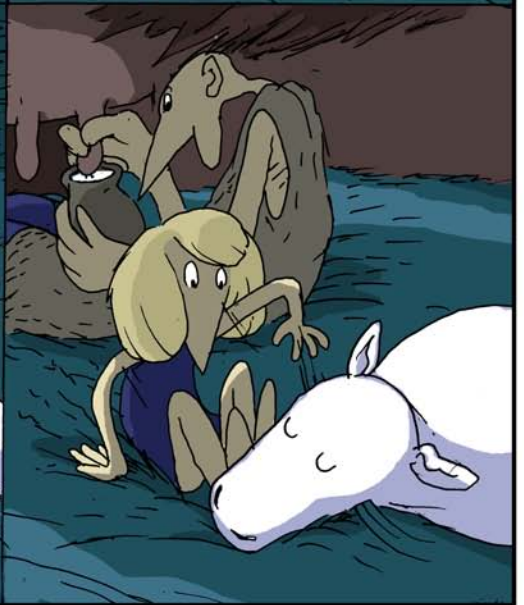








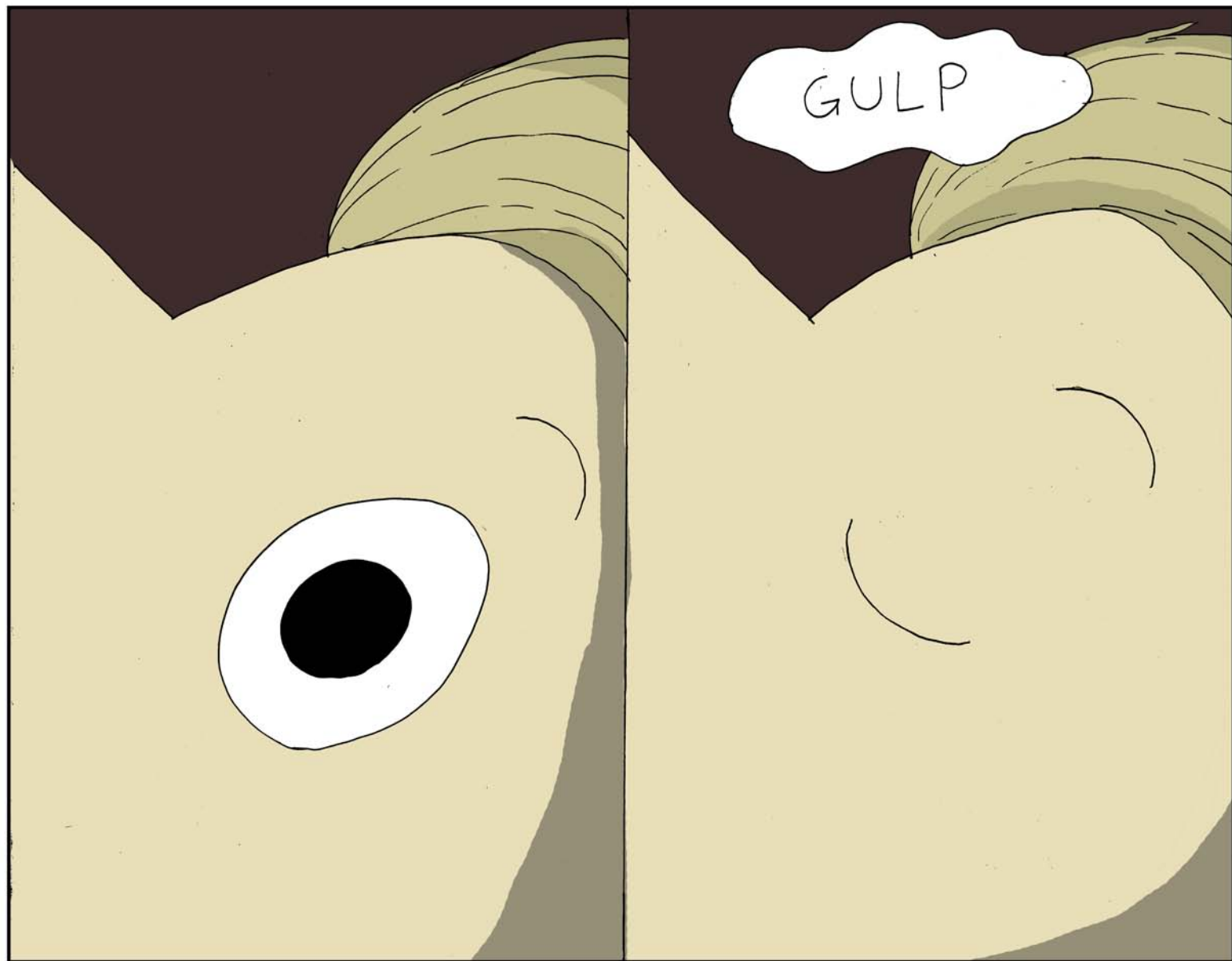




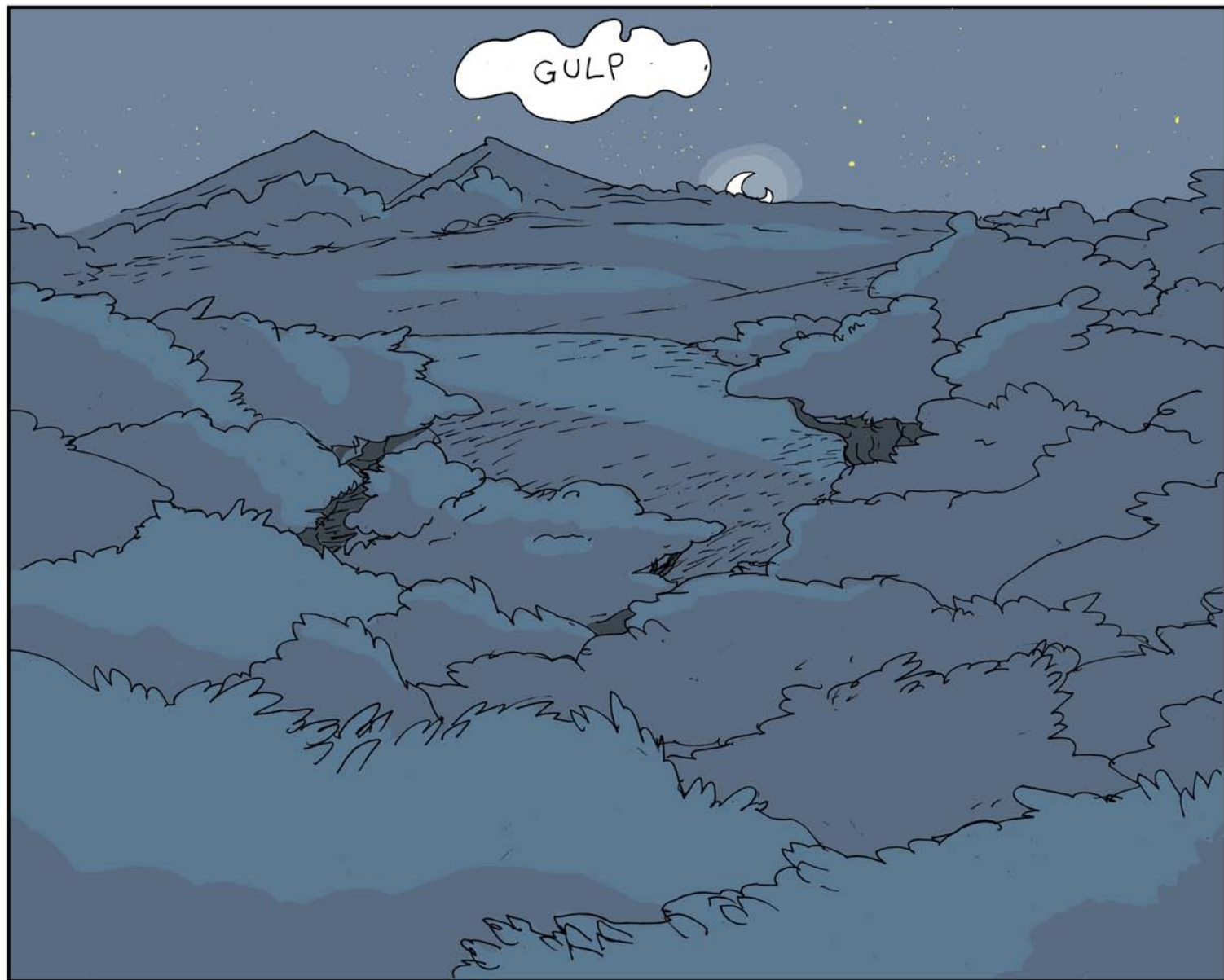


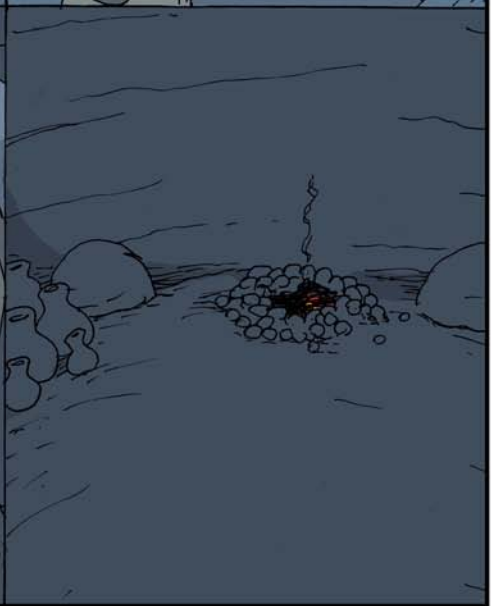






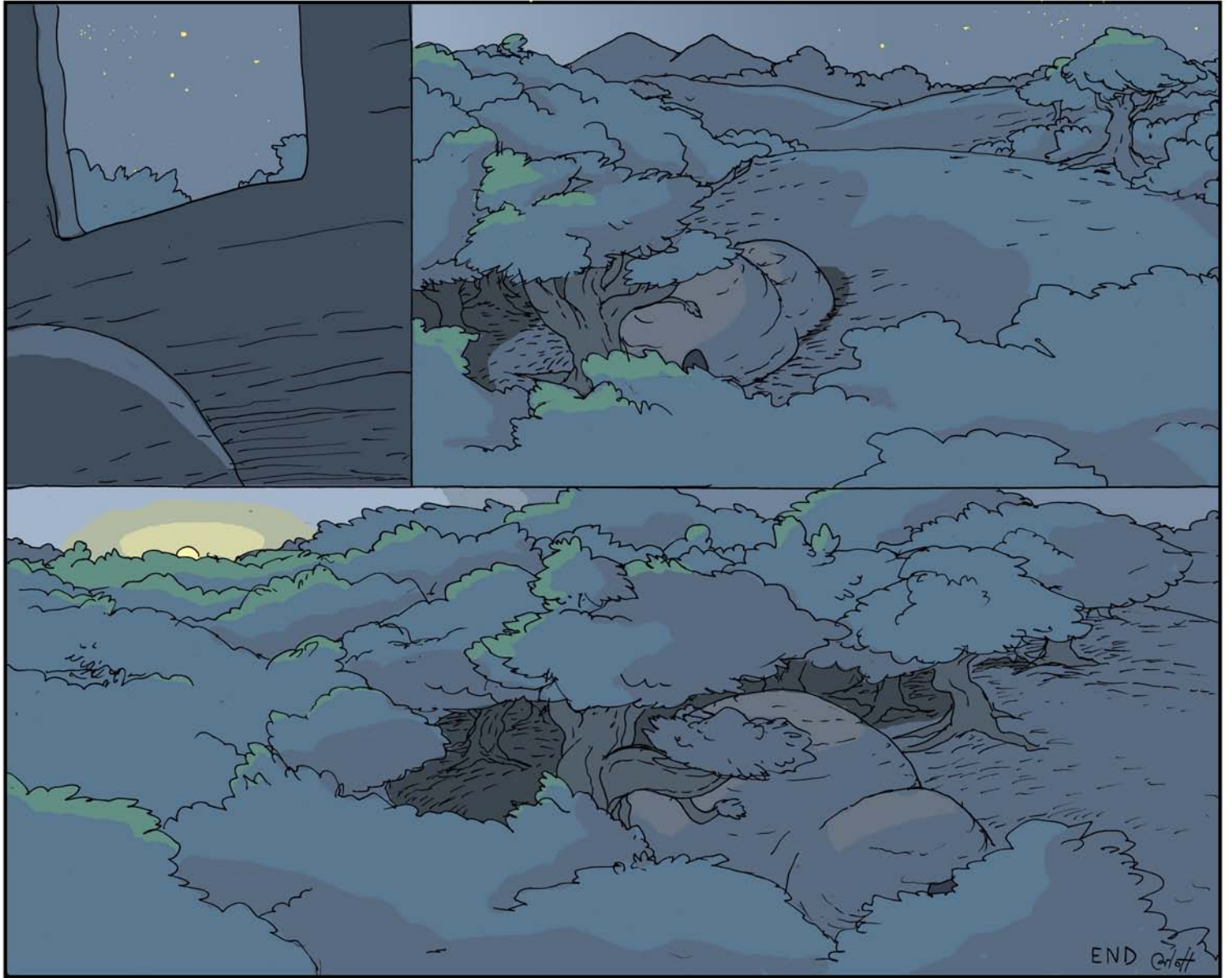














**Joel Orloff** grew up in Cambridge, MA. He has a BA in English from Vassar College and two cats, as well as a beautiful blue Motobecane road bike from the seventies that was his father's. You can see more of his drawings at [skaweeerureeweeert.tumblr.com](http://skaweeerureeweeert.tumblr.com).

## Postscriptum: Thoughts on the Liveliness of Comics

or 2 revisions and 1 thing left the same

The mexican fabulist Juan Luis Arreola has a story called "Parturient Montes" which is based on the old tale "The Mountain in Labor", first appearing in Phaedrus and most famously in Horace's *Ars Poetica*. Phaedrus gives it two lines: 'A mountain had gone into labour and was groaning terribly. Such rumours excited great expectations all over the country. In the end, however, the mountain gave birth to a mouse.' Horace likens this to the writer of epics who promises much but produces little. Arreola makes