



TEN SPEED GRAPHIC

EXCERPT

A Game of Cat and Mouse

In a graphic novel rendition of his life, the acclaimed artist reflects on the Chinese zodiac, its connection to his own family story, and the power games us animals play.

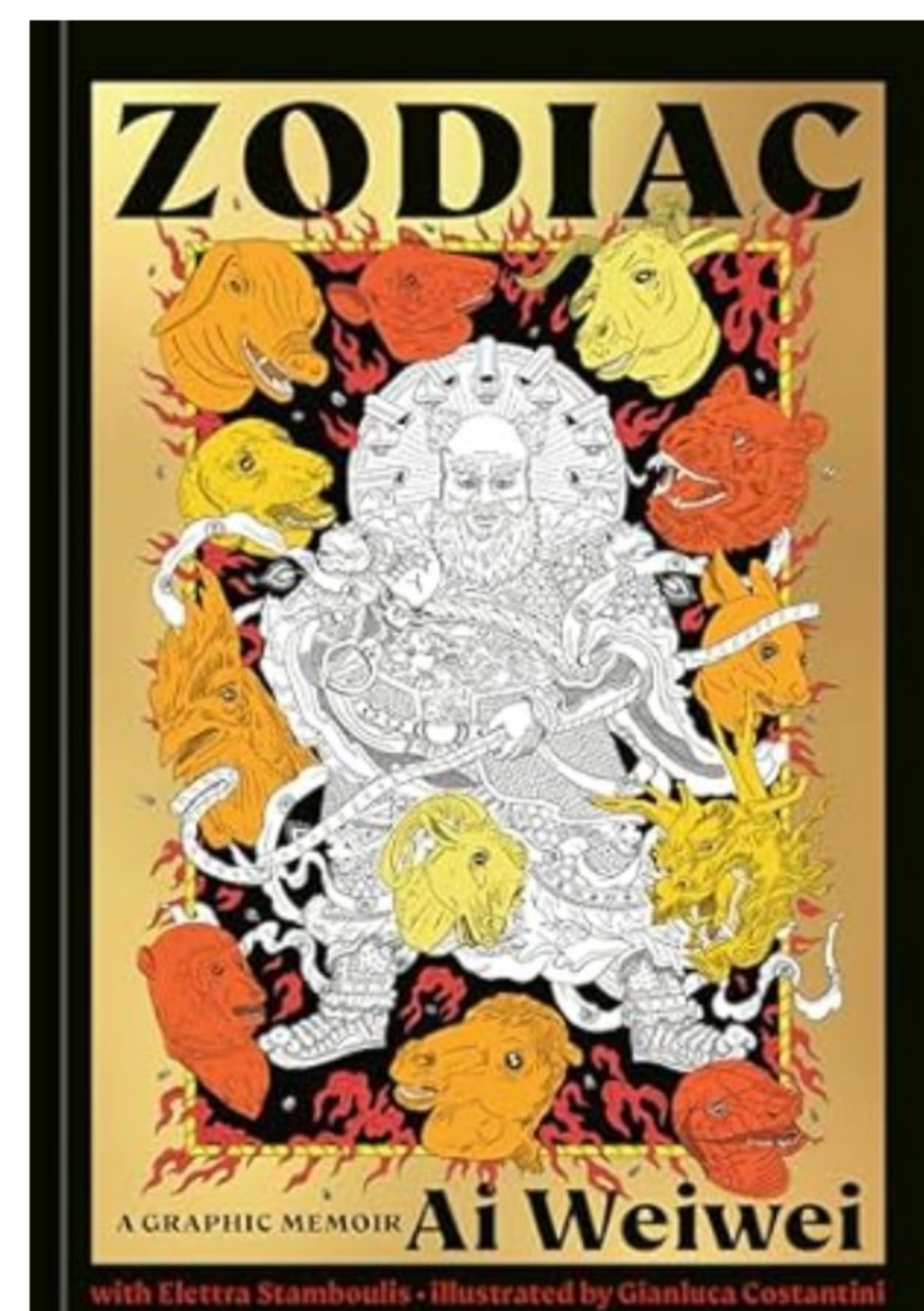
AI WEIWEI — FEBRUARY 8, 2024

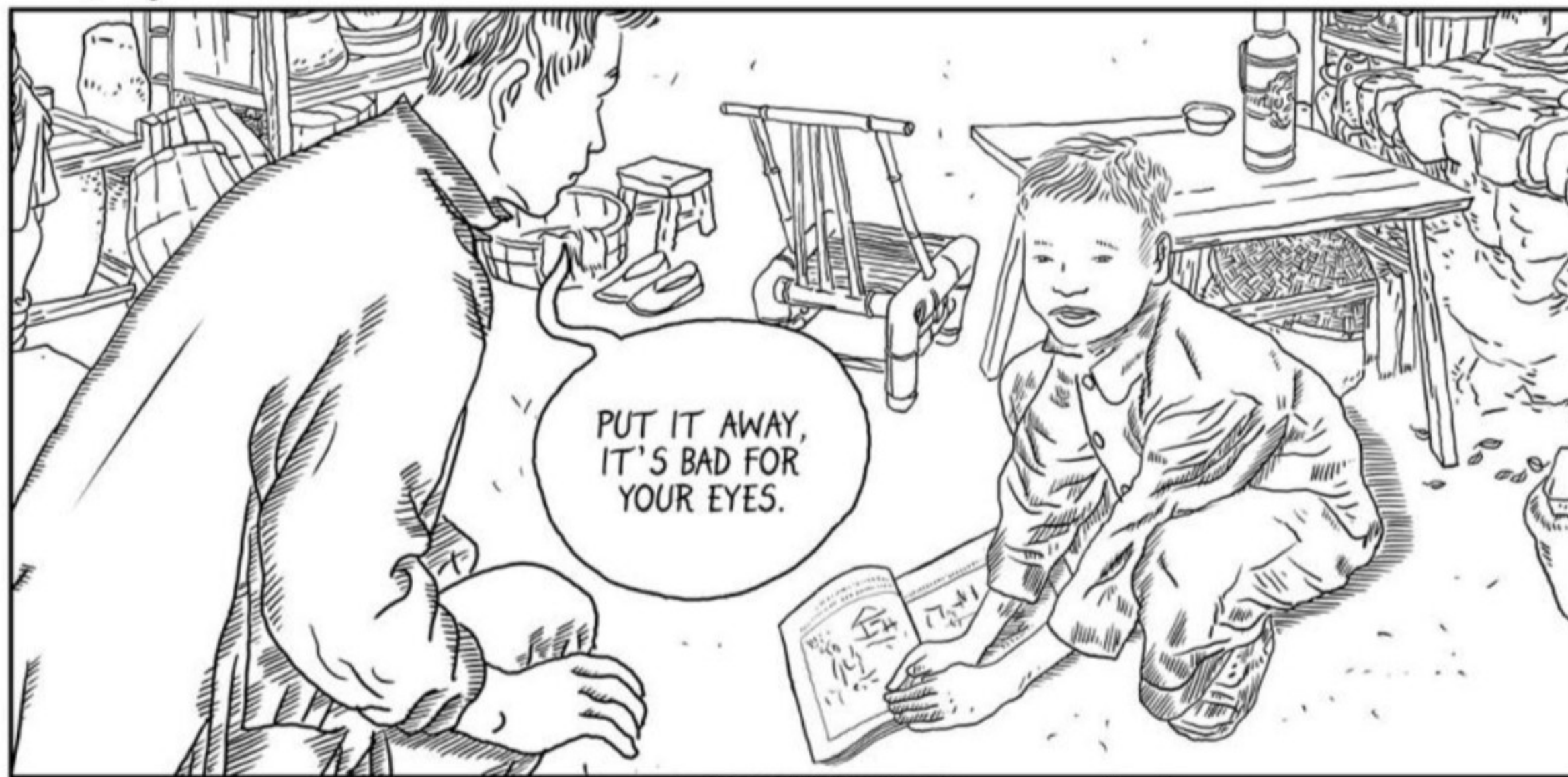
MEMOIR



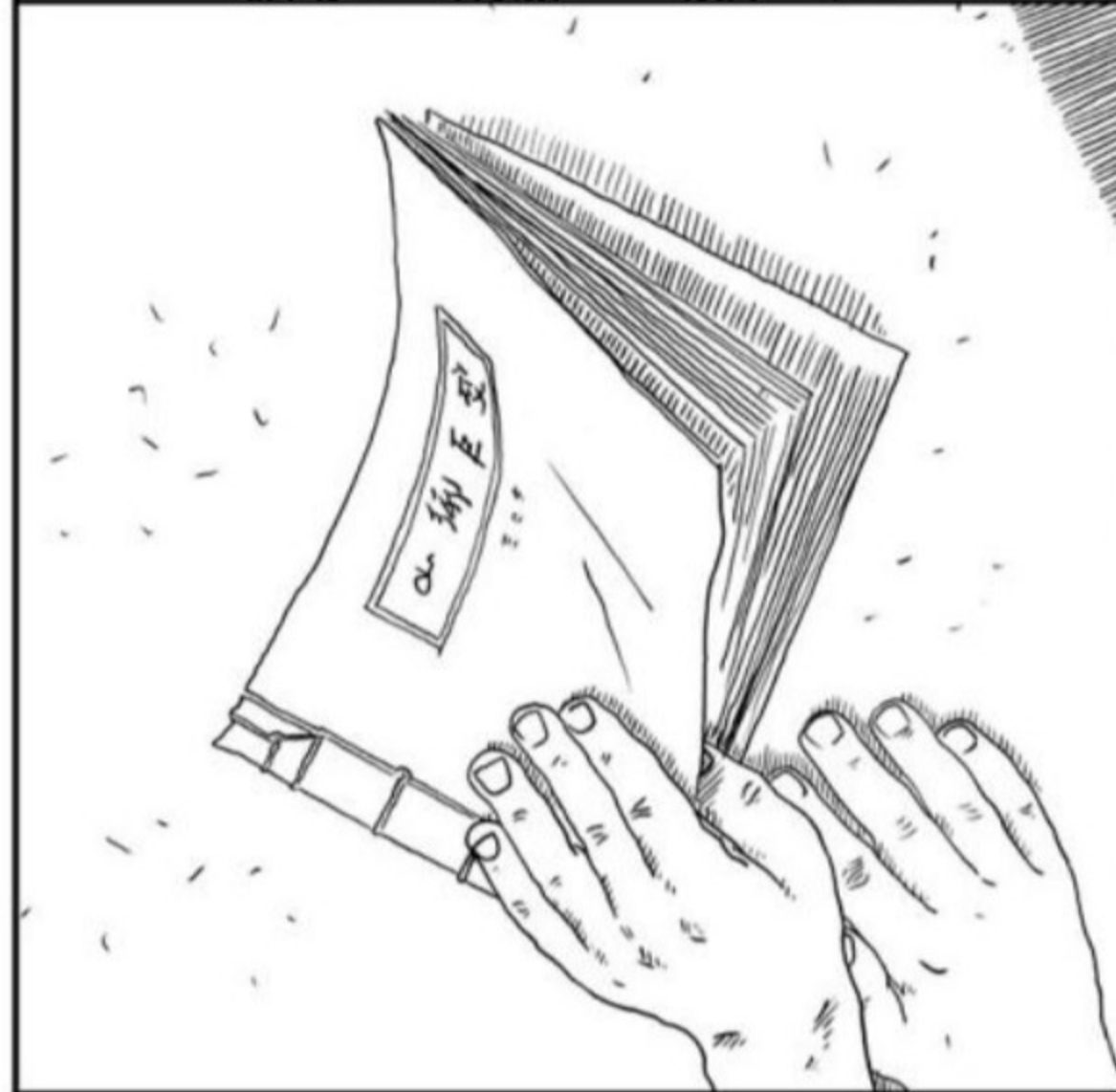
Editor's note: In [Zodiac: A Graphic Memoir](#), published last week, conceptual artist Ai Weiwei teamed up with Italian cartoonist Gianluca Costantini, and Greek-Italian graphic novelist Elettra Stamboulis, to produce a different kind of memoir to his [last](#). The comic book delves into Ai's personal story, from his formation as an artist to his detention by the