COMMONING ETHNOGRAPHY

Vol 4 | No 1 | 2021

Graphic Poesis

Drawing things to other

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ABSTRACT | The author offers a prose and visual analysis of how things make sense only in relation to other things, and experiments with unleashing these obligations.

Keywords: Graphic ethnography; Classification; Sorting; Drawing.

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ISSN 2537-9879 | DOI: http://doi.org/ 10.26686/ce.v4i1.5202

Published online 17 December 2021

My father grew up in India and has a dark complexion. By the time I was born, he had lived in the UK for seven years, married a white woman, and given up or disavowed everything Indian. In no sense was I 'Indian,' other than, perhaps, in my ability to parse his accent. Still, half a shade darker than my classmates, my sisters and I occasionally heard "Paki" half-heartedly called across the playground. If meant to interpellate us, and if one takes Paki to indicate Pakistani, the naming was (a) not true, and (b) more a statement than an insult. But it was a moniker of some sort, intended to mark us vis-à-vis our different complexion, just as another was marked by her weight and another by the fact that he had one leg. On another occasion a schoolmate, Craig, came up with an equally meaningless comment, a geographical homophone for my name. When I mentioned it to my mother, she offered 'craggy mountain' as a retort. I can still see the satisfying contorted red pique of his 9-and-three-quarter-year-old face when I took the 'insult' for a test drive the next day.

These not-quite-innocent schoolyard games show how naming serves as a sorting, and then hierarchizing mechanism, indicating and then attempting to activate an inside and an outside, even as they reference innocent nations and peaks. Such namings are mutable, to be sure. Even five years ago most people would have said that binary gender pronouns are absolutely essential in sorting the social world. Now, nearly all of my students say that there is no reason for them, other than to create stereotypes and hierarchies.

Such linguistic pellets are not so very different than what children learn contemporaneously in their formal education. Think of the flashcard, a technology that isolates things from their environments, names them, and offer ways to understand them not as elements of lived assemblages of grass, water, air, and kin, but as abstracted beings inhabiting classifications: Secretary Bird, Blue Footed Booby, mammal, invertebrate. What belongs together? Why? Paki. Craggy Mountain.

In my book *Things that Art* (2019), I aimed to rethink and refigure the epistemological mechanisms of sorting and meaning making – not by writing a political or theoretical treatise and explaining how it all worked, but through play. Afterall, how do we make categories visible and thinkable when they serve as the basis for thinking? In some sense I offer a collage, making new meanings from recognisable fragments of naming, gathering, and sorting. I do this by breaking apart and remaking some of the elements of knowledge-building practices, in particular, of illustration, label, and title. Within each card, and then throughout the series, I aimed to create frictions and undermine expectations by creating little paradoxes and gaps.

Each drawing does this in a different way. Some simply report collections of bizarre facts, such as who served as crash test dummies, or how drowning resuscitations have taken place in the past. Others, after Magritte, think about how negatives change what we think and see, such as things that mark negative space, or things that are not things – or various of the categories that use word play or random associations made by figures of speech, such as in our attempts to describe death. Others draw attention to the somewhat random social agreements: what counts as fame, or what holds value. And then some draw attention to the collection itself – a collection of random things from my cards put together and redrawn with my left hand.

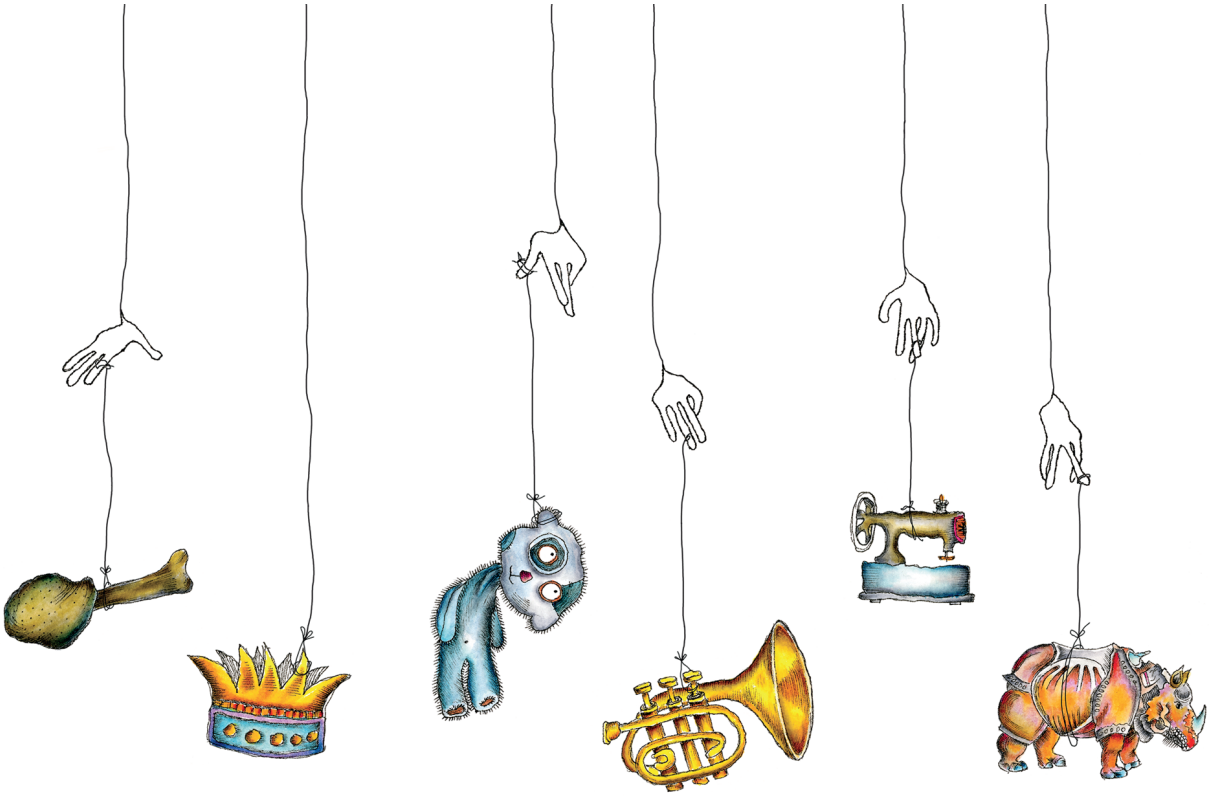
I think of ethnography as the project of seeing things askew, shedding new light on old questions. But I'm also interested in breaking ethnography's old worn and too-comfortable forms of observation and argument. Artist William Kentridge, in conversation with Rosalind Morris, noted the epistemological difference between prose and art: 'One constantly feels a need to come up with clarity, with a single opinion … with a linear statement, when, in fact, there often are many different statements competing for attention' (2014: 10). At this juncture in my career, I find a need to make those complexities more visible in the work and scholarship, and art offers one promising way of doing this.

