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SECONDSON

by

Jonathan Blake Heaton

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

English

Approved:

Michael Sowder, Ph. D.
Major Professor

Shanan Ballam, MFA
Committee Member

Christopher Gonzalez, Ph. D.
Committee Member

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

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ABSTRACT

Secondson

by

Jonathan Blake Heaton, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2019

Major Professor: Dr. Michael Sowder
Department: English

This author's introduction is an analysis of graphic literature and poetry, and the combining of the two to create graphic poetry. Themes are explored of what it means to be a second son in a world permeated by traditional values, regarding the prominence of the first son.

This thesis was split into five sections: Finding My Story—in which the author explains how he came to the main narrative content behind *Secondson*; Finding My Themes—in which the author discusses the four themes that are included in *Secondson* and the inspiration received from outside works of poetry; Finding My Genre—in which the author examines how he came to the genre of graphic poetry; Critical Scholarship—in which the author reviews poetry, as well as graphic novels and memoirs, and the scholarship that supports graphic poetry; and The Graphic Images of *Secondson*—in which the author analyzes the graphic images in his creative work, showing how they blend together to create a unique body of work.

(55 pages)

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Secondson

Jonathan Blake Heaton

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Jonathan Blake Heaton

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Introduction

The academic world is my home: I am a product of the public-school system, I am a veteran educator, and I have multiple degrees, certifications, and licenses from state-run universities. When I was confronted with the task of writing a thesis, I knew immediately that I wanted it to be something creative. I was told that perhaps it would be easier to do something more analytical and research-based. After all, while I am a full-time student, I also have a full-time career as a public-school teacher. I knew it would be difficult, but I wanted to create something of which I could be proud—something I could pass down to my children. *Secondson* is the product of my desire. *Secondson* is more than a mere thesis assignment. The work I have created is a portrait of my life as a son and a father. It is a part of me.

I have split this author's introduction into five sections: Finding My Story—in which I explain how I came to the main narrative content behind *Secondson*; Finding My Themes—in which I discuss the four themes that I have included in *Secondson* and the inspiration I received from outside works of poetry; Finding My Genre—in which I examine how I came to the genre of graphic poetry; Critical Scholarship—in which I review poetry, as well as graphic novels and memoirs, and the scholarship that supports graphic poetry; and The Graphic Images of *Secondson*—in which I analyze the graphic images in my creative work, showing how they blend together to create a unique body of work.

Finding My Story

I was fifteen when my parents divorced. The third of six children, I easily disappeared into the familial background. My father was a doctor, my mother a cosmetologist. After twenty years together, their marriage crumbled, and my father was forced from his 12,000 square-foot home and 40-acre lot. My mother claims he saw it coming, my father claims it was a surprise. I remember the day he left. He came to me in my room and cried, asking me what he should do. I was at a loss. I had long known that my mother wasn't happy, but I never believed that they would actually separate. Such things weren't supposed to happen in fiscally prosperous, affluent, religious homes. Yet there I stood, a fifteen-year-old boy, watching the tears of my father. He knew I was close to my mother. His fatherly distance from me had driven me into her arms as a child. Maybe he believed I could sway her. I don't remember what happened next or what was said, but the feeling of standing there—a helpless father and a helpless son, without answers—seared itself into my memory forever.

My family and I stumbled through the next few years. My mother remarried, and she and my stepfather were excommunicated from our church, my father moved closer to his work, and we sold the house. All of us children stayed with my mom. For a while we lived in a fifth-wheel trailer until we found a small rental home. Eventually, we settled in a hundred-year-old, leaky farmhouse in a small town in northern Utah. At 900 square feet, the house couldn't accommodate all of us, so my parents and my stepbrother slept in our fifth-wheel parked just outside our back door. A new house, a new school, a new father, a new life.

After the divorce was finalized, I didn't hear from my father again until I was twenty-two and engaged. He sent me a hundred-dollar bill for my birthday that year—it

was the first gift I had ever received directly from him. I was in college at the time, and I used the money to take my friends to dinner. He would have been disappointed with that. Money—all money—was meant to be saved. A year or so later, I married. My father didn't come to my wedding, although I did talk to him for the first time in years when I asked if he could pay for the luncheon. He paid for it willingly. Many of the disconnected feelings I have toward my father can be traced to the distance that the divorce caused.

I have experienced a different kind of separation as well—an emotional separation. My father had never been mean. He never hit me or verbally assaulted me. He didn't drink. He didn't swear. He wasn't negligent. I never wanted for any physical item as a child. If he could be accused of anything, it was—and is—a lack of love. Perhaps not a *lack* of love, but rather a weakened form of it—like a virus in a vaccine. And like a vaccine, I was able to take this weakened form of love and build antibodies to develop a tolerance for the absence of a fuller love. There are many things, and people, that my father loves—but he has prioritized his loves, and I am low on the list.

This discounted love has left me feeling torn between my physical and emotional wellbeing. On one hand, I have little to complain about. Before my parents divorced, I lived a charmed life: a large home, gifts on birthdays and Christmas, a father who cared about my education and my academic and financial future. He did all of these things—and yet, something inside me still scratches at my heart, telling me that the things he did were hollow. It's as if he was merely fulfilling his patriarchal obligations. My mother once told me that my father didn't feel joy in fatherhood—that he was a man whose every

action needed to be validated. She said selfless acts with no clear benefit to him simply were not in his nature.

There has never been a doubt in my mind that my father prioritized his love for my older brother Dallas over his love for me—a fact that he too would acknowledge. I believe that a key factor to the relationship I have with my father is the placement of my birth. I am the third child of six, and the second of two sons. Dallas, however, is not only the first son, but also the oldest of the six siblings. I'm not sure if it is possible to define the exact moment when traditions begin, but I do know that my brother is the first son of a first son—five generations deep.

Since I was little I remember hearing about the importance of this tradition. It was not until I was in my thirties that the tradition was broken. Dallas came out as transgender and announced to my family that he would be transitioning to present himself as a female. The explosive announcement sent shockwaves throughout my family. Some decided to support Dallas, others ignored her, while some cut her off completely. Surprisingly, my father seemed to take it in stride. It wasn't long, however, until I started noticing changes. He started coming to my house, he called me more, and he even hugged me once. Dallas also noticed the change, expressing frustration that our father had largely stopped communicating with her. It wasn't long after that Dallas came to me and compared us to the biblical Jacob and Esau—the latter selling his birthright to his younger brother. But the transfer of a birthright is superficial at best. My father still considers Dallas his first son—temporarily lost. I have never been able to fill the role.

My second son role has always been clear, but the mists are gathering, blurring once defined roles. Like the time my father stood in the room with his fifteen-year-old

second son, asking him for advice, my father and I now again found ourselves at an impasse: he didn't want me as his first son, and I didn't know how to be one. It was here in the clouded atmosphere of our relationship that I found my story. It is the story of a second son; the story of a boy who could never keep up with his father and brother; the story of a changing family dynamic still governed by unchanging minds; the story of a son becoming his father—and hating himself for it; the story of my relationship with my father and my sons; the first thirty-five years of my life.

Finding My Themes

Reflecting upon my family history, I see recurring themes. In this section, I will discuss these themes as they appear in *Secondson*, and poems that have inspired my graphic poetry. In *Secondson*, I explore four main themes: heroes and disillusionment, loneliness and being left behind, not measuring up, and the cycle of sons mirroring their fathers.