authorities for challenging the system. This story also crosses generations, from his father's own political persecution, to his son's curiosity about the legacy he inherits.

Woven through it all is the folklore of the Chinese zodiac, whose twelve animals name each lunar new year. At the outset of the Year of the Dragon, we're delighted to present an excerpt below, from the beginning of both book and zodiac, with Chapter 1, "Mouse" — although the cat, excluded from the calendar, also makes an appearance. Read on to go back to the start, with Ai growing up in Xinjiang with his father, the revolutionary poet Ai Qing:

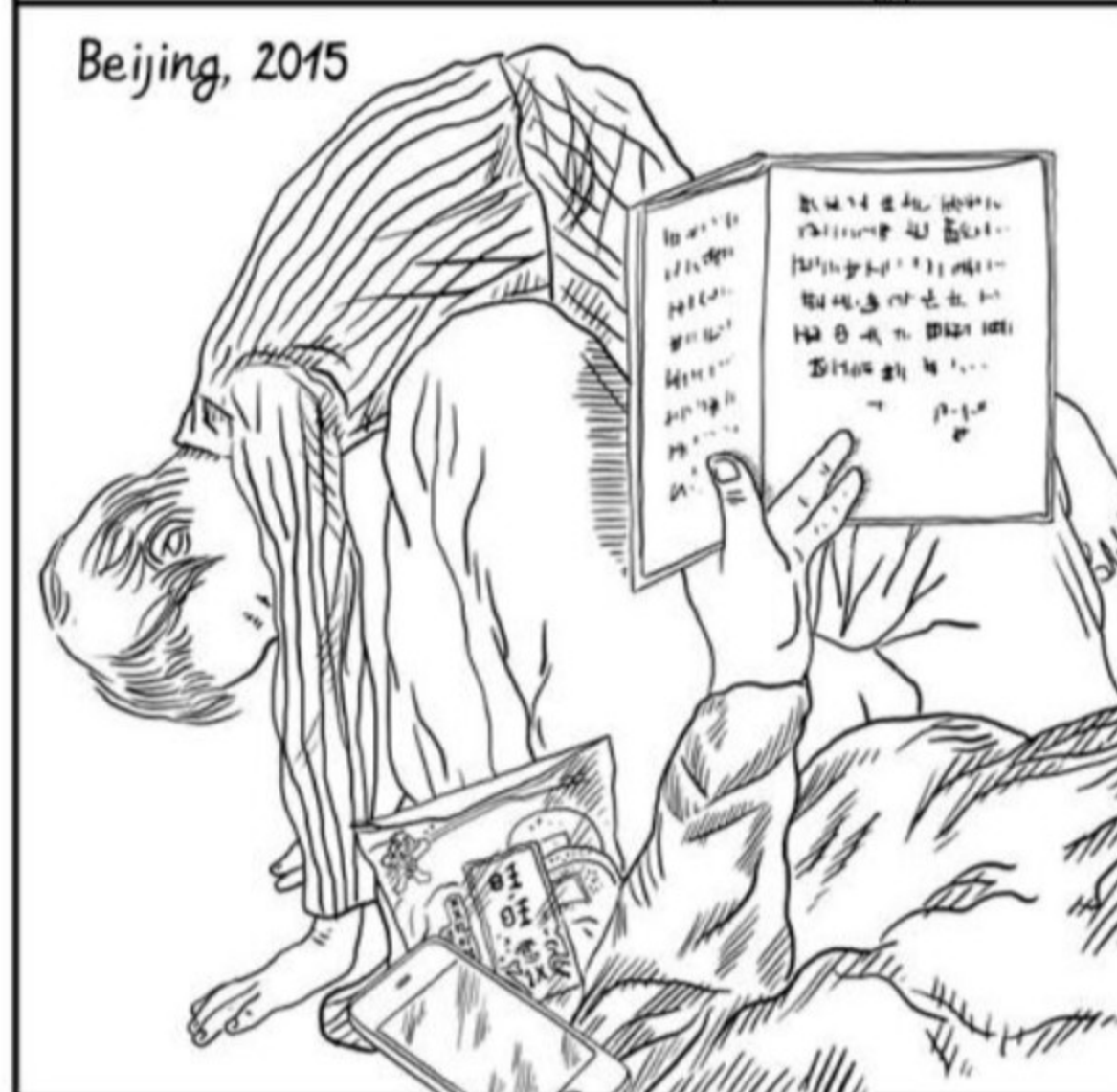

[Buy the book >](#)



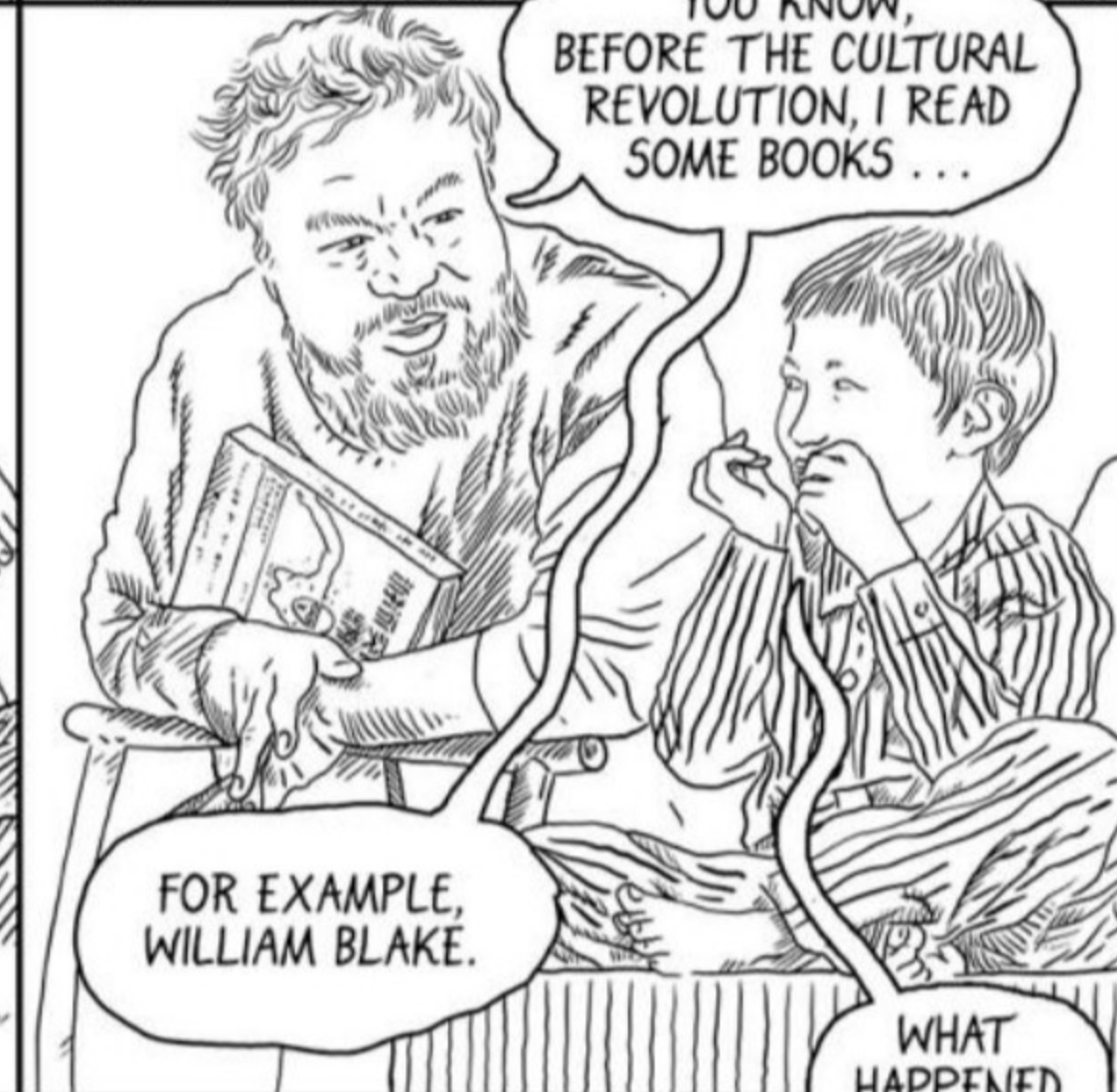
PUT IT AWAY, IT'S BAD FOR YOUR EYES.



