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Double Trajectories: Crossing Lines in *Fun Home*

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Fun Home is a study in skepticism: from the title itself, the reader must question her/his assumptions and learn to distrust appearances. That is the lesson taught as early as the first chapter. There is a deeper, equivocal truth to be probed behind a deceptively unified front.

This could serve as a metaphor for human relations, and more particularly the father-and-daughter relationship, in *Fun Home*. Behind the decorative façade of their home, the Bechdel family is soon presented as dysfunctional. However, one should be suspicious of such a unifying reading of an essentially deconstructed plot. The dislocation of the composition—or rather, the re-composition at work in *Fun Home*—purports to let an invisible “network of transversals” (102) emerge. In what follows I would like to combine two key notions: on the one hand the duplicating gesture implied in the very nature of this autobiographical work and, on the other, the fact that this gesture must be understood as a process—as opposed to a given, a static fact. In this respect, the concept of motion comes as an apt metaphor to highlight the imperfect nature of such a gesture while carrying its own prolific network of connotations.

Consequently, I will use “trajectories” as a central paradigm to account for the proliferating paradoxes that underlie the work and the plot. Starting from the reader’s point of view, this paper purports to show that, in the very process of reading, words and images meet and at times collide. Collision seems to be also the

only way bodies interact in the enclosed family “circle.” Combining these two aspects together, I will conclude that, in the rewriting of her own “family tragicomic,” Alison Bechdel manages an aesthetic family reunion precisely through the circulation of words and images.

Words and images: collusion and collision

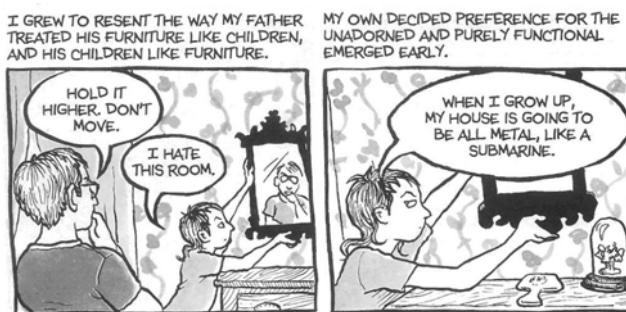
To read a graphic novel is to follow a double narrative line, one pictorial and the other textual. On closer inspection, in *Fun Home* this “double line” turns out to be two independent lines that are juxtaposed, playing at times side by side and on several occasions against one another. I would like to show here that text and images actually converge up to a point where they collide: this is what I call “crossing lines.”

Admittedly, in a graphic novel, the text enters a picture in order to collaborate with its narrative content. Let us consider the arrowed balloons with which Alison Bechdel elucidates the ambiguities of pictures, or a dimension they fail to express. On page 103, for example, the text is used to convey olfactory information that a pictorial representation is at pains to convey (more particularly, the realm of the senses: food is often accompanied by one of these “information signs”). Thus envisaged, words seem to be “posted” to indicate a limitation of the suggestive power of images, they point to the irretrievable loss of a representational system relying on the reflection of mere surfaces. This elicits the sense of a missing dimension, one which words only can reach, because their superimposition on pictures invites the beholder to take a second look at them. As mentioned earlier, the first chapter of *Fun Home* is entirely devoted to the description of the deceptive aspect of façades, and, as appearances, images fall prey to the same critique. A tragic truth often runs deep beneath the opacity of such screens, which need to be watched closely, “read” as it were and not simply looked at. For instance, the picture of James Joyce’s children is reproduced (231) with a caption that informs the reader of their unfortunate personal trajectories. Re-reading *Fun Home*, i.e. having a second look with the benefit of hindsight, one cannot but notice a similar panel representing Alison and Christian at a very early age (18). The text only establishes their respective ages and identities, ominously

suspending their future destinies, which the rest of the book discontinuously deals with. Indeed, some scars, beyond the suspended time of fixed images, never heal—as another arrowed balloon indicates on page 21 (“Permanent linoleum scar”).

