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Queer as Folklore: How *Fun Home* Destabilizes the Metronormative Myth

Imagine a queer person. Imagine what they look like and how they move through space. Now imagine the spaces they move through: where they work, where they go, and where they live. You are constructing a queer geography around your individual, who likely moves through crowded streets, coffee shops, concerts, and dark bars illuminated by weak neon. Our communal conceptualization of queer experience in modern-day America, especially as recorded in queer media, skews heavily towards urban geographies. The constituent “imaginative processes associated with gay migration from rural and suburban areas to cities” (Weston 256) continually construct and reinforce a hegemonic “discourse of metronormativity” (Sander 28) from which an imaginary narrative has emerged. The narrative mythologizes urban/rural as a strict binary and systematically privileges the urban above the rural. After constructing a theoretical foundation, this paper will explore the metronormative myth in lesbian cartoonist Alison Bechdel’s 2006 graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*.

The metronormative myth teaches us that queerness and rurality are not just incompatible but antithetical. Its omnipresent “clarion call” (Weston 253) to cosmopolitan refuges like New York City, San Francisco, and Seattle associates each half of the urban/rural binary with the dominant and subservient halves of auxiliary binaries. Take, for example, the private/public, protected/exposed, social/family and cultural/useful pairs in Foucault’s “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias” (1967). Queering Foucauldian theory to describe the metronormative myth means naming the urban as the imagined sexual geography where queer folk have “found their natural ground and stability” and the rural as the urban’s inverse where they have “been put

because they [have] been violently displaced” by birth or other unfortunate circumstances (Foucault 22). Yet queering Foucault himself proves more difficult.

Despite his lifelong partnership with the sociologist Daniel Defert, his early death from AIDS, and his scholarly interest in sexuality, Foucault’s personal narrative rejects queer identity, including the very label “gay” (Downing 2008). Just as rising ranks of queer youth inherit the gay liberation generation’s founding myth of rural-urban migration (D’Emilio 1983), Foucault inherits the legacy of famous men who have sex with men (MSM) but never identify as bisexual, or homosexual. In *Fun Home*, Bechdel treats some of Foucault’s iconic literary predecessors, including Oscar Wilde, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust, as stand-ins for the troubled anti-hero: her father, Bruce. The book provides a nuanced model for the necessary work of exposing the metronormative narrative as myth through a “theoretical” and “practical desanctification of [queer] space” (Foucault 23). Queer theorists, artists, writers, and activists must show that both the good and the bad of queer experience exist in all geographies. They must also interrogate the problematic notion of a so-called gay mecca. Fortunately for Bechdel, the graphic medium, which takes visual space into much greater account than other formats, lends itself to narratives whose structure is more simultaneous than sequential and more spatial than temporal.

As Bechdel explores her fraught relationship with Bruce, an MSM whose personal narrative resists queering even by his own lesbian-identified daughter, she illuminates “the hidden presence of the sacred” (Foucault 23) in the queer urban. After questioning the metronormative myth’s role in their intertwined narratives, she ultimately discards its harsh dichotomous framework for a cyclical one. Thus, *Fun Home* proposes a viable alternative to this enduring tenet of queer hegemony. It also furthers the work of post-structuralists like Foucault

and Roland Barthes who dissolved the binary oppositions of the structuralists before them. Interestingly, Bechdel simultaneously pushes back on Barthes' concept of "la mort de l'Auteur" (Barthes 67), or the death of the author, by honoring her father's rejection of queer identity over her own desire to read his narrative as queer. Drawing inspiration from Proust to locate analogous queer experiences in supposedly inverse geographies, she desanctifies the city, destabilizes the urban/rural binary, and challenges the queer metronormative imaginary.

Before beginning our close study of *Fun Home*, we must build a basis for analysis in recent, relevant theory. According to Foucault, the twentieth century abandoned prior centuries' fixation on time, instead becoming "the epoch of space...of simultaneity...of juxtaposition...of the near and far...of the side-by-side...of the dispersed" (Foucault 22). The modern personal narrative is now "less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein" (Foucault 22). Meanwhile, Barthes defines the written text not as a linear sequence of words but as a multi-dimensional space (Barthes 65). *Fun Home*, then, is not only a literary product of the new spatial epoch but also a multi-dimensional poststructural space in itself. Bechdel's intratextual world challenges the "hierarchic ensemble of places" (Foucault 22) in the metronormative myth, along with the endless series of imagined yet seemingly "inviolable" (Foucault 23) binary oppositions that support it.

