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Performing Unreachable Bodies:

The Politics of Encounter in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*

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Performing Unreachable Bodies:
The Politics of Encounter in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2010

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Readings of *Fun Home* thus far have tended to focus on the representation of Alison Bechdel's traumatic life experiences and on the ways in which the memoir bears witness to that trauma. While Jennifer Lemberg explores the role of drawing in overcoming the difficulty or impossibility of naming the traumatic experiences Alison undergoes (135), Ann Cvetkovich draws attention to the cultural and political work the memoir performs by making space for everyday life histories of trauma and for accounts of forbidden, pathologized desires (111).

I would like to explore the ways in which *Fun Home* foregrounds those illicit desires, and performs that political work, not only through the telling of Alison's story but, more specifically, by mobilizing the reader's affective capabilities in the face of what may be read as surprising, emotionally charged objects and situations. I suggest that Bechdel's memoir boldly sets the stage for an affective and cognitive encounter with out-of-bounds, unapproachable bodies and histories. Our assumptions about hetero and homonormativity, as well as our conception of home and the family as heterosexual, normative spaces, are interrogated in and through those encounters. I analyze the fundamental role of the graphic narrative form, and the employment of archival objects and elements of performance in particular, in setting the stage for the reader's affective encounter with Alison's family history.

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Introduction

Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* controversially invites us to approach and inhabit a pedophile's body and desires. Page after page, we experience along with Alison, the autobiographical narrator, a series of encounters with her father Bruce and, through the exploration of his archive, we access not only his illicit sexuality but also his role as a father and as the head of a heterosexual family.[1] In our current cultural setting, where LGBTQ discourses and politics too often reinforce the values and status of normative culture, queer desires that exceed hetero and homonormative understandings of sexual identity continue to be pathologized. In this context, I suggest that Bechdel's memoir boldly sets the stage for an affective and cognitive encounter with out-of-bounds, unapproachable bodies and histories. Our assumptions about hetero and homonormativity, as well as our conception of home and the family as heterosexual, normative spaces, are interrogated in and through those encounters.

Fun Home takes us back to Alison's childhood and young adulthood, recreating her family history and, above all, her conflicted relationship with an emotionally distant father. In her attempt to reclaim his story, Alison explores Bruce's queer tendencies in parallel to her own coming out process. We learn early on in the story that Bruce is sexually attracted to adolescent boys (17). He works as a funeral director and English teacher in an American rural town, where he runs into legal difficulties after his

[1] Throughout this essay, I use 'Alison' to refer to *Fun Home*'s autobiographical narrator, and 'Bechdel' to designate the author. However, it is worth noting that the text blurs and problematizes these categories not only through the ambivalence the memoir genre introduces with respect to questions of voice and authorship but also, as we will explore, through its performance of archival evidence.

relationship with one of his high school students is exposed. Shortly after Alison comes out as a lesbian to her parents, her mother decides to divorce her father. Two weeks later, Bruce dies under the wheels of a truck and, although the evidence is equivocal, Alison seems to believe that her father committed suicide. She is haunted by guilt at the prospect that her sexual coming out might have contributed to his decision and by the impossibility of ever knowing what really went through Bruce's mind. This sense of haunting informs Bechdel's writing of *Fun Home*.

Readings of *Fun Home* thus far have understandably tended to focus on its representation of Alison's experience of trauma when faced, first, with her father's suicide and, later on, with the discovery of his queer sexual desire for adolescent boys. While Jennifer Lemberg focuses on the role of drawing in overcoming the difficulty or impossibility of naming the traumatic experience Alison undergoes, allowing her to articulate feelings and sensations that would otherwise remain silenced (135), Monica Pearl reflects on the text as reparation, as a space for reconciling post-traumatic "feelings of ambivalence and guilt for both writer and reader" (298). Ann Cvetkovich, on her part, draws attention to the cultural and political work the memoir performs by making space for everyday life histories of trauma and, perhaps most importantly, for stories of forbidden, pathologized desires (111). I would like to explore the ways in which *Fun Home* foregrounds those illicit desires, and performs that political work, not only through the telling of Alison's story but, more specifically, by mobilizing the reader's affective capabilities in the face of what may be read as surprising, emotionally charged objects and situations. I argue that reading becomes a politically risky, transforming, almost

violent endeavor as the reader becomes affected by a series of encounters with sexual, pathologized 'others.' I propose to draw attention to the ways in which the text, beyond bearing witness to a traumatic history, embodies and performs queer bodies and desires.[2] Those embodied performances, in turn, work to produce an affective response in the reader, where the term "affect" is understood, following Nigel Thrift, as a biological phenomenon that "brings together a mix of hormonal flux, body language, shared rhythms and other forms of entrainment to produce an encounter between the body … and the particular event" (236). Embodying and communicating affect, *Fun Home* invites us to participate in a series of encounters that cast Bruce as a complex, multifaceted human being. By prompting us to affectively access Alison's intimate relationship with her father, the text undermines the figure of the pedophile as a 'stranger' whose history and desires are socially scripted as unapproachably out of bounds. The memoir thus works to politically reposition the reader with respect to prevailing conceptions of the heterosexual family and normative sexualities.

The graphic narrative form becomes fundamental to allow for our affective encounter with Alison's family history. In his "Introduction" to *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* Number Thirteen, Chris Ware makes a convincing case for the central role that affect plays in comics. He argues that the graphic narrative builds a sense of intimacy through the direct access to emotion its visual language grants the reader:

Unlike prose writing, the strange process of writing with pictures encourages

[2] I use 'queer' as a comprehensive term that encompasses lesbian, gay and other non-heteronormative practices and desires.

> associations and recollections to accumulate literally *in front of the eyes*; people, places, and events appear out of nowhere. Doors open into rooms remembered from childhood, faces form into dead relatives, and distant loves appear, almost magically, on the page—all deceptively manageable, visceral, the combinations sometimes even revelatory. (Ware 12)

Indeed, as we will explore, visual language plays a fundamental role in the communication of affect in graphic narratives. However, in *Fun Home* archival objects also prove to be central in producing an effect of textual embodiment that renders lost bodies and situations more vivid and present. That sense of textual embodiment, in turn, both gives way to and is sustained by gestures of performance. It is around these graphic and archival objects, memories and events that affective encounters might take place as the reader is invited not only to witness but also, through graphic embodied performance, to become physically engaged with the remains of past histories.

Fun Home immerses the reader in its intricate affective histories partly through performance. Much has been said about the possibility that a specific type of performance may exist in and through writing. When discussing the epistemic change that current digital technologies give rise to in the field of performance studies, Diana Taylor reminds us that the question of what we mean by embodiment has become a central debate in the field. Even though performance, as she argues, "has manipulated, extended, and played with embodiment" (4-5) since ancient times, some critics limit performance to present, physical embodiment: "performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representation…Performance's

being…becomes itself through disappearance" (Phelan 146). According to this view, (archival) writing and performance are by definition antithetical notions. Other critics such as Joseph Roach, however, propose an extended, nuanced definition of performance as coterminous with memory and history: "performance genealogies draw on the idea of expressive movements as mnemonic reserves, including patterned movements made and remembered by bodies, residual movements retained implicitly in images or words (or in the silences between them)…" (qtd in Taylor 5). Strikingly, Roach's understanding of performance as rooted in residues or traces of movements found not only in the body itself but also in images, words and the silences between them might simultaneously be read as a formal definition of the archival graphic memoir. With its generic combination of images, words and blank spaces or silences in between each frame, which the reader must collaboratively fill in, the graphic narrative is particularly well equipped to bear the genealogical and, I would add, the affective traces of performance. The formal traits of the graphic narrative define its potential to become fertile ground for the transmission and production of cultural memory in and through performance. The archival graphic memoir in particular, involved in the re-enactment of lived experience, memories, bodies and indexical objects, bears the capacity to perform important political and cultural work as a technology that enables the preservation of specific genealogies of queer and other underrepresented forms of embodiment and performance. Unlike other technologies that preserve cultural and affective memories, such as documentary film and video,[3] the

[3] See Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings* for a more thorough discussion of documentary film and video technologies as queer archives.

graphic narrative shares a fundamental trait with traditional theatre: the recurrent, structural aporetic blanks in between frames or scenes that the reader/viewer must imaginatively fill in. Those silences, those inscribed absences are, as Roach suggests, intrinsic to performance. They point towards what is not there, towards unresolved situations and unnamed affects that are constantly actualized through reading/viewing. In this sense, as we will explore, they become fundamental in making space for the reader's own (queer) intervention.

Fun Home as a graphic memoir speaks to Roach's extended notion of performance, opening up paths to think beyond the writing/performance binary. Rather than uphold the dualistic divide between writing and performance, *Fun Home* queers writing from within, unveiling the constructed nature of that dichotomy and suggesting the latent interactions between them, the presence of one in the other. In *The Archive and the Repertoire,* Diana Taylor suggests that writing and performance exist in an unstable, forever shifting and continuously reinvented relation to each other. I argue that in graphic memoirs such as *Fun Home,* elements of performance leak into the textual space of the page through forms of archival embodiment and a range of performative gestures that re-draw the boundaries of the written text to encompass a series of lived bodies, including the reader's. Such blurring of generic boundaries, I suggest, becomes political in the sense that it functions to facilitate affective encounters with unapproachable, socially out-of-bounds queer bodies within the environment of the written page. I would like to suggest that, cutting across the boundaries that separate performance from the written text, the graphic archival memoir makes encounters with queer bodies possible through its capacity to

performatively produce forms of embodiment that materially and hauntingly evoke lost objects and corporealities. Those embodied encounters, in turn, function to affectively engage the reader.

