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Life Like Us

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Life Like Us

by Darren Fleet and Jim Holyoak



About the Artists

Darren Fleet (Ph.D.) is a writer, artist, and instructor at the SFU School of Communication and at the UBC School of Journalism, Writing, and Media. His creative, journalistic, and scholarly work has been featured in numerous publications and forums including Vice, Public, Frontiers in Communication, Journalists for Human Rights, UTNE Reader, and at the Istanbul Biennial of Art. He won a 2021 Webby Award for his work with Greenpeace International. He is currently interested in the ways that fossil fuels mediate and define our relationships with the non-human world, and with one another.

Jim Holyoak's discipline consists of book arts, ink-painting, and room-sized drawing installations. He received a BFA from the University of Victoria, an MFA from Concordia University, and studied ink painting in Yangshuo, China. Though the content of his work ranges from the biological to the phantasmagorical, there is a persistent interest in human empathy for other species, and in the challenge of fathoming deep time. Jim has exhibited his work, contributed to publications, and attended artist residencies internationally.

Life Like Us

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*Beginnings become middles, middles become ends, and ends become fragments.
Each of the words that the trilobites share on the page are words stated in real
life, though at times the order and authorship is blurred. Time is often
reorganized, chopped-up, shifted from scene to scene, epoch to epoch.*

—Darren Fleet and Jim Holyoak

In this artwork we present a set of personal conversations between ourselves, Jim and Darren, transported across deep time, more than half a billion years ago on planet earth, where we are personified as a pair of trilobites—Douglas and George—who themselves are trying to make sense of their world, the Cambrian, which also ended in a mass extinction event, though an extinction event not of their making.

The artwork is primarily based on two mountain treks that we took together in the summer of 2019, into the Walcott Quarry and Mount Stephen Trilobite Beds at the Burgess Shale (a UNESCO World Heritage Site) in the Canadian Rocky Mountains. These sites are in the traditional and unceded territories of the Ktunaxa and Secwepemc First Nations. This region contains some of the most significant fossils ever found. They have been profoundly influential in tracing and understanding the origins of life on earth. The sheer richness of their detail and preservation is surpassed only by their immense improbability. Once hunting for food on the bottom of a vast global sea that covered all land on the planet, the creatures of the Burgess Shale now rest thousands of feet above sea level, resting across a thin band of scattered mountain scree in the peaks of the continental divide.



Figure 1. Holyoak, Jim, and Darren Fleet. *Trilobites Above the Fog*. 2021. Detail of the artwork in “Overburden,” The Kootenay Art Gallery, 2021. Ink and graphite on paper. Drawings by Jim Holyoak; text and story by Darren Fleet and Jim Holyoak.



Figure 2. Holyoak, Jim, and Darren Fleet. *Trilobites Above the Fog*. 2021. Detail of the artwork in "Overburden," The Kootenay Art Gallery, 2021. Ink and graphite on paper. Drawings by Jim Holyoak; text and story by Darren Fleet and Jim Holyoak.

Through a theorization of contemporary extraction practices as actions of extinction, we travelled back through deep and spiraling time into these ancient rocks to connect the Cambrian explosion (which was the greatest diversification event of evolution on earth—541 million years ago) to the Anthropogenic implosion (the great contemporary extinguishing of the biosphere). Together, we produced a collection of notations, plein-air sketches, and prose-poetry to document and express this mediation. In doing so, we pondered the parallel meanings between historical mass extinctions and contemporary logics of domination. Titled *Trilobites Above the Fog* (2021), these experiences and creations were then transformed into a series of comic panels of Cambrian life forms conversing about extraction, extinction, and climate change.

Those familiar with the history of Romanticism as a literary and artistic movement will recognize the inspiration for the lead image (see Fig. 1) as a playful take on Caspar Friedrich's *Wander Above the Sea Fog*, an archetypal Romantic era image painted in 1818 two years after a major, and sudden, climatic cooling event. Humour and laughter are a way of coping with grief, loss, culpability, absurdity, and powerlessness. As such, *Trilobites Above the Fog* (2021) attempts to capture the very real and often conflicted responses to ecological crisis that many of us have.