The structuralists who championed binary oppositions hoped that these pairs of inverse yet mutually dependent entities, such as the characters of Alison and Bruce in *Fun Home*, would "produce an ultimate conjunction from an initial disjunction" (Pasero 109). For instance, Claude Lévi-Strauss considered "myth [a]...means for overcoming contradiction" by "[reconciling] paradoxes" and "[mediating] polar extremes" (Pasero 109). However, these myths often

masquerade as reality in the popular imagination. When understood as fact, they elevate one half of a binary the other, thereby perpetuating social inequality. Observing this phenomenon, the poststructuralists characterized binary oppositions as “stable and fixed categories” in which one of the two “identities or subject positions [is] dominant” while the other is “subservient” (Gewirtz and Cribb 70). One entity must be the thesis and the “Same” (Butler 140) and the second its Hegelian antithesis and the “Other” (Butler 140). Therefore, these binaries promote oppression far more often than they produce synthesis. For instance, in the male/female binary, male is the dominant/thesis/Same, while female is the subservient/antithesis/Other.

Unsurprisingly, an “uncritical reliance on... [binaries] serves to reinforce [and] reproduce these hierarchical relationships” (Gewirtz and Cribb 70) and promote essentialist views of identity categories like race, class, gender, and sexuality. In this case, the designation of urban queerness as the default and rural queerness as the exception perpetuates epistemological violence on the queer rural Other. Historian John D’Emilio’s description of queerness as a phenomenon that originally manifested in “the formation of urban communities” (D’Emilio 104) exemplifies the “urban bias” (Boso 562) in queer scholarship. This bias renders the queer and the rural mutually exclusive in theory even though they coexist in reality. For instance, most queer people do not know that the “get thee to a big city” (Weston 253) mandate is an “invented... mythology” (D’Emilio 101) based on the personal narratives of queer folks who “discovered their homosexual desires in isolation, unaware of others, and without resources for naming and understanding what they felt” (D’Emilio 101). To its credit, the founding myth helped legitimize queer existence in the face of dangerous homophobia and transphobia. Nevertheless, the loudest voices of the 1960s gay liberation movement made the “silence, invisibility, and isolation” of

their own origin stories “the essential characteristics of gay life in the past” (D’Emilio 101).

They created a politically expedient but largely fictional history of queer experience in America.

Foucault posits that time “appears to us only as one of the various distributive operations that are possible for the elements that are spread out in space” (Foucault 23). If time is thus secondary to space in the modern mind, then our forebears’ founding myth was even more spatial than it was temporal. Just as they projected their own narrative back into the imagined black box of queer prehistory, they projected it out into the imagined empty space of the rural. In this way, they “embedded...urban/rural contrasts...in the gay imaginary” (Weston 260) of every generation that has followed, and those contrasts have become canon. For twenty-first century queer folks, especially queer youth who may not share their predecessors’ silent, invisible, and isolated experience, the urban is still an inherited Foucauldian sacred. It is a fairy tale as stubbornly relevant as *Beauty and the Beast*, a magical myth as esteemed and widespread in the collective millennial consciousness as the *Harry Potter* series.

Like other pieces of children’s folklore, the metronormative myth is supposed to teach queer kids that “certain problems, dangers and ordeals can be overcome, that transformations and changes must occur, and that everything will work out in the end” (Mieder 90), as Wolfgang Mieder writes of fairy tales. The urban-to-rural migration story previews the “optimistic and future-oriented worldview” they will need to weather the particular “rites of passage in their maturation process to adulthood” (Mieder 91). It passes down queer values like the “trust in ultimate justice,” “the belief in the good of humanity,” and “the desire for a fairer political system and social order” (Mieder 91). As a unifying coming-of-age/coming out narrative that ends in an urban “happily ever after” (Mieder 91), the story mythologizes queerness “as a sexual

identity capable of providing a basis for community” (Weston 255). Ironically, its promise of a better future might even “contain emancipatory potential” (Mieder 91) for rural queer youth who struggle with the same vacuum of supportive resources that it sustains.

