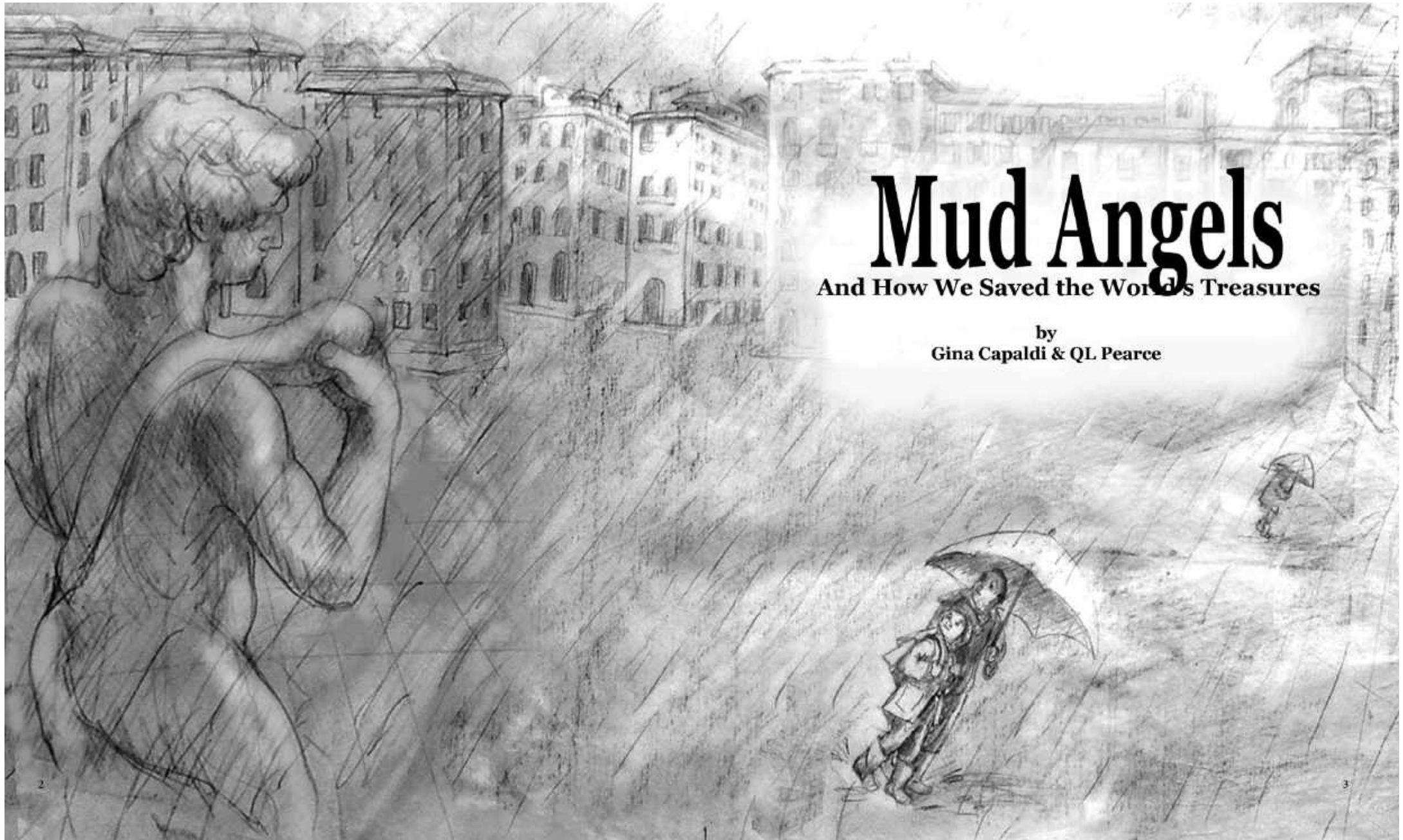


MUD ANGELS

And How We Saved the World's Treasures



Gina Capaldi & QL Pearce



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by
Gina Capaldi & QL Pearce

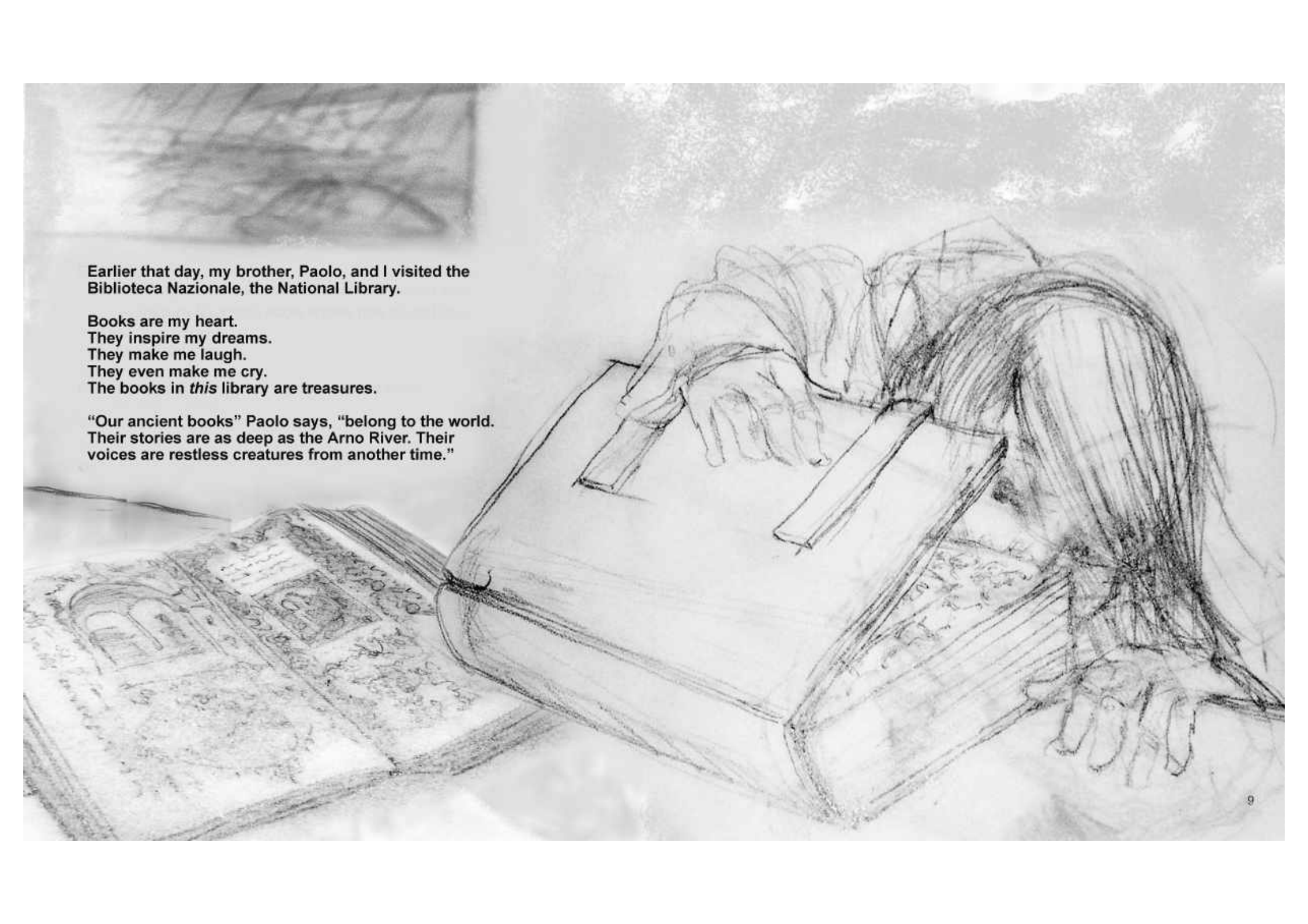
On the night the Arno River roared, the books of Florence, Italy, drowned.



2.



3.



Earlier that day, my brother, Paolo, and I visited the Biblioteca Nazionale, the National Library.