A poet told his son not to read ...



Beijing, 2015



YOU KNOW, BEFORE THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION, I READ SOME BOOKS ...

FOR EXAMPLE, WILLIAM BLAKE.

WHAT HAPPENED THEN?



BOOKS WERE FORBIDDEN THEN ...



YOU COULD ONLY READ THE COMPLETE WORKS OF ENVER HOXHA* AND MAO ZEDONG OF COURSE ...

WHO IS HODJA? ** IS THAT THE GUY WITH THE DONKEY?

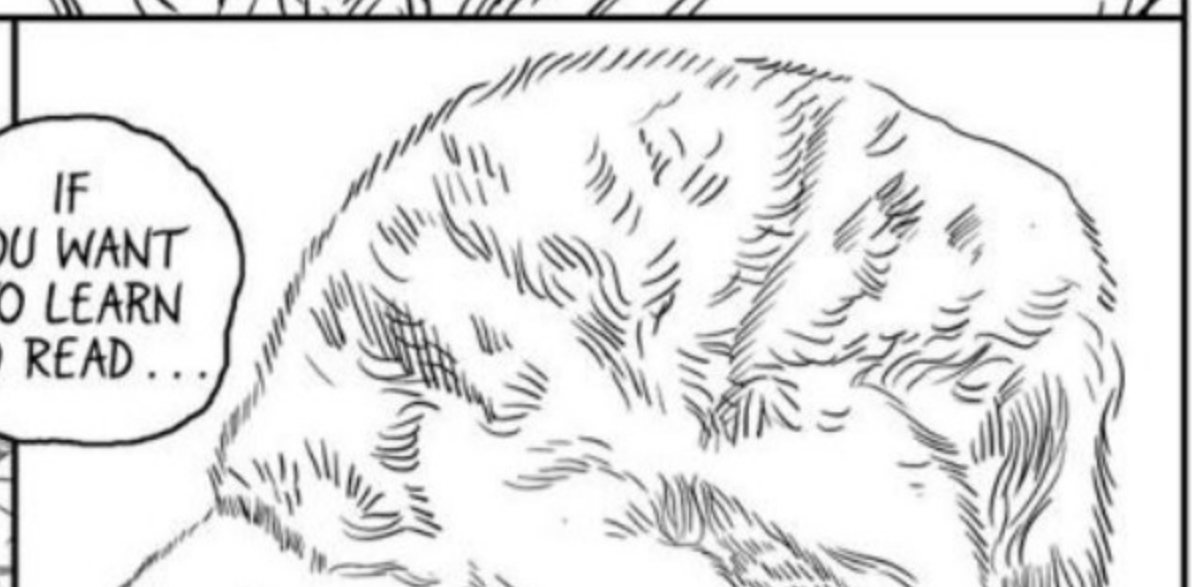


THOSE MEN I'M SPEAKING OF WERE POWERFUL MEN. MEN WHO MADE DECISIONS FOR EVERYBODY.

WELL, IN A CERTAIN SENSE ... BUT THE HODJA YOU ARE THINKING OF IS PART OF THE FAIRY TALES.



IF YOU WANT TO LEARN TO SWIM, YOU HAVE TO JUMP INTO THE WATER.

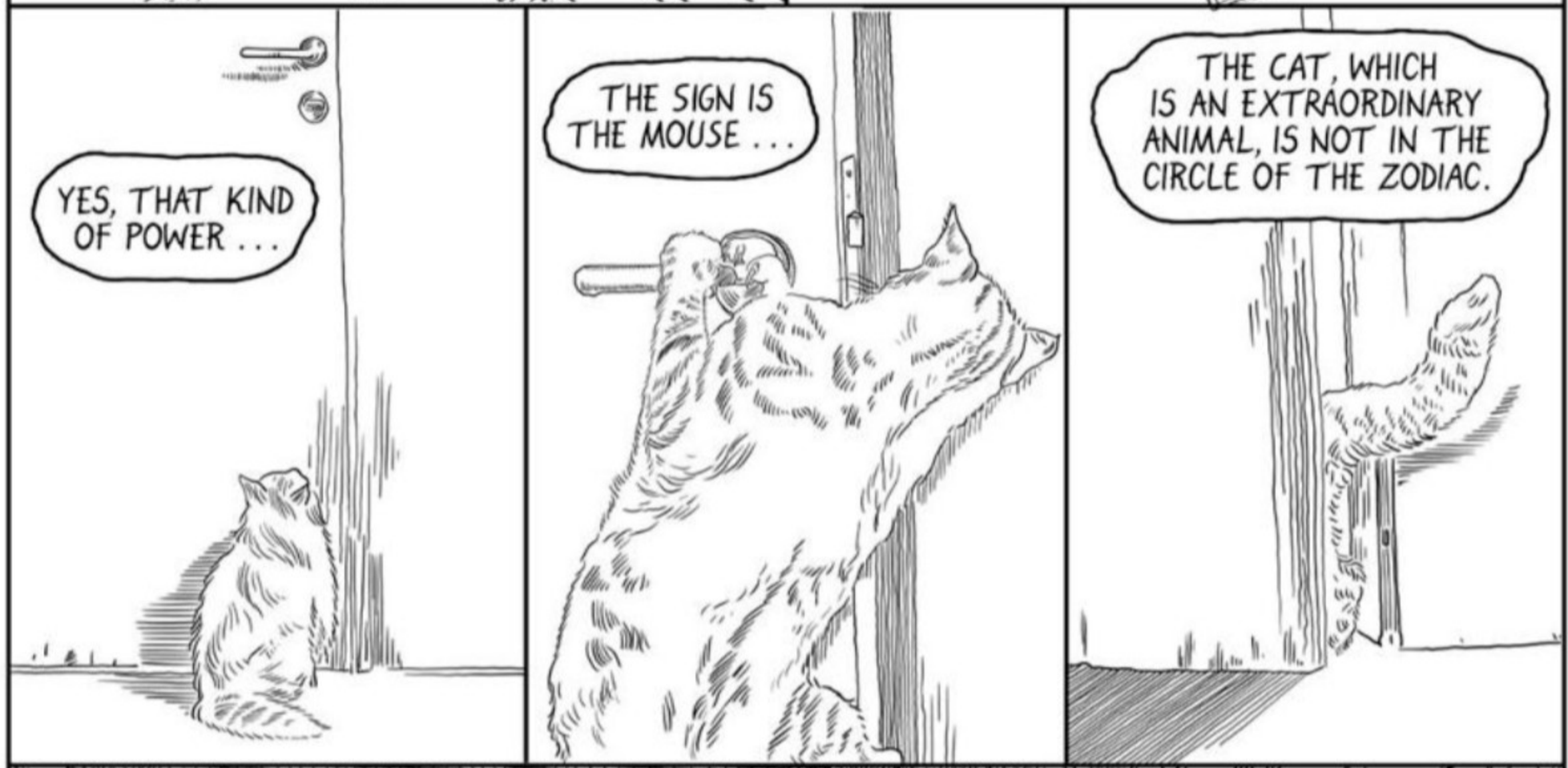
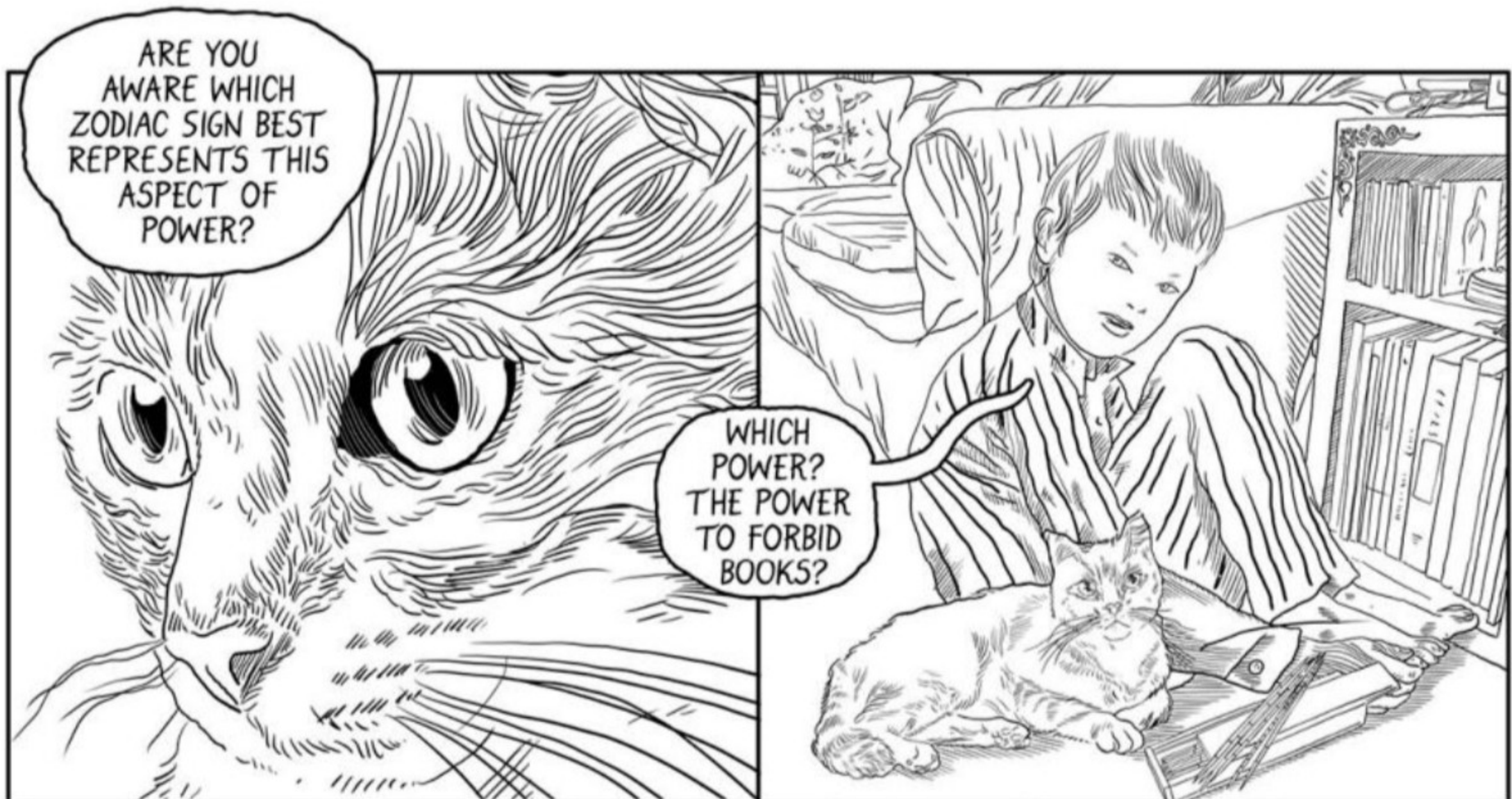