As discussed above, the graphics in the text become crucial to enable the type of performative, embodied textuality capable of engaging the reader in a material encounter with affective histories. In other words, the graphic language of *Fun Home*, and its archival elements in particular, work to recreate embodied affect. In regard to the role of archives in this genre, Jared Gardner observes that documentary evidence - in the "loosest, messiest sense of the word" - is omnipresent in contemporary graphic narratives (787). Not only do graphic novels consistently foreground archives as a main thematic concern, as in the paradigmatic works of Ben Katchor and Kim Deitch, but the issue of archiving and collecting comics is integral to their form of distribution and production. The circulation of comics often involves a serial gap, since they tend to be delivered in installments. As Gardner accurately observes, comic readers are stereotyped as obsessive collectors, and this overwhelming need to "make connections between issues" is "a forge for the…collaboration between reader and writer that is central to the comic form" (800). In other words, he draws a parallel between, on the one hand, Scott McCloud's notion that the comic form places a demand on the reader to bring closure to the blank space between the frames (McCloud 67) and, on the other hand, the serial gaps between comic issues to which readers also bring closure through their collections. He argues that it is "this collaborative work on the part of the reader that accounts at least in part for the deeply personal, prideful relationship that many collectors have for the comics they hold

in their possession" (800). *Fun Home* suggests that the presence of the everyday archive is fundamental to the graphic memoir genre in yet another way: archival elements have the capacity to function alongside performance to produce a sense of presence and embodiment that can politically re-enact individual, private affective histories. In particular, the everyday archive reasserts the possibility that performance might take place in and through the graphic memoir by constituting a physical, indexical bridge between the text and the material world and bodies beyond it. The indexical nature of archival materials necessarily evokes a past body, action or event that has left a physical trace behind, a real, corporeal mark of its presence that becomes fundamental to produce a sense of textual embodiment. In this way, *Fun Home*'s recreation of autobiographical, affective histories not only engages us but also plays in and with the lines that separate the text and the world, the text and the anti-normative bodies it centers on, those anti-normative bodies - their archival remains - and the reader.

In short, the archive becomes fundamental to the construction of the graphic memoir as a site of embodied performance and to the consequent construction of a mode of what I will term 'embodied textuality.' The sense of textual embodiment in *Fun Home* also responds to the fact that the graphic memoir itself can be read as a space in which photographs, handwritten letters and personal diaries perform a version of the past, as an archive of Alison's and Bruce's affective histories, in Ann Cvetkovich terms, an "archive of feelings." This mode of textuality finds a home in the graphic memoir idiom and, in *Fun Home*, becomes fundamental in setting the stage for the reader's encounter with queer bodies and desires. What is more, through those encounters the memoir invites a

queer mode of textual engagement and spectatorship. In other words, the text calls for a queer reception which might involve, through the very gesture of making usually unreachable, out-of-bounds bodies and desires approachable, a "queering" of the reader's affective capacities.

I explore the presentation and performance of queer bodies in *Fun Home* through graphics and, in particular, through the everyday archive. I argue that these remembered bodies and their archival remains contribute to build a queer archive that becomes fundamental in Alison's search for her own identity in relation to her father.[4] At the same time, the archive mediates the reader's affective encounter with out-of-bounds, unreachable subjects and their silent desires and loss. In the first section, "Strange/r Encounters," I focus on the way in which the memoir makes space for a 'politics of encounter' by inviting us to participate in a series of affectively loaded confrontations with queer bodies and desires. I then analyze the centerpiece, a drawn photograph of Alison's babysitter originally taken by Bruce, as a paradigmatic case of the performance of queer desire and archival objects in *Fun Home*, a performance which, in turn, both enables and relies on the sense of 'embodied textuality' that permeates the memoir. The centerpiece becomes fundamental in establishing an affective link between the reader, Alison, Roy's body and Bruce's desiring gaze. In the next section, "The Queer Archive," I explore the central function of archival elements in creating a sense of embodiment that, in turn, enables the reader's queer encounter with the text. I then focus on the specific

[4] See Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings* for a discussion of the queer archive as a technology of identity

type of textual embodiment that the graphic narrative genre allows. In "The Graphic Narrative as Performance," I look into the similarities and differences between the notion of performance in the archival graphic memoir and that of traditional, live theatre. In the next two sections, "Archiving Remains" and "The Undertaker's Burial," I turn to specific passages in the text that prompt the reader's queer encounter with corpses and remains, analyzing their relation to the archive and to the writing of the memoir as a whole. In the following section, "Graphic Embodied Textuality as a Queer Space," I explore Alison's paradigmatic gesture of representing her blood on the page as a fundamental element in the construction of the body of the text as a queer space, a space that feeds on 'embodied textuality.' In "Queering Reception: The Family Album," I look at the memoir's calling for a type of embodied, queer spectatorship that subverts the mythologies of the family album. I turn to the memoir's self-aware account of the ways in which renderings of the body necessarily construct the subjects they claim to represent. In the final section, "Death, Beauty and the Queer Body," I analyze the text's reflection on its aesthetization of queer bodies and histories.

Strange/r Encounters

When analyzing contemporary graphic memoirs such as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Gillian Whitlock comments on how these authors employ cartoon drawing to interrogate complex and historically marked images such as the veil or the World Trade towers. She argues that these images embody a sense of otherness that produces dissonance, leading readers to reflect on them (974–77). Whitlock goes on to suggest that "the unique vocabulary and grammar of comics and cartoon drawing might produce an imaginative and ethical engagement with the proximity of the other" (978). I propose that *Fun Home* similarly engages the reader in an intimate encounter with Bruce, interrogating and challenging the construction of the figure of the 'stranger' and the accompanying discourse of 'stranger danger.'

In *Strange Encounters,* Sara Ahmed discusses the rhetoric of 'stranger danger' in connection to power relations that determine that some bodies are considered stranger than others. She reflects on the social function of the pedophile as the paradigmatic embodiment of the stranger, the most feared social outcast, who is capable of, through his touch, putting in danger the innocence of the child. Ahmed provides a Marxist analysis of the way in which the stranger has been subjected to what she terms "fetishization of figures" (rather than object or commodity fetishism), which involves the concealment of power relationships. In Ahmed's terms, a figure such as the stranger emerges when "fantasies are transformed into figures as these are cut off from material relations that over-determine their existence" (5). She argues, in other words, that the 'stranger' figure

works to conceal differences by aligning and collapsing different forms of displacement. This figure also works to obscure anti-normative differences lying at the center of the family and the community itself through, as Teressa Brennan argues, projecting onto the other our own unwanted, negative affects (134). Such projection of affects in the West today, according to Brennan, functions to increase the subject's sense of self-containment and results in a series of affective judgments about the 'other' (113). According to Ahmed, the projection of danger on the stranger figure becomes instrumental in the sense that it "allows the definition of the subject-at-home, and home as inhabitable space, inherently safe and valuable" (32). This process sets the basis for the formation of an exclusive community and communal identity. As Ahmed reflects, even if in general identity "may operate through designating others as strangers," it becomes imperative to "ask about the political process by which some others are labeled as stranger than other others" and by which certain lives come to be valued over others (6).

Fun Home, through making space for and affectively re-enacting Bruce's personal history as inseparable from Alison's, performs precisely that cultural work. The memoir challenges the social expulsion of Alison's queer father from the psychic and material space of the family by placing him at the center of the Bechdels' home. In particular, *Fun Home* structurally dismantles the mythology of the pedophile as an unreachable, intrinsically threatening 'stranger' through focusing on Bruce's foundational role as Alison's father. Positioning Bruce at the core of the Bechdel family home and as a central character to whom Alison's turns once and again in the search for her personal identity, the text creates a sense of intimacy and familiarity around him. In fact, through his

obsessive historical restoration practice, he is the one who literally invents and re-invents the physical space of the family home (5-9). Bruce is featured as the father that Alison sometimes despises but, ultimately, cannot help loving. What is more, Alison cannot quite separate her own desires, her own story, her own compulsions from her father's, even as she attempts to distance herself from him. This is why, even while criticizing Bruce's "libidinal," "manic," "martyred" obsession with home decoration (7), she nonetheless mirrors her father's compulsions through the writing and drawing of this memoir, which Valerie Rohy characterizes as "a case of documentary obsession" (341). Alison's appreciation and aesthetic rendering of the queer body becomes another bridge between herself and her father, another point of contact that draws Bruce even closer to her and, through her, to the reader. As we empathize with Alison and her story, we cannot escape sharing her intimacy with Bruce, since her story is also his story.

In this respect, I propose that the queer encounters in which *Fun Home* potentially engages the reader call for a different understanding of the process of reading graphic memoirs. Much has been written on the sadistic and voyeuristic investment of the memoir reader as she consumes what are often tragic and traumatic histories. In the growing critical literature on *Fun Home*, in fact, Watson (46) among others reads the visual representation of Alison's hyperbolic hand in the centerpiece photograph (100-1) and in the depiction of her own pictures with lovers alongside her father's (100, 120) exclusively in terms of the way in which they function to draw attention to the reader's voyeurism. In Watson's words, the rendering of Alison's hands in these scenes makes us aware of our complicit act of looking "at her intimately personal acts of investigating her

father's hidden history and her own identification with it" (33). Is it possible, however, to think of the reader's investment in autobiographical genres and, in particular, in the graphic memoir, beyond these terms? *Fun Home* suggests that it is in fact not only possible but also politically viable. As Hillary Chute suggests when discussing the graphic narrative, the genre is characterized by "an embrace of reproducibility and mass circulation as well as a rigorous, experimental attention to form as a mode of political intervention" (2008, 462). I want to suggest that, far from being exclusively concerned with the reader's voyeurism, the text affectively implicates us so that we become (un)willing participants in climatic moments of Alison's life. In other words, the text, rather than imagine readers as detached voyeurs, invites us to feel empathy, surprise and shock, to re-think our ethical positioning, in Deleuzian terms, to 'become.' The particularities of the graphic narrative genre render it an especially suitable means for this type of cultural work. The possibilities it grants to combine archival, graphic and verbal elements make space for the performance of the archive, which, as in the case of the centerpiece, places a significant role in engaging the reader.

It is significant that the text invites us to access Alison's relationship with Bruce through her memories and through the archive he has left behind. *Fun Home*'s "documentary obsession" contributes to recreate a type of intimacy between Alison and her father that the text invites us to encounter and participate in. It is an intimacy born out of the traces of Bruce's untouchable, unapproachable body and illicit desires, traces that still breathe in and through the archive. Page after page, as we make contact with Bruce's body, his "otherness" becomes less threatening. In this sense, Julia Watson argues that, in

Fun Home, a physical relation is established between the reader and the text through the graphic representation of bodies, which become "connected to our own [body] as we touch and turn the pages" (35). The graphic novel genre is unique in the sense that it enables our physical contact not only with the body of the text but also with the forms and shapes of the graphic bodies that inhabit it. As we touch and, in turn, allow Bruce's archival remains to 'touch' us, bodies that had been made unreachable are put within reach. In Erin Manning's terms, touch involves an economy that establishes a normative distinction between those who can and cannot be reached, between those bodies that should and should not come into contact (9-13). Through touch, *Fun Home* invites us to approach and become intimate with a paradigmatic stranger, who has paradoxically become familiar to us and whose own touch, we have been taught, must be avoided at all costs. The memoir thus prompts us to reach through, to touch and be touched by Alison's multi-faceted, layered, queer father. Page after page, the text thus invites us to reconsider our own ethical position with respect to the figure of the queer 'other,' it invites us readers to take form through and against these encounters. However, as we will explore, when we reach out towards the textual body of *Fun Home* and its archival remains, we are not simply encountering Bruce. Rather, we connect with his history, his gaze and queer desires through Alison and her own story, her mediating, drawing hand.

