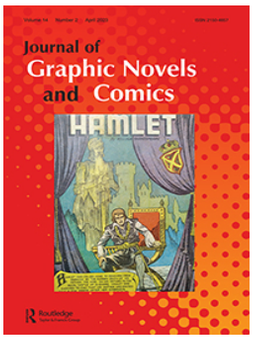

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"Something happened": an interview with Lynda Barry

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ABSTRACT

In Fall 2022, we sat down with MacArthur Genius Award winner, cartoonist Lynda Barry to share our admiration for her work and learn about her advocacy for cartooning and creativity. We talked about comics, her work in the classroom, and the techniques she uses to help students expand their visual focus and their imaginative capacity. In this interview, we think about child development and the nurturing of children's imagination, our favourite cartoonists, what happens in comics, and music and drawing together. We also hear stories from the classroom of Lynda Barry! Reflecting Barry's work and her ways, this interview explores and celebrates her genius.

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In Fall 2022, we sat down with MacArthur Genius Award winner, cartoonist Lynda Barry to share our admiration for her work and learn about her advocacy for cartooning and creativity. We talked about comics, her work in the classroom, and the techniques she uses to help students expand their visual focus and their imaginative capacity. In this interview, we think about child development and the nurturing of children's imagination, our favourite cartoonists, what happens in comics, and music and drawing together. We also hear stories from the classroom of Lynda Barry! Reflecting Barry's work and her ways, this interview explores and celebrates her genius.

Vera Camden and Valentino Zullo: Thank you so much for meeting with us. Just to start out with straight up appreciation: there's just nobody whose work is as impressive as yours in the world of comics. We are blown away by what you do! And we are a bit nervous!

Lynda Barry: Awww!

Camden and Zullo: We mean that from the heart. Having paid our respect, we can proceed, but we just want to say that this is an honor.

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Barry: There was just something about your invitation that felt exactly right. I was nervous after I read the two examples you sent because I'm not an academic at all, although I swim in those waters. I was just really impressed with how different both of those interviews were.[1]

Camden and Zullo: We admire the cartoonists we interview, so if that came through, that's a score.

Barry: It really came through. And both interviews you sent sounded so different in the way that the cartoonists talked about their work and also in the way that you both facilitated that. So, right on.

Camden and Zullo: Thank you so much.

Barry: Also, I live in a really rural area with weak internet, so it may glitch. I might sound like an alien now and then.

Camden and Zullo: We'll roll with it! We dread Zoom in most cases, but this really gives us an opportunity that is rare.

Barry: There are things I love about Zoom which is just what you described, getting to talk, but when it's a big meeting that's when it's . . .

Camden and Zullo: And people just have their names up and you know that they're just doing their shopping lists or whatever.

Barry: I've watched some videos of teachers, particularly in public schools trying to teach a class and it's just these little black boxes and I just can't imagine. How do you teach without being able to see your students' faces?

Camden and Zullo: Comics and creating comics feels like the right antidote to Zoom though. They keep us connected.

Barry: Well, you know, when I was teaching online, when I started to see the Zoom frame as a frame, like a comics frame, I figured out a couple things. One was that I should be standing when I'm teaching because of the way that we react to another person's body.

So, if I was sitting already, if I was the instructor and I was also sitting, everybody was tired. Then I realized we need puppets, unexpected puppets. I also start the class fifteen minutes early, and I just put on music, and I dance so you have the uncomfortable situation of watching your professor dancing, which is so upsetting and jarring that you're not in a normal mood by the time class starts. I started to look at it like this frame that I could sort of fill like a comic and I figured out how to do share screen and stuff or have my students hold up a drawing – they just hold up a drawing, and they'd have to hold it there for three minutes and then we'd all have to copy it. So, there were ways that I could make it more like a comic and that made it, that actually made it really fun.

Camden and Zullo: Has it made its way back to your work in some way?

Barry: Well, I think teaching is probably the thing I'm the most interested in and fascinated with. So, one of the things that happens is – in my classroom – I always play music. Always. We use music when I have them draw. Say they're going to draw for three minutes, just one panel, I always use music as a timer. Dancing is something that I include, again, not because it's a good thing to watch me dance, but it's that there's a full body that's moving around. When people make comics, especially if they're new to making comics, getting them to draw a whole body is so difficult. They have such a hard time believing it's important and they have a hard time believing feet are important to showing how a character feels or how they're standing or what they're doing. So, I realized that if I could start to incorporate that into class, if they had a body moving (it's usually with my back to them because I'm DJing), then I feel like something sort of steps out of the frame and into the room and then back into the frame through them. I mean that's the part that I think fascinates me the most is when one student draws a picture, we often copy each other's work and then we'll pass it around and somebody else draws it and then the student who originated it goes around the room and finds their drawing, and it went through an entire human body and came out without them talking to each other at all. That's when you start to see the transfer of images and how amazing it is (Figure1). It's this ordinary superpower.

Camden and Zullo: This idea about the body is interesting. When we think of comics they're connected in a particular way with bodies, right? It doesn't matter if it's an autobiography or superheroes, they're all body all the time. That's one of the things that makes comics so interesting. What do you think is occurring in these students that they are not thinking about bodies early on in their work?

Barry: Well, part of it is, I think, that the visual focus for young people, in particular, has gotten smaller and smaller and smaller. Partially because of phones they lose their peripheral vision and just sort of whatever's going on there. They don't see. If it was up to them, if I wasn't behind them going you must draw full bodies, they would just draw faces and maybe just an eye, like just an eyeball. It's as if they don't quite know how to use their bodies to draw another person.

