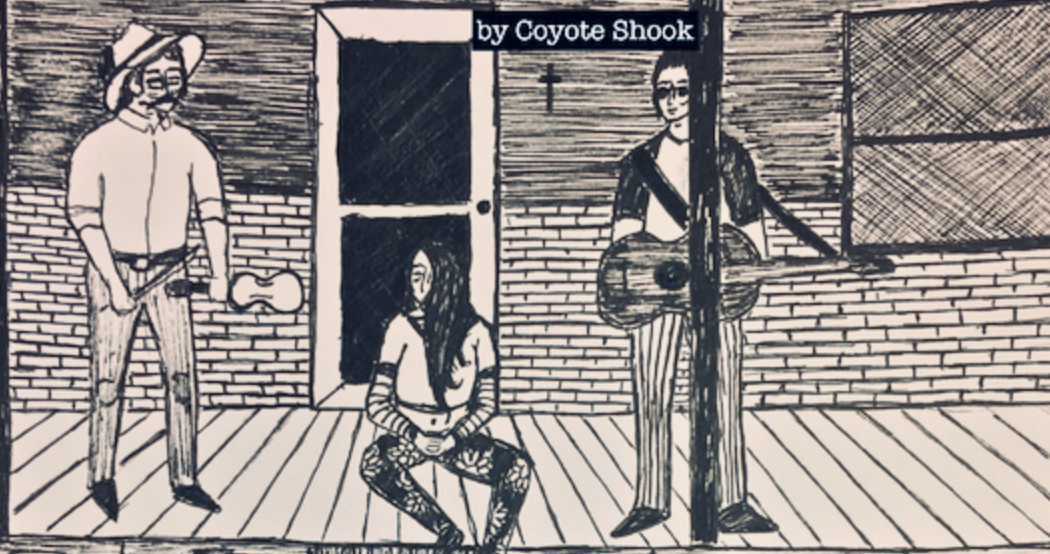
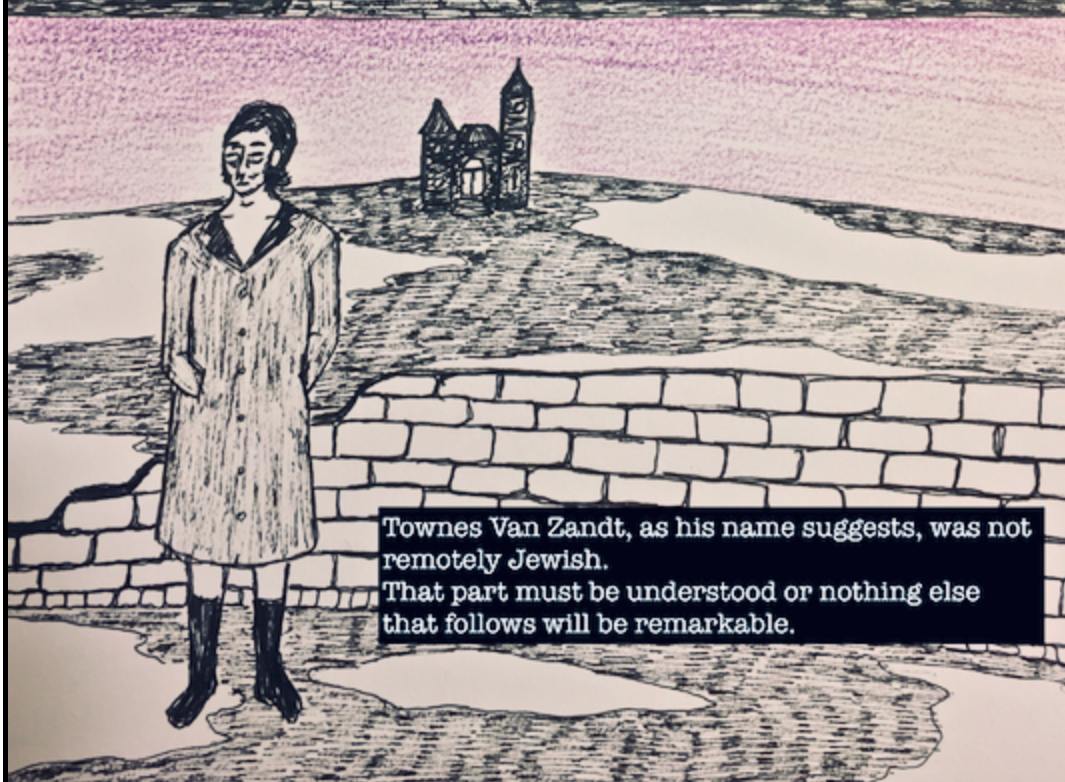


Via Dolorosa:  
an Autoethnography of Townes Van Zandt

by Coyote Shook



Submitted to the Rabbinical Court as the Creative Component for the  
Conversion of the Author to Reconstructionist Judaism.