Books are my heart.
They inspire my dreams.
They make me laugh.
They even make me cry.
The books in *this* library are treasures.

"Our ancient books" Paolo says, "belong to the world. Their stories are as deep as the Arno River. Their voices are restless creatures from another time."



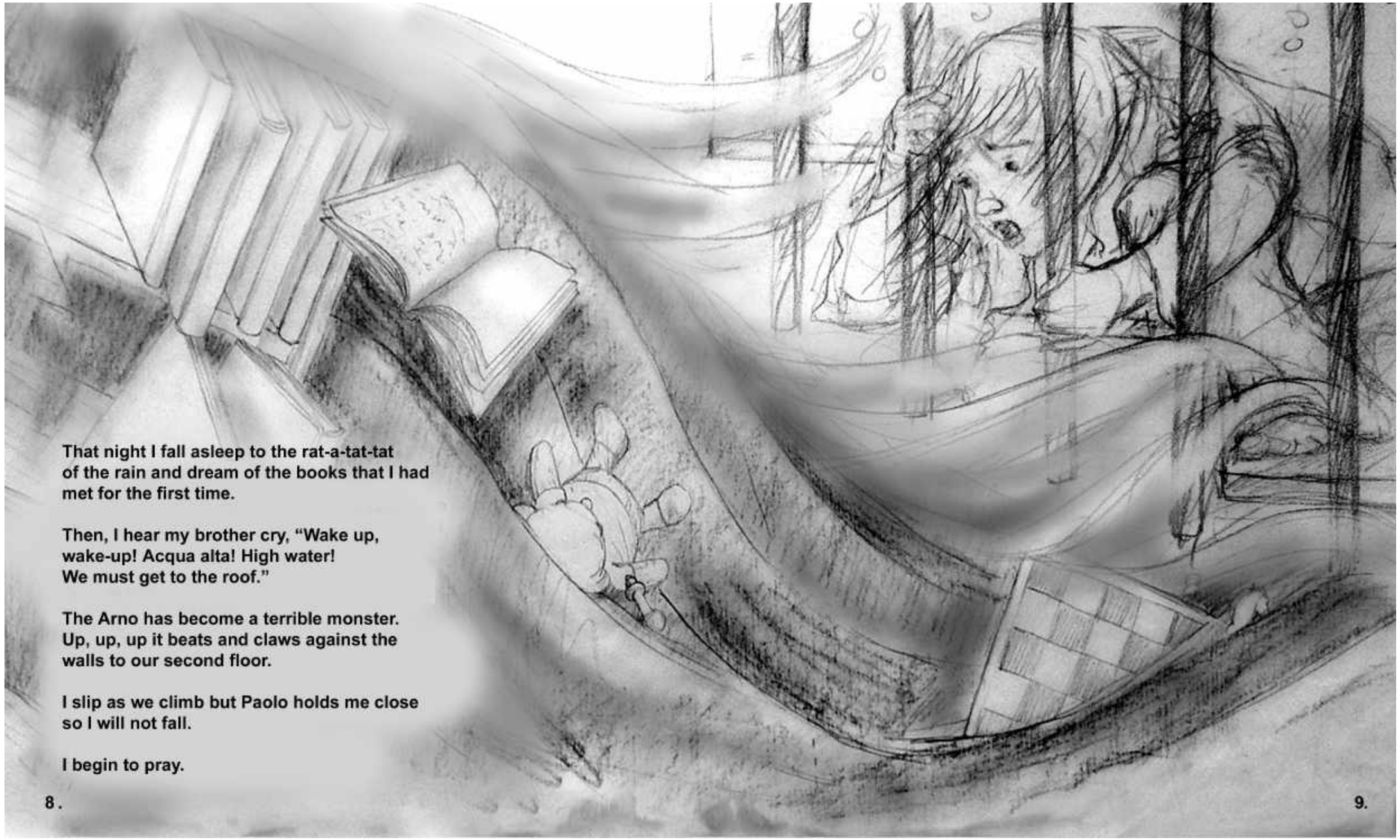
As Paolo reads, I turn the dusty, musty pages and search for serpents and dragons.