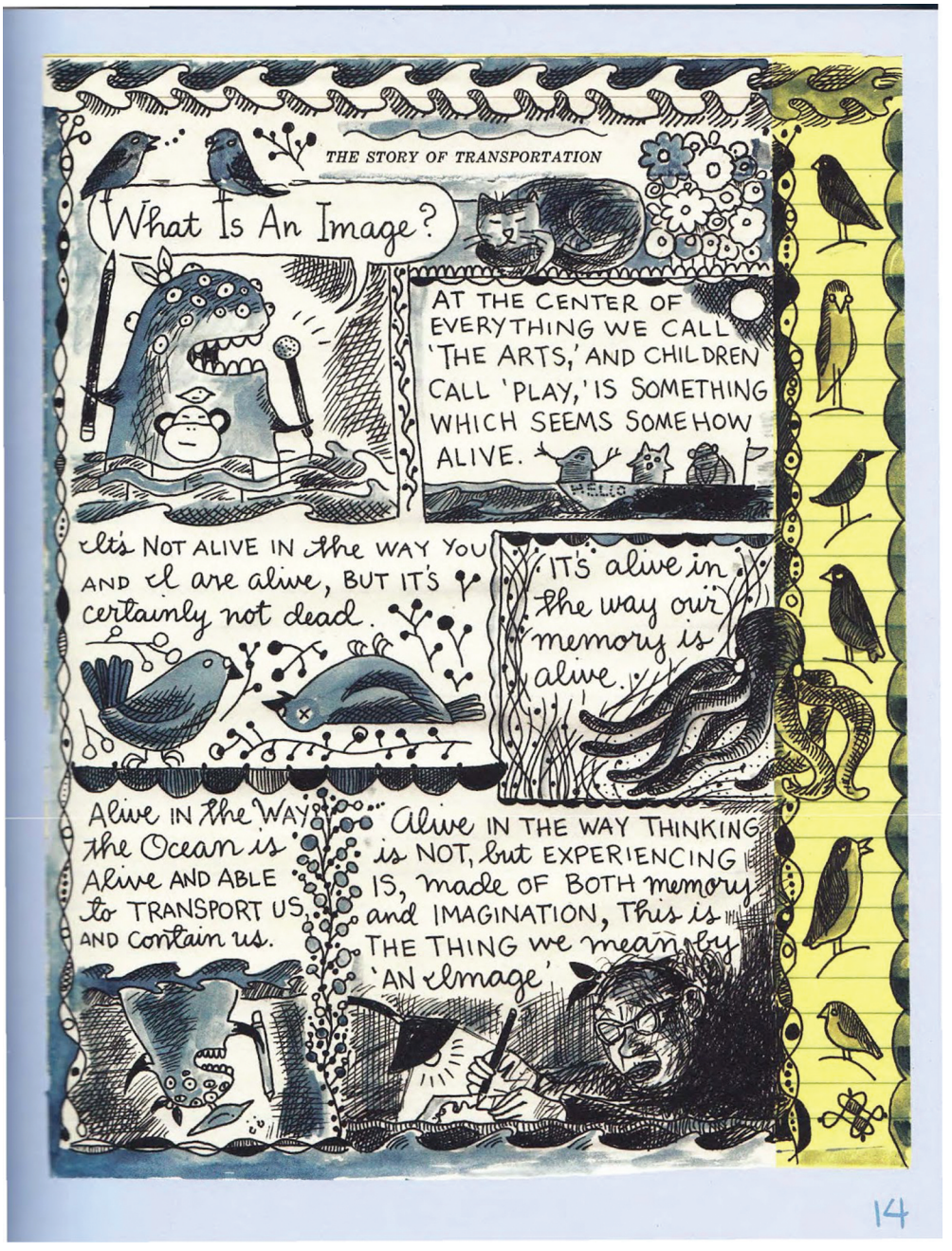

Figure 1. From What It Is, p. 14 by Lynda Barry. Reprinted with permission..

So, one of the things I talk to them about is how I've never been able to draw someone screaming without moving my face. I tried. I put masking tape all over my face because that was the only way I could feel if it was moving. I said I cannot draw someone screaming without also making that face. I think that goes on maybe on a micro level when we're reading comics. I think there's that

imitation or that mimicking. Yesterday I sent my students out to draw people passing by and I said use your body to help understand what they're doing, like if they're just looking at their phone as you're drawing them feel that thing of how their neck is down and they're looking at this phone and they're walking. Then the trick, the cool trick is everybody's nervous about drawing people especially drawing people like on the street, so you think you're trying to do a portrait of them, but then what I have them do is come back in, and trade pictures. They do it in a non-photo blue and I have them ink it, but they have to turn it into an animal. So instead of a person, a sorority girl looking at their phone, it's an alligator. Then they see why the feet are important because then there are alligator feet coming out of her capris, right?

Then see how you guys are laughing and you feel happy about it just thinking that? That's what I'm talking about, about this transferring of images that it's transformative. It transforms them (Figure 2). It doesn't stay. It's not transformative like, I don't know, a shooting star is transformative in the moment. It doesn't transform your whole life, but there is something about this transfer and I think that I've gotten more and more interested in that than anything else right now. So, the way it comes into my work is my students are now my comics. They're my page. They're my characters kind of having a life of their own. It's a wonderful to watch this thing because this very old thing that was there for them in the beginning is reborn.

Camden and Zullo: We were sitting here before we logged on today and one of the things that we were discussing is the point you've made that when you see the students draw, you can see when they stopped drawing as children. It's almost a gauge of the actual age that they were when they stopped. What you're describing now is that it gets opened up again and they get to develop again, but they're also back in touch with that childhood energy.

Barry: And it's important to have a mix of students. My favorite classes are with the people who didn't quit drawing mixed with the people who did. I say this a lot: that most people quit drawing at about the age of eight or nine when they realize they can't draw a nose or hands. That's it. They're washed up and they're living with a decision that they've made about themselves at about the age of 8 or 9. The beautiful thing about comics is comics leaps right over that problem. I mean you wouldn't want Charlie Brown with a hyper realistic nose. It would look like a horror movie.

Comics use the way that we're built as human beings to recognise upright faces, to recognise what mood they are in an instant, to recognise what the hands are doing because hands will tell us a lot about the mood somebody's in. This can be done with the smallest little lines. Also, what's beautiful about comics is you can't always control people: especially people who gave up drawing a long time ago cannot always control the expression of their character. Very interesting things happen. You know, they'll tilt an eyebrow a certain way. So, there's something about the people who draw being together with the people who quit drawing and copying each other's work that helps the people