the story literal, and in doing so, turns it on its head. He tells of a storyteller who, called upon by a crowd to give his new version of "el parto de los montes", eventually produces, apparently from nowhere, a live mouse. Far from being disappointed, this is exactly what the crowd expects, and



they crowd forward to see the mouse, and most importantly, to verify its vivacity. That the mouse lives, has a beating heart and soft fur, is their foremost concern.<sup>1</sup>

This is more or less the only way I can understand my relationship to art, and most particularly the only way I can understand my relationship to my own art. Questions of what it expresses or, say, of technique are really largely moot in the face of that one, central question: does it live? Is it warm, and fragile? Does blood pump through it? It is true, of course, that beneath this question are all sorts of issues of technique, of expression, of the nuts and bolts of creation, but it is very difficult for me to address these outside of the realm of this instinctual quality of life vs lifelessness.

This is why, in the hopes that it will illuminate something about the more concrete issues of creating worthwhile comics, I am going to take this space to talk about how I deal with a lack of life in a comic. I have picked two places in *Una and the Milk* that seem to me, if not dead, certainly in need of a couple of whacks from the defibrillator. I'll try to say why I think they are at risk of flatlining, and what exactly that defibrillation might look like. Then finally I'll talk about one place in the comic that seems brimming with life.

First though, I hope it will be helpful if I provide the glimmerings of a theoretical/metaphorical framework for the way I think about the life of a work of art. I'll begin with a kind of synonym for the word life: vibrance. Vibrance, according to the Apple Dictionary, means, by turns, "full of energy or

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<sup>1</sup> Arreola, 65-71.

enthusiasm", "quivering; pulsating", "(of color) bright and striking", or "(of sound) strong or resonating". It comes from the Latin verb *vibrare*, whence we also have vibrate. I mention it to suggest that essential to aliveness is a kind of oscillating simultaneity of states. Seamus Heaney provides a signpost on this track of thought with his poem *Blackberry Picking*. In it he describes a week in "late August" when "the blackberries would ripen", berries with "flesh... sweet like thickened wine" full of "summer's blood". The children in the poem greedily pick this outpouring of life and pile it into a bathtub, only to discover a gray mold "glutting on [the] cache", and the "juice... stinking." "Once off the bush" Heaney writes, "the fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour./I always felt like crying. It wasn't fair/That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot./Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not."<sup>2</sup> Here is the lurking death always hidden in the center of life. This is more than a dichotomy, in that the fungal death does not simply overtake the life of summer, but rather *is* that life, is, somehow, essential to it, just as the spoiling is caused as well by the natural fermentation of the berries: the poem paints a world where life and death commingle in a vibrating pulse, which is, in itself, Life.<sup>3</sup>

