

The famed comics artist Joe Sacco has reported from Iraq on the US military in action. Now



TRAUMA ON LOAN

I. 'JUST CONFESS'

by Joe Sacco @2006

Thahe Sabbar and Sherzad Khalid have other things to worry about besides one last interview. Tomorrow they are supposed to fly back to Iraq through Dubai, and their transit visas haven't come through.

They are nervous, exhausted, filling their hotel room on Times Square with cigarette smoke.

But I have been lurking for three days—good-naturedly, patiently—and they feel they owe me.

They say as much.

And though I know it will wreck them to explain yet again how they—two businessmen; one an Arab, the other a Kurd; old friends; "soul mates," says Sherzad—came to be plaintiffs in a lawsuit against US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, I'm not about to let them off the hook.

So with some reluctance, but graciously, they turn back the clock to that afternoon in July 2003 when they sat together in Thahe's office in Baghdad and heard the unmistakable squeaking of US armored vehicles approaching.

What followed still bewilders them.



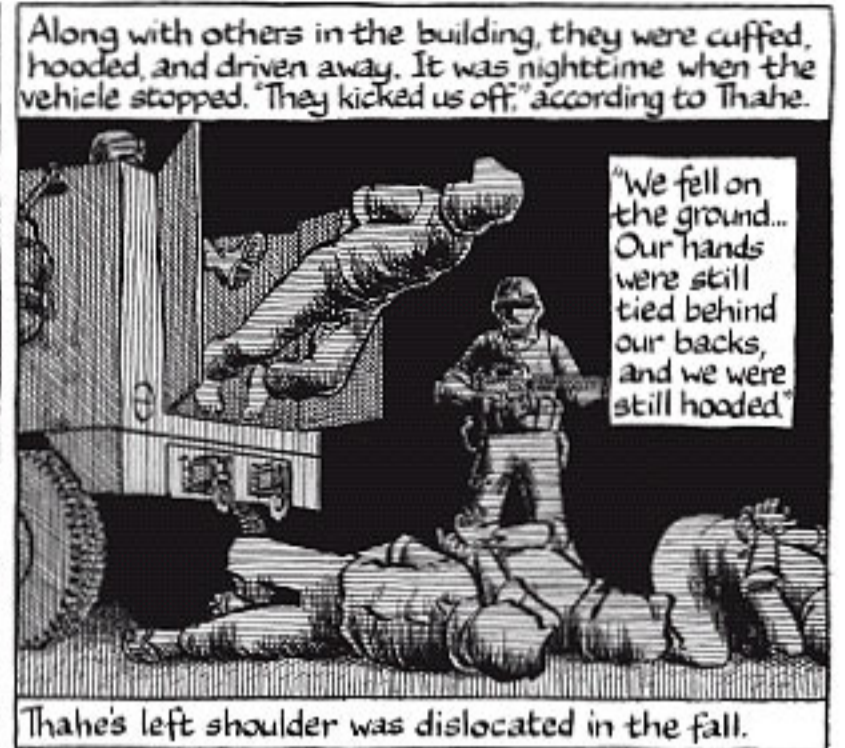
he's met former Iraqi prisoners who are accusing the troops of torture. Here he tells their tale

According to the two men, American troops then entered the building "from all sides," including from the roof.



Sherzad: "They were yelling... and aiming their guns. And they started beating everybody."

Along with others in the building, they were cuffed, hooded, and driven away. It was nighttime when the vehicle stopped. "They kicked us off," according to Thaha.



"We fell on the ground... Our hands were still tied behind our backs, and we were still hooded."

Thaha's left shoulder was dislocated in the fall.

When their hoods were removed, they say they found themselves in one of Saddam Hussein's presidential palaces—standing in front of a cage of lions. The lions, evidently, once had been the personal property of Uday, one of Saddam's notorious sons.




One by one, the detainees were taken to the cage and, according to Sherzad, told to confess.




WHAT DO YOU WANT US TO CONFESS?
YOU DON'T KNOW WHY YOU'RE HERE? JUST CONFESS!


Thaha: "They opened the door... We went in, maybe a meter..."



"But when the lions came running toward us, they pulled us outside..."



"I lost consciousness. I was unconscious most of the time now. And the way they woke me up was by beating me..."