Heroes and Disillusionment

Secondson begins with heroes. When elementary children list their heroes, it is not uncommon to find the word “father” on the list. They are our protectors and providers. As children, we watch them perform impossible tasks. They salve our wounds. They fix our broken bikes. They tell us that there is nothing to fear. Once one is labeled a hero, he or she stays a hero. Li-Young Lee examines this idea in his poem “Epistle.” The speaker hears “the sound of weeping/coming from some other room/of his father’s house.” It is when we see our heroes break that we also break. Sons see in their

fathers the men that they will become. In the cultural tradition in which I was raised, men do not cry. When I saw my father cry, the foundation of my very being was torn asunder. I became disillusioned as I saw my protector, my provider, my should-be-hero admit that he didn't have all the answers—and there were some things he couldn't repair. I saw my future, my past, and I realized for the first-time that my father was subject to the same emotions as I was.

My father's emotional distance also conflicted with my beliefs about heroes. I learned from my peers that fathers were heroes. And so the conflict began: a young boy trying to fit his father into the mold of a hero, while knowing deep down that he would never be my hero. I begin my thesis with the theme of heroes and disillusionment in an attempt to show the naiveté of my young self—the speaker in such poems as “MASH nights,” and “Elementary.”

In “MASH nights,” the speaker attempts to reconcile the idea of fathers as heroes with the fact that he does not see his father as one. The speaker watches *MASH* with his father and realizes the show is not what he thought. Where he expected to find unbroken heroes, he found cynical doctors. The irony is that the doctors in *MASH* are unwilling heroes—almost antiheroes. The poem “Elementary” again considers images of doctors and heroes. The speaker continues to struggle, wanting his father to be something more.

Loneliness and Being Left Behind

Along with the theme of heroes and disillusionment, I have explored the loneliness, anger, and sadness I felt as a child upon being left behind by my father and brother. Feelings of loneliness and being left behind have filled my life for as long as I

can remember. Even when I was able to spend one on one time with my father, the conversation felt forced—often focusing on schoolwork and what I needed to do to be better. In Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy,” the speaker expresses once-restrained emotions to her now-dead father. Plath’s speaker claims that “I could never talk to you./The tongue stuck in my jaw./It stuck in a barb wire snare./Ich, ich, ich, ich,/I could hardly speak.” An inability to express oneself to his or her parent drives Plath’s poetry. The poems in *Secondson* mirror Plath’s poetry, as the speaker similarly speaks directly to his father, questioning, wondering, understanding, and questioning again.

Loneliness, sadness, and anger are manifested in many of the poems in *Secondson*. It is most prominently displayed in “Six Years Old,” and “My Shoes.” These poems echo imagery of shoes and the speaker’s attempt to keep up with his father and brother. Other poems deal with loneliness as well, including “Elementary” and “Dandelion Boy.” The realization that my relationship with my father was distant, starkly contrasted with the relationship my father had with my brother—exposing this prioritized love. Loneliness then became inextricably linked with my feelings of disillusionment of fathers as heroes. Because of the loneliness I felt as a child, I could not believe that my father was a hero. *A hero, I would think, wouldn’t leave his son alone on the driveway.*

Not Measuring Up

The third theme explored in *Secondson* is that of a son trying to measure up to traditions, familial roles, and fatherly expectations—and falling short. As stated earlier, I hail from a religious, traditional family. My brother was the first son of the first son, as

was my father—for five generations. As a second son, I have largely dodged familial expectations. My father never pushed me the way he did my brother growing up. I came up with the personal mantra, “If Dallas can do it, I can do it better.” I practiced harder at soccer. I worked harder at school. I gained more merit badges. Yet, my father didn’t notice. At thirty-five-years-old I still find myself chasing the shadow of my brother—for naught. My father has never acknowledged my achievements with more than a cursory, “Good for you.” I discovered this theme more fully when Dallas came out as transgender. Suddenly I was thrown into the expectations of the first son. But I wasn’t the first son. I knew it. My father knew it. We pretended for a while, my father deferring more to me and suddenly taking an interest in my life, but it felt contrived—forced—and it quickly flamed out.

David Bottom’s poem “Sign for My Father, Who Stressed the Bunt,” drove my desire to develop this theme more. Even when the speaker “could homer/into the left-field lot of Carmichael Motors” his father still stressed the bunt. Failing to live up to fatherly expectations is something that is not new to children. The father refused to see what his child was capable of and persisted in his preconceived opinion of his son. This sort of fatherly categorization is frustrating to the child. The speaker in *Secondson* expresses a similar frustration. In the poem “Grandpa’s Funeral” the speaker tries to carry the mantle of a first son, but knows that ultimately, he never will be accepted. The speaker speaks of his sons carrying him one day. “Grandpa’s Funeral” echoes imagery from another poem, “Lego Boy,” showing the traditional family roles and how they have shifted through the years of the speaker’s life. The speaker sees himself, his brother, and his father in his own sons and himself as he watches them and considers their future and

his own past. The irony of this theme is that the speaker of *Secondson* feels the fatherly expectations, but they are largely the expectations of him as a second son where few expectations exist, and when asked to carry the expectations of a first son, the speaker fails, knowing some traditions cannot be passed.

The Cycle of Sons Mirroring Their fathers

The final theme examined in *Secondson* is the cycle of sons mirroring their fathers. Since my sons were born, I have found myself making decisions that immediately ring of how my father interacted with me. This is a theme that I wish I never would have found in my life. This theme is a confession—an admission that I have treated my sons in some ways similarly. I understand now—to a degree—why my father treated me the way he did. Yet conflict arises with this new understanding of my father. For I also understand what he *could* have done.

The internal conflict that this causes is the very core of *Secondson*. What does it mean to become one's father? What does it mean to carry our fathers into our adulthood? The poet Li-Young Lee joins Bottoms in examining the pieces of our fathers that we carry throughout our lives. In Lee's poem "The Gift," the speaker has his father remove a metal splinter from his hand. His father performs the feat with such gentleness that the speaker claims, "I recall his hands,/two measures of tenderness/he laid against my face." The speaker then goes on to explore how he passed this gift from his father on to his wife, and then ends with the image of a young boy kissing his father. The final image of Lee's poem develops a cyclical feeling between father and son. I have ultimately become

the man that left me behind. I have chosen work over my sons. I have pushed them into roles.

The speaker in *Secondson* sees the reflection of his father in himself. The theme of sons mirroring fathers appears in “Lego Boy,” “Son Flowers,” “Grandpa’s Funeral,” and “I Understand Now.” Beyond just these poems, the overall structure of *Secondson* has been developed to reflect the theme of sons mirroring their fathers in an endless cycle. The final graphic image in *Secondson* is also the cover. The final graphic image is one of a son and father holding a copy of the book *Secondson*.



Many other poems inspired the themes of *Secondson*. The poem “Digging” by Seamus Heaney examines a son as he watches his father digging potatoes as he sits and writes. He contemplates the generations as he claims that “the old man could handle a spade./Just like his old man.” Intergenerational conflict is at the core of *Secondson*. I learned from Heaney’s poem that the four themes of *Secondson* would be best presented

through everyday activities of both the sons and the fathers. There is only one exceptional situation in *Secondson*: my grandfather's funeral. In the other poems, I took Heaney's example to heart and focused around seemingly meaningless fleeting moments and daily occurrences. Heaney allows the actions of the subjects of his poem—the father digging, the son writing—to establish his theme. The simple, daily occurrences of watching a television show, going to the hardware store, going out to lunch, mowing the lawn, going for a walk, and building with Legos, allow the four themes of *Secondson* to rise through the page, unsoiled by extravagant events and settings.

