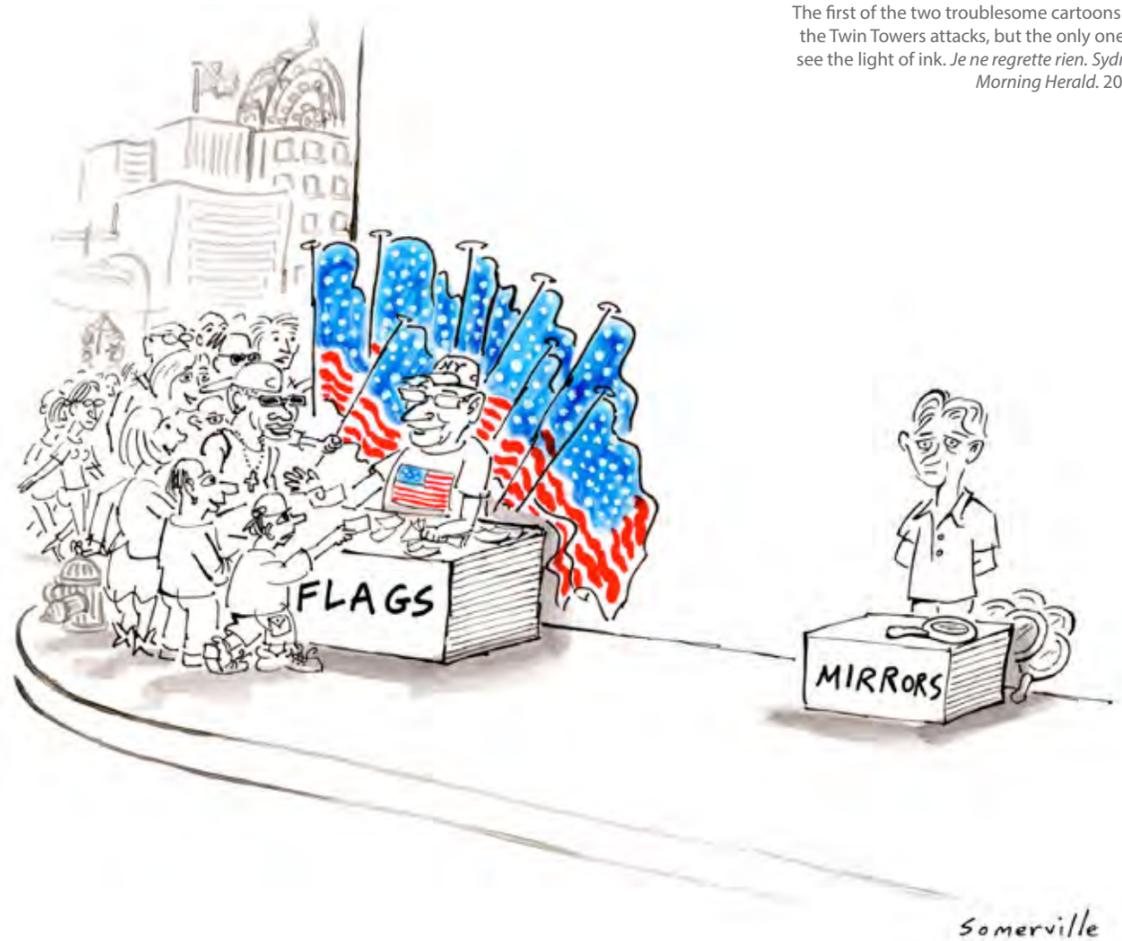


The first of the two troublesome cartoons on the Twin Towers attacks, but the only one to see the light of ink. *Je ne regrette rien*. Sydney Morning Herald. 2001.



Being a freelancer at home as opposed to a full-timer in the office is like being the audience instead of the magician: you never fully understand how it works.

the tranquil eddies of controversy. Upon graduating I was anaesthetised by the landscape of untethered adulthood. An exciting drought of prospects opened before me. The immediate few years were filled in with dismissals from a variety of ill-paid jobs. The only one not passionless was as a postie in North Sydney where I wafted my way through the day with 40 kilos of mail on my back and a ballooning fantasy that I was Hermes.

After five months and three strikes I was called in to a conference with my postmaster where it was suggested that my presence would be greatly enhanced by my absence. I strode out in a cloud of cluelessness and signed on to the dole where I reflected upon my options.

Savings allowed me three years of travel overseas. In essence it was a protracted bout of self-funded daydreaming, something that one or two philosophers have cited as undervalued. That daydreaming was the completion of a curious internship and upon returning I quietly slipped into the life of the freelance.