The interaction between text and images therefore generates meaning, suggesting the complexity of such a memory work as *Fun Home*. Sometimes though, words and pictures tend to be loosely interwoven as if each followed its own train of thought, its own mnemonic stream. See for instance the image on page 141 where young Alison is represented making popcorn while the narrative voice elaborates on the manifestations of her obsessive compulsive disorder. The accompanying text precisely questions the (re)liability of writing. As a matter of fact, the very moment when the written narrative contained in the child’s diary is acknowledged as doubtful corresponds to the appearance of a drawing on the same page (184). The explicit self-disavowal of the narrator’s voice elucidates the implicitly deceptive void of the diary entry. The drawing becomes then, not a signifier, but a symptom, obliquely saying what it does not represent; it becomes “decorative,” similar to the father’s ornaments.

Drawings therefore become decorative panels, of which one should be suspicious. The best example of this is the father’s tomb represented as a frontispiece to Chapter 2 (25), where the visual representation of flowers (associated by young Alison with her father’s effeminacy) literally blocks the name of the father. The imaginary order is thus superimposed on the symbolic order and, as a result, the law represented by the name of the father cannot be clearly stated. Consequently one may say that the father is figuratively castrated. In a reversed instance, words pronounced by Alison literally screen off the reflection of her father’s face in the mirror she is holding (14).



She thereby obliterates the visual self-representation that he is trying to create with his own “interior” decoration. In other words, she disrupts the ideal image of the self that a mirror constructs for the psyche by restating her own voice, her own command of the symbolic order. As such, the rebellion against patriarchal authority assumes the form of authorship (“When I grow up, . . .”). The book the reader is faced with testifies to this reaction against paternal design: a command of both textual and visual levels, a re-ordering of her own family romance into a genre of its own—a graphic family tragic-comic.

(E)motion and desire: contact and impact

The clashing convergence of the narrative lines is matched by the contradiction within the father’s psyche. It is essentially conflicted between his fixations: on the one hand, his obsessive control of the “order of things” (18), his insistence that everything should be in its place, and, on the other, his desire which is never where it is supposed to be. His desire for objects creates but stasis (and represents social status) whereas the objects of his desire engage mobility. No wonder then that he died hit by a truck—killed by the speed of others and his own slowness.

This peculiar tension accounts for the “narrow compass” of his life (30-31) in spite of his formative years spent in Europe (when, one supposes, his desire for his wife-to-be is only increased by her absence). Even his childhood anecdote tells the tale of his incapacity to follow his desire: always attracted to masculine ascension (formalized by the figure of Dedalus in chapter 1 and later in his adult life by the obelisks he collects, on page 29), he is stuck in his native land, bogged down in the female sphere. Maternal symbols abound in this provincial folk tale: in the imaginary (i.e. visual) transcription of the oral story, the postman becomes a *milkman* and the boy is returned to his mother who puts him in the womb-like oven.

The tension between a tendency to depart from the origin and an inescapable propensity to come back to it justifies the circularity of the map of his life (30), and is echoed throughout the book (most emblematically on the cover of a book he reads,

The Worm Ouroboros, page 117). It also illustrates the father's incapacity to choose one of the two ways that Proust defines as life choices, as summed up by the narrator:

In one of Proust's sweeping metaphors, 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. (102)

One of these contradictions is also that, although he never goes anywhere since he always comes back, the pictures of him in a car are innumerable (47, 73-4, 126, 199, etc.).

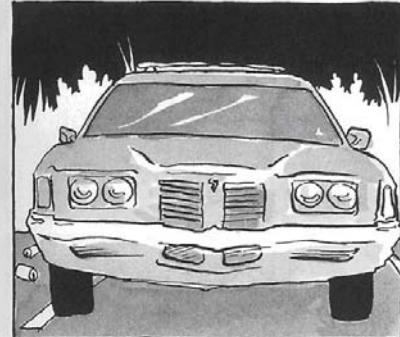


ON THURSDAY AT DUSK, HE'D DRIVEN OVER TO THE NEXT VALLEY. I KNOW THIS BECAUSE I LOOKED IT UP IN THE POLICE REPORT TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS LATER.