The one exceptional event of my grandfather's funeral was inspired by Dylan Thomas's poem "Do not Go Gentle into that Good Night." The speaker of Thomas's poem pleads with his father to "Rage, rage against the dying of the light." The simplicity in the diction of Thomas's poem inspired me to simplify the diction in *Secondson*. He speaks of "frail deeds" and "Grave men." Colloquial diction allows the reader to place importance on other aspects of the poem, such as his use of enjambment, rhyme, refrain, and the villanelle structure. In *Secondson*, I have attempted to simplify the diction to allow readers to resonate not just with the language of the poems, but also with each graphic image. Beyond this, the setting of a funeral allowed me to show the continuance of the themes of tradition and expectation throughout the generations of sons.

The four themes of *Secondson* have been a lifetime in the making. Some I encountered early in life, some when I had children, and some when my brother came out as transgender. And some I wish I had never found.

Finding My Genre (finding myself as an artist)

Growing up, I always yearned to be an artist. I took art classes, read Garfield comic strips, and dreamed of the day that I could join the ranks of Disney's animators. I watched the bonus content of Disney movies, enamored by how their animators flipped expertly from paper to paper to give their hand-drawn creations life. I took my drawing booklet to the zoo, and while my family walked from exhibit to exhibit, I would stay behind and sketch animals. I spent hours sketching cartoons, wondering what it would be like to work under the tutelage of Garfield's Jim Davis. I gave myself future career options: Disney, Paws, Inc., freelance, or the prospect of starting my own comic strip. But in 1995 everything changed. I was twelve when the movie *Toy Story* came out—the first fully computer-animated film. I knew computer animation was gaining popularity. I had seen it used in bits and pieces in several movies: *Aladdin's* Cave of Wonders, *The Lion King's* water buffalo stampede, and *Pocahontas's* canoe. I didn't worry, however. I believed that nothing would ever supplant the hand-drawn animation that I had known and loved.

I was sixteen in 1999, when *Toy Story 2* was released, and it was clear that computer-generated imagery (CGI) was here to stay. It was the same year of my parents' separation. I watched as my home and dreams were shattered. Over the next few years I lost all sense of direction. I graduated and found myself in college studying political science. But I wasn't happy. I switched my major to physical education. Again, I felt something was lacking, and in one last, desperate attempt to find a particle of who I once was, I switched my major to English.

I still remember the first time I picked up the novel *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. I was skeptical: collegiate-level literature—with pictures? I didn't believe such a novel

could match the rigor of Hugo, Dickens, and Shakespeare. When I first cracked the spine of *Maus*, something inside me broke. I fell down the rabbit-hole of imagination and possibility. Graphic images exploded from every page. I knew that this genre was meant for me.

After *Maus* and *Maus II*, I read *Persepolis*, *American Born Chinese*, *Hyperbole and a Half*, *Fun Home*, and *Stitches*. I searched out graphic novel adaptations of books I had grown to love such as *Redwall*, and *The Metamorphosis*—and I began to dream of writing my own graphic novel one day. I had given up on my drawing years before my encounter with *Maus*, and I knew that my drawing skills were amateur at best. But I found that the graphic images in many graphic novels and memoirs were far from perfect. I began to believe that my amateur drawings could not only be accepted in graphic literature, but could create meaning. My stylized drawings, like one's handwriting, was not only unique to me but left behind a piece of myself in every graphic image. I felt more expressive in my graphic imagery than I had ever felt before in any other type of writing—save poetry.

Poetry had also drawn me to it early. As a public school English teacher, I am often confronted with the preconception that all English teachers love poetry. But I don't love poetry due to English—I love English due to poetry. As a teenager I wrote unrestrained, stumbling free verse poems, connecting with my feelings, acknowledging my weaknesses. Poetry became cathartic. I taught myself to play the guitar, and soon I was writing songs. I recorded an album. My ballads told the story of my life. I wrote of my parent's divorce. I wrote of feeling I could achieve greatness. I wrote of my failures. I played and sang through college until I married. It was then that I began my English

degree. I was introduced to new forms of poetry and I cast aside my guitar and began writing sonnets, villanelles, and new free verse. My poems—like my songs—told of my deepest desires, dreams and insecurities. They acted as a journal, chronicling my life.

For a long time, nothing changed. I wrote poems and dreamed of one day writing a graphic memoir. After I began teaching high school, I was given the opportunity to teach a creative writing class. I added to the curriculum a unit on graphic literature. I then began my graduate degree in literature and writing. I decided to write a graphic memoir as my thesis. I stuck with this idea until I took a poetry writing course in which we were given the opportunity to write a chapbook of poetry. I entitled it *Dandelion Boy*. The central theme of *Dandelion Boy* is the feeling of belonging without feeling wanted. As I wrote each poem, I found myself taking breaks, sketching scenes from the poems. These scenes drove my words as I reached for the symbolism and diction to make the poems a piece of me that I left on the page. It was there, in that class, that I began to imagine writing a chapbook of graphic poetry. I had found my genre. It was something new, something challenging, and I knew I could create something that would make me proud.

Critical Scholarship

The idea of a series of pictures or graphics telling a story is not a new one. People have been telling stories through art for millennia. Pieces of graphic art such as the thirty-six foot brightly-colored screenfold found by Cortes around 1519 that told the story of the great military and political hero 8-Deer “Tiger’s-Claw,” or even the French work known as the *Bayeux Tapestry* depicting the Norman conquest of England, have told

cultural and historical stories and allowed insight to events that otherwise would have perhaps disappeared in the folds of languaged history (McCloud 11-13). In this section, I will look at the benefits of using graphic images. After this, I will focus on three types of graphic literature: graphic novels, graphic memoirs, and concrete poetry, which have helped me think about how to create graphic poetry. Very few graphic poetry collections exist.

Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* is foundational to the understanding of graphic literature. McCloud argues that comics and graphic literature are the bridge between physical art and written art, *Understanding Comics* is a critical graphic work about graphic works. One thing McCloud explains in his meta-graphic text is the difference between drawings and cartoons. Drawing is often a more serious form of art, and it can become cartoons, which in turn are abstract enough to allow the reader to see themselves as characters in the work, rather than to see the characters as disconnected drawings, rendering someone else's life. McCloud explains that the more detailed a drawing becomes, the more difficult it is for the reader to connect with the character—for they can no longer *become* the character (28-29).

McCloud explains that images in graphic literature transcend the realm of pictures and become symbols (36-39). Symbols have the power to thread themselves throughout a work in both language and graphic images, creating intricate themes and adding psychological depth.

The ideas of symbolism and imagery are also expounded upon in Will Eisner's text *Comics and Sequential Art*. Eisner discusses the nuances of graphic art—what he refers to as “sequential art.” Eisner discusses imagery in graphic art as being “the

anatomy of expression.” He uses the example of the image of a person kneeling with their hands in a pleading position. Eisner explains that through skilled manipulation and an understanding of the anatomy of expression, “the cartoonist can begin to undertake the exposition of stories that involve deeper meanings and deal with the complexities of human experience” (9-10).

Besides expressing symbols and imagery, Eisner speaks of how words and art become “irrevocably interwoven” on the page (127). Creators of what Eisner terms comics must control the reader’s ear and eye. Words themselves become visual art, along with the graphic images. By placing a word larger on the page, Eisner claims “the reader is being asked to supply (or ‘hear’) the sound internally” (129, author’s parenthesis). The author controls the effect is more powerful (129).

To Eisner, sequential art or comics are a medium—a type of tool—with many uses. Eisner speaks about various uses for sequential art, and how it can add meaning to work, including entertainment comics, graphic novels, technical instruction comics, attitudinal instruction comics, and storyboards—yet he never postulates that comics could also be used in poetry (147-155). Graphic poetry is still on the fringe of graphic literature.