Performing Queer Desire

A central example of the kind of performative, affective, embodied, illicit encounters that the memoir deploys is the book's centerpiece, a striking picture of Bruce's young male lover, which Alison discovers after her father's death in a box of family photos, inside an envelope labeled 'family.'

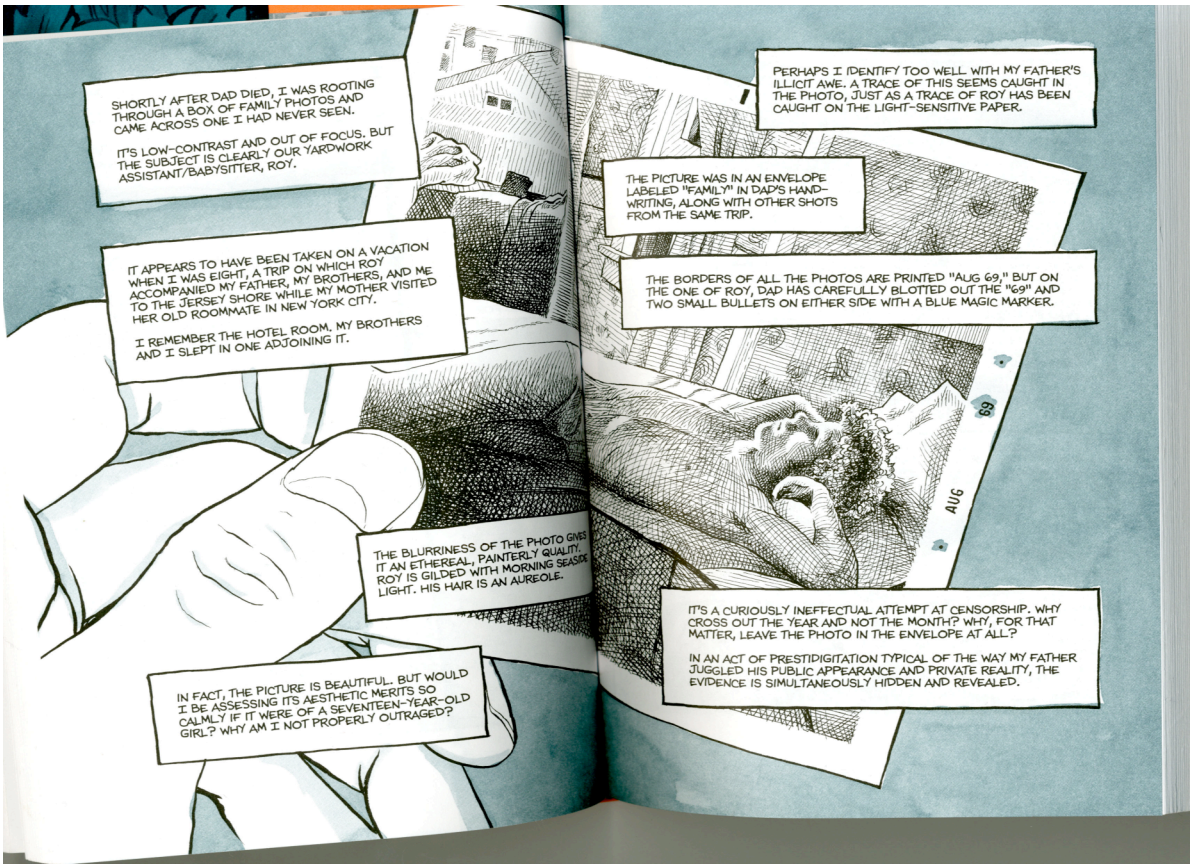

Fig. 1.: Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 100-101.

In the picture, the boy poses for the camera in his underwear, stretched on what looks like a bed or couch. He lies on pillows with his legs turned in the direction of the camera and his torso flat

and reclined. He seems to be offering himself to Bruce's gaze through his physical posture and his non-confrontational gesture of looking away from the camera. In its formal particularities, this picture stands apart, disrupting narrative time and space and thus visually recreating the affectively loaded experience the author – and potentially, the reader – face when encountering it. Unlike all other graphics in the text, the drawn photograph stretches across two pages and there is no external framing other than that of the picture itself. This lack of external framing, along with the fact that we get to see Alison's hand holding the picture, introduces a break in the visual narrative. Will Eisner observes that comics use panel size to determine certain rhythms, and interruptions in the established pattern draw the reader's attention to specific scenes (39). In the centerpiece, the change of rhythm produced by the break in the visual configuration creates a different temporality: it allows us to pause in order to engage in a queer encounter with Roy's intimate performance. It is this visual disruption, rather than the verbal comments, that conveys Alison's surprise when encountering this picture in a box of family photographs after Bruce's death.

Alison's hand is hyperbolically represented: it occupies a great portion of the left page, and looks considerably larger in size than our own hand, which is likely to lie on top of the drawing of Alison's hand as we hold the book. Through collapsing the reader's and Alison's hand, the text foregrounds the significant role of the former in piecing this story together. At the same time, this gesture re-aligns the reader's experience of encountering a picture of Bruce's lover with Alison's. I read the hyperbolic representation of Alison's hand and its juxtaposition with the reader's as an element of performance as well as a gesture towards the possibility of embodiment and the

communication of affect. The body of the reader mirrors Alison's in this scene: it is through symbolically holding on to her drawing hand that she implicates us in these intimate histories as she prompts us to experience them on a par with her. In connection to this, the effect of unclear boundaries and the lack of external framing in these two pages might thus suggest that the text, and the visual representation of Alison's hand, actually extend beyond the material boundaries of the book to, in a shocking gesture, encompass our own hand, our own body. The hyperbolic hand drawn on the page visually performs, and invites us to participate in, Alison's original encounter with the photograph. What is more, through drawing attention to Alison's hand, the text performs a series of acts of looking: Bruce's behind the camera eye, Alison's in front of the original photograph, and the reader's as she holds up the book. We are thus caught in a ménage à trois or, rather, à quatre, as we are drawn into the queer pleasures the picture evokes. As we inhabit Alison's physical and affective stance vis-à-vis the picture of Roy, the text prompts us to experience empathy towards Alison and, through her non-judgmental stance, towards Bruce. We, like Alison, encounter Bruce's illicit desire through the archive, and the overwhelming affective load of the picture itself and of her reaction to it will potentially, in turn, mediate and re-shape our own affective response to Bruce's queer body. Suggestively, the colored background seems to spill over the page, as the page seems unable to contain within its boundaries, and within the institutional framing of the family album, the fluidity of affect and desire that links the text to what lies beyond it, that is, the reader and her world. Roy's performance and Bruce's desire are realized in excess of the context that originally framed and contained them, exploring the

archive's claim on queer bodies and histories. In short, through the scene's lack of framing and its juxtaposition of Alison and the reader's hand, the text figuratively disrupts the boundaries between the real and the fictional world, performatively breaking the "fourth wall" between the viewer and the characters.

Interestingly, our gaze is aligned, on the one hand, with Alison's, much as our hand lies on top of the representation of hers. However, the erotic charge of the scene makes it difficult to forget Bruce's illicit gaze that lies beyond the frame of the picture, behind the camera's eye, figuratively invading the reader's space. The visual configuration of this scene thus invites the reader to inhabit for a moment, even if unwillingly, Bruce's gaze and desire. In admiring the craftsmanship of the picture, Alison wonders, "In fact, the picture is beautiful. But would I be assessing its aesthetic merits so calmly if it were of a seventeen-year-old girl? Why am I not properly outraged?" (100). Alison abstains, as Cvetkovich notes, from morally condemning her father and is rather taken aback by how closely she identifies with his "illicit awe" (101): "Alison moves away from moral condemnation of the image, letting it sit uncomfortably within ambiguous distinctions between the erotic and the aesthetic, the past and the present, the father's sexuality and his daughter's" (117). Alison thus chooses not to judge her father's illicit desire and rather identifies with him, recognizing her own anti-normative lesbian identity. Interestingly, Alison avoids the trap of assuming a judgmental stance in relation to Bruce's sexuality not only verbally but also graphically. Through presenting us with a drawn photograph created by Bechdel rather than with the original, the text exploits the potentialities of the graphic genre to put into question the boundaries that separate

Alison's gaze and artistic practice from her father's illicit desires. Strikingly, the text also works to performatively upset the ethical and affective boundaries that differentiate the reader from the text, Bruce and Alison.

Part of the shock of the scene both on the part of Alison and the reader seems to find its roots in the way in which the text creates the sensation that we inhabit Bruce's physical space, that we can almost touch him as we access the traces that his gaze, and his desire, left behind. Similarly, the indexical nature of photography has left a trace of Roy on the page, a trace that, even if rendered through the affective investment of Alison's drawing hand, remains nonetheless ghostly present. In Alison's words, "Perhaps I identify too well with my father's illicit awe. A trace of this seems caught in the photo, just as a trace of Roy has been caught on the light-sensitive paper" (101). Finally, this sense of physical presence and intimacy is reinforced by the fact that we figuratively 'touch' the representation of Alison's hand on the page as it is juxtaposed with our own hand. The employment of the photographic archive in this case plays a significant role in creating the sensation of immediacy of Bruce, Roy, Alison and their emotions and desires. In fact, this drawn photograph is a paradigmatic instance of how archival elements in the text can embody and communicate affect through their tight connection to lived bodies, histories and emotions. According to Nigel Thrift, objects form shields to human vulnerability by extending the body's circumference; they bear the capacity to provide mental and physical resources that allow the body to exist in the world, adding to what and how the body can experience. Most importantly, objects have their own agency, an ability to move bodies in particular ways (Thrift 239). If we think of the photograph

portrayed in *Fun Home*'s centerpiece phenomenologically and in terms of its affective load, granted by its indexicality and the concomitant connection it warrants with Alison's father, then its agency, its capacity to "move bodies" (Bruce's, Alison's and the reader's) in specific ways becomes vividly apparent.