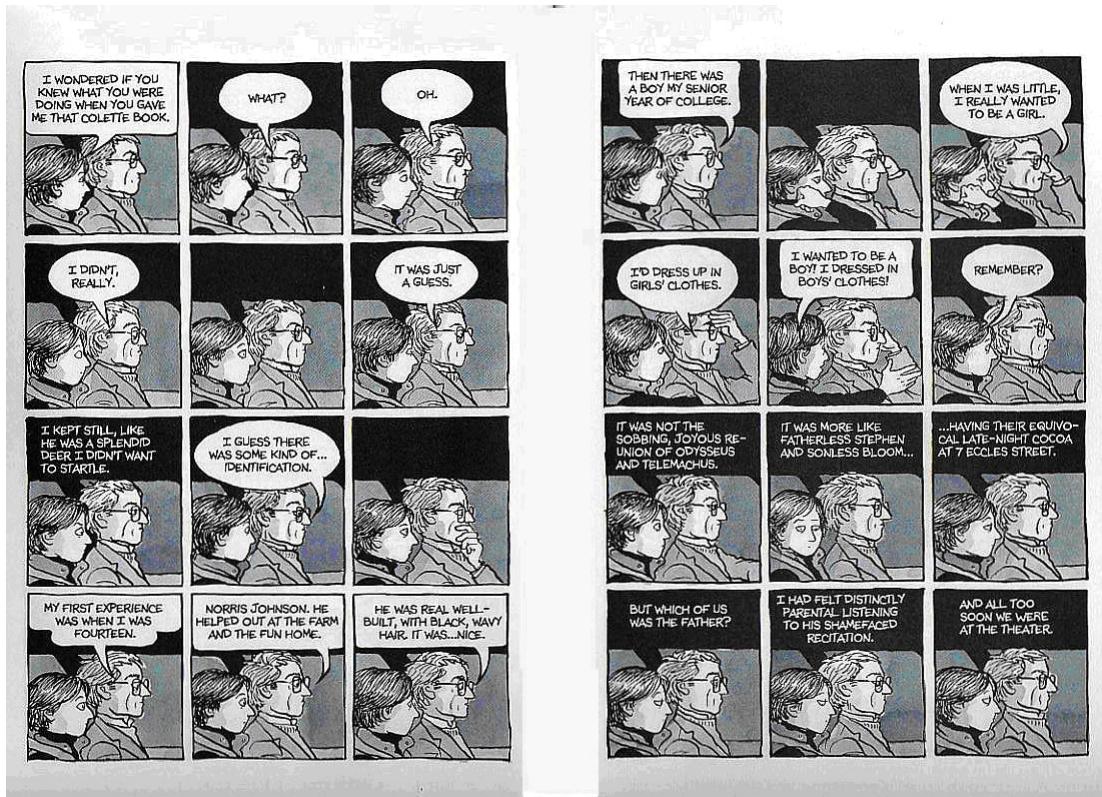
5¢ firm, 75¢ per additional page 10¢cts each mile Mr. Rep Commitment \$2.50 Pending Search Warrant \$1.00 Fare 10¢cts each mile		Mark Douglas Walsh, Booneville, Penna., witness for the Commonwealth, testified under oath that on June 20, 1974, between the hours of 9PM and 10PM he saw Bruce Allen Bechdel, with whom he was acquainted. Mr. Bechdel asked him where his brother David was and that he got in the car with Mr. Bechdel and they went to look for his brother. During the course of the evening, defendant purchased a six-pack of beer. Witness stated that Mr. Bechdel offered him a beer and he took it and drank it. Mr. Bechdel asked him what he did and what his brother was doing at that time. He then let him off in the vicinity of his home. Witness testified that at the time of this incident he was seventeen years old and that he told Mr. Bechdel his age.
Constable Costs		
WITNESSES 50¢cts per day		
5¢cts per mile each way Witnesses Costs		
Total Costs	\$ 13.00	

THEY NEVER DID FIND MARK'S OLDER BROTHER, DAVE.