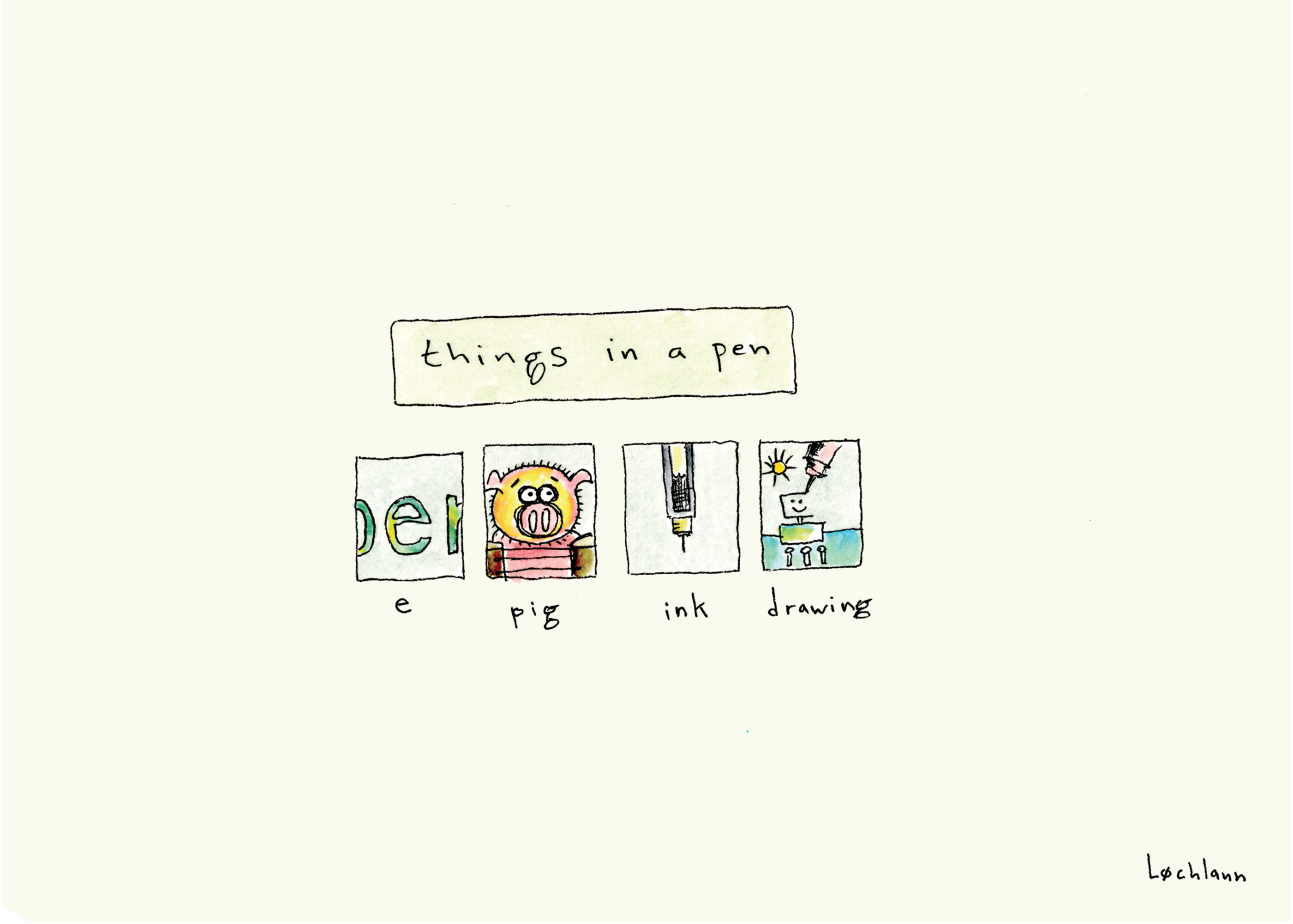
In that sense, I see *Things that Art* as a work of 'graphic poesis.' I harness things that poets use, the random/not random connections found in words and images based in the shape or sounds of words, the connections that are logical but from within different forms of logic, drawing attention to the seemingly arbitrary ways that rhyme and onomatopoeia – indeed, meaning itself – operate. Thus, I found the form of the word/image/collection generative in that it could push a fundamentally poetic project (making connections and leaps among meaning, sound, and the shapes of letters and words) into a visual mode.

The broader project, then, is about pushing the boundaries of what counts as anthropology. Articles in anthropology tend to derive their authority by reiterating a standard form. The citation of certain prominent – and often, but not always, brilliant – scholars create a common language, a 'debate' if you will, that enables certain forms of 'contribution' that publication in anthropology journals requires. All that is well and good. But how might we make deepen these vocabularies by opening spaces for different registers of investigation?

In that sense, I'm interested in experimenting with how drawing, as an epistemic form in its own right (and not simply a means to represent another object or illustrate a text), might shift the didactic and presumed authority of the written word. In that sense, *Things that Art*, I think, suggests that *what* is said or argued cannot be distinguished from *how* it is presented and communicated. The drawings are not illustrative of an idea or text – rather they *are* the idea, they *are* the argument. I want to think about drawing as a separate epistemology: what different modes of thought and feeling altogether emerge from ordering source materials in a drawing rather than in an academic essay? In that way I aim to slightly displace the sovereign author required by academic writing and consider a way to respond to social phenomena in and through images. And, of course, they shift the zone of engagement: are the drawings 'good enough,' should an anthropologist be drawing, how does this visual practice relate to art and art history, do they count as professional anthropology?