The Queer Archive

In an interview with Hillary Chute, Bechdel comments on the significance of visual archival materials, and of the centerpiece (Fig. 1) in particular, as emotionally charged elements that triggered her desire to create *Fun Home*: "photographs were a huge resource for me. In many ways photographs really generated the book. In fact the whole story was spawned by a snapshot I found of our old babysitter lying on a hotel bed in his Jockey shorts" (1005). Such reliance on photographs is far from incidental. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes reflects on the sense of intimacy and immediacy pictures create on the basis of their indexicality: "the photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately *touch* me, who am here…" (qtd in Hirsch 4-5; emphasis added). The centerpiece photograph, which bears physical traces of Roy's body, Bruce's desiring gaze and Alison's affective intervention through drawing it, becomes fundamental in the creation of a queer space in which we are encouraged to intimately know what is left of the other's physicality. It evokes, in addition, the affective relation that once drew Bruce and Roy together, a relation whose subtleties are suggested by Bruce's gaze, which frames the scene, and by Roy's bodily performance, a performance materialized in and for Alison's father.

When discussing the ways in which the archive creates a sense of embodiment in *Fun Home*, it is important to take a moment to consider how the text builds meaning on the basis of the drawn *representation* or translation of archival elements. This becomes a paradox in itself, since through the very gesture of representing an indexical sign, that sign loses a layer of physical connection with its referent while nonetheless retaining the

remnants of such connection. In short, it becomes an echo that is twice removed from the signified object. Bechdel's choice of drawing the family pictures, diary extracts, handwritten letters and the other archival objects she presents in *Fun Home* allows her to claim and appropriate her family's archive. In this respect, her formal decision performs a strategic political work: in presenting Bruce's photographs and archival 'remains' through Alison's eyes, the text renders her gaze, affects, reactions and desires indistinguishable from Bruce's. As the reader is prompted to empathize with Alison when she encounters, for instance, the picture of Bruce's lover (Fig. 1), it becomes difficult to separate our identification with Alison from our potential identification with Bruce, since her gaze is also his, her traces are present in the photograph as well as those of Roy's body and Bruce's illicit desire. Drawn archival elements thus work to complicate the hierarchy and the processes of differentiation between homo/heteronormative and queer, anti-normative bodies. Physical traces, desires and sensibilities are placed next to each other and are presented as intricately, intimately related.

In particular, the formal choice of drawing the archive further immerses the reader in the text by aesthetically mediating her access to past histories. By aestheticizing and performing the queer body, the text introduces another layer through which to encounter not only archival remains but also Alison's personal investment in Bruce's story. The memoir, in this sense, is informed by a deep awareness of the ways in which the representation of the body actually constructs the body it claims to represent. *Fun Home* thus questions the archive's claim to historical truth and, in particular, the myth of the photograph as a transparent sign. This last move is significant in the light of the history of

photography in its connection to its representation of the body as an archive. In "The Body and the Archive," Allan Sekula describes how, in the nineteenth century, the camera became instrumental for the construction of the criminal archive, and of the criminal's body, as distinct from the body of the law-abiding citizen. The invention of the photographic camera had apparently realized the positivist dream of a universal language of factual truth. As Hoffman argues, the rise of photography in the nineteenth century was, in addition, instrumental in its role of documenting hysteria (6). The camera thus became a fundamental tool for the construction of the pathological, deviant body, a construction that was, in turn, necessary to define the normative subject. In *Fun Home*, drawn photographs and their aesthetic rendering of anti-normative bodies function to subvert photography's historical role in the construction of the pathological subject through dismantling the camera's objectifying force. Drawing the archive becomes, then, a formal mechanism to signal Alison's close relation to Bruce while simultaneously marking the queer bodies in the pictures as part of a personal, affective history. Once again, the text defines anti-normative desires as constitutive of home rather than as strange and, at the same time, it sheds light on the illusion of the photograph as a natural sign. The memoir, making a point of revealing the conditions of production behind this picture and others that we will explore, unveils the family photograph's origin in a performance which works to reproduce its own mythologies.

The Graphic Memoir as Performance

The graphic memoir's capacity to incorporate visual archival elements, that is, elements whose indexicality functions to evoke and make those who are absent present, enables the embodiment and communication of affects. The sense of embodiment and 'presence' the archive contributes to create both allows for and is reinforced by the performance of lived memories, which plays a central role in engaging the reader. Performance is present in *Fun Home* from the very moment of its material production. In a recent interview with Hillary Chute, Bechdel reveals that, in order to draw *Fun Home*, she created a reference photograph for every pose in each of its panels and, significantly, she posed as the different members of her family in those shots (2006, 1009-10). Bechdel's body thus spills over the pages, reaching out and overflowing every nook and corner of the text. This becomes yet another way in which the memoir problematizes the distinction between the real and the fictional world, between the author's body, the text and its characters. It becomes another way in which the text surreptitiously produces and plays with a sense of 'embodied textuality.' Throughout the text, the production of a mode of embodied textuality and spectatorship involves the performance of the archive. In *Fun Home*, Alison explores her father's old photographs, handwritten letters and highlighted books among other archival objects. We can think of this everyday archive as an extension of Bruce's body, what is left of his physical presence in the world. In a sense, then, we could say that as readers we are invited to affectively engage with Bruce's remains. The sense of embodiment and physical presence that archival elements convey, even when translated into the graphic medium through drawing, allows us to

think of the graphic memoir as performance. These elements of performance in the text, in turn, function to draw the reader closer to a lost past, lost affects and 'strange/r encounters' while at the same time contributing to create a sense of 'embodied textuality.'

Graphic narratives are capable of recreating a form of textual embodiment that is, needless to say, different from that of live theatre. Embodiment is, of course, a central element of performance. Peggy Phelan reminds us that "performance art usually occurs in the suspension between the 'real' physical matter of the 'performing body' and the psychic experience of what it is to be em-bodied" (167). In this respect, *Fun Home* expands conventional understandings of embodiment through the graphic and archival technologies it deploys, especially photography. As Carol Martin suggests, in our contemporary technological paradigm embodied practice does not necessarily proceed body to body (10). As we encounter the text's drawn family frames, visual indexical traces of past moments, bodies, relations and desires look back at us from the page. In their physical link to a lost past, the photographs can be read as the archival remains of those who are no longer present. Bearing the traces of bodies and histories that are long gone, archival remains speak of and from those bodies and desires and constitute a material link to that past. In his absence, Bruce's body becomes hauntingly present through those objects he has left behind, those extensions of himself that contribute to produce a textual form of embodiment.

And even though, as Peggy Phelan suggests, this type of embodiment is quite different from that of traditional, live performance, it is at the same time strikingly

similar. As Phelan proposes, performance is built on metonymy rather than on metaphor, as it moves from the grammar of words to that of the body. While metaphor erases dissimilarity and difference through turning the two elements of a comparison into one, metonymy, working through continuity and displacement, is additive and associative. The artist's body functions as a metonymic sign because, "in the plenitude of its apparent visibility and availability, the performer actually disappears and represents something else," be it dance, movement, character, art, voice, self or presence (150). The subject's body thus remains unseen in itself, as it really is. In short, the sign fails to reproduce its referent. Della Pollock, on her part, draws attention to the ways in which 'performative writing' is also necessarily metonymic, since it constitutes "a self-consciously partial or incomplete rendering that takes its pulse from the *difference* rather than the *identity* between the linguistic symbol and the thing it is meant to represent" (82-3). In *Fun Home*, this preoccupation with the gap between signifier and signified is expressed both formally and in words. When Alison is a young girl she keeps a private diary where she records the everyday events in her life. However, after some time she experiences what she calls a "sort of epistemological crisis" as she begins to question the possibility that language may accurately describe the world: "how did I know that the things I was writing were absolutely, objectively true? All I could speak for was my own perceptions, and perhaps not even those" (141). For this reason, Alison starts to compulsively follow each declarative sentence in her journal with "I think," and, later on, with a "curvy circumflex" that symbolizes that phrase. In her words, "my *I thinks* were gossamer sutures in that gaping rift between signifier and signified" (142). At the same time, the

memoir expresses this concern formally through drawing attention to the difference between the photograph and its referent. The choice of drawing family frames rather than reproducing the actual pictures exploits the gap between signifier and signifier, the failure of representation, making partially absent what mimetic uses of language attempt to make fully present. In this sense, *Fun Home* shares performance's formal awareness of the limits of a mimetic/metaphoric type of representation, which tends to displace and efface others and their worlds with its partial renderings of them. Like performance, *Fun Home* formally exploits a type of signification that, rather than work to reproduce the illusion of wholeness between signs and their referents, is instead capable of staging encounters between Alison and Bruce's inevitably partial, diverse, slipping bodies, sensibilities and histories.

There is yet another sense in which the graphic memoir tends to work, like traditional performance, through metonymy, further enabling embodied encounters. When the story is built around indexical archival objects, past bodies and sensibilities become present through the physical marks and traces those objects bear. The relationship between indexical signs and their referents is one of contiguity, that is, there is a physical or causal link between the signifier and the signified. These types of signs, in Charles Peirce's words, "direct attention to their object by blind compulsion" (2.306). As Phelan argues, while metaphor, working to secure a vertical hierarchy of value, erases dissimilarity and difference, metonymy is additive, associative and builds a horizontal axis of continuity (150). If *Fun Home*'s everyday archive is indexical, and thus metonymic, and if, as Pollock suggests, performative writing requires that signs "and the

world intersect in active interpretation," that they "press into and are deeply impressed by the 'sensuousness of their referents,'" (81) then the indexical visual archive becomes a powerful vehicle for textual embodied performance. While in live performance the body tends to function metonymically, in graphic narratives archival remains evoke, through indexical contiguity, lost bodies and desires. Basic formal mechanisms of performance are thus exploited and hyperbolically rendered in *Fun Home* to create an effect of embodied performance in and through textuality. The memoir brings physical traces and desires to the page and, as archival remains pile up, subjects and bodies begin to emerge in a metonymic, horizontal axis of difference and contiguity. Rather than reproduce a hierarchy that privileges normative bodies and sensibilities, the text performatively and metonymically juxtaposes diverse stories, feelings and bodily remains, placing out-of-bounds bodies within reach. In this way, the text makes space for a range of affective responses and sensibilities.

Archival Remains

The notion of archival remains finds an echo in another gory and violent encounter the text invites us to participate in. The scene, a re-enactment of one Alison's most shocking childhood memories, reads as one of the most salient graphic moments in *Fun Home*. It takes place during Alison's childhood, years before she finds the picture of Roy, in the context of the family's funeral home business. Bruce Bechdel's job as an undertaker entails prepping up bodies in an embalming room, grooming them before their final public appearance. Alison usually sees the corpses once they are fully clothed, but one time her father calls her into the embalming room and asks her to hand him a pair of scissors while he is working on a dead man. We first see Alison vacuuming just outside the closed door of the embalming room, which reads "private."