HE'D BEEN AT HOME ALL NIGHT, AND WHEN DAD DROPPED MARK OFF, DAVE RECOGNIZED THE CAR AND CALLED THE COPS.



Of particular relevance here is the association of the car with his illicit pleasures (161) and with his final confession (220-221).



In that last instance, the mobility suggested by the car is counteracted by the quasi-fixity of the images. Furthermore, all three voices (the narrative voice and the dialogue between the characters) reach dead ends, despite their diverging nature. The circle here is not hermeneutical, not even vicious—it suggests Proust's *temps perdu*: “not just lost but also ruined, undone, wasted, wrecked, and spoiled” (119). The vanity of an existence that never comes to the critical point of a decision (etymologically, *krisis* means “decision”) is encapsulated in the very vehicle the father drives: a hearse (117-119). Even his death, which is only assumed by Alison to be suicide, never reaches the existential status of an act of will. The father died an “absurd” death, as he had lived an absurd life caught in a Sisyphean circle (48-49).

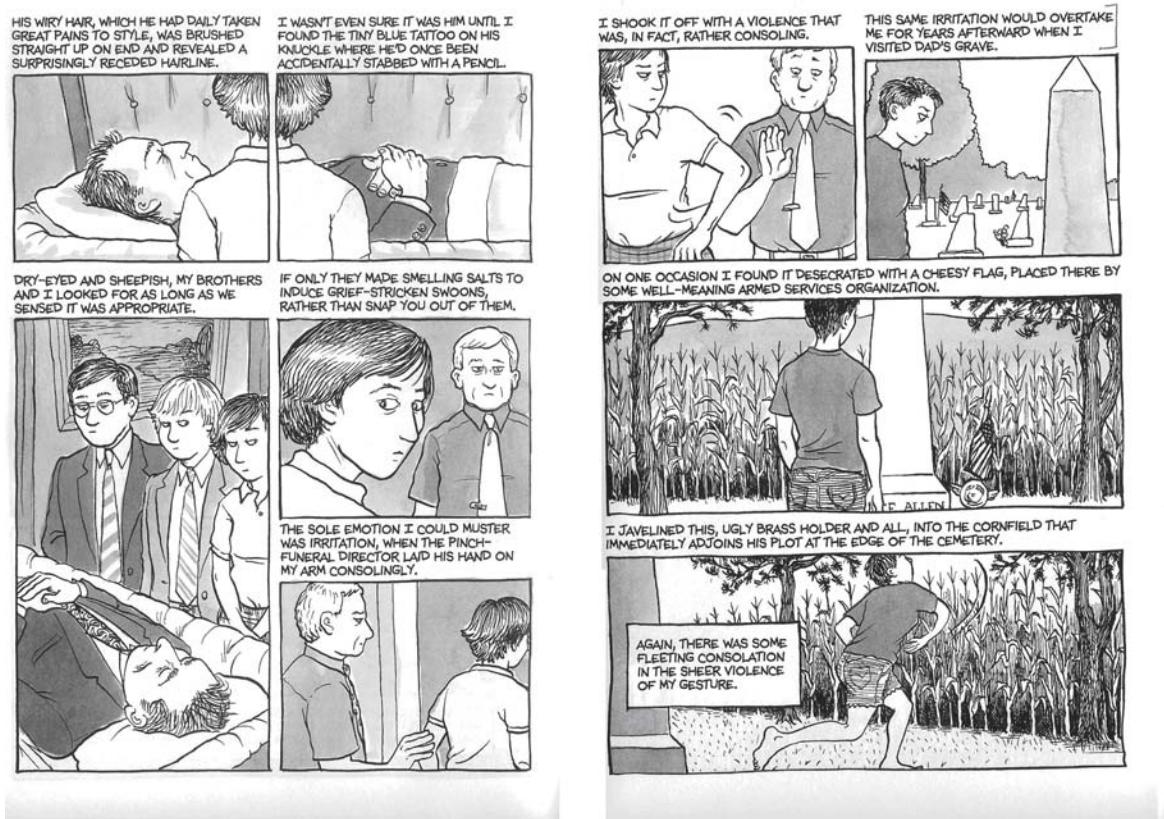
Alison meets an equally daunting challenge when she tries to wrench herself out of the domestic sphere of her “fun home.” Her “family circle” informs all her early life: as Alison-as-character mows the lawn in circles, Alison-as-narrator tellingly acknowledges that her father had always / already been dead to her (23). Trying to break free from the noxious circle of her father’s closeted homosexuality,