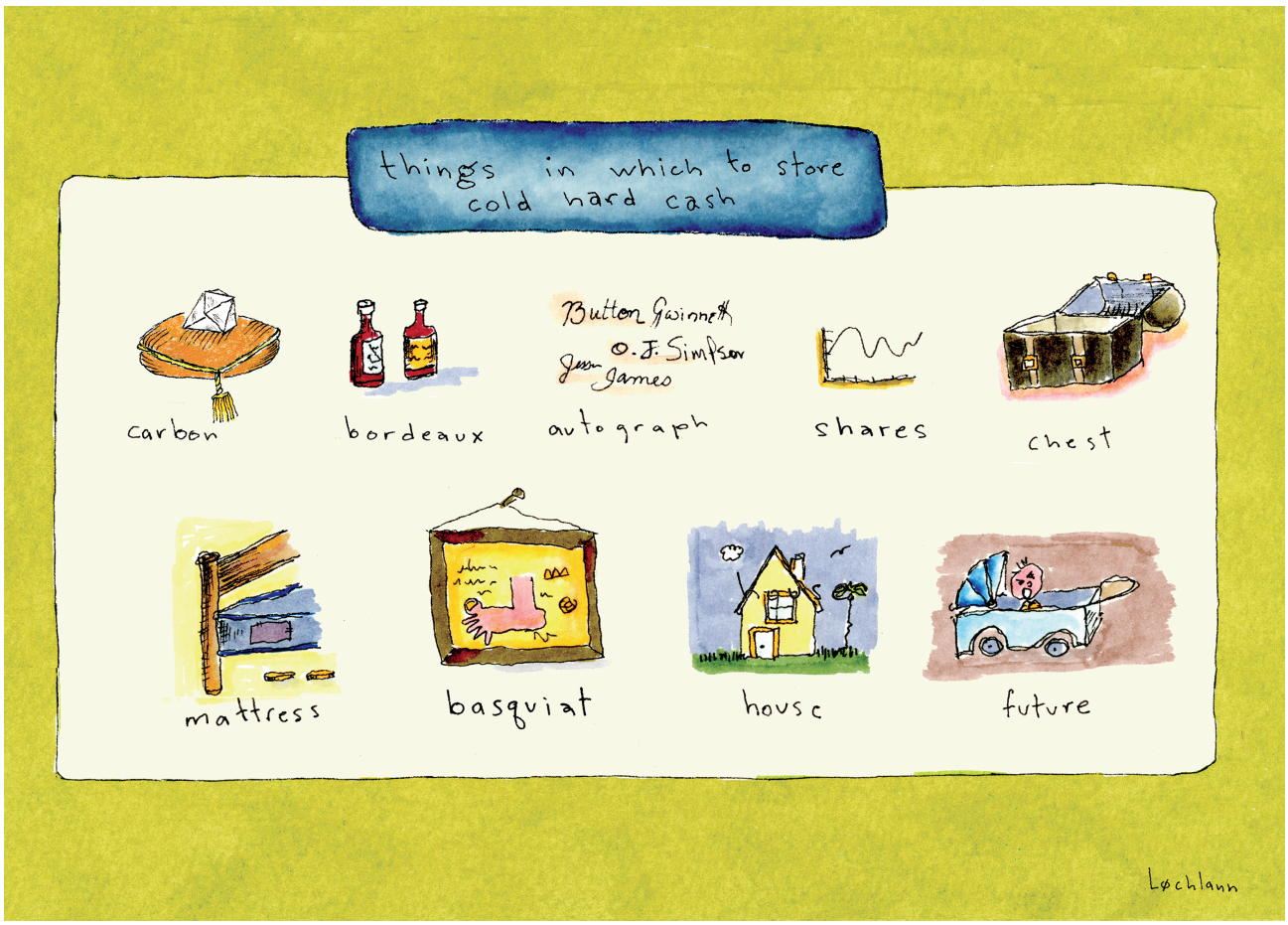
Ultimately, decolonising anthropology requires more than rethinking race, gender, and the other categories the discipline has created, enlivened, ordered, and theorised. Decolonising anthropology, if that is indeed what anthropologists want, demands a revision of the forms of knowledge production that undergird the making of these classifications and hierarchies. *Things that Art* is in the service of this effort.




things in a pen
e
pig
ink
drawing
Løchlann


things that are not a hippo
taxidermy
Boynton
birthday card
carcass
campus
dürer
aphrodisiac
Lochlann

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things in which to store cold hard cash
carbon
bordeaux
Button Gwinnett
O.J. Simpson
Jesse James
autograph
shares
chest
mattress
basquiat
house
future
Lochlann

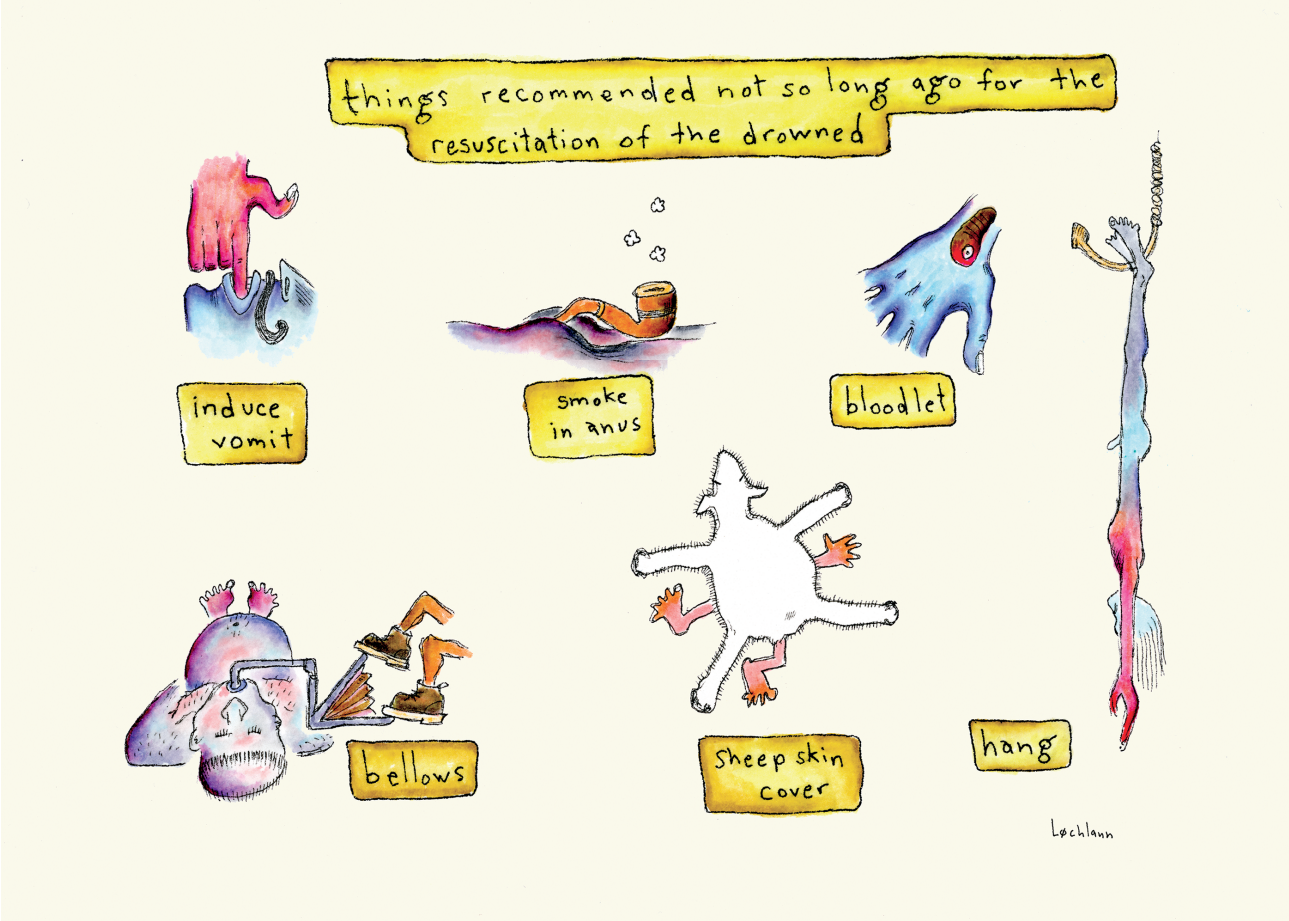
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things one holds
tongue
dear
breath
memory
opinion
your horses
forth
a grudge
Lochlann