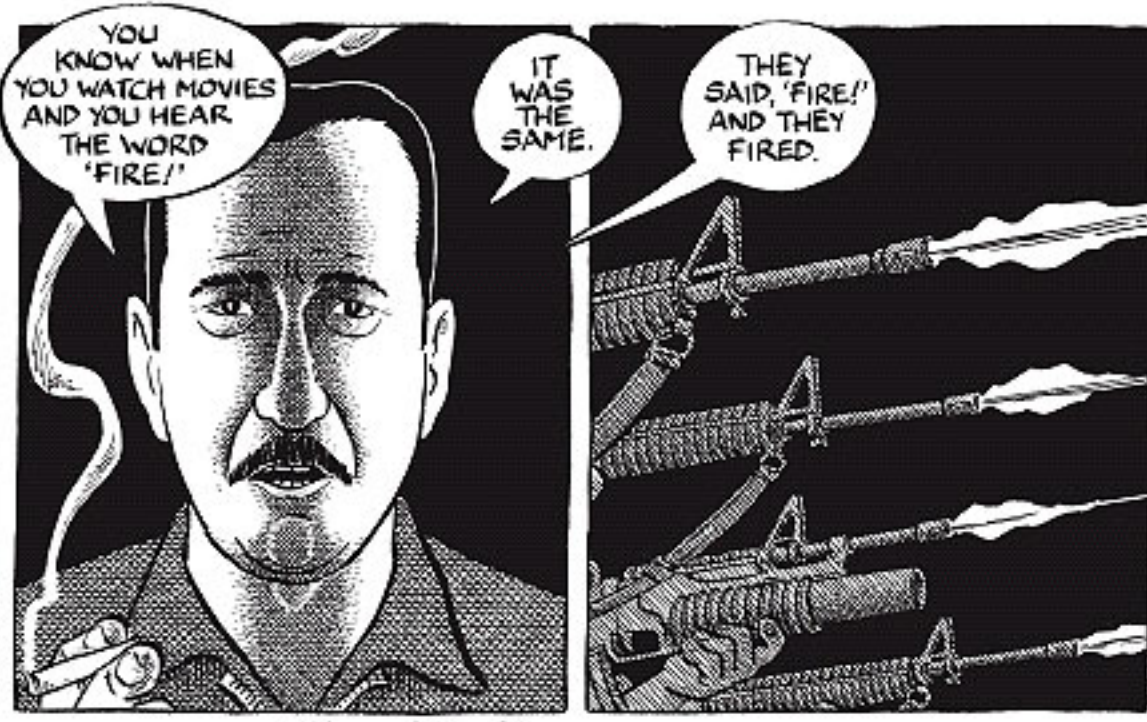


The men then were taken to a wall behind the cage.

THE OFFICER HAS DECIDED TO EXECUTE YOU BY SHOOTING. SO YOU BETTER CONFESS.



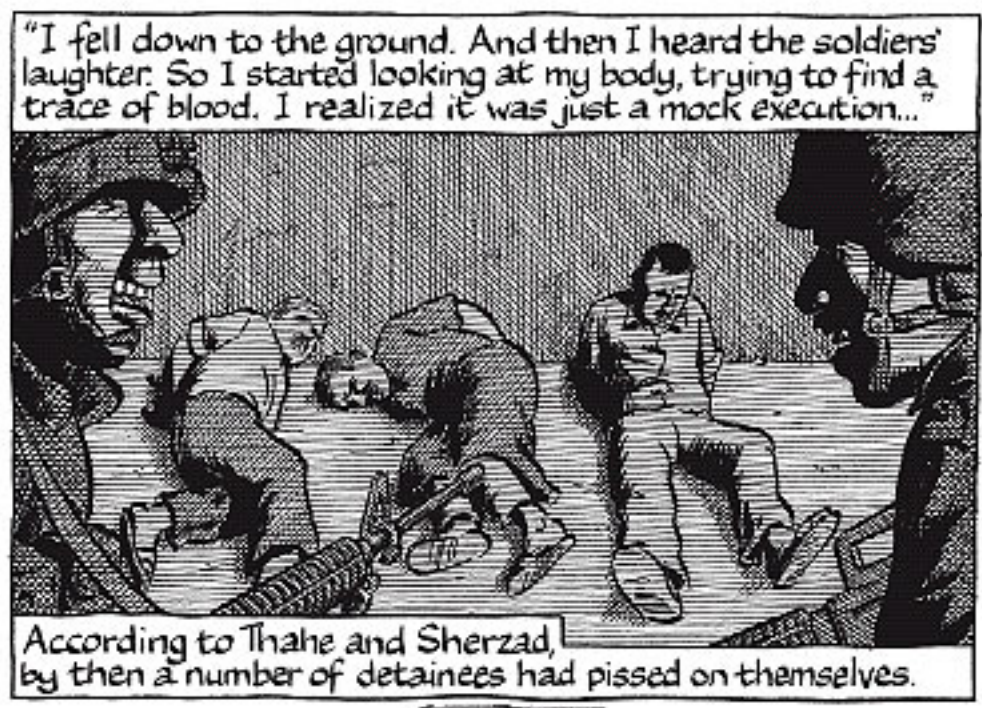
Sherzad: "And we didn't confess because we didn't know what they wanted us to say."



YOU KNOW WHEN YOU WATCH MOVIES AND YOU HEAR THE WORD 'FIRE!'