My eyes gobble up the angels and demons, castles and churches, and princesses riding white horses.

There are pictures of blustery days alive with dazzling light, and perfect nights studded with stars.

Painted letters dance across the pages and the margins are filled with flowers. Shimmering blues and greens, gilded in gold.

I touch the pages. I want to read them all.



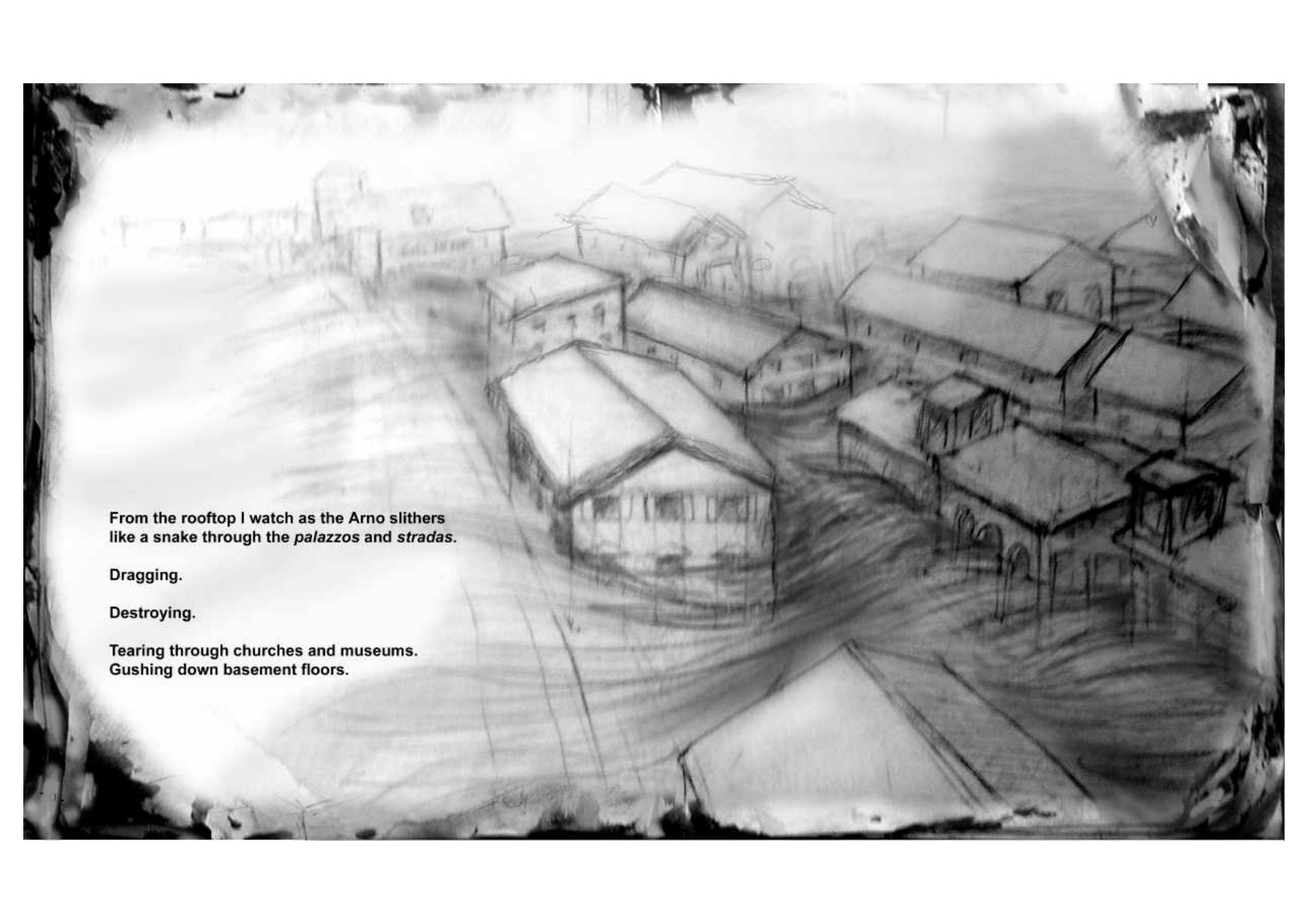
That night I fall asleep to the rat-a-tat-tat
of the rain and dream of the books that I had
met for the first time.

Then, I hear my brother cry, "Wake up,
wake-up! Acqua alta! High water!
We must get to the roof."

The Arno has become a terrible monster.
Up, up, up it beats and claws against the
walls to our second floor.

I slip as we climb but Paolo holds me close
so I will not fall.

I begin to pray.