Graphic Novels

Graphic novels have become ubiquitous. The other day I attended the Scholastic Book Fair at my children’s elementary school. The sheer quantity of young graphic novel literature astounded me. From *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* to *Catwad*, graphic novels crowded the shelves. Children are growing up with graphic novels now more than ever.

Graphic novels engage their readers on multiple sensual planes at once. Color, pictures, and words work together, pulling in young and old alike.

One of my favorite graphic novels is an adaptation of one of my favorite childhood books: *Redwall*, by Brian Jacques. The first time I picked up *Redwall*, I did so because of the graphic on the cover. It was segmented, much like a graphic novel would be, with a picture of a warrior mouse. I found myself constantly returning to the cover, looking at the characters and wondering what the others would look like.



But I was worried the first time I picked up *Redwall: The Graphic Novel*. I was scared I would lose the images that my imagination once forged. But my fear was unfounded. Rather than destroy the scenes created by my imagination, the graphic novel augmented them. Suddenly, the characters I had viewed as heroes were *more* heroic. I saw their hyperbolized foes and saw them defeated. The graphic novel made me want to

read *more*. It increased my connection to the characters at a level I had never before experienced.

Feeling connected with characters can happen in any type of literature. But *seeing* characters adds a sense of reality to the scenes. One scene I remember vividly comes from *Maus*. The scene takes place as Spiegelman's father is forced to fight and kill someone. I never forgot the image of the Nazi soldier camouflaged as a tree being shot. The irony created by this image is palpable: the Jewish soldier did not want to kill another man, the Nazi soldier wanted to be camouflaged to protect himself, but the Jewish soldier has no qualms about killing a tree. All of this was portrayed in just one page of text and graphic images—and the image of the Nazi soldier falling scarred itself forever in my memory forever.



The inner turmoil of Spiegelman's father is further portrayed in the graphics as they become darker on the page. Culminating in the image of the Nazi-cat holding up a

hand to surrender, coupled with the caption “but I kept shooting. Until finally the tree stopped moving.” Spiegelman artfully juxtaposes the darker cells with lighter cells before and after, allowing readers to sink into the heart of the character. Darkened drawings, focused on the narrator’s target, show the importance of this moment as the narrator is forced to kill his first human being.

Graphic novels create symbolism beyond the words: Jews are mice, Nazis are cats, Poles are pigs. Even the Star of David can incorporate the head of a mouse. Repeated graphic images create symbolism that helps the reader understand the gravity of the situation. It’s not that the mice choose not to fight back against the cats—it’s that they cannot. They are not predators—they are prey. Spiegelman emphasizes this throughout his book, but shows it clearly with the scene of several mice being hanged in a city square. To read of a hanging is bad—to see an image of a hanging is horrific.



If one were to draw an image of a cat hanging a mouse, it would be ludicrous at best, and sociopathic at worst. Yet because of the narrative and mixture of text with pictures, Spiegelman is able to create a moving—yet horrific—scene of the narrator’s friends’ deaths. He layers graphics, allowing the reader to fully visualize the scene being told. Here, Spiegelman uses only the most cursory of descriptions, saying “They hanged there one full week.” He allows the graphic to tell the rest of the story—faceless Jews’ corpses being guarded by a faceless Nazi soldier with faceless crowds watching from a distance. Spiegelman then gives short descriptions of each of those that hanged. He does this while also allowing his drawings to be more specific—zooming in on the hanging feet of those that died. Spiegelman’s use of quasi-general graphics allows the reader to understand that these types of events are not unique to this story. The symbolism created stretches the reader’s viewpoint beyond Spiegelman’s story and suddenly the reader sees the holocaust in all its horror.

The success of graphic novels such as *Maus* and *Maus II* paved the way for other types of graphic literature: young adult graphic literature, graphic memoirs, and now graphic poetry.

Graphic Memoirs

Graphic memoirs have gained great popularity in the past two decades. The nature of graphic literature often creates a feeling of fiction. Yet despite the illustrative symbolism, the graphic memoir has established itself as a powerful medium through which serious experiences can be told. The mixture of graphics with narrative allows authors to achieve the depth they seek when writing their personal histories. The

symbolic images mixed with the text create a work that teeters on the summit of where fiction and non-fiction collide. The book *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang is one of these liminal novels at the threshold of fiction and memoir. Yang uses colorful, crisp images to interweave three tales together. Three disparate stories loop together and create meaning as each of the characters tries to discover who they are.

The graphic memoir *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel is similar. A memoir of a daughter remembering her deceased father and childhood, *Fun Home*'s narrator regularly poses questions regarding her father's sexuality while also discovering her own. By focusing on familial relationships, Bechdel is able to create a sense of satiric tragedy—due in part to traditional values held by her father, and the paradoxical life that these values forced him to live. Bechdel explores her father's life as a closeted homosexual man who never fully accepts himself. Her graphics are stylized with simple shading and clear sequence, the images thick with symbolism. A striking image is that of her father carrying a post as he works to repair the home he loves. The image mirrors Christ carrying a cross. The reader understands that her father finds some sort of sanctity in his work on the home—as if it were his calling.

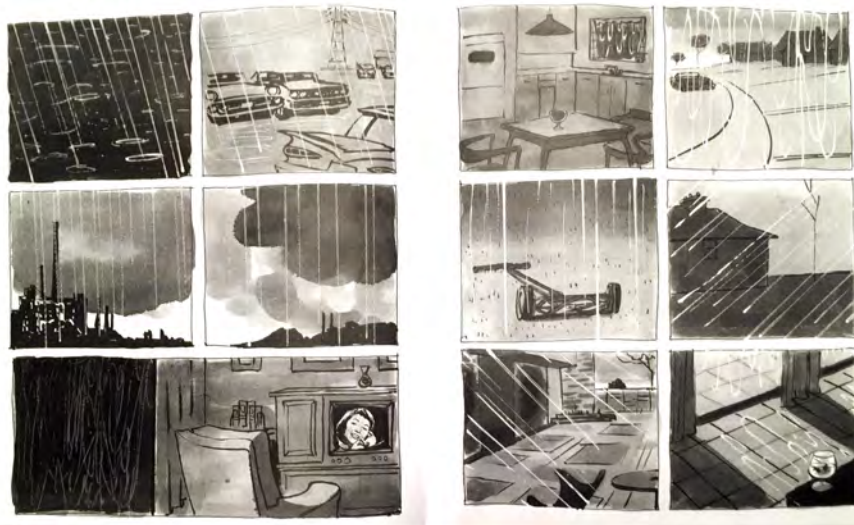


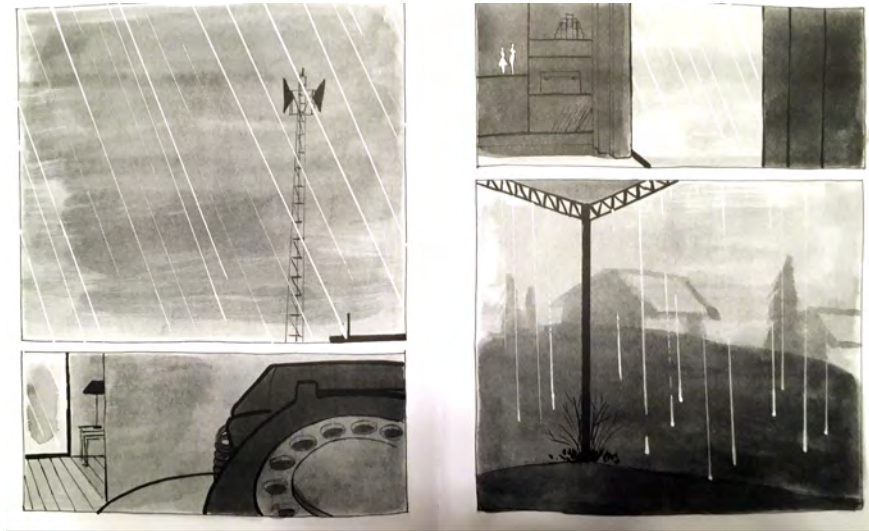
Bechdel adds diversity with full-page graphics and more detailed drawings that serve to deepen the tone of the overall memoir. Bechdel unapologetically exposes everything she knows about her father and how it affected her own sense of self.