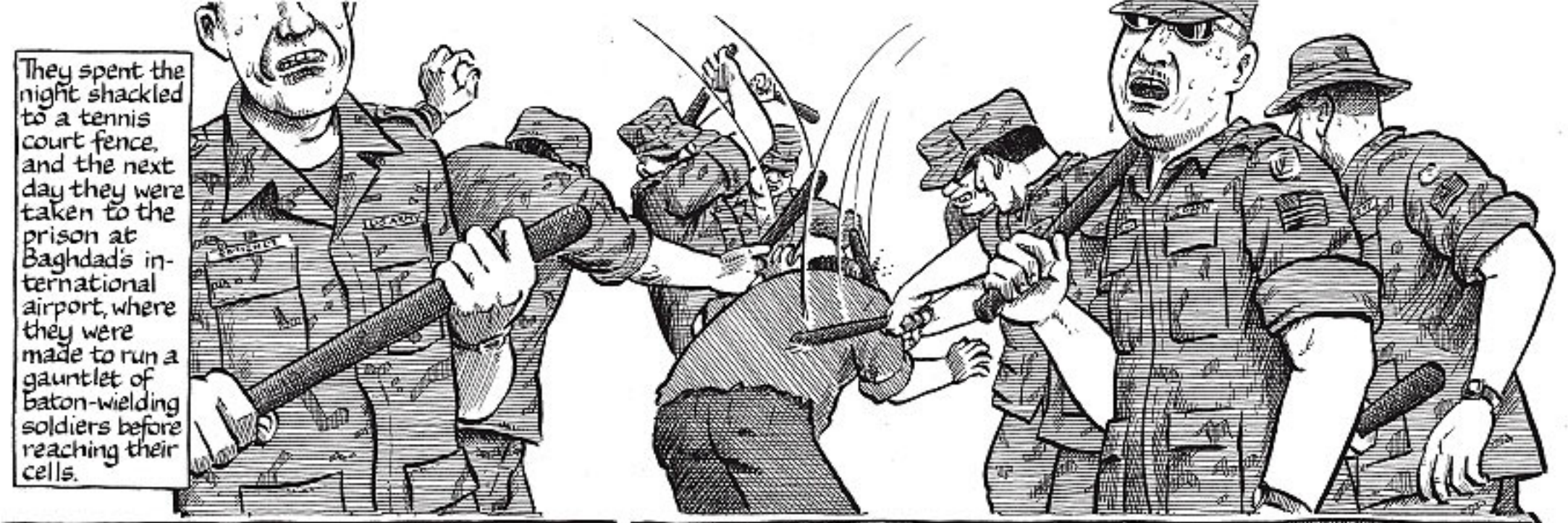
IT WAS THE SAME.

THEY SAID, 'FIRE!' AND THEY FIRED.