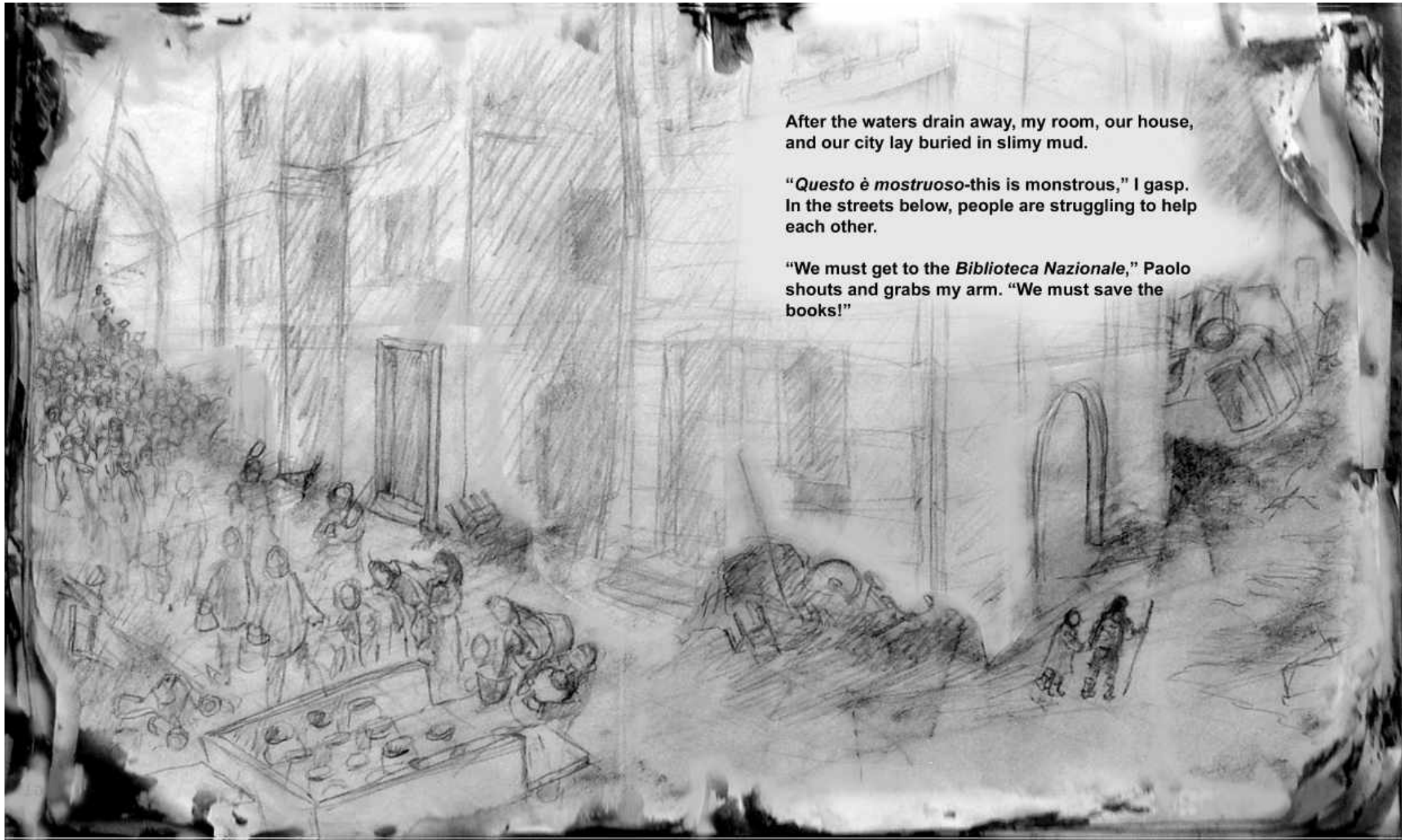


From the rooftop I watch as the Arno slithers
like a snake through the *palazzos* and *stradas*.

Dragging.

Destroying.