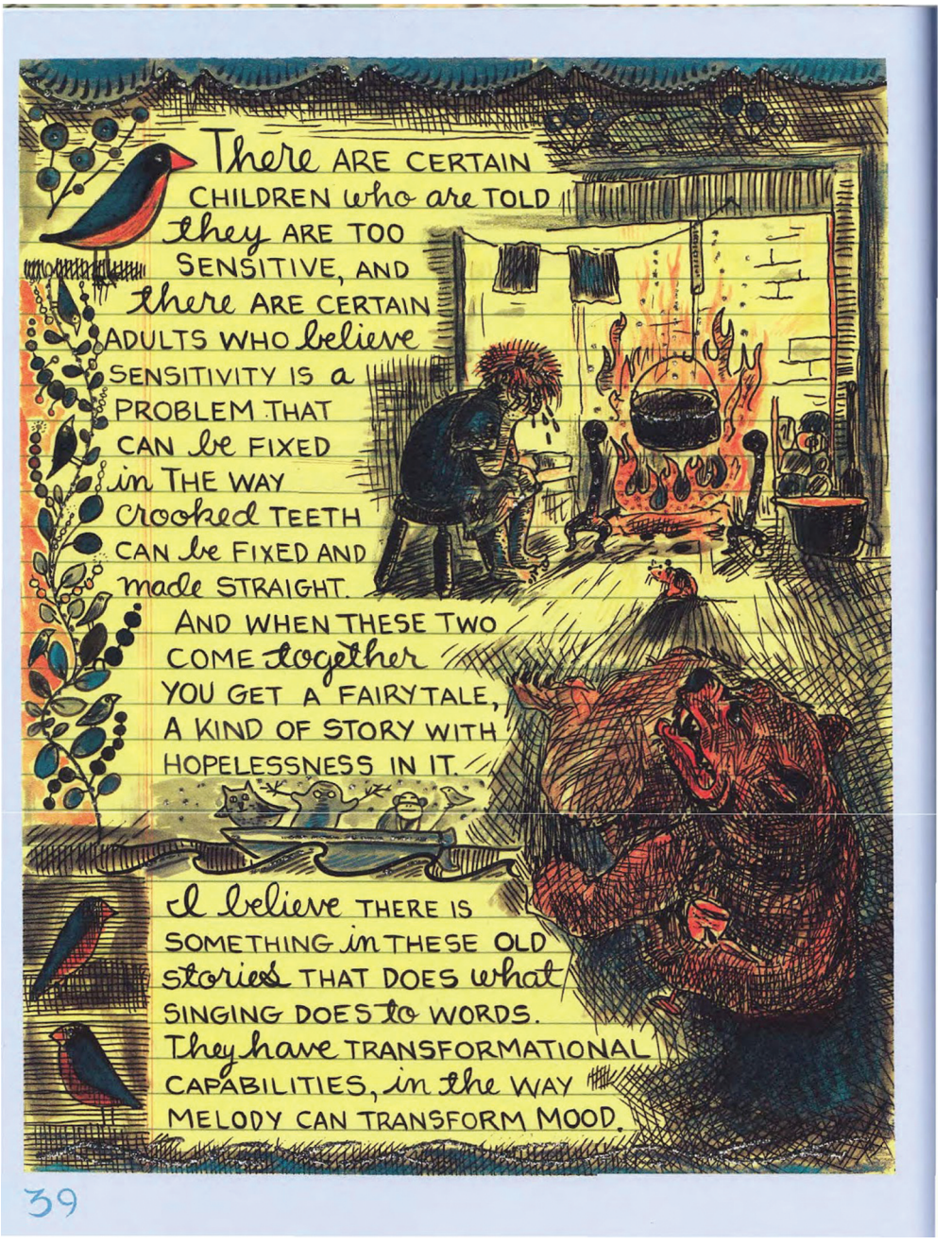

Figure 2. From What It Is, p. 39 by Lynda Barry. Reprinted with permission.

who kept drawing, too. Those people, their problem is they know what they can draw well and then they won't draw anything that they are worried about. So, the students who quit drawing can help them with that. They'll draw a bull in a way that you would never in a million years draw a bull looking up. There is one drawing that I saw, it was a bull and it

had to be looking up, but the bull's head was pointing down and they are just like 'what the hell' and they just put the eyeballs up there on top of the head! And it totally worked!

Camden and Zullo: That's great.

Barry: So, the kind of joy that you can tell I have as I'm talking about them is the joy I experience in my classroom.

Camden and Zullo: Well, it's contagious. It makes me think of Freud's essay on thought transference in which he describes cases that reveal the unspoken, unbidden communication that goes on outside of conscious intention.[2]

Child psychoanalysts often remark that what they are interested in, too, is helping children get back on track, developmentally. And even for an adult psychoanalyst, a patient may arrive at thirty-five years old, but developmentally in some ways they're still eight or nine. What we are linking back to is the public health concern of art you discuss in the *New York Times Magazine*[3] interview. One of our major public health concerns is getting people developmentally back on track.

Barry: Yes, absolutely. And it's not just that if someone quits drawing at the age of 8 or 9 that they can just start drawing again. It's not a free, wonderful experience because all the emotion and all the trouble can come right with it if you're teaching in a traditional way where you look at the drawing as a *thing*, rather than a *place* for an experience. That's the big split. One of the splits that happens is this: when little kids are drawing, the paper's a place for an experience, right? And the experience is always changing, like: 'I'm drawing a cooler. No, it's a house. No, it's a rocket.' As they go it changes. But in traditional teaching, there's some point when that place for an experience becomes a thing that we look at as if it's separate in the world and it's not as attached, and that thing is either good or it's bad.

One of the things in the teaching of students that I've found is to talk less about the work and instead we interact with the drawing physically. By that I mean I'll have students stand next to each other and I say, one of you is the leader and you're going to draw one half of a person and the other person is just following you. At first you think, there's no way it can work, but then we know we've all played the Ouija board and being able to spell out whatever we needed. You watch them sort of start to use each other's bodies the way four-year-olds do when they're acting a scene out.

The best thing, if you want to try this with your students is to have them close their eyes and draw for a minute. You tell them what to draw, but as you're doing it, you have to count down for them, you have to tell them, you'll have fifty more seconds, forty more seconds. So, what you're doing is making it so the experience is continuous. Then they don't get lost and want to open their eyes. I also always have them draw a bacon and egg breakfast with coffee and a napkin. So, everybody goes, 'Oh God, I don't know how I'm gonna do this.' I'll put a song on, and I'll count for them. Then everybody in the room

opens their eyes and they go mad because everybody can do it, right? I mean you really can't mess that up. So, they're like 'damn.' I say, 'hold your drawings up and show them!' Because that's the other critical thing, the drawings have to be (and I said, I don't care if *you* look at them) but the drawings need to be able to see each other. So, then they do that. Then after a while they're just behind the scenes and the drawings become the living art. Then I have them do the same thing, but this time draw a mermaid. I can tell you those drawings . . . when they open their eyes . . . everyone laughs their asses off because they look insane, but you can totally tell it's a mermaid and the same thing is true with anything with a silhouette, like The Statue of Liberty – but eyes closed. They're always amazing. You can tell it's the Statue of Liberty but they're also hilarious. That's comics.

And what happens is, in those moments, the mood of the room transforms instantly. It's such a good way to start a class. It's the same way I have people draw at first. They always have to do a three-minute drawing to take attendance in the class. Yesterday they had to draw themselves as an animal drawing somebody else who was an animal. They only have three minutes to do it. Then they show each other and there's just something that happens to the room when we do that. Also, I'm somebody who loves to start on time. I just can't take people wandering in, so they know that right at ten o'clock, they're going to start their drawing and that and the music's going to start and if they come in after that, they're late. Plus, they didn't get to draw themselves shooting out of a volcano or whatever.

I collect them all and then at the end of the semester, if I have time, I tape them all together so there is a giant accordion book made for each of them. And they get to see *not* how they improved – because I just don't believe in that – as much as how much things *change*: how they got more fluent.

Camden and Zullo: And more fluid, right?

Barry: There you go.

Camden and Zullo: There's a fluidity, it's a flow. Even the way you're describing it as an accordion is that there's a flow, and it's also like a dance. You know, when you were describing them drawing together, they're dancing together really. I mean you've obviously got to be right, that whole movement is liberating them from the rigidity, needless to say, of the majority of their classroom experiences.

Barry: I've sat in on a couple classes, big lecture classes not because I was so interested in the subject, but I wanted to see how students thought through them. So, I sat behind them and then just took notes on what everybody was doing. If you have screens, if you allow students to take notes on screens, they're everywhere but listening to the lecture. They're online, they're shopping. I actually got a good idea for a Halloween costume from the girl who was sitting in front of me shopping for her Halloween costume. I thought, 'oh, I'm going to go as that dinosaur.'