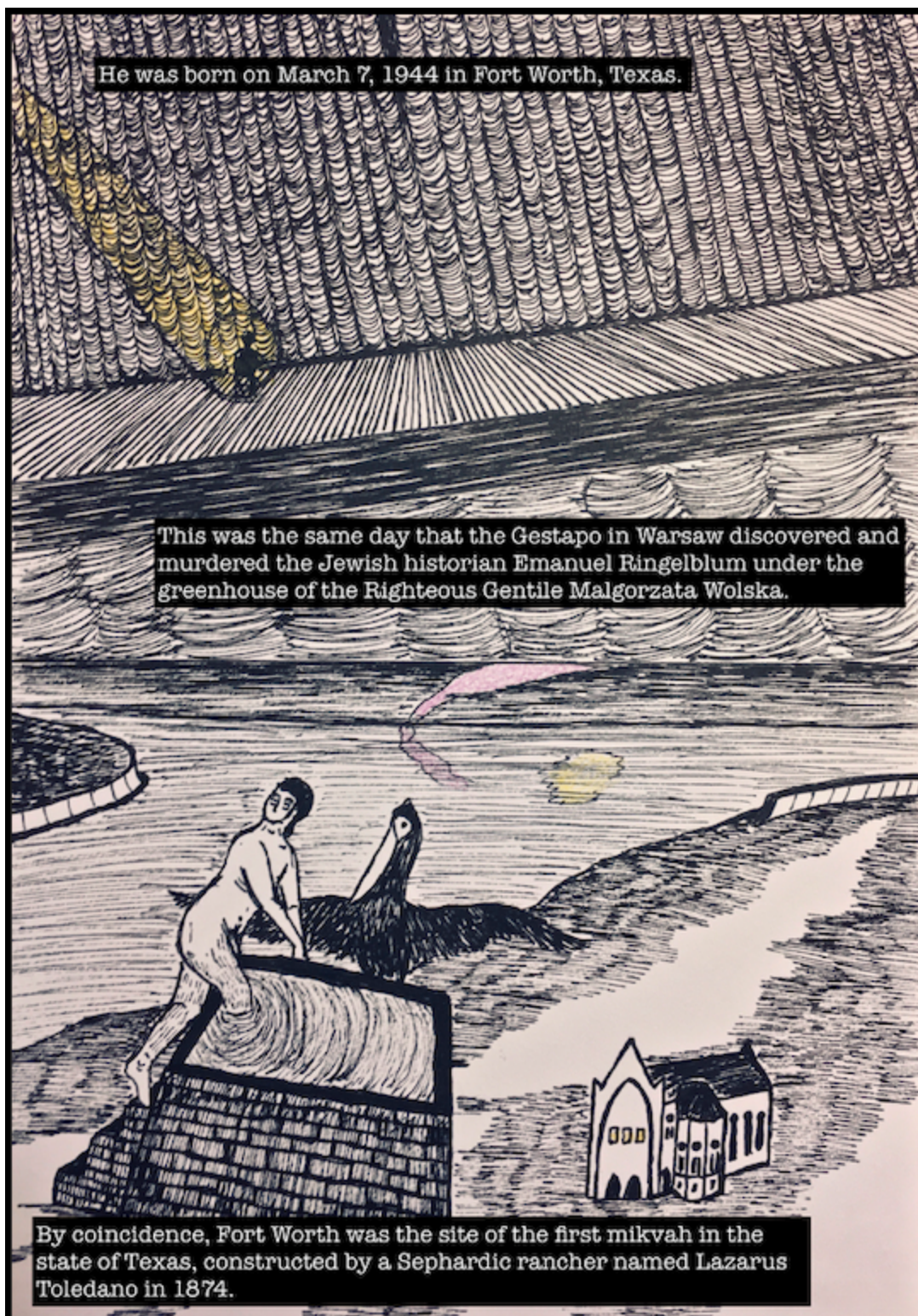
Townes Van Zandt, as his name suggests, was not  
remotely Jewish.  
That part must be understood or nothing else  
that follows will be remarkable.



He was born on March 7, 1944 in Fort Worth, Texas.

This was the same day that the Gestapo in Warsaw discovered and murdered the Jewish historian Emanuel Ringelblum under the greenhouse of the Righteous Gentile Malgorzata Wolska.