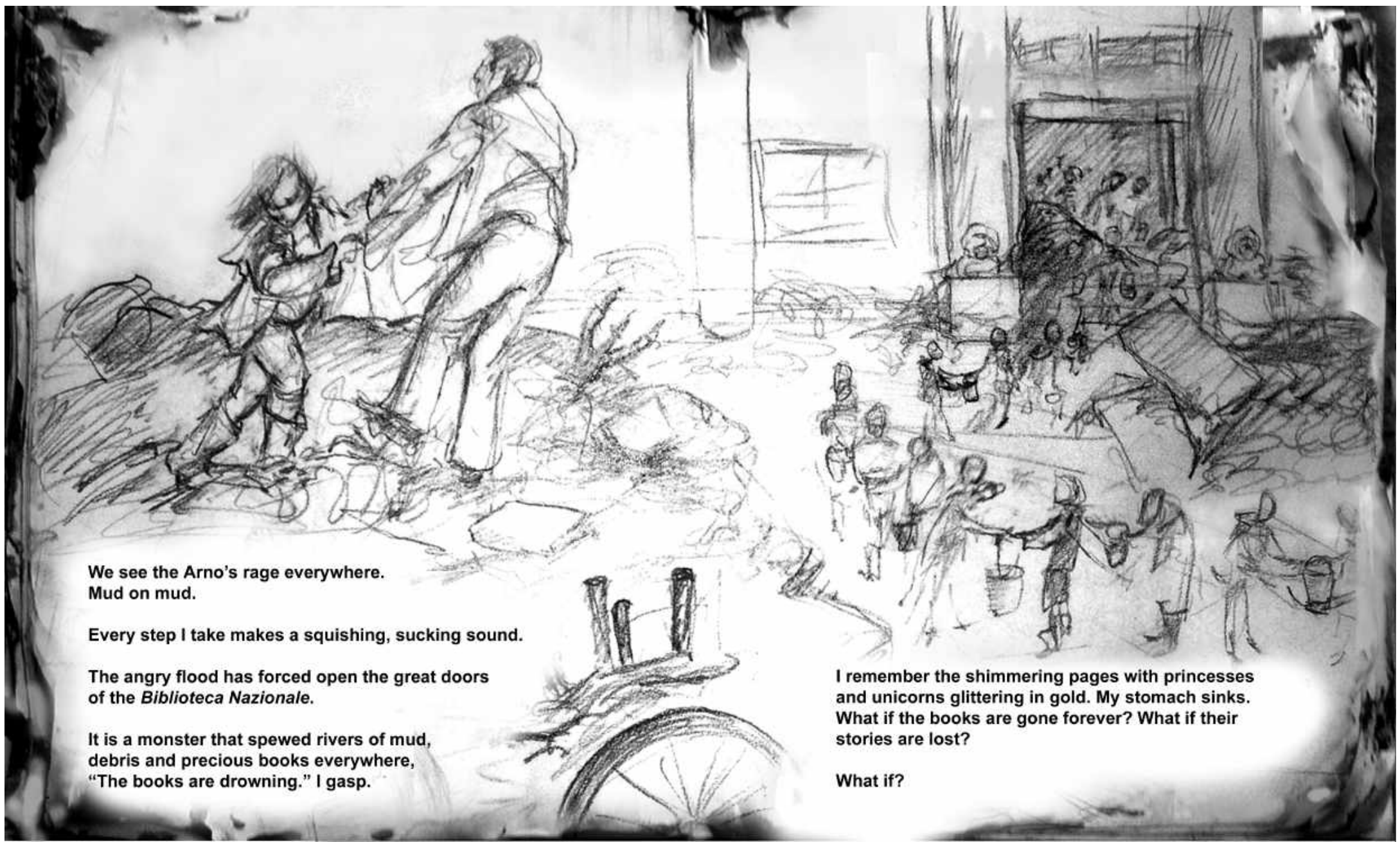
Tearing through churches and museums.
Gushing down basement floors.



After the waters drain away, my room, our house, and our city lay buried in slimy mud.

"Questo è mostruoso-this is monstrous," I gasp. In the streets below, people are struggling to help each other.

"We must get to the *Biblioteca Nazionale*," Paolo shouts and grabs my arm. "We must save the books!"



**We see the Arno's rage everywhere.
Mud on mud.**

Every step I take makes a squishing, sucking sound.

**The angry flood has forced open the great doors
of the *Biblioteca Nazionale*.**

**It is a monster that spewed rivers of mud,
debris and precious books everywhere,
"The books are drowning." I gasp.**

**I remember the shimmering pages with princesses
and unicorns glittering in gold. My stomach sinks.
What if the books are gone forever? What if their
stories are lost?**

What if?



Others join us on the steps.

University students pitch in to help. They are from countries all over the world. Each speaks a different language but they work together as one.



Saving Books

The books that were submerged in the flood faced several dangers: wet pages could rot or fall to pieces; pages could cement together to form unreadable books, or mold could set in.

Mud Angels needed to act immediately. Millions of pages had to be treated. This required lots of room.

In some cases book pages were removed and hung on lines to be dried by kilns or heaters. Others had blotting paper slipped between pages. The paper had to be changed regularly.

Saving Paintings

Panel paintings had to be laid flat as they dried. Glue and gesso that supported paint had often been dissolved by the water. Removing mud was a painstaking process as the surfaces beneath the goo were often softened and swollen. Some paintings buckled or developed cracks or blisters. Restorers applied rice paper and treated the surfaces with an antifungal to prevent mold from growing.



Paolo passes a heavy book to another student who passes it to another and another like a giant winding centipede until the book is safe and out of the library.