Despite its potentially constructive role in queer lives, the metronormative myth usually works less like a blueprint and more like a “mandate to fold into urban, neoliberal gay enclaves” (Puar 430). It creates a hegemonic discourse of “upward-mobility that echoes the now discredited ‘pull yourself up [by] the bootstraps’ immigrant motto” (Puar 430). Widely accepted as fact, the myth becomes a central aspect of nascent queer identities. For young rural queer folk in particular, the oft-repeated promise that “It Gets Better” (Puar 431) becomes the well-intentioned warning that *it only gets better somewhere else*. Thus, the myth’s “cultural prerogative to come out and into a gay community...[dictates] the contours of how to be a modern gay person” (Boso 562) for impressionable children and teenagers. They instinctively seek identity through identification with queerness that is not only visible but also locatable.

Queer youth predictably learn to internalize and repeat the mythical narrative of the “repressive and oppressive rural” (Sander 28), the “urban Promised Land” (Weston 270), and “the Great Gay Migration” (Weston 270) that connects them. A recent Human Rights Campaign survey polling 10,030 youth revealed “a high degree of optimism” (HRC 11) among queer respondents. This data reflects the hopeful worldview they learn from the metronormative fairy tale. Even though only 37% of these respondents were happy, 77% said that they know things will get better (HRC 7), and 83% believe they will be happy eventually (HRC 11). However, when asked to confine their futures to their hometowns, this optimism “declined markedly compared to their [cishet] peers” (HRC 11). Only 49% believed they could be happy if they were

not allowed or able to move (HRC 11). 63% believed they will need to move to another town or area of the country to feel accepted in their community, compared to 31% of their cishet peers (HRC 11). Although the study does not provide its respondents' geographical locations, it is clear that queer kids' assumed "likelihood of life achievements" (HRC 11) declines by a greater percentage than that of their cishet peers when restricted to a known sexual geography.

Despite empirical evidence suggesting that "rural gay people fare no worse than their urban peers" (Wienke and Hill 1256), *the queer imaginary conceptualizes queer happiness as essentially conditional and thus fundamentally unstable*. No wonder queer youth are 34% less likely to believe they will "be happy" (HRC 11) if they cannot leave their hometowns in adulthood. For queer rural youth, the same rites of passage and ideal adult experiences that the metronormative myth promises them, such as career satisfaction, college education, long-term romantic partnership, marriage, community engagement, and parenthood (HRC 11), are contingent upon their adherence to its rules. Why would any young queer person detach their personal narrative from a metronormative myth if their aspirations appear far less achievable outside of the sacred urban space? Why try and reconcile the irreconcilable?

Instead of convincing queer kids to undertake a seemingly impossible enterprise, queer content creators must present rural, queer adulthood as a possibility. They must stabilize the notion of queer happiness by freeing it from spatial conditions, as Bechdel does in *Fun Home*. Her analysis of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* offers one potential plan for this kind of liberation. Prefacing her first, overwhelming visit to New York as a child (see fig. 1), she writes:

the two directions in which the narrator's family can opt for a walk -- Swann's way and the Guermantes way -- are initially presented as diametrically opposed.

Bourgeois vs. aristocratic, homo vs. hetero, city vs. country, eros vs. art, private vs. public. But at the end of the novel the two ways are revealed to converge -- have always converged -- through a vast 'network of transversals.' (Bechdel 102)

Her summary recalls Foucault's characterization of the modern personal narrative as "a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein" rather than a "long life developing through time" (Foucault 22). She also echoes Mieder's observation that "often one and the same tale deals with [human] phenomena...in contrasting pairs; that is success versus failure, wealth versus poverty, luck versus misfortune, kindness versus meanness, compassion versus indifference, or simply put, good versus evil" (Mieder 90). Both scholars demonstrate the power of binary oppositions in modern mythopoeia. Bechdel's locations and relocations of herself and her father within queer time and space challenges those binaries.