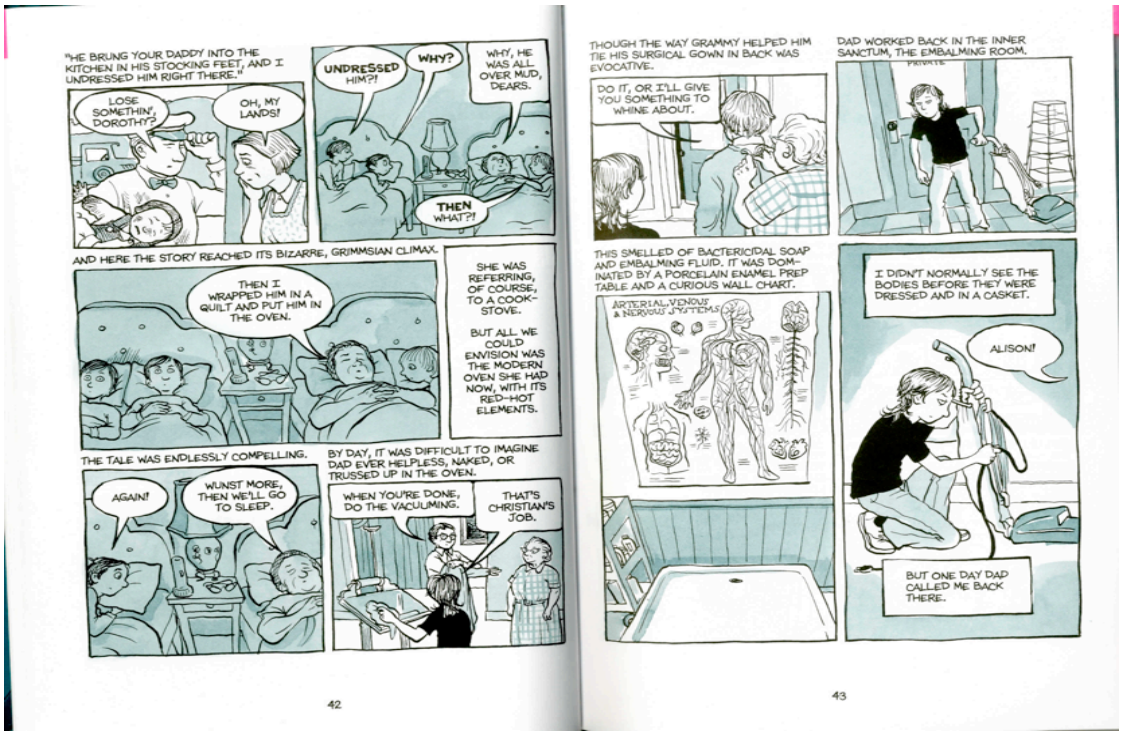

Fig. 2.: Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 42-43.

The graphics show the empty prep table and a poster of the human body pinned on the wall. As we turn the page, our kinetic gesture performatively echoes Alison's opening of the door that separates the private from the public and, with her, we cross that threshold:

Fig. 3.: Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 44-45.

Like Alison, as readers we are likely to be shocked by the visual representation of a dead, "fleshy" man lying on the prep table, his chest split open and his genitals exposed. Except in the first frame, the dead body is represented as a fragmented entity through synecdoche: the frames that follow depict the man's open chest and genitals, his head, upper torso, his lower legs and feet respectively. Significantly, one of the frames consists of a close-up of the most shocking parts of the drawing: the dead man's open chest is depicted alongside "the strange pile of his genitals" (44). The image collapses genitalia/sexuality and a dead body torn open. Through its visual elements the text suggests the larger concern of the memoir, Alison's dead father's repressed sexuality. Most significantly, the stark visual representation of a naked corpse torn open in this

scene may be read as an early record of Alison's affective encounter with death. Like her father, who, she speculates, had maybe become "too inured to death, and was trying to elicit from [her] an expression of the natural horror he was no longer capable of" (44), Alison cannot feel anything when she confronts her father's death. In her words, "they say grief takes many forms, including the absence of grief." When she reflects on her emotional reaction to her father's death, she confesses that she would tell people about her father's suicide "in a flat, matter-of-fact tone…eager to detect in my listener the flinch of grief that eluded me" (227). Alison closely follows in her father's footsteps with respect to his presumed attempt to access emotion vicariously. However, in her words, "the emotion I had suppressed for the gaping cadaver seemed to stay suppressed. Even when it was dad himself on the prep table" (45). Once more, the narrator finds it difficult to differentiate her own self and her own history from her father's: they both manifest non-normative affective responses in the face of death.

Strikingly, in recreating Alison's encounter with that "gaping cadaver," the text builds a bridge for the reader to cross the threshold along with her own younger self. The text presents us first with a drawn poster of the human body pinned on the wall, that is, a representation of a representation (43). When we turn the page, however, the gap between the signifier and the signified is narrowed as we are exposed to a representation of a flesh and bone dead body (44). This progression, along with the use of synecdoche that directs our gaze to specific parts of the cropped body on the table, allows us to access a deeper layer of reference. In this way, through its use of signification, framing and synecdoche, the text performatively echoes Bruce's gesture of delving deeper into the body as he

literally cuts it open, cinematically directing our gaze gradually closer and closer to the image of the corpse up to the point when, faced with the difficulty to represent the interiority of the dead body, words and image fail to convey what lies below the skin, and the invading gaze recedes as we are left with a vague reference to a "dark red cave." As readers, we are invited to experience this performative re-enactment of Alison's encounter with the corpse, first by crossing the door with her, moving past the threshold that divides the 'public' from the 'private,' to then inhabit her gaze as it shockingly and gradually focuses on the corpse's split open chest and genitals. As in the case of the centerfold drawn photograph of Bruce's lover, we are once more, through a performative gesture, invited to both participate in an out-of-bounds encounter and empathize with Alison as we share her most intimate experiences. What is more, this scene from Alison's childhood can be read in terms of its sensual, if 'perverse,' homoeroticism in connection to the centerpiece photograph of Bruce's lover we saw before (Fig. 1). The trope of Bruce's physical, and this time literal, penetration of another man through cutting him open both anticipates and plays with the reader's anxiety about anal penetration.

A final parallel between Alison and Bruce's respective occupations is drawn in this scene through the representation of what looks like a toolbox with pencils and bottles to the right of the frame that shows the dead corpse (44). Bruce's work instruments eerily resemble a painter's kit, subtly echoing Alison's own work as an artist as she draws these graphics. The representation of her father's embalming and grooming practice as artistic is further reinforced later on in the memoir, when he is depicted applying color to a dead woman's lips, brush in hand and holding what looks like a watercolor palette:

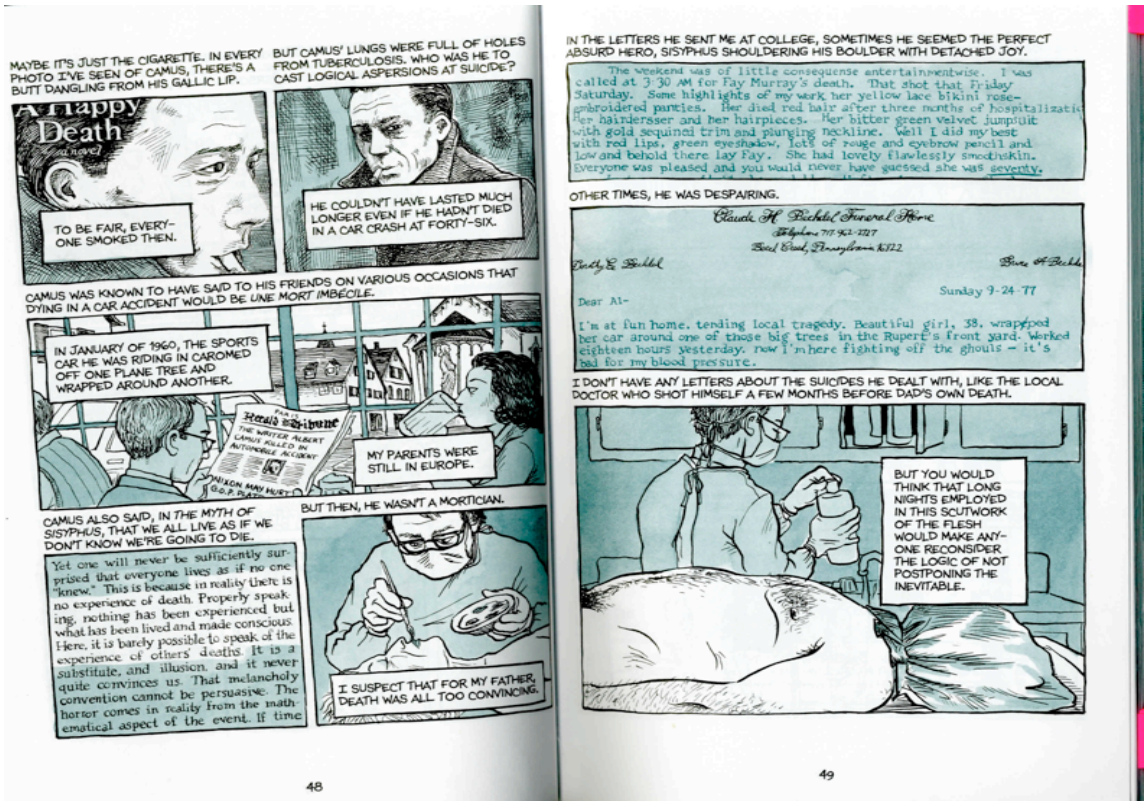

Fig. 4.: Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 48-49.

It is possible to read Bruce, an archivist of corpses who turns the dead into objects of public display, in parallel to Alison, who obsessively archives her dead father's life and queer desire through the writing of this memoir. Accessing the interiority of the human body, that part of the self that cannot be widely known and thus resists signification, Bruce works, like the memoir as a whole, on the limit between the private and the public, interiority and exteriority, death and life/sexuality. On the one hand, in performatively re-enacting fundamental moments of Bruce's life and of Alison's history, the text both thematically and formally works to blur the physical boundaries that separate Bruce's

affective history from Alison's and, most importantly, from the reader's. On the other hand, we might read the memoir's foregrounding of Bruce's practice as an undertaker, which entails his working with the remains of the dead, as a visual echo of the text's handling of Bruce's archive, of those traces he has left behind. Figuratively and aesthetically mirroring her father, Alison performs her art through an exploration of a dead person's archival remains, of what is left of her father's physical presence in the world. Readers are invited to engage with archival elements that bear Bruce's marks and traces: it is precisely through his remains that affects and emotions are performatively embodied for and in the reader. In other words, it is through the employment of archival elements connected to Bruce's and Alison's affective histories that *Fun Home* builds a bridge between them and the reader's affective capacities.