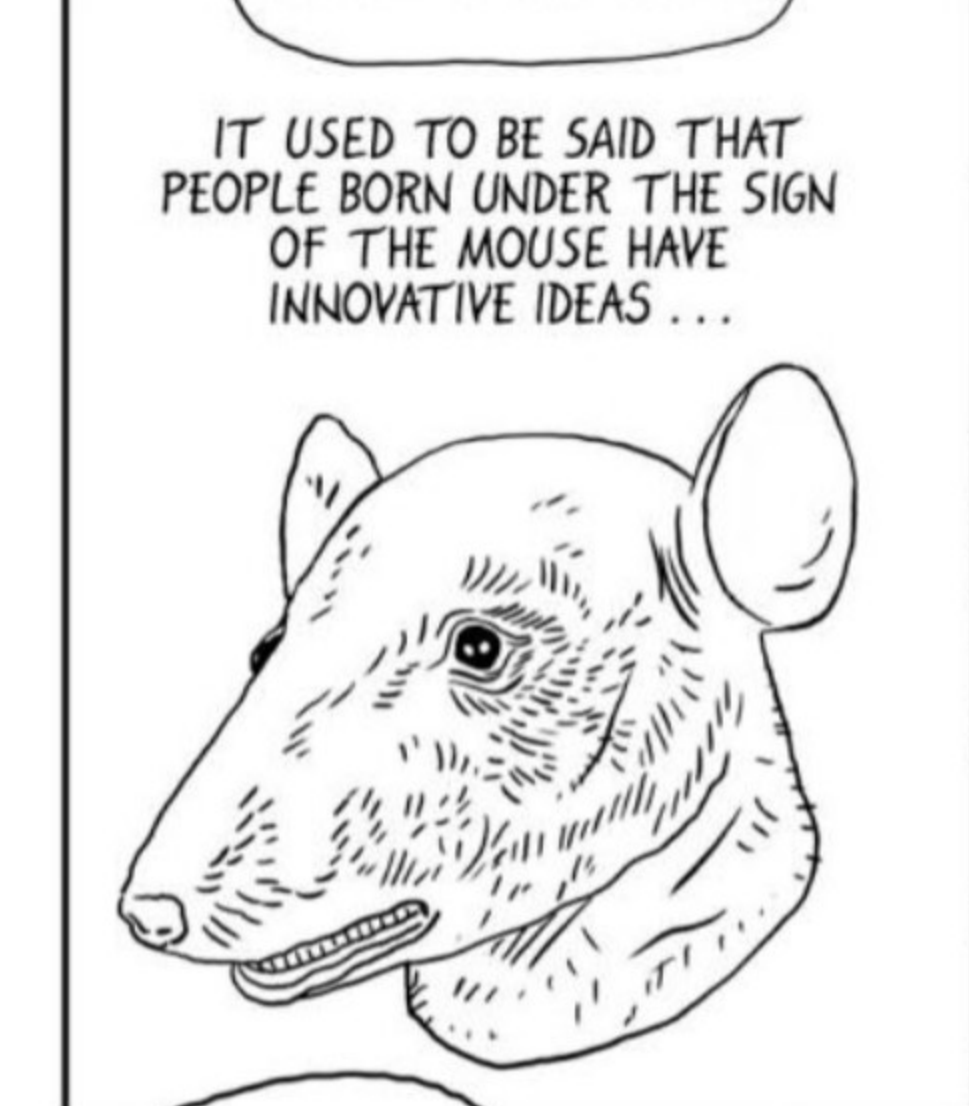
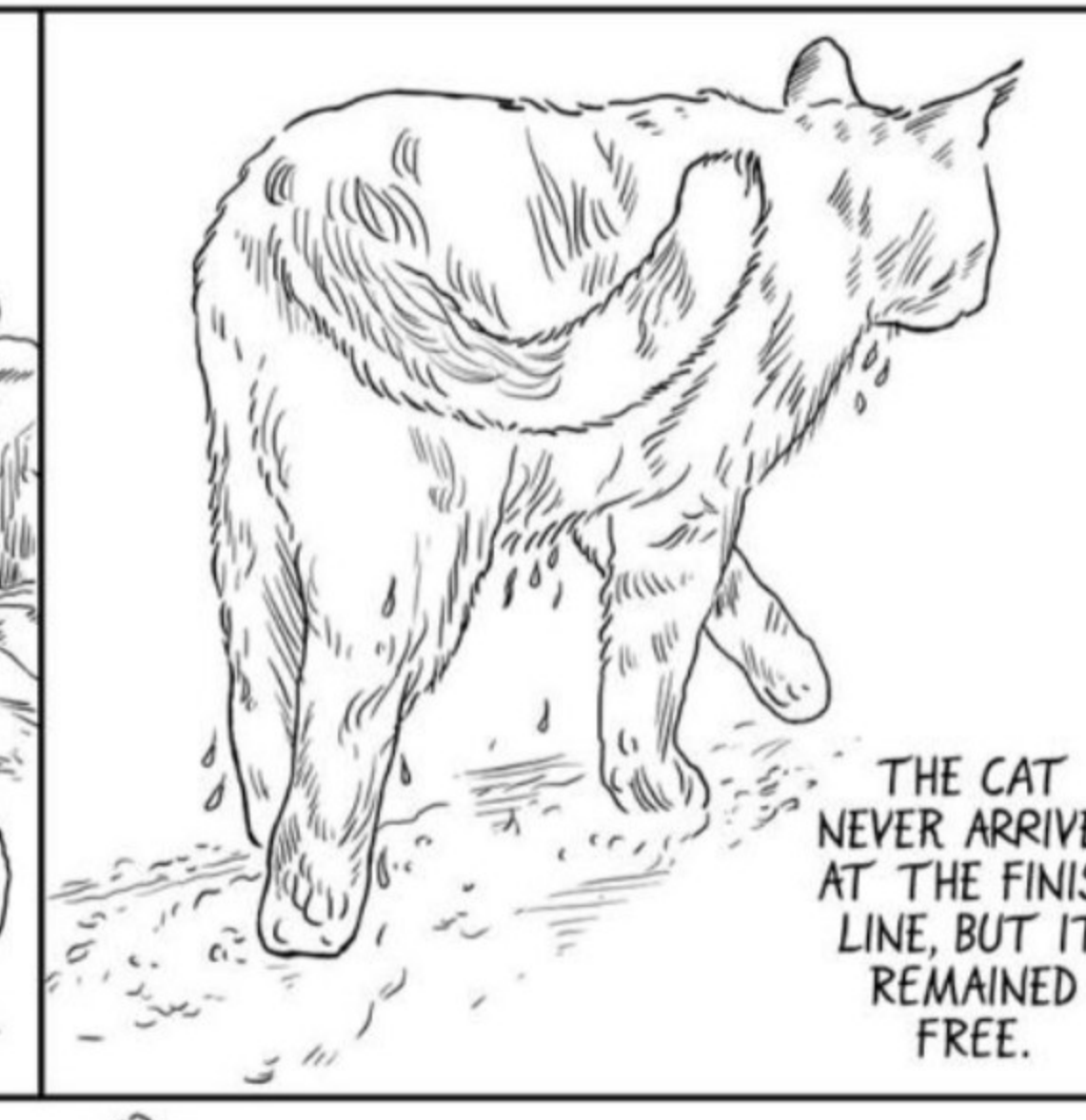
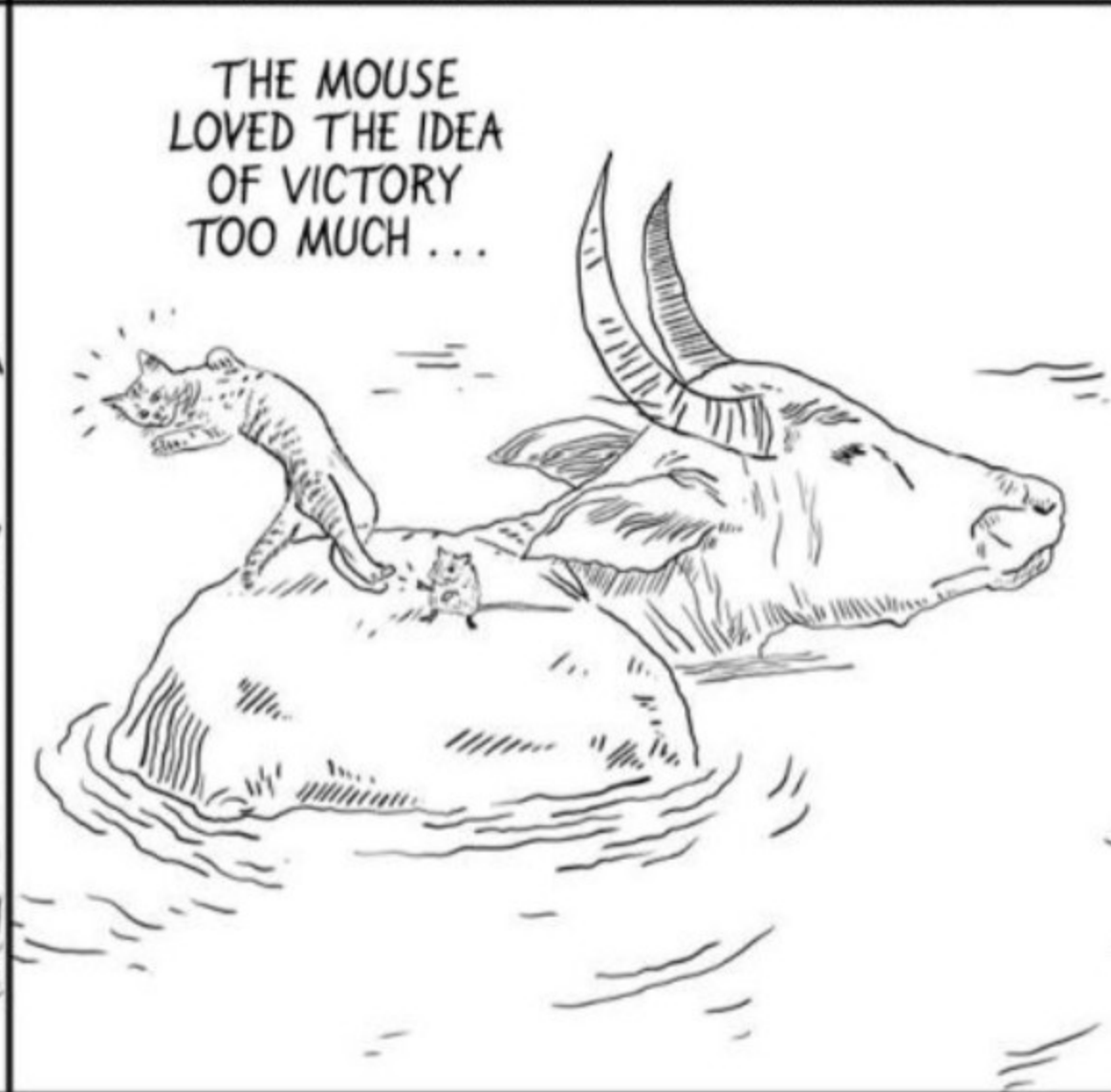