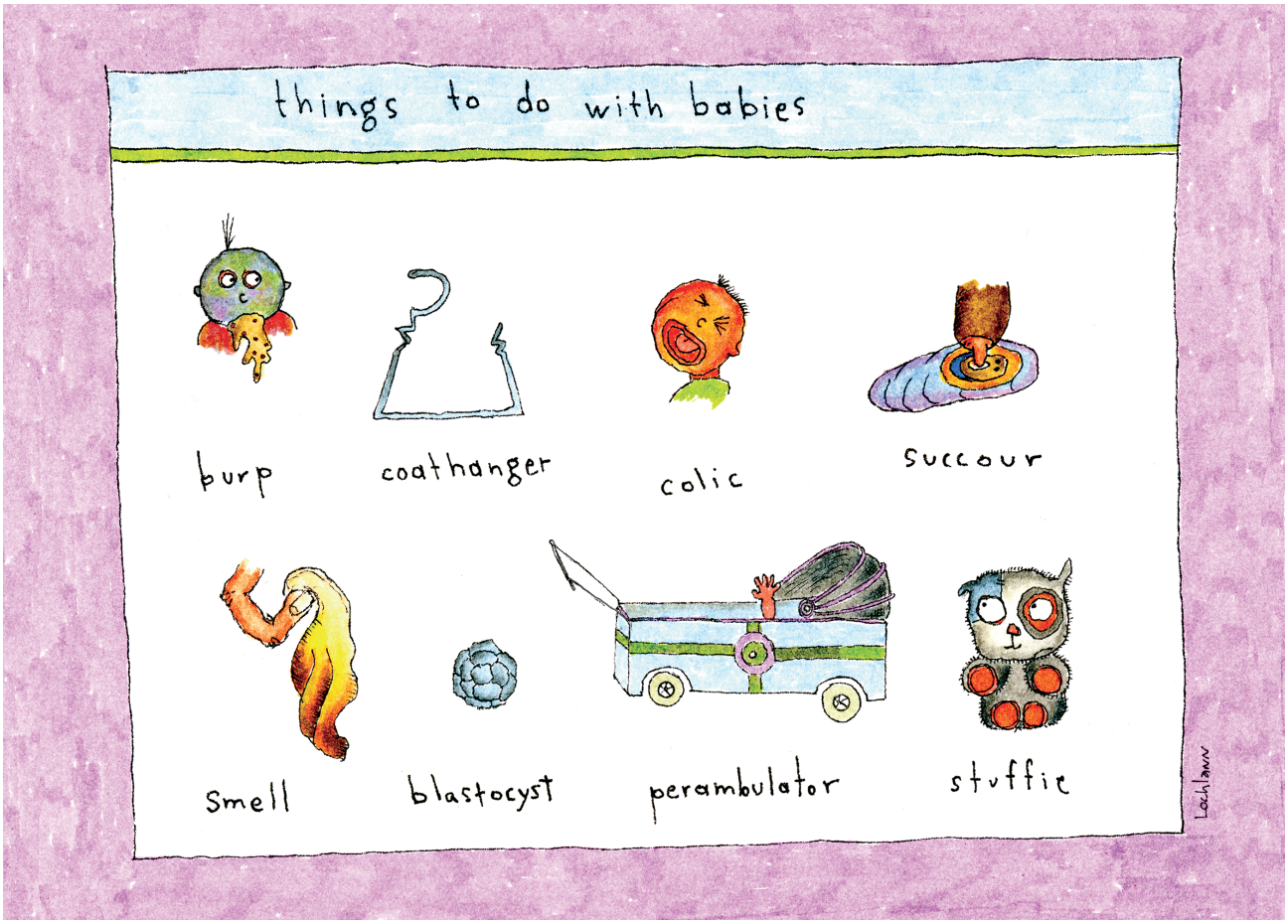
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things that will happen when
hell freezes over
father comes home
meek inherit the earth
workers lose their chains
the fat lady sings
your time has come
Løchlann

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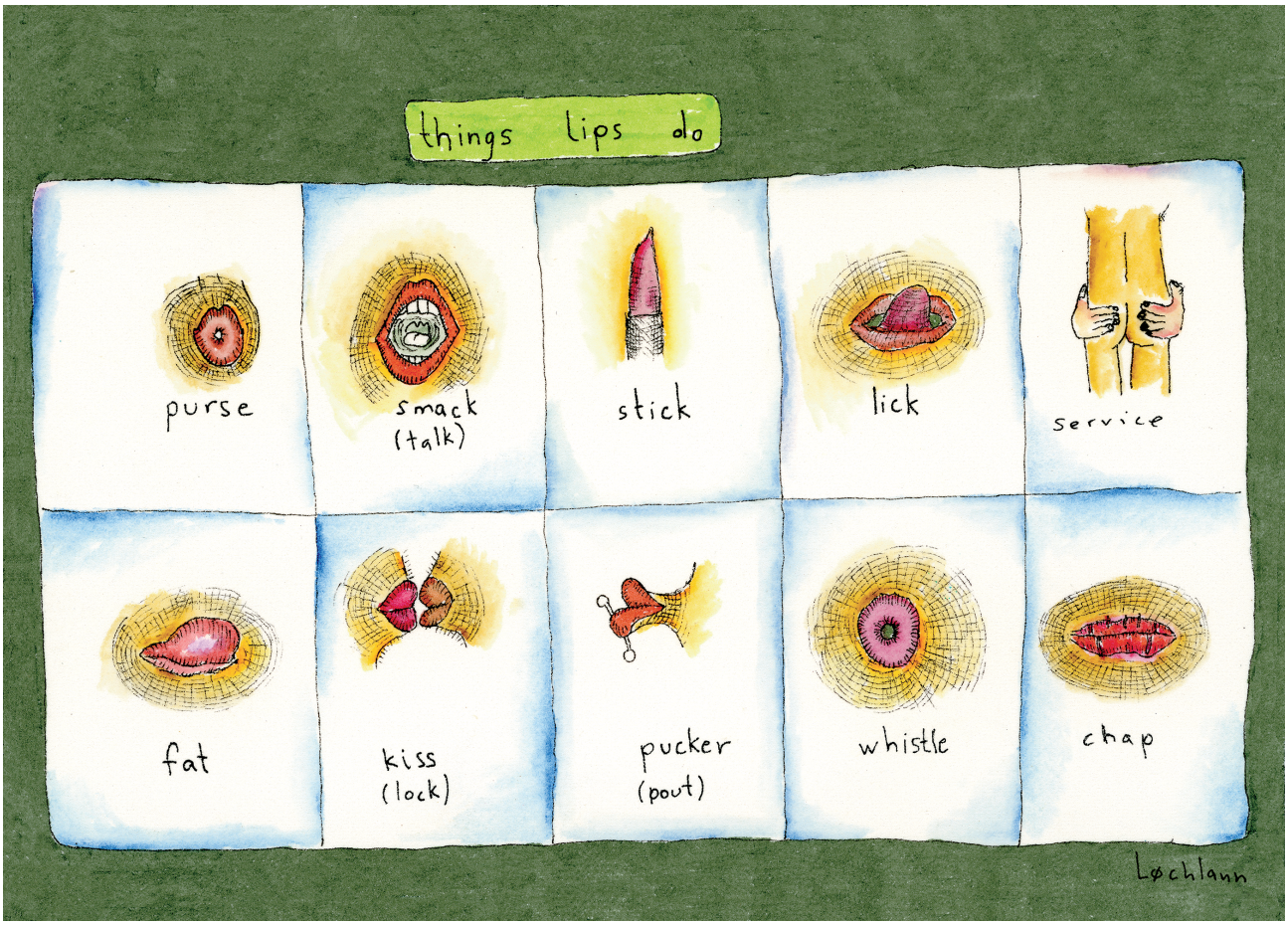