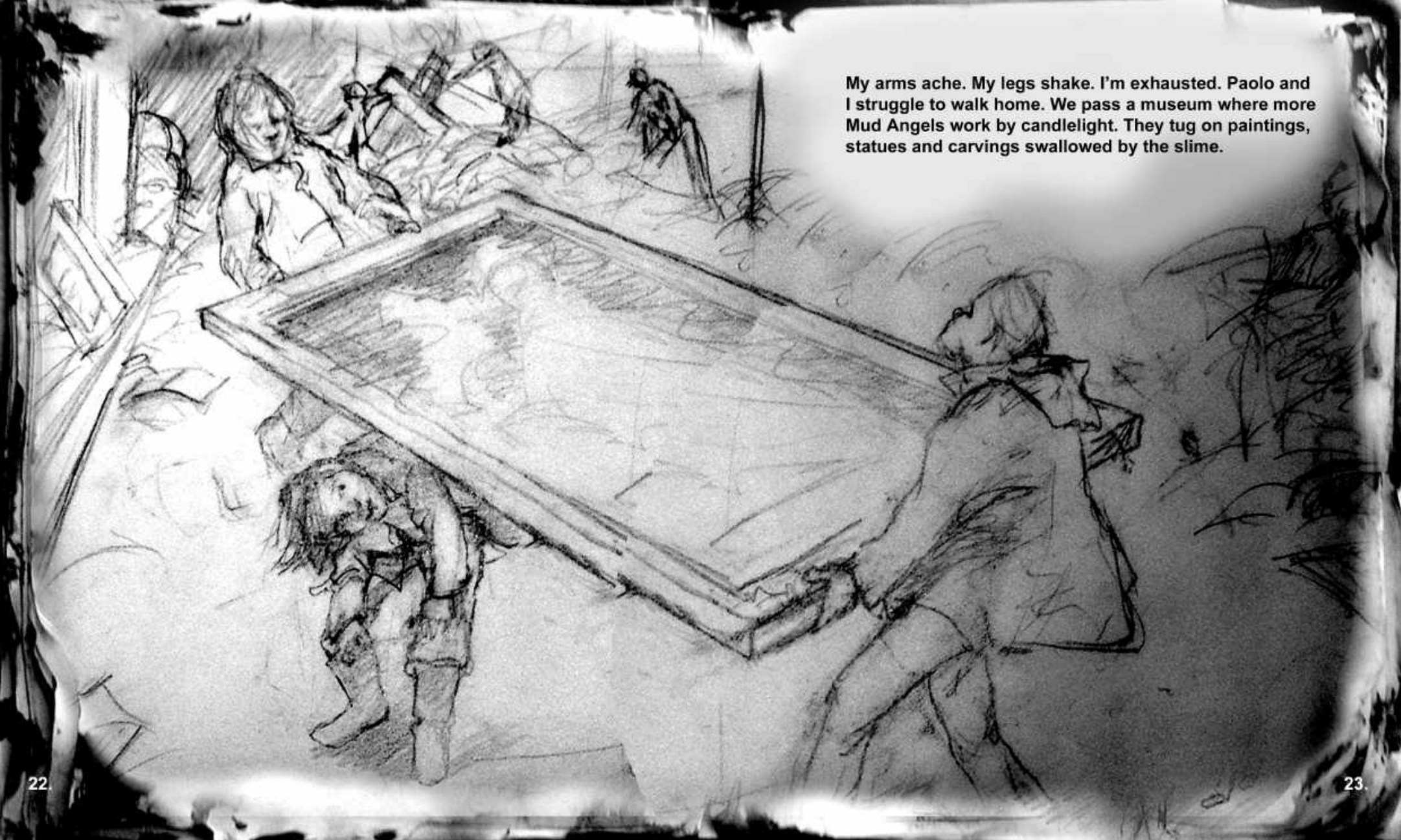
White horses and dragons SLURRRPP and BURP when I pull them from pools of thick mud and freezing water.



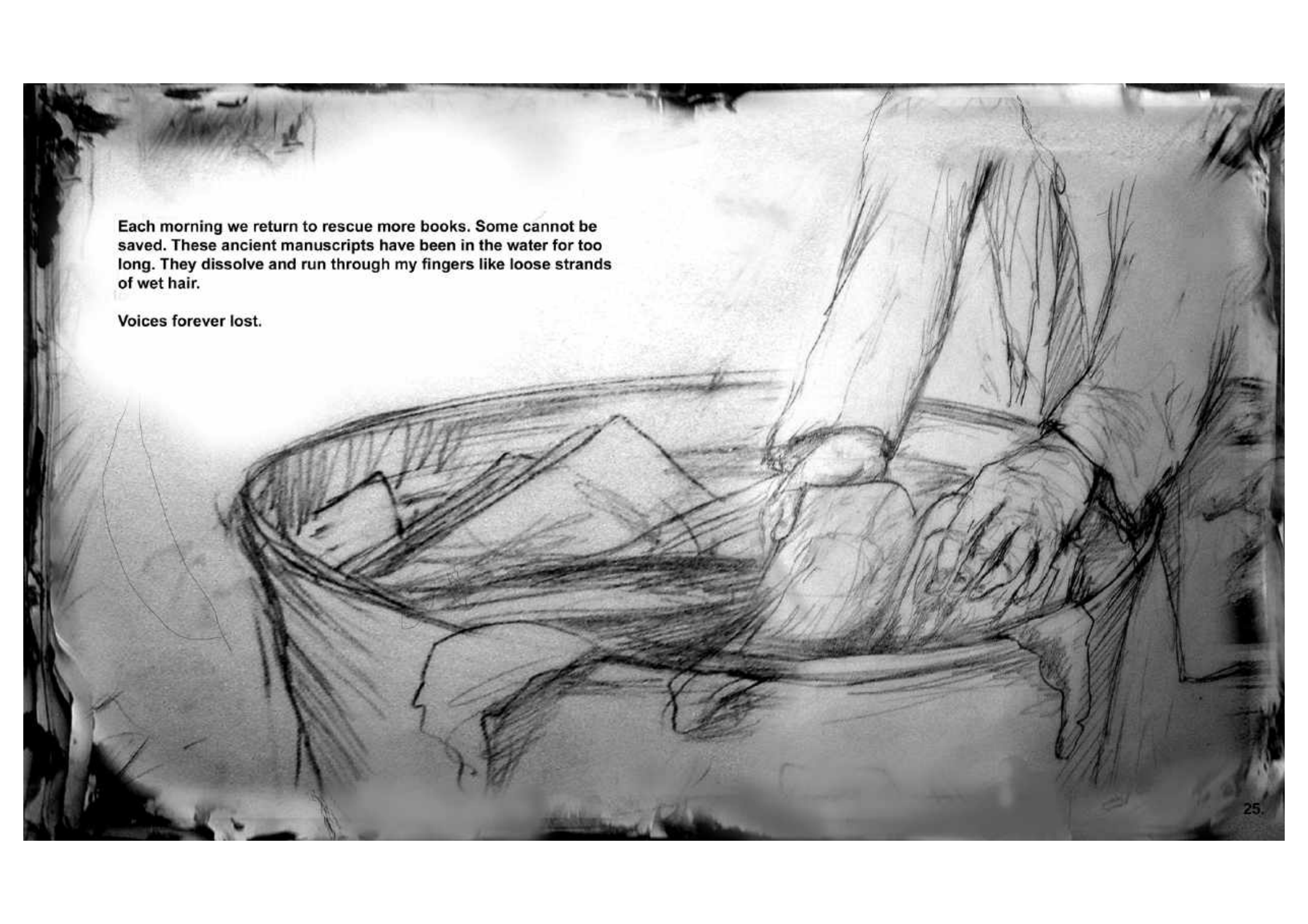


Others come to encourage us. "You are an angel!" a woman says, "*Angeli del Fango*-Mud Angel."

