There is an acute political sensibility here, subtle critiques of state sovereignty spliced alongside not-so-subtle takes on corporate sovereignty and explicit scenes where, for instance, pornography and ads for humanitarian relief agencies are indistinguishable, or young people insist that the only way to survive Cairo is by seeking innovative sexual thrills or snorting “hash mixed with sleeping pills.” “Everyone here has done lots of drugs, both during and after college,” Naji writes; “Yet here we all are, little islands unto ourselves, with no greater aspiration than to hang out together. We manage to stay alive by sucking our joy out of one another.”

Narration of more literal sucking led to a stint in prison for the author—the charge made against his work, in court, involved certain written descriptions of a sexual act that caused a dangerous spike in blood pressure for one reader—a fact that, cruel and farcical and puritanically oppressive, reads like part of the novel rather than an extra-literary reality. Indeed, Naji’s punishment is precisely the sort of violation one expects from the Cairo in Using Life.

While the novel is patchwork, there are various threads of plots fluttering around. Bassam is hired to help make a series of documentaries about architecture, a device that allows for some discussion of environmental exploitation and environmentalist fetishism, architecture as control and grassroots architecture as resistance. Also, people hook themselves up to machines, which doesn’t generally end well for the people. A sandstorm, a “Tsunami of the Desert,” causes mass asphyxiation on the first page. But all of this, rather than serving as a trajectory for the narrative, functions ornamentally, much like architectural details which, in aggregate, establish a mood.

The illustrations, by Ayman Al Zorkany, do the same: a man in a suit with a wolf’s head for a crotch, a hash trip imagined as a journey in a paper boat, a flaccid penis resembling a human heart—these are pieces of a varied “naked lunch,” a smorgasbord spread with grotesqueries, stuff that could be categorized as exaggeration if Naji hadn’t presented a Cairo so inhuman, so breathlessly dull, so suffocating, that exaggeration feels impossible. The images in these pages feel instead like the occasional itches Bassam scratches in an intoxicated and post-coital daze that offers only the fleeting possibility of denial rather than a glow of pleasure.

Apocalypse in Using Life thus becomes a fantasy devoutly to be wished, but one that remains frustratingly unsatisfying. Describing Cairo’s “vibrant nightlife,” Naji describes “masturbating in front of the computer screen,” wandering “the streets to the point of exhaustion,” or “sitting around on cheap plastic chairs at the cafe and smoking shisha mixed with glycerin.” In such a city, who wouldn’t pray for cataclysm, be it in the form of sandstorm or ninja assassin? “Let Cairo go fuck herself,” indeed; in Naji’s novel, the city has fucked over its youth for too long.

— Spencer Dew