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OLD WISDOM RE-IMAGINED: PROVERBIAL CARTOONS FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Abstract: Proverbs are frequently used in the media as a way to attract attention or to impart wisdom. As an attempt to bring new life into proverbial teachings, a weekly cartoon entitled “Proverb Place” was created in 2011 for the University of Vermont student newspaper, *The Water Tower*. Using a mix of proverbs and anti-proverbs, the cartoons aimed to re-introduce, or perhaps introduce, university students to important proverbial wisdom in a culturally relevant medium.

Keywords: proverbs, anti-proverbs, iconography, cartoons, art, media, newspaper, paremeology, language, culture

Cartoons have a refreshing way of modernizing ancient wisdom and making old proverbs culturally relevant. However, there is always the danger of a lack of cultural literacy when including proverbial wisdom in art. For example, how many young people today know the origins of the proverbs “Big fish to eat a little fish” or “Strike while the iron is hot” and would recognize an artistic reference to them? Older proverbs are modified and new ones are created as jargon transforms in the age of technology—a cleansing process that weeds out irrelevant sayings and preserves the favored ones. Cartoons and digital media help to keep proverbs like “First come, first served” and “An apple a day keeps the doctor away” relevant, although they may invoke very different images today than at the time of their inception.

Proverbs are often metaphorical and thus lend themselves well to cartoon art and satire. The weekly cartoon “Proverb Place” published in the twelve-page University of Vermont student newspaper *The Water Tower* between Fall 2011 and Spring 2012 aimed to illustrate this fact, while trying to inform a young audience that old wisdom is never out of style.

As the artist of the weekly comic series, I continually searched for a way to connect my education to my university social life

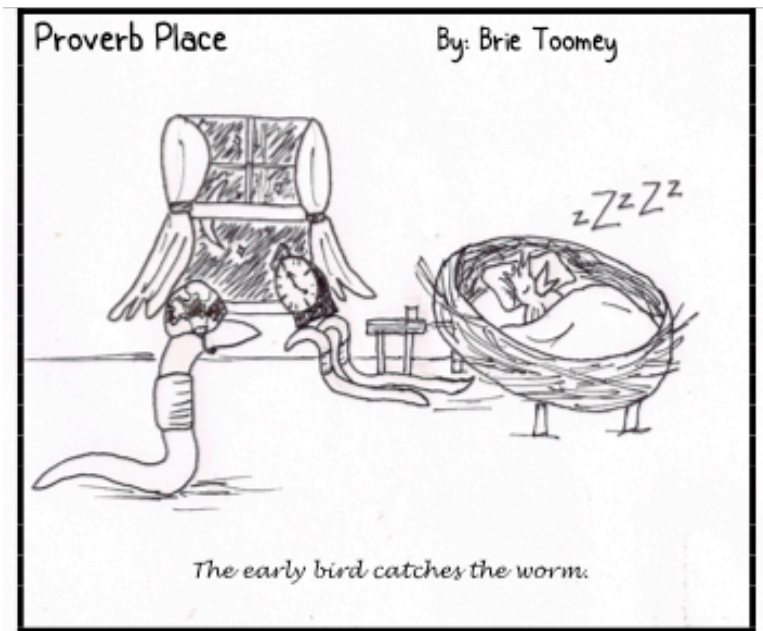
through my drawings. The idea occurred to me as I sat in Professor Wolfgang Mieder's lecture course *The Nature and Politics of Proverbs* at the University of Vermont in the fall of 2011. Professor Mieder was teaching a class about the countless proverb references in today's media—newspapers, advertisements, songs, poetry, etc. As part of a semester long project, the students were assigned to create a collection of fifty proverbial references and describe the context in which they were being used. Of particular interest to me, as an aspiring artist, were the cartoons that Professor Mieder had collected over the years from prominent magazines such as *The New Yorker*, *Time*, and *Playboy* as part of his international proverb archive at the University of Vermont. He suggested that if there was any difficulty finding cartoons, or if the students preferred to, they could create their own. At that moment I thought, well of course, I will make my own!

Art does not grow on trees. The idea for my first cartoon came to me as I was home visiting my parents and doodling images of the proverb, "The early bird catches the worm". I realized the potential that word play held, and the unlimited possibilities that came from combining text and art. With the encouragement of my professor, I decided to continue drawing proverbial cartoons, and I wanted them to be directly relatable to the undergraduate student body audience.