This self-awareness is similar to what author Allie Brosh provides in her graphic memoir *Hyperbole and a Half*. In this memoir, Brosh creates a disjointed story based on seemingly random events of her life. It includes stories that span the author's childhood to adulthood. She is at once witty and serious as her main character works through times of depression and confusion in her life. The drawings are loose and simple with full, bright colors. Brosh routinely presents larger blocks of text followed by small graphics depicting the situation. The simplicity of the graphics and their child-like quality creates a feeling of innocence that complements the speaker as she works through everyday situations.

Unlike Bechdel and Brosh, the author David Small balances his memoir, *Stitches*, more heavily on the side of the graphic image. *Stitches* follows Small through his life as

a boy to adulthood. Small sections his memoir into various ages—some of which are presented only in graphic images without narrative: tears turn to rain, empty streets, and homes. The absence of words itself leaves the reader feeling hollow and empty—much like the young protagonist.





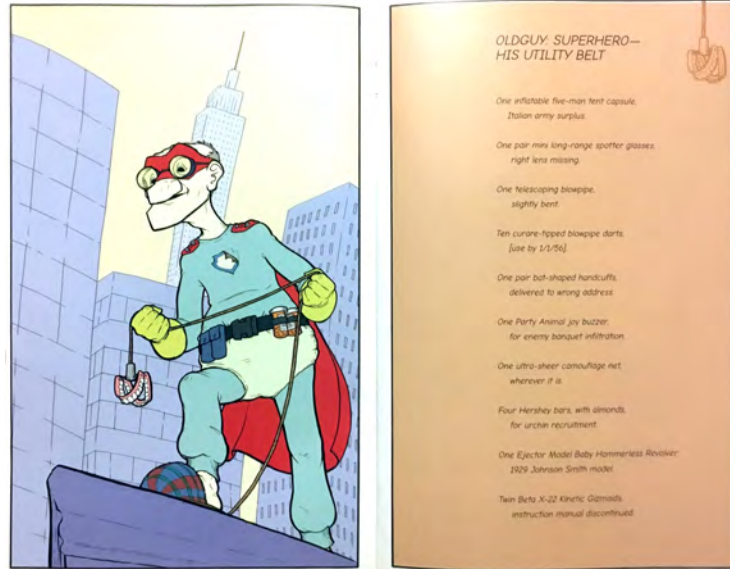
Concrete Poetry

While few collections of graphic poetry exist, I have drawn inspiration from poems that rely upon visual expression. Ekphrastic poetry is poetry based on an image (Myers and Simms 393). Ekphrastic poetry can be seen in W. H. Auden's "Musee des Beaux Arts," which was inspired by the painting "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus," by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" provides another example of poetry inspired by visual art. *Secondson* creates an inverted ekphrastic—ultimately creating the image from my own poetry. The art of spatial awareness in poetry is something that poets have long appreciated and embraced as an integral part of the art of poetry. The poet e. e. cummings employed spelling, syntax, capitalization, lineation, and stanzaic divisions to help carry the meaning of his poetry to new levels (Myers and Wojahn 70). Perhaps one of Cummings' most famous poems is "*r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r.*" In this poem, Cummings uses the page as a canvas upon which the grasshopper is bouncing from one side to the other, confounding not only syntax and space, but also

words themselves. While the poem itself contains no graphic image, the visual art is clear. But Cummings was not alone in his use of spatial awareness in his poetry.

May Swenson wrote concrete poetry that she labeled iconographs. In *Iconographs*, Swenson allows poems to take the shape of their subject. In the poem “The DNA Molecule,” the stanzas twist and tumble upon themselves down the page over the course of two pages. Swenson creates images of theaters, bottles, even cuts. The poem’s language and shape become one—allowing the reader to appreciate the literature in imaginative ways. Though different from the graphic poetry of *Secondson*, her iconographs stand as a unique form of visual art mixed with language.

Works like Cumming’s spatial poetry and May Swenson’s *Iconographs* helped to shorten the leap from wholly verbal poetry to graphic poetry. Graphic poetry is still a newcomer in the world of graphic literature, and few examples exist. One example is the chapbook *Old Guy Superhero*. Tim Mayer and poet William Trowbridge combined their talents to create a comic-book-style chapbook of poetry. The chapbook contains thirteen poems with various full-page graphics. Not every poem has an accompanying graphic, and each appears as a complete poem on a page separate from the images.



The chapbook follows the misadventures of the aptly named protagonist, Oldguy, and his interactions with the world around him. The images in *Old Guy Superhero* work with the text to augment the meaning of the poems by providing a satirical, visual humor that the poems would only partially do.

Graphic literature has gained prominence over the past thirty years. Graphic images that were once only the stuff of comic books have broken barriers and inundated the academic and publishing worlds. Authors and artists have blazed the pathway for my graphic poetry thesis, *Secondson*.

The Graphic Images of *Secondson*

The poems of *Secondson* were written and revised towards words achieving complex integration between the words and the graphic images: without one, the other becomes weak, but when placed together, they create emotionally charged graphic images that support the four themes previously discussed. The graphic images of

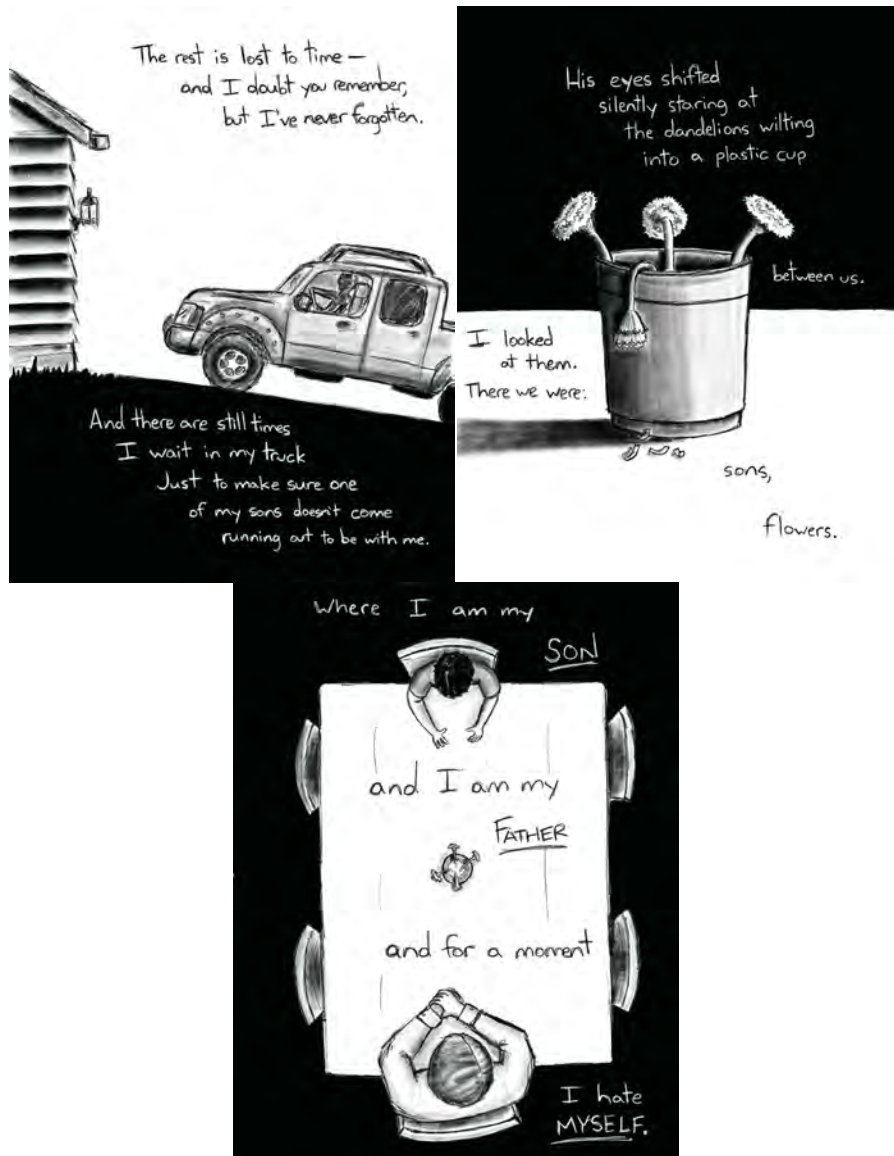
Secondson rely on four major stylistic choices: the choice of color scheme, the style of the poetry and of the drawings, the use of hyperbole and metaphor, and the use of repetition. Each graphic image represents hours of work. Each was drawn, written, redrawn, rewritten, and revised again in an attempt to capture the perfect balance.