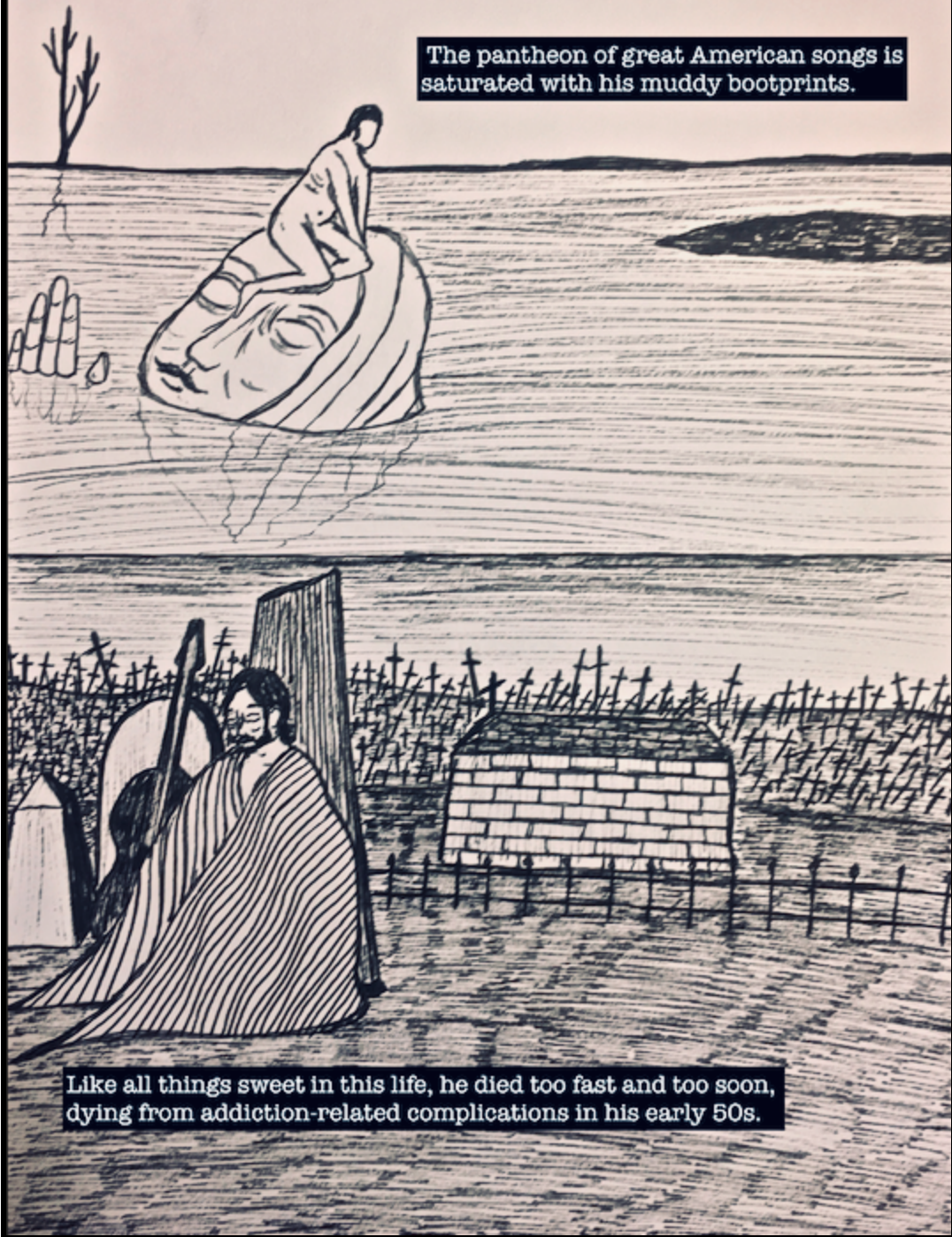
By coincidence, Fort Worth was the site of the first mikvah in the state of Texas, constructed by a Sephardic rancher named Lazarus Toledano in 1874.





His work, to be indiscreet, is absolute genius.

The pantheon of great American songs is saturated with his muddy bootprints.



Like all things sweet in this life, he died too fast and too soon, dying from addiction-related complications in his early 50s.



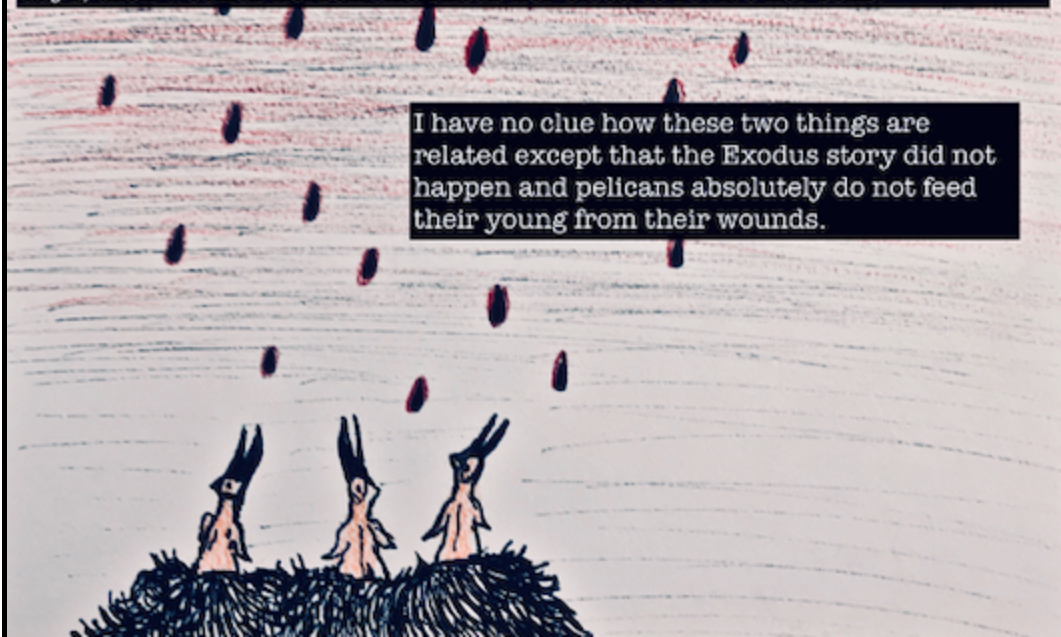
Rabbis describe the struggle with addiction using the metaphor of the Exodus from Egypt, with each addict being viewed as "enslaved" by their addiction.