Then I time these lecture hall students. I try to time them to see how long before they even just minimally tune back in and it was so clear that their experience was fragmentary and because their experience was fragmentary, so was the teacher's. I mean, the teacher is trying to talk to these people that are tuning in and out. So, there are no screens in my class. I mean I have a screen, one, that we use together if I'm going to play something, but they can't, they can't even take their phones out in class.

Camden: You know, what you're saying about the lecture is also important, because on that unconscious level the transference for the lecturer is not happening. The transference of thought, I mean. There is a breakdown.

A creative writing professor once explained to me that students will often bring tremendously personal traumatic events into their poetry, but we don't address the actual content. We address the process of creating. That seems to me like what you were saying is you want the students to interact, you know, with the product that they're looking at, but you're not getting them to necessarily disclose all kinds of personal stuff, right?

Barry: Or worse, talk about the personal content of a story somebody wrote in eight minutes, where maybe I gave them the word 'nightgown.' So, in my classroom, there are sixteen different people that are writing down in ninety seconds all the memories they have about just that word. They then write these stories about these memories in eight minutes and I have them read them out loud. The rule in my class is you can't look at the person who is reading. You have to draw a spiral. Concentrate on the spiral. So, what you're practicing is listening and moving your hand, which is writing and drawing, right? You're listening and moving your hand. Then when the person is done, all I do is say, 'good.' Then I say, alright, you have three minutes to draw what you saw in that story and you must include a whole body, and then we show each other the drawings and that's it.

Camden and Zullo: They can go wherever they want to go internally, but the process of the classroom is this production of this page, this picture.

Barry: It starts to be a garden. I've said about, you know, the normal critique, that when I first started doing 'critiques' when I was in school, the only things I cared about really was saying something that would make my teacher think I was smart and get everyone else in the room to want to make out with me. That was like, that was it. While the critique was going on, all I was thinking was, okay here's my smart thing, 'say it,' and then afterwards I can't hear anything because I am looking around, 'did it work, did it work?'

I was telling my class yesterday, I said, 'you know, for me, it's sort of like asking to someone to go into the front of the room and just say, okay we're going to talk about

her leg right now. Her left leg. Everybody? Anybody? What do you want to say about it?' It's such a horrible idea. It doesn't get you very far. It doesn't get you very far in terms of the image world, in terms of this world that language can address. It's based on a different kind of language. I guess that's the beautiful thing about teaching for me is I have the students to help me understand this thing I've been fascinated with since my teacher asked me, when I was nineteen years old, the question that shaped my life, 'What is an image?' It still shapes my life. I'm still thinking about it, still chasing it now.

Also, what are characters? I always say to my students, 'Where's Scrooge? Where's Medusa? Where's Spider-Man?' One way to think about it is, what would it take to get rid of them?

Then you realise they are some place and we can't get rid of them unless there's total annihilation of the culture. Certainly characters who have been very important, critical characters, have been annihilated with cultures that have been decimated, but I think one of the joys of being somebody who creates characters is that one is born into a world full of them. I came from a difficult family, and so many people do, and this idea that there are all these characters waiting for you to become attached to them, it's incredible. It's like having these external organs or this external immune system. You can become very attached to Chewbacca or Heidi. Nobody teaches you how to do that, though. Little kids know how to attach to characters in the same way they know how to make their own character in a blanket. Nobody teaches them how to do that. I mean, it's pre-verbal. They know this thing. It's the first artwork, right? It's really this piece of cloth, but also, somehow now it contains a character that has everything to do with their well-being. So much so that the whole family recognises it.[4]

Camden and Zullo: If they're tuned in.

Barry: If they're a decent family, yes. Or they can recognize it enough to take it away. To be the mean witch.

Camden and Zullo: That's what we see too. The robbery.

Barry: Hostage taking! It is. It is hostage taking. Until you do this, this character that you love, you don't get them back. It always works, whether you're an adult or a little kid. I think comics is tied to all of this. You know, I think comics must be one of one of the oldest art forms (Figures 3 and 4).

Camden and Zullo: What you're pointing out too, developmentally, which is important to stress, is the pre-verbal aspect of image making.

Figure 3. From One! Hundred! Demons!, p.7 by Lynda Barry. Reprinted with permission.

Barry: It's the language that language is based on because people who feel like they can't draw, can't sing, can't dance will in fact do all of these things with a three-year-old, will totally do it with a two-year-old. If you say to them, well why? They'll say, 'oh well, they're not as judgmental.' I'm like, 'the hell they aren't!' Give them the wrong color mug, you know.

It's because it's the language that works. It's a native language. It's the first language and people just know how to do it and they do it instinctively. Sometimes, I'll see a grumpy old dude at the airport with his godchild or his grandchild cooing and dancing and I just want to take the baby and just see the guy continue to dance. It's interesting how we have a tacit understanding or recognition of the connection between that use of images or playing and mental health. This is something I say to my students, if you know a four-year-old and they're terrified of drawing, like terrified, you're worried about them. If they're forty and they're terrified?

Camden and Zullo: Well, that is typical!

Barry: What happened? That's another question I have is, how old do you have to be to make a bad drawing? Can a three-year-old make a bad drawing? seven? Like at what point are you old enough to say sorry, that's bad. It's odd, isn't it?

Camden: I remember the moment and I can still see the teacher!

Figure 4. From Making Comics, p. 18 by Lynda Barry. Reprinted with permission.

Barry: This is the thing. That's the part that's so heartbreaking because teachers saved my life, but they also really can cause terrible harm (Figures 5 and 6). Almost everybody does have that story of – it's usually an art teacher or somebody who was trying to teach art, who said something that managed to shut down a lifetime of making images, what had

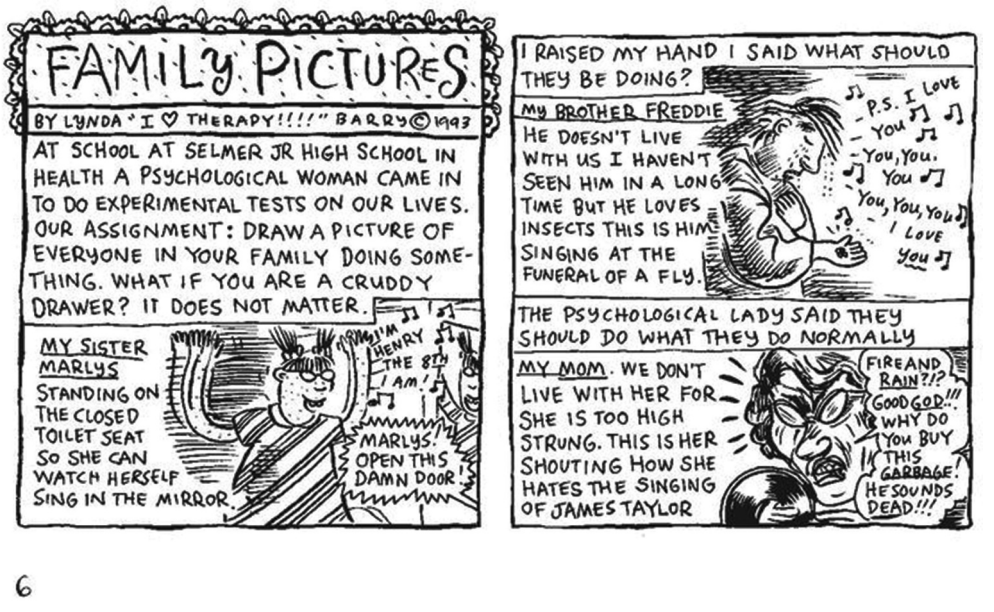

Figure 5. From *It's so Magic*, p. 6 by Lynda Barry Reprinted with permission.

