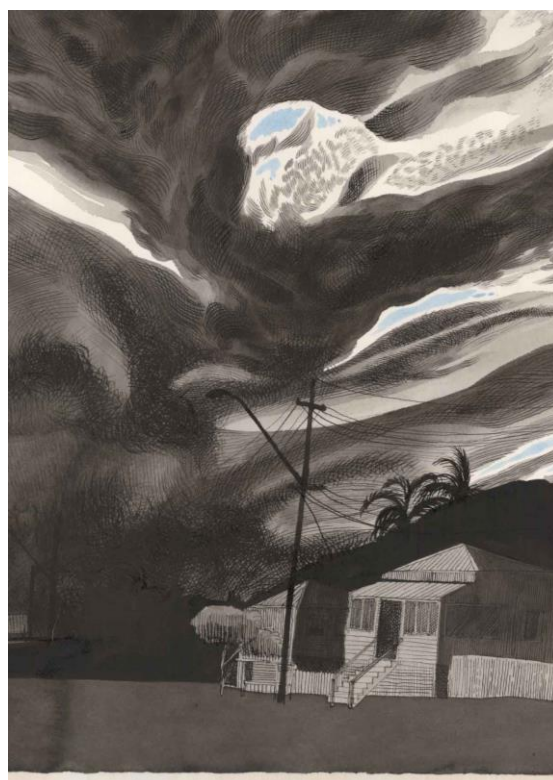


Touch Wood

By Jonathan McBurnie

Framing my work in the context of this topic can be done, but please excuse me if I come at it in a peculiar way. Superstition does relate, in some ways, but far more in my life than in my work, but obviously the two things are not mutually exclusive. I have never been superstitious in the usual sense of the way we use the word. I have never broken a mirror, but I have certainly crossed the path of a few black cats, so to speak, and it never bothered me. What I am cautious about, though, is giving power to ideas by speaking them. I have had many experiences in my life when careless words said in jest have forecast grim tidings. This may sound silly—and yes, superstitious—but I figure it can't hurt not to tempt fate. Allow me to explain.

When I was almost twenty, I had gone through a sustained period of stress, and was just coming out of it and finding my feet again when I found that the glands on my neck were up. Thinking it an infection, I waited (I have never been one for doctor visits) and it went away. The next week it was back, so off I went. My doctor, suspecting glandular fever, took a blood test just to be sure. That night, I was having some beers with a friend. I had just gotten a job, and with my recently dyed hair, a one-off attempt at purple; I