Why does anyone do anything? Perhaps for the needed suck to get out of bed each morning and do some surviving. From some early point, however, I was slave to the middle-class conceit of seeking passion in work. My grandmother once said that 'persuing art was getting into the self-expression racket'. The chop of her summary intrigued me.

The first decade of my making cartoons was anchored in learning the internal cogs of cartoon composition and taming the gangly self-consciousness of my draftsmanship. I also mapped some of the mysterious geography of selling drawings to newspapers and magazines as an outsider. Then came the first fork in the road.

The morning after I had completed any drawing, I rarely liked it. Yes, there was advancing technical prowess but no life. Lines were neat and dutifully joined but freedom and ebullience were cauterised.

The cultural poles for cartoons then were distinct: the British school and the American. Only Bruce Petty had kicked down the door to something wholly new. I started to suspect I had coupled myself for too long to the former and decided to court the latter. The cartoons of Playboy, MAD, National Lampoon and the New Yorker were possessed of an unshackled lightness, oscillating between extroversion and reflective intelligence. Cartoonists San Frontières. Perhaps the antidote to my anal retentiveness lay there. The next five years were spent unlearning and letting my hand jump off a few cliffs.

By now I was a successful journeyman cartoonist. And so came the next fork: Why draw a cartoon at all? Why? I was clutched by the need to put my own feelings and spirit into the ideas that the drawings travelled upon. By my thirties I was well down the road to cynicism, which Ambrose Bierce defined as 'seeing the world as it is, not as it should be'.

Since the early 18th century cartoons had sought to hold a corrective lens up to society's eye to see things as they are. It felt a good *raison d'être*. Happily, at the moment of this awakening a door opened up to me at Fairfax. I was given Sunday nights doing two cartoons for the Stay-in-Touch page in Monday's Sydney Morning Herald. I was hired by then editor Luis Garcia, a Cuban émigré who had a fragile grip on humour. At night's end I would show him my inked pieces. He'd gaze at them searchingly then ask, 'Now, you are sure they are funny?'



THE CARTOONING LIFE

Phil Somerville

I was born in 1954, the same year Miles Davis managed to kick heroin. This is of no specific relevance other than to note the curious richness of unlikely juxtaposition, a helpful mechanism in a cartoonist's mind.

My mother, a devoted Catholic late of far north Queensland, popped me out into a secular world at Sydney's Mater Hospital. I've convinced myself I hold clear memory of the Sisters of Mercy nuns who ran the place in a plume of formaldehyde and rectitude, sheathed figures in stark black and white.

Such monochrome has obsessed my eyes and imagination ever since, an unbroken ribbon wrapped around early television, old library copies of Punch and the New Yorker and entire afternoons sacrificed at the altar of Film Noir and Buster Keaton at the Valhalla Cinema in Glebe.

The dominant twelve years of my schooling were at a Catholic boys' college in the eastern suburbs. The place was held together by the usual quantities of guilt, corporal violence, fear of women and homo-erotic experiment.

The outsider experience seems a common one for poets and professional humourists of all stripes. At my school the margins were crowded. Becoming 'class clown' was a promotion out of the crosshairs of bullies, and my only ambition. There and then it was a competitive vocation, brimming with gifted smart-arses.

I honed my ear for the music of sarcasm and absurdist comedy, practising it more than I took the sacraments. By sixteen I was adding brand-value by developing a respectable line as scornful cartoonist. For the remaining two years of education this kept me safe in



