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CHLOE CHAN

*GRAPHIC NOVEL PANEL FOR
POSTAPOCALYPSE NOW*

May 2019

The American Cultures Student Prize

Awarded since 2008, the American Cultures Student Prize provides students with the opportunity to highlight work taken in an American Cultures course which promotes understanding of race, ethnicity, and culture. The prize also recognizes student's work as a standard of excellence in scholarship wrestling critically with the complexities of our diverse social conditions in illuminating ways.

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Chloe Chan

Graphic Novel Panel for "Postapocalypse Now"

Comparative Literature N60AC, "Postapocalypse Now"

Instructor: Caitlin Scholl

This graphic novel panel is based on her analysis of literary texts and films that are intertwined with and working through, specific American histories of genocide, racism, and misogyny. The panel represents how, in some respects, we are already living in a post-apocalyptic world. Drawing inspiration from Chang-Rae Lee's dystopic novel "On Such a Full Sea," Chloe's spatial arrangement creates an interaction between the agents of "history from above" and "history from below" within their various environmentally and historically determined constraints. The genius of her panel captures how one's socioeconomic position—always-already buoyed to one's race, gender, and class can dramatically transform one's path through, and perception of, the same moment of American history.

Statement

My project engages with several texts that speak to the apocalyptic histories (and postapocalyptic presents and futures) of various racial and ethnic groups in America. Working most directly with images and quotations from “The Confessions of Nat Turner”, *On Such a Full Sea, Night of the Living Dead*, “The Comet”, and *Black Elk Speaks*, I put these texts into conversation with my own simple narrative. A father walks with his son on an elevated platform, telling a story of civilization overcoming apocalypse and progressing towards utopia. Meanwhile, the literal pile of bodies behind and below the platform suggests that the father’s utopia is sustained by the continuation of apocalyptic conditions for oppressed groups. Below, we also see the continuation of resistance as a lone figure climbs up to the platform, inspiring others to join her in challenging the boundary that protects the elites. With the disparity of the stories depicted above and below the platform, I sought to represent how the dominant narrative of a singular American experience attempts to sweep under the rug the plurality of other American histories and cultures.

The lens of the apocalyptic allows us to trouble the narrative of white civilization’s teleological advance. We can acknowledge the extent of the destruction and trauma caused, for example, by the American institution of slavery or the conquest of the Americas, world-shattering events for displaced Africans and generations of Black Americans and Natives. That said, the understanding of such events as historical apocalypses might also lend itself to supporting the dominant narrative of white American civilization—as if the history of Natives has ended and simply been superseded by the story of white Americans, or as if to say that slavery was a shame, but it’s in the past and there’s nothing to be done about it now. The father in my drawing promotes this kind of conveniently streamlined narrative, trying to emphasize the present as he says, “Thank God that’s all behind us”—perhaps exhibiting some reluctance to name the reality of the apocalypse—“But **now**, look how far we’ve come!”

Apocalypse in fiction can be wielded critically against such simplifications. The science-fiction apocalypses of W.E.B. Du Bois’s “The Comet” and George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, which kill people indiscriminately, allow us to imagine the destruction of the racist structures of the world before. In Romero’s film, and my drawing, Black and white characters initially work together and take shelter to survive the apocalypse; and in Du Bois’s story, it even seems that apocalypse might offer the opportunity of a post-racial utopia. But at least in these texts, the apocalyptic imaginary falters. Enough of the old world survives for the violent oppression of Blacks to continue, suggesting that even apocalypse can’t destroy systems of oppression. More grimly, perhaps only a truly world-ending apocalypse would be enough.

These unsatisfactory apocalypses lead us into a discussion of the postapocalyptic, a genre that’s exploded in popularity in recent years. In contrast to the dead-end of apocalypse or the oversimplified teleology of white civilization, the lens of the postapocalyptic draws attention to the continuation of the stories and histories of oppressed groups *through* historical trauma. These stories speak against the hegemonic discourse of a singular American experience. Multiple elements in my project push against the father’s narrative: the multimedia clips from different texts, the visual story below the platform whose timeline contradicts the overarching story of progress, and even the bodies whose limbs cross the boundary of the platform. To destabilize the father’s attempt to lock the apocalypse into the past, I decided not to use the kind of bordered panels that usually sequentialize time in comic books. Rejecting such temporal divisions, I wanted to emphasize the continuity of the struggle below the platform and also wanted to

suggest the father's inability to escape himself and the need for him to be held accountable for his violent actions during the apocalypse.