things recommended not so long ago for the resuscitation of the drowned
induce vomit
smoke in anus
bloodlet
bellows
sheep skin cover
hang
Lachlann

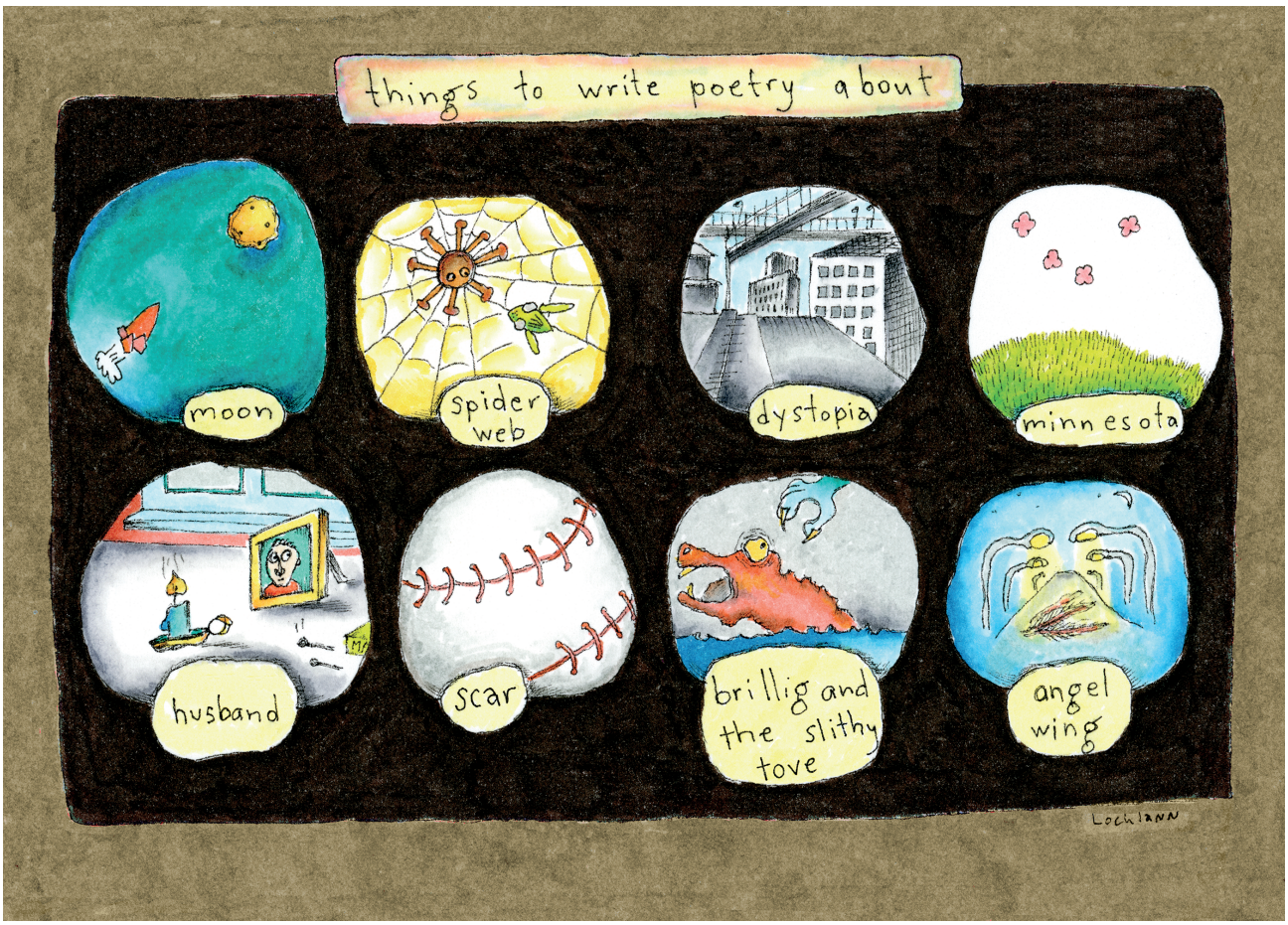
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things to do with babies
burp
coathanger
colic
Succour
Smell
blastocyst
perambulator
stuffie
Lachlan


things inside things
sting
gin
night
sigh
sing
hi
shin
tin
Lochlann

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things lips do
purse
smack (talk)
stick
lick
service
fat
kiss (lock)
pucker (pout)
whistle
chap
Lochlann


things to write poetry about
moon
spider web
dystopia
minnesota
husband
scar
brillig and the slithy tove
angel wing
LOCHLANN