The Undertaker's Burial

A further example of the tight connection between the archive, death and embodiment involves Bruce's corpse. Years after the incident in the embalming room, it is Bruce himself who lies on the prep table:

Fig. 5.: Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 51.

The image of Bruce in his casket suggestively emerges at the bottom of the page, evoking the lowering of the coffin into the ground. Visually, his children are positioned above him, in the world of the living, practically stepping on him in the right-hand frame, as if he were already below the ground. Bruce, unlike the dead man he once groomed (Fig. 3),

is dressed in a suit and covered with what appears to be a blanket, so that only his face and hairy hands are visible. As we turn the page, we once more cross a threshold with Alison.

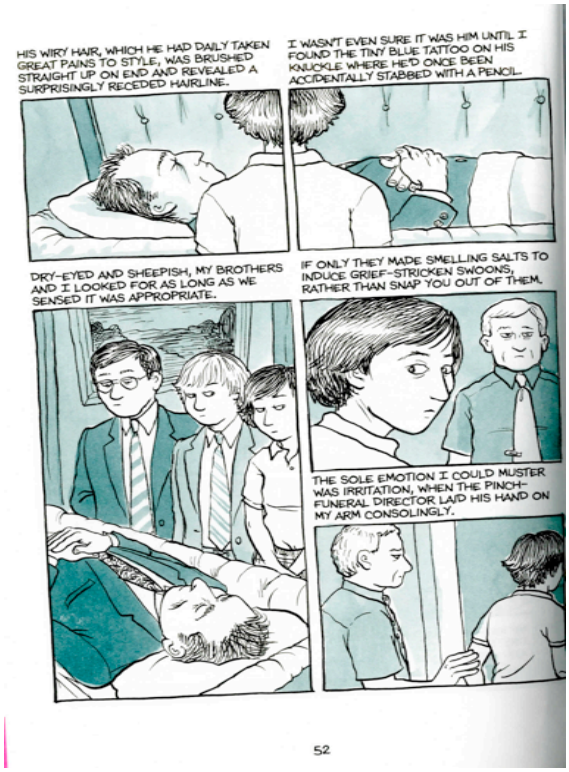

Fig. 6.: Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 52.

This time it is her emotional reaction to her father's death that we witness, a reaction that, once more, is conveyed visually rather than verbally. At the top of the page, we encounter the only split frame in the book. Alison is literally torn apart as she looks at her father, who is also split into two. Strikingly, the frame parallels Alison's encounter with the dead corpse in the embalming room in both the affective load of the scene and the

performative representation of the body as fragmentary. This time, though, it is through the technique of framing rather than through the embalmer's knife that bodies are cut. We only see Alison's back and not her facial expression, but the impact the sight of her father produces on her is nonetheless rendered evident by the organization of the frame. Her separation from her father, prompted by his death, suggests a break in space and time, a before and after, an interruption in the continuity of life that is manifested by the split frame.

At the same time, Alison is momentarily alienated from the body in front of her, since at first she does not recognize her father: "his wiry hair, which he had daily taken great pains to style, was brushed straight up on end and revealed a surprisingly receded hairline. I wasn't even sure it was him until I found the tiny blue tattoo on his knuckle where he'd once been accidentally stabbed with a pencil" (Fig. 6). Interestingly, the text renders Bruce's hands in more detail on the previous frame. When he first appears in his casket, we can see his hands are hairy (Fig. 5), but in the next frame they are rendered hairless. This can be connected to the fact that, in the first frame, Alison is unable to recognize her father, and it is the tattoo on his knuckle that allows her to do so: at first, then, the hair on his hands potentially hides the mark. However, the two different representations of Bruce's hands might also respond to the performative aspect of the text, which, as in the case of the centerfold, favors the reader's identification with Alison. In the first frame, it seems as if Bruce's hairy hands render him more real and thus more uncanny, preventing our identification with him. Scott McCloud's famously observed that in graphic narrative a "cartoony" type of drawing encourages the reader's

identification and understanding, while graphics that represent their objects more realistically create an alienating distance between reader and text (qtd in Lemberg 135). This may be the reason why, once Alison recognizes the corpse as her father's, the text renders his hands in less detail, hairless and more cartoon-like. As Alison finally relates to the corpse, we are performatively prompted to mirror her sudden closeness to her father's body through our visual identification with Bruce. Even if we see his hairless hands in the second frame (Fig. 6), we are not, however, granted access to the tattoo. This seems to create a sense of intimacy between Alison and her father, a privacy that cannot be pierced, a space of his body that the text does not to reveal to us. Such elision functions to create a queer space that, as readers, we cannot access and must imagine, a blank space of silence that allows Alison to recognize and claim her father's corpse. In that sense, that hidden space of his body echoes the protagonist's, and the reader's, work throughout this narrative, as we collaboratively fill the blank spaces of Bruce's history, spaces that can be re-imagined but never, like the blue tattoo, fully represented or recovered.

Graphic 'Embodied Textuality' as a Queer Space

Alison's hands draw our attention throughout the memoir. They are conspicuously present as she holds up the pictures of her father's lover (Fig. 1) and, later on, shots of her father and herself in their youth (120). The narrator's body is also rendered particularly vivid when, shortly after coming out as a lesbian, Alison accidentally cuts her finger with a pocket-knife to then smear the pages of her journal with blood as a sign of her anxiety and anguish:

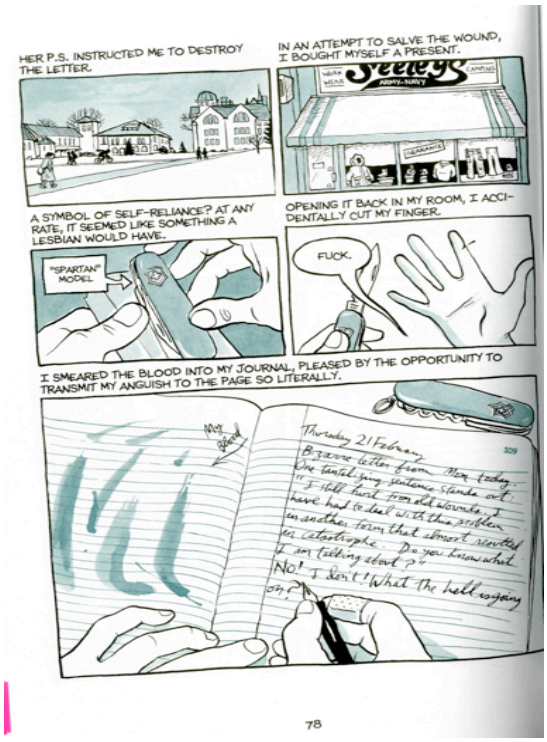

Fig. 7.: Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 78.

The representation of Alison's blood on the page of her journal, as in the case of the picture of Bruce's lover and the depiction of the corpse in the funeral home, will potentially mobilize and engage us as we becomes involved in recreating the elided performance in between the moment when she cuts her finger and the next panel, when we see the blood already smeared on the page. Interestingly, the communication of affect in this scene is, once again, tightly bound to the sense of embodiment that the performative re-enactment of archival elements, in this case Alison's diary and, strikingly, her blood, help to construct.

It is not coincidental that she accidentally cuts her finger with a pocket-knife, "something a lesbian would have," which she buys "to salve the wound" opened up by her mother's rejection of her newly discovered sexuality (Fig. 8). In this passage, as readers we access the archival traces that shape this story not only through Alison's diary. Her blood, her queer body, leaks onto the page and comes to metaphorically inhabit it, to mark it with the trace of past histories, past encounters and familial, genetic genealogies. In *Queer Phenomenology,* Sara Ahmed reflects that "loving one's home is not about being fixed into a place, but rather it is about becoming part of a space where one has expanded one's body, saturating the place with bodily matter: home as overflowing and flowing over" (11). A similar operation seems to take shape with respect to the 'queering' of space in *Fun Home*. Bruce's obsessive bent towards household decoration may be read as an attempt to extend his own body, to create his own queer space within the heterosexual world of the family. Even if Alison reads her father's decorative ornaments

as “lies” with no purpose beyond obscuring his homosexual identity by building what she terms the “simulacrum” of a house (16-7), it is also possible to think of his obsession with decoration as a queer practice, an anti-normative activity in which a stereotypically heterosexual man would only rarely engage. In this sense, rather than obscure Bruce’s queerness, his obsession with household decoration seems to reveal it: “historical restoration wasn’t his job. It was his passion. And I mean passion in every sense of the word” (7). We may think, then, of the house itself as an archive that Bruce slowly builds throughout his life, an archive through which Alison attempts to read him. On her part Alison, echoing her father, literally embodies Ahmed’s notion of ‘overflowing’ through her radical gesture of leaving a trace of her own blood in her journal when she comes to terms with her lesbian identity. In this sense, the representation of Alison’s blood on the page marks her journal, her archive and the memoir itself as intricately knit to her father, since her blood inevitably bears his genetic traces. In yet another way, we are reminded of Alison’s connection to Bruce, and the text emerges as a common queer space, a tight fabric held together by the everyday archives and the physical traces that father and daughter have left behind. I read Alison’s drawing of her blood on the page as a radical gesture of embodiment that simultaneously works to foreground her own mediation, her undeniable presence and her personal investment in the telling of her family history. Through her blood, then, Alison marks the body of the text itself as a queer space and simultaneously recreates a sense of embodiment which, like the frameless picture of Bruce’s lover (Fig. 1), works to complicate the boundaries that separate text and author, author and characters and, finally, author and reader. The problematization of those

boundaries performs the cultural work of demystifying the figure of the sexual 'stranger' by rendering a pedophile's desires, affects and bodily traces indistinguishable from Alison's and, ultimately, from the reader's. The text encourages our empathic identification with Alison and, in the process, interrogates our own impermeability and affective distance with respect to Bruce. The challenging of physical and inter-subjective boundaries, in turn, is also suggested thematically through the constant exploration of the skin as a surface that can be pierced, marked and ripped open, such as in the scene we just encountered and, most strikingly, in Bruce's treatment of the corpses at his funeral home.