Color Scheme

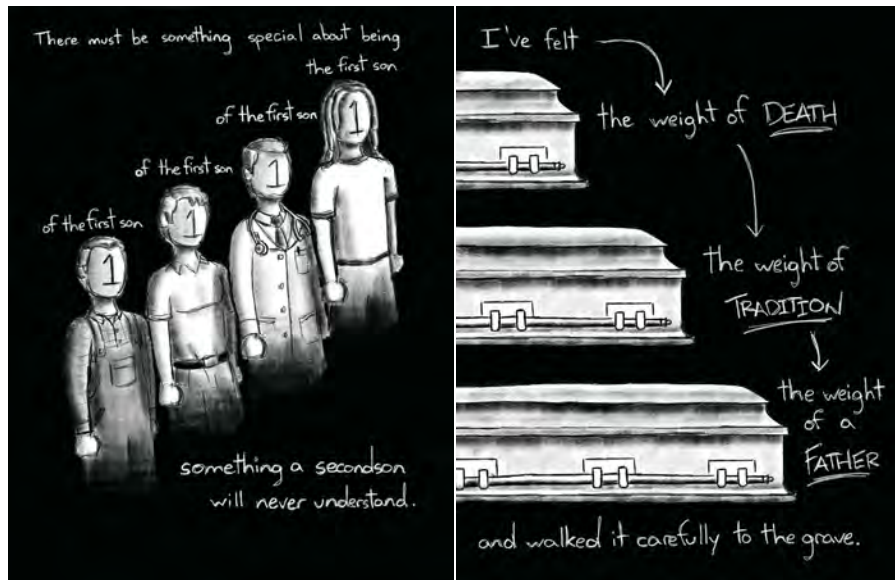
I have chosen to keep the graphic images in a grayscale color scheme. In his book *The Invisible Art: Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud states, “In black and white, the ideas *behind* the art are communicated more *directly*. Meaning transcends form. Art approaches *language*” (192, author’s italics). One of the goals of *Secondson* is to fully integrate the images with the language. Black and white drawings integrate rather than distract. Shading and gradients allow for readers to feel different weights of emotions throughout the poetry. For example, the darkened scene of a boy climbing mountains of shoes in “Six Years Old” provides a similar effect to that of the darkened final graphic in “MASH Nights.”



A black-and-white style is used in the poems “Son Flowers” and “Grandpa’s Funeral,” as well as in the final scene of “Six Years Old.” The stark contrast between black and white on the pages helps to create feelings of division. The use of black and white in “Son Flowers” creates a feeling of opposites—but opposites confined and confronted on one page.



The stark black and white in “Grandpa’s Funeral” helps to create the feeling of the weight the speaker is experiencing—with the black sections of the work taking over much of the pages.



Just as I used black and white to create feelings of division and weight in “Son Flowers” and “Grandpa’s Funeral,” I used lighter shades with less contrast in “My Shoes,” “Elementary,” and “Six Years Old.” Darker poems not only provide contrast within themselves from page to page, but provide contrast on a larger scale from poem to poem. The lighter tones and smoother contrasts in “My Shoes,” “Elementary,” and “Six Years Old” work to provide a feeling of youthful innocence. The constant push and pull of black and white, dark and light, express the ongoing conflicted feelings of understanding and innocence, anger and forgiveness.



Style

While much could be said for the narrative style of *Secondson*'s poetry, this section will focus around *Secondson*'s graphic style. The graphic image style of *Secondson* centers around three things: the use of incorporated words, loosely rendered drawings, and perspective.

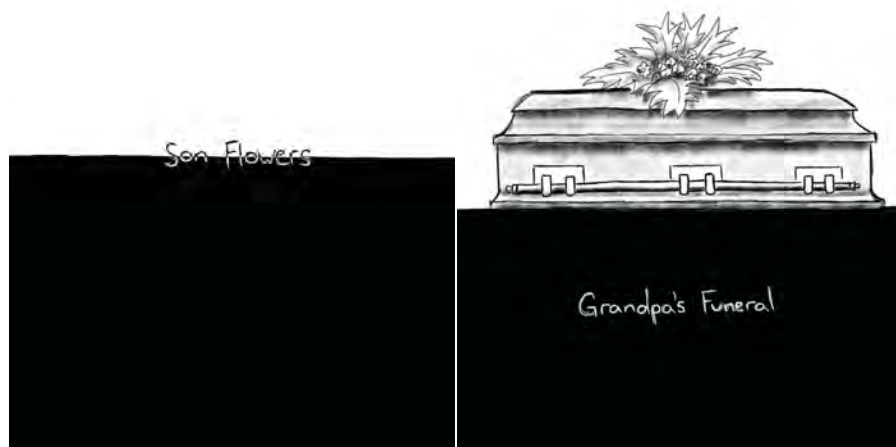
With the exception of the poems "Dandelion Boy" and "Son Flowers," each poem in *Secondson* was developed jointly with the graphics to create a cohesive graphic image. "Dandelion Boy" and "Son Flowers" were revised from poetry in the chapbook *Dandelion Boy* discussed under the section Finding My Genre. These two poems were included in an attempt to tie *Dandelion Boy* and *Secondson* together. The other seven poems included in *Secondson* were developed as graphic poems. One of the first goals I had upon finding my genre was to incorporate the diction with the graphics in such a way as to make them rely upon one another for meaning. I did not want to merely illustrate my poems, but rather I wanted the poems to come into being organically infused. I

wanted each piece to be an inseparable work of graphic poetry, so that one without the other would feel incomplete.

I decided to break the boundaries that many graphic novels and memoirs fall into with their standard text boxes and bubbles. I began to include words on walls such as in the first scene of “MASH nights,” and intermingle words with graphics such as in “Dandelion Boy.”