The drawings also reflect and acknowledge aspects of the lingering influence of Romanticism in Western liberal capitalist culture, and how many of us who live in these contexts are invited to view and to understand the non-human world, and mountainous landscapes, as sites of inspiration, renewal, and insight—a place to experience a sense of the sublime. These invitations come through advertisers, popular literature, films, television shows, schooling, tourism boards, and even our governments. And as such, in a country like Canada where we both live, we are positioned to exist in a stasis where we love “nature” and yet also disproportionately hasten its demise. This is a place where our leading politicians promise us oil riches forever and carbon neutrality now, without even a whiff of contradiction. Living in dissonance, many of us wrestle to find a way beyond the emotional weight of this condition, and in doing so, search for new political and social realities.

Stepping away from the work to consider process, one way to think of this project is as one long and ongoing conversation that began 25 years ago next to a bus stop outside of a Chevron gas station in the suburbs of Vancouver. There, beneath an early evening grey sky and the blinking of traffic lights, we had our first conversations about art and writing. Soon after that serendipitous encounter, we started meeting regularly to read poetry and to participate in a shared free flow writing practice called 856, named after the first three numbers of the telephone code for our town.

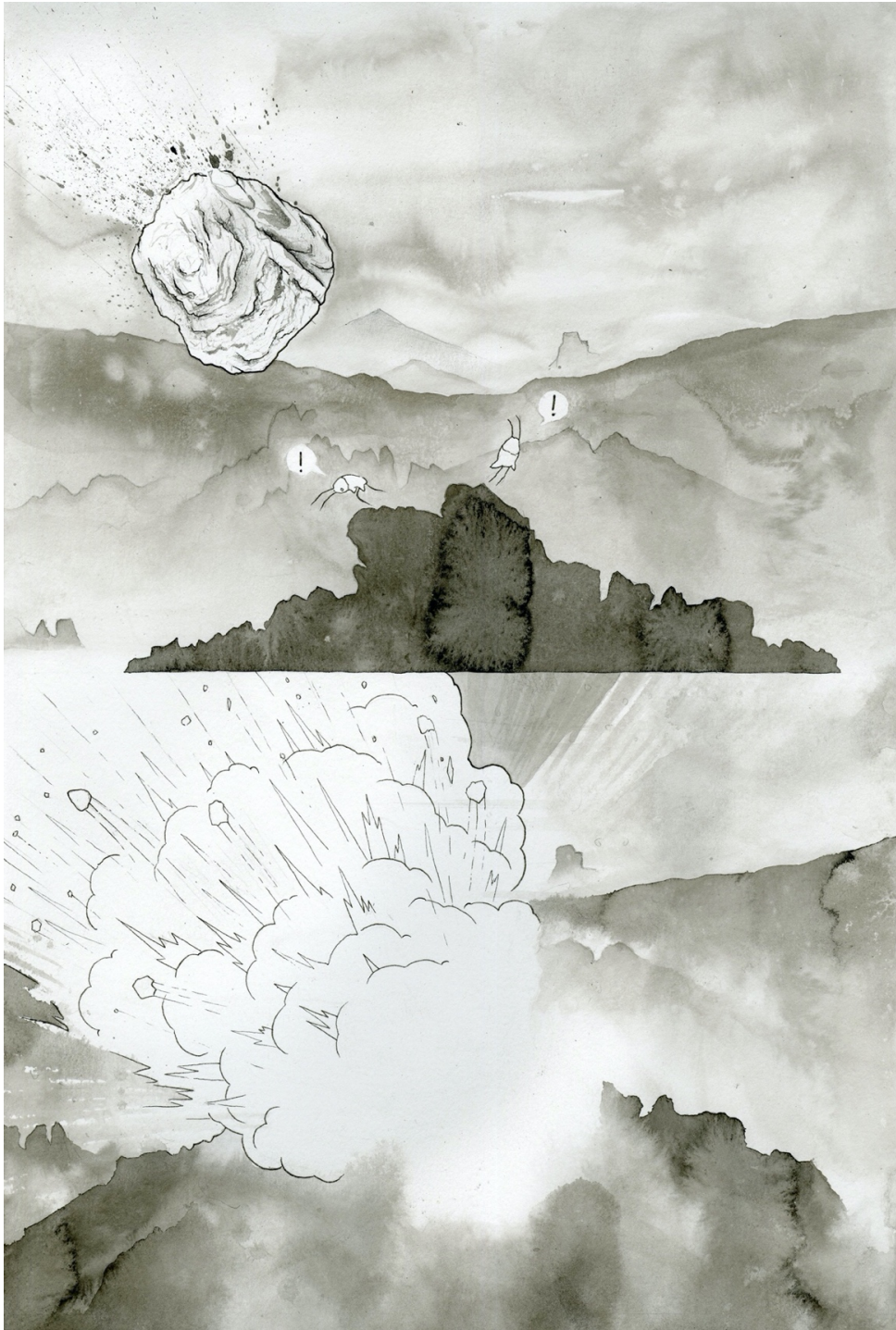


Figure 3. Holyoak, Jim, and Darren Fleet. *Trilobites Above the Fog*. 2021. Detail of the artwork in “Overburden,” The Kootenay Art Gallery, 2021. Ink and graphite on paper. Drawings by Jim Holyoak; text and story by Darren Fleet and Jim Holyoak.

We came of age during the era of irrational economic exuberance and post-cold war capitalistic optimism. This was a time that equally celebrated the Kyoto Accord and the establishment of the WTO, The Montreal Protocol and the refinement of technologies for extreme extraction. Everything about our town was typical of the North American petrol landscape: automobiles, fast food restaurants, and one-story shopping malls where teens aspired to driver's licenses, first jobs, and graduation. The suburban experience, and our reaction to it, has shaped much of our present thinking and artistic practices.