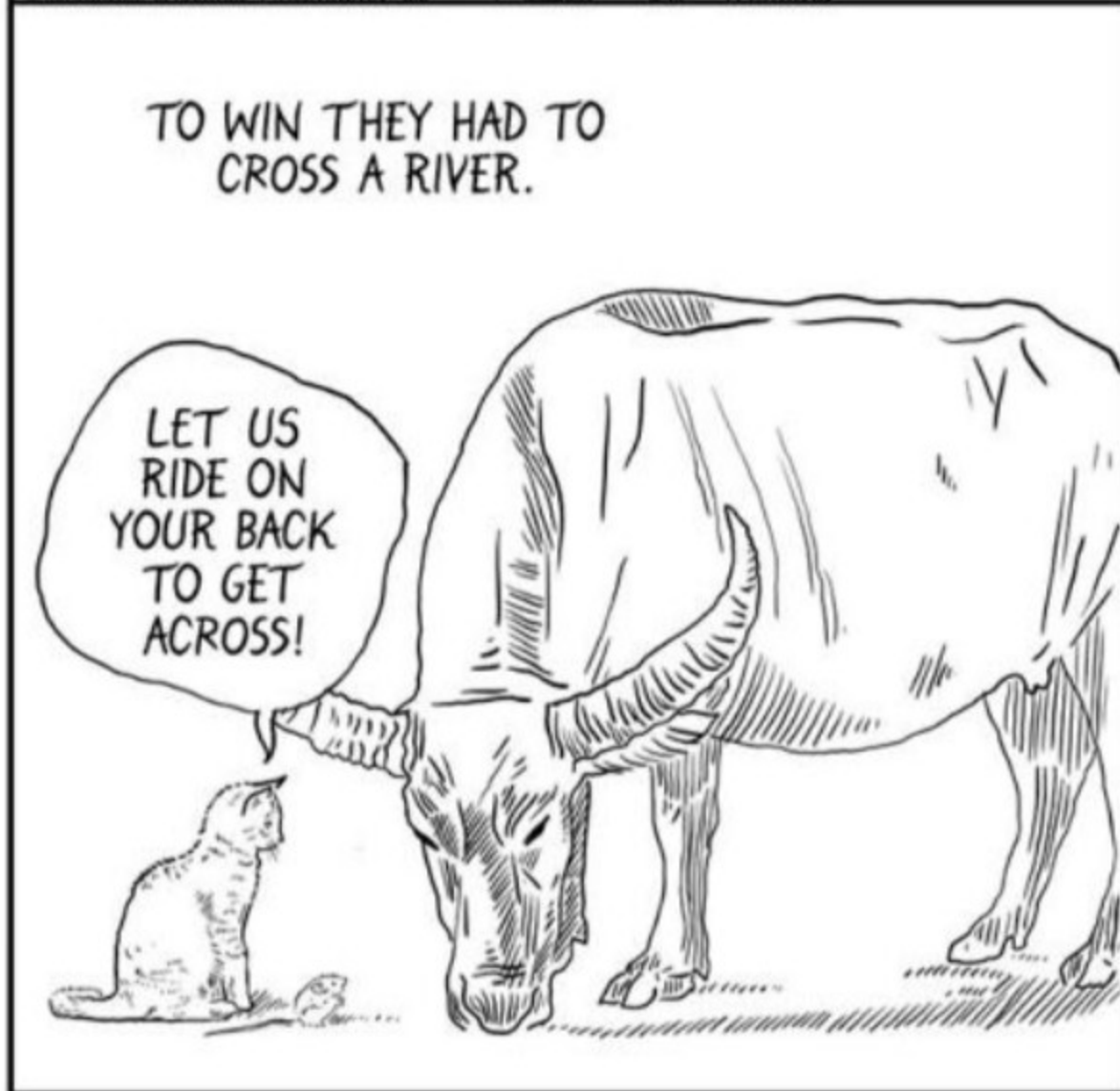
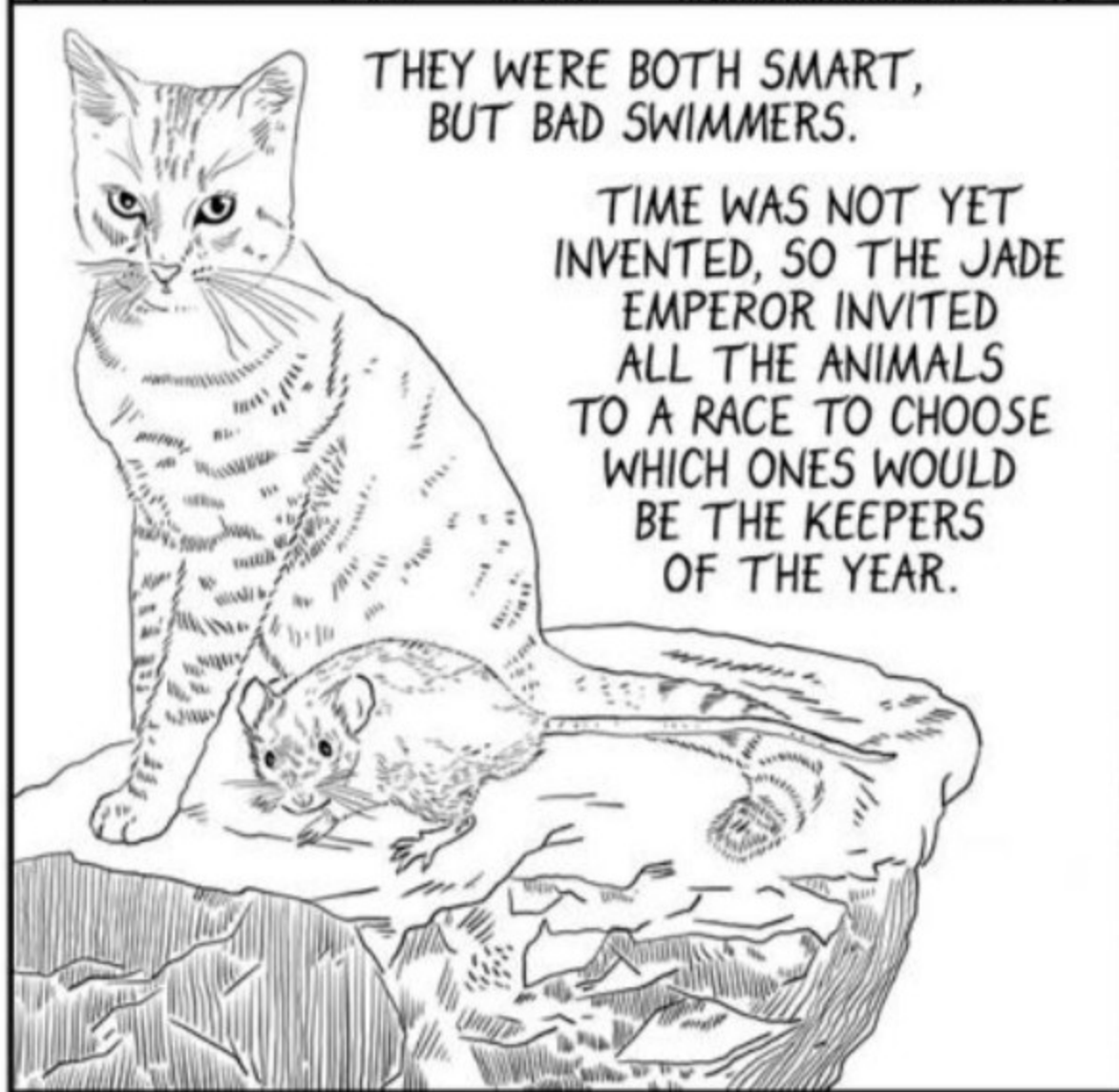
IF YOU WANT TO LEARN TO READ ...