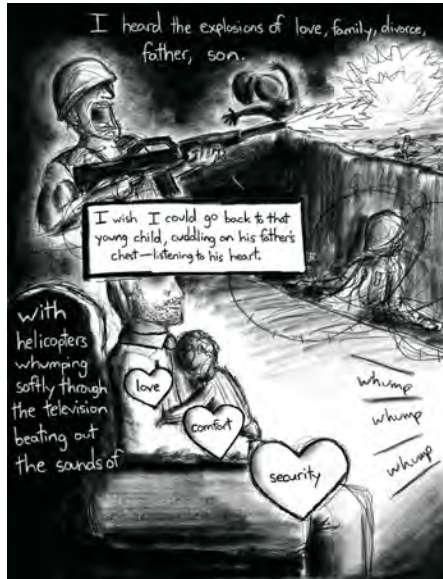
Each word in *Secondson* was carefully chosen and placed on the page. The title page of “Son Flowers” reflects the words across the black and white divide. Meanwhile, the title of page of “Grandpa’s Funeral” buries its title beneath the coffin.



One of the most obvious uses of incorporated words is in “Son Flowers” as the words spill from their confined text box into the cup where one sees the words “father” and “son” floating.



Each pencil stroke *Secondson* has purpose. Loosely rendered drawings are my preferred method of art. I have often drawn, painted, or crafted formal works of art, sharp in their presentation and clean in their lines. I wanted *Secondson* to be different. I wanted it to be pure, unadulterated me. I allowed my weaknesses in art to shine through. I wanted the readers to see the unused lines. I wanted them to understand that each graphic image included multiple failed hand strokes that eventually led to them being what they are. This loose style is prominent in a scene from “MASH nights” as the speaker contemplates war and his past self, cuddling on his father’s chest.



The graphic images of *Secondson* are far from perfect. They represent myself and my life in their purest forms: vulnerable, blurred, and, at times, chaotic.

The use of perspective in *Secondson* works to try and emphasize different emotions. In poems such as “Elementary,” “Lego Boy,” and “Son Flowers” the perspective is intentionally skewed to hide the faces of the characters. The intention of this is to allow the readers to see themselves in these characters. The graphic images allow for each father or son to represent anyone.

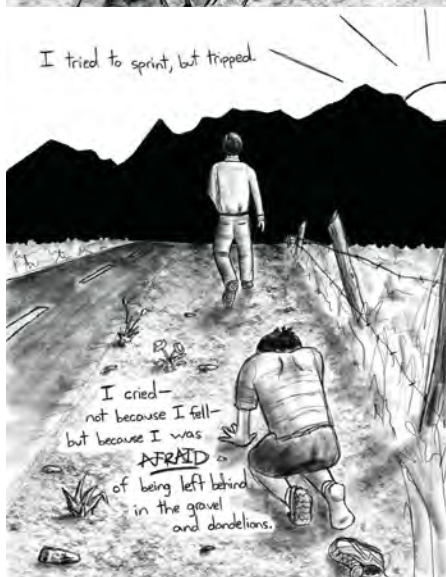


Other times perspective is used to emphasize the previously discussed themes of the poems. The poem “My Shoes” uses varied perspectives to allow the reader to feel a quicker pacing to the poem. The scene of the boy kneeling with his father walking into the distance uses perspective to allow the reader to also feel left behind. The scene then cuts to a mix of close-ups and distance, to show the boy’s troubles while simultaneously

showing the distance between himself and his father. The poem then ends with a close up of the footprints in the dirt—left behind by his father.



— in one step I was lost.



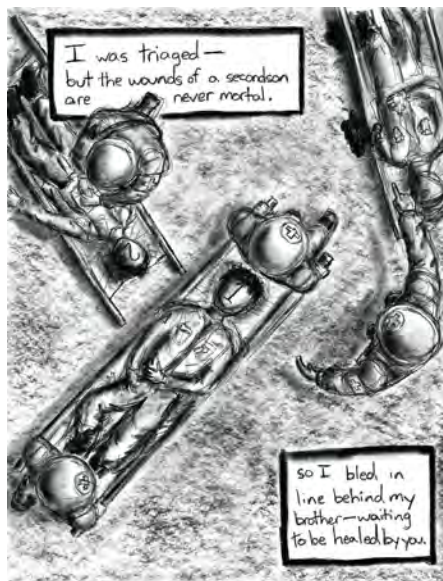
DAD!
WAIT!



Each graphic image of each graphic poem has been purposefully arranged to wring every last drop of emotion and empathy from the reader. Through perspective the reader becomes *part* of the poem rather than a mere receptacle of the graphic poem.

Hyperbole and Metaphors

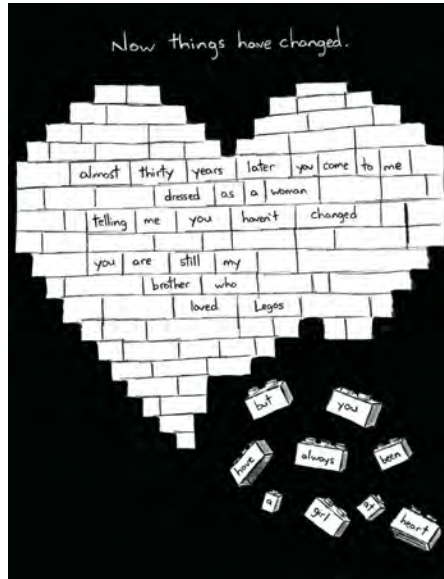
The graphic images in *Secondson* also take full advantage of hyperbole and metaphors. I have striven to create hyperbolic graphic images that create metaphorical meanings to the graphic poems. In the poem “MASH nights,” the speaker is sucked into the world of *MASH*. He sees himself as a warrior wounded in battle and waiting to be healed by the doctors. This war metaphor creates an overwhelming feeling of life and death.



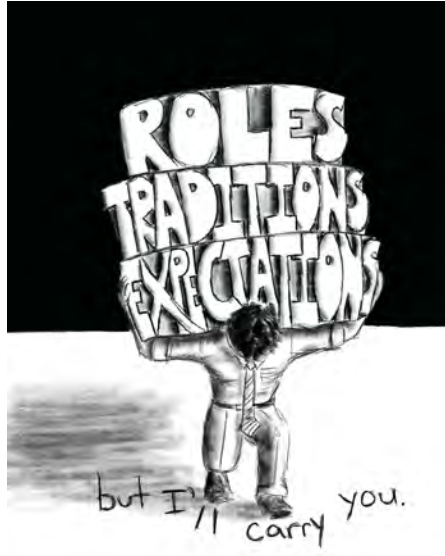
The scene from “Six Years Old” of the son scaling shoes uses the metaphorical mountain of shoes to help show the daunting feeling that a six-year-old experiences when trying to find his shoes to not be left behind.



A graphic image in “Lego Boy” of a Lego heart breaking into pieces helps to show the fracturing that began to occur in the family—something the language of the poem does not explicitly reference.



In the final scene of “Grandpa’s Funeral,” I take the idea of carrying the weight of my father and expand it to carrying the weight of tradition, of being a father, and of being a son. Coupled with this image, the simple words “and I’ll carry you” suddenly feel heavier. The word “you”—indicating the speaker’s father—is transformed into a weight-laden word. The speaker bends under the weight of his father as he tries to carry all that has been heaped upon him.



The language of *Secondson*, as stated previously, is unremarkable. By hyperbolizing the language through the graphic images, simple words take on the weight of the themes of the chapbook. This also works to create a more unified graphic image—one that makes the words and images feel inseparable.

Repetition

Throughout *Secondson*, I have used repetition of graphics to help promote various symbols and to echo themes. I have used repetition in two distinct ways: externally across the poems, and internally within each poem.