Figure 4. Holyoak, Jim, and Darren Fleet. *Trilobites Above the Fog*. 2021. Detail of the artwork in “Overburden,” The Kootenay Art Gallery, 2021. Ink and graphite on paper. Drawings by Jim Holyoak; text and story by Darren Fleet and Jim Holyoak.

One of the things that we enjoyed about creating *Trilobites Above the Fog* (2021) was having the opportunity to rekindle our writing and reading practice and having the freedom to create a world in which our deepest eco-anxieties and questions could be put into images, panels, and moments of absurd jest. Sometimes, our Cambrian characters are talking about doom-scrolling on iPhones or reminiscing about long gone fashion trends from their youth. In others, they ponder brood care, mass wasting events, punctuated equilibrium, and other profound insights from the fossil record. Something the characters consistently come back to, however, is the question of how to challenge the catastrophic systems of provision that also give their lives meaning.

In one particular scene, the trilobites discuss the notion of implication. Douglas says to George: “Thank God for this beautiful place we’re destroying.” George replies: “Thank God for this beautiful place we’re destroying. And by we, I mean we in this place. And by we in this place I mean some people in this place. And by some people in this place, I mean some people in this place are more responsible than others” (Holyoak and Fleet 2021). In this conversation they explore what ecomarxist scholar Jason Moore calls “a trick as old as modernity”: how “the rich and powerful create problems for all of us, then tell us we’re all to blame” (Moore 2017, 599). This panel travels across the layers of contradiction and implication that makes imagining alternative futures less Romantic, less scientific and more social, more political. It begins with some playful banter about the contemporary cultural moment, then transitions into a heady and theoretical exchange about assigning blame and the role of domination and power in the ecological crisis, and then finishes with a stark reflection on the demise that comes to Cambrian and Anthropogenic creatures alike:

‘I don’t want to be eaten,’ says Douglas.

‘I don’t want to be eaten either’ George replies. (Holyoak and Fleet 2021)



Figure 5. Holyoak, Jim, and Darren Fleet. *Trilobites Above the Fog*. 2021. Detail of the artwork in “Overburden,” The Kootenay Art Gallery, 2021. Ink and graphite on paper. Drawings by Jim Holyoak; text and story by Darren Fleet and Jim Holyoak.