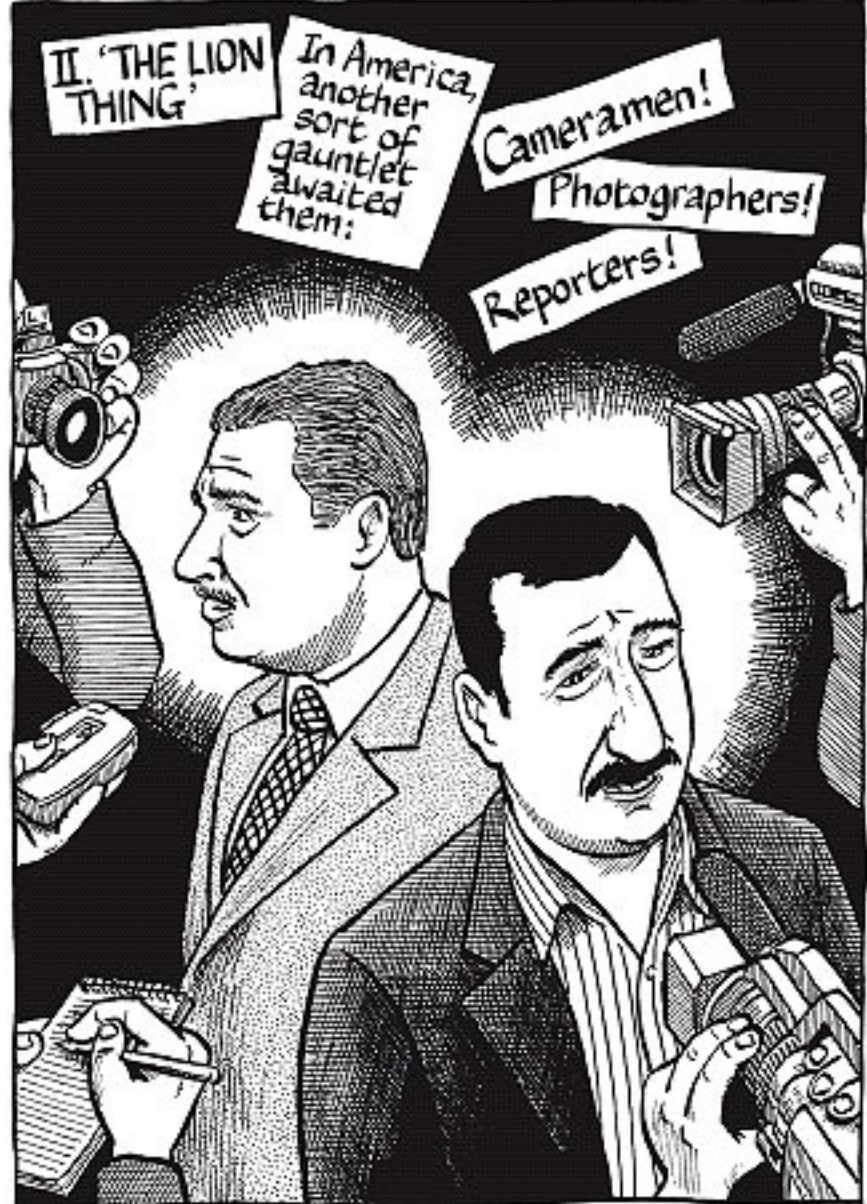


"I fell down to the ground. And then I heard the soldiers' laughter. So I started looking at my body, trying to find a trace of blood. I realized it was just a mock execution..."

According to Thahe and Sherzad, by then a number of detainees had pissed on themselves.



They spent the night shackled to a tennis court fence, and the next day they were taken to the prison at Baghdad's international airport, where they were made to run a gauntlet of baton-wielding soldiers before reaching their cells.



II. 'THE LION THING'

In America, another sort of gauntlet awaited them:

Cameramen!

Photographers!

Reporters!



By the time I met them in Washington, DC, their lawyers, who include members of the American Civil Liberties Union and Human Rights First, fretted that all the interviews had pushed their clients to the edge.

ATTORNEY HINA SHAHSHI, HUMAN RIGHTS FIRST

SOMETIMES WE DON'T KNOW WHEN THEY'VE HAD ENOUGH, AND SOMETIMES THEY DON'T KNOW THEMSELVES UNTIL AFTERWARDS.

Thahe and Sherzad's visit to the States is meant to draw attention to their legal complaint, which alleges "torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment" while they were in U.S. military custody.

They "are representative of so many hundreds or thousands of others whose shockingly brutal mistreatment" is ultimately Mr. Rumsfeld's responsibility, according to Emily Whitfield, the ACLU's media relations director.



In effect, Thahe and Sherzad are standing in for all the hooded and beaten. For this case, they are sacrificial detainees.*

* THEY ARE JOINED BY SIX OTHER PLAINTIFFS: FOUR AFGHANS AND TWO IRAQIS

So when their lawyers expressed misgivings about Thaha and Sherzad reopening their wounds for one last journalist - me! - when they hinted my interview might be cancelled, I wanted to snap back -



Besides, the media blitz has had an impact. Even the chief defendant has taken notice.



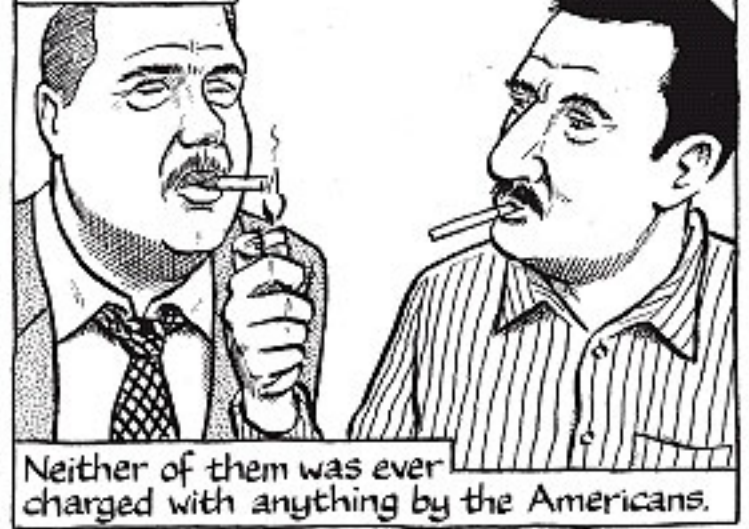
Yes, it's "the lion thing" that is raising eyebrows. Much else of what Thaha and Sherzad allege - the shackling in extreme temperatures, the electric shocks, the desecration of the Koran - might seem ho-hum to an American public that has long digested the enormities of Abu Ghraib.



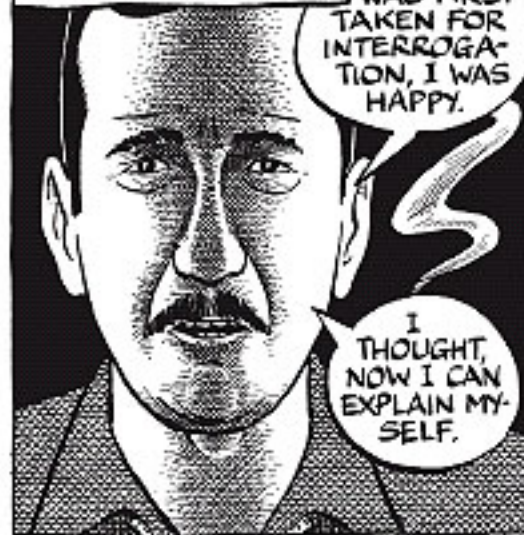
And at his press conference, Mr. Rumsfeld called Thaha and Sherzad's lion story "farfetched" and referred to Al-Qaeda documents that -