The American Cultures website states a commitment to fostering “civic engagement of issues critical to America’s dynamic ethnic, racial, and socio-cultural landscape,” a project that begins with investigating the landscape under our feet. This “landscape” has been structured by particular narratives to benefit particular groups and contains both buried histories of trauma and narratives of resistance that simmer just under the surface. Questions of engagement and agency were on my mind throughout the creation of my project: in the parent who naps peacefully in front of the warnings on the news, the people who run or watch helplessly as their companions are exploited, the heroic figure who climbs to the platform and those who help each other follow her, and the guard who may or may not shoot. The scene ends with the question of whether the uprising will succeed, which becomes linked to the question of what story our children will believe. At the far end of the page, despite his father’s attempt to hurry him away, the son keeps turning back to look; and in the foreground, a parent lifts a child onto her shoulders and points the child’s attention to the uprising. Given that the word “apocalypse” originally means an uncovering or revelation, perhaps the preponderance of post-apocalyptic literature speaks self-reflexively to the failure of apocalypse to reveal much to humans who stubbornly refuse to see. The lens of the postapocalyptic then allows critical insight into the continuation of history, not just to point out the continuation of violence and cycles of oppression—work that is necessary but often exhausting—but to suggest that the story is still being told and that we can take part in its telling.

Interpretive Essay

Throughout the course, we noted the unequal experiences of (post)apocalypse/utopia, both in speculative fiction and in texts by the survivors of “apocalyptic” historical events; and regarding the comic book form in *Maus*, we talked about how space is time, and Art Spiegelman often draws the past impinging on the present. I thought it would be interesting to make a graphic that depicted those unequal experiences with no panels at all, except the boundaries the privileged characters want to draw: the thought bubble that tries to separate past and present, and the platform separating the privileged from the oppressed. However much the mustachioed speaker, the father, likes to think he’s moving forward, these boundaries are permeable, and nothing really gets left behind.

The first scene responds to statements made by white lawyer Thomas R. Gray in the introduction to “The Confessions of Nat Turner.” Insisting on the “calm and peaceful” surface of society, Gray expresses bemusement at what could have provoked the slaves’ violent rebellion. His reaction blithely overlooks the violence of the system of slavery that undergirded white society. The father describes how unexpected the apocalypse was, but this comes down to being ignorant of (or his father closing his eyes too) the signs of the apocalypse, the protests on TV that declare that society is reaching a breaking point.

While Gray and the father sees the surface of things, we get a different perspective from below. The father’s present position is founded on the crushing of another population, the platform supported by the skull in the corner. The figure below is Fan, the protagonist of Chang Rae Lee’s *On Such a Full Sea*, a member of a worker community brought from China to produce food for a higher caste. Her character raises questions about agency as she ventures out of her ordained societal place with unclear, individual motives, but guided by some kind of faith, a sense of direction that no one else can see. Here, Fan seems to look beyond Thomas Gray’s words to read the quotation I hid under the flap, from the apocalyptic vision that preceded Nat Turner’s revolt. Turner sees the signs of the apocalypse on the corn in the field (a site of labor, something only the slaves are in a position to see and recognize): the slaves’ bloodshed for the sustenance of whites. Though “The Confessions” has been criticized as being Gray’s construction, a warning that serves the purposes of white society, the essence of Turner’s message may still survive—unperceived and thus uncensored by Gray, but visible to those who labor in the field.