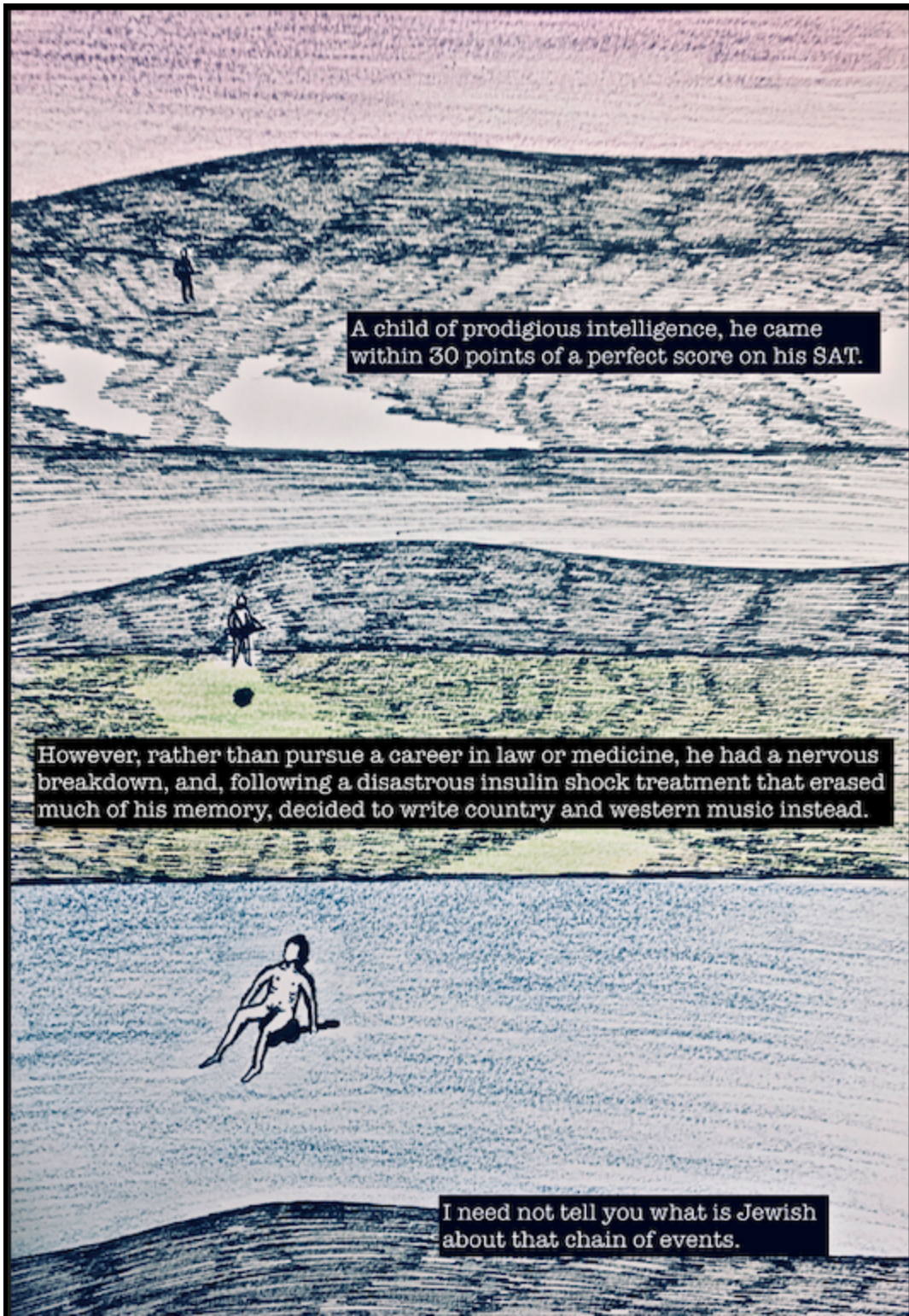
Confoundingly, several medieval Jewish communities adopted the pelican, pecking at its breast and feeding its blood to its young as a synagogue decoration.

The Spanish cleric Isidore of Seville wrote in a 7th century book of natural history, "The pelican is an Egyptian bird that lives in the solitude of the river Nile. It is said [...] that she kills her offspring and grieves for them for three days, then wounds herself and sheds her blood to revive her sons."

I have no clue how these two things are related except that the Exodus story did not happen and pelicans absolutely do not feed their young from their wounds.







A child of prodigious intelligence, he came within 30 points of a perfect score on his SAT.