Once a week, usually the night before the deadline, I sat down with a fine-tip pen and stared at a blank piece of white paper. The cartoon ideas often did not come as an "ah-ha!" moment, but rather as the result of pure focus and concentration. I tried to think of proverbs that I knew were easily recognizable, and often ones that were more iconographic. I would choose a proverb, doodle some things that came to mind when I thought of the proverb, and see if anything could be created from the jumble of images. Often times, I was unsuccessful. Luckily there are thousands of proverbs, however, so if one didn't ignite a spark there was a chance that the next one might.

My cartoon series "Proverb Place" became a single-paneled weekly cartoon, which used proverbs and anti-proverbs to touch upon varying topics. The following eleven cartoons from the thirteen issue series take on a few different tones. Several of the cartoons mock the literal interpretation of proverbs, teasing a proverb-ignorant audience, while others use motifs from proverbs, such as an apple from the saying "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree",

to hint at the metaphorical theme. A few of the cartoons go so far as to mock the proverbs themselves, implying that people should be weary before adopting such statements as supposed universal truths.



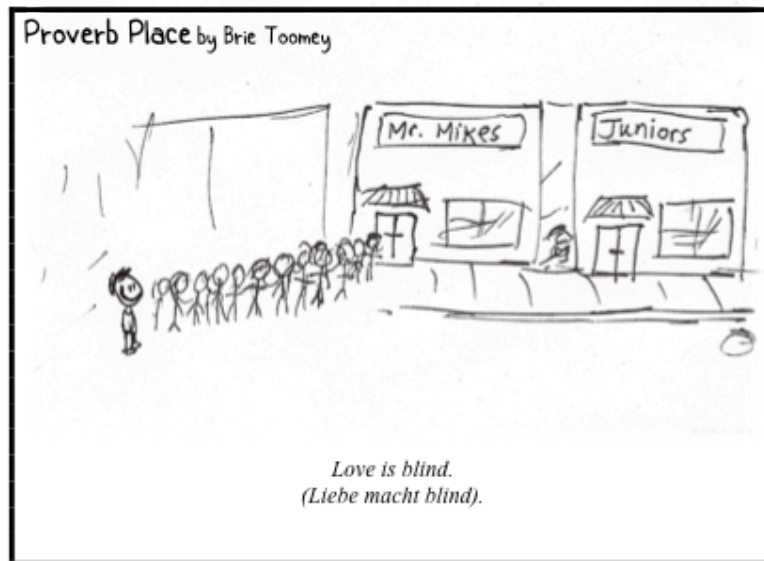
The Water Tower, vol. 10, issue 12 (November 29, 2011).

The first cartoon of the series was one of my favorites, and takes the opposing perspective on the widely used proverb "The early bird catches the worm". Instead of the usual bird-dominant metaphor, the worms in this scenario are in control, tricking the bird into sleeping late. Because the illustration uses the motifs of a bird and a worm, the proverb is perhaps recognizable without the text. I felt that this proverb was one of the most frequently used in American culture, as the stress of a morning wake up and busy workday pervade American society. In this cartoon, the worms are concerned with their own safety, but there is also nothing wrong with a bird wanting to spend the morning sleeping in.



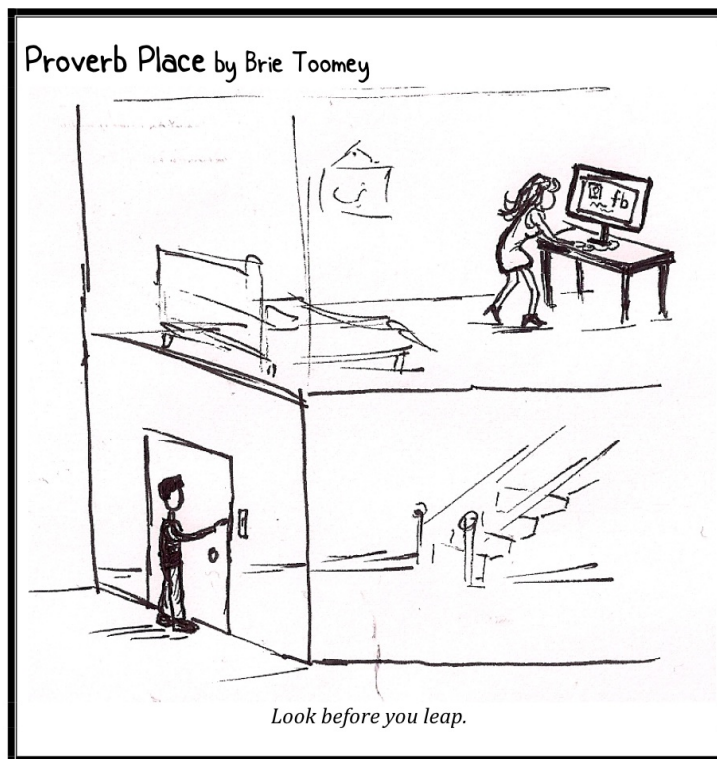
The Water Tower, vol. 11, issue 1 (January 24, 2012).