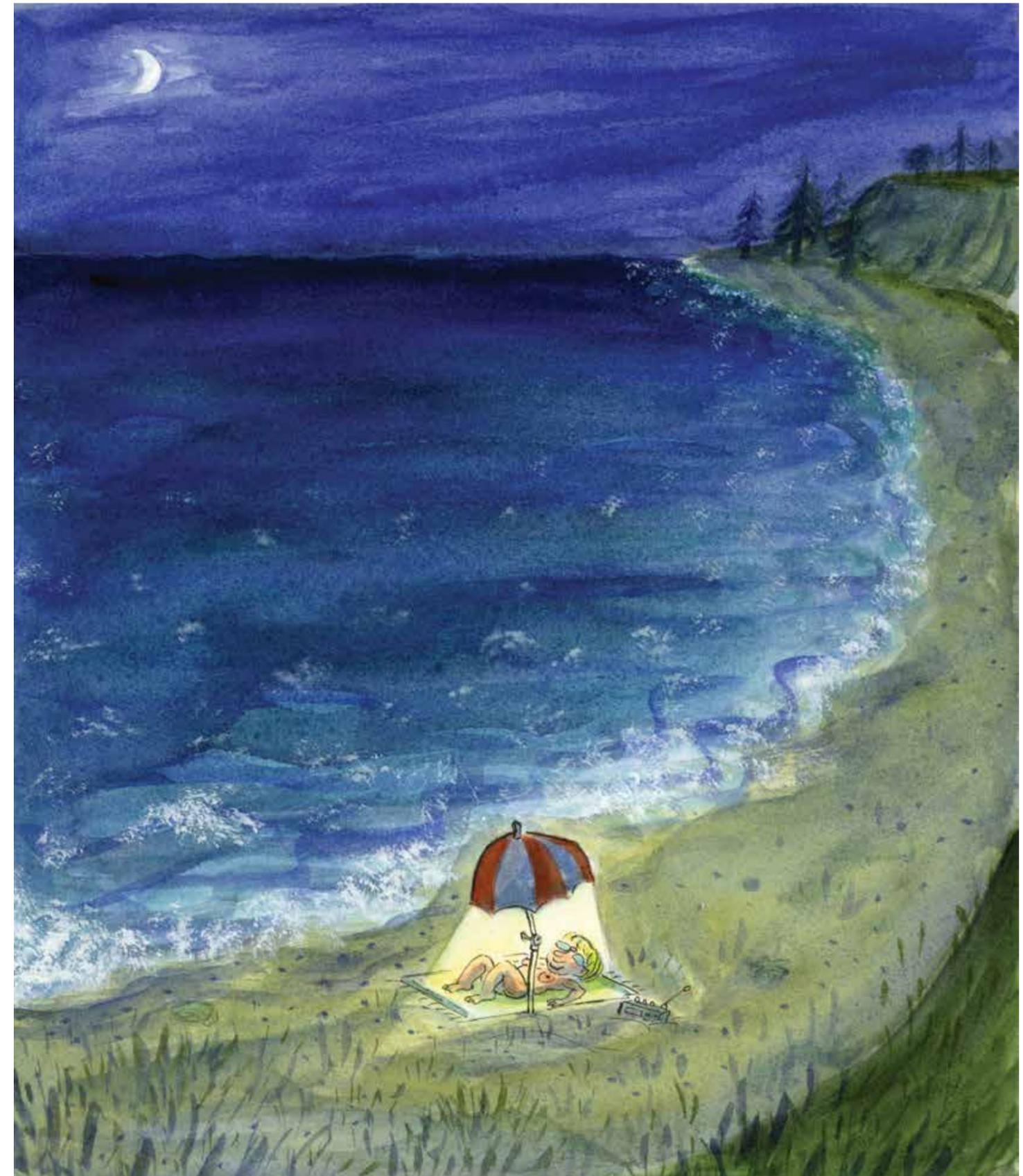
to which I would nod obligingly. Eighteen months later it all fizzled out but now I felt I was finally doing more of what Saul Steinberg dubbed 'thinking on paper'.

I continued freelancing, including two years doing a literary cartoon for a supplement in *The Australian*. But my heart lay at Fairfax. A few years later David Dale returned to the Herald and opened another door for me there. He was a rare editor: a catholic sense of humour and no latent resentment of cartoonists because of their superseding connection to readers. He let me draw what I wished and in a large space. He was the first of a cadre of sensitive, smart editors I flourished under, including Bernard Zuel, Angela Bennie and Shelley Gare. Their ethos was clarity and originality. They were actively encouraging. Angela once said to me in a moment of self-doubt, 'Your drawing will only get better, your mind has already arrived.' This is whispering apprenticeship that has long since evaporated.

Being a freelancer at home as opposed to a full-timer in the office is like being the audience instead of the magician: you never fully understand how it works. This gap underpinned my eventual undoing. The prelude was the political vulcanism of September 2001. It was after midnight and I was flicking through TV trying to find some weather. I saw a bright blue sky and a commercial airliner flying into the second Twin Tower, the first one already an obsidian horror. It was live. I stayed up all night hypnotised and anxious. As reality settled in, so did self interest. I had a good notion of what the next day's cartoons would depict: Bruegelian devastation. Angry wailing. Statue of Liberty weeping into her open palms. I wanted to avoid more hand-wringing. I wanted to come up with something that was somehow an x-ray. The back page editor was a stand-in—he was normally the motoring editor. He told me to quit fretting over ideas and just put in some American flags. This turned the key. I sent the final drawing. He liked the flags, didn't understand the idea so would use it anyway but print it half the normal size of my spot 'just in case'.