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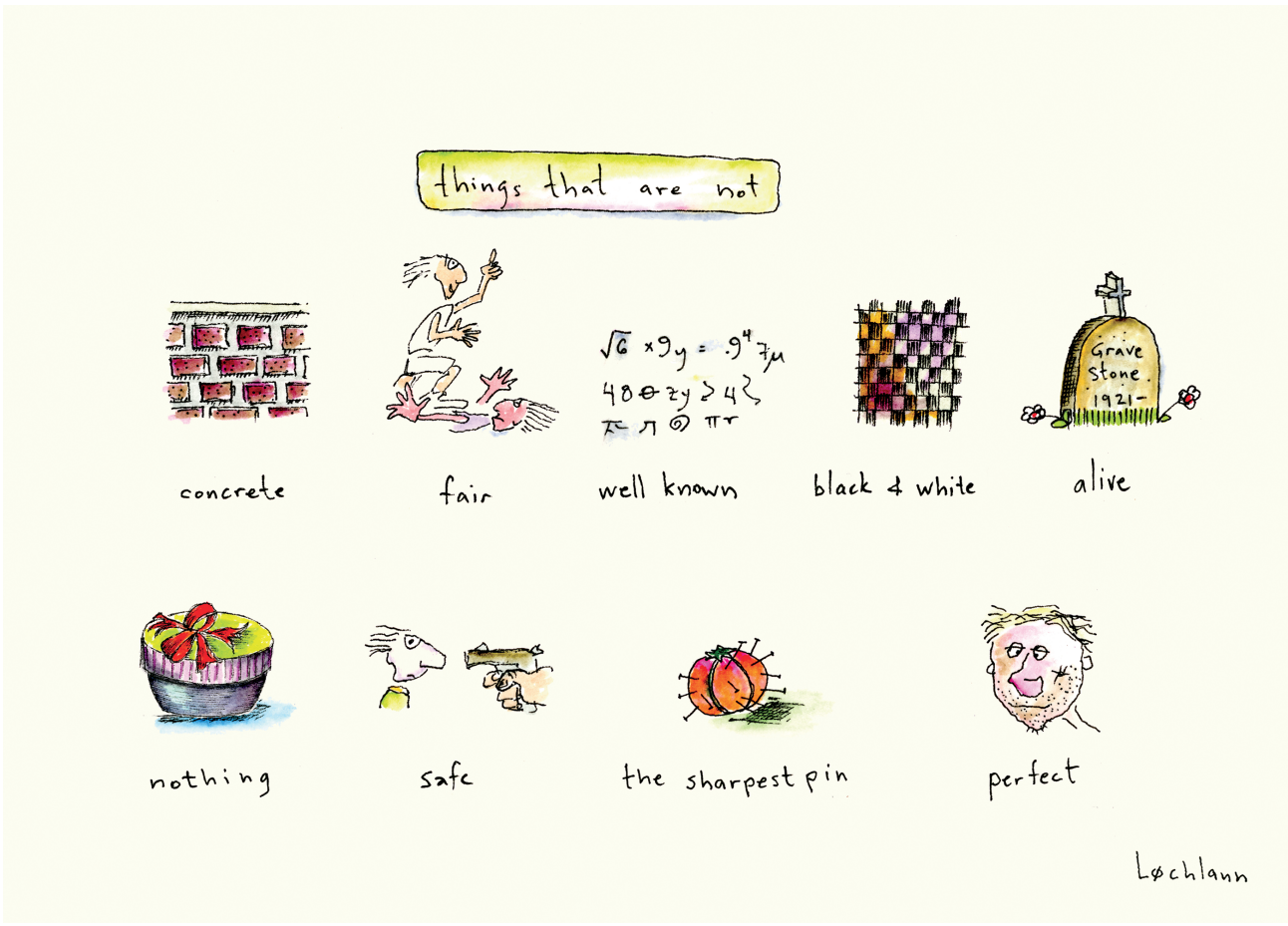

things with an asshole
bird
baboon
hemorrhoid
donkey
office
worm
baby
LochLann

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things one doesn't give
flying f*@k
two shakes
a damn
up
time of day
rat's ass
dog gone
second glance
chance
hoots