This cartoon was for the winter holiday issue of the student newspaper, and is a great example of the potential of proverbs in cartoons with its play on "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree". Motifs of the apple and the tree are used in a literal way, while the father and daughter characters hint at the metaphorical interpretation of the proverb. This proverb is used frequently in the English language and lends itself perfectly to this technological age and craze with Apple electronic products amongst all ages.



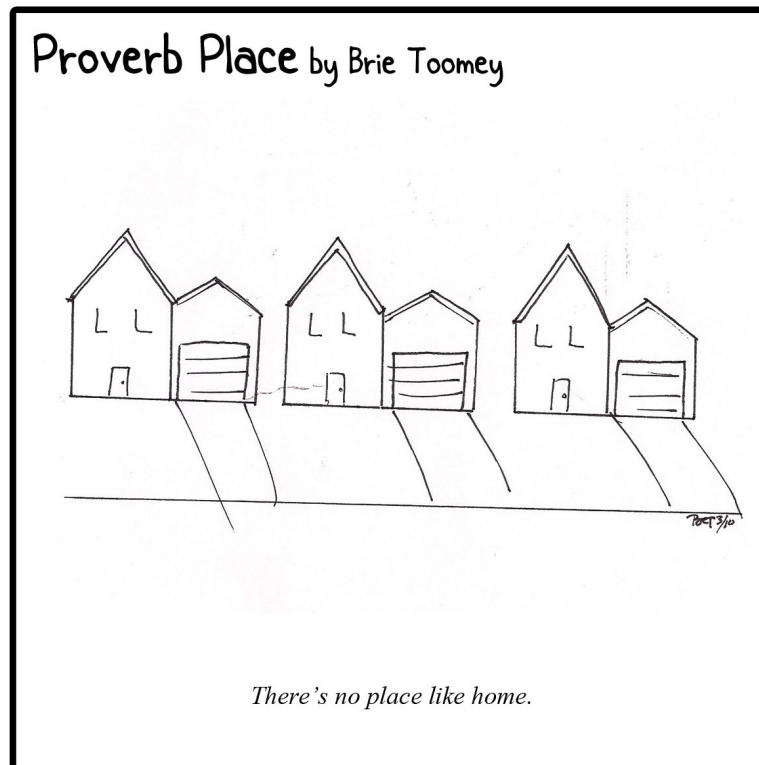
The Water Tower, vol. 11, issue 4 (February 14, 2012).

The “Love is blind” cartoon deals with the mundane topic of waiting in line at a pizza shop, but addresses the age-old issue of love-induced ignorance. Is it worth it to wait for a slice of pizza from your favorite restaurant when a similar product is instantly available? Letting love guide one’s choices can be a risky business, be it pertaining to a human or material relationship. The pizza shop example is exceptionally relatable for the American university audience and uses light humor to acknowledge the process of decision-making.