However, rather than pursue a career in law or medicine, he had a nervous breakdown, and, following a disastrous insulin shock treatment that erased much of his memory, decided to write country and western music instead.

I need not tell you what is Jewish about that chain of events.



On Yom Kippur, 5780 (2019), I abstained from all my prescription painkillers, including my beloved codeine and Percocet. I realize that Jewish law would have permitted their use, as I'd had my lungs operated on less than a month before.



Instead, any time I felt the urge to take one, I took out my knife and cut myself neatly on my left leg. This ended up being 8 cuts. For the days after, I told anyone who asked that I'd accidentally walked through a rose bush wearing shorts.

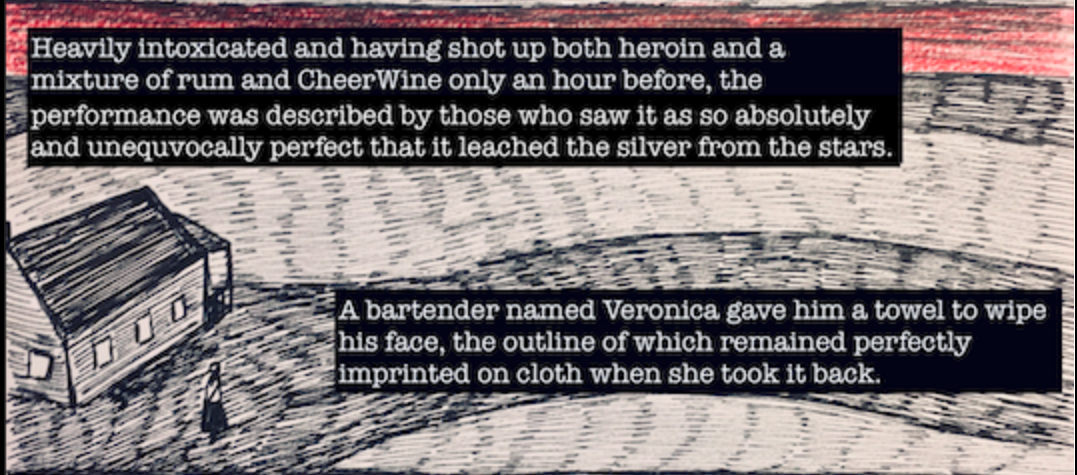


I broke the fast that night with the Reconstructionist congregation and took a bowl of cowboy caviar as my potluck contribution.






On September 22, 1996 (by coincidence Yom Kippur in 5757), Townes Van Zandt played unexpectedly at an open mic night at Cantina Dolores in El Paso, Texas.



Heavily intoxicated and having shot up both heroin and a mixture of rum and CheerWine only an hour before, the performance was described by those who saw it as so absolutely and unequivocally perfect that it leached the silver from the stars.



A bartender named Veronica gave him a towel to wipe his face, the outline of which remained perfectly imprinted on cloth when she took it back.

That part is absolutely true. The bar still exists, and the towel is still hung from the wall in a poster frame above the ladies' john.





By the end of Van Zandt's life, doctors, aware that he would not regulate his alcohol or drug use, refused to prescribe him painkillers.

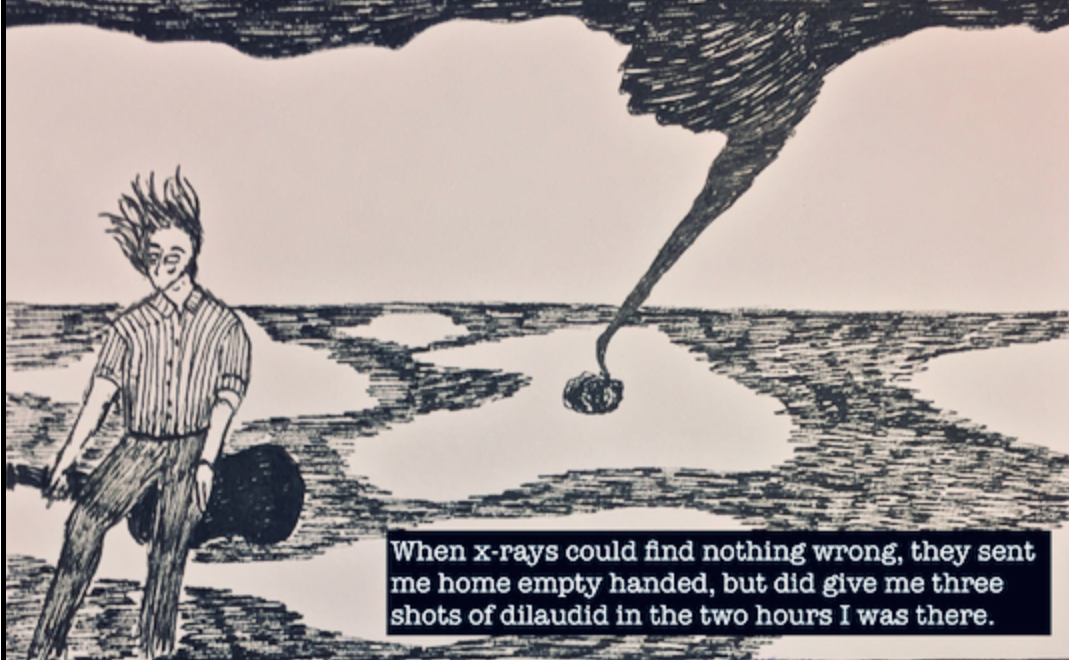
He spent his final months sleeping on the sofas of various ex-lovers and friends who would provide him with vodka to stave off the unpleasant side-effects of alcohol withdrawal.

