Faced with an impending deadline and pressure from his publisher, a cartoonist named Kento finds inspiration for a story by projecting a mystery plot onto his inhospitable neighbors. The sullen Mr. Niichi, who lives next door, owns an unruly cat that repeatedly disturbs Old Man Hageno, who lives in the adjacent building. Hageno blames Kento for everything, and Niichi makes no effort to take responsibility for his animal. Unable to write due to the constant clamor and bad energy of his neighbors, Kento dreams up a solution that would grant him a well-needed respite: he draws a scenario where Niichi’s cat is killed and Niichi murders Hageno in revenge. The story seems harmless enough, but, upon its completion, Kento finds that some of his predictions may have actually come true.

“The Man Next Door” is one of four works in Breakdown Press’s exceptional compilation of Masahiko Matsumoto’s manga from the mid-1950s. Originally published in the first issue of Shadow magazine in 1956, “The Man Next Door” is a common sort of cautionary tale about imagination and confrontation, but the historical context of the work endows it with far more significance. In it, Matsumoto provided readers with one of the first widely read visions of a mature, cinematic manga, one that deals not only with a thrilling story but how that story is told.

Matsumoto took a different approach in his comics than that of his peers: he chose to be far less literal in his work and to be calculatingly convoluted with his characters and their motivations. Emotions in Matsumoto’s stories are not always obvious and are certainly deeper than a single-panel rendering: while most artists of the time were content with drawing a sad face with text or dialogue explicitly saying they were sad, Matsumoto took time to develop his characters over multiple frames with quiet, subtle movement. At the start of “The Man Next Door,” Kento spends six entire frames brooding over a confrontation with Hageno: “What a jerk,” he thinks with his head down. “I hate that old man,” he continues, three frames later, head still hung. And then, in the following frame: “One look at his face ruins my day.” Kento’s not just sad, he’s hung up, and almost immature in his ruminating. In six panels, we’re introduced not only to a conflict but to the breadth of the protagonist’s emotional range. He’s either insecure enough to dwell on something at this length, or perhaps he’s been pushed to the brink of his limits.

At the time, Matsumoto’s use of panels was so unlike anything seen in manga that Matsumoto felt his work needed a new term. He decided on “komaga,” or “panel comics,” and even crafted a komaga insignia to herald the arrival of this new genre. Some readers will draw connections between Matsumoto’s komaga and the work of Yoshihiro Tatsumi, a widely celebrated cartoonist whose oeuvre has been published in English by Drawn & Quarterly incrementally since 2005. Tatsumi’s masterpiece is the illustrated autobiography A Drifting Life, which chronicled the creation of “gekiga,” another new nomenclature for a darker, dramatic manga aimed at older audiences. Curiously, Matsumoto appears throughout Tatsumi’s memoir; there are even scenes of Tatsumi and a colleague first discovering Matsumoto’s new term, komaga (“Without even talking to us first?” asks Tatsumi in one scene, incredulously). Some supplemental reading, namely an outstanding essay by The Man Next Door editor Ryan Holmberg that appeared in the October 2014 Comics Journal (and should have appeared in some capacity in Breakdown Press’s collection), will reveal that Matsumoto may have been far more instrumental in the transformation of comics than Tatsumi gave him credit for in A Drifting Life. Perhaps gekiga could not have become a movement had Matsumoto not started his experiments with storytelling.

Matsumoto’s illustrations do not showcase an artist with full command of his subjects’ facial expressions, but this shortcoming is balanced by his uncanny ability to draw readers through pacing and subtext. In “The Man Next Door,” a train barrels through a crossing in a blur, only to reveal Kento, alone, with his drawing book under his arm. Noisiness gives way to something akin to loneliness, which in a few silent frames gels towards contentment. In “Thick Fog,” a boy runs through a factory village in search of his father, unable to see anything through the haze of mechanical steam. In one sequence of frames, he suspects someone is following him: in three short square panels, we see feet astride, then a sweating face and the sound of distant footsteps, then feet stopped. “I knew it,” he thinks, flexing a level of deduction exclusive to panel comics, “Someone’s coming.” In “The Cat and the Locomotive,” Matsumoto conveys frenetic tension by working with perspective and distance. The locomotive blur of Kento’s introduction in “The Man Next Door” is instead rendered here head-on: a train approaches in one frame, and in the next is closer and then even closer still, tilting out of control.