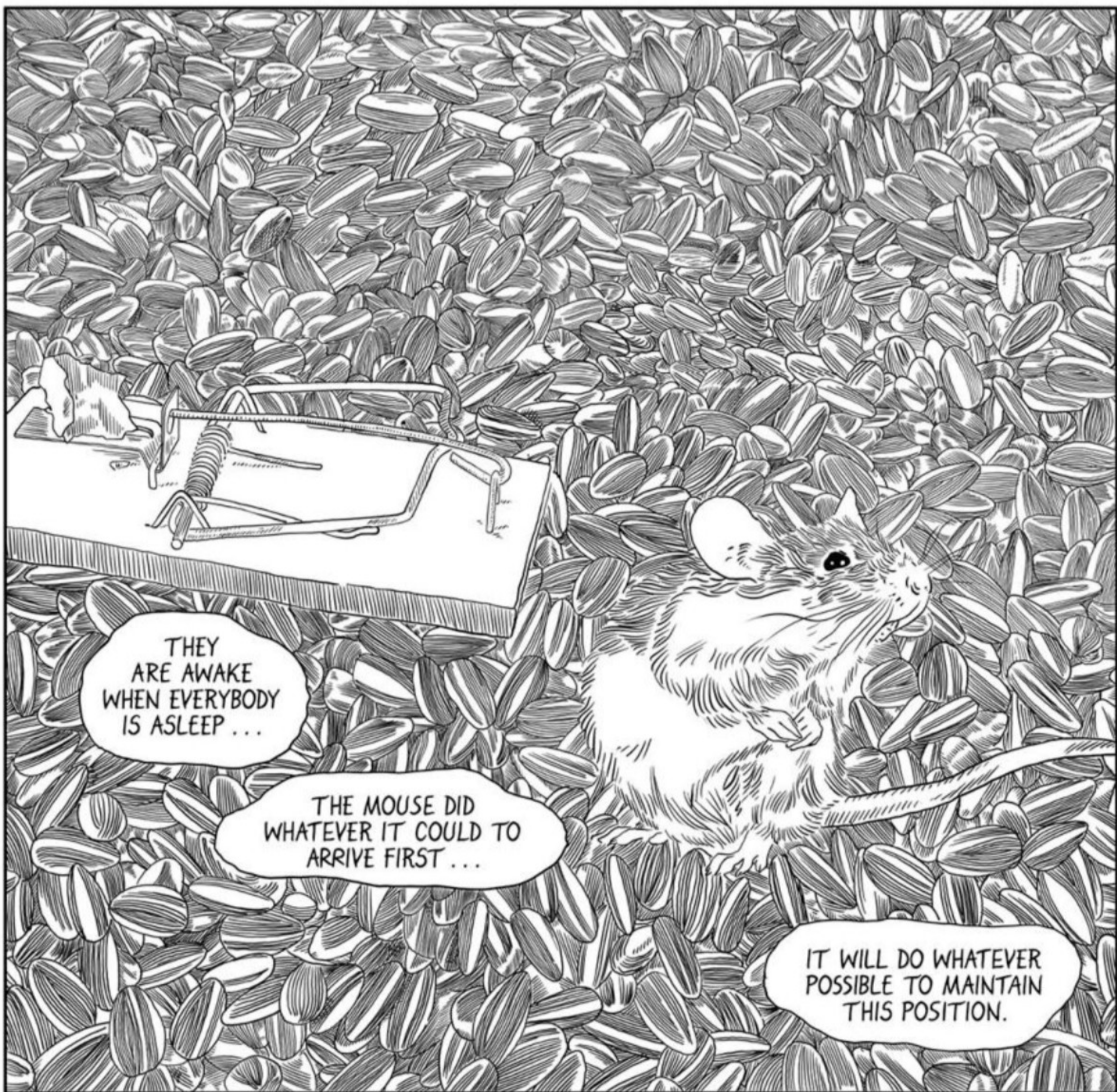


* Enver Hoxha was the Secretary of the Party of Labour of Albania from 1941 until 1985.

** Nasreddin Hodja was a satirist and philosopher who lived in 8th century in the Ottoman Empire.







THEY ARE AWAKE WHEN EVERYBODY IS ASLEEP ...

THE MOUSE DID WHATEVER IT COULD TO ARRIVE FIRST ...

IT WILL DO WHATEVER POSSIBLE TO MAINTAIN THIS POSITION.



SO THE MOUSE LOVES WINNING?

INDEED.

I ALSO LIKE TO WIN.

I LOVED IT, TOO, WHEN I WAS YOUR AGE.

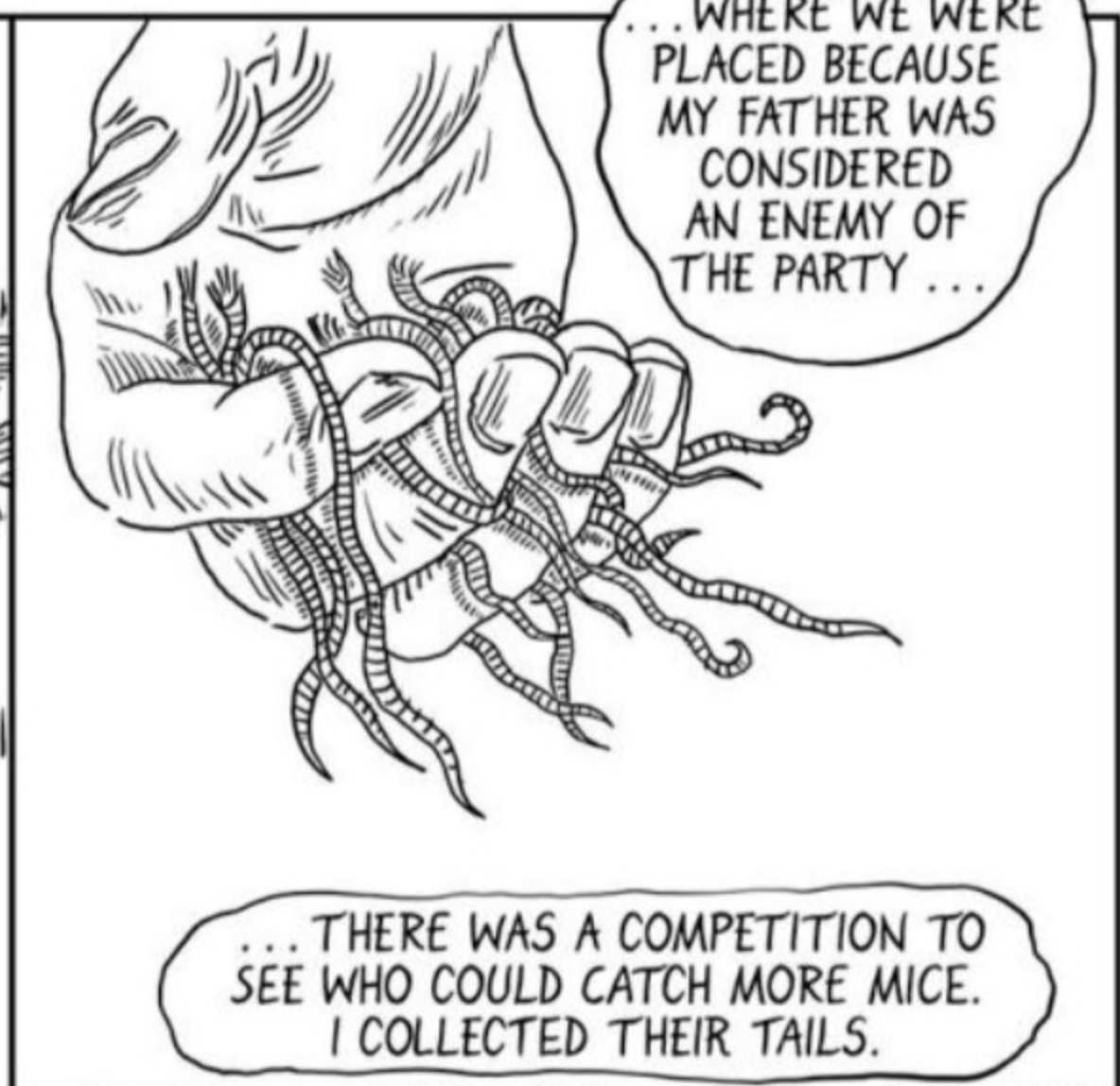
Xinjiang Province 1967. Near the Gobi Desert.