This would continue until his death on the Protestant New Year in 1997

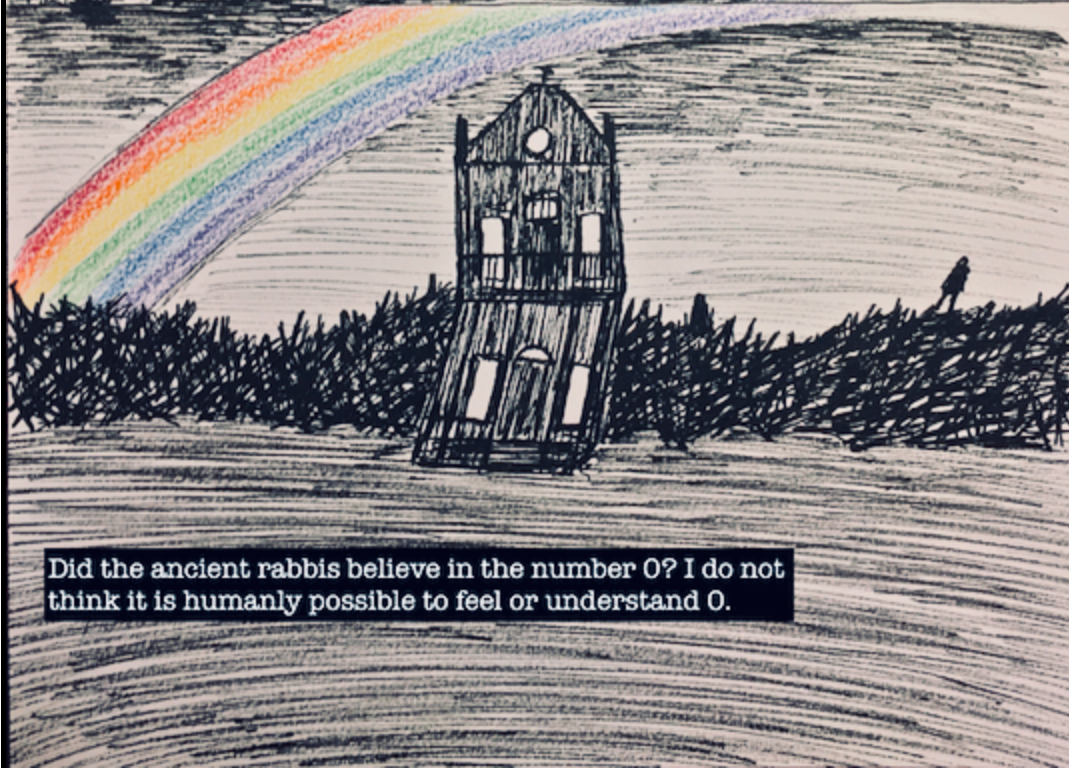
My research has not returned any significance of the date January 1,1997 for the Jewish community, but the fatalistic truth of that is in itself somewhat Jewish.



Two days after my prescriptions ran out and no doctor would refill them, I went to the ER claiming the pain so severe that I would rate it at the highest possible score on a scale from 0-10.



When x-rays could find nothing wrong, they sent me home empty handed, but did give me three shots of dilaudid in the two hours I was there.



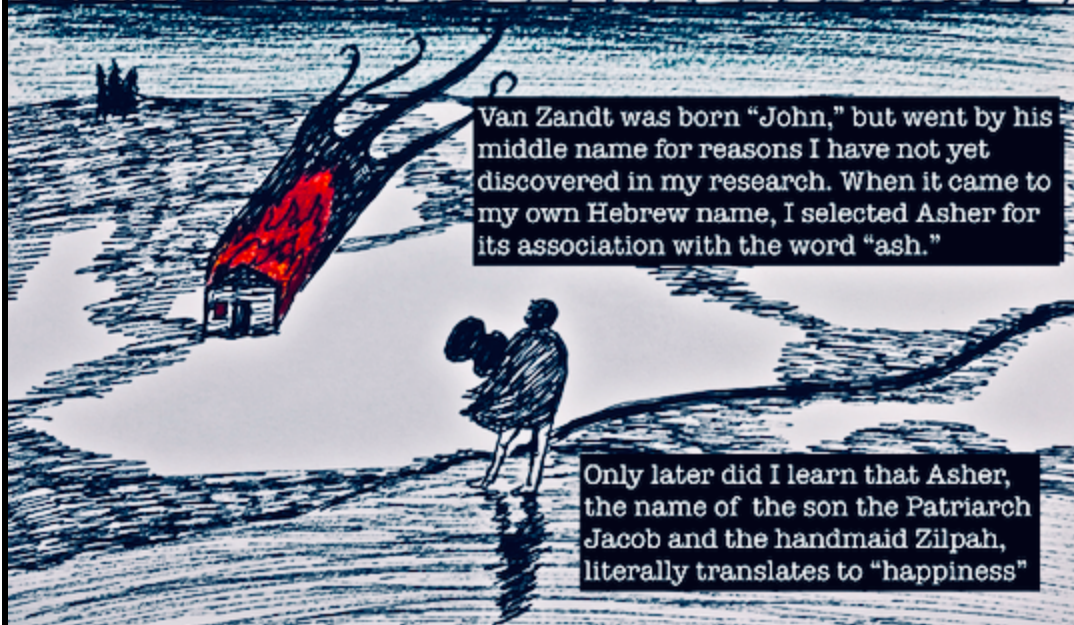
Did the ancient rabbis believe in the number 0? I do not think it is humanly possible to feel or understand 0.