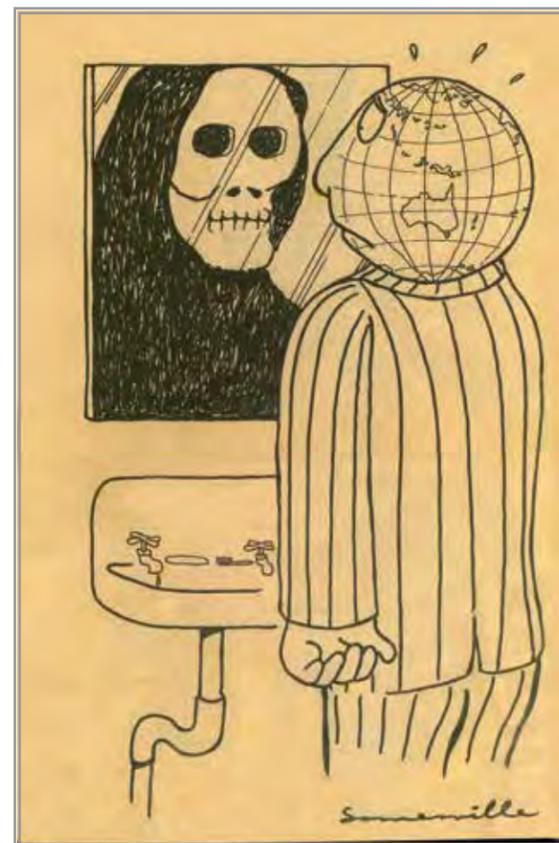
Left: I was asked to do a weekly cartoon in a Sunday newspaper colour supplement magazine. The space was a leftover, one column by the full page height. Form created content as stories told in 5 vertical panels. This calmly wordless example was one of some 80 I contributed. *Sunday Life* magazine. 2002.

Opposite: While I confess to the ability to write humorously the romantic in me pines for the sanctity of the pure visual cartoon. This one was a louche indulgence in watercolour washes worthy of an MGM musical from the fifties. From the book, *I am moderately fond of Australia*. 2001.



In Monday's Herald, despite its postage stamp presence, the cartoon made immediate ripples. I was praised for my avant garde insight and savaged as a tasteless bigot. Feelings surged, letters rolled in, debate raged. I could understand the anger while not agreeing with it. Commentary is simultaneously illuminating and exploitative. Like most human endeavour it is messy. I survived and my weekly spot continued intact.

Exactly one year later there was a new section editor. I submitted a cartoon marking the first anniversary of 9/11. It was possibly more incendiary than the previous year's. Roundly rejected, despite my protests, I submitted an alternative which was printed. The original drawing however would not unclutch me. I felt gnawing frustration and, naively, sent it to David Marr who was on leave from the Herald while hosting ABC TV's Media Watch. He felt it was an important story of media self-censorship and wanted to broadcast it. By the time my sense of career survival had woken up, momentum had overtaken. The ship had sailed on withdrawal. It went to air and the resultant blizzard of debate and viewer support gave me fifteen minutes of exhilaration.