As we hold the page representing indexical traces of Alison's blood, as we look at the open, dead corpse in Bruce's funeral home and as we witness his illicit desire, we encounter embodied traces of the queer, abject "other." Those traces are ubiquitous in the memoir, we feel them in the form of a variety of archival drawn pictures, personal diaries, handwritten letters, highlighted books as well as in the graphic representation of Alison's memories. Among such memories we find corpses at the funeral home, the family home's obsessive decoration, the indexical "permanent linoleum scar" Bruce leaves on the kitchen floor as he smashes a plate in a fit of rage (21) and the grease stain from Alison's dead grandfather's vitalis at the headboard in their grandmother's house (39). These bodies that overflow and exceed their boundaries to leave their trace on the page contribute to create a sense of "embodied textuality" that prompts the reader's affective encounter with queer objects and situations. Bodies that create their own archives, leaving marks on the world, on other bodies, on the text, *create space*. Erin

Manning, Nigel Thrift, Sara Ahmed and other theorists of affect understand the body not merely as a socially inscribed surface located in space, but rather as a complex entity that creates distinct spaces and temporalities.[5] Thinking of the archive of queer, overflowing bodies that leave their traces on the pages of *Fun Home*, I would like to suggest that the text creates a mode of "embodied textuality" as a queer space, a space of "strange/r encounters" that encourage the reader to reflect on the normative boundaries between different types of bodies and, in Ahmed's terms, on the power relations and techniques of differentiation that play into the construction of our everyday spaces.

There is, however, yet another sense in which the graphic memoir genre particularly welcomes the creation of queer spaces. In *Understanding Comics,* McCloud has influentially described how comics formally require the active collaboration of the reader, who must bring "closure" to the blank space between the frames or panels (67). The imagination of the reader, then, comes together with the author's creation as the former is asked to fill in the missing actions in the narrative sequence. Similarly, comics as a medium engages the reader in "healing the rupture between text and image," a gesture that Bruce echoes and literalizes through cutting and then threading up corpses at the funeral home. As Gardner suggests, comics, unlike the motion picture, "do open up (inevitably and necessarily) a space for the reader to pause between the panels and make meaning out of what she sees and reads" (791). In this sense, Naghibi and O'Malley have called attention to the gutters of comics as aporetic, blank spaces where new meanings

[5] See Manning's *The Politics of Touch: sense, movement, sovereignty*, Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* and Thrift's *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect.*

arise (qtd in Whitlock 978). In *Fun Home*, those spaces to pause and take in the words and bodies on the page, along with the formal visual disruptions that draw our attention towards specific passages such as the frameless centerpiece (Fig. 1) and Alison's split frame (Fig. 6), enable queer encounters. In this respect, we can read the gutters and visual disruptions on the page as spaces that welcome queer readings or reconstructions, since, as Lemberg suggests, "[in graphic narrative] the story is told not only through the combination of the words and images, but also in the spaces between the picture panels" (154). The blank space in between panels, as well as the gap that separates text from images in the graphic narrative, can be thus read as spaces of indeterminacy, conditional spaces that enable potentially disruptive, queer interpretations. The blank space, in short, dramatizes the tension of that which has been left unsaid. Echoing that formal tension, in *Fun Home* the reader is at the same time engaged in the reconstruction of a queer archive and queer desires that have been lost and silenced.

Queering Reception: The Family Album

Fun Home invites an embodied spectatorship and a queer mode of reception, then, through its formal traits, its transgression of generic boundaries and through its foregrounding of queer bodies and spaces. As in the case of the photograph of Bruce's lover (Fig. 1), the text actively 'queers' its reception by encouraging us to inhabit queer desires, queer gazes, queer affects. Through this gesture, the memoir actively disrupts the traditional role of family pictures in creating and perpetuating familial mythologies. Marianne Hirsch argues that, "in the [twentieth century] the camera has become the family's primary instrument of self-knowledge and self-representation – the primary means by which the family memory is perpetuated, by which the family's story is told" (*Familial Gaze* xvi). Hirsch has pointed out that, even if they embody the illusion of being natural, translucent signs, "[family frames] are as essentially constructed as any other representational form" (*Family Frames* 6). She argues that family pictures function to perpetuate dominant mythologies of family life: as they pose for each frame, family members tend to perform the specific, fixed roles that define them within that scheme. Thus we can productively read family pictures in *Fun Home* as instances, registers or, better, archives of embodied performance that the reader is invited to interact with both on a cognitive and affective level. A paradigmatic example of the way in which *Fun Home* challenges the conventions of the family photograph is the frame that introduces Chapter Four:

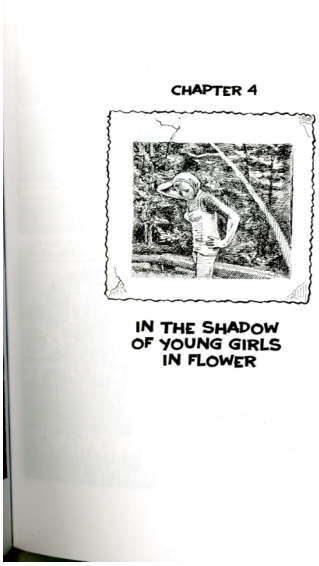

Fig. 8.: Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 87.

The beginning of each chapter in *Fun Home* is signaled, and strategically framed, by a picture from Alison's family album. This image, as we learn at the end of chapter four (120), features none other than Bruce in drag during his college years. At first glance, Alison's father looks like a woman. This initial impression is underscored by the title of the chapter, "In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower." When we learn later on that it is Bruce who is actually depicted in the picture, our initial reading is exposed and challenged. Bechdel indirectly raises a series of questions that directly implicate us: what are the sexual and ideological frameworks through which we read family pictures? Are transgender and transsexual bodies included within our definition of family? Are we capable of entertaining different possibilities when it comes to reading the sexual identity

of the members of the family in a picture of this type? Through playfully delaying the textual reflection on the picture, the text produces surprise in the reader, and it is this sense of having been tricked that leads her to interrogate her previous reading while simultaneously introducing the need for a queer mode of reception. Once more, the text exploits the visual archive in its intimate connection with verbal text to mobilize the reader and prompt her into a re-positioning of her stance towards queer bodies, gender and sexual identities and familial mythologies. Hirsch suggests that our affective engagement with family frames is further heightened by our tendency to strongly relate to family pictures precisely because they embody familial mythologies and are, in consequence, similar to one another. In this scene in *Fun Home*, the reader's engagement and identification with those familial mythologies is exploited, interrogated and radically dismantled through the revelation that the picture is in fact a picture of Bruce.

As we discussed above, the text's interrogation of the mythologies that attach to traditional family pictures extends to those connected to photographs of anti-normative, queer 'others.' In the case of the central picture of Roy (Fig. 1), through the focus on the picture's aesthetic qualities and Alison's translation of the frame into drawing, the text distances us from a conventional reading of the picture in terms of the myths often associated with perverse sexualities. What is more, through the Bechdel's exploration of Bruce's role as a father and through affectively and performatively engaging us in frames that re-enact queer, out-of-bounds situations and bodies (100-101, 44), the text dismantles the pathologized figure of the sexual 'stranger.'

Similarly, the memoir works against conventional, fetishized readings of family frames by juxtaposing them with those that reveal Bruce's anti-normative sexuality and by exposing the pictures' conditions of production. That kind of contextual information tends to be absent from the family album, since the illusion of freezing a particular moment in the life of a family is instrumental in perpetuating a mythology of the family as static, stable, united and monolithic (Hirsch, *Family Frames* 48). Through openly exposing the circumstances of the photographs' production, the text reveals the underlying familial conflicts that the original pictures elide and raises awareness of the complex interactions involved. A paradigmatic instance of this takes place when father and daughter are depicted in the act of taking a photograph:

Fig. 9.: Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 16-17.

In the first scene, Bruce is intently shooting a picture of his family before going to church. The overriding force of the familial gaze is particularly poignant in the case of the father, who "used his skillful artifice… to make things appear to be what they were not" (16). Bruce's wife and children, while participating in his scheme, show physical signs of resistance to the pressure of embodying his ideal of the perfect family: Alison, her brothers Christian and John and their mother stand rigid and apart from one another, avoiding any form of physical contact that might suggest familial harmony. This is significant in the light of Nancy Miller's ideas: "by taking the picture, parents

consciously and unconsciously rehearse the drama of related identities. In a way the photo is the relation" (1999, 53). This scene is followed by the family's subsequent appearance at church, where Bruce's homosexual tendencies are exposed (17), a gesture that empties the first picture of its power to perpetuate familial mythologies. The next panel depicts the shooting of a new family picture, though this time Alison is behind the camera. This second scene presumably gives way to a less ceremonial photograph: Alison's older brother is touching his nose and the youngest one's hands are in his pockets. It is clear that the photographer's look and the power relations involved radically affect the way in which family members pose for these two pictures. It is worth noting that Alison takes the last picture in the series. Once more, we are reminded that her viewpoint prevails in this memoir, and that it is through the lens of her craft that we access her family's story. As Miller asserts when exploring autobiographical texts that center around parental death, "if the memoir of a parent's death is always the story of at least two lives- told and telling- it is also always the triumph of the child's view of the past. The child who looked at the camera now looks back at the person who held it" (1999, 51-2).