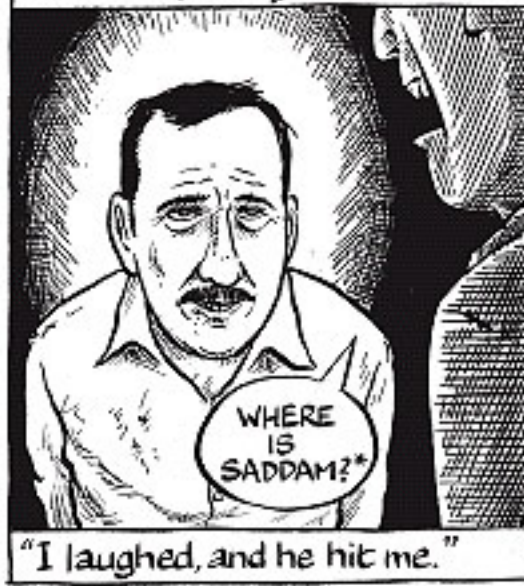
Thaha and Sherzad might take exception to Mr. Rumsfeld's implication that they have studied Al-Qaeda manuals or that they are "terrorists."



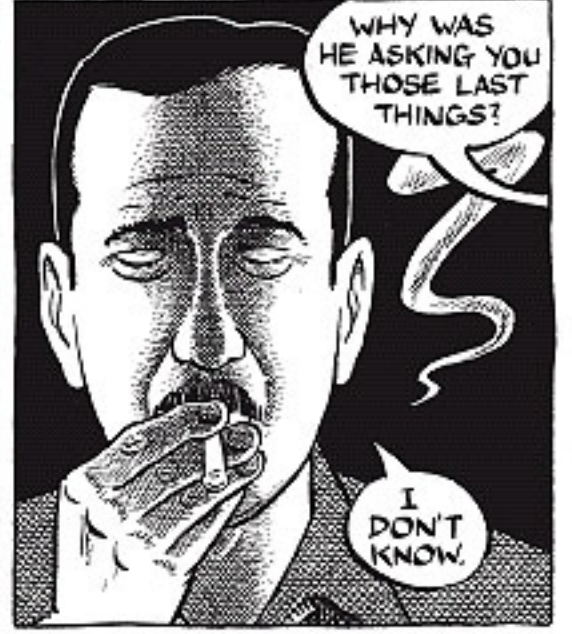
III. 'WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE SPORT?'



"But the first question was -



After perfunctory questions about weapons of mass destruction, Al-Qaeda, etc., the interrogator asked -



But then, does Sherzad know why he was subjected to "simulat[ed] anal rape" with a water bottle? Does Thaha know why "one or more soldiers in the presence of male and female soldiers inserted their fingers" into his anus?



I've quoted Thaha's and Sherzad's sexual assault allegations from the lawsuit. Their attorneys ask me not to bring up the subject with the men. When CNN broke that ground rule and badgered Thaha about his ordeal, he was retraumatized, I'm told.

* SADDAM HUSSEIN WAS STILL IN HIDING WHEN THIS INTERROGATION TOOK PLACE

IV. 'I HAVE NO DESIRE TO TELL A SAD STORY'

In the morning, an interview with 'Time' magazine; in the afternoon, a meeting with earnest Senate staffers who promise to relay Thahe and Sherzad's story to their bosses.

And now one of the attorneys suggests a quick get-together with her colleagues in an office nearby.

IT'S UP TO YOU.

But Thahe is only being diplomatic. He boards the van rented for the day's activities and waits for his handlers to follow.

WE WANT TO GO SEE THE WHITE HOUSE.

The lawyers are sensitive to the moods of their clients. The rest of the day will be given over to sight-seeing.

For an hour or two, Thahe and Sherzad smile in front of America's monuments to liberty.

But the cell phones are ringing again.

A senator has agreed to meet with Thahe and Sherzad personally.

When?

Now!

Thahe is almost despondent.

He has to remind himself why he's here.

WE DIDN'T COME AS TOURISTS.

Sherzad, on the other hand, won't have it.

AFTER SEEING THIS BEAUTIFUL VIEW, I HAVE NO DESIRE TO TELL A SAD STORY.

The attorneys turn down the senator. And they tell Thahe and Sherzad they will get to see the White House in the morning.

V. THE AIRPORT

AT THE AIRPORT, THERE WERE 75 TO 150 DETAINEES IN EACH TENT.