The water is cold but her words warm my heart. I look around at the students and realize that we are ALL Mud Angels.



My arms ache. My legs shake. I'm exhausted. Paolo and I struggle to walk home. We pass a museum where more Mud Angels work by candlelight. They tug on paintings, statues and carvings swallowed by the slime.

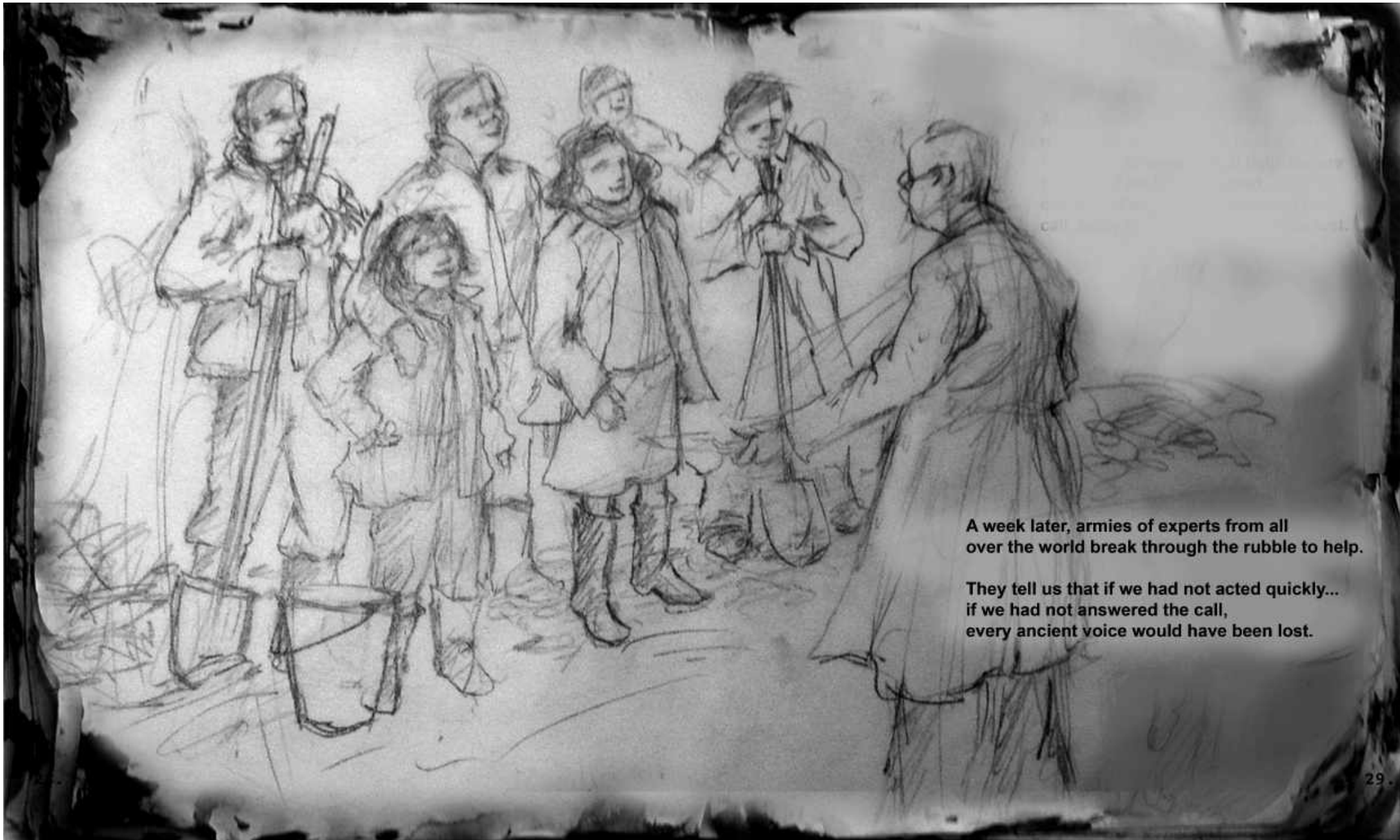


Each morning we return to rescue more books. Some cannot be saved. These ancient manuscripts have been in the water for too long. They dissolve and run through my fingers like loose strands of wet hair.

Voices forever lost.