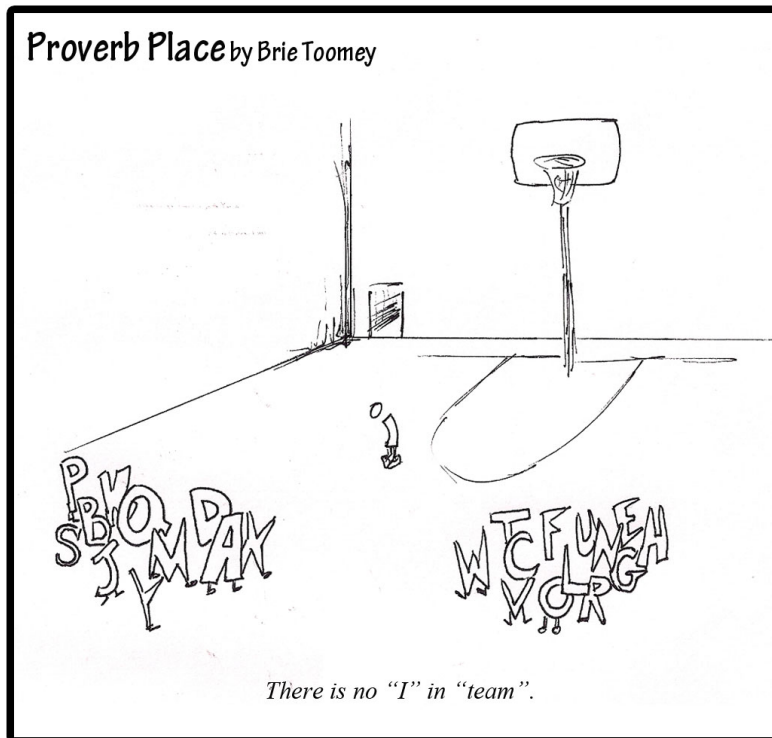
The Water Tower, vol. 11, issue 5 (February 21, 2012).

Today's Google generation is constantly immersed in the world wide web, and it has become customary to look up someone's online profile before hiring that person for a job or, in this case, going out on a date. The proverb "Look before you leap" is reimagined here in the relevant sense of physically looking something up online before making a decision, yet still hangs on to the precautionary wisdom of the proverb.



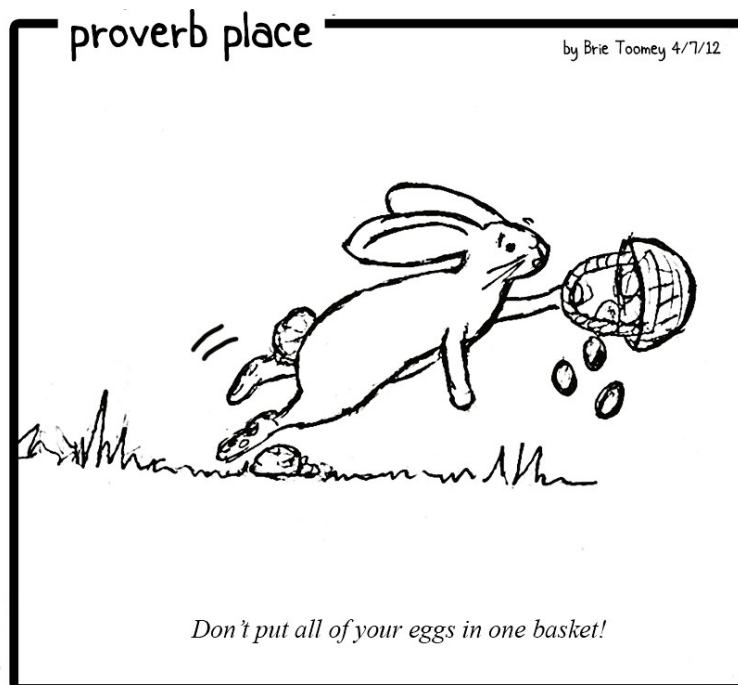
The Water Tower, vol. 11, issue 7 (March 13, 2012).

Proverbs can be extremely context specific. For example, the proverb “There’s no place like home” is often used to imply the positive, warm feeling one gets when thinking about home and family. But, as in this cartoon, it can also be used in a sarcastic tone, implying that there is nothing at all unique or special about such entities. The artistic reference to this proverb is simple and recognizable, but is intended to make the viewer feel slightly uncomfortable.



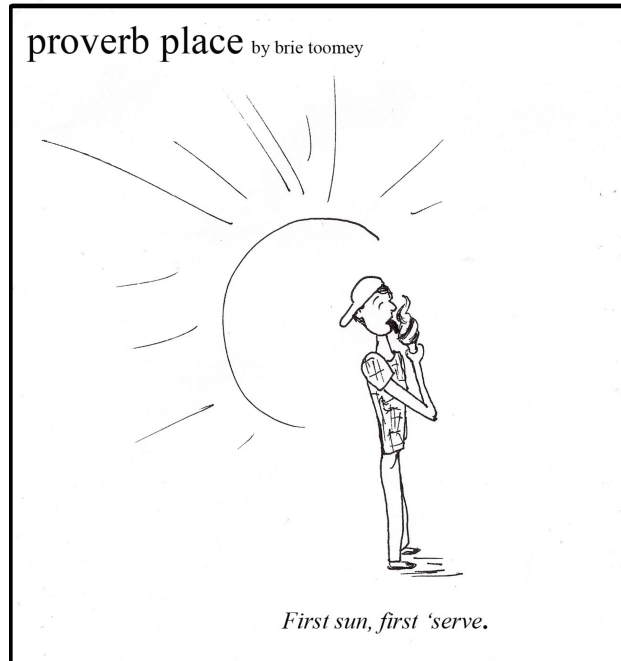
The Water Tower, vol. 11, issue 8 (March 20, 2012).