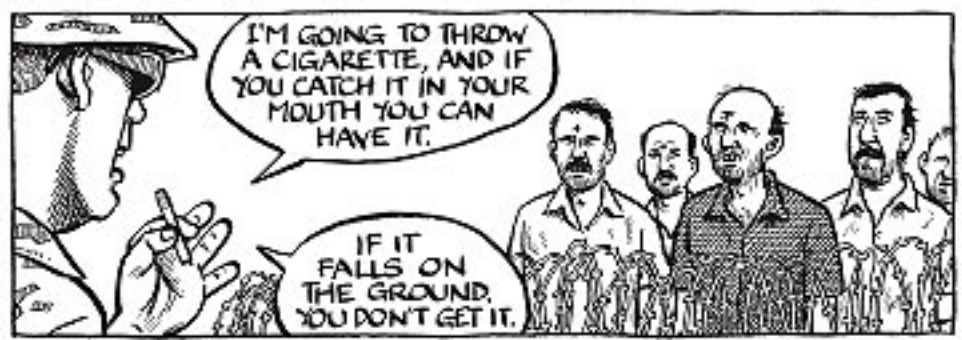
"There was a place for people to sit, but not to sleep. The ground was earth. We were given one blanket. My pillow was my shoes.

"I had a beard. I had long hair just like a beast.

"Each tent had its own guard... The guard would bring a folding chair.. and he'd sit with his water, and he had a carton of cigarettes, and he smoked as much as he wanted."



"One time, a very ugly person came."



"The soldiers saw this funny situation, and they were coming over."



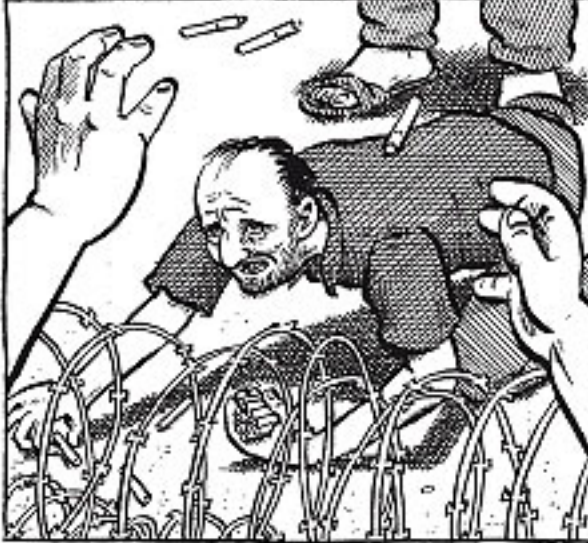
"One of the detainees was in front, and his actions were like a dog's."



"The soldier was faking as if he would throw the cigarette this way or that way."



"The soldiers were laughing. They gave him a lot of cigarettes..."



"It was my turn. I told him in very basic English:"

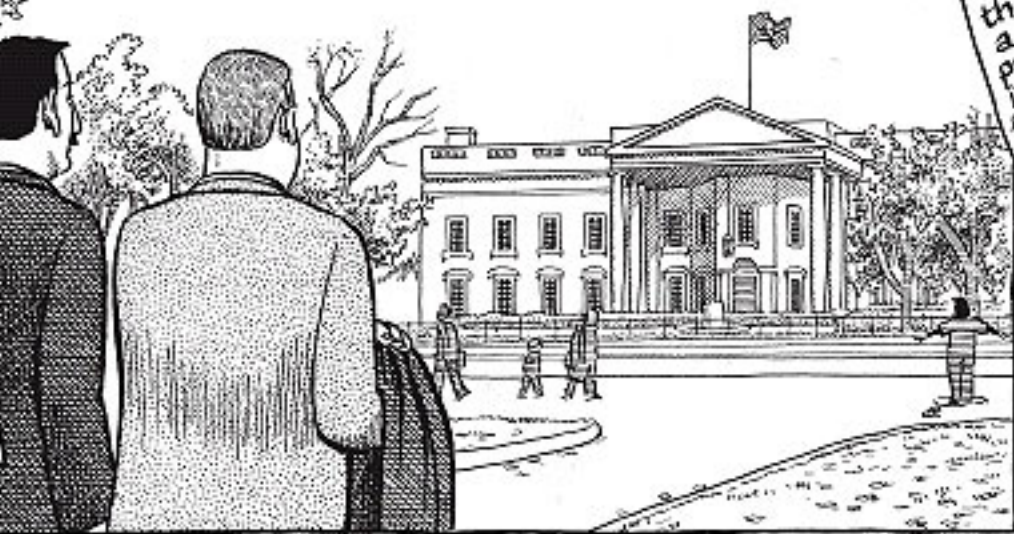


"He opened the wire and came in... He beat me and he cursed me."