Figure 6. From *It's so Magic*, p. 7 by Lynda Barry Reprinted with permission.

been a lifetime of making and working with images that stops on that day. And then you think about how for those kids what happened was on one day, but the next day it was still there when you went back, that shadow was still there and then you carry it with you

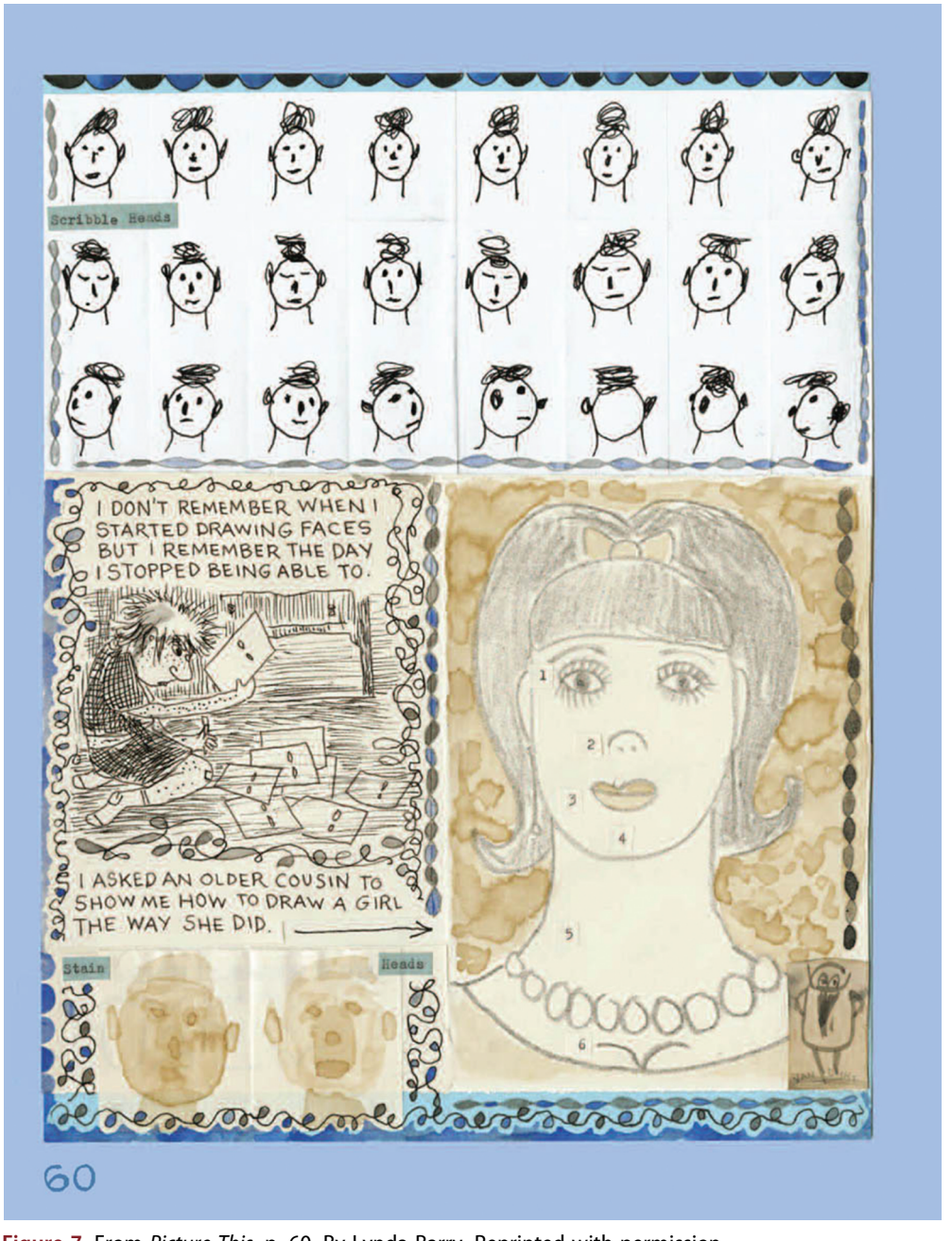

Figure 7. From *Picture This,* p. 60. By Lynda Barry. Reprinted with permission.

(Figures 7 and 8). My husband and I talk about this all the time, like how often I'll find myself during the days trying to explain something that I did when I was eight you know, like in my head to Miss Connors, look, I'm sorry I did that.

Figure 8. From Making Comics, p. 15 by Lynda Barry. Reprinted with permission.

Camden and Zullo: So important. Also, you were mentioning dreams, do you work with dreams in your own creative process? Are you aware of dreams or working with them in some way?

Barry: I am aware of them and fascinated, deeply fascinated by them. I'm unfortunately somebody who doesn't remember my dreams very often. During the pandemic when we were really restricted as to where we could go, though, I couldn't get over how in the night when I was sleeping, I got to go places and see people. I mean it was just unbelievable. I couldn't go to the grocery store without like full PPE, but I could go to sleep and be on a cruise ship trying to pack! The dreams that in the past would've been irritating to me were now like, I saw somebody wearing a coral-colored dress! But I think that images are the shared currency of both worlds – the dream world and our waking world.

Camden and Zullo: You said there are dreams that would irritate you. What were those?

Barry: Unluckily, I have dreams that repeat. It's sort of like having a song stuck in your head. I'll have dreams where it's just packing. Packing, packing, packing. It's usually to get on a train. I did graduate to packing on a cruise ship. So that was very exciting. Still packing but at least it was on a ship. That's what I mean. I think if I can dream anything, it's not why am I dreaming packing, there's probably a thousand reasons I'm packing, it's just so disappointing to do the same thing. It's like somebody who can go to this buffet and my right hand can choose anything it wants, except for somehow it becomes paralyzed, and my left hand always picks bologna sandwich. Like no matter what.

Camden and Zullo: Another question we had in relation to comics is that in the current upsurge in comics creation the stories often revolve around political or personal trauma. You certainly capture that exquisitely in *One! Hundred! Demons!* Nobody plans this, though, right? We wonder if you have some thoughts about that.

Barry: I wonder. Well, in pop culture memoir, that's also true, isn't it?

Camden and Zullo: Yes.

Barry: I just read one of the books I told myself I'm not going to read, but I just had to: *I'm Glad My Mom Died*. I was curious about, one how she was going to do it and then also, was there going to be any weight in there? I was just so curious about it. I feel like many memoirs can be about trauma or a lot about sexual abuse and then like you were saying political stuff. Have you read Kate Beaton's book *Ducks*?