Throughout the work, beginnings become middles, middles become ends, and ends become fragments. Each of the words that the trilobites share on the page are words stated in real life, though at times the order and authorship is blurred. Time is often reorganized, chopped-up, shifted from scene to scene, epoch to epoch. In one moment, we learn of sea water acidity and the continental shelf, the unique biochemical, geological, and fluvial features that led to these creatures’ fossilization; and in another moment they talk about spiritual confusion, the fears and hopes of having children, or the latest media reports of resurgent stock market confidence in the price of oil. The phrase “wild is my truth” is something Darren’s then 6-year-old daughter said to Jim during an after-school chat about motivation and art (Holyoak and Fleet 2021). The statement “Disregard is a symptom and an action [sic] of extinction” is taken from the ramblings of an 856 writing circle (Holyoak and Fleet 2021). “Following the fossil trail to the bottom of the sea” is an extracted sentence from the page of a travel journal (Holyoak and Fleet 2021). Other words were penned on scrap paper and book sleeves. Some were written under the glare of a camping LED light fastened to the tent mesh slightly above Jim’s hunched shoulders as he prepared to sleep under a cold, mountain summer sky. And many of the factoids that populate these conversations came from the lively brain of our official Burgess Shale geologist-tour-guide, a required chaperone for all treks into the fossil beds.



Figure 6. Holyoak, Jim, and Darren Fleet. *Trilobites Above the Fog*. 2021. Detail of the artwork in “Overburden,” The Kootenay Art Gallery, 2021. Ink and graphite on paper. Drawings by Jim Holyoak; text and story by Darren Fleet and Jim Holyoak.

In all that “humanity” is said to know, the sum of it all is so often only a glimpse of a glimpse. What is most ominous to consider when looking out from the Walcott Quarry, high above the tree line in the Western Canadian Rockies, is how little these creatures tell us about of the expanse of their elaborate and flourishing underwater world. The fossils are the keyholes, but it is the contemporary imagination that fills the room with light. To wander amongst the fossils of the Burgess Shale is to have conversations that span the totality of every second, minute, hour, day, week, year, decade, century, millennia, aeon, and all events that came before, and will also come after. It is a space to imagine as brightly, or as darkly, as one feels. So, what kind of world would we imagine if we were free to imagine? It is easy to forget that imagination works in all directions. Biologically, the Mount Stephen Trilobites beds in Yoho National Park are almost as far back as the past goes. So what future is possible from the shadow of this Cambrian graveyard?