The father’s overarching speech bubble presents the dominant narrative of the overcoming of the apocalypse. Inside the house, inspired by *Night of the Living Dead*, there’s a potential for unity between people of different colors, but maybe this unity is precisely what threatened the father’s way of life and made things so “terrible” for him. (It’s also unclear

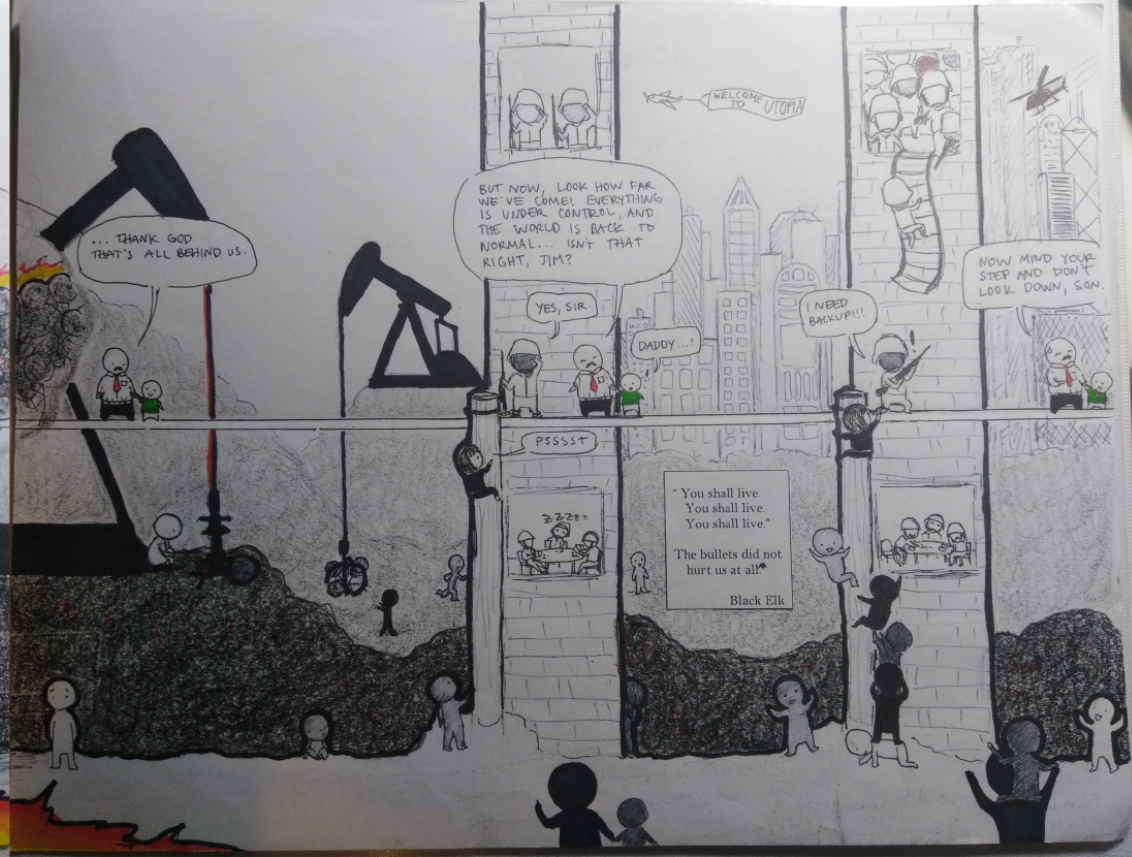
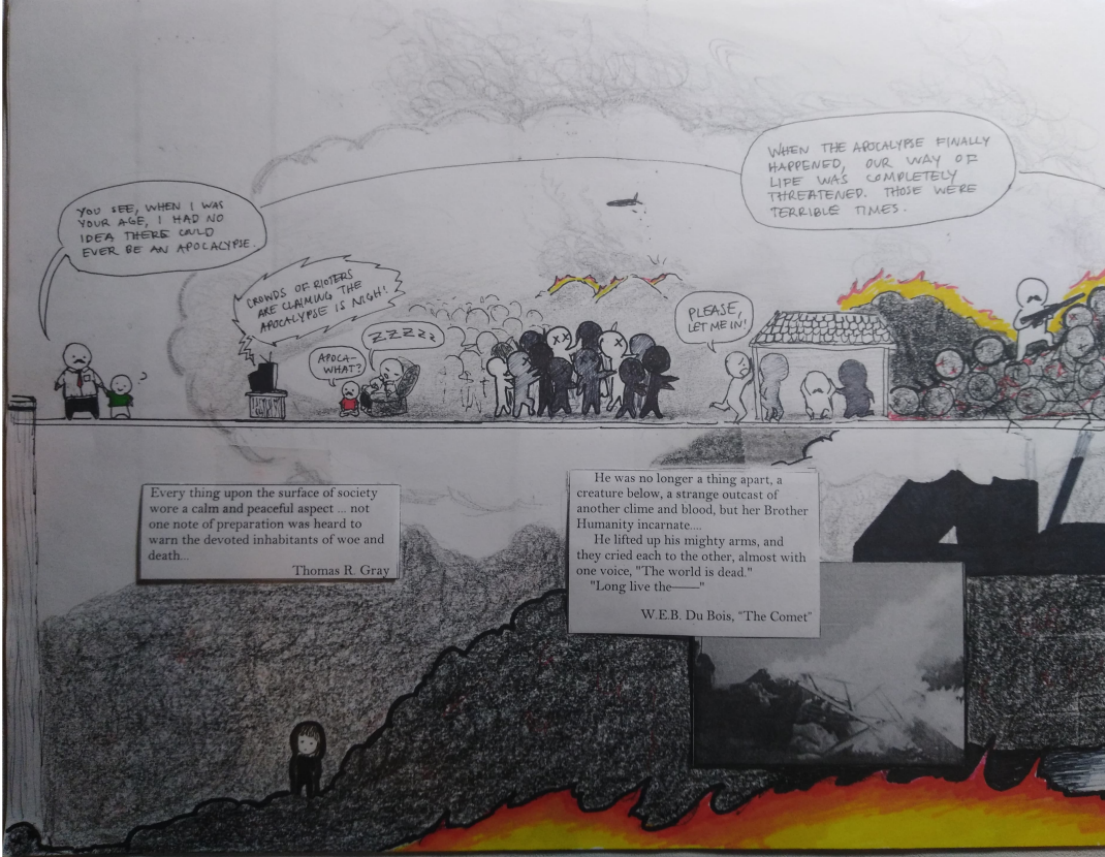
whether the crowd consists of dangerous zombies or victims fleeing the humanmade destruction caused by the plane in the background—but it justifies the father’s narrative of progress if the bodies he steps on are merely zombies.) In Du Bois’s “The Comet,” the apocalypse seems almost hopeful for a Black man and a white woman who believe they’re the last people alive in the world. In a transcendent moment, they envision a postracial future and almost embrace. But after the final em-dash in the quote, a car honk breaks the fantasy, and the stubborn cockroach of racist society rears its head. The image of a fire is a still from the end of *Night of the Living Dead*, where the bodies of the zombies, along with the unjustly killed Black protagonist, are burned. The evidence is destroyed and “normalcy” returns; “everything is under control,” in the father’s