Camden and Zullo: Yes! She's one of the people we also want to interview.

Barry: I hope you will because what she's describing is – so it's a political issue in that it's, environmental destruction – the circumstance surrounding all these people up in the oil fields sort of living together in these very constrained situations. Without her taking a hammer to your head about it, she also describes a kind of environmental destruction that's of the psyche. That's what happens to people. She also gives everyone, even the kind of people that it'd be easy to just dismiss, she gives everyone a fair shake. It's one of the most extraordinary – I mean, it's right up there with *Kent State* you just realize you're looking at a master work.[5]

The thing that I'm, in fact, more interested in with comics is what happens when what you're doing with drawing is done on, say, an Ipad that has a step backwards function, or where it's not real handwriting anymore (or I don't think it's real). It's typed, but it's like a font. I'm curious about the loss of hands and loss of the kinds of happy, interesting mistakes that happen when you're dealing with three dimensional materials. Real paper. I can't help but believe that that stuff affects what kinds of stories we're going to get in here.

Camden and Zullo: What's so interesting about many earlier comics is how visible the revisions and edits are on the pages. *Binky Brown* comes to mind.

Barry: Well, think about it. I have my students write by hand and what they find by the end, well not even before the end of the semester, is that it's faster to write a story by hand in eight minutes than it is to type a story because when you're typing the story and you have that option to go back, you have the option to cut and paste, the thing already looks finished. It visually looks finished as you're typing and it doesn't allow you to know that while you're writing something, there's always a moment where what you're writing sort of takes a breath or stops for a little bit. I say, if the story stops just write tick, tick, tick, tick, keep your hand in motion and then the story will start again. But what happens if you're doing it on the computer and you stop? What people do is they start to read it over from the top and start messing with things that don't need to be messed with. So, by the time the story wants to come back to you, there's no place to go, you've lost your place. I think that writing by hand is so much more like speaking – like I can't take back or cut and paste what I've just said to you. In fact, if we did have the text that we were writing on a computer, if we had it vocalized, and it included all the stops and the starts, it'd sound completely crazy right? There's this point where it is no longer completely attached to speech. And if you're making comics and you're writing people speaking, having that type and take away the type and delete and paste makes it so much less like speaking. Like the weird subtleties of speaking are no longer there. That's my feeling about it and it makes me sad.

Camden: E. M. Forster, who famously said 'only connect' wrote a very weird, prescient short story, 'The Machine Stops' (1909) about people who lived underground, in small spaces who could never leave their minds and communicated only via technology. He saw it coming.

Barry: And you won't notice it. You'll notice something's kind of wrong.

Speaking of prescient, that interview you all did with Derf which was done in the spring of 2020 about 1970! And the only difference is there aren't the riots in the streets. Then sixty days later . . . When I was reading it, the hairs just stood up on the back of my neck.

Camden and Zullo: Yes, sadly, the finger on the pulse.

Barry: Well, but those protests were the thing that lifted my heart the most, because I just felt like we were in in crisis and to see people take to the streets in the kinds of numbers and the variety of ways that they did – like in Portland, the silent march, that just went on forever, it was just people walking silently – those things made me feel like there were many of us who were deeply disturbed by what was going, on what happened with George Floyd. There were many, many, many of us, you know, and I think it completely connected to the election. It lifted my heart as well as gave me PTSD.

Camden and Zullo: It's bodies on screen, again. We all were so deep in Zoom at that time, and all of a sudden, all these bodies were appearing on screen again.

And speaking of hair raising: the other person's work we are very taken with right now is Nick Drnaso.

Barry: There's power there. There's immense power in that it is so painful. I mean, it's the closest thing I can imagine to getting the bends, you know, when you come up if you're a scuba diver and they have to put you in that chamber that helps equalize stuff. I mean his work is so powerful. It's not even sad. It's not sad. I mean, it's sad, it's terribly sad, but it's something more than that. It's like being crushed.

Camden: One of the things that I felt with *Sabrina*, is my heart started beating. I started getting afraid.

Barry: He somehow makes that transfer and when you look at his drawings, it's hard to see how.

Camden: Talk about not drawing noses!

Barry: Right? These little marks for eyes. Then you realize it's the environment. Even if the room looks like there's not much going on with fluorescent lighting, somebody walking through, there's that ominous feeling and not ominous the way Hitchcock gives it to you where it's ominous with blood and darkness and all this stuff can happen. This is solitary confinement.

Camden and Zullo: You have the bends is the perfect metaphor – or solitary confinement, too is a perfect description of Drnaso's work. Before we forget, when you said that you use music, may we ask what music you play? Or does it just depend on what you wake up with in the morning?

Barry: No, I make a playlist for every semester. I can send you the link if you like. My students become very attached to the playlist and only a few songs make it to the next semester. It's stuff that's mostly non-English. Right now I'm in a heavy Brazil phase. But I can tell you, there's a website called radio, but there's five O's, so it's radiooooo. It was developed by this woman in France so that music lovers all over the world can upload their most interesting stuff. So, when you go to the website what you'll see is a map of the world and then there are these little tabs, and they'll say 1910, 1920, 1930. So, you can click on Brazil, then you click on 1930. Music from Brazil in 1930. You can get playing the craziest music from Estonia in 1970, but you can just click a link and just have Hawaiian music from 1940 playing. I find a lot of fantastic music there. I love that station, and you can get it on your phone so that when you're driving to work, it's like I'm feeling kind of Havana in 1970.

I want to say one more thing about music and why I use a song. Because people can feel, the beginning of the song, they can kind of feel where the bridge is or the centre, and they can sort of feel when it's ending. So, if you're making a drawing that's three minutes, you can tell where you are in the drawing by where you are in the song. And because one of the things that happens when we're working with images is our sense of time, it's beautiful, but our sense of time goes right out the window. You have a hard time. It's like falling in love a little bit. You have a hard time telling how long you've been drawing or how much time you have left.

Camden: So, the other thing I was thinking about that comes from *One! Hundred! Demons!*, I suppose, is your influence from your mother who was from the Philippines. I resonate with Southeast Asia. Is that connection, for you, a conscious part of your repertoire?

Barry: Being Filipino is one of my happiest things. My mom is the only one on her side of the family that married a white guy. My dad left early on, but I grew up in an extended Filipino family. My brothers and I, when you look at family portraits, we always look like the white kids from next door that dropped in. But I grew up completely that way. I'm only a quarter Filipino though. My mom had a white dad and he died right before World War II. So, she was half American, half Filipino and during the Japanese invasion, their

whole family lived in hiding for all four years. That's the thing about war, what's wild is, when people go, 'how long will this war last?' it's like, 'uh, several generations.' So, all of them, all of her brothers and sisters had some mental problems. They had some real damage from that. Somehow, my grandma, although she was not very kind to her own children, she was a wonderful grandma. She was, I mean, for all of us. She's our Statue of Liberty. It's also funny because I don't look Filipino at all, but I can spot a Filipino or even a partial Filipino anywhere and then what I've realized is I can't just go up and be like do you speak Filipino? I go, yeah, my grandma is from Iloilo. And then we'll talk about it, but I always get super excited when I meet another Filipino.