A traumatic tradition in American schools lets team captains pick their own players in gym class, often leaving the least athletic children until the very end. This cartoon plays with the proverb "There is no 'I' in 'team'" by literally spelling out the alphabet and turning a proverb about cooperation into one of isolation.



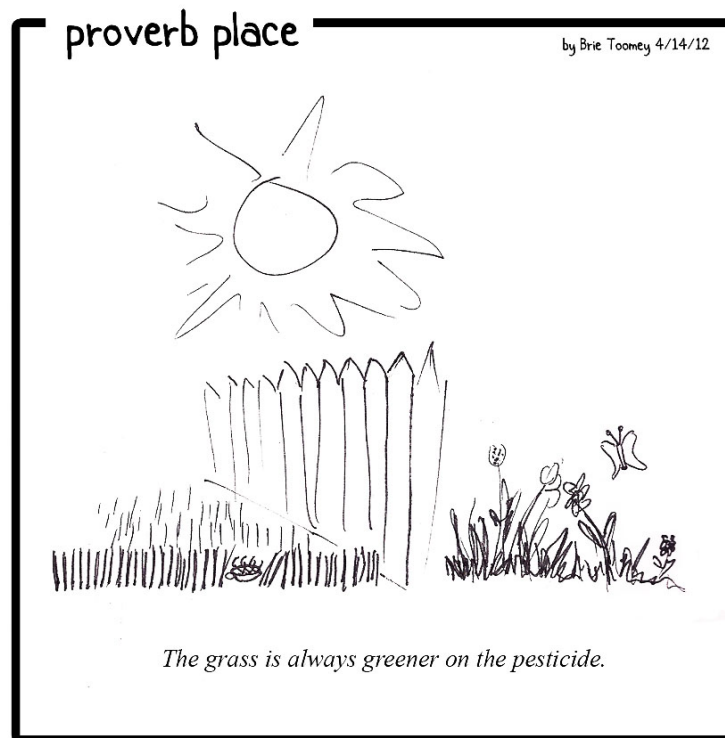
Unpublished (April 7, 2012).

Created for the newspaper issue before Easter but unfortunately not printed, this image uses the motif of eggs to play off the American tradition of the Easter Bunny, while showing a literal interpretation of the proverb “Don’t put all of your eggs in one basket”. Metaphorical proverbs offer endless possibilities through such symbols for artistic interpretation. Whether or not a cartoon is literal, however, the proverbial reference still makes the viewer wonder about the true meaning of the proverb.



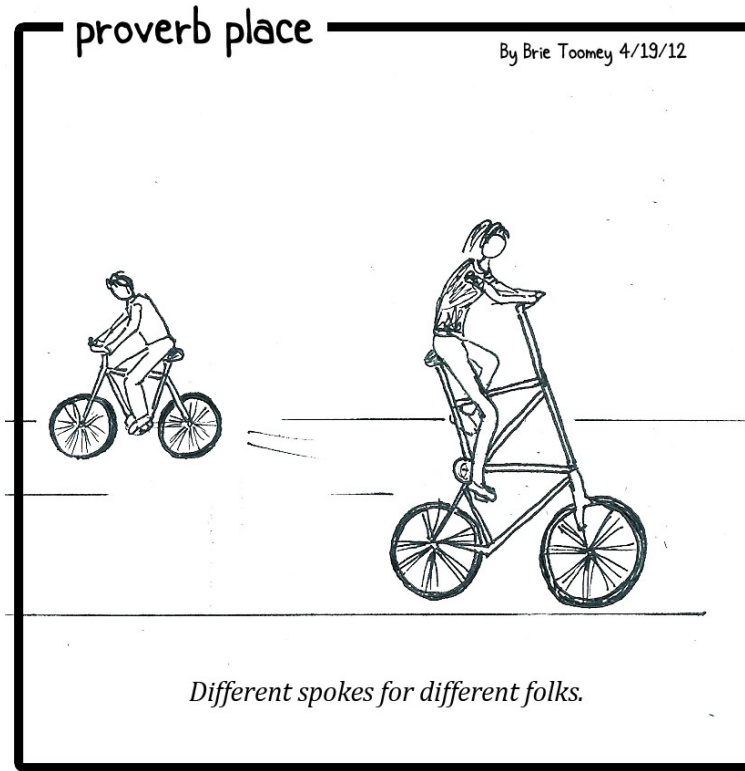
The Water Tower, vol. 11, issue 9 (March 27, 2012).