words, which really means a return to the status quo of utopia for the dominant class and apocalyptic hell for the oppressed.

In the vein of contemporary critiques that marginalized people are too fixated on past bygones, the father tries to emphasize the present over the past that's left behind ("But **now**, look how far we've come!"). But while the father may have walked a distance across these sheets of paper and claims the apocalypse is "all behind us," really he just refuses to turn around and look. The boundary of his thought bubble is permeable, and the pile of corpses continues from the past into the present—and in fact, sustains his world. In Amirpour's *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, the trope of the bloodsucking vampire, the motif of oil drills, and the closeups of heroin injections suggest a dependence on destructive and exploitative extraction. The father's present comfort and the industry of the city full of skyscrapers thrive precisely on the exploitation of the lower class, whose bodies are both discarded and perversely valued. (*On Such a Full Sea* reflects on our contradictory attitudes towards Blackness as the object of both racist microaggressions and fetishization; Fan's boyfriend, Reg, has some Black heritage, which people previously denigrate but begin to value as they link it to his immunity to a disease.) One of the figures in the backdrop goes after its friends, but most of the victims are paralyzed, resigned to their fate or entranced by the flames that destroy them.

Ending on this point would problematically position the marginalized as eternal victims. I wanted to inject some hope with the quote from Black Elk, but his chant of impenetrability is followed by what would become the Wounded Knee Massacre. *On Such a Full Sea* looks at how a social movement might begin even among a passive community that accepts its model minority status, as Fan's actions catalyze expressions of unrest that had previously been repressed; but Lee's novel is ambivalent about whether or not the community will achieve change or allow itself to be pacified. In my drawing, Fan reaches the platform, and people below begin to notice her ascent. Still, we don't know if the guard (called Jim after the protagonist of "The Comet") will use his gun against Fan, even as she extends a hand to the shackle that binds him to his position of subservience. The soldiers may suppress the uprising, and the one long sheet of paper might even be folded around to lock the victims of apocalypse in an endless cycle of oppression.

Even if the guards overwhelm this particular wave of insurgents, the potential for a break in the cycle comes from a question implicit in a course that studies postapocalyptic *literature*: What stories do we pass on to the next generation? The father tells his son to mind his step and not look down—willful ignorance is the way to keep their lofty status. It's possible the son will grow up to take on his father's role and pass the same story on to his own child. However, the son, who has spotted Fan's act of heroism, has seen something that can't quite fit into his father's story. More hope may lie in the bottom right corner, with the model of a parent actively pointing out things in the world for their child to see, learn from, and be inspired by.



YOU SEE, WHEN I WAS
YOUR AGE, I HAD NO
IDEA THERE COULD
EVER BE AN APOCALYPSE.

CROWDS OF RIOTERS
ARE CLAIMING THE
APOCALYPSE IS NIGH!

ZZZZZZ

APOCA-
WHAT?

Every thing upon the surface of society
wore a calm and peaceful aspect ... not
one note of preparation was heard to
warn the devoted inhabitants of woe and
death...

Thomas R. Gray

While laboring in the field, I discovered
drops of blood on the corn as though it
were dew from heaven.

Nat Turner





WHEN THE APOCALYPSE FINALLY
HAPPENED, OUR WAY OF
LIFE WAS COMPLETELY
THREATENED. THOSE WERE
TERRIBLE TIMES.

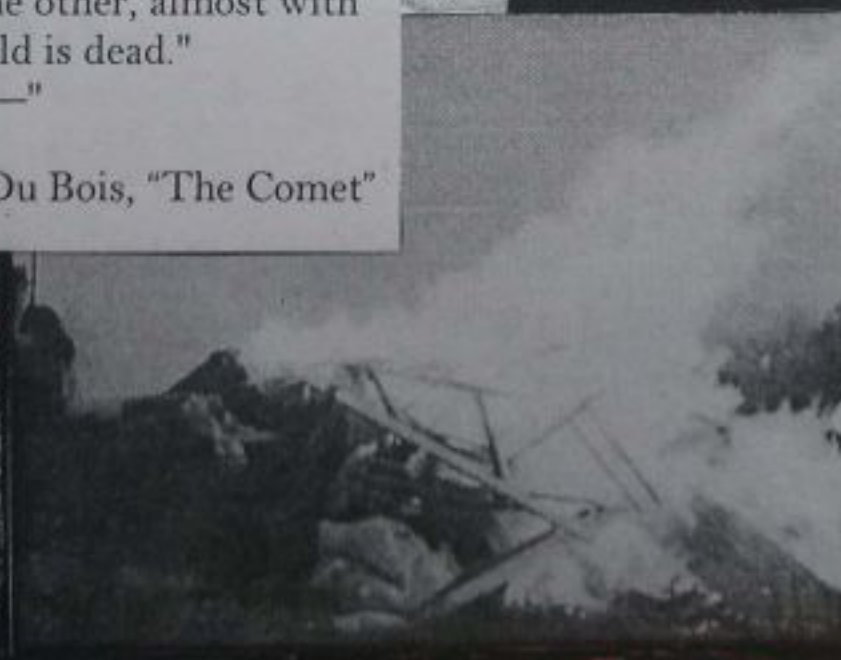
PLEASE,
LET ME IN!