Camden and Zullo: Yet you cannot just regale a perfect stranger!

Barry: It's sort of like going up to a kid and saying, 'want to talk about your transitional object? I noticed you have. Hulk doll!'

Camden and Zullo: But that cultural amalgamation, as it were, has contributed to your capacity to be so inclusive.

Barry: Even just with the face, the eyebrows like blinking with your lips. Also growing up in a family like a lot of immigrants' kids, my cousins and I understand a lot of Tagalog. We don't speak it very well, but to be in a family where there were two languages going on at all times, and then that sort of middle language of somebody for whom English is their second language. So, there's some middle part there and I feel like that, that got me interested in how people speak, I think (Figure 9).

Camden: And then there's emotional registers that are correlated to that.

Barry: You bet.

Camden: So interesting!

Barry: I have to ask, what is it?[6] I've been doing it for so long it's hard to imagine.

Camden: Well, you talk about it. The way comics stirs the dead hours inside of us. That's what it is. You talk about it to when you say you don't want to let go of the book when you have finished reading it. You want to hold it. Because something happened. You attach to that that that feeling, and you don't want to let it go.

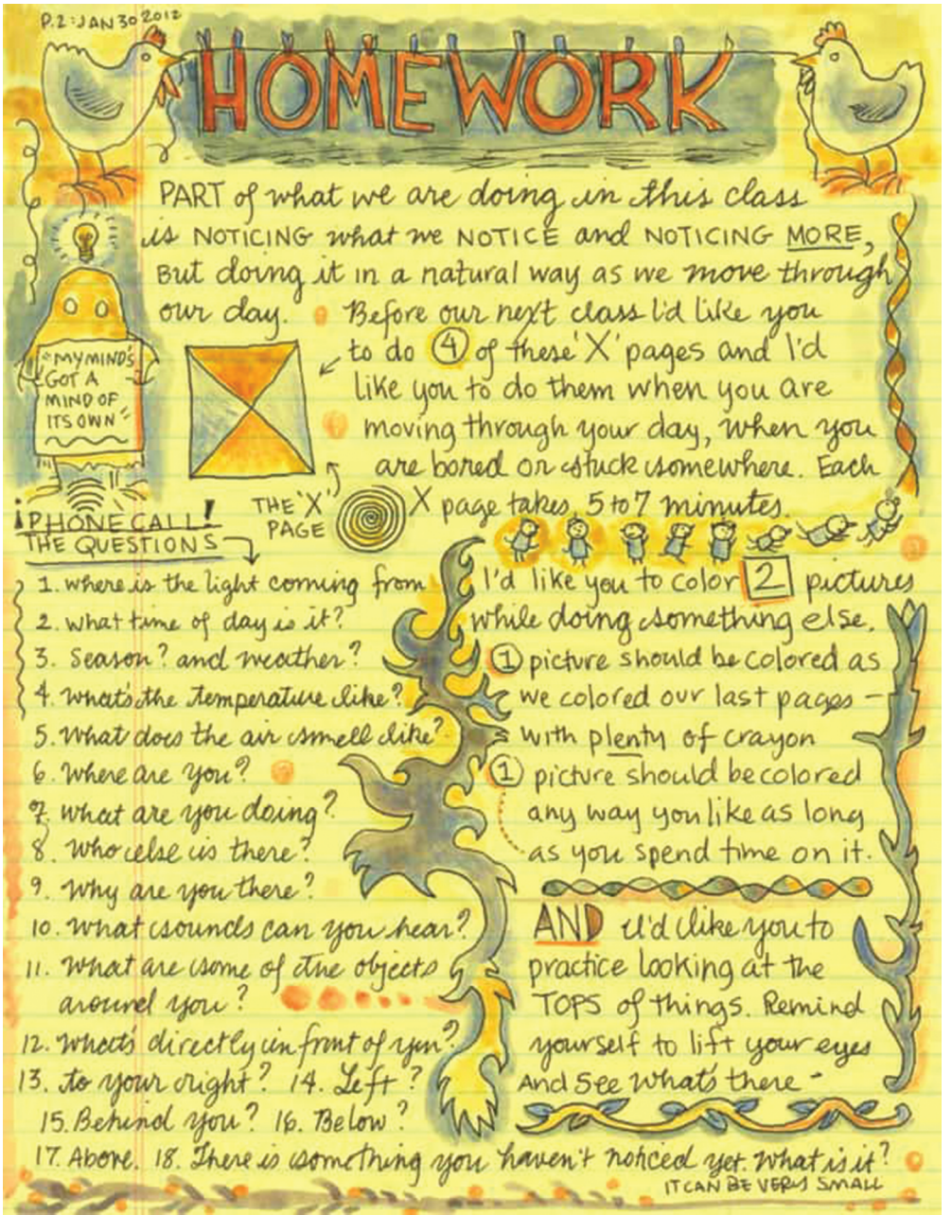

Figure 9. From *Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor*, p. 93 by Lynda Barry. Reprinted with permission.

Barry: You just said something when you talked about the book. I feel like this is a missing piece for me because you know what I'm talking about when a blanket that goes from being a cloth blanket to one that contains a character, something happened.

Like the baby discovering its hand, something happened so that that connection or relationship got made. I don't know why, that phrase, when you said 'something happened' it just glowed like neon. It's something that happened. I mean, it's a clue to this whole thing of chasing down images, you know, something happened. Where did it happen? Like with the baby and the blanket, something happened so that that blanket became more than the blanket.

Camden and Zullo: And the book becomes more than the book because it becomes part of me.

Barry: Yes, but I don't know, are we aware? Again, I go back to falling in love – that weird phenomenon. One of the things that I ask my students is to think of the initials of the first person that they can remember being in love with. And then I have them say it out loud. Then I'll say, now your crush from three crushes ago. You can see everybody's like: was it the barista? But that thing, there's that wild thing where that somebody that you see just somehow . . . something happened. I just love this. I don't know why. This is my, this is my clue: something happened. Yes, it's something that happened, that changes . . .

Camden: Everything.

Barry: Everything except for you don't necessarily know until it's happened until after. I don't know. And then that gets back to unconscious processing or whatever else we want to call it, which is this something that's so fascinating.

Camden: Well, it is the power of the unconscious that we barely tap into, but artists do more.

Barry: Although it's totally tapped into us.

Zullo: Yes. I also want to add, when we say something happened, I think it's the space which gets created This morning I was thinking about your work and asking myself if there is a cat in *What It Is* and then I thought I'm just going to put a cat in there in my memory even if there is not a cat. There's something about your work that you open things up for us to put things in there – like the child with the blanket – while others, as we said with *Sabrina*, close down for another purpose, and we are in solitary confinement. That's the something that happens for me, the way those spaces open and close between us and the comic, and the way it acts on us, too.