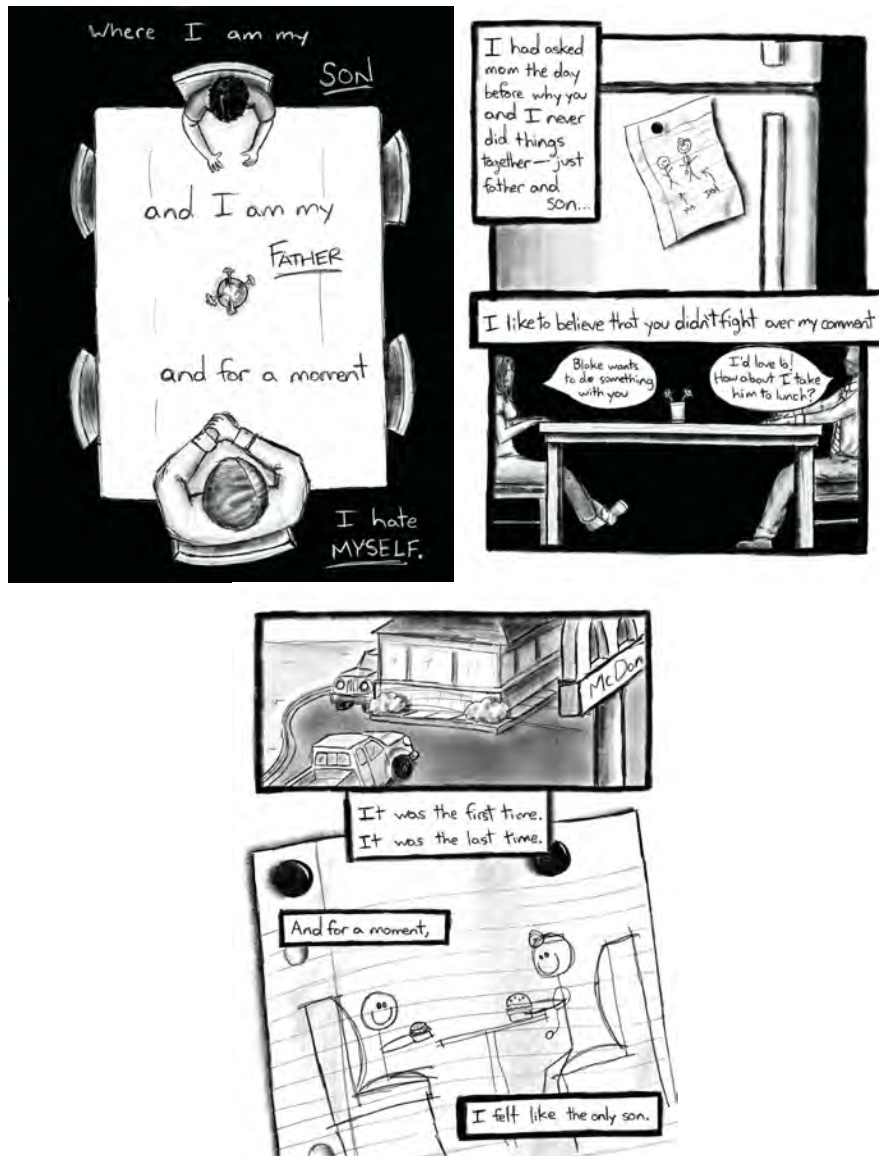
External repetition is prevalent throughout much of *Secondson*. Three distinct images include dandelions, discussions around a kitchen table, and numbered faces. The repetition of each of these helps create and carry symbolism throughout the pages of the chapbook.

Dandelion imagery is found in “Six Years Old,” “Son Flowers,” “Dandelion Boy,” and “My Shoes.” In “Dandelion Boy,” the dandelions represent an object of taboo desire and hope. Dandelions reappear throughout the other poems, as the speaker is left on the driveway in “Six Years Old,” is acutely aware of the dandelions in the cup between him and his son in “Son Flowers,” and falls to his knees on the gravel when trying to keep up with his father in “My Shoes.”



As the dandelion imagery is repeated, it begins to take on new meaning. The dandelions remind the reader of the hope the boy once held of a loving father. The hope continues through the beginning poems but is absent from the final poems, until the very end in “I Understand Now.” As the poems progress through the speaker’s life the hope dies.

Another reoccurring image is that of discussions around a kitchen table. These images occur on the title page, “Son Flowers,” and “Elementary.” This first time this image is seen beyond the cover is in “Son Flowers” as the father and the son sit across from each other, separated by a vast emotional expanse. This image is used again in “Elementary” in two different ways. The first shows the father and mother sitting across the table discussing the son. Though the dialogue is amicable, the reader is reminded of the previous scene between father and son—and the separation felt in “Son Flowers.” This helps the reader understand that even though the parents are together, they are still emotionally separated. The image is repeated in “Elementary” when the father and son go to the restaurant and sit across from each other at the table. Even though the speaker felt as though he were “the only son,” he is still separated from his father by the vast emotional expanse that the table has come to represent.



At various points throughout the graphic poems, numbers appear on the character's faces. The numbering of faces cements the main idea of the main speaker being the second of two sons. The numbers first appear in "MASH nights" when the sons are being triaged. They continue to resurge throughout the graphic images—often replacing previously drawn character's faces. By placing numbers instead of faces, I have worked to bring out the previously discussed themes of being left behind and not

measuring up to traditions, familial roles, and fatherly expectations. After “MASH nights,” the numbered faces are repeated in “Six Years Old,” “Dandelion Boy,” “Lego Boy,” “Grandpa’s Funeral,” and “I Understand Now.” The reason these occur is to remind the reader of the prioritized love and positioning that the speaker has experienced throughout his life.

There are three poems that make use of internal repetition: “Elementary,” “My Shoes,” and “Grandpa’s Funeral.” The repeated childlike drawings in “Elementary” work to create a feeling of sustained innocence throughout the poem. The repeated images of footprints in “My Shoes” work to create a quick-paced feeling of being left behind. In “Grandpa’s Funeral,” I used the repeated imagery of a photograph. Funerals are family settings. I chose to use the repeated image of a photograph due to the strong link that photographs have in preserving family memories. Photographs carry traditions and memories from generation to generation—not unlike the intergenerational theme of “Grandpa’s Funeral.”

Conclusion

The relationship between a father and a son is complicated. David Bottoms examines this relationship in his poem “The Desk” as the speaker recounts breaking into an elementary school to steal the desktop upon which his father etched his name. The speaker is driven to unlawful activities to procure a piece of what was once his father—and is at once himself. He claims, “I saw again, after many years the name/of my father, my name, carved deep into the oak top.” The speaker then falls into a reverie as he imagines what it must have been like to be his father, sitting at the desk, etching his name

while dreaming of his future. For a moment, the speaker and his father become one. They are the same, and yet different—they are both father and son. This reflection is followed by dark and frustrated diction as the speaker “hammered up in the ringing dark/a salvo of crossfire” as he removes the desk top. Perhaps the most poignant part of this poem occurs at the end, when the speaker wonders “what it means to own my father’s name.”

The speaker of *Secondson* echoes the Bottoms’ speaker in “The Desk.” The son in *Secondson* seeks to discover his own identity—as a father, as a son, and as a brother. *Secondson* strives to use common symbols and themes as threads that work to pull the poems together, creating a work that builds upon itself, deepening the tones of longing, loss, and confusion of the speaker. *Secondson* shows the cyclical nature of the a father-son relationship. The ultimate goal is to expose the nuances and complications that arise as one begins to recognize that there is no real healing of the wound created in a toxic father-son tradition. *Secondson* is a work of longing, understanding, and self-discovery. The graphics and language of the poems are designed to work together in such a way as to resonate with the readers’ own challenges and struggles in their own familial relations. The tragic truth remains that sons are left behind, and—though their fathers were imperfect beings—they will carry them throughout their lives—and their sons will carry them.

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