At the start of *Fun Home*, Bechdel positions her childhood self opposite to Bruce by framing their relationship as a binary of mutually dependent inverses. Young Alison is "Spartan to [her] father's Athenian. Modern to his Victorian. Butch to his Nelly. Utilitarian to his aesthete" (Bechdel 15). After coming out to her parents in college, she buys a "'Spartan' model" (78) swiss army knife because it seems "like something a lesbian would have" (78). This reference retrospectively graphs the gay/lesbian binary onto their father/daughter relationship. Meanwhile, the self-aware humor of Alison's performance of queerness through knife purchase delegitimizes the notion of an original lesbian essence to her identity. Bechdel seeks clarity on these issues by interrogating a long list of binaries, such as rural/urban, protected/exposed, real/imaginary, free/constrained, public/private, hidden/revealed, truth/lie, known/unknown, student/teacher, parent/child, pure/polluted, straight/queer, and beginning/end. For example,

Alison's questioning of her decision to come out to her parents when she "[hasn't] even had sex with anyone yet" while "conversely, [her] father [has] been having sex with men for years and not telling anyone" (59) destabilizes the out/in binary of the metronormative closet metaphor.

The film that bookends Bruce and Alison's only explicit discussion of shared queer experience features a protagonist who "leaves America for Europe" seeking a life "free from provincial convention and constraint" only to "[end] up 'ground in the very mill of the conventional'" (71). Alison's own "heady notions" (71) about *It Getting Better* somewhere else are similarly shattered when she moves to New York after finishing college "expecting a bohemian refuge" (107). Instead, she finds the Village "a cold, mercenary place" filled with "many...humiliations" (107). On the other side of the coin, the clarion call of certain rural spaces like "the local college library" (217) near her tiny Pennsylvania hometown of Beech Creek draws her back day after day during her vacations from college. After Bruce dies, she "[javelines]...a cheesy flag" placed on his grave "into the cornfield that immediately [adjoins] his plot at the edge of the cemetery" (53). The protection of the rural topography enables her physical expression of an unspeakable grief; the cornfield's cover also provides her privacy in a moment of vulnerability. Lying in the grass afterwards (see fig. 2), she experiences the sort of peaceful catharsis a city could never give her. Bechdel thus desanctifies the sacred urban in the context of her own queer narrative. In the "abrupt and wholesale revision of [her] history" (79) that follows, she uncovers artifacts and holds conversations in which Bruce's queerness is "simultaneously hidden and revealed" (101); he is both "the vicarious teacher [and] the vicarious student" (201) in her queer coming-of-age. Each time Bechdel pulls queerness across the line separating one

half of a binary from the other in order to characterize herself, her father, or their relationship, she destabilizes the overarching rural/urban binary that much more.

Bechdel further challenges the metronormative myth by locating imminent bodily harm to a child in both the rural and the urban. She dissolves the auxiliary binary of dangerous/safe, detaching those qualities from their respective sexual geographies. The story of her father wandering off into the fields, getting stuck in the freshly tilled mud, and nearly escaping death thanks to the mailman's heroic rescue (40) mirrors the story of her younger brother John "[wandering] off [into the]...notorious cruising grounds" near Christopher Street and narrowly escaping one of the "chickenhawks" who "[preys] on young boys" (192). Alison's own brush with danger comes when she stumbles upon a serpent at her "family's deer camp...out in the forest" (111) of the Allegheny Plateau. Reflecting on this moment, Bechdel argues that the "vexingly ambiguous archetype" of the snake is "obviously a phallus," but it is also an "ancient and universal symbol of the feminine principle" (116). In short, the serpent destabilizes the male/female binary. Bechdel then suggests that the serpent's "undifferentiation, [its] nonduality...[its implication of] cyclicity, life from death, creation from destruction" is "what [is] so unsettling about" it for people who prefer dichotomous frameworks to cyclical ones (116). As we will see, Bechdel leans into that discomfort during her memoir's conclusion.