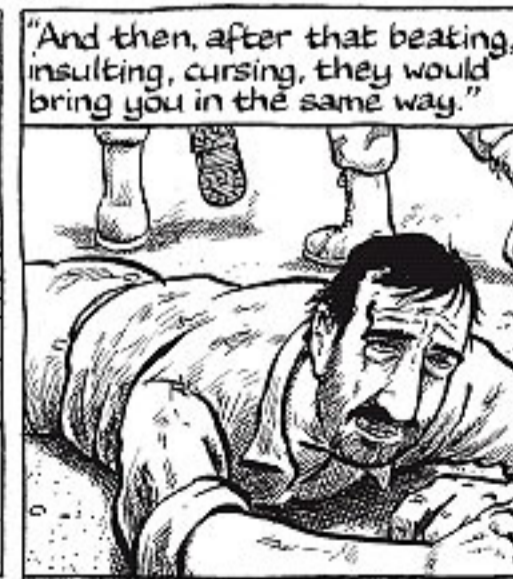
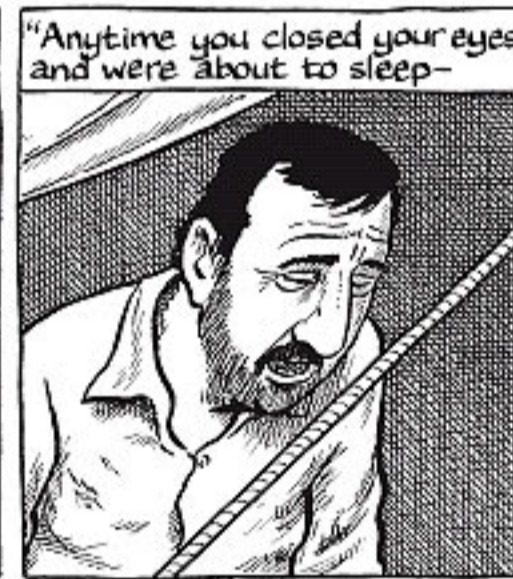
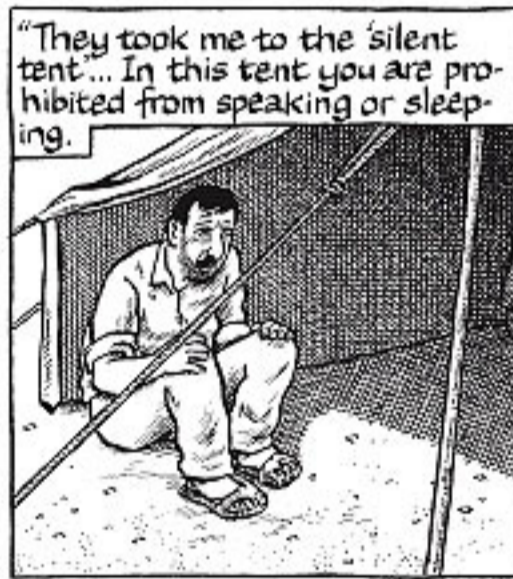
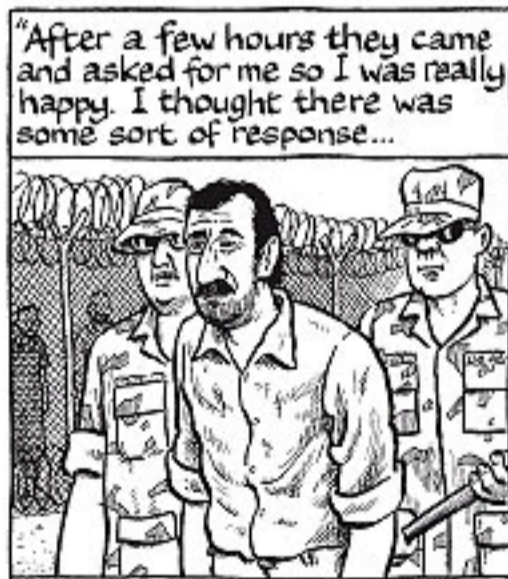
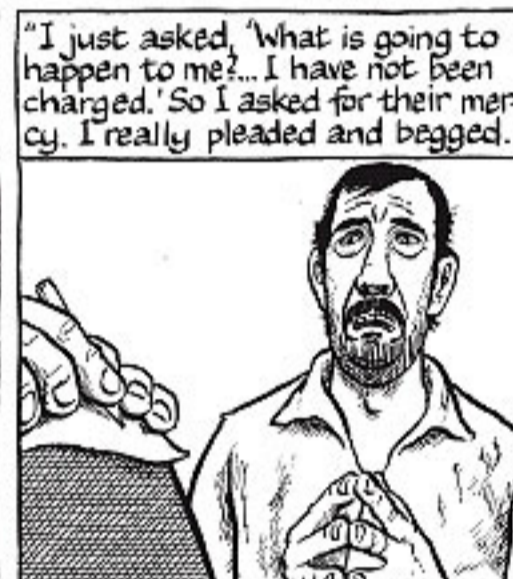
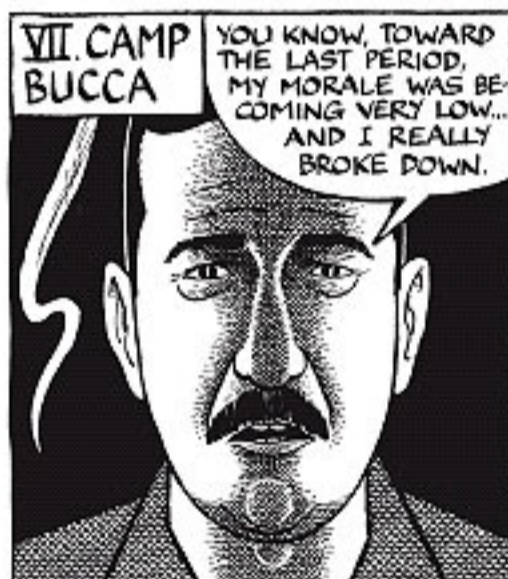
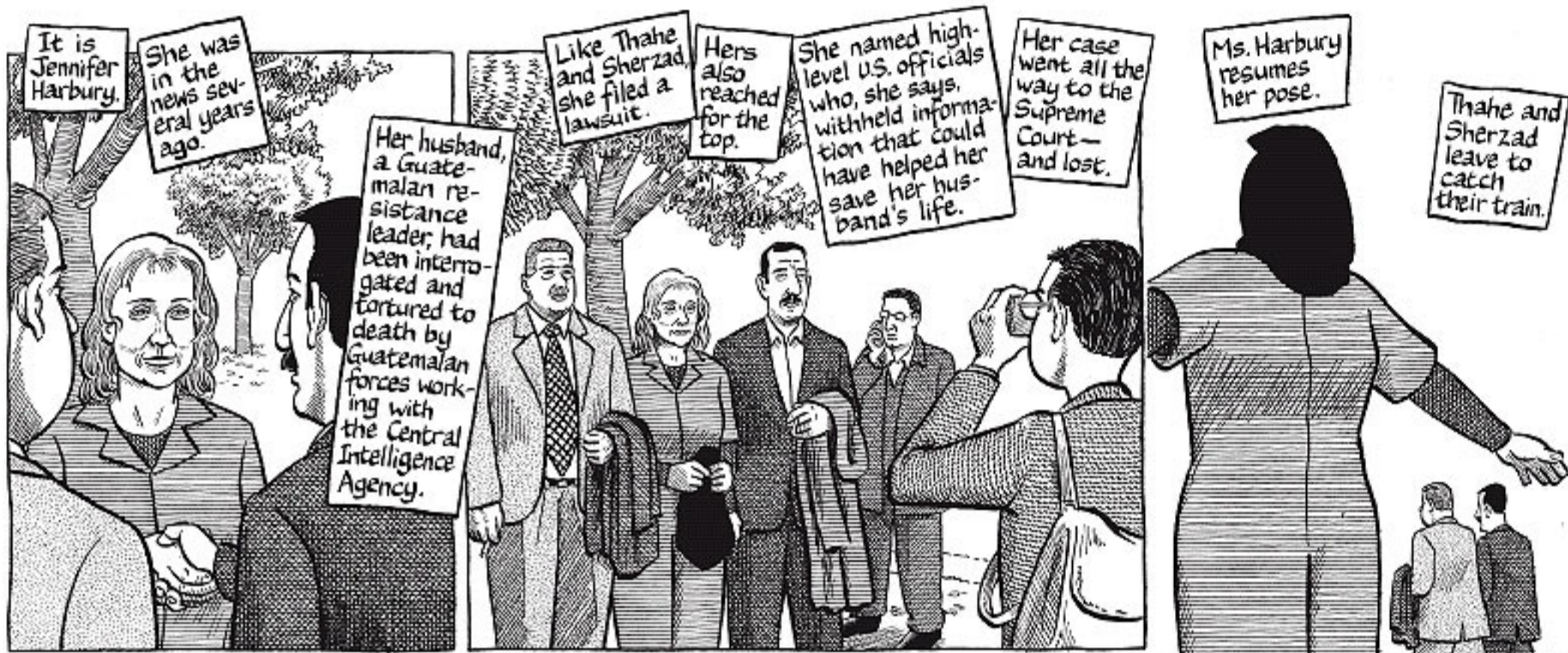
VI. THE WHITE HOUSE