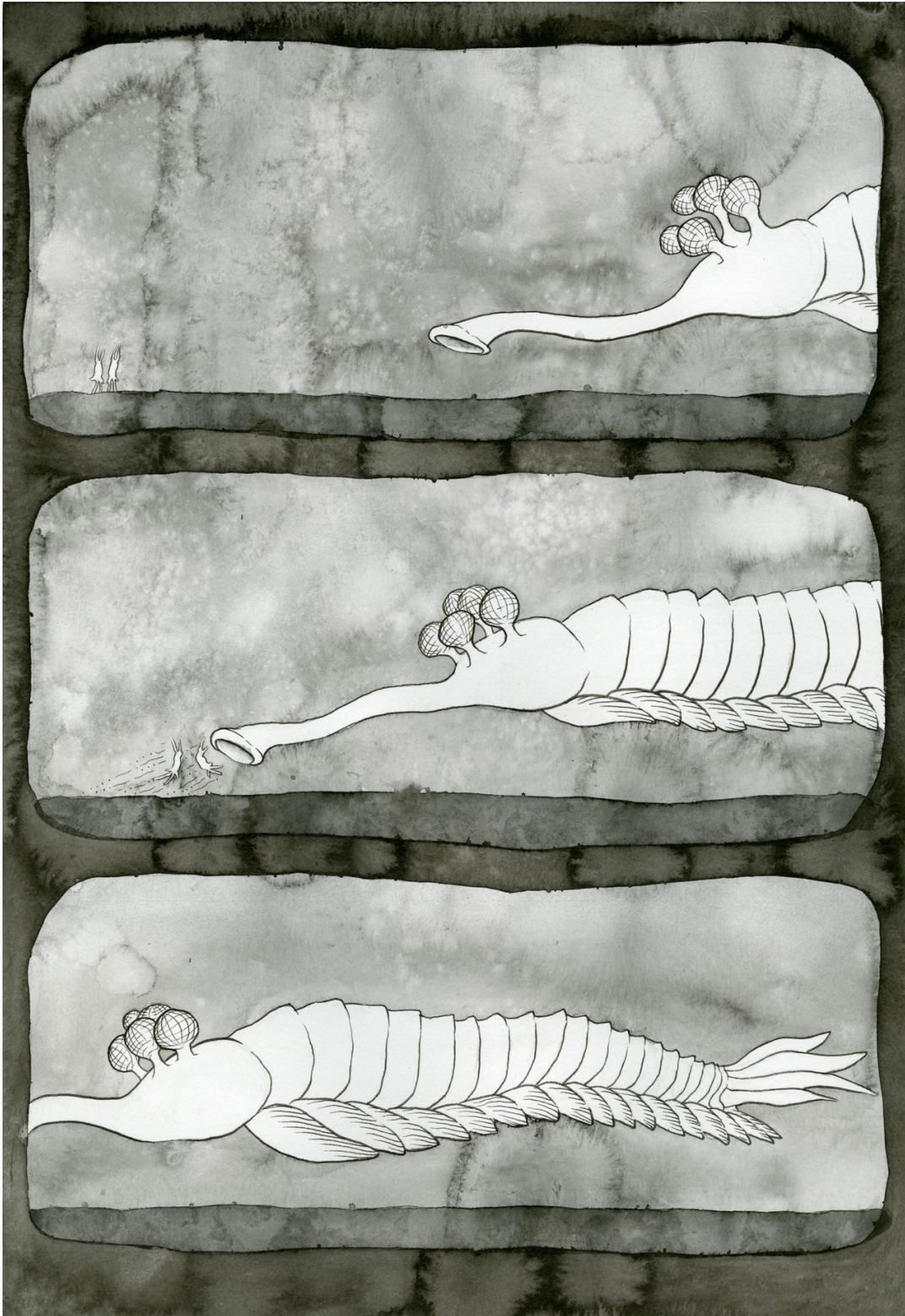


Figure 7. Holyoak, Jim, and Darren Fleet. *Trilobites Above the Fog*. 2021. Detail of the artwork in “Overburden,” The Kootenay Art Gallery, 2021. Ink and graphite on paper. Drawings by Jim Holyoak; text and story by Darren Fleet and Jim Holyoak.

Over the years, we have had a lot of conversations about E.O. Wilson, the scientist and author we both admire and enjoy. And we often consider his insights about insect culture and the selective processes of evolution in the context of our present extinction event. Never has there been more human beings on the planet, and yet so much of how we are encouraged to address the climate crisis is still as these lone, individual, selves—a couple of trilobites in a world that never even knew of dry land. Wilson used the term “eusocial” to describe the most unique feature of a very small, minuscule, group of “successful” species (Wilson 2012). Across the vast expansive slowness of evolutionary time, he argues, it is the intergenerational, the homely, and the social that thrive. Humans. Wasps. Ants. Similarly successful. But not so similar in this moment.

In the flaking terrain of shale rocks fused with the skeletons, stomachs, tails, and mandibles of ancient stone sea bugs, we simultaneously experience the immense improbability of life, and the immense probability of life. There is abundance even on the sliver of a silver of a sliver. As we describe in the artwork, every existent phylum and every existent body structure can be found in the Cambrian (see Fig. 8). This is where, as our Burgess Shale guide reminded us again and again, “life like us begins”, or more crudely, where symmetrical biological organisms with a “mouth-gut-butt” internal arrangement begin (see Fig. 8). Things that eat, digest, and excrete. These are the oldest of human kin. The origins of life like us.