The central auxiliary binary opposition of *Fun Home* is dead/alive. After all, the titular "fun" is short for "funeral," and the central tragicomical event of the subtitle is Bruce's sudden death by passing truck à la Barthes. The author Bechdel cannot definitively rule his death either a suicide or an accident, but the character Alison blames her father's death on the toxic cocktail of queerness and rurality. Bechdel uses *Fun Home* to confront her former conviction that her father

“killed himself because he was a manic-depressive, closeted fag and he couldn’t face living in [their] small-minded small town one more second” (125). Drawing herself at the funeral, she calls “sexual shame is in itself a kind of death” (228) and explains that “a geographical relocation is usually involved” in her hypothetical alternative versions of “[her] father’s story” (125). “If only he’d been able to escape the gravitational tug of Beech Creek,” she laments, “his particular sun might not have set in so precipitate a manner” (125). By aligning rural/urban and dead/alive in her father’s queer narrative, the college-aged Alison raises the stakes for the rural queer Other. In her eyes, rurality and queerness are not merely antithetical but deadly. For Bruce, *it only gets better somewhere else* becomes *it could have gotten better somewhere else*.

Fortunately for the rural queer Other, Bechdel ultimately rejects Alison’s perception of her father. She refuses to position herself opposite to him, to see Alison and Bruce as “inversions of one another” (98) any longer. Instead, she opts for a cyclical narrative framework, a chiasmic structure in which her “father’s end [is] her beginning” (117). Ironically, “the end of his lie,” which is also the end of his life, “[coincides] with the beginning of [her] truth” (117). This framework unites father and daughter and closes the gap between urban and rural.

Geographically speaking, “specificity is abandoned...in the primeval wilderness beyond the [Allegheny] front” just like the “speed and pavement...on Route 80...toward New York City...[erase] not just the names of things, but the particular, intimate contours of the landscape itself” (144). The rural and the urban are equally unknown and, more importantly, equally unknowable. Bechdel admits that “although the anonymity of a city might have saved [her] father’s life, [she] can’t really imagine him anywhere but Beech Creek” (144). She resists the temptation to locate his “erotic truth” (228) in either country or city. She also refuses to label

him, to “claim him as ‘gay’ in the way [she is] ‘gay’” (230). However painful to admit, Bruce is unknowable, too. By making these choices, Bechdel privileges Bruce’s metaphorical Authorship of his personal narrative above her interpretation of it. She moves beyond poststructuralism by denying her own entitlement to Bruce’s story, especially as the literal author of the book that tells it. *Bien que l’Auteur meure, il n’est pas mort*. Although the Author dies, he is not dead.

As Bechdel continues dissolving binary oppositions, she builds a “vast ‘network of transversals’” (102) through which the seemingly divergent Proustian ways of the urban and the rural converge. Each dissolved binary is one transversal. In *Fun Home*’s final scene, “spiritual [and] consubstantial paternity” (231) converge in the character of Bruce. Bechdel draws herself leaping into his outstretched arms from a diving board (see fig. 3). The image recalls the opening vignette (see fig. 4) in which she learns that the “discomfort” (3) of her position in the airplane game “is well worth the rare physical contact [with her father], and certainly worth the moment of perfect balance” (3) in the air. The comfort/discomfort and connection/disconnection binaries are irrelevant to their “reenactment of [the] mythic relationship” (4) between Icarus and Daedalus. Likewise, the rural/urban binary is irrelevant to their shared queer experience. The cyclical nature of their “entwined stories” (232) draws “life from death [and] creation from destruction” (116), bringing father and daughter, urban and rural, straight and queer, alive and dead, and all other seemingly inverse pairs together. Though the serpent disappears from view soon after the character of young Alison finds it (115), the author Bechdel discovers its symbolic “undifferentiation” and “nonduality” once again (116) in her final reflections.

In the tradition of poststructuralist theory and Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* deconstructs fixed binary oppositions to reveal the convergence of

their supposedly divergent elements. As they digest our hegemonic discourse, new generations of queer people will continue learning that rurality and queerness should not meet, or at least that they should not stay together, but, in Bechdel's words, "is it so unusual for the two things to coincide?" (231). This question is rhetorical. The answer is no. Rural queer people exist at all ages in all areas of the country. The metronormative narrative is a myth for many reasons, but none so important as its erasure of their stories. Even those of us with the best intentions and the most optimistic worldview are forcing queer youth into a corner. When we say "it gets better" and we mean *it only gets better somewhere else*, we are asking them to choose between two significant aspects of their identity. Some queer people do not have to make that choice, and that is a privilege. It should not be a privilege. Bechdel's rhetorical question shifts the onus of responsibility onto us, since *Fun Home* theoretically desanctifies queer space, but reading *Fun Home* practically desanctifies it. Creator and consumer work together to propose a queer narrative in which happiness does not depend on circumstance. This kind of work must continue. We must do better for queer kids. They deserve the world, not a narrow, preselected slice of it.