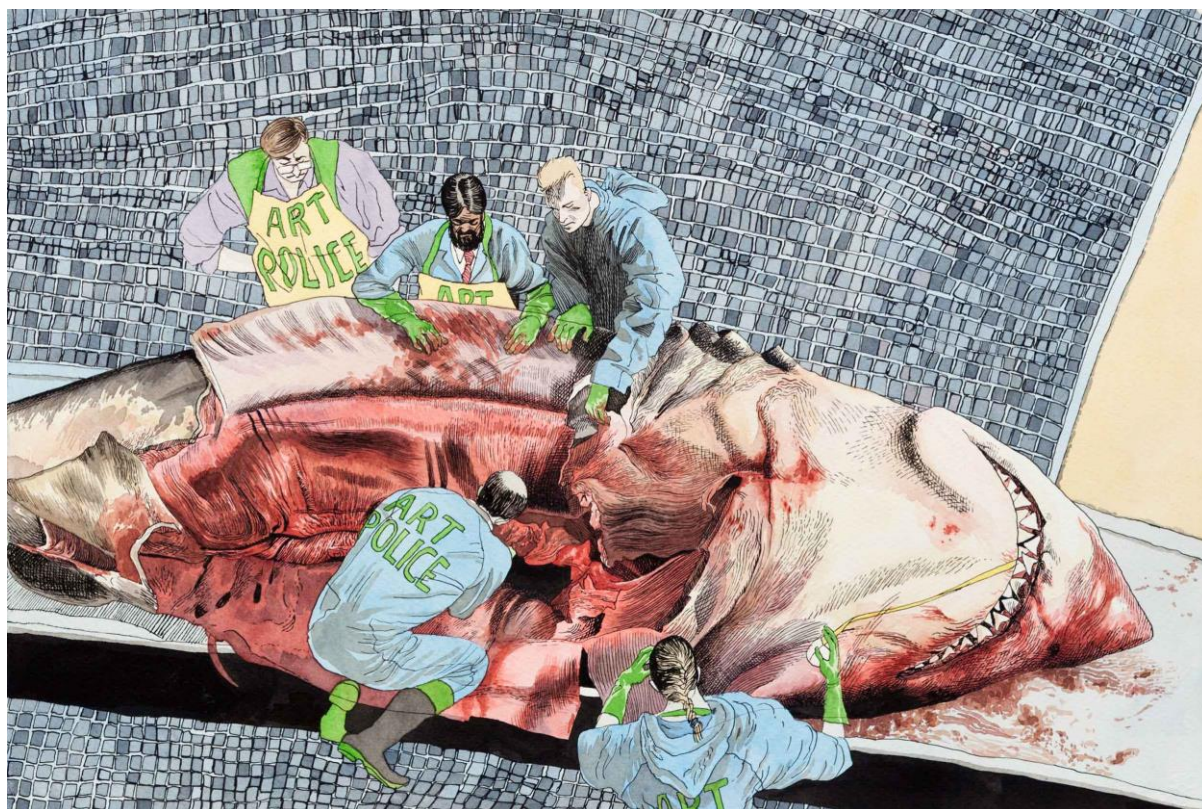


needed rid of it. So my mate used his clippers and shaved it off. He usually got around with a number two or three, but this dye was down to the roots, so it all had to go, right down to the skin. Later we were just goofing around, and he asked about my visit to the doctor. I told him about the blood test and joked that now that I had shaven my head, it would probably be leukemia. You can probably see where this is going.

Sure as rain, the next morning, the doctor rang

me quite early, which, I reasoned, was probably not great. He asked me to come in right away, where he informed me that it was leukaemia. After I had gotten to hospital (I basically had to pack a bag and head straight over) and “settled in,” I called my friend from the night before, who at first thought I was joking around. Eventually it sunk in; for him, in terms of realising the gravity of what I had just shared; for me, that perhaps deep down I already knew. It was confusing, obviously, but I was never so quick to joke about such things after that. Since then I have seen a lot of friends and family (too many, really) die from such ailments. Unfortunately, nobody precious to me that has gotten cancer of any sort has made it.

This sends chills down my spine when I think of friends who are fighting it right now as I write this. Some people, like my Uncle Chip and my friend Jess, a day older than me, who was doing chemo when I was, were granted reprieves, substantial ones too, before it came back with a vengeance. I am happy that they got that. Jess used her time to raise an amazing amount of money for cancer-adjacent charities and got married. Chip got to be a loving—and absolutely proud—grandfather for the first time. Beautiful, amazing things. Others were not so lucky, and I just can’t write about them here, not yet. Without those second chances, it is still too raw and too real.



Above: “ALT ERA AGITA” (2021).