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2 Heaney, 7

3 The idea of vibrance makes especial sense in discussions of comics because comics are, at their essence, systems of coexisting contradictions. They are often a combination of text and image, and thus consist of at least two sources of meaning and significance vibrating together in concert. Often the two may even contradict each other, or deepen each other. Additionally, there is a fundamental contradiction in the way comics exist as movement and stillness coexisting in one body. Time both moves and is frozen and chopped up, and even doubles back on itself.

There exists, in the birthing of the mouse that is art, a kind of merging of two energies as well. The first is the spirit of the mouse, which has a kind of life in the mind before it is born. Unencumbered by a body, this is a wild, free life, but it is also pale and fragile, a shade-life. The second energy is that body, which comes of the work of crafting the art, and which if well-made will be a suitable home for the spirit. These are opposing qualities. The spirit is light, and is the part of the work that dances, but it is also fragile, gossamer; at risk, without a proper body, of blowing away. The body is heavy, and if formed improperly can flatten the spirit into death, but it is also the mode in which a kind of exuberance becomes possible: namely, the exuberance of the hand of the artist, of the marks that make up the surface of a work as opposed the ideas beneath them.<sup>4</sup>

But before we ourselves drift away, I think it is time to return to the body at hand. The first scene I would change is the one that takes place in the forest. When I imagined the comic, before I had set pencil to paper, this was one of the most beautiful scenes, and one of the most alive. Possibly it is the potential I see in it that makes me most disappointed about its current state (though rarely, certainly, can the weight of a realized image compete with the ethereal lightness of one's imagined scenes), because it is potentially a highly vibrant moment. It should be, viscerally, a liminal space, between day and night, home and outside world, cultivation and nature, a place that is both fearful for Una and

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<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that the life of the lines of a comic is always of the realm of the body, and indeed, the reader should do his or her best to resist and reject the strict dichotomy that I am setting up. When lines refer to themselves they are of the realm of the body, but when they succeed they are referring both to themselves and to the spirit underneath them, at which joyous point the spirit and the body cease to stand apart, mistrustful of one another, and occupy the same space, happily vibrating.



exciting, unknowable and simultaneously revelatory. Balanced correctly, these qualities could vibrate in concert, energizing the scene. As it is right now, the tuning is off, and what could be a potent ambiguity becomes confusing lifelessness.

Some fixes: first I would try to become more comfortable with the fact that these characters are in a forest. I was far too apprehensive, in my laying out of the scene, about the location of trees. I worried that they would be too distracting in the background, and too obfuscating in the foreground, and generally too confusing visually, and so I disallowed myself from being exuberant with them – rather than enjoying them, I treated them with caution and uncertainty. This lack of joy translates into the composition – the trees seem awkward and in the way, or like a screen behind the characters – characters who are then, through lack of other objects of focus, consistently middle-grounded in a monotonous way that robs the scene of all its vigor. Put another way, I feared to give the scene too heavy a body, and in so doing left the spirit with nothing to cling to.

I would, similarly, be freer with the fireflies, who I think are tied to the spirit: again I feared them too much, and in fearing them, robbed them of their power, and thus of their point in the balance of the scene. Were they to have their own life, to be allowed to swirl throughout the scene, with power and influence, they, like the trees, would balance the tone of the scene, providing a strong, uncanny note for the heaviness of relaxation and filial affection to vibrate against. Further, an abundance of trees and fireflies would set up a scene in which Una and her father are wading through something, which

would fill out the resonance of the rest of their journey: they next wade through water, then grass, and then cows. As it is, however, these elements are only shadows of what they should be, and end up sucking more life than they provide.

The second scene I would change is this one, in which Una seems to see the fox's spirit rising up out of the river, followed by hungry fish.