WHEN I WAS A CHILD MY FAMILY AND I WERE FORCED TO LIVE UNDERGROUND.

WE LIVED IN A BURROW DUG INTO THE DESERT.

IN THIS STRANGE COMMUNE ...



... WHERE WE WERE PLACED BECAUSE MY FATHER WAS CONSIDERED AN ENEMY OF THE PARTY ...

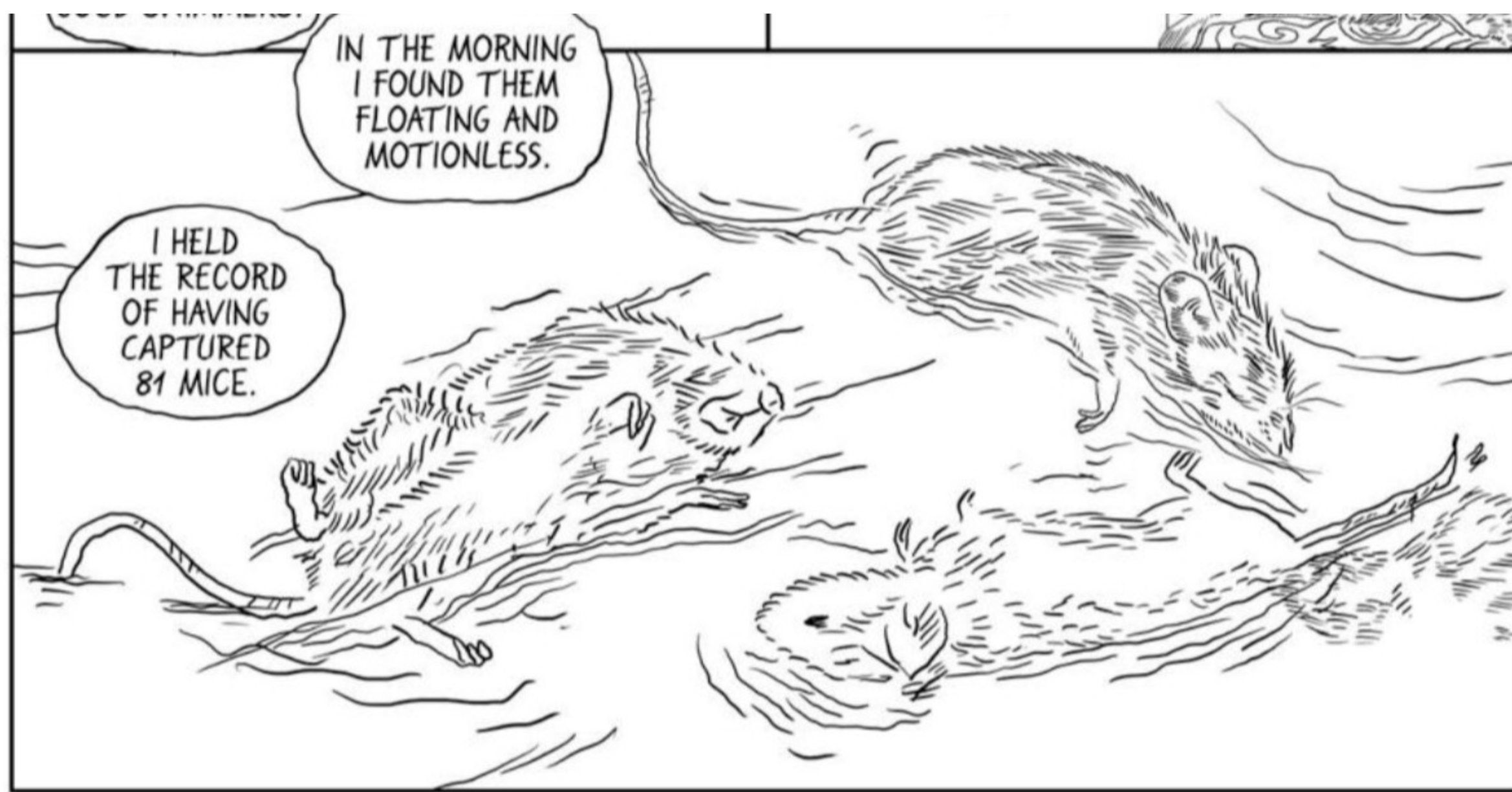
... THERE WAS A COMPETITION TO SEE WHO COULD CATCH MORE MICE. I COLLECTED THEIR TAILS.



MY TRAP WAS THE WINNER.

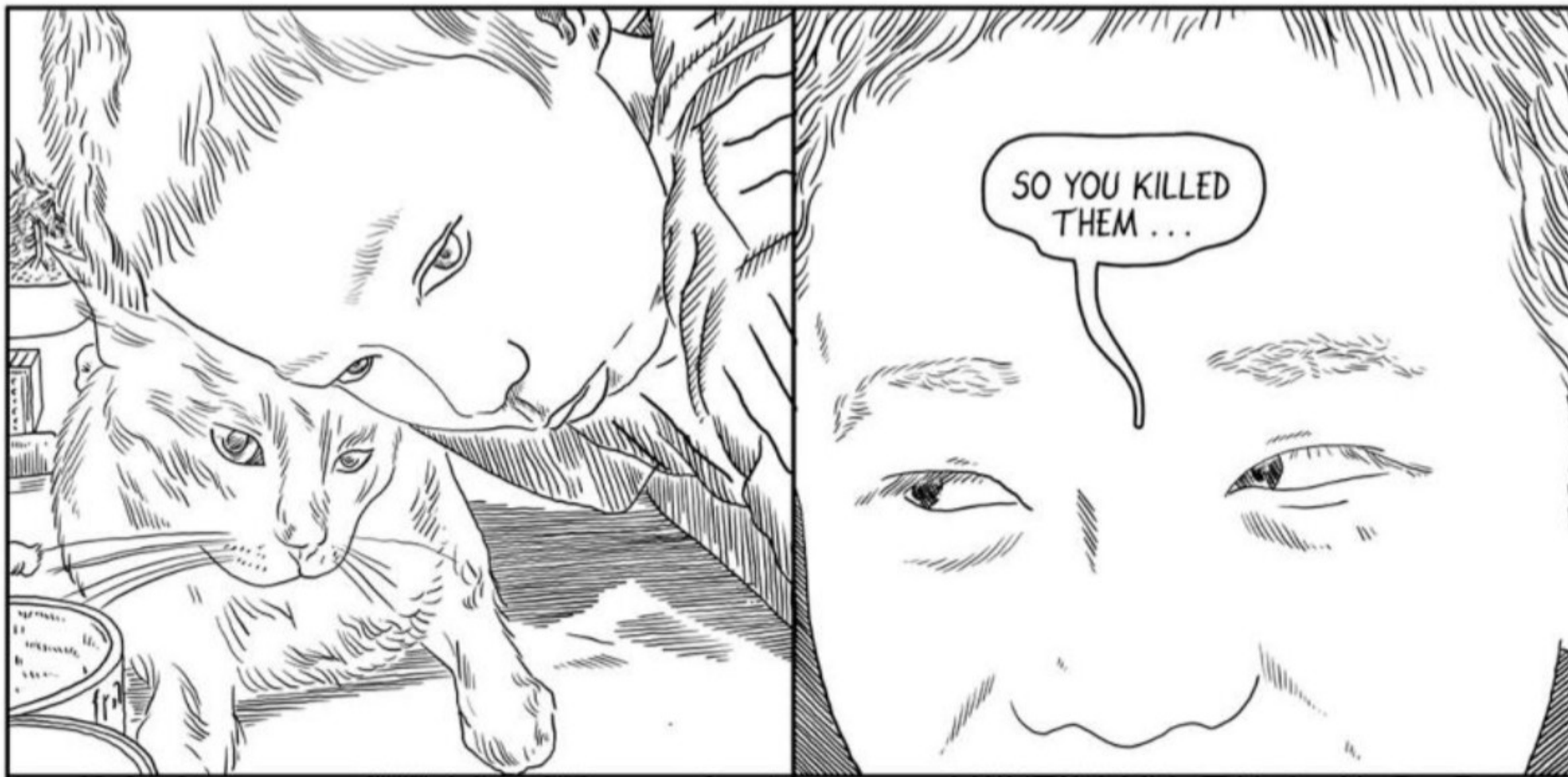
I KNEW THAT MICE WERE NOT GOOD SWIMMERS.