her own confession actually drags her into it: "I had imagined my confession as an emancipation from my parents; instead I was pulled back into their orbit" (59). The trajectory she set herself on turns out to be a broken line, because her path crossed her father's again where she expected it the least. Instead of a warm paternal meeting, it assumes the form of a deviating impact.

It appears, indeed, that contact regularly turns into impact with the Bechdels and this is what paradoxically keeps the family together. On pages 11-12, one can see a very concentrated example of this awkward situation: Christian cannot hold the Christmas tree and gets hit by his father. Trying to escape this undeserved punishment, the boy rushes past his sister who breaks one of the father's antiques. Also fearing the latter's violence, she runs away but soon comes back; as the narrator has it: "Escape was impossible." The circularity of the trajectory seems to be an effect of a series of shocks, centrally organized around the father's obsessions.

Another series tells of the same configuration, involving a dialectics between the human and the inanimate, the recurring impact of the mobile against the motionless. On page 18, the father hits his children because of a misplaced object, i.e. the brutal contact of bodies translates frustrated desire. On page 19, although not violent *per se* but spatially arranged to be potentially harmful, objects physically hurt human characters (it should be noted that, once again, it is a mirror that carries such dangerous—almost vindictive, or at any rate, passive-aggressive—connotations). On page 20, the father demonstrates his destructive faculty, making vicarious material damage. As already remarked, the real cause for this circulating violence remains—conspicuously—absent and nonetheless a constant obstacle. That accounts for the awkward demonstration of affection in the selfsame passage (19): when Alison tries to kiss her father, she only manages a clumsy impact of her lips on his hand. The ensuing sense of failure turns out to be all-pervasive.

The hand that she had tried to kiss in such a clumsy fashion, she can barely recognize except for a scar. She responds to a physical gesture of sympathy with utmost violence, "a violence that was, in fact, rather consoling" (52-53).



The same solace she finds (on the same page) in duplicating the father's violent demeanor: "Again there was some fleeting consolation in the sheer violence of my gesture." The unmistakable difference is that, whereas the father exerted his violence in the closeted, reverberating space of the domestic maze, hers takes place in the open—an ultimately free, because victimless, act.

Moving words and touching images

Repetition and duplication then appear to be a form of convergence that does not entail such destructive encounters—and upsetting consequences. By "repetition and duplication," I mean diverse devices and strategies that share a mimetic agenda. The point is not to imitate, but to represent, to enter the sphere of artistic capacity defined by mimesis. This is to be found in the plethoric variety of media and forms juxtaposed in *Fun Home*: drawing of course, but also printing, handwritten imitation of printed text, printed imitation of handwriting (in the captions), drawn imitation of handwriting (in the father's letters), and reproduction of maps, sketches, paintings, photographs. I want to try to make the first two sections of this paper converge: the

image (in both senses of the word) of the inscribed word (i.e. both printed, and handwritten, as opposed to oral) and the reproduction of visual forms compensate for the aforementioned incommunicability between the characters because the former are endowed with a mobility that the latter seemed to lack.