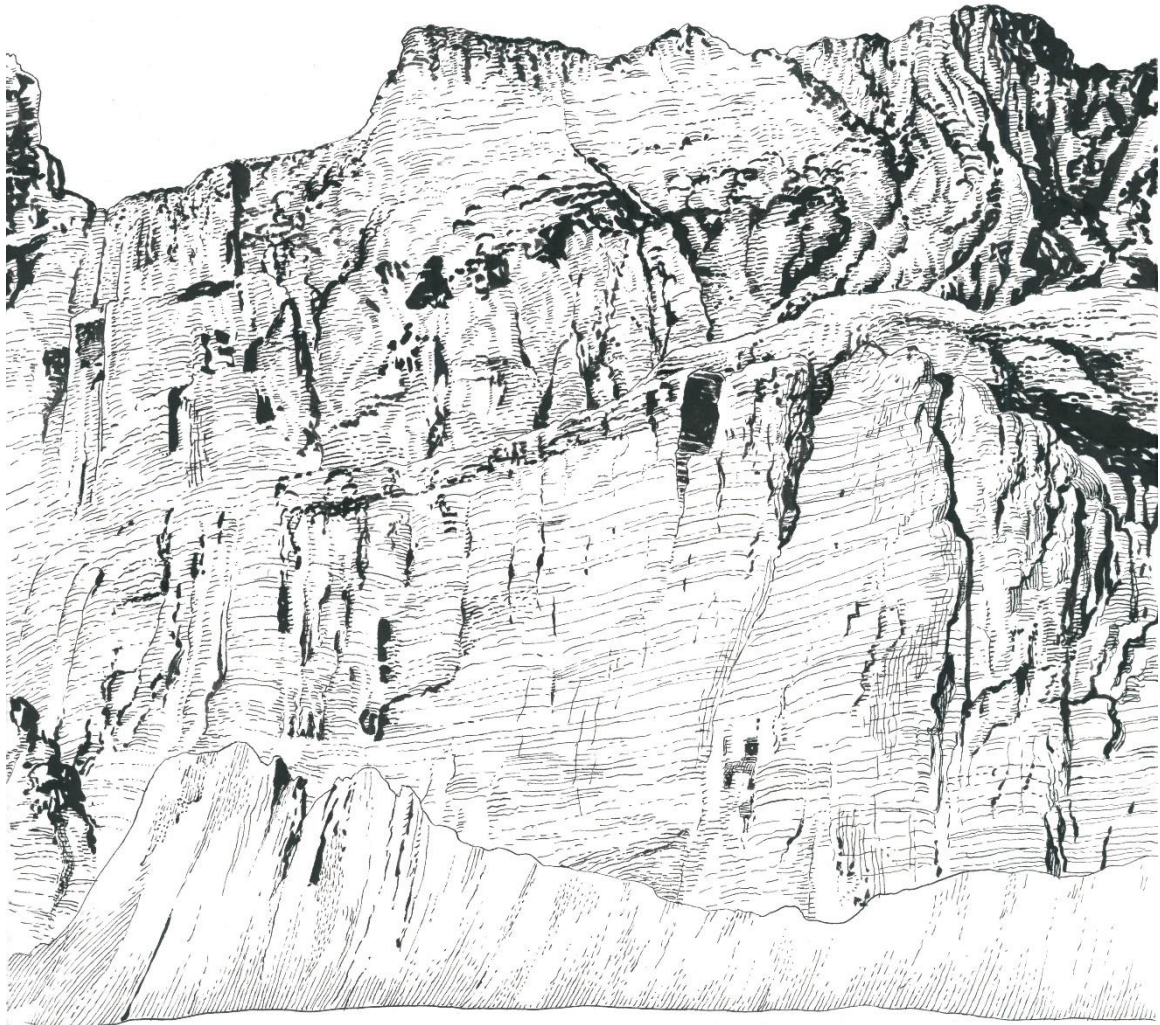
Above: "ANXIETY DOG (WHAT'S MY HABITAT)" (2021).

This may not appear to have an obvious correlation to my work, but it does come into it. There is a sadness that can be difficult to express in words, and sometimes images, for me, are the only way to put it. Going through these things did make me really start to question what I was saying, even as a joke, and by extension, what I was saying in my work. I don't know if that counts as superstition, but I am certainly more mindful and deliberate about my words and my choices now.

Jonathan McBurnie is an artist, writer and cartoonist, based in Queensland, Australia.

McBurnie began self-publishing comic books at

the age ten, and his life has been a series of constant projects ever since. Completing a PhD at Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney, in 2014, his thesis and accompanying studio works explored the shifting role of drawing in the digital age. McBurnie approaches his work as a collision of high and low forms, and seeks the narrative propulsion and dense visual language that lies in the tension between these forms.



manage it.

Above: "HIGH VALUE PLACEBOS" (2021).