This moment is a good example of how a scene can be tremendously lively on its own but collapse under the pressing weight of the rest of the story if the two are out of sync. The scene itself is, I think,

quite lovely. There is a certain exuberant freedom in the lines and shapes being made and a good rhythm from one panel to the next. In the context of the comic as a whole, however, too much is happening all at once – specifically, the comic is moving very suddenly from a very embodied moment to one that dwells, quite literally in the house of the spirits. We transition away from Una's face to what she is seeing, which is already a geographically confusing moment, and really the first P.O.V. shot in the comic so far – we are now in a mind as opposed to in the world. A character reappears who we thought was gone, bringing with him a seeming shift in the previously established metaphysics of the comic. The geographical ambiguity in particular seems to almost force a collapse of trust in the physical, and so a detachment of the spirit-life of the page.

Were I more cautious, I might find myself tempted to scrap the moment of magic all together and simply sit with Una on the hill, trusting that we have lived enough of her experience to glimpse some of the roots of her unhappiness, but I think with a little finesse the moment of flight this scene attempts is possible and even useful. It is not that a register so far from the physical is impossible on its own, and indeed I would wager that comics are better at this kind of flight than other story-telling mediums, because of how much their existence as a drawn visual form keeps them grounded in their physicality. I think the shift does not even need to be terribly grand. Perhaps it would be enough to change that first panel so that rather than just Una's hand, we see her whole body, and so are privy to the actual physical reality of how she is experiencing this very subjective and non-physical thing. The



same could be done with the last panel. In this way, the sudden shift in registers would be a panel more gradual in both directions, along the spirit to ease into its momentary freedom rather than being flung away into it.

The scene I would not change one bit is this one, whose five panels are, I think, the liveliest ones in the comic:



I said about the first scene that it didn't live up to my imagining of it, and conceded that for the

most part, life in the imagination will always be more alive than the final, mediated product. So then, does this simply capture what I had imagined perfectly? In fact, I find that in looking at these panels, I can't remember what I had imagined for this scene. The mind spirit, having found a home, has settled and spread out, able to luxuriate into the form of the body that I have made for it.

What do I find so successful about these panels? I think they are vibrant, in the sense that they find a strange balance between the disgust of the udders and the comfort and peace of this moment, between anticipation and fear and resoluteness. I love their wobbliness – the way the 'camera' seems unsure of its position, undecided on whether it should be high or low, near or far. I find a similar lovely fragility in Una's changing expression throughout, which goes from bemused to happy and calm, to blank, to angry, to resolute. I think this fragility and wobbliness carries through into the lines themselves, which dance more freely than they do anywhere else in the comic. I love how they swirl, in the form of the grass, behind the figures, how delicate and almost ethereal they are in the father's arm in the second panel, and how authoritative in the udder and hooves in the bottom two panels.

It is a bit frustrating then, if also, I think, extremely revealing, that how this comes about is still more or less as mysterious to me as how a few cells become a mouse. The closest I can come is to say that I remember the moment I made this page, and I was fully calm and ready to be content with whatever I produced. I wasn't holding any elements back, or regulating the composition, or nervously watching myself from a distance. I think it's generally held that when one is giving birth to a human

being, calm is the most important thing, and I suppose the same holds true of birthing a mouse.

And now, before I close, I guess I should try briefly to address the question I have been avoiding throughout this essay: why aim for life at all? Why not aim for power, why not try to make art like mountains, or like earthquakes, art that rattles, art that destroys and re-forms? What good is a mouse?

The theater director Peter Brooks writes in his book *The Empty Space* that “during the war, the romantic theatre...came like water to the thirst of dry lives...it was an escape, but also a reminder: a sparrow in a prison cell.”<sup>5</sup>

The sparrow, like the mouse, is very small. It cannot break down the walls of the prison, or wing the prisoner to safety, or even carry messages to friends far away. The most it can do is carry with it the promise of a life outside of the prisoner's own. I was nourished, it says with its beating heart, by a vast vibrant world outside of this little cell.

So when I encounter a little flitting spirit in my mind and endeavor to build it a body, I do so knowing two things. The first is that, in all likelihood, it will never dart and wheel as swiftly, once embodied, as it did in its pre-birth. But the second thing I know is that without a body it could never soar or crawl through the bars of someone else's window, carrying with it the promise, wrapped in blood, that I also lived, and nourished, and was a womb.

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5 Brooks, 43



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