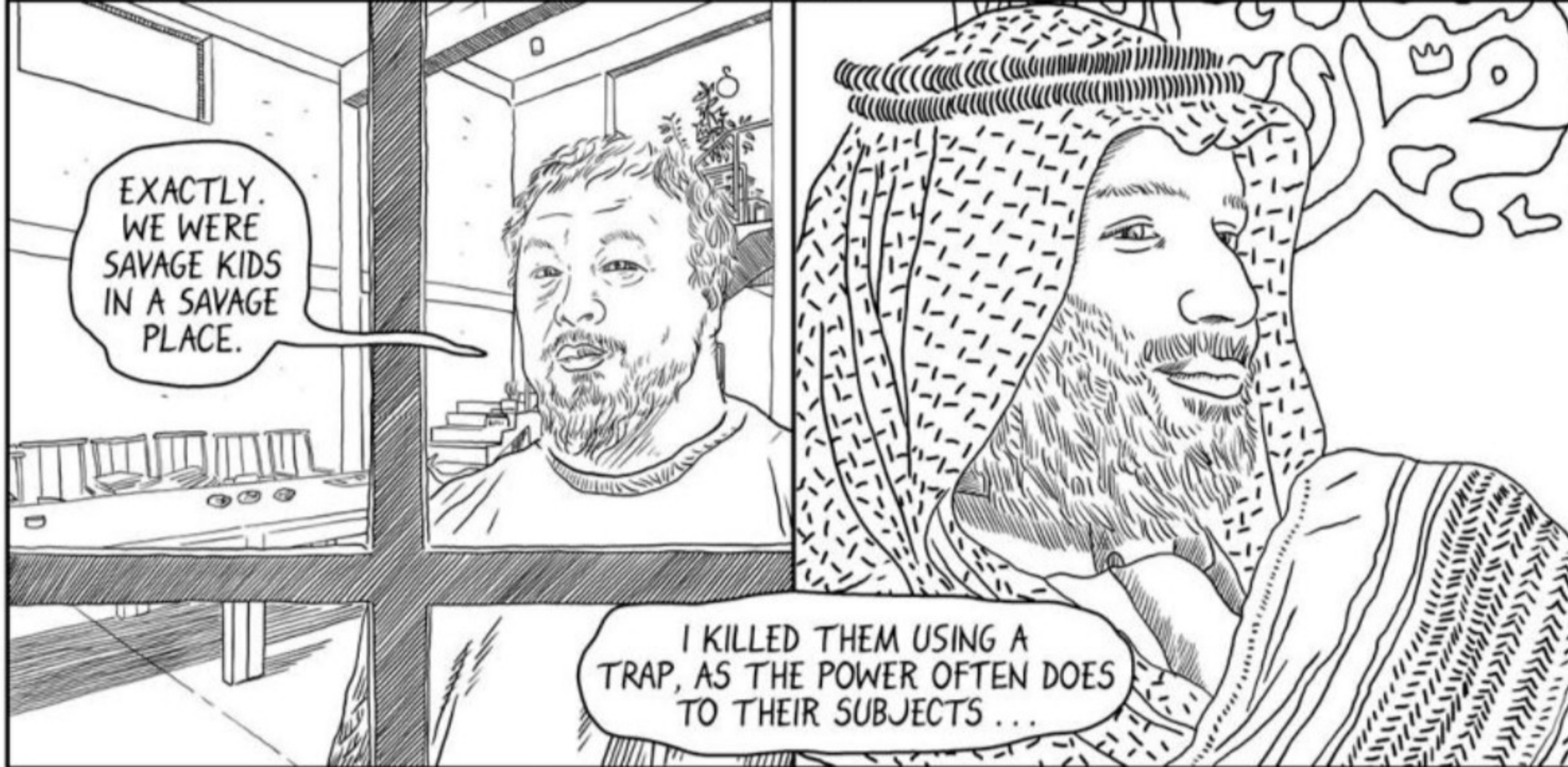


IN THE MORNING I FOUND THEM FLOATING AND MOTIONLESS.

I HELD THE RECORD OF HAVING CAPTURED 81 MICE.



SO YOU KILLED THEM ...



EXACTLY. WE WERE SAVAGE KIDS IN A SAVAGE PLACE.

I KILLED THEM USING A TRAP, AS THE POWER OFTEN DOES TO THEIR SUBJECTS ...



THERE IS A STORY I WILL TELL YOU ONE DAY ABOUT A MAN FROM SAUDI ARABIA.

HIS NAME WAS KHASHOGGI. BUT NOW LET'S GO TO SLEEP ...



LIVING UNDERGROUND WITHOUT BOOKS ...

THE KEY IS TO KEEP THE DOORS OPEN ...

... MUST BE A VERY STRANGE SITUATION.

AS CATS DO?

RIGHT! LIKE THE CATS. WE HAVE TO KEEP THE DOOR THAT WE CALL FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND THOUGHT OPEN.

AND WHO CLOSES THE DOOR?

THE MICE. THOSE WHO TRAP OTHERS.



IN EVERY POWER, AS IN EVERY SIGN, THERE IS A DARK AND A LIGHT ASPECT.

ALSO, YOUR GRANDFATHER WAS BETRAYED, AND HE WAS ACCUSED OF BEING A TRAITOR. HE WAS AN IMPORTANT POET.

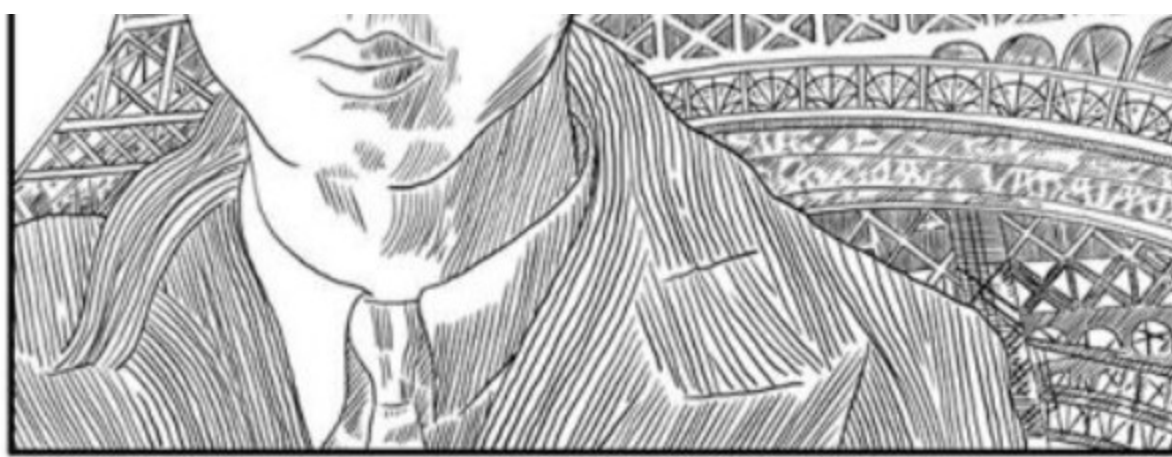
FOR THE MOUSE, THE DARK SIDE IS THE RELATIONSHIP WITH BETRAYAL.

AI QING, YOUR GRANDFATHER, WAS FIRST BETRAYED BY HIS PARENTS.

IN THAT EARLY PERIOD, HE LIVED WITH A FARMING FAMILY. LIKE MOSES, KRISHNA, AND OTHER MYTHS YOU HAVE READ.

THEY BELIEVED IN FORTUNE-TELLING* AND KEPT HIM AWAY FOR 9 YEARS, BEFORE ACCEPTING HIM AGAIN.

HE WENT TO PARIS IN 1928 TO STUDY ART.



BUT WHEN HE CAME BACK TO CHINA IN 1932 HE WAS ARRESTED BECAUSE HE WAS CONSIDERED A REVOLUTIONARY.

* The prediction was that he would be the cause of the household's demise.



LIKE WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?

NO, HE STAYED IN PRISON FOR MUCH LONGER: 3 YEARS.



HE COMPOSED HIS MOST FAMOUS POEMS THERE. WHEN HE WAS RELEASED, HE NEVER GAVE UP HIS RADICAL IDEAS.



IN 1942, HE JOINED THE COMMUNIST PARTY.



HE BECAME AN IMPORTANT AND ENGAGED INTELLECTUAL. HE WAS EDITOR OF POETRY MAGAZINE.



IN 1957, ALONG WITH MANY OTHERS, HE WAS CHARGED FOR BEING A COUNTERREVOLUTIONARY ...



AND THAT'S WHY WE ENDED UP UNDERGROUND, WITH THE MICE.



ALL OF MY FATHER'S WRITING OF THAT PERIOD WAS LOST.



I THINK I UNDERSTAND ...



* Verses from Ai Qing's poem "Dreams" in *The Red Azalea: Chinese Poetry Since the Cultural Revolution*. Edited by Edward Morin; translated by Fang Dai, Dennis Ding, and Edward Morin. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, November 1990.

Excerpted from [Zodiac: A Graphic Memoir](#), by Ai Weiwei with Elettra Stamboulis, illustrated by Gianluca Constantini, published by Ten Speed Graphic (January, 2024). ■