Of course, mail comes to manifest a system of correspondence between characters; if they cannot speak vocally, they can write. It is significant in this respect that Alison declares her homosexuality by mail, and her mother replies similarly. Interestingly, the parents seem to have fallen in love, however vicariously, through an impassioned exchange of letters—the subject of which revolved around books more than actual shared feelings. Indeed books operate as substitutes, and become the (mobile) vehicles of love and feelings.

For example, on page 61, the narrator establishes a clear connection between the transmission of books and a more physical expression of mutual affection:

Part of Dad's country squire routine involved edifying the villagers—his more promising high school students. The promise was very likely sexual in some cases, but whatever else might have been going on, books were being read. (61)

Even if this is presented as an idiosyncratic feature of the father's, the mother soon duplicates this gesture of dissemination: as a token of her gratitude, she "bestow[s] a book on Joan" (82). The circulation of texts does not stop after this gift but is disseminated in other forms: the poem written by Joan is reprinted at the very beginning of the anecdote and the book is described as "heavy as a turtle shell filled with mud." The very element that was earlier associated with the father's stasis is now "packed" as it were, made portable, and consequently gains an unsuspected mobility.

This new "package" is by no means merely incidental; it brings about the essential notion that communication can only be effective in *Fun Home* if it is somehow mediated. The failed attempts at immediate physical and verbal communication end in painful disasters, as noted earlier. A remarkably fruitful exchange between Alison and her father is mediated by an exchange of books. On pages 204-205, one can see that books literally become replacements for paternal love: "Home for Christmas, I found Dad's delight about *Ulysses* a bit galling. But it was nice to have his attention. I realized I had missed it, however vicarious it may have

been. In a burst of tenderness, I encouraged him further." In plain words, the literary space opened by the material exchange of books becomes the stage for the desperately longed for "sobbing, joyous reunion of Odysseus and Telemachus" (221). On a material level their "home" never allowed for it—nor did dialogue on a more abstract plane.

Obviously, the content of the book is also of significance: the book given on page 205 is Colette's account of lesbianism, and later, Alison returns the favor, and the affection, with Kate Millet: "In an eloquent unconscious gesture, I had left *Flying* for him to return to the library—mirroring his own Trojan horse gift of Colette" (224). Then again, this book reverberates in another form: paralleling Joan's poem, the father's letter rewrites the event but with a completely different simile: "I am flying high on Kate Millet." The very next page illustrates how father and daughter's common readings create common grounds on which they meet without clashing, or at least get closer: "On our final evening, a family friend remarked admiringly to Joan on the close relationship between my father and me. It was unusual, and we were close, but not close enough" (225). And yet, books and mobile words can make them so close that they almost become hardly distinguishable: a beautiful instance thereof is on pages 84-86. Alison asks her father for a check to order books by mail (note here again that inanimate objects travel more freely than human beings), to which he replies: "Write it out and I'll sign it." The chapter ends on this rare harmonious note where books, writing and signing, signal a perfect conjunction of identities.

As we have just seen, words circulate—and in their dissemination lies the very possibility of communication, but also of self-discovery. Unsurprisingly Alison finds out about her own homosexuality reading a pamphlet entitled *Word is Out* (75, 203). Without commenting upon the title, the narrator adds: "And indeed, I embarked that day on an odyssey which, consisting as it did in a gradual, episodic, and inevitable convergence with my abstracted father, was very nearly as epic as the original." If the father becomes here an abstracted figure, it is doubtlessly because the convergence is just as abstracted, and limited to literary grounds. Such converging is however made easier because it is mimetic, a copy as valid as the original.

One more word must be said about the compelling sequence of images on page 203.