During a 24 hour period on August 6th-7th, 1971, Van Zandt wrote "Dead Flowers," "Pancho and Lefty," and "Tecumseh Valley" while under the influence of prescription lithium and near-lethal doses of heroin in a one-room shack in Travis County that had no electricity or running water and housed some 9 armadillos in addition to the artist.



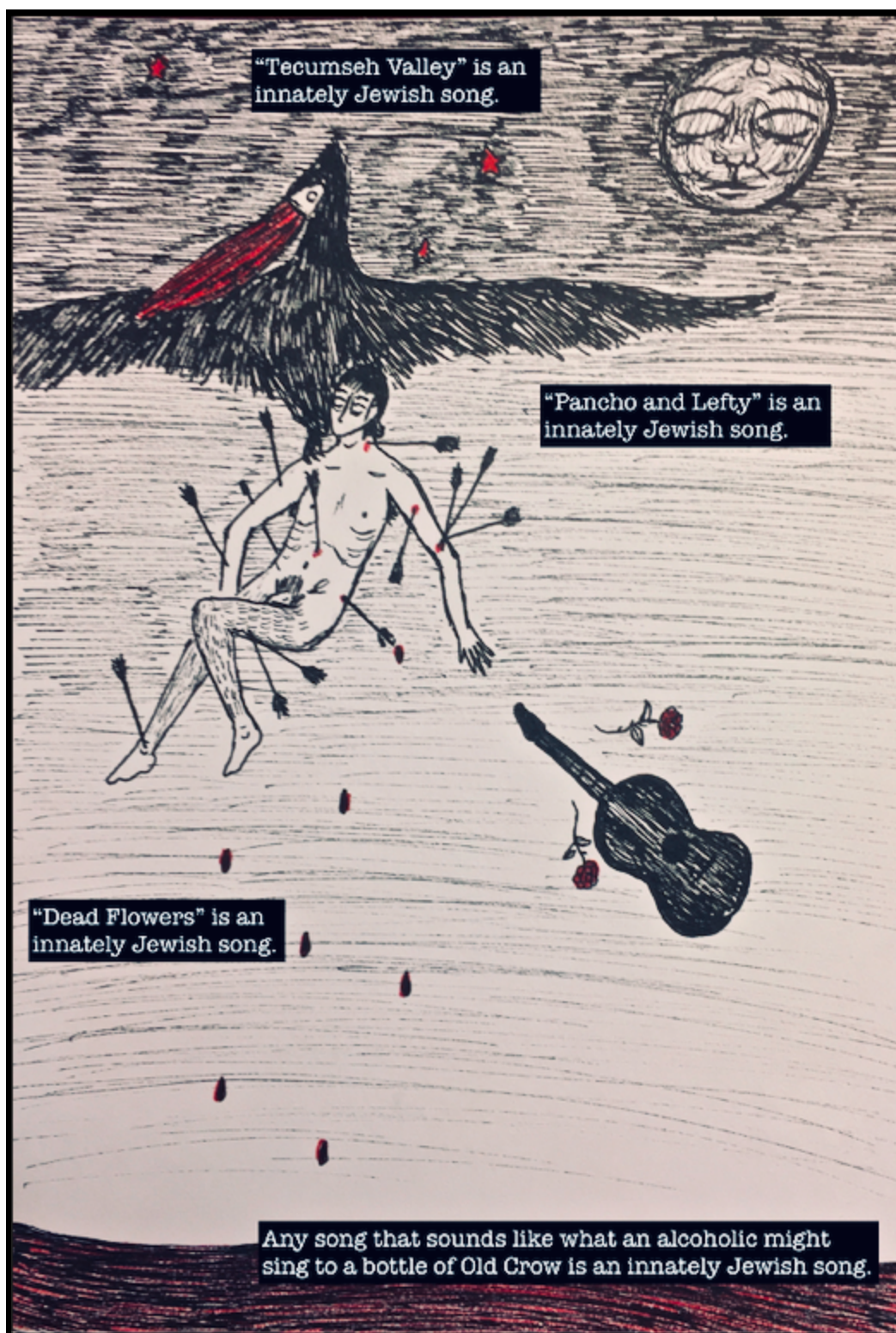
Van Zandt was born "John," but went by his middle name for reasons I have not yet discovered in my research. When it came to my own Hebrew name, I selected Asher for its association with the word "ash."