Death, Beauty and the Queer Body

A similar exploration of the circumstances around the production of photographs is present in chapter five, which is framed by a black and white picture of a landscape:

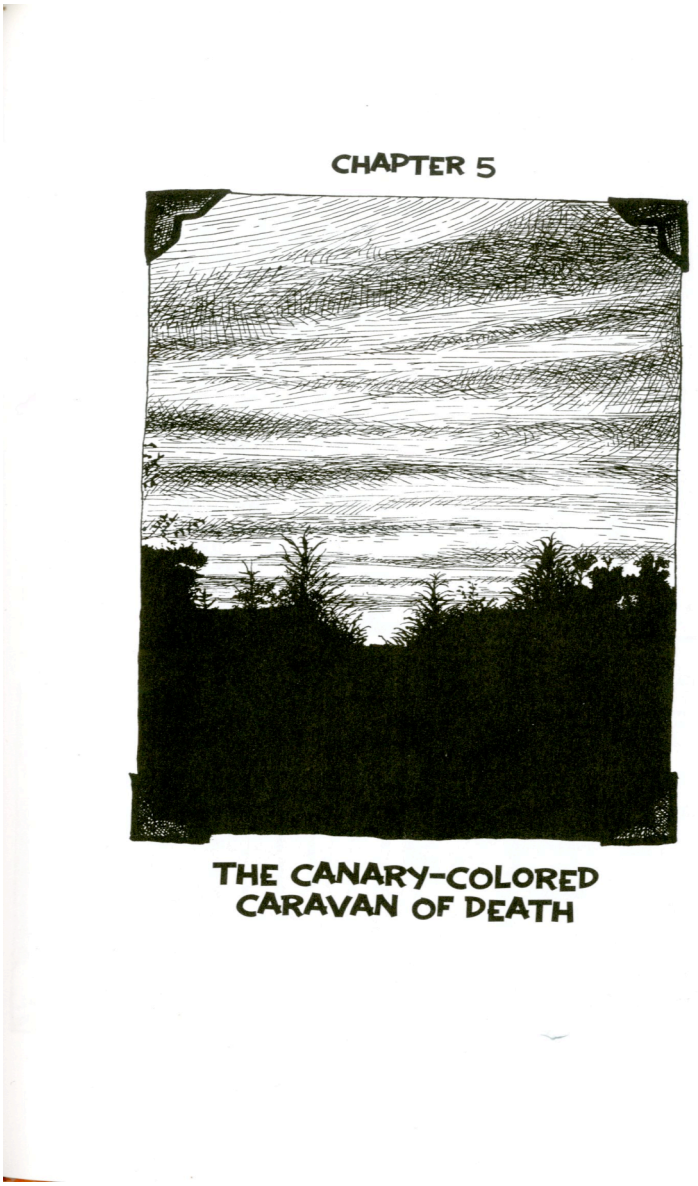

Fig. 10: Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 121.

Throughout the chapter, Bechdel focuses on the importance of setting in her father's story by introducing a series of drawings that show her photographing the natural scenery near her hometown. We thus witness the possible circumstances of production of the picture that opens this chapter, and the reader's pastoral idealization of the photograph is undermined:

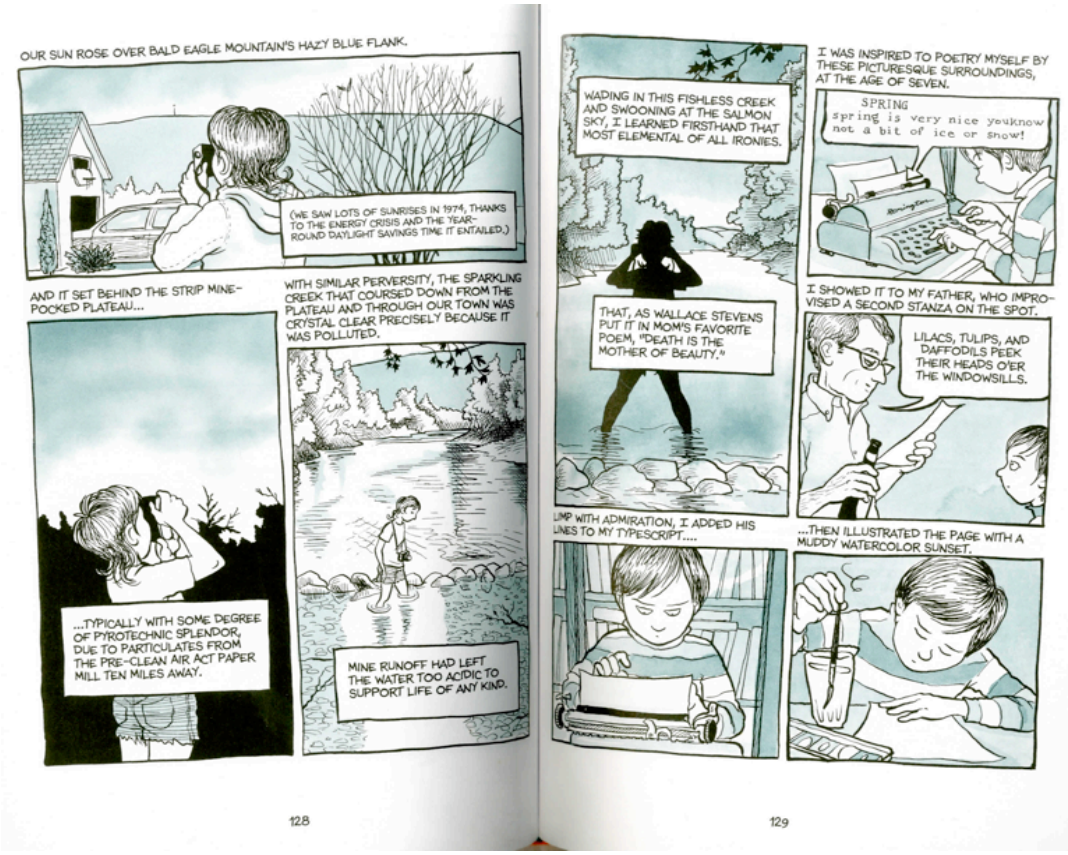

Fig. 11.: Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 128-129.

Alison recalls that the sunsets in her town were characterized by "some degree of pyrotechnic splendor, due to particulates from the pre-clean air act paper mill ten miles away" (128). In addition, Alison relates the crystal clarity and the lifelessness of the creek to pollution. She concludes, quoting Wallace Stevens, that "death is the mother of

beauty" (129). What is lost from the original photograph is precisely "that most elemental of all ironies" (129), along with the appreciation of the chasm between appearances and reality. Interestingly, as Watson argues, Bechdel makes us aware of the fact that "…narration is rooted in acts of looking and seeing differently" (44).

We might read this passage as a reflection on the problem of turning death and, in the specific case of this memoir, the queer body, into an object of art. In the scenes that follow, a younger Alison writes a poem and illustrates a watercolor sunset on the page, thus inaugurating her first version of the genre she exploits in this memoir. She absolves herself of the contradiction between her cheerful drawing/poem and the artificiality of the landscape's beauty by recalling that she never wrote another poem and stopped using color soon afterwards. However, in writing this memoir, what Bechdel accomplishes is precisely to make an artistic project out of her father's suicide. The text is highly aware of the ways in which it exposes, manipulates and exploits Bruce's archival remains and of the ethical problems such exploitation gives rise to. The aesthetization of the queer body in *Fun Home*, which we can see throughout the text but particularly in drawn photographs such as the centerpiece (100-1) and the opening of chapter four (87), seems to be at the service of encouraging the reader's encounter with subjects and desires normally perceived as unapproachable. At the same time, the artistry involved in the representation of queer bodies and of Bruce's archival remains is closely tied to Alison's intimacy with her father, an intimacy that is deployed from the very beginning and which takes different shapes as the story progresses. Alison's tight connection to Bruce is also instrumental in enabling the reader's encounter with queer bodies and desires and is

further manifested in their shared admiration of art, aesthetics and the male physique. Alison's reflection on photography and beauty (128-9), however, reminds us of the ethical danger of creating a mythology around what lies before the camera, of turning the queer body itself into a fetishized object, even if for a politically valuable purpose.

Conclusion

In the midst of a global context where 'strange/r encounters' with sexually, racially, ethnically marked 'others' are becoming the rule rather than the exception, *Fun Home* performatively sets the stage to allow for a series of affective confrontations between the reader and anti-normative, out-of-bounds queer bodies and sensibilities which are presented as closely familiar. In the process, the distinction between self and 'other,' and the identification of the latter as a stranger, collapse. The memoir dismantles this category by repositioning queerness as constitutive of home and family, re-situating it within the realm of the everyday, of the ordinary. In this sense, the text simultaneously interrogates our assumptions about hetero and homonormativity, strange or monstrous bodies and desires and normative, heterosexual familial mythologies. By encouraging the reader to empathize with Alison while simultaneously blurring the distinction between her desires and emotions and Bruce's, *Fun Home* prompts us to affectively re-invent ourselves as we come into contact with queer bodies and histories.

In *Fun Home*, the different encounters between Alison, Bruce, reader and text are made possible to a large extent by the performance of archival elements and graphic representations of lived experience. Auto/biographical memories and objects work to re-enact a sense of embodiment and affective engagement and thus create a mode of "embodied textuality" that both enables and is reinforced by the performative elements in the text. The graphic narrative genre has been associated with the everyday archive due to the latter's recurrent presence not only in the texts themselves but also in the fans' common practice of obsessively collecting issues. *Fun Home* suggests yet another central

way in which the graphic narrative genre, and the graphic memoir in particular, is linked to archives: archival elements have the capacity to function alongside performance to produce a sense of embodiment in the text that politically re-enacts individual, private affective histories. If we think of Roach's definition of performance as coextensive to histories and memory, we can think of the graphic memoir itself as an archive of queer performative genealogies, an archive of residual movements, gestures and bodies that remain latent in its images, words and blank spaces or gutters. In this sense, we need to start acknowledging and taking stock of the indispensable cultural work that graphic narratives perform as informal archives of queer experience, queer bodies, gestures, desires and histories of relationality and performance. Similarly, further work needs to be done on the graphic narrative as a liminal genre, paying particular attention to the political potentialities that emerge at the crossroads of encounters between the visual and the verbal, performance and textuality, the body and the archive.

In *Fun Home*, the physical traces of past histories not only affect the reader but also play in and with the lines that separate the text and the world, the text and the characters, the text and the anti-normative bodies it centers on, those anti-normative bodies, their archival remains, and the reader. As we turn page after page, it becomes more and more difficult to draw a clear line between our own affective stance, Alison's and Bruce's gaze and feelings, and the text itself. The memoir thus performs the political work of rendering a Bruce's illicit desires, affects and bodily traces indistinguishable from Alison's and, ultimately, from the reader. Most strikingly, the text interrogates the very possibility of actually telling normative and queer, anti-normative bodies apart. The

affective engagement the text proposes, along with its work of making out-of-bounds, untouchable bodies and desires approachable, calls for an embodied, queer mode of reception. The graphic narrative form lends itself to this type of spectatorship, both through welcoming archival and performative elements that recreate a sense of embodiment and through its very formal characteristics, which entail a constant encounter with blank spaces of interpretative indeterminacy. *Fun Home*'s mode of "embodied textuality" may be read as a queer space where forms of contact between the reader and strange/r bodies and desires become almost inevitable. A queer space that renders these encounters possible as they take place within the boundaries of a politically productive textual environment. In this sense, we might think of the graphic memoir form as a mediating technology for the production and the processing of affect and, most significantly, for the realization of a politics of encounter.

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