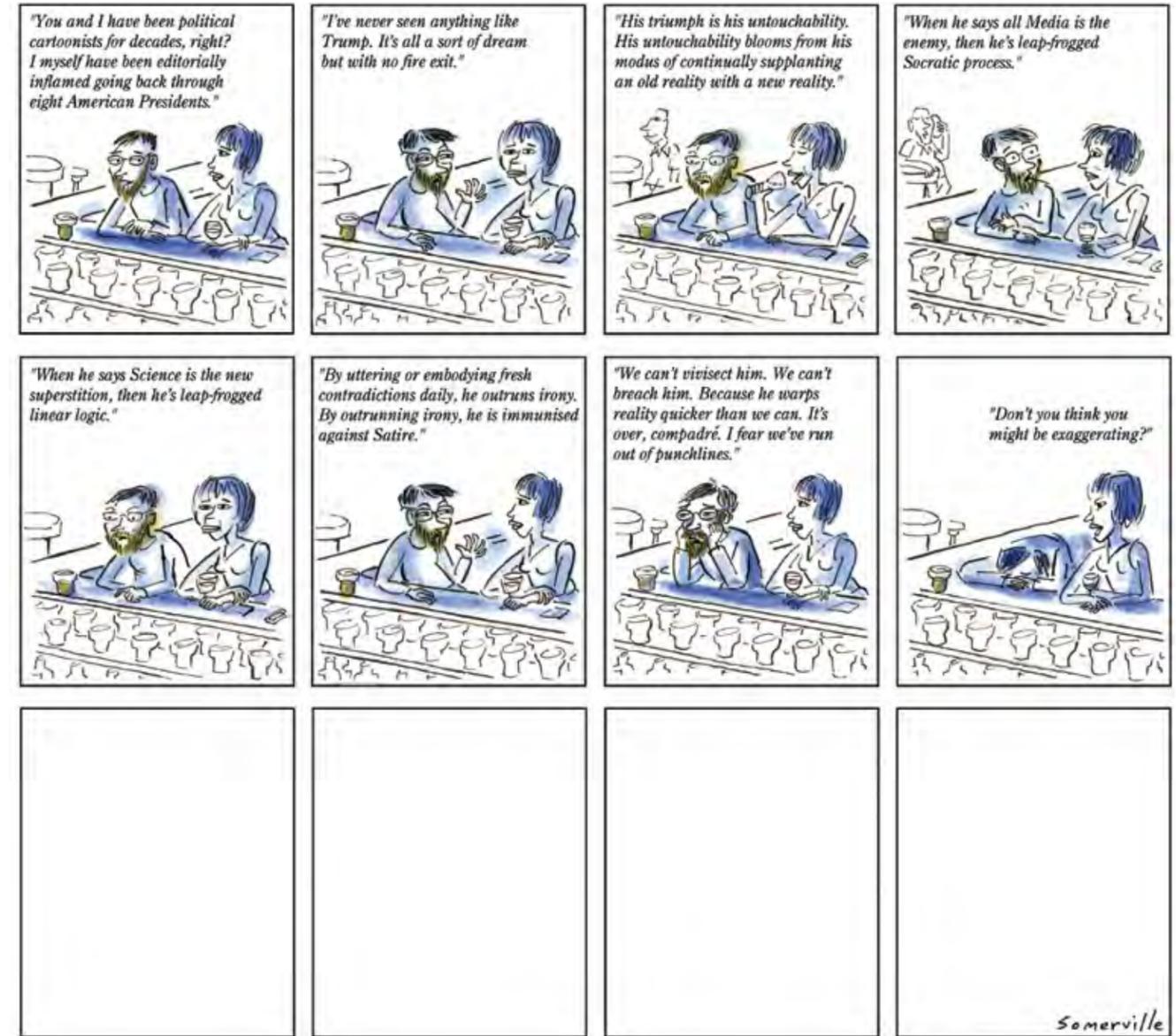
The next day I was phoned by the paper to explain my actions and told curtly that one should pause for thought before shitting in their own nest. In retrospect, probably sound advice. Within four months the back page was re-designed and I was quietly cut loose into outer space. All part of the freelance life.

Years later I enjoyed a third act as chief editorial cartoonist on the Sun Herald. It was a good run of work I could mostly look at squarely the morning after. In 2009 the GFC came and I went, part of a first wave of severances that sadly continue to this day at Fairfax.

Professional cartooning today is in contraction. I managed to earn my supper from it for decades without a day job. As the analogue landscape has given way to a digital one, this is less feasible for younger practitioners. Despite such ebb I continue to toil in quieter vineyards and am arguably doing my best work. Drawing cartoons is a disease one contracts and whose cure is never sought.

Phil Somerville produces a fortnightly topical cartoon under the moniker Line of Thought. It is by paid subscription only. For further enquiry regarding receiving this, contact Phil directly by email at phil.somerville@somervillecartoons.com

An early attempt at old lefty community group editorial cartooning on a bed of Grand Guignol. I was 22 but still apparently stuck in traffic somewhere in puberty. From a brochure, Campaign Against Nuclear Energy (CANE) Adelaide 1977.



Above: Postmodernist self-reference generally sees me reaching for a pack of reflux tablets. However this more recent drawing, fresh from the age of Lewis Carroll 2.0, was an idea I chose to succumb to. My thanks to John Cage. From online cartoon Line of Thought. 2017.

Left: The impetus for environmental angst cartoons is, sadly, timeless. I suspect I did this one for the puerile motivation of anything to annoy motorists. Woody Allan said that Black & White was an endangered species. I would say the same of the Elysium Fields of ink & grey wash. Nexus Magazine. 2015.