Matsumoto asks us to read between the frames and to absorb the stories hidden behind his art direction. By reading for the
visual subtext in Matsumoto’s comics, the reader is invited in turn to extrapolate their seemingly basic plots and discover more layers to their stories. What, in these tales, is left unsaid? In “Thick Fog,” a boy stumbles upon a body in his search for his father, and although the body turns out to be just a drunkard, it could just as well have been someone he knew. “Thick Fog” pulses with an unspoken understanding that any unknown body could be anybody, and that there is so much a person will never understand about those lonely lives around them. “The Man Next Door” is a particularly devastating example of this disconnect: Matsumoto knows that his readers will unquestionably render Kento an infallible hero (he is a manga artist, after all), but, imagining Kento himself as the eponymous “Man Next Door” will quickly transform the story into something deeply disconcerting. Kento and his imagination might make him the most dangerous neighbor of all: he may not cause outward trouble or disturb his surroundings, but inside he’s lost in thought, twisting reality into stories, fictionalizing the lives around him and dreaming of their deaths.

— Jeff Alford

HERE

Richard McGuire
Pantheon Books ($35)

What is here? Like much in the world, the more closely we examine the question, the more complicated it reveals itself to be. First, of course, when we think of “here,” we might simply think of a place that is not “there.” But if we stop for a moment, we might ask ourselves what such a definition entails. Is it simply a physical location, or does “here” also imply “now”? Indeed, we are not only always exactly here, we are also always exactly now. Being here does not occur at some other time. And once one is in the realm of where and when one always exists, the notion of being arises. Being here entails being.

Expanding upon an evocative six-page strip published in the seminal comics anthology RAW in 1989, Richard McGuire’s beautifully illustrated graphic novel Here teases out these questions with a simple conceit: McGuire limits each panel in Here to depicting one corner of a room in a house, with each iteration of this single space representing a mere flicker in the entirety of time. The location never changes—it’s always the same view of the same corner of the same room of the same house—unless it’s from a time when the house doesn’t exist, though even then McGuire doesn’t shift the perspective from which the site is viewed. What changes, as is indicated by a caption at the top of each panel, is the year. McGuire uses the panels to punch temporal holes into this seemingly unified scene, opening rifts in time that reveal mostly noncontiguous moments separated by years, decades, or even centuries. Those panels that do represent contiguous moments are often interrupted by page turns—except, noticeably, one startling moment when an agitated bird flies into the room, and in panel after panel marked 1998, flaps menacingly about the head of a young woman.

The effect is resonant. At times, McGuire makes overt connections among disparate time periods, like the series of panels depicting various people wearing costumes, or the ones in which people have lost something—car keys, a wallet, a temper, perhaps even a life. At other times, the associations are more glancing and so more suggestive, as when, in 1907, we see a construction worker laying the flooring of the house, peering off into the distance, asking “Now where did he go?”—his question bracketed by a panel on the left from 1907 in which another construction worker can be seen in the distance carrying a board, and a panel on the right dated 2005 that reveals a baby being playfully tossed into the air by a young man.

The very form of comics itself lends poignancy to these connections; comics splay time across a page, rendering visible the interdependency of each moment. As Scott McCloud effuses in Understanding Comics: “In comics, as in film, television and ‘real life,’ it is always now. This panel and this panel alone represents the present . . . But unlike other media, in comics, the past is more than just memories for the audience and the future is more than just possibilities! Both past and future are real and visible all around us!” If one pays careful enough attention, though, one sees that this is not only true of comics, but of the world around us as well. McGuire shows us this very truth in Here.

—Steve Matuszak

1964, artwork from Here