Barry: There is a cat! And in fact, I've changed my name every semester. My students go, 'You must pick a class name. You can't use your real name.' And one way that I utilize that is I'll have somebody say their name is Julia, but they go by 'The Groke.' So, Julia will say, 'I have trouble drawing somebody who's sitting down.' And I'll say, 'You do, but the Groke has no trouble doing that.' So, changing into this newly named character does open up space for students and for me. My professor name, this semester, is Professor Cats, the Musical.

Camden and Zullo: That's great!

Barry: Well, it's only because I was watching the musical that everybody hates! And I said, 'how could Judi Dench be bad?' But it turns out all you have to do is have a friend come over and give you a gummy and then while you're watching it, you'll turn to them and go, 'Why do people hate this movie?'

Camden and Zullo: We also want to ask, what are you reading?

Barry: What I'm reading now is Iain McGilchrist's new book *The Matter with Things*. Do you know Iain McGilchrist's work? He's an interesting fellow. He studied poetry and literature at Oxford, and he became very interested in images and then shifted and became a medical doctor. His interest is in hemispheric differences of the brain and why the brain is divided. Also, it goes right back to those experiments – well they weren't experiments – but the things that were done for people with intractable epilepsy in I think it was Caltech in the 1960s where Roger Sperry and Michael Gazzaniga severed the corpus callosum between the hemispheres and it did help the people with intractable epilepsy.[7] It helped calm the storms. But one of the most interesting things that they were able to observe was the different parts of the body started acting independently. One woman talked about when she recovered from surgery, she was going to get dressed and she went to pick out the uniform she was supposed to wear in this hand and she picked out a completely different outfit in the other hand and wouldn't let go. People talk about previously smoking with this hand now would knock the cigarette out. There were tasks that could be done with the right hand, spatial arrangements like just arranging blocks couldn't be done with the right hand could be instantly done with the left hand. When both hands were allowed to do it they fought. There was something when I first started to read his work, there was something I recognized. Like, recognized as the states of mind that in my class I call the top of the mind and the back of the mind. His work is fascinating.

His first book is called *The Master and His Emissary*, which is all about, again, hemispheric differences of the brain and why does only one side have speech? Right? The left hemisphere is the Broca's area and the Wernicke's area and so what are the differences and why are our brains divided also in fish and birds? It's all about the

different ways that people use imagery and it's been the most illuminating work that I found in terms of me being able to study the nature of images.

Camden: That's high praise. When you were talking about it, I noticed the gesture you use was the same one you were using describing your dreams. You know, the one you were saying you know I have this smorgasbord over here, but I always reach for the same bologna sandwich.

Barry: Same bologna sandwich. Exactly. You know, what I thought about that when I was doing that is Ramachandran's work.[8] You know who he is?

Camden and Zullo: Yes.

Barry: With the mirror box.

Camden and Zullo: What kinds of comics are you reading? You've already mentioned Beaton and Drnaso.

Barry: I just read *Rolling Blackouts*. I read *Grass* where the artist uses ink for the parts that are kind of unspeakable or unseeable. Tom Gauld has a new book called *Revenge of the Librarians*. It's a collection of his stuff that's been in the *Guardian*. I just ordered *Trashed* because of your interview, it's a Derf Backderf book I hadn't read. I order all kinds of books all the time and then I put them in my comics library in my classroom. We have this enormous library and I have reason to read everything.

Camden and Zullo: You get the same classroom all the time, that's really nice.

Barry: There was a fascinating thing that happened. So, my classroom used to be the art ed classroom. I inherited the classroom and there were flat files in it. I pulled this drawer open and found eighty-eight large tempura children's drawings. You could tell that they were not pictures of America. They showed scenes that looked like celebrations and I didn't know what they were, but my students were fascinated by them. There was some writing on the back, but we couldn't tell what it was. It looked Greek. We didn't know. Anyway, I put my graduate students on it, and it turned out that these drawings – we never found out how they got to the university – but they were from Cyprus before the Turkish invasion, which happened in 1974. They're from this area, and people just like now in Ukraine, had to leave with only the shirts on their backs. This area is still in dispute between Cyprus and Turkey and so everything basically is as it was in 1974. The airport, mannequins in the store

windows, nobody's there. We were able to find a Cypriot living in Madison, and after some digging, we were able to reunite these people with these childhood paintings!

Camden and Zullo: Wow.

Barry: And one of the women Cypriots that we found, her mom was one of the people who had to flee when the Turkish invaded. She went on the radio to talk about finding these paintings, and they got a call. And it was this woman's mother who said, 'did they find my oven painting?' And, sure enough we did. It was a painting she made when she was a little girl of *her* mother putting some bread in the oven. She says: 'look at her, I remember I painted her singing and there I painted myself.' Sure enough, we had that painting. So, these images, even though we never found out how they got there, we were able to reunite them and now they're part of Cypriot history and the kids who are coming up see them. That's what I mean, the power of these pictures found their way home.

It's wild! It's wild to think that these pictures are that alive, that they got us to act, in a way, and got the people in Cyprus to act. They talked, just talked about people just weeping because they thought they had nothing. And now they have their pictures.

Camden and Zullo: Were the drawings protected in any way?

Barry: Well these they were actually destined for the dumpster. So, there was no protection at all. They happened to be at the bottom of the file drawers, and I happened to recognize them, to see them.

Camden and Zullo: So, you were the angel of the archives.

Barry: I was, or my students were too because everybody just went crazy when they saw them. That's the part that I think is miraculous.

Anyway, if you have any other follow up questions, look out, because I'll talk to you for about three hours!

Camden and Zullo: This has been a thrill.

Barry: I've looked forward to this. And I really, really enjoyed speaking with you, very much!

Camden and Zullo: That's so nice. Thank you so much.

Barry: My pleasure. Peace.

Notes

1. See Vera J. Camden and Valentino L. Zullo, '"My claim to fame is footnotes": an interview with Derf Backderf,' *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 12, no. 4 (2021): 281–297 and '"History is not over; we are made of it": an interview with Nora Krug,' *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (2022): 1–15.
2. See for example, Sigmund Freud, 'Psycho-analysis and Telepathy' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 18 (1921):173–94.
3. See David Marchese, 'A Genius Cartoonist Believes Child's Play Is Anything But Frivolous,' *The New York Times Magazine* September 2, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/09/05/magazine/lynda-barry-interview.html
4. See D. W. Winnicott, 'Transitional objects and transitional phenomena – a study of the first not-me possession.' *International journal of psycho-analysis* 34 (1953): 89–97.
5. See '"My claim to fame is footnotes": an interview with Derf Backderf,' *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 12, no. 4 (2021): 281–297.
6. See also, *What it Is*, where Barry explores the question, what is an image? Do we need the ref
7. For a discussion of this work and its history, see Michael S Gazzaniga, 'Forty-five years of split-brain research and still going strong,' *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 6, no. 8 (2005): 653–659.
8. Vilayanur Subramanian Ramachandran is an Indian-American neuroscientist known especially for his invention of the mirror box, invented for post-amputation patients to address phantom limb syndrome.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).