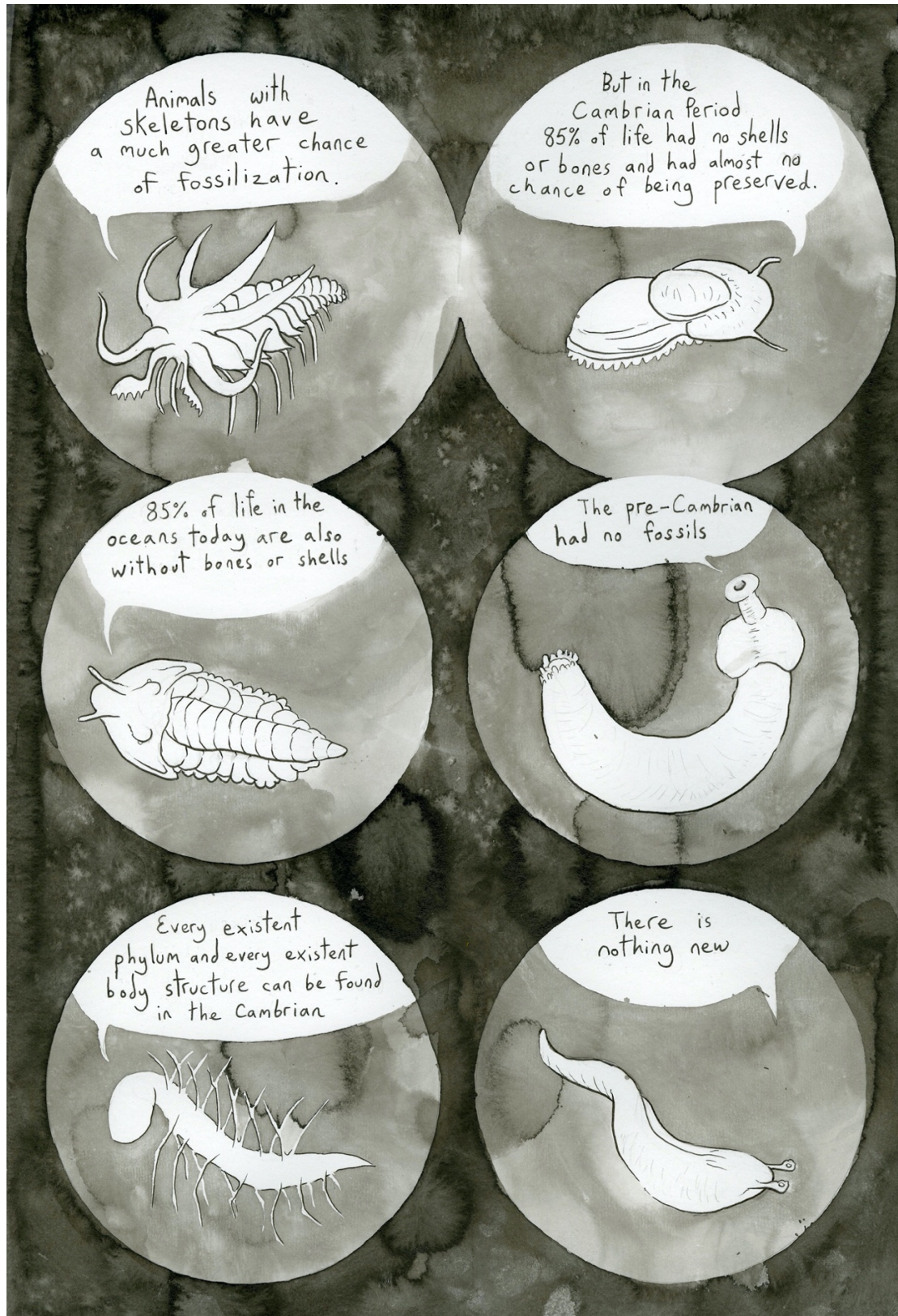


Figure 8. Holyoak, Jim, and Darren Fleet. *Trilobites Above the Fog*. 2021. Detail of the artwork in "Overburden," The Kootenay Art Gallery, 2021. Ink and graphite on paper. Drawings by Jim Holyoak; text and story by Darren Fleet and Jim Holyoak.

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