Only later did I learn that Asher, the name of the son the Patriarch Jacob and the handmaid Zilpah, literally translates to "happiness"

Please rest assured that the irony of this fact is absolutely not lost on me.





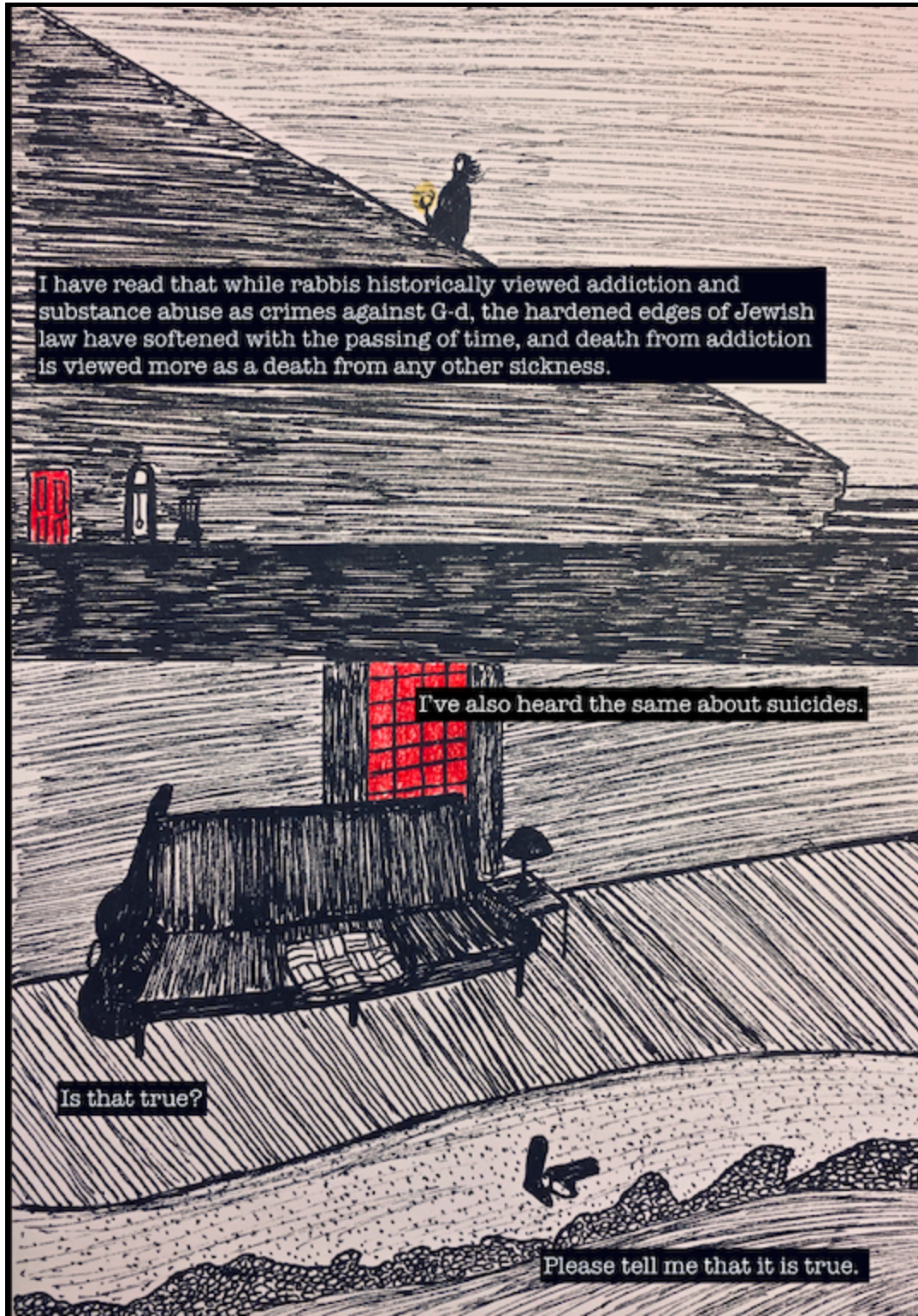
"Tecumseh Valley" is an innately Jewish song.

"Pancho and Lefty" is an innately Jewish song.

"Dead Flowers" is an innately Jewish song.

Any song that sounds like what an alcoholic might sing to a bottle of Old Crow is an innately Jewish song.





I have read that while rabbis historically viewed addiction and substance abuse as crimes against G-d, the hardened edges of Jewish law have softened with the passing of time, and death from addiction is viewed more as a death from any other sickness.

I've also heard the same about suicides.

Is that true?

Please tell me that it is true.





Oh, but most learned sages of the Jewish community, please understand that everything I've written is not strictly accurate.

But in the long and winding history of our people, who would really know the difference?