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SHE WAS STAYING ON BLEECKER STREET WITH HER FRIEND ELLY.



ROY TOOK US FOR A WALK WHILE DAD WENT UP TO THE APARTMENT. IN THE HOT AUGUST AFTERNOON, THE CITY WAS REDUCED, LIKE A LONG-SIMMERING DEMIGLACE, TO A FRAGRANCE OF STUNNING RICHNESS AND COMPLEXITY.



Fig. 1. The Bechdel family visits the West Village. Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Boston, Mariner Books, 2007.



Fig. 2. Alison mourns by her father's grave in Beech Creek. Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Boston, Mariner Books, 2007.

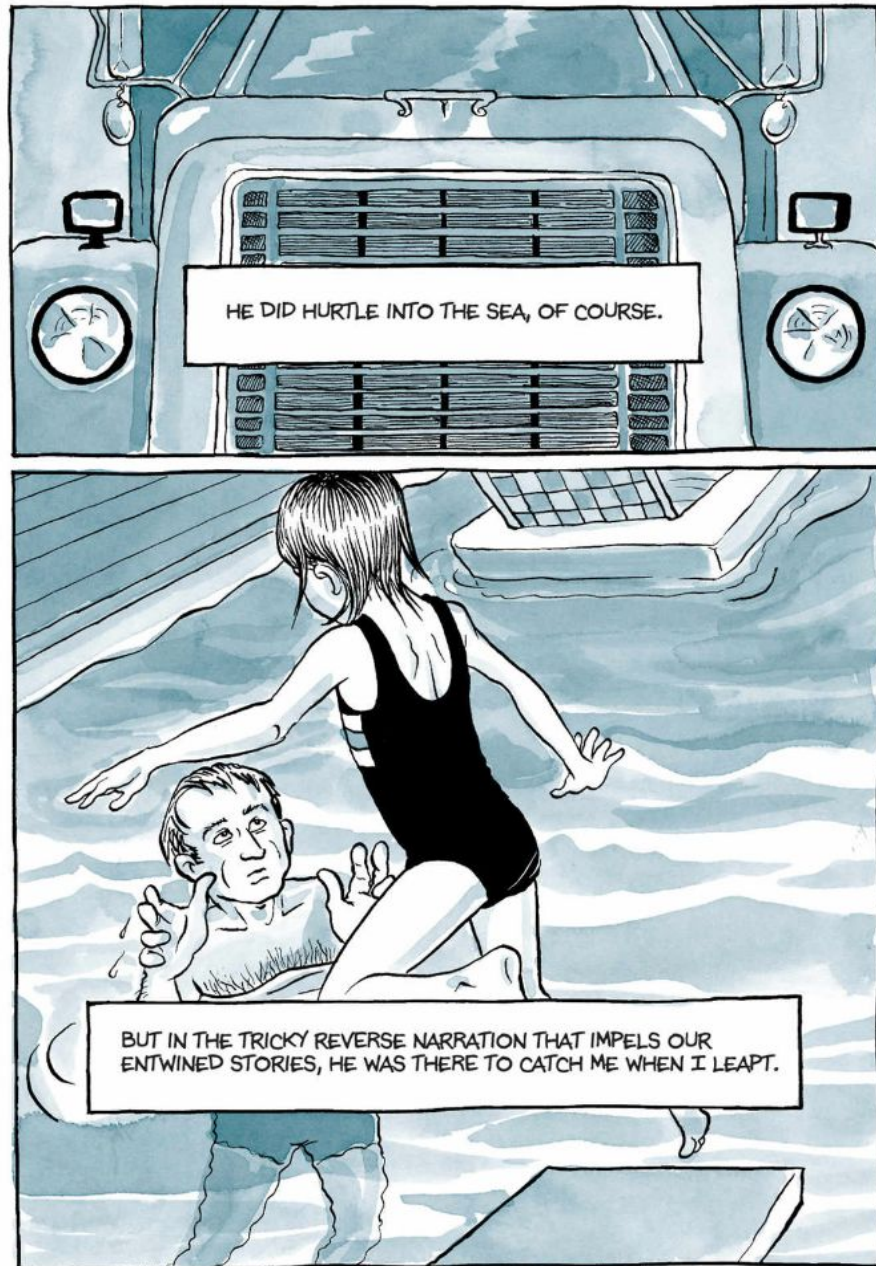
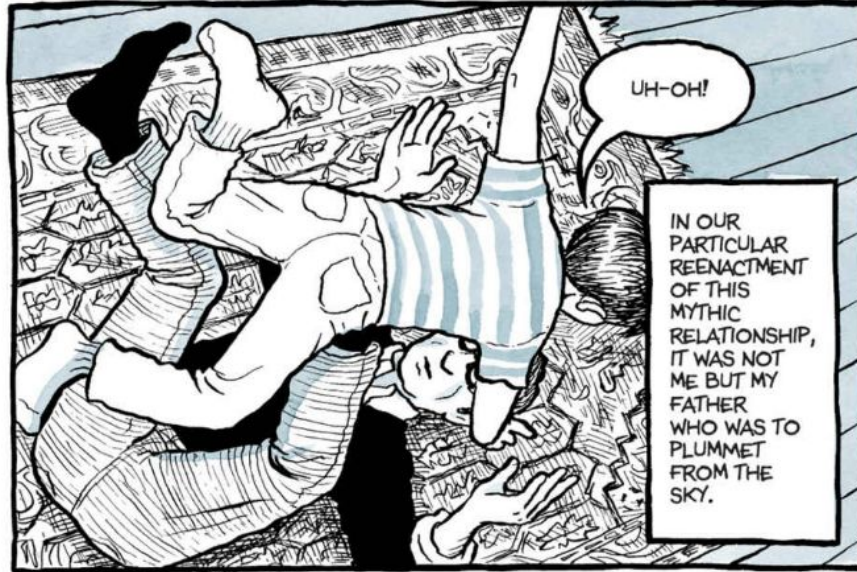