The anti-proverb “First sun, first ’serve” was the most controversial of the series. The interpretation of the proverb portrayed in the cartoon heavily relied on jargon that is only known to a small audience. The “’serve” reference comes from the New England word “soft-serve” to describe an alternative style of ice cream. To some New Englanders, however, the particular type of ice cream is known, fittingly to its texture, as a “creamee”. The image here was a reference to Vermont students eagerly hitting the ice cream stands as the first sun of the spring sprung out of a seemingly endless winter. This cartoon was an example of the fact that although proverbs may be ubiquitous, there is the danger of limiting the audience with a context specific reference.



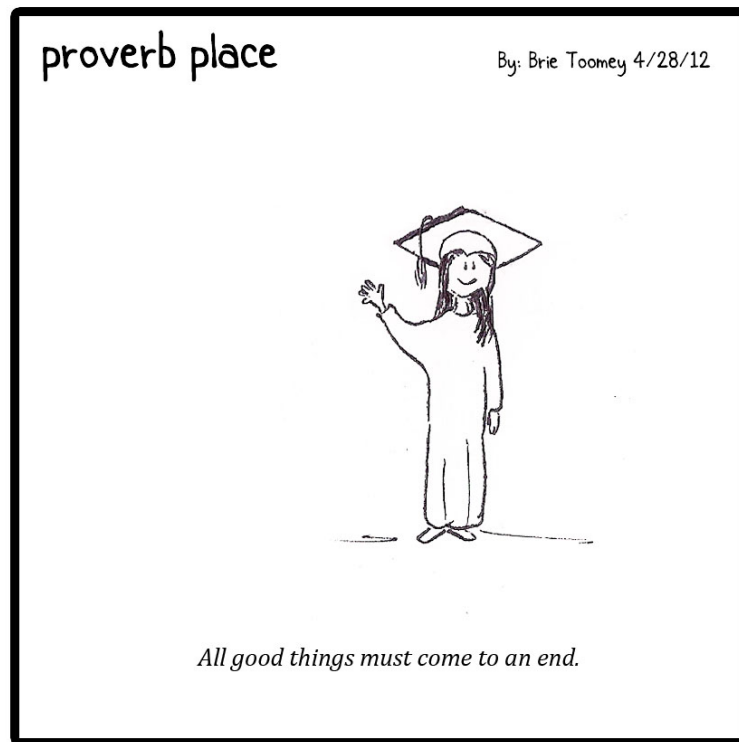
The Water Tower, vol. 11, issue 12 (April 17, 2012).

The ambiguity of proverbs makes them great tools for indirectly addressing sensitive topics. This environmental cartoon questions if a green lawn is truly the best lawn, and takes a stab at America's obsession with using deadly pesticides through the anti-proverb "The grass is always greener on the pesticide". It doesn't refer to the popular interpretation of being envious of something unattainable, but rather provokes the question, whether perfect actually is better than imperfect?



The Water Tower, vol. 11, issue 13 (April 24, 2012).

Anti-proverbs have a fascinating way of making people think twice—once about why they seem to recognize the phrase, and a second time to figure out what the new phrase is supposed to mean. This cartoon's play on words makes the reader look twice before perhaps laughing about the fact that in this age of individuality, even bikes have established unique personalities.



The Water Tower, vol. 11, issue 14 (May 1, 2012).

For the end of the series and the end of the school year, the proverb “All good things must come to an end” adequately describes the bittersweet feelings that often accompany change. Imagery has a beautiful way of claiming an otherwise ubiquitous phrase, and it is for this reason that proverbs will forever be redefined and reimagined.

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