There's a train to catch back to New York, but a promise is a promise, and in the morning Thaha and Sherzad are taken to see the White House.



And there they find a lone protester in a painfully familiar pose.





VIII. RELEASE

Honestly, I've been gentle.

I haven't pushed.

I've jumped over whole allegations, entire beatings and humiliations.

I've curbed my enthusiasm for detail.

Yet even without the hints from the attorney monitoring our conversation, it's clear to me that Thahe has had enough.

CONTINUE WITH ME BECAUSE I'M STRONGER THAN HE IS.

So I go on with Sherzad for a few minutes more, but I know it's time to leave.

Because after awhile, in certain situations, a journalist in a room begins to smell; even he notices.

Still - I have one more question. Just one more and I'm going.

How were you released?

YOU KNOW, THE RELEASE IS RANDOM, JUST LIKE THE ARREST.

"Once you're released, you don't believe it. You look behind you because you're so scared that they're going to jump you and arrest you again."



"And I did not believe that I was released until I arrived at my house and saw my children."



"And I closed the door."



"And I asked my brother to bring me a lock so I could lock the door from the inside."



"And they were laughing at me."



I pack my pen and notebook and tape recorder.

I get up to go



I tell Thahe and Sherzad that I was honored to meet them.

I thank them.

I wish them a good journey back to Iraq.



And, once again, they are released.