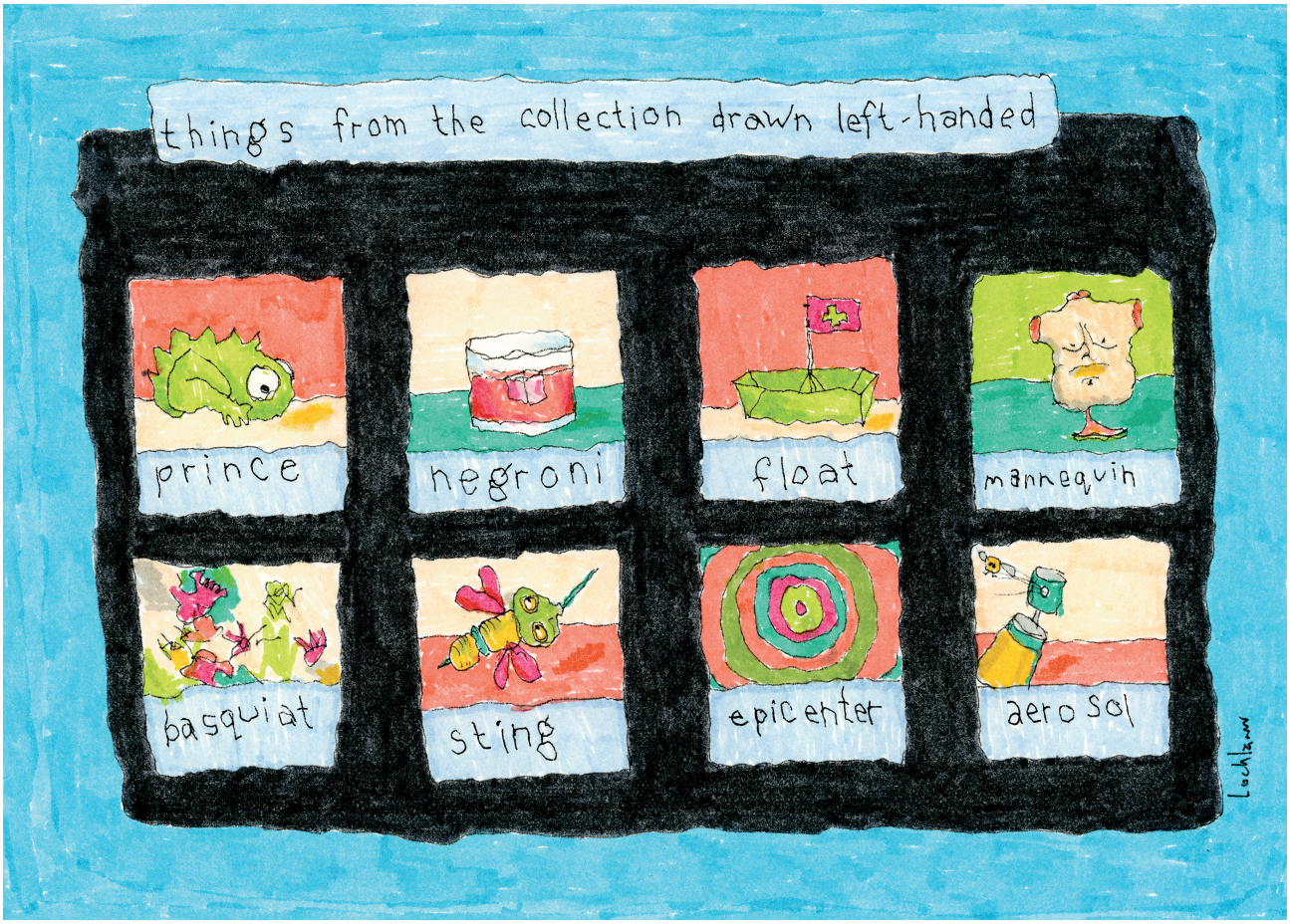
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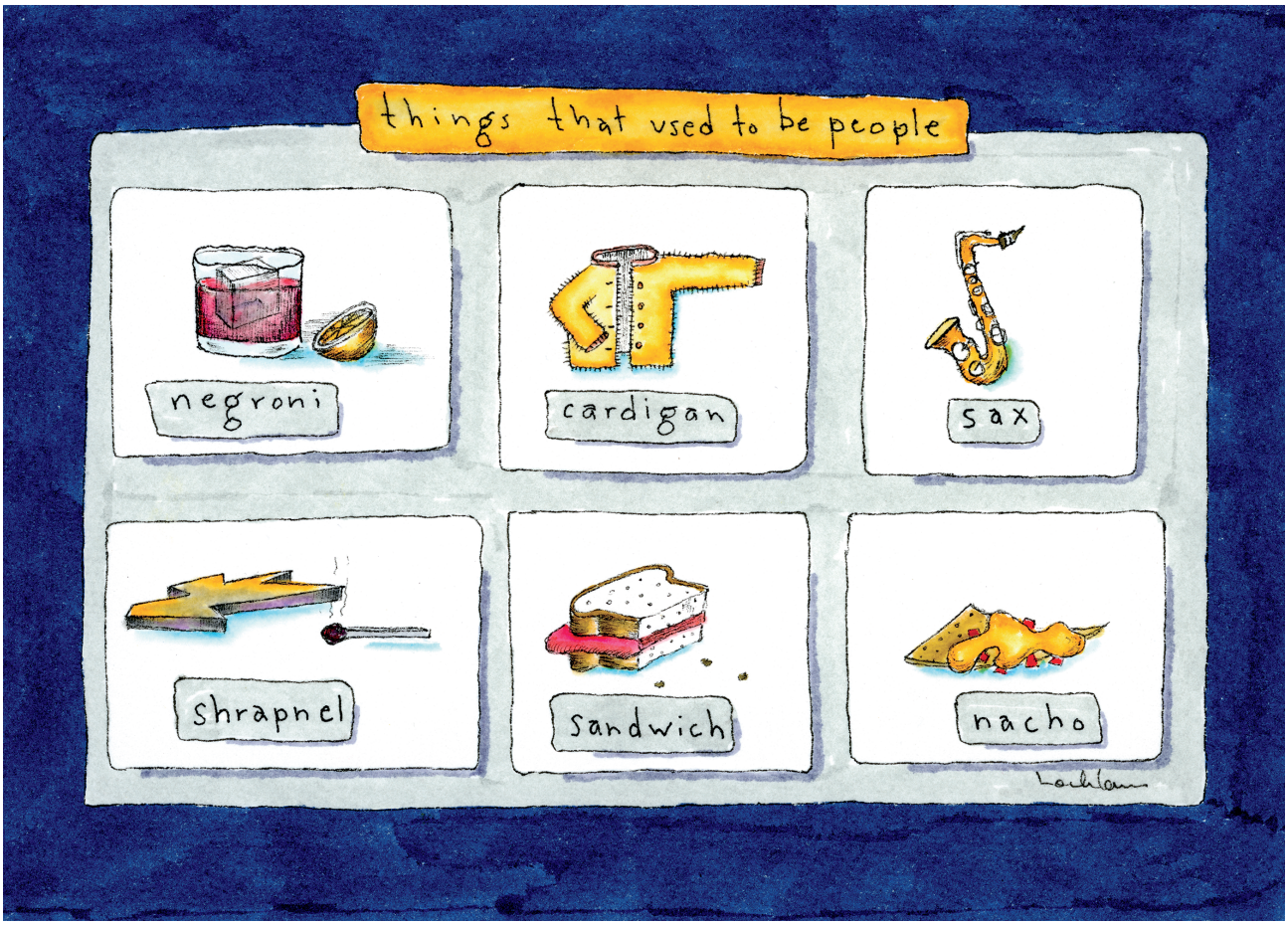

pearly gates
one-way ticket
moved on
things that actually mean died
met maker
kick the bucket
expired
croak
Løchlann


things that are not
concrete
fair
well known
black & white
alive
Grave Stone 1921-
nothing
safe
the sharpest pin
perfect
Lachlann


things that mark a negative space
cloud
chalk
optical illusion
shadow
intestine
fish
bird
satellite
lung
windsock
Lochlann

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things from the collection drawn left-handed
prince
negroni
float
mannequin
basquiat
sting
epicenter
aerosol


things that used to be people
negroni
cardigan
sax
shrapnel
sandwich
nacho


thing that are not a pipe
cigarette
yellow teeth
leather chair
ceci n'est pas un
pen and paper
cinnamon stick
nicotine patch
cup of tea
brandy
Lochlann

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Things That Art: A Graphic Menagerie of Enchanting Curiosity (2019)

All hail the nose. Not just any nose, mind you, but the flawless, magnetic Caesar of a colleague, which, one afternoon, yanked my attention from the lobs and volleys of a committee meeting. Awestruck and unable to help myself, I jotted its likeness on my agenda.

Intuitively, I penned 'kinds of noses' and ruminated on the category nose, casting for specimens. I conjured a bulbous ski-slope, labelling it 'my sister's.' The comforting paean to kinship momentarily staved off my alienation from the discussion and the Important Matters under debate flew to the wayside. My unleashed hand crowded the page with depictions of the materially comic (a clown's foam ball), the conceptual (a drawing of a drawing of a nose ripped in two: out of joint), the uncanny (equine, porcine), and cynical (racialized). The latter nose invoked the centuries of looked-down turned-up ivory tower noses. 'Standard' nose, I sneeze at you.

This form of a sketched mini gallery could describe relationships, trace infrastructures, and invoke curiosity through juxtapositions – offering an amusing form of resistance to everyday pigeonholing. Thus, the unadulterated play of that first graphic menagerie morphed into the multi-year project you have before you.

One day the artist and commentator John Berger mused, while drawing a group of seven irises from his garden, 'We who draw do so not only to make something visible to others, but also to accompany something invisible to its incalculable destination' (Berger 2015: 9). I love this idea of the artist escorting an unseen, beloved companion into an interdependent existence. *Things that Art* proposes that drawing might also offer some kind of access to the shadowy internalized images that serve as shaky bedrocks and clammy wellsprings for our most prized assumptions.