Books are confirmed to be crossroads by their visual (as opposed to exclusively textual) impact: the cover of *The Odyssey* is reminiscent of a book repeatedly found in the father's library: *The Nude* by Kenneth Clark (15, 99). But they also conjure up other uncanny associations: behind Alison's back, as she is reading *Word is Out*, appears a silhouette, suspiciously evocative of the picture of Roy reproduced on pages 100-101. A possible slip of the pencil, it nonetheless figures the constant circulation, and unexpected apparition, of images in *Fun Home*.

This picture of Roy came as a similar surprise to the narrator, for it was as out of context in an envelope labeled "family" as in a university bookstore—or was it? The return of this spectral image is associated to the *post-mortem* return of the father's repressed. The haunting figure of Roy seems to be associated with homosexuality, as the image of the masculine, presumably lesbian, woman is said to haunt the young girl "as perhaps it haunted [her] father" (119). Just as this episode takes place on a business trip to Philadelphia, i.e. placed under the sign of mobility, the picture of Roy was taken on a trip to the Jersey shore, in a hotel—a space of transit, as the soft-edged picture suggests instability. On the next page, Alison Bechdel represents the series of negatives that places Roy among the father's loved ones, each negative being underscored by an arrow, delineating another emotional trajectory. This apparently detached comment on Proust follows: "The two ways are revealed to converge—to have always converged—through a 'vast network of transversals'" (102).

Photographs follow and materialize such transversals allowing for the final convergence between father and daughter. The notion of transversal motion, of intersecting trajectories is duplicated in the very term "translation," bringing back the Proustian associations at the very end of Chapter 4. "What's lost in translation is the complexity of loss itself. In the same box where I found the photo of Roy, there's one of dad at about the same age" (120).

WHAT'S LOST IN TRANSLATION IS THE COMPLEXITY OF LOSS ITSELF. IN THE SAME BOX WHERE I FOUND THE PHOTO OF ROY, THERE'S ONE OF DAD AT ABOUT THE SAME AGE.



The loss is inevitable in translation, as mourning brings about a possible convergence on spectral trails, gliding through "time past" and "things lost." The treasure-chest of a box functions as an allegory of memory, conscious and unconscious, supportive of free association—convergence at last. Like memories, photographs are "traces" left by a physical presence (101) and these ghosts of past

presences are united again in the chapter's final panel where portraits of Alison and of her father are held side by side. Ultimately, the narrator wonders about the identity of the photographer, i.e. the emotions of the initial beholder: "Was the boy who took it his lover? As the girl who took this Polaroid of me on my twenty-first birthday was mine?" The question needs to be rephrased: can the feelings of the beholder be caught on the (light-)sensitive paper, as the father's awe seems to surface on Roy's picture? Since the hands of the supposed narrator appear in the drawing (of the four pictures of Roy, the father and Alison), the reader must acknowledge that s/he is seeing through the eyes of a similar kind of beholder. If it be excessive to talk about the look of love, "it's about as close as a translation can get." (120)

In this final movement, in this very translation of her own history into a story, the ultimate reunion within the text is illustrated in the last picture (232). Rounding off the whole book, the panel shows Alison caught in the air, i.e. in motion but suspended in time, with her father ready to catch her. In this split second, it is impossible to decide whether the next image should be one of a warm paternal embrace or another clashing impact. But it also encapsulates the very essence of such a work as *Fun Home*: it is a translation of a personal memory, and a graphic response to the photograph that serves as a frontispiece to the last chapter (187). By reproducing it from a different angle, which illustrates the geometrical meaning of the word "translation," this displacement epitomizes the autobiographical project. Like a "reverse shot" of the photograph, it instances the "tricky reverse narration" of the concluding remark. Reversing also the myth of Dedalus and Icarus, the father is "there to catch [his daughter]" in the water (as against "letting her down"). Images and text converge and diverge continuously to tell "[their] entwined stories" (illustrated here in the disjunction of images as opposed to the linearity of text, on page 232).

Recreating a dialogue with the dead, like an open letter suspended in time, *Fun Home*'s meaning resides in its paradoxes: converging but static, giving answers while asking questions, grateful and ultimately uncertain.