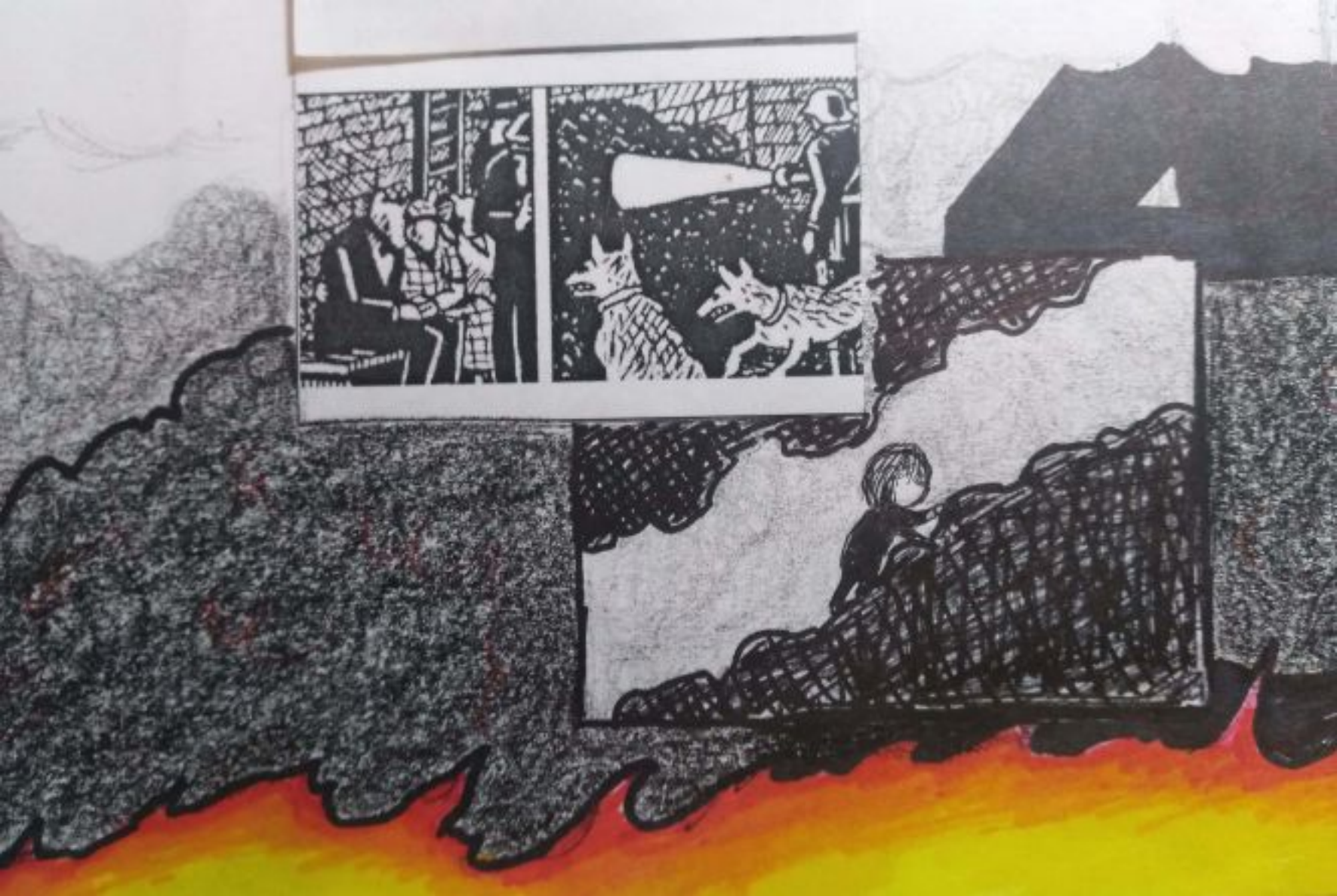
He was no longer a thing apart, a creature below, a strange outcast of another clime and blood, but her Brother Humanity incarnate....

He lifted up his mighty arms, and they cried each to the other, almost with one voice, "The world is dead."

"Long live the——"

W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Comet"





... THANK GOD
THAT'S ALL BEHIND US.





WELCOME TO UTOPIA

BUT NOW, LOOK HOW FAR WE'VE COME! EVERYTHING IS UNDER CONTROL, AND THE WORLD IS BACK TO NORMAL... ISN'T THAT RIGHT, JIM?

YES, SIR.

DADDY...?

I NEED BACKUP!!!

PSSSST

ZZZZZ

" You shall live.
You shall live.
You shall live."

The bullets did not hurt us at all.

Black Elk