Initially, 4 x 6 inch watercolor pads limited my scope for catastrophe; these became incrementally larger with my aging eyesight. The stamp-sized drawings were done in pen, from memory, without judgement, and as such many became friends. Such guidelines stymied any imposter complex and liberated me to simply draw a likeness of objects I had only occasionally or never seen: a salamander, a shadow of doubt, or a pirate.

In a life drawing class, the professor will demand the student look closely—a prior idea of what a hand should look like will only lead the neophyte artist astray as they attempt to sketch the knuckles actually before them. *Things that Art* offers something different. My approach practically requires the regurgitation of a standardized version of a thing, one learned not by close examination of an actual dragon fly or tibia, but by recalling a diagram, an illustration, or stereotype. A unique line will muscle in, dispensing a charming variation on remembered shapes, but the point is to materialize a memory rather than the body behind an easel.

In my bailiwick as an anthropologist I study people and stuff: cars, laws, viruses, for instance. As an artist, I create things, things that sometimes have no discernible purpose other than attracting an eye or evincing a chuckle, and other times offer a way to process questions in ways not available through traditional scholarly methods. Initially curious about the sorts of juxtapositions that emerged unbidden from my pen, I also came to see that this graphic menagerie enabled me to reimagine and revision engagements with age-old philosophical questions

about the relations among word and image, category and individual, hand-drawn and mass produced lines, and label and collection.

The form of my drawings will be familiar, invoking the picture postcard, the botanical color plate, the baseball trading card. Zoos, art galleries, and museums adopt a parallel scaffold. Each framed or caged thing harnesses the same design principle as the lowly flashcard and child's alphabet book. Crushing the cardinal rule of writing, 'show don't tell,' these artifacts patently show *and* tell in a mutually illustrative circuit. A Macintosh computer SE, 1989 from Silicon Valley will be labeled, 'Macintosh computer SE, 1989, Silicon Valley.' We see, we recognize, we know, we reiterate. This is the process of Western education, learned inside a classroom, from 8:15am – 3:25pm, as we quietly sit, for years, pasted to a seat at a desk, with our hands to ourselves learning the arts of docility and looking at words and pictures to reproduce in future exams. We've all been there.

The seamlessness of the conjunction between word and image obscures nearly entirely the institutions, politics, and hierarchies that sift, sort, and collect to make way for representative words and things. As someone who has spent altogether too much time around books and museums, it was no accident that this idiom invaded my doodles and pastimes and now, for a moment, yours as well.

Nothing if not useful, the genre does tender a fragile thread to the sentient world. Consider your last trip to the zoo. Visitors may disagree about whether polar bears should be in cages, but we all accede that what prowls behind the glass is from up north and that it is bigger and hairier than the snake in the next pavilion. This diaphanous concept of Polar Bear, gleaned between the kiddie train and a frayed nerve, can't compare to what the Inuit knew. Yet it forms the basis of a shared understanding.

Leaving the zoo for the museum, one might come upon a plinthed assemblage presented with a brass plate: *Hippopotamus amphibius*. Never mind that the hide of the original hippo was peeled off its fleshy owner and stuffed with sawdust several thousand miles later. Never mind the virtual impossibility of imagining the evacuated life force – the conversational hippo grunts with friends munching the sweet grass of the Okavango Delta. The series of unpleasant encounters that led to the appearance of this solitary, spiritless aggregate also hide behind the painted weeds and crumbling plaster of the diorama in London or New York or Rome.

Giving my pen over to the spontaneity of the form sometimes yielded groupings that I didn't fully understand myself, in part because of the arbitrariness of the English language that linguists and grand theorists have attempted to overcome somewhat fruitlessly (with all due respect) since at least the beginnings of philosophy. While naming and organizing the world and all that's in it has been something of an obsession among men with pens, those who have been squashed into categories for convenience or out of confusion do add a unique perspective.

Just ask the platypus, a cutie with whom I strongly identify. First disemboweled and sent to London in 1798 by the Governor of New South Wales in Australia, the poor soul's blended reptilian and mammalian characteristics wrought consternation, sparking an 85-year-long battle about whether to slot this compromising hoax into the animal kingdom at all. That 'first' platypus soon became an exemplar specimen used to judge subsequent platypodes; it still resides

in London's Natural History Museum, in a drawer, with a label hanging from its toe. The mobile version, a 1863 drawing, neatly perches the label beneath.

The Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus, inventor of the binomial classification system from which no animal or plant could escape, accounted for exiles such as platypodes with two special taxa. Into *Monstrous* he placed 'wild and monstrous humans, unknown groups, and more or less abnormal people.' *Paradoxa* contained the phoenix, dragon, manticore. Even the penniless old pelican took up temporary residence in the *paradoxa* half-way house, falsely accused of feeding blood to her young through a self-stabbing ritual. Orthrus or abaia might escape the dime museum or freak show, but beware of the hedged existential bets of binomial classification and its effort to devolve Monstrous to mundane.

The scholar most alive to paradoxus, Dr. D. Haraway, has written of the appeals of both fact and fiction: 'the word fiction is an active form, referring to the present act of fashioning, while fact is a descendent of a past participle, a word form which masks the generative deed or performance. A fact seems dumb, unchangeable, only to be recorded; fiction seems always inventive, open to other possibilities, other fashioning of life (Haraway 1989). Any scientist knows that facts derive from observation and theory and serve as placeholders that work well enough (for various purposes) until something better comes along. Even so, Uncle Fact tends to take his jealousies out on Master Fiction rather than hauling them to the therapist's couch. Thus, the term o*rnithorhynchus paradoxus,* used by Charles Darwin himself, swathed the bewildered platypus in existential uncertainty for nearly two centuries.

Categories are certainly useful. But they also constitute those who devise them, those who are concocted or ensnared by them, and the worlds in which they move. They order things and perceptions. They dispense opportunity for some, and discomfort for anyone not fully invested in their proper slot. But if categories need us and we need them, what scope is there for revision? If things fail, do we fail—in our identity performances, the value of our social contributions, our modes of being? Maybe a new hodgepodge can burst from the ruins. But debris has its uses.

It became immediately apparent, in the very first sketch of the exquisite professorial nose – the very incarnation of the nose that gets to know – that living, lying, consensual paradoxes could be drawn together, drawn out, drawn into being, and drawn nearer. The adage that showing and telling offers only a boring overdetermination disavows the crack between showing and telling: they are not the same but their adhesion has a history that when loosened lets in a light that can reflect anew onto the work of the flashcard, the museum, the menagerie, or the souq.

From this abyss, I present to you this aerated, kaleidoscopic, and woolly graphic menagerie. With the completion of the project, I am now going off to new explorations of the category of things that I may have to toss into my mesh bag of regrets. Perhaps this collection will inspire you to register a squiggle resembling your own colleagues' body parts. Discretion is advised.

Lochlann Jain
February 9, 2019

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