Fig. 3. Alison jumps into Bruce's arms. Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*.

Boston, Mariner Books, 2007.

CONSIDERING THE FATE OF ICARUS AFTER HE FLOUTED HIS FATHER'S ADVICE AND FLEW SO CLOSE TO THE SUN HIS WINGS MELTED, PERHAPS SOME DARK HUMOR IS INTENDED.



BUT BEFORE HE DID SO, HE MANAGED TO GET QUITE A LOT DONE.

HIS GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT, ARGUABLY, WAS HIS MONOMANIACAL RESTORATION OF OUR OLD HOUSE.

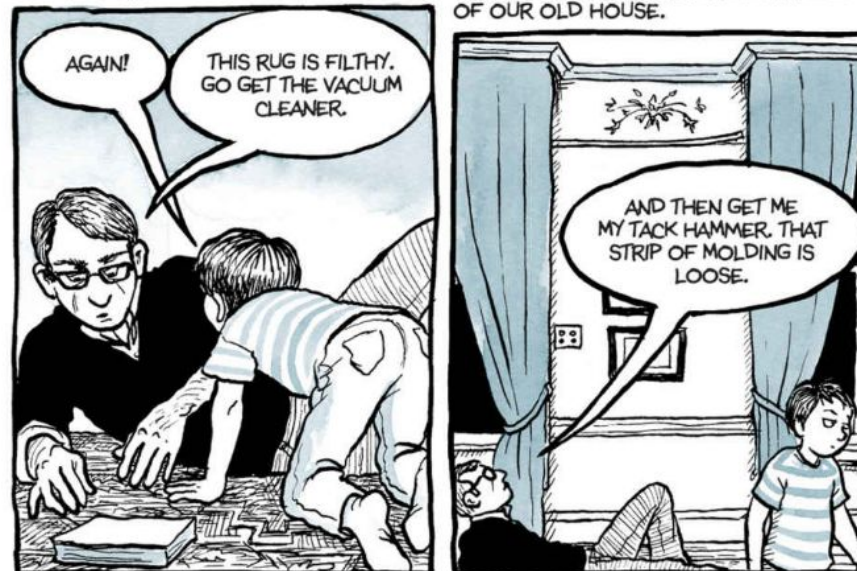


Fig. 4. Alison and Bruce play airplane. Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*.

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