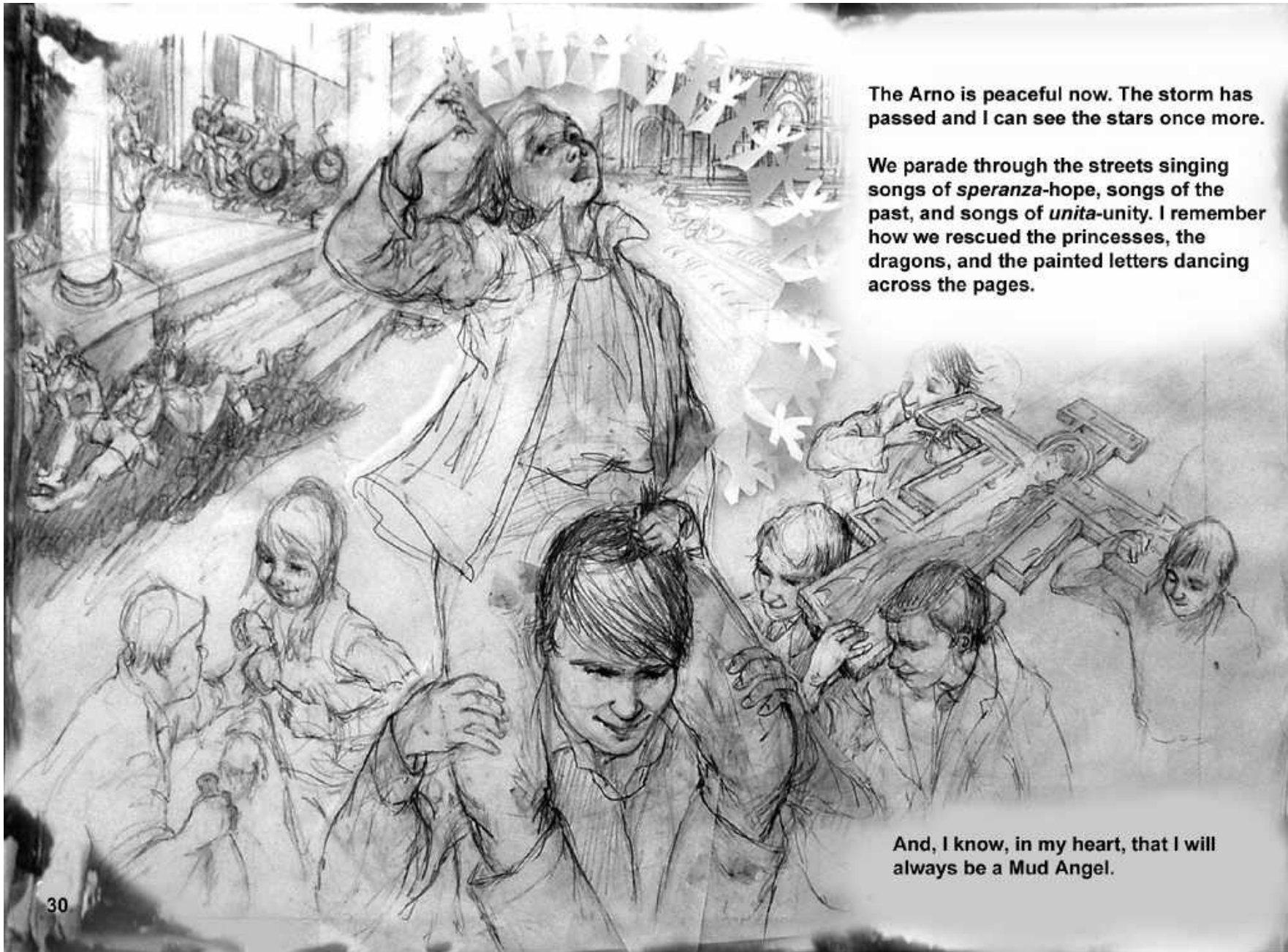


I carefully clean the books and tuck blotting tissue paper between each soaking page. Then I hang each page up to dry and hope they will see *nuevo vita*-new life.



A week later, armies of experts from all over the world break through the rubble to help.

They tell us that if we had not acted quickly... if we had not answered the call, every ancient voice would have been lost.



The Arno is peaceful now. The storm has passed and I can see the stars once more.

We parade through the streets singing songs of *speranza*-hope, songs of the past, and songs of *unita*-unity. I remember how we rescued the princesses, the dragons, and the painted letters dancing across the pages.

And, I know, in my heart, that I will always be a Mud Angel.



Mud Angels Answer the Call

A plaque at the National Library commemorates the days that young people of every race and nation "came to the rescue through the water and the mud."

End of Nov

Author's Note: The Floods of November

November 3rd, 1966, Armed Forces Day, a storm drenched central Italy. In Florence, after midnight, a massive flood raced through the narrow streets, scouring away everything in its path. Rushing water engulfed the lower levels of the National Library and the Uffizi Gallery. Floodwaters twenty-two feet high plowed toward the Church of Santa Croce. In homes and apartments, people scrambled to the rooftops. In hospitals, medical personnel carried patients to upper floors.



As the floodwaters withdrew on the evening of November 4th, they left behind a city in shambles. Dozens of people were dead. Hundreds were injured. Thousands were homeless and six thousand shops were destroyed. Florence was buried in 600,000 tons of mud, 15,000 wrecked cars, and mountains of debris and garbage that cut it off from outside help for many days.

Thousands of artworks and photographs, and millions of books and manuscripts were damaged but all available rescuers were trying to save human life. When the director of the National Archives radioed a plea for help to save what they could, no one could have guessed who would answer the call.

Young people from all over the city responded. Most were students: a group of Americans with their professors; art students

from Germany, France, England, Japan; local teens; and children as young as ten slogged into icy waist-high mud and felt blindly for books or peeled soaked manuscripts from walls. Students working in the basements wore masks because of the stench.

Medical students organized disinfecting stations and handed out vitamins. The youngest children passed out food and water. Art students washed and dried book pages, then carefully separated each leaf with blotting paper and tissue. They worked for days with little sleep or shelter from the cold.

Six days after the flood, mechanical scrapers arrived. Help finally poured into the city to take over what the young people had started. Since 1966, thousands of rare books, manuscripts, and works of art